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Verbal duels in the
fornaldarsögur

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Abstract

Questa tesi analizza il modo in cui tre generi di duelli verbali della tradizione norrena (*senna*, *mannjafnaðr* e gara di indovinelli) sono stati introdotti e rielaborati nelle *fornaldarsögur* o “saghe del tempo antico”.

I duelli verbali dimostrano l’eloquenza e la sagacia dei personaggi coinvolti, ma permettono anche di comprendere i valori della cultura che li ha prodotti. Essi sono presenti nelle letterature di tutto il mondo, ma assumono delle forme particolari nella tradizione norrena: la *senna*, il *mannjafnaðr* e la disputa sapienziale. Questi tre generi sono originati nella poesia e ve ne sono degli esempi sia nell’*Edda poetica* che nelle saghe. Alcuni dei duelli verbali più interessanti della tradizione norrena appaiono nelle cosiddette *fornaldarsögur* (“saghe del tempo antico”), ambientate nella Scandinavia precristiana prima della colonizzazione dell’Islanda (870). La presenza di questi generi di duelli verbali nelle *fornaldarsögur* è uno dei tanti esempi della profonda influenza che la poesia eddica ha esercitato su questo genere, ma permette anche di comprendere meglio il modo in cui queste saghe sono state modificate nel corso della loro trasmissione manoscritta.

Il dibattito accademico riguardo ai duelli verbali ha tentato di trovare dei tratti universali di questo fenomeno, particolarmente nella poesia epica e nella narrazione di guerra. La classificazione proposta distingue i duelli verbali in base agli argomenti trattati, al grado di ritualizzazione del dialogo e alla presenza di un’effettiva intenzione di nuocere all’avversario (Parks, 1990). L’effetto collaterale di questo tentativo è stato di fondere due generi della letteratura norrena, *senna* e *mannjafnaðr*, in un unico genere denominato in inglese *flyting* (Clover, 1980; Swenson, 1991). Questa classificazione può essere utile in un’analisi comparativa ma risulta riduttiva per comprendere le caratteristiche e meccanismi di questi generi.

Anche la tassonomia delle saghe è stata al centro di un acceso dibattito accademico. La classificazione moderna delle saghe ha dovuto supplire alla mancanza di una terminologia medievale che tentasse di identificarne le varie tipologie. Per questo motivo, i criteri di classificazione odierna sono basati su alcuni tratti salienti delle saghe: i protagonisti principali (re, cavalieri, santi, i primi coloni islandesi) o l’ambientazione spazio-temporale (la Scandinavia precristiana o vari periodi del Medioevo islandese). L’applicazione di questi criteri nella classificazione delle *fornaldarsögur* è stata criticata

come arbitraria e insufficiente a spiegarne l'eterogeneità (Quinn, et al., 2006). Studi più recenti hanno preferito assumere un approccio descrittivo e hanno riconosciuto nell'ambientazione spazio-temporale delle *fornaldarsögur* il cronotopo che ne determina i tratti salienti, mentre si è concluso che la varietà interna al genere sia il risultato dell'influenza di altre tipologie di saghe e della traduzione di letterature straniere (Bampi, 2017; Ferrari, 2012; Rowe, 1993). Nel corso di questa tesi si presta particolare attenzione al ruolo del prosimetrum nell'origine ed evoluzione delle *fornaldarsögur*, un aspetto che testimonia come l'*Edda poetica* sia stata fonte di ispirazione nella composizione di queste saghe ed è strettamente collegato alla presenza dei duelli verbali. L'utilizzo di poesia eddica all'interno della prosa contribuisce alla rappresentazione di un passato ancestrale che il pubblico medievale islandese trovava sicuramente affascinante, ma che imponeva anche di misurarsi con gli aspetti più scomodi dell'eredità culturale pagana.

Il modo in cui i duelli verbali appaiono nelle *fornaldarsögur* è indicativo dei numerosi cambiamenti che sono intercorsi nella trasmissione di questi racconti e riflettono la percezione di concetti come marginalità e mascolinità nell'Islanda medievale, oltre a precise idee sugli ambiti in cui poteva essere dimostrata la saggezza di un individuo.

La *senna* (pl. *sennur*) è un elaborato scambio di insulti il cui obiettivo è delegittimare l'avversario agli occhi della società e rappresentarlo come "l'altro". Gli insulti lanciati dai partecipanti riguardano la sfera della sessualità, gli obblighi nei confronti della famiglia e le virtù guerriere. In *Ketils saga hængs* ci sono due *sennur* in cui il protagonista Ketill deve affrontare un avversario caratterizzato per la propria diversità etnica o di genere, inestricabilmente legata al sovrannaturale. Nella prima *senna* Ketill si confronta con Gusir, una figura misteriosa che incarna i pregiudizi razziali diffusi in tutta la Scandinavia nei confronti della popolazione lappone e una serie di connotazioni negative attribuite alle regioni settentrionali dell'odierna Norvegia. L'avversario di Ketill nella seconda *senna* è invece una donna troll, Forað, una creatura sovrannaturale che minaccia la società degli uomini. A seconda dei rivali, ciascuna *senna* nella saga si concentra su argomenti diversi: il primo duello contiene principalmente minacce corporali e accuse di codardia, nel secondo gli insulti esprimono aggressività sessuale e preoccupazioni riguardo alla sovversione dei ruoli di genere. Il fatto che porzioni della seconda *senna* sembrino essere stati riassunti in brevi passaggi in prosa, suggeriscono che lo scriba abbia riconosciuto le somiglianze tematiche e strutturali fra questi due dialoghi e abbia deciso di non ripetersi.

Anche il *mannjafnaðr* (letteralmente “confronto fra uomini”) tratta il tema dell’identità di genere maschile, ma il suo scopo è di stabilire una gerarchia di uomini all’interno della società attraverso un confronto delle loro abilità e gesta. Gli insulti fanno parte di questo tipo di dialogo solo come mezzi per sminuire le prodezze altrui, ma non ne sono il fulcro. Nella *Örvar-Odds saga*, il *mannjafnaðr* ha luogo durante una gara di bevute in un momento nella trama in cui Oddr, il protagonista della saga, ha rinunciato alla propria identità e vive come un mendicante. Il duello verbale diviene quindi un mezzo per riappropriarsi della propria identità e assumere il ruolo che spetta all’eroe nella corte del re. Confrontando il contenuto del *mannjafnaðr* con quello della narrazione in prosa, è possibile notare alcune discrepanze ideologiche: nel corso del confronto Oddr esalta la vita del guerriero vichingo e deride l’esistenza confortevole dei servitori del re, ma le vicende narrate nel corso della saga premiano l’evoluzione del protagonista da vichingo a membro di una corte reale. È possibile che tali contraddizioni siano dovute al fatto che il *mannjafnaðr* in poesia sia stato composto in un’epoca precedente alla saga, il cui manoscritto più antico risale all’inizio del XIV secolo.

Infine, nella *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* si può trovare un esempio molto particolare di disputa sapienziale in una gara di indovinelli fra il re Heiðrekr e Odino. Per molti versi questa gara è unica nella letteratura norrena, ma presenta interessanti parallelismi con i poemi gnomici dell’*Edda poetica* e alcuni episodi delle *Gesta Danorum* di Sasso Grammatico. Nel dialogo sapienziale due personaggi si affrontano in una gara di intelligenza ed erudizione con pena la morte. A differenza di *senna* e *mannjafnaðr*, le qualità personali dei partecipanti non sono oggetto di discussione, ma vengono implicitamente dimostrate dalla loro abilità nel rispondere alle domande dell’avversario, dalle strategie che utilizzano per vincere e dalla loro reazione davanti alla sconfitta.

È possibile individuare determinate somiglianze fra i tre generi in queste *fornaldarsögur*: per esempio, tutti e tre utilizzano l’interazione fra prosa e poesia a loro vantaggio per introdurre i necessari elementi di contesto. Inoltre, sia nelle *sennur* che nella gara di indovinelli l’incontro con il sovrannaturale è descritto come potenzialmente fatale ma dà accesso a dei benefici materiali o a della conoscenza occulta. Infine, sia il *mannjafnaðr* che la gara di indovinelli vertono sul confronto verbale fra due individui eccezionali e le loro abilità straordinarie.

Introduction

Verbal duels are fascinating phenomena which usually involve two or more opponents engaged in a battle of wits and quips. In literature, this trope allows the author to play with puns and *double-entendres* to showcase the characters' intelligence, while offering us the readers interesting insight in a culture's set of values and worldview. Although they are by no mean culture-specific, verbal duels assume particular forms in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, to the point of becoming distinct genres: the *senna*, the *mannjafnaðr* and the wisdom contest. All three have origins in poetry and are well represented in the *Poetic Edda*, but they also found their way into sagas. Some of the most interesting instances of verbal duels in saga literature appear in the so-called *fornaldarsögur* or "legendary sagas", set mainly in Scandinavia before the colonisation of Iceland and the conversion to Christianity. The presence of these types of verbal duels helps to understand the connections between *fornaldarsögur* and eddic poetry, but also the way mythic-heroic themes from the pre-Christian tradition were re-elaborated in 13th- and 14th-century Iceland.

Chapter I of this dissertation surveys the recent academic debate on verbal duels attempting to find universals in examples of this phenomenon, particularly in epics and war discourse. Verbal duels can be classified according to their subject matter, tone, locus of resolution and context (inter- or intra-societal). In this taxonomy, flyting shows the most eristic features, since it deals directly with the contestants' personal qualities, it is serious in tone, it often involves individuals from different societies and finds its resolution in a subsequent battle. According to this classification, however, *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* fall under the category of "ludic flytings", since they do not always end in violence and can have comedic overtones. The two genres have also been merged into one, on account of their many similarities, but this does not account for their inner mechanisms, central traits and reception.

The question of genre is of primary importance in saga literature, especially for what pertains the *fornaldarsögur*. The classification of saga genres has been at the centre of much academic debate: the main points of contentions were the criteria used to define *fornaldarsögur* (especially the time and space setting), which did not explain their heterogeneity. Recent descriptive approaches instead consider the setting as instrumental in shaping the *fornaldarsögur* and have explained their heterogeneity as the result of the evolution of the genre, influenced by other sagas and translated literature. Moreover,

particular emphasis has been put to the fundamental role the prosimetrum had in the origin and evolution of this genre, which confirms the deep connections between the *fornaldarsögur* and eddic poetry. In particular, the legendary sagas are the ones that make more frequent usage of eddic meters and subject matter, although even in this aspect the genre displays some variety. It is therefore possible that the saga writers had a range of possibilities in the use of prosimetrum and chose whichever they preferred at their discretion. The prosimetrum contributes to the representation of the Icelanders' ancestral past, which was both fascinating and problematic. Like in many other courts around Europe, the nascent Icelandic aristocracy revelled in celebrating the legendary heroes from whom they claimed to descend. The time setting, however, caused medieval Icelanders to face their pagan heritage: in this it is possible once again to notice a spectrum of attitudes that go from the absolute condemnation of witchcraft and idolatry to the celebration of warrior ethics and customs of hospitality.

The way verbal duels are inserted and re-elaborated in *fornaldarsögur* is indicative of the various modifications these stories underwent through time. Moreover, they reflect the medieval Icelandic views on marginality, masculinity and wisdom.

Chapter III focuses on the way *senna* is introduced in *Ketils saga hængs*. The *senna* is a form of stylised exchange of insults, whose aim is trying to discredit the opponent by depicting him or her as monstrous, therefore re-establishing the boundaries of male society. The exchange usually verges on the opponents' shortcomings in central spheres of human experience such as sexuality, kinship and martial qualities. There are two *sennur* in *Ketils saga hængs* and both see the hero facing an opponent who represents the "other", due to their ethnicity, gender and connections with the supernatural. The first *senna* sees Ketill facing Gusir, a Finn, thus referencing a series of prejudices about the *Finnar* and a set of negative connotations the North of Scandinavia which go back to mythology. In the second *senna*, Ketill competes with the troll-woman Forað, a supernatural being threatening human society. Each *senna* focuses on different topics, according to the features of Ketill's opponents: the first contest mainly contains threats and accusations of cowardice, the second deals with sexual aggression and subversion of gender roles. The fact that parts of the second *senna* seem to have been summed up in short prose passages suggests that the compiler was aware that these two dialogues were instances of the same genre and chose not to repeat himself.

The *mannjafnaðr* of *Örvar-Odds saga* is discussed in Chapter IV. Like the *senna*, the *mannjafnaðr* also deals with male identity, but its aim is to establish a hierarchy of men *within* society, by having the participants compare their achievements and abilities. Insults are present, but they are only a way to dismiss the claims of the opponents, not the core of the exchange. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the *mannjafnaðr* is vividly described as taking place during a drinking-contest while the protagonist is posing as a beggar. Therefore, the contest becomes a narrative device to expose the hero's real identity. The *mannjafnaðr* is an exaltation of life as a warrior and a Viking, in contrast with the tendency of the saga to celebrate monarchic rule and courtly values. These discrepancies suggest that the poetry of the contest was probably composed before the writing of the saga and later adapted to fit the ideology conveyed by the prose.

Finally, Chapter V deals with the riddle-contest in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. This dialogue is unique in saga literature, but it does have some interesting parallels with wisdom contests in the *Poetic Edda* and riddling dialogues in the *Gesta Danorum*. The wisdom contest sees two characters showcasing their intelligence and erudition while putting their lives at stake. Compared to the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*, the wisdom contest is more self-contained and its subject matter has less to do with the characters' lives or identity. There are, however, some thematic and structural similarities between the three genres, particularly in their interplay with prose, the rivalry between a champion of society and a supernatural creature, and the verbal comparison between two exceptional individuals and their skills. The riddle-contest in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* is one of the four poems around which the saga was constructed and a sophisticated battle of wits between king Heiðrekr and Óðinn, whose result will determine the king's death.

Before beginning the discussion, it is necessary to briefly address the choice of sources in this dissertation. In academic research on *fornaldarsögur* it is most common to cite as primary sources either the edition by Carl Rafn (1829-30) or the one by Guðni Jónsson (1944-45)¹. The first gathers thirty-one sagas and spawned the genre classification of "legendary sagas", although the criteria behind this collection are dated and arbitrary². Meanwhile, the edition curated by Guðni Jónsson is not accompanied by a critical

¹ Provided, of course, that the scholar does not have unreserved access to the relevant manuscripts, which is unlikely.

² For a full discussion on this matter see Driscoll, "A new edition of the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*: Some basic questions" in *On editing Old Scandinavian texts: Problems and perspectives*, edited by Ferrari and Bampi (2009, 71-84).

apparatus, nor by an extensive discussion of the sagas' textual transmission. It is also possible to find in print and online an exhaustive corpus of Medieval skaldic poetry curated, among others, by Margaret Clunies Ross and Kari Ellen Gade (2012)³. This corpus is an excellent resource, but it has the disadvantage of removing each stanza from its prose context in the sagas: since all verbal duels in *fornaldarsögur* are to different degrees prosimetrical, this would have meant the loss of important information. Therefore, the solution adopted here was to base the analysis on the edition by Carl Rafn for what pertains *Ketils saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga*, while referring to the volume *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (1960) edited by Christopher Tolkien for *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. An edition of the *fornaldarsögur* reflecting the recent developments in this field of research would be most welcome, especially if it also took advantage of the tools provided by digital editing.

³ The corpus is available in a collection titled *Skaldic Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, and three of the nine volumes have been digitised and made available on the “Skaldic Project” website (<https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=skaldic>).

Chapter I – On Verbal Duels

I.1 A definition of Verbal Duels

The study of verbal duels is fairly recent and can be traced back to a more generalised interest toward the causes and dynamics of contest behaviour in human beings. A seminal work on this subject was *Fighting for Life* by American scholar Walter J. Ong (1981), which explained the agonistic drive as the result of the psychological and biological need to establish male sexual identity. Ong found a correlation between increasing levels of literacy and a progressive interiorization of conflict, something that is also reflected in the development of narrative (Ong 1981, 188-9). Alternatively, violent behaviour, and language, has been displaced to in other areas such as sports, politics and religion (for a detailed discussion see Chapter 5 of Ong 1981). Ong also observed that oral cultures were more prone to agonistic performances: since repetitions and formulas constituted the way members of oral cultures thought, particular value was placed on the individual's skills at story-telling, thus promoting competition (Ong 1981, 124). In literary studies, some of the most influential works on verbal duels were written by Ward Parks, who first proposed his typology of the genre in the article *Flyting, Sounding, Debate: Three Verbal Contest Genres* (1986). Parks moved from Ong's observation on conflictual behaviour in his cross-cultural analysis of dialogues from heroic epics published under the title *Verbal Dueling in Heroic Narrative: The Homeric and Old English traditions* (1990): as he states in the Preface, Parks was particularly struck by the universality of what he calls "war-in-dialogue" and speculated on how its language and structure played a role in actual war discourse (Parks 1990, vii). Among the examples analysed by Parks there is also the so-called "Unferþ episode" from *Beowulf*, which had already been discussed by Carol J. Clover in relation to a wider Germanic tradition of verbal duels, which are also well-represented in Old Norse-Icelandic literature (The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode 1980). The article, as we will see, contributed to a wider debate on the Norse poetic genres of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* and the validity of the typological distinction between the two. An important addition to the conversation was Karen Swenson's *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insults in Old Norse Literature* (1991), which attempted to define both as means for expressing male selfhood, thus going back to the approach proposed by Ong.

The phrase "verbal duel" refers to a dialogic encounter during which the participants exchange words in the attempt of prove their superiority or belittle their opponent. In his

1986 article, Parks groups under the category of “verbal contests” three quite different genres: debate, sounding and flyting. In order to analyse them, Parks also proposes four categories of classification: subject matter, referential mode, locus of resolution and context. For each he identifies two alternatives which can be either eristic (contestant-oriented exchange, serious tone, external resolution and inter-societal context) or ritualizing (other-oriented exchange, ludic tone, internal resolution and intra-societal context). Parks ultimately claims that the eristic choices generally allow for more freedom of expression, while the ritualized alternatives do not (1986, 450).

This tendency can be verified by examining intellectual debates: they are indeed ritualized verbal confrontations whose subject matter are the contestants’ theories and the evidence backing it, not their personal qualities (other-oriented exchange). Therefore, emotional involvement and aggressive or scurrile language are usually frowned upon, because the tacit agreement is that any claim uttered by the participants is earnestly reflecting their opinions (serious mode). Moreover, success is determined by the contestants’ ability to prove their point and effectively deflect the objections raised by their adversaries. Victory may be decided by some form of external jury, but the verdict is ultimately based on the performance during the verbal confrontation (internal resolution). Finally, the contestants in intellectual debate consider themselves peers in a community that shares the same values, methods and qualifications (intra-societal) (Parks 1986, 453-455). In Western culture, intellectual debate traces its origin in Platonic dialogues and has nowadays assumed highly conventionalised forms.

Outside of the academic world, a good example of verbal duel is “sounding”. Famously studied by Labov (*Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* 1972), “sounding” is an abuse game practiced by Afro-American youth, consisting in a ritualized exchange of insults. The targets of these invectives are the participants themselves, or their relatives, making sounding clearly contestant-oriented. The tone and content of sounding is remarkably more playful than that of intellectual debate (ludic mode), but the two are similarly intra-societal and are typically resolved internally: though sounding might culminate in in a brawl, its purpose is to assess one’s verbal skills, not to lead up to a physical fight (Parks 1986, 452-453).

Hence, for all their differences, debate and sounding are both highly ritualized and generally devoid of physical confrontations. There is however a third category of verbal

duel that not only deeply connected to violence, but typically appears in relation to war narration: flyting.

I. 2 Flyting

The word *flyting* is a Scot term meaning “contention”, derived from the Middle English *fliten*, which is found as *flitan* in Old English and *flīzan* in Old High German. Originally, it was only associated with the humorous exchange of insults among 16th-century Scottish poets (OED Online, “flyting | fliting”). The comical connotation of the term is still very much present in modern definitions of flyting as an expression of “playful anger”. Its comedic effect arises from the disproportion between the rage it conveys and the “verbal invention” used to communicate it, suggesting that it is actually a pose, an amusing way to utter what is, at best, annoyance (Auden 1963, 383).

Conversely, Parks defines flyting as an “openly bellicose exchange of insults and boasts, frequently followed by actual fighting” (1986, 440-441). According to Parks’ own typology, flyting selects all the eristic alternatives: its focus are the contestants, their prowess, bravery and honour; its outcome is decided by a physical fight, which is the aim of the entire verbal confrontation, and it is characteristically performed by two individuals belonging to or championing for two distinguished warring communities (Parks 1986, 455). As for its referential mode, the author concedes that flyting is not always as serious as its content would suggest. According to Parks’ taxonomy there is a fundamental distinction between “heroic” and “ludic” flyting based of the intentions underlying the verbal confrontation, as in, whether or not the two participants mean to kill one another once the flyting is over (Parks 1990, 165).

Parks’ analysis also draws a link between flyting and genres that find their origins in oral traditions, particularly epics, since this kind of verbal duel seems to fit in a pattern of formulas, themes and type scenes that are typical of that medium (Parks 1990, 9-10). Moreover, given its numerous cross-cultural occurrences, flyting can be said to be almost a universal in storytelling, while setting is predictably culture specific (Parks 1990, 40, 54). In Germanic literature, Clover identifies two typical settings for flyting: outdoors, usually with the two contestants separated by a body of water, or indoors, typically during a feast in a hall or at court (Clover 1980, 447-448).

As for structure, from an extensive analysis of numerous heroic flytings mainly from the *Iliad*, Parks abstracts a pattern that can be summed up as such (Parks 1990, 50):

Engagement

Flyting proper → Eris
→ “Oral contract”

Trial of arms

Ritual resolution → Retrospective speech
→ Symbolic act

Flyting ensues when the author narrows the focus of the tale from great battles to small, intimate duels between two heroes (though several duels can happen consecutively, or divine interventions can interrupt them). This is what Parks calls Engagement, the first part of the pattern revolving around heroic flyting. The Engagement is followed by the actual verbal contest: as the action of the grand battle is momentarily suspended, the two heroes meet and proceed to boast, taunt and threaten, only then does the actual fight take place. These exchanges are interpreted as a sort of “oral contract” establishing that the outcome of that duel holds a special significance. Then, the heroes fight and once a winner emerges, he either launches in a speech or performs some kind of symbolic action. By Parks’ own admission, however, the movement is not always this clear and rarely complete (Parks 1990, 50).

I. 3 Flyting in Germanic literature

Flyting is well represented in Germanic literature as well, sometimes with features that fall neatly in Parks’ classification. In *The Battle of Maldon*, a poem commemorating the homonymous battle fought in 991, the verbal duel (ll. 25-61) takes place between the English hero Byrhtnoth and a Viking messenger, who remains nameless. The contractual element of flyting is very well exemplified when the envoy explains the two alternatives facing the English: either they pay them tribute or they will have to fight (ll. 31-33). Since one of the two contestants remains unnamed and there is little to no reference to any personal attributes or deeds, the flyting in *The Battle of Maldon*, feels less personal, “more *ad gentem* than *ad hominem*” (Parks 1990, 70).

Another example of flyting in Old English literature is contained in the second fragment of *Waldere*, when the protagonist Waldere of Aquitaine fights Guthhere, the king of the

Burgundians. This argument centres around the stripping of the armour, a cliché also found in the *Iliad*: Waldere’s dares Gutthere to deprive him of his corselet, thus setting the significance of the action in their duel, the “oral contract” that is so integral to heroic flyting (Parks 1990, 68).

Two instances of flyting can be found in *Beowulf*: one when the hero meets a nameless Danish coastguard and the other famously when Unferth derides Beowulf for believing to be able to slay the monster Grendel. The first occurrence (237-319) seems to fit in Parks’ classification, but it is somewhat atypical: the two contestants from different communities meet one another on a beach, “a suitable battlefield setting” (Parks 1990, 78), but the initial threat from the coastguard is followed by the Beowulf’s offer of counsel on how to defeat Grendel:

We þurh holdne hige hlaford þinne,
sunu Healfdenes, secean cwomon,
leodgebyrgean.
[...]
Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg,
þurh rumne sefan, ræd gelæran,
hu he, frod 7 god, feond oferswyðeþ.

We through a loyal spirit your lord, | Halfdane’s son have come to seek | the peoples-protector. [...] For that I can for Hrothgar, | through a caring spirit teach a cure, | how he, wise and good, will overcome the fiend. (ll. 267-269, 277-279)⁴

Thus, the physical fight is avoided in what Parks calls the “modulation from battlefield to guest-host patterns”, as in the shift from the hostile overtones of physical confrontation to a more friendly, highly ritualized mode of expression (Parks 1990, 78-79).

The second instance of flyting in *Beowulf* (ll. 505-605) takes place in a similar guest-host situation between the hero and Unferþ, one of Hrothgar’s servants, during a feast at court. In this context there is not explicit indication that the two mean to kill one another and the customs of hospitality that make the cultural background of the scene ideally prevent them from doing so. In Parks’ classification, this exchange cannot be strictly defined as “heroic” flyting because it does not conclude in a fight (Parks 1990, 165). To differentiate flytings based on their more or less violent endings, however, may not be the best approach, especially for Germanic literatures: as Clover points out, flyting is “a combat

⁴ All passages from *Beowulf* and their translations are taken from the online edition by Kiernan (<http://ebeowulf.uky.edu/#>).

within itself” and she goes as far as to claim that not only fighting is not the “requisite ending” of flyting, but also that it is almost never the cause of a battle, but at most of a revenge episode (1980, 464-5). Clover’s claim, though, ends up undermining the importance of aggression and physicality in verbal confrontations. A middle-ground proposition has been advanced by Swenson, who considers the display of hostility in verbal duels, not as simply leading up to a fight, but as an assertion of the contestants’ (masculine) self (Swenson 1991). Parks too admits that this is one of the main preoccupations of flyters, but only sees the verbal duel as the prelude of the event in which the sexual identity is established (1990, 13). What perhaps escapes Parks’ analysis is that the flyting between Beowulf and Unferþ is less about challenging the adversary to a fight by boasting one’s deeds, and more about debating the interpretations of those deeds and their significance in an established set of values (Clover 1980, 458).

The altercation starts with Unferþ’s attempt to shame Beowulf for a defeat in a swimming contest, particularly stressing the futility of the challenge and the unnecessary danger he put himself in for pride:

Eart þu se Beowulf, se þe wið Breca wunne
on sidne sæ, ymb sund flite,
ðær git for wlenca wada cunneðon
7 for dolgilpe on deop wæter
aldrum neþdon?

Are you that Beowulf, that with Breca struggled | on the spacious sea,
around the sound contended, | where you two for pride proved the water
| risked your lives? (ll. 505-509)

Unferþ continues to narrate the match in detail, taunting Beowulf for having lost and describing how his adversary was celebrated for his victory. Finally, he declares that he does not expect Beowulf to have more success in fighting Grendel:

Ðonne wene ic to þe wýrsan geþingea,
ðeah þu heaðoræsa gehwær dohte,
grimre guðe, gif þu Grendles dearest
nihtlongne fyrst nean bidan.

So I expect from you worse exploits, | though you in battle-storms were
strong everywhere, | in grim war, if for Grendel you dare | a night-long
vigil nearby to abide. (ll. 524-528)

Beowulf immediately responds, accusing Unferþ of being drunk and of telling lies. He reframes the episode conceding that they were still boys but already able of great deeds. Beowulf tells of how he and Breca were separated during the swimming match and how he had to defend himself from sea-serpents (ll. 530-580). Here it emerges the contrast between the interpretations given by the two contenders of the same event: what Unferþ considers a foolish match between two boys, is retold by Beowulf as an epic contest between two, admittedly young but still brave, heroes. Once Beowulf has successfully repelled Unferþ's attack, he proceeds at accusing him of having slain his own kinsmen:

[...] ðu þinum broðrum to banan wurde,
 heafodmægum. Þæs þu in | helle scealt
 werhðo dreogan, [...].

[...] you to your brothers were a death-bane, | to your head-kinsmen. For
 that you in hell must | endure torment, [...]. (ll. 587-589)

This kind of accusation, as we will see, is fairly common in Old Norse verbal duels as well. Finally, Beowulf mocks Unferþ for not having fought Grendel himself:

Secge ic þe to soðe, sunu Ecglafes,
 þæt næfre Gredel swa fela gryra gefremede,
 atol æglæca ealdre þinum,
 hynðo on Heorote, gif þin hige wære,
 sefa swa searogrim swa þu self talast.

I say to you in truth, son of Ecglaf, | that never Grendel so many
 gruesome deeds would have done, | the horrid opponent to your
 protector, | harms in Heorot, if your heart were, | [your] spirit as fierce
 in fight as you yourself profess. (ll. 590-594)

The charge of cowardice is also widely used in Old Norse literature to belittle the opponent. Beowulf's remarks leave Unferþ speechless and humiliated, his honour questioned, along with his manliness and relative worth in the society of men. There was no need for a battle, Beowulf's words have wounded him enough.

The insistence on manliness (or lack thereof) presupposes a complementary idea of femininity, that is used in derogatory terms in flyting. Accuses of femininity are used almost universally as a way to belittle one's adversary (Parks 1990, 13). This is a side-effect of the fact that the contestants in flytings are almost exclusively men. As we will see, this is complicated in Old Norse literature by the distinction between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* and the underlying discourse that comes with them. For now, it suffices to

say that flyting between men and women often, but not exclusively, verges towards wooing. As for flyting between women, the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* offers the example of the verbal duel between queen Brunhild and queen Kriemhild (also present in the *Völsunga saga*). This flyting, however, deals less with their own personal qualities and more with their husbands', thus it ends up being a "male flyting by proxy". Furthermore, the tacit agreement is that the eventual violent resolution will be between the respective spouses, not between the two women (Parks 1990, 11-13).

I. 4 Old Norse verbal duels

Flyting in Germanic literatures does not conform fully to the taxonomy proposed by Parks. When it comes to Old Norse literature, though, the very term "flyting" poses a number of issues, mainly because it annuls the distinction between the genres of *senna* ("quarrel") and *mannjafnaðr* ("man-comparison"). Some scholars maintain that such distinction has no reason to exist: Clover claims that the two forms, while perhaps differentiated in the past, were indistinguishable by the time the extant witnesses of Norse literature were written. Thus, Clover resorts to the term "flyting", which she sees as detached from physical fighting, a combat in itself consisting in a combination of clichés articulated in Claim – Defence – Counterclaim (Clover 1980). A similar approach was taken by Lönnroth who considered the *mannjafnaðr* to be "a more formalised version" of the *senna*, but ultimately regarded the two as identical (Lönnroth 1979, 97). Ellis Davidson similarly conflated the two genres into one, but never employed the word "flyting" nor addressed the distinction of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*. However, her extensive list of verbal duels has the merit of including in the discussion the wisdom contest, brought under the broad category of "exchange of questions and answers" and rarely connected to *senna* or *mannjafnaðr* (Ellis Davidson 1985, 26).

Conversely, other scholars have chosen to follow Ben-Amos' proposal to adopt an "ethnic taxonomy" instead of using analytic categories, which often fail to account for the peculiarities of certain cultural-specific genres (Ben-Amos 1969). Building upon this framework, Harris argued in favour of the use of *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* also because of their "semi-independent status" as "middle-level compositional units", for which he cited both literary and codicological evidence (Harris 1979, 67). An interesting example comes from the principal manuscript witness of the *Poetic Edda*, the Codex Regius (GKS 2365

4to), and the two poems on the hero Helgi Hunding's bane⁵. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* have been treated by the compiler as two complementary narrations on the same character, thus the second poem avoids repeating episodes or details that had already been mentioned in the first one (Harris 2008, 197). This attitude also meant that the *senna* of the second Helgi poem (St. 19-24) was initially excluded, but then interpolated when the compiler noticed that there were significant differences with the verbal duel in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (St. 32-46): such behaviour indicates that whoever was copying the manuscript saw the two *sennur* as coherent units (Harris 2008, 201). There are other ways in which the semi-independence of verbal duels can be signalled: in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* the *senna* is framed by two prose passages, but more importantly it is marked by a clear change in meter, from *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttur*, to the point that it is presented in some editions as a subsection of the poem titled *Hrímgærðarmál*. Moreover, the very fact that *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* appear both as relatively short passages in sagas (*Ketils saga*, *Örvar-Odds saga* among others), and as lengthy, autonomous poems (*Lokasenna*, *Hárbarðsljóð*), suggests that they have an underlying structure that could be expanded, compressed and adapted to a wider, prosimetrical context (Harris 1979, 67).

Elaborating on Harris' proposals, Bax and Padmos took a historical-pragmatical approach and observed how *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* are two very different speech acts, the first aiming at deprecating the opponent and exposing his or her faults, the second dealing with the speaker and his or her merits (Bax and Padmos 1983). Furthermore, Swenson stressed that the very existence and usage of the words *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* suggest a generic difference that must have been perceived by the community of performers and audience (Swenson 1991, 27). Moreover, she claims that the two genres have different functions: the *senna* constructs the ideal self and the boundaries of society by asserting the hero's identity and power over that of the monstrous and marginal; while the *mannjafnaðr*, acting within the boundaries set by the *senna*, realises a hierarchy of men based on a shared set of values (Swenson 1991, 53, 58-9). This distinction has been partially rejected by Broussard, who claimed that *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* have the same outcome, as in the exaltation of one contestant and belittlement of another, so they do not have different functions, but different forms (Broussard 2010, 4-5). Admittedly *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* have enough in common to be deemed as complementary in a wider discourse concerning

⁵ There are enough similarities between this figure and the protagonist of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* to assume that the two are in fact variations of the same character (Harris 2008, 196).

sexual identity and gender roles. Swenson's analysis, however, better accounts for their language and contextual events, for example the requirements that have to be met to participate to a *mannjafnaðr* and the violent reaction of the characters when such participation is denied.

The need to demonstrate the difference between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* may have hindered a discussion that draws a comparison between them and the wisdom contest (except for the already cited Ellis Davidson, 1985). Like *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*, the wisdom contest is a veritable battle of words and minds, with high stakes that can only be internally decided by the contestants' ability to trick the adversary. The wisdom contest is a sophisticated duel made of riddles, puns and metaphors, and it shares enough themes, style and structure with the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* to call for a parallel analysis of the three.

As it will be discussed in the following chapters, since verbal duels appear in different measures in the *Poetic Edda*, they also offer some insight in how eddic material was re-elaborated in Medieval sagas and of how the sagas themselves were composed. *Senna*, *mannjafnaðr* and wisdom contests all appear in prose sagas, but it is in the *fornaldarsögur* ("sagas of ancient times") that they maintain their distinctive style, themes, conventions and even characters. Thus, the present discussion will analyse the three Norse genres of verbal duels declined in as many *fornaldarsögur*: *Ketils saga hængs*, *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to explain what are the *fornaldarsögur*, how poetry appears in this prose genre and, finally, how these sagas reconstruct the historical and literary past they are inspired by.

Chapter II – On *Fornaldarsögur*, prosimetrum and legendary past

II. 1 *Fornaldarsögur* and genre classification of sagas

The label *fornaldarsögur* (“sagas of the ancient times” or “legendary sagas”) refers to a group of sagas, characteristically set in Scandinavia before the settlement of Iceland (c. 870) and the conversion to Christianity (Bampi 2017, Clunies Ross 2009, 317). The large number of manuscripts containing *fornaldarsögur* and their relatively poor condition have been seen as indicators of intense usage and, thus, great popularity. The wide approval enjoyed by this subject matter is also testified by numerous sculptures, carvings, and literary works in several Germanic traditions and across Old Norse literature, especially for what concerns the *Völsunga saga* (Mitchell, *The Heroic and Legendary Sagas* 2008, 320).

The dating of the *fornaldarsögur* is a complicated issue: most of the extant manuscripts date from the 14th century onwards, but there is evidence that points to an earlier composition (Tulinius 2002, 47). Most of the subject matter of the *fornaldarsögur* originated in pre-literate Scandinavia and was probably inspired by historical persons and events of which we do not always have certain records⁶. However ancient, this subject matter arrived in Iceland in different ways at different times and “the archaism of the material is no proof of great age” of the sagas themselves (Tulinius 2002, 48-49). The fact that 13th century sources such as Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* and *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* (which will be discussed more extensively later) mention the composition of tales that resemble the *fornaldarsögur*. could be seen as evidence of the circulation of legendary sagas in the 12th century. Even if this were the case, however, it is probable that they circulated orally, not in written form (Tulinius 2002, 49, 54). A solution to this conundrum may come from considering the *fornaldarsögur* as the result of the evolution and fusion of the Icelandic poetic and historiographic traditions, which took place between the late 12th and early 13th centuries and was encouraged by the surging local aristocracy (Tulinius 2002, 58-9). In this period of literary development and diversification, sagas dealing with historical royal dynasties began to the use heroic poems as sources (for example in *Skjöldunga saga*), thus boosting the interest for the

⁶ For example, we know from several European chronicles that a man called Ragnar loðbrók lived in the 9th century, but we do not know for certain if or how the legend told in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* relates to this figure (Tulinius 2002, 48-49).

subject matter and inspiring the first *fornaldarsögur*, which incidentally also deal with Scandinavian royalty (e.g. *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*) (Tulinius 2002, 59-60). This would place the origin date of legendary sagas before 1230 and probably as far back as 1180 (Tulinius 2002, 63).

The generic label *fornaldarsögur*, on the other hand, is definitely much younger. The term was first used by Carl Christian Rafn as the title of a collection of tales on legendary Northern heroes, *Fornalda Sögur Norðurlanda* published between 1829 and 1830. The title was reprised by Guðni Jónsson in 1943 for an edition of basically the same corpus, counting twenty-six sagas, six *þættir* and two genealogies (Righter-Gould 1980, 423). A further distinction is made within this genre between *Abenteuersagas*, *Wikingersagas* and *Heldensagas* (respectively, adventure sagas, Vikings' sagas and heroic sagas): the first two are very similar, following the deeds and life of one hero, while the *Heldensagas* span across several generations and their protagonists meet tragic ends (Righter-Gould 1980, 423, Bampi 2017). The term *fornaldarsögur* has been in use in saga studies, along with other generic labels such as *Íslendingasögur*, “family sagas”, telling the stories of early Icelandic settlers; *konungasögur*, “kings sagas”, pseudo-historical accounts of Scandinavian kings' lives; *riddarasögur*, “knights' sagas”, translated or indigenous courtly romances; *samtíðarsögur*, “contemporary sagas”, set between 1117 and 1291, and *heilagra manna sögur*, hagiographic sagas. Together these labels form a system of classification of sagas that is based either on subject matter, in the case of *konungasögur*, *riddarasögur* and *heilagra manna sögur*, or time setting, for *fornaldarsögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and *samtíðarsögur* (Bampi 2017).

This classification is entirely a modern creation, but its appropriateness is debatable, firstly because, with the exception of *konungasögur* and *riddarasögur*, none of the labels listed above are attested in Medieval manuscripts (Bampi 2017). In 1964, Lönnroth criticised the modern system of classification, based on a lexicographical analysis that tried to reconstruct medieval terminology (Lönnroth 1964). As a matter of fact, while Old Norse poetics were extensively discussed in works such as *Skáldskaparmál* or *Háttalykill*, there are no analogous works for prose, nor explicit generic definitions in medieval witnesses: the ones found by Lönnroth dealt mainly with the hagiographic tradition, obviously of continental importation and thus calquing on a pre-established classification (Clunies Ross 2006, 276-7, Harris 1972, 24). One medieval term displaying some form of generic distinction of sagas is *lygisögur* (“lying sagas”). It appears in a passage from

Porgils saga ok Hafliða (“The Saga of Þorgil and Hafliði”), describing a wedding feast taking place in 1119 in Reykjahólar (Western Iceland)⁷ and particularly the story-telling that was part of the entertainment. The subject matter of these stories is briefly listed by the narrator, who evokes the names of legendary heroes, kings and even berserkers, all figures that are at the core of *fornaldarsögur*. King Sverrir is said to be particularly entertained by these “lying stories”, though his remark is closely followed by the admission that people still thought these heroes to be their ancestors (Clunies Ross 2010, 18-19). The lack of a medieval taxonomy of sagas does not imply that there was no perception of genre differences by the compilers or the original audience. In fact, there is some codicological evidence that suggests at least a division between fiction and “real” stories: manuscript AM 343a 4to only contains *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*; AM 152 fol. brings together legendary sagas, romances and two *Íslendingasögur* in which the fantastic elements are most prominent (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Þórðar saga hreðu*); finally, of the several texts in GKS 2845 4to only one can be described as realistic, namely *Bandamanna saga*, while the others deal with the supernatural one way or the other (Mitchell 1991, 22).

Conversely, Harris suggested to establish genres based on an analysis of the texts’ structures and motifs and look for similarities, a proposition that was later accepted by Righter-Gould and applied to the *fornaldarsögur* (Harris 1972, Righter-Gould 1980). According to Righter-Gould’s description, the narration of legendary sagas is made of five components: Introduction, Hero’s Youth, Motivation for Departure, Adventure Cycle and Concluding Elements (1980, 424). The first part is by no means exclusive to *fornaldarsögur*, since it sets the spatial and temporal coordinates by referring to a ruler and a country. What sets legendary sagas apart from, say, *riddarasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, is that the kings mentioned are often fictional, while the narration remains for the most part grounded in real Scandinavian geography (except for Iceland) (Righter-Gould 1980, 426). The Hero’s Youth contains extremely stylised and conventional descriptions found also in other genres, but particularly bidimensional in *fornaldarsögur*. The hero is presented either as *efniligr* (“promising”), thus virtually flawless and consistently so during the whole plot, or as *heimskr* (“foolish”) and his laziness and apathy is summed up by the attribute *kolbíttr* (“coal-eater”). In the latter case,

⁷ The episode is cited in most discussions about the origins of sagas, the dating of earlier examples and the occasions and mode of performance, see among others Heusler 1969, Clover 1986, Harris 1997, Tulinius 2002 and Clunies Ross 2010.

the protagonist undergoes a striking change into a successful hero (Righter-Gould 1980, 427-8). The third part, the Motivation for Departure, sets the action in motion, but, given the episodic nature of some of the sagas, further motivations are provided along the plot. This component is dependent on the characterisation in the previous passage, while also presenting enough regularities to support a subdivision within the genre. In *Abenteuersagas*, if the hero is promising he will immediately enter a king's service, otherwise he will depart after being taunted or out of necessity (in *Ketils saga*, the hero risks starvation). In *Wikingersagas* all protagonists are talented and keen on fighting, yet the motivations are the most varied: the desire to lead a raiding party (*Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*), or to embark on a quest for revenge, for love or to please a monarch (*Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*), but also to disprove a prophecy (*Örvar-Odds saga*). Finally, the *Heldensagas* deal with members of royal dynasties that see revenge as their moral duty (*Völsunga saga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*) and for whom even wooing can have deadly consequences, like in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (Righter-Gould 1980, 429-31). Once the action has been set in motion, the Adventure Cycle displays a paratactic structure made of individual episodes combined. There are usually two “pivots”, two major events, the first of which is only partially successful and often followed by an interval, generally a period of healing or a digression leading to the second pivot, a climactic ending of the cycle. In *Abenteuer* and *Wikingersagas* the first pivot determines the main theme of the narration, while the second brings about an expected positive conclusion; meanwhile, in *Heldensagas*, there can be more than one adventure cycle, usually one for each hero of the dynasty, and success is not won by fighting but through a display of wisdom, which is implied to be of divine origin and allows the protagonist to have previous knowledge of their fate (Righter-Gould 1980, 432-5). The main plot of *fornaldarsögur* usually finishes with the end of the Adventure Cycle, but the Concluding Elements can provide some further information, sometimes in the form of genealogies, which link the narration with historical kings or Icelandic *landnámamenn*; other times as brief epilogues inserted to give the fullest account possible of the hero's life or to provide connections with other sagas. Furthermore, the saga can conclude with a learned discourse claiming its own veracity or thanking the audience, one of the rare occasions in which the voice of the author takes a central role instead of transpiring from the prose. Finally, sagas can end very straightforwardly with a formula announcing their ending, like *ok lýkr hér þessari sögu* (“and here ends this saga”) from *Ketils saga* (Righter-Gould 1980, 437).

One of the dangers of pointing out and describing the shared features of an already existing group, however, is to exclude other texts that could be relevant (Jakobsson, 2006, 282). No matter how helpful Righter-Gould's description is in understanding the structure of *fornaldarsögur*, her selection of texts was still based on Rafn's collection. A close analysis of legendary sagas by Kalinke has exposed the underlying bridal-quest structure of some of them, which they share with most *riddarasögur*⁸ (2006, 276). Righter-Gould had already noted the influence of translated romances in the wooing motif or in the final comments by the author, but she did not question whether this inflected the generic division between *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* (1980, 430, 437). However, hybridity and multimodality are recurrent features in sagas: *Örvar-Odds saga* starts off as a *Wikingerssaga* and turns into a wonder tale, while *Samsons saga fagra* is a *riddarasaga* that takes on the style and motifs of *fornaldarsögur* as the action moves into the far North (Tulinius 2006, 280).

To account for this hybridity, it may help first to redefine the concept of genre, not as a prescriptive category, but in Jauss' terms as a "historical family", which can be subjected to changes through time (Jauss 1977). In this frame, genre is understood as a "set of signals and indications activating different horizons of expectations in the audience" (Ferrari 2012, 271, Bampi 2017). As for what these signals and indications are, academic research has concentrated on how spatial and temporal setting, the chronotope⁹, directly influences the way their fictional world is constructed: for *fornaldarsögur* this generally means a greater presence of the supernatural in a mostly episodic narrative and the upholding of aristocratic values of honour and bravery by characters that appropriate the vocabulary of European romances (Bampi 2017, Rowe 1993, 541). In contrast, *Íslendingasögur*, that take place during the settlement of Iceland (c. 950-1050), usually deal with feuds between Icelandic farmers, told in a rather regular, six-part structure¹⁰, with a concise, objective style (Rowe 1993, 541).

This does not mean that all *fornaldarsögur* realised these elements in the same ways, given that they often incorporated narratives and references from multiple sources (Ferrari 2012, 273). Besides, there were specific communicative intentions behind the

⁸ She also points out the fundamental inconsistency of the modern classification system: while the modifier *fornaldar-* refers to a time setting, *riddara-* points to the sagas' protagonists and neither is truly indicative of genre (Kalinke 2006, 276).

⁹ "The intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature." (Bakhtin 1981, 84-85)

¹⁰ First described by Theodore M. Andersson in *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (1967), it is made of 1) introduction, 2) conflict, 3) climax, 4) revenge, 5) reconciliation, 6) aftermath.

composition of the sagas, inevitably influenced by the socio-historical context in which they were written (Rowe 1993, 545). For example, the three redactions of *Örvar-Odds saga* draw from different traditions, which confers distinct tones on their narratives: the earliest version re-elaborates a Scandinavian legend in light of Christian anti-pagan discourse, coming off as more serious and moralising; while the younger version integrates elements of *mirabilia* from European traditions and erudite knowledge to the story, which becomes more playful and varied (Ferrari 2012, 283). Meanwhile, *Áns saga bogsveigis* (“The Saga of Án Bow-Bender”), traditionally considered a *fornaldarsaga*, is in fact a generic hybrid: the saga displays the structure and sets of values typical of *Íslendingasögur*, but purposefully adopts the typical space-time setting of *fornaldarsögur* as “a mirror to fourteenth-century Iceland”, in order to criticise more freely the increasing interferences of Norwegian royal power in Icelandic politics¹¹ (Rowe 1993, 550).

Central to the evolution and, ultimately, the heterogeneity of *fornaldarsögur* was also the influence of translated literatures, which could be better explained in Even-Zohar’s framework of polysystem theory. The base assumption of this theory is that literature, language, culture, and society are “heterogenous, hierarchised systems” continuously interacting with one another and, thus, continuously evolving. Literature itself is a polysystem in which genres are not “high” or “low”, but rather “canonized” or “non-canonized” to the extent to which they are accepted by the dominant circles as legitimate (Even-Zohar 1990a, 15-17). Literary genres are in constant competition to assume a central position in the system, as opposed to a peripheral one, and the same can be said for either primary/innovative or secondary/conservative literary principles. On this struggle and on the interaction with other systems depends literary development (Even-Zohar 1990a, 21). Translated literatures, which constitute a, usually peripheral, system within literature, become central in three cases: when the polysystem is “young”, when literature is somewhat “peripheral” or “weak” in the wider polysystem of a society, or at a time of turning points, crises or vacuums in the literature (Even-Zohar 1990b). The introduction of courtly ideology in Iceland can easily be deemed one of such major turning points, so much so that the translated *riddarasögur* conveying such set of ideas suddenly became central to Old Norse literary polysystem, reinvigorating it with new material and new narrative patterns and conventions. As a direct consequence, translated

¹¹ After several centuries of independence, Iceland became progressively subject to Norwegian monarchic rule: the process was completed in the years 1262-64 when Iceland officially became part of the Norwegian kingdom (Þorláksson 2005).

romances came to influence already existing genres, especially *fornaldarsögur*, not only in the composition of new stories, but also in the re-elaboration of older tales, providing new possibilities and, ultimately, leading to further hybridization. The canonisation of such innovations was significantly aided by the support of Norwegian and Icelandic higher social classes, which became the main patrons and audience of saga composition (Bampi 2012, 191-193).

To sum up, the *fornaldarsögur* are sagas set in pre-Christian Scandinavia, mainly dealing with aristocratic heroes and their several adventures, often involving supernatural creatures, magic and pagan deities. The generic classification of *fornaldarsögur* has been criticised as an entirely modern convention, only based on the setting of the sagas in pre-Christian Scandinavia and does not account for their heterogeneity. Recent scholarship, however, has preferred a more descriptive approach towards genre that explains the heterogeneity of these sagas in terms of diachronic evolution and inter-generic relationships, sometimes realised with full awareness by the saga writers. Moreover, rather than being an incidental common feature, the space-time setting in *fornaldarsögur* is the cornerstone that determines much of the core features of the genres: episodic structure, presence of the supernatural or *mirabilia*, aristocratic characters and ethics. Another feature that sets the *fornaldarsögur* apart from other genres is their relationship with eddic poetry.

II. 2 Prosimetrum in the *fornaldarsögur*

One of the most striking features of sagas is their extensive and sophisticated use of prose narration, what has been called the “long prose form”. Before the appearance of the novel, long narratives in prose were very rare in Europe and the only one that had an attested impact on the evolution of Icelandic sagas was the 13th-century French prose romance, which was an exclusively literary phenomenon (Clover 1986, 10-11). As a matter of fact, the long prose form seems to be inextricably linked to literacy, at least in Europe. However, the observation of extra-European oral traditions may provide some insight in how this form may have developed in pre-literate Iceland (Clover 1986, 12-13).

The oral prose traditions outside of Europe are always prosimetrical and should not be thought as long entities, but as relatively short episodes part of an “immanent whole”. The phrase “immanent whole” refers to a set of contextual references that existed in the minds of the performer and the audience but that need not to be retold in its entirety for the story to make sense. A classic example of immanent whole is the shared knowledge

most churchgoers have of the events recounted in the Gospels, so that when they hear a single episode from the life of Christ, they are able to place it in a larger narrative, even though they may have never read it in its entirety (Clover 1986, 19-20). Part of the reasons why episodes are preferred in oral traditions may be that the long prose form is perceived to be particularly taxing on the memory of both the storyteller and the listeners (Clover 1986, 29). In this context, the plainness and length of saga prose either stands out as a remarkable exception or is evidence that sagas never existed in the oral stage if not in the form *þættir* understood to be part of immanent wholes (Clover 1986, 34). This hypothesis is supported also by the original meaning of *þátrr* as “strand in a rope”, conveying the idea of one smaller unity belonging to a bigger collectiveness (Clover 1986, 30) The idea of tracing the origins of sagas to short stories had already been proposed in the 19th century but was dismantled by Heusler in 1969 on the basis of several objections: the contemporary evidence of saga performance we have, i.e. the account of the wedding in Reykjahólar, suggests a long narrative or at least a combination of short stories still in an oral phase (Heusler 1969, 441). Moreover, some sagas cannot be divided into shorter stories that make sense and even the most episodic narrations have a basic frame holding the single narratives together, for example a biographical narration. Finally, this theory does not consider the fact that sagas were composed also by integrating and expanding written sources, nor the possibility that the single *þættir* we may identify within a saga could have been invented by the compilers or authors (Heusler 1969, 441). However, by integrating the so-called “*þátrr*-theory” with the notion of the immanent whole, it would be possible to imagine a subdivision of even the most organic sagas: if the audience was aware of the context of each episodes, they would be able to make the necessary connections to understand the story. This is particularly true for biographies which by themselves are prone to fragmentation (Clover 1986, 38). This would all bring to the conclusion that sagas as “long prose form” did not exist in the preliterate stage if not in the form of short stories existing in the context of an overarching immanent narrative shared by the audience (Clover 1986, 34).

There are, however, some adjustments to be made to these hypotheses. Firstly, the main problem with the concept of immanent whole is that it is difficult to imagine that each member of the audience had the same understanding of it or that their interpretation of the story was not somehow influenced by their individual background, which can only result in different versions of the “same” story circulating at the same time. Secondly, it is possible that the oral phase knew, if not a “long prose form”, perhaps a prosimetrical

“long oral form” which for a time coexisted with written narration and ended up influencing the composition of sagas (Clunies Ross 2010, 42-43).

The prominence of prosimetrum in the origins of sagas also helps to understand the profound connections that tie the *fornaldarsögur* with the *Poetic Edda*. Prose introductions and transitions are by no mean rare in the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to)¹², in fact they offer essential context to some of the heroic poems, like *Völundarkviða* (“The Lay of the Wayland”) and to speech poems in *ljóðaháttur*, for example *Grímnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Lokasenna* in the first half of the collection, and *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál* dealing with heroic material (Harris 1997, 133, Fulk 2016, 262). *Ljóðaháttur* (“song-form”) is one of the three meters found in the Poetic Edda, the others being *málaháttur* (“speech-form”) and the most widely used *fornyrðislag* (“old story meter”) (Clunies Ross 2005, 22). Since the Codex Regius was compiled in 1270 it is uncertain to what extent the prose passages were innovations by the compiler. Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum* has some significant parallels with the *Poetic Edda*, especially regarding the Sigurðr poems, while also presenting a prosimetrical form in its first nine books that is many ways similar to that of *fornaldarsögur* (Clunies Ross 2012, 121). Saxo’s insertion of verses was not only a heritage of traditional vernacular composition, but also in compliance with the models of imported Latin literature, in which it was fairly common to quote poetry to support the contents of prose. (Harris 1997, 134).

That the practice of prosimetrum was already established before the 13th century is suggested by two further pieces of evidence. The first is the already mentioned passage from *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, describing the storytelling as entertainment in 1119 and referencing the insertion of verses in a saga (Harris 1997, 134):

Ingimundr prestr sagði sögu Orms Barreyjarskálds ok vísur margar ok flokk góðan við enda sögunnar, er Ingimundr hafði ortan, ok hafa þó margir fróðir menn þessa sögu fyrir satt.

¹² Manuscript GKS 2365 4to is the main manuscript of the *Poetic Edda*. Written around 1270 it is a collection of 29 poems, 10 mythological and 19 dealing with Germanic heroes. It is considered a national treasure in Iceland and was among the first manuscripts to be returned from Denmark. The *Poetic Edda* is also preserved in three fragments under the siglum AM 748 4to (1300-1324, preserved in Copenhagen), while a version of the *Voluspá* was handed down in the codex called *Hauksbók* (AM 544 4to, Copenhagen) (Gunnell 2005, 82-83).

Ingimundr the priest told the story of Ormr Barreyjarskáld including many verses and a good flokk towards the end of the saga, which Ingimundr had composed, yet many learned men regard this story as true.¹³

The *flokk* is a genre of skaldic poetry without refrain (Clunies Ross 2005, 32n7). The final remark on the veracity of the tale is an indicator that, at least in this case, the verses were not used to authenticate the narration. The second piece of evidence comes from *Norna-Gests þáttr* (“The Story of Norna-Gestr”), set during the reign of king Olaf Trygvason (995-1000). The protagonist of the story is a mysterious old skald who entertains the king’s men during feasts by telling them stories in prose and verse, which he apparently draws from a manuscript in his possession. There is admittedly some distance between the events narrated in the *þáttr* and its date of composition (probably around 1300), yet the detailed description of the performance seems to reflect an actual practice (Harris 1997, 134, Lönnroth 1990, 76).

The information given about the performance also allows to make some assumptions on the development that led to the prosimetrical form of sagas. In the *þáttr* one can recognise that the stories told by Norna-Gestr are taken mainly from the cycle of the Volsungs. Also, there is a quite noticeable “division of labour” between the prose, in which the narration unfolds, and the poetry, through which the characters speak in direct quotations from *Reginsmál* (“The Lay of Regin”) and *Helreið Brynhildar* (“Brunhild’s Ride to Hel”) (Lönnroth 1990, 76). Everything else about the performance is in line with West Germanic tradition: the story being told at a feast while the audience is drinking, the skald being a wanderer who carries a harp, the plot being centred on themes of revenge or war, the Migration period (4th to 6th century CE) as the main time setting; not to mention the use of an alliterative long verse form that is common to Germanic narrative poetry and is represented also in *Beowulf*, *Widsith* or *Hildenbrandslied* (Lönnroth 1990, 77-78). Only in Iceland, however, there is indication that the entertainment provided by the skald had become divided into three separate acts: the playing of the harp, the telling of a story in prose and the recitation of poetry, which either happened at the end of the tale or was used to emphasise the most poignant speeches or dialogues (Lönnroth 1990, 78). It was suggested by Phillipotts (1920) that eddic poetry was originally a form of ritual drama, but the evolution most probably went the other way around: the verses were probably recited by the performer in an almost theatrical way precisely because their content was

¹³ Icelandic text from the edition of Ursula Brown (1952), 17–18. Translation by Margaret Clunies Ross (2005, 32).

particularly dramatic (Lönnroth 1990, 79). In the story told by Norna-Gestr, both poetic passages interrupt the narrative to express the characters' emotion and indirectly address the audience: in *Reginismál*, Óðinn instructs young Sigurðr on how to be a respectable warrior, a piece of didacticism that would have resonated among king Olaf's followers; meanwhile, *Helreið Brynhildar* functions as Brunhild's self-defence during which the heroine tells her tragic story from her perspective, voicing the griefs and worries of many women (Lönnroth 1990, 80). The emotional charge of these moments is in stark contrast with the otherwise distanced and objective prose, but the two work together as two distinctive voices, each with a precise role in bringing forth either narration or sentiment (Lönnroth 1990, 81). In short, while the general tendency in West Germanic traditions was the (musical) performance of narrative poems, in Iceland, verses became the mark of the most dramatic passages of the tales, also prompting a development towards more regular and succinct stanzas and an avoidance of ornamental repetitions (which were no longer necessary as mnemonic devices for shorter pieces) (Lönnroth 1990, 83-84). The separation was ultimately beneficial for prose as well, since it was freed from the conventions of narrative poetry and could explore further possibilities (Lönnroth 1990, 84).

If the gradual specialisation of prose and poetry at the beginning of saga literature gives an idea on how the prosimetrical form of the extant sagas came into existence, it is also true that from the late 12th onwards the insertion of poetry was used differently, in ways that seem to confirm generic subdivisions (Clunies Ross 2012, 123). The sagas that were aiming for a greater sense of historicity, for example the *konungasögur*, used poetry as authenticating evidence for the claims contained in the prose. This has been called the "evidence use" of isolated skaldic stanzas (*lausavísur*) in *dróttkvætt* ("court-meter"), the principal meter in 12th century poetry. It is possible that these stanzas were originally part of larger compositions, but their usage in the context of historical sagas allows the authors to indirectly express their views, in contrast with a prose that aimed to be as objective as possible (Clunies Ross 2012, 124). A curiously reverse purpose was instead at the base of the typical use of *lausavísur* in *Íslendingasögur*: here the verses, mainly in *dróttkvætt*, were supposed to be the direct speech of the characters, only partially converted from third- to first- person sentences. Whereas poetry in *konungasögur* was used to give voice to the writer, its "situational" use in *Íslendingasögur* ends up toning down or distancing the characters' speech through a highly stylised and impersonal language (Clunies Ross 2012, 124).

On the other hand, poetry in *fornaldarsögur* is typically in eddic meters, either *fornyrðislag* or *ljóðaháttur*, which concur to create the legendary and pagan setting of the stories, and they are not *lausavísur*. On the contrary, the poems found in this genre can be assigned to poetic genres, for example the *spá* (“prophecy”), the *senna* or the *mannjafnaðr*. Like in *Íslendingasögur*, they are mainly speech acts carried out with a simple, direct style (Clunies Ross 2012, 125-6). A conspicuous exception to this tendency is the riddle-contest in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* in which, as we will see, enigmatic poetic language will serve as a device to pose the riddles. As for what these speeches do, Heusler has underlined the parallel between legendary sagas and Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, while proposing a distinction between *Situationgedichte* (“situation poems”) and *Ereignisgedichte* (“action poems”): the first are either retrospections on the speaker’s life or prophecies and may have had their origins in *lausavísur* or dialogue poems, whereas action poems are generally dialogical and advance the narrative, while the prose provide context and motivation (Heusler 1969, Clunies Ross 2012, 126).

Poetic retrospections and dialogues are, of course, not exclusive of the *fornaldarsögur*: they are present also in *Beowulf* and, to a certain extent, in *Íslendingasögur*, although in this case they might have been a later addition (Clunies Ross 2012, 127). Moreover, by comparing eddic poetry with the *fornaldarsögur* we notice a curious shift in gender roles when it comes to monologues: *Guðrúnarkviða* I and II (“The Poem of Guðrún”) and *Helreið Brynhildar* contain retrospections from female protagonists, while in legendary sagas and the *Gesta Danorum* they are usually delivered by men (Oddr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, Hjálmar in both *Heiðreks* and *Örvar-Odds saga*, Starkaðr in Book 8 of the *Gesta Danorum*). Still, in *Örvar-Odds saga* the prophecy that starts Odd’s adventures is crucially pronounced by a woman, in the tradition of the eddic *Vǫluspá* (“The Seeress’ Prophecy”) (Clunies Ross 2012, 126). As for dialogues, Heusler’s classification seems to miss the fact that their role in the prosimetrum is much more multifaceted in both *fornaldarsögur* and *Gesta Danorum* than it was in the *Poetic Edda* (Clunies Ross 2012, 127). As we will see, dialogues in legendary sagas are often confrontational, conveying tension chiefly between the human and the supernatural world, whose creatures react with open hostility to any intrusion (Clunies Ross 2012, 127). Exchanges between humans, on the other hand, can transform into the retrospective monologues discussed above, as they often recount, justify and compare the deeds of the heroes: an example of this phenomenon is the so-called *Innsteinskviða* in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, which starts off as a dialogue between king Hálf and his warriors Innsteinn and Útsteinn and ends

with two retrospective poems by Innsteinn (Clunies Ross 2012, 129). A similar transition occurs, as we be discussed in Chapter IV, during the *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga*. Unsurprisingly, this kind of dialogues also carries specific gender connotations: the participants are exclusively males and, when they are not, they are either posing as a man (like Hervor in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*) or somehow connected with paganism and magic (like the priestesses in *Örvar-Odds saga*) (Clunies Ross 2012, 128-9).

Eddic poetry has been deemed crucial for the origins of *fornaldarsögur*, as the “stable core” on which they developed (Clunies Ross 2012, 132). The emergence of legendary sagas was also aided by the general interest in skaldic poetry in the 12th to 14th century, reflective of a changing cultural sensitivity also influenced by socio-political factors (Nordal 2012, 139, 148). Several parallels can be seen between the *fornaldarsögur* and the most appreciated works on skaldic poetics, particularly *Skáldskarparmál* and *Háttalykill* (“Key to Verse Form”). The first is famously part of Snorri’s *Edda*, written at the beginning of the 13th century to provide explanations and examples of skaldic poetry dealing with the mythological tradition; meanwhile, *Háttalykill* is a 12th-century poem written by the earl of Orkney Rögnvaldr kali Kolsson and an Icelandic poet by the name of Hallr Þórarinnsson (Nordal 2012, 139-140). The poem was conceived as a *clavis metrica* (the title is indeed a calque of this Latin phrase) and it exemplifies the numerous types of skaldic meters in stanzas dealing with ancient heroes and kings. There is evidence in the *Orkeyinga saga* that *Háttalykill* was initially orally transmitted, but it is uncertain when it was finally written down, since the only surviving manuscript dates to the 17th century (Clunies Ross 2005, 155). The events cited in *Háttalykill* and *Skáldskarparmál* are at the core of *Völsunga saga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, *Ragnarssona þátr*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Gautreks saga*, other than the first parts of the *Heimskringla* (Nordal 2012, 141). Other than providing subject matter, the poetic treatises gave indications on the appropriate meters and poets to quote in different contexts: citing the skalds mentioned by Snorri in *Skáldskarparmál* meant authenticate the content of *konungasögur*, while the original poetry of *Íslendingasögur* is in line with their “situational” use of verses as expressions of the characters’ voices. For *fornaldarsögur*, there was an awareness of the appropriateness of *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðahátt*, given the sagas’ time setting and subject matter, even though the medieval treatises did not explicitly distinguish between skaldic and eddic meters (Nordal 2012, 143-4).

Nevertheless, the usage of skaldic stanzas in *fornaldarsögur* is far from homogeneous and so is their relationship with skaldic poetics and the cultural milieu they reflected. Firstly, there is a considerable group of eighteen legendary sagas and short stories that contains few or no verses at all. Secondly, of the remaining sixteen sagas, some have the strongest thematic connections with skaldic poetics and are amongst the first to be written down in manuscripts, while others have been transmitted later and display a preference for Norwegian material (Nordal 2012, 145).

The first subgroup includes sagas like *Völsunga saga* and *Heiðreks saga* that played a pivotal role in the distancing of the genre from narrative poetry. The sagas of this subgroup make wide use of material discussed in treatises on skaldic poetics and dealing with Danish royalty. The popularity of this material can be explained by the desire of Icelandic surging aristocracy to claim their descentance from Danish ruling dynasties. The early preference for Danish material is testified by the fact that only in the 15th century were the *Hrafnistasögur* collected in manuscripts along with *Íslendingasögur*. (Nordal 2012, 146, 148). The second subgroup is of later transmission and comprises precisely these four sagas, *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Áns saga bogsveigis* and *Örvar-Odds saga*: also known as *Hrafnistumannasögur* (“The sagas of the men of Hrafnista”), they tell the stories of the descendants of Ketil Salmon who lived on the island of Hrafnista (now Ramsta) off the coast of Norway. In this group, *Örvar-Odds saga* is somewhat atypical, because it was transmitted quite early¹⁴ and it does contain some references to *Háttalykill*, but there is enough manuscript evidence to suggest that they were perceived as a group. Together with *Bósa saga* and *Friðþjófs saga frækna* they deal with the stories of Norwegian kings and farmers (Nordal 2012, 147). Whatever references to eddic material they contain is subtler or in the form of adoption of generic models.

The variety displayed by *fornaldarsögur* in the use of poetry, or lack thereof, is significant enough to believe that eddic poetry was not that stable a core after all in their development, and that the passing of time brought about further changes in the usage of prosimetrum. It is possible that medieval compilers were aware of the different combinations of prose and poetry that resulted from this process and used them at their discretion (Clunies Ross 2012, 132). Still, the special relationship uniting legendary sagas

¹⁴ The earliest extant manuscript of *Örvar-Odds saga*, dates from around 1300-1325, while the oldest witnesses of *Ketils saga*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Áns saga bogsveigis* are from 1450-1475.

and the *Poetic Edda* was functional in the construction of that “legendary past” that not only serves as their setting, but also provides a set of very distinctive motifs.

II. 3 The legendary past of the *fornaldarsögur*

The widespread interest in skaldic poetics mentioned above emerged in a conducive climate that interested the whole of Europe. The development of Icelandic literature and *fornaldarsögur* took place in a period of generalised interest for vernacular legends, which was also symptomatic of the desire of the aristocracy to (re-)appropriate culture from the hegemony of the Church. As in the continent writers and audience were interested in the “Matter of Rome”, or in the Carolingian and Arthurian cycles, Icelandic composers felt a similar appeal towards the “Matter of the North”, but in drawing from it they invented the unique genre of the saga (Tulinius 2002, 46).

The rediscovery of this corpus of legends was probably motivated by precise socio-political needs: one of the possible explanations, is that this tendency emerged in emulation of the European courtly customs which started to circulate thanks to the translation of romances. Even more, it is useful to remember that Icelandic aristocracy was fairly recent¹⁵, and their attempt to trace their ancestry to past kings or legendary heroes was reflective of the necessity to justify the legitimacy of their rule and, before that, of the settlement in Iceland itself (Tulinius 2002, 45). Furthermore, the reading of sagas was part of the entertainments offered precisely to showcase the nobles’ wealth and power (Tulinius 2002, 65). The attempt at historicity of the *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* served the purpose well enough, but the fantastic mode of the *fornaldarsögur* is apparently ill-fitted to this ideological framework, a contradiction which has spurred some controversy. The bulk of the discussion was how aware the saga composers were of their stories’ fictionality and whether did it matter at all. The answer is that there probably was a mildly diffused understanding that these sagas were not true, but that did not diminish the prestige that came from them (Tulinius 2002, 64-65).

Besides, the peculiar blend of realism and fiction in *fornaldarsögur* may have provided a unique outlet for contemporary tensions and anxieties. The world of the legendary sagas

¹⁵ During the Commonwealth (950-1262), Icelandic society was not organised in a complex hierarchy, on the contrary, the only consistent social division was between the slaves and farm workers on one hand, and the farmers and *goðar* on the other. The *goðar* were chieftains with both secular and religious authority, who took part in the Alþingi (Þorláksson 2005, 139). During the 12th century, however, an increasingly small number of *goðar* managed to amass power and wealth and exerted their influence on large rural areas or *héraðsríki*. By 1220 Iceland was under the authority of only ten *goðar* and their families, of which the most influential were the Sturlungars, thanks to their ties with Norway (Þorláksson 2005, 149).

was interpreted by medieval Icelanders along three lines: it was set in the past, outside of Iceland and a few families had (or claimed to have) genealogical links with the characters (Clunies Ross 2009, 319). Still, the time setting was neither remote nor alien: on the contrary, the society described in *fornaldarsögur* is fairly similar to that of medieval Icelandic aristocracy. Moreover, while the protagonists of the sagas often travel all over world, the plot always begins and ends in Scandinavia. As for the supernatural creatures, the understanding was that the introduction of the Christian faith had repelled them or that they belonged to lands that had not yet been converted. In short, legendary sagas depicted a world that was in between fantasy and reality, a “distorted mirror”, foreign but familiar enough to provide both escapism and catharsis (Clunies Ross 2009, 320). Thus, the *fornaldarsögur* were able to treat topics such as the relationship between children and (adoptive) parents or gender relations within a couple, but also dealt with ethical dilemmas concerning honour, courage and loyalty (Clunies Ross 2010, 80).

This is partially possible because in fantastic literature there need not be a complete separation between fantasy and reality. In fact, this mode “juxtaposes elements of the realistic and the marvellous or improbable, often without comment, and thereby problematises both” (Clunies Ross 2002, 448). The general tendency in *fornaldarsögur* is indeed that the fantastical elements appear more frequently as the nature of reality is questioned or when the social norms are subverted (Clunies Ross 2009, 321). However, the fantastic mode alone does not fully explain the blend between fiction and factuality that is found in the genre. Another approach is to look at legendary sagas within the literary mode of ethnography, as in authoritative, objective description of a foreign culture in terms that the receiving audience will understand. One of the main issues of ethnography is the pretention of objectivity, which would require complete disinterest on the part of the observer. In fact, the representations of the “other” are inevitably compromised, either by the power relations between the cultures, or, if the culture has disappeared or dying, by the tendency to idealised it, which is especially strong in its last survivors. The Christian saga authors felt the need to depict the pagan world of the *fornaldarsögur* as “other”, but they still wanted to establish real connections with it: this desire is testified by the fact that some people claimed to descend by famous heroes and by the genuine admiration medieval Icelanders expressed for their ancestors (Clunies Ross 2009, 322). The sources of these “fantastic ethnographies” was what information had been transmitted through the ages by poetry, genealogies and the first attempts at

narrative, while fantastic legends were useful to fill the gaps in the representation (Clunies Ross 2009, 323).

The extensive use of mythological, pagan material is a feature that surely sets Icelandic literature apart from the common tendency on the continent. Contrasted with their European analogues, saga authors were comparatively accommodating with the pre-Christian tradition: while elsewhere any trace of paganism was either hidden or Christianised, here there was at least an attempt to put the two traditions in continuity with one another (Tulinius 2002, 65-66). There are a number of reasons why Iceland was not excessively hostile towards its pagan heritage: the already mentioned effort to construct genealogical link to the past was probably also encouraged by the English Benedictine monks that played a pivotal role in the conversion of Iceland. Even in the stories recounting the lives of saints, like *Þorláks saga helga*, “genealogies and knowledge about people” (*ættvísi og mannfræði*) are told to be an important part in the education of a holy man. The accessibility of pagan lore was also symptomatic of the relatively late Christianisation of Iceland: by the time the first sagas appeared, Christianity had been present in Iceland only for two centuries and the influential imported culture from Europe was starting to rediscover the pagan Greco-Roman world (Tulinius 2002, 67). In translated sagas, this produced a curious encounter between two heathen traditions: both in *Clemens saga* (on the life of St. Clement) and the *Hauksbók* version of *Trójumanna saga* (a rendition of the *Iliad*) Greco-Roman mythology is clarified by comparisons with pre-Christian Norse tradition¹⁶ (Tulinius 2002, 68).

That is not to say that Icelandic Christians did not have strong feelings about paganism: the euhemeristic justifications of *Snorra Edda* or Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* could intermingle with the contemptuous condemnation of heathens as servants of the Devil, like in the Latin biographies of king Olaf Tryggvason. Also influential was St. Paul’s idea of paganism as “imperfect Christianity”, a disposition resulted from instinct and the observation of nature, but not enlightened by faith (Lönnroth 1969, 4-5). The two set of ideals were, at least superficially, incompatible: where Christianity preached humility, forgiveness and free will, while promising a reward after death for the believers; paganism would exalt honour, vengeance and would think of a man’s life as governed by fate and luck. Of course, neither Christianity nor paganism were monolithic blocks and

¹⁶ This encounter is not unprecedented: the days of the week in Germanic languages are famously calques from Latin, in which the Roman divinities are equated to those of the Norse pantheon.

the medieval attitude towards the ancient lore was influenced by cultural and social background. Some of the practices of paganism were surely considered abhorrent (like the sacrifices and the orgiastic rituals), but other values were diversely accepted or even admired, for example when it came to the obligations of hospitality and generosity (Lönnroth 1969, 24-5). It is also important to remember that medieval Christianity and the Church as an institution did practice some blatant double standards both in Scandinavia and in wider Europe: romances and “kings’ mirrors” commended the honour of princes and concepts of “rightful war” and “just retaliation” were promoted by the Church itself (Lönnroth 1969, 26). As for the concepts of fate and free will, Christian doctrine also posed some limitations to human actions in the form of the Divine Providence, while the fine theoretical distinction between the Norse concept of “luck” (*gæfumenn*) and the Christian “grace” had hardly any place in the entertaining, prosaic discourse of sagas (Lönnroth 1969, 27-8).

The effort to reconcile old lore and new faith and the Christian influence on the representation of pagan past are best exemplified by the figure of the “Noble Heathen”, a type of characters that recurs in both *fornaldarsögur* and in the *Íslendingasögur* set around the time of conversion (1000). By no means an Icelandic invention, the “Noble Heathen” has analogues in translated hagiographies and the Carolingian cycles, but the peculiarity of sagas is that his depiction is rarely accompanied by explicit commentaries by the authors, in line with the ideal of objective narration that characterises the genre (Lönnroth 1969, 11-12). The Noble Heathen is a wise, patient and restrained character, virtues that are also celebrated in the eddic poem *Hávamál*, but he shows Christian compassion for the weak and poor. He does not avoid his duties to get vengeance, but he expresses both hesitancy and guilt. This type of character is never naïve and even in his youth displays an uncanny wisdom for his years, again in line with the advice given in *Hávamál* but in contrast with the supposed “foolishness” that led the pagans away from God (Lönnroth 1969, 14-16). Like a Biblical old prophet, the Noble Heathen is able to predict the future, particularly the conversion to Christianity, which becomes a predetermined event told in Messianic terms. Interestingly, a sense of looming inevitability is also recurrent in the mythological poems of the *Edda*, but with decidedly gloomier overtones: whereas the Noble Heathen is looking forward for the coming of a new religion and, with it, salvation, the gods of Norse mythology are headed towards Ragnarök (Lönnroth 1969, 17). Although he has some sort of supernatural abilities, the Noble Heathen is never ever involved in witchcraft or idolatry, which are rather the main

traits of the villain (Lönnroth 1969, 16). Even so, from the perspective of the modern reader it is hard to ignore the pragmatism that goes along with the sudden pious behaviours depicted in sagas: in *Vatnsdæla saga*, invocations to an unnamed Creator appear when the protagonist is asking for a miraculous healing or some other kind of reward for their good behaviour (ÍF 1954, VIII, 97-8, 62). The irony was probably lost at a time when the Church had very important and very well-known economic and political interests. Besides, this practical mindset may have been encouraged by the missionaries themselves to draw people to the new faith (Lönnroth 1969, 3-4).

Much like the legendary past serves a distorted mirror to the world of medieval Iceland, the character of the Noble Heathen is often pitted against “Ignoble Christians”, a motif found for example in the *Flateyjarbók* version of *Ólafs saga Trygvassonar*, when a comparison is made between the pagan king Haraldr hárfagri and Hakon, a Christian who has abandoned his faith, thus much more deserving of contempt (Lönnroth 1969, 20). A more interesting contrast is that between a Noble and a “Less Noble” Heathen, a defining conflict in brotherly relationships like that of Egill and Þórólfr in *Egils saga* or Skarpheðinn and Gunnar in *Njáls saga*. In both cases, the Noble Heathens Þórólfr and Gunnar come out as less fascinating, passive characters, while the narration concentrates on their more problematic, unlucky and even uglier brothers (Lönnroth 1969, 22-3).

In *Íslendingasögur* set in an Iceland on the brink of conversion, the figure of the Noble Heathen makes sense, it even manages to reconcile Christian Icelanders with their pagan ancestors. In the *fornaldarsögur*, however, the setting and source material inevitably placed the authors in front of the issue of how to make unequivocally pagan narratives acceptable to Christian ideology (Ferrari 2012, 272-273). In this aspect, like in many others, the legendary sagas display a certain variety, which probably reflects the different attitudes towards paganism of a heterogeneous audience (Ferrari 2012, 272-273, Lassen 2006, 283). The three *fornaldarsögur* discussed in this dissertation are a good example of the range of possibilities available to the authors to address paganism, reflected, among other things, by the way they chose to depict Óðinn (Lassen 2005, 283-284).

The protagonist of *Ketils saga hængs* has no contact with Christianity whatsoever, but he is innately hostile towards paganism and is consistently depicted as fighting against heathens, sorcerers or supernatural beings. This alone qualifies him as a Noble Heathen, although he does not display the same patience, compassion or prophetic abilities of his

counterparts in the *Íslendingasögur*. By the end of the saga, Ketill finds himself fighting against the Viking Framarr, a devout pagan who has been made invulnerable to iron by Óðinn. Ketill gets furious at the sole mention of Óðinn and he finds himself in serious disadvantage when the god's magic blunts his sword. When Framarr is ultimately defeated, he declares his incredulity and sense of betrayal in verses (Lassen 2011, 173):

„Hugur er í Hængi,
hvass er Dragvendill,
beit hann orð Óðins,
sem ekki væri;
brást nú Baldurs faðir,
brigt er at trúá honum,
njóttu heill handa,
hèr munum skiljast.“ (St. 41)¹⁷

"The Salmon has daring. | Dragvendill is sharp; | it hacked Odin's words,
| as if they had not been. | Balder's father fails now, | it's folly to believe
in him. | Blessed be thy hands | Here we must be parted."¹⁸

The epithet *Baldurs faðir* connects Óðinn's failure towards his son to his inability to protect his champion. The final verses read as the pagan warrior's late realisation that he has put his faith in the wrong god (Lassen 2011, 174).

In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the protagonist is similarly depicted as innately hostile towards paganism and its representatives: at the beginning of the saga he attacks the seeress who prophesises his future, and later on, he sets fire to all the pagan temples of the city he is sacking (Chs. 2 and 29). There, he is confronted by a priestess, who accuses him of having abandoned his gods. Oddr claims that he has never believed in them anyway and boasts of having destroyed what he sees as mere idols (Lassen 2011, 169-170):

„Ætla ek Æsa
örhjartaða tvo,
sem fyrir úlfi geitr
argar rynni;
illt er at eiga Óðin
at einka vin;
skaltu eigi lengr

¹⁷ Icelandic text edited by Carl Rafn (1829), 139.

¹⁸ English translation by Ben Waggoner (2012), 26.

skrattann blóta.“ (St. 69)¹⁹

“I chased two gods, | those gutless cowards, | like fearful goats | facing
a wolf; | it’s bad to have Óðinn | as a bosom friend; | no more to
monsters | you’ll make sacrifices.”²⁰

Moreover, Oddr inadvertently avenges the assassination of a bishop in Chapter 17 and even gets baptised, although he declares his intention to maintain his life unchanged.

In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the only neutral, if not positive, mention of the worshipping of Óðinn is found in the so-called “Sámsey poetry”²¹, in which Oddr, Hjálmar and Angantýr all refer at dying as to “be Óðinn’s guests” (*vér Óðin gista*). As it will be discussed in Chapter IV, the Sámsey poetry precedes the compositions of the saga (though it is hard to establish exactly by how long) and the references to pagan beliefs regarding the after life are most probably reflective of the age of the poems.

Örvar-Odds saga has indeed undergone many changes during its transmission and one of them has been the introduction of the character of Rauðgrani²² (Red-Beard), none other than Óðinn in disguise (Ch. 20). Rauðgrani quickly becomes Oddr’s blood brother and introduces him to other brave warriors, while offering some valid advice. However, Rauðgrani is also described as a coward, who constantly disappears when there is any danger; and Oddr ignores his advice not to fight his nemesis Ögmund (Lassen 2011, 169). In short, in *Örvar-Odds saga* Óðinn is reduced to a comical sidekick, while the symbols of his power are destroyed (Ferrari, Possible Worlds of Sagas: The Intermingling of Different Fornaldarsögur as a Genre 2012, 279).

Conversely, the depiction of paganism in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* is more complex, as the old religion is depicted as part of its fictional world. This saga includes the same fight on the island of Sámsey as *Örvar-Odds saga*, this time told from the perspective of the berserker Angantýr and his brothers, along with a somewhat shorter version of the same corpus of poetry. However, the mentions to the worshipping of Óðinn in *Heiðreks saga* are more numerous and rarely negatively connotated: for example, by the end of the saga in Chapter 10, the Goths dedicate their battle with the Huns to Óðinn in order to obtain victory (Lassen 2011, 154).

¹⁹ Icelandic text edited by Carl Rafn (1829), 291.

²⁰ Translation by Ben Waggoner (2012), 132-133.

²¹ This corpus of poetry will be discussed more extensively in Chapters IV and V.

²² The pseudonym is rather unusual in Norse mythology, since the red beard was a typical feature of Þórr’s appearance (Lassen 2011, 168).

Like in *Örvar-Odds saga*, Óðinn himself appears in disguise but he is more important to the advancement of the plot and his depiction is not entirely negative (Righter-Gould 1980, 426-427). In the best-preserved redactions of the saga, the presence of Óðinn is excused by euhemeristic introductions resembling those of *Snorra Edda*, which claim that Óðinn was a Trojan chieftain leading his people in Scandinavia (Lassen 2011, 154). Moreover, one of the reasons why Óðinn does not come off as a negative presence in this saga is that the rest of the characters are hardly flawless, pious heroes: Heiðrekr, in particular, is a problematic and violent figure who murders his own brother on a whim (Lassen 2011, 153). Throughout the saga, Heiðrekr has a complicated relationship with Óðinn: in Chapter 6 he is asked to sacrifice his son to save his kingdom from famine, but instead he kills his father-in-law and his army in battle and dedicates the slain to Óðinn. Shortly later, in Chapter 8 and 9, it is implied that Heiðrekr has started worshipping Freyr, while Óðinn helps one of his enemies defeat him in a riddle-contest (Lassen 2011, 154). It is possible that the connection between these events was some sort of pact with Óðinn that Heiðrekr breaks when he refuses to sacrifice his son, a passage which probably went lost in the several reworkings of the saga (Tulinius 2002, 112).

To sum up, the *forn öld* represented in the legendary sagas was never intended as a historical depiction of the past, but rather a literary construction reflecting the Icelanders' real fascination towards the pre-Christian cultural heritage. The legends of the *fornaldarsögur* were entertaining, they provided with escapism, moral teachings and catharsis, and contributed to the sense of prestige and sophistication the Icelandic aristocracy wanted to build around itself. Inevitably, the source material of the *fornaldarsögur* carried numerous references to paganism, which forced their author to find a way to accommodate them to the not always homogenous sensibilities of a Christian audience. The result is an ambivalent attitude that goes from the clear condemnation of paganism to an amused toleration, provided that some kind of distancing device is used not to contradict Christian ideology.

Chapter III – The *senna* in *Ketils saga hængs*

III. 1 The *senna*

In her 1991 work, Swenson mentions the etymology of the word *senna* to suggest that this genre is conceptually linked to the idea of existential struggle. The term, usually translated with “quarrel” or “dispute”, is closely related with the adjective *sannr* (“true”), which, along with the noun *sannendi* (“truth”), came to have a judicial connotation, meaning respectively “guilty” and “evidence of guilt”. A legal implication is also found in the related verb *sanna*, which means “to give evidence, to prove”. The word has cognates in other Germanic languages such as the Old English, *sōð* (“truth”), and Old High German *sand* (“true”) and they all derive from the Germanic root **sanþ-* (“true”). This root is in turn related with the Indo-European verb *es* (“to be”), suggesting the shift from the meaning of “what is” to that of “true”. On the other hand, the word *senna* in Old Norse is often used in skaldic poetry in relation with terms such as *sverða*, *vápna* and *geira* (“of swords”, “of weapons”, “of spears”) to form *kenningar* (periphrases) signifying “battle, struggle” (Swenson 1991, 34). This possibility is suggested in *Skáldskaparmál* (St. 72²³), where Snorri Sturluson lists *senna* as one of the possible words that can be used to describe speech (*mál*) and observes that “by means of these expressions battle shall be referred to in terms of swords or other weapons or shields”²⁴ (*Svá skal orrostu kenna við sverð eða önnur vápn eða hlifa*, 109). This type of *kenning* does appear in skaldic poetry: in *Erfidrápa Óláfs Tryggvasonar* (“Memorial drápa for Ólafr Tryggvason”) it is used after an elaborate periphrasis for “warrior”:

Geta skal máls, þess’s mæla
menn at vápna sennu
dolga fangs við drengi
dádøflgan þor kvôðu.²⁵

One must mention the speech which men reported the deed-mighty tree
of the tunic of strife [MAIL-SHIRT > WARRIOR] addressed to the
warriors at the flying of weapons [BATTLE].

²³*Skáldskaparmál* edited by A. Faulkes (1998).

²⁴ Translation by A. Faulkes (1995).

²⁵ Icelandic text edited and translated by Heslop (2012, 405). The word order in the translation is very different from that in the verses, so I have preferred not to insert line breaks.

A similar *kenning* is found in one of the *lausavísur* contained in *Sverris saga: Mánadag kvaddi mildingr sína / menn; drifu hart til vápna sennu*, meaning “On Monday the generous one summoned his men; they gathered quickly to the quarrel of weapons [BATTLE]”²⁶. The variation with *sverð* is found, for example, in *Háttatal* (St. 6) and in the celebratory poem *Eiríksflokkur* (“*Flokkur* about Eiríkr”) by Halldórr ókristni, together with another *kenning* for “sword”, *fráns leggbita* (“glittering leg-biter”):

Dolgs kvôðu framm fylgja
fráns leggbita hönnum
sœnska menn at sennu
sunnr ok danska runna.

They said that Swedish men and Danish bushes of battle [WARRIORS] followed him [Eiríkr] forward in the south at the flyting of the glittering leg-biter [SWORD > BATTLE].²⁷

Furthermore, the word *senna* combined with *örvar* (“arrow”) and *oddr* (“point of a weapon”) forms *kenningar* with the same meaning in *Þjalar-Jóns saga*, *Krákumál* and *Liðsmannaflokkur*²⁸. The semantic field of these periphrases probably implies a parallel between “the general struggle of existence [...] and the particular effort to survive a battle”, thus Swenson concludes that *senna* was considered as a verbal battle for the power to define oneself and others (Swenson 1991, 34, 36).

The term *senna* appears in the title of one eddic poem, *Lokasenna* (“Loki’s Quarrel”). The poem centres around Loki, who sneaks into a feast of the *Æsir* with the purpose of sowing discord, then starts insulting the gods by making bawdy allusions to their sexual conducts and supposed cowardice. *Lokasenna*, as it will be discussed, well exemplifies many of the main features of this genre. The same episode is briefly mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál* (St. 33) and the verb *sanna* is used to refer to the quarrel (Swenson 1991, 119-121).

The term *senna* occurs in other poems of the *Poetic Edda*. In *Guðrúnarhvöt* (“Guðrún’s Incitement”, St. 1), it refers to Guðrún’s reproach to her sons before she urges them to avenge their half-sister. Swenson claims that the subsequent narration of Guðrún’s life is a form of *senna*, since it is an attempt of self-definition (Swenson 1991, 36). In *Hymiskviða* (“Hymir’s Poem”, St. 28), the verb *senti* (past tense of *sanna*) is used to describe a giant’s mockery of Þórr’s strength, in the context of a contrast between the

²⁶ Edition and translation by Gade (2009, 845).

²⁷ Edition and translation by Gade (2012, 477).

²⁸ For a full list, see the section on kennings for “battle, conflict” of the online corpus *The Skaldic Project*: <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=kenning&i=128>.

society of the gods and the giants that are excluded from it. The same verb is used in *Hynduljóð* (“The Song of Hyndla”, St. 8), a poem revolving around the goddess Freyja attempting to gain knowledge from the giantess Hyndla. Finally, in *Hávamál* (“Sayings of the High One”, St. 125) the listener is advised not to exchange “quarrelsome words” (*orðom senna*) with people of inferior social status (Swenson 1991, 119-121).

In sagas, *senna* is used with equal variety according to the context: in a dialogue appended to the hagiographic *Malcus saga* (“The Saga of Malchus”) and titled *Viðræða líkams ok sálar* (“Dialogue of Body and Soul”), the word *senna* is used to refer to a philosophical dispute between two allegorical figures of Courage and Despair, while in *Brennu-Njáls saga* (“The Saga of Burnt-Njál”) it simply means “to quarrel, to wrangle” (Swenson 1991, 122-124). It also appears in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* (“The Tale of Sarcastic Halli”), when the chief skald Þjóðólfr suggests that his opponent should be avenging his father’s death rather than “*eiga sennur við mik*”, “engaging in a verbal contest with me” (Gurevich 2009, 68).

In much later literature, the word *senna* retains its original meaning of “struggle for the integrity of self” in the title of *Flærðarsenna* (“Siren-Song”), a seventeenth-century poem by Icelandic poet and pastor Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674). *Flærðarsenna* is a general warning against the falseness of this world and of close friends in particular, resulting in an encouragement to be as independent as possible in order to remain pure-hearted. Although the title may suggest otherwise, the feminine is not represented as the origin or incarnation of such falseness (Swenson 1991, 124).

Finally, in literary analysis the word has come to denote the Old Norse genre of verbal duel during which the contestants progressively insult one another for entertainment, to assert their status or to impress their opponents before a battle (Bax and Padmos 2017, 572). The *sennur* can be found in a wide variety of texts in Old Norse Literature, even when they are not explicitly defined as such. In addition to the already cited *Lokasenna*, the *Poetic Edda* contains a poem called *Hárbarðsljóð* (“The Song of Hárbarðr”), which starts with a *senna* between Þórr and Óðinn, disguised as a ferryman named Hárbarðr. The quarrel between the two revolves around the ferryman’s refusal to transport Þórr across an inlet. Once a sort of stalemate is reached in the dispute, the confrontation shifts to the themes and language of a *mannjafnaðr*. In the end, Þórr loses and is forced to walk around the lake. As it has been mentioned in Chapter I, all Helgi poems in the *Edda* contain a *senna*. Codicological evidence suggests that the copyist of the Codex Regius

(GKS 2365 4to) was aware that the exchange of insults was a discrete, coherent unit in the poems and that there was enough variation between the two *sennur* in *Helgakvíða Hundingsbana I* and *II* to justify the insertion of both in the collection (Harris 1985, 201). *Helgakvíða Hjörvarðssonar* (“Poem of Helgi Hjörvarðsson”) also contains an 18-stanza long *senna* (Sts. 19-30), known as *Hrímgerðarmál* (“Hrímgerð’s Sayings”): the semi-independence of this verbal duel is signalled in the poem by the shift from *fornyrðislag* (“old story metre”) to *ljóðaháttur* (“song metre”), a metre also used in *Lokasenna* (Fulk 2016, 262). *Sennur* appear in sagas as well: examples of *senna* can be found in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Bandamanna saga* (“The Saga of the Banded Men”), *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (“The Saga of Grim Shaggy-Cheek”), *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis* (“The saga of Hjálmpér and Ölver”) and *Ketils saga hængs* (“The Saga of Ketil-Trout”), but also in short stories called *þættir* such as *Ölkofra þáttur* (“Tale of Ale-Hood”) and the already cited *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* (Bax and Padmos 2017, 572, Gurevich 2009, 64). Some *sennur* found in *þættir* and *Íslendingasögur* are in prose, while in *fornaldarsögur* they appear as skaldic stanzas, often in *ljóðaháttur*.

Although this genre displays a certain degree of variability, the possible settings of a *senna* are strikingly fixed. A good number of the *sennur* cited above take place outdoors, usually in the presence of a body of water (the “sundering flood”, Phillipotts, 1920, Clover, 1979) that conveniently separates the two contestants: the physical distance forces to postpone the fight and gives way to the verbal duel. This is the case of course of *Hárbarðsljóð*, but also of the *Hrímgerðarmál* and *Ketils saga hængs*. The other typical setting *senna* is the hall, generally during a feast. In this case, there are copious references to drunkenness, which frames and almost justifies the gross language and violent tones of the *senna*. In *Lokasenna* the goddess Iðunn tries to calm down Bragi, who has reacted angrily at Loki’s insults, saying that her husband has been “made talkative with beer” (*bjórreifan*). Later, Heimdallr accuses Loki of being drunk and tries to silence him:

„Qlr ertu, Loki, svá at þú er ørviti,
 - hví né lezcaðu, Loki? -
 þvíat ofdryccia veldr alda hveim,
 er sína mælgí né manað.”

“Drunk you are, Loki, | so that you’re out of your wits, | why don’t you stop speaking? | For too much drinking | affects every man | so he doesn’t notice his talkativeness.”²⁹ (St. 47)

Historical accounts contained in later sagas suggest that exchange of insults in a context of heavy drinking were a rather common diversion during feasts (Clover 1980, 447-8). A verbal duel as entertainment is at the heart of the *senna* between the two skalds Þjóðólfr and Halli in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, which, while being fuelled by the actual rivalry between the two poets, also functions as an amusement for king Haraldr. Conversely, in *Lokasenna* Loki’s purpose is explicitly stated as an attempt to sow discord among the gods during a festive occasion. Finally, the fact the *mannjafnaðr* also typically takes place during a feast may have contributed to the assimilation of the two genres into the wider label of “flyting”.

The contestants of a *senna* are usually strangers to one another and only share an intense mutual hostility. However, with *sennur* Parks’ distinction between intra-societal and inter-societal verbal duels is not entirely appropriate: as Swenson notes, the ultimate function of *sennur* is to establish the boundaries of a society. In fact, the main difference between the contenders is not that they belong to two warring communities: one of them is part of the society of men and one is excluded from it, because of his or her being “monstrous” (Swenson 1991, 55-6). Otherwise, the participants aim at demonstrating the other’s “monstrosity” by attributing him or her some trait that would exclude them from society (sexual perversion, cowardice, slaying of kinsmen) (Swenson 1991, 62). In *Lokasenna*, for example, although he has access to the feast by virtue of his kinship with Óðinn, Loki is continually attacked for his otherness, which ultimately sums up to him being “unmanly” (Swenson 1991, 68).

As for the gender relationship in a *senna*, the contestants can be either two men or a man and a woman, although in the latter case the language of the accusations change predictably from charges of “unmanliness” to those of infidelity or lecherousness, which will be discussed in details later. *Sennur* between women are admittedly rare and are often complicated by one of the female contestants acting as a sort of “proxy” of a male (her husband or lover), as seems to be the case in *Hynduljóð* (Swenson 1991, 68). Conversely, *Helreið Brynhildar*, Brynhildr verbally fights for herself, effectively reflecting the

²⁹ Reference edition for the *Poetic Edda* by H. Kuhn (1983). All English translations of passages from the *Poetic Edda* by C. Larrington (2014).

accusations of the hag and furnishing her version of the facts, thus asserting her selfhood and subjectivity (Swenson 1991, 69).

Finally, *Njáls saga* presents a peculiar *senna* taking place at the *Alþingi*, during which the main characters ask five chieftains for help in a feud (ÍF XII, 297-306). Here, the contest involves not two, but six characters, in a succession of *sennur* taking place every time Njál's sons ask for help to the various chieftains: each one of them addresses some kind of insult to Skarphéðinn and he responds in kind; the chieftain decides whether or not to help them and they move on.

The structure of a *senna* is quite variable, but it can be summarised as such (Harris 1979):

	Identification
Preliminary	Characterisation
	Accusation & Denial
Central Exchange	Threat & Counterthreat
	Challenge & Reply

Since, as it has been mentioned, the participants of a *senna* are strangers, the Identification is the starting move and consist in the challenger demanding to know his opponent's name. This phase is usually carried out with rather direct questions like in *Hrímgerðarmál*, when the giantess Hrímgerðr asks for the names of the hero:

„Hverir ro hǫlðar í Hatafirði?
 Scioldom er tialdat á scipom yðrom;
 frœcnliga látið, fát hygg ec yðr síázc,
 kennit mér nafn konungs!“

“Who are those men | in Hatafjord? | Shields are hanging outside your ships; | you're acting rather boldly, | I don't think you're afraid of much; | tell me the name of the king!” (St. 12)

At this point, the addressee has three feasible options: to remain silent and refuse the challenge, to point out the inappropriateness of these words, or to provide the name while adding insults, threats or boasts (Bax and Padmos 1983, 152). Atli, one of Helgi's followers, chooses the latter:

„Helgi hann heitir, enn þú hvergi mátt
 vinna grand grami;

iárnborgir ro um ǫðlings flota,
knegoð oss fálör fara.“

“Helgi is his name, | and you can never | bring harm to the prince; | iron
plates protect | the prince’s ships, | no troll-women can attack us.” (St.
13)

As it often happens in eddic poems, the Identification is almost immediately followed by a Characterisation, in this case, a boast about prince Helgi’s ships and their resilience. In stanza 15 and 17, the Identification is similarly entwined with the Characterisation: *Atli ec heiti, | atall scal ec þér vera* (“Atli I’m called, atrocious I shall be to you”) and *Hrímgerðr ec heiti, | Hati hét minn faðir, | þann vissa ec ámátcastan iotun* (“Hrímgerðr I’m called, Hati is my father, the most all-powerful giant I know of”) are both examples of this tendency.

However, the structure of a *senna* can be subjected to manipulation. The first portion of *Hárbarðsljóð* starts with an Identification, but does not follow the expected pattern:

Þórr kallaði:

„Hverr er sá sveinn sveina, er stendr fyr sundit handan?“

Hann svaraði:

„Hverr er sá karl karla, er kallar of váginn?“

Thor called: | “Who is that lad of lads, | who stands on the other side of
the inlet?” The ferryman said: | “Who is that churl of churls, | who calls
over the gulf?”. (St. 1)

According to Bax and Padmos, this opening question, along with the usage of the derogatory word *sveinn* (“boy, kid”), immediately communicates Þórr’s intention to start “a specific speech event”, a *senna* (1983, 152). However, Hárbarðr chooses to deflect Þórr’s provocation by posing a similarly derogatory question. This response throws his opponent off balance by using a strategy of “mirroring and surpassing” that is typical of the *senna* (Bax and Padmos 1983, 153). The peculiarity of *Hárbarðsljóð* lies in the fact that here the Characterisation is the aim of the *senna*: once the opponents have revealed their names and their abilities have been put to the test, they recognise a worthy adversary and start a *mannjafnaðr* (Bax and Padmos 1983, 157).

Similarly, the distinction within the Central Exchange are not always clear cut, with the elements tending to blend into one another as the *senna* progresses, while still maintaining different key features: Accusations refer to the past, being narrative in nature, while Threats and Challenges are usually in the future tense. This feature of *senna* has particular

import in prose texts, both sagas and *þættir*, where narration is almost never found in direct speech, but usually undertaken by an omniscient third-person narrator (Gurevich 2009, 63).

The temporal shift is well exemplified in the following two stanzas from *Lokasenna*. Here, Loki accuses Freyja of having had sex with all the present gods and elves:

Loki qvað:
„Þegi þú, Freyja! þic kann ec fullgerva,
era þér vamma vant:
ása oc álfa, er hér inni ero,
hverr hefir þinn hór verið.”

Loki said: | “Be silent, Freyja, | I know all about you, | you aren’t free of faults: | of the Æsir and the elves, | who are in here, | each one has been your lover.” (St. 30)

Freyja immediate Denial is blended with a Threat in the future tense, warning Loki that the *Æsir* will not tolerate his insults:

Freyja qvað:
„Flá er þér tunga, hugg ec at þér fremr myni
ógott um gala;
reiðir ro þér æsir oc ásynior,
hryggr muntu heim fara.“

Freyja said: | “False is your tongue, | I think that soon, | it will chant out disaster for you; | the Æsir are furious with you, | and the Asynior, | you’ll go home discomfited.” (St. 31)

At the end of the poem, the gods do indeed take their revenge on Loki for having insulted them so: in a gruesome prose description it is revealed that they punished Loki for his transgression by binding him with the guts of one his sons and letting the poison of a snake dripping on his face.

Other *sennur* terminate less violently with a long narration, which, according to Swenson, are a reflection of the winner’s earned privilege to define the loser (Swenson 1991, 37). The ending of *Hrímgerðarmál* is somewhat in the middle between these two possibilities: in stanza 29, Helgi triumphantly announces to Hrímgerðr that the night has passed and soon she will be turned into stone by daylight:

„Austr líttu nú, Hrímgerðr, er þic lostna hefr

Helgi helstöfum;
á landi oc á vatni borgit er lofðungs flota
oc síclings mǫnnum íþ sama.“

“Look east now, Hríngerðr, | See if Helgi has struck you | with fatal
runes; | on land and sea | the prince’s ships are safe | and so are the
prince’s men.” (St. 29)

The word *helstöfum*, used by Helgi to refer to his own verbal abilities, is a compound of *hel* “death” and *stafir* “stave, written letter” but also “wisdom”, which sheds a rather disturbing light on the hero’s skill at words, almost as if he were in possess of a dark and mysterious power (Swenson 1991, 64). Finally, Atli, who had been previously defeated in the *senna* with the troll-woman and had to ask for Helgi’s intervention, gets to throw a final mockery at his adversary, taking the credit for having stalled her:

„Dagr er nú, Hríngerðr, enn þic dvalða hefir
Atli til aldraga;
hafnar marc þyccir hlæglict vera,
þars þú í steins líki stendr.“

“It’s day now, Hríngerðr, | Atli has kept you talking | until you laid down
your life; | as a harbour-mark | you will look hilarious, | standing there
transformed into stone.” (St. 30)

A common feature of verbal duels in Old Norse-Icelandic literature is the recurrence of formulaic expressions through the poem, usually to signal the beginning of another “turn” in the match. Examples of formulae of this type in *sennur* are phrases like *Þegi þú* (“Be silent”) and *Veiztu* (“You know”) in *Lokasenna* or *þar sitr þú* (“There you sit”) in *Bandamanna saga*, which are usually followed by a claim that mirrors what has just been said by the opponent. In *Njáls saga* each one of the chieftains’ turns is introduced by a similarly formulaic question (Clover 1980, 453):

„Hver er sá maður, [...] er fjórir menn ganga fyrri, mikill maður og
fólleitur, ógæfusamlegur, harðlegur og tröllslegur?“ (ÍF XII, 298)

“Who’s that man, [...] who goes fifth in line, a big man with a pale and
luckless look about him, but fierce and troll-like?”³⁰

Each time Skarphéðinn answers with increasing irritation in longer speeches which grow harsher as the chieftains refuse to help him and his brothers. In a way, Skarphéðinn’s long replies signal the end of the five “mini-*sennur*” which constitute this particular contest.

³⁰ Translation by R. Cook (2001).

Despite its malleable structure, a *senna* is well identifiable from its content, a great variety of insults, which Clover lists quite exhaustively:

The repertory of insults reduces to a few major categories: appearance, acts of cowardice (deserting a battle), heroic failure (losing a battle), trivial or irresponsible behavior (pointless escapades, domestic indulgencies, sexual dalliance), failings of honor (unwillingness or inability to extract due vengeance, hostile relations with kinsmen), alimentary taboos (eating corpses, drinking urine), and sexual irregularities (promiscuity for women; castration, bestiality, and passive homosexuality for men; incest for both). (Clover 1980, 453)

These offences may appear in other verbal duels as well, but less frequently. As for the reality of these charges, Gurevich claims that since the *senna* is essentially ritual, there are no real consequences to this exchange of insults (Gurevich 2009, 63). While this may be true in the *þættir* that she was analysing, the evidence from both the *Edda* and the *fornaldarsögur* suggest otherwise: the effects of losing a *senna* go from the metaphorical castration and objectification highlighted by Swenson (1991, 58-9), to corporal punishment and death.

A common trait uniting most of the insults listed by Clover is the charge of “unmanliness”, which was expressed through the word *ragr/argr*. Generally translated as “effeminacy”, this term and his derivatives (*regi/ergi*, “effeminate” and *ergjask* “to become *argr*”) were considered extremely offensive: together with the words *sorðinn* and *stroðinn* (which indicate a man who has been sexually abused by another man) they could be punished with outlawry or by blood-revenge. Their usage fell under the category of *níð*, a practice of slander that could be carried out verbally or by raising a *níðstöng*, a pole on which an insult had been carved (Sørensen 1983, 17).

The substantive *argr* specifically pertains of “a man who is willing or inclined to play or interested in playing the female part in sexual relations” (Sørensen 1983, 18). Its meaning, however, could go beyond the sphere of sexuality as the term also signified “versed in witchcraft”, particularly the kind of heathen sorcery that had to do with the breaking of sexual taboos and during which “men appeared as women” (Sørensen 1983, 19). The practice is referred to in *Heimskringla* in relation to Óðinn, who is said to have used the kind of witchcraft that is “accompanied by so much *ergi* that men could not be associated with it without disgrace, and that is why this art appertains to goddesses” (*fylgir svá mikil*

ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skamlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kend sú íþrótt) (Sørensen 1983, 19). Thus, *argr* is not just sexual perversion, but the practice of an unseen art during which the ideal of “manliness” is challenged and possibly subverted, thus it has to be relegated to the female world. Finally, the concept of *argr* touches the domain of morality, mirroring the sense of “effeminacy” into the obvious “unmanliness” and extending it into “cowardly” (Sørensen 1983, 20).

As it has already been noted, the semantic domain of a *senna*’s content changes significantly when the opponent is a woman. In *Lokasenna*, women are attacked for their failures as wives and always referenced as “belonging to males” (Swenson 1991, 75). Martínez Pizarro has analysed several women-to-men *sennur* and observed how in *Hrímgerðarmál* and during the duel between Erik and Gøtwara (Book V of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*), the main difficulty of the female contestants is to adapt to themselves a typically male-centred language, which results in their defeat (Martínez Pizarro 1990, 344, 348).

The term *argr* also undergoes a semantic shift when applied to a female: its feminine form, *org*, indicates a woman who is promiscuous, adulterous or lecherous. A passage in *Hauksbók* describes Venus in these terms, making the association between *org* and incest (Sørensen 1983, 18):

En hon var sua mann gjorn, oc sua org oc sua ill at hon la með feðr
sinum. oc með morgum monnum oc hafðezt sua sem port kona.

She was so eager for men and so lecherous and so bad that she laid with
her father and many men and behaved like a harlot.³¹

The latter is a particularly common charge against women in *sennur*, the main one used by Loki in *Lokasenna* against the *Ásynjur* (Sørensen 1983, 19):

„Þegiðú, Iðunn! þic qveð ec allra qvenna
vergiarnasta vera,
síztu arma þína lagðir, ítrþvegna
um þinn bróðurbana.“

“Be silent, Iðunn, | I declare that of all women, | you’re the most man-
mad, | since you wound your arms, | washed bright, | around your
brother’s killer.” (St. 17)

³¹ Icelandic text edited by Finnur Jónsson (1892-96), 159. My translation.

Here, the charge of sexual promiscuity is entwined with another central theme in *senna* insults: the crimes of kinship. Fratricide and parricide are recurrent themes in Germanic literatures, and they must have been considered such shameful crimes as to become part of the verbal weaponry of a *senna*. So, Iðunn is attacked for having slept with her brother's killer (*bróðurbana*), while Skarpheðinn shames Þorkell for having fought his father (Clover 1980, 454):

„Hefir mig aldrei það hent að eg hafi kúgað föður minn og barist við hann sem þú gerðir við þinn föður.“ (ÍF XII, 304)

“It's never happened that I threatened my own father or fought him, as you did with your father.”³²

In *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, Þjóðólfr chastise Halli for not having avenged his father, while he enjoys life at court, including engaging in *sennur* during king Haraldr's feast (Gurevich 2009, 68):

„En skyldara þoetti mér honum at hefna föður síns en eiga sennur við mik hér í Nóregi.“ (ÍF IX, 278)

“[He] is more obliged to avenge his father than engage in verbal duels with me here in Norway.”³³

As we have mentioned, threats of physical violence are also part of the *senna* vocabulary. In the final movements of *Lokasenna*, Þórr enters the hall and threatens Loki four times:

„Þegi þú, roð vættr! Þér scal minn þrúðhamarr,
Miöllnir, mál fyrnema;
herða klett drep ec þér hálsi af,
oc verðr þá þíno fíorvi um farit. “

“Be silent, perverse creature | my mighty hammer | Mjöllnir shall deprive you of speech; | your shoulder-rock | I shall strike off your neck, | and then your life will be gone.” (St. 57)

Þórr also resorts to threats when halfway through the *mannjafnaðr* in *Hárbarðsljóð*, Hárbarðr resorts to a *senna*-like accusation. In stanza 26, Hárbarðr/Óðinn mocks Þórr for having inadvertently hidden inside a huge glove belonging to the giant Fjalarr. This attack echoes almost verbatim stanza 60 of *Lokasenna*, where Loki tries to belittle Þórr's courage by recounting the same episode (only there the name of the name of the giant is

³² Translation by R. Cook (2001).

³³ Translation from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (1997), vol. I, 349.

Skrymir). Þórr reacts to this unexpected violation of the *mannjafnaðr* pattern by threatening the ferryman in equally *senna*-like tones (Bax and Padmos 1983):

„Hárbarðr inn ragi, ec mynda þic í hel drepa,
ef ec mætta seilaz um sund.“

“Hárbarðr you pervert, | I would knock you to hell, | if I could stretch
over the water.” (St. 27)

Finally, the contestants of a *senna* can resort to curses, either because found in a lack of words or to make sure they have the last word, like in the final verses of *Hárbarðsljóð*: “*Farðu nú, þars þic hafí allan gramir.*” (“Go now, where the devils shall have you!”) (Clover 1980, 453).

To sum up, a *senna* is a genre of verbal duel mainly based on the exchange of insults between two or more participants, that can be of both genders, although contests of this type between females are rare. Said participants are usually strangers and often one of the two is a figure that embodies liminality or otherness. *Sennur* are found both in poetry and prose and their structure can be divided in two parts: a Preliminary and a Central Exchange. The Preliminary serves as a way to communicate the intention of initiating a *senna*, usually through the uttering of an overtly insulting question (Identification), but also as a way for the contestants to present themselves and their identities (Characterisation). The aim of the Central Exchange is to derogate the adversary, to expose his or her faults in the crucial spheres of sexuality, kinship and martial qualities. Victory in a *senna* is marked by having the last word, by claiming to be the one who will define the loser and reduce him or her to a passive object of the winner’s speech.

III. 2 *Ketils saga hængs*: a summary

The main witnesses of *Ketils saga hængs* are all preserved in Reykjavík at the Árni Magnússon Institute:

A=AM 343 a 4to (1450-1475);

B= AM 471 4to (1450-1500);

D= AM 340 4to (17th century);

E= AM 173 fol. (1686-1707).

A is the oldest extant witness and it contains fifteen sagas, five of which are *riddarasögur* (*Samsons saga fagra*, *Flóres saga konungs og sona hans*, *Vilhjálmss saga sjóðs*, *Sálus saga og Nikanórs* and *Vilmundar saga viðutan*), while the remaining ten are

fornaldarsögur. After *Ketils saga hængs* (ff. 54r-57v), the collection continues with *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Áns saga bogsveigis*, in this order, thus concluding the narrative cycle dealing with the island of Hrafnista. AM 343 a 4to (A) is used as the primary source in Rafn's edition, although by the editor's own admission the manuscript is heavily damaged, which, together with an unusual spelling and poor writing, makes it very difficult to read. The lacunae cannot be filled with the aid of the slightly later manuscript *B*, because this version, while fairly similar to *A*, lacks some paragraphs that may have been omitted unintentionally (Rafn 1829, VIII). Luckily, *D*, a 17th-century paper manuscript by Reverend Jón Gissurarson, is almost a full copy of *A*, so accurate that it provides useful information to fill in the gaps or include additional material to the saga (Rafn 1829, IX). Conversely, *E*, a paper manuscript coeval with *D* and written by Asgeir Jónsson, displays numerous omissions and several misinterpretations, while its content seems to be drawn from oral sources. Nonetheless, *E* is almost identical to at least other four witnesses: AM 172 a fol. (1686-1707), AM 342 II 4to (c. 1650), AM 552q 4to (1600-1650) and AM 109 a 8vo (17th century) (Rafn 1829, IX)³⁴.

Ketils saga hængs begins with Ketill being described as a promising but lazy youth, living in the house of his father Hallbjörn Half-troll on the island of Hrafnista. Although he spends most of his time dozing by the fire, Ketill is already able to defend himself during his fishing trips, and even manages to slay a dragon. As a famine strikes the island, Ketill leaves for a series of fishing trips to find food for himself and his family, and he encounters various enemies, including a man-eating giant called Surtr.

During one of these trips he is thrown off course by a storm and finds himself on the coast of Finnmark. There he is welcomed warmly into the house of a man called Bruni and even offered to sleep with his daughter Hrafnhild. Ketill spends there the better part of a winter, but soon after his departure from Bruni's house, he meets with Gusir, king of the Lapps. After a *senna*, the two fight until Gusir dies, so Ketill takes from him the sword Drangvendill and three magical arrows. He returns to Hrafnista and he is soon after joined by Hrafnhild and Grímr, her new-born son from Ketill. The woman immediately leaves, however, while Hallbjörn arranges a marriage between Ketill and Sigríðr, the daughter of a local farmer, and the two have a child, whom they call Hrafnhild.

³⁴ A full list of the witnesses of *Ketils saga hængs* can be found on the website *Stories for All Time: the Icelandic Fornaldarsögur* (<http://fasnl.ku.dk/bibl/bibl.aspx?sid=ksh&view=manuscript>).

Time passes and Ketill is now a powerful and respected man, but the island is once more plunged into famine and even fishing becomes hard, so the hero has to leave Hrafnista to find fish. He comes across a giantess called Forað, with whom he exchanges a series of insults and threats in a *senna*. In the end, Ketill shoots an arrow which the giantess tries to escape by swimming into the ocean in the form of a whale, but she is hit anyway.

Sometime later, a Viking named Framarr comes to Hrafnista to ask for Ketill's daughter hand in marriage: he is an infamous man and a devout pagan, so much so that Óðinn has made him invulnerable to iron weapons. Hrafnhild, however, does not accept him as her husband and Ketill does not give his consent to the match. Then, Ketill reaches the place where Framarr makes his sacrifices to Óðinn: there he learns that Framarr has challenged him to a duel and he meets Böðmóðr, Framarr's son, who has become estranged from his father because of his use of witchcraft. During the duel, Framarr is wounded repeatedly by an eagle, while Ketill's sword is made blunt by Óðinn. In the end, Ketill defeats and kills Framarr and Böðmóðr and Hrafnhild get married.

The summary of *Ketils saga* shows how the plot follows closely the structure of the so-called *Abenteuersagas* proposed by Richter-Gould (cf. pp. 20-21): Introduction about the hero's father, Hero's Youth and characterisation as a *kolbíttr* type, Motivation for Departure, in this case famine, Adventure Cycle (the first pivot being the battle with Gusir and the second the duel with Framarr) and Concluding Elements, in this case the brief mention of the wedding between Böðmóðr and Hrafnhild (Richter-Gould 1980, 433-4). Now that the plot of the saga has been surveyed, it is possible to contextualise both *sennur* in the tale and to analyse them: particular attention will be paid on their structure and the vocabulary the contestants use to insult one another, also explaining the implications that go with it and briefly commenting the choices made by the translator.

III. 3 The *sennur* in *Ketils saga hængs*

Ketill and Gusir

The first *senna* found in *Ketils saga hængs* is a 10-stanzas long dialogue between the protagonist and Gusir, the king of the Lapps. The setting of this verbal duel is quite unique among *sennur* since the two contestants meet in a forest. The situation does not impose any form of etiquette or custom which would forbid fighting: there is no feast like in *Lokasenna*, nor a competition between poets like in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, nor a meeting of the *Alþingi* like in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Ketill and Gusir are not even separated by a body of water like in the second *senna* of this saga with the giantess Forað, or in the encounters

between Helgi and Hríngerðr or Hárbarðr and Þórr. At first glance, there are very few indicators that a *senna* is about to start.

There are, however, other factors at play that characterise this verbal duel as a *senna*, specifically Gusir's "otherness". Gusir is first mentioned in the saga by Bruni, who warns Ketill not to leave his house during the winter, both because of the freezing cold and because of this man living in the forest:

Um vetrinn eptir jól fýstist Ketill íburt; en Brúni kvað eigi það
mega fyrir vetrarríki ok illum veðrum: en Gusi Finna konúngur
liggr úti á mörkum. (118)³⁵

In the winter, after Yule, Ketil wished he could leave. But Bruni said that he could not, because of the severe winter and foul weather – "and Gusir, king of the Finns, lurks in the forest."³⁶

The fact that Gusir is described with such ominous lack of details only builds up expectations around this mysterious character. The setting definitely contributes to this aura of dread: at this point of the story, Ketill is still living in Finnmark, the northernmost region of Norway. In Norse literature and mythology there was a consistent tendency to associate the North with the supernatural, particularly the presence of giants, and death (De Angelo 2010, 257n1, Wanner 2009, 45). By "North", saga authors often referred to the medieval province of Hålogaland (nowadays the regions of Nordland and Troms in Norway) and the adjacent lands where the Sámi populations lived, roughly corresponding to modern-day Finnmark³⁷ (De Angelo 2010, 257n1, 265, Thorsnæs 2018). Part of the negative connotations attributed to the North had to do with the actual harsh conditions that characterise these regions, with unrelenting cold and bad weather that caused settlements to fail or stall. Because of these extreme conditions, the ability to live in such a hostile region was regarded with incredulity and even suspicion (De Angelo 2010, 271-272). Moreover, the North was thought to have unequivocally negative effects on people and their level of civilization, an idea that contributed to a rooted prejudice towards the *Finnar*³⁸, which is referenced more than once in the *Ketils saga*: for example, when Ketill

³⁵ The Norse text is from Rafn's edition (1829), available online at: <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?r8630-109>.

³⁶ The English translation is taken from *The Hrafnista Sagas*, translated by Ben Waggoner (2012), 10.

³⁷ It would perhaps offer more clarity to the reader unfamiliar with Scandinavian geography to specify that the regions of Nordland, Troms and Finnmark are indeed closer to the North Pole than Iceland and have a much more rigid climate.

³⁸ The term is not reflective of the modern distinction between Sámi and Finns, although there were synonyms which more specifically indicated the Sámi, like *lappr* and *semsveinar* ("Finnish youth") (Mundal 1996, 98).

is in Bruni's house he has to hide under a bear pelt because some Lapps are visiting and would not be happy to see him (Ch. 3). The *Finnar*'s hostility towards the Norse was perceived to be part of the North's cruelty to the unprepared explorer (De Angelo 2010, 271). In *Ketils saga hængs* the *senna* between Ketill and Gusir is indeed framed as the clash between a foreign intruder and a local authority, whose power comes from the knowledge of the place (Clunies Ross 2012, 128). The *Finnar*'s depiction in sagas was also characterised by their natural predisposition for sorcery: for example, they are able to transform into animals such as dogs, eagles, walruses and whales (*Sturlaugs saga starfsama*; *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*; *Hjálmþés saga*). The *Finnar* can also control the weather, like when in *Örvar-Odds saga* (Ch. 5) they send a storm to force Odd's ships into an island inhabited by giants (De Angelo 2010, 275).

So, Gusir is the ethnical "other", emarginated from the society of men, mysteriously able to live in an inhospitable environment and called a *grýla* ("bugbear") by Ketill when he decides to ignore Bruni's warning. If not outright monstrous, like the giantess Forað, he is still marginal enough to be the adversary against whom Ketill will have to define his identity and reaffirm the boundaries of society. The peril for Ketill is to become *au pair* with the *Finnar* he so much despises, since he has lived with Bruni for a time and has conceived a son with his daughter Hrafnhild. Indeed, the legacy of Ketill's union with the Sámi woman is said to live on in his descendants: in *Örvar-Odds saga* (Ch. 3), Odd claims to be able to control the weather by virtue of his descentance from Ketill (De Angelo 2010, 280).

This uncomfortable link between Ketill and the *Finnar* should have given the opportunity for the composer of the *senna* to have Gusir insist on the hero's "inner monstrosity", the way Loki does in *Lokasenna* by reminding Óðinn of his own association with *ergi* (Swenson 1991, 77). On the contrary, in this *senna* the insults never get as elaborate and the duel mainly revolves around the concept of cowardice, rather than sexual perversion, but the language and structure are in line with the tradition of the genre.

The *senna* starts with a typical Identification, which is at least at the beginning not overtly hostile. Ketill sees Gusir on his sledge in the forest and asks:

„Skríð þú af kjálka,
kyrr þú hreina,
seggr síðföllum,
seg, hvattú heitir.” (St. 3a)

“Creep from your cart | and calm your reindeer, | traveller at twilight³⁹, |
tell me your name.”⁴⁰

Ketill’s choice of words already conveys a certain level of suspicion if not outright hostility: the verb *skríða* (“to creep, crawl”) was used mainly for reptiles⁴¹ but it could also mean “to ski” or “to slide”, while *segger síðforull* (“traveller at twilight”) pictures Gusir as a mysterious, potentially dangerous figure. Compared with the opening lines of *Hárbarðsljóð* or the repeated insults suffered by Skarphéðinn in *Njáls*, this Identification is relatively inoffensive. Gusir’s answer is more complex and takes up two stanzas:

„Gusi kalla mik
göfgir Finnar.
Em ek oddviti
allrar þjóðar. (St. 3b)

“The noble Finns | name me Gusir. | I am the head | of the whole
tribe.”⁴²

This is a standard introduction in Germanic literature, but here it functions as Gusir’s characterisation, a preliminary move in *sennur*. In Stanza 4 it is now Gusir’s turn to make his Identification act, already conveying a greater level of hostility than Ketill’s, since the protagonist is compared to a wolf stalking in the forest. What follows is a blend of Threat and Accusation, containing a rather obscure reference to Ketill running away from Þrumufjord, a place that is never mentioned before or after in the saga.

„Hvat er þat manna,
er mèt ímóti ferr,
ok skríðr, sem vargr, af víði?
æðru skaltu mæla,
ef þú undan kemst
þrisvar fyri Þrumu,
Því tel ég þik ósnjallan.“ (St. 4)

“Who is this man | who meets me here, | and creeps like a wolf from the
woods? | You’ll speak words of fear, | if you scurried away | thrice in
Þrumufjord. | I think you’re no hero.”⁴³

³⁹ A more literal translation of *seggr síðforull* would be “man [who is] out late in the evening”.

⁴⁰ Translation by Ben Waggoner (2012), 10-11.

⁴¹ The Old English cognate *scriðan* is used in *Beowulf* (l. 702) to describe Grendel’s arrival to Hrothgar’s hall.

⁴² Ben Waggoner 2012, 11.

⁴³ Ben Waggoner 2012, 11.

It is now turn for Ketill to make his own Characterisation, which is followed closely by a Counter-threat:

„Hængr ek heiti,
kominn úr Hrafnistu,
hefnir Hallbjarnar;
hví skríðr þú svâ, hinn armi?
friðmálum mæla
mun ek ei við Finn ragan,
heldr mun ek boga benda,
þann mér Brúni gaf. ” (St. 5)

“Trout I’m called, | come from Hrafnista, | son of Hallbjorn. | Why do
the skulking, wretch? | I’ll speak no soft words | for the spineless Finn, |
I’ll bend the bow, rather, | that Bruni gave me.”⁴⁴

Here the duel starts to assume the typical language of a *senna*: the expression *Finn ragan* (“the spineless Finn”) is of particular importance in the exchange, since the usage of the adjective *ragr* references the concept of *ergi* and its set of connotations that were discussed above (p. 11). Throughout this *senna*, however, the insults seem to revolve only on the theme of cowardice in battle, while the allusions to (or accusations of) sexual perversion or use of forbidden magic, so frequent in *Lokasenna* or *Hárbarðsljóð*, are absent here. In fact, Gusir’s response to Ketill’s insults is rather a sarcastic invitation to reflect on the decision to fight him, which may prove foolish and rushed:

„Hverr er á öndrum
öndverðan dag,
gjarn til gunnar
í grimmum hug?
við skulum freista
flein at rjóða,
hvorr at öðrum,
nema hugr bili.“ (St. 6)

“Who is in snowshoes | at sun’s rising, | eager for fighting, | in a fierce
mood? | We two shall strive | to stain our arrows | in each other’s blood,
| unless bravery falters.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ben Waggoner 2012, 11.

⁴⁵ Ben Waggoner 2012, 11-12.

By now, the Preliminary is over and the *senna* has moved into its Central Exchange. So, Ketill's Threat is not accepted, in fact it is mocked. In Stanza 7, Ketill challenges Gusir again:

„Hæng kalla mik
hálfu nafni,
mun ek veita þèr
viðnám hèðan;
skaltu víst vita,
áðr vit skiljum,
at búkörlum
bíta örvar.“ (St. 7)

“As half my name, | I'm known as Trout. | I will defy you from this day
forth. | Before we two part, | I'll prove to you | that farmers' shafts |
have sharp points.”⁴⁶

The fact that Ketill talks about himself as a farmer (*búkarl*) can be read as a further way to distance himself from Gusir. Part of the Norse prejudice towards the *Finnar* had to do with their pastoralism, which was seen not as a necessity dictated by the hostile climate, but as a reflection of the Finns' lack of civilization and deficient alimentation, in turn causing envy for the settlers' superior comforts (De Angelo 2010, 270). This subtle attempt by Ketill at belittling his adversary is mirrored in the next stanza by Gusir's offer of peace in exchange for gold:

„Bústu nú við
bitri eggþrumu,
haf þú hlíf fyrri þèr,
hart mun ek skjóta;
þèr munk bráðliga
at bana verða,
nema þú af auði
öllum látir.“ (St. 8)

“Ward yourself against | bitter edge-thunder [=BATTLE]⁴⁷. | Shield
yourself well. | I will shoot hard. | Soon I'll become your slayer, unless |
you give up all of | your gold to me.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ben Waggoner 2012, 12.

⁴⁷ This verse I translated referencing the list of kennings for “battle” on the *Skaldic Project* website since it was more faithful to the original.

⁴⁸ Ben Waggoner 2012, 12.

With these words, Gusir accepts Ketill's challenge to fight, so it makes sense that the two contestants renovate their threats in Stanzas 9 to 11, now that both are set to kill one another. A brief prose passage describes the fight: Ketill and Gusir shoot arrows at one another until each of them has only one left. Ketill has a broad, stone-tipped arrow given to him by Bruni, while Gusir's shaft is bent so he steps on it (probably to try straightening it). Seeing how his adversary is having some difficulties, Ketill recites the final verses of the *senna*:

„Feigr er nú,
Finnr hinn rafi,
er hann fóttreðr
flein sinn rángan.“ (St. 12)

“This fearful Finn | is fated to die, | since he treads upon | his twisted
arrow.”⁴⁹

They shoot their arrows, Gusir is hit in his chest and dies. In true *senna* fashion, the winner gets the final word, he gets to define his adversary one last time. The second verse of the stanza contains all the elements that definitively exclude Gusir's from the society to which Ketill belongs: he is ethnically different and *ragr*, cowardly, fearful, spineless and all the other synonyms that imply that he is not worthy of being considered a man. As a price for having won the battle, both verbal and physical, Ketill obtains a sword and more importantly three arrows, Flaug, Fífa and Hremsa⁵⁰, which, as it is explained in *Örvar-Odds saga* (Ch. 4), return to the archer after they have been shot and are aptly called Gusir's Gift (*Gusisnautar*).

Ketill and Forað

The second *senna* of *Ketils saga* displays more of the typical features of the genre: the opponent is a troll-woman, the contestants are separated by water, and the language is decidedly cruder than in the duel with Gusir. The situation is strongly reminiscent of the *senna* between Helgi and Hríngerðr and sees one of the many battles between humans and trolls in legendary sagas. Trolls are the adversaries *par excellence* in the *fornaldarsögur*, the representatives of a supernatural world that defies full understanding and constantly threatens the society of men⁵¹ (Mitchell 2009, 281). Troll-women are

⁴⁹ Ben Waggoner 2012, 13.

⁵⁰ All three names are listed as *heiti* for “arrow” in *Skáldskaparmál* (122, Sts. 465-6).

⁵¹ In the rivalry between humans and trolls in legendary sagas it is possible to see a parallel with the war between giants and gods in Norse mythology (Clunies Ross 2012, 127).

represented as particularly dangerous, since not only are they monstrous but they also subvert gender roles and express both physical and sexual aggression (Swenson 1991, 66). In *Ketils saga*, Forað poses a double threat to “normal” society: she intends to marry a jarl, thus bringing her “monstrosity” into the community of humans, and she is preventing Ketill to find food for his family during a famine. Like in other *sennur*, the hero becomes the champion of humanity and has to defeat the monster to guarantee its survival, which he is able to do in different ways: Helgi in *Hrímgerðarmál* wins by virtue of his superior intelligence, while Ketill is in possession of a magical weapon (the three arrows) (Mitchell 2009, 268, Clunies Ross 2012, 128). It is actually a recurrent theme in the *Hrafnistusögur* that the hero is able to succeed thanks to his dealing with the supernatural: Ketill’s father is nicknamed Half-troll and the man-eating giant Surtr claims to know him, thus it is entirely possible that he is indeed part troll. Moreover, Ketill obtains his magic arrows from a Sámi king, which are handed down to his descendants, and his son Grímr is part Sámi. Similarly, in *Örvar-Odds saga*, Oddr obtains a magic vest from an Irish woman, which makes him invulnerable to weapons and fatigue, unless he flees from a battle (Ch. 12) (De Angelo 2010, 279). The *senna* between Ketill and Forað is once again about reinstating the proper boundaries, which are not only threatened by the female monster but by the link the hero shares with her species.

Ketill first sees Forað in a place called Skrofa, while he is out fishing: she is resting on a promontory; she is described as “dark as a pitch” (*svört sem bik*) and she is wearing a short skin tunic, a detail which might symbolise an aggressive female sexuality or simply signal her otherness in the eyes of the Norse reader (Straubhaar 2001, 110). The protagonist begins the *senna* with a classic Identification:

„Hvat er þat flagða,
er ég sá á fornu nesi
at uppverandi sólu,
er ek hefík
aunga eina
leiðiligri litit.“ (St. 16)

“What’s that ogress I see | out on the old cape | gaping and gawking at me? | I have never seen | while the sun is up | anything more ugly.”⁵²

⁵² Ben Waggoner 2012, 17.

Insults referencing physical appearances, as it has been mentioned, are quite common in *sennur*, reflecting the association between outer looks and moral qualities that was quite common in Medieval Icelandic literature (Lönnroth 1969, 22). Forað's answer is equally caustic: in her Characterisation she boasts of her bravery and viciousness, especially towards the fishermen that have sailed in her territory. Her turn ends with a request of identification:

„Forað ek heiti,
fædd var ek norðarla
hraust í Hrafnseyju;
hveimleið búmönnum,
ör til áræðis
hvatki er íllt skal vinna.“(St. 17)

“I am called Forað. | Far to the north | is my home in Hrafnsey. | I'm hated by landlubbers; | keen is my courage, | whatever crime I shall do.”⁵³

„Mörgum manni
hefik til moldar snúit
þeim er til fiskjar fóru;
hverr er sjá
hinn köpr máli,
er kominn er í skerin?“ (St. 18)

“Many men came here | meaning to fish, | but I've sent them down to the dust. | Who is this clown | who's come to the skerries?”⁵⁴

The name Forað means either “dangerous place” or “ogre, monster”⁵⁵. In Stanza 17 there is a typical reference to the north as the home of the trolls, a cliché that contributed and was inspired by all the negative connotations that that particular region carried: even when describing fictional places, evil is always placed in the North (Wanner 2009, 54). Surprisingly, Ketill's characterisation is very short and in prose, where he simply demands to be called by his nickname Trout (*Hann svarar: “kalla mig Hængs!”*), reflecting the same request he made twice in the previous *senna* (Sts. 5 and 7). The brevity and form of Ketill's characterisation suggests that the writer of the saga may have recognised the similarities with the duel with Gusir and saw it as a repetition (Straubhaar 2001, 112n10). Forað's reply is also in prose and signals the passage from the Preliminary

⁵³ Ben Waggoner 2012, 17-18.

⁵⁴ Ben Waggoner 2012, 18.

⁵⁵ According to both the Cleasby/ Vigfusson Icelandic-English Dictionary.

to the Central Exchange, with the giantess threatening Ketill: “It would be better for you to stay home in Hrafnista, rather than dragging yourself to the outer skerries alone.” (*nærr væri þér, at vera heima í Hrafnistu, en dratta einum til útskerja*). Since Ketill still has not mentioned his home island, it is implied that Forað knows him by fame. Ketill answers with two stanzas: the first (St. 19) contains some pretty standard insults at the race of giants and to Forað, while the second (St. 20) is a curiously introspective stanza which interrupts the rhythm of the *senna* and reminds the audience of the urgency of Ketill’s situation.

„Einhlítr ek þóttumst,
áðr enn hér kvomum,
um flestar allar
farir vorar,
hvat sem ferlig
flögð um gleipa,
lastig dreng drasinn,
drefik á vit fanga.“ (St. 19)

“I thought the jeering | of giant trolls | would be arrogant, | before we
arrived here, | from all our travels. | I curse the sluggard. | I came here
to fish.”⁵⁶

„Læt ek hær fyrri vinnast,
hvat er Forað mæli;
nauðir mik hvöttu,
nánnum er at bjarga;
hættik eigi
á hólmi til sela,
ef í eyju
ærnir væri.“ (St. 20)

“I don’t think I’ll desist, | despite Forað’s words. | Needs drove me on;
| I have neighbours to help. | I wouldn’t sail on this skerry | and risk
sealing here, | if we had enough | over my island.”⁵⁷

This very human hesitation on Ketill’s part is enough to attract Forað’s mockery, in the form of an accusation of cowardice. Before that, the reader sees a first glimpse of the troll-woman’s desire to be included into the society that so much despises her: she will leave Ketill alive if he will talk of their meeting to other heroes:

⁵⁶ Ben Waggoner 2012, 17.

⁵⁷ Ben Waggoner 2012, 18.

„Synja ek þess eigi,
segir hin víðförla,
at þú líf hafir
lángt um aðra,
ef þú fund okkarn
fyrðum segir
sveinn allítill,
sè ek þinn hug skjálfa.“ (St. 21)

“Wide-faring warrior, | I won’t prohibit | you from living | longer than
others, | if you tell of our meeting | to mighty heroes. | I see that your
will | is wavering, little boy.”⁵⁸

Ketill responds with a Denial, telling of how he ventured alone at sea even as a boy, and counters with another insult on her physical appearance:

„Úngr var ek heima,
fór ek einsaman
opt í útveri
marga myrkviða;
hvatki ek fann
á minni götu,
hræddumst ek aldri
flagða forynjur.“ (St. 22)

“When I was a wee lad, | I went all by myself | often, to outlying places.
| Many night-riders (witches) I met on my way. | I’m not scared of ogres’
snorting.”⁵⁹

„Langleit ertu, fóstora!
ok lætr róa nefit,
ei hefi ek flagðit
felligra litit;
eða hvert hefr þú
förina gjörfa?“ (St. 23)

“You are long-faced, foster-mother, | and you let your nose wage like an
oar. | I don’t look for an awful ogre.”⁶⁰

It is uncertain whether by addressing Forað as “foster-mother” (*fóstora*), Ketill is acknowledging the possible blood ties he might share with the troll-woman or just being

⁵⁸ Ben Waggoner 2012, 19.

⁵⁹ Ben Waggoner 2012, 19.

⁶⁰ Ben Waggoner 2012, 19.

ironic (Straubhaar 2001, 122). The giant *fóstra* is a recurrent character in saga literature, a wilful, wise, sometimes beautiful woman who opposes physical violence with cunning (Lozzi Gallo 2006, 17). Forað does not really fit this profile: other than her outer appearance, she is consistently depicted as cruel and, as it becomes clear by the end of this *senna*, she relies more on physical aggression than intelligence. Either way, here Ketill has abandoned any hesitation and has launched into a direct attack towards his opponent. Forað's countermove is a 10-lines long stanza in which she traces her journey through Norway and announces her intentions to destroy cities and to be married to a jarl:

„Gang hóf ek upp í Angri,
eigraða ek á til Steigar,
skálm glotaðri skroptu,
skrarin raðri ek á tilKarmtar;
elda mun ek á Jaðri,
ok at Útsteini blása;
þá mun ek austr við Elfi,
áðr dagr á mik skíni
ok með brúðkonum beigla
ok bráðliga gefit jarli.“ (St. 24)

“I began my goings in Angr, | then got to Steigen, plodding. | A clattering sword scraped. | Then I strode to Karmoy. | I will set blazes in Jaeren, | blow up flames in Utstein. | Then I'll go east to the Elfr | ere daylight dawns upon me, | and frolic with bridesmaids, | be betrothed to a jarl soon.”⁶¹

In a seemingly peaceful pause from the *senna*, Forað asks Ketill what he will do, and he responds that he will make camp and cook himself some meat. Forað replies with a Threat, sexual, rather than physical, threat:

„Seyði þínum mun ek snúa,
en sjálfum þèr gnúa,
unst þik gríðr grípr,
ok mun hun koma
með sínu gjálfri.“ (St. 25)

“I will come to your campfire, | and clutch you with desire, | until I grab you greedily.”⁶²

⁶¹ Ben Waggoner 2012, 19.

⁶² Ben Waggoner 2012, 20.

In Stanzas 24 and 25, the monstrosity of Forað has taken another shape: not her outer ugliness, but her cruelty and predatory appetites. An indication of how steeped this representation of troll-women was in Norse cultural memory is found in Ketill’s lack of surprise at this threat, which is simply commented on by the hero with: “Now this is what I expect from her”⁶³ (*Þess er nú at henni von*, 130). In the following stanza, Ketill issues a counter-threat:

„Örum trúi ek mínum,
en þú afli þínu,
fleinn mun þér mæta,
nema þú fyrir hrökkvir.“ (St. 26)

“I trust in my shooting, | you trust in your strength. | A barb will bite
you, | unless you back away.”⁶⁴

The *senna* is coming to an end and Forað replies one last time, declaring that she is not afraid of Ketill’s magical arrows.

Flög ok Fífu
hugða ek fjarri vera,
ok hræddumst ek eigi
Hremsu bit. (St. 27)

“Flaug and Fífa | are far from my mind, | and I’m not scared | of a stab
from Hremsa.”⁶⁵

Again, by saying the names of the arrows Forað displays a certain familiarity with Ketill’s life and deeds, probably a signal of the hero’s fame, but also an uneasy link between him and the monster. With that said, Forað transforms into a whale and dives into the sea to avoid Ketill’s arrows, but she is hit under the tail. Like in the previous *senna*, Ketill comments on his act of violence, this time in prose: “Forað’s engagement to that jarl will have to be broken off. He won’t find her bed very desirable now.”⁶⁶ (*Rennt mun nú þeim sköpunum, at Forat eigi jarlinn, ok ógirnilig er nú rekkja hennar*, 131). It is possible that this remark refers to her being somehow defaced or scarred by Ketill, but there is a strong chance that this is a metaphor for rape (Straubhaar 2001, 113). Either way, Ketill’s actions have made it impossible for Forað to marry. After defeating the troll-woman, Ketill is able to provide plenty of food for his family. The *senna* is followed by a short encounter

⁶³ Ben Waggoner 2012, 20.

⁶⁴ Ben Waggoner 2012, 20.

⁶⁵ Ben Waggoner 2012, 20.

⁶⁶ Ben Waggoner 2012, 20.

with another troll-woman who claims to be going to an assembly of trolls and the hero lets her go: it is unclear whether this must be read as a manifestation of Ketill's guilt or a hint at a retaliation from the trolls (Straubhaar 2001, 114).

Summary and comparison

The two *sennur* in *Ketils saga hængs* both see the hero facing opponents that due to their belonging to a different ethnicity or species, are considered as irrevocably "other", although one way or another, Ketill does share with them some form of connection or even kinship. The exclusion of what is perceived as "monstrous" or "abnormal" is a recurrent theme in the genre, though the modalities in which these qualities are addressed and condemned may vary. In the *senna* with Gusir the discourse centres mostly around him being a Finn and around rather standard threats and accusations of cowardice. On the other hand, the duel with Forað deals more with the inversion of gender roles and sexual aggression. Furthermore, the structure of the *sennur* is influenced by their context in the saga: it is entirely possible that the prose passages in the second *senna* are the result of a compression of longer poetical stanzas, probably to avoid repetitions of similar parts in the previous duel. A similar approach has probably been taken by the compiler of the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to) while writing the *sennur* in *Helgakvíða Hundingsbana I* and *II* and suggested that the medieval writers recognised the *senna* as a discrete unit. In the duel with Forað the passages rendered in prose are Ketill's characterisation, the giantess' initial threat, an exchange about Ketill's intention to set camp and ignore her threats, his reaction to Forað's sexual advances, and his final remarks after he has wounded her. Of these, only Ketill's characterisation and final comment have poetical analogues in the *senna* with Gusir, so one can only speculate on how these parts could have been in verses and why they were so compressed in the saga: perhaps they were truly too repetitive or too long or not entertaining enough.

Anyway, these two *sennur* present some similarities to those found in the *Edda*, starting from the fact that, like in *Lokasenna*, all three are resolved in violence: while Loki's punishment is briefly delayed, but gruesome nonetheless, here the attacking "monsters" are immediately defeated by Ketill and each time the hero gains some sort of material benefit out of it (be it magical weapons or food). The violent ending of the *senna* with Forað sets it apart from *Hrímgerðarmál*: the two poems are very similar in many ways, from the setting, to the characters and the depiction of the troll-woman as a sexual predator. In the eddic poem, however, victory is won by virtue of Helgi's intelligence,

thanks to the “dark power” of his words to stall his opponent long enough for her to be turned into stone by sunshine (St. 29-30). Either way, both *sennur* reaffirm the superiority of the male hero over the supernatural threat posed by a belligerent female, who in the end are mocked for the consequences their defeat have over their body.

Chapter IV – The *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga*

IV. 1 The *mannjafnaðr*

The word *mannjafnaðr* (pl. *mannjafnaðir*) is a compound literally meaning “comparison of men” and refers to the assessment of two or more men’s worth in relation to their accomplishments. There are testimonies in historical sagas of the term being used with a legal connotation, in particular denoting the practice of calculating the monetary value of a slain person, in order to establish a compensation for their family and ending a feud (*Grónlendinga þáttur*, Ch. 6, ÍF IV, 290 and *Heiðarvíga saga*, Ch. 35, ÍF III, 315) (Swenson 1991, 116-117).

In literature, a *mannjafnaðr* is a verbal duel during which the participants boast their heroic deeds in the attempt of establishing their own superiority by outdoing the opponent (Bax and Padmos 2017, 572). The word appears in several sagas in the context of a banquet scene and is often referred to as entertainment: in *Eyrbyggja saga* (“The Saga of the People of Eyri”, Ch. 37, ÍF IV, 98) the guests compare the merits of chieftains and farmers of the area, hinting at the *mannjafnaðr* as a common custom. In *Magnússona saga*⁶⁷ (“The Saga of Magnus’ sons”) king Eysteinn realises that at the feast he and his brother are attending everyone is silent, so he proposes to cheer up their guests with some *skemmtanarræða* (“entertaining talk”). Sigurðr, however, does not want to partake in any kind of amusement with his brother and rival:

Þá mælti Eysteinn konungr: „Þó eru menn hljóðir; hitt er ǫlsiðr meiri, at menn geri sér gleði; fáam oss ǫlteiti nǫkkura. Mun þá enn á reitask gaman manna. Sigurðr bróðir, þat mun ǫllum sœmst þykkja, at vit hefim nǫkkura skemtanarræðu.“ Sigurðr konungr svarar heldr stutt: „Ver þú svá margr sem þú vill, en lát mik ná at þegja fyrir þér.“ (ÍF XXVIII, Ch. 21, 259)

Then King Eysteinn spoke: “But people are silent. That is a better custom with ale, that people should provide themselves with some amusement. Let us get ourselves some ale-cheer. Then people’s fun will start up again. Brother Sigurðr, that will by everyone be thought most suitable that we engage in some entertaining conversation.” King Sigurðr replies rather curtly: “You be as expansive as you want but let me be allowed to be silent before you.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Also appearing in *Morkinskinna* as *Saga Sigurðar jórsalafara, Eysteins ok Ólafs*, “The Saga of Sigurðr Jerusalem-Travel, Eynsteins and Ólaf”.

⁶⁸ Translation of *Magnússona saga* by Finlay & Faulkes (2015), 158.

Rather than being put off, Eysteinn smartly mentions the custom of engaging in a *mannjafnaðr* during a banquet. Sigurðr does not state his interest, but he does not refuse either, so Eysteinn takes it upon himself to openly challenge his brother:

Þá mælti Eysteinn konungr: „Sá ǫlsiðr hefir opt verit, at menn taka sér jafnaðarmenn. Vil ek hér svá vera láta.“ Þá þagði Sigurðr konungr. „Sé ek“, sagði Eysteinn konungr, „at ek verð hefja þessa teiti. Mun ek taka þik, bróðir, til jafnaðarmanns mér. Fœri ek þat til, at jafnt nafn hofum vit báðir ok jafna eign. Geri ek engi mun ættar okkarrar eða uppfœzlu.“ (ÍF XXVIII, Ch. 21, 259)

Then spoke King Eysteinn: “This ale custom has often been indulged in, for people to choose their equals to compare themselves with. I wish that to be done here.”

Then King Sigurðr said nothing.

“I see,” says King Eysteinn, “that I am going to have to start this entertainment. I will choose you, brother, to compare myself to. I adduce this, that we have equal titles and equal possessions. I can see no difference in our descent or upbringing.”⁶⁹

Interestingly, Eysteinn’s goal here is not to prove his superiority to his brother, but their equality. This has a specific political importance within the context of the narration, since it tells the story of two brothers sharing the rule over Norway. The *mannjafnaðr* becomes entwined with politics also in in *Ólafs saga Triggvasonar en mesta* (“The Greatest Saga of Ólaf Triggvason”, Ch. 36, EA, A:1, 58-59), where it is used as a deception: the two contestants compare the merits of the kings in a heated verbal duel only to make people think that the kings are enemies (Swenson 1991, 115).

References to the practice of *mannjafnaðr* also appear in less festive contexts, even as the causes of escalations of violence: in *Orkeyinga saga* (“The Saga of the Orkneyingers”, Ch. 61, ÍF XXXIV, 133-4) the men are said to compare the noblemen Jón Pétrrson and Solmund, but the discussion turns into an actual fight with several victims (Swenson 1991, 118). In Chapter 25 of *Flóamanna saga* (“The Saga of the Men from Flói”) a similar situation is defused with some difficulties: the narrator shortly summarises the conversation between the servants Kolr and Starkaðr, comparing the merits of two of the main characters, the Christian hero Þorgil and the heathen Eiríkr (Swenson 1991, 117):

⁶⁹ Translation by Finlay & Faulkes (2015), 158

Þat var tal þeira, at þeir fóru í mannjöfnuð ok töluðu um Þorgils ok Eirík. Sagði Kolr Þorgils mörg afreksverk gert hafa.⁷⁰ (Ch. 25, 53)

They were talking about comparing men and they spoke about Þorgil and Eirík. Kolr said that Þorgil had done many valiant deeds.⁷¹

The conversation seems to end rather peacefully, but a third man, one of Eirík's servants, intervenes and objects to the comparison, claiming that Þorgil is too poor and too unmanly to be put on the same level as his master:

Þá svarar sá maður, er Hallr hét, — hann var heimamaður Eiríks—: „Þat er ójafnt,“ segir hann, „því Eiríkr er höfðingi mikill ok frægr, en Þorgils þessi hefir verit í vesöld ok ánauð, ok óvíst er mér, hvárt hann er heldr karlmaður eða kona.“ (Ch. 25, 53)

A man, who was called Hallr – he was one of Eirík's servants – replied: “This is unfair” he said “because Eirík is a great and famous leader, while this Þorgil has been in wretchedness and oppression, and I don't know whether to consider him a man nor a woman.”⁷²

By using the keyword *ójafnt*, Hallr does not simply mean that a comparison between the two men would be unbalanced, but that they are not comparable to begin with: in his opinion, Eirík is a great hero, while Þorgil barely qualifies as a man, an accusation reminiscent of *senna* and *níð*. For this comment, Hallr is killed by Kolr and the incident risks to degenerate in a violent feud, only to be settled by an unstable truce (Swenson 1991, 47).

A refusal of a comparison between men is taken as a serious offence also in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (“The Saga of Gunnlaugr Seprent-tongue”, Ch. 5, ÍF III, 66) and it involves two generations, with the accomplishment of the fathers favourably reflecting on their sons. In Chapter 5, Gunnlaugr repeatedly asks Þorsteinn for his daughter Helga's hand in marriage. As he starts to lose his patience, Gunnlaugr claims that no one is equal to him for importance, since he is the son of the famous Illugi the Black. Þorsteinn, however, refuses to compare Gunnlaugr to other men and to his father, thus implying that he is not worthy to enter in such a competition (Swenson 1991, 117-8):

Gunnlaugr mælti: „Hvar til ætlar þú um gjaforð dóttur þinnar, ef þú vill eigi gipta syni Illuga svarta, eða hvar eru þeir í Borgarfirði,

⁷⁰ Text of *Flóamanna saga* edited by Finnur Jónsson (1932).

⁷¹ My translation.

⁷² My translation.

er meira háttar sé en hann?“ Þorsteinn svarar: „Ekki fer ek í mannjofnuð,“ segir hann; „en værir þú slíkr maðr sem hann, þá myndi þér eigi frá vísat.“ (ÍF III, 66)

Gunnlaug asked: “Where do you expect to find a match for your daughter if you don’t marry her to Illugi the Black’s son? Where in Borgarfjord are there more important people than him?”

Þorsteinn replied: “I don’t go in for drawing comparisons between men, but if you were such a man as he is you wouldn’t be turned away.”⁷³

The situation is ultimately solved by Illugi himself, who threatens Þorsteinn of ending his alliance with him: not wishing to start a feud, the man agrees to the betrothal.

Unlike *senna*, the term *mannjafnaðr* only appears in prose texts and never in poetry, even though there are some, rare, poetic instances of the genre, for example *Hárbarðsljóð*. The absence of explicit references to the *mannjafnaðr* in eddic poetry has led Swenson to suggest that this genre lacks the mythical and magical connotations of other genres of Old Norse literature, *senna* included, a theory that is enforced by the fact that these verbal duels deal with “mundane” preoccupations, rather than with the existential struggle implied in *sennur* (Swenson 1991, 32).

This controversy is part of a larger one surrounding the ultimate usefulness of distinguishing between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*. It is true that the two genres share some common traits: for example, the typical setting of the *mannjafnaðr*, the banquet, is one of the possible backgrounds of the *senna*, and, as it has been discussed, both are accompanied by references to heavy drinking. Instances of *mannjafnaðir* taking place outdoors are admittedly rare, but still existent: in *Flóamanna saga* the servants are left out of a crowded refuge during winter and start comparing men as a diversion. Here, the entertainment value of the *mannjafnaðr* is preserved but simply moved from the conviviality of a banquet to the discomfort of two servants waiting in the cold. In *Hárbarðsljóð* the confrontation takes place on a body of water, a setting that can be found in several *sennur* but also in flytings in other Germanic literatures (Beowulf vs. the Danish guard, Byrhtnoth and the Viking).

As the name itself indicates, the *mannjafnaðr*, much more than the *senna*, is a male exercise: even when the interested parties are referred to in the third person, the participants are always men. First and foremost, the *mannjafnaðr* requires the existence of an external idea of “manliness” to which the contestants must adhere: the confrontation

⁷³ Translation of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* by K. C. Attwood (2015), 14.

can be prematurely interrupted either by stating that someone is not “manly enough” to participate, or by implying that his accomplishments are not worthy of consideration (as it is the case in the already mentioned *Flóamanna saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*) (Swenson 1991, 53). In *Hárbarðsljóð*, participation to a *mannjafnaðr* is something that must be earned, thus Þórr and Hárbarðr/Óðinn have to test their verbal skills and resolve in a brief *senna*, before realising that they are facing an opponent with whom they can truly measure their worth (Bax and Padmos 1983, 157).

A female involvement in these comparisons is, at best, peripheral: in *Ólafs saga Triggvasonar en mesta* it is Gunnhild, the kings’ mother, who has the idea to use the *mannjafnaðr* as a deception, but ultimately she and her deeds are not the topics of the comparison (Swenson 1991, 115). In *Hárbarðsljóð* “women” are one of the many fields in which the contestants have managed to distinguish themselves, the objects by which the two subjects define themselves. This rather unusual choice of topic will be discussed later in more details.

Like the *senna*, the *mannjafnaðr* presents a structure made of a Preliminary and a Central Exchange. The initiation of the comparison can be stated explicitly, as in *Magnússona saga*, or understood to be an integral part of a drinking match, like in *Örvar-Odds saga*, or it can be implicitly signalled, for example by the sudden change of topic operated by Harbarðr/Óðinn in stanza 14 of *Hárbarðsljóð*. The Central Exchange is a succession of boasts adhering to a rather regular pattern, in which each Assertion can be met with a, often implied, concession (“Well, that may be true”) and immediately followed by a Counter-Assertion that shifts the attention onto another theme. This exchange usually takes this form (Swenson 1991, 50):

Speaker A: “I did X better than you did.”

Speaker B: “Well, that may be true, but X is not important. I did Y better than you did.”

The typical contents of a *mannjafnaðr* can be summed up in five categories: physicality (strength, agility, bravery and skill in battle), sexuality and sexual irregularity (with all the implications of the word *argr*), social duties (public speaking, avenging of kinsmen, handling of disputes, familial relations), appearance and alimentary taboos (Broussard 2010, 38). Of these, the first three seem to be valued more, while the relative infrequency of references to appearances and alimentary taboos probably signal their minor

importance (Broussard 2010, 53). The *mannjafnaðr* evidently shares many of its topic with the *senna*, and some of them are exclusively used for insults: the contestants rarely boast of behaving properly towards their family, while they are often charged of not having met their familial obligations (Broussard 2010, 46). Alimentary taboos are exclusively used for insults and add “shock value and humour” to the exchange (Broussard 2010, 54). However, reminiscing these offences are of *sennur*, these do not constitute the core of the exchange, and the belittlement of the adversary is only a side effect of the self-praising at the centre of *mannjafnaðr* (Bax and Padmos 1983, 159).

The *mannjafnaðr* of *Magnússona saga* showcases the typical structure, strategies and contents of this genre. The exchange starts by comparing the physical prowess of the two kings, almost in a reminiscence of their boyhood years:

Þá svarar Sigurðr konungr: „Mantu eigi þat, er ek braut þik á bak, ef ek vilda, ok vartu vetri ellri?“ Þá svarar Eysteinn konungr: „Eigi man ek hitt síðr, er þú fekkst eigi leikit þat, er mjúkleikr var í.“ Þá mælti Sigurðr konungr: „Mantu, hversu fór um sundit með okkr? Ek máttu kefja þik, ef ek vilda.“ Eysteinn konungr segir: „Ekki svam ek skemra en þú, ok eigi var ek verr kafsýndr. Ek kunna ok á ísleggjum, svá at engan vissa ek þann, er þat keppði við mik, en þú kunnir þat eigi heldr en nau.“ (ÍF XXVIII, 259-60)

Then King Sigurðr replies: “Do you not remember how I was able to force you over backwards, if I wished, and you were a winter older?” Then King Eysteinn replies: “I remember it no less clearly, how you were unable to take part in any sport that required agility.” Then King Sigurðr spoke: “Do you remember how it went with our swimming? I was able to duck you if I wished.” King Eysteinn says: “I could swim no less far than you, and I was no worse at swimming under water. And I was able to go on ice-skates so well that I knew no one that could compete with me at it, but you could not do it any better than an ox.”⁷⁴

Once the topics having to do with brute force and physical dexterity have been dealt with, the discussion shifts to appearances. Exterior looks were also commented upon in *sennur*, though of course in explicitly insulting tones. Here, Sigurðr alludes to his striking, muscular figure, that does not let him go unnoticed; while Eysteinn praises his own good looks and welcoming appearance:

Sigurðr konungr segir: „Þess þykkir mér mikill munr, at þat er hofðingligr, at sá, er yfirmaðr skal vera annarra manna, sé mikill í

⁷⁴ Translation of *Magnússona saga* by Finlay & Faulkes (2015), 158.

flokki, sterkr ok vápnfærr betr en aðrir menn, ok auðsær ok auðkendr, þá er flestir eru saman.“ Eysteinn konungr segir: „Eigi er þat síðr einkanna hlutr, at maðr sé fríðr, ok er sá ok auðkenndr í mannfjölda. Þykki mér þat ok hǫfðingligt, því at fríðleikinum sómir inn bezti búnaðr. Kann ek ok miklu betr til laga en þú, ok svá hvat sem vit skulum tala, em ek miklu sléttorðari.“ (ÍF XXVIII, 260)

King Sigurðr says: “In this there seems to be a great difference, that it is more princely that one that is going to be a superior over others should stand out in a crowd, be strong and a better fighter than others, and conspicuous and easily recognised when there are most people around.” King Eysteinn says: “It is a no less distinguishing feature for a man to be handsome, and he will also be easily recognised in a crowd. That also seems to me princely, for the finest outfit suits handsomeness. I am also much better acquainted with the law than you, and also, whatever we have to talk about, I am a much more fluent speaker.”⁷⁵

Understanding that he cannot best his brother in the field of physicality alone, Eysteinn stresses his own knowledge and eloquence. This reinforces a thematic opposition that is at the core of the saga, telling the story of two kings who have two different conceptions of kingship: Sigurðr places more value in military exploits, adventure, exploration and conquest; while Eysteinn remains in Norway and focuses on improving the quality of life of his people. In a way, this *mannjafnaðr* partially challenges Swenson’s interpretation of the man-comparison as having as a reference point a shared, external ideal of “manliness”, because here the debate problematises this model and offers a more successful alternative that does not entirely adhere to it: Eysteinn is not as good a warrior as his brother, he does enjoy a comfortable life at court, but he takes strength in his wisdom and eloquence. Sigurðr lacks his brother’s wit to respond effectively, so he resorts to insults, a wrong move that gives Eysteinn yet another opportunity to prove his case (Broussard 2010, 84).

Sigurðr konungr sagði: „Vera kann, at þú hafir numit fleiri lögprettu, því at ek átta þá annat at starfa, en engi frýr þér sléttmælis, en hitt mæla margir, at þú sér ekki allfastorðr, ok lítit mark sé, hverju þú heitr, mælis eptir þeim, er þá eru hjá, ok er þat ekki konungligt.“ Eysteinn konungr sagði: „Þat berr til þess, er menn bera mál sín fyrir mik, þá hygg ek at því fyrst, at lúka svá hvers manns máli, at þeim mætti bezt þykkja; þá kemr opt annarr, sá er mál á við hann, ok verðr þá opt dregit til at miðla, svá at báðum skyli líka. Hitt er ok opt, at ek heit því, er ek em beðinn,

⁷⁵ Translation of *Magnússona saga* by Finlay & Faulkes (2015), 158.

því at ek vilda, at allir fœri fegnir frá mínum fundi. Sé ek hinn kost, ef ek vil hafa, sem þú gerir, at heita öllum illu, en engi heyri ek efndanna frýja.“ (ÍF XXVIII, 260-1)

King Sigurðr replies: “It may be that you have learned more legal tricks, for at that time I had other things to occupy me. And while no one questions your fluency, yet many also say that you are not too reliable in what you say, and little notice can be taken of what promises you make, you speak to please those that are present at the time, and that is not kinglike.” King Eysteinn replies: “The reason for this is that when people bring their suits before me, then I am concerned first to conclude everyone’s business in a way that will please them best. Then there often comes another that has a suit against him, and then it is often necessary to make adjustments to reach a compromise so that both will be pleased. It also often happens that I promise something that someone asks, because I would like everyone to go from his audience with me happy. The alternative I can see, if I wished to follow it, is what you do, to promise everyone something unpleasant, and I never hear anyone complaining of your failure to fulfil those promises.”⁷⁶

Realising the fallacy of this strategy, Sigurðr brings the discourse back to his expeditions, even daring his brother to leave Norway and follow his trail. Eysteinn, however, is able to maintain his point on the merits of his wise rule and the conversation ends abruptly, as the two brothers fall in an uncomfortable silence.

Similarly, in *Hárbarðsljóð* the opponents choose to boast about two different fields of proficiency. The exchange deals at first with the usual topic of victory in battle: Þórr recounts his victory against the giant Hrungrnir and concludes his turn with the formulaic question *Hvat vanntu þá meðan?* (“What were you doing in the meantime?”)

Þórr qvað:
„Hins viltu nú geta, er við Hrungrnir deildom,
sá inn stórúðgi iotunn, er ór steini var hqfuðit á;
þó lét ec hann falla oc fyrir hníga.
Hvat vanntu þá meðan, Hárbarðr?“

Þórr said: | “This is what you’re talking about, | that Hrungrnir and I fought, | the great-spirited giant, | whose head was made of stone; | and yet I brought him down | and made him fall before me. | What were you doing in the meantime, Hárbarðr?” (St. 15)

Hárbarðr/Óðinn seems to follow along on the same subject, until he unexpectedly introduces a new one: women.

⁷⁶ Translation of *Magnússona saga* by Finlay & Faulkes (2015), p.159.

Hárbarðr kvað:
 ”Var ek með Fíolvari fimm vetr alla
 í ey þeiri, er Algææn heitir;
 vega vér þar knáttom oc val fella,
 margs at freista, mans at kosta.“

Hárbarðr said: | “I was with Fjölvar | five winters long | on that island
 called All-green; | we fought there | and wreaked slaughter, | we tried out
 many things, | had our choice of girls.” (St. 16)

As a topic in a *mannjafnaðr*, sex is rather unusual: while heterosexual relationships were by no means discouraged, “sexual dalliance” was considered reprehensible for a man, the sign of a soft and lazy life, in opposition to the more honourable hardships of battle (Clover 1979, 127). Óðinn’s insistence on this point was one of the aspects that led Clover to claim that *Hárbarðsljóð* was in fact a parody of the *senna-mannjafnaðr*, which she does not distinguish as two genres. This claim has spawned some controversy, fully accounted for by Martin Arnold (2014): on the one hand, it is true that the poem presents numerous metrical irregularities, so much so that Icelandic philologist Finnur Jónsson postulated the intervention of an untalented interpolator (Jónsson 1888, 173, Clover 1979, 124). Moreover, its comical overtones, the unflattering characterisation of Þórr and overall apparent breaking of *mannjafnaðr* conventions suggest a conscious choice of subverting expectations to entertain an audience (Clover 1979, 126). However, Bax and Padmos have been able to identify two separate components of the poem as a *senna* and a *mannjafnaðr*, while also accounting for some of its innovations. For example, the structure of the *mannjafnaðr* in *Hárbarðsljóð* is somewhat more complex than usual, with the turns alternating as such (Bax and Padmos 1983, 161):

<i>Turn:</i>	<i>Move(s):</i>	<i>Act(s):</i>
I	Initiating	Claim Theme 1 + Formula
II	Responding	Rejection of Claim Theme 1
	Initiating	Claim Theme 2
III	Responding	Rejection of Claim Theme 2
IV	Responding	Defence of Claim Theme 2 + Formula

This alternation is well exemplified by Stanzas 19 to 22:

<p>Þórr said: “I killed Þjazi, The powerful-minded giant, I threw up the eyes Of Allvaldi’s son 19 Into the bright heaven; They are the greatest sign Of my deeds, Whose which since all men can see,</p>	<p><u>Claim Theme 1</u> Þórr, by killing Þjazi, has metaphorically conquered the dark and night.</p>
<p>What were you doing meanwhile, Hárbarðr?”</p>	<p><u>Formula</u></p>
<p>Hárbarðr said: “Mighty love-spells I used on the witches, Those whom I seduced from their men; 20</p>	<p><u>Rejection of Claim Theme 1</u> Not only has Óðinn conquered the dark, he has conquered its magical forces of evil.</p>
<p>A tough giant I think Hlébarð’s was, He gave me a magin twig, And I bewitched him out of his wits.”</p>	<p><u>Claim Theme 2</u> Hlébarð’s deception</p>
<p>Þórr said: 21 “Malevolently you repaid him For his good gifts.”</p>	<p><u>Rejection of Claim Theme 2</u> Þórr rebukes his adversary</p>
<p>Hárbarðr said: “One oak-tree thrives, 22 When another is stripped, Each is for himself in such matters.</p>	<p><u>Defence of Claim Theme 2</u> Óðinn quotes a proverb, shared knowledge both agree on.</p>
<p>What were you doing meanwhile, Þórr?”</p>	<p><u>Formula</u></p>

Moreover, the rivalry between the two deities and the characterisation of Þórr as considerably less sophisticated than Óðinn need to be read in light of the social tensions incurring between their worshippers: Odinism was much stronger within the aristocracy, while Þórr-worship was more widespread among lower classes on in areas where Norwegian central authority was resented (Arnold 2014, 20). As for the tones of *Hárbarðsljóð*, both Harris and Arnold remark how *mannjafnaðr* and *senna* are “typically comic”, even when the characters take them very seriously (Harris 1985, 82, Arnold 2014, 17).

As a matter of fact, the participants of *mannjafnaðir* can take them so seriously as to let them escalate into deadly fights, like in the already cited *Orkeyinga saga* and *Flóamanna saga*. Other times the undercurrent hostility is renovated rather than quenched it, as in *Magnússona saga*, or the *mannjafnaðr* only concludes with an exchange of insults and curses, like in *Hárbarðsljóð*. Alternatively, the victor launches into a final triumphant speech, a “chain of boasts” finally declaring the speaker’s superiority and effectively annulling the opponents, like in *Örvar-Odds saga* (Swenson 1991).

To sum up, the *mannjafnaðr* is a verbal duel is a contest of boasts between two heroes, that are compared and measured according to an ideal of manliness that is universally recognised. While they position in the same discourse, especially regarding gender roles, *mannjafnaðir* and *sennur* have different aims and utilise different strategies and speech acts to achieve them. Moreover, among the Norse verbal duels the *mannjafnaðr* is the one with the weakest mythological connotation: its participants, settings and characters all pertain to human society, it is almost exclusively found in prose and its only exemplar involving two gods appears to be either a full-fledged parody of the genre or a *mannjafnaðr* with particularly comedic overtones. In this, the *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga* makes no exception: even though the contest is presumably older than the saga, the comparison and its consequences take place in the sphere of the human, not of the supernatural or mythological.

IV. 2 Örvar-Odds saga: a summary

The “Saga of Arrow-Oddr”⁷⁷ is one of the most popular and longest of the *fornaldarsögur*, preserved by a significant number of manuscripts. To understand how the different versions told in the witnesses interact with one another it would perhaps be easier to sum up the main plot-points of the saga first.

Oddr is the grandson of Ketill-Trout and the son of Grímr loðinkinni and Lofthæna. During Lofthæna’s pregnancy Oddr’s parents are travelling, therefore the baby is born in Berurjóðr on the island of Jaðarr and entrusted to be fostered by a local farmer. Thus, Oddr grows up away from Hrafnista and forms a strong friendship with his foster-brother Ásmundr. One day a prophetess comes to Berurjóðr, to Oddr’s disapproval, and predicts that Oddr will live three hundred years, will lose all his friends during his travels around the world and will be killed in Berurjóðr by his horse Faxi. To prevent this from

⁷⁷ The nickname of the protagonist is a play with the Old Norse word *oddr*, which means “point of a weapon”, therefore literally meaning “arrow point”.

happening, Oddr leaves the island with Ásmundr and reunites with his family on Hrafnista.

There, Oddr receives by his father Gusir's Gifts, the three magical arrows that belonged to Ketill, and learns that his brother Guðmundr and his cousin Sigurðr are about to leave to raid Permia (or Bjarmaland). Oddr asks to join them, but they initially refuse. Guðmundr and Sigurðr, however, are delayed by bad weather and, in a dream, they learn that it is caused by Oddr's *fylgja* (a manifestation of a man's spirit in animal form). They then ask Oddr to go with them and sail for Bjarmaland, where they battle with Finns and giants. There Oddr is given the nickname "Arrow-Odd" by a troll and distinguishes himself as a valiant hero, so much so that he becomes famous for his travel to Bjarmaland. Once he is back to Hrafnista, Oddr asks his father to tell him about three adversaries worthy of his abilities. He manages to kill two Vikings and their large hosts of warriors, but he is not able to defeat the third, Hjálmar, who, together with his companion Þórðr, is able to stall Oddr in a fight for three days. They decide to join forces, but Oddr has to accept Hjálmar's code of honour that particularly imposes to spare women.

After some very successful raids, Oddr goes with Hjálmar at the court of the Swedish king, of whom he is a vassal. Here, we learn that Hjálmar is in love with the king's daughter Íngibjörg. Oddr and his friends leave again on a Viking expedition, this time to Ireland. There, Ásmundr is killed by an arrow and a mourning Oddr launches in a furious rampage in which he kills several men and almost breaks Hjálmar's code by forcing a woman called Ölver on his ship. Ölver, however, is able to calm Oddr down by promising to give him a magical shirt as a compensation for his friend's death. The shirt takes exactly a year to be made, but in the end, it provides Oddr protection from cold, fatigue and weapons, unless he is fleeing.

Oddr stays in Ireland for a while, where he marries Ölver and protects her people from pirates, then he gets bored and leaves again in search of adventure. At this point, he meets his most formidable foe, Ögmundr Eyjólfsbani, a mysterious, menacing warrior who seemingly cannot be killed. After begrudgingly accept a truce with Ögmundr, Oddr stops on an island where his friend Þórðr is mysteriously killed, which, as it turns out, is Ögmundr's way to express his resentment for not having defeated Oddr. While pursuing Ögmundr to get his revenge, Oddr lands on the island of Sámsey, where he and Hjálmar leave their men behind to find wood to repair their ships. While they are in the forest, twelve berserkers surprise and slaughter all their men. Oddr avenges his warriors by

killing the berserkers, but Hjálmar is hit and dies while reciting a poem for his beloved Íngibjörg. Oddr brings back his body to the Swedish king and, upon hearing Hjálmar's poem, the princess dies of grief.

Oddr departs once again in search for Ögmund but his luck seems to have abandoned him as he loses all his men and he is taken prisoner. He manages to escape and re-join with his brother and cousin, with whom he travels to Aquitaine. There they meet with some Christians and Oddr is baptised, although he retains his way of life. His brother and cousin decide to stay with the Christians, while Oddr leaves for more adventures. After having bathed in the river Jordan, Oddr is snatched by a vulture and brought to the land of the giants (Ungaraland). There, he helps the giant Hildir win the crown and gets his daughter Hildigunnr pregnant. When he eventually leaves, he asks her to send him the child if he is a boy.

Oddr starts to wander in the forests and meets a man named Rauðgrani (actually Óðinn in disguise), who reveals how Ögmund was purposely conceived by the king of Bjarmaland with a troll-woman to kill Oddr. Rauðgrani also says that thanks to his heritage and the magic of the Finns, Ögmund has been made invulnerable, and that his mother has transformed into a monster and is also looking for Oddr. To defeat this monster, Oddr joins forces with two companions of Rauðgrani's, Sirnir and Gardar. Soon after, they encounter Vignir, Oddr's son by Hildigunnr, who, being half-giant, is already a strong warrior at ten. Vignir leads Oddr to a fjord where he can find Ögmund, hiding. They fight, until Vignir is killed and Ögmund escapes once again. Wanting to put an end to Ögmund once and for all, Oddr finds him in Geirröðargarðar, a fabulous land where the hero is still unable to kill his foe but manages to disfigure him.

Demoralised by this endless feud, Oddr rejects his name and identity and hides in the woods, wearing tree-bark as clothes and calling himself Barkman (*Næframaðr*). During his wanderings, Oddr meets a farmer named Jólfr who gives him some magical stone-tipped arrows, and later he stays at King Herraúðr's court among the servants. There, he distinguishes himself in contests of archery, swimming and drinking (during which the *mannjafnaðr* takes place) and his real identity is revealed. Oddr then embarks on a mission for king Herraúðr, in order to collect tribute from the rulers of Bjálkaland, who are sorcerers. Oddr's enemies are protected by magic but he manages to defeat them thanks to Jólfr's gifts and burns down all the pagan temples in the city. As a reward he is given the princess Silkisif's hand in marriage.

Oddr then learns that Ögmund has become the king of Hólmgarðaríki and assembles his forces to fight him. Once again, Oddr loses all his men in battle but this time, at last, the two enemies make peace. Many years pass and Oddr yearns to see Hrafnista again. On his way there he visits Berurjóðr and he is bitten by a snake that was hiding in the skull of the horse Faxi. As the prophetess predicted, Oddr dies on that island after having lived an extraordinary long life, travelled all around the world and lost all his friends. Oddr composes a death-song celebrating all of achievements and finally he dies.

Now, the version of the story summed up here appears in manuscript AM 343 4to, which is only one of the six most important witnesses of this saga⁷⁸:

S= Stockholm, KB, Perg. 4to nr 7 (1300-1324);

M= AM 344 a 4to (1350-1400);

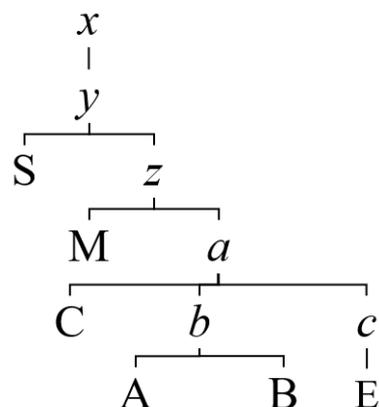
A= AM 343 4to (1450-1475);

B= AM 471 4to (1450-1500);

C= AM 567 IV 4to (1400-1499);

E= AM 173 fol. (1686-1707).

A, *B*, and *E* also contain *Ketils saga hængs* and together with *M* and *C* are preserved at the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík. An extensive and highly influential study of the relationships between these witnesses is found in the introduction of the edition by R. C. Boer⁷⁹. According to Boer, the stemma of the tradition can be represented as follows (Boer 1888, xxxiv):



⁷⁸ A comprehensive list of all the manuscript copies of *Örvar-Odds saga* can be found on *Stories for All Time* (<http://fasnl.ku.dk/bibl/bibl.aspx?sid=oeos&view=manuscript>).

⁷⁹ R.C. Boer (ed.), *Örvar-Odds saga*, Leiden: Brill, 1888.

In short, the archetype *x* included the core of the saga: Odd's life until the baptism, his stay at the court of king Herraud̄, the mission to Bjálkaland and his death on Berurjóðr. This manuscript was then probably copied to *y*, in which the travel to Ungaraland, the battle with a king Vilhjám and the narration regarding the stone arrows were added, while the expedition to Bjálkaland was heavily rewritten. Although it probably had several lacunae, *y* was the model for *S*, which is now the oldest extant witness of the saga. In *S* the battle of Sámsey has been scraped out and the travel to Bjálkaland was heavily interpolated. After the compilation of *S*, its predecessor *y* must have undergone an important revision which resulted in a copy *z*, in which Odd's adventures are completely reshaped and the battle with Vilhjám disappeared. In *z* the expedition to Bjálkaland was also modified, while a series of *lausavísur* were collected by the compiler in the lengthy autobiographical poem that Oddr recites before dying (*ævidrápa*, "life-song", Sts. 71-141), while a poem listing the names of the twelve berserkers (*nafnapula*) was added to the battle of Sámsey (Boer 1888, xxxv). This explains the substantial differences that we find between *S* and *M* even though the two are "only" a few decades apart. Substantial modifications and interpolations were made during the 15th century and resulted in the addition of the Rauðgrani arc and the last battle with Ögmundr found in *A* (Tulinius 2002, 325-326).

According to Tulinius, the comparison between the later manuscripts with the oldest *S* and *M* shows how the lengthy narration of the gruesome and ultimately futile feud with Ögmundr reflects 15th-century preoccupations with the idea of fighting an unbeatable foe, probably fuelled by the spread of plagues around Europe (Tulinius 2002, 164). Ögmundr was already present in redactions *S* and *M* but as a marginal character whose representation oscillates between a troll-like Viking to a devil (Ferrari 2009, 372). In the longer redaction, however, Ögmundr is re-introduced by the character of Rauðgrani (another innovation of the *ABE* version), who reveals his origins: Ögmundr was conceived by the king of Bjarmaland precisely to be Oddr's nemesis. The expansion of Ögmundr's role radically change the meaning of the saga: the fact that Oddr is unable to defeat him once and for all does not grant the hero his final, glorious success, ultimately spoiling an otherwise perfect happy ending (Ferrari 2009, 376).

On the other hand, the 13th century witnesses highlight the theme of conversion and the forsaking of the Viking lifestyle in favour of an existence in service of a king and regulated by a chivalric code (Tulinius 2002, 162-163). The importance of these ideals to

the medieval audience can only be understood in light of the social and political changes that Iceland was undergoing at the time, especially since the whole island had been subjected to Norwegian monarchy after almost four centuries of independent, quasi-democratic rule (Tulinius 2002, 162, Sigurðsson 2008, 573).

Interestingly, the set of values conveyed by some of the poetry in the saga is slightly different. For example, *Hjálmar's Death-song* (Sts. 14-29) is a celebration of a restless Viking life of combat and raids in opposition to the comforts, idleness and “softness” of the court. As it will be shown below, the *mannjafnaðr* between Oddr, Sigurðr and Sjólf similarly stresses the same opposition, although the end of the contest and the subsequent reveal of Oddr's real identity determine an almost immediate rising in social status and the admission to the king's “inner circle” (Ch. 27, 281). These ideological shifts could be explained by the fact that some of the poetry in *Örvar-Odds saga*, like in many other *fornaldarsögur*, is with all probability much older than the prose text and actually provided the source material for the original, which was later interpolated and revised (Lönnroth 1979, 105, Clunies Ross 2005, 11). For example, the battle of Sámsey is found in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, whose earliest witnesses date from c. 1302-1310, but it is also told in Book 5 of the *Gesta Danorum*, while Hjálmar is mentioned in *Háttalykill*, which suggests that this story was already in circulation in the 12th century (Tolkien 1960, xii, Nordal 2012, 147). Since, as Boer claimed, the narration of Oddr's stay at king Herrauð's court is also part of the original version of the saga, it is possible that the *mannjafnaðr* is just as old as *Hjálmar's Death-Song*, which would explain the contrast between the views of honour and masculinity upheld in the poetry and the discourse in favour of monarchic authority promoted by the prose. As a matter of fact, while the plot of the saga celebrates Oddr's transition from free Viking to king's champion, for which the protagonist is rewarded with stability and success for himself and his friends; both the *mannjafnaðr* and *Hjálmar's Death-Song* consistently praise the Viking life, even if it brings suffering, and depict the comfortable life of royal retainers as less honourable (Tulinius 2002, 161-162, Lönnroth 1979, 106). The discrepancies between prose and poetry in *Örvar-Odds saga* are not only ideological: while the *mannjafnaðr* retraces the plot of the saga rather faithfully, it also mentions a fight between Oddr and a man named Ölvir, which is never mentioned elsewhere in the saga. It is therefore possible that this episode was part of the original nucleus of the story and that it went lost somewhere down the transmission (Lönnroth 1979, 105).

To sum up, the *Örvar-Odds saga* available to the modern reader is the result of a long evolution influenced by the interests and preoccupations of audiences from different epochs, but in which poetry, including the *mannjafnaðr* analysed in the following section, provided fundamental source material for the prose narration.

IV. 3 The *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga*

The *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga* is framed in a drinking contest in the hall of king Herraud, the last of three challenges (archery, swimming and drinking) between Oddr and the brothers Sigurðr and Sjólf. Chapter 24 to 26 of the saga already establish the hierarchy at court, made even more clear by the seats assigned to each character in the mead-hall: the king and his daughter⁸⁰ are of course in the highest seats, along with Hárek, Silkisif's foster-father and Herraud's closest advisor, while Sigurðr and Sjólf are two *öndvegishöldar*, which literally means that they sit opposite the king on the high seat as the most important nobles in his entourage (Lönnroth 1979, 101). In many ways, the two brothers fit the stereotype of the berserkers, who in *fornaldarsögur* are pitted against the hero in dangerous challenges and are always humiliatingly defeated. In this saga, Sigurðr and Sjólf are opposed to other two brothers, Óttar and Ingjald: clumsy, foolish and way too fond of drinking, these characters prove nonetheless to be honourable and provide an avatar for the audience to identify with (Lönnroth 1979, 101). Oddr meets them when he is first admitted to the king's hall, still disguised as Barkman and claiming to be good at nothing: as a begging wanderer, Oddr is seated "on the lower bench near the door, between the freed men and the slaves"⁸¹ (96) and there Óttar and Ingjald welcome him warmly.

As it was discussed above, the *mannjafnaðr* is a contest to establish a hierarchy between men based on their prowess and achievements, which is precisely what happens here: the order, already problematised by Sigurðr and Sjólf's defeats in the previous challenges, will be definitively reversed by the end of the *mannjafnaðr*, a process which will be overseen and sanctioned by the king's uncontested authority (Lönnroth 1979, 100).

The contest proper is preceded by the king advisor Hárek voicing his suspicions about Barkman's real identity and Sigurðr and Sjólf waging with Óttar and Ingjald on who is the better drinker between them and Oddr. The two slaves accept the challenge while

⁸⁰ As per *mannjafnaðr* tradition, the female character does not take part to the contest, in fact she is completely passive and ultimately, she is only functional to allow Oddr's ascension in society.

⁸¹ *Utar hinum óæðra megin, þr sem mætast þrælar ok frelsingjar*, 262.

being drunk, a scene that has repeated itself twice before, although this time instead of gold they have wagered their lives. For his friends' sake, Oddr is forced to accept the challenge and the king, his daughter and his advisor are there to judge and witness it. The structure of the *mannjafnaðr* is closely tied with its setting: Sigurðr and Sjólf recite one stanza each, Oddr recites two, for each stanza they hear they have to drink a horn of mead, meaning that Sigurðr and Sjólf drink one each, while Oddr drinks two. However, halfway through the *mannjafnaðr*, the brothers are no longer able to keep up with Oddr. Here is how the turns work:

Turns	Stanzas	Contestants
I	34-37	Oddr, Sigurðr, Sjólf
II	38-41	Oddr, Sigurðr, Sjólf
III	42-44	Oddr, Sjólf
IV	45-46	Oddr
V	47-48	Oddr
VI	49-50	Oddr
VII	51-52	Oddr
Coda	53-58	Oddr

The obvious imbalance of the contest is meant to further highlight Oddr's superiority to his opponents: not only does he drink twice as much as they do, but he is not affected in any way by the mead, in fact in the end he is able to recite several stanzas in a row, celebrating his deeds (Lönnroth 1979, 103-4).

The first round begins with the stanzas recited by Sigurðr and Sjólf:

„Oddr! klaufstu eigi
 at orrostu,
 hrökku hjálmat lið,
 Hamdis skyrtur,
 guðr geisaði,
 gekk eldr um bæ,
 þá er á Vindum

vo sigr konúgr.“ (St. 34)⁸²

“Odd, you've never burst | mail-coats in battle | when helmed warriors |
took to their heels. | The war raged, | fire raced through the town | when
our king won | victory over the Wends.”⁸³

„Oddr! vartu eigi
att eggroði
þá seggi alvalds
svelta létum;
bar ek sár þaðan
sex ok átta,
en þú með bæjum
bat þèr matar.“ (St. 35)

“Odd, you weren't there | at the weapon-clash when | we gave the king's
troops | a taste of death. Fourteen wounds | I fared home with, | while
you were begging | your bread from the farmers.”⁸⁴

Some of the most typical features of the *mannjafnaðr* are evident from the beginning: there is a formula (name + *vartu eigi...*/“you weren't there”) that is repeated eleven times, each contestant boasts about his military achievements and a first insult is addressed to the opponent, implying his inadequacy in respect to the two brothers' status and abilities. It is now Oddr's turn to drink two horns of mead and reply with as many stanzas:

„Þið skuluð hlýða
hróðri mínum,
Sigurðr ok Sjólf,
sessunautar!
ykkur á ek gjalda
greypan verka,
hróðr harðsnúinn
huglausum tveim.“ (St. 36)

“Listen to my song | you seat-warmers, | Sigurðr and Sjólf, | it's time to
serve you | for your nasty piece | of knotty poetry - | you're a pretty |
pair of milksops!”⁸⁵

⁸² The Norse text is from Rafn's edition (1829), available online at: <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?r8630-109>. The English translation is by H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (1985).

⁸³ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 101-102.

⁸⁴ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 102.

⁸⁵ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 102.

Oddr is immediately quite aggressive but takes his time in replying with a boast of his own, and probably the incipit *Þið skuluð hlýða hróðri mínum*⁸⁶ is also a way to signal his contestants and the audience that he has done many deeds worthy of praise. The word *sessunautar* is not intrinsically an insult since it just means “bench-mates”, but in this contest it immediately evokes the opposition between life at court and life as a Viking.

„Þú látt, Sjólf!
í soðgólfi
dáðavanr
ok dýrs hugar;
en ek út á
Aqvítanía
fjóra menn
fjörvi næmdak.“ (St. 37)

“Sjólf, you were flat | on the kitchen floor | no sign of daring, | not a
single deed - | you had faced nothing | when I felled four | in Aquitaine
| and ended their lives.”⁸⁷

The second stanza is directly addressed at Sjólf, who has insulted Oddr for his poverty, but is here mocked for his comfortable life at court. The last verses recall an episode that has already been told in the saga (Ch. 17), but that has also undergone important transformations in the various redactions: the result was that the only detail they agree upon is Oddr killing four men, which in turn suggests that somewhere in the transmission the episode was modified or made up on the basis of this brief mention (Lönnroth 1979, 105).

Now it is Sigurðr and Sjólf’s turn again and both their stanzas reflect their urgency to deny the charges of being “seat warmers” by telling of their own exploits abroad:

„Þú hefr Oddr! farit
með öbnösum,
ok bitlínga
borit frá porti;
en ek einn
af Ygsfjalli
högginn skjöld

⁸⁶ Literally: “You shall listen to my song”.

⁸⁷ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 102.

í hendi bar.“ (St. 38)

“Odd, you've busied yourself | with a band of beggars, | taking titbits
from the table. | But I bore | back alone, | home from Ulfsfell, | my
hacked shield.”⁸⁸

„Oddr! vart eigi
út með Grikkjum,
þá er á Serkjum
sverð vár ruðum;
gjörðum hafan
hljóm ísarna,
fëllu firðar
í fólkröði.“ (St. 39)

“Odd, you weren't | with the Greeks, when | we reddened our swords |
on the Saracens; | we made the martial | music of steel, | the fighters we
felled | in the folk-flame⁸⁹.”⁹⁰

Oddr responds in kind with two stanzas stressing his opponents' idleness as opposed to his prowess in battle, although in the second stanza he slips in some very important information:

„Þú látt Sigurðr
í sal meyja,
meðan við Bjarma
börðust tvisvar;
háðum hildi
hauksnarliga,
en þú seggr í sal
svaft undir blæju!“ (St. 41)

“You, Sigurðr, were lying | enchambered with the ladies, | while twice we
clashed | in combat with the Permians. | Hawk-minded, we won | our
war like heroes, | while you lay dozing | under the linen.”⁹¹

Now, the mention of Bjarmaland/Permia is a crucial clue in identifying Barkman as Oddr, since every time he introduces himself in the saga, he is asked if he is “that Oddr that made the journey to Permia” (Lönnroth 1979, 105). Remembering Hárek and king

⁸⁸ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 103.

⁸⁹ The Norse word *fólk* does mean “folk” but it is also a *heiti* for “battle”, so the phrase *fólkröði* literally means “the redness of battle”, though it is not sure if it refers to blood or fire.

⁹⁰ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 103.

⁹¹ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 103.

Herrauð's suspicions at the beginning of the chapter, we may wonder whether they have already recognised who is standing in the hall only from this stanza.

At this point of the *mannjafnaðr*, all contestants have been able to complete their turns and drink their mead. From now on, the structure of the contest is not quite so regular, as the two brothers start showing some sign of fatigue (or lack of deeds to boast of): at first, Sigurðr stays silent while Sjólf recites his verses, but soon afterwards both are unable to compose poetry. In the meantime, Oddr has continued to drink twice as much as they have, while also being perfectly able to compose two stanzas for each rounds (Lönnroth 1979, 104). Therefore, turns IV to VII are only about Oddr declaiming his deeds in poetry, while the prose passages in between describe Sigurðr and Sjólf drinking silently. Even though they are not technically contributing, it does not mean that the *mannjafnaðr* ends as soon as the brothers stop talking, since, as it happens in the contest between the two kings in *Magnússona saga*, even silence can be considered “a move” in this context. However, given the pattern of the three challenges in *Örvar-Odds saga* and the repeated humiliations Oddr inflicts on his opponents, it is possible that even insisting on Sigurðr and Sjólf's inability to respond is a way to further chasten them.

Along with the progress of the *mannjafnaðr*, the excited reactions of the audience are also described, probably a nod to the actual audience of *Örvar-Odds saga*, but also a reference to the practice of *mannjafnaðr* for diversion during banquets (reminiscent of King Eynteinn's *skemtanarræðu*). After Oddr's mention of his travels to Permia, the narrator briefly comments on how the spectators are entertained by the contest (*Þótti mönnum þetta mikil skemtan*, 274), but by the end of turn VII, after Oddr has recited his verses unchallenged for a third time, the audience is definitively cheering for him: *Þá varð óp mikit í höllinni af þessu, [...]. Konungsmenn hlýða skemmtan þeira*, “There was loud cheering in the hall when Odd had spoken this, [...]. The king's men couldn't get enough of this entertainment.”⁹² (278).

At this point, Oddr realises that Sigurðr and Sjólf are no longer able to compose any poetry and launches in a closing coda, which occupies Stanzas 53 to 58. The first three stanzas are a fond, bittersweet eulogy of Oddr's closest companions, Hjálmar, Þórðr and Ásmundr, to whom his present opponents are compared unfavourably:

⁹² Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 106.

„Þið munuð hvergi
hæfir þikja,
Surgrðr ok Sjólf!
í sveit konúngs,
ef ek Hjalmars get
hins hugum-stóra,
þess er snarpligast
sverði beitti.“ (St. 53)

“Where will you ever | be estimated worthy | company, Sigurðr | and
Sjólf, for a king? | But I bear in mind | Hjalmar the Brave, | who
brandished his sword | more briskly than any man.”⁹³

Throughout the *mannjafnaðr*, the metre by which the contestants’ moral value was measured was their willingness to leave the comforts of domestic life behind and embarking on adventures in faraway lands and endure the fatigue and pain of battle. The same idea is notably expressed in *Hjalmar’s Death-song*:

„Drekkur með jöfri
jarla mengi
öl glaðliga
at Uppsölum.
Mæðir marga
munngát fira,
en mik eggjar spor
í eyju þjá.“ (St. 16)

“The earls are all | eager at the ale-drinking, | easy in the king’s |
companionship at Uppsala; | many a warrior | weakens at the ale: | on
the isle I weary, | alone with my wounds.”⁹⁴

By the end of the contest, however, this argument takes a slightly different turn: Oddr and his companion are worthy not only because they have fought all over the world instead of sitting idly in the hall, but also because while doing so they have been useful to the kings they have served (Lönnroth 1979, 107). In fact, after having listed all the people they have fought against (St. 56), the last stanza even mentions the honours that Oddr and his friends were given for their deeds:

„Nú hefik vorar
iðnir taldar,

⁹³ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 105.

⁹⁴ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 68.

þær er forðum vèr
framdar höfðum;
aptr gengu vèr
til öndveigs,
sigr gæddir;
látum Sjólf mæla!“ (St. 58)

“I have listed all | the exploits now | which we performed | in the far
past: | rich in victories | we reached our homes, | to sit on the high-seats.
| Now, Sjólf, have your say.”⁹⁵

The final verse is one last ironic taunt towards the opponent that has longer been able to respond to his boasts: the two brothers have at last collapsed for the drinking and are now soundly asleep. The day after, Oddr’s friends Óttar and Ingjald disrobe him of his disguise and they discover the fine garments he has been wearing underneath the bark. Then, they lead him to the hall, where Oddr reveals his identity to the king (who asks him if he is “that Oddr who went to Permia”) and is invited to join him on the high seat: Oddr will only accept if Óttar and Ingjald are admitted there with him, and so they are. Soon afterwards, Oddr will be given the mission to collect tribute from Bjálkaland and will obtain the princess’s hand in marriage, thus marking his transition from Viking raider into a member of courtly society and, ultimately, king (Tulinius 2002, 162).

The *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga* utilises the classic strategies of the genre, while cleverly entwining the verbal duel with a drinking game that forwards the plot of the saga and probably reflected the actual condition in which it was performed (Lönnroth 1979, 98). The contestants are evaluated by their achievements, but while Sigurðr and Sjólf attack Oddr for his low status as a (presumed) beggar, Oddr scolds them bitterly for their idle life at court. The final stanzas of the contest, however, suggest an attempt at compromising between Viking ethics and the reverence towards the figure of the monarch imposed by courtly values, probably reflecting a new sensibility at a time of crucial social and political changes in Iceland.

⁹⁵ Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 108.

Chapter V – The riddle-contest in *Hervarar saga ok*

Heiðreks

V. 1 Wisdom contests and riddles in Old Norse literature

Among the verbal duels in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, the wisdom contest stands apart for many reasons. Unlike the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*, wisdom contests do not seem to be connected with specific settings. The frequency of halls as the backdrop of these type of duels seems to have more to do with the narrative frame of the contests: *Vafþrúðnismál* takes place in Vafþrúðnir's hall because Óðinn specifically seeks him out in his home; the riddle contests in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and Book V of *Gesta Danorum* are public, institutional events involving two kings, so it makes sense that they would be set in their halls. It is possible that, like the *mannjafnaðr*, the setting reflects the existence of a customary form of entertainment. Also, given that the contestants are expected to keep their wits about them, riddle contests are never accompanied by references to drinking.

Insults and threats are sometimes present before the riddle contest starts and are reflective of the fact that the contestants are always strangers and somewhat hostile towards one another. At the beginning of *Alvíssmál*, there appears to be a pattern of Identification and Characterisation that reminds of that of *sennur*: Þórr comments on Alvíss' appearance by calling him an ogre; the dwarf introduces himself then mocks Þórr for being a vagabond, so the god reveals his name. The conclusion of the poem is also very reminiscent of that of a *senna*, specifically *Hrímgerðarmál*: Þórr reveals that he was only stalling the dwarf until dawn, so that Alvíss would turn into stone. The general tone is more courteous in *Vafþrúðnismál*, where Vafþrúðnir is initially less than welcoming towards a disguised Óðinn, but when the latter asks for hospitality, he invites him to take a seat. Admittedly, the whole exchange takes place under the looming threat of death for the loser. However, even in loss Vafþrúðnir does not resort to insults and graciously compliments his adversary.

While *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* are clearly entwined with violence, there are some instances of them just being ritualized entertainment. In wisdom contests, however, the stakes are always very high: in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Heiðreks saga*, the life of one or both the contestants is on the line; in *Alvíssmál* the dwarf duels with Þórr for his daughter's hand in marriage, and, unbeknownst to Alvíss, for his own life. In Book V of Saxo's

Gesta Danorum, Erik has to use his eloquence and riddling abilities to showcase his own intelligence to king Frothi III to become his advisor.

Another way in which the wisdom or riddle contests are different from other verbal duels is that Old Norse vocabulary does not seem to have a term that univocally refers to them: in the *Poetic Edda*, the two poems containing such contests are called *Vafþrúðnismál* (“Vafþrúðnir’s Sayings”) and *Alvíssmál* (“All-wise’s Sayings”), thus using a very broad generic mark (*mál*, “speech, words”) (Clunies Ross 2005, 30). Both of them, however, are in *ljóðahátt*, a metre, that, while not appearing exclusively in verbal duels, is utilised also in eddic *sennur* like *Lokasenna* and *Hrímgerðarmál* (Fulk 2016, 262). As for the sagas, the only wisdom contest to receive a sort of generic mark is an extract from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (Chapter 9), which appears independently in 17th-century manuscripts under the title of *Heiðreksgátur* (“Heiðrek’s Riddles”). This collection of riddles touches a wide variety of topics, from the mythological to the daily, with very interesting parallels in the *Poetic Edda*.

As in other cultures around the world, riddles in medieval Scandinavia were not just meant for entertainment, but also served as vehicles for knowledge. Thus, their topics could range from the familiar objects of everyday life to mythology. As a matter of fact, the riddles that have come down to us offer precious insight of the worldview of Old Norse-Icelandic culture and their reception by Medieval composers of sagas (Burrows 2014, 134-135). Moreover, since a riddle is essentially a description of an object in unusual terms or under an uncommon perspective, synonyms, metaphors and puns play a fundamental role in them. In Old Norse literature, this is further complicated by the extensive use of *heiti* (poetic names) and *kenningar* (periphrases) in poetry, which, as *Snorra Edda* demonstrates, could prove to be positively enigmatic and required an extensive background knowledge to be solved. Thus, in Old Norse literature the ability to list names and synonyms is in itself a proof of wisdom, as *Alvíssmál* testifies.

The poem centres around a dwarf, who wants to marry Þórr’s daughter. The centrality of naming in the poem is immediately foreshadowed by the names of the protagonists: the dwarf is called *Alvíss*, literally “All-wise” and Þórr introduces himself using two *heiti*: *Vingþórr ec heiti, [...] sonr em ec Síðgrana*, I’m called Vingþórr (probably battle-Þórr), son of Síðgrani (“Long-Beard”)⁹⁶. Þórr does not agree to the match and challenges the

⁹⁶ According to the Cleasby/Vigfusson dictionary, this name of Óðinn only appears in *Alvíssmál* and it is also used for Bragi.

dwarf to a wisdom contest, specifically to list the names used in each of the Nine Realms for various natural entities (the earth, the sky, the sun and moon, etc.).

„Segðu mér þat, Alvíss, - öll of röc fira
vorumc, dvergr, at vitir -:
hvé sú iorð heitir, er liggr fyr alda sonum
heimi hverjum í?“
„Iorð heitir með mönnum, enn með ásom fold,
kalla vega vanir,
ígrœn iotnar, álfar gróandi,
kalla aur upregin.“

“Tell me this, All-wise | – I reckon, dwarf, | that you have wisdom about
all beings - | what the earth is called, | which lies in front of men, | in
each world.”

“Earth it’s called among men, | and ground by the Æsir, | the Vanir call
it ways; | the giants splendid-green, | the elves the growing one, | the
Powers above call it loam.”

A similar episode is briefly mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál*, where Snorri quotes a list of *kenningar* for skald as part of a verbal duel between the Norwegian skald Bragi Boddason and a troll-woman. This is how Bragi talks about himself:

„Skáld kalla mik
skapsmið Viðurs,
Gauts gjafrotuð,
grepp óhneppan,
Yggs qlbera,
óðs skap-Móða,
hagsmið bragar.
Hvat er skáld nema flat?“ (St. 300b)

“Poets call me | Vidur’s [Odin’s] thought-smith, | getter of Gaut’s
[Odin’s] gift, | lack-nought hero, | server of Ygg’s ale | song-making
Modi, | skilled smith of rhyme, | what is a poet other than that?”⁹⁷

The contest in *Vafþrúðnismál* follows, at least at the beginning, a similar route. The poem starts with Óðinn deciding to visit the giant Vafþrúðnir who is renowned for his wisdom, specifically to learn about the future. His wife Frigg tries to dissuade him, since the giant is also known to be very powerful, but Óðinn departs anyway. He enters Vafþrúðnir’s hall disguised as a wanderer named Gagnráðr (literally “Advantage Counsel”), who has

⁹⁷ Icelandic text edited by Faulkes (1998). English translation by Faulkes (1995), 132.

travelled there to see in person if the giant is as wise as it is said. Vafþrúðnir does not immediately respond to this challenge and demands first that his guest prove his own wisdom. Thus, Vafþrúðnir asks Gagnráðr firstly to name the two horses that draw day and night over mankind, then the river that divides the lands of the giants and the gods and finally the plain where the gods will fight Surt during Ragnarök. This last question seals the first part of the duel and introduces a theme that is later revealed to be of great import to Óðinn. Now that Gagnráðr has proven himself, he can ask twelve rather direct questions of mythology and cosmology (Sts. 19 to 43), while from Stanza 44 the subject changes to Ragnarök. Vafþrúðnir tells in detail what will happen to the gods at the end of days, and once Óðinn finds out how he will die, he poses one last question:

„Fíolð ec fór, fíolð ec freistaðac,
fíolð ec reynda regin;
Hvat mælti Óðinn, áðr á bál stigi,
sialfr í eyra syni?“ (St. 54)

“Much I have travelled, | much have I tried out, | much have I tested the Powers; | what did Óðinn say | into his son’s ear | before he mounted the pyre?”

This question, referencing Baldr’s death, is an example of “neck riddle”, impossible to answer because it is based on a piece of knowledge that only Óðinn possesses (Ellis Davidson 1985, 30). Vafþrúðnir recognises his adversary and admits his defeat. A similar scene occurs elsewhere in the *Edda*, in *Baldrs draumar* (“Baldr’s Dreams), when Óðinn questions a seeress about Baldr’s nightmares: the woman recognises him after he asks an enigmatic question about “girls who weep” (St. 12) which is never given an answer, but may refer to Frigg’s attempt to make all living creatures weep in order to free Baldr from Hel, or to the waves, daughters of the sea-god Ægir (Larrington 2014, 314n12, Tolkien 1960, xx). It is not clear how exactly does this question betray Óðinn, since either way there is no indication that this is knowledge exclusive to him (Tolkien 1960, xx).

It is worth noting that both *Alvíssmál* and *Vafþrúðnismál* make an intense use of formulaic expressions. Þórr introduces every question with some variant of: “*Segðu mér þat, Alvíss, | - ǫll of rok fira | vǫrumk, dvergr, at vitir –*”, “Tell me this, All-wise, - I reckon, dwarf, that you have wisdom about all beings –”. Vafþrúðnir addresses his guest by his fake name and implicitly reminds him that it was him who started the challenge by doubting his wisdom in Stanza 6: “*Seg þú mér, Gagnráðr, | alls þú á golfi vill | þíns of freista frama,*”, “Tell me, Gagnráðr, | since on the hall-floor | you want to try your skill.”. When

it is Óðinn's turn, he uses the phrase: “*Seg þú þat it eina, | ef þitt æði dugir | ok þú, Vafþrúðnir, vitir,*”, “Tell me this one thing, | if your mind is sufficient | and you, Vafþrúðnir, know”, which is repeated twelve times to enumerate his questions on the origin of the world and of various mythological figures. When the subject shifts to the future and Ragnarök, Óðinn's need for knowledge becomes more evident as he admits that, even though he has seen much and has travelled much, he is still ignorant of what comes next: “*Fjólð ek fór, | fjólð ek freistaðak, | fjólð ek of reynda regin*”, “Much I have travelled, | much have I tried out, | much have I tested the Powers”. Formulae are almost universally part of the tradition of riddles and contain in themselves a challenge to solve a difficult puzzle (Taylor 1943, 129). Thus, they are particularly apt in the context of an actual riddling match, no matter how fictional.

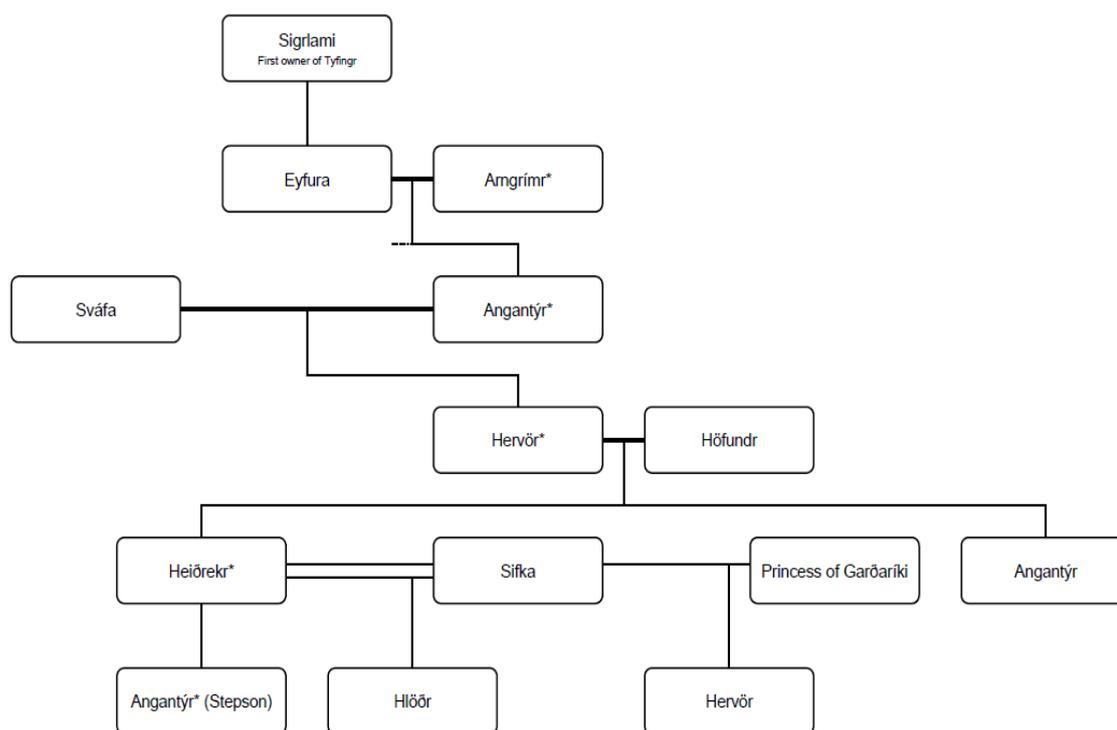
Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* also contains two examples of quite sophisticated riddle contests. In Book III, Amleth has to solve a series of riddles describing everyday objects in almost fantastical ways. His companions take this as a way to tease an apparent madman, and Amleth seems to answer with utter nonsense. His responses, however, give the solutions using *kenningar* and puns, while introducing subtle accusations to the king his uncle. This strategy betrays Amleth's intelligence and sanity to the attentive reader, while maintain the fiction of his madness in the context of the narration (Ellis Davidson 1985, 38). In Book V, already quite rich of verbal duels, wordplay turns into riddling when Erik the Eloquent is asked to describe his journey from Norway to Denmark and chooses to do so through a series of enigmas based on ancient place names, thus almost indecipherable by the modern reader (Ellis Davidson 1985, 37).

Going back to Parks' theoretical framework, the main difference between the wisdom contests on one side, and the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* on the other, is that the first is closer to debate, with its other-oriented subject matter, internal resolution and serious referential mode (Parks 1990, 450). The wisdom contest is more self-contained than the other Old Norse verbal duels, other than having very different contents, but it is possible to find some similarities with the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*. The fact that the contestants are risking their lives and that one of them is usually a supernatural creature holding some sort of occult knowledge evokes the themes and original meaning of the *senna* (cf. §III.1). Moreover, the wisdom contest could be seen as a *mannjafnaðr in fieri*, a comparison between men that does not recall the contestants' past deeds but asks them to display their skills at the moment. More than the *senna* and the *mannjafnaðr*, the wisdom contest is a

duel with words with specific and sophisticated strategies that result in enjoyable entertainment for the audience.

V. 2 *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*: a summary

The “Saga of Hervör and Heiðrek” (also known as *Heiðreks saga inn vitra*, “Saga of Heiðrek the wise”) tells the story of a dynasty of legendary kings and of the cursed sword Tyrting that is handed down for generations. Its plot, quite long and convoluted, can be divided in four parts, one for each generation involved: the first deals with the berserker Angantýr and his brothers, who die in the battle of Sámsey with Hjálmar and Oddr; the second tells of Angantýr’s daughter Hervör who poses as a man to retrieve the sword Tyfing; the third is the longest and deals with the various accidents of king Heiðrekr’s life (including a riddle-contest against Óðinn); the fourth and final part revolves around the rivalry between Heiðrekr’s sons Angantýr and Hlöðr and the battle that ensues between the Goths and Huns.



1 *Heiðrekr's family tree. The asterisk marks the owners of Tyrting*

It has been suggested that the saga originated from the legend of Heiðrekr and his sons, who are mentioned in the 9th-century poem *Widsith*⁹⁸ (ll. 116-9) and in *Háttalykill*. Their story must have been later connected with that of Agantýr and his brothers, which, as it has been mentioned before (cf. p. 84), was also told in Book 5 of the *Gesta Danorum*

⁹⁸Cf. *Widsith* in the edition by Bernard J. Muir (2000).

(Mundt 1990, 414, Tolkien 1960, xxviii). It is also generally agreed that the Icelandic composer of the saga built the prose narrative around four much older poems: *Hjálmar's Death-Song*, *The Waking of Angantýr* (also known as *Hervararkvíða*), *The Riddles of Gestumblindi* (sometimes found as *Heiðreksgátur*) and *The Battle of the Goths and the Huns* or *Hlöðskvíða*, the oldest extant heroic poem in Norse tradition (Tolkien 1960, viii, Love 2013, 22). There are, of course, also significant parts of the saga that are not based on poetry, e.g. Höfund giving six good counsels to his son Heiðrekr before he gets banished, but for the most part the saga is a patchwork of different events only tied together by the ominous presence of the sword Tyrfingr, which effectively dooms the dynasty to eternal conflict (Tolkien 1960, viii, Love 2013, 22).

The situation is also complicated by the fact that the saga has been transmitted in three redactions and its most important manuscripts are sometimes in poor conditions. The principal witnesses of *Heiðreks saga* are⁹⁹:

R= Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, GKS 2845 4to (1440-1460);

H= Copenhagen, University Library, AM 544 4to, *Hauksbók* (1290-1360);

*h*₁= Copenhagen, University Library, AM 281 4to (1685-1699);

*h*₂= Copenhagen, University Library, AM 597 b 4to (1650-1699);

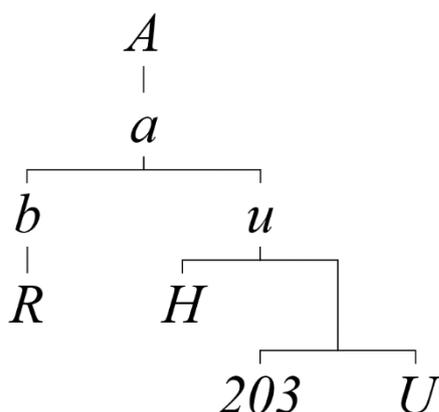
U= Uppsala, University Library, R 715 (1630-1658);

203= Copenhagen, University Library, AM 203 fol. (1600-1699).

Manuscript *R* preserves the earlier version of the saga and is presumably the closest to the oldest written original (*A*), although one leaf is missing (between ff. 65 and 66) and the end of the saga is lost (Tolkien 1956, xvii). The so-called *H*-version found in *Hauksbók* is also missing the ending, from the answer to the second riddle onwards. The rest of the riddle-contest has been reconstructed thanks to the much younger *h*₁ and *h*₂, which both contain the entire *Heiðreksgátur* and are probably indirect copies of *H* (Tolkien 1956, xvii). Finally, *U* and *203* preserve the *U*-version, although the first manuscript is extremely corrupted and is often integrated with material from *U/203*, which was copied from several sources, probably including *Hauksbók* itself (Tolkien 1956, xviii). In general, *H* and *U* are closer and probably stemmed from an earlier version

⁹⁹ The witnesses of *Heiðreks saga* are discussed extensively in Chapter Two of *The reception of Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century* by Jeffrey Love (2013).

of *Heiðreks saga* that had undergone important alterations around 1300 (*u*). The genealogy of the transmission has been reconstructed like so (Tolkien 1956, xix):



The sub-archetype *a* is thought to be the common source to all extant manuscript, while *b* and *u* represent the reworkings that have produced some pronounced differences between the *R*-version and *HU*. For example, in the latter versions Heiðrekr's receives the sword before being banished by the king and with it he kills his brother Angantýr. Throughout *HU* the curse of Tyrfingr is mentioned more often, though it is probable that the compilers took their inspiration from verses 32 to 39 of *Hervararkviða*, where the spirit predicts that the sword will bring misery to Hervör's descendants (Tolkien 1960, x). Furthermore, the long genealogy that retraces the history of Sweden until the early 12th century is almost certainly a 17th century addition (Tolkien 1960, xxviii). As for the riddle-contest, the *H*-version contains seven more riddles and the two contestants interact a bit more during the dialogue. In all redactions the first four and last two riddles are the same, but for the rest, *H* groups together those with similar beginnings, while *U* and *R* order them by subjects (Tolkien 1960, xviii). To aid our discussion, it seems quite useful to include here the list of the riddles compiled by Burrows, comparing their order in the three redactions (2014, 118-9):

<i>H</i> (AM281 and AM597b)	<i>R</i>	<i>U</i>
1 Ale	1 Ale	1 Ale
2 Paths	2 Paths	2 Paths
3 Dew	3 Dew	3 Dew
4 Hammer	4 Hammer	4 Hammer
5 Fog	9 Bellows	22 Waves
6 Anchor	14 Spider	23 Waves

<i>H (AM281 and AM597b)</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>U</i>
7 Raven, dew, fish, waterfall	X	X
8 Leek	8 Leek	21 Waves
9 Bellows	16 Obsidian	20 Ptarmigans
10 Hail	X	X
11 Dung-beetle	X	X
12 Pregnant sow	17 Swan	14 Spider
13 Arrow	X	X
14 Spider	18 Angelica	8 Leek
15 Sun	X	X
16 Obsidian	25 Dead-snake on an ice-floe	18 Angelica
17 Swan	32 Ítrek and Andad	32 Ítrek and Andad
18 Angelica	19 <i>Hnefatal pieces</i>	19 <i>Hnefatal pieces</i>
19 <i>Hnefatal pieces</i>	30 Fire	26 <i>Húnn in hnefatafl</i>
20 Ptarmigans	5 Fog	16 Obsidian
21 Waves	26 <i>Húnn in hnefatafl</i>	30 Fire
22 Waves	27 Shield	5 Fog
X	20 Ptarmigans	24 Waves
24 Waves	22 Waves	6 Anchor
25 Dead-snake on an ice-floe	21 Waves	9 Bellows
26 <i>Húnn in hnefatafl</i>	23 Waves	17 Swan
27 Shield	28 Duck nesting in a skull	25 Dead-snake on an ice-floe
28 Duck nesting in a skull	24 Waves	X
29 Cow	33 Piglets	27 Shield
30 Fire	X	X
31 Rod & loom	X	X
32 Ítrek and Andad	12 Pregnant sow	33 Piglets

<i>H (AM281 and AM597b)</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>U</i>
33 Piglets	29 Cow	12 Pregnant sow
34 Embers	X	X
35 <i>ofljóst</i> riddle	35 <i>ofljóst</i> riddle	X
36 Óðinn on Slepnir	36 Óðinn on Slepnir	36 Óðinn on Slepnir
37 Neck-riddle	37 Neck-riddle	37 Neck-riddle

Tolkien's edition uses the text from *R* and integrates it with *U* and 203, but the seven extra riddles from *H* are added in an appendix.

V. 3 The riddle-contest in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*

In Chapter 8 of *Heiðreks saga*, we learn that king Heiðrekr has had twelve men raise a boar with golden bristles and that he entrusts these men's judgement in any matter. He also swears on the beautiful animal that he will pardon any man who will be able to pose him a riddle he cannot solve. In the following chapter, we meet Gestumblindi, one of Heiðrekr's enemies, who realises that he would be heavily punished for his crimes by the twelve judges and that he cannot compete with the king's wisdom. Thus, he decides to make a sacrifice to Óðinn, asking for his protection. Soon after, Gestumblindi receives the visit of a wanderer who looks just like him, they exchange clothes and the mysterious man goes to meet with the king: if he will be able to pose to Heiðrekr a riddle he cannot solve, he will walk away free. Thus, Gestumblindi questions the king with thirty (or thirty-seven depending on the redaction) riddles, but Heiðrekr is able to answer correctly to all of them. In the end, Gestumblindi tricks the king by asking him what Óðinn whispered to Balder's ear on his funeral pyre. The answer is, of course, known only to Óðinn himself, but from this question Heiðrekr realises who is actually in front of him. Enraged, Heiðrekr slashes at Óðinn, who transforms into a falcon but is wounded anyway, so he curses the king, saying that he will be murdered by slaves (which is precisely what happens in Chapter 10).

The riddle-contest in *Heiðreks saga* is the youngest of the four poems around which the saga was built, although it is hard to trace its history with precision: the contest as a whole can be dated to the 12th century, but some of the riddles in *ljóðaháttir* may be even older (Mundt 1990, 411). Attempts have been made at identifying the "original" riddles from later interpolations, mainly based on the differences in metre: most of the riddles are in *ljóðaháttir*, while around one third of them is in *fornyrðislag*. Such variety, however, may

just as well be the inevitable consequence of gathering together riddles that probably circulated individually, probably even in oral form. Moreover, if even some of the riddles had been composed together, the solutions would have been in poetry as well, while here they are in prose (Tolkien 1960, xviii-xix).

As for the inspiration behind the episode, the name Gestumblindi, otherwise only known from Swedish legends, suggests a Swedish origin, although the motif of the prisoner who is freed after presenting an impossible problem is widespread in fairy-tale literature (Tolkien 1960, xx, Mundt 1990, 411). In the swap between two identical men, Tolkien has seen a parallel between *Heiðreks saga* and the English ballad “King John and the Bishop” (16th century), although it has been observed that the ballad is too late to have had any impact in the composition of the saga (Tolkien 1960, xix, Mundt 1990, 411).

The riddles of *Heiðreks saga* also share some imagery and themes with eddic wisdom poetry (cf. Burrows 2014), which will be discussed below (pp. 103-104). As for the structure of the riddle-contest, the observations by Ellis Davidson (1985, 30-31) regarding the similarities between *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál* (already discussed in §V.1), prompt to extend the comparison to the *Heiðreksgátur* as well. For example, all of these contests ensue from some sort of starting incident that sets the participants against one another: in *Alvíssmál*, Þórr is stopping Alvíss from kidnapping his daughter, in *Vafþrúðnismál* Óðinn is trying to extract information about his own death from the giant Vafþrúðnir, while in *Heiðreks saga* Gestumblindi is called to court to answer for his crimes (Ellis Davidson 1985, 30-31). This introductory part also sets the stakes of the contest: for Þórr the penalty is losing a daughter to a dwarf, while Óðinn risks his own life¹⁰⁰. Moreover, during the riddle-contest, Gestumblindi also uses a formula, “This riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!” (*Heiðrekr konungr, huggðu at gátu!*) to incite his opponent to solve his riddles, which recalls similar phrases in both *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál*. It is possible that, like for the *senna* and the *mannjafnaðr*, the composers of these contests used these elements to create both suspense and certain expectations in the audience.

The contents of the riddles are various but mainly deal with natural phenomena (26 riddles), man-made everyday objects (8 riddles) and only three are about mythology. None of them mentions the Bible or anything concerning Christianity, and neither do they

¹⁰⁰ From this caveat one could argue that the contest in *Heiðreks saga* was fixed from the start: one wonders how a mortal man could possibly kill a god, at least in this narrative universe, although perhaps the sword Tyrfingr would be able to perform this feat.

refer to writing or to the arts. Moreover, there is no allusion to places outside of Scandinavia, or possibly outside of Iceland (Tolkien 1960, xxi).

The first riddle posed by Gestumblindi well exemplifies the exchanges that occur between the two opponents during the contests:

„Hafa vildak
þat er hafða í gær,
vittu, hvat þat var:
lýða lemill,
orða tefill,
ok orða upphefill.
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu.“ (St. 44)

“Would that I had now | what I had yesterday, | find out what that was;
| mankind it mars, | speech it hinders, | yet speech it will inspire. | This
riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

The solution to this one is “ale”. Each riddle opens with two lines setting the scene, describing an apparently normal context in which the object may be found. This introductory part is called the “positive description” and it is here followed by a summon to solve the riddle (Taylor 1943, 130). Then, Gestumblindi gives three clues for the solution which are intentionally phrased to confuse the hearer: in this case, the puzzlement particularly ensues from the description of the mysterious object as something that both hinders and inspires speech. This is the “negative description”, designed to sound impossible if taken literally (Taylor 1943, 130). Actually, in any riddle the questioner is giving two descriptions at the same time, one literal, one figurative, and it is the solver’s job to find out the connections between the two levels and identify the referent of these descriptions (Taylor 1943, 130). Finally, all the riddles in the collection, except the last one, end with the formula addressing king Heiðrekr.

The structure described above is not the only one found in the contest. For example, Riddle 7 (unique to the *H*-version) is made of four, seemingly unrelated questions:

„Hverr byggir há fjöll?
Hverr fellr í djúpa dali?
Hverr andalauss lifir?
Hverr æva þegir?
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu!“ (St. *H* 7)

“What lives on high fells? | What falls in deep dales? | What lives without breath? | What is never silent? | This riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

In *Háttatal* (St. 40) this is called *greppaminni*, “the poets’ reminder”: a full *greppaminni* would have the four questions followed by the answers. Here, the answers are obviously omitted, and it falls on Heiðrekr to complete the poets’ reminder, although he does so in prose (Tolkien 1960, 80n2):

„Góð er gáta þín, Gestumblindi, getit er þeirar; hrafn byggir jafnan á háum fjöllum, en dugg fellr jafnan í djúpa dali, fiskr lifi andalauss, en þjótandi fors þegir aldri.“ (79)

“Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi,” said the king “I have guessed it. The raven lives ever on the high fells, the dew falls ever in the deep ales, the fish lives without breath, and the rushing waterfall is never silent.” (80)

The phrase *Góð er gáta þín, getit er þessar* is repeated fourteen times in the contest and was probably a standard way to introduce the solution of a riddle (Tolkien 1960, 33n1). For most of the riddles, Heiðrekr gives a full explanation of how the clues must be interpreted to lead to the answer. Moreover, in more than one occasion the solution is given in a way that directly refers to the context of the scene, for example after Riddle 1 when the king orders to bring Gestumblindi some ale. Although we do not have evidence that riddle-contests were a praxis in drinking-halls, like for example the *mannjafnaðr*, we can imagine that these details were functional to involve the audience into the performance of this episode. Another indication of this tendency is found in the *H*-redaction, where king Heiðrekr asks his court to ponder a riddle before giving the answer:

„Þessa gátu skulu ráða hirðmenn mínir.“ Þeir gátu margs til ok eigi fags mjök. Þá mælti konungr, sem hann sá at þeir gerðu ekki at, „Hest þann kallar þú línvef, en skeið meri hans, en upp ok ofan skal hrista vefinn.“ (81)

“The men of my court shall solve this one,” They made many guesses, but none very good, and when the king saw that they could make nothing of it he said, “What you call a ‘stallion’ is a piece of linen, and his ‘mare’ is the weaver’s slay; up and down the web is shaken,” (82)

This passage has several functions: in the *H*-redaction this is riddle 30, so the composer is inserting some variation in the contest not to bore his audience, and we can imagine at this point the performer pausing and inciting the spectators to contribute with their own guesses. Within the saga, this also highlights Heiðrekr and Gestumblindi’s exceptional intelligence compared to the members of the court. Finally, since the final part of the

riddle is lost, it is fortuitous that king Heiðrekr takes the time to explain each clue, so that the modern reader may attempt to reconstruct the question.

King Heiðrekr's reactions, however, are not always positive, which contributes to put pressure on Gestumblindi and reminds the audience that this is a contest with a real life at stake. For example, after Riddle 16, Heiðrekr mocks his adversary: "Your riddles become trifling, Gestumblindi, what need is there to spend more time at this?"¹⁰¹. In the *H*-version, Gestumblindi asks a riddle about the dung-beetle. Heiðrekr uses the traditional complimentary formula to introduce the solution, but he voices his displeasure with a riddle dealing with such a base subject: "when great men ask questions about dung-beetles, they have talked too long"¹⁰².

The strategies used by Gestumblindi to mislead his adversary are various. For example, in Riddle 9 about the bellows, he describes everyday objects in wondrous terms:

„Hvat er þat undra,
er ek úti sá
fyrir Dellings drum;
ókvikvir tveir
andalausir
sáralauk suðu?
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu!“ (St. 48)

“What strange marvel | did I see without, | in front of Delling's door; |
two things lifeless, | twain unbreathing, | were seething a stalk of wounds?
| This riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

In this riddle, the negative description again plays on the impossibility to reconcile the characteristics given to the object, but the most misleading part is the beginning, which brings the hearer to search the answer in the realm of the extraordinary. Meanwhile, the reference to “Delling's door” is rather obscure, but it could be a kenning meaning “at sunrise”: *Hávamál* contains a reference to a dwarf singing “before Delling's doors” (St. 160), and a figure by the same name is said to be the father of Day in *Vafþrúðnismál* (St. 25) (Tolkien 1960, 34n1). If so, this would mean that this is one of the many cases in which mythological knowledge is alluded to in the riddles.

¹⁰¹ „Smækkask nú gáturnar, Gestumblindi, hvat þarf lengr yfir þessu at sitja?“ 34-36.

¹⁰² „Er nú mart til tínt, er tordýflar eru ríkra manna spurningar.“, 81-2.

Strictly speaking, there are only three riddles in the contest that deal with mythology, including the last neck-riddle. One example is Riddle 32:

„Hverir eru þeir þegnar,
er ríða þingi at
sáttir allir saman;
lýða sína
senda þeir lǫnd yfir
at byggja bólstaði?
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu!“ (St. 55)

“What thanes are they | to the thing riding, | all at one together; | across
the lands | their liegemen sending | seeking a place to settle? | This riddle
ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

According to Heiðrekr, these are “Ítrekr and Andaðr, sitting at their chequerboard”¹⁰³. Ítrekr could be one of the many names of Óðinn, since the Æsir are referred to as Ítreksjóð in *Skáldskaparmál* (St. 429), while Andaðr is listed among the names of giants in the same work (St. 420) (Burrows 2014, 122). The game alluded to here might be the *hnefatafl*, a sort of chess which might have been “representing a conflict between the gods and the giants” (Tolkien 1960, 37n6).

Another riddle dealing with mythology is the penultimate in all redactions and its solution is Óðinn riding his horse Sleipnir:

„Hverir eru þri tveir,
er tíu hafa fœtr,
augu þrjú
ok einn hala?
Heiðrekr konungr,
huggðu at gátu!“ (St. 72)

“Who are those twain | that on ten feet run, | three their eyes are | but
only one tail? | This riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

To understand this riddle, one must be aware of the fact that Sleipnir has eight-legs, being the supernatural offspring of Loki in the form of a mare, and that Óðinn sacrificed one of his eyes to gain knowledge from the well of Mímir. Heiðrekr is able to solve the riddle, but he once again criticises Gestumblindi for his choice in subject matter: “you are really

¹⁰³ „þat er Ítrekr ok Andaðr, er þeir sitja at tafli sínu.“, 37

making a game of it now, when you find in your deliveries to me those wonders which happened in ancient times”¹⁰⁴ (Burrows 2014, 122). It is possible that this remark reflects the fact that at the time of the composition of this passage riddles about mythology or mythology in general were considered “outmoded” (Ellis Davidson 1985, 31).

Nonetheless, even in the riddles not explicitly dealing with mythology, there are some quite oblique allusions to it which serve as clues for the solution of the riddles. For example, Riddle 15 about the sun from the *H*-redaction reads like this:

„Hvat er þat undra,
er ek úti sá
fyrir döglinga durum;
lýðum lýsir,
en loga gleypir,
ok keppask um þat vargar ávalt?
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu!“ (St. *H* 15)

“What strange marvel | did I see without, | before the great one’s gate; |
the giver of light, | but engulfer of flame, | for which wolves unceasing
strive? | This riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

In the solution, King Heiðrekr correctly identifies the wolves as Sköll and Hati, which were believed to chase the sun and the moon, mentioned also in *Grímnismál* (St. 39) and *Gylfaginning* (14) (Burrows 2014, 121). The mythological references also become part of Gestumblindi’s strategy to deceive Heiðrekr by describing normal objects or animals in wondrous terms: for example, in Riddle 8, Gestumblindi describes the leek as a “wonder” with “its head turning | to Hel downward, | but its feet ever seek the sun?”¹⁰⁵ (Burrows 2014, 123).

Knowledge of mythology is also necessary to understand Gestumblindi’s wave-riddles (21, 22, 23, 24). These riddles occur one after the other in all redactions, which in the narration can be read as an attempt at surprising king Heiðrekr by asking about the same thing more than once. The waves are referred to as women or maidens with pale hair and white hoods, who wander “by their father unceasing sought” (*at forvitni fǫður*) and have caused the deaths of many men. Once more, one must turn to mythology to interpret these clues correctly: in *Skáldskaparmál* (36, 95) it is said that the sea creature *Ægir* (whose

¹⁰⁴ „Margs freistar þú nú, er þú finnr þau rök til framburðar við mik, er forðum váru“, Icelandic text quoted and translated by Burrows (2014, 122).

¹⁰⁵ *hofði sínu vísar | á helvega, | en fótum til sólar snýr.*, St. 50.

name literally means “sea” or “ocean”) had nine daughters all with names referring to or literally meaning “waves” (e.g. Bylgja and Bára). Heiðrekr is able to pick up on these references because in the solutions he calls the waves *Hlés brúðir* (“maids of Hlér” one of Ægir’s names) or *Ægirs ekkjur* (“Ægir’s women”). Moreover, each time the king uses a different word for wave: *bylgjur* for Riddle 21, *ǫldur* for Riddle 23 and *bárur* for Riddle 24 (Burrows 2013, 199). Like in *Alvíssmál*, the knowledge of poetical synonyms and periphrases becomes a way to measure the contestants’ wisdom.

A similar appreciation of world-play is found in Riddle 35:

„Sat ek á segli,
sá ek dauða menn
blóðshol bera
í bǫrk viðar.
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu.“ (St. 71)

“On a sail I sat | and saw dead men | bearing a blood-vein | to the bark
of a tree. | This riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

The solution is that the speaker was sitting on a wall while he saw a falcon carrying a dead duck on a cliff. This is an *ófljost*, “overtly clear”, a quite complicated poetic form in which the intended referent is replaced by a homonym and then replaced again by a synonym or a circumlocution (Tolkien 1960, 43n3). Here, the substitutions work like this:

veggr (wall) → *veggr* (sail) → *segl* (sail)

valr (falcon) → *valr* (the slain) → *dauðir men* (dead men)

æðr (duck) → *æðr* (vein) → *blóðshol* (blood-cavity)

Admittedly, the last one seems a bit far-fetched, while no convincing explanation has been found for *í bǫrk viðar* (Tolkien 1960, 43n3-6, 44n1).

Meanwhile, like in the *mannjafnaðr* of *Örvar-Odds saga*, the real identity of Gestumblindi is betrayed by some of his riddles, which in redactions *RU* starts to happen near the end of the contest. The first clue comes from Riddle 12 about the pregnant sow, which is much later in the *RU* versions and reads like this:

„Hvat er þat undra,
er ek úti sá
fyrir Dellings durum;
tíu hefir tungur,

tuttugu augu,
fjóra tigu fóta,
fram líðr sú vættr?
Heiðrekr konungr,
hyggðu at gátu!“ (St. 69)

“What strange marvel | did I see without, | in front of Delling’s door; |
ten its tongues are | and twenty its eyes, | with forty feet | fares that
creature? | This riddle ponder, | O prince Heiðrekr!”

This time, Heiðrekr is thoroughly impressed by Gestumblindi’s ability, which is in itself a small victory, but the answer requires evidence, so he orders his servants to verify:

Konungr mælti þá, „Ef þú er sá Gestumblindi, sem ek hugða, þá eru
vittrari en ek ætlaða; en frá gyltinni segir þú nú úti í gardöinum.“
Þá lét konungr drepa gyltina, ok hafði hon níu grísi, sem
Gestumblindi sagði. Nú grunar konung, hver maðrinn mun vera.
(42)

“If you are the Gestumblindi I took you for,” said the king then, “you are
cleverer than I thought. You are speaking now of the sow out in the yard.”
Then the king had the sow killed, and it had nine piglets inside it, as
Gestumblindi had said. The king now began to suspect who this man must
be. (43)

The brief remark by the narrator voices the king’s suspicions and it helps building suspense as the contest comes to an end. In redaction *R*, this riddle is followed by an enigmatic description of a cow, the *ófljost* Riddle 35 and the question about Óðinn riding Sleipnir, while version *U* jumps immediately to the latter. From a dramatic point of view, the disposition in version *H* makes less sense, because Heiðrekr starts to suspect about his adversary quite soon in the contest, yet he waits until the end to have the confirmation and is still enraged when he realises that Gestumblindi is in fact Óðinn. In *RU* his annoyance is perhaps more justified, since it has taken him the whole contest to discover the real identity of his adversary. Anyway, in all redactions the riddle that finally betrays Óðinn is:

„Hvat mælti Óðinn
í eyra Baldri,
áðr hann væru á bal hafðr?“ (St. 73)

“What said Óðinn | in the ear of Balder, | before he was borne to the
fire?”

The similarity between the faux Riddle 37 and the final question Óðinn poses in *Vafþrúðnismál* is self-evident, although the wording is not quite the same (*Hvat mælti Óðinn, | áðr á bál stigi, | sialfr í eyra syni?*). It is possible that the composer of the *Heiðreksgátur* chose this riddle because at the time it was the unanswerable question *par excellence*, or maybe because it had become part of Óðinn's image (Tolkien 1960, xx, Larrington 2014, 36). Still, given the structural parallels between *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Alvíssmál* and *Heiðreksgátur* it is also possible that some kind of trickery was expected to conclude these wisdom-contests anyway. However, the neck riddle causes Heiðrekr to lash out at Óðinn, a frustrated reaction that is in striking contrast with the subdued acceptance of defeat by Vafþrúðnir, but which is in line with the king's troublesome character showcased throughout the saga.

To sum up, the riddle-contest in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* is an extraordinary battle of wits in which the challenger, Gestumblindi, uses a variety of strategies to defeat king Heiðrekr. In the course of the contest, both participants display to have a thorough knowledge of poetic language and metrics, the human and natural world and mythological lore. A comparison between the *Heiðreksgátur* on one hand, and eddic wisdom contests on the other, shows that these were the areas in which wisdom was measured, other than some significant structural parallels. It is possible, however, to notice the distance between *Heiðreks saga* and the *Poetic Edda* in the way in which mythology is dismissed as "ancient".

Conclusion

Research in the field of verbal duels has tried to classify Norse verbal duels in terms of “seriousness”, and much has been debated about the difference between the *senna* and the *mannjafnaðr*. The similarities between the two are significant, including the type of language used and the kind of moral values that transpire from the exchanges. This has led many to conclude that they could be brought together under the term “flyting”, a cross-cultural category that has representatives within and without the Germanic world. A close analysis of Norse verbal duels, however, shows that the *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* are two quite different speech acts: the first is an exchange of insults in which a champion of “normal” society aims at verbally (and sometimes physically) destroy an adversary perceived as marginal, different, monstrous; the second measures the relative worth of two or more men based on their physical prowess and military success.

The verbal duels in *Ketils saga hængs* and *Örvar-Odds saga* display exactly these characteristics. In *Ketils saga*, the hero enters two *sennur* with two adversaries who are mainly characterised for their “otherness”, because of their ethnicity, gender and ties with the supernatural. Both *sennur* take place in the wild, in a forest or while sailing off coast, and the participants exchange insults about their physical appearance, social status, wealth, and, most importantly, cowardice and perversion. Meanwhile, in *Örvar-Odds saga*, the protagonist Oddr, reduced to live as a nameless beggar, climbs the ladder of a male-centred society thanks to his victory in a *mannjafnaðr*, during which he is able to demonstrate his superiority by eloquently recalling his past heroic exploits. His adversaries are two royal retainers who are accused to have grown accustomed to a comfortable lifestyle at court and not partaking in Viking expeditions or quests in service of their king. The setting of this *mannjafnaðr* is the king’s hall, but the fact that the competition is framed as a drinking contest allows the audience to hear about and see Oddr’s superiority showcased in his resistance to alcohol.

Another type of verbal duel that is well represented in Norse literature is the wisdom contest. The fact that the discussion of Norse verbal duels has concentrated so much on proving the difference between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*, has often prevented to examine the wisdom contest in relation to them. By widening the discussion beyond the narrow limits of “flyting”, it is possible to trace the similarities between wisdom contest, *senna* and *mannjafnaðr*. Like the *senna*, the wisdom contest deals with the dangers of facing a supernatural “other” especially if it is to obtain forbidden knowledge. Moreover, like the

mannjafnaðr, the wisdom contest is a “comparison of men”, only in the latter the yardstick is intellectual ability, which the participants are boasting and showcasing at the same time. In most of the wisdom contests in Old Norse literature, the questions posed by the contestants to challenge one another are rather direct, but there are some instances in which they take the form of riddles. In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, the verbal trickery employed in the riddle contest relies on a thorough knowledge of the natural world, a confident usage of *heiti* and *kenningar* and a certain familiarity with mythology, all of which are areas in which the participants to the wisdom contests excel.

A common trait of all verbal duels in the sagas discussed here is the interplay between prose and poetry. In all three sagas, the verbal duels are mainly in poetry, either in *fornyrðislag* or *ljóðaháttr* metres, and they form a cohesive unit inside the sagas: this does not happen in verbal duels in other saga genres (*Íslendingasögur* or *konungasögur*), where they are always in prose. In the *fornaldarsögur* there is usually a sort of “division of labour” between the prose, which advances the narration, and the poetry, which conveys the most dramatic expressions of the characters’ voices. The verbal duels in *fornaldarsögur* do both things: they advance the narration while giving space to the participants to express themselves. For example, the second *senna* of *Ketils saga* ensues because Ketill is forced to fish far from Hrafnista due to a famine: the contest shows Ketill in a rare moment of self-doubt as he remembers that if he fails to return with food, his island will starve. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, the *mannjafnaðr* is an occasion for Oddr to reminisce about his deeds and misfortunes, especially the death of so many of his companions. In the end, victory allows him to rank and status at king Herraud’s court. Conversely, in the riddle-contest in *Heiðrekr saga* king Heiðrekr’s personality shines through his remarks in prose.

The interplay between prose and poetry in verbal duels also gives some insight in the process of composition of the sagas. For example, in *Ketils saga*, the use of prose in the second *senna* probably reflects the writer’s attempt to avoid repetitions, given that another *senna* occurs a few chapters earlier in the saga. In *Heiðreks saga*, the solutions are in prose probably because the riddles were originally gathered from different sources. A similar usage of prose is made in the *mannjafnaðr* of *Örvar-Odds saga*, which allows for the identification of the audience with the characters described in the sagas. This is possible because, even though the original writers may not have been entirely aware of

this, verbal duels are semi-independent units, whose structure can be expanded or shrunk to adapt the needs of the composer.

Other than reiterate the “special relationship” *fornaldarsögur* enjoy with eddic poetry and display a use of prosimetrum unique to the genre, the verbal duels give some insight in the way medieval Icelanders used the construction of the past in *fornaldarsögur* to elaborate on concepts such as otherness, manliness, honour, wisdom and mythology.

In *Ketils saga*, Gusir represents a cultural and ethnic “other” connected with paganism and magic, which tries to assert his superiority on the Norwegian hero. It is possible that the prejudice was imported to Iceland from mainland Scandinavia, but its presence in saga literature suggests that it was still relevant to understand diversity. Meanwhile, the figure of Forað embodies tensions around gender roles and sexual aggression, but she also represents a very direct threat to a starving human community. In this way, she gives shape to otherwise uncontrollable and unknowable forces, which are promptly defeated by the hero Ketill via his verbally and physically destroying of Forað. As it has been discussed in Chapter III, *sennur* also deal with the theme of “the monstrous within”. In *Ketils saga*, this concept is addressed by having Ketill’s adversaries being uncannily familiar with the hero’s life and by implying that the protagonist shares some links with the supernatural.

The *mannjafnaðr* in *Örvar-Odds saga* conveys an ideal of personal worth and male sexual identity based on military skills, physical prowess and companionship among peers. The comfortable lifestyle of royal retainers is identified as damaging for these virtues, since it prevents men to embark in heroic expeditions across the world. By the end of the *mannjafnaðr*, however, this discourse seems to be slightly bent in favour of monarchic authority, probably to harmonise this episode with the overarching narrative. Indeed, *Örvar-Odds saga* follows the evolution of the hero from independent Viking raider, to royal retainer and king, mirroring a similar socio-political transition into monarchic rule that was under way when the first redaction of the saga appeared. Therefore, the writer was probably mediating between an ancient ideal of manliness that was still appreciated and a new favourable sentiment towards courtly life and monarchy spreading in some aristocratic circles.

As for the views on wisdom, it is clear from *Heiðreks saga* that a thorough knowledge of the (Scandinavian) natural world and poetic language were considered the basic criteria for “the wise”. In the riddle-contest, mythology is relatively marginal, but still necessary

to decipher some of the clues and, within the narration, it allows Heiðrekr to (tardively) recognise his adversary as Óðinn. However, the king's remarks expressed in prose demonstrate how mythological lore was perceived in medieval Iceland as “outmoded”, if not downright “ancient”, whereas proficiency in the use of *heiti* and *kenningar* was still very much appreciated.

Further research in this field could probably expand this analysis to other genres of sagas, something this dissertation has only touched upon, while accounting for transmission history and influences of foreign literatures, which in turn may help to further delineate generic distinctions in saga literature.

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