

INTRODUCTION	2
<i>Níð</i> and Manliness	2
Legal Sources	6
NÍÐ RESEARCH.....	9
The Establishment of <i>Níð</i> as a Scholarly Issue	9
Erik Noreen: <i>Níð</i> and <i>Ergi</i>	9
Bo Almqvist	14
Folke Ström	18
Towards a Functional Approach: Preben Meulengracht Sørensen	21
THE EXPERIMENT.....	25
Speech Acts and Fiction	27
Performatives in Sagas – Thomas Bredsdorff	30
<i>Níð</i> , Performativity and Gender – Judith Butler’s Theory	32
MASCULINE IDENTITY IN (RE-)CREATION	37
Rivalry and <i>Níð</i> in <i>Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa</i>	37
A Butlerian Reading of <i>Grámagaflím</i>	54
Revealing (Re-)creation.....	68
CONCLUSION	70
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	74
APPENDIX	79

Introduction

Níð and Manliness

In this thesis I intend to address the matter of manliness and its challenge in Old Norse literature. From the time the research started in 1922, this issue has been associated with two concepts, *níð* and *ergi*. How does one define these terms? In short, *níð* is an insult that questions an individual's manliness, and often involves an accusation of *ergi*, an expression meaning cowardice, but also seems to include hints of sexual deviance.

The discussion surrounding these terms has continued since the early twenties, although with long pauses within the dialogue. As to the present state of this discussion, I risk to say that it has been a long time since the latest innovation.

Níð as a literary phenomenon divides scholars: some think, that it has a crucial thematic, structural and dramaturgical function in the *Íslendingasögur* ('sagas of Icelanders'), some believe that its importance is highly overrated (Hallberg 94). Of course, I agree with the former view, and I intend to demonstrate this in the following.

Moreover, I do not think *níð* is just remarkable within the context of literary history; in the paper, I focus on the theoretical issues: I will take into account the main tendencies of scholarly approaches from the early twenties, and also the possibilities of continuing the discussion within a post-modern context. At the end of the thesis, I would like to demonstrate my statements by re-reading *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*.

Bjarnar saga belongs to a thematic group within the sagas of Icelanders known as poets' sagas or *skald sagas*.¹ For someone who is familiar with the subject-matter of these sagas, good examples of *níð* abound. The four "core" skald sagas (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* and *Kormáks saga*) tell the story of a talented and unmarried Icelandic poet who falls in love with a young girl

¹ The original term (*skáldasögur*, or *ástaskáldasögur*) comes from Bjarni Einarsson. He introduced it in his book *Skáldasögur* in 1961. However, these four stories were recognised earlier as a group by Felix Niedner who translated and published them with the title *Vier Skaldengeschichten* in 1914. The term and subject was revived in a collection of studies (*Skaldsagas: text, vocation and desire in the Icelandic sagas of poets*) edited by Russell Poole, published in 2001.

and they become engaged. Being ambitious, the young man travels abroad to gain reputation and wealth, but during this time, a rival marries his fiancée. Our hero returns to Iceland and tries to avert the situation, with mixed results. The outcome of the plot is diverse in the individual sagas.

The situation is inflammable. We have here a conflict between two men, fighting for the most precious thing a young man can achieve: a well-born woman. The fact that the marriage has already happened, makes the deceived lover even more desperate, and the situation more sensitive, because the husband is supposed to protect his wife's and his own reputation. At least one of the antagonists is a poet with a sharp tongue, so the text is abound with poetic insults and defamation of various kinds. Of course, the purpose of each is to outshine the other in manliness and bravery.

The theme is fixed, but in approaching these texts there are several possibilities. Without being complete, listed here are some aspects:

Firstly, they can be read as poetic biographies and indigenous literary history: the saga casts light on the situations in which the poems were composed, and evoke the poet's life story. Since the poet is often self-reflective, the poems can be seen as original documents of his life.

Secondly, they can be interpreted as love stories; they show several parallels with the theme of the medieval *romances* (unrequited love with a married woman).

Finally, they can be read as reflections on the Icelandic expansion and social history, with an emphasis on two spaces: firstly, Iceland and, secondly, the rest of the contemporary Scandinavia. In Iceland, the question is which man gains more power in society: the farmer staying home or the one who takes the risk of travelling? On the other hand, the travel experiences lead to a comparison of the Icelandic and the feudal Scandinavian societies, and raise another question: what is an Icelander worth abroad?

I would like to read these sagas in a fourth way, with emphasis on the *masculine gender identity* presented by the texts, both in the sociological and literary sense. From this point of view, skald sagas tell us about the challenge of manliness.

This focus is not unique in Old Norse literature. Apart from the "genre" of poets' sagas, where masculinity is an important issue, we can find that conflict between men is quite dominant in sagas of Icelanders. One explanation of this might be historical: these stories were composed during the late "Commonwealth" period (930-

1262) which was characterised by the fact that Iceland lacked a central executive authority (Helgi Þorláksson 139). The absence of central power causes a higher mobility within a society and wider possibilities for the individual man to increase his status. This social dynamism obviously leads to conflicts, and occasionally, it might make the members of the society more sensitive to conflict issues.

Also, if we compare the Old Norse sources to the modern concepts about masculinity, one difference is obvious: the medieval Icelandic author and his audience do not regard manliness as a biologically determined quality; manliness is rather seen as an attribute that a young man could only achieve by efforts. Additionally, the sagas suggest that manliness should be maintained through a lifetime, and it is always exposed to attacks from other men. In order to call himself a free man, the individual should actively protect this reputation. However, as a man grows old, he loses his manliness along with his physical (and reproductive) power. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen remarks resignedly in *Unmanly man*: “A man was a man only as long as he had the strength, courage and virility to be so” (87).

Manliness is a transient possibility a man can possess between the helpless states of youth and old age. This powerlessness appears in the resigned reflection the old warrior, Bersi composed about himself and his foster son, the young Halldór:

Liggjum báðir
í lamasessi
Halldór og ek,
höfum engin þrek.
Veldur elli mér
en æska þér.
Þess batnar þér
en þeygi mér.²
(*Laxdæla saga* 76; ch. 28)

² This poem is incorporated both in *Laxdæla* and *Kormáks saga* (261; ch. 16) in a slightly different context, but with the same emphasis on age-related impotence.

But how does *níð* relate to this? Quite simply: insults are the challenge a man should respond to if he wants to retain his image as a man. If he is not capable of that, then he is not yet, or no longer considered as a man.³

In skald sagas, defamation and insults are usually associated with a specific personality type called the “troublesome poet” (*vandræðaskáld*⁴). The hero is a young poet of “great physical strength, poor judgement, a violent temper, and an inability to get on with other people” (Clunies Ross 44). This is the stereotypical portrayal of an inexperienced but ambitious young man who should prove that he is worth the respect. Young adulthood is a crisis period in male life, and is especially difficult: the young man has to build up an adult identity, he has to focus on his career, achieve a position among other men (and quite often, *against* them). Besides, he has to find a partner for a lifetime. It is not an exaggeration to say that the most distinctive feature of the skald sagas is that they reflect the perspective of a **young, single man**. The timeless topic and plot might actually explain, why a skald saga, namely *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* is one of the most translated pieces among the sagas of Icelanders, although it is not the most popular or most appreciated within the canon.

Career and love are in conflict in skald sagas; there is always a fear that the hero cannot accomplish one of these important goals. Even though he is the handsomest, strongest and most intelligent within his age group, entering the adult world causes him to realise that there is always someone who is better, or simply was in the right place in the right time to win the prize.

And that is what happens in every skald saga: the protagonist loses his loved one to another man. The characters and outcome of these sagas are quite diverse, but they share this plot: we have a main character that gets an once-in-a-lifetime chance; he comes close to being reunited with the loved woman. But he fails and loses the opportunity. Of course, the main character becomes a hero and a highly appreciated member of community. Values are finally in balance, but still, these sagas are not Cinderella-tales. The plot focuses on a personal fiasco, and in this way, it recalls the modern *Bildungsroman*.

³ *Níð* however does not have to be associated with men only. In a few sources, gender-bound insults are applied to women. The reason I do not list these is due to my focus on masculinity in this thesis.

⁴ Originally the nickname of the protagonist of *Hallfreðar saga*, see Poole 131-132.

Verbal insult, *níð* is necessarily a frequent motif in these stories: *níð* is a test but also a device of learning for a young man: it prepares him to understand and control the mechanism of hierarchy. In the following, I would like to concentrate on when and how this term was brought into focus. The Cleasby-Vigfusson dictionary (1874) explains *níð* as “a libel, liable to outlawry”, but also associates the word with magic sculptures and poems connected to ritual carvings (*beina-kerlinga-vísur*). Fritzner identifies *níð* as ‘mockery’ where a person is presented as an inferior being.⁵ He mentions two types of *níð*, called *tunguníð* and *tréníð* the first referring to verbal (and poetic) insults, the second to obscene sculptures. Zoëga (1910) defines the term as (1) *contumely, derision*; (2) *libel*; and regarding sculptures: (3) *insult* by carving a person's likeness (*tréníð*) on an upraised post or pole (*níðstöng*).

Legal Sources

These definitions all originate in Old Norse legal sources. According to the *Íslendingabók*, the first Icelandic law, the so-called *Úlfjót's law* was modelled on the Norwegian *Gulapingslög* (*Íslendingabók* 7; ch. 2). The thirteenth century *Gulapingslög* manuscript has decreed about mocking:

Engi maðr skal gera tungu níð um annan. ne trenið. En ef hann verðr at því kunnr oc sannr. at hann gerir þat. þa liggr hanom utlegð við. syni með settar eiði. Fellr til utlegðar ef fellr. Engi skal gera yki um annan. æða fiolmæle. þat heiter yki ef maðr mælir um annan þat er eigi ma væra. ne verða oc eigi hever verit. kveðr hann væra koni niundu nott hveria. oc hever barn boret. oc kallar gylvin. þa er hann utlagr. ef hann verðr at því sannr. syni með settar eiði. fellr til utlegðar ef fellr. (*Norges gamle love* 1: 57).

This source makes a formal distinction between verbal and figural defamation, a distinction which was taken up by many scholars, as Fritzner (see above). However, a remaining fragment of the other Norwegian law book, the *Frostapingslög* even distinguishes mocking poetry (*Norges gamle love* 2: 505) from other types of verbal defamation, and so does the Icelandic *Grágás*. The *Staðarhólsbók* manuscript of this

⁵ “Forhaanelse, hvorved nogen fremstilles som en Person, der fortjener hver Mands Foragt, betegnes som hvers manns níðingr” (Fritzner 2: 817-818).

Icelandic law codex contains four long paragraphs dealing with insults.⁶ These regulations are probably developed from the Norwegian laws (Almqvist 48-49), but their extensiveness and complexity is surprising. Almqvist claims (56) that the regulations became more complex due to the more commonly practised mocking poetry in Iceland.⁷

Grágás is an invaluable document regarding verbal offence in medieval Iceland. The four paragraphs in *Staðarhólsbók* are included in the *Vígslóði* part of the manuscript, which was an essential regulation in Icelandic society from the beginning.⁸ The complexity of these paragraphs amused scholars such as Bo Almqvist with good reason. He called them “motley swarm of decrees” (Almqvist 56) as they also deal with seemingly special cases for example with insulting poetry against “dead Christian men” or Scandinavian kings.⁹ The first two chapters deal with colloquial verbal injuries (“prose” defamation as opposed to versified insults). The *Grágás* distinguishes between two kinds of colloquial defamation: *fullréttisorð*, (an insult worth for full compensation) and *hálfvéttisorð* (half compensation). *Fullréttisorð* is an insult that cannot be interpreted as positive (“eigi ma föra til goðs”). *Hálfvéttisorð* can be interpreted in both a positive and a negative way (“er föra má til hvarstueGía goðs oc illz”), which is the equivalent of irony. Direct and unmistakable offences such as a *fullréttisorð* are always punished, with *fförbaugsgarð* (lesser outlawry, a three years’ exile, see Meulengracht

⁶See these quoted in the Appendix of this thesis, p. 79-80. These paragraphs slightly differ in the two manuscripts, *Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók*. The reason why I prefer the *Staðarhólsbók* manuscript (AM 334 fol.) in this thesis is that the chapters regarding verbal insults are more detailed. Also Línal observes (*Hvers vegna...?* 280), that *Konungsbók* is likely to be an extract of a more extended, now lost version that might have been the source of both manuscripts. The quoted text supports this point of view since the paragraph about the heaviest colloquial insults (*ragr, stroðinn, sorðinn*) is omitted from *Konungsbók*, but it mentions them later in the chapter on poetry as known words to kill for (Ef maðr heyrir iscallidscap orð þat er maðr a vigt vm. at hann se ragr eða stroðen. *Konungsbók* 183-184.)

⁷ This development is difficult to reconstruct, since the earliest Norwegian sources on defamation are contemporary with the thirteenth century *Grágás* manuscripts. But in case this is true, complexity might allude that verbal defamation became a more important social issue in Iceland than in Norway. The theory is confirmed by the fact that defamation was very severely judged in *Grágás* compared to all Norwegian sources. There is another argument that supports this: when *Járnsíða* came to force 1271, with a shorter and less detailed regulation of poetry (see *Norges gamle love* 1: 273), the new law book met the resistance of Icelanders, mainly as it did not fulfil their increased requirements (Almqvist 57-58). Therefore, when only ten years later it had to be replaced with the new law book, the new regulation (*Jónsbók*) made allowances for the *Grágás* text: it reinstates rules for some particular cases of mocking poetry (as when several poets compose one stanza or someone adapts poetry). There are several cases like this in *Jónsbók*; therefore scholars agree in general that *Grágás* was much more used in *Jónsbók* than in the refused *Járnsíða* (*Hvers vegna...?* 294, Ólafur Lárusson 65-66).

⁸Ari fróði emphasises in *Íslendingabók*: (on the winter of 1117-18): “...þá var skrifaður Vígslóði og margt annað í lögum” (*Íslendingabók* 24; ch. 10).

⁹ *Grágás*: *Staðarhólsbók* ch. 377, see Appendix.

Sørensen, *Fortælling* 201) and fine, except of the special case of *skáldskaparmál* (literary quotation). *Hálfréttisorð* (irony, equivocality) is not punishable between free men, but if a servant refers to the farmer or a slave to a free man, the procedure is the same as if it were *fullrétti*. If the servant willingly leaves the farm, he is not to be punished. But if a servant or slave says *fullrétti* to a free man, he is penalised with lesser outlawry, the same as between free men.

The accusation is possible irrespectively of whether the verbal injury is said in an individual's hearing or in his absence, but the process of accusation is different. If the complaint can name witnesses, he should do so, and the witnesses, once named, cannot excuse themselves, otherwise they are to pay a fine. This rule protects the plaintiff and makes it more difficult for the accused party to deter the witnesses. *Grágás* seems to make an especially great effort to ensure the rights of the *offended* party: an affront against a free man's life or reputation cannot remain uncompensated. Also in other respects, balance is a basic principle of the *Víglóði*: even if the fact of verbal abuse cannot be proven, because no third person was present, the affronted one has the right to take revenge with equally abusive words ("hefna orðe orðz") in the spirit of *jus talionis* (eye for an eye).

For the same reason, if someone spreads verbal injuries said in a dispute, he has to face lesser outlawry, because the offended person cannot defend himself (the expression *bacmæli* refers to that). The offended party has a long time to consider the case, he has about three years to accuse counted from the time he becomes aware of the offence.

Unlike any other remaining Norwegian law book, *Grágás* (both *Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók*) deals in detail with defamatory poetry.¹⁰ Compared to the colloquial abuse, the severity of the punishment for poetry is striking: the most common penalty is full outlawry which meant that the condemned person became completely exiled from the community and anyone could kill him with impunity. Full outlawry was the heaviest possible punishment in a community that lacked a central executive power. The retribution is the same as the one judged for homicide or rape. According to *Grágás*, erotic poetry composed for a woman is equally punishable as actually raping her; an attack against someone's reputation by poetry is presented as equal to seriously hurt or

¹⁰ In the *Staðarhólsbók* manuscript, the entire chapter 377. is about poetry; see Appendix p. 80.

kill him. The same concerns the offensive usage of three words: *ragr*, *stroðinn* or *sorðinn*.¹¹ Insults containing these words were considered more seriously than any other offence and a man had the right to kill the offender immediately.

***Níð* Research**

The Establishment of *Níð* as a Scholarly Issue

The early research period between 1922 and the seventies was dominated by three Swedish scholars: Erik Noreen, Bo Almqvist and Folke Ström. The common characteristic of their studies was historical approach: they shared the interest to find out more about the social and historical reality of the Middle Ages by analysing the contemporary sources. With Almqvist's words, they wanted to determine the „Sitz im Leben” of *níð* and *ergi* (Almqvist 77). In harmony with this approach, their methods were interconnected with historical linguistics, and included both etymology and semantics. They compared Old Norse legal sources, sagas and eddaic poetry, and they tried to determine *níð* based on content and formal criteria. Their basic aim was to give a general definition of *níð*.

Apart from these similarities, the three scholars' research resulted in diverse concepts about the phenomenon *níð* which led to a debate.

Erik Noreen: *Níð* and *Ergi*

Erik Noreen was the first to publish an extensive study about the topic with the title *Om niddiktning* in 1922. As the title suggests, it was versified *níð* that aroused his interest. He made an attempt to classify *níð* poems within the system of Old Norse poetry.

¹¹ ”Þav ero orð þríu ef sva mioc versna máls endar manna. Er scog Gang varða avll. Ef maðr kallar man ragan eða stroðin. Eða sorðin. (...) Enda a maðr vígt igeign þeim orðum þrimr” (*Staðarhólsbók* 392). *Ragr* (*argr*) is the masculine adjective form of the noun *ergi*. I will discuss this word in greater detail the next chapter. In short, *ragr* refers to cowardice, unmanly behaviour and occasionally sexual deviances as homosexuality and bestiality. *Stroðinn* and *sorðinn* are variations of the same word and they refer to a man who was anally penetrated by another man.

It was not clear what kind of mocking is addressed in these poems. Noreen is debating the issue with Finnur Jónsson and Magnus Olsen. Olsen claimed that “real” *níð* poems are the ones that are not only humiliating but effectively harmful for the person they are directed against (235). But Finnur Jónsson – so claims Noreen – included harmless teasing poems in the category of *níð* poetry (Noreen 38). Noreen agreed with Olsen when he claimed that *níð* is a serious offence against honour (*ärekränkning*). He relied on the relevant Old Norse legal sources, first of all, *Frostapingslög*, *Gulapingslög* and *Grágás* (Noreen 38-39). These sources provide a rich assortment of punishable verbal insults. As he compared the law texts with each other, he found that the insults are often used to question the offended individual’s manliness. Besides other terms, this unmanliness is often expressed with the masculine adjective *argr* or *ragr* (40) or with the abstract noun *ergi*.

At this point, Noreen juxtaposed these sources to a long debated locus of Tacitus’ *Germania* (see Appendix 80). *Germania* was written in the first century and is about the history and life of Germanic tribes of the time. Tacitus mentions the following legal practice among the Germanic tribes:

In their councils an accusation may be preferred or a capital crime prosecuted. Penalties are distinguished according to the offence. Traitors and deserters are hanged on trees; the coward, the unwarlike, the man stained with abominable vices, is plunged into the mire of the morass with a hurdle put over him. This distinction in punishment means that crime, they think, ought, in being punished, to be exposed, while infamy ought to be buried out of sight (Tacitus, *Complete works* 714-15).

This “the coward, the unwarlike, the man stained with abominable vices” (*ignavos et imbelles et corpore infames*) excited Noreen’s interest. He suggested that these words do not refer to three different types of crime, but to the same shameful quality that can be summarised with the word *ergi* (40).¹²

Noreen claimed that this unmanliness expressed as *ergi* was a central concept in order to understand *níð* and the background of Old Norse mocking poetry. This was his

¹²Noreen was not the first to draw attention to this interconnection, Nathanael Beckman had already done this two years earlier (Beckman 103-108).

lasting legacy in *níð* research. Although later, Bo Almqvist criticised this connection, the two concepts, *níð* and *ergi* have been associated with each other since.

Noreen identified the semantic compounds of *ergi* as the following: 1. ‘unmanly’ within this: a. sexually perverse (a man who behaves sexually as a woman); b. coward; c. involved in sorcery (in a negative meaning).¹³ Concerning how the word *ergi* functions in the texts, Noreen postulates a standard semantic model: in some connections one of these meanings (a., b. or c.) is accentuated, in other connections the other (40). With other words, the three described meanings are according to him three different sides of the same concept.¹⁴

This view is quite defensible. Noreen brings the following examples:

He mentions an episode in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, the saga I will discuss later. The saga concerns the conflict between Björn Arngeirsson and Þórðr Kolbeinsson. One day, a disgraceful sculpture is found on Þórðr’s land:

Þess er nú við getit, att hlutr sá fannsk í hafnarmarki Þórðar, er þvígít vinveittligra þótti; þat váru karlar tveir, ok hafði annarr hött blán á höfði; þeir stóðu lútir, ok horfði annarr eptir öðrum. Þat þótti illr fundr, ok mæltu menn, at hvárskis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð. (154; ch. 17)¹⁵

The sculpture represents Þórðr involved in a sexual act with another man. It seems likely that Þórðr is the one depicted as standing in the front. According to the commentary, Þórðr is the most offended person because he is shown in the passive role.¹⁶

It is a frequent motif that the insult is intensified by the claim that the two men begot children together as in *Kristni saga*. The *níð* is directed against bishop Friðrekr and his follower, Þorvaldr Konráðsson:

¹³ Noreen also claims that there is a second, weakened meaning ‘morally repulsive’ (40).

¹⁴ See also Noreen 47, footnote nr. 1.

¹⁵ “It is further related that something appeared by Thord’s landing-place which hardly seemed a token of friendship. It represented two men, one of them with a black hat on his head. They were standing bent over, one facing the other’s back. It seemed to be an indecent encounter, and people said that the position of neither of the standing figures was good, and yet that of the one in front was worse” (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 40).

¹⁶ A similar sculpture is described in *Gísla saga*: „Refr hét maðr, er var smiðr Skeggja. Hann bað, at Refr skyldi gera mannlíkan eptir Gísla ok Kolbirni, —»ok skal annarr standa aptar en annarr, ok skal níð þat standa ávallt, þeim til háðungar«” (*Gísla saga* 10; ch. 2). Passive homosexual behaviour was considered more degrading, see Gade 132, Noreen 61.

Hefir börn borit
byskup nú,
þeira er allra
Þorvaldr faðir.
(*Kristni saga* 12; ch. 4)¹⁷

Here, the bishop is told to have given birth to nine offsprings fathered by Þorvaldr. But homosexuality is not the only sexual deviation they use for humiliation. In *Njáls saga*, Flosi ridicules Skarphéðinn's father Njáll who is beardless, and questions if he is a man at all. In response, Skarphéðinn accuses him of *ergi* too: he throws him a pair of blue trousers, a piece of female clothing and says he needs them. When Flosi asks why, he says: „Því þá – ef þú ert brúðr Svínfellsáss, sem sagt er, hverja ina níundu nótt ok geri hann þik að konu” (314; ch. 123). Here, Skarphéðinn suggests that Flosi was the “bride” of the troll of Svínafell.

Besides implication of sex with supernatural creatures, accusations of bestiality are common, involving especially horses¹⁸, as in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* when two hostile poets, Þjóðólfr and Halli are the guests of Harald harðráði, the Norwegian king. Þjóðólfr wants to give a present to the king, a horse. Halli comments on this in the following poem:

Dýr es ávallt,
hefr saurugt allt
hestr Þjóðólfs erðr,
hann es dróttinserðr.
(*Sneglu-Halla þáttr* 294; ch. 3)

“Dróttinserðr” indicates that Þjóðólfr has anally penetrated the horse. The king refuses the gift.

Another example is the one Snorri tells about: Icelanders composed a *níð* poem against a man called Birgir who took property from Icelanders in Denmark and the

¹⁷ See also *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla* I. (79; ch. 6)

¹⁸ Jochens, *Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women and Beasts* 369.

Danish king, Haraldr Gormsson who gave permission to him. The short poem claims that the two had copulated together in the shape of horses where Haraldr was a stallion and Birgir a mare (Noreen 44). Thus he accuses of shape-shifting (sorcery) and homosexuality.

As we see above, Noreen's examples support only the "a." sense (sexual deviance) of the concept *ergi* which was later criticised by Almqvist.

In addition, Noreen made an attempt to restrict the concept even further. In harmony with Magnus Olsen, he excluded several satiric, mocking poems from the category of *níð* (49), as this short poem of Gunnlaugr ormstunga:

Hirðmaðr es einn,
sá's einkar meinn;
trúið hónum vart,
hann's illr ok svartr.
(*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* 69; ch. 6)

The poem claims merely that the king's man is deceitful, spiteful and malignant, which insult – according to Noreen – is not severe enough to be called *níð*, because it does not refer to sexual deviance, *ergi*. He also notes that the poem is not called *níð* in the prose text of the saga.

The same concerns *Grámagaflím*, a poem in *Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa* (see below, p. 54ff). This is a lampoon composed by Björn Hítðalakappi that claims that Þórðr's mother ate a rotten fish she found on the seashore, become pregnant from it and gave birth to Þórðr. Noreen does not categorise this as a serious insult either.

Here, again, Noreen found that the distinction is sustained by the fact that these poems are not explicitly called *níð* in the prose text. This is actually true; among the short poems he exclaims, *Grámagaflím* is called *flím*, some poems are called *flimtan*, while most of them are not called anything at all. He suggests that these refer to a different genre of light, satiric poems which are not to be taken as seriously as *níð* (43 ff).

I find Noreen's handling of sources somewhat contradictory. Firstly, he uses the category *níð* for a type of Old Norse poems, but he ignores the fact that the word is used

in a much wider context in his sources, also meaning insults uttered in prose or offensive sculptures.¹⁹

This treatment is not problematic *per se* if we are conscious that we use a different, modern scholarly definition of *níð*. But in Noreen's study this is not the case. He argues that a poem cannot be categorised as *níð* if it is not so called in the prose commentary of the poem; based on the texts, he creates new categories as *hálfníð* and *ópökkavísur* (51), which increases confusion. In my opinion, medieval sources (including legal documents) cannot be used as modern scholarly literature. These texts often use words vaguely, not as precisely as we are expected to handle terms in a philological study.

But in Noreen's opinion, terms (or, *his* definition of them) should be absolute, independent of context, time and ages. He takes this so seriously that he criticises the author of *Egils saga* for the "incorrect" usage of the word *níð*:

Jag tillåter mig att förmoda att sagans författare även på en annan punkt har gjort sig skyldig till misstag, nämligen genom bruket av ordet *níð*. De två stroferna skilja sig skarpt från de i de gamla källorna verkligen som *níð* betecknade. Och på samma sätt skiljer sig Egils »nidstång« avsevärt från de resta *níð* som vi förut ha redogjort för. Niden och nidvisorna innebära som ofta nämnt en ärekränkning av värsta slag, Egils »nidstrofer« innebära svart magi" (57-58).

This statement is in harmony with Noreen's opinion that "real" *níð* poetry should include accusation of sexual deviance (55), while Egill does not pronounce such charges: he uses sorcery. It was this statement that provoked indignation on Bo Almqvist's behalf.

Bo Almqvist

The first volume of his comprehensive study, *Norrön niddiktning* was published in 1965 (and the second part in 1974), more than forty years after Noreen's study, and

¹⁹ "Þat ero níð ef maðr skeR tré nið maNe. eða ristr eða reisir manne nið stavng" (*Grágás: Staðarhólsbók* 392).

twenty years after his death. Almqvist's thesis is an excellent work based on a thorough evaluation of the sources.

The paragraph written by Noreen that I have cited above was the main inspiration for Almqvist's elaborate research. He wanted to prove that Noreen was wrong, when he did not accept the poem against Eiríkr and Gunnhildr as *níð*, and when he said, that black magic cannot be counted as *níð*.

Bo Almqvist's main approach in *Norrön niddiktning* is ethnographical. He wants to prove that the Icelandic improvised poetry, the so-called *kraftaskáld* tradition that flourished in the nineteenth century (Almqvist 20) has its roots in the *níð* poetry of the Middle Ages. From his point of view, black magic does not exclude mocking; on the contrary, sorcery and ritual are the *essential* characteristics of *níð*. This argument had already come up in scholarship; the Cleasby-Vigfusson dictionary from 1874, as mentioned above also brings *níð* into connection with past-medieval ritual practices.²⁰

Being aware of Almqvist's background in ethnography, we cannot find surprising that he come to the conclusion: Noreen puts too much stress on the *sexual* nature of accusations when he tries to describe *níð*.

Almqvist's critique was in fact a result of Noreen's controversial handling of the meaning of *ergi*. Based on Noreen's textual analysis, Almqvist interpreted *ergi* merely as 'sexual perversion' (Almqvist 66). However, this restricts the concept of *níð* so much that it has rendered Noreen's theory unacceptable to him. Almqvist agreed with Noreen that *níð* is a serious insult according to the medieval law (*fullbötesord*, see 65) and the charges *may* be of a sexual nature, but he denied the reasoning that *only* the accusations of sexual abnormality are "real" *níð*. He argues: *Gulapingslög* regards certain "sexuality-free" charges as an equally severe insult, for example when someone is called a coward, a traitor or troll, or when a free man is called slave (Almqvist 67-73).

²⁰ "The beina-kerlinga-vísur of modern times are no doubt a remnant of the old *níðstöng*; – certain stone pyramids (*varða*) along mountain-roads are furnished with sheep legs or horses' heads, and are called beina-kerling (*bone carline*); one of the most noted is on the Kaldadal, as one passes from the north to the south of Iceland, it is even marked in the map; a passing traveller alights and scratches a ditty called beina-kerlinga-vísa (often a scurrilous or even loose kind) on one of the bones, addressing it to the person who may next pass by; (...) there hardly was a poet who did not indulge in these poetical licences. In popular legends the devil always scratches his writing on a blighted horse's bone" (Cleasby-Vigfusson 455).

Almqvist's "Solution"

Almqvist disagreed with Noreen in the sexual nature of *níð* accusations. Initially, however, he believed that although *níð* is a very complex phenomenon, it is possible to define it precisely through textual analysis.

He used historical linguistics like Noreen to find a solution to the problem; he started with the most trustworthy sources: Germanic etymology and medieval legal texts. Etymology turned out to be useless: the Germanic equivalents of the word *níð* have a different meaning: 'jealousy'; 'hatred'; 'combat'; 'hostility', which is distinctively different from the Old Icelandic 'derision', 'defamation' (Almqvist 39, footnote 7).

Contemporary Old Norse law books seemed to be more promising: but again, a thorough reading of the legal texts illuminate the fact that the medieval terms and definitions are not to be relied on; *Grágás* gives a formally correct definition of *níð* I cited above,²¹ but through further examination we can see that it only refers to a carving or *níð*-pole, while later in the *Grágás* text, the author uses *níð* for mocking poetry. The reason for that is that medieval law books were supposed to give *examples*, *not definitions*. Almqvist recognised this and pointed out, that the informal and legal use of the word might have been different in the Middle Ages (40). As we see, Almqvist was more critical of the medieval sources than Noreen who used them as he would use modern scholarly texts.

Almqvist accepted Noreen's interpretation of the concept *ergi* ('sexual perversion'). Therefore, he had to disagree with the exclusive connection between *ergi* and *níð*. Subsequently, he had to find another way to define *níð*. Finding a proper definition was problematic.

Semantics seemed to be a useful way of addressing the issue: Almqvist admittedly (73) took over Fritzner's *níð*-definition.²² This definition goes back to the threatening phrase that is often used in *níð* situations by the offenders. They mostly declare that if the assaulted person does not respond to the challenge as a man, he would

²¹ Þat ero níð ef maðr skeR tré nið maNe. eða ristr eða reisir manne nið stavng (*Grágás: Staðarhólsbók* 392).

²² "Forhaanelse, hvorved nogen fremstilles som en Person, der fortjener hver Mands Foragt, betegnes som *hvers manns níðingr* (...)" (Fritzner 2: 817).

be “hvers manns níðingr” (ca. ‘disdained by everyone’). Fritzner and Almqvist used the word *níðingr* to find out what *níð* means. In this case, *níð* can be defined as ‘a kind of mockery, when someone is presented as a person who deserves the contempt of the community.’²³ Almqvist takes up Folke Ström’s interpretation on the word *níðingr*: this word often refers to betrayal (of God, of a king), or a person who does not dare to take revenge for injustice, shows cowardice in battles, or commits certain violent acts such as murder by night, murder of a relative, attacks against the defenceless, cruelty to animals, or in some cases, miserliness with food as a host (*Sacral origin* 57). According to Almqvist, the common feature of these misdemeanours is that all were considered unmanly, and, in some cases, inhuman. Furthermore, he agreed with Ström that *níðingr* is more a *moral* concept, rather than a legal one (*Norrön niddiktning* 76).

However, these statements on *níðingr* did not help much in throwing further light on *níð*. In my opinion, Almqvist’s attempt to define *níð* based on semantic meaning was unsuccessful, although his intuition led him to some interesting remarks.

Almqvist himself came to the conclusion that it is *not* possible to give a traditional definition (*Norrön niddiktning* 82); he remarks: an ideal formula on *níð* should define exactly the forms and content of *níð*, the attitude and reactions of the parties that directly take part in the act, and the wider social and historical background and effects. But these factors are too complex to coordinate. Furthermore, the term appears in quite different milieux and periods which makes the research even more complicated (*Norrön niddiktning* 82).

However, Almqvist put forward an idea that is very important from my point of view; he suggested that when talking about a case of *níð* we should always pay attention to the *situation* (*Norrön niddiktning* 77ff) in which it occurs. I think this might be a productive idea if the formal methods do not offer a solution. I intend to return to this thought later.

²³ Almqvist examines other derivations (such as *níðingr*, *níðingsverk*, *guðníðingr*, *matníðingr* amongst others) that can be useful to trace back the meaning of *níð*. This is however not a standard philological method. Usually, it happens the other way around: derivations are explained from the root. Almqvist is conscious of this, and excuses himself thus: “Det kan måhända vid första anblicken synas betänkligt att draga slutsatser om det primära, *níð*, men det är här ej fråga om att fastställa etymologien utan betydelsefältet, varvid ordens samhörighet är en styrka” (*Norrön niddiktning* 74). He argues that his aim is not to establish a valid etymology of *níð*, but to locate the “semantic field” of the word. Thus, we can say that Almqvist postulates a correlation between the semantic field of a word and its conceptual or mental equivalents. In other words, he supposes that our words and their derivations reflect how we think, that is how we can use semantics to get closer to the social and conceptual reality of past ages.

Almqvist approached the situational issue through psychology. He accentuated the excitement a *níð* situation entailed (*Norrön niddiktning* 83). His motivation was, of course, to verify that each act of *níð* was new, improvised and unique as a magic *kraftaskáld* poem (82), far away from the mere sexual offence as Noreen suggested. The lively debate between Almqvist and Noreen had a refreshing effect on Swedish *níð* scholarship.

Folke Ström

This scholar published an article about the issue in *Saga och sed*, the annual of the Gustav Adolf Academy, in 1972. The article appeared in English two years later with further additions.²⁴

On the one hand, Ström agreed with Noreen, saying that the concept of *níð* does have a close connection to *ergi*. On the other hand, he opposed Noreen in assuming that *ergi* always refers to sexual perversion. His solution was simple and could be formally drawn up thus:

ergi = omanlig ≠ *sexually* unmanly (as Noreen)

instead:

ergi = omanlig = kvinlig (Ström).

Meaning that the accusation of *ergi* does not primarily condemn unmanly sexual behaviour but *effeminacy*; certain patterns of behaviour that are considered normal for women, but as taboo for men (40; 17). Ström pointed out, that most of Noreen's examples condemn the *passive* sexual behaviour in the sexual act between men, which is an emblematic female role. The same concerns the (otherwise absurd) accusation of men giving birth. Cowardice was also regarded as a feminine quality, because in Old Norse society women were rather considered to be timid, they did not typically take part in battles, carried weapon or took revenge (Gunnar Karlsson 377).

Even sorcery (*seiðr*) was typically feminine, and as such, an effeminate action for men. He maintains his statement by referring to *Heimskringla* that says that even if Óðinn had been the most skilled in sorcery, it is not a proper activity for males (32; 8):

²⁴ Below, I refer to the page numbers of both articles, taking the Swedish version first.

Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr mátt fylgði, ok framdi siálfr, er seiðr heitr, en af því mátti vita ørlög manna ok óorðna henti, svá ok at gera mönnunum eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mönnunum vit eða afl ok gefa öðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt (*Heimskringla* 19; ch. 7).

Ström widened the concept of *ergi* from merely sexual to generally *unmanly*, *effeminate* behaviour. This makes it possible that *níð* always implies *ergi*. He also pointed out a similar pattern in *ergi* charges against females: the few cases we know about, accusation of women with *ergi* often involves charges of promiscuity that was considered a male attribute (27). In that sense, *ergi* can also be defined as *gender-incompatible behaviour*. Thereby Folke Ström resolved the contradiction between the theories of Noreen and Almqvist and re-established the connection between the two concepts, *níð* and *ergi*.

Níð as a Symbolic Act

In addition, Ström raised a very interesting question: to what extent is *níð* and *ergi* meant to be symbolic? Because of its importance, I have to treat this issue at length.

It is obvious, that most of the *níð* accusations we can read in sagas are difficult to believe. This is not because it is inconceivable that homosexuality and bestiality was practised in the Middle Ages, but these accusations have mostly no confirmation in the story. The accusations are often mutual, if a man utters such charges, the offended replies with similar ones, as we see in the quarrel between Flosi and Skarphéðinn, mentioned above. Some charges – as the assumption that bishop Friðrekr and Þorvaldr Konráðsson begot children together – are even absurd. The Old Norse *Gulapingslög* includes a sentence that might be an allusion: these accusations were never meant to be serious: “þat heiter yki ef maðr mælir um annan þat er eigi ma væra. ne verða oc eigi hever verit. kveðr hann væra koni niundu nott hveria. oc hever barn boret” (*Gulapingslög*). (“It is called an exaggeration (yki) if someone says about another man what he cannot be, nor come to be, nor he has been.”)

If so, it seems inconsistent that baseless and often nonsensical utterances were regarded as the gravest insults.

Bo Almqvist was aware of the contradiction, but again, he had a psychological explanation. During a *níð* situation, he said, the offenders were in such a furious, almost hysterical state of mind, that they could not tell the difference between truth and invention (83).

Folke Ström is sceptical about this argument. Spontaneity might have had a role occasionally, but this was certainly not general. He makes the believable claim that most of the verbal offences and especially sculptural *níð* would have been planned in advance and carried out with a clear head (40).

Ström, however, supports Almqvist's opinion on the ritual and symbolic character of *níð*. He cites a challenging ritual described in the so called *Hednalagen* in Old Swedish that might reveal the background of *níð* scenes in saga literature. This is a legal instruction how a challenge to a duel should happen (42). The fragment, similarly to the Norwegian and Icelandic sources, refers to the consequences of a verbal offence. For example if a man says to another: “þu ær æi mans maki oc eig madher i brysti” meaning “You are no match for a man and you are not a man in your heart!” The offended party is supposed to reply: “I am a man like you” and challenge the offender to a duel. If the challenged man did not appear at the duel, he would be considered a pariah within society, and would be excluded from legal processes. On the other hand, if it was the offender who did not attend, the insulted had the right to perform a *níð* act: he shouted three “*níð calls*” and made a mark on the ground (“þa opar h’ þry nippinggx op oc markar h’ a iarþv”). Ström claims that this ritual combines verbal and pictorial elements. The verbal call stigmatises the other as *níðingr*, while drawing a mark on the ground is a similar symbolic act.

Thereby, Folke Ström was the first to emphasise the generally symbolic nature of *níð*. This is obvious regarding sculptures, but he claimed that *even the verbal offences are symbolic*. I agree with him, especially that verbal symbolism is common in *níð* utterances. For example, accusation of *ergi* is often realised through metaphors such as calling someone a mare (Wayers 27ff).

On the *ergi*-debate Ström says:

The sexual meaning cannot be isolated from the other elements which go to make up the *ergi* concept. *Ergi* in its narrower sexual sense merely constitutes the physical side of a personality type that was regarded deeply contemptible. But the sexual component lent itself to

visual illustration in a form which everyone could understand, and could therefore serve as a concrete expression of the corresponding mental quality: that is what we should call a symbolic presentation. Cowardice is an abstract concept, to which the mind tries to give a visual form which is plainly offensive and at the same time generally valid (45; 18).

Ström claims, the word *argr*, and other accusations of unmanliness worked as a brand: the person was declared as morally depraved. Thereby “*níð* was a terrible and effective weapon” (47; 20). Joaquín Martínez Pizarro agreed with Ström in his 1982 article *On Níð against Bishops*, and reworded his thesis:

(...) *ergi* stands for unmanliness in general, and passive homosexuality is its most obvious manifestation. *Ergi* is a syndrome, the sexual form of which works both as a symptom and a cultural symbol (Pizarro 149).

Summary: Noreen, Almqvist and Ström

By calling the Swedish scholars’ approach historical in the introduction of this chapter, I mean that they founded their method on the belief that the relation between concepts represents relations between real phenomena. So, by finding the way from one concept to another in historical sources, the scholar can reconstruct the facts of real life as they were in past ages. I accept this as a possible approach of *níð* although I disagree with Noreen as he did not consider the historical distance between the sources and his literary criticism (57-58).

Again, Noreen, Almqvist and Ström shared an approach that was built on *concepts*; they thought that all social phenomena can be summarised through concepts, and each concept can be described in a single, concise Aristotelian definition. Similarly to Almqvist (82), I find formulating an exact and universal definition for a complex and diverse social phenomenon such as *níð* problematic. I think these efforts remained fruitless, although an interesting scholarly discussion developed and a valuable examination of the source material was provided.

Towards a Functional Approach: Preben Meulengracht Sørensen

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen devoted a whole book *Unmanly man* to *níð*, first published 1980 in Danish and slightly modified in English 1983, criticising his colleagues' repeated attempt to formally define *níð*. He claims the problem was that they isolated the examples from their context: "The aim has been to describe the concept of *níð* as such, independent of the textual setting in which the insult occurs" (11).

The reason for that is, says he, that Almqvist, Noreen and Ström handled the literary examples as "source material for a tradition which is assumed to be several centuries older than the written texts" (11).

Meulengracht Sørensen, on the contrary, sets himself the aim to examine the texts in the context of the time they were presumably written, the thirteenth and fourteenth century. In opposition to Noreen, Almqvist and Ström, his aim is not to describe the "real" social practices; conversely he chooses to throw light on the contemporary way of thinking:

The text and the tradition is based on formed part of a contemporary conceptual universe which the author and his readers – or the reciter and his audience – had in common. The tradition is seen in the light of the contemporary world view, and from this it is formulated (*Unmanly man* 12).

He wants to determine *níð* as a conceptual fact and its place within the thirteenth and fourteenth century's "conceptual universe". In other words, Meulengracht Sørensen saw his predecessors as representatives of diachronic discourses (folklorists, historians of religion and law, see 11). His ambition was to give a different, synchronic study of the topic. He intends to do this by giving a literary textual analysis of some chosen texts and then to conclude with the conceptual reality.

He is more interested in the medieval Norse ideas than the actual practices, but his approach is nevertheless historical. Still, he was the first to discuss *níð* as a literary motif and to analyse the sources as original, complete literary texts, not as faulty imprints of social practices.

The book *Unmanly Man* consists of three parts: the first part is a theoretical introduction on *níð*, based on legal and literary sources and concluded with a working definition of the term (which is not to be taken as exclusive or universal, 32). The working definition serves as foundation for the next chapters that provide us with a literary analysis of three texts, *Ölkofra þátr*, *Króka-Refs saga* and *Gísla saga*

Súrssonar. In the third part, he connects the literary topic *níð* to the “community behind the text” (13), that is to say, he quotes some trustworthy accounts of sexual defamation from contemporary sagas (*Sturlunga saga*). These maintain that defamation *was* a social institution in the Northern community around the time the literary texts were written.

Meulengracht Sørensen, unlike some of his predecessors, is acutely aware of the historical distance between his medieval sources and modern scholarship, as he points out when discussing the term *níð*: “We must convert the ancient idea into our modern terms” (14).

Apart from his critical attitude, his study is based on the works of the three Swedish scholars; for example, he determined the essence of the insults as effeminacy (declaration of unmanliness), like Ström, and he agreed with him on the symbolic nature of sexual accusations (32). He also accepts the close connection between *níð* and *ergi*, which is Noreen’s invention.

As the sub-title of his book (*concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern society*) indicates, Meulengracht Sørensen focused on the sexual nature of offences just as Noreen. As I mentioned above, Almqvist rejected this sexual accentuation, but here we see a return to this view.

However, Meulengracht Sørensen saved the research from the impasse by raising the main question differently. Instead of seeking the answer for “What is *níð*?” and try to determine *níð* formally and isolated, he rather asked: “What is the *function* of *níð*?” He focused on what role this phenomenon played in the medieval Norse society. He thought the best explanation is connected the folkloristic idea of the *taboo*. He claims: the main function of fiction is to confirm norms by breaking them on an imaginative level (*Unmanly man* 14, 26). Since the value system of Old Norse society was based on male dominance, it was strictly circumscribed how a man should behave. Breaching these conventions was considered to threaten the moral basis of the entire community.

On the other hand, taboo-breaking on a fictional level (for example *níð* scenes in the sagas) can help to confirm norms within the society. Heterosexual behaviour is such a norm, but this is not the only reason why hints of sexual transgression (such as passive homosexuality) occur often in sagas. “Improper” male sexual behaviour was the most obvious symbol of condemned male qualities such as cowardice and deceit. The effect

of non-sexual accusations, for example *seiðr* ‘versed in witchcraft’ can be explained the same way. Such activity, especially in the Christian Middle Ages, was considered as taboo-breaking (19).

In the theoretical introduction Meulengracht Sørensen emphasises that *níð* insults can both include sexual and non-sexual accusations. In practice however, he focuses on the sexual character of *níð*. In the sagas that he analyses he has a tendency not to consider an utterance as *níð* unless it contains clear sexual allusions (43). From this point of view, he returns to the roots of *níð* scholarship. As Noreen, Meulengracht Sørensen was criticised for restricting the concept to sexual insults (Hallberg 93), but was also defended (La Farge 60).

The sexual-non-sexual issue seems to be the *circulus vitiosus* of *níð* research. I think that as is the case with many recurring scholarly issues, it not a real problem but is caused by the conceptual system of the research itself. I intend to return to this question later in the thesis, because I think it can be easily overcome by a shifting of viewpoint.

Summary

In summarising the methods and approaches within *níð* scholarship, we can see that scholars as Noreen, Almqvist and Ström tried first to examine medieval texts, isolate the proper examples, and define the concept based on content and formal criteria. This method could be visualised as straining off a liquid where the obtained essence would symbolise the concise definition. But this method risks the result of an inconsistent system and unproductive debates. Bo Almqvist actually realised the difficulties of essentialism, and suggested considering the situation in which these examples occur, but he did not continue the idea. The turning point was Preben Meulengracht Sørensen’s *Unmanly man*, where he examines the insults in their context, and set the aim to wholly concentrate on the function of *níð*.

My main criticism of the book would be that Meulengracht Sørensen utilised functionalism in his saga analysis, but not in his entire *níð* theory. He criticised other scholars’ historical point of view, and wanted to pursue a literary approach freed from historical tradition, but still ended up with history writing – although of a literary

history.²⁵ The reason for that is mentioned above: he applied functionalism only partially.

THE EXPERIMENT

Up to this point, I have made an attempt to summarise *níð* theories, but now I shall progress to the aim of this thesis which is to explore: what would have happened if Preben Meulengracht Sørensen had been more radical?

Reading Meulengracht Sørensen's book made an impression that he does not take this literary approach seriously. Some of his remarks (13, 33) testify that he understands the word 'literature' in the meaning of 'fiction' as the opposite of 'reality'. He says, for example, that the theoretical chapter of his book tries to define *níð* as "part of the contemporary concepts of reality, thus as a non-literary factor" (13). This means that sagas of Icelanders can be used as somewhat unreliable sources of historical truth, but as a fiction, they do not tell us much about culture and human thinking. For that purpose, we have to rely on other types of texts, for example law books (*Unmanly man* 14ff) and contemporary historical writing as *Sturlunga saga* (*Unmanly man* 79-85). And indeed, he only viewed the analysed sagas within a historical discourse, as opposed to within a literary critical debate.

Here, I disagree. I think it is unfair to expel fiction from collective experience. Fictional works are equally important sources of social experiences and 'conceptual reality' as Meulengracht Sørensen calls it. It would be naive to suppose that legal or historical texts are not human constructions but some kind of imprint of objective reality. As a matter of fact, medieval Norse fictional works and law books have much in common if we consider that neither are records of objective reality. They are intended to tell how reality *should be*. For example, in the sagas of Icelanders, conflicts are

²⁵ The question here is if he succeeded to combine literary functionalism (in the analysis) with a historical view (in the whole) into a consistent approach. I think the *Unmanly man* is quite inconsistent in that way, and Peter Hallberg would agree with me: "P[reben]M[eulengracht]S[ørensen]'s interest is not focused on *níð* from a mainly historical point of view – tradition, religion, law – as has usually been the case, according to him. He wants to discuss his examples in a literary context, 'as a functional part of the saga where they appear' (p 12). But at the same time he applies to them an aspect of literary history 'in a broad sense', 'the relationship of the texts to the social period which created them' (p 13)" (Hallberg 93).

expected to end with value balance. Legal texts are obviously intended to show an ideal world. That is why these legal texts can be so easily involved in literary analysis.

However, we could accept that the main difference between the various disciplines is *how* we interpret a text. But if so, why not attempt to involve modern ideas in the research, such as performance theories? I would like to emphasise: I do not intend to criticise historical approaches of *níð*. They are a fully legitimate treatment of the sources, and I make use of many of their ideas.

However, my reading is not going to try to reconstruct the “conceptual universe” of the examined Old Norse texts. In this case, I do not think it is possible at all. All the observations I make in this thesis (including the historical ones) are influenced by my contemporary worldview. My non-historical attitude corresponds to my belief that I cannot leave my own historical situation in order to enter the “conceptual universe” of past ages. As this is not possible, ideally I can be aware that I am *always* approaching texts according to my current situation, even when I try to be as accurate and realistic as possible.

I am not alone in claiming this. It was Örnólfur Thorsson who revived the issue of the dating of sagas of Icelanders some years ago. He claimed that the locating of the “golden age” of these sagas in the thirteenth century, before the “Commonwealth” period ended in 1262 was influenced by the political movement for Iceland’s independence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He reflected that during the period when Icelanders struggled to achieve political independence, it became especially important to declare these sagas as uniquely Icelandic (Örnólfur Thorsson 36, 42).

Therefore, the best solution is to be aware of the fact that current politics, theories and culture always influence how we read texts written in the past.

But returning to fiction: even if we cannot know concretely how the medieval Icelandic audience used to read these sagas, we should not give up on them. On the contrary, even if sagas of Icelanders were written hundreds of years ago, many of them still interact with our culture; otherwise we would not continue our interest in them.

Reading sagas could be compared to playing chess. Chess became known in Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, around the same time that several manuscripts were written (Murray 420). At that time, a game of chess was a war game,

probably understood as an allegory of a feudalistic battle. There are several indications of this, for example the naming of the pieces (king, queen, knights, bishops, pawns) and the rules: the chess-men's actions are restricted according to their 'rank' within a strict hierarchy.

Today's Western culture is not concerned with this allegory, but we have changed the values associated with the game. For example, chess has a high status in the Western world, almost considered as art, and exceptionally talented players are treated as geniuses. These people can make a living as players, which would have been quite strange in the Middle Ages.

If we would like to write the cultural history of chess, we should deal with several layers of meaning and attitudes. But this fact does not disturb the joy of playing. The game is just as amusing as it was in the fourteenth century.

Speech Acts and Fiction

Although Noreen, Almqvist and Ström concentrated on the formal criteria of *níð*, they did not overlook the intense effect of these insults. Folke Ström drew attention to the fact that "*níð* was a terrible and effective weapon" (47; 20). Ström probably meant this as a metaphor, but actually, the idea that verbal utterances are used as a tool for action, is not unknown in modern philosophy of language.

The Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin made the observation that speech is not only intended to make statements about the world around us but it can be a form of action. According to the book *How to Do Things with Words* he claimed that some of our utterances state facts (Austin called these *constatives*) but they differ from those that perform actions, as the wedding oath 'I do' or the sentence "I name this ship the *Queen Elisabeth*" while smashing a bottle to the stem of a ship (5). Austin called these utterances *performatives*. As the example shows, these sentences are valid only if the circumstances are appropriate.

Unlike constatives, performative utterances cannot be categorised as true or false, which does not mean that such utterances are always successful. When something goes wrong with the utterance, for example the circumstances are not adequate, they are called unhappy or infelicitous (14). Austin claimed that performatives effectuate actions

that he named *speech acts*. For this reason, Austin's initiative is commonly called *speech act theory*.

Austin's aim was to exactly determine the difference between performatives and constatives. This proved to be difficult. As J. Hillis Miller points out in his book *Speech acts in literature* (11-21): Austin failed to establish a clear distinction between these two, as sometimes an utterance can be both, or it is not possible to decide at all. His theory developed in two directions. The first is represented by Searle who claimed that Austin's failure was due to being not good enough at classifying the performatives he discovered. So he did provide a proper "taxonomy of illocutionary acts" (Searle 1-30).²⁶ The other direction includes Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, who both claimed that the reason why Austin failed is that in fact, performative and constative utterances *cannot be* sharply distinguished. In this thesis, I do not have enough space to dwell long on their respective ideas about speech acts but in short, I would agree with the later. My opinion can be summarised as the following: performative and constative are not different *types* of utterances but different *aspects* of language. From a certain aspect, *all* utterances can be considered as performatives.

As we saw the idea of performatives originated from language philosophy but had a great influence on literary theory. The main reason literary theorists such as Derrida disagreed with the original speech act theory was its traditional view on fiction. Both Austin and Searle saw fiction as a "parasite" of 'real' performative utterances. In *How to do things with words* Austin claimed: in order to make a felicitous performative, "I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem" (9). Searle in his essay *The logical status of fictional discourse* called fiction a pseudoperformance (65) that is to say, the author of fiction is only *pretending* to perform illocutionary acts.²⁷ But how can we decide if a text is fictional or non-fictional, if the author is pretending or not? Using our factual knowledge is not always sufficient; so Searle seems to save the situation by rehabilitating the author:

²⁶ This view appealed to Thomas Breidsdorff, see later.

²⁷ A typical characteristic of Searle's positivist view, that he logically separated "serious" and "fictional" utterances even within a fictional piece of work: "Another interesting feature of fictional reference is that normally not all of the references in a work of fiction will be pretended acts of referring; (...) along with the pretended references to Sherlock Holmes and Watson, there are in Sherlock Holmes real references to London and Baker Street and Paddington Station; again, in War and Peace, the story of Pierre and Natasha is a fictional story about fictional characters, but the Russia of War and Peace is the real Russia, and the war against Napoleon is the real war against the real Napoleon" (Searle 72).

(...) the identifying criterion for whether or not a text is a work of fiction must of necessity lie in the illocutionary intentions of the author (...) What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it (*Expression and meaning* 65-66).

Therefore, if the author intended to write fiction, then the text in question is fiction. If the author was committed to refer to actual facts, the text is non-fiction.

Jacques Derrida claimed: the mere fact that signs (utterances) are *iterable* (can be repeated in a different context) overrules Searle's solution:

If one admits that writing (and the mark in general) *must be able* to function in the absence of the sender, the receiver, the context of production, etc., that implies that this power, *this being able*, this *possibility* is *always* inscribed, hence *necessarily* inscribed *as possibility* in the function or the functional structure of the mark (*Limited Inc.* 48).

According to Derrida, the mere possibility of iterability abolishes the borders between fictional and non-fictional:

As soon as [*aussi sec*] a possibility is essential and necessary, qua possibility (and even if it is the possibility of what is named negatively, absence, »infelicity,« parasitism, the non-serious, non-»standard,« fictional, citational, ironical, etc.) it can no longer, either de facto or de jure, be bracketed, excluded, shunted aside, even temporarily, on allegedly methodological grounds (*Limited Inc.* 48).

With this move, Derrida broke away from an old Western tradition starting with Plato²⁸ that declared fiction as non-serious and secondary compared to "objective" writing as law or history. Derrida's argumentation on iterability laid the foundation of

²⁸ In *Republic*, books II., III. and especially X. 595a-608b. *Plato's Republic*. Ed. I. A. Richards. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966. 173-196.

the theory of *performativity* or *performance theory*,²⁹ involving Paul De Man, Stanley Fish and Judith Butler.

Performatives in Sagas – Thomas Bredsdorff

As far as I am aware, only a couple of articles have been written about speech acts in sagas of Icelanders, namely *Speech act, saga and society* by Thomas Bredsdorff and *Speech acts and violence in the sagas* by Frederic Amory. Frederic Amory approaches the examples from a sociolinguistic perspective (*Speech acts and violence* 61). As I would like to focus on the literary aspects of the theory, I do not discuss his article here at length.

Thomas Bredsdorff, on the other hand, provides a literary analysis. He is Searle's follower. He calls Austin's distinction between constatives and performatives "the first stage" of the theory, or the "fundamentalist speech act theory" (Bredsdorff 24), while my approach (see above p. 28), where all utterances can be considered as performatives, he calls the "second stage". He claims:

This second stage may be useful, particularly in opening up the possibilities of sociolinguistic approaches. But a useful tool for the analysis of literature has been lost in the transition from the specific stage one to the universal stage two. A theory that is called upon to explain everything ends up explaining nothing (Bredsdorff 24).

Bredsdorff may have reason to prefer Searle, but I think he is incorrect in discounting the possibility of a literary analysis that regards all utterances as performative. On the contrary, I think such an experiment can be very fruitful. But before we turn to the analysis, I would like to point out some characteristics of Bredsdorff's methods.

Bredsdorff describes a scene of *Njáls saga* (58-68; ch. 21-24) when Unnr, Gunnarr's cousin has divorced her husband, Hrútr, and wants to retrieve her dowry. Hrútr refuses. In order to revive a legal claim on the dowry, a summons should be made either in Hrútr's hearing or at his home, to which, of course, he would not agree.

²⁹ In order to avoid misunderstanding, I would like to point out that in this thesis, I distinguish between the terms *performative* (an utterance that is intended to perform action) and *performativity* (referring to the term of the post-austinian/searlian theories).

Gunnarr is willing to help Unnr, and turns to Njáll for advice. Njáll suggests to him to disguise himself as a travelling merchant called Kaupa-Heðinn and to visit Hrútr. He also advises him to pretend to be interested in the legal process of summoning, and make Hrútr cite the relevant summons and repeat after him as if he wanted to learn about the process. Gunnar does exactly as Njáll told him. Hrútr falls for the trick. He is summoned, Gunnar wins the lawsuit, and Unnr retrieves her money. Bredsdorff condemns Njáll's legal manipulations and points out, that "under any decent rule of law this entire histrionic procedure would have to be considered null and void" (21). He draws the conclusion that the abuse of speech acts like this example indicates a serious moral crisis and corruption in the society Njáls saga was composed. Bredsdorff clearly has the presupposition that Iceland lost its independence in the thirteenth century because of this moral decay. He supposes that there used to be an ideal state of affairs in Old Norse society when nobody abused performatives (28). This view cannot be maintained by sources and is by no means inherent in the text. As a matter of fact, Bredsdorff himself has determined ethical views about Njáll's action and about law in general: he claims that law should be in harmony with his ethics. He tries to suggest these presuppositions are reflective of how Icelanders thought:

The medieval Icelanders tended to interpret this development [of increasing differences in social hierarchy – V. E.] in moral terms. In the good old days a man was as good as his word. The legal spine of society, based on declarative speech acts, was the model of decent behaviour. The decay so often depicted in the family sagas as they approach contemporary times is often represented as a decay in the dependability of words, indeed as a state of affairs where supposedly declarative speech acts no longer function as such (Bredsdorff 28).

First of all, Gunnar's speech act works: as a result of the summoning, Unnr gets her dowry back. Despite that according to modern law, this legal act should be "considered null and void", it does not mean that medieval society was rushing into decline. As a matter of fact, all points to an opposite interpretation that Njáll's advice was bright and he is a wise character in the saga. Bredsdorff seems to realise this, but he argues: the disastrous outcome of *Njáls saga* proves that the manipulation of speech act was considered to be the main cause of moral decay. (Bredsdorff 22). Bredsdorff

ignores a common tendency of fiction that a character's death does not always imply his moral defeat.

Bredsdorff reads *Njáls saga* as if it were a nineteenth century realist novel with a Christian moral lesson (22). At the same time, he disguises his own reading as literary history that reveals how Icelanders saw their own society by the end of the "Commonwealth" period. Thomas Bredsdorff applied Searle's theory in a unique way: he displayed felicitous legal performatives as pillars of morality.

I find Bredsdorff's thoughts remarkable: he might not have emphasised it, but his article is in fact not an application but an ethical *extension* (or version) of speech act theory. This step is not uncommon among many post-searlian thinkers as Felman, Derrida and Sedgwick³⁰, but Bredsdorff's view is unique in the sense that he applies radical formalism to morality:

The Icelandic family sagas, their rhetoric as well as their thematic content (...) are about what the fundamentalist speech act theory was about, that is, speech act theory before it swelled – or perhaps rather: was dissolved – into general sociolinguistics (Bredsdorff 24).

Austin says: if a speech act does not work, it is because of occasional infelicities. Deceptive speech acts are formally infelicitous, so they should not work, claims Bredsdorff. In case that they work, then society's morality has declined. He calls his theory "fundamentalist", but from an ethical point of view I would call him an idealist. *Speech act, saga and society* is an example of a text reading that reflects the author's own worldview and has little to do with historical truth. Thomas Bredsdorff provides us with a specific interpretation of Searle's speech act theory and uses it to maintain a subjective reading of *Njáls saga*.

Níð, Performativity and Gender – Judith Butler's Theory

I do not agree with Bredsdorff as I believe it is possible to use a more general performance theory for literary critical purposes, not only for sociolinguistic research. I

³⁰ "They [Derrida, Felman and Sedgwick] testify, though, to a recognition that Austin's account of performativity has broader implications, particularly of an ethical and political kind" (Loxley 4).

would like to prove that this is possible without concluding with “explaining nothing”. I would prefer to focus on *níð* acts as performative utterances.

Although this is located differently within their system, both Austin (*How to do things with words* 151) and Searle (*Expression and meaning* 14) listed *challenge* as an important illocutionary act. But using the Austinian terminology: what is the perlocution (effect) of *níð* in a saga narrative? What kind of act does it (or tries to) carry out? Or in other terms: what is *níð*’s dramatic function?

To use Meulengracht Sørensen’s idea: the goal of *níð* is humiliation by effeminacy or other hints of transgression, and thereby these insults are intended to symbolically *exclude the other party from community*.

Since sagas of Icelanders often relate conflicts and contention between men, public defamation is very common in these narratives. But beyond that, Meulengracht Sørensen claims, these insults have a more important function. He writes in a paragraph concerning taboo:

The sharply marked distinction between the sexes, and the associated strong emphasis on male ethics and behaviour, widen the field of taboo associated with the contrasts between male and female. The taboo serves to sustain the antithesis; or more accurately, the male role. When the taboo is contravened, as in *níð*, the masculinity so vital to the social system is called in question; and when the breach is subsequently repudiated, as happens over and over again in actuality and in literature, masculinity is reaffirmed (*Unmanly man* 24).

Thus, in a wider context, the ritual insult (*níð*) is intended to confirm the masculine ideal within the community. This paragraph of the *Unmanly man* served as the main inspiration for this thesis: I think, it brings together the most important characteristics of the performative *níð*.

First of all, Meulengracht Sørensen points out that defamation (the *taboo-breaking* as he puts it) should be repeated in order to uphold a norm system. Secondly, he emphasises the deeply gendered quality of the *níð* phenomenon, although he does not directly use the word *gender*.

Judith Butler’s theory about the (re)construction of gender system embraces both of these ideas. *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990, ten years after the *Unmanly man*. Butler’s work is usually classified as feminist theory, but nevertheless criticised and

provoked such classics of gender studies as Simone de Beauvoir or Foucault. Butler points out that many feminist theorists still pursued “truth” while trying to reflect concepts of sex and gender. Simone de Beauvoir’s famous phrase “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir 267), is rooted in the existentialist premise *existence precedes essence* which implies that there is a pre-gendered, natural state of the individual, upon which the socially constructed gender identity is built, as a house upon the foundations. The political aim of feminism is to destroy the house, that is to return to the pre-social, pre-discursive ego (De Beauvoir xxxv), and rebuild it in the “proper” way that makes women to be able to take the position in society they are worthy of by nature. In this narrative, this “original” subject serves as a point of departure to criticise the oppression of women in a patriarchal society.³¹

The problem with the “return to the natural state” is the same as with Bredsdorff’s “ideal Commonwealth morality”: it might serve as a logical starting point, but let’s not deceive ourselves: historically, this state never occurred. Morality, femininity and masculinity are ideals; norms that are impossible to embody (*Gender Trouble* 192). Butler’s gender theory radically breaks away from essentialism when she claims that there is no stable point we could return or refer to when we talk about sex and gender.

But this feminist tradition indicates another contradiction. Butler quotes Monique Wittig (*Gender Trouble* 151-175) who pointed out, that when feminists wanted to fundamentally re-establish women’s rights, their notion of a “woman” (and a “man”) was founded on the heterosexual man and woman. The standard gender-system, the *heterosexual matrix* (*Gender Trouble* 208. 6) is based on a binary opposition and excludes homosexuals, trans-gender and other minorities (*Gender Trouble* viii). Therefore, if feminists intend to re-build the heterosexual gender-system, they create something equally superficial and discriminative as the patriarchal system they challenged in the beginning. In order to avoid discrimination, the lesbian literary theoretician Wittig sees no other solution: it is the heterosexual system that should be destroyed to establish “the possibility of a new humanism” (*Gender Trouble* 162-163).

³¹ It is not difficult to recognise the Rousseauian and marxist “social contract” as the origin of this political rhetoric. The only difference is that the contract is not established between social classes, but between sexes.

Butler is more cautious when it comes to destructive manifesto. She claims that Wittig and other feminists see the heterosexual matrix as a stable, solid unity that oppresses its minorities through physical violence. This is not necessarily so. She claims: direct violence is not the way the system gains legitimacy and power.

But how does the system achieve its legitimacy? According to Butler, heterosexuality is a through-and-through construction, with no stable identity to return to. The standard identity is constructed by a ritual act, a performative that marks the enemy, “the Other” and thereby separates it from the standard. The “Other” is marked as unacceptable and illegitimate for the members of the community. But these non-standard identities are not simply on the periphery or outside of system; they have the most important role: they *create* the category of “We” and thereby the matrix itself.

These performatives occur through action, bodily gestures or utterances, but they share an important attribute: they are temporal (Butler: *Gender Trouble* 180-193). Having no fixed departing point or identity, it is not enough to establish the boundaries between standard and non-standard identities only once. The creative performative should happen over and over in order to uphold the matrix. Masculine identity is no exception. The masculine ideal is never directly available for any man, so masculinity – as heterosexuality – is unstable and incredibly vulnerable.

The system functions by recreating itself in performances (as *níð*), but at the same time, it deliberately conceals its performative character. As Judith Butler emphasises: “Gender is thus a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (*Gender Trouble* 190). Thereby it tries to avoid that its instability would be revealed. The matrix pronounces itself as a permanent and solid unity, but this is an illusion.

This is an important feature of the gender-constructing mechanism; as a matter of fact, it is not physical aggression that provides the heterosexual matrix with the most power, but this illusion. The matrix pretends to be pre-existent, pre-discursive instead of being constructed, and its temporality is disguised as stability and solidity. Bodies that are marked as “the Other” are concealed as permanently and totally unacceptable despite of that their position can change to the opposite by another performative act.

Gender and *ergi*

And here I would like to return to the *circulus vitiosus* of *níð* research: the role of the concept *ergi*. Up to the present, many scholars have been fascinated by this word, and it is difficult to determine its exact meaning. Noreen, Almqvist and Ström focused on the word's sexual connotations, and determined the main meaning as 'sexual perversion', 'homosexuality' which was approved by Meulengracht Sørensen. The latest example of a similar opinion is Gunnar Karlsson's article, published in *Bókmenntajós* in 2006. He claims, that *ergi* refers firstly to cowardice and secondly to male homosexuality (377), where the last is the primary meaning:

Jafnframt verður niðurstaðan sú að samkynhneigð karla hafi verið einna mest áberandi þeirra kynhneigða sem féllu undir *ergi*, þannig að orðið *ergi* hafi getað vísað til hennar einnar án sérstakra skýringa (Gunnar Karlsson 380).³²

This might be right if we insist on defining the meaning of the isolated word. But if we approach the question functionally, it is only the sentence, or, rather the utterance that has an effective meaning. The isolated "word" is an abstract idea; words never occur in situations without context. In practice, *calling* someone *argr* or *ragr* is simply marking him as "the Other", the "Foreign", and challenging him.

Thereby, I think it more useful to approach *ergi* as an aspect of *gender construction* than sexuality.³³ The performative gender is a complex matrix which involves sexuality, but actual sexual behaviour is not the only factor of manliness. Gender-creating rituals do not need to involve homosexual individuals. *Branding* the enemy as such has the same effect, even if the accusation is merely symbolic. I believe, *ergi* accusations in the sagas of Icelanders are in *most* cases symbolic, and *níð* as such is a symbolic ritual. The "Other", i.e. the foreign element is so essential in the process of gender construction, that if it is not at hand, it should be created.

³² I wonder why *níð* scholarship has been so focused on the sexual issue, and especially the male homosexual practices from the very beginning. This may be because this issue has been one of the most subversive taboos in Western Society in the past hundred years. Allusions of homosexual contact are frequent in *níð* utterances, but the special emphasis on this particular issue might be explained by a projection: unconsciously, scholars read their own culture's taboos into the texts.

³³ Ármann Jakobsson states something very similar: "(...) *ergi* may have more to do with a world view than with sexuality, in that it indicates everything unbecoming, villainous and deviant: incest, bestiality, homosexuality, the blurring of gender role, aggressive female lust, shape-shifting and sorcery" (63). The listed qualities all function as the expelled "Other".

In the following chapter, I intend to provide an analysis of *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*. I follow Meulengracht Sørensen's (*Unmanly man*) and Alison Finlay's (*Níð, Adultery and Feud* 166-167) method, focusing on the conflicts and *níð*-acts in the narrative. I consider how a conflict develops of a series of ritual performances, and how branding effects the social status of the participants.

Masculine Identity in (Re-)creation

Rivalry and *Níð* in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*

The plot of *Bjarnar saga* is based on a life-long series of conflicts between two poets, Þórðr Kolbeinsson and Björn Arngeirsson, giving an excellent example of *níð* insults and conflict development. The standard text of the saga was published in the critical edition series *Íslensk fornrit* in 1938 (Below, referred as *Bjarnar saga*). This text is however a reconstruction, as no complete version survived. Apart from two late-fourteenth-century fragments in Árni Magnússon's possession, the saga was copied in a seventeenth-century paper manuscript (AM 551 D α, 4to.). The paper manuscript does not contain the opening five chapters of the saga and a further chapter is missing (Sigurður Nordal lxiii). These parts were lost before the medieval manuscript was copied. In Sigurður Nordal's edition (and in late manuscript copies) the missing beginning was substituted by a passage from the *Bæjarbók* version of Snorri Sturluson's *Separate saga of St Olaf* (AM 71, fol.), which tells about the two poets because of their connection with King Óláfr (*Bjarnar saga* 111; ch. 1). This section is clearly an extract, limited to the poets' travels abroad.

The protagonist of the saga is Björn Arngeirsson, but his rival, Þórðr Kolbeinsson is a better known poet in the historical sources; he is listed in *Skáldatal*, and reported to be the skald of Eiríkr jarl, but also known to compose for the Norwegian king Magnús inn góði (†1047) and Sveinn king of Denmark who died in 1076 (Clunies Ross 31).

Considering the development of the conflict between Björn and Þórðr, I have divided the saga into two parts that are determined by different spaces:

The first part (ch. 1-9) happens mainly abroad, and tells of the primary conflict between the antagonists: Þórðr deprives Björn of his fiancée; in revenge, Björn takes money from Þórðr and humiliates him. The Norwegian king, Óláfr effects reconciliation

between them and they both pledge to keep the agreement. The primary conflict is thereby closed.

The second part (chapters 10-34) takes place in Iceland. This fact is important to emphasise, because the conflict develops differently within the Icelandic social circumstances: without the king's presence, there is no higher authority to reconcile the protagonists. This part can arbitrarily be divided into two further sections:

A. Ch. 10-18. Björn returns to Iceland, but the settlement between Þórðr and himself cannot be held very long. Provocation starts again in form of mocking poetry, verbal and figurative insults. Physical violence is not yet present.

B. Ch. 19-34 with the appearance of physical violence, the boundaries are passed: the conflict becomes serious, and after a failed attempt at reconciliation in chapter twenty-nine, Björn and Þórðr become lethal enemies: after this point, the discord will not stop until one of them dies.

The first nine chapters deal with Björn's youth, his adventures abroad and the basic conflict between him and Þórðr. Þórðr Kolbeinsson's presence in the story is daunting from the beginning. The first chapter describes Þórðr Kolbeinsson as a quarrelsome, unpopular character: "Ekki var Þórðr mjök vinsæll af alþýðu, því at hann þótti vera spottsamr ok grár við alla þá, er honum þótti dælt við" (*Bjarnar saga* 112; ch. 1). He lived in *Hitárnes*, on the coastal area of Borgarfjörður. Björn is introduced as a tall, strong and brave-hearted adolescent, but being 15 years Þórðr's junior, he is an easy target of his mockery. The accounts of their early encounters and „small quarrels" are omitted from the introduction, because of their irrelevance to St Olaf's story (Finlay, Introduction xlvii).³⁴

The lost beginning of the original narrative probably included the story of the first encounter between the two, now impossible to reconstruct. The tension between Björn and Þórðr is however a motif, the young single man versus mature man conflict. The two men's situation is different, but their prospects for a favourable marriage are similar: Björn is a tall and strong, very promising young man which is equilibrated by Þórðr's experience and maturity. Additionally, Þórðr is unmarried, and as the older man, he is trying to break the potential rival as early as possible.

³⁴ „En því get ek eigi þeira smágreina, sem milli fóru þeira Bjarnar og Þórðar, áðr Björn kom til Skúla, at þær heyra ekki til þessarri sögu" (*Bjarnar saga* 112; ch. 1).

In order to protect him against provocation, Björn is sent away to his uncle Skúli to the Borgarfjörður centre, Borg, where he is raised until the age of 18.

The introductive part of the narrative relates two encounters between the poets. The first encounter serves as the main cause of the fatal conflict between Björn and Þórðr, and it occurs as follows: the young Björn starts seeing Oddný “Eykindill” (Isle-candle), Þorkell’s daughter. A merchant ship arrives, and Björn decides to sail to Norway with it. Before he leaves, he asks Oddný’s father for her hand in marriage and Þorkell agrees: the girl will wait for him for three years (*Bjarnar saga* 114; ch. 2). Björn sets off and goes to jarl Eiríkr who receives him warmly; to express his benevolence, he gives Björn a ring. The same summer, Þórðr Kolbeinsson has to travel to Denmark to visit an uncle, but he departs from Iceland too late, and has to spend the winter with the jarl in Norway. Björn and Þórðr suspend hostility in the court, their relation is almost friendly. Once, when Björn is drunk, Þórðr tries to win his confidence. First, he wants to persuade him to go back to Iceland, but Björn intends to follow the jarl in a military expedition. (Þórðr’s behaviour can be interpreted in this way: he tries to persuade Björn to return to Borgarfjörður, where he can control him. He is afraid, that if the young Björn collects experience and wealth, he can easily outshine him on the home turf.) When Þórðr sees that his persuasion is unsuccessful, he convinces Björn to send the ring with him back to Iceland to Oddný to confirm their engagement (*vitja ráðs*).³⁵ As soon as the winter is over, Björn follows the jarl to warfare to Garðaríki (Russia), but Þórðr sails back to Iceland. Instead of confirming the betrothal, as Björn asked him, Þórðr says that Björn gave him the right to marry Oddný if he would die (*vitja ráðs*) and shows the ring as evidence. Björn is heavily wounded in Gardaríki which prevents him from travelling back to fulfil the arrangement. Þórðr spreads the lie that Björn is dead, marries Oddný and they have eight children. Björn is devastated but stays abroad and becomes a great Viking. Þórðr wins this crucial encounter, the woman is his. The motif of a rival tricking away the other’s woman is a basic feature in the “core” skald sagas. Theodore Andersson calls this motif “bride theft” (272-274).

The second encounter is Björn’s revenge. Þórðr’s uncle in Denmark dies and bequeaths him money. He has to sail over to fetch his inheritance. He visits king Ólafr

³⁵ This confirmation of engagement is referred by the expression *vitja ráðs* which has another meaning as well: ‘to fetch the bride’ i. e. to marry her (*Bjarnar saga* 114; note 4); this double meaning is later abused by Þórðr.

in Norway and collects the inheritance. On the way home, he is attacked by Björn, the powerful Viking, at an island called Brenney. Þórðr tries to hide from him shamefully, but Björns finds his hiding-place. Þórðr begs and behaves cowardly in all respects. Björn does not kill him, but takes away his money and ship. This conflict ends with reconciliation between the rivals: the new Norwegian king, Óláfr (who is unfamiliar with Björn) arbitrates between them. As he learns about the reason of the conflict, he adjudges Thordr's money to Björn as a compensation for Oddný. The dishonour of the theft is considered equal to the shame caused by the taking of the woman (*Bjarnar saga* 131; ch. 8). The judgement is favourable to Björn, especially considering that Þórðr has been the king's courtier and protégé. The king takes Björn into his favour, and invites him to stay with his court. As time passes, he comes to like him even more, gives him presents and they part as good friends. Björn travels back to Iceland.

Björn wins this encounter, because he gets the last word in the bride-theft conflict, receives a huge amount of compensation and wins the king's friendship. Yet in the first part we can observe the dialogic structure of encounters: a defamative deed calls for a response.

The second part (chapters 10-34) happens in Iceland. It is only when Björn arrives home that Oddný learns that her ex-fiancé is alive. She is the one that puts into words what light the previous events cast on Þórðr's character: when Oddný confronts her husband about the lie, Þórðr tries to shun the question. Oddný's reaction is the following statement:

“ok enn gørr veit ek nú (...) hversu ek em gefin; ek hugða þik vera góðan dreng, en þú ert fullr af lygi ok lausung”³⁶ (*Bjarnar saga* 135; ch. 10)

This utterance confirms the impression that the previous encounter indicates: treachery is not an acceptable virile attitude, and Þórðr is not a good man (*góðr drengr*) (about this expression, see Gunnar Karlsson 374ff).

Björn is now in Iceland, and plans to stay. We could expect that Þórðr is not happy about this, but shortly after his rival returns to Iceland, the most unexpected thing happens: Þórðr invites Björn to stay in his house even though Oddný dislikes the idea.

³⁶ “(...) now I see more clearly what sort of marriage I have made. I thought you a good man, but you are full of lies and deceit” (Finlay *The Saga of Bjorn* 23)

Scholars have interpreted Þórðr's behaviour in various ways. His motivation might be to keep an eye on his enemy, but it is also possible that he wants to provoke him.

At that point, another unfavourable opinion about Þórðr's character is put in the mouth of another woman; Þórdís, Björn's mother warns her son:

Þórdís mælti: "Þat mun sýna, at ek mun ekki mjök talhlýðin. Hugðu svá at, Björn," segir hon, "at því flára mun Þórðr hyggja, sem hann talar sléttara, ok trú þú honum eigi." (*Bjarnar saga* 138; ch. 11)³⁷

Björn, nevertheless, accepts the invitation and moves to Þórðr and Oddný. Living in the same household sours the relationship between the antagonists, just as the women predicted: the following chapters abound with insulting poetry. The narrative of these chapters is loosely attached through verses of occasional poetry. This anecdotal middle part (chapters ten to twenty-six, according to Nordal, lxxv) was considered the main aesthetic defect of the saga:

(...) allt þetta miðbik er í molum, óskipulegt og samhengislaust. (...) Um heilmildirnar að miðhluta sögunnar er óþarft að fjölyrða. Hann er 17 kapítular, og í þeim eru tilfærðar 28 vísur, sem mjög víða eru kjarni frásögunnar. Enginn skáldsöguhöfundur myndi heldur setja saman svo sundurlausa og óskipulega frásögn. Undirstaðan hlýtur að vera munnmæli, sem hafa verið í molum, og höfundur veit ógjörla, í hvaða röð hann á að segja frá þessum "smágreinum", né hve langt líður á milli atburðanna. Það er eins og honum hafi fallizt hendur að reyna að steypa þessu saman í verulega heild, það er þóf og stapp, sem engin stígandi er í. (...) Höfundurinn ræður ekki við að steypa úr efninu samfellda heild. (Sigurður Nordal lxxvi, lxxix).³⁸

I am however most interested in this middle part: the question-answer structured insults are the most obvious example of a ritual *níð* encounter. I intend to look closer at

³⁷ "It will be evident that I'm not very easily swayed by talk. Bear in mind, Björn, that the more fairly Thord speaks, the more falsely he thinks, so don't trust him" (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Björn* 25).

³⁸ Nordal also called the saga "primitive" (*frumstæð*, Nordal xc), and the narrative "immatureness" served as the main argument to list *Bjarnar saga* as one of the earliest sagas of Icelanders, written around 1215-20 (Sigurður Nordal lxxxix). About the dating, see Bjarni Guðnason and *Interpretation* by Alison Finlay.

chapter twelve, where this poetic battle takes place. This single chapter includes not less than ten mocking strophes (verses number three to twelve in the saga).

Shortly after Björn moves to Þórðr and Oddný, Þórðr gives the order to his wife to milk the sheep while the servants are away. Milking was the task of servant girls in the Icelandic household and an unworthy activity for the lady of the house (Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 27; Jochens 117). Oddný denies, and responds that she is willing to do that if Þórðr mucks out the sheep-pens (which is an equally degrading work for the master). Þórðr becomes angry and slaps her in the face. Björn is present, and composes a strophe:

3. Snót biðr svein enn hvíta
svinn at kvíar innan,
reið esa Rínar glóðar
ranglót, moka ganga;
harðla nýt, sús heitir,
Hlökk miðs vita Rökkva,
sprund biðr út at andar,
Eykindill, mik skynda.³⁹
(*Bjarnar saga* 140; ch. 12)

Note that Björn calls Oddný respectfully *snót* (Zoëga 394), and praises her with several kennings; to Þórðr, in contrast, he refers as “sveinn in hvíti” (‘white boy’). This is definitely an offence: the word ‘white’ refers to paleness that is associated with fear and cowardice (*Bjarnar saga* 140; note 3.b). According to Ólsen, it is also an effemination : light complexion was linked to women because they spent more time inside than men (Ólsen 28-29). The insult serves the purpose of branding the enemy, and is, again, symbolic; calling Þórðr *sveinn* (‘boy’) is clearly metaphoric, because Þórðr is older than Björn (the antagonists are supposed to be 30 and 45 years old at that time). The purpose of the insult is obvious: this performative is an attempt to brand Þórðr as an unworthy member of men’s society, as someone too incompetent to be regarded as man of full

³⁹ “The lady bids the lily-white/ lad muck out the bryes;/ wise wearer of Rhine-fire,/ the woman, speaks not wrongly./ The handy girl, the Hlokk of / home of Rokkvi’s beacon,/ called Isle-Candle, bids me/ come to the porch, quickly.” (Transl. Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 27-28).

value. Later on in the saga, this performance is repeated; “white boy” becomes a recurring epithet for Þórðr.

Þórðr does not wait long with the answer: when he comes into the house one evening, he sees Björn to jest with his servant girls and tease them. He says:

4. Út skaltu ganga,
illr þykki mér
gleymr þinn vesa
við griðkonur;
sitr þú á öptnum,
es vér inn komum,
jafnauðigr mér, út skaltu ganga.

Björn responds immediately:

5. Hér munk sitja
ok hótt vel kveða,
skemmta þinni
þjóðvel konu;
þá mun okkr eigi
til orðs lagit,
emk heill í hug,
hér munk sitja.
(*Bjarnar saga* 140-141; ch. 12)⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 28-29. These verses seem to be out of sequence: they have not much thematic connection to the previous strophes, even their metre is different. A similar pair of *fornyrðislag* strophes is cited later in the saga (*Bjarnar saga* 148-149; ch. 14), which repeat a similar “Út skaltu ganga” and “Kýrr munk sitja” lines referring to some unfair bargain between them. Both Sigurður Nordal (141; note 1) and Alison Finlay (*The Saga of Bjorn*, 28, note 66) suppose, that these verses refer to the lost introduction of the saga including the “small quarrels” between Björn and Þórðr. Although I do not have any proof of it, I think, these verses are out of sequence simply because they belong to a cycle of occasional poems that have no connection to the Björn Hítðælakappi-tradition. The saga author connected poems from various sources to create the dialogic “poetic duel”. If this assumption is true, it might cast a different light to the whole visit-scene. The author of the saga might have put the enemies in the same household merely to incorporate these short, entertaining poems into the saga and amuse his audience.

The love triangle within the household creates more tension; another encounter occurs, when Þórðr comes home one evening, and hears Björn and Oddný talking together. He tries to overhear them. Björn notices him and composes this verse:

6. Eykindill verpr öndu
orðsæll ok vill mæla,
brúðr hefr baztar ræður
breksöm, við mik nekkvat;
en til Jarðar orða
öleyrar gengr heyra
lítill sveinn ok leynisk
launkárr ok sezk fjarri.⁴¹
(*Bjarnar saga* 141-142; ch. 12)

The verse states the same contrast between Oddný and Þórðr as in verse three, and marks him as a ‘little boy’. The repetition of a similar expelling metaphor makes this a branding ritual. The verse adds to the situation too: Björn provocatively exposes, that he is aware of Þórðr’s presence and depicts him slyly sneaking to overhear the conversation. The described scene does not indicate a straight and honest character, and undoubtedly supports the defamatory metaphor. Þórðr does not like this portrait of himself, and answers with another provocation: he takes his wife on his knee and kisses her, to see how Björn would react. Thereby Þórðr reminds of his biggest triumph over his enemy: Oddný became his wife, not Björn’s:

7. Muna mun Björn, at Birni
bauga Grund ór mundum,
snót en snerriláta,
slapp Hítðælakappa;
skapat vas mér, en mjórar
muna þjótr konu njóta,
ráð es slíkt til snúðar,
sveigar þöll at eiga.⁴²

⁴¹ Panting, the much-praised/ imperious Isle-Candle/ tries to tell me something;/ her talk best pleases me./ But at the words of ale-horn’s/ Jord, is listening/ a little lad, who lingers/ lurking, at a distance (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Björn*, 29).

(*Bjarnar saga* 142; ch. 12)

By the boasting, Þórðr incautiously exposes himself to a counter-attack; Björn can namely also tell about events that Þórðr would probably want to forget: his humiliation at Brenney. He describes how Þórðr trembled of fear, and run away as a scared boy:

9. Muna mátt hitt, at hattar
halland, vann ek grandí,
lítill sveinn, of leiti
látprúðr hvatt þú dúðir,
ok frá byrjar blakki
brátt, sem orka máttir,
annars snauðr en æðru
ills kunnandi runnuð.⁴³
(*Bjarnar saga* 143; ch. 12)

Björn expresses, that he payed Þórðr back for the bride-theft, and Þórðr's reputation has been declining since then:

10. Hefnt telk þess, at þessa
þornteigar gekkt eiga,
þín es í þurrð at einu,
Þórðr, vegsemi, skorðu;
ér á Oddaeyri
undan mínum fundi
brúar und bakka lógum,
Brenneyja lóguð, skreyja.⁴⁴
(*Bjarnar saga* 144; ch. 12)

⁴² From Bjorn, Bjorn remembers, / the bracelet-ground, proud lady,/ from the hero of Hitardale's/ hands has slipped now./ For me the headband-fir-tree's/ fated; the rogue won't have her./ the slender maid I've married;/ mine, too, the advantage (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 29-30).

⁴³ You'll recall, your cap's land/ keenly you shook, noble/ little lad, on the hillside;/ less harm I endured./ And from the wind-steed speeding/ swift as legs could take you/ you ran, in raging temper,/ robbed of all but panic (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 30)

⁴⁴ I think it avenged that/ the thorn-ground's prop you married./ Your honour now only/ ebbs, Thord, and dwindles/ since by a bridge you grovelled/ in Brenneyjar, to dodge me,/ under a bank, dishonoured,/ on Oddaeyr, you braggart (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 30).

Björn continues to assault him, calls him a coward again and says that Þórðr's spitefulness (*gráleikr*) was well payed back with the humiliation:

11. Sátt við, sveinn enn hvíti,
sviptr auði og giptu,
áðr vask odds við hríðir,
öfund í Sólundum,
þás raungetinn reyttak,
rusilkvæðr, af þér bæði,
heldr vas gráleikr goldinn
gauri, knörr ok aura.⁴⁵
(*Bjarnar saga* 144; ch. 12)

A poetic competition recalling past great deeds is traditional in Old Norse literature: this genre is called *mannjafnaðr*, and has some famous examples as in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, where Sinfjötli and Guðmundr engage in such a duel, or *Hárbarðsljóð*, where Þór and the disguised Óðinn are competing. The reminiscence of heroic deeds can easily change into mutual insults (*senna*) in these duels, but the contest has an essential feature: they are always dialogic. A challenge is followed by a response or counter-attack from the antagonist, and the other man answers.

Björn and Þórðr's case is not an exception, at least in the beginning of the encounter. But in his last answer, the narrator lets Björn attack uninterruptedly. Five verses are cited as a response, while Þórðr remains silent. Concerning this inequality of insults, I would like to remind of the *jus talionis* principle in the *Grágás* chapter (above, p. 8): the law book provides the offended party with the right to defend himself, in front of the Althing or with equally defamatory utterances (*hefna orðe orðz*, *Staðarhólsbók* 391, Appendix 79-80. *Bjarnar saga* emphasises the importance of *balance* in poetic duels as well: in the twenty-third chapter, Björn and Þórðr engage in another poetic contest in public, where they compose verses about each others' wives. After both poets recite the poems, Þórðr asks his sons, Arnór and Kolli how they liked the competition.

⁴⁵ Lily-white lad, though stripped of/ luck and wealth in Solundir –/ I've often been in battle –/ envy you avoided,/ when, I, my talents tested,/ took from you, doggerel-maker –/ richly repaid for cunning/ the wretch – ship and cargo (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 31).

Arnór disapproves it: “Víst líkar mér illa, ok eigi um slíkt sætt”⁴⁶. But Kolli, who is later presented as a very remarkable young man, disagrees: “Eigi sýnisk mér svá; mér þykkir jafnskapnaðr, at verki koma verka á mót”⁴⁷ (*Bjarnar saga* 174-175; ch. 23). In the visitor-scene, the balance-principle is transgressed; Björn’s offense is comprehensive and overwhelming, even beyond measure. Each of the four strophes regarding the Brenney-encounter is a heavy blow on Þórðr’s self-esteem. Björn repeatedly brands him as an impotent coward (*sveinn inn hvíti, lítill sveinn*), calls him a bad poet (*rusilkvæðr* in verse 11), while he uses the opportunity to show that he is an excellent poet. We should not forget the dramatic character of the scene. This is the first time that Þórðr’s wife and servants learn about his dishonour and shameful behaviour at Brenney. Björn’s performance publicly undermines Þórðr’s social identity in the most important fields: firstly, he deprives him of the image of a potent man, secondly, he reduces him to silence as a poet, and considering the situation, he humiliates him as master of the household in front of his family and servants. But reminding him of the Brenney-episode is not enough for Björn. He tops it with the following utterance:

12. Þá mun þunnrar blæju
 þöll vestarla und fjöllum,
 Rindr vakði mik mundar,
 manns þíns getu sanna,
 ef gæti son sæta
 sunnu mars við runni,
 vón hétk rétrrar raunar,
 ríklunduð mér glíkan.⁴⁸
 (*Bjarnar saga* 145; ch. 12)

Where Björn predicts that Oddný is going to give birth to a boy similar to him. This comes true later, when Kolli inn prúði, the brave and good-looking boy is born; Björn hints at several times that he is Kolli’s father, and he was begotten during the time Björn enjoyed Þórðr’s hospitality. The indication, that his wife cheated on him humiliates

⁴⁶ “I certainly do not like it, and this is not to be borne” (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 57).

⁴⁷ I don’t find it so. I think the balance is even, since one poem counters the other (ibid.).

⁴⁸ Tree of gauzy garments,/ gold-Rind west under mountains,/ who waked me, will confirm/ the worst fears of your husband,/ if soon the spirited lady’s/ son by bush of sea-sun/ is born – I’ve promised perfect/ proof – in my image (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 32).

Þórðr in the husband's role. Björn's voice prevails in chapter twelve, and he overwhelmingly wins the encounter.

The twelfth chapter of *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* is an excellent example of a dialogic *níð* ritual. Even though written in poetry, it is structurally alike the duel challenge described by *Hednalagen* (above, p. 20). The challenger questions the other's manliness and the challenged tries to demonstrate his virile image by another accusation, thereby questioning the provoker's masculinity, and so on: each encounter between the two is a single battle fought in the long war of gender construction: each poetic duel entails the destruction and reconstruction of the Masculine.

As the structure of the middle chapters abounds with insulting poetry, prosa is indeed secondary in these chapters, just as Sigurður Nordal remarks. Its main function is to link the otherwise slightly related verses. Nordal considered this "loose" narrative structure imperfect, childish and primitive. He criticised that the chronology is inaccurate and the narrative has little dramatic value: it does not prepare for the grand finale of the saga. He claims that *Bjarnar saga* is overmatched if we compare it to Snorri Sturluson's polished historical narrative style (Nordal xc).

I think, Nordal passes an unfair judgement on the aesthetic value of *Bjarnar saga*'s structure. There plot is methodically arranged, but not in a chronologic order as Nordal requires. The author of the saga probably collected poems from various sources and created a dialogic provocation-response-provocation structure that captivates and holds the attention of the audience. If it is read as a historical work, it might seem unstructured and random, but we should not forget, that the saga was probably read aloud, which created an almost theatre-like atmosphere. The lively encounters and poetic duels between Björn and Þórðr must have entertained the listeners greatly, which was certainly the author's purpose when he composed *Bjarnar saga*. Alison Finlay does not agree with Nordal either. She claims, too, that the composition of the saga is not as arbitrary as it seems; "The author is not attempting a chronological account of the verbal attacks in the order of their composition, but placing them to suit his artistic purposes." Besides the dialogic structure of the conflicts, Finlay points out that the narrative shows a "pattern of an exchange of verbal insults which grows increasingly serious" (*Níð, Adultery* 171, 168) and ultimately leads to Björn's death (see also Finlay, *Monstrous* 30-31). In that sense, the "loose" middle part prepares well for the dénouement.

I agree with Finlay and would like to add that it is the asymmetry of the insults that leads to increasing aggression: Björn wins most of the encounters in the middle part of the saga which paradoxically leads to his downfall. Now, let's turn back to the story to see what happens after Björn leaves Þórðr's farm.

After a couple of poetic insults, where Þórðr has to pay a large amount of compensation (Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 39, note 96.), an obscene sculpture is found on Þórðr's property. The sculpture (described above p. 11) depicts him engaging in a homosexual act with another man, where Þórðr is in the passive role. An obscene poem (Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 40, note 99.) composed by Björn on the figures confirms the suspicion that he erected the sculpture. The sculpture is an insult of a kind that was called *tréníð* in the Norwegian legal sources; through the accusation of passive homosexuality, it is a reference to cowardice and unmanliness. The sculpture fits into the row of accusations expressed by the metaphors *sveinn inn hvíti* and *lítill sveinn*, it is in fact the repetition of the same accusation: *ergi*. The main difference is, however, that the metaphors are tropological, obscure allusions, but the sculpture has a transparent meaning, it is a stronger expressed *níð*. Furthermore, *tréníð* is not an ephemeral verbal utterance; it can be seen by anyone. Björn has to pay compensation, but only the fifth of the amount that Þórðr paid for the previous one. The compensation is not enough to balance out the dishonour that happened to Þórðr, which makes Björn the winner again.

After this especially heavy insult, the conflict moves to the next level; Þórðr lies in wait for Björn to kill him. Up to this point, no physical insult occurred between the antagonists, despite of that Björn had the opportunity to hurt or kill Þórðr at Brenney, but he let him go. This boundary line, "from words to deeds" marks the last part of the narrative, from the eighteenth chapter to the final encounter. Alison Finlay also draws the line at the *tréníð* incident: "it marks (...) the point where physical violence takes over from verbal abuse as the major currency of the feud" (*Níð, Adultery* 171).

Of course, Þórðr does not contradict his character, and he arranges it so, that he does not have to take part in the attack, but instigates his two kinsmen to kill Björn for him. His relatives attack Björn and his uncle, but Björn kills them. Björn composes a verse (verse 21.) about the encounter, and he makes clear that Þórðr involved his relatives because he does not dare to fight with him in a duel. He calls Þórðr *ætna eyðir*, food-diminisher, referring to Þórðr's miserliness with food when he was his guest (see

matníðingur, Zoëga 288) and *kvenna kneytir* ('woman-presser', Finlay, *The Saga of Björn* 43) referring to that he had hurt his wife. None of these metaphors show Þórðr as a respectable *man*.

Chapter nineteen tells us about when Kálfr illviti changes sides, from first supporting Þórðr to becoming good friends with Björn. Kálfr even rents a farm from Björn, and he lives there with his son, Þorsteinn. But the friendship does not last long. Þorsteinn Kálfsson attacks Björn by surprise, instigated by Þórðr, and Björn kills him. At the end of the chapter the saga author summarises: "Ok hefir nú Björn drepit þrjá men fyrir Þórði ok gört alla ógilda at lögum réttum" (*Bjarnar saga* 168; ch. 19). Despite of Björn's all efforts, and thanks to Þórðr's intrigues, Kálfr too becomes Björn's enemy.

Grámagaflím is the next *níð* performative in the saga; this longer poem seems at first inconsistent with the other poetic insults in the saga. At first sight, it is difficult to understand why it is a heavy offense; instead of accusing Þórðr or mentioning some shameful event he was involved in, Björn tells this story about Þórðr's origin: Þórðr's mother went to the seashore and found a rotten fish. She ate it, became pregnant, and gave birth to Þórðr. This offense is quite peculiar among the other poetic *níð* utterances, which is not as common as calling someone a little boy. I intend to look at this poem in the next chapter.

After the twenty-fourth chapter, there is a string of physical encounters, where Þórðr attempts to get Björn killed: first, he hires two assassins to murder him, but Björn kills both (*Bjarnar saga* 175-176; ch 24). Shortly after this, Björn goes to visit a relative. And indeed, on the way home Þórðr and five men attack him. He kills two and strikes at Þórðr, who dodges the blow like a coward, and lets Björn go home undisturbed.

When Björn visits a sister, Þórðr lies in wait for him, this time with nine men. They surround him, but he jumps into the Hítará river and swims across with all his weapons. A man throws a spear at him which hits him in the thigh. Björn pulls it out and throws it back, killing two men. Þórðr is very dissatisfied.

He does not give up though and finds a wealthy and mighty ally to help to get rid of his enemy. The man is called Þorsteinn Kuggason, and the news about the alliance is wide-spread. The same winter, Þorsteinn Kuggason is on the way to yule feast with his wife and company when they get into a snowstorm, close to Björn's farm.

They have no choice but to stay at his house. Björn wins his friendship in his clever, but in a straightforward way. In the end, they spend yule at Björn's farm. This incident increases both Björn's and Þorsteinn's reputation. Þorsteinn offers to mediate between Þórðr and Björn. Þórðr seems to be willing to accept reconciliation.

It is in the second reconciliation-scene in chapter twenty-nine when the dramatic tension reaches its culmination point: Björn and Þórðr are by this time mortal enemies and the question is: is there a way to solve this deeply rooted conflict? As a result of Þorsteinn Kuggason's mediation, both Þórðr and Björn show willingness to reconcile. They almost succeed to agree, when Þórðr comes up with an odd demand: he wants to hear all the poems they have composed about the other, to be sure that the insults balance out each other (which is another reference to the *jus talionis* principle described in *Grágás*. Þorsteinn is not happy about the suggestion, but he does not prevent it. They recite the verses, and it turns out that Björn had composed one verse more. Þórðr insists to compose one more to be even. Björn finally gives the permission, but on the stipulation that no open slander can be in the verse. Þórðr nevertheless composes an insult indicating cowardice (*hvítmál*) and passive homosexuality (*með stjöl breiðan*) which is equal to a very direct accusation of *ergi*, judged from Björn's reaction. This incident reopens the conflict and stir up hatred between them. The reconciliation fails and it is clear that there is no way to solve their conflict in a peaceful way.

Most of the *níð* encounters in the saga are overwhelmingly won by Björn; Þórðr, on the other hand, gets mostly the worst which leads to unbalance. The unbalance in a *níð* dialogue increases the physical aggression, as Alison Finlay points out. The intensification of conflict is also indicated by the increasing number of men involved in the assaults: Þórðr attacks with two men, then with five and nine. For a last, fatal encounter, Þórðr collects a large troop to kill Björn. Kálfr illviti and Dálkr join him as well. Björn has an eye disease which causes that he does not see well. They attack him close to his farm when he is on the way to his horses, unprepared for a fight. Þórðr's group includes two dozen armed men, they are overpower Björn whose only companion is a fifteen year old boy, and his only weapon is a pair of scissors used to cut horses' manes. Björn's loneliness, powerlessness and bad sight reminds of a motif of the tragic hero that has to face impotence through no fault of his own; Björn also remarks about his weapon: "Illt sverð á hér góðr drengr" ('Here a good man has bad sword.' *Bjarnar*

saga 199; ch. 32). Where sword can interpreted as a phallic symbol. The pair of the bad sighted, helpless hero and a powerless young boy can remind us Bersi and Halldór “í lamasessi” in *Laxdæla saga* (*Laxdæla saga* 76; ch. 28).

Just before they attack them, Björn sends the boy away to save him. The last verbal encounter between the antagonists occurs in chapter thirty-two: after Björn killed two men and crippled one, he provokes Þórðr by saying: “Seinn til slíks móts, lítill sveinn”⁴⁹; thus repeating the defamatory epithet he gave Þórðr. “Sá skal þér þó nú nær standa í dag,” answers Þórðr, “ok höggva þik klækishögg.”⁵⁰ But Björn responds: “Þau ein muntu höggva meðan þú lifir”⁵¹. Here is a play with the double meaning; as Þórðr abused Björn’s words in the beginning of their conflict (*vitja ráðs*) so turns Björn Þórðr’s words against him.

Björn defends himself with the scissors, but they kill him.

But Þórðr’s victory is not glorious. The respected Þorsteinn Kuggason, who once was Þórðr’s ally, controls compensation on Björn’s behalf, and he makes him pay an enormous sum of nine hundred ounces (Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 83; note 207) for Björn’s death and as ransom to save himself and Kálfr illviti from full outlawry. Oddný falls into depression because of Björn’s death, and never recovers from it, although she lives long after that. At the end, Þórðr wishes that Björn was alive, “and he himself should have the same love from his wife as before” (Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 80). Þórðr’s punishment is to see his wife every day withering because of him. There is a symmetry in the antagonists’ fate: as Björn was hounded by Þórðr’s presence from his early life, Björn has effect on Þórðr’s life, marriage and reputation even after his death. This demonstrates that the (re)construction of manliness is continuous: it cannot be avoided just because the antagonist is physically not present any more.

I think, the previous chapters illustrate how *níð* as a *process* functions. In a duel of insults, one antagonist accuses, and the other responds with similar offenses. Each of these accusations is a statement about what “we” the “Truth” is *not*, and thereby it

⁴⁹ “You come late to such a meeting, little lad”

⁵⁰ This is a slip of tongue; Þórðr wanted to threaten Björn with a *klámhögg*, a struck from behind on the buttocks, which was considered shameful, because it indicated that victim intended to flee (Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 77; note 197). It also implies passive homosexuality and *ergi*, because it means that the victim could not have defended himself against rape either. The man mutilated in this way was deprived of his manhood (Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly man* 68). *Klækishögg* on the other hand means “dastardly blow” (Zoëga 243).

⁵¹ “Those are the only blows you will strike,” said Bjorn, “as long as you live.” (Transl. Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 77)

determines its real subject: what qualities and individuals are considered being *within* the boundaries of the Masculine and which are expelled from this category.

The duellers, however, are captives of Time: when Björn utters an insult, he can merely make an *attempt* to expel his rival and increase his own reputation: Þórðr can return the offense, thereby restoring his own image as a man, and question Björn's capabilities. That is why it is important, who gets the last word in the poetic encounters. The presentation of "the real Man" is a pitfall, because it is not a stable entity; its Truth is merely constituted temporarily. That means that Truth at any time is not more than the *last felicitous utterance*. A man is not less and not more a man than his last felicitous performance. Björn and Þórðr might seem to execute the duel, but in fact, the duel *creates* them as men.

Each performance carries great danger for them, and being overwhelmed by the other party is not the only way to be defeated. The demonstration of manliness carries the risk of an *infelicitous performance*. Þórðr's last tongue slip is an excellent example of that. The mistake he makes is listed by Austin as a *misfire*, a *flaw*⁵², because the utterance is not executed correctly. This causes his performance to become unfelicitous. And a public, unhappy performance can never be taken as something that never happened. On the contrary; Þórðr's utterance can be used as a weapon against him, just as the spear that Björn throws back to his offenders; to be outwitted it is more humiliating than losing in a straight attack. The opponents expose themselves completely during the ritual, and they risk to lose all reputation they have built up from their young adulthood, but they also have the opportunity to gain more. An interesting feature of the duel is, as I mentioned above, that it seems to be constant and never-ending; even when there are great efforts made to end the conflict between Björn and Þórðr, the attempts of reconciliation remain fruitless (*Bjarnar saga* ch. 29). The challenge-response series is extremely difficult to end, because this structure provokes its continuity.

Up to this point, I have tried to give a general idea on how single *níð* insults and *níð* as a dialogic process challenges, destroys and reconstructs the Masculine. But Butler talks about an important feature of the constructed gender that provides its authority and power: illusion. Illusion is the mechanism through which the gender matrix conceals its constructed nature and states itself as genuine and original. If Butler is right, we should

⁵² Infelicities, type B.1, Austin 15, 35-36.

be able to find some “flaw”, or contradiction within the text where the illusion, the “lie” unveils itself. The question is if we can catch illusion in the very act. To look into this, I arbitrarily chose a performative, a poetic act from *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* for close reading: the poem called *Grámagaflím* (The Grey-belly Satire). In the following chapter, I discuss this performance in detail, try to put it into “slow motion” to find out how this single act of *níð* works, and how the illusory mechanism is put into action.

A Butlerian Reading of *Grámagaflím*

The poem *Grámagaflím* appears in chapter twenty, after the first physical assault, but in a context of episodes that all cast positive light on Björn. As I mentioned above, chapter nineteen tells us about Björn’s renter, Kálfr illviti. Þórðr instigates Kálfr’s son, Þorsteinn to kill Björn. Kálfr assaults Björn, but is slain. Since the attack was committed by surprise, Björn does not pay compensation for Þorsteinn’s death; Björn acts according to law, and apparently strengthens his reputation, but the unlucky incident changes Kálfr illviti from his friend to a mortal enemy.

The twentieth chapter relates further incidents that create tension around Björn. In the beginning of the chapter Björn eavesdrops on Þorkell Dálksson and his servant, who compare the insulting poetry composed by the rivals, Björn and Þórðr, on each other. This element, again, brings to mind the genre of *mannjafnaðr* where their poetic achievements are set against each other. The poem *Grámagaflím*, composed by Björn on Þórðr, is not put in the mouth of Þorkell or the servant, the narrator quotes it himself:

Fiskr gekk á land,
en flóð á sand,
hrognkelsi glíkr,
vas á holdi slíkr;
át einaga
ylgr grámaga,
meinblandit hræ;
mart’s illt í sæ.

Óx brúðar kviðr
frá brjósti niðr,

svát gerðu eik
gekk heldr keik
ok aum í vömb,
varð heldr til þömb.

Sveinn kom í ljós,
sagt hafði drós
auðar gildi,
at hon ala vildi;
henni þótti sá
hundbítur þars lá,
jafnsnjallr sem geit,
es í augu leit.⁵³

(*Bjarnar saga* 168-69; ch. 20)

The quotation is introduced with the sentence „En þetta er í flíminu” (“And this is in the satire”). According to Finlay, this may suggest that only a part of the poem is quoted (*Monstrous* 38). The second stanza has only six lines which also suggest that some more lines got lost.

The servant says he has never heard an equally offensive poem (“kvazk ekki jafnillt heyrt hafa”), but Þorkell claims that another poem(s) called *Kolluvísur* that Þórðr composed about Björn is even more derisive. The servant does not know this poem. Þorkell states that if someone quotes it in the hearing of Björn, he will lose his immunity.⁵⁴ But the temptation is huge, and Þorkell cites the poem without knowing about Björn’s presence. At this moment, Björn steps forward and kills Þorkell for his audacity. Þorkell’s father, Dálkr turns to Þórðr for help, but the court refuses his claim and he cannot gain compensation: “ok hlýddi vörn sú, ok ónýttisk málit fyrir Þórði” (*Bjarnar saga* 171; ch. 20).

⁵³ In Alison Finlay’s translation: “A fish came to land/ with the flood on the sand,/ a lump-sucker seeming,/ slimy flesh gleaming./ She-wolf of the gown/ gulped grey-belly down,/ poisoned; you’ll see/ bad things in the sea./ Her belly increased/ below her breast/ so the oak of the girdle/ walked with a waddle,/ sore in the womb, swelled like a balloon./ A boy was born./ She had to warn/ the man wealth-winning;/ the birth was beginning./ Fondly eyeing/ the dog-biter, lying,/ his eyes she thought/ brave as a she-goat.” (*The Saga of Bjorn* 51)

⁵⁴ Although earlier in the story (see *Bjarnar saga* 154; ch. 16), this is decreed about the rivals only, not about any third person.

Here, as in the previous chapter, the outcome is temporarily favourable for Björn, but because of Þórðr's intrigues, he gains another enemy: both fathers, Kálfrillviti and Dálkr support Þórðr in the final confrontation, where Björn is defeated. Thus, this episode is the next narrative step towards the tragic dénouement.

The narrator is undoubtedly partial towards Björn, as he quotes a derisive poem that he composed but the one composed about him is left out. This leads to an ambivalent narration also pointed out by Finlay: "Paradoxically [...] the poem that is not said to be recited is quoted in the text, while the one that is said to be recited is not quoted" (*Monstrous* 29). The Kolluvísur may be more offensive than *Grámagaflím*, but the narration presents Björn as the winner of the defamation contest since the reader is in the same situation as the servant initially – he cannot compare the grey-belly satire with an untold libel.

There are several comments in the prose that provide an interpretation of the poem. Firstly, considered the evaluation given by the servant, *Grámagaflím* is to be taken as an especially gross insult. The prose introduction describes the content, it points out that the emphasis of the fragment is on Þórðr's partially non-human origin: "væri hann ekki dála frá mönnum kominn í báðar ættir" (*Bjarnar saga* 168; ch. 20).

Except for the prose interpretation, neither Þórðr nor his mother, Arnóra are mentioned by name in the poem. Furthermore, the text deals rather with the mother than Þórðr. Such an offence is not as explicit as if the poem would refer straight to the adult Þórðr. *Grámagaflím* is an indirect, subdued, yet witty insult. But as we see later, the fact that it is the origin of the defended person is ridiculed makes the poem especially scurrilous.

The offence might seem to be softened by the fact that it is a woman who is accused of inappropriate gender behaviour (*ergi*), not a man. Such behaviour of women might have been condemned less than men's.

Þórðr's masculinity is not directly criticised in the poem but through the accusation of his mother. This is part of the poetic "camouflage" so common in *Bjarnar saga*. However, the causality is obvious; the imaginative paternity of a fish indicates Þórðr's cowardly behaviour.

As mentioned above, apart from in the prose introduction, there are no clear references to Þórðr. This might originate in that the poem is an adaptable one

(mentioned in *Grágás* under the term of *víðáttuskáldskapr*, (see *Grágás, Staðarhólsbók* 394; Appendix 80), and the narrator included it because it was easy to apply it to Þórðr. However, we should concentrate on the poem in the context as it appears in the saga: *Grámagafllím* might be a late addition to the Hítðælakappi-narrative, but it includes several hidden references that make obvious that the poem is directed against Þórðr:

A. The *Grámagi*

First of all, the poem gains its title of a fish that impregnates Arnóra: it is called *grámagi* (grey-belly). This word does not occur anywhere else in the Old Norse corpus (see Cleasby-Vigfússon 212). Most scholars (Finlay, *Monstrous* 34, Harris 339) agree on that the name refers to the fish *Cyclopterus lumpus* (stone grig, lump-sucker). It is also called *hrognkelsi* (both genders), since it is valued for its roe. The female is usually called *grásleppa* (*gráslappi*, *gróslappi*; see Cleasby-Vigfússon), while the male is referred as *rauðmagi* (red-belly). Although the stanza does not state explicitly that the fish *was* a hrognkelsi, it only tells that it *looked like* one. It is a subject of debate whether the word *grámagi* refers to a male or a female animal. According to Harris, it is a male (339), because of the gender of the word, but it is also possible to argue for the opposite.

It is obvious that the *grá-* (“grey”) attribute of the fish is due to a second meaning of the word which is “malicious, evil” (Harris 339).⁵⁵ As I mentioned above, that is also one of the first qualities mentioned about Þórðr in the saga. He is introduced as follows:

Ekki var Þórðr mjök vinsæll af alþýðu, því at hann þótti vera spottsamr ok grár við alla þá, er honum þótti dælt við (*Bjarnar saga* 112; ch. 1).

The fishy origin is used as an explanation for Þórðr’s viciousness.

⁵⁵ According to Fritzner (1: 632), this meaning originates in the grey colour of the wolf’s fur: see: “grár 2) uvenlig, fiendsk, = ulfhugaðr (jvf gráleikr, grá-ligr, grályndr) (...) Udtrykket er, naar Ordet bruges i denne Betydning, hentet fra Ulvens graa Farve, idet det Menneske kaldes graat, der i situvenlige, fiendske Sindelag ligner Ulven, som paa Grund af sin graa Farve og saa kaldes grábeinn, grádýri, ligesom det Meklenburgske de grîse, de grawe(se). Saa sagde man ogsaa i Middelalderen: lupus capiatur et sæpeper aures trahatur ut tandem presbiter fiat, semper tamen griseus erit (dvs. saa vedbliver den dog at være hvadden efter sin Natur er, graa i Sind som i Skind)”

Although, the adjective *grá* has another meaning that usually remains undetected in this context, but might also be a hidden reference to Þórðr. Zoëga's dictionary mentions the word *gráleitr* that means "pale-looking" (170). In *Lárentius saga* it is used for Lárentius himself when he was seasick (*Biskupa sögur* 797), but in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, pale complexion is a recurring motif, and it is always associated with cowardice (such as the metaphor "sveinn inn hvíti" used for Þórðr; see notes in *Bjarnar saga* 140, 145).⁵⁶ Paleness is also mentioned in chapter nineteen of *Bjarnar saga* when the young Þorsteinn attacks Björn. He is said to be *litverpr mjök* ("very pale") right before he attacks the weaponless hero by surprise (*Bjarnar saga* 166; ch. 19).⁵⁷ Notably, this attack is also connected to Þórðr, as he is the instigator of it, and the whole act can hardly be considered as a straight, manly act. Therefore, we can come to the conclusion, that in *Bjarnar saga*, the motif of paleness usually occurs in an unheroic context.⁵⁸

In this case, the *Grámagaflím* starts with a hidden reference to cowardice (*grá*) associated with the fish that fathers Þórðr and the closing phrase "jafnsnjallr sem geit" concludes the same about the offspring, thereby creating a frame of suggested meaning in the poem: Þórðr's unmanliness.

This interpretation, however, does not exclude the possibility, that the poem plays with *both* meanings: viciousness and cowardice. The poem's grey-belly fish undoubtedly functions as a compact metaphor, and it may unite several attributes of the character; these qualities are credibly united in Þórðr. He is presented as a malevolent but sly individual who avoids direct confrontation. He is more likely to instigate others against his life-long antagonist instead of carrying out the revenge himself which indicates both malignancy and sneaky behaviour.

Grá might also be a hidden reference of *argr* merely because of the similar sound: both words include the same phonemes, and we know that the noun had different versions as *ragr*.

⁵⁶ The adjective meaning *white* is used in a similar meaning in *Laxdæla saga* (160; ch 52.), when Kjartan Ólafsson is called "hvítan mann ok huglausan".

⁵⁷ „Birni kom í hug, at hann [Þorsteinn] hafði komit til Þórðar, áðr hann fœri vestr; hann sá Þorstein vera litverpan ok grunaði, at hann myndi vera flugumaðr".

⁵⁸ In Björn Magnússon Ólsen's interpretation (although he took examples from *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*), whiteness/paleness is not meant to be temporal (caused by emotions), but a generally fair complexion which was considered as an attribute of female beauty (28-29), since women spent more time inside than men.

B. “Eye-Theme”

The closing phrase of *Grámagaflím* presents the offspring (presumably Þórðr) in an interesting way, by describing an eye glance: “jafnsnjallr sem geit/es í augu leit”.⁵⁹ According to Finlay, “goat” refers to sexual ambivalence “the unspoken word *ragr* hanging heavy in the air” (*Monstrous* 38). Just in the next chapter, Björn spots Þórðr’s toddler son, Kolli inn príði, who was begotten while Björn enjoyed his father’s hospitality. Björn recites this stanza:

Leitk, hvar rann hjá runni
runn dökkmara Gunnar
ægiligr í augum,
at glíki mér, víka;
kveða þreyjendr þeygi
þat barn vita Mörnar
Heita humra brautar
hlunns, sinn föður, kunna.⁶⁰
(*Bjarnar saga* 171-72; ch. 21)

Björn states that the child’s eyes are *ægiligr*, “terrible, awful” (Cleasby-Vigfússon 738), and are in his likeness, suggesting that he is the biological father of the child. This description is a contrast to the verse on Þórðr’s eyes, and implies that he cannot be the father of brave-eyed Kolli. These utterances belong to the subject-matter in the saga that has been called *paternity-theme* by Ursula Dronke (69-72).

C. *Meinblandit hræ*

Like the grey-belly described in the poem, *Meinblandit hræ* means ‘carrion mixed with poison’. Similar phrases occur several times in Eddic poetry, for example in *Völuspá* (“hverir hefði lopt alt lævi blandit?”) (*Vsp.* 25; *Edda* p. 6); it is often connected to Loki and is especially frequent in *Lokasenna*. The verb *blanda* (‘to mix’) has a second meaning that refers to carnal intercourse (Cleasby-Vigfússon 67, Fritzner 150),

⁵⁹ “his eyes she thought brave as a she-goat” (*The Saga of Bjorn* 51)

⁶⁰ I saw the sprig of dusky/ stallions of creeks (boy) running / by the battle-tree, eyes/ blazing, in my likeness./ The child knows not, chasers/ of channel-fire say, the/ lord of the launching-roller/ of lobster-path – his father (Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, 54).

and it is often pejorative (The examples mentioned by Cleasby refer to sexual relationship with animals or heathens, and Fritzner also mentions beasts) and the combination with the word *mein* (poison) accentuates its negative connotations:

Þegi Þú, Freyja! Þú ert fordæða
oc meini blandin miöc
(*Ls. 32; Edda* p. 103)

Loki hereby suggests that Freyja committed incest with his brother, Freyr. Later, Loki attacks Frey's servant, Beyla with the same word:

Þegi Þú, Beyla! Þú ert Byggvis qvæn,
oc meini blandin miöc;
ókynian meira koma með ása sonom,
öll ertu, dregia, dritin.⁹
(*Ls. 56; Edda* p. 107)

Borovsky provides this analysis of the myth:

The insults that Loki directs at Freyja and Beyla both convey a sense of contamination or pollution of the group, a transgression against the purity of the group inside its boundaries. (...) Those who threaten this purity are designated impure, contaminated, or tainted with poison; they are perceived as a threatening force outside the group's boundaries. Thus, it follows that Þórr, the god who protects and enforces the boundaries of the Æsir, should be the one who expels Loki for corrupting the *griðastaðr*. Loki's punishment fits the crime: he is not only expelled from the group and bound (which immobilises him and prevents him from mixing or transgressing boundaries), but, in addition, the Æsir fasten a poisonous snake above him so that drops of venom fall on him. His body suffers the physical effects of the metaphorical poison –or insults– he infused into the symbolic nourishment of the gods. (...) the group retaliates by torturing him with poison. (Borovsky 4-5).

Within this myth the poisonous nature of Loki is clearly associated with his ambivalent sexuality; Njörd calls him “áss ragr”, which can be considered as his most expressive epithet. It is not only Borovsky's analysis that lets us connect Loki with the

grey-belly satire; Harris agrees that the word *meinblandit* is an allusion to the treacherous mythological character Loki in *Grámagafllím* (331). Additionally, the situation itself (conception by food) reminds us another Loki-myth described in *Hyndluljóð* (*Hdl.* 41; *Edda* p. 294) when Loki becomes pregnant by eating a woman's heart and gives birth.⁶¹

All the textual references mentioned above have something in common: they all try to establish an associative connection between Þórðr and the quality of *ergi* by a symbolic accusation concerning the ambiguous sexual behaviour of his mother. There are some hints that suggest such behaviour: she is called *einaga ylgr*. This kenning emphasises her femininity (*einagi* means a piece of female clothing), but also her wolf-like voracity (*Bjarnar saga* 168, notes of verse 26), not only concerning her appetite, but supposedly also her sexual greediness. Yet, the equivalent of male *ergi* (passive homosexual behaviour) was nymphomania in case of women (Finlay, *Monstrous* 26).

The examples concerning female *ergi* are less numerous in Old Norse literature, but *ergi*-accusations towards males often involve the wolf-motif. *Gulapingslög* prohibits a man from calling another *gylvin* (*Norges gamle love* 1: 57). The meaning of the word is doubtful, but according to the common etymology, the original form of the word might have been *gylfinn*, that comes from the word *úlfr* with a prefix (-ga) used for adjective derivation. (see Almquist 41). The word supposedly means “to be of a wolf's nature, wolf-like”, “being a werewolf”, and might have a connection to the word *gylfra/gylfa* that means “an ogre, a beast” and occasionally “she-wolf” (Cleasby-Vigfússon 221).

This connection is realised in two ways: either the person with the abnormal sexuality transforms into a wolf-like monster or it gives birth to wolf-like creatures as in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. During a quarrel between Sinfjötli and Guðmundr, Sinfjötli implies that Guðmundr transformed into a certain female creature that gave birth to nine wolves begotten by Sinfjötli:

Nío átto við á nesi Ságo
úlfa alna, ec var einn faðir þeira.⁷
(*HHL*. 39; *Edda* p. 136)

⁶¹ “varð Loptr qviðugr af kono illri” *Hdl.* 41; *Edda* p. 294.

At this point, Guðmundr makes a similar accusation.⁶² These examples refer to another Loki-myth described in *Gylfaginning* (32 104; ch. 32-34). This myth mentions that Loki begot three children with a giantess (which is a transgression against the purity of the Æsir); one of these is the Fenrir-wolf who has a decisive role in the destruction of the Æsir (*ragnarök*). In Old Norse Mythology, Loki's *ergi* is the greatest threat against the Æsir and the cosmological harmony.

Grámagafllím is nevertheless a satire, and even if Arnóra's behaviour seems immoral, it does not seem to have effect on cosmological balance. Her case is rather comical, especially, that she – the woman – is presented as the active participant in the conception. Correspondingly, she commits the act with another female being. Even though there are other opinions about the gender of the fish (see Harris 339), it seems to me that the poem refers to a female *grásleppa*. In addition, fish as a gender symbol rather implies femininity as opposed to virile, powerful and aggressive animals like horse or bull that often serve as “phallic” symbols. Also Loki, who has a tendency to transform himself into a female creature, a woman (*Lokasenna* 23, 33, *Hyndluljóð* 41) or a mare (*Gylfaginning* 42), changes his shape into that of a fish, a salmon (*Gylfaginning* 49), when he tries to escape from the Æsir. If we accept the conception in the grey-belly satire as a pure female procreation, it is rare in Old Norse literature, and more ridiculous than threatening.

Conception by a fish is a common motif in folk tales (Thompson T511.02; Uther 300 A, 303). There are even versions when the eating of fish causes pregnancy of the husband, where the fish behaves as a man and the man acts like a woman (Uther 705 A). Alison Finlay quotes (*Monstrous* 35) some other examples of Icelandic folktales about women who eat fishes and become pregnant, as Kisa Kóngsdóttir who eats two trout and gives birth to a daughter and an ugly black cat (Jón Árnason 513-19).

The conception presented in the grey-belly satire is folktale-like and fictional, even if Þórðr Kolbeinsson's genealogy isn't preserved in the saga. The piscine ancestry can hardly be taken seriously, and hereby I do not refer to our contemporary knowledge of biology which contradicts the story. Instead, I would like to point out the fictional and illusive mechanism in the poem.

⁶² 'Faðir varattu /fenrisúlfa, /öllom ellri, etc.

Firstly: what can be the function of such an absurd idea? Judith Butler claims that the construction of the “heterosexual matrix” has a tendency to construct itself in opposite of marginal behaviours. That also means that establishing of the standard also means outcast of a group (*Bodies* 1-16). The refused sexual attitude is called *queer* in Butler’s theory (*Bodies* 223 ff), but this position is fulfilled by *ergi* in Old Norse culture. Outcasts are thereby necessary for establishing and consolidating the identity of the hegemonic group. With other words, it is not possible to create and maintain the category of “we”, if not by creating and accentuating the category of “they” or “the others”.

Níð that involves *ergi* is therefore not autotelic aggression but an act in order to create and uphold coherence within the community. Alison Finlay asked in her article on *Níð, Adultery and Feud* (159): to what extent the concept of *níð* is inherently symbolic? Although I do not believe the question can be answered generally, I think in the case of *Grámagafllím* mocking is entirely symbolic: its main issue is not Þórðr Kolbeinsson’s origin or sexual orientation but the narrator’s intention to make the character an outcast and thereby strengthen concord within the audience through laughter.

Although *Grámagafllím* is only a parody, and we cannot expect that assuming a woman’s gender-incompatible behaviour would have as serious and dramatic consequences as in case of the Loki-myth, the satire is still a very serious offence. Questioning Arnóra’s sexual preferences is by no means a private joke; it challenges her and her descendant’s place in human society *and* humanity. Butler also points out the paradox that non-standard sexuality is often considered as “*both* uncivilized and unnatural” (*Gender Trouble* 180), which demonstrates the gravity of the symbolic exile. Someone who does not behave according to the standard is *not* considered as an unusual or marginal person, he is *not a person*.

Butler considers this as part of the discourse that establishes human identity:

Such attributions or interpellations contribute to that field of discourse and power that orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as “the human”. We see this most clearly in the examples of those abjected beings who do not appear properly gendered; it is their very humanness that comes into the question (*Bodies* 8).

This explains why derisive poetry presents the offended person as an animal or monster: these concepts are the opposite of *human*. Now, in *Grámagaflím*, Arnóra, the mother gains animal quality through the kenning used for her: she is called a she-wolf. Her humanity is questioned by this poetic figure, but only at the time of her act. This can be regarded a temporal transformation. But in case of Þórðr, his *very nature and identity* is challenged. The prose introduction to the poem puts stress on that “ok væri hann ekki dala frá mönnum kominn í báðar ættir” (*Bjarnar saga* 168; ch. 20). He is presented as an unhuman creature; this is the reason why he is associated with several animals in the poem. Firstly, he is the descendant of a she-wolf and a suspicious, poisonous, half-rotten carrion of a fish. The unknown, and possibly dangerous nature of the sea is stressed in the stanza (*mart's illt í sæ*), which alienates Þórðr even more from humanity, since “sea” is an equal conceptual opposite of “land” as “animal” of “human”. Similarly, the carrion as “dead” is a similar opposite of “living”. The nature of Þórðr's suggested “father” cannot be more unlike a healthy, active and productive human male.

Þórðr is also called *hund-bítr* which either means that he bites (eats) dogs (*Bjarnar saga* 169, notes of verse 28) or he is a biter (like a dog, Cleasby-Vigfússon 292, R.C. Boer). Finlay cites both (*The Saga of Bjorn* 51).⁶³

Þórðr's glance is described as *jafnsnjallr sem geit*: goat refers here to a she-goat (Cleasby-Vigfússon 196) that often occurs as a metaphor for a coward person, as in *Grettis saga* (18; ch. 7), and *Valla-Ljóts saga* (245; ch. 4: “eltast sem geit”). The scene when scared goats flee before wolf is supposedly ancient; it also appears in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (HHII. 37, *Edda* p. 158). There are several examples that she-goat is explicitly associated with *ergi* in this situation, for instance in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (“eltast sem ragar geitr fyrir vargi” 73; ch 11.) in connection with sexual harassment,⁶⁴ and also in *Karlamagnús saga* (398; V. ch. 24: “ragr sem geit”).⁶⁵

⁶³ Considering Þórðr's verbal offensiveness, I prefer Boer's and Cleasby's interpretation. Furthermore, the allusion of giving birth to a dog might be a parodic version of the wolf-descendants (see above).

⁶⁴ “Ketill mælti: “Slíkt er mikil skömm at þola einum kvenmanni at vera eltr sem merr í stóði eða hundr á stöðli. Veit ek víst, ef ek hefði þar verit, at eigi mundi þessi ferð hafa orðit jafnhæðilig, ok fyrri skyldu vér þar hafa fallit allir, hvárr um þveran annan, en at láta eltast sem ragar geitr fyrir vargi” (Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar. 73; ch .11)

⁶⁵ Fritzner: “Geit forekommer ofte i Sammenligninger som skulle tjene til at fremhæve eller illustrere a) en Mands Frygttagighed eller Mangel paa Mod, b) et Menneskes Enfoldighed eller Uforstand, c) en Kvindes Geilhed” (1: 573).

Harris found the structure of the line similar to the phrase “konung óneisan sem kattar son” in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, (HHI 18, *Edda* p. 133) where the adjective is also complimentary while the comparison is derogatory (Harris 324). This is a poetic device to express irony, since, as also Finlay remarks (*Monstrous* 38), laws prescribed very serious punishment for calling a man explicit bad names (as *ragr*, *stroðinn*, *sorðinn*, see above). The ironic inversion allows the poet to express *ergi* without uttering the word itself.

As we see, Þórðr is stigmatised as *argr* by the associations with unworthy and repulsive animals. His tongue is smooth but deceptive, he creates tension and people get killed because of his intrigues. *Grámagaflím* uses symbols of social contamination and the poem suggests that he is unworthy to belong to a human community.

Grámagaflím is one of the efforts within the saga to stigmatise an opponent. The two major rivals repeatedly try to stigmatise each other, followed with keen attention by the audience.

Attempts of stigmatisation have significance beyond the individual conflict between Björn and Þórðr. Stigmatisation is in fact, as a linguistic and conceptual isolation of the “alien” (for instance, by inventing and uttering the word *ergi*). Ethnographic research shows that the isolation of “social pollution” is often considered to protect the “normals” and thereby it makes possible to live in the ambiguous world of experiences.⁶⁶ As mentioned above, Judith Butler went further and said that “social contamination” has essential importance in establishing the collective identity. She claims that it is a mistake to think that the rejection happens by an already existing norm system. She argues that the gender norm (“the heterosexual matrix”) is not pre-existent, but is created *simultaneously as* it isolates and outlaws its opposite (*Bodies* 1-16).

An important characteristic of Butler’s theory is that the construction is not a single act but a *public performative that should be repeated over and over* in order to

Fritzner originates the first meaning in the fact that goat was used as a metaphor for women: “At identificere Kvinder og Gjeder, ligesom Kvinder og Gjæs, synes altsaa at have været almindeligt i Middelalderen, og man kan derfor tænke sig, at dette hargivet Anledning til at sammenligne en modløs Mand med geit for derved atbetegne ham som kvindagtig, blauðr, argr, ragr” (1: 574).

⁶⁶ “In a given culture it seems that some kinds of behaviour or natural phenomena are recognised as utterly wrong by all principles which govern the universe. There are different kinds of impossibilities, anomalies, bad mixings and abominations. Most of the items receive varying degrees of condemnation and avoidance. Then suddenly we find that one of the most abominable or impossible is singled out and put into a very special kind of ritual frame that marks it off from other experience. The frame ensures that the categories which the normal avoidances sustain are not threatened or affected in any way” (Douglas 166)

uphold the norm. *Grámagaflím* can thereby be considered as a performative, one among the many that occur in the saga. The poem is an act that isolates Þórðr from the “normal”; it presents him as impurity within the human society. It recreates the ethos of humanity for the audience, defined as the opposite of the uncivilised, monstrous. At the same time, performatives function as a competitive dialogue. Þórðr has the opportunity to refuse the accusation with another performance: if he would succeed to stigmatise Björn more effectively (and wouldn’t be hindered by the narrative technique), then Björn is to be exiled and he gains reputation. The performative is repeated, thus by an other person, and the repetition affirms the *same collective norms*.

But let us return to *Grámagaflím*. Up to this point, we have discussed Þórðr’s stigmatisation. There is another remaining question: how serious is this attempt? Judged from the servant’s comment, the satire is the most serious insult one can imagine. But why? Why is it so special beyond the fact that Þórðr is suggested to be unmanly? It stigmatises him, but is he to be exiled? According to Butler, the two things occur at the same time; stigmatisation is a symbolic exile, since the creation of hegemonic identity states a barrier between inner and outer: familiar and alien (*Gender Trouble* 182). If Þórðr is contamination within the human society, similarly to Loki, he is to be exiled.

I would like to argue for that Butler’s theory is relevant here, and exile is indirectly hidden in the poem. First of all, the second stanza gives a detailed and naturalistic description of pregnancy, which is rather unusual in sagas (Finlay, *Monstrous* 36).

Her belly increased
below her breast
so the oak of the girdle
walked with a waddle,
sore in the womb,
swelled like a balloon.

(Transl. Alison Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn* 51)

The pregnancy causes repugnant changes: Arnóra’s body swells so much that she cannot walk straight. The symptoms of child-bearing are presented similar to a sickness: deformation, unease and pain in the womb. The unusual redundancy of the

description might stress on the causal connection between Arnóra's abnormal appetite (*ergi*) and the abnormal and grotesque bodily changes.

In the Middle Ages, body was often used as allegory for the social system, even for the cosmos (Bakhtin 336). I think there is a parallel here between Arnóra's pregnancy and Þórðr's symbolic rejection: in non-fiction world eating rotten or poisonous food would obviously have caused gastric trouble and likely diarrhoea. But in the satire – instead of the logical consequences – a conception occurs and Þórðr is born. The analogue does not only associate Þórðr with monsters but also with *the refused excrement of the body*. The satiric element of the poem originates in the poetic shift between two physiological processes: eating (Arnóra's unappeasable appetite) and sexual functions (conception). The two processes are linked by grotesque logic: abnormal desire has abnormal physical consequences. Bakhtin points out that these functions are also connected by their location; both belong to the “bodily lower stratum”, the genital area, which is traditionally associated with debasing gestures (148). Butler claims that dirt symbolises the abjected in a general range:

The “abject” designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “Other”. This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of “not-me” as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject (*Gender Trouble* 181).

The literal act of quoting the poem has two effects: Þórðr becomes the representative of the “alien”. At the same time, the category of alien is reconstructed, together with the category of familiar. Speaking in terms of the body-allegory, alien corresponds with “external” while familiar is the equivalent of “internal”. The poems hidden suggestions establish the borders between these two, and performs the symbolic abjection:

What constitutes through division the »inner« and »outer« worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model

by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit (*Gender Trouble* 182).

If we accept Butler's model, creation and recreation is realised by the same performative. *Grámagaflím*, as a narrative performative has effects on two levels: Firstly, as we discussed above, the category of the alien/external is established, together with the familiar/internal. Secondly, considered the more concrete sphere of individual characters, Þórðr is expelled while Björn's position is consolidated as part of the legitimate, hegemonic world order.

Revealing (Re-)creation

Up to this point, we discussed two layers of the poem: one that presents Þórðr as monster (grámagi-theme), and another, a more hidden, rather suggested one that implies his symbolic exile from society (diarrhoea-theme).

But then, there is a contradiction between these two layers. As we described here, Þórðr is expelled by a performative act. Exile, as excretion is always a *process*: it makes something, or someone who originally has been "internal" part of the "external". The hidden suggestion of the poem refers to this process: it implies Arnóra's pregnancy as digestion and Þórðr's birth as defecation.

And there is the basic contradiction. Namely, on the primary level, Þórðr is shown as a monster from the moment of his conception, as an offspring of unnatural creatures, someone, who is non-human by nature. Thereby on the primary level he is presented as someone who *has never been* part of the internal, which is, of course, an illusion. The poem is intended to expel Þórðr, but exile as an act is concealed. Instead, his inhumanity is presented as the undeniable Truth,⁶⁷ a fact that has been valid *ab ovo*. The hidden suggestion of diarrhoea unveils the performative quality of *níð* in the poem. It reveals that the text does not state pre-existent facts; indeed, the poem is only an *attempt* of exile, a performative that can be deactivated by following performatives.

There is another subversive effect in the poem that should be taken into account: laughter. There are several reasons for this: first of all, the unusual presentation of Arnóra's pregnancy. In *Grámagaflím*, the pregnant body is presented in a way that it

⁶⁷ "(...) genders can be neither true or false, but are only produced as the truth" (*Gender Trouble* 186)

seems unproportionate and grotesque. The “loss of the sense of »normal«” (*Gender Trouble* 189) can be reason for jest in itself. The exaggeration of bodily images is comical, as Bakhtin points out:

Wherever men laugh and curse, particularly in a familiar environment, their speech is filled with bodily images. The body copulates, defecates, overeats, and men’s speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths and dismembered parts. Even when the flood is contained by norms of speech, there is still an eruption of these images into literature, especially if the literature is gay or abusive in character (319).

It is especially the bodily lower stratum that evokes laughter: “It can be said that excrement represents bodies and matter that are mostly comic” (Bakhtin 151-152). Here, the object of laughter is undoubtedly Þórðr who is degraded to the level of bodily filth.

Furthermore, Joseph Harris does not only perceive *Grámagaflím* as a comical poem in itself but as a *parody* of the heroic. He claims that the poem exploits several clichés of heroic life-stories in a satirical form, as for instance supernatural conception, ambiguous paternity (half divine-half human origin) and prophecies of future greatness (Harris 331). His arguments are especially convincing as he compares *Grámagaflím* with *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (330-33). Harris points out that the satire is “a parodistic treatment of elements of a certain *kind* of poem” (333), referring here to heroic poetry.

The ambiguity of the poetic language supports Harris’ theory: the phrase *jafnsnjallr sem geit* might be a satirical version of heroic comparisons as “brave as a lion”, but this is not the only example. Arnóra is called with a derisive kenning *einaga ylgr* (roughly: “she-wolf in female clothes”, see *Lexicon poëticum* 123), and she acts like one, but in the second and third stanza she is referred with fine woman’s *heiti* as *eik* (*Lexicon poëticum* 123) and *drós* (109). The fine wording is ironic. According to the third stanza, the mother announces: “Sagt hafði drós / auðar gildi / at hon ala vildi” Harris interprets the verb *ala* as “bring up” which implies that Þórðr’s exposition after birth was a possibility the parents had to consider:

(...) by specifying the decision at all Björn manages to imply that Þórðr's was one of those poor families for which the possibility of exposing its infants, a practice frowned on even during the pagan period, was a real alternative (Harris 331).

But suggesting the poverty of the family puts the kenning used for the father (*auðar gildi*, “increaser of riches”, see *The Saga of Bjorn* 51) into a context that also implies irony (See also Harris 340). Furthermore, a superb kenning is hardly relevant to a husband whose wife committed adultery with a rotten fish, and he was ignorant enough to raise the offspring.

Summary

Grámagaflím can be considered as a public performative act of *níð* within *Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa*. It makes an attempt to abject Þórðr, but at the same time, it is a display of a ritual that is meant to provoke and uphold the hegemonic gender system.

The establishment of gender identity is analytic and unjust,⁶⁸ as excretion. Verbal performances as the grey-belly satire function in an analytical way; they isolate qualities and substances within the perceptive disarray we call “world”. Everything is separated into useful and useless, important and unimportant, good and bad, which does not only comfort us, but it is essential for thinking, living and procreation. *Níð* stigmatises and expels certain bodies by calling them *queer* or *argr*. On the other hand, it is a fertiliser and renews culture by ritual utterances.

Conclusion

I started this thesis with a critical summary of the origins of Old Norse *níð* as a scholarly issue. I discussed the similarities between the research of Erik Noreen, Folke Ström and Bo Almqvist. Each of these scholars sought to reconstruct medieval *níð* practices by using law books, sagas and other texts from this period as historical sources. Their research method was founded on the belief that the relation between concepts like *ergi*, *ragr*, *níð* in these texts represents relations between real historical phenomena. So, by deriving one concept from another in the historical sources, a

⁶⁸ See further Butler *Bodies* 238.

scholar could reveal the social reality (or, in Meulengracht Sørensen's version, the „conceptual reality“) of the Middle Ages. They devoted their research to summarize the concept of *níð* in a single, comprehensive Aristotelian definition. My view has been that their attempts remained fruitless due to the complexity and diversity of the social phenomenon called *níð*.

I chose a more pragmatic approach instead, followed in the footsteps of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen. His book, the *Unmanly man* provides literary analysis of various saga texts, and focuses on the function of *níð* acts in the story. Meulengracht Sørensen came to the conclusion that *níð* is a repeated ritual that has the function of first displacing, then restoring and thereby confirming the ideal of Masculinity in the medieval community.

I found this thought similar to Judith Butler's feminist theory on the performative and constructed nature of the gender system. Butler emphasises that the standard system of genders, the „heterosexual matrix“ is not a fact, it is a process. By pointing out and expelling nonstandard individuals („the Alien“, „the Other“), the matrix creates itself. Since there is no stable point to return to, expellation has to be repeated over and over to provide the system's legitimacy.

I pointed out, that a *níð* act is such an expelling ritual performance. At the same time, I allowed myself to suggest a more extended interpretation of the Old Norse *níð*. A single *níð* performance is always part of a dialogue, since the success of the act depends on the response that follows this utterance. In verbal duel represented in literary works like *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, *níð* appears as a dialogue, as a string of gender-constructive performances.

The dialogic performance goes on within the story, but also beyond the narrative. As J. Hillis Miller remarks, performativity has two literary aspects: firstly, it can mean the speech acts uttered within the literary work, as Þórðr and Björn challenge each other with verbal performances in *Bjarnar saga*. Secondly, there is a “possible performative dimension of a literary work taken as a whole” (Miller 1). *Níð* as a ritual of gender construction is enacted on a meta-textual level as well. Namely, the text challenges its audience and the audience's concept of “the real man”. On both levels, the purpose is to uphold the heterosexual matrix, and the Masculine's position within it.

This ritual is iterable and iterated. The repetition happens in a different context every time, so every occasion a *níð* ritual is “performed” (read, analysed) is unique. Iterability makes possible the creation of a slightly different image of the Masculine each time.

The Old Norse masculine ideal is difficult to define, because it has never been a stable entity, no masculine ideal is. It is a protean construction that always changes its shape. *Níð* is an analytic, violent and delusive separation of legitime and illegitime: during the process, some bodies are branded as *níðingr* and expelled in order to establish the category of legitime bodies (referred for example as *góðr drengr*). But *níð* is an essential ritual that creates and re-creates, *performs* the myth and illusion that we call Man.

But another meaning of the word *recreation* can also be associated with the literary *níð*: used in the sense of amusement and laughter. *Bjarnar saga* is an excellent example of a witty and amusing narrative that involves the audience in the gender-constructing ritual by playing: the irony, play with double meaning, poetic puzzles and anecdotes catch and hold attention. And not only that: a playful performance leads to more play and incites the repetition of the performance. Thereby it is the narrative that provokes to be performed over and over.

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Appendix

Grágás (Staðarhólsbók)

375.

Ef maðr mælir við maN a þéttar orð þat er fullretti metz þat varðar Fiör Bavgs Garð hvart sem hann mælir við maN a heyranda eða af heyranda. Enda a hann rétt or fe hans ef hann verðr sekr um. En þat ero vii. avrar ens fimtatigar lavgavra. Þat er fullréttis orð ef maðr mælir við aNan þat er eigi ma föra til goðs. Oc scal sva huert orð vera sem mælt er. eN ecki scal at scalldscapar mále raða. Half rétti er þat orð er föra má til hvarstueGia goðs oc illz. Þat a eigi at standa a meðal manna sva at þat varði við lavg nema grið maðr mæli við bönda eða þræll við frialsan maN. Þeir scolo sva sækia um orð þat sem full rétte se við þa mælt. Þat a grið maðr at hafa til varnar fyrir sic ef hann mælir halfrétti vð bonda at fara or griðe sino oc hafa ecki vistar siNar oc fellr þa niðr savk við hann. EN ef grið maðr mælir full rétti við bonda. Þa varðar honom þat Fiör Bavgs Garð enda scal hann þo ecki hafa vistar siNar. Ef fullrétti er mælt við maN oc heyrir hann á. Þa scal hann nefna vatta at orðino oc nefna ser þat vétti at lavgom at niota oc neyta. Ef menn segiaz or því vetti oc varðar þeim þat iii. Marca utlegð. Savk þeirre scal stefna heiman oc queðia v. bva a þingi. enda ero þeir þo i vettino oc iafn scylldir þa at bera sem aðr. Ef maðr mælir sva aþettar orð við maN at þeir ero .ii. saman oc er þa eigi costr at nefna vatta at. Þa scal hann hefna orðe orðz ef hann vill oc mæla þa iafn illt at móti at o sekio. Nu segir aNar hvár ifra oc hóliz oc er þat þa bacmæli oc varðar Fiör Bavgs Garð oc scal sækia við .xii. quíð. Ef hiN þriði maðr heyrir a orð þeirra. Eða þeir einir er eigi ero vátt bærir þoat fleire se. Þa er kostur at sækia við xii. quíð. Ef maðr mælir við mann ahelgaðu þingi oc eykz þa rétrr manz hálfo. Ef maðr mælir við maN af heyranda. oc a sa kost er við er mælt at sækia til ens iii. Þings þaðan fra er hann fregn. Hvart sem hann vill við xii. quíð eða við heyrin orð. v. landeiganda þeirra er réttir se i quíðum at hörungum við aðilia hvart sem mælt var fyrir ollum saman eða fyrir ser hueriom þeirra. oc scolo þeir þat leGia undir þegn scap siN at domi at þeir heyrðo þat mál or hans muNi. (*Grágás: Staðarhólsbók 390-91*)

376.

Ef maðr bregðr manne brigzlum oc mælir aliót þott hann segi satt oc varðar þat Fiör Bavgs Garð oc scal sækia við .xii. quíð ef hann heyrir eigi á. En við vátt orð ef hann heyrir. Ef maðr gefr manne nafn annat en hann eigi. oc varðar þat Fiör Bavgs Garð ef hiN vill reiðaz við. Sva er oc ef maðr reiðir avknefni til haðungar honom oc varðar þat Fiör Bavgs Garð oc scal þat hvartueGia sækia við vii. quíð. Ef maðr görir ýki um mann oc varðar þat Fiörbavgs Garð; þat er yki ef maðr segir þat fra avðrom manne eða fra eign hans nokoRe er eigi ma vera oc görir þat til háþungar honom. Ef maðr görir nið um maN oc varðar þat oc scal sækia við .xii. quíð. Þat ero níð ef maðr sker tré nið maNe. eða ristr eða reisir manne niþ stavng. Þav ero orð þriú ef sva mioc versna máls endar manna. Er scog Gang varða avll. Ef maðr kallar man ragan eða stroðiN. Eða sorðiN. Oc scal sva sækia sem avNor full rettis orð. Enda a maðr vígt igeign þeim orðum þrimr. Jam lengi a maðr vígt um orð sem vm konor oc til ens næsta alþingis hvartueGia. Oc fellr sa maðr oheilagr er þesi orð mælir fyrir avllom þeim mönnom er hinom fylgia til vettvangs er þesi orð voro við mælt.” (*Grágás: Staðarhólsbók 391-92*).

377.

Hvartki a maðr a yrkia um maN lof ne lavst. Scala maðr reiðaz við fiordungi víso nema last mæli se í. Ef maðr yrkir .ii orð eN aNaR avNor ii. oc raða þeir bápir samt um oc varðar scog Gang hvarumtveGia. EN ef eigi er háþung i. þa varðar iii. Marca vtlegð. Nu yrkir maðr fleira vm. oc varðar þat Fiör Bavgs Garð þott eigi se háþung í. Ef maðr yrkir hálfa viso vm mann þa er lavstr er í eða háþung oc varðar þat scog Gang. Nu ef hann queðr eða keNir avðrom. oc er þat þa avNor save oc varðar eN scog Gang enda varðar sva þeim er nemr þann verka oc reiþir til haðungar manne. Su reiðing varðar scog Gang er til háþungar metz. Stefno soc er um scalld scap oc sócn til es iii. alþingis þaðan fra er aðili spyR. oc scal queðia til hvart sem vill ix. heimilis bva a þingi þes er sottr er eða ella xii. quiðar. Scog Gang varðar með favrin sem verkiN oc sciptir engo hvart fyr er sótt oc scal við hin savmo gavgn sækia bæði. Scog Gang varðar þoat maðr yrki vm davðan maN kristiN eða queði þat er vm hann er ort til lyra eða til haðungar oc fer sva sœc su sem vig sœc. Ef maðr hefir orð þat iscálldscap er aNaR maðr a vigt vm. Enda hefni hann vígi eða verkom. oc scal sa þa um illmæli sækia til biargar ser. Ef maðr queðr níð um maN at lavgbergi. oc varðar þat scog Gang enda fellr sa oheilagr til þes alþingis er næst er eptir. fyrir honom oc þeim mönnom er honom fylgia til. oc scal hann queðia til vetvangs bva vm þat hvart hiN hafe queðit níð þat honom til haðungar. eða eigi. Ef maðr yrkir níð eða háþung um konung suia eða dana eða norð manna. oc varðar þat scog Gang oc eiga huscarlar þeirra sakirnar. En ef þeir ero eigi her staddir eða vilia þeir eigi sækia. þa á sœc sa er vill. Ef maðr yrkir mansavng vm kono. oc varðar þat scog Gang; kona a sœc ef hon er tuitög eða ellri. EN ef hon er yngri eða vill hon eigi sækia láta. þa a lög ráðande hennar sökina. Ef maðr queðr scálldscap til háðungar manne þott vm aNaN maN se ort eða snyr hann á havnd honom. nokoro orðe oc varðar scog Gang oc scal sva sækia um scálldscap aNaN. Ef maðr yrkir víðatto scálld scap. þa a hver maðr þes cost er vill at dragaz undir oc stefna vm. þott quiðr bere þat at hiN hafe eigi vm þan ort er sœkir um. eN þat bere þo quiðr at hann hafe ort. oc varðar þo scog Gang vm víðatto scáld scapr. Þat er víðatto scáld scapr er maðr yrkir um engi mann einkum. enda fer þat þo um herað iNaN. Oc varðar scog Gang.” (Grágás: Staðarhólsbók 392-394)

Tacitus: *Germania*, ch. 12:

Licet apud concilium accusare quoque et discrimen capitis intendere. Distinctio poenarum ex delicto. Proditores et transfugas arboribus suspendunt, ignavos et imbelles et corpore infames caeno ac palude, iniecta insuper crate, mergunt. Diversitas supplicii illuc respicit, tamquam scelera ostendi oporteat, dum puniuntur, flagitia abscondi. (Cornelii Taciti. *Germania*. Ed. Heinrich Schweizer-Sidler. 5. neu bearb. Aufl. Halle an der Saale: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1890. 32-33.)

“In their councils an accusation may be preferred or a capital crime prosecuted. Penalties are distinguished according to the offence. Traitors and deserters are hanged on trees; the coward, the unwarlike, the man stained with abominable vices, is plunged into the mire of the morass with a hurdle put over him. This distinction in punishment means that crime, they think, ought, in being punished, to be exposed, while infamy ought to be buried out of sight.”

(Tacitus, Cornelius. *The Complete Works of Tacitus*. Trans. A. J. Church, W. J. Brodribb. Ed. Moses Hadas. New York: Modern Library, 1942. 714-15.)