

**Scenes of a sexual nature: theorising
representations of sex and the sexual body in
*the sagas of the Icelanders***

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I, Lucy Keens, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis considers depictions of and discourse around sexual activity in the *Íslendingasögur* (the sagas of the Icelanders), also drawing on Eddic poetry, the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas), *foraldarsögur* (legendary sagas) and *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas) to give a broader view of sex in Old Norse literature.

The Old Norse literary canon is extensive, and seduction, complicated love lives and sexual insults often lie at the heart of conflicts and fatalities. Where sex comes into focus, contextually and culturally relevant imagery and wordplay enliven the scenes, conveying the tension, humour, or erotic ambitions of the authors. The thesis explores how sex and sexuality are represented, possible reasons behind these methods, and their effect on the audience's perspectives of sex and the body. Analysis of the language and context is supported by contemporaneous literature, cognitive metaphor theory and modern theories of sexuality and anthropology, providing fresh perspectives on well-known passages in the sagas.

The first chapter concentrates on sexual metaphors, offering an assessment of different aspects of sexual language that feature in the sagas and identifying common themes, from the benign and regular euphemisms for sexual intercourse, to more obscure metaphors that are highly contextualised and ambiguous. The second chapter looks at public judgement in the form of gossip, which often serves as a vehicle for sexual material, as well as the methods and motivations behind its circulation. Chapter three considers the opposite: the private discussion of sex and sexual woes, with reference to Foucault and examples of the model of confession as precedent for honest and open discussion. The final chapter looks at how sex and the sexualised body are employed as a means of entertainment, bringing slapstick humour, jokes and grotesque imagery to even the bleakest situations, thus concluding an interdisciplinary, theoretically-inflected approach to the forms and functions of sex in the sagas.

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Abbreviations and notes on the text

Unless stated otherwise, all *Íslendingasögur* quotations are from the *Íslenzk Fornrit* series. Translations from the Old Norse, modern Icelandic and Swedish are mine alone, unless otherwise stated. Old Norse personal names are written in the nominative singular, as are adjectives and nouns as appropriate. Verbs are given in the infinitive.

Abbreviations in the footnotes are as follows:

<i>BWP</i>	Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, <i>Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power</i>
<i>Cleasby-Vigfússon</i>	<i>An Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> , Cleasby, Richard; revised, enlarged and completed by Guðbrandur Vigfússon
<i>DONP</i>	A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose online
<i>ÍF</i>	<i>Íslenzk Fornrit</i>
'G&S'	Max Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal'
<i>MWLB</i>	George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, <i>Metaphors We Live By</i>
' <i>Níð</i> in <i>BsH</i> '	Alison Finlay, ' <i>Níð</i> , Adultery and Feud in <i>Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa</i> '
'TILV'	Jenny Jochens, 'The Illicit Love Visit'
<i>TUM</i>	Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, <i>The Unmanly Man</i>
<i>WiONS</i>	Jenny Jochens, <i>Women in Old Norse Society</i>
<i>WtK</i>	Michel Foucault, <i>The Will to Knowledge</i>

Introduction

Since Árni Magnússon's scholarly, personal and possibly ruthless¹ mission to collect the manuscripts of Icelandic origin, the corpus of Old Norse literature has continued to draw attention as a fascinating source of medieval north European mythology and social anthropology. In the three centuries of critical analysis following Árni's pursuit, every aspect of human behaviour manifested in the canon has been plucked out and dissected, only for said critical analysis to be tweezed and dissected in its turn.

One such aspect is that of sex and sexuality. Alongside the violent feuds for which the sagas are famed, sexual activity is a pervading theme throughout the canon; be it amorous, forceful, comedic, surreal, tangential or salient to the main storyline, its emotional weight lends an empathetic shade to our heroes and heroines, and a malevolent edge to a host of villainous characters.

However, it is rarely explicit in the text, in either sense of the word. Clear and vulgar references occur most often in insults implying homosexual behaviour; these were considered highly offensive and incurred a heavy penalty according to *Grágás*, in which they form part of the legal concepts of *níð* and *ýki*. These obscene and hyperbolic insults (and carvings), usually with a sexual tinge, are employed to humiliate a man and imply that he is *argr*. The scope of *ergi* and what it means to be *argr* has been much discussed, but is generally interpreted as weakness, cowardice, and effeminacy. Indeed, accusations of *argr* behaviour include the crudest and most imaginative expressions of sex and sexuality. Folke Ström confirms its poisonous use:

Níð was a terrible and effective weapon, especially on account of its connexions with sexuality. The obscene element in an insult conferred on it a defamatory power, a deadly, poisonous sting, which it otherwise would have lacked.²

Heterosexual sex, on the other hand, has a broader and comparably milder remit, with commentary on every aspect of initial attraction, seduction, intercourse within and outside of marriage, marital strife, more forceful episodes of sex, and supernatural romantic encounters. Much of this is euphemised, as will be discussed here, but all contribute to a rich variety of sexual material and

¹ Not necessarily true, but depicted so by Halldór Laxness in the novel *Íslandsklukkan* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1994).

² Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1974), 20.

representations of the sexualised body. The scope makes this an appealing subject for analysis.

Scholarship on the subject of sex in Old Norse literature

Many scholars are also attracted to the subject, and there is a large body of work dedicated to sex in the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of the Icelanders). A few worthy of mention that appear in this thesis are: Jóhanna Katrín Fríðriksdóttir, Jenny Jochens, and Helga Kress, for their work on the roles of women in Old Norse society. The use of magic by women in lieu of masculine tokens of power clarified by Jóhanna supports sexual readings of magical scenes. Helga Kress also writes about powerful women, and gendered gossip, while Jochens has explored the use of the male gaze and seduction. Carol Clover's analysis of sexuality and power – virile man versus everyone else – has also been a valuable source.

However, the focus here is rather towards sex than gender, and takes its cue from the following: Kari Ellen Gade, who insightfully deconstructs sexual metaphor in skaldic verse; Carl Phelpstead's inspiring article on the penis in the sagas, which is supported by theoretical analysis; and David Clark for discussing the symbolism of sexual weaponry to create a sound basis for a sexual reading of a violent scene. Richard Perkins' discussion of rude topographical features has provided useful support to arguments, as has his observations on how considering the composition and recital of skaldic verse in action can uncover new meanings within them. Ursula Dronke's 1980 Dorothea Coke lecture on sexual themes in *Njáls saga* also gives precedence to sex in plot development. She praises the author for his 'ironic imagination and his command of old and new literary structures'³ and highlights the value of the sexual episodes that underpin the tragedy of the saga, but also demonstrates that sex can be discussed candidly and with tongue in cheek, delighting in and unravelling the humour of the material while recognising the author's dexterity in conveying detail and influencing our perceptions.

Works by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, Folke Ström, and more recently, Alison Finlay (especially in relation to *Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa*) on the subject of *níð*-based insults in the sagas have been relied upon for their methodical insight and clarity of the topic. Finlay states that the term *níð* 'is used so sparingly in the texts that its specific application is probably irrecoverable,

³ Ursula Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981), 31.

particularly since the instances which have come down to us have so often been damaged by scribal embarrassment or incomprehension.⁴ While some useful parts of the puzzle are indeed missing, the three draw a good picture of its breadth and target.

The scope of this thesis

The ambition of this thesis is to contribute to the established scholarly discourse by concentrating on the ways in which sex is communicated to the reader: the words and phrases that articulate it, as well as the contexts and social structures in which it is discussed and disseminated. Many of the scenes of a sexual nature analysed here are well-known, well-scrutinised passages, but it is my intention to apply a combination of modern theoretical approaches and anthropology to this task to produce original interpretations of scenes and themes. This should contribute to our understanding of how sexuality and the sexualised body are represented in the *Íslendingasögur*.

My search for sex in the sagas began with the verb *tala*, ‘to talk.’ It is often employed as a suggestive signpost; especially in cases of wooing and seduction, this is followed by a more direct indicator, i.e. a betrothal or pregnancy, that a pair were indulging in more than conversation. Where violence is concerned, distressing and gruesome commentary of injury and death can appear in vivid detail, and yet sexual interaction is more often hidden behind locked doors, in overheard whispers, or implied through slanderous jibes and innuendo. Perhaps the reliance on euphemisms and subtle irony formed part of the entertainment, where emphasis on ambiguous phrases was left to the discretion of the reader or speaker. At the other end of the spectrum, the verbs *serða* and *streða* (a metathesis of *serða*) mean ‘to fuck’, and occur very infrequently throughout the sagas, and indeed Old Norse literature in general: only the bawdy poem *Grettisfærsla* features them in abundance (as well as *moga*, with the same meaning). Apart from the comical application in this poem, it is elsewhere used dysphemistically to cause great offence, suggesting it remained a powerful and taboo word not wholly appropriate to be committed to vellum. Between these two extremes is a wealth of material that benefits from clever, culturally relevant metaphors and expressions for sex that are direct but less vulgar and offensive than *serða*. And omission, too: skilful storytelling is equally powerful when it leaves room for the imagination.

⁴ Alison Finlay, ‘*Níð*, Adultery and Feud in *Bjarnar saga Hitdœlakappa*.’ *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXIII 3 (1991), 162.

The structures in which these words are conveyed to the audience are also significant to the argument of this thesis. Vésteinn Ólason praises the measured narrative of the *Íslendingasögur*, which creates a strong contrast with the events described.⁵ Where narrative is reserved, more crude and lively detail is imparted in dialogue, giving an understanding of the characters through the way in which they express sexual matters. Equally, sex is often presented through the lens of social commentary, allowing for analysis of the motivations of those discussing it, as well as sex's place in the creation of power and reputation within the sagas. Furthermore, Randi Eldevik says that 'Fictional narratives commonly purport to record spoken dialogue by characters; we take for granted the *mimesis* of oral conversation in written fiction.'⁶ Eldevik notes that a letter written to another character within a novel articulates a character's voice through self-expression. In the sagas there are no such letters, but profound self-expression can be conveyed through verse, providing an insight into the speaker's mind, largely at a time of turmoil, anger, love, celebration, longing, or deep unhappiness. The richness and artistry of the metaphors within poetry articulate that expressiveness powerfully, with an emotional eloquence that may not be as successfully realised by the *mimesis* of the dialogue.

I argue that the words and phrases used in these contexts help identify how sex was conceptualised in Old Norse literature. However, there are a couple of challenges to this claim. Firstly, the anonymity and multiplicity of saga authorship: the authorial identities remain a source of fascination and contention to scholars who wish to pin down the finer points of saga origins, and attempting to understand metaphors and discern structures in a wide variety of unidentified literature may seem problematic.⁷ It is difficult to distinguish, for instance, if the use of a metaphor derives from personal choice, a misunderstanding in the transmission of an older manuscript, a foreign literary influence, an unconscious decision, or simply was a popular turn of phrase at that time, or in that place of writing. Kari Ellen Gade observes the varying levels of prudishness throughout

⁵ Vésteinn Ólason, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas,' *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by Rory McTurk, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 106.

⁶ Randi Eldevik, 'Women's Voices in Old Norse Literature: The Case of *Trójumanna saga*,' *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson, with Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002), 56.

⁷ For discussion on scholars' speculation of saga authorship, see Carol J. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas,' *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, edited by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 245-246. Some (including Hallberg, Bjarni Einarsson and Jónas Kristjánsson) propose that Snorri Sturluson wrote *Egils saga*, and possibly *Laxdæla saga* (Madelung), though the latter's more emotional expressions have led people to perceive a female influence. Sturla Þórðarson has also been credited with *Laxdæla saga* (Heller, Mundt) and *Eyrbyggja saga* (Hallberg).

the centuries, with reference to the thirteenth-century poet Óláfr Þórðarson, who appreciated the nuances of poetic language: “*Karientismos* er þat, ef ófögr nöfn talaz grannligarr, sem egill qvað...”⁸ Yet, perhaps others were not so accommodating of sexual euphemisms; for instance, one manuscript of *Grettis saga* (AM 556 A, 4to) is missing two sexually expressive verses for reasons unknown.

Roland Barthes suggests in *Death of the Author* that knowledge of the author is not a necessity in analysis of a text; he says in composing a narrative ‘the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins.’⁹ Separating the writer from the writing is a difficult task for the modern reader; it is a source of frustration when we are unable to attribute a tale to one author, and a relief to imply authorship of a piece and give it a human context. However, as Barthes observes, this identification brings with it a person’s ‘life, his tastes, his passions’¹⁰ and without a sense of ownership ‘it is language which speaks, not the author.’¹¹ Recognising the scribe’s role in transmission is equally fraught with difficulty:

The scribe literally reproducing the text by hand is reproducing the text at another level; he reproduces the ‘content,’ or perhaps it would be better to say that he reproduces his own reading of that content. On the other hand, to the extent that he takes up a role already scripted in the text, the text could be said to inscribe him, to reproduce him in its own image.¹²

Perhaps, then, the idea of an identified author or scribe is a consolation too easily relied upon. We can gain more insight into the text by considering it independently of one mind and rather as a source of interest in itself, a product of combined forces – however many and varied they may be – that brought it to the page. There is as much pleasure in analysis and informed speculation as there is in definitive answers. Thus by giving prominence to sexual discourse in its own right, its significance within the context of the sagas can be explored thoroughly.

⁸ Kari Ellen Gade, ‘Penile Puns: Personal Names and Phallic Symbols in Skaldic Poetry,’ *Essays in Medieval Studies* 6 (1989), 60. ‘*Karientismos* is this, if unpleasant words are spoken gently, as Egill said...’ Óláfr hvítaskáld made this observation regarding verse 58 in *Egils saga*, in which Egill bemoans the many ailments that accompany old age.

⁹ Roland Barthes, ‘Death of the Author,’ *Image Music Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana, 1977), 142.

¹⁰ Barthes, ‘Death,’ 143.

¹¹ Barthes, ‘Death,’ 143.

¹² Elizabeth Pittenger, ‘Explicit Ink,’ *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 224.

This also poses a problem with regard to the literary and historical origins of the sagas. Excerpts from contemporaneous laws in *Grágás* are relied on as source material, and are a good indication of the scope of real sexual offences committed in medieval Iceland. However, while we can suppose that the sagas offer a verisimilar account of the contemporaneous culture, emphasis here is placed firmly on the sagas as a literary phenomenon rather than as an historical one. We cannot be sure how much historical fact was elaborated, and while some scholars have researched this matter extensively, I will be looking at the conceptualisation of sex primarily within the realms of literature. Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir articulates the blurring of fact and fiction well:

It should be kept in mind that despite the illusion of social, historical, and topographical reality, the world of the *Íslendingasögur* is an imagined space and as such obeys the laws of literary creations. At the same time, judging from manuscript evidence, the schism between fiction and nonfiction, historiography and entertainment, and different genres, as perceived by modern scholars, was likely less important in the medieval period than today.¹³

On the topic of genre, this thesis predominantly deals with the *Íslendingasögur*. Sometimes called the family sagas, these tell the stories of people living in Iceland from the time of settlement until just after the conversion to Christianity around the year 1000.¹⁴ The *Íslendingasögur* form the main thread of discussion as a practical means to adequately develop ideas and analyse them within the parameters of a thesis. This particular sub-section of Old Norse literature has received a great deal of critical attention. The range of material from scholars mentioned above is not as extensive regarding, for example, *biskupasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* or *riddarasögur*, so this point of focus has the added benefit of drawing on a store of scholarship into sexual material. Yet it would not be wise to confine the scope of thesis to one genre only, as Gísli Sigurðsson observes:

By studying a text with only its manuscript history in mind, or merely as a representative of a particular literary genre, we lay ourselves open to the danger of our research revolving around itself alone and our losing sight of the essential point that lies behind it: the culture that shaped the text, the meaning of the text and the function it fulfilled in the lives of the people that knew it.¹⁵

¹³ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3.

¹⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

¹⁵ Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality Harnessed: How to Read Written Sagas from an Oral Culture?' *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, edited by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008), 20-21.

Hence the sexual interpretation of passages in *Íslendingasögur* has been discussed in conjunction with other genres, such as Eddic poetry, *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas) and *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), where they reinforce the analysis or offer an interesting parallel.¹⁶ The specific classifications of genres are based on subject matter, place and time, but the extent to which these are delineated is a topic of debate, and sub-sections posited within these genres can be very methodical. Furthermore, there are features shared between the genres that test their stability. For example, Clover refers to postulations of romantic literature associations in *Egils saga* and *Kormáks saga*, while influence from the contemporary sagas can be detected in *Gísla saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga*,¹⁷ which suggests that the boundaries are not so rigid. That said, the genres do have perceptible differences in their treatment of sex (and in general) that demonstrate the extent to which fact and fiction are blurred. Theodore Andersson explains that ‘the classical sagas passed through a sort of storytelling filter at the oral stage and were thus transformed into streamlined narratives, while the contemporary sagas experienced no such narrative refinement and remained at a more chronicle-like stage.’¹⁸ *Fornaldarsögur* and some Eddic poems, since they have a greater distance in time and place, provide vulgar representations of sex. That is not to say that the *Íslendingasögur* are not as sexually charged, but simply that it is expressed in a different way.

As mentioned in the quote above from Jóhanna, genre may not have been so significant in the past. In manuscripts, for example, sagas and poems exist side by side, regardless of genre. Therefore it would be severely limiting and obstinate not to embrace relevant material within the Old Norse canon.

With these proposals and caveats in mind, this thesis builds on what has gone before and brings in modern theoretical approaches to analyse the discourse and depictions of sex in the sagas, with the ambition of reinforcing its diversity and its importance in the development of plot and characterisation.

Foucault’s *The Will to Knowledge* has provided a useful study on the history of sexuality, but has been approached with some trepidation on account

¹⁶ For a list of sagas in their sub-groups see Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 31-36.

¹⁷ Clover, ‘Family Sagas,’ 250-255.

¹⁸ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘From Tradition to Literature in the Sagas,’ *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, edited by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008), 11. On the subject of oral forms, Andersson proposes in this article that the content of the spoken sagas was flexible, adapted to suit the skill of the teller and context, primarily for entertainment. He suggests that there was no one antecedent for a saga; rather the writer was free to curate their own structure from the sources and traditions available (e.g. chronicle, biography, feud), though the style remained close to the oral narrative.

of Foucault's terminus post quem of the seventeenth century. Nonetheless, Foucault's observations can be as pertinent to medieval Iceland as they are to twentieth-century France, and, together with the application of other theoretical approaches, provides original analysis of scenes of a sexual nature.

Defining sex depends on an all-encompassing approach to sexual adventure: reading and recording every hint of sexual union, from explicit words to ubiquitous euphemisms in prose and verse, to get to the bottom of all the manifestations of sexual themes, such as love and seduction, rape, romance, marriage and sexual slander. However, Foucault speaks of an 'eagerness to suspect the presence of sex in everything.'¹⁹ This has led to some restraint on my part to avoid extraneous and erroneous analysis, yet without such eagerness the thesis would lack the initiative that makes it worthwhile. Patterns have come to the fore, and unique episodes of interest have been examined in relation to sex in a wider context, drawing on other saga genres for comparison. The following four areas define my field of interest and structure of the thesis:

Sexual metaphors

The first chapter examines sexual metaphors, identifying common themes as well as obscure and ambiguous metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive metaphor theory has helped define the metaphorical concepts for sex and supports the interpretation. Attention is also paid to the artistry and cultural relevance of metaphors, and how far they are appropriate to their context.

Gossip and scandal

The next two chapters look at the wider discussion of sex, and how details of sexual relationships – both genuine and constructed – are transmitted. This chapter considers gossip as a vehicle for sexual material, how it allows social opinion of sex to permeate the narrative informally, as well as the methods and motivations behind its circulation. With support from modern anthropology, it explores how sexual details are communicated, the trouble with trying to conduct a private life within a small society, and how gossip can lead to humiliation and have fatal consequences. Gossip confirms or corroborates evidence, or offers a dissenting view, yet always fills in valuable details for the audience.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 151.

Private discussion

This chapter turns away from social commentary to consider how people talk about their own sexual behaviour. Analysis draws on Foucault's theories regarding confession as a component of the Church's power over modern sexuality. Though the passages chosen are not examples of confession *per se*, they offer glimpses of the traditional confessional framework and exhibit many of the emotional responses intrinsic to the ritual, as well as supporting Foucault's interpretation of it.

Grotesque sex and bodies

The fourth chapter continues the theme of defamation from the gossip chapter, looking at some of the most exaggerated and grotesque examples of physical and verbal slander that the sagas have to offer. Sex and the sexualised body are employed as a means of entertainment in the sagas, focusing on the body as an instrument of obscenity. They present slapstick humour, jokes and lewd imagery that suggests our perceptions of the body and sense of humour have changed little in the last thousand years. Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque elucidates why certain areas of the body are emphasised more than others: orifices and excrescences are locations of great importance when it comes to insults, and thus play a large part in the dramatic tension, methods of humiliation and source of entertainment. The chapter provides an appreciation of what the grotesque adds to the construction of sexuality, storyline, morality, and power struggles between characters.

In summary, this thesis explores the role sex plays in saga literature, and the role language plays in saga sex.

Chapter 1.

Metaphors for Attraction, Sex, and the Sexualised Body

1. Introduction

Attraction and sexual relationships are abundantly expressed in literature, but representations of them vary wildly in terms of success. To articulate them well requires wit, sensitivity and the skill to linger on details that capture the reader's imagination. That this remains a point of interest in modern writing – note the annual *schadenfreude* around the 'Bad Sex in Fiction' Award – makes it even more remarkable that, centuries earlier, the saga authors managed to evoke powerful descriptions of love and sex with flair. This was not always the case, admittedly, as close readings reveal a reliance on common and fairly neutral metaphors to highlight sexual attraction. And yet, rare descriptions can be found that offer a refreshingly imaginative and uniquely Old Norse perspective on sex and the sexual body that can compete with modern renderings of love and lust.

This chapter concentrates on the use of words and expressions for sexual attraction, intercourse and genitalia in order to gain an understanding of the metaphorical conceptualisation of sex and sexuality in the sagas. Metaphors shape our interpretation and opinions; they rely on a shared understanding for their transaction and durability and for this reason can be seen as representations of the culture/s from which they derive. Translating them into our own socio-linguistic plane is therefore fraught with difficulty: we cannot always be sure of their reception and meaning at the time of writing and to past generations, and, at the other end of the spectrum, on the reliability of our own interpretive power. Beyond cultural and diachronic differences are the consequences of personal experience; subjective interaction with and knowledge of sex and sexual metaphors will influence each appreciation of what the individual perceives as sexual, and what goes unnoticed. This challenge may even apply to the scribes themselves; Carl Phelpstead comments: 'As thirteenth-century texts, the *Íslendingasögur* provide evidence of contemporary Icelandic understandings of sex and gender, or perhaps of thirteenth-century views of tenth- and eleventh-century understandings.'²⁰ Manuscript variations, as will appear in later chapters, demonstrate peculiarities or acute brevity around sexual scenes that make this problem even more complex: were they

²⁰ Carl Phelpstead, 'Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of the Icelanders', *Exemplaria* 19:3 (2007), 421.

misinterpretations of earlier metaphors, or identifiable sexual material that was then censored?

Metaphors feature heavily in Old Norse literature, notably in the kennings that vitalise skaldic poetry.²¹ These are subject to a wide variety of interpretations and scholarly debate, and it is clear that the pleasure of ambiguity in metaphors, including those of a sexual nature, was not lost on the earlier audiences. The modern audience can appreciate some of these metaphors since the fundamental references translate to other cultures. For example, the bed, lying down and sleeping with another person are cross-cultural idioms for sexual intercourse that cut across time and linguistic barriers. However, semantics should not be taken at face value, as noted by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero: 'What has to be asked is whether the observation of similarities or even continuities between past and present inevitably produces an ahistoricist or universalizing effect.'²² In other words, what we think we recognise as a metaphor may be anachronistic. It is also important to acknowledge that there are limitations in dealing with a dead language rather than one that keeps evolving. Individual cultures conceive of sexual phenomena in different ways; for instance, it is claimed that 'pussy,' the modern English slang term for vagina, derives from the Old Norse word *puss*, meaning pouch or purse, while Old Saxon *puse*, meaning vulva, equates the vagina (itself, Latin for sheath) with a receptacle for the penis. It is also suggested that pussy was a general term for women, so the current connection between female genitalia and an affectionate term for cat has brought a new interpretation to an old metaphor.²³

Thus interpretation can only be undertaken speculatively on the texts we have, but in spite of these limitations, the methodology is based on sturdy foundations. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* has been a valuable tool in mapping connections between the source domain of a metaphor, e.g. SEX, and its target domain, e.g. PLEASURE.²⁴ The premise of

²¹ Kennings are circumlocutions used primarily in verse that rely on compounds of words, often related to mythological stories or natural phenomena to describe something more concrete. See Frederic Amory, 'Kennings,' *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, edited by Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages 1, 1993), 351-352.

²² Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, 'Caxton, Foucault, and the Pleasures of History,' *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), xix.

²³ See Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, 'Snatch,' 'Hole,' or 'Honey-Pot'? Semantic Categories and the Problem of Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang.' *The Journal of Sex Research*, 38:2 (2001), 156.

²⁴ Conceptual metaphors are given in capital letters, in accordance with Lakoff and Johnson's paradigms.

their theory is that we use our everyday experiences to describe many other experiences, and the choice of phrase we use shapes our understanding of it; as they explain, ‘the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.’²⁵ For example, Lakoff gives the paradigm of metaphors that equate lust with a game:

LUST IS A GAME.
I think I’m going to *score* tonight.
You won’t be able to *get to first base* with her.
He’s a *loser*.
I *struck out* last night.
She wouldn’t *play ball*.
*Touchdown!*²⁶

The metaphors chart progress made in a sport against the progress in courtship, drawing on many aspects of the game to demonstrate the perceived highs and lows experienced in the pursuit of passion. Lakoff and Johnson based their research on common phrases in parlance and prose; though the sagas do not offer such a diverse paradigm, this form of metaphorical mapping of experiences does translate to the saga narratives. This chapter looks at metaphors in the context of the saga in which they occur, in comparison with examples from other sagas and the Old Norse canon in order to, as far as possible, appreciate why certain conceptual metaphors are appropriate to their contexts.

Aside from Lakoff and Johnson’s metaphorical conceptualisation, it is interesting to consider whether the metaphors are intended for euphemistic or dysphemistic purposes. Allan and Burridge’s study on the subject of euphemisms and dysphemisms in the English-speaking world provides useful background information, while Eliecer Crespo Fernández identifies four types of euphemism according to their degree of association with taboo; these are explicit, conventional, novel and artful.²⁷ In Crespo Fernández’s opinion, explicit euphemisms are those that are normalised and offer a non-threatening alternative to obscenities. Conventional euphemisms have semantic associations that link the metaphor with the taboo. Novel euphemisms are

²⁵ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

²⁶ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 411.

²⁷ Eliecer Crespo Fernández, ‘Sex-Related Euphemism and Dysphemism: An Analysis in Terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory,’ *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 30:2 (2008), 98. He takes his cue from the three types established by Domínguez and Benedito, which are lexicalised, semi-lexicalized and new or creative metaphors.

highly ambiguous and only accessible in their individual contexts, while artful euphemisms go one step further and require some work on the part of the reader to grasp its meaning. In terms of the taboo of sexual excitation, he gives examples of arousal, heat, intoxication and glorification respectively. In his words, 'an artful euphemism like "drink the moisture from one's lips" stands as a modality of verbal mitigation with a connotative and artistic value on which its euphemistic force is based.'²⁸ These categorisations help determine the properties of Old Norse metaphors. Phrases used to depict concrete sexual material, i.e. explicit and conventional euphemisms, in particular those pertaining to the bed, were collected and examined alongside subtle and ambiguous allusions, i.e. novel and artful euphemisms, which were not as recognisable and relied on the context for clarification and interpretation. This is particularly the case in skaldic poetry, where novel and artful euphemisms are obfuscated by word order and kennings. Metaphors dealt with here cover the breadth of Crespo Fernández's categories, though I would argue that the greater frequency of explicit and conventional euphemisms suggests that these are easier to identify by the modern reader, rather than more common than novel and artful euphemisms.

2. Metaphors for attraction

The analysis starts with the mildest of metaphors, which are also the most common in the sagas: those denoting attraction. These can be stated according to Lakoff and Johnson's source and target domains thus:

TO BE ATTRACTED TO IS TO REGARD
TO BE ATTRACTED TO IS TO THINK (OF SOMEONE)
LOVE IS HEAT
LOVE IS IN YOUR CHEST

The act of looking upon someone is used to convey feelings of romantic attachment and foreshadow the consequences of that attraction, whatever they may be. It is predominantly the case that men gaze at women, and in the infrequent cases where the metaphor relates to a woman's eyes, it usually occurs in response to a man's affections.²⁹ Lakoff and Johnson speak of

²⁸ Eliecer Crespo Fernández, 'Metaphor in the Euphemistic Manipulation of the Taboo of Sex,' *Babel A.F.I.A.L.* 15 (2006), 34.

²⁹ For further discussion of this and other factors that indicate attraction and standards of beauty, such as clothing and hair, see Jenny Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze: the Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse,' *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, edited by Joyce E. Salisbury (New York & London: Garland, 1991), 3-29.

ontological metaphors as the creation of an entity that can be quantified, for example, consider the bath as a container for water.³⁰ In the same way, the eyes serve as a visual container for love and lust.

The metaphorical concept of TO BE ATTRACTED TO IS TO REGARD covers a large range of meanings, from simple glances described in standard expressions to more elaborate descriptions. The relationship between eyes and emotions is an established trope in Old Norse literature.³¹ In *Þrymskviða*, for instance, the connection between sexual desire and the eyes is made when Þórr masquerades as Freyja to fool the giant Þrymir, who stole Mjöllnir and demanded Freyja in exchange for its return. The giant is confused by his new bride:

Laut und líno, lysti at kyssa,
enn hann útan stöcc endlangan sal:
'Hví ero ǫndótt augo Freyio?
þicci mér ór augom eldr of brenna.'

Sat in alsnotra ambót fyrir,
er orð um fann við iqtuns máli:
'Svaf vætr Freyia átta nóttom,
svá var hon óðfús í iqtunheima.'³²

The quick-thinking Loki (in the guise of Freyja's maid) equates the metaphorical fire with a great intensity of passion in meeting the bridegroom. The use of *óðfús*, 'eager,' echoes an earlier stanza in which Freyja tells the gods that she will be considered *vergjarnasta*, 'most lustful,' if she goes to Jötunheimar. While Þórr's reaction to the giant is quite the opposite, the verses illustrate the use of the eyes to express attraction and anger. Lakoff observed that in English

³⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, *MWLB*, 30.

³¹ Finlay discusses Bjarni Einarsson's proposal that the emphasis placed on the eyes and love at first sight in *Kormáks saga* derives from French poetry. She cites twelfth-century French writer Andreas Capellanus speaking of the suffering inherent in seeing and thinking about what one finds beautiful; however, she proposes that metaphors about eyes used in sagas are 'of light and fire' and not the personification of Love or other tropes found elsewhere. See Alison Finlay, 'Skalds, Troubadours and Sagas,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XXIV 2-3 (1995), 132-134.

³² *Þrymskviða*, *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, edited by Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag, 1962), 115, verses 27 and 28.

'He stooped under the veil, yearning for a kiss,
But leapt right back to the other end of the hall:
"Why are Freyja's eyes so fiery?
It seems to me that fire blazes from them."

Sat in front of him, the very wise serving maid
found a response to the giant's concern:
"Freyja did not sleep a wink for eight nights,
so desperate was she to come to Jötunheimar."

cultures the metaphorical conceptualisation for lust overlaps considerably with that of anger:

Just as one can have *smoldering sexuality*, one can have *smoldering anger*. One can be *consumed with desire* and *consumed with anger*. One can be *insane with lust* and *insane with anger*. Your lust, as well as your anger, can *get out of hand*. I believe that the connection between our conception of lust and our conception of anger is by no means accidental and has important social consequences.³³

This is just as pertinent to Old Norse culture. Loki's explanation compounds the sense of lust, as mentioned by Freyja, with Þórr's burning fury, thus using the close relationship between the two emotions to his advantage.

The intensity of Þórr's gaze also shows how indiscreet visual attraction is. These examples from *Kjalnesinga saga* (about Örn and Ólof) and *Fóstbræðra saga* (regarding Þormóðr and Þorbjörg) convey its immediacy and conspicuousness:

En er austmaðr hafði þar eigi lengi verit, leiddi hann augum til, hversu fögr Ólof var Kolladóttir.³⁴

Þormóðr rennir nokkut augum til dóttur húsfreyju, ok lízk honum vel á hana; hon hefir ok nokkut augabragð á honum, ok verðr henni hann vel at skapi.³⁵

The verbs *renna* and *leiða (til)*, running and leading, provide a sense of direction towards the women in two ways. They evoke an exploratory action, that the man runs or leads his eyes across the whole of the woman's body. It is almost as if the eyes take their leave of the man, acting on his behalf as witness and guide to female beauty. There is also a sense of magnetism: the eyes seek out and rest on what delights them most, i.e. that which is pleasing to the eye is pleasing to the rest of the person. Þorbjörg's *augabragð* also supports this: as a compound noun it means a glance, but *bragð* means taste. Jochens calls this particular example a rare glimpse of scopophilia, i.e. visual pleasure,³⁶ and the narrative highlights that the gazing upon each other is enough of an indication of their reciprocal feelings. One wonders if the repetition of *nokkut* is therefore

³³ Lakoff, *Dangerous Things*, 411-412.

³⁴ *Kjalnesinga saga*, ÍF 14, edited by Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959), ch. 6, 16. 'The Norwegian had not been there long before he noticed how beautiful Ólof Kolladóttir was.'

³⁵ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ÍF 6, edited by Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), ch. 11, 170. 'Þormóðr sometimes looked over to Katla's daughter and he liked her; she also glanced at him occasionally, and he seemed pleasing to her.'

³⁶ Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze,' 6.

ironically used to gently mock their attraction and any efforts towards furtiveness.

Þorbjörg is later incensed to discover that Þormóðr dedicated verses composed for her to another woman.³⁷ She metes out a fitting punishment that affects his eyes, since they have been much emphasised in the erstwhile dalliance: ‘þú skalt nú taka augnaverð mikinn ok strangan, svá at bæði augu skulu springa ór höfði þér.’³⁸ This pairing of punishment and metaphor works well as an ironic joke, even more so if we consider the ontological entity of eyes as a container; Þorbjörg’s desire for them to burst their sockets evokes the excessiveness of his gaze. Too much ogling is also a source of derision in *Njáls saga*. There is no curse this time, but Þórhildr instead publicly chastises her husband Þráinn for staring at a teenage girl with a scornful ditty:

Þráinn Sigfússon var starsýnn á Þorgerði; þetta sér kona hans,
Þórhildr; hon reiðisk ok kveðr til hans kviðling:

‘Era gapriplar góðir,
gægr er þér í augum,

Þráinn,’ segir hon.³⁹

This reinforces that one’s gaze does not linger upon unpleasant things, nor is it discreet, as Þórhildr is quite aware of her husband’s desires. The verse contains unique words to denote his gaze. *Gægr* comes from *gaegjask* (to sneak a look at), while *gapriplar* is not entirely clear in meaning. *Gap* is a gap or hole; Cleasby-Vigfússon refers to the word as ‘staring with open mouth’ (i.e. the ogling affects his whole face, not just the eyes), while Einar Ól. Sveinsson suggests that *ripp-* could refer to a man’s state of erotic excitement;⁴⁰ this would extend the metaphor to another part of the body. The narrative also supports the sentiment of the poem; the rare adjective *starsýnn*, meaning ‘evidently-staring,’ indicates a stronger longing than that of a simple glance. Peeking or openly ogling, it is clear that the couplet delivers a heavy blow to Þráinn, and,

³⁷ This will be looked at in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

³⁸ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11, 174-175. ‘you shall now feel a great and horrible pain in your eyes, as if both eyes were to burst out of your head.’

³⁹ *Brennu-Njáls saga (Njáls saga)*, ÍF 12, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), ch. 34, 89. ‘Þráinn Sigfússon was ogling Þorgerðr; his wife Þórhildr spotted this; she grew angry and spoke a couplet to him:

“The gawping’s no good,
You are goggle-eyed,

Þráinn,” she said.’

⁴⁰ See *Njáls saga*, ch. 34, 89, note 2.

humiliated and angry, he divorces his wife there and then, before seeking and gaining the hand of Þorgerðr.

A peculiar simile in *Njáls saga* also highlights how the eyes quantify love: 'Þar með skaltú segja, at ek mun sækja Þorkotlu, dóttur mína, ok láta hana fara heim til mín, en þat mun hann eigi þola, því at hann ann henni sem augum í hofði sér.'⁴¹ Here, the container for love becomes the contained in a reflexive display of love. True love is also conveyed through eye contact in *Víglundar saga*:

Þat var jafnan, er þau váru bæði saman, at hvárki gáði annars en horfa upp á annat.⁴²
hvárki mátti af öðru sjá, þaðan af er þau sáust fyrsta.⁴³

These metaphors reinforce the physiological assault their love has on the senses, with love at first sight and blindness to others: unlike Þormóðr and Þráinn, their attraction is well contained. The extravagant expressions convey to the reader that visual attraction reaches deep into the soul.

The other common metaphor for attraction, TO BE ATTRACTED TO IS TO THINK (OF SOMEONE), demonstrates a less conspicuous affection than ogling that is still easily understood in the narrative. To think (excessively) about the person you are attracted to is an understandable psychological response, and is a standard method of introducing the idea of a (usually male) character falling in love. In *Grœnlendinga saga*, for example, the use of a singular *hugr* (thought) in the phrase *felldi hann hug til Guðríðar*⁴⁴ suggests 'affection' rather than the literal sense of 'thought.' The ontological metaphor of the mind as container for love is evident; however, the concept of falling suggests a helplessness that corresponds to Allan and Burrige's thoughts on the subject of madness:

Human beings fear losing control of their destinies, and this seems to be at the root of a lot of taboos: it is why madness featured in the discussion of euphemism. In normal nonclinical usage, madness is perceived as a lack of control, and fear of becoming insane has

⁴¹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 135, 355. 'Also tell him that I will fetch Þorkatla, my daughter, and bring her home with me, and he won't be able to deal with that, because he loves her like the eyes in his head.'

⁴² *Víglundar saga*, *ÍF* 14, edited by Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959), ch. 7, 76. Regarding Viglundr and Ketilríðr: 'Every time they were both together, neither noticed others or looked upon another.'

⁴³ *Víglundar saga*, ch. 12, 82. 'neither wanted to be without the other since they first saw each other.'

⁴⁴ *Grœnlendinga saga*, *ÍF* 4, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), ch. 7, 261. 'he had feelings for Guðríðr.'

inspired some of the strongest linguistic taboos to be found in the general area of illness and disease.⁴⁵

A lament in *Eyrbyggja saga* that 'ek hefi svá mikinn ástarhug til hennar fellt, at ek fæ þat eigi ór hug mér gort.'⁴⁶ works well with this concept: love and feelings of affection can be beyond control, are combative with the rest of the mind, and not always welcome. More commonly, *leggja* is used to convey the feelings placed on the object of affection. For instance, in *Flóamanna saga*, 'þú hefir lagt ástarþokka til hennar'⁴⁷ gives a stronger sense of control than *falla*, yet the implication remains that this is not a conscious choice. Nor is the amount of feeling/thought bestowed on the object of affection. The phrase 'þú ert svó ær fyrir henni'⁴⁸ in *Fljótsdæla saga* equates an excessive quantity of love with madness, which is just as relevant in our own metaphorical conceptualisation of lustful feelings. Lakoff demonstrates:

LUST IS INSANITY.
I'm *crazy* about her.
I'm *madly* in love with him.
I'm *wild* over her.
You're driving me *insane*.
She's *sex-crazed*.
He's a real *sex-maniac*.
She's got me *delirious*.
I'm a sex *addict*.⁴⁹

In the *Eyrbyggja saga* example, the man bemoaning his love sickness is Halli, a berserker the narrative explains is good-natured until roused into a frenzied state, which is advantageous for the purposes of battle.⁵⁰ Therefore, as one familiar with the benefits of fits of madness, perhaps it is unsurprising that Halli perceives the taboo of love sickness with less shame than others, thus using his lustful insanity as justification for betrothal to Ásdís, the focus of his obsession.

Love is experienced in many ways, and shaping it into an entity allows us to refer to it, quantify it and identify particular aspects of it, and give it

⁴⁵ Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 229.

⁴⁶ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF 4, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), ch. 28, 70. 'I have so many thoughts of love about her that I cannot get it out of my mind.'

⁴⁷ *Flóamanna saga*, ÍF 13, edited by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), ch. 17, 264. 'you have feelings of love for her.' *Þokka* has a stronger sense of a pleasurable thought, and may infer a sexual meaning; note that a term for mistress is *þokkakona*.

⁴⁸ *Fljótsdæla saga*, ÍF 11, edited by Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), ch. 13, 250. 'you are so crazy for her.'

⁴⁹ Lakoff, *Dangerous Things*, 410.

⁵⁰ See *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 25, 61.

characteristics that describe an individual's experience. Equating love with heat, and as a feeling within your breast/heart, are highly recognisable metaphorical concepts that acknowledge the whole body as a container for emotions, and more specifically lodge love within the spiritual centre. These metaphors appear predominantly in *Víglundar saga*, which was written around the end of the fourteenth/early fifteenth century and is notably influenced in style and subject matter by medieval romances.⁵¹ However, John McKinnell proposes that the breast or heart can be identified as the emotional centre in Icelandic literature much earlier.⁵² Several references convey LOVE IS HEAT and LOVE IS IN THE CHEST with regard to *Víglundr ok Ketilríðr*:

En þau unnust því heitara með leyniligri ást ok fólginni elsku þeim í
brjósti þegar í fyrstu, er þau váru uppvaxandi
eldr yndisins ok logi elskunnar brennr því heitara
þau unnust alla æfi svá heitt.⁵³

With their clandestine love comes a sense of burning within; here the container of the body is not sufficient for the emotion. Combined with the glances between them mentioned earlier it appears their love is a complete bodily and sensory experience. The relationship between love and heat also occurs frequently in modern English metaphors, as demonstrated by Lakoff:

LUST IS HEAT.
I've got the *hots* for her.
She's an old *flame*.
Hey, baby, *light my fire*.
She's *frigid*.
Don't be *cold* to me.
She's *hot stuff*.
He's still carrying a *torch* for her.

⁵¹ See Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'Víglundar saga,' *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, edited by Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages 1, 1993), 692-3.

⁵² In the dating of *Hávamál*, McKinnell cites Sprenger, who argued that the emotional heart of the body was a development of the early thirteenth century. McKinnell proposes it could be found from the first half of the eleventh century, and even earlier if attested to *Gísla saga*. See John McKinnell, 'Hávamál B: A Poem of Sexual Intrigue,' *Saga Book of the Viking Society XXIX* (2005), 94. Similarly, in 'Skalds, troubadours and sagas' Finlay examines the emotional content of skaldic verses in relation to the scholarly debate around the influence of classical literature and French troubadour poetry in Old Norse literature. She concludes that there is not enough similarity in theme to fully support this reading, but that some traces of courtly material could be imposed on older works; see 150.

⁵³ *Víglundar saga*, ch. 12, 82. Respectively: 'But they loved each other all the more intensely [literally: hotter] with their secret love and hidden affection in their hearts than before, when they were growing up.' 'the fire of attraction and flame of love burn all the more intensely [hotter]' and 'they loved each other all their lives with a burning heat.' A comparable metaphor is found on a runestick from Bergen, B644, from the late twelfth century. The first part reads 'An ek sua:kono mans at mer:pyki kaltr æltr' 'I love a man's wife so much that fire seems cold to me.' See Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, translated by Betsy van der Hoek (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2005), 193.

She's a *red hot mama*.
I'm *warm* for your form.
She's got *hot pants* for you.
I'm *burning* with desire.
She's *in heat*.
He was *consumed* by desire.⁵⁴

With eyes bursting their sockets, lovesick minds and hearts bursting with passion, metaphors in the sagas depict the excesses of love as unhealthy for mind and body; an acceptable level of emotion at the early stages of romance is one that is well contained.

3. Sexual metaphors relating to the bed

Some metaphors are so ingrained in our culture and communication that we barely recognise them as such. Sexual metaphors that focus on the bed fall into this category, in which the typical location of sex serves as a circumlocution for the activity. It is the most common metaphorical conceptualisation of sexual activity in the sagas and is used in a wide variety of contexts, but seemingly only for heterosexual couplings. A likely reason for this is that the taboo of male-male intercourse is expressed in more imaginative and novel metaphors than simply sharing a bed. Moreover, the bed's role in marriage ceremonies may be salient to its natural metaphorical association: Jochens notes that witnesses were required to watch the husband 'openly go to bed with the wife' (*gangi bruðgumi í ljósi í sama sæng konu*).⁵⁵

In many cases, the concept TO HAVE SEXUAL INTERCOURSE IS TO BE (or GET) IN BED WITH SOMEONE can be denoted as an explicit euphemism according to Crespo Fernández's categorisation, as it requires no further explanation, is unambiguous, and neutral in its communication of sex. Several nouns are used to convey the bed in Old Norse: *hvíla*, *rekkja*, *rúm* and *sæng*. *Hvíla* and *rekkja*, as verbs, are equivalent to the English euphemism used today meaning 'to bed.' Examples include:

Björgólfr keypti hana með eyri gulls, ok gengu þau í eina rekkju
bæði.⁵⁶
Hon spurði um ørendi hans, en hann segir, hvar máli er komit, at
Torfi myndi eigi koma í rekkju hennar eða senda henni grís, – 'sem

⁵⁴ Lakoff, *Dangerous Things*, 410.

⁵⁵ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 30.

⁵⁶ *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ÍF 2, edited by Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska forritafélag, 1933), ch. 7, 17. 'Björgólfr bought her for one ounce of gold and they both got into one bed.'

ek skilða við hann.⁵⁷

Klaufi tók sér jafnaðarmann Ólaf Ásgeirsson ok strengdi þess heit at koma í sömu rekkju Yngvildi fagrinn án vilja Ljótólfs goða.⁵⁸

Þar hefir hann viljat hvíla með henni.⁵⁹

Þá segir Björn, at hann ætlar sér forræði fyrir þúi því ok vill, at Ingibjörg hafi samrekkjur við hann slíka hrð sem honum sýnsk.⁶⁰

The emphasis is on sharing one (or the same) bed, and that the trespasser engages in a sexual relationship with the woman occupier of the bed, regardless of who else might use it, i.e. a husband. Movement towards/into the bed is provided by the verbs of intention, *koma* or *ganga*, equating to a desire for sex. The speed at which this movement occurs also comes under inspection:

Þrammar, svá sem svimmi
sílafullr, til hvílu
fúrskerðandi fjarðar,
fúlmör á tröð böru,
áðr an orfa stríðir
ófríðr þorir skríða,
hann esa hlaðs við Gunni
hvílubráðr, und váðir.⁶¹

Þorsteinn bað hann bíða ok hrapa eigi svá skjótt til rekkjunnar Helgu.⁶²

The verse conveys Hallfreðr's intense jealousy of his lover's husband, and, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, he paints a vulgar and unpleasant image of his rival's body and sex with his wife. Compared to *koma* and *ganga*, the verb

⁵⁷ *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *ÍF* 9, edited by Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), ch. 1, 236. 'She asked about his errand, and he said, how the matter had gone, that Torfi would not get into her bed or send her a pig, – "[in the way] that I left him.'"

⁵⁸ *Svarfdæla saga*, *ÍF* 9, edited by Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), ch.16, 166. 'Klaufi took Ólafr Ásgeirsson as his equal match [in a legal exchange] and swore this oath that he would get into the same bed as Yngvildr fagrinn [faircheek] without the permission of Ljótólfr the *goði* [chieftain].' Helga Kress gives a good account of Yngvildr's fate as concubine and slave in 'Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature,' *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson, with Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002), 81-92. See also Robin Waugh, 'Misogyny, Women's Language, and Love-Language: Yngvildr fagrinn in *Svarfdæla saga*,' *Scandinavian Studies* 70:2 (1998), 151, which proposes the cruel treatment of Yngvildr 'seems to have as its principal aim the erasure of her sexual attractiveness.'

⁵⁹ *Króka-Refs saga*, *ÍF* 14, edited by Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959), ch. 17, 154-155. 'There he had wanted to sleep with her.'

⁶⁰ *Gísla saga Súrssonar (Gísla saga)*, *ÍF* 6, edited by Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), ch. 2, 6. 'then Björn said that he intended to be in charge of the household and that Ingibjörg sleep with him at such time that he felt like it.'

⁶¹ *Hallfreðar saga*, *ÍF* 8, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), ch. 9, 182, verse 19.

'Lumbering to bed, the man [diminisher of the fjord-fire] is like a herring-stuffed fulmar swimming on the sea-path, before he [the unpleasant rival of scythes] dares to crawl under the bedclothes; he is not quick to bed with Kolfinna [the Gunnr of lace].'

⁶² *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, *ÍF* 11, edited by Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), ch. 6, 13. 'Þorsteinn asked him to wait and don't rush so fast to Helga's bed.'

bramma, to lumber along, emphasises a reluctance to move towards Kolfinna, reasserted by the suggestion that he is not *hvíluþráðr*. In contrast, Þorsteinn's warning to sexual rival Einarr not to rush to his wife Helga's bed is literal and metaphorical; when he pays no attention Þorsteinn plunges a spear through him and he dies at the bedroom door.

Lakoff and Johnson discuss the 'used' and 'unused' part of a metaphor. For instance, in *THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS*, only the outer shell and foundation of a building are relevant; where we may say 'this idea has no foundation', internal structures, such as stairs, would not be understood as a recognisable metaphor - these would be more creative, figurative metaphors.⁶³ There are metaphors that remain within the realm of the bed, but do not fit with the established ways of expressing it, including this hapax legomenon in *Gísla saga*: 'þú hafir aldri hvíluþröng af mér síðan.'⁶⁴ Ásgerðr says this to threaten her husband with divorce. The metaphor's potency ensures he regrets beginning an argument with his wife: in conjunction with the bed, *þröng* meaning 'throng' and 'tight', creates a sexually charged and intimate image that clarifies Ásgerðr's motivation for using this particular metaphor in this context.⁶⁵ The prepositional *af mér* subtly emphasises the direction away from the marital bed as well as the marriage. Though a unique instance of the word, it does not fit with Crespo Fernández's description of novel euphemisms, which have a high level of ambiguity: Ásgerðr's meaning is quite clear, thus it may be a novel interpretation of a conventional euphemism.

Helga Kress suggests that 'Endilangir í rúminu eru karlarnir veikastir fyrir, og þar ná konur helst völdum.'⁶⁶ Ásgerðr's threat of leaving the marital bed is quickly replaced by seduction, reinforcing this idea of the bed as the woman's domain. There are many instances of women adopting similar approaches, either by persuading their husbands to do something in return for sex, or denying them the privilege:

⁶³ See Lakoff and Johnson, *MWLB*, 52-53.

⁶⁴ *Gísla saga*, ch. 9, 33. 'You will never share a bed with me again.' This scene will be discussed in relation to gossip in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

⁶⁵ Similarly, in the scene in which Gísli enters Þórdís and Þorgrím's bed closet to kill the latter (ch. 16, 52-54), the verbs *snúask* and *snerask* (*at einhverju*) imply the instigation of sex with great intimacy; within this confined space they turn towards each other and away from Gísli, leaving Þorgrím even more vulnerable to attack. See David Clark, 'Revisiting *Gísla saga*: Sexual Themes and the Heroic Past,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 106 (2007), 504-507, for a sexual interpretation of the killing as phallic aggression.

⁶⁶ Helga Kress, 'Staðlausir Stafir: Slúður sem uppsprettu frásagnar í Íslendingasögum,' *Skírnir* 165 (1991), 138. 'Stretched out in bed is where men are weakest, and that is where women hold the most power.'

Þegar þeir váru nýfarnir, þá mælti Þórhildr við Arnór, bónda sinn: 'Ef Birni verðr nokkut til meins í dag,' segir hon, 'þá munu vér eigi til einnar rekkju í kveld.'⁶⁷

Húsfreyja mælti: 'Ef þú fylgir Kára illa, þá skalt þú þat vita, at þú skalt aldri koma í mína rekkju sinn síðan'.⁶⁸

Þórdís nefnir sér þá vátta ok segir skilit við Bork ok kvezk eigi skyldu koma síðan í sǫmu sæng hjá honum, ok þat endi hon.⁶⁹

'Hogg þú manna armastr; þetta eru ráð þér vitrari manna, en frá þessum degi skal ek aldri þín kona vera.' Ferr hon nú til Arnórs kerlingarnefs ok kom aldri í sama sæng Arngrími.⁷⁰

Þat er sagt, at Þorgerðr húsfreyja vildi eigi fara í rekkju um kveldit hjá Þormóði, bónda sínum; ok í þat bil kom maðr neðan frá naustinu ok sagði þá Bergþór látinn. Ok er þetta spurðisk, fór húsfreyja í rekkju sína, ok er eigi getit, at þeim hjónum yrði þetta síðan at sundrþykki.⁷¹

The bed as woman's territory is reflected in the language, with 'my bed' and 'her bed' often used to indicate who belongs beside the woman. In the example from *Víga-Glúms saga*, Steingerðr's role as wife is reduced to bedfellow, indicating that the two concepts were closely linked. The examples from *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa* and *Njáls saga* demonstrate the power women wielded when it came to meddling in political and personal conflicts by withholding sex from their husbands. Similarly, *Eiríks saga rauða* illustrates how sex could be used in the battle for Christianity's supremacy: 'Þjóðhildr vildi ekki samræði við Eirík, síðan hon tók trú, en honum var þat mjök móti skapi.'⁷² However, Þjóðhildr is not mentioned again, and two chapters later Eirík marries Guðríðr, bringing doubt to the total effectiveness of sex's bargaining powers.

Bedclothes also form part of the metaphorical association between the bed and sex:

⁶⁷ *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa*, ÍF 3, edited by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), ch. 18, 158. 'And when they had just left [i.e. Björn and his men], then Þórhildr said to Arnór, her husband, "If any harm comes to Björn today," she said, "then we will not share a bed tonight.'"

⁶⁸ *Njáls saga*, ch. 150, 429. 'The wife said, "If you do any harm to Kári then you should know that you will never come in my bed again.'"

⁶⁹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 37, 116-117. 'Þórdís then named her witnesses and declared herself divorced from Bork and said she would not get into the same bed as him, and she ended it.'

⁷⁰ *Víga-Glúms saga*, ÍF 9, edited by Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), ch. 21, 68. "You strike a blow of the most wretched of men; this is the plan of wiser men than you, but from this day on I will never be your wife." She went now to Arnórr kerlingarnefs house and never shared the same bed as Arngrímr.'

⁷¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 46, 131. 'It is said that Þorgerðr did not want to get into bed that evening with her husband Þormóðr; and at that moment a man came down from the boathouse and told of Bergþór's death. And when it was known, Þorgerðr got into her bed, and it is not mentioned whether the couple were driven apart again.'

⁷² *Eiríks saga rauða*, ÍF 4, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), ch. 5, 212. 'Þjóðhildr did not want to sleep with Eiríkr, since she accepted the faith, but he was very much against it.'

Þá sendi Þorsteinn Eiríksson nafna sínum orð, at hann kæmi til hans, ok sagði svá, at þar væri varla kyrrt, ok húsfreyja vildi færask á fœtr ok vildi undir klæðin hjá honum; ok er hann kom inn, var hon komin upp á rekkjustokkinn. Þá tók hann hana hǫndum ok lagði bolæxi fyrir brjósti henni.⁷³

gerðu Bil borða bæði senn und klæðum.⁷⁴

höfum vit ok aldri undir einum klæðum legit, því at rekkjustokkr tekr upp á millum rúma okkarra, þó at vit höfum haft eitt áklæði.⁷⁵

‘Vildi hann upp í sængina ok undir klæðin hjá henni, en hon vildi þat eigi.’⁷⁶

In *Eiríks saga rauða* a sense of intimacy is asserted with the use of *hjá*, while in *Gunnlaugs saga* what takes place under the bedclothes could not be clearer. In *Víglundar saga*, a literal interpretation of the sentence would lead it to contradict itself: ‘we had not lain under one coverlet ... though we had one cover.’ The first part of the sentence may therefore be taken metaphorically to signify that sex did not take place, on account of the bedpost, despite one cover between them. The extra layer of prepositional detail in *Bárðar saga* – up and under – is evocative of penetration and sexual rhythm as much as it reveals the man’s physical pursuit.

The verb *liggja* is commonly used to denote sex in the concept of TO HAVE SEX IS TO LIE DOWN (WITH SOMEONE), either in conjunction with the bed or on its own. Examples include:

ef hun hefði eigi lagt Svart, þræl sinn, í rekkju hjá sér.⁷⁷

Hana lagði Ögmundur í rekkju hjá sér um vetrinn.⁷⁸

Ok var þat við orð at leggja Þórunni í rekkju hjá einhverjum gárungi.⁷⁹

Settisk hann [Björn inn blakki] í bú manna, þar er honum sýndisk, en lagði í rekkju hjá sér konur þeira ok dætr ok hafði við hǫnd sér slíka

⁷³ *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 6, 215. ‘Then Þorsteinn Eiríksson sent word to his namesake that he should come to him, and said this, that it was hardly peaceful there, since the farmer’s wife wanted to get on her feet and get under the bedclothes with him; and when he came in, she was up on the edge of the bed. He then took hold of her and drove a poleaxe into her chest.’

⁷⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ÍF 3, edited by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), ch. 11, 90, verse 14. ‘under the bedclothes they both made a goddess [Bil of embroidery].’

⁷⁵ *Víglundar saga*, ch. 23, 115. (literal) ‘We have never laid under one coverlet, because a bedpost divided our beds, though we had one cover.’

⁷⁶ *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, ÍF 13, edited by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), ch. 7, 124. ‘He wanted to get up in the bed and under the bedclothes with her, but she did not want that.’

⁷⁷ *Flijótsdæla saga*, ch. 11, 242. ‘[it was asked] if she hadn’t lain her slave Svart in bed next to her.’

⁷⁸ *Guðmundar saga dýra*, *Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 1, edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), ch. 10, 178. ‘Ögmundur had her in bed with him all winter.’

⁷⁹ *Guðmundar saga dýra*, ch. 19, 201. ‘And word went around to put Þórunn in bed with any loser.’

stund sem honum sýndisk.⁸⁰

Hann lá í lokhvílu ok tvær frillur hans, Halldóra, dóttir Sveins Helgasonar, ok Lofnheiðr.⁸¹

Konungr bað engan svá djarfan vera, at á Halla tœki hér fyrir, - 'en at því má gera, ef þér þykkir ǫnnur makligri til at liggja hjá mér ok vera dróttning, ok kanntu varla at heyra lof þitt.'⁸²

Ok um kveldit mælti hon [Gunnhildr]: 'Þú skalt liggja í lopti hjá mér í nótt, ok vit tvau saman.' ... En um morguninn fóru þau til drykkju, ok allan hálfan mánuð lágu þau þar tvau ein í loptinu.⁸³

Hrappr mælti: 'Ef þú vill vita þat, þá lá ek hjá dóttur þinni, ok þótti honum þat illa.'⁸⁴

The king's discussion with the queen in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* contains a novel metaphor, equating sex with the royal roles and, as he says this in the context of her disgust at a sexually salacious poem Halli has composed about her, creates a sense of unity in their intercourse. Hrappr's confession to sex with Guðbrandr's daughter in *Njáls saga* is made explicit when it is announced she is pregnant with his child. Yet Gunnhildr's request to Hrútr, and the narrative's repetition of her words thereafter, requires the context to ensure the sexual relationship is implicit: the time, manner and place of their secluded union specifies that this is a conventional euphemism for sexual intercourse. The example from *Fljótsdæla saga* is a rare example of a woman in the dominant position, sexually and domestically, for most occurrences present the male as the subject of the verb, in accordance with the medieval conventional role of the dominant male in sexual intercourse.

The metaphor can extend to SEX IS TO SLEEP, suggesting that the primary activity associated with the bedroom stands for sexual activity. It is a cross-cultural euphemism, but a peculiar one when we consider the implications of physical intimacy in the bedroom at a time when privacy was at a premium. The example above from *Íslendinga saga* is unequivocal in its presentation of a man (Þorvaldr) in a discrete bed closet with two women who are designated for sexual purposes. The other illustrations present concrete metaphors that

⁸⁰ *Gísla saga*, ch. 2, 6. 'He [Björn inn blakki] set himself up in men's homes, wherever he liked, and got into bed with their wives and daughters and had them with him for as long as he liked.'

⁸¹ *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 1, edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), ch. 46, 295. 'He lay in his bed closet with his two concubines, Halldóra, the daughter of Sveinn Helgason, and Lofnheiðr.'

⁸² *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, *ÍF* 9, edited by Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), ch. 10, 294. 'The king bade no one to be so bold as to grab Halli for this [offensive poem about the queen], - "but it may be put right, if you think another more fitting to lie beside me and be queen, you can barely hear your praise."

⁸³ *Njáls saga*, ch. 3, 15. 'And in the evening she [Gunnhildr] said, "You will lie in this attic with me tonight, just us two together." ... And in the morning they went to drink, and for two weeks the two of them were alone in the attic.'

⁸⁴ *Njáls saga*, ch. 87, 212. 'Hrappr said, "If you'd like to know, then I slept with your daughter, and he thought it was bad." The 'he' refers to Ásvarðr, just slain by Hrappr.'

circumvent the sex, but leave us in no doubt of the couples' activities; this theme is evident in two further examples of isolated 'sleeping':

Síðan gengu þau til svefns, ok læsti hon þegar loptinu innan; ok sváfu þau þar um nóttina.⁸⁵
'Skaltu nú hér sofa í nótt í mínu herbergi.' Hann lét sér þat vel líka.
Skemmtu þau sér þar um kveldit.⁸⁶

The sexual implications of the metaphor are made clear by the length of time, the manner of the relationship as well as the place. The use of the word *þegar* in *Njáls saga* indicates the voracity of Gunnhildr's sexual appetite to comedic effect between the emphasis of *svefns* and *sváfu*. In the *Kjalnesinga saga* example, Fríð's invitation to *sofa* in her room is made innocently: it would be dangerous for Búi to venture out among giants and trolls, but the verb *skemmta* here strengthens the sexual implications of her offer. Besides, Fríð is pregnant when he leaves, leaving no uncertainty that their nocturnal activities included more than sleep.

Laxdæla saga presents an interesting case of two bed-related metaphors possibly meaning very different things. Having just bought the concubine Melkorka in Denmark, Hǫskuldr wastes no time getting to know her: 'Þat sama kveld rekkði Hǫskuldr hjá henni.'⁸⁷ But when he returns to Iceland with Melkorka and faces the wrath of wife Jórunn, the narrative explains that 'Hǫskuldr svaf hjá húsfreyju sinni hverja nótt, síðan hann kom heim, en hann var fár við frilluna.'⁸⁸ The verb *rekkja* expresses Hǫskuldr's sexual enthusiasm for his new purchase, but *sofa hjá* is more ambiguous. His wife Jórunn's initial reaction to the situation is far from convivial; it is unlikely that she would want to show her husband any affection, unless he sought forgiveness. Or perhaps, returning to the idea of the bed as the woman's domain, a more seductive approach was employed by Jórunn to ensure her supremacy.

⁸⁵ *Njáls saga*, ch. 3, 15. 'Then they went to bed [lit. sleep], and she immediately locked them in the attic; and they slept there all night.'

⁸⁶ *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 13, 31. "You shall sleep here tonight in my room." He said he would like that very much. They entertained themselves there that evening.'

⁸⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ÍF 5, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), ch. 12, 24. 'that same evening Hǫskuldr bedded her.'

⁸⁸ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 13, 26-27. 'Hǫskuldr slept with his wife every night, since he returned home, and he had little to do with the concubine.'

4. Sexual metaphors relating to pleasure and shame

The metaphorical concept SEX IS PLEASURE appears with regularity throughout saga literature, signalling a sensual and emotional connection to the experience of sex that is much more intimate than 'to bed' and 'to lie down with,' yet does not appear to be considered risqué. It is an explicit euphemism in Crespo Fernández's terminology: inoffensive and clearly identified as a neutral term for sex. Lakoff and Johnson say that:

our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.⁸⁹

Thus, the way that we talk about something reflects the way that we experience it, and the way we experience something is influenced by the way we communicate it. Or, as Crespo Fernández puts it: 'our conception of the target domain as expressed in a source-domain pairing is grounded in our knowledge and experience of how the reality expressed by the source domain is culturally understood.'⁹⁰ Two such metaphorical concepts for sex that are shared culturally between Old Norse and modern English (and Icelandic) are pleasure and shame. To take pleasure first: as with the bed and sleeping, pleasure is synonymous with sex to such an extent that it is barely acknowledged as a metaphor, or indeed for its euphemistic qualities. Yet on closer inspection it requires some unpacking. When we speak about pleasure as a metaphor for sex, do we refer to arousal, orgasm, physical or mental pleasure, the whole experience of the human sexual response cycle? Not everyone who has penetrative sex or foreplay experiences gratification every time, nor throughout the experience, nor the same intensity of pleasure, and while the sagas offer examples of mutual pleasure, they also allude to sex as the source of pleasure for only one of its participants, for example, in acts of phallic aggression. The inconsistency in using pleasure to denote sexual intercourse in modern terminology is noted by Robert Gray:

⁸⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, *MWLB*, 4-5. They take as an example the conceptual system of arguing as war. We (in English and the West) barely recognise the winning or losing as metaphorical concepts, so ingrained as they are in the way we talk about arguing, yet another culture may theoretically discuss the act of arguing as if it were, say, a dance. Though both passionate concepts, the narratives they create contrast highly and affect the way we perform the act of arguing.

⁹⁰ Crespo Fernández, 'Euphemism and Dysphemism,' 97.

Although pleasure would thus seem to enter the analysis of sexual activity only as a matter of degree, as one means of determining the comparative worth, in sexual terms, of any given sexual experience, the notion of completeness would not appear to enter at all.⁹¹

So while the literal experience of sexual intercourse does not necessarily support this metaphorical meaning, the metaphor endures as a euphemism for the taboo in many languages and cultures. In Old Norse, several words convey the concept, including *eptirlæti*, *fagnaðr*, *gaman*, *kátr*, *munúð*, *njóta*, *skemmta* (*sér*), *yndi* and *þokka*, bringing together notions of mental, spiritual and physical stimulation.⁹² Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson explain the metaphorical meaning of *gaman* as ‘holdlegur unaður, samfaranautn karls og konu,’⁹³ emphasising a carnal pleasure, while the etymology of *munúð*, from *munr-hugr* (with *hugr* meaning mind or thought), points to psychological pleasure; similarly *vilja* implies one’s will is fulfilled. Therefore it appears that the psychological and physical capacity for pleasure equated with the breadth of the sexual experience was acknowledged by the metaphors in this culture.⁹⁴

An episode in *Njáls saga* exemplifies SEX IS PLEASURE. On leaving Norway, Hrútr lies to his lover Queen Gunnhildr about having a woman in Iceland, which fuels her jealousy more than he anticipated:

Hon tók hendinni um háls honum ok kyssti hann ok mælti: ‘Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur.’⁹⁵

Gunnhildr’s curse is powerful in its ambiguity. Here pleasure and an inability to achieve it is given importance over all else; Gunnhildr does not care about Hrútr’s desire to go forth and procreate, or to *hvíla sig*, but rather her focus is on

⁹¹ Robert Gray, ‘Sex and Sexual Perversion,’ *The Philosophy of Sex, Contemporary Readings*, edited by Alan Soble (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 61.

⁹² They do not always have a sexual meaning, of course; as Jochens points out, *skemmta sér* is used to describe the enjoyment of a card game or innocent conversation as well as intercourse. *WiONS*, 68-69.

⁹³ *ÍF* 3, note to verse 2 in *Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa*, 123. ‘physical pleasure, of the conjugal pleasure of a man and woman.’ Oren Falk notes the innuendo of the *kviðling* in *Gísla saga* where *gaman* parallels Skeggi’s win in a duel with sex; see ‘Beardless Wonders: Gaman vas Söxu (The Sex was Great),’ *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, edited by Antonina Harbus and Russell Poole (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 223-46. See also Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, translated by Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), 57.

⁹⁴ Also noted by Jochens: the terms for pleasure ‘can imply the entire process of lovemaking,’ *WiONS*, 69.

⁹⁵ *Njáls saga*, ch. 6, 20-21. ‘She put her hand around his neck, kissed him and said: “If I have as much power over you as I think, then I put this spell on you, that you will not be able to have sexual pleasure with that woman you are betrothed to in Iceland, but you will be able to fulfil your desires with other women.”’

denying him pleasure. Although *munúð* alludes to psychosexual stimulation, it is not clear how this is qualified, until his wife explains the root of the problem to her father:

‘Ek vilda segja skilit við Hrút, ok má ek segja þér, hverja sǫk ek má helzt gefa honum. Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans, en hann er at allri náttúru sinni annarri sem inir vǫskustu menn.’ ... ‘Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hǫfund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik, en þó hǫfum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at vit mættim njótask, en þat verðr ekki. En þó áðr vit skilim, sýnir hann þat af sér, at hann er í æði sínu rétt sem aðrir menn.’⁹⁶

Unnr’s revelation relies heavily on terms for pleasure, a deliberate choice of metaphor that indicates where her unhappiness and motivation for divorce lie. The introduction to the problem begins with a non-pleasure-related euphemism, *hjúskaparfar*,⁹⁷ as if to ensure that her father Mǫrðr, and the audience, is in no doubt about the connotations of the euphemisms that follow. The metaphors here resonate with Gunnhildr’s curse but focus on its manifestation as an attack on sensory pleasures rather than psychological: it appears that Hrútr can become aroused to maintain an erection, but that is the end of his gratification. Is it possible to read more into each of Unnr’s euphemisms? If we take *hjúskaparfar* to mean ‘sexual intercourse’ at its most general level, the *njóta* in *svá at ek mega njóta hans* may play on both of the word’s meanings, i.e. ‘to enjoy’ and ‘to use’ him, therefore implying vaginal stimulation and using him for reproductive purposes. And if we assume that it is Hrútr’s penis (rather than another part of his ‘flesh’) that is too large for him to have *eptirlæti* with her, *eptirlæti* could also refer to a specific part of the sexual experience: penetration and ejaculation may both be impeded by his exaggerated erethism. The final use of *njótask* implies mutual pleasure; since it comes at the end of her description, it too may have connotations of climax.

Unnr’s delicate turn of phrase and aversion to using more direct terminology may be explained by the fact that she is speaking to her father. Braun and Kitzinger state in their research into English sexual euphemisms that:

⁹⁶ *Njáls saga*, ch. 7, 24. “I would like to divorce Hrútr, and may I tell you the main charge against him. He cannot have sexual intercourse [lit. matrimonial conduct] with me, so that I may get pleasure from him, but he is in all other ways completely the same as the manliest of men.” ... “When he comes to me, his penis [lit. flesh] is so big, that he cannot get any pleasure with me, and though we have both tried in every possible way to enjoy each other, it doesn’t happen. But before we part, he shows himself to be in his nature as normal as other men.”

⁹⁷ Cleasby-Vigfússon refers to it, rather euphemistically, as “‘knowing’ one’s wife.” Richard Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. 2nd ed, revised, enlarged and completed by Guðbrandur Vigfússon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 268.

Our findings suggest that euphemism is more often produced by women than men, and is particularly likely in relation to women's bodies. One explanation for this is that it reflects previous findings that women are 'polite' speakers of English (Lakoff, 1975), and generally produce more euphemistic slang, overall, than do men.⁹⁸

Correspondingly, Unnr is a well-bred woman who articulates her dysfunctional sex life politely. It is also important to consider that a woman's sexual pleasure was, in the Galenic view of female sexuality, intrinsic to reproduction in order to produce the female seed (as opposed to the one-seed Aristotelian model, which rendered pleasure irrelevant);⁹⁹ this may have had an influence on the range of words at people's disposal, and a propensity to rely on them for expressing sexual matters in the way Unnr has here. Joan Cadden explains that the feelings associated with ejaculation also implicated sexual pleasure in the reproductive process for men; thus 'the failure of pleasure and the failure of ejaculation were linked with impotence and infertility.'¹⁰⁰ This would be a sound justification for Gunnhildr's emphasis on pleasure in her curse, guaranteeing the collapse of his marriage.

Carl Phelpstead queries whether Hrútr was actually impotent on account of the sorcery, or whether it was a psychosomatic response based on the assumption he has been cursed.¹⁰¹ Likewise, in *Kormáks saga*, Kormákr is cursed by Þórveig as vengeance for killing her sons, using *njóta* and *njótask* to signify sexual intercourse and pleasure he will never enjoy with Steingerðr as a result. He is just as dismissive of the spell as Hrútr, until it comes to pass.¹⁰² Kieckhefer notes that in medieval Europe far more women were tried for erotic magic than men:

probably not because women were more inclined to this offense than men, but because women's manipulation of male affections was more intensely feared, and because men would be more likely to explain their irregular liaisons by charging their mistresses with bewitchment.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Braun and Kitzinger, 'Snatch,' 150.

⁹⁹ See Joyce E. Salisbury, 'Gendered Sexuality,' *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Routledge, 1996), 84-85; also Carolyne Larrington, *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 50.

¹⁰⁰ Joan Cadden, 'Western Medicine and Natural Philosophy,' *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Routledge, 1996), 56.

¹⁰¹ Phelpstead, 'Size Matters,' 432. He also points out that Unnr's account avoids any suggestion that Hrútr's problem was caused by her inability to arouse him.

¹⁰² See *Kormáks saga*, *ÍF* 8, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag 1939), chs. 5 and 6, 222-223.

¹⁰³ Richard Kieckhefer, 'Erotic Magic in medieval Europe,' *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, edited by Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1991), 30.

This may work in support of the psychosomatic response: the men's sexual deficiencies are a consequence of fear rather than magic. However, turning sexual pleasure into something palpable to be manipulated remotely by an external power (in keeping with ontological metaphors)¹⁰⁴ gives these women the dominance and agency that would have appealed to saga audiences more than a man's physiological impairment and trauma.

Whatever the reason behind Hrútr's problem, Unnr's articulation of the problem in terms of pleasure shows that it was ingrained in Old Norse culture as a non-offensive metaphorical conceptualisation of sex. It also explains that pleasure was important, as her request for annulment is predicated on the lack of sex and sexual satisfaction in their marriage, not to mention the frustration of enduring hopeless attempts to achieve it.

While Hrútr and Unnr strived and failed to find mutual satisfaction, there are instances in the sagas where the metaphor only refers to men's sexual pleasure. In *Fljótsdæla saga* this is apparent when an earl speaks of his daughter using phrases that describe her as a commodity: 'mér lízt þú makligastr at njóta hennar, ef nökkur nyt er í.'¹⁰⁵ The earl does not mean this in a derogatory way: the narrative explains that he loves his daughter Droplaug dearly and gives her to the hero Þorvaldr as a reward for rescuing her from a giant. The preposition *í* arouses thoughts of penetration, and gives rise to the conceptual metaphor that A WOMAN IS A CONTAINER FOR A MAN'S PLEASURE, which is reiterated shortly after:

Þau systkin kómu þangat, ok er þeim sagðr þessi kaupmáli, þeim kvaðst svó at hyggjast, at eigi mundi annar makligri at njóta þessarar konu en þessi maðr, ok sögðust hér góðan þokka til mundu leggja.¹⁰⁶

Though the earl had promised the hand of his daughter to whoever rescued her, and Þorvaldr was struck by her beauty, the repetition of *makligr*, 'deserving,' suggests that pleasure is as much a reward as whatever else the woman could provide.

¹⁰⁴ I.e. turning something abstract, such as an emotion, into an entity or substance in order to quantify and identify a particular aspect of it; see Lakoff and Johnson, *MWLB*, ch. 6.

¹⁰⁵ *Fljótsdæla saga*, ch. 6, 231. 'It seems to me you are most deserving to enjoy her, whatever pleasure is in [her].'

¹⁰⁶ *Fljótsdæla saga*, ch. 6, 232. 'The brother and sister came there and were told of this wedding. They said they thought there was no other person who deserved more to enjoy this woman than this man and said they gave their blessing to it.' As mentioned earlier, the verb *njóta* can also mean 'to use,' but in the context of the wedding and Þorvaldr's love for her, the romantic connotations are clear.

Pleasure is not always presented in such a light-hearted and romantic way, as *Grettis saga* demonstrates:

Grettir svarar: 'Gæfumenn miklir munu þér vera, því at þér hafið hér góða atkvámu, ef þeir eru menninir, sem ek ætla; bóndi er heiman farinn með alla heimamenn, þá sem frjálsir eru, ok ætlar eigi heim fyrir en á bak jólnum; húsfreyja er heima ok bóndadóttir; ok ef ek þœttumk nokkurn mótgang eiga at gjalda, þá vilda ek þann veg at koma, því at hér er hvatvetna þat, er hafa þarf, bæði öl ok annarr fagnaðr.'¹⁰⁷

With those words, *annarr fagnaðr*, the women of the house become hysterical. They recognise themselves as the source of that pleasure, made more obvious by Grettir's emphasis on their present vulnerability. Calling the men *gæfumenn* adds to the notion that luck and pleasure are very much one-sided in this scenario. Yet, luckily for the women, Grettir's intention was to trap the berserkers by lulling them into a false sense of security: constructing a positive metaphorical association with sex was fundamental to his plot.

Thus equating sex with pleasure in the sagas is not always a positive association, in particular where women are concerned. This can be seen in the term for a womaniser or reveller, *gleðimaðr*, which brings a negative connotation to those who place an emphasis on seeking pleasure. A young woman in *Ljósvetninga saga* named Friðgerðr – also referred to as a *gleðimaðr* – is sent away by her father to protect her from seduction. Bad weather leads to a change of plan, and she ends up in a worse situation than before. After indications that Friðgerðr had 'talked' with local troublemakers Brandr and Høskuldr, she seeks advice:

'nú þykki mér þess ráðs þurfa, er svá berr til; ek em nú kona eigi heil.' Þorkell svarar: 'Hverr veldr því?' Hon kvað Brand valda því. Þorkell svarar: 'Þó hefir hann þetta óvinliga gort ok sagt mér ekki til. Er mér þetta vandsét mál. Hefir hér verit gleðivist mikil, en þú kona eigi fálynd. Ok veit ek ekki, hvárt hann veldr þessu eða aðrir hleypimenn, þó at eigi sé jafnrífli gir sem Brandr.'¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar (Grettis saga)*, *ÍF* 7, edited by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), ch. 19, 63-64. 'Grettir said, "You are very lucky men, because you have arrived at a good time, if you are the men that I think you are; the man of the house is away from home with all the other freed men, and is not intending to return until after Yule; the wife is home and her daughter; and if I had a score to settle, then I would come this way, because here is all that you need, both ale and other pleasures."'

¹⁰⁸ *Ljósvetninga saga*, *ÍF* 10, edited by Björn Sigfússon (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1940), ch. 12 (22), 65. "Now I think I need advice, as it so happens, I am pregnant." Þorkell answered: "Who by?" She said Brandr [lit. caused it]. Þorkell replied: "He has done badly not to have told me. For me this is a difficult case. There has been a visit with great merriment here, and you are not a reserved woman. But I do not know, whether he is the father or other drifters, though not as fine as Brandr."

While Unnr is saddened by her lack of pleasure, Friðgerðr's concerns come from having too much. Þorkell's response blames her entirely for her situation, dysphemistically using *gleðivist* (lit. pleasure-visit) to disgrace her. Þorkell's motive for phrasing it this way is to avoid having to defend Brandr, who left him this responsibility when he set sail for Norway. Þorkell would rather augment Friðgerðr's dishonour by suggesting only her behaviour is shameful than deal with the prosecution that Brandr must have anticipated before his departure; casting aspersions on the quantity and quality of men she slept with demeans her further while distancing Brandr from her shame.

Ísólfr, Friðgerðr's father, has a different view on the matter, and asks Eyjólfur to help settle the case. Ísólfr explains that he intended to send Friðgerðr to Eyjólfur to 'firra hana svá ámæli vándra manna. En þeir heptu ferð hennar, Brandr ok Hǫskuldr, ok dvöðu hana til svívirðingar.'¹⁰⁹ Ísólfr's words contain no trace of pleasure and place the blame firmly back in the hands of the two foster-brothers and their shameful sexual manipulation of his daughter.

It is not clear where the fault truly lies. Where *níð*-based insults shame their victims with effeminate and cowardly *argr* behaviour, Þorkell's description of Friðgerðr characterises her as the female equivalent to *argr*, *ǫrg*, depicting her as a nymphomaniac and consequently conflating pleasure and shame. After an inconclusive trial, Friðgerðr's fate is unknown, but the matter has already inflamed local tensions and a large combat leads, satisfyingly, to Brandr, Þorkell and Hǫskuldr's comeuppance.

The metaphorical concept SEX IS SHAME can be found in modern cultures, and elsewhere in the medieval world. Allen and Burridge point out that genitalia are restricted in terminology and are known as private parts in many languages: they cite 'Dutch *schaamdelen* "shameful parts," Indonesian *kemaluan* "shame, embarrassment," and Latin *pudendum* "that of which one ought to be ashamed"'.¹¹⁰ Jochens claims that there is a general sense of discomfort around nudity in the sagas,¹¹¹ so perhaps the physical shame of the naked body contributes towards the social shame inherent with illicit sex in the sagas. Many conventional metaphors express this. For example, rape is regarded as 'ruining' a woman in *Króka-Refs saga*: 'Helga hljóp ok til dyranna ok vill þrifa til Narfa, – "ok láttu Grana fara," segir hon, "því at hann hefir öngri eigu

¹⁰⁹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, ch. 12 (22), 66. He wanted to 'to spare her the blame of bad men. But they impeded her journey, Brandr ok Hǫskuldr, and kept her for shame.'

¹¹⁰ Allen and Burridge, *Euphemism*, 54.

¹¹¹ Jochens, *WiONS*, 76-77.

pinni spillt.”¹¹² Helga refers to herself as a possession of her husband’s: while legally accurate, this is her way to articulate to Refr that no violation took place and therefore he has no reason to seek vengeance. *Spilla* also appears in *Kjalnesinga saga*:

Búi mælti þá til Kolla: ‘Nú er svá, Kolli,’ sagði Búi, ‘sem þér er kunnigt um skipti okkar Ólofar; hefir ek launat Kolfinni sína djörfung; en nú skal Ólof, dóttir yður, vera með þér, þar til henni býðst forlag, því at ek vil nú þó ekki elska hana, síðan Kolfiör hefir spillt henni.’¹¹³

In this case, an enemy’s defilement of a woman is definitive: the sexual violation is physical, but also creates a social shame and psychological barrier that prevents Búi from loving Ólof. *Sturlu saga* offers a different interpretation on shame and ruin: ‘Hallr Þjóðólfsson var heimamaðr Einars. Hann kvað þat aldri skyldu lengr, at gamall maðr flekkaði svá væna konu, ok tók hana af honum ok svá hest hans, er Máni hét, allra hesta beztr.’¹¹⁴ In this case, the woman is not spoiled in the same sense as those above, only stained, and that can be reversed. This reinforces the idea that *spilla* refers to physical and social shame, while *flekka* refers to the body only. This could be an example of synecdoche, in other words:

gamall maðr flekkaði (the body of) svá væna kona

So the (whole) woman represents only her body in this case, which, in Hallr’s opinion, is easier to cleanse than a reputation. This extends the concept to SEX IS DIRTY, which is exploited creatively at the end of *Grettis saga*. Having been made to marry a man of lower status, Spes embarks on an affair with Þorsteinn that rouses suspicion, especially from her cuckolded husband Sigurðr. While travelling to church to swear an oath to the bishop and clear her name, she is accidentally touched by a beggar – Þorsteinn in disguise – helping her across a muddy ditch. She rewards the beggar for his efforts nonetheless. This allows her to add an important caveat to her oath:

¹¹² *Króka-Refs saga*, ch. 16, 152. ‘Helga ran to the door and wanted to grab Narfi, – “and let Grani go,” she said, “because he has not ruined your possession.”’

¹¹³ *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 16, 40. ‘Búi then said to Kolli: “Now it’s like this, Kolli,” said Búi, “that you are aware of my relationship with Ólof; I have paid Kolfiör back for his boldness. Now your daughter Ólof should stay with you until she is offered a proposal, because I cannot love her now, since Kolfiör has tarnished her.”’

¹¹⁴ *Sturlu saga*, *Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 1, edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), ch. 12, 78. ‘Hallr Þjóðólfsson was part of Einar’s household. He said it shouldn’t go on that an old man spoil so beautiful a woman, and took her off him along with his horse, called Máni, the best of all horses.’

en fyrir þat vil ek sverja, at engum manni hefi ek gull gefit ok af engum manni hefi ek saurgazk líkamliga, útan af bónda mínum ok þeim vándum stafkarli, er tók sinni saurugri hendi á lær mér, er ek var borin yfir díkit í dag.¹¹⁵

Here the verb *saurga* covers both sexual and non-sexual meanings. It is interesting that she uses such an unpleasant metaphor to describe sex with her husband, which, within the parameters of a lawful wedded life, would not be considered socially dirty nor shameful. But in the context of an oath in church its use may be appropriate, since the word is used most frequently in religious literature. Take, for example, a passage from the *Icelandic Homily Book*: 'Hordóm oc allan licams losta oc saurgon méire oc mine scolom vér rækia.'¹¹⁶ This expresses the shame of sexual lust as well as the physical pollution, and thus the metaphor meets Spes's very specific criteria to cover up her affair. *Saurga* also sufficiently betrays her opinion that Sigurðr is inferior to her: while the experience of her relationship with Þorkell is conveyed in pleasure,¹¹⁷ to Spes her husband's touch corresponds to that of a dirty beggar, bringing a literal sense to her words as well as a metaphorical one.

5. Specific metaphor for sex I: SEX IS THE LAUNCH OF A SHIP

This singular concept draws on metaphors for the bed and pleasure, and provides an example of artful euphemism, multi-layered and rich in interpretation. When Björn Hítðœlakappi is resident in Earl Eiríkr's court, he receives news that Oddný, his betrothed, has married his deceitful love rival Þórðr back in Iceland. While on board ship, Björn's thoughts turn to Oddný engaged in sexual activity:

Hristi handar fasta
hefr drengur gamans fengit;
hrynja hart á dýnu

¹¹⁵ *Grettis saga*, ch. 89, 284. 'And for that I swear that I have given no man gold, and I have not been defiled physically by any man, except by my husband, and that vile beggar, who laid his dirty hand on my thigh when I was carried over the ditch today.' It has been noted that the ambiguous oath motif is a loan from *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*. However, Kalinke observes that the divorce reflects the rights of women in medieval Iceland. See Marianne Kalinke, 'Female Desire and the Quest in the Icelandic Legend of Tristram and Ísodd,' *The Grail, the Quest, and the World of Arthur*, edited by Norris J. Lacy (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), 77-78.

¹¹⁶ *The Icelandic Homily Book: Perg. 15 4o in the Royal Library, Stockholm*, edited by Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1993), 98v, lines 32-33. [If one wants to enter the kingdom of god] 'We must reject whoredom and all bodily lust and defilement [great and small].'

¹¹⁷ *Grettis saga*, ch. 88, 277. 'Opt sátu þau á tali ok skemmtu sér.' 'They often sat in conversation and enjoyed themselves.'

hjóð Eykyndils vøðva,
meðan vel stinna vinnum,
veldr nokkvat því, kløkkva,
skíð verðk skriðar beiða
skorðu, őr á borði.¹¹⁸

It is common for men in battle or at sea to compose verses alluding to the woman their heart desires, and here Björn interweaves sexual imagery with the task at hand. The verse draws on familiar sexual metaphors that are categorised in this chapter: *gaman* for pleasure, and, as a seldom used part of the metaphor SEX IS IN THE BED, the activity endured by the feather mattress creates a powerful image, conjuring a rhythmic sound that could be inspired by noises of the ship straining to move. This creates a juxtaposition of sexual intercourse leading to orgasm and the simultaneous launch of the ship, denoted by the conjunction *meðan*. Richard Perkins highlights that poetry and music complemented rhythmic labour processes: he coined the term ‘*meðan*-verses’ for those where one part describes the rhythmical work of the composer/singer, while the other part describes rhythmical work undertaken by someone else, joined by the conjunction *meðan*.¹¹⁹

This is a complex verse that leaves a lot of room for speculation on its meaning. *Drengr* has connotations of bravery and worthiness, which would certainly be meant ironically if Björn alludes to Þórðr having sex.¹²⁰ Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson agree that the first part of the verse relates to Þórðr and the latter to Björn.¹²¹ So, still troubled by the news of their coupling, Björn torments himself with visions from across the water. The powerful muscles, vigorously in motion – most likely to be large muscle groups activated in energetic sex, such as thighs or buttocks – is not an image set to arouse but rather a crude interpretation of sex he wishes did not exist, the vulgarity of which

¹¹⁸ *Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa*, ch. 5, 123, verse 2.

‘The boy has given the goddess [Hrist of the hand-fire] pleasure; Oddný’s [Isle-candle’s] powerful muscles beat hard and fast on the down mattress, while I try to stiffen the swaying oar on the ship’s railing (gunwale); something powers it; I must bid the ship [ski of the boat-prop] to creep forward.’

Gade documents the origin and use of Eykyndill for Oddný in ‘Penile Puns,’ noting the sexual connotations of fire and *oddr* as a sharp object (cognate to phallus); see 58-60.

¹¹⁹ Richard Perkins, ‘Rowing Chants and the Origins of *dróttkvæðr háttr*,’ *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXI (1985), 160-161. Perkins proposes that it is a rowing chant and cannot be attributed to Björn – the only relevance being Eykyndill, which is interchangeable with other names – and the ‘salaciousness’ of the content is a common feature of work chants and sea shanties, where tools and equipment were equated with sexual organs; see 158-160 especially.

¹²⁰ Laurence de Looze notes that in two stanzas (6 and 9) Björn refers to Þórðr as *litill sveinn*; perhaps this is a continued condescension of *drengr*. See ‘Poet, Poem, and Poetic Process in *Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa* and *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*,’ *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85:4 (1986), 484.

¹²¹ *Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa*, ch. 5, 123-124, notes to verse 2.

illustrates his sexual jealousy and the bitterness behind the poetic composition. In contrast to any semblance of passion, the violent nature of the sexual act may rather imply, perhaps as some consolation to Björn, that Oddný is not a willing participant in Þórðr's pleasure. And yet, there is also a possibility that Björn visualises himself in Þórðr's position: the verb *drengja* (pres. sing. *drengr*) is a nautical term meaning to 'bind fast, haul taut to a pole,' bringing the nautical theme of the latter half of the poem across the *meðan* barrier. While *drengr* in the poem can only be a noun, the aural association with *drengja* (and the possibility that Björn is the brave *drengr* here) leaves room to consider whether Björn is also recalling a memory of his own passion as inspiration to get the ship in motion.¹²²

It is feasible that the oar is a metaphor for Björn's penis in a sense of THE PENIS IS A TOOL, bringing together the sexual and nautical themes to form a self-deprecating punch line. In this case, striving to 'stiffen the swaying oar' relates to an inability to gain an erection, as well as the literal sense of the ship's current predicament. Kari Ellen Gade notes that not all scholars interpreted it thus:

The obscenity of the first half-stanza was recognized by Sveinbjörn Egilsson, but most scholars take the second *helmingr* literally and claim that Björn, when composing the poem, was standing by the railing of the ship so that his oar became wet from the seaspray. However, there can be no doubt that the oar mentioned by Björn on this occasion did not belong to the ship and that the last four lines have another and more indecent meaning than the standard interpretations allow for.¹²³

Perkins also considers the interpretation that the stiffening of the oar alludes to masturbation.¹²⁴ This could be supported by Roberta Frank's proposal that the kenning for woman, *Hristi handar fasta*, is carefully worded to provide sexual innuendo: *Hristi* is the dative of *Hristir*, meaning 'shaker,' and in conjunction with *handar fasta*, which could be construed as 'stiffness of the hand,' the audience can deduce a rude kenning.¹²⁵ This then encourages the reader to seek out clues about Björn's self-love, such as a euphemism for penis hidden in the

¹²² *Drengr* also refers to an unmarried man, i.e. Björn. It may not be a coincidence that the verb alludes to pulling taut and suggestive poles.

¹²³ Gade, 'Penile Puns,' 61.

¹²⁴ Perkins, 'Rowing Chants,' 192.

¹²⁵ Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: the Dróttkvaett Stanza*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 161-163.

kenning *skíð skorðu*.¹²⁶ A further play on words is couched in the use of *kløkkva*. Literally meaning soft or pliable, Cleasby-Vigfússon states that the adjective *kløkkv*'s metaphorical meaning is 'moved to tears' or 'broken-hearted', and the verb *kløkkva* means to sob. If there is a link to masturbation, the meaning of *kløkkva* that equates it with tears and sobbing may hint at another watery emission. The relationship between softness and cowardice, or emotional behaviour typical of a female, is often made in Old Norse literature – perhaps Björn refers to himself in self-pity as much as his penis.¹²⁷ The movement at the end gives a ray of hope: if the oar is thrust through its hole and the ship can progress, then Björn can also gain strength, and ultimately achieve satisfaction.

6. Specific metaphor for sex II: SEX IS TO STROKE THE BELLY

The metaphor of rubbing or stroking a woman's belly occurs four times in the *Íslendingasögur*, though with different permutations of verb (stroke) and noun (belly and/or groin):

brǫlta á maga = to jump/tumble about on the stomach
 klappa um kviðinn = to pat/stroke the belly/womb
 klappa um maga konum = to pat/stroke women's bellies
 klappa um kerlingar nárann = to pat/stroke the old woman's groin

Following the rather inactive metaphors of sleeping, bedding and lying down, this metaphor presents a much more energetic image of sex. In each case the comment is directed towards a man in an unsubtle accusation of sexual intercourse with a woman, alluding to all or part of his body rubbing against the woman's and therefore grounding the sexual act in the physical, possibly rhythmic movement that Jenny Jochens proposes to be the missionary position.¹²⁸ However, it might be that the belly (or groin) is a euphemism for vagina. If we apply Crespo Fernández's euphemism categories, the level of ambiguity depends on the meaning of belly (novel: high ambiguity) or vagina (conventional: low to medium level of ambiguity); the rarity of the metaphor suggests that it is more novel than conventional. For this reason the metaphor initially appears inoffensive, with emphasis moved away from penetration to the intimate yet comparatively non-sexual stomach. Nonetheless, it is always

¹²⁶ Gade, 'Penile Puns,' 62. As well as the word for a boat prop, *skorða* is a heiti for woman, thus the 'ski (or pole) of the prop' could also be 'the pole of the woman,' i.e. penis. Frank adds another layer to the poem's imagery by proposing that *skorðu skíð* creates an image of Oddný reclining on her *dýna*; 163.

¹²⁷ See Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' *Speculum* 68:2 (1993), 363-387, for analysis of the word *blauðr* 'soft' and its relationship with *ergi*.

¹²⁸ Jochens, *WIONS*, 75.

intended to make a mockery of the man engaging in sexual intercourse and is therefore only employed in a dysphemistic manner, i.e. to give a negative impression of sex. In *Njáls saga*, for example, Glúmr reluctantly received Þjóstólfr into his household at his wife Hallgerðr's request. After an unsuccessful attempt to catch escaped sheep, Þjóstólfr insults Glúmr: 'Ámælti þá hvárr þeira qðrum, ok mælti Þjóstólfr við Glúm, at hann hefði til engis afla nema brqlta á maga Hallgerði.'¹²⁹

Þjóstólfr is a troublemaker to everyone except Hallgerðr. Though there is no obvious indication of sexual feelings between them, at least from her side, Dronke notes that Þjóstólfr kills both of her husbands with 'an obsessive note of sexual mockery.'¹³⁰ The implication that Glúmr is too uxorious to expend energy on anything but sex with his wife reveals such underlying sexual jealousy from Þjóstólfr and certainly a great disrespect of Glúmr. Dronke also suggests that this insult betrays Þjóstólfr's own emotional fantasies. This is feasible, yet the use of *brqlta*, meaning 'to tumble about,' or 'romping,' as Jochens suggests,¹³¹ does not sound complimentary of sexual technique and would do more to discredit Glúmr as a lover than explain Þjóstólfr's own private passions. Like Björn's thoughts of Oddný's bottom, it evokes passivity on the part of the woman, invisibility almost, reducing her presence to a small part of her body and turning the spotlight onto a farcical display of lust from the man on top. Glúmr's response before the two come to blows mirrors the construction of Þjóstólfr's slur: 'Án er illt gengi, nema heiman hafi.'¹³² Glúmr is slain, and Hallgerðr sends Þjóstólfr to his own death at the hands of Hrútr.

The same construction appears in the *riddarasaga Valdimars saga*: 'þu eckj framaverk meirj at vinna en braullta a maga mer edr manntu eigi huers þu hefer heitstreingt.'¹³³ In this case, it is the jumped-upon giantess who speaks, gently insulting Valdimar to motivate him to find her sister, as promised. The narrative explains that he was deeply deferential to her, and tried his best *til huilubragda* (as a bed-fellow), but after spending two years as ardent lovers, her irritation is understandable. *Bragða-Mágus saga* dispenses with the belly altogether: 'Hrólfr leggur þá konu í húðfatit hjá sér, ok bröltir á henni, ok lét

¹²⁹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 17, 49. 'Each laid blame on the other, and Þjóstólfr said to Glúmr that he had strength for nothing but jumping on Hallgerðr's stomach.'

¹³⁰ Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, 18.

¹³¹ See Jochens, *WiONS*, 75-76 for an outline of this scene, and those from *Grettis saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* below.

¹³² *Njáls saga*, ch. 17, 49. 'Bad luck comes from home.'

¹³³ *Valdimars saga, Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, edited by Agnete Loth in *Editiones Arnemagnaenae*, vol 20, 1 (Kopenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1962), 59. 'You don't do more than work at jumping about on my stomach or don't you remember you have taken a solemn vow?'

allheimsliga.¹³⁴ In this scenario, Hrólfr had paid for the most expensive slave-woman he could buy in England. The commentary does not come from another character but the narration, yet is similarly inclined to mock his performance. Again, *brǫlta* suggests an enthusiastic physical display, and without mention of the belly, his jumping heightens the element of absurdity, as *allheimsliga* pointedly suggests, turning into something of a slapstick comedy made even more humorous by the precarious nature of a hammock-style bed. There is nothing to be said of the woman's movement or emotional presence, simply Hrólfr making a mockery of himself.

In *Grettis saga*, the insult is delivered as an ultimatum to Grettir. On board ship, the crew have tired of his lampoons and refusal to lift a finger: “Þykkir þér betra,” sǫgðu þeir, “at klappa um kviðinn á konu Bárðar stýrimanns en at gera skyldu þína á skipi, ok er slíkt óþolanda.”¹³⁵ Bárðr's wife is mentioned in passing as young and pretty, but there is no suggestion of her associating with Grettir until much later: ‘Stýrimannskona sú in unga var því jafnan vǫn, at sauma at hǫndum Gretti, ok hǫfðu skipverjar þat mjök í fleymingi við hann.’¹³⁶ The act of making shirts for men was considered a sign of love, so mending Grettir's could be an indication of their intimacy. But perhaps the sexual aspect of their relationship is mere fantasy on the part of the crew, a convenient hook from which to hang Grettir in retaliation for his rudeness, and an ironic statement that pokes fun at his laziness. Certainly nothing else is said of Bárðr, who would have taken umbrage at an affair. *Klappa* is a gentler verb than *brǫlta*, meaning to pat or stroke gently, and *kviðr* can mean uterus or stomach; together they are probably employed also for onomatopoeic purposes, emphasised by the rhythmic alliteration of *klappa um kviðinn á konu*.¹³⁷

In *Fóstbræðra saga*, the metaphor is used to insult a large group of men: ‘Nú fyrir því at þeim Þorgrími reyndisk meiri mannaun at sækja Þorgeir heldr en klappa um maga konum sínum.’¹³⁸ The use of the word *mannraun* is telling of

¹³⁴ *Bragða-Mágus saga (með tilheyrandi þáttum)*, edited by Gunnlaugur Þórðarson (Kaupmannahöfn: Páll Sveinsson, 1858), ch. 63, 149: ‘Hrólfr laid the woman next to him in the hammock and jumped on her, and acted foolishly (or frantically).’

¹³⁵ *Grettis saga*, ch. 17, 51-52. “‘You think it better,” they said, “to stroke helmsman Bárðr's wife's belly than to do your duty on ship, and that is not tolerated.”

¹³⁶ *Grettis saga*, ch. 17, 53-54. ‘The helmsman's young wife was in the habit of sewing Grettir's sleeves and the crew teased him greatly about it.’

¹³⁷ This phrase is translated as ‘stroke Bard's wife's belly with your hands’ by Bernard Scudder in ‘The Saga of Grettir the Strong,’ *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. 2, edited by Viðar Hreinsson et al. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson, 1997), 72. I do not believe this is the intended meaning, particularly in the context of the other metaphors mentioned here. A discussion between the seafarers about frozen fingers not long before this may have prompted the connection.

¹³⁸ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 17, 208. ‘Now for this it turned out that Þorgrímr and his men needed more machismo to attack Þorgeir than that needed to stroke their wives' bellies.’

the narrator's sardonic tone towards the motley crew attacking the protagonist, Þorgeirr, who (the narrator is quick to explain) was given fearlessness and courage by the Almighty. *Flateyjarbók* offers an even more insulting description: *klappa um maga* is replaced with *klappa um júgr*, meaning to pat/stroke the udder. This brings to mind Crespo Fernández's thoughts on animal equivalence in sexual contexts:

[by placing] negatively evaluated animal attributes onto the human referent ... the receiver is aware that attributes of a negative nature are commonly associated with animals, which constitutes the basis for the dysphemistic interpretation of the metaphorical utterance.¹³⁹

This choice of metaphor dehumanises the women, their bodies degraded and vicariously the enemies are further degraded with the implication of bestial lust. This is an artful dysphemism that could imply the women were on all fours (i.e. akin to a cow being milked), yet would contradict the idea of *klappa* indicating the missionary position. It is likely the metaphor was applied to be more offensive than realistic, in a similar vein to the symbolic insults thrown at *argr* men where they are likened unfavourably to (female) animals. To assign the same abuse to women is an unusual occurrence.

The common theme of all three phrases is that the insult accuses men of not having the energy to do something more important, or keeps them from performing their duties on account of their sexual lust and subsequent lethargy. The construction of the metaphor (doing X rather than Y) humorously juxtaposes romping on the woman's stomach with traditional activities of manliness: entering battle, proving one's worth on a fishing expedition, and maintaining one's livestock and household.¹⁴⁰ This is why it is a successful dysphemism: by not only chastising them for an inability to carry out the task at hand, the metaphor offers a demeaning vision of sexual performance, undermining their masculinity completely. The exception to this rule appears in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where the metaphor is used not to deride Gunnlaugr for laziness but for the object of his affections:

Þat var einn dag, er Gunnlaugr fór í Mávahlíð, at hann kom í Holt ok talaði mart við Kǫtlu, en hon spurði, hvárt hann ætlar þá enn í Mávahlíð – 'ok klappa um kerlingar nárann?' Gunnlaugr kvað eigi

¹³⁹ Crespo Fernández, 'Euphemism and Dysphemism,' 105.

¹⁴⁰ Clover analyses other insults directed at men that accuse them of avoiding tasks, often involving an accusation of lustfulness. She notes that even if the men are phallic aggressors, the avoidance can be considered effeminate, and sometimes 'tip over into *níð*.' See 'Regardless of Sex,' 376.

þat sitt ørendi, – ‘en svá at eins ertu ung, Katla, at eigi þarftu at bregða Geirríði elli.’ Katla svarar: ‘Eigi hugða ek, at þat mundi líkt vera, en engu skiptir þat,’ segir hon, ‘engi þykkir yðr nú kona nema Geirríðr ein, en fleiri konur kunnu sér enn nokkut en hon ein.’ Oddr Kǫtluson fór opt með Gunnlaugi í Mávahlíð; en er þeim varð síð aptr farit, bauð Katla Gunnlaugi opt þar at vera, en hann fór jafnan heim.¹⁴¹

As with the Glúmr and Þjóstólfr example, the teasing is motivated by sexual jealousy, indicated by Katla’s dismissive responses and invitations to stay the night. Her dysphemistic turn of phrase includes the word *kerling*, which mocks the disparity in age between the pair in an attempt to undermine both Gunnlaugr’s masculinity and Geirríðr’s femininity and sexuality. Similarly, *nári* means the groin (for both genders) and, if old age and sex were not looked upon favourably, it is likely she intended to provoke him with an unattractive image of old genitals – or perhaps this was the image inside her head, fuelling her jealousy and bewilderment at the pairing. Forrest S. Scott considers that Katla’s mention of a sexual relationship with the older woman is done unconsciously: she brings sex into the conversation to make sure Gunnlaugr knows her intentions towards him.¹⁴² Whatever Katla’s reasons, Gunnlaugr is not interested in her sexually, nor in her magical abilities, but in the next chapter it is suggested that he is on the receiving end of both of these when he wakes to find himself bruised and bloodied. While Katla’s son and others blame Geirríðr for having ‘ridden’ him, the reader knows she warned him to be careful, but he did not heed her words.¹⁴³

Though the metaphorical concept SEX IS TO STROKE THE BELLY is not frequently used, its sexual meaning must have been well known; apart from the example above using just *brǫlta* alone, the euphemistic qualities of the verb *klappa* may have also endured to function without parts of the body. In *Þjalar-Jóns saga* the connection between pleasure and sex can be observed in the phrase ‘þuiat mier þikier þu fátt huxa, nema klappa vm konur med gledi og

¹⁴¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 15, 28. ‘One day as Gunnlaugr went to Mávahlíð he stopped by Holt and talked for a long time with Katla. She asked if he planned to carry on to Mávahlíð “and stroke the old lady’s groin?” Gunnlaugr said that wasn’t his plan, “and you aren’t so young yourself, Katla, that you can hardly call Geirríðr old.” Katla replied, “I didn’t think to compare us but it doesn’t matter,” she said. “You think of no other woman now but Geirríðr alone, but many women know as much as she does.” Oddr Kǫtluson often went with Gunnlaugr to Mávahlíð. And whenever they came back late Katla often asked Gunnlaugr to stay but he always went home.’

¹⁴² See Forrest S. Scott, ‘The Woman who Knows: Female Characters of *Eyrbyggja Saga*,’ *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson, with Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002), 232.

¹⁴³ *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 16, 29. This scene is discussed by Ármann Jakobsson in relation to *trollskapr*, see ‘The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of *Troll* and *Ergi* in Medieval Iceland,’ *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXXII (2008), 41-43.

gaman.¹⁴⁴ It is worth noting that the three examples given here outside of the *Íslendingasögur* genre are from *riddarasögur* believed to be native to Iceland,¹⁴⁵ i.e. not translated southern tales, leading to the conclusion that this is most likely an indigenous metaphor for sex.

To conclude, the metaphor is only for comedic/derogatory use. The words for belly may simplify the sexualised female body or possibly hint at anatomical confusion. As this marginalia from a mid-sixteenth century manuscript demonstrates, some people required assistance in locating the vagina:

Anno 1566: Nu af þui ad menn uita ogiorla huar kuntan muni þa skal leita fyrst um bringu og bringuteina þa um nara og nafla stad þa mun finnast fud nærri feiginbrecku. kann eg ecki seigia af henni meira.¹⁴⁶

This provides an enlightening map of the female body. Working from top to bottom down the centreline, it raises the question of specific meanings of each of the words. *Kunta* is cognate with ‘cunt,’ referring to the vulva or vagina. *Nári* usually means ‘groin,’ but therefore should go after *nafli* (navel) in this sequence, so perhaps serves as a synonym for *kviðr*, here meaning belly area in general. But what is *feiginbrecka*, the slope of pleasure? This is likely to be the *mons pubis*, or specifically pudendal cleft, which includes the clitoris. It would seem strange to mention as a point en route to the cunt; one would imagine knowledge of one would mean knowledge of the other.

The curtness of the last sentence puzzles: is that the extent of his knowledge, or an attempt to cut off any licentious feelings that may have stirred the reader, enjoying a welcome interruption from the rather dry subject matter on the page concerning judgements of the Bishop of Hólar? The answer, perhaps, is in the apologia offered before this sexual guidance. On this page are various writings by Vigfúss Jónsson, district official á Kalastöðum, some are crossed out and illegible, but this gives clarity to his explanation: ‘Hier kemur þu

¹⁴⁴ *Þjalar Jóns saga*, edited by Louisa Fredrika Tan-Haverhorst (Haarlem (unknown binding), 1939), ch. 23, 37. ‘Because you think of little else than stroking women for fun and pleasure.’

¹⁴⁵ See Jürg Glauser, ‘Mágus saga jarls,’ ‘Valdimars saga,’ and ‘Þjalar-Jóns saga,’ *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, edited by Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages 1, 1993), 402-403, 686-687 and 664-665 respectively.

¹⁴⁶ *Diplomatarium Islandicum IX*, edited by Jón Þorkelsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1909-1913), 53. ‘Now because men barely know where the cunt may be, they shall first look around the breast and breast-bars, then to the groin and belly button, then the cunt may be found near the slope of pleasure. I can’t say more about it.’ The marginalia is dated 1566 and appears alongside a document from 1508 in AM 238, 4to. (*Bessastaðabók*), 127-128.

mier til jllz...þu villtt ecki uera glaud uid mig kerling min.¹⁴⁷ Where scribes were once censored by morals, perhaps they were later censored by spousal approval.

7. Introduction to metaphors for genitalia

Genitalia do not feature prominently in the sagas; as we have seen from examples mentioned so far regarding pleasure, venue, and the belly and vagina confusion, terminology is heavily euphemised in prose and artistically articulated in poetry. A reliance on euphemisms is still in force today; Braun and Kitzinger's 2001 investigation into terminology and statistical use of female genital slang (FGTs) and male genital slang (MGTs) in modern English usage recognised that 'Euphemistic genital slang is vague to the extreme, with no clear bodily reference point, which implicitly reinforces the idea that we should not talk, or even think, about genitalia explicitly.'¹⁴⁸ Unnr's reference to *hqrund* certainly relates to this sentiment, as does the use of *kviðr*. Braun and Kitzinger's study distinguished 317 different terms for FGTs; though their focus was not on MGTs they also identified 351 terms for these.¹⁴⁹ Both genders were coded into 17 categories, with the majority of FGTs coming under the categories of standard slang, euphemism, space, receptacle, abjection, hair, animal, or money. MGTs predominantly came under the categories of personification, gender identity, edibility, danger, or nonsense. Many of these classifications apply to Old Norse terms for genitalia too; in *Parts of the Body in Older Germanic and Scandinavian*, Arnoldson extensively categorises words for penis in several medieval languages. Those that include Norse words are Creative Organ; Tool; Power; Shame; Member of Need; Something Small or Pointed: Knife, Spear, Rod, Goad; Lump, Ball, Chunk; Secret Part; Member of Blame; and Urinator, Water-Pipe.¹⁵⁰ Several non-euphemised words for penis in an Old Norse context do not fit in these categories. *Völsa þátrr* introduces a few in its entertaining and vulgar verses about the worship of a horse's penis: *vingull*, *beytill*, *Mörnir*, *nosi* and *reðr*, and *Völsi*,¹⁵¹ while Cleasby-Vigfússon cites some poetic examples for

¹⁴⁷ *Diplomatarium Islandicum IX*, 53. 'This will be bad for me ... you will not be happy with me, my darling.'

¹⁴⁸ Braun and Kitzinger, 'Snatch,' 150.

¹⁴⁹ Braun and Kitzinger, 'Snatch,' 146. Study One collected these terms from 156 females and 125 males; the findings of these will be applied to Old Norse genitalia. Study Two, which took 49 of the FGTs to investigate a consistent vocabulary for genitalia, is specific to modern English and not relevant to this thesis.

¹⁵⁰ Torild Arnoldson, *Parts of the Body in Older Germanic and Scandinavian*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1915), 163-170.

¹⁵¹ *Völsa þátrr*, *Stories from the Sagas of the Kings*, with introduction, notes and glossary by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007). Turville-Petre describes it

penis as *böllr* (ball),¹⁵² *lókr*, meaning tramp, *titlingr* (a sparrow-like bird) and *snýpr* as a vulgarity, related to the word *sneypta*, meaning outrage, dishonour or disgrace.

Arnoldson's categories offer a similar range for the female pudenda including Bearer; Crack, Streak, Opening; Bag, Pouch, Sheath, Pocket; Flap, Wrapper, Fold; Shame, Repugnant Part; Play; and Urinating Organ.¹⁵³ The vagina is often obscurely presented: sometimes it is notably absent, for example, in the case of witches being targeted *í milli fótanna*, while the euphemistic internal and external implications of *kviðr* means it encapsulates the entire lower female torso. Cleasby-Vigfússon cites *kviðr*, *kunta*, *pussa* (of animals) and *fuð* as 'cunnus.'¹⁵⁴ Cleasby-Vigfússon also lists *gás* (goose) from *Jómsvíkinga saga*,¹⁵⁵ which equates to Braun and Kitzinger's animal category, and *leika* 'play,' which provides extra support to the pleasure metaphor.

The euphemisms demonstrate the diverse range of nuances used to describe genitalia according to the context in which they are used. Contrary metaphors appear alongside each other, despite incompatible meanings, hence genitalia are discussed here in broader terms than the metaphors above. Arnoldson's list created an invaluable basis; however, since he did not include references to specific texts, some terms have eluded detection, therefore not all of his are incorporated in the catalogue in the conclusion to this chapter.¹⁵⁶

7.1. Metaphors for genitalia in *Íslendingasögur*

In *Kormáks saga*, Kormákr's pining for Steingerðr provides scope for sexual interpretation:

as 'a sophisticated author's burlesque of "goings-on" among illiterate peasants living on a remote headland of northern Norway.' See Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: the Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (Conneticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 256.

¹⁵² David Clark discusses a *níð*-based pun on the dual meaning of the word *böllr* during a game in *Gísla saga*; see 'Gísla saga,' 510; also Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 66-67.

¹⁵³ Arnoldson, *Parts of the Body*, 173-177.

¹⁵⁴ The appearance of *fup* in runic inscriptions (mostly on wood) is a curiosity: it is unclear if these are obscured references to the *fupark* alphabet or simple vulgarities. See Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes*, 192-199, for a summary of runic inscriptions pertaining to love and sex. He notes it was assumed that *fup* did not mean 'cunt' but was the beginning of *fupark*, especially if the stone, bone or other carved material was broken and the remainder missing. This was certainly not always the case, though, and he offers inscription B434 as an example of conscious wordplay: 'Jón silkifuð á mik, en Guþormr fuðsleikir reist mik, en Jón fuðkúla ræðr mik' – 'Jón silky-cunt owns me, but Guþormr cunt-licker carved me, but Jón cunt-ball reads me'; see 191.

¹⁵⁵ *Jómsvíkinga saga*, edited by Ólafur Halldorsson (Reykjavík: Prentsmiðja Jóns Helgason, 1969), ch. 8, 108. On the sexual meaning of *gás*, Jochens suggests that the nickname *Tregagás* (reluctant goose) could indicate frigidity; see *WiONS*, 204.

¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, he did not take into account kennings, or other words for genitalia encountered in the sagas. However, many of those he includes support the argument here, since they allude to pouches, animals, weaponry, urinating, anger and displeasure.

Hvílum, handar bála
 Hlín, valda sköp sínu,
 þat séum reið at ráði,
 rík, tveim megin bríkar,
 nærgi's oss í eina
 angrlaust sæing göngum,
 dýr sköfnungi drafnar
 dyneyjar við Freyja.¹⁵⁷

The verse is ambiguous. Einar Ól. Sveinsson states that some people consider the last couplet an obscenity; he does not agree, but concedes that the meaning is not supposed to be clear-cut.¹⁵⁸ Kormákr's obsessional love for Steingerðr certainly makes it feasible that being in bed with her, albeit divided by a partition, would give rise to a sexual lament. The intensity of Steingerðr's upset after its recital also makes clear that it was offensive to her tastes.¹⁵⁹

Kormákr's choice of metaphor for his penis is *sköfnungr*, which Cleasby-Vigfússon modestly refers to as 'a kind of weapon:' this is the sword *Sköfnungr*, once owned by King Hrólfr Kraki and now in Kormákr's possession.¹⁶⁰ His dealings with *Sköfnungr* until this point were not positive since he showed no respect for the sorcerer's meticulous instructions on its use, and he composes seven verses about its poor performance.¹⁶¹ However, the sword's history, prominence and reverence in many sagas make it a worthy *heiti* for penis and would suggest that, no matter how dear Steingerðr's genitals are to him, his own are truly treasured.

The *mons pubis* as downy-haired island fits with Braun and Kitzinger's hair terminology as a soft landing for Kormákr's penis.¹⁶² However, associations

¹⁵⁷ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19, 272-273, verse 59.

'We rest, goddess [Hlín of hand-gold], on either side of a screen;
 – the powerful fates cause this and we see they are cruel –
 whenever we get into the same bed, carefree, goddess [Freyja of sea spray],
 your downy-haired island is dear to my sword.'

¹⁵⁸ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19, 272, note to verse 59.

¹⁵⁹ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19, 275. Steingerðr tells Kormákr in varying ways to stop reciting verses, culminating with 'Troll hafi þik allan ok svá gull þitt.' – 'May the trolls take you all and your gold as well.'

¹⁶⁰ The acquisition of *Sköfnungr* and ensuing duel occur in chapters 9 and 10 of the saga.

¹⁶¹ William Sayers highlights Kormákr's ambivalent attitude towards magic and the trouble that causes him, especially in his love-life, in 'Sexual Identity, Cultural Integrity, Verbal and Other Magic in Episodes from *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga*,' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 107 (1992), 141-151.

¹⁶² Falk, 'Beardless,' 239-240, discusses pubic hair in medieval texts, including a relevant example from *Þórsdrápa*, where the liquids (urine and/or menstrual blood) flowing from between the giantess's thighs are 'Fríðar fen svarðrunnit,' which he translates as 'Fríðr's sward-runoff fen' and 'Fríðr's hair-swamp spillage'. A less romantic image than that in Kormákr's poem (though, perhaps, still erotic), the emphasis on landscape features is a suitable parallel here. Furthermore, Jochens notes the connection between hair and beauty is made with reference to Kormákr and Steingerðr's hair – on her head – but perhaps the association extends south. See Jenny Jochens, 'From Libel to Lament: Male Manifestations of Love in Old Norse,' in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gisli Pálsson (Middlesex: Harislik Press,

with nature also offer a new addition to the metaphorical terminology, that of an indigenous geographical features drawing inspiration from the Icelandic landscape. The combination of island and sword metaphors is evocative of a duel, in particular *hólmgangr*, the convention of combat on an islet or *hólmr*: this is a duel he is desperate to participate in, and win. Unfortunately, the island metaphor also symbolises the distance between them; hers is an island he cannot reach. The metaphorical concept continues in the next verse:

Svǫfum 'hress' í húsi
 hornþeyjar vit Freyja
 fjarðarlegs en frægja
 fimm nætr saman grimmar,
 ok hyrketils hverja
 hrafns ævi gnoð stafna
 lags, á lítt of hugsi,
 lák andvana banda.¹⁶³

In the context of the VAGINA IS AN ISLAND, we can deduce that Kormákr's time on the 'ship,' i.e. bed, has not resulted in him reaching the island. These erotic metaphors instil other conventional kennings with sexual meaning: *hornþeyjar*, 'horn-thaw,' meaning ale, and *drofn*, meaning sea spray, could be suggestive of ejaculation if we consider the nautical/obscene kennings in the verse from *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* above. Gade proposes that *hornþeyjar* can also be connected with *hress* (in the context of being well and able) to mean 'having full physical ability with regard to the melting or thawing of the horn,' which has crude connotations in relation to his unfulfilled urges.¹⁶⁴ This also relates favourably with Sayers' proposal that Kormákr's avoidance of sex may be evidence of a sexual dysfunction.¹⁶⁵ In terms of Crespo Fernández's categorisation, these metaphors are highly contextual, open to several interpretations and therefore can be considered artful. Kormákr's terminology, amplifying his and Steingerðr's genitalia on a grand scale, emphasises how heavily his frustrations weigh on his mind.

1992), 258.

¹⁶³ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19, 273, verse 60.

'We slept 'heartily' together, famed goddess [Freyja of horn-thaw's fjordland],
 for five miserable nights in a house, and every night [lit. raven's lives]
 I lay on the ship by the embers-kettle's gables,
 thinking of little, craving a unifying embrace.'

¹⁶⁴ Gade, 'Penile Puns,' 63. She also discusses non-sexually related interpretations of *hress*.

¹⁶⁵ See Sayers, 'Sexual Identity,' 145. On the saga's connections to mythological literature, he speculates that, similar to Óðinn sacrificing his eye for knowledge, Kormákr's sexual problem is 'the price he must pay for the ability to create erotic verse,' 148-151, at 148. Though, as mentioned previously, it is also the price he must pay for killing a woman's sons.

Discussion of one's own genitals is rare in the sagas, and Kormákr's bold comparison of his penis to a celebrated sword paints a picture of crude immodesty. Shortly after, a verse composed by his enemies and attributed to him lacks the romance of these verses, demeaning Steingerðr's vagina severely:

Vildak hitt, at væri
 vald-Eir gǫmul jalda
 stœrilát í stóði
 Steingerðr, en ek reini,
 værak þráða Þrúði
 þeiri's stǫðvar geira
 gunnǫrðigra garða
 gaupelds á bak hlaupinn.¹⁶⁶

It is surprising that such vulgarity would be credited to Kormákr considering the dramatic change in tone, but the plot is effective and the verse reaches Steingerðr, who 'verðr nú reið mjök, svá at hon vill eigi Kormák heyra nefndan.'¹⁶⁷ The metaphor for horses mating is an obscenity of the worst kind, made clear in the narrative through her distress that 'hann yrkir um hana níð.'¹⁶⁸ The perverse bestial imagery is heightened by *á bak hlaupinn*, which, in the context of *níð* insults, could refer to anal sex instead of vaginal; however, reference to *í stóði* (stud) and allusion to mating may apply more readily to procreative sex. To further support this, *gaupn* refers to holding/cupping both hands together, which relates to Braun and Kitzinger's receptacle category, as does *garðr*, an enclosed space; both could symbolise the anatomy of the vulva and vagina. Gade considers various scholars' interpretations of *gaupeldr* and *garðr* but uses a *vísa* by Magnús inn góði to convincingly argue that, since *gera garð of hestredr* refers to the custom of applying a bandage (*garðr*) to a horse's penis to stop it mating, then *gunnǫrðigra geira garða* means Steingerðr 'stops the phalli of stallions,' and thus the equestrian metaphor is carried throughout the verse.¹⁶⁹

THE PENIS IS A WEAPON metaphor continues, this time with *geirr* in the plural implying that several spears have penetrated Steingerðr. This

¹⁶⁶ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 20, 277-278, verse 64.

'I would have liked this, that the magnificent goddess [powerful Eir], Steingerðr, were an old mare, proud in a stud, and I a stallion; I would jump on the back of the valkyrie [Þrúðr of threads], whose fiery hole's enclosure stops stiffly contested spears.'

¹⁶⁷ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 20, 278. Steingerðr 'became so angry about this that she didn't want to hear Kormákr's name mentioned.'

¹⁶⁸ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 20, 278. 'He composed *níð* about her.'

¹⁶⁹ Gade, 'Penile Puns,' 64-65. In 'Regardless of Sex,' 376, Clover observes that horse genitalia feature heavily in Old Norse obscenity.

interpretation suggests that SEX IS A BATTLE; Steingerðr's island has already been conquered, and with *gunnþrðigr* as a laudatory epithet meaning 'difficult in battle',¹⁷⁰ the metaphorical concept extends to SEX IS A BATTLE WON BY MEN AND LOST BY WOMEN. However, at the end of the saga, Steingerðr wins the war by rejecting Kormákr for good and choosing to stay with her husband, vocalising her intention as *ekki skyldu kaupa um knífa*.¹⁷¹ Sayers highlights the sexual meaning, with Steingerðr 'intentionally reifying herself, in cynicism and distaste perhaps'.¹⁷² In the context of the men's contest for her, and Kormákr's already pointed remarks about his penis, it is a fitting and rather disdainful metaphor that discloses her sentiments on the situation and simultaneously provides a less glorious equivalent to Kormákr's sword.

There is a possibility that *Svarfdæla saga* builds on the symbolism inherent in THE PENIS IS A WEAPON and SEX IS A BATTLE further: Waugh considers a link between Skíði's torn, bleeding lip and female genitals, bringing to mind 'violent sex, tearing of the hymen, and the fantasies of dominance that are complicit in such wounds'.¹⁷³ He also notes that each time Karl talks to Yngvildr, he draws his sword first (*Karl brá þá sverði*), 'thus the saga writer explicitly associates sex with power – but for men only'.¹⁷⁴ If this theory is accepted, it certainly challenges Kormákr's romantic rendering of his xiphoid penis with a sharp shock of graphic realism.

Grettis saga also illustrates the metaphorical concepts of weaponry and battle. When Grettir's naked body is rudely mocked by a serving girl, his two stanzas in defence of the small measure of his penis are rich in metaphors for male genitalia, some of a more humble nature than Kormákr's:

Váskeytt es far flósu;
fár kann sverð í hári
æskiruðr fyr ǫðrum
ǫrveðrs séa ǫrva;
veðjak hins, at hreðjar
hafit þeir en vér meiri,
þótt éldraugar eigi
atgeira sin meiri.

Sverðlítinn kvað sæta,
saumskorða, mik orðinn;
Hrist hefir hreðja kvista

¹⁷⁰ It is also worth noting that *þrðigr* on its own can mean erect.

¹⁷¹ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 26, 298. She said she 'should not exchange knives.'

¹⁷² William Sayers, 'Steingerðr's Nicknames for Bersi (*Kormáks saga*): Implications for Gender, Politics and Poetics,' *Florilegium* 12 (1993), 46.

¹⁷³ Waugh, 'Misogyny,' 172. See *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 20, 185.

¹⁷⁴ Waugh, 'Misogyny,' 182, *Svarfdæla saga*, chs. 25-27, 197-203.

hœlin satt at mæla;
 allengi má ungum,
 eyleggjar bíð Freyja,
 lágr í læra skógi,
 lotu, faxi mér vaxa.¹⁷⁵

Gade proposes that these stanzas are not very sophisticated in their use of sexual imagery; the composer appears to have employed similar imagery and kennings to verses mentioned above. Note, for example, the similarity between *Hrist hreðju kvista* here and *Hrist handar fasta* (in *Bjarnar saga*), as well as *Freyja eyleggjar* and *Freyja fjarðarlegs* (in *Kormáks saga*). *Freyja fjarðarlegs* contains *ofljóst*,¹⁷⁶ a pun on Steingerðr's name, which Gade notes is lost in the transition from one saga to the other.¹⁷⁷ *Hrist* does appear to construct the same insult in both cases, with *hrista* (to shake) implying that the girl has first-hand experience of shaking ball-branches. However, there are some artful and unique kennings in the stanzas that capture the spirit of Grettir's defence. The metaphorical concept of THE PENIS IS A WEAPON is apparent in the use of *sverð* (twice), and *atgeira*, which Cleasby-Vigfússon defines as a bill or halberd, a weapon of foreign origin that is – pertinently – mostly used for thrusting. The kenning *éldraugar* combines a fierce battle (*él*) with a dry log (*draugar*) to signify man, continuing the SEX IS A BATTLE metaphor with imagery of war. The use of *qr* in *qrveðrs*, spear-storms, is also well chosen in this particular context, drawing all metaphorical focus to a sense of danger. Kormákr's imagery of *sköfnungr* seems delicate and ornate by contrast; this is an aggressive verbal assault for the serving girl's benefit, a call to arms that sets a precedent for the sexual violence that follows. The word *lota* in the last line, meaning 'bout,' reinforces that sexual intercourse – or perhaps more to the point, non-solicited sex – is a physical conflict in which to put the weapon to use.

The verses also contain sexual allusions to natural elements. Two refer to pubic hair: in Cleasby-Vigfússon *ruðr* is given as an old form of the word

¹⁷⁵ *Grettis saga*, ch. 75, 240-241, verses 64 and 65.

'The stupid girl is shallow; few warriors [wish-bushes] of spear storms can clearly see the sword in the hair of others; I bet this, that they have balls but mine are bigger, even though the warriors [battle-logs] have more penis to thrust.

...

Short-sworded said the seated seam-cutter, about me,
 The boasting woman [Hrist of ball-branches] may speak the truth;
 As a young man, in the groin forest my small penis [horse] grows much longer,
 Wait, goddess [Freyja of the leg of the island, i.e. stone], for a session.'

This scene is also discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

¹⁷⁶ 'Over-light' is a pun on the name of a referent in which the name is obscured in kennings. See Amory, 'Kennings,' 351-352.

¹⁷⁷ Gade, 'Penile Puns,' 65.

runnr, meaning a bush or grove, while *skógi* translates as forest, implying a dense layer of pubic hair. The connection of wood with *læra*, usually meaning the thigh area, or leg above the knee, extends its meaning here to the groin as a whole. But whose? Guðni Jónsson in *ÍF* 7 presents it as Grettir's *læra skógi*, while Clunies Ross and Oren Falk both suggest it refers to the serving girl's groin-forest.¹⁷⁸ Clunies Ross points to *heimisskógar* 'home-woods' in verse 44 of *Hárbarðsljóð*, which she proposes could be a kenning for female pubic hair, and proposes that 'it is the female genitals not the male that are compared to features of the landscape in the skaldic tradition.'¹⁷⁹ It is not entirely clear in this poem, and arguably *kvistr*, a twig or branch, continues the sylvan theme, but does so in relation to the penis; in conjunction with *hreðr* (scrotum), it evokes the image of a solitary branch extending from the groin-forest. However, perhaps the verse insinuates that Grettir's penis only grows when it is in proximity to the girl's groin-forest: this would work well as a metaphorical container/receptacle for his horse, denoted by *faxi*. *Fax* means mane, but in its dative form of *faxi*, it becomes a popular name for a horse: metaphorically speaking, the part of the animal becomes the whole and, simultaneously, Grettir's appendage grows bigger.¹⁸⁰ It is interesting how the emphasis shifts from martial kennings in the first verse to natural kennings in the second, as if to signify both attack and defence, bravado and beauty. Carl Phelpstead comments on the diverse terminology employed for Grettir's penis:

One of the most remarkable features of this remarkable passage is that although the penis of Grettir Ásmundarson is central to the episode, in a sense it is never actually quite present. The servant girl uses periphrastic euphemism ('small down below') and Grettir himself employs figurative language ('sword,' 'twig of the testicles').¹⁸¹

The serving girl's insult of Grettir's manhood that instigated the verses comes in three variations. AM 150, fol. and AM 152, fol. use the rather coy directional euphemisms *hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri* and *í milli fótanna* respectively, intimating that the girl's words do not match her boldness in mocking him. Sverrir Tómasson observes that this is similar to French *fabliaux*, in which the

¹⁷⁸ See Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Hildir's Ring: A Problem in the *Ragnarsdrápa*, Strophes 8-12,' *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 6 (1973), 85; also Falk, 'Beardless,' 242.

¹⁷⁹ Clunies Ross, 'Hildir's Ring,' 85, also citing evidence from Bo Almqvist, *Norrön niddikning I*.

¹⁸⁰ In contrast, and keeping the penis humble, figuratively speaking, Falk queries whether *faxi* is simply a weak form of *fax*, with the meaning of a 'mane down below,' see 'Beardless,' 244.

¹⁸¹ Phelpstead, 'Size Matters,' 430.

penis is often euphemised or missing.¹⁸² In DG 10, fol., the unusual term *dólgr*, which means fiend, devil or criminal,¹⁸³ brings an air of prophecy to her rudeness. Furthermore, in relation to Phelpstead's observation of the disparity between Grettir and the girl's respective metaphors, hers belittle him and render the penis non-existent, while his, novel and artful, refer to natural phenomena that grow – notably tall and thick.

There is much debate about the relationship between Grettir in *Grettis saga* and Grettir in the lewd poem *Grettisfærsla*.¹⁸⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen points out that they appear in the same manuscript, with the poem following the saga, hence the close association.¹⁸⁵ However, if Grettir's penis is as small as the girl says, perhaps line 85 of the poem cheekily indicates that they cannot be written about the same person, or, on the other hand, that Grettir is telling the truth about its growth, as we are told *stórt er hans reður* – 'his cock is large.'¹⁸⁶

Unnr employs a similar vagueness as the serving girl in her description of Hrútr's priapic penis as *hǫrund* (flesh or skin). Sverrir Tómasson suggests it is a loanword from the Latin *caro*, but may also have euphemistic qualities.¹⁸⁷ It is clear from the context that Unnr refers to a defect with his penis, though the vagueness of the euphemism leaves scope for speculation. As discussed, Lakoff and Johnson talk about synecdoche, the act of using part of something to represent the whole of it (and *vice versa*): does *hǫrund* refer to a particular part of the penis, such as an engorged foreskin, or that the shaft grows in height or girth to prevent penetration? Is Unnr using a part of the penis for the whole, or does she refer to the penis in its entirety? *Grettisfærsla* includes the word *hörundamuðr*, which has been translated by Heslop as 'mouth of penises,' and most likely refers to the vagina rather than the mouth, which would suggest *hǫrund* signifies the whole penis in penetrative sex.¹⁸⁸ An alternative reading proposes that Unnr uses the whole body (i.e. all skin) for a part (i.e. penis). In

¹⁸² Sverrir Tómasson, 'Hugleiðingar um horfna bókmenntagein,' *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 50:2 (1989), 216. See also Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson, 'Grettir vondum vættum, veitti hel og preytti,' *Gripla* 11 (2000), 45-46.

¹⁸³ No sexual reference is given in Johan Fritzner's *Ordbog Over Det Gamle Norske Sprog*. 3 vols. (Kristiania: Den Norske Forlagsforening, 1886-1972), Cleasby-Vigfússon, Geir T. Zoëga's *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1910), nor the *DONP* online. However, Arnoldson suggests that *skrimsl*, monster, refers to the penis in Old Norse. He categorises it under the term Secret Part, equating monsters and genitals with shame and hiding. See *Parts of the Body*, 169.

¹⁸⁴ See Kate Heslop, 'Grettisfærsla: The Handing on of Grettir.' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXX (2006), 72-75 for discussion on the scholarly debate.

¹⁸⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 18.

¹⁸⁶ 'Grettisfærsla,' in Heslop, 83 (line 85).

¹⁸⁷ See Sverrir Tómasson, 'Hugleiðingar,' 214.

¹⁸⁸ 'Grettisfærsla,' in Heslop, 89 (line 242). The text is poorly preserved so the context is not immediately clear; however, the two lines above mention kissing and food, so perhaps it alludes to the mouth as much as it does the vagina.

either situation, when she says that he is as ‘right’ as other men otherwise, we can assume that the penis returns to its flaccid state, or, as Phelpstead has suggested, he is able to ejaculate outside her body.¹⁸⁹

It is worth mentioning a possible link between Unnr’s *hǫrund* and Kormákr’s *sköfnungr* metaphors. In *Íslendinga saga*, AM 122a fol. (c. 1350-1370), the word *sköfnungr* means skin in a non-sexual situation.¹⁹⁰ This could create a triple play-on-words for Kormákr’s *sköfnungr*, with readings as sword, skin, and penis, and therefore may also support Unnr’s conceptualisation of Hrótr’s penis as skin.¹⁹¹

Moving away from weaponry, several scenes add further support to the sexual interpretation of natural phenomena and geographical features. *Sneglu-Halla þátr* provides a good example in a double entendre when the king orders Halli to make an ambiguous statement about Queen Þóra, ‘ok vit, hversu hon þolir.’¹⁹² Halli’s verse, in keeping with the crude tone of the tale, is not particularly ambiguous and centres on the royal genitalia:

Þú est makligust miklu,
munar stórum þat, Þóra,
flenna upp af enni
allt leðr Haralds reðri.¹⁹³

Allt leðr – all the foreskin, literally leather, praises Haraldr’s penis as a large and luxurious appendage. The king criticises Þóra for not accepting praise, but the offence to her is more apparent. *Makligust* suggests that she is most fitting in her royal role to receive the king’s penis, and also that she can physically accommodate it in her *enni*. *Enni* means forehead, but has a metaphorical meaning of precipice or steep crag. This would fit with Braun and Kitzinger’s space category, and, if Halli is insinuating the king is well endowed, also suggests that the queen has a sizeable vagina to cope with it. *Sneglu-Halla þátr*

¹⁸⁹ See Phelpstead, ‘Size Matters,’ 431. Also Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Ekki kosta munur: Kynjasaga frá 13. öld,’ *Skírnir* 174 (2000), 21.

¹⁹⁰ *Íslendinga saga*, ch. 174, 493. ‘Hann skeindist á lófunum ok svá framan á beinum á sköfnungunum.’ ‘He was grazed on the palms of his hands and on the skin on the front of his legs.’

¹⁹¹ *DONP* mentions that *sköflungr* is used in another manuscript but is an error (evt. fejl for *sköfnungr*); Cleasby-Vigfússon cites *sköflungr* as skin, (mod. *sköfnungr*) and as a secondary meaning for *sköfnungr*.

¹⁹² *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, ch. 10, 294. ‘and we will see how she tolerates it.’

¹⁹³ *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, ch. 10, 294, verse 13.

‘You are the most suitable
by a long way, Þóra,
to pull wide with a steep crag
all the foreskin of Harald’s cock.’

includes another nature metaphor when Halli composes a verse expressing his own sexual satisfaction:

Gótt es Gulapíng þetta,
gilju vit, hvat es viljum.¹⁹⁴

Cleasby-Vigfússon writes that *gilja* means ‘to beguile,’ but in this case probably has more obscene connotations in relation to nature if we compare it to a euphemism in *Króka-Refs saga*. When explaining that a man tried to rape his wife, Refr tells the king that ‘hann vildi fjallskerða konu mína’.¹⁹⁵ This is part of a collection of euphemisms invented by Refr to confuse the king and courtiers long enough for him to escape. Later, the king deconstructs Refr’s metaphor:

Hann sagði hann hafa viljat fjallskerða konu sína. Þar hefir hann viljat hvíla með henni, því at þá er kallat, at konur sé giljaðar, en gilin eru fjallskörð.¹⁹⁶

A *gil* is a ‘deep narrow glen with a stream at the bottom’ according to Cleasby-Vigfússon. A connection is made between sex and *gil*, and the idea of a vagina being equated with a natural receptacle to be explored by a man. The context of a glen could therefore add a metaphorical meaning to the verb *gilja* and imbue it with the sense of ‘to plunge:’ certainly that is the interpretation given by Refr and explained by the king, and most likely the intention in Halli’s couplet. Halli creates a misogynistic and dysphemistic connection between this expression of sex and a man’s lustful will by juxtaposing *gilja* and *vilja*, as well as the use of ‘what’ rather than ‘who’ to objectify the vagina and ignore the rest of the woman.

The use of nature in sexual metaphor corresponds to Bergsveinn Birgisson’s belief that ‘Instead of the cultural model of *mimesis* and the aesthetics of clarity and natural harmony, the Old Norse skald is much more interested in making something new, unseen or unexpected with his metaphors. And nature is the raw-material with which to create something new.’¹⁹⁷ However, there is an element of *mimesis* in their construction; geographical features were often given sexual parallels, as Richard Perkins explains:

¹⁹⁴ *Sneglu-Halla þátrr*, ch. 10, 293.

‘This Gulapíng is great,
we fuck what we like.’

¹⁹⁵ *Króka-Refs saga*, ch. 16, 153. ‘He wanted to mountain-pass my wife.’

¹⁹⁶ *Króka-Refs saga*, ch. 17, 154-155: ‘He said he had wanted to mountain-pass his wife. That means he wanted to sleep with her, because it is so called, that women are seduced, and a glen is a mountain pass.’

¹⁹⁷ Bergsveinn Birgisson, ‘What Have We Lost by Writing? Cognitive Archaisms in Skaldic Poetry,’ *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, edited by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf, (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008), 167.

Seamen along the Norwegian coast paid their respects to objects and localities representing sexual organs and the like (cf. for example the female Kontevika, 'Cunt Bay', and Hondsfitt, 'Bitch's Cunt'; the male Eistene, 'The Testicles'.¹⁹⁸

Therefore the skalds may have been drawing inspiration from this practice as much as they were creating something new. An episode in *Þorskfirðinga saga* raises a question about similar place-naming in Iceland:

Þórir elti Kerling upp með firðinum, til þess er fyrir þeim varð gil mikit. Steyptist Kerling ofan í einn mikinn fors, en Þórir kastar eptir henni hellusteini miklum, ok kom á milli fóta henni, ok þar lézt hon. Heitir þar síðan Kerlingargil ok Kerlingareyrr, ok þar hefir jafnan síðan reimt þótt.¹⁹⁹

The interpretation above could be applied to the *gil* here. The saga suggests that it wasn't falling into the waterfall that killed her, but the large slab of rock hitting her between the legs; therefore one wonders if the name Kerlingargil refers as much to the kerling's own cleft as it does the natural one.

Returning to the plunging metaphor applied to Refr's euphemistic *fjallskerða*, the noun *skarð*, a passage or mountain pass, can refer to the anus as well as the vagina. This is demonstrated in *Qlkoфра þáttr* when Broddi insults Guðmundr's lack of defense of his own *skarð*.²⁰⁰ Allan and Burridge note that there is a cultural connection between the vagina and anus for the following reasons:

The ambiguity presumably arises because (1) they share a similar location on the lower trunk; (2) they are both tabooed; (3) both saliently contain orifices and passages that expel waste products from the body; (4) those passages are used, respectively, in anal and straight sexual intercourse.²⁰¹

Clunies Ross observes that this kind of wordplay would be for slanderous purposes: 'ring-words were current in Old Icelandic for the vagina and thus

¹⁹⁸ Richard Perkins, 'The Gateway to Trondheim: Two Icelanders at Agdenes,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXV 2 (1999), 208.

¹⁹⁹ *Þorskfirðinga saga (Gull-Þóris saga)*, ÍF 13, edited by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1991), ch. 20, 225. 'Þórir chased the old woman up the fjord, to where there was a great gully. The old woman fell down into a great waterfall, and Þórir threw a large slab of rock after her, and it hit her between the legs, and she died there. That place was thereafter called Kerlingargil, and Kerlingareyri, and it has been considered haunted ever since.'

²⁰⁰ This scene is discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

²⁰¹ Allan and Burridge, *Euphemism*, 97.

might have been considered especially insulting in a masculine context.²⁰² In this respect the word *skeið* (f.; *skeið* n. translates as a race) presents an interesting case. Its meanings include warship, a weaver's rod, a spoon, and a scabbard. The first two of these fits metaphorical concepts for penis (weaponry and shape), while the latter two are more appropriate to the vagina as a receptacle. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, David Clark proposes it is employed to create a pun on scabbard and vagina.²⁰³ However, *Grettisfærsla* includes the line *við skeið at skotta*, which Heslop translates as 'move back and forth against the sheath.'²⁰⁴ While a sexual meaning is deliberate, the gender of the performer is uncertain; perhaps this too is an intentional part of the humour.

Regarding Crespo Fernández's theory, weaponry euphemisms extend from conventional references to swords to novel mention of Kormákr's specific sword. In a society in which combat appears with great regularity it is not surprising that sex is conceptualised as a combat, and a duel in particular. A harder task is considering the originality and medieval comprehension of the nature metaphors. They are ambiguous, but in the context of the Icelandic and Norwegian landscape, and people's experience with their surroundings, would perhaps be easily drawn on and the implications understood. *Grettisfærsla* contributes greatly to an inclination to interpret natural phenomena as sexual metaphors. It includes a long list of daily chores that depict domestic life in Iceland (such as lines 19-20, *Hann kann at slá ok at raka ljá* – 'He knows how to mow grass and rake the mown grass') and similes of phenomena in Icelandic nature; for example, lines 152-153: *eður lax at straumi, sem frost á breðum*, which Heslop has translated as 'or salmon to stream, like frost on glaciers.'²⁰⁵ Given the overt sexual content of the poem it is hard not to construe all lines with a sexual intention, and expand this practice to the wider Old Norse canon; however, since much of the poem is obscured this is mostly supposition. And yet, these metaphors are intended for comedic effect, as are many of those mentioned in this chapter, which would support an evaluation of them as novel

²⁰² See Clunies Ross, 'Hildir's Ring,' 81; also Clover, 'Regardless of Sex,' 378; and Bruce W. Holsinger, who mentions that Latin *ficus* could mean both vagina and anus, and a sore resulting from anal penetration. See 'Sodomy and Resurrection: the Homoerotic Subject of the *Divine Comedy*,' *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 251. On the meaning of the word *fuð* in runic inscriptions, Liestøl notes that in modern Norwegian the word *fu* can mean vulva or anus, though the scope of the meaning in pre-modern times is unclear. See Aslak Liestøl, 'Runer frå Bryggen' (Bergen: Viking, 1964), 24. Arnoldson also lists *fuð* as *podex* and *cunnus* in Norwegian, Swedish and Old Norse; *Parts of the Body*, 127.

²⁰³ See David Clark, *Gender, Violence and the Past in Edda and Saga*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56.

²⁰⁴ 'Grettisfærsla,' Heslop, 81-82, note 28 (re. line 49).

²⁰⁵ 'Grettisfærsla,' Heslop, 80 and 86 respectively.

and artful, enjoyed all the more for the effort of interpretation required to delight in the obscenities they conceal.

7.2. Metaphors for genitalia in *Bósa saga ok Herraúðs*

Seduction, typically of a woman by a man, is a ubiquitous trope in the Old Norse canon, often with grave consequences for the seducer or girl's family. Yet the physical act receives little attention; the sexual element of seduction is less important than the intention, and even the mildest public displays of affection are symbolic of the shame attached to being seduced. *Bósa saga ok Herraúðs* fills in the blanks with a level of lewdness that conveys an enthusiasm for the distasteful, which Jenny Jochens calls 'almost pornographic,' observing that the saga portrays

a rollicking sexuality, these scenes leave little room for the imagination. Although the women clearly enjoy the activity – the second episode even indicates that 'the missionary position' was not universal – on all three occasions it was Bósi who took the initiative, as the point of the narrative would require.²⁰⁶

A *fornaldarsaga* composed before 1350, Naumann says it is 'not the invention of the author, but a prose paraphrase of a widespread type of erotic popular song'²⁰⁷ and presumably takes inspiration from the above-mentioned French *fabliaux*, short tales or verses that were well known for earthy dialogue and lusty, bawdy themes, as Phillips and Reay note:

Many *fabliaux*, and the related genre of farce, employ straightforwardly coarse language (*foutre, cul, vit, coilles, con* [fuck, arse, prick, balls, cunt]), though it is arguable whether these terms were as offensive to contemporaries as their modern equivalents. However, others prefer an extravagantly inventive range of metaphors. The sex act is variously 'a ferret's hunting for a rabbit in its lair, a squirrel's searching for nuts, ... feeding or watering a horse, and ... feeding a piglet' ... 'polish the ring'. Several metaphors emphasize male dominance or military allusions: 'to give justice.'²⁰⁸

Bósa saga fits into the latter of these with metaphors that are not directly sexual but evidently common to the *fabliaux* context. There is a great deal of potential

²⁰⁶ Jenny Jochens, 'The Illicit Love Visit: An Archaeology of Old Norse Sexuality,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1:3 (1991), 380-381. By 'point of the narrative' she refers to the role of seducer.

²⁰⁷ Hans-Peter Naumann, 'Bósa saga,' *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, edited by Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages 1, 1993), 54.

²⁰⁸ Kim M. Phillips, and Barry Reay, *Sex Before Sexuality: A Premodern History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 122.

sexual innuendo within the saga, but for the purposes of this chapter the focus is on the recurring theme of Bósi sleeping with farmers' daughters. In the three episodes of this occurrence, different euphemisms for his penis create distinctive linguistic frames of reference, with the target domain as an earl, an animal, and a stump respectively. Though the saga is a *fornaldarsaga*, and therefore outside the general scope of research, these exceptional and entertaining euphemisms make it a useful addition to the discussion of genital and sexual metaphors and show how modest the metaphors discussed above in the *Íslendingasögur* are in comparison.

7.2.1. The earl and the path

Bósi and Herrauðr are invited to stay at a house with a farmer, his wife and their daughter, who is said to be attractive (*væn*). A flirtation between the daughter and Bósi is noted: 'Bósi leit opt hýrliga til hennar ok sté fæti sínum á rist henni, ok þetta bragð lék hún honum.'²⁰⁹ We are told that the farmer's daughter sleeps in the middle of the hall, but that does not deter Bósi from his sexual mission:

En er fólk var sofnat, stóð Bósi upp ok gekk til sængr bóndadóttur ok lypti klæðum af henni. Hún spyrr, hverr þar væri. Bósi sagði til sín. 'Hví ferr þú hingat?' sagði hún. 'Því, at mér var eigi hægt þar, sem um mik var búit,' ok kveðst því vilja undir klæðin hjá henni. 'Hvat viltu hér gera?' sagði hún. 'Ek vil herða jarl minn hjá þér,' segir Bögu-Bósi. 'Hvat jarli er þat?' sagði hún. 'Hann er ungr ok hefir aldri í aflinn komit fyrri, en ungan skal jarlinn herða.' Hann gaf henni fingurgull ok fór í sængina hjá henni. Hún spyrr nú, hvar jarlinn er. Hann bað hana taka milli fóta sér, en hún kippti hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga jarl hans ok spurði, hví hann bæri með sér óvæni þetta, svá hart sem tré. Hann kvað hann mýkjast í myrkholunni. Hún bað hann fara með sem hann vildi. Hann setr nú jarlinn á millum fóta henni. Var þar gata eigi mjök rúm, en þó kom hann fram ferðinni.²¹⁰

The dialogue provides a humorous depiction of the girl's initial reluctance and naivety giving way to a curiosity, indicating her wholesomeness and virginity,

²⁰⁹ *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs (Bósa saga), Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 2, edited by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1944), ch. 7, 476. 'Bósi often looked cheerily to her and put his feet on her instep, and she played the same game with him.'

²¹⁰ *Bósa saga*, ch. 7, 476-477. 'And when everyone was asleep, Bósi stood up and went to the farmer's daughter's bed and lifted the bedclothes off her. She asked who it was, and Bósi told her it was him. "Why have you come here?" she asked. "Because I was not comfortable with things as they were," and asked if he could get under the bedclothes with her. "What do you want to do here?" she said. "I want to make my earl hard with you," said Bögu-Bósi. "What earl is that?" she said. "He is young and his strength has never come forth, but a young earl should be hardened." He gave her a gold ring from his finger and got into bed next to her. She asked now where the earl was. He asked her to touch between his legs, but she pulled back her hand and bade his earl unwelcome and asked, why he carried this monster with him, as hard as a tree. He said that it would soften in the dark hole. She told him to do what he wanted. He placed the earl between her legs. The path was not very wide; however, he completed the journey.'

and creates a good contrast between the figurative language employed by both of them and the physical movements. Bósi is gentlemanly, asking her permission, yet persuasive in telling her what he wants to do. Every move he makes is detailed, and there is an element of payment or gift exchange in producing a gold ring just before getting into bed.

The metaphors are not always consistent. Lakoff and Johnson comment on the inconsistencies of metaphorical use: 'In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept, ... a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor.'²¹¹ In this case, it appears that the earl takes precedence, with the penis personified and thus imbued with supremacy and dominance. The idea of hardening an earl is incongruous, although perhaps could imply further domination, and one wonders if there was a play on words with the verb *hirða*, meaning 'to tend to' or 'to hide,' either of which is fitting in the context of sexual intercourse. When Bósi says his penis *hefir aldri í aflinn komit fyrri* it is likely he exposes his virginity, yet this creates another complication in interpreting *herða* as harden: even as a virgin he would have experienced erections. Does harden here equate to sex rather than simply an erection? Perhaps in this case the comedy of the piece does not stand up to too much analysis.

The girl's initial reaction to feeling his penis is an entertaining interlude before penetration; her description of his *óvæni* fits into the personification category but is less complimentary than his earl euphemism. The vagina turns from dark hole to pathway; again, not compatible with the earl metaphor, but the irony of it being a difficult journey that he managed foreshadows the wider mission Bósi is on throughout the saga. He reveals his vigour as their sexual activity continues through the night:

Lágu þau nú um stund, sem þeim líkar, áðr en bóndadóttir spyr, hvárt jarlinum mundi hafa tekizt herzlan. En hann spyr, hvárt hún vill herða optar, en hún kvað sér þat vel líka, ef honum þykkir þurfa. Greinir þá ekki, hversu oft at þau léku sér á þeiri nótt, en hins getr, at Bósi spyr, hvárt hún vissi ekki til, – 'hvert at leita skyldi at gammseggi því, sem vit fóstbræðr erum eptir sendir ok gullstöfum er ritat utan.' Hún kvaðst eigi minna mundu launa honum gullit ok góða nætrskemmtan en segja honum þat, sem hann vill vita, – 'en hvern var þér svá reiðr, at þik vill feigan ok senda þik forsending?' 'Eigi gengr illt til alls, ok verðr engi frægr af engu,' segir hann, 'eru þeir ok

²¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson, *MWLB*, ch 3, 10.

margir hlutir, at opt snúast til gæfu, þó at háskasamliga sé stofnaðir.²¹²

The narrative ensures we know this is a mutual passion, placing them as equals in the bed and the daughter instigates the next round of sex, clearly enjoying it. The use of *leika sér* resonates with SEX IS PLEASURE – here a game – and certainly there is a playful element to their questioning of each other. The climax of the passage is not the sex but Bósi's attempt to further his true mission and reach the egg, and the gift exchange continues as the girl wishes to thank him for the pleasure and gold ring.

Bósi's final words recall the girl's initial apprehension at his erection. Before they part, Bósi has the stamina for one more hardening: 'Bósi þakkar henni nú sögu sína ok gerði henni góðan danganda í skemmtanarlaun, ok fór þá báðum vel, ok sváfu þau nú allt til dags.'²¹³ The continued sense of repayment and deference on her part is unusual and does not conform to the typical seduction trope. *Dangandi* is not a common word (only appearing in this instance according to the *DONP*²¹⁴), but may be analogous with *dingli-dang*, *dingla* or *dangla*, which respectively mean 'penis,' 'to swing to and fro,' and 'swing' in Swedish dialect.²¹⁵ According to modern parlance it has the meaning of *sláttur*, a beating sound, bringing a multi-sensory element to their sexual activity.

7.2.2. The foal and the wine-well

The second sexual scenario follows the same format as the first: Herrauður and Bósi stay at a house with an old man and woman, and a beautiful daughter, with whom Bósi strikes up a rapport: 'Bósi var glaðkátr ok gerði henni smáglingur;

²¹² *Bósa saga*, ch. 7, 477. 'They lay there for a while, as they pleased, before the farmer's daughter asked whether the earl had managed to harden. And he asked if she wanted to harden it more often, and she said she would like that, if it seemed to him that it needed to be done. It is not mentioned how often they enjoyed themselves during the night, but it is mentioned that Bósi asked if she knew – "where they should search for the vulture's egg, that he and Herrauður were sent after, and it has gold letters written around the outside of it." She said it was the least she could do to repay him for the gold and the good night of pleasure and told him that which he wanted to know, - "but who did you make so angry, that they would send you to your death to send you on this mission?" "Not everything goes badly, and no one becomes famous for nothing," he said, "and there are many things that often turn out for the better, though they start dangerously."

²¹³ *Bósa saga*, ch. 8, 478. 'Bósi thanked her for the information, and gave her a good banging in payment of pleasure, and both enjoyed it, and they slept until day.'

²¹⁴ *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog (A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose)*. The Arnamagnæan Institute, University of Copenhagen. Available from <http://onp.ku.dk/>.

²¹⁵ Arnoldson, *Parts of the Body*, 168.

hún gerði honum ok svá í móti.²¹⁶ The sexual metaphors that follow are in keeping with those of *fabliaux*, as mentioned above:

Um kveldit var þeim fylgt at sofa, en þegar at ljós var slokit, þá kom Bögu-Bósi þar, sem bóndadóttir lá, ok lypti klæði af henni. Hún spurði, hvat þar væri, en Bögu-Bósi sagði til sín. 'Hvat viltu hingat?' sagði hún. 'Ek vil brynna fola mínum í vinkeldu þinni,' sagði hann. 'Mun þat hægt vera, maðr minn?' sagði hún; 'eigi er hann vanr þvílíkum brunnhúsum, sem ek hefí.' 'Ek skal leiða hann at fram,' sagði hann, 'ok hrinda honum á kaf, ef hann vill eigi öðruvísi drekka.' 'Hvar er folinn þinn, hjartavinrinn minn?' sagði hún. 'Á millum fóta mér, ástin mín,' kvað hann, 'ok tak þú á honum ok þó kyrrt, því at hann er mjök styggr.' Hún tók nú um göndulinn á honum ok strauk um ok mælti: 'Þetta er fimligr foli ok þó mjök rétt hálsaðr.' 'Ekki er vel komit fyrir hann höfðinu,' sagði hann, 'en hann kringir betr makkanum, þá hann hefir drukkit.' 'Sjá nú fyrir öllu,' segir hún. 'Ligg þú sem gleiðust,' kvað hann, 'ok haf sem kyrrast.' Hann brynnir nú folanum heldr ótæpiliga, svá at hann var allr á kafi. Bóndadóttur varð mjök dátt við þetta, svá at hún gat varla talat. 'Muntu ekki drekkja folanum?' sagði hún. 'Svá skal hann hafa sem hann þolir mest,' sagði hann, 'því at hann er mér opt óstýrinn fyrir þat hann fær ekki at drekka sem hann beiðist.' Hann er nú at, sem honum líkar, ok hvílist síðan.²¹⁷

Once again the narrative assures us that this is consensual seduction: Bósi takes the role of courteous seducer and the girl his curious damsel, and the dialogue between them is one of mutual temptation. As mentioned above, the concept of feeding or watering a horse appears in *fabliaux*, and also in *Grettisfærsla*,²¹⁸ and the euphemisms in this passage adhere to a more consistent metaphorical concept than the first episode, with the penis as animal and vagina as (drinking) receptacle – at least for the horse's head if not the entire foal – fitting into the typical sexual euphemism format, as described by Allan and Burridge:

²¹⁶ *Bósa saga*, ch. 11, 485. 'Bósi was of good humour, gave her flirtatious comments, she did the same in return.'

²¹⁷ *Bósa saga*, ch. 11, 485-486. 'In the evening they were shown where to sleep, and as soon as the light was turned off, Bögu-Bósi came to where the farmer's daughter lay, and lifted the bedclothes off her. She asked who was there, and Bögu-Bósi told her it was he. "What do you want here?" she said. "I want to water my foal at your wine-well," he said. "Do you think it possible, my man?" she said; "he is not used to the sort of springhouse that I have." "I'll lead him there," he said, "and push him deep down, if he does not want to drink otherwise." "Where is your foal, my dear?" she said. "Between my legs, my love," he replied, "and take hold of him, but carefully, because he is quite shy." She took hold of his pole and stroked it and said, "It is a lively foal, though with rather a straight neck." "He is not well placed when it comes to the head," he said, "but he curves better at the mane, when he has drunk." "See to it now," she said. "Lie as you like to," he said, "and keep as still as possible." He now watered the foal rather thoroughly, so that it plunged in all the way. The farmer's daughter was very surprised about it that she could barely speak. "Are you going to drown the foal?" she said. "He shall have as much as he can tolerate," he said, "because he is often hard to manage if he does not get to drink when he wants to." He then went at it as long as he pleased, and then rested.'

²¹⁸ *Grettisfærsla*, Heslop, 80-81 (lines 36-37): *Hann greiðir festum / ok gefur hestum* 'He arranges ropes / and gives horses (food or drink).'

[there are] a number of terms which recognize that the physical characteristics of the female genital organ are determined by its function as a container for the penis during copulation.²¹⁹

It is worth speculating if the drinking/moisture theme refers to female arousal, or perhaps is an anatomical confusion with the urethra; Braun and Kitzinger note that 'minge,' the British slang term for vagina, derives from the Latin *mingere*, meaning to void urine,²²⁰ but in either case the horse-to-water metaphor is expressed in great detail. Unlike other references to horses in sexual contexts in Old Norse literature, this foal is notably non-dysphemistic. Bósi and the girl discuss it in loving, nurturing terms, and her questions allow the saga to go into detail of the anatomy of Bósi's penis in relation to the anatomy of a horse. Cleasby-Vigfússon notes that *makki* is the upper part of a horse's neck. After mention of the head, one can assume the upper part refers to the shaft of the penis. His penis is both foal and, according to the narrative, *göndull*, which is an oblong of spun (tangled) material and would denote a flaccid penis rather than an erect one, and indeed, Bósi explains it will change shape if she continues stroking. There is also a small difference between the euphemisms used by the girl and by Bósi for her vagina: he flatteringly calls it a *vínkelda* – wine-well, while she refers to it in rather more earthy terms as *brunnhús* – spring-house.²²¹ Sverrir Tómasson notes the similarity of dialogue and euphemism here with the *fabliau*, *De la Damoisele qui ne pooit oir parler de fotre II*, in which the vagina is referred to as 'ma fontaine,' i.e. *brunnhús*.²²² The sexual encounter lingers on the post-coital details more than the first, and continues the fluid theme:

Bóndadóttir undrast nú, hvaðan væta²²³ sjá mun komin, sem hún hefir í klofinu, því at allr beðrinn lék í einu lauðri undir henni. Hún mælti: 'Mun ekki þat mega vera, at folinn þinn hafi drukkit meira en honum hefir gott gert ok hafi hann ælt upp meira en hann hefir drukkit?' 'Veldr honum nú eitthvat,' kvað hann, 'því at hann er svá linr sem lunga.' 'Hann mun vera ölsjúkr,' sagði hún, 'sem aðrir drykkjumenn.' 'Þat er víst,' kvað hann. Þau skemmta sér nú sem

²¹⁹ Allan and Burridge, *Euphemism*, 212.

²²⁰ Braun and Kitzinger, 'Snatch,' 154.

²²¹ See Arnoldson, *Parts of the Body*, 176. In terms for female pudenda, he gives a cognate euphemism of Middle High German *brūne*, Irish *brú* from **bhrēu-* meaning to swell or project. *Brún* has the sense of brow in most ON contexts but Arnoldson also provides examples of the vagina equating to a spring or fissure (173); this offers an interesting parallel here, and possibly even further comparison with *enni*, meaning crag, forehead and brow. The verb *bryнна*, 'to give water to,' also appears in line 51 of *Grettisfærsla*; see Heslop, 82. While we may speculate on a comparably suggestive meaning, the context of the word is unclear.

²²² Sverrir Tómasson, 'Hugleiðingar,' 219-220.

²²³ Cf. a verse in *Völsa þátr*, ch. 2, 56: the farmer's son uses the verb *væta* to indicate female sexual lubrication. *Þær skulu vingul væta í aftan*. 'They shall make the penis wet tonight.' Also Heslop, 79, connects this sentence in *Bósa saga* with line 8 of *Grettisfærsla*: '*verm freyddi*,' which she translates as 'warm river frothed.'

þeim líkar, ok var bóndadóttir ýmist ofan á eða undir, ok sagðist hún aldri hafa riðit hæggengara fola en þessum.

Ok eftir margan gamanleik spyrr hún, hvat manni hann sé, en hann segir til it sanna ok spurði á móti, hvat þar væri títt í landinu. ...Ok fellr þar nú tal þeira, ok sofa þau af um náttina.²²⁴

The personification of the penis (in the refractory period) as a drunk man turns Bósi's body upside down, equating ejaculate with vomit, and perhaps serves to convey the volume of Bósi's emission as much as the girl's lubrication. Conventional terms of *skemmta* (pleasure) and *gamanleik* (play) are used to describe the variety of sexual positions they perform; the girl's reference to previous sexual experiences here diverges from her initial reaction and shock at penetration that mirrored that of the virginal girl in the first episode, but offers an appropriate metaphorical and comedic use of *ríða*, as well as a flattering description of Bósi's penis. The scene ends with exhaustion and the girl providing Bósi with very detailed knowledge of the king and hall in order to help him achieve his mission.

7.2.3. The stump and the ring

Not deviating from the past two episodes, a couple with a good-looking daughter host Bósi for the night. However, this time the girl is not as open to his advances: 'Bögu-Bósi leit hýrliga til bóndadóttur, en hún var mjök tileygð til hans á móti.'²²⁵ Bósi's metaphors help reassure her and secure his final sexual encounter in this sequence:

Litlu síðar fóru menn til svefnis. Bósi kom til sængr bóndadóttur. Hún spyrr, hvat hann vill. Hann bað hana hólka stúfa sinn. Hún spyrr, hvar hólkrinn væri. Hann spurði, hvárt hún hefði engan. Hún sagðist engan hafa, þann sem honum væri hæfiligr. 'Ek get rýmt hann, þó at þröngur sé,' sagði hann. 'Hvar er stúfinn þinn?' sagði hún. 'Ek get nærri, hvat ek má ætla hólkbörinni minni.' Hann bað hana taka á millum fóta sér. Hún kippti at sér hendinni ok bað ófagnað eiga stúfa hans. 'Hverju þykkir þér þetta líkt?' sagði hann. 'Pundaraskapti föður míns ok sé brotin aptan af því kringlan.' 'Tilfyndin ertu,' sagði Bögu-Bósi; hann dró gull af hendi sér ok gaf henni. Hún spyrr, hvat hann

²²⁴ *Bósa saga*, ch. 11, 486-487. 'The farmer's daughter wondered where the fluid had come from, that she had in her cleft, because all the bed was in a lather under her. She said, "Could it be that your foal has drunk more than was good for him and has now thrown up more than he has drunk?" "He has lost his power somewhat," he said, "because he is as limp as a lung." "He might be drunk," she said, "just like other drunk men." "That's for sure," he said. They enjoyed themselves as much as they liked, and the farmer's daughter was sometimes on top or underneath, and she said she had never ridden an easier foal than this one. And after several rounds of fun, she asked who he was, and he told her the truth and asked in return what was happening in the country. ... And then they stopped talking, and slept for the rest of the night.'

²²⁵ *Bósa saga*, ch. 13, 491. 'Bögu-Bósi glanced warmly at the farmer's daughter, but she looked quite squint-eyed at him in return.'

vill á móti hafa. 'Ek vil sponsa traus þína,' sagði hann. 'Ekki veit ek, hvernig þat er,' segir hún. 'Ligg þú sem breiðast,' kvað hann.²²⁶

Yet again, the extensive dialogue is comedic as he tries to charm the innocent girl. The rapid rally of questions and answers is evocative of the motion of sexual intercourse, and her continued naivety suggests that the double entendres used by Bósi have been lost on her. Her assessment of his penis as machinery fits the *fabliaux* ring and stump theme, as well as the suggestiveness of domestic chores intrinsic to *Grettisfærsla* mentioned above, but is an unflattering parallel for Bósi, reaching an anti-climax with mention of her father during this moment of intimacy. Bósi's reaction, *Tilfyndin ertu*, does little to disguise his disappointment. Nonetheless, the gift of a gold ring and unromantic sentiment of *Ek vil sponsa traus þína* leads to intercourse.²²⁷

Hún gerði sem hann bað. Hann ferr nú á millum fótanna á henni ok leggur síðan neðan í kviðinn á henni, svá at allt gekk upp undir bringspölu. Hún brá við hart ok mælti: 'Þú hleyptir inn sponsinu um augat, karlmaðr,' kvað hún. 'Ek skal ná því ór aprtr,' segir hann, 'eða hversu varð þér við?' 'Svá dátt sem ek hefði drukkit ferskan mjöð,' kvað hún, 'ok haf þú sem vakrast í auganu þvegilinn,' sagði hún. Hann sparir nú ekki af, þar til at hana velgdi alla, svá at henni lá við at klíjja, ok bað hann þá at hætta. Þau tóku nú hvíld, ok spyrr hún nú, hvat manna hann væri. Hann sagði it sanna ok spyrr, hvárt hún væri nokkut í kærleikum við Eddu konungsdóttur. Hún sagðist opt koma í skemmu konungsdóttur ok vera þar vel tekin.²²⁸

This time there is more focus on the girl's body and sensations than on Bósi's penis. The direction of the metaphors journeys from between her legs, down in her belly, and up to her rib-cage, before she announces that she can feel it in

²²⁶ *Bósa saga*, ch. 13, 491. 'A little later people went to bed. Bósi came to the farmer's daughter's bed. She asked what he wanted. He asked her to ring his stump. She asked where the ring was. He asked if she did not have one. She said that she did not have one that would be fitting for him. "I could make room for it, even though it is narrow," he said. "Where is your stump?" she asked. "I can more closely guess, what I may expect from my ring's hole." He asked her to touch between his legs. She jerked her hand back and bade his stump unwelcome. "What did it seem like to you?" he said. "My father's pounding shaft as if the disk were broken off behind it." "You are fault-finding," said Bögu-Bósi; he drew a gold ring from his hand and gave it to her. She asked what he wanted to have in return. "I want to bung your spout," he said. "I don't know how that is," she said. "Lie down as wide as you can," he said.'

²²⁷ The gift of a gold ring is not always welcome in Old Norse literature. For discussion of ring puns with *argr* connotations, see Clunies Ross, 'Hildir's ring.'

²²⁸ *Bósa saga*, ch. 13, 491-492. 'She did as he asked. He now goes between her legs and then lies down on her belly, so that everything went up under her ribcage. She reacted greatly and said, "You pushed the bung in up to my eyeball, man," she said. "I shall get it out again," he said, "or how do you feel?" "As woozy as if I had drunk fresh mead," she said, "and keep a sharp eye on the mop," she said. He spared nothing now, until she came over completely nauseous, so that she was close to vomiting, and asked him then to stop. Now they took a break, and she now asked what sort of man he was. He spoke the truth and asked whether she was somewhat close to Edda the king's daughter. She said she often went to the king's daughter's bower and was well received there.'

her eyes (or, since *augat* is in the singular, its journey to one eye socket could be even more suggestive of the penile journey); this is a more flattering description of Bósi's sexual prowess. In this case the girl is more likely to vomit before Bósi's penis can, and his courtesy to stop provides an opportunity to discuss the logistics for the next part of his mission.

To summarise the three episodes, it is unusual that with each sexual encounter Bósi's metaphor for his penis depreciates in value: from earl to animal to bung, yet each episode brings assurance of his virility: his size, stamina, rigidity and the quantity of emission are all emphasised by the girls. It appears that, if the euphemisms are common in bawdy tales from other countries as noted by Phillips and Reay, they are conventional, yet the construction of each episode may be considered novel, mixing the physical with the metaphorical, and verbalised with a sense of humour. The standard reference point for his penis in each case is *í milli fótanna*, and the continuity of this aspect creates humour in the girls' respective reactions. Unlike some of the sex scenes explored so far, the role-play and dialogue between Bósi and each girl presents mutual attraction and both parties contribute to the construction of the metaphorical conceptualisations. It is all the richer and more entertaining for it. Thus it appears that, as sensational and vulgar as the sex is, it plays an important part in the story: services rendered by Bósi and a mutual pleasure and gift exchange allow him to gain the girls' confidence and obtain the information he requires. However, it is disappointing that none of the girls are given names, despite the many aliases of Bósi's penis.

8. Conclusion

I tend to think what is explicit is often ineffective, that you can do more by hints and implication. As with describing anything, the trick is to get the reader doing the work. The space between the lines, that's where the reading experience takes place. If you can make your reader's imagination work, that is much more powerful than saying, he put his hand here and she put her hand there.²²⁹

Hilary Mantel

Centuries earlier, the saga authors demonstrated a similar awareness of the power of the imagination and the opportunity for interpretation of what is said, how it is said, and what is left out. Björn's thoughts of a pounding mattress, the

²²⁹ Hilary Mantel, quoted in Susanna Rustin, 'Let's not talk about sex – why passion is waning in British books,' *The Guardian*, 16 October 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/oct/16/sex-disappearing-from-novels>

prominence of pleasure for Unnr, bouncing on or stroking bellies, and Grettir's choice of kennings for his penis all create an atmosphere and depth of characterisation that is appropriate to and enhances the sexual intention of the metaphors. While the explicit and lengthy depictions of sexual intercourse in *Bósa saga* make it a hyperbolic and entertaining romp, such attention to detail seems pertinent to Mantel's enthusiasm for the elusive. While she is right to question the effectiveness of heavy divulsions, perhaps we need to ask in what way do we expect the sex scenes to be *effective*? Phillips and Reay pose a question:

Could the problem be the modern invention of pornography as a readily identifiable genre? If it is assumed that naked sex organs, depictions of sex acts and words and euphemisms for sex are intended to cause arousal, then such images can be taken as pornographic. On the other hand, we have no reason to suppose that pilgrim badges featuring vulvas on horseback, church carvings of arses or French comic tales of fucking and farting were necessarily sexually arousing. Their bodily explicitness is unmistakable; what is harder to determine is the reaction of contemporary observers.²³⁰

From our modern perspective, it is tempting to consider the intention behind explicit episodes in the sagas to be arousing, yet other sexual scenes described here (*Bósa saga* especially) present a bawdy and playful version of physicality rather than anything sensual and erotically charged. Perhaps sex and sexuality in a literary context were more for amusement purposes than erotica, with imagery of nubile sex equally entertaining in a non-sexually arousing sense. However, this view also supposes that sexual material can be categorised according to emotional interpretation (e.g. funny versus sexy). While medieval audiences appreciated that sex and pleasure were intertwined, sexual gratification was not the multimedia experience it is today, and the sagas, expensive and esteemed manuscripts as they were, may have been an inappropriate place to look for it.

The following tables, in accordance with Braun and Kitzinger's categorisations and with the addition of a nature and geography category, give an outline of metaphors for genitalia that have been discussed in this chapter and that will be discussed in other chapters. They reveal the diversity and quality of terms:²³¹

²³⁰ Phillips and Reay, *Sex Before Sexuality*, 114.

²³¹ Crespo Fernández's terms have not been applied; they are more subjective and related to individual contexts.

Table 1: Metaphors for female genitalia²³²

Female Genital Slang	Old Norse Terminology	English Translation	Reference in this thesis
Standard slang	Klof, n.	Cleft between the legs	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 11
	Kviðr, m.	Belly, womb, vagina	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 17; <i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 13
	Nári, m.	Groin	<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i> , ch. 15; <i>Diplomatarium Islandicum IX</i> , p. 53
Euphemism	Feiginbrecka, f.	Slope of pleasure (<i>mons pubis</i>)	<i>Diplomatarium Islandicum IX</i> , p. 53
Space	Gata, f.	Pathway	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 7
	Innan læra	Within the thighs	<i>Völsa þáttr</i> , ch. 2
	Í milli fótanna	Between the legs	<i>Þorskfirðinga saga</i> or <i>Gull-Þóris saga</i> , ch. 20; <i>Vatnsdæla saga</i> , ch. 26; <i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 7 and ch. 13
	Myrkhola, f.	Dark hole	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 7
Receptacle	Brunnhús, n.	Spring house	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 11
	Hólkr, m.	Ring/tube	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 13
	Hólkþora, f.	Ring-hole	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 13
	Hörundamuðr, m.	Mouth of penises	<i>Grettisfærsla</i> , line 242
	Skeið, f.	Scabbard	<i>Grettisfærsla</i> , line 49
	Traus, f.	A wooden container (for liquids) with a spout or bottleneck	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 13
	Vínkelda, f.	Wine spring	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 11
Abjection	Fuþ/fuð, f.	Cunt	<i>Diplomatarium Islandicum IX</i> , p. 53
	Garðr (m.) gaupelds	Fiery-hole's enclosure	<i>Kormáks saga</i> , ch. 20, verse 64
Hair	Dýney, f.	Downy island	<i>Kormáks saga</i> , ch. 19, verse 59
Animal	Gás, f.	Goose	<i>Jómsvíkinga saga</i> , ch. 8
Money	x		
Other - Breeding Function	Kunta, f.	Cunt (related to OE <i>cynn</i> , meaning species, race, progeny, sex) ²³³	<i>Diplomatarium Islandicum IX</i> , p. 53

²³² The following terms from Arnaldsson and Cleasby-Vigfússon have not been incorporated in this thesis but may be worth comparison: (Euphemism) *Leika*, f., plaything; *Sprund*, n., woman; *Hrukka*, f., wrinkle; (Receptacle) *Pussa*, f., pouch, especially of beasts; *Púss*, m., small bag; (Abjection) *Styggr*, adj., shy, showing anger or displeasure; (Animal) *Mús*, f., mouse; (Geographical and nature) *Sprungu*, f., chink, fissure, crevice. The use of *gregr* in a slanderous insult in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 33) may also refer to a mare's genitals, but is inconclusive; see William Sayers (citing Almqvist and Jan de Vries), 'Sexual Defamation in Medieval Iceland: *gera meri ór einum* "to make a mare of someone,"' *NOWELE* 30 (1997), pp 30-31. Sayers proposes it is a metathesis and reduplicate of *argr*.

²³³ Arnaldsson, *Parts of the Body*, 173.

Geographical and nature	Dýney, f.	Downy island	<i>Kormáks saga</i> , ch. 19, verse 59
	Enni, n.	A steep crag, precipice	<i>Sneglu-Halla þáttr</i> , ch. 10, verse 13
	Fjallskarð, n.	Mountain pass	<i>Króka-Refs saga</i> , ch. 17
	Gil, n. cf. gilja	Deep, narrow glen, cf. to seduce or fuck a woman	<i>Sneglu-Halla þáttr</i> , ch. 10; <i>Þorskfirðinga saga</i> or <i>Gull-Þóris saga</i> , ch. 20
	Læra skógr, m.	Forest of the thighs (or male)	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 65

Table 2: Metaphors for male genitalia²³⁴

Male Genital Slang	Old Norse Terminology	English Translation	Reference in this thesis
Standard slang	Erðr, m.	Penis, vulgar (cock, dick)	<i>Sneglu-Halla þáttr</i> , ch. 10, verse 14
	Nosi, m.	Penis, vulgar (cock, dick)	<i>Völsa þáttr</i> , ch. 2
	Reðr, m.	Penis, the genitals, especially of beasts. Usually vulgar (cock, dick)	<i>Sneglu-Halla þáttr</i> , ch. 10, verse 13; <i>Völsa þáttr</i> , ch. 2; <i>Grettisfærsla</i> , line 85
	Sin, f.	Penis, especially of beasts	<i>Sneglu-Halla þáttr</i> , ch. 10
	Vingull, m.	Penis, especially of beasts	<i>Völsa þáttr</i> , ch. 1
Personification	Höfuð, n. and makki, m.	Head and 'mane' (of the penis)	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 11
	Dólgr, m.	Enemy, fiend, troll	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75
	Jarl minn, m.	My earl	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 7
Gender identity	Jarl minn, m.	My earl	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 7
Edibility	x		
Danger	Atgeirr, m.	Bill or halberd	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 64
	Bogi, m.	Bow	<i>Njáls saga</i> , viðbætir (supplementary verse to ch. 7), verse 3
	Dólgr, m.	Enemy, fiend, troll	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75
	Geirr, m.	Spear	<i>Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa</i> , ch. 17, verse 20; <i>Njáls</i>

²³⁴ Terms from Arnoldsson and Cleasby-Vigfússon for male genitalia: (Standard) *Kokkr*, m., cock; (Personification) *Lókr*, m., tramp; (Danger) *Bersi*, m., bear; *Nýrna sverð*, n., sword of the testicles (kidneys); *Skrimsli*, n., monster; (Nonsense) *Snýpr*, m., penis, akin to *sneyppa*, meaning disgrace, but with original meaning of snip (possible association with gelding); *Skopp*, n pl., fate; (Shape) *Hjálmvölr*, m., helm-handle; *Tól*, n.pl., tools; (Other - power) *Mátt*, m., might; (Other - emotions) *Bljúgr*, adj., bashful, shy; *Blygð*, f., shame; (Geographical and nature) *Titlingr*, m., a tit, sparrow; *Bessi*, *Bersi*, m., bear.

			<i>saga</i> , viðbætur (auxiliary verse to ch. 7), verse 1
	Knífr, m.	Knife	<i>Kormáks saga</i> , ch. 26
	Mörnir, m.	Name of a sword	<i>Völsa þáttr</i> , ch. 2
	Orf, n.	Scythe-pole	<i>Hallfreðar saga</i> , ch. 9, verse 19 (orfa stríðir, m. scythe-wielding foe) and verse 20 (orfpægir, m. scythe-wielding bully)
	Sköfnungr, m.	Name of a sword	<i>Kormáks saga</i> , ch. 19, verse 59
	Stál, n.	Steel	<i>Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa</i> , ch. 17, verse 20
	Sverð, n.	Sword	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 64 (and <i>Kormáks saga</i> , ch. 19, verse 59 by association with the heiti <i>Sköfnungr</i>)
	Sverðlitinn, adj.	With a short sword	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 65
	Undlinnr, m.	Sword – ‘wound-snake’	<i>Njáls saga</i> , viðbætur (supplementary verse to ch. 7), verse 2
	Qrveðr, n.	Storm of spears	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 64
Nonsense	Völsi, m.	Penis	<i>Völsa þáttr</i> , chs. 1-2
Other - Location	Í milli fótanna	Between the legs	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75; <i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 7, ch. 11 and ch. 13
	Hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri	How little he is down below	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75
- Shape	Böllr, m.	Ball (the glans penis)	<i>Gísla saga</i> , ch. 15, verse 9
	Skeið, f.	Weaver’s rod	<i>Grettisfærsla</i> , line 49
	Þvegill, m.	Mop	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 13
	Ór, f.	Oar	<i>Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa</i> , ch. 5, verse 2
- Skin	Höfund, n.	Skin, flesh	<i>Njáls saga</i> , ch. 7
	Líkami, m.	Body, flesh	<i>Njáls saga</i> , viðbætur (supplementary verse to ch. 7), verse 2
	Leðr, n.	Leather (foreskin)	<i>Sneglu-Halla þáttr</i> , ch. 10, verse 13
- To fit a receptacle	Spons, n.	Bung, stopper	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 13
	Stúfr, m.	Stump, stub	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 13

Geographical and nature	Bergis fótar borr, m.	The borer of the leg boulder	<i>Egils saga</i> , ch. 85
	Beytill, m.	Penis, especially of beasts. Also the name of <i>Equisetum hyemale</i> , or rough horsetail, a reed-like plant	<i>Völva þáttr</i> , ch. 2
	Fax, n.	Horse	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 65
	Faxi, m.	Mane, often name of horse	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 65
	Foli, m.	Foal	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 11
	Göndull, m.	An oblong of material, such as hay or straw	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 11
	Hreðja kvistr, m.	Branch of the testicles	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 65
	Læra skógr, m.	Forest of the thighs (or female)	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ch. 75, verse 65
	Makki, m.	Mane of a horse (as above), referring to shaft of the penis	<i>Bósa saga</i> , ch. 11
	Skarð, n.	Passage, pathway (male anal passage)	<i>Þlokofra þáttr</i> , ch. 4

As the tables show, nature and geography metaphors form a substantial part of the sagas' metaphorical conceptualisation of male and female genitalia, thus corroborating Lakoff and Johnson's theory that our understanding of the world draws on the things around us. Dangerous weapons, corresponding receptacles and the penile personification of both the lowly and high status also provide a clue as to what was most pertinent to medieval Icelandic mind.

This chapter has not provided a comprehensive guide to sexual metaphors. As mentioned in the Introduction, there are cultural factors that impede such an interpretation; one wonders if, even with the benefit of an Icelandic mother tongue, recognising all the double-entendres as they were intended would be an impossible task. Rather, the aim was to offer a more holistic perspective on metaphors and gain an understanding of the application and variety of common terminology and how that may reflect the conceptualisation of sex, with the caveat that it is challenging to observe from a contemporary perspective, complete with our own concepts that we impose on medieval literature. In my view, the most novel and artful euphemisms and dysphemisms are those that are, or at least appear to be, native: warming each other up under the bed clothes, genitalia compared to landscape, ship analogies and the alliterative and onomatopoeic qualities of *klappa um kviðinn* are more

prominent in their quality and measure of cultural understanding than those that appear to be overly apparent in other cultures (lying with, and being 'entertained,' for example). We do not know if these are borrowed from other cultures or simply common metaphors that derive from shared human experience. However, a cultural interpretation of native sexual metaphors shows that erotica, sexual comedy, violence and love can be expressed in poetic elegance couched in the land, sea and weaponry, drawing on the hardships and desires experienced by those who lived in the cold and challenging north.

Chapter 2.

Sexual Gossip and Scandal

1. Introduction

In *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* a man named Þorkell and his farmhand gossip while making charcoal. They discuss the feud between Björn and Þórðr Kolbeinsson, which has descended into mudslinging of the basest kind. Þorkell recites *Grámagafllím*, Björn's lampoon on the subject of Þórðr's conception, which he claims was the result of his mother's gluttonous sexual encounter with a fish. Egged on by the farmhand, Þorkell reluctantly delivers Þórðr's counter-verses, the *Kolluvísur* or cow-verses, aware that their utterance carries a heavy penalty if recited within earshot of Björn.²³⁵ Unbeknown to him, Björn has heard every word – the gossip hearing his own gossip – and at this moment appears before them to deal Þorkell his deathblow. It is an unfortunate outcome for what appeared to be a pleasurable way to pass the working day, and a cautionary tale that the act of gossiping can easily become a serious and dangerous matter.

Gossip is often presented in a derogatory manner in the sagas, despite its ubiquity, much as in modern-day western society it is a word associated with tabloid sensationalism and lowbrow culture. This chapter has two aims: to first establish a definition for gossip, both in a modern setting and in the context of the sagas, perhaps challenging the perception of gossip as a trivial pastime by acknowledging the role it plays in disseminating valuable information to other characters and the audience. This enables the second aim, a closer reading of gossip with particular reference to sexual material: how people gossip, why they gossip, and the consequences of sexual liaisons, insults and discussion becoming public knowledge. Observations from anthropologists who have studied the social structures of marginalised communities, many of which resonate strongly with medieval Iceland and the literature it produced, underpin

²³⁵ *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, ch. 20, 170. The text says *í heyrn Birni*, however, recital of either poem was banned by anyone other than Þórðr or Björn; see note 2. This is also stipulated in *Grágás*: 'Scog gang varðar ef maðr yrkir vm man hálfá víso þa er löstr er í eða háþung eða lof þat er hann yrkir til haðungar. Ef hann queðr þat eða kenir öðrum manne oc er þat avnor söc oc varðar scog gang. sva varðar oc hveriom er nemr.' *Grágás, Islændernes lovbog í fristatens tid*. Volume 2.b, edited by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Kjøbenhavn: Brødrene Berlings bogtrykkeri, 1852-70) 2.b, 238, 183. 'The penalty is full outlawry if a man composes half a poem that contains scorn or mockery or praise that he composes as mockery. If he recites it or teaches it to other men that is another case and that is full outlawry. It is the same for anyone who learns it.' For discussion of this scene and the two bestial insults, see Alison Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations: An Exchange of ýki in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*,' *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001), 28-42.

interpretations on the general theme. Although none here broach sex and sexuality expressly, their observations on group morality and a tenacity to uphold honour are useful tools in the analysis of sexual gossip in saga society. This then forms the foundation of analysis of a diverse selection of episodes pertaining to sexual behaviour, strengthened by Foucault's theories on the combination of verbal reasoning and sexual repression.

1.1. Useful interpretations of gossip

A simple definition of gossip is casual conversation or unsubstantiated reports about other people. The complexity of gossip lies in the methods of dispersing this information: in his analysis of gossip in a theoretical Spanish town, David Gilmore managed to isolate eleven forms, such as 'to criticize,' 'to whisper,' 'to tonguelash' and 'to niggle.'²³⁶ While these criteria are mostly based on verbal nuances and content, they may not translate adequately into other languages and cultures. A broader categorisation is offered by F.G. Bailey in his identification of six variants: these are chat, gossip, scandal, rumour, confidence and open criticism.²³⁷ According to Bailey, chat is a benign exchange of news; discussion of trivial subjects unlikely to stir emotion. Gossip is chat with the addition of moral opinion; rumour is gossip with the caveat that in declaring its transmission as an unsubstantiated report, all responsibility for its dispersal is absolved. Open criticism is quite the reverse: the gossiper lays claim to the gossip and awaits confrontation when delivered to its intended recipient. Scandal is a universally condemned behaviour, a story that requires no moral contribution from the gossiper. Similar to rumour, no blame is apportioned for passing this information on as awareness of a scandal is considered to be of public interest. At the other end of the spectrum, a confidence is intended to remain a private matter, which should be implicit in the context of its transmission. Should word get out, the responsibility lies at the hands of the recipient. It appears therefore that Bailey's (and Gilmore's) variations of gossip diverge in three key ways: the level of discretion, moral subjectivity, and where the liability falls should the source of the gossip be sought.

Two of Bailey's contemporaries, Max Gluckman and Robert Paine, created a little gossip of their own in a rally of articles regarding its social

²³⁶ See David Gilmore, 'Varieties of Gossip in a Spanish Rural Community,' *Ethnology*, 17:1 (1978), 89-99.

²³⁷ Frederick G Bailey, *Gifts and Poison: The Politics of Reputation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 281-299. These are not related to one society in particular, but draw on small communities in Italy, France and Austria.

purpose. For Gluckman, it is a unifying force with a dampening effect on the individual; Paine considers it a more powerful, personal and strategic tool. Through analysis of anthropologists' work in communities diverse as a Welsh mining village and Native American tribe, Gluckman puts forward the idea that gossip and scandal have a valuable role in creating social bonds, commenting that 'they maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups.'²³⁸ Unity does not necessarily mean peace in Gluckman's context,²³⁹ but rather a social cohesion of good and bad reputations. In his view, people bond over judgement of the behaviour of others, achieving a mutual understanding of what is deemed proper and improper in their peer group, and in doing so establish and perpetuate the shared values of the community. Gluckman's hypothesis is particularly relevant to medieval Iceland because he argues that gossip is a culturally determined process within small, exclusive social groups;²⁴⁰ by way of their isolated locations the regional communities represented in the sagas fit his model well, and indeed this is illustrated by the collective regional focus of sagas such as *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Ljósvetninga saga*. Within these pockets, interfamilial scandal and gossip strengthens the group's bond and provides the cohesion necessary to create a barrier against the many threats from wandering troublemakers who do not share their common values. How information comes out is equally as pertinent as why it does, echoing Bailey's definitions, and in small, isolated groups it is the rapport between gossipers – the social bonds – that allows gossip to remain unsigned or exculpatory, permitting moral judgement, ill feeling or confidential information to enter the public realm without confrontation. Gluckman explains:

if your allegations are at all open, to his face, you must be delicate and never give him ground to state that you have insulted him. For insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretence of group amity. Similarly, misplaced behind-the-back gossip may force the group either to expel the person slandered or to turn on the gossip. More than this, the process of scandal enables a group to evaluate people ... for their moral character, without ever confronting them to their faces with failures in any sphere.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Max Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal,' *Current Anthropology*, 4:3 (1963), 308.

²³⁹ A point Max Gluckman makes in riposte to Paine in 'Psychological, Sociological and Anthropological Explanations of Witchcraft and Gossip: A Clarification,' *Man*, New Series 3:1 (1968), 20-34.

²⁴⁰ Gluckman, 'G&S,' 308. This was discussed in relation to Elizabeth Colson's study of the Makah Indians, 1953: 'The more exclusive the group, the greater will be the amount of gossip in it.'

²⁴¹ Gluckman, 'G&S,' 313.

This perspective regards gossip as a socially sanctioned intermediary, nominally allowing generator and subject to remain in harmony. However, its effectiveness depends on the person who is the source of the gossip choosing his or her conduits carefully to avoid risking his or her own honour and bearing the brunt of the subject's or community's disapproval. This raises two observations about gossip. Firstly, it relies on the implication that rumours, judgement and scandal will commonly find their way into public consciousness, otherwise it is not gossip, but an inconsequential utterance. Secondly, that its distribution is a carefully managed process that upholds anonymity and therewith the pretence of amity, otherwise it is not gossip, but slander.²⁴² Therefore the community's ability to maintain this balance and momentum with each verbal transaction is fundamental to gossip's existence. As this chapter demonstrates, in the sagas the ideal of group amity is often shattered by leaked gossip, proving the delicacy of this process, not to mention how appealing it is as a means of causing dramatic tension.

Paine attempted to discredit Gluckman's argument, but in publicly doing so verified Gluckman's remark on the pretence of amity. Gossip, says Paine, is 'a genre of informal communication'²⁴³ and 'a device intended to forward and protect individual interests.'²⁴⁴ He criticises Gluckman's emphasis on the community, proposing that gossip is primarily used to discredit other individuals; the dispersal of morality is an unintentional consequence. Contrary to the fortifying values proposed by Gluckman, this adds a degree of relativity and self-preserving manipulation to the purpose of gossip. Unity is neither intended nor achieved. Paine proposes that this informal channel of communication has little to do with creating amity, but rather avoiding bloodshed, and the success of this operation is in the transaction of knowledge:

sometimes a good gossip plans on certain of his 'confidences' being passed on; at other times the social costs to him of a leakage would be disastrous. The use of information itself to promote a situation of pre-emption, whereby he himself acquires information in return for what he has given, is indispensable to the gossip. A particular problem is what the individual can do to ensure that his

²⁴² Examples are: an inconsequential utterance in *Víglundar saga*, ch. 17, 96. 'Töluðu þat sumir menn, at vel mundi hafa fallit á með þeim Helgu ok Sigurði, en þó kom þat ekki mjök á lopt fyrir alþjóðu manna.' 'Some said that there was something between Helga and Sigurðr, but it did not become talk among the people.' And slander: Björn's slanderous verse insinuating that Þórðr was the passive partner in sex with a man in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, ch. 17, 155. This is discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

²⁴³ Robert Paine, 'What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis,' *Man*, New Series 2:2 (1967), 278.

²⁴⁴ Paine, 'Alternative Hypothesis,' 278.

gossip flows in ungarbled form, and from person to person in the sequence he desires.²⁴⁵

Paine's designation of a good gossip refers to someone who takes control of his or her words and those of others, utilising gossip as communal 'informational storage and retrieval'²⁴⁶ according to requirement. William Ian Miller agrees that such a system applies to the sagas: he says, 'Above all, people talked and talked; they withdrew information from the gossip networks and they put information in, hoping to manipulate the flow of information to their advantage.'²⁴⁷ The manipulative quality of such a system applies to the individual, whose information-management extends to self-publicity and dispersing defamatory remarks, but also to the community, who can be equally discerning in their promotion and concealment of information in accordance with the values of the group. This emphasises the concept of gossip's intrusion on reality: it need not be true, but it needs to be pervasive and, perhaps, adhere to partialities and prejudices.

Paine and Gluckman make a productive contretemps that provides complementary theories, which may have been observed sooner had they not been engaged in internecine debate. By focusing on the individual's purpose for gossip, Paine does not fully explore the delicate social structure that gossip relies on to propel it forward and meet its targeted audience, which may or may not include the subject: first, for people to care enough about the gossip to listen; second, for people to believe it to be credible, and third, for them to want to then circulate it in society. Further, Paine's attention to negative gossip ignores any positive or neutral rumours that would undermine his argument. On the other hand, Gluckman does not address the negative implications enough and neglects fabricated gossip, which would bring a further moral complication to the pretence of amity. Both men emphasise the start and end points, but as *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* demonstrates, intermediaries also risk their lives in gossip's transmission. Subjective morality and personal interpretations fluctuating between gossip transactions also compromise both arguments' foundations – there is not always a consensus. Polarised opinion is often capitalised on for social, sexual and/or political gain in the sagas: to galvanise a

²⁴⁵ Paine, 'Alternative Hypothesis,' 283.

²⁴⁶ Paine, 'Alternative Hypothesis,' 279, citing a suggestion from anthropologist John Roberts.

²⁴⁷ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 216.

force into burning a house, for example, or dispute a case at the Alþingi, or to gather enough supporters to take a woman illegally from her home.

1.2. Gossip in an Old Norse context

The ubiquity of gossiping and the tales it produces provides a plentiful source of tension in the sagas. It acts as a catalyst that turns malice and resentment into fatal encounters, amplifying secrets and rumours on which whole plots turn. As an intrinsic element of the saga narrative, it enriches the tone, provides background knowledge and compensates for authorial impartiality by introducing social opinion on events and behaviour that would otherwise not be made clear. It looks forward, too: similar to dreams, gossip can be a prophetic narrative device, but subtly so, along the lines that character determines fate; the *vox populi* observes character flaws and charts inevitable demise. In this way gossip contributes to the verisimilar style for which the sagas are famed, establishing a powerful relationship between the two. The sagas celebrate and cultivate the fundamental aspects of gossip's popularity and indeed plausibility: these are stories composed/compiled and recited by people they knew of, about people they've heard of, in a time and place that has meaning to them. This is vocalised in the vainglorious hopes of Þorgils, breaking the fourth wall in *Þorgils saga skarða*: “Ek hugsa þat”, segir Þorgils, “hvé illt mér þykkir, ef engi skal saga ganga frá mér, áðr en þýtr líf mitt, svá at ek geta ekki á hefnileið róit um svívirðing þá, er mér er nú ger.”²⁴⁸ At the nadir of his life, thoughts of reputation and honour trouble Þorgils more than the fear of death, corresponding to Robin Waugh's definition of a reputation as ‘a fragile, time-sensitive construct — never to be taken for granted, because a character can wreck a lifetime's worth of reputation-building with just one failed effort.’²⁴⁹ Þorgils wants his story told, but only after he can right the wrongs done to him, and in doing so raises the question of how these actions become literature.

Evocative of the sagas' origins in oral tradition, prevalent rumours and tales of good and bad deeds were fortified in their spoken transmission, embellished, and crafted into the canon. Perhaps the sagas could therefore be considered as macrogossip, or hypergossip: regional tales collected and

²⁴⁸ *Þorgils saga skarða*, *Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 2, edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), ch. 17, 132. “I was thinking,” said Þorgils, “how little I would like it if there were no saga about me, before my life comes to an end, so that I could not take revenge for the dishonour that is now done to me.” See Clark, *Gender, Violence and the Past*, 135-139 for discussion of this scene in the context of vengeance and Christian sensibilities.

²⁴⁹ Robin Waugh, ‘Antiquarianism, poetry, and word-of-mouth fame in the Icelandic family sagas.’ *Gripla* 18 (2007), 48.

transmitted on a grander scale, reputations elevated in the transition from private (informal) gossip to public (formal) saga, imbued with literary finesse and years of fine-tuning that may have influenced (and been influenced by) audience appreciation. Helga Kress considers the family sagas to be ‘að mjög miklu leyti paródískar, þær eru tal um tal, *sögusagnir*.’²⁵⁰ Yet to be the subject of gossip does not carry the same prestige as to be the subject of a saga, and the general mood presented in saga literature is one of ambiguity or apprehension towards gossip, similar to how it is perceived today. On the one hand it is a necessary, informal and useful conduit for information; on the other, it is a much-maligned word and deed that lacks credibility. We gossip en masse in our social groups, yet the individual gossipier is held in contempt as a small-minded or malicious type who takes pleasure in unsolicited scrutiny. This rather lowly cultural position is unhelpful to the study of gossip, which Chris Wickham calls ‘an unstudied, marginalized, and devalued Other, but one that we actually all (or nearly all) engage in.’²⁵¹ A dichotomy therefore exists between an inclination to condemn gossip as an unreliable, petty pastime, and the compulsion to participate and even delight in it. This conflict is made more complex by gossip’s ability to be absorbed into social consciousness as an adjunct form of reality, what one may call a socially constructed truth,²⁵² forming an eternal association with a person’s name even when allegations are legally or publicly refuted. Nicknames are a good indication of this: consider Steingerðr’s mocking attribution to her husband Bersi in *Kormáks saga* after a humiliating defeat in a duel results in injury to his bottom: ‘Fyrst vartu kallaðr Eyglu-Bersi, en þá Hólmgöngu-Bersi, en nú máttu at sönnu heita Raza-Bersi.’²⁵³ Steingerðr accompanies this statement with a further injury: divorce. She knows the lasting damage such a name will cause her now ex-husband, encouraging people’s imaginations to run wild and cause further humiliation through association with a *klámhogg* (a shameful striking of the buttocks) and *níð*.

²⁵⁰ Helga Kress, ‘Staðlausir Stafir,’ 156. They are ‘to a great extent parodies, they are talk about talk, *story-stories*.’

²⁵¹ Chris Wickham, ‘Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry,’ *Past & Present* 160 (1998), 10.

²⁵² Corroborated by Wickham: ‘agreed truth was constructed through gossip.’ ‘Gossip and Resistance’, 6.

²⁵³ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 13, 254. ‘First you were called Loop-eye-Bersi, and then Dueller-Bersi, but now you should really be called Arse-Bersi.’ Name-calling was a crime: *Grágás* 2.b, 182. ‘Ef maðr gefr manne nafn annat en hann eigi aðr. oc varðar fiorbaugs garð ef hann vill reiðaz við.’ ‘If a man gives another man a name other than that which he had before, it is lesser outlawry if he is offended by it.’ In ‘Steingerðr’s nicknames’ Sayers discusses these nicknames and the wider implications of their use in society. He notes that Bersi had a reputation as a dueller and fighter before this, thus the three nicknames form the structure of a joke, with the third component providing a deflating punch-line in its ‘taxonomic incongruity;’ see 35. He also proposes an ursine connection, and the *aide-memoire* of the alliterative *raz* and *bers*; see 38.

Similarly, Miller comments (with reference to Þórsteinn stangarhogg's nickname) that the *klámhogg* was intended to be associated with 'the shame of [being] *ragr*, the shame of being sodomized. And if the nickname stuck, as it did here, it meant that the incident and the shame would not be forgotten.'²⁵⁴ Therefore the act, however private, became part of their public identities. Where good reputations are upheld with honour, intentional and durable besmirching of another's character is born out of the highest malevolence. Merry notes that in small and isolated towns 'the power of public opinion is very great.'²⁵⁵ Greater, perhaps, than the truth: even when rumours are outlandish, they still have the desired effect – behaviour and imagined behaviour become part of the same system, their distribution changing public opinion and demanding a reaction from the slandered party. Social interest is greatly occupied by themes of sex and sexuality, providing a running commentary on taboo subjects, most conspicuously seduction, accusations of *argr* behaviour and other perversions that blur defined gender boundaries. In drawing attention to what is not acceptable in society, gossip constructs a blueprint of appropriate behaviour in much the same way as penitentials and laws. What is socially acceptable may have a different remit to what is religiously or legally permitted, but gossip polices and disciplines with equal intensity, its distribution inveighing against the evils of seducers, criminals and vagrants to ensure that communities are forewarned of incoming and domestic threats.

The methods with which Old Norse gossip is communicated to the reader are varied and amply encompass Bailey's definitions with *hjal* (chat), *orðrómr* (rumour), *höfuðskömm* (scandal), *guðsifjar* (gossip), *í trúnaði* (in confidence), and *fjándmæli* (open criticism). The act of gossiping is often indicated by the verbs *tala*, *mæla* and *segja*, with the context denoting the informality of verbal gossip. Also of note are *kvisa*, suggesting the sibilance of a whisper, *standa á hleri*, to eavesdrop (literally to stand at the shutter or door), and *hjala*, used to indicate chatter. Usually neutral in tone, *Gísla saga* offers derogatory connotations of the hazards of women's chatter with *hjal* in the compound *kvennahjal*, as will be analysed later.²⁵⁶ An abundance of phrases indicate *munnmæli* of any description has taken place, regardless of gender, with public opinion commonly expounded through adverbial phrases: *þat er*

²⁵⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, 63.

²⁵⁵ Sally Engle Merry, 'Rethinking Gossip and Scandal.' In *Reputation*, edited by Daniel B. Klein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 47.

²⁵⁶ See Helga Kress, 'Staðlausir Stafir,' for analysis of gendered gossip in the sagas and *Lokasenna*.

sagt, svá kvittr kom yfir, á því gerðisk orð mikit, þat var mál manna, þat er í mæli, menn halda, þar tóluðu sumir menn, var þat alþyðumál, and at gerðisk til tíðenda are just a few variations on the theme.²⁵⁷ It is interesting to consider the use of *halda* (to believe) which implies that gossip graduates from simple verbal interaction to a fixed belief, while *tíðenda* (news) blurs the boundaries between formal and informal communication. These reports of public opinion act like a Greek chorus,²⁵⁸ and the reader is in the privileged position to be allowed 'in' on the gossip. Sometimes we are not party to the content, but the knowledge that gossip exists is enough of a clue to its meaning and intention; equally, derogatory and inflammatory verses are dispersed through gossip (indeed, more effectively, since a rhythmic verse may be more easily recalled), as is the case with Þórðr's *Kolluvísur*, the 'lost' counter-verses to Björn's *Grámagafllím* that motivated Björn to kill Þorkell. Using gossip to voice opinion is a form of focalization skilfully employed by the author that maintains narrative objectivity, referring instead to the jury of gossipers for corroboration of events and preconceptions of character.

1.3. Gossiping about sex

Gossip and sex are natural bedfellows; the intimacy of the sexual act can arouse a curiosity in others that strives to grasp the elusive connection between its participants, but in failing to do so unravels and focuses on tangible details, often rendering it sordid, or perfunctory. But to use these morsels, however trivial or fallacious, to generate exciting discourse with fellow gossipers can provide a way in to the sexual experience, at once satiating curiosity and reducing the sense of exclusion. Thus gossip celebrates and represses sex with equal measure, at once labelling it subversive while delighting in its every detail. With regard to the scientific interest in sexuality Foucault calls this dichotomy the pleasure of analysis:

Perhaps this production of truth, intimidated though it was by the scientific model, multiplied, intensified, and even created its own intrinsic pleasures. It is often said that we have been incapable of imagining any new pleasures. We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of

²⁵⁷ These phrases are found widely throughout saga literature. Respectively: 'it is said; the rumour came about; much was said about it; it was people's talk (i.e the talk of the town); it is in discussion; people believe; some people said; it was common talk; it became news.'

²⁵⁸ Wickham also notes the chorus function, 'Gossip and Resistance,' 7.

confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open – the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.²⁵⁹

The sexually explicit material in the sagas illustrates this pleasure well. In the metaphors described in the previous chapter, there is often a sense of delight in the detail, and the choice of words certainly contributes to that – consider Katla’s audacious question to Gunnlaugr about stroking an old lady’s groin, or the uncouth slanderous verse that creates a vivid vision of sex between Kormákr and Steingerðr – these verify that truth is not entirely a priority as long as the insult is appealing enough to distribute. Instead, details are embellished according to imagination and pleasure in vulgarity and taboo. Foucault comments that ‘what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*.’²⁶⁰ These ideas suggest that sexual gossip propagates the notion of sexual analysis, making secrets public, yet does so in the spirit of inhibition. It explains the synergy between sex and gossip: allowing socially-sanctioned discourse of other people’s relationships, sexual gossip courts opinion and takes pleasure in analysis: perhaps it seeks a notional truth, but does not want (or need) to be endorsed to be enjoyed, hence the inhibition. This is not peculiar to modern societies and underpins much of the sexual discussion in the sagas. Using Bailey’s six categories of gossip, the following instances demonstrate the jealousy, reputation anxiety, self-promotion and pleasure of analysis intrinsic to sexual gossip.

2. Chat

Bailey’s categorisation of chat poses a challenge to discussion of sexual gossip, as he believes it is ‘story-telling unembroidered by moral comment. It is an exchange of news which, ostensibly at least, is not intended to manipulate attitudes and opinions.’²⁶¹ The benign quality of chat is therefore not agreeable to the sense of drama, moralising and other powerful emotions that often accompany sexual discussion in the sagas. However, there are instances of lesser importance and little consequence – at least compared to those explored later – that offer glimpses of trivial sexual chat. One such example is found at the end of *Haukdæla þátr*. Two sisters named Þóra, both desirable matches,

²⁵⁹ Foucault, *WtK*, 71.

²⁶⁰ Foucault, *WtK*, 35.

²⁶¹ Bailey, *Gifts and Poison*, 287.

wash their clothes at the river, in a bucolic scene akin to that of the men gossiping while working in *Bjarnar saga Hítödlakappa*. The older Þóra asks her sister a leading question:

‘Hvat ætlar þú, systir, hversu lengi þetta mun vera, at eigi verði menn til at biðja okkar, eða hvat ætlar þú, at fyrir okkr muni liggja?’ ‘Þar ber ek litla hugsun fyrir,’ segir in yngri Þóra, ‘því at ek unni allvel við, meðan svá búit er.’ ‘Svá er ok,’ segir in ellri Þóra, ‘at hér er sæmiligt at vera með föður ok móður, en eigi er hér glaðværi eða svá unaðsamligt at vera fyrir þat.’ ‘Svá er víst,’ segir in yngri Þóra, ‘en eigi er víst, at þú unir þá betr, er þessu bregðr.’²⁶²

The dialogue provides an insight into the two girls’ characters: the older, a wilful dreamer, the younger, level-headed and less inclined to gossip. The older presses her sister further for details of who she would like to marry, and is twice rebuffed, as the younger Þóra is not interested in such petty matters, which she calls *geipan*, nonsense, and acknowledges that gossip can be dangerous with the proverb *brátt ferr orð, er um munn líðr*.²⁶³ However, their discussion does not expose any scandalous activities and no one overhears them. The older Þóra then gets to the crux of the issue: that she simply wishes to tell her sister who she wants to marry:

‘Þat vilda ek,’ segir in ellri Þóra, ‘at Jón Sigmundarson riði hingat ok bæði mín ok honum vera ek gefin.’ In yngri Þóra svarar: ‘Víst hefir þú at því hugat at láta þann eigi undan ganga, er nú þykkir beztr karlkostr vera, ok vildir þú því fyrr kjósa, at þú sátt, at þá vandaðist körit. Nú er þat miklu torveldligr ok ólíkligr, er ek vilda, at væri. Þat vilda ek, at Jóra biskupsdóttir andaðist, en Þorvaldr Gizurarson færi hingat ok bæði mín.’ ‘Hættum þessu tali,’ segir in ellri Þóra, ‘ok getum eigi um.’ Síðan gengu þær heim.²⁶⁴

The older Þóra’s romantic vision of Jón arriving on horseback to propose is a sharp contrast to the matter-of-fact description by her sister of what would need

²⁶² *Haukdæla þátr, Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 1, edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), ch. 5, 61. “What do you think, sister, how long will it be until men come to ask to marry us, or what do you think may lie ahead for us?” “I give it little thought,” said the younger Þóra, “because I am perfectly happy with things as they are.” “Me too,” said the elder Þóra, “it is fine to be with mother and father, but it is not as much fun or so wonderful as it could be.” “That is certain,” said the younger Þóra, “but what is not certain is that you would like it better if things were to change.”

²⁶³ *Haukdæla þátr*, ch. 5, 61. ‘word quickly spreads, that which leaves the mouth.’

²⁶⁴ *Haukdæla þátr* ch. 5, 61-62. “I would like it,” said the older Þóra, “if Jón Sigmundarson rode here and asked for me to marry him, and I was given to him.” The younger Þóra replied, “You have certainly chosen not to let this matter pass, who you believe to be the most eligible bachelor, and for this reason you wanted to choose first, as you realised that then you could pick the best choice. Now what I would like is much more difficult and unlikely to happen. I would like that Jóra the bishop’s daughter would die, and Þorvaldr Gizurarson would come here and ask for my hand.” “Let’s end this conversation,” said the older Þóra, “and say no more about it.” Then they went home.’

to happen to her love rival for her own desires to be met. The struggle for sisterly supremacy is evident here: despite having the higher moral ground initially by choosing not to indulge in idle chat, the younger Þóra's taciturn dominance quickly crumbles when her sister declares her choice of man. It is an unusual quibble, as the older Þóra had asked her sister who she wanted to marry, but by the end of their conversation the younger criticises the older for choosing first and claiming the most eligible bachelor, when she could equally have claimed him for herself on the numerous occasions when she was interrogated but instead tried to halt the conversation. Simply by vocalising her desires, the older Þóra has laid claim to her man, regardless of his thoughts on the matter. And indeed, what is more unusual about the younger Þóra feeling affronted is that she is not attracted to the same man as her sister.

With this new piece of information it is tempting to see the younger Þóra's reluctance to gossip about men and marriage not as the moral stance it first appeared to be, but rather a way to conceal her ethically dubious desires. It is not *geipan* at all; more an awkward truth. Once her sister has divulged her secret crush, the younger Þóra also chooses to reveal hers, creating a sense of reciprocity in the act of gossiping that resonates with Gluckman's sense of social bonding; similarly it is clear that her secret desires are safe with her sister. However, it is now the older Þóra's turn to take the morally dominant position and she tells her sister to be quiet, perhaps indicating disgust, though she does not verbalise it further. She has an answer from her sister, but it wasn't what she wanted to hear. While the younger Þóra has had to tolerate a lengthy questioning, it is only now the older chooses to stop; perhaps young Þóra should have answered her earlier. The narrative tells us they then leave, and no more is mentioned, indicating that this type of discussion passes the time while doing chores but does not necessarily have further implications.

Any judgement on the younger Þóra's dark desires are conveniently made obsolete when the narrative discloses in a dispassionate manner that Jóra has died. The objects of the Þóras' affections, now both bachelors, happen to travel together, and it is mentioned that the Þóras were *margt talat*²⁶⁵ – discussed a great deal – by them while riding around Borgarfjörður and before arriving at the farm where the sisters live. The accumulation of conveniences leads the audience to believe the girls' dreams will be achieved, but there is one final and convoluted hurdle to overcome. The narrative turns to sleeping

²⁶⁵ *Haukdæla þáttr*, ch. 5, 62.

arrangements, creating a rather subtle link between the girls' desires and the bed as destination for husband and wife: 'Þær systur lágu jafnan í einni hvílu, ok hvíldi in ellri Þóra jafnan við stökk. Ok er þeir koma vestan, Þorvaldr ok Jón, þá gistu þeir enn á Þingvelli.'²⁶⁶ The older Þóra once again takes charge:

Þá mælti in ellri Þóra til systur sinnar: 'Nú mun ek skipa þeim í hvílu okkra í kveld, Þorvaldi ok Jóni. Ok með því at þeir biði okkar nú, þá skal ek þann eiga, er í minni hvílu liggr, en þú þann, er við þili liggr.' – Þat vissi hon, at Þorvaldr var jafnan vanr at hvíla við stökk, ok vildi þá hvár tveggja hann heldr. 'Hví muntu eigi slíku ráða,' segir in yngri Þóra, 'hversu þú skipar hvílum? En þat mun verða um forlög okkur, sem áðr er fyrir ætlat.' Ok um kveldit, er þeir Þorvaldr kómu til hvílu, þá spurði Jón: 'Þorvaldr bóndi, hvárt viltu heldr hvíla við stökk eða þili?' Þorvaldr svarar: 'Jafnan em ek vanr at hvíla við stökk, en þó skaltu nú kjósa.' 'Þá mun ek við stökk hvíla nú,' segir Jón. Ok svá var. Ok um morgininn eftir höfðu þeir uppi bónorð sín, ok fór þat fram, at Þóra in ellri var gift Jóni, en in yngri Þorvaldi.²⁶⁷

The men's discussion is trivial, much in accordance with Bailey's interpretation of chat, but made more dramatic following Þóra's declaration that their fate rests on the men's choice of place to sleep. The narrative shares this conversation with the audience, but without being privy to the men's conversations about the Þóras, the reader is in the dark as to which man is attracted to which sister.

The younger Þóra is, we can assume, none the wiser about her sister's attempted deception in trying to get Þorvaldr for herself. If, according to the younger Þóra's annoyance that her sister had 'claimed' Jón earlier by naming him at the riverside as her ideal husband, it follows suit that the younger Þóra has a right over Þorvaldr as her match. Perhaps the older Þóra stopped the conversation abruptly at the river because she wanted what her sister had claimed, rather than out of a sense of impropriety at the younger Þóra's desire for another woman to die. That the older sister knows which side the men sleep on may disclose that she is the better gossip of the two, obtaining useful

²⁶⁶ *Haukdæla þátr*, ch. 5, 62. 'The sisters always slept in the same bed, and the older Þóra always slept next to the beam. And when they came from the west, Þorvaldr and Jón, they stayed once more at Þingvellir.'

²⁶⁷ *Haukdæla þátr*, ch. 5, 62. 'Then the older Þóra said to her sister, "Now I will make arrangements for them to sleep in our bed tonight, Þorvaldr and Jón. And thus if they were to propose to us now, then I shall marry he who lies in my bed, and you shall have the one who lies beside the partition." – For she knew, that Þorvaldr was usually accustomed to sleeping beside the beam, and of the two of them she preferred him. "Why would it make any difference to so decide," said the younger Þóra, "how you arrange beds? But that will be our fate, what has already been allotted." And in the evening, when Þorvaldr and Jón came to bed, Jón asked, "Þorvaldr my man, which would you prefer, to sleep by the beam or partition?" Þorvaldr answered, "Usually I am accustomed to sleep by the beam, though you can choose now." "Then I will sleep next to the beam this time." said Jon. And so it was thus. And the next morning they sought permission to marry, and it went like this, that the older Þóra was married to Jón, and the younger to Þorvaldr.'

information from other places in accordance with Paine's definition of a good gossiper: to use this information to manipulate the situation is much closer to Paine's theory than Gluckman's.

Despite her sister's attempts to engineer things to her own advantage, the younger Þóra, observing that the sleeping arrangements make no difference to potential marriage proposals, repeats a warning from earlier: fate cannot change what will be. That the men end up sleeping on the side of their respective brides is an amusing touch that serves to ensure the older sister gets her comeuppance, and for Jón to be the slightly more dominant of the two men, it sounds like they will be a perfect match. We are only told of Þorvaldr and the younger Þóra's children, which may be a final indication of who is favoured in this episode. The marriage and children provide a neat and 'happily ever after' ending to the episode, and indeed the *þáttur*.

3. Rumour

Gluckman and Paine's hypotheses concentrate on the perpetrator of the deeds generating gossip, but there are also great implications for those who are wronged by rumours through no fault of their own. Beyond the pleasure of analysis there is the pleasure of consequence: it is a regular occurrence that characters are compelled to react to gossip while the gossipers' commentary continues as the situation unfolds. In other words, when a piece of gossip becomes prevalent it is hard to ignore, and for those who choose to pay no attention to it initially, they may be faced with a worse situation later. Vermundr and Styrir find themselves in this position in *Heiðarvíga saga*, concerning their daughters and two berserkers:

Vermundr átti dóttur eina fullvaxna; Halli lagði hug á hana ok var opt á rœðum við hana. Þetta rómaðisk brátt, ok verðr Vermundr þessa varr, en lætr, sem hann viti eigi.²⁶⁸

Halli's visits to the daughter would have aroused suspicion of seduction, although as is often the case her feelings on the matter are not mentioned. The text implies that Vermundr became aware of the situation through rumours rather than witnessing it himself. His reaction, to ignore it, could be seen in two ways: either he does not trust the gossipers, or he does not want to confront the

²⁶⁸ *Heiðarvíga saga*, ÍF 3, edited by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), ch. 3, 218. 'Vermundr had an adult daughter; Halli was attracted to her and often went to talk to her. Rumours spread about this, and Vermundr became aware, but acted as if he did not know.'

lusty berserker. The latter is clear when he begs his brother to take ownership of both berserkers, a cowardly move considering it was on account of his doggedness the pair were given to him by Earl Hákon, who provided ample (and prescient) warning of the hazards. The scenario of berserker falling in love is quickly repeated at Styrr's house:

Styrr átti dóttur eina gjafvaxta, er Ásdís hét. Leiknir, sá yngri berserkrinn, lagði þat í vanða sinn, at hann sat lǫngum á tali við hana ok at tafli; tók þá mǫnnum til at verða margrœtt um þetta, ok kom þat fyrir Styr, en hann kvað þat engu varða ok lét, sem hann ekki vissi, þó hann þat vel sæi.²⁶⁹

More details are given this time: the suggestion of long visits, chess games, the widespread nature of the gossip and repetition of false ignorance build tension and imply that a reaction is imminent. For both fathers the sexual attention bestowed on their daughters is undesirable and dangerous, therefore their choice to ignore rumours is a risky strategy; the longer the meetings between the berserkers and girls continue, the greater the chance of the girls' seduction and even more salacious talk, and concomitant loss of honour. But Styrr's and Vermundr's denial is not without cunning motive. By paying no attention to the gossip, even though their awareness of it is apparent to all, they delay any social obligation to react to the situation, providing more time to hatch an elaborate plan to rid themselves of the berserkers. Styrr does so dishonourably, killing the naked and vulnerable pair in a bathhouse after giving his blessing to Leiknir and Ásdís's marriage. Before death, the berserkers are presented sympathetically as simple, lovesick, reformed characters ready to settle down; Judy Quinn speaks about the 'hopelessness of berserk-love' and unattainability of the women they fall for.²⁷⁰ So it is unsurprising that rumours of the killing circulate widely, but where suspicion of the sexually illicit, compromising positions merely titillated, the execution is judged more severely by others - 'ræddu menn misjafnt of víg þessi.'²⁷¹ Even if only some were critical of this outcome, it is further evidence of the sympathetic perspective towards the naïve

²⁶⁹ *Heiðarvíga saga*, ch. 4, 221. 'Styrr had one eligible daughter called Ásdís. Leiknir, the younger berserker, became attracted to her, and he sat for long periods of time talking to her and playing chess; people began to talk a lot about this, and Styrr became aware of it, but he said there was nothing to be concerned about and acted as if he didn't know, though he could see what was going on perfectly well.'

²⁷⁰ Judy Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas,' *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 520-521. See also Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, translated by Betsy van der Hoek (Belgium: Brepols, 2005), 264, who points out that, as a marginalised character, marriage to a berserker would have posed a threat to the social strata.

²⁷¹ *Heiðarvíga saga*, ch 4, 224. 'people's opinions of this murder were varied.'

berserkers, as opposed to other, more calculated and dishonourable seducers. That the gossipers were disparaging of Styrr and Vermundr's secrecy and trickery reveals a blinkered judgement of the role gossip played in disseminating knowledge of the berserkers' romantic inclinations that led to their demise. Further, by not recognising this role, it suggests that the moralising Gluckman regards as the gossipers' unifying strength is rarely introspective.

According to Bailey, gossip passed on as a rumour absolves all responsibility for its transmission. In other words, he says:

[the gossiper] is evidently uncertain enough about the truth of the story (or about the way it will be interpreted) to behave as if he were a mere instrument, nothing more than a channel of information, and therefore absolved from taking moral responsibility for handing on the news.²⁷²

Commenting on the sexual behaviour of others is a common pastime in the sagas, and a great many rumours the reader is alerted to follow Bailey's logic. *Heiðarvíga saga* is typical in offering the opinions of an anonymous chorus: the gossipers are often not identified to us, nor to the victim of the gossip, hiding within a critical mass and obfuscating responsibility. Such is the case with Ketill Þorsteinsson in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* too, who recalls his experience of unwelcome rumours about his wife:

Ek fekk ok þann kost, er beztr þótti vera, Gróu, dóttur Gizurar biskups. En þat var mælt, at hon gerði mik eigi einhlítan. Þat þótti mér illa, er þat var mælt, ok tilraunir váru gervar, ok gengu þær vel. En eigi at síðr þótti mér illr orðrómr sá, er á lagðist. Ok fyrir þat lagða ek fjandskap á manninn. Ok eitt sinn, er vit hittumst á förnum vegi, þá veitta ek honum tilræði. En hann rann undir höggit, ok varð ek undir. Síðan brá hann knífi ok stakk í auga mér, ok missta ek sýnar at auganu. Þá lét hann Guðmundr Grímsson mik upp standa.²⁷³

Ketill's impetuous and sexual jealousy-fuelled blows emasculate him: he appears as a feeble fighter helped to his feet by a noble opponent, and comes off worse than before. The persistence of rumours, despite the successful outcome of the trial proving Gróa's innocence, illustrates that the pleasure of

²⁷² Bailey, *Gifts and Poison*, 288.

²⁷³ *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða, Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 1, edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), ch. 29, 47. 'I got the opportunity, which was considered the best, to marry Gróa, the daughter of Bishop Gizurr. But it was said that she was not faithful to me. I found what was being said upsetting, and trials were held and all went well. But nonetheless I was displeased with the rumour that was going round. And for that reason I grew hostile towards the man. And one time, when we met one another on an old path, I launched an attack on him. But he escaped the blow and I fell down. Then he drew a knife and stabbed me in the eye, and I lost sight in that eye. Then he, Guðmundr Grímsson, helped me get up.'

gossip is undeterred by evidence to the contrary. However, it also calls into question whether the reliability of trials was viewed with scepticism, or perhaps Gróa had been and continued to cuckold Ketill, assured by his faith in her. On the other hand, one could even be sceptical about the circumstances of the alleged affair, and wonder if the rumours were sustained by personal agenda such as that established by Paine – perhaps against Ketill, or Guðmundr, or even Gróa's father Bishop Gizurr, who was not without enemies. If Ketill was supportive of his wife and believed her innocent, the gossip still aroused comparison and sexual resentment of the other man. What emerges as a trend in the sagas is the irrelevance of the female in these situations, who serves a purpose as the ignition of a conflict between men and then fades out of focus. Ketill's description of events notably lacks any detail of Gróa's part in this beyond her trials and is solely directed towards Guðmundr. He expressly says it is the rumours that make him miserable and antagonistic: all the focus is drawn to his reputation anxiety and sexual jealousy. Nowhere does Ketill indicate that he used his own senses to determine that an affair was taking place, relying instead on the ears and eyes of others, before losing one of his own. This violent culmination of events leads him to turn to God, since his own judgement had proved unsuccessful:

Ok bauð ek honum til mín, ok var hann með mér lengi síðan. Ok þá snerist þegar orðrómrinn ok með virðing manna, ok lagðist mér síðan hverr hlutr meir til gæfu ok virðingar en áðr.²⁷⁴

In choosing the unconventional approach of inviting his alleged sexual rival to his house in friendship, Ketill challenges the gossipers' influence and they are no longer able to aggravate and compel him to violence. The audacity of such a gesture, both in terms of courting gossip and risking sexual liaisons, is more apparent in comparison with an analogous situation in *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa* with Þórðr and Björn. Þórðr plans to invite Björn to stay to moderate gossip, because he 'kvazk eigi vilja, at menn gengi milli þeira ok rægðri þá saman,'²⁷⁵ but his wife Oddný advised against it: 'Hon...kvað þat óráð at því orði, sem áðr lék á.'²⁷⁶ Resolute in the matter, Þórðr approaches Björn who confirms the irregularity of the invitation and echoes Oddný's apprehension:

²⁷⁴ *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, ch. 29, 48. 'And I invited him to my home, and he was with me for a long time afterwards. And then immediately people's rumours and judgements changed, and afterwards my fortune changed in every way and I was held in higher esteem than before.'

²⁷⁵ *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa*, ch. 11, 136. He 'said he did not want people going between them and slandering them both.'

²⁷⁶ *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa*, ch. 11, 136. 'She ... said it was unwise on account of the gossip that was already doing the rounds.'

‘Þat hefi ek ætlat, at vera með fǫður mínum, ok mǫrgum mun kynligt þykkja heimboð þetta sakar orðróms manna.’²⁷⁷ Where Ketill succeeds, Þórðr’s plan backfires. Björn and Þórðr continue to provoke each other, often with sexual boasting, which does little for Þórðr’s marriage and generates a rally of verses and squabbles that local gossips would undoubtedly take pleasure in. *Víga-Glúms saga* offers a comparable case where a husband’s suspicions contrast with local rumour. Arngrímr is concerned that his friend Steinólfr ‘hefði fleira talat við Þórdísi, konu hans, en skaplígt væri; en þat er flestra manna sǫgn, at lítit væri til haft eða ekki.’²⁷⁸ When a friend intervenes to repair their relationship, Arngrímr invites Steinólfr to stay, which goes well until Arngrímr’s suspicions get the better of him and he chops off Steinólfr’s head. This time the testimony of witnesses was ignored. Whether or not the suspicions were justified remains ambiguous, but Steinólfr’s undertaking of Þórdís’s craftwork prior to death and Þórdís’s immediate divorce from Arngrímr certainly point towards an intimate relationship that escaped the attention of the rumourmongers.

In Ketill’s case, gossip is presented as an unrelenting force that preys on sexual anxiety rather than performing any ethical function. It is unsurprising in consideration of his future role as Bishop of Hólar that Ketill’s tale bears a resemblance to a parable; the wronged man choosing to forgive and improving his lot. Ketill’s moral superiority defeats the gossipers; whether the affair existed or continues remains uncertain, but in the battle between gossip and God, gossip is forced to retreat. Miller also notes the parable-like veneer to Ketill’s story, and comments that

Presumably Ketil’s arguments could have been made without recourse to God and Christian values, but, then, by this time, it may have been almost impossible to conceive of such arguments independently of Christian themes and Christian figures. Christianity provided a ready rhetorical fund to draw on for these kinds of arguments.²⁷⁹

However, he also notes that Ketill’s claim was a weak one, since Guðmundr had already been cleared of adultery, and seeking vengeance would not have been strategically wise against his stronger opponent. In *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla* God and gossip come into conflict once again, with an unambiguous moral message:

²⁷⁷ *Bjarnar saga Hítödelakappa*, ch. 11, 138. ‘I had intended to stay with my father, and many will think this invitation to your home strange, because of people’s gossip.’

²⁷⁸ *Víga-Glúms saga*, ch. 20, 67. He ‘had more to do with his wife Þórdís than was proper; but most people’s view is that there was little or nothing in it.’

²⁷⁹ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, 270.

Heðinn mælti margt illt við Þorvald ok guðlastaði mjök í móti heilagri trú. Ok svá gat hann með sinni illgirnd um talit fyrir fólkinu, at engi maðr lagði trúnað á þat, er Þorvaldr hafði sagt, heldr tók þaðan af svá mjök at vaxa illviljafull ofsókn ok hatr heiðingja við þá byskup ok Þorvald, at þeir gáfu skáldum fé til at yrkja níð um þá. Þar er þetta í:

Hefr börn borit
byskup nú,
þeira es allra
Þorvaldr faðir.²⁸⁰

Héðinn's hate campaign echoes Paine's theory of manipulation: how quickly the masses lose faith in Þorvaldr demonstrates Héðinn's recognition of the power in combining people's trepidation of the new religion with salacious and witty gossip, which then turns into slander with the production of the poem.²⁸¹ Þorvaldr does not hesitate to seek revenge and kills the poets for their defamation, which sends a clear warning of the risks involved in being part of the production of unfounded rumours. However, Bishop Friðrekr condemns his reaction to the slander, telling Þorvaldr that 'Eigi skyldi kristinn maðr sjálfr leita at hefna sín, þó at hann væri hatrliga smáðr, heldr þola fyrir guðs sakar brigzli ok meingerðir.'²⁸² The bishop's view fits well with Ketill's once he had chosen to forgive and ignore gossip, and puts forward the idea that gossip and sexual insults are a heathen pastime, as is retaliation; as David Clark comments, the bishop 'put into practice the Christian ethic of "turning the other cheek" (Matthew 5: 39) and not taking revenge oneself (Romans 12: 19).'²⁸³ Miller highlights that Christian values greatly affected the peacemaking process in medieval Iceland:

... it gave peacemakers a new stock of rhetorical devices with which to play their roles. Christianity helped improve the status of arguments urging forbearance, and even forgiveness, as against the

²⁸⁰ *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla, Húnavetninga sögur II*, edited by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1947), ch 5, 454. 'Heðinn spoke many wicked things against Þorvaldr and blasphemed a lot against the holy faith. And so with his hatred he persuaded people not to put trust in what Þorvaldr had said, but rather from then on the malicious persecution and hatred of the heathens towards the bishop and Þorvaldr grew so much that they gave poets money to compose *níð* about them. This is in it:

The bishop has borne
Nine children;
Of all of them
Þorvaldr is the father.'

²⁸¹ See Finlay, '*Níð in BsH*,' 162, for references to poets taking on a 'professional role' in composing abusive verses for other people.

²⁸² *Þorvalds þáttur víðförla*, ch 5, 455. 'A Christian should not seek to avenge himself even if he is maliciously dishonoured, but for the sake of God tolerate shame and acts of harm.'

²⁸³ Clark, *Gender, Violence and the Past*, 133. Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 78, notes the 'Christian imperative' of the bishop's words but appreciates that many conflicts that occur in the sagas could not meet such aspirations.

competing demands of heroic honor. A politics of forgiveness might now be pursued with less cost in honor than before.²⁸⁴

Rather sweetly, the bishop tells Þorvaldr that he would gladly bear his children, subverting the gossip but also Gluckman's theory of its unifying qualities: the pair are united in their moral superiority, but excluded from the gossipers' moral circle.

It appears that there are two options available to the person who wishes to address the dishonour of gossip: to confront the rumourmonger, or to confront an opponent associated with the gossip. Ketill attempted to appease the gossipers with trials before tackling the perceived challenger to his wife's affections. Though Þorvaldr dealt with a large mass of gossipers, he was able to identify those who composed slanderous poetry about him and meted out the punishment he saw fit. A similar fate awaits Sigmundr in *Njáls saga*, where a detailed domestic scene illustrates a complex social construction of gossip:

Sá atburður varð, at farandkonur kómu til Hlíðarenda frá Bergþórshváli. Þær váru málgar ok heldr orðillar. Hallgerðr átti dyngju, ok sat hon þar optlaga í; þar var þá Þorgerðr, dóttir hennar, ok Þráinn; þar var ok Sigmundr ok fjölði kvenna.²⁸⁵

The *dyngja* is women's territory, and the men permitted attendance are there on Hallgerðr's request. She is the centre of attention, questioning the women, who give small morsels of information. The dialogue reaches a crescendo when Hallgerðr grabs onto a small detail the women give about carting dung to the fields that she can turn into something more defamatory:

‘Þat mun ek til finna, sem satt er,’ segir Hallgerðr, ‘er hann ók eigi í skegg sér, at hann væri sem aðrir karlmenn, ok kǫllum hann nú karl inn skegglaus, en sonu hans taðskegglinga, ok kveð þú um nokkut, Sigmundr, ok lát oss njóta þess, er þú ert skáld.’²⁸⁶

Hallgerðr and the beggar women concoct a perverse sexual insult, equating Njáll's inability to grow a beard with a lack of masculinity. Meulengracht Sørensen calls it a double breach of taboo, that the gossipers focus not only on

²⁸⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, 268.

²⁸⁵ *Njáls saga*, ch. 44, 112. ‘It happened that beggar women came to Hlíðarenda from Bergþórshvol. They were garrulous and quite malicious with it. Hallgerðr had a *dyngja* [women's room] and sat there often; her daughter Þorgerðr and Þráinn were there then. There was also Sigmundr and a crowd of women.’

²⁸⁶ *Njáls saga*, ch. 44, 113. “I will tell you what's true,” said Hallgerðr, “that he did not cart [dung] to his beard so that he would be like other men. And we will call him the beardless man, and his sons little dungbeards, and compose something about that, Sigmundr, so that we can enjoy the fact that you are a poet.”

an insult about Njáll's sexuality but also allege that his sons use dung in an unconventional and deviant way.²⁸⁷ Sigmundr's verses are not mentioned, but are credited as *illar* (malicious) and accidentally reach the ears of Gunnar, who was not invited to take part in the gossiping:

Þá kom Gunnarr at í því; hann hafði staðit fyrir framan dyngjuna ok heyrtr ǫll orðtækin. Ǫllum brá við mjök, er hann sá inn ganga; þögnuðu þá allir, en áðr hafði þar verit hlátr mikill.²⁸⁸

As with Björn's eavesdropping, once again the sagas expose the vulnerability of vocalisation and the dangers of someone eavesdropping on the wrong conversation. The sudden silence of the room does little to compensate for the scandalous entertainment before it, and in chastising the group Gunnar sets a prophesy in motion:

Gunnar var reiðr mjök ok mælti til Sigmundar: 'Heimskr ertú ok óráðhollr, er þú vill hrópa sonu Njáls ok sjálfan hann, er þó er mest vert, ok slíkt sem þú hefir þeim áðr gǫrt, ok mun þetta vera þinn bani. En ef nokkurr maðr hermir þessi orð, þá skal sá í brautu verða ok hafa þó reiði mína.' En svá stóð þeim af honum mikil ógn, at engi þorði þessi orð at herma. Síðan gekk hann í braut.²⁸⁹

Though Gunnar tried to use his eavesdropping for good – to stop the gossip going any further – it is to no avail and the leaked gossip does indeed lead to Sigmundr's death. As a direct method of silencing his slander, Sigmundr's head is cut off by Skarphéðinn. It is intended for delivery to Hallgerðr, in an antagonistic act that acknowledges the special relationship between the pair: after composing the verses Hallgerðr tells Sigmundr, 'Gersimi ert þú, ... hversu þú ert mér eptirlátr.'²⁹⁰ Gunnar and his mother's remarks to Sigmundr also acknowledge that Sigmundr is the mouthpiece to Hallgerðr's malice: 'ok skyldir þú nú eigi annarri flugu láta koma í munn þér.'²⁹¹ Helga Kress calls Hallgerðr Sigmundr's *skáldskapargyðja* or muse,²⁹² and their relationship expounds the variety of roles that constitute the crafting of gossip. The beggar women

²⁸⁷ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 25.

²⁸⁸ *Njáls saga*, ch. 44, 113. 'Then Gunnar came in at that moment; he had been standing outside the *dyngja* and heard every word. Everyone jumped when he entered, and they all fell silent, where before there had been great laughter.'

²⁸⁹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 44, 113. 'Gunnar was very angry and said to Sigmundr, "You are stupid and unwise that you are willing to slander Njáll's sons and Njál himself, which is worse than what you have already done to them, and this will be the death of you. And if anyone here repeats these words, they shall be sent away and face my wrath." And so they were left in such great fear of him that no one dared repeat these words. Then he went away.'

²⁹⁰ *Njáls saga*, ch. 44, 113. 'What a treasure you are ... how you are obedient to me.'

²⁹¹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 44, 111. 'You must not let another fly in your mouth.'

²⁹² Helga Kress, 'Staðlausir Stafir,' 140.

facilitate the rumour, which Hallgerðr produces and directs. Sigmundur then composes the perilous lampoon and, in adding a creative and offensive interpretation, forfeits his status as a mere instrument. As Finlay notes, the role of the poet is to 'intensify the expression of a slander already formulated in prose.'²⁹³ Though Sigmundur's verses were not provided originally, they evidently captured the imagination of later readers who composed apocryphal verses of their own and continued the production of gossip themselves.²⁹⁴

The beggar women, since they are itinerant and risk nothing by incurring Gunnar's wrath, consider the value of their knowledgeable position:

Farandkonurnar tóluðu sín í meðal, at þær myndi hafa laun af Bergþóru, ef þær segði henni orð þessi; þær fóru síðan ofan þangat ok sǫgðu Bergþóru á laun ófregit.²⁹⁵

As mentioned, Bailey proposes that the doubt inherent in rumours derives from the gossiper's uncertainty about their origin, and how they will be interpreted.²⁹⁶ In this case, the beggar women know how it will be interpreted: they depended on Hallgerðr's delight in scandal from Njáll's household and anticipated Bergþóra's temper on hearing the latest slur upon her family. The idea of travelling and using gossip as currency is explained by Gísli Pálsson, who says that 'gossip was practically the only source of power available to slaves, vagabonds, and free laborers and, above all, women who were normally denied access to other avenues to politics.'²⁹⁷ His comment could also refer to Hallgerðr herself, whose profound characterisation is dominated by slander and incitement. Helga Kress says that gossip 'fylgir Hallgerði frá upphafi til enda, svo að segja má að hún sé búin til úr slúðri.'²⁹⁸ Skarphéðinn viciously remarks to Hallgerðr that 'Ekki munu mega orð þín, því at þú ert annathvært hornkerling eða púta.'²⁹⁹ But her words do count, much to everyone's detriment.

²⁹³ Finlay, 'Nið in BSH,' 163.

²⁹⁴ See *Njáls saga*, *viðbætur*, 471-472, verses 13, 14 and 15, which are attributed to him.

²⁹⁵ *Njáls saga*, ch. 44, 114. 'The beggar women discussed between themselves that they could be rewarded by Bergþóra if they were to tell her these words; they then went there and told Bergþóra in secret without being asked.'

²⁹⁶ Bailey, *Gifts and Poison*, 288.

²⁹⁷ Gísli Pálsson, *The Textual Life of Savants: Ethnography, Iceland, and the Linguistic Turn* (London: Routledge, 2004), 102. This is also observed by Jamie Cochrane in 'Gossips, Beggars, Assassins and Tramps: Vagrants and Other Itinerants in the Sagas of the Icelanders,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society XXXVI* (2012); 54.

²⁹⁸ Helga Kress, 'Staðlausir Stafir,' 147. Gossip 'follows Hallgerðr from beginning to end, so that it may be said that she is constructed out of gossip.'

²⁹⁹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 91, 228. 'Your words count for nothing as you are either an old hag or a whore.'

4. Open criticism

Killing the slanderers, as Þorvaldr and Skarpheðinn do, is not an uncommon reaction to such circumstances in the sagas. Those guilty of slandering Þorvaldr and Njáll were employed solely for that task and became scapegoats for those who commissioned the compositions and were equally, or more, deserving of wrath and vengeance. Cochrane observes that it is common in the sagas for vagrants in particular to be employed to start and spread slanderous rumours: 'Given the importance of honour in saga society, the mobility of the vagrant puts him in a powerful position. As he moved from farm to farm the vagrant had the opportunity to spread news, either true or untrue, about the farms he had already visited.'³⁰⁰ The distance, both geographically and socially, from the people they concocted stories about was a great advantage to their distribution.

Bailey's inclusion of open criticism within the gossip terminology, on the other hand, seems incompatible with the valuable shelter that gossip networks can afford, expanding gossip's remit to suggest that such anonymity is not necessarily desired. This introduces the idea of gossip removed from the conventional notion as a 'behind the back' discussion about events or people, ostensibly intended to remain unheard by the subject, or at the least to remain unidentified and protect the gossip's composer/s from recognition. But can this still be considered gossip, in its strictest sense?³⁰¹ In the context of saga society (if not others), gossip progresses to slander, and has greater recriminations for those who are caught engaging in it. However, slander often begins with gossip: the attacker's canny exploitation of the social networks to inflict public humiliation on the victim forms a vital part of their engagement. While the origins may still be behind the back, the anticipated conclusion is face-to-face. The motivation for such an open verbal assault may be vanity, a proud declaration of gossip authorship, folly, or aggravated incitement, or a combination of all of these. It is therefore worth exploring the ways in which gossip supports slander as part of the Open Criticism classification.

Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskáld epitomises the potential recklessness of open criticism in its depiction of Hallfreðr composing insulting and intimate verses about his lover and love rival, thus exposing himself to legal judgement and retaliation. Though poetry can by no means be considered an informal

³⁰⁰ Cochrane, 'Gossips, Beggars,' 57.

³⁰¹ Henry Lanz claims that gossip is 'idle and aimless,' and without advantage. See 'Metaphysics of Gossip,' *International Journal of Ethics* 46:4 (1936), 494. While some examples in this chapter reflect this interpretation, the general argument leans towards the individual and collective advantages proposed by Gluckman and Paine.

mode of communication, Hallfreðr's skaldic verses are a vehicle for malicious rumours about Gríss that complement and enhance the underlying strategy of defamation, acting as a witty *aide-memoire* to reinforce its transmission. For this reason the verses have been included here since they, and the passage in which they occur, focus on gossip and declarations of love.

Following the death of his wife Ingibjörg, which the saga notes is *allmikill skaði*,³⁰² Hallfreðr returns from Norway to Iceland with his two young sons and fosters them out to good homes. Having rid himself of his responsibilities, he quickly regresses to the impetuosity of youth by resuming pursuit of Kolfinna, the object of his earlier lust. Indeed, Hallfreðr's first port of call on landing is Kolfinna's farm, where he is delighted to discover that her husband Gríss is absent:

Sauðamaðr Kolfinnu sagði, at tólf menn riðu at selinu ok váru allir í litklæðum. Hon segir: 'Þeir munu eigi kunna leiðina.' Hann segir: 'Kunnliga riða þeir þó.' Nú koma þeir til seljanna. Kolfinna fagnar vel Hallfreði ok frétti tíðenda. Hann segir: 'Tíðendi eru fá, en í tómi munu soggð vera, ok vilju vér hér í nótt vera.' Hon svarar: 'Þat vilda ek, at þú riðir til vetrhúsa, ok mun ek fá þér leiðsögumann.' Hann kvazk þar vera vilja. 'Gefa munu vér yðr mat,' sagði hon, 'ef þér vilið þetta eitt.' Nú stíga þeir af hestum sínum, ok um kveldit, er þeir váru mettir, sagði Hallfreðr: 'Þat ætla ek mér, at liggja hjá Kolfinnu, en ek lofa félogum mínum at breyta sem þeir vilja.' Þar váru fleiri sel, ok er svá sagt, at hverr þeira fengi sér konu um nóttina.³⁰³

The reference to coloured clothing indicates that the riders are prosperous, hence Kolfinna's assumption that they are lost. Hallfreðr's surprise arrival, complete with a company in all their finery, creates a dilemma for Kolfinna. Allowing them to stay means nothing but trouble: the clipped comment that food is 'the only thing you want' belies her suspicions about his appearance, yet the obligation to show hospitality to one's guests – especially those who are moneyed and powerful – gives Hallfreðr the foot in the door that is Kolfinna's

³⁰² *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 9, 179. 'a terrible loss'.

³⁰³ *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 9, 180-181. 'Kolfinna's shepherd said that twelve men were riding towards the shieling, and all were in coloured clothes. She said, "They must not know the way." He said, "They ride like they know it, though." Now they came to the shieling. Kolfinna gave Hallfreðr a warm welcome and asked the news. He said, "There is little news, but it can be spoken of in good time, as we would like to spend the night here." She replied, "I would prefer it if you ride to the main house, and I can get you a guide." He said he wanted to stay there. "You will be given food," she said, "if that is all you want." Now they dismounted from their horses, and in the evening, when they were sated, Hallfreðr said, "I intend to sleep with Kolfinna, and I allow my fellow travellers to do what they want." There were many shielings, and it is said, that each man got himself a woman for the night.' *Grágás* states that plotting to sleep with a woman carried a penalty of full outlawry, see *Grágás* 2.b, 47.

undoing. His intentions are confirmed in his plans to sleep with her;³⁰⁴ a combination of the arrogance and presumption evoking that which he showed as a young man in his decision to seduce rather than marry Kolfinna. This time he achieves his ambition: ‘En er þau kómu í sæng, Hallfreðr ok Kolfinna, spýrr hann, hversu mart væri um ástir þeira Gríss. Hon kvað vel vera.’³⁰⁵ The casualness with which the scene is introduced contrasts sharply with Kolfinna’s last known thoughts of his stay. There is a sense of Shakespearean comedy about the symmetry of union: his companions are economically paired with women, each in their own shieling, and talk of these mystery lovers serves as a convenient deflection from Hallfreðr’s seduction of Kolfinna off stage. The reader moves directly from gossip about the multiple pairings to the bedchamber, and into the bed to eavesdrop on Hallfreðr and Kolfinna’s pillow talk. It is an intimate scene, but any notion of romance is destroyed by Hallfreðr’s derision of Gríss and jealous scepticism of Kolfinna’s positive evaluation of their marriage. One can deduce from Hallfreðr’s ongoing diatribe that *ástir* refers to the physical expression of love more than any other:

Hallfreðr segir: ‘Vera má, at svá sé, en annat þykkir mér finnask á vísu þeim, er þú hefir kveðit til Gríss.’ Hon kvazk engar kveðit hafa. Hann segir: ‘Ek hefi litla stund hér verit, ok hefi ek heyrt vísurnar.’ ‘Lát mik heyra,’ segir Kolfinna, ‘hverninn verki sá er, at mér er kenndr.’ Hallfreðr kvað þá vísu:

Leggr at lýsibrekku
 leggjar íss af Grísi,
 kvöl þolir hón hjá hõnum,
 heitr ofremmðar sveiti:
 en dreypilig drúpir
 dýnu Rõn hjá hõnum,
 leyfik ljóssa vífa
 lund, sem ǫlpt á sundi.³⁰⁶

Hallfreðr’s mischievous ruse to recite his slanderous verses plays on the voracity of local gossip and Kolfinna’s natural curiosity to know what is attributed

³⁰⁴ One wonders whether he addresses his group of men, or an unknown confidant. My belief is that the group is small enough for a brag to all, before directing them all to do as they please.

³⁰⁵ *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 9, 181. ‘And when they got into bed, Hallfreðr and Kolfinna, he asked how much love there was between her and Gríss. She said it was well.’

³⁰⁶ *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 9, 181, including verse 18. ‘Hallfreðr said, “It may be that this is the case, but it seems to me otherwise according to those verses that you have made up about Gríss.” She said she had not composed any verses. He said, “I have only been here a short time, and I have heard the verses.” “Let me hear the work that is in my name,” said Kolfinna. Hallfreðr spoke a verse:

“Hot, revolting sweat drips from Gríss onto the woman [lit. limb of the light slope’s ice]. She tolerates this torment from him, but the goddess [lit. Rõn of the mattress] droops miserably beside him. I praise the temperament of this bright woman, like a swan swimming.”

to her. By putting them in her name he undermines the concept of open criticism but fools no one: verses that glorify Kolfinna and ridicule Gríss can only be by one man.³⁰⁷ Despite Kolfinna's repeated pleas, Hallfreðr recites four verses to her, the imagery of which is offensive to Gríss and the couple's sexual relationship, depicting Gríss as a selfish, repulsive sexual partner incapable of satisfying his reluctant wife. His insults are plentiful and varied: twice abusing Gríss's performance as an ungainly scythe-wielder ('*orfa stríðir/ófríðr*' and '*orfpægir ... ófríðr*'), but also suggesting that he cares more for his animals than his wife (he is not quick to bed – *hvílubráðr* – and 'enjoys' his livestock, *hirðandi nýtr hjarðar hjorfangs*).³⁰⁸ The name Gríss, meaning pig, is a bonus addition to Hallfreðr's inventory of insults of the man: the pig and swan (as depicted in his verse) do not make compatible bedfellows. It is a powerful depiction from Hallfreðr's imagination. He does not wish to visualise the pair in love or having passionate sex; it needs to be unpleasant and unwelcome – Kolfinna being done to, not engaging in. The vivid details see Kolfinna trapped underneath Gríss, a receptacle to his grotesque bodily fluids, only enduring his lovemaking. *Dreyþilig drupir* may refer to the wilting Kolfinna, but perhaps conjures further association with Gríss's sexual stamina. That Hallfreðr is reciting his verses in Gríss and Kolfinna's marital bed suggests that, even if his imagination runs wild in his poetry, there may be some truth in his assumptions of their unhappy marriage. The scene provides room for speculation on this matter: as is the case in many seduction episodes the female perspective does not feature prominently. Ruth Mazo Karras suggests that rape has taken place:

Here the sexual use of the women servants is placed in the context of a hostile occupation; the mistress of the house, Hallfreðr's former mistress, is apparently raped by him. The issue of consent never arises; ... the implication is clear that women servants would be considered legitimate prey sexually, and that no one would object to it very much (as they certainly would in the case of the rape of the wife of the house).³⁰⁹

Karras is correct that consent does not appear to be given, and that *at fá sér konu* implies a forceful union for the female servants. However, though the dialogue between Hallfreðr and Kolfinna in bed is antagonistic, it is not in favour

³⁰⁷ In addition, it would be highly unlikely for a woman to compose such a verse, and particularly use it to praise herself (denoted by *Leyfik*).

³⁰⁸ From verses 19 and 20, ch. 9, 182.

³⁰⁹ Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Servitude and sexuality in medieval Iceland.' In *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 297. Miller also suggests that Hallfreðr 'forces his ex-mistress to sleep with him,' see *Bloodtaking*, 208.

of the view that she is raped by him: the saga records her pleas only for him to stop reciting offensive verses, and despite his verbal anti-foreplay, Hallfreðr insinuates Kolfinna is still drawn to the skilled poet and is giving off a pleasant fragrance (*dýrliigr angi*, verse 21).

In the same manner as their arrival in the bedroom, the narrative jumps forward, this time to Hallfreðr's departure *snimma* (early), giving the couple privacy while attention is directed to raising Gríss's awareness of the visit. We can assume that sexual intercourse took place in this length of time and on account of Hallfreðr's cheery demeanour and allusions to sex in his parting verses:

Lítt hirði ek, lautar
lundr hefr hætt til sprunda
viggs, þótt verðak hoggvinn,
varra, í hǫndum svarra,
ef ek næða Sif slœðu
sofa karms meðal arma,
mákat ek láss við ljósa
lind ofrækðar bindask.

Síðan hljóp hann á bak ok brosti. Kolfinna mælti: 'Hví brosir þú nú?'
Hann kvað vísu:

Veitkat ek hitt, hvat verða
verglóðar skal Móða,³¹⁰
rinnumk óst til Ilmar
unnar dags, á munni,
ef fjölgegnir fregna
fagnendr jǫtuns sagna,
flók af gyltar grísi
geitbelg, hvat mik teitir.

Hallfreðr vildi gefa Kolfinnu skikkjuna Konungsnaut, en hon vildi eigi
þiggja, ok áðr þeir riðu brott, kvað hann vísu:

Heim koma hirði-Naumur,
hams es góðr á fljóðum,
sævar báls frá seljum
sléttfjallaðar allar;
nú selk af, þótt ýfisk
ǫlbekkjjar Syn nekkvat,
hverr taki seggr við svarra
sínnum, ábyrgð mína.³¹¹

³¹⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes that in one manuscript *tróða* is written in the place of *Móða*, suggesting a female rather than male referent. Perhaps the author or scribe misinterpreted the mouth reference for oral sex. Hallfreðr's intended victim is indicated by the homonyms *ver* (n.) *sea*, and *ver* (m.) *husband*, as well as the context. See *ÍF* 8, 185.

³¹¹ *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 9, 184-185, verses 22-24.

"I would care little if I [grove of the hollow-wake's (i.e. sea's) stallion (i.e. ship)] were cut down in the woman's arms – I have taken risks for her –

The focus of his verses has shifted from slandering Gríss to romantic visions of himself entwined with Kolfinna. If rape has taken place, Hallfreðr is oblivious to his crime; he expresses a passionate union and the self-righteous injustice of separation. The poet does not linger on glorifying himself, instead revealing an obsessive idolisation of Kolfinna. The sexual imagery includes an intriguing reference to love flowing from him, which, in the context of his self-satisfaction, sexual interpretation of *ástir* above, reference to the cuckolding of Gríss and delight in Gríss's reaction to the incident, could support a physical as well as metaphorical meaning, signifying ejaculation. This would provide a more symbiotic, romantic metaphor of the couple as well as a contrast to the image of Gríss's fluids trickling onto Kolfinna in the earlier stanza.

Hallfreðr appeals directly to the gossipers – those 'wise men' who he says 'delight in tall tales' – acknowledging the inevitability in word getting out and encouraging it; it is no surprise that his nickname is *vandræðaskáld* (troublesome poet). *Vatnsdæla saga* mentions the incident, with an emphasis on the gossipy nature of its transmission 'þó lék it sama orð á með þeim Hallfreði [and Kolfinna], ... þá kom Hallfreðr þar, sem Kolfinna var í seli, ok lá þar hjá henni,'³¹² confirming that his sexual conquest achieved the notoriety aspired to.

On his departure, Hallfreðr's gift-giving is shunned by Kolfinna, yet he remains conceited, acknowledging her displeasure of the situation with a light-heartedness and inclination to see all the men's sexual activities as a right, which gives credence to Karras's thoughts on the sexual availability of servant women. Calling them sleek-haired and splendid seems, in that case, to be an ironic observation on their post-coital appearance.

if I get to sleep in Kolfinna's [Sif of the clothes-chest] embrace.
I am unable to control my blind passion for the lady [light linden of the lock]."

Then he mounted his horse and smiled. Kolfinna asked, "What are you smiling about now?" He spoke a verse:

"This I know not, what will be on the lips of that man [Móði of sea-fire (i.e. gold)]
– love flows from me to the goddess [Ilmr of wave's day] –
if the wise men who delight in tall tales [giant stories] hear
what gladdens me, I flayed a goatskin off Gríss."

Hallfreðr wanted to give Kolfinna the cloak King's Gift, but she refused to accept it, and before they rode away, he spoke this verse:

"The women [tending-Naumurs of the sea-fire (i.e. gold)] come home all smooth-haired
from the shielings, there is a good look about them.
Now I renounce all responsibility, though Kolfinna [Syn of the ale-bench] is somewhat perturbed,
each man should take a woman for himself."

³¹² *Vatnsdæla saga*, *ÍF* 8, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), ch. 45, 122-123. 'though there were the same rumours going around about Hallfreðr [and Kolfinna] ... then Hallfreðr came there, while Kolfinna was in a shieling, and slept with her.'

Little is said about the relationship between Kolfinna and Gríss following this incident. Gríss ignores her request not to immediately pursue Hallfreðr, but the couple stays together for the remainder of the saga. Again, a woman's role in a feud takes backstage, though the enduring unobtainable status of Kolfinna drives Hallfreðr's passions right until his death. The feud, however, dissolves. Suggestive of the Christian values mentioned, Gríss honourably defends Hallfreðr against accusations of being *lítillmannliga* (cowardly) when he is seen to be emotional following news of King Óláfr's death – who was responsible for Hallfreðr's conversion – and the pair resolve their dispute legally and fairly. Hallfreðr is forced to give Gríss an item of value for composing the *Gríssvísur*,³¹³ while the visit to Kolfinna, for which one would expect him to be heavily penalised, is offset against compensation for a slaying. This penalty corresponds to the quantity of space and attention spent on the verses and their reception rather than the sexual liaison.

5. Scandal

Unlike the other gossip typologies defined by Bailey, which derive from specific verbal transactions, scandal could relate to any of the other categories and thus requires further clarification on account of its culturally determined nature. What is deemed to be sexually scandalous in saga-age Iceland depends on the taboos and legal rulings of that time, which, as can be seen from a cursory reading of the sagas and *Grágás*, primarily focuses on homosexual acts (or rather, allegations thereof), incest, breaches of perceived gender conventions, and extra-marital sexual relationships. Regardless of what constitutes scandal in any culture, Bailey observes the universal opinion towards its distribution:

There is no possible ambiguity about its interpretation, since the act constitutes a gross breach of a widely accepted norm of conduct. S [the sender] has no need to add an interpretive gloss to the plain story. Once uttered it circulates with great rapidity and is beyond his control. He risks nothing by transmitting it, since no blame can attach to him for passing on news which everyone has a right to know.³¹⁴

In Bailey's opinion, the sender is exonerated from all judgement in its dispersal on account of the reprehensible nature of the scandal perpetrated. The flaw in this argument is the presumed objectivity of the sender, which can be diminished deliberately or accidentally in both the role of witness to the scandal

³¹³ *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 10, 193.

³¹⁴ Bailey, *Gifts and Poison*, 287.

and in its transmission. It is clear from the treatment of Þorvaldr and the bishop in *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla* above that not all bearers of scandalous tidings have altruistic intentions at heart, and either fabricate or manipulate evidence as required. The acceptance of this information as truth relies on the reputations of the sender and the scandalised party, as well as the general public's enthusiasm for titillation. A good illustration of this occurs in *Laxdæla saga*. Þórðr Ingunnarson takes an interest in Guðrún, 'ok fell þar mǫrg umræða á um kærleika þeira Þórðar ok Guðrúnar.'³¹⁵ – much to Guðrún's husband's displeasure. In an attempt to facilitate an end to her unhappy marriage, Þórðr suggests Guðrún provide her husband with a low-cut shirt akin to female clothing and thus provide herself with grounds for divorce.³¹⁶ Guðrún may or may not have taken this approach; it is uncertain as the text simply says 'Eigi mælti Guðrún í móti þessu, ok skilja þau talit.'³¹⁷ This comes just before mention of the divorce and her settlement, which must have been founded on a justified legal matter since she receives half of everything. However, Þórðr and Guðrún undeniably adopt this method as a means to create scandal for Þórðr's wife Auðr, who is oblivious to his motives:

Þat var einn dag, er þau riðu yfir Bláskógaheiði, – var á veðr gott –, þá mælti Guðrún: 'Hvárt er þat satt, Þórðr, at Auðr, kona þín, er jafnan í brókum, ok setgeiri í, en vafit spjǫrrum mjǫk í skúa niðr?' Hann kvazk ekki hafa til þess fundit. 'Lítit bragð mun þá at,' segir Guðrún, 'ef þú finnr eigi, ok fyrir hvat skal hon þá heita Bróka-Auðr?' Þórðr mælti: 'Vér ætlum hana litla hríð svá hafa verit kallaða.' Guðrún svarar: 'Hitt skiptir hana enn meira, at hon eigi þetta nafn lengi síðan.'³¹⁸

There are two readings of this scene. The indication of good weather may suggest that they expect to encounter other people along the path who can hear their discussion and convey Guðrún's gossip to their social circles. Alternatively,

³¹⁵ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 34, 93. 'and there was much talk about Þórðr and Guðrún's affection for each other.'

³¹⁶ *Grágás* 2.b, 47, explains the deviance associated with cross-dressing: 'Ef konor geraz sva af siða at þær ganga íkarlfötum eða hvemgi carla sið er þær hafa fyrir breytne sacir oc sva carlar þeir er kuena sið hafa huemge veg er þat er. þa vardar þat fiorbaugs garð. huarom sem þat gera.' 'If women become so abnormal that they go around in men's clothing or adopt other men's customs that they have for the sake of change and thus if men take on women's customs or any way it is, the judgment is lesser outlawry, whoever does it.' Also see Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze,' 9-12, for discussion on clothing as gender markers, with reference to this passage.

³¹⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 34, 94. 'Guðrún did not speak against this, and they ended the conversation.'

³¹⁸ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35, 95. 'One day, as they rode across Bláskógar heath – the weather was good - Guðrún said, "Is it true, Þórðr, that Auðr, your wife, is often in breeches, and a jockstrap, and with stockings wrapped all the way down to her shoes?" He said he had not noticed. "Then you don't look properly," said Guðrún, "if you don't notice, or why else would she be called Breeches-Auðr?" Þórðr said, "I assume she has only been called this for a short while." Guðrún replied, "What matters more than that is that she will have this name for a long time."

it is a rehearsal of details between Guðrún and Þórðr, he playing the part of ignorant and innocent husband, unaware of his wife's alter ego, she the bearer of bad news.³¹⁹ In either case, Guðrún's prophecy reveals a shrewd strategic use of nicknames to ensure the spectacle of a female in men's clothing is lodged in the minds of those who hear it. The level of detail is also a tantalising prospect to gossipers. Who would stop to consider Guðrún's motivation for disclosing this information when they can instead delight in the image of a woman in men's clothing?³²⁰ Guðrún employs the same method of introduction to the topic as Hallfreðr gave Kolfinna: to put the testimony in the mouths of others: 'is it true (*what I hear*),' she asks, identifying herself as a mere intermediary and thus absolved from the responsibility of bearing this news. She hints at cracks in their relationship – again, as Hallfreðr did to Kolfinna – with the idea that Þórðr should have paid more attention, or perhaps her emphasis is on the clandestine nature of Auðr's deviance. The more people share in the scandal, the easier it will be for Þórðr to leave her, and indeed, he is able to use their sham evidence to prepare a case for divorce, which he announces at the Alþingi using the term *karlkona* (male-female) to indicate his wife's cross-dressing tendencies. This is a great surprise to Auðr, whose reaction – 'Vel es ek veit þat, vask ein of látin.'³²¹ – rouses sympathy and is a final confirmation of her innocence in the affair. Sandra Ballif Straubhaar notes that this epigram sums up the situation 'in the audience-aware manner characteristic of skalds.'³²² Since the number of male skalds far outweighs the female, perhaps this versification of Auðr's reaction serves as another contributing factor to her *karlkona* character.

Þórðr and Guðrún's scandal-mongering embodies the manipulative nature of gossip promoted by Paine, and Þórðr is demonstrably cautious in his

³¹⁹ The second of these options would explain Þórðr's question to Guðrún regarding the consequences of cross-dressing, which, one would have thought, would be apparent to him after his earlier suggestion of Þorvaldr's low-cut shirt. An alternative meaning for the insertion of this information is to remind the audience of the social and legal implications that allow Þórðr to divorce her.

³²⁰ I have used the term jockstrap for *setgeirr*; codpiece is the term adopted in the translation by Keneva Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. 5, edited by Viðar Hreinsson et al. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson, 1997), ch. 35, 48. However, while these recreate the sensationalism of Guðrún's imagery for the modern audience, they are not the most appropriate words. More suitable is gore, a padded insert that fits into leggings to offer better support to horse riders (and cyclists). As Thor Ewing explains in *Viking Clothing*, (Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2006), 58: 'The men's seat gore might have allowed the legs to be spread more widely than was considered seemly. The lack of a gore clearly made women's breeches unsuitable for riding, presumably because the wearer could not spread her legs.'

³²¹ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35, 96. 'It is good that I know this, though I was the last to find out.'

³²² Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, 'Ambiguously Gendered: The Skalds Jörunn, Auðr and Steinunn,' *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson, with Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002), 266.

movements immediately following the assembly, travelling with an entourage to avoid retaliation by Auðr's brothers. Þórðr and Guðrún are quickly wed, and we are told Auðr's brothers do not gain support for a case against him. Revenge comes in an unanticipated guise, exposing the fundamental flaw in Þórðr and Guðrún's strategy:

... ok nokkuru fyrir sólarfall sté Auðr á bak, ok var hon þá at vísu í brókum. Smalasveinn reið qðrum hesti ok gat varla fylgt henni, svá knúði hon fast reiðina. ... Hon gekk í lokrekkjuna, en Þórðr svaf ok horfði í lopt upp. Þá vakði Auðr Þórð, en hann snerisk á hliðina, er hann sá, at maðr var kominn. Hon brá þá saxi ok lagði at Þórði ok veitti honum áverka mikla, ok kom á hǫndina hægri; varð hann sárr á báðum geirvortum; svá lagði hon til fast, at saxit nam í beðinum staðar. Síðan gekk Auðr brott ok til hests ok hljóp á bak ok reið heim eptir þat. Þórðr vildi upp spretta, er hann fekk áverkann, ok varð þat ekki, því at hann mœddi blóðrás. ... Ósvífr spyrr, ef hann vissi, hvern á honum hefði unnit, ok stóð upp ok batt um sár hans. Þórðr kvazk ætla, at þat hefði Auðr gǫrt. Ósvífr bauð at ríða eptir henni; kvað hana fámenna til mundu hafa farit, ok væri henni skapat víti. Þórðr kvað þat fjarri skyldu fara; sagði hana slíkt hafa at gǫrt, sem hon átti. ... Þórðr lá lengi í sárum, ok greru vel bringusárin, en sú hǫndin varð honum hvergi betri til taks en áðr.³²³

In their creation of a masculine identity for Auðr, the pair did not foresee her responding in a manner that undermines and even celebrates the shame of the scandal that brought dishonour to her name. The inclusion of *at vísu* suggests the author takes pleasure in Auðr's defiance,³²⁴ with small details of her revenge charting the potency of her *karlkona* identity: the speed at which she rides, the strength of her attack, her quick departure. Auðr's brothers believe Þórðr deserves worse, but what they might consider clemency on her part can also be seen as a legacy of emasculation; Þórðr's wounded nipples are a humiliating affliction in location, his sword arm is permanently damaged in an injury meted out by a woman, and bandaged by a man. As Sayers puts it, 'we could say that Þórðr survives the feminine role forced on him by the masculine Auðr but his

³²³ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 35, 97-98. '... and just before sundown Auðr mounted her horse; then she was certainly dressed in breeches. A shepherd boy rode another horse and could barely keep up with her, she rode so fast. ... She went into the bed closet; Þórðr was sleeping facing upwards. Then Auðr woke Þórðr, but he turned onto his side when he saw that a man had come in. She drew her sword and struck at Þórðr, giving him a great wound. It came across his right arm and he was wounded on both nipples; her attack was so strong that the sword stuck in the bed post. Then Auðr went to her horse, jumped on its back and rode home. Þórðr wanted to jump up when he was wounded, but could not on account of the blood loss. ... Ósvífr asked if he knew who had attacked him, and dressed his wounds. Þórðr said he thought Auðr had done it. Ósvífr offered to ride after her; he said she would have few people with her, and deserved punishment. Þórðr said it was far from the case, and said she did what she had to do. ... Þórðr was laid up for a long time with his wounds, the chest healed well but the arm was never as good as it had been before.'

³²⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen says, 'It is clear that the sagawriter approves of this action.' *TUM*, 22.

own masculine nature remains impaired.³²⁵ Where Þórðr and Guðrún's strategy required maximum publicity, Auðr's retaliation relies on a quiet indignity that will haunt Þórðr for as long as he is alive.³²⁶

The selfish sexual motives of Guðrún and Þórðr prompted the scandalisation of Bróka-Auðr. It is imperative for the gossip to have a good reputation in order for people to believe the story; Bailey's categorisation of scandal does not take into account that it may be fabricated, or embellished, as it was in this case. Scandal does not lose currency and the damage can be long-lasting, as illustrated by the tenacity of the nicknames. In a small community, knowing historical gossip and the origins of scandal can play an important part in the social and political power struggles, as Gluckman argues:

each group comprises not only the present members of the group, but also the past dead members. And here lies great scope for gossip as a social weapon. To be able to gossip properly, a member has to know not only about the present membership, but also about their forbears. For members can hit at one another through their ancestors, and if you cannot use this attack because you are ignorant, then you are in a weak position.³²⁷

One use of this knowledge is in bringing scandalous sexual behaviour to light to preclude a person from financial gain. Such is the case of the Hildiríðarsons in *Egils saga*, in which Hárekr and Hrcerekr are deprived of their father Björgólfr's inheritance on account of the illicit way in which he obtained their mother. On Björgólfr's death, his estate went to his legitimate son, Brynjólfr, who in turn left it to his son Bárðr. Hárekr and Hrcerekr appealed to Þórólfr, who inherited all of Bárðr's estate, for a claim on Björgólfr's property after Bárðr's death, but Þórólfr denies them their claim, citing his knowledge of Brynjólfr and Bárðr as generous men and thus reinforcing the significance of a good reputation. Þórólfr chooses their word over Hárekr's: 'Því síðr ætla ek ykkur arfborna, at mér er sagt móðir ykkur væri með valdi tekin ok hernumin heim hqfð.'³²⁸ Hárekr declares he will bring witnesses that their mother was duly bought with payment – which is true, but the situation is more complex. Although Hildiríðr's father agreed to the union, Jochens suggests the illegality stems not from 'the lack of payment as much as the lack of the normal waiting period between the agreement and the

³²⁵ Sayers, 'Sexual Identity,' 135.

³²⁶ Which, incidentally, is not long, as he dies in a shipwreck at the end of the chapter.

³²⁷ Gluckman, 'G&S,' 309.

³²⁸ *Egils saga*, ch. 9, 27. 'For this reason I do not believe that you have any birthright, because I am told that your mother was taken with force and carried off to your father's house'.

consummation.³²⁹ Using gossip as a strategic weapon, Brynjólfr and Bárðr have made sure their father's debauched history remains in the public realm, and, proving the obstinacy of association, the Hildiríðarsons' position is permanently weakened by their father's sexual rashness and the incident's infamy. It is also telling that Þórólfr is more inclined to believe what he has heard from his trusted acquaintance, despite the offer of evidence to the contrary, not to mention keep hold of all the wealth that he has inherited. Cause and effect is a common theme of the sagas, and Þórólfr's rejection leads the brothers to gossip about him instead, with much invention. Their deceit puts an end to Þórólfr's favourable connection with the king and, heralding his demise, exposes the difficulty in defending a good reputation or elevated position from the threat of negative attention. Perhaps Þórólfr's reputation was quick to suffer because, as an honourable man, he was not prepared for his impeccable behaviour to be attacked, and his accumulation of power meant he had far to fall.³³⁰

Paradoxically, it is those who have the most to hide who demonstrate great expertise in managing their reputations. In *Njáls saga* Queen Gunnhildr indulges in sexual affairs, yet her ability to keep a stranglehold on potential scandal is remarkably strong. Gunnhildr spends two weeks in a room with Hrútr, the young Icelander she has seduced. Ursula Dronke comments that 'the door was locked on the love-making of Hrútr and Gunnhildr,'³³¹ but it is clear that even the locked door is symbolic enough to generate gossip and suspicion among Gunnhildr's staff, whom she threatens: 'Þér skuluð engu fyrir týna nema lífinu, ef þér segið nokkurum frá um hagi vára Hrúts.'³³² Once again we encounter gossip punishable by death, reinforcing that the scope of its gravitas extends from the highest level of Norwegian society here to the humble Icelandic farmworker. Bailey's proposal that there is no risk in the transmission of scandalous affairs appears idealistic in relation to Gunnhildr's threat; immunity is by no means guaranteed, especially not when one's opponent is rich and resourceful. Her attempt to intimidate those who may have heard or seen her sexual activities exposes the commodification of privacy: the delineation between public and private persona is signified by the locked door, yet she is aware that what has happened in private will be the most prized gossip and the most likely to weaken her publicly. Not her position though:

³²⁹ Jochens, 'TILV,' 377.

³³⁰ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir gives this case as an example of the literary motif of negative male talk at court; see *BWP*, 38.

³³¹ Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, 9.

³³² *Njáls saga*, ch. 3, 15. 'You will lose nothing but your life, if you say anything about mine and Hrútr's behaviour.'

Merry notes that some people are ‘insulated from the social, political, and economic consequences of gossip either by their wealth and control ... or by their accepted marginal social status and economic self-sufficiency.’³³³ While Gunnhildr is protected by her status, she nonetheless fears intrusion into her sexual relationships. Dronke sees a correlation with other romances in her motivation for silencing the gossipers:

it brings with it also echoes of the taboo of the supernatural mistress – ‘tell no one of our love’ – and of the secrecy of the perfect lovers of romance – the Châtelaine de Vergi, Tristan, Troilus – for whom the ideal of sexual union is fulfilled in seclusion from the outer world and the slanderous tongues of men.³³⁴

This reading softens the blow somewhat; it gives a sense of validation to Gunnhildr’s threat to gossipers and provides a romantic frame of reference for the lovemaking and Hrútr’s supernaturally-inflicted erectile dysfunction away from his ‘secret’ lover. Whether anyone lost his life for gossiping about the queen’s sexual transgressions is not mentioned. However, there is evidence that her super-injunction has not been entirely successful: when Hrútr asks where he shall sit in court, the king responds wryly, ‘Móðir mín skal því ráða.’³³⁵

The rumours are also confirmed in *Laxdœla saga*, when we are told:

Gunnhildr lagði mikil mæti á Óláf, er hon vissi, at hann var bróðursonr Hrúts; en sumir menn kǫlluðu þat, at henni þœtti þó skemmtan at tala við Óláf, þótt hann nyti ekki annarra at.³³⁶

The comparison of affections for Óláfr and Hrútr appears to be an incidental comment, but as an unusually candid insight into Gunnhildr’s emotional proclivities it reiterates Paine’s information-storage idea, as well as Gluckman’s knowledge of present and past members: after all, *sumir menn* must have been aware of – and remembered, and divulged – her relationship with Óláfr’s uncle to deliberate judgement on her fondness for the two Icelanders. This also suggests that the urge to disclose sexual rumours is greater than a threat to one’s life. Gísli Pálsson puts it well, that ‘For the weak, gossip was an effective method of resistance, empowering the otherwise silent agenda of the mass *vis-*

³³³ Merry, ‘Rethinking Gossip,’ 48.

³³⁴ Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, 7.

³³⁵ *Njáls saga*, ch. 3, 15. ‘My mother will decide that.’

³³⁶ *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 21, 52. ‘Gunnhildr was very fond of Óláfr, when she learned that he was Hrútr’s nephew, but some people said that she would have enjoyed talking with Óláfr even if this was not the case.’

à-vis the noisy one of the wealthy and powerful.³³⁷ It is worth observing, however, that Hrútr and Gunnhildr's scandalous sexual encounter does not appear to extend to Icelandic shores. On his return from Norway no one seems aware of his dalliance, nor does he see fit to explain the cause of his priapism; only Hrútr, the author and the reader is privileged enough to see the whole picture. Icelandic-Norwegian communication was temperamental, with information lost at sea, fabricated en route or heavily delayed, a plot device employed to elicit many a broken heart.³³⁸ Within Iceland, on the other hand, networks of communication were strong enough between communities for scandal to gain a foothold quickly, and a *þing* was a perfect platform for nationwide rumourmongering. Some children's ridicule of Hrútr's poor sexual performance in *Njáls saga* is a good indication of the limitations of privacy; to them gossip is the premise of a game, but their knowledge of events reveals that gossip in small communities not only concerns past and present generations, but also the younger members of the group, another asset to Gluckman's social bonding theory.³³⁹

Sexual scandals such as these highlight a practical reason for the dispersal of sexual knowledge as a social defence against incest, which is in itself a taboo. The popularity of methodical genealogy in Old Norse literature is testament to a fascination with origin and history, and one could argue consequently that knowledge of the sex lives of ancestors of which they are the outcome is an essential part of it. Bringing sexually illicit links and illegitimate offspring into the public realm continues this tradition, no matter how objectionable one's ancestry may be. According to *Grágás*, major incest extended to the third degree, and was punishable with full outlawry, while fifth degree incest came with a sentence for lesser outlawry. However, it gave dispensation to those who were not aware of a close familial tie (between four and six degrees) before they married to divorce without penalty.³⁴⁰ One would expect, considering the amount of vellum given to the subject of genealogy

³³⁷ Gísli Pálsson, *The Textual Life of Savants*, 102.

³³⁸ An example occurs in *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 42, 127, where Bolli sabotages Kjartan and Guðrún's betrothal by telling her 'hvert orðtak manna var á um vináttu þeira Kjartans ok Ingibjargar konungssystur' – 'every utterance [of the people] was about the relationship between Kjartan and the king's sister Ingibjörg.' Thus gossip about gossip is accepted, and Bolli does not take responsibility for passing on this information.

³³⁹ The children's performance is discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

³⁴⁰ See *Grágás* 2.b, K 144, 29-31. Brundage says that up until 1215 'Christians were forbidden to marry anyone related to them within seven degrees of blood kinship.' However, this would have not been possible to enforce in as small a population as Iceland. See James A. Brundage, 'Sex and Canon Law,' *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Routledge, 1996), 38.

throughout the saga canon, that most parentage and familial ties were firmly established, but this brings into question the possibility of children brought up not knowing their familial relationships, or the truth of illegitimacy coming to light at a later date and compromising existing legacies. Hárekr and Hrórekr can certainly testify to the enduring value of scandal: once it is out in the open, it cannot be unheard.

6. In confidence

It is clear from these cases that gossip is an assertive force in society, heralding change and action and causing all to keep a close eye on their relatives and friends in case rumours encroach on their own reputations and interests. All these threads converge in one of the most renowned instances of gossip in the family sagas, that of Auðr and Ásgerðr in *Gísla saga* and the tragic events that follow their idle chatter. The plot hinges on the scene where Þorkell eavesdrops on the women's conversation, his sexual jealousy and slow-burning reaction to the news precipitating the deaths of Vésteinn, Þorgrimr and ultimately Gísli. The women's confidential gossip comes directly from the source: private matters are shared within the informal environment of kinship, allowing candid discussion to take place. The darkest of secrets can therefore be uncovered and analysed in the unlikeliest of places, for instance, passing the time as an innocent accompaniment to the tedium of manual chores, as was the case of the Þóra sisters in *Haukdæla þátr*. *Gísla saga* toys with this scenario and exposes its vulnerability. A domestic scene is carefully constructed:

Gísli lét alla menn vinna heyverk, nema Þorkell, hann var einn heima karla á bænum ok hafði lagizk niðr í eldhúsi eptir dögurð sinn. Eldhúsit var tírœtt at lengð, en tíu faðma breitt, en útan ok sunnan undir eldhúsinu stóð dyngja þeira Auðar ok Ásgerðar, ok sátu þær þar ok saumuðu. En er Þorkell vaknar, gengr hann til dyngjunnar, því at hann heyrði þangat mannamál, ok leggsk þar niðr hjá dyngjunni.³⁴¹

The detailed description of the building is not arbitrary; providing a simple plan of the women's quarters in relation to the fire-room, Ásgerðr and Auðr are placed in a setting that should be private and emphasises Þorkell's deceit in

³⁴¹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 9, 30. 'Gísli made all the men go haymaking, except Þorkell; of all the men he was alone at home in the farmhouse and had lain down in the fire-room after eating his day-meal. The fire-room was a hundred fathoms long and ten fathoms wide, and on the south side under the fire-room stood Auðr and Ásgerðr's *dyngja*, and they were sat there and were sewing. And when Þorkell awoke, he went to the *dyngja*, because he heard voices coming from there, and he lay down near to it.'

encroaching on their territory, concealing himself in a calculated act of intrusion and nosiness similar to that of Gunnar in the earlier example from *Njáls saga*. However, Þorkell's behaviour reveals him to be a passive and idle man, more suited to being in the *dyngja*. As Helga Kress says, 'dyngja er staður kvenna með ákveðnum mörkum sem enginn sannur karlmaður fer yfir.'³⁴² The narration turns to dialogue, so that we may listen too:

Nú tekur Ásgerðir til orða: 'Veittu mér þat, at þú sker mér skyrtu, Auðr, Þorkatli bónda mínum.' 'Þat kann ek eigi betr en þú,' sagði Auðr, 'ok myndir þú eigi mik til biðja, ef þú skyldir skera Vésteini bróður mínum skyrtuna.' 'Eitt er þat sér,' segir Ásgerðir, 'ok svá mun mér þykkja nokkura stund.' 'Löngu víska ek þat,' segir Auðr, 'hvat við sik var, ok ræðum ekki um fleira.' 'Þat þykki mér eigi brigzl,' sagði Ásgerðir, 'þótt mér þykki Vésteinn góðr. Hitt var mér sagt, at þit Þorgrímr hittizk mjök opt, áðr en þú værir Gísli gefin.' 'Því fylgdu engir mannestir,' segir Auðr, 'því at ek tók engan mann undir Gísli, at því fylgdi neinn mannlöstr; ok munu vit nú hætta þessi ræðu.'³⁴³

Quickly, the innocuous subject of making a shirt escalates into argument. When Ásgerðir asks Auðr to undertake the task, it may be innocently intended, but chimes with the concept of making a shirt as a symbol of affection for a man. It is unlikely in this case to take on such meaning as Ásgerðir is not accusing Auðr of adultery, at least not with her husband. Nonetheless the comment prompts a difficult discussion about the women's lovers. Though sexual intercourse is not made explicitly clear there are plenty of insinuations: Ásgerðir's *þit Þorgrímr hittizk mjök opt* suggests intimate meetings alone, and Auðr's response is that she had not been unfaithful to Gísli – by her protest the implication is made that a sexual relationship existed, but not during her marriage. Auðr's comment, *Löngu víska ek þat hvat við sik var*, and the pious, supercilious tone within also points towards allegations of clandestine and sordid liaisons between Ásgerðir and Vésteinn. For clarity, these connections are identified:

³⁴² Helga Kress, 'Staðlausir Stafir,' 136. 'The *dyngja* is a place for women with defined barriers that no real man would cross.'

³⁴³ *Gísli saga*, ch. 9, 30-31. 'Now Ásgerðir was speaking, "Can you do something for me and cut a shirt for my husband, Þorkell?" "I am no better than you," said Auðr, "and you would not ask me to if the shirt happened to be for my brother Vésteinn." "That's something else," said Ásgerðir, "and it seems to me to be so for some time." "I have known for a long time," said Auðr, "what was going on, and we will say no more about it." "I don't believe there is any shame in it," said Ásgerðir, "that I find Vésteinn attractive. I was told that you and Þorgrímr met up often, before you married Gísli." "There was no harm in it," said Auðr, "because I was not unfaithful to Gísli, and therefore there is no shame in it; now let's stop this discussion."



Table 3: Sexual relationships in *Gísli saga Súrssonar*

Jochens speculates that marriage turns the once flirtatious activity of shirt making into ‘drudgery,’³⁴⁴ which justifies an asexual reason for Ásgerðr’s request. Auðr’s riposte about Ásgerðr’s interest in Vésteinn is uncharacteristically teasing and defensive, and hits the right nerve. It also highlights a further discrepancy in the text regarding the temporal ambiguity of Ásgerðr’s relationship with Vésteinn: is it current or past? Ásgerðr speaks of her fondness for Vésteinn in the present tense,³⁴⁵ but Auðr suggests it is in the past - *hvat við sik var*. It is also unclear if Ásgerðr suggests that the relationship, or simply knowledge of the relationship, will be kept quiet for some time. Jochens proposes the affair continues – if this is the case then it does discreetly enough that Auðr had assumed it has ended – which would extend the shirt as love token metaphor to include illicit love.³⁴⁶ If Jochens were correct, it would add an extra layer of defence to Auðr’s closing statement, as if to say ‘I was never unfaithful to Gísli – *as you are to Þorkell* – and have therefore brought no disgrace upon him – *unlike you, who have brought disgrace to Þorkell*.’ The fault in this theory is that if Ásgerðr and Vésteinn were indulging in illicit sex, to expose the relationship by making a shirt for one’s lover would be a highly precarious strategy, undoubtedly meriting further gossip and suspicion.

Moreover, Ásgerðr’s defiance in defending her attraction towards Vésteinn, and by extension a woman’s prerogative to be attracted to more than one man, suggests that there is no longer any transgression in it, even if the feelings have not disappeared completely. She adds spiteful and well-informed rejoinders of her own to redirect attention onto Auðr’s alleged indiscretion. The tension between the two women is palpable, and, despite Auðr’s attempts to bring it to an end, their conversation is a lesson in social pride and moral

³⁴⁴ Jochens, *WiONS*, 71.

³⁴⁵ *Þykki* is in the subjunctive due to the conditional clause *þótt*.

³⁴⁶ Jochens, *WiONS*, 71.

posturing. This calls to mind one of Gluckman's thoughts on why gossip requires established relationships and familiarity:

Correspondingly, the badge of membership [to a social group] is that a person can quite allusively, and apparently naively, cut another member to the quick by a seemingly innocent statement. And of course, it is important that the person offended knows that the allusion is intended but not be able to pin it down, and that the injurer should know that the offended knows, and that the offended should know that the injurer knows that the offended knows – and so on *ad infinitum*.³⁴⁷

Ásgerðr and Auðr's curt, biting ripostes indicate that neither party is pleased to be discussing this, but they continue to do so, spurred on by underhand comments. Nor are they comfortable with the other's display of knowledge: the deflection of gossip demonstrates that their respective social alertness is good enough to be aware of secret passions and perhaps they are party to other gossip circles. Auðr's claim that *Löngu víska ek þat* asserts social dominance over Ásgerðr, implying that she is highly observant, or not only hears secrets but keeps them too. The passive-aggressive information exchange suggests that the sisterhood is not a companionable one, yet they are complicit in their confidences and unlikely to jeopardise the balance. Bailey and Paine both acknowledge the terminality of information in this form of gossip, and this was the case with the Þóra sisters.³⁴⁸ However, the matter is swiftly taken out of the women's hands:

En Þorkell heyrir hvert orð, þat er þær mæltu, ok tekr nú til orða, er þær hættu:

'Heyr undr mikít,
heyr ørlygi,'
heyr mál mikít,
heyr manns bana,

eins eða fleiri' – ok gengr inn eptir þat. Þá tekr Auðr til orða: 'Opt stendr illt af kvannahjali, ok má þat vera, at hér hljótsk af í verra lagi, ok leitum okkr ráðs.'³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Gluckman, 'G&S,' 314.

³⁴⁸ Bailey, *Gifts and Poison*, 289; Paine, 'Alternative Hypothesis,' 283.

³⁴⁹ *Gísla saga*, ch. 9, 31, including verse 1. 'But Þorkell heard every word that they said, and spoke when they stopped:

"Hear a great wonder,
hear fate,
hear a great matter,
hear of a man's death,

In barely a few sentences the fate of the menfolk is sealed. Þorkell's verse, ominous and self-fulfilling, reinforces the power of gossip: repetition of *heyr* warns of the danger of careless talk and, as observed previously, the ease with which intimate conversation can be heard by the person who should not be party to it. *Mál mikit* signifies that gossip is far greater than its connotations of idle chatter too, with a double meaning of 'great matter' and 'much talk.' Auðr's remorseful mention of *kvannahjal* brings to mind the words of *Hávamál*: '*Meyjar orðum / skyli manngi trúa / né því er kveðr kona.*'³⁵⁰ It is interesting that the blame lies with the women in both sources, although there is a contradiction between the two: while *Hávamál* discredits women as liars, *Gísla saga* proposes that articulating the truth causes the most harm, inferring the opposite: it is the honesty inherent in women's talk that makes it dangerous. Perhaps if Þorkell had disbelieved their talk, fewer people would have died: here, the clandestine nature of the confidence proves its legitimacy.

The implication that it is the women's fault detracts from Þorkell's underhand behaviour. He wanted to hear what they spoke of, and his subsequent jealousy leads to violence. One wonders why he was spying on them in the first place. Jochens notes that he is the lazier of the two brothers; the irregularity of their cohabitation is strong evidence of this,³⁵¹ as is the portrayal of him idling in the fire-room while all the men of the household work outside. Was this how he spent his days, taking pleasure in listening to the sexual gossip of women? Alternatively he may have been suspicious of his wife and vindicated by confirmation of her passion for another man. Whether Jochens' reading of a continued affair, or revelatory knowledge of past sexual liaisons is the cause of his anger, it is probable that he is embittered not only by jealousy but also by Ásgerðr's secrecy. Gluckman talks of the social bonding qualities of gossip: the reverse, to be on the outside of the knowledge-sharing, can instil a sense of exclusion. In this case Þorkell's desire to be in on the local gossip meant he got more than he bargained for; visibly hurt by what he has heard, he remains uncommunicative and stoic despite Gísli's gentle attempts to

one or many." - and went in after that. Then Auðr spoke, "Often women's talk leads to trouble, and it may be that here it is of the worst kind, and we should seek advice."

An almost identical stance to gendered gossip is observed in *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 21, 188: 'Gunnarr svaraði: "Óft stendr illt af tali kvenna, ok kann vera, at af hljóttist þessu tali sem þá er verst hefir af hlotizt.'" 'Gunnar replied, "Often women's talk leads to trouble, and it may be, that from this conversation it will seem to be the worst."

³⁵⁰ *Hávamál*, edited by David A.H. Evans (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2000), 56, verse 84. 'The words of a girl / no man should trust / nor that which a woman says.' The stanza continues: *því at á hverfanda hvéli / váru þeim hjörtu sköpuð, / brigg í brjósti um lagit.* 'for on a turning wheel / their hearts were created / fickleness set in their breast.'

³⁵¹ Jochens, *WiONS*, 100-101.

pry, and thus his sense of isolation is reinforced. When Gísli asks if something troubles him Þorkell is reluctant to disclose the source of his woe: “Sá er engi hlutr,” segir Þorkell, “ok muntu þessa viss verða, þó at síðar sé.”³⁵² Considering his uncommunicativeness about the *engi hlutr* that troubles him, this is an unusual remark, implying that he believes such rumours will not stay quiet for long, despite not giving any indication of speaking about it himself.

Creating an inversion of Foucault’s theory, there is no pleasure in analysis here for Þorkell. He has the truth, but no joy in knowing it, nor in luring it out into the open. Exposure is part of the pleasure according to Foucault, and naturally Þorkell would not want people to know this smear on his name. However, by avoiding the subject he does not fare any better, and the images of sexual pleasure he wishes to suppress are left to ruminate in his head. We are, of course, not party to his thoughts, but the killing of Vésteinn betrays an unhealthy obsession with this news that extends beyond his reconciliation with Ásgerðr. In his self-pity and fear for reputation, Þorkell takes a course of action that mitigates both and leads to Vésteinn’s killing under the cover of darkness. His silence on the matter allows him to maintain the pretence of amity with his wife, as well as his kinsmen, who remain unaware of the affair (otherwise they would have been more likely to discover the motivation for the killing), only to arouse Gísli’s suspicions when his guilty conscience shatters the façade.

The gossip and sexual precedent to this incident do little to arouse sympathy for Þorkell’s situation. In his youth he demonstrated selfishness and apathy towards his sister’s sexual reputation, when ‘Þat tóluðu sumir menn, at Bárðr fíflði Þórdísi Þorbjarnardóttur.’³⁵³ When warned to stay away, Bárðr, in his arrogance, foolishly belittles the gossip and its implicit caution, and ‘kvað ómæt ómaga orð, – “ok mun ek fara sem áðr.”’³⁵⁴ This scenario established the brothers’ characters and morality: while Þorkell, as a friend of Bárðr’s, took no interest, Gísli slaughtered Bárðr to protect his sister’s virginity and the family honour.³⁵⁵ Ignoring the honourable motivation behind Gísli’s actions, Þorkell intended to avenge Bárðr’s death, and it is testament to Gísli’s strength of character that the two were reconciled. It also reveals Þorkell’s impetuosity and misplaced sense of loyalty that in both instances his immediate thoughts turn to

³⁵² *Gísla saga*, ch. 9, 32. “It is nothing,” said Þorkell, “but you will surely become aware of it sooner or later.”

³⁵³ *Gísla saga*, ch. 2, 7. ‘Some people said that Bárðr seduced Þórdís Þorbjarnardóttir.’

³⁵⁴ *Gísla saga*, ch. 2, 7. Bárðr ‘said not to pay attention to worthless words, – “and I will continue as before.”’

³⁵⁵ Or perhaps for less altruistic reasons, Gísli has a habit of killing his sister’s lovers out of jealousy. See Alan Berger, ‘Text and Sex in *Gísla saga*,’ *Gripla* 3 (1979), 163-164 for a summary of (pre-1979) interpretations of this passage.

killing brother or blood brother (i.e. Gísli and Vésteinn);³⁵⁶ in this instance, now that gossip and honour have hit closer to home for Þorkell, and without Gísli's intervention, he achieves his goal.

To return to the women, in spite of being caught gossiping, or perhaps with the assurance that they are now alone, they continue to talk conspiratorially about how to remedy the situation. The contrast between the two could not be more disparate: Auðr commendably intends to swap gossip for frank discussion with her husband. In return, Gísli is forgiving and regards gossip as no more to blame than the headstrong, vituperative nature of his unsworn brothers. He sees the women's gossip merely as the conduit for fate: 'En þó mun ek ekki kunna þik um þetta, því at mæla verðr einhverr skapanna málum, ok þat mun fram koma, sem auðit verðr.'³⁵⁷ Ásgerðr, on the other hand, plans to use the source of the trouble, sex, to convince Þorkell to take her back:

'Hugat hefi ek mér ráð,' segir Ásgerðr, 'þat er hlýða mun, en ekki sé ek fyrir þína hönd.' 'Hvert er þat?' kvað Auðr. 'Leggja upp hendr um háls Þorkatli, er vit komum í rekkju, ok mun hann þetta fyrirgefa mér, ok segja þá lygi.'³⁵⁸

A further insult to Auðr is couched in Ásgerðr's comments. By insinuating this scheme won't work for Auðr, she is either desexualising Gísli or deeming Auðr incapable of seducing her husband with the same flair as she can. The euphemistic term for instigating sexual intercourse expresses a dominance and sensuality; her conviction that he will acquiesce implies this may be a familiar routine and supports Helga Kress's opinion that women have the most power in bed, while men are weak.³⁵⁹ However, Þorkell is initially not as accommodating as Ásgerðr assumed:

³⁵⁶ Vésteinn would have been his sworn brother had it not been for Þorgrímr's withdrawal at the eleventh hour, which also lays out the relationships between the four men: Þorgrímr and Þorkell versus Gísli and Vésteinn.

³⁵⁷ *Gísli saga*, ch. 9, 33-34. 'But I will not blame you for this, as fate must speak through someone, and that will come to pass as it is destined.'

³⁵⁸ *Gísli saga*, ch. 9, 31. "'I have thought of a plan for me," said Ásgerðr, "that will work, but I do not see it working for you." "What is it?" asked Auðr. "I will put my arms around Þorkell's neck, when we have got into bed, and he will forgive me for this, and say it is a lie."

³⁵⁹ Helga Kress, 'Staðlausir Stafir,' 138, as mentioned in Chapter 1. It is worth noting that even in the *dyngja* – the area specifically for women – Þorkell overpowered Ásgerðr by eavesdropping on her private conversation, but in the bedroom she regains power by using her body to pacify him. This is supported by Zoe Borovsky, who states that women 'were powerful in the private sphere and powerless in the public sphere.' 'Powerless' may be a slight generalisation here: public displays of female power are sufficiently evident in the sagas, particularly in relation to wisdom, magical abilities and royal status, all of which feature in this thesis. See Borovsky, 'Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature.' *The Journal of American Folklore*, 112:443 (1999), 11.

Ok er hann var kominn í rekkju, þá kemr þar Ásgerðr ok lyptir klæðum ok ætlar niðr at leggjask. Þá tók Þorkell til orða: 'Ekki ætla ek þér hér at liggja náttlangt né lengra banni.' Ásgerðr mælti: 'Hví hefir svá skjótt skipazk, eða hvat berr til þess?' segir Ásgerðr. Þorkell mælti: 'Bæði vitu vit nú sðkina, þótt ek hafa lengi leyndr verit, ok mun þinn hróðr ekki at meiri, þó at ek mæla berara.' Hon svarar: 'Þú munt ráða verða hugleiðing þinni um þetta, en ekki mun ek lengi þæfask til hvílunnar við þik, ok um tvá kosti áttu at velja. Sá er annarr, at þú tak við mér ok lát sem ekki sé í orðit. Ella mun ek nefna mér vátta nú þegar ok segja skilit við þik, ok mun ek láta fōður minn heimta mund minn ok heimanfylgju, ok mun sá kostur, at þú hafir aldri hvíluþrōng af mér síðan.' Þorkell þagnaði ok mælti um síðir: 'Þat ræð ek, at þú ger hvárt þér líkar, en eigi mun ek banna rekkjuna náttlangt.' Hon lýsti brátt yfir því, hvárr henni þótti betri, ok ferr þegar í rekkju sína. Eigi hafa þau lengi bæði saman legit, áðr en þau semja þetta með sér, svá sem ekki hefði í orðit.³⁶⁰

In responding to Ásgerðr's feigned ignorance, Þorkell's foremost anxieties about the situation are confirmed: he is bitter about being kept in the dark for a long time, and fears for his reputation. Ásgerðr's response focuses on the latter: a bedside divorce would generate gossip and compromise his reputation further, as well as denying him sexual intercourse with her. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir analyses speech acts in the role of the female inciter, where a speech can compel a man to respond to the woman's urges. She notes that in these cases 'the woman deliberately makes the incitement a public matter because it has a different effect from speaking to the husband in private.'³⁶¹ In this passage Ásgerðr is not inciting her husband to vengeance (quite the opposite, in fact), but she acknowledges the importance of the speech act made in public compared to words spoken in private. She is persuasive, and their make-up sex proof of her powers of seduction, if not rhetoric. The use of *semja með sér* offers dual meaning, with connotations of both restoration of their relationship and a composition, here of bodies united. The recurrence of *sem ekki sé í orðit* – as if nothing had happened – implies that Gluckman's pretence of amity is capable of

³⁶⁰ *Gísla saga*, ch. 9, 32-33. 'And when he had got into bed, Ásgerðr came in and lifted the covers to get into bed. Þorkell then spoke, "I don't intend for you to lie here all night, nor for a long time." Ásgerðr said, "Why the sudden change, what is behind it?" Þorkell said, "We both know the reason, though I have long been kept in the dark, and it will be worse for your reputation if I speak more clearly." She replied, "You can think along those lines if you like, but I will not stand here arguing about whether or not I can sleep with you, and there are two options you can choose. The first is that you take me in and act as if nothing has happened. Or I call witnesses here immediately and announce my divorce from you, and I will get my father to collect my bride price and dowry, and with that choice, you will never share a bed with me again." Þorkell was silent and after a little while said, "I advise that you do what you like, and I will not ban you from the bed all night." She soon made it clear, which seemed better to her, and immediately got into the bed. They had not been lying together long before they made up, as if nothing had happened.'

³⁶¹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 18.

leading to an authentic one. But something did happen, and although Ásgerðr has inveigled her way out of trouble, Vésteinn is not so fortunate.

7. Gossip

The canny use of gossip channels can sometimes be mistaken for prophecy, as this example from *Íslendinga saga* demonstrates:

Ok þá er Jón reið brott af Valþjófsstöðum ok suðr á Öxarheiði, snýr hann aftr hestinum ok mælti: 'Hér skiljumst ek við Fljótsdalsherað, ok á ek nú hér ekki eftir.' Þá svarar Þóra, kona hans: 'Þú átt eftir, en ek á ekki eftir.' Þetta spámæli birtist á þann hátt, at nökkurum vetrum síðar var sveinn sá kenndr Jóni í Fljótsdalsheraði, er Þórarinn hét.³⁶²

Þóra's echoing of Jón's words in a balanced sentence, made to the point and slightly sardonic, deepens the meaning to imply what a man can leave behind that a woman cannot. It is the perfect put-down: the narrative conjures a moment of solemn sentimentality, a man on horseback surveying his old home before moving onto the next, punctured by his wife's awareness of her husband's sexual liaisons. Knowledge is useful, but timing is critical to gossip's delivery. In a similar style to Þóra's dig at Jón, the final example of gossip reveals its ability to facilitate a pre-emptive attack. Ásgerðr and Auðr's former romances were intended to remain confidential indefinitely, and this would not have mattered at all; they were inconsequential secrets until Þorkell's jealousy intruded. Fresh news, on the other hand, demands an urgent reaction before it depreciates in value and becomes common knowledge, or reaches certain ears. Indeed, some gossip (in the sagas, and in general) depends entirely on this temporal interlude for its value. Whether it circumvents or arrives at its destination has great implications for the recipient's level of public humiliation and capacity to deal with the impending news.

In *Laxdæla saga*, Jórunn is forewarned of her husband Hǫskuldr's imminent arrival with his concubine Melkorka. The chapter charts his journey across Iceland in enough detail to suggest that he and Melkorka would have been spotted at several locations before he returned home. Gossip has travelled quicker than he, which is to Jórunn's advantage:

³⁶² *Íslendinga saga*, ch. 13, 239: 'And when Jón rode away from Valþjófsstaðr south over Öxarheiði, he turned his horse back and said, "Here I leave the Fljótsdalr district, and nothing of mine is left behind." His wife Þóra said, "Something of yours is left behind, but nothing of mine." This prophecy came true in this way, that some years later a boy named Þórarinn claimed paternity of Jón of Fljótsdalr.'

Jórunn spyr, hvat konu þat væri, er í fõr var með honum. Hõskuldr svarar: 'Svá mun þér þykkja, sem ek svara þér skõtingu; ek veit eigi nafn hennar.' Jórunn mælti: 'Þat mun tveimr skipta, at sá kvittr mun loginn, er fyrir mik er kominn, eða þú munt hafa talat við hana jafnmart sem spurt hafa hana at nafni.' Hõskuldr kvazk þess eigi þræta mundu ok segir henni it sanna ok bað þá þessi konu virkða ok kvað þat nær sínu skapi, at hon væri heima þar at vistafari. Jórunn mælti: 'Eigi mun ek deila við frillu þína, þá er þú hefir flutt af Nóregi, þótt hon kynni eigi góðar návistir, en nú þykki mér þat allra sýnst, ef hon er bæði dauf ok mállaus.'³⁶³

Jórunn's sarcasm belies the humiliation she must be feeling at Hõskuldr's betrayal, and it is not surprising that she is inclined to exploit gossip to gain the upper hand. By initially feigning ignorance, the dominance of the situation is reversed when Jórunn's revelation that she already knew disarms Hõskuldr into submissive honesty. Her carefully chosen words imply social supremacy: the gossip has come to her, and she trusts her sources well enough to know that the rumours of a sexual relationship between Hõskuldr and Melkorka are true, indicating that gossip is not simply a case of information-management for Jórunn but a method of social bonding with her chattering counterparts. This resonates with Bailey's definition of gossip, which states that, like rumour, 'it is said to spread quickly, but it does so along specific channels. A rumour may be passed to anyone: only certain people can properly be entrusted with gossip.'³⁶⁴

It is a small victory insofar as the concubine remains, but the swift delivery of rumours has enabled Jórunn to negotiate on her terms with Hõskuldr and made him aware that his conduct is and will continue to be scrutinised. The extent of his compliance is expressed in the report that he slept with his wife every night after his return.³⁶⁵

Jórunn's disclosure also sets a humorous tone to the account of the love triangle, if it could be called such. It is not the source of humiliation and shame anticipated but rather one of amusement and interest, treated light-heartedly by the author and including the compelling scene where Jórunn and Melkorka

³⁶³ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 13, 26. 'Jórunn asked who that woman was, who was accompanying him. Hõskuldr answered, "It may seem to you that I answer you with mockery; I do not know her name." Jórunn said, "There must be two sides to this, either the report that has come to me must be a lie, or you have spoken with her enough to have asked for her name." Hõskuldr said he could not deny this and told her the truth. He then asked her to be gentle with this woman and said it was his intention that she would live at home there. Jórunn said, "I will not argue with your mistress, who you have brought back from Norway, though she does not seem to know good manners, and it now seems to me most obvious of all that she is both deaf and dumb."'

³⁶⁴ Bailey, *Gifts and Poison*, 288.

³⁶⁵ As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis: whether or not this suggests sex took place is debatable. Jesch notes that while extramarital relationships were commonplace, this passage acknowledges that these sorts of situations were 'not always conducive to happiness.' See Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), 196.

come to blows with that most unlikely of weapons: socks.³⁶⁶ Social opinion expresses uncommon fascination with Óláfr, Hǫskuldr's beautiful illegitimate son; that the saga goes on to report his heroic and magnificent deeds justifies this approach. A philanthropic attitude is also adopted toward Melkorka, as 'Ǫllum mǫnnum var auðsætt stórmennsku-mót á henni ok svá þat, at hon var engi afglapi.'³⁶⁷ This reinforces the shame of having a sexual relationship with a slow-witted person, and in his choosing such a noble woman for a mistress (although her nobility was not immediately apparent) Hǫskuldr escapes stigmatisation in his social circles.

It is interesting to note that Jórunn's trust in the gossip network surpasses her trust in personal honesty. When Hǫskuldr catches Melkorka speaking and she reveals her noble Irish heritage, 'Jórunn kvazk eigi vita, hvat hon segði satt.'³⁶⁸ Of course, Jórunn's profound jealousy and distrust of her husband's mistress do little to endear Melkorka to her, and her own agenda corresponds with the idea that people are willing to overlook good gossip in favour of the bad. However, Jórunn is now at the mercy of Melkorka, who, by playing deaf and dumb, has eluded all participation in the community's social networks.³⁶⁹ When she finally speaks, Jórunn is rendered speechless, playing second fiddle to a concubine.

8. Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has explored sexual material in the sagas through the lens of social commentary to understand the importance of sex and gossip about sexual matters in the construction of plot. The dichotomy between gossip as useful or untrustworthy source remains, but the continual references to oral sources in the sagas present a reliance on informal verbal communication for both structural foundation and revelation that is hard to ignore. While the content of gossip may be unsubstantiated, public opinion derived from it illuminates the moral attitudes of the time, not to mention what captured people's imaginations. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir mentions forms of power evident in the sagas, including "the ability to keep the community unified, harmonious, and prosperous

³⁶⁶ This occurs at the end of chapter 13 (*Laxdæla saga*, 28). For an idea of the types of socks and stockings available to Old Norse women, see Thor Ewing, *Viking Clothing*, 58.

³⁶⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 13, 27. 'It was clear to everyone that she had an air of grandeur about her and thus that she was not a simpleton.'

³⁶⁸ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 13, 28. 'Jórunn said she didn't know whether she spoke the truth.'

³⁶⁹ Auerbach's survey of women in *Laxdæla saga* includes Melkorka, whose voluntary muteness is used to 'maintain her identity and self-respect, her dignity and self-possession'. See Loren Auerbach, 'Female Experience and Authorial Intention in *Laxdæla Saga*,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXV 1 (1998), 34, for a summary of her intelligence and strength.

rather than feuding and violent;³⁷⁰ I would argue that gossip is a powerful tool to be wielded for both these purposes.

The term gossip has served as a catch-all for a variety of methods of verbal communication, the axis of which comprises the level of informality, moral judgement and the dubious origin of information, all of which are suitably delineated in Bailey's terminologies, extended to include slanderous verses that are more formal in their production. Two different functions of gossip have become apparent. The first is the textual vocalisation of local rumours, revealing how gossip operated in saga society. It emerges from the examples that sexual relationships were a popular subject in their communities, eliciting reactions of curiosity, jealousy, anger and the pleasure of sustained sub rosa moral critique. In fact, the act of gossiping about sex is almost as subversive as the sex itself; as Foucault says, it is '*the secret*,'³⁷¹ and, as we have seen, the reprisals of indulging in either can be fatal. Gossip can also be as intimate as sex: often spoken about in small groups, one-to-one, in quiet corners: in these small groups Foucault's observations on the pleasure of analysis meets Gluckman's thoughts on social bonding and Paine's manipulative influence of judgement.

The examples, especially those that involve eavesdropping, also clarify that privacy was hard to come by. Living in close quarters, work, family life, socialising and sleep all took place under one roof. It is therefore not surprising that gossip is such a prevalent feature of the sagas, and that *Grágás* advocates the testimony of neighbours. Sex between two people engages many more: Foucault's pleasure of analysis is amply evident here in all the gossip forms and it is apparent that reviewing the sex lives of one's peers is an enjoyable and ubiquitous pastime, not to mention a natural deflection from one's own sex life, which is (as observed in the next chapter) far from a choice topic of conversation. Naturally some people are more worthy of surveillance than others, in particular those who have the most honour to lose, or those whose deviance, sexual or other, endures in spite of an accumulation of shame, enemies, or ill repute. Such resistance to gossip exposes a flaw in Gluckman's argument in favour of its morally acquiescent qualities, inclining instead towards the opinion that social acceptance is not prioritised by all. Paine suggests young men don't care for judgement or the pretence of amity because they are able to defend themselves and are burdened with little responsibility³⁷² – consider

³⁷⁰ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 16.

³⁷¹ Foucault, *WtK*, 35.

³⁷² See Paine, 'Alternative Hypothesis,' 281.

Bárðr's indifference to *omæt orð* and Þorkell's disregard for how his friend's sexual behaviour may affect his family in *Gísla saga*. However, Gluckman's assertion of gossip's stronghold on small communities holds water. Note that the communities presented to us are small enough for gossip to spread rapidly, and for acts and identities to be judged exhaustively: the moral judgement exists, thus reinforcing the community's morality, or at least its moral aspirations.

Prevalence of illicit sexual relationships may have been common but that does not mean it was accepted. Gossip promotes sex as a public concern, dissecting every sexual and sinful act and imposing morality on small society life by humiliating and ostracising those who do not conform, or indeed participate in the gossip. Thriving on the clandestine nature of sin, yet celebrating its exposure, illicit sex and confidential knowledge become currency. As Ketill, Auðr, and many others have learnt, vocalising one's own deeds devalues this currency.

The second purpose is in its operation in the wider context as a structural device of the family and contemporary sagas. Gossip functions as an unreliable-but-omnipresent witness to events, an informal collective narrative that negotiates between fact and fiction, creating an impression of an anecdotal, informal construction of the sagas. As a collection of dissenting voices, it creates an unstable narrative voice, one that is as speculative as the information it passes on. Merry says that 'Gossip may be a phenomenon that must rely heavily on reports of participants rather than those of observers.'³⁷³ In other words, to hear gossip is to be a part of it, and that usually results in a sense of complicity between the gossipers, of being drawn into the lives of others through one's own geographical or genealogical knowledge of the people and places in which these events occur.³⁷⁴ Use of direct and indirect speech offers us the privilege of being party to private conversations, or steers the reader towards public opinion, so that we too can take pleasure in speculating about what took place behind closed doors.

³⁷³ Merry, 'Rethinking Gossip,' 49.

³⁷⁴ Þorkell in *Gísla saga* and Björn in *Bjarnar saga Hitdœlakappa* take the roles of both observer and participant; in crossing the boundary they damage the safety net gossip had created for its original parties. However, that is a different situation, since the gossip is about them: here I refer to the audience throughout history.

Chapter 3.

Private Matters, Private Discussion

1. Introduction

The previous chapter explored the use of gossip as a literary device in the sagas. In that context there was little respect for privacy where exciting speculation was concerned, and in accordance with the social functions of gossip put forward by Gluckman and Paine, the common pastime of spreading rumours often had wider and graver implications for the saga communities. Talking about one's own sex life, on the other hand, is a rare occurrence in the sagas. From the outcome of the discussion between Auðr and Ásgerðr it is clear to see the risks that accompanied candid expression were often not worth taking, though in that particular case, the exchange turned into backbiting about each other's perceived indiscretions rather than sharing honest details of their own sexual relationships. This chapter continues the gossip theme, expanding Bailey's categorisation of *In Confidence* to look at private discussion about personal sexual matters in three scenarios: the spell cast on Hrútr, and Unnr's divorce of him in *Njáls saga*; Þormóðr's cheating ways in *Fóstbrœðra saga*; and Grettir's defense of his penis in *Grettis saga*. Analysis of these passages is concerned with the dynamics of the conversations more than the liability and subjectivity of private discussion explored in the previous chapter as there is no ambiguity around the basic facts of what happens. This analysis is underpinned by Foucault's observations on confession: the first two scenarios in particular share an underlying theme of disclosing sexual troubles. The ritual and literature of Christian confession has a natural association with the concept of discussing personal sexual transgressions: sex has been a prominent subject in the confessional since the medieval period and people were encouraged to relate their sins, warts and all, to a figure of authority.³⁷⁵ The stimulus to confess required both harmful effect on one's neighbour and personal shame, with the emphasis shifting from the former to the latter as time progressed. Foucault has written prolific and provocative commentary on the subject of confession and the

³⁷⁵ On the development of guides for confessors in the Middle Ages and the range of sexual sins therein see Pierre J. Payer, 'Confession and the Study of Sex in the Middle Ages,' *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3-31. For an example of medieval Icelandic penitentials, see Þorlákr Þórhallsson's (bishop of Skálhólt, 1178-1193), which penalise bestiality, adultery, theft, incest, sacrilege, magic and negligence in the celebration of the Eucharist. In John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal 'Libri Poenitentiales' and Selections from Related Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 354.

significant role it played in the Church's desire for social control; similar to the pleasure of analysis intrinsic to gossip, he considers the ritual of confession to obsess over and repress sex in equal measure. In *The Will to Knowledge*, he observes the high regard for frankness endorsed by the Church with particular focus on exhaustive discourse of sexual practices. Ostensibly at odds with modern Puritanism's 'triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence,'³⁷⁶ this frankness in fact underpins sexual repression: such discourse takes place within the parameters of prohibition and employs a codification of speech, as Foucault says:

As if in order to gain mastery over it (sex) in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present.³⁷⁷

Thus confession maintained the fundamental link between power, knowledge and sexuality. The Church sought to discover as much as possible about sexual trends and motives with a neutral line of questioning that did not betray its own knowledge, lest the penitent learn more: a so-called 'dispersion-avoidance' observed by Foucault.³⁷⁸ And yet, while the Church held back, it required full details from those in confession:

It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done – the sexual act – and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it ... a society has taken upon itself to solicit and hear the imparting of individual pleasures.³⁷⁹

Foucault presents a distrust of confession, but by concentrating on this bias and throwing scorn on the Church for its uncompromising pursuit of knowledge, he ignores the benefit confession brought to the individual. He reveals a clinical regard; he says 'it extracted from the individual a particularly sinister regimen of "unconditional obedience, uninterrupted self-examination, and exhaustive

³⁷⁶ Foucault, *WtK*, 5.

³⁷⁷ Foucault, *WtK*, 17.

³⁷⁸ Foucault, *WtK*, 53. He says confessional sexual discourse left its monastic setting, 21: 'The Christian pastoral prescribed as a fundamental duty the task of passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech. The forbidding of certain words, the decency of expressions, all the censorings of vocabulary, might well have been only secondary devices compared to the great subjugation: ways of rendering it morally acceptable and technically useful.'

³⁷⁹ Foucault, *WtK*, 63.

confession.”³⁸⁰ Regardless of the founding motivation, penitents emerged from the obligatory task absolved and with a greater sense of self-consciousness. Confession, no matter how it concedes to Christian power ambitions, is an outlet in which repression is acknowledged; the ‘subject’ sin and the ‘subjectivised’ sinner are pulled apart, the act and the identity. The transaction rewards the Church with the knowledge it requires and the self with absolution released by compliance.

It is worth mentioning that Foucault’s original theory is attributed to the seventeenth century and beyond. The reason for this date is the emergence of industrialisation ‘after hundreds of years of open spaces and free expression,’³⁸¹ which he proposed was linked to the repression of pleasure in order to generate productivity. He later abandons this hypothesis with a nod to the intricately woven mechanisms of sex and power since the nineteenth century, and we are left wondering if this simply replaces his previous starting point, or if we can assume that, as he says, ‘pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another,’³⁸² indicating that this has always been the case. For this reason it is unfortunate that his three books in the *History of Sexuality* series primarily dealt with modern sexuality: the fourth, which was to concentrate on pre-modern sexuality, was not published. Karma Lochrie discusses medievalists’ enthusiasm for using Foucault as a corroborator for their sexual discoveries, and how he might have been amused by this:

I do not think we can separate the multiple and contradictory ways in which Foucault uses the Middle Ages from his technologies of the self, his methodology of his history of sexuality, or his characterization of modernity. I am also convinced that we have not given adequate attention to the inconsistencies, contradictions, and changes in Foucault’s thinking about sexuality, perhaps because so much is at stake.³⁸³

Much of Foucault’s interest in the Church’s repression of sexuality relates more than adequately to pre-modern sexuality. While his theory relates to Christian confession, I propose the fundamental principles can be applied to private dialogue in the sagas, providing an interesting perspective that allows us to see

³⁸⁰ Karma Lochrie, ‘Desiring Foucault,’ *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27:1 (1997), 6, quoting and translating Foucault, ‘Du gouvernement des vivants,’ in *Résumé des cours: 1970-1982* (Paris, 1989), 128.

³⁸¹ Foucault, *WtK*, 5.

³⁸² Foucault, *WtK*, 48.

³⁸³ Lochrie, ‘Desiring Foucault,’ 10.

what the confessional framework can offer in a literary context. It shows how delicate discussions can be played out, the roles of the people involved, the requirement for full disclosure, and perhaps sheds light on perceptions of the authors and the people who have engaged with the sagas since then. Moreover, Christian doctrine may well have influenced vernacular literature; after all, with the two seats of learning in Iceland based at the dioceses of Skálholt (founded 1056) and Hólar (founded 1106), scribes took responsibility for the transmission of religious and culturally important literature, both in Latin and the vernacular.³⁸⁴ Since amanuenses at the two sees were Christian themselves, it is expected that the influence of the prevailing religion permeated sagas that were copied there. Torfi Tulinius notes the 'in-between-ness' of the family sagas as they take place in the transition from paganism to Christianity;³⁸⁵ as Jochens puts it, 'Since churchmen simultaneously introduced both a new religion and a new medium of writing, the former undoubtedly informed the latter regardless of subject matter, in the present case constructing a picture of pagan sexuality mediated through a Christian optic.'³⁸⁶ This not only relates to sexuality but all moral values: peppered throughout the sagas are overt explanations or judgements on pre-Christian life from the perspective of a Christian mind set, thus presenting a combination of pre-Christian ideals and Christian doctrine. Characters of faith are apparent in the sagas too, alongside 'noble heathens' who exhibit a predilection towards Christian morality in the time before its introduction to Iceland.³⁸⁷ These characters highlight the fact that, despite a lack of religious leadership, it is possible to embrace Christian sensibilities in saga society, and the practice of confession may be one of those. The family sagas do not present the obligation to confess very often; pilgrimages are the most conspicuous example of a religious life, and this usually comes at the end of a life rather than integrated into the daily existence of the saga characters. Yet confession is evident in the contemporary sagas, where it appears in the narrative regularly; for instance, following the heinous burning of Flugumýri, the burners immediately seek absolution: 'Þaðan riðu þeir út til Hóla ok taka lausn af

³⁸⁴ Jónas Kristjánsson discusses the breadth of scholarly endeavour at religious establishments in *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*. 3rd ed, translated by Peter Foote (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1997), 128-129.

³⁸⁵ Torfi H. Tulinius, 'Saga as a myth: the family sagas and social reality in 13th-century Iceland,' *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society Proceedings of the 11th International Saga Conference, 2-7 July 2000, University of Sydney*, edited by Geraldine Barnes and Margaret Clunies Ross (University of Sydney, 2000), 529.

³⁸⁶ Jochens, 'TILV,' 358.

³⁸⁷ See Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A theme in the sagas,' *Scandinavian Studies* 41:1 (1969), 1-29, and Torfi Tulinius, 'Saga as myth,' in particular 529-532.

Heinreki biskupi.³⁸⁸ In this important case, it is telling that even the narrative prays for their forgiveness, adding a commentary on the social and moral principles of prominent characters: 'guð fyrirgefi þeim, er gerðu, með sinni mikilli miskunn ok mildi.'³⁸⁹ Confession may not have been able to resolve the social consequences of the sin, but it methodically processed the shame, as Pierre J. Payer explains:

A repentant sinner (*contrition*) approaches a priest to acknowledge sins committed in the past (*confession*), is placed under an obligation to perform a penance (*satisfaction*), and is forgiven through *absolution*.³⁹⁰

Hence the framework of the confession ritual is a straightforward transaction between the figure of authority and the penitent, ending in resolution. It is possible to consider the fundamental values and mechanism of confession as a basis for these difficult discussions; even if a sense of sin is not always discernable in the text, the narratives present a certain amount of vulnerability and shame in the individuals who acknowledge their sexual problems, and all three share a sense of absolution.

2. Hrútr, Unnr and Gunnhildr in *Njáls saga*

In her 1981 lecture, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga*, Ursula Dronke explains that sex and sexual jealousy are not frivolous details, but rather catalysts for much of the tragedy that befalls the saga's characters. This is evident from the first chapter, when Hrútr Herjólfsson prophesies the danger that will shadow his niece Hallgerð's beauty, a judgment that naturally angers his brother Hǫskuldr but sure enough comes to pass. Hrútr is not without his own sexual troubles, however. Following this incident, he is betrothed to Unnr Mǫrðsdóttir and travels to Norway for an inheritance claim; there he catches the eye of Queen Gunnhildr and a secretive sexual relationship ensues. When it ends, bitterly, Gunnhildr inflicts a supernatural curse on him in a deliberate attempt to thwart sexual intercourse with Unnr, resulting in the breakdown of their marriage, and his subsequent social humiliation.³⁹¹ In Chapter 1 of this

³⁸⁸ *Íslendinga saga*, ch. 175, 494. 'From there they rode out to Hólar and received absolution from Bishop Heinrekr.'

³⁸⁹ *Íslendinga saga*, ch. 174, 493. 'may God forgive those who did it, in his great mercy and mildness.'

³⁹⁰ Payer, 'Confession and the Study of Sex,' 3.

³⁹¹ The Gunnhildr, Hrútr and Unnr storyline occurs in chapters 1-8 of *Njáls saga*. It is also mentioned briefly in *Laxdæla saga*: the saga notes the awkwardness of Hrútr's departure but does not give a reason for it. After the gift giving, Gunnhildr 'brá síðan skikkjunni at hǫfði sér ok gekk snúðigt heim til bæjar' – she 'wrapped her cloak around her head and walked swiftly back to the

thesis, analysis of the episode demonstrated that Gunnhildr's curse and Unnr's motivation for divorce are both conveyed by metaphors for sexual pleasure; this chapter considers the wider context of the private discussions between the protagonists with particular focus on the consequences of deceit and value of personal honesty that resonate with Foucault's ideas about the confession ritual.

When Gunnhildr probes Hrútr on his reason to return to Iceland, he chooses to evade the truth:

‘Átt þú konu nokkura út þar?’ segir hon. ‘Eigi er þat,’ sagði hann. ‘Þat hefi ek þó fyrir satt,’ segir hon. Síðan hættu þau talinu. ... Hon [Gunnhildr] leiddi hann á einmæli ok mælti til hans: ‘Hér er gullhringr, er ek vil gefa þér’ – ok spennti á hönd honum. ‘Marga gjöf góða hefi ek af þér þegit,’ segir Hrútr. Hon tók hendinni um háls honum ok kyssti hann ok mælti: ‘Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur. Ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel: þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins.’ Hrútr hló at ok gekk í braut.³⁹²

Similar to the ritual Payer speaks of, here is a dialogue between two, with Queen Gunnhildr as the dominant figure. She unambiguously moves the conversation away from prying ears and urges the subordinate to speak, giving Hrútr ample opportunity to confess his love in Iceland when specifically asked. Yet contrary to the premise of the ritual, there is no willing submission to the higher authority and he declines to answer truthfully. This is noticed by Gunnhildr: *Síðan hættu þau talinu* leads her suspicion of his reticence to a dramatically terse point. On his departure, Hrútr is presented with gifts, as is customary. The gold ring, placed carefully on his arm, serves as a poignant reminder of Gunnhildr's wealth and power over him. Safe in the same privacy

town' in ch. 19, 44. Larrington proposes that Gunnhildr's lustful character may be an entertaining fictional trope; see Carolyne Larrington, 'Queens and Bodies: The Norwegian Translated *lais* and Hákon IV's Kinswomen,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108:4 (2009), 509. William Sayers proposes that Freyja, 'in her associations with magic, sexuality, conflict and death' provides a model of sexual desire for Gunnhildr in relation to the Icelanders; see 'Power, Magic and Sex: Queen Gunnhildr and the Icelanders,' *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies/Études scandinaves au Canada* 8 (1995), 60. Similarly, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir notes that in the varying portrayals of the beautiful and sexually attractive Gunnhildr, that of the 'amorous dowager' in *Laxdæla saga* is the most sympathetic, while in *Egils saga* she is an evil sorceress; see *BWP*, 82-83.

³⁹² *Njáls saga*, ch. 6, 20-21. "Do you have some woman out there?" she asked. "No, it's not that," he said. "I am certain of it, though," she said. Then they ended the conversation. ... She [Gunnhildr] led him aside for a private discussion and said to him: "Here is a gold ring that I want to give to you," – and she placed it around his arm. "Many good gifts have I had from you," said Hrútr. She grabbed his neck, kissed him and said, "If I have as much power over you as I think, then I put this spell on you, that you will not be able to have sexual pleasure with that woman who you are betrothed to in Iceland, but you will be able to fulfil your desires with other women. And now it will go well for neither of us: you did not trust me on this matter." Hrútr laughed at this and went away.'

that has shrouded their relationship, his euphemistic response to her generosity, *Marga gjöf góða hefi ek af þér þegit*, implies gratitude for the sexual gifts she has given him as much as material treasures. But this is little consolation for Gunnhildr and, with her hand to this throat, she adopts a dominant sexual posture to seal the curse with a final kiss.

With no hint of contrition the audience witnesses the moral sting of a punishment that is both fitting to the nature of their relationship and context of his dishonesty, exacerbated by his cavalier attitude to both questioning and curse. The unusual caveat that he may sleep with other women shows that Gunnhildr wants to punish him for this lie, indicating that her wrath is more greatly concerned with his concealment of the truth rather than the rival lover abroad. However, the rivalry may still be a factor in the spell; Bagerius proposes that she refuses to accept defeat by 'the other',³⁹³ thus asserting her power as widely as she can.

What is the reason for Hrútr's dishonesty? Gunnhildr puts it down to a lack of trust, and is hurt that their intimacy had not been as comprehensive as she had thought; by implication, this also suggests that her domination of him was also lacking. José Piedra considers the sway of power in pairings that bear a similarity to this situation:

Whatever excesses of prowess the powerful assign away, whatever benefits they receive from such projections, the process remains under control. Deviations from a pre-established norm are readily corrected by acts of chastisement that include political subjugation. ...Like Adam towards Eve, or Othello towards Desdemona, sensitive traditions prescribe checking out the genitally-obsessed dependant for any purportedly independent display of the libido.³⁹⁴

Hence she checked, and was not pleased with the answer. Yet Gunnhildr recognises that she still has a powerful enough hold over him for the curse to take effect: even if he will not submit verbally, he is physically and physiologically at her mercy.³⁹⁵ Foucault suggests that the obligation to confess does not come from a religious volition but is an innate quality we all possess:

³⁹³ Henric Bagerius, 'I genusstrukturens spänningsfält: om kön, genus och sexualitet i saga och samhälle.' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 116 (2001), 51. Original quote: 'Hon vägrar att se sig besegrad och bräddad av 'den andra', och hennes attack riktar sig därför specifikt mot Hrútrs och Unnr's sexuella relation, dock inte mot vare sig hans eller hennes sexualliv i stort.' 'She refuses to see herself defeated and supplanted by 'the other', and her attack is therefore aimed specifically against Hrútr's and Unnr's sexual relationship, and not against either his or her general sex life.'

³⁹⁴ José Piedra, 'In Search of the Black Stud,' *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 24.

³⁹⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 50-51, notes that this spell is similar to the Celtic *geis*, a command that is usually given by a woman to a man 'to force or prohibit him to act.'

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at a price of a kind of liberation. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom.³⁹⁶

This may offer an explanation for Hrútr's inability to bring himself to tell the truth. The 'constraint' that held him back from telling Gunnhildr what, one assumes, she demands but does not want to hear, is precisely that which gives the curse its potency: her power over him. As a parting shot, his laughter creates the illusion of liberty, but he is not free, and indeed the power of the curse results in a prolonged period of oppression and silence when (from what we can deduce from its absence in the saga henceforth) he hides the curse and the motivation behind it from Unnr. Thus, she too unwittingly falls victim to Gunnhildr's power by proxy as a consequence of his reluctance to discourse.

When the author reveals that Unnr is seen to be depressed on her wedding day,³⁹⁷ the reader may now believe the wrath of Gunnhildr has manifested itself, but there is no indication of the details of Hrútr's affliction. We are told that 'Hrútr fekk henni ǫll ráð í hendr fyrir innan stökk'³⁹⁸ but this cannot compensate for sexual pleasure, acknowledged by 'En fátt var um með þeim Hrúti um samfarar.'³⁹⁹ Here *samfarar* is ambiguous and may either imply their general relationship or their sexual relationship; it is more likely in this instance that the author refers to the former, observing their relationship from the perspective of those around them.⁴⁰⁰ Dronke observes that in *Njáls saga* the author's sense of humour permeates the narrative; this innuendo may be one such occasion. If this phrase did refer to their sexual relationship, it could conceal a wry joke at Hrútr's expense, with *fátt* (meaning few) indicating the rarity of sexual relations between them. In any case, both of these meanings ring true.

Unnr tells her husband she must go to the *þing* and see her father, to which he agrees. However, her visit does not go as planned, and the reader

³⁹⁶ Foucault, *WtK*, 60.

³⁹⁷ *Njáls saga*, ch. 6, 22. 'ok var brúðrin dǫpr heldr.' 'and the bride was rather downcast.'

³⁹⁸ *Njáls saga*, ch. 6, 22. 'Hrútr put all the running of the household in her hands.'

³⁹⁹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 6, 22. 'But there was not much to their relationship.'

⁴⁰⁰ Bagerius also observes a sexual tone in this phrase; see 'I genusstrukturens,' 50.

remains in the dark and all the more curious about the intimate matters of their marriage:

Unnr gekk til búðar fjoður síns; hann fagnaði henni vel, en henni var skappungt nokkurt. Ok er hann fann þat, mælti hann til hennar: 'Sét hefi ek þik með betra bragði, eða hvat býr þér í skapi?' Hon tók at gráta ok svaraði engu. Þá mælti hann við hana: 'Til hvers reitt þú til þings, ef þú vill eigi segja mér trúnað þinn? eða þykki þér eigi gott vestr þar?' Hon svaraði: 'Gefa munda ek til alla eigu mína, at ek hefða þar aldri komit.' Mjörðr mælti: 'Þessa mun ek skjótt viss verða.'⁴⁰¹

When Mjörðr sends for Hrútr and asks him to explain why Unnr seems troubled, once again Hrútr evades the question and simply responds, 'Segi hon til, ef hon hefir sakagiptir nokkurar við mik.'⁴⁰² Since she does not speak up, and reports of her domestic authority ostensibly speak in favour of a happy marriage, Mjörðr has no choice but to send her home. However, when Hrútr decides not to ride to the *Alþingi*, Unnr seizes the opportunity to see her father without her husband's knowledge:

Mjörðr var á þingi, faðir hennar. Hann tók við henni allvel ok bað hana vera í búð sinni, meðan þingit væri; hon gerði svá. Mjörðr mælti: 'Hvat segir þú mér frá Hrúti, féлага þínum?' Hon svarar: 'Gott má ek frá honum segja þat allt, er honum er sjálfrátt.' Mjörðr varð hljóðr við. 'Hvat býr þér í skapi, dóttir?' segir hann, 'því at ek sé, at þú villt, at engi viti nema ek, ok munt þú trúna mér bezt til órráða um þitt mál.' Þá gengu þau á tal, þar er engir menn heyrðu þeira viðræði. Þá mælti Mjörðr til dóttur sinnar: 'Seg þú mér nú allt þat, er á meðal ykkar er, ok lát þér þat ekki í augu vaxa.' 'Svá mun vera verða,' segir hon. 'Ek vilda segja skilit við Hrút, ok má ek segja þér, hverja sök ek má helzt gefa honum. Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans, en hann er at allri náttúru sinni annarri sem inir vöskustu menn.' 'Hversu má svá vera?' segir Mjörðr, 'ok seg enn górr.' Hon svarar: 'Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hvarund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik, en þó hofum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at vit mættim njótask, en þat verðr ekki. En þó áðr vit skilim, sýnir hann þat af sér, at hann er í æði sínu rétt sem aðrir menn.'⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ *Njáls saga*, ch. 6, 22-23. 'Unnr went to her father's booth; he greeted her well, but she was rather low. And when he noticed that, he said to her, "I have seen you in a better mood, what is on your mind?" She started to cry and did not answer. Then he said to her, "Why did you ride to the *þing* [Assembly], if you did not want to bring me into your confidence? Don't you have it good there in the west?" She answered, "I would give all my possessions to have never gone there." Mjörðr said, "I will soon know what this is about."

⁴⁰² *Njáls saga*, ch. 6, 23. 'Let her say if she has any charges against me.'

⁴⁰³ *Njáls saga*, ch. 7, 24. 'Mjörðr, her father, was at the *þing*. He received her warmly and asked her to stay in his booth while the *þing* was on, which she did. Mjörðr asked, "What can you tell me about Hrútr, your husband?" She replied, "I can say all good things about him, about that over which he has control." Mjörðr was silent at this. "What is on your mind, daughter?" he said, "because I see that you want no one to know except me, and you may believe that I am the best person to sort out your problem." Then they went to talk where no one could hear their

This is the antithesis of Hrútr's discussion with Gunnhildr. The exceptionally personal and delicate divulgence is a highlight of the saga, revealing the cause of the unhappiness to the audience in great detail and clarifying Dronke's interest in sexual material in *Njáls saga* beautifully. Seeking counsel and the dissolution of her marriage, Unnr's admission to her father is a plea for practical understanding and legal assistance rather than any religious absolution, yet the scene provides the fundamental elements of the confession ritual, predicated in the heightened drama expressed in the use of dialogue rather than narrative. It follows the same framework as the dialogue between Gunnhildr and Hrútr, with the authority figure urging the subordinate to speak, and in both cases the saga notes the discussion is specifically moved away from the crowds into a more intimate setting. Such a level of power in these private discussions parallels Foucault's thoughts on the subject in confession, which acknowledges the value of subordination:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.⁴⁰⁴

This explanation contextualises the relationship between Mqrðr and Unnr. If we take Payer's model of confession, here we have the 'penitent,' Unnr, approaching an authority figure to ask for guidance in absolving her marital troubles. Mqrðr, as 'confessor,' has the wisdom and intuition to recognise that his daughter is troubled by a secret. The dialogue cleverly reveals the mechanisms of confession: Mqrðr's gentle introductory questions serve to put Unnr at ease, indicating that he recognises the gravity and confidentiality of the

conversation. Then Mqrðr said to his daughter, "Now tell me all about it, what is happening between you two, and do not exaggerate." "So it will be," she said. "I would like to divorce Hrútr, and may I tell you the main charge against him. He cannot have sexual intercourse with me, so that I may get pleasure from him, but he is in all other ways completely the same as the manliest of men." "How can that be so?" asked Mqrðr, and told her to go on. She replied, "When he comes to me, his penis [lit. flesh] is so big, that he cannot get any pleasure with me, and though we have both tried in every possible way to enjoy each other, it doesn't happen. But before we part, he shows himself to be in his nature as normal as other men."

⁴⁰⁴ Foucault, *WtK*, 61-62.

situation, as well as assuring her of his authoritative powers. The phrase *Mǫrðr varð hljóðr við* adds a touching pause to the proceedings while Mǫrðr interprets Unnr's cryptic opening statement and considers how best to approach this discussion. Moving away from the crowd, he continues to obtain details from her in an assertive but kind manner, and duly completes his obligation by hearing her revelation free from embellishment – *lát þér þat ekki í augu vaxa* – and offers a solution to release her from her burden, facilitated by his status as an esteemed lawyer.⁴⁰⁵ His legal position also clarifies the secular need for clear expression in order to understand what has happened and secure a good divorce for his daughter. Her sense of shame, apparent from her initial reluctance to speak, underlines the honesty and difficulty underpinning subjectivisation and therefore supports Foucault's idea that the truth is corroborated by the obstacles in its path: Mǫrðr is assured that his daughter is not fabricating evidence. The unravelling of her worry is achieved by his skilful efforts to coax information from her in a non-judgemental and consoling line of questioning, as well as the recognition that he is the only person who can take on this role. We are privileged to eavesdrop on this private and awkward conversation; by wheedling out the sexual details in a confession-like situation, the audience learns more about the mechanics, frustration and potential comedy of the sexual dysfunction first hand, and the saga is all the richer for it.

The dialogue allows subtle linguistic points to come through that demonstrate the humility and sincerity intrinsic to the subordination noted by Foucault. In the first instance, when Unnr does not go into detail, she euphemistically uses the term *hjúskaparfar*, literally 'matrimonial practices,' in lieu of 'sexual intercourse' or a direct synonym for it. And what can one infer from (he is) *allri náttúru sinni annarri sem inir vǫskustu menn?* With these words it is as if she wishes to hide behind simplistic inference and defend his reputation and virility in spite of his shortcomings. The somewhat faulty and naive perception of his manliness is quickly revealed by her description of his erethism. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the euphemism for his penis, *hǫrund* ('skin' or 'flesh'), indicates shyness on her part – or that of the person writing – and also adheres to the Foucauldian observation on extinguishing words that render sex too visibly present. It is an unusual word to use in this context, and

⁴⁰⁵ Ármann Jakobsson notes that Mǫrðr is Iceland's foremost lawyer, and his importance is evident from the first sentence of the saga. He is 'respectable almost to the point of dullness' though his nickname *gígja*, meaning fiddle, (and indeed Mǫrðr meaning ferret, 'as dangerous a beast as you will find in Iceland') may suggest otherwise, and is exploited by the author as such. See 'Some Types of Ambiguities in the Sagas of the Icelanders.' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 119 (2004), 37–53, especially 46–50.

not used with the same meaning elsewhere in the sagas.⁴⁰⁶ Unnr is described as *kurteis*,⁴⁰⁷ which perhaps implies such a person would not use vulgar language to describe genitalia, certainly not to her father; therefore the author allows the true meaning to be deduced through the description alone. 'Flesh' is not as illogical as it first sounds; the penis is the only part of the male anatomy to which she could be referring in terms of (sudden) growth, and Mǫrðr should instantly understand the delicate context of the phrases used to denote sexual satisfaction.

In possession of a large penis, Hrútr's manliness is indeed undeniable, yet this is cold comfort to the miserable Unnr. Her frustration is clear from the verbalisation of their sexual incompatibility. She talks of *njóta* ('to please' or 'to use') and *eptirlæti* ('enjoyment'), or more to the point, the lack of pleasure. With Hrútr unable to perform, she is denied gratification, and goes on to explain that this disappointment is mutual, with both parties left dissatisfied. While the duty of consummation was an acknowledged obligation of married life in the medieval period,⁴⁰⁸ mostly to assure that men did not stray and strew complicated inheritance claims in their wake, Unnr's emphasis on pleasure in her articulation of the problem contravenes the contemporaneous Christian notion that sex was predominantly for reproductive purposes.⁴⁰⁹ In addition, Unnr's comment that they have tried every possible way suggests that they have experimented with positions. This disobeys the only 'natural' sexual position tolerable for procreative purposes, with the woman supine underneath the man, i.e. the missionary position.⁴¹⁰ Here physical position imitates the natural order of the sexes, and canonists deemed any other position perverse. Within her revelation perhaps we can also infer that they have tried other sexual

⁴⁰⁶ According to the 71 citations currently presented on *DONP* this is an exclusive instance of *hǫrund* not meaning 'skin' in its basic sense. From http://dataonp.ad.sc.ku.dk/wordlist_d.html (Accessed 29 June 2016). However, *Grettisfærsla* includes the word *hǫrundamuðr*, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁴⁰⁷ *Njáls saga*, ch. 1, 5. She is 'well-mannered'.

⁴⁰⁸ Paul of Hungary considers the function of marital intercourse is 'to procreate, to pay the debt, to avoid incontinence and to satisfy lust.' See Pierre J. Payer, 'Sex and Confession in the Thirteenth Century,' *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, edited by Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1991), 134.

⁴⁰⁹ Payer, 'Thirteenth Century,' 130. Payer comments on a universal notion of correct sexual intercourse: 'all authors share the overall sexual ethic of the period which was concisely enunciated by the Synod of Angers (ca. 1217): In regard to the sacrament of marriage it must be said that every voluntary emission of semen is a mortal sin in both males and females unless excused by legitimate marriage. But faith teaches that sexual intercourse between male and female is excused by legitimate marriage as long as the union is in the proper manner.'

⁴¹⁰ Brundage, 'Sex and Canon Law,' 36: 'Penitentials further warned couples that they sinned if they engaged in sexual relations during the daylight hours, while they were naked, or in positions other than the one that we nowadays describe as the missionary position.' Michael Camille discusses didactic images of copulating couples in 'Manuscript Illumination and the Art of Copulation,' *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 58-90.

activities considered unnatural: that is to say, foreplay and stimulation beyond vaginal penetration by the penis, yet they still fail to meet reproductive or pleasurable expectations. As Phelpstead has suggested, *rétt sem aðrir menn* may imply that he is able to achieve orgasm, possibly through masturbation, or that the penis returns to its normal size when they give up.⁴¹¹

It is unusual for a woman to discuss sexual matters explicitly, particularly to having unfulfilled sexual urges. Unnr is convincingly portrayed as a frustrated and sympathetic character, in accordance with Jacqueline Murray's claims about medieval penitential texts:

In these manuals women were defined by their sexual and reproductive functions. They were not considered to have an independent or individual social, economic or spiritual identity. Nor were their souls seen as truly sexless because their whole spiritual identity was inextricably tied to their sexed bodies. This had an important influence on how writers constructed both male and female sexuality in confessors' manuals and the values that confessors subsequently conveyed to the laity.⁴¹²

One reason women were defined by their sexuality could be informed by the enduring medieval opinion that they were lustful creatures; by default Unnr's sexual priorities (not to mention Gunnhildr's) mean she falls into this category. Murray looked at fifteen manuals from England and northern France from the first half of the thirteenth century and concluded that the 'structure of confessors' manuals reinforced the notion of women as primarily, even exclusively, sexual. In the process, therefore, the salvation of women's souls was linked to their sexuality and to their sexuality alone.'⁴¹³ Murray's comments on women and sex in confession and the penitential texts are relevant to Unnr's discussion with her father. She is not a rounded character and we know very little about her, yet her sexuality is constructed more thoroughly than many other women in the sagas; through Unnr we learn that sexual pleasure could be as significant a requirement in marriage as procreation, and a reason for divorce as good as any other. She is defined by her passionate sexuality, but also her courage to assert its significance for her happiness. The author has presented her with enough nous to be effective and memorable in her own right, which is unusual in its defiance of the typical male scribe perspective: Guido Ruggiero looks at

⁴¹¹ Phelpstead, 'Size Matters,' 431.

⁴¹² Jacqueline Murray, 'Gendered Souls in Sexed Bodies: The Male Construction of Female Sexuality in Some Medieval Confessors' Manuals,' *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, edited by Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1998), 83.

⁴¹³ Murray, 'Gendered Souls,' 83.

Venetian court records and how, even when a woman had consented to or even imposed illicit sex, the scribe attributed a passive mood verb to her. He says 'This enduring description of female sexuality may merely reflect a scribal convention.'⁴¹⁴ We may therefore consider Unnr a non-conformist whose predicament of sexual frustration will be familiar to many of either gender, as much in the contemporary world as in the medieval, and the prominence of euphemisms pertaining to personal desire rather than, say, more vulgar or abstract metaphors, supports the delicacy of her situation. Murray presents another consideration of the female plight in confession:

Interestingly, as well, is Guy of Orchelless' distinction between frigidity or impotence in men and women. In women, arctation that would inhibit intercourse was considered to occur naturally and could be cured by frequent attempts at intercourse or by medical intervention. On the other hand, men were presumed to be naturally potent and able to have intercourse. In them, impotence was understood to be the result of witchcraft.⁴¹⁵

Mention of natural potency brings into focus Unnr's thoughts on what is considered natural and unnatural in men: perhaps she considered herself (at least in part) at fault for his failings, which may explain their repeated efforts to achieve penetration. Furthermore it offers a reminder of the hypocrisy that exists in considering women simultaneously lustful and frigid, as well as blaming them for a variety of men's sexual problems either through witchcraft or vaginismus. According to Unnr's report, she has been a willing participant in attempted intercourse in all possible ways to no avail; thus the problem, incongruous with Guy of Orchelless' logic, does not rest with her vagina, but Hrútr's penis. It is clear that he is not impotent in the conventional sense of the word. Quite the opposite, as Heather O'Donohue says: 'Gunnhildr's curse has an effect which, far from diminishing Hrútr's manhood, almost farcically amplifies it.'⁴¹⁶ Throughout the medieval world, comparable phallic misfortune is often presented as administered through witchcraft. In his memoirs, the thirteenth-century French monk Guibert of Nogent relates an analogous sexual curse that tormented his parents:

It is said that their marriage had drawn upon them the envy of a stepmother, who had nieces both beautiful and well-born, and who

⁴¹⁴ Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 48.

⁴¹⁵ Murray, 'Gendered Souls,' 91-92.

⁴¹⁶ Heather O'Donohue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 31.

would have liked to slip one of them into my father's bed. When this attempt failed utterly, she is said to have resorted to evil spells to prevent the consummation of the marriage. Thus my mother preserved her virginity intact for seven full years. This great misfortune was kept secret for a long time, until my father finally revealed it when summoned to speak before his relatives.⁴¹⁷

He continues by saying that these relatives tried to bring about divorce for greedy means and also that his mother was left vulnerable, as rich men, 'seeing how she was inexperienced in conjugal matters, began to lay siege to the young girl's heart. But you, Lord, the builder of inner chastity, inspired in her a modesty that neither her nature nor her youth could have maintained.'⁴¹⁸ Like Guibert's father, Hrútr remains silent about his affliction for a long time and Unnr is complicit in the secrecy at first. By being the first (and only) party in this matter to speak up, she proves her integrity; whether or not Hrútr's infidelity was acknowledged as the reason for the underlying affliction is not given in the text, it therefore appears that Mqrðr helps his daughter divorce Hrútr purely on account of his inability to penetrate his wife. In Guibert's tale, the revelation of the problem also takes place in front of the family, albeit in a more public setting than that of Unnr and Mqrðr. Despite a similar mix of lust, envy, sorcery and secrecy, Guibert's tale highlights the difference that exists between his mother and Unnr. He admits that enforced celibacy is frustrating: 'yet against the tinglings of her own flesh, against the attempts of others to seduce her, she strove with an admirable self-control. I am not saying, O Lord of goodness, that she acted out of virtue but that the virtue was yours alone.'⁴¹⁹ Without such Christian virtue to fall back on, Unnr's patience is strained and she relies on more conventional and secular means to resolve the problem.

Unnr's frank revelation in explicit detail of her marital non-sex life thoroughly adheres to the spirit and framework of confession. But it is worth noting that this is inverted: Unnr is admitting to a lack of sexual intercourse, not for want of trying; therefore the fault lies with Hrútr for not delivering on the conjugal aspects of their marriage. Peter Biller offers a parallel example of inverse confession from Germany:

Two men from the parish are travelling together along the road to Soest ... A conversation starts. The man had been told he must pay his parish priest eighteen pence to say masses, after confessing to

⁴¹⁷ Archambault, Paul, trans. and ed. *A Monk's Confession: the Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 34-35.

⁴¹⁸ Archambault. *A monk's confession*, 35.

⁴¹⁹ Archambault. *A monk's confession*, 37.

having sex during Lent. The other man had had a similar experience at the hands of the parish priest, Hegennaïrd, with one exception. When confessing he had admitted the opposite – *not* having sex with his wife during Lent. The dreadful Hegennaïrd had upbraided him: 'You have done very badly, keeping yourself from your wife for such a long time. She could have conceived a child with you, but with your continence you've shut off that possibility.'⁴²⁰

Biller goes on to conclude that this story demonstrates the abuse of confession by corrupt priests. In relation to Unnr, it shows that withholding sexual intercourse from one's husband or wife could be considered a sin, not only in a religious sense, but also socially and legally. Hrútr has denied his wife the opportunity for procreation, in the eyes of the law, but in the eyes of the audience, the author and of course Unnr, he has denied her the pleasures that accompany married life. With this in mind we return to questioning Hrútr's inability to be honest, which has extended beyond the shores of Norway and stops him revealing the curse to his wife, or simply ending their marriage, painting him as a coward who has avoided voicing his sexual problem. Foucault explains the silence and anxiety associated with sex as part of the Christian repression:

Is it not with the aim of inciting people to speak of sex that it is made to mirror, at the outer limit of every actual discourse, something akin to a secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing abusively reduced to silence, and at the same time difficult and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge? We must not forget that by making sex into that which, above all else, had to be confessed, the Christian pastoral always presented it as the disquieting enigma: not a thing which stubbornly shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that one risks remaining deaf to it.⁴²¹

Through her incitement to discourse, the secrecy behind Unnr's misery disintegrates, both in the society in which she lives and for the reader, now enlightened. Recall Foucault: 'Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom.'⁴²² It is clear she has internalised this problem for a long time, most likely for fear of social recrimination. Unnr's honest discussion with

⁴²⁰ Peter Biller, 'Confession in the Middle Ages: Introduction,' *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, edited by Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1998), 6-7.

⁴²¹ Foucault, *WtK*, 34-35.

⁴²² Foucault, *WtK*, 60.

her father allows her to escape Gunnhildr's power; thus she is liberated, not only from her marriage, but also from her sexual frustration.

Mǫrðr's scheme for a divorce relies on some trickery and patience on Unnr's part, and she calls witnesses to declare her separation from Hrútr while he is away from home. Mǫrðr takes up the lawsuit for his daughter's property but is met with a challenge to a duel by Hrútr, which, as an older man, would not be a fair fight, but by declining the encounter he is left shame-faced and open to ridicule. However, Hrútr fares no better socially, as the gossip has clearly got out and is reenacted with great vulgarity by some local children:

Annarr þeira mælti: 'Ek skal þér Mǫrðr vera ok stefna þér af konunni ok finna þat til foráttu, at þú hafir ekki sorðit hana.' Annarr svaraði: 'Ek skal þér Hrútr vera; tel ek þik af allri fjárheimtunni, ef þú þorir eigi at berjask við mik.' Þetta mæltu þeir nokkurum sinnum; þá gerðisk hlátr mikill af heimamönnum.⁴²³

Once more, confidential material has passed into common knowledge. The crudeness and insouciance of the words uttered by the children provide a strong contrast to the many euphemisms used by Unnr to describe the same problem to her father. The narrative explains that the boys are *veizlusveinar* – poor boys – and 'váru málgir mjök, því at þeir váru óvitir'⁴²⁴ which can be read as an apology, or at least justify the use of the rare and explicit verb *serða*. Mention of the boys' situation brings a socio-linguistic aspect to the episode: where the poor and simple folk rely on crude terms, the more intellectually, socially and financially rich compose creative metaphors and euphemisms, displaying poetic ability and humility, thus retaining their dignity. As Ármann Jakobsson comments, since the boys are marginalised characters, 'they are able to say what other people may well be thinking, but are too cautious or too polite to put into words.'⁴²⁵ In one manuscript, GKS 2870 4to., written around 1300, the word *sorðit* is replaced by *knafat*.⁴²⁶ This is a hapax legomenon that Cleasby-Vigfússon equates with *stuprare*; we cannot know if this word is a euphemism, a mistake or a colloquialism employed by the scribe for censorship, but in the context of causing enough offence that one of the boys be physically chastised

⁴²³ *Njáls saga*, ch. 8, 29. 'One of them said, "I will be Mǫrðr to you and summon you to divorce your wife on the grounds that you have not fucked her." The other said, "I will be Hrútr to you: I will take from you all property if you do not dare to fight me." They said this a few times; it caused a lot of laughter among the household.'

⁴²⁴ *Njáls saga*, ch. 8, 28-29. 'were very coarse in their language, because they were unknowing.'

⁴²⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Troublesome Children in the Sagas of the Icelanders.' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* XXVII (2003), 8.

⁴²⁶ It may be a metathesis of the verb *kafna*, with the sense of plunging or submerging.

by Höskuldr, it is likely that it was included with the recognition that a high degree of vulgarity was necessary.

When his brother draws blood, Hrútr steps in and shows some compassion and humility. He gives the boy a ring from his finger and some words of wisdom, and we are told the boy appreciates his honourable behaviour. This gesture, in a small way mirroring the gift exchange and pleasantries between Gunnhildr and Hrútr, brings closure to the episode, as the saga states that Hrútr received praise for this and 'er nú lokit þætti þeira Marðar.⁴²⁷ Hrútr has been morally judged by the author, legally by Mqrðr, socially by the community and the audience, and has been exonerated by – *finally* – speaking truthfully and valiantly.

As for his penis, the audience are left in no doubt that it resumes full 'natural' function. Dronke considers that the priapism was a joke invented by the author of *Njáls saga*:

With his impish and satirical eye for opposites he may have devised this cause for Unnr's divorce and invested the traditional incompatibility of the couple with such physical exactitude, precisely because, according to other sources, Hrútr was renowned for the astonishing number of children he had by his two subsequent wives.⁴²⁸

Dronke may be right in stating that Hrútr's virility, and honour, were renewed with gusto: despite the discrepancy in number between accounts of his offspring, the point is perfectly clear.

The boys' mockery of the situation assumes that they are aware that Hrútr cannot penetrate his wife for an unknown reason, yet he is not considered to be *argr* in any of the discussion presented by the saga.⁴²⁹ As mentioned in the previous chapter, this pleasure of analysis into other people's private lives is a common theme in the sagas, and also extends to the audience: several supplementary verses attributed to Unnr divulge more information about the marital problems than the principal dialogue and do so in keeping with the spirit

⁴²⁷ *Njáls saga*, ch. 8, 29. 'Now the section about Mqrðr and Hrútr comes to an end.'

⁴²⁸ Twenty children according to *Landnámabók* and twenty-six in *Laxdæla saga*. *Landnámabók*, ÍF 1, edited by Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), 144 (S§106): 'Hrútr bjó á Hrútsstaðum; hann átti Hallveigu dóttur Þorgríms ór Þykkvaskógi, systur Ármóðs ens gamla; þau áttu mrg þörn.' 'Hrútr lived at Hrútsstaðir: he married Hallveig Þorgrímsdóttir from Þykkvaskógur, the sister of Ármóðr the old: they had many children.' This is followed by a list of fifteen boys and five girls' names. In *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 19, 48-49, he has sixteen sons and ten daughters with two women.

⁴²⁹ However, Ármann Jakobsson says Hrútr and Mqrðr can be considered *ragr*: 'Annar er ekki maður til að serða konu sína, hinn hræðist bardaga.' 'One is not man enough to fuck his wife, the other fears combat.' 'Ekki kosta munur,' 22.

of her discussion with Mǫrðr. One key detail differs from the original prose, which is to disregard the breadth of Unnr's knowledge and assume that she is aware of the source of the curse:

Víst segi ek gott frá geystum
geirhvessanda þessum,
þat er sjálfráðligt silfra
sundrhreyti er fundit;
verð ek, því at álmr er orðinn
eggþings fyrir gjörningum,
satt er, at ek ség við spotti,
segja mart eða þegja.

Víst hefir hringa hristir,
Hrútr, líkama þrútinn,
eitrs þá er linnbeðs leitar
lundýgr munuð drýgja;
leita ek með ýti
undlinna þá finna
yndi okkars vanda,
aldræðr boði skjaldar!

Þó veit ek hitt, at hreytir
handfúrs, jökuls spannar
meiðr! er jafnt sem aðrir
ýtendr boga nýtir;
vilda ek við öldu
jókennanda þenna, –
rjóðr, lít þú orð ok íðir,
undleggs! – skilit segja.⁴³⁰

Guðrún Nordal questions if the verses were part of oral tradition, composed at the time of writing, or were composed later and incorporated. Since they repeat information provided in the dialogue, i.e. that Hrútr is the same as other men and generous in all that he has control over, it appears they were inspired by the prose and may have been composed after the saga was written. As Guðrún

⁴³⁰ *Njáls saga*, *viðbætur*, 465-466. Verses 1-3 are preserved in three manuscripts: *Reykjabók* (AM 468 4to.), *Kálfalækjarbók* (AM 133 fol.), and *Oddabók* (AM 466 4to.) and are integrated into Unnr's discussion with Mǫrðr.

'Certainly I say good things about Hrútr [this impetuous spear-sharpener], about that which the generous man [the broad spreader of silver] has in his power. I must either say much or keep silent, because Hrútr [the elm of the edge assembly] has fallen victim to sorcery; it is true that I fear mockery.'

Certainly Hrútr [the shaker of swords] has a body swollen, when in the poisonous serpent's bed he enthusiastically seeks sexual pleasure; I try with Hrútr [the launcher of wound-snakes (i.e. swords)] to find the sexual delight in our efforts, Mǫrðr [elderly commander of the shield]!

Though this I know, Mǫrðr [beam of the span of the glacier], that Hrútr [hurler of gold (hand-fires)] is the same as other able men [launchers of bows]; I want to declare myself separated from him [the guide of the stallion of the wave (i.e. ship, therefore seafarer)], Mǫrðr [reddener of weapons], consider words and deeds.'

says, 'The additional stanzas belong, therefore, to the first stage in the history of the text, and they may hold a key to the saga's reception in that early period.'⁴³¹ If this were the case, the delight in suggestive metaphor reveals how Unnr's disclosure captured the imagination of later audiences. Hrútr is described as a hasty spear-sharpener; while there is little subtlety in the noun *geirhvessandi* one wonders if the adjective *geystr*, meaning 'rushing/gushing hastily' or 'enraged,' implies his mental anguish at his inadequate spear, or the physical action and exertion in trying to satisfy his wife, or perhaps it is an ironic statement concerning his inability to ejaculate. Similarly, *hringa hristir* conjures an amusing image of a frustrated Hrútr as much as it does a valiant warrior, and to call him *ýtir undlinna* sounds ironic in this context. The second verse does not repeat *hǫrund*, instead using *líkami* to describe the swollen flesh, but this remains in keeping with the obliqueness of *hǫrund* in signifying carnal sensations. Guðrún Nordal also observes that *linnbeðs* ('of the serpent's bed') in *Kálfalækjarbók* is articulated as *línbeðs* ('of the linen bed') in *Reykjabók*. While Einar Ól. Sveinsson plumped for the former in his edition, Guðrún prefers the latter, which she argues is more appropriate to the context of the marital bed and evokes the dress worn by Unnr for the wedding.⁴³²

Suggestiveness aside, the repetition of *Víst* emphasises the honesty with which Unnr speaks. The last line of the first verse, *segja mart eða þegja* juxtaposes the two extreme reactions taken by Unnr and Hrútr, to say everything or nothing. This focus on words and deeds – even the phrase for divorce expresses the linguistic acknowledgement involved – appears to work well with the thoughts expressed earlier on the importance of vocalisation as a means to absolution. Furthermore, included in the accompanying verses attributed to people other than Unnr is one recited by a poet when asked by Hrútr if he had heard of his dealings with Mǫrðr. This verse circumvents the sexual details to offer a summary of events that resonates strongly with the Foucauldian theory offered in this chapter and the previous; he says, *slíkt talar þjóð í hljóði, / opt heyrtr er þat*,⁴³³ thus acknowledging the irony of an open secret.

In summary, this episode presents parallel scenes of private discussion: Hrútr's lie to Gunnhildr, verging on mockery and defiance, and his subsequent

⁴³¹ Guðrún Nordal, 'The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls saga's* Manuscripts,' *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, edited by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2008), 186.

⁴³² See Guðrún Nordal, 'Dialogue,' 193.

⁴³³ *Njáls saga*, *viðbætur*, 466, verse 4. 'such speaks a nation in silence / often it is heard.'

silence in contrast to Unnr's honest and lengthy explanation of the problems within her marriage. Speaking the truth is lauded, perhaps in line with the Christian morals exemplified in the saga,⁴³⁴ and the behaviour of all parties parallels the confession ritual and Foucault's views on its inherent designation of power and the liberation it brings. In verbalising her marital problems to her father, Unnr broke the silence around the curse and relinquished Gunnhildr's vicarious power over her, strengthening her own in a singular and literary way. This rebellion, in a Foucauldian sense '...to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures'⁴³⁵ causes personal shame and embarrassment, which are integral parts of confession and speaking the truth, in contrast to Hrútr's taciturn reaction to the problem. In a literary sense, this dramatic discussion is the pinnacle of a heartfelt and enlightening storyline and answers questions about the demise of their marriage, setting the scene for a compelling legal denouement.

3. Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld in *Fóstbrœðra saga*⁴³⁶

It is with great wit that Hrútr's priapic affliction is a fitting punishment for his sexual entanglement. *Fóstbrœðra saga* presents a similar predicament of a man caught between two women that results in an unpleasant curse. Though Þormóðr's consequent physical suffering is not directed towards his penis, there is nonetheless a comparable motivation to cause a womaniser harm and a requirement to make amends that resonates with the confession trope.

The episode begins by highlighting Þormóðr's boredom at his father's house, which serves as justifiable motivation for him to seek out more entertaining surroundings:

Kona hét Gríma, er bjó á bæ þeim, er í Qgri heitir. Hon var ekkja ok vel fjáreigandi. Þat var mælt um Grímu, at hon kynni sér mart, ok þat tǫluðu menn, at hon væri fjǫlkunnig. Nú fyrir því at kristni var ung ok vangǫr, þá sýndisk þat mǫrgum mǫnnum atgørvi, at maðr væri fjǫlkunnigr. Þórdís hét dóttir Grímu; hon var væn ok vinnugóð ok var heima með henni; hon var oflátlig.⁴³⁷

⁴³⁴ Njáll's 'noble heathenism' as noted above; also see Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 251, on how Christian 'forgiveness triumphs over vengeance.'

⁴³⁵ Foucault, *WtK*, 7.

⁴³⁶ The edition of the saga in *ÍF* 6 comprises five manuscripts, with *Möðruvallabók* and *Hauksbók* as the principal texts in this particular passage. The versions are stipulated in each quotation, and variations between them are discussed where appropriate.

⁴³⁷ *Fóstbrœðra saga*, ch. 9, 161. (*Möðruvallabók*) 'There was a woman named Gríma who lived at the farm called Qgur. She was a widow and quite wealthy. It was said about Gríma that she knew many things, and people said that she was skilled in sorcery. Now because Christianity was new

The emphasis on the distinction between pre- and post-conversion evaluations on magic offers both apology for pre-Christian beliefs and a disdainful explanation indicating that this is certainly no longer the case, while at the same time setting the scene for the later supernatural intervention. The introduction to Þórdís, the object of Þormóðr's affections, seems somewhat muted after the description of her magical mother, and is a less than flattering depiction.⁴³⁸ Þormóðr does not plan to commit to Þórdís, much to her mother's annoyance, and before rumours of seduction spread too far he is badly wounded by Gríma's slave in an encounter that should have ended worse for him.⁴³⁹ Following this narrow escape, the saga reiterates Þormóðr's boredom at home with his father, sympathising with his desire to seek out the company of women, as he does a second time:

Katla hét kona, er bjó í Arnardal. Hon var ekkja; hana hafði átt maðr sá, er Glúmr hét. Dóttir hennar hét Þorbjörg; hon var heima með móður sinni. Þorbjörg var kurteis kona ok eigi einkar væn, svart hár ok brýnn, – því var hon kǫlluð Kolbrún, – vitrlig í ásjánu ok vel litkuð, limuð vel ok grannvaxin ok útfœtt, en eigi alllág.⁴⁴⁰

Like that of Þórdís above, the account given of Þorbjörg's features is a little disparaging, balancing beauty with flaws. Again, due attention is paid to the mother, though in this instance Katla warmly welcomes Þormóðr into her home – in fact, Þormóðr's presence is favoured by all the womenfolk of the house, who are pleased to have his company. The narrative focuses on coy glances between the two lovers: 'Þormóðr rennir nokkut augum til dóttur húsfreyju, ok lízk honum vel á hana; hon hefir ok nokkut augabragð á honum, ok verðr henni hann vel at skapi.'⁴⁴¹ He frequently visits and composes *mansǫngsvísur* for Þorbjörg; far from being a shameful seduction, his wooing is celebrated:

and not perfect, it appeared then to many people to be an advantage if a person were skilled in sorcery. Gríma's daughter was called Þórdís, she was attractive and hard-working and lived with her; she was also showy.'

⁴³⁸ Helga Kress also notes the mixed descriptions of Þorbjörg and Þórdís in 'Bróklindi Falgeirs: *Fóstbræðra saga* og hláturmenning miðalda.' *Skirnir* 161 (1987), 283-284.

⁴³⁹ Gríma's slave was supported by her magical prowess. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir discusses Gríma's use of magic, and that of widows and independent women in general, in *BWP*, 54-55, observing that 'when there are no husbands or male relatives who could act on their behalf, magic is the primary tool available to women in order to maintain their family's honor.'

⁴⁴⁰ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11, 170. (*Möðruvallabók*) 'There was a woman named Katla, who lived in Arnardalir. She was a widow, her husband had been called Glúmr. Her daughter, Þorbjörg, lived at home with Katla. Þorbjörg was a courteous woman but not especially attractive. She had black hair and eyebrows – for this reason she was called Kolbrún [dark brow] – an intelligent look about her, a good complexion, was well proportioned, slim, and wide of foot, and not too short.'

⁴⁴¹ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11, 170. (*Möðruvallabók*) 'Þormóðr glanced a little at Katla's daughter, and very much liked what he saw; she also noticed him and liked what she saw.'

Þormóður var í Arnardal hálfan mánuð. Hann yrkir þá lofkvæði um Þorbjörgu kolbrún; þat kallaði hann Kolbrúnarvísur. Ok er kvæðit var ort, þá færði hann kvæðit, svá at margir menn heyrðu. Katla dregr fingrgull af hendi sér, mikit ok gott, ok mælti: 'Þetta fingrgull vil ek gefa þér, Þormóður, at kvæðislaunum ok nafnfesti, því at ek gef þér þat nafn, at þú skalt heita Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld.' Þormóður þakkaði henni gjöfina. Nú festisk þetta nafn við Þormóð, sem Katla gaf honum.⁴⁴²

Katla had invited Þormóður to stay at her home and avoid the task he was sent to do with his father's farmhands. Her hospitality suggests that, in spite of the visit being a short one, she hopes that this will lead to a proposal. Indeed, providing him with a nickname associated with her daughter is a canny move that could act as a deterrent to other possible suitors for Þorbjörg as well as anyone who may want to match Þormóður with their daughters. If this is the case, then Þormóður has no one but himself to blame, having exposed his burgeoning romance with Þorbjörg by broadcasting his verses. Aside from the romantic tangle and fear of incurring a mother's wrath, this behaviour also posed a risk to Þormóður's freedom, as composing love songs carried a legal penalty,⁴⁴³ though as already mentioned, the women do not appear to be affronted by his serenading.⁴⁴⁴

After leaving Katla and Þorbjörg, Þormóður pays a visit to Þórdís. In a reversal of their initial meeting, it is Gríma who welcomes him, while Þórdís 'skaut í skjálg augunum stundum ok sá nökkut um ǫxl til Þormóðar.'⁴⁴⁵ By giving him the cold shoulder, Þórdís entices Þormóður into wanting to please her and remind her of their past intimacy. But word has reached Þórdís about his recent shenanigans, which propels Þormóður into an act of deceit:

Þórdís mælti: 'Þat hefi ek spurt, at þú hefir fengit þér nýja unnustu ok hafir ort lofkvæði um hana.' Þormóður svarar: 'Hver er sú unnusta

⁴⁴² *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11, 171-172. (*Möðruvallabók*) 'Þormóður was in Arnardalir for a fortnight. He composed praise poetry about Þorbjörg kolbrún at that time, which he called the Dark Brow verses. And when the poem was composed, he then recited it so that many people could hear. Katla drew a gold ring from her finger, large and grand, and said, "I give you this gold ring, Þormóður, as a reward for the poetry and as a name-present, because I give you a name, and declare that you shall be called Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld." Þormóður thanked her for the gift. The name that Katla gave Þormóður then stayed with him.'

⁴⁴³ See *Grágás* 2.b, 238, 184. *Ef maðr yrkir mansöng vm cono oc varðar scog gang. kona asöc ef hon er xx. eða ellre. ef hon vill eigi sækia láta. oc a lavg raðande hennar sökena.* 'If a man composes a love-song about a woman the judgment is full outlawry. The woman makes the case if she is 20 years or older; if she will not seek to make a case, it rests with her advisor.'

⁴⁴⁴ See also *ÍF* 6, note 4 on 170-171.

⁴⁴⁵ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11, 172. (*Möðruvallabók*) She 'threw him glances every now and then and looked over her shoulder at Þormóður.' The *Hauksbók* version offers a more concise account without the glances, while in the *Möðruvallabók* version (main text, 172) the narrative adds more detail on the reason behind her behaviour: 'sem konur eru jafnan vanar, þá er þeim líkar eigi allt við karla,' i.e. 'as women are always wont to do, when they completely dislike a man.'

mín, er þú talar til, at ek hafa um ort?’ Þórdís svarar: ‘Sú er Þorbjörg út í Arnardal.’ Þormóður svarar: ‘Engu gegnir þat, at ek hafa kvæði ort um Þorbjörgu; en hitt er satt, at ek orta um þik lofkvæði, þá er ek var í Arnardal, því at mér kom í hug, hversu langt var í milli fríðleiks þíns ok Þorbjargar ok svá it sama kurteisi; em ek nú til þess hér kominn, at ek vil nú færa þér kvæðit.’ Þormóður kvað nú Kolbrúnarvísur ok snýr þeim ørendum til lofs við Þórdísi, er mest váru á kveðin orð, at hann hafði um Þorbjörgu ort. Gefr hann nú Þórdísi kvæðit til heilla sátta ok heils hugar hennar ok ásta við sik.⁴⁴⁶

Like Hrútr’s denial of a lover to Gunnhildr, Þormóður chooses not to confess his wrongdoings when purposefully questioned on the subject, albeit with a longer, more contrived line of defence.⁴⁴⁷ The poems are not conveyed in the saga, so it is uncertain how easily Þormóður was able to transfer them from one woman to the other; nonetheless, through underhand subversion of the verses he manages to convince Þórdís that he composed the poetry while pining for her. This greatly demeans Þorbjörg: not only does he deny their relationship and deprive her in an undignified manner of poetry composed in her name, but he also uses her as a stepping stone to bring about a favourable comparison with Þórdís by making disparaging remarks about her beauty and character. Similarly, he makes a mockery of the gifts bestowed on him by Katla, especially the name, which has lost its value through his fraudulent compositions, and thus demeans himself at the same time.

This is not a destructive love triangle (i.e. akin to those of the poets’ sagas) but an opportunity for comic relief: the audience follows the complications of Þormóður’s love life, his ability to charm and inveigle his way into the different households, while awaiting the inevitable messy denouement. This comes courtesy of Þorbjörg in a vengeful attack:

Ok er svá hafði nokkura hríð fram farit, þá verð sá atburð eina nótt, þá er Þormóður var heima á Laugabóli, at hann dreymir, at Þorbjörg kolbrún kœmr at honum ok spurði hann, hvárt hann vekði eða svæfi. Hann kvazk vaka. Hon mælti: ‘Þér er svefns, en þat eitt berr fyrir þik, at svá mun eptir ganga, sem þetta beri fyrir þik vakanda. Eða hvat er

⁴⁴⁶ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11, 173. (*Möðruvallabók*) ‘Þórdís said, “I have heard that you have got yourself a new love and have composed a praise poem about her.” Þormóður replied, “Who is this lover of mine that you speak of, about whom I have composed poetry?” Þórdís answered, “It is Þorbjörg in Arnardalir.” Þormóður replied, “There is no sense in that, that I would have composed poetry about Þorbjörg, but it is true that I composed a praise poem about you, when I was in Arnardalir, because it dawned on me how much of a difference there is between your beauty and Þorbjörg’s, and likewise in grace; for that reason I came here now, I want to give you the poem.” Þormóður then recited the Kolbrún verses and twisted the meanings to make them praise Þórdís, which were mostly particular words that he had composed about Þorbjörg. He then gave Þórdís the poem in order to be fully reconciled, and for all her thoughts and love towards him.’

⁴⁴⁷ In the redaction of the saga that features in *Hauksbók*, the prose is more concise, and does not indulge as much in the dialogue between Þórdís and Þormóður at this point, reducing the effect of Þormóður being a dithering if clever liar.

nú, hvárt hefir þú gefit annarri konu kvæði þat, er þú ortir um mik?’ Þormóðr svarar: ‘Eigi er þat satt.’ Þorbjörg mælti: ‘Satt er, at þú hefir mitt lofkvæði gefit Þórdísi Grímudóttur ok snúit þeim ørendum, er mest váru ákveðin orð, at þú hefðir um mik ort kvæðit, því at þú þorðir eigi, lítill karl, at segja satt til, um hverja konu þú hefðir ort kvæðit. Nú mun ek launa þér því lausung þína ok lygi, at þú skalt nú taka augnaverik mikinn ok strangan, svá at bæði augu skulu springa ór hofði þér, nema þú lýsir fyrir alþýðu klækisskap þínum, þeim er þú tókt frá mér mitt lofkvæði ok gefit annarri konu. Muntu aldregi heill verða, nema þú fellir niðr þær vísur, er þú hefir snúit til lofs við Þórdísi, en takir þær upp, er þú hefir um mik kveðit, ok kenna eigi þetta kvæði qðrum en þeim, sem ort var í qndverðu.’⁴⁴⁸

Though the composition of *mansqngsvísur* was considered an offence, the social sin of rededication is considered more heinous here. Þorbjörg gives Þormóðr the opportunity to tell the truth, but he lies, even in his sleep. Unlike his earlier lie to Þórdís, this one does not afford Þormóðr any room for manoeuvre. Appearing in his dreams, Þorbjörg becomes an omnipresent witness to his deceit, not only acknowledging the act but also his motivation for doing so in order to win Þórdís back with words that did not belong to her.

This scenario presents several parallels to the Hrútr-Gunnhildr discussion: the lying man, the powerful woman, the missed opportunity to speak the truth and of course the curse, though Þorbjörg tells Þormóðr how to rectify the situation, a luxury not given to Hrútr. In the scene in which Katla bestows an epithet on Þormóðr, Helga Kress compares her behaviour to that of a king:

Í þessari frásögn er dyngja kvenna sett á svið sem konungleg hirð. ‘Lofkvæðið’ er til ungrar stúlku í afskekktari sveit sem hefur tæplega unnið margar hetjudáðir, og bóndakonunni Kötlu er lýst sem konungi þegar hún dregur hring af fingri sér og gefur skáldinu að kvæðislaunum. Á sama hátt og konungar gefur hún honum einnig nafn og skáldaímynd.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁸ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11, 174-175. (*Möðruvallabók*) ‘And after some time had passed, an incident happened one night, when Þormóðr was home at Laugaból, that he dreamed that Þorbjörg kolbrún came to him and asked him whether he was awake or asleep. He said he was awake. She said, “You are asleep, but what happens to you now will thereafter transpire thus and happen to you when awake. And is it the case, that you have given another woman that poem, which you composed about me?” Þormóðr answered, “That is not true.” Þorbjörg said, “It is true, that you have given my praise poem to Þórdísi Grímudóttir and changed the meaning, most of which were specific words that you had composed about me, because you dared not, little man, to speak the truth about the woman you had composed the poem for. Now I will repay you for your dishonesty and lies, and you shall now feel a great and horrible pain in your eyes, such that both eyes should burst out of your head, unless you admit to the public your cruelty, in that you took my praise poem from me and gave it to another woman. May you never be well unless you take away those verses that you had turned into praise for Þórdísi, and restore those that you had composed about me, and do not dedicate this poem to any other than that person who it was originally composed for.” Again, the *Hauksbók* version offers a slightly abridged dialogue, omitting the word *klækisskapr* (cowardice, meanness), but is otherwise very similar.

⁴⁴⁹ Helga Kress, *Máttugar Meyjar* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1993), 183. ‘In this story the women’s *dyngja* becomes the stage of a kingly court. The ‘praise poetry’ is to a young girl in a far off region who has barely won many admiring heroes, and the farmer woman Katla is presented

This interpretation puts Þormóðr and Þorbjörg's relationship on a par with that of Hrótr and Gunnhildr, elevating the characters to regal positions, thus turning Þormóðr's wrongdoing into a more serious matter and fortifying the strength of Þorbjörg's curse. The earlier explanation of pre-Christian belief in and admiration of magic now seems to be a satirical commentary, as it serves as a blight on philanderers' lives. There is little Christian sentiment in Þorbjörg's ultimatum, but much to do with the power of words that Foucault speaks of:

When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body. Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied it like a shadow, and supported it when it could go no further: the dark twins.⁴⁵⁰

There is no imperative compelling Þormóðr to speak truthfully. He does not appear to be in awe of the dominant woman, nor ashamed of his verse-twisting and the web of lies that cushion it; hence he bears the brunt of Þorbjörg's dark powers of persuasion. Inflicting pain on his eyes is not as obvious a curse as Gunnhildr's attention to Hrótr's penis, yet corresponds well to the loving looks and flirting. Returning to their first encounter, the narrative concentrates on the glances between them and the extent of their body language; perhaps with these details in mind it is more understandable that Þorbjörg would attack that which incapacitates his wandering eye, while still allowing him to reverse his fortune. The pain is instant:

Þormóði sýndisk Þorbjörg vera reiðulig ok mikilúðlig; þykkisk nú sjá svipinn hennar, er hon gengr út. Hann vaknar við þat, at hann hafði svá mikinn augnaverð, at hann mátti varla þola óæpandi ok mátti eigi sofa, þat sem eptir var nætrinnar. Hann hvílir lengi um morgininn. Bersi ríss upp, sem hann átti vanða til; ok er allir menn váru upp risnir, aðrir en Þormóðr, þá kom Bersi til Þormóðar ok spurði, hvárt hann væri sjúkr, er hann reis eigi upp, sem hann átti vanða til. Þormóðr kvað vísu:

Illa réðk þvís allar
eydraupnis gafk meyju
– mér barsk dóms í drauma
dís – Kolbrúnar vísur;
þá tókk þorna Freyju
– Þrúðr kann mart en þrúða;
líknumk heldr við Hildi
hvítungs – á mér víti.

as a king when she pulls a ring off her finger and gives it to the poet as reward for his poetry. In the same way as a king she also gives him a name and a poet's identity.'

⁴⁵⁰ Foucault, *WtK*, 59.

Bersi mælti: 'Hvat hefir þér í drauma borit?' Þormóðr segir drauminn ok alla málavöxtu kvæðisins. Bersi mælti: 'Óþarfar unnustur áttu, hlaut af annarri ørkuml þau, er þú verðr aldri heill maðr, en nú er eigi minni ván, at bæði augu springi ór höfði þér. En þó er þat nú mitt ráð við þik, at þú snúir aptr kvæðinu á þann hátt, sem þat var ort fyrir ǫndverðu, ok eigna þat kvæði jafnan Þorbjörgu kolbrún, sem þú ortir um hana.' Þormóðr segir: 'Þú skalt ráða þessu.' Nú lýsir hann fyrir alþýðu, hversu farit hafði um kvæðit, ok gefr þá af nýju við mǫrg vitni Þorbjörgu kvæðit. Þormóði batnaði þá skjótt augnaverklarins, ok verðr hann þá alheill þess meins.⁴⁵¹

For a second time, punishment for a sexual misdemeanour has been meted out with a heathen curse by a scorned woman, only to be worn away by the Christian trope of confession and contrition. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir says that 'Magic is often a crucial narrative element in the Íslendingasögur, employed against an individual at the turning point of a story, for better or for worse, according to where the audience's sympathies lie.'⁴⁵² Here, the canny use of magic to inflict pain, not to mention Þorbjörg's visible emotional upset, help endear the audience to her and turn against the lying Þormóðr, who deserves his punishment. If we remind ourselves of Payer's confession framework, a repentant (Þormóðr) acknowledges offences committed to an authority figure (confession to Bersi), is placed under an obligation to perform a penance (public admission and reverting the poems to their original composition) and is absolved (receiving relief from pain). Like Unnr, a private and comprehensive admission to his father represents confession to a pre-Christian agent of authority, who fits Foucault's profile as 'the agency of domination [is] ... in the

⁴⁵¹ *Fóstbrœðra saga*, ch. 11, 175-177, including verse 9. (*Möðruvallabók*) 'Þorbjörg appeared to Þormóðr to be angry and aggressive; he thought he saw the look on her face as she went out. He awoke at that with such a great pain in his eyes that he could barely tolerate it without crying out, and was unable to sleep for what was left of the night. He rested in bed for a long time in the morning. Bersi got up at the same time as usual, and all the men were up and about except Þormóðr; Bersi came to Þormóðr and asked if he was ill, as he had not got up as he usually would have. Þormóðr spoke a verse:

"It was highly ill-advised when I gave the maiden of Ǫgur [the ring of islands] all the dark-brow verses,
the fierce goddess [Freyja] of judgement appeared to me in a dream;
I then took her punishment – the magnificent woman [Þrúðr] is learned in many ways;
I would rather ask for mercy from the goddess [Hildir of drinking horns]."

Bersi said, "What came to you in the dream?" Þormóðr relayed the dream and the whole story about the poem. Bersi said, "You have disastrous lovers, having received from one a deep wound from which you will never recover, and now I expect no less that both your eyes will burst out of their sockets. However, my advice to you now is that you revert the poem to the way that it was originally composed, dedicating that poem once more to Þorbjörg kolbrún, that you have composed about her." Þormóðr said, "You shall be the judge this." He publicly explained what had happened about the poem, and then rededicated it to Þorbjörg in front of many witnesses. The pain in Þormóðr's eyes improved quickly, and he then fully recovered from the pain.' Throughout this episode *Hauksbók* has omitted or abridged several small words or sentences that add depth and pace to the scene in *Möðruvallabók*; here Þormóðr's deference to his father is missing.

⁴⁵² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 48.

one who listens.⁴⁵³ Although the method of penance comes from Þorbjörg, it is ultimately his father who judges him and commands him to undertake the penalty honourably. The dialogue between them heightens the pseudo-confessional quality of the scene, culminating in Þormóðr's deferential statement to Bersi: *þú skalt ráða þessu*. This is in keeping with Foucault's theory of unconditional obedience, self-examination and exhaustive confession, as well as the verbalisation of sin producing the necessary shame intrinsic to confession, which was widely recognised by medieval theologians:

Peter the Chanter and Thomas of Chobham had argued that the first reason why confession by the mouth is necessary is because it produces shame (*erubescencia*). When anyone confesses odious wickedness to a priest, the shame that results becomes sufficient penitence.⁴⁵⁴

Indeed, this has required a level of humility not witnessed in him previously and is just cause for absolution. Having confessed to his father, Þormóðr now keeps his word on the second part of the penance. The public explanation is fitting: whereas Hrútr's affliction was a source of private trouble for the couple, Þormóðr's reputation is based on his poetry, and the widespread awareness of the reappropriation of verses is a great dishonour to Þorbjörg. Poetry is therefore Þormóðr's fall and his salvation: it is apt that part of his penitence is revealed in verse form, composed sincerely, to recompense for his earlier poetical indiscretion. It is praise and apology in one verse, demonstrating that he has gained self-awareness and remorse and wishes to seek reconciliation. Though the reader is not privileged to learn of those that he composed and amended, this final verse can only be dedicated to Þorbjörg, has a confessional quality to it, and therefore is probably the most important of them all for the reader to be privy to. The *In Confidence* category of gossip observes a sense of accountability in the disclosure of private conversations: in line with Foucault's synthesising of truth and freedom, Þormóðr has firmly positioned himself as responsible for his own mess and divulged all he can to appease Þorbjörg and liberate himself. Therefore, during this process he has confessed privately and publicly and submitted to several levels of agency: parental, the victim, and the community. It is interesting that the sentence drawing this episode to a close still

⁴⁵³ Foucault, *WtK*, 62.

⁴⁵⁴ John Baldwin, 'From the Ordeal to Confession: In Search of Lay Religion in Early Thirteenth Century France,' *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, edited by Peter Biller and A.J. Minnis (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 1998), 204.

refers to Þormóðr as *kolbrúnaskáld*, as if to say all was rectified.⁴⁵⁵ However, beyond his public confession, we are left in the dark as to Þórdís and Þorbjörg's final reactions, not to mention those of their mothers.

4. Grettir Ásmundarsson and the serving girl in *Grettis saga*

The next example of private discussion does not follow the same framework as the previous two, but rather offers a literary parallel to Foucault's observation on the Church's subjugation of sex with regard to language, providing examples of taboo, non-existence and silence as well as exhaustive monologue that Foucault equates with the statute of confession.

Grettir, living in exile on Drangey, ventures to the mainland in search of a means to reignite the fire that had gone out – a swim of one sea mile in freezing cold water. After thawing himself out in a hot pool, he finds a farmhouse and falls asleep, exhausted, in front of the fire. But his slumber is rudely disturbed by a servant girl and the farmer's daughter:

Grettir var við svefn, ok hǫfðu fǫtin svarfask af honum ofan á gólfit. Þær sá, hvar maðr lá, ok kenndu hann. Þá mælti griðkona: 'Svá vil ek heil, systir, hér er kominn Grettir Ásmundarson, ok þykki mér raunar skammrifjamikill vera, ok liggr berr. En þat þykki mér fádæmi, hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri, ok ferr þetta eigi eptir gildleika hans ǫðrum.' Bóndadóttir svarar: 'Hví berr þér svá mart á góma? Ok ertu eigi meðalfífla, ok vertu hljóð.' 'Eigi má ek hljóð vera um þetta, sæl systirin,' segir griðkona, 'því at þessu hefða ek eigi trúat, þó at nokkurr hefði sagt mér.' Fór hon nú yfir at honum ok gægðisk, en stundum hljóp hon til bóndadóttur ok skelldi upp ok hló.⁴⁵⁶

The dialogue here echoes those in the previous chapter of the two Þóras, as well as Ásgerðr and Auðr, where one woman enthusiastically discusses sexual and romantic matters with another, clearly reluctant to join in. While this discussion is intended to remain between them, the serving girl's repeated trips to gawp at the sleeping hero awaken him, to her disadvantage:

Grettir heyrði, hvat hon sagði; ok er hon hljóp enn yfir á gólfit, greip hann til hennar ok kvað vísu:

⁴⁵⁵ *Möðruvallabók* gives a final nod to his nickname *kolbrúnarskáld*, and in all versions he retains the nickname thereafter.

⁴⁵⁶ *Grettis saga*, ch. 75, 239-240. 'Grettir was sleeping, and his clothes had fallen from him down to the floor. They saw where he lay and recognised him. Then the serving girl said, "In all honesty, sister, here is Grettir Ásmundarson and as a matter of fact he seems to me to be portly, and lying naked. But it seems remarkable to me how little grown he is down below, and it is not in keeping with the rest of his stoutness." The farmer's daughter replied, "Why do you have to talk so much about it? Aren't you a half-wit, be quiet." "I cannot be quiet about it, dear sister," said the serving girl, "because I would not have believed it, even if someone had told me." Then she went over to him to take a look and now and then ran back to the farmer's daughter bursting with laughter.'

Váskeytt es far flósu;
fár kann sverð í hári
æskiruðr fyr qðrum
qrveðrs séa gqrva;
veðjak hins, at hreðjar
hafit þeir en vér meiri,
þótt éldraugar eigi
atgeira sin meiri.

Síðan svipti hann henni upp í pallinn, en bóndadóttir hljóp fram. Þá kvað Grettir vísu:

Sverðlítinn kvað sæta,
saumskorða, mik orðinn;
Hrist hefir hreðja kvista
hælin satt at mæla;
allengi má ungum,
eyleggjar bíð Freyja,
lágr í læra skógi,
lotu, faxi mér vaxa.

Griðka æpði hástöfum, en svá skilðu þau, at hon frýði eigi á Gretti, um þat er lauk. Litlu síðar stóð hann upp ok gekk til Þorvalds bónda ok sagði honum til vandkvæða sinna ok bað hann flytja sik út, ok gerði hann svá ok léði skip ok flutti hann út, ok þakkaði Grettir honum fyrir þenna drengskap. En er þat fréttisk, at Grettir hafði lagzk viku sjávar, þótti qlum frábærr fræknleikr hans bæði á sjá ok landi.⁴⁵⁷

The verses lift this scene from the prose and turn it into something far more significant and memorable, gracing Grettir with an opportunity to defend (praise, even) his small penis with great vocalisation and poetic refinement.⁴⁵⁸ The piece is rife with sexual euphemisms that disguise the penis in a variety of ways: as

⁴⁵⁷ *Grettis saga*, ch. 75, 240-241, including verses 64 and 65. 'Grettir heard what she said, and when she ran once more across the room he grabbed her and spoke a verse:

"The stupid girl is shallow; few warriors [wish-bushes] of spear storms
can clearly see the sword in the hair of others;
I bet this, that they have balls but mine are bigger,
even though the warriors [battle-logs] have more penis to thrust."

Then he swept her up onto the bench, and the farmer's daughter ran away. Grettir then spoke a verse:

"The seated seam-cutter called me short-sworded,
The boasting woman [Hrist of ball-branches] may speak the truth;
As a young man, my small penis [horse] grows much longer in the groin forest,
Wait for a session, goddess [Freyja of the leg of the island, i.e. stone]."

The serving girl shouted at the top of her voice, but they parted in such a way that she did not question Grettir when it was finished. A little later he got up and went to Þorvaldr the farmer and told him of his troubles and asked him to transport him out. He did this, lent him a boat and ferried him out, and Grettir thanked him for his magnanimity. And when it was reported that Grettir had swum a sea mile, everyone thought his feats both on land and sea were magnificent.'

⁴⁵⁸ Phelpstead, 'Size Matters,' 430, also proposes that the verses may be asserting the importance of testicles in pre-modern times, hence his pride in having an unusually large pair.

mentioned in Chapter 1, Grettir employs xiphoid kennings that convey the spirit of battle, but it is unclear if they are meant as a warning to his adversary, or simply used as a culturally appropriate double-entendre, in keeping with other metaphors examined in this thesis. Nonetheless, his pugnacious verses offer a witty and skilful retort to the girl's mockery. Her description of Grettir's genitalia vary in three manuscripts: none is as poetic as Grettir's kennings, and all three skirt around the penis with unflattering and belittling euphemisms.⁴⁵⁹ So, while her behaviour may be offensive, her language is not. Adhering to Foucault's subjugation of sex through language, this circuitousness creates an atmosphere of taboo around Grettir's penis and renders it absent, concealing the weapon.

Carl Phelpstead observes that 'The implied rape, too, falls into the silent interstices of the text and goes untold.'⁴⁶⁰ Indeed, the rape scene discreetly passes over the physical crime, which is implied only by Grettir's provocation, a scream, and the ambiguous comment at their parting, which may be infused with menace or dry wit. The dramatic tension of the scene is instead drawn out by the verses, which intersperse the logistical details (Grettir moving from the fire, grabbing her, and pulling her up on the bench) with his implied arousal when he tells the girl to prepare herself for action. Grettir's verses could therefore be said to serve as foreplay: during their recital he becomes aroused precisely while, or perhaps because of, describing the growth of the penis during occurrences of arousal, and thus is erect and ready for penetration on that final and significant word *vaxa* (to grow). The scream, immediately following his stimulating verse, may be one of anguish or pleasure, but its positioning as the climax to the episode (and following the forceful placing of the girl) indicates in all likelihood that it is the outcome of unsolicited penetration.

A similar textual smokescreen occurs in the early seventeenth-century play *El burlador de Sevilla*, as María M. Carrión explains: 'The textual economy of *El burlador* reveals a much greater investment of space in the areas of planning, escaping, and bragging than in the execution of the sexual acts *per se*, which by default become dramatic gaps.'⁴⁶¹ This particular dramatic gap cushions Grettir from audience disapproval, and there is no need for escape, since the narrative continues to turn a blind eye. The relaxed aftermath following

⁴⁵⁹ As noted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, these are: 'hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri,' 'í milli fótanna' and 'dólgr,' respectively 'how little he is down below,' 'in between his legs' and 'penis' (monster or enemy).

⁴⁶⁰ Phelpstead, 'Size Matters,' 430.

⁴⁶¹ María M. Carrión, 'The Queen's Too Bawdies: *El Burlador de Sevilla* and the Teasing of Historicity,' *Premodern Sexualities*, edited by Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), 59.

the alleged rape, when we are told Grettir gets up a little later – *litlu síðar* – suggests he was in no rush to flee the scene. Once again, the author allows ambiguity and black humour to overshadow Grettir’s misdemeanour: that the girl did not taunt him once they parted implies that, with regard to her uncharacteristic silence, he is not only vindicated but may have pleased her sexually. This reading is supported by Jochens, who says ‘The author assures his readers that when Grettir and the maid separate she is duly impressed.’⁴⁶² On the other hand, she may be cowed by the whole experience and the statement simply factual, although from the perspective of an author who supports Grettir’s actions this is less likely.

The lack of legal repercussions is also cause to believe the rape was either forgiven or not taken seriously. Since the serving girl is considered Þorvaldr’s property, the law is on Þorvaldr’s side should he wish to punish Grettir: as the rape victim’s guardian he could have sought compensation, which is not mentioned in the episode.⁴⁶³ This is a moot argument since Grettir is already an outlaw, yet Þorvaldr would have had ample opportunity to speak up: if Grettir takes his time rousing, and the farmer’s daughter fled the scene, the likelihood of Þorvaldr receiving news of the incident is great. Yet he does not charge Grettir, nor capture our heroic outlaw, and instead listens to his troubles and comes to his aid, for which Grettir is appreciative. Instead, the author immediately draws attention away from the crime and back to Grettir’s courageous swim, and, more to the point, people’s impressed reaction to his achievements when it is then reported, *at Grettir hafði lagzk viku sjávar, þótti öllum frábærr frækneikr hans bæði á sjá ok landi* (that Grettir had swum a sea mile, everyone was full of admiration for his feats both on land and at sea), and with that the incident of rape is rendered unexceptional.⁴⁶⁴

Ruth Mazo Karras considers the piece as evidence of the sexual use of the lower classes:

One example of a man assuming sexual access to servant women occurs in *Grettis saga*, in a rare bawdy anecdote in which one man exercises his class prerogative ... it is significant that the author has

⁴⁶² Jochens, ‘TILV,’ 386.

⁴⁶³ See *Grágás* 2.b. K 156, 48, which states that sleeping with a slave-woman carries a penalty of at least three marks.

⁴⁶⁴ It is worth noting, particularly in relation to gossip, that Robin Waugh discusses this sentence in relation to heroic moments and proposes that ‘The reiteration of word-of-mouth praise may well take place, then, simply because a reputation requires continual reinforcement.’ Waugh questions why this sentence occurs so late in the saga, when Grettir’s reputation has been established thoroughly, but it is clear that this comes at a most convenient time and may be used strategically. See Waugh, ‘Antiquarianism,’ 48.

made it the servant (*griðkona*) whom Grettir pulls down to him rather than the daughter of the *bóndi*. The text implies that it was not an actual rape, or if it was (in the sense of being initiated without her consent) she has enjoyed it ... It certainly does not seem to have been taken as an insult to the farmer who is the maid's employer, since the latter is quite willing to help Grettir by ferrying him back to his island hideout.⁴⁶⁵

Hence Karras assumes Þorvaldr is aware of the morning's events and chooses not to punish Grettir for his actions. Jochens also regarded this scene as an illustration of 'the difference in sexual availability between a free farmer's daughter and the servant girl from the house.'⁴⁶⁶ However, there is little to suggest the assault has anything to do with class and sexual availability. Grettir is merely proving his manhood to the person who questioned it – in this case a serving girl; the farmer's daughter, on the other hand, twice chastised her for the remarks. If class is an issue here, it reflects the gravity of the crime: Jacqueline Murray sees a woman's status as nothing more than 'the passive vehicle which exacerbated or diminished his (i.e. man's) sin,'⁴⁶⁷ and of course had Grettir raped the daughter, the legal ramifications would have been far greater. Perhaps, if class does serve a purpose, it is to highlight the distinction between the manners of the two girls: the farmer's daughter is well bred enough not to provoke a sleeping man with crude insults, while the serving girl, much in the same way as the young boys in *Njáls saga* mentioned above, is not well bred enough to appreciate the implications of such crude insults. Furthermore, where penitential texts and confession are concerned, the blurring between the innocent and guilty parties is acknowledged and suggests that incitement is a sin in itself, as Foucault says:

Thus sex gradually became an object of great suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence, in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us.⁴⁶⁸

The difficulty to resist such temptation could provide a means of forgiveness for Grettir's sexually subversive/possibly criminal act, supported adequately by fourteenth-century penitential writers who 'eloquently demonstrated the important role of other people in bringing a person to sin. Nassington, echoing

⁴⁶⁵ Karras, 'Servitude,' 297.

⁴⁶⁶ Jochens, 'TILV,' 386.

⁴⁶⁷ Murray, 'Gendered Souls,' 84.

⁴⁶⁸ Foucault, *WtK*, 69.

Augustine's analysis of his theft in a pear orchard, reflected that the individual lost his sight of God in the company of others. For this writer the most insidious and seductive temptations came not from within the self ... but from other people who were motivated by malice and envy.⁴⁶⁹ This statement concerns an English penitential text, but the sentiment was a widespread one and complements the similar understanding that recidivists deserved harsher punishments than those incited to sin. This logic exonerates Grettir, since he embarked on the defence quite spontaneously.

Grettir's proud and impulsive response to hurtful criticism may compare favourably to the idea of leniency shown in the penitential teachings, but it also points towards another possible explanation for his unremitting waywardness: the hero complex. In her analysis of saga scholarship, Carol J. Clover explains the difficulty of trying 'to live heroic lives in a post-heroic age,'⁴⁷⁰ ably demonstrated by Grettir himself:

When Grettir can perform epic tasks for lordly persons, he – like his relative Beowulf – thrives. But in the long stretches of civilian life that lie between such heroic occasions (the call for heroes not being what it once was) Grettir is positively dysfunctional. The central theme of *Grettis saga* is the 'incompatibility of a traditional form of heroism with the demands of an evolving society.'⁴⁷¹

Such incompatibility is apparent in the scene here: while Grettir can pull off feats of strength, cunning and daring to the amazement of others, he reveals himself incapable of dealing with day-to-day life, including social and sexual contact. The authorial leniency in this case suggests that his struggle to live peacefully with others was worthy of special dispensation.

A further consideration in defence of Grettir is that he is a Christian; the religious background may have caused the authors to shade his life with noble gestures. He is nonetheless an outlaw, and this non-Christian conduct needs to be reconciled with Christian morals. Clover brings together the work in this field of scholars such as Hermann Pálsson, Paul Schach and Steblin-Kamenskij and concludes that in 'rejecting both the purely pagan and the purely Christian models, these critics propose instead a peculiar third category that at the same time embraces and transcends the other two – a secularized "syncretic ethics"

⁴⁶⁹ Jonathan Hughes, 'The Administration of Confession in the Diocese of York in the Fourteenth Century,' *Studies in clergy and ministry in medieval England*, edited by David M. Smith (York: University of York, Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1991), 126.

⁴⁷⁰ Clover, 'Family Sagas,' 265.

⁴⁷¹ Clover, 'Family Sagas,' 266, citing Hume, K, 'The Thematic Design of Grettis saga' in *JEGP*, (1974), 469-86.

that allowed the thirteenth-century Icelanders to “come to terms with both their ancestors and themselves.”⁴⁷² Bearing this in mind, which supports the theory described earlier that there exists in the sagas a middle ground between Christian and non-Christian ethics, we may view Grettir’s defence and escape from punishment as the author’s attempt to provide him with retrospective atonement in lieu of a formal religious practice. Jochens is of a similar opinion that the sagas ‘indicate what the authors thought or wanted their audience to think about their pagan forefathers.’⁴⁷³ As witnesses only to his violent foreplay we are isolated from the truth. The author does not seek our forgiveness, but enforces, as Foucault calls it, a ‘policing of statements,’⁴⁷⁴ hiding both the sexual assault and description in order to mitigate Grettir’s debauched crime. Grettir is helped by Þorvaldr, forgiven by the author, who chooses to gloss over any ramifications of the crime, as well as his peers, who praise him publicly, leaving his heroic character untarnished by this exploit. Thus Grettir’s absolution is amplified from the chorus of gossipers to the meta-narrator and ultimately, the audience.

It may also be noted that this episode is tangential to the plot; Grettir’s transgression goes unpunished and is neatly wrapped up and never referred to again. Its inclusion may be to add an entertaining interval to his time in exile and the scenario could be attributed to the *Decameron*, as observed by Robert Glendinning:

In the *Decameron* (Day 3, Tale 1) Boccaccio tells the story of a certain Masetto who, by pretending to be a deaf mute, obtains employment as a gardener in a convent. His purpose is not to cultivate the convent garden, but to attempt intimacies with the nuns. This he accomplishes, first by pretending to be asleep in the garden when two of the sisters chance to come along, and on another occasion, by really falling asleep with his smock disarrayed in a manner irresistible to the abbess of the convent.⁴⁷⁵

While the approach of two women to a sleeping man (in this case feigning sleep) is similar, very little else is. Grettir’s victim is not as revered as the nuns, and, if the above reasoning is correct, it is her taunting that brings him to sex in contrast to Masetto’s inveigling methods. The rape of religious figures would not

⁴⁷² Clover, ‘Family Sagas,’ 267, citing Claiborne W. Thompson, ‘*Moral Values in the Icelandic Sagas: Recent Re-Evaluations*’ in *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. Scholler, H. 1977, 347-360.

⁴⁷³ Jochens, ‘TILV,’ 363.

⁴⁷⁴ Foucault, *WtK*, 18.

⁴⁷⁵ Robert J. Glendinning, ‘Grettis saga and European Literature in the Late Middle Ages,’ *Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature and Ideas* 4:2 (1970), 57.

so easily have been forgiven culturally as the rape of a serving girl. Further, Masetto is playing deaf and mute, and it is he who is 'coerced' (cooperatively) into sex by the nuns; no rape takes place. As we have ascertained, Grettir's verses are vital to the strength of his defence of the rape within the narrative and to the reader, not to mention the significance of the scene. Finally, the chronological order of Boccaccio's completion of the *Decameron* in 1351⁴⁷⁶ and the assumed composition of *Grettis saga* in 1320-30⁴⁷⁷ may also pour cold water on this potential source, but the episode's tangential nature may indicate that it could be easily edited at a later date.

In keeping with the tangential and flippant nature of the episode, there are no repercussions to his status as an outlaw. At the end of the saga we are told that Sturla Þórðarson considered Grettir the most distinguished outlaw of all time for several reasons:

Hefir Sturla lögmaðr svá sagt, at engi sekr maðr þykkir honum jafnmikill fyrir sér hafa verit sem Grettir inn sterki. Finnir hann til þess þrjár greinir. Þá fyrst, at honum þykkir hann vitrastr verit hafa, því at hann hefir verit lengst í sekð einhverr manna ok varð aldri unninn, meðan hann var heill; þá aðra, at hann var sterkastr á landinu sinna jafnaldr ok meir lagðr til at koma af aptrgöngum ok reimleikum en aðrir menn; sú in þriðja, at hans var hefnt út í Miklagarði; sem einskis annars íslenzks manns; ok þat með, hverr giptumaðr Þorsteinn drómundr varð á sínum efstum dögum, sá inn sami, er hans hefndi.⁴⁷⁸

The religious ending to the saga supports a sympathetic interpretation of the above passage, and indeed the series of unfortunate events that befall Grettir, with reference to vengeance and mention of his bravery, wisdom and strength compensating for any wrongdoings. To end on such a supportive, positive opinion from a distinguished man reiterates that Grettir's memory is held in high esteem.

To summarise, Grettir's sexual transgressions throughout the saga reveal him to be a lustful character, yet are also deemed by the author

⁴⁷⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, translated by Guido Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 171-177.

⁴⁷⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson states that the verses are considered a late composition but there are clues to the saga's age through its connection to Sturla Þórðarson. See *Eddas and Sagas*, 235-236.

⁴⁷⁸ *Grettis saga*, ch. 93, 289-290. 'Sturla the Lawspeaker has said that he did not hold any outlawed man in as high regard as Grettir the Strong. He had three reasons for this. The first was that it seemed to him that he was the wisest because he had been outlawed the longest of any man and had never been defeated while he was healthy. The second reason was that he was the strongest in the land among his peers and more prepared to tackle revenants and hauntings than other men. The third reason was that, unlike any other Icelander, he was avenged in Constantinople; and what's more, Þorsteinn drómundr [warship], who became a lucky man in his later years, was the very same man who avenged him.'

appropriate to the culture in which he lives. The strong and varied narrative provides an entertaining episode, while authorial subjectivity and discretion suggest sympathy for Grettir's predicament and an attempt to obfuscate not only explicit material but also potential audience disapproval of our hero. The text glosses over both the rape and any retribution for it, signalling a form of acceptance for his act; thus it can be argued that the literary treatment of the rape absolves Grettir's crime. It is the girl who disturbs Grettir from his well-deserved rest and, mocking him mercilessly, she ignores the farmer's daughter who repeatedly tells her to stop; thus she is depicted as crude and disrespectful to the vulnerable, brave poet who rightly chastises her. Her vulgarity in poking fun at his penis lends a sense of bathos to the scene and provides the motive for Grettir's actions. The textual economy puts the emphasis not on the rape, but on the incitement and Grettir's defence; that he does so succinctly with two passionate, witty and suitably bellicose stanzas prior to penetration is testament to the author's belief in his justification. The two verses serve as soliloquies, appealing to the audience to understand that he must defend and prove his masculinity despite outward appearances, liberating himself from those who casts doubt on his manhood and masculinity. He may have a short-sword, which is undoubtedly somewhat subdued by the long swim in freezing cold water, but it is a sufficient weapon for this particular encounter.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Foucault's observations on the ritual of confession support a reading of these passages that offers an insight into the processing of shame, the transfer of power, and liberation in the face of mockery that comes from telling the truth about private matters. The language used carefully conceals offensive sexual material and powerfully manipulates the audience's judgement of the wrongdoers and victims in its delivery of information. In Unnr's situation, it is the interaction with the authority figure, the teasing of information that delivers the punchline of Hrútr's warranted misfortune. Þormóðr's comeuppance, well deserved, is meted out in private and public when the lies supporting his self-protection are discovered. Grettir's candid and impassioned defence when his penis comes under scrutiny is carefully handled by the author as a justified and worthy response to his agitator. In all three cases the resolution – and liberation – is brought about by honest words, heightened emotional response and self-examination. It is worth noting the value of skaldic verse to Grettir's and Þormóðr's causes: not only does it make the message more memorable,

capturing the essence of these private conversations, but it voices the men's perspectives in their own words, giving them back control of their lives and existence as sexual beings. In Grettir's case his poetic ability and use of culturally relevant, stimulating metaphors silences the girl's indistinctive insults, while Þormóðr's repentance and admiration of Þorbjörg comes through loud and clear, with the verse standing strong amidst the variations to the prose. Perhaps it is for similar reasons that Unnr's admission to her father was put into verses: the marginalised woman's voice is strengthened through skaldic power.

In terms of sexual activity, the two situations where penis size matters could not be more dissimilar. Hrútr's unwieldy, priapic penis renders him unforthcoming in speech and act. Grettir, on the other hand, receives no complaints and lauds his under-endowed manhood loquaciously. The language used to describe them subtly indicates the contrast in their manifestations. Hrútr's ineffectual penis is described as *hǫrund*, rendering it as unremarkable as the rest of the skin on his body, even more so in comparison with the weapon-like representation of Grettir's *sverðlítinn*, which is nonetheless capable of harm. Hrútr does not take the opportunity to defend his penis, only his wider masculinity by opting to fight Mǫrðr, a cowardly tactic that favours his strength.

Sex and lust, so adequately exemplified by Hrútr, Þormóðr and Grettir, are very much a private matter, yet, not surprisingly, are popular themes in medieval literature. At this point we must acknowledge the legacy of oral tradition and apply its principles to our own use of imagination: intonation and gestures accompanying the retelling of the sagas would have added nuances of drama, fear and – dare I say it – comedy to these scenes. Drawing on one's experience of confession gave a similar scope of entertainment in literature and was a common motivation for writers (possibly of dubious discretion). Hughes gives Robert Manning as an example, a chaplain in Lincoln in the 1320s, who:

drew on his experiences as a confessor ... and used the vernacular to convey penitential teaching with psychological insight and literary skill. However his main purpose seems to have been to entertain: he attempted to appeal to 'lewd men' who listened to tales and rhymes by reducing the emphasis on penitential teaching and expanding the examples of the *Manuel des Péchés* to provide entertaining and instructive tales on the deadly sins, some of which were set in his native Lincolnshire.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁹ Hughes, 'Administration of Confession,' 92.

The insight and entertainment elements of the sagas are in no doubt, and sexual antics, however manipulated, are often depicted with a sense of humour, ridiculing both the desperate and the lascivious for their sexual transparency. Yet with a fondness for dramatic tension the saga authors take great pleasure in unfurling the complicated social consequences in full glare of the spotlight, indulging the reader with commentary from the omnipresent grandstand of anonymous spectators, and once again we find ourselves, as audience and scholars, indulging in the pleasure of analysis.

Chapter 4.

Grotesque Renderings of Sex and the Body

1. Introduction

The previous chapters have illustrated how sexual material is transmitted in the sagas, and also what is most successfully transmitted: much of the gossip and defamatory insults rely on comically repulsive or shocking elements to make them memorable and ensure maximum circulation, duly expressed in, for example, Kolfinna pinned underneath her slobbering husband and the carnal and bawdy ‘stroking the old groin’ insult. Though women are seen to be gossiping more than men, it is apparent from these chapters that men bear the brunt of speculation and scandal the most, with allegations of *argr* behaviour being the easiest method of attack. These were treated seriously; laws in *Grágás* set out the penalties for accusations of *níð* and *ýki*, which could be outrageously absurd, from the cliché that a man turns into a woman every ninth night, to more imaginative and personalised creations, and the laws recognised that formulaic name-calling was just as potent as surreal constructions:

Ef maðr mælir við man háðung eða gørir ýki vm oc varðar fiorbaugs garð. scal sækia við xii. quið. Ef maðr gørir manne níð oc varðar fiorbaugs garð. EN þat ero níð ef maðr scer manne tré níp eða rístr eða reisir manne niðstöng scal sækia við xii. quið.⁴⁸⁰

Furthermore, the right to kill was implemented should someone dare to use any of three particularly provocative words alluding to sodomy,⁴⁸¹ but all the legal stipulations reveal the fundamental importance of protecting one’s honour from malicious and lying tongues. Exaggeration and the grotesque go hand in hand, as Mikhail Bakhtin discusses in his book *Rabelais and His World*, which looks at crude imagery in works by sixteenth-century author François Rabelais. Though

⁴⁸⁰ *Grágás* 2.b, K 237, 182-183. ‘If a man speaks with mockery about a man or makes an exaggeration about him, then [the judgment] is lesser outlawry and will be prosecuted by a verdict of twelve [men]. If a man makes *níð* about another it is lesser outlawry. And it is considered *níð* if a man cuts a wooden *níð* or carves or erects a *níð*-pole about a man. The case will be prosecuted by a verdict of twelve.’ Alison Finlay analyses the parameters of *níð* and *ýki* and the inconsistency of Icelandic and Norwegian legal texts in ‘Monstrous Allegations.’ She notes that the text in *Konungsbók* does not provide a definition of *ýki*, only of *níð*, but in *Staðarhólsbók* it is defined as a comment about a man or his possessions, ‘that which cannot be,’ 21. This chapter focuses on the verbal and visual insults of *níð*.

⁴⁸¹ Explicit clarifications are made in another manuscript of *Grágás*, which states that a man has the right to kill if he is called *ragr* (effeminate), *stroðinn* or *sorðinn* (fucked or bugged), which falls under the charge of malicious speech. See *Grágás (Stykker, som findes i det Arnemagnæanske haandskrift nr. 351 fol., Skálholtsbók)*, edited by Vilhjálmur Finsen (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendal, 1883), 434-435.

the imagery and his analysis may be far removed from medieval Iceland, his interpretations are pertinent to the more vulgar imagery presented in Old Norse literature, in particular that which focuses on the body as an instrument of obscenity. Bakhtin explains why certain areas of the body are emphasised more than others:

Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths. Mountains and abysses, such is the relief of the grotesque body; or speaking in architectural terms, towers and subterranean passages.⁴⁸²

The emphasis on orifices works with the *níð* motif. In Old Norse literature the passive partner in sex between two males is scorned more so than the active partner: with his back to the other person, he has allowed himself to be attacked (and/or desired it). Attention is placed on the buttocks and anal passage as the entry point for sex, while the phallus performing the action mostly goes unchallenged; if it belongs to man, beast or troll, the burden of perversity is still on its recipient. These insults work on the basis that what happens around the bottom matters as much as in it, and the whole area is ripe for malicious imagination. Such mockery shapes our opinion of characters, and the grotesque imagery – the more absurd the better – is a powerful tool in the creation of enduring memories of them. As Frances Barasch says:

the grotesque is a 'moment' in literature (as in art) that is manifested in image or event and functions as an 'objective correlative of ludicrous-horror.' In the best or purest grotesque, conflicting elements of ludicrous-horror occur simultaneously, producing in the reader a confused and uneasy tension between laughter and fear or disgust.⁴⁸³

Such 'moments' punctuate feuds in the sagas and straddle the line between horror and humour; this compares with Bakhtin's belief that 'medieval laughter is directed at the same object as medieval seriousness'⁴⁸⁴ and it is clear that, while the act of *níð* could be a source of comedy in the sagas, being accused of its traits was quite the opposite. Perhaps this is why, as Meulengracht Sørensen

⁴⁸² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 317-318.

⁴⁸³ In Frances Barasch, 'The Grotesque as a Comic Genre,' *Modern Language Studies* 15:1 (1985), 4.

⁴⁸⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 88.

also notes, there are very few examples of ‘unconcealed *níð*’ in the contemporary sagas: time and distance allow the serious to become less so for saga writers, with insults adopting a softer, comedic slant that would still be too provocative for the living or those recently deceased.⁴⁸⁵

Supernatural characters are also subject to farcical representation. Since they do not belong to the natural order and social structures, depicting them as grotesque is quite different from that of humiliating an opponent, and instead takes pleasure in the embellishment of fantastic and ludicrous elements, while still focusing on the orifices Bakhtin speaks of.

Since orifices feature so heavily in the grotesque, the aim of this chapter is to analyse the intertwining of the sexual body and grotesque imagery in terms of verbal insults and visual depictions of offensive behaviour. Scenes of this nature are scrutinised with reference to three of Bakhtin’s observations in particular: the idea of employing grotesque imagery as a means of uncrowning one’s opponent; that it relies greatly on exaggeration and hyperbole for comedic effect; and a sense of confusion in metaphorically (and sometimes literally) turning the body upside down, effectively replacing one orifice with another. A fourth section explores grotesque representations of the upper body, though as Bakhtin observes, the grotesque is predominantly concentrated on the lower bodily stratum. The sagas are no different in this respect, and the following episodes demonstrate how the grotesque functions in the creation of comedic bodies.

2. The uncrowning effect

According to Bakhtin, ‘The grotesque was the basis of all the abuses, uncrownings, teasing, and impertinent gestures (as pointing at the nose or the buttocks, spitting, and others).’⁴⁸⁶ The pointing may be more figurative than literal in the sagas, but the ability to influence perceptions of another was a useful strategic weapon nonetheless. The sexualised insult is particularly formidable in bringing an opponent down to the basest level, as Folke Ström says:

As a rule the formulaic expressions (‘woman every ninth night’ and similar clichés) point to established symbols and current phraseology rather than to a genuine belief in the female sexual role of the accused. The symbols and the phrases were intended to strike a man where he was most vulnerable. The concepts of *níð*

⁴⁸⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 80-81.

⁴⁸⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 341.

and *ergi*, corresponding to each other and constituting the nadir of the ethical scale, were heavily emotionally charged.⁴⁸⁷

As we will see in the examples discussed below, where such uncrownings take place (even in a kingless society such as Iceland), witty word play and distinctive imagery often result in the speaker being lauded, if not by the characters then by the saga author and audience in the depiction of the insult and intended reaction to it. In this way a grotesque scene can become an exchange of power, an act of rebellion: a recrowning more than an uncrowning.

2.1. Horseplay in *Ǫlkofra þáttur*

The first scene exemplifies the gesture of uncrowning one's opponent with sexually offensive insults. Or rather, multiple opponents and multiple insults: in *Ǫlkofra þáttur*, Ǫlkofri is accused of burning down woods belonging to six *goðar* (chieftains). Broddi Bjarnason acts in defense of the weak, poor and cowed Ǫlkofri, securing a lenient penalty charge of six ells to each *goði*. However, it becomes clear that this was not Broddi's motivation for offering his services, as he then provocatively calls the ells *argaskattr*, 'queer tax', insulting the *goðar* as a collective for their greed, before picking on each in turn with a litany of personal and damaging insults. He targets dishonourable conduct that condemns them all as *argr*, for example, attacking one chieftain for not avenging his father; however, four of the six allegations pertain to sexual offences. Meulengracht Sørensen says that *níð* has no indispensable function in this story, and that 'Other forms of disgrace could be substituted in its place, for instance allusions to shameful acts or behaviour without any sexual implications. The taunt with a sexual tinge enhances insult.'⁴⁸⁸ I would argue that Broddi's choices of insult are visually stimulating, sexually humiliating and therefore all the more powerful uncrownings.

Two of the allegations take the form of bestiality. Eyjólfur Þórðarson is accused of stealing from a man and then changing into a mare as he fled, which is an absurd exaggeration but, as Ström noted, symbolic slurs are just as abusive as anything based in reality. Accusations of bestial liaisons are seldom in the realms of sex with an animal *per se*, and usually appear in the form of a comparison to female animals in order to highlight weakness and/or effeminacy, or a charge of turning into an animal and having sex with another animal. This

⁴⁸⁷ Ström, *Moral Attitudes*, 20.

⁴⁸⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 43.

makes Broddi's claim that Þorkell trefill could be the object of a stallion's affections most foul:

Broddi segir: 'Ekki er þat missýni at halda einurð sinni, þótt mannamunr sé með yör Qlkofra, en hitt var glámsýni í vár, er þú reitt til várpings, at þú varaðisk eigi þat, er Steingrímr hafði stóðhest selfeitan, ok lagðisk hann upp at baki þér, en merrin sú, er þú reitt, var mǫgr, ok fell hon undir þér, ok hefi ek eigi spurt til sanns, hverjum þá slauðraði, en hitt sá menn, at þú vart lengi fastr, því at hestrinn lagði fœtrna fram yfir kápuna.'⁴⁸⁹

Using gossip as a shield, Broddi is able to keep a distance from his defamation while simultaneously casting aspersions on what may or may not have happened, 'according to other men'. The delivery is a masterclass in joke telling: the multiple clauses add layers of detail in a staccato effect to capture a scene-by-scene replay of the degradation. The contrast of the seal-fat stallion and the frail mare undermines Þorkell's masculinity further, not only emphasising that he was riding a weak horse, but also that, of the three of them, the stallion was the most virile.

The use of the verb *slauðra* is unusual in this context; with the meaning of 'to drag along' or 'trail behind' it is not used elsewhere to denote sexual intercourse.⁴⁹⁰ Broddi's dysphemism conjures an obscene image of the horse forcefully (and animalistically) taking charge from behind, with its phallus lodged in either the mare's vagina or Þorkell's pseudo-vagina. Neither orifice is mentioned, but the word *en* in *en hitt sá menn* subtly adds suspicion that Þorkell was the recipient, thus turning him into a mare as much as his fellow *argr goði* Eyjólfur. Whatever the truth of the penetration, all focus is drawn to Þorkell: the mare is only mentioned twice in the insult, compared to six references to him; thus our attention is directed to him being screwed, rather than the humble mare beneath him.

The top-heavy configuration of large horse on top and fragile horse beneath is a comical and distinctive image. Yet the alleged sex act is not the punchline of the joke – that image was worth employing early – but rather it is that he was stuck there, with the horse's feet laid out over his cloak. The cloak

⁴⁸⁹ *Qlkofra þáttur*, *ÍF* 11, edited by Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), ch. 3, 91. 'Broddi said, "It is not a mistake to maintain one's sense of fairness despite the difference in status between you and Qlkofri, but it was the impression people had last spring, when you rode to the Spring Assembly, that you didn't notice that Steingrimr had a sealfat stallion, and it jumped up behind you, and the mare, that you rode, was frail, and she fell underneath you, and I have not heard the truth about who it screwed, but men saw that you were pinned down for a long time, because the horse had its feet over your cloak."'

⁴⁹⁰ *DONP* online has four entries for the word *slóðra* (and its variations *slauðra*, *slóðra* and *slǫðra*); this is the only example of it used in a sexual context. (Accessed 29 June 2016).

brings the association closer to Þorkell than it does the mare, lingering on what appears to be an act of post-coital tenderness; the juxtaposition between obscene bestiality and delicacy gives the grotesque scene its potency and ensures Þorkell's sexual association with the horse is an enduring image to his detriment.

The layers of detail also work on a Bakhtinian level. Bakhtin says that the grotesque is 'the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.'⁴⁹¹ Þorkell begins erect, riding, and is slowly lowered as the tale evolves, finally being pinned to the ground, which is humiliating even without the alleged addition of equine penetration. This evaluation diminishes the validity of Meulengracht Sørensen's argument that *níð* is dispensable to the story. However, it is a satire about the chieftains' greed and pride rather than their sexual exploits. He says that:

The names of the six chieftains are indeed taken from history; but the fact that they were not all contemporaries shows at once that the tale is an invention. The same emerges from the course of events, which is improbable on two counts at least. First, six powerful chieftains and landowners would hardly stoop to conspire to swindle a defenceless ale-brewer out of a comparatively meagre sum of money. Second, it is out of the question that Broddi would actually have escaped scot-free after the calumnies he had uttered.⁴⁹²

If the *þáttr* is entirely fictional, it is an exemplary satire demonstrating an effective way to bring people back to earth. I would argue that the style and wit used to achieve this lowering is equally important in its efficiency, which Broddi's grotesque, layered insults amply convey. With each accused of a different deviance, and taking it in turns to stand up for each other, the scene is reminiscent of *Lokasenna*, the quarrel in which Loki confronts the gods with their depraved sexual activities, leading Meulengracht Sørensen to call this *Broddasenna*.⁴⁹³ The gods call Loki *argr* for turning into a mare and giving birth to Sleipnir; perhaps Þorkell's equine encounter is a coincidental parallel, a sign of popular folk humour at the time. The pace of the piece and subversive desire to topple those who are pompous is a great example of a medieval sense of humour that is still successful today.

⁴⁹¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 19-20.

⁴⁹² Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 35.

⁴⁹³ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 38.

2.2. The king's bottom in *Sneglu-Halla þátr*

Meulengracht Sørensen is right to query the realism of Broddi getting away with slanderous remarks to the highest authority figures in Iceland. However, Broddi's insults pale into insignificance compared to those of sarcastic Halli, an Icelander in Norway, whose vulgarity towards the king is so improper it is unbelievable that he gets away without incurring a severe penalty. Like *Qlkofra þátr* the tone of this *þátr* is more comedic than serious, creating a platform for subversive entertainment.⁴⁹⁴ Bakhtin recognises that such risky comedy had a place in medieval court: 'No doubt laughter was in part an external defensive form of truth. It was legalized, it enjoyed privileges, it liberated, to a certain extent, from censorship, oppression, and from the stake.'⁴⁹⁵ Indeed, the saga conveys King Haraldr's jovial tolerance and even encouragement of mockery from the outset: 'Hann var skáld gott. Jafnan kastaði hann háðyrðum at þeim mönnum, er honum sýndisk; þolði hann ok allra manna bezt, þótt at honum væri kastat klámyrðum, þá er honum var gott í skapi.'⁴⁹⁶ Perhaps the caveat of 'when he was in a good mood' adds mild suspense, as Halli's impertinence tests the king's temperance thoroughly. However, the banter is reciprocated, as the king sets the tone for their relationship when he interrogates Halli on his entrance to Norway:

Þessi maðr spurði, er reyndar var Haraldr konungr Sigurðarson: 'Sarð hann yðr eigi Agði?' 'Eigi enna,' segir Halli. Konungrinn brosti at ok mælti: 'Er nokkurr til ráðs um, at hann muni enn síðar meir veita yðr þessa þjónustu?' 'Ekki,' sagði hann Halli, 'ok bar þó einn hlutr þar mest til þess, er vér fórum enga skömm af honum.' 'Hvat var þat?' segir konungr. Halli vissi gǫrla, við hvern hann talaði. 'Þat, herra,' segir hann, 'ef yðr forvitnar at vita, at hann Agði beið at þessu oss tignari manna ok vætti yðvar þangat í kveld, ok mun hann þá gjalda af höndum þessa skuld ótæpt.' 'Þú munt vera orðhákr mikill,' segir konungr. Eigi er getit orða þeira fleiri at sinni.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁴ Cf. the rude verse composed about the queen, as discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁴⁹⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 93-94.

⁴⁹⁶ *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, ch. 1, 263. 'He was a good poet. He always threw crude insults at whoever he pleased; he could deal with vulgar abuse if it was heaped on him just like the best of them, when he was in a good mood.'

⁴⁹⁷ *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, ch. 2, 265. 'The man asked, who in fact was King Haraldr Sigurðarson, "Didn't Agði fuck you?" "Not yet," answered Halli. The king smiled at this and said, "Is it likely that he will provide you with that service at some point in the future?" "No," said Halli, "and there was one reason in particular why we will receive no shame from him." "What was that?" asked the king. Halli knew very well who he was talking to. "That, sir," he said, "if you are curious to know, is that Agði was waiting for men of a higher rank than us and expects you to go there this evening, and he will pay that debt very thoroughly." "You are very abusive," said the king. No more of their conversation is mentioned.'

This is based on *Flateyjarbók* (and AM 593 b 4to.), which provides a longer and more detailed version of the saga and is the source of all citations in this section. It is worth noting that the king's smile does not appear in *Morkinskinna*; it is a subtle addition to indicate the mischievous nature of the question.

The audience's vantage point, to be aware of the king's disguise, as well as Halli's knowledge of it, makes the joke even funnier. If it were anyone but the king asking if he had been fucked, would Halli have responded the same way? His retort only works because we know that it is the king, and Halli knows that he is indeed of higher rank. Halli is deferential yet insulting, and this contrast between his insolence and the polite tone of the piece also adds to the comedic effect. Richard Perkins notes that, 'to his question *sarð hann yðr eigi Agði?* Haraldr is, doubtless, expecting an affirmative answer from Halli and to be able to make merry over this.'⁴⁹⁸ Agði is believed to be the *landvættir* or land guardian of Agdenes; sex is the debt to be paid for arriving there, as Perkins discusses:

If Agði had control of the waters around Agdenes, he could probably grant safe passage into the fjord and to Trondheim and away to other places south, west and north from Agdenes. One may assume, then, that Agði demanded sexual services from those passing through his territory.⁴⁹⁹

This chimes with one of Bakhtin's observations that 'The parts of the giants' dismembered bodies and their houseware, scattered throughout France, had an obviously grotesque character.'⁵⁰⁰ The equating of geographical features with giants or supernatural figures is also evident in northern Europe, as Perkins considers that the geographical nature of the peninsula could imply an entry and thus a penetration point, as it projects up northwards as the entrance to Trondheimsfjorden.⁵⁰¹ As mentioned above in relation to *Ölkofra þáttur*, this idea resonates with the sense of a literal and figurative lowering to earth; the king using comedy and crudeness to demean Halli for his own amusement. But Halli reciprocates, and surpasses the king, recognising that the king has further to fall. The vision of Halli being bugged is transferred to the king as recipient of Agði's advances. Much like the insult slung to Flosi by Skarphéðinn in *Njáls saga* about his role as the bride of Svínfellsáss,⁵⁰² among other similar *níð-*

⁴⁹⁸ Perkins, 'Trondheim,' 208.

⁴⁹⁹ Perkins, 'Trondheim,' 201.

⁵⁰⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 342.

⁵⁰¹ Perkins, 'Trondheim,' 207-208.

⁵⁰² The scene appears in *Njáls saga*, ch. 123, 314. 'Síðan tók Skarphéðinn til sín slæðurnar, en kastaði brókum blám til Flosa ok kvað hann þeira meir þurfa. Flosi mælti: 'Hví mun ek þeira meir þurfa?' Skarphéðinn mælti: 'Því þá – ef þú ert brúðr Svínfellsáss, sem sagt er, hverja ina níundu nótt ok geri hann þik at konu.' 'Then Skarphéðinn took the cloak himself and threw black breeches at Flosi, and said he had more need of them. Flosi said, "Why would I need them more?" Skarphéðinn said, "Because, if you are the bride of the Svínfellsás, as it is said, every ninth night he uses you as a woman.'" This is considered an example of *yki*; see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Ekki kosta munur,' 40-44 for further discussion. Also Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 9-11 and 16.

based insults, the idea of being bugged by a supernatural being rather than by a human male is even more depraved. The king had not anticipated this response, and the smile quickly fades. It is he who was abusive first, but not last; that is the problem. However, Halli is in all other respects submissive to the king, enters his court, and a friendship based on mockery ensues. Jacques le Goff discusses this phenomenon:

A chronology of the progressive liberation of laughter in the High Middle Ages has been compiled. The thirteenth century sees the appearance of two new types of laughter related to the social classes: 'curial' laughter, the laughter of the royal court with the king himself (*rex facetus*) and his comic mirror the joker, the king's fool, and the urban and carnivalesque laughter described by Bakhtin and critiqued by Gurevich (1988).⁵⁰³

From this perspective, the Bakhtinian sense of laughter liberating from censorship (and treason) is dependent on King Haraldr's participation in the merriment; certainly his response to ridicule is more reciprocal and convivial than that of the *goðar* in *Qlkofra þátttr*. Halli, in the role of comic mirror, amuses himself and the king by mocking anyone he is able to, or feels deserves it. The king, as the saga reminds us a few times, finds Halli *jafnan gaman*,⁵⁰⁴ even when he himself becomes the butt of the joke, as is the case when he boasts of a great treasure:

'Hefir þú sét betri øxi?' 'Eigi ætla ek,' segir Halli. 'Villtu láta serðask til øxarinnar?' segir konungr. 'Eigi,' segir Halli, 'en várkunn þykki mér yðr, at þér vilið svá selja sem þér keyptuð.' 'Svá skal vera, Halli,' segir konungr, 'tak með, ok njót manna bezt, gefin var mér, enda skal svá selja.'⁵⁰⁵

Again, trading insults over a depraved act of buggery culminates in a symbolic and powerful slur. In each of these cases the king initiated the vulgarity, and in doing so perhaps gives permission to interact on this level. Halli proves himself to be as skilled in joke-making as he is in composing poetry. His audacity is rewarded, which the queen considers most unfair, and the king's defence is that he can do what he likes with his possessions and in doing so strives not to

⁵⁰³ Jacques Le Goff, 'Laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga*,' *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 161.

⁵⁰⁴ *Sneglu-Halla þátttr*, ch. 9, 293. 'always entertaining.'

⁵⁰⁵ *Sneglu-Halla þátttr*, ch. 10, 294. "Have you seen a better axe?" "I don't think so," said Halli. "Will you allow yourself to be fucked for the axe?" said the king. "No," said Halli, "but it seems understandable to me that you would want to pass it on in the same way you received it." "It shall be so, Halli," said the king, "take it now and get the greatest pleasure from it; as it was given to me that is how I will pass it on."

make Halli's words worse, *þeim er tvíræði eru*.⁵⁰⁶ Thus, it is not certain if the king was entertained by this, or, as Meulengracht Sørensen says, the king has to give Halli the sword otherwise it will look like he really was fucked for it.⁵⁰⁷ Perhaps this is a peculiar example of gift exchange: Halli, as a poor Icelander, can only give the king jokes and poetry in exchange for entrance to Norway and the axe. In both cases the king speaks with greater vulgarity than Halli, who returns the insult using potent visual imagery instead. Such quick and clever thinking is often admired in the sagas, and it is difficult to tell if there is any admiration in the king's bestowal of the gift, or simply quiet resignation and anger at having been outdone again. There is a sense of the king being a foil to Halli's joker, in accordance with Bakhtin's belief that 'the medieval culture of folk humor actually belonged to all the people. The truth of laughter embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it.'⁵⁰⁸ Therefore the uncrowning effect here is achieved by bringing the king down to the level of the populous through humour. Having gained Haraldr's trust, Halli is prepared to take his comedy even further, and the final use of the word *serða* comes from him:

Konungrinn gekk at sjá hestinn, ok var mikill ok feitr. Halli var þar hjá, er hestrinn hafði úti sinina. Halli kvað þá:

Sýr es ávallt,
hefr saurugt allt
hestr Þjóðólfs erðr,
hann es dróttinserðr.

‘Tví, tví,’ segir konungr, ‘hann kemr aldri í mína eigu at þessu.’⁵⁰⁹

The horse's erection – in close proximity to the king – is grotesque and comical. The large and fat horse adds to the comedic perversity, much like the one in *Ǫlkofra þáttr*, and once again the king is placed in the position of being a passive recipient in a deviant sex act. It is also a slur on Þjóðólfr as owner of the horse. However, there is a palpable shift in power compared with the episodes

⁵⁰⁶ *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, ch. 10, 294. ‘Those that are ambiguous.’

⁵⁰⁷ See Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 27.

⁵⁰⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 82.

⁵⁰⁹ *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, ch. 10, 294-295, including verse 14. ‘The king went to see the horse, and it was big and fat. Halli was standing there when the horse stuck out his penis. Halli spoke a verse:

“Always a sow,
Þjóðólfr's horse has
a completely filthy cock,
he is a master fucker.”

“Dear dear,” said the king, “he will never come into my possession like that.”

above, as it seems that the pair have finally become a double act: Halli's entertainment and poetic skills are still evident, yet it is he who is the most vulgar here, leaving the king to have the pleasure of the final word, not to mention a sharp punchline.

A sense of balance is re-established at the very end of the *páttr*. After many jokes on the subject of sex and sodomy, the only ejaculation could be said to belong to Halli, who dies after eating porridge. The king gets the last word on this:

Halli fór til Íslands ok bjó þar. Eyddusk honum penningar, ok lagðisk hann í útróðr, ok eitt sinn fekk hann andróða svá mikinn, at þeir tóku nauðuliga land. Ok um kveldit var borinn fyrir Halla grautr, ok er hann hafði etit fá bita, hnígr hann aptr ok var þá dauðr. Haraldr spurði lát tveggja hirðmanna sinna af Íslandi, Bolla ins prúða ok Sneglu-Halla. Hann svaraði svá til Bolla: 'Fyrir dǫrrum mun drenginn hnigit hafa.' En til Halla sagði hann svá: 'Á grauti myndi greyit sprungit hafa.'⁵¹⁰

This relates to Halli buying porridge in an earlier chapter, which had given the implication that the king did not feed his men adequately. When Haraldr became aware of this, incensed, he tried to force Halli to eat an excessive amount of it. On his return to Iceland, the saga reports that Halli's life was far from glamorous, suggesting that he suited the role of court fool more than he did a farming life. The unheroic, poverty-stricken death and the king's assessment of it are not sexual, but in their comedy and baseness provide a fitting end to the saga; finally the king gets the last laugh and one up on Halli. King Haraldr's image of Halli may not be as potent as those of a king being buggered, yet he creates an *argr* legacy for Halli, dying in a shameful, comedic way. Bakhtin comments:

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. The

⁵¹⁰ *Sneglu-Halla páttr*, ch. 10, 295. 'Halli went to Iceland and lived there. He wasted all his money and took up fishing, and once he had such difficulty rowing that they just made it back to land. And that evening Halli was brought porridge, and when he had eaten a few bites, he fell backwards and was instantly dead. Haraldr learned of the deaths of two of his courtiers from Iceland, Bolli the Elegant and Sarcastic Halli. He said of Bolli, "The hero must have dropped down dead in a hail of spears." And of Halli he said, "The idiot must have burst eating porridge."'

common human fund of familiar and abusive gesticulations is also based on these sharply defined images.⁵¹¹

This encapsulates what we have observed of the king: he has instigated many discussions about obscene sex, tried to force Halli to overeat, and has shown himself to be an abusive (if fairly forgiving) king. Halli did not burst, yet as the final dialogue and penultimate sentence of the saga it is an enduring image, made all the more comical in contrast to Bolli's honourable death. A correlation between the stomach and anus is made on a rune stick, which could be pertinent to this episode:

Runar jak risti
a rikjanda træ,
sva reð sar riki mǫgr:
æsir a ardagum,
hullar auk bullar
mæli þær ars sum magi.⁵¹²

Barnes suggests that, though the meaning of the last line is unclear, it is most likely proposing that both are full and the person this is directed towards is a glutton.⁵¹³ Thus if the anus and stomach are related, they are similar vestibules to be filled and containers for dubious fluids – one wonders if there is a grotesque joke couched in the substance of porridge or if it is simply a continuation of the theme. The king was unable to get to Halli's bottom directly, but now does so through his stomach.

2.3. Rude graffiti in *Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa*

We have already seen grotesque elements of *Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa* in Chapter 2, in particular the *Grámagafllim*. Björn and Þórðr's feud includes many sexual insults, each man trying to undermine the masculinity of the other in order to justify his rightful ownership of Oddný, Þórðr's wife and Björn's previous betrothed. Having reached an agreement not to compose poetry about each

⁵¹¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 319.

⁵¹² Michael Barnes, *Runes: A Handbook*. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 110. Rune Stick DR SCHL3 from Schleswig, Germany, dated to c. 1050-1100. Translation: §A Runes I carved on [a] scrap wood/driftwood/___ tree [could also be from *hrekka*, to trick, or be mischievous]. Thus §B interpreted the mighty boy: Gods in [the] days of yore, §C Hurly-burllys may they speak to you §D [your] arse as [your] stomach.

On 110-111, Michael Barnes notes that the language is 'mock-pompous' which makes the baseness of the last line funnier, resonating with the Bakhtinian sense of bringing people down to earth.

⁵¹³ Barnes, *Runes*, 111. He also proposes that *hullar* and *bullar* are filler words, since they are not documented elsewhere. If so, I would speculate that they are employed with an onomatopoeic emphasis to indicate hurling or churning of the stomach.

other (after a malicious verse from Þórðr),⁵¹⁴ Björn finds an inventive, non-verbal way to take vengeance:

Þess er nú við getit, at hlutr sá fannsk í hafnarmarki Þórðar, er þvígít vinveittligra þótti; þat váru karlar tveir, ok hafði annarr hǫtt blán á hǫfði; þeir stóðu lútir, ok horfði annarr eptir ǫðrum. Þat þótti illr fundr, ok mæltu menn, at hvárskis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð.⁵¹⁵

In the same style as Broddi's build-up of derogatory detail, the narrative appears to take pleasure in reporting the illustration thoroughly, albeit in typically understated and neutral tone, but the detail of the depraved positions and intention of the men is implicit in no uncertain terms. The reaction to the graffiti is also communicated, and thus confirms that the public humiliation is already underway.

The location of the graffiti assumes Þórðr to be its intended victim, stigmatising him as the most depraved on account of his position as passive partner. It is interesting that neither party is considered good, and it invites the question as to whether Björn is the aggressor in the illustration. Meulengracht Sørensen notes that phallic aggression was known in medieval Iceland, and accordingly usually exonerated the active party from accusations of perversity:

The aspect of homosexuality which finds expression in *níð* can best be understood from the concept of 'phallic aggression'. It is recognised that the sexual act can be impelled by aggression rather than by libido; and phallic aggression in a homosexual situation is well known both in non-Christian cultures – where at times it was an officially recognised phenomenon – and in subcultures within our own cultural environment.⁵¹⁶

Therefore, regardless of the identity of the aggressor, the narrative takes pleasure in creating an image of Þórðr rendered grotesque, vulnerable and comedic at the same time. If we return to the gossip category of *Open Criticism* discussed in Chapter 2, people would have immediately come to the conclusion

⁵¹⁴ See Finlay, 'Níð in BSH,' 166-167 for a list of their offenses against each other, the public reaction and legal consequences.

⁵¹⁵ *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, ch. 17, 154-155. 'It is now mentioned, that something was found at Þórðr's harbour mark, which was not deemed particularly friendly; there were two men, and one of them had a black hood over his head; they stood stooped, and one stood behind the other. It was considered an unpleasant union and people said that neither party was decent, of those who stood there, but it was even worse for the one who stood in front.' A similar example of carved *níð*, and wording, appears in *Gísla saga*, ch. 2, 10, where Skeggi asks a smith to 'gera mannlíkan eptir Gísla ok Kolbírni, – "ok skal annarr standa aptar en annarr, ok skal níð þat standa ávallt, þeim til háðungar.'" 'to make an effigy of Gísli and Kolbjörn, – "and one shall stand behind the other, and this *níð* will always stand to their shame.'" This episode is discussed extensively in the 'Peace and honour' chapter in *TUM*.

⁵¹⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 27.

that Björn was the perpetrator of the graffiti (and depicted himself in the superior position) and consequently condemned both men for their petty feud, rather than pity Þórðr for being the victim. Ström proposes it is important to the role of *níð* in the saga that we recognise that no third party is involved; in this case it not only demonstrates that Þórðr is not a man, but also that Björn most definitely is as the active partner.⁵¹⁷ Perhaps this could, by implication, suggest that Björn has had sex with Þórðr's wife because Þórðr is a deviant incapable of normal sexual relations; this resonates well with Alison Finlay's point that 'the sexual element in the abuse not only alludes to but actually helps to inform us of the adulterous relationship ... between Björn and Þórðr's wife Oddný.'⁵¹⁸ Björn, unable to restrain himself, composes an accompanying verse that secures his responsibility for the graffiti:

Þá kvað Björn vísu:

Standa stýrilundar
staðar;
glíkr es geira sækir
gunnsterkr at því verki;
stendr af stála lundi
styrr Þórrøði fyrri.

Þórði þótti ill sú tiltekja ok hneisa, er níð var reist í landi hans, ok hafði þetta á hendr Birni; ok eigi þótti honum yfirbót í vísunni, er Björn orti, ok reið nú um vart eptir til Bjarnar við sex tigu manna ok stefndi honum til alþingis um níðreising ok vísu.⁵¹⁹

While the verse inevitably would have been repeated far and wide and delighted audiences with its depraved illustration, that privilege is not extended to the reader on account of the lacuna in the verse. Kari Ellen Gade suggests that this was an attempt in later centuries to preserve ancestors' dignity:

The *vísa* that accompanies the episode with the *níðstengr* is incomplete, for the pertinent five and a half lines have been deleted

⁵¹⁷ Ström, *Moral Attitudes*, 14, and Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 57.

⁵¹⁸ Finlay, '*Níð in BSH*,' 158.

⁵¹⁹ *Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa*, ch. 17, 155, including verse 20. 'Then Björn spoke a verse:

"Stand the helmsmen ... of places ...
The valiant warrior [invoker of spears]
Is suited to this deed;
The steel-wielder troubles
Þórðr, standing in front."

Þórðr considered this contrivance to be malicious and a disgrace, that *níð* was raised on his land, and he held Björn responsible for it; and to him it seemed there was no compensation in the stanza, which Björn had composed, and in the following spring he rode to Björn with sixty men and summoned him to the Alþingi for the erection of *níð* and the stanza.'

from the manuscripts. That *vísa* also occurs in the grammatical treatise of Óláfr hvítaskáld but lacks the same lines. There is no reason to believe that a medieval sense of modesty prevented the recording of those lines; the poem must have contained those words which would incur severe legal penalties. Since the descendants of the saga characters might still be alive in Iceland at the time the saga was composed, the poem was censored.⁵²⁰

If this is the case, one wonders whose dignity was most at stake: Þórðr's for humiliation, or Björn's for obscenity. Despite the lacuna, the extant fragments of verse are rich in metaphor that accentuate the combative element of the union; the active partner is a steel-wielder, attacking with his own spear-like instrument. The metaphors may be employed simply as an extension of conventional penis imagery, or perhaps the spearing represents the damage Björn wants to imagine for Þórðr's bottom, for the emphasis on sharp objects points towards inflicting on the *argr* party an extension of the *klámhogg*, in this case injuring the internal cavity rather than simply the buttocks. It may also suggest that the active partner is not doing this willingly but as a violent act of combat; certainly the indication of anger, the martial kennings and the hooded head corroborate this. If Björn is implicating himself in the poem as the aggressor, is he suggesting that the active helmsman is suited to the act of buggery, or defeating his opponent with aggression? Perhaps in this case it is also a cheeky commentary on the active partner's penis: how well endowed he is with this most suitable of weapons, how stout, strong, full of stamina.⁵²¹

In agreement with Meulengracht Sørensen's phallic aggression observations, unless Þórðr has already been mentioned in the lacuna, the last line acts as a punchline, ensuring, if it was not already clear enough, that Þórðr is recognised as the sodomised party, and the burden of perversity rests with him. This bears a similar message to that found on an obscene rune stick in Oslo:

§A huæssø:for:mal:pet:er þu:reist i kroskirkiu (???)
§B ole er oskøynt auk stöpen i rasen
§A uæl:for þet⁵²²

⁵²⁰ Kari Ellen Gade, 'Homosexuality and Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature,' *Scandinavian Studies* 58:2 (1986), 135.

⁵²¹ Also discussed as 'the proud boast of the aggressor' in Finlay, '*Níð in BsH*,' 170. Meulengracht Sørensen notes that the active party in acts of phallic aggression was also shamed from a Christian point of view, and also possibly for performing 'a disloyal act'; see *TUM*, 28.

⁵²² Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes*, 196. Rune stick A322 from Oslogt. 6, Gamlebyen, Oslo, dated to c. 1200. Translation: §A How did that saying go that you carved at the Cross Church? (???) §B Óli is unwiped and fucked in the arse §A That went well.

As Spurkland notes, the Old Norse word *mál* has many meanings, including matter, meeting, speech, or statement; he prefers the latter. Cleasby-Vigfússon notes that *mál* has an alternative

Graphically crude, the penetrated man is given prominence to the exclusion of all else; his aggressor is unknown and unnecessary for the insult to be effective. Uncrowning relies on the comedy of orifices and humiliation to shame the injured party, and indeed, to return to *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* it is suggested that they do not take *svá ljótt mál* (such an ugly matter) to the Alþingi. Yet that would not suit Björn's campaign to make his verse and accusations well known: to ruin Þórðr the grotesque vision of him needs to be seen and heard by as many people as possible.⁵²³ Later in the saga, Þórðr redresses the balance with a symbolic uncrowning of his own by decapitating Björn. However, as Laurence de Looze points out, 'severing speech from the body'⁵²⁴ causes Þórðr even more distress, as Oddný's health deteriorates after hearing of Björn's death. Similarly, Þórðr is forced to pay out large sums of compensation for the killing, and thus finishes his own uncrowning that Björn started.

2.4. The Norwegian's bottom in *Fóstbrœðra saga*

The bestial theme is a prominent and heavily relied upon form of insult throughout the saga canon that can quickly sour a man's reputation. In *Fóstbrœðra saga* this is conveyed in a scene that combines comparison to female animals with a *klámhogg*. At the end of the Battle of Stiklastaðir, Þormóðr composes verses and grieves for King Óláfr. The scene in the tent where the men seek recovery is already gruesome, creating a strong image of the carnage of the wounded post-battle:

Þar váru margir menn mjök sárir, ok lét hátt í holsárum manna eða hǫfuðsárum, sem náttúra er til stórsára. Bóndi nam staðar í hlöðunni ok hlýddisk þaðan um; ok er hann heyrði, at hátt lét í holsárum manna, þá mælti hann: 'Þat er ván, at konunginum hafi lítt gengit bardaginn við böendr, svá þróttlaust lið sem þetta er, at honum hefir fylgt, því at mér þykkir svá mega at kveða, at þeir þoli eigi óæpandi sár sín, ok eru þetta fýlur, en ekki dugandi menn.' Þormóðr svarar: 'Sýnisk þér svá, félagi, sem þeir sé eigi þróttmiklir, er hér eru inni?' 'Já,' segir hann, 'svá sýnisk mér sem hér sé flestir menn of þreklausastir saman komnir.' Þormóðr svarar: 'Vera kann þat, at nokkurr sé sá hér inni, at eigi sé þrekmikill, ef til er reynt, ok eigi mun

meaning of 'a drawing' in the sense of effigies and ornaments on weaponry, and one wonders if, with the sense of a crude depiction, that may also be apt here. Spurkland translates the last statement, *vel fór þat*, as 'that sounds great.' See Gade, 'Homosexuality and Rape of Males,' for analysis of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Norwegian laws and penitential texts concerning sodomy.

⁵²³ See *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, ch. 17, 156. Björn's penalty is three marks of silver for the verse and *nið*-raising, which is much less that Þórðr incurs for lesser offences; see Finlay, '*Nið* in *BsH*,' 171.

⁵²⁴ de Looze, 'Poetic Process,' 487. Finlay notes that removing the head of abusive poets happens here and in *Njáls saga*; see '*Nið* in *BsH*,' 162-163.

þér mitt sár mikit þykkja, þótt þú hyggir at því.' Bóndi svarar: 'Ek ætla þá væri betr, at þú hefðir bæði mǫrg ok stór.' Snýr bóndi þá útar eptir hlöðunni ok ætlaði út at ganga. Í því hǫgg Þormóðr eptir honum. Þat hǫgg kom á baki, ok hjó hann af honum báða þjóhnappana. 'Styn þú eigi nú,' kvað Þormóðr. Bóndi kvað við hátt með miklum skræk ok þreif til þjóhnappanna báðum höndum. Þormóðr mælti: 'Þat vissa ek, at vera myndi hér inni nokkurr maðr, sá er eigi myndi þróttigr reynask; er þér illa saman farit, er þú finnr at þrek annarra manna, þar er þú ert þróttlauss sjálf. Eru hér margir menn mjök sárir, ok vælar engi þeira, en þú bræktir sem geit blæsma ok veinar sem merr, þó at þú hafir eina vǫðvaskeinu litla.'⁵²⁵

Here there is hyperbole from all sides. Note that the narration does not focus on the noises the casualties make, but rather paints a picture of pain and suffering endured by brave men on the side we have been following; it is the wounds themselves that are the source of sounds rather than the men, as reiterated by Þormóðr. Though it is unlikely they suffer in silence, their plight is muted, making the farmer's cries more shameful.

The farmer's sense of superiority and antagonism of the casualties is transferred directly onto Þormóðr, and the argument becomes personal. The farmer was foolish to expect no recriminations for his goading, and even more so to turn his back on Þormóðr, which is naturally taken advantage of when he is struck with a *klámhǫgg*. Þormóðr's warning, not to groan, could be taken as sarcastic or threatening, or both, but the farmer is in too much pain to heed his words and the narration delights in the gory and farcical image of him clutching his buttocks with both hands, howling in pain. There are many examples of *klámhǫgg* in the sagas, but not all contain such moralising or are the most appropriate punishment to fit the crime.⁵²⁶ This *klámhǫgg* is delivered with a

⁵²⁵ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 24, 272-273. (*Flateyjarbók*). 'There were many men there gravely wounded, and their gaping wounds or head wounds made terrible noises, which is what happens with large wounds. A farmer came into the barn and listened; when he heard that the flesh wounds were making loud noises, he said: "It is no wonder that the king had little success in his battle with us farmers, with such a feeble group of men following him. It seems to me that they can't tolerate their wounds without crying out, and are dirty, uncourageous men." Þormóðr said, "So it seems to you, my man, that those in here are lacking in courage?" "Yes," he said, "it seems to me that here is a gathering of the most pitiful men." Þormóðr replied, "It could be, that someone in here lacks courage, if we search, and you wouldn't think my wound so serious if you thought about it." The farmer answered, "I would prefer it if you had larger ones, and more of them." The farmer turned around and made for the door. At that moment Þormóðr struck his behind. The blow made contact with his backside, and cut off both buttocks. "Don't whine now," said Þormóðr. The farmer let out a loud scream and grabbed his buttocks with both hands. Þormóðr said, "I knew that there was a certain man here, who would prove himself not to be so mighty; you fare badly, that you question the courage of other men, when you yourself are lacking in bravery. Here are many men severely wounded, and not one of them complains, but you bleat like a goat in heat and whine like a mare, though you only have a little flesh wound.'"

⁵²⁶ Examples of *klámhǫgg* include: Bersi in *Kormáks saga* (ch. 12, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis), Sóti in *Hallfreðar saga* (ch. 2), Björn's death in *Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa* (ch. 32), and Jökull wielding his sword *Ættartangi* in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ch. 29). Meulengracht Sørensen discusses these and others, see *TUM*, 68-69.

moral message: the farmer is made *argr* physically and verbally, not only compared to a goat and mare in heat, but also subordinate to the men he has just mocked for being so.⁵²⁷ It is sweet justice, a final show of strength, not only for the men in the tent, but also in the greater scheme of fighting in the name of King Óláfr, which Þormóðr is until his imminent death.

In regard to Bakhtin's theory, this is an uncrowning; the farmer may have been on the winning side of the battle, but he has just lost to Þormóðr's stamina, wit and ongoing loyalty to the king. Despite the legal penalties for inflicting a *klámhogg* (at least, in contexts outside of organised conflict), there is very little the farmer can do apart from leave in pain and shame. His apathy and inability to repay the wound could be seen as another attribute of his *argr* nature. Dark humour is brought to the scene in another way: of the many orifices and grotesque passageways in this scene, Þormóðr creates a new one for this man who has managed to be involved in one of the biggest battles in Norwegian history and come out unscathed – one wonders if his lack of battlewounds is also a signifier of an *argr* persona.

The variations in treatment of the scene in manuscripts reveal how important the grotesque is in making such insults more profound and memorable. *Hauksbók* offers an abridged version of the episode:

Þormóðr segir: 'Sýnisk þér svá sem eigi sé þróttigir þeir menn, sem hér eru inni?' Hann svarar: 'Svá sýnisk mér víst, at hér sé margir menn þreklausir saman komnir.' Þormóðr mælti: Svá má vera sá sé hér nokkurr maðr í hlöðunni inni, er eigi sé þrekmikill, ok eigi mun þér sýnask sár mitt mikit.' Bóndi gengr at Þormóði ok vildi sjá sár hans. En Þormóðr sveipar øxinni til hans ok særir hann miklu sári. Sá kvað við hátt ok stundi fast. Þormóðr mælti þá: 'Þat vissa ek, at vera mundi nokkurr sá maðr inni, er þreklauss myndi vera. Er þér illa saman farit, leitar á þrek annarra manna, því at þú ert þreklauss sjálfr. Eru hér margir menn mjök sárir, ok stynr engi þeira, en þeim er ósjálfrátt, þótt hátt láti í sárum þeira; en þú stynr ok veinar, þó at þú hafi fengit eitt lítit sár.'⁵²⁸

⁵²⁷ In 'Monstrous Allegations,' Finlay cites Simon Teuscher's survey of attitudes towards animals in saga texts and observes that comparing a man to a goat, sheep or sow is common: the more domestic the animal, the more humiliating the insult; see 28.

⁵²⁸ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 24, 273-274. (*Hauksbók*). 'Þormóðr said, "So it seems to you that those in here are not brave?" He answered, "It definitely seems to me that here is a gathering of weaklings." Þormóðr replied, "It could be, that someone in here lacks courage, and you wouldn't think my wound a bad one." The farmer went towards Þormóðr and wanted to see his wound. But Þormóðr swung an axe at him and inflicted a severe wound on him. He let out a loud scream and deep groan. Then Þormóðr said, "I knew that someone in here was pathetic. You are an idiot for questioning the bravery of other men, when you yourself are cowardly. You are a hypocrite, looking for courage in other men when you lack such courage yourself. Here are many men who are severely wounded, but none of them whine, and they cannot help that their wounds make sounds; but you whine and whimper over one little injury."

The focus shifts away from his bottom and only mentions the sounds of wounds versus his bleating, creating a verbal rather than holistic picture of a grotesque scene. In the *Flateyjabók* version, Þormóður was given a direct line of attack to penetrate the man's buttocks when he turned away from him. In this version, the farmer braves coming closer to Þormóður to see his wound and is lured in before being attacked. The description does not make clear that it was a strike to the buttocks; in fact, there is no mention at all of where the axe meets the farmer's flesh, though the scene paints a picture of the farmer facing Þormóður. This does not seem to be as important here as the sound that the man makes; again, this is in contrast to those around him, vindicating Þormóður's actions. The focus is directed to the farmer's insult and remedying it to balance the situation and reveal what a cowardly hypocrite he is.

So, like *Qlkofra þátr*, is *níð* necessary to the uncrowning or not? It is a livelier scene with it, and the insults Þormóður uses about the noises emanating from the farmer make a lot more sense in the context of belittling him with a *níðhogg* than a wound elsewhere on his body. Perhaps the reader of *Hauksbók* can postulate on the whereabouts of the injury from the suggestive verbs used to describe his whining. Þormóður did not aim to kill the man immediately, for then he would not have had the pleasure of the pain he feels, and the delight in pointing out his hypocrisy. In many ways this can be achieved without the *níð* symbolism, but in the context of battle and open wounds, it reduces his masculinity even further. These warriors were wounded in conflict; the Norwegian farmer is injured and uncrowned for a throwaway remark, ironically about their lack of courage.

In summary, the sense of uncrowning presented here is to bring people who deem themselves superior back to earth. Halli's mockery of King Haraldr in Norway offers a straightforward example of a dignitary demeaned, but, since Iceland does not have a king, this has posed an interesting challenge to the theory. Broddi's quarrel offers an analogy of the uncrowning within Iceland's smaller hierarchy; though lacking in divine right, the *goðar* are powerful, and the risk Broddi takes in criticising them is no less dangerous than Halli's. The scene in *Fóstbræðra saga* presents another interesting case: the Norwegian has already seen the king uncrowned, and now lauds his victory over the wounded losing side. Þormóður redresses the balance with a symbolic dethroning. Similarly, Björn and Þórðr's argument is between two equals, but in competing for the prized possession that is Oddný, Þórðr is triumphant – at least superficially – in his marriage to her. Björn's relentless siege with witty verses

and guile chips away at his opponent's established power and ensures there is little admiration left for him.

3. Exaggeration

Bakhtin says that 'exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style.'⁵²⁹ This can be applied to all the sources discussed here, but some rely on excessive grotesqueness for entertainment value more than others. Descriptions of supernatural phenomena especially provide a foundation for creative exaggeration.

3.1. Þorsteinn and Skjaldvör in *Þorsteins þátr uxafóts*

In this short tale, a scene of Þorsteinn wrestling with a troll-woman combines elements of exaggeration with a gross representation of femininity and the supernatural, creating a carnivalesque scene that builds to a stomach-churning climax. The hero Þorsteinn revels in the trials of strength, tenacity, and tolerance of revolting bodily fluids, earning a great reputation and the esteem from his father that he desired, and the episode provides the audience with a humorous and intimate portrait of trollish domesticity. It is the humour and hyperbolic grotesque of the situation that create a reassurance that Þorsteinn, though in a tight spot, will come out alive.⁵³⁰

On an errand, Þorsteinn comes across a young female troll, discreetly follows her home and then stumbles upon her mother, Skjaldvör:

Þorsteinn sér, at kona liggir í sænginni, ef konu skyldi kalla. Hon var bæði há ok digr ok at öllu tröllslig; hon var stórskorin mjök í andliti, en álitis bæði svört ok blá. Hon lá í einum silkiserk; hann var því líkastr sem hann væri þveginn í mannablóði. Flagðit var þá í svefni ok hraut ógurliga hátt. Skjöldr ok sverð hekk uppi yfir henni. Þorsteinn steig upp á rekkjustokkinn ok tók ofan sverðit ok brá. Hann fletti þá klæðum af flagðinu; sá hann þá, at hon var öll alloðin, nema einn dæli undir inni vinstri hendi sá hann, at snöggr var. Þat þóttist hann vita, at annathvært mundi hana þar járn bíta eðr hvergi annars staðar. Hann leggur sverðinu á þessum sama flekk ok fellr á hjöltin. Sverðit bítr svá, at oddrinn stóð í dýnunni. Kerling vaknaði þá, ok eigi við góðan draum, ok fálmaði höndunum ok spratt upp. Þorsteinn hefir allan einn rykkinn, at hann slökkvir ljósit ok stökkur upp yfir flagðit í sængina. En hon hleypr fram á gólfit ok ætlar, at

⁵²⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 303. In this section Bakhtin's interpretation of exaggeration is used rather than that implied by *yki*, the Old Norse term for exaggeration, as delineated above.

⁵³⁰ This is confirmed by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, who says that 'Scholars tend to align giantesses with the forces of nature against culture and the hegemonic social order, therefore inevitably being conquered by the saga heroes.' See *BWP*, 60.

vegandinn muni til dyranna leitast hafa; en er hon kemr þar, sæfist hon á sverðinu ok deyr.⁵³¹

Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir says that in the sagas a monster such as this ‘embodies and mirrors not only the fears and anxieties but also the desires of the culture that produces it.’⁵³² This extends to deviant sexual practices; she also notes that women’s bodies are often only described when they are deeply unattractive or unusually large.⁵³³ In relation to this interpretation, the comedy derives from the creation of and immediate undermining of Skjaldvör’s femininity. Þorsteinn sees a woman in bed, dressed in a nightgown; in terms of a human equivalent this would be a romantic and sensual scene, but the notion is quickly brought down to earth with *ef konu skyldi kalla*. The narrative lingers on every feature of the troll-woman’s grotesque body in such a way that it is as if we are seeing her from Þorsteinn’s point of view, slowly taking in the scene before him. It is a feast for the senses, and the combination of superlatives, understatement and emphatic extremes build a picture of a monstrous ogress: the ugly face, the furred body, the loud snoring. The brief glimpse of sensuality with the delicate luxury of a silk nightdress is shattered when it is revealed to be soaked with human blood, highlighting her foulness even more in contrast.

There are episodes in the sagas where sword penetration may be compared to sexual penetration, and such an analysis would seem fitting here. Þorsteinn’s removal of Skjaldvör’s clothes and inspection of the body beforehand construct a sense of foreplay, if not worse; certainly Helga Kress believes so: ‘Er drápinu lýst sem nauðgun, sverð og reður verða eitt.’⁵³⁴ Though Skjaldvör’s weak spot is not a traditional erogenous zone, its smoothness, vulnerability and marked difference can be perceived as a representation of the

⁵³¹ *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*, *ÍF* 13, edited by Þórhallur Vilmondarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), ch. 10, 360-361. ‘Þorsteinn saw that a woman was lying in the bed, if she could be called a woman. She was both tall and stout and completely troll-like; she was very haggard of face, and black and blue in appearance. She was lying in a silk dress; it looked as if it had been washed in blood. The ogress was at that moment asleep and snored very loudly. A shield and sword hung above her. Þorsteinn climbed up on the bedframe, took the sword down, and brandished it. He stripped the clothes off the ogress, and saw then that she was completely covered in fur all over, except for one spot under her left armpit, which he saw was bald. It seemed clear to him that iron would pierce her here or nowhere at all. He thrust the sword in that spot and weighed down on the hilt. The sword penetrated so that the point struck the mattress. The old woman woke then, and not from a good dream, and felt around with her hands and jumped up. In one swift movement Þorsteinn put out the light and jumped up over the ogress into the bed. But she ran across the floor and expected that the slayer would have aimed for the door, but when she got there she fell unconscious on the sword and died.’

⁵³² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 60-61, discusses the many roles of giantesses, predominantly in *fornaldarsögur*, in relation to monster theory by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen.

⁵³³ See Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 64.

⁵³⁴ Helga Kress, *Máttugar Meyjar*, 123. ‘The killing is described as a rape; sword and penis become one.’ She sees it as a rape on account of his removal of her clothes and the way he plunges his sword into the sleeping woman.

human female sexual organ, in accordance with the 'displaced vagina' motif observed by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir and Uli Linke.⁵³⁵ Brandishing his sword in the context of the bed and description of the excessively powerful penetration – forcing his weight onto the hilt – is redolent enough of phallic aggression to create a grotesque parallel to a sex scene, as well as a new orifice. However, the mood is nothing but light, continuing with humorous understatement (she awakens, and 'not from a good dream') and the slapstick comedy of her groping for the wound and briefly chasing him reveals a delight in the opportunity for observational comedy of this absurd character. Such pleasure in the gory details is not extended so intricately to Þorsteinn's attacks on Skjaldvör's husband and daughter, who he takes out swiftly and dexterously following this encounter. Yet Þorsteinn's trial is not over, as Skjaldvör returns from the dead to offer even more grotesque farce:

Þorsteinn finnr þá, at þar var komin Skjaldvör kerling, ok var þá sýnu verri viðreignar en fyrr. Hon greyfist þá niðr at Þorsteini ok ætlar at bíta sundr í honum barkann. Þorsteini kemr þá í hug, at sá mun mikill vera, er skapat hefir himin ok jörð; hafði hann ok heyrt margar sögur ok merkiligar frá Óláfi konungi ok þeiri trú, er hann boðaði; heitr nú af hreinu hjarta ok heilum huga at taka við þeiri trú ok þjóna Óláfi, meðan hann lifði, ef hann kæmist heill ok lífs í brott, af allri kunnáttu. Ok er hon ætlaði tönnum at víkja at barka Þorsteins, en hann hafði staðfest heitit, kemr geisli inn í skálann ógurliga bjartr ok stendr þvert framan í augun kerlingar. Við þá sýn varð henni svá illt, at dró ór henni mátt ok magn allt. Hon tók þá at geispa niðörkliga. Hleypr þá ór henni spýja ok ofan í andlit Þorsteini, svá at nálíga helt honum við bana af illsku ok óþef þeim, er af stóð. Þykkir mönnum ok eigi örvænt, at í brjóst Þorsteini muni af komit hafa nökkurr partr, sakir þess at mönnum þykkir sem hann hafi eigi síðan dyggliga einhamr verit, hvárt er því veldr meir spýja Skjaldvarar eðr þat, at hann var út borinn. Liggr nú hvártveggja þeira í milli heims ok heljar, svá at þá mátti hvárki upp standa.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir notes sexual undertones in violence towards giantesses are made 'often by penetrating the giantess' body with a spear or arrow in the eys, genital area, or armpit, perhaps signifying a displaced vagina.' See *BWP*, 66. Linke discusses the displaced vagina with reference to Ymir creating the world; see Uli Linke, 'The theft of blood, the birth of men: cultural constructions of gender in medieval Iceland,' *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, edited by Gísli Pálsson (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 275.

⁵³⁶ *Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts*, ch. 11, 363-364. 'Þorsteinn then found that old Skjaldvör had returned and was much worse than before. She bent down over Þorsteinn and went to bite his windpipe in two. It occurred to Þorsteinn at that moment that he who had created Heaven and Earth must be very powerful. He had heard many interesting stories of King Óláfr and that faith which he followed, and he vowed with pure heart and full mind to accept that faith and serve Óláfr as best as he could as long as he lived, if he got through this safe and sound. And just as she intended to put her teeth to Þorsteinn's throat, and he had pledged his vow, an incredibly bright ray of light came into the hall and shone directly into the old woman's eyes. At that sight she became so ill that all her strength and might were drained from her. She started to yawn hideously. Then vomit poured from her and onto Þorsteinn's face, so that he could barely keep alive from the foulness and stench coming off it. People think it is not surprising that some of it reached Þorsteinn's breast, because it seemed to them that he did not always have a human form, either because of Skjaldvör's vomit or because he had been exposed [i.e. as a baby, to die]. They both lay there

The situation has been reversed: this time it is Skjaldvör who surprises Þorsteinn, and gets to be on top (in both senses). But in contrast to Þorsteinn's creation of a new orifice, Skjaldvör's attempt at savage penetration is less successful than his, hampered as she is by the power of his spiritual epiphany. At the end of their experience, the pair lie exhausted, prone, post climax. Þorsteinn is a changed man physically, as the saga reports, which echoes a comment by Bakhtin:

Actually, if we consider the grotesque image in its extreme aspect, it never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body. It is a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception.⁵³⁷

Skjaldvör is purged of blood, bile and energy, all orifices drained and convexities deflated. Þorsteinn is at once closer to God but also polluted by her vomit into a shape-shifter; thus it is both a christening and a farewell to the old Þorsteinn.

The grotesque and exaggeration are manifested in many forms here: the comedy of the sleeping beauty, the ferocity of each assault, and the combination of celestial light and copious vomit in the finale. The image of the vomiting mouth is hard to forget, and brings to mind Bakhtin's thoughts on the mouth as symbolic of the grotesque:

The grotesque ... is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines. Special attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside. ... But the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.⁵³⁸

Skjaldvör's mouth is unquestionably gaping, and the sheer volume of vomit intimated by the narrative creates the impression that it dominates and obscures the rest of her, not to mention Þorsteinn underneath. Though not a bodily protrusion in the sense that Bakhtin had intended, her vomit nonetheless envelops all in its path and forms a link to Þorsteinn's body: that it makes direct contact with his face and inevitably enters him creates a grotesque mouth-to-

between life and death as neither could get up.'

⁵³⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 318.

⁵³⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 316-7.

mouth, body-to-body connection between Þorsteinn and Skjaldvör that continues long after her death.

Unlike the uncrownings discussed earlier in this chapter, one wonders if there is a larger meaning at hand here. Skjaldvör is not uncrowned by Þorsteinn – admittedly it is his awakening that leads to her downfall – but it is the divine intervention that causes her to debase herself, piercing her eyes and bringing forth a stream of vomit, purging the innate filth from her insides. The grotesque depictions of Skjaldvör and exaggerated repulsiveness leading to her own death may imply that Christianity uncrowns the supernatural and the heathen.⁵³⁹ The Christian sentiment of the saga permeates the narrative at these key points, and when Þorsteinn’s friend seeks him out in the carnage he prays to God first; Christianity is once again given credit for their success. Shortly after this scene, Þorsteinn is acknowledged by the father who had snubbed him and the pair are baptised and welcomed into the king’s service.

3.2. Itchy thighs in *Þorleifs þátr jarlsskálds*

Þorsteinn and Skjaldvör’s wrestling is a powerful example of Old Norse slapstick; there is no dialogue, only action. In a similar vein, *Þorleifs þátr jarlsskálds* presents a scene of farcical mime that epitomises the ego of medieval dignitaries as much as it does the hyperbolic style of grotesque. Þorleifr disguises himself as an old beggar-man in order to get close to earl Hákon and seek vengeance for his companions, whose goods were stolen before they met their deaths at the earl’s hands. Sycophantic to the earl, Þorleifr’s deception goes unnoticed and he asks permission to compose a poem about him, claiming to have done so for other kings and earls, which delights Hákon:

Þá hefr karl upp kvæðit ok kveðr framan til miðs, ok þykkir jarli lof í hverri vísu ok finnr, at þar er getit ok í framaverka Eiríks, sonar hans. En er á leið kvæðit, þá bregðr jarli nokkut undarlíga við, at óværi ok kláði hleypr svá mikill um allan búkinn á honum ok einna mest um þjóin, at hann mátti hvergi kyrr þola, ok svá mikil býsn fylgdi þessum óværa, at hann lét hrífa sér með kǫmbum, þar sem þeim kom at; en þar sem þeim kom eigi at, lét hann taka strigadúk ok ríða á þrjá knúta ok draga tvá menn milli þjóanna á sér. Nú tók jarli illa at geðjast kvæðit ok mælti: ‘Kann þinn heljarkarl ekki betr at kveða, því

⁵³⁹ I add heathen because his exposure as a baby is alluded to as a possible cause for his shape-shifting: it seems an unusual moment to weave into the narrative alongside the contamination caused by Skjaldvör’s vomit. Exposing babies to die was a practice outlawed with the introduction of Christianity to Iceland. See Jochens, *WiONS*, 85-89 for details of infanticide.

at mér þykkir þetta eigi síðr heita mega níð en lof, ok lát þú um batna, ella tekr þú gjöld fyrir.⁵⁴⁰

How droll that the verses result in amusement for everyone but Hákon. Though the uneasiness spreads all over the earl's body, the focus is firmly placed in the most humiliating of areas, and the visual imagery of him desperately trying to scratch hard-to-reach, magically-produced itches between his thighs is highly comedic, compounded by the coordinated but inevitably futile efforts of his men to alleviate the symptoms with the hardest of tools available. Though not a particularly sexual episode, there are clues to the intended disgrace: an onanistic, masochistic perversion in applying combs to his body; the obstinate urge between his thighs bears a similarity to depictions of *argr* men's relentless desire for sex; the verb *ríða*, 'to ride' has connotations as a sexual euphemism, especially in conjunction with two men's intimate proximity to his groin. Allan and Burridge explain the general tone of the verb 'to ride' used in sexual contexts: 'this expression seems to draw attention rather than divert it ... It is difficult to accept that modesty is the motive behind such an actively enthusiastic euphemism as this one.'⁵⁴¹ Certainly the pace of the scene heightens the sense of enthusiastic urgency on the earl's part. Þorleifr goes under the less than conspicuous name Níðungr, which also confirms the intention that he set out to humiliate the earl in the most shameful way possible.⁵⁴²

The comedy is not only derived from physical humour but also the pride that accompanies it. Aware that the old man has composed poems for respected people before, Hákon believes him to be skilful and perhaps does not immediately equate the physical discomfort with the poem, but by the end is convinced of it. However, his reluctance to stop the poetic verse sooner makes it a funnier scenario. The earl's demand exemplifies his egotism: he does not

⁵⁴⁰ *Þorleifs þátr jarlsskálds*, ÍF 9, edited by Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), ch. 5, 222. 'Then the man began the poem and recited it until he was halfway through, and it seemed to the earl that there was praise in every stanza and the accomplishments of his son Eiríkr were also mentioned. But as the poem continued, the earl was rather surprised to feel an uneasiness and itching spread greatly all over his body, and most of all around his buttocks, so that he could not bear to sit still, and so much peculiarity accompanied the uneasiness that he had himself scratched with combs wherever they could reach. And where they could not reach, he had a coarse cloth tied with three knots, and he rode it as two men dragged it between his buttocks. Now the earl was less pleased with the poem and said, "Can you not recite better, you horrible man, because it seems to me that this may be called abuse more than praise, and you had better improve it or you will pay for it.'" Note that *þjó*, n., can mean thigh but more commonly means buttocks, especially in the plural, as it is here, and would have added more verve to the earl's *argr* reaction.

⁵⁴¹ Allan and Burridge, *Euphemism*, 59.

⁵⁴² Falk, 'Beardless,' 243, notes that this episode caused lasting damage to the earl's pubic hair.

request that the poet stop, but simply improve the poem. One wonders how long the poem was, that there was time for the many elaborate actions to be taken.

4. From bottom to top

As already indicated, there is a close relationship between orifices and the body in the Old Norse world that resonates strongly with Bakhtin's observations on the grotesque style in Rabelaisian literature. The next examples demonstrate that there are many variations on this theme.

4.1. Ljót's seiðr in *Vatnsdæla saga*

There is markedly little emphasis on the female bottom in the sagas; perhaps they have less capacity for grotesqueness than male bottoms do. Certainly they do not carry the same legal and cultural significance as that of the *argr* male. However, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, the female derriere becomes the focus of a supernatural ritual for which Terry Gunnell coined the term 'magical mooning'.⁵⁴³ It is a strange scene to the modern reader, although as Gunnell suggests, with no obvious parallels or explanation, it may be the case that the listening audience were sufficiently familiar with this peculiar activity.

The incident occurs during a conflict between the sons of Ingimundr and a mother and son, Ljót and Hrolleifr, recognisably villainous characters who have been the source of several disturbances in the valley. Hrolleifr inflicts a fatal wound on Ingimundr that compels his sons to seek vengeance. Having found Hrolleifr's hiding place, Jökull is wrestling with Hrolleifr, when his brother Högni asks:

'Hvat fjánda ferr hér at oss, er ek veit eigi hvat er?' Þorsteinn svarar:
'Þar ferr Ljót kerling ok hefir breytliga um búizk;' – hon hafði rekit
fötin fram yfir höfuð sér ok fór qfug ok rétti höfuðit apr milli fótanna;
ófagrligt var hennar augnabragð, hversu hon gat þeim trollsliga
skotit.⁵⁴⁴

It is immediately clear that the old witch Ljót does not represent the ideal of Old Norse femininity, and unlike in other parts of Scandinavia, there is nothing

⁵⁴³ Terry Gunnell, 'Magical Mooning' and the 'Goatskin Twirl': 'Other' Kinds of Female Magical Practices in Early Iceland,' *Nordic Mythologies: Interpretations, Intersections, and Institutions*, edited by Timothy R. Tangherlini, (Berkeley og Los Angeles: North Pinehurst Press, 2014), 133-153.

⁵⁴⁴ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 26, 69-70. "What sort of devil approaches us, that I cannot tell what it is?" Þorsteinn answered, "Old Ljót is coming and has done something strange to herself;" – she had pulled her clothes up over her head and was walking backwards with her head back between her legs; the look in her eyes was terrifying, how she could dart them like a troll.'

sexually exciting about her exposure.⁵⁴⁵ Here are references to monsters and trolls; a depiction of a grotesque person contorting her body into an indecent and unnatural silhouette. The mooning stance relates to two of Bakhtin's observations on primeval popular humour, the first is 'the cartwheel, which by the continual rotation of the upper and lower parts suggests the rotation of the earth and sky. This is manifested in other movements of the clown: the buttocks persistently trying to take the place of the head and the head that of the buttocks.'⁵⁴⁶ and secondly 'the important role of the inside out and upside down in the movements and acts of the grotesque body. A deeper and more subtle analysis would disclose in many traditional popular comic gestures and tricks a mimicking of childbirth.'⁵⁴⁷ These two concepts – topsy-turvy chaos and the act of birth – are closely intertwined in Ljót's behaviour. To take the physical form first, the prominent position of her exposed bottom with her head between her legs draws attention to the adjacency of the head and genitals, suggesting an imitation of birth, with her own head crowning. *Landnámabók* offers an alternative ending to this episode, in which Jökull cuts off Hrolleifr's head and throws it at Ljót. The son's bloody head once again comes into contact with his mother's genitals; the association between the acts of birth and death is even more pronounced, and no less grotesque.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir observes that the saga audience seldom hear the content of spells.⁵⁴⁸ Here any magical utterance is inconsequential compared to Ljót's bizarre contortion, which is intrinsic to her supernatural aims, as she comments:

'Já, já,' sagði Ljót, 'nú lagði allnær, at ek mynda vel geta hefnt Hrolleifs sonar míns, ok eru þér Ingimundarsynir giptumenn miklir.' Þorsteinn svarar: 'Hvat er nú helzt til marks um þat?' Hon kvazk hafa ætlat at snúa þar um landslagi öllu, – 'en þér ærðizk allir ok yrðið at gjalti eptir á vegum úti með villidýrum, ok svá myndi ok gengit hafa, ef þér hefðið mik eigi fyrr sét en ek yðr.'⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁵ Elsewhere in Scandinavia witches were a source of carnal lust, enticing men into allegiance with the devil. For example, Bridget of Sweden helped combat witchcraft and sexual disorder; see Michael Goodich, 'Sexuality, Family, and the Supernatural in the Fourteenth Century,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4:4 (1994), 502-503.

⁵⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 353.

⁵⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 353.

⁵⁴⁸ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 50. She questions whether verbal utterances would have been inappropriate for a Christian author or scribe to commit to vellum.

⁵⁴⁹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 26, 70. "Well, well," said Ljót, "I came very close to being able to avenge Hrolleifr my son, and you sons of Ingimundr are men of great fortune." Þorsteinn answered, "What makes you say that now?" She said she had planned to change the entire landscape there, "and all of you would have gone mad and crazy out amongst the wild animals, and that is how it could have gone, if you had not seen me before I saw you."

By trying to avenge Hrolleifr's death, Ljót stepped beyond the parameters of her gender and was humiliated in the process: Jóhanna says that the sagas do not deny that 'magic-wielding women have just cause for their actions although they subvert their gender role by acting on their own behalf instead of using more traditional, indirect methods such as goading men.'⁵⁵⁰ In this case, the subversion was figurative and literal. Ljót's ambition was an act of malevolent transformation to reverse the natural order of the land and men; and, in conforming to Bakhtin's cartwheel, it is no coincidence that this parallels the somersault and mimicry of childbirth that she herself is doing. The eyes also play an important part, both in the curse and creating a grotesque facial expression. It is tempting to consider that the term *augnabragð* cheekily also refers to her arsehole as a third eye; certainly this would work well with Bakhtin's version of the carnivalesque upside-down body. Fortunately for the brothers and inhabitants of Vatnsdalr, she was exposed in every sense of the word by the absurd performance of her enchantment, and the saga reports that 'Síðan dó Ljót kerling í móð sínum ok trolldómi, ok eru þau ór þessi sǫgu.'⁵⁵¹ And, briefly, peace returns to the valley.

4.2. The taunting of Guðmundr in *Ǫlkofra þátr* and *Ljósvetninga saga*

Returning to the perversity of *Ǫlkofra þátr*, another of Broddi's insults also focuses on anal penetration as a means of derision, this time directed at Guðmundr the Powerful. The clever wordplay likens bodily orifices to geographical features and can be compared to a similar accusation thrown at Guðmundr in *Ljósvetninga saga*, which leads the reader to question whether the *Ǫlkofra þátr* joke is derivative or if Guðmundr was a popular target for *níð*-based humour. As they leave the assembly, Guðmundr asks Broddi which route he plans to take:

Guðmundr mælti: 'Efn orð þín ok ríð Ljósavatnsskarð.' Broddi segir: 'Efna skal þat, eða ætlar þú, Guðmundr, at verja mér skarðit? Allmjök eru þér þá mislagðar hendr, ef þú varðar mér Ljósavatnsskarð, svá at ek mega þar eigi fara með fǫrunautum mínum, en þú varðar þat eigi it litla skarðit, sem er í milli þjóa þér, svá at ámælislaust sé.' Skilðusk þeir við svá búit, ok spurðusk þessi orð um allt þingit.⁵⁵²

⁵⁵⁰ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *BWP*, 56.

⁵⁵¹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 26, 70. 'Then the old woman Ljót died in her wrath and sorcery, and they [she and Hrolleifr] are out of this saga.'

⁵⁵² *Ǫlkofra þátr*, ch. 4, 94. 'Guðmundr said, "Keep your word and ride on Ljósavatn pass." Broddi said, "I will keep it, but are you planning, Guðmundr, to defend the pass from me? That would be poor work on your part, if you close Ljósavatn pass to me, so that I cannot travel there with my

An uncrowning debasement comes into play once again; in a Bakhtinian sense, body and earth are united. The gossip spreads all around the Assembly, as Broddi had hoped. The previous accusations had all been initiated by Broddi; this time he turns Guðmundr's threat to his own advantage, twisting a question into an opportunity to create an offensive charge of anal sex, similar to the way that Sneglu-Halli exploited the king's jokes. The joke is devalued somewhat if we consider that the implications of being *argr* meant that you not only received anal sex but also desired it; for Guðmundr not to be able to defend his 'pass' suggests that there was an attempt at protection against attack. On the other hand, the implication could be that he *does not* defend his pass – as a man should – rather than he *cannot*. However, the pun and the resulting imagery are compelling enough for this not to matter. Abuse is heaped on Guðmundr, yet he does little to defend himself against it physically or verbally. He cannot defend his bottom, and he cannot defend himself.

An episode in *Ljósvetninga saga* continues the theme of Guðmundr's *argr* nature, of which Preben Meulengracht Sørensen argues:

These taunts against Guðmundr reach the limit of unequivocal grossness with which saga writers could put *níð* on parchment; and they leave us in no doubt about the implications of being *argr*. We can be sure that the audience of the sagas was familiar with similarly crude notions and expressions in everyday life.⁵⁵³

A minor etiquette faux-pas at a wedding results in an argument between two women, Þórlaug and Geirlaug. Geirlaug, (again, using gossip as a shield) comments unfavourably on Þórlaug's husband, Guðmundr, speculating poorly about his courage and masculinity.⁵⁵⁴ She implies that many people are of the same opinion, including a man named Þorkell hákr (bully) and her own husband, Þórir Helgason. Upset by the gossip, Þórlaug takes to her bed; Guðmundr is quick to recognise that not all is right with his wife and coaxes the information from her. In retaliation, he uses a legal manoeuvre to get Þórir charged with lesser outlawry in a dispute over livestock, but Þorkell hákr receives a far harsher punishment:

Síðan drifu menn at bænum ok inn í húsin. Var þar kominn Guðmundr ok þeir tuttugu saman. Ok við gnýinn ok vápnabrák vaknaði Þorkell, ok varð eigi ráðrúm til at fara í brynju sína. En

men, but you cannot protect the little pass that is between your buttocks, so that it is not without reproach." With that they parted and word went around the entire *þing*.'

⁵⁵³ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 37.

⁵⁵⁴ See Bandlien, *Strategies*, 260-261, for the development of the women's argument.

hoggspjót tók hann í hönd sér, en setti hjálm á höfuð sér. Mjólkrketill stóð í húsinu, ok var þröngt. Þá mælti Guðmundr: ‘Þat er nú ráð, Þorkell, at sýna sik Guðmundi ok skrifa eigi í hreysi.’ Þorkell svaraði: ‘Nú skal ek víst sýna mik þér, Guðmundr. Ok eigi komtu fyrr en ek ætlaða. Eða hverja leið fóru þér hingat?’ Hann svarar: ‘Ek fór Grímubrekkur ok Hellugnúpsskarð.’ Þorkell mælti: ‘Þú hafðir bratta leið ok erfiða, ok trautt kann ek at ætla, hversu rassinn myndi sveitask ok erfitt hafa orðit í þessi ferð.’ Síðan hjóp hann fram með brugðit sverð ok hjó þegar til Guðmundar. En hann hopaði undan.⁵⁵⁵

Þorkell, living up to his nickname, shows consistency in his beliefs by continuing to mock Guðmundr’s manliness even when outnumbered and faced with imminent death. It is a battle of masculinity: Guðmundr offends Þorkell first, suggesting he is cowardly. Þorkell’s response is bold and cheeky, as if to say ‘I have been expecting you, and you took your time getting here’ despite evidence to the contrary in his state of undress. This inquiry into the route almost appears courteous, a sporting gesture, before turning into a crude insult very much in line with that in *Qlkofra þátrr*. Perhaps the insinuation is that Guðmundr is physically unfit, another deficiency of his masculinity, but to focus on the sweaty bottom reduces the exertion to one particular place, creating a comical and grotesque caricature of Guðmundr that ignores the rest of his body. It appears that Þorkell tries to delay Guðmundr with words and bravado, but, knowing what malicious deeds and speech Þorkell is capable of, it is not the surprise that Þorkell hopes for and Guðmundr escapes Þorkell’s thrust attack. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that he does little to actively defend himself or tackle Þorkell at this point. The fight continues:

Þorkell lét sem hann sæi engan nema Guðmund í atsókninni. Menn báru vápn á Þorkel. En hann varðisk hraustlíga, ok fengu menn sár af honum. Þorsteinn hét maðr ok kallaðr inn rammi; hann gekk mest í móti Þorkatli. Ok varð hann sárr mjök, því at margir váru um einn. Hann var eigi at óákafari, þó at iðrin lægi úti. Guðmundr hopaði undan ok hrataði í mjólkrketilinn. Þat sá Þorkell ok hló at ok mælti: ‘Nú kveð ek, [at] rassinn þinn hafi áðr leitat flestra lækjanna annarra, en mjólkina hygg ek hann eigi fyrr drukkit hafa. Enda rázk þú nú

⁵⁵⁵ *Ljósvetninga saga*, ch. 9 (19), 51-52. ‘Then men went to the farm and entered the house. Guðmundr had arrived with twenty men. And with the commotion and sound of weapons Þorkell woke up, and had no chance to put on his armour. But he brandished his halberd and put a helmet on his head. A milk vat stood in the house and there was not much room. Then Guðmundr said, “The time has come, Þorkell, to show yourself to Guðmundr and don’t crawl into your hovel.” Þorkell replied, “I will certainly face you Guðmundr. And you have not come sooner than I had expected. Which way did you come here?” He answered, “I came over Grímubrekkr and Hellugnúp pass.” Þorkell said, “You have had a steep and difficult journey, and I expect that you must have a sweaty arse from the difficulty in this journey.” Then he ran forward with his sword drawn and immediately struck at Guðmundr. But he ducked out of the way.’

hingat, Guðmundr; úti liggja nú iðrin mín [þar hefir þú jafngjarn á verit er þik lysti þessa].’ Síðan drápu þeir hann.⁵⁵⁶

Even with his guts hanging out, Þorkell has the strength to laugh. His insults – both about Guðmundr’s journey and the milk vat – display a quick-witted humour akin to Broddi’s that takes advantage of the immediate context to compose jokes at Guðmundr’s expense. There are two possible meanings to this imaginative insult. The first continues the theme of Guðmundr’s sweaty bottom and may imply that he needs to cool it down in streams from the exertion of travel. However, it is clear that Þorkell’s intention is to humiliate Guðmundr with a further implication of his effeminacy and this meaning would not have the desired impact. The second meaning would include a far greater reference to *níð* and tally with the grossness Preben Meulengracht Sørensen speaks of. Where the insult before concentrated on the fluid – sweat – emanating from his bottom, this time the liquid travels in the opposite direction. Stream waters, as mentioned by Þorkell, conjure a less bucolic and pure image in relation to slaking the thirst of Guðmundr’s bottom, and the milk analogy is even more perverse, perhaps evoking an image of the man being a willing recipient of milk-like fluids of a more indecent nature, i.e. semen. With an emphasis on Guðmundr’s bottom drinking from more than one stream, the insinuation is subtly made that he has an insatiable thirst that can only be quenched with depravity, akin to the rampant male nymphomania equated with other representations of *argr* males. Perhaps the streams also debase Guðmundr in the same way as the metaphor *skarð* did, bringing his body back down to the earth in a Bakhtinian sense of uncrowning. Whatever Guðmundr’s physical motions as he tumbles into the milk vat, the slapstick scenario gives Þorkell the opportunity for one last dig; a symbolic cartwheel takes place and in Þorkell’s grotesque imagery Guðmundr’s bottom takes the place of his mouth, the drinking arse creating a sense of the body being turned upside down, which Bakhtin observes as ‘the substitution of the face by the buttocks, the top by the bottom.’⁵⁵⁷ For instance, the use of the verb *drekka* creates a sense not of the anus being a pseudo-vagina in a typical symbolism of effeminacy, but as a

⁵⁵⁶ *Ljósvetninga saga*, ch. 9 (19), 52. ‘Þorkell attacked as if he saw no one but Guðmundr. But he defended himself well, and many men were wounded by him. A man there was called Þorsteinn the Mighty; he went against Þorkell the most. And he received many wounds, because many men were against one. He was no less rigorous even though his guts were hanging out. Guðmundr hopped out of the way and crashed into the milk vat. Þorkell saw this, laughed, and said, “Now I say that your arse has drunk from many streams, but I suspect it has not drunk milk before. Come here, Guðmundr, my guts are hanging out [you were so eager for it when you wanted to meet].” Then they killed him.’

⁵⁵⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 373.

mouth. This works well with Bakhtin's theory that 'All the main organs and areas, as well as all the basic acts of the grotesque body, are pictured and developed around the central image of the gaping jaws. This is the most vivid expression of the body not as impenetrable but open.'⁵⁵⁸

Guðmundr's army of twenty certainly seems overkill in combat against one, but almost everyone fades into the background as the emphasis rests on their personal conflict. Even in the delicate situation of having his entrails exposed, Þorkell takes advantage of Guðmundr's slip-up and his quick thinking turns it into one of the gravest insults in saga literature. It is the perfect situation comedy, with the scene set up well: a comparison of Þorkell's guts being on the outside of his body and the insinuation that Guðmundr invites fluid into his.

Þorkell's last words, *þar hefir þú jafngjarn á verit er þik lysti þessa* do not appear in every manuscript, suggesting that they too could have obscene connotations: a close association between the guts and the anus may imply that not only does Guðmundr enjoy being buggered, but that he took pleasure from Þorkell's insides too, or that this is as far as he is able to go inside Þorkell. So vulgar are Þorkell's insults that manuscript AM 561, 4to. replaces *áðr leitat flestra lækjanna* with *freistast áðr flestra klækjanna* (tempted earlier every trick, or tried every disgrace). Björn Sigfússon writes that the 'change is hardly caused by a misunderstanding of *að leita lækjar* (i.e. to quench one's thirst), but rather by the scribe's shocked condemnation.'⁵⁵⁹ Certainly it muddles the meaning and suggests that the imagery is not simply a reference to washing in streams. While the message that Guðmundr is *argr* is still apparent, it is a less shocking and vivid sketch; the milk analogy does not make as much sense, and the joke is lost.

Why is Þorkell saying these things? Jochens comments that Þorkell is poor;⁵⁶⁰ perhaps this tallies with the same rebellious urge to degrade the *goðar* that Broddi had. From a reader's perspective, the insults inject some comedy into the comeuppance and not too tragic demise of a mildly wicked character. Surely in his predicament, half clothed, unprepared for conflict, it is rather too late to instigate a psychological battle with his opponent, who is going to kill him no matter what. Or is he: perhaps Þorkell views Guðmundr as so *argr* that there is still a chance to subdue him. These are the last weapons Þorkell has, and

⁵⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 339.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, ch. 9 (19), 52, note 3. 'stafar sú breyting varla af misskilningi á að *leita lækjar* (p.e. leita þorsta sínum svölunar), heldur af hneykslun afritarans.'

⁵⁶⁰ Jenny Jochens, 'Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women and Beasts,' *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Routledge, 1996), 384.

Guðmundr does not even retaliate with his own insults. Is this because Guðmundr has nothing clever to say in his defence? With Þorkell's continued focus on Guðmundr's bottom, one begins to wonder who is the more *argr* man. But the fact that he does little to stop Þorkell's abuse is an indication of Guðmundr's *argr* nature: to do nothing about the insults proves Þorkell right. There are more clues in the text that suggest that this reflects the author's opinion. Notice that Þorkell is described with intense concentration on Guðmundr, which is ultimately to his detriment, but reveals a fervent fighter whose argument is only with one man. His ability to defend and attack is praised, and his bravery does not diminish despite the poor state of his exposed guts, nor does his sense of humour. Guðmundr, on the other hand, does not escape persecution from the narration. His band of twenty is excessive in a personal conflict against one ill-prepared man, and it is not Guðmundr but Þorsteinn the Mighty who is described as attacking most forcefully – Guðmundr, on the other hand, can barely keep his balance. What is not clear, and perhaps equally telling of Guðmundr's manliness, is who gave Þorkell the final blow, as we are simply told *Síðan drápu þeir hann*.

At the end of his life, Þorkell is as open and metaphorically penetrated as Guðmundr, but, with the unique and imaginative insults still heavy in the air, it is Guðmundr's bottom that remains the butt of the joke. Moreover, the repulsive connection to milk sets the scene for Guðmundr's death a few chapters later, this time from drinking it (via the conventional orifice):

Ok eptir þat réttisk Guðmundr upp, ok var þá fram kominn matr. Mjólk var heit, ok váru í steinar. Þá mælti Guðmundr: 'Eigi er heitt.' Þórlaug mælti: 'Kynliga er þá' – ok heitti steinana apr. Síðan drakk Guðmundr ok mælti: 'Eigi er heitt.' Þórlaug mælti: 'Eigi veit ek nú, Guðmundr, hvar til kemr heitfengi þitt.' Ok enn drakk hann ok mælti: 'Ekki er heitt.' Þá hneig hann á bak apr ok var þegar andaðr.⁵⁶¹

Like Sneglu-Halli, Guðmundr dies a humiliating death at the dinner table. It is no coincidence that the cause of his death relates to the same fluid that cemented his dishonourable name in one of the most offensive remarks in the sagas. To add insult to injury, Guðmundr's last words are unremarkable, his last actions inconsequential, and his death ludicrous, rendering him *argr* to his last day.

⁵⁶¹ *Ljósvetninga saga*, ch. 21, 61. 'And after that Guðmundr sat in his seat while food was served. The milk was hot and heated with stones. Then Guðmundr said, "It is not hot." Þórlaug said, "That's strange," and heated the stones again. Then Guðmundr drank and said, "It is not hot." Þórlaug said, "I don't know what's wrong with your sense of temperature, Guðmundr." He drank yet again and said, "It is not hot." Then he leant back and was immediately dead.'

4.3. Falgeirr's death in *Fóstbrœðra saga*

The next example demonstrates different depictions of the grotesque in narrative and verse. Like the episode with Guðmundr and Þorkell, this personal conflict begins and ends with *níð*. Or at least we are led to believe so by Þormóðr, who later in the saga reports that he had been likened to a mare among stallions when King Óláfr asks why he has killed so many men in Greenland. This is not mentioned anywhere else; until then the motive has simply been to seek vengeance for the death of his sworn brother, Þorgeirr. One of the perpetrators of Þorgeirr's killing is Falgeirr, who, during conflict with Þormóðr in which he had the upper hand, suddenly finds himself in an unfortunate predicament:

Ok því næst falla þeir báðir fyrir hamrana ofan á sjóinn; reyna þeir þá sundit með sér ok færask niðr ýmsir; finnr Þormóðr, at hann mœddisk af miklu sári ok blóðrás. En fyrir því at Þormóði varð eigi dauði ætlaðr, þá slitnaði bróklindi Falgeirs; rak Þormóðr þá ofan um hann brœkrnar. Falgeiri daprask þá sundit; ferr hann þá í kaf at qðru hverju ok drekkur nú ómælt; skýtr þá upp þjónum ok herðunum, ok við andlátit skaut upp andlitinu; var þá opinn muðrinn ok augun, ok var þá því líkast at sjá í andlitit, sem þá er maðr glottir at nqkkuru. Svá lýkr með þeim, at Falgeirr drukknaðr þar.⁵⁶²

The text makes it sound as if the opportunity to remove Falgeirr's trousers was because Þormóðr was not fated to die; rather, it was Falgeirr's fate not only to die, but to do so in a humiliating way.⁵⁶³ It may also be significant that just before this happens, our hero finds consolation and strength in thoughts of King Óláfr, which again suggests the support of divine and royal intervention, even if salvation comes in the form of something as simple as a broken belt. Meulengracht Sørensen calls the scene a burlesque:

the hero wins, because his adversary loses his breeches. We can believe that the author of the saga, in his careful description of Falgeirr's body as he died, was fully aware of the real meaning of

⁵⁶² *Fóstbrœðra saga*, ch. 23, 240. (*Hauksbók*) 'The next thing that happened was that they both fell from the cliffs down into the sea; they tried to swim and push each other under; Þormóðr found that he was weakened by great wounds and blood loss. But because Þormóðr was not fated to die, at that moment Falgeirr's girdle broke; then Þormóðr pulled his breeches off him. Falgeirr struggled in the water; he was submerged now and then and drank a lot of water. Then his buttocks and shoulders shot up, and his face turned upwards; his mouth and eyes were open, and on his face it looked as if he was smiling at something. So it ended with them, that Falgeirr drowned there.'

⁵⁶³ In her analysis of the verb *fletta*, Gade comments that stripping the dead was a common practice, and the *Gulapingslög* includes a section stipulating that stripping a man was considered a *níðingsverk*. Though it was not Þormóðr's intention to strip Falgeirr, it is worth noting the wider context around this scene. See Kari Ellen Gade, 'The Naked and the Dead in Old Norse Society' *Scandinavian Studies* 60:2 (1988), 219- 245.

the stanza, and in a slyly humourous way insinuated the same in his prose.⁵⁶⁴

The tussle for supremacy in the water combines the seriousness of fate with the comedy of the belt and the subsequent shameful death. The first part of Falgeirr's body to rise up out of the water is his bottom, but the text moves swiftly from this exposure to the top of his body, with the back and the face twisted to the surface, providing the opportunity for the poetic turn of phrase *við andlátit skaut upp andlitinu*. In a similar fashion to Ljót, Falgeirr's contortion juxtaposes bottom and head in a strange alignment, with the face appearing to reflect the innermost thoughts of the character. The gaping mouth and eyes recall one of Bakhtin's observations, made earlier in relation to Skjaldvör's emetic episode:

But the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.⁵⁶⁵

The verb *glotta*, to grin, suggests a smirking smile, and is inconsistent with the open mouth as described. The grin remains in the accompanying stanza, suggesting that it is the more offensive facial expression of the two. It is a strange observation of the throes of death. Complementing the grotesque image, to be turned *argr* in death, the grin seems to make him complicit with his own image of perversion:

Þeir spyrja at um samaneign þeira Falgeirs. Þormóðr kvað þá vísu:

Skoptak enn, þás uppi
undarligt á sundi
– hrókr dó heimskr við klæki –
hans razaklof ganði;
alla leitk á Ulli
eggveðrs hugar gleggum
– setti gaurr ok glotti –
goðfjón – við mér sjónir.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 73.

⁵⁶⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 317.

⁵⁶⁶ *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 23, 241-242, verse 27. (*Hauksbók*) 'They [Skuf and Bjarni] asked about his fight with Falgeirr. Þormóðr spoke this verse:

"I was bobbing up and down, when Falgeirr's arsecrack gaped at me strangely up out of the waves. The silly idiot died an abomination; I saw all the disgust in the cowardly warrior [Ullr of 'edge-weather,' i.e. battle], the sad fellow cast his eyes on me and grinned."

Falgeirr and Þormóðr are both subjected to the up and down motion of the waves, only Þormóðr manages to right himself. The image of a half-naked drowned man is already grotesque, but the grin makes Falgeirr's death more clownish. This is reminiscent of a gesture Bakhtin speaks of in grotesque Rabelaisian death scenes:

a peculiar mimicking of death-resurrection; the same body that tumbles into the grave rises again, incessantly moving from the lower to the upper level (the usual trick of the clown simulating death and revival).⁵⁶⁷

In his watery grave, Falgeirr is not smiling in the face of mortality; it is an extension of his *argr* nature that gives him a new reputation after death. The physical inversion is the buttocks rising out of the water first; it is not his mouth gasping for air, but his anus. Where Guðmundr's arse had slaked itself at many streams, Falgeirr's swallows too much at sea. It is almost a resurrection: with his eyes and mouth open, contorted into a smile, it is as if he were aware of his exposed bottom and delights in the depravity. Like Ljót's cartwheeling clown, he is as close as can be to an Old Norse fool – *heimskr* and *klæki* – with the arse cleft, gaping open, like a second mouth. Or perhaps it is a pseudo-vagina: Meulengracht Sørensen says that 'Falgeirr is mocked because at the very instant of death he offered himself as a woman, and for this reason he died shamefully.'⁵⁶⁸ Perhaps both interpretations of the grotesque can be applied to the comedic circumstances of his demise and the body's involuntary actions post mortem. Þormóðr's verse creates a myth of *níð* around his passing: what could have been but a brief moment in the throes of death becomes exaggerated for the sake of Þormóðr's anecdote, frozen in verse as Falgeirr's epitaph.

5. The upper body: breasts and nipples

This chapter has predominantly dealt with grotesque depictions of the lower body, or rather, the bottom and anal orifice, complementing Bakhtin's focus on the lower stratum. I would like to direct attention to the upper torso: with no orifices there is less opportunity for grotesque and humiliating wounds. Specific description of female breasts are rare in the sagas; William Ian Miller notes the sad episode in which 'Some [women] were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, as when old Ysja lost her breasts and her life to the indiscriminating

⁵⁶⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 354.

⁵⁶⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 73.

hacking of the men from Vatnsfjord.⁵⁶⁹ It is strange to consider that such an attack would not be more calculated as a form of humiliation equivalent to *níð*, a mutilation of convexities, though that it is not recounted more may imply that it was not a common method of injury for women, or highly taboo.

5.1. Breast-slapping in *Eiríks saga rauða*

In *Eiríks saga rauða* exposure of the breasts becomes part of an attack in a comedic example of female grotesqueness that overcomes a vicious encounter with Greenlandic natives:

Freydís kom út ok sá, at þeir Karlsefni heldu undan, ok kallaði: 'Hví renni þér undan þessum auvirðis-mönnum, svá gildir menn sem þér eruð, er mér þætti sem þér mættið drepa niðr svá sem búfé? Ok ef ek hefða vápn, þætti mér sem ek skylda betr berjask en einhverr yðvar.' Þeir gáfu engan gaum hennar orðum. Freydís vildi fylgja þeim ok varð seinni, því at hon var eigi heil; gekk hon þó eptir þeim í skóginn, en Skrælingar sækja at henni. Hon fann fyrir sér mann dauðan; þar var Þorbrandr Snorrason, ok stóð hellusteinn í hofði honum. Sverðit lá bert í hjá honum; tók hon þat upp ok býsk at verja sik. Þá kómu Skrælingar at henni; hon dró þá út brjóstit undan klæðunum ok slettir á beru sverðinu. Við þetta óttask Skrælingar ok hljópu undan á skip sín ok reru í brott. Þeir Karlsefni finna hana ok lofa happ hennar.⁵⁷⁰

Freydís's unconventional demonstration of bravery makes the men look weak and emasculated in comparison. There is no dialogue in the confrontation scene, only actions, which makes it a visually striking piece. Aside from the breast-slapping incident, there are many elements in this scene worth unpicking that contribute to its exaggerated grotesque nature. Firstly: her fighting words, 'if I had a weapon, I would fight better than you lot', is demeaning to the men, or would be if they had paid her any attention. Words are, in the midst of the battle, redundant; deeds are more effective. The men fade into the background as Freydís comes to the fore: after her criticism the narrative delicately observes that she cannot walk as fast as the others because she is pregnant, making her seem all the more fearless beside her feeble male companions.

⁵⁶⁹ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, 207.

⁵⁷⁰ *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11, 229. 'Freydis came out and saw Karlsefni and the others running away, and called out, "Why are you running away from these disgraceful men, as valiant men as you are, when it seems to me you could strike them all down like livestock? If I had a weapon I reckon I could fight better than any of you." They took no notice of her words. Freydís wanted to follow them but moved slowly because she was pregnant; nonetheless she followed them into the woods, and the Skrælingar came after her. She saw in front of her a dead man, it was Þorbrandr Snorrason, and a large slab of rock lay in his head. A sword lay close by him; she picked it up and got ready to defend herself. Then the Skrælingar came at her; she pulled out her breast from her clothes and slapped the sword on it. With that, the Skrælingar became frightened and ran quickly to their ships and rowed away. Karlsefni and the others found her and praised her good fortune.'

Like Ljót, Freydís creates a grotesque version of herself to construct a powerful identity. This is not a clownish vision, however, but one of severity and seriousness. Where men with swords failed, killed by a method that used a blunt and primitive instrument, she goes forward and scares the many opponents alone. The Skrälingar do not fear the sword: when she picks it up off the floor they come closer still, and it is only when she uncovers her breast and slaps it that they show fear of the combination of sword and breast. That women render themselves grotesque compared to men declaring it of others seems to be that which strikes fear into the Skrälingar; not only is she grotesque, but a masochistic female warrior, swollen and pregnant. The Skrälingar are depicted as a primitive people, preferring stones to swords; perhaps this natural brutality is more understandable to them than weaponry.⁵⁷¹ There is little masculine about her method of attack: where physical combat failed, it is a very womanly gesture, a vision of fertility and ferocity, that beats them into submission. This aggressive exposure may also fall into the category of a female *argr* act: Meulengracht Sørensen observes that when the word *prg* is applied to a woman, it is with a sense that she is 'generally immodest, perverted or lecherous.'⁵⁷² The irony of that statement, *Ok ef ek hefða vápn*, is revealed when she resourcefully uses her body in defence. One wonders if her pregnant body was also mentioned to heighten the effect, an exaggeration, perhaps insinuating swollen breasts as well as belly. Where orifices are used to humiliate, here excrescences are used to incite fear. The comedy derives from her individual attack not just repelling one, but all of the attackers, and they humorously run and row away as fast as they can to get away from this slow-moving woman.

5.2. Breast-feeding in *Flóamanna saga*

The upper body does not feature so heavily for men either, although as Bróka-Auðr's attack on her ex-husband showed, nipple wounds were an effective form of humiliation. *Flóamanna saga* depicts an act of bodily harm that is absurd but not at all comical when Þorgils chooses to cut his own nipples to breastfeed his starved son, Þorfinnr, after their camp is ransacked and his wife, Þórey, is killed. The result is a grotesque image of bodily fluids that toys with Old Norse representations of masculinity and femininity:

⁵⁷¹ As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis, Jochens suggests that the sagas reveal a general discomfort with nakedness, and the Skrälingar may have had a similar aversion when faced with Freydís's breast; see *WiONS*, 76-77.

⁵⁷² See Meulengracht Sørensen, *TUM*, 18.

En er þeir kómu innar í skálann, heyrðu þeir snörgl nökkurt til rekkju Þóreyjar, ok er þeir kómu þar, sjá þeir, at hon var önduð, en sveinninn saug hana dauða. Leituðu þeir um hana ok fundu ben litla undir hendinni, sem mjóvum knífsoddi hefði stungit verit. Mjök var þar allt blóðugt. Þessa sýn hafði Þorgils svá sét, at honum þótti mestr harmr í vera. Burt var sópat öllum vistum. Um nóttina vill Þorgils vaka yfir sveininum ok kvaðst eigi sjá, at hann mætti á lengdar lifa, – ‘ok þykki mér mikit, ef ek má eigi honum hjálpa; skal þat nú fyrst taka til bragða at skera á geirvörtuna,’ – ok svá var gert. Fór fyrst út blóð, síðan blanda, ok lét eigi fyrr af en ór fór mjólk, ok þar fæddist sveinninn upp við þat.⁵⁷³

This is not a grotesque scene with a light heart; the sense of loss, and fear of further loss, is palpable both in depictions of the discovery of the body and decision to breastfeed the child. The main version of the saga in *Íslensk Fornrit* is based on shorter manuscripts; a supplementary text that survives as a fragment, AM 445 b 4to., is also provided. This text is longer and more detailed, and considered closer to the original.⁵⁷⁴ The slight variations reveal different levels of sensitivity too. In the above quote, which is from the longer version, the direct speech brings the scene to life; Þorgils announces his grief for the loss of his wife and concern for his son, and the vow to look after him is powerful and heartfelt. The devastation is highly apparent in the multi-sensory scene of carnage, sorrow, the noise of death and the expanse of blood and loss of everything useful. The tiny wound is the opposite of the grotesque exaggerations we have seen so far, creating a real sense of injustice. Þórey's earlier prophetic dream of a beautiful land (i.e. heaven) does little to console at this moment of need. In the shorter version, there is no direct speech, only description. There is greater detail of the loss (even the doors of their hut have been taken); rigor mortis has set in and the reader is told they bury the body. Once this has been taken care of, the more pressing matters of hunger and what to do about Þorfinnr come to the fore:

Um nóttina vildi Þorgils vaka yfir sveininum ok minntist þá drengiliga á karlmennsku ok kvaðst eigi sjá mega, at barn þat mætti lifa, nema mikit væri til unnit, ok vill hann eigi, at þat deyi. Lætr hann nú saxa á

⁵⁷³ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 23, 288-289. ‘And when they came further into the hut, they heard a sort of gurgling sound from Þórey's bed, and when they reached it, they saw that she was dead, but the boy was suckling her dead body. They examined her and found a small wound under her arm, as if she had been stabbed with a thin knife blade. Everything was covered in blood. Seeing this scene caused Þorgils the greatest amount of sorrow he had ever felt. All provisions had been taken away. During the night Þorgils wanted to watch over the boy and said he couldn't see that the boy could live much longer, – “and it would pain me greatly if I couldn't help him; I shall first cut my nipple,” – and it was done. First came blood, then a mixture, and he did not stop until milk came out, and he fed the boy with it.’

⁵⁷⁴ Wilhelm Heizmann, ‘Flóamanna saga,’ *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, edited by Phillip Pulsiano et al. (New York: Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages 1, 1993), 199-200.

geirvörtuna á sér, ok kemr þar blóð út; síðan lætr hann teygja þat, ok kom þar út blanda, ok eigi lét hann af, fyrr en þat var mjólk, ok þar fæddist sveinninn við, ok um nóttina trúði hann sér eigi til vöku, fyrr en hann lét glóð undir fætr sér.⁵⁷⁵

The nipple mutilation is clear in both redactions, but the longer version is more expressive. For that reason it has the edge on grotesqueness; *saxa* is a more forceful verb than *skera*, suggesting an aggressive cutting action, and *teygja* indicates that it was not easy to get the milk to flow.

From what we have seen of grotesque depictions in the sagas, it appears that men make other men grotesque, while women make themselves grotesque in order to achieve their goals (i.e. *klámhogg*, graffiti and a plethora of verbal insults versus breast-slapping, Ljót's spell and the hirsute, blood-soaked troll-woman). Here, Þorgils mutilates himself for altruistic reasons, making himself grotesque and subverting the conventional gender stereotypes. This tallies with what Bakhtin says about the newly conceived body, death and conception: here is the creation of new life for both Þorgils and his son, but in a very different way to that of other gender subversions explored in this chapter. Bagerius discusses this episode in relation to males with female biological functions, juxtaposing Þorgils with accusations of *argr* behaviour (womanly chores and giving birth) aimed at Loki in verse 23 of *Lokasenna*.⁵⁷⁶ However, the seriousness of Þorgils' actions means that, at least among his friends and in accordance with the author's careful description of the difficult choices he makes, Þorgils escapes association with being *argr*; he has not given birth to the child or been *sorðinn*; the text focuses on his upper body rather than delving into any grotesqueness of the lower stratum, and his body is not sexualised in that sense but rather seen as a practical tool. He does not derive pleasure from his actions, only physical pain, perhaps more comparable with a Christian symbolism of martyrdom. His maternal instinct is introduced as a continuation of Þórey's duties, as the son moves from one parent's nipple to the other's. Þorgils' milk is a source of nourishment and the self-mutilation an honourable action, no matter how grotesque, and the description of how the milk is produced is detailed and described without hyperbole, confirming the gravity of the role. It could also be seen as a seamless extension of the role Þorgils has

⁵⁷⁵ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 23, 288-289. 'That night Þorgils watched over the boy and thought him admirable and good and said he could not see how the child could live, unless something significant happened, and he did not want the child to die. He cut his nipple and blood came out; then he manipulated it, and a mixture came out, and he did not stop until it was milk, and he fed the boy, and that night he did not let himself sleep until he had nursed the boy to health.'

⁵⁷⁶ Bagerius, 'I genusstrukturens,' 37-38.

assumed as leader, providing his people with enough provisions to survive, such as the whale meat he steals from a troll-woman shortly after this scene, and the killing of a bear.

There is a great deal of Christian symbolism in this story: the trials the group face, so hungry and without hope that Þorgils considers killing the boy, the need to consider drinking urine when they are looking for land (and are subsequently saved by prayers), and Þorfinnr's humble sharing of food given to him. So it is not surprising, then, that a dissenting voice is quickly hushed by those who have witnessed Þorgils' feats:

Þat er sagt um vetrinn, at menn sátu í náðahúsi í Brattahlíð, ok þó eigi allir senn, því at sumir stóðu fram í húsinu; þar var Kolr ok Starkaðr. Þat var tal þeira, at þeir fóru í mannjöfnuð ok töluðu um Þorgils ok Eirík. Sagði Kolr Þorgils mörg afreksverk gert hafa. Þá svarar sá maðr, er Hallr hét – hann var heimamaðr Eiríks –: 'Þat er ójafnt,' segir hann, 'því at Eiríkr er höfðingi mikill ok frægr, en Þorgils þessi hefir verit í vesöld ok ánauð, ok óvíst er mér, hvárt hann er heldr karlmaðr en kona.' Kolr svarar: 'Mæl þú manna armastr,' – ok leggr í gegnum hann með spjóti. Fekk hann þegar bana. Eiríkr bað menn sína upp standa ok taka Kol. Kaupmenn allir hlaupa til ok veita Kol.⁵⁷⁷

This conversation is placed in and around a toilet, which is not a noble place to die. Hallr's derision of Þorgils at first equates wealth and status with manliness, but it is questioning his gender that prompts Kolr to protect his friend's honour. In defense of Hallr, Þorgils' gender could indeed be called into question, as *Hauksbók* (c. 1290-1334) defines a hermaphrodite thus:

Ermofrodite heita menn er geir vortu hafa hína hægri sem kallar en hína vinstri sem konor þeir mega vera beði feðr oc mæðr barna sína.⁵⁷⁸

It is interesting that the emphasis is on the upper body rather than the lower here when discussing the roles of father and mother to children, thus bypassing the reproductive organs, but the idea of one male and one female side of the

⁵⁷⁷ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 25, 304-305. 'It is said that in the winter men were sitting in the outhouse at Brattahlíð, although not all at once, as some stood in front of the house; Kolr and Starkaðr were there. It was during their talk that they turned to comparing men and discussed Þorgils and Eiríkr. Kolr said that Þorgils had performed many courageous deeds. Then the man called Hallr answered – he was a man of Eirík's house –: "It is unequal," he said, "because Eiríkr is a great and famous chieftain, but this Þorgils has been in misery and hardship, and it is unclear to me whether he is rather a man than a woman." Kolr answered, "Says the poorest excuse for a man," – and ran him through with a spear. He died immediately. Eiríkr bade his men to stand up and grab Kolr. The merchants all ran to protect Kolr.'

⁵⁷⁸ *Hauksbók*, edited by Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (København: Thieles bogtr, 1892-96), 166. 'Hermaphrodites are men who have their right nipple as men do and the left as women; they may be both father and mother to their children.'

body may well be true of Þorgils' one lactating nipple. However, it is conveyed clearly that Þorgils is still a man, at least where his milk is concerned, as when Þorfinnr is eventually breastfed by a woman, 'hann kvað ekki þannig lita mjólk föður síns.'⁵⁷⁹ Hallr's death and the instant defense of Kolr reveal that this is no laughing matter, and forcing himself to feed the child shows a level of honour and courage in Þorgils that transcends conventional displays of masculinity. After the barrage of difficulties Þorgils and his men overcame, the reader would not be surprised nor bothered by Kolr's act of honour. The final irony is that Þorgils' gender discrepancy is only focused on the upper half of his body, whereas Hallr's degrading death on the toilet draws attention on his bottom, making him the more *argr* of the two.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the grotesque scenes in the sagas revel in all the body has to offer as a platform for surreal and imaginative vulgarity. Bakhtin's thoughts on the grotesque translate very well to imagery in the sagas, suggesting a shared cultural association between comedy and disgust, as well as how to implement them together to the greatest effect.

One of the most interesting patterns to emerge is that of women debasing themselves versus men inflicting grotesqueness on others. Perhaps female sexuality was a potent weapon because it was feared or misunderstood, as seen in *Eiríks saga rauða*. Þorgils' *karlkona* identity in *Flóamanna saga*, challenged unsuccessfully by Hallr, blurs the boundaries of this concept. Since he has willingly rendered himself grotesque for the sake of someone else, Þorgils may be the least *argr* of them all, in what is a haunting and emotionally demanding passage.

Such an interpretation of female debasement for a male character may also be applied to Egill Skallagrímsson regarding the two self-pitying verses he composes about himself in his old age,⁵⁸⁰ and complement Carl Phelpstead's interpretation in which the ambiguous kennings 'Blautr erum bergis fótar / borr' may either suggest his legs are no longer working, he has lost the ability to compose good poetry, or his penis is soft. If we view his transformation from hero to sitting in front of the hearth in the company of the women of the

⁵⁷⁹ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 24, 299. 'He said it didn't look like his father's milk.'

⁵⁸⁰ Verses 58 and 60 in *Egils saga*, 294 and 296 respectively.

household, Egill is no longer the man he was, and has rendered himself an *argr* and grotesque caricature in his woeful poem.⁵⁸¹

Elsewhere, there is great pleasure in the small details, which are carefully constructed to create an entertaining climax in many of the examples above and compose enduring images of characters that stay in the reader's mind. As with gossip, the grotesque can be most powerful when grounded in truth; Broddi's insults in *Qlkofra þátr* transform the mundane into unique and witty vignettes, every moment of Falgeirr's drowning is captured and twisted to fit Þormóðr's lewd vision, and *Ljósvetninga saga* exploits the hazards of combat in a small space to great effect. As Bakhtin said of the concepts of laughter and seriousness being closely linked, *Sneglu-Halla þátr* suggests this could be as much a form of bonding as it was a form of mockery.

But, as Ström and Meulengracht Sørensen have observed, truth is irrelevant in the pursuit of humiliation. The lower body is subjected to a bombardment of insults that venture into the realms of fantasy and indicate that the male bottom was a taboo ripe for the picking. Defecation is rarely mentioned in the sagas – one notable example is the embarrassment of having to go indoors in *Laxdæla saga*⁵⁸² and Hallgerðr's designation of Njáll's dungbearded sons associates the family with excrement to bring them back down to earth, figuratively speaking. Yet what comes out of the bottom is less interesting than what could possibly go into it, of human and of non-human origin, and it is telling that only one of the many episodes featured here is a physical assault; while several episodes of *klámhogg* feature in the sagas, they are rather formulaic in comparison to the variety of original and bawdy verbal abuses. Accusations of an *argr* nature uncrown men, reducing the body to a collection of orifices to be imaginatively ridiculed. And then laughter can strip away the heroic: the *goðar* lose face when confronted by Broddi, the Norwegian won the war, but not the battle against Þormóðr, and Ljót is not remembered as a mother who defended her son, but as a peculiar witch who is the victim of her own sorcery. Likewise

⁵⁸¹ See Phelpstead, 'Size Matters,' 425-426. This idea may be further supported by Phelpstead's regard of Egill's self-pity in ch. 85 of *Egils saga*, 426: 'However, the point about Egill's leg-hill borer [i.e. penis] is precisely that it is no longer capable of boring. It is now *blautr*, 'soft.' Egill, like many another 'older man' through history, is suffering from erectile dysfunction. For him this is not merely a medical problem or an unfortunate constraint on his sex life: it is also integral to his (and presumably other people's) sense of his identity.' See also Gade, 'Penile Puns,' 60.

⁵⁸² *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 47, 145. 'Í þann tíma var þat mikil tízka, at úti var salerni ok eigi allskammt frá bænum, ok svá var at Laugum. Kjartan lét þar taka dyrr allar á húsum ok bannaði qllum mǫnnum útgöngu ok dreitti þau inni þrjár nætr.' 'At that time it was normal that the toilet was outside and not far from the farm, as was the case at Laugar. Kjartan made sure all the doors were covered and banned everyone from going outside, and they defecated indoors for three days and nights.'

Guðmundr gained no honour from killing Þorkell, and Falgeirr's demise is not a valiant one, despite fighting to the death. It is interesting that these three cases present very different cartwheels: Ljót's is voluntary, necessary for her magic to work; she exposes her buttocks but it is their prominence that puts an end to her. Falgeirr had no choice about turning upside down and exposing himself to the elements and complete ridicule, while Guðmundr's bottom remains firmly hidden under his clothing, yet is open to Þorkell's mockery and accusations of baring it elsewhere. Perhaps it is not surprising that these three occur in conflict and feud, when the chaos of bodily combat occurs naturally, and unnaturally, and mockery of clownish figures is at its most powerful. Bakhtin quotes Ronsard in his preface to *La Franciade*: 'If you wish a soldier or an officer to die on the battlefield, he must be smitten at the most sensitive part of his body and you must be a good anatomist to draw such a picture.'⁵⁸³ The above episodes certainly capture the spirit of this message.

⁵⁸³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 354.

Conclusion

This thesis provides an analysis of sex in the sagas, with particular focus on the words and structures that shape the way it is described. Many of the passages here are well known and possibly over-exposed in scholarly works; Falgeirr's bobbing bottom, the barefaced cheek of Björn Hítðælakappi's graffiti, Hrútr's priapic abstinence, and, well, quite the opposite for Grettir. Their ubiquity would have been a foolish reason to overlook them in an analysis of the representations of sexual activity in the sagas, since they are such prominent and significant examples, but increased the challenge of finding new perspectives on popular passages. By applying theory that focuses on the construction of sexual acts and identities, and seeking new connections between these and lesser-known episodes, I propose this thesis offers fresh observations on sex in saga literature. Though the theories applied come from a diverse range of eras and backgrounds – Lakoff and Johnson, Gluckman and Paine, Foucault, Bakhtin – it was my intention to arrange them in such a way that they complement each other and create a convincing case for the myriad ways in which sex is conveyed linguistically and structurally, as well as where the power lies in its discourse.

Conclusions to chapters

Each chapter explores a different angle from which sex and sexual behaviour are presented by the authors to the audience. The first addresses the words and phrases used to express sexual activity, attraction and genitalia. Reading classifications of genitalia by Braun and Kitzinger (in English) and Arnoldson (in Old Norse) in conjunction with Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive metaphor theory provided a strong foundation on which to define the metaphorical conceptualisations of sex and the sexual body. Application of metaphor theory to specific episodes in the sagas then allowed me to locate and interpret sexual material within each target domain, the breadth of which extended further than I had anticipated. In turn this provided scope for original and informed speculation about the feasibility of highly artful metaphorical interpretations within passages that had previously escaped consideration and those already subjected to scholarly attention. In many cases the metaphors presented in the sagas are euphemisms that create a sanitised version of sex, ignoring the body and its physical movements in favour of the location of the activity. But the bed and

nebulous references to pleasure can only work in certain contexts, and there are occasions when an appropriately placed dysphemism can shock or provide light relief; *klappa um kviðinn* captures the essence perfectly of demeaning sexual activity with a crude image in a succinct and satisfying turn of phrase. Skaldic verse offers more complexity, with metaphors carefully woven in to create ambiguous kennings that make the reader question the existence and extent of indecency therein: are the references to the Valkyrie Hrist intentionally made in order to arouse suspicions of shaking? Is Björn really masturbating while thinking of Oddný's bottom pounding on the bed? The disparity of interpretation is a fitting compliment to the writers' power and linguistic skill, leading our own imaginations to run free where the opportunity arises, compared with, say, the rather less contentious, but equally pleasurable, euphemisms of *Bósa saga*.

Some metaphors for sex and genitalia indicate that it is not so different conceptually now (i.e. SEX IS PLEASURE, THE PENIS IS A WEAPON). Yet an inventory of more creative metaphors of craggy vaginas and groin-forests reveal a distinctive collection of concepts at the authors' disposal that are culturally appropriate to Iceland and the North. Perhaps that says more about what I could identify in the text than it does about the broad spectrum of sexual metaphors, many of which still lie undetected.

Following the analysis of words, it was important to understand some of the literary contexts in which sex is depicted and discussed. Sex in the sagas is often presented to us through the lens of social commentary, and the second chapter explores what this brings to the discourse on sex. Analysis drew on two anthropological perspectives. Firstly, Bailey's definitions of what gossiping is – chat, gossip, scandal, rumour, confidence and open criticism – provided a structure in which to analyse the levels of subjectivity, liability and informality that underpin discussions of sexual relationships and romantic entanglements in the sagas. However, the open criticism category required qualification on account of the close relationship in the sagas between gossip and slander, with the former quickly escalating to the latter where sexual interaction is concerned, and thus propelling it into the legal sphere. Within these categorisations, Gluckman and Paine's notions of the social and individual advantages of gossiping were applied to scenes to provide an awareness of the motivations behind discussing sexual relationships, how it is articulated, as well as how reactions to sexual gossip contributed to characterisation. In these discussions, thoughts become words become insults; a woman is falsely exposed as a cross-dresser, a husband's sexual performance is pilloried, men are accused of

shovelling shit onto their chins, and a wife is charged with infidelity. The negative sheen of gossip permeates conversations about other people's sexuality and relationships, and the speculative nature demonstrates the fickleness of gossip as well as a willingness to believe seedy fabrications or deny the truth for personal advantage. Meanwhile, those who participate in gossip about relationships and sexual insults expose themselves to the danger of being overheard, leading to shame, murder, and legal wrangling – particularly for Björn and Þórðr, and those implicated in Auðr and Ásgerðr's gossip.

The vulnerability of eavesdropping continues to the next chapter, and the irony of the girl's sexual insults aimed at the snoozing Grettir being physically contested by the man himself. Such cases demonstrate how sex and love can be discussed without intervention from a host of gossipers: within personal discussions Unnr is coaxed to delicately reveal her husband's erectile dysfunction, Þormóðr confesses his sense of shame to his father for mistreating his lover, while Grettir proudly defends his manhood with poetic flair. If we draw on the supplementary verses attributed to Unnr, all three of these passages are articulated not only through dialogue but also through skaldic verse; thus the delicacy of matters of the heart is cleverly manifested in skaldic poetry's inherent intricacy. There is honesty in these moments, which is why the ritual of confession seemed to be a suitable frame of reference. Applying Foucault's observations about what was permitted and encouraged in confession, as well as the transfer of power intrinsic to the ritual, creates an original discourse on the concept of saga 'confession.' Taking ownership of one's words is as important as taking ownership of one's sexual issues, giving voice to them and telling a sincere truth, publicly or privately.

Returning to the wider society, the anthropological perspectives from Bailey, Gluckman and Paine provided valuable insight into the methods and motivations behind gossip's circulation, yet did not adequately cover more malicious use of sexual knowledge. With a wealth of material remaining, it was worth exploring the slander, obscene representations of the sexual body and humiliating wounds inflicted on erotic body parts as powerful methods of promoting and enhancing personal and cultural prejudices. Many of these scenes are exaggerated, grotesque, comedic, and memorable, and it is clear that the most ambitious and explicit insults refer to male-male sex rather than heterosexual couplings. Their originality, paradoxically, is the source of great shame for the characters involved, yet a source of delight for the reader (and, of course, slanderers within the sagas). The final chapter explores how and why

the grotesque is manifested in several passages, with particular emphasis on bodily injuries and the degree of lewdness.

Applying Bakhtin's theories on the significance of the grotesque and its manifestations in literature brought new observations to the mechanics behind the creation of grotesque comedy in the sagas. Analogous behaviour to that identified by Bakhtin, in particular turning upside down, showed how popular certain expressions of bodily humour were across medieval Europe: the sense of bringing a person back down to Earth appears to be a cross-cultural concept expressed literally and figuratively. Bakhtinian theory also assisted in building a case to identify the trend that men are made sexually grotesque by others, while women often become grotesque versions of themselves in a bid to defeat men, reinforcing the implications of what it means to be *argr* in Old Norse society. The emphasis on comedy reminds us that these scenes are rarely tragic, relying instead on slapstick humour and wit to reassure the audience that they are, for the most part, meant to be taken lightly. The power is in the imagination of the authors who can describe grotesque scenes as liberally as they please, mocking legal and social protocol as well as the exotic and the alien: it is interesting that non-Christian characters such as a disrespectful Norwegian, trolls, witches and wild natives bear the brunt of the authors' sexual discrimination.

Flaws and further areas of scholarship

The initial ambition was to fully embrace all saga genres; though the thesis draws on runic inscriptions, Eddic verse and genres other than the *Íslendingasögur* to support the principal argument, lack of space and the desire to keep within relevant parameters prevented a comprehensive multi-generic analysis. Therefore, there is scope for further research into a wider treatment of sexual activity in other Old Norse literature to more fully complement and challenge the conclusions made here.

The thesis does not tackle the question of whether saga or manuscript age contributes to a change in the quality or quantity of explicit sexual material. Any significant discrepancies between manuscripts have been highlighted where appropriate to the argument, but there may be merit in undertaking a thorough analysis as a separate project. As mentioned in the introduction, it is difficult to discern if a trend is of a time or idiosyncratic to a particular author. This approach would have detracted from the theoretical focus too much, but it

may be worthwhile examining a narrower selection of sagas and more manuscripts.

Conclusions to thesis

In complete summary, this thesis examines the construction of sexuality in saga literature through words – those of the characters, and those of the narration. It promotes the significance of sex and the dexterity with which it is expressed through metaphors and composition. Reputation was of supreme importance, reflecting the hierarchy of society, laws and religion; modifying the reputations of characters is as much in the power of the author as it is in the acts and identities described. The treatment of sex and injury in the sagas can be very different: where violence and death are often described in gory detail, sex is sometimes treated with kid gloves. This might not be a sign of over-censorship, but of a skilful writer aware that it does not pay to furnish your reader with excessively explicit and thus restrictive details. The *fornaldarsaga Bósa saga*, written around the same time as the *Íslendingasaga Grettis saga*, is absurdly crude in its use of extended metaphors that describe the earthy mechanics of sexual intercourse, but as entertaining as it is, this is somewhat to the detriment of the imagination. Yet the multiplicity of interpretations in Grettir's kennings, not to mention what happened in the gap between the verses and his departure from the farmhouse, is enduringly thought-provoking. But all of these descriptions, obscene or obscure, have their place in the canon and suit their context: bouncing bellies, bobbing bottoms and the exquisite pain of burning desire help to uncover a vast array of sexual proclivities in the sagas, articulated in culturally-appropriate metaphorical concepts. Hrútr's *hqrund* in particular has remained a fascination as the most delicate but attention-grabbing of euphemisms in its elusiveness. It almost comes as a punchline, then, that one chapter later the children's play version of the situation is vocalised with that sharpest of words, *serða*, reminding us that, despite all of Unnr's delicate circumlocutions regarding her husband's penis, no one else would have considered her predicament in terms of skin and pleasure: the simple truth is that Hrútr could not fuck her.

So, what emerges from these four chapters is the power of the word: it is possible to appreciate the linguistic nuances, carefully crafted, that make sex and the sexual body indecent, erotic, funny, mysterious, and grotesque. There is so much to learn from and enjoy in close readings of the sagas and exploration of the scope of behaviour within. Interpreting sexual activity in meticulous detail with modern and pre-modern theory has been enlightening: much was taken for

granted by me, and undoubtedly still is. There is a great deal of wit, ingenuity and power behind the conveyance of sex; that these scenes stand up to a staggering breadth of analysis, here and elsewhere, is testament to their enduring appeal.

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