

Monstrous Allegations: An Exchange of *yki* in *Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa*

Níð and *yki* in the Laws

In their proscriptions against various kinds of verbal and other insults, the thirteenth-century Icelandic law codes known as Grágás include, alongside the well-known category of *níð*, the more obscure term *yki*:

Ef maðr gerir *yki* um mann ok varðar þat fjörbaugsgarð. Þat er *yki* ef maðr segir þat frá qðrum manni eða frá eign hans nokkuri er eigi má vera ok gerir þat til háðungar honum. Ef maðr gerir *níð* um mann ok varðar þat fjörbaugsgarð ok skal sækja við tylftarkvið. Þat eru *níð* ef maðr sker trénið manni eða rístr eða reisir manni *níðstong*. (Staðarhólsbók, AM 334 fol.; normalized from Finsen 1879, 392)¹

[If a man composes *yki* about another man, the penalty is lesser outlawry. It is *yki* if a man says about another man or any one of his possessions that which cannot be, and does so to dishonour him. If a man makes *níð* about another, the penalty is lesser outlawry and is to be prosecuted with a jury of twelve. It is *níð* if one man cuts a wooden *níð* against another, or carves or raises a *níð* pole against another.]

The two terms are implied to be equivalent by the specification of the same penalty for both; at the same time, they are differentiated by their separate itemization. Neither is fully comprehensible. Many scholars have attempted to determine the precise significance of *níð*,² as it is defined in the legal texts and manifested in literary form in the sagas; but its relationship with the more specialized concept of *yki* has generally been overlooked. The word *yki*, related to the verb *auka* ‘to increase’, survives in the modern Icelandic feminine plural form, *ýkjur* ‘exaggeration’, along with the verb *ýkja* ‘to exaggerate’. This corresponds to its sense in *Alexanders saga*, “Hverr er þetta kallar lygíliga sagt eða telr slíkt með ýkjum” [‘whoever considers this a lying story or counts such things among exaggerations’], Jónsson 1925, 23.10–11). It appears otherwise in the adverbial phrase *með ýkjum* ‘enormously’. Thus *yki*

1. The text of Konungsbók (Gks 1157 fol.) is shorter, including the definition of *níð* but not that of *yki*, and entitling the section “Um fullréttisorð” [On insults incurring full compensation] (Finsen 1852, 2:181–83). The translations of quotations from legal texts are my own but have benefited from reference to Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 1980–2000.

2. Important studies of *níð* are Noreen 1922, Almqvist 1965–74, Ström 1974, and Meulengracht Sørensen 1983. See also Almqvist 1967.

appears to mean “exaggeration” or “fantasy,” rather than, as Cleasby and Vigfússon suggest, “aggravation” (presumably implying the overstating of some lesser charge). The definition of *yki*, in the Icelandic and Norwegian law texts as “that which cannot be” indicates that it should be understood as something beyond the bounds of literal possibility.

In this paper I shall attempt to identify the boundaries of *níð* and *yki*. In particular, I shall argue that the identification of a man with the animal world, which plays a part in many of the insults in saga texts loosely referred to by commentators as *níð*, particularly fits the definition of *yki* as “that which cannot be.” My examples will be drawn from a sequence in *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa*, in which, as I have outlined elsewhere (Finlay 1990–93), the verbal duel between two rival poets takes the form of an exchange of insults echoing their sexual rivalry.

The Norwegian Gulapingslög—also, in its present form, dating from the thirteenth century, but originally claimed to be the prototype on which the Icelandic laws were based—offers a more explicit definition of *yki*:

Engi maðr skal gera tunguníð um annan né trénið. En ef hann verðr at því kunnr ok sannr, at hann gerir þat, þá liggr honum utlegð við. Syni með séttar eiði. Fellr til utlegðar ef fellr. Engi skal gera ýki um annan eða fjölmæli. Þat heitir ýki ef maðr mælir um annan þat er eigi má vera né verða, ok eigi hefir verit; kveðr hann vera konu níundu nótt hverja, ok hefir barn borit, ok kallar gylfin. Þá er hann utlagr ef hann verðr at því sannr. Syni með séttareiði. Fellr til utlegðar ef fellr. (normalized from Keyser and Munch 1846, 57)

[No man is to make verbal *níð* or wooden *níð* about another. But if he becomes known for that, and it is proved that he has done it, then he incurs outlawry. Let him deny it with an oath of six persons. Outlawry is incurred if the oath fails. No one is to compose *yki* or slander about another. It is called *yki* if a man says about another that which cannot be nor come to be, and has not been; states him to be a woman every ninth night and to have borne a child, and calls him a *gylfin*.³ He is an outlaw if it is proved that he has done that. Let him deny it with an oath of six persons. Outlawry is incurred if the oath fails.]

Ýki, perhaps because its semantic field was more limited, is more fully explained in the law codes than *níð*. This passage, from which the Grágás versions may derive, offers not only a fuller definition and enlightening examples, but also a clearer context. Its inclusion under the heading “Ef maðr níðir annan” [If one man slanders another], and the precedence of the reference to *níð* (the reverse of the order found in Grágás), imply that *yki* refers to a sub-class of all the insults covered by the term *níð*. But it is difficult to be certain about this, since the application of the term *níð* is undefined; Meulengracht Sørensen’s contention that *níð* refers predominantly to sexually symbolic insults leads him to the opposite conclusion, that “*níð* may most readily be understood as a specialized form of *yki*” (1983, 29).

3. The term *gylfin* is obscure and does not occur elsewhere. Cleasby and Vigfússon identify it as an adjective, of which this would be a feminine form, and translate “being a werewolf (?)” (1957, s.v. “gylfinn”); de Vries as a neuter noun meaning “Unhold” [fiend] (1962, s.v. “Gylfi”). Both associate it with the feminine noun *gylfra*, also of uncertain meaning but apparently signifying an ogress or beast.

Another significant difference between the Grágás and Gulapingslög versions is that Grágás seems to imply a distinction between *yki* as a verbal insult—what one man says about another—and *níð*, which, in the passage quoted above, apparently applies only to the kind of insult presented in the visual form of a carving or *níð-stong* ‘slander-pole’. This apparent distinction between verbal *yki* and graphic *níð* may be the consequence of a subdivision in the Grágás texts, in which the provisions on *níð* are followed by a separate section headed (in Konungsbók) “Um skáldskap” [On poetry], which as might be expected deals specifically with verbal abuse. That it is a false distinction is revealed not only by the Gulapingslög version of the proscription of *níð*: “Engi maðr skal gera tungunið um annan né trénið” [No man is to make verbal *níð* nor wooden *níð* against another], but also by the fact that in the “Um skáldskap” section of Grágás, the word *níð* appears as object of the verb *kveða* ‘to recite’: “Ef maðr kveðr níð um mann at lögbergi, ok varðar skóggang” [If one man recites *níð* against another at the Law-Rock, it incurs full outlawry] (normalized from Finsen 1852, 2:184).

Despite a certain apparent preference both in law and saga texts for applying the term *níð* particularly to carved or “wooden” insults, then, this word could denote both insults of this visual kind and verbal insults—whether necessarily in verse is debatable (Finlay 1990–93, 160). But the import of an insult that could be classified as *níð* is not made explicit in the laws, nor the relationship of the term to the other specific proscriptions relating to verbal insult. The wording of these in Gulapingslög appears to announce a complete list of proscriptions (“orð eru þau . . . eitt . . . annat . . . hitt þriðja”), but the examples specified within this tripartite classification appear rather arbitrary, including a whole sub-category under *hitt þriðja*:

Um fullréttisorð. Orð eru þau er fullréttisorð heita. Þat er eitt ef maðr kveðr at karlmanni qðrum, at hann hafi barn borit. Þat er annat ef maðr kveðr hann vera sannsorðinn. Þat er hitt þriðja ef hann jafnar honum við meri eða kallar hann grey eða portkonu eða jafnar honum við berendi eitthvert. (normalized from Keyser and Munch 1846, 70)

[On insults requiring full compensation. These are the words which are called *fullréttisorð* ‘insults requiring full compensation’. The first is if a man says to another man that he has borne a child. The second is if a man says him to be *sannsorðinn* ‘plainly sexually penetrated’. The third is if he compares him to a mare or calls him a bitch or a whore or compares him with any kind of breeding (i.e., female) animal.]

In the Konungsbók version of Grágás a section headed “Um fullréttisorð” immediately precedes that in which *yki* and *níð* are defined, but it does not include a passage corresponding to the one found under that heading in Gulapingslög. However, Staðarhólsbók appends to the provisions on *yki* and *níð* cited above a passage echoing one of the insults specified in Gulapingslög, as well as the tripartite structure of three specified terms and the categorization of these as *fullréttisorð*:

Þau eru orð þrjú, ef svá mjök versna málsendar manna, er skóggang varða qll, ef maðr kallar mann ragan eða stroðinn eða sorðinn. Ok skal svá sækja sem qnnur fullréttisorð, enda á maðr vígt í gegn þeim orðum þrimr. Jafnlengi á maðr vígt um orð sem um konur ok til ins næsta alþingis hvarvegja, ok fellr sá maðr óheilagr er þessi orð mælir fyrir

öllum þeim mönnum er honum fylgja til vettvangs er þessi orð váru við mælt. (normalized from Finsen 1879, 392)⁴

[These are the three words, if matters become so much more serious between men, which all incur full outlawry: if a man calls another *ragr* or *stroðinn* or *sorðinn*. They are to be prosecuted like other insults meriting full compensation, and moreover, a man has the right to kill in response to those three words. He has this right for the same length of time as he has for (offences committed against) women, until the next Alþingi in both cases, and any man who speaks these words can be killed, having forfeited his immunity, by anyone who has accompanied the man about whom they were spoken to the place where it happened.]

The Grágás passage clearly identifies those insults imputing effeminacy, and specifically that of having a passive role in a homosexual act, as more serious than other kinds of calumny, including those identified as *ýki* and carved *níð*; in the Gulapingslög this particular charge is not differentiated from those likening a man to a female animal or a child-bearing woman. None of these insults is specifically defined as either *níð* or *ýki*. However, it may be possible to use these passages to arrive at a clearer definition of the terms.

Scholars have tended to identify *níð* with sexual insult, and specifically with the particularly severe insults singled out by Grágás. Meulengracht Sørensen associates it with homosexuality and the complex of socially disapproved concepts—effeminacy, cowardice, and moral baseness—this symbolically implies:

níð stands for very serious allegations of a symbolic nature, and . . . the symbols are to a great extent sexual, in more specific terms of the kind comprised by the concept *ergi*. There has been discussion as to whether *níð* always contained an allegation of *ergi*, or only in most cases . . . It always conveys contempt, and its purpose is to expel the person concerned from the social community as unworthy; in this aspect, sexual symbolism was the strongest way of putting it. (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 29)

There is some justification for the association of *níð* with *ergi*, and in particular with the words *ragr*, *stroðinn* and *sorðinn*, since their implication does mirror the symbolism often attached to the *níðstong* or carved *níð*, to which the term is uncontroversially applied. The most explicit example is in *Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa*, where a carving, or a pair of carved figures, appears on the harbour mark of Þórðr Kolbeinsson, and is attributed to his rival Björn Hítöelakappi:

hlutr sá fannsk í hafnarmarki Þórðar, er þvígit vinveittligra þótti; þat váru karlar tveir, ok hafði annarr hqtt blán á hqfði; þeir stóðu lútir, ok horfði annarr eptir qðrum. Þat þótti illr fundr, ok mæltu menn, at hvárskis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð. (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 154–55)

[something appeared on Þórðr's harbour mark which did not seem at all friendly; it was two men, and one had a black hood on his head. They stood bending over, and one was

4. This passage does not occur in Konungsbók, but is reflected in the “Um skáldskap” section: “Ef maðr heyrir í skáldskap orð þat er maðr á vígt um, at hann sé *ragr* eða *stroðinn*, hefnir hann vígi eða áverkum, ok skal hann um illmæli sækja” [If a man hears in poetry a word for which he is entitled to kill, that he is *ragr* or *stroðinn*, and avenges it with killing or wounding, he shall prosecute for abusive speech] (normalized from Finsen 1852, 2:183–84).

standing behind the other. This was considered a bad meeting, and people said that the situation of neither of those standing there was good, but that that of the one in front was worse.]

The less explicit depiction of a homosexual encounter in *Gísla saga* suggests that such depictions were common enough, whether in actuality or in literary representation, for a bald allusion to the relative positions of the two men to establish the indecency of what was portrayed: “ok skal annarr standa aptar en annarr” [and one is to stand further back than the other] (Þórólfsson and Jónsson 1943, 10).⁵ Other *níðstengr*, though, are less obviously sexual in their symbolism, which is uncertainly conveyed by the fixing of a mare’s head or body to the pole (*Vatnsdæla saga*, *Egils saga*).⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen comments (1983, 29): “We do not fully understand the significance of the horse symbolism, but it is conclusive that a female animal is in question, and it is a fair guess that the mare is a symbol of the absent man, who by this means is accused of cowardice.” If so, such an insult is to be equated with the Gulapingslög prohibition on likening a man to a mare or other female animal, rather than with an outright accusation of *ergi* in its literal sense of homosexual activity.

It seems clear, then, that both an unambiguous sexual slur and the metaphorical identification with a female animal are covered by the term *níð* as it applies to visual representations. It may be reasonable to suppose that the term extended to verbal insults with the same implications. However, not all *níð* is equally serious, since within its scope Grágás (though not the Norwegian law) singles out more heavily penalized verbal insults of a specific kind.

Partly because of the inconsistency of the legal texts, the application of *ýki* is less secure than that of *níð*. However, it is possible to base some suppositions on the etymology of the word, with the support of the distinction in Grágás between insults such as *ragr* and those likening a man to a woman or female animal. The definition of *ýki* as “something which cannot be” suggests a distinction between accusations—those most strongly condemned by Grágás—which, whether literally intended or not, are physically possible, and those (*ýki*) which transgress the boundaries of human or masculine possibility—the accusation of being a woman, an

5. For discussion of these scenes, and in particular the problematic involvement of the creator of the *níð* in the metaphorical homosexual act, see Finlay 1990–93, 170–71. Meulengracht Sørensen (1983, 56–57) and Gade (1986, 134–35) argue for the significance of “phallic aggression” in the relationship suggested between the two men, but while Meulengracht Sørensen emphasizes the metaphorical status of the insult, Gade’s attempt to detect literal homosexual rape in *Bjarnar saga* is unconvincing.

6. Sayers’ speculation that the pole in *Vatnsdæla saga* passed “through the chest of the animal and, one must assume, out through the anus” (Sayers 1997, 30) is not supported by the saga’s words, “Síðan drap Jökull meri eina, ok opnuðu hana hjá brjóstinu ok færðu á súluna” [Then Jökull killed a mare, and they cut it open at the breast and placed it on the pole] (Sveinsson 1939, 91). Sayers refers to evidence for the role of the horse in Germanic pagan religion as support for the mythic significance of the stallion/mare opposition: “In this perception the mare is not just another ‘despicable female animal,’ as Almqvist would have it . . . but the fundamental opposite, yet insidious, infrangible link, to all that was virile, powerful and aggressive as symbolized by the stallion” (1997, 32). For insults involving reference to mares, see Almqvist 1965–74, 1:63, 96–107, 120, 167–82; Almqvist 1991.

animal, or some kind of monster, or of bearing a child. This could well be the implication of the prefix *sann-* in the term *sannsorðinn* condemned in the Gulapingslög, emphasizing the *literal* nature of the accusation. It could also explain the basis for the heavier penalties imposed by the Icelandic law where an accusation had the potential to be literally as well as metaphorically founded.

Meulengracht Sørensen argues that the comparison with the animal essentially reinforces the antithesis between masculine and feminine,

so that the contrast which carries the allegation becomes ‘masculine + human’ vs. ‘feminine + animal’. Predominance of the sexual sense is emphasised by the corresponding provision in the *Law of Frostathing*, which together with the *Law of Gulathing* represents Norway’s oldest legislation. Here too it amounts to *fullréttisorð* if a man is compared to a dog or called *sannsorðinn*; but it is further said that to compare a man with a bull, a stallion or other male animal is *hálfvéttisorð*, that is to say verbal offences that incur only half-compensation. (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 16)

The transference of the insult into the category of the animal emphasizes the impossibility of what is alleged, thereby drawing attention to its metaphorical force, which could of course receive additional impetus from the negative properties attached to the particular species of beast referred to. The only female animals specified in the laws are the mare and the bitch. Despite Meulengracht Sørensen’s observation that the symbolism of the mare in the *níðstong* is unclear, insults representing both males and females as mares involved in sexual acts suggest that the implication was of inordinate sexual appetite—in itself, of course, a dreadful slur on medieval femininity. An obscene verse in *Kormáks saga*, which according to the saga prose is falsely attributed to the hero by his enemies, is an unusual example of calumny directed at a woman.⁷ The verse, referred to in the saga as *níð*, characterizes the woman as a mare, emphasizing its sexual availability:

Vildak hitt, at væri
vald-Eir gømul jalda
støerilát í stóði
Steingerðr, en ek reini,
værak þráða Þrúði
þeiri’s stöðvar geira
gunnrðígra garða
gaupelds á bak hlaupinn.

(Sveinsson 1939, 277–78)

7. Karen Swenson remarks of the slurs against goddesses in *Lokasenna* that “Loki . . . turns the thrust of the *senna* back towards the gods. While the issue of women’s ‘virtue’ may be of some significance in itself, it does here serve primarily as a weapon which Loki uses against the gods. The goddesses are not attacked as ‘goddesses’ or as ‘women’; they are attacked as ‘wives’ or as ‘women belonging to males.’ It is not, one suspects, ‘unwomanly’ to sleep with several men; it does seem, however, that a man who does not control ‘his women’s’ essentially promiscuous nature is an ‘unmanly man’” (Swenson 1991, 75). Meulengracht Sørensen observes that “phallic aggression can also be expressed in a heterosexual relation, where it is either directed personally against a woman or else—using her as a medium—against the man who is responsible for her and is her guardian” (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 28).

[I wish that the ruling goddess, Steingerðr, were an old, proud mare in the stud, and I a stallion; I would have leapt on the back of the goddess of threads (woman), who stops battle-ready spears of the vagina(?).]⁸

A *níð* allegedly perpetrated by all the Icelanders against King Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark and one of his officials, Birgir, who had confiscated property retrieved from an Icelandic ship, represents the two men as mare and stallion in a sexual act. A verse to this effect is cited in its earliest form in the older recension of *Jómsvíkinga saga* in AM 291 4^o (Halldórsson 1969, 99) and also in *Heimskringla*, where it is said to be only part of a longer slander:⁹

Þás sparn á mó mǫrnis
 morðkunnr Haraldr sunnan,
 varð þá Vinða myrðir
 vax eitt, í ham faxes,
 en bergsalar Birgir
 þöndum rækr í landi,
 þat sá ǫld, í jǫldu
 óríkr fyrir líki.

(Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:270)

[When Haraldr, famous for murder, braced himself in a stallion's shape on the land of the horse's penis (= a mare's rump) in the south, the killer of Wends became nothing but wax, while wretched Birgir, deservedly driven out by guardian spirits of the land, was in front in the likeness of a mare; men saw that.]

The potentially less derogatory casting of Haraldr in the active or male role is nullified by his impotence: “varð þá . . . vax eitt.” The transposition into equine terms of the posture represented on the *níðstengr* of *Bjarnar saga* and *Gísla saga* suggests that the attachment of a mare's head or body to such poles does indeed imply a (metaphorical) sexual slur. The possibility that the Icelanders' *níð* originally accompanied a *níðstǫng* is suggested by the verse's allusion to Birgir's being driven out (of Norway) by guardian spirits: “rækr bergsalar þöndum í landi,” and by the accompanying story in *Heimskringla* of Haraldr's spy being ejected from Iceland by supernatural beings, a neat parallel to the invocation of *landvættir* in the *níð* in *Egils saga*.

The particular associations of grey ‘bitch’ are presumably similar to those of *merr*.¹⁰ In his *kviðlingr* cited in *Íslendingabók* and elsewhere (see p. 33 below), Hjalti Skeggjason applies the term to Freyja, who in *Þrymskviða* 13.7–10 fears being thought *vergjarnasta* ‘most eager for men’ and who is accused in *Lokasenna* 30.4–6

8. This translation follows Sveinsson's interpretation. See, however, Gade's suggestion that *garðr* means a bandage applied to the phallus of a stallion to prevent its mating, and that *geirar garða* ‘the phalli of the stallions’ extends the equine conceit of the verse (Gade 1989, 64–65).

9. For discussion of the two versions of the verse and their contexts, see Almqvist 1965–74, 1:119–85. The interpretation of “á mó mǫrnis” is that of Magnús Ólsen (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:270–71 note to v. 133).

10. Taylor (1992, 178–80) catalogues insults based on *hundr*, which of course do not emphasize the feminine. He believes the “dog” insult to have been widespread in Germanic from an early date.

of sexual relations with all the gods and elves present (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 113, 102). Perhaps these two animals are singled out in the laws for carrying the special implication of sexual appetite, that is, lust for sexual attention from the male, but it is likely that this was implied by any comparison with the female and bestial. The other female aspect emphasized by the laws is that of *berendr* ‘a bearing animal’, that is, the essentially female function of bearing young.

It is common in prose texts for a man to be likened to a *gyltr* ‘sow’ or *geit* ‘nanny-goat’, animals not mentioned specifically in the laws. In a survey of attitudes to animals revealed in saga texts, Simon Teuscher finds a uniformly negative attitude to attributes associated with animals. This is intensified in proportion to the domesticity of the species and its natural degree of aggression; comparison with milder species such as sheep and goats was particularly humiliating (Teuscher 1990).

Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa: The “Fish” and “Cow” Exchange

The insults discussed above involve comparison or association with animals where this intensifies or conveys a sexual connotation. In the light of this discussion I turn now to the *Grámagaflím* of Björn Hítðelakappi, a rare instance of an insult where the animal association is only incidentally accompanied by sexual undertones. Chapter 20 of *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* relates a tit-for-tat exchange of insulting verses between the two rival poets, Björn Hítðelakappi and Þórðr Kolbeinsson. Unlike other insulting verses recorded in the saga, the poems are not said to be spoken by the poets themselves, but are the subject of debate between two supernumerary characters: Þorkell Dálksson, who has not appeared in the saga before this point, and his farmhand. These two enliven the tedious task of charcoal-burning by discussing “hvárr háðugligar hefði kveðit til annars” [which (of the two poets) had composed more insultingly about the other] (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 168). The farmhand takes the view that a poem composed some time before by Björn, the *Grámagaflím* or *Grey-Belly Satire*, is the worst thing he has ever heard. The poem is not said to be recited, but the saga gives a brief account of its content and quotes three stanzas, one incomplete, said to be “í flíminu” [in the satire].

The essence of the insult is that Þórðr owes his conception and parentage to a fish, which his mother ate, decayed and slimy, after it was found on the shore, thereby becoming pregnant with her less-than-heroic son. Neither Þórðr nor his mother Arnóra is named in the verses cited; the identification is made in the prose preamble. In fact, the saga names Arnóra only here; this may be an accident of preservation, since the saga’s opening, now lost, is likely to have detailed Þórðr’s parentage. The implication of the slur is spelled out by the saga; this miraculous conception means that Þórðr was “ekki dála frá mǫnnum kominn í báðar ættir” [not entirely descended from humans on both sides] (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 168).

Þorkell, however, is not impressed and nominates the *Kolluvísur*, which Þórðr is said to have composed about Björn, and which Þorkell calls “miklu háðugligri”

[much more shameful]. If the saga is vague about the occasion for the composition of the *Grámagaflím*, it is totally uninformative about the nature and content of Þórðr's poem, except for the word *kolla* 'cow or other female animal' in the title. Like the reader, the farmhand is curious, and he persuades Þorkell to recite the poem, although this is not recorded. Paradoxically, then, the poem that is not said to be recited is quoted in the text, while the one that is said to be recited is not quoted. Teuscher suggests that Björn is not given the opportunity to recite his own satire because its offensiveness would diminish his stature as hero: "Selv om det blir sagt at det er Björn som laget denne visen, blir den fremført for leseren av en huskar. Den var nok for stygg til å kunne bli lagt i heltens egen munn" (Teuscher 1990, 318). But the *flím* is not, in fact, put in the mouth of the servant; it is the saga author himself who cites, as an aside, what he refers to as an extract from the poem. The fact that neither poem is recited by the poet to whom it is attributed is more complex than this and warrants further discussion here.

In response to the recitation of the *Kolluvísur*, Björn, who unknown to the charcoal burners has overheard the performance, jumps out of hiding and kills Þorkell. It might be assumed that the violence of this reaction gives us an indication, however indirect, of the offensiveness of the verse. According to Grágás,

Skóggang varðar, ef maðr yrkir um mann hálfá vísu, þá er lqstr er í eða háðung eða lof þat, er hann yrkir til háðungar. Ef hann kveðr þat eða kennir qðrum manni, ok er þat qnnur sqk ok varðar skóggang; svá varðar ok hverjum, er nemr. (normalized from Finsen 1852, 2:183; cf. Finsen 1879, 392–93)

[Full outlawry is incurred if a man composes about another half a stanza in which there is shame or insult or the kind of praise which is composed in order to insult. If he recites that or teaches it to another man, that is another offence and incurs full outlawry; the same is also incurred by anyone who learns it.]

This provision would seem to apply to Þorkell who, though he did not originate the verse, is guilty of reciting it or even of teaching it to someone else. Björn's accusation hints at this: "Þá hleypr Björn fram at þeim ok kvað fleira mundu til verkefna en kenna Kolluvísur" [Then Björn ran up to them and said there was more work to do than teaching the *Kolluvísur*] (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 170). But instead of invoking this principle, Björn twice justifies his violence—first in his remark to Þorkell before he kills him, and again in the ensuing lawsuit—by referring to a prohibition determined after an exchange of verses between the poets earlier in the saga, the first in which legal action was involved. Here, after Þórðr had been forced to pay compensation for an offensive verse, "þess beiddisk Björn í lqgrétu, at hvárr þeira, sem kvæði nqkkut í heyrn qðrum, at sá skyldi óheilagr falla" [Björn proposed to the court that either of them who recited anything in the hearing of the other should die having forfeited his immunity] (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 154).

If a man who had committed an offence against another was killed, his killer could attempt to show in his defence that the dead man was *óheilagr* 'unhallowed'; that is, he had forfeited his immunity, with the consequence that no compensation

was due for his killing (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 1980–2000, 1:247–48). This stipulation, then, provides for a more immediate penalty than that defined by Grágás; rather than prosecuting the offending poet, the victim was empowered to kill first and ask questions later. Confusingly, when Björn deploys this argument in his defence after the killing of Þorkell, he extends the terms beyond those of the initial prohibition against the two poets themselves reciting in the hearing of each other. This confusion may be an indication that in an earlier or alternative version of the story, the two damaging poems, the *Grámagafli*m and the *Kolluvísur*, were placed in the mouths of the poets themselves, rather than the two lay figures of chapter twenty. But more significant is the fact that the early quarrel in which this condition is laid down concerns a verse in which Þórðr pictures Björn in close proximity to a cow, actually using the word *kolla* (v. 19). I will return later to the possible relationship between this verse and the *Kolluvísur*.

Before considering the detail of the *Grámagafli*m and attempting to build some bricks from the absence of straw that is the *Kolluvísur*, let us look more closely at the significance of this exchange within the structure of the saga. If it is true that the pattern of exchange of insults in the saga is carefully planned and makes use of themes reflecting the personal relationship of the two poets, seeing these insults in the context of the whole may help us to fill in the gaps in the text. Or, since it is perfectly possible that the *Kolluvísur* never existed as more than a name, to understand the connotations the name was intended to evoke.

The structure of *Bjarnar saga* has been condemned as loose and arbitrary by, for instance, Sigurður Nordal:

allt þetta miðbik er mjög í molum, óskipulegt og samhengislaust . . . Um heimildirnar að miðhluta sögunnar er óþarft að fjölyrða. Hann er 17 kapítular,¹¹ og í þeim eru tilfærðar 28 vísur, sem mjög víða eru kjarni frásögunnar. Enginn skáldsöguhöfundur myndi heldur setja saman svo sundurlausa og óskipulega frásögn. Undirstaðan hlýtur að vera munnmæli, sem hafa verið í molum, og höfundur veit ógjörla, í hvaða röð hann á að segja frá þessum “smágreinum,” né hve langt líður á milli atburðanna. Það er eins og honum hafi fallizt hendur að reyna að steypa þessu saman í verulega heild, það er þóf og stapp, sem engin stígandi er í. (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, LXXVI, LXXIX)

[the whole of the middle is very fragmentary, disorganized and discontinuous . . . There is no need to say much about the sources of the middle part of the saga. It consists of 17 chapters, in which are cited 28 verses that to a large extent are the kernel of the narrative. No writer of fiction would choose to compose such an incoherent and disorganized narrative. The basis must be oral tradition, which was fragmentary, and the author was not sure in what order he should narrate these “petty quarrels,” or how long a time should elapse between incidents. It is as if he lacked the ability to attempt to mould together into a unified whole material that is tangled and repetitive, with no climax in it.]

Nordal is probably right in his judgement that the verses are the inspiration for this part of the narrative, and that they and some of the anecdotal material in which they are embedded reached the saga author in oral form. But he does less than

11. Chapters 10–26 (specified on page LXXV).

justice to the structural organization of the saga. I have argued elsewhere that the saga uses episodes in which abusive verse is exchanged as elements that advance the progress of the feud; insults are the currency of the feud as killings or physical attacks are in other sagas, and the content of the verbal abuse mirrors the sexual rivalry between the contenders (Finlay 1990–93).¹² Up to the point of the *trénið*—roughly halfway through the catalogue of exchanges—the hostility between the two poets has been purely verbal; I argue that the severity of this insult is so acute that it motivates a second stage of the feud in which physical violence plays a part. Þórðr is represented as so cowardly and devious that he does not confront Björn directly, but contrives assaults on him by others. The *Grámagaflím* exchange inaugurates a sequence in which verses no longer offer extempore commentary on events, but are poems said to have been composed earlier, which are reconsidered and compared either by the poets themselves or by others.

The fact that these poems are spoken by characters other than the poets themselves has two consequences besides the straightforward one of motivating the gathering of enemies against the hero (the killing of Þorkell motivates his father, the previously neutral Dálkr, to join Þórðr in the final assault on Björn). First, it moves the rivalry between the poets into the public sphere, where poetic productions are measured and assessed for their offensiveness as they would be before a court of law; this emphasizes their power to injure. Secondly, it cuts the poems loose from the need for the occasion that is usually provided when a *lausavísa* is attached to an anecdote, thus focusing attention directly on the act of poetic production.

In the final part of the saga, after the conclusion of the section marked out by Nordal as its middle, a new phase of action is initiated, in which Þórðr, having failed to get the better of Björn by means of indirect attack, is forced to enter directly into the conflict, and the saga moves quickly towards the climax that Nordal felt to be so lacking in the middle of the saga.

If we assume that to create this effect was the author's conscious intention, it suggests a very different way of working from Nordal's account of the inept cobbling together of a mass of unassimilated material. The author actively seeks to build up symmetry between the productions of his two poets, so that he can present their works in pairs, with one insult answering another. He is somewhat hampered by having considerably more verse to quote on Björn's behalf than on Þórðr's; twelve stanzas are attributed to Þórðr, twenty-seven (including the three of the *Grámagaflím*) to Björn. An economical solution to this problem might be to invent the names of poems, which never existed in reality but whose titles suggest content suitable to his theme. A fairly clear example of this, it seems to me, is the exchange of love verses that the poets are said to address to each other's wives later in the

12. Joseph Harris makes a similar observation: "many of the hostile acts are satirical sallies, especially in verse, since both men were adept skalds of the 'serpent-tongued' variety. In fact the structure of the saga itself resembles an acting out of the alternating dramatic exchanges of a flyting" (Harris 1981, 330). See also de Looze 1986.

saga (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 174). These verses are not quoted, but are named as if they were identifiable poems: a poem Þórðr is said to have composed about Björn's wife Þórdís is answered by Björn's *Eykyndilsvísur* on Þórðr's wife Oddný. Several of Björn's cited verses do refer to *Eykyndill*, that is, Oddný, the girl he was betrothed to before Þórðr cheated him and married her—the cause of the feud in the first place. The title *Eykyndilsvísur* could loosely refer to all of these verses, though they can hardly have been part of a coherent poem.¹³ But that Þórðr should address love verses to Björn's wife—who speaks to him only once, very contemptuously, in the saga as it stands—is unlikely, and the title of the poem, *Daggeisli* 'Beam of Day' and the nickname *Landaljómi* 'Light of the Land' he is said to have given her are probably inventions inspired by Oddný's nickname *Eykyndill* 'Island-Candle'.¹⁴ There may well be a similar explanation for the reference to the *Kolluvísur*.

The saga author may also have imported into his narrative, as no doubt authors must often have done, verses of appropriate content which did not originate in the story of Björn and Þórðr. While there is no way of showing that this was the case with the *Grámagaflím*, it is worth noting, as was pointed out above, that neither Þórðr nor his mother is specifically identified in the poem, and that its crude comedy is rather at odds with what Ursula Dronke calls the "scaldic dignity" of other elements in the poetic competition of Björn and Þórðr (1981, 71–72).

One problem with trying to account for the exchange of poems in chapter twenty as part of a coherently structured flyting is that the *Grámagaflím* comes as an apparent anticlimax after the item before it in the sequence, Björn's *níð* against Þórðr in chapter 17. This is cast in both verbal and visual form: a carving is erected in which two men are depicted in a posture suggesting a homosexual act; in case anyone fails to get the point, Björn accompanies this with a verse identifying Þórðr as the passive partner. Among those who have commented extensively on this passage is Meulengracht Sørensen, who argues that the image goes to the heart of the saga's narrative, reflecting and to some extent confirming the fact that Björn has seduced Þórðr's wife (whom Björn should have married in the first place).¹⁵ This is the only insult in the saga referred to by the word *níð*, probably because it includes

13. For a contrary view, see Marold 2000, 83–91. It is often unclear whether the term *vísur* 'verses' signifies a unified poem or a looser collection of strophes perhaps composed over a period of time. The hero of *Hallfreðar saga*, for example, has to pay compensation for the *Gríssvísur*, a name which may refer to a number of verses quoted in the saga in which Hallfreðr ridicules Gríss, besides others he is said to compose in the course of a winter; these may or may not amount to a single poem (Sveinsson 1939, 188, 193). The *Kolluvísur*, despite the plural form of the title, is referred to several times in the singular: "Húskarl kvazk hana aldri heyrta hafa,—'eða kanntu vísuna?'" [The farmhand said he had never heard it, "do you know the verse?"] (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 170). On the analogy of the poem *Kálfsvísa*, of which several strophes survive in *Snorra Edda* despite its singular title, *vísuna* here should possibly be translated as "the poem."

14. *Daggeisli* and *Landaljómi*, like *Eykyndill*, are kennings for the sun. The *Norwegian Rune Poem* includes the line "Sól er landa ljóme" (st. 11; Dickins 1915, 26).

15. Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 56–57; see also Ström 1974, 12–14; Gade 1986, 134–35; Finlay 1990–93, 169–71.

a carving. Compared with this, being called the son of a fish sounds rather mild. There are indications in the *Grámagaflím* sequence, however, that it is to be seen as an escalation of the seriousness of the verbal feud. Let us look in more detail at the *Grámagaflím* and analyse the nature of the attack that is being made.

The poem consists of three stanzas, one of which has only six lines and may have lost a couplet. The metre is that described in *Háttatal* as “in minnzta runhenda,” that is, lines rhyming in pairs; the line is short and end-stopped, with 4–5 syllables. This is similar to the form of praise-poems such as Egill’s *Hqfuðlausn*, but is also found in *kviðlingar* such as verse 2 of *Gunnlaugs saga*:

Hirðmaðr es einn,
sá’s einkar meinn;
trúið hónum vart,
hann’s illr ok svartr.

(Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 69)

[There’s a certain courtier who is especially evil; never trust him, he’s bad and black.]

Also comparable, but with a regular six-syllable line and final trochee, is Hjalti Skeggjason’s mockery of the gods:

Spari ek eigi goð geyja!
Grey þykki mér Freyja;
æ mun annat tveggja
Óðinn grey eða Freyja.

(*Njáls saga*; Sveinsson 1954, 264)¹⁶

[I don’t mind baying at gods. I think Freyja a bitch. It’s one of the two: Óðinn a bitch, or Freyja.]

None of these mocking poems is more than a stanza long. So we have no indication from comparable examples of the probable original length of the poem; this seems to be our only example of *flím* as a genre. There is no doubt that the abrupt, end-stopped metre contributes strongly to the impression of the distinctness of this poem from the other verse of *Bjarnar saga* and of its comparative crudity.¹⁷

The content of the satire, in which the animal with which the victim is associated is a fish, is unique and relies on an unusual wealth of circumstantial detail. We are told in the prose preamble that Arnóra ate a fish that Bjørn called a *grámagi* ‘grey-belly’; in verse 26 it is said to be “hrognkelsi glíkr” [like a hrognkelsi]:

Fiskr gekk á land,
en flóð á sand,

16. *Íslendingabók* and *Kristni saga* record a variant form of the first two lines of the verse; the third and fourth lines are believed to be a later addition.

17. Marold suggests that the use of *runhent* amounts to a veiled allusion to Þórðr’s English connections, “mockery of a poet who aped English innovations” (Marold 2000, 80), since the only two known praise poems using end-rhyme were composed in the British Isles. However, the parallels with the less formal *kviðlingar* cited here are more telling. *Sturlunga saga* includes further instances of verses in *runhent* metre referred to as *spott* ‘mockery’ (for instance, Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:279; see Almqvist 1991, 136–38).

hrognkelsi glíkr,
 vas á holdi slíkr:
 át einaga
 ylgr grámaga,
 meinblandit hræ;
 mart's illt í sæ.
 (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 168–69)

[A fish came to land with the flood on the sand, a lump-sucker seeming, slimy flesh gleaming. She-wolf of the gown (*einaga ylgr*, she-wolf of the trailing dress: greedy woman) gulped grey-belly down, poisoned and rotten; much is foul in the ocean.]

The hrognkelsi is not a fish that figures extensively in saga literature, although it is named in a fish-*pula* appended to *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998, 1:126, verse 485). *Hrognkelsi* is the Icelandic name for *Cyclopterus lumpus*, the lump-sucker, so named for “a suctorial disk on its belly with which it adheres to objects with great force” (Murray et al. 1989, s.v. “lump, *sb.*”). This coastal species is still caught in spring and summer in south-west Iceland; the male, *rauðmagi* ‘red-belly’, is eaten smoked or dried, while the female *grásleppa* ‘grey thin one (?)’ is valued for its roe (*hrogn*), which is used for caviar. Probably Þórðr’s humiliation partly depends on association with a species in which the female is more important, and indeed larger, than the male. Moreover, because it frequents shallow coastal waters, it was in fact fished for on the beach, by hand or with spears, a practice called “að fiska undir föeti.” This was done often by women and children; the fish was also gathered after it was washed up on the beach after a storm. In *Guðmundar saga biskups*, a boy drowns while fishing for hrognkelsi by hand (Sigurðsson et al. 1858–78, 1:610–11). The association of the fishing with women and children would not increase its heroic connotations. The fish is described as *hræ* ‘carion’, and said to be *meinblandit* ‘poisonous’ and slimy. This need not imply that it was actually rotten, though Joseph Harris infers an allusion to the fact that “the female is actually eaten in a ripe condition (like the delicacy *hákarl*, rotten shark)” (1981, 339 n. 30),¹⁸ and Lúðvík Kristjánsson uses the story in *Bjarnar saga* as evidence that hrognkelsi was not eaten in the district at the time of the saga’s composition (1980–86, 4:363).

But we are talking here about no ordinary hrognkelsi. The poem says the fish is “hrognkelsi glíkr,” as if to signal some doubt about its nature; and the prose relates that it was Björn who called it *grámagi*, suggesting that the term is his coinage. This may indeed be the case. The modern Icelandic name for the male is *rauðmagi*, while the female is *grásleppa*; the neuter *hrognkelsi* denotes the species. I am told that “the male does have a reddish belly, and the female is, compared with the male, rather greyish.”¹⁹ No other medieval text includes any gender-specific

18. This conforms to modern practice as reported by Þorvaldur Thoroddsen, who says that the *rauðmagi* is usually eaten fresh or smoked and the *grásleppa* salted, half-rotten (*sigin*), or dried (Thoroddsen 1908–11, 2:552–54).

19. I am indebted to Helgi Skúli Kjartansson and Matthew Driscoll for helpful information about the hrognkelsi and the etymology of its names.

reference to the fish. Only *Bjarnar saga* records the form *grámagi*. The logic of the satire, as well as the masculine grammatical form, implies that this refers to the male, as is inferred by Turville-Petre (1976, 88) and Lúðvík Kristjánsson (1980–86, 4:363). Fritzner also translates as “hannen af hrognkelsi” (1886–93, 2:214). If the modern distinction between the red of the male fish and the grey of the female has any physical validity, it is puzzling that the form in *Bjarnar saga* should transgress it. While Lúðvík Kristjánsson records a variety of other modern names for the fish (including *grálidda*, *gráslippa*, *gráslemba* [1980–86, 4:363–76]), all those which include the element *grá-* refer to the female. Cleasby and Vigfússon (1957, 566) claim as a parallel with the modern feminine term *grásleppa* the nickname *gróslappi* (Sveinsson 1934, 161), apparently using this form as a basis for the identification of *slappi* as “a lump-fish,” but this can hardly be sustained.²⁰ There is some basis, then, for the speculation that *grámagi* is a coinage deliberately merging elements of the gender-specific terms *grásleppa* and *rauðmagi* to suggest a creature of indeterminate gender, neither fish nor fowl.

Conception after swallowing fish is a motif known in Icelandic folktale, and indeed has international currency (Thompson 1955–58, vol. 6, §§T 500–599). As Marold notes, “only in Icelandic folktales does the motif extend to the devouring of the whole fish” (2000, 80 n. 6). Icelandic tales, too, share with the *Grámagafli* the idea of such an origin as derogatory, rather than presaging the birth of a hero. Several versions of the story of Kisa Kóngsdóttir tell of a childless queen who swallows two trout, one white and one black (the colours are red and yellow in one version), and as a result gives birth to a beautiful daughter and an ugly black cat (Árnason 1954–61, 4:513–19). There is, of course, no reason to suppose that this story is as old as the saga; but if the poet of *Bjarnar saga* did have access to a version of it, he might be using grey to signify semi-human.²¹ Once again, the imputations of indeterminate gender and of non-human origin—manifest both in the association with the animal and in the unnatural manner of conception—combine and reinforce each other in the slander. It has been suggested that the poem parodies tales of supernatural conception such as that in *Hyndluljóð* 41, where Loki becomes the mother of ogresses after eating a woman’s (perhaps a burnt witch’s) heart (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 294; Clunies Ross 1999, 66).²²

20. *Slappi* occurs as a nickname in *Laxdæla saga* (*Hölluslappi* [Sveinsson 1934, 197]) and in a list of derogatory man *heiti* in the Codex Wormianus version of *Snorra Edda* (Jónsson 1924, 104.6), varying the related *slápr*. De Vries translates as “lange, schlaffe person” [tall, flabby person] (1962, 513), Alexander Jóhannesson as “lange und faule person” (1956, 1171, 753). If this is the origin of the element *slappa* in the name of the female hrognkelsi, “given the shape of the creature in question this can only be the same sort of thing as calling a big man ‘tiny’ or a bald man ‘curly’” (Matthew Driscoll, e-mail to author, June 1997).

21. Coincidentally, folktale records a supernatural origin for the species itself; it is said that Christ spat in the ocean and produced the *rauðmagi*, while St. Peter spat and produced the *grásleppa* (Árnason 1954–61, 2:7).

22. Marold suggests that the poem alludes to the story told in *Flateyjarbók* of Sighvatr Þórðarson acquiring poetic gifts through eating a fish, in order to disparage Þórðr’s poetic skill: “Sighvatr is said to

The fantasy of Þórðr's piscine origin, transgressing the boundaries of human possibility in his conception through his mother's eating, his descent from a fish, and a fish obscurely deviant from its own species, may represent the kind of impossibility referred to by the term *yki*: "ef maðr segir þat frá qðrum manni . . . er eigi má vera ok gerir þat til háðungar honum" [if one man says about another . . . what cannot be, and does it to defame him] (normalized from Finsen 1879, 392). Contrasting with this fantastic element, the poem's humour depends on its insistence on a level of realistic experience generally ignored in the conventionally heroic sphere of the sagas. This emerges both in the association with this rather undignified fish and, in the second stanza, in the vivid physical representation of pregnancy, a subject usually euphemistically skated over in saga texts:²³

Óx brúðar kviðr
frá brjósti niðr,
svát gerðu eik
gekk heldr keik
ok aum í vqmb,
varð heldr til þqmb.

(Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 169)

[Her belly increased below her breast, so the oak of the girdle (*gerðu eik*, oak-tree of the belt or headdress: woman) walked with a waddle, sore in the womb, swelled like a balloon.]

Harris (1981, 339) links the image of the bloated Arnóra to the properties of the fish: "The lump-sucker is a bloating fish that feeds on the 'garbage' of the ocean floor. Is this not a fitting model for Arnóra, who is pictured as feeding off carrion on the beach and then swelling in pregnancy?"

The third and last stanza, which recounts the birth of the unnatural offspring, homes in on its true target. The poet pointedly details the expectant mother's announcement to her husband of the impending birth:

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

(Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 169)

[A boy was born. She had to warn (literally "had told") the man wealth-winning (*auðar gildir*, increaser of riches: man [Þórðr's father]); the birth was beginning. Fondly eyeing

have gained his extraordinary talent by devouring the head of an extraordinary fish. Correspondingly, Þórðr owes his birth to his mother's having eaten a fish—but this fish stank and so too, allegedly, do Þórðr's poetic abilities" (Marold 2000, 83).

23. See Jochens 1995, 79–80. In an unpublished paper Margaret Cormack (1997) discusses the more detailed treatment of pregnancy in the *Biskupa sögur*.

the dog-biter (*hundbíttr*, eater of dogs, or man who bites like a dog), lying, his eyes she thought brave as a she-goat.]

The first four lines seem, in themselves, weak and redundant after the graphic description of all-too-evident pregnancy. Harris interprets *ala* as “bring up, rear,” but it is more likely from the context, and the pluperfect *sagt hafði*, that *ala* means “to give birth,” and the point of the insult is the parallel implied between the superfluity and ignorance of the husband about to become the titular parent of a child he has not fathered, and Þórðr’s own situation, unknowingly fostering his enemy’s son (Harris 1981, 330–31; see Finlay 1991, 172–73). As Harris points out, *auðar gildir* may be no more than a colourless kenning for man, but the primary sense “increaser of wealth” acts as a satirical inversion of the heroic type “destroyer of wealth” which suggests a generous man; hence, miser. Björn himself applies a similar kenning, *hoddgeymir*, to Þórðr in verse 18 of the saga.

The animal images of the final lines, jostling to portray the lumpish offspring, stray from the central proposition of the victim’s fishy origin. He is referred to as a *hundbíttr*, possibly one who bites like a dog, but on the analogy of forms like *kolbíttr* and *fótbíttr*, more likely conjuring up the freakish inversion “man bites dog” satirically attributed to modern headline writers.²⁴ The image is all the more monstrous when applied to a new-born child and perhaps recalls the class-determining epithets that name the sons of Þræll in *Rígsþula* 12 (Dronke 1997, 164–65).²⁵ The poem’s final judgement of the poem on its subject is that, even to his doting mother, he looked “jafnsnjallr sem geit” [as bold as a nanny-goat]. Here the exotic byways of fantasy are abandoned for an image central to the conventions of verbal abuse, comparison with one of the lowliest of female beasts. In *Lokasenna* 23, Óðinn accuses Loki of having been a “kýr mólkandi ok kona” [a milch-cow and a woman] (Dronke 1997, 338).²⁶ Cowardice is frequently suggested by comparison with a nanny-goat, as Fritzner outlines: “Geit forekommer ofte i Sammenligninger som skulle tjene til at fremhæve eller illustrere (a) en Mands Frygtagtighed eller Mangel paa Mod, (b) et Menneskes Enfoldighed eller Uforstand, (c) en Kvindes Geilhed,” citing among other instances the phrase *ragr sem geit* in *Karlamagnus saga*; it also occurs in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (Fritzner 1886–96, 1:573b). *Snjallr* has sexual

24. “When a dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news” (attributed to John B. Bogart, American journalist [Partington 1996, 116]).

25. Dronke points out the suggestion of monstrosity attached to the thralls: “Þræll . . . has the disfigurements endemic to old age and poverty and hard work that might make him and his unlovely children seem almost monstrous in the mocking eyes of those born later to better fortunes. Mocking names are another burden that Þræll’s kin shares with the giants—‘Thistlebeard’, ‘Sootface’, ‘Slowcoach’—and the giantesses—‘Hangjaw’, ‘Hairyfingers’, ‘Grittingteeth’” (Dronke 1997, 183).

26. The taunt is ambiguous: “Should we interpret 23/6, as ‘a milch-cow and a woman’ or as ‘milking cows and a woman’? Is Loki here re-enacting the primordial role of the cow Auðumla, who fed the first giant Ymir (*SnE* 13), but re-enacting it in the underworld, for some mythological parody? I have for the translation assumed that Óðinn is describing an ordinary woman’s life—milking cows and bearing children—but in the underworld (though this may well not be the poet’s intention)” (Dronke 1997, 361). See Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 24.

connotations in *Ljósvetninga saga*, where two women dispute the relative status of their husbands: “Þá værir þú vel gefin, ef þar væri einmælt um, at bóndi þinn væri vel hugaðr eða snjallr” [you would be well married if there were general agreement that your husband was bold and manly] (Sigfússon 1940, 18).²⁷ Harris compares the line with a similarly constructed insult in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, where Sigrún calls the man she is unwilling to marry “konung óneisan sem kattar son” [a king as not-inglorious as a cat’s son (kitten)], with a comparable ironic discrepancy in sense between the adjective and the noun of comparison. In the *Grámagaflím* there is a particular reason for the sarcastic use of this construction. The laws explicitly state that to call a man *ragr* was potentially fatal; the inversion allows the poet to allude to the conventional formulation *ragr sem geit*, while ostensibly stating its opposite. The technique of *yki*, if we may use that term for the poem’s central fantasy, is oblique; the poem is rounded off with a more outright—though still allusive—accusation of unmanliness.

If we are correct in identifying Björn’s slur on Þórðr’s parentage as an example of *yki*, the weight accorded to this offence in Grágás explains its position in the saga as part of the process of escalation of verbal insult, in which it follows the erecting of *níð* and in turn is capped by a series of verses—itsself not cited—for which the victim is able to justify the summary execution of the reciter. That the ambiguity of the diction of *dróttkvætt* was routinely exploited for the purposes of insult is commonly deduced from the prohibition against reciting praise composed in order to insult (see p. 29 above); *yki* represents another kind of obliquity, transparent in expression but clearly metaphorical in import because of its literal impossibility.

The saga narrative suggests that the three stanzas we have are only an extract (“þetta er í flíminu,” Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 168). Can we imagine how the poem might have continued? Harris, who sees the poem as parody of a traditional genre of poems about a hero’s youth, speculates: “one would like to think the poem originally went on to a satirical *Heldenjugend*, perhaps working out the consequences of the piscine paternity” (1981, 332). It is hard to imagine what these consequences might be. The poem seems to be leading up to its final dismissive comment, with the unspoken word *ragr* hanging heavy in the air. And the reading of this insult from the infant’s eyes does lead on very aptly to the saga’s immediately following scene, in which Björn identifies Þórðr’s supposed son Kolli as his own, in a verse which stresses the heroically flashing eyes of the little boy. But this is not evidence that the *Grámagaflím* originally ended on this note; it could equally be the reason why the saga author quoted the poem this far and no further.

We turn now to Þórðr’s answering poem, the *Kolluvísur*. It happens that another poem called *Kolluvísur* is attributed, without citation, to the protagonist of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*: “Þat heita Kolluvísur, er hann orti of kýr út á Íslandi, er hann gætti” [Cow-verses is the name of a poem which he composed about cows he was

27. References later in *Ljósvetninga saga* make clear that this is a veiled allusion to an accusation of perversion against Guðmundr (Sigfússon 1940, 40, 52).

looking after out in Iceland] (Kristjánsson 1956, 276). Here, as in *Bjarnar saga*, the context involves poetic rivalry: Halli's antagonist is said to respond with his *Sóptrogsvísur* [Swill-trough verses]. The pairing of these names suggests, as indeed does the prose context, that these poems are about menial work. This parallel supports the likely connection between Þórðr's *Kolluvísur* and another exchange of verse insults in *Bjarnar saga*, also based in the mundane transactions of everyday life: the sequence in which Björn's verse mocking Þórðr for being bitten by a seal is answered by Þórðr's mockery of Björn for lifting a new-born calf and throwing it into a stall:

Hvat skyldir þú halda
 heima ríkr í slíki,
 enn hqfumk orkn of skeindan,
 ár á mínu sári?
 Þat mun sorg, und saurgan,
 seimþollr, hala kollu,
 remmitungls, at røngum
 randskjalfr, greiptu kalfi.

(Nordal and Jónsson 1983, 153)

[Why must you, O mighty mud-dweller, keep casting—though a seal has scratched me—scorn on my wounding? You'll be sorry, soldier (*seimþollr*, fir-tree of gold: man), at sight of shield shaking (*remmitungls randskjalfr*, shaker of the strong moon of the rim [shield]: coward), you clutched a twisted calf 'neath a cow's tail, dung-encrusted.]

The verse itself is more equivocal than the gloss put on it by the saga. "Greiptu at røngum kalfi und saurgan hala kollu" [you groped for a crooked calf under the grubby tail of a cow] seems to assert a more hands-on (or in) approach to the birth of the calf than does the prose. Mocking Björn for the menial and possibly feminine role of midwife is part of the thrust of the verse, but it could also suggest sexual activity with the cow, as Ursula Dronke speculates:

The *Kolluvísur* would almost certainly have been an elaboration of the mockery expressed in an earlier *lausavísa* attributed to Þórðr . . . For a man to pick up a new-born child may signify that he accepts paternity; it is not difficult to see what coarse comedy Þórðr could have made out of the incident in his *Kolluvísur*, or to imagine the incident being invented, and given circumstantial detail, to provide a convincing occasion for such verses, by a teller of the saga (whether the verses were authentic or not).

If so, the function of the *Kolluvísur* is to anticipate the incident following the reference to it in the saga, in which Björn claims to be the father, not of a "crooked" or "breech-born calf," but of Þórðr's son Kolli:

If Þórðr mocked Björn as father of a calf by a cow, it would be a pointed riposte . . . in their increasingly bitter game of verbal combat, for Björn to claim that the bravest-looking of Þórðr's flock of children was not a child of Þórðr's begetting, but of Björn's: identifiable by the dauntless glance, not *jafnsnjallr sem geit*. (Dronke 1981, 71)

This explanation of the gist of the *Kolluvísur* remains an attractive guess. The laws do not refer to allegations of having sex with animals as instances of *níð*. Likening

a man to a stallion or a bull, which may be tantamount to an accusation of having sex with female animals, is specified as an insult in the Norwegian *Frostaþingslög* (Keyser and Munch 1846, 225), but comparison with a stallion or a bull was only half as serious as comparison with the female counterpart. The fact that it was classed as an insult is at odds with the symbolism of phallic aggression outlined by Ström and Meulengracht Sørensen. Indeed, in the flyting in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, v. 42, Guðmundr applies such an image to himself by likening his opponent to a mare and boasting of having “ridden” him. The lesser status of this kind of insult as *halfréttisorð* [insult requiring lesser compensation] could not justify the violent response of Björn, who kills the man who recites the *Kolluvísur*, or the comment that these were “miklu háðugligri” [much more insulting] than the *Grámagaflím*.

It would be more congruent with the pattern of symmetrical insult in the saga if Þórðr had accused Björn in turn of unnatural origin. In this case the poem’s title would presumably imply the assertion that Björn was the son of a cow. There is no firm evidence that any such insult existed, but a parallel in the late fornaldarsaga *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, in which the victim is elaborately called the son of a mare, shows what it could entail:

Veit ek gerla ætt þína. Hrosskell, faðir þinn, var mikill vinr Gautreks konungs, föður míns, ok skiptust þeir gjöfum við. En þar sem þú býðst til at stríða í móti mér, þá vil ek segja þér eina litla frásögn ok gera þér kunniga ætt þína. Þat var á einum tíma, sem oft bar at, at faðir þinn kom við Gautland. Faðir minn tók honum vel ok bauð honum til veizlu, ok þat þá hann, ok var honum veitt it kappsamligasta. Sat hann þar mjök lengi. Faðir minn átti þá gripi, er ágætir váru. Þat váru stóðhross, hestr mikill ok vænligr, apalgrár at lit, ok með fjögur merhryssi, ok at skilnaði gaf Gautrekr konungr föður þínum marga dýrgripi, er gætir váru, ok þessi stóðhross gaf hann honum. Föður þínum fannst mikit um gripina ok gjafirnar ok þó mest um hrossin ok þakkaði þessa gjöf Gautreki konungi með mörgum fögrum orðum. Skildu þeir, ok fór faðir þinn á braut með hrossin ok heim. Hann varðveitti þau virkuliga ok gekk til hvern dag. Ok eigi liðu langar stundir, áðr þat fundu menn, at föður þínum þótti hestrinn ekki jafngóðr sem verit hafði. Þat fundu menn ok, at honum þótti hrossin slík eða betri. Ok einn dag, er hann kom til hrossanna, fann hann hestinn drepinn ok lagðan með spjóti í gegnum. At þessu gaf hann sér ekki. Þat undra menn, er honum þótti eigi skaði at um slíkan grip sem hestrinn var, en því oftár gekk hann til meranna, ok þeim fylgdi hann því fastara. Eitt var hrossit bleikt á lit. Þat þótti honum bezt allra hrossanna, ok um várit ætluðu menn, at fyl mundi í merinni bleiku, allir þeir, er hana sá. Svá er sagt, at stundir liðu, þar til er merrin berr. Varð þat öðruvísi en menn ætluðu; þat var sveinbarn, en eigi fyl. Faðir þinn lét taka ok fæða upp barnit. Þat var mikit ok frítt. Hann lét þenna svein heita Hrossþjóf ok kallaði sinn son. Ok er eigi kynligt, at þú rembist með, þar sem þú ert merarson. Hafði ok faðir sinn sjálfr drepit hestinn, ok eigi veit ek, hvárt hann hefir fleiri syni átt við þeiri meri, en sagt heyrði ek, at hann ætti þann annan son, er Hesthöfði hét, ok væri ok at honum hrossakyn, en þar sem þér eruð mjök líkir hvern öðrum ok allir illir ok ólíkir öðrum mönnum, þá er þat líkast, at þér séuð svá allir getnir. (Jónsson 1954, 4:121–22)

[I know your family well. Your father Hrosskel was a great friend of my father, King Gautrek, and they exchanged gifts. And since you are preparing to fight against me, I will tell you a little story and acquaint you with your origin. It happened once, as it often did,

that your father came to Gautaland. My father welcomed him and invited him to a feast, and he accepted and was lavishly entertained. He stayed there for a long time. My father had some very valuable treasures. They were a stud of horses, a big and beautiful stallion, dapple-grey in colour, and four mares. When they parted King Gautrek gave your father many valuable presents, including these horses. Your father was very pleased with the treasures and gifts, especially the horses, and thanked King Gautrek effusively. They parted, and your father went home with the horses. He looked after them carefully and went to see them every day. And it was not long before people noticed that your father did not think the stallion as good as he had at first. They also noticed that he thought as much or more of the mares than before. And one day when he went to see the horses, he found the stallion killed, run through with a spear. He seemed not to care about this. People wondered that he did not feel the loss of such a fine asset as the stallion, but went to see the mares all the more and kept even closer to them. There was one light-coloured mare. He thought it the best of all the mares, and in the spring everyone who saw the light-coloured mare thought she was carrying a foal. It is said that time passed until the mare foaled. It turned out other than was expected: it was a boy, not a foal. Your father had the boy taken up and reared. He was big and handsome. He had the boy named Horse-Thief and called him his son. No wonder you give yourself airs, since you are a mare's son. Your father had killed the stallion himself, and I don't know whether he had any other sons with that mare, but I have heard tell that he has another son called Stallion-Head, also of horse origin; since you are all so like each other, all evil and unlike other men, it is most likely that you were all conceived in the same way.]

The victim of this satire, one Hrossþjófr, and his brother Hesthöfði already have otherworldly and animalistic associations, since they are the leaders of a gang of berserks.²⁸ The bizarre anecdote apparently has as its starting-point an entirely neutral scene in *Gautreks saga* recounting King Gautrekr's gift of horses to the berserks' father, Hrosskell, whose name presumably supplied the inspiration for the equine fantasy (Jónsson 1954, 4:35).

While there is no reason to postulate a relationship between *Hrólfs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, it is interesting to note the stylistic similarity of this insult to the *Grámagafli*. Both suggest a realistically impossible situation—the descent of a man from an animal—but do so in an apparently realistic and circumstantial style. Both elaborately and circuitously approach the victim of the satire by means of ridicule of his parent's behaviour: Hrosskell's alleged sexual congress with a mare, Arnóra's eating of a gastronomically negligible, possibly decayed fish. The comic indignity of the insult in the *Grámagafli* suggests, perhaps, satirical treatment of an already satirical genre, but in both cases the insult to the parent is incidental; the real purport of the insult is an attack on the status and birth of the victim, who is rendered “ólíkr öðrum mönnum” by the unnatural identification with the animal.

The term “satire” implies an element of inversion; to this extent Harris is right to stress the anti-heroic element in the *Grámagafli*. But there is more to it than this. The anti-hero is not only mean and ridiculous, but is explicitly identified with the animalistic and non-human. Ursula Dronke's identification of the “paternity

28. *Hrossþjófr* occurs as a giant-name in *Hyndluljóð* 32; see McKinnell 2001, 396.

theme,” while important, also does not fully deal with this aspect. I wonder whether the saga author, in naming the verses the *Kolluvísur*, was inventing a title which would build on the known association of Þórðr with one verse about a cow, but would also suggest, in the aftermath of the citation of the *Grámagafli*m, an insult more congruous with that poem, and one which casts a slur on the hero’s own birth. We can never know whether the *Kolluvísur*, if it actually existed, was an example of *yki*, matching the gross birth-fantasy of the *Grámagafli*m. There is some justification, however, for seeing the fragmentary remains of Björn’s poem as an instance of “þat . . . er eigi má vera,” and for interpreting it, according to the prescription of Grágás, as an insult of equal severity to the raising of *níð*.

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