



Gender, Violence, & the Past in Edda & Saga

DAVID CLARK

OXFORD

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IN EDDA AND SAGA

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Abbreviations

Cleasby–Vigfusson	Richard Cleasby, <i>An Icelandic–English Dictionary</i> , rev. Gudbrand Vigfusson [Guðbrandur Vigfússon]; 2nd edn by William Craigie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957)
<i>DII</i>	<i>Diplomatarium islandicum</i> , I, ed. Jón Sigurðsson (Copenhagen: S. L. Möller, 1857)
Dronke I	Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., <i>The Poetic Edda</i> , volume I: <i>Heroic Poems</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969)
Dronke II	Ursula Dronke, ed. and trans., <i>The Poetic Edda</i> , volume II: <i>Mythological Poems</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)
<i>HHI</i>	<i>Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri</i>
<i>HHII</i>	<i>Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar</i>
<i>HHv</i>	<i>Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnor</i>
Neckel–Kuhn	Gustav Neckel (ed.), <i>Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern</i> , 4th edn., rev. Hans Kuhn, 2 vols. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962)
<i>NGL</i>	R. Keyser, P. A. Munch, <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>Norges gamle Love indtil 1387</i> , 5 vols. (Christiania: Grøndahl, 1846–95)

Introduction

OUTLINE AND METHODOLOGY

This book is the first study to investigate both the relation between gender and violence in the Old Norse *Poetic Edda* and key family and contemporary sagas, and the interrelated nature of these genres. Beginning with an analysis of Eddaic attitudes to heroic violence and its gendered nature through the figures of Guðrún and Helgi, the study broadens out to consider the whole poetic compilation and how the past (and particularly the mythological past) inflects the heroic present. This paves the way for a consideration of the comparable relationship between the heroic poems themselves and later re-workings of them or allusions to them in the family and contemporary sagas. Accordingly, the study considers the use of Eddaic allusion in *Gísla saga*'s meditation on violent masculinity and sexuality, assesses the impact of the Church on attitudes to revenge in family and contemporary sagas, and finally explores the scapegoating of women for male violence in the contemporary sagas. Although the Eddaic poems themselves present a complex and sometimes conflicting attitude to vengeance, revenge and other forms of violence are in later texts regularly associated with the past, and often represented by Eddaic figures. Moreover, saga authors often attempt to construct a national narrative which shows moderation and peace-making as the only viable alternatives to what is seen as the traditional destructive model of vengeance. Nevertheless, the picture the sagas present is far from uniform, rather being one of conflicting voices as the attractions of heroic violence prove difficult to resist for many, particularly when issues of masculinity are at stake.

The book's thematic concentration on gender and violence (whether sexual or familial), and its generic concentration on the

Poetic Edda and later texts which rework or allude to it, enable a diverse exploration of both key and neglected Norse texts and the way in which their authors display a dual fascination with, and rejection of, heroic vengeance.

The book employs a range of critical approaches, aiming to unite the use of contemporary theories of gender and sexuality with more traditional close readings of literary texts, and, where this is known, to situate them in their historical context. This approach allows medieval and modern material to be brought into productive dialogue, rather than attempting simply to impose modern perspectives on the material. The book aims to illuminate these fascinating texts from a variety of angles and thus to stimulate further work in the many areas upon which this study touches. Because it is hoped that the book will be of interest both to Norse scholars and medievalists (some of whom may be unfamiliar with some of the theoretical approaches employed) and also to theorists of gender and sexuality (who may be unfamiliar with the medieval texts), it seems useful to provide a general introduction here to both sets of material and summaries of the key texts examined. Readers can, of course, skip straight to the analysis in Chapter 1.

OLD NORSE LITERATURE

Old Norse literature—or Old Norse–Icelandic literature, as it is sometimes called, to reflect the fact that the majority of it was written down or composed in Iceland—constitutes an exceptionally large and varied body of texts. The best-known examples of this are the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders), or ‘family sagas’, which are set in the *söguöld* (saga-time) from the settlement of Iceland in the late ninth century until the early eleventh century, after Iceland’s conversion to Christianity in around the year 1000. They were not written down in manuscript form, however, until the thirteenth century. They are often compared to the novel because of the way they combine gripping plots with naturalistic accounts of Icelanders’ (often violent) interactions. Unlike the realist novel, however, the saga authors affect a unique stance which mixes omniscience at some times with non-omniscience at others, usually maintaining an appearance of objectivity by external focalization—that is, the events

are seen from outside the world of the characters and we are rarely told what a character is thinking or feeling. Characters are less important than events. As Heather O'Donoghue writes: 'Saga narratives end not with denouement, but when causality finally runs out of steam, or when characters, having often lived longer or shorter lives than they deserved, die.'¹ Although sagas were once taken to represent historical accounts, over the last few decades their unique literary characteristics have been explored, and the often subtle narrative art of their authors revealed. Much less literary attention has been paid to the other works of Norse literature, from the poems of the *Poetic Edda* (the focus of Chapters 1, 2, and 3) to the contemporary sagas (Chapters 5 and 6), and so, although the family sagas are discussed (particularly in Chapters 4 and 5), they are mainly considered in terms of their reworking of and attitude to Eddaic poetry, concentrating on *Gísla saga* (Chapter 4).

The chapters in one sense follow a broadly chronological order, from the Eddaic poems (set in the distant mythic or heroic past) through the family sagas (set in the late ninth to the early eleventh centuries) to the contemporary sagas (set in the first half of the thirteenth century). However, this should not be taken to indicate a chronology in the true sense, since the dating and contextualization of these texts is extremely problematic, as we shall see, and they were all in fact written down (in their current form) at around the same time. For instance, the Eddaic poems are collected in the Codex Regius, an Icelandic manuscript from around 1270, the contemporary sagas were compiled in around 1300, and the family sagas were written down from the thirteenth century. Thus, whilst they are by no means a homogeneous body of material and are discussed as individual texts below, it also makes sense to discuss them within the context of thirteenth-century audiences.

What is most important to remember is that, although the subject matter of a particular text may be later than that of another, there is

¹ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 60. This is one of the most accessible introductory accounts of the area, and can be supplemented by the chapters collected in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (eds.), *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

no simple correlation to the composition of that text, nor any straightforward way to determine the direction of influence between one text and another. Although the issues are discussed briefly below, there is much that we still do not know (and perhaps will never know) about the relative datings and composition of Norse texts.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY THEORY

Following the Second Wave Feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the emergence of the gay and lesbian political and social activism after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, there was an explosion of scholarly research in the areas of Gender Studies and Gay/Lesbian Studies, aimed at uncovering the history of the oppression of women in general, gay men and lesbians, and other non-(hetero)normative persons, including the ways in which this is manifested in literature, and at drawing attention to and analysing the work of marginalized writers from these groups. The publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* in 1990 inaugurated the era of Queer Theory, which aimed to uncover not only the way that constructions of gender and sexuality have structured twentieth-century Western thought (and literature), but also the ways in which apparently stable gender and sexual identities are in fact contested and indeterminate, emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of human experience.²

Medievalists have increasingly turned to gender and queer theory in the last couple of decades, although this has been particularly evident in the study of later medieval literature.³ Nevertheless, more

² For a summary of these issues and extracts from some of the key theoretical texts, see Part Nine of Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, *Literature Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 885–956.

³ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Tison Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Richard Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); as well as the essays in Glenn Burgess and Steven F. Kruger

recently it has influenced Old English scholarship.⁴ Old Norse scholarship has been less keen to follow the trend. Jenny Jochens has looked at literary attitudes to women from a broadly feminist perspective in two books,⁵ and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's book *The Unmanly Man* is invaluable for attitudes to same-sex activity (and is referred to extensively below, especially in Chapter 4).⁶ There are, of course, also several works that deal with women from a largely non-literary perspective.⁷ However, although several excellent articles have appeared recently, this is the first literary monograph to engage substantially with contemporary theories of gender and sexuality.⁸

DATING OF EDDAIC POEMS

There is a particularly wide range of critical opinion on the date of composition of the Eddaic poems, although the general consensus dates *Hamðismál* (The Lay of Hamðir) and *Atlakviða* (The Poem of Atli) early (late ninth to early eleventh century) and *Guðrúnarhvöt*

(eds.), *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Karma Lochrie et al. (eds.), *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Jacqueline Murray (ed.), *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York: Garland, 1999).

⁴ David Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Allen Frantzen, *Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from Beowulf to Angels in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Carol Pasternack and Lisa M. C. Weston (eds.), *Sex and Sexuality in Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in Memory of Daniel Gillmore Calder*, MRTS, 277 (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004).

⁵ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), and *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁶ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

⁷ For instance, Judith Jesch's *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991).

⁸ See e.g. David Ashurst, 'The Transformation of Homosexual *Liebestod* in Sagas Translated from Latin', *Saga-Book*, 26 (2002), 67–96; Carl Phelpstead, 'The Sexual Ideology of *Hrólfs saga kraka*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 75 (2003), 1–24, and 'Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders', *Exemplaria*, 19 (2007), 420–37.

(The Whetting of Guðrún) and *Atlamál in grænlensku* (The Greenlandic Lay of Atli) late (late twelfth to early or mid-thirteenth century).⁹ The argument by Klaus von See that *Hamðismál* forms part of the 'younger' layer of poems and is thus later than *Guðrúnarhvöt*, has not gained general acceptance.¹⁰ It seems to me impossible at present to solve the problem of the dating of these poems, since linguistic tests continue to prove inconclusive for both Old English and Old Norse poems, and internal evidence is unhelpful. For instance, one might argue that the poems quoted above which place their events in the distant past do so because they were composed later than those poems which place their events in the present. However, it seems more profitable to view this as a poetic choice and to investigate the literary *effects* of this distancing, especially given the continuing debate over dating. Similarly, it might be argued that early poems represent Guðrún as avenger and later ones as lamenter. However, some of the Guðrún elegies in fact break down this binary, particularly *Guðrúnarkviða 2nnor* (The Second Lay of Guðrún), since it is generally considered late, but centres on Guðrún's insistence on vengeance. In the analyses below, the aim is to treat the dating and audience of these poems as unproven, whilst nevertheless to provide material which may contribute to the continuing discussion of these issues.

Although there is no agreement as to when the compilation took its current form, the Codex Regius was written down in Iceland in about 1270, as we have seen, and it has been established on scribal and linguistic evidence that all the poems must have existed in written form before the mid-thirteenth century and that the lost exemplar or exemplars from which the Codex Regius was copied cannot have pre-dated the beginning of the thirteenth century.¹¹ The original

⁹ For an overview see Joseph Harris's article in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, vol. 4, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), sub 'Eddic Poetry', and the discussion in his chapter 'Eddic Poetry' in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. Clover and Lindow, 68–156, at 93.

¹⁰ See his 'Die Sage von Hamðir und Sörli', in his *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung: Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1981), 224–49, and 'Guðrúnarhvöt und Hamðismál', *ibid.* 250–8.

¹¹ See further Dronke I, pp. xi–xiii and Gustaf Lindblad, *Studier i Codex Regius av äldre Eddan* (Lund: Gleerup, 1954), esp. 257–75 *passim*.

composition of many (though not all) of the poems certainly predates the thirteenth century, and we do not know how many copyists intervened between then and the copy that has come down to us. However, the present form of the poems is at least as important, if not more so, since it represents firmer evidence.¹² Whatever the poems' lost origins may have been, it therefore surely makes sense to interpret the compilation in the light of thirteenth-century Icelandic sociocultural conditions. Similarly, although there is much debate over the integrity of the poems as we have them, it seems useful to interpret the poems as extant, rather than trying to interpret a reconstruction of a hypothetical 'original'.¹³

It is not practical to give a detailed summary of every one of the almost thirty poems contained in the Codex Regius, so the account below concentrates primarily on those poems most discussed in this book. The manuscript is commonly divided into two parts, the first dealing with mythological themes and the activities of the Norse gods, starting with *Völuspá* (The Seeress's Prophecy) and continuing through poems about the gods Óðinn, Freyr, and Þórr. The second part centres on the exploits, relationships, and deaths of heroes like Helgi Hundingsbani and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and the conflict between the latter's two loves, Brynhildr and Guðrún, and the fate of Guðrún's children by her subsequent marriages. This neat division is problematized, however, by the placement of *Völundarkviða* (The Lay of Völundr) in the 'mythological' section, since, although he is designated as a prince of the elves, his actions and the poem's setting seem to relate it better to the 'heroic' section. The arguments below, particularly in Chapter 3, also point to purposeful links between the two sections.

¹² For a lucid account of *mouvance* theory, which argues for the importance of each extant copy of a text against some putative reconstructed 'ideal' text, see Bella Millett, 'Mouvance and the Medieval Author: Re-Editing *Ancrene Wisse*', in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Late Medieval Texts and their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A. I. Doyle* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1994).

¹³ For detailed accounts of these debates, see Dronke I and II, and the volumes of Klaus von See's ongoing *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1993–). For a facsimile edition of the Codex Regius with transcription, see Ludvig F. A. Wimmer and Finnur Jónsson, *Håndskriftet Nr. 2365 4^{to} gl. kgl. Samling* (Copenhagen: Møller, 1891). For consistency, poems are cited from Neckel–Kuhn. Translations are my own.

VǫLUSPÁ

The first poem in the Codex Regius has a cosmic scope, recounting as it does the events before the beginning of the world but ranging forward through divine and human history to the end of the current dispensation at Ragnarøk (the Doom of the Gods) and beyond to a new world-order. The death of the beautiful god, Baldr, at the hands of his brother Höðr but instigated by the malevolent god Loki, is avenged by Óðinn's one-day-old son, Váli, born precisely for this purpose. However, his death and Loki's punishment appear to be the harbingers of Ragnarøk. The end of the world is preceded by a cosmic war between gods and giants: Óðinn is killed by the wolf Fenrir (and avenged by his son Víðarr), Freyr by the fire-giant Surtr, and Þórr by the Miðgarðsormr (the Midgard Serpent). The world ends in a fiery conflagration, but the seeress's vision promises renewal and the peaceful return of Baldr and his brother. Much of the poem is obscure or debated, and particularly controversial is the question of how much Christian influence has affected this account of the Norse cosmogony.¹⁴

OTHER 'MYTHOLOGICAL' POEMS

Following *Vǫluspá* we have *Hávamál* (Sayings of the High One), a long piece of wisdom poetry, which is almost certainly a composite drawn together by the figure of Óðinn, obsessed with learning to the extent of hanging himself on the world-tree Yggdrasill for nine nights whilst wounded with a spear to gain the mystery of the runes. More gnomic wisdom is revealed in *Vafþrúðnismál* (Sayings of Vafþrúðnir), a wisdom contest between Óðinn and the giant Vafþrúðnir, and *Grimnismál*, a contest between Grimnir (Óðinn in disguise) and King Geirroðr. *Skírnismál* follows, which tells of Freyr's servant Skírnir's wooing mission to get the giantess Gerðr to agree to marry the love-struck god. In *Hárbarðsljóð* (The Song of Hárbarðr) Þórr

¹⁴ See the commentary in Dronke II, and John McKinnell, *Both One and Many: Essays on Change and Variety in Late Norse Heathenism* (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994), esp. 123–4.

and Óðinn (in disguise as the ferryman Hárbarðr) engage in a verbal contest because the latter refuses to ferry Þórr across a fjord. Þórr is also at the centre of *Hymiskviða*, in which he must obtain a giant cauldron for a feast and in the course of which he goes on a fishing trip with the giant Hymir and almost catches the Miðgarðsormr, to the peril of the earth and the terror of Hymir. In *Lokasenna* (Loki's Quarrel) Loki insults all of the gods in turn until he is silenced by Þórr's arrival and threat to destroy him with his hammer. The comic *Þrymskviða* centres on the giant Þrymr's refusal to return Þórr's stolen hammer unless the goddess Freyja marries him. When she refuses, Þórr must go instead, disguised as a (less than dainty) bride so that he can get his hands on the hammer and kill the giants.

Völundarkviða tells of skilled smith Völundr's obsessive revenge against his captor by killing his two sons and impregnating his daughter. The final poem in the so-called mythological section is *Alvíssmál*, another wisdom contest, but this time between Þórr and the dwarf Alvið.

THE HELGI POEMS

Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri (The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani)

Helgi's birth is attended by the Norns, the Norse version of the classical Fates, who predict his fame as a warrior-prince. He kills a ruler named Hundingr at the age of 15, followed by Hundingr's four sons when they come seeking revenge. He meets Sigrún, a valkyrie who complains that her father Hogni has betrothed her to an unworthy suitor, Hqðbroddr son of Granmarr. Helgi sails with his warriors to fight Granmarr and claim Sigrún himself, and after his half-brother Sinfjötli bests Hqðbroddr's brother Guðmundr in a verbal contest (or *flyting*), he leads his armies to victory, aided by the valkyries, and can claim land, treasure, and bride.

Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar (The Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson)

This poem precedes the first lay chronologically, since Helgi and his valkyrie bride Sváva are said to have been reincarnated as Helgi and

Sigrún, but it is positioned between the other two lays in the Codex Regius. It starts with a prelude recounting how Helgi's father King Híorvarðr won his mother Sigrlinn through the agency of his second-in-command Atli. Then, after an inauspicious youth, Helgi is directed to a special sword by the valkyrie Sváva, with which he kills his mother's former suitor Hróðmarr and the giant Hati. Hati's daughter Hríngerðr then engages in a *flyting* with Atli, now Helgi's companion, but he keeps her talking until the sun comes up and turns her to stone. Helgi and Sváva marry, but his brother Heðinn insults a troll-woman and is cursed to make a foolish drinking-vow to have his brother's wife. Heðinn guiltily wanders off but encounters Helgi, who magnanimously forgives him, explaining that he is doomed anyway, because the troll-woman was his *fylgia* (a sort of guardian spirit) and he thinks therefore he will die in his imminent duel with Hróðmarr's son Alf. This duly occurs, and Helgi asks his bride not to weep but to marry his brother Heðinn. However, the poem ends with Heðinn's vow to avenge his brother.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor (The Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani)

This poem follows much the same course as the first lay, of which it may represent an oral variant; this version, however, emphasizes the conflict Sigrún feels between her love and family loyalty. The *flyting* is abbreviated, and instead we learn of the revenge Sigrún's brother Dagr takes on Helgi for killing his father. After an exchange of hostile words between sister and brother, we are shown Helgi's pre-eminence in Valhalla over Hundingr, and the poem ends with a supernatural encounter between Helgi and Sigrún at the burial mound. Sigrún wishes to stay with her dead husband, but he rides away and we are told that she dies from grief.

THE SIGURÐR AND GUÐRÚN POEMS

We now enter upon a series of poems dealing with the birth, life, and death of Sigurðr, the pre-eminent hero amongst men, and the consequences of his murder. *Grípisspá* is a prophecy by Grípir of the

events of Sigurðr's fateful life (though it was clearly written later than the other poems and acts as a summary of what is to come). Three poems then deal with Sigurðr's youth: *Reginismál* explains how, in order to compensate Hreiðmarr for the accidental killing of his son Otr (Otter), Loki and the gods take the gold of the dwarf Andvari, who therefore curses it to be the cause of strife. Hreiðmarr's son Fáfnir kills his father for the gold, then guards his treasure in dragon's form. His brother Reginn helps Sigurðr to kill his brother Fáfnir, recounted at length in *Fáfnismál*. When Sigurðr roasts Fáfnir's heart and tastes his blood he understands the speech of birds and overhears them discussing Reginn's plans to kill him. He therefore kills his erstwhile mentor and carries off the treasure. The following poem, *Sigrdrífumál*, tells how the hero obtains advice from the wise valkyrie Sigrdrífa. It is incomplete, since at this point the manuscript has a large lacuna, or gap, so the missing material has to be reconstructed from the late *Völsunga saga*, which was based on the heroic Eddaic poems. Sigurðr meets and agrees to marry Brynhildr, but is given a potion which makes him forget this promise. He therefore marries Gunnarr's sister Guðrún and agrees to woo Brynhildr on Gunnarr's behalf (disguising himself as his friend). Eventually Guðrún is goaded to reveal this deception to the proud Brynhildr, and this sets in motion the events of the rest of the compilation. Brynhildr incites the murder of Sigurðr by Guðrún's brothers; Guðrún is inconsolable and Brynhildr kills herself; then Guðrún is forced to marry again. Her second husband Atli kills her brothers, whom she then avenges by killing her sons by him and serving up their bodies at a feast, before stabbing him in their bed and setting the hall on fire. The compilation ends with two texts which recount the events of her third marriage and, in the final text, *Hamðismál*, the end of the dynasty.

Hamðismál

At the start of *Hamðismál* Guðrún incites her sons to kill Iqrmunrekkr, who has had their sister Svanhildr, whom he had married, trodden to death with horses. The prose preceding *Guðrúnarhvöt* informs us that this is because Iqrmunrekkr believed his son Randvér to have had adulterous designs on his wife and so hanged him and executed

Svanhildr in this cruel and public way.¹⁵ Hamðir reminds his mother that revenge has not brought her happiness in the past, having caused the loss of two husbands, brothers, and children. Sqrli refuses to argue but tells his mother to weep as they leave for certain death. On the way the brothers meet their half-brother Erpr, who offers them help in an oblique phrase which they take as an insult and for which they kill him. The text proleptically informs us that they have diminished their strength by a third, but it is not until the brothers reach Iqrmunrekkr's hall, killing many of his men, that they realize what they have done. They cut off Iqrmunrekkr's feet and hands, but his head remains to advise his men to stone them, since they are enchanted against metal weapons. Hamðir and Sqrli recognize that Erpr would have helped them by cutting off Iqrmunrekkr's head, then succumb to their fate, thus bringing to an end the Volsung dynasty.

What these summaries do not make clear is the fact that these poems do not tell a neatly unified and coherent story. They overlap in terms of plot and often conflict in various details, reflecting the fact that they were composed by a variety of poets from different times and places. The summaries may also give a false sense of the character of these poems, since bald plot-outlines may unduly emphasize the bizarre elements of these characters' lives and motivations. The same, of course, is true of Wagner's Ring Cycle, which is based on these poems. Neither Wagner nor the Codex Regius can be fairly represented in summary.¹⁶ However, the foregoing provides the essential facts for newcomers to Eddaic poetry.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 centre on the Eddaic poems and the Codex Regius. Chapter 1 concentrates on the final four poems of the compilation: *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvot*, and *Hamðismál*. It argues that the hero in these poems (whether male or female) is distanced

¹⁵ As seen below, it seems likely that the hanged man of *Hamðismál* 17 is to be identified with Randvér, (the term *systor son* 'sister's son' can be explained by the fact that, as Iermunrekkr's wife, Svanhildr is Randvér's stepmother, and thus he is her brothers' nephew).

¹⁶ Indeed, Wagner particularly lends himself to humorous or parodic summary, as famously seen in the comedienne Anna Russell's *The Ring of the Nibelungs (An Analysis)*, Side 1 of *Anna Russell Sings! Again?* Columbia Masterworks, 1953 (Vinyl).

and represented as belonging to the past, and that *Hamðismál* and *Atlakviða* even seek to undermine the heroic ideal of vengeance. The chapter also employs contemporary gender theory to investigate whether the portrayal of Guðrún is anti-feminist or in fact champions female autonomy. Chapter 2 takes a similar approach, evaluating issues of masculinity and homosociality in the Helgi poems, using the theoretical work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. These two chapters pave the way for an exploration of the twin themes of vengeance and kin-slaying in the Codex Regius compilation as a whole, and the relation of past and present. Chapter 4 moves on to the relationships between the Eddaic poems and the sagas through a detailed study of *Gísla saga*.

GÍSLA SAGA

Amongst Old Norse texts, *Gísla saga Súrssonar* has received a comparatively large amount of critical attention over the last century. Moreover, it holds a central place on the syllabus for some universities, and has seen a relatively well-known film adaptation in Ágúst Guðmundsson's *Útlaginn* (1981). The attractions of the saga are obvious: a plot driven by conflicting loyalties, far less emotional restraint than is usual in the sagas, murder and suspense, a powerful but doomed poet-hero, and so on. The eponymous hero is the central figure of the plot, which follows his life and problematic relationships and particularly the course of his outlawry for killing his brother-in-law Þorgrímr. Gísli manages to survive as an outlaw in Iceland for thirteen years, until he is finally tracked down and killed in a heroic last stand which ultimately costs the life of eight of his enemies and brings the rest nothing but shame.

There is some uncertainty as to the date of many sagas, including *Gísla saga*, and this ties in with the more extensive debate over the authenticity and provenance of skaldic verses contained within sagas. As Peter Foote aptly states with regard to the poetry in *Gísla saga*: 'It may be the work of Gísli in the tenth century, as it purports to be. It may be the work of the author of the saga we now have. It may also be the creation of a man who lived some time between Gísli's death

and the time when the saga was written.¹⁷ Here, following Foote's persuasive arguments, the discussion assumes that the verses are not by Gísli but were composed some time after Gísli's death and adopted (and possibly modified) by the saga author.¹⁸ On the basis of the saga's literary relationships with *Droplaugarsona saga* (early thirteenth century) and *Eyrbyggja saga* (1220–50), and some contemporary historical events, Foote places the date of *Gísli saga* soon after 1225.

Unusually for the Norse sagas, *Gísli saga* survives in two important redactions: the 'M' version, which is shorter and which has been most discussed, and the 'S' version, which is longer and less frequently analysed. It used to be thought that the longer version was later and secondary to the shorter one, but that view was challenged in the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁹ Nevertheless, a full comparison of the different versions is still lacking, and hence the shorter version is the one analysed in Chapter 4.²⁰ Critical discussion of *Gísli saga* has ranged from textual issues such as these, to literary concerns such as the question of the identity of Vésteinn's killer, and the nature of Gísli's heroism and the saga author's attitude to it.²¹ Chapter 4 reconsiders two other fairly well-trodden paths of enquiry into this text—the saga's allusions to Eddaic verse and its author's use of sexual themes—but

¹⁷ Peter Foote, 'An Essay on the Saga of Gisli and its Icelandic Background', in *The Saga of Gisli*, trans. George Johnstone, ed. Peter Foote (London: Dent, 1963), 93–134, at pp. 113–14.

¹⁸ On this issue, as well as Foote's essay, see further the discussion and references in Jamie Cochrane, 'Word-play on *björg* in Dreams and Elsewhere,' *Saga-Book*, 28 (2004), 95–104, at 102, and the more detailed analysis and comprehensive argument in Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 3.

¹⁹ For a summary and references, see Carol J. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. Clover and Lindow, 239–315, at 247.

²⁰ Emily Lethbridge is doing valuable work on precisely this area, much of which is still to be published. See initially, 'Narrative Variation in the Texts of *Gísli saga Súrssonar*', in Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge (eds.), *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability, and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010). All quotations from *Gísli saga* below are from the edition in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, VI (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943).

²¹ For an overview, see Riti Kroesen, 'Gísli saga', in Philip Pulsiano *et al.* (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1993), 227–8.

by considering them together offers a rather different but rewarding perspective on the text. It argues that the saga's use of and relation to the past is bound up with the network of sexual themes which runs through the text, exploring its use of *níð*, or the imputation of stigmatized effeminacy, and its conceptual opposite, phallic aggression, in order to explain the saga's ambivalent attitude towards a glorious hero, who does not fit into a world where the demands of Christianity are superseding concerns of honour and vengeance.

Although the New Testament clearly prohibits Christians from taking personal revenge, this has not stopped several nominally Christian societies from engaging in vengeance, and medieval Iceland was no exception. However, Chapter 5 shows that attitudes were changing in Icelandic society, and analyses the representation of revenge in family and contemporary sagas in the light of ecclesiastical precepts. It argues for a growing perception that secular revenge must be tempered with moderation, and that clerics should not involve themselves in acts of vengeance, although this is often difficult for them because the failure to take revenge can often seem to impugn their masculinity. Revenge comes to be associated with the past, but its gender implications give it a stranglehold on the present which is hard to shake off. Chapter 5 looks at these gender implications from the point of view of male clerics, while Chapter 6 investigates the attitude to women in a more detailed examination of *Sturlunga saga*.

STURLUNGA SAGA

This compilation, created around 1300, collects together a number of sagas composed during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries about the events of those centuries, hence the common designation of them as *samtíðar sögur* (contemporary sagas). As Jón Jóhannesson states, the compilation is 'ekki þjóðarsaga, heldur persónusaga og saga um deilur og vígaferli' ('not the story of a nation, rather a story of individuals and about quarrels and killings').²² As well as the *páttr*

²² Jón Jóhannesson, 'Um Sturlunga sögu', in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnþórgason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), vol ii, p. xii.

(a short self-contained narrative) of Geirmundr heljarskinn with which it begins, the compilation contains several sagas, including *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*,²³ and the longest and most important component, Sturla Þórðarsson's *Íslendinga saga*, which begins in around 1183 and ends in around 1264, just after Iceland had become subject to the Norwegian king. As with *Gísla saga*, the authenticity and dating of the many skaldic verses contained within *Sturlunga saga* is much debated. Again, however, it seems sensible to assume that some or all of them may have been composed some time after the events to which they relate, and have been adopted and possibly modified by the authors.

As Chapter 6 shows, the compilation has received a lot of attention from a historical perspective, but very little from a literary one because it is often seen as a straightforwardly historical account. This chapter identifies and explores literary themes and motifs, such as the female inciter, in order to investigate the representation of women in the compilation. It argues that women play a significant role in the compilation's exploration of vengeance and violence in the Sturlung Age, and demonstrates the value of literary analysis of these texts.

It is evident that this study covers a lot of ground and, in doing so, inevitably touches on numerous important critical issues which it is not possible to deal with adequately in a single book. It is also far from comprehensive in its analysis of the texts explored here, and there are many relevant angles and texts which are not covered or are only hinted at. What the book aims to do is to shed new light on the texts and issues it does cover by the way that it draws together not only contemporary theories and medieval texts, but also Eddaic poems and family and contemporary sagas, into a fruitful dialogue which will hopefully inspire further research into these areas. It does not aim to present a coherent picture, since the argument is precisely that the texts present a diverse and often conflicting set of attitudes towards issues of gender, violence, and the past, and the relation of these themes to each other. What is certain, however, is their inextricable interrelation and their generative power as literary inspiration for Norse authors.

²³ Edited separately by Ursula Dronke (as Ursula Brown), *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

1

Undermining Vengeance: Distancing and Anti-feminism in the Guðrún Poems

Vengeance is of central importance to the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*; it underpins the action of each one. This first chapter focuses on the final four poems of the Codex Regius—*Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Hamðismál*—since they constitute a manageable body of material for close analysis, unified by the figure of Guðrún, although containing significantly different perspectives on revenge. It is argued that the hero in these poems (whether male or female) is distanced and represented as belonging to the past, and that *Hamðismál* and *Atlakviða* even seek to undermine the heroic ideal of vengeance. The chapter also asks whether the portrayal of Guðrún is anti-feminist, or in fact represents an autonomous female figure, in control of her own destiny. It forms one part of a pair with Chapter 2, which evaluates the Helgi poems' perspective on masculinity and homosociality. The poems considered here also provide an introduction to the twin themes of vengeance and kin-slaying in the Codex Regius compilation as a whole and the relation of past and present, which will be considered in Chapter 3.

The Russian critic M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij makes the following statement concerning the Eddaic lays under discussion here:

To a modern man it might seem that Guðrún's vengeance is a piling up of monstrous crimes designed to horrify the hearers. But to interpret thus her vengeance would be, of course, to ignore the ethics of the society where this heroic legend and the lays based on it were popular. Since the greater the sacrifices a vengeance requires the more heroic it is, Guðrún's vengeance for her brothers no doubt seemed an unexampled heroic deed, and this is explicitly said in the lays: *ferr engi svá síðan*... and *Sæll er hverr síðan*...¹

¹ M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, 'Valkyries and Heroes', *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 97 (1982), 81–93, at 86.

I quote this statement at the outset principally because the critical approach it exemplifies is diametrically opposed to mine in this chapter. Although he claims to be interpreting the lays on their own terms, Steblin-Kamenskij makes unsupported generalizations about 'the ethics of the society', assuming that it regards vengeance as heroic but providing no corroborating evidence. Moreover, he ignores the context of the lines he quotes, which, as we shall see shortly, makes their interpretation more complex than he indicates. Finally, he ignores the fact, which is emphasized below, that the heroic poems he quotes often distance the events they describe and so the relation of these events to the society for which the poems were composed may be far from straightforward, not to mention the possibility that the poems may in fact be working *against* a social ethic (the so-called vengeance imperative).

THE DISTANCED PAST AND THE HEROIC IDEAL

In the Eddaic poems the hero and the heroic are frequently observed from a distanced perspective, and this is seen most clearly in the opening formulae:

Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrsta:

Ár var alda, þat er arar gullo.
It was in early times, when eagles yelled.

Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta:

Ár var, þatz Guðrún gorrðiz at deya.
It was early, when Guðrún prepared to die.

Sigurðarkviða in skamma:

Ár var, þatz Sigurðr sótti Giúca.
It was early, when Sigurðr sought Giúki.

Oddrúnargráta:

Heyrða ec segia í sǫgom fornóm.
I heard it said in ancient stories.

Atlamál:

Frétt hefir öld ófo, þá er endr um gorðo / seggir samkundo.
The world has learned of the enmity, when once warriors
made a meeting.

Hamðismál is no exception to this tendency, recalling (str. 2):

Vara þat nú né í gær,
þat hefir langt liðit síðan,
er fát fornara, fremr var þat hálfo,
er hvatti Guðrún...

It was not now nor yesterday, it has long since passed by—few things are older; further [back] was that by half [as much again]—when Guðrún whetted...

The vengeance of the poem is set long in the poet's past: the cumulative effect of the first six lines opens up a yawning chasm of time, emphasizing that the events about to unfold are unimaginably ancient. Moreover, although the companion-poem *Guðrúnarhvot* makes no mention of the age of the events, the opening formula—'Þá frá ek..., er...' ('Then I heard..., when...')—is comparable to that in *Oddrúnargráta* and *Atlamál*.²

This perspective is thus not confined to any particular date of a poem, since it appears both in poems generally considered old, as well as those that are thought to be young.³ Certainly the motif is widespread in 'heroic' literature. As Aaron Gurevich states:

The time of the heroic lay is absolute, epic time. It is irretrievable, majestic; it is 'the good old days', the only time when the grandiose figures the heroic lays tell about existed. Everything that happened in those former times has been completely finished. In the words of M. Bakhtin, an 'absolute, epic distance' separates heroic time and the time when the lay is performed.⁴

² Compare also *Háttatal*, verse 94: 'slíkt var allt fyr liðit ár' ('such was all in time past'), which appears in the context of a corrupt verse mentioning the prowess of heroes such as Kraki, Haki, Sigurðr, Ragnarr. *Háttatal*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1999), 37.

³ On the dating of Eddaic texts (and its concomitant problems), see the Introduction above.

⁴ Aaron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. Howlett (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 122; cf. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael

This distancing might be seen as a function of the genuine antiquity of the poems and their subject matter. However, I want to argue here for a perception that the 'heroic ideal' (as embodied in texts such as the Helgi-poems) *belongs* to the past, a perception which is observable in several Eddaic poems—even in some of those ostensibly most ancient. This view stands in stark contrast to Theodore M. Andersson's belief that the heroic poems: 'eulogize the individual who does what honor demands and despises the consequences.'⁵

Guðrún is exceptional and an outsider (as is Brynhildr); her individuality, her self-assertion, is admirable in its strength, but it is not in fact unambiguously eulogized, as we shall see, for it is ultimately fatal—both for her and her family line, and also for the society which cannot contain her. Indeed, her uniqueness may render her an 'archetype'—it is argued below that, in *Hamðismál*, Guðrún and her sons are both made representatives of the 'heroic ideal', and simultaneously are also vehicles through which the poet can explore the dilemmas of heroic society; the characteristics of a Heroic Age (as imaginatively recreated by the poet) inhere in them. In conjunction with the distancing effect that has already been explored, it is arguable that the 'heroic ideal' is not (and should not be) applicable to the present, and moreover that *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvöt* share a common theme in their undermining of the revenge ethic.

HAMÐISMÁL AND GUÐRÚNARHVÖT: UNDERMINING THE ETHIC OF VENGEANCE

Hamðir reveals in *Guðrúnarhvöt*, strophe 5, that

Urðo þér bræðra hefndir
slíðrar oc sárar, er þú sono myrðir...

For you, brothers' vengeance became terrible and painful, when you murdered your sons.

Holquist, University of Texas Press Slavic Series, 1 (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981; repr. 1996), 3–40, esp. 13–17.

⁵ Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas', *Speculum*, 45 (1970), 575–93, at 593.

He casts up in his mother's face her attempt to avenge the murder of her first husband Sigurðr by killing her second husband Atli's sons, Erpr and Eitill, because in doing so she caused pain to herself.⁶

Likewise in *Hamðismál*, strophe 8, Hamðir reproaches his mother for lack of foresight, continuing with what Dronke calls 'cynically sententious lines':⁷

svá scyldi hverr qðrom veria til aldrлага
sverði sárbeito, at sér né striddit.

Each against the other unto his life's end should wield a wound-cutting sword such that one harms not oneself.

In *Guðrúnarhvot*, strophe 5, there is the explicit recognition that, ironically, if Guðrún had not taken vengeance for the previous killing of her brothers, she would have made it much easier to avenge Svanhildr, since there would now be four half-brothers:

knættim *allir* lqrmunrecci,
samhyggiendr, systor hefna.⁸

We could all, thinking together, have avenged our sister upon lqrmunrekkr.

In this poem no more is seen of the two sons, as they ride to avenge Svanhildr, and the audience is left with scant hope of their survival. Hamðir warns (str. 8):

at þú erfi at ql oss dryccir,
at Svanhildi oc sono þína.

that you might drink a funeral feast to all of us, to Svanhildr and your sons.

Guðrún, who had previously been described as *Hlæiandi* ('laughing') (str. 7), is left *grátandi* ('weeping') (str. 9) to bemoan her fate. The poem may end on a note of consolation for the listening audience, whose own sorrows may be lessened by this litany of woe (str. 21), but the only way that Guðrún can find peace is in death: 'megi

⁶ Indeed, in the prose prologue to *Guðrúnarhvot*, we are told that Guðrún unsuccessfully attempts to drown herself after this deed.

⁷ Dronke I, 151.

⁸ Both Neckel-Kuhn and Dronke supply 'allir' here from the equivalent passage in *Volsunga saga* to fill the obvious metrical gap (ibid. 155).

brenna brióst þǫlvafult eldr' ('May fire burn the breast full of evils') (str. 20).

In *Hamðismál*, by contrast, the majority of the poem concerns the brothers' vengeance. Moreover, here the responsibility for the ironic loss of a potential helper in their mission is taken from Guðrún's shoulders and placed on their own, when they kill their half-brother, the second Erpr: 'þverðo þeir þrótt sinn at þriðungi' ('they diminished their strength by a third') (str. 15).⁹ This is even more striking if one makes a comparison with *Guðrúnarhvot*, insofar as Hamðir does exactly that for which he reproaches his mother: he acts without foresight. The connection may be underlined by the repeated use of the name 'Erpr'—paralleling the two murders: one by a mother, one by a brother. The poet foregrounds the brothers' error to the audience, but it is not until the dénouement when Iqrmunrekkr's calls for the brothers to be stoned that he allows them to recognize: 'Af væri nú haufuð, ef Erpr lifði' ('The head would be off now, if Erpr lived') (str. 28).

Guðrún's three similes in strophe 5 illustrate movingly the fact that 'lifð einir ér þátta ættar minnar' ('you [i.e. Hamðir and Sǫrli] alone live of the strands of my race') (str. 4). She is 'Einstæð... sem ǫsp í holti' ('Alone... like an aspen in the wood'); 'fallin at frændom sem fura at qvisti' ('bereft of kinsmen as a fir-tree of branches'); and 'vaðin at vilia sem viðr at laufi' ('destitute of pleasures as a forest of leaves'). This imagery is picked up again at the end of the poem, where the satisfaction that the brothers derive from the fact that 'Vel hǫfom við vegit' ('We have fought well') and 'góðs hǫfom tírar fengið' ('We have gained good glory') is undercut by the reminiscence of Guðrún's awful loneliness in the simile 'sem ernir á qvisti' ('as eagles on a branch') (str. 30).¹⁰ Guðrún likewise stands on men's corpses—those of her kinsmen—just as the brothers, like her, are left 'standing alone'.

The poem is thus framed with 'sorrowful tasks' and the deaths of the last living relatives of the woman who incited their vengeance.

⁹ cf. Dronke I, 155; she suggests the second Erpr may be the bastard son of a foreign concubine of Iqrmunrekkr's (p. 230).

¹⁰ See further Ch. 3 below for more detailed comments on tree and branch imagery in *Hamðismál*.

Indeed, there is a transference of ideas between the kindling of *sorg* (in str. 1) and Guðrún inciting her sons, with the result of *sorg*. Guðrún may have been left *einstæð* ('alone') in strophe 5, but she is now totally isolated, with no hope of redress and, from a modern perspective at least, it seems only an empty comfort that her daughter has been avenged. It is true that Jenny Jochens asserts that, 'Having privileged strong emotional ties to [Sigurðr, Guðrún] chooses their offspring over sons produced in a union over which she had little choice and in which she did not become emotionally involved'.¹¹ However, there is no evidence whatsoever that she was not 'emotionally involved' with Hamðir and Sqrli—if not, why should she weep? The poet makes no comment about Guðrún's relationship with their father, and the idea that she loves Svanhildr more because she is born of Sigurðr remains speculative.

The function of the eerie emblem of the sister's son hanged on *vargtré vindköld* ('the wind-cold wolf-tree') (str. 17) is surely not just to contribute to an impression of desolation—it also adds another kin-killing to that just previously perpetrated by the brothers, since it seems likely that the hanged man is Iqrmunrekkr's son Randvér, who he believed had adulterous designs on Svanhildr and whom he therefore executed.¹² Moreover, the 'wolf-tree' image perhaps hints that Guðrún is ultimately responsible for the deaths of her final two sons, just as she killed the offspring of her union with Atli—certainly the tree imagery of the poem's beginning is here picked up in a dark and ominous way, and this also reinforces the argument that it is deliberately revived at the end of the poem to foreground the sterility of the vengeance achieved.

The only scene of apparent happiness in *Hamðismál*, the *glaumr* ('merriment') in Iqrmunrekkr's hall, is not only tainted with a note of horror as he laughs about hanging the two young men (strophes 18–21), but is also totally overshadowed by the image in the previous strophe of the hanged man, and followed by the horrific picture of strophe 23: 'í blóði bragnar lágo, komið ór bríosti Gotna' ('men lay in blood come out of the breasts of the Goths'). That this unpleasant scene is not just

¹¹ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 147.

¹² As Iqrmunrekkr's wife, Svanhildr is Randvér's stepmother, and thus he is her brothers' nephew, or their *systor son*.

an ancient legend, but also has relevance to the poem's audience, is perhaps signified by the sense of timelessness identified in strophe 2, linked with the penultimate strophe 'góðs hofom tírar fengit, þótt scylim nú eða í gær deyia' ('We have gained good glory, though we should die now or tomorrow'). The verbal echo here with 'Vara þat nú né í gær' (strophe 2) is paralleled by the use of the term *fornara* ('more ancient') in strophe 2 and the echo in the final prose comment that 'Þetta ero kǫlluð Hamðismál in forno' ('This is called the ancient lay of Hamðir'). The timelessness both distances the action, but also renders it eternally relevant by the very non-specificity of the chronology.

One of the brothers (unnamed) calls for the two of them to avoid 'the example of wolves', saying (str. 29) they should not fight

sem grey norna, þau er gráðug ero
í auðn um alin.

like the dogs of the Norns, which, greedy, are reared in the wilderness.

So, too, it seems the poet calls for this principle to be extended outside the immediate family line to society at large—heroes must live not in a 'wilderness', snapping at each other's heels like dogs, but in a community. He does not minimize the tragedy of Svanhildr's death—indeed the description in strophe 3 heightens its horror—but reminds the audience that revenge is self-perpetuating and ultimately leads to loneliness and sterility. The very last statement of the poem proper is as follows:

Þar fell Sqrli at salar gaffli,
en Hamðir hné at húsbaki.

Sqrli fell there at the gable of the hall, but Hamðir sank down at the back of the house.

This separation of the brothers is surely not otiose, but rather intended to foreground the loneliness of revenge once more. As von See writes, 'Der Gegensatz . . . ist so betont, daß der Dichter sicherlich hierauf das Gewicht legen wollte' ('The opposition . . . is emphasized so much that the poet surely wanted to lay stress on it'). He continues: 'Der elegische Ton aus Str. 10 *fiarri munom deyia* "fern von hier werden wir sterben" klingt hier zum Schluß noch einmal an' ('The elegiac tone from strophe 10 *fiarri munom deyia* "far from here will we die" here is reminiscent

of the end once again').¹³ *Hamðismál* ends with the image of two young men, lying dead, alone, on a pile of bloody corpses, and the mind inevitably returns—not least because of the verbal echoes—to Guðrún in her splendid but barren isolation. It cannot be anachronistic, then, to see the poem as conveying a sense that the ethic of vengeance for kin is limited and even self-destructive.

As corroboration for this idea, we may look to verse 59 of *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson's compendium of poetic language and kennings, where the event Guðrún is associated with is causing the death of a son—'Varð sjálf sonar... Goðrún bani' ('Guðrún herself became her son's slayer').¹⁴ Anthony Faulkes convincingly argues on the grounds of rhyme for the emendation of *sonar* to *sona* (p. 166), which then makes the verse refer to two sons. The story alluded to could therefore refer to one of two events, the first of which is Guðrún's actual slaying of her two sons by Atli (as Faulkes reads). Since Hamðir is also mentioned in the same verse, however, it could instead (or in addition) refer to her responsibility for the later slaying of Hamðir and Sqrli. Certainly, the *Skáldskaparmál* verse is evidence that Guðrún was associated primarily with killing her kin for at least one other medieval author and audience.

Guðrúnarhvöt shows Guðrún not only as the murderess of *Atla-kviða*, but also as a victim of heroic society's treatment of women. When her brothers kill Sigurðr, who 'Einn var mér... / þlloin betri' ('Alone for me was... better than all') (str. 10), she is hurt grievously: 'Svárra sár / sakat ek né kunna' ('A heavier pain I never saw nor knew') (str. 11). However, that is not the end:

meirr þóttuz mér um stríða,
er mic þðlingar Atla gáfo.

they intended to harm me more, when those princes gave me to Atli. (str. 11)

In this context, the murder of her sons is seen in strophe 12 less as the terrible and unnatural deed of *Atlamál* than as a sad necessity imposed by circumstances forced on her by others:

¹³ von See, 'Die Sage von Hamdir und Sörli', 230.

¹⁴ *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1997), 18.

máttigac bqlva bætr um vinna,
 áðr ec hnóf hqfuð af Hniflingom.

I was not able to bring about compensation for my ills, till I lopped the heads off the Hniflungs.

Her attempted suicide here (which she describes in the following strophe) may be seen by juxtaposition to be, at least in part, motivated by her sorrow at killing the boys. In this poem Svanhildr is indeed seen as the favourite child—‘er ec minna barna bazt full-hugðac’ (‘for whom of my children I most fully cared’) (str. 15)—but she is destroyed by marriage, the radiant figure clothed in gold and costly weavings ‘áðr ec gæfac Goðþióðar til’ (‘before I gave her to the Gothic people’) (str. 16) trodden in the mud beneath horses’ hooves.

The thought of her husband’s ignominious murder in their bed combined with the memory of her brother’s heart being cut from his living body (str. 17) is enough to send her into a kind of grief-stricken hallucination that Sigurðr is returning to her:

Beittu, Sigurðr, inn blacca mar...
 Minnztu, Sigurðr...?

Bridle, Sigurðr, the black horse... Do you remember, Sigurðr...? (str. 18–19)

Moreover, the ostensible comfort that the uttering of *þetta tregróf* (‘this series of sorrows’) (str. 21) is to be, can hardly blot out the terrible pathos of a sorrow so great that only the funeral-pyre of strophe 20 can end it.

In this poem, certainly, woman appears as a victim or pawn of heroic society, and Sävborg’s comment seems to epitomize the portrayal of Guðrún in many of the poems which deal with her: ‘För Gudrun gäller sorg i der förflutna, sorg i nuet och sorg i framtiden’ (‘For Guðrún there is grief in the past, grief in the present, and grief in the future’).¹⁵

¹⁵ Daniel Sävborg, *Sorg och elegi i Eddans hjälteediktning* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1997), 115.

ATLAKVIÐA: UNDERMINING GUÐRÚN?

Atlakviða initially seems to present a straightforward validation of heroic behaviour: the poet explicitly praises Gunnarr's actions on more than one occasion. In strophe 9 Gunnarr speaks 'sem konungr scyldi' ('as a king should') and, although his people weep as they see him off, it is not like the hopeless weeping of Guðrún in *Guðrúnarhvot*. There is a sense that Gunnarr and Högni are doing what is fitting, and they leave an heir behind them, into whose mouth the poet puts words that imply not a sense of hubris, but rather a glorious heroic spirit: 'Heilir farit nú oc horscir, / hvars ycr hugr teygir!' ('May you go now unharmed and wise, wherever your spirit takes you!') (str. 12). Again, Högni's conduct is explicitly praised in strophe 19:

svá scal frœcn fiádom veriaz,
sem Högni varði hendr sínar.¹⁶

so shall a brave one defend himself against foes, as Högni defended himself.

However, the similar construction with which the poet ostensibly praises Gunnarr's death rings false:

svá scal gulli frœcn hringdrifi
við fira halda.

Thus shall a bold ring-strewer keep his gold from men. (str. 31)

Here the gnomic construction would naturally lead one to expect the 'ring-strewer' to distribute his gold generously among his followers, in the typical Germanic lord-retainer manner. In the Anglo-Saxon gnomic poems, as just one example, we find the proverbial wisdom that 'hord [sceal] in streonum bidan . . . hwonne hine guman gedælen' ('a hoard shall remain in its resting-place . . . until men distribute it').¹⁷ However, we are told in *Atlakviða* that Gunnarr instead 'keep[s it] from men'. The king's concern to keep the treasure from

¹⁶ Adopting Dronke's emendation for the last word (instead of *Gunnars*, Dronke I, 59).

¹⁷ *Maxims I*, ll. 67–8, in *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 159.

Atli at all costs seems futile insofar as what the poet speaks of as the *arfi Niflunga* ('Niblungs' inheritance') (str. 27), instead of being used to forge societal bonds, is destined to lie useless at the bottom of the Rhine.¹⁸ The terrible sway treasure can exert over men and its deleterious effects are seen, too, in the description the poet gives of the gold as *rógmálmi scatna* ('discord-metal of men') (str. 27), a phrase foregrounded by its unusually skaldic flavour. Here, although heroic deeds are praised, there is an implication that love for gold can be a dangerous thing, for the individual as for a society. A similar conception is found in the *Icelandic Rune-Poem*, where 'fer frænda róg' ('wealth is kinsmen's discord').¹⁹ Gunnarr's behaviour is in marked contrast to Guðrún's in strophe 39:

Gulli seri in gaglbiarta,
hringom rauðom reifði hon húskarla.

The gosling-bright one strewed gold, with red rings she showered the men-servants.

Certainly, it is going too far to state with Stephens that Gunnarr and Högni's 'acts of self-destruction are emphasized and approved by authorial comment',²⁰ although one might agree that courage in the face of death is praised in this poem. It is possible, indeed, that the poet both admires Gunnarr (in his heroic lack of self-regard) and also criticizes him (because of the effect his actions will have on his people).

There is no explicit condemnation of Guðrún's actions in *Atlakviða*. Nevertheless, there is a clear sense of horrified admiration for the stature of this woman in the final strophe:

ferr engi svá síðan
brúðr í brynio brœðr at hefna;

¹⁸ Eis's view that this is to prevent the sacrilege of the *áskunni arfi* falling into human hands seems tenuous; Gerhard Eis, 'Die Hortforderung,' *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, NS 7 (1957), 209–23, at 221–2.

¹⁹ *Icelandic Rune-Poem*, ed. R. I. Page (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1999), 27.

²⁰ John Stephens, 'The Poet and *Atlakviða*: Variations on some themes', in Gabriel Turville-Petre and John Stanley Martin (eds.), *Iceland and the Medieval World: Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell* (Victoria, Australia: Organising Committee for Publishing a Volume in Honour of Professor Maxwell, 1974), 56–62, at 61.

hon hefir þriggia þjóðkonunga
banorð borit, biqt, áðr sylv.

never afterwards will a bride in a mailcoat thus go to avenge her brothers. She was the bane of three nation-kings, bright one, before she died. (str. 44)

It is possible, as Dronke suggests, that this strophe is a later addition by a reciter. However, whether the poem ends with strophe 42 or 43, the final emphasis is on the deaths Guðrún has caused. Likewise, in strophes 36 to 38 the horror of the child-murder is foregrounded by the explicit physical detail of the unsuspecting cannibalism. Moreover, although the way the boys' humanity is stressed in strophe 37 suggests that Guðrún may feel some sorrow at their deaths, it also prevents us from seeing them as mere elements of the plot, so that we appreciate the full enormity of the deed. We have seen *Guðrúnarhvot's* emphasis on Guðrún's anger at the Fates for causing her to kill her sons, but there is no comparable emphasis in *Atlakviða*. Rather, there is an implication that Guðrún is unnatural in her inability to weep (str. 38):

gréto börn Húna,
nema ein Guðrún, er hon æva grét.

the Huns' children wept—except Guðrún alone, she who never wept.

Furthermore, the description of her murder of Atli is astonishingly sympathetic—not to her, but to the ostensible villain of the piece (str. 40):

Óvarr Atla, móðan hafði hann sic druccit,
vápn hafði hann ekki.

Unwary Atli... he had drunk himself weary; weapons had he none.

Not only does Guðrún here appear less than honourable in her killing of a defenceless man—in just the way her beloved Sigurðr was killed in their bed in *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvot*—but the poet quashes any idea that he was a tyrannical or proud husband as in *Atlamál* by stating:

opt var sá leicr betri, þá er þau lint scyldo
optarr um faðmaz fyr qðlingom.

often the play was better, when tenderly they would frequently embrace before the noblemen. (str. 40)

This perspective lends great pathos to the previous line: ‘varnaðit hann við Guðrúno’ (‘he was not on guard against Guðrún’), and suggests that she is a different person now that the heroic ethic has possessed her. This idea is borne out by the strange, fey description of her in strophe 35: ‘Scævaði þá in scírleita . . . afkár dís’ (‘The lambent-faced one darted then . . . wild lady’).²¹ It also renders more brutal what Dronke calls ‘an ironic play on the connotations of [*leikr*]: “love-sport” (which Guðrún should have offered her husband), and “cruel trick” (which she does offer him)’.²²

Certainly, any criticism of the vengeance imperative in this poem is not overt, and, as we have seen, heroism is explicitly praised in Högni’s behaviour. However, the poet seems to depict Guðrún as a kind of impressive monster in her inhuman self-control. Indeed, amongst those she burns in the hall, it is the *scíaldmeyjar* (‘shield-maidens’) who are singled out at the end, who ‘aldrstamar, hnigo í eld heitan’ (‘stemmed of life, sank down in the hot fire’) (str. 42), which perhaps hints at the irony inherent in the death of heroic women owing to the adherence of another ‘brúðr í brynio’ (‘bride in a mailcoat’) to the heroic ethic of vengeance.

ATLAMÁL: DEFLATING THE HEROIC

Atlamál, at just over one hundred strophes compared to the forty-four of *Atlakviða*, is at first glance merely a modernizing expansion of what most scholars deem to be an earlier work. However, a closer look reveals it to be a more fundamental reworking, or, as T. M. Andersson aptly puts it, a ‘remodelling according to . . . consistent poetic and psychological principles’.²³ Andersson examines several

²¹ Dronke I reads ‘dæmonic woman’ (p. 10), and the word *dís* has a supernatural sense.

²² Dronke I, 72. There are other sympathetic portrayals of Atli, too. For example, *Guðrúnarkviða 9nnor* reveals his struggles with his nightmares, and a positive version of his character appears in the Middle High German epic *Das Nibelungenlied*.

²³ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘Did the Poet of *Atlamál* Know *Atlaqviða*’, in Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (eds.), *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies, 4 ([Winnipeg]: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 243–57, at 250.

differences between *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*, but the ones of interest here are those concerning the roles, first of Gunnarr and Högni, then of Guðrún and Atli.

The sympathy of the poet at first seems to be squarely with the brothers. He opens by describing the meeting of their enemies in terms of treachery: the brothers were *sannráðnir* ('truly betrayed') (str. 1) and *scylðoat feigir* ('should not have been doomed') (str. 2). Andersson would place with this the 'cordial and unsuspecting reception accorded Vingi by the Burgundians' which was elaborated in order to 'set off the baseness of [Vingi's] betrayal', or as a rationalization:

Twice the poet notes a failure to perceive deceitfulness when it was plain to see... We may suppose that the poet did not appreciate the point in *Atlaqviða* that one may accept one's fate with open eyes and chose to develop the theme of unawareness instead... [or wished] to suppress the fear which the poet of *Atlaqviða* expressly attributes to the Burgundians as being unworthy of them. (p. 249)

However, in view of the fact that the brothers also ignore quite clear warnings from their wives in the form of ominous dreams, their reinterpretation of which is highly implausible, one has to wonder whether the poet is not characterizing the undoubtedly heroic brothers as also being obstinately short-sighted. It is true that heroes cannot simply decide to stay at home in the face of danger and lose face, and their unguardedness is not explicitly criticized in strophes 5 and 7.²⁴ However, after the misinterpretation of the dreams and dismissal of their wives' fears in strophe 9 onwards, the poet overtly comments on the numbers they travelled in (str. 30):

fóro fimm saman, fleiri til vóro
hálfu húskarlar, hugat var því illa.

²⁴ For an analysis of the psychology of honour and shame, see William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), esp. ch. 3 ('Emotions, Honor, and the Affective Life of the Heroic'), part of which considers these concepts as mediated by saga texts. Here, however, I am more narrowly concerned with whether the brothers are portrayed critically (to some degree) in the manner they take up Atli's challenge, not the social pressure upon them to accept it.

They went, five together—more housemen by half [as much again] were available—it was ill thought out.

Nevertheless, he leaves the possibility that fate is to blame for this to some degree also (strophes 28–9, 48), and does not undercut the valour of their doomed defence at all:

Þiqrco þar gorðo, þeiri var við brugðit;
þat brá um alt annat, er unno þörn Giúca.

A dispute they made then which was extolled—that surpassed all others, what the children of Giúki did. (str. 52)

Moreover, the expansion of the Hialli episode seems designed to heighten Högni's heroism, as the Orpheus-like skill of Gunnarr's podiatric harp-playing lends him a certain romantic cachet.²⁵ So, although the poet may be depicting some element of hubris (or foolhardy lack of caution), the final emphasis is on the brothers' heroic acceptance of their fate:

Dó þá dýrir, dags var heldr snemma,
léto þeir á lesti lífa íþróttu.

Then dear ones died, it was rather early in the day. At the last they caused prowess to live. (str. 67)

The rest of *Atlamál* is almost wholly taken up by the marital bickering of Atli and Guðrún, and this gives the poem an entirely different character from *Atlakviða*: with the introduction of the brothers' wives, around 60 per cent of the poem consists of marital interchanges—generally acrimonious. Atli and Guðrún's relationship has no hint of anything other than hostility, nor is there any indication that Guðrún feels sorrow at killing her children (strophes 77–9), and, whereas the poet partly validates the brothers' behaviour, he undermines Guðrún's role entirely.

We do not find *Atlakviða's* sympathy for Atli: like the brothers, he is depicted as easily duped (str. 74):

²⁵ Although Gunnarr plays the harp with his hands in *Atlakviða* (str. 32), here the poet of *Atlamál* rationalizes the fact that he has been bound and makes him play movingly with his feet. As Dronke says, this 'grotesque version' proved more popular in later illustrations (Dronke I, 131).

Gnótt var grunnýðgi, er gramr því trúði,
 sýn var sveipvísi, ef hann sín gæði.

There was an abundance of shallow-mindedness when the leader believed this—the duplicity was obvious, if he had been on his guard.

However, with the exception of the personal pronoun, the last two lines are an exact repetition of the poet's comment about the brothers in strophe 7. The paralleling of Atli's situation with that of the brothers is telling, for it renders the deceitful Guðrún comparable to Atli's treacherous messengers, and, although she is included in the poet's final validation of the *born* *Giúca* ('children of Giúki') (str. 52), it seems that the poet feels that her revenge for their death goes too far. He precedes her murder of the children with this comment (str. 76):

ströng var stórhuguð, stríddi hon ætt Buðla,
 vildi hon ver sínom *vinna* ofrhefndir.

The great-minded one was strong; she pained the race of Buðli; she wished to work great revenge on her husband.

Although it can be interpreted neutrally, the last word, *ofrhefndir*, may carry the sense that the revenge is not just 'great', but 'too great'.²⁶ Moreover, there is an awful pathos in the fact that the children, although afraid (*glúpnodo*), do not cry (*gréto þeygi*, str. 77). Despite the rather unconvincing calm prescience of their warning 'scom mun ró reiði, ef þú reynir gorva' ('Short will be the rest for wrath, if you do try this') (str. 78), this surely necessitates a negative construction of Guðrún's action. Moreover, the boys are not designated by bestial adjectives here, as they are in other poems, and we are told that she 'Brá þá barnæsko' ('destroyed their childhood') (str. 79).

Both she and her husband, however, are depicted utterly unsympathetically in their final argument, as:

²⁶ The prefix *ofr-* is ambiguous in a similar way to the cognate term *ofer-* in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*'s notorious crux *ofermod*. Cleasby-Vigfusson glosses the adverb *ofr* as 'over-greatly', 'exceedingly', and its compounds occupy the semantic range between 'excessive' and 'overwhelming'. *Ofrhefnd* appears here with reference to the same *Atlamál* citation, and is translated 'a fearful vengeance', but it could just as easily be rendered 'excessive vengeance'.

Sáto samtýnis, senduz fárhugi,
henduz heiptyrði, hvártki sér unði.

They sat in the same dwelling, sent each other hostile thoughts, caught from each other words of hatred—neither was satisfied. (str. 88)

They are portrayed equally fairly, and equally unattractively. When Atli is dead, the narrator reminds us that he will be mourned by a family, too: ‘niðiom stríð æxti’ (‘made his kinsmen’s grief grow’), but he also records that ‘efndi ítrborin alt, þatz réð heita’ (‘The noble-born one fulfilled all that she decided to promise’) (str. 104). Nevertheless, Guðrún is far from being the heroine of this poem, and the poet designates her decision to attempt suicide as *fróð* (‘wise’) (str. 104).

After such a scene, the final strophe strikes an odd note—‘Sæll er hverr síðan, er slíct getr fœða’ (‘Happy is each one afterwards who manages to beget such a child’)—which seems totally off-key as far as the latter part of the poem is concerned, almost as if the poet were uncomfortable with the negative light in which he had placed the characters of *Atlakviða*, and wished to gloss over Guðrún’s ‘deeds’ and return to her brothers’ less dubious achievements. Whether or not this is the case, *Atlamál*’s completely different poetic character has an important effect on the audience’s perceptions of its protagonists. It transposes the aristocratic world of *Atlakviða* to a bourgeois setting which recognizes more everyday concerns such as a wife’s fear for her husband (like that of Glaumvǫr and Kostbera) but also makes Guðrún’s vengeance appear the action of one inspired less by necessity than by spite.

It has been seen above that the protagonists of the Eddaic poems analysed, along with their actions, are distanced from the narratorial present whilst simultaneously having implications for that present. *Hamðismál* even emphasizes the destructive nature of heroic individualism and the ethic of vengeance. However, the question might be raised as to whether Guðrún (as the central figure of these poems) is being criticized on the one hand for taking active vengeance even though she is a woman, or, on the other, for inciting the revenge taken by her male relatives—that is, becoming a scapegoat for the results of male violence, as Jenny Jochens contends.

EN-GENDERING HEROIC VENGEANCE: MADNESS AND ANTI-FEMINISM

Carol Clover uses Guðrún's speeches in *Guðrúnarhvot* and *Hamðismál* as part of an extended argument about the nature and function of lamenting and whetting; her conception of the relation between these behaviours is comparable to that of Margaret Alexiou on Greek lament.²⁷ Clover points out that in *Hamðismál* Guðrún's speech 'is pure lament [but] is *meant* as a *hvot*' (that is, functions as a *hvot*), and that the fact that in *Guðrúnarhvot* 'the same set of verses that in *Hamðismál* was harnessed to a lament could here be reharnessed to a *hvot* suggests an easy transfer between the two themes'.²⁸ These inextricably linked functions are often seen to be the paradigms for female participation in revenge, going back as far as Tacitus' *Germania* (c. AD 98), in which we are told that Germanic warriors are urged on to prowess in battle by the sound of their women's laments and their children's cries.²⁹ Therefore it is important to consider whether Guðrún, as inciter of vengeance through lamentation or active whetting, is held ultimately responsible for the ensuing revenge, and whether this betrays an anti-feminist attitude on the part of the authors of the poems. One must not, however, assume that a social reality lies behind the depictions considered. It is possible that in historical situations (whether in Greece, Germania, or Scandinavia) women may genuinely have been responsible for the perpetuation of vengeance. The Eddaic poems, however, are primarily literary

²⁷ Carol J. Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament,' in John Lindow *et al.* (eds.), *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 141–83. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 22. On the links between revenge and lamentation, see also Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), esp. ch. 3.

²⁸ Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', pp. 155 and 158 respectively.

²⁹ *Cornelii Taciti De Origine et Situ Germanorum*, ed. J. G. C. Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), §7.3–4. For a translation, see J. B. Rives, *Tacitus. Germania* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

creations, and we must deal with the possibility that they constitute scapegoats for the results of violence.³⁰

Certainly, women were and are still often associated with emotional and mental instability, contrasted with male rationality—an association which renders possible the representation of female literary characters as mentally ill and/or dangerously violent in relation to men, and the re-presentation of the pathology of historical female killers as being linked in some way to their gender.³¹ Vengeance is also often gendered female when it is being criticized. Sir Thomas Browne advocates moderation in his *Christian Morals*, urging, 'Answer not the Spur of Fury, and be not prodigal or prodigious in Revenge', but continues: 'Since Women do most delight in Revenge, it may seem but feminine manhood to be vindictive [*sic*].'³² Nietzsche even attempts to render the feminization of revenge proverbial, opining in his *Spruch* 139: 'In der Rache und in der Liebe ist das Weib barbarischer, als der Mann' ('In vengeance as in love, woman is more barbaric than man').³³

It is entirely possible to present Guðrún as part of this anti-feminist literary trope, as in Jochens' assertion: 'the whetter was largely a male construct applicable to the pagan era. For contemporary audiences she served as a convenient scapegoat for male misdeeds that threatened the existence of the present society.'³⁴ It is most com-

³⁰ Jenny Jochens states of Brynhildr and Guðrún: 'Their behavior justified and explained men's actions and ultimately the fate of tribes and nations'; *Old Norse Images of Women*, 89. Similarly, concerning the deaths of Attila, Ermanaric, and Sigurðr, she asserts: 'Trying to understand events that defied normal expectations, men naturally turned their attention to women', *ibid.* 139.

³¹ See further Victor J. Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1989); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds.), *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); E. Berrington and P. Honkatukia, 'An Evil Monster and a Poor Thing: Female Violence in the Media', *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 3 (2002), 50–72.

³² In *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Norman J. Endicott (London: University of London Press, 1968), 409.

³³ In *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann; 1886); repr. in *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, VI:2, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968), 97.

³⁴ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 211.

monly assumed (as Jochens does) that Guðrún is inscribed by a male author for a predominantly male audience. The Old Norse historian Judith Jesch does raise the interesting possibility with regard to the poems' composition and audience that rich or influential women may have commissioned or occasioned elegiac poetry, in addition to the well-attested practice of commissioning memorials for rune-stones.³⁵ However, few would go as far as Gísli Sigurðsson in his belief that all the Eddaic poems are 'female-orientated poems . . . made by women or for the benefit of a female audience'.³⁶ Probable male authorship problematizes the representation of Guðrún in the poems, raising perhaps unanswerable questions as to whether male representations of women can ever be authentic, and whether male ventriloquism always disempowers the female subject. Nonetheless, it does not entirely mitigate against a (male) portrayal of an autonomous (female) figure. Moreover, Guðrún cannot be dismissed entirely as a 'male fantasy' or daydream in the way that Jenny Jochens does.³⁷

A further attempt to detect anti-feminism might see Guðrún as part of the 'monstrous Other' trope, familiar from literature and art.³⁸ Certainly in *Atlakviða*, which (as we saw above) depicts Guðrún as having inhuman self-control, the horror of her deeds is foregrounded, and the poem lends an element of sympathy even to Atli. Indeed, it could be argued that Guðrún is monstrous precisely for adopting the masculine prerogative of active revenge and the display of heroic (that is, tough and anti-emotional) behaviour—that

³⁵ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 49–53. Both Jesch and Joseph Harris read a contemporary carving known as the Bällsta inscription as evidence that women composed funeral laments or poems; Jesch, *ibid.* 62–3, and Harris, 'The Bällsta-Inscriptions and Old Norse Literary History', in Michael Dallapiazza *et al.* (eds.), *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, Hesperides, 12 (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), 223–39. Also noteworthy is the possibility that *Hervarar saga* was commissioned by Queen Ingigerðr—for which see Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 99.

³⁶ Gísli Sigurðsson, 'On the Classification of Eddic Heroic Poetry in View of the Oral Theory', in Teresa Pàroli (ed.), *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, Seventh International Saga Conference, Spoleto, 4–10 September 1988 (Spoleto: Presso la Sede del Centro Studi, 1990), 245–55, at 255.

³⁷ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 88.

³⁸ One particularly acute analysis is Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

is, she transgresses the boundaries of the lamentation-whetting role prescribed for women who desire vengeance.³⁹ Likewise, the analysis of *Hamðismál* above sees Guðrún as an implied presence, isolated and destructive, at the end of the poem.

However, one could take a subtler approach to Woman as Other. One might construe Guðrún as a figure of awe, rather than of monstrosity—her deeds are recognized to be terrible, but the poetic attitude evoked is one of awestruck admiration. As was seen above at the end of *Atlakviða*, ‘Never again will a bride in a mailcoat go thus to avenge her brothers’. Guðrún can in this context be construed as a successful male impersonator: she takes on the male role of active vengeance, the male paraphernalia of armour. As in the trope of the Norse shield-maidens, who reject their gender and sexuality in favour of the pursuit of war, so Guðrún rejects her children and husbands in favour of the pursuit of revenge. This could be interpreted as an attempt at autonomy in a male-dominated society. However, we must register the fact that Guðrún is not acting on her own behalf, but avenging her brothers—her actions are with reference to men.

Similarly, it is problematic from a feminist viewpoint that the basic motivation for the actions of both Brynhildr and Guðrún is their love for the same man, the (idealized) Sigurðr, continually designated by superlatives.⁴⁰ This counts against the anti-feminist reading in one sense, since from a masculinist point of view this perhaps excuses the violent actions against other men because of the motivation of avenging another (perfect) man.⁴¹ Nevertheless, female choices and actions

³⁹ A similar approach to the figure of Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf* is taken by Jane Chance in her ‘The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel’s Mother’, in Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessy Olsen (eds.), *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 248–61, esp. 251: ‘a kinswoman or mother must passively accept and not actively avenge the loss of her son.’

⁴⁰ The prose passage preceding *Grípisspá* claims that he was the *frammarstr* (‘foremost’) of all Sigmundr’s sons, ‘oc hann kalla allir menn í fornfroðdom um alla menn fram oc gofgastan herkonunga’ (‘and all men in the ancient traditions name him beyond all men and most magnificent of war-kings’). See further Ch. 3 below.

⁴¹ Indeed, it could be argued that Guðrún’s commitment to revenge is exactly what a Norse audience might want in a wife, sister, or mother. My thanks to Judy Quinn for this point.

in the poems are predicated upon and motivated by the lack of a male partner, and female lives are conceivable only with reference to men—whether lover, husband, brothers, friend, or enemy.

All these interpretations have their own attractions and problems. However, looking at Guðrún through the lens of two modern concepts, it is in fact possible to put forward an even more rewarding interpretation: to suggest that Guðrún in fact constitutes an autonomous female figure, that is, she is engaged in shaping her own destiny.

FEMALE AUTONOMY: 'SKQP LÉT HON VAXA'

In the introduction to her book *Guilty Pleasures*, Pamela Robertson takes a revisionist view of the popular concept of 'camp' and looks at its employment in terms of gender parody, not by gay men of women, but by women of women. She cites as prime examples Mae West and Madonna, who manipulate and play with stereotypical attributes of femininity as part of their performance personas; a more contemporary example would be Lady Gaga. Robertson writes: 'In opposition to drag, the surprise and incongruity of same-sex female masquerade consists in the identity between she who masquerades and the role she plays—she plays at being what she is always already perceived to be.'⁴² Looked at in this way, Guðrún can be seen, in *Atlakviða* at least, not as a successful male impersonator, as above, but as a successful female impersonator. Guðrún's terrible revenge in *Atlakviða* can be seen to serve as a form of subversive parody of her role as wife and queen.⁴³

In strophe 33 the audience is told:

Út gecc þá Guðrún	Atla í gogn,
með gyltom kálki,	at reifa giöld ragnis.

⁴² Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (London: Tauris, 1996), 12.

⁴³ Compare Dronke's characterization of 'une vengeance horrifiante de femme: ménagère, cuisinière, compagne de lit' ('the horrifying vengeance of a woman: housewife, cook, bed-companion'), in 'Le Caractère de la poésie germanique héroïque', in Ursula and Peter Dronke, *Barbara et antiquissima carmina*, Publicaciones del Seminario de Literatura Medieval y Humanística (Barcelona: Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 1977), 16.

Guðrún went out then to meet Atli with a gilded goblet to present the reward for the ruler.

She also bears drink to the warriors (str. 35), and this is precisely the behaviour expected of a Germanic queen—one thinks of Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*, and the type of the Lady with the Mead Cup.⁴⁴ However, of course Guðrún is actually serving up her children's blood instead of the ale the men expect, and the dainty tidbits (ironically termed *plkrásir*, 'ale-morsels') that accompany it are the boys' flesh, blended with honey. Again, when Guðrún gives away the household treasure in strophe 39, she is inhabiting the role of the archetypal, generous Germanic queen admirably. However, her motive is in fact to squander and waste the treasure, not to use it to strengthen loyalty toward her husband.

It has already been seen how Atli's death is described in the context of happier times of lovemaking for the couple, and the situating of the killing in their marital bed, combined with this reference, foregrounds Guðrún's subversion of the sexual aspect of her role as queen. There is additionally a symbolic reversal of gender roles, as, in strophe 41, we are told 'Hon beð broddi gaf blóð at drecca' ('With sword-tip she gave the bed blood to drink'). Since we have been told that Atli 'vápn hafði . . . ekki' ('had no weapon'), and this occurs immediately after a reminiscence of their past lovemaking, it is clear that the killing involves a symbolic castration of Atli and 'endowment' of Guðrún, as she penetrates her husband's inert and passive body, drenching the bed in blood in a symbolic hymenal rupture and defloration. Guðrún becomes simultaneously not only a female impersonator but also a male impersonator, perhaps the ultimate manipulation of gender roles. The final conflagration includes not only Atli and his warriors in its death-toll, but also the shield-maidens who, in this context, fall victims to Guðrún the female-male impersonator by virtue of their own male impersonation.

Atlakviða, then, would seem to be a good source in the search for female autonomy in the poems we are discussing. However, the

⁴⁴ Michael Enright, *The Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Blackrock, Co. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), *passim*.

problem with this reading is that it is still open to the charge of anti-feminism—the male author here using Guðrún simultaneously both as a female beyond all females, and lethal and terrifying with it, and also as a negative *exemplum* to all women in the audience with ideas of taking active control of their destiny ('scop lét hon vaxa', 'she made fate unfold', str. 39). Guðrún may be playing with gender roles, but her laughter is threatening, not joyful.

Finally, though, one can see Guðrún from yet another angle—and indeed acknowledge that she is, in this analysis as in the poem, the object of the male gaze. Although women may well have constituted part of the audience of the Eddaic poems, it is probable that a large part of the audience was male. Since Guðrún is such a dynamic figure in these poems, then, it is instructive to consider the issue of audience identification.

In her influential contribution to film studies, Carol Clover notes the statistical predominance amongst audiences of horror films of young adult males, and argues 'that male viewers are quite prepared to identify not just with screen females, but with screen females in the horror-film world, screen females in fear and pain'.⁴⁵ I wish to engage less with this specific aspect of Clover's thesis, than with the more fundamental questions she raises of male–female identification in general. There is little scope in the Guðrún poems for a male audience, in Laura Mulvey's terms, to gaze with a 'voyeuristic-scopophilic look',⁴⁶ since Guðrún has little physical 'presence'—in the poems description is largely of actions, and much of the narrative is carried forward by dialogue. Later in her introduction, however, Clover speaks of 'the politics of displacement: the use of the woman as a kind of feint, a front through which the boy can simultaneously experience forbidden desires and disavow them on grounds that the visible actor is, after all, a girl'.⁴⁷ Read in this context, Guðrún might become, not a transvestite figure, as above, but rather a medium enabling (some) men to 'act out' through identification their (possibly

⁴⁵ Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 5.

⁴⁶ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 25.

⁴⁷ Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 18.

subconscious) desire to escape the male-and-war-dominated society in which they live—Guðrún thus functioning not as Jochens’ ‘male fantasy’, but rather to punish the forces of male aggression represented by Atli, Iqrmunrekkr, and the others. The resumption of the narratorial voice at the end of the poems allows the hypothetical male audience member to disavow his experience and maintain the status quo—distanciation from autonomous women. This shift, however, does not invalidate the process of female identification. Indeed, even if one does not accept the motivation for the identification postulated above, it is nevertheless rewarding to consider the possibilities inherent in a male audience identifying with a strong female character taking revenge on the men who have injured her, even if, ultimately, this has its root in their depriving her of a male lover, thus rendering her existence always predicated upon maleness—whether in absence, or in opposition.

GENERALIZING THE BLAME FOR VENGEANCE

It is therefore inaccurate to suggest that the poet is scapegoating Guðrún alone (because she is female), since this oversimplifies the poems. In addition to the complexities of attitude explored above in *Atlakviða* and *Atlamal*, it is clear in *Hamðismál* that Guðrún’s sons are also held responsible for the results of their vengeance.

First, one of the brothers themselves explicitly recognizes their fault in strophe 28: ‘Af væri nú haufuð, ef Erpr lifði...’ (‘the head would be off, if Erpr lived’), but it is not just the practical consequences of their action that he bemoans. Rather, he understands the moral transgression involved in killing one’s *bróðir*, someone who should have remained *inn gunnhelgi* (‘the battle-inviolate one’). That the point here is primarily symbolic is evinced by the lack of realism in the scenario envisaged—there is no reason why one of the brothers could not have cut off Iqrmunrekkr’s head *before* his arms or legs, thus preventing him from calling out for them to be stoned. The only reason to leave Iqrmunrekkr undecapitated is to emphasize the brothers’ need of Erpr. That is, the need for a community transcending the circle of the immediate kinship group is foregrounded, along with the need for wisdom rather than short-sighted heroics. Indeed,

since *Hamðismál* portrays the brothers' enterprise as doomed from the start, the introduction of Erpr works against the inevitability of their deaths, and can only function to draw attention to the point about community.

An article by Brodeur and Brady admirably summarizes the progression in *Hamðir* and *Sǫrli's* understanding of their kinship obligations as represented by the three phrases *inn sundrmæðri* ('the one born of a different mother') (str. 13), *bræðra sammæðra* ('brothers born of the same mother') (str. 24), and *bróðir occarr* ('our brother') (str. 28):

The first emphasizes the hostility of the legitimate sons toward the illegitimate, and explains their violation of the obligations of kinship. The second crystallizes... the expression of the brothers' exultation in their double triumph: their vengeance upon *Jǫrmunrekkr*, and their apparent vindication of their slaying of Erpr. The third, at the moment of their downfall, signals the emotional reversal by which, at last, they recognize not only that it is Erpr who is vindicated over them, but also that the blood-tie between him and themselves is real and binding. Through this recognition, and most specifically through the words *bróðir okkarr*, the poet achieves, in the final moment, a genuine catharsis.⁴⁸

Without necessarily accepting Klaus von See's argument about the (putatively early) date of *Hamðismál*, one can certainly agree with him that part of this poem's overall message is 'daß jedermann die Folgen seines Tuns bedenken soll' ('that everyone should think of the consequences of his actions').⁴⁹ Heinrich Beck goes further than this, and argues that *Hamðismál* 'contains an outspoken critique of *hugr*', a concept he attaches to the heroic ideal.⁵⁰ He points out that, although *Hamðir* is designated *inn hugomstóri* ('the high-minded one') (str. 6, 24), *Sǫrli* (of whom strophe 9 says '*svinna hafði hann hyggio*', 'he had a wise mind') criticizes him in strophe 27, saying: '*Hug hefðir þú, Hamðir, ef þú hefðir hyggiandi*' ('You would have had a great heart, *Hamðir*, if you had had wisdom'). Beck comments: 'It is

⁴⁸ Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur and Caroline Brady, '*Sundrmæðri—Sammæðra*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 16 (1940–1), 133–7, at 36.

⁴⁹ von See, '*Guðrúnarhvöt und Hamðismál*', 258.

⁵⁰ Heinrich Beck, 'Heroic Lay and Heroic Language', *Scandinavian Studies*, 60 (1988), 137–46, at 143.

clear that *hugr* is ascribed to the heroic mentality; at the same time, however, it is distinguished from *hyggiandi* and *manvit*. Only *hugr* in combination with *hyggiandi* and *manvit* would have made possible the killing of Jǫrmunrekkr... *Hugr* means intellect and courageous disposition, not necessarily coupled with wisdom...⁵¹ It is difficult to accept Beck's wider conclusion that *Hamðismál* reflects the 'thymos stage of culture' whose heroes are 'not yet controlled by the morality of higher, organized societies' (p. 145), since this seems to betray a false sense of societal and cultural progression from ancient and primitive to later and 'higher'. Nevertheless, his argument about the brothers' mentality, in conjunction with the other material adduced above, strongly suggests that any characterization of *Hamðismál*, at least, as purely anti-feminist scapegoating of women in the person of Guðrún, is simply not borne out by the poem itself. There is no scapegoat here, unless it is the heroic ethic of vengeance itself.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter it has been argued that heroism is portrayed as individualistic and belonging to the past in some of the heroic poems, especially *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvöt*. Although heroes (whether male or female) possess an admirable grandeur, they can also be destructive of family and social groups in their obsession with vengeance. The analysis, from various angles, of gender issues in the woman-centred Guðrún-poems, in particular the female roles of lamentation and whetting (both serving to incite vengeance), suggests that elements of anti-feminism do enter into the portrayal of Guðrún—she can be seen as monstrous or mad in *Atlakviða*, for instance. Nonetheless, the poems do not uniformly blame women for the results of male violence. Indeed, far from blaming Guðrún alone, it is argued the blame for the results of revenge is generalized in *Hamðismál*. Guðrún's murderous actions in *Atlakviða* are represented as those of a woman taking control of her destiny—to the question of whether this is an approved course of action, or rather one to be

⁵¹ Beck, 'Heroic Lay and Heroic Language', 144.

feared and stigmatized, no definitive answers were found. Ultimately, Guðrún's portrayal is ambiguous, and indeed this may reflect ambivalence on the part of the author. Nevertheless, this very ambiguity leaves both attitudes available to a medieval or a modern audience—indeed, I have suggested they may hold both attitudes simultaneously. Furthermore, the author may well have intended the ambiguity to inspire debate amongst his audience as to the merits and blame to be attached to his characters. Certainly, it functions not only to raise the possibility of successful female autonomy, but also, via the concept of (possibly disavowed) male–female identification, to destabilize binary notions of gender.

This chapter has largely concentrated on a single female character, Guðrún, in its exploration of the interrelation of gender and violence in the Eddaic poems. The following chapter now considers these issues from the perspective of masculinity and the relations between men through the character of Helgi Hundingsbani and his namesake Helgi Hjörvarðsson. It also introduces the work of another theoretician of gender and sexuality, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as another way of bringing contemporary perspectives into dialogue with medieval texts.

2

Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems

In the previous chapter we saw how useful modern theoretical concepts can be in illuminating medieval texts from a new perspective, including the work of Carol Clover on gender identification in films and Pamela Robertson on female impersonation. This chapter takes a similar approach, evaluating the usefulness of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of 'homosocial desire' in understanding the construction of heroism in the Helgi poems of the *Poetic Edda*. She inaugurates the use of this collocation in pursuit of her hypothesis of 'the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual'.¹ However, she observes that homosocial desire is often normalized by homophobic discourse—homosexuality is explicitly abjected or refused in order to validate homosocial bonds. Therefore, Sedgwick's concept is potentially helpful in illuminating the dynamic at work in three poems which seem to replicate this dynamic: *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* (The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani), *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (The Second Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson), and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnor* (The Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani). As is evident from their synopses, these poems centre on heroic adventure and martial exploits, where homosocial intimacy between warriors is predicated on the exclusion of same-sex eroticism seen most clearly in the exchange of sexual insults, or *níð*. Nevertheless, although Sedgwick has influenced work on pre-modern sexuality by several medieval and early modern scholars, her approach has not been accepted uncritically, and indeed it needs some modification in order to avoid anachronism in its application to medieval texts.

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Drawing on research on cognate material by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and my own work,² this chapter begins to develop a critical approach to heroic homosociality that allows the texts to speak on their own terms and to interrogate modern categories and taxonomies of sexuality. In particular, it replaces Sedgwick's emphasis (via Girard) on the triangulation of desire through a woman with a more nuanced approach to the erotics of interpersonal relations. Finally, the chapter demonstrates that the 'incoherent' plot of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* makes more sense if we unpack the complexities of the poem's construction of Helgi's relations with friend, brother, and lover.³

Relatively little has been written on the Helgi poems, particularly from a literary perspective. Indeed, there are fewer than a dozen post-war critical works on these texts before the commentary represented by the fourth volume of the monumental *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* in 2004.⁴ English-language criticism is even scarcer: outside of a handful of encyclopedia entries there is T. M. Andersson's 1984 article on *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* and bridal-quest romance, and Joseph Harris's work on the orality of the Helgi poems.⁵ However, renewed interest in the poems may be signalled by Carolyne Larrington's insightful study of sibling relations in the heroic poems of the *Edda*, which contains detailed discussion of the Helgi lays.⁶ The relative lack of attention to the Helgi poems as literary works is perhaps attributable to the difficulties surrounding their origins and problematic

² Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*; Clark, *Between Medieval Men*.

³ On the incoherence of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*'s plot see Carolyne Larrington (trans.), *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 123.

⁴ For a comprehensive list of criticism, see von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, iv. 95–8.

⁵ Theodore M. Andersson, '“Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar” and European Bridal-Quest Narrative', *JEGP*, 84 (1985), 51–75; Joseph Harris, 'Satire and the Heroic Life: Two Studies', in John Miles Foley (ed.), *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1981), 322–40; 'Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems for Questions of Composition and Performance', in Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (eds.), *Edda: A Collection of Essays* ([Winnipeg]: University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 210–42.

⁶ Carolyne Larrington, 'Sibling Drama: Laterality in the Heroic Poems of the Edda', in Daniel Anlezark (ed.), *Myth, Legends, and Heroes: Studies in Old Norse and Old English Literature in Honour of John McKinnell* (Toronto, 2010), 169–87. I would like to thank Carolyne for several helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this chapter, and for giving me pre-publication access to her article.

relation between the first and second Helgi lays and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*.⁷ What this chapter seeks to do is less to disentangle the complexities of the poems' textual prehistory than to explore their gender dynamic and assess how far it can be explained by contemporary theory.

SEDGWICK AND HOMOSOCIAL DESIRE

The heroism in the Helgi poems is readily apparent. It may be less obvious, however, why the chapter title employs and opposes the terms 'homosociality' and 'homophobia'. In doing so, I am explicitly drawing on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the founders (along with Judith Butler and others) of the branch of gender/sexuality studies known as Queer Theory, and this chapter seeks to evaluate the usefulness of her concept of 'homosocial desire' by applying it to the construction of Eddaic heroism.

Sedgwick inaugurates the use of the phrase at the start of her influential book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*.⁸ The term 'homosocial' had already become a standard term in sociological studies, and, in a discussion of Sedgwick's work, Stephen Jaeger describes the term with approval as one which 'sets sexuality to one side, eliminates its automatic inclusion, while holding it in readiness. The discourse of male-male love displays on its surface sexuality vanquished and banished. Sexual desire and sexual intercourse can infiltrate it secretly, but they do not govern it from their position of hiding.'⁹ However, Sedgwick in fact employs the term in a collocation of her own coinage: 'homosocial desire'. This, as she remarks, appears to be something of an oxymoron—'homosocial' is a neologism formed by analogy with 'homosexual', from which it is thus intended to be distinguished, and is usually applied to so-called 'male bonding' activities which are frequently, in many Western societies, characterized by homophobia. Therefore, Sedgwick remarks: 'To draw the

⁷ See further the Introduction above. These texts will on occasion hereafter be referred to as *HHI*, *HHII*, and *HHv*.

⁸ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 1.

⁹ C. Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensitivity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 15.

“homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire”, of the potentially erotic . . . is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted’ (pp. 1–2). In our society, she explains, where there is a site of homosocial desire that society sanctions, one often finds that this desire is normalized via homophobic discourse—homosexuality is explicitly abjected.¹⁰ Often cited in this context is the locker-room, where manly men often make homophobic jokes to demonstrate that their physical and emotional intimacy with other men does not make them ‘gay’.¹¹ Sedgwick clarifies that she does not want to suggest a ‘genetic’ hypothesis—to claim that homosexual desire lies at the root of all forms of interaction between men. Instead, her term is ‘a strategy for making generalizations about, and marking historical differences in, the structure of men’s relations with other men’, and she is using ‘desire’ for its affective force, leaving open the question of how far that force can be considered to be sexual (pp. 1–2).

Sedgwick’s work has been extremely influential, whether receiving plaudits or criticism.¹² The specific argument of *Between Men*, however, is that the homosocial relations in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature are cemented by the exchange of women

¹⁰ ‘Abjection’ (literally, the state of being thrown away, or cast off) is a term employed in critical theory to denote individuals, groups (people with disabilities, the LGBT community, people of colour), or objects (corpses, faeces, rotting matter) which may be associated with degradation, baseness, and/or disgust by those belonging to the dominant social group. See initially Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: Essays in Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

¹¹ This applies more to professional than to amateur sports, and particularly to football. See e.g. Tony Cascarino, ‘Boys being boys in the dressing-room helps to keep homosexuality in football’s closet’, *The Times*, 13 Feb. 2006 and, more recently, Christopher Brocklebank, ‘Daily Mirror journalist says there is “no chance” of English football players coming out’, *Pink News*, 23 June 2010. Eric Anderson argues persuasively that this kind of ‘homohysteria’ is fast disappearing in university-educated men. See his *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2009), esp. 7.

¹² See initially the contributions to Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (eds.), *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2002). For a critical review, see G. S. Rousseau in Kent Gerard and Gert Hekma (eds.), *The Pursuit of Sodomy: Male Homosexuality in the Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe* (New York: Haworth, 1989), 515–29.

(for instance, in marriage) and involve sublimated homoerotic desire. Her model is thus not immediately applicable to medieval literature, where women are often not involved in homosocial exchanges, and this chapter outlines some modifications that a reading of the Helgi poems suggests need to be made to make her theories more applicable to medieval literature. Nevertheless, her approach remains valuable in its decision not to prejudge the relations between friendship, sex, love, and desire in a specific historical context. It is clearly also of potential use in illuminating the dynamic at work in the Helgi poems, with their episodes of homosocial intimacy and prominent display of homophobic insults, a dynamic which reveals the constructed and fragile nature of heroic masculinity and the complex interaction of, and competition between, familial and other affective bonds.

HELGAKVIÐA HUNDINGSBANA IN FYRRI

Heroic homosociality is evident from the outset in the first Helgi lay, exemplified by the way the protagonist, from the moment he receives his name, is said in strophe 9 to 'vaxa / fyr briósti' ('grow in the bosom of his friends') as a 'álmr ítrborinn / ynðis líóma' ('noble-born elm, light of bliss'). He is clearly at the top of the hierarchy here, metaphorically as a tall tree and literally as the prince and future ruler of the land. He maintains these homosocial bonds by the distribution of wealth: 'hann galt ok gaf / gull verðungo' ('he paid out and gave gold to his retinue'), and we may compare here the gnomic passage at the start of *Beowulf*, where the young prince Beow behaves in similarly exemplary fashion and we are told:

Swa sceal geong gum agode gewyrcean,
 fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,
 þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
 wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,
 leode gelæsten.¹³

¹³ *Beowulf*, 20–4a, cited from Fr. Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edn. (Boston: Heath, 1950).

So shall a young man bring about good, with costly gifts from his father's breast, that in old age his dear retainers remain with him afterwards: that when war comes, they will serve their prince.

Although treasure does not in fact ensure loyalty in *Beowulf* beyond the prologue (Beowulf's hand-picked warriors notably desert him in the dragon fight),¹⁴ in *HHI* Helgi is followed by a large retinue of warriors into battle with the sons of Hundigr, and, as we shall see, his brother and second-in-command, Sinfjötli, represents him staunchly in the verbal battle with Guðmundr.

However, even at this early point we have to register that this treasure is *blóðrekin* ('bloodstained'), and its continuing supply and thus the bonds of loyalty are predicated on martial dominance. It necessitates that Helgi kill his rivals—for instance, he kills Hundigr at the age of 15 in strophe 10, presumably to gain the 'londum ok þegnom' ('lands and men') over which we are told Hundigr 'lengi réð' ('ruled for a long time'), and he accepts Sigrún's request to challenge her unwanted suitor Hǫðbroddr in strophes 18 and 19. He must also resist calls for compensation and peace, as we see in strophe 12:

Létat buðlungr bótir uppi,
né niðia in heldr nefgjöld fá;
ván kvað hann mundo veðrs ins mikla
gráa geira ok gremi Óðins.

The Buðlungr did not allow compensation to be seen, nor the kinsmen any sooner to obtain kin-payment: he said they should expect the great storm of grey spears and Óðinn's wrath.

The interaction here is curiously reminiscent of that in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* in the exchange between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger, where the latter threatens the Anglo-Saxon leader with *garræs* ('a rush of spears', l. 32) and Byrhtnoth promises to give *garas* ('spears', l. 46) instead of tribute.¹⁵ In neither text is there any question of the hero giving up his treasure to avoid battle. Similarly, in strophe 13 we are told that

¹⁴ On this aspect of *Beowulf*, see David Clark, 'Relaunching the Hero: The Case of Scyld and Beowulf Re-opened', *Neophilologus*, 90 (2006), 621–42.

¹⁵ Cited from *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 6 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 7–8.

Fróða frið fiánda á milli,
fara Viðris grey valgiörn um ey.

The peace of Fróði was torn between the foes; Óðinn's dogs roamed slaughter-eager throughout the island.

Although the wolves here connote the bestial nature of battle to a modern audience, there is no doubt that Helgi is right to spurn peace and attempt to crush his foes. The final element of the heroic dynamic here is the imposition of an abjected sexual passivity onto one's opponents, which we see in the extended *flyting* between Helgi's brother Sinfjötli and Hqðbroddr's brother Guðmundr.¹⁶

Much has been written about *flyting*, and the best of it by Sørensen in his book *The Unmanly Man*.¹⁷ In this work Sørensen details the sexual and gender dynamic found in both saga and Eddaic literature, whereby male-male erotic activity is stigmatized, and specifically sexual passivity. (He argues persuasively that the stigma was not generalized to all forms of same-sex activity until later in the medieval period, under the influence of the Church's attempts to impose orthodoxy and reform.) Indeed, the worst insult one man can level at another in the Icelandic laws is to call him *sannsordinn* or *ragr*—that is, to state that he has been penetrated by another man, an issue which still causes anxiety (and sometimes violence) today in men insecure in their own sexual identity. This kind of insult, known as *níð*, is considered to be so heinous that it justifies the recipient in killing his taunter, and the threat posed by *níð* is a key feature of sagas such as *Króka-Refs saga* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.¹⁸ Often, how-

¹⁶ It is interesting that both rivals are represented in the verbal contest by their close associates, and this split is seen in a variety of medieval contexts where the skills of physical prowess and verbal dexterity are shared between two closely connected men. It seems clear that the former is privileged over the latter, and it is the less highly ranked individual who carries out the verbal contest. We might compare the similar split when the god Freyr's servant Skírnir woos Gerðr on his lord's behalf. (See further comments below.)

¹⁷ More recently, Antje Frotscher has done illuminating work on *flyting*, which will be published in a co-edited volume by Carolyne Larrington and Paul Acker on the heroic poems of the Poetic Edda to be published by Garland.

¹⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, chs. 3 and 4. For a more detailed description of *níð* and on the sexual and gender dynamic of *Gísla saga*, see Ch. 4 below.

ever, these insults form part of an extended and somewhat ritualized exchange, known as a *flyting*, defined by Carol Clover as ‘an exchange of verbal provocations between hostile speakers in a predictable setting. The boasts and insults are traditional, and their arrangement and rhetorical form is highly stylized.’¹⁹

These *flytings* can be found in mythological poetry such as *Lokasenna* and heroic poetry alike. The insults all pertain to a man’s masculinity and putative deviations from the sexual norm, and can blend assertions of homosexual behaviour with imputations of bestiality and transvestism. Often, as here in the first Helgi lay, one party will make an opening claim which is then refuted by the other, who then makes a counter-claim, and the back-and-forth exchange tends to observe formal boundaries, with each claim occupying a separate strophe.²⁰

In *HHI* Sinfjötli starts the process by saying in strophe 34:

Segðu þat í aptan, er svínom gefr
ok tíkr yðrar teygir at solli...

Say this evening, when you feed the pigs and entice your bitches with their slops...

Sinfjötli is implying that Guðmundr, far from being nobly born, is in fact base, performing menial and degrading tasks that are ordinarily given to slaves. He follows this up by contrasting Helgi, whom he characterizes as supremely brave, who is *flugtrauðan* (‘averse to flight’), and who ‘opt hefir / ǫrna sadda’ (‘has often given food to the eagles’ i.e. killed many warriors), while Guðmundr ‘á kvernom / kystir þýiar’ (‘was kissing bondswomen at the querns’). This is a double insult in that, as well as the imputation of low rank or at least an undesirable affinity with those of low rank, it also contains the idea that Guðmundr spends a lot of time with women. While in Western culture today this might suggest a successful demonstration of heterosexual and hyper-masculine credentials, in the medieval

¹⁹ Carol Clover, ‘The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode’, *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 444–68, at 445–6.

²⁰ For a detailed list of the formal and generic characteristics and common components of *flytings*, see Clover, ‘Germanic Context’, *passim*. See also Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos, ‘Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 55 (1983), 149–74.

period a preference for female company (even when engaged in flirting with and kissing them), especially when preferred over martial activity in the company of other men, most often connotes effeminacy.²¹

Guðmundr comes back with the accusation that Sinfjötli has spent time as a werewolf and killed his own brother, violating both the species boundary and the most basic family bond. There is some truth to this, since in chapter 8 of *Völsunga saga* Sinfjötli does in fact spend time living out in the forest like a wild animal, and kills his half-brothers. Sinfjötli does not counter these charges, but instead raises the stakes by embarking on a series of *níð* insults. He says:

37. 'Þú vart völvá í Varinseyio,
skollvís kona, bartu skrokk saman;
kvaztu engi mann eiga vilia,
segg brynjaðan, nema Sinfjötla!

38. Þú vart in skœða, skass, valkyria,
ötol, ámatlig, at Alföður;
mundo einheriar allir beriaz,
svévís kona, um sakar þínar!

39. Nío átto vit á nesi Sága
úlfa alna, ek var einn faðir þeira!

You were a seeress in Varinsey, woman wise in deceit—you collected lies together: you declared you wanted to have no man, mailcoated warrior, except Sinfjötli!

You were the destructive witch, of the valkyries, terrible, fearsomely strong, of the Allfather—all the Einheriar were near fighting each other, self-willed woman, for your sake!

On Sága headland we two had begotten nine wolves—I alone was the father!

Calling Guðmundr a 'seeress' (str. 37) feminizes him twice over, since magic is frequently associated in Norse literature with effeminacy, and Helgi follows this up in the next strophe by calling him a 'witch' and one of the 'valkyries' (str. 38). The feminization is

²¹ See e.g. Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 129; Elizabeth B. Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and its Contexts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 141–51.

necessary to make a further element of the insult work, which is that he lusted after Sinfjötli. It might seem odd to impugn another man's masculinity by implying that he desires the speaker himself. However, there is in medieval culture a fundamental distinction between what is often known as the 'active' and 'passive' dimension, though it is more accurately described as 'insertive' and 'receptive'.²² This becomes clear in strophe 39, where Sinfjötli claims to have fathered nine wolves with Guðmundr, where the insult lies in the assertion of Sinfjötli's dominance and Guðmundr's passivity and femininity. Of course it goes without saying that this gender dynamic rests on a misogynistic view of femininity. The accusation that a man has born another man's children is a subsection of *níð*, as for example in *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjrla*, when Þorvaldr kills two men who have composed an obscene poem about him and the bishop, implying that they have had sexual relations and the bishop has borne Þorvaldr's children.²³

Guðmundr refutes the charge of having been impregnated by Sinfjötli and counters it by asserting in strophe 40 that 'þik geldo ... þursa meyar' ('the ogre maidens ... gelded you'), thus implying Sinfjötli was not only dominated by female figures but also literally emasculated (which would of course also render him incapable of fathering children). He then reiterates in the following strophe the accusation of fratricide and adds to it the imputation of slackness and indolence when he says 'Stiúpr ... Siggeirs, / látt und stöðom heima' ('Siggeir's stepson [Sinfjötli] lay under the grain stacks at home').²⁴ Although an idle youth is a common feature of a hero's biography, this is supposed to be followed by great deeds of heroism, rather than the *firinverkom* ('wicked deeds') for which Guðmundr says Sinfjötli is *frægian* ('infamous').

Guðmundr then raises the stakes still further by combining bestiality with effeminacy in his charge in strophe 42 that Sinfjötli was

²² See Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 4; Stephen O. Murray, *Homosexualities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5; and the discussion in Ch. 4 below.

²³ See Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 54–5; Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, 'On *Níð* Against Bishops', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 11 (1978–9), 149–53, and Ch. 5 below.

²⁴ Taking *stöðom* as a form of *staði* ('stack of grain' or 'haystack'); cf. Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* (Heidelberg, Winter, 1992), s.v.

‘brúðr Grana / á Brávelli, / gullbitluð vart / gǫr til rásar’ (‘Gráni’s bride on Brávöllr, with a golden bit you were ready to go for a gallop’). It is one of the worst imaginable Norse insults to call a man a female animal and, as a further intensification, Guðmundr asserts his own humanity and mastery when he says ‘hafða ek þér móðri / mart skeið riðit’ (‘I’ve ridden you weary over many a course’), reversing the situation in strophe 39 where Sinfjötli claims dominance.²⁵

Sinfjötli next achieves a double insult in strophe 43 in accusing Guðmundr again of performing menial tasks, saying he ‘Gullnis / geitr mólaðir’ (‘milked Gullnir’s goats’) and that he did this again as ‘Imðr’s dóttir / töttrughypia’ (‘Imðr’s daughter in a tattered dress’). Although the stories behind these allusions are now obscure and thus the full import of the insult is lost, it is clear that they combine the stigma of transvestism with that of low rank and poverty.²⁶ The tag ‘vill þú tala lengri?’ (‘Do you want to keep talking?’) is a challenge, asking Guðmundr whether he is ready to admit defeat, but Guðmundr responds with curses and murderous wishes.

This *flyting* is a verbal contest with gender implications, but it is in fact inconclusive. Helgi stops the dispute (and to some extent belittles the contribution of his second-in-command) when he declares that the time for exchanging ‘ónýtom orðom’ (‘useless words’) is over and the time for battle has come. However vicious the *flyting*, it would seem the true test of heroic masculinity lies in martial prowess, and Guðmundr is not only vanquished by words: Helgi proves himself the better man in the terms of the poem by his actions. We are told in strophe 53 that

²⁵ There may be an obscene pun on *skeið* here. It appears in Fritzner as a ‘scabard’ word, with obvious resonances picked up in the fact that the Modern Danish word *skede* is a vulgar term for ‘vagina’: J. Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*, 3 vols., 2nd. edn. (Kristiania: Carl Werner, 1886–96). My thanks to Carolyn Larrington for alerting me to this.

²⁶ It is, of course, possible that the stories never existed. Accusations in *flytings* often have no factual basis, as with Loki’s untrue accusations in *Lokasenna* and the Beowulf–Unferth interchange in *Beowulf*, where Beowulf corrects Unferth’s version of events. More generally, allusions could easily be created to give an impression of a rich background.

ey var Helgi	Hundings bani
fyrstr í fólki,	þar er firar þorðuz...
alltrauðr flugar.	

Always was Helgi, Hundings's bane, first in the host where men were fighting, wholly averse to flight.

He is the ideal warrior-prince. The detail that he had 'hart móðakarn' ('a hard acorn of a heart') is found elsewhere in Norse literature, for instance in *Fóstbræðra saga* chapters 2 and 17 and the interplay between Gunnarr, Högni, and Hjalli in *Atlakviða* strophes 23 and 25, where a small heart that is hard or firm is an index of a hero's bravery.

The reward for Helgi's successful meeting of these heroic requirements is seen in the final strophe of the poem, where Sigrún asserts that it is 'fitting' ('samir...vel') that he should have both 'rauðir baugar ok in ríkia mæ'r' ('red-gold rings and the powerful girl'), both 'sigrs ok landa' ('victory and lands') (str. 56). She is a semi-divine figure who can give herself, along with these other representations of power, to Helgi because of his demonstration of heroic masculinity signified by both verbal and physical dominance. This heroic masculinity is supported further by the preponderance of kennings in the lay (more than any other Eddaic heroic poem), most of which are military.²⁷ This gives it an affinity with skaldic verse, and could be seen to tap into that medium's interest in heroic rulership and kingship, expressed in terms of generosity with treasure, martial accomplishment, and the effective vanquishing of foes.

HELGAKVIÐA HJØRVARÐSSONAR

Even though it concerns an entirely different Helgi, *Helgakviða Hjorvarðssonar* contains similar elements to the two Helgi Hundingsbani lays. However, the winning of a woman is even more central, not least because the poem proper is preceded by a passage

²⁷ For instance, *varga vinr* ('friend of wolves' = warrior) (str. 6); *blóðorm* ('serpent of blood' = sword) (str. 8); *benlogum* ('wound-flames' = swords) (str. 51). See von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, iv. 144.

describing how Helgi's father Hjörvarðr won Sigrinn through the agency of Atli, the son of one of his earls. Since Helgi is the product of Hjörvarðr's fourth marriage (all of which produce sons), he can be seen as the product of hyper-masculine sexuality. We are told in the prose preceding strophe 6 that he is 'mikinn ok vænn' ('tall and handsome'), but 'var þöggull; ekki nafn festiz við hann' ('was silent; no name had fastened itself to him'), which may suggest the trope of the *kólbítr* or unpromising youth, and the idea that a hero somehow has to earn his name. As the youth soon to be known as Helgi sits on a burial mound he sees nine valkyries ride past, the chief of whom (later revealed to be Sváva) gives him his name and warns him that, if he is always silent, it will be a long time before he achieves dominance, figured (as in *HHI*) as the possession of wealth ('hringom ráða', str. 6), martial prowess (in the kenning for warrior, 'ríkr rógapaldr', 'powerful apple-tree of strife'), and possession of land (*Röðulsvellir*). The warning implicitly urges him to embark on this heroic trajectory, and the valkyrie also tells him of a pre-eminent sword he should seek out.

Like Helgi Hundingsbani, he pursues heroic masculinity by vengeance and martial deeds, taking a troop of his father's men 'hefna móðurföður síns' ('to avenge his grandfather') (prose before str. 12) and using the sword Sváva directs him to, to kill his mother's former suitor Hróðmarr and achieve 'mörg þrekvirkí' ('many valiant deeds'), including killing the giant Hati, apparently without motivation. The hero's actions are thus to some extent predetermined, since from his youth he must engage with the consequences of decisions and actions taken before his birth. However, the pressure to achieve 'valiant deeds' and gain a suitable bride leads to other actions which have further consequences. As in *HHI*, when the giant's daughter Hrímgæðr begins a *flyting* it is his companion Atli who takes up the challenge. As we saw before, Atli had been Helgi's father's second-in-command too, and wooed his wife for him, and this echoes the split we saw in *HHI* between physical and verbal prowess, in some sense therefore making Atli Helgi's double.

Atli attacks Hrímgæðr as one of the *kveldriðor* ('night-riding witches', str. 15) and 'hála nágráðug' ('corpse-greedy trollwife', str. 16), but since she is female he cannot of course employ the full range of *níð* insults. She, on the other hand, has no such problem and, like

Guðmundr, combines accusations of bestiality and effeminacy, saying in strophe 20:

Gneggia myndir þú, Atli, ef þú geldr ne værir:
brettir sinn Hríngerðr hala! Aptarla hiarta
hygg ek at þitt, Atli, sé, þótt þú hafir hreina rödd!

You would neigh, Atli, if you were not gelded: Hríngerðr raises her tail! Further back, Atli, I think your heart must be, though you have a stallion's voice!

The sexual dynamic here is complicated if, in raising her tail, Hríngerðr is (in either her imagined equine form, or in her own form, since it is conceivable that a troll might have a tail) signalling sexual availability. The essential idea then would be that she is effectively saying: 'Even though I am sexually available, you are so gay that you can't do anything about it.' That is, she is implying effeminacy, even though this could leave her open to the type of *níð* insult most often levelled at women: that they are nymphomaniacs; they are interested in heterosexual sex to a degree that is shameful.²⁸ Presumably the need to mock Atli's lack of masculinity outweighs the potential insult to which she is opening herself.²⁹

Atli reverses the gender polarity, though, and asserts his dominance over her—he is the *reini* ('stallion'), not the mare—threatening that his sexual prowess is such that she would be entirely lamed—'öll muntu lemiast' (str. 21)—if he really engaged seriously in their congress ('ef mér er alhugat'). Hríngerðr suggests that if she can sleep with Helgi 'eina nótt' ('for one night', str. 24) this would be fitting compensation for the killing of her father, a proposal which is oddly flattering to her opponent but which Atli rejects on his behalf, and she recognizes that Helgi would rather have Sváva, whom she has seen reconnoitring the harbour and who she claims is the only thing preventing her from killing Helgi's men (str. 26).

Atli wins the *flyting* by cunning rather than anything else, by keeping the giantess talking until sunrise, at which point she is turned into stone. Carolyne Larrington, in her introductory note to her

²⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 18–19.

²⁹ It is also possible that, since Hríngerðr is a troll-wife, there is no need for her to abide by the normal social rules.

translation of this poem, says that this *flyting* ‘has no relevance to the plot’ (p. 123), and this is true. However, it is not irrelevant to the dynamic of the poem, since it enables the credentials of Helgi’s heroic masculinity to be set out. In both *HHI* and *HHv* homosocial bonds are directed at facilitating a male–female union—Sinfjötli and Atli both enable their companions to attain their valkyrie brides. However, the homosocial aspects of *HHv* are more complicated, because of the introduction of the tragic episode with Helgi’s brother Heðinn after Helgi and Sváva become betrothed, as we shall see.

It seems at first like a bizarre and unnecessary part of the plot. After Heðinn rejects a troll-woman’s advances she vengefully curses him to vow to have Sváva, and he wanders off in sorrow. However, when he bumps into Helgi and tells his brother what has happened, Helgi seems not to be angry or perturbed but to resign himself to dying in a duel, content with the idea that his brother will take over his bride. In addition to this psychologically implausible scenario, we are also given the rather odd and unexplained information that the troll-woman was probably actually Helgi’s *fylgia*.

However, this section does make rather more sense viewed in terms of its gender dynamic. If the troll-woman is really Helgi’s *fylgia*, then Heðinn’s rejection of her invitation to have ‘fylgð sína’ (‘her company’) may actually represent unacknowledged enmity toward his brother, later manifested in the oath over the pledging-cup to have Sváva. It is an interesting scene. We are told:

Um kveldit óro heitstrengingar; var fram leiddr sonargoltr; lögðo menn þar á hendr sínar ok strengþo menn þá heit at bragarfulli.

During the evening oaths were made; a sacrificial boar was led forth; men laid their hands on it, and men made vows on the oath-cup.

This is a ritualized scene of homosocial bonding—we are not told what the other men vow, but judging from other similar episodes in medieval literature, such as the well-known *beot* scenes in *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, we may imagine that they involve boasts of individual prowess: the ability to do certain things, achieve certain goals. Essentially, it is a site for competitive masculinity to display itself, and which is implicitly hostile: it involves saying, ‘I am better than you, I am a bigger man than you’. The boasts are sublimated forms of the basic male forms of competition—who can urinate highest up a wall,

who has the biggest penis: who has dominance. Indeed, as a speech-act the boasting forms a counterpart to the *flyting*: the former involves the competitive comparison of positive attributes; the latter the competitive comparison of negatives ones.

What is surprising here is not so much that this homosocial scenario leads to the potential disruption of homosocial bonds in fratricide, an act viewed with horror in medieval texts (as, for instance, in Beowulf's claims about Unferth).³⁰ Heðinn clearly fears this, but attempts to avoid it, since we are told he 'iðraðiz svá miðk at hann gekk á braut villistígo suðr á lǫnd' ('repented this so greatly that he went away on wild paths to the south'). Rather, it is Helgi's ready acceptance of the situation his brother has brought about and his recognition that destiny cannot be avoided: 'Sǫnn muno verða / ǫlmál' ('the ale-talk must come true') (str. 33). Not only does he tell his brother not to 'reproach' himself ('Sakaz eigi þú'), he even thinks that it may be for the best if he does not return from his duel ('þá má at góðo / gøraz slíkt, ef skal', 'it may turn out for good if that is what occurs') (str. 33). Heðinn underlines his brother's unusually accommodating nature by saying that, rather than forgive him, 'þér er sœmra / sverð at rióðað' ('it would be more seemly to redden your sword') (str. 34). However, Helgi prioritizes his homosocial bond with his brother over his love for Sváva, asking her not to weep (*grát-tattu!*) but 'at þú Heðni / hvílo gørvir / ok iǫfur ungan / ástom leiðir' ('that you prepare your bed for Heðinn and love the young prince') (str. 41). She, however, seems less than keen to be passed between the brothers, implying that Heðinn is unworthy of her as a 'iǫfur ókunnan' ('unknown prince') (str. 42), and the poem ends with Heðinn's vow to avenge his brother (str. 43) and presumably thus to render himself worthy of Sváva.³¹ Larrington points out that the fatal duel Helgi faces is against Álfir, 'the son of his grandfather's killer, the son of his mother's thwarted suitor, and thus in a sense his brother

³⁰ When Unferth questions Beowulf's bravery, the latter claims that Unferth became his brothers' slayer: 'þinum broðrum to banan wurde' (l. 587). He will be punished for it in hell (ll. 588–9).

³¹ Women are often passed between male relatives when one of them dies, and the poet's acknowledgement of Sváva's reluctance shows an unusual recognition that women's desire for men is not interchangeable.

manqué, the man who might have occupied the place he now has'.³² Therefore one could read this duel as a displacement of the 'real' sibling rivalry between Helgi and Heðinn, which neither of them is willing to contemplate: homosocial bonds are paramount, and the threat to them is eliminated by Helgi's sacrifice.

HELGAKVIÐA HUNDINGSBANA QNNOR

Despite the similarities of plot between the First and Second Helgi poems, the latter has a very different tone and emphasis. Here, Helgi kills not only Sigrún's suitor and his kin but also Sigrún's father Högni and all of her kin except for her brother Dagr. Although he swears a truce and Helgi and Sigrún marry and have children, Dagr nevertheless later takes revenge for his father's death and slays Helgi. As Heinz Klingenberg comments, the leitmotif here is 'revenge of kin. Kin-loyalty is opposed by individualistic love... which itself is overtaken by... kin-revenge'.³³ The gender dynamic is correspondingly different, too. In another motif not present in *HHI*, we are told that Helgi goes in disguise to reconnoitre the court of King Hundingr before he kills him. When Hundingr sends men to search for him, Helgi has to disguise himself as a woman: 'En Helgi mátti eigi forðaz annan veg en tók klæði ambáttar ok gekk at mala' ('But Helgi could not save himself any other way, but put on a serving-woman's clothes and went to grind [meal]') (prose before str. 2). However, a figure called Blindr 'inn bōlvísi' ('the malevolent') seems to see through his disguise, saying

Hvōss ero augo	í Hagals þýio,
era þat karls ætt	er á kvernom stendr;
steinar rifna,	stökkur lúðr fyrir!

Sharp are the eyes of Hagall's bondwoman; that is not one of lowborn lineage who stands at the millstone—the stones are tearing apart; the wooden stand is cracking!

³² Larrington, 'Sibling Drama', 174.

³³ Heinz Klingenberg, 'Helgi Poems', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, 280–1, at 281.

It is an episode similar to the one in which Achilles tries to disguise himself as a girl but is unmasked when he is seen to be fascinated by the weaponry in the market rather than the silks and fabrics: the moral being that one's true nature will out.³⁴ However, the emphasis in *HHII* seems to be on the disparity in rank rather than in the cross-gendered aspect. Moreover, Helgi's friend Hagall covers for him by claiming that this is in fact Sigrún, and the reason the wooden stand is struggling under this miller's force is that she is a valkyrie, a fighter: that is why this person's eyes are *ötul* ('terrible', str. 4).

It is rank, too, that is at issue rather than gender in the later *flyting* between Sinǫtli and Guðmundr, when Sinǫtli says that Guðmundr will have 'geitr um halda' ('to herd goats') rather than fight (str. 22). It is true that the verbal interchange is much briefer in this poem, and it is possible, as Carolynne Larrington suggests, that the scribe 'intended readers and reciters to leaf back to the first poem and read the *flyting* there' (p. 132). However, there are no marks of abbreviation in the manuscript to indicate that this should occur, and I would argue that this is a deliberate choice to de-emphasize the gender aspects here and avoid sexual insults based on *níð*. A possible reason for this is that, although he is still pre-eminent in martial activity, in this poem Helgi responds in love to the sexual initiative of Sigrún, the valkyrie who chooses him as her lover in defiance of her kinsmen. We are told in strophe 14 that she went to see the prince 'Helga / hǫnd at sœkia' ('to seek Helgi's hand'), and there is a repeated emphasis on her volition and agency. In strophe 15 she says she had already wholeheartedly loved Helgi before she had seen him, then later that, although she is betrothed to Hǫðbroddr, 'iǫfur annan / eiga vildak' ('I wished to have another prince') (str. 16). We are told:

Nama Hǫgna mæR	of hug mæla;
hafa kvaz hón Helga	hylli skyldo.

Hǫgni's maiden did not speak contrary to her thoughts; she said she intended to have Helgi's favour.

There might even be a hint of initial reluctance on Helgi's part in the statement that 'nú vill dyliaz / dǫglingr fyr mér, / en Hǫgna mæR /

³⁴ See e.g. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13. 162–80.

[Helga] kennir' ('now the prince wishes to hide himself from me, but Högni's maiden knows Helgi!' (str. 13).

The sense of her initiative here is so strong that for Helgi or his second to accuse another of sexual passivity might raise uncomfortable questions. The emphasis shifts in this poem from homosociality and its abjected opposite to the conflict between relations and to doomed male–female love. Nevertheless, at the end of the poem Helgi remains in the otherworld with his warriors, and Sigrún remains in the house with her maid until she too dies of grief.

The emphasis at the end of *HHv* and the start of *HHII* that Helgi and Sváva were reincarnated as Helgi Hundingsbani, and the idea at the end of *HHII* that Helgi and Sigrún were reincarnated as Helgi Haddingia damager and Kára Hálfðansdóttir, another valkyrie, even though this is disavowed as *kerlingavilla* ('an old wives' tale'), perhaps reflects the sense that heroic masculinity involves a trauma endlessly repeated in the hope of its working out right this time: the hero defeats his rival for a bride but sparks a turn of events which in turn leads to the hero's demise. Certainly, it would seem that heroic masculinity in these poems is a fragile thing. It is predicated on the support of other men achieved by the maintenance of homosocial bonds, but also the displacement of homosocial desire onto the enemy who is feminized and then destroyed. Desire is validated when its object is a woman, but this in itself can have fatal aspects.

I have tried to demonstrate the utility of Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire. However, as mentioned earlier, in her work this is triangulated by a woman. This occurs in one of two ways. First, it can occur in a positive sense, where two men are brought into an alliance by the exchange of a woman in marriage, usually as father-in-law and son-in-law. Secondly, however, and negatively, it can occur where two rivals are joined in competition for the love or possession of the same woman.

This dynamic can be seen to some extent in the Helgi poems, but it has to be modified significantly. For instance, in *HHI* one could loosely see Helgi and Höðbroddr as joined in their rivalry over Sigrún, but the site of the greatest antagonism and that which most clearly fits Sedgwick's dynamic of abjected homosexuality is the *flyt-ing*. However, the verbal contest is not between the rivals themselves

but between the men's companions and representatives, Sinfjötli and Guðmundr, which complicates the binary relationship envisaged by Sedgwick. The same scenario holds for *HHII*, but in this poem we have a further triangle, where Helgi and Dagr are, in a sense, rivals for Sigrún. However, this bond of enmity is motivated by Dagr's wish to avenge his father and reappropriate his sister, and thus the sexual bond is replaced by the sibling bond for one of the parties.

HHv is even more complicated. There is an instance of Sedgwick's positive triangle, in Helgi's relationship with Sváva's father, Eylimi, but this bond is largely peripheral to the poem, and covered in a single sentence ('Hann kom til Eylima konungs ok bað Svávo dóttur hans', 'He came to King Eylimi and asked for his daughter, Sváva'). Again, in terms of the negative triangle, in a sense Helgi's father Hiorvarðr is joined in enmity to Sigrlinn's father Sváfnir, who refuses their alliance. However, it is Atli who does the wooing and who later kills Sváfnir. It is Atli, too, who carries out the *flyting* with Hrímgarðr, both protecting his prince from the giantess's desire and also clearing the way for Helgi to get to Sváva. Finally, the best example of Sedgwick's type of triangulation is in Heðinn's rivalry with his brother for the love of Sváva. However, not only is there a sibling connection here, an aspect which does not really feature in Sedgwick's account, but the rivalry is turned by Helgi into a positive homosocial bond in his acquiescence in his fate and desire for his brother to take over his bride.

It is thus clearly not possible to take over Sedgwick's taxonomy of homosocial desire wholesale in analysing medieval texts, and the Helgi poems delineate a much more complex set of overlapping and competing bonds, indicating that a more nuanced consideration is necessary of how the roles of lover, rival, friend, and sibling can interact. It suggests, too, that the modern emphasis on the desire for the sexual object choice, which Sedgwick argues structures much of modern thought and culture in the West, is still less accurate and apposite than even she suggests.³⁵ Desire in medieval texts is involved

³⁵ Sedgwick's later comments go further in recognizing the complexity of intimate bonds. See e.g. *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 8.

in and inflected by these other relations in a way that does not come to the fore in the texts Sedgwick analyses. A more nuanced typology seems desirable, and it is hoped that the analysis in this chapter and elsewhere in the book may serve as a tentative move towards a recognition of the fluidity of relationships of desire—a recognition largely accepted in practice, but which we seem curiously unable to formulate discursively.

In Chapters 1 and 2 we have considered the relation of gender and violence, and that of past and present, in terms of both femininity and masculinity through the key characters of Guðrún and Helgi. We now move on to consider these themes in the compilation as a whole, and how the past—and particularly the mythological past—inflects the heroic present. This will pave the way for an analysis of the comparable relationship between the heroic poems themselves and later reworkings of them and allusions to them in the family and contemporary sagas.

3

Kin-slaying in the *Poetic Edda*: The End of the World?

In the first two chapters issues of gender and sexuality were at the fore in the discussion of attitudes to revenge and violence. Here the relation of revenge and violence is broadened to embrace not just familial and societal strife but destruction on a cosmic scale. The proverbial wisdom of *Hávamál* advises one not to trust ‘Bróðurbana sínom, þótt á brauto mœti’ (‘A brother’s killer, though one meet him on the road’) (str. 89), and the apocalyptic voice of *Völuspá* even links fratricide with Ragnarøk, prophesying: ‘Brœðr muno beriaz oc at bōnom verðaz’ (‘Brothers will fight each other and become one another’s slayer’) (str. 45). Despite these warnings, kin-slaying, and especially fratricide, constitute crucial factors in the history of both gods and men, recurring throughout the Codex Regius, and they are particularly prominent in *Völuspá* and *Hamðismál*, respectively the first and last poems of the compilation. This chapter first explores the treatment of these themes in the two texts and the way in both that these themes interact with the use of certain shared motifs, then analyses the references to Ragnarøk and these same motifs in the heroic poems, in particular the poems of Sigurðr’s youth. It is argued that many events in the heroic poems, and in particular *Hamðismál*, function at least in part as microcosmic analogues of key events in the mythological texts, in particular *Völuspá*. The explicit references to Ragnarøk in four heroic poems are explored, along with the links between the figures of Sigurðr and Baldr, and the way that human strife, primarily characterized by kin-slaying and revenge, is thus linked to the archetypal cosmic strife. Trees and branches are seen to be consistently employed as a metaphor for human interrelation and interdependence, and wolves to represent human strife, and it is speculated that *Sigrdrífumál* 12 may even hint at the potential of

language used with wisdom to prevent conflict and control retaliatory impulses. I argue that the poet of *Hamðismál* may have been alluding to the cosmic struggle as a means of warning his contemporaries of the dire consequences of kin-slaying and the way it brings a human dynasty to an end, but that within the context of the compilation we are encouraged to extend this warning to the consequences of strife within the community in general.

RAGNARÖK IN *VÖLUSPÁ* AND *HAMÐISMÁL*

In *Völuspá* 31–3 the allusively told death of Baldr overshadows the history of the gods in the poem, and effectively begins the inexorable approach of Ragnarök. These allusions are usually interpreted using the clearer versions in Snorri Sturluson's mid-thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, although almost all the important facts are confirmed by the extant Eddaic or skaldic poetry.¹ Some uncontroversial details will therefore be adopted here from Snorri, but primary reference will be to the text of the Codex Regius.

The question of who is to be punished for Baldr's killing is a complex one, since his immediate killer, his brother Höðr, is blind and is wholly unaware that the dart with which he shoots Baldr is made out of mistletoe, the one thing in the world which can harm his otherwise invulnerable brother. It is therefore arguable that it is Loki who bears the responsibility, having planned and instigated the killing; and indeed he is punished, by being bound and tortured until Ragnarök, as *Völuspá* 35 describes. Nonetheless, Óðinn clearly finds it important to avenge Baldr directly, since he immediately begets another son Váli, who avenges him by killing Höðr at one-night old (*Völuspá* 32–3, although Váli is not named here). However, these actions clearly do not resolve the problem.

It is clear that Váli's vengeance for Baldr's death can only perpetuate the fratricidal cycle, since Höðr is Váli's brother just as much as Baldr was. Moreover, the ultimate culprit Loki is Óðinn's blood-

¹ It seems likely that the closely contemporary (late thirteenth-century) audience of the Codex Regius would have a similar background in mind, perhaps even derived from Snorri.

brother, as we know from *Lokasenna* 9, and thus Óðinn's involvement in his punishment is likewise problematic.² Interestingly, a very similar story of accidental killing is told in *Beowulf* (ll. 2435–43). There, however, the emphasis is on the fact that, because the slayer is the victim's brother, no revenge can be taken. The Norse fratricidal cycle continues when Loki gets free from his bonds at Ragnarøk, since it is his progeny who battle Óðinn and his children (*Völuspá* 50): the wolf Fenrir kills Óðinn and is killed in turn by Óðinn's son Víðarr; Þórr kills the Midgard serpent, but is killed in the process (strophes 53–6).

The apocalypse is followed by the restoration of cosmic order and the creation of a new world, where all is put to rights, and Hqðr and Baldr are at peace (str. 62). One might interpret this as a sign that fratricide, along with other ills and strife, is at an end; indeed, this is precisely the way in which John Lindow understands the strophe, when he claims: 'This is indeed a new order, in which the demands of vengeance have been put aside.'³ However, the cohabitation of Hqðr and Baldr could equally well be seen as an ominous sign for the future tranquillity of the new world, given their designation there as *valtívar*—literally, 'slaughter-gods' (str. 62)—and given the characteristic longevity of memory where feud or revenge is concerned in Norse (and Old English) texts, causing past wrongs to spark off renewed enmity over periods of years. One could, therefore, see the brothers' past strife as a banished but lurking threat, just as the dragon Niðhoggr remains a troubling presence at the end of the poem, its wings laden with corpses. We shall return to the import-

² The possible relation of the two stories is considered in Heather O'Donoghue, 'What Has Baldr To Do with Lamech? The Lethal Shot of a Blind Man in Old Norse Myth and Jewish Exegetical Traditions', *Medium Ævum*, 72 (2003), 82–107.

³ John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance Among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997), 170. In context, Lindow interprets the *Völuspá* strophe using the end of *Vafþrúðnismál*, where we are told that after Ragnarøk, Víðarr and Váli (Óðinn's sons) will live together and Móði and Magni will possess their father Þórr's hammer Miðllnir for strength in battle (*at vígþroti*, str. 51). Lindow then describes Snorri's systematized version, where all six gods sit down together: 'Baldr the victim, Hqðr the murderer, Váli the avenger, and the other three, all of whom have...connections with vengeance.'

ance of fratricide and kin-slaying in Ragnarøk shortly, but first we turn to these themes in the final poem of the Codex Regius.

As we have seen, *Hamðismál* comes as the last in a long line of eighteen poems dealing with the Völsung dynasty, beginning with *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, which deals with Helgi Hundingsbani, Völsung's grandson and Sigmundur's son. The Helgi poems are followed by lays which deal with Sigurðr, Sigmundur's son by a different wife, his rise to fame, and his complicated sexual life which causes the antagonism between Brynhildr and Guðrún and leads to his murder by Guðrún's brothers. The remaining poems largely relate the remainder of Guðrún's life, the murder of her brothers by her second husband Atli (possibly at her instigation), her revenge on Atli through the murder of their children, and the fate of the children of her third marriage.

It is thus already evident that the backdrop for *Hamðismál* is gloomy, permeated with vengeance, treachery, and kin-slaying. In this last poem, however, these concerns come to a head. *Hamðismál* need not have been presented last in the compilation—for instance, it might seem more logical to have *Hamðismál* precede *Guðrúnarhvöt*. The latter text's beginning is very similar to that of *Hamðismál* and could thus serve as a flashback; a final emphasis on Guðrún's grief and decision to end her life on a funeral pyre (rather than ending with the brothers' fatal revenge) would create a satisfying tragic conclusion. The compiler's decision to present *Hamðismál* last is surely therefore purposive, throwing the final emphasis onto this text and its themes. We considered the attitude to revenge displayed in *Hamðismál* in Chapter 1, which argued that the poem distances the audience from Guðrún and her sons in order to interrogate the ethic of vengeance. However, I want here to examine the poem from a different angle.

Even from a bare-bones account of the plot, such as that in the Introduction, the centrality of vengeance and kin-slaying to the poem is evident. Within this basic frame, however, the poet uses the lexis of brotherhood together with tree and wolf imagery to emphasize the destructiveness of revenge. As we saw in Chapter 1, Brodeur and Brady's insightful article on the three terms *inn sundr mæðri*, *bræðra sammæðra*, and *bróðir occarr* shows that the progressive

intimacy of these terms parallels Hamðir and Sǫrlí's deepening understanding of their relation to Erpr, progressing from initial hostility to a final, though tardy, recognition of his blood-tie with them.⁴ However, I want here to suggest that we need to widen our scope from the fraternal bond to kinship in general, since kinship terms (including, but not confined to, fraternal bonds) are employed in fifteen of the thirty-one strophes of the poem, and kinship bonds (or their denial) are crucial elements throughout the text (strophes 2–5, 7, 9–10, 13, 16–17, 19, 24–6, 28). We can see this through an examination of the poet's use of tree imagery, which is inextricably linked to kinship bonds and should colour our perception of them.

The first explicit mention of trees in the poem comes when Guðrún employs three similes in strophe 5 to emphasize the fact that she is left standing alone, deprived of kinsmen: she is 'Einstœð . . . sem ǫsp í holti' ('Alone . . . like an aspen in the wood'); 'fallin at frændom / sem fura at qvisti' ('bereft of kinsmen as a fir-tree of branches'); and 'vaðin at vilia / sem viðr at laufi' ('destitute of pleasures as a forest of leaves'). The very start of the poem perhaps also evokes trees in its use of the imagery of growth, when it says that grievous deeds 'sprutto á tái' ('sprang up on the threshold') (str. 1). At the end of the poem, however, it is the brothers who stand on Goth corpses 'sem ernir á qvisti' ('as eagles on a branch') (str. 30), a verbal echo of the first simile which undercuts the brothers' contentment with having fought well and won glory—foregrounding their isolation and reminding us of Guðrún's loneliness, which is inevitably still greater now that she is the last living Vǫlsung. One is reminded, too, of the lament in *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, strophe 19, where Guðrún says she is 'svá lítil, sem lauf sé' ('as little as a leaf is') because of Sigurðr's death, or the image in Egill Skallagrímsson's poem *Sonatorrek*, strophe 4: 'Þvítt ætt mín / á enda stendr, / hræbarnir / sem hlynir marka' ('For my lineage is at an end, like the corpse-borne [felled] maples of the forest').⁵

⁴ Brodeur and Brady, 'Sundrmæðri—Sammæðra', 136.

⁵ See *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, II (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), at ch. 78. Compare also str. 5, where Egill claims to bring 'ór orðhofi / mærdar timbr / máli laufgat' ('out of the word-temple the timber of glory, leafed with speech').

One might contrast Guðrún's use of this imagery to dupe Atli in *Atlamál in grænlensku*, where she pretends to concede that Atli, having killed her brothers, has all the power. She laments:

í kné gengr hnefi, ef qvistir þverra;
tré tecr at hníga, ef høggr tág undan. (str. 73)

The trunk goes to its knees if the branches decrease; a tree starts to sink down if one cuts the root from under it.

This translation adopts a reading opposed to that of Dronke, explicated in her commentary.⁶ She takes *hnefi* in its usual sense of 'king-piece' in the form of chess called *hnefatafl*, which she thinks is appropriate for the expression 'í kné gengr', and takes *kvistir* to refer to the minor pieces of the game, speculating that in primitive sets they may have been made from twigs and hence familiarly been called *kvistir*. However, as she concedes, 'the use of *kvistir* in a rare sense would be confusing when a straightforward reference to a tree follows' (p. 134). Using her logic, however, one might postulate that the king-piece itself was originally made of wood, and hence *hnefi* might have meant 'trunk' or some other part of a tree. If this is so, then the poet may be deliberately playing on both meanings of the words, a play which has two effects. First, the phrase 'í kné gengr hnefi' as translated above strengthens the metaphorical link we have been tracing between trees and humans, which is after all the point of the strophe. Secondly, the alternative meaning for *hnefi*, 'king-piece', strengthens Guðrún's irony—she is ostensibly using the phrase as a parallel for her own position, but of course Atli, the king, is also about to go to his knees as his 'minor pieces' fall. There is a further possible allusion, since one of the symbols of survival and regeneration towards the end of *Völuspá* is a set of *gullnar toflor* ('golden chequers') (str. 58), which are found after the apocalypse and which are interpretable as a symbol of their tragic meddling in human affairs, and of which Guðrún's *hnefatafl* imagery may represent a microcosmic analogue.

There is a deep irony in the use of this image in *Atlamál*, which lies in the fact that Guðrún has already avenged herself by killing

⁶ Dronke I, 133–4, 70/3–4.

her sons with Atli, and is about to make him eat their flesh and drink their blood. However, in the wider context of the manuscript it is doubly ironic, since in *Guðrúnarhvöt* 5 Hamðir points out that, if Guðrún had not killed her sons, her ‘minor pieces’, they could have joined the brothers in avenging Svanhildr. Coming to *Hamðismál* after these two poems, the reader is thus attuned already to negative associations of tree imagery with destructive family behaviour.

The tree imagery in *Hamðismál* is also picked up ominously in strophe 17, where Randvér is said to swing on the ‘vargtré vindkøld’ (‘the wind-cold *varg*-tree’). Although *vargr* has the meaning ‘thief, outlaw’ and hence *vargtré* yields a kenning for ‘gallows’ (the ‘tree’ of the outlaw), its primary meaning is ‘wolf’, and so, in addition to foregrounding a further kin-slaying, this strophe introduces another image which is picked up at the end of the poem. One of the brothers (unnamed in the manuscript) calls for the two of them to eschew ‘úlfa dæmi’ (‘the example of wolves’). He urges that they should not fight ‘sem grey norna, / þau er gráðug ero / í auðn um alin’ (‘like the dogs of the Norns, which, greedy, are reared in the wilderness’) (str. 29). As we saw in Chapter 1, in conjunction with the poem’s final, apparently unmotivated, statement that the brothers lay apart in death, the poet may be seen here as foregrounding the loneliness of revenge at the end of his work, and thus implying the necessity of community bonds, rather than the ‘wilderness’ created by self-perpetuating acts of vengeance.⁷

Hamðismál can thus clearly be seen as echoing *Völuspá*’s emphasis on the destructive results of vengeance and kin-slaying. However, it is possible to link it and the other heroic poems even more explicitly to the cosmic concerns of the mythological lays. Caroline Brady argues that, in his hanging of Randvér and his threat to hang Hamðir and Sqrli, Iqrmunrekkr (as king of the Goths) demonstrates his affiliation to Óðinn (god and eponym of the Goths), who is often as-

⁷ As we saw in Chapter 2, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* also associates fratricide or fraternal strife with wolf-imagery. Guðmundr accuses Sinfjötli during their flying of being a werewolf, saying: ‘þú hefir etnar úlfa krásir / oc bræðr þínom at bana orðit’ (‘you have eaten the tidbits of wolves and been your brother’s slayer’) (str. 36).

sociated with hanged human and animal sacrifices.⁸ One might see this link, in conjunction with the poems' otherwise obscure references to the *disir* and *nornir* (str. 28–30), as an indication to the alert reader to place these events in a wider, not exclusively human and heroic, context.

The events of this poem can be seen as a kind of microcosm of Ragnarøk. *Völuspá* describes a kin-slaying and consequent act of revenge which culminates in the interrelated gods and giants fighting an epic conflict which destroys the cosmos. The compilation's last poem describes on a smaller, human level how two brothers start to fight each other. They are the last living representatives of a dynasty that has been steeped in kin-slaying and revenge, incited to avenge their sister on a man who is himself a filicide by a mother who has been involved in the deaths of brothers, husbands, and children. Guðrún, in particular, seems consumed by revenge, and in *Guðrúnarhvöt* we see her preparing to be literally consumed on the funeral pyre, having no use for life now that she has sent her sons off to vengeance and death (and thus recalling Signý in *Völsunga saga*, who is burnt out by revenge and can find nothing further to live for). This conflagration might even be linked to the final destruction of the Earth in Surtr's flames at Ragnarøk (*Völuspá* 52 and 57), just as the association of Fenrir with Ragnarøk can be linked to the prominent wolf imagery of *Hamðismál*, and the foregrounded tree and branch imagery of the latter can be linked to the World-Ash Yggdrasill. We might also compare the use of the term *meiðr* ('tree, gallows-tree') to refer to the mistletoe from which Baldr's bane was formed in *Völuspá* 32, both on the one hand to the tree (presumably Yggdrasill) on which Óðinn sacrifices himself to himself in *Hávamál* 138, and, on the other, to the gallows-tree on which Randvér is hanged in *Hamðismál* 17. The motifs of trees and wolves are also linked in *Guðrúnarkviða qnnor* 12, where Guðrún says that it seemed to her as she grieved for Sigurðr that it would be better if they let her

⁸ Caroline Brady, 'Óðinn and the Norse Jǫrmunrekkr-Legend', *PMLA*, 55 (1940), 910–30, at 918–19. Her argument that it is Óðinn and not Jǫrmunrekkr who gives the order to stone the brothers does not fit the extant version of *Hamðismál*, however, where logically it has to be Jǫrmunrekkr whose head Erpr would have cut off (thus helping his brothers who have cut off his arms and legs).

‘úlfaŕ . . . lífi týna / eða brendi mic sem birkinna við’ (‘destroy my life with the wolves or burned me like the birchwood’) (str. 12).⁹

The idea that these and other important figures in the mythological poems may be seen as in some way iconic or archetypes for their earthly counterparts finds support in *Grímnismál*, where we are told (str. 44):

Ascr Yggdrasils, hann er æztr viðā,
 enn Skíðblaðnir scipa,
 Óðinn ása, enn íóa Sleipnir,
 Bilrǫst brúa, enn Bragi scálda,
 Hábróc hauca, enn hunda Garmr.

The ash Yggdrasill, it is best of trees, and Skíðblaðnir of ships; Óðinn of the Æsir, and Sleipnir of horses; Bilrǫst of bridges, and Bragi of poets; Hábrók of hawks, and Garmr of dogs.

If these things are the best of their kind, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine Fenrir as worst of wolves, Miðgarðsormr as worst of serpents, and so on. Thus, the wolves, trees, eagles, and serpents of *Hamðismál* and the other heroic poems all have cosmic counterparts in *Völuspá* and the mythological poems. However, the allusions to Ragnarǫk in the heroic poems of the Codex Regius are not merely implicit in this way—there are several explicit eschatological references.

RAGNARǪK IN THE HEROIC POEMS: THE DOOM OF GODS AND MEN

In addition to the explicit references to Ragnarǫk in *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Hymiskviða*, and *Lokasenna*, there are four explicit references to it in the heroic poems: in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǥnnor* 40–1, *Atlamál* 21, *Fáfnismál* 14–15, and *Sigrdrífumál* 19.¹⁰

⁹ Compare also *Hávamál* 85, *Reginismál* 22, and the remarks immediately below.

¹⁰ The references in the mythological texts are: *Völuspá* 40–58; *Vafþrúðnismál* 17–18, 39–55; *Grímnismál* 4, 17, 23; cf. *Hymiskviða* 23–4; *Lokasenna* 38–41, 49–50, 58.

In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor* 40–1, Sigrún's maid sees Helgi riding into his grave mound with a host of men, and asks:

Hvárt ero þat svic ein, er ec síá þicciomz,
eða ragna rǫc, ríða menn dauðir?

Is it a trick, when it seems to me I see dead men ride, or the doom of the gods?

In Helgi's reply he almost repeats verbatim what the maid has said in assuring her that what she sees is not a trick. However, rather than repeating 'ragna rǫc', he substitutes 'aldar rof' ('doom of men'), which thus equates these phrases. This linking of the dooms of men and gods will be returned to later, but here it seems significant in the context of the foregoing discussion of *Hamðismál* that this immediately follows sibling conflict between Dagr, who has killed Helgi with a spear loaned to him by Óðinn to avenge his father, and Sigrún, who curses her brother. Moreover, the poem also employs wolf, tree, and eagle imagery in a way comparable to *Hamðismál*: Sigrún tells her brother in strophe 33 that 'Þá væri þér hefnt Helga dauða, / ef þú værir vargr á viðom úti' ('Helgi's death would be avenged upon you if you were a wolf/outlaw out in the wood').¹¹ She also claims that Helgi surpassed other leaders 'sem ítrscapaðr ascr af þyrni' ('like the gloriously shaped ash-tree beside the thorn-bush') (str. 38), and at the end of the poem, as she waits in vain for Helgi at his grave mound, Sigrún says her hopes of his coming are fading, 'er á asclimom ernir sitja' ('where eagles sit on the ash-tree's limbs') (str. 50). Here too, then, as in *Hamðismál*, these images are associated with conflict between siblings, and death as the result of revenge.

Just as in the Helgi reference a character (Sigrún's maid) associates a personal situation (Helgi's return from the dead) with the doom of the gods, so in *Atlamál* 22, as Peter Hallberg puts it, 'the catastrophe at Atli's court is compared with the mythic destruction of the world'.¹²

¹¹ The translation 'wolf' may perhaps be preferred to 'outlaw', since this is followed by a reference to feasting on corpses; cf. the remarks on *vargr* in *Hamðismál* above.

¹² Peter Hallberg, 'Elements of Myth in the Poetry of the Poetic Edda', in Bela Brogyanyi and Thomas Krömmelbein (eds.), *Germanic Dialects: Linguistic and Philological Investigations* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 213–47, at 238; Hallberg does not connect the other poems considered here.

The comparison comes in the context of the ominous dreams of Gunnarr's wife Glaumvǫr before he sets off to his death at the hands of Atli:

Gǫrvan hugða ec þér gálga, gengir þú at hanga,
æti þic ormar, yrða ec þic qviqvan,
gordiz rǫc ragna.

I thought I saw a gallows prepared for you; you went to be hanged; serpents ate you; I lost you from life—the doom of the gods happened.

The Ragnarǫk association perhaps explains the apparently unmotivated mention of hanging on the gallows in this strophe as a reference to Óðinn, the Hanged God. Moreover, the *ormar* can allude not only to the literal snakes which will be the death of Gunnarr, but also perhaps to the *Miðgarðsormr* which will kill and be killed by Þórr in the final battle (*Völuspá* 56).

Haraldur Bessason suggests that *Atlakviða*, too, alludes to Ragnarǫk, contending that by the use of the terms *scævaði* (which he translates as 'took great strides' and argues could 'fit giantesses'), *afkár*, and *fjarghús*, the author 'intended to make subtle allusion to the famous encounter of gods and giants in the *ragnarök*... using the mythical idea... to convey the magnitude and finality of Guðrún's revenge'.¹³ If this is the case, then it is an extremely subtle allusion, but it is certainly possible that the author of *Atlamál*, like Haraldur Bessason, *perceived* an allusion to Ragnarǫk in the earlier *Atlakviða*, and that this is the source of his own reference.

In *Fáfnismál* 14–15 the Ragnarǫk reference seems at first to be merely one of many elements of lore on which Sigurðr is testing Fáfnir. However, Kragerud has explored what he calls 'diktningens allegoriserende anvendelse av mytologiske motiver' ('the poetry's allegorizing application of mythological motifs') in *Fáfnismál*.¹⁴ He argues that there is a profound relationship between the eschatological events of Ragnarǫk and Sigurðr's fate, a relationship which is not obvious, how-

¹³ Haraldur Bessason, 'Mythological Overlays', in Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (eds.), *Sjöttíu Ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni, 20. júlí 1977*, I (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), 273–92, at 276.

¹⁴ Alv Kragerud, 'De mytologiske spørsmål i Fávnesmål', *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*, 96 (1981), 9–48, at 42.

ever, but lies 'i de underliggende motivhistoriske og formhistoriske forbindelser som består mellom den mytologiske diktning og helte-diktningen' ('in the underlying motif-historical and form-historical connections which exist between the mythological poetry and the heroic poetry').¹⁵ Taking this proposal on board, the following section explores further the possibility of a meaningful link between Sigurðr's life and the events of Ragnarøk in the poems of Sigurðr's youth, ending with a contextualized analysis of the final explicit reference to Ragnarøk in *Sigrdrífumál* 19.

KIN-SLAYING IN THE POEMS OF SIGURÐR'S YOUTH

Baldr's death is a pivotal moment in the progression towards Ragnarøk, as we have seen above. As represented by the mythological poems, his father Óðinn is veritably obsessed by his fate and that of the gods, questioning endlessly about Ragnarøk, and ending his wisdom contests with the unanswerable question about what he whispered into his dead son's ear as Baldr lay on his funeral pyre.¹⁶ Baldr when alive was an exemplary figure—his loss devastates the gods, and in *Grímnismál* 12 Baldr's hall Breiðablik is 'á því landi, er ec liggia veit / fæsta feicnstafl' ('in that land where I know the fewest treachery-runes [i.e. evil, or plots] lie'). This would seem to reflect his character, as with the other gods' halls in *Grímnismál* 8–13. A fuller picture of Baldr as the god of pre-eminent goodness is obtained from Snorri, who, in chapter 22 of *Gylfaginning*, has Hár state:

Annarr son Óðins er Baldr, ok er frá honum gott at segja. Hann er beztr ok hann lofa allir. Hann er svá fagr álitum ok bjartr svá at lýsir af honum, ok eitt gras er svá hvítt at jafnat er til Baldrs brár. Þat er allra grasa hvítast, ok þar eptir máttu marka hans fegrð bæði á hár ok á líki. Hann er vitrastr Ásanna ok fegrst talaðr ok líknsamastr.¹⁷

¹⁵ Kragerud, 'De mytologiske spørsmål i Fávnesmål', 26. One remains wary of his assertions of a direct link between the Eddaic poems and a living religion (p. 42), however.

¹⁶ *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, and *Vafþrúðnismál*, *passim*. The unanswerable question comes in *Vafþrúðnismál* 54; cf. *Heiðreks saga*, ch. 10.

¹⁷ Anthony Faulkes (ed.), *Prologue and Gylfaginning* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1988).

The second son of Óðinn is Baldr, and there is good to tell about him. He is the best and all praise him. He is so fair of countenance and so bright that it shines from him, and a certain plant is so white that it is likened to Baldr's brow. It is of all plants the whitest, and by this you may mark the beauty both of his hair and of his body. He is wisest of the Æsir and fairest spoken and most merciful.

Although it is difficult to be certain how much of this passage is Snorri's scholarly elaboration, nevertheless it clearly has its ultimate basis in tradition.¹⁸

Sigurðr's death at the hands of his sworn brothers likewise hangs over the remainder of the Codex Regius like an ever-present shadow, embittering the lives of Guðrún and Brynhildr, and motivating Guðrún's terrible acts of vengeance. Like Baldr, Sigurðr is lauded everywhere: Grípir predicts that he will be 'mæztr und sólo / oc hæstr borinn hveriom iðfri' ('most glorious under the sun, and highest born of any prince') (*Grípisspá* 7). The prose passage on the death of Sinfjötli preceding *Grípisspá* remarks:

Sigmundr oc allir synir hans vóro langt um fram alla menn aðra um afl oc vøxt oc hug oc alla atgervi. Sigurðr var þó allra framarstr, oc hann kalla allir menn í fornfræðom um alla menn fram oc gofgastan herkonunga.

Sigmundr and all his sons were far beyond all other men in strength and stature and spirit and all accomplishments. Sigurðr was nonetheless foremost of all, and all men in the ancient traditions name him beyond all men and most magnificent of war-kings.

Similar expressions of pre-eminence can be found throughout the heroic poems.¹⁹ I would argue therefore that the deaths of Sigurðr and Baldr may be linked as parallel murders of two paragons which constitute events of catastrophic proportions and far-reaching

¹⁸ On Loki and Baldr, and the problematic linking of their portrayal in Eddaic poetry and in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, see Yvonne S. Bonnetain, 'En er þetta sá Loki Laufeyjarson, þá líkaði honum illa, er Baldr sakaði ekki', in Michael Dallapiazza et al. (eds.), *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, Hesperides, 12 (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), 73–87.

¹⁹ In *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* 18, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 27 (from Guðrún), 39 (from Brynhildr); *Guðrúnarkviða önnor* 2, *Guðrúnarhvöt* 10 (from Guðrún).

consequences.²⁰ More than this, the poems which describe Sigurðr's life and adventures are semi-heroic, semi-legendary with their motifs of talking birds and shape-shifting, and they display an interest in the link between the behaviour of gods and humans, since the earlier history of the treasure-hoard involves Óðinn and Loki, as can be seen below. Moreover, like *Völuspá*, they are imbued with treachery, revenge, and kin-slaying.²¹

In the prose preceding *Reginsmál* Reginn tells Sigurðr how Óðinn, Hænir, and Loki had been fishing, and Loki killed Otr, Reginn's brother who was in the form of an otter. When the gods showed their host that night the bag they made from the flayed skin of the otter—unaware that he was Hreiðmarr, Otr and Reginn's father—he made them ransom their lives by filling the bag and covering it on the outside with gold, revenge here ward off by compensation. This sets the scene for the beginning of the poem itself, where Loki, in order to obtain this compensation, nets a dwarf in the form of a pike and forces him to hand over his gold in return for his life (strophes 1–4). The dwarf wants to retain one ring (*Snorra Edda* credits it with self-replicating powers), and when Loki takes that too, the dwarf vengefully curses the gold (str. 5):

Þat scal gull,	er Gustr átti,
brœðrom tveim	at bana verða,
oc ǫðlingom	átta at rógi;
mun míns fiár	mangi nióta.

That gold which Gustr had will be the death of the two brothers, and the cause of discord for eight noblemen; none shall enjoy my wealth.

²⁰ In view of the parallels between *Hamðismál* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*, indicated above, one might also follow up the links between Sigurðr and Helgi, who is also a pre-eminent warrior and hero, described in superlative terms—for instance, both *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor* 38 and *Guðrúnarkviða ǫnnor* 2 describe the heroes as stags which surpass other animals. See also the remarks on tree imagery in *Sigrdrífumál* below.

²¹ Edgar Haimel argues that *Reginsmál*, *Fáfnismál*, and *Sigrdrífumál* constitute a thirteenth-century poetic unity, depicting Sigurðr's development as a hero in terms of *sapientia et fortitudo*. Although the poems are treated separately here, this should not be taken as disagreement with his thesis. See Edgar Haimel, 'Sigurd—ein Held des Mittelalters: Eine textimmanente Interpretation der Jung Sigurddichtung', *alvíssmál*, 2 (1993), 81–104, esp. 82.

The gods spread the gold over the otter-skin, but Hreiðmarr sees a single hair uncovered, and thus they must in turn yield this ring, *Andvaranaut*, the curse upon which Loki reveals, warning that ‘þat verðr yccarr beggia bani’ (‘that will be the slayer of you both’) (str. 6), and again, that it will bring ‘niðia stríð ónept’ (‘unending strife among kinsmen’) (str. 8).²²

One can trace the effects of this curse throughout the rest of the poems which follow in the *Edda*, but the immediate effects are striking. In the prose before strophe 10 Hreiðmarr refuses to share the compensation with his sons Fáfnir and Reginn, so the former kills his father as he sleeps; in the prose before strophe 15 Reginn incites Sigurðr to kill his brother Fáfnir, and it is ambiguous whether his motivation is to avenge his father or greed for the gold. In *Fáfnismál*, once Sigurðr has done as Reginn wants him to, the dying Fáfnir predicts that the treasure will be Sigurðr’s death (strophes 9 and 20); he also warns that Reginn will betray Sigurðr, the boy he has brought up as his foster-son, just as he betrayed his brother (str. 22). The nuthatch warns that Reginn ‘vill...bróður hefna’ (‘wishes...to avenge his brother’) (str. 33), and Sigurðr takes the advice to behead his foster-father. Thus, crucially, even before the cycle of revenge that surrounds Sigurðr’s relations with Brynhildr and Guðrún begins, his youth and the deed of prowess with which his name is associated (as Sigurðr *Fáfnisbani*) are steeped in treachery and kin-slaying. Moreover, all these events (like Ragnarøk) ultimately stem from the mal-evidence of Loki.

Sigrdrífumál adds to this analysis in two ways. First, it reintroduces Óðinn, as the reason why Sigrdrífa is lying asleep within a shield-wall for Sigurðr to rescue. Although a valkyrie and, as such, under Óðinn’s command, Sigrdrífa disobeyed his order to protect a certain old warrior, and Óðinn ‘stacc hana svefnþorni í hefnd þess’ (‘pricked her with a sleep-thorn in revenge for this’) (prose before str. 5). He curses her to sleep, never to be victorious in battle again, and (worst of all) to get married. Although the lacuna prevents us being wholly certain how *Sigrdrífumál* and the following

²² Taking Dronke’s emendation of *um nept* to *ónept*; see Ursula Dronke, ‘Reginismál v. 8’, *Maal og minne*, 3–4 (1960), 97–8.

extant poems relate, it is obvious that Óðinn's action is at least partly responsible for the fatal complexity of Sigurðr's sexual liaisons, providing yet another link between the gods' actions and human strife. The poem also contains some advice from the valkyrie to her lover that seems deeply ironic in the light of ensuing events (str. 22):

Þat ræð ec þér íþ fyrsta, at þú við frændr þína
 vammalauss verir;
 síðr þú hefnir, þótt þeir sacar gori,
 þat qveða dauðom duga.

I advise you this first—that you be blameless toward your kinsmen; avenge [but] slowly, though they give cause for strife; they say that is good for the dead.

Moreover, Sigrdrífa utters the ominous warning not to trust someone whose brother or father one has slain (str. 35), going on to predict trouble and a short life for Sigurðr, because 'römm ero róg of risin' ('mighty quarrels have arisen') (str. 37).²³ *Sigrdrífumál* thus sets the reader up for the death of Sigurðr at the hands of his kinsmen by marriage. However, it also contains the final explicit Ragnarök reference, in *Sigrdrífumál* 19, immediately preceding Sigrdrífa's numbered items of advice.²⁴

Sigrdrífa has been revealing wisdom to Sigurðr, beginning each strophe from 6 to 13 with a different type of rune, followed by what the runes are useful for. Although there are many enigmatic factors in this section of *Sigrdrífumál*, a couple of elements seem striking. Strophe 11 deals with *limrúnar* ('limb-runes'), which are used to heal wounds and must be cut on bark (*á berki*) and on those trees whose branches or *limar* ('limbs') face east. This striking equation of trees and branches with bodies and limbs bears an interesting similarity to

²³ This phrase is from later paper manuscripts, for the Codex Regius lacuna begins at str. 29, l. 1. However, there seems no reason to doubt its authenticity.

²⁴ These are interrupted at number six by the lacuna. Thus, the exact progression from *Sigrdrífumál* to the following poem is unclear and one can never be certain how or whether the betrothal to Sigrdrífa is reconciled with the subsequent betrothal to Brynhildr. However, it is possible that intervening prose might explain it with some device similar to the reincarnation motif of the Helgi poems.

Hamðismál's use of the family-tree image.²⁵ Presumably here in *Sigrdrífumál* there is some notion of 'sympathetic magic', where if healing runes are carved on branches, then the similar limbs of the body will be healed. Strophe 12 goes on to juxtapose this image of bodily healing with the idea of preventing revenge, saying that one must know *malrúnar* ('speech-runes') if one wishes that no one 'heiptom gialdi harm' ('should repay sorrow [or injury] with hatred [or feud]); these *malrúnar* are to be set at the assembly and courts. The final runes listed are *hugrúnar* ('mind-runes'), which are needful to be wiser than any other man ('ef þú vilt hveriom vera / geðsvinnari guma'). We are told how Hropr (a pseudonym for Óðinn) first gained them, and that they are cut on various liminal or mythic places (which include references to wolves, eagles, and norns, str. 15–17). *Sigrdrífa* then seems to speak of all the runes at once, stating that they are present among the Æsir, Vanir, elves, and humans (str. 18). They are valuable to those who know how to manipulate them correctly, and *Sigrdrífa* advises *Sigurðr*: 'níóttu, ef þú namt, / unz riúfaz regin' ('use them, if you take them, until the gods are torn apart') (str. 19).

Whilst conceding the obscurity of much of this section, it is perhaps not too bold to see the runes, particularly *malrúnar* and *hugrúnar*, as representing the power of language used wisely to prevent strife and control vengeful impulses with law and reason (str. 12). If so, then the allusion to *Ragnarøk* here again links the doom of the gods with destructive strife among humans. It may even hint to a Christian audience that wise speech in the law-courts can prevent the doom of the gods meaning the doom of humankind. Nonetheless, if so, it is merely a hint here that takes on greater force only when read in conjunction with other elements of the compilation.

²⁵ Thomas Hill also argues that the *barnstokkr* ('child trunk') in *Völsunga saga* is a symbol for the Völsung family, and there are several other Norse examples of a tree symbolizing a family: *ætt-kvísl* and *kyn-kvísl*, *ættar ask*, and *kynvið* (both from *Sonatorrek* 21). See Thomas D. Hill, 'The Confession of Beowulf and the Structure of *Völsunga saga*', in Robert T. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings: Papers from the Cornell Lecture Series Held to Coincide with the Viking Exhibition 1980–1981* (London: Phillimore, 1982), 165–79, at 168 and 179 n. 12.

RAGNARÖK AND ITS PLACE IN THE POETIC EDDA

Ragnarök was clearly a resonant and fascinating, perhaps even disturbing, idea for several Norse writers; it certainly represents a recurrent preoccupation throughout much of the *Poetic Edda*. We have already explored its presentation in *Völuspá* and some of the heroic poems. However, it runs as a thread through many of the mythological poems, too. *Vafþrúðnismál*'s account of Óðinn's wisdom contest with the eponymous giant shows him to be obsessed with the gods' fate at Ragnarök. *Skírnismál* can be interpreted partially as an explanation of the reason that Freyr has no sword at Ragnarök (as Loki points out in *Lokasenna* 42). (This is certainly how Snorri interprets it in *Gylfaginning*, chapter 37, and it may be alluded to in *Völuspá* 52 if one understands Surtr to be fighting Freyr with his own lost sword.)²⁶ The embedded episode in *Hymiskviða* where Þórr fishes for the Midgard serpent (terrifying the giant Hymir in the process) is a precursor of Ragnarök, where the god and the serpent kill each other. In *Lokasenna* Loki lists the faults of the gods and taunts them with having caused Baldr's death and the certainty of their destruction at Ragnarök. As Ursula Dronke points out, the humour of the poem prevents one from seeing it as a simple moral indictment of the gods; rather, it must stem from the tradition of Loki's opposition to the gods at Ragnarök.²⁷ *Þrymskviða* explains how Þórr got back the hammer he needs for Ragnarök. These links to Ragnarök are also supported by the fact that the poems are ordered both according to their main protagonist, and also according to the order in which those protagonists died at Ragnarök: Óðinn, Freyr, Þórr.²⁸

²⁶ As Dronke II, 148–9, 50/3–4. Indeed, *Skírnismál* contains some of the motifs analysed above in *Hamðismál*: tree imagery functions to emphasize coercion in Skírnir's use of the *tamsvendi* ('taming-wand', str. 26) and *gambantein* ('twig of power') he gets from the *hrás viðar* ('sap-filled wood', str. 32); an eagle represents the loneliness and isolation with which Gerðr is threatened (str. 27).

²⁷ Ibid. 353.

²⁸ *Völuspá* 56 onwards; compare Heinz Klingenberg, *Edda—Sammlung und Dichtung*, Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie, 3 (Basel and Stuttgart: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1974), 57.

One can take this idea further, though, using Carolyn Larrington's insight that, as a contest between god and giant, *Vafþrúðnismál* is in fact 'mimetic of Ragnarok', since this principle could equally well be applied to *Skírnismál*, *Hymiskviða*, and *Þrymskviða*.²⁹ Moreover, the other mythological poems, too, are predicated on conflict and contest. *Grímnismál* stems from a conflict between the gods, in this case Óðinn and Frigg, whose rival patronage of two prospective kings leads to the death of one of the candidates. Likewise, *Hárbarðsljóð*, as a flyting between Óðinn and Þórr over the relative merits of wisdom and strength, further explores divine conflict, in this case interpretable as an almost Oedipal father-son power-struggle.³⁰ *Lokasenna* is centred either on internal godly strife or conflict between gods and giants, depending on one's view of Loki's heritage, and finally *Alvíssmál* is a contest between god (Þórr) and dwarf.

The heroic poems, too, are clearly imbued with conflict of all kinds, but particularly kin-slaying and fratricide and their interaction with marital strife, these themes together running through almost every single one of the heroic poems. Given the recurrent preoccupation with Ragnarok, one is justified in asking, whether the compiler of the Codex Regius picked up on these hints in the original texts and construed the events of the heroic poems as a sort of microcosmic human outworking of patterns laid down on a cosmic level in the mythological poems, and ordered his compilation in such a way as to attempt to bring out these links.³¹ As Dronke remarks, the compiler 'has arranged his material with much forethought and care'.³² Indeed, although it is difficult to make definitive statements from a fragment, the order of the five poems contained in the later manuscript AM 748 I 4^{to} indicates that the schema of the Codex Regius was not traditional.³³ Therefore the links throughout the

²⁹ Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 39.

³⁰ Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Heroic Legend, Parricide, and Istaby', in [no ed.], *The Audience of the Sagas*, II (Göteborg: Gothenburg University, 1991), 113–19, at 117.

³¹ The evidence of AM 748 I 4^{to} suggests that the order was not traditional.

³² Dronke I, p. xi.

³³ AM 748 I 4^{to} contains *Grímnismál*, *Hymiskviða*, the only extant medieval copy of *Baldrs Draumar*, and parts of *Skírnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Vafþrúðnismál*, and *Völundarkviða*. See Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Håndskriftet nr. 748, 4^{to}* (Copenhagen: Møller, 1896) for a facsimile.

manuscript, and particularly the allusions to Ragnarøk, indicate that the compiler was indeed working to unify his collection.

A similar proposal was made in 1974 by Heinz Klingenberg, who argued that the compiler himself composed *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* to serve as a kind of prologue for the heroic poems, in a compilation ordered in such a way as to show the evil of killing within one's kinship group, and depicting the end of the Heroic Age.³⁴ His frequently speculative arguments did not meet with critical approval, and it is true that he resorts in part to special pleading and excessive repetition.³⁵ Nevertheless, as Joseph Harris has remarked, Klingenberg makes some valuable points, and his recognition that an 'idea' informs the manuscript as a whole should encourage productive work on the compilation of the Codex Regius.³⁶ A full re-examination of these issues, which is not dependent on the compiler's authorship of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* (a poem to which Klingenberg devotes six of nine chapters on the compilation) is overdue. Even from a brief consideration of the compilation, however, there is clearly some effort on the part of the compiler to bring out the links or points of similarity between individual poems, particularly in the prose passages, which he may have invented. For instance, the prose 'Frá dauða Sigurðar' ('On the Death of Sigurðr'), preceding *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* emphasizes that although there are several versions of Sigurðr's death, they are all unanimous in proclaiming that he was treacherously betrayed. Similarly, the prose on the 'Death of Sinfjötli' (preceding *Grípisspá*) explains the kinship between Helgi and Sigurðr, the two pre-eminent heroes of the collection. Like *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnor*, and many of the following poems, it concerns family strife because of the love of or revenge by a woman: Sinfjötli kills his stepmother's brother and his stepmother Borghild poisons him (apparently with the complicity of his father Sigmundr). Sigmundr is killed by Hundingr's sons—the end of that

³⁴ Klingenberg, *Edda—Sammlung und Dichtung*, 'Teil II' (pp. 37–133); see particularly the conclusion, at 130–3.

³⁵ An unduly harsh review is represented by Claiborne W. Thompson, in *JEGP*, 75 (1976), 246–8.

³⁶ Harris, 'Eddic Poetry', 78.

particular cycle of revenge, but his son's death will spark off another.³⁷ The undoubted heroism of the *Poetic Edda* is occluded by violence, past, present, and future.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter concludes with a couple of remarks on the implications of this analysis with regard to the Codex Regius's contemporary context. The first is that the arguments above should encourage further research into the compilation of the Codex Regius, and the relative datings of the individual poems it contains. Although, as Harris says, dating has remained one of the 'two most vexed problems of eddic scholarship', the arguments made here may perhaps provide support from a literary angle for von See's claim that *Hamðismál* (at least as extant) belongs to the youngest layer of Eddaic poems, although this is likely to remain controversial.³⁸

The second is that the careful reader of *Hamðismál* within the setting of the compilation, alert to its connections to *Völuspá* and the other poems which make allusion to Ragnarøk, would surely be encouraged not only to interpret *Hamðismál* as an indictment of kin-slaying and fratricidal strife, but also to extend this principle to the wider community. Just as the tree and branch imagery represents the family, so the kinship group represents the community (a still more natural conclusion in a community which was largely interrelated anyway). Just as a tree is bereft without its branches and vulnerably isolated without the other trees of the forest, so is Guðrún without the other members of her family, and so too is the individual without the community to which he or she is tied by bonds of blood, marriage, and friendship. Kin-slaying is a terrible act which diminishes

³⁷ In a different context, Carolyn Larrington argues that: 'The sibling drama of the eddic heroic poems teases out and dramatizes sibling relations in a large-scale chiasmic structure. Strong brotherly loyalty and love, even overcoming the desire of one brother for another's betrothed [in the Helgi poems], is countered at the end of the manuscript by brothers who refuse to admit a half-brother to their cohort.' 'Sibling Drama', 182–3.

³⁸ Harris, 'Eddic Poetry', 93 and *passim*; also von See, 'Guðrúnarhvöt und Hamðismál'.

the perpetrator, and revenge is self-perpetuating—such wolfish acts should be outlawed. *Sturlunga saga*, which was probably being compiled around the same time as the Codex Regius in the thirteenth century, makes it clear that revenge and kin-slaying would also have been ever-present companions for many in the audience, some of whom might well have seen the need to stop these practices to avoid a cycle of endless future vengeance. These matters are considered further in Chapters 5 and 6. Although history indicates that such a cessation of revenge and kin-slaying did not take place, it nevertheless seems rewarding to consider *Hamðismál* at least as a literary attempt to forestall destructive social trends which, its author would have us believe, would lead to a human Ragnarøk. Its emphatic final position and its links to *Völuspá* and several other poems in our main manuscript witness strongly suggest that the thirteenth-century compiler of the Codex Regius agreed with the prognosis.

In each of the first three chapters we have seen relationships to be problematic. This has applied equally to inter-marital, sibling, familial, societal, inter-racial, and even divine and cosmic relations. The following chapter takes forward the analysis of problematic relationships in its exploration of the troubled sibling and familiar relations of Gísli, Þorkell, Auðr, and Þorgrím in *Gísla saga*, and the way that these are sexualized and bound up with issues of masculinity. They bear out the observation that the closer and more intense the relationship, the more likely it is to become violent. They also indicate an association of Eddaic characters and texts with violence and revenge.

4

Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past in *Gísla saga*

In the previous chapter we saw at least one author's attempt to call for an end to the practices of kin-slaying and vengeance, and in Chapters 5 and 6 we shall look at some similar attempts on the part of saga authors. As a means of transition from the analysis of primarily Eddaic material to the textual dynamic of the sagas, this chapter takes a single saga as the basis for an analysis of the relationship between Edda and saga, and the use of the former by one saga author in connection with the dynamic he explores. In this dynamic, as we shall see, familial (and particularly sibling) relationships are pitted against (and violently implicated in) sexual ones.

Of all the family sagas, *Gísla saga* makes most striking use of Eddaic motifs, particularly regarding the symbolic role of the Eddaic heroine Guðrún Giúkadóttir to represent what may be called the old way of vengeance. This chapter argues that in *Gísla saga* this use of and relation to the past is bound up with the network of sexual themes which runs through the text, and the discussion focuses particularly on the concepts of *níð*, or the imputation of stigmatized effeminacy, on the one hand, and phallic aggression on the other.

PARALLELS BETWEEN EDDA AND SAGA

There are numerous evident general similarities between the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* and many of the family sagas: strong female characters, the importance of revenge, the topos of incitement by women of their male relatives. However, there are also specific instances of influence from the heroic poems, ranging from isolated motifs, characters, and plot-line to the very occasional explicit

quotation of or reference to individual Eddaic strophes. Magnus Olsen and Guðbrandur Vigfússon argued long ago that *Laxdæla saga* and *Gísla saga* are both modelled on or deeply indebted to the Eddaic heroic poems.¹ More recently, Eddaic motifs or influence have been seen in many other sagas.²

At the end of *Grettis saga*, in chapter 82, Illugi refuses to accept his life in return for promising not to avenge Grettir, and the text tells us that he laughs at impending death (*hló hann*), just as *Atlakviða* 24 says of the heroic brother of Guðrún: 'Hló þá Hogni, er til hiarta scáro' ('Hogni laughed then, when they cut to the heart').³

In *Fóstbræðra saga* the fearless Þorgeirr's small, hard heart may also echo the Eddaic emphasis on the hero's heart as the signifier of courage. In *Atlakviða* 25 Gunnarr identifies his brother's heart, as opposed to the cowardly servant Hjalli's, by the fact that it 'litt bifaz, er á bióði liggir' ('trembles little as it lies on the platter'; compare also strophe 23). Also, in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrsta*, the eponymous hero has 'hart móðakarn' ('a hard acorn of a heart') (str. 53). There are three passages concerning Þorgeirr's heart in *Fóstbræðra saga*, the first being in chapter 2, where the hero shows

¹ Magnus Olsen, 'Gísla saga og heldediktningen', in Johs. Brøndum-Nielsen *et al.* (eds.), *Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson, 29. Maj 1928* (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1928), 6–14; see also Gudbrand Vigfusson [Guðbrandur Vigfússon], 'Excursus III. On the Traces of Heroic Poems to be Found in the Icelandic Family Tales (Islendinga Sögur)', in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale: The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Thirteenth Century*, ed. and trans. Gudbrand Vigfusson and Frederick York Powell, 2 vols., vol. 2: *Court Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), 501–8.

² e.g. John Lindow, 'A Mythic Model in *Bandamanna saga* and its Significance', in John Tucker (ed.), *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland, 1989), 241–56; also Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Inheritance, Ideology, and Literature: *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*', in Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 147–60, at 154. It must be stated at once that it is *not* the intention here to assess the possibility of Eddaic verse representing saga origins, as Bandle and Andersson do. See further Oskar Bandle, 'Isländersaga und Heldendichtung', in Jakob Benediktsson *et al.* (eds.), *Afmálsrit Jóns Helgassonar: 30 júní 1969* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1969), 1–26; Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 28 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), ch. 3.

³ *Grettis saga Ásmundarssonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, VII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 263; cf. *Atlamál* 65.

no signs of emotion on hearing of his father's death. The narrator lists the physical signs of emotion that Þorgeirr does *not* display, then explains, 'því at eigi var hjarta hans sem fóarn í fugli; eigi var þat blóðfullt, svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu' ('for his heart was not like the gizzard in a bird; it was not full of blood, so that it trembled from fear').⁴

At the end of Þorgeirr's life, in chapter 17, the narrator returns to the subject of the hero's heart, with a passage associating the courage and extraordinary valour of his last stand with his 'snart hjarta ok óhrætt' ('bold and fearless heart'). The third and final passage occurs in the same chapter after Þorgeirr's death when, in view of his courage, people decide to cut open his breast to see what his heart looked like. The narrator goes on to explain: 'ok hofðu sumir menn þat fyrir satt, at minni sé hugprúðra manna hjörtu en huglaussa' ('and some people take it to be true that the hearts of stout-hearted men are smaller than [those] of faint-hearted ones'). Thus it seems likely that, in addition to whatever physiological and theological ideas may lie behind these passages, the saga author, or redactor, had in mind the extraordinary courage of the Eddaic hero in the face of death, so raising the stature of his hero by comparison.

More summarily, *Heiðarvígá saga*, like *Atlamál in grænlensku*, contains a vision of a river rushing through a house portending doom, as well as a similarly troubled marriage where each spouse wishes the other dead.⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu* contains an ominous dream in the verse in chapter 11, where Hrafn dreams of being wounded by a sword as he lies in his wife's arms, his blood soaking into the bed in a clear parallel to Sigurðr's death in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 24 and Atli's in *Atlakviða* 41.⁶ Guðbrandur Vigfússon compares Freydis in *Eiríks saga* to Guðrún, fighting alongside her broth-

⁴ *Fóstbræðra saga*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, 128.

⁵ See further Anne Heinrichs, 'Beziehungen zwischen Edda und Saga: Zur Interpretation zweier Szenen aus der *Heiðarvígá saga*', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, 99 (1970), 17–26. Heinrichs points out verbal parallels, but also notes the differences between the narratives, and suggests the saga may stand 'ironisch-distanziert zum Heldenlied' ('at an ironic distance from the heroic lay') (p. 26).

⁶ See Russell Poole, 'Verses and Prose in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*', in Tucker (ed.), *Sagas of the Icelanders*, 160–84, at 165.

ers in *Atlamál*, and he also likens the arguing of Skarpheðinn in *Njáls saga* to the *flyting* in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*.⁷ These motifs may be viewed as lending the saga characters an epic grandeur by association with their Eddaic forebears. There are also several motifs in common between Eddaic verse and *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) like *Hrings saga ok Tryggva*, *Þjalar-Jóns saga*, and *Hrings saga ok Skjalldar*, but, as Margaret Schlauch has demonstrated, these motifs have been mediated through *Völsunga saga*.⁸

Laxdæla saga would seem at first to be deeply interconnected with the Eddaic poems, since its entire plot is predicated upon the Niflung love-triangle, a circumstance which is a striking anomaly in the family-saga corpus.⁹ Ursula Dronke, in her study of the saga, parallels the pre-eminence and excellence of both Kjartan and Sigurðr, and the oaths sworn between the brothers-in-law Gunnarr and Sigurðr with those implicit between Bolli and Kjartan as cousins and foster-brothers (none of these oaths are kept).¹⁰ The parallel between *Laxdæla's* heroine Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and the Eddaic heroine Brynhildr has also been of interest to saga scholars.¹¹ Recently, sev-

⁷ Vigfússon, 'Excursus III', 507.

⁸ See Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934), 38–41.

⁹ See further A. C. Bouman, *Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1962), 133–47. Influence from other (non-Norse) heroic poems on saga plots has, however, been postulated. Jeff Opland traces a *Beowulf* analogue in *Njáls saga* in Þorkell's three monster fights 'against an evil-doer human in shape, against a creature half man half beast living near or in water, and against a flying dragon' ('A *Beowulf* Analogue in *Njáls saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 45 (1973), 54–8, at 56). The parallels between *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* are extremely controversial. Nonetheless, Andy Orchard claims that 'the author of *Grettis saga* assumed in his audience a detailed knowledge of a narrative paradigm also found in *Beowulf*, and which he was to use and adapt five times in key episodes of the saga'. See his *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the 'Beowulf'-Manuscript* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), 167. This argument has not yet found general acceptance.

¹⁰ Ursula Dronke, 'Narrative Insight in *Laxdæla saga*', in Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (eds.), *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays 'In Memoriam'* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 120–37, at 121.

¹¹ See particularly Rolf Heller's *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas*, Saga, 2 (Halle (Saale): M. Niemeyer, 1958), and Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, *passim*. Interestingly, the Faroese ballad 'Brynhildar táttur' also explicitly compares the saga heroine with Eddaic character—see Andersson, *Legend of Brynhild*, 65.

eral critics have written on how *Laxdæla saga*, almost uniquely, addresses issues of female autonomy, potential, ability, and intelligence, evincing an interest in women comparable to that in the Guðrún poems of the Edda.¹² However, perhaps surprisingly, the text has relatively few isolated motifs that can be shown to be directly from the Eddaic poems, and so it is difficult to compare them in any detail.¹³

There are, then, several sagas which adopt Eddaic motifs, and, although the discussion now turns in detail to *Gísla saga*, this wider context should be borne in mind in the analysis.

GÍSLA SAGA'S ALLUSIONS TO THE POETIC EDDA

As we saw in the Introduction, *Gísla saga* is characterized by its prominent use of skaldic verses as a driving force in the narrative, and the saga's most obvious reference to the *Poetic Edda* is in one of these verses: the much-quoted strophe in which Gísli remarks how unlike his sister is to the Eddaic heroine Guðrún Giúkadóttir:

Gatat söl fastrar systir,
sveigar, mín at eiga,
gætin, Gjúka dóttur
Goðrúnar hugtúnum;
þás log-Sága lægis

¹² See Alison Finlay, 'Betrothal and Women's Autonomy in *Laxdæla saga* and the Poets' Sagas', *Skáldskaparmál*, 4 (1997), 107–28; Loren Auerbach, 'Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla Saga*', *Saga-Book*, 25 (1998), 30–52; Robert Cook, 'Women and Men in *Laxdæla saga*', *Skáldskaparmál*, 2 (1992), 34–59.

¹³ Rolf Heller's article on the motifs *Gísla* and *Laxdæla* have in common seeks to establish that the latter's author knew *Gísla* and used its motifs in the creation of his narrative: 'Gísla saga Súrssonar und Laxdæla saga', in Kurt Rudolph *et al.* (eds.), *Festschrift Walter Baetke: Dargebracht zu seinem 80. Geburtstag am 28. März 1964* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1966), 181–90. However, the cursed weapon motif, for example, could have been an independent borrowing from heroic poetry. Guðbrandur Vigfússon remarks that Guðrún's dream about her four husbands' different fates 'is a parallel to the Dream of a Lay in the Lacuna...' ('*Excursus III*', 507), but this must remain hypothetical, since the material is no longer extant.

lét sinn, af hug stinum
 svá rak snjallra brœðra
 sör-Freyja, ver deyja.

My finery-obsessed sister did not manage to have the soul of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, firm in her spirit-dwelling—the goddess of the flame of the sea [= goddess of gold, = woman] who caused her husband to die. Thus the goddess of the necklace [= woman] avenged her valiant brothers with an unbending spirit.

Here, clearly, Gísli resurrects the image of Guðrún as a pre-eminent example of sisterly loyalty—as *Atlakviða* details, her husband Atli had her brothers Gunnarr and Högni killed, and, rather than side with her spouse, Guðrún prioritized her kinship bonds and avenged her brothers by murdering Atli. There is more to say about this verse, especially the fact that it ignores Guðrún's earlier prioritizing of her marital bonds to her first husband Sigurðr in some versions of the story. However, the Eddaic allusions in the saga are far more extensive than this one verse, as Magnus Olsen pointed out as long ago as 1928.¹⁴ I present here a brief overview, before returning later to the significance which should be attributed to these allusions and some of the problems with Gísli's reading of the heroic past in more detail.

The verse preceding the direct reference to Guðrún is Gísli's incriminating strophe on Þorgrím's death in chapter 18, which begins with the phrase 'Teina sák í túni' ('I saw sproutings in the enclosure'), referring to the blades of grass which are poking through the thawed part of Þorgrím's burial mound. This phrase directly echoes *Guðrúnarkviða ǫnnor* 40, which begins: 'Hugðak hér í túni / teina fallna'.¹⁵ Moreover, the lines from *Guðrúnarkviða ǫnnor* come at the beginning of Atli's recounting of his ominous dreams, where the strophes all begin with the word *Hugðak*. Similarly, five verses in chapter 22 of *Gísli saga* begin with *Hugðak*, and also contain motifs of spilt blood, connected with a sword and a woman. The saga author introduces this verse by saying: 'Gísli kvað þá vísu, er æva skyldi'

¹⁴ Olsen, 'Gísli saga', *passim*.

¹⁵ 'I thought I saw [= I dreamed] the shoots fallen here in the enclosure'. The image is also reminiscent of the beginning of *Hamðismál*, where not green shoots but grievous deeds sprout on the threshold.

(‘Gísli then spoke a verse, which he never should have’), and Turville-Petre observes that there is another possible verbal influence in this unusual extra-diegetic intrusion, since the word *æva* is archaic and common in heroic poetry, and the phrase ‘*æva skyldi*’ is also found in *Völundarkviða* 41.¹⁶

The verse which follows Gísli’s invocation of Guðrún is the one on Bjartmarr’s sons in chapter 21, which speaks of their cowardice in terms reminiscent of the strophes from *Atlakviða* cited above in connection with *Fóstbræðra saga*:

Myndit þá
 á Þórsnesi
 meðallok
 á minni sök,
 ef Vésteins
 vári hjarta
 Bjartmars sonum
 í brjósti lagit.

There would not have been a bad end to my case at Þórsnes, if Vésteinn’s heart had been laid in the breast of the sons of Bjartmar.

As with the similar allusion in *Fóstbræðra saga*, here Gísli raises the stature of his friend by implicit comparison with the Eddaic hero, and correspondingly holds up for contempt the cowardice of Bjartmar’s sons. In more general terms, Auðr’s sorrow over her brother Vésteinn in chapter 14 is linked by Olsen with that of Guðrún for Sigurðr in the Guðrún lays, and Turville-Petre contends that Gísli’s verses on her sorrow suggest the influence of *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*.¹⁷ Similarly, the oaths of blood-brotherhood in *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* between Gunnarr, Högni, and Sigurðr clearly parallel those in *Gísla saga*, chapter 6, and Heather O’Donoghue suggests that, when Vésteinn ignores the messengers who warn him not to return to Gísli in chapter 12 there is another echo of *Atlakviða*, since although Guðrún warns her brothers not to visit Atli, they seem to feel this warning makes them ‘honour-bound to accept an invitation

¹⁶ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, ‘Gísli Súrsson and his Poetry: Traditions and Influences’, *Modern Language Review*, 39 (1944), 374–91, at 377.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 380.

they would have scorned to accept had they not been warned of some danger'.¹⁸

One of the most discussed similarities is the slaying of Þorgrímr in bed with his wife Þordís. This is a scene crucial to the saga's plot, and it clearly echoes the similar murders of Sigurðr and Atli in some versions of the Niflung legend. However, I return to this important episode in more detail shortly, because it draws together both the saga's use of the Edda and its sexual themes.

Finally, though, there is an allusion to the Edda which has not been mentioned elsewhere, and that is an apparent reference to Ragnarøk in chapter 22. Gísli tells his wife Auðr about two dream-women who appear to him, one of whom foretells misfortune, but the other gives him advice. He then describes the latter's advice in a sequence of four verses, in the last of which she warns:

Vald eigi þú vígi,
ves þú ótyrrin, fyrri,
morðs við mæti-Njorðu,
mér heitið því, sleitu.
Baugskyndir, hjalp blindum,
Baldr, hygg at því, skjaldar,
illt kveða háð ok hǫtum,
handlausum tý, granda.

Do not cause killing first; be not ill-tempered in quarrel with *the meeting-Njorðs of death* [= warriors (the gods of death-meeting, i.e. battle)]; promise me this. *Ring-distributor* [= generous man], help the blind; consider this, *Baldr of the shield* [= warrior (god of the shield)]; men say mockery is bad [as it is also to] harm the lame; help the handless [i.e. helpless].

We shall return to the significance of this strophe for the saga's attitude to the heroic later, but here it is initially argued only that this alludes to the events which lead up to Ragnarøk. This may seem a surprising statement, since this strophe's influence would seem most obviously to be religious. Frederik Paasche pointed out in 1928 its similarity to a passage from the apocryphal *2 Esdras* 2: 20–1.¹⁹ Here the divine in-

¹⁸ O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 151.

¹⁹ Frederik Paasche, 'Esdras aabenbaring og Pseudo-Cyprianus i norrøn litteratur', in *Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson*, 199–205, at 201. *2 Esdras* is considered apocryphal in Protestant doctrine and deuterocanonical in the Catholic tradition.

struction is to ‘Guard the rights of the widow, secure justice for the ward, give to the needy, defend the orphan, clothe the naked, care for the injured and the weak, do not ridicule the lame, protect the maimed, and let the blind have a vision of my splendour.’²⁰ The second half of the injunctions clearly relate to the second *helmingr* of the skaldic verse. However, the relation is not a close one as the following briefly illustrates:

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| <i>Gísla</i> | Help the blind |
| 2 <i>Esdras</i> | Let the blind have a vision of my splendour |
| <i>Gísla</i> | Do not mock or harm the lame |
| 2 <i>Esdras</i> | Care for injured and the weak, do not ridicule the lame |
| <i>Gísla</i> | Help the handless |
| 2 <i>Esdras</i> | Protect the maimed |

The lack of precise correspondence could be explained as the inevitable result of metrical constraints, or by the poet relying on an imprecise memory of his source. However, it is argued here that the poet is making two sets of allusions, the first being the ones to 2 *Esdras*, the second set stemming from his lexical choices which invoke mythological motifs.

First of all, talking about the blind in juxtaposition with the god Baldr (the man-kenning ‘Baldr of the shield’) of course brings to mind Baldr’s death at Loki’s instigation, alluded to in *Völuspá* 31–2 but expanded on in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning*. Snorri tells us that all of creation promised not to harm Baldr, except for the mistletoe, and so the gods decided to entertain themselves by shooting at Baldr or throwing stones at him or hitting him. Loki goes up to Høðr, Baldr’s blind brother, and enables him to join in the fun by giving him a stick to shoot and guiding his aim. Unbeknownst to Høðr, the malevolent Loki has given him some mistletoe to shoot and Baldr is killed. Loki then ensures that Baldr cannot be released from Hel, and the gods catch and punish Loki by tying him down with a poisonous snake dripping venom onto his face, where he will stay until Ragnarøk.

In a less straightforward allusion, however, the phrase in the last line, ‘handlausum tý’, perhaps in conjunction with the word *ótyrrin* in

²⁰ 2 *Esdras* 2: 20–1 (New Revised Standard Version).

the second line, creates both an auditory and a conceptual allusion to the binding of Fenrir, where Týr loses his hand. This story is referred to in *Lokasenna* 38–41, and again expanded on in *Gylfaginning*. Snorri relates that Týr is the bravest and most valiant of the Æsir, and that men of action pray to him. The proof of his bravery is the story of how the Æsir got the fetter Gleipnir on the wolf Fenrir. Fenrir did not trust the gods, and so they placed Týr's hand in its mouth as a pledge. Of course the gods reneged on their promise and refused to let Fenrir go, and so the wolf bit off Týr's hand. The wolf is left bound, with a sword painfully keeping its jaws apart until Ragnarøk when, as *Völuspá* and *Lokasenna* detail, it breaks free and kills Óðinn.

These references to stories which foreshadow and lead up to Ragnarøk, placed as they are in the context of Gísli's better dream-woman urging him to adopt Christian values of non-aggression and helping the helpless, may be designed to foreground the dubious actions of the old gods—that is, not just using the gods as the base for kennings for battle and warriors, but pointing out what the saga author may see as the destructive trajectory of their behaviour. This perhaps suggests that not following the Christian code, but continuing to pursue heroic aggression, will lead, not to Ragnarøk, but to destructive human conflict that is detrimental to society.²¹

THE RELATION OF EDDA TO SAGA

Rather than continuing to trace individual Eddaic motifs in the sagas, though, we shall now look at exactly how *Gísli saga* relates to Eddaic verse, since there are certain problems with the way some critics use one to interpret the other and assume, first, that the Eddaic poems have the same motivation as the saga and indeed lend the later text its motivation, and second, that the Eddaic poems are a homogeneous body telling a consistent story.

²¹ I return to the function of these allusions later to provide a fuller context for this statement. As seen in the Introduction, there is much debate over the authenticity and provenance of skaldic verses in sagas. Here, the argument assumes that they are not by Gísli but were composed some time after Gísli's death and adopted and modified by the saga author.

H. M. Heinrichs, for instance, in his study of the relationships between the Niflung legend and the saga goes so far as to see in Gísli's strophe on his sister's inconstancy the central impetus for the saga author's narrative strategy, and he also makes the point that, as in the Sigurðr legend, a conversation or argument between women determines the fate of men. However, as Heinrichs himself admits, the conflict between the Eddaic antagonists Brynhildr and Guðrún can have been no more than a stimulus for the disastrous conversation between Ásgerðr and Auðr about their pre- and extra-marital affairs, since Ásgerðr does not incite murder, unlike Brynhildr.²²

Theodore M. Andersson uses the Eddaic background to support his argument about the identity of Vésteinn's murderer, stating that, given that Þorgrímr signally refused to become Vésteinn's blood-brother, he must therefore 'of necessity be the killer since he has undertaken no obligations toward Vésteinn and is free to do the deed'.²³ In the *Edda*, he points out, Sigurðr is bound to both Gunnarr and Högni, and so they get Gotþormr, who is not so bound, to kill him. Andersson reasons that: 'The foursome in *Gísla saga* seems clearly to be modeled on the foursome in the legend of Sigurðr, and if blood brotherhood legislates against murder in one case, it seems certain to legislate against murder in the other case' (p. 22). The problem with this reasoning, of course, is that it ignores the fact that not all of the Sigurðr legends are the same. Certainly, in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 20 Högni decides that they should get Gotþormr to do the killing, because 'hann var fyr útan / eiða svarna' ('he was outside of the oaths sworn'). However, in the prose passage 'Frá dauða Sigurðar' and the preceding *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* the responsibility is seen as collective: Högni tells Guðrún in *Brot* 7 that 'Sundr höfum Sigurð / sverði högginn' ('We have hewn Sigurðr asunder with a sword'). A further logical flaw is that, even if the saga author did know only the version of the legend in which Gotþormr is the killer because he swore no oaths, this does not necessarily imply that he

²² See H. M. Heinrichs, 'Nibelungensage und Gísla Saga', in H. W. Seiffert (ed.), *Beiträge zur deutschen und nordischen Literatur: Festgabe für Leopold Magon zum 70. Geburtstag, 3. April 1957* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), 22–9, at 27–9.

²³ Theodore M. Andersson, 'Some Ambiguities in *Gísla saga*: A Balance Sheet', *BONIS* 1968 (1969), 7–42, at 22.

saw Þorgrímr as Vésteinn's murderer; it could have been part of his design that one of Vésteinn's blood-brothers killed him, for example, to provide greater justification for Gísli's retaliation. It does not matter for my argument who actually did the killing: the point is that the text does not make it clear.²⁴ It is thus important to bear in mind not only that there are significant differences between Edda and saga, even when the latter is clearly alluding to the former, but also that the *Poetic Edda* is not a homogeneous entity and contains differing versions of the Sigurðr legend within itself.

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen presents a very rewarding reading of the killing of Þorgrímr and its use of the Edda, and we shall return to this scene shortly. However, after his examination of the passage in question, Sørensen goes on to look at the differences between the attitude of the saga author and that of the poets. He states:

The poetry essentially deals with the conflict between loyalty and tragic betrayal. The same holds true for the saga, but here the old ethical views are challenged and become open to discussion. The old heroic poetry rested on fixed ethical norms, and its heroes and heroines are never in doubt as to how they should act. In *Gísla saga* the situation is quite different. The heroic ethical code is called into question, and most obviously so in those cases where heroic poetry served as a foil and model for the saga.²⁵

Sørensen's evaluation of the poetry is problematic, not least in his homogenization of its authors and the attitudes they display within it, as we saw in Chapter 1. Nonetheless, more persuasive is his assessment of *Gísla saga* as a text which questions the heroic and does so particularly clearly where it is alluding to the Eddaic poems. As

²⁴ On the vexed question of Vésteinn's murderer, see further initially, Andersson, 'Some Ambiguities', 20–8. It is true, as Andersson points out, that the shorter version of the saga gives the chapter-heading 'Þorgrímr drap Vésteinn', but this seems likely to be a later scribal addition, as could be the line in the longer redaction which specifies that Þorgrímr killed Vésteinn (Andersson, 'Some Ambiguities', 21). Certainly, the murderer's identity is clearly left deliberately unclear in the actual text of the murder scene.

²⁵ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in *Gísla saga*', trans. Judith Jesch, in John Lindow et al. (eds.), *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 235–63, at 251.

Theodore M. Andersson states, *Gísla saga* is the 'saga which most clearly borrows heroic forms, [but] also the saga which most clearly questions the transmitted norms of heroic conduct'.²⁶

If we turn specifically to the skaldic verses, which, as has been seen above, contain some of the strongest Eddaic allusions, Alois Wolf sees their function as being consciously to 'heroicize' the story, as he puts it, to elevate this Icelandic farmer's fate into that of a hero of old.²⁷ Although there is much truth in that statement, I would argue that one should see Gísli the *character* as being made consciously to heroicize his situation through his verses, but the saga author himself as having a more ambivalent attitude towards the heroic and to his hero, an attitude which sees the attractions of such an approach to life and to honour, but which recognizes that this is no longer appropriate. This is an attitude similar to the ambivalence explored in the heroic poems discussed in Chapter 1.

Gísli's verse on his sister's lack of loyalty shows that he thinks that his sister should behave like his perception of an Eddaic heroine—that is, be loyal to him rather than to her husband; he scorns Bjartmar's sons in another verse because they are not courageous like Eddaic heroes and thus lose his case at the assembly; his verses on his wife Auðr's grief describe her with approval as an Eddaic heroine in her epic sorrow for her brother. However, the supplementary details of the saga prose imply that things are more complicated than Gísli perceives—we are not so certain whether the bonds of matrimony or kinship should prevail, we have exemplified for us the difficulties of prosecuting legal cases, and we discover that saga women are not able to be Eddaic heroines, when Þórdís fails in her attempt to kill Eyjólfur in vengeance for her brother. Out of context, the verses present a strong heroicizing view of the events and characters of the saga. When read in conjunction with the surrounding prose, however, the

²⁶ Andersson, 'Some Ambiguities', 42.

²⁷ Alois Wolf, 'Zur Rolle der visur in der altnordischen Prosa', in Osmund Menghin and Hermann M. Ölborg (eds.), *Festschrift Leonhard C. Franz zum 70. Geburtstag*, Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft, 11 (Innsbruck: Das Sprachwissenschaftliche Institut der Leopold-Franzens-Universität, 1965), 459–84, at 475.

picture is inevitably complicated and the heroic absolutes are weakened and sometimes undermined.

A pertinent instance of this undermining process within the saga is discussed by Heather O'Donoghue, in an evaluation of the scene in chapter 30 where Auðr tells Gísli of Þorkell's slaying by the sons of Vésteinn. She claims that 'Auðr sees herself as the pivot between the two sides; like her legendary predecessor Guðrún... she embodies the tense link between warring natal and marital families'.²⁸ Gísli, however, is far less like a poetic hero in this instance. It is true that on learning the news Gísli leaps up, drawing his sword, and speaks a verse vowing immediate violent action. Nevertheless, O'Donoghue reveals the emptiness of Gísli's heroic posturing:

All the customary rhetorical flourishes are there... but an act of revenge remains only a possibility, a chance... [The verse's] status as a statement of intent is in any case undermined since Auðr then reveals that the boys have already gone. Gísli has been given the chance to express his response, but not the opportunity to act on it... it is what Gísli fails to say which reveals most: he does not ask where [the boys] are... and he makes no show of going after them. (p. 174)

It seems reasonable to see this episode as the saga author's way of acknowledging the greater complexity of family ties and societal obligations he perceives to be characteristic of the saga age.

To summarize, the argument in this chapter so far has been that the author of *Gísli saga* uses Eddaic motifs or parallels both as a means of heightening the heroism of his protagonist, but also as representative of what he considers the 'old' attitude to revenge, an attitude which his text seeks to complicate. Through Eddaic allusion in conjunction with his use of sexual themes, the saga author addresses the changing nature of his society and its literary depiction—less a critical view of heroism (to which he seems ambivalently attracted), than a recognition that the time for heroism is past. A close reading of a key episode now follows—namely, Gísli's murder of Þorgrímr—to outline two influential ways of reading it, and then offer a new slant on the passage before showing how this interacts with the dynamic just put forward.

²⁸ O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, 173.

MURDER IN MARITAL BED: A KEY EPISODE

In chapter 16 the narrator provides a very detailed description of Gísli's exact movements and his surroundings before his murder of Þorgrímr—his explanation to his wife Auðr of why he is going out so late; his route through the stream and the cow-byre. Most space is given to the description of the killing itself, which is quoted in full below. Once Gísli gets to the bed closet and sees Þorgrímr and his sister, the audience is told:

Gengr hann þangat ok þreifask fyrir ok tekr á brjósti henni, ok hvíldi hon nær stokki. Síðan mælti hon Þórdís: 'Hví er svá kold hõnd þín, Þorgrímr?' ok vegr hann. Þorgrímr mælti: 'Viltu at ek snúumk at þér?' Hon hugði, at hann legði hõndina yfir hana. Gísli bíðr þá enn um stund ok vermir hõndina í serk sér, en þau sofna bæði. Nú tekr hann á Þorgrími kyrrt, svá at hann vaknaði. Hann hugði, at hon Þórdís vekði hann, ok snerisk þá at henni. Gísli tekr þá klæðin af þeim annarri hendi, en með annarri leggir hann í gegnum Þorgrím með Grásíðu, svá at í beðinum nam stað. Nú kallar hon Þórdís ok mælti: 'Vaki menn í skálanum. Þorgrímr er veginn, bóndi minn.'

He goes in there and gropes along and touches her breast, and she was sleeping towards the outer bedboard. Then Þórdís said: 'Why is your hand so cold, Þorgrímr?' and wakes him. Þorgrímr said: 'Do you want me to turn to you?' She thought that he had laid his hand on her. Gísli waits then a while and warms the hand in his shirt, and they both fall asleep. Now he touches Þorgrímr gently, so that he awakened. He thought that Þórdís had roused him, and turned toward her. Gísli then takes the bedclothes with one hand, and with the other he thrusts through Þorgrímr with Grásíða, so it stuck in the bed. Now Þórdís calls out and said: 'Wake up, men in the hall! Þorgrímr is slain, my husband!'

Evidently, part of the reason for all the detail is to build the suspense and tension of the episode: the audience freezes like Gísli as his sister wakes up at the touch of his cold hand, then relaxes as the couple fall asleep again; then the tension rises to a climax as the killing is achieved, Þórdís calls for help, and Gísli makes his escape. However, there is more to this scene than the foregoing summary admits. As both Meulengracht Sørensen and Andersson demonstrate, Gísli is

here clearly initiating a sexualized situation, although they disagree on why he might want to do that.²⁹ This section builds on their arguments to suggest a new perspective on the scene, which is then contextualized with regard to the sexual themes of the rest of the saga.

Andersson's argument centres on the phrase describing Þordís's misperception of the situation: 'Hon hugði, at hann [Þorgrímr] legði höndina yfir hana' ('She thought that he laid his hand over her'). Andersson cites parallel uses of this phrase in sexual situations in three strophes in *Hávamál* (108, 113, 163), and two in *Lokasenna* (17 and 20). He states that: 'What Gísli does is to initiate love-play between the spouses, perhaps inadvertently at first, but then deliberately, and when Þorgrímr turns with this in mind, he is speared instead.'³⁰

Meulengracht Sørensen agrees with this eminently reasonable interpretation, but is unconvinced by Andersson's speculation on Gísli's possible motivation, namely attributing it to 'an element of undefined and latent sexual jealousy' (p. 38), pointing out that Gísli's wife Auðr had had some sort of relationship with Þorgrímr before her marriage to Gísli. Meulengracht Sørensen counters that, rather than jealousy, the saga in fact emphasizes Gísli's absolute faith in Auðr and the strength of their marital bond. Moreover, he cannot see why the sexual manipulation which precedes the killing would compensate Gísli for any jealousy he might feel.³¹

Meulengracht Sørensen then dismisses Hermann Pálsson's explanation that Gísli's behaviour 'serves to strengthen the vague suspicion adumbrated in an earlier episode that Gísli is incestuously in love with Thordís'.³² This episode is Gísli's killing of Bárðr in the shorter version of the saga, but he sees no hint of incestuous love there, and finds it difficult to see from the saga why Gísli, if in love

²⁹ For another view still, see Vésteinn Ólason, 'Morð í rekkju hjóna: Þrætt um túlkun Gísla sögu', in Gísli Sigurðsson *et al.* (eds.), *Sagnapíng: helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl 1994*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994), ii. 823–8.

³⁰ Andersson, 'Some Ambiguities', 37–8.

³¹ Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Murder in Marital Bed', 250.

³² Hermann Pálsson, 'Death in Autumn: Tragic Elements in Early Icelandic Fiction', *BONIS* 1973 (1974), 7–39, at 19.

with his sister, would initiate love-play between her and her husband.³³ Perhaps Meulengracht Sørensen is being a little naive here, since a psychoanalyst could surely tell us of much more convoluted outworkings of sexual jealousy, incestuous or otherwise. However, that would entail treating the characters as if they were real people, rather than semi-fictional constructs—the saga certainly does not give us any clear information on the subject, although it is true, as Pálsson points out that, that Gísli has destroyed his sister's relationships several times before.

Meulengracht Sørensen argues that Gísli has revoked his brother-in-law relationship with Þorgrímr in the ball-game scene in which the two display open and violent antagonism, a scene examined below. Sørensen then cites a legal passage from the Icelandic law-book *Grágás* to support his own interpretation of the murder in marital bed, namely that Gísli views his enemy's marriage to his sister as invalid, and thus 'Gísli kills Þorgrímr in bed with Þórdís as if he were an illicit lover, guilty of *legorð* and caught in the act' (p. 251). The code reads as follows:

Þat er mælt. ef maðr kómr at þar er aNar maðr brytr kono þa til svefnis er hann a vigt vm. þar a þeim vetvangi oc hafe hann fellda hana oc látet afallaz oc a hann vigt vm þar a þeim vetvangi eða sva er han fiðr hann i sama sæing konoNe sva at þav huile bæðe saman af því at hann villde misrøðo við hana drygia. oc a maðr þar vigt vm ihvaromtveGía stað þott misrøþan hafe eigi tekiz.

It is prescribed that if a man arrives to find another man forcing a woman to lie with him there, a woman he has the right to kill for, and the man has forced her down and lowered himself down upon her, then he has the right to kill on her account there at that place; or likewise if he finds him in the same bed as the woman, so that they lie side by side, because it was his will to have wrongful intercourse with her; then the man has the right to kill on her own account in both instances, even if intercourse has not taken place.³⁴

Meulengracht Sørensen thus sees Gísli as setting up the sexualized situation in order to stress that Þorgrímr is no longer his brother-in-law, therefore his marriage to Gísli's sister has no validity, therefore Gísli's revenge is morally justified—at least in his own eyes. He argues

³³ Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Murder in Marital Bed', 251.

³⁴ Cited and translated in *ibid.* 251–2.

further that the saga author was using the murder of Sigurðr Fáfnis-bani in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* as a source, and cites strophe 24:

Sofnuð var Guðrún í sæingo
 sorga laus, hiá Sigurði.
 enn hon vacnaði vilia firð,
 er hon Freys vinar flaut í dreyra.

Asleep was Guðrún in the bed, free of sorrows, beside Sigurðr; but she wakened robbed of her desire, swimming in the blood of Freyr's friend.³⁵

Meulengracht Sørensen thinks that the author 'may have interpreted the killing of Sigurðr in Guðrún's arms in their marital bed not only as revenge on behalf of the Burgundians, but also as a symbolic riposte to his alleged breach of oath, of which Gunnarr . . . believes him guilty' (p. 253). He goes on to show, too, how in the parallel situation in *Atlakviða*, 'the sexual symbolism of the bed is stressed immediately before the killing takes place (str. 40)'.

These allusions do seem apposite, and the sexual and gender dynamics of *Atlakviða* were explored in Chapter 1. However, the weakness in Meulengracht Sørensen's argument is its inability to explain why Gísli would want to set up this symbolic negation of the marriage, unless it is purely for Þórdís's benefit, since she is the only other living witness of the scene. It seems as insufficient a motive as Andersson's suggestion of conflicted incest and jealousy.

In fact Meulengracht Sørensen's own investigations of the *níð* motif in the saga indicate another, more convincing possibility: that is, that Gísli is committing a symbolic act of phallic aggression. This interpretation ties in with Gísli and Þorgrímr's former public attitudes to one another in the saga—attempting to attribute *níð* to the other, and placing themselves in the role of phallic aggressor. These passages are examined briefly, before returning to how this explanation fits into the reading of the murder proposed here. Some of the discussion that follows is explicit in nature. However, the saga itself demands this, and a reading of it which does not take account of its sexual themes is incomplete.³⁶

³⁵ Cited in Meulengracht Sørensen 253; my translation.

³⁶ For an astonishing example of an attempt to 'write out' the sexual elements of the saga on the basis that they are 'distasteful' (and for no other reason), see Alan Berger, 'Text and Sex in *Gísli saga*', *Gripla*, 3 (1979), 163–8.

THE DISCOURSE OF *NÍÐ* AND PHALLIC AGGRESSION

As we saw briefly in Chapter 2, *níð* denotes an extensive discourse within Old Norse literature, where the cognate noun *ergi* and verb *ergjask*, along with the adjective *argr* and its metathesized form *ragr*, denote the ultimate insult. They imply not merely that a man is cowardly, but that he is also effeminate, and specifically has been the passive partner in anal intercourse. Indeed, in Icelandic law a man called *ergi* can kill the slanderer with legal impunity.³⁷

The concept of *níð* is, of course, foregrounded from the very start of the saga, set up by Gísli's zealous defence of his family's honour, and explicitly broached by the *tréníð* episode in chapter 2, where Holmgang-Skeggi, in order to mock Kolbjörn, the cowardly rival suitor of Þordís, tells his carpenter to carve two wooden figures of Gísli and Kolbjörn: 'and skal annarr standa aptar en annarr, ok skal níð þat standa ávallt, þeim til háðungar' ('and one shall stand behind the other, and the shame of that will always remain to their dishonour') (p. 10).

Meulengracht Sørensen, in *The Unmanly Man*, makes an important distinction in this episode between the shame that attaches to the man in front—that is, the shame of being *argr*, or effeminate, allowing oneself to be anally penetrated—and the shame that attaches to the man behind—that is, the shame of putting one's friend in the position of being *argr*. Usually cited in this context is the passage in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* where a similar episode occurs and the saga author tells us that, 'mæltu menn, at hvárkis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð' ('people said that neither's situation was good, of those who stood there, but still it was worse for the one standing in front').³⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen reads this distinction as suggesting that the active partner, or the aggressor, is disapproved of, not because he has shown effeminacy, but

³⁷ As with any other commentator on this subject, I am indebted in much of what follows to Meulengracht Sørensen's fine book *The Unmanly Man*, which see for a fuller discussion of *níð*. I seek to take his argument further with regard to *Gísla saga*, however.

³⁸ Cited in Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 56; my translation.

rather that he has shown himself to be uncivilized and savage by his actions (pp. 57–8).

Anthropologically, the distinction is clearly apposite. Thorkil Vanggaard's book *Phallós*, provides evidence from several ancient cultures, such as ancient Greece, and present-day tribes that the act of anally penetrating another man is often perceived as a manly act and is not stigmatized in the same way as being the passive partner in anal intercourse commonly is in heterosexist societies such as the United Kingdom or the United States.³⁹ It is not just a dynamic we observe in non-Western tribal societies, however. It is apparently standard in the gay porn industry to find that self-designated heterosexual men will quite happily take the active role in same-sex activity, but would consider being asked to accept the passive role to be demeaning—the recent mainstream film *The Fluffer* partly explores this situation.⁴⁰ Of course, the cynical might question how far some form of face-saving is at work here—what's in a name? Still, the fact remains that in several societies, including our own, the active role in same-sex activity does not automatically imply homosexuality or even bisexuality. Since this is so, then even the essentialists among us clearly need to guard against unwarranted assumptions about sexual attitudes in medieval societies.

The practice of phallic aggression, or anal rape, is still further removed from the stigma of effeminacy. As the medical profession and law-enforcement agencies have long known, rape has little to do with sex and sexuality and everything to do with power—the power to dominate and to humiliate. Male rape is commonly seen as asserting the hyper-masculinity of the aggressor and attempting to destroy the masculinity of the victim—a perception which clearly rests on the misogynistic assumption that the passive role is female and that the male–female binary corresponds to the positive–negative one.

Certainly, phallic aggression is very much a factor in male–male antagonism generally in both saga and Edda. We have already seen

³⁹ Thorkil Vanggaard, *Phallós: A Symbol and its History in the Male World* (London: Cape, 1972), *passim*.

⁴⁰ *The Fluffer* (dir. Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, 2001).

in Chapter 2, for instance, that in the *flyting* or verbal battle in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* both Sinfjötli and Guðmundr claim to have had the other sexually. In strophe 39, Sinfjötli claims:

Nío átto við á nesi Ságo
úlfa alna, ek var einn faðir þeira.

We two had [engendered] nine wolves on Saga's headland; I alone was their father!

In reply, in strophe 42, Guðmundr turns his opponent into a mare, a frequent insult in *níð* exchanges, and claims:

hafða ek þér móðri mart skeið riðit,
svagri und sǫðli, simul forbergis!

I've ridden you weary over many a road, thin nag, downhill under my saddle!

In the context this clearly carries sexual connotations, and thus each is claiming that his adversary has been the passive partner in sex and clearly does not consider the implication that they were the active partner shaming. This dynamic is observable in several sagas, too, and specifically in the antagonism between Gísli and Þorgrímr, as shown in the ball-game on the frozen lake near Vésteinn's grave mound in chapter 15.⁴¹

Gísli is clearly the better player in the game, which presumably frustrates and angers Þorgrímr. At one point Gísli throws his opponent down onto the ice so that he skins his knuckles and gets a nose-bleed. When eventually Þorgrímr gets up, he looks across to Vésteinn's grave mound and says:

Geirr í gumna benjom
gnast; kann-at ek þat lasta.

The spear grated in men's wounds; I find no fault with that.

The meaning here is fairly straightforward, and represents an open challenge to Gísli: Þorgrímr is publicly exulting over Vésteinn's murder, and, since it has not yet been avenged, he is also implicitly

⁴¹ For a fuller discussion of the following episode, see Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 64–75.

shaming Gísli for failing in his duty of revenge, which is of course often inextricably linked with masculine reputation.

In such a context Gísli's response reads rather oddly. He hits Þorgrímr between the shoulders with the ball so that he falls head over heels, then says:

Böllr á byrðar stalli
brast; kann-at ek þat lasta.

The ball crashed against the load's support; I find no fault with that.

This of course mirrors Þorgrímr's *kviðlingr* exactly in form, but there seems a huge disparity in content. At face value, Gísli is merely being petty—Þorgrímr has angered and shamed him, and all he can do is to throw a ball at him and make a ditty saying just that: 'I've hit you between the shoulders, so there...' However, the verse's implications are far more serious and, for a contemporary audience, shaming. The kenning 'byrðar stalli' ('the load's support') can of course mean 'shoulders', which carry loads. However, secondary senses of both elements of the kenning are sexual in nature: *böllr* means 'penis', and *stallr* means 'the step of the mast', that is, the timber in a ship containing the hole in which the mast is fixed. It has a synonym, *kerling* ('old woman'), which suggests that sailors (as is their wont) saw the metaphorical relationship between the mast-step and the penetrable body. In the context of Gísli's verse, the sense would then be elucidated: the penis struck hard on the load's mast-step, that is, Þorgrímr's buttocks. This interpretation is further supported by the position into which Gísli forces his antagonist by knocking him over—either on all fours, or head over heels with his legs in the air, depending on which version one reads.

The aggression between Gísli and Þorgrímr, then, is represented as being partly sexual in nature. A similar dynamic occurs in the exchange of verses between Gísli's great-uncle of the same name and Skeggi in chapter 2 of the saga—these antagonists are clearly not sexually attracted to one another; rather, this represents phallic aggression, and concerns power relations.

Returning to the differentiation of active and passive same-sex behaviour, Meulengracht Sørensen again makes an interesting suggestion. He postulates that the active role was not stigmatized in

pre-Conversion Iceland, any more than it was or is in various other societies, but that, along with the many other changes that Christianity brought, there also began a process of stigmatizing all forms of same-sex activity, resting on the common medieval interpretation of certain biblical passages. How does this relate to Gísli's murder of Þorgrímr and the wider question of the saga author's invocation of the heroic past? The next section presents a new reading of the murder episode, which is then related to the Eddaic allusions pointed out at the beginning of the chapter.

PHALLIC AGGRESSION IN MARITAL BED

Looking again at the passage from chapter 16 quoted in full above, it can be seen that when Gísli gropes along the bed in the dark, trying to find Þorgrímr, he first touches his sister, and the narrator specifies that he touches her breast ('á brjósti henni'). This, of course, is what led Hermann Pálsson to see an incestuous desire in Gísli's solicitude for his sister's honour, already raised by his killing of more than one of her suitors in the early chapters of the saga, and which Andersson sees as the motivation for Þórdís's betrayal of Gísli when she realizes he has killed Þorgrímr from his incriminating verse—that is, she is fed up with him continually killing her men.⁴² It seems, nevertheless, quite possible that the touching was inadvertent. However, if so, Gísli at once realizes that he has initiated a sexualized situation, and the narrator makes it clear to the audience also by revealing Þórdís's thoughts: 'Hon hugði, at hann legði höndina yfir hana'—a phrase which, as we saw above, has sexual overtones in various Eddaic passages.

However, Gísli then changes his tactic and, I would argue, deliberately arouses Þorgrímr—the saga-author uses the same verb *taka á*, as he used for Gísli's touching of his sister's breast, with the implication that he is also, by parallel, touching Þorgrímr's sexual organs. The sexual aspect of the scene is emphasized by the narrator's careful use of the different Icelandic verbs in the semantic field of wakefulness and wakening. After Gísli has gently touched Þor-

⁴² Pálsson, 'Death in Autumn', 19; Andersson, 'Some Ambiguities', 17.

grímr, the audience is told ‘hann vaknaði’ (‘he awakened’); then that he thought Þórdís ‘vekti hann’ (‘roused him’). The other similar term comes when Þórdís calls out ‘Vaki menn!’ (‘Wake up, men!’)—a different verb altogether, implying that this is a deliberate differentiation between what Gísli is doing with Þórdís and Þorgrímr, and what Þórdís is doing to the men around the hall. The translation ‘roused’ is apposite, since the same ambiguity exists in the Icelandic as in English: *vekja* can mean merely ‘to waken, rouse from sleep’, but also metaphorically ‘to stir, rouse’ as in to rouse one’s spirits. This does not have an attested sense specifically of sexual arousal. However, given that the homonym *vekja* meaning ‘to make flow’ is used particularly of blood, and given the sexualized situation and the parallel use of the verb *taka á*, this strongly suggests that this particular use of *vekja* would be understood to be ambiguous, and to hint again that Gísli has deliberately created physical arousal in Þorgrímr.⁴³ The audience is told what Þórdís thought, and what Þorgrímr thought, but not what Gísli was thinking—we are left to work that out for ourselves.

Significantly, these verbs of wakening are used in connection with blood earlier in the saga in two important passages. The first is in the blood-brother oath-taking of chapter 6. The audience is told:

Peir skyldu þar fjórir undir ganga, Þorgrímr, Gísli, Þorkell ok Vésteinn. Ok nú *vekja þeir sér blóð* ok láta renna saman dreyra sinn í þeiri moldu, er upp var skorin undan jarðarmeninu, ok hræra saman allt, moldina ok blóðið; en síðan fellu þeir allir á kné ok sverja þann eið, at hverr skal annars hefna sem bróður síns, ok nefna ǵll goðin í vitni.

The four of them were to go under [the raised strip of turf], Þorgrímr, Gísli, Þorkell, and Vésteinn. And now *they make their blood flow* and let their blood run together in the earth which had been scratched up under the strip of turf, and mix it all together, the earth and the blood; and afterwards they all fall on their knees and swear this oath: that each shall avenge the other as his brother, and call all the gods as witnesses.

There is thus a direct verbal connection between the scene where Þorgrímr refuses to swear formal homosocial bonds to Vésteinn, setting up their later deadly antagonism, and the later scene where Gísli

⁴³ Cleasby–Vigfusson, *s.v.* ‘vekja’, senses ‘II’ and ‘B’.

avenges his beloved friend on Þorgrímr by killing and symbolically sexually dishonouring him, as is argued shortly.

The second verbal connection comes during the killing of Vésteinn in chapter 13, which closely parallels the later revenge-killing of Þorgrímr:

Ok nú er mest tóku at drjúpa húsin, þá snúa þau systkin rekkjum sínum um endilangt húsit; en allir menn aðrir váru brott flýðir ór húsinu nema þau tvau ein. Nú er gengit inn nokkut fyrir lýsing, hljóðliga, ok þangat at, sem Vésteinn hvílir. Hann var þá vaknaðr. Eigi finnr hann fyrr en hann er lagðr spjóti fyrir brjóstit, svá at stóð í gegnum hann. En er Vésteinn fekk lagit, þá mælti hann þetta: 'Hneit þar', sagði hann. Ok því næst gekk maðrinn út. En Vésteinn vildi upp standa; í því fellr hann niðr fyrir stokkinn dauðr. Auðr vaknar við...

And now when the building started leaking badly, then the siblings turn their beds lengthways down the building, but everyone else had fled away out of the building except those two alone. Now someone comes in a little before dawn, silently, to where Vésteinn is resting. He was awake. The first thing he notices is when he is stabbed by a spear in the breast so that it stuck through him. And when Vésteinn received the blow, he said this: 'Struck there', he said. And thereupon the man went out. And Vésteinn wanted to stand up; in that moment he fell down dead by the bed-board. Auðr awoke...

Here, if we compare the passage from chapter 16 quoted above, we can see verbal parallels in *vaknaðr*, *vaknar*, *stokkinn*, *lagðr*, and *í gegnum*, as well as a sister and brother being situated close to one another in bed. Here, though, rather than the bereaved woman, it is the victim who speaks: Vésteinn uses the rare verb *hneita* in his laconic response, which perhaps ties in with his attempt to stand up to represent a suitably heroic attitude in the moment of death.

Returning to the killing of Þorgrímr, and the issue of Gísli's possibly erotic behaviour toward his enemy, it is clear that the action of spearing his enemy in this context carries a sexual resonance, and this symbolic penetration ties in with the sexualized situation Gísli has carefully set up in order to shame his enemy. To put it in the most basic terms, Gísli deliberately ensures that Þorgrímr is aroused so that, when he spears him, he is symbolically saying: 'I am penetrating you, because I am a *real* man, and you are taking it from me

like a woman, and indeed your erection shows that you are enjoying it.' However, it is argued here that this ties in with other elements of Gísli's characterization to indicate that the saga author is not wholly in favour of this phallic aggression on the part of his protagonist, and so this chapter concludes by considering how the dynamic outlined above might relate to the other Eddaic allusions considered earlier.

AN AMBIVALENT VIEW OF THE HEROIC PAST

From the Eddaic allusions surveyed above, it is evident that several of the verses frame key characters or moments of the saga plot in a heroic light. However, it was suggested that, rather than necessarily representing the saga author's perception of these characters and moments, this is the protagonist Gísli's assessment. That is, the heroicizing touches represent Gísli's world-view, a world-view which the saga author at least partly undermines by the way that the prose surrounding these verses continually implies that things are more complicated than the stark, uncompromising view of people and events given by the verses. The complex interactions of siblings, spouses, and in-laws foreground the problems inherent in living according to what the saga represents as old heroic values: loyalties continually conflict, and even Gísli realizes this when he allows his best friend's sons to escape instead of avenging his brother on them. His older brother Ári may appear as some kind of *deus ex machina* at the end of the saga and tie up that loose end by killing one of the sons (Bergr), but by the end of the saga the reader is no longer convinced that this act of revenge is inevitable or even desirable, an interpretation perhaps supported by the fact that the other brother (Helgi) escapes and survives to become a prosperous man, despite further attempts to kill him.

In terms of the skaldic verses, it seems significant that their tone and content change after the first part of the saga. There are several vexed questions surrounding the dream-women and the Christian content of some of the later verses.⁴⁴ However, one might see the preponderance of bloody imagery and of doomed battles as partly

⁴⁴ On these issues, see Cochrane, 'Word-play', *passim*.

representing Gísli's misgivings about his earlier straightforward heroism. The saga author seems to portray him as feeling almost guilty for all those he has killed, and tired of the continual effort involved in being a heroic outlaw, missing the community, but knowing he has gone too far to go back. The saga author's attitude also partakes of this ambivalence: he sees the problems of a heroic approach to life, and the unsuitability of such an attitude to thirteenth-century Iceland. However, the depiction of his hero's last stand clearly indicates admiration of Gísli's fortitude, bravery, and endurance. Like certain other saga protagonists, Gísli appears to be a glorious hero unfortunately out of time and place. He is an Eddaic hero in a saga world which no longer has room for such heroes: it is now a world where the demands of Christianity are taking over. Honour and revenge are no longer paramount concerns; rather, they lead to a scaled-down Ragnarøk, the analysis above suggested. Similarly, Gísli's behaviour towards Þorgrímr, characterized by phallic aggression, is no longer appropriate in a Christian society where one should forgive one's enemies and avoid extramarital sexual acts. These conclusions are not, however, susceptible to definitive proof. It is in fact possible, as was suggested with regard to the Guðrún poems in Chapter 1, that the author's ambivalence is a deliberate stance, an attempt to leave the issues open in order to engage his audience and encourage debate.

In finishing, let us consider the very end of the saga, and its comment about Gísli's brother Ari. It is generally accepted that his historical existence is doubtful—nothing is recorded elsewhere about his settlement in Iceland, or any of his descendants. His life is very different to Gísli's—other than his killing of Bergr to avenge Þorkell, he does nothing but farm some land in a presumably peaceful and uneventful way. This gives another explanation for the ambivalence toward Gísli the saga displays: Gísli's heroic concern for honour may be flawed and out of place and time, but it certainly created a powerful story, full of conflict and intrigue, and that is why we have the saga of Gísli Súrsson and not the saga of Ari Súrsson. On the other hand, Gísli dies childless and the depiction of his interpersonal relations is at least uneasy, whereas the dull Ari lives a normative existence for a long time and achieves (even if only fictionally) a good lineage:

Ari Súrsson fór til Íslands. Hann kom í Hvítá ok seldi skipit, en keypti sér land at Hamri ok bjó þar nokkura vetr. Víða hefir hann búit á Mýrum, ok eru menn komnir frá honum.

Lúku vér hér Gísla sögu Súrssonar.

Ari Súrsson went to Iceland. He arrived at Hvítá and sold his ship and bought land at Hamar and lived there for some years. He farmed extensively in Mýrar, and men are descended from him.

We end here the saga of Gísli Súrsson.

This chapter has concentrated on sexual themes and the past in *Gísla saga*. We now move on to look more generally at related issues of revenge and violence and their relation to the past in the wider context of the family and contemporary sagas in Chapter 5, before coming back in Chapter 6 to the issues of revenge and its relation to femininity with which we started in Chapter 1, but now in relation to the women of the contemporary sagas.

5

Violence in Moderation: The Church and Vengeance in the Sagas

The New Testament clearly prohibits Christians from taking personal revenge. However, whether in first-century Palestine, medieval Europe, or contemporary North America, Christian societies have always found this a difficult prohibition to observe, and indeed, individuals and institutions have often cited other parts of the Bible to legitimize vengeful acts. This chapter considers the changing attitudes to clerical and secular vengeance in medieval Iceland. It adduces evidence from a range of legal, political, and ecclesiastical documents to contextualize a study of the representation of revenge in family and contemporary sagas in the light of ecclesiastical precepts. The analysis points to a growing perception on the part of Norse authors that secular revenge must be tempered with moderation, and that clerics should not involve themselves in acts of vengeance, although this is often difficult for them because the failure to take revenge can often seem to impugn their masculinity. Within the sagas, religious figures are employed variously as the moderating voice and as those implicated in the turmoil of the *Sturlunga öld* (the Sturlunga Age). The analysis indicates that revenge comes to be viewed in the sagas as something that belongs to the past, but with a stranglehold on the present which is hard to shake off.

REVENGE AND RECONCILIATION: THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

Theodore M. Andersson concludes his landmark study, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas', by stating that: 'What gives a consistency to the ethical temper of these sagas is

precisely a sense of proportion and moderation. They are written against excess . . . or they are written in praise of moderation . . . Most other sagas . . . conform to the same ideal.¹ As we shall see, however, this over-generalizes the situation. A more nuanced approach is that of Heiko Uecker, who also sees in the saga corpus, however, a tendency toward moderation and reconciliation ('zum Maßvollen, zum Angemessenen, zur Versöhnung').² In the course of his discussion of his four groups of sagas, Uecker speaks of those, like *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, which deal with magnanimity, forgiveness, and a will to reconciliation. *Vápnfirðinga saga* also, in his view, validates the impulse toward reconciliation, not the ethic of revenge (p. 84):

Die Versöhnung triumphiert, nicht die Rache, der Wille zum Ausgleich ist stärker als der Drang zur gewaltsamen Auseinandersetzung.

Reconciliation, not vengeance, triumphs; the will toward equilibrium is stronger than the urge toward violent confrontation.

Although Uecker traces similar themes of reconciliation through texts such as *Þorsteins páttir stangarhöggs*, *Droplaugarsonar saga*, *Gunnars páttir Þiðrandabana*, *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, and *Valla-Ljóts saga*, he does not attempt to homogenize these disparate texts like Andersson. Rather, he recognizes that, though reconciliation and 'das rechte Maß' (the right [amount of] moderation) play a significant role in all such sagas, the themes do not always carry the same weight, and there are different motives for reconciliation, such as pragmatic political reasons (pp. 86–7). His conclusion does not reach a decision about where this theme comes from: he suggests that it could stem from Christian values, or represent a critique of the contemporary chieftains of the thirteenth century, or even 'eine literarisch fixierte Gegenposition zur Helden-dichtung' ('a position fixed in literature in opposition to the heroic poetry') (p. 87). This last possibility, that saga-authors may deliberately take a stand against attitudes they see as characteristic of heroic poetry, certainly seems to hold for some of the sagas, as we have seen in the previous chapter and will see again in the next one.

¹ Andersson, 'Displacement of the Heroic Ideal', 588.

² Heiko Uecker, 'Isländersaga contra Heldensaga', *skandinavistik*, 10 (1980), 81–8, at 83.

There is, in fact, a tendency in some critical saga studies to speak of texts such as *Brennu-Njáls saga* as depicting the change from the old, pagan ethic of revenge to the new, Christian ethic of forgiveness and grace.³ However, this conception cannot be found uniformly in the texts themselves, as is shown below. First, however, it is important to address some of the evidence for contemporary society's attitudes to revenge, as seen in the arenas of politics, law, and religion. This material both supports and complicates Andersson's and Uecker's interpretations of the revenge ethic in the sagas, and paves the way for the analysis of individual saga texts which follows.

CHRISTIAN REVENGE?

One might expect the Icelandic Church's attitude to revenge to follow that of the Bible, perhaps based on such passages as Romans 12: 19, where the Apostle Paul (quoting Deuteronomy 32: 35) says: 'Revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved; but give place unto wrath, for it is written: Revenge is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.'⁴ Indeed, this seems to be the attitude in parts of the *Homilíubók* ('Homily Book'):

Dominus let eige hefna sín ne veria síc þa es hann vas hondlaþr. oc bundeN af gyþingom. heldr grødde hann eyra þræls eiNs er petrus hafþe af hogvet... hverso megom vér verþa liþer crists. ef vér georom oss aþra goto en hann geck fyrer.⁵

The Lord did not let himself be avenged nor defended when he was seized and bound by the Jews. Rather he healed the ear of a certain slave which Peter had cut off... How can we become Christ's followers, if we take a different path from the one he took?

³ Studies which fit this formulation either explicitly or implicitly include: Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 41 (1969), 1–29; Andersson, 'Displacement of the Heroic Ideal'.

⁴ Romans 12: 19, quoted from *The Holy Bible: Douay Version, translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Douay, A.D. 1609; Rheims, A.D. 1582) (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956); cf. Hebrews 10: 30.

⁵ *Homilíu-bók*, ed. Theodor Wisén (Lund: Gleerup, 1872), 67.

Here, Christ's behaviour serves as an *exemplum* for Christians, and forgiveness and kindness, not revenge, is what is expected of the Christian. However, the picture is inevitably much more complicated than this in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. That revenge will be exercised to some degree is taken for granted in secular Norse texts.

REVENGE IN THE *KONUNGS SKUGGSJÁ*

The authoritative 'Father' of the mid-thirteenth-century *Konungs skuggsjá* ('The King's Mirror') recognizes that revenge is in certain circumstances inevitable, and is most concerned that it should achieve its aims efficiently:

En þó at navzynligar sacar þreyngve þec til uspectar þa gersc þu eigi braðr ihemdom fyrr en þu ser at uel uerði framgengt ok þar come niðr sem maklect er.⁶

But though necessary causes press you to strife, do not take revenge hastily before you see that it will succeed well and come down where it is deserved.

However, later on in the context of advice on wisdom, the Father urges circumspection:

æf þær sannaz oc kæmr til þin hæfnder firir at vinna þa hæfn mæðr hofi oc sannsyni en ægi mæðr illgiarnligri akefð.⁷

if [rumours of slander] prove true and it comes to you to avenge it, then take revenge with moderation and equity, but not with ill-willed vehemence.

A fuller examination of revenge in the whole of the *Konungs skuggsjá* reveals that revenge is considered to be unacceptable if taken by justly exiled subjects against their lord (p. 53), including Lucifer and the fallen angels (p. 80), or by foolish kinsmen who are aggrieved at

⁶ *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. Ludwig Holm-Olsen, 2nd edn, Norrøne tekster, 1 (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institut, 1983), 6. I have on occasions silently normalized the text.

⁷ Ibid. 66; cf. Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen', 26.

not getting as much compensation for a greedy or quarrelsome relative as for a kinsman who was both wise and peaceful (p. 54).⁸

Vengeance is, however, approved if it is carried out by God—for instance, against the rebellious angels (p. 85), the greedy and unjust (p. 102), or those who die in a state of sin, as Hezekiah fears he may (p. 91)—or a representative sanctioned by Him, such as a king. The Father justifies this by arguing that fear of punishment is an effective deterrent (p. 107). The king, however, cannot act with impunity: King David takes revenge (*hæfn*) on the slayers of Ishbosheth, saying they have committed ‘niðings værc’ (‘a vile deed’) in slaying their lord, and his punishment is implicitly commended (§62, p. 107). However, his predecessor Saul’s rejection occurs because he carries out the vengeance he is charged to wreak upon the Amalekites in a way not sanctioned by God (§63, pp. 109–10). David twice refuses to harm the rejected Saul, saying first that he has no (implicitly justifiable) revenge to take for kinsmen (‘faður . . . ne brøðra ne ængaRa annaRa . . . frænda’, §63, p. 113), and that it is God’s place to deprive Saul of the kingship, and not David in ‘agirndligri dirfð’ (‘avaricious boldness’) (p. 113). The second statement is even more revealing in its implications (p. 114):

þar sām ec a hvarki at minnaz til hāmnda við hann storra rana ne frænda
latz nema þeiRa æinna at hann hæfir reinsat land mæð rettre ræfsing. oc er
þat hvarki mitt oc ænskis annars rett værk at hæfna þæss.

since I do not have to remember to avenge upon him either great plundering or loss of kinsmen, except those [things] alone when he cleansed the land with just punishment—and it is neither my nor any other’s just work to avenge that.

Thus, one may conclude that revenge under certain circumstances for loss of land, possessions, or kinsmen *is* conceivable. A king’s revenge against ambitious rivals is likewise implicitly sanctioned (as Solomon’s against Adonijah, p. 119), but if the king takes the law into his own hands and kills out of hatred, it is considered *mandrap* as with anyone else, and he is liable to ‘svara . . . firi guði’ (‘answer . . . before God’) (p. 124).

⁸ See further, Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of ‘The King’s Mirror’*, Mediaeval Scandinavia Supplements, 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), 71–84.

Since much of this seems particularly relevant to Christian kings, we may return finally to the second passage quoted in this section, where circumspection is advised in the taking of revenge. Immediately previous to this statement, the Father says (p. 66):

Ef þu ert æinum hværium reiðr firir noccors konar fiandskap eða sakar þa rannzaka vandliga ihugþocca þinum fyRr en þu leitr hæfnda hværso mykel soc er eða hværso mikillar hæfndar su soc er værð.

If you are angry with any individual for some kind of enmity or lawsuit, then carefully search your disposition before you seek vengeance [as to] how great a matter it is, or how great a revenge this offence is worth.

It is therefore clear that, although the authoritative speaker of the *Konungs skuggsjá*, at least, sees revenge as inevitable and indeed commendable in certain circumstances of individual injury, he nonetheless urges caution and moderation.⁹ However, it remains to be seen whether this attitude can be reconciled with the picture given by the extant law-codes of the period.

REVENGE IN THE LAW-CODES

A complete study of vengeance in the Norse law-codes would take a book in itself. Here I seek briefly to survey the contexts of the terms *hefna* (alt. *hemna*, *hæmna*), and *hefnd* (alt. *hæmd*) as used in the collection *Norges gamle love*.¹⁰ These codes come from various periods and places, and any full study would have to examine in detail the evidence for Icelandic legal attitudes to vengeance.¹¹ However, it is

⁹ Bagge, *Political Thought*, 83–4.

¹⁰ The (un-normalized) Norse texts of the laws are cited from *NGL* by page and section number unless otherwise stated; translations are my own.

¹¹ Particularly important would be the evidence of *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, and the ways in which legal provisions here differ from those in *Grágás*. See *Íslendingabók*; *Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, 2 vols., Íslenzk fornrit, I (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968); and (for *Konungsbók*) *Grágás... efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, Nordiske Oldskrifter, 11, 17, 21, 22, 32 (Copenhagen: Brødrene Berling, 1852), §§ 86, 89, 90, 111; also (for the additions in *Staðarhólsbók*) *Grágás: efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol. i Stæðarhólsbók*, ed. Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske Legat [i.e. Finsen] (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1879), §§ 265, 271, 293, 366–7.

evident that, as with any system of laws, the texts are influenced by, and often copy closely, the precedent and wording of those legal texts already extant, and it thus seems permissible to take the corpus as a whole as representative of prevailing legal attitudes to revenge, in a way not possible with other types of text. It should be remembered that law-codes are frequently not just prescriptive but also idealistic, rather than representing the actual historical situation or describing accurately what was done in response to crimes.

The use of *hefna/hefnd* falls into only a few main groups. One can dismiss first the instances where they are employed merely as a synonym for punishment, as in *kononglige hemd* ('kingly revenge').¹² The second group of instances concern the avenging of certain criminals, which is universally condemned. *Gulathing* §178 states 'þat er oc niðings vig ef maðr hefnir þiova. syni með settar eiði' ('It is also a base killing if a man avenges a thief—let him deny it with a sixfold oath').¹³ The penalty is exile as an outlaw with no rights, and one may compare to this statute *Gulathingslov* §32, which lists criminals suffering permanent outlawry and forfeiture of all rights to property and peace, including 'þeir er hemnast þessara ubota manna. æða heimta giolld efter ef vitni veit þat' ('those who avenge these irredeemable criminals, or claim compensation for them, if witnesses know it').¹⁴ Conversely, those who defend themselves, their property, or their kinswomen against these men are *friðhelger* ('inviolable', 'protected by law'), and need pay no compensation if they wound or kill the outlaws—*Frostathing* V, §45, repeats these statements.

Bjarkö-Ret §162 (and likewise *Frostathing* X, §35) reveals the great importance and power of words, providing a detailed list of payments to be made to men of various ranks if they are compared *við berendi* ('to a female animal'). Calling a man *sannsorðinn* ('buggered') demands full atonement (*fullrétti*), but comparison to a male animal necessitates only half-atonement (*hálfrétti*), and the statute ends: 'En ef menn mælast illa við eða geyast. þá skal orð orðs hefna' ('But if men speak ill of each other or abuse each

¹² Compare *NGL* III, p. 143, §60; also, p. 189, §100; IV, p. 382, §13.

¹³ *NGL* I, p. 66; cf. §133, p. 56; also II, p. 50, §3; II, p. 212, §3.

¹⁴ *NGL* I, p. 19; cf. II, p. 288, §X; II, p. 52, §4.

other, then shall word avenge word') (*NGL* I, p. 333). The Gulathing code speaks of two occasions when it is 'good' for someone to be avenged. The first statute (§152) states 'ef maðr er i flokke vigin. þa er vel ef hemt verðr' ('If a man is slain in a crowd, then it is well that he be avenged') (*NGL* I, p. 60). It goes on to specify what should happen if the killer gets away—none must hinder his pursuit and capture, and if anyone does and is killed, then the fallen man is to be considered an outlaw, that is, he himself cannot be avenged because he obstructed vengeance for another. The second statute (§171) states:

Ef maðr vigr annan a skipi. þa er vel ef hans er hemt. æða utanborðz rundit mannbana.

If a man kills another on a ship, then it is well if he is avenged, or the slayer pushed overboard. (*NGL* I, p. 65)

The crew is permitted to take the killer to the shore, but no further, upon penalty of a fine. If they take him out to sea with them they are outlawed with him, and anyone who refuses to row while he is on board cannot be punished if they report the situation to the first people they meet. These statutes presumably attempt to combat lawlessness in situations (in crowds, on board ship) which were difficult for authorities to control directly.

The introduction to the Frostathing code clarifies in detail the procedure in situations that were evidently proving complicated, sometimes through the abuse of legal loopholes. Section 6 of the introduction states that if a man wounds without reason, or an injury necessitates full atonement but revenge is taken by the victim or his kinsmen before the offender can offer atonement, then the offender is still considered to be an outlaw, even if he is killed, because he 'fyrri braut friðin' ('broke the peace first'), unless his is judged a special case. However, once he has offered full atonement, then anyone who kills him is punished with outlawry. Provision is made, however, for those who trust to their wealth or kinsmen to allow them to injure an innocent man a second time, and the victim need only accept atonement if he wishes, and remains in the king's peace, 'þó at hann hemni sín. hvárt sem hinn daur eða lifnar' ('though he avenges himself, whether the other lives or dies') (*NGL* I, p. 122).

Similarly, section 8 of the introduction addresses a problem that had arisen, whereby a slain man's kinsmen would kill in revenge not

the offender himself, but that member of the offender's family 'er beztr er' ('who is best, foremost'), presumably because this would cause the family more harm and weaken its power base. Consequently, the offender was not punished for his crime, an innocent man suffered, and the country lost some of its 'beztu þegna' ('best thanes'):

oc fyrir því leggium ver við þetta úbóta sök oc aleigumál hverium þeim sem hefnir á öðrum en þeim er drepa eða ræðr.

And therefore we designate this an irredeemable offence and an entire property case for the one who takes revenge on another than the one who kills or plans [the killing]. (*NGL* I, p. 123)

This is comparable to the *Nýere By-Lov*, §3, which states 'Þat er oc niðings værk ef maðr hæfnizt a öðrum en þæim er gerer eða ræðr' ('It is also a vile action if a man takes revenge on anyone other than the one who acts or plots') (*NGL* II, p. 212).

Finally, section 5 of the introduction provides for the situation where a man outlawed for killing abuses the king's pardon by refusing to pay the remaining price of atonement after being permitted to remain in the land:

þá megu frændr hins dauða hefna á honum. þó at hann sé sátttr við konung. svá at þeir verði eigi útlægir þó at þeir drepri hann.

Then the kinsmen of the dead man may take revenge on him although he is reconciled with the king, such that they will not become outlaws though they kill him. (*NGL* I, p. 122)

Similarly, the law already allowed a man to kill another who had unlawful sex with a woman of his immediate family, thus dishonouring him. In section 7 of the introduction, however, the Frostathing law further states that, if the offender refuses to defend himself against any legal action, 'þá verðr hvárgi útlagr þó at hinn hefniz þeirrar scammar' ('then there will be no outlawry, though that one [the offended man] avenges himself for the disgrace') (*ibid.*).

This might seem to indicate an attitude more of tolerance than enthusiasm for legal compensation, with the default feeling being that, if compensation or the law is not providing satisfaction, revenge is there to turn to—possibly borne out by *Gulathing* §186, which warns: 'Nu

a engi maðr rett a sér oftarr en þryssvar. hvarke karl. ne kona. ef hann hemnisc eigi a milli' ('No one has a claim to redress more often than three times, neither man nor woman, if he does not avenge himself in between') (*NGL* I, p. 68). Monetary compensation was becoming increasingly more acceptable as the wergeld system developed, but revenge was evidently still an ever-present thought in some minds.

The growing complexity of this situation, where recourse was sometimes had to revenge, sometimes to compensation, is epitomized by a long passage in King Magnús Hákonsson's *Nyere Landslov*, paralleled almost word for word in *Jónsbók*, chapter 21 and the *Nyere By-Lov* §21, and shows clearly an attempt to bring the alternation of offence and revenge under due legal process and the control of the king's officials.¹⁵ Careful provision is made against official neglect, or corruption, and a pragmatic view is taken of the taking of personal revenge if legal justice is not brought about. There is a very clear sense that an offence requires the appropriate retribution, preferably a legally controlled and reasoned fine, but, if that should not be forthcoming, then an equal act of revenge. This sense is the same as that in *Hertug Haakon Magnussöns store Retterbod for Hedemarken og Thoten* §6, which states that, if revenge is taken by innocent victims, 'ok værðær hæmden æi mæiri en hin hafde til gort aðr. þa skal sa vera saklaus er hæmdizst sin' ('and no more revenge occurs than that one had done before, then that one shall be guiltless who avenges himself') (*NGL* III, p. 21).

Finally in this survey of these secular law-codes, a statement in King Magnús Hákonsson's *Hirðskrá* provides a close parallel to one of those quoted from the *Konungs skuggsjá*, stating:

Þo at þer misliki [nokor lutr þa ver [æighi braðr hælld(r) forseall huat hæfnð [er þu at að væita eða huerium oc at æigi værðe ofhæfnt [eða a uverðugum.

Though some thing displeases you then be not hasty, rather prudent [as to] what revenge you have to inflict, or on whom, and [such] that it is not excessively avenged or undeservedly. (*NGL* II, p. 418, §28)

¹⁵ *NGL* II, pp. 66–7, §20; *Jónsbók: Kong Magnus Hakonssons Lovbog for Island vedtaget paa Altinget 1281 og Réttarbætr de for Island givne Retterbøder af 1294, 1305 og 1314*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1970), 60–1; *NGL* II, pp. 222–3; cf. also the excerpt in *NGL* IV, p. 153.

Again, the greatest importance is placed on moderation and a sense of justice based on equality of crime and punishment. We see in these examples of sanctioned and unjustified revenge in both political and secular legal texts the various distinctions that medieval Christianized Scandinavians were able to draw with regard to this subject. These texts, however, refer primarily to individual, secular revenge—it is a different matter when it comes to the involvement of clerics in vengeance and litigation.

REVENGE IN THE CHURCH

Orri Vésteinsson's densely detailed study *The Christianization of Iceland* makes very clear how the early period in the Icelandic Church saw the gradual disentanglement of ecclesiastical and secular power.¹⁶ At the beginning of the period clerics were heavily involved in legal prosecutions and the overseeing of fighting, or even participated in fighting themselves. Orri details the legal dealings of Bishop Klængr Þorsteinsson (1152–76), who, in 1160, was asked to arbitrate between Sturla Þórðarson in Hvammr and Einarr Þorgilsson in Staðarhóll. Bishop Klængr took the part of Einarr, his second cousin, with whose sister he had had an affair. However, when in 1170 the enmity was still unabated, Bishop Brandr stepped in to arbitrate, this time taking the part of Sturla, his first cousin once removed. Brandr was heavily involved in politics and arbitration. In 1190 he had seized control of a church farm because the owner died and he deemed the sons incapable of taking over. By 1200 the sons felt they were old enough to take charge, but Brandr refused to relinquish control, and they asked Chieftain Ögmundr sneis to help them occupy the farmstead and prepare for battle. Bishop Brandr assembled a force, which marched on the church farm under the command of his grandson Kolbeinn Arnórsson and Hafr Brandsson (possibly his illegitimate son). The fighting was averted, but this does indicate the way that bishops were functioning much like chieftains at this period. Reform began under Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (1161–88), although it

¹⁶ Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000–1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

was only at the very end of the twelfth century that the offices of chieftain and priest began fully to separate.¹⁷

Eysteinn's archiepiscopal letter of c.1173 clearly and specifically attempts to remove clerics from the field of legal prosecution, and retributive violence. He states:

Nu kenne menn aller. þeir sem menn hafa drepit. þa fyrbyð ek þeim Guds þionostv giord. fra hinne fystu uigslu til ennar efstu. og framleidis fyrbyð ek ollum ken[n]e monnum soknar mal. aa hendur sier at taka nema orvøssum frændvm sinvm. eda börnvm. fōdvr lausvm. eda konum verndarlausum. og þo felausvm. og fyri gudz saker.¹⁸

Now [with regard to] all clerics, those who have killed men, I forbid them God's services, from the first consecration to the last, and further I forbid all clerics to prosecute [*lit.* take into their own hands] lawsuits except on behalf of their aged kinsmen, or children, orphans, or defenceless women, and even then [they must do it] without money, and for God's sake.

However, immediately following this the archbishop makes it clear that violence against clerics by laymen will not be tolerated, such acts not being susceptible to absolution except by intervention of the pope or archbishop:

hverr er sa j gudz banne og papans er misþyrmer kenne manni med heiptugri hendi. og ma hvergi lavsn taka vm drap. eda afhøg[g] ken[n]e manz eda mungs. nema þar sem papinn er.

anyone who maltreats clerics with a vengeful hand is under the interdict of God and of the pope, and none may take absolution for the killing or striking of a cleric or monk, except where the pope is concerned. (*DI* I, p. 222)

Nevertheless, it is apparent that these reforms took time to have an impact, if indeed they were ever wholly successful. Both Orri Vésteinson and Jón Jóhannesson are sceptical about the effectiveness of the

¹⁷ See Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga* (orig. pub. Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1956); trans. Haraldur Bessason: *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies, 2 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1974), 186–90. Although archiepiscopal orders seem not to have been made law in Iceland, nevertheless 'there is no evidence of the assuming of priestly orders by a temporal chieftain after 1190' (p. 190).

¹⁸ *DI* I, p. 222. I have on occasion minimally normalized some of the texts.

reforms, and this is borne out by the later archiepiscopal letters. Around 1179 Archbishop Eysteinn had to write again, this time to support Bishop Þorlákr's institutions, which apparently were being disregarded because of the fact that they were new laws ('helldur til nymælis', p. 259). Then, around 1180, Eysteinn writes not only to the bishops, but also to the chieftains Jón Loptsson and Gizurr Hallsson, making it clear that clerics should not bear arms, but that the chieftains should be supporting the discipline of the bishops (*DII*, pp. 262–4).

Change had still not occurred by 1189, when Archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson (1189–1205) felt he had to repeat his predecessor's instructions. He writes to Bishops Þorlákr and Brandr that 'Kenne menn bere eigi vopn. og skulv vera fridsamer vit olærda menn' ('Clerics should not bear weapons, and should be peaceful toward laymen') (*DI* I, pp. 288–9). He also re-emphasizes that clerics should not litigate on behalf of anyone other than defenceless relatives. His following letter also repeats directions about clerical immunity, and forbids ecclesiastical involvement in violence and litigation (*DII*, pp. 290–1).

Orri Vésteinsson suggests that these archiepiscopal letters of the late twelfth century only began to have their effect in the thirteenth century, when it gradually came to be perceived that clerics were 'benevolent and trustworthy', and increasingly involved in reconciliation.¹⁹ However, in this context one must also take account of the work of Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Sverrir Jakobsson. The former shows that canon law and the Niðarós diocese were bringing to bear strong influence on the Icelandic Church in this period, and that canon law instigated certain changes in judicial matters such as the legal protection of individuals being taken over by official institutions.²⁰ The latter places the archiepiscopal directives in the context of the European *Pax Dei* movement of the tenth and eleventh centuries, encouraging physical immunity for those who did not carry arms.²¹

¹⁹ Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization of Iceland*, 234.

²⁰ Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, 'Um afskipti erkibiskupa af íslenskum málefnum á 12. og 13. öld', *Saga*, 20 (1982), 28–62.

²¹ Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Friðarviðleitni kirkjunnar á 13. öld', *Saga*, 36 (1998), 7–46, *passim*. Violent clerics were clearly a concern in late Anglo-Saxon England—see *Wulfstan's Canon Law Collection*, ed. J. E. Cross and Andrew Hamer, Anglo-Saxon Texts, 1 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), §§ 75, 79, 83, 102, 159, 164–7.

The implication of the evidence just surveyed, therefore, is that clerics up until this period were heavily involved in all kinds of violence and litigation. When we turn to the sagas, whether family or contemporary sagas, a fuller picture emerges of what kind of situation the archbishops may have been addressing. One must, of course, always remember that the balance between historicity and fictionality within both kinds of saga texts is very variable, and it is not in fact my intention to claim a direct relation to actuality for the discussion which follows. Rather, it will serve as a window onto the world-view of certain Icelandic saga authors, focusing particularly on their perceptions of the interaction of ecclesiastical and secular authorities in the matter of revenge.

CLERICS AND REVENGE IN THE FAMILY SAGAS

In chapter 49 of *Laxdæla saga*, in an unexpected twist, Kjartan throws down his weapons so that Bolli can slay him: ‘Síðan kastaði Kjartan vápnum ok vildi þá eigi verja sik, en þó var hann lítt sárr, en ákafliga vígmóðr’ (‘Then Kjartan cast down his weapons and would not defend himself, and yet he was little wounded, but terribly weary from fighting’).²² This gesture is sometimes compared to the self-sacrificial behaviour of medieval Christian martyrs, despite the fact that a more conventional martyr, such as Saint Edmund in *Ælfric’s Life of St Edmund* refuses to fight from the beginning.²³ Richard North points out, however, that the action can be seen in a very different light: ‘Kjartan taunts Bolli to attack him, so he can watch Bolli incur the *níð* [of attacking a defenceless man] ... It is to cause the ultimate injury, not to forgive, that Kjartan throws down his sword.’²⁴ Rather than Christian pacifism, it is an unusual way to take revenge.

²² *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, V (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), 154.

²³ See *Ælfric: Lives of Three English Saints*, ed. G. I. Needham (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1976), 48–9.

²⁴ Richard North, *Pagan Words and Christian Meanings* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1991), 163–4. North construes the *níð* as ‘the attacking and then killing of a foster-brother and cousin’ (p. 163), but the cowardice of attacking a defenceless man surely also enters into the disgrace Kjartan intends for Bolli.

The author of *Njáls saga*, too, is sometimes seen as validating the new Christian way of peace in contradistinction to the old heathen way of vengeance (famously exemplified by the conduct of Hallr of Síða, who, in the interests of peace, waives both revenge and compensation for his son's killing). Lars Lönnroth, for instance, argues that the author of *Njáls saga* had grown up with the older law-code *Grágás*, but was influenced by the later *Járnsíða*. According to Lönnroth, the narrator quotes the old law, but makes the ones who respect it either Christians or noble heathens 'acting in the spirit of the new law by taking revenge only when they were prompted by justice, atoning for their sins like any good Catholic, sometimes even abstaining from seeking legal compensation when higher interests were at stake'.²⁵

However, one must place this against *Njáls saga*, chapter 129, where Njáll refuses to leave his burning farmstead at least in part because he can neither avenge his sons nor live in shame, however martyrlike other aspects of his death may seem. He says:

Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm.

I do not wish to go out, for I am an old man and little equipped to avenge my sons, and I do not wish to live in shame.²⁶

Further, in the same saga, Ámundi inn blindi ('the blind') is miraculously awarded his sight for just long enough to avenge his father with an axe in the head of his slayer. Lýtingr has refused to pay him compensation, and Ámundi says that if he could see he would have 'annathvært fyrir fõður minn fébætr eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr!' ('either compensation or blood-revenge for my father, and so may God judge between us!') (ch. 106, p. 273). Immediately his eyes open, and he cries, 'Lofaðr sé guð, dróttinn minn! Sér nú, hvat hann vill' ('Praised be God, my Lord! It can now be seen what he wishes'). After Ámundi has killed Lýtingr his eyes close once more, 'ok var hann all ævi blindr síðan' ('and he was blind all his life afterwards'). It could

²⁵ Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 147.

²⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, XII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 330.

be argued that, in choosing to take revenge rather than the other option he mentions, compensation, Ámundi has misinterpreted God's will and his subsequent blindness is a punishment of his vengeance. However, it is equally possible that the quick succession of events—prayer, miracle, revenge, then blindness once more—implies that divine intervention was necessary to restore the 'correct' state of affairs, and that blindness is merely Ámundi's normal state, not a judgement upon him—he certainly is not represented as complaining about his lot, only as celebrating his chance to restore equity.

Hildigunnr's inciting of Flósi in *Njáls saga*, chapter 116, mentioned above, further complicates the matter. She tells him (p. 291):

Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek særi þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns níðingr ella.

I call God and all good men to witness that I adjure you with all the powers of your Christ and your manhood and manliness, that you avenge all those wounds which [Hǫskuldr] had upon him when dead, or else be called every man's *níðingr*.

Flósi's oft-quoted retort, 'eru kǫld kvenna ráð' ('cold are the counsels of women') (p. 292), and the insistent personal deixis in Hildigunnr's speech ('Krists þíns'; 'karlmennsku þína') foreground gender in this episode, and it is clear that Hildigunnr is enlisting the authority of the male, Christian God in her quest for vengeance.²⁷

Although it might seem that she represents the 'old way of vengeance', kept alive by women, she equally evidently does not associate the Christian God with an ethic of forgiveness. This is a point in the saga, nonetheless, where the relationship between Christianity, vengeance, and gender is less than clear, abetted by the traditional external focalization of the saga narrative—the author avoiding explicit intrusion which might guide the reader's judgement. In *Njáls saga*, however, it seems that God may not always be averse to individuals

²⁷ On the proverb, see Sarah M. Anderson's introduction to Sarah M. Anderson, with Karen Swenson (eds.), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xi–xvi; see also Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', 145 n. 8.

taking vengeance. Certainly, there is no clear denunciation of ‘just’ revenge, and in fact the family sagas often present a similarly mixed attitude to revenge in a Christian context.

If revenge has an ambiguous gender association in *Njáls saga*, it is unequivocally associated with manhood by the eponymous hero of *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla*. In this short narrative vengeance comes as a restitution of impugned masculinity, when Þorvaldr kills two men who have composed an obscene poem about him and the bishop which implies that they have had sexual relations and the bishop has borne Þorvaldr’s children. However, when Þorvaldr tells the bishop about the killing, the latter rebukes him. Þorvaldr gives as his excuse that he ‘þolda eigi, at þeir kölluðu okkr raga’ (‘could not endure that they called us queer’).²⁸ The translation ‘queer’ (rather than ‘effeminate’) for *raga* (a cognate of *ergi*) is chosen here to reflect the fact that Þorvaldr’s reply includes both himself and the bishop in the insult, which implies that he is the active (or insertive) and the bishop the passive (or receptive) partner. As we saw in Chapter 4 above, it seems likely that only the passive partner was stigmatized until the advent of Christianity generalized the stigma to both parties, as we see here.

Far from taking umbrage himself, however, even given the possibly greater stigma imputed to him, the bishop calmly replies that Þorvaldr should have taken the words to mean merely that the bishop had carried Þorvaldr’s children around, saying:

Eigi skyldi kristinn maðr leita at hefna sín sjálf, þó at hann væri smáðr hatrliga, heldr at þola fyrir guðs sakir brizgli ok meingörðir vándra manna.

A Christian man should not seek to avenge himself, though he might be reviled hatefully—rather suffer for God’s sake the reproach and offences of wicked men.

The bishop here attempts to to put into practice the Christian ethic of ‘turning the other cheek’ (Matthew 5: 39) and not taking revenge oneself (Romans 12: 19), and to encourage Þorvaldr to adopt this

²⁸ *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla*, in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, 4 vols. (Akraness: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944–5), i. 299.

new moral standard. Being ‘reviled hatefully’, even if this involves accusations of effeminacy and non-normative sexual behaviour, is just part of the Christian lot.

Þorvaldr, however, is not easily persuaded to accept slurs on his masculinity. Later, Heðinn—a man who spoke out effectively against the bishop’s preaching, leading to the utterance of the slanderous poem already mentioned—puts into the same harbour as Þorvaldr, who takes a slave into the forest where they know Heðinn to be and orders the slave to kill Heðinn. When the bishop is told, he informs Þorvaldr that they must part: ‘því at þú vilt seint láta af manndrápum’ (‘because you will be slow to leave off man-slaying’) (p. 300). Bishop Friðrekr goes to Saxony, and we are told that he dies there with *heilagleik* (‘holiness’)—an implicit commendation of his rigid line on vengeance and killing, and disregard of gendered insults.²⁹

Not all clerics are so gender-neutral, however. In *Knyttlinga saga*, chapter 96, Archbishop Qzurr addresses Eiríkr’s troops before the impending battle and invokes their masculinity: ‘Nú er sú skript mín, at ek býð yðr í guðs nafni, at þér gangið fram karlmannliga ok berizk djarfliga’ (‘Now this is my penance, that I command you in God’s name that you go forth in manly fashion and bear yourselves boldly’).³⁰ Eiríkr immediately follows the archbishop’s speech with an exhortation of his men, ending: ‘Má oss hugkvæmt vera, hvers at hefna er’ (‘We must be mindful of what there is to avenge’).³¹ The implication is, thus, that the archbishop is underwriting this revenge—and indeed (‘í guðs nafni’) bestowing God’s blessing upon it, although admittedly soldiers taking revenge is different from a cleric doing so himself.

²⁹ This attitude is in stark contrast to that of the notorious Bishop Þangbrandr, who seldom allows an opportunity to avenge slights to himself to pass. Joaquín Martínez Pizarro compares the episode in which Þorvaldr and Bishop Friðrekr feature to a similar one in Gregory of Tours’s *History of the Franks* (IV. 39). The interesting thing here is that Gregory represents God as taking the revenge (‘Gregory talks of *divina ultio* and not *poena*’, ‘On *Nið* Against Bishops’, 152 n. 13), as opposed to the *þátrr* which implicitly sets God against vengeance.

³⁰ *Knyttlinga saga*, in *Danakonunga sögur*, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, Íslensk fornrit, XXXV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1982), 260.

³¹ Indeed, this is a male whetting, since ‘Hann eggjaði mjök liðit’ (‘he greatly incited the troop’), *ibid.* On female whetting see further Chapter 1 above.

Still another attitude is shown in *Ljósvetninga saga*, chapter 20, where Þorvaldr Hóskuldsson wants to avenge his brother upon hearing of his death on his way back from Rome. Þorvaldr has presumably been on a pilgrimage, and declares: 'Ok verði nú sem Pétur postoli vill. Ætla ek þó, at betra væri, at ek kæma eigi út aptr' ('And let it now happen as the Apostle Peter wishes. I think, though, that it would be better that I did not come back to Iceland').³² He suddenly develops severe eye-pain, dies, and is thus prevented from taking a revenge which is implicitly both desired but also perceived as sinful.

These passages—just the most representative of those which might be cited in this connection—serve to highlight the far from consistent attitudes to the involvement of Christians and clerics in revenge evinced in the family sagas and *þættir*, and their different perspectives on femininity and masculinity.

CLERICS AND REVENGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SAGAS

As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, the *Sturlunga saga* compilation as a whole, by the use of theme and the process of compilation itself, has been seen to foreground the necessity of moderation and mediation, lest the violence of the Age of the Sturlungs bring Iceland to ruin.³³ Within this broader context, however, it is possible to draw out separate strands of narrative that create a picture of the complex of attitudes which must have prevailed according to individuals' different understandings of the place of vengeance in Christian society, reflected by their differing educational, theological, and spiritual experience.³⁴ And if in the

³² *Ljósvetninga saga*, ed. Björn Sigfússon, Íslensk fornrit, X (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1940), 103.

³³ See Stephen N. Tranter, *Sturlunga Saga: The Role of the Creative Compiler* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), 221; Úlfar Bragason, 'In the Scriptorium of *Sturlunga's* Compiler', in M. Dallapiazza *et al.* (eds.), *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, Hesperides, 12 (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), 471–82, at 472 and 481.

³⁴ It is of course possible that the saga authors are misrepresenting to some extent the behaviour of their subjects according to their own biases.

Íslendingasögur revenge is often condoned or exercised by Christians, in the *samtíðar sögur* contained in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation one finds numerous examples of priests and clergy taking part in revenge attacks, or killing opponents. The beginning of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* features a notable heir to the violently irascible Þangbrandr in the vengeful priest Már Guðmundsson, who steals from and finally kills Óláfr Hildisson, although his conduct is frowned upon.³⁵ One of the more notable unions of at least nominal Christianity and revenge, however, is found in chapter 44 of *Íslendinga saga*, in a verse attributed to Guðmundr *skáld*:

Stórlátr hefir Sturla,
—stendr hrafn á ná jafnan,
Kistr ræðr tír ok trausti—,
Tuma hefndir vel efndar.

Proud-minded Sturla has—the raven always stands on the corpse: Christ rules over glory and protection—fulfilled vengeance well for Tumi.³⁶

As Peter Hallberg comments: ‘The Prince of Peace has been assigned a place in the ideology of the blood-feud, and has been made to take over the old war-god Óðinn’s bird, the black guardian spirit of the battle-field.’³⁷ We may note that immediately before this Bishop Guðmundr ‘bað guð hefna sín’ (‘asked God to avenge him’) (p. 293)—that is, both parties are invoking God on their side, expecting divine aid in battle.

A more nuanced approach to revenge can be seen in *Þorgils saga skarða*. In chapter 17, when Þorgils asks Sturla for quarter, Hrafn interjects, saying that Sturla cannot give it, and will rather give him the same degree of quarter he intended to give his kinsman Sturla.³⁸ The narrator says that Óláfr Þórðarson then told Hrafn, Sturla, and the rest that he intended to avenge the shame done to him and the Church, continuing: ‘Skal ek þess biðja almatktan guð ok inn helga Nicholaum biskup, er staðinn á, at hann hefni yðr sinni mis-

³⁵ Chapters 4–6: Már is introduced as ‘unpopular and ill-natured’ (ch. 1), and his actions depicted unsympathetically, and criticized by Hafliði (ch. 6).

³⁶ *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson et al., i. 293.

³⁷ Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 113.

³⁸ *Þorgils saga skarða*, in *Sturlunga saga*, ii. 130.

gerða . . .’ (‘I shall pray to Almighty God and the holy Bishop Nikulaus, who holds the place, that he avenge upon you your misdeeds’) (pp. 130–2). Here, God is being invoked in a feud between kinsmen, and not just on one side.

Later in the same chapter, Þorgils muses:

Ek hugsa þat . . . hvé illt mér þykkir, ef engi skal saga ganga frá mér, áðr en þrýtr líf mitt, svá at ek geta ekki á hefnileið róit um svívirðing þá, er mér er nú ger.

I was thinking . . . how ill it will seem to me, if no saga shall be current about me before my life runs out, such that I cannot set out upon the way of vengeance for that dishonour which is now done to me. (p. 132)

That is, he wishes to take vengeance lest, in not doing so, his life be unworthy of posthumous fame. However, Þórðr replies:

Ger eigi þat í hug þér. Ger þá sem þér sýnist, ef þú þiggir líf, en ef þú skalt nú deyja, þá er þér því betra, sem þú átt færum ábyrgðum at svara.

Do not have that in your mind. Do what you think fit if you receive your life, but if you must die now, then it will be the better for you, the less responsibility you have to answer for.

There is a consciousness that present actions of revenge, however satisfying, may have eternal consequences—even thinking about revenge or wishing one could take it is a dangerous indulgence when one is about to die. Nevertheless, the implication of Þórðr’s advice is that, if Þorgils in fact does not die, he can then resume thoughts of revenge, and even carry them out, presumably with the intention of repenting later, a pragmatic approach to religion.

That Icelandic religious leaders were not supposed to take revenge seems to be implied in chapter 44 of *Þorgils saga*, where Þorgils is planning to help Þorvarðr attack Hrafn and Eyjólftr, and asking Abbot Brandr’s advice as to how he should proceed. He at once makes it clear that ‘mér er þat bannat at eiga nökkurn hlut í mannráðum eða nökkurs kyns ófriði’ (‘it is forbidden for me to have any part in plots against men’s lives or any kind of hostilities’) (p. 174).³⁹

³⁹ Compare Ælfric’s *Life of St Edmund*, where it is said that canon law (*þa halgan canones*) forbids clerics’ involvement in judgements which lead to executions, but the source of the rule is again not cited (Needham, *Lives of Three English Saints*, p. 55, l. 182).

Nonetheless, it is very evident how hard he finds it to obey the Church's constraints on clergy, both in his careful omitting to command Þorgils *not* to act, and in his demeanour as he leaves the scene:

Spratt ábóti þá upp ok bað, at verða skyldi guðs vili. Mæltu þá sumir menn, at honum hlypi kapp í kinn,—því at hann dreyrrauðr á at sjá ok mælti þetta, er hann gekk í brottu: 'Hart er þat, at vér skulim bera frændr vára göfga bótalausa fyrir bóndasonum, ok svá myndi þykkja Ormi, bróður mínum, ef hann lifði.'

The abbot then sprang up and bade that God's will should be done. Some men said then that zeal overcame him [*lit.* leapt into his cheek, i.e. flooded his face]—for he was blood-red to look at and said this, when he walked away: 'It is hard that we must bear our noble kinsmen [being] without compensation before the sons of farmers, and so it would seem to Ormr, my brother, if he lived.' (p. 175)

This seems to indicate, at least in some areas, a policy whereby clerics themselves were not supposed to countenance or become involved in violent feuds and revenge, but had a certain amount of leeway to turn a blind eye to the actions of laymen.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, zealous churchmen (such as Bishop Friðrekr in *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla*) might still take a hard line even on revenge by laymen—perhaps citing Christ's non-violent stance of forgiveness in support of their exhortations, as in *Homilíubók*.

Finally, the office of priest has a double implication in chapter 18 of *Guðmundar saga dýra*, where Snorri Snorrason and Þorsteinn, his brother and a priest, are about to be executed. They are both ready to die, but Snorri asks to be killed before Þorsteinn, 'því at ek treystumst honum betr, at hann muni fyrirgefa yðr, þótt hann sjái mik af

⁴⁰ See, however, Marlene Ciklamini's article 'The Christian Champion in *Íslendinga saga*: Eyjólfur Kársson and Aron Hjörleifsson', *Euphorion*, 82 (1988), 226–37. Here she argues: 'In describing the life of Eyjólfur Kársson and the youth of Aron Hjörleifsson, *Íslendinga saga* has set the champion into a Christian context. The narrative exemplified the lawlessness, pride, and vengefulness to which champions inclined and which disrupted community life. Nevertheless, by the mercy of God and with the aid of his vicar, the two champions were tamed to serve a purpose higher than that dictated by selfishness or pride... The end of their roles in *Íslendinga saga* thus coincides with their attainment of spiritual magnanimity or insight' (p. 237).

lífi tekinn' ('for I trust to him better that he will forgive you, even if he sees me put to death').⁴¹ The implication is evidently that, because Þorsteinn is a priest, he will forgive even the person he sees slay his own brother. Snorri, on the other hand, might not be able to endure this sight, and presumably wishes to die with a clean conscience and not with a thwarted desire for vengeance. The saga audience is then told that Hámundr Önundarson kills Snorri, but that his brother Vigfúss Önundarson did not want to kill Þorsteinn, 'er hann var prestur' ('because he was a priest'): in the end Starkaðr inn seki ('the outlaw') kills him. Thus, the office of priest at this time is such that only an already marginal and ostracized criminal is willing to shoulder the responsibility for killing one. Significantly, in the same chapter Þorgrímr prevents the killing of a woman and her male child (*sveinbarn*), saying: 'Hváarki skal hér vinna á börnum né konum, þótt sjá sveinn verði oss öllum at bana' ('Neither women nor children shall be harmed here, even if this boy should become the slayer of us all') (p. 199). Revenge is portrayed here as somewhat unpalatable, the avengers owing to scruples, and the threat of future vengeance or a feud is not a sufficient incentive to kill children.

CONCLUSION

It is, of course, impossible to say exactly what *did* happen with regard to the taking of revenge by the historical clergy of Iceland. None of the written sources we have provides unadulterated historical evidence: the family sagas are primarily literary works based on historical events, and the contemporary sagas also betray literary shaping and ideological bias. Sources such as the laws, homilies, and archiepiscopal letters deal with the subject only sporadically, and they are predominantly normative rather than descriptive. Moreover, the texts come from different geographical and temporal spheres, and the historical practices are likely to have varied according to place and time. The main consideration, however, is that practice (as opposed to intention, or duty) most certainly will have varied from individual to individual, according to the degree of religious

⁴¹ *Guðmundar saga dýra*, in *Sturlunga saga*, i. 198.

zeal, socio-political ambition, and personal circumstance. Thus, from the material adduced above it is clear that, in historical matters as well as literary ones, it is imperative that one proceed only with caution from individual analyses of texts to general statements about society or a body of literature, since both involve individuals with differing ideological and literary concerns and diverse understandings of their society, its history, and the ways in which they wish they were different.

It seems fair, nevertheless, to see a general perception in the sagas that, even in secular revenge, moderation is necessary, and that it is inappropriate for clerics to engage in violence and litigation. This corresponds with the evidence of the historical sources, which suggests a progression towards greater consistency in the Church's attitude to revenge: urging moderation in laymen and forgiveness and a degree of religious separation from secular affairs in clerics. Saga characters complying with this Christianizing trend are depicted favourably, whereas those who do not, in general terms, are seen as a threat to society.

The sagas are not a homogeneous body of texts, and generalizations about attitudes to revenge, such as those of Andersson quoted at the beginning of this chapter, are unhelpful. Nevertheless, the analysis above suggests a general validation of a moderate approach to revenge in several different contexts, where the figure of the cleric in both family and contemporary sagas can feature not only as perpetrating or encouraging revenge, in clear contravention of ecclesiastical policy, but also as a voice exhorting Christian forgiveness.

This chapter has focused on the Church's attitudes to revenge and the way this impacted upon societal attitudes as witnessed in the family and contemporary sagas. In terms of the latter, the emphasis has been on the figure of the cleric. One of the reasons for the variety of attitudes exhibited amongst the clergy, from Bishop Friðrekr's calm acceptance of homophobic insults to many other religious figures' thirst for vengeance, is perhaps that clerics occupy an uneasy space with regard to gender. Clerics are clearly men, but they are not supposed to pursue the occupations of womanizing and fighting that stereotypically characterize men. As Pizarro states in a broader context: 'The principles and models of behavior of the Christian church clashed strongly with Germanic values of honor and virility, and priests who were zealous and consistent in their

Christianity must often have been exposed to charges of *ergi*' (p. 152). It is, therefore, possible that the Icelandic clerics' differing decisions in negotiating this aspect of gender identity partly accounts for the range of attitudes displayed to them. Indeed, Jo Ann McNamara posits that clerical celibacy led to a widespread 'crisis' of masculine identity and around 'the whole question of sexuality' in Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which she argues can explain both clerical misogyny and homophobia.⁴² Although there is not enough evidence to substantiate the application of this particular idea to Norse texts, the next chapter continues to examine the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, but this time with the emphasis on the role of women, so that its gender dynamic can be explored in more detail. As with the other sagas and Eddaic poems analysed, it remains important not to generalize about the attitudes displayed in these texts or their reception. Nevertheless, some broader conclusions are nonetheless possible about the links between manslaughter and misogyny in the contemporary sagas.

⁴² Jo Ann McNamara, 'The *Herrenfrage*: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050–1150', in Clare A. Lees (ed.), *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, Medieval Cultures, 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3–29.

6

Manslaughter and Misogyny: Women and Revenge in *Sturlunga saga*

One of the most discussed female stereotypes in the *Íslendingasögur*, or family sagas, is that of the inciter; indeed, the incitement by a woman of a male relative to take vengeance on her behalf is one of the more familiar saga themes.¹ As William Ian Miller emphasizes, a 'bloody token' is an important factor in many incitements, and this can take the form of a murder weapon, a bloody cloak, or even a decapitated head.² The few women in the *Íslendingasögur* who attempt to take active revenge are usually unsuccessful and the actual physical act of vengeance is generally left to the female inciter's male relatives.³

In *Old Norse Images of Women*, Jenny Jochens argues that the reason saga women so often feature as inciters of revenge ordinarily carried out by men is that inciting women are scapegoats, designed to exonerate men from blame for the trouble their killings cause.⁴ It is certainly true that much blame for killings is

¹ The classic study of women in the sagas is Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau*; the third chapter deals with the inciting female (*die Hetzerin*). Heller counts 51 of these female goaders in the *Íslendingasögur* at a conservative estimate. More recent studies are cited in the discussion and footnotes below.

² W. I. Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review*, 1 (1983), 159–204; id., *Blood-taking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 210–15. For an important consideration of the methods and contexts of such whetting episodes, see Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament'. See also the discussion in Ch. 1 above.

³ In ch. 37 of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Þórdís attempts to avenge her brother by killing Eyjólfur but succeeds only in wounding him in the thigh. The actions of the notoriously successful female killer, Freydis Eiríksdóttir, in *Grœnlendinga saga*, ch. 8, are so monstrous that the narrator is uncharacteristically moved to make an adverse comment upon her.

⁴ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 211.

apportioned to women implicitly by the very nature of the topos, and explicitly by male characters within the texts.

The clearest example of explicit blame is found in chapter 116 of *Njáls saga*, after Hildigunnr flings the bloody cloak over Flósi and charges him solemnly with revenge. As we saw in the previous chapter, Flósi retorts:

Þú ert it mesta forað ok vildir, at vér tækim þat upp, er qllum oss gegnir verst, ok eru kold kvenna ráð.⁵

You are the greatest monster, and would have us take up the course which will be worst for all of us, and 'cold are women's counsels.'

Jochens's argument therefore has a certain amount of support, and this chapter does not focus on the role of vengeful women in the *Íslendingasögur*, since so much has been written on it elsewhere. However, in two further pieces Jochens seeks to contrast this literary stereotype with what she sees as the historical reality of women's roles in the *samtíðar sögur* ('contemporary sagas') contained in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. It is with the depictions of women in this compilation that I wish to engage here, since careful analysis presents a challenge to Jochens's approach.

The first piece by Jochens is an article entitled 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?' (although, in fact, her argument is somewhat more nuanced than the stark binary of the subtitle would suggest). The first part of her article analyses 'the nature and extent of power exercised by the heroines found in the family sagas', and this is complemented by a second section which compares this picture 'with evidence drawn from the law codes, the contemporary sagas, and the meager charter material' in order to 'determine whether the heroines should be taken at face value or whether they are irredeemably fictitious', finding 'a clear discrepancy' between the family sagas and the 'legal and historical material'.⁶ Jochens recognizes that laws are frequently 'prescriptive rather than descriptive' (p. 116), and

⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 291–2. On male reluctance to seek revenge, see Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 195–8, and specifically on this passage, see Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', 141–6 and 175–9.

⁶ Jenny Jochens, 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?', in Tucker (ed.), *Sagas of the Icelanders*, 99–126, at 101 and 120.

thus, although she concedes that the 'historical material' may contain 'some distortion', she relies primarily on *Sturlunga saga* for her picture of the historical reality of medieval Icelandic women's experience, deeming these narratives 'at least more coherent and most likely more reliable than the literary sagas' (p. 120). She concludes concerning the female inciter (p. 125): 'The fact that we cannot find her equivalent in the contemporary *Sturlunga saga* should inhibit our acceptance of her historical existence. The domineering Icelandic heroine of the family sagas bears little resemblance to female existence and, *hélas*, should be consigned to the realm of male fiction.' Leaving aside the issue of the existence of 'domineering women' in history, Jochens is here effectively setting up a binary distinction between fiction and history. She recognizes that legal material cannot quite be placed on the 'historical' side because of its prescriptive character, although she does align it with the historical material, but seems to see historical material generally, and *Sturlunga saga* specifically, as a generally straightforward reflection of social reality.

Jochens sets up a similar contrast in another article on the female inciter in the *konunga sögur* ('kings' sagas'), where she asks if this figure reflects 'a social reality, if not of pagan times, perhaps of the authors' contemporary situation'.⁷ In the first two sections of the article Jochens analyses the depictions of inciting females in the kings' sagas and discusses Snorri's possible literary motivation for depicting women in this way in *Heimskringla*, arguing in the third section that he modelled the inciting women on Oddr Snorrason's depiction of Sigríðr stórráða in his saga of Óláfr Tryggvason (see especially p. 115), and, in the fourth section, that the ultimate 'prototype of all evil and revenging women' is to be found in Queen Gunnhildr (p. 118). In the final section Jochens makes a brief connection between paganism and the inciting woman in the family sagas, before concluding in this way (p. 119): 'The female inciters in the Kings' sagas and especially in the Family sagas are unique by the almost frightening success of their goading. That the social reality was different can be seen from *Sturlunga saga* where female goading behavior is far less frequent and almost without success.' Again, then, Jochens sets

⁷ Jenny Jochens, 'The Female Inciter in the Kings' Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 102 (1987), 100–19, at 100.

Sturlunga saga up as the primary source of information on the social reality of women's situation and behaviour, opposing this to the 'male fictions' of the family and kings' sagas.

As this chapter will show, however, a more detailed analysis of some of the female characters of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation does not in fact support Jochens's assumption. There are indeed several significant and pro-active women in the work, and these characters are based on historical figures.⁸ Nevertheless, we shall see that the episodes in which they appear (and in which they are often scapegoated) bear clear marks of significant shaping for literary purposes, and thus cannot be taken as a straightforward indication of social reality in the way that Jochens proposes. It has, of course, long been recognized by historians that all narrative, including historical narrative, is 'shaped'; only the barest annalistic pieces could lay any claim to be considered as 'pure' history, and even then, what incidents have been selected and what have been ignored need careful consideration.⁹ This chapter does not seek simply to separate out elements of 'fact' and 'fiction' in *Sturlunga saga*; rather, it seeks to explore certain literary themes and motifs in the compilation in order to investigate the place of women in the texts. It argues that women play a significant role in the compilation's exploration of vengeance and violence in the Sturlung Age, and that literary analysis of 'historical' Norse texts can be as rewarding as literary analysis of the family and kings' sagas. Unlike the articles by Jochens discussed above, this chapter

⁸ Jochens does not actually analyse the female figures in any detail. In her article on the family sagas she comments specifically on marriage and divorce practices ('Medieval Icelandic Heroine', 112–13) and the lack of prominence of women and particularly inciting women (pp. 117–19). However, the only (relatively) detailed account she gives is of Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, wife of Hálfðan and sister of Þórðr kakali, who unsuccessfully urges her husband to aid her brother's revenge attempt (p. 118). Other women are mentioned only briefly, such as a woman who lets two killers escape, to her husband's annoyance, and a wife whose attempt to cool her husband's temper is rebuffed (p. 119).

⁹ Hayden White is one of the better-known writers on this subject. However, he has received a certain amount of criticism from historians, many of whom claim that he merely states what has long been their understanding of history, or who deem his political views to have adversely affected his academic writing. See initially Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 3rd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2003); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986).

does not search for the social reality of medieval Icelandic women, but it does seek to elucidate further the significance of the female inciter in the contemporary sagas, and thus the representation of women by male authors in medieval Icelandic texts.

It must be said that the texts collected in *Sturlunga saga* have not generally received sustained critical attention from a literary perspective, although they afford much useful and interesting material to the literary critic.¹⁰ As Úlfar Bragason points out, 'historians have been of the opinion that *Sturlunga saga*... gives a generally true picture of Icelandic society'.¹¹ He is unusual amongst Icelanders in having championed the literary approach to the *samtíðar sögur* in a series of publications.¹² In one particularly interesting piece of analysis, he argues that:

Sturlunga saga recounts how 'the age of heroes' came to an end, because the advice of such men as [the wise and moderate leader] Þórðr [Sturluson] was not heeded. Icelandic historian Gunnar Karlsson is of the view that *Íslendinga saga* expresses tension between 'the *tough* values of heroism, pride, revenge, and the *soft* values of modesty, humility, peacefulness'. Sturla Sighvatson represents the former set of values, his uncle Þórðr the latter. The saga unambiguously takes Þórðr's side, and is critical of destructive elements in society—those who are depicted as causing conflict and hostilities.¹³

¹⁰ Compare Úlfar Bragason's comment to the same effect (Úlfar Bragason, 'Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga saga*): Texts and Research', in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 427–46, at 428); he shows that other literary approaches have mostly concerned narrative method and the relation of the contemporary and family sagas; see also Jacqueline Simpson, 'Advocacy and Art in *Guðmundar saga dýra*', *Saga-Book*, 15 (1961), 327–45.

¹¹ Úlfar Bragason, 'The Word and the World: A Resonant Textual Fragment of *Íslendinga Saga*', trans. Anna H. Yates, in Stefanie Würth et al. (eds.), *Sagas and Societies: International Conference at Borgarnes, Iceland, 5.–9 September 2002* (Tübingen, 2002), 2. Accessed at: <http://tobias-lib.uni-tuebingen.de/volltexte/2004/1081/>. For such comments by historians, see Gunnar Karlsson, 'Goðar og bændur', *Saga*, 10 (1972), 7–8; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. Jean Lundskær-Nielsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999), 18.

¹² Much of this material is now collected in his recent book, *Ætt og saga: Um frásagnarfriðu Sturlungu eða Íslendinga sögu hinnar miklu* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2010). Unfortunately, as of the time of writing none of the UK copyright libraries yet possesses a copy of the book.

¹³ Úlfar Bragason, 'The Word and the World', 7.

Another notable exception to the critical trend is Stephen Tranter's monograph, *Sturlunga Saga: The Rôle of the Creative Compiler*. Tranter characterizes the message of the prefatory sagas of the compilation in a similar way to Úlfar's characterization of *Íslendinga saga*: 'The less prepared the body of good men within the land are, whether as individuals or through social institutions, to act as mediators, the longer, the more violent, and less reconcilable will be the conflicts through which the land is plagued.'¹⁴ He continues: 'The remainder of the compilation is therefore to be read as a demonstration of the evils that came upon the land as a result of men's failure to secure reconciliation... [It is] a plea to the men of the compiler's own age to learn from the Age of the Sturlungs and to settle their differences before they fall into further chaos.'¹⁵ Although Tranter's characterization of *Sturlunga saga* is persuasive, he repeatedly speaks about the behaviour of men within the compilation and men's reception of the work. The analysis here is more limited in scope than Tranter's work, but seeks to investigate further the place of women in the masculine dynamic he delineates along the lines outlined above: to evaluate the writers' attitudes to women and their perception of the role of women in the conflicts of the Sturlung Age.

MEN VS. WOMEN: STURLA AND ÞORBJÖRG IN *STURLU SAGA*

Þorbjörg, the wife of Páll Sölvason in *Sturlu saga*, figures in that text as an incompetent mutilator of her husband's adversary, the formidable Sturla Þórðarson. Although Þorbjörg certainly existed, her function in the passage examined here indicates that the events

¹⁴ Tranter, *Sturlunga Saga*, 221.

¹⁵ Tranter's analysis of *Sturlunga saga* is comparable to my argument in Ch. 3 about the purpose of the compiler of the *Poetic Edda*. In another article, Úlfar Bragason agrees with Tranter to a certain extent but argues that the compilation reflects 'the Icelandic ruling class's attempt to understand its new situation after 1262, when Iceland became a part of the Norwegian kingdom, and to underscore its right to power based on origin and wealth' (Úlfar Bragason, 'In the Scriptorium of *Sturlunga's* Compiler', at 472).

recounted have been described in a way which betrays the author's ideological biases.¹⁶

The incident comprises chapter 31 of the saga, and occurs in the context of a *sáttarfundr* ('meeting of reconciliation') between the priest Páll and Böðvarr Þórðarson and his kinsman, Sturla. The reader is told:

Þorbjörg, kona Páls, var grimmúðig í skapi ok líkaði stórilla þóf þetta. Hon hljóp fram milli manna ok hafði kníf í hendi ok lagði til Sturlu ok stefndi í augat ok mælti þetta við: 'Hví skal ek eigi gera þik þeim líkastan, er þú vill líkastr vera,—en þar er Óðinn?' Ok í því var hon tekin. Ok stöðvaðist lagit ok kom í kinnina, ok varð þat mikit sár.¹⁷

Þorbjörg, the wife of Páll, was of a ferocious disposition and heartily disliked this endless struggle. She ran forward between the men with a knife in her hand and thrust it at Sturla, aiming at his eye, saying this: 'Why shouldn't I make you just like the one you wish to be most like—and that is Óðinn?' But she was seized immediately. And the thrust was stopped and entered his cheek, and it was a serious wound.

Böðvarr and Sturla's men are furious and want to fight, but Sturla prevents this, saying:

'Setist menn niðr, ok tölum um sættina, ok þurfu menn eigi hér at lýsa vanstilli fyrir þessa sök, því at konur kunnu með ýmsu móti at leita eftir ástum...' Hann hafði höndina at andlitinu ok dreifði blóðinu á kinnina ok mælti: 'Þess er mest ván, at vit Páll munim sættast á okkur mál...'

'Let people/men sit down and we will talk about reconciliation—and there is no need for people/men here to display a lack of self-control in this case, because women know how to seek for love in various ways...' He had his hand to his face, and the blood was dripping down his cheek, and he said: 'It is most to be hoped that Páll and I will be reconciled in our dispute...' (pp. 109–10)

¹⁶ The events described take place in 1148–83, and the saga was probably written in the first quarter of the thirteenth century (Úlfar Bragason, 'Sagas of Contemporary History', 432).

¹⁷ Jón Jóhannesson *et al.* (eds.), *Sturlunga saga*, i. 109. All citations are taken from this edition, although I have also consulted Guðbrandur Vigfússon [Guðbrand Vigfusson], *Sturlunga Saga, Including the Islendinga Saga of Lawman Sturla Thordsson and Other Works*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878).

Rather than having this new case discussed immediately, Sturla has that between Páll and Böðvarr reopened; the two men are reconciled, 'ok lét Páll þá gangast þá hluti, at áðr höfðu í millum staðit' ('and then Páll let those things go which had stood between them before') (p. 110).

It is at once evident that Sturla has manipulated the situation by his display of self-control and moderation, so as to bring his kinsman's case to a successful conclusion. Impressed by his forbearance over Þorbjörg's attack, his opponents are better disposed toward him than before. However, it becomes apparent just how calculating Sturla is when we see that his conduct has caused Páll's friends to urge him to give Sturla self-judgement in the matter. Although Páll is at first unwilling, he is persuaded, and Sturla accepts these terms, promising to drop the case. In the following chapter, however, Sturla instead pronounces a decision in which he awards himself a huge amount of compensation, prompting Páll to accuse him of *ósómann* ('dishonour'), and the narrator comments: 'þótti öllum mönnum mikil undr, er honum kom í hug at kveða slíkt upp' ('it seemed to everyone extraordinary that it came into his mind to call for such a thing') (p. 111).

It seems that in this episode the saga author is acknowledging Sturla's flaws, emphasizing by the comment on people's perceptions of the event how manipulative and scheming Sturla has been: pretending to have no ill-will towards Páll in order to score off him the more heavily later.¹⁸ His meanness is again underlined at the end of the saga, where he takes to his bed on learning of Þorbjörg's death. When people say that they would not have expected him to be upset by her demise, he explains the real reason for his apparent sorrow:

ek virði svá sem aldri væri saklaust við sonu Páls ok Þorbjargar, meðan hon lifði. En nú samir eigi vel at veita þeim ágang, er hon er önduð.

I considered that I'd never be without due cause against the sons of Páll and Þorbjörg, while she was alive. But it's not very becoming to get at them now she's dead. (p. 114)

¹⁸ This may also be reflected in Þorbjörg's comparison of him with Óðinn, who often seems a manipulative or obsessively controlling figure, and who regularly resorts to deceit to get his own way.

Since this is the last thing the reader is told about Sturla before his death, his reaction gives a rather sour and petty cast to his character, and evinces the true nature of his declaration in chapter 31 that ‘lengi hefir vinfengi okkart Þorbjargar verit mikit’ (‘there has long been great friendship between Þorbjörg and me’) (p. 110). Sturla’s grudges are long harboured, and surface appearances can conceal a lasting enmity.

Nevertheless, looking more closely at the passage, one can argue that the entire episode works at the expense of women. First of all, it is Þorbjörg’s violent temperament (she is ‘grimmúðig í skapi’—‘of a ferocious disposition’) that contrasts with Sturla’s cool, measured equanimity in not becoming enraged at a grave wound (‘mikit sár’) that nearly cost him his eyesight, allowing him to speak calmly whilst blood pours down his cheek. His patronizing comment that ‘konur kunnu með ýmsu móti at leita eftir ástum’ (‘women know various ways of seeking for love’) points up the contrast in their behaviour—he presents himself as a calm and moderate man, making allowances for a violent and uncontrolled woman. The comment also removes Þorbjörg’s autonomy, if we understand it to imply that she is doing this in order to gain or keep her husband’s love, whilst simultaneously implying by its generalizing quality that all women are similarly motivated by their need for male affection but confusedly choose inappropriate ways of gaining it (‘með ýmsu móti’). Additionally, the author has Sturla repeat the word *menn* (‘Setist menn niðr... þurfu menn eigi...’), which emphasizes the fact that gender is at issue in this speech. *Maðr* does, of course, often mean ‘person’ without necessarily specifying the gender of the person. However, it can also be used in opposition to *kona* (‘woman’),¹⁹ and thus the repetition of the term in the plural here, followed by the use of the specific term *kona*, also in the plural, creates an implicit contrast between the two. The ambiguity of the term *maðr*, then, suggests that, although rational behaviour—sitting down calmly and discussing disputes—is what should be expected of people in general, it is in fact only to be expected from men and not from women, who are ruled by their emotions.

¹⁹ See Geir Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), s.v. *maðr*, sense 3.

It is true that Sturla is creating a scene for his own ends and that his behaviour is criticized here. However, the way that the episode is framed indicates that the author perhaps concurs in blaming the undesirable outcome on Þorbjörg and her womanly lack of self-control. It is her inappropriate intervention that provides the opportunity for Sturla's injustice, first allowing him and Böðvarr to get their own way in the initial case, and then permitting his unfair self-judgement in the second case. The passage may thus suggest that other women too, like Þorbjörg, may act on violent impulse, unable to bear the 'endless struggle' (*þóf*) of men's controlled, rational litigation.²⁰ If so, this should not come as a surprise, given the prevalence and longevity of medieval misogynistic constructions of women as corporeal, irrational entities in opposition to men who represent rationality and the intellect (stereotypes which still have influence even today). These models are, of course, seen most clearly in the writings of the Church Fathers such as Augustine, and are conveniently summarized by Caroline Walker Bynum in her comment that: '*Male and female* were contrasted and asymmetrically valued as intellect/body, active/passive, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, self-control/lust, judgment/mercy and order/disorder.'²¹ It is perhaps such clerical thinking that lies behind the framing of this passage in *Sturlu saga*, the author by his description of the results of Þorbjörg's behaviour in effect corroborating Sturla's analysis of her womanly nature, even if he himself is not viewed positively either.²² Sturla may not live up to his words, but their message still stands.

The rest of this chapter explores some other episodes where women seem to be viewed negatively in the other texts in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, and some episodes which seem to run counter to this

²⁰ Þorbjörg's failure to blind Sturla, instead only wounding his cheek, is comparable to Auðr's failure to kill Þorkr in ch. 37 of *Gísla saga*, and similarly presents women as ineffective though perhaps valiant adversaries.

²¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, '“And woman his humanity”: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages', in her *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 151–79, at 151. She goes on to complicate this picture by showing how these binaries are often in fact subverted in medieval texts.

²² For a negative reading of Sturla, see Úlfar Bragason, 'The Word and the World', 6–7.

pattern, in order to gain a fuller picture of how women feature in the compilation.

PUTTING THE BLAME ON MAME: FEMALE
SCAPEGOATS IN *GUÐMUNDS SAGA DÝRA*
AND *ÍSLENDINGA SAGA*

First to be considered are two women in *Guðmunds saga dýra*, both called Guðrún. The first, Guðrún Þórðardóttir, has trouble getting on with her second husband, Hrafn Brandsson, after an ominous marriage night when she runs away from the marital bed (chapter 5). After some temporary respite at her previous father-in-law's, Guðrún returns to Hrafn's house, where she is visited by a further male suitor, Hákon Þórðarson, until she feels she has to discourage these visits whilst Hrafn is still alive, saying 'en ger sem þér sýnist síðan' ('but do as you think best after that') (p. 170). Soon after, Hákon attempts to kill Hrafn, wounding him in the chest with a spear. When Hrafn picks up an axe and gets to his feet, we are told that 'Guðrún tók til hans, ok bað hann eigi fram ganga' ('Guðrún grabbed him and begged him not to go forward [i.e. attack]'). Hrafn says that he (i.e. Hrafn) would not have got far anyway and she asks 'hvé mjök hann væri sárr' ('how badly he was hurt'). Although his reply plays down the seriousness of his wounds in the laconic manner typical of a saga hero, Hrafn dies three nights later. The clear implication is that Guðrún is complicit in her husband's slaying and that she wishes to get him out of the way so as to be free to marry Hákon, and this is confirmed in the following chapter where Guðmundr tries to settle the case. We are first told that

Þórðr kvaðst eigi nenna at bæta Hrafn fé, nema Guðrún bætti at helmingi. Þórðr kvað hana ráðbana Hrafn. En Guðrún vildi þat eigi ofrast láta.

Þórðr declared that he would not pay compensation for Hrafn unless Guðrún paid half; he said she was the contriver of Hrafn's death. Guðrún didn't want to let that become known. (p. 171)²³

²³ An editorial note to *ofrast* suggests the alternative: 'But Guðrún was not willing to admit to that', which would provide further support for my argument. Thanks to Alison Finlay for alerting me to this.

Moreover, the chapter ends by telling us of Hákon's marriage to Guðrún, and we are informed that he 'var við hana harðr ok kvað sér eigi skyldu þat verða, at hennar menn stæði yfir höfuðsvörðum hans' ('was severe with her, and said that it must never happen to him that her men [lovers?] should have him [*lit.* his scalp] in their power') (p. 171). Guðrún features here as the real scapegoat for Hákon's actions, and as an unfaithful and even callous wife to Hrafn.

The second Guðrún, daughter of Önundr, features in a traditional inciting scene, serving her three brothers singed sheep's heads and feet to force them to avenge the burning to death of their father (ch. 17, p. 195). Her brother Vigfúss responds that, 'Eigi er þat, at þú minnir oss eigi á, hvat vér eigum, þar er sviðin eru' ('It's not that you haven't reminded us about what we must do, as far as the singed heads are concerned'),²⁴ and vengeance duly comes. However, the blame for the series of killings which follow can ultimately be attributed to Guðrún, and one may even see an allusion to the Eddaic archetype of vengeful femininity, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, in the first name that these two women share.²⁵

A further scene, which may initially seem innocuous, but where (as in *Guðmunds saga dýra*) the blame for men's violent actions is ultimately attributed to women, can be found in *Íslendinga saga*, chapter 105, where two parties prepare for a fight during Lent.²⁶ The author informs us that the quarrel occurred because

Skofa hvarf skyrta ok fannst á Játvarði Guðlaugssyni,—var þat þá af gert, at konur hefði gleymt í þvætti. Aðrir váru í skála, en aðrir í stofu. Órækja átti hlut at ok sætti þá í því sinni, ok varð þó engi alvara með þeim.

²⁴ R. George Thomas translates: 'No one can deny that you have reminded us what we have suffered through singed flesh' (Julia McGrew and R. George Thomas, trans., *Sturlunga saga*, 2 vols. (New York: Twayne, 1970–4), ii. 187)—Önundr had been burned to death.

²⁵ Guðrún herself appears in a vision to Jóreiðr in ch. 190 of *Íslendinga saga*, where she embodies the past and heroic vengeance. On this episode, see Judy Quinn, 'The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas', *Frá suðlægri strönd*, 3 (1987), 54–72, at 60 and 63; also Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 28–9, 205, 215, and *Women in Old Norse Society*, 14–16, 16, 170.

²⁶ The saga was written by Sturla Þórðarson in the mid- to late-thirteenth century and covers the period between approximately 1183 and 1264 (Úlfar Bragason, 'Sagas of Contemporary History', 432).

Skofti's shirt disappeared and was found on Játvarðr Guðlaugsson—it happened because the women had forgotten it in the wash. Some people were in the hall, and others in the sitting-room. Órækja had a part in it and reconciled them this time, and yet they did not take the reconciliation seriously. (p. 381)

Part of the fault here lies with the way men have allowed a trivial incident to escalate into a major conflict, and thus the episode evidently reflects poorly on the moderation of the men involved. However, the ultimate blame remains with the women who have not performed their household duties adequately: 'the women had forgotten it in the wash.' The correct role for men here is to respond with moderation to provocation, and the correct role for women is to attend carefully to their domestic responsibilities. This is perhaps a small detail, but its significance is supported by the function of women more generally in this saga.

One of the recurrent themes of *Íslendinga saga* is the appearance in a vision or dream of a woman who is often large and evil-looking or ill-smelling, and who announces war, often in verse, as for instance in both chapter 65 and chapter 122. It must be said that it is not just women who appear in visions portending, or indeed enacting, violent death, as witnessed by the similar male figures in chapters 122 and 131. Indeed, in chapter 136 there is a whole series of ominous dreams and visions of fighting and slaughter. Thus, both men and women feature in these visions in *Íslendinga saga* to emphasize and render vivid the narrative's depiction of contemporary Iceland as a dangerous and increasingly lawless and violent place.²⁷ However, although men do sometimes appear in this role, the majority of these ominous apparitions are female, and, if one looks in detail at two further visions of women speaking verses in this chapter, one sees that these women are more than simply harbingers of doom: they often actually embody or symbolize enmity and violent strife.

The first woman appears to a man called Snæbjörn, and is 'mikil ok þrýstilig and í dökkbláum kyrtli' ('large and robust . . . in a dark-blue tunic') (pp. 424–5), the colour of her tunic an ominous sign in

²⁷ Compare Tranter, *Sturlunga Saga*. On the function and nature of the verses, see Quinn, 'Use of Eddic Poetry', 54, 65, and 70.

itself for experienced saga readers. She speaks a verse, the first half of which reads (p. 425):

Gríðr munk gumnum heðra,
—grand þróask margt í landi—,
sótt munk yðr, þvít ættak
efni margs at hefna.

Gríðr [a giantess; here, ‘a harmer’, ‘destruction’] will I be to men here—
injury will increase greatly in the land—sickness will I be for you, for
I have had reason to avenge many things.²⁸

The saga author thus has the apparition make explicit her personification of death and *sótt* (‘sickness’) to men, driven by vengeance (*hefna*).²⁹ Then, in a second verse, she reveals:

Eisandi ferk unda
undrsamliga funda,
líðk of hól ok hæðir
hart sem fugl inn svarti.
Kemk í dal, þars dyljumk,
dánarakrs til vánar,
harmþrungin fórk hingat
Heljar ask at velja,
Heljar ask ferk velja.

Rushing wondrously, I go off to wound-meetings [i.e. battles]; I travel fast over hill and heights, like the black bird. I come, as expected, into a dale of the land of death where I lie hidden; pressed with grief I came here to choose the dish of Hel [i.e. hunger]—I go to choose the dish of Hel.

The woman’s flight over ‘hól ok hæðir’, along with her association with ravens (‘fugl inn svarti’), the field of the dead (‘dánarakr’), and

²⁸ Skaldic verses have been translated as literally as possible, since in order to produce an idiomatic translation the exact meaning would have to be sacrificed. The translations of saga prose have been rendered more idiomatically, and the characteristic switch between present and past tenses has been removed.

²⁹ The use of a giantess-term also connotes antipathy to men, although the choice of Gríðr is ambiguous. The name appears in *Skáldskaparmál* in kennings for axe and wolf in the sense ‘troll-wife’ (verses 241 and 245), and as part of a valkyrie name in a *þula* (v. 449), but she is also known for helping Þórr against Geirrððr and as the mother of Óðinn’s son Víðarr (ch. 18; verse 81). (See Faulkes (ed.), *Skáldskaparmál*, ad. loc.)

Hel, seems to identify her with the valkyries and certainly makes her an embodiment of male death in battle.

The second woman speaks to a priest called Þorgeirr in a dream, saying (pp. 427–8):

Líðk of heim ór heimi
 heims myrkrum frá þeima,
 hörð munu gjöld of gjalda
 grimmeiks stafir rimmu.
 Fásk munu sár af sárum,
 svás heldr, þars menn felldusk,
 koma mun hörð fyr harða
 hrið ok skammt at bíða.

I pass over the world out of the world from the darkness of this world—the staves of tumult [i.e. men] will pay a hard payment for their grimness. From wounds wounds will be produced, thus it is rather, where men felled each other. A hard storm [i.e. battle] will come before [another] hard one, and not long to wait.

Here, the female apparition seems to personify the evil that goes throughout the world and inspires the endless chain of violence (‘sár af sárum’), which men have perpetrated (‘menn felldusk’) despite the cost to themselves; she warns of a succession of hard battles. Although the self-destructive nature of men’s behaviour is emphasized by the *figura etymologica* on *hörð*/*harða* and *gjöld*/*gjalda*, read in conjunction with the previous verse the use of the female figure seems to make her the overseer of this behaviour.

It can be argued, then, that women in this narrative represent the impetus and take much of the blame for male violence. In Kristevan terms, the female apparitions might even be seen as representing abject woman, rendered monstrous by their ugly appearance or unnatural size and strength; in their roles as those who are present at, or perceive, or predict human conflict, they seem to constitute female embodiments of vengeful strife.³⁰

³⁰ The male apparitions are not generally distinguished in this way: compare the man in ch. 122 who is only described as big, with the woman who is also evil-looking and carries a bloody cloth with which she decapitates men (pp. 307–8), although there are some exceptions, such as the ugly male figures in chs. 131 and 136.

One might set against this pattern the horrifying burning later in the saga, in chapters 172–4, where Gizurr's wife Gróa and his son Ísleifr are killed, and where at first glance men might seem culpable. The narrator comments on this burning:

Þessi tíðindi spurðust brátt, ok þótti öllum vitrum mönnum þessi tíðindi einhver mest hafa orðit hér á Íslandi, sem guð fyrirgefi þeim, er gerðu, með sinni mikilli miskunn ok mildi.

These events were quickly heard of, and these events seemed to all wise men some of the greatest to have occurred here in Iceland, for which may God forgive those who perpetrated them, in his great mercy and grace. (ch. 174, p. 493)

This divine invocation underlines the gravity of the deed and the horror it aroused, but the author does not stop there: he enables the audience to feel the situation by creating empathy with Gizurr. The remains of Gróa and Ísleifr are brought out to him, and he identifies them to Páll: 'Ok fann Páll, at hann leit frá, ok stökk ór andlitinu sem haglkorn væri' ('And Páll found that Gizurr looked away, and [tears] sprang from his face as if they were hailstones') (p. 494). This motif of hard tears has parallels in the family-saga corpus and lends an epic grandeur to the scene.³¹ One could, therefore, see the saga author as blaming men for this awful revenge, crowning the pathos with a final emphasis on the surviving daughter-in-law Ingibjörg, who moves to stay with a kinswoman after the burning: 'Var hon mjök þrekuð, barn at aldri' ('She was greatly worn, [although] a child in years') (p. 494).

Nevertheless, elsewhere it can be seen that the blame even for violence which harms women is laid at their door, if we look back to one of the few inciting scenes in the saga. In chapter 168 Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson asks Vígdís Gísladóttir, *í gamni* ('in fun'):

'Hvat myndi honum Gizuri til ganga, er hann vildi eigi byggð þína í Skagafirði?'

Vígdís varð fá um.

³¹ The motif appears in *Gísla saga*, ch. 14, *Njála*, ch. 142, and *Víga-Glúms saga*, ch. 7 (where the tears become those of vengeful laughter).

Þá svarar Þuríðr, dóttir hennar: 'Því at Gizuri,' segir hon, 'þótti hver herkerling líkligri til at hefna föður míns, Sturlu, en þú. Sér hann þat, at þér er litr einn gefin.' Eyjólfr svarar engu ok var rauðr sem dreyri.

'What reason could Gizurr have had for not wanting your dwelling in Skagafjörðr?' Vígdís was reserved about this. Then Þuríðr, her daughter, answered: 'Because any and every old woman seemed to Gizurr more likely to avenge my father, Sturla, than you. He sees that all you have been granted is your appearance.' Eyjólfr did not answer and was red as blood.

By chapter 170 the audience learns that Eyjólfr and Hrani have planned to attack and kill Gizurr and his son. Thus the saga author implicitly gives a woman, in her function as the inciter of this revenge, the ultimate blame for the terrible death of Gizurr's wife and son, and the devastation of his young daughter-in-law, old before her time. *Íslendinga saga*, then, employs the topoi of predominantly female supernatural apparitions and of the female inciter in a way which often leaves women as the ultimate scapegoat for the vengeful violence of the period. There are, of course, several violent incidents between men which do not involve or foreground women, but it nonetheless seems significant that crucial conflicts can often be traced back to female causes.³²

WOMEN AS ANTI-INCITERS IN *ÞORGILS SAGA* *OK HAFLIÐA* AND *SVÍNFELLINGA SAGA*

The apparent misogyny of *Íslendinga saga* is not to be found uniformly in the other texts in the *Sturlunga* compilation, however. In *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, for instance, women act to prevent violent revenge on two occasions.³³ In chapter 5, Óláfr has given Már a skin-deep wound for responding rudely to his polite request for

³² Additionally, Guðbjörg's violent response (along with two young boys) to Einarr's attempt to claim her property in ch. 2 leads to major conflict, as does Jóriðr's refusal to marry so as not to deprive her daughter of her property in ch. 57.

³³ This saga (which is cited from the English edition) describes the conflict of the eponymous chieftains, 1117–21, and has been dated variously to the late twelfth- and mid-thirteenth-century (Brown, *Þorgils saga*, pp. x–xxix).

compensation for having seized Óláfr's possessions. The reader is told (p. 7):

gengr Ólafr út, en [Már] vill hlaupa eptir honum. Þorsteinn hleypr upp ok heldr Má[vi] ok þægir honum í bekkinn. Már verðr ákafliga óðr við ok lézk Þorsteini vilja slíkan kost, ef hann bannaði honum at hefna sín. En Þorsteinn gaf engan gaum at orðum hans. Þá eggjaði Már son[u] Hneitis út at ganga ok hefna sín. En sveinarnir hlupu út, en móð[i]r þeira eptir þeim ok bað, at þeir hlupi eigi í þetta vandræði. Óláfr ferr nú leiðar sinnar. En þær konur bundu sár Más. Hann þiggr þat illa. Ok litlu síðar spréttir upp Már ok at honum Þorsteini ok vegr hann.

Óláfr went out, and Már wanted to run after him. Þorsteinn jumped up and held Már back and shoved him onto the bench. Már became fiercely enraged at this and declared he would give Þorsteinn the same terms if he forbade him from avenging himself. But Þorsteinn gave no heed to his words. Then Már egged on Hneitir's sons to go out and avenge him. And the boys ran out, but their mother [went] after them and told them not to rush into this difficulty. Óláfr now went his way. But the women bound Már's wound. He received this badly. And a little later Már sprang up and at Þorsteinn and slew him.

Although Þorsteinn is the focus for the episode, first ignoring Már's threats and then giving his life for his refusal to countenance unjust revenge, the nameless mother of Hneitir's sons also contributes to peace by persuading them not to involve themselves in Már's evil. She is presumably also one of the women who binds up Már's wound, perhaps an implied attempt (although an unsuccessful one) to pacify him and prevent further action.³⁴

The second situation has a happier result for all but Már, and occurs in chapter 9, when he and his men are intending to ride after Óláfr over boggy moors (p. 13):

³⁴ We may compare Haflíði's wife Rannveig, who reproaches her husband for carrying a weapon in ch. 16, and who is designated *vitr kona* 'a wise woman' by the narrator (p. 25) and, indeed, Haflíði himself in ch. 18, p. 26. A similar attempt to encourage peace may be identified in the account of the battle of Hrístateigr in *Víga-Glúms saga*, ch. 23, where Halldóra encourages the women with her to bind up all the men's wounds, 'ór hvárri liði sem eru' ('to whichever party they belong'): G. Turville-Petre (ed.), *Víga-Glúms saga*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 40.

Í því kemr heiman af Staðarhóli fjöldi kvenna, gyrðar í brœkr ok höfðu sverð í hendi. Þeir Már fóru þá af baki ok ætluðu at henda Óláf á hlaupi, er hestunum mátti eigi við koma. Ok þá er kómu heiman at konurnar, snúa þeir undan ok vildu til hesta sinna ok náðu eigi, komask á hlaupi undan ok áttu fótum fjör at launa.

At that moment a crowd of women came from the house at Staðarhóll, girded in breeches and they had swords in their hands. Már and his men then dismounted and intended to catch Óláfr by running, since the horses could not do it. And when the women came upon them from the house, they drew back and wanted to [go] to their horses and did not reach them—they got away by running and had to ‘make the heels save the head’.

Here again women *prevent* violent action, albeit by impersonating men. The pacific activity of women in this particular saga may be a consequence of its late date, since it may have been composed a century after the relatively early events it describes. Certainly, Sverrir Jakobsson has argued that the rhetoric of arbitration in the saga is related to the *Pax Dei* movement, which became influential in Iceland from the late twelfth century.³⁵ Moreover, the cross-dressing activity of the Staðarhóll women also sets the saga apart from its companions and reminds one of Auðr’s similar behaviour in *Laxdæla saga*. However, *Þorgils saga* is not the only text in the compilation containing this motif of women as pacifiers or ‘anti-inciters’.

We find a further female anti-inciter in Álfheiðr in *Svinfellinga saga*, chapter 6.³⁶ She tries to persuade her son Guðmundr not to take part in Sæmundr’s expedition against Ögmundr, and although he answers angrily that he is old enough to decide for himself:

Hon kvað hann þó eigi mundu fara svá búinn ok bað hann ganga með sér til litlustofu ok gera klæðaskipti. Ok er hann klæddist, gengr hon brott af stofunni ok rekr fyrir lás. Ok er hann verðr þessa varr, tekr hann einn stein, er hann fann í stofunni, ok brýtr frá hurðina ok komst út eftir þat.

She said he would nevertheless not go thus dressed and bade him go with her to the little sitting-room and make a change of clothes. And while he

³⁵ Sverrir Jakobsson, ‘Friðarviðleitni kirkjunnar’. In Ch. 5 above we saw that in several contemporary and family sagas there is a perception that moderation in revenge is necessary.

³⁶ The saga deals with events of 1248–52 and was written around 1300.

was dressing, she quickly went out of the sitting-room and drove the bolt across. And when he became aware of this, he took a stone, which he found in the sitting-room, and forced open the door and got out after that. (ii. 91)

Here, the woman takes not only verbal but physical action to prevent revenge, although she is unsuccessful against her apparently young son, who perhaps feels that his manhood is being called into question by this enforced incarceration by his mother. Nonetheless, such examples show that women are not uniformly blamed for vengeance and violence in this compilation.³⁷

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMAGES OF WOMEN

Looking at the collection as a whole, then, both positive and negative female characters are employed in such a way as to encourage women to inhabit the approved female roles of nurturers (as dutiful wives and mothers), mediators, and healers, and to discourage female autonomy. This dynamic coexists with a frequent tendency to seek to blame women where possible for male conflicts and violence, and we can see both impulses at work if we return briefly to *Sturlu saga*, the text with which we started. Chapter 4, for instance, ends with what Oddi Þorgilsson calls an *illr* ('evil') act (p. 67), when Aðalríkr strikes Skeggi in the head with an axe, an act with far-reaching consequences in the saga. However, the source of this male conflict can be traced back to the start of the chapter, where Aðalríkr's mistress, the *skillitil* ('not very trustworthy') Vigdís (p. 65), steals linen belonging to Skeggi's wife. Similarly, Þordís Bersadóttir causes trouble between men in chapter 23, when she leaves home to visit her sister and, because she is *óskapvær* ('of a restless temperament') (p. 95), is reluctant to return, and in chapter 29 the beauty of Hallgerðr causes conflict when she is abducted by Páll from her

³⁷ The female 'anti-inciter' is, of course, also a theme in some *Íslendingasögur*, for example *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18, where women attempt to stop the fighting and Auðr even loses her hand.

husband.³⁸ In chapter 11, on the other hand, Guðfinna Sveinsdóttir fits the role of the anti-inciter when she holds Einarr Þorgilsson back in his attempts to avenge what he sees as his ill-treatment by Einarr Ingibjargarson.³⁹ Thus, although the dominant picture of women in *Sturlu saga* is negative, a positive role as mediator can be envisaged.

There is much more that could be drawn out from the *Sturlunga saga* compilation on this subject. However, the analyses above suffice to undercut arguments such as Jochens's that, because there are not very many inciting women in *Sturlunga saga*, the family and kings' sagas are male fictions, and conversely, that the *samtíðar sögur* represent unmediated historical reality. It is apparent from the foregoing study that, although dealing with contemporary events and those of the recent past, the authors of *Sturlunga saga* still use literary conventions and shape the narrative, just as the *Íslendingasögur* are based on historical events, but manipulate them; the difference between the genres is more a matter of authors employing different motifs and conventions to differing degrees (in *Sturlunga saga*, for instance, a much greater use of dreams and visions at key points in the narrative). Moreover, a more subtle analysis of the contemporary sagas is needed, in order to reveal the literary shaping of narratives and manipulation of events. Although Stephen Tranter's study of *Sturlunga saga* makes some progress in this direction, it has been seen that Tranter's arguments about the role of men within the work and their reception of it can be fruitfully extended by attention to the role of women and gender issues in the compilation.

The interpretation of the vengeful female characters of the contemporary and family sagas is a complex issue. This chapter has shown that, as far as the former are concerned, misogynistic tropes such as the scapegoating of women for the results of men's violent actions, and negative images possibly resting on religious construc-

³⁸ That both husband and abductor are priests may indicate that the episode supports attempts to stop priests from inappropriate sexual and martial involvements, but it functions at the expense of the woman, and fits in with medieval religious warnings of the dangers of female beauty, which is viewed as culpable.

³⁹ Compare *Þorgils saga skarða*, where Gróa, Jórunn, and Herdís serve as the voice of reason, protecting their husbands in chs. 1, 9, and 42 respectively; Gróa urges moderation again in ch. 14.

tions of women as irrational and corporeal or even abject, are employed in *Sturlunga saga*. However, the picture is not a uniform one, and in several texts in the compilation one finds women acting as mediators or 'anti-inciters' who attempt to dissuade men from revenge and destructive acts, although this may ultimately suggest that female autonomy is discouraged except in the approved nurturing, mediating, and healing roles.

Epilogue

This study has emphasized the complex textual dynamic behind the book's seemingly straightforward title: the fluidity of relationships of desire and affect and the inextricable link between affective and sexual relationships and violence. It explored attempts to call for an end to kin-slaying and vengeance on the part of both Eddaic and saga authors, by associating them with societal destruction or even cosmic apocalypse and with stigmatized aspects of gender and sexuality. Revenge was seen to enact a perpetual and self-destructive cycle in *Hamðismál* and the other Eddaic poems, and the same characters are associated in *Gísla saga* and other sagas with an 'old' way of vengeance whose time has now passed. However, the heroic way of life and revenge itself exerted a certain fascination for saga authors, and this ambivalent attitude may have been a deliberate attempt to provoke debate in Norse audiences. A similar ambivalence and potential for debate was also seen in the Guðrún poems, though centred this time on whether she herself is a figure to be admired or feared. The complexity of the gender and sexual dynamic in the Guðrún and Helgi poems indicates that it is not just attitudes to revenge and heroism and their place in society that are potentially multiple and contested, but also attitudes to gender and sexuality.

A consistent concern with the preservation of human society was identified in the poems of the Codex Regius and the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. Interpersonal bonds must be maintained with wisdom and a moderate approach to vengeance must be taken, if society is to survive. Even clerics, however, are susceptible to the demands of honour, and men consistently find it difficult to turn the other cheek when confronted with insult or violence to themselves or their families. Women play a key role in inciting or discouraging violent revenge, and their representation varies in Norse texts, from the

embodiment of strife and the impetus for violence, to a conduit through which to explore the effects of revenge, or even a force for peaceful reconciliation.

Throughout this study complexity and ambiguity have been watchwords. The analyses above suggest that Norse authors expected their audiences to be highly proactive, intelligent interpreters, and the very existence of such large quantities of skaldic verse indicates that audiences delighted in the interpretive work and debate this must have occasioned.

The audience for demanding and complex literature is now much reduced. However, a quick search of news stories for the past few months reveals that the themes of this book are still very much a live issue for contemporary societies. In March 2011 the Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke invoked the rhetoric of revenge and the longevity of its destructive reach when he emphasized Britain's interest in ending the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Alluding to the Lockerbie bombing of 1988, he warned: 'The British people have reason to remember the curse of Gaddafi—Gaddafi back in power, the old Gaddafi looking for revenge, we have a real interest in preventing that.'¹ In the same month, tribal leaders in Pakistan vowed vengeance against the United States after unmanned drones killed around forty people near the Afghan border of North Waziristan. They are reported to have claimed: 'We are a people who wait 100 years to exact revenge. We never forgive our enemy.'² The past's stranglehold on the present here strikingly parallels the Norse texts' perception of the hold vengeance has on heroic societies.

Even more striking is a recent scientific study which tentatively suggested that men may get more satisfaction from revenge than women. Tests by Dr Tania Singer of University College, London, monitored subjects' fronto-insular cortex and anterior cingulate cortex, the areas of the brain which relate to the perception of pain. The results suggested that, when witnessing apparently deserved pain in others, women felt empathy but men felt satisfaction. Singer her-

¹ Source: BBC News UK; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12869566>. (All websites accessed 22 July 2011.)

² Source: BBC News South Asia; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12784675>.

self concludes that 'there is a predominant role for men in maintaining justice and issuing punishment', although several other interpretations of the data would seem possible.³ However, what is interesting is the perception that the association of revenge and gender is in itself something susceptible to scientific enquiry. Gendered violence, social identity predicated on vengeance, past revenge impacting on present policy: the Norse texts considered above speak eloquently to these issues.

³ Source: BBC News; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4620922.stm>

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