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A PROBLEM OF GIANT PROPORTIONS

Distinguishing Risar and Jötnar in old Icelandic saga material

The problem

IT IS EASY TO FALL into the trap of viewing the literature of the ancient past through the lens of our own cultural experience. For as long as scholarship on and translations of Old Icelandic sagas have existed in the English language, the word “giant” has been silently accepted as a term which maps unproblematically onto this literature. When employing this word in scholarly discourse on Old Norse-Icelandic prose and poetic works, we unconsciously impose our preconceptions about giants of recent folklore onto the literature of the distant past.¹ The result is distortionary. The words that medieval Icelandic authors used for gigantic beings, including, but not limited to *jötunn*, *risi*, *þurs* and *tröll* (plural *jötnar*, *risar*, *þursar* and *tröll*), and any independent meaning that might be attached to these individual words, is whitewashed.² These emic terms and the figures

- 1 On this practice see Ármann Jakobsson, “The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of *Troll* and *Ergi* in Medieval Iceland,” *Saga-Book* 32 (2008): 40 and “The Taxonomy of the Non-Existent: Some Medieval Icelandic Concepts of the Paranormal,” *Fabula* 54 (2013): 199–201. In this article, “Old Norse-Icelandic” will be used when referring to texts which derive collectively from Norway and Iceland, such as when referring to the “Old Norse-Icelandic corpus.” “Old Icelandic” will be used of texts which were produced in medieval Iceland, such as the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*. “Old Norse” will be used both of the language in which these texts were composed and of the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia.
- 2 Comments made here about the misuse of the word “giant” are also true of the word *Riese*, which is the usual term used to translate *risar* and *jötnar* in German-language scholarship. The translation of both of these terms as *Riese* stretches back to Jacob Grimm’s *Deutsche Mythologie*, and this practice has been followed by Katja Schulz in her ambitious study of these figures, *Riesen: Von Wissenschütern und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda and Saga* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004). Norwegian-, Swedish- and Danish-speaking scholars and translators typically use the terms *jotun*, *jätte* and *jette* respectively. While these terms are cognate with the Old Norse *jötunn*, they are generally used to translate the words *jötunn*, *risi* and *þurs* indiscriminately and are therefore also problematic. Modern Icelandic editions and scholarship expectedly retain the terms *risi*, *jötunn*, *þurs*

they describe are made to match the expectations attached to the singular, modern, and etic noun “giant.”³ In other words, using the word “giant” forces all of the above Old Norse words into a single, narrow semantic range. The ongoing use of this word in English-language translations and scholarship continually reinforces the view that *jötunn*, *risi*, *þurs* and *tröll* must be essentially identical, and explorations of whether this homogeneity is reflected in the textual record itself are almost non-existent.⁴

Hard-and-fast distinctions between the Old Norse terms *jötunn*, *tröll* and *þurs* are often difficult to locate, especially in saga literature. The level of synonymy between these words when describing giantlike beings is such that identifying the individual meaning attached to them is a speculative task.⁵ As a result, although some nuances are paved over when these words are collectively rendered as “giant,” I will not be taking up the question of the distinction between them. Instead, this discussion is concerned with the words *risi* and *jötunn*. Of the four terms mentioned above, these are the two which have been most critically mis-rendered in English-language

and *tröll*, though this does not necessarily imply that differences between these terms are considered in Icelandic scholarship.

- 3 Emic labels describe “the entities and processes of social life that are real and important to the participants,” whereas etic labels describe “entities and processes which by virtue of their scientific status are capable of efficaciously explaining (and changing) social thoughts and activities, regardless of whether they are real or important from the participant’s point of view,” Marvin Harris, “History and Significance of the Emic/Etic Distinction,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 330. That is to say, while *jötunn*, *risi*, *þurs* and *tröll* are “real and important” terms to the societies that generated Old Norse-Icelandic literature, “giant” and related terms are labels of extra-cultural provenance that were unknown to these societies.
- 4 The most notable study of this kind was conducted by Lotte Motz, “The Families of Giants,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 102 (1987): 216–36. She attempted to show that *jötunn*, *risar*, *tröll* and *þursar* all possessed distinct characteristics in Old Norse-Icelandic sources, and that each could be characterised as a different type of “giant.” However, the textual support for such neat divisions between all four of these terms does not exist.
- 5 This is not to say, of course, that the semantic range of these words is necessarily restricted to giantlike beings. The word *tröll*, for instance, has a striking array of different meanings. See Ármann Jakobsson, “Trollish Acts,” “Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in *Egils saga*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 83 (2011): 32; “Taxonomy,” 201; and Randi Eldevik, “Less Than Kind: Giants in Germanic Tradition,” *The Shadow Walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. by Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 91. On *tröll* in general, see John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) and Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (New York: Punctum Books, 2017).

translations and scholarship. This is because, with few exceptions, the beings that they describe exhibit significant differences that do not survive the translation into English “giant,” or the subsequent scholarly discourse on these “giants.” The present paper will focus on the distinctions between *jötnar* and *risar* in the extant Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, and especially in Icelandic sagas. This will, in turn, allow for reflection on the impact of translation practices on our reception and analysis of Old Norse-Icelandic material.

It is worth beginning this discussion with an example of the distortionary effects of translating *risi* and *jötunn* collectively as “giant.” Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards’ translation of the *fornaldarsaga Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns* presents a useful case. In one episode in the saga, a figure known as Goðmundr explains the location of his realm and the political relations that he has with his neighbours. The English text reads:

I’m called Godmund, and I’m the ruler of Glasir Plains; this country’s a dependency of Giantland...the neighbouring country’s called Jotunheim and there’s a king called Geirrod ruling it just now. We’re tributaries under him...but we’re not happy about being ruled by giants.⁶

This text presents a confusing situation. One might well ask why a figure living in “Giantland” but subject to a king from another realm, “Jotunheim,” should express unease about being ruled by “giants.” In fact, the Old Icelandic text is far clearer in its description of this political arrangement:

Goðmundr heiti ek. Ræð ek þar fyrir, sem á Glæsisvöllum heitir. Þar þjónar til þat land, er Risaland heitir...þat land liggr hér næst, er Jötunheimar heitir. Þar ræðr sá konungr, er Geirröðr heitir. Undir hann erum vér skattgildir...en þó unum vér illa við at þjóna jötnum.⁷

6 Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans.), *Seven Viking Romances* (Penguin Books: London, 1985), 263–4.

7 Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda*, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950), IV, 328–9.

Here, Goðmundr, the gigantic ruler of part of Risaland and conceivably therefore a *risi* himself, expresses his displeasure about being ruled by *jötnar* from Jötunheimar, the region to which he pays tribute. The words *risi* and *jötunn* are conflated in the translation, such that the meaning of the original text is confused. This kind of uncritical use of the term “giant” is endemic. Although it has its basis in translations such as that by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, this practice also extends to scholarship on Old Norse-Icelandic texts. This is in spite of the fact that, as Ármann Jakobsson suggests, “the paranormal is created in thought and in words and thus the vocabulary used to encapsulate it is of paramount importance.”⁸ This discussion will demonstrate that Icelandic authors attached significantly different meanings to the terms *risi* and *jötunn* in saga literature.⁹ This will be achieved in the first place by contrasting the origins and functions of these terms in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus as a whole, from mythological poetry to early translated prose works and later saga material. Such a distinction will be argued for in the second place by investigating more closely how these terms came to be received and used by Icelandic saga authors. In so doing, it will be contended that the term “giant” is unsuitable for use in scholarly contexts, since it not only fails to represent these beings, but actively *misrepresents* them.

The Evolution of the term *jötunn*

Before turning to the use and associations of the term *jötunn* in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, it is worth considering the meaning and etymology of the term. Pokorny traces *jötunn* to the Proto-Germanic **etuna*, which he defines as *Vielfresser* or *Menschenfresser* “voracious eater, man-eater.” This is on account of its derivation from the Proto-Indo-European root **ed-* “eat.”¹⁰ The etymological association between *jötnar* and greedy con-

8 Ármann Jakobsson, “Taxonomy,” 207.

9 There is not space here to discuss the complex issue of saga authorship, both in oral and written terms. For more discussion, see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. by Nicholas Jones (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004). In what follows, “saga author” will be taken to refer to those figures who first committed saga material to vellum, acknowledging that many sagas were communally generated in oral tradition at some point preceding this.

10 Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3 vols. (Bern and Munich: A. Francke, 1959–1969), I, 289. The connection espoused above has found broad acceptance

sumption is readily apparent in Old Norse-Icelandic sources. In the earliest mythological material, certain *jötnar* are not only swollen in size, suggesting a voracious appetite – they are also greedy hoarders of resources that are either consumable, such as the mead of Suttungr, or connected to eating, as with Hymir’s magical cauldron.¹¹ The *jötunn* Ægir is also the patron of the divine feast. Joseph Harris adds to this list the *jötunn* Hræsvelgr, whose name means “corpse-swallower.”¹² This obvious connection with excessive consumption and greed might be key to the negative mythological identity of the *jötnar*. This reading is supported by the appearance of the cognate noun *eoten* in *Beowulf*, where it applies to the gluttonous man-eater Grendel. Judging by the probable etymology of the word *jötunn*, these figures had negative associations with greed from the earliest times. This is crucial for contextualising the negativity of *jötnar*, both in early mythological material and in the sagas in which they later appear.

Turning to Old Norse mythology itself, the term *jötunn* abounds in pre-Christian skaldic poetry, in the eddic poems of the Codex Regius manuscript, and in the narratives of *Snorra Edda*. It is well known that the *jötnar* occupied a crucial position as the wise and civilised enemies of the Æsir. In these texts, *jötnar* do not resemble the giants familiar from later European folklore. Extant sources suggest that, instead, they occupy a similar social rung as the Æsir, against whom they are terminally opposed. As Kuusela has recently argued, “I fornnordiska myttraditioner framställs jättar varken som proportionsmässigt överdimensionerade eller stupida” [in Old Norse mythic traditions, giants are portrayed neither as proportionally oversised nor stupid].¹³ This point will be returned to in due course.

in recent scholarship. See, for instance, Eldevik, “Less Than Kind,” 98–9; Joseph Harris, “The Rök Stone’s iatun and the Mythology of Death,” *Analecta Septentrionalia* 65 (2009): 488–93; and Tommy Kuusela, “‘Hallen var lyst i helig frid.’ Krig mellan gudar och jättar i en fornnordisk hallmiljö,” (PhD diss., University of Stockholm, 2017), 24–6.

11 The eddic poem *Hymiskviða* relates that Hymir’s cauldron is inordinately large and this implies that both he, and his hall, are huge. The largest *jötunn* is the primordial being Ymir, from whom the world is shaped. Ymir’s dismemberment is described in stanza 4 of *Völuspá* and stanza 21 of *Vafþrúðnismál*.

12 Harris, “Rök Stone,” 488.

13 Kuusela, “Hallen,” 23. Ingunn Ásdísardóttir affirms that “the more negative and exaggerated derogative connotations regarding size and monstrosity seem to become more prominent in later sources,” “*Jötnar* in War and Peace: The *Jötnar* in Old Norse Mythology. Their Nature and Function” (PhD diss., The University of Iceland, 2018), 9. See also Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes, Volume 1: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*,

Nevertheless, mythological *jötnar* are aligned from the earliest times with forces of chaos in the Old Norse cosmos.¹⁴ In the second of two possibly ninth-century verses in *Snorra Edda* that describe an exchange between the poet Bragi Boddason and a *tröll*, *jötnar* are listed along with *völur*, *tröll*, and devourers of the moon and cosmos.¹⁵ In the mythological poems of the Codex Regius and in *Snorra Edda*, *jötnar* frequently imperil divine society by attempting to acquire the gods' women; by stealing the most powerful items which they possess; and by entering physical and verbal contests with them. The force most inimical to the Æsir, Loki, is the son of a *jötunn* and goes on to produce a monstrous progeny.¹⁶ Finally, it is *jötnar* who are the chief opponents of the Æsir at *ragnarök*, the divine battle which heralds the destruction of the cosmos. When saga authors use the term *jötunn*, then, it is already loaded with a range of negative associations which likely stretch back far into the pre-Christian period.

The negative role which *jötnar* play in the above mythological narratives affects the character of these figures in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus more widely. In translated texts, which make up some of the earliest attested writings in this corpus, the term *jötunn* is overwhelmingly applied to negative figures. The earliest non-mythological source in which *jötnar* appear is the so-called *Niðrstigningar saga*, which is a translation

The Viking Collection 7 (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 1994): 67 and Ármann Jakobsson, "Identifying the Ogre: The Legendary Saga Giants," *Fornaldarsagaerne, myter og virkelighed: studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney and Ármann Jakobsson (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009), 189.

- 14 The earliest extant example of the word *jötunn* is found on the ninth-century Rök stone, where the form *iatun* is given. See Joseph Harris, "Rök Stone," and "Varin's Philosophy and the Rök Stone's Mythology of Death," *New Perspectives on Myth: Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for Comparative Mythology, Ravenstein (the Netherlands), August 19–21, 2008*, ed. by Wim M. J. van Binsbergen and Eric Venbrux (Haarlem: Shikanda, 2010), 91–105.
- 15 Anonymous Stanzas from *Snorra Edda*, ed. and trans. by Kari Ellen Gade, Margaret Clunies Ross and Matthew Townend, in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics, Part 1*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 519.
- 16 Loki is called *sonr Fárbauta jötuns* "son of Fárbauti the *jötunn*" in Snorri's *Gylfaginning*. Anthony Faulkes (ed.), *Snorri Sturluson, Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 26. On the perilous nature of Loki's being fathered by a *jötunn*, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Starkaðr, Loki and Egill Skallagrímsson," *Sagas of Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. by John Tucker (New York: Garland, 1989), 150–3, and Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 64–5.

of the Gospel of Nicodemus.¹⁷ Here, the term *jötunn* is applied to Satan, although no corresponding word appears in the original Latin text. The translator's application of this term to describe Satan depends on an understanding of the negative character of mythological *jötnar*, and their position as the opponents of the Æsir, the divine forces who represent the interests of humanity.¹⁸ The word *jötunn* also appears in *Alexanders saga*, a translation of Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*. In this text Typhoeus, the primary opponent of Jupiter in the Gigantomachy, is described as a *jötunn*. Again, no term exists in the Latin text that encourages the application of the term *jötunn*, so it is clear that the translator made an independent connection between the *jötnar* of mythological tradition and the monstrous Typhoeus of *Alexandreis*. *Jötnar* are placed in Hell once more in chapter 17 of *Duggals leizla*, a translation of the *Visio Tnugdali*. In each of these texts, the use of the word *jötunn* is connected to its chief function as a descriptor for the chaotic beings who oppose the Æsir in mythological sources. *Jötnar* also appear sporadically in translated romances, namely *Bervers saga*, a likely translation of the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone*; *Ívens saga*, a translation of Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain*; and *Erex saga*, a translation of Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*. In all of these texts *jötnar* are monstrous creatures who oppose humans.

However, *jötunn* was not an especially productive term for describing gigantic figures from other literary traditions, since these are apparently the only six texts in which it functions as such. *Jötnar* feature more prominently in works of Scandinavian provenance. They appear as monstrous adversaries in several indigenous romances, namely *Bærings saga*; *Ála flekks saga*; *Kirjalax saga*; *Ectors saga*; *Sigurðar saga þögla* and *Tristams saga*. *Jötnar*

17 For locating many of the instances of the words *jötunn* and *risi* in the prose works discussed in this section, I made use of the online *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, hosted by the University of Copenhagen, <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o> (accessed August 8, 2019). I have supplemented the information provided by this resource with my own findings. Any omissions are my own. I have not mentioned instances where *risar* and *jötnar* feature in figurative expressions such as *sterkr sem risi* "strong as a *risi*" because these do not reference actual *risar* and *jötnar* and are therefore not relevant to the current investigation.

18 It is likely that this was a conscious equivocation, as the translator of *Niðrstignings saga* routinely altered his source so that Christian narratives adhered to Old Norse mythological material. See Gary Aho, "Niðrstigningsarsaga: An Old Norse Version of Christ's Harrowing of Hell," *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1966): 150–59, and Dario Bullitta, *Niðrstignings saga: Sources, Transmission and Theology of the Old Norse "Descent into Hell"* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2017).

are also compared with *monoculi*, or cyclopes, in the religious biography *Mariu saga*. However, in the majority of the texts in which they appear, *jötnar* are closely linked to Scandinavia, or at least to northern Europe. *Jötnar* appear in this capacity in *Landnámabók*; *Grettis saga*; *Jökuls þáttur Búasonar*; *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*; *Hversu Nóregr byggðisk*; *Gautreks saga*; *Gríms saga loðinkinna*; *Hálfðanar saga brönufóstra*; *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*; *Ketils saga hængs*; *Sörla saga sterka*; *Völsunga saga*; *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*; *Örvar-Odds saga*; *Hálfðanar saga svarta* and *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. The predominance of *jötnar* in sagas which treat Scandinavia and other northern regions is not surprising. Again, *jötunn* was a word loaded with deeply rooted mythological associations, and the *jötnar* of the sagas were conceivably inseparable from their mythological forebears.¹⁹ This explains the rarity of their appearance in texts which are non-Scandinavian in origin and focus. It also accounts for the fact that, when *jötnar* appear in these texts, their function does not depart markedly from that which they performed in the mythology of pre-Christian Scandinavia, insofar as this can be reconstructed from extant sources. The antagonistic nature of *jötnar* will be discussed in greater detail below in the context of Old Icelandic saga material.

The evolution of the term *rísi*

If it is accepted that the term *jötunn* was already saturated with complex mythological associations by the time that saga authors employed it, then the term *rísi* presents a different situation. By the time that *rísar* came to be prominent figures in the sagas, the term had acquired quite a different set of associations. The first significant distinction between the words *rísi* and *jötunn* is etymological. According to Pokorny, the word *rísi* can be traced to Proto-Germanic **wrisan*, which is ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European root **uer-*. This word originally bore the sense of height, and this can be detected in the reflexes of this root in other Indo-European languages.²⁰ *Rísi* is also ultimately cognate with the Proto-Germanic **rīsan*,

19 *Jötnar* even come to be closely associated with the *Æsir* in the *fornaldarsögur*, as both were viewed by some saga authors as demonic remnants of pre-Christian religion. See Schulz, *Riesen*, 225–30.

20 Consider, for example, Sanskrit *varṣmán* “height” and Latvian *viršus* “higher.”

which gave Old Norse *rísa* “rise.”²¹ The basic sense of the word *rísi*, then, was one of height or altitude. This is quite distinct from *jötunn* which, though also conceivably connected with notions of size, had a prevailing sense of gluttony. Whereas the etymology of *jötunn* suggests a possibly negative perception of the figures that it describes, the term *rísi* has a decidedly more “neutral” semantic value.

It is also significant that *rísar* do not appear to have been agents of consequence in Old Norse mythology. The earliest possible instance of the term in extant mythological sources (and indeed in all of Old Norse-Icelandic literature) is in stanza 14 of the tenth-century skaldic poem *Þórsdrápa*, composed by Eilífr Goðrúnarson. In all editions of *Þórsdrápa* produced to date, the term *rísi* is given as part of a kenning, *kváðnar rísa* “wives of *rísar*,” which applies to the daughters of the *jötunn* Geirrǫðr.²² However, it should be noted that the word *rísi* given in these editions is actually an emendation of the unsatisfactory manuscript reading *res*.²³ If this emendation is accepted as a reasonable possibility, then the word *rísi* was a part of the Old Norse lexicon at least as early as the late tenth century. It is telling, however, that in early poetic material the term *rísi* only appears – if it appears at all – in *Þórsdrápa*, which is notable for its use of obscure vocabulary. At least according to the extant Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, *rísi* did not possess any real mythological associations before the Christian era. In this respect it ought to be distinguished not only from *jötunn*, but also from other terms which could pertain to giantlike beings of pre-Christian mythology, such as *þurs* and *tröll*.²⁴ The term *rísi* next appears in the eddic poem *Grottasǫngr*, preserved in the Codex Regius and Codex Trajectinus of *Snorra Edda*, where it refers to Fenja and Menja and their kin.²⁵ *Rísi* appears once as a simplex, in stanza 12, and in stanzas 9,

21 Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, III, 1152.

22 Translations of Old Norse-Icelandic texts in this paper are my own, unless otherwise stated.

23 See *Þórsdrápa*, ed. and trans. by Edith Marold, in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics, Part I*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 108. All editors of *Þórsdrápa* to date have chosen to emend the word *res* in this way.

24 This is a point also made by Motz, who suggested that “the noun *rísi* came late into Scandinavian speech and did not denote a truly ancient spirit,” “Families,” 235.

25 See Clive Tolley (ed.), *Grottasǫngr. The Song of Grotti* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008), 1.

10 and 24 as a compound, *bergrisi* “mountain-*risi*.”²⁶ However, *Grottasöngur* is likely a late eddic composition.²⁷ This largely non-mythological quality of the term *risi*, as evidenced by its almost total absence from skaldic and eddic mythological poetry, is a crucial point of difference when compared with the term *jötunn*.

The term *risi* lacked both the etymological and mythological negativity that was such an important factor in defining the character of the *jötnar* in saga material and translated works. As the term *risi* occupied no place in the pre-Christian mythology of Scandinavia and was therefore separable from it, the earliest Icelandic authors used the word to refer to giantlike beings who were emphatically *not* Scandinavian in origin or nature – and this point should be emphasised. Katja Schulz suggested that “ganz offensichtlich eröffnen die als *risar* bezeichneten Figuren ein anderes semantisches Feld als die aus der Mythologie vertrauten *jötnar* und *þursar*; neben den nordischen auch eine exotische, fremdartige Art von Riesen” [obviously, the figures called *risar* open up a different semantic field than the *jötnar* and *þursar* familiar from mythology. In addition to the Nordic, they are an exotic, alien type of giant].²⁸ This important distinction between *jötnar* and *risar* is captured by Snorri Sturluson’s use of the two terms in his *Edda*. While *jötnar* appear throughout Snorri’s work as the enemies of the gods, the simplex *risi* appears only once, in the Prologue. In this context, it is used to describe giantlike beings of the pseudo-Classical past whom Tror, the euhemerised Þórr, destroys when he leaves Troy. Snorri thus separates the *jötnar*, whom Þórr kills in the mythological narratives in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*, from the emphatically non-Scandinavian and non-mythological *risar* who are the victims of the “historical” Trojan hero.

The distinction that Snorri draws is representative of a wider practice among Icelandic authors and translators. In the vast majority of cases, the term *risi* is used to describe gigantic beings from outside of Scandinavia

26 Snorri Sturluson also uses the term *bergrisi* twice in *Gylfaginning*, where it apposes *brimþurs* “frost-þurs.” His use of *bergrisi* may in fact be inspired by *Grottasöngur*, which Snorri preserves in his *Edda*. *Bergrisi* might be semantically distinct from *risi* as a simplex. The mountainous associations of *bergrisar* perhaps encouraged a closer association with *jötnar* and *þursar* than was the case for ordinary *risar*, though there is not sufficient textual support to confirm this speculation.

27 Clive Tolley dates the poem to the twelfth century at the earliest and considers it above all a literary product, *Grottasöngur*, 31–3.

28 Schulz, *Riesen*, 44.

and from other literary traditions. The application of *risi* as a gloss for gigantic figures from Judeo-Christian tradition is especially prominent. In the collection of Icelandic translations of Old Testament material known as *Stjórn*, Goliath is a *risi*. In this text *risar* also settle in the city of Hebron after the Biblical flood, and more *risar* still are said to settle in Asia. Goliath is also identified as a *risi* in the Norwegian tract on kingship, *Konungs skuggsjá*, and in an encyclopedic section of Hauksbók. Further, a *risi* descended from Goliath attacks Charlemagne in *Karlamagnúss saga*, an Old Icelandic translation of the Anglo-Norman *La Chanson de Roland*. In the same encyclopedic section of Hauksbók, one also finds a *risi* called Nemroð, or Nimrod, to whom the construction of Babel is attributed. *Risar* are also responsible for constructing Babel in the Old Icelandic *Elucidarius*.²⁹ In the indigenous *riddarasaga Kirjalax saga*, the giantlike Kristeforus, or St. Christopher, is called a *risi*. In all of these examples, Icelandic and Norwegian authors and translators selected the term *risi* to describe beings from Christian tradition in preference to *jötunn*, which they used sparingly and restricted to negative figures from Greek and biblical tradition. From the earliest times, then, *risi* appears to have been a preferable term to describe giantlike figures from other literary traditions, and this was likely encouraged by its absence from mythological texts.

Because the term *risi* had no specific associations with a distinctly Scandinavian past, at least in extant sources, it could be employed more freely to describe giantlike figures encountered in exotic locales. Outside of theological contexts, the term *risi* is used to describe “foreign” giantlike figures which do not resemble those of Scandinavian tradition.³⁰ Snorri Sturluson’s use of *risi* to refer to creatures dwelling on the periphery of the classical world has already been mentioned. Saga authors follow a similar practice, as they frequently include *risar* in lists of exotic creatures.

29 In their capacity as the figures who construct Babel, these *risar* parallel the *entas* of Old English tradition. Anglo-Saxon authors often used *ent* in preference to the more usual *eoten* when discussing gigantic figures from biblical tradition. See Peter J. Frankis, “The Thematic Significance of *enta geweorc* And Related Imagery in *The Wanderer*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973): 261–4. The impulse here might have been the same as for Icelandic authors: namely, that Anglo-Saxon authors wished to demarcate the gigantic figures of biblical tradition from those belonging to their own cultural experience, and so used the less familiar *ent* for the former. See Stephen C. Bandy, “Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of Beowulf,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 9 (1973): 240.

30 See page 84–86 above.

In such cases, they emphasise their nature as non-Scandinavian and non-familiar.³¹ In *Þorvalds þáttur tasalda*, the figure Bárðr *digri* boasts that he is far-travelled, and claims that “ek hefi farit land af landi ok möett bæði risum ok blámönnum”³² [I have gone from land to land and encountered both *risar* and *blámenn*]. In this example it is taken for granted that *risar* are markers of the foreign and strange, as meeting one is an indication of having travelled great distances. This is heightened by their grouping with *blámenn*, who also came to be associated with culturally and geographically distant places in Old Icelandic literature.³³ *Risar* are associated with *blámenn* in *Kirjalax saga*; with *blámenn*, *dularfólk* and *regintröll* in *Sigurðar saga þögla*; and with *blámenn* and, interestingly, *dvergar* in the prologue of *Heimskringla*. In *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, *risar* appear alongside *blámenn*, *dvergar*, *tröll*, *berserkir* and *fitónsandafólk* as wondrous beings.³⁴ Further, *risar* are regarded as the progenitors of the *Serkir* “Saracens” in *Alexanders saga*, and are included in an encyclopedic section on strange groups of beings in *Hauksbók*. *Jötnar*, in contrast, appear only once in such a list, in *Kirjalax saga*. *Risar*, then, not only lack distinctly Scandinavian associations: they are also used as a device to signify that which is *un-Scandinavian*. In this sense, their function is sharply distinguished from that of the *jötnar*.

Risi was also the preferred term to refer to giantlike beings in translated romances – narratives which also have a distinctly non-Scandinavian

31 Such lists owe a debt to the encyclopedic tradition of Isidore of Seville. See Schulz, *Riesen*, 44.

32 *Þorvalds þáttur tasalda*, in *Eyfirdinga sögur*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslensk Fornrit IX (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1961), 124.

33 *Blámenn* (sg. *blámaðr*, “black man”) are men with black skin who appear in a variety of Icelandic works. *Blámenn* in saga material and translated works are typically said to live in regions south of the Mediterranean, and the term likely refers to Africans. However, *blámenn* took on a variety of characteristics that range from the supernatural to the monstrous. Icelandic authors followed wider European traditions in construing men from Africa and Asia as Other. The Anglo-Norman work *La Chanson de Roland* is perhaps the most notable example of this tradition. See Richard Cole, “Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature: The Case of the *Blámaðr*,” *Saga-Book* 30 (2015): 21–40; Arngrímur Vídalín, “Skuggsjá sjálfsins,” (PhD diss., The University of Iceland, 2017), 161–189; John Lindow, “Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millennium of World View,” *Scandinavian Studies* 67 (1995): 13–18 and Schulz, *Riesen*, 159.

34 The precise meaning of the element *fiton-* or *phiton-* is unclear, but it appears to denote some kind of magical ability in the sources in which it appears. A *fitonsandi* would therefore be a magical spirit.

setting and roster of characters. In *Breta sögur*, a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, *risar* are said to inhabit Cornwall. The foremost of these *risar* is a gigantic figure, Goemagog, who is well-known in Welsh and later English tradition.³⁵ In *Þiðreks saga*, a translation of a now-lost German text concerning Dietrich von Bern, a *risi* appears with the name Etgeirr. In *Karlamagnúss saga*, a *risi* bears the name Gondoleas. In all of these texts, Icelandic translators selected the term *risi* to denote giantlike figures of non-Scandinavian European tradition.

As will be discussed in greater detail below, *risar* appear in a significant number of Icelandic works that are not translations or reworkings of other texts. *Risar* feature in several indigenous romances, namely *Flóress saga konungs ok sona hans*, *Ála flekks saga*, *Kirjalax saga*, *Ectors saga*, and *Sigurðar saga þögla*. They also appear in a number of *fornaldarsögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, some of which have already been mentioned. These texts are Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the prologue to *Heimskringla*; *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*; *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*; *Þorvalds þáttur tasalda*; *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar saga berserkjabana*; *Yngvars saga*; *Örvar-Odds saga*; *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*; *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*; *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*; *Þorsteins þáttur Víkingssonar* and *Sörla saga sterka*. The important point to take away from the above evidence is that, although *risar* feature in works of Scandinavian provenance like *jötnar*, they have a far more prominent role as non-Scandinavian beings in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus.

To sum up the findings thus far, when *jötnar* appear in translated material and indigenous romances, their identities are tied to the fact that they both played an antagonistic role in Old Norse mythology and, from the perspective of Christian authors, were vestiges of pagan times. They appear, therefore, as exclusively negative figures: Satan, Typhoeus or denizens of Hell. The term *risi*, in contrast, was more neutral to the Christian authors who employed it. It could be applied unproblematically to giantlike creatures from classical tradition; from biblical literature; from saints' lives; and from national histories; and could be used to describe a wide range of

35 Interestingly, Goemagog has his basis in the biblical figures Gog and Magog, who first appear in the books of Genesis and Revelation. See Victor Scherb, "Assimilating Giants: The Appropriation of Gog and Magog in Medieval and Early Modern England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32 (2002): 59–65.

different beings inhabiting distant locales more generally. The absence of *risar* from Old Norse mythology gave them a flexibility which *jötnar* apparently lacked, being inexorably tied as they were to the heathen past.

Risar and *jötnar* in the sagas

For the Icelandic translators of biblical, learned and chivalric literature, then, the terms *risi* and *jötnunn* pertained to very different beings. The existence of a deeply rooted distinction between *risar* and *jötnar* problematises the projection of the term “giant” onto both of these beings. In what follows, I will consider how the different associations of *risar* and *jötnar* just discussed – the etymology of these terms; their relationship with mythological material; and their different roles in translated literature – resulted in a disparity between these beings in saga material.

It will be useful to begin this exercise with an assertion made by Ármann Jakobsson, which exemplifies the tendency in current scholarship to homogenise the *risar* and *jötnar* of the sagas. In an article on these figures, Ármann suggests that “apart from being rather stupid and dangerous, mostly because of their primitive ways, the legendary saga giants are akin to many a mediaeval monster in being deformed and ugly.”³⁶ The contention that Ármann seems to be making here is that *fornaldarsaga* “giants” are both socially and physically monstrous.³⁷ It will be contended that, in fact, *risar* and *jötnar* are at variance in these two respects, and this results in an often stark contrast between these beings in saga literature. Broadly speaking, *jötnar*, as vestiges of pre-Christian mythology, are demonised by saga authors and presented as physically and socially monstrous, as Ármann suggests. *Risar*, by contrast, are presented as more attractive and socially articulate figures on account of their absence from mythological material and their link with non-Scandinavian locales. In demonstrating that the distinctions between *risar* and *jötnar* established above extend into

36 Ármann Jakobsson, “Identifying the Ogre,” 189.

37 This same thinking might also be revealed in his generalisation of saga “giants” as “a handful of stupid and wild loners in caves and desolate places, much less cultured and wise than ordinary humans and only terrible in their enormity and their wildness,” and as “large, ugly, physically abnormal and bestial,” Ármann Jakobsson, “Identifying the Ogre,” 185; 189. These views are also broadly shared by Katja Schulz, who outlines in some detail the terrifying aspects of “Riesen,” *Riesen*, 139–155.

Old Icelandic saga material, it will be possible to view with greater clarity the distortionary effects of using the term “giant” in scholarship on and translations of Old Norse-Icelandic texts.

Ármann Jakobsson’s claim that the saga “giants” are “deformed and ugly” will be considered first. This characterisation certainly applies to many *jötnar* in the sagas. As suggested above, the primary function of *jötnar* in the mythological narratives of the Codex Regius poems and *Snorra Edda* was as the wise and ancient opponents of the Æsir, and this is reflected by their physical appearance in this context: they are, as Clunies Ross suggests, “frequently characterised as old, as befits their role as the original inhabitants of the mythic world,” are only occasionally enormous, and only rarely horrific.³⁸ This important mythological function is lost in the sagas where, as demonic vestiges of the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia, *jötnar* are recast as agents of terror and fear.³⁹ Accordingly, their physical monstrosity is emphasised over their wisdom, and *jötnar* with horrific appearances abound in the sagas. The bodily mutations of these *jötnar* can be extreme. The younger Starkaðr of *Gautreks saga*, for instance, complains in a verse that men mock him for the fact that he once possessed eight arms. He continues:

Hlæja rekkar, er mik sjá,
ljótan skolt, langa trjónu,
hangar tjálgur, hár úlfgrátt,
hrjúfan háls, húð jótraða.

[Men who see me laugh at [my] ugly snout, long muzzle, dangling branches, wolf-grey hair, scabby neck, scarred skin.]⁴⁰

References to such physical imperfections are not uncommon in the corpus of *fornaldarsögur*: the *jötnar* of *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra* possess two or three heads each; Selr of *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* has a tusked

38 *Prolonged Echoes*, 67.

39 On this, see Schulz, *Riesen*, 139–55.

40 *Vikarsbálkr*, ed. and trans. by Margaret Clunies Ross, in *Poetry from the Fornaldarsögur, Part I*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 286. The translation offered here has been influenced by that of Clunies Ross.

snout; and Arinnefja, the queen of Jötunheimar who appears in *Egils saga ok Ásmundar*, lacks teeth, fingers and even skin after emerging from the underworld.⁴¹ The *jötnar* of the sagas join many other gigantic monsters of European tradition, such as Grendel of the Old English *Beowulf* and the *gigas* of Mont Saint-Michel from Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*, in inspiring terror by their very appearance. The physical monstrosity of the *jötnar* is their most immediate and defining feature, and this is apt for beings whose primary function in the sagas is to bring an increased sense of dread to the remote forests and mountains where they dwell.

Thus far, Ármann Jakobsson's comment on the physical terror of "giants" holds true. If we turn from *jötnar* to consider the other so-called "giants" included in his statement, the *risar*, then the picture is dramatically different. *Risar* seem to be renowned not for their physical monstrosity, but for their incredible beauty. In *Bárðar saga*, the first character introduced is a gigantic figure named Dumbr, who is descended from *risakyn* "risi-kind" on his father's side and from *trölllaett* "tröll-lineage" on his mother's. The author of the saga comments that *risar* "er...vænna fólk ok stærra en aðrir menn" [are a more beautiful and larger people than others].⁴² Dumbr is accordingly described as *vænn* "handsome" and *sterkr* "strong" – qualities that the author directly attributes to his paternal ancestry.⁴³ These aspects of Dumbr's *risi* heritage materialise in all of his descendants. His son Bárðr is so immaculate that "menn þóttust öngvan fe-gra karlmann sét hafa" [people thought they had not seen a more beautiful man], and Bárðr's own children are of superlative beauty.⁴⁴ His daughter

41 Even though Arinnefja is the child of *jötnar* and is described as the ruler of Jötunheimar, she cannot be characterised as a *jötunn* herself, as *jötnar* are exclusively male in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus. Female beings who marry and produce children with *jötnar* are usually referred to by the terms *gygr*, *flagð* or *tröllkona*. See Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Monstrous Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 59–77. Nevertheless, Arinnefja's associations with *jötnar* are pronounced, and it is reasonable to refer to her in this discussion with the above caveat in mind.

42 *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, in *Harðar saga*, ed. by Bjarni Vilhjálmsson and Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), 100.

43 Eldevik expresses her surprise that the gentle disposition of Dumbr should stem from his "giant" father, when, according to her, these figures played such a negative role in mythological contexts, "Less Than Kind," n. 23. This point of view is of course encouraged by the conflation of *risar* and *jötnar* which is widespread in scholarship. In fact, as suggested above, *risar* barely appear in mythological sources at all.

44 *Bárðar saga*, 102.

Helga is *kvenna vænst* “most beautiful of women,” and his son Gestr is both *mikill* “great” and *fríðr* “beautiful.” *Bárðar saga* is by no means unique in its presentation of the appearance of *risar*. In *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*, the *risi* Goðmundr is first seen approaching the protagonist Þorsteinn on horseback, clothed in scarlet garments and flanked by two similarly well-dressed attendants. The *risar* in *Örvar-Odds saga* are “vænni...en flestir menn aðrir” [more beautiful than most other people].⁴⁵ Further, Logi of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* is only *allra manna fríðastr* “most attractive of all men” because he is of *risi* heritage, and even Ármann admits that the *risi* of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* is “less ugly than expected.”⁴⁶ This is not an exhaustive list. The characterisation of *risar* as beings of superlative beauty is one of their most consistent attributes, and that which distinguishes them most from *jötnar*. Indeed, I have not found any *jötnar* described in this way in Old Icelandic saga material. On the one hand, we have beings which inspire terror by their very appearance, and on the other, beings who are so beautiful that it often attracts comment.

Ármann Jakobsson also implies that “giants” are dangerous on account of their stupidity and general lack of social sophistication. This is also the opinion of Katja Schulz.⁴⁷ This is clearly the case with the *jötnar* of the *fornaldarsögur*, whose opposition to the human world is their chief function in these texts. In almost every instance in which *jötnar* appear, they forego social interaction with humans and immediately resort to physical violence. In *Örvar-Odds saga* *jötnar* resolve to kill Oddr and his companions merely for entering their territory, and the *jötunn* Geirröðr kills more of Oddr’s men later in the narrative. In other instances, *jötnar* assail human society in a more calculated manner. Numerous *jötnar* in the sagas have designs on human women – a situation which is evocative of the desire of *jötnar* for *ásynjur* in mythological contexts. In *Egils saga ok Ásmundar* two *jötnar* named Gautr and Hildir steal the daughters of King Tryggvi, and in *Gautreks saga*, the elder Starkaðr abducts the daughter of the human king Álfr, to name but two examples. *Egils saga ok Ásmundar* arguably reveals the most varied kinds of hostility towards humans: one *jötunn* severs the protagonist Egill’s arm; the queen of Jötunheimar, Arinnefja, attempts to

45 Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldarsögur*, III, 274.

46 Ármann Jakobsson, “Identifying the Ogre,” 186.

47 See Schulz’s section entitled “Primitivität und Obszönität,” *Riesen*, 4, 161–2.

tear a woman named Ingibjörg in two out of sexual jealousy; and another *jötunn* binds Egill to his service on pain of death. Though the physical appearance of the *jötnar* is their most immediate defining feature, it would seem that their opposition to humanity is what characterises their role in the *fornaldarsögur*. To be a *jötunn*, in other words, is to oppose civilised human society by nature.

The relationships between humans and *risar* in the sagas are of an emphatically different nature. This distinction is perhaps best indicated by the fact that *risar* are freely able to marry human women. This is remarkable considering that *jötnar* in the sagas are only able to do so by abducting their brides. Human-*risi* marriage occurs on a number of occasions in *Bárðar saga*, and in no instance is it regarded as unconventional. While the *jötunn* Gautr from *Egils saga ok Ásmundar greip* “grabbed” his human bride and the elder Starkaðr of *Gautreks saga* *tók* “took” his, the *risi* Bárðr *bað* “asked” for the hand of his intended marriage partner – in this case a certain Herþrúðr, the daughter of a Norwegian *hersir*. Dumbur also marries a beautiful human bride Mjöll, and Bárðr marries his daughter to his human friend and protégé Oddr. Similar ties are seen in *Örvar-Odds saga* where Oddr and Hildigunnr, the daughter of the *risi* Hildir, appear to have an affectionate relationship and even produce a child. Along with the many examples of friendship observable in the *fornaldarsögur* between humans and *risar*, it appears that numerous humans apparently had few reservations when it came to marrying into a *risi* family.

The fact that dynasties of men and *risar* could be joined through marriage speaks to the fundamentally positive perception of the latter. In this regard, they could be hardly further from *jötnar*, who, as in mythological sources, are never presented as acceptable marriage partners. The suitability of *risar* from a dynastic standpoint stems not only from their physical beauty, but from the fact that they can assimilate into the human world. The child of Oddr and Hildigunnr, Vignir, integrates seamlessly into human society upon maturity. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Þorsteins þáttr*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* and *Bárðar saga*, *risar* are called *menn*, and in the last of these, Dumbur is said to be “allt sambland við mennska menn” [entirely integrated with human beings] on account of his *risi* heritage.⁴⁸

In certain cases, *risar* are even exalted *above* humans – a remarkable fact

48 *Bárðar saga*, 101.

in the context of this investigation. Indeed, *risar* are represented in some texts as the mythical ancestors of humans, and the source of their most noble qualities. The narrator of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* urges “undrist menn eigi, þó at menn hafi verit fyrr ágætari at vexti ok afli en nú. Hefir þat satt verit, at þeir hafa skammt átt at telja til risanna sinnar ættar” [men should not marvel that people were formerly more famous in size and strength than now [since] it is true that they were descended more closely from *risar*].⁴⁹ The prestige of *risar* is so great here that they are seen as the progenitors of the strength and size of ancient heroes. A similar statement is found in the U redaction of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*: “en áðr Tyrkjar ok Asíamenn kómu í Norðrlond byggðu norðrhálfurnar risar ok sumt hálfrisar; gerðisk þá mikit sambland þjóðanna; risar fengu sér kvenna or Mannheimum, en sumir giptu þangat dætr sínar” [but before the Turks and the Asians came into the northern lands, *risar* and some half-*risar* inhabited northern parts; then a great mixing of peoples occurred; *risar* got wives for themselves from Mannheimar, and some gave their daughters to there]. The *risar* are granted a kind of antique dignity that the *jötnar* appear to have lost in their transition to Icelandic saga literature. It is no exaggeration to say that in these cases, *risar* enjoy a connection with the human world that is unparalleled by any other supernatural being in the saga corpus. The distinction between *jötnar* and *risar* in this regard cannot be stressed enough: while the former are almost invariably the mortal enemies of humankind in the sagas, the latter are often able to freely enter dynastic relationships with humans and are even exalted as their ancestors.

It should be said that the image of *risar* as socially sophisticated and pro-human is not without exception. Two *risar* encountered in *Yngvars saga* are described as *ógurligr* “terrible” and are hostile to the human protagonists. In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, a well-dressed *risi* is ostensibly hospitable, but seeks to exact revenge on the protagonist for the slaying of his brother. A hostile *risi* also appears at the conclusion of *Kormáks saga*. Further, some terminological overlap between *jötunn* and *risi* appears sporadically in the sagas. Individual *risar* who are also referred to as *jötnar* appear in *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, *Egils saga ok Ásmundar* and *Sörla saga sterka*, and in the last three of these, they are also hostile to humans. These are important exceptions. The fact that the authors of

49 Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldarsögur*, IV, 176.

these last four texts could employ the terms *jötunn* and *risi* interchangeably suggests that, to a limited extent, some crossover between the two beings must be allowed for – that, as *risar* are depicted more negatively, they might suitably be described by the term *jötunn*.⁵⁰ However, in view of the numerous sources adduced above, these sagas are somewhat anomalous in their presentation of *risar*.⁵¹ Indeed, in the majority of instances, *risar* are sharply distinguished from *jötnar* in terms of their civility and their ability to not only deal amicably with humans, but to interbreed with them.

Risi-jötunn conflict

An impression of the differences between *jötnar* and *risar*, grounded as they are in etymological, mythological and functional distinctions, is therefore furnished by the saga corpus as a whole. Numerous sagas which treat *jötnar* or *risar* individually seem to present these figures as separate in a consistent fashion. It remains to turn to sagas where *jötnar* and *risar* appear together, where Icelandic authors could consider the distinction between different kinds of “giants” directly. The most notable example of this practice is in *Bárðar saga*. It has already been pointed out that the author of this text distinguished between Dumbur’s descent from *risakyn* on one hand and from *tröllætt* on the other. There also seems to have been a distinction between *risar* and *jötnar*, though this is not described with the same taxonomical precision as the prior one. *Bárðar saga* expresses the two most important distinctions between *jötnar* and *risar* that have been discussed thus far. It has been pointed out that the author characterises *risar* as *vænir* “beautiful,” but he treats the appearance of *jötnar* less favourably: Þorkell, the grandson of the *jötunn* Svaði, is “svartr á hár ok hörund” [black of hair and skin].⁵² Further, this author casts *risar* as socially articulate be-

⁵⁰ See Ármann Jakobsson, “Identifying the Ogre,” 186; “Trollish Acts,” 44.

⁵¹ Further, the use of *risi* for misanthropic beings in these specific texts is far rarer than the use of *jötunn*. In *Egils saga ok Ásmundar*, for example, *jötunn* appears 50 times as a term to describe hostile beings, whereas *risi* is used only once, of the being who severs Egill’s arm. This is a significant discrepancy. *Jötunn* is also used of the positive figure Hildir in *Örvar-Odds saga*, but once he identifies himself as a *risi* of Risaland and is shown to be a harmless, the saga refers to him only as a *risi* thereafter.

⁵² *Bárðar saga*, 106. Swarthinness is often treated as a physical flaw in Icelandic saga material. In *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, Lambi Þorbjarnarson is said to be *svartr á hár ok...heldr ósýnilegr* “black of hair and...rather ugly.” In *Eiríks saga rauða*, Þórhallr *veidimaðr* is described

ings who can marry human brides, whereas the *jötnar* in the text are workers of discord. Þorkell is an *ójafnaðarmaðr* “overbearing person” from a young age, and passes this quality down to his sons. Without any apparent provocation, Þorkell’s son Rauðfeldr pushes Bárðr’s daughter Helga out into the sea on an ice floe. A rivalry then emerges between the saga’s *risar* and *jötnar*, with Bárðr slaying Þorkell’s sons Rauðfeldr and Sölvi and then besting Þorkell himself in a fight.⁵³

Ármann Jakobsson has dismissed the author’s sharp division between different giantlike creatures as a unique “taxonomical project” and has suggested that “it is very difficult to find any source which, like *Bárðar saga*, confidently divides the giants into groups and elaborates on their differences.”⁵⁴ It is quite true that no text draws as exact a distinction between *risar* and *tröll* as *Bárðar saga*, but other sagas exist which sharply demarcate the so-called “giants,” *risar* and *jötnar*. In *Þorsteins þáttur bæjar-magns* and *Samsons saga fagra*, texts often overlooked by scholars of the saga “giants,” the differences between *risar* and *jötnar* are distinguished with a clarity that arguably rivals the genealogical introduction of *Bárðar saga*.⁵⁵

as *svartr ok þursligr* “swarthy and þurs-like.” Black hair and swarthy skin are also common characteristics of poets and *þælar*, who are often represented as physically flawed. For example, Kormákr Ögmundarson is characterised in chapter 3 of his saga only with the adjectives *svartr* “swarthy” and *ljótr* “ugly.” These are also the first two adjectives applied to Skallagrímr and his son Egill in *Egils saga*. Such cases are common in the saga corpus. It is likely that the author of *Bárðar saga* was drawing upon the connection between swarthinness and ugliness in his characterisation of the *jötunn* Þorkell.

53 This division breaks down in the course of the saga, when Bárðr departs from human company and lives among *þursar* and *tröll*. This is prompted by the tragic disappearance of his daughter and his killing of Rauðfeldr and Sölvi: “svá brá Bárði við allt saman, viðreign þeira bræðra ok hvarf dóttur sinnar, at hann gerðist bæði þögull ok illr viðskiptis” (*Bárðar saga*, 118) [Bárðr reacted to everything together – the conflict with the brothers and the disappearance of his daughter – by becoming both silent and difficult to deal with]. At this point in the narrative Bárðr ceases to exhibit the benevolent and humanlike characteristics typically attributed to *risar*, but this does not detract from the significant distinction that exists until this point in the saga. On Bárðr’s turning away from human society, see Ármann Jakobsson, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: *Bárðar saga* and Its Giants,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 15 (2005): 9–10.

54 Ármann Jakobsson, “Taxonomy,” 205; Ármann Jakobsson, “The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly,” 5.

55 *Samsons saga* is traditionally considered to rest between the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. Commentary on the genre of the text is provided in Mary L. R. Lockley, “An Edition of *Samsons saga fagra*” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1979), i–xx.

The distinction between *risar* and *jötnar* in *Þorsteins þáttur* was hinted at in the beginning of this discussion. As was suggested there, this opposition is first alluded to by Goðmundr, who notes that his native region Glæsisvellir lies within Risaland but is nevertheless bound to pay tribute to Geirröðr, a *jötunn* who resides in Jötunheimar.⁵⁶ This arrangement is evidently dynastic, since Goðmundr reveals that his own father died while travelling to Jötunheimar to render his tribute. After Goðmundr notes that he must travel there himself to renew his hereditary vows of servitude, he remarks: “þó unum vér illa við at þjóna jötnum” [though we do not like serving the *jötnar*].⁵⁷ Here Goðmundr draws a distinction between *vér*, presumably the community of *risar* over whom he reigns, and the *jötnar* to whom he must pay tribute. The differences in social sophistication between these two groups is made clear when Goðmundr arrives at the *jötunn*’s homestead. Geirröðr is insistent on securing the *hlýðni* “obedience” of Goðmundr, which he demands of him shortly after his arrival. Goðmundr retorts “ekki er þat lög at krefja svá unga menn til eiða” [it is not lawful to demand oaths of men so young].⁵⁸ This tense interaction between Geirröðr and Goðmundr is illuminating: the *jötunn* Geirröðr acts in a tyrannical and intemperate fashion that departs from expected standards of kingship, whereas the *risi* Goðmundr appeals in the first instance to the rule of law.

The sense that the author is offering a deliberately distinct characterisation of *jötnar* and *risar* is heightened in the hall-games that make up the majority of the saga narrative. In an obscene perversion of the kind of hall-games that would be played in human social settings, Geirröðr orders a *gullhnöttur* “golden ball” to be brought into the hall – an object which turns out to be a two-hundred-pound molten seal’s head. Before this ludicrous

56 Goðmundr is one of several figures in *Þorsteins þáttur* who can be convincingly identified as a *risi*, though it is not explicitly stated that he is such in the text. He appears as an enormous, civilised, splendidly dressed and good-natured being whose hereditary realm lies within Risaland, and so his status as a *risi* is beyond doubt. A Goðmundr also appears in *Örvar-Odds saga*, and there he both lives in Risaland and is explicitly described as a *risi*. Goðmundr’s likely status as a *risi* in *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns* is discussed in Tom Grant and Jonathan Hui, “Between Myths and Legends: The Guises of Goðmundr of Glæsisvellir,” *Margins, Monsters, Deviants: Alterities in Old Norse Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rebecca Merkelbach and Gwendolyne Knight (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

57 Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldarsögur*, IV, 329.

58 Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldarsögur*, IV, 331.

object is cast between *risar* and *jötnar*, Geirröðr stipulates that whosoever should drop the fiery head shall become an outlaw and forfeit his property, and anyone who does not suffer to hold it shall be called a *níðingr*.⁵⁹ These outrageous rules would have been a clear sign to the saga's audience of the social monstrosity of the *jötunn* and his court. The portrait of uncouth *jötnar* offered here is consistent with those that other saga authors present. The initial characterisation of the *jötnar* in *Þorsteins þáttr* contrasts with that of Goðmundr. To his appeal to law we might add his introduction to the protagonist Þorsteinn, briefly mentioned earlier in this discussion, which speaks to his social refinement. The saga has it that “nú sér Þorsteinn þrjá menn ríða vel vápnaða ok svá stóra, at enga menn sá hann fyrr jafnstóra. Sá var mestr, er í miðit reið, í gullskotnum klæðum á bleikum hesti, en hinir tveir ríðu á grám hestum í rauðum skarlatasklæðum” [Þorsteinn saw three men riding well equipped with weapons and so large that he had not seen men so large before. He who rode in the middle was greatest, in gold-decorated clothes and on a pale horse, and behind him two rode on grey horses and in scarlet clothes].⁶⁰ Besides the visual splendour of these figures, Goðmundr's retinue is also arranged hierarchically, with rank apparently indicated by clothing and riding order. The rigid organisation of these *risar* provides a contrast to the picture of chaos that is the hall of the *jötunn* Geirröðr.

The opposition between *risar* and *jötnar* which the author presents in this text extends to physical characteristics as well. This is expressed in the wrestling match between Goðmundr and Agði, Geirröðr's underling. When describing the match, the narrator comments that “eigi þóttist Þorsteinn sét hafa tröllsligri bók en á Agða. Var hann blár sem hel. Goðmundr reis mót honum. Var hann hvítur á skinnslit” [Þorsteinn thought he had never seen such a monstrous torso as Agði's. It was black as Hel. Goðmundr rose against him. His skin was white in colour].⁶¹ That this

59 The word *níðingr* is impossible to satisfactorily translate. Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen suggested that “the Old Norse noun *níðingr* refers to an abhorrent person who is devoid of honor and disrespects the basic norms of society,” “The *Níðingr* and the Wolf,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011): 171.

60 Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldarsögur*, IV, 328.

61 Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldarsögur*, IV, 334. Agði is most often called a *tröll* in this text, though he is said to exhibit a *jötunnmóðr* “*jötunn*-rage.” As suggested at the beginning of this discussion, however, Icelandic authors did not distinguish greatly between the terms *jötunn*, *tröll* and *þurs*.

wrestling match should occur at all in Icelandic sources is significant. A king in Risaland and therefore, presumably, a king of *risar*, is pitted against his polar opposite, the monstrous deputy of a *jötunn* king. The extent of the difference between them is clearly signalled in visual, physical terms: the one fits Ármann's description of "giants" as "deformed and ugly," but the other is white or even shining, depending on how *hvítr* is translated.⁶² If the author of *Bárðar saga* was careful to distinguish between his different "giants," then the same conclusion about the author of *Þorsteins þáttr* seems inescapable. This is a distinction that is, quite literally, black and white.

In *Samsons saga*, the author also characterises *risar* and *jötnar* in opposition to one another. Goðmundr reappears in this saga narrative, and though he is not explicitly identified as a *risi*, his status as such is likely.⁶³ In *Samsons saga*, Goðmundr is first characterised by his capacity as an opponent of *jötnar*, and his role in this text is similar to that which he performs in *Þorsteins þáttr*. In fact, his first action in the saga is to engage the *jötnar* in battle: "þat er sagt einnhuern tima at Goðmundr kongr af Glæsis vollum fór norðr fyrri Jotunheima ok heriade a jotna ok giorde þar mikit heruirke hia þeim" [It is said that one time, King Goðmundr of Glæsisvellir went north to Jötunheimar and harried the *jötnar* and there was a great battle between them].⁶⁴ That this opposition was dynastic is suggested by the fact that the king of *jötnar*, Skrímir, then wages war on Goðmundr's *risi*-like son Sigurðr. In both *Samsons saga* and *Þorsteins þáttr*, then, attractive, gigantic and socially refined figures likely identifiable as *risar* pit themselves against monstrous *jötnar*. The characteristics of these two groups are consistent with those that have been identified throughout the sagas and in translated works. The significance of the final three sagas

62 Agði's hellish blackness may be inspired by Christian *vitae*, where bright saints are often said to wrestle with dark demons. Such an episode is related in the Old English poem and saint's life *Juliana*. The equivocation between *tröllsligr* "monstrous" and *blár sem hel* "black as Hel" which the author makes also reflects a wider connection between swarthinness and ugliness in Icelandic literature. See note 52 above.

63 Goðmundr can be identified as a *risi* in *Samsons saga* with reasonable confidence on account of his status as such in other *fornaldarsögur*; his proximity to a region called Risaland and his giantlike son Sigurðr who is *fríðr* "beautiful" and *furðuliga mikill* "wondrously large"—qualities which apply to *risar* thought the *fornaldarsögur*. Sigurðr's extreme height must stem from his father Goðmundr, since his mother apparently belongs to a fantastical group of beings known as *smámeyjar* "small-maidens."

64 John Wilson, *Samsons saga fagra* (Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur, 1953), 32.

mentioned – *Bárðar saga*, *Þorsteins þáttr* and *Samsons saga* – lies in the fact that these texts not only distinguish between *risar* and *jötnar*, but contain episodes which rely upon and engage with the differences between these two beings. These texts provide narrative arenas where the oppositional characteristics of *risar* and *jötnar* translate into very real social and physical conflict between them.

Conclusion

The crucial distinctions between *risar* and *jötnar* discussed above permit some reflection on the use of the term “giant” and other, similar terms of modern provenance that are used to translate the untranslatable in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The term “giant” was not a product of medieval Scandinavia, and it seems apparent that Icelandic authors would have identified a significant disconnect between it and the *risar* and *jötnar* to whom it is applied. A search for the “giants” of the sagas turns up creatures who are at times remote, hideous and savage, and at others beautiful, civilised and socially articulate. This has led some scholars to wonder at the apparent variability in the saga “giant,” but this confusing situation might easily be avoided by appealing instead to the terms which Icelandic authors themselves used.⁶⁵ Ármann Jakobsson has discussed the prospect of distinguishing between the different “kinds” of giantlike figures present in this corpus, but suggests that “the sources are very unhelpful and provide no support for [this], showing us instead confusion and uncertainty and distributing these terms in a random fashion.”⁶⁶ Ármann’s contention does not extend to *risar*, who are in fact distinguished from *jötnar* in their origin and, with few exceptions, in their function and nature. Indeed, the translation of both *risar* and *jötnar* as “giants” forces these two quite divergent figures into a terminological straitjacket, to borrow a phrase from Kalinke.⁶⁷

65 E.g. Schulz, *Riesen*, 159–65.

66 Ármann Jakobsson, “Taxonomy,” n. 26.

67 Marianne E. Kalinke, “*Riddarasögur*, *Fornaldarsögur* and the Problem of Genre,” *Les Sagas de Chevaliers (Riddarasögur)*. *Actes de la V^e Conférence Internationale sur les Sagas*. Toulon, Juillet 1982, ed. by Régis Boyer (Paris: Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1985), 77. Kalinke uses this to describe the effects of the modern *fornaldarsaga* genre on the texts that it describes, but this term also usefully applies to the present problem.

It remains to be suggested what changes could be made in scholarly practice and translation in light of the above findings. If the *risar* and *jötnar* in the Old Icelandic sagas and in the wider corpus are to be understood, then the dismissal of the term “giant” – or at least an acknowledgment of the problems involved in its use – is an important first step. As the preceding discussion has indicated, there is little value in the term “giant” or in related terms such as *Riese* and *jätte* in scholarly discourse, as these represent imprecise modern projections. I propose that in academic papers and books on Old Norse-Icelandic texts, the terms *risi* and *jötunn* are adopted for the purposes of clarity and accuracy. It is less simple to arrive at a solution in the case of translations produced for non-academic audiences, as readers may not understand the meaning of and distinction between the Old Norse terms. Considering that translations cannot, by their nature, capture all of the nuances of the original language, it may be necessary to retain “giant” and related terms in such texts, even if such a solution is not ideal. The complications involved in the translation of the words *risi* and *jötunn* could be outlined in explanatory notes.

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SUMMARY

A Problem of Giant Proportions: Distinguishing *Rísar* and *Jötmar* in Old Icelandic saga material

Keywords: *rísi*, *jötunn*, giant, sagas, mythology

In this article, it is argued that the English noun "giant" is unfit as an analytical term in scholarship on Old Norse literature. It is demonstrated that a significant semantic distinction exists between the words *rísi* and *jötunn*, which are most often rendered as "giant" in English. A basis for this distinction between *rísi* and *jötunn* is established by looking at the etymologies of the words, their presence or absence in mythological literature, and their use in early Old Norse translations of continental literature. On these grounds, it is argued that these terms were distinct by the time that saga authors inherited them. The continuation of this distinction in the sagas

themselves is explored and the physical and social differences between *risar* and *jötnar* in the corpus are reviewed. In the concluding section, cases where saga authors directly contrast *risar* and *jötnar* are considered. After reviewing the above evidence, some final thoughts are offered on the appropriateness of the term “giant.”

ÁGRIP

Risastórt vandamál: Aðgreining risa og jötna í íslenskum fornbókmenntum

Lykilorð: risi, jötunn, *giant*, þýðing, sögur, goðafræði

Í þessari ritgerð eru færð rök fyrir því að enska orðið „giant“ sé ónothæft sem þýðing á bæði *risi* og *jötunn* í fræðilegum greiningum á fornnorrænum bókmenntum. Sýnt er fram á að í fornbókmenntunum er mikilvægur merkingarmunur á þessum tveimur orðum.

Ofangreint er rökstutt með úttekt á orðsifjafraði norrænu orðanna sem og hvernig þau birtast í norrænum goðsögum, og að auki hvernig þau eru notuð í fornnorrænum þýðingum. Á grunni þessa eru færð rök fyrir því að merking þessara tveggja orða hafi verið ólík á þeim tíma sem norrænar sögur voru færðar í letur. Greint er hvernig merkingarmunur orðanna birtist sem bæði líkamlegs og félagslegs eðlis í sögunum og skoðuð textadæmi þar sem *risum* og *jötnum* er stillt upp sem andstæðum. Að lokum er rætt hvort og hvenær það eigi við að nota orðið „giant“ í enskum þýðingum.

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