## Thor's Duel with Hrungnir

f the few myths known with certainty to have decorated shields or chieftain's halls, two attach to Thor, and both recount his fights with monsters. Bragi the Old's Ragnarsdrápa and Úlfr Uggason's Húsdrápa have the story of his encounter with the Midgard serpent, and Þjóðólfr of Hvin's *Haustlong* has a slightly lengthier account of his combat with Hrungnir. The latter found its way into manuscripts of the Edda of Snorri Sturluson (R, T, and W, but not U), where it is arranged as seven stanzas (numbers 14-20 in the standard editions of the poem) cited just after the long prose account of the myth in Skáldskaparmál. Þjóðólfr imparts the following information. It can be seen on the shield how the terror of the jotnar visited Jotunheimar; Thor traveled to the battle; the earth shook beneath him; and Thor became swollen with rage. The air flamed and the earth was beaten with storms as the goats pulled Thor along (Svolnis ekkja was near breaking). Thor did not spare the enemy of mankind; the mountains shook and the cliffs broke apart; heaven burned; the giant prepared himself for a powerful defense when he saw his slayer ready for battle. The gleaming shield flew quickly under the giant's feet; the gods [bond] caused it, the (imun) dísir willed it to be so; the giant did not have to wait long for a hard blow from Thor. Thor caused the giant to fall on the shield-island; there the giant fell before the sharp hammer, and Thor overcame the enemy. And the giant's hard, broken hone went flying at Thor and into his head and stayed there, covered with his blood, until the woman sang it out of Thor's head.

How many scenes adorned the shield is unclear. Certainly Thor's journey to meet the giant was depicted, with its many cosmic disruptions. Then the high point of the combat was presented, as Thor bashed the giant's head and the screaming hone was planted in his own head. Whether the removal of the hone was actually on the shield or is just alluded to by the poet cannot be known, but since thirteen stanzas have been retained describing Thor's fight with the Midgard serpent against the seven stanzas on the Hrungnir battle, it seems likely that not all of what *Haustlong* had to say about this battle and its aftermath found its way onto vellum, and perhaps we are entitled to imagine a scene with the woman singing over Thor.

Compared to Snorri's account, Þjóðólfr's places far more emphasis on Thor's journey to Grjótúnagarðar and the noise and flames that accompany it. The journey is mentioned in three of the seven extant stanzas and thus seems to have occupied the poet nearly as much as the combat itself. It is easy to detect a cosmic dimension to this journey: the language of stanza 14, "ok dunði Mána vegr und hónum" [and the way of the moon or night sky thundered beneath him] suggests that he is traveling high in the celestial realm, and the next two stanzas allude to the creation of the cosmos and its destruction. Stanza 15 is particularly cosmic and deserves to be quoted in full.

Knóttu oll — en Ullar endilóg fyr mági grund vas grápi hrundin — ginnunga vé brinna, þás hofregin hafrar hógreiðar fram drógu — seðr gekk Svolnis ekkja sundr — at Hrungnis fundi. 1

[All the holy places of mounds (air) were able to burn — and the earth was pushed aside with hail for the kinsman of Ullr, when the goats of the light carriage pulled the temple god forward to the meeting with Hrungnir, and the woman of Svolnir quickly broke apart.]

In this stanza, the references to the earth echo the cosmogony of the early stanzas of *Voluspá* in their use of the words *ginnunga* (*Voluspá* 3.7: "gap var ginnunga") and grund (Voluspá 4.7-8: "þá var grund gróin/grænom lauki"). However, what we see here is not the creation of the cosmos but something very like its end, in flames (Voluspá 57.7-8: "leicr hár hiti/við himin siálfan") and storms (Voluspá 41.7: "veðr oll válynd"). For this reason the last clause of the second helming is of particular interest. Since Svolnir is an Odin-name, the kenning Svolnis ekkja must refer to earth — and perhaps the base word, with its etymological sense of "unattached woman" (Jónsson 1931b, 106, s.v. "ekkja") may refer to the unconsecrated nature of the relationship between Odin and Jorð. In any case, the kenning succeeds in drawing together earth's role as the consort of Odin and the mother of the awesome Thor, setting forth on this journey to battle. Finnur Jónsson's translation in Skjaldedigtning, however, seems unnecessarily literal: "Odins enke var nærved at briste" (1912–15, B1:17). Better is his rendering in Lexicon poeticum (Jónsson 1931b, 546, s.v. "sundr"): "jord var nær ved at rævne." Surely the earth was in fact cracking, as the other stanzas note repeatedly, in accord with Voluspá 52.5: "griótbjorg gnata" (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 12).

The mix of motifs from cosmogony and Ragnarok continues in stanza 16. When rocks and mountains break there, it is the "upphiminn" that burns, and this

<sup>1.</sup> Cf. Jónsson 1912–15, B1:17; here I follow the reading of Ernst Albin Kock (1923, art. 140; 1926–29, art. 1812) in reducing to two the number of clause elements in the first line and retaining manuscript *hofregin* in line 5.

term calls on the widespread Germanic earth-heaven formula that accompanies both the creation and the destruction of the cosmos (Lönnroth 1981). This mix encapsulates in a sense the entire mythology: the tension between the competing groups of æsir and jotnar that brought the cosmos into being will also destroy it. But in this specific case, it suggests the cosmic nature of Thor's duel with Hrungnir. Such a cosmic sense would be implicit if Thor's daughter had been carried off by the giant, since ordinarily the flow of women goes only in the opposite direction (Ross 1994a), and it is explicit in the version in *Snorra Edda*, according to which the most powerful beings from each of the groups are to meet in formal combat.

It is in this light that one should understand the kennings for Thor in these stanzas, which turn so frequently on his kinship relations: "Jarðar sunr" [son of Jorð], "Meila blóði" [brother of Meili], "Ullar mágr" [male affinal kin of Ullr], "Baldrs barmi" [Baldr's brother], "Óðins búrr" [Odin's son]. Taken together, these kennings place Thor in the center of a kinship net: he is son, brother, and fatherin-law. All that is missing is a role as father, which would be implicit if the motivation for the journey and duel were the kidnapping of his daughter. One might also imagine a paternal role in connection with the young Þjálfi in Snorri's version.

In contrast to Þjóðólfr, Snorri makes relatively little of Thor's journey to Grjótúnagarðar. Indeed, he also describes Hrungnir's journey.

Fór þá Hrungnir braut leið sína ok hleypti ákaflega, þar til er hann kom í Jotunheima, ok var ferð hans allfræg með jotnum ok þat, at stefnulag var komit á með þeim Þór. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 102.8–10)

[Then Hrungnir went his way and galloped impetuously until he came into Jotunheimar, and his journey was very renowned among the jotnar as was the arrangement of a duel between him and Thor.]

Hrungnir's furious galloping threatens initially to occupy the "travel slot" in the structure of the narrative that Thor's terrifying ride takes in Þjóðólfr's *Haustlong*. In a sense, Snorri's version has shifted a great deal of the point of view to that of the jotnar. This shifted point of view also applies to the few words that Snorri actually devotes to Thor's journey. These words occur after Þjálfi has tricked the giant into standing on his shield.<sup>2</sup>

Pví næst sá hann eldingar ok heyrði þrumur stórar; sá hann þá Þór í ásamóði, fór hann ákaflega ok reiddi hamarinn (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 103.5–6)

[Next he saw fires and heard huge rumblings; he saw Thor in divine form, he was traveling swiftly and stretched out the hammer]

Besides the greater emphasis on Thor's journey, the version in *Haustlong* lacks numerous elements found in *Snorra Edda*. The most important of these are the motivation for the combat in the first place and the presence of Þjálfi and

<sup>2.</sup> The location of this description of the terrors of Thor's journey to Jotunheimar is perhaps best explained as the result of the juxtaposition of travel and duel in Þjóðólfr's version.

Mǫkkurkálfi, the seconds in the duel. The element of the motivation may once have been on the shield and in the poem, but we cannot express any confidence about what such a scene might have portrayed. Hrungnir drunk in Valhǫll, boasting of the evils he plans as Thor looks on helplessly, bound by the sanctuary the æsir have granted the giant? Or Hrungnir abducting Thor's daughter Þrúðr, as Bragi's use of the kenning "blað ilja Þrúðar þjófs" [leaf of the soles of the thief of Þrúðr] in *Ragnarsdrápa* 1 appears to suggest? Clunies Ross (1994b) makes a strong case for the latter.

It is, however, difficult to believe that Þjálfi and Mokkurkálfi were on the shield, since the extant stanzas tell about the combat without mentioning them. Indeed, where Snorri assigns to Þjálfi the credit for getting Hrungnir to stand on his shield and thus leave himself open to a hammer blow, Þjóðólfr seems to regard it as something carried out by the gods as a whole [bond ollu bví], according to the will of the dísir [vildu svá dísir]. Thus to Þjóðólfr, apparently, the action and will of the entire community of gods were necessary for Thor to overcome Hrungnir.<sup>4</sup> And clearly there is no room here for the initiatory pattern that Dumézil (e.g., 1973, 68-71) argued informed the relationship between Thor and Þjálfi and the latter's slaying of the dummy Mokkurkálfi. Dumézil's hypothesis had been launched as early as in the 1939 first edition of his *Dieux des Germains* and has remained influential, not least perhaps because it was endorsed by de Vries (1970, 2:136–37). It stayed in the wider arena of Indo-European scholarship, too; Bruce Lincoln, for example, notes: "The initiatory combat with a tripart dummy is also attested among the Germans in the account of the 'combat' between Þórr's servant Þjalfi and the stone image of the giant Hrungnir found in Skaldskaparmal 59" (1981, 128 n111), which gives a rather unusual summary of Snorri's plot. However, it is important to note that this hypothesis requires that Snorri's version of the story have a claim to age equal to that of *Haustlong*.

Just as the verses about Thor's encounter with the Midgard serpent focus the moment when the two adversaries lock eyes, so these verses seem to focus the moment when the weapons are aloft. Hrungnir did not long await the blow of the hammer (stanza 19), but his hone was flying, presumably simultaneously, into the head of Thor (stanza 20). To judge from Snorri and the other evidence, Hrungnir was standing on his shield at the time. The poem itself is somewhat equivocal on this point. Stanza 17 has the "randa íss" ("folr randa íss" according to Finnur Jónsson) flow under Hrungnir's soles, and the kenning is not fully satisfying, since the base word "ice" ordinarily is used of swords, and the modifier "of the edge" uses a word (*rond*) which itself is often a metonym for "shield." What makes "shield"

<sup>3.</sup> Here again I follow Kock (1923, art. 142), who rejects Finnur Jónsson's (1912–15, B1:17–18) creation of the compound *imun-dísir* 'battle-dísir' across several lines and instead associates *imun*- with the immediately following word to create an adjective *imunfolr* 'battle-bright'.

<sup>4.</sup> De Vries (1970, 2:2) throws out the idea that in this stanza, the terms *bond* and *dísir* may refer generally to divine beings, "die nicht gerade Götter sein müssen." The idea is not convincing.

plausible here is the use of metaphoric consonance: if this particular ice flows, it is more likely to be an ice floe or sheet of ice than an icicle. *Rond* is also the modifier in the kenning making up the other apparent reference to the shield, in the following stanza: Thor felled Hrungnir "á randar holmi" [on the island of the shield-edge] (*Haustlong* 18.4; Jónsson 1912–15, B1:18). "Island" is certainly a reasonable base word for something shaped like a shield, and this stanza also verifies the imagery of the ice in the last shield, as a floating object.

The external evidence is also somewhat equivocal. That what Hrungnir stood on was his shield is verified by the kenning in the opening stanza of Bragi's Ragnarsdrápa mentioned above, "blað ilja Þrúðar þjófs," which can hardly refer to anything but the shield he is praising and describing. Another apparent shield kenning is "stallr Hrungnis fóta" [stand of the feet of Hrungnir], which is found in Kormákr Ogmundarson's lausavísa 14 and dates from the second half of the tenth century if genuine. The problem is not directly with its authenticity, however, but rather with its fit with the preceding prose. At the point in the saga when the two sons of the sorcerer Pórveig have just entered the story (chap. 5 in the standard editions), Þorkell and his follower Narfi set up a trap for Kormákr at Tunga, with a scythe on one side of the door and a drawn sword on the other. As Kormákr enters the door, the scythe falls and cuts a chink out of the sword (Sveinsson 1939, 218). Porkell hustles his daughter out a back door as Kormákr enters and to his amazement sees the two brothers. He then recites the verse in question, whose first helming says that an "engis sax" [sword of the meadow] hit the "stallr Hrungnis fóta." If we are to follow the saga prose, then, the seat of Hrungnir's feet was a sword. The gloss "shield" can only be rehabilitated through appeal to metaphor (the sword shielded Kormákr from the scythe) or to the notorious and frequent misunderstanding of the verses revealed by the author of Kormáks saga.

From the point of view of early myth it hardly matters whether Hrungnir stood on his shield or on his otherwise unknown sword. In either case the point would seem to be that through the working and will of the community of the æsir, he misused ordinary weaponry — that is, the cultural implements of the society that consumed the myth. Either a shield or a sword would be held up in the air with the hands, not stood upon with the feet. Like the supernatural beings of most mythologies, Hrungnir is culturally clueless. For one reason or another, he cannot properly use the culture's tools, any more than he can adhere to its other norms.

Clearly Bragi understood Hrungnir's misused tool as a shield, and we can hardly go wrong in following his lead, not to mention that of Snorri. It is, however, interesting and in my view significant that Þjóðólfr chose to use island imagery about the weapon on which Hrungnir stood, not just once but twice, and not just metaphorically (flowing ice in a river) but also concretely (the island of the shield edge). Or did he have something else in mind with the second kenning? If

<sup>5.</sup> So all editors, following the emendation proposed by Ólsen (1888, 12–13) from MS *engi sar* or *eingiss ser* (Jónsson 1912–15, A1:82).

we pursue for a moment the logic of Hrungnir standing on his sword and being struck down by Thor, the "island of the shield edge" might be nothing more than the place of battle, and the place of battle for single combat was according to such later sources as *Kormáks saga* itself a specially marked-off space to which two adversaries repaired for a duel, an *einvígi* 'single combat' or *hólmganga* or literally "going onto an island."

The problem with this reading remains the chronological precedence of Bragi over Pjóðólfr, which puts Hrungnir's shield firmly under his feet a generation or so before Pjóðólfr was born. This chronological precedence may make an uncharacteristic shield out of the ice in *Haustlong* 14, but it does little to unseat the possibility of word play in the semantic field of the duel in stanza 15. "The island of the shield-edge," in short, may be a pun. Hrungnir stood on his shield, and the confined space there was similar to the confined space on which the contestants stood when they had formal single combat. Olav Bø (1969) argued that the term *hólmganga* was a specifically west Scandinavian form that developed during the late Viking Age alongside the older pan-Scandinavian form *einvígi*. If so, Þjóðólfr drew on current linguistic fashion.

The version in *Skáldskaparmál* contains far more material than just the duel, and the whole must be taken together to reach any kind of full understanding of the story. The drama has four scenes: Odin's encounter with Hrungnir, Hrungnir's visit to Valhǫll, the duel (including Magni's freeing of Thor from the giant's leg), and Gróa's attempted removal of the hone from Thor's head.

As Snorri tells it, this is a myth of both Odin and Thor:

Nú skal enn segja dæmi, af hverju þær kenningar eru, er nú váru ritaðar, er áðr váru eigi dæmi til sǫgð, svá sem Bragi sagði Ægi, at Þórr var farinn í Austrvega at berja trǫll, en Óðinn reið Sleipni í Jǫtunheima ok kom til þess jǫtuns, er Hrungnir hét. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 100.18–22)

[Now some tales will be recounted from which those kennings which were just cited derive, for which no stories were previously told, as when Bragi told Ægir, that Thor had traveled to the east to kill trolls, and Odin rode Sleipnir into Jotunheimar and came to that jotunn who was called Hrungnir.]

As we know from such sources as *Hárbarðsljóð*, the journeys and actions of these two major deities can be construed as having occurred simultaneously, and they can further be contrasted in ways that bring out their characteristics and domains. The typical nature of Thor's journey is immediately apparent, but what of Odin's? Although he often wanders, riding on Sleipnir is not very usual. He does so on a journey to Hel in *Baldrs draumar* 2, and we may presume that it is Sleipnir that he rides to Baldr's funeral according to Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa*, stanza 8; since Hermóðr too rides off to Hel on Sleipnir according to *Gylfaginning*, there may be a special connection with Baldr, and that connection would appear to have to do with the role of the horse in general in the cult of the dead (Gjessing 1943). At the same time, however, it must be pointed out that both Odin's and Hermóðr's jour-

neys to Hel are motivated by a quest for knowledge of the future and involve verbal exchanges with members of the otherworld community. What transpires between Odin and Hrungnir also takes the form of a verbal exchange, and even if it appears to be no more than idle boasting about the quality of their horses, Odin's willingness to bet his head — i.e., his life — indicates the cosmic nature of the exchange. Here comparison is instructive with *Vafþrúðnismál*, where the bet is explicit, and with *Grímnismál*, where it is implicit. In those cases what is disputed is the supremacy of Odin's wisdom, but if we follow the logic of the story, Odin cannot live if Sleipnir is not the best of horses (literally, if he is not better than all the horses in Jotunheimar), and the journey tests that premise, perhaps even, we may infer, deliberately, since spontaneous behavior is hardly characteristic of Odin. In other words, Odin's journey seeks both to acquire wisdom and to affirm it, in this case wisdom concerning the special status of Sleipnir among horses.

In the verbal exchange in Jotunheimar between Odin and Hrungnir it is, curiously, Hrungnir who has the last word.

en hafa lézt hann mundu miklu stórfetaðra hest, sá heitir Gullfaxi. Hrungnir varð reiðr ok hleypr upp á hest sinn ok hleypir eptir honum ok hyggr at launa honum ofrmæli. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 101.2–4)

[but he (Hrungnir) said he had a much more long-striding horse, the one called Gullfaxi. Hrungnir grew angry and jumps on his horse and gallops after him and intends to repay him for his arrogant speech.]

Gullfaxi is a strange name for a jotunn's horse, since the æsir control gold and the prefix gull[in]- ordinarily attaches to animals in their domain: Gulltoppr (Heimdallr's horse), Gullinborsti (Freyr's boar), Gullintanni (one of Heimdallr's names). Indeed, as Hrungnir notices, Odin has arrived in Jotunheimar wearing a gold helmet.<sup>6</sup> We should probably assume that one of the legitimate functions of the entire Hrungnir narrative in Skáldskaparmál is to move this horse from the jotnar to the æsir, where indeed the so-called Porgrímshula places it: "Gollfaxi ok Jór með goðum" (Jónsson 1912–15, B1:656). The mechanism for this movement appears to be Hrungnir's forfeiture of his property as the loser of the duel with Thor, which permits Thor to award it to Magni as a reward for lifting the giant's leg off him. Odin's strange admonition to Thor, that he did wrong to give the good horse to one born of a giantess rather than to his own father, returns Odin to the story and returns the story to the subject of Odin's original verbal encounter (duel?) with Hrungnir: was Gullfaxi the equal of Sleipnir? From this perspective Odin's visit to Jotunheimar and exchange with Hrungnir takes on the form of a journey of acquisition.

<sup>6. &</sup>quot;Þá spyrr Hrungnir, hvat manna sá er með gullhjálminn, er ríðr lopt ok log" [Then Hrungnir asks what kind of man this is with the golden helmet who rides the air and sea] (Jónsson 1931a, 100.22–23). The last clause should perhaps be read in light of the description of the journey that Haddingus takes on the horse of the one-eyed stranger who helps him in Book 1 of *Gesta Danorum*.

The verbal exchange between Hrungnir and Odin is soon transformed into a test of the speed of their two horses. This may look rather like the displaced contests of Thor's companions in the long narrative of Thor's visit to Útgarðaloki, but it is important that the head of the gods should have the best of horses; indeed, the gods should and must have the best of everything that can be compared if they are to maintain their hierarchical position above the jotnar. Here it is productive to recall the use of Sleipnir I mentioned above, as a means of journeying to gather information, especially in connection with Baldr's death. As the facilitator of such information-gathering, Sleipnir must be superior to any jotunn horse.

The race is, however, very close. Odin on Sleipnir is faster, but not fast enough to keep the giant out of Ásgarðr. When Hrungnir enters Ásgarðr, he uses Thor's drinking vessels, but what he has really done is change places with Odin; that is, he has arrived (on a very fine horse, no less) in the hall of the chieftain of the opposing tribe, and, after being given an alcoholic beverage, he is prepared to spout wisdom. When Odin plays this role, his wisdom is ordinarily cosmological (so Grímnismál) or cosmogonic and ultimately oriented toward the end of the cosmos as well (so Vafþrúðnismál). Hrungnir's view of the future is naturally different from that of the æsir, but even a cursory inspection shows that it mirrors the views, desires, and goals of his adversaries. He will take Valholl out to Jotunheimar (thus making the gathering place of the gods that of the giants); he will attack Ásgarðr and kill all the gods (just as Thor attacks trolls and giants in their homelands); he will carry off with him Freyja and Sif (just as Odin slept with various giant girls and Freyr arranged a liaison with Gerðr). When only Freyja dares to pour him more to drink, one wonders whether that is because she, like Odin, can see the future. The result of this final drink is a threat to drink up all the beer of the æsir, which is serious not only because it would deprive them of the means for hospitality but also because of the close relationship between alcohol and the wisdom of Odin, who after all lived on wine alone.

Hrungnir's role as verbal dueler continues even after Thor arrives, for it is the giant and not any of the æsir who answers Thor's angry questions about what is going on. Indeed, Thor has couched his question in language that reinforces the notion of a verbal encounter, for he asks why "hundvísir jǫtnar" should be drinking there. The combination of the adjective -víss and the drinking again recalls Odinic wisdom, although of course the term hundvíss has nasty connotations; cf. Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar 25, which contains a curse like many of those in Skírnismál: a woman will have no better than a hundvíss jǫtunn as a husband. In any case, Hrungnir's wisdom extends to extricating himself from Thor's threats and arranging instead a formal duel with Thor.

Pá svarar Hrungnir ok sér ekki vinaraugum til Þórs, sagði, at Óðinn bauð honum til drykkju ok hann var á hans griðum. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 101.19–21)

<sup>7.</sup> Hrungnir is indeed so wise that he appears to have read Dumézil and made a trifunctional threat; or perhaps he has just had too much to drink.

[Then Hrungnir answers and glares angrily at Thor; he said that Odin invited him to drink and that he had his surety.]

With this response, Hrungnir places himself firmly, as I have said, in the position in mythological narrative usually reserved for Odin: the stranger who arrives from outside and is given a drink. What ordinarily follows, of course, is a contest of wisdom in which the stranger triumphs. Besides this inversion of the usual Odinic pattern, however, Snorri's presentation of the scene also makes it clear that the present moment involves a struggle between Hrungnir and Thor. This he does with the words "ok sér ekki vinaraugum," which ought to conjure up for anyone familiar with stock mythological motifs the moment when Thor and the Midgard serpent lock glances when Thor fishes him up.

In the verbal duel with Thor, Hrungnir parries Thor's verbal thrusts, and Snorri gives Hrungnir the last utterance, presenting Thor's response in indirect discourse.

"En ef ek hefða hér vápn mín, þá skyldu vit nú reyna hólmgonguna, en at oðrum kosti legg ek þér við níðingsskap, ef þú vill drepa mik vápnlausan." Þórr vill fyrir engan mun bila at koma til envígis, er honum var hólmr skoraðr, þvíat engi hefir honum þat fyrr veitt. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 102.3–8)

["But if I had my weapons here, we would hold a duel now, but as it is I declare you will be guilty of baseness if you go and kill me when I am unarmed." Thor was eager not to let anything stop him from going to single combat when he had been challenged to a duel, for no one had ever done that to him before.]

However Þjóðólfr of Hvin may have regarded the story of the encounter between Thor and Hrungnir, Snorri clearly regarded it as a duel in the formal sense, as his use of the technical terms *hólmganga*, *skora hólm*, and *einvígi* reveal. It is therefore worth reviewing what that would have implied.

Perhaps the first salient point is that dueling was forbidden in Iceland in the year 1006. Gunnlaugs saga reports a duel undertaken in Norway after this ban, and Grettis saga adds that dueling was subsequently abolished in Norway. Saxo too knows about the circumstances surrounding the elimination of dueling in Denmark after the acts of the missionary Poppo. Dueling was thus in effect a pre-Christian phenomenon according to the later medieval world view, and any reader of Skáldskaparmál would know that Hrungnir's challenge to Thor was couched in a pagan form. Perhaps we should recall here chapter 102 of Njáls saga, in which the pagan poetess Steinunn attempts to convert to paganism the missionary Pangbrandr (a nice example of the kinds of inversions that paganism adheres to in the sources: a female trying to convert a missionary bishop). Steinunn asks Pangbrandr whether he has heard that Thor challenged Christ to a duel, and that Christ did not dare to accept. In such a case, the struggle between two religions would be brought down to the level of the duel. By refusing the battle, Christ would by "pagan" logic have indicated the superiority of his opponents, and indeed he would have forfeited his honor, as is made clear by Morðr's loss of honor

when he declines the challenge of Hrútr in chapter 8 of the saga. But the audience of *Njáls saga* knew full well that they themselves were bound by Christian forms.

Although the laws are silent on the subject, the sagas of Icelanders tell of many duels, and the famous passage in *Kormáks saga* giving elaborate instructions for the *hólmganga* is the most complete description of dueling in the north (however fantastic it may be). This textual situation suggests that duels were more a part of the historical imagination than of reality in thirteenth-century Iceland.<sup>8</sup> The passage in *Kormáks saga* associates dueling with pagan ritual through its claim that the remarks that the one who prepared the dueling area should make while approaching it were later used in a mysterious ritual called the *tjosnublót*. Although the bold observers who have tried to make sense of *tjosnublót* and duel have seen associations with fertility (Olsen 1910; Lid 1933; Lundberg 1946), the argument is highly circumstantial and not very convincing (Bø 1969). But the point here is simply that in one late medieval source dueling attached to pagan ritual, and Thor's duel with Hrungnir thus was surely regarded as a pagan excrescence.

In the provision for the duel in *Kormáks saga*, it seems plain that what was at stake was not fertility but the honor of the duelers, especially as related to sexual reputation and  $ni\delta$ . The formulas that supposedly later were adopted in the *tjosnublót* are to be uttered while looking up between one's legs, which suggests a vulnerability to sexual penetration from behind, and grasping the earlobes would if nothing else make defense in such a case difficult. The duel itself according to *Kormáks saga* is a public event that requires an audience whose lines are scripted: "ferr hann á hæl" [he travels on his heel] if one foot leaves the ring, "rennr" [he runs off] if both so do. These surely have to do with public accusations or even acknowledgments of cowardice. Certainly in his duel with Hrungnir, Thor's honor is indeed at stake (Ross 1994b; cf. Nelson 1944). Other aspects of the duel, however, both those used and those ignored in Snorri's version of the Hrungnir story, are also relevant.

In the first place, most of the duels in the sagas are fought over a woman, money, or to settle some legal dispute. In this case the first of these causes is relevant, and it is doubled: the woman fought over is not only Freyja, who has served drinks to Hrungnir and whom the giant has threatened to abduct, but also Sif, whom he has threatened to carry off as well. Adding her to the list makes plain Thor's need to protect his females, which Clunies Ross shows to be central to the myths of the gods (1994a), even if an earlier abduction of Prúðr is ruled out of court.

Indeed, a common and relevant story pattern in the sagas of Icelanders is the challenge to a duel by a berserk with a woman's hand at stake. Hrungnir as berserk provides a nice touch of irony to the story, and contextualizes it as well. Hrungnir is truly, like a berserk, an ill-mannered, dangerous being, big and con-

<sup>8.</sup> This fact is recognized in the titles of Ciklamini 1963 and Jones 1933.

tentious. In the sagas, the locus classicus of the story pattern occurs in Eyrbyggja saga and Heiðarvíga saga, when Vermundr inn mjóvi Þorgrímsson transports out to Iceland two unruly berserks whom he cannot control. He gives them to his brother Styrr, and after one of them, Halli, proposes for the hand of his daughter Ásdís, Styrr murders both of them in a hot bath. In Skáldskaparmál, Odin brings Hrungnir into Valholl and then apparently cannot handle him; Hrungnir expresses an erotic interest in Freyja and Sif; Thor takes Hrungnir off Odin's hands and kills him in a duel. Although imprecise, the parallel is telling. Like the berserks in this story pattern, Hrungnir arrives in some settled place from outside and attempts to abrogate to himself property located within. That Snorri should allow a giant to play a role assigned in sagas to a berserk is not unprecedented if one accepts the reasoning of Joseph Harris (1976) concerning the masterbuilder story, which, based on other plot elements, he thinks is genetically related to the story of the berserks in Eyrbyggja saga. Furthermore, there is the case of the duel for the hand of Gyða between Olaf Tryggvason and Alpin, which the monk Oddr Snorrason presents as the case of a man with berserk qualities trying to get his hands on a woman not suitable for him (Jónsson 1932, 56–60). 10

Thus the background of Thor's duel actually resembles rather closely a story pattern that might have been well known to Icelandic audiences with an interest in the early history of their island and cultural sphere, and the honor provisions in the description of the duel in *Kormáks saga* were probably also relevant. So, surely, were the other details. Perhaps the most important of these is the provisioning of each participant in the duel with a second, who is to hold the shields for the principal.

Kormáks saga is silent on the relationship of the principal and second, stating only: "Sinn maðr skal halda skildi fyrir hvárum þeim, sem bersk" [his man shall hold the shield before each of the two of them, who fights]. The difference between the two seconds, however, is one of the most striking aspects of the version of the myth in Snorra Edda. They are in effect complete opposites. <sup>11</sup> Þjálfi is small, young, quick, clever, brave, and a real contributor to Thor's effort in the duel. Mokkurkálfi is huge, cowardly, incontinent, and useless. Most commentary has centered on the mare's heart inserted into the clay body of the constructed giant, and that is appropriate, for the heart as the seat of courage is well known elsewhere in medieval Scandinavian heroic literature, and the mare's heart all but guarantees that he will lack bravery and will fail in combat. Equally important in my view, however, is the provenance of Þjálfi, which is recounted in the well-

<sup>9.</sup> Note such proposed etymologies as "noise-maker" (Jónsson 1934–35, 301) and "big person, strong man" (Malone 1946).

<sup>10.</sup> In his version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla* (Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 267–68), Snorri plays down the berserk qualities of Alvini and adds that it was the custom in England for people to fight duels when each wished to marry the same woman. In both versions, the point of the story is Olaf's triumph and healing of the rival in the duel.

<sup>11.</sup> Does the rhyme that joins their names invite comparison?

known Útgarðaloki story in *Gylfaginning*. Like Mǫkkurkálfi, Þjálfi too comes from outside the races of æsir and vanir whose struggle is the stuff of the mythology. Unlike Mǫkkurkálfi, however, Þjálfi is as natural a being as a medieval audience could imagine, for he is human. The story as we have it is not in a pagan source, to be sure, but it expresses a sentiment with which any religion would concur, namely that human interaction is necessary for the ultimate success of the gods.

As it happens, no shield is held in this duel — indeed, Þjálfi is probably too small to hold a shield big enough to cover Thor, and Mokkurkálfi is probably too craven to hold a shield for anyone. Thor apparently always operates without one anyway, and Hrungnir is tricked into misusing his. That he ordinarily has and uses a shield is forthcoming from the mention of the weapons he is without when he visits Valholl.

"Ok hefir þat verit mikit fólskuverk," sagði hann, "er ek lét eptir heima skjǫld minn ok hein." (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 102.2–3)

["And that was an act of great stupidity," he said, "when I left behind my shield and hone."] $^{12}$ 

Þjálfi tricks Hrungnir in a way that would suggest Hrungir's cultural ignorance to an audience familiar with the kind of (historical) duel prescribed in *Kormáks saga*.

Þórr fór til hólmstefnu ok með honum Þjálfi. Þá rann Þjálfi fram at, þar er Hrungnir stóð, ok mælti til hans: "Þú stendr óvarliga, jǫtunn, hefir skjǫldinn fyrir þér, en Þórr hefir sétt þik ok ferr hann it neðra í jǫrðu, ok mun hann koma neðan at þér." Þá skaut Hrungnir skildinum undir fætr sér ok stóð á, en tvíhendi heinina. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 102.24–103.5)

[Thor traveled to the duel and with him Þjálfi. Then Þjálfi ran up to where Hrungnir was standing and said to him: "You stand unwisely, giant, you have your shield in front of you, but Thor has seen you and is traveling the underground route through the earth, and he will come at you from underneath. Then Hrungnir thrust his shield under his feet and stood on it, and grabbed the hone with two hands.]

Besides the lack of technical knowledge about the duel which Hrungnir betrays here, there is also ignorance about the mythology. Mjǫllnir is a weapon that is deployed in the air, and the connection of hammer and god with thunder and lightning makes it clear that Thor's realm is an airy one. When Thor first confronted Hrungnir in Valhǫll, he did so with his hammer in the air, and yet Hrungnir now allows himself to be tricked into preparing for an attack from underneath him, from within the earth. The identity of Thor's mother as earth would make such an attack even more unlikely, for it would associate Thor with a feminine side of himself that would be wholly out of place in a duel.

<sup>12.</sup> For a frank discussion of Hrungnir's stupidity, here self-confessed, see Martin 1994.

<sup>13. &</sup>quot;Því næst kom Þórr í hǫllina ok hafði uppi á lopti hamarinn" [Next Thor entered the hall and had his hammer raised in the air] (Jónsson 1931a, 101.15–16).

Pjálfi's tricking of the giant finds a parallel in the prose frame to *Grímnismál*. Frigg sends Fulla, her handmaiden, to Geirrøðr before his impending contest of wisdom with Odin, and Fulla informs the human king that a man with magic powers will shortly arrive. Like Hrungnir, Geirrøðr is deceived by the subterfuge and adopts a fatal strategy in the encounter; placing Odin in the fire triggers an ecstatic wisdom performance which leads to the death of Geirrøðr.

Pjálfi's action also unites the roles of both seconds, for he intervenes in the way Hrungnir's shield is deployed (the responsibility of Hrungnir's second, not Thor's). He thus directly affects the outcome of the duel in a way that goes well beyond the provisions set forth in *Kormáks saga*. There the role of the second appears to be more or less ornamental: the seconds hold up the three shields until they are rendered useless, at which point the real duel appears to begin.<sup>14</sup>

In persuading the giant to stand on his shield, Pjálfi affected the outcome of the duel, to be sure. But he did more, for Hrungnir's shield was made of stone. In causing the giant to return the stone to the earth and place it underfoot, where it belongs, rather than brandish it in the air, where stone is out of place, Pjálfi performed an act pertaining ordinarily to the realm of his master, for Thor makes natural the unnatural, as when he removes the extra arms of Starkaðr inn gamli (Lindow 1988). The parallel is made even more explicit by Thor's splitting of the giant's skull in the actual duel, for the giant's head, like his three-cornered heart and his shield, is also made of stone.

In making the unnatural natural, Þjálfi presents himself as in direct contrast with Mokkurkálfi, who is supremely unnatural—a mix of clay body and animal heart, with human shape. When Þjálfi quickly dispatches this sad monster, who dies "við lítinn orðstír" [with little glory], he also in a sense returns its clay body to its more natural form, as a simple unanimated component of nature (just as Thor does when he smashes the giant's stone skull into little bits). Þjálfi also takes on the role of his principal, for seconds are not ordinarily meant to fight each other. The "duel" between Þjálfi and Mokkurkálfi is subsidiary to the duel between Thor and Hrungnir but significant as an indicator of the hierarchical placement of the human and natural above the unnatural.

In the main duel, the time comes quickly when the antagonists are to defend themselves with their weapons. And just as the seconds contrasted directly and meaningfully, so do the weapons. Hrungnir and Thor use different weapons. Although *Kormáks saga* and the other sources are silent on this possibility, it has a venerable history. According to Tacitus (*Germania* chap. 10), the Germanic peoples tried to arrange a duel between a captured member of a tribe with whom they were at war and one of their own champions, and the outcome was taken as an augury. In such a case, each champion fought with his own weapons (*patriis* 

<sup>14. &</sup>quot;En er þeir [the shields] eru farnir, þá skal ganga á feld, þó at áðr hafi af hǫrfat; þá skal hlífask með vápnum þaðan frá. Sá skal hǫggva, er á er skorat" [And when the shields are used up, then one shall go onto the cloak, even if one has previously gone off it; thenceforth defense is to be made with weapons. That one shall strike (first), who was challenged] (Sveinsson 1939, 238).

*armis*). In this light it is appropriate that Hrungnir should choose an inappropriate weapon, such as his whetstone, <sup>15</sup> and that Thor should use his hammer.

The vatic nature of the duel according to Tacitus also finds a parallel in Snorri's text.

Póttusk jotnar hafa mikit í ábyrgð, hvárr sigr fengi. Þeim var ills ván af Þór, ef Hrungnir léti, fyrir því at hann var þeira sterkastr. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 102.10–12)

[The jotnar thought they had a lot at stake, regarding who won. They could expect the worst of Thor, if Hrungnir fell, for he was the strongest of them.]

Because this is the mythology of the æsir, not of the jotnar, Hrungnir must fall. The actual duel comes down to a simultaneous crashing together of the two weapons, hammer and hone, in the air, Thor's realm. Instead of standing formally before his antagonist, as the rules for the duel set forth in *Kormáks saga* stipulate, Thor simply flings his hammer at Hrungnir from a great distance ("um langa leið"). Hrungnir, in turn, throws the hone at Thor. In the hands of the giant, the whetstone is an awesome weapon, but it is no match for Mjǫllnir. Mjǫllnir strikes its mark, as always, but as bits and pieces of the giant's head fly about (whence the name of the site for the duel, *Grjótúnargarðar?*) and the hone breaks in two, one part of the broken hone is lodged in Thor's head. Thus both Odin and Thor have failed to defeat completely the adversary they share, even though Odin's horse was faster and Thor's hammer was stronger. Odin ended up with Hrungnir in his house and apparently could not for once or at least did not triumph over him in speech. At the end of the duel Thor lies under Hrungnir's leg with a whetstone fragment sticking out of his head.

As we have already seen, the removal of the leg draws Odin and the horse race back into the story, and we see and hear the gods comment on three generations of their progeny. That it is Hrungnir's lower leg (fótr) that pins Thor down may gain irony from the provisions of the duel in Kormáks saga concerning the placement of the feet and the concomitant comments that the placement elicits, but in its location across Thor's neck it also may be sexually suggestive, and it suggests defeat (Martin 1994). It certainly has to be removed, and neither Þjálfi nor the æsir can do so. That act is left to Thor's son Magni. Magni falls into the category of those doubled second-generation gods who are to survive Ragnarok, and whose purpose frequently involves vengeance, as is the case with Víðarr and Váli. The removal of the leg should perhaps be viewed first, then, as an act of vengeance, and this is further suggested by Magni's casual remark to his father that he would have killed the giant with one blow of his fist had he been the one to confront the giant. This could, I think, be read as a comment to the effect that a formal duel would not have been necessary nor even possible, since the second-gen-

<sup>15.</sup> The association of the hone with sovereignty and especially kingship suggested by the materials gathered in Mitchell (1985) strikes me as outweighed in this instance by the simple fact that a hone would make a relatively poor weapon. It is, indeed, the antithesis of those sharp weapons it is intended to ameliorate.

eration gods are to inhabit a renewed cosmos after Ragnarok in which the giants are conspicuously absent.

One interesting point about Magni is his age. Codex regius of *Snorra Edda* assigns him an age of three years (*brívetr*), which Finnur Jónsson emends (following W and U) to an even more astonishing three days (*brínættr*). The point of course is simply that he is not full grown, and thus it matters little whether he is three years or three days old. But whether the units of his age are years or days, they are three in number, and this number is not without significance in the story. Hrungnir's heart has three points, and Mokkurkálfi, who is in some sense a pale parallel to his principal, is nine (three times three) *rastir* tall and three wide. The hard and huge threes of the jotnar are no match for the baby threes of the æsir.

The final part of the story returns it to the realm of Odin. That such a return is underway is apparent not only from the reentry of Odin and the horse Gullfaxi into the story, but also and especially from the very beginning of the last section. Having in effect rescued Odin from a problem with a giant whom Odin could not or would not defeat with his usual means, and having himself been rescued by his son from under the leg of the dead giant, Thor still has the bit of hone lodged securely in his head. He returns home. "Pá kom til volva sú, er Gróa hét, kona Aurvandils hins frækna" [Then that seeress came there who was called Gróa, the wife of Aurvandill the Bold]. Thor is now playing the role played by Odin when hosting Hrungnir at Valholl. Furthermore, Gróa is a volva, a seeress of the sort whom Odin apparently caused to chant Voluspá and with whom he has ample other connections. The solution to Thor's problem, then, is to be an Odinic one; the seeress is to sing the hone out of Thor's head. 16 By working a cure through singing, Gróa positions herself in Odin's realm, as is indicated specifically by the "Ljóðatal" of *Hávamál*, especially stanzas 146–47. The charm is to fail, however, and it does so because of a story Thor tells. By so doing he too enters Odin's realm of the verbal, and since his previous entry into this realm, when he dueled verbally with Hrungnir at Valholl, can hardly be regarded as a complete success, the prognosis cannot be favorable here. But as if to underscore his assumption of an Odinic role or persona, Thor tells a story in which he, not Odin and two others, performs a cosmogonic act: the creation of the star that is called Aurvandilstá. This he does by dismembering, albeit in a small way, Aurvandill, and casting the relevant body part up into the sky, just as the triumvirate led by Odin dismembered the proto-giant Ymir and created the cosmos from the parts of his body.

In Thor's creation of the star Aurvandilstá, the names involved are suggestive of cosmogony. Aurvandill shares the first component of his name with Aurgelmir, who according to *Vafþrúðnismál* 29–33 was the proto-giant and presumably

<sup>16. &</sup>quot;Hon gól galdra sína yfir Þór, til þess er heinin losnaði" [She sang her magic charms over Thor until the hone grew loose] (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 104.3).

<sup>17.</sup> My point here is that the components are homonyms, not that they are etymologically identical. The latter possibility is dimmed by the apparent Old English cognate *earendel* 'morning-star' (which

is identical with Ymir. Vafþrúðnismál 31 makes it explicit that Aurgelmir derived from the poison drops that ran out of the Élivágar, and it is across these rivers that Thor is carrying Aurvandill from the North out of Jotunheimar when the toe freezes. Equally suggestive is the creation of stars out of the eyes of the giant Þjazi, whose fatal interaction with the æsir was initially, like that of Ymir, with a triumvirate of gods led by Odin (Loki and Hænir as opposed to Vili and Vé). The versions of the story in Þjóðólfr's Haustlong and Skáldskaparmál, the fullest sources, vary substantially, and Skáldskaparmál adds to the story of the compensation extracted from the æsir by Þjazi's daughter Skaði the detail that Odin took the eyes of Pjazi and threw them up to the sky and made two stars of them, in language that is precisely parallel to that used of Thor's creation of the star Aurvandilstá. 18 The circumstances too are curiously parallel; Odin makes stars out of Pjazi's eyes as additional, unrequired, extracontractual compensation ("til yfirbóta") for Skaði, and Thor tells Gróa of her husband's small place in the starry skies as a premature, unnecessary, and ultimately counterproductive reward for her efforts to cure him. His motivation for the actual making of the star at the time is not recoverable.

Even more striking, however, is Thor's boast in *Hárbarðsljóð* 19.

Ec dráp Piaza, inn þrúðmóðga iotun,
upp ec varp augom Allvalda sonar
á þann inn heiða himin;
þau ero merki mest minna verca,
þau er allir menn síðan um sé.
(Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 81)

[I killed Pjazi, the powerful giant, up I threw the eyes of the son of Allvaldi into that bright heaven; those are the greatest tokens of my deeds, which all men afterwards see.]

This is a serious boast, <sup>19</sup> even if no other source will support it. As a slayer of giants Thor maintains the order of the cosmos, but there are few visible indications of his actions. Here are two, he says, and the star Aurvandilstá would have been another.

*Vafþrúðnismál* 21, which describes the creation of the cosmos from the dismembered body of Ymir, does not mention the stars. According to the more elaborated version of the story in *Gylfaginning*, the creating triumvirate used sparks fly-

would attach to the Aurvandill story; see especially Much 1934) and the apparently cognate heroic names. The etymology of *Aurvandill* remains unsolved (Vries 1962, 20, s.v.; Simek 1984, 31–32, s.v.), but Aurgelmir, at least, must have *aurr* 'stony sand' as its first component. The connection of Aurvandill, too, with the waters of the Élivágar would have made such a meaning plausible to a medieval audience.

<sup>18. &</sup>quot;Svá er sagt, at Óðinn gerði þat til yfirbóta við Skaða, at hann tók augu Þjaza ok kastaði upp á himinn ok gerði af stjornur tvær"; "ok var sú [tá] frerin, svá at Þórr braut af ok kastaði upp á himinn ok gerði af stjornu þá, er heitir Aurvandilstá" (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 81.13–15, 104.8–10).

<sup>19.</sup> Various sources agree that Þjazi lived at Þrymheimr, which would be a suitable dwelling for someone named Þrymr. The name of Þrymr's dwelling is never given in *Þrymskviða*, and the story of Thor's dealings with this giant is not known from other sources. Could there be a connection, however, distant, between Þjazi and Þrymr?

ing about from Muspellsheimr for stars, and their creative act was to order these heavenly bodies.

Pá tóku þeir síur ok gneista þá, er lausir fóru ok kastað hafði ór Muspellsheimi, ok settu í mitt Ginnungagap á himinn bæði ofan ok neðan til at lýsa himin ok jǫrð. Þeir gáfu staðar ǫllum eldingum, sumum á himni, sumar fóru lausar undir himni, ok settu þó þeim stað ok skǫpuðu gǫngu þeim. (normalized from Jónsson 1931a, 15.8–13)

[Then they took the embers and sparks that were traveling aimlessly and had been thrown out of Muspellsheimr, and they put them in the middle of Ginnungagap in the sky both above and below in order to illuminate heaven and earth. They gave stations to all things glowing; some were in the sky, some traveled unbound under the sky, but they made a place for them and fashioned a route for them].

Thus Thor can make a claim to have participated in the creation of the cosmos, specifically in that portion of it to which his connection with thunder and lightning attaches him.

From this point of view, then, the Hrungnir story is not only about Odin and Thor. Like *Hárbarðsljóð*, it contrasts and orders them, but unlike that poem, it gives Thor the final victory. Like Styrr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, who arranged the demise of Vermundr's berserks, he takes on and solves the problem of an unruly houseguest who has proved to be too much for a relative and who indeed threatens his control over his own females. In the drama as it appears in *Skáldskaparmál*, Thor first brings order to Odinic hospitality that has spun out of control. Then, operating in his own area of expertise, he defeats the strongest of giants in a formal duel, thus establishing a quasi-legal basis for the hierarchical positioning of the æsir above the jotnar. Finally, he makes a claim to the Odinic realm of the creation of the cosmos.

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