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RINGING CHANGES

On Old Norse-Icelandic mál in Kormáks saga

Introduction

ONE OF THE DETERMINATIVE CONVENTIONS of the sagas of Icelanders is that introductory chapters name the ancestors of its principals and through capsule accounts of their deeds establish motifs that will later be developed to thematic status in the saga proper, albeit in new combinations, with inversions, negations, etc.¹ *Kormáks saga* is exemplary in this respect.² Chapters 1 and 2 introduce (1) the saga hero's grandfather and namesake, the Norwegian Kormákr (an Irish name), and his son, Qgmundr; (2) further Irish onomastics, associations, and possible heritage; (3) successful Viking raids and intra-Viking conflict; (4) *hólmganga* with questionable procedure; (5) hesitation, here parental, over a proposed marriage; (6) "wise women"; (7) the apparatus and techniques of magic; and (8) irregularities in measuring the lot for a building. In more analytical terms, the essay explores the measure of man against man, man against social standards (including in sexual matters), the complementarity of *eros* and *thanatos* in human life, and, on the level of detail, the differing valences of human body parts, ritual behavior, and apotropaic readings and interventions, which include charms, curses, supernaturally endowed weapons and their temperamentality, and other apparently common yet magical acts, both causing and preventing human intention and efforts.

- 1 See Theodore M. Andersson, "The Rhetoric of the Saga," *The Icelandic Family Saga* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 31-37. A recent general study of the saga is Daniel Sävborg, "Kormáks saga – en norrön kärlekssaga på vers och prosa," *Scripta Islandica* 56 (2005): 65-99.
- 2 *Kormáks saga*, in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), 201-302. All quotations are from this edition, referenced by chapter, page, and stanza or note number. English translations are adapted from *Kormak's Saga*, trans. by Rory McTurk, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 3:179-224.

These several topics and motifs will recur in elaborated form and interrelation in the course of the saga, interconnected by the polysemantic term *mál*, variously ‘speech, poetry; measure, measurement; case, matter, affair’, after the younger Kormákr has entered the narrative spotlight. The introduction of the saga’s principal is here deferred in order to examine the opening episodes of the saga.

The Icelanders of the sagas are depicted as believing in a personal destiny.³ The focus in this belief was on terminal states: death in combat or an uneventful old age, although the decisive etiological moment was imagined as in the Norns’ determination of an individual fate at birth. The ways and sequences of events in which such destinies are realized are often effected through a double or enhanced causality, human and supernatural. Ultimate fate is generally beyond human scrutiny, although certain wise folk have intimations of an unseemly or untimely end. On a level more perceptible to human understanding, magic or sorcery may be put to work. Lastly, the more apparent reasons for certain turns of event are generally to be traced to the personalities of the principals and to their interaction.

Ógmundr Kormáksson, from the Vík region of Norway, goes raiding in the British Isles as soon as mature, and his reputation comes to the attention of Ásmundr, a notorious Viking. In a development more suggestive of romance than saga, the men establish contact and agree to meet in a Viking approximation of pitched battle. Yet when this takes place, Ásmundr does not engage his full force and, after four days of conflict, is routed with great losses. Ógmundr returns home with fame and fortune. His father states that no more prestige is to be gained through warfare (“Kormákr kvað Ógmund eigi mundu meira frama fá í hernaði”).⁴ This is an indirect appeal for moderation on the part of the elder Kormákr. *Hóf* ‘moderation’ represented a masculine ideal in pagan Iceland – think of Gunnarr Hámundarson of *Brennu-Njáls saga* – but is only a shadow motif in *Kormáks saga* (see below).⁵ Kormákr also judges it opportune

3 See, most recently, Neil Price, “The Home of Their Shapes,” in his *Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 31–63.

4 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 1, 204.

5 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1944), ch. 19, 52–53. *Hóf* displays an interesting semantic development. The term is traced to Proto-Indo-European **kap-* ‘to grasp’, via a sense of ‘fit amount under the circumstances’; cf. Gothic *gahōbains* ‘abstinence’, Old English *behōfian* ‘to require’, Old High German

for Qgmundr to marry at this moment, and the daughter of *jarl* Fróði is courted. The father is favorably disposed to the match but with reservations: “Jarl tók því vel og kallaði á liggja ótta nökkurn um skipti þeirra Ásmundar” (The father was agreeable but there was some cause for concern over Qgmundr’s relations with Ásmundr).⁶ Ostensibly, the father’s anxiety is that his daughter may be left a young widow, yet it also raises other possibilities. The reluctance of the girl’s father seems borne out when Ásmundr hears of the planned wedding and challenges Qgmundr to single combat. The old nurse of the bride-to-be runs her hands over Qgmundr’s body and determines that he will come to no great harm. In the ensuing duel on the islet designated for such purpose, the first of several in the saga, Ásmundr’s opening blow is without effect. In turn, Qgmundr quickly shifts his sword to his other hand, most likely from right to left, strikes a downward blow, and takes off Ásmundr’s leg – a lower body member.

Social standing in early medieval Scandinavia was dependent on recognition as a fully competent adult male. Less than this was equated with weakness, even effeminacy, which was subject to ridicule, defamation (often poetic), and loss of standing. Suspicion over sexuality and sexual behavior then hung in the Viking air, and was directed toward any hint of latent, even if coerced, homeo-erotic behavior. *Jarl* Fróði’s unease may then also have included some doubt as to the equivocal and rather too cozy dealings between the two Vikings, in which the “jilted lover” Ásmundr takes the initiative. But such reluctance is over-ridden and the wedding proceeds. With these early, pre-Icelandic events, a number of important motifs are introduced into the saga and will find a rich and interdependent development in the following.

Mál as Measure: Land Grants

Although Qgmundr comes out the victor in the judicial duel, cutting Ásmundr down to size, and the marriage proceeds, his good fortune does not last through his subsequent emigration to Iceland. His well-born wife dies as does his son Fróði, significantly named “the wise.” A second wife

behuobida ‘presumption’ (Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols. (Bern and Munich: Francke Verlag, 1959), 1:528, s.v. *kap; Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd edition (Leiden: Brill, 1962), s.v. hóf 1.

6 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 1, 204.

in Iceland is the daughter of *Qnundr sjóna* “the sighted”; her name is Dalla and is drawn from Irish *dall* ‘blind’. Thus what might be called the center of mental gravity shifts from reason to intuition and insight, and perhaps from measured thought to impulse, as will be reflected in Kormákr’s character. But first, on his arrival in Iceland *Qgmundr* is granted land by *Miðfjörðs-Skeggi*. He sets about building a house by marking out the exterior dimensions in order to lay, within, a foundation of gravel. The saga continues:

Þat þá *Qgmundr*, mældi grundvöll undir hús. Þat var þeirra átrúnaðr, ef málit gengi saman, þá er optar væri reynt, at þess manns ráð myndi saman ganga, ef málvöndrinn þyrri, en þróask, ef hann vissi til mikilleiks; en málit gekk saman ok þrem sinnum reynt.⁷

The general sense of this passage has been well enough understood by commentators and translators,⁸ but (1) an apparent redundancy has not been “honored” in all modern renderings; (2) there is the chronic question of the subject of verbs in the absence of nouns or pronouns; and (3) some semantic equivalences are questionable, e.g., *mál* is translated as “measuring rod” on the basis of the putative synonym *málvöndr*, which occurs later in the text. In one sense *mál* means only ‘measure, the act of measuring, mark (as indicative of measurement)’,⁹ although the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* offers instances of *mál* as ‘speech, organs of speech, voice, account, poem, poetry; matter, affair, case, dispute; time, point in time, meal-time’.¹⁰ The semi-ritualized use of demarcating hazel rods and pegs returns to the discussion below in the context of dueling, but here we

7 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 2, 205.

8 E.g., *Kormáks saga Qgmundarsonar*, in *Isländersagas*, ed. by Klaus Bödl, Andreas Vollmer, and Julia Zernack, 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2011), 3:55–126; *Kormak’s Saga*, trans. McTurk; *La Saga de Kormak*, trans. by Frédéric Durand (Caen: Heimdal, 1975); *The Sagas of Kormak and The Sworn Brothers*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

9 All uses are ultimately traceable to Proto-German, **mēla-* ‘measure, amount’; *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, ed. by Guus Kroonen (Leiden: Brill, 2010), s.v. *mēla* 3. Cf. Old English *metian*, ‘to assign due measure; to moderate’, Old High German *mezzōn*, ‘to moderate’.

10 *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog = A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, ed. by James Knirk et al. (Copenhagen: Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission, 1989–), s.v. *mál*, noun, 1–3.

might picture a handy instrument of a fathom's length, roughly six feet. A word-for-word translation yields:

Qgmundr received that [the land grant] and measured for the foundation under a house. It was people's belief at the time that, if the measuring grew shorter when it was tried repeatedly, the man's fortunes would also contract, if [as?] the measuring rod shrank; but it would lengthen, if he were to know greatness. But the measurement grew shorter over three tries.

So understood, the text displays a chiasmic effect: MEASURE DIMINUTION: IN PRINCIPLE: poor fortune : *rod contraction* || *rod extension* : good fortune : MEASURE DIMINUTION: IN PRACTICE (three tries). It seems most plausible to conclude that the omen of future ill fortune would be more apparent in the marked-off outline of the foundation than in the observable length of the rod. This could also be figured as the result of the measuring rod itself shrinking, a touch of the preternatural. Otherwise, what could the rod have been measured against as a reference unit and why would the same rod be used a third time? Nevertheless, an underdimensioned house plan, visible on the ground when the measuring was completed, is clearly the product of the use of rod. A basic question – if one could usefully be asked – is whether the fault lies with the rod (an inherent weakness in any kind of measurement) or with its manipulator, the man. Since the episode is *sui generis* in Old Norse-Icelandic letters, further speculation is not warranted; the situation seems intentionally vague as to exact process. Still, for the saga public familiar with portents, the prognosis is clear enough and is projected forward onto expectations for the career of Qgmundr's elder son. In a larger frame of reference, Qgmundr's fortunes appear to take a turn for the worse when Norway is abandoned for Iceland. Although unstated in the saga, he seems to have met an early death. Kormákr becomes the senior male at the farm in Mel, living with his mother and younger brother Þorgils.

Mál as Poetry: Kormákr as Suitor

At this point the saga proper may be said to begin, and a general familiarity with it is here assumed among readers. As noted, Kormákr is born to

Ögmundur in his second marriage in Iceland to a daughter, Dalla ‘the blind’, of Ögmundur *sjóna* ‘the sighted’. This detail illustrates the Norse concept of the loss or absence of a physical faculty that is compensated for by its enhanced spiritual or mental version.¹¹ We return to this concept below. This suggests a zero-sum conception of human existence and is consonant with the present narrative, which will be devoted to comparison, competition, and various forms of exchange. Kormákr is characterized as “svartr á hár ok sveipr í hárinu, hǫrundljóss ok nokkut líkr móður sinni, mikill ok sterkr, áhlaupamaðr í skapi” (black hair with curls, with a fair complexion, rather like his mother, big and strong, impetuous in temperament).¹² This, the mixed heritage of Norse and ostensibly some Irish along both paternal and maternal lines, second sight and blindness/insightfulness all predict complexity and even irresolution. In the study that follows, Kormákr’s life trajectory will be assessed in and against both absolute and relative measures/measurements, the *mál* (measure) as instantiated in the opening chapters and informing this essay’s intentionally overdetermined title. The relevant vocabulary and its deployment in the narrative are reminiscent of the encryption of familiar names that figures elsewhere in the saga (*Steingerðr*) and in Egill Skallagrímsson (*Ásgerðr*, *Arinbjörn*, and *Bǫðvarr*).¹³ In this riddling exercise a compound personal name is masked by one component being replaced by a homophone (retention of sound but substitution of meaning) and the other by a synonym (retention of meaning but substitution of sound).¹⁴ Name encryption, with its substitutions and allusions, can be grouped among other tropes that exemplify homological or typological thinking, as when the motif of beer-drinking that we find

11 See Lois Bragg, “Impaired and Inspired: The Makings of a Medieval Icelandic Poet,” *Madness, Disability and Social Exclusion: The Archaeology and Anthropology of “Difference”*, ed. by Jane Hubert (London: Routledge, 2000), 128–43; and Sayers, “Guilt, Grief, Grievance, and the Encrypted Name in Egill Skallagrímsson’s *Sonatorrek*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 92 (2020): 229–46.

12 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 2, 206.

13 Sayers, “Onomastic Paronomasia in Old Norse-Icelandic: Technique, Context, and Parallels,” *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 27 (2006): 91–127; and Sayers, “Guilt, Grief, Grievance.”

14 Bergsveinn Birgisson writes of such crafting of metaphor and meta-metaphor, the “likeness [between referents] in the context of kennings is only valued if it is surrounded by tensions or clashes of elements that represent contrastive categories or semantic frames” (“Skaldic Blends Out of Joint: Blending Theory and Aesthetic Conventions,” *Metaphor and Symbol* 27.4 (2012): 283–98, at 289.

in Egill Skallagrímsson can have overtones of the myth of the cauldron of poetry and its transmarine transmission. The kenning belongs here, along with, on a larger scale, the above referenced practice of recasting and elaborating the motifs of the introductory chapters of a saga. In *Kormáks saga*, polysemy, one element of name riddling, is the product of the various meaning of *mál*. After this quite serious pun, in the putative equation here proposed, the second replacement in narrative proximity should be open to service as a synonym of *hóf*. But in an artful turn, we find, not a word with similar meaning, but its antonym as ascribed to Kormákr: *áhlaupamaðr* ‘impetuous, immoderate man’. *Mál* will be ubiquitous in the examination of the saga, not in the teasing incorporation of a name but in the artful exposition of saga theme; *hóf*, on the other hand, is seldom mentioned or in evidence, this, too, with thematic intention.

The first events of the poet’s saga concerns Kormákr’s choice as to participation in two household duties: either to help flense a stranded whale or go into the mountains to round up sheep. This initial episode will be discussed in some detail, since it establishes motifs and themes that will inform the entire work. Kormákr’s options (sea-shore or mountains), like lexical alternatives, recall the myth of Njörðr, Skaði, and their troubled marriage.¹⁵ We should not look so much for point-by-point correspondence as to the mythic framing of an individual human destiny. Electing the ovine option, Kormákr overnights at the farm of a man called Tosti and meets his foster-daughter Steingerðr Þorkeldsdóttir after a series of glimpses of her feet under the swinging door to the hall and of her face by the door-frame (Kormákr’s introduction to the linearity motif met in the land measure). The sheep search is broken off. Ten improvised stanzas of love poetry then follow. The sparse situational information in the verses and a near contemporary understanding of their kennings and allusions seem to have determined the composition and hence understanding of the accompanying prose. The stanzas are uniform in content and style: skaldic poetics, including kennings, devoted to praise a girl’s beauty, with the poet a shadowy but consistent presence in the poems. As a reference point against which to evaluate verses in a very different register, Kormákr’s first

15 John Lindow, “When Skáði Chose Njörðr,” *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland: Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. by Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin. *Islandica* 54 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 165–82.

stanza is reproduced here. The editor and subsequent commentators have endeavored to sort out the imagery.

Nú varð mér í mínu,
menreið, jötuns leiði,
réttumk risti, snótar
ramma-óst, fyr skömmu;
Þeir munu fœtr at fári
fald-Gerðar mér verða,
alls ekki veitk ella,
optarr en nú, svarra.¹⁶

Poole translates:

Now a mighty love came about for me in my mind (“favourable wind of the giant’s wife”) – the woman (“wagon of the necklace”) stretched out her instep toward me – a short while ago. Those feet of the woman (“giantess’s daughter of the ?head-dress”) will mean jeopardy for me more often than now: otherwise I do not know the woman at all.¹⁷

Kormákr extemporizes another nine stanzas in this vein on this and subsequent visits to see Steingerðr at the farm in Gnúpsdalr, where she is being fostered. The saga makes no mention at this point of him ever approaching Steingerðr’s father Þorkell at the home farm in Tunga. But knowing that amorous verse directed to his daughter was circulating does not please

16 *Kormáks saga*, ch.3, 207, st. 1.

17 Russell Poole, “Composition, Transmission, Performance: The First Ten *lausavísur* in *Kormáks saga*,” *Alvíssmál* 7 (1997): 37–60. Some sense of, and fun with, the baroque skaldic poetics can be had in the following English rendering, which attempts a pastiche of some of the stylistic effects while remaining close to the general meaning. Closer translations of individual words figure in the subsequent discussion.

Now the craggy course of my mind
is breached by a burst of love;
at me, the *ásynja* just
angled her ankle.
In the future the feet
of this walled-in woman
will bring me more ill,
else know I naught about nymphs.

the farmer. Although the girl is not explicitly identified at this time, her name's encryption in the first stanza would have been easily discovered, even sought out, since everyone knew of everyone else's comings and goings, and of poetic conventions. Aware of his master's displeasure, one of Þorkell's retainers, Narfi, a kinsman in service at the farm, offers to intervene. Narfi is characterized as "hávaðamaðr ok skapheimskr, hœlinn ok þó lítilmenni" (pushy and foolish, boastful yet mean), and this prepares the saga public for the nature of his intervention.¹⁸ On one of his visits, Kormákr seeks out Steingerðr in the cook-house, where Narfi is occupied with boiling blood and suet sausages in a kettle, the product of the fall slaughter. The saga continues: "Narfi stóð við ketil ok er lokit var at sjóða, vá Narfi upp mörbjúga ok brá fyrir nasar Kormáki ok kvað þetta ..." (Narfi stood by the kettle and, when the boiling was completed, Narfi lifted the sausages up and waved them under Kormákr's nose and said ...):

Hversu þykkja ketils þér,
Kormákr, ormar?

Hann segir:

Góðr þykkir soðinn mör
syni Ögmundar.¹⁹

(How do these kettle snakes seem to you, Kormákr?

He says:

To the son of Ögmundr the boiled suet seems good.)

Formal features of this instance of verse-capping will be discussed below but it is important first to establish social context, imagery, and register. Kormákr's foray into casual visits, erotic versifying, and express interest in an unmarried girl living outside parental supervision take him beyond the zone of the normative adult Norse male and the stage where his actions may be seen as appropriate. Penetrating the interior space reserved for women and servants exacerbates his exposure. Narfi can risk an insulting couplet both because it will please his master and because Kormákr is suddenly in a situation and quandary that occur in Old Norse letters with

¹⁸ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 4, 216.

¹⁹ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 4, 216, st. 11-12.

some frequency: how to respond to criticism, mockery, or abuse by a social inferior, when anything more than words in response would be an abuse of status-derived power and thus in the nature of a minor injustice. The well-known whetting scenes illustrate that the “heroic” male often has little choice but to act on the directives of his critic, e.g., Hrafnkell *Freysgoði* after the washer-woman’s comments on his laxity in seeking vengeance.²⁰ We may imagine Narfi lifting a length of sausage on a wooden stirrer for their assessment and recall the measuring rod of an earlier chapter. Yet here quality not quantity is to be tried. Narfi is also taking the measure of his man by inviting his evaluation of the products of the non-male environment, products with which he should have little expertise. In a homological reading, the stirring rod has the latent potency of a *níðstǫng* or pole of defamation, on which a slaughtered (or sacrificed) horse’s head might be mounted.²¹ The meat sausage thus brandished might be open to interpretation as a phallic symbol, albeit a limp one. At most, Kormákr has entered a scene productive of impressions of gender ambiguity and is being called on it: his interest in food preparation and possibly in a symbol of male genitalia is questioned, prompted by his having already taken several steps away from mainstream manliness by coming into the cookhouse to seek out female company.

Homological thinking was integral to the Norse worldview and was applied over great differences of scale.²² Narfi mocks Kormákr through the appropriation of poetic technique. His kenning is a debasement of poetic lexis and register, since *ormr* is otherwise frequent in the sense of serpent or dragon in kennings for gold. Narfi employs apostrophe, creates a subjective environment through the use of the verb *þykkja* ‘to seem’

20 *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, in *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), ch. 8, 126–27.

21 On *níð* and related, see the fundamental studies of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), and Folke Ström, “Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes,” The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies delivered at University College London, 10 May 1973 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973).

A classic realization is found in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappi*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938). In homological terms both the assumed stirring rod and lot-measuring rod have their analogues in *Yggdrasill*, the cosmic ash tree, yet in a significantly different register.

22 Sayers, “Njáll’s Beard, Hallgerð’s Hair, and Gunnarr’s Hay: Homological Patterning in *Njáls saga*,” *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 15 (1994): 5–31.

and the second person pronoun *þér*, and makes a coarse application of the kenning principle in that the blood-and-suet sausages are likened to snakes in a kettle, now raised to the level of the snakes into whose pits Germanic heroes were thrown. The sausage in the spherical cauldron is thus also a miniaturization of *Jormungandr*, the *Miðgarðsormr* or World Serpent at the bottom of the sea, who holds the cosmos together. He takes Þórr's bait of an ox head on a line but his correct management is otherwise required in order to preclude cosmic chaos. How do you compare with Þórr, Kormákr? All this in a brief question that demands a public answer. Narfi's tone is that of Loki in *Lokasenna*, his critical catalogue of divine misbehavior. And the cookhouse is essentially an arena for transformation, Loki's *forte*. Although Narfi employs only rudimentary poetic devices – alliteration and internal rhyme – through chiasmus and assonance he neatly encompasses most of Kormákr's name within the two elements of his culinary compound (*ketils ormar*). Kormákr is then caught in the carnal, mythologically fraught image like the suet mixture in its intestinal casing (see below for another equation of a personal name with a menial object for purposes of disparagement). Thus, on the homological principle and with its intricate cross references, in Narfi's mouth even a kitchen kettle can supply inspiration comparable to that of the cauldron of poetry.²³ We should not forget the larger context of the cookhouse: heat, smoke, water vapor, the seething kettle, inherently slippery sausages, a scene reminiscent of cosmogonic myth: death, dismemberment, and reconstitution on the one hand, and the fastidious aspiring lover, decked out in his custom finery on the other.

Narfi's question also seems a mischievous and insinuating parody of the collaborative preparation of food as sacrifices to the gods. The Gotlanders' term for such co-religionists was *supnautr* (putative Icelandic **soðnautr*) 'boiling-mate'. Kormákr's impatience with shared religious or magical activity is well illustrated in the remainder of the saga.

23 Cf. the vat of beer when Egill Skallagrímsson is poorly received by the king's reeve Bárðr, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), ch. 44, 108–11. On liquids as the medium for the transferal of knowledge and art, see Judy Quinn, "Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualization of Learning in Eddic Poetry," in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and Their Implications*, ed. by Slavica Ranković, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 89–100, and Stefka G. Eriksen, "'Liquid Knowledge' in Old Norse Literature and Culture," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 49 (2018): 169–97.

Kormákr is obliged to reply but does so in such a controlled way so that he seems barely to rise to Narfi's bait. This could be seen as a first instance of *hóf* 'moderation', otherwise not expected of his impulsive nature. Yet his understated reply is more aggressive than superficially evident. Kormákr replicates each item in Narfi's question but with a distancing effect and affect, in which Narfi's homologies are not replicated or imitated. He does not mention Narfi's name, nor even his own or a first personal pronoun. Instead his father's son is referred to in the third person, but not as an agent, not actively involved. The father's status as a famous Viking is brought to the fore but this patronymic construction is not qualified through rhyme or alliteration and is thus kept distant from the subject matter. The key verb *þykkja* is repeated. The kettle worms are not referenced as such, nor sausages even named. Instead, a somewhat more abstract term is used: *morr* 'suet, animal fat'. *Góðr* 'good', and nothing more, is the essential answer to Narfi's question. Kormákr does, however, introduce a new lexical item, *soðinn* 'boiled', past participle of the verb *soðna*, 'to be boiled' (cf. English *seethe*), reflected earlier in the saga in *soðhús*, literally 'boiling hut'. Kormákr has capped Narfi's verses, has retreated personally from the matter, has refrained from adding anything new. He has not accepted the challenge of abusive verse-capping, and abstains from graphic imagery, word play, and, most significantly, Narfi's register. Or is this abstention feigned?

The earlier discussed name encryption in skaldic verse that relies on substitutions in both sound and meaning illustrates the developed taste of Icelandic poets for what might too simply be called word play. *Morr* figures in the compound *morr-landi* 'suet-lander', and was used mockingly by Norwegians of Icelanders and of their reliance on animal fat in their diet. Let us imagine that the *morr* of Kormákr's couplet is a reference to Narfi as Icelander, both occupied with, and dependent on, suet. The suet is *soðinn* (boiled) but in the present circumstances *soðinn* may sound dangerously close to the word *sorðinn*. This, under Icelandic law, was among a number of legally actionable words that referred to the passive role of a man in same-sex activities: *argr*, *ragr*, *stroðinn*, and *sorðinn*.²⁴ The inventive

24 On the possibility of speech itself being judged unmanly, see Mats Malm, "The Notion of Effeminate Language in Old Norse Literature," in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*, ed. by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 305–20.

subtext of Kormákr's retort then goes beyond Narfi's offensive allusion: "To the son of Ögmundr, the Suet-lander seems good and fucked" (with some latitude tallowed with *góðr*). Kormákr has then taken Narfi's offensive question (how he might find the sausages) and transformed it into a completed act of male rape or worse, if consensual. The cauldron of poetry is double-bottomed and the trick is turned back on the trickster.

This reading is admittedly tendentious, less in terms of the Old Norse poetry of personal insult than in its lexical allusions and substitutions. But without such a reading and its *double entendre*, Kormákr's retort is unmemorable, almost a turning away from the contest, and this in the presence of Steingerðr. At a minimum, it is an understated warning to Narfi that Kormákr is capable of a more forceful reply, in a variety of genres, including the scurrilous (see further below on his threats in this regard). Later in the day of the above incident, Kormákr encounters Narfi at the farmstead and, having reflected that he didn't want Narfi running his affairs (in a prose statement), he gives the servant a blow to the head with the poll or butt of his axe and improvises stanzas that are insulting without being scurrilous. Class distinctions are still operative, but the dimension of human sexuality is not alluded to. It must be admitted that this suggests that Kormákr, as conceived by the author of the prose narrative, judged his reply to Narfi inadequate to the circumstances, which would undercut the speculative reading proposed above. But the incident may also seem an afterthought. It could also be put down to the occasional inconsistencies in the information content in the saga between verse and prose.²⁵

Hvat skaltu, orfa Áli,
ófróðr of mat ræða?
Þér vas kerski þeirar
þørf eng við mik, Narfi.²⁶

²⁵ On the long-recognized but difficult problems of the *prosimetrum*, see most recently Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormáks saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). We do well to bear in mind features of *Kormáks saga* that may owe their presence to a recognition of the skalds' sagas as a sub-genre with its own conventions, e.g., the love triangle; see the essays in Russell Poole (ed.), *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).

²⁶ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 4, 216–17, st. 13.

(What should you, Narfi,
 you ignorant, overfed drudge
 of the scythe snath,
 have to say about food?)

Kormákr is in charge now and can call his opponent by name and even pun on it (*Narfi* ~ *orf* 'scythe-handle'; cf. *Kormákr* and *ketilsormar*, above). He dissociates farm work from food, thus delegitimizing Narfi's earlier question in the cook-house.

He continues:

Spurði frenju fæðir
 fréttinn, hve mér þœtti,
 hann sýnist mér heima
 hvarmrauðr, ketilormar;
 veitk at hrímugr hlúki,
 hrókr saurugra flóka,
 sás túnvöllu taddi,
 tíkr ørendi hafði.²⁷

(The quester into cow fodder asked

what I thought of the kettle snakes.
 Red-eyed, he seems to me
 to be at home with them.
 I know that rook with the filthy, matted head,
 soot-blackened from the cookhouse fumes,
 who drove dung to the infields,
 and bore a bitch's beating.)

It should be recalled that Narfi is a kinsman, albeit a humble one, of Steingerðr; Kormákr may have saved his insults for a moment when she was not present. This extensive examination of the Narfi encounter will guide further scrutiny of the saga text.

The incident between Narfi and Kormákr may also be viewed from the

²⁷ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 4, 217, st. 14.

perspective of *Sneglu-Halla þátr* in the saga of King Haraldr *harðráði*.²⁸ His queen, Þóra, thinks it scandalous that the king should allow himself to be talked to by his poet Sneglu-Halli in an indirect but insulting way that suggests that the king has willingly or unwillingly participated in same-sex acts. Haraldr states that he alone will determine what is permissible: “vil ek eigi snúa orðum Halla til ins verra, þeim er tvíræði eru” (rather literally: I don’t wish to turn to the worse words from Halli that are *tvíræði*).²⁹ *Tvíræði*, literally ‘bi-vocalism’, an utterance in “double-speak,” has often been rendered “ambiguous.”³⁰ Yet we may prefer a literary use of the term “bivalent,” it being not so much a question of obscurity as of the need to recognize two disparate valences, one of which is unacceptable in public or in the presence of one’s betters. Haraldr charges Halli to compose something bivalent (“mæla nokkur tvíræðiorð”) about the queen. Modern interpretations have Halli stating that Þóra is the most suitable sexual partner for the king but accompanying this with explicit detail on the act of penetration that enrages the queen, who calls the stanza slanderous and also calls for the poet’s head. But for Halli to have met Haraldr’s criteria for *tvíræði*, an innocuous reading must also be available. The vocabulary employed here allows the interpretation “to peel back all the leather from Haraldr’s forehead to the nape of his neck (beam).” The queen is being identified by Halli as the person most fitted for the intimate act of removing the leather cap or liner worn by Haraldr under his metal helmet.

- 28 See the fuller discussion in Sayers, “Command Performance: Coercion, Wit, and Censure in *Sneglu-Halla þátr*,” *Mediaevistik* 34 (2021): 25–48, and a related episode in the life of King Haraldr of Norway in Sayers, “The Gift of a Sail in a Tale about King Haraldr *harðráði* Sigurðarson: Textile and Text,” *Maal og minne* 113.2 (2021): 197–216. Other recent studies of the þátr include Jeffrey Turco, “Loki, *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, and the Case for a Skaldic Prosaic,” *New Norse Studies: Essays on the Literature and Culture of Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Jeffrey Turco (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 185–241; Christopher Abram, “Trolling in Old Norse: Ambiguity and Excitement in *Sneglu-Halla þátr*,” in *Words that Tear the Flesh: Essays on Sarcasm in Medieval and Early Modern Literature and Cultures*, ed. by Alan Baragona and Elizabeth A. Rambo (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2018), 41–62; “Sneglu-Halli, Lausavísur,” ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas from c. 1035 to c. 1300*, 2 vols., ed. by Diana Whaley *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009) 1:325–26.
- 29 *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, in *Eyfirdinga sǫgur*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), 263–95, ch. 10, at 294.
- 30 *The Tale of Sarcastic Halli*, trans. by George Clark, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols. (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997) 1:342–57.

Haraldr's statement on *tvíraði* and Sneglu-Halli's extemporaneous composition in this mode make more credible the argument here advanced concerning Kormákr's first verse exchange with Narfi, a reply operative on the two levels of *tvíraði*.

Mál as Matters, Affairs: Marriage Contracts

To return to Kormákr's courting of Steingerðr, the signification of *mál* as 'poetry' can be juxtaposed with his father's measuring out of a house foundation. Although the rigorous metrics of *dróttkvætt* may be compared to the fixed metrical unit as established by the measuring rod,³¹ the resulting amorous verses repeatedly yield an apparently diminishing return: a father's opposition, a girl's only modest interest. Yet, although Kormákr is a suspect suitor (as was his father earlier), he is eventually accepted by Steingerðr and her father as a prospective groom, just as Qgmundr's house gets built. Yet his impetuosity, lack of *hóf*, precludes a successful outcome in the longer run. Kormákr has no patience for, or belief in, magic, as is evident in his poor handling of matters open to coloring by the supernatural: the offense to the witch Þórveig and her curse that Kormákr will never enjoy Steingerðr; the loan but poor handling of Skeggi's temperamental sword; somewhat later the bungled goose sacrifice that would have remedied many of his ills, and more. Poet's character and witch's curse contribute to an intertwined causality. In general, sorcery in the saga is employed in two related spheres, *eros* and *thanatos*, the latter met in the context of judicial dueling, the validity of which can, conversely and perversely, be jeopardized by magically endowed weapons and physical invulnerability, not to mention errors of procedure.

Þórveig's curse, well known as it is, will reward a closer examination. A sequence of *lausavísur*, without accompanying prose contextualization, follows Kormákr's encounter with Narfi. Steingerðr's father, Þorkell, engages the rambunctious sons of the neighboring wise woman or witch, Þórveig, to add physical dissuasion to the poet's courting. A poorly understood

31 In the poem *Höfuðlausn* Egill Skallagrímsson states: "kann ek mála mjöt" (I know the measure of words); *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), ch. 55, 145, st. 20. This may be a *double entendre* – referencing both metrics and the poet's assessment of a notorious ruler – and a bit of parodic hyperbole.

stanza suggests that some kind of booby-trap was set for Kormákr at the entry to the hall, involving a suspended scythe and sword (or shield, according to the resulting verse). Later, an ambush is laid for the poet on his way home. He kills one of Þórveig's sons outright and wounds the other fatally. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, this is not followed by any triumphant poetic statement. Rather, the narrative moves forward to Kormákr's confrontation with Þórveig, in which the witch is evicted from the district and the poet refuses to pay any compensation for the killings. From notions of measurement – the juxtaposition of the individual phenomenon with the standard – the saga moves to reciprocal actions and relationships, the sphere of gift-giving and patronage on the one hand, feud and revenge on the other. Þórveig's vengeance for the loss of her sons and eviction from her place of residence takes verbal form:

Þórveig mælti: “Þat er líkast, at því komir þú á leið, at ek verða héraðflóttu, en synir mínir óbættir, en því skal ek þér launa, at þú skalt Steingerðar aldri njóta.”³²

McTurk's translation, “There's nothing more likely than that you'll arrange things so that I am compelled to flee from the district, with my sons unatoned for but this is how I'll pay you back for it: you will never enjoy Steingerd's love,” exemplifies the sentimental reading that Kormákr will never enjoy Steingerdr's love.³³ The carnal reading is that he will never enjoy her body; and the social and economic reading, that she will never mother his sons, that is, supply him with some concrete profit. In the saga world, the two latter doubtless weighed heaviest, despite Kormákr's poetic profession of something like romantic love and esthetic appreciation of female beauty. Perhaps a less specific rendering is most prudent: “You will not be able to become intimate with the woman.” It is after this dire prediction that the narrative offers the single most explicit expression of Steingerðr's feelings toward the poet, in verse of her own to the effect that she would have Kormákr even if he were blind.³⁴ The stanza is ominous. To return to the idea of a complex causality, Kormákr's failure to appear for the marriage ceremony with Steingerðr is surely an element of his

³² *Kormáks saga*, ch. 5, 221–22.

³³ *Kormak's saga*, trans. McTurk, ch 5, 187.

³⁴ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 6, 223, st. 21.

destiny and is consonant with the curse, but such a destiny and behavior are also in part determined by his combination of short-sightedness and recklessness. Seemingly genetically conditioned by his mother Dalla, he is blind to his own best interests, as Steingerðr symbolically senses. We recall that his half-brother Fróði “the wise” (named in Steingerðr’s stanza) died en route to Iceland. How this interacts with Kormákr’s poetic gift is considered below.

The witch-mother’s curse recalls the supernatural female who appears to Óláfr *pái* Høskuldsson in a dream in *Laxdæla saga*, when he, insensitive to the true source of his material well-being as a stockman, kills the preternatural ox Harri after its snow-clearing fourth horn drops off with age. The next night Óláfr has an ominous dream in which a large, angry woman appears to him. “Hon tók til orða: ‘Er þér svefn?’ Hann kvazk vaka” (She spoke: “Are you asleep?” He said that he was awake).³⁵ The spectral woman’s question is actually wider-ranging than the present moment and might be interpreted, in view of the consequences, as “Aren’t you yet aware?” The woman continues:

Þér er svefn, en þó mun fyrir hitt ganga. Son minn hefir þú drepa látit ok látit koma ógørviligan mér til handa, ok fyrir þá sök skaltu eiga at sjá þinn son alblóðgan af mínu tilstilli; skal ek ok þann til velja, er ek veit at þér er ófalastr.

(You are asleep but it will all come down to the same thing. You have had my son killed and returned to me butchered, and for that reason you will have to see your son covered in blood by my doing; and I will choose the one that I know you would least want to part with.)³⁶

Óláfr can get no satisfactory explanation for the dream from his household or is unwilling to understand its true meaning, preferring to think it a false prediction of future events. Collective community experience, Icelandic “wisdom,” seems to trump reason and analysis here. Although Óláfr him-

35 *Laxdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), ch. 31, 84–85.

36 *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. by Keneva Kunz, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997), 5: ch. 31, 42.

self is inattentive to the supernatural dimension and dismisses his dream, its real-life outcome is apparent to others, like Gestr Oddleifsson, who not only foretells Guðrún's four marriages on the basis of four dreams but also sees Kjartan slain by Bolli. He refrains from sharing this future event with Óláfr. The saga public, too, knows better, from the experience of literary convention. An even more telling analogy is met in *Njáls saga*. Hrútr Høskuldsson, Óláfr's brother, has found the personal favor of Queen Mother Gunnhildr of Norway. Their liaison extends over a period when Hrútr is the king's retainer. At Hrútr's expressed desire to return to Iceland, the queens asks whether he has a woman waiting there. He replies in the negative, but Gunnhildr perceives a lie. She gives him a gold arm ring in parting but says that he will never achieve sexual congress with his wife but may have relations with other women. Thus, with Hrútr's marriage to Unnr Marðardóttir and her subsequent divorce on grounds of failure to meet physical marital responsibilities, *Njáls saga* begins its acceleration toward inter-family violence and feud. Gunnhildr's equivalent to Þórveig's curse reads:

Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek það á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur. Ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel. Þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins.³⁷

(If I have as much power over you as I think I have, then I place this spell on you: you will not have any sexual pleasure with the woman you plan to marry in Iceland, although you will be able to enjoy yourself with other women. Neither of us will come out of this affair well, since you did not trust me with the truth.)³⁸

We note the presence of *mál* 'matter, affair'. Later, in Iceland and after the marriage of Hrútr and Unnr, and some very specific marital difficulties, Unnr informs her father Mǫrðr of her intention to divorce her husband. The effects of Gunnhildr's spell are ironic if not subtle. Instead of a lack of sexual desire in the presence of Unnr, Hrútr experiences a hyper-tu-

³⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 21.

³⁸ Adapted from *Njal's saga*, trans. by Robert Cook, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiriksson Publishing, 1997), 3: ch. 6, 9.

mescence that prevents vaginal penetration and thus consummated marital relations. Here, the extreme penile measurement (*mál*, although the term is not used) leads to another *mál*, the divorce case, which will drive the dynamic of the saga.

To return to *Kormáks saga*, the sagaman writes:

... þar kom um síðir, at Kormákr bað Steingerðar, ok var hon honum fóstnuð ok ákveðin brullaupsstefna, ok stendr nú kyrrt um hríð. Nú fara orð á milli þeira, ok verða í nokkurar greinir um fjárfar, ok svá veik við breytliga, at síðan þessum ráðum var ráðit, fannsk Kormáki fátt um, en þat var fyrir þá sök, at Þórveig seiddi til, at þau skyldi eigi njótask mega.³⁹

(... what finally happened was that Kormákr asked for Steingerðr's hand and she was betrothed to him and the wedding was arranged, and then things were quiet for a while. Then there were discussions between them, and these came to include certain disagreements about money matters and strangely it turned out that after the marriage contract was settled on, Kormákr's attitude cooled, and this was because of the spell Þórveig had cast that they would be not enjoy one another.)

The key verb *njótask* is now repeated, underlining the efficacy of the spell. Two measures are in play here: adequacy of financial settlement and intensity of feeling. Where Hrútr's desire took hypertrophic expression, Kormákr's emotions slacken off on less readily determined scales, both quantitative and qualitative. The effects of the curse are subtle: Kormákr cannot be said to have been queered. No dramatic shift in the course of events is apparent but rather a slide from interest to indifference, a diminution of emotional intensity and foreseen advantage.

Kormákr's new emotional engagement takes very obvious form when he fails to show up for the wedding feast. While community opinion might say that "Kormákr is a little less of a man than we thought," the girl and her family have been stood up in very evident form and keenly resent the dishonor stemming from Kormákr's disinclination to see the marriage through. Narfi, a bit of a local Loki, comes up with a clever solution. The

39 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 6, 223.

young woman will be offered to the widower Bersi, whose history and reputation as dueler makes him well placed to meet any repercussions from Kormákr, if he in turns judges himself slighted. Thus far in the saga, Kormákr has faced two conflictual encounters: a verse-capping contest with a workman in a low register with both domestic and sexual allusions (art perverted), and a face-off with a witch involving eviction and a spell that will stymie romance, marriage, and family alliance, and lessen a man's social standing (social relations hampered by the supernatural). A third act of male measuring is now initiated by Porkell betrothing Steingerðr to Bersi, a mainstream member of the local community, the embodiment of conventional virtues but with a suggestion of *démesure*, given that he has killed more than thirty men. His thumbnail portrait offers a picture of the man that is not only organized a bit differently than that of Kormákr but also highlights different qualities and reaches a different summation than that of the *áblaupamaðr* Kormákr. "Bersi hét maðr, er bjó í Saurbœ, auðigr maðr ok góðr drengr, mikill fyrir sér, vígamaðr ok hólmgöngumaðr" (There was a man called Bersi, who lived at Saurbæ, well-to-do and very manly, big of build, a fighter and judicial dueler).⁴⁰ The portraits of Kormákr and Bersi are of equal length and offer a number of points of comparison, although correspondences among the criteria of effective manhood are subtle. No explicit physical description is given of Bersi except his stature; "mikill fyrir sér" might also be read figuratively as referencing importance or self-importance as well as physique. There is no retrospective reference to family that might suggest youth. Instead, Bersi is presented as wealthy, mature, and settled. The summary and static judgment, "góðr drengr," encapsulates many conventional Icelandic male virtues, as illustrated by the careful definition of *drengr* in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*: "person of integrity, person of honour, stalwart, courageous/brave person."⁴¹ This characterization establishes Bersi as oriented toward *hóf* 'moderation', while Kormákr is dynamic and impetuous, oriented toward excess.⁴² These miniature portraits often hint at more than they

40 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 7, 224.

41 *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, s.v.

42 The most complete exposition of *hóf* in the sagas of Icelanders is the introductory portrait of Gunnarr Hámundarson in *Brennu-Njáls saga*: "Manna kurteisast var hann, harðgörr í öllu, fémildr ok stilltr vel, vinfast ok vinavandr; hann var vel auðigr at fé" (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 19, 52; "He was very courteous, firm in all ways, generous and even-

will reveal, and the reader is left to wonder at the reasons for Bersi's many judicial duels. Was he litigious by nature and exploited his fighting ability to win his cases? Did he provoke people with the intention of acquiring more property, a tactic met in other sagas? Since he appears not to be the descendant of a prominent family, perhaps his wealth originated in the spoils and settlement from such combat. This element of the portrait also serves the ends of prolepsis, as judicial dueling will figure importantly later in the saga. The description of Kormákr concludes with the term *áblaupamaðr*, in which the root is the verb of motion, *blaupa* 'to run'. Bersi's portrait closes with *hólmgöngumaðr*, formed on the equivalent verb *ganga* 'to go, walk'. With their actions (Bersi's history as fighter) and temperaments (Kormákr's impetuosity) determined by basic nature or semi-free will, the agents of these verbs converge at the designated dueling site, the *hólmr*, also the object of telling description that makes explicit its purpose.

Thus far in the saga, the principal signification of the word *mál* has been 'measuring, measurement'. Now it assumes both frequency and importance in the general sense of 'matter', here of a social and contractual nature, e.g., Narfi: "Komum í Saurbœ til Bersa; hann er kvánlauss; bindum hann í málit; hann er oss ærit traust" (Let's go to Bersi in Saurbær, he is without a wife. Let's get him involved in the affair; he could be a great support to us).⁴³ Narfi subtly appeals to Bersi's fighter's vanity to forestall any reluctance before the proposed match: "Ef menn hræðask Kormák, þurfu þeir þess eigi, því at vandliga er hann horfinn þessu máli" (Even if people fear Kormákr, they don't need too, because he is wholly disinclined to proceed with the matter).⁴⁴ Reassured or pressured, Bersi then raises the "matter" with Steingerðr's father Þorkell, and the betrothal is a fact, with the wedding soon to follow.

While the notion of *mál* is repeatedly drawn to the saga public's attention in the form of measurements, speech acts, and contracts and court cases, *hóf* 'moderation' is invoked only in the negative form of Kormákr's behavior, and in his namesake and grandfather's early observation that Ögmundur's Viking activity has had its optimal yield. This downgrading

tempered, a true friend but a discriminating friend" *Njal's saga*, trans. Cook, ch. 19, 24). *Vinavandr* "discriminating as to friends" is of particular interest in the present context of the evaluation of men.

43 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 7, 225.

44 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 7, 225

of this central social ideal takes the express form of the trivial use of the word *hóf* at this point in the saga. After the paternally coerced wedding, Steingerðr sends Narfi to Kormákr to inform him. When Kormákr learns that Steingerðr has been married, perhaps unwillingly, he attacks Narfi physically. Þorgils finds this reaction excessive, but Kormákr, “moderate, reasonable” under the circumstances: “Þorgils, bróðir Kormáks kvað þetta ofgort. Kormákr kvað nær hófi.”⁴⁵ For Kormákr, the press of circumstances can always be invoked to justify impulsive behavior and refer it to the norm. Then, in pursuit of Bersi and his party after the marriage, Kormákr discusses with his brother what might be thought a suitable rental charge for a dilapidated boat that he hopes to rent from Þórveig. Þorgils finds a fee of two ounces of silver to be reasonable, less than the asked-for three (“Þorgils kvað hóf á, ef væri fyrir tvá aura”) but Kormákr refuses to haggle.⁴⁶ When Kormákr is finally able to confront Bersi, he demands the return of Steingerðr and compensation for the dishonor. Bersi is firm in denying any possibility of the bride being released but conciliatory (and thus acting within parameters of moderation) in offering Kormákr his sister Helga as wife. Kormákr, once precipitous, can only hesitate (“Kormákr varð staðr at”).⁴⁷

In an incident of unprovoked malice that will find a parallel later, an evil-tongued woman named Þórdís defames Helga as not worthy of Kormákr, and this tips the poet toward rejecting the marriage offer. Instead he will challenge Bersi to a formal duel, *hólmganga*. As will be seen, this procedure is set about with formalities and details. Bersi instead offers that they meet in *einvígi*, ‘single combat’. His concern seems to be that an inexperienced litigant and fighter is likely to make a procedural mistake and thus lose on a technicality. Typically, Kormákr rejects the advice, saying that he wishes to maintain equal status with Bersi in every way (“í þllu til jafns halda við þik”).⁴⁸ Poetry and judicial dueling both involve symbolic systems. Kormákr can speak with authority from the former, since he commands all its resources. As for the latter, he seems to improvise, ironically the very compositional and performance mode for poetry to which the fiction of the saga would have us lend credence. Judicial dueling was

45 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 7, 227.

46 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 7, 230.

47 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 8, 232.

48 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 10, 237.

clearly operative in early Norway and Iceland as numerous saga accounts attest. The absence of executive authority to punish illegal acts left the individual and his family to seek redress. The *hólmganga* returns the narrative to the earlier notion of a plot of land for house construction given measurable definition through the use of a wooden rod.

As with the measuring procedure for the house lot, the saga's account is unique in Icelandic letters. *Kormáks saga* offers the sole account of the preparation of the dueling ground, and much of this historical reconstruction may be fanciful. The detail of the plot being prepared by a man approaching it by bending down and looking through his legs while holding his ears has a parallel in early Irish culture, in which the pose may be imagined as dispelling malevolent spirits (cf. the *sheela-na-gig* figures in Ireland and elsewhere). At the center of the dueling ground is a cloak held in place with pegs to create a central fighting area five by five ells, or about 55 square feet. The dueling site is marked off with long hazel rods on the perimeter and shorter pegs that hold down a precisely measured central expanse of cloth on which the duelers will stand. This is in turn enclosed in a series of squares within squares defined by rods, further prompting notions of non-secular symbolism, in order to mark when a fighter had strayed or fled. This is initially not a spontaneous hand-to-hand combat but a staged sequence of alternating blows against a shield held by a second. When the shields are damaged beyond effective use, freer blows are given with the possibility of defense and counter-blows with the other principal's sword. The perverse impression is that the duelers are seeking the safest and quickest way to draw first blood in order to conclude the duel before serious injury, that is, reach an outcome in the litigation before anyone is badly hurt. The duel between Kormákr and Bersi is less than ideally executed. We might speak of continuing inadequacies in linearity and of "instrumental deficiency": a sword that cannot be easily drawn from its scabbard and is then notched in combat; another that loses its tip (cf. the shrinking plot-measuring rod). Concordantly, the notch cannot later be masked by honing. Kormákr suffers a wound to his thumb from a struck-off sword tip, the consequence of no true blow, and then neglects its care, rejecting Bersi's offer of a healing stone (cf. the subsequent failed honing of the nicked sword). Anticlimax marks the entire operation. Later, in another duel, a sword will be judged longer than allowed by law.

Although a murky business in modern eyes, the detailed preparation of the dueling ground might suggest that the rigorous establishment of prescribed dimensions brought the site into cosmic order, enhancing what human justice might achieve. Yet despite such an appeal to superior powers, participants also opportunistically seek expedients that will tip the scales of such justice in their favor: charms and spells to assure corporeal invulnerability, and the use of weapons with magical properties. Even such post-duel matters as fines imposed on the loser are accompanied by recourse to healing stones that repair the injury of combat.

Moderation and the Measure of a Man: Judicial Duels and Proxies

Kormákr engages the help of his uncle Steinarr in addressing the matter of the fine owed Bersi after the duel. This Steinarr does in the most provocative matter, by appearing at the assembly and sitting in Bersi's place, dressed in a bear-skin cloak and giving his name as Glúmr or Skúmr. The disguise mocks Bersi's name; the name is Odinic and thus a poet's and fighter's; the usurpation of a customary seat is a denial of social standing. Little wonder that a challenge to another duel ensues. The dialogue is revealing. A variety of synonyms, allied words, and graphic images of measurement have been deployed in the saga thus far. Another term at home in this cluster is the verb *meta* 'to assess value' (cf. English *mete*). It is introduced early in the saga when the servant woman in Steingerðr's company remarks on Kormákr's expression of interest: "Ambáttin mælti: 'Jafnaðarþokki er með ykkur, en þó muntu dýrt meta hana alla'" (The servant said, "So, you have some liking for one another; but you surely will set a high price on her as a whole").⁴⁹ As in other cases of the interdependence of verse and prose, the poet himself promptly uses the word in a stanza in which he assesses Steingerðr's value as greater than those of Iceland, Denmark, England, and Germany. *Meta* does not recur in the saga until the exchange between Steinarr and Bersi now under consideration. Its explicit naming and use in dialogue is significant for the saga's theme. After an impromptu stanza, Bersi, as the man challenged, continues: "... en auðsætt er þat, at þér frændr ætlið mér at fyrirkoma; er ok vel, at þú

49 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 3, 213.

vitir, hvárt nokkut er undir mínum þokka, ok mætti setjask ofmetnaðr þinn” (... but it is clear that you and your kinsmen intended to put an end to me. It would be good for you, Steinarr, to recognize whether my good will counts for anything; then your arrogance might be kept in bounds).⁵⁰ In turn, Steinarr states that he and his kinsmen do not seek Bersi’s death, only his dishonor, and continues: “Ekki vinnu vér þér bana en vel þætti oss at þú kynnir at meta þik” (We will not cause your death, but it would sit well with us if you could take a proper measure of yourself). Here, after the motif of *mál* has referenced measure against external standards in ways significant to the saga public, if not always the principals, very close to the exact mid-point of the saga the concept is suddenly interiorized and lent weight by two mature, deliberative Icelanders through appeals to subjective assessment – not absolute measurement – even to self-assessment, as Steinarr urges on Bersi. Illustrative of the various kinds of indirection in the saga, the measure motif is never explicitly associated with Kormákr (save in the sausage episode) yet underlies his saga as a whole. In Old English, *metod* ‘fate’ survived the pagan period and was used by Ælfric of the Christian god as ‘creator’.⁵¹ In Old Norse, however, the root retained its association with fate, i.e., the mete outcome, e.g., *mjot* ‘right measure’, *mjotudr* ‘dispenser of fate, bane’, the *mjotviðr* ‘fate tree’ (= Yggdrasil) of *Völuspá*.⁵²

In the following discussion, saga events will be treated in briefer fashion. Kormákr acts as Steinarr’s second in the ensuing duel. After a number of shields have been damaged, one of Steinarr’s blows glances off Bersi’s shield rim and takes the unexpected trajectory of running down his back, slicing into his buttocks and the back of his knee. The resulting injury is symbolically tantamount to a male rape or emasculation, and the knee wound to an interruption in the family line, since the knee symbolized consanguinity and generational descent. The resulting loss of social status to Bersi, if one chooses this symbolic interpretation, includes Steingerðr’s divorce of the famous dueler, whom she now labels Arse-Bersi.⁵³ Kormákr

50 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 12, 249.

51 *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. by Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller (London, Oxford University Press, 1882, 1954), s.v. *metod*.

52 *Völuspá*, in *Eddukvæði*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 1:291, st. 2.

53 See Sayers, “Steingerðr’s Nicknames for Bersi (*Kormáks saga*): Implications for Gender, Politics and Poetics,” *Florilegium* 12 (1993): 33–54.

evades his fine; Bersi, although diminished, eventually recovers his chieftain's standing and influence, and can remarry. Þorkell seeks to recover Steingerðr's property, and this leads to yet another duel. But it does not proceed in due order, since Þorkell claims that Bersi's sword is too long, another recall of the earlier motif cluster. Bersi has a ready expedient: a different sword, with which he promptly dispatches Þorkell. This fatal outcome is also in contrast to earlier procedural mishaps and woundings and establishes a reference point at the far end of the spectrum of judicial dueling. With this death, matters in the saga take a more serious turn.

Men Compared (*mannjafnaðr*): Indirection

Another indirectly realized but significant mensurability motif is the *mannjafnaðr* or comparison between men, which recalls the single combat between Ögmundr and Ásmundr in Chapter 2 over pre-eminence as Viking leader.⁵⁴ Here the men compared are Bersi and Þórarinn Álfsson; their respective proponents are the minor characters Oddr and Glúmr. There is, however, no detailing of these heroes' attributes and accomplishments, nor any statement on the conception of a "good man," i.e., a representative of the mainstream. Instead of the criteria for such a comparison being listed, it becomes the source of yet another squabble, with wider implications. The more interesting comparison of prominent men – that suggested by the narrative – would, naturally, have been between Kormákr and Bersi. The former is unlikely to have come off the better. Yet the saga author eschews such an explicit matching up. Also relevant in this context is the term *ójafnaðarmaðr*, the agent of immoderate, unjust treatment of others, as met in numerous other sagas. The argument between Oddr and Glúmr moves to the level of the principals, when Þórarinn abducts a marriageable girl, Steinvǫr Oddsdóttir. Her father engages Bersi, who recovers

54 Medieval Norse conceptions and literary realizations of "masculinity" have been profitably explored in several recent studies and collections of essays. Particularly relevant to the matters of *Kormáks saga* are Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020); and Ármann Jakobsson, "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls Saga*," *Viator* 38.1 (2007): 191–215. For the comparison of "champions" by two subalterns, see Keith Ruiter, *Mannjafnaðr: A Study of Normativity, Transgression, and Social Pragmatism in Medieval Authors* (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2018).

the girl at the cost of a number of deaths, although none within the dueling framework, which is now retired from the narrative, as soon will be Bersi, perhaps the most moderate man in the story, despite his readiness for acts of violence. In this, his status as chieftain appears vindicated. His final appearance in the saga, a “last hurrah,” is conditioned by his advanced age. For socioeconomic advantages he has undertaken to foster one of Óláfr pái Høskuldsson’s sons, Halldórr. This arrangement yields a new twist on the *mannjafnaðr*, Halldórr wondering and Bersi musing on how he compares with the younger man he once was. His skaldic verses on themes of old age are reminiscent of those of Egill Skallagrímsson. Bersi concludes that there is still one man worth his fighter’s attention, his brother-in-law Váli, who is grazing his stock on Bersi’s land. This is also partly the outcome of his troubled marriage, perhaps because of the presence of Steinvǫr in the house. The ensuing encounter is not a judicial duel but a killing, in which Halldórr and Bersi collaborate, the former with Bersi’s sword Hvítingr, the latter with a halberd – a symbolic extension, not reduction, on the weapon of war motif. The episode also has a positive generational dimension not met since the opening chapter of the saga. Bersi has symbolic offspring, while Kormákr has none.

Mediocrity: A Second Husband

With Bersi’s retirement from the action of the saga, the narrative introduces Steingerðr’s second husband, Þorvaldr, nicknamed *tinteinn*. The conventional introductory thumbnail portrait shows him as unprepossessing, with little social influence, although his brother Þorvarðr is more forward and capable of armed conflict.

Þorvaldr hét maðr ok var Eysteinnsson ok var kallaðr tinteinn. Hann var maðr auðigr ok hagr, skáld ok engi skǫrungr í skaplyndi. Bróðir hans hét Þorvarðr, er bjó norðr í Fljótum. Þeir váru frændr margir, ok var sá kynspátrr kallaðr Skíðingar og hafði litla mannheill.⁵⁵

(Now there was a man named Þorvaldr, the son of Eysteinn, nicknamed “Tin-strip”: he was a well-to-do man, a smith, and a skald; but he was mean-spirited for all that. His brother Þorvarðr lived in

55 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 17, 263.

the north country at Fljót, and they had many kinsmen – they were called the Skidings – but little standing.)

In spite of his wealth and skills, Þorvaldr enjoys little respect, and is then inconsequential, which will have made for less social prominence for Steingerðr than that enjoyed in her marriage to the chieftain Bersi. Kormákr feigns not to have heard of the betrothal and makes plans to go abroad, which will prove a pivotal point in the saga.

There is no pointed comparison between Þorvaldr and either Kormákr or Bersi, although it is clear to the saga public that despite his abilities as a craftsman and his wealth, Þorvaldr is far from meeting Icelandic standards as a fully competent male. His brother Þorvarðr acts in his interests. In all this, the motifs of measurement (especially linear) are exploited in only very subtle fashion.

The *tin* of the name *tinteinn* clearly means ‘tin, pewter’, and there are numerous other references to the craft of tin-working. *Teinn* has been less surely associated with Irish *tein* ‘fire’. Yet *teinn* also meant ‘spit, stake, twig, stripe’ in Old Norse, which might well describe thin lengths of precious metals, iron, pewter, and other alloys cut from plates or sheets, prior to further refinement. In the medieval north, wire-making involved a draw-plate or die (of horn or wood in the case of the softer alloys), mounted on a wooden block.⁵⁶ Through a graduated series of perforations, a strip of heated metal was repeatedly drawn with tongs, often of bone, until the desired diameter was reached. Wire had multiple uses, e.g., joining the halves of sword hilts over the tang, in filigree work, and in the creation of ornaments for male and female dress. In his verse Kormákr calls up the image of Þorvaldr, the *tindrátarmaðr* or ‘tin-wire-drawer’, pulling wire through his teeth. The perforated die seems to have been likened to a human mouth displaying a range of (ill-kept?) teeth. Kormákr, on the other hand, can scarcely show his teeth in a smile, such is his distaste at seeing his beloved married to a lesser man. Wire-drawing continues saga’s motifs of linearity but also diminution. Þorvaldr’s cited mean-spiritedness may

56 John Granlund, “Träddragning,” *Kulturbistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, ed. by John Granlund, 22 vols. (Malmö: Alhems Förlag, 1956–76), 19: cols. 5–7. *Teinn* is found elsewhere as an element of personal names; *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, ed. by Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956), s.v. *teinn*.

also be figured in this image, the speech that passed through his mouth successively reducing his stature as a man. Kormákr suggests his craftsmanship is of a coarse kind, since he is familiar with the *fél* ‘rasp, file’ and thus not with fine work. The reference to dung and even a sledge for the transport of dung may indicate that Tinteinn used animal dung as fuel in his workshop, not unreasonable in power-scarce Iceland but nonetheless somewhat demeaning, one may assume. Kormákr’s mockery of Þorvaldr is unprovoked and hinges on metonymy, the assumed superiority of the poet over a craftsman engaged in making material goods smaller, as if vocation were the equivalent of character. One recalls that Steingerðr found the location of Bersi’s dueling wound sufficient symbolic cause to leave him. Steingerðr judges Kormákr’s verse defamatory (“hróp *þitt*”) and says it will not be tolerated.⁵⁷ Her reputation is, after all, also at stake. Kormákr retorts that if he wished he could craft slander with the best of them, even cause stones to float on water (“skalk níða [...] svát steinar fljóti”) – perhaps like sausages in a kettle.⁵⁸ But he refrains from doing this, as he will on a later, more serious occasion, displaying here at least more moderation than usually shown. The ill-favored pair part on unfriendly terms.

Kormákr and Þorgils go trading and raiding in continental Europe, with the Icelanders’ near-compulsory stop at the Norwegian royal court. As is usual in the sagas, the Icelanders shine in Norway, whatever problems they may have left behind them at home.⁵⁹ After a profitable summer raiding and trading in the British Isles, on the Atlantic or Baltic coast, during which Kormákr’s verse is preoccupied with his situation and with Steingerðr and Tinteinn, they serve with distinction in King Haraldr *gráfeldr* (greycloak)’s military forces. His brother faults him for not marrying Steingerðr when he had the chance. Like the trip abroad, his reply suggests a greater degree of self-scrutiny and freedom from his Icelandic matrix than previously shown – a step toward maturity, as it were – while

57 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 17, 264.

58 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 17, 265, st. 52.

59 See Jakub Morawiec, “In a Quest for a Fame and Recognition – on the role of the *útanferð* motif in medieval Icelandic sagas of warrior-poets,” *Quaestiones medii aevi novae* (2017): 37–52; Yoav Tirosh, “Icelanders Abroad,” *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 502–7; and Sayers, “Death Abroad in the Skalds’ Sagas: Kormák and the Scottish *blótrisi*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 121 (2006): 161–72.

still ascribing his abandonment of the marriage to external forces: “Meir olli því vándra vætta atkvæði en mín mislyndi.”⁶⁰ McTurk translates “That had more to do with the spell-casting of evil spirits than with my fickleness,”⁶¹ but “fickleness” seems a bit frivolous and suggests a preferred alternate course of action; “moodiness” may better capture the state of mind. The poet’s characterization of Þórveig’s malevolent words, *atkvæði*, is of interest as drawn from the word cluster of *mál* ‘speech’. Its principal use was to designate a term of in the vocabulary of law but it was also used of a ‘syllable’, ‘sentence’, or ‘decision’ and, figuratively, as a ‘decree of fate’, ‘spell’, or ‘charm’. Speaking *to* something, it is then a performative utterance, speech with intended consequences. Kormákr is eager to return to Iceland, but Þorgils is unsure of how they will be received. The crossing is a difficult one and the ship’s yard breaks, an echo of the motif of linear deficiency. A chance meeting with Steingerðr once ashore leads to their spending five nights at a small farm, chastely sharing a bed.

The inconsequential interlude at the farmhouse is typically followed by a stanza by Kormákr, which is as follows:

Hvílum, handar bála
 Hlín, valda sköþ sínu,
 þat séum reið at ráði,
 rík, tveim megin bríkar,
 nærgi’s oss í eina
 anglaust sæing göngum,
 dýr sköfnunga drafnar
 dyneyjar við Freyja.⁶²

The first helming is relatively straightforward:

| | |
|--|--|
| Goddess of arm’s fire, we repose on either side of a screen the mighty fates have their way, and are hostile; I see it clearly. ⁶³ | [arm’s fires: their goddess; (Hlín): woman] |
|--|--|

60 *Kormáks saga*, ch.18, 267.

61 *Kormak’s saga*, ch. 18, 209.

62 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19, 272, st 59.

63 *Kormak’s saga*, trans. McTurk, ch. 19, 211, st. 59.

curse. The closing helming might then read: “Whenever we go carefree to a single bed, Freyja, the scabbard beast (= sword = penis) goes mushy as dregs before the down-island.” Here, superficially, the poet has stayed within his known parameters of taste. It is at this juncture that Steingerðr makes her longest speech thus far in the saga, gaining in distinction from the contrast with Kormákr’s ongoing versifying. It is well worth noting for its succinctness, directness, and analysis of the situation from a woman’s perspective. The topic, established by Kormákr’s stanzas, is intercourse: “Þat skal eigi verða, ef ek má ráða, ok skildisk þú svá at eins við þau mál, at þess er þér engi ván” (That is not going to happen, if I have any say in the matter; you withdrew from the arrangements between us in the one way that made sure you could have no hope of that”).⁶⁷ *Mál* ‘affair’ reenters the discourse, with its several resonances: measure, speech, poetry.

Mál and *níð* ‘Defamation’: Escalation

Despite Kormákr’s various indecisions and mismanagement of both human and supernatural relations, no outrageously insulting verse occurs again until late in the saga and then in two forms. Some stanzas are critical of Steingerðr’s second husband, Þorvaldr *tinteinn*, for his general ineffectuality. The other recall of possible earlier scurrility is a stanza that may have been composed by Þorvaldr or Narfi and that is circulated through the offices of a paid accomplice under Kormákr’s name. Defamation is the only mode in which men like Narfi and Þorvaldr can compete with Kormákr. The purpose of the stanza is to insult Steingerðr and simultaneously divert her affections permanently from Kormákr. The verses in reality reference only natural and conventional sexual activity, not acts under social sanction, and owe their abusive nature primarily to their likening of Steingerðr and Kormákr to a broken-down old mare and stallion engaged in the act of mating. Difficulties in interpreting the closing verse of the stanza may be due to its poor initial crafting or to some editing in the interests of taste in the subsequent tradition.⁶⁸ What is important for present purposes is that the deception has inherent credibility in that some people, Steingerðr included, are ready to believe that Kormákr was the author. This episode

67 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19, 275.

68 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 20, 277–78, st. 64 and note a.

offers indirect evidence of Kormákr's status in the community as a well-known crafter of verse. Yet in such a stanza, Kormákr would have gone beyond the bounds of moderate social behavior and would have shown himself a lesser man by any measure. It was comparable verses on equine sexuality that so angered Queen Þóra of Norway in the run-up to the scene in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* discussed above. Whether intentionally or coincidentally, the metaphors echo those of the shared-bed stanza, e.g., male weapon (spear) as the equivalent of the penis. By referring to Steingerðr as “Þrúð þráða” ‘goddess of threads’ (= women’s finery), the poem also gets in a dig at Tinteinn, since *þráðr* does double service as both ‘woolen or linen thread’ and ‘metal wire’. This makes Kormákr’s authorship appear more plausible. The community may well have known that such poetic treatment was unprecedented in Kormákr’s production, but Steingerðr is outraged, and Kormákr is unable to disabuse her. Although the situation is now less intimate than that in the cookhouse, Kormákr is again obliged to reply to a poetic charge of unmanliness, now not effeminacy but imagined bestiality. Kormákr clearly recognizes that he has been the object of an act of defamation, *níðingr*.⁶⁹ He concludes that Narfi is the source of the libel and kills him, death now being the retribution for dishonoring verses, not a clever poetic riposte. In a slightly later context of conflict with the Skíðungar clan, Kormákr says again that he can defame with the best of them, yet he refrains from attacking the Eysteinnssonar in the same scurrilous register.

These developments lead to yet another judicial duel, this between Kormákr and Þorvaldr’s brother, Þorvarðr. Familiar motifs recur: magical practices to create physical invulnerability, Kormákr’s impatience with these, leading to his cutting short (the diminution motif) the sacrifice of domestic geese that might have protected him. With both combatants protected by the same witch’s charms, the duel is initially inconsequential. Finally Kormákr delivers a blow that cracks or breaks Þorvarðr’s ribs (another instance of impaired linearity?). No blood has been drawn, but Þorvarðr is unable to continue fighting, and Kormákr is the victor. He sacrifices a bull, which seems to have been part of the ritualized event, but its carcass is then bought by Þorvarðr and family for use in a healing process. A second combat between the two, again attended by magic intended to

69 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 21, 280, st. 67.

prevent injury, is also called off, now because of a broken shoulder suffered by Þorvarðr. As previously, unambiguous sword wounds that draw blood are not the norm in these encounters. In sum, in *Kormáks saga*, duels are never ideally executed and are further compromised by attendant magic. They are largely inconsequential, and social interaction between the combatants continues despite hostile meetings on the dueling islet. From the perspective of the Christian author of *Kormáks saga*, the old ways of realizing justice seem muddled, discredited.

Masculine vs Feminine: Steingerðr and Female Agency

The scene shifts to Norway, and Kormákr seems to grow in stature, jettisoning his petulance and impatience and behaving as a conventional hero. At this point in the discussion, we may turn from the matter of just how poorly the tinsmith Þorvaldr matches up with Kormákr or Bersi, and consider a less symmetrical relationship – these men in comparison with Steingerðr, although she must be viewed from the perspective of a different set of criteria. Women can achieve no equivalent of male public social competency. Any power or influence is exercised from the household scene. Still, wives are often shown being consulted by their spouses. Despite their sex-determined domestic and social roles, the women of the sagas do at times exhibit a surprising degree of agency, to which the Guðrún of *Laxdæla saga* or Hallgerðr of *Brennu-Njáls saga* attest. What truly counts is what women prompt men to do. The saga-typical introductory portrait of Steingerðr betrays these assumptions: “Þorkell hét maðr, er bjó í Tungu; hann var kvángaðr, ok áttu þau dóttur, er Steingerðr hét; hon var í Gnúpsdal at fóstri” (There was a man named Þorkell who lived at Tunga. He was married and had a daughter named Steingerðr; she was being fostered in Gnúpsdal).⁷⁰ Kormákr’s verses add little to this, since the female figure is idealized, equated with various goddesses but displaying nothing of a personal nature. The saga seldom details the inner workings of Steingerðr’s personality. Her interest in Kormákr, as well as annoyance, is then difficult to pin down. Yet inferences may be readily drawn. Only in the case of Steingerðr is the saga’s leitmotif of diminution reversed. She gains in agency as she matures, first as having some say about Kormákr

⁷⁰ *Kormáks saga*, ch. 3, 206.

coming courting, then as a married woman and head of the household, and third, as the plaintiff in a divorce suit and consequently a divorcee. She also gains a voice and increasingly figures in dialogue, primarily with Kormákr and then in a critical mode, as his attentions and verses are bluntly rejected. The saga offers no example of the casual conversations that might have figured in Kormákr's repeated visits. This is consistent with saga style; the criterion for inclusion in the narrative is that dialogue must move the narrative forward. And, indeed, all Steingerðr's reactions are to events and poems that occur in public, e.g., a street in Norway, and thus affect her honor and standing. But there is never any final break with the poet. In all of this, she enjoys the envy and notoriety of being celebrated for her beauty and, via metonymical attributions, her domestic virtues – but little else – in Kormákr's verse, as it is committed to memory by the community and circulates as entertainment. And it is she who rejects an extramarital sexual relationship with Kormákr. Finally, even Kormákr acknowledges her right to make up her own mind and live with whom she will. Little of this is reflected in Kormákr's verse, where only her muted responses to the poet's acts and words are noted. But to the end, like the reification in poetry as the goddess of the hearth and hall, woman is susceptible to commodification as in a lightly coerced marriage or kidnapping by pirates for a more forced union. By the end of the saga, Steingerðr has achieved a considerable degree of resigned autonomy and even cynicism, expressed in a remark with clear sexual symbolism. Invited by her second husband to go with Kormákr, who has bravely rescued her from pirates, she makes a telling remark, perhaps more from cynicism than principle: "Steingerðr kvazk ekki skyldu kaupa um knífa" (Steingerðr said that she was not going to exchange one knife for another).⁷¹ Since knives were personal possessions in the medieval North, this is not a reference to who provides her with room and board but rather a sexual allusion in which she figures herself as a sheath. One knife is the same as another, in this continuation of the weapon/penis equation. Kormákr immediately follows this remark with his own summation of their mutual history. "Kormákr kvað ok ekki þess mundu auðit verða; kvað illar vættir því snimma skirrt hafa eða ósköp"⁷² (Kormak also said that that was in no way fated to come about; he said

71 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 26, 298.

72 *Kormáks saga*, ch. 26, 298.

that evil spirits or adverse destinies had prevented it from the start). *Óskop* (< *skap* ‘condition of mind’, *inter alia*) illustrates the Icelandic predilection for negatives created by prefixing *ó/ú* to nouns and adjectives. Here ‘malevolence’ captures the essentials. This cannot be a reference to the Norns, since they may be assumed to be without emotions in assigning a destiny to a newborn. The witch Þórveig is the likely prime referent, although Kormákr rightly concludes that other parties will also have wished the poet ill luck.

In Norwegian waters, the trio continue their altercations. Kormákr hits Þorvaldr on the head with the tiller of his ship, the bar attached at the top of the side rudder (recalling various rods and swords), while Steingerðr further compromises the dignity of the ship by arrogating the tiller (weapon, penis) and ramming Kormákr’s vessel. The gear in question – the steering instrument – invites us to see, if not a touch of proto-feminism, at least a woman’s disillusionment with men. Both ships founder, as Kormákr’s amorous hopes are also definitively scuppered. Like Kormákr, Steingerðr appears to gain in autonomy once beyond the seeming constraints and threats of diminution of Icelandic life.

With the physical move of the principals to Norway and beyond, the narrative is somewhat deflated, with such repeated elements as kidnapping by pirates. The correspondence between the prose narrative and the verses is also less good. Yet some kind of resolution among the principals is achieved. With it, the motifs of measure and measurement persist only as echoes. Before the poet’s martial encounter with his bane in Scotland, it is stated that none in his troop compared with him in strength and courage: “í þeim her var engi slíkr sem Kormákr um afl ok áræði.”⁷³ In Kormák’s final combat against a Scottish *blótrisi* (‘sacrifice giant?’; imagined in earlier scholarship as a standing stone) his sword slips, as swords had performed erratically earlier, and the giant breaks his ribs. While he kills the giant with a sword blow, it falls on him and further crushes him – all recalls of earlier nonnormative duels and longitude motifs. The *hapax legomenon* *blótrisi* may be a Scottish standing stone, as has been suggested, before which sacrifices could have been imagined. The term also suggests an augmentation, after the recurrent diminution motif of the Icelandic chapters. Kormákr is portrayed as a poet to the end, however, and judges himself

73 *Kormáks saga*, ch 27, 299.

to have died unheroically in bed, without either widow or offspring. The generational line then stops here. The saga has an *uroboros* effect, returning as it began to Viking activity beyond Scandinavia. Ásmundr's son even makes an appearance.

The Measure of the Saga: Conclusion

Kormáks saga was crafted with the aid of familiar compositional conventions. These include the prosimetric form, with its tacit acceptance of Icelandic poets' ability to extemporize complex verse; the establishment of motifs in generation-oriented introductory chapters that will be recalled and recast in successive episodes; capsule portraits that will steer audience interpretation in lieu of ongoing psychological insights into a character's thoughts and action; a complex causality in human affairs that combines the effects of destiny, personality, luck, and actions, at times the magic-working of other characters. Like his father Ógmundr, who is successful only before emigrating to Iceland, the precipitous Kormákr achieves a full measure of male competency over the narrative arc of the saga only when abroad, beyond what he experiences as the situational confines in which he reached manhood in Iceland. In this wider world he ceases to be an immoderate threat – legal/martial or poetic – to Icelandic social order, a threat most manifest in his amorous attention to a married woman. Kormákr's life – in the saga ranging from kitchen to court – may be viewed against the background of the putative Norse zero-sum view of the world, in which a human faculty, such as an eye, may be sacrificed for enhanced ability in its abstract sense, such as wisdom or foresight (Óðinn), or the loss of a son may, with tragic irony, be compensated for by the ability to compose an elegiac poem, e.g., Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek*. In these often involuntary transactions, the relative worth of the properties lost and gained is balanced, present in equal measure. Kormákr is deliberate, skilled, and fortunate in poetry (in terms of audience reception, if not his beloved's) but impulsive, gauche, and unlucky in love, as he recognizes in his final verses. For the enamored verbal artist, the preferred trade-off may be unsatisfied desire and high art over satiety and silence. From this perspective, Þórveig's curse that he would never enjoy Steingerðr may be seen as an enablement. But in important respects, Þórveig has queered

Kormákr's prospects in various senses of the term. Yet his verse, *mál* in this sense, suffers none of the diminution (inadequate *mál*) apparent in his social activities and their various "affairs" (yet another *mál*). Kormákr's verses are typically snapshots of his situation of the moment, although with the principals somewhat epicized or heroicized. In the saga as we have it, they do not contribute to the narrative advance. In the skaldic tradition, there is an underlying tension between couplets and/or helming, e.g., the poet's risk-filled trials aboard a ship, while Steingerðr and Tinteinn relax in bed. This compositional principle is reflected in the relationship in that a fundamental difference keeps Kormákr and Steingerðr at a distance, if not always at odds. In the verse, exposition of a situation or relationship is more frequent than actual events so that the verse always has a reflective nature. The riddling nature of the verse also maintains a tension between poet/poem and listener, until the poem has been memorized and the syntax and kenning-based imagery of the stanza then "solved."⁷⁴

Among the important symbols and topics set out the introductory chapters of *Kormáks saga*, the shrinking measuring rod is tone-setting. Its first subsequent realization is in the pivotal kitchen scene with Narfi, which seeks to measure the "doneness" of kettle snakes and the "madness," in the sense of adult male competency, of Kormákr. To reformulate one early question of this study: just how did the saga public interpret the kettle-snake and verse-capping episode? Not to see in Kormákr's response more than a superficial, uptight, and dismissive nod to his antagonist is to leave Narfi the victor and the poet at an even greater psychological disadvantage than is more openly apparent in the mismanaged affairs, human and supernatural that follow. The poet knew himself fully competent to versify in Narfi's base register, with its objectives of defamation and dishonor, as later stanzas evidence. As the saga advances, the motif of unmanliness in an absolute sense is dropped in favor of that of ineffectual masculinity – of measures not met – and thwarted sexual, social, and judicial contests persist, steered by a multifaceted causality. The poet's impulsiveness cuts short effective relationships with both human society and the supernatural. Recourse to magic invulnerability and healing is,

74 On an English king's wish that the poet stay at court until this process was complete and some "profit" could be had of the verses, see *Sneglu-Halla þátrr*, ch. 8, 290.

like the witch's curse and defamatory accusations, lying just beyond the social norm.

In addition to the motif of measure/measurement, speech acts (including poetry and its metrics) and contractual and judicial matters (such as marriages) – all changes run on the word *mál* – pervade the saga. Yet the measure of a man in Iceland seems to have lacked any sense of an absolute standard, as might be concretized in a measuring rod. The gods surely do not qualify as a model for morality. With the decisive decisions of the Norns generally unknown and one's fate veiled, only comparisons among men are feasible, and these valorize a behavior that promotes social stability in a highly contingent world. This objective is encapsulated in the notion of moderation, the *hóf* prized by Icelanders but often beyond their grasp in the sagas, since ambition cannot be thwarted nor insult left unanswered. *Hóf*, however, is not an absolute but a kind of communally recognized mean. It designated action appropriate to specific circumstances, so it too is a relative concept, accompanied by a degree of instability. Related motifs are the frequent lower body injuries in duels, with their symbolic relevance both to manliness (synchronic) and generational descent (diachronic). In the former case, there is a pervasive innuendo in the matter of sexual orientation and practice: Ásmundr's relations with Ögmundr, Narfi's sneers over sausages, the pegs of the dueling ground whose Old Norse term was also used of the penis, Kormákr's injured and tumescent thumb, his slackened libido in the matter of the marriage, Bersi's buttocks, the scurrilous equine stanza, Steingerðr ramming Kormákr's ship, even the sacrifice giant who fatally pins Kormákr – all admissible as instances of questionable masculinity. The saga also offers insights into perceived ambitions of female agency, although the character of Steingerðr and her actions may owe more to art than to history.

The poetic device of personal name encryption was invoked at the beginning of this essay, principally as a heuristic tool to track the multiple significations of Old Norse *mál* ('measure, speech, poem, affair'). It revealed the absence, save in trivial idiom or antonym, of a kindred concept, *hóf* 'moderation'. The Christian compiler of the saga clearly had a perspective wider than that of its principals, from which the heroic pagan past appeared as a scene of darkness in which heathens could only stumble toward the light. Thus seen, Kormákr's ultimate failure in all but the

narrow spheres of art and plunder is comprehensible and can be valued, if only in terms of cultural history and as preparation for a more enlightened and faith-led Christian era. We have seen how another *mál*, skaldic poetry with its demanding metrics and mythological and metaphorical apparatus, was also preserved for only a limited transitional period after the conversion, during which its thematics were Christianized, as in *Lilja*. The third *mál* ‘affairs’ chiefly concerns the pursuit – and manipulation – of marriage contracts and judicial duels, and these two will also be transformed under Christian canon and civil law. *Kormáks saga* will continue to challenge modern readers, in no small part because of the strained effort of the prose to make sense of the allusions in the poet’s many verses.⁷⁵ Although *Kormáks saga* as a narrative of thwarted and thus static love has long been viewed through a romantic lens, the theme of competence and dynamic personal agency – open to measure and comparison as explored under the aegis of the polyseme *mál* – now emerges with clarity, as does the larger topic of Iceland’s fitness for incorporation in a greater Christian Europe.

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75 Due to its choice of theme, this essay has chiefly addressed the prose text in which poems ascribed to Kormákr are embedded; stanzas in which the various topics incarnated in the polysemantic *mál* are less evident. The historical Kormákr may also be less than fully evident there too. Evidence from the saga of King Haraldr suggests that impromptu versifying on assigned or challenging topics, e.g., the altercation of a smith and a tanner described as might be Þórr, Sigurðr, and their opponents, could have been in the nature of a “parlor (or hall) game” in the medieval North, with the results added to the Kormakian corpus; see *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, ch. 3, 269–70.

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ÁGRIP

Breytileg merking fornorræna/íslenska orðsins *mál* í *Kormáks sögu*: stærðarmál, skáldamál og ástarmál

Efnisorð: mæling, meðalhóf, dróttkvæði, hólmganga, formælingar

Fornorræna eða íslenska orðið *mál* (ýmist notað um mælingar, tungumál, skáldskap, málarekstur eða umfjöllunarefni) leikur víða lykilhlutverk í *Kormáks sögu*. Hinar ólíku merkingar orðsins varpa allar ljósi á ævi skáld-hetjunnar sem er lýst sem miklum og sterkum og áhlaupamanni í skapi. Hann nær því fram í skáldskap sínum sem hann missir af í lífi sínu og ástum: meðalhófinu (miðgildinu í hvers kyns mælingum). Hann lendir í mannjöfnuði við aðra karla í sögunni, þarf að

þola hæðyrði vegna sambands síns við Steingerði frá skapheimsku lítilmenni og formælingar hinnar fjölkunnugu Þórveigar. Formælingarnar verða að áhrinsorðum því Kormákur fær ekki Steingerðar en skapar draumsýn hennar með skáldskap sínum. Á vikingaferðum fjarri Íslandi finnur Kormákur það jafnvægi í lífi sínu sem stendur honum ekki til boða í íslensku samfélagi. Dómur hins kristna höfundar er að Kormákur hafi náð langt í list sinni en í lífinu hafi ójafnlyndið verið honum fjötur um fót, auk formælinganna og álits annarra – eins konar heiðin örlög. Á vissan hátt má lesa *Kormáks sögu* sem forsögu að því sem gerðist á Íslandi á þrettánda öld.

S U M M A R Y

Ringing Changes: On Old Norse-Icelandic *mál* in *Kormáks saga*

Key words: measure, moderation, skaldic poetry, judicial dueling, curse

The Old Norse-Icelandic word *mál*, variously “measure, speech, poetry, case, matter,” is strategically called on at various points throughout *Kormáks saga*. Its diverse significations all bear on the life of the warrior-poet, who is himself characterized as precipitous by nature. He achieves in his poetry what eludes him in life and love: moderation (*höf*), the midway point in measures of all kinds. Subject to comparisons with other males in the saga, mocked in his masculinity by an insolent servant, and cursed by a sorceress, he does not attain the body of his beloved Steingerðr but succeeds in recreating her in ideal form in skaldic poetry. Away from Iceland on Viking expeditions, he finds an equilibrium that was denied him in Icelandic society. The overall judgment of the Christian author is of a successful career in art yet one limited in life by an impulsive character, curse (this, too, a kind of *mál*), the judgement of others – in all, a pagan destiny. In significant ways Kormákr prefigures the Iceland of the thirteenth century.

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