

THE ROLE OF SEXUAL THEMES
IN NJÁLS SAGA

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FOR THE CRITIC, *NJÁLS SAGA* SEEMS AS SLIPPERY as an eel the size of Miðgarðsormr. Its skin glistens with a myriad themes, all familiar, yet all precisely different from any seen elsewhere. This alternation of familiarity and surprise gives a remarkable illusion of reality. Perhaps for that reason the saga has often been read as if it contained insights into the life-stories of real people, whose characters may be probed and analysed and domestic circumstances debated as if these were matters of historical truth. But only an imagined Miðgarðsormr can encircle the earth, and it is only a human fantasy—though fed indeed by natural images—which has been able to impose the horizon of *Njáls Saga* upon us.

This creative fantasy the author of *Njáls Saga* has himself placed under the governance of certain rhetorical rules, techniques already polished by traditional narrative practice and clearly visible from without. For example, when Skarpheðinn Njálsson, skimming over the ice as swift as a bird, brings down his axe through the head of Þráinn, the back teeth from the jaws spill out on to the ice. When Skarpheðinn himself is trapped in the burning house at Bergþórshváll, Þráinn's nephew, Gunnarr Lambason, leaps up onto the wall and calls out 'Are you crying now—*hvárt grætr þú nú, Skarpheðinn?*' 'No,' he answers, 'though it's true my eyes are smarting. But you seem to be laughing—*hvárt er svá?*' '*Svá er víst*—yes,' says Gunnarr, 'and I have not laughed till now since you killed Þráinn.' 'Then here is the memento from that,' says Skarpheðinn, and he took from his purse the jaw-tooth he had hacked from Þráinn and flung it at Gunnarr's eye, so that the eye lay out over the cheek. When Gunnarr Lambason is in exile for the burning he is invited to tell the tale of it before the King of Dublin and the Earls of Orkney and the Hebrides. The King asks how Skarpheðinn bore the burning. 'Well at first, but by the end he was weeping—*lauk svá at hann grét.*' And Gunnarr told a biased tale, lying about the event time and time again—*ló frá víða*. Outside, Skarpheðinn's brother-

in-law, Kári, is listening. He springs into the hall with drawn sword and strikes Gunnarr's neck with such force that the head bounds up onto the table before the King and the Earls. In this way, by links of parallel and echo—the severed heads, the jaw-tooth, the jibe of womanish weeping—each incident is made to live on rhetorically in the next as it would live on in fact in the memory of any man who might have experienced them.¹

A contrasting device of suppression of information is also used by the author of *Njáls Saga* to achieve the continuity he wants for his narrative. For example, the saga draws to a close with a marriage uniting a man and a woman from the two feuding families. This event is very plainly stated: Flosi then married Kári to Hildigunnr, his brother's daughter, whom Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði had been married to. We are not here reminded that Kári was one of those who stabbed Höskuldr. We are not asked to recall the scene at the finding of Höskuldr's body, when Hildigunnr sees the five wounds on her saintly husband and remarks wryly: 'Manly work, if only one man had done it—*karlmannligt verk væri þetta, ef einn hefði at verit.*' Nor are we asked to remember her superlative act of theatre, and of grief, when she plays her part with exalted histrionic power, in order to bind her uncle, Flosi, to the duty of vengeance—lifting back her hair from her eyes so that he may see her weeping, unfolding over his shoulders the stiffened cloak in which she had carefully gathered the clotted blood from Höskuldr's corpse. During that impassioned scene we were not reminded that Hildigunnr had at first rejected Höskuldr as a husband because he had no status, no *godorð*. We may recall now that we are never in fact informed that Hildigunnr's marriage to Höskuldr (once he has acquired his *godorð*) was a happy one. Of course, if we were concerned simply with real life, then we would suppose without hesitation that the match was satisfactory. But the author of *Njáls Saga* has deliberately not given us this information. Often in the sagas, after a marriage, we are told that things went well—*fór alt vel*—with the young couple—*þau kómu vel ásamt*. Here, however, we are told that all went well, not with Hildigunnr and Höskuldr but *með þeim*

¹ So the saga-writer shows that the phrase *Hart ríðit þér, sveinar* echoes in Gunnarr's ears from one encounter with Skammkell to the next (chapters 53 and 54).

Hildigunni ok Bergþóru, Njáll's sharp wife. In the first months of their marriage the new couple live with Njáll and we are told that the families are inseparable, so infatuated with each other—*svá var dátt með þeim öllum*—that no one would dream of taking any decision unless all the men approved it—at *engum þótti ráð ráðit, nema þeir réði allir um*. Yet in a short time such violent hatred springs up, fostered by patent calumny, that the innocent, peace-loving Höskuldr will be slaughtered by Njáll's sons—and Kári. We are never invited to understand this reversal in detailed human terms, we are left to observe it, like the platitude of *Hávamál*:

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Eldi heitari | Hotter than fire |
| brennr með illum vinum | for five days |
| friðr fimm daga, | love burns among bad friends, |
| en þá slokknar, | but it dies out |
| er inn sétti kemr, | when the sixth day comes |
| ok versnar allr vinskapr. | and all that friendship grows foul. |

(v. 51)

The same pattern, the same swing from one extreme to another, has governed the depiction of Hildigunnr, for she is the figure that formally reconciles the antagonists. Her second marriage returns us to the early months of her first, when the families were at peace. In relation to both marriages all inward-looking matter has been omitted; what is public holds the eye. So the two events are kept in structural harmony.

While such patternings, based on deliberate inclusion or exclusion of detail, run clearly through the saga, there are other sequences, more elusive and difficult to demonstrate, which yet seem so insistent that one thinks they must represent a mode of thought and construction consciously chosen by the author of *Njáls Saga*. One such sequence is the continuum of reference to sexual matters: experiences, emotions and attitudes. Here, too, the author plays his game of opposites—it is perhaps his technique for encircling *Miðgarðr*. The action of the saga is brought to a close with a formal, diplomatic marriage, but it is inaugurated with an intimate episode of sensuality. This is extra-marital. It concerns *Hrútr Herjólfsson*, who has just become engaged to *Unnr Mörðr's* daughter, a good-looking, well-bred lady, whom

he hardly knows personally. Hrútr comes to Norway to claim an inheritance. The Queen Mother, Gunnhildr, takes complete control of him, his lawsuit, his clothes, his reception by her son, the King, and finally of his body. His friends have warned Hrútr that to cross the Queen in any way would rouse her hatred and they would be driven from the land. There is no alternative but absolute acquiescence.

The witch-like powers of Queen Gunnhildr and her traditional licentiousness have often been remarked upon.¹ She is a Circe, who traps men. But the author of *Njáls Saga* has given her, as well as her traditional characteristics, the profile of another archetypal figure, that of the supernatural mistress who fulfils the dreams of her chosen Launval, or haunts to madness her Cuchulainn with the memory of her love. We are shown Gunnhildr imperiously making Hrútr her equal, even her master, for the moment. He has been led to the high seat in her tapestried hall, and as she enters he is about to spring to his feet in deference. 'Sit þú,' she says abruptly. 'You shall keep this seat as long as you are my guest.' All her utterances at first are commands. She sits beside him and they drink together. In the evening she announces: 'You shall lie in the upper room with me tonight—þú skalt liggja í lopti hjá mér í nótt, ok vit tvau saman—just the two of us.' 'You must decide such matters—þér skuluð slíku ráða,' said Hrútr. They went to rest and she straightway locked the upper room from the inside—*læsti hon þegar loptinu innan*. This familiar, intimate, homely act suggests—as well as the trapping of the man—the discarding of all formalities: thrones and tapestried halls. They are two lovers alone in an upper room. In the morning they resumed their drinking (we may note that we are never told that they ate anything) and the whole of that half-month they lay there, the two of them, alone in the upper room—*lágu þau þar tvau ein í loptinu*. Gunnhildr imposes the taboo of silence on all the other men there: 'You lose nothing but your life—þér skuluð engu fyrir týna nema lífinu—if you speak to any

¹ See Sigurður Nordal, 'Gunnhildur konungamóðir', *Samtíð og saga* I (1941), 135-55, reprinted in his *Afangar* II (1944), 249-73. On traditions of Gunnhildr's sensuality in folklore, see Jónas Jónasson, *Íslenzkir Þjóðhættir*³ (1961), p. 165, note 4. I am grateful to Richard Perkins for these references.

man of the matter of myself and Hrútr.' Such an imposition of secrecy is indeed appropriate to the social circumstances of a licentious Queen Mother (from the outset she has shown her concern to keep up appearances, not inviting Hrútr to her house straightaway—*fyrir orðs sakir*), but it brings with it also echoes of the taboo of the supernatural mistress—'tell no one of our love'—and of the secrecy of the perfect lovers of romance—the Châtelaine de Vergi, Tristan, Troilus—for whom the ideal of sexual union is fulfilled in seclusion from the outer world and the slanderous tongues of men. With a few strokes of the pen these concepts are drawn by the author of *Njáls Saga* into his representation of Hrútr's union with the Queen, while he lets it retain still the solidity of a domestic experience, locked behind wooden walls. In this imposition of guarding silence, Hrútr's will is shown to be identified with that of the Queen. In a sea-battle, later, one of the Queen's captains mockingly compliments Hrútr on his fighting skill against enemies of the Norwegian royal house: 'You strike mighty blows, Hrútr, and besides you have much to repay Gunnhildr—*enda átt þú mikit at launa Gunnhildi.*' 'I suspect you speak with fated lips—*þess varir mik, at þú mælir feigum munni,*' says Hrútr, and in that instance the mocking captain is pierced through the body by an enemy spear. Chance—or is it Gunnhildr's work—saves Hrútr when a stone's blow hits the sword-hand of an enemy Viking who has just rent Hrútr's shield and bears down on him unprotected. The sword falls like a gift—Hrútr seizes it and kills him. (We are reminded of the incident in the Norwegian histories of the strange arrow that sped against King Hákon góði—Gunnhildr's enemy—and killed him in the moment of victory.) Commonly, Gunnhildr's long-ranging power is malevolent; in this sea-battle in *Njáls Saga* it is tenderly deployed with Ariel-like swiftness in defence of her lover.

We may note that the Gunnhildr of *Laxdæla Saga* publicly emphasizes her admiration for Hrútr. She is a constant advocate of his rare qualities, scorning all comparison of other men to him as sheer witlessness or envy. As she bids farewell to him when he leaves for Iceland, and escorts him to his ship, she proclaims aloud: 'This must be said in no hushed terms—*ekki skal þetta lágt mæla*—I have proved you a man of great nobility—*at miklum*

ágætismanni.' She gives him a gold ring, then draws her cloak over her head and swiftly makes her way back to the town. Her candour, her shrouded grief, make her seem vulnerable and womanly. The emphatic openness of her behaviour may be read as her defence against the slanderous tongues of any who might perceive, and mock, the depth of her feeling, and it implies that she finds solace in words for a fondness that has had no physical fulfilment. The author of *Njáls Saga* has converted this proud openness into secrecy, but he has kept the tenderness. When Hrútr thinks of returning to Iceland—like all good Icelanders, he grows melancholy in the alien court—Gunnhildr, apparently for the first time, asks about his private life there. 'Have you some woman out there—*konu nökkura?*' Hrútr says 'No—*eigi er þat.*' It is a half-truth. He has an affianced bride-to-be, but not a wife or a woman he yet loves. Gunnhildr does not believe him: 'I am sure you have—*þat hefi ek þó fyrir satt.*' The author makes her plain words seem to spring from a woman's instinct rather than a witch's. Hrútr makes no attempt to explain—*síðan hættu þau talínu.* When Hrútr leaves, she puts her arms round his neck—a gesture characteristic in moments when women wish to impose their will upon their men through their sexual power over them. Because he has not told her the whole truth, for the first time not trusted her with his affairs—*þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins*—not identified his will with hers, she places the cruel spell of sexual frustration upon his first marriage. He will attain no sexual pleasure—*munúð*—with the woman he intends to marry in Iceland, though with all other women he can have his will. And she turns from him, melancholy both for herself and for him: 'Now neither of us has happiness—*ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel.*' We see how buoyantly Hrútr in his new sense of independence and liberty brushes aside her melancholy and her prediction with a laugh—*Hrútr hló at ok gekk braut.* In Gunnhildr's prediction we can perceive again a theme from the world of romance. Tristan's all-absorbing physical passion for the first Isolde makes him incapable of consummating his marriage with the second. Had the author of *Njáls Saga* shown Hrútr only as the unwilling captive of a lustful and elderly witch, we might interpret the humiliating collapse of his marriage to Unnr simply as the working

of a malevolent curse, comparable with that on Kormakr. But the author has made it clear that Hrútr has been deeply moved by the Queen's physical love for him: 'Many a good gift have I received from you—*marga gjöf góða hefi ek af þér þegit,*' he says soberly, and we can be sure it is of her love—*átt þú mikit at launa Gunnhildi*—and not just of her gold that he is thinking. The power she has over him is not that of an external magic; it operates through his physical nature and his memory. So, I think, the author of *Njáls Saga* intends to suggest.

The door was locked on the love-making of Hrútr and Gunnhildr. The ribald light of publicity is trained on that of Hrútr and his first wife, Unnr. Even at the wedding feast the bride is, inexplicably, 'low-spirited', *döpr*. From the first we are told that their marital relations were not easy—*fátt var með þeim Hrúti um samfarar*—though Unnr has every freedom and consideration shown her that a woman could wish. The warmth of their marriage fluctuates strangely with the temperature of the seasons: the coldness is worst in winter. (Is this the haunting of two winters in Norway beside Gunnhildr?) Unnr's father is a celebrated lawyer, and it is to him she goes. She wants a divorce. She claims that Hrútr is unable to consummate the marriage with her in any way that is of use or joy to her—*svá at ek mega njóta hans*—though in every other aspect of his nature he resembles the manliest of men—*inir vöskustu menn*. Her father insists on a precise, unevasive statement—*seg enn görr*—such as the law can use. So Unnr spells out her meaning to him: Hrútr's penis is too large to enter her. 'When he approaches me the flesh of his member is so great that he can have no satisfaction with me, and yet we both make adjustment in every way in the hope that we might enjoy each other, but it never happens. Before we leave each other, however, he gives proof that in his physical constitution he is exactly like other men.'¹ Hrútr is clearly not impotent. Unnr is puzzled: something is wrong with her husband that is not in his control, not *honum . . . sjálfrátt*. The Queen has played

¹ 'Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hörund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik, en þó höfum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at vit mættim njótask, en þat verðr ekki. En þó áðr vit skilim, sýnir hann þat af sér, at hann er í æði sínu rétt sem aðrir menn.'

an unkind joke on Hrútr, a joke invented perhaps by the author of *Njáls Saga*. With his impish and satirical eye for opposites he may have devised this cause for Unnr's divorce and invested the traditional incompatibility of the couple with such physical exactitude, precisely because, according to other sources, Hrútr was renowned for the astonishing number of children he had by his two subsequent wives. In *Landnámabók* twenty children of Hrútr are mentioned; in *Laxdæla* he is said to have had sixteen sons and ten daughters, 'and one summer at the Alþing he was accompanied by fourteen sons, and that was considered a great mark of splendour and strength.'

But what does the countryside think of Hrútr's brief first marriage? Unnr's father, Mörðr, has announced the legal divorce at the Alþing (we are given no account of what he said), but loses the claim for recovery of his daughter's dowry because Hrútr challenges him to a duel and the old man cannot accept it. A great outcry of jeering—*þá varð óp mikit at lögbergi ok óhljóð*—breaks out against the old lawyer, and Hrútr seems to have the honour of the day. But the children's games show how swiftly gossip travelled. On the road home from the Alþing Hrútr and his brother Höskuldr are guests overnight at the farm at Lundr, in *Lundarreykjadalr*. The scene is carefully set indoors. It had rained heavily during the day and long fires had been lit down the hall for the wet clothes on the men to dry out. On the floor beside the men two boys and a girl are playing and chattering. They invent a game. One boy says to the other: 'I'll be Mörðr and I'll divorce you from the woman and make the charge that you have not fucked her—*ok finna þat til foráttu, at þú hafir ekki sorðit hana*.¹ 'I'll be Hrútr—I'll say you lose all claim to the money if you don't dare to fight with me.' The boys repeated this several times, the success of their device going to their heads—*þetta mæltu þeir nökkurum sinnum*—for guffaws of laughter are coming from the farm-men around the fires—*þá gerðisk hlátr mikill af heimamönnum*. Trapped by this remorseless repetition and the laughter of the crowd of men gathered steamily round the fires, Höskuldr cannot control his vexation. He strikes the boy who

¹ I can arrive at no better idiomatic rendering of *sorðit* (literally, 'penetrated by the male organ'); 'fucked' is not precise enough and coarser than the original.

started the game, on the face, with a switch, and the blood spurts from the cut: 'Get out and don't mock us.' Hrútr, countermanding his brother's words, calls the boy: '*Gakk hingat til mín.*' He draws a gold ring from his finger and gives it to him, and then dismisses him: '*far braut*—and don't seek to insult any man again.' The boy rises to this dignity: 'From this moment I shall always tell people what a real man you are—*þínum drengskap skal ek við bregða æ síðan.*'

The story of Hrútr, as the author of *Njáls Saga* tells it, explores the notion of virility: what Unnr describes as the constitution proper to the most manly men—*inir vöskustu menn*—and the boy calls *drengskapr*. Effeminacy is the sharpest jibe to cast at any man in the society depicted in the sagas. It embraces the notions of both cowardice—'you are your father's daughters, not his sons' is an effective taunt—and homosexuality. If we turn our gaze from this opening drama of Hrútr, we see another figure in whom virility is in question: at the centre of the saga is the effeminate visage of Njáll himself. No beard ever grew on him—*honum óx eigi skegg*. Yet he had seven children. In *Landnámabók* one ancestor of Grettir is mentioned with the nickname 'beardless', Ásmundr *skegglauss*, but no such epithet is there attributed to Njáll. In the fictional world, in *Karlamagnús Saga*, a valorous lord is named Bófi *inn skegglaus*, and, in *Þiðreks Saga*, Þiðrekr himself is said never to have grown a beard (though he had the physique of a giant, with shoulders two ells broad—*hans herðar voru svá miklar at tveggja alna var yfir at mæla*). No opprobrium is attached to any of these beardless men except Njáll, and we are not told that he was mocked for his physical eccentricity until Hallgerðr Long-breeches, Höskuldr's daughter, began to do so. She made up a crude and fancifully strained joke about it, which could hardly have raised a laugh had malice not been gratified by it. In the episode of the joke, as in that of the play-acting boys, we see again the role that the author has assigned to the instinctive spite of local gossip. Some loud-mouthed wayfaring women—*málgar ok heldr orðillar*—come to Hallgerðr's farm, having just stayed the night at Njáll's. Hallgerðr asks what Njáll had been doing. 'Oh, Njáll was working hard at sitting—*strítaðisk hann við at sitja.*' (They are parasitically swift to fall in with the known

dislike of Hallgerðr for Njáll and ironically mock him for aged impotence.) And the sons of Njáll? she asks: 'Now they really think themselves men—*þeir þykkjask nú helzt menn.*' 'They are big on the horizon—*miklir eru þeir at vallarsýn*—but quite untried,' and the women give a mock-heroic picture of the four sons, assiduously perfecting their war-gear. And the farm-men, what were they doing? The women answer with exaggerated accuracy: 'We don't know what some of them were doing, but one was carting dung on to the hillocks.' 'What was the purpose of that?' asks Hallgerðr, her mind—no doubt—working quickly. 'He said it was to make the hay better there than elsewhere.' 'Wise Njáll is not so clever—*misvitr er Njáll*—considering he knows the answer to everything.' 'What's your evidence for that—*hvat er í því?*' the women ask. Hallgerðr answers elaborately, responding to the mock-pedantic tone of the women: 'I will adduce the evidence, which is nothing but the truth—*þat mun ek til finna, sem satt er*—that he was not carting dung onto his own beard so that he could be like other men. We shall call him Old Beardless—*köllum hann nú karl inn skegglaus*—and his sons Little Dungbeards—*taðskegglínga*.¹ Make up a verse about it, Sigmundr. Let us profit from the fact that you are a poet.' And her guest, Sigmundr Lambason, makes up three or four strophes, and all—we are told—were foul. 'Gersimi ertu—what a jewel you are,' says Hallgerðr. 'How you do just what I want—*hversu þú ert mér eptirlátr!*'

This ready flow of coarse humour on the well-worn theme of womanish men, which is always at Hallgerðr's command, surges grotesquely to form the climax of the saga. For the killing of Höskuldr Þráinsson by Njáll's sons a huge compensation has been gathered—three times the customary sum in payment for a man's life—and placed in the advisory court for Flosi, the prosecutor. At the last moment Njáll adds to the pile a long silken surcoat and a pair of riding-boots. He then returns to his booth and exhorts his sons not to break the peace. Flosi approaches the court and approvingly notes the generosity of the pile of money.

¹ Hallgerðr's joke may have been suggested to the saga-writer by the abusive term 'Dirt (excrement) Beards', *dritskeggingar* (for *dritskegglínga?*), which is preserved only in one manuscript of *Breta Sögur*: Þá mælti Merlin til spámanna konungs: 'Segið til, dritskeggingar, hvat undir var vatninu' (see *Íslenzk Fornrit* XII, 1954, 113, note 1).

Then his eye is caught by the long silken surcoat; he lifts it up and asks who would have contributed that—*hverr til mundi hafa gefit*—and no one answered him—*engi svaraði honum*. He dangles the surcoat in the air once again, and repeats his question, and laughs at it, and no one replies—*svaraði engi*—though Njáll was at the court again, we have been told (*Njáll gekk vestan at lögréttu ok synir hans*). Flosi said: ‘Is it a fact that none of you knows who was the owner of this gear, or don’t you dare to tell me?’ Skarpheðinn said: ‘What is your notion of who gave it—*hvat ætlar þú, hverr til hafi gefit?*’ And here the serious, dignified, habitually self-controlled Flosi is guilty of as foul an insult as Hallgerðr is: ‘I think your father gave it, *karl inn skegglausí*—Old Beardless, because many people don’t know, when they see him, whether he is a man or a woman.’ Flosi’s nerves are stretched and he attacks with a spurt of savagery, returning the insult he thinks he has been given: a silken surcoat, trailing to the ground, is an ambiguous garment, for it might be worn by a man or a woman.¹ Is someone hinting that Flosi is womanish because he is taking compensation and not avenging with blood? The vulgar mockery of the neighbourhood which Hallgerðr had started springs at this moment into Flosi’s mind and becomes his instinctive defence.

Flosi’s outbreak is common rudeness and momentary hate. Skarpheðinn’s reply outstrips it in crude, contrived indecency. Withdrawing the silken surcoat and throwing on to the compensation pile a pair of black knickerbockers of the sort women wore, he tells Flosi he will have greater need of these, if he is—as everyone says he is—the bride of the Troll of Svínafell—*brúðr Svínafellsáss*—every ninth night, ‘and he makes you his woman—*geri hann þik at konu*’. This is as fantastic as Hallgerðr’s suggestion that Njáll could make his beard grow by putting dung on it, but it is the elaborate nastiness of both insults that makes them sting, giving the measure of the animosity involved, as if the speaker’s mind were straining for some unparalleled lewdness to make the challenge unrefusable. (How calmly Hrótr was able to

¹ In *Egils Saga Skallagrímsson*, Chapter 79, Egill’s son wears his father’s trailing surcoat, *slæður*, at the Alþing, for elegance. In *Rígsþula*, verse 29, it is the lady’s garment. The boots also could be male or female gear, but we are not told that Flosi took exception to them.

dispel with dignity the ribald mockery of his manhood when no animosity was involved.) Under the exchange of insults, however, we can discern another man's strategy. Njáll, who claims to have foreseen all the disaster which is to arise from this lawsuit—*Nú kemr þat fram, sem mér sagði hugr um, at oss mundi þungt falla þessi mál*—has been deliberately manipulating the gossip of the region for his own purposes. He placed the ambiguous garment upon the compensation pile. He did not answer Flosi's repeated question and explain his gift. When the case against his sons for the murder of Höskuldr had been defeated on technical grounds¹—*ónýtt er málit*—it was Njáll who rose to his feet, asking that compensation be accepted for the slaying, because the dead man, his fosterson, Flosi's nephew by marriage, was dearer to him than his own sons—*ek unna meira Höskuldi en sonum mínum*—and he would rather he had lost all his own sons and Höskuldr were living—*heldr vilda ek misst hafa allra sona minna ok lifði hann*. So Njáll himself provokes the burning, forces his sons—against their better tactical judgement—to go into the house to be burnt like foxes in a hole, and dies himself with them, because he is too old to avenge them—*maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna*. Njáll, with the help of Hallgerðr's gossip, wins blood-vengeance for her grandson Höskuldr.

How has the author of *Njáls Saga* depicted the degeneration of Hallgerðr into the coarse-styled and irrepressible antagonist of the house of Njáll? He shows it as her response to progressive disappointment in marital life. Once, when she was little, playing on the floor with the other little girls, her uncle Hrútr was sitting with her father. Her father called her to him, took her chin in his hand and kissed her. He said nothing to her, nor she to him. Then she went away—*síðan gekk hon braut*. It is a familiar piece of domestic ritual to show off his daughter. But Hrútr is repelled by the eyes in the girl's uplifted face. They seem to him 'thief's eyes—*þjófsaugu*', low-born, have-not's eyes²: how did they come into the family? Hrútr's insight is expressed by the saga-author in this succinct, colloquial way so that it can refer ahead to the

¹ John Enoch has kindly drawn my attention to this legal point.

² *Þjófsaugu* seems an uncommon term. *Þjófs-* might be prefixed to a reference to any part of the body—*þjófsnef*, *-tennr*, *-haka*—to indicate scorn and aversion.

occasion when Hallgerðr sends out a serf to steal butter and cheese from an ill-willed neighbour, to 'pay him out'—an occasion that epitomizes her moral recklessness; but at this early moment of her life we are meant to see just what Hrútr sees, the seeds of a dissatisfied—and therefore vengeful—nature. He senses an un-governed guttersnipe spirit, wholly alien to his own sound temperament of rigorous probity. It is this rowdy and abusive spirit that we are made to hear the last time that Hallgerðr appears in the saga, as she still crows over her old joke, the same phrases inanely repeated: 'Go home, Little Dungbeards,' she shouts to Skarphéðinn and his brothers, 'we shall always call you that from now on—*munu vér svá jafnan kalla yðr heðan af, en föður yðvarn karl inn skegglaus*—and your father Old Beardless.' And soon she has all her household—except Þráinn—shouting the same.

Hallgerðr, however, is 'very mixed—*blandin mjök*', as Hrútr later describes her, and there is a time when she is quite noble. She had been genuinely hurt when her father—who kissed her so ostentatiously before visitors—married her off to the first suitor who came, without consulting her, in order to get her out of the house because her temper was proving too sharp. She had always been suspicious—those watchful thief's eyes noting hypocrisy—of his show of fondness—*mik hefir lengi grunat, at þú mundir eigi unna mér svá mikit sem þú sagðir jafnan*—and now she has proof. He had promised her a fine marriage, and this is not it. If she is accused of over-valuing herself, why should she not have her share of the family pride—'You men of the family have plenty—*mikill er metnaðr yðvarr frænda . . . ok er þat eigi undarligt, at ek hafa nökkurn*.' She behaves, accordingly, like the devil they all think her. But when she is happy, during her short-lived second marriage, she shows that she can be quite different. The tone of her voice changes, it is no longer irascible, but gracious. Simply to show us this the author invents occasion. We hear her, for instance, acquiescing in an arrangement of land-holding with her brother-in-law: 'Þórarinn deserves this of us—*makligr er Þórarinn þess frá oss*,' with warm appreciation in her voice, taking pleasure in not being petty in material matters. Twice we are told she is lavish—*örlynd*—by nature. She takes delight in the grand manner. To show her approval of the fact that she is being consulted about

her second marriage, she comes as a lady of rank, with two women in attendance, in brilliant clothing, her fabulous long hair—so long that she could hide herself in it—caught demurely in her silver belt. She performs the opening move in the game of manners perfectly, placing herself between father and uncle, greeting everyone with courteous words—*kvaddi þá alla góðum orðum*—showing her command of elegant and even stately speech—*mælti vel ok sköruliga*—and asking, conventionally, for news (though she knows, of course, what the visitors have come for, and they have already been there overnight)—*spurði tíðenda*. Then she stopped talking—*síðan hætti hon at tala*. The author need not have told us this so specifically, but he does, in order to make it quite clear that Hallgerðr is being very deliberate, waiting for the men's next move: there are to be no mistakes about this marriage. Everything is to be above-board, and she is to be properly valued.

Glúmr understands her perfectly and correctly plays the next move in her game: since she is a woman of independent spirit—*er þú ert skörungr*—she must say plainly whether she will have him or not, and if not, then 'we shall speak no more about it—*þá viljum vér ekki um tala*.' Glúmr, handsome and widely travelled, had the wit and the tenderness to see that the notorious shrew in Hallgerðr could be tamed by the right husband, and also the self-assurance to believe that this was himself. The author suggests that Glúmr had a certain admiration for a woman who would not endure the wrong husband. When he is warned against her by his brother, 'she was married to one man and she had him killed—*var hon gipt manni ok réð hon þeim bana*,' he replies ironically, reversing the sympathy: 'Perhaps she will not have similar misfortune a second time—*má, at hana hendi eigi slík ógipta í annat sinn*.' (The humour, with the pun on *gipt* and *ógipta*, is so quiet that some scribes evidently did not catch it: one group of manuscripts reads '*má, at eigi hendi annan bónda hennar slíka ógiptu*—perhaps her second husband will not meet with similar misfortune.') Glúmr has a certain scorn for husbands who let their wives 'have them killed': 'I know for sure she will not have me killed—*veit ek víst, at hon ræðr eigi mér bana*.' And of course he is right. Hallgerðr controls her obstinate temper and

quick tongue—*Hallgerðr sat mjök á sér um vetrinn*—because of her domestic and physical contentment with Glúmr. They suited each other well—*þau kómu vel ásamt*. ‘All is well in our love—*vel er um ástir okkrar*,’ she tells her fosterfather. When her first child is born, she gives it her own grandmother’s name, Þorgerðr, ‘because she was descended from Sigurðr the Dragon-slayer by her lineage on the father’s side—*því at hon var komin frá Sigurði Fáfnisbana í föðurætt sína at langfeðgatölu*’. In this maternal extravagance we see Hallgerðr’s serene self-satisfaction and romantic pride in her new situation. The saga-author plays with the heroic genealogies current in his own time to give us this bright picture of felicity.¹

Hallgerðr’s marital contentment with Glúmr is broken by the sexual jealousy of her fosterfather. She is the only woman outside the *fornaldarsögur* who is said to have been fostered by a man.² We may suspect that this is a motif chosen by the saga-author (rather than an historical fact about Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir’s upbringing, preserved only in *Njáls Saga*) for the sake of the emotional complexities such a relationship might bring, complexities that he can use in the web of sexual reference that he is creating. The demanding girl, early aware of the overwhelming effect of her unusual beauty, relies upon it to get her own way, from father and fosterfather alike. When the father loses patience, the fosterfather comes into his own. Þjóstólfr deepened her wilfulness by his own violent example. She was unyielding—*skaphörð*—by nature and, as everyone could see, he had not improved her: *þat var mælt, at hann væri engi skapbætir Hallgerði*. When he has long been dead and she is a mature woman, married for a third time, she still shows characteristics that are identical with his—swiftness to take offence, elation in revenge and prompt facility in insulting speech. Compulsively—he cannot keep away from her home during her second marriage—Þjóstólfr destroys all other relationships for Hallgerðr, in the hope that the two of them may revert to that old confederacy, when he was her closest confidant, the only man she needed to serve her. The folly of his illusion makes him comic. At Hallgerðr’s weddings the author

¹ See *Íslensk Fornrit* XII, 46, note 2.

² See A. C. Kersbergen, *Litteraire Motieven in de Njála* (1927), p. 93.

caricatures Þjóstólfr's behaviour, as if to show his total isolation from the normal ways of life. At the first wedding, which she does not want, he is continually whispering with the bride, conspiratorially, and she is bursting into laughter at every word the bridegroom says: it is clearly a double act. At the second wedding, when she is content and her manners and her beauty are well matched—*Hallgerðr sat á palli ok samði sér vel*—Þjóstólfr glowers, coldshouldered, ludicrously striding up and down swinging his axe. In the scenes when he kills both her husbands, however, we are shown with greater realism the centre of his thoughts. The author introduces an obsessive note of sexual mockery into Þjóstólfr's words as he provokes each husband to attack him. He bluntly picks a quarrel with the first husband, whom Hallgerðr does not love, leaping up to join him in loading a boat: 'You are being feeble and incompetent—*lítilvirkr ok óhagvirkr*—the way you are doing this.' 'Do you think you will do it better—*hyggsktú betr gera munu?*' the husband replies amiably enough. Þjóstólfr swiftly seizes on the comparison (which the saga-author has deliberately provided for him): 'There won't be anything we do that I shan't do better than you—*þat eitt munu vit at hafask at ek mun betr gera en þú,*' he says, 'and that woman is wretchedly married who is your wife—*ok er sú kona illa gípt, er þú átt*—and your union ought not to last long—*ok skyldi ykkrar samfarar skammar vera.*' The brutal sequence of statements is intended to imply that Þjóstólfr himself would be a more effective sexual partner for Hallgerðr. The second husband, whom she loves, Þjóstólfr derides appropriately for uxoriousness. As they scramble, irritably blaming each other, up a mountain-side after fleeing sheep, he declares that Glúmr has strength for nothing but sprawling on Hallgerðr's belly—*til engis afla nema bröлта á maga Hallgerðar.* In these moments when he is bracing himself physically to vanquish her husbands, Þjóstólfr's own emotional fantasies are betrayed.

We are not told that Hallgerðr grieved over Glúmr's death, but we see her decisively cutting herself off from Þjóstólfr, deceiving him with a laughing compliment on his alacrity in action—*eigi ert þú engi í leikinum*—and dispatching him to her uncle Hrútr to be killed. Despite his hangdog suspicion that his

deed may not have pleased her (she had, after all, forbidden it)—*eigi veit ek, hversu þér mun þykkja*—Þjóstólfr obeys her now, yet still doubtfully—*eigi veit ek, hvárt þetta er heilræði, en þó skal ek þínum ráðum fram fara um þetta mál*. It is the first time we hear any expression of uncertainty on Þjóstólfr's lips. But now he quietens his doubts: if Hallgerðr advises him, it must be safe. So, delicately, with these simple hesitant phrases, the saga-writer indicates how pathetically hard it is for Þjóstólfr to believe that Hallgerðr could have cared so much for another man that she would avenge that man upon himself. The story-pattern of the beautiful girl jealously served by a devoted guardian is found in other literatures, but I have not met it elsewhere in Norse.¹

The docile Hallgerðr, who put her arms round Glúmr's neck to ask him a favour—the favour of admitting the shelterless Þjóstólfr into their home—assuring him that if he did not wish it she would not take it amiss—*ek vil þó eigi þvert taka, ef þér er lítit um*—is not seen again. There is a touch of hardness, brazenness, when many years later (her daughter Þorgerðr is fourteen now) she meets her third husband, Gunnarr. Robed in scarlet florid with lace, at the head of a band of women, she boldly strikes up a conversation with him—*hon mælti til hans djarfliga*. They are quickly at ease with each other, absorbed in conversation—*þau töludu lengi hátt*—and attracted, as we can guess from the oblique touches of flirtation in their first exchange of words on the subject of marriage. When Gunnarr asks her if she is unmarried, Hallgerðr is wryly honest with him. She tells him that she is unmarried, 'and it is not for many men to venture on that—*ok er þat ekki margra at hætta á þat*'. Gunnarr is so impressed by her handsomeness and confident, frank manner, that he assumes she finds no man a fit match for her—*þykki þér hvergi fullkosta?* 'That is not the case—*eigi er þat*,' she replies, 'but, for a husband, I shall be exacting—*en mannvönd mun ek vera*.' I suggest that the saga-author here means us to understand that Hallgerðr is using *mannvönd* in two current senses,² implying (1) that she will be

¹ An analogue that comes to mind is that of Salamambo and the eunuch priest who reared her, in Flaubert's novel. The priest, Schahabarim, sacrifices her vanquished lover with fervour.

² See Fritzner s.v. *mannvand* (1) and (2).

very particular, exacting, in her choice of husband (she will not accept a second Þorvaldr), and (2) that she will prove to be a severe, exacting, test for any man who becomes her husband. She speaks wittily, in somewhat rueful self-knowledge, but Gunnarr, once again, sees in her words only the meaning that is more flattering to her. She demands a high standard in husbands—does he reach it? ‘How will you answer if I ask for your hand—*hversu munt þú því svara, ef ek bið þín?*’ ‘You will not be thinking of that—*þat mun þér ekki í hug,*’ she replies deprecatingly. ‘That is not the case—*eigi er þat,*’ Gunnarr teases her, humorously negating her negative (it is the only time in the saga that Gunnarr approaches lightheartedness). Without directly answering his question, Hallgerðr refers him to her father. She clearly intends that he shall know everything about her, there shall be no deceit. Though Gunnarr with utter confidence at first demands permission to marry her, he is rapidly dismayed. For Hrútr tells him plainly, without waiting for him to ask, all about Hallgerðr’s character—*allt um skaplyndi Hallgerðar ófregit*, and it seems at first to Gunnarr that there are quite enough deficiencies—*þótti Gunnari þat fyrst ærit mart, er áfátt var*. But, eventually (for he has been so aggressively insistent on being accepted as a suitor for Hallgerðr that he can hardly now withdraw without seeming foolish), they come to a formal agreement on the marriage and the terms of it—*kaupmáli þeira*. What had sprung up—through striking looks and fluent words—as an infatuation, an exciting and challenging desire to be married—a *girndarráð*, as Hrútr says—has already become an embarrassment for Gunnarr. Even the announcement of the wedding, to be held at Gunnarr’s home, is kept quiet—*skyldi fara fyrst leyniliga*, though of course everyone soon knew—*en þó kom þar, er allir vissu*.

So for Gunnarr, the saga-author makes quite clear, marriage begins, as many marriages end, without illusion. From this first encounter we are shown the falling away of Gunnarr’s initial liking for Hallgerðr—a Jason cannot love a Medea for long—and, because of that, of Hallgerðr’s feeling for him, until she is able to say with cold honesty, as she refuses Gunnarr a strand of her hair for his bow-string: ‘I do not care how long or short a time you keep yourself alive—*hirði ek aldri, hvárt þú verr þik lengr eða skemr.*’

She knew he had rejected her in his heart from the moment when he refused to defend her dignity at a feast at Njáll's home: when he chose to ally himself with Njáll and not with her. Hallgerðr does not seek to provoke, but if provoked, she retaliates. Bergþóra thrusts her out of her place of honour in order to accommodate her own daughter-in-law: 'You must get out of your place for this woman—*þú skalt þoka fyrir konu þessi.*' Her tone is insultingly rough, and she means it to be. Hallgerðr refuses: 'I will not get out of my place—*hvergi mun ek þoka*—because I am not going to be an old crone in a corner—*því at engi hornkerling vil ek vera.*' Since no one intervenes on Hallgerðr's behalf, Bergþóra has her way—*ek skal hér ráða.* The author of *Laxdæla* shows how a husband can watch over the honourable seating of his wife, if it is ever in question: 'Hrefna is to sit in the seat of honour,' Kjartan insists, 'and to be accorded the highest esteem as long as I am alive.' But at such a moment at Bergþórshváll we hear no word from Gunnarr. Hallgerðr is left to avenge herself. When Bergþóra comes round with the hand-bowls, Hallgerðr takes hold of Bergþóra's hand and remarks: 'There is not much to choose between you and Njáll. You have a diseased nail (we can imagine her examining the hand with exaggerated interest) on every finger—*kartnagl á hverjum fingri*—and he has no beard.' Whether or not Hallgerðr is intending an elaborate and obscene insult, as one commentator suggests,¹ namely, that Bergþóra's unhealthy nails reflect the scabrous life of a promiscuous woman, who must have had other help in the begetting of her children than that of her beardless husband, Bergþóra cuts through any insults against herself with a swinging counterstroke: 'True enough,' she admits Hallgerðr's observations, 'but we never blame each other for that. But your husband Þorvaldr had a beard all right, and yet you had him killed—*eigi var skegglauss Þorvaldr, bóndi þinn, ok rétt þú honum þó bana.*' Flabbergasted by this new insult (which is simply the truth) Hallgerðr turns to Gunnarr for defence: 'It stands me in poor stead to be married to the most manly man in Iceland—*þann mann er vaskastr er á Islandi*—if you don't avenge this, Gunnarr.'

¹ See C. C. Mathiesen (translated by Magnús Már Lárusson), 'Um Kartneglur', *Skírnir* 139 (1965), 127. I am grateful to Sverrir Tómasson for this reference.

But Gunnarr strides from the table—‘I am going home—*heim mun ek fara*’—and gives involuntarily a sorry insight into his domestic life: ‘It is best if you bicker with the people of your own home and not in other men’s houses. I owe Njáll much honour and I am not the fool to be goaded by you.’ Gunnarr is too ashamed of his wife to stand up for her. But it is not surprising that Hallgerðr feels little fondness for his ‘friends’—*Tröll hafi þína vini*—who treat her so.

Why should Bergþóra have taken so strong a dislike to Hallgerðr and sought occasion to slight her? She reveals the root of her disapproval in her second insult: Hallgerðr was a traitor to her first husband, she had him killed. She betrayed the principle that a wife should live by: she did not build her life upon the marital bond. To Bergþóra this is a woman of bad character and not socially acceptable. She deserves every humiliation and Bergþóra is happy to devise that for her. We are shown with great simplicity the positive principle that governs Bergþóra’s own life. When she chooses to stay in the burning house with Njáll, she says she makes this choice because she was given to Njáll in marriage when she was young—*ek var ung gefin Njáli*—and on that account she has promised Njáll that one death would overtake them both—*ok hefi ek því heitit honum at eitt skyldi ganga yfir okkr bæði*. We are not told when she made this promise, but the implication is that it was not at the time of her youthful marriage; rather, we might imagine, later in life, when with the years death was coming closer. In this last moment of choice the saga-writer does not make her speak of love but of contract: she accompanies Njáll in death as one who from her earliest womanhood has been dedicated to him and possessed by him—*gefin*. The heroic and mythical analogues for Bergþóra’s voluntary death in the flames—Signý in *Völsunga Saga*, Sygne, lover of Hagbarthus, in Saxo,¹ Brynhildr, Baldr’s wife Nanna—as well as the hint of suttee, underline the archaic nature of the social rule by which Bergþóra determines her life. Here the saga-writer has imposed the outline of a convention upon the dramatic individuality of the woman; by this means he conveys not only

¹ Peter Dronke has pointed out to me the parallel with Bergþóra’s words in Sygne’s vow in Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, vii, vii, 10:

her moral rigour, but the benign simplification of her personality when faced with death.

We are invited to see more deeply into Bergþóra's concept of wifehood than this calm contract of death. Njáll has a natural son by another woman; the young man is often with his half-brothers. One evening he is found killed, with sixteen wounds. His mother, Hróðný, will not believe that he is dead, since the head is not off: 'Njáll will heal greater wounds,' she says, her mind seeming to wander. She carts the body to Njáll's sheep-byre at night, knocks at the house-door, brushes past the man who opens for her—*snarar þegar inn hjá honum*—without greeting him and goes straight to Njáll's bed. She asks whether he is awake. He answers patiently, with a touch of humour, that he was asleep until this moment, but now he is awake—'but why have you come here so early?' (It is clear that he knows her propensity for melodrama.¹) She quickly dispels any tone of frivolity by her unexpected and peremptory words: 'Get up from your cushions away from my co-wife—*statt þú upp ór binginum frá elju minni*, and go outside with me, and she shall go too, and your sons.' She maintains the fiction that her son is alive, but Njáll sees that he is dead—*Dauðamörk sé ek á honum, en engi lífsmörk*—but why has she not performed the last rites and closed the nostrils of the corpse? 'I meant that for Skarpheðinn,' she says. We see now the deliberate fantasy behind her actions. She pretends she thinks her son is not dead: that is her excuse for taking him for healing to Njáll in the night. The image of her past association with Njáll dominates her mind as she rouses him from his bed beside

Nec hunc, necis sensura pœnas, deseram,
 quem dignum Venere constitui mea,
 qui prima nostri carpsit oris oscula
 et floris teneri primitias tulit.
 Nullum puto votum futurum certius,
 si quid feminea vox fidei gerit.

¹ The saga-writer maintains this characterization of Hróðný in the scene when she goes to persuade her brother not to join with Flosi against Njáll (chapter 124). She does not return his greeting, makes him go outside to talk with her, grasps hold of him as they sit down together—*síðan þreif hon til hans, ok settusk þau niðr*. She has the torn and bloody cap of her son and Njáll's in her purse to show to her brother and enforce her request.

Bergþóra—though all of them are aged now. Now, when she comes to tell him that the child he had by her is dead, she reverses the roles: she is the wife who claims priority in the husband, the other is the concubine in the lovers' bed. The word she uses for bed, *bing*, is poetical (in verses attributed to Kormakr and Björn Breiðvíkingakappi it is used by the lover of his beloved's bed) and the term she applies so possessively and ironically to Bergþóra, *elja*, though used in the Norse paraphrase of the Bible to denote legitimate wives in the polygamous society of the Old Testament, was probably (the evidence is scanty) used in Norse society itself only of the concubine, like the term *arinelja*, 'co-wife of the hearth', in the old Norwegian laws. No doubt this is Hróðný's meaning here. Bergþóra shows no resentment at Hróðný's behaviour; she understands it and is deeply moved by it and reacts in sympathy with the violence characteristic of her nature. When Hróðný asks Skarpheðinn most solemnly to avenge his half-brother, though he was not born in wedlock—*þó at hann sé eigi skilgetinn*—Bergþóra breaks in before he can reply, turning with a strange roughness upon her sons (a roughness that perhaps the author means to be a reflection of the upheaval in her own heart, as she perceives the derangement in Hróðný): 'Your behaviour is astounding—*undarliga er yðr farit*. You kill when small cause compels you, but stay digesting this and stewing it in your minds till nothing comes of it—*en meltið slíkt ok sjóðið fyrir yðr, svá at ekki verðr af.*' And she urges them to kill in vengeance as Hróðný asks, before the peace-makers come. She identifies herself with the obligations Njáll has to Hróðný, but also with the feelings of the other woman. Though Bergþóra scorns Hallgerðr, she has respect, at once austere and emotional, for her husband's former mistress.

The saga-author has also given us the picture of a wife who resents her husband's interest in another woman. At Gunnarr's own marriage feast another marriage breaks out. Þráinn cannot take his eyes off the fourteen-year-old Þorgerðr, Hallgerðr's daughter—*hann var starsýnn á Þorgerði*. She has her mother's beauty—*var hon kvenna fríðust*. Þráinn has a harsh-natured wife whom he does not love much—*hann unni henni lítit*. She is a poetess, with a diabolical tongue—*hon var orðglfr mikit*—which

she frequently used to satirize others—*ok fór með flimtan*. As she helps Bergþóra to serve at the wedding feast, she sees her husband's dazzled gaze; she grows angry and mocks him in a verse for his staring:

Those feelings are not fine—
there is a leer in your looks,—Þráinn

—with a snappish tone of rebuke calling out his name after her verse.¹ She sees with asperity the sexual admiration that does not go out to her roused by another. She is the image of the older, dry-witted wife, neither loved nor lovable, sourly mocking what she no longer possesses, but with no intention of relinquishing her hold. Stung beyond bearing by her taunt and the publicity of it, Þráinn leaps from the table and names witnesses to his divorce. 'I will not have her sarcasms and her words of malice flung over me—*vil ek eigi hafa flimtan hennar né fáyrði yfir mér,*' and he insists that she be dismissed from the wedding. When the drink flows again, Þráinn asks for Þorgerðr as his wife. 'It seems to me only a short time since you parted with the wife you had before,' her grandfather replies in some bewilderment, but in the end consent is given. With deliberate economy the saga-author has set this climax of dislike in one marriage within the inaugurating celebration of another.

After Gunnarr's death, what happens to Hallgerðr? The last we are shown of her is exchanging insults with Skarpheðinn. Like his mother, he sees Hallgerðr as a woman of no importance, whose words are not worth hearing, because she is either 'an old crone in a corner—*hornkerling*' (he throws back at her the term she herself used on the memorable occasion of his mother's first insult) 'or a whore—*púta*'. Then she is living with her daughter and Þráinn, and with Þráinn is Hrappr, and some people said that she and Hrappr were on very friendly terms—*vingott væri með þeim Hallgerði*—and that he had seduced her—*ok hann fíflði hana*, but others said it was not so—*sumir mæltu því í móti*. What

¹ The verse reads *Era gapriplar góðir, gægr er þér í augum* (with manuscript variants of *gapriplar góðir*). The first sentence has not been interpreted with certainty, but words with the stem *ripp-* suggest that the term *gapriplar* may refer to the man's state of erotic excitement (see *Íslensk Fornrit*, XII, 89, note to the verse).

are we shown of Hrappr, this possible lover of Hallgerðr? In some respects he bears a striking resemblance to her fosterfather Þjóstólfr. He has the same genius for disturbing the peace of a household: of both men it is said, when they stay in other men's homes, *hann þótti þar öllu spilla*. And he has the same speed and dexterity in killing the men he provokes. But Hrappr is more sprightly, more versatile, more modern than Þjóstólfr, and certainly suffers no sexual frustration. He lives by his impudent wits. He comes to Norway and cheeks his way to a seat in the hall of the famous nobleman, Guðbrandr of Dalir. At first people find him amusing, but after a while many feel his talk is too bold—*mörgum þótti ofkerski*. He got into conversation with Guðbrandr's daughter, and many people said he was trying to seduce her—*margir töluðu at hann myndi ffla hana*. Eventually her father has her accompanied everywhere by his steward. Once she said she wished to go gathering nuts—at *fara á hnotskóg at skemta sér*—and out she went into the woods with the steward in attendance. Hrappr meets her and leads her off, and the steward finds them lying together in the bushes. He leaps at them with his axe and aims at Hrappr's leg. Hrappr whirls out of the way, grasps his own axe and cuts the steward's back in two as he turns to run. 'Now,' the girl says, 'you will not be able to stay any longer with my father because of what you have done. And yet there is one thing he will be even less pleased about, because I am expecting a child.' Promptly Hrappr shoulders this situation: 'He shall not learn this from anyone but me—*eigi skal hann þetta af öðrum fréttu*—and I shall return home and tell him both pieces of news.' 'Then you will never get away alive,' says the girl. 'That shall be risked,' he replies. Here the saga-author has depicted a couple of lovers well matched in cool bravado, the man living up to the boldness of his tongue by the dare-devil frankness of his actions, the girl his adventurous, unrecriminating partner, following her own will as much as his. With unhurried courtesy he leads his pregnant sweetheart into the care of some women before he goes to confront her father—*fylgir hann henni til kvenna annarra, en hann fór heim*.

Before a tiny audience—there were few men in the hall—Hrappr plays the scene with Guðbrandr for laughs. When asked

why his axe is blood-stained, he says he was helping to ease the steward's lumbago. 'You must have killed him then,' says Guðbrandr. 'What was his misdeed?' 'You would not think it much of a misdeed,' answers Hrappr, 'he wanted to cut my leg off.' 'What had you done to occasion that?' 'Something that was no business of his,' Hrappr replies primly. 'But you can say what it was.' 'If you wish to know, I was lying with your daughter and he did not like it.' 'Stand up and seize him,' Guðbrandr bellows to the few men around him in the hall. 'He's got to be killed.' 'You are not letting me benefit much from the fact that I have married into the family—*allítt lætr þú mik njóta mágsemðar*. But you don't have those handpicked men you need to carry out that order in a trice,' and Hrappr skips out of the hall and escapes to the forest. In the forest he comes upon a lonely house and a man outside chopping wood. Why is this man in the forest, remote from other people? He has abducted a woman, he tells Hrappr, and she lives with him now, and only here in the depths of the forest can he escape pursuit. Hrappr blackmails the man into harbouring him—'if you don't, I'll tell of your hiding-place'—and then spends his time roaming—*hann var förull mjök ok var aldri heima*. Always at night he visited Guðbrandr's daughter. There were always guards out for him, but they never caught him.

Why has the author of *Njáls Saga* given us these sharply focussed incidents of Hrappr's seduction and the detail of the man who had exiled himself in the forest to live with the woman he had abducted? These tales are not history. They can only be fictions employed by the author to catch for us two more facets of the bond that there can be between men and women. The man who may be Hallgerðr's lover is not casually drawn: he is given qualities which might make Hallgerðr class him as 'a real man'—outrageous impudence that can raise many a laugh, iconoclastic fearlessness (he pillages and burns the heathen temple of Earl Hákon; other sources tell us that King Óláfr Tryggvason did this, but in *Njáls Saga* it is Hrappr), and the pleasing audacity of a lover who places more value on his sexual adventures than on his life. We saw how the sober-sided Gunnarr disappointed his wife at Bergþóra's feast. The tension of living with her during the feud that follows makes him disapproving, humourless, stern

—*ver þú dæl, meðan ek em heiman*—and unrelenting in coldness after their quarrels—*var þá Gunnarr lengi fár við hana*, until she is the first to give in—*þar til er hon lét til við hann*. So far is he from being her idea of a real man that in her temper she says he is as much of a chicken-hearted woman as Njáll—*hvárrtveggi er blauðr*¹—as he dutifully pays Njáll compensation for all the men she has had killed. No one could call Hrappr *blauðr*: self-assertion and danger are the spice of his life. But he is a trickster hero from a fabliau world, of a lower moral—and social—order than the epic Gunnarr: Hrappr infuriates great men by his irreverence, Gunnarr rouses animosity in little men by his dignity. And yet, though the two men are shown to be the reverse of each other in many ways, in the saga it is only Hrappr and Gunnarr who express remorse for killing men. Almost as if he were beginning to see the justice of Hallgerðr's criticisms, Gunnarr asks his brother, when they have just killed eight men: 'How do I know whether I am less manly—*óvaskari maðr*—than other men, because I feel it more repellent to kill men than they do—*mér þykkir meira fyrir en öðrum mönnum at vega menn?*' At the killing of Þráinn on the frozen Markarfljót, Hrappr sees his own hand and the axe it held fall on the ice and he congratulates Helgi Njálsson on maiming him: 'This is a most necessary work that you have done, because this hand brought many men harm and death.' He is as much sickened by the memory of his skill in slaying as Gunnarr, who feels in his moment of victory—*Hart ríðr þú nú, frændi*—no better than the coarse braggarts who had ridden him down—*Hart ríðið þér, sveinar!*

Hrappr and Gunnarr have no narrative connection with each other: Gunnarr is dead before we hear anything of Hrappr. Only their relationship with Hallgerðr is intended to bring the two men together in our minds. It would have been sufficient for the coherence of events in the saga if we had been told no more about Hrappr than that he had offended Earl Hákon by burning his temple down, for this is the chief cause of the quarrel between

¹ I am indebted to Susan Blackall for pointing out to me how frequently Hallgerðr refers challengingly to masculinity (as also when she attempts to screen her theft of food: 'It is not for men to concern themselves with the preparing of meals—*er þat ekki karla at annask um matreiðu.*').

the Njálssons and Þráinn, leading to the killing of Þráinn, the fostering of his little son by Njáll, and so ultimately to the burning at Bergþórshváll. But the narrative thread is not all that matters to this saga-writer. Were he concerned only to build a logical sequence of happenings, he would not have introduced the abductor in the forest—whom he does not even allow to perform the narrative function of harbouring Hrappr—*hann var aldri heima*. The behaviour of Hrappr in Norway that is not relevant to Þráinn's fate and the burning of Njáll is designed to be relevant to Hallgerðr. Skarpheðinn calls her *púta*, and the saga-author too could have dismissed her as one of Cressid's kind. But he does not. Some gossiping people said she had taken Hrappr as her lover, others said this was not true. The author brushes aside the truth of this matter as unimportant by refusing to decide for us what it was, and instead opens for us the fictional labyrinths of amatory adventure—light hazelwoods and impregnable forests—to depict the kind of lover—debased but valorous—who might have seduced Gunnarr's widow. Hrappr, like the girl with thief's eyes, was 'very mixed'. The tracery of the author's imaginative structure is delicate, but it is clear that he intends us to see it.

I called this paper 'The role of sexual themes in *Njáls Saga*' because, by their variety and rarity, these themes show themselves to be the saga-writer's deliberately chosen medium for deepening the shallow image of human society in his native narrative tradition. The wealth of sexual themes represents his impatience with the monotony of the subject-matter that was commonly thought appropriate for the family sagas, and with the rigidity of the conventional motivations of action. He does not discard the form of the native saga—he is not discontented with that—but he makes new growth spring from the old structures. For example, instead of the familiar sexual motivation for enmity and killing in the earlier sagas—the rivalry of two men over a woman—the author of *Njáls Saga* offers us a less predictable range of sexually based reasons for slaughter: marital dissatisfaction, conflicting ideals of wifehood, a fosterfather's possessiveness. Again, for his chronicle of Gunnarr, he follows the episodic tradition of earlier sagas that trace the life of a hero, in which one series of disputes is brought to a close, before the next springs from a fresh source. But to

sharpen the realism of his tale, and keep before our minds the atmosphere of sexual challenge in which so many of his themes are rooted, the author of *Njáls Saga* invents a sexual stimulus for the new outbreak of enmity against Gunnarr. After the victorious end of his first series of contests, all is peaceful, until some neighbouring braggarts boast of their fighting-stallion: no one dares to match it. A woman mockingly cuts in on their boasting. She knows a man who would dare—Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi: he has a good stallion. ‘You women think no one can be his equal—*svá þykkir yðr konum, sem engi muni vera hans maki,*’ the braggarts complain, ‘but though he’s got the better of others, it’s not so certain he will get the better of us.’ ‘You won’t get within an inch of him,’ the woman retorts, and a fierce argument follows. Envious male aggression now turns against Gunnarr, to undermine the hero-worship of the women. Rivalry at horse-fights is a common device for reviving feuds in the sagas, but I do not think it is elsewhere provoked by the wager of a female admirer.

Another common spur to hatred and killing in the earlier sagas is sexual insult, sometimes a simple mockery for womanishness, sometimes a more virulent attack on the man, crudely guying him as the passive partner in a homosexual pair, as in *Bjarnar Saga Hítðelakappa*. Such extreme denigration the author of *Njáls Saga* uses for Skarpheðinn’s jibe at Flosi, as he flings him the black knickers, but he also displays, in the course of the narrative, several variants of the mockery of defective masculinity, making each instance double-edged with irony. Though beardless as a woman, the patriarch Njáll has two wives, and sons by both of them; over-stimulated virility makes Hrútr an ineffectual husband; and Gunnarr begins to question his own manliness, because he loathed killing the men who had mocked him as unmanly—who spread the rumour that he had cried at a little injury: ‘You would have said, if it had been a low-born fellow, that he had actually cried—*þat myndi mælt, ef ótiginn maðr væri, at grátit hefði!*’

The author of *Njáls Saga* saw that the realistic conventions of the native saga allowed for the narrative interplay of a multiplicity of private feelings—if anyone had the wit to depict them—and that he did not need to alter the traditional style in order to

mobilize this diversity. He worked, as did his predecessors in the family saga, by focussing attention on action and utterance, without introspection, conveying insight into the mind through external detail. He differs from his predecessors only in the quantity and the nature of the details he elects to give, and such is his dramatic virtuosity and power of concentrated expression that behind every chosen detail he conveys a full version of the reality he has imagined. For his creation of a deeper image of the society of the sagas, he has drawn ideas from every genre of story-telling—romance, fabliau, folktale—available to him. Their themes coalesce effortlessly, it would seem, in his writing. Sometimes we can trace the paths of his invention: the old wife stepping into the flames is like Signý, but with a difference; trolls can come down from their mountains to seduce young girls, as Bárðr Snæfellsáss came down from Snæfell to seduce Þórdís Skeggjadóttir¹—perhaps one comes down from Svínafell for Flosi? But I know of no model for the touching mixture that is Hallgerðr, so skilful is the author in making the natural and the stereotype interact. By the force of his ironic imagination and his command of old and new literary structures, he has shown us the sensational life within the World-Serpent body.

¹ See *Bárðar Saga Snæfellsáss*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1860), p. 24. 'Troll' is, of course, an inadequate translation of *áss*.