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The god Þórr throughout the
centuries: from mythographic
texts to *rímur*.

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Introduction

Þórr is undoubtedly one of the main gods in the Germanic *pantheon*, and our knowledge of him, as well as what we know about the whole Germanic mythology, is based essentially on Nordic sources. Since only some rare traces of the heathen cult in other parts of the Germanic area have been preserved in written form, we must focus mainly on the Nordic production in order to understand what the ancient religion of the Germanic peoples was like. This issue is however not without problems. In fact, after a long period of oral transmission, several parts of this tradition were written down in the Middle Ages, when Christianity had already become the official religion of the Scandinavian countries, including Iceland, and consequently the redactors of these works were (presumably) Christians. Therefore, it is often difficult to detect what is purely pagan and what has been “corrupted” by the close contact with the dominant religion. The same problem is also noticeable when we concentrate on the figure of Þórr, whose centrality in the wide frame of Nordic religion has made him more vulnerable to changes and influences.

This centrality is inferable by noticing that Þórr is the protagonist of many mythological tales, mainly preserved in works such as the two *Eddas*, and he also appears in sagas, ballads and *rímur*. References to his cult have been also transmitted in works by authors such as Tacitus and Adam of Bremen, but clues to his worship can also be found in evidence outside the field of literary production, that is to say archaeological finds, place and personal names.

In the first part of this work, I will focus on the cult of Þórr in the Germanic territories by considering the most ancient sources witnessing his worship, including both literary and material evidence. In the following chapters I will turn my attention to selected texts, and precisely to *Gautreks saga*, Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*, *Heiðreks saga*, *Flóamanna saga* and the cycle of *rímur* known as *Þrymlur*. In all these sources, Þórr is presented differently, and consequently his function changes. The purpose of this work is to detect such roles and to understand how the figure of this god has been interpreted and reshaped throughout the centuries and the literary genres.

1. The cult of Þórr

Son of Óðinn and of the Earth (Jörð)¹, husband of Sif (= affinity), father of Magni (>*magn* = strength, power), Móði (>*möðr* = angry, enraged)² and Þrúðr (= strength)³, Þórr is represented as a strong, red-bearded god, who hardly manages to restrain his hunger and thirst⁴. References to one of the main characteristics of the god, i.e. strength, can be found in the names of several elements which are related to him. In fact, the place where he dwells is called Þrúðheimr or Þrúðvangr⁵, both of which contain the word *þrúðr*, meaning strength. Moreover, his anger and wrath lead him to *möðr*, a characteristic condition of excitement and of extreme physical power⁶. His strength is implemented by the magical objects that he always carries with him: Mjöllnir, a powerful hammer that functions as a boomerang and that is essential in the struggle against giants; the iron gloves that Þórr wears in order to be able to handle Mjöllnir; and the belt, which allows him to double his strength when he wears it⁷. The god's means of transport is a cart drawn by two goats⁸, a kind of animal that used to be sacrificed to him⁹.

The first reference to a Germanic god that might correspond to Þórr is the description made by Tacitus in his *Germania*, where the Latin author hints of Hercules.

¹ *Lokasenna* 58; *Þrymskviða* 1. According to Simek (1993:316), „ the idea that Thor is the son of the earth-goddess, the personification of the earth, surely derives from an ancient tradition“, although he does not explain why.

² *Hymiskviða* 34, *Harbarðsljóð* 53.

³ De Vries (1957:123-124); Clunies Ross (1994a:46), Simek (1993 :316, 319). While Clunies Ross seems to be quite sure about the etymology of Þórr's wife's name, Simek (1993:319) points out that this is not clear.

⁴ In *Þrymskviða* 24 he is said to have eaten one ox and eight salmons and to have drunk three pints of mead.

⁵ *Grímnismál* 24; *Gylfaginning* 20; *Skáldskaparmál* 17.

⁶ Dumézil (1971:122).

⁷ *Gylfaginning* 21.

⁸ *Hymiskviða* 7;20; *Þrymskviða* 21.

⁹ De Vries (1957:113). According to Simek (1993:321), the story narrated in *Gylfaginning* 44, in which it is told that Þórr kills, eats and then brings his goats back to life, is a trace of an ancient form of sacrifice that was made to the god.

Herculem ac Martem concessis animalibus placant.¹⁰

Although some scholars take for granted the identification of Þórr with Hercules¹¹, others, such as De Vries (1957:110) doubt of this correspondence, for “Hercules hat übrigens wenig Züge mit dem germanischen Donnergott gemeinsam”, furthermore underlining that, in other sources, Þórr is “Latinized” as Jupiter¹².

The problems concerning the Latin sources for the ancient Germanic religion are not limited to the work of Tacitus. In fact, if we consider the description of these cults given by Cesar in his *De bello gallico*, the discrepancies with the account by Tacitus are remarkable. Cesar describes a very primitive religion based on the worship of natural elements instead of anthropomorphic entities, a description that evidently differs from the one given by Tacitus only one hundred fifty years later¹³. Such a discrepancy could be explained by taking into consideration the evolution that Germanic peoples could have experienced within this period of time, an evolution made faster and deeper by the encounter and the constant relations with other cultures, such as the Celtic and the Roman traditions. Furthermore, it has to be kept in mind that remarkable differences existed among the several Germanic tribes. This is an aspect that should not be forgotten when we consider the descriptions proposed by external witnesses, who probably did not have information about every single Germanic population. Therefore, the accounts given by these authors cannot be generalized¹⁴.

Some scholars have concentrated their studies on the origins of the Germanic religion. Among them, Georges Dumézil is surely to be remembered. Dumézil dedicated a large part of his work to the detection of similarities and common traits between Germanic myths and other Indo-European mythological traditions, such as the

¹⁰ Tacitus, *Germania*, c. 9,1.

¹¹ Among others, Molinari (1987:28-29), Simek (1993:322).

¹² Although a deeper overview on the issues concerning the presumed correspondence between Þórr and Hercules goes beyond the purposes of this work, it is interesting to notice that the difficulty in identifying Hercules with the Germanic god is implemented by the fact that, in other chapters of the *Germania* (3,1) and also in his *Annales* (II, 12), Tacitus clearly describes Hercules as a hero, and not as a god (De Vries [1957:107]).

¹³ Simek (2003:108-109).

¹⁴ Molinari (1987:32).

Italic, the Celtic and the Indo-Arian ones¹⁵. By comparing tales, legends and stories composing these traditions, Dumézil believed to have found a common Indo-European mythical frame, which reflected the social structure of this ancient population, a society that, according to the scholar, was divided into three classes: political and religious/magical rulers, warriors and farmers. Each of these classes would correspond to a group of divinities. As far as the Germanic religion is concerned, Óðinn would represent the first class, that of rulers; Þórr would belong to the second class, while the gods of fertility such as Njörðr and Freyr would be the representatives of the last class¹⁶. Indeed, correspondences between different religious traditions can be actually noticed. For instance, the similarities between Þórr and Indra, the Indian god of war, are remarkable: both travel to far lands in order to fight against monstrous creatures, both have powerful objects, e.g. weapons and a chariot, both eat and drink exaggeratedly¹⁷. Some of these characteristics are also common to the protagonists of myths of other traditions, for example Hercules¹⁸. Nonetheless, although this hypothesis is surely fascinating, recent studies have questioned the accuracy and of the concreteness of this view¹⁹, which seems to be too schematic. If we concentrate our attention in particular on the figure of Þórr, for instance, we can infer that his function cannot be simply reduced to military aspects. Certainly, the major role of this god in the myths concerns the struggle against giants and other evil creatures such as the Miðgarðsormr, thus functioning, as we are going to see in detail, as protector of Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr from the threats from outside, but the characteristics that identify him as a god of fertility should not be ignored; on the contrary, they have a central importance.

A first glimpse to aspects that are connected to the fertility function of the god is given by his name, ON *Þórr*, OHG *Donar*, OE *Punor*, OSX *Thunær*²⁰, which is bound to the Indo-European group of words designating the thunder: lat. *tono*, *tonitrus*; skr. *tanyati*; celt. *taran*.²¹ Even the names of Þórr's goats, *Tanngnióstr* and *Tanngrísni*²²,

¹⁵ In particular, *Les dieux des Germains*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959.

¹⁶ Dumézil (1959).

¹⁷ Simek (1993:322).

¹⁸ Simek (1993:322).

¹⁹ Among others, Molinari (1987:34), Milroy (1974-1977), Page (1978-1981).

²⁰ Molinari (1987:28).

²¹ De Vries (1957:111-112).

recall this natural phenomenon²³ that is obviously associated to rain, which of course is essential for agriculture. Mjöllnir, Þórr's hammer, one of the magical objects that the god always carries with him, was considered a powerful amulet against sterility²⁴, and it was also used to consecrate and therefore to give fertility to the bride²⁵, as it is also briefly mentioned in *Brymskviða* 30²⁶. This aspect is underlined also by De Vries (1957:110), according to who even the day that was dedicated to Þórr and that carries his name, i.e. engl. Thursday; germ. Donnerstag; swed. Torsdag etc.,

heilig gehalten wurde. Er galt in Deutschland bis zum 17. Jahrh. mehr oder weniger als Feiertag. [...] Dass der Donnerstag zu den beliebtesten Hochzeitstagen gehört, stimmt dazu, dass auch in den altnordischen Mythen seine Beziehung zu den Mächten der Fruchtbarkeit feststeht und sein Hammer die Heirat einsegnet.

These aspects, which are bound to the function of fertility, are confirmed by Adam of Bremen in his work "*Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*". In the description of the heathen temple of Uppsala and of the pagan rites that were officiated in that place, Þórr has a central function and is even considered the most important god.

Nobilissimum illa gens templum habet, quod Ubsola dicitur, non longe positum ab Sictona civitate [vel Birka]. In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro paratum est, statuas trium deorum venerator populus, ita ut potentissimus eorum Thor in medio solium habeat triclinio; hinc et inde locum possident Wodan et Fricco. Quorum significationes eiusmodi sunt: "Thor" inquiunt "presidet in aere, qui tonitrus et fulmina, ventos ymbresque, serena et fruges giberna. Alter Wodan, id est furor, bella gerit hominique ministrat virtutem contra inimicos. Tercius est Fricco, pacem voluptatemque largiens

²² The names of Þórr's goats are only preserved in *Gylfaginning* 73, but this feature, i.e. the fact that only a late source gives this information, has made Simek (1993:325) doubt of the originality of these names, which, according to him, are a later invention.

²³ De Vries (1957:113).

²⁴ Simek (2003:130 ff.)

²⁵ De Vries (1957:122).

²⁶ In this scene, the giant Þrymr tells his servants to bring him Mjöllnir to consecrate the bride.

mostraliibus”. Cuius etiam simulacrum fingunt cum ingenti priapo. Wodanem vero sculpunt armatum, sicut nostri Martem solent; Thor autem cum sceptro Iovem simulare videtur.²⁷

Omnibus itaque diis suis attributos habent sacerdotes, qui sacrificia populi offerant. Si pestis et fames imminet, Thor ydolo lybatur [...].²⁸

Even if, as some have argued²⁹, this kind of cult, characterized by the presence of a temple and of a sacerdotal class, is due to the influence of other religions, above all Christianity, which, when Adam of Bremen was writing, was spreading in Scandinavia, the function of fertility of Þórr is undeniable. In fact, according to Simek (1993:322), traces of this role of Þórr in ancient cults can also be found in some evidence dating back to the Bronze Age³⁰:

On the rock carvings at Stora Hög and Hvitlycke next to a picture of a copulating couple there is a large phallic figure carrying a hammer or an axe. This scene has been interpreted as marriage vows [...] supervised by Thor whose hammer was understood as a fertility symbol right into the Middle Ages.

Another aspect that is to be considered with attention and that will be of extreme relevance in our discussion is the importance that Þórr had among the common people, above all farmers, an importance that is of course bound to the function of fertility that we have briefly mentioned above. As much as Óðinn was perceived as the god of chieftains and nobility³¹, Þórr was invoked by simple people who asked for very practical favors, usually concerning atmospheric and natural phenomena. This opposition between the two gods is visible in a couple of verses of *Hárbarðsljóð* 24,

²⁷ *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, book IV, c. 26.

²⁸ *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, book IV, c. 27.

²⁹ Gräslund (2008:250).

³⁰ This aspect is also mentioned in De Vries (1957:124).

³¹ Since this aspect has been reported by Snorri, this kind of information concerning the function of Óðinn has not come down to us directly, but it has been filtered.

where it is told that, when men die in battle, the noble ones are collected by Óðinn, while the slaves belong to Þórr:

[...] Óðinn á jarla,
þás á val falla,
en Þórr á þrælakyn.³²

[...] Odin has all the jarls
that in conflict fall;
but Thor the race of thralls.³³

The reliability of these verses with respect to the different functions of the two gods have is nonetheless to be doubted because of the fact that *Hárbarðsljóð* has been composed presumably in late times by a poet supporting Óðinn instead of Þórr, thus making the former more important than the latter³⁴. However, for our discussion it is nonetheless interesting noting that, even though this assumption is valid only as far as the last times of heathenism are concerned, Þórr was anyway perceived as a god close to farmers and common people.

The fact that Þórr was particularly worshipped by this class of the society is surely due to his closeness to aspects regarding the falling of rain, the abundance of harvest, the fertility of fields, of cattle and even of women. But Þórr occupied a special place in everyday life also thanks to his role of protector, not only of the work of people, an aspect that is again connected to the fertility function of the deity³⁵, but also of humans and gods in a more physical sense. This becomes evident if we consider several stories narrating the efforts of the god against the monstrous creatures that constantly threaten Miðgarðr and Asgarðr. The main enemies of men and divinities are

³² Jónsson (1932:86).

³³ English translation taken from www.gutenberg.org . :

<http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1496941&pageno=54>

³⁴ Simek (1993:319).

³⁵ De Vries (1957:147).

the giants, extremely ancient creatures, for they were the first to inhabit the Earth, who live outside our world, i.e. in Útgarðr, usually identified in myths and sagas as the far East³⁶. Þórr is the principal opponent to these supernatural beings³⁷, who always try to steal the gods' wives, or at least to take possession of them somehow. This topic is the *leitmotiv* of many stories concerning the fight between gods and giants, and in particular of the Eddic poem called *Þrymskvíða*, in which the giant Þrymr steals Þórr's hammer and asks for the goddess Freyja in exchange. We will come back to this composition, since it is the basis of the cycle of *rímur* we will analyze, but it is however interesting evidencing that, in this poem, it becomes clear that Þórr has no power against giants without his hammer. This aspect is underlined by the following verses³⁸:

Þegar munu jötnar
Ásgarðr búa,
nema þinn hamar
þér of heimtir.³⁹

Forthwith the Jotuns
will Asgard inhabit,
unless thy hammer
thou gettest back.⁴⁰

Other stories of the efforts of Þórr against giants are contained in the Eddic poem *Hymiskvíða* and in several parts of the *Snorra Edda*, in particular in the sections concerning the journey of the god to Útgarðaloki and to Geirröðagarð. This last episode

³⁶ For instance in *Lokasenna* it is said that Þórr is in the East, presumably to fight giants. The same information is given in the introduction to *Hymiskvíða*, where it is said that Þórr is coming back from the eastern lands, and in *Hárbarðsljóð* 23, where the god says to have been in the east and to have killed giants. In *Skáldskaparmál* 3 he is in the east to fight Trolls (another way to name giants).

³⁷ In *Hymiskvíða* 14 he is said to be the one who causes the cry of giants' women (*sá gýgjar græti*) and in stanza 19 he is called „exterminator of giants“ (*þurs ráðbani*).

³⁸ *Þrymskvíða* 18.

³⁹ *De gamle Eddadigte* (1932:117).

⁴⁰ www.gutenberg.org :

<http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1496941&pageno=46>.

is based on the poem known as *Þórsdrápa* (“eulogy to Þórr”), written by the skald Eilífr Goðrúnarson towards the end of the 10th century and only partially preserved in *Snorra Edda*⁴¹. A brief glimpse at the hostility that Þórr feels for giants is also given in *Snorra Edda* in the frame of the description of the funeral of Baldr, Þórr’s brother. Unable to move the heavy ship that functions as pyre for the dead god, the Æsir call the mighty giantess Hyrrokkin for help, who eventually manages to accomplish to this task. Þórr, wrathful for the loss of Baldr, but most likely also envious for the strength of the giantess, tries to kill her with his hammer but is stopped by the other gods⁴². In conclusion, some verses quoted by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* and attributed to the skald Vetrliði present a short list of giants who have been killed by Þórr⁴³. We will return later to these verses, for they will be useful when we will take into consideration the function of Þórr in *Gautreks saga*.

The problem concerning the function of giants in Old Norse religion is very complex and therefore interesting, but a complete discussion of this topic is not among the purposes of this work. Nonetheless, some elements of the studies that have been made upon giants will be useful to us later on. For the moment, it is sufficient noting that Þórr, the fighter of giants *par excellence*, was considered the protector of the world of humans. The threatening beings were not however only giants. One of the main enemies of Þórr, and maybe the principal one, is in fact the Miðgarðsormr (Serpent of Middle Earth), one of the monstrous children of the god Loki, which lives in the sea and surrounds the whole earth with its coils. In *Hymiskviða* Þórr goes with the giant Hymir on a fishing expedition and manages to capture the Serpent, but not to kill it. In fact, it will be precisely the Miðgarðsormr that will fight against Þórr in Ragnarök, the final battle at the end of the world, and the two opponents will kill each other, as it is told in *Völuspá* 56.

⁴¹ Simek (1993:327).

⁴² *Gylfagynning* 49. Another source, i.e. Þorbjörn díarsarkáld’s verses preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*, counts the giantess Hyrrokkin among the victims of Þórr. For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Lindow (1988).

⁴³ A deeper overview on this topic is given in Lindow (1988).

One of the principal functions of Þórr was therefore that of fighting against monsters and giants, a feature that contributed to his importance for people, who considered him as a protector.

A characteristic of the heathen Germanic cult is that it was not uniform, neither in time nor in space. As far as the last aspect is concerned, the differences are not to be noticed only between the various populations composing the wide Germanic cultural world. On the contrary, divergences are visible also in narrower areas, e.g. Scandinavia. Here not every god was worshipped the same way and had the same importance. For instance, as far as the territory of modern Sweden is concerned, even the fertility function of Þórr seems to have been more deep-rooted in the eastern part of the country than in the western one⁴⁴. But a fact that suggests that the cult of Þórr was becoming more and more popular in the last centuries of heathenism⁴⁵ is the case of Iceland. This island, which was colonized during the Viking Age, thus showing the traits of the Scandinavian culture in the last times of paganism, was inhabited by many people whose names contained an explicit reference to Þórr, as it is confirmed in *Landnámabók*: a quarter of the 4000 people mentioned in this book have a name that is related to the god. On the contrary, very few people had names recalling other important deities such as Óðinn and Freyr.⁴⁶ Also place names reveal the particular importance that Þórr had among Icelanders⁴⁷, even though, as Simek (1993:321) points out, it is sometimes hard to understand whether these denominations are based directly on Þórr or on people whose names had the *Þór*- element within. It is however clear that place

⁴⁴ Turville-Petre (1972:20). An evidence of this aspect is given by the recurrence of the place name “Torsåker” (“Thorr’s field”) in this area.

⁴⁵ Simek (1993:321). Simek, as well as McKinnell (1994:57), seems to be sure of the fact that the devotion of Þórr became popular during the Viking Age, but De Vries (1957:120) is more cautious, for there is evidence of the important role that this deity had in ancient times too. Nonetheless, he does not deny that, to a certain degree, the cult of Þórr was increasing in that period.

⁴⁶ Simek (1993:320), De Vries (1957:120).

⁴⁷ Of course, place names linked to Þórr do not only exist in Iceland. On the contrary, other areas in Scandinavia, especially in central and southern Sweden and in Denmark, show a great amount of place names related to this god (De Vries 1957:118-120).

names presenting elements such as *-hof*, *-lundr*, *-vé* and so on refer to cultic places and are therefore dedicated to the god⁴⁸.

Sagas and other sources narrating the colonization of Iceland account for the particular devotion that the people who dwelt on the island had for Þórr, who was considered their protector. In fact, Þórr was mainly worshipped by the communities living in Iceland, but also by chieftains, an aspect that is probably due to the provenance of the majority of the settlers, i.e. the western part of Norway.⁴⁹ The cult of Njörðr and of Óðinn seems to be rarer in Iceland, while the devotion to Freyr was still present. Some *goðar* worshipped this god, so that they were called *Freysgoðar*, a denomination that could imply the function of leaders of the cult of this deity.⁵⁰

The importance of Þórr for the settlers of Iceland is testified by an interesting custom, which consisted, while approaching to the island's shores, in throwing overboard pillars with images of the god carved in them and settle where these objects arrived ashore, thus meaning that that place had been chosen by Þórr and was therefore blessed⁵¹. There were temples in Iceland⁵² where one or more gods were worshipped⁵³, and Þórr was the patron of places called Þórsnes⁵⁴ and Vestfirðir, in the west of the island⁵⁵.

⁴⁸ Simek (1993:321).

⁴⁹ Strömbäck (1975:50).

⁵⁰ Strömbäck (1975:51).

⁵¹ Turville-Petre (1972a:25), McKinnell (1994:66). Examples of this tradition can be found in *Landnámabók* and in *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 3-4) (Turville-Petre 1972a:26).

⁵² References to this aspect can be found in *Eyrbyggja saga* and in *Kjalnesinga saga* (Simek 1993:320). Some sources (e.g. *Oláfs saga tryggvasonar* and *Oláfs saga hins helga*) also account for temples dedicated to Þórr in Norway too, and more precisely in Trondheim and Guðbrandsdal. But, as Simek (1993:320) points out, the absence in these areas of place names such as Þórshof (Þórr's temple) leads to doubt of the reliability of this kind of information.

⁵³ Turville-Petre (1972a:4). Of course, Þórr was not the only god being worshipped on the island. In *Landnámabók* (*Hauksbók*, chapter 28) it is mentioned that three gods, i.e. Freyr, Njörðr and the all-powerful (*allmáttki*) god were worshipped by law. Some suggestions have been made about the identity of the latter: it could be Óðinn (De Vries, Jan Contributions to the study of Othin, Folklore Fellows communications XXXIII, 2, No. 94, 1931, esp. 46 ff.), but it is more probable that this god has to be identified with Þórr, also because the cult of Óðinn in Iceland is not well attested (Turville-Petre 1972a:5-6). As far as the mention to Freyr is concerned, it is likely that his cult was more important in the eastern and northern part of Iceland, but the devotion to this god was not so strong (Turville-Petre 1964:327).

⁵⁴ This place, according to *Eyrbyggja saga*, was dedicated to Þórr by Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, the „most ardent Þórr-worshipper in the history of Iceland“ (Turville-Petre 1964:329).

⁵⁵ Turville-Petre (1964:327).

For the settlers of Iceland, Þórr was the chief god; he was the all-powerful god (*hinn almáttki áss*), who upheld their houses, as he upheld their law and their traditional religion.⁵⁶

These words introduce us to another topic of extreme relevance. The remarkable popularity of Þórr in late times is not only due to intrinsic characteristics of the god, i.e. his role of warrior, fertilizer and defender of humans, but also to aspects that are related to the historical and cultural changes that occurred in those periods, i.e. the conversion to Christianity. This event, in fact, had consequences on a wide range of aspects, such as politics, relationship with the rest of Europe, rise of a written tradition and so on, but, more importantly for our discussion, it influenced deeply the older religion too, so that episodes of syncretism are present.⁵⁷

Going back to the figure of Þórr, it is likely that the great success that his cult had was due to a reaction against the spreading of the new religion. A clear evidence for this assumption is the wide use in the last periods of paganisms of amulets with the shape of Þórr's hammer^{58 59}. We have already discussed of the importance of this symbol already in ancient times, but it is probable that the spreading of this kind of ornament is to be considered as a manifestation of opposition to the cross⁶⁰. Even the use of consecrating rune-stones to Þórr can be considered as a reaction against the spreading of carvings carrying the symbol of the cross and inscription invoking the Christian god⁶¹. As Simek (1993:321) points out:

It is possible that Thor became the symbolic figure for this heathen renewal movement, in particular because of the hammer symbol.

In fact, the similarity of the shape of the hammer to that of the cross could have inspired the heathens in finding a way to display their belonging to the traditional

⁵⁶ Turville-Petre (1972a:26). This aspect is underlined also by De Vries (1957:121).

⁵⁷ Apart from the Christian influence that is noticeable in the literary sources, of which we have discussed above, also other evidence demonstrates this aspect. For instance, rune stones with both pagan and Christian motifs have been found (Gräslund and Lager 2008).

⁵⁸ For a discussion on this kind of amulets, see Gräslund (2008:254).

⁵⁹ Cfr. Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4 in appendix.

⁶⁰ Simek (1993:320).

⁶¹ Simek (1993:321), Gräslund and Lager (2008).

religion⁶². Going back to more literary aspects, some verses dating to the end of the 10th century testify the function of Þórr as reference for the opposition to the new religion, especially in Iceland. The shipwreck of the Christian missionary Þangbrandr is at the origin of these verses by the prophetess Steinunn:

Þórr brá Þvinnils dýri
Þangbrands ór stað löngu,
hristi buss ok beysti
barðs ok laust við jörðu;
munat skíð of sæ síðan
sundfært Atals grundar,
hregg þvít hart tók leggja
hónum kent í spónu.

Thór tore Þangbrands long beast of the sea-king from its place; he shook the tree of the prow and smashed it and struck it against the land; the ski of the ground of the sea-king will not henceforth be fit to swim over the sea, for the strong gale, attributed to him [Thór], broke it to splinters.⁶³

In a following stanza, the same prophetess says that “Christ did not protect the ship” (*hlífðit Krístr...malmfeta varrar*).⁶⁴ In another verse by another poet it is stated that “the gods are evidently in the land” (*vera munu bond í landi*).⁶⁵

Anyway, it would be a mistake considering the cult of Þórr in late times only in a perspective of contrast to Christianity. In fact, episodes of syncretism regarding this god and the new religion are not infrequent. There are even examples of people being baptized who invoked Christ and the Christian God in some circumstances and Þórr for other kinds of needs. This is the case of Helgi inn Magri (Helgi the Lean), who moved to Iceland during the end of the 9th century, and who, even if he was baptized and faithful to Christ, kept on asking for Þórr’s help when he really was in situations of

⁶² De Vries (1957:125-126).

⁶³ Verses and translation taken from Strömbäck (1975:49-50).

⁶⁴ Strömbäck (1975:50).

⁶⁵ Strömbäck (1975:50). All verses quoted in this section are taken from Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning* A I-II, B I-II (1912-15).

need⁶⁶, for instance when travelling on the sea⁶⁷. In fact, the use of sacrificing to Þórr in order to obtain fair wind for navigation seems to have been quite widespread⁶⁸.

⁶⁶ Turville-Petre (1964:330). His story is narrated in *Landnámabók* 184(De Vries 1957:122; 145).

⁶⁷ De Vries (1957:122). However, Schach (1975) points out that this, so to say, “double belief” of Helgi is not so clearly defined. In fact, the land that Þórr indicates to the character as place for the settlement turns out to be a poor land. Furthermore, Helgi’s son mocks him because of his belief. The faith in the pagan god is therefore perceived as an handicap, so much that in the end of his story Helgi is said to have become a true Christian: “Helgi believed in Christ and for that reason he named his farm for Him (*Helgi trúði á Krist ok kenndi því við hann bústað sinn.*)

⁶⁸ De Vries (1957:147).

2. Þórr in *Gautreks saga*

Gautreks saga is a saga belonging to the genre of *fornaldarsögur* that has come down to us in two versions, one longer and one shorter. The date of composition of the saga is not sure, but it is generally considered to have been composed in the 13th century⁶⁹. The main problem concerning the dating of the work is that only one medieval fragment (AM 567, XIV γ, 4^o; 15th c.) of the shorter version of the saga has come down to us, while the witnesses of the longer version are later⁷⁰. In fact, the oldest manuscript we have of the longer version dates to the first quarter of the 16th century⁷¹. As far as the existence of two different versions is concerned⁷², the shorter version seems not only to be older than the longer version, but also the basis for the latter⁷³. However, as Bampi (2006:70) points out, this assumption is nonetheless not shared by all scholars, but in any case it is undeniable that strong differences exist between the two versions of the saga. The most evident one is the presence in the long version of the *Víkars þáttr*⁷⁴, the section of the texts that interests me the most in this work, since it contains the narration of Starkaðr's adventures and its relationship with Þórr. The *Víkars þáttr* is to be considered a story within the story, for it deals with characters and events that are hardly mentioned within the main frame of the narration. Furthermore, the *Víkars þáttr* contains the *Víkarsbálkr*, a poetic version of the prose text itself⁷⁵. That is to say, "Die Sage von Starkaðr und Víkarr wird darin doppelt dargestellt, in Prosa und

⁶⁹ Ranisch (1900: CVI-CIX). Olrik (1910:204) dates it to the 13th or 14th century (Bampi 2006:89).

⁷⁰ Bampi (2006:89).

⁷¹ Ranisch (1900) dates this manuscript, AM 152, fol., to the 15th century, but further studies have proved it to be more recent (Bampi 2005:72, footnote 18).

⁷² For an exhaustive treatment of this theme, see Ranisch (1900:I-XL).

⁷³ The same happens with respect to *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, to which *Gautreks saga* has often been associated and of which it might be a sort of introduction, as has been proposed by Ranisch (1900). Even from the point of view of the manuscript tradition, the two sagas are closely bound together, since they are preserved in the same codices. Also *Hrólfs saga* has come down to us in two versions. In the manuscript tradition, the shorter version of *Gautreks saga* precedes the shorter version of *Hrólfs saga*, and the longer version of *Gautreks saga* precedes the longer version of *Hrólfs saga*. Nonetheless, *Hrólfs saga* seems to be an independent product with respect to *Gautreks saga*, but the same argument cannot be applied to *Gautreks saga* which, as has been said before, probably works as an introduction to *Hrólfs saga* (Ranisch 1900:XIX).

⁷⁴ Ranisch (1900:LXXXIII).

⁷⁵ As far as the chronological relationship between the two versions is concerned, the poetic stanzas are to be considered older than the prose text (Bampi 2006:89).

in Strophen”⁷⁶. Ranisch (1900:LXXXV) defines this poetic section as a “Starkaðslied”, for in the story it is presented as a composition by the hero Starkaðr, consisting of 24 stanzas. *Víkarsbálkr* is to be dated to the end of the 11th century and it is said to have been added to the saga in the 13th century⁷⁷.

The story transmitted in *Gautreks saga* begins with the adventure of king Gauti of western Götland (*Vestra-Gautlandi*), who gets lost in a forest during a heating. There he meets a strange family whose members are all mad apart from one of the daughters, Snotra, with whom the king generates a son, Gautrek. The child, who is born in the farm in the forest, is later brought to the court of the king by the mother, where Gauti welcomes them and keeps them under his protection. Gautrek becomes king after his father’s death and is honored as a great hero of Scandinavia. Within the main narration another episode is inserted, i.e. the story of the hero Starkaðr and of king Víkarr. Starkaðr is a descendant of the homonymous giant Starkaðr Áludrengr, who carried off a king’s daughter, Álfhilldr, and generated a son with her. Álfhilldr’s father, king Álf, called Þórr and asked him to rescue his daughter, which the god managed to do after killing the giant. Back to the court, Álfhilldr gave birth to the child of Starkaðr, Stórvirk, who, once he became adult, went to live on an island, but was also part of the retinue of Harald, king of Ögðum. Later Stórvirk acted like his father did, i.e. he carried off a young woman, Unn, daughter of earl Freki of Hálogaland, with whom he generated a child, Starkaðr. One night, the brothers of Unn secretly attacked and burnt the farm where Stórvirk and his family lived. All died except Starkaðr, who was therefore taken to the court of king Harald and grown as his son, thus becoming foster-son of Víkarr, the natural son of the king. After a series of adventures, both Víkarr and Starkaðr are imprisoned by some Vikings, and Starkaðr is taken as foster-son of one of them, Hrósshars-Grani. During a Viking expedition, the ship of Víkarr and Starkaðr encounters problems because of wrong wind, and is not able to go further. For this

⁷⁶ Ranisch (1900:LXXXIII).

⁷⁷ Ranisch (1900:CVI-CIX). It has to be specified that the *Víkarsbálkr* has not been inserted without being modified. In fact, according to Ranisch (1900:LXXXVII-LXXXVIII), eight stanzas (21-28) were added and some of the former existing ones were changed. It is however possible to assume that the reviser of the saga and the interpolator of the *bálkr* are the same person (Ranisch *ibidem*).

reason, the crew decides to undertake a divination ceremony in order to understand the will of the gods. It turns then out that Óðinn wants that one member of the crew is sacrificed to him, and the lot to decide who has to be killed gives as result Víkarr. Since everybody is shocked by this, it is decreed that an assembly of the counselors has to be organized in order to discuss of the matter. That night, Hrósshars-Grani wakes Starkaðr up and carries him on mainland where an assembly composed by eleven judges is taking place. When the two arrive, Hrósshars-Grani takes one of the seats and reveals himself as Óðinn. Then a crosstalk between him and Þórr begins, one of the gods blessing Starkaðr and the other cursing him. At the end of the meeting, Óðinn-Hrósshars-Grani, talking to his foster-son, tells him that as a reward for all the blessings that he has received, Starkaðr has to send him Víkarr, which means that the king has to be sacrificed. The hero obeys, but after killing the king he is hated by all the common people and has to emigrate from Norway. From now on the peregrinations of Starkaðr begin: his adventures entail many fights, in which he is always the winner but which cause him serious injuries⁷⁸.

Þórr appears only twice in the saga as an active character: when he kills Stórvirkr's father and when he curses Starkaðr during the assembly. He is also mentioned after the sacrifice of Víkarr, when Starkaðr is scorned by some men declaring that he is the reincarnation of another Starkaðr, a giant with many arms who had been killed by Þórr. In fact, the hero still carries on his back the signs of the superfluous arms of the grandfather, in a sort of inheritance of the monstrous characteristics. Finally, in a poem telling about the sacrifice of Víkarr, composed by Starkaðr himself and called, as it has already been shown, *Víkarsbálkr*, the hero identifies in Þórr the origin of all his evil deeds and misfortunes.

The brief interventions by Þórr in the plot of the saga are essential in order to comprehend the differences between the protagonists of the saga, i.e. Gautrekr and Starkaðr. Moreover, the actions of Þórr, as we are going to see, can be perfectly included in the general function that the god had not only in medieval Icelandic literature, but also in the heathen religion existing before the conversion to Christianity.

⁷⁸ This last part is actually very summarized in *Gautreks saga*, which can be taken as an evidence for the fact that the story that interested the most the saga-teller was concluded.

Let us now analyze the two scenes in which the god acts. In the first one, as said before, Þórr kills the father of Stórvirk, also named Starkaðr, a giant who had carried off Álfhilld, the daughter of king Álf. Although the princess was rescued by the god, the giant had begot a child on her, i.e. Stórvirk himself.

Stórvirk hét maðr; hann var sonr Starkaðar Áludrengs. Starkaðr var hundvís jötunn. Hann tók ór Álfheimum Álfhilldi, dóttur Álfs konungs. Álfr konungr hét þá á Þór, at Álfhilldr skyldi aptr koma. Þá drap Þórr Starkað, en flutti Álfhilldi heim til föður síns, ok var hun þá með barni. Hun fæddi son, þann er Stórvirk hét, er áðr er nefndr.⁷⁹

There was a man called Stórvirk; he was the son of Starkaðr Áludreng. Starkaðr was a very wise giant. He carried off Álfhilld, daughter of king Álf, from Álfheim. Then king Álf called Þórr and asked him to take Álfhilld back home. So Þórr killed Starkaðr, then carried Álfhilld back home to her father, and she was with child. She gave birth to a son who was called Stórvirk, who was already mentioned before.⁸⁰

The second moment in which Þórr appears is the assembly of the gods. Here, in a crosstalk with Óðinn, he curses Starkaðr, son of Stórvirk, while Óðinn blesses him.

Þá tók Þórr til orða ok mællti: "Álfhilldr, móðir föður Starkaðs, kaus föður at syni sínum hundvísan jötun helldr en Ásaþór, ok skapa ek þat Starkaði, at hann skal hvórki eiga son né dóttur ok enda svó ætt sína."

Óðinn svaraði: "Þat skapa ek honum, at hann skal lifa þrjá mannzaldra."

Þórr mællti: "Hann skal vinna níðingsverk á hverjum mannzaldri."

Óðinn svaraði: "Þat skapa ek honum, at hann skal eiga in beztu vópn ok vóðir."

Þórr mællti: "Þat skapa ek honum, at hann skal hvórki eiga land né láð."

⁷⁹ *Die Gautreks saga in zwei Fassungen* (1900:12;7-13)

⁸⁰ My translation.

Óðinn mællti: "Ek gef honum þat, at hann skal eiga of lausafjár."

Þórr mællti: "Þat legg ek á hann, at hann skal alldri þikjast nóg eiga."

Óðinn svaraði: "Ek gef honum sigr ok snilld at hverju vígi."

Þórr svaraði: "Þat legg ek á hann, at hann fái í hverju vígi meizlasár."

Óðinn mællti: "Ek gef honum skálldskap, svó at hann skal ei seinna yrkja en mæla."

Þórr mællti: "Hann skal ekki muna eptir þat er hann yrkir."

Óðinn mællti: "Þat skapa ek honum, at hann skal þikja hægtr enum göfguztum mönnum ok inum beztum."

Þórr mællti: "Leiðr skal hann alþýðu allri."

Þá dæmdu dómendr allt þetta á hendr Starkaði, er þeir höfðu um mællt, ok sleit svó þinginu. Fóru þeir Hrosshárs-Grani ok Starkaðr til báts síns.⁸¹

Then Þórr took the word and said: "Álfhildr, the mother of Starkaðr's father, preferred the very wise giant as father of his son rather than Ásapór, so I make that Starkaðr shall have neither sons nor daughters and that his family will end with him."

Óðinn answered: "So I'll make that he shall live three lives of men."

Þórr said: "He shall commit villainies in every life."

Óðinn answered: "I'll make that he shall have the best weapons and clothes."

Þórr said: "I'll make that he shall not possess neither land nor properties."

Óðinn said: "I'll make him this gift, that he shall have plenty of money."

Þórr said: "I ordain that he shall always take offence because he has not enough."

Óðinn answered: "I'll give him victory and skill in every battle."

Þórr answered: "I ordain this to him, that he shall suffer for injuries in every battle."

⁸¹ Taken from: Ranisch, *Die Gautreks saga in zwei Fassungen* (1900:28-29;25-20). I have preferred to divide graphically the statements of the dialogue in order to make the following discussion clearer.

Óðinn said: “I’ll give him the ability to compose poetry, so that he shall not make verses more slowly than he speaks.”

Þórr said: “Afterwards he shall not remember what he has composed.”

Óðinn said: “I’ll make this to him, that he will be considered in the highest way among the men of noble extraction and the best ones.”

Þórr said: “All the rest of the people shall dislike him.”

Then the judges decreed that all that they had talked about would happen to Starkaðr, and the assembly was ended. Hrosshárs-Grani and Starkaðr went back to their boat.⁸²

Because of the murder of Víkarr, Starkaðr is hated by all common people and has to leave Norway and flee to Sweden. He moves to Uppsala where the kings Alrekr and Erik welcome him and invite him to tell his story. Starkaðr then composes the poem called *Víkarsbálkr*, in which he narrates his life as a member of the retinue of Víkarr until the moment in which he sacrificed the king. The most interesting stanzas for the purposes of the present discussion are the following⁸³ :

31. Þess eyrindis, (18)

at Þórr um skóp

mér níðings nafn

nauð margs konar;

hlaut ek óhróðigr

illt at vinna.

This happened,

that Þórr made me a villain

⁸² My translation.

⁸³ These stanzas, as well as the parts of the prose text considered so far, are taken from the edition by Ranisch, *The Gaureks saga in zwei Fassungen* (1900:31-33). The number before the first verse of each stanza is the number of the stanza itself with respect to all the poetic sections of the saga. The number in brackets is the number of the stanza with respect to the beginning of the *Víkarsbálkr*.

and gave me misfortunes of any kind;
I was led to gain bad reputation.⁸⁴

36. Sjá þikjast þeir (23)

á sjálfum mér
jötunkuml
átta handa,
er Hlórriði
fyr hamar norðan
Hergrímsbana
höndum rænti.

They said
that they could see on myself
the signs of the giant's eight hands,
that Hlórriði
robbed to the slayer of Hergrím
north of the mountains.⁸⁵

By analyzing the parts of the text that we have taken into consideration, it is inferable that Þórr is identified as the main opponent with respect to the hero. First of all, the god kills Starkaðr's grandfather, an action that does not directly affect the protagonist, but which is nonetheless a violent deed concerning his family. Secondly, and most importantly, Þórr is responsible for all Starkaðr's misfortunes. In fact, the hero indicates the god and his curses as the origin of his reputation of criminal. This all is made worse by the fact that apparently Þórr had no reason to punish Starkaðr by cursing him. The god actually says that the cause of the hatred he feels for the warrior is to be

⁸⁴ My translation.

⁸⁵ My translation.

found in the behavior of his grandmother, Álfhild, who preferred a giant instead of Þórr himself as father of his son. In the saga there is no mention of any particular relationship between the princess and the god. According to the story, they meet for the first time when Þórr rescues her at the request of king Álf, and there is no reason to presume that they were lovers or betrothed. The question that arises is consequently the following: why does Þórr curse Starkaðr?

Dumézil (1971:109-113), who, as said before, has concentrated his attention on the detection of common traits among the different Indo-European literary traditions, has tried to explain the problem of the behavior of Þórr with respect to Starkaðr by comparing the text of *Gautreks saga* with an Indian legend, which tells the story of the giant Śísupāla and the god Kṛṣṇa who fight for the same woman, Rukmiṇī. The giant takes the woman with her consent and begets a child with her, but the god kills the rival and brings Rukmiṇī back to her father. Kṛṣṇa is however offended by the fact that the woman has preferred a giant to him, so he curses their grandson by punishing him with sterility. The similarities between this story and the one narrated in *Gautreks saga* have led Dumézil to suggest that the version transmitted by the Indian legend is the complete one, thus demonstrating that Þórr, here compared to Kṛṣṇa, is the protagonist of a romantic affair concerning the fight for a woman.

Although the common traits of the two stories are relevant and the hypothesis of an Indo-European origin of the legends is fascinating, the accuracy of the studies of Dumézil has been questioned⁸⁶. Furthermore, it is unlikely that a saga that has been written in the 13th century still reflects a four-thousand years old story.

Another proposal has been made by Milroy (1974-1977:134, footnote 25), who stresses the fact the Starkaðr's father's name, i.e. Stórvirkr, is connected to the figure of Þórr, whose deeds are often described as *stórvirkr*⁸⁷. This issue would suggest that Þórr and Starkaðr are bound by a blood-relation, and that consequently:

The enmity of Þórr towards Starkaðr may be explained as “Freudian” jealousy of father of son, which is common enough in myth and folklore.

⁸⁶ Cfr. footnote 19 on page 6.

⁸⁷ *Snorra Edda* 29, 55

Even if this idea is fascinating, I think that it is a too pretentious, and that the reason adduced by Þórr, i.e. that he hates Starkaðr because Álfhildr has preferred his grandfather to the god, may be the trace of a tradition which we are not aware of, for it has not been transmitted in any written source. Apart from the specific topic regarding Þórr's motivation for this hostile feeling toward Starkaðr, I believe that the real reason for this enmity between the two characters is to be searched in the functions of Þórr, which are connected to the figure of the woman and of giants.

Recent studies by Clunies Ross (1994a and 1994b) pointed out the role that the god had in the Scandinavian myth with respect to the feminine gender. By analyzing some sources for the figure of Þórr preserved in *Snorra Edda*, in skaldic poetry and in the *Poetic Edda*⁸⁸, Clunies Ross suggests that the function of Þórr in these myths is that of preserving women's honor, which is usually connected with the sexual sphere and on which the god's own honor is often dependent. According to Clunies Ross (1994b:50), this issue reflects some aspects of the Scandinavian and Icelandic society, in which:

A violation of a woman's sexual integrity is thought to reflect directly upon the honour of the man who is her guardian.

Þórr is therefore often involved in situations regarding the protection of women, who are often desired by supernatural beings other than gods, i.e. by dwarves (e.g. in *Alvíssmál*) and, above all, by giants⁸⁹. The theme of the giant trying to abduct or at least to take possession of the goddesses is a constant feature in Norse myth, a topic that needs to be briefly analyzed, since it is very useful in order to understand the function of Þórr in *Gautreks saga*.

The giants are often present in the narrations of gods' adventures. In fact, although they live outside the world inhabited by divinities and men, they often come in contact with them. In most of cases they are antagonists of the Æsir and they are characterized with negative features⁹⁰, but sometimes they are even said to be strong

⁸⁸In particular, *Alvíssmál*, *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna* (*Poetic Edda*), some sections of *Skáldskaparmál* often quoting skaldic poems, *Ragnarsdrápa* (Clunies Ross 1994a:51-56).

⁸⁹In the episode of the giant Hrugnir narrated in *Skáldskaparmál* 3, Þórr is evoked to contrast the monster in his intent of destroying the Vallhöll and of carrying the goddesses off.

⁹⁰In *Gylfaginning* 5 it is said that the kin of giants is wicked. Some of the monsters threatening the world, e.g. the wolves hunting the sun and the moon (*Gylfaginning* 12), are children of giants. Furthermore, the

and wise⁹¹. The giants present an interesting peculiarity: they belong to the kin of the Æsir. This might be surprising, as it is well known that a strong antagonism exists between giants and gods. But the facts are more complicated and they have not only a religious and mythical importance, but are also meaningful from a literary and social perspective⁹².

The common descent of gods and giants has its origin in the first moments of the world, when the first man-like being, Búri, was licked from a stone by the cow Auðhumbla. Búri generated Borr with a non-defined female character, and Borr begot his three sons Óðinn, Vili and Vé with a giants' daughter, Bestla⁹³. There are other examples of similar contacts between Æsir and giants. Þórr generates his son Magni with a giantess called Járnsaxa⁹⁴. Moreover, Þórr himself is son of Óðinn and the giantess Jörd, as we have seen in the first chapter. This means that the most important gods in Norse mythology are strongly related with the supernatural beings that are their principal enemies. Another central god, at least for his constant presence in many stories, belongs to the kin of giants: Loki. This is a mythic character who is considered one of the Æsir, but has an ambiguous behavior that characterizes him sometimes as an ally and other times as an opponent of the gods. The ambiguity of the character is also noticeable in his doubtful belonging to the group of the Æsir. In *Skáldskaparmál* 1 he is said to be one of the 12 gods on the high-seat in Ásgarðr, but also that he is “counted with gods” (*taldr með Ásum*⁹⁵), a definition that is used only for beings who do not completely belong to the divine kin (other examples are Jörð and Rindr)⁹⁶. This feature deeply characterizes Loki and is a consequence of his ascendance.⁹⁷ Loki is son of the

children of Loki and the giantess Angrboða are the wolf Fenrir, killer of Óðinn during Ragnarök, the goddess of hell Hel and the Miðgarðsormr, Þórr's main enemy (*Gylfaginning* 34).

⁹¹ For instance, in the Eddic lay known as *Vafþrúðnismál*, Óðinn and the wise giant Vafþrúðnir challenge each other's knowledge of the world. Even in *Gautreks saga* it is said that Starkaðr Áludrengr is a *hundvíss jötunn*.

⁹² In particular, Clunies Ross (1994a) and Meulengracht-Sørensen (1989) have examined the connection between the relationships between gods and giants in literary fiction and the social environment in which these cultural products circulated.

⁹³ This myth is narrated in *Gylfaginning* 6-7, *Snorra Edda*.

⁹⁴ *Skáldskaparmál* 3, *Snorra Edda*.

⁹⁵ *Gylfaginning* 19.

⁹⁶ Meulengracht-Sørensen (1989:152).

⁹⁷ Meulengracht-Sørensen (1989:152).

goddess Laufey⁹⁸ and of a giant named Fárbaúti⁹⁹. The fact that he is related to the kin of giants would make him similar to the Æsir, but this similarity is only apparent. In fact, there is a huge difference between the origin of Loki and that one of Óðinn and Þórr: the two mighty gods have a human-like father (Borr in the case of Óðinn and Óðinn himself in the case of Þórr) and a giant mother, while Loki has a giant father and a mother who presumably belongs to the family of the Æsir. This difference has meaningful consequences in the whole Norse myth and reflects somehow the mentality and the rules of the Medieval Icelandic society. According to Meulengracht-Sorensen (1989), the relationships between giants and Æsir are to be considered as “extreme exogamy”, that is to say, a sexual contact between members of the social world, identified in Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr, and the “outside” world, Útgarðr. After Borr and Bestla, male gods marry Ásynjur, but the sexual contact with lower-ranking classes as that of giants is not prohibited. There are often cases in which the Æsir take giant mistresses.

The opposite type of contact, i.e. the one between a male member of a lower-ranking class and a goddess, is strictly prohibited. The fact that the giants belong to the same kin of the gods and that the Æsir are free to take giant mistresses should, at first sight, make it possible for the giants to take a Ásynja as wife. This kind of mutual contract is nonetheless not contemplated, and this is the main reason why gods and giants are in contrast. In order to maintain their social position, which is the highest among all beings in the mythic world, the Æsir have to exercise a strong control over the other classes, and a way to do this is to have privileges and make them prevail on

⁹⁸ It is not sure that Laufey is a member of the kin of the Æsir. She is mentioned only in *Snorra Edda*, but no more information is given. Meulengracht-Sørensen (1989:152-153), in order to make his theory work, postulates that she should belong to the gods’ family. According to the scholar, “[...] several traits support this conjecture. The name Laufey itself could scarcely have had negative associations in Snorri’s time. It seems, true enough, not to have been used as a woman’s name in the Middle Ages, but it may well have had a ring and status in common with Bjargey, Bótey, Þórey, etc. an important clue is provided by the fact that Loki is identified by the matronymic Laufeyjarson (*Gylfag.* 25,33,35; *Skáldsk.* 44). This shows that he grew up in his mother’s home and that she lived in another place than did his father, presumably among the Æsir. The pattern is reinforced by *Lokasenna* 9, where Loki says that he has mingled his blood with Óðinn’s. They are thus foster-brothers.” Even if, in my opinion, this attempt of explanation is not totally convincing, it is possible neither to confirm it nor to prove it wrong, therefore in the following discussion I will accept this hypothesis, since it is suitable and sufficient for the purposes of my work.

⁹⁹ Meulengracht-Sørensen translates it with „he who causes misfortune by thrusting“, an expression that should be connected with a sexual characteristic (see Meulengracht-Sørensen 1989:152 for the discussion on this aspect).

the low-ranking beings. As the mythic literature is always god-centered, the disparity of the classes is justified as necessary to keep the social order. For this reason, among all the features characterizing the giants, the one concerning their genealogy, and thus their strong relationships with the kin of the gods, is de-emphasized. This is made possible by the presence of another important factor: the gods are genealogically connected with the giants in the female line. In fact, the Æsir descend from man-like males (Búri and Borr) and giantesses (Bestla), and in sometimes the female generatrix is not even mentioned, as it is the case for the unknown partner of Búri. The de-emphasis of the matrikin is central in order to understand the complex relationships existing among the gods and the rest of the supernatural beings. In fact, as Clunies Ross (1994a:57) puts it:

If the matrikin had been equally valued, it would have not been possible to construct a system of social inequality in which the Æsir were justified in withholding their women from the giants as marriage partners on the implicit ground of their lower status.

It is now clear how, even if giants and gods belong to the same kin, this fact is neglected most of the times. The possibility for the Æsir to take mistresses from the giantland and to have children with them is implicit, as it is implicit that it is prohibited for the giants to have sexual relationships with a member of an upper class. The gods, and especially Þórr, have the task to prevent this from happening. Their efforts are though not always successful, which is an aspect that has important consequences for their own doom and for the fate of the world. A clear example in this sense is the case of Loki. As we have seen, he is son of a giant and presumably of a Ásynja, Laufey, and this ascendance represents a danger for the gods. In fact, Óðinn, Vili and Vé killed most of their mother's family, that is to say giants. If Loki would behave the same way, he would be supposed to kill the Æsir, i.e. his mother's family. To avoid this misfortune, the gods decide to take Loki and make him become one of them. As is well known, they fail.¹⁰⁰ Even if it is not rare that Loki helps the gods in their affairs, he remains one of their main opponents; in fact, he will be one of the causes of their end. In ragnarök he and his monstrous children will fight against the Æsir in the final battle of the world. The example of Loki, in comparison with the aspect of the origin of the gods, implies an important issue: the positive and legitimate union between a male god and a giantess is

¹⁰⁰ Meulengracht-Sørensen (1989:153).

bound to the origin of the world; the opposite contact, i.e. the one between a male giant and a goddess is linked to destructive forces. Both cases imply extreme exogamy, but the opposition between legitimate and illegitimate contact has evidently very different consequences.¹⁰¹

This complex system of relationships between gods and giants can be successfully applied to the situation described in *Gautreks saga* as far as the conflict between Þórr and the giant Starkaðr, grandfather of the homonymous hero, is concerned. The theme is in fact the same: a giant abducts a woman belonging to the higher class of the society and begets a son with her; Þórr, the god that, quoting Clunies Ross (1994b:57), “secures the social and territorial boundaries of the divine world”, intervenes to rescue the princess and kills the abductor. By acting this way, the balances between gods and giants, i.e. between higher and lower social classes, are re-established. The function of Þórr as protector and controller of the stability of the relationships between gods and other beings is the reason why he is made intervene in the scene of *Gautreks saga*: nobody else could have played the role of opponent of a giant abducting a princess.

Another aspect to be considered is the fact that the hatred that Þórr feels for Starkaðr strengthens the negativity of this last character. This bad fame is not only due to the dreadful deeds the hero commits in his long life, but also to his social status, which has its origin in the relationship between a princess and a giant, an union that was considered totally inappropriate. The model that was approved is the one concerning the origins of the other protagonist of the saga, Gautrek. As we have seen, Gautrek too is the fruit of a union between two members of different levels of the society, i.e. king Gauti and the poor girl who lives in the forest. Nonetheless, this kind of union, as we have seen, was tolerated, and in fact it gives origin to a positive character, i.e. Gautrek. The whole saga can be therefore seen as an opposition of models of relationship between members of different classes of the society, i.e. between chieftains and leaders on one side and slaves on the other side. In this perspective, the role of Þórr is central

¹⁰¹ Meulengracht-Sørensen (1989:150).

within the narrative structure of the saga, for it underlines some aspects that are very important in order to understand the story as a whole.

The issues we have considered so far are a clear demonstration of how the functions of Þórr, which have their origin in the pagan tradition of Scandinavia, and in particular his role of defender of the social order, are utilized in late literary productions too. Anyway, this is not the only case in *Gautreks saga* where the characteristics of the god emerge. In fact, in the episode of the assembly of the gods in which Óðinn and Þórr dispute on the destiny of Starkaðr, the functions of both deities are highlighted. Let us analyze the scene.

The tribunal is composed by twelve members, only two of which are mentioned, that is to say Hrosshárs-Grani/Óðinn and Þórr. They are actually the only participants in the discussion, while the others are nothing more than audience, except for the last part of the scene, when they all ordain that what has been discussed shall happen to Starkaðr. The number twelve is in any case remarkable. Other sources account for this amount of heathen gods. For instance, the Eddic poem known as *Lokasenna* reports of twelve gods taking part in the banquet: namely they are Óðinn, Frigg, Sif, Bragi, Iðunn, Tyr, Njörðr, Skaði, Freyr, Freyja, Viðarr and Loki. Moreover, also in *Skáldskaparmál* 1 twelve Æsir participate in a banquet offered by Ægir; they are Þórr, Njörðr, Freyr, Týr, Heimdallr, Bragi, Víðarr, Váli, Ullr, Hœnir, Forseti and Loki. In this case, the Ásynjur are counted a part, and they are eight, namely Frigg, Freyja, Gefiun, Iðunn, Gerðr, Sigyn, Fulla and Nanna¹⁰². In the same episode it is told that the Æsir gather in council (*þa attu þeir æsir þing*¹⁰³) to discuss the disappearance of Iðunn and to accuse Loki for this event.¹⁰⁴ Another assembly of the gods, which here seems to have the function of a tribunal, is described in *Skáldskaparmál* 5, where Óðinn, Þórr and Freyr have to deliberate about the objects forged by the dwarves Eitri and Brokkr ([...] *þa settvz æsirnir adomstola, ok skyldi þat atqvæpi standaz sem segþi Óþinn, Þor, Freyr*¹⁰⁵). In conclusion, in *Völuspá* (6, 9, 23, 25) the gods gather in counsel in order to discuss about issues concerning the creation of the world (*þá gingu regin öll á rökstóla , ginnheilög goð, ok gættusk of þat*

¹⁰² *Edda, Skáldskaparmál* (2008: ch.1, p.127).

¹⁰³ *Snorra Edda, Skáldskaparmál* (1931: ch.3, p.80).

¹⁰⁴ *Edda* (2008: ch.1, p.129).

¹⁰⁵ *Snorra Edda, Skáldskaparmál* (1931: ch.5, p.122).

[...] ¹⁰⁶). It is therefore clear that the theme of the assembly of the gods is often recurrent in Old Norse literature, and Bampi (2006:95) does not exclude that the author of the saga could have been influenced by Eddic poetry. Even the motif of the crosstalk between Þórr and Óðinn could be based on the *Poetic Edda*, and in particular on *Hárbarðsljóð*, in which:

the two god engage in a verbal duel that puts on stage some of the characteristics of their relation that are depicted in the saga as well. ¹⁰⁷

Going back to the assembly described in *Gautreks saga*, Þórr is the first to speak, declaring the reasons of his hatred towards Starkaðr and condemning him not to have children, thus erasing the possibility for him to give a continuation to his kin. This curse, as it is clear, enters the field of fertility, and, precisely for this reason, it is uttered by Þórr. As we have seen, this deity, besides the role of warrior and protector of men and gods, had also the function of god of fertility, not only of fields but also of humans.

After this curse by Þórr, Óðinn takes the initiative and blesses Starkaðr with a very long life, corresponding to three spans of men's life. Þórr replies that the hero shall commit dreadful deeds (*níðingsverk*) in every part of his existence. As pointed out by Dolfini (2008:181, ch. 3, note 2),

Essere considerato un “níðhingr” è per la morale germanica l'offesa più grave e infamante. Così per es. nelle leggi longobarde (Editto di Rotari, 381: Si quis alium *arga*...clamaverit...) l'accusa infondata di vigliaccheria è severamente punita.

We are not aware of all terrible actions that Starkaðr did, for, as we have seen, in *Gautreks saga* the narration of the life of the hero ends with a non-detailed summary of the adventures of Starkaðr after the killing of king Víkarr. However, this last deed is to be considered a betrayal towards one's own lord, an action that in the Germanic culture

¹⁰⁶ *De gamle Eddadigte* (1932:3).

¹⁰⁷ Bampi (2006:95).

is severely disapproved¹⁰⁸. Moreover, the murder of the king appears even more dreadful if we consider that the relationship between Starkaðr and Víkarr is of particular importance. In fact, the two characters meet because Starkaðr, being orphan after the slaying of his family, is adopted by Harald, father of Víkarr, thus becoming his foster-brother. By killing the king, Starkaðr does not only betray his lord, but also a member of his family. As it is confirmed in a prose section of *Gautreks saga* that is inserted between the stanzas 34 and 35 of *Víkarsbálkr*:

Pát má finna á Staraði, at honum þikir þetta eitthvert verk sitt vest ok óskapligazt orðit hafa, er hann drap Víkar konung [...].¹⁰⁹

This can be said about Starkaðr, that he thought that this deed, that of killing king Víkarr, was the worst and most awful thing he ever did.¹¹⁰

Anyway, we should not forget that the murder of Víkarr is the consequence of a decision by lot to understand the will of the gods and get fair wind for navigation during a Viking expedition. Nonetheless, the sacrifice should have been fake, and it is Starkaðr who turns it into a real homicide in order to accomplish the promise he had made to Óðinn, who, during the assembly of the gods, had bestowed many gifts upon the hero. However, what is interesting is the point of view of the hero, who firmly thinks that Þórr is the only responsible for his criminal deeds and therefore for his bad reputation¹¹¹. Of course, it is Þórr who curses him, but it should not be forgotten that it is Óðinn who asks Starkaðr to send him the king, thus becoming the effective cause of his *níðingsverk*¹¹². Anyway, in the frame of the story the responsibility of Óðinn does not seem to have a great significance, thus confirming once more that Þórr is the only real divine opponent of Starkaðr.

¹⁰⁸ The importance of the relationship between warrior and leader is visible already in ancient times, when it was considered a dishonor for a soldier to survive if the master had fallen, as it is told in Tacitus' *Germania* (chapt. 14).

¹⁰⁹ *Die Gautreks saga in zwei Fassungen* (1900:32).

¹¹⁰ My translation.

¹¹¹ See stanza 31 reported on page 22.

¹¹² To this end, an interesting stimulus of reflection is given by Dumézil (1971:28). According to the scholar, the sacrifice to Óðinn was not originally perceived as a crime. On the contrary, it was considered as a big honor, as well as dying in battle. The victim was in fact allowed to enter the Valhöll, thus becoming one of the Einherjar and participating in banquets and feasts. However, *Gautreks saga* was composed in Christian times, so it is unlikely that a murder of this kind would have considered an honor by the audience of that period and by the redactor himself.

The next series of curses and blessings concerns property and goods. Óðinn furnishes Starkaðr with the best of weapons, clothes and with money, while Þórr condemns him to have neither land nor properties and not to be satisfied with what he owns. At least as far as the theme of money is concerned, the blessing of Óðinn is openly in contrast with stanza 32 of *Víkarbálkr*:

Þaðan vappaða ek
villtar brautir,
hörðum leiðr,
með huga illan,
hringa vanr
ok hróðrkvæða,
dróttinlauss,
dapr allz hugar.¹¹³

From there I wandered
astray and far away
with ill temper,
without gold
and poems,
without a lord,
all my thoughts were sad.¹¹⁴

In this stanza, it is clearly pointed out that Starkaðr is without gold, a feature that completely contradicts what Óðinn has bestowed upon him. It is not easy to provide a sure interpretation of this issue. Maybe this lack of gold is to be understood as a manifestation of greed, so that Starkaðr is so unsatisfied with the money he owns that he thinks he is poor, thus accomplishing Þórr's curse. Or, maybe, this blessing by Óðinn is

¹¹³ *Die Gautreks saga in zwei Fassungen* (1900:32).

¹¹⁴ My translation.

an invention by the redactor of the saga. In fact, since the god is often associated to nobility, and consequently to gold and richness, it could be supposed that the *sögnmaðr* thought that a blessing concerning money had to be inserted and connected to Óðinn, thus not realizing that such an issue would have clearly contradicted what is reported in *Víkarsbálkr*.

Anyway, the considerations that can be made on this topic are twofold. On one hand, this debate seems to reflect somehow the rivalry existing between Þórr and Óðinn, which is made explicit in the Eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*, and above all in stanza 6, where Óðinn tells Þórr:

Þeygi es sem þú
þríu bú góð eigir;
berþeinn þú stendr
ok hefr brautinga görvi.
(þatki at þú hafir brœkr þínar).¹¹⁵

Thou dost not look like one
who owns three country dwellings,
bare-legged thou standest,
and like a beggar clothed;
thou hast not
even breeches.¹¹⁶

Even if here nothing about weapons is told, the correspondence between the section of *Gautreks saga* and this stanza is remarkable. Óðinn, the god that represents nobility and its wealth, laughs at Þórr for his wretched look, thus implicitly affirming that he is more similar to a servant than to a landowner. The different functions of the gods are thus clear: as it is told in the same poem in the already quoted stanza (*Hárbarðsljóð* 24), Óðinn is associated to noble men, while Þórr to servants and poor

¹¹⁵ *De gamle Eddadigte* (1932:83).

¹¹⁶ www.gutenberg.org :

<http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1496941&pageno=52>.

people. It is however interesting to notice that, in *Gautreks saga*, Óðinn, by giving Starkaðr good clothes, tries to make the hero become similar to himself and different from Þórr. The aim of Þórr's efforts, on the contrary, is that of making Starkaðr dissimilar to himself by condemning him not to have land (while, as reported above, Þórr is said to own *þríu bú góð*) and to be always unsatisfied with his possessions. This leads us to the second aspect, which is connected to the characteristics of giants. These supernatural beings are in fact said to be very wealthy. The giant Þiazi owns a big amount of gold¹¹⁷ (*hann var mioc gvllapigr*¹¹⁸). In *Þrymskviða* 23 Þrymr says:

Fjölð ák meidma,
Fjölð ák menja,
Einnar mér Freyju
Ávant þykkir.¹¹⁹

Treasures I have many,
necklaces many,
Freyja alone
seemed to me wanting.¹²⁰

The giants are therefore wealthy, but they are not satisfied with what they have and they desire more. More precisely, they long for the women of the Æsir, a feature that, as we have seen, is the origin of the eternal contrast between the two classes of supernatural beings. The curse of Þórr towards Starkaðr condemns him to be even more similar to giants than he still is because of his belonging to their kin. Consequently, this further connection to giants strengthens the hostility between the hero and the god.

¹¹⁷ *Edda, Skáldskaparmál* 1 (2008:130).

¹¹⁸ *Snorra Edda, Skáldskaparmál* (1931: ch.4, p.81).

¹¹⁹ *De gamle Eddadigte* (1932:118).

¹²⁰ www.gutenberg.org :

<http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=1496941&pageno=47>.

The next blessing and the following curse regards the military sphere. Óðinn assures to Starkaðr success and glory in every battle, but Þórr replies that the hero will suffer great injuries in every fight. Once again, the sudden ending of Starkaðr's story as it is presented in *Gautreks saga* does not let us understand whether this curse was fulfilled or not. We only know that:

fór hann víða um lönd ok framdi orrostur ok einvígi ok hafði jafnan sigr [...] ¹²¹

he travelled through many lands and fought many battles and duels, and he always won [...] ¹²²

As far as the functions of the gods with respect to this couple of curses and blessings are concerned, it can be assumed that both Óðinn and Þórr are, to a certain extent, gods connected to war aspects. But the difference between them is however visible: while Óðinn reflects the positive aspects of the life of a warrior, i.e. victory and fame, Þórr seems to embody the negative features of war, i.e. pain and wounds. In this passage of text, the two deities together offer the complete frame of the military life: perspective of success and glory that however has to be conquered with sufferance. Moreover, these two aspects reflect somehow also social issues connected with war: in battle, both leaders, i.e. the upper class of the society, and common warriors risk their lives and suffer for injuries, but eventually only the formers are remembered and glorified, while the latter are soon forgotten. Once again, it can be confirmed that Óðinn represents the upper social classes, while Þórr is closer to humble and poor people.

Poetry is the topic of the next blessing by Óðinn. The god gives the hero the ability of composing poems without any difficulty. Óðinn is actually the principal god of knowledge, magic and poetry ¹²³, and he is also connected with memory: the name of one of his birds is in fact “Muninn”, which means mind, memory ¹²⁴. Þórr, on the

¹²¹ *Die Gautrekssaga in zwei Fassungen* (1900:34).

¹²² My translation.

¹²³ Molinari (1987:28).

¹²⁴ Cleasby, Vigfusson (1957:438).

contrary, seems not to have any kind of link neither with poetry nor with memory. Probably here it is the function of Óðinn that prevails, while Þórr's role is simply that of reducing and contrasting the positive effects of the blessing. The skill of composing poetry is immediately shown by Starkaðr, who after very short time recites the *Vikarsbálkr*. However, in this poem he defines himself “a man without poetry”¹²⁵, thus contradicting what he is doing at the same time, i.e. reciting a poem. Probably this is a hint of the fact that afterwards he will be not able to remember what he has composed, thus fulfilling the curse by Þórr.

Finally we come to the last couple of blessing and curses, the one in which some of the topics that have been considered so far are included and summarized. Óðinn promises Starkaðr that he will have a good fame among the noble, who are defined as the best members of the society (*göfguztum mönnum ok inum beztum*), while Þórr assures the hero that he will be hated by all common people. This is therefore the explicit reference to the opposite functions that the two gods have and that have been hidden and implicit in most of the other blessings and curses: Óðinn is promoted the god of nobility, while Þórr is the god of common people¹²⁶. The narration of Starkaðr's adventures in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* gives other interesting inputs on this topic, therefore we will return on this theme in the following chapters.

In conclusion, let us briefly comment on the episode of *Gautreks saga* in which twelve *berserkr* laugh at Starkaðr by accusing him of being a traitor and the reincarnation of a giant¹²⁷, the killer of Hergrím. They also say that they can still see on him the scars of the superfluous arms his ancestor had and that were torn off by Þórr.¹²⁸ There are not other mentions of this in *Gautreks saga*, but, as we will see, the theme of the exceeding arms torn off by Þórr is reported in *Gesta Danorum*, while the epithet “killer of Hergrím” can be explained by considering the beginning of the *U redaction of *Heiðreks saga*, where a eight-armed giant called Starkaðr kills a character whose

¹²⁵ Cfr. stanza 32 reported on page 33.

¹²⁶ As far as this aspect is concerned, it should be kept in mind that the Nordic religion was not uniform. On the contrary, the gods were worshipped differently with respect to the various areas. For instance, the central position occupied by the statue of Þórr in the pagan temple of Uppsala evidences the importance of this god for the whole society of that environment, and not only for the lower classes.

¹²⁷ [...] *en berserkir kölluðu hann endrborinn jötun ok niðing* [...]. (*Die Gautrekssaga in zwei Fassungen* 1900:32-33).

¹²⁸ See stanza 36 of *Vikarbálkr* reported above.

name is Hergrím and then is slewed by Þórr. We will return later on this topic. For the moment, it is interesting to notice that evidently *Víkarsbálkr* shows a connection with a tradition regarding the figure of Starkaðr that has not been meticulously followed in *Gautreks saga*, at least as far its prose sections is concerned. Milroy (1974-1977:133) has pointed out that this omission is actually intentional and is part of a plan of rationalization of the character of Starkaðr. According to the scholar, the issue of the exceeding arms would have been too weird to be believed and reported. For this reasons, the medieval redactor(s) of *Gautreks saga* would have substituted the mutilation of Starkaðr with the killing of his ancestor. *Víkarsbálkr*, which is older than the prose text¹²⁹, has maintained the original version. I can neither confirm nor contradict the proposal by Milroy; anyway, this does not concern the function of Þórr in the saga, which is that of putting obstacles in the way of Starkaðr: he kills one of the ancestors of the hero, he curses him and contrasts the blessings that Óðinn bestows upon him, thus condemning him not to have a descent, land and properties, to be hated and considered a *níðing* by the common people, to be greedy. All these issues, which reflect the role that the god had in heathen religion, have a common goal, i.e. to strengthen the giant nature of Starkaðr, thus augmenting the rivalry existing between him and Þórr, the fighter of giants *par excellence*. The whole demonization of the hero is to be intended in a wider frame, whose aim is that of showing Gautrek, the other protagonist of the story, as a model to follow, while Starkaðr, whose guilt is that of being the fruit of a union that is disapproved by the society, is even more characterized by negative features. However, Milroy (1974-1977:134) has argued that the origin of Starkaðr is not only characterized by features connected to darkness and wilderness. His grandmother is in fact Álfhilldr, who comes from Álfheimar, the land of the elves, supernatural beings linked to light¹³⁰. Starkaðr seems therefore to carry on himself both light and darkness, but, since he is essentially presented as a negative character, it can be assumed that in his case the aspects connected to the dark, i.e. his giant ancestors, have taken advantage on the positive features of his ascendance.

¹²⁹ However, as was put into relevance above (note 76 on page 18), some of the stanzas composing *Víkarsbálkr* were added afterwards with respect to the others.

¹³⁰ Although even dark elves exist (Scardigli 2004:343), this seems not to be the case of Álfhilldr, who belongs to nobility.

3. Þórr in *Gesta Danorum*

Despite the dubious historical accuracy of this work¹³¹, the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus is an essential source for the Nordic tradition. Consisting of 16 books composed presumably between 1185 and 1216¹³², this wide work presents the history of the Danish people from the pre-Christian era up to the end of the 12th century. The first nine books are usually considered as an epic narration of a far and mythical past, while the following ones deal with a historical period that is closer to Saxo's times.

Starcatheurs¹³³, is one of the main characters of the first part of the work, i.e. the first nine books dealing with the most ancient history of Denmark. The hero appears, even if often only briefly, in no less than three books, i.e. VI, VII and VIII, so that his whole long life is narrated, thus making *Gesta Danorum* the most complete source about Starcatherus' life. While in fact *Gautreks saga* only informs us about the origins, the childhood, the first deeds of the hero until few episodes after the killing of king Víkarr, Saxo goes further and presents the whole adventures of Starcatherus, concluding with his death.

Starcatherus is introduced at the beginning of book VI¹³⁴ and he is presented as a Viking who has escaped to death after a shipwreck while the rest of the crew has died. He is welcomed to the court of king Frothi "on account of his wonderful pre-eminence of mind and body"^{135 136}. He is not in fact a common warrior, on the contrary he is incredibly strong and brave, which makes him famous and respected in the whole

¹³¹ Ellis Davidson (1980). According to her, the work by Saxo, and especially the first nine books dealing with the legendary past of Scandinavia, has often been considered as not much historically reliable, not only because it presents fantastic creatures and unrealistic situations, but also because it seems to be a confused mixture of many different kinds of written and oral traditions, which seem to have been collected in a very uncritical way (Ellis Davidson 1980:1-2). However, recent researches have evidenced the artistic purposes of Saxo instead of his historical accuracy, so that the scholar aimed to "give a model of the world as he saw it" rather than being historically accurate. (Ellis Davidson 1980:5).

¹³² Ellis Davidson (1980:12).

¹³³ Although *Gautreks saga* and the *Gesta Danorum* tell evidently the story of the same hero, from now on, in order to make the discussion clearer, I will refer to the character of the saga by calling him „Starkaðr“ and to the hero of the *Gesta* with the name „Starcatherus“.

¹³⁴ *Gesta Danorum* (1980:170).

¹³⁵ "ob incredibilem corporis animique praestantiam hospes a Frothone colligitur". Taken from the website of the Royal Library – National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library:<<http://wayback.kb.dk:8080/wayback-1.4.2/wayback/20100107153228/http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit/dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/6/5/index.htm>>.

¹³⁶ *Gesta Danorum* (*ibidem*).

North. At this point, Saxo informs us on the probable origins of the hero, although it is clear to him that most of the legends surrounding Starcatherus are not realistic and therefore not to be trusted.

[1] Hunc in ea regione, quae Suetiam ab Oriente complectitur quamque nunc Estonum aliarumque gentium numerosa barbaries latis sedibus tenet, originem duxisse memoriae proditum constat. [2] Fabulosa autem et vulgaris opinio quaedam super ipsius ortu rationi in consentanea atque a veri fide penitus aliena confinxit. [3] Tradunt enim quidam, quod a gigantibus editus monstruosi generis habitum inusitata manuum numerositate prodiderit, asseruntque Thor deum quattuor ex his affluentis naturae vitio procreatas, elisis nervorum compagibus, avulsisse atque ab integritate corporis prodigiales digitorum eruisse complexus, ita ut, duabus tantum relictis, corpus, quod ante in giganteae granditatis statum effluerat eiusque formam informi membrorum multitudine repraesentabat, postmodum meliore castigatum simulacro brevitatis humanae modulo caperetur.¹³⁷

Certainly it is recorded that he came from the region which borders eastern Sweden, that which contains the wide-flung dwellings of the Estlanders and other numerous savage hordes. But a common tale has been invented about his origin which is fictitious, unreasonable and downright incredible. For some folk tell how he was born of giants and revealed his monster kind by an extraordinary number of hands. They assert that the god Þórr broke the sinews which joined four of these superfluous extensions of freakish Nature and tore them off, plucking away the unnatural bunches of fingers from the body proper; with only two arms left, his frame, which before had run to a gigantic enormity and been shaped with a grotesque crowd of limbs, was afterwards corrected according to a better model and contained within the more limited dimensions of men.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ *Gesta Danorum* 6.5.2 (p. 151,30). Taken from the website of the Royal Library – National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library: <<http://wayback.kb.dk:8080/wayback-1.4.2/wayback/20100107153228/http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit/dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/6/5/index.htm>>

¹³⁸ *Gesta Danorum* (*ibidem*).

After that, Saxo opens a brief parenthesis in which he explains that those who in heathen times were considered as gods were in reality skilled magicians who, pretending to have supernatural powers, ended up being considered as divinities. After this short but meaningful excursus, the historian goes back to the main trail and tells the story of Starcatherus before his arrival to the court of king Frothi:

[1] Tradunt veteres Starcatherum (...) in Wicari Norvagiensium regis iugulo deorum favori facinorum suorum principia dedicasse, cuius rei tenor tali quorundam assertione contexitur: Volens quondam Othinus Wicarum funesto interire supplicio, cum id aperte exsequi nollet, Starcatherum, inusitata prius granditate conspicuum, non solum animi fortitudine, sed etiam condendorum carminum peritia illustravit, quo promptiore eius opera ad peragendum regis exitium uteretur. [2] Hanc quippe eum dignationi suae gratiam relaturum sperabat. [3] Quem etiam ob hoc ternis aetatis humanae curriculis donavit, ut in his totidem execrabiliu[m] operum auctor evaderet. [4] Adeo illi consequente flagitio vitae tempora proroganda constituit.

Qui mox Wicarum adiens inque eius aliquamdiu contubernio deversatus insidias obsequito texit. [2] Tandem piraticum cum eo opus ingreditur. [3] Cumque quodam in loco diutina tempestatum saevitia vexarentur, ita ventis navigationem frustrantibus, ut maiorem anni partem quieti tribuerent, deos humano sanguine propitiandos duxerunt. [4] Itaque coniectis in urnam sortibus, regiae necis victimam deposci contigit. [5] Tunc Starcatherus facto ex viminibus laqueo regem implicuit, poena speciem dumtaxat exiguo temporis momento daturum. [6] Sed nodi rigor suum ius exsequens supremum pendentis halitum rapuit. [7] Cui Starcatherus adhuc palpitanti ferro spiritus reliquias evulsit, cumque remedium afferre deberet, perfidiam detexit. [8] Neque enim illa mihi recensenda videtur opinio, quae viminum mollitiem subitis solidatam complexibus ferrei morem laquei peregissee commemorat.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ *Gesta Danorum* 6.5.6 (p. 152,32); *Gesta Danorum* 6.5.7 (p. 153,3). Taken from the website of the Royal Library – National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library: <http://wayback.kb.dk:8080/wayback-1.4.2/wayback/20100107153228/http://www2.kb.dk/elib/lit/dan/saxo/lat/or.dsr/6/5/index.htm>

Ancient tradition says that Starkather (...) devoted his initial career to pleasing the gods through the murder of Vikar, king of Norway. Some narrate this version of the affair: Odin once desired that Vikar should come to a dismal end, but did not wish to effect this openly. He therefore made Starkather, already remarkable for his unusual size, famous for his courage and his artistry in composing spells, so that he could use the man's energies more readily to accomplish the king's death. Odin hoped that this was how Starkather would show his thanks for the privileges bestowed on him. To this end he also gave him three times the span of mortal life, in order that he might perpetrate a proportionate number of damnable deeds, and crime accompany his prolonged existence.

He soon came to Vikar and for some time lodged with him in his palace, devising a trap during his attendance on the king. Eventually they embarked together on a pirating expedition but arrived at a place where they were troubled by a long spell of violent storms. The gales interrupted their voyage and made them spend a major part of the year doing nothing, till they decided that the gods must be appeased by human blood. Lots cast in an urn showed a demand for a royal victim. Starkather then twined round the king's neck a noose he had made of osier, pretending to offer the appearance of an expiation merely for a moment. But the tightness of the knot fulfilled its function and cut short Vikar's breathing as he hung there. While he was still panting Starkather tore out the remnants of life with his sword, and when he should have lent relief disclosed his treachery. I cannot entertain the view of one version which relates that the soft osiers hardened as they suddenly gripped and acted like a halter of iron.¹⁴⁰

The appearances of Þórr within the narration of the adventures of Starcatherus are even rarer than in *Gautreks saga*. The god is only mentioned for having given the future hero a human form by tearing off his superfluous arms, and he has nothing to do with the sacrifice of Víkarr, in which only Óðinn is involved. Nonetheless, the function of the god is not marginal at all: the act of giving Starkaðr a normal shape is to be seen as a positive deed towards the hero, which greatly contrasts with the role that Þórr plays in *Gautreks saga*. In the saga, in fact, the behavior of the god is definitely hostile to Starkaðr and, as we have seen, its goal is that of underlining the negativity of the

¹⁴⁰ *Gesta Danorum* (1980:171-172).

character. In *Gesta Danorum*, on the contrary, the function of Þórr is completely the opposite. However, even in this case the actions of the god reflect one of the functions that he had in Norse religion, i.e. the opposition to monstrous beings and unnatural features. As it has been noticed by Lindow (1988), several sources account for the struggle between Þórr, female figures and beings carrying unnatural characteristics:

Thor's defense of gods and men seems in this view to have been directed against female, presumably chthonic, forces. The feminine is equated with the unnatural: nine heads, extra arms, crooked and bent bodies, exaggerated ears, and so forth.¹⁴¹

The unnatural shape of Starcatherus in *Gesta Danorum* is a sufficient reason to let Þórr intervene and make him more human. In fact, as Lindow (1988:129-130) has pointed out:

In fighting and overcoming the unnatural, one of the things Thor does is to make it natural: he rips the extra arms from Starkaðr [...]. The other thing he does to the unnatural is destroy it [...].

In this view, it is inferable that Saxo prefers the first function of Þórr, while the anonymous compiler of *Gautreks saga* clearly interprets the deed by the god as a negative action towards the hero. Consequently, it can be assumed that the violent act of tearing the superfluous arms is perceived by Saxo as a positive deed,¹⁴² and furthermore it can be interpreted as an operation whose aim is that of making Starcatherus become more human and therefore able to be accepted into the society¹⁴³, thus giving him a possibility to obviate his original condition of outsider.¹⁴⁴ This theme is part of Saxo's aim of rationalization of the traits of the hero, a rationalization that is however only partial, for the author of *Gesta Danorum* does not completely erase Starcatherus' giant features.¹⁴⁵ In fact, although Þórr gives him human form, Starcatherus does not manage to become integrated into the society, thus remaining an "alien"¹⁴⁶. In other words, the impression is that Þórr gave him the possibility to go beyond the features imposed by

¹⁴¹ Lindow (1988:129).

¹⁴² Dumézil (1971:41).

¹⁴³ Ciklamini (1971:171).

¹⁴⁴ Ciklamini (1971:171).

¹⁴⁵ Ciklamini (1971:188).

¹⁴⁶ Ciklamini (1971:179).

his origin, but that in the end his nature cannot be denied. In fact, his features still recall those of giants: he is often lonely and prefers not to stay at court, described as a morally corrupted environment. He is aged, but his ability as a warrior remains unchanged.¹⁴⁷ Interestingly, Ciklamini (1971:179-180) stresses the fact that, unlike *Gesta Danorum*, in which these features of Starcatherus are due to his giant nature, *Gautreks saga* explicitly attributes the loneliness of Starkaðr to the curses by Þórr, thus making more evident the contrastive function that the god plays with respect to the hero. The evident sympathy that characterizes the behavior of Þórr towards Starcatherus in *Gesta Danorum* has led Dumézil (1953) to suggest that this character is to be seen as a rare example of Þórr's hero, even though in successive studies he has partially retracted his view because of the several critics his proposal has received.¹⁴⁸ The function of Þórr with respect to Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga*, where, as we have seen, the attitude of the god towards the hero is hardly positive, cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, some other hasty conclusions have to be avoided. The fact that one of the curses by Þórr makes Starkaðr be hated by the common people could lead to the assumption that the hero is to be perceived as close to aristocracy and therefore to Óðinn. Once again, the confrontation with the other source accounting for the story of Starkaðr, i.e. *Gesta danorum*, makes us doubt of this hypothesis, for in Saxo's work it is clear that the only responsible for the *níðingsverk*, and consequently for Starcatherus' bad fame, is Óðinn. The issue of the hero's bad behavior towards common people can be explained (at least as far as *Gesta Danorum* is concerned) by assuming that, as has been proposed by Milroy (1974-1977:129),:

It is not the humble social status that Starkaðr particularly condemns, but rather the absence of the puritan virtues of independence and self-respect.

In fact, Starcatherus is not always hostile to members of the lower class of the society¹⁴⁹, while he heavily criticizes critics to nobles who, according to him, do not behave correctly¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁷ Ciklamini (1971:179).

¹⁴⁸ See the introduction to Dumézil (1971).

¹⁴⁹ Dumézil (1971) points out that he has a positive attitude towards farmers.

¹⁵⁰ A clear example in this sense is the episode of Starcatherus reproaching Ingel for he does not revenge the death of his father who has been murdered by Sverting (*Gesta Danorum*, book VI).

Going back to the topic of the humanization of the character, it is worth remembering that, although the act of tearing off Starcatherus' superfluous arms would seem to be an attempt by Saxo to develop his rationalization process, this theme is not to be intended as a pure invention by the author. In fact, as we have seen, even *Vikarsbálkr*, which is believed to be older than *Gesta Danorum*, in the episode of Starkaðr being mocked by the twelve *berskerks*, reports the theme of the scars of the superfluous arms that were torn off by Þórr that the hero still bears on his back. As was shown above, this theme is not developed in *Gautreks saga* and it only recurs in *Vikarsbálkr*. However, this is not the only case in which issues that were only briefly mentioned in the saga find an explanation in *Gesta Danorum*. In fact, the features that remain unexplained in *Gautreks saga*, such as the accomplishment of some of Þórr's curses, are developed in the work by Saxo, which presents a more complete description of Starcatherus' deeds. For instance, the *níðingsverk* that Starkaðr should commit, only one of which is reported in *Gautreks saga*, i.e. the murder of king Víkarr, are narrated in *Gesta Danorum*¹⁵¹, although scholars are not sure about the identification of these deeds¹⁵². The theme of the wounds of which, according to the curse by Þórr in *Gautreks saga*, Starkaðr should suffer in every battle is reported by Saxo¹⁵³. His long age, which in *Gautreks saga* as well in *Gesta Danorum* is interpreted as the consequence of a blessing by Óðinn, is however to be considered as a feature characterizing giants, who, as we have seen, are often said to be very old.

As we have seen in this chapter, the function of Þórr is remarkably different in *Gautreks saga* and in *Gesta Danorum*, even though both works are based on the same legend. There is another source that shows many similarities with the saga and the work by Saxo, i.e. *Heiðreks saga*. It is worth then considering briefly this other text and focusing again on Þórr's role in the story.

¹⁵¹ Dumézil (1971:18; 42), Ciklamini (1971:180).

¹⁵² This difficulty is due to the fact that Saxo does not account for the participation of Óðinn in other murders (Milroy 1974-1977:123). As far as the second *níðingsverk* is concerned, De Vries and Dumézil have tried to identify it, but they have reached different conclusions. On the contrary, the third criminal deed seems to be the murder of king Olo in book VIII. For a more detailed discussion on this topic, see Milroy (1974-1977:123).

¹⁵³ Ciklamini (1971:182), Grimstad (1976:292). With respect to the theme of the injuries that the hero has to suffer, Milroy (1974-1977:135) puts into evidence an interesting aspect: the mutilation of the exceeding arms of Starcatherus/Starkaðr is to be considered as an anticipation of the terrible wounds that will be inflicted to him in every battle.

4. Þórr in *Heiðreks saga*

The introduction to the U version of *Heiðreks saga* reports another version of the origin of Starkaðr and of his first encounter with Þórr.

According to Tolkien, *Heiðrekssaga* has come down to us in two versions: R and HU. Hall identifies three versions instead, thus considering U and H separately, even if they descend from a common antigraph, now lost, called *U. R (Copenhagen, Royal Library, Gl.kgl.sml. 2845 4to) is the most conservative manuscript¹⁵⁴, dating to the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century¹⁵⁵, but unfortunately it is damaged and presents some lacunae¹⁵⁶. U (Uppsala, University Library, R:715) is a paper manuscript dating to the 17th century, while H (Copenhagen, Royal Library AM 544 4to, usually known as *Hauksbók*) goes back to the 14th century, and most probably, as Hall (2005:2) specifies, it was written down between 1302 and 1310. Another important witness is AM 203, for, as Hall (2005:5) clearly shows, by means of comparison with the other manuscripts it can help define the *U version¹⁵⁷.

Apart from elements such as scribal errors and other textual evidence, the close relationship between U and H is proved by the fact that both differ from R from the point of view of the names of the characters and the plot. The major divergences are to be seen in the beginning of the saga, which is of particular importance for us, since it is in this introduction that the relationship between Starkaðr and Þórr is presented. In fact, *U accounts for geographical, genealogical but above all mythological information that in R are completely missing and which probably were not part of the original saga¹⁵⁸. *U should be seen as a complete rewriting of the original version,

¹⁵⁴ Hall (2005:2).

¹⁵⁵ Tolkien (1960:IX). Hall (2005:1) only mentions the beginning of the 15th century as date of composition.

¹⁵⁶ Tolkien (1960:IX), Hall (2005:4).

¹⁵⁷ I prefer here the denomination given by Hall (*U) instead of that proposed by Tolkien (HU).

¹⁵⁸ Tolkien (1960:XXX).

in part on the basis of interferences drawn from the saga itself and in some cases apparently by purely arbitrary alteration, and in part on the basis of a written and oral tradition that cannot now be defined.^{159 160}

In fact, according to Hall (2005:5), the introduction to *U shows a probable influence from *Ynglinga saga* and the prologue to *Snorra Edda*. The link to *Ynglinga saga* can be noticed in the euhemerization of the Norse gods and in the description of the kingdom of *Álfheimar*¹⁶¹. As far as the connection with *Snorra Edda* is concerned, this influence would be inferable by considering the peculiar references to the Bible and to the *Aeneid*. Nevertheless, Hall proposes that the redactor of the *U version “was himself capable of this sort of syncretism”¹⁶², and, moreover, that this particular mixture of elements, together with the unusual opening of this version of the saga, makes *U different from the other *fornaldarsögur*¹⁶³. In fact, usually *fornaldarsögur* begin with a presentation of one of the protagonists. On the contrary, U and AM 203 start by setting the scene both spatially and chronologically¹⁶⁴:

Svá finnsk ritat í fornum bókum, at Jötunheimar váru kallaðir norðr um Gandvæik, en Ymisland fyrir sunnan í millum Hálogalands. En áðr Tyrkjar ok Asæiamenn kómu í Norðrlönd byggðu norðrhálfurnar riser ok sumt hálfrisar; gerðisk þá mikit sambland þjóðanna; riser fengu sér kvenna ór Mannheimum, en sumir giptu þangat doetr sínar.¹⁶⁵

It is found written in ancient books that to the north beyond Gandvík it was called Jötuheimar, and Ymisland to the south between there and Hálogaland. But before the Turks and the men of Asia came to the Northlands giants dwelt in the northern regions, and some were half-giants; there was a great mingling of races in those days, for the giants got themselves wives out of Mannheimar, and some married their daughters to men from that country.¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹ Tolkien (1960:XXX).

¹⁶⁰ For a deeper overview on the textual relations between the manuscripts, see Hall (2005:3-6).

¹⁶¹ Hall (2005:5).

¹⁶² Hall (2005:5).

¹⁶³ Hall (2005:16).

¹⁶⁴ Hall (2005:13) assumes that the mentioning of giants in the portion of text which I propose below reflects an influence from the Old Testament (Genesis 6:4), thus setting the scene in a very far past, almost at the beginning of the world.

¹⁶⁵ Tolkien (1960:66).

¹⁶⁶ Tolkien (1960:66).

The initial part of the story is characterized by a series of abductions of women: the giant Arngrímur carries off the daughter of Áma Ymir from Ymisland; they generate a son, Hergrímur called the Hálftröll, who, as his name suggests, has many extraordinary features and lives with the mountain giants, but sometimes also among men. Hergrímur carries off Ögn Álfasprengr from Jötunheimar. They have a son, Grímur. It is at this point of the narration that we first encounter Starkaðr Áludrengr, son of Stórvirkur. We are told that he descends from giants, he is characterized by unnatural strength and he resembles physically to his ancestors: he has eight arms.

Starkaðr áludrengr bjó þá við Álufossa; hann var kominn af þursum ok hann var þeim líkr at afli ok eðli; hann hafði átta hendr. Stórvirkur hét faðir hans.¹⁶⁷

Starkad Áludrengr at that time dwelt at Álufossar; he was descended from giants, and he resembled them in his nature and his strength; he was eight-armed. His father's name was Stórvirkur.¹⁶⁸

Ögn Álfasprengr, the woman carried off by Hergrímur, was betrothed to Starkaðr. In order to recover her, Starkaðr challenges Hergrímur and kills him in duel. Nonetheless, Ögn was truly devoted to her kidnapper, so much that she commits suicide instead of going back to her betrothed man. Then Starkaðr takes all the wealth belonging to the couple, including their son Grímur, who will grow up with him. Finally, we get to the most important point for our discussion, which is the intervention of Þórr. Very similarly to what is narrated in *Gautreks saga*, Starkaðr carries off Álfhildr, the most beautiful woman in the world, daughter of king Álf, while she is attending a sacrificial rite to the Dísir¹⁶⁹ in Álf's house. At this point the king asks Þórr for help. The god¹⁷⁰ kills Starkaðr and lets Álfhildr go back home to his father, but she is pregnant, and she

¹⁶⁷ Tolkien (1960:66-67).

¹⁶⁸ Tolkien (1960:66-67).

¹⁶⁹ Tolkien (1960:26, note 2) defines the *dísir* as „female guardian spirits, associated with a man from his birth, and appearing especially before a battle or at the time of death“.

¹⁷⁰ I refer here to Þórr as a god, although it is not clear how he is considered in this version of *Heiðreks saga*. Since Óðinn, who will be introduced later in the narration, is viewed as a euhemerized character, and more specifically as one of the leaders of the men coming from Asia, it is probable that even Þórr is not considered as a god, thus having the same treatment as Óðinn.

gives birth to the daughter of Starkaðr, Bauggerðar, who will become the wife of Grímr. The couple moves to Bólm and generates a son, Arngrímr, who is actually the point of connection between the whole precedent narration and the main plot of the story. In fact, Arngrím is the killer of Svafrlami, another main character in *Heiðreks saga*.

This story has evidently common elements with both *Gautreks saga* and the *Gesta Danorum*. In all three versions, there is a character called Starkaðr descending from the giants and bearing physical traits of his ancestors. As well as in *Gautreks saga*, even in *Heiðreks saga* one of the main themes is the motif of the giant abducting women belonging to higher classes of the society. In this case, however, the implications on the connotation of the characters do not seem to be as important as it is in *Gautreks saga*. As we have seen, the description of the origins of Starkaðr in *Víkars þáttr* and the related function of Þórr have a specific aim, i.e. to underline the negativity of this hero in order to exalt the positivity of Gautrekr. On the contrary, in *Heiðreks saga* the narration of the episodes concerning Starkaðr only seems to be a part of the presentation of the exploits of Arngrímr's ancestors, a simple narration of episodes whose development has led to the birth of this character. However, the story of the encounter of Starkaðr and Þórr is clearly based on the same tradition on which both *Gautreks saga* and *Gesta Danorum* have drawn. Even in this case, Þórr's function is that of defending a woman from the threats of a giant, a role that we have already noticed not only in *Gautreks saga*, but also in other sources, which present the god as the opponent *par excellence* of giants and other monstrous supernatural beings.

5. Þórr in *Flóamanna saga*

Flóamanna saga belongs to the genre of *Íslendinga sögur*, also known as family sagas. It has been handed down in two main versions: one longer and one shorter. Only fragments of the longer redaction survived, preserved in the manuscripts AM 445b 4to, dating ca. 1390-1425¹⁷¹, and in a copy of this, in AM 515 4to (dating 1660-1695¹⁷²). The shorter version is preserved in many late paper manuscripts.¹⁷³ As far as the presumed date of composition is concerned, Perkins (1978:24, 28), after a long discussion on different aspects that may help date the saga, concludes that it was probably composed by a cleric within the period 1290 to 1375, and preferably before 1330.

Flóamanna saga shows many influences from other sources, such as *Landnámabók*, *Egils saga*, *Njáls saga*¹⁷⁴, but also to religious and ecclesiastical writings, to lives of saints, and even to the Bible.¹⁷⁵ This latter aspect is of particular importance for our discussion, since it is strictly connected with the religious theme and therefore for the topics concerning the function of Þórr in this saga. Furthermore, quoting Perkins (1978:12):

It is the overall impression left by “the Christian element” that gives *Flóamanna saga* its special position amongst *Íslendinga sögur* of its own age.

This “Christian element” mentioned by Perkins is expressed principally in the dreams of the protagonists of the story, dreams that function as connectors between reality and supernatural world. Before concentrating our attention on the motif of dreams in *Flóamanna saga*, let us first briefly summarize the content of the plot.

¹⁷¹ Handrit.is website: <<http://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/AM04-0445b>>.

¹⁷² Handrit.is website: <<http://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0515>>.

¹⁷³ Perkins (1978:14-19).

¹⁷⁴ Perkins (1978:9-11).

¹⁷⁵ Perkins (1974-1977:197).

The story¹⁷⁶ begins with the narration of the adventures of the settlers of Flói, in southern Iceland. The hero of the saga is Þorgils, son of Þord, who embodies the ideal of the perfect Viking:

Svá er sagt, at Þorgils var fríðr maðr sýnum ok drengilegr í viðbragði ok skýrlegr, hár á vöxt ok rðett vaxinn, sterkr at afli, harðgerr ok skjótráðr, gegn ok örugggr, örðigr ok allra manna bezt vígr, ok hinn traustasti í öllum mannaunum, þegar honum dróst aldr, sem frá mun verða sagt; hann var stórlýndr ok þó stöðuggr, hjartaprúðr ok hugstórr, stóðst vel margar mannaunir, er hann hlau at bera.¹⁷⁷

It is told that Thorgils was a handsome man, manly in appearance, intelligent, tall and upright of stature, strong, hardy, decisive, honest and reliable, stalwart, the best of men in battle and bravest in all trials after he came of age, as will be told. He was generous in spirit, resolute, proud-hearted and noble-minded; he endured well the many trials he had to bear.¹⁷⁸

Þorgils travels to Norway, the Hebrides, Ireland, where he lives many adventures, and then he goes back to Iceland. In that period Christianity arrives on the island and Þorgils is one of the first to convert to the new faith. It is at this point that the protagonist of the saga begins to dream about Þórr, who tries to convince him to go back to heathendom. When Þorgils refuses, the god threatens him and begins to punish him for his disobedience.

Nú kom kristni á Ísland, ok tók Þorgils í fyrra lagi við trú. Hann dreymdi eina nótt, at Þórr kæmi at honum með illu yfirbragði, ok kvað hann sér brugðizt hafa, - „hefir þú illa ór haft við mik“, segir hann, „valit mér þat, er þú áttir verst til, enn kastat silfri því í fula tjörn, er ek átta, ok skal ek þér í móti koma“. „Guð mun mér hjálpa“, segir Þorgils ok em ek þess sæll, er okkart félag sleit“. Ok er Þorgils vaknar, sá hann at töðugöltr hans er dauðr. Hann lét grafa hann hjá tóftum nökkurum ok lét ekki af nýta. Enn barst Þórr í drauma Þorgils, ok sagði, at honum væri eigi meira fyrir at taka fyrir nasar honum enn galta hans. Þorgils kvað guð mundu því ráða. Þórr heitaðist at gera honum fjárkaða. Þorgils kvaðst eigi hirða um þat. Aðra nótt eftir dó uxi gamall fyrir Þorgils. Þá sat hann

¹⁷⁶ The following discussion is based on the text of the short version translated by Paul Acker and published in *The complete sagas of the Icelanders*, Leifur Eriksson Publishing Ltd, Reykjavík, 1997.

¹⁷⁷ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 11, p. 16-17.

¹⁷⁸ *The saga of the people of Flói*, ch. 11, p.279.

sjálfr hjá nautum sínum um náttina eftir. Enn um morgininn, er hann kom heim, var hann víða blár. Hafa menn þat fyrir satt, at þeir Þórr muni þá fundizt hafa. Eftir þat tók af fallit.¹⁷⁹

Then Christianity arrived in Iceland, and Thorgils was among the first to receive the faith. One night he dreamt that Thor came to him with an evil look on his face and said he had betrayed him. „You have done me wrong,“ he said. „You have picked out for me the worst you had, and thown the silver that was mine into a stinking pond. I will pay you back for that.“ „God will help me,“ said Thorgils, „and I am happy that our fellowship is over.“ When Thorgils awoke, he saw that his *hayfield* boar was dead. He had it buried by a ruined house and let no one use it for food. Thor appeared again to Thorgils in a dream and said that he could snuff him out as easily as he had the boar. Thorgils said God would prevail. Thor threatened to kill off more of his livestock. Thorgils said he did not care about that. The next night an old ox of Thorgils' died. The following night he stayed up himself beside the cattle. But in the morning when he returned home he was black and blue all over. People were convinced that he and Thor must have met that night. After that the killings stopped.¹⁸⁰

After this episode, Þorgils is invited by Erik the Red to join him to Greenland, and the protagonist decides to leave, but Þórr appears in his dreams again.

Þorgils bíðr nú byrjar, ok dreymir, at maðr kæmi at honum, mikill ok rauðskeggjaðr, ok mælti: „Ferð hefir þú ætlat fyrir þér, ok mun hon erfið verða“. Draummaðrinn sýndist honum heldr grepplegr. „Illa mun yðr farast“, segir hann, „nema þú hverfir aftr til míns átrúnaðar; mun ek þá enn til sjá með þér“. Þorgils kvaðst aldri hans umsjá hafa vilja, ok bað hann brott dragast sem skjótast frá sér; enn mín ferð tekst sem allmáttigr guð vill“. Síðan þótti honum Þórr leiða sik á hamra nökkura, þar sem sjóvarstraumur brast í björgum, - „í slíkum bylgjum skaltu vera, ok aldri ór komast, utan þú hverfir til mín.“ „Nei“, sagði Þorgils, „far á brott enn leiði fjandi; sá mun mér hjálpa, sem alla leysti með sínum dreyra“. Síðan vaknar hann, ok segir drauminn konu sinni. „Afr munda ek setjast“, segir hon, „ef mik hefði svá dreymt, ok eigi vil ek segja Jósteini draum þenna ok eigi öðrum mönnum“. Nú kemr byrr, ok sigla þau út ór firði; hafði Jósteinn skipp fyrir framan siglu; ok sem þau kómu ór landsýn, tekst af byrr allr, ok velkjast þau úti lengi, svá at bæði varð matfátt ok drykkjarfátt. Þorgils dreymdi, at enn

¹⁷⁹ *Flóamanna saga*, ch.20, p. 35-36.

¹⁸⁰ *The saga of the people of Floi*, ch. 20, p. 288.

sami maðr kæmi at honum ok mælti: „Fór eigi sem ek sagða þér“? Þórr talaði þá enn mart víð Þorgils, enn Þorgils rak hann frá sér með hörðum orðum. Tekr nú at hausta, ok mæltu sumir menn, at þeir skyldu heita á Þórr. Þorgils bannaði þat, ok sagði, at menn skyldi missmíði á finna, ef nökkurr maðr blæotaði þar í skipi. Við þessi orð treystist engi á Þór at kalla. Eftir þetta dreymdi Þorgils, at sami maðr kom at honum ok mælti: „Enn sýnist þat, hversu trúr þú vart mér, er menn vildu á mik kalla, enn ek hefi beint nú fyrir þínum mönnum, ok eru nú komnir at þrotum allir, ef ek dugi þeim eigi, enn nú muntu taka höfn á sjau náttu fresti, ef þú hverfr til mín með nökkurri alvöru“. „Þótt ek taka aldri höfn“, sagði Þorgils, „þá skal ek þér ekki gott gera“. Þórr svarar: „Þótt þú gerir mér aldri gott, þá gjalt þú mér þó góz mitt“. Þorgils hugsar hvat um þetta er, ok veit nú, at þetta er einn uxi, ok var þetta þá kálfr, er hann gaf honum. Nú vaknar Þorgils, ok ætlar nú at kasta utanborðs uxanum. Enn er Þorgerðr verðr vís, falar hon uxann, því at henni var vistafátt. Þorgils sagðist vilja ónýta uxann ok engum selja. Þorgerði þótti nú illa. Hann lét kasta uxanum útbyrðis, ok kvað eigi kynlegt, þót illa f'rist, er fé Þórs var innbyrðis.¹⁸¹

He dreamt that a man came to him, large and red-bearded, and said, „You have decided on a journey, and it will be difficult.“ The dream-man looked huge to him. „It will go ill for you,“ he said, „unless you believe in me again; then I will watch over you.“ Thorgils said he would never want his help again and told him to go away as fast as his legs would take him: „But my journey will go as almighty God wills it.“ Then he thought that Thor led him to a certain crag where ocean waves were dashing against the rocks. „You will find yourself in such waves and never get out, unless you return to me.“ „No,“ said Thorgils, „get away from me, you loathsome fiend. He will help me who redeemed us with his blood.“ Then he awoke and told his wife about the dream. „I would not make the journey,“ she said, „if I had dreamt thus, and I would not tell this dream to Jostein or anyone else.“ Then fair winds came and they sailed out of the fjord. Jostein's group occupied the ship in front of the mast. But when they came out of sight of land, the winds died down. They were tossed about on the sea for a long time, so that they began to run short of both food and water. Thorgils dreamt that the same man came to him and said, „Has it not gone as I said it would?“ Thor went on talking, until Thorgils drove him away with harsh words. Now autumn began to draw near, and some men said that they should invoke Thor. Thorgils forbade it and said the men would regret it if anyone made sacrifices on the ship. With those words no one dared to call

¹⁸¹ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 21, 37-39.

upon Thor. After that Thorgils dreamt that the same man came to him and said, „Again one can see how faithful you were to me, when the men wanted to call upon me. I have lent a hand to your men, but they will all become exhausted if I don't help them prevail. You will reach harbour after seven night if you return to me in earnest.“ „Even if I never reach harbour,“ said Thorgils, „I will never worship you.“ Thor replied, „If you will not worship me, then return my goods to me.“ Thorgils thought about what that might be, and then he knew that it was an ox, that he had dedicated to Thor when it was a calf. Thorgils woke up, intending to throw the ox overboard. But when Thorgerd found out she asked for the ox because she needed food. Thorgils said he wanted to destroy the ox and not give it to anyone for food. Thorgerd was much displeased. He had the ox thrown overboard and said it was hardly strange if things went badly while Thor's livestock was on board.¹⁸²

Þorgils and his men are shipwrecked on a bay in Greenland, where they start suffering for starvation, climatic difficulties and plague. After Christmas, the ghosts of the dead members of the crew attack Þorgils and the survivors, until the protagonist burns their bodies on a pyre. Meanwhile Þórey, Þorgils's wife, has given birth to a child, Þorfinn, but the effort has weakened her. She has a dream in which she has a vision of heaven, and she tells it Þorgils.

Þat er eitthvert sinn, at Þórey sagði draum sinn Þorgilsi, at hon kvaðst sjá fögr heruð ok menn bjarta, - „ok get ek, at vér leysimst brott ór þessum vandræðum“. Þorgils svarar:“ Góðr er draumr þinn, ok þó eigi ólíkast at viti til annars heims, ok munir þú eiga gott fyrir höndum, ok munu helgir menn hjálpa þér fyrir hreint líf ok mannaunir“. ¹⁸³

One time Thorey told Thorgils about a dream she had, in which she had seen a beautiful land and bright shining people: “I think we may be delivered from these troubles.” Thorgils replied, “Your dream is good, and yet it is not unlikely that it betokens the other world and that you have good things in store for you. The saints will help you because you have led a clean life and suffered many trials.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² *The saga of the people of Floi*, ch.21, pp.289-290.

¹⁸³ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 23, p. 41.

¹⁸⁴ *The saga of the people of Floi*, ch. 23, p.291.

Nonetheless, a tragic episode occurs. While Þorgils and other men have gone hunting and fishing, Þorey is murdered by some thralls, but the child remains unharmed.

Finally, the survivors manage to stop Þórr's curses.

Þá mælti Starkaðr: “Þat hefi ek vitat menn hafa gert, ef lífi þeira hefir við legit, at men hafa blandat saman sjó ok hlandi”. Þeir taka nú auskerit ok míga í, ok blönduðu við sjó, ok báðu Þorgils leyfis at drekka. Hann kvað várkunn á, enn kvaðst þó hvárki banna né lofa. Enn er þeir ætluðu at drekka, bað Þorgils þá fá sér, ok kvaðst skyldu mæla fyrir minni. Hann tók við ok mælti svá: “Þú it argasta dýr, er ferð vára dvelr, skalt eigi því ráða, at ek né aðrir drekki sinn þarfagang”. Í því fló fugl, þvílkastr sem álkuungi, brott frá skipinu ok skrækta við. Þorgils holti síðan útbyrðis ór auskerinu. Síðan róa þeir ok taka sér vatn, ok var þat síð dags. Þessi fugl flaug í norðrætt frá skipinu. Þorgils mælti: “Seint hefir fugl þessi við oss skilit, ok taki nú allar gramir við honum; enn við þat megum vér una, at hann kom eigi því á leið sem hann vildi”.¹⁸⁵

Then Starkad said, “I have known men, when their lives were at stake, to have mixed together seawater and urine.” They picked up the bailing scoop and urinated in it and mixed it with seawater. They asked Thorgils for permission to drink. He said there was no reason for it, but he would neither forbid nor allow it. When they were about to drink, Thorgils asked to have it for himself and said he would say a prayer over the cup. He took it and said, “O most evil of beasts, you who delay our journey, you shall not prevail and make me or anyone else drink his urine.” At that a bird, most like a young auk, flew away from the ship, shrieking. [...] The bird flew away in northern direction. Thorgils said, „The bird has left us at last, and may the demons take him. Let us be thankful that he did not bring about what he intended.”¹⁸⁶

Delivered from bad fate, they travel to the settlement of Erik the Red in Greenland, but the difference in faith of the two Vikings (Erik is still heathen) provokes some disagreements between them, and Þorgils, after some other adventures, sails back to Iceland. Here he dies at the age of eighty-five, and is buried in a church. Among his descendants there will be a bishop called Þorlak.

¹⁸⁵ *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 24, p.45-46.

¹⁸⁶ *The saga of the people of Floi*, ch. 24, p. 293.

The motif of Þorgils's visions of Þórr in dreams and the consequent series of misfortunes provoked by the supernatural entity occupies a large section of the saga, therefore the importance of the function of the god for the development of the plot, as well as for the characterization of the protagonist, is evident. The role of Þórr is clearly that of contrasting his former worshipper, thus stressing the negativity of the heathen deity and praising the positivity of the protagonist who does not surrender to the temptations of evil and remains strong in his faith in Christ.

The theme of the newly converted character facing his former god is not unique in the sagas. In fact, other sources account for this kind of confrontation between Christianity and heathendom.¹⁸⁷ In *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (II, 122-3) Þórr appears to Sveinn, who has recently become Christian, and asks him to remove the image of the god from his temple, for he knows that Sveinn's brother, Finnur, will destroy it. But Sveinn does not accomplish Þórr's will. In the same saga, another episode is told that shows many elements in common with *Flóamanna saga*, but here the difference is that the character, Koðrán, is not Christian yet, but is going to be baptized. In this scene (*Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, I, 285) it is told of the bishop Friðrekr, who travels to Giljá and throws water on the stone where Koðrán's *ármaðr* lives. For the next three nights, the *ármaðr* appears in the dreams of Koðrán and laments for what has been done on his home. The analogies to *Flóamanna saga* are evident. The words that are used to describe the encounters between the two characters are very similar in the two sagas: in the first dream in *Ólafs saga* the *ármaðr* begins with the sentence "*Illa hefir þú gert*", which is very close to the sentence in *Flóamanna saga* "*ok hefir þú illa ór ráðit*". Anyway, even in this case the protagonist of the episode does not listen to the lamentations of the supernatural being and is baptized. The same situation, and almost the same words ("*Illa hefir þú gert er þú hefir látit trú þína, þá er langfeðgar þínir hafa haft...*"), occur also in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (353), in which the half-god Bárð appears to his son Gestr, who has just been baptized.

As we have seen, Þórr's manifestations to Þorgils occur in dreams. Dreams are very common in the sagas of the Icelanders and they represent the fantastic element in

¹⁸⁷ The following discussion is based on the work by Perkins, *The dreams of Flóamanna saga*, 1974-1977:199.

them, in contrast with the usual effort of presenting the stories and the adventures of the protagonists as real and rational.¹⁸⁸ Lönnroth (2002¹⁸⁹) has examined the use of the oneiric elements in family sagas and has identified two functions: they anticipate future events and they “signal the presence of some metaphysical force – a blind destiny or possibly a god – operating behind the stage”¹⁹⁰. This is precisely the function that dreams have in *Flóamanna saga*, in which Þorgils, through such oneiric experiences, is connected to the supernatural world, the world where Þórr lives. This issue leads us to another aspect, that is the perception of Þórr: is he considered a god, a demon or simply man with magical powers¹⁹¹? The fact that this entity appears in the dreams of the protagonist and that he punishes him by letting several misfortunes happen to him is an evidence of the supernatural nature of Þórr. The saga, however, refers to him as a man: “He dreamt that a man came to him, large and red-bearded [...]”¹⁹²; „The dream-man looked huge to him”¹⁹³. “[...] Thorgils dreamt that the same man came to him [...]”¹⁹⁴. Even though this denomination may lead to think of the euhemeristic theory, this is probably only a way to describe Þórr, whose shape, as is well known, is completely human-like, therefore it is not to be considered as opposed to his identification as a supernatural entity. Nonetheless, the epithet “god” is never used as a reference to him. Therefore, it is likely that, in this saga, Þórr is rather presented as a demon, a

¹⁸⁸ Lönnroth (2002:456). According to him, the importance of the supernatural element in the saga is so central that “the art of the best family sagas consists in concealing the mythical world so that it is just barely visible behind the deceptive surface of narrative realism” (Lönnroth 2002:463).

¹⁸⁹ In this article, the scholar has concentrated his attention mainly on the function of dreams in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in which Gísli, the protagonist of the story, dreams of two women, one good and one evil. The former suggests him to abandon the pagan belief and to convert to Christianity, while the latter predicts misfortunes to him. This opposition, which reflects the contrast between the two religions and, more generally, the conflict between good and evil, is not however so well defined in the saga, for at a certain point the roles of the two women switch, and the evil one becomes a representative of the Christian faith. Anyway, it is interesting to notice that „the Christian elements in dreams cannot thus emanate from Gísli himself but must come from another world“ (Lönnroth 2002:461).

¹⁹⁰ Lönnroth (2002:455).

¹⁹¹ Lönnroth (1969:4) reports the idea of Rudolph Schomerus (*Die Religion der Nordgermanen im Spiegel Christlicher Darstellung*, Borna-Leipzig, 1936), according to whom there were three ways of considering the pagans and consequently the heathen gods: they were demons or the devil himself who deceived humans by pretending to be gods; they were powerful men of the past whose glory had made them be perceived as gods (euhemeristic interpretation); paganism was “a sort of imperfect Christianity, derived from the natural instinct of the human heart and from primitive observations of nature.” However, Lönnroth (1969:5) points out that these three ways are not to be considered “mutually exclusive doctrines”, but they could be combined.

¹⁹² Chapter 21.

¹⁹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

manifestation of Satan. This hypothesis is supported by the passage of the text in which Þorgils refers to Þórr as “most evil of beasts”, an epithet that is associated with the devil, the beast of the Apocalypse¹⁹⁵. The demonization of the heathen gods is not unusual in medieval literature¹⁹⁶, principally because the Church was involved in the production of manuscripts.¹⁹⁷ Perkins (1974-1977:204) confirms that the missionaries who acted in the Northern countries often compared the heathen gods, and above all Þórr, to demons. Also Vésteinn Ólason (1998:217; 2005:115) identifies Þórr in *Flóamanna saga* as a messenger of Satan. Furthermore, the description of Þórr as a red-bearded man, even if it is a very established feature of the deity, increases his negativity. During the Middle Ages, a man with a red beard was not to be trusted, and in the Icelandic tradition the devil is often depicted with such an attribute.¹⁹⁸

In the first dream Þórr comes to Þorgils with an evil look, accuses him of betrayal and tells him:”You have picked out for me the worst you had, and thrown the silver that was mine into a stinking pond“. By reading the text of the saga so far there is evidently no mention of this episode. Perkins (1974-1977:199-200) has proposed three possible explanations: 1) a textual corruption has provoked this lack of information; 2) it is the consequence of an oversight by the saga author; 3) the fact that Þórr mentions this episode is a sufficient evidence for it to have happened. Nonetheless, Perkins notices that, if the last hypothesis is correct, it would be a very rare element in the sagas. Anyway, what seems to be clear is that Þorgils has denied his old belief by destroying something that linked him with the heathen religion. In fact, as Perkins (*ibidem*, p.200) points out, there are examples in other sagas such as *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (II, 186) and also in other sources, e.g. *Flateyjarbók* (I, 452 ff.), of newly converted people who get rid of objects that once they had used to worship and to praise the pagan deities. In the former, Þórhallr destroys a heathen temple, while in the latter Óláf

¹⁹⁵ Apocalypse (13, 11-17).

¹⁹⁶ In a wider European context, it is worth mentioning Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* (ii, 15), in which a situation of syncretism is described: in a temple in Anglia there are both a Christian and a pagan altar. On the latter, sacrifices to the “demons” are made: “...in eodem fano et altare haberet ad sacrificium Christi et arulam ad uictimas daemoniorum”. (Orton 2005:317, footnote 2).

¹⁹⁷ Clunies Ross (2000:118).

¹⁹⁸ Perkins (1974-1977:201).

Tryggvason burns Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr with her gold and silver. The use of giving silver and other precious things to the gods is also mentioned in *Færeyinga saga*¹⁹⁹.

The decision of Þorgils not to go back to paganism is anyway sure, and the protagonist affirms clearly that he is glad that his relationship with Þórr is over, as well as that God will always protect him. For this reason, Þórr punishes him by causing Þorgils's boar's death during the night. Even in the case of *Flóamanna saga*, it is inferable that the role of the god reflects the function that this deity had in the ancient religion. In fact, even in this case, Þórr is connected to aspects concerning the rural world, and more precisely to cattle keeping. This issue is put to relevance in the following dream too, in which Þórr threatens Þorgils by affirming that he will kill other animals of the protagonist. In fact, an old ox dies during the night, and Þorgils decides to sleep close to the cattle to protect it. The motif of the killing of this kind of animals could also be explained by supposing that Þórr punishes Þorgils by depriving him of the most precious thing a medieval man could possess²⁰⁰. This is probably correct, but I think that the aspect concerning the connection between Þórr and the cattle is in any case central. Another element that can be included in the topic of the relationship between the cattle and the heathen god is the episode of the ox that had been consecrated to Þórr when it was still a calf²⁰¹. The motif of the animal consecrated to Þórr proves once more his connection with the rural world, and the fact that Þorgils throws the ox off-board in order to give it back to the god is another way of erasing his pagan past. The conversion of the protagonist is therefore definitive. For this reason I agree with Perkins (1974-1977:198, footnote 16) when he assumes that the conflict between Þorgils and Þórr does not represent an internal struggle between the acceptance

¹⁹⁹ Ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, 1967, 44.

²⁰⁰ The importance that cattle had in the Middle Ages is evident also in a passage of *Gautreks saga* (ch. 2; page 10 in Ranisch's edition [1900]), in which Gilling, a member of the family living in the forest, commits suicide because the young Gautrek has killed his ox.

²⁰¹ Perkins (1974-1977:207) compares this issue to similar episodes in other sagas such as *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (ch. 15), Oddr Snorrason, *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, 134, *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch. 8).

of the new religion and what makes him still bound to the old belief²⁰², but is rather a way to show the complete approval of Christianity²⁰³. We will return later on this topic.

An interesting section of text (chapter 20) shows the importance of color and its symbolic function in Old Icelandic literature:

But in the morning when he [Thorgils] returned home he was black and blue all over. People were convinced that he and Thor must have met that night. After that the killings stopped .

Kirsten Wolf (2006) has analyzed the recurrence of the color blue (*blár*) in Old Norse- Icelandic literature, pointing out that it basically identifies a dark color, thus not clearly distinguishing between blue and black²⁰⁴. The translation of this passage of *Flóamanna saga* is therefore very appropriate: the English correspondent of the Icelandic term *blár* is in fact “black and blue”, and not simply “blue”. As far as the meaning of this feature is concerned, Wolf, by taking into consideration several sources, assumes that the term *blár* refers to both practical and symbolic features: it is usually used in order to describe clothes and fabric, but it also refers to the dead and to ravens, thus associating it with Óðinn²⁰⁵. A link between *blár* and Þórr seems therefore not to be direct, but the mythological and symbolic aspects of the use of this color connect it to the supernatural world²⁰⁶. With respect to this, the above mentioned scene in which Þorgils is colored in blue and black after his encounter with Þórr not only confirms that the protagonist is actually dealing with a supernatural being, but it also emphasizes the negative features characterizing such encounters and consequently Þórr.

The following appearance of Þórr in a dream happens right before Þorgils’ decision to undertake a journey to Greenland. Þórr tells that it will be a difficult journey, but when the protagonist strongly affirms that his destiny is in the hands of God, Þórr

²⁰² This hypothesis has been proposed by H. Ljungberg, *Den nordiska religionen och kristendom* (1938:125).

²⁰³ This view is confirmed by E. Vesper, *Christen und Christentum in den isländischen sagas*, typewritten Leipzig thesis, 1950, 104.

²⁰⁴ Wolf (2006:55-56).

²⁰⁵ In a poem by Einar Skúlason Óðinn-s aven Muninn is described as *blásvartr* (Wolf 2006:73).

²⁰⁶ However, according to Wolf (2006:72), the connection between the color black (*svartr*) and the supernatural entities seems to occur more often: “*Svartr* is [...] generally the term used about the appearance of supernatural and mythological beings, although *blár* does occur.”

carries him on a cliff and shows him a stormy sea, threatening him that he will be in such danger if he does not worship him again. Þorgils replies: „Get away from me, you loathsome fiend. He will help me who redeemed us with his blood“. Perkins (1974-1977:202) has noticed here a reference to the evangelic scene of Jesus being tempted by Satan narrated in Matthew 4, 8-10²⁰⁷. In the biblical episode, in fact, Christ is carried by the devil on a very high mountain, where the demon shows Jesus all the territories of the earth and promises that all of this will be his if he will praise him. Jesus orders him to get away, for, as it is written in Deuteronomy 5, 7 (the first of the Ten Commandments), only the Lord is to be praised, and not other gods. The similarities between the evangelic episode and the saga are remarkable, thus stressing some very important aspects: Þórr is once more associated to the devil of Christian tradition; furthermore, Þorgils does not yield to Þórr's temptations and remains strong in the faith of God. The positivity of Þorgils as a character becomes even more evident if one considers that he trusts a supernatural being that he cannot see and that will never reveal himself to him openly, while the existence of Þórr cannot be doubted, for he constantly appears to the protagonist. Furthermore, the power of Þórr can be actually experimented, for Þorgils really encounters many difficulties because of the contrastive action of the god, while, at least at the beginning, the protagonist seems not to be helped by God. Only his faith and his unconditioned trust in the Lord allow him to survive and to endure all misfortunes. In other words, Þorgils is the example of the believer who, even if he does not experience directly the presence of God, trusts Him with no hesitation. As Jesus says to Thomas in John 20, 29: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed.”²⁰⁸ Þorgils seems therefore to embody a Christian model.

The temptations that Þorgils has to face do not only come from Þórr. Even his companions and his wife try to convince him to listen to the words of Þórr and even to ask the deity for help in time of need. When Þórr appears to Þorgils for the second time and threatens him to make his journey go ill, he tells his dream to his wife Þórey and she counsels him not to leave. The decision of the protagonist to undertake the journey

²⁰⁷ The episode is also reported in Luke 5, 5-8.

²⁰⁸ From theBible.net website: <<http://bible.org/netbible/>>.

in spite of the dangers Þórr is preparing for him stresses the strength of his faith, while his wife seems to be more vulnerable to the influences of the Evil, embodied here by Þórr. Even the members of the crew represent another source of temptation for Þorgils. When winter is approaching, they suggest that they should invoke Þórr to ask for his protection. Once more, Þorgils shows the strength of his personality and of his faith by forbidding them to sacrifice to the heathen god. The same situation occurs when one of the men of Þorgils, Starkaðr, proposes to drink urine mixed with sea water as a sort of rite that would help them in that moment of difficulty. Þorgils's adversity towards this use suggests that it is probably a pagan rite. In fact, the protagonist, with the cup containing the mixture in his hands, pronounces this prayer: "O most evil of beasts, you who delay our journey, you shall not prevail and make me or anyone else drink his urine." Here Þorgils is almost certainly referring to Þórr, who, as we have seen before, is called "beast", thus associating him to the devil, and is explicitly identified as the cause of every misfortune of the members of the expedition. The message that this part of text wants to transmit is clear: the power of the evil can be defeated by faith and trust in God.

After this prayer, a bird, more precisely an auk, flies north away from the ship. Þorgils indicates it as an evil presence. I have not been able to find anywhere else mentions of the association of this kind of bird with Þórr. Birds, and more precisely two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, can be considered as messengers and spies of the god Óðinn, who, through these servants, always becomes aware of what is happening in the world. Nonetheless, this feature does not concern Þórr. It could be supposed that the auk described in *Flóamanna saga* is in reality Þórr, transformed into an animal. In fact, this magical ability is present in northern mythology, but it concerns only Óðinn and Loki, and not Þórr. Maybe this episodes simply refers to a superstition binding auks to bad omens, a belief that is now unknown to us.

Let us go back to the story. Short before being murdered by some servants, Þórey, Þorgils's wife, has a vision of heaven: she sees "a beautiful land and bright shining people". Þorgils interprets this vision as a good sign, a foresight of the end of all dangers and misfortunes. The dream can be interpreted as a message of hope from God, who appreciates the Þorgils' faithfulness. It could also mean that, although Þórey has

often tried to convince her husband to follow the Þórr's suggestions, she has been forgiven, so that the power of God can be manifested even through her.

The function of Þórr is therefore to stress the positivity of the character of Þorgils with respect to his faithfulness to the new religion and his trust in the Christian God. However, as Perkins evidences, if we consider the saga as a whole, we notice that there is a big difference between the pious and mild Þorgils, who is presented as a model for all Christians, and Þorgils the warrior, who, in some cases, does not avoid killing his opponents or those whom he does not trust²⁰⁹. Anyway, this assumption by Perkins seems not to be always valid. In fact, in one of the scenes towards the end of the saga (ch. 34), Þorgils challenges an opponent to a duel and manages to kill him, but he shows regret by saying that this is “the worst deed he had ever done”²¹⁰. In order to be forgiven, he gives his sword and five marks of silver to the brother of the man he murdered. The plurality of behaviors of Þorgils has been explained by Vigfusson and Powell²¹¹ with the hypothesis of the “plural authorship”, but Perkins (1974-1977:238) affirms that it is probable that the saga was composed by a single man. There is however a clear mixture of “profane” and “learned” elements.²¹²

As it is clear, the attitude of the author of *Flóamanna saga* towards the heathen religion is very negative. This aspect is noticeable in many works, where the devotion for the pagan gods is depicted as a matter of ignorance and stupidity and can be treated with irony as well as with seriousness, mostly when the dangerous aspects of the heathen belief, i.e. witchcraft, magic and issues that can be associated to the demoniac world, are concerned.²¹³ This aspect is often present in the *corpus* of the sagas of the Icelanders, in which the negativity of the heathen religion is stressed by the narration of episodes telling of misfortunes occurred to pagan characters²¹⁴. Outside the field of

²⁰⁹ For instance, Þorgils's foreman is killed only because he has told Þorgils a story concerning the death of his wife Þórey that the protagonist finds unlikely (ch. 24). In this episode Þorgils does not evidently show any kind of Christian pity and inclination to forgiveness.

²¹⁰ *The saga of the people of Floi*, ch. 34, p. 304.

²¹¹ Vigfusson, Gudbrand and Powell, F. York (edited and translated by) (1905), *Origines Islandicae*, II, 629 ff. .

²¹² Perkins (1974-1977:238).

²¹³ Schach (1975:111,125).

²¹⁴ See Schach (1975:116-121) for a presentation of sagas in which characters suffer for their closeness to heathen beliefs.

Íslendingasögur, it is worth mentioning an episode narrated in *Landnámabók* (S, ch.15), in which a character called Örlygr invokes the bishop Patrekr and arrives safely in Iceland, while his companion Kallr calls Þórr for aid during a storm, but he is shipwrecked.²¹⁵ In *Eyrbyggja saga* the strong devotion to Þórr is the cause of conflicts between characters, an issue that somehow recalls the contrasts existing between Erik the Red and Þorgils in *Flóamanna saga*. However, pagan characters are not always depicted in a negative way. In some cases there is a sort of twofold attitude of the saga authors towards the heroes of the heathen past. They embody the glory of a distant time when Iceland was still independent from the kingdom of Norway, but they are not Christian. Therefore a strategy was elaborated in order to underline the positive aspects of the ancestors and somehow to justify them, a strategy that has been analyzed by Lönnroth (1969) in his article *The Noble Heathen: a theme in the sagas*. The definition of Noble Heathen identifies this hero as a precursor of Christianity, characterized by courage, mercifulness, sense of justice, but who still has pagan ethics. As reported by Schach (1975:108):

When Arnkell goði is described as “one of the best and wisest men *in the ancient faith*”, the implication is clear.

In *Landnámabók*, Þorkell máni, whose son Þormóðr takes part to the Alþingi that will declare the conversion of Iceland to Christianity, is said to have been “the equal of the best of Christians”²¹⁶.

Anyway, as the scholar underlines, these characters are nonetheless depicted as inferior to Christian heroes. For instance, in *Vatnsdæla*:

Þorkell Krafla owes his superiority over such great heroes as Þorsteinn and Ingimundr to the fact that he has embraced the true faith and loves the true God.²¹⁷

Going back to *Flóamanna saga*, in this context the positive features of the figure of Þorgils are even more stressed. His conversion to Christianity has been firm and convinced, so much that he has been able to endure the threats and the temptations by

²¹⁵ Schach (1975:123).

²¹⁶ Schach (1975:108).

²¹⁷ Schach (1975:108).

Þórr. Furthermore, the fact that he is haunted by misfortunes is not bound to Þorgils's former pagan faith, as it is in other sagas, but is due to the opposition exercised by Þórr as a consequence for his conversion. This aspect stresses even more the positivity of the character, a Christian hero that has to be taken as a model.

6. The *rímur*

The genre of *rímur* is a fundamental component of the Icelandic literature, not only for the extension of the *corpus*, but also because it can be an important means to understand the sources they are based on.

The term *rímur* defines a type of stanzaic narrative poetry in multiple fitts, while the singular form *ríma* indicates that the poem is composed by only one fitt²¹⁸. The production of these poems began presumably in the 14th century²¹⁹, although some scholars postpone the date of rise of this literary genre to the 15th century²²⁰. In fact, the problem of the dating of the single *rímur* and consequently of the genre as a whole is not without complications, but it seems to be clear that the production started in the late Middle Ages, and that it continued for almost seven centuries, even until the 19th century. Although we can notice a decadence of this genre in the following decades, some examples of *rímur* can be found in rural environments up to the 20th century.²²¹

As far as the initial spreading of this literary genre is concerned, Kuhn (1990-1993:454) interestingly stresses the fact that:

It may be taken as a sign of Icelandic stubbornness or independence of mind that they switched to a form of verse epic just as other European literatures were abandoning the verse epic for prose, while Iceland had produced superb narrative prose at a time when the rest of Europe could not conceive of narrative literature except in verse.

The problem of the date of rise of such a genre is connected to the oldest *ríma* that has come down to us, *Ólafs ríma Haraldssonar*. This composition by Einar Gilsson²²², preserved in *Flatexjarbók* (Gl. Kgl. Sml. 1010 fol., c. 1390), has been dated between 1339 and 1369.²²³ This *ríma* “already shows the new genre being used with

²¹⁸ Hughes (2005:206).

²¹⁹ Hughes (2005:206).

²²⁰ Kuhn (1990:454).

²²¹ Vésteinn Ólason (1982:59).

²²² Bampi (2012:6).

²²³ Hughes (2005:206). Bampi (2005:6-7), quoting Rowe (Rowe, Elizabeth Ashman [2005], *The Development of Flatexjarbók. Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389*, Odense, p. 299),

skill and sophistication”²²⁴, a feature leading to the hypothesis that the genre flourished in the first part of the 14th century, although further *rímur* have been preserved only in later codices²²⁵.

In order to face the problem of the origins of the *rímur*, three further aspects should be kept in mind: 1) this new genre developed in the late Middle Ages, consequently it has a wide literary production behind itself; 2) most *rímur* are based on pre-existing material, i.e. there are very rare examples of *rímur* telling completely new stories²²⁶; 3) the *rímur* are examples of narrative poetry.

These aspects lead to the assumption that the origin of the *rímur* is to be seen from two points of view: the tradition that furnished the material for the stories that are narrated, and the poetic corpus that furnished the more technical aspects of the *rímur*, that is to say, the linguistic and metrical aspects.

It was believed that the *rímur* developments of *fornaldarsögur*.²²⁷ In fact, almost all *fornaldarsögur* have been re-elaborated into *rímur* in the course of their long history²²⁸. But the facts are actually more complex:

The relationship of these versified traditions of the *fornaldarsögur* materials to the medieval *fornaldarsögur* little resembles the inverted branching tree to which manuscript stemmata accustom us; the filiation is instead like a complex net of interrelationships based on both direct and indirect influences.²²⁹

points out that Einar Gilsson composed *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar* between 1350 and 1370 and that Magnús Þórhallsson copied it in *Flateyjarbók*.

²²⁴ Hughes (2005:206).

²²⁵ *Kolsbók* (Cod. Guelf. 42. 7. Aug. 4to, c. 1480-90); *Staðarhólsbók* (AM 604 4to, c. 1550) (Hughes 2005:206).

²²⁶ An exception is *Skíðaríma*, which, according to Vésteinn Ólason (1982:54), „is probably the only example of a medieval *ríma* where the story is invented by the poet himself.“

²²⁷ Mitchell (1991:137).

²²⁸ A useful means for the study of the relationships between *fornaldarsögur* and *rímur* is the website “Stories for all time: the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*” : <<http://am-dk.net/fasn/>>, developed by Matthew James Driscoll, which offers an accurate description of the existing *fornaldarsögur* and the correspondent *rímur*.

²²⁹ Mitchell (1991:138).

In fact, not only the *rímur* are based on *fornaldarsögur*, but also some *fornaldarsögur* are based on *rímur*, which are themselves based on *fornaldarsögur*²³⁰.

A clear example in this sense is *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, which is based on a *rímur* that is based on a now lost **Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*.²³¹ The interaction between several levels of literary production concerning *rímur* and sagas could also lead to hybrid texts combining elements from the old and the new prose versions.²³² This can help us understand the importance that *rímur* still have (or should have) in the field of the studies of Icelandic literature. Indeed, these narrative poems are in some cases the only surviving legacy of sagas that are now lost, as is the case for 14 extant *rímur*.²³³

It is worth making a distinction from the *rímur* descending directly from the traditional legendary material (as it is for example for *Prymlur*, whose primary source is an Eddic lay, *Þrymskviða*, or for *Lokrur*, whose subject is taken from a myth narrated in *Snorra Edda*²³⁴), and those that are only indirectly based on this material, for they descend from sagas based on the already mentioned ancient traditions. Besides these two different types of *rímur*, there are poems, e.g. the *Völsungs rímur*, which put together material from the *Poetic-Edda* and the *Völsunga saga*.²³⁵ Furthermore, while the later *rímur* are based especially on *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, the oldest ones take their subject from the *konungasögur* and even from the *þjóðsögur*, a term meaning “popular traditions”, therefore including legends and folklore.²³⁶ The *rímur* composed after the 17th century are based on later paper manuscripts and from published versions of the sagas.²³⁷

Not all *rímur* are based on Nordic material. In fact, some examples are present of *rímur* with biblical subject. Since the reformed church was hostile to this literary phenomenon based on traditions going back even to the heathen past of Iceland and more generally of Scandinavia, the ecclesiastical authorities encouraged the compilation of *rímur* based on the Bible, so that 27 biblical *rímur* have survived until the present

²³⁰ Quoting Mitchell (1991:137) once more: “Some of what we generally regard as *fornaldarsögur* are simply prose reworkings of *rímur*.”

²³¹ Mitchell (1991:137).

²³² Hughes (2005:211)

²³³ Hughes (2005:211).

²³⁴ Vésteinn Ólason (1982:53).

²³⁵ There are three examples of this type of *rímur* cycles (Vésteinn Ólason, 2006:58).

²³⁶ Mitchell (1991:164).

²³⁷ Mitchell (1991:164).

day. But these poetic compositions had not the same success as the other type of *rímur*: people were more interested in *rímur* that retained their original nature.²³⁸ Furthermore, some medieval *rímur* are based on European romances translated into Old Icelandic, as is the case with *Karlmagnús saga* and *Piðríks saga*. There are even examples of comical *rímur*: *Skiðaríma* is one of them, and others are based on legendary sagas and *riddarasögur*. In this last case, the theme is as usual the courage and the strength, but unlikely the traditional Germanic poetry, the situations are definitely comical.²³⁹

In the complex world of *rímur* it is not easy to find a common point to which all the elements of this phenomenon can go back to, for the production of this literary genre embraces a very long period of time (almost seven centuries) and is based on many components of the wide Icelandic literary field. But what is indubitable is the great success of *rímur*, a success that can be noticed considering the large number of extant compositions (226 from before 1700 century alone²⁴⁰), and that can be explained by assuming that the *rímur* were easy to memorize and less dependent from books. Even if they were meant to be read aloud, they could occasionally be sung and danced²⁴¹.

However, the success that *rímur* had in the late Middle Ages in Iceland did not injure the importance of the *fornaldarsögur*. On the contrary, this new genre contributed to the strengthening of the traditions that were bound to the old sagas.²⁴²

As was seen above, *rímur* take their themes and stories especially from old sagas, but also from the Eddic tradition. What about the metres and, more generally, the poetic form?

Studies on *rímur* have detected several types of metres, a fact that is not surprising if we keep in mind that the production of *rímur* embraces nearly seven centuries. The scholars have identified five types of metres that could be considered basic, at least because they are the most used ones in the long tradition of *rímur* and, which is perhaps more important, because they have parallels in the 12th, 13th and 14th

²³⁸ Hughes (2005:210).

²³⁹ Vésteinn Ólason (2006:58).

²⁴⁰ Hughes (2005:206).

²⁴¹ Vésteinn Ólason (2006:57).

²⁴² Mitchell (1991:138).

European poetry.²⁴³ However, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the basic metres from their further developments. What is common to all types of metre (not only to the basic ones) is that they are always stanzaic and never use a refrain. Each stanza is composed by a maximum of four lines, which are very short and connected one to another by alliteration and rhyme. The basic metres are namely *ferskeytt* (square metre), *stafhent*, *skáhent*, *úrkast* and *braghent*. The latter is the only one consisting of three lines per stanza, while the others are four-lines metres²⁴⁴.

The *ferskeytt*-metre is the one that can be most frequently encountered in the production of *rímur*. It consists of lines with alternately four and three stresses. The rhyme is abab. Differently from the *ferskeytt*-metre, *stafhent* has four four-stressed lines and the rhyme is aabb²⁴⁵. The third type of metre, *skáhent*, is closely related to *ferskeytt*, since the length of the lines is the same. The difference consists in the fact that the second stress in the 1st and 3rd lines rhymes with the last stress of the same line, but these lines do not rhyme with each other. On the other hand, the 2nd and the 4th lines rhyme together. Therefore, the rhyme scheme is aabccb. *Úrkast*, the last basic type of metre consisting in four lines²⁴⁶, has four stresses in the 1st and 3rd lines, but only two in the 2nd and 4th. The rhyme is abab. The last metre considered basic, *braghent*, consists in three lines, the first with 12 syllables, 8 in the second and the third²⁴⁷. It characterizes some of the oldest *rímur* and, according to Vésteinn Ólason (1982), is a mixture of the *ferskeytt* metre and the *stafhent*.

As far as the origin of these metres is concerned, it seems likely that they descend from the metrical forms used in European poetry, which arrived in Iceland through the mediation of the English tradition. The hypothesis according to which the *rímur* and their metres are to be considered as developments from only Skaldic poetry is no more supported by anyone.²⁴⁸ However, the genre of *rímur* owes to Skaldic poetry other features, concerning in particular linguistic aspects. In fact, *kennings* and *heiti* are

²⁴³ Vésteinn Ólason (1982:56-57).

²⁴⁴ The following presentation of metrical form is mainly based on Vésteinn Ólason (1982:57 ff).

²⁴⁵ The *samhent* is very similar to *stafhent*, but the rhyme is aaaa.

²⁴⁶ Other metres in four lines are *gagraljóð* and *stiklúvik*. The former has seven syllables per line and is rhymed abab, where the rhyming words are alternately masculine and feminine. The latter consists in seven syllables in the first, third and fourth lines and six in the second, and is rhymed axaa. Hughes (2005:208)

²⁴⁷ Hughes (2005:208)

²⁴⁸ Vésteinn Ólason (1982: 2006).

present in the *rímur*. The *kennings* are a characterizing feature of the Medieval Icelandic production, above all of Eddic poetry and *Snorra Edda*. As is well known, Snorri Sturluson wrote his *Edda* in order to explain the myths and legends that hid behind the *kennings* to the skalds who were supposed to know them and to utilize them in their compositions. Some *kennings* are very complex, not only because they refer to particular mythical situations, but also because they are composed by several elements. An example can be *Mævils hesta mistin[s] ljóma jörð* (“land of light of the land of the horses of Mævill [sea king] [>ships; land of the ships > sea; light of the sea > gold; land of gold > woman]”).²⁴⁹ Such complicated *kennings* are rare in the *rímur*, in which simpler combinations of words are preferred. Even *kennings* composed by three elements are unusual in the *rímur* production. Furthermore, a lacking knowledge of the mythological background and also some misunderstandings are noticeable in the use of *kennings* in the *rímur*. For example, the kenning *tár Friggjar* is the wrong form of *tár Freyju*.²⁵⁰

Mythological kennings are used without any hesitation, but limited knowledge of mythology, insufficient understanding of older poetry, and the influence of a florid style often yield corrupt kennings or paraphrases different in nature from true kennings.²⁵¹

This is also valid for the invented *kennings*, for not all of them were simply copied from Skaldic poems.²⁵²

Another feature that distinguishes the use of *kennings* in Skaldic poetry and in *rímur* is the fact that the words composing these periphrases were not distributed throughout the stanza, but they were kept together “so that the meaning remains transparent and easily accessible, an important feature for poetry that is primarily narrative in nature”²⁵³.

Most of the *kennings* are periphrases for “man” and “woman”. In this last case, they can refer to a specific woman, who can be the poet’s lover, a woman famous for

²⁴⁹ Hughes (2005:209)

²⁵⁰ Hughes (2005:209).

²⁵¹ Vésteinn Ólason (2006:58).

²⁵² Hughes (2005:209).

²⁵³ Hughes (2005:209).

her beauty or even a member of the audience.²⁵⁴ Sometimes there are *kennings* for “ship” and “battle”, and very often for “poetry”. Usually the source for this last type of *kennings* is *Skáldskaparmál*.²⁵⁵

One of the peculiarities of the *rímur* as a genre is the effective presence of the author of the poem in the context of the composition. The poet of the *rímur* is not a hidden entity that barely tells a story from a separate point of view, but he plays an active part in the composition, for he intervenes with comments and thoughts and speaks in the first person at the beginning and at the end of the *ríma*. He is therefore both a performer and a member of the audience, an audience that is a “listening partner implicit in the text of the *rímur*”.²⁵⁶

The interventions concern the performance situation and their aim is that of assuring that the material of his poem comes from an oral or a written source and not from the poet’s fantasy. Of course, in some cases, these references also have the more practical function of completing the verses with the number of syllables, rhymes and alliterations needed; but, on an extra-textual *niveau*, by means of these interventions the poet “reminds” his own presence and the listeners’ role of audience.²⁵⁷ In particular, assertions regarding the personal opinion of the author such as “I think/I believe” (*trú eg*) etc. serve as connectors between two levels, the fictional and that of the audience²⁵⁸, thus attempting to involve the listeners and make them appreciate the work of the poet. It should be kept in mind that the denomination “*rímur*” identifies groups of poems called “*ríma*” that were not necessarily performed in the same occasion. The performer could decide to tell only one *ríma* a evening and the following one the evening after. Consequently, the story itself was divided in pieces and, in order to keep the interest high, the performer intervened at the beginning of the *ríma* by saying for instance “Last time I/the *ríma* stopped where...”.²⁵⁹

The use of these interventions is not a prerogative of *rímur* alone. On the contrary, it has roots in other genres of the Icelandic literary world, whose components,

²⁵⁴ Kuhn (1990:462).

²⁵⁵ Kuhn (1990:462).

²⁵⁶ Kuhn (1990:454).

²⁵⁷ Kuhn (1990:456).

²⁵⁸ Kuhn (1990:461).

²⁵⁹ Kuhn (1990:457).

as is well known, are based not only on a long oral tradition, but were also intended to be performed orally. However, if in the poetic compositions such as Skaldic poems and *rímur* such interventions by the performer have come down to us because they are fixed in the poems and are effectively part of it, in prose texts they were lost when sagas were transposed from their oral form to the written one.²⁶⁰ To use an expression by Kuhn (1990:467), the sagas are “depersonalized”, while the “authorial presence” in Skaldic poems and *rímur* is still visible.

6.1 *Þrymlur*: an analysis

Þrymlur is a cycle of three *rímur* composed presumably around the year 1400²⁶¹ and preserved in a single manuscript, AM. 604 g., dated between 1540 and 1560 and produced in Iceland²⁶². The content of these *rímur* is mostly based on the Eddic poem known as *Þrymskviða*, but it also shows influences from the *Snorra Edda*.²⁶³ Although the story narrated in this group of poems follows the narrative in *Þrymskviða*, the *rímur* version adds several details, gives a general introduction to the theme, focuses on the description of the locations, the characters (both esthetically and “psychologically”) and the events.

In short, the story deals with the following situation: the giant Þrymr, lord of the *þurs*, has stolen Þórr’s hammer while he was sleeping. The god, enraged for the theft, asks Freyja for her bird-suit, so that Loki, in this case depicted as a helper of the protagonist, can fly to Jötunnheim and get information about the hammer. Loki finds out that the responsible for the disappearance of the powerful object was actually Þrymr, who has hidden the hammer and demands the hand of the goddess Freyja as ransom. Of course, none of the gods wants to let Þrymr marry the most beautiful woman of Ásgarðr, so they gather in order to discuss on what needs to be done. The god Heimdallr suggests the possibility of deceiving the giants by disguising Þórr as a woman and presenting him as Þrymr’s future bride. The god accepts to dress as a woman and

²⁶⁰ Kuhn (1990:467-468).

²⁶¹ Von See (1997:517).

²⁶² The manuscript, called *Rímnabók*, contains other *rímur*: *Þrændlur*, *Færeyinga rímur*, *Rímur af Sörla sterka*, *Óðins rímur*, *Lokrur*, *Völsungsrímur* (<<http://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/AM04-0604g>>).

²⁶³ Jónsson (1912:278).

together with Loki he travels to the land of giants. The trick is successful: the two fake ladies are welcomed by Þrymr and his retinue, but, when the lord of the *þurs* asks for the hammer to be carried to him, Þórr reveals himself and kills the whole kin of giants.

As mentioned before, this cycle of poems is divided in three fitts, each one having a different metrical structure.

The first part is composed of 29 stanzas of 4 verses in *ferskeytt*-metre; it shows in fact an abab rhyme scheme and verses characterized alternatively by four and three stresses. Let us take as an example the third stanza:

3. Fenris ulfren frænde hans,
frægr er hann af Gleipni;
margr hefr það mælt til sanns
at móðir sé hann að Sleipni.²⁶⁴

The second part is composed of 23 stanzas of 3 verses each. The metre is *braghent*, for the end rhyme scheme is aaa and the first verse has 12 syllables, while the second and the third have 8 syllables. E.g. stanza 2:

2. Þá nam kallsa þessi orð við þellu veiga:
“Viltu nokkuð jötuninn eiga?
Ýtum gjörir hann kosti seiga.”²⁶⁵

The third and last part has 27 stanzas composed of 4 verses, each having 4 stresses. The rhyme scheme is aabb. The metre is therefore *stafhent*. Let us take for example the second stanza:

2. “Ekki svaf hun um átján dægr,”
- Óðins talaði þrælinn slægr, -
“svó var hun hingað Freyja fús,

²⁶⁴ Jónsson (1912:278). Since the edition by Jónsson does not report any diachritical mark, I have based the quotations also on the normalized text presented in the [heimskringla.no](http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymlur_I-III) website: <http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymlur_I-III>.

²⁶⁵ Jónsson (1912:282).

Fari nu men ok tialdið hús.”²⁶⁶

The author’s presence is inferable in the *rímur* by means of comments in the first person by the poet himself. These interventions, as we have seen, have a double function: they complete the verses with the syllables and stresses needed, but they are also used in order to assure the audience that what the performer is reciting is not his invention, but that he has learned it in some kind of source.

The construction *frá eg* (“I heard”; “I have been told”), occurs four times (part I, stanza 1, verse 1; st. 7, v. 3; part III, st. 4, v. 3; st. 10, v. 1). In part I, st. 9, v. 1 the author says *sem greint var mér*, which means “as I have been told”. In the 5th stanza of part II, verse 2, there is the expression *trú eg* (“I think; I believe”), and in stanza 11, verse 1, the poet says *sem eg vil greina* (“as I want to tell”).

The second and the third *rímur* have a short introduction, and every part has its own conclusion. Part I ends with the verse *Falli þan veg ríma*: “Thus ends [falls] the ríma”; the second part begins with this interesting line: *Höldum færi eg Herjans snekkju, hróðar barða*. Herjan is another name of the god Óðinn, thus the sentence refers to Óðinn’s ship, presumably a *kenning* for poetry²⁶⁷. The poet seems therefore to invoke the poetic inspiration that will help him go on telling his story. The second *ríma* ends, very much like to the first one, with the words *Þar mun bragrinn verða falla*, which means “here ends [falls] the poem”. The use of the term *bragr* to refer to a poetic composition is interesting, for this word, as it is told by Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda*, is connected to the god Bragi, whose eloquence and ability with words is so famous that poetry is called *bragr* (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 14 [26])²⁶⁸. The third part begins with the verses *Þar skal brátt enn þriðja mærd / þegna sveit af aflli færð*. The last stanza of this cycle of *rímur* is entirely dedicated to a sort of description of the composition that has been recited so far:

²⁶⁶ Jónsson (1912:285).

²⁶⁷ This suggestion is confirmed by Homan (1975:347). In his translation of *Skíðaríma*, the scholar explains that the expression „Fjölur had an old boat“ (stanza 6) indicates a poem.

²⁶⁸ *Bragi heitir ein, hann er ágætr at speki ok mest at malsnild ok orðfimi; hann kann mest af skaldskap, ok af honum er bragr kallaðr skaldskapr [...]* (Jónsson 1931:32).

27. Þrymlur heiti þetta spil,
þann veg gekk um hamarinn til;
eignist sá, sem óðar biðr,
ekki skal þeim kasta niðr.²⁶⁹

As it is valid for other *rímur*, it is probable that also the parts composing *Þrymlur* were recited in different occasions. A clue in this sense is given by the end of part I and the beginning of part II:

29. Reiðan gjörði Rögnis kund
rétt í þenna tíma;
Þór gekk upp á Freyju fund.
Falli þan veg ríma.²⁷⁰

1.Höldum færi eg Herjans snekkju, hróðar barða.
Fyst kom upp í Freyiu garða
Fjölnis burr með reiði harða.²⁷¹

If one compares the third verse of stanza 29 and the second verse of stanza 1, it can be noticed that their meaning is almost the same: both describe Þórr going to Freyja's residence. Moreover, also the first line of stanza 29 and the third line of stanza 1 tell about Þórr's anger. The similarity of the two verses becomes more evident if we consider the fact that in both cases Þórr is defined with a *kenning*. In the first case, he is called *Rögnis kund*, meaning "son of Rögnir", one of Óðinn's names²⁷², while in the second case he is named *Fjölnis burr*, meaning "son of Fjölnir", again a name of Óðinn (*Gylfaginning* 11 [20]). The apparent redundancy of information given by such close lines can be explained by taking into consideration the possibility that the two parts were recited in different moments, or at least with a pause in the middle.

²⁶⁹ Jónsson (1912:288).

²⁷⁰ Jónsson (1912:282).

²⁷¹ Jónsson (1912:282).

²⁷² Cleasby, Vigfusson (1957:507).

By analyzing the final episodes of every *ríma*, it can be inferred that the skilled author of *Prymlur* has decided to interrupt the narration of every section with a *spannend* scene, thus creating expectation and suspense. The first part concludes, as we have just seen, with Þórr going to visit Freyja. The listeners are consequently led to wonder what is happening next, how the situation is going to evolve. The second part ends even more with *Spannung*: during the wedding-banquet at Þrymr's residence, the giant notices that the "bride", i.e. Þórr disguised as Freyja, behaves strangely. In particular, his eyes are in flames for the hate and the wrath Þórr feels for Þrymr and his companions. Even in this case, the fact of interrupting the narration at this point seems to be part of a strategy whose aim is that of involving the audience by making it wonder: how is this problem going to be solved, now that the giant is about to discover the trick? Will Þórr and Loki be able to get out from this dangerous situation?

The plot of *Prymskviða* was quite known²⁷³, therefore probably most of the listeners were already aware of what was going to happen. But maybe it is precisely for this reason that the author of the *rímur* needed to make the story more dynamic by interrupting it in the central moments of the narration.

Let us briefly consider some other linguistic aspects of *Prymlur*. The language used is quite simple, there are not refined terms, some words recur several times²⁷⁴, and there are not *kennings* of particular complexity. Some of the terms used are in their modern form (e.g. *hnífr* [knife], whose ancient form is *knífr*).

As far as the *kennings* are concerned, these poetic elements almost always refer to characters. The most frequent kennings identify Þórr by calling him *Herjans burr* (part I, s. 8, v. 2), *Grímnis kundr* (I, 10, 3), *Rögnis kund* (I, 29, 1), *Fjölnis burr* (II, 1, 3), in which the first element is always one of Óðinn's names and the second one means "son". Other *kennings* regard Loki, and they are very interesting since they define him as Óðinn's slave or servant (*Fjölnis þjón* [I, 21, 1], *Óðins þræl* [I, 21, 3; III, 2, 2]), while once he is called Nál's son (*Nálar burr*) (III, 12, 2). Nál is another name of Laufey²⁷⁵, Loki's mother. The identification of Loki as Óðinn's servant is particular, since, as far as I know, the two gods are not bound by any slave-lord relationship.

²⁷³ This aspect is confirmed by the spreading of works based on the theme of *Prymskviða* from the late Middle Ages onwards. For a deeper overview on this topic, see Von See (1997:514-519).

²⁷⁴ For instance, this is the case of the word *ljótr* (ugly), used in several occasions to describe giants.

²⁷⁵ Gylfaginning 19 (33).

Prymlur begins with a long introduction (11 stanzas) to the characters of the composition: in the first stanza²⁷⁶ the god Heimdallr²⁷⁷ is briefly described. In the second stanza, whose first verse is incomplete, Ullr and Loki are introduced. The stanzas 3 and 4 are dedicated to Loki's children, i.e. the wolf Fenrir and Hel. The following stanzas of the introduction, i.e. 5-11, describe Þórr and his powerful objects, i.e. the hammer Mjöllnir (st. 7-8), the belt (st. 9) and the steel gloves (st.10). The main source for the information contained in these stanzas is most likely *Snorra Edda*. In fact, even the order with which the gods Heimdallr, Ullr, Loki and his children are presented follows the one proposed by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* 15 (27)- 22 (34). This is valid also with respect to the description of Þórr's objects in *Snorra Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 11 [22]). In *Prymlur* also the dwarf Atli is mentioned. This dwarf is the skilled smith who forged Mjöllnir; the episode is narrated in *Skáldskaparmál* 5. As far as the powerful objects is concerned, the only divergence between *Prymlur* and *Snorra Edda* consists in the fact that in the former it is said that Þórr has iron gloves (*iarnglofar*), while in the latter they are made of steel (*glófa átti Grimnis kundr, / gjörðir vóru af stále*).

The effective narration begins with stanza 12, which tells of a feast organized by Þórr after which the giant Þrymr, while everybody is sleeping, steals Mjöllnir. There is no mention of this feast neither in *Þrymskviða* nor in other sources, for, as we have seen, the material of this Eddic poem is not treated anywhere else²⁷⁸. From stanza 13 of *Prymlur* the main source for the narration becomes *Þrymskviða*. At this point, in order to understand the relationship between these two compositions, it is worth focusing shortly on the Eddic lay functioning as the principal base for the cycle of *rímur* we are analyzing.

²⁷⁶ In the manuscript, this stanza occurs after the 7th one, but has been moved to the first place in the edition by Bugge (Torsvisen, 1987:83) and consequently by Jónsson (Rímnasafn, 1912:278).

²⁷⁷ Heimdæll in *Prymlur*. This form is late and used only in *rímur* (Cleasby, Vigfusson 1957:250).

²⁷⁸ A parallelism could be detached between the topic of the feast in *Prymlur* and in *Beowulf*, for in both stories the monstrous creature (Þrymr in *Prymlur* and Grendel in *Beowulf*) intervene while everybody, including the warriors, is at sleep. This is not the place to speculate on this element, but it is not impossible that the author *Prymlur* had known *Beowulf*, for, as we have seen, the contacts between the Icelandic and the English world were not unusual in the late Middle Ages.

6.2 *Prymskviða* and *Prymlur*: a comparison.²⁷⁹

Prymskviða is an Eddic poem of 32 stanzas preserved in Codex Regius (R) and in late paper manuscripts.²⁸⁰ The story narrated in *Prymskviða* is not told anywhere else, neither in *Snorra Edda*²⁸¹ nor in any skaldic poem. This, together with the fact that *Prymskviða* shows connections with other late Eddic lays and that it has similarities with the genre of ballads, has led to the assumption that the date of composition is quite late, i.e. the 13th century.²⁸² The poem has always been well known. Evidence to this is the quite long list of other poetic and prose compositions, but even musical works, inspired by *Prymskviða*²⁸³, among which there is of course the cycle of *rímur* known as *Prymlur*.

The theme of the loss of a magical object recurs in other mythical traditions, even outside the Germanic area. This has led some scholars (Dumézil 1924; Schröder 1965) to suppose that the motif is Indo-European. In particular, such scholars have compared the material of *Prymskviða* with the vedic legend of the theft of Soma's beverage.²⁸⁴ Other connections can be detected with the Dionysiaka by Nonnos (5th century after Christ), in which is narrated of the giant Typhon who steals Zeus' bolt while the god is sleeping. Zeus will get his powerful object back with the help of Kedmos, disguised as shepherd. Also the Hittite legends concerning the fight between the god of weather and the dragon Illujankaš and the Song of Ullikummi show similarities with the theme of the loss of a magical object.²⁸⁵ However, as has been

²⁷⁹ In this chapter, the quoted part of *Prymskviða* are taken from the website of the „Heimskringla Project“: <<http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymskvi%C3%B0a>>.

²⁸⁰ Von See (1997:511).

²⁸¹ In order to explain this feature, De Vries (1927:297, 301-304) has suggested that the origin of *Prymskviða* is to be searched in Norway, and not in Iceland. Others, e.g. Hallberg (1954) and Kvillerlund (1965), support the thesis according to which the poem was composed in a developed literary milieu, and maybe even by Snorri himself, who for this reason would not have reported it in his *Edda*. But Magerøy (1958) has stressed another important aspect. Since *Prymskviða* differs from other compositions because its basic element is the verse and not the stanza, it is hard to believe that Snorri, whose interest was that of transmitting and preserving the poetic tradition, would have composed a poem with such stylistic peculiarities (Von See 1997:513-514, 520).

²⁸² Von See (1997:526). This hypothesis has been supported especially by De Vries (1927).

²⁸³ See Von See (1997:517-519) for further information.

²⁸⁴ Von See (1997:512-513).

²⁸⁵ Von See (1997:514-515). These parallelisms have been pointed out by Masing (1944), Schröder (1965), Wais (1952).

pointed out before, the theories proposing a common matrix of Indo-European legends have been heavily criticized.

Scholars have also connected the theme of the loss of the hammer in *Þrymskviða* with aspects bound to fertility, to which Þórr is closely related. Up to the first decades of the 20th century, many studies have focused on the “seasonal” meaning of the material of the composition. With respect to this, the hammer Mjöllnir would symbolize rain and bolts, while Þrymr, a term meaning “uproar”, would play the part of the winter storm. The whole story would then be a spring myth about the absence of thunder storms during winter. In order to get the bolts back, Þórr, symbolizing summer, has to dress up as Freyja, symbolizing spring.²⁸⁶ Vestlund (1919) has even suggested that the poem is part of a rite whose function was that of calling the rain.²⁸⁷ On the other hand, recent studies (Clunies Ross 1994b; Perkins 1994) have led to the assumption that the hammer is a symbol of virility, and that its loss means lack of masculinity. In fact, the function of the hammer as amulet against sterility is stressed not only in *Þrymskviða* itself (in particular when, in stanza 30, the hammer is used in order to bless the bride), but also, as reported by Elgquist (1934) and Wikman (1959), by the Swedish lore of putting a hammer in the wedding bed and of using it during the wedding rites.²⁸⁸

Although the theme of the poem is presumably very ancient and can be considered as a mirror of old heathen beliefs, the parodic intent of the whole composition is undeniable. The motif of the most masculine of the gods who dresses up like a woman in order to recover an object that probably symbolizes his virility must have been hilarious. The comical aspects of the scene are stressed by the fact that the other Æsir and Loki amusingly give Þórr suggestions about how he should dress. Furthermore, even the fact that the god has to wear a cloth called *faldr*, which is the typical female dress up to the 18th century in Iceland, enhances Þórr’s embarrassment and consequently the hilarity of the whole episode.²⁸⁹

This topic is nevertheless very important if one considers the myths regarding Þórr as a whole figure. As has been seen in chapter 1, the relationship between the god Þórr and femininity, an aspect that is usually bound to sexuality, is often conflicting. As

²⁸⁶ Von See (1997:512). Such hypothesis have been supported by Uhland (1868) and Bergman (1878).

²⁸⁷ Von See (1997:512).

²⁸⁸ Von See (1997:512).

²⁸⁹ Perkins (1986:280).

has been proposed by Lindow (1988), giants and monstrous creatures are often associated to femininity, and in several stories Þórr expresses his violence against giantesses. This is evident also in *Þrymskviða*, and consequently in *Þrymlur*, in which Þrymr's sister is depicted in a very negative way. But the most interesting aspect of this issue concerns the theme of Þórr wearing female clothes. Clunies Ross (1994a:65) has stressed the rivalry existing between Þórr and two other important gods: Óðinn and Loki. The Eddic lay *Hárbarðsljóð*, as we have seen, expresses such a relationship between Þórr and his father, who in this episode fight verbally on topics regarding also women. Óðinn underlines his ability in seducing them (stanzas 16, 18), while Þórr stresses his warrior skills by affirming that, while Óðinn was lying with beautiful girls, he was killing giants (st. 19) and above all giantesses (st. 23, 37, 39) in the East. These can be perceived as two ways of representing masculinity, and it is clear that Þórr rejects Óðinn's model because sexual desire is too closely connected to his main enemies, i.e. giantesses. But it is the relation with Loki that is particularly important in this context. Loki is definitely an ambiguous figure, not only because, as has been pointed out above, he is both ally and enemy to the Æsir, but also because he embodies both masculine and feminine features. He does not avoid changing his gender in order to accomplish his tricks, and in such occasions he can also generate children, usually with unnatural characteristics²⁹⁰. By considering these elements, it becomes clear why in *Þrymskviða* Loki does not show any reluctance in wearing feminine clothes. Þórr, on the contrary, is forced to deny his nature, to become what he has always fought. The comical elements of this episode are therefore evident²⁹¹.

All these elements can be defined as “burlesque” and can be identified especially in stanza 13 (Freyja enraging for the giant's proposal), 15-17 (Heimdallr suggesting to dress up Þórr), 19-20 (Þórr and Loki wearing feminine clothes), 25-29 (the wedding feast, during which Þórr eats and drinks exaggeratedly and Loki has to invent some

²⁹⁰ The clearest example is the episode, narrated in *Gylfaginning*, in which Loki turns into a mare in order to distract the stallion of the giant who is building the gods' fortress. After this encounter, he gives birth to Sleipnir, an eight legged horse.

²⁹¹ With respect to the theme of Þórr's dressing up, Damico (Damico, Helen (1986), *Þrymskviða* and *Beowulf's Second Fight: The Dressing of the Hero in Parodt*, in: *SS* 58, p. 407-428.) has proposed another interpretation by identifying in this scene the European *topos* of the hero who arms himself before a fight. This theme, which in other works, e.g. *Beowulf*, is treated very seriously, is to be seen in *Þrymskviða* as a parody of the military *milieu*.

excuses in order to justify this strange behavior).²⁹² In particular, the last stanzas mentioned imply the ironic element consisting in the fact that the audience knows who the bride and the maid really are.²⁹³

Let us now go back to *Prymlur*. As we have seen, the real parallelism between this group of *rímur* and *Prymskviða* can be detected from stanza 13 of *Prymlur*, even though the description of the facts differs considerably. Let us compare stanzas 13 and 14 in *Prymlur* with stanzas 1 and 2 in *Prymskviða*:

Prymlur:

13. Brögðin taka að birtast stór,
Er bragnar vóru í svefni;
Hamarinn Mjöllnir hvarf frá Þór,
Hér eru brögð í efni.

14. Hvergi fengu hamri náð,
hvar sem ýtar fóru,
eingi hittir jötna láð,
allir þrotnir vóru.²⁹⁴

Prymskviða:

1. Vreiðr var þá Vingþórr
er hann vaknaði
ok síns hamars
of saknaði,
skegg nam at hrista,
skör nam at dýja,
réð Jarðar burr
um at þreifask.

²⁹² Von See (1997:521).

²⁹³ Von See (1997:521).

²⁹⁴ Jónsson (1912:280).

2. Ok hann þat orða
 alls fyrst of kvað:
 "Heyrðu nú, Loki,
 hvat ek nú mæli
 er eigi veit
 jarðar hvergi
 né upphimins:
 áss er stolinn hamri!"²⁹⁵

The divergences that can be noticed are evident. First of all, in *Þrymlur* the responsible for the theft of the hammer, i.e. Þrymr, has been introduced before (stanza 12). Consequently the audience already knows what happened during the night. In *Þrymskviða*, on the contrary, the narration begins with Þórr waking up, noticing the lack of the hammer and telling this to Loki. In *Þrymlur*, Loki is absent and will intervene only later as a sort of messenger of Þórr and Freyja.

The parallelisms between *Þrymlur* and *Þrymskviða* continue with stanzas 15 and 16 of *Þrymlur*, corresponding to stanza 3 in *Þrymskviða*. Here Þórr goes to Freyja's court in order to ask her for her *fjaðrhamr*, a winged dress that will allow Loki to fly to Jötunheim²⁹⁶. In *Þrymskviða* Loki is chosen to be the one to visit giantland presumably because he is the first one to become aware of the loss of the hammer. In *Þrymlur*, as we have seen, Þórr does not speak to Loki when he notices the disappearance of Mjöllnir, but he is sent to Jötunheim because he is "the most able in causing ruin" (*granda fæst*) and "the best in tricks" (*bragðadrjúga*).

Freyja accepts to lend her *fjaðrhamr* to Loki, who begins his journey to Jötunheim. There he meets Þrymr, sitting on a mound²⁹⁷, who asks Loki for news²⁹⁸ and informs him that the hammer is hidden nine feet underground (*níu feta niðr í jörð*). This element differs sensibly from the information provided in *Þrymskviða*, for in the Eddic

²⁹⁵ < <http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymskvi%C3%B0a>>.

²⁹⁶ For an overview on the motif of such bird-suit in other sources, see Von See (1997:515).

²⁹⁷ The motif of the giant sitting on a mound or a hill occurs also in *Völuspá* (42), in *Skáldskaparmál* 10 and 11 and in some sagas. For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Von See (1997:516).

²⁹⁸ In *Þrymskviða* (stanza 7, line 1) Þrymr asks: „Hvat er með ásum? Hvat er með alfum?“. Such questions are the same occurring in *Völuspá* (48:1-2), but there is no trace of them in *Þrymlur*, where the giant simply says: "hvað hefr kall í fréttum?" (stanza 22, line 4).

poem Þrymr affirms that he has buried Mjöllnir eight miles (*átta röstum*)²⁹⁹ under the surface of the earth. Another significant difference between *Þrymlur* and its main source is the order with which Þrymr's discourse is structured. In *Þrymskviða*, the succession of the information given by the giant is 1) admission of the responsibility for the theft of the hammer; 2) identification of the hammer's hiding-place; 3) demand for Freyja's hand. In *Þrymlur* this sequence is partially changed, i.e. the last two points are inverted, as if the author of the *rímur* wanted to highlight Þrymr's unscrupulousness by making him say what he desired and only in a second moment what he had to give back.

Furthermore, in *Þrymskviða* the description of Loki's journey back to Ásgarðr is present (stanza 9), while in *Þrymlur* this scene is totally absent, and, after the dialogue between Þrymr and Loki, the narration goes on with Þórr asking Loki what the results of his quest are (stanza 27).

After the verses describing Loki's report, the first part concludes with a wrathful Þórr going again to Freya's residence. The second part, as we have seen, begins where the first part ends, and the narration goes on from stanza 2 and 3, in which Þórr speaks to Freyja about the giant's request:

2. Þá nam kallsa þessi orð við þellu veiga:

“viltu nokkuð jötuninn eiga?

Ýtum gjörir hann kosti seiga.”

3. Hann greinir mál, en gullaðs skorðu gjörir svó hljóða:

”þigg nú málm og menið hið góða”;

mælti síðan sprundið rjóða.³⁰⁰

This scene corresponds to the 12th stanza of *Þrymskviða*³⁰¹:

²⁹⁹ See Von See (1997:539).

³⁰⁰ Jónsson (1912:282).

³⁰¹ The confrontation of these parts of text can make a contribute to a discussion that has been focusing on the problem of who is speaking in stanza 12 of *Þrymskviða*. According to Gering and Jónsson (*De gamle eddadigte*, 1932:116), such words are pronounced by Loki, who in the Eddic lay accompanies Þórr visiting Freyja, while Perkins (1986-1989:284) points out that here it is Þórr who speaks. The version transmitted in *Þrymlur* confirms Perkins' hypothesis, although it could be inferred that, as we have seen, Loki is totally absent in the first part of the narration in this cycle of *rímur*, therefore the author would not have had other choice than making Þórr pronounce these words. Anyway, it could be also pointed out that an aspect that to us is ambiguous could have been clear to the poet who based his *rímur* on *Þrymskviða*.

12. Ganga þeir fagra
 Freyju at hitta,
 ok hann þat orða
 alls fyrst ok kvað:
 ”Bittu þik, Freyja,
 brúðar líni;
 vit skulum aka tvau
 í Jötunheima.”³⁰²

In *Prymlur*, Þórr tells Freyja to wear her best golden jewels and necklaces (st. 3, line 2). Again, this detail differs from *Prymskviða*, in which, according to the speaker, the goddess should wear a bride-linen (st. 12, l. 3). Even more evident is the difference in Freyja’s reaction in the two poems. In fact, in *Prymlur* she obviously rejects this idea, but not with the same energy that characterizes her reaction in *Prymskviða*, where she becomes furious and says:” *Mik veiztu verða / vergjarnasta / ef ek gekk með þér / í Jötunheima.*” The comical element of this scene, connected to the fame of lust surrounding Freyja³⁰³, is therefore missing in *Prymlur*³⁰⁴.

In order to decide how to recover Þórr’s hammer, Óðinn summons an assembly of the gods, as it is told in stanza 7, corresponding to stanza 14 of *Prymskviða*. In both poems, it is Heimdallr who suggests the trick consisting in disguising Þórr as Freyja, but once again another comical moment of *Prymskviða* is missing in *Prymlur*. In the Eddic lay, in fact, Þórr initially rejects the proposal by affirming that he will be considered a pervert if he dresses like a woman. This element is lacking in *Prymlur*, where Þórr begins immediately to wear female clothes and jewels. Even such a feature could have been subjected to censorship since it is an aspect that is too closely connected to the

This aspect highlights once more the importance that the study of *rímur* can have in understanding also other expressions of Old Icelandic literature.

³⁰² < <http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymskvi%C3%B0a>>.

³⁰³ Also in *Lokasenna* 30 Freyja is accused by Loki to have shared her bed with many gods and elves.

³⁰⁴ Two hypotheses can be proposed in order to explain such feature. On one hand, it could be pointed out that the author of *Prymlur* decided to omit this element because the Christian audience lacked of sufficient knowledge of the pagan myth and would not have understood the implications of such an affirmation by Freyja. On the other hand, since such an element is definitely bound to sexuality, this aspect could have been censored.

field of sexuality. We will return later to this topic. Anyway, the description of Þórr and Loki's dressing is detailed (st. 10-12), so that the result is in any case comical.

From stanza 13 to stanza 20 of *Prymlur* there seems not to be correspondence with *Prymskviða*; the content of this portion of text is probably fruit of the author's own fantasy³⁰⁵. In fact, no parallelism with *Snorra Edda* can be detected with respect to these stanzas dealing with the arrival of Þórr and Loki in Jötunheim³⁰⁶, where the giant Þrymr asks why Þórr is absent. The cunning Loki answers that the owner of Mjöllnir is waiting at home for the return of his hammer. It is in this scene that the function of Loki becomes clear: he is there to fulfill the deception and to invent excuses in order to explain the strange things happening at the court of giants:

16. Þegnar koma í þussagarð, er þundar heitir
úti stóðu jötna sveitir,
allir vóru furðu-teitir.

17. »Því kom ekki Ásaþór með yðr til veislu?
honum mun verða gjöf til greislu;
gjört var slíkt að vórri beislu«.

18. Seggrinn talaði sæmdar-gjarn við sína rekka;
»hamarinn veldur hann fær ekka,
heima trú eg hann vili drekka«.

19. Þegnum heilsar þussa gramur Þrymr í kífi,
Grímni þótti gaman að lífi,
glotti þegar og hyggr að vífi.

20. Flagðavinrinn fífla vill til fljóðs í vagni,
eigi skyldi hann yglast magni,

³⁰⁵ It is of course possible that the poet of *Prymlur* was aware of another tradition, unknown to us, reporting the details that are missing in *Prymskviða*. A deep study on these *rímur* could give answer to this issue.

³⁰⁶ In stanza 16, verse 1 of *Prymlur* it is said that *Þegnar koma í þussagarð, er Þundar heitir*. The name of this place, Þundar, is not attested anywhere else (Jónsson 1912:288).

Æsum kom nú brögð að gagni.³⁰⁷

The second *ríma* ends, as we have seen, with a difficult moment for the gods: Þrymr tries to kiss the disguised Þórr, and the god reacts with an enraged glance, so much that his eyes seem to be burning:

22. Brúsi sagði brögðin ljót á bauga-eyju:
“Því eru öndótt augu Freyju?
ekki list oss bragð á meyju.”³⁰⁸

This stanza corresponds to stanza 27 of *Þrymskviða*:

27. Laut und línu,
lysti at kyssa,
en hann útan stökk
endlangan sal:
"Hví eru öndótt
augu Freyju?
Þykki mér ór augum
eldr of brenna."

The third and last part of *Þrymlur* begins with Loki managing to find an explanation for the behavior of the false bride:

2. “Ekki svaf hun um átján dægr,”
-Óðins talaði þrælinn slægr,-
“svó var hun hínagað Freyja fús,
Fari nú men og tjaldið hús.”

Also in this case, the text reported in *Þrymlur* corresponds to the version reported in *Þrymskviða*:

³⁰⁷ Jónsson (1912:284).

³⁰⁸ Jónsson (1912:284).

28. Sat in alsnotra
ambótt fyrir,
er orð of fann
við jötuns máli:
"Svaf vætr Freyja
átta nóttum,
svá var hon óðfús
í Jötunheima." ³⁰⁹

The only difference that can be noticed concerns the fact that Freyja's eight sleepless nights (*átta nóttum*) in *Þrymskviða* have become eight days (*átján dægr*) in *Þrymlur*. However, this divergence can be explained by considering metrical aspects of this cycle of *rímur*: since the author needed a monosyllabic word, he chose to write *dægr* instead of *nóttum*.

The narration goes on with the description of the wedding banquet and with its participants. This part of the poem, which contains many details that are absent in *Þrymskviða*, occupies a different position with respect to the narrative sequence of the Eddic lay. In fact, in *Þrymskviða* the banquet starts immediately after the arrival of Þórr and Loki, and the scene of Þrymr trying to kiss the false Freyja occurs afterwards. In *Þrymlur*, the order of the two episodes is inverted³¹⁰:

3. Síðan settist brúðr á bekk,
Baugi alt til veislu fekk;
bar hun af flestum brúðum stærð
býsna-digr og allvel hærð.

4. Loptur svaf hjá lauka rein,
leist hun vera sem þernan ein;
tröllin frá eg að tóku upp borð,

³⁰⁹ < <http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymskvi%C3%B0a>>.

³¹⁰ As was seen above, the part of text describing Þrymr trying to kiss the fake Freyja corresponds to the last stanza (21-23) of part II. As far as the other stanzas reporting the scene of the banquet are concerned, they will be quoted in the following chapter (pp. 96, 99).

talaði brúðrin ekki orð.

5. Allir skipuðust jötnar tólf
öðru megin við hallar gólf,
hlaupa upp með heimsku á bekk,
hefr sá verr að fyr þeim gekk.³¹¹

The narration continues with stanza 10, in which the author of *Þrymlur* bases again his material on *Þrymskviða*. This stanza corresponds to the 24th stanza of the Eddic lay, in which Þórr's enormous hunger and thirst are described. The only difference that can be noticed concerns the amount of food consumed by the protagonist: in *Þrymskviða* he is told to have eaten an ox and eight salmons, while in *Þrymlur* the salmons are twelve:

10. Uxa frá eg að æti brúðr,
ekki var þeira leikrinn þrúðr,
lagði hun að sér laxa tólf
og lét þó aldri bein á gólf.

Even in this case, this divergence can be explained on the base of metrical constraints. In both versions, Þrymr is surprised by the strange behavior of his future wife, and once more it is Loki who explains the reason of the disguised Freya's hunger and solves the difficult situation by affirming that the woman was so longing for the land of giants that she has not eaten for fourteen nights (eight in *Þrymskviða*). The stanzas from 14 to 17 are dedicated to the description of Þórr drinking a lot. It is then clear that the whole comical scene concerning the god's hunger and thirst are expanded in *Þrymlur*, while in *Þrymskviða* it occupies only three stanzas.

Stanzas 18 to 20, telling about a giantess who is asked by Þrymr to carry Mjöllnir, correspond to the stanzas 29 and 30 in *Þrymskviða*, but with an interesting

³¹¹ Jónsson (1912:285).

difference: in the Eddic lay the reason why the giant needs the hammer is clarified, while in the *ríma* this feature is not explained:

Þrymlur:

19. Kellíng þessi kemr í höll,
knýtt er hun ok bömluð öll;
hafði hun vetr um hundrað þrenn,
hvergi var hun þó bognuð enn.

20. "Syrpa eg vil senda þig,
sækja skaltu hamar fyrir mig
niðr æi jarðar neðsta part";
nú mun verða leikið mart.³¹²

Þrymskviða:

29. Inn kom in arma
jötna systir,
hin er brúðféar
biðja þorði:
"Láttu þér af höndum
hringa rauða,
ef þú öðlask vill
ástir mínar,
ástir mínar,
alla hylli.

30. Þá kvað þat Þrymr,
þursa dróttinn:
"Berid inn hamar
brúði at vígja,
lekkid Mjöllni

³¹² Jónsson (1912:287).

í meyjara kné,
vígið okkr saman
Várar hendi." ³¹³

In *Þrymskviða* it is said clearly that Þrymr needs Mjöllnir in order to bless the bride (*brúðr at vigja*), an aspect that, as we have seen, denotes the function of the hammer as amulet of fertility. In *Þrymlur* this issue is not present. We will return later to this aspect.

Once again, stanzas 22 to 26 present an expanded version of the text of *Þrymskviða*. In this section it is told of Þórr grasping his hammer and killing all giants. The long and detailed final sequence is proportioned to the length of the cycle of *rímur*, concluding with a long final scene, which is also the climax of the whole story:

22. Hamarinn kom í höllina stór,
hvórt mun nokkuð gleðjast Þór?
mærin þrífur Mjöllnir viðr; -
margir drápu skeggi niðr.

23. Sundr í miðju borðin brýtr,
brauð og vín um gólfið hrýtr,
jötnum vesnar heldr í hug,
hjartað þeira er komið á flug.

24. Braut hann í sundr í Beslu hrygg,
brúðrin fell þar eigi dygg,
síðan lemr hann tröllin tólf,
tennur hrjóta um hallar gólf.

25. Æsiligr var Ásaþór,
upp mun, reiddur hamarinn stór,
setti hann niðr á Sauðúnga kinn,

³¹³ < <http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymskvi%C3%B0a> >.

sökk hann þegar í hausinn inn.

26. Pústrað hefr hann pílta Rymr,
prettum var leikinn skálkrinn Þrymr,
hann fekk högg það hausinn tók,
höfuðið fast með afli skók.³¹⁴

The 27th and last stanza of *Þrymlur*, as has been seen above³¹⁵, functions as conclusion to the whole cycle and refers shortly to the theme treated in the cycle of *rímur*.

This comparison of *Þrymlur* and its main source, *Þrymskviða*, has put into relevance the close relationship between the two compositions, but it has also evidenced several divergences. Such differences concern principally the abundance in *Þrymlur* of further information as compared to *Þrymskviða*, underlining the most comical aspects of the situation. Some diverging elements, e.g. those concerning the amount of food eaten by Þórr or the number of the bride's sleepless nights, are probably due to metrical constraints. On the other hand, some features characterizing *Þrymskviða*, especially those connected to the sphere of sexuality, have been omitted in the cycle of *rímur*, maybe because they have been subjected to censorship.

Anyway, the divergences between *Þrymlur* and *Þrymskviða* denote, in my opinion, an attempt by the author of the cycle of *rímur* to personalize and to make more interesting a material that was widely known, as is proved by the numerous reworkings of *Þrymskviða*.

³¹⁴ Jónsson (1912:287).

³¹⁵ Pp. 75-76.

6.3 Þórr in *Prymlur*

Þórr is undoubtedly the protagonist of *Prymlur*. The whole story focuses on his quest for the recovery of his most precious object, a task that requires a very embarrassing effort: he has to wear female clothes and to play the part of the goddess Freyja in order to enter the land of giants. All aspects characterizing Þórr in Old Norse mythology are present in this story: his strength and virility, as well as his relationship to giants and to the feminine. However, as we shall see, the function of Þórr as god of fertility is missing, while in *Prymskviða* is present.

In the first part of *Prymlur*, a section consisting of 11 stanzas that can be considered as an introduction to the main pagan gods and their characteristics, Þórr is presented as the son of Óðinn, young³¹⁶, tall³¹⁷ and famous for his strength³¹⁸. He is also depicted as a warrior: part I, stanza 6, line reads *Harðan rýðr hann hjalta-kólf* (“he reddens the sword’s handle”), meaning that he kills many enemies.

The introduction to Þórr goes on with the description of his items. As has been shown above, the presentation of Þórr’s magical objects is based on *Snorra Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 11 [22]): the hammer Mjöllnir is identified as a creation by the dwarf Atli and described as a powerful item used against trolls:

7. Eitra dverg er Atli lét,
ágætt færið smíða,
Mjöllnir frá eg að hamarinn hét,
hann bar kappinn víða.

8. Þegar hann gekk með heipt í höll
Herjans burr enn júngí,

³¹⁶ Part I, stanza 8, line 2: *Herjans burr enn júngí*.

³¹⁷ Part I, stanza 6, lines 3-4: *hann var átta álna og tólf / upp á höfuð af ristum*.

³¹⁸ Part I, stanza 5, lines 3-4: *Ódensson var Ásaþór, / efldr stórum frægðum*; part I, stanza 10, line 1: *Undra-digr er örva Þundr*. The kenning *örva Þundr*, literary “Þundr’s (=Óðinn’s) arrow”, means “Óðinn’s man” (Homan 1975, p. 349, stanza 26), and consequently refers to Þórr.

meiddist bæði menn.og tröll,
er Mjöllnir reið að þungi.³¹⁹

Another powerful object is the belt (*gjarð*), which makes Þórr stronger than his opponents. The presentation of this item is peculiar, since Þórr is told to be the owner of more belts, while the Eddic tradition reports the existence of only one belt:

9. Gjarðir á hann, sem greint var mér,
gripirnir finnast fleiri,
þegar hann spennir þeim að sér,
þá er hann tröllum meiri.

This aspect is particularly interesting because the author of *Prymlur* stresses the truthfulness of such information (*sem greint var mér*), although in the prose *Edda* Snorri clearly writes about only one belt³²⁰.

The last objects are the gloves, which, as has been noticed above, in *Prymlur* are said to be made of steel, while in *Snorra Edda* they are described as iron gloves.

10. [...]
glófa átti Grímnis kundr,
gjörðir vóru af stáli.

11. Glófar vinna görpum mein,
greyptir hauka foldu,
hrífr hann með þeim harðan stein,
sem hendur væri í moldu.³²¹

Another discrepancy can be noticed here with respect to *Snorra Edda*. In Snorri's work it is clearly pointed out that Þórr needs the gloves in order to be able to

³¹⁹ Jónsson (1912:279).

³²⁰ *Gylfaginning*, 11 [21]. It could be inferred that the composer of this cycle of *rímur* was aware of another tradition reporting the existence of more belts. A deeper study on this topic could solve such problem.

³²¹ Jónsson (1912:279).

grasp Mjöllnir. In *Prymlur* the gloves are used directly as weapon, since in stanza 11 we are told that, with such items, Þórr's hands wrap his enemies, i.e. he strangles them.

As far as Þórr's personality is concerned, he is often described as a wrathful god who hardly manages to restrain his fury. In *Prymlur* this depiction is very highlighted, since in several passages adjectives and substantives denoting anger occur: part I, stanza 8, line 1: *Pegar hann gekk með heipt í höll*; part I, stanza 27, lines 1-2: *Æsir heim sá ilsku tér / allur reiði bólginn*; stanza 29, line 1: *reiðan gjörði Rögnis kund*; part II, stanza 1, line 3: *Fjöltnis burr með reiði harða*; stanza 13, line 3: *með reiða gekk það um löguna heima*; part III, stanza 25, line 1: *Æseligr var Ásaþór*. Furthermore, he is described as *ekki blíðr í máli* (not gentle in speech) and greedy: the scenes describing Þórr's enormous hunger and thirst are very detailed.

Another feature characterizing Þórr is the relationship between the god and the feminine. As we have seen, such relationship is very conflicting, and the episode in which the god has to disguise himself as a woman, besides the clear comical aspects of the situation, is connected to this topic. In *Prymlur*, this theme is even more emphasized. In fact, while in *Prymskviða* Þórr is only referred to as "woman" only in direct speech, i.e. when Þrymr and Loki talk about the "bride's" strange behavior, in *Prymlur*, more precisely from stanza 21, part II to stanza 22, part III, he is called *brúðr*³²² (bride) and *drós*³²³ or *mær*³²⁴ (girl) also in the rest of the narration. Moreover, the pronoun indicating Þórr is *hun*³²⁵ (she). This way of referring to the god is likely to have been very hilarious for the audience of *Prymlur*: not only the characters of the story describe Þórr as a woman, but also the narrator of the story itself does so. With respect to this, stanza 22, part III is very interesting:

22. Hamarinn kom í höllina stór,
hvórt mun nokkuð gleðjast Þór?

³²² Part II, stanza 21, line 3; part III, stanza 3, line 3; stanza 4, line 4, stanza 10, line 1; stanza 11, line 2; stanza 15, 2; stanza 16, line 4.

³²³ Part III, stanza 13, line 3.

³²⁴ Part III, stanza 22, line 3.

³²⁵ Part III, stanzas 3, line 3; stanza 10, line 3; stanza 13, line 1; stanza 17, line 4. In part III, stanza 4, line 2, the manuscript reports „hann“, but Jónsson emends it and substitutes it with „hun“.

mærin þrífur Mjöllnir viðr; -
margir drápu skeggi niðr.³²⁶

This scene, describing the hammer Mjöllnir being taken at the wedding banquet, precedes Þórr's reaffirmation of his identity and, consequently, of his gender. However, in the third line he is still called *mær* (girl), so that the result is definitively comical. After this stanza, Þórr is referred to again as *Ásaþórr*³²⁷ and as *hann* (he).

Another aspect to be considered is the relationship between Þórr and the giants. As we have seen, this is a recurrent topic in the literature concerning this god, and *Brymskviða* is a clear example in this sense. In *Brymlur*, the depiction of giants is very cured, and its aim is that of presenting these supernatural beings as similar to beasts.

Two stanzas of *Brymlur* mention some of the participants in the banquet. It is interesting to try to detect whether these names of giants are present in other texts or not, in order to understand the sources of the author, which in this case is not *Brymskviða*, where this list does not occur. The stanzas read as follows:

6. Þar var Surtr, Haki ok Hrymr,
höfðinginn var jötna Þrymr,
Sörkvir, Móði, Geitir ok Glámr,
Grímnir, Brúsi, Dofri ok Ámr.

7. Eigi var þeira flokkinn fríðr;
Fála kom inn ok Gríðr,
Hlökk ok Syrpa, Gjálp ok Greip;
geysiligt var þeira sveip.³²⁸

The first character to be mentioned is Surtr, which means “the Black”. This is the name of a well known giant who is connected with the fire that will destroy the

³²⁶ Jónsson (1912:287).

³²⁷ Part III, stanza 25, line 1.

³²⁸ Jónsson (1912: 285).

world at the end of days, i.e. during Ragnarök, as it is narrated in *Völuspá* 47, 52, 53. He is also mentioned in *Vafþrúðnismál* 17, 18 and 50, in *Fjölsvinnsmál* 24, in *Fáfnismál* 14, in *Gylfaginning* 4, where a quotation of *Völuspá* is reported, and in 37-39 (51).

The identification of the second character, Haki, is not equally easy. This name occurs also in *Skáldskaparmál* 74 and 78 and in *Háttatal* 94, but he is a saga king. Not even the meaning of the term is clear. *Haki* literary means “hook”, but it is probable that this term is to be associated to the verb *hakka*, meaning “to devour as a beast”³²⁹.

The third name is Hrymr, a giant mentioned only in *Völuspá* 50 and in a quotation of this stanza reported in *Gylfaginning* 38 (51).

Sörkvir occurs neither in *Snorra Edda* nor in the *Poetic Edda*, but Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957:621) indicate that this is a proper name appearing in *Landnámabók* and in *Fagrskinna*. However, it is not connected to a giant.

The case of Móði is interesting. This name does appear several times both in *Snorra Edda* (*Gylfaginning* 41 (53); *Skáldskaparmál* 9) and in the *Poetic Edda* (*Vafþrúðnismál* 51 and *Hymiskviða* 34), but he is always identified as one of Þórr’s sons. True enough, his mother is a giantess, but it is unlikely that the author of *Brymlur* has decided to mention him in the list of giants that in this situation are the worst enemies of Þórr. The meaning of the term is “wrath”, so maybe his name barely identifies a wrathful giant who has nothing to do with Þórr’s son.

Geitir as a character appears only in the Eddic lay known as *Grípispó* (introduction; st. 3, 4, 5), where he is defined as a man of a royal court. However, Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957:196) explain that this term means generically “giant”. This is therefore the case of a common name made proper name.

The name Glámr occurs neither in *Snorra Edda* nor in the *Poetic Edda*, but Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957:203) indicate that this can be considered as poetic name of the moon as well as the name of a ghost in *Grettis saga*.

Even the case of Grímnir is interesting. Once again, this name occurs both in the *Poetic Edda* (*Grímnismál*) and in the corresponding quotation in *Gylfaginning* 11 (20), but it is one of the names of Óðinn and has nothing to do with giants. However Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957:216) point out that in poetry a serpent is called *grímr*.

³²⁹ Cleasby, Vigfusson (1957:232).

The name Brúsi identifies a giant mentioned in Fms. Iii, 214, but he does not occur in any *Edda*.

Dofri is the name of a giant in *Bárðar saga*.

Ámr as a name is only mentioned in the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð* 22, but Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957:43) identify it as an adjective meaning “black, loathsome” occurring also in *Gylfaginning*, where it metaphorically indicates a giant.

The 7th stanza of the third part of *Prymlur* deals with giantesses. The first to be mentioned is Fála, which is not a proper name (it does not occur in any *Edda*) but it is a word meaning generically “giantess” (Cleasby, Vigfusson 1957:146).

Gríðr is a giantess mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál* 27 (18) whose name means “frantic eagerness” (Cleasby, Vigfusson 1957:214).

Hlökk identifies a Valkyriur in *Grímnismál* 36 and in the corresponding quotation in *Gylfaginning* 22 (36). Therefore, she is not a giantess, but she belongs anyway to the field of supernatural women living in the Nordic mythic world.

Syrpa is the name of an ogress in *Gylfaginning*, and more generally this term identifies a “dirty woman” (Cleasby, Vigfusson 1957:614).

Eventually, Gjálp and Greip, the last two names mentioned in stanzas 6 and 7 of *Prymlur*, have to be considered together for they appear one close to the other in the short *Völuspá* 8 and in *Skáldskaparmál* 27 (18). They are the daughters of Geirröðr, a giant who is the protagonist of a well known adventure of Þórr.

Some comments can be made on the information detached by this brief research. The author has mostly taken names of giants especially from the two *Eddas*. In some cases, however, he has chosen terms denoting beastly features³³⁰ and has made them become proper names identifying giants. This last aspect is very interesting, for it shows the creative spirit of the poet, and also, to some extent, his relationship to the audience, who is led to detect some sort of word puns that make the whole performance more stimulating for the listeners.

³³⁰ The association of giants to these features is made more evident by the words of the first verse of stanza 7: *eigi var þeira flokkinn fríðr*, meaning „they were not a handsome company“. Other characteristics that stress the “bestiality” of giants are their description as ugly (*ljótr*) beings (I, 22, 1; II, 22, 1; III, 12, 1), the fact that they live in a cave (*hellir*) (III, 18, 2) and that they are defined as full of wrath (*gramr*) (I, 12, 4; II, 19, 1). Giants are also associated to goats and sheep: Prymr is called *brúsi* (he-goat) (II, 22, 1; III, 14, 3) and the giants are defined as *sauðungs kinn*, where *sauð* means “sheep”.

The description of giants, and especially of giantesses, as animal-like beings goes on in stanzas 8 and 9:

8. Kómu á borðið bryt-trog stór,
brúðir sátu upp hjá Þór;
jaxlar veitu jöttnum lið,
eingin hafði hnífinn við.

9. Börðust þeir með býsnum svó,
blóðið freif um alla þá;
knútum var þar kastað opt,
kómu stundum hnefar á lopt.³³¹

It can be noticed that the stanzas from 5 to 9 are dedicated to the description of giants in a very negative but at the same time comical way. An interesting passage is the fourth line of stanza 8, in which is specified that the giants were not using any knife during the banquet, but that their grinders were their only tools, thus letting the audience imagine that they were eating like animals. The ironic intent of this part of text is therefore evident, but it also continues a tradition identifying the giants as horrible creatures to be fought, which is exactly what Þórr does. This aspect can help us interpret the second line of stanza 8, in which it is said that the giantesses sit beside Þórr. The god not only has to suffer humiliation because of his disguise and consequently the denial of his virility; he not only has to stand the presence of his worst enemies, the giants; he is also surrounded by giantesses and has to share their own table. Once again, the whole scene must have been very hilarious for the audience.

Let us now focus on Þórr's fertility function. In *Þrymskviða*, such function is made clear in stanza 30, in which, as has been pointed out above, Þrymr asks for Mjöllnir to be brought in order to bless the bride. However, this last feature is absent in *Þrymlur*. In fact, there is no mention of this function of the hammer. Let us compare stanza 20 in *Þrymlur* and stanza 30 in *Þrymskviða*:

³³¹ Jónsson (1912:285).

Þrymlur:

20. "Syrpa eg vil senda þig,
sækja skaltu hamar fyrir mig
niðr æi jarðar neðsta part";
nú mun verða leikið mart.³³²

Þrymskviða:

30. Þá kvað þat Þrymr,
þursa dróttinn:
"Berið inn hamar
brúði at vígja,
lekkið Mjöllni
í meyjarné,
vigið okkr saman
Várar hendi."³³³

Why did the author omit such an element? Only hypothesis can be suggested with respect to this issue. It could be inferred that this theme was important neither for the author nor for the audience in a time when heathen uses were bound to a far past. However, even the opposite explanation could be suggested. As we have seen, still in the 19th century in Sweden there was the tradition consisting in placing a hammer in the wedding bed. This aspect could lead to the hypothesis that this use was still practiced by Icelanders too, who therefore knew implicitly what the function of the hammer was; consequently, the poet of the *ríma* did not feel the need to make it clear in his work. Even if such hypothesis is interesting, I believe it to be too pretentious. By analyzing Þórr's function in *Þrymlur*, it emerges that this god is described by means of the most

³³² Jónsson (1912:287).

³³³ < <http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/%C3%9Erymskvi%C3%B0a> >.

evident features characterizing him in mythographic literature: virility, strength, constant anger, greed, features that have then been transferred on an ironic level. In other words, Þórr seems to have been taken from the Eddic tradition as a stereotyped figure that has been transformed into a comical character. Of course, *Þrymskviða* itself has a clear parodic intent, but still this Eddic lay retains deeper aspects of the figure of Þórr, e.g. his fertility function. In *Þrymlur*, as has been shown above, such features have been omitted, while the most immediate ones, e.g. physical strength and the contrast between the theme of virility and that of femininity have been highlighted. Probably we will never know why the author of *Þrymlur* decided to present Þórr this way. I believe that, in times when Christianity was deeply rooted in Iceland, the audience simply needed to be entertained with stories connected to the heathen past, but from a different perspective, that of irony. A deeper study of other *rímur* dealing with heathen deities could give a contribution to such discussion.

Anyway, these considerations do not invalidate the importance of *rímur* in the history of Icelandic literature. On the contrary, they denote another kind of relationship with the past, an inheritance that is constantly utilized as reshaped on the basis of the society's requirements.

Conclusions

In times when the heathen system of beliefs was widespread in northern Europe, the cult of the god Þórr was already multi-faceted and non-uniform. Even though the main features of this deity were common to all realities of the Germanic area³³⁴, his figure and functions, as well as the intensity of the devotion to him, varied sensibly from region to region. Warrior god, protector of humans and Æsir, fighter of monsters, but also deity bound to the fertility of fields and of human beings: this is what characterized the figure of Þórr in Scandinavia and Iceland, as is confirmed both by archaeological and literary evidence. However, the differentiation in Þórr's roles is not visible only from a spatial and synchronic point of view, but also from a diachronic perspective. The important changes that affected the Nordic society and its system of beliefs, such as the coming of Christianity, deeply influenced the figure of the heathen gods too. Indeed, the centrality of Þórr in the Nordic pantheon had a double consequence: it made him more vulnerable to influences from the new religion, so much that episodes of syncretism were not rare at all, but at the same time it strengthened his function of defender of the heathen tradition, as if he was a symbol of the old religion that could be taken as bulwark against the god of Christians.

It is this richness in characteristics that allowed him to be taken from mythographic texts and, more generally, from the heathen tradition, and to be reshaped for different needs and situations. On this line, his function of fighter of giants and of defender of the boundaries between the world of humans and gods and that of monstrous creatures made him the perfect opponent to Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga*, in which Þórr's role is that of stressing the negative aspects of the hero, characterized by unacceptable giant origins, and consequently of enhancing the positivity of the protagonist Gautrekr. The same function of Þórr was taken by Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum*, but for a different purpose. Here the god fights the unnatural and the monstrous, but his aim is that of helping the hero Starkaðr by erasing his physical diversity, thus allowing him to enter the human society.

³³⁴ E.g. his association to the hammer Mjöllnir.

In *Flóamanna saga* Þórr's function differs considerably from that in *Gautreks saga* and *Gesta Danorum*. His representation as manifestation of Evil and ambassador of Satan is evident in his constant adversity to the protagonist of the saga, Þorgils, who has just converted to Christianity. The opposition between an important icon of the old religion, i.e. Þórr, and the Christian Þorgils, aims to underline the positivity of the protagonist who, despite the numerous difficulties and the temptations offered by his former god, remains strong in his faith in God and manages to be released from the influence of Evil.

An interesting conclusion can be drawn from the analysis of the figure of Þórr in the two sagas, i.e. *Flóamanna saga* and *Gautreks saga*. Besides the single features characterizing the way of presenting Þórr in such stories, the general impression that one can get is that his function is that of providing a key to the interpretation of the protagonists. Indeed, thanks to the interventions of Þórr in *Flóamanna saga*, we are able to understand the intent of the redactor(s) of the saga, that is that of presenting a model of Christian believer, Þorgils, who does not deny his faith in Christ even though he is subjected to constant temptations. In *Gautreks saga*, the characterization of the protagonists of the story by means of the function of Þórr is even more interesting, since it directly regards Starkaðr, but, as a consequence, it indirectly affects Gautrekr.

Finally, let us comment on the function of Þórr in *Þrymlur*. Faithfully to its main source, i.e. the Eddic lay *Þrymskviða*, this cycle of *rímur* presents Þórr as a comical character who is the protagonist of a funny adventure in which he has to deny his nature of strong and masculine god and has to dress up like a woman in order to recover the object that symbolizes his virility, i.e. the hammer Mjöllnir. The interesting aspect of such a representation of the god Þórr in the *rímur* is that the comical features of the situation have been underlined, even if some have probably been subjected to censorship, while other aspects that were present in *Þrymskviða*, for instance the fertility function of Mjöllnir, have been neglected or ignored. Þórr is neither a god to be worshipped nor to be feared as a manifestation of Satan anymore; he is just the protagonist of a comical situation, a character to laugh at, stripped of those features that made him one of the most important deities in heathen times.

From respected and worshipped god to comical character; from fertility deity to fighter of giants: this is the multi-faceted figure of Þórr, a richness in features that has allowed him to be reshaped and reworked throughout the centuries and the literary genres.

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Appendix: plates

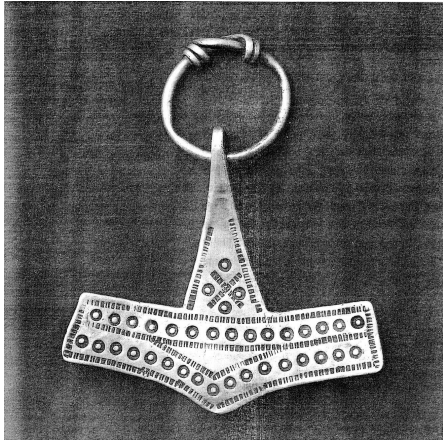


Fig. 1: Silver Þórr's hammer amulet, Rømersdal, Bornholm, 10th century; Danmarks Nationalmuseum, Copenhagen, inv. 597.

Taken from: Clunies Ross (1994b:64-65).



Fig. 2: Silver Þórr's hammer amulet, Skåne, Sweden, c. 1000. Statens historiska museum, Stockholm, inv. 9822:810.

Taken from: Clunies Ross (1994b:64-65).

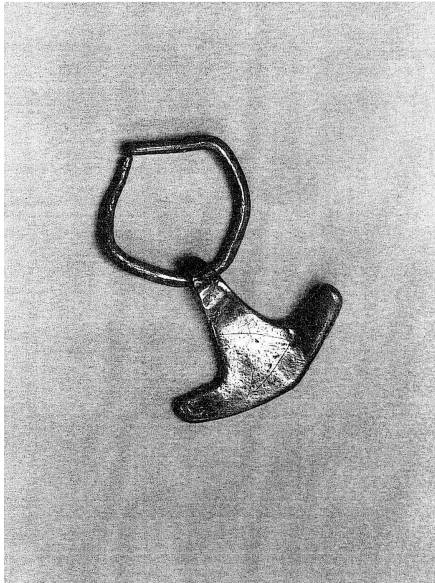


Fig. 3: Silver Þórr's hammer amulet, Eketorp, Edsberg parish, Närke, Sweden, c. 960; Örebro läns museum inv. 22.461.

Taken from: Clunies Ross (1994b:64-65).



Fig. 4: Distribution of Þórr's hammers.

Taken from: Staecker (2005:468).