Ten Scandinavian and North English Etymologies

(1) OI Edda, (2) OI þulr/OE þyle, (3) OI Loki, Laufey, (4) OI Viðarr, (5) OI litr, (6) (O)I glenna, etc., (7) (O)I glíma, (8) OI kofa(r)n, (9) N Engl. taistrel, (10) N Engl. pawky

1. Edda

The history of the book title Edda is enveloped in total obscurity, for this word emerged as a byname (nickname). The long list of Icelandic bynames put together by Finnur Jónsson (1907) contains puzzling specimens of ancient slang. Hundreds of them mean nothing to modern Icelanders, and most do not occur except as bynames. They are awaiting the anthropologist who will explain how people ready to kill for a mocking verse put up with the most demeaning soubriquets one can imagine (cf. Liberman 1994c, 465–66). Given so many unintelligible bynames, it is not surprising that the meaning and origin of the word Edda remains a mystery.

Jan de Vries (1962, 93) offers an incomplete survey of opinions on Edda. Holthausen (1948, 45), Alexander Jóhannesson (1956, 44, 102), and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989, 144) add nothing to the works of their predecessors. All the attempts to trace the history of Edda assume that this name has something to do with either old lore or skaldic poetry, or Oddi, the place where Snorri grew up. But titles like Grágás, Fagrskinna, Morkinskinna, Móðruvallabók, Flateyjarbók, Hauksbók, Kröling, etc., contain references to irreconstructible associations, the outward appearance of the manuscript, its place of origin, the first word in it, and the like, but never to its content. Nor is Hungvaka a cookbook. This circumstance should never be lost sight of.

For a long time it was believed that Edda is a variant of Veda (so, for example, in Holmboe 1852, 120). As late as 1883, Long mentioned this derivation as self-evident (1883, 243). In the same year, Guðbrandur Vigfússon and York Powell brought out their celebrated Corpus poeticum boreale. In the introduction to volume 1 (xxvi–xxxvii), the history of the word Edda is told in great detail, and in “Excursus 4” to volume 2 (514) a new etymology of Edda from Ertha ‘Terra Mater’ of the Teutons is put forward. According to Guðbrandur Vigfússon,
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a western man has learnt a snatch of a High German song on that favourite subject with all Teutons, the Origin of Mankind and Mother Earth, from a Southern trader or comrade... In this song the word “Erda” (or Grandmother Erda) occurs; he puts it into his own tongue as neatly as he can, and the result is “Edda.” Or, if he himself did not make the change, the minstrel would have done so, who sung it after him, for the Lay had passed through many Northern mouths before it got written down in our Codex.

This etymology is now cited (if at all) only to prove that Guðbrandur Vigfússon was a poor philologist. And yet he may have borrowed his idea from Jacob Grimm (1841, 22), who reconstructed the putative cognates of Edda as Gothic *izdô and Old High German (OHG) *erdâ (cf. his brief comment in Grimm 1878, 62, “ëdda [proavia, vielleicht: origo generis? oder summa, auctoritas, acumen als name für die alten dichtungen?]”). But Grimm wisely refrained from identifying the root, while Guðbrandur Vigfússon took this incautious step. Guðbrandur Vigfússon could not decide whether Edda was a borrowing from German or a cognate of *ertha. He first says that dd in Edda is from zd, which is wrong, for r in þorð is old (that is, not from z by rhotacism). But then he speaks about a snatch of a German song learned by a Western man; surely, such a man would not have reproduced ertha as edda. Heinzel (1885, 69) pointed out in his review that Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s etymology is nonsense, and Eiríkr Magnússon (1896, 224–26) destroyed what little was left of it (he does not seem to have read Heinzel).

Guðbrandur Vigfússon, like Jacob Grimm before him, was inspired by the fact that OI edda meant ‘ancestress’ or ‘grandmother’; this word occurs in Rígsþula. Rígr visits Ái and Edda, spends three nights in their cottage, and in due time Edda gives birth to Þræll (‘slave’), the progenitor of all future slaves by Þír (‘bondswoman’). The common noun ái has survived into Modern Icelandic (‘great-grandfather’), but edda has dropped out of the language, and its etymology is unknown. Few people in those days lived to be really old, so that an everyday word for ‘great-grandmother’ could not have had wide currency (the same of course holds for ‘great-grandfather’). Moreover, edda has a shadowy existence outside Rígsþula. The main question is whether Snorri knew it. Here Eiríkr Magnússon’s remarks have retained their importance. He quoted and compared the relevant passages in the Codex regius and the Codex Upsaliensis of the Younger Edda (Magnússon 1896, 226–29). The Codex regius contains a list of heiti for ‘woman’, among which we find “sværa heitir vers móðir, amma, priðja edda, eiða heitir móðir” (cf. Sigurðsson et al. 1966, 1:538). Flanked by amma ‘grandmother’ and eiða ‘mother’, edda can mean ‘great-grandmother’.

In the capacity of Ái’s mate, Edda must also be understood as ‘great-grandmother’. But in the Codex Upsaliensis, the oldest extant manuscript of the Younger Edda, the series of appellatives for kinswomen including edda is missing from the list of ókend heiti for ‘woman’ (Sigurðsson et al. 1966, 2:347), although the manuscript begins with the crucial sentence: “Bok þessi heitir edda. hana hevir saman setta snorri sturlo sonr” [This book is called Edda; Snorri, son of Sturla, put it together] (Sigurðsson et al. 1966, 2:250). According to many scholars, the
Codex Upsaliensis is not far removed from the original. Eiríkr Magnússon concluded that someone (not necessarily Snorri) who knew the word edda ‘great-grandmother’ and the fact that Snorri’s book was called Edda would hardly have left out the passage with a comment on edda. In Eiríkr Magnússon’s opinion, Snorri was not familiar with the common noun edda ‘great-grandmother’ and could not have had it in mind when he called his work Edda. If the book title does not go back to Snorri, the same argument is valid for the compiler or scribe of the Codex Upsaliensis.

The most imaginative development of the great-grandmother idea belongs to Sivert N. Hagen (1904). He gave a detailed survey of earlier scholarship, but, for obvious reasons, did not mention Eiríkr Magnússon’s doubts about Snorri’s knowledge of the common noun edda. His starting point is that Snorri knew it and that he wanted to call his book (ars) metrica, “but without actually using the word metrica. And since he did not understand the real etymological meaning of the word, he translated it only after first connecting it with the similar word matrix, which is plainly a derivation from the word mater ‘mother’, and which is recognized as meaning ‘great-grandmother, urgrossmutter, eltermutter, oldemoder, edda’” (Hagen 1904, 130–31). In the remaining four pages of the article, he explains why Snorri could have arrived at such an etymology and how etymological games of the Middle Ages and exercises in folk etymology resulted in the production of bizarre words and ideas.

Hagen ignored two difficulties. He did not address the question raised by Eiríkr Magnússon, and he assumed that Snorri tried to find an appropriate name for Skáldskaparmál and especially for Háttatal. But Snorri’s Gylfaginning is not less important than his guide of the skaldic meters, even though in later times eddureglur referred to versification, not to mythology. The only scholar who noticed Hagen’s article was Neckel (1908b). Usually a reserved critic, he expressed his admiration for Hagen’s idea. He was also the only scholar who pointed out the specific nature of the title Edda: Edda is not a title in the same sense as Guðrúnarkviða, Sverrissaga, or Skáldskaparmál; it is a nickname given for fun, like Sigrfluga (King Sverrir’s banner), Ormr inn langi, etc. But he returned to the great-grandmother theory. In his opinion, Snorri had chosen as his book title the word preserved by Rígsþula because the idea of an old mother, matrix, matched so aptly the concept of (ars) poetica. Written twelve years after Eiríkr Magnússon’s paper, Neckel’s review contains a sympathetic reference to Jacob Grimm and Müllenhoff, but passes by Eiríkr Magnússon’s central thesis, namely, that Snorri appears to have been ignorant of the word edda. Neckel (1908a) also devoted an article to the etymology of edda, but it does not discuss Snorri’s book.

The latest defender of Edda ‘great-grandmother’ was Gutenbrunner (1942). Contrary to Hagen, Gutenbrunner believed that Edda had originally served as the title of Gylfaginning only, for each of the other two parts of the Younger Edda
had its own name. Since Edda resembles such words as Eigla, Njála, Grettla, and so forth, he suggested that the tales of the gods had once been called Eddumál or Eddusaga, Edda being an abbreviation of the longer title. This idea is uninviting: Eigla appeared as the short (clipped) form of Egilssaga, but the abbreviation Edda is the same as its source edda. Also, the prehistory of the name Edda cannot be demonstrated; therefore, Gutenbrunner’s reconstruction falls to the ground.

The author of another derivation of Edda was Árni Magnússon, who knew and rejected the great-grandmother etymology and as early as 1787 traced Edda to óðr ‘wits; poetry’. The semantics of óðr is discussed in all works on Óðinn and is here of interest only in so far as it connects the name of the god who stole the mead of poetry with the name of the first book on the foundations of skaldic art. Árni Magnússon’s derivation found its champion in Konráð Gíslason. Few people read Konráð Gíslason today, but those who do know how irritating his style is: dozens of seemingly disjointed examples form a loose argument; there is almost no narrative and no culmination. However, it usually pays off to plod through his works, for Konráð Gíslason was a scholar of immense erudition and considered no detail insignificant. His 1884 article is typical. It begins in medias res with the following observation: “The verb grenna, derived from the adjective grannr ‘tenuis’, has been glossed as follows” (Gíslason 1884, 42, my trans.). By the middle of the article it becomes clear that Konráð Gíslason wants to establish the existence of the alternation δ~dd. Such niceties naturally did not bother Árni Magnússon, but Konráð Gíslason needs a “law” to prove his derivation. Once he has shown, as he believes, that grenna ‘satisfy one’s appetite’ and greddir ‘having had one’s fill’ can be related, he addresses the history of the words stedda ‘mare’ and ledda ‘lead plummet of the fishing line’, presumably derived from stóð ‘stud’ and lóð ‘bullet’. With such parallels, Edda and óðr also appear to be related.

Konráð Gíslason’s etymology was immediately attacked by Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1885). He showed that ledda and lóð (both designating ‘lead’, the name of the metal) are late borrowings and that neither of them is derived from the other. The origin of stedda is obscure and is better left alone. As a final thrust of his rejoinder, Guðbrandur Vigfússon proposes the pair góðr ‘good’–gedda ‘pike’ (fish), thus adding insult to injury. With the analogues stedda–stóð, ledda–lóð gone, the bottom is knocked out of Konráð Gíslason’s argument once and for all. Gering also found Konráð Gíslason’s derivation unacceptable. In his annotations to a bibliography of Scandinavian philology for 1884, he summarizes Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s letter and adds his own comment: “the new explanation is invalidated by the fact that as a skaldic term óðr is rarely used. Under certain circumstances, μανία could also mean ‘poetic ecstasy’, but μαντική [‘prophetic gift’] never means ‘poetics’” (Löschhorn and Gering 1885, 152, my trans.). Eiríkr Magnússon (1896, 230–32) subjected Konráð Gíslason to devastating criticism. Hagen (1904, 127–29) devoted a lot of space to the refutation of the óðr-edda etymology; his objections to Konráð Gíslason are valid, but none of them is new.
Contrary to expectation, compromised ideas tend to be indestructible. The great-grandmother etymology of *Edda* had a distinguished supporter (Gutenbrunner) in 1942, and it may still be alive. The reason for its longevity is not far to seek: *edda* is the only link between *Edda* and the rest of Old Icelandic vocabulary. The same is true of the *óðr-Edda* etymology. It was endorsed by Mogk (1893, 77), who says that both Finn Magnusen and Peter Erasmus Müller derived *Edda* from *óðr* (I could not find the relevant passage in Magnusen’s books; see Müller 1811, 66–68), and with reservations by Sijmons 1899, 16–20. When later Mogk changed his mind (1901–9, 570–71), Flom took him to task for it (1905, 575). It was favored by Alexander Jóhannesson (1932, 19; 1956, 44, 102). The supporters of Konráð Gíslason’s etymology recognize its weakness, but semantic considerations outweigh all others.

A variation on Konráð Gíslason’s theme was offered by Willy Krogmann (1934). He objected to Konráð Gíslason’s pseudoparallels *stóð/stedda, lóð/ledd* – *óðr/Edda*, expressed his surprise that no one had contested them (!), and derived *Edda* from *óðr* ‘singing’ or ‘art of singing’, or ‘the corpus of songs’ (*óðr* is not glossed) > ‘poetry’, an abstract noun like Gothic *hauhiþa* ‘height’. Unfortunately, *óðr* is a figment of Krogmann’s imagination, and even if such a word had existed, *óðr* would not have had to lose labialization after syncope and umlaut, and *óðr* would not have become *dd* (Andersen 1936, 67–70).

The third widely known etymology of *Edda*, like the previous ones, is also centuries old. Its originator, Björn á Skarðsá, traced *Edda* to *Oddi*, the farmstead on which Snorri grew up. Snorri lived there from the age of three (1180) to 1197, when his foster father Jón Loptsson died, and he must have profited immensely by the collection of manuscripts Jón had. Björn’s etymology was not completely forgotten. Karl Blind (1895) pointed out that Rasmus Anderson (1880) shared Björn’s view: Anderson surveys the other derivations of *Edda* and refers to those who “have suggested that it [i.e., *Edda*] may be a mutilated form of Odde (*Oddi*), the home of Saemund the Wise, who was long supposed to be the compiler of the Elder Edda.” In his book on Norse mythology, Anderson mentions only *edda* ‘great-grandmother’, *Veda*, and Swed. *veta* ‘know’ (1879, 116; the same in later editions). The present-day popularity of the *Edda-Oddi* theory goes back to a lecture and an article by Eiríkr Magnússon.

On November 15, 1895, Eiríkr Magnússon spoke on the origin of the literary term *Edda* at the Viking Club. He discussed the great-grandmother theory, Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s derivation of *Edda* from *Erda*, Árni Magnússon–Konráð Gíslason’s *óðr-Edda* idea and suggested that *Edda* was formed from *Oddi*. The report printed in *The Academy* (Anonymous 1895) reflects the enthusiasm of the audience. The paper was considered to be “among the most important of any that had yet been given before the Viking Club” and “certainly one of the most learned” and the result “such . . . as could not well be impugned . . . new and startling” (Jón Stefánsson); “apparently no one had previously known the true mean-
ing” of the term (E. H. Baverstock). In expressing his agreement with Jón Stefáns-
son, A. F. Major, hon. sec., noted that “where an Icelander could find nothing to
criticise, an Englishman could not venture to say much” and added: “If we talked
of the Codex Upsaliensis, if in our own early literature we spoke of the Exeter
Book and the Vercellae Book, why should not Icelander scholars have talked of
the book of Oddi?” Finally, the president (the Rev. A. Sandison) said that Eiríkr
Magnússon’s “destructive criticism was . . . most fair, though crushing; while the
constructive part of his paper was, if possible, even more brilliant, and so lucidly
set forth that to him, at any rate, it had carried conviction.”

In his talk, Eiríkr Magnússon did not mention Björn á Skarðsá and presented
his etymology as absolutely new. (In Magnússon 1895, only the misprints — pollr
and pella instead of þollr and þella — are corrected, and it is said that no genuine
Icelandic root ending in øð ever combines with the suffix edd.) Karl Blind could
not come to the lecture and was much surprised to learn that Eiríkr Magnússon’s
discovery had been called new and startling; hence his reference to Anderson’s
book (see above). Blind knew nothing about Björn á Skarðsá, but Eiríkr Magnús-
son was well aware of his existence. In the published text of his talk (Magnússon
1896), there is a brief mention of Björn, but it is skillfully embedded in a long
paragraph about other matters:

Coming now to the consideration of the derivations of Edda as a book title, the first that
presents itself is Arni Magnússon’s. After rejecting the great-grandmother interpretation
and Björn of Skardsa’s suggestion that edda was derivable from Oddi, the home of
Sæmund the Learned, whom Björn took to be the author of the Younger Edda, he pro-
poses to derive the term from “óðr,” which originally means “wits,” the faculty of think-
ing and reasoning. (Magnússon 1896, 229–30)

The following footnote is given to the word Oddi: “Vigfusson, who has made a
very careful study of Björn’s Edda speculations, does not mention this point, and
I have no means of verifying the source of Arni’s statement” (Magnússon 1896,
229n2). It must be said in all fairness that, although Eiríkr Magnússon was not the
first to suggest the connection between Edda and Oddi, it was he who made this
connection look plausible. In 1880, Anderson still speaks about Edda as a muti-
lated form of Oddi, while Eiríkr Magnússon showed that the two forms can be
related by means of umlaut. As analogical cases he cites Vatnshyrna ‘the book
of Vatnshorn’, knot–knetr (‘nut’–‘nuts’), kom–kemr (‘come’–‘comes’), sof–
sefr (‘sleep’–‘sleeps’), brodd–bredda (‘goad’–‘big knife’), boli–belja (‘bull’–
‘cow’), and pollr–pella (‘pine tree’–‘pine tree sapling’) (Magnússon 1896, 237 n1,
238).

Not all of Eiríkr Magnússon’s examples strengthen his argument. Belja ‘cow’
is “a bellowing animal” and is not derived from boli ‘bull’. Brodður ‘sharp point’
and bredda ‘knife’ are probably related, but the situation is not clear, for bredda
surfaced only in the fifteenth century (Magnússon 1989, 78). The pollr (=pollur)–
pella pair also poses problems. Eiríkr Magnússon gives Swed. tall ‘fir tree’ as a
cognate of pollr, but tall is a cognate of OI poll (Mod. Icel. þöll) ‘young fir tree’,
not of þollr. Nor does þoll(u)r mean ‘fir tree’: þoll(u)r is simply ‘tree’; however, it can be related to þoll (þoll). Þella ‘fir tree’ is a cognate of þoll < *þalno¯ (Vries 1962, s.v. “þoll”), but its ties with þoll(u)r need further proof.

If we look at the products of i-umlaut in short vowels, we will find the alternation a~æ > a~e (as in nafn ‘name’ ~ nefna ‘to name’), e~i (as in segl ‘a sail’ ~ sigla ‘to sail’), and o~ø (as in norþr ‘north’ ~ nørðre ‘more northern’) (Noreen 1970, 57–58). Owing to the alternation OI ø~e, sofa ‘sleep’ acquired the third person sg. sofr/sefr, and the plural of knot ‘nut’ became knotr/knetr. The alternation o~e permeated morphology, but it seldom underlay word formation (and when it did, the derivation was never straightforward). Eiríkr Magnússon had no trouble finding the pair Vatnshorn ~ Vatnshyrna (he could have added Hrafn-kell~Hrafnkatla), but evidently there is no pair of this type with o~e. It is most unlikely that Snorri or any of his contemporaries should have used the paradigm knot~knetr, sofa~sefr to invent a word like Edda that would form a partner for Oddi, and if the association was not obvious, there would have been no point in inventing such a name. We do not think of Boston and lot when we hear best and let, though the alternation e~o is present in get~got and length~long. If Snorri wanted to immortalize Oddi, why did he not call his book Odda? And of course we do not know for sure that Edda is Snorri’s coinage; even Snorri’s authorship of the Younger Edda was not recognized as widely as we might wish. Eiríkr Magnússon must have had similar doubts, for he suddenly explains that Edda is related to both Oddi and Oddr and that it

is the female counterpart of Oddr or Oddi, as, for instance Æsa is of Asi, Hrefna of Hrafn, Olöf of Ólafr, &c. She is the passive, while Oddr or Oddi is the active principle in the evolution of the species, simply: Woman. This is the Edda of Rigsmál. From Oddi, as a local name, the derivative fem. Edda for a particularly notable book preserved at a place of such a name, is in every way appropriately evolved both as to form and sense. This I maintain is the derivation of the Edda of Cod. Upsaliensis, which, as far as any tangible evidence goes, has nothing to do with Rigsmál. In both cases, however, Edda descends from the stems odd- and oddan- in a perfectly correct manner. (Magnússon 1896, 238)

So, Ái’s wife Edda and Snorri’s Edda turn out to be the same word after all, twice derived from the root odd(an)-. This conclusion is quite incredible.

Like Konráð Gíslason’s etymology, the one proposed by Eiríkr Magnússon is still treated with respect. The editors of the Saga-Book included Eiríkr Magnússon’s article in the 1992 anniversary volume of the Viking Club. Jan de Vries (1962, 93) finds Eiríkr Magnússon’s etymology the best of those in circulation (Murray et al. 1989, s.v. “Edda,” preferred Konráð Gíslason’s). Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989, 144) calls both etymologies unconvincing, but, like James Murray, he would rather trace Edda to óðr than to Oddi. Sijmons (1906, xcii–xcii) gave up óðr and accepted Oddi as the source of Edda.

One more etymology of Edda was offered by Hugo Pipping (1926, 103–5). His starting point is the Swedish proverb “som man är klädd, så blir man hädd”
[as one is dressed, so is one judged]. He notes that in its present form this proverb makes little sense, for hāda means ‘defame, revile’, rather than ‘assess, judge’, and concludes that people once said not “hwar ær swa hæðher, som han ær klædher,” but “hwar ær swa ædder, som han ær klædher,” with *ædder being the past participle of *ēra ‘to honor’. He sets up OI *ædder ‘honored’, explains Edda ‘a book about valued (respected, honored) things’, though he does not exclude the possibility of Edda being the past participle of *eira < *eizian ‘bound in brass’. He compares Fagrskinna ‘beautiful leather’ to his first gloss and Eirspennill ‘brazen clasp’ to the second.

Pipping’s reconstruction is needlessly complicated. In Swedish, the cognates of OI heiðra ‘show respect, honor’ and hæða ‘mock, revile’ appear to have been confused, so that hāda ‘revile’ took on both meanings, but the meaning ‘honor’ has been preserved in the proverb in which it serves as a doublet of hedra. Hellquist mentions Pipping’s opinion without discussion (1939, s.v. “hāda”). With regard to Edda, Pipping’s conjecture is of no value, for the participle *eddr (‘honored’ or ‘bound in brass’) would have had to occur very often to become the title of a book, but it has not been attested a single time. Besides that, the names of manuscripts were always nouns. Pipping’s etymology has never been subjected to serious criticism. Jan de Vries (1962, 93) simply dismisses it as “verfehlt” [wrong].

This brings our survey to a close. Its highlights are as follows. (1) Edda is most probably not a word reflecting the content of Snorri’s book (‘old lore’, ‘ars poetica’, ‘ars metrica’, ‘venerable past’, or whatever). It is rather a conventional, perhaps even jocular byname referring to the appearance of the original manuscript or to some extraneous factor. There was a fashion of giving Icelandic manuscripts bird titles. Such are the legal codes Grágás ‘grey goose’, Gullfjödr ‘gold feather (quill?)’, and Hryggjar-stykki ‘a kind of duck’. It is hard to believe that Grágás got its name because it was copied with a quill made from a feather of a grey goose. Perhaps Edda was also one of such titles: Edda would be an appropriate “pet name” of æðr pronounced [æ:ðr] f. ‘eider duck’! If the title Edda has nothing to do with what is written in the Younger Edda, our chance of discovering its etymology is close to zero.

(2) Whatever Edda meant, the word must have been clear to Snorri’s contemporaries. Edda ‘ancestress’ or ‘great-grandmother’ was known too little. As long as there is a suspicion that even the scribe of the Codex Upsaliensis was ignorant of this word, it is better not to explain Edda as edda. With some ingenuity, Edda can be associated with óðr and Oddi. But the flaws of both derivations are such that both etymologies should be abandoned. No one would have understood Edda as meaning Óðbók or Oddabók. There were more natural ways to suggest the connection between the book and óðr or Oddi than coining a word whose sound shape furnished no clue to the riddle. (3) Whatever the origin of Edda, it was invented as the title of one particular book, more or less, we can assume, on
the spur of the moment. It is therefore futile to look for the prehistory of this word and set up asterisked forms (\textit{*ezda, *erda}, and the like). Hypotheses based on such forms carry no more weight than those which trace \textit{Edda} to Sanskrit \textit{Veda} or German \textit{ertha}.

2. OI \textit{þulr} / OE \textit{þyle}

The figure of the Old Scandinavian / Old English \textit{þulr} / \textit{þyle} has been discussed by scholars for at least two centuries. The authors of countless articles and chapters in books devoted to Unferth, King Hrothgar’s \textit{þyle}, keep arguing not over the basic facts, but over their interpretation. A few proposals (‘poet’, ‘spokesman’, ‘orator’, ‘jester’, ‘priest, wizard’, ‘sage’) have been defended and rejected over and over again. But in Scandinavian philology the question seems to be closed. The tone was set by Axel Olrik (1909, 8–10), who drew a picture of an ancient \textit{þulr}, a teacher, the king’s alter ego, a man shedding words of wisdom from his seat (\textit{stóll}) that stood on top of a hill. Olrik’s inspiration was the runic stone of Snoldelev (“Gunnwalds steininn, sunar Hróalds, þular á Salhaugum”; photographs of this stone can be found in many books, for example, in Vries 1956, table 10, between pp. 400 and 401). In 1927, Vogt brought out a monograph on \textit{þulr}. He surveyed all the available data, concluded that the \textit{þulr} had been connected with the Germanic cult practices, and called him a “Kultredner.” Although the reviewers of Vogt’s monograph questioned the \textit{Kultredner} hypothesis (Malone 1929; Kauflmann 1934, 132–33), Jan de Vries (1956, 403) gave Vogt enthusiastic support, and Holthausen (1934, 374) referred only to him in the entry on \textit{þyle}.

Below, I will offer some ideas on the meaning of \textit{þulr} / \textit{þyle} as prolegomena to what I consider the most promising search for the etymology of this word. Spellbound by the Scandinavian \textit{þulr} on a hill, some students of Old English literature have also attempted to show that Unferth was an exorcist, a wizard, a heathen priest, or even a hypostasis of Wodan (Clarke 1936; Hardy 1969, 60–68; Hardy 1979, 442–43; Baird 1970; Hollowell 1976). This path leads nowhere; one has to twist the clearly narrated facts from \textit{Beowulf} in light of incomprehensible hints in Scandinavian sources. However tempting it may be to try to obtain an all-round picture of the Scandinavian \textit{þulr} and then build a bridge to Unferth, this procedure is unrealistic, for Scandinavian texts contain fragmentary and seemingly contradictory references, while Unferth is a figure in flesh and blood. Our only hope is to characterize the Old English \textit{þyle} and then see whether the type we have reconstructed is compatible with its Scandinavian counterpart.

Since \textit{þyle} is glossed not only \textit{orator} but also \textit{scuerra} in Old English, it has been suggested that Unferth is the predecessor of court jesters. Stumpf (1936, 397) and Welsford (1935, 85–87) had few doubts on this score, but their idea ran counter to the role played by the Scandinavian \textit{þulr} and by Unferth and made no stir until it was revived (or rather advanced for a second time) by Rosier (1962)
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and especially Eliason (1963); see also Kabell 1979. In its new form it found several supporters and several critics (among the latter are Ogilvy 1964; Hughes 1977; Bjork 1980).

As is well known, Beowulf promises to fight Grendel, but at the banquet Unferth recounts a story from Beowulf’s youth which allegedly proves that Beowulf is obstinate, foolhardy, and not equal to the task he has undertaken. Beowulf parries the accusations and puts Unferth to shame. Later, Unferth appears in the poem a few more times: he observes Grendel’s arm and does not say anything in his humiliation, but when Beowulf is getting ready to fight Grendel’s mother, Unferth lends him his sword Hrunting, which fails at the decisive moment and after the adventure is returned to its owner.

The main question about the banquet scene is why Unferth attacks Beowulf with impunity. We can dismiss Deutschbein’s answer (a þyle, like the Irish *filid*, was so revered that even Hrothgar did not dare interrupt him [1909, 114–15]), for it is not Unferth’s impertinence that matters. We have to understand why someone — regardless of his position — should have wished to insult and alienate a potential avenger and savior. Nor was it safe to irritate Beowulf! We are told that Unferth was jealous of Beowulf. He may well have hated the young whippersnapper, and yet who would have allowed him to vent his anger in public? There is only one answer to this question, and it has been clear to many for a long time: Unferth attacked Beowulf because as þyle he was supposed to do so. Everyone, including Beowulf, knew what to expect and how to behave under the circumstances.

A newcomer had to be tested, for the host to find out how dangerous he was and whether he was not an impostor (Britton 1971, 247–48). A visit meant months of living together. Today’s guest could become tomorrow’s usurper, so some sort of initiation was necessary. Þórr’s visit to Útgarðaloki’s is a classic example. Once he and his companions arrived, they were immediately invited to take part in several contests and were humiliated. The moment Beowulf sets foot in Denmark, he is also made to go through “customs”: he is tested by the coastguard, then by Wulfgar, and finally by Unferth. This is what Brennan says on the subject:

> Whether Unferth is a fool or a knave or both, or the symbol of some evil force in the cosmos, . . . may be put aside for present purposes. Whatever his personality or symbolic value, his function in the diplomacy is not obscure. As the coastguard had challenged Beowulf to match his deeds to his words, and as Wulfgar had challenged him to observe the niceties of Danish protocol, and as Hrothgar had challenged him to forgo possible claims against the Danish kingdom, and as Wealhtheow will challenge him to defend her children’s succession to the throne, so Unferth challenges the hero to defend himself in public disputation. And while this may be . . . a test of his *sapientia* as the coastguard had challenged his *fortitudo*, and while the debate may provide amusement to the court in the form of a *flyting*, it is also an important part of the negotiation in progress. The king is about to make a decision which may jeopardize the kingdom’s independent survival; the case *pro* has been made by the petitioner himself and the case *contra* will now be presented by Unferth. (Brennan 1985, 9–10)
It has always been known (though often contested) that the Unferth-Beowulf exchange resembles the Scandinavian senna (flyting). Several detailed analyses (especially Clover 1980) have made this idea familiar (cf. Parks 1990). But, as Brennan points out, the banquet scene in Beowulf, though a typical case of verbal dueling, is not a senna, for its function is different: it is not a prelude to a fight.

From oral tradition the Beowulf poet inherited the figure of a professional taunter and the motif of testing the hero. The office of Hrothgar's þyle offered him a unique opportunity to combine the two. Ogilvy (1964, 373), Rosenberg (1969, 57; 1975, 204–5), and Feldman (1979) compared Unferth to a type character (Malvolio), Sir Kay of Arthurian legend, Euryalus at the court of Alcinous in the Odyssey, Kent, a rough, outspoken fellow, in King Lear, etc. All these men indeed have something in common, but once again, only their function is relevant to us. Sir Kay is the whipping boy of the Arthurian cycle, something like Dr. Watson alongside Sherlock Holmes: Kay’s lack of manners and Watson’s lack of imagination serve as a foil to the perfect knights and the perfect detective; contrariwise, Unferth is not a foil to Beowulf: he is an indispensable part of the ensemble whose other members are Beowulf, Hrothgar, and Wealthow. The formulaic theme of the hero’s arrival often contains the following elements: the guest is welcomed by the king, challenged by a retainer, and soothed by the queen (Smits 1986, 29–33, on Beowulf). In this respect, too, the þyle stood the Beowulf poet in good stead.

“Perhaps,” observes Hulbert (1951, 16), “when a stranger had performed his beot before the court, it was the business of the þyle to bring up some event in the stranger’s past which could be interpreted unfavorably, even though the þyle knew his imputations were untrue, so as to test the stranger’s ability to defend himself.” On the other hand, Welsford reminds us “that it is sometimes regarded as lucky to be abused, and that in very much later times good English hosts would keep a jester for the purpose of scoffing at his guests” (1935, 87). All this is true, but we need a conception that will allow the numerous observed parallels and motifs to merge.

We have to accept the following. (1) According to Beowulf, the king had a special man (þyle), whose duty consisted in challenging visitors. (2) Insulting visitors was part of their “initiation.” It was expected and taken seriously. (3) A þyle’s position was ambiguous: his services were valued, but he had a thankless job. Worthy guests defended themselves well, and a þyle must often have been worsted, as happened when Unferth attacked Beowulf. He could not help making himself ridiculous, so, in a way, he resembled the Hofnarr of the future. Modern scholars shy away from the term jester, which conjures up the Fool in King Lear and Rigoletto. But there is no shaking off the evidence of the gloss scurra. Unferth sits at the feet of his master, and that is where he belongs (Vogt 1927, 114; Eliason 1963, 269; Silber 1980, 103). In similar fashion, the trickster combined the traits of a culture hero, who had to learn his skills by trial and error, and a clown, for one’s first steps are of necessity awkward. That is why the trickster could be elevated to the rank of a demigod or turn into a buffoon and still later
into the hero of picaresque novels. The glosses *orator* and *scurra* fit the þyle’s office perfectly. (4) As early as 1909, Orlrik called Müllenhoff’s (1891, 288–301) idea about the þyle being a poet like a scop or a skald antiquated (Orlik 1909, 10). But verbal creativity in the epoch of the Edda and *Beowulf* was naturally associated with poetry, and even Vogt admits that there was something in common between the þulr and the composers of nið (1927, 58–59, 70). A þyle must have had a “dossier” on all heroes and princes. He was as well informed as any Widsith, but, unlike the singer of tales, he needed the knowledge of comparatively recent events, rather than historical parallels, and in this respect he was closer to the skalds.

In the second part of the poem, Unferth is indistinguishable from the other retainers. The banquet is forgotten not because Unferth was drunk (*Beowulf*’s jibe need not be taken literally; besides, being drunk did not absolve the speaker from responsibility: Einarsson 1934, 978), but because there is nothing to remember: each actor played his part, and a new drama has started. This is another reason Rosier’s reconstruction of Unferth’s Machiavellian scheming is indefensible; Unferth is not a villain, he is a þyle. The fact that he owns Hrunting should not bother us. As far as we can judge, the plot preserved by the finale of *Regimsmál* and especially by *Fáfnismál* reached Anglo-Saxon England in garbled form. The similarity between Regin and Unferth is incontestable (Rosier 1962, 3), but Hrotti/Hrunting must have been in the possession of Sigurðr’s, not Regin’s counterpart. Attempts have been made to play down the fame of Hrotti/Hrunting (allegedly, *Hrunting* is a cognate of Engl. *runt*), but names were not bestowed on swords to bring out their uselessness. Whatever the reasons Hrunting ended up in Unferth’s hands and failed against Grendel’s mother, the lending of it to *Beowulf* tells us nothing about Unferth’s office.

A last caveat is in order here. *Beowulf* has been twice analyzed according to Propp’s model of the fairy tale (Shippey 1969; Barnes 1970). Both scholars drew the conclusion that Unferth is a kind of magical donor (Shippey 1969, 6–9; Barnes, 1970, 422–24). This idea is wrong. Rosenberg (1975, 202, 204–5) noted a logical mistake in it; it should also be borne in mind that the donor’s gift always works, while Hrunting does not. *Beowulf* is an epic poem “composed by theme,” unlike the fairy tale with its rigid structure; consequently, the arrival scene does not prepare for the gift of the sword.

According to Fred Robinson (1974, 130–31), Unferth is “a blustering, mean-spirited coward who does not enjoy the respect of his comrades and who seeks to bolster his self-esteem by decrying Beowulf’s past performance and present qualifications.” On the contrary, Unferth is a sharp-witted, well-informed, brave man, whose reputation has spread far and wide, and who performs the difficult task of challenging visitors, provoking their *beot*, and guarding the court of his king against usurpers and impostors. Such is the þyle of Old English epic poetry.

Scandinavian allusions to the þulr can be interpreted in too many ways. By and large, the þulr must have been a close relative of the þyle, even though he had
a special seat (stóll), rather than sitting at the feet of the king. He also often made a fool of himself while performing his duty. Especially pathetic was an old þulr: wise but powerless, and Hāvamál 134.5 enjoins us not to laugh at him. It was not necessary to be a þulr to be called one. Vafðrúðnir (Vafðrúðnismál 9.6) introduces himself as inn gamli þulr (which commands respect!), and Óðinn, the invincible challenger of all his opponents, was a fimbulþulr (Hávamál 80.5, 142.5), an arch-þulr, so to speak. In Grímnismál 27, fourteen rivers are named; only two of the names are compounds: Fimbulþul and Geirvimul. Geirvimul is reminiscent of Öðinn’s name Geirþrolnir (see Vries 1962, s.v. “Geirþrolnir” and “vimarr”). Perhaps both rivers were dedicated to Öðinn (the distance between ‘stream’ and ‘man’ was short, as evidenced by vimarr). Fimbulþul could have been an especially mighty or dangerous, or treacherous river (certainly not ‘a roaring river’, for þylja meant ‘murmur, mumble’). The literal meaning of þylja was to ‘speak like a þulr’ or ‘compose þulur’ (a special type of mnemonic poetry); cf. the verb skálda.

An admired orator, a despised taunter, a feared character assassin, a repository of obscure gossip — the þulr was all of this and much more, but never a wizard or officiating priest (Kultredner) and hardly ever an evil counselor. The use of the word þulr in everyday life is attested to by the “Víkarsbálkr” of Gautreks saga. Starkaðr did not want to sacrifice King Víkarr to Öðinn, but was duped into doing it. His reward was the derogatory title (almost a nickname) þogull þulr ‘mute þulr’. This alliterative phrase of the sartor resartus type does not mean that Starkaðr was a þulr: it was coined or used as an insult and can be glossed ‘the defeated’. Vogt called the phrase þogull þulr an oxymoron (1927, 45), and indeed ‘mute þulr’ is like ‘wingless bird’ or ‘declawed tiger’, the most miserable creature one can imagine (cf. Hollowell 1976, 244).

Unferth challenged Beowulf and played his part as best he could, but some time earlier, when Grendel arrived, Unferth had kept mum. Beowulf’s gibe (“if you had been as brave with Grendel as you are now with me”) probably hurt more than we can realize (cf. Britton 1971, 249). No one was able to resist Grendel, but Grendel appeared as a visitor and an ellengæst ‘valorous guest’, and Unferth had to test him. He missed his chance, and now he is a mute þyle (“Ða wæs swiðegræc, sunu Þç[ç]laæces” [980]). Swiðe secg is a less pointed phrase than þogull þulr, but its idea is the same. (The comparison of Starkaðr after the sacrifice and Unferth at the sight of Grendel’s severed arm has often been made.) When Þórr and Loki bandy words in Lokasenna, each of them begins his speech with þegi þú (other verbal duelers do the same). We are apt to understand these words as ‘shut up’, and this is what they mean, but within the framework of a senna they carry additional connotations: he wins in a flying who silences his opponent (Harris 1979, 69, 73n15).

Nothing definite is known about the etymology of þulr/þyle. Both words belong to the same strong declension (i-stem; no umlaut in Old Icelandic because the root is short). The noun *þuliz must have been old, and one can expect related
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forms outside Germanic. But even in Germanic the few putative cognates are of little interest. Although OI þula could in some exceptional situations refer to any poem (cf. Rígþula), a usual þula was a versified list of names, that is, something mechanical and composed for memorization, not for pleasure. If Mod. Icel. þaul and þauli ‘difficult situation’ are also related to þulr, as Persson seems to have thought (1915, 216), it is characteristic that all the compounds beginning with þaul- designate laborious tasks, solid enterprises, and the like. The genre of the þula accords well with the idea implied by þaul-.

The earliest etymology of þulr (or rather of þyle) was offered by Schlutter (1896, 87). He connected OE þyle and OE þel ‘board, platform’ and suggested that a þyle was, from a historical perspective, an orator who used the platform for his appearance. The author of the next conjecture, Francis A. Wood (1899, 267; 1919, 246; 1927, 324–25), traced þyle/þulr to the Indo-European root *tuel- ‘swell’ and compared þyle to OE geþyll ‘breeze’ (an obscure word from a gloss). Loewental (1919, 236) cited Lat. tumeo ‘(I) swell’ and tullii ‘violent hemorrhages’; þulr emerged from these efforts as the producer of ‘a torrent of words’. Torp, too, thought of a þulr as a vehement speaker, for he derived þulr/þyle from the root *tus ‘rage’ (1909, 188). Torp could have been influenced by the idea of Óðinn, the “furious” god of poetry. Loewental also mentioned Russ. toloka ‘work done by a group of peasants, thrashing floor, pasture’ (stress on the second o or a) and its Baltic cognates, allegedly from ‘swell’. Seeing that þylja meant ‘whisper’, it is hard to imagine þulr as having anything to do with Wood’s “swelling” or Loewental’s “Wortschwall.” Latvian tulúoties ‘procrastinate; chatter’, suggested as a cognate by Alexander Jóhannesson (1956, 450–51), is too remote but closer to ‘murmur’.

Blankenstein (1908–9, 134) explained þulr in light of Church Slavonic tiskovati ‘interpret’. This explanation was supported by Olrik (1909, 10n5), Vogt (1927, 27), and Jan de Vries (1962, 626), who called it the best as regards meaning; it certainly fits the idea of þulr ‘interpreter of magic’, but not that of a challenger, taunter, or orator. Also, the fact that Old Icelandic borrowed the word tulkr `interpreter’ (cf. Swed. tolka; Norw., Dan. tolke) from Baltic or Slavic seems to indicate that the Scandinavians did not have cognates of this word. Trier gives no references to his predecessors (1944–45, 118–19). Perhaps he was unaware of their hypotheses, but he combined several elements of the former etymologies. He compared þulr to OI þil (= OE þel ‘board’) and both of them to Russ. toloka and to other Baltic and Slavic related words. For Trier þil/þel was both a stage (Ge-rüst) and a territory fenced in (Gehege), and þulr a speaker belonging to a strictly defined group.

In 1987 I began working on a new etymological dictionary of Modern English (see, for example, Liberman 1991 and 1994b). One of the lessons I have learned from sifting countless conjectures, some of them fanciful, others reasonable, still others brilliant, even if not always persuasive, is that scholars tend to
promote their solutions in disregard of those advanced by their predecessors. But a good etymology should not only contain a clever idea; it must make the other etymologies redundant. I am unable to offer a convincing etymology of þulr (just as I was unable to solve the Edda crux), but I find it useful to clear away heaps of respectable-looking rubbish. If we, however reluctantly, agree that the existing etymologies of Edda and þulr/þyle are wrong, we will stop referring to them, as we have stopped referring to Horne Tooke and Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary.

Chance comparisons — with OI þil (OE þel), Lat. tullii, Russ. toloka (assuming they are acceptable philologically), and the like — because we need an Indo-European root *tel-/*tol- — will not make the derivation of þulr clearer. Only two ways are open to us. We should either look for the answer in archaic religious vocabulary or in medieval slang. The first way has been chosen by Polomé (1975, 661–62). In his view, the þulr fulfilled the “role of oral performer of the cult, mediating between men and gods . . . Described as sitting on a hill, pronouncing mysterious words, he must have communicated with the deity by means of special prayer formulas.” If this is what the þulr did, þulr can perhaps represent the zero grade of the root preserved by Hittite talliia, a verb possibly meaning ‘solemnly call upon the god (to do something)’ (this is Polomé’s etymology). But the evidence for identifying the þulr and the priest is wanting. The word that will illuminate the prehistory of þulr (if it ever happens to be found) will rather mean ‘mock’, or ‘folly’. Even Lat. stolidus and stultus ‘obtuse, foolish, stupid’ provide better clues to *þuliz than Church Slavonic tlakovati or Hittite talliia.

Recently, some attention has been expended on the name Unferð. Perhaps Hunferð is the correct form after all, and the time-honored emendation Hunferð to Unferð, introduced to save the vocalic alliteration in all four cases in which Hunferð occurs and to turn him into a legitimate son of Ecglaf, was unnecessary. It is also possible that -ferð goes back to -ferhð, but even if we could solve these problems, little progress would be made in the search for the etymology of *þuliz, for there is no reason to believe that Hrothgar’s þyle had a telling name like Alvíss, Malvolio, or Barnacle (see especially Vaughan 1976). Fred Robinson’s (1970) gloss on Unferð ‘Un-intelligence’ or ‘Folly’ suits my ideas about *þuliz. However, the match would be too good to be true: the Beowulf poet could not have known the etymology of þyle, and he did not consider Unferth stupid. Nor was any of the Scandinavian þulir a fool.

Etymology keeps pointing to the humble antecedents of all Germanic word-smiths. The scop started as a scoffer, the skald as a scolder (though the second case is less obvious). The *þuliz was like them. He did not mount a platform (OE þel, OI þil) to pour out his invective, he did not interpret anything or call upon the gods. The name given him was low slang (like mimus, scurra, and so forth). It is no wonder we are at a loss when we attempt to trace its origin: we are seldom successful even in trying to guess the origin of our own colloquial and vulgar words.
3. Loki and His Mother Laufey

Some time ago, I published a long essay on Loki and Útgarðaloki (Liberman 1992b). Half of it is devoted to the origin of Loki’s name. Here I would only like to call the attention of those interested in such matters to my conclusions. I believe that Loki was originally a chthonian deity and that his name meant ‘enclosure’ (from lúka ‘close, lock up, bolt’). Germ. Loch and OE loc(a) ‘enclosure’ are cognates of Loki. This etymology and the comparison of Loki to Grendel (whose name can also be understood as ‘bolt, latch’) goes back to Jacob Grimm, and there would be no virtue in repeating it if Loki’s name were not used for multifarious fantasies on Indo-European themes. Two of them will suffice as examples. Carnoy (1955, 51, s.v. ‘Οδυσσεύς) compares Loki and Odysseus, for alongside ‘Οδυσσεύς, ‘Ολυμπεύς (the source of Ulysses) exists. The two characters are said to share the root *leuk- ‘light, brilliance’ or *leugh- ‘lie, deceive’. A partial inspiration for this idea must have been Walde 1927–32, 2:410 (the same in Walde 1938–54, 1:824; cf. Pokorny 1959, 686). Knobloch (1974) returns to the old etymology of Loki < *wlqw-a¯nos and compares his name to Volcānus and Ossetic Kurd-Alæ-Wærgon ‘lux/lupus’. The Ossetic connection may owe its existence to Dumézil’s attempt to represent Loki as Syrdon’s counterpart. It is a matter of some importance to discredit such speculations.

If Loki started his career as a chthonian deity, his ties to his father Farbauti ‘dangerous striker’ (a kenning for death) and his children Hel, the goddess of the underworld, and Fenrir, the main enemy of cosmic order, must have been old, which also explains the names of his mother: Laufey and Nál. Laufey ‘leafy island’ is simply ‘earth’, and, in a way, so is Nál. *Náley would be an almost exact doublet of Barrey (in the Younger Edda [Jónsson 1931, 41, line 15]), the place (“grove”) where Gerðr promised to meet Freyr (Barri in For Scírnis 39 and 41 [Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 77]). The compound Nálgrund existed, and, curiously enough, in Modern Icelandic nál means both ‘needle’ and ‘bud’. There is probably no reason to refer Nál to nár ‘corpse’, for it would be more natural if Laufey and Nál were synonyms.

4. Óðinn’s son Víðarr

Víðarr, a silent god, whose only function was to avenge Óðinn, that is, to be his father’s son, lived in a wooded tract overgrown with shrubs and tall grass (Grímnismál 17), but viðr ‘wood; tree’ has a short vowel, while in Víðarr the vowel is long. Since it is hard to imagine that the names of a god and his abode should be related by ablaut, Víðarr cannot mean ‘the lord of the woods’, though the later mythologists connected Víðarr and viðr, as evidenced by Grímnismál. Nor does this exercise in folk etymology explain Víðarr’s role (the Scandinavian pantheon lacked Pan’s counterpart, and in Iceland the deities of “the dark forest” would have been soon forgotten; even in fairy tales Icelanders are lost in the fog,
not in the wood). Attempts to connect Víðarr and víðr ‘wide’ have also failed to yield a satisfactory meaning.

The best solution would be to explain Víðarr as ‘offshoot, offspring’, and there is a way to arrive at such an etymology. Very early in its history, Germanic developed the syncretism ‘child’/‘wood’. Compare, for example, Engl. chit ‘young of a beast, very young person’ (as in chit of a child, chit of a girl, and the like) and ‘potato shoot’ recorded in the seventeenth century on the one hand and OE ciþ ‘shoot, sprout, seed, mote in the eye’ on the other; Germ. Kind ‘child’ and Old Saxon cíthlêk ‘tax on bundles of wood’. The association could have been from ‘offshoot’ to ‘child’, as in imp, scion, stripling, slip, or from ‘chip off an old block’, or even from ‘stub, stump’ (something formless, “swollen”) to ‘child’. In studying the history of German words for ‘boy, lad’, one constantly runs into nouns designating ‘peg, stump, bundle’, etc. (see the etymology of Bengel, Knabe, Knecht, Knirps, and Striezal in etymological dictionaries). The most complete list of such words can be found in Much 1909. In the Scandinavian picture of the world, the descent of human beings from trees (Askr and Embla) finds the well-known complement in skaldic kennings for ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Outside Germania, the Pinocchio myth points in the same direction.

In light of these facts, it seems that Kauffmann (1894, 168n1) was right when he compared Víðarr and víðr ‘willow’, though one can dispense with his *víða-gairaz ‘willow branch’. Jan de Vries (1962, s.v.) calls Kauffmann’s etymology of Víðarr the least convincing of all. Perhaps this harsh verdict can be mitigated. One can ask, why Víðarr from víðr? Why precisely ‘willow’? And why Askr ‘ash’? Why Embla (possibly ‘elm’)? (See Liberman 1992a, 78–79.)

5. The Gifts of the Gods (Völospá 18)

Three gods make Askr and Embla human: Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr. Each of them could have been expected to have given the first human beings the property for which he is “responsible”: thus, in the Greek counterpart of this tale Athena would have endowed her protégé with wisdom, Aphrodite with the power to attract women, and so forth. But nothing is known about Hœnir and Lóðurr, so we cannot guess what wonders they worked. The gods gave Askr and Embla ond (all these nouns will be cited in the accusative, as in the text), which can be understood as ‘breath’, óð ‘spirit’ or ‘speech’, which probably came from Óðinn, lá, and lito góða.

In the first half of strophe 18, it is said that “ónd þau [that is, Askr and Embla] né átto, óð þau né hóðo, lá né læti né lito góða” ; then “ónd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hœnir, lá gaf Lóðurr oc lito góða” (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 5). Læti dropped out of the catalog; perhaps it was a synonym of lá. Læti is usually explained as the ability to move (it can also mean ‘voice’), while lá is glossed as either ‘warmth’ or ‘life’s color’. Lito (pl.) seems to pose no problems, for litr (cf. Gothic wlits, Old Saxon wliti) is ‘color’ and, by association, ‘human appearance’. Although the most
obscure of these words is lá (blood?), it may be that lito góða has also been misinterpreted.

The gods took care of people’s ability to breathe, move, and speak, they gave them blood and human features, but they seem to have forgotten to supply Askr and Embla with a reproductive system. All the relevant nouns in Völospá 18 begin with l. The creation myth in the form it has reached us must have been fairly old, and if the text is not corrupt, lito ‘color(s)’ is a wrong word: since its l- goes back to wl-, lito could not be an original member of the alliterating series. Either lito found its way into the strophe after wl- > l- or it does not mean ‘color(s)’.

In the Elder Edda, there is one more baffling occurrence of the word litr. While teasing Þórr, Óðinn says that Sif, Þórr’s wife, entertains a lover in her husband’s absence and adds, “langt myndir þú nú kominn, Þórr, ef þú litom fœrir” (Hárbarðzlióð 50.3–4; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 86). The beginning is clear (“You would have been far along, Thor, if you”), but litom fœrir makes no sense. However, the line needs no emendation; as Sophus Bugge noted long ago, the same enigmatic phrase occurs in Bergbúaþáttr, in which a giant says, “ferk opt litom þopta,” which may mean “I often row [=travel by means of oars in boats]” (this passage is reproduced in most annotated editions of the Edda). In the giant’s line, litom (dat. pl.) seems to designate ‘oar’. If this is correct, the end of Óðinn’s speech should be understood “if you applied your oars,” with an allusion to ‘penis’ (‘oar’): “you would have been right in it if you had worked with your oar(s)” (as Sif’s lover is now doing). The nonscurrilous meaning of Óðinn’s remark is unlikely, for his taunt must be offensive. It is not improbable that inscription no. 9 of Maeshowe contains the same obscenity, with lut- being the main word (Liberman 1995, 265). In Old Norse, there could have been the l-t (lit-/lut-) root meaning ‘peg, stump, oar, penis’. Such roots (k-b, r-b, and the like) were most common, and vowels alternated freely in them. See also section 8, below.

Equally changeable were their final consonants. The complex l-t had a doublet l-d. In the Old Saxon Heliand, Zacharias, after having heard the prophesy, says about himself and Elisabeth, “is unca lud giliðen, lîk gidrusnod,” apparently, “our time for having children is gone, our bodies are withered” (Behaghel and Mitzka 1958, 9, line 154). The context is unambiguous, but lud is a ē̄paξ λεγόμενον. It is usually glossed ‘form, figure’ or ‘bodily strength’ and referred to the root *leudh- ‘grow’. Rauch (1975) examined all the literature on lud and came to the conclusion that this word means ‘sexual power’, which is possible, though if lud is related to Norw., Swed. ladd/lodd and OI lodda/lodd- (see below), the meaning can be ‘youth’, that is, the time when one is still a ladd and a lodda. She also cited Scottish lud ‘buttocks’ (perhaps a short form of luddock). In Murray et al. 1989, luddock is glossed ‘the loin, or the buttock’. Buttock is the sum of butt ‘thicker end, esp. of a tool or a weapon; trunk of a tree, esp. the part just above the ground, etc.’ (the definitions are from Fowler and Fowler 1990, 152) + the suffix -ock. I assume that lud(d) at one time also meant ‘thicker end; tree trunk’ and so forth, including ‘penis’. 
Still another possible candidate for membership in the l-t/l-d groups is Norw. -ladd, mentioned above. Ladd means ‘thick sock worn over another sock or stocking’, but in tusseladd ‘gnome’ and askeladd (Askeladden) ‘Boots’ (in fairy tales) the second component should be glossed ‘fellow’ or ‘boy’. According to Falk and Torp 1910–11, Engl. lad is the same word (a borrowing). A close parallel (‘sock’/‘child’) is provided by German Strumpf, originally ‘stump’, later ‘trouser leg’ and still later ‘stocking’, and Engl. dial. strumpet ‘fat, hearty child’; the reference to ‘woman’ is also common: alongside Engl. strumpet ‘whore’, we find seventeenth-century Icel. strypa, which denotes all kinds of (mainly tall) receptacles (‘dipper, pointed hat, bucket, building with a cone-shaped roof’) and ‘virago, big woman’ (Magnússon 1989: the more modern variant of strypa is strumpa; see Liberman 1992a, 87–91). OI lodda ‘woman’ and, most probably, lodd- in Loddfáfnir cannot be separated from Norw. -ladd.

Norw. and Swed. dial. ladd also displays the alternation a/o (ladd/lodd) typical of such words. In Falk and Torp 1910–11, ladd/lodd are tentatively derived from Celtic, but I wonder whether we are not dealing with another synonym for ‘stump, peg, (oar, shaft, etc.)’ and ‘penis’. Wright (1898–1905, 3:496, s.v. “lad sb. 3”) mentions a Yorkshire word lad ‘the upright bar of an old-fashioned spinning-wheel, which turns the wheel; a stay for timber work; a back stay for corves or wagons’. The first step would be from ‘stump, peg’ to anything short and upright (the range is wide, cf. ‘trouser leg’). The meaning ‘penis’ would develop easily in such words, and somewhere along the way ‘sexual power’ could have been added. One and the same word often has (and had in the past) an abstract and a concrete meaning: cf. OE gebyrd ‘birth’ and ‘offspring’, MHG gemaht (and ge-mehte) ‘might’ and ‘penis, genitalia’, etc.

The history of the French source of Engl. harlot is unknown, but if it is har-dot, rather than har-lot, and if it was indeed borrowed by Old French from Germanic before it returned to Middle English, this compound can be glossed ‘army fellow’ (har- = Germ. Heer). Cf. also ME kikelot ‘tattling woman’, gig(e)lot ‘vagabond, itinerant jester’ precede ‘prostitute’. Lot could have been one more of the l-d/l-t words for ‘stump’ and ‘young person’. All this is too speculative to form the foundation for a solid etymology, but it is curious how many impenetrable words in Germanic cluster around the l-d/l-t root: litr, læti, lut; -lot; lud; ladd, and its variant lodd.

6. Icel. glenna ‘opening; joke; woman’; New Norw. glensa ‘glide precipitously; joke’; Dan. dial. glente, glinte ‘woman’

How can a group of closely related words combine the meanings ‘opening (=open space)’, ‘joke’, ‘glide’, and ‘woman’? Some of them coexist within the bounds of one and the same word. It will be useful to start from afar, namely, with the
history of the English verb *glide* (Germ. *gleiten*). This verb was originally present only in West Germanic (Swed. *glida*, Norw. *gli*, and Dan. *glide* are borrowings), but Scand. *glīða* seems to have existed. In Old English, the kite (a bird) was called *glida*, and in Old Icelandic *gleða*. The usual explanation is: ‘kite’=‘gliding, soaring bird’ (cf. Connolly 1984, 273, sec. 4.1). OI *gleiðr* ‘with one’s legs wide apart’ represents the same grade of ablaut as OE *a-glæ¯dan* ‘make glide’. In Modern English, *glad* reminds one of ‘joke’, but ‘pleased’ is not the oldest meaning of this adjective. Germ. *glatt*, Lat. *glaber*, Russ. *gladkij*, etc., all point to ‘smooth’.

Since the principal meaning of numerous Germanic *gl*- words is ‘light’ (from IE *ghlei-*), *glad* could have been coined with the sense ‘shining’; hence ‘pleased’ (the sheen itself was probably associated with smooth surfaces). The semantic bundle ‘opening-joke-glide-woman’ is a Scandinavian phenomenon without parallels in West Germanic.

In reconstructing the origin of this bundle, the most important thing is to find a correct point of departure. The etymology of *glidan/* *glīða* has not been ascertained, but the old idea (one finds it in Murray et al. 1989, s.v. “glide”) that *glide* experienced the influence of *slide* deserves support. In the remote past, *glidan/* *glīða* probably designated quick, precipitous movement, like Norw. *glensa* and its synonym *glanta*, but with a still stronger emphasis on quickness. If this is true, the kite (in Old English and Icelandic: *glida*/*gleða*) is not a ‘soaring bird’, but a ‘bird swooping down on its prey’, and *gleiðr* refers to the legs of a runner or a jumper. I assume that all these verbs (*glidan/* *glīða* and *glensa/* *glanta*) meant, among other things, ‘jump’ and possibly ‘dance’; cf. Germ. *springen* ‘jump’ and Old French *espringuier* ‘dance’, borrowed from Germanic (Stumpfl 1936, 123n52).

This reconstructed meaning of *glensa/* *glanta* will lead us to ‘joke’. Originally, fun was not synonymous with wit (see my discussion in Liberman 1994a). That is why it is so hard to accept the current etymology of Lat. *jokus* ‘joke’ (OI *já* ‘agree, confess’, OHG *jehan* ‘say’, OInd. *jācati* ‘[he] pleads, begs’), while the etymology of Germ. *Scherz* (MHG *scherzen* ‘jump merrily, have a good time’, OHG *schaz* and *schurz* ‘jump’, noun) is fully acceptable; and cf. OI *skopa* ‘mock’ and ‘jump’: the common denominator of gambols, buffoonery, mockery, etc., was ‘having a good time, amusement’ or ‘joke’. Norw. *glensa* * ‘jump, dance* is then related to *glensa* ‘joke’ as MHG *scherzen* to Mod. Germ. *Scherz*.

The next two steps will be more difficult. With some trepidation, I approach the barrier beyond which Jost Trier’s reign begins; cf. his work called “Spiel” (Trier 1947). Usually I prefer to admire his etymologies from a distance. There existed special fields, or enclosures, designated for games and entertainment, the prototypes of our stadiums. It is such fields that must have been called *glenna*. I believe that *glenna* meant ‘open space, valley’ (especially in place-names) and ‘joke’ because people enjoyed themselves in *glennor*. But the path from ‘jump’ to ‘open space’ could have been via ‘space between a jumper’s legs’ (Andrew Sihler, personal communication). Fritzner, the only scholar who gave this word some
thought, connected the two meanings, indeed with great caution, via such compounds as leikvangr and leikvollr ‘playground’ (Fritzner [1883–96] 1954, 1:610, s.v. “glenna”). Later, glenna ‘enclosure, field for entertainment’ expanded its semantic range. It began to be used about light spaces between clouds and the woman’s genitals. Whenever glenna, glente, etc., means ‘woman’, the reference is always to a coquette. Glenna ‘woman’ could have developed only from opprobrious or depreciating usage. Snorri’s word glyðra ‘featherbrained woman’ may have a comparable etymology. Thus we have ‘move quickly, jump, glide’ > ‘joke, jest, pranks’ > ‘place designated for public amusements, for example, edge of the forest, clearing’ > ‘open space in general, including patches of blue sky’ > ‘vulva’ > ‘featherbrained woman, coquette’.

This may seem a fanciful reconstruction, but nearly the same bundle ‘move quickly, joke; open field; vulva’ exists in Slavic, and the parallel is so striking that it is hard to think of a chance coincidence. The Russian noun šut means ‘clown, buffoon’, from which šutka ‘joke, jest’ (šut-k-a) was derived (unless šut is a back formation from šutka). Bulgarian dial. šutka is glossed ‘vulva’, an incomprehensible meaning to someone who comes to Bulgarian from Russian; it seems that šūthka ‘vulva’ is equally puzzling to a speaker of Standard Bulgarian, for Mladenov” (1941, 696, s.v. šūktka) tried to find a special etymology for it and compared it to Lat. caverna, etc., from *(s)keu- ‘hollow’. Slovenian šutec ‘madman, fool’ and Old Polish szut ‘clown, buffoon’ belong to the same group. The Common Slavic root is believed to be sjut.<*šjetos<IE *seu-t-, from *seu- ‘seethe, boil, make precipitous movements’; cf. Lith. siaisti ‘rave, rage; play, play pranks’, siūst ‘make a noise’, and so on (Pokorny 1959, 914–15). Russ. šustryj ‘quick, artful’ is possibly related to šut, etc. (Vasmer 1953–58, 3:439–40, s.v. šûtryj; Černyx 1993, s.v.). In Balto-Slavic, the development from ‘quick, violent movement’ to ‘pranks, joke’ is fairly straightforward.

Next appear Pol. ośust ‘cheat (sb.), swindler’ and ośustać ‘deceive’, Church Slavonic ašut in vain’, Russ. dial. šutēm (that is, šutjóm) ‘fallow field’ and šutyj ‘hornless’. Vasmer doubts that any of these are related to šut, but they probably are. Kalima (1927, 50–51, and especially 1950, 415–17) believed that šutka ‘joke’, ošut ‘in vain’, and šutij ‘hornless’ share the feature ‘spoiled’ and compared Finnish pilu ‘joke’ and pilata ‘spoil’. But a piece of uncultivated land, a fallow (šutēm) is not ‘spoiled’: it is ‘bare, empty’ or ‘unused’. In Jakobson’s opinion (1959, 276), ‘fallow field’, ‘vulva’, ‘in vain’, ‘hornless’, and ‘joke’ all have the connotation of ‘vacuum’. He lays stress on ‘joke’ being devoid of serious purport. But silliness is never the etymological meaning of old words for ‘joke, jest’, and it is undesirable to separate šutka from the Baltic verbs of violent movement listed above. Once again we end up with the following sequence: ‘move quickly, (rave)’ > ‘joke, jest’ > ‘open space’ (‘fallow field’, ‘vulva’, ‘hornless’, and many figurative meanings, such as ‘cheat, swindler; in vain’).

Only along this path can we account for all the members of the bundle discussed here. The other explanations leave something out. The easiest approach to
glenna would be from the root *ghlei- ‘light, brilliance’; Engl. *clearing* and Germ. *Lichtung* are spaces of light in a dark forest. From ‘opening’ we easily get to ‘blue sky’ and ‘vulva/woman’. But what shall we do with ‘joke’ and ‘glide, (move) quickly’? Falk (1925, 118) noted that the connection between Swed. *glida* ‘glide’ and OE *gleiðr* ‘with legs wide apart’, which seemed natural to Hellquist, is not obvious, and indeed it is not: OE *a-glædan* is the causative of *glídan*, but is a person with legs apart or standing astraddle “made to glide”? According to Falk, the connotation ‘open’ can be traced either to ‘light space’ or ‘glide from one another’. ‘Gliding from one another’ and thus creating some distance is an odd concept. *Glide* ‘move quickly’ (not ‘slide’!) can perhaps be connected with *ghlei-*, cf. the phrases “quick as lightning,” “with the speed of lightning,” and so forth.

It is rarely discussed how *glen-s, glen-n-a, glen-t-e, etc., are interrelated. Why, for example, does *glen-s* mean ‘joke’ but not ‘opening’ or ‘woman’? Why does Norw. *glenne* not mean ‘joke’ or ‘woman’, while Icel. *glenna* has all these meaning (in addition to ‘opening’)? What exactly are *s, -n, and -t appended to *glen-*? Hellquist, who devoted a long article to such words (1898), treated them like the analogous examples from the reconstructed Indo-European: he posited certain roots and listed “extensions” (= suffixes). This may be the only rational approach to similar-sounding and apparently related words, but the picture that emerges from Hellquist’s analysis is one of largely unpredictable alternations of vowels and consonants. Language creativity breaks loose from the pages of Brugmann’s *Grundriß* and becomes a fact of everyday life. At one time, I traced the history of some *fl-* words in Germanic (Liberman 1990); it is as intricate as the history of the words beginning with *gl-*. One moves (glides) from item to item trying not to deviate too far from the initial phonetic nucleus and not to build flimsy semantic bridges. To present an unbiased picture of the state of the art, I will quote the entry on *glenna* in *Íslensk orðsifjabók*:

**glenna** f. ‘rift, perineum, blue sky between clouds; grimace; trick, a movement in Icelandic wrestling; featherbrained woman, coquette; a great quantity of something’; **glenna** v. ‘open, stretch asunder; stride, walk with long steps; make mouths, rear up; clear up (about weather), brighten (about the sky)’. Cf. Faroese *glenna* ‘stare with a grin’, New Norw. *glenne* f. ‘the edge of the forest, blue sky between clouds’, *glenna* v. ‘have blanks, gaps; start running, etc.’, Swed. dial. *glänna* ‘blue sky between clouds, clearing in the forest’, *glänna* v. ‘gape, etc.’, *glännas* ‘be in the habit of biting (about horses)’, Dan. dial. *glenne* ‘clear up’ (with most of the clouds dispersed). The original meaning ‘brilliance, sheen > light spot (in the forest and in the air) > rift, blank’, etc. See also *glan* ‘brilliance’, *glanni* ‘foolhardy man, prankster’, *glensa* ‘play a trick on someone’. (Magnússon 1989, 254; my translation)

Almost the same information can be found in Vries 1962. The main difference is that ‘coquette’ is not mentioned (it appears only among the Danish cognates), and the semantic history is reconstructed so: the meaning ‘to joke’ < ‘to be open’ goes back to the mocking expression of ‘a half-open mouth’, with reference to Hellquist 1898, 23. Actually, Hellquist does not offer this reconstruction.
Magnússon 1989 and Vries 1962 obviate the main difficulties by ignoring the related verbs for “glide,” though Jan de Vries mentions them among the cognates. As regards *glenna* ‘brilliance’ and *glanni* ‘foolhardy man, prankster’, Magnússon 1989, s.v. “glanni,” says the following: “The original meaning of the root was ‘brighten up, shine’, whence such later meanings as ‘to be smooth, run, stare, joke, grin’.” On the evidence of Germ. *glatt* / Lat. *glaber* / Russ. *gladkij* ‘smooth’ versus Eng. *glad* / Icel. *glað(u)r* ‘pleased, expressing joy’, it is believed that the sequence was ‘smooth’ > ‘shining’ > ‘beaming with joy’ (see above), so even the step from ‘shining, happy’ to ‘smooth’ needs additional proof. One can imagine that ‘shine’ developed into ‘look’, then ‘look intently’ (= ‘stare’) and even ‘grin’ (as a matter of fact, *grin* and several other *gr-* words designating a smile go back to showing one’s teeth, so to ‘opening’), but how could ‘run’ and ‘play tricks’ evolve from ‘shine’? It seems that unless we begin with ‘move quickly’, we will never unravel this clew.

Finally, the relations between OI *glenna* and Irish *glenn*, Welsh *glean*, etc. ‘valley’ have to be explained. Strangely enough, not a single Scandinavian etymological dictionary touches on this problem. It may be that *glenna* ‘open space’ is a borrowing from Celtic; then the construction erected with such ingenuity from native (Scandinavian) elements will collapse. Eng. *glen* ‘mountain valley, usually narrow and forming the course of a stream’ reached England from Scotland (Murray et al. 1989). It was first recorded in 1489 and is mainly remembered because it occurs in numerous place-names (cf. *Glen More*, *Glen Albyn = Great Glen of Scotland, Glencoe, Glendale*, and so forth). The meanings of *glenn*, *glean*, etc., are ‘valley; brink, edge, slope, shore, river bank’. The word is old in Celtic; in Old Irish, it turned up in all case forms (*glenn, glinne, glinnib; s-stem: Thurneysen 1909, sec. 337*). For the meanings of *glenna* in Icelandic see the entry in Magnússon 1989 quoted above. The evidence from modern Norwegian dialects adds nothing new: ‘clearing, glade, grassy patch between the wood and the cliffs’ (Aasen 1873, 227, s.v. “glenna”). Incidentally, Aasen is the only scholar who mentions Eng. *glen* in a Scandinavian dictionary.

Despite the antiquity of the Irish word, its etymology is unknown, and it is isolated in Celtic. Stokes (1894, 120) compares *glen* and MHG *klinnen*, Swiss *klänen* ‘climb’, OI *klunna* ‘cling to’; this is an etymology born of despair. *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Thomas et al. 1950–, 2:1399, s.v. “glen”) only reconstructs Celtic *glanno-*, without giving any arguments. MacBain (1911, s.v. “gleann”) repeats Stokes and adds OI *gil* ‘ravine’ with a question mark, but in *gil*, *l* is an extension (the Indo-European root is *ghe¯i-* ‘gape’; cf. Behre 1944–45, 274–75). Since I am not a Celticist and not versed in special literature (perhaps the derivation of *glen* has been solved, without my being aware of this fact), I can only juxtapose the following circumstances.

(1) It is rather improbable that the Celtic and the Scandinavian words should be unrelated. Phonetically they are extremely close, and the meanings ‘valley’ and
'open space' are not irreconcilable. It is also characteristic that in both groups of languages glenn/glenna regularly occur in compound place-names. (2) In Scandinavian, glenna has numerous ties to words formed from the same root with the help of other ancient suffixes (s, t) and sometimes displaying another grade of ablaut (glaanni, glanta), unless e is the umlaut of a, a conclusion suggested by Celtic glanno. All the meanings of glenna can be traced to a word designating quick movement, and glenna ‘open space’ is only one link in a long process of development. In Celtic, glenn is isolated, and its cognates outside Celtic have not been discovered.

It seems reasonable to conclude that Celtic borrowed this word from North Germanic. The borrowing must have taken place early enough for the noun to be assigned to the s-stem and spread to all the Celtic languages. If this conclusion is correct, the history of Scandinavian glenna/glens/glente, etc., can be described without regard to its counterpart in Celtic.

7. (O)I glíma ‘wrestling’

Two ways have been tried in reconstructing the history of glíma. Every time a Germanic word begins with bn-, br-, bl-, gn-, gl-, gr-, it may happen that we are dealing with a reduced prefix, as in Germ. bleiben and glauben. This approach has been used even in Gothic, but bnauan ‘rub apart’ (<*binauan?) still lacks definite etymology. Old Norse lost the prefixes so characteristic of the other Old Germanic languages, and it is seldom clear whether we are justified in looking on Scand. g- as a possible remnant of *ga-. In 1895, Elis Wadstein analyzed a great number of Scandinavian words beginning with g- and suggested that their g- did not belong to the root, but glíma was not among them.

Conjectures along these lines have been made before and after Wadstein (Fick 1873, 1–2 [gneistr, grettir]; Bugge 1885, 212–13, 238–41 [grein, greiða, greddir, grettir]; Gould 1929, 948 [Grerr]; Holthausen 1942, 272, no. 77 [glyðra]; Sturtevant 1912, 218 [grein]; Sturtevant 1948, 138–39 [greppr]). Jan de Vries (1962, 172–89) lists twenty-nine words that have been decomposed according to Wadstein’s method: glam, glata, glíkr, glíma, glófi, glyðra, glynja, Gná, gneggja, gneista, gnipa, gnipall, gnit, gnjóði, gnógr, gnótt, gnúpr, gnægja, greddir, gregr, greiða, grein 1, grellskapr,grenja,grenna 2, greppr, Grerr, gríð, grína. Only two of them undoubtedly have g- from *ga-, namely, glíkr (=Mod. Icel. likr) ‘like’ (adj.) and gnóg (Mod. Icel. nóg). Greiða ‘make ready’ is a cognate of Gothic garaidjan and OE gerādian (less certain is their connection with grein ‘difference’), and it can go back to g-reiða. Greddir ‘provider of sustenance’ compares well with OE gereordian and reord. Glófi ‘glove’, regardless of whether it is a borrowing from Old English, resembles lófi ‘palm of the hand’. None of the others has been recognized by Vries 1962 as containing an ancient prefix. This does not mean that the etymologies questioned by Jan de Vries are wrong, but, on the
whole, it is better not to derive OI g- from *ga- without the support of incontestable cognates in the other Germanic languages. (Words with putative *ga- can also be found outside the gl-, gr- set: cf. gyggja ‘frighten’ derived from *ga-yggja in Holthausen 1948.)

Glíma has been analyzed as g-líma twice. Le Roy Andrews (1914, 134–35) suggested the etymon *gaðlímôn- (with the root meaning ‘inclined, bending’), while Sturtevant (1926, 216) posited *ga-líman (with the root meaning ‘glue together’; glíma = ‘with limbs twisted together, interlocked’). Sturtevant must have missed Andrews’s article, for Andrews begins his explanation by rejecting *ga-líman as the source of glíma. When Sturtevant’s work was ready to be published, he read Brøndum-Nielsen’s etymology, approved its idea, but considered his own to be more convincing from a semantic point of view.

Brøndum-Nielsen (1924) examined glíma as one of the gl- words denoting brilliance (such as Germ. glänzen and OI gljá ‘shine’) and ‘quick movement’. In his opinion, glíma also meant ‘quick movement’; he compared glíma and bregða ‘move quickly’ < *breh- ‘light up suddenly’. This etymology was accepted by Alexander Jóhannesson (1956, 379), Holthausen (1948, 89), and partly Jan de Vries (1962, 174), but de Vries gravitated toward understanding glíma as ‘amusement’ (cf. OI glinga, noun, ‘joke’ and glinga, verb, ‘blink’); he was followed by Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989, 255). This idea (glíma = joke, amusement) also occurred to Le Roy Andrews, but he rejected it.

The problem with gl- words is that so many of them are partial synonyms (see section 6, above). One constantly runs into ‘light’, ‘open space’, ‘move quickly’, ‘joke’, and ‘woman’. Even within Old Icelandic, glenna is like glyðra ‘feather-brained woman’, glens, and glinga (all three mean ‘joke’); since glenna also designates ‘open space’, it resembles gljá ‘shine’, and so forth. It is easy to combine these elements and produce any number of plausible etymologies. A feather-brained woman may have received her name because she is given to silly jokes or because she grins all the time; or a joke is called glenna from the association with coquettes, unless it is something empty (inane) or, conversely, bright and merry. The only way to avoid useless conjectures is to reconstruct entire semantic bundles (rather than each word separately) and check every step.

Generally speaking, Brøndum-Nielsen’s etymology of glíma is acceptable. The verb glíma could have been a synonym of *gliða, though the function of the postvocalic consonants (“extensions”) remains unclear: gli-m-a = *glið-ð-a. Glíma ‘make rapid movements, move quickly’ could have meant ‘jump, dance’ > ‘have a good time, joke’. But it is improbable that wrestling, despite its popularity in Iceland, is simply ‘amusement’. ‘Sport’ is indeed ‘amusement’, but in such names as tennis, cricket, golf, hockey (to the extent that their etymology is known) and football, basketball, volleyball, reference to some technicality is usually hidden. The same is true of terms like goal. ‘Quick movement’, let alone ‘amusement’ is not specific enough. I am not sure I can supply the missing link between ‘quick
movement’ and ‘wrestling’, but it may be worthwhile to examine the North English verb \textit{glime} ‘look askance or shyly’ (Murray et al. 1989).

This widely current verb must be of Scandinavian origin, even though \textit{*glima} ‘look’ has not been found in any of the Scandinavian languages. Many words are apparently related to \textit{glime}: OE \textit{glæ¯m} ‘brilliant light’, which yielded \textit{gleam} ‘subdued or transient light’ and later the verb \textit{gleam}, MHG \textit{glimmen} ‘shine brightly’ (cf. Mod. Germ. \textit{glimmen} and \textit{glimmern}), Swed. \textit{glimra}, Dan. \textit{glimre}, Engl. \textit{glimmer} (probably also of Scandinavian origin; like \textit{gleam}, \textit{glimmer} has changed from ‘shine brightly’ to ‘shine faintly’). See a detailed discussion of these and more distantly related verbs in Vries 1971, s.v. “glimmen.” \textit{Glime}, however, means ‘look’, and in this respect it shares some common ground with Middle English \textit{glenten} ‘shine; move quickly; look’. In Murray et al. 1989, s.v. “\textit{glent} v.”, we again run into words for ‘shine, glitter’, ‘banter, taunt’, and ‘kite’. Murray was uncertain about their interrelations, but he made the following statement, with which I wholly concur: “The orig[inal] sense is prob[ably] that of quick motion, the application to light being secondary; for a similar development cf. \textit{Glance} v.” The Slavic counterparts of \textit{glent} (again from Scandinavian) and MHG \textit{glinzen} are Russ. \textit{gljadet’}, Old Polish \textit{glêdać} (with a nasal vowel), etc. All of them mean only ‘look’.

As was pointed out in the previous section, the reconstructed meaning of \textit{glidan}/ \textit{*gliða} ‘move precipitously’ may go back to the observation of light’s great speed. The same holds for Norw. \textit{glensa}, but the subsequent semantic development of both roots depends on ‘quick motion’, not on ‘light’. It is even possible that ‘quick motion’ is the primary sense, as the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} says, and that \textit{*ghlei='')shine brightly' is not the source of all the vaguely synonymous verbs from \textit{glow}/\textit{glühen} to \textit{glent}/\textit{glinzen}. In any case, some words mean only ‘shine’ (\textit{gleam}, \textit{glow}), others ‘shine’, ‘move’, and ‘look’, still others ‘shine’ and ‘move’ (such are, for example Swed. dial. \textit{glânta}, \textit{glinta}, \textit{glätta} ‘shine, gleam; slip, slide, open slightly’), and finally, some mean only ‘look’ (Russ. \textit{gljadet’}, Engl. \textit{glime}). Later interaction among these groups is more than likely.

It is noteworthy that \textit{glime} means ‘look shyly or askance’, not ‘look quickly’, and here the history of \textit{glance} provides a useful parallel. The origin of \textit{glance} (first recorded in the fifteenth century) is not quite clear, but its semantic history has been traced in sufficient detail. \textit{Glance} often presupposes a sideways motion of the eyes. Among the technical meanings of this word we find ‘glide off an object struck, without delivering the full effect of the blow’, and a stroke in cricket is called \textit{glance} when “the face of the bat is turned slantwise to meet the ball, which should glance off towards fine-long-leg” (Murray et al. 1989, s.v. “\textit{glance sb. 1}”). Perhaps Scand. \textit{glima}, of which the Icelandic noun and verb (‘wrestling; wrestle’) are the only known representatives, also meant a \textit{sideways} twist.

Some of the movements (\textit{bragð}, \textit{hnykkur} ‘movement’) in Icelandic wrestling are called \textit{bakbragð}, \textit{halsbragð}, \textit{handabragð}, \textit{hnébragð}/\textit{hnékkur}, \textit{hælbragð}/\textit{hælkrokur}, \textit{klofbragð}, \textit{leggiarbragð}, \textit{magahnykkur}, \textit{mjaðmahnykkur} (cf. lausa-
mjöðm), rassbragð, ristabrágð, and tábragð. These are named after the part of the body gripped (back, neck, hand, knee, heel, groin, shin, belly, thigh, buttocks, instep, toe). Others contain the names of different “grippers”: bolahnykkur (boli ‘bull’), draugabrágð (draugur ‘animate ghost’), múabrágð (múr ‘mouse’), skessabrágð (skessa ‘giantess’). Skólabrágð (skóli ‘school’) is nonspecific; veltibrágð refers to ‘rolling’ (velta); grikkur means a “Greek” (cunning) movement’, and its synonym is glenna (Magnússon 1989). My source of information is Davíðsson 1888–92, 53–70.

Three words deserve special mention: sveifla (‘turning over, swinging’), for it shows that the name of a movement can indeed sound like glíma, sniðglíma, because the idea of the term is ‘side wrestling’ (cf. á snið ‘obliquely’, drauga e-ð á snið ‘pull something aside’), and súðahnykkur (súða ‘clinch’), because this term contains reference to the type of ‘interlocking’. I believe that at one time glíma was a term of the same type as sveifla and súða. Perhaps it even described the most common movement, so that the sport came to be known as glíma. Once this happened, glíma in its specific meaning inevitably went out of use. Wrestling as the name of a sport usually goes back to the name of a characteristic movement: cf. Gr. παλαίω ‘wrestle’ (if it is related to πόλλω ‘swing’), Lat. luctāri ‘wrestle’ (if it is related to Gr. λυγίζω ‘bend, twist’), Engl. wrestle (frequentative of west ‘twist, turn’), and Germ. ringen ‘wrestle’ (from ‘move in an enclosure for prize fighting, Ring’). The combined evidence of Engl. dial. glime and the reconstructed Icel. glíma yields a verb that can be glossed approximately ‘push or pull aside; cast a sideways look’.

8. OI kofa(r)n ‘lapdog’

The Old Icelandic word kofa(r)n is interesting not only because its origin remains undiscovered, but because its Old Danish cognate occurs in a famous episode. The Danish chronicler of Gesta Danorum tells the story about how Hagan, King of Sweden, sent a dog to rule the Danes. The two extant versions are nearly identical: (1) “Tha sendæ konung Hogun of Swerike et køuærne Danum til konung,” (2) “Tha sendæ Haghen konung aff Swerighe eet køwernæ Danæ thill konung” (Lorenzen 1887–1913, 10–11). It is køuærne / køwernæ that corresponds to OI kofa(r)n and OSwed. køærne, køværn.

Alexander Bugge (1906, 163) considered kofa(r)n to be a borrowing. Kristensen (1906, 31) did not exclude the possibility of a native origin, but Fischer (1909, 91) followed Bugge and included this word in the section “Loanwords of Unknown Origin.” The few attempts to find the etymology of kofa(r)n revolve around the fact that kofa(r)n was a small dog which could be carried around or kept in the house. Kristensen cited MHG kober ‘basket’ (its Low German counterpart was kower). According to Fischer (1909, 232), Verner Dahlérup compared kofa(r)n and OI kofi ‘room’; he treated kofa(r)n as the substantivized form of an
adjective and referred to the pairs OI salr ‘hall’ and salerni ‘privy’, faðir ‘father’ and faðerni ‘fatherhood, patrimony’, as well as Mod. Icel. þjóð ‘nation’, þjóðerni ‘nationality’. Holthausen (1948, 159, s.v. “kofa[r]n”) repeats this etymology but supplies it with a question mark. Alexander Jóhannesson (1927, sec. 26) suggested that the earliest form had been kofarnrakki (rakki ‘dog’), with kofarn being related to Germ. Kiefer ‘jaw’ < *kefru.

OI faðerni corresponds to Gothic fadrein*, a substantivized adjective; OI faðerni corresponds to Lat. paternus. But in the other words the suffixes -arn / -ern(i) are troublesome. The origin of -erni in salerni ‘privy’ and viderni ‘jacket’ (a poetical word derived from vid ‘wide’) is unknown. Sometimes the group -ern is the result of later changes, with -n added as an excrescent element. Such is the history of Engl. bittern, slattern, and marten<martern and of Germ. Ostern ‘Easter’. Alexander Jóhannesson (1927, sec. 26) lists akarn ‘acorn’, ísarn ‘iron’, undarn ‘time before dawn’, and fóarn ‘crop or maw of a bird’ as having the suffix -arn, but -arn is not a suffix in any of them. Words like þjóðerni are late in Icelandic. At present, they are rather numerous, but Alexander Jóhannesson (1927, sec. 38) can only refer to the influence of foreign models (taverna > Icel. taverni, etc.).

Equally troublesome is the suffix in Gothic widuwairna ‘orphan’.

In German, -ern in hölzern ‘wooden’ and other similar adjectives also supplanted -in late, and its history remains partly unclear. The history of -ern in verbs like folgern ‘follow as a conclusion’, steigern ‘raise’ is even more obscure. Engl. stubborn (with movable s) corresponds sound by sound to Icel. þybbinn (the same meaning), but the Icelandic adjective has a regular suffix, while stubborn ends in -orn, a pseudosuffix without analogues (Liberman 1986, 110–12). It is safer not to compare -a(r)n in kofa(r)n and -arn in akarn, ísarn, undarn, fóarn and -erni in salerni, þjóðerni.

Jan de Vries (1962, 323) calls all the existing proposals about the etymology of kofa(r)n idle speculations. However, the case is not absolutely hopeless. This word probably has the root kof- and the suffix -a(r)n. The fact that the suffix appears in two forms indicates that it was added late. Kof- also turns up in Mod. Icel. kofa ‘young bird of the loon family’. Although kofa was first recorded in the seventeenth century, it must be related to other nouns designating (young) animals, from OI kobbi ‘seal’ to Engl. cub, with the consonant frame k-b: cf. Dutch dial. kabbe ‘young pig’, Germ. dial. Kibbe ‘ewe’, Scottish keb, Engl. dial. kebber ‘refuse sheep taken out of the flock’, Swed. dial. kibb, kubbe ‘cub’, and so forth. Most of such words have -bb- (expressive geminates are typical of hypocoristic names), but Magnússon 1989 is probably right in viewing kofa as part of this group; Icel. kufungur (or küfungur, a variant of kuðungur) ‘young snail’, another seventeenth-century word, may belong here, too. I believe that kofa(r)n was simply a cub, that is, a whelp.

One can also approach kofa(r)n as Kläffer ‘barker’. The Dutch counterpart of Germ. klaffen is keffen (first recorded in 1598); cf. Dutch dial. kaffen and
Westphalian käffen (Vries 1971, 310). It is always taken for granted that such words are of imitative origin. To be sure, if dogs can go arf-arf, bow-wow, woof-woof, and yap-yap (in English), beff-beff and bouff-bouff (in German dialects), gav-gav and tjav-tjav (in Russian), they can also go keff-keff, koff-koff, and klaff-klaff. But some of these “imitations” may be more than accidental echoes of baby talk, and keffen could have been prompted by the k-b animal names and had a variant kaffen from the same source.

The cognates of kofa(r)n in the other Scandinavian languages reflect either the lack of a native protoform or the proliferation of expressive synonyms for ‘puppy’ (or both): cf. the list from Rietz 1867, s.v. “kövan”: kjövan, kjövern, kji-van, käven, kjävling. The suffix -arn remains unexplained (as always). If the original form was kofan, rather than kofarn, it must have sounded unusually funny: it had the root designating clubby and chubby creatures and a “royal” suffix, as in þjóðann ‘king’ and Herjann (one of Óðinn’s names, apparently meaning the leader of the hosts). Kofan had an appellation indeed worthy of a cub king or a king of barkers. It may have been native or borrowed from Low German, or made up of a native root and a foreign suffix, but, in any case, we may safely dispense with ‘room dog’ and ‘basket dog’.

9. North English taistrel ‘rascal’

The etymology of this word, which occurs in many North English dialects, has hardly been discussed at all. (Hoy 1952 does not mention it.) In the files of the English etymological dictionary at the University of Minnesota, taistrel has turned up only once. In 1863, a certain reader of Notes and Queries asked about its origin (he spelled it taistrill) (D. 1863), and the editor cited Grose’s entry taistrill ‘a cunning rogue’ (which I could not find) and Jamieson’s taistrill, tystrill. In Jamieson 1879–82, taistrell is defined as ‘a gawkish, dirty . . . sort of woman; often applied to a girl who from carelessness tears her clothes’. Taistrill/taistrell must have been understood as tearstrel; hence the reference to a girl who tears her clothes. C. Clough Robinson (1862, 427) notes the spelling tarestril (as he suggests, under the influence of tar ‘mischievous character’), and Atkinson (1868, s.v. “tastrill”) thinks of a person in tearing rage.

Jamieson was aware of the difference in the meaning of taistrel in Scotland (‘dirty woman, slovenly girl’) and England (‘rascal’) and in his etymology referred to Dan. taasse (that is, tosse) ‘a silly man or woman, a booby, a looby’. In Wright 1898–1905, 6:11, taistrel (with numerous spelling variants) is explained as ‘rascal, scoundrel; a loose liver; a mischievous child’. This word seems to be a borrowing from Scandinavian, and here Jamieson was right. Mod. Icel. teistinn, teistugur, teistur means ‘peevious, fretful’. It surfaced only in the eighteenth century, but Cleasby-Vigfusson included it too ([1874] 1957, s.v. “teistinn”). Magnússon 1989, s.v. “teistinn,” compares New Norw. teisten ‘lively, merry’ and teistell m. ‘brave

Consider also Dan. tøs ‘(saucy) girl, hussy’, Swed. tös, and New Norw. taus. It is not unthinkable that taus- and teis-t represent two grades of ablaut of the same root. Engl. tease < tæsan ‘separate the fibers’ and OHG zeisan ‘ruffle’ are related by ablaut to Engl. touse(l) and German zausen. If Icel. teista is not a late corruption of þeista, this bird name can be understood as ‘tearer’. The origin of words for ‘girl’ is exceptionally difficult to trace, but it is worthy of note that OHG erzüsen ‘ruffle’ is related to MHG züsach ‘shrubbery’ (Kluge and Mitzka 1967, s.v. “zausen”), and words for ‘bush’ (just like words for ‘stump’) are often used in naming children and young women (these are usually derogatory names): cf. Germ. Strumpf ‘stump’ and Strunze ‘slattern’ and see section 5, above. So teistinn and taus/tos/tös can be related. In any case, the English word must have come from Scandinavian. Given the wide range of meanings in Icelandic and Norwegian (‘peevish, fretful’, ‘lively, merry’, ‘brave and stern man’), ‘rascal, villain, cunning rogue; passionate, violent, or sour-tempered person’ fits the picture well. And so does -rel, a suffix with depreciatory force, as in scoundrel, wastrel.

10. North English pawky ‘pert, saucy’

Not much is known about the origin of this word. Jamieson’s (1879–82, s.v. “pauky, pawky”) derivation from OE pæcan ‘deceive’, itself an obscure word, although accepted by Brocket (1846, s.v.) and Atkinson (1868, s.v.) and reproduced in Hoy 1952, 374, is untenable for phonetic reasons: ME pêchen would have given peach. Skeat (1900) looked for a different etymon and compared pawky to Norw. dial. poka ‘be peevish, cross, defiant’, whence poken ‘defiant’ (said about children) and pok ‘refractory child’, but o in an open syllable would have become [ou], and the result would have been poky, not pawky.

I think pawky is a Scandinavian word from the root polk-; the Oxford English Dictionary cites a sixteenth-century form palk for pawk. In Modern Icelandic, polloka ‘work hard, kill oneself with work’ is part of a large group: pollok ‘bad farm’, pjallaka, a synonym of polloka, and the like (Magnússon 1989, 718, 713); all these words are recent and apparently borrowed. Engl. pawky is not recorded before the seventeenth century. The Icelandic words refer to strenuous efforts and hard but inefficient work, whereas pawky runs the gamut of ‘malignously deceptive, wily, shrewd, saucy, pert, insolent, arrogant, proud, squeamish, humorously tricky, arch’ (see Murray et al. 1989 and Bayne 1900). Some slangy etymon from Low German is not unthinkable.
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