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## **NJÁLL'S BEARD, HALLGERÐR'S HAIR AND GUNNARR'S HAY: HOMOLOGICAL PATTERNING IN NJÁLS SAGA**

The homology of hair and vegetation, as found in the Norse creation myth of the primal giant Ymir, is continued laterally in early Norse culture into innumerable relationships on the macro-, meso- and micro-cosmic levels. It has origins extending deeper than Germanic culture, as evidenced by the linguistic cognates Ir. *fol* 'hair', Ice. *vollr* 'meadow', Germ. *Wald* 'forest', Lith. *váltis* 'spelt' and 'yarn' (Pokorny 1959: 1139). In early societies such wide-ranging homological paradigms were among the structuring principles in cognitive processes and in the collective archive of cultural information.

This study will explore how the deployment of a typical homology contributes to cohesiveness and reinforces the themes of *Njáls saga*. The correspondence hair : vegetation is a visible strand stitched through several key relationships in the work. Yet it does not achieve thematic status, since it was in the nature of a commonplace. Homology, analogy, metonymy and metaphor might be said to be relational devices and, in their two-part dynamics, have counterparts in the construction of Icelandic narrative. We see the proleptic  $a_1 - a_2$  relationship in dreams of the future, to give one of the most dramatic and frequent examples (Turville-Petre 1966). Similarly at work along the temporal and narrative axis are portents, prescience or foresight, curses, threats, counsels and incitations (Loescher 1956, Schach 1955, 1989), whose content, often first given relief through direct speech, is fulfilled, either through an honour-driven dynamic, as in women verbally coercing reluctant men to take vengeance (Clover 1988, Jochens 1986b, Miller 1983), or through what could be called narrative inevitability and economy--the curse, intended as a performative utterance, is not justified in the narrative if it fails to be effective. The initial thumbnail sketches of character work in the same way, combining authorial comment and

societal judgment. Their abstractions are later illustrated in events as the tale unfolds. To consider larger compositional units, the 'ancestral' chapters that open many family sagas often establish motifs and themes that, like the genes of their characters, are more fully developed in the ensuing stories.

*Njáls saga* is distinctive in beginning not with events from the settlement period but during the adult years of two important characters from the first half of the work, Hrútr Herjólfsson and his half-brother, Hoskuldr Dalla-Kollsson. Hrútr is characterized by the sagaman as "shrewd" (*manna vitrastr*) as well as having other socially valued characteristics.

Þat var einu hverju sinni, at Hoskuldr hafði vinaboð, ok þar var Hrútr, bróðir hans, ok sat it næsta honum. Hoskuldr átti sér dóttur, er Hallgerð hét. Hon lék sér á gólfinu við aðrar meyjar; hon var frið sýnum ok mikil vexti ok hárit svá fagrt sem silki ok svá mikit, at þat tók ofan á belti. Hoskuldr kallar á hana: 'Far þú hingat til mín,' sagði hann. Hon gekk þegar til hans. Hann tók undir kverkina ok kyssti hana; síðan gekk hon í braut. Þá roeddi Hoskuldr til Hrúts: 'Hversu lízk þér á mey þessa? Þykki þér eigi fogr vera?' Hrútr þagði við. Hoskuldr innti til annat sinn. Hrútr svaraði þá: 'Ærit fogr er mæer sjá, ok munu margir þess gjalda; en hitt veit ek eigi, hvaðan þjófsaugu eru komin í ættir várar.' Þá reiddisk Hoskuldr, ok var fátt um með þeim brœðrum no kkura hríð. (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: Ch. 1)

[On one occasion Hoskuld was holding a feast for his friends; Hrut was there, sitting next to him. Hoskuld had a daughter called Hallgerd, who was playing on the floor with some other girls; she was a tall, beautiful child with long silken hair that hung down to her waist. Hoskuld called to her, 'Come over here to me.' She went to him at once. Her father tilted her chin and kissed her, and she walked away again. Then Hoskuld asked Hrut: 'What do you think of her? Do you not think she is beautiful?' Hrut made no reply. Hoskuld repeated the question. Then Hrut said, 'The child is beautiful enough, and many will suffer for her beauty; but I cannot imagine how thief's eyes have come into our kin.' Hoskuld was furious; and for a time there was coldness between them. (*Njal's saga* 1960)]

'Thief's eyes' is the theme-marker in this passage, but the long, beautiful

hair will also recur in its homological ramifications as grass, hay and other crops, in particular those cultivated by Njáll or sought by her future husband, Gunnarr Hamundarson. The chuck under the chin will also return, in debased form.

It will be noted that in this initial 'cameo' appearance, Hallgerðr neither speaks nor interacts socially. No qualities of character are attributed by the author. Hallgerðr is exteriorized and reified, made into the beautiful object, but with a suggestion of excess in her height and luxuriant hair. Simile (*hárit svá fagrt sem silki*) is relatively rare in saga prose and the choice of imported cultural goods as the comparator may signal the incursion of properties foreign to Icelandic society's idealized saga conception of itself. Hrútr's judgment on Hallgerðr's beauty and eyes is an absolute one; it is not qualified by the prediction of specific future acts. With the establishment of this ominous potential, both passive (beauty) and active (theft), for ill, Hallgerðr leaves the saga to mature while the social and legal complexities in which she will play a decisive future role are ensnarled.

Plot proper then begins with Hrútr who, despite his insight with regard to others, is susceptible to poor judgment in his own social dealings. A marriage is proposed between Hrútr and Unnr, the daughter of Morðr *gígja* 'fiddle'. Hrútr likes the looks of the girl but does not feel that they are fated to be happy together (*en eigi veit ek, hvárt vit eigum heill saman*). Again, beauty is at odds with destiny. But first Hrútr must go to Norway to claim an inheritance. As often, the reputation of the prominent Icelander has preceded him to the royal court and Hrútr is taken into the social and sexual custody of the king's mother, Gunnhildr. She will further his case with the king in return for his service as lover. The saga's tone is neutral and its pragmatism suggests Hrútr had very little choice in the matter. The composite saga portrait of Gunnhildr is of a domineering sorceress. In *Njála* she lays a spell on Hrútr when she learns of his desire to return to Iceland and sees through his ill-advised lie that he had no woman waiting for him there. While accident and coincidence are often stimuli to contention and feud, there is always a volitional human act, with its origin in malice, anger, acquisitiveness, or simple ill-chosen reticence.

Hrútr's failure to answer Gunnhildr honestly is the first willed act in the long chain of events that will lead to the deaths of Gunnarr and later of Njáll and his family. Good will and reconciliation break the chain at times, but other factors contribute to reforge the links. The spell is that while Hrútr may have normal sexual relations with other women, he will experience a sexual dysfunction with his future wife; eventually the marriage is dissolved (Dronke 1980). Hrútr's foreboding that he will not be happy with Unnr is realized through a combination of poor judgment, vengeful malice and magic. Although much of Icelandic feud has its origin in contention over land and other property, marital irregularities are also strong stimulants to strife (Byock 1982, Miller 1990). These irregularities take a variety of forms: marriages arranged without consulting the woman involved, seductions, economical and social mismatches, mismanagement of joint resources, spousal abuse (Mundt 1976, Frank 1983, Jochens 1986a).

After the divorce of Hrútr and Unnr, and the consequent legal wrangle over the dowry, the saga returns its attention to Hallgerðr.

Nú er þar til máls at taka, at Hallgerðr vex upp, dóttir Hoskulds, ok er kvenna fríðust sýnum ok mikil vexti, ok því var hon langbrók kolluð. Hon var fagrhár ok svá mikit hárit, at hon mátti hylja sik með. Hon varo rlynd ok skaphorð. (Ch. 9)

[We return now to Hallgerd, Hoskuld's daughter, who had grown up to be a woman of great beauty. She was very tall, which earned her the nickname Long-Legs, and her lovely hair was now so long that it could veil her whole body. She was impetuous and wilful.]

There is a sexual and duplicitous undercurrent in the description which complements the earlier one: the reference in *brók* 'breeches' to parts of a woman's body normally concealed by skirts in medieval Iceland, then the image of the body so glimpsed now veiled by the luxuriant hair. Just as height and hair length lie beyond the usual, her qualities of personality, or *rlynd ok skaphorð*, place her outside the highly normative code of Icelandic behaviour.

The reintroduction of Hallgerðr is accompanied by a reference to her

foster-father, Þjóstólfr, of Hebridean descent. Post-settlement arrivals from the Hebrides are often suspect (Sørensen 1987). Hallgerðr's foster-father does little to temper her wilfulness. The motif of the marital mismatch is reintroduced when Hallgerðr's hand is sought by Þorvaldr Ósvífrsson. Earlier judgment on Hallgerðr's character is confirmed when Þorvaldr's father, Ósvífr, and her own father, Hoskuldr, warn the suitor that the girl is hard-willed. Thus, we have three mutually reinforcing characterizations of Hallgerðr, by the narrator, the community, and the family. The marriage is arranged without consultation with Hallgerðr and the contracted alliance is, in saga terms, flawed from the beginning. Hallgerðr also judges that she has been married beneath her station, exhibiting a concern for social ranking that will recur later. Various ominous elements precede and accompany the marriage feast. Hallgerðr proves a wasteful housewife, again a characteristic of excess, and when supplies run low a quarrel erupts, leading Þorvaldr to slap Hallgerðr. Her foster-father promises vengeance and her husband is killed.

A second marriage suit is later presented, although the would-be husband, Glúmr, is warned that he has not learned his predecessor's lesson. Signalling Hallgerðr's progression towards status as a fully empowered actor in the saga, she is consulted about the proposed arrangement. Her appearance at the meeting is described:

Hon hafði yfir sér vefjarmottul blán ok var undir í rauðum skarlatskyrtli ok silfrbelti um sik, en hárit tók ofan á bringuna tveim megin, ok drap hon undir belti sér.

[She had put on a woven blue cloak over a scarlet tunic and a silver belt. She wore her hair hanging loose on either side of her bosom and tucked under her belt.]

Again the length of the hair is emphasized by the fact that it reached her waist. Significant in a way that will be apparent later when one of its homologues enters the saga, the hair is spanned over the curve of her breast and bound at the ends to head and belt. Distant as we are from medieval Icelandic cultural norms, it would be hazardous to attribute symbolic importance to the hair contained by the belt (this detail, too, is

recalled years later), yet at a minimum it appears that the hair is 'fronting' for Hallgerðr, being turned into her most immediately apparent personal feature and further associated with her feminine sexuality by its proximity to her breasts (cf. Jochens 1991). This concern with externals will later be reflected in Hallgerðr's judgmental statements about Bergþóra, Njáll, and their sons. Marital status in medieval Scandinavia was signalled by unmarried girls' hair worn loose, married women's hair worn bound and covered (Michelsen 1962). Here, the widowed but remarriageable Hallgerðr presents herself as a previously unmarried girl would. Was this an exception or the norm?

Hallgerðr's behaviour here is exemplary and this marriage begins auspiciously, with Hallgerðr displaying greater economic restraint. But again a quarrel and a blow bring Þjóstólfr's vengeance, this time not willed by Hallgerðr. The killer is disposed of by Hrútr. At the end of each of these abruptly terminated marriages, Hrútr and Ho skuldr have paid compensation to the kin of the slain men and rifts in the social fabric have been patched over. This block of narrative concludes with a bridging chapter stating briefly that Unnr never remarried, but mismanaged the inheritance she received after her father's death and became destitute. Unnr's personality seems to have undergone some impairment after the failed marriage. Gunnarr and Skarpheðinn can similarly be seen to pass a threshold and point of no-return in their psychological development (see below).

It is at this point in the saga, with the character of Hallgerðr fully established but with the most recent narrative matter lying on the positive side of the judgmental scales, that Gunnarr Hamundarson is introduced. Significantly, it is his relationship to Unnr that is the introductory feature, a marker for the circumstances under which the character will act in immediate future events: *Gunnarr hét maðr; hann var frændi Unnar*. Before taking a first narrative step, Gunnarr is heir to the contested legal case between Hrútr and Unnr, and thus, through the former's brother Ho skuldr, is in proximity to Hallgerðr and her troubled history.

The portrait of Gunnarr is more conventional and balanced than that of Hallgerðr and its sequence also differs. In this respect it also stands in

contrast to that of Njáll which follows closely thereafter. Gunnarr's pre-eminence as fighting man and sportsman precedes his physical description, so that, unlike Hallgerðr's, his appearance is secondary to his acts. But he, too, is handsome (*hárit mikit, gult, of fór vel*). Gunnarr's ambidexterity with weapons, his ability to jump his own height and as far backwards as forwards, even his amphibian skill seem martial translations of the equilibrium associated with *hóf* ('moderation'). This is further stressed in the statement of his generosity and fidelity to his friends, but his careful choice of them. This motif of duality is later realized in Gunnarr's ability to pursue his interests either through political alliance, negotiation and law or, when pressed, through recourse to arms. Gunnarr's skill with the bow is also introduced. Since his arrows never missed their mark, his failure as archer, if he were to fail, would be due to some exterior cause. Although the snapshot of Hallgerðr as a child showed her passive beneath her father's gaze and external appearance was stressed, she was described as volatile and selfish in temperament. Gunnarr, on the other hand is physically dynamic, but temperate in his social dealings. In what follows, the field of action for Hallgerðr will normally be interior: the household, the women's rooms, verbal exchanges in public with other women, men of the household commandeered by her to perform antisocial acts. Gunnarr's field of action is exterior: social, political, legal and economic dealings with other men in the public forum. This is in keeping with the gender-differentiated spheres of male and female action in medieval Iceland, yet is to a degree at odds with certain strains of their personalities.

After the introduction of Gunnarr's brother, Kolskeggr ('Charcoal-Beard'), comes that of Njáll. The portrait seems in one sense to take its cue from Hallgerðr's and, indeed, it will be she who first recalls attention to Njáll's most distinguishing exterior feature: *Njáll hét maðr; ... Hann var vel auðigr at fé ok vænn at álití, en sá hlutr var á ráði hans, at honum óx eigi skegg* ('A man called Njal ... [genealogy, family, residence] was wealthy and handsome, but he had one peculiarity: he could not grow a beard'). Only then are Njáll's qualities of spirit and character itemized: his skill in law, second sight, sound advice, gentleness, integrity. This fits well into the larger paradigm of Dumézil's *mutilations qualifiantes*, in

which a body part or faculty is sacrificed for enhanced spiritual ability in the same sphere of action. Here, absence of facial hair is compensated for by the seer's power, seated in the mind; the mark of masculinity active in the present is suppressed in favour of knowledge of the future outcomes of such male activity (cf. the bald poet, Egill Skallagrímsson). This characterization of Njáll (hairless, deficient in the conventional insignium of manliness) puts him at the other end of a spectrum from long-haired Hallgerðr, although the signification of this spectrum is not yet clear. Later, Hallgerðr will raise the issue of male adequacy and, in a surprising revelation of interiority for saga prose, so will Gunnarr, but to question his own manliness. As the saga's concerns are largely public judgments in an honour-conscious society, we are dealing not with sexual orientation or function/dysfunction but with public perceptions of the conventional realization of prescriptive gender roles.

Gunnarr successfully undertakes legal action in support of Unnr's claim and his prestige is enhanced. No longer destitute, Unnr now marries without consulting her kin, and will have the trouble-maker Morðr as her son. Gunnarr has outmanoeuvred Hrítr and Hoskuldr in the matter of the marriage settlement, but the former has a foreboding--a sure signal to the saga public--that Gunnarr will be paid back for his success. Similarly, his adventures in Norway, Denmark and the Baltic cap his achievements in purely Icelandic terms to make him a prominent public figure. And, recalling the motifs of ostentation and status associated with Hallgerðr, we note that it is at this point that Gunnarr comes to her attention. Twice widowed, she has moved from passive commodity in the first marriage deal to consenting partner in the second, and now takes the initiative. Gunnarr's very success creates a situation of vulnerability, made manifest in a later key programmatic exchange between Gunnarr and Njáll:

Njáll sagði hann vera inn mesta afreksmann -- 'ok ert þú mjök reyndr, en þó munt þú meir síðar, því at margr mun þíko funda.' 'Við alla vilda ek gott eiga,' segir Gunnarr. 'Mart mun til verða,' segir Njáll, 'ok munt þú jafnan eiga hendr þínar at verja.' 'Undir því væri þá,' segir Gunnarr, 'at ek hefða málaefni góð.' 'Svá mun ok vera,' segir Njáll, 'ef þú geldr eigi annarra at'. (Ch. 32)

[Njal said that Gunnarr had proved himself to be an outstanding man -- 'and now you have been well tested. But you have yet to be tested even more, for there are many who will envy you.' 'I want to be on good terms with everyone,' said Gunnarr. 'Much will happen,' said Njal, 'and you will often be forced to defend yourself.' 'Then it will be important that I should have justice on my side,' said Gunnarr. 'And so you will,' said Njal, 'as long as you do not have to suffer for the action of others.']

Thus, the saga creates a causal chain more subtle than the simple escalation of retaliatory acts between housewives by which the mechanism of future tragedy is first wound. In this supercharged environment, all acts, even accidental ones, are assigned meaning and will have consequences.

At Gunnarr's first appearance at the Althing after his return to Iceland he is accosted by Hallgerðr, who asks him to tell of his travels.

Hon var svá búin, at hon var í rauðum kyrtli, ok var á búningr mikill; hon hafði yfir sér skarlatsskikkju, ok var búin hloðum í skaut niðr; hárit tók ofan á bringu henni ok var bæði mikit ok fagrt. Gunnarr var í tignarklæðum þeim, er Haraldr konungr Gormsson gaf honum; hann hafði ok hringinn á hendi, Hákonarnaut. (Ch. 33)

[Hallgerd was wearing a red, richly-decorated tunic under a scarlet cloak trimmed all the way down with lace. Her beautiful thick hair flowed down over her bosom. Gunnar was dressed in the robes that King Harald Gormsson had given him, with the gold bracelet from Earl Hakon on his arm.]

The appearance of Hallgerðr is a visual recall of the scene in which she was consulted about her second marriage. Here, in the public sphere of the assembly as opposed to the farmhouse (where male supervision might be expected), she takes the initiative to lay the grounds for her third marriage, to the most distinguished man in the land. Dressed in the finery that was the reward of his accomplishments abroad, Gunnarr, the man of good judgment, is ensnared by the beautiful woman and her beautiful hair. Hrútr, ever clear-sighted, calls it a mutual infatuation (*ykkir er báðum girndarráð*). Warning recapitulations concerning Hallgerðr's character are

given but to no avail and Njáll, too, responds negatively to the news of the betrothal. Like the usually insightful Hrútr before Gunnhildr, Gunnarr's judgment abandons him when faced by the female dimension. He shows less care in his choice of wife than of friends and his masculine agenda will later be appropriated.

After the marriage, Hallgerðr proves an extravagant and overbearing mistress of her household. The resulting tension is not, however, first expressed in the relations between husband and wife. Instead, the agonistic scene is between two women, Hallgerðr and Njáll's wife, Bergþóra. The superficial contention is over seating precedence at table. Hallgerðr goes beyond whatever may have been the true issue at stake (the relative eminence of the husbands of the three women involved) to make a coarse insult concerning Bergþóra's fingernails. This leads to a series of tit-for-tat acts of vengeance, which starts with the killing of slaves, servants and overseers of the households headed by Gunnarr and Njáll. Settlements are made by the two men, but the escalation continues, Gunnarr seemingly unprepared to discipline his wife but ready to offer compensation. A key scene brings the grass : hair homology into the foreground, where it is narrativized by the protagonists. The resulting act of public defamation yanks the housewives' quarrel into a larger social and legal context, and it calls for decisive action on Gunnarr's part, although the damage cannot be undone.

Hallgerðr is in one of the women's rooms of the farmstead, along with Gunnarr's kinsman, Sigmundur, and her son-in-law, Þráinn Sigfússon (both of these marked by the sagaman with negative characteristics), when some indigent women arrive with news from neighbouring farms where they have sought hospitality. While such travelling gossips may well have existed in medieval Iceland, they are also narrative facilitators, presenting seemingly trivial information in neutral fashion or in judgmental terms that favour their listeners. But however inconsequential the information may seem, within the economy of saga narrative it is precisely enough to stimulate the other party to prompt action. Hallgerðr asks what was going on at Njáll's farm, Bergþórshváll. Nothing much was the answer; the sons were attending to weapons and Njáll was sitting doing nothing. As for the

servants (and why should Hallgerðr be asking about servants?):

‘Eigi vissu vit þat, hvat sumir gerðu,’ segja þær, ‘en einn ók skarni á hóla.’  
 ‘Hví mundi þat sæta?’ segir Hallgerðr. ‘Þat sagði hann,’ kváðu þær, ‘at þar yrði taða betri en annars staðar.’ ‘Misvitr er Njáll,’ segir Hallgerðr, ‘þar er hann kann til hversvetna ráð.’ ‘Hvat er í því?’ sogðu þær. ‘Þat mun ek til finna, sem satt er,’ segir Hallgerðr, ‘er hann ók eigi í skegg sér, at hann væri sem aðrir karlmenn, ok kollum hann nú karl inn skegglaus, en sonu hans taðskegginga, ok kveð þú um nokkut, Sigmundur, ok lát oss njóta þess, er þú ert skáld.’ Hann kvezk þess vera alþúinn ok kvað þegar visur þrjár eða fjórar, ok váru allar illar. (Ch. 44)

[‘We didn’t see what all of them were doing,’ they replied, ‘but one of them was carting dung to the hummocks in the field.’ ‘What was the point of that?’ asked Hallgerd. ‘He said it would make better hay.’ ‘Njal can sometimes be very stupid, for a man who can always give advice to others,’ said Hallgerd. ‘Why is that?’ they asked. ‘I’ll tell you why, and it’s quite true,’ said Hallgerd: ‘because he didn’t cart dung on to his own chin [lit. beard], so that his beard would grow like other men’s. So let’s now call him “Old Beardless”, and his sons “Little Dung-Beards”. And let’s have a poem from you about it, Sigmund; give us the benefit of your talent for poetry.’ Sigmund said he was quite prepared to do that, and at once composed three or four verses, all of them extremely malicious.]

The experienced saga public would interpret the beggar-women’s comments to know that it was just before mid-July (and the nights were light), that the Njálssons were preparing for some punitive action in the petty feud between the two households and that Njáll, if a party to it, was reflecting on strategy or, if not, was assessing its consequences with a look into the future. The servant seems an intrusive element, a narrative pretext for Hallgerðr’s coarse witticism, but his work too is preparatory and may be seen to reinforce the vision of the sons as future ‘grim reapers’.

Hallgerðr’s scurrilous nicknames exploit the analogy of facial hair and meadow grass by introducing a third element which creates a socially intolerable tension in the paradigm. Dung (*tað, myki*), stockpiled from the stables and carried out in July to the home field (*taða*), enriched the soil so that its future yield of grass and hay (the latter also called *taða*) would be greater (Benediktsson 1961, Granlund 1971, Lárusson 1971). This act closes

the positive physical and lexical cycle of grass and hay eaten by domesticated animals, whose higher dairy products are consumed by humans, with the lower animal waste then returned to the fields. But from the perspective of the human face, there is no recycling of shaven hair; at most the one complete and one incomplete cycle overlap when milk products are brought to the mouth as food. Hallgerðr's conceit is to pretend that Njáll's lack of beard is due to his failure to fertilize his chin, while the beards of his sons prove that they did so spread manure on theirs. These are two direct attacks on the male identity of Njáll and the Njálssons. Lacking the male marker, Njáll is charged with effeminacy, as the medieval Icelanders understood a now dated term (Ström 1974, Sørensen 1983, Gade 1986). The sons are accused of coprophagy, a gross although seldom recorded insult in that society (Louis-Jensen 1979). Both Njáll and his sons have 'lost face'. This is seen in their reaction to the news, which travels quickly. But first Sigmundur puts the scurrilous comments into the more telling and lasting form of verse, more precisely, *níðvísur*, defamatory verses which carried a severe legal penalty, clear proof of the power of the spoken word and its art forms in this pre-literate society (Almqvist 1965, Sørensen 1983). In a sense the dung--the dirty joke--has also been recycled into proscribed art. Recognition of this power is evident in the reaction of Gunnarr who has entered and overheard the stanzas. On pain of expulsion from the household he forbids their further circulation. And, indeed, the verses are not reproduced in the saga itself. Nonetheless, report of the slur does reach Bergþórshváll with the same old gossips. At the news Skarpheðinn tries to be dismissive of his mother's comments about their passivity in the face of the charge, but he grins, sweat breaks out on his forehead and two red spots flare in his cheeks. Skarpheðinn's face has then reacted to the accusation against it; he and his brothers will later respond with the arms they had been readying. The satiric poet Sigmundur will be killed, moving the level of retaliation from slaves and servants to kinsmen. Although compensation is paid for the killings that result from the verses, the *taðskegglíng* motif has not--indeed, could not--be excised from the story and will resurface, like a fresh growth of grass.

Thus far we have seen the hair motif repeatedly introduced in positive

but perhaps disquietening fashion in the context of Hallgerðr's marriageability. She makes the explicit equation hair and grass/hay in the above episode. Hay and food will be at the centre of a third sequence of events, before these related strands are pulled together in the events of Gunnarr's heroic final defence. The chance combination of deficiencies gives fresh impetus to the dynamic of the saga. A poor growing season results in shortages of hay and food among Gunnarr's clients and a slave Melkólfr, whose name indicates his suspect Celtic origins, also enters the scene. Gunnarr approaches Otkell Skarfsson and offers to buy hay and food if Otkell has a surplus, or invites Otkell to give him the needed supplies in return for an appropriate counter-gift (Miller 1990: 84-93). But Otkell has a malicious counsellor, Skamkell, who dissuades him from making the gift. Gunnarr's third option is to take the needed supplies by force, but he rejects this, which he characterizes as robbery (*rán*). Then Otkell pushes his hand and asks Gunnarr whether he would be willing to buy a slave from him. Gunnarr's usual good judgment is here suspended, since he must show himself more open-minded than Otkell has proven in the earlier proposed exchange. He purchases the slave and later receives the needed hay and food from Njáll (hay from the beardless one) at the prompting of Bergþóra, an act of good will that had been tactfully deferred and now comes too late to stay the flow of events.

Hallgerðr apparently resents the slight to her husband and coerces the slave Melkólfr to rob Otkell's farm of food, and set fire to the storehouse to cover the traces. The object of the theft, dairy products, fits neatly in the earlier established farm cycle of grass, hay, domestic animals, dung, etc. But in an expression of the stereotyped behaviour of those of servile condition, Melkólfr negligently leaves a knife and belt near the scene when he stoops to retie his sandal. These are eventually recognized by Otkell and the stolen butter and cheese, once served, are also identified when they can be matched with the moulds of the farmhouse where they were produced. Up to this point Gunnarr has sought to contain Hallgerðr's provocations to killing through the payment of compensation. Homicide that was subsequently declared publicly was a manageable form of social violence in medieval Iceland and Gunnarr works within this system. He would

appear to be motivated by a desire to preserve his wife's and his own public honour by not criticizing or disavowing her acts, and to maintain her more private honour and their relations within the household by not openly reprimanding her. In this he is recognizing the separate spheres of authority of men and women and, indeed, Hallgerðr makes no secret of the purloined goods, responding to Gunnarr not to meddle in kitchen affairs. But now Hallgerðr has been the instigator of theft, the kind of illegal action that Gunnarr had abstained from in his visit to Otkell. Even before the theft becomes public knowledge, he repeats his statement of principle, saying he will not be the accomplice of a thief and slaps Hallgerðr in the semi-public forum of the farmhouse in the presence of others. *Ílla er þá, ef ek em þjófsnautr*' (Ch. 48) takes us swiftly back to the beginnings of the saga and Hrútr's query about thief's eyes, but Hallgerðr's response to the slap (*hon kvazk þann hest muna skyldu ok launa, ef hon mætti*; 'Hallgerd said that she would remember that slap and pay him back if she could') throws a point of reference far forward into the saga, and again the saga public knows that these are not idle words.

While the escalation toward Gunnarr's tragedy is a gradual one, with many settlements for the intervening acts of violence, there are some clear boundaries between orders of magnitude. One is between the retaliatory killing of those of servile condition and that of kinsmen and affines; another occurs here, both in public and in private, in the open recognition of Hallgerðr's engineering of the raid on Otkell's stores and Gunnarr's repudiation of his wife's act, verbally and physically. With the single exception to be noted below, Hallgerðr has propelled the action of the feud beyond the point where she can effectively influence its further development (Miller 1990: 329n30). In counter-balance, it is also at about this point that Njáll ceases to exercise effective control over his sons' actions. Hallgerðr becomes a bit player in the saga, and it is Skarpheðinn who makes summary judgment on her role.

Through the combination of envy (the horse-fighters), malice (Skamkell, M o rðr Valgardsson) and chance (short-sighted Otkell's accidental riding down of Gunnarr, significantly for our motif with a blood wound to the head when the latter is sowing corn) the saga advances. But

before taking what Njáll sees as the fatal step over the threshold of killing more than once in the same family and then breaking a settlement, Gunnarr wonders whether he is less manly than other men, being so reluctant to have recourse to killing (*'Hvat ek veit, hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir eno þrum mo nnum at vega menn'* Ch. 54). Thus, as well as by the hay : hair homology, which we might imagine as on a horizontal axis moving from like to like, the saga is informed by the theme of gender adequacy, for which we may adopt the perception of the time and an imaginary vertical axis, male over female, with characters questioning their own and others' placement above or below the norm.

Once over the threshold of homicide Gunnarr is a ruthless pursuer of his interests, but at great cost to the principle of moderation. While physically dynamic, he also seems to relax into a kind of fatalism (*'Koma mun til mín feigðin, hvar sem ek em staddr, ef mér verður þess auðit'* Ch. 68; 'Death will catch up with me wherever I am, when it is so fated'). This prepares his last major decision regarding a court sentence. A case is concocted to the effect that Gunnarr has broken a settlement through the seizure of a corn-field (recalling in inverted fashion his earlier disinclination to take hay and food by force). This develops to the point where Gunnarr is judged at the assembly and outlawed from Iceland for three years. Then follows the celebrated scene of his intended departure on his voyage of exile. Leaping from his horse when it stumbles on the way to the ship, Gunnarr looks back at his farm, Hlíðarendi, and cries out: *'Fogr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfogr sýnsk, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi'* (Ch. 75); 'How lovely the slopes are, more lovely than they have ever seemed to me before, golden cornfields and new-mown hay. I am going back home, and I will not go away.'

The beauty he had earlier seen in Hallgerðr and her hair is now seen even more clearly in the ripened crops and cut hay of his farm. As landscape description unrelated to the tactical detail of plot is rare in the sagas, the hair and grass element of the here unstated homology is given much of the relief achieved by others means in the *taðskegglng* episode.

Hallgerðr is delighted at Gunnarr's return and the saga public is left to guess why his absence would have been incompatible with her intentions. Finally, circumstances contrive to send a large force of men against Gunnarr when he is alone at home with Hallgerðr and the other men are off making hay.

Gunnarr successfully defends his home with his bow and at one point his attackers withdraw. He then makes a fatal, honour-prompted error of judgment when he decides to take one of their arrows from the roof and shoot it back to humiliate them. The ill-considered nature of the act is highlighted by his mother's advice to the contrary and it has the undesired but not unexpected effect of alerting his enemies to his possible shortage of arrows. They renew their attack and at this point Gunnarr's bow-string breaks. The string would have been made of the flax that likely grew among the other crops on the farm; in any case, its affinities lie there.

Hann mælti til Hallgerðar: 'Fá mér leppa tvá ór hári þínu, ok snúið þit móðir mín saman til bogastrengs mér.' 'Liggr þér nokkut við?' segir hon. 'Lif mitt liggr við,' segir hann, 'því at þeir munu mik aldri fá sóttan, meðan ek kem boganum við.' 'Þá skal ek nú,' segir hon, 'muna þér kinnhestinn, ok hirði ek aldri, hvárt þú verr þik lengr eða skemr.' 'Hefir hverr til síns ágætis nokkut,' segir Gunnarr, 'ok skal þik þessa eigi lengi biðja.' Rannveig mælti: 'Illa ferr þér, ok mun þín skomm lengi uppi.' (Ch. 77)

[He said to Hallgerd, 'Let me have two locks of your hair, and help my mother plait them into a bow-string for me.' 'Does anything depend on it?' asked Hallgerd. 'My life depends on it,' replied Gunnar, 'for they will never overcome me as long as I can use my bow.' 'In that case,' said Hallgerd, 'I shall now remind you of the slap you once gave me. I do not care in the least whether you hold out a long time or not.' 'To each his own way of earning fame,' said Gunnar. 'You shall not be asked again.' Rannveig said, 'You are an evil woman, and your shame will long be remembered.']

Gunnarr's attachment to his hay and his crops leads to a situation where he is dependent on their homologue, a woman's hair, and here the memory of the slap to the face, a kinetic version of Hallgerðr's own insult

to the faces of Njáll and his sons, will cause the homology, in its effective sense, to break down. Hair will not be available to take the place of flax. Now we understand the earlier image of the long hair arched over Hallgerðr's bosom and tucked into her belt. Hallgerðr's last domestic act is one of denial, at the other extreme from her early prodigality, but equidistant from the norm of moderated generosity.

At this point the saga takes its leave of Gunnarr, in typical Icelandic fashion with a fatalistic proverb on his lips. In a distancing effect his last exchanges with his enemies are not detailed, nor is the identity of the man who struck the fatal blow given. When Gunnarr is next seen in the saga, it is as a happy spirit (or quiet revenant) in his burial mound, exulting in his last battle and posthumous fame (Ch. 78). Gunnarr's defence is the last glorious expression of the old heroic code before *Njáls saga* turns to new themes such as the process of law and its importance for national unity, the conversion to Christianity and resultant questioning of the old ethos. Although Kári Solmundarson (*hárit bæði mikit ok fagrt*) will subsequently be judged the most outstanding man of arms in Iceland after the death of Gunnarr, both he and Flosi, who is forced to undertake the burning of Njáll and his family through the unrelenting pressure of kinship and woman's call for payment of blood debts, are almost technicians of revenge, mercenaries in an old-fashioned war, and their emotional commitment, always slight in Flosi's case, wanes over time so that at the end of the saga after the separate pilgrimages to Rome they are reconciled.

With the killing of Gunnarr and the earlier move of the saga dynamic beyond the reach of Hallgerðr's influence, except in its final expression toward him, the hair : hay homology almost ceases to be operative in the narrative. Hallgerðr makes only one more appearance in the saga, just after its mid-point, one preceded by rumours that she has become the mistress of Víga-Hrappr 'Killer-Hrappr', a resourceful villain (an anti-Gunnarr) who is reminiscent of her foster-father Þjóstólfr. In her last scene, which is without physical description, Hallgerðr is standing in the company of a group of men on the porch of Þráinn's farmhouse when the Njálssons ride up on a feud-related errand. Hallgerðr says they are not welcome. Skarpheðinn replies that her words do not count 'for you are either an

outcast hag or a harlot' (*bví at þú ert annathvárt hornkerling eða púta*, Ch. 91). In his view she has left society and her words and actions are inconsequential. She says that they will be paid back for these words before they go but, true to Skarpheðinn's judgment, they are not. Still, Hallgerðr revives the 'Dung-Beards' charge. This, too, might have been thought a stale joke, but the other men with her publicly associate themselves with the insult, making it as fresh as when Hallgerðr first coined it years earlier.

In the course of the Njálssons' and Ásgrímr's solicitations at the Assembly for help in their legal troubles, Skarpheðinn, now recklessly over his personality threshold, will respond to the cool reception of one of the chieftains with imagery drawn from the hair : vegetation homology (on flyting Harris 1979, Bax and Padmos 1983, Parks 1990; on speech acts and violence, Amory 1991). He accuses a man once on the run of having had his head shaved and smeared with tar (derived from tree resin) and having slaves cut loose a strip of turf under which he could hide himself; later he is smuggled away in flour sacks. Here we have the essentials of the *taðskegglíng* charge in transmuted form. The associated motif of manliness will also be given its most dramatic expression in the later attempted settlement with Flosi. He has taken on the case of compensation or vengeance for the death of Hoskuldr Hvítanessgoði, but the deal is scotched at the last minute when he senses that a fancy cloak, used to top up the compensation sum, may have been an insinuation of deficient masculinity (full discussion in Sørensen 1987). He calls the gift appropriate for the giver, Old Beardless, but not for him. Although it may be straining the limits of the homology, woven goods, the products of wool, flax or silkworms, might also be seen as extensions of vegetation. Skarpheðinn's response to this development is an insult even more scurrilous than that of Hallgerðr. Flosi's advice to his followers on the conclusion of the failed negotiations is to go home and tend to their hay-making for a while.

When Bergþórshváll is eventually fired it will be with a dried pile of pulled weeds left unattended by the farmhouse, despite a prescient old woman's repeated warnings that it would mean their death. The fatal

'harvest' is then a truly negative one, chickweed or stitchwort (*arfi*), at the low end of the vegetation value scale. Kári's fine head of hair is burnt off in his escape from the blazing house (as it were reducing him to the elemental form of the avenger) but Njáll, Bergþóra and Kári's son Þórðr, who had elected to stay in the house, are found dead but unburned under an oxhide. Although beardless in life, Njáll goes to his death physically intact.

Hallgerðr seems to be recalled a last time in the saga in the account of the Battle of Clontarf, many of whose details provide symbolic equivalences, on the larger stage of North Sea politics, to the characters and relationships of the saga in Iceland. Kormloð (Ir. *Gormflaith*), the estranged wife of Brian *boru* and mother of King Sigtryggr *silkiskegg* of Dublin, is described as follows:

Hon var allra kvenna fegrst ok bezt orðin um allt þat, er henni var ósjálfrátt, en þat er mál manna, at henni hafi allt verit illa gefit, þat er henni var sjálfrátt. (Ch. 154)

[She was endowed with great beauty and all those attributes which were outside her own control, but it is said that in all the characteristics for which she herself was responsible, she was utterly wicked.]

Sigtryggr's efforts to recruit allies for his forthcoming battle against Brian involve a trip to the court of Earl Sigurðr of Orkney, who agrees to join forces on condition that he receive Kormloð in marriage. A similar condition is made by one of two viking chieftains with a fleet in the Hebrides, Bróðir. He is described as follows:

Bróðir hafði verit kristinn maðr ok messudjárn at vígslu, en hann hafði kastat trú sinni ok gorzk guðníðingr ok blótaði heiðnar vættir ok var allra manna fjolkunnigastr. Hann hafði herbúnað þann, er eigi bitu járn á; hann var bæði mikill ok sterkr ok hafði hár svá mikit, at hann vafði undir belti sér; þat var svart. (Ch. 155)

[Brodir had been a Christian and had been consecrated a deacon, but he had abandoned his faith and become an apostate. Now he sacrificed to heathen

spirits and was deeply skilled in magic. He wore armour that no weapon could pierce. He was tall and powerful, and his hair was so long that he tucked it under his belt; it was black.]

Although Brian will die at the hands of Bróðir despite being a non-combatant in the battle, his side will win the long day, so that neither of the two negotiated unions, Kormloð and Sigurðr, Kormloð and Bróðir, will be realized. The apostate and regicide Bróðir will be killed by evisceration in a scene that has been compared to the death of the arch-betrayers Judas and Arius (Hill 1981), the unwinding of his intestine, tied to an oak tree, seemingly matched to his long hair. Here, in my opinion, we have a closing judgment on Hallgerðr, divided into two gender-conditioned parts. Just as Queen Gunnhildr of Norway in her relationship with Hrútr anticipated some aspects of Hallgerðr's seduction of Gunnarr, so the judgment on the ex-queen and queen mother of Dublin sums up events in Hallgerðr's later life. Expressed here in an instant case is the dark side of the Icelandic ambivalence to things Norwegian and Celtic. Beauty and talents are natural gifts for whose use the individual is responsible. In the sphere of willed action, the emphasis on *sjálfrátt* is fundamental to the saga ethos. The judgment on Kormloð also recalls Rannveig's final words to Hallgerðr before Gunnarr's death. Bróðir has attributes of several of the men close to Hallgerðr: as a fighter he recalls her Hebridean foster-father Þjóstólfr; the Icelandic term translated as 'apostate', *guðníðingr*, recalls Sigmundur and the *níðvísur* composed at Hallgerðr's request, the practice of magic, her uncle Svanr and, again, Gunnhildr. But the long hair, now black, tucked into the belt, and like the bound intestine resonating with Odinic associations, is the clearest signal that Bróðir is to be seen as a kind of demonized, near-allegorical Hallgerðr. His fate will be the cumulative punishment for all sorcerers and sorceresses in the saga. But before that, he will kill the saintly King Brian of Ireland, just as Hallgerðr was responsible for the death of the man Iceland had recognized as its comparable ideal. The last monstrous misapplication and distortion of the vegetation : hair homology is perhaps in *Darraðarljóð* which concludes the Clontarf chapters. Here, the valkyries' loom, instead of being strung with linen thread or woollen

yarn, has a warp of human entrails, the harvest of the field of battle.

While the vegetation : hair homology might have mythological antecedents, these would not have been recalled each time this or any other homology was exploited. They simply became part of the cognitive programming, the way in which the world was perceived. An ideological surcharge could be added, if artistic need be, but homological thinking must have functioned autonomously from religious belief systems. With allowances for the very different aesthetic principles at work and the conscious intentionality, one might compare the use of mythologically based imagery in skaldic verse. Once made an obligatory constituent in the production of kennings and these made stylistically indispensable, the mythic corpus of events and relationships led a life *sui generis*.

We have seen that the hair : vegetation homology contributes to the overall unity of the saga, in which, otherwise, the causality of feud operates by fits and starts. The extension of the mirroring effect of correspondence into the sphere of personal worth, material and figurative, makes it more than a simple stylistic device but does not raise it to the status of theme. It cannot be said to inform the three blocks of narrative here reviewed any more than do the three fatal slaps to Hallgerðr's face. It is rather, to take a metaphor from within the semantic field, like a reinforcing thread, more appreciated in aesthetic terms than intentionally perceived by the public as plot-related. Occasionally it rises to the surface in an arresting pattern, given greater relief through direct speech, as in the case of the 'Dung-Beards' verses or the denial of a make-shift bowstring. Like the various techniques of narrative foreshadowing but without their linear narrative dynamic, deployment of one element of the homology readies us for the other to surface in satisfying complementary fashion, in a kind of economical logic of story-telling.

On the level of character the homology does not operate in the saga in quite the same way, although each of its components played a major role in the social and economic life of medieval Iceland. Grass, hay and other crops were prized commodities on the resource-scarce island and at the cornerstone of the rural economy. Less naturally but no less fundamentally, hair was associated with personal worth, a touchstone of

beauty in the case of unmarried women, its fullness and inviolate status equated with manliness and honour in the case of men. And like hair and hair in the homological relationship, but according to another principle of causality and with far greater consequences than meeting the aesthetic criteria of story-telling, economy and honour were linked. Long-term economic success in the form of a network of clients or, for a man of more modest means, a reliable patron as *goði* could depend on community perceptions of personal status for which honour was a determining factor. As the sagas make evident from the many failed forays, simple courage did not necessarily translate into honour. Effective courage, rationally deployed towards a successful outcome (not that dissimilar to the well prosecuted court case), generated community admiration and honour. The lines of force could work the other way, as well; a man might decline to seek the path of honour in a matter of vengeance because he would not be able to meet possible future demands for financial compensation for his acts. While law and sex might be situated at the extremes of the culture-nature axis, honour had an uneasy seat in between, male susceptibility to emotional reaction and to women's charms no less than scorn pulling it from culture toward nature.

Hallgerðr's presence marks the three blocks of narrative in which the vegetation : hair homology is active. In addition to not starting with the customary ancestral chapters, *Njáls saga* might be judged unusual in devoting so much narrative volume to the early life of Hallgerðr, during which very little, in conventional saga terms, is at stake, despite the necessary tie of her uncle's Hrútr's dealings to the later action or her own subsequent contention with Bergþóra. We see her at three stages: 1) child and maiden, her maidenhood renewed in Icelandic terms through widowhood, scenes in which her beauty is stressed, 2) twice widowed then a wife again, with the key scene of erotic confrontation at the assembly, where her beauty is now mature and accompanied by conscious freedom of action, and 3) as the vindictive wronged wife, then mistress of a villain. Skarpheðinn's last judgment on sexual pathology, *hornkerling eða púta*, may not come as a shock on the second count, but the modern reader may be brought up a bit short by *kerling* until it is recognized that if Hallgerðr

were, say, fifteen years old at the time of her first marriage, she would have been in her mid-fifties at the time of Gunnarr's death and about five years older when the Njálssons came calling on Þráinn. On balance, Hallgerðr's role is a considerable one in a genre and a society thought to be under effective male control.

While *Njála* should not, on the basis of its portrayal of a single character acting with the degree of free will and social mobility that she accords herself, be called a misogynistic work, we must draw the conclusion that in a socio-legal system in which women were not fully empowered, their capacity for good, from their limited power base in the household, was lesser than their capacity for ill (Heller 1958, Kress 1979, Dronke 1980, Jochens 1991).

Against the desirable authority and power of the law, whose importance for national cohesion is stressed in the second half of the saga in general plot development and in programmatic statements by Njáll and Þorgeirr (the arbitrator in the question of wholesale conversion to Christianity), we see the power of feminine beauty and sexuality on the one hand, and the power of the word on the other, the latter both in its most casual form--gossip traded from farm to farm--and in its most studied--Sigmundur's verses that assure Hallgerðr's scurrilous images their greater currency (*lát oss njóta þess, er þú ert skald*). Especially in its proscribed forms of erotic and defamatory verse, we see how close for medieval Icelanders some verbal art was to similarly extra-legal magic. We also see how the fires of feud, once smothered, can be fanned alive again in a small community where the actors remain juxtaposed, through the combination of bad luck, poor judgment, partially motivated malice and unmotivated envy, and the exposure and vulnerability that accompany more than a moderate share of success.

The portion of *Njáls saga* reviewed here is that before the conversion of Iceland to Christianity and before legal structure, restructuring (the fifth court) and process take over the thematic agenda of the work (most recently Ordower 1991), then yield in turn to the Clontarf chapters. Just as Hallgerðr's last vindictive, wholly heathen act is a long look into her personal past and life with Gunnarr, so Gunnarr, despite his susceptibility

to the attractions of hair and hay, must be seen as the last, fullest and best expression of the `old' temperate heroic ideal, the *hóf* which was the finest achievement of the `noble heathen' and which had been all but lost by the troubled but Christian age of the Sturlungs, to which we owe the composition of this richest among the family sagas.

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