

## Loki, *Sneglu-Halla pátttr*, and the Case for a Skaldic Prosaics

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In his 1993 novel, *Angels of the Universe*, Icelandic author Einar Már Guðmundsson recounts an episode in the life of his schizophrenic and ultimately suicidal protagonist, Páll: Born on the day of Iceland's domestically divisive entry into NATO, Páll sees no mere coincidence in the fact that his birthday is commemorated annually by massive public protests. The Icelandic parliament has split the country between the Eastern and Western Blocs, and as a consequence, it would seem, Páll's psyche now patrols its own tenuous borders—between reason and madness. The episode in question is a succinct and paradigmatic illustration of how allusions to the medieval sagas continue to create meaning for contemporary Icelandic audiences, many of whose members avidly trace their ancestry to the *dramatis personae* of narratives written largely in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Páll recounts:

Once I had been drinking with Rognvald and Arnor in the east of the city. On our way down to the town centre afterwards, by a building workers' shed on Miklatorg, we found a pickaxe. It was stuck in a half-frozen heap of earth and had clearly been forgotten when the tools were put away in the chest that stood beside it. Rognvald freed the pickaxe and walked along carrying it over one shoulder. We walked down to town like this and must have made a fairly sinister impression, the three of us, one carrying a pickaxe and Arnor seven feet tall to boot. On the corner of Laekjargata and Bankastraeti, we were stopped by the police. "And just what are you going to do with that pickaxe?"

asked one of the policemen, turning to Rognvald. “Kill one man and another,” quoted Rognvald, in a malicious tone of voice. The police officer must have taken this otherwise innocent quotation [“höggva mann ok annan”] from *Egil’s Saga* somewhat literally, because he jumped on Rognvald and they began fighting over the pickaxe. After they had skirmished for a good while, the three of us, Rognvald, Arnor, and I, were put in the back of the police van, and the pickaxe followed. On the way to the station, Rognvald said to the policemen: “You lot ought to piss off home and read the Sagas.” “There’s really not any need,” said one of the officers.<sup>1</sup>

Rognvald can no doubt be forgiven for expecting the unexpectedly literally-minded (and apparently unliterary) policeman to recognize a celebrated moment in medieval Icelandic poetry—the famous verse composed by the temperamental warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson to honor the occasion of his first killing, committed at the tender age of seven:

|  |                                    |
|--|------------------------------------|
| My mother said                         | Þat mælti mín móðir,               |
| I would be bought                      | at mér skyldi kaupa                |
| a boat with fine oars,                 | fley ok fagrar árar,               |
| set off with Vikings,                  | fara á brott með víkingum,         |
| stand up on the prow,                  | standa upp í stafni,               |
| command the precious craft,            | stýra dýrum knerri,                |
| then enter port,                       | halda svá til hafnar,              |
| kill one man and another. <sup>2</sup> | höggva mann ok annan. <sup>3</sup> |

The episode in Einar Már Guðmundsson’s *Angels* effectively divides the Icelandic public into two distinct interpretive communities, one obtusely exoteric, the other esoteric and elusively allusive. The later, conspicuously, are disciplined by state powers on account of a penchant

1. Einar Már Guðmundsson, *Angels of the Universe*, trans. Bernard Scudder (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1995), 105–106. The original may be consulted in *Englar alheimsins* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993), 124–25.

2. Bernard Scudder, trans., *Egil’s Saga*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, 5 vols. (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 1:77–78 (I have modified the ultimate line to correspond with Scudder’s translation of Einar Már Guðmundsson’s novel).

3. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), 100–101, ch. 40, v. 7.

for witty, seemingly harmless intertextual references that nonetheless subtly undermine the social hierarchy. While such tongue-in-cheek use of allusion may strike some readers as characteristically postmodern, this “weaponization” of narrative tradition, and the swift reaction it provokes, can (like most present-day Icelanders) readily trace a genealogy further back into the national past.

This essay examines analogous networks of allusion—not between the contemporary Icelandic novel and its saga intertexts, but rather between a medieval Icelandic prose narrative and the thirteenth-century mythographic tradition. To be sure, the “echoes” of mythic tradition in saga narrative are hardly a new object of critical attention.<sup>4</sup> Here, rather than simply adding to our catalogue of mythic analogues in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, I show (on the basis of a text where such analogues have escaped detection altogether) how mythic allusion can create a *sustained* secondary level of meaning that—contrary to prevailing notions of saga textuality—one might well call “allegorical.” Such allusion, it seems, prompts similarly forceful reactions from state powers, be they modern-day Reykjavík police or medieval Norwegian royalty. In the seemingly mundane *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* (whose protagonist is a something of a counterpart to Einar Már Guðmundsson’s snarky Rognvald), the

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4. Several terms have been put forth since the 1950s to describe the workings of “myth in the saga” (Georges Dumézil), including “fictionalized mythology” (Dumézil), “Mythic overlays” (Haraldur Bessason), “prolonged echoes” (Margaret Clunies Ross), “mythic models” and “mythic elements” (John Lindow), and “mythic allusion” (Joseph Harris), albeit each term having somewhat different metaphorical implications. “Mythic elements” perhaps least prejudices the character and direction of the relationship between myth and saga, which, as Lindow notes, is not necessarily uni-directional, i.e., the myths themselves, at least in their extant form, may well have been influenced by the feud patterns evident in the sagas; see his “Bloodfeud and Scandinavian Mythology,” *alvissmál* 4 (1994 [1995]): 51–68. See further the following foundational studies: Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: The Saga of Haddingus*, trans. D. Colman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Joseph Harris, “The Masterbuilder Tale in Snorri’s Edda and Two Sagas,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 91 (1976): 66–101 [repr. in “Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing”: *Old Norse Studies by Joseph Harris*, ed. Susan E. Desks and Thomas D. Hill, *Islandica* 53 (Ithaca: Cornell University Library), 51–95]; Haraldur Bessason, “Mythological Overlays,” in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni* 20. júlí 1977, *fyrri hluti* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), 273–92, esp. 282. This line of inquiry has been reinvigorated more recently by Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, 2 vols. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994–98). See additionally Torfi H. Tulinius, “The Prosimetrum Form 2: Verses as the Basis for Saga Composition and Interpretation,” in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), 191–217.



oblique citation of mythic tradition is mobilized by a disenfranchised medieval Icelandic poetic elite in order to negotiate a tenuously distinct Icelandic cultural identity vis-à-vis the political dominance of the Norwegian monarchy. In the *pátttr*, the Norse mythographic tradition is marshaled, in a manner reminiscent of the spirit of Germany's opposition to French domination in the early nineteenth century, to posit an Icelandic intellectual *Kultur* distinct from, or even superior to, the merely brute and administrative powers of a Norwegian *Zivilisation*.<sup>5</sup> And yet this movement is profoundly ambiguous in its—hardly uniformly hostile—relationship to Norwegian power, an ambiguity embodied in the *pátttr*'s eponymous hero and, I argue, in his persistent mythic analogue: the Norse god Loki.

### Reading, Myth, and Monarchy: Skaldic Poetry and Saga Prose (Revisited)

Concerning the esoteric and exoteric dimensions of saga narrative, Torfi Tulinius has revived a useful hypothesis, first formulated in a 1959 article by Lee M. Hollander, which forms the starting point for this essay.<sup>6</sup> As Torfi notes, Hollander had suggested that “there could

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5. In Germany, formulation of the distinction between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* can be traced back at least to Kant's essay, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (published in 1784, while one-fifth of Iceland was starving). The contrast of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, i.e., the positing of a disjuncture between “true” cultural achievement and the “merely” practical and technical prowess of the state and its veneer of courtliness, recalls the dilemma of Icelandic identity under Norwegian rule (dramatized in the *pátttr* in the interactions of the poet and his patron). See Norbert Elias, “Zur Soziogenese des Gegensatzes von ‘Kultur’ und ‘Zivilisation’ in Deutschland,” in *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1997), 89–131, translated as *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 3–30: “In German usage, *Zivilisation* means something which is indeed useful, but nevertheless only a value of the second rank, comprising only the outer appearance of human beings, the surface of human existence. The word through which Germans interpret themselves, which more than any other expresses their pride in their own achievements and their own being, is *Kultur*” (6). Further: “Whereas the concept of civilization has the function of giving expression to the continuously expansionist tendency of colonizing groups, the concept of *Kultur* mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation which had constantly to seek out and constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as a spiritual sense, and again and again had to ask itself: ‘What is really our identity?’” (7). And most relevantly for present purposes: “It is in the polemic of the stratum of the German middle-class intelligentsia against the etiquette of the ruling courtly upper class that the conceptual contraposition of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* originated in Germany. But this polemic is older and broader than its crystallization in these two concepts” (10).

6. See Torfi H. Tulinius, “The Prosimetrum Form 2,” 191.



be a relationship between the episodic, and seemingly rambling, structure of [*Eyrbyggja*] saga and the [structure] of skaldic verse. The author could trust his audience to link events narrated at a considerable distance from one another, because it was intellectually prepared for such linking by its experience in the interpretation of skaldic poetry.”<sup>7</sup> Torfi also notes that the *fornaldarsögur* (ancient-legendary sagas) are marked with insertions of mythological poetry in Eddic verse, whereas the putatively historical *Íslendingasögur* are filled with quotations from skaldic poetry, that hermetic Nordic *Gelegenheitsdichtung* based on complex and sometimes impenetrable compound metaphors or kennings, often dense in allusion to mythic narratives. Torfi goes on to ask: “If the relative simplicity of the poetic language in Eddic verse is in accordance with [the simplicity] of the narrative of the *fornaldarsögur* . . . could [there] possibly also be a relationship between the narrative complexity of the *sagas of Icelanders* and that of the verse they contain? Could the latter sagas—or at least some of them—have been composed for a public which was capable of more sophisticated reading than that required for the simpler sagas of the former genre?” Torfi continues:

This does not mean that the sagas of Icelanders were not intended for purely literal enjoyment, but that they could however allow for other levels of interpretation . . . . It makes sense to ask whether saga prose was composed in a way which might have been more accessible to a specific public [i.e., skilled in Skaldic and biblical hermeneutics] than to other readers, such as ourselves. (“The Prosimetrum Form 2,” 192–93)

These questions have hardly received the attention they deserve.<sup>8</sup>

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7. Quoted in *ibid.* See Lee M. Hollander, “The Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*,” *JEGP* 58 (1959): 227. Carol Clover appends the following comment to Hollander’s discussion of *Eyrbyggja saga*: “The prose of the saga may be plain and natural, reflecting the patterns of an oral telling style; but the organization of the story is patently unnatural, closer in spirit to the sinuous patterns of skaldic diction.” *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 91.

8. Despite its suggestive title, Heather O’Donoghue’s useful book-length study of *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2005) accounts for the relationship between prose and verse in the *Sagas of Icelanders* within a conventional formalist framework (e.g., how the prosimetrum form achieves “sophisticated stylistic and psychological effects”). Alois Wolf conceives of the relationship between saga prose and Skaldic poetry as an essentially *negative* one: the “*erzählferme Skaldik*” necessitated the development of a new tradition of *Erzählprosa* better suited for continuous,

A re-investigation of the relation of skaldic *praxis* to saga prose seems especially timely upon the publication of a monumental new edition of the skaldic corpus, both symptom and cause of a minor renaissance of scholarly interest in skaldic poetry and poetics.<sup>9</sup> As I will attempt to illustrate, Torfi's question—at least as it regards the seemingly “prosaic” tale under discussion—must be answered in the affirmative.

While narratives that can be described, in various senses of the term, as “allegorical” are taken for granted in the literatures of other medieval European vernaculars, the literary dimension of medieval Icelandic prose is still something of a proverbial third rail in certain quarters. (Paradoxically, attention to complex literary artistry is the precondition of an ever-growing scholarship on the sagas' strange, prosimetric bedfellow—skaldic verse.) Recent criticism continues to echo romantic pronouncements that cast the writers of the sagas as the stenographers or (perhaps somewhat more generously) copy editors of oral tradition. A frequent assumption is that the sagas' murky oral origins (which one need not dispute) disallow them the sophisticated, “literary” qualities found in narrative traditions cultivated by secular and ecclesiastical elites in the court culture of continental Europe, which never developed in Iceland, even if Icelanders abroad participated in it. Despite renewed interest in the elite patronage of saga literature,<sup>10</sup> one routinely encounters a desire to view the sagas as overwhelmingly indebted to putatively simpler, popular traditions. The political implications of such a view of the past are clear enough, and scholars have been quick to offer romanticized portraits of the *Sitz im Leben* of medieval Icelandic literature that pit native oral traditions against the products of foreign-imposed literacy, rather than recognizing their frequent symbiosis.<sup>11</sup> (Indeed,

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linear narration and commemoration of the indigenous past; see “Die Skaldendichtung—Wegbereiterin der Sagaprosa?” in *Studien zur Isländersaga*, ed. Heinrich Beck and Else Ebel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 288.

9. I refer to the monumental *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, forthcoming in eight volumes under the general editorship of Margaret Clunies Ross (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007-). See further, e.g., Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) and in the present volume; Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005); and Russell Poole in the present volume (see also his *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire*, cited in note 4 above).

10. See, e.g., Theodore M. Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas (1200–1250)*, *Islandica* 55 (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2012).

11. See Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse*



one might be forgiven for mistaking competing analyses of *Snorra Edda*, for example, for a referendum on Icelandic membership in the European Union.) Under such conditions, literary tropes associated with “foreign” literatures, such as allegory, typological relationships, intertextual references, and allusion can safely be ascribed to the vagaries of manuscript or oral transmission, if not written off as figments of the scholarly imagination.

I would offer that we are still oddly comfortable with romantic commonplaces about the alleged “simplicity,” “straightforwardness,” and “objectivity” of medieval Icelandic narrative prose—as if one merely had to prick Icelanders to watch them bleed sagas.<sup>12</sup> Two ideological presuppositions underpin this view: first, that the sagas are closer to “the people” than are the medieval literatures of the European continent—imbued with a lingering whiff of *Volkspoesie* that masks the scent of a system of literary production fostered by elites and expressive of their values; the second, a corollary to the first, is the belief (largely axiomatic in Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship) that the *Íslendingasögur* are “decidedly anti-monarchical in outlook”<sup>13</sup> vis-à-vis the Norwegian royal powers that reasserted control over the so-called Icelandic “Free State” in the mid-thirteenth century. This is hardly to claim that scholars have neglected the sagas’ ambiguous attitudes toward royal persons, as valorized and vilified portrayals of individual kings have been amply taken into account.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, medieval Icelanders’ *ambivalence* towards the institution of monarchy has been the subject of increasing comment. What has been starkly underestimated, in my view, is the extent to which underlying attitudes

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*on Method* (Cambridge, MA: The Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, Harvard University; distr. Harvard University Press, 2004).

12. For a classic formulation of this view of the sagas’ allegedly “straightforward” style, see Dietrich Hofmann, “Vers und Prosa in der mündlich gepflegten Erzählkunst der germanischen Länder,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 5 (1971): 169–70.

13. “The Icelandic family sagas of the 13th and 14th centuries display a decidedly anti-monarchical point of view.” Gerd Wolfgang Weber, “*Intellegere Historiam*: Typological perspectives of Nordic prehistory (in Snorri, Saxo, Widukind and others),” in *Tradition og Historieskrivning*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Aarhus Universitetsforlag og Acta Jutlandica, 1987), 128n9. The sagas constitute “a form of resistance” according to Theodore Andersson, “The King of Iceland,” *Speculum* 74 (1999): 932.

14. See esp. Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi: Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997).



towards foreign monarchy in saga literature are often positive, indeed *welcoming*.<sup>15</sup>

The adoption of the Icelandic sagas as a “national literature” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would hardly be the first time a modern state has made an ironic choice of texts, medieval or ancient, to embody its nationalist aspirations; Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and the *Nibelungenlied* have all shared similar fates.<sup>16</sup> But only through a distorted national-romantic, anti-monarchical lens can the sagas be safely viewed as a wistful homage to a former state of freedom, reflected in a literary *Blütezeit* or “classical” period, followed by a period of literary decadence first redeemed by the rebirth of political independence in the twentieth century. The glorification of the national past inherent in what one might dub the romantic-nostalgic “snapshot” theory (i.e., saga writing as an attempt to capture the fleeting image of a formerly free, once proud society during its gradual disappearance) is, perhaps unsurprisingly, often taken for granted in Iceland today, but also no infrequent guest in critical studies, where somewhat more skepticism might be due.<sup>17</sup> Such a view naturally

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15. For an exception to this rule, see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, “Absent Mothers and the Sons of Fornjótr: Late-Thirteenth-Century Monarchist Ideology in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 14 (2004): 133–60.

16. See Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

17. A comprehensive list of scholarly expressions of the “snapshot” theory would require its own critical bibliography. For a succinct, representative formulation, consider the following passage from Vésteinn Ólason’s *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998), excerpted from a discussion of *Njáls saga* (tellingly titled “Retrospect”): “We have sought to analyse the thoughts and feelings of an individual looking back to the commonwealth period from the perspective of the new and different world order. For all that he recognizes the faults which led to the old world’s demise and lives under a worthier moral system than that of the old world, he nevertheless looks back *nostalgically* [emphasis mine] to the human dignity and grandeur which seems to have perished with the fall of the old commonwealth” (206). See also Vésteinn Ólason, “Family Sagas,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 100–101, 111–12. See additionally Herman Pálsson, *Oral Tradition and Saga Writing*, *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 3 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 1999): “All of the outstanding sagas are imbued with the same democratic spirit that inspired early Icelandic law makers. Collectively, the sagas constitute one of the great triumphs of medieval humanism. By liberating the Icelanders from the *restrictive bonds of absolute monarchy* [italics mine], the Althing created unique conditions for a new kind of imaginative literature. When Icelanders founded the Althing they were, unwittingly, taking the first step towards the creation of *Njáls saga* and other great prose works of the 13th century” (102). For further paradigmatic examples, see Kurt Schier, “Iceland and the Rise of Literature in ‘terra nova’” *Gripla* 1 (1975): 80–81; Lars Lönnroth,

leaves little room for displays of literary sophistication and evidence of connoisseurship practiced by the elites that patronized the production of written texts—powerful farmers and clerics with a far more ambivalent relationship to royal powers on the Scandinavian continent than national-romantic literary historiography, or its heirs, can allow.

As Sigurður Nordal once wisely surmised, “All general statements about the Icelandic sagas must be regarded as so much hot air until those sagas which show themselves capable of being laid open to research are analyzed one by one.”<sup>18</sup> With that in mind, I make the “case” here for the existence of both considerable literary sophistication, and the connoisseurship necessary to detect it, in a text that has received largely sparse, sporadic, and dismissive comment; I test Torfi’s notion of “skaldic prose”<sup>19</sup> in order to elaborate a “skaldic prosaics”<sup>20</sup>—a poetics of saga prose, as it were—on the basis of a re-reading of the “episodic, and seemingly rambling”<sup>21</sup> *Sneglu-Halla þátr*.<sup>22</sup> I show how this “misunderestimated” tale (to borrow a fortuitous malapropism) operates on multiple planes, literal and allegorical,

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*Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1976), 136: “Icelanders . . . revered the pagan era as a kind of Golden Age.” This line of thinking has been cautiously tempered, but not challenged in its essentials, by a younger generation of scholars, see, e.g., Ármann Jakobsson, “Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*,” *Viator* 38 (2007): 191–215: “As a tragedy, *Njáls saga* might be seen more as a lament over the past than a celebration of the present or future, in the socio-political sense perhaps even nostalgic to a degree” (194).

18. Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, trans. R. George Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), 3.

19. Torfi H. Tulinius, “The Prosimetrum Form,” 198. Torfi’s criteria for “skaldic prose” include “interlacing of plot lines” and “absent or inconspicuous connectors” in addition to the three I focus on here: “intertextuality,” “unity,” and “ambiguity.”

20. I avail myself of the term *prosaics* in the sense employed by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson as “a theory of literature that privileges prose in general . . . over the poetic genres.” *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 15. Morson and Emerson’s further thoughts there are relevant for us here: “Critics have become so accustomed to using the term *poetics* as a virtual synonym for ‘theory of literature’ that they often overlook or underestimate the implications of the word *poetics* for an understanding of prose. For if literature is defined primarily with verse genres . . . in mind, then prose necessarily emerges as something less than fully literary, as literary only by association, or, perhaps, as not really literary at all.”

21. Tommy Danielsson, “*Sneglu-Halla þátr*,” in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland, 1993), 599.

22. Or “Tale of Sarcastic Halli,” as it is titled in the translation by George Clark in Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *Complete Sagas*, 1:342–56. Page numbers hereafter refer to the more widely available *Sagas of Icelanders* anthology (London: Penguin, 2000), which reproduces the text of the “Tale” in the *Complete Sagas*, followed by the corresponding



before suggesting what the multivalence of Halli's seemingly simple tale allows us to infer about the social and political ambivalences of the milieu that produced, received, and—judging from a wide manuscript transmission down to the nineteenth century—rather thoroughly enjoyed it.

### Halli *Agonistes*: Myth vs. Folklore

*Sneglu-Halla þáttir* is the unrelentingly raunchy tale of two Icelandic country boys, Halli and his envious rival Thjodolf, who compete for royal favor as skaldic poets at the court of Haraldr harðráði (“hard ruler”) Sigurðarson in Norway.<sup>23</sup> As such, the tale belongs to the narrative type designated by Joseph Harris as “King-and-Icelander *þættir*,” the short prose narratives sometimes also referred to as *Íslen-dingapættir*.<sup>24</sup> With a story that ostensibly grew up around the skaldic verses it contains, it also shows an affinity with the so-called “Skald *þættir*,” or short tales about the lives of the poets.<sup>25</sup>

But there is more at work in the *þáttir* than the sexual and gastro-nomic humor for which it is known. In the person of Halli, it features a figure whose one-upmanship and sexual defamation of his rivals (including his own royal patron) depend on a mastery and manipulation of generic conventions derived from Norse myth as represented in *Snorra Edda*, the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, and *Völsunga saga*.<sup>26</sup> While practitioners of skaldic poetry depended on their knowledge of Norse myth and mastery of allusion to produce complex forms for

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passage in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslenzk fornrit 9 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1956), henceforth ÍF 9.

23. Unless making an argument from etymology, I henceforth generally employ anglicized forms of Icelandic proper names, more readily recognizable to readers of the aforementioned translation, e.g., *Þjóðólfr* = Thjodolf.

24. See Joseph Harris, “*Þættir*,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer, 13 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1989), 12:1–6. See also Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris, “Short Prose Narrative (*þáttir*),” in McTurk, *Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 462–78.

25. See Rowe and Harris, “Short Prose Narrative,” 463.

26. The agon between Halli and King Harald has a precedent in the figure of the skald Rögnvaldr kali, of whom Joseph Harris writes: “It seems that Rögnvaldr [in *Skjaldadigting* BI, p. 478 (*lausavísa* 1)] is executing ‘one-ups-manship’ on his predecessor Haraldr harðráði (poem. c. 1040), for Haraldr’s fragmentarily transmitted poem listed the king’s eight accomplishments (*Skjaldadigting*, BI, p. 320),” i.e., whereas Rögnvaldr’s lists nine of his own. Harris, “*Speak Useful Words*,” 341n82.



simple meanings, Halli instead embodies this practice “in the flesh,” i.e., in his own person, in a series of analogues to the mythic figure of Loki. The tale thus plays out the agonistic aspect of skaldic composition (which depends on the poet’s “mythic competence”) on the level of the prose narrative: Halli establishes his new social position as courtier by ensconcing himself within a sustained series of allusions to Norse myth, while framing his peers, and even his superiors, as the sexual deviants, low-lives, and numbskulls of a *déclassée* “folktale” world.

The *þáttir* exists in a long version inserted into Flateyjarbók (1387–90) in the fifteenth century, on which I focus here, and a short version in Morkinskinna (ca. 1275). There is no general agreement as to which of the two stories is older (or rather, the two scholars who have addressed the question of dating have, respectively, occupied the two positions available on the matter.)<sup>27</sup> The later, and longer, version appears to be an elaboration; however, the shorter version could, according to Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, be a reduction. It is perhaps least problematic to assume that the longer, later version is precisely that: *later*. There are indeed philological and stylistic grounds (though not unambiguous ones) for believing this to be the case.<sup>28</sup> The Flateyjarbók version exhibits a preoccupation with class stratification and unstable social identities that may indeed be reflective of later developments in medieval Icelandic society. Unlike the text in Morkinskinna, the Flateyjarbók version invokes “class consciousness,” humble versus exalted origins, from the very beginning, contrasting King Harald Sigurðarson with his chief poet, Thjóðolf, an Icelander of “humble origins” (*aettsmár*) who, like any *arrivista*, is “envious of newcomers” (*öfundsjúkr við þá, er til kómu*), and does not appreciate the arrival of Halli, a fellow farm boy turned poet.<sup>29</sup>

The *þáttir* does not introduce Halli with the genealogical excursus typical of saga narrative, but simply states that “His family was from Fljot” (*hann var ættaðr ór Fljótum*), a remote district in northern

27. See Tommy Danielsson, *Om den isländska släktsagens uppbyggnad* (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986), 74–75, and Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Om de norske kongers sagaer* (Oslo: I kommisjon hos J. Dybwad, 1937), 156.

28. See note 56 below.

29. 695; ÍF 9:264.

Iceland.<sup>30</sup> In saga-ese, this means the character in question is a nobody. Yet even this limited account marks the beginning of a preoccupation with genealogy that is rare in the *Íslendingaþættir*, a literary form less concerned with lineage than the *Íslendingasögur*. Family ancestry is not only a recurring theme but a major source of contention in *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. Halli may be a “nobody,” but his bold words and ability to “speak with kings” belie this lack of social status. Thus when the king passes by in his dragon ship, striking Halli’s shipmates dumb with a barrage of questions regarding their comings and goings, Halli nimbly replies, “We were in Iceland for the winter, and sailed from Gasir, and made land at Hitra, last night we lay up at Agdenes (Agdi’s Ness), and our skipper is called Bard” (*Vér várum í vetr á Íslandi, en ýttum af Gásam, en Bárðr heitir stýrimaðr, en tókum land við Hítrar, en lágum í nótt við Agðanes*).<sup>31</sup> To this deft accounting the king provocatively replies, “Didn’t Agdi fuck you?” (*Sað hann yður eigi Agði?*) “Not yet” (*Eigi enna*), Halli retorts, setting off a ribald ship-to-ship repartee:

The King grinned and spoke, “Is there some agreement that he will do you this service sometime later?” “No,” said Halli, “and one particular consideration was crucial to our suffering no disgrace at his hands . . . . Agdi was waiting for nobler men than ourselves, and he expected your arrival there tonight, and he will pay you this debt fully.” (695)

Konungrinn brosti at ok mælti: “Er nokkurr til ráðs um, at hann muni enn síðar meir veita yðr þessa þjónustu?” “Ekki,” sagði hann Halli, “ok bar þó einn hlutr þar mest til þess, er vér fórum enga skömm af honum . . . at hann Agði beið at þessu oss tignari manna ok vætti yðvar þangat í kveld, ok mun hann þá gjalda af höndum þessa skuld ótæpt.” (ÍF 9:265)

This is the first of several sexually-barbed volleys the two will exchange, in effect accusing each other of *ergi*, that much-discussed Old Icelandic concept whose basic meaning is “effeminacy” or “passive” homosexuality, although *ergi* and its adjectival form *argr*

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30. Ibid.

31. 695; ÍF 9:264–65.

extend to witchcraft, promiscuity, cowardice, and other Norse concepts of “unmanliness.”<sup>32</sup> The term has legal standing in medieval Iceland; accusing another man of *ergi* is an actionable offence whose perpetrator can be slain with impunity.

If the scene between Halli and Harald seems familiar to readers of the sagas, that is as it should be; nearly identical accusations are made under strikingly similar circumstances in *Völsunga saga* when Sinfjotli initiates a ship-to-shore insult match with the brother of a king whose land he is invading. Of Sinfjotli, we are wryly told, “This man knew how to speak with kings” (*Sá kunni at mæla við konunga*):

You probably do not remember clearly now when you were the witch on Varinsey and that you wanted to marry a man and chose me for the role of husband. And afterwards you were a valkyrie in Asgard and all were on the verge of fighting for your sake. I sired nine wolves on you on Laganess, and I was the father of them all.<sup>33</sup>

Eigi muntu glöggst muna nú, er þú vart völvan í Varinsey ok kvaðst vilja mann eiga ok kaust mig til þess embættis at vera þinn maðr. En síðan vartu valkyrja í Ásgarði, ok var við sjálft, at allir mundu berjast fyrir þínar sakar, ok ek gat við þér nú varga á Láganesi, ok var ek faðir allra.<sup>34</sup>

Sinfjotli’s insult barrage culminates, “Do you remember when you were a mare with the stallion Grani and I rode you full speed at Bravoll?” (*Hvárt mantu þat er þú vart merrin með hestinum Grana, ok reið ek þér á skeið á Brávellis?*), thus linking his invasion of the king’s realm with his imagined penetration of the king’s brother’s private regions. Halli is not merely “extremely impudent” (*orðhákr mikill*)<sup>35</sup> in his exchange with King Harald, nor simply displaying the knowledge of myth that qualifies him to be a skaldic poet; rather,

32. See, foremost, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 1 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

33. Jesse Byock, trans., *The Saga of the Volsungs* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 49.

34. *Völsunga saga*, in Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 131.

35. 695; ÍF 9:265.



he is shown, for the first but not the last time, to take a page from mythic-legendary history as a template for his own actions as a means of standing up to a social superior, despite, or rather because of, his own undistinguished origins. This resonance of *Völsunga saga* is soon underscored by the introduction of Halli's benchmate ("Sigurd") and the recitation of a poem about Sigurd Fafnisbani and Fafnir, the respective dragon-slayer and slay-ee of the same tale.<sup>36</sup> By invoking Sinfjotli, the son of a king, the "genealogically-challenged" Halli implicitly asserts his own claim to a kind of nobility—but one grounded in *Kultur* rather than lineage. For any medieval Icelander who may have missed the point, the link between mythic competence and social status is made explicit in the next episode.

The tale tells how one day the king's entourage strolls by a blacksmith and tanner at fisticuffs. Harald commands his court poet Thjodolf to compose a verse on this street brawl. Thjodolf however considers the lowly subject matter, a fight between craft laborers, beneath his dignity, replying, "My lord . . . that's hardly suitable considering that I am called your chief poet" (*Herra . . . eigi samir þat, þar sem ek em kallaðr hofuðskáld yðvart*).<sup>37</sup> Such a common subject is—both literally and literarily—"too close to home" for Thjodolf, the former Icelandic farm boy who has worked his way up under royal patronage, and is perhaps unpleasantly reminded of his own "humble origins" (see note 29 above) by the lowly laborers, as well as by the arrival of a fellow *aettsmár* Icelandic wordsmith. But Thjodolf soon finds the task more befitting his station once the king orders him to recast this low topic in the mytho-heroic mold, transforming the blacksmith "into Sigurd Fafnisbani and the [tanner] into Fafnir, but nevertheless identify[ing] each one's trade" (*lát annan vera Sigurð Fáfnisbana, en annan Fáfni, ok kenn þó hvern til sinnar iðnar*).<sup>38</sup> Thjodolf promptly produces the poem made-to-order, followed by a second in which he poetically transforms the blacksmith into Thor and the tanner into the giant Geirrod—the opportunity to display his socially prestigious mythic learning obviously more in line with his own class aspirations. Thus when Halli later learns of Thjodolf's masterful poems, and is told that he could not produce their equal, he takes umbrage not

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36. In *Morkinskinna* (ÍF 23:270) the name "Sigurðr" is borne by Halli's skipper.

37. 696; ÍF 9:267.

38. *Ibid.*

simply because Thjodolf has had the advantage of composing poetry in his absence; the more imminent threat to the status-seeking Halli is Thjodolf's command of mythic tradition per se.

Hence it comes as no surprise that Thjodolf continues to try to assert a monopoly on mythic discourse, attempting to shame Halli by contrasting, in full view the court, his own poetic productions with the unsophisticated juvenilia on rural themes once composed by his rival, known as Halli's "Polled-Cow Verses" or *Kolluvisur* (701; ÍF 9:276). Halli retaliates by informing the court of his antagonist's similar experiments in low genres, the so-called "Food-Trough Verses" or *Soðtrogsvisur* (701; ÍF 9:277) that Thjodolf composed back on the farm. Halli also tells the king's company how Thjodolf avenged his father more grimly than other men—namely by *eating* his father's killer: He relates the story of Thjodolf's father who "lived in Svarfadardal in Iceland . . . was very poor, and had many children" (*Hann bjó i Svarfaðardal á Íslandi, ok var hann fátækr mjök, en átti fjöldu barna*).<sup>39</sup> Thjodolf's poverty-stricken father, Thorljot, receives a calf out of charity and leads it home with a noose around its neck—the other end around his own. When the numbskull Thorljot attempts push the calf over the barnyard wall, both man and beast hang to their deaths. Thjodolf and his starving family then eat their father's "killer" (*föðurbana*).

According to medieval Icelandic law codified in the *Grágás*, a man had to own one cow for every one of his dependents in order to qualify to serve on a jury or accompany his chieftain to the Alþingi, i.e., to be considered an independent householder. Thus even with the gift calf, Thjodolf's father would still have been considered someone else's dependent. Thjodolf's father's inability to secure an existence for his family leads to his symbolic equation with an animal also (on account of its immaturity) unable to nurture others, except, like Thorljot, in death. Thorljot's bizarre, equilibristic hanging death conjures the image of a balance or scale, with the father on one side and the calf on the other, imputing to him the same dumb, animal nature as the beast whose fate he shares.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the calf is considered a "cowardly" animal in medieval Iceland, as is suggested by the name

39. 703; ÍF 9:279.

40. See, e.g., Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, s.v: "[Das Kalb] gilt sprichwörtlich als dumm." <http://www.dwb.uni-trier.de>.

of the golem-like giant *Mokkurkálfi* (literally, “dust-calf”) who wets himself before doing battle with Thor in *Snorra Edda*.<sup>41</sup> In other words, there is nothing heroic, much less “mythic” about Thjodolf’s ancestry. The rural misadventure occasioned by Thjodolf’s father’s bestial stupidity stands in stark contrast to the world of myth, where the ability to transform oneself into an animal is reserved for figures whose power and cleverness are the opposite of Thjodolf’s father’s impotence and stupidity: Odin, to cite a well-known example, transforms himself into an eagle in order to steal the Mead of Poetry, and Loki famously becomes a seductive mare in order to lure away the Master Builder’s work horse, having “such dealings” with the stallion that he later gives birth to Odin’s eight-legged steed, Sleipnir.<sup>42</sup> Loki, on other occasions in the mythological tradition, transforms himself into a bird, a fly, a flea, a seal, and a fish.<sup>43</sup> Hence Halli, with his tale of the parodic “animal transformation” of Thjodolf’s father, is not merely revealing a compromising story about Thjodolf and his kin; he is illustrating that they, unlike himself, do not belong in the world of myth (the province of the skaldic poet) but rather in a barnyard anecdote. Thus when Thjodolf flaunts his “mythic competence” by composing verses about Thor and Sigurd Fafnisbani in Halli’s absence—and lampoons Halli’s humble origins in Iceland to boot—Halli exacts literary revenge by transforming Thjodolf’s family into the subjects of a folktale.

There is no Aarne-Thompson tale type that corresponds precisely with Halli’s anecdote about Thjodolf’s father, and yet the genre of the “anecdote,” its status as oral narrative, its “there-once-was-a-poor-farmer” *incipit*, as well as its subject matter (i.e., the foolish man who accidentally causes the death of livestock) and barnyard setting all place it firmly within the confines of a folk tradition that will not be codified as such for centuries. Halli’s malicious

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41. See *Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2 vols. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 1:21.

42. See *ibid.*, 45; Snorri Sturlason, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1988), 35.

43. See, respectively, Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, eds., *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, vol. 1, *Text*, 4th ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962), 111–12 (st. 3–5 and 9); *Skáldskaparmál*, Faulkes, 1:24, 2, and 42; *Sörla þáttr*, in Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 369; Úlfr Uggason’s *Húsdrápa*, cited in *Skáldskaparmál*, Faulkes, 19–20; and *Gylfaginning*, Faulkes, 48–9.



association of Thjodolf (*Þjóðólfr*) with what the nineteenth-century folklorists would later call *þjóðsögur* (folktales) is supported by the anecdote's display of a complex of motifs found in Scandinavian and international tales. Particularly relevant from this perspective is type 1281a, "Getting rid of the man-eating calf," a variant of which is attested in nineteenth-century Iceland.<sup>44</sup> In continental Scandinavia this "numbskull" tale contains the elements of the hanged man, the man-killing calf, and the family's revenge on the bovine *fǫðurbani*, not to mention the generic figure of the poor, foolish father. In the folktale, the latter comes upon a hanged man and tries to take the deceased's shoes. The hanged man's feet, however, are so swollen that the shoes cannot be removed; thus the foolish man cuts off the feet and takes the shoes with the feet still in them. That night he sleeps in a room where a newborn calf has been sheltered. The man leaves early in the morning, taking the shoes but leaving behind the dismembered feet. His family discovers the calf and assumes that the newborn beast has devoured their father, leaving nothing but his feet. The family then slays their father's "killer." In other versions, the family members (or neighbors), rather than risk death in the maul of such a horrible creature, set the house ablaze and burn the calf inside. This burning might be considered loosely cognate with Thjodolf's family's eating of their father's "killer" (assuming, of course, that they cook the calf first). Versions of this tale are also attested in Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish.<sup>45</sup> (In Jón Árnason's Icelandic variant, the protagonist is a farm boy.) The story about Thjodolf's father in the *þáttur* could be related to these modern Scandinavian analogues, although the anecdote is also attested in Latin as early as 1508–12 in Heinrich Bebel's *Facetiae*.<sup>46</sup> While Bebel's anecdote or some variant thereof could be the proximate source of the nineteenth-century Icelandic version, the evidence of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*

44. See "Rauðskjöldóttur bolakálfur," in Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1862–64), 2:531–33; translated loosely and abridged in Adeline Rittershaus, *Die neuisländischen Volksmärchen: Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Märchenforschung* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1902), 363–65, no. 103.

45. See E. T. Kristensen, *Efterslaet til "Skattegaveren"* (Kolding, 1890), no. 166; Ørnulf Hodne, *Types of the Norwegian Folktale* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984), no. 1739; Waldemar Liungman, *Die Schwedischen Volksmärchen* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), no. 1201; Eva Wigström, *Skånska Visor, Sagor och Sägner* (Lund, 1880), no. 26.

46. See Heinrich Bebel, "De quodam histrione," in *Facietiarum Heinrici Bebelii, poetae A.D. Maximiliano laureati, libri tres* (Bern, 1550), 62<sup>r-v</sup>.

would suggest that this material was already familiar in medieval Iceland.

The tale of Thjodolf's "father's killer" has further motifs in common with international tale types represented in Scandinavian and other European folklore. In AT 1210 "Cow driven/hoisted to roof to graze, strangled," a cow is similarly pushed to its death by a fool. A Danish version of this well-attested tale features an industrious but poor man whose wife makes a disaster of everything. One day he asks her to tend to the family cow, with predictably dire results:

Således sagde han en dag til hende, at hun skulde give deres ko et godt skub ovenpå vandet. Det var hun også villig til. Da hun altså havde vandet koen, førte hun den ovenpå et jordhus, som brugtes til stald, og styrtede den ned, så den var død på stedet.<sup>47</sup>

And so one day he said to her that she should give their cow a good "push" [an untranslatable pun which here means "en god del foder" or "extra portion"] on top of the watering. She was more than eager to do it. And so when she had watered the cow, she led it up onto an earth house, which they used as a stall, pushed it down off the top, and it was dead on the spot. (Translation mine.)

In other analogues, the cow is tethered, falls off the roof, and is strangled, more closely approximating the hanging death of Thjodolf's family calf. In another closely related tale, a "numbskull ties the rope to his leg as the cow grazes on the roof. The cow falls off and the man is pulled up the chimney."<sup>48</sup> Halli's account begins with the same scenario we find in the sixty-first tale of Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, "Das Bürle" (The Little Farmer):

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47. Laurits Bødker, ed., *Folkeeventyr fra Kær herred* (Copenhagen: Akademisk forlag, 1963–67), 73. Also attested in Arthur Christensen, ed., *Molboernes vise gerninger* (Copenhagen: Det Schønbergske forlag, 1939), 89; Waldemar Liungman, *Die schwedischen Volksmärchen: Herkunft und Geschichte* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961); Kristensen, *Efterslaet til "Skattegaveren,"* 209–10.

48. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 182 (J2132.2); cf. 214.

Es war ein Dorf, darin saßen lauter reiche Bauern und nur ein armer, den nannten sie das Bürle (Bäuerlein). Er hatte nicht einmal eine Kuh und noch weniger Geld, eine zu kaufen; und er und seine Frau hätten so gern eine gehabt.<sup>49</sup>

There once was a village full of rich farmers and only one poor one, whom they called “Little Farmer.” He didn’t even have a cow, much less money to buy one, though he and his wife would have been very happy to have one. (Translation mine.)

Related to Grimm’s “Bürle” is the humorous eleventh-century Latin tale *Unibos*, which has a number of *Schwank* elements in common with *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. *Unibos* tells the story of a wily peasant who, like Thjodolf’s father, has but “one ox” (i.e., *uni-bos*), but who, like Halli, routinely outsmarts his superiors. Further elements paralleled in the *þátr* (which I discuss more fully below) include the transfer of a horse to a new owner (ÍF 9:294–95), trickery involving silver (ÍF 9:286–87, 290–91) and other devious transactions (ÍF 9:293–94), a critique of feigned praise (ÍF 9:290–91, 292–93), and a bizarre underwater death (ÍF 9:291–92). Other tale types attest more broadly to the folkloric register of the Thorljot-subplot, such as AT 1122 “Stupid ogre hangs self” and 1681 “Stupid man kills animal.”<sup>50</sup>

From the vantage point of “etymology as mode of thought,” most famously associated with the Latin tradition codified by Isadore of Seville, but also attested in medieval Iceland,<sup>51</sup> the name “Thjodolf” (*Þjóð-ólfr*) is itself perhaps suggestive of the contrast of high and low social status implied by the generic distinction between myth and folktale. While one would not want to press the point, *Þjóð* is

49. *Kinder- und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, Vollständige Ausgabe auf der Grundlage der dritten Auflage (1837), ed. Heinz Rölleke (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 296.

50. For further discussion of folktale elements in the *Íslendinga þættir*, see Joseph Harris, “Folktale and Thattr: The Case of Rognvald and Raud,” *Folklore Forum* 13 (1980): 158–98.

51. See, for example, Snorri Sturluson’s well-known explanation of the name of the gods (*Æsir*) as “men of Asia.” Although *Sneglu-Halla þátr* is not generally considered a “learned” text, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson argues that it was influenced by chapter 3 of the *Disciplina Clericalis*: “Exemplum de tribus versificatoribus”; see “Sagnastef í íslenskri menningarsögu,” *Saga* 30 (1992): 92–95.



Icelandic for “people” in the dual sense of “nation” and “common people” (as in German *Volk*).<sup>52</sup> The *þáttr* arguably plays with this ambivalence. While the *Þjóð* element would presumably have had a positive connotation for a medieval Icelandic audience, *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* arguably inverts this meaning, turning the historical court poet Thjodolf into a *déclassé* “man of the people” in the pejorative sense. Further suggestive of class consciousness in the tale is the transformation in Flateyjarbók of Thjodolf’s father’s name from “Arnórr” to “Þorljótr.” As Jónas Kristjánsson notes, “Thjodolf’s father’s name is correctly given as Arnórr in Morkinskinna (cf. *Skáldatal*), but Flateyjarbók gives his name as Thorljot [Þorljótr].”<sup>53</sup> The *Third Grammatical Treatise* and *Skáldatal* are the two sources for the “historical” Halli. While it is unknown whether *Skáldatal* served as a source for the writer of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, it seems unlikely, especially given medieval Icelanders’ preoccupation with genealogy, that someone with the author’s level of interest in the Halli figure would have been ignorant of this tradition. (The actual name of Thjodolf’s father is irrelevant; what is important is the evidence of an onomastic tradition from which the text of Flateyjarbók diverges.) What at first appears a meaningless (perhaps originally oral) variant or simple error repays investigation as the product of conscious literary artistry. In light of the conflict of the genres of “myth” and “folktale” in this part of the *þáttr*, this variation may well be less incidental than it seems. The *Þor*- prefix in Thjodolf’s father’s name is of course derived from the Norse god Thor (*Þórr*), and is a frequent element in medieval Icelandic male personal names; *ljótr* is a common adjective meaning “ugly.” I have argued that Halli contrasts his own “mythic” superiority with the imputed baseness of Thjodolf and his family, whom he casts as folkloric simpletons.<sup>54</sup>

52. See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland*, Viking Society for Northern Research 16 (Exeter: Short Run Press, 2003), 15–16; originally *Um íslenzkar þjóðsögur* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1940).

53. ÍF 9:cxi (“Formáli”).

54. If one might speculate, the location of Thjodolf’s family homestead in *Svarfaðardalr* (694; ÍF 9:263)—a detail not found in Morkinskinna—may also be suggestive of this contrast. The Icelandic verb *svarfa* (cognate to English *swerve*) can mean to sweep, swerve, or upset by overturning (in the sense of “upsetting the apple cart”); used reflexively (*svarfask um*) it can mean to cause a great tumult or havoc. Hence the root meaning of the name of Thjodolf’s ancestral home might be suggestive of the lack of physical and affective restraint that typically characterizes the lower classes in medieval literature (and not least the behavior of Thorljot & son here); the *svarfa* element in the place-name of Thjodolf’s

Thus the fact that “Thjodolf” (*Þjóð-ólfr*)—contrary to the evidence of *Skáldatal* and *Morkinskinna*—is turned into the son of “ugly Thor” (*Þor-ljótr*), would also (contrary to the historical evidence) not seem to bode well for Thjodolf’s skaldic career, which depends in large measure on one’s familiarity with mythic tradition. Hence I would suggest that the change of Thjodolf’s father’s name from “Arnórr” to “Þorljótr” in *Flateyjarbók* further underscores Thjodolf’s family’s “mythic incompetence.”<sup>55</sup> The deliberate artistry implicit in this “variant” might be further suggested by Halli’s unusual formulation, “*Pat hygg ek*, at Þorljótr hétir Þjóðólfs” (*I think that Thorljot was the name of Thjodolf’s father*).<sup>56</sup>

A further measure of Thjodolf family’s unreadiness for myth, exemplified in this barnyard anecdote, might be found in an implicit contrast between Thjodolf’s unwise father and the all-wise *Alfǫðr*, Odin—both noted for the act of hanging, but for diametrically opposed reasons, and with opposite results. In *Hávamál*, Odin hangs from the tree Yggdrasil in order to acquire runes and wisdom, an act that contrasts starkly with Thjodolf’s father’s unwise hanging of

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(fictive?) point of origin is perhaps suggestive (*nomen est omen*) of a certain rural boorishness contrasted with the refined etiquette of the court. In addition, a *svarf* (neuter singular) is a “hard fray” or “broil,” such as the fight between the two craft laborers, which (recast as the battle of Thor and the giant Geirroð) serves as an allegory of the verbal brawling of Halli and Thjodolf. Such etymological resonances may seem far-fetched to us, but we must leave open the question as to whether such associations would have been unavailable to an audience schooled in skaldic poetics, particularly since Halli devotes considerable artistry to mocking Thjodolf’s humble origins.

55. Naturally, the *ljótr* element in Icelandic personal names need not carry the resonance of its etymological meaning “ugly” any more than “Jeffrey” connotes “God’s peace” to the native speaker of English. Still, Icelandic is etymologically more transparent to native speakers than English is to native speakers not fluent in a handful of languages, living and dead. Such etymological connotations would hardly have been unavailable to medieval readers and listeners schooled in deciphering skaldic poetry, i.e., from the perspective of a “skaldic prosaics.”

56. 703; ÍF 9:279. See Jónas Kristjánsson, ÍF 9:cx: “Allar líkur eru til, að Sneglu-Halla þáttur hafi upphaflega verið sjálfstæð saga . . . Í *Flateyjarbók* er mjög eindreginn heildarsvipur á þættinum, og bendir það til að hann sé þar verk eins höfundar” (All indications are that *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* was originally an independent story [*saga*] . . . In *Flateyjarbók* there is a very distinct cohesiveness in the *þáttur*, which suggests that it is the work of a single author). The last line of the text in *Flateyjarbók* (ÍF 9:295) supports this conclusion: “Lýk ek þar sögu frá Sneglu-Halla” (Here I close the tale of Sneglu-Halli). Harris, however, calls the *ek*-narrator “a pre-classical stylistic trait,” which would support an early origin of the *Flateyjarbók* version (see Harris, “Þættir,” 3118). Although this tag line could be a later addition, it is unlikely that this can be deduced on philological grounds.



himself back on the farm. Thorljot's accidental self-sacrifice, although it allows Thorljot to provide posthumously for his family, displays an utter lack of the wisdom that Odin acquires by sacrificing "himself to himself."<sup>57</sup> Halli's overarching argument about Thjodolf before the king's court seems to be that you can take the poet off the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the poet—unless, of course, the poet in question happens to be Halli himself.

This brand of "class warfare" by proxy of rapid-fire intertextual references is a pervasive feature of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*. The closest "mythic analogue" to the noose that links Thjodolf's father and the calf is the tether Loki ties between his testicles and a nanny-goat's beard in Snorri's account of the myth of Skaði. Whereas Loki's testicular tug-of-war is funny (at least for those not personally involved), these very serious jests have deadly consequences for Thjodolf's father, and, by extension, for Thjodolf's pretense to a distinguished genealogy. As Einar Haugen once observed, Loki can be viewed as a "mediator" between the realms of Human and Animal.<sup>58</sup> As previously noted, Loki turns himself variously into a mare, a flea, a fish, a seal, a bird, and a fly (i.e., creatures of land, sea, and air—thus underscoring his indeterminate nature). The tale of Thjodolf's father and the calf might been seen as a failed "mediation" of this kind, an inability to successfully exist in between two orders, which is the characteristic talent of Loki and, as I shall argue, of Halli. Since Thjodolf's family lacks Halli's "mythic" stature (which he only begins to claim for himself in the first insult scene with the king), for them such a balancing act, i.e., between human and animal, can only end badly. Loki's animal transformations, by contrast, often rescue the family of the gods from cosmic catastrophes that dwarf the quotidian hunger faced by Thjodolf's kin, such as when he turns into a mare, foils the Master Builder's scheme, and bears Odin the fastest horse, the eight-legged Sleipnir. While Halli does not literally undergo any Loki-esque metamorphoses, he succeeds in demonstrating that Thjodolf's mastery of myth, as evinced in his stanzas on the blacksmith and

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57. "Myself to myself" (*siálfr siálfom mér*). Neckel, *Edda: Lieder*, 40 (st. 138). Neckel, *Edda: Lieder*, 40 (st. 138).

58. See "The Mythical Structure of the Ancient Scandinavians: Some Thoughts on Reading Dumézil," in *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 170–83.



the tanner, is merely formal. Poetry, at least since Ovid (who was known in medieval Iceland),<sup>59</sup> has been conceived of as the art of transformation, an art Halli embodies in his personal transformation from Icelandic bumpkin to Norwegian courtier, and, as I will now show, from mundane wisecracker to “mythic” Loki-figure. Unlike his skaldic rival, Halli does not merely compose about the myths (in fact, he hardly composes about them at all); rather, he alludes to them in his own actions. In other words, Halli “lives them out,” transforming himself literally into what Russell Poole (in this volume) calls “a living embodiment of tradition.”

By casting Thjodolf in the lineage of “ugly Thor” (*Þorljótr*), the tale relocates the antagonism between Thjodolf and Halli within the paradigm of the antagonism between Thor and Loki, and between the gods and the giants more generally. Similar to the enforcer role played (albeit badly) by Thjodolf at King Harald’s court, Thor maintains the tenuous exclusivity of divine society against would-be entrants from the “lower classes” (such as Hrungnir and the Master-Builder, i.e., “Hallis” of the giant world, who try to earn or conquer a place in divine society). In both the myths and the *þáttur*, the grounds for such exclusion on the basis of genealogy, as opposed to ideology, are tenuous at best; Thor and Loki are both half-giant, on their mother’s and father’s sides, respectively, just as Halli and Thjodolf are both sprung from the same humble Icelandic roots.

Previous scholarship has not taken note of any analogues between Loki and Halli, but they are in fact a pervasive, if overlooked, feature of the *þáttur*.<sup>60</sup> The *Tale* is indeed highly conscious of the thirteenth-century Icelandic mythographic tradition of Loki, which serves as a constant intertextual reference point, and furnishes meaning beyond the tale’s literal sense, no less than *Egils saga* adds poignancy to Rognvald’s actions in the episode recounted at the beginning of this essay.

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59. See Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, 22, 37–38; Anne Holtsmark, “Ovid,” in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, ed. John Danstrup (Roskilde: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1968), col. 65.

60. The only previous essay-length study of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* addresses the status of the poet’s “mouth”; see Ármann Jakobsson, “Munnur Skáldsins: Um vanda þess og vegsemd að vera listrænn og framgjarn Íslendingur í útlöndum,” *Ritmennt: ársrit Landsbókasafns Íslands—Háskólabókasafns*, 10 (2005): 63–79.

### Halli as a Loki Figure

As part of the “case” made here, I will now offer into evidence a series of thematic parallels and motivic analogues that link the figures of Halli and Loki. The three themes that are discussed first and more briefly are general in nature (and might pertain equally well to saga characters, e.g., Gísli Súrsson, who are not in any obvious sense Loki figures), but will take on greater significance in light of the highly specific character of the motifs later adduced.

#### “No Equal in Trickery”

Both Loki and Halli are noteworthy “trickster” figures, although this is not ultimately the defining characteristic of either. (The equation of Loki with “the trickster of primitive religions” is problematic; trickery is not Loki’s essential function, although it is a key part of his toolkit, and he is arguably its unsurpassed mythic practitioner.) Similarly, the comment of Halli’s benchmate that the poet has “no equal in trickery” (*Engum manni ertu líkr at prettum*)<sup>61</sup> is amply borne out in the series of episodes recounted below.

#### *Ergi* and Slander

Halli and Loki are arguably the two preeminent dispensers of sexual defamation in medieval Icelandic literature. The accusations of *ergi* and homosexuality which Halli lobes at his superiors are paralleled by Loki’s sexual defamation of the gods in *Lokasenna*. Whereas Loki’s slander takes place under the protection of Odin, King Harald likewise forbids his court to harm Halli for his outrages. A case in point is afforded by the following episode: “In the spring, King Harald went to the Gulathing Assembly. And one day the king asked Halli how he was doing for women at the assembly. Halli answered:

|                                  |                                       |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| This Gulathing’s great.          | Gótt es Guláþing þetta.               |
| We fuck whatever we fancy. (710) | Gilju vit, hvat es viljum. (ÍF 9:293) |

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61. 707; ÍF 9:287.

The king then insultingly assigns Halli and Thjodolf the feminizing tasks of cooking and serving food, but the goldbricking Halli forces Thjodolf to perform these tasks alone. Since Thjodolf can no longer snub Halli socially, since he is now, like himself, a courtier of the King, Thjodolf, it seems, tries his own hand at sexual defamation—a form of verbal violence that knows no class boundaries, as Halli’s exchanges with the king make evident. Spying Halli napping under a boat, Thjodolf lamely attempts to compose an insulting verse:

|   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Sticking out from under the boat              | Út stendr undan báti           |
| is a sole-bucket [shoe]. <sup>62</sup> You’re | Ilfat. Muntú nú gilja? (Ibid.) |
| fucking now? <sup>63</sup> (Ibid).            |                                |

Thjodolf’s verse, naturally, is hardly much of an insult to a man who avowedly “fucks whatever he fancies.” This is a rather flatfooted comeback indeed, considering that Halli has just made Thjodolf culpable of *ergi* by forcing him to assume the role of female domestic. The setting of this incident at the Gulathing may be thematically

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62. The folkloric connection between the human foot and wanton sexuality is seen, e.g., in the children’s nursery rhyme, “There was an old woman who lived in a shoe / She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do.” (This association is presumably evident in more contemporary forms of foot-fetishism as well.) Since the foot is our primary means of “getting around,” its association with sexual license may be rooted in well-documented male anxieties about unfettered female mobility leading to unrestrained female sexuality (fears that emerged full force in early-modern urban culture), as evinced by the figure of the airborne witch. In Snorri’s mythography, the equation of sexuality with mobility is exemplified in the male sphere by the god Freyr, often interpreted as a fertility figure, whose golden boar Gullinbursti (in contemporary parlance, his “sweet ride”) can convey him by both sky and sea, day and night, although the extant mythographic tradition does not depict this. The connection between the exposed foot and sexuality is evident in Snorri’s account of Skaði’s unintended betrothal to Njörðr: Skaði is allowed to choose for herself a husband from among the gods, but permitted only a preview of their feet. On the erotic potential of the “foot” in skaldic verse, see Russell Poole’s discussion of *fótr* in the poetry of Sigvatr Þórðarson (*Austrfararvísur*, st. 15) in this volume.

63. “Muntú nú gilja?” might alternately be rendered as “So *this* is how you go about seducing?” So understood, Thjodolf would not be accusing Halli of having sex but of trying—ineptly—to solicit it. The human foot is associated with attempted seduction (or rather *abduction*) in Bragi Boddason’s kenning for “shield” in *Ragnarsdrápa*: “blað ilja Þrúðar þjófs” (the blade/leaf of the sole of the thief of Þrúðr [i.e., Hrungnir]). This reading would give Thjodolf’s lame quip a firmer footing, but such a sudden display of sexually barbed wit might seem out of character with the portrayal of Thjodolf as an adept but otherwise uninspired and prudish technician. In either case, Thjodolf’s response cannot withstand Halli’s rebuttal (710; ÍF 9:293), reaffirming that Thjodolf, like whomever Loki targets, ultimately remains on the receiving end of sexual defamation.



relevant as well, since the laws of this particular Norwegian assembly made it a crime to accuse a man of behaving “like a woman.”<sup>64</sup>

Having made short work of Thjodolf, Halli promptly avenges himself on the king for assigning him these unmanly kitchen duties. In the following episode, Harald spies Halli gazing covetously at an ornate axe and asks if him he will allow himself to be “fucked for the axe” (*Viltu láta serðask til oxarinnar?*). Halli nimbly replies, “I will not . . . but it seems understandable to me that you should want to sell the axe for the same price that you paid for it” (*Eigi . . . en várkunn þykki mér yðr, at þér vilið svá selja sem þér keyptuð*).<sup>65</sup> Forced to choose between a tacit admission of *ergi* and a display of royal munificence, Harald, with characteristic sagacity, opts for the latter, giving Halli the axe. Chided by the queen for being too lavish with commoners, especially ones who lambaste the royal couple with shameful obscenities, the king replies, “I don’t wish to take in bad sense those words of Halli’s which are *ambiguous*” (*vil ek eigi snúa orðum Halla til hins verra, þeim er tvíræði eru*),<sup>66</sup> a statement to which we will have ample cause to return.

### *Sexual Ambiguity*

A third thematic parallel between Halli and Loki is Loki’s ambiguous gender identity, as well as his well-attested bisexuality, e.g., as the mother of Odin’s horse, and as father of the Midgard Serpent, Fenriswolf, and Hel. This sexual ambiguity is a trait shared by Loki and Odin, who in *Ynglinga saga* is said to practice *seiðr*, the “shameful” and “unmanly” form of sorcery associated with female sexuality.<sup>67</sup> The sexual ambiguity of Loki and Odin is playfully

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64. “There are certain expressions known as *fullréttisorð* [actionable verbal offenses]. One is if a man says to another that he has given birth to a child. A second is if a man says of another that he is *sannsorðinn* (demonstrably used sexually by another man). The third is if he compares him to a mare, or calls him a bitch (*grey*) or a harlot, or compares him with a female of any kind of animal.” Quoted in Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 16 (see endnote 26); see also pp. 15–20, 28–31, and 38.

65. 711; ÍF 9:294.

66. 711 (modified); ÍF 9:294.

67. See Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnason, Íslenzk fornrit 26–28, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941), 1:19; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, ed. and trans. Lee Hollander (University of Austin Press, 1964), 11. See also Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, 19–20, 63–64.

recapitulated (though not without potentially serious consequences) in Halli's and Harald's reciprocal accusations of so-called "passive" homosexuality.

In addition, however, to the merely *thematic* parallels between Halli and Loki, Halli's deeds in the tale constitute nothing less than an extended series of motivic analogues to various exploits of Loki's depicted in the mythographic tradition. Deftly interwoven in the narrative strands of the *þátttr*, these analogues can now be picked out and recounted forthwith.

### *The Eating Contest in the King's Hall*

When Halli accuses Harald of being stingy with food, Harald orders two men to carry a trough full of porridge onto the floor and commands Halli to eat from it until he bursts (700; ÍF 9:273–74). The eating contest in the royal hall and the trough (*trog*) arguably parallel the trough of meat that king Útgarðaloki has brought into his hall for Loki's eating contest in *Gylfaginning*, the first book of Snorri's *Edda*.<sup>68</sup> Both Loki and Halli compete against forces of nature: Loki against the ravenous element of fire, Halli against his own ravenousness and the limitations of the human stomach. Halli ultimately refuses to indulge the king's whim. Nonetheless, Loki's ability to consume massive quantities of food, while superhuman, is not supernatural either; Loki, too, has his limits and, unlike his rival Logi (fire), cannot continue eating indefinitely. Harald's apparent generosity can be understood as a snub at the poverty of medieval Icelanders, since porridge is the lowliest of medieval foodstuffs.<sup>69</sup> Halli's quip about porridge, that "battered, it's the best of foods" (*Gǫrr matr es þat, smjǫrvan*), is proverbial in several Germanic languages and well attested in both Dutch and German around the time of the "younger" Flateyjarbók.<sup>70</sup> There is an undercurrent of

68. See *Gylfaginning*, Faulkes, 39–40.

69. See Melitta Weiss Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), esp. 3–5. Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (see note 40 above), s.v. "Brei," provides ample illustration from medieval literary sources that "Brei ist eine einfache Liebesspeise des Volks."

70. "In den Brei gehört Fett." See "Brei" (s.v.) in *Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi: Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters*, ed. Samuel Singer, 13 vols. (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter, 1996–2002), 2:85. Additionally, "Brei im Maul haben" is a well-attested idiom in *Frühneuhochdeutsch* meaning "to speak equivocally,"

irony in the king's gift insofar as the historical Harald was credited by Snorri (in *Heimskringla*) with saving Iceland from famine with shipments of wheat. By presenting his newest courtier with a trough of porridge, Harald puts the *arrivista* back in his place (i.e., on the farm); and by refusing to eat all of it, Halli reasserts his newfound position at court. The episode harkens back to the incident in which Halli accuses Thjodolf of having composed "Food Trough Verses" (*Soðtrogsvísur*) at home in Iceland—an insulting backstory that renders the double-edged nature of the king's magnanimity unambiguous.

### *Head Wagers*

Loki and Halli are two of a select body of figures in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus with a penchant for wagering their heads.<sup>71</sup> In *Snorra Edda*, Loki bets the dwarf Brokk that his brother Eitri cannot produce three treasures as good as those made for the gods by rival dwarf smiths: a head of golden hair for Sif; *Skíðblaðnir*, the folding ship that provides its own perpetual breeze; and Odin's spear *Gungnir*. Eitri indeed produces three superior treasures: the golden ring *Draupnir*, the golden boar *Gullinbursti*, and Thor's hammer *Mjöllnir*.<sup>72</sup> Halli, for his part, wagers his head against his friend Sigurd's golden ring that he can obtain compensation for the death of a non-existent brother, who is in fact a complete stranger, killed by the king's irascible envoy Einar Fly, a classic saga "bad guy" or *ójafnaðarmaðr* (inequitable man) who "pays compensation to no one." Halli succeeds in securing compensation for the non-kinsman, but his deceit is not outrageous merely because the slain man is not Halli's brother. The episode must be viewed in the context of Halli's and Thjodolf's competing claims to genealogical preeminence. Without a

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which is to say *ambiguously*, as in Luther: "wer sophistisch redet und brei im maul behelt" and "Sagt weder Ja noch Nein, wie der Leute Art is, gehen nicht gleich zu, behalten immer Brey im Maul" (Ibid., 2:86). In Norwegian folktales, failure to provide the mischievous *nisse* with properly buttered porridge invariably leads to malicious tricks played on the farmstead and its stingy inhabitants. See, e.g., Peter Christen Asbjørnsen, *Norske Huldreeventyr og Folkesagn*, 3rd ed. (Christiania [Oslo], 1870), 77.

71. The head wager is a mythic *topos*; alongside Loki, one might mention Odin, the giant Vafþrúðnir, and Snorri's fictive Swedish king, Gylfi, among its noteworthy practitioners.

72. *Skáldskaparmál*, Faulkes, 1:41–42.



genealogy to speak of and hailing “from Fljot” (695; ÍF 9:264), Halli is not simply a “nobody,” but a nobody par excellence—a man with no business avenging *anyone*, much less a fictive kinsman. (Halli’s fictive “brother” is indeed best viewed not just as a prank but in the context of the *Genealogie-Ersatz* constituted by Halli’s ongoing self-mythologization.) Halli thus simultaneously appropriates and lampoons the revenge ethic of the class to which he aspires—in pointed counterpoint to Thjodolf’s “avenging” of his father’s bovine killer. Einar Fly, moreover, in contrast to Halli, can actually boast a distinguished genealogy, one that traces back to his grandfather, the famous poet Eyvindr skáldaspillir (“spoiler of poets”) and his great-great-great-grandfather, King Harald Fairhair. Hence Einar Fly, descended from kings and poets, combines in one figure the social status of Halli’s two previous antagonists: the poet Thjodolf and King Harald himself. Thus Halli’s seemingly merely episodic conflicts are in fact progressive and cumulative, not arbitrary in their sequence.

Nor is the head wager the only Loki-ism at work in the Einar Fly episode. The student of Norse myth will readily recall Snorri’s account in the *Edda* of how Loki transforms himself into a fly in order to sabotage the dwarf Eitri’s attempt to produce treasure for the gods by stinging Eitri’s brother three times as he works at the smith’s bellows.<sup>73</sup> While threefold iterations are too common a literary and folkloric device as to be meaningful in themselves, in the context of the other Loki-motifs mentioned thus far it is difficult to ignore the fact that Halli tries exactly three times to trick Einar, who happens to be nicknamed “Fly,” into paying compensation in the form of treasure (here, three marks of silver). Furthermore, in the case of both Halli and Loki, a “head wager” is at stake, making the list of allusions to Loki’s ruse in Halli’s dealings a rather complete one. In a further episode (707–8; ÍF 9:287–89), Halli once more wagers his head, this time against a gold ring, that he can silence an unruly mob, which he promptly accomplishes with an indecipherable but obscene-sounding public outburst. While in *Morkinskinna* the gold ring is wagered against Halli’s *life*, in *Flateyjarbók* this deal is explicitly turned into a head wager.

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73. *Ibid.*, 1:42.

*The Dwarfs' Treasures*

The parallels between Snorri's myth of the gods' treasures and Halli's machinations, however, run deeper still: As mentioned previously, Loki acquires six treasures for the gods: Sif's golden hair, the magic ship *Skíðblaðnir*, Odin's spear *Gungnir*, the golden boar *Gullinbursti*, the golden ring *Draupnir*, and Thor's hammer *Mjöllnir*. Not to be "out-Lokied" (as it were), Halli acquires a roast *piglet* in exchange for a swiftly composed poem, golden *rings* through a head wager, and passage on an overcrowded *ship* by scaring away all the German passengers with feigned premonitions of a watery grave. Finally, as a reward for a poem of pure gibberish, the English King Harold Godwinsson (whose knowledge of Old Norse is apparently not what it might be) grants Halli as much *silver* as will stick in his *hair* after it is dumped on Halli's head; this turns out to be a fair amount after Halli covertly coats his hair with tar. While this is not exactly a head of *golden* hair, a coiffure made of another precious metal is perhaps close enough.<sup>74</sup> One might also recall that in the myths Loki is represented as having mysterious powers of adhesion (as when he sticks to the eagle Thiassi or to the roof of the hall of the giant Geirrod). At this point, it might seem that Halli only receives *four* items, to Loki's six, making the parallel incomplete. But Halli also receives a belt and knife from King Harald, for a total of six objects. We might consider the belt a stand-in for Thor's hammer, since Thor is equally famous for his belt of strength. Halli's knife, like Odin's spear, is a pointed cutting weapon, on a scale more appropriate for its recipient. More significantly, the knife and belt are functionally identical with Odin's spear and Thor's hammer as emblems of status and strength, respectively. The formulaic "knife and belt" are well attested in the sagas as tokens of noble identity.<sup>75</sup> Hence, the gift of

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74. In light of the ongoing agon between Halli and the king in the *þáttur*, there may be an ironic contrast implied here between Halli's easy success in England and Harald's harsh demise there in 1066.

75. For the formulaic *knífr ok belti* as tokens of noble identity, see (in the *Bibliography* below) *Laxdæla saga*: "En áðr en þau Melkorka skildisk, selr hon í hendr Óláfi fingrull mikít ok mælti: 'Þenna grip gaf faðir minn [King Mýrkjartan] mér at tannfé, ok vænti ek, at hann kenni, ef hann sér.' Enn fékk hon honum í hönd kníf ok belti ok bað hann selja fósturu sinni: 'get ek, at hún dylisk eigi við þessar jartegnir'" (ÍF 5:51, ch. 20; also ÍF 5:241, ch. 84); as identifying tokens, see the slave Melkólfr in *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12:124, ch. 49; also



the knife and belt might be viewed a symbol of Harald's recognition of Halli's poetic sovereignty, just as Odin's spear is a symbol of his power, and Thor's belt the brute force with which that power is maintained.

Anyone unconvinced by these parallels is invited to consider the roasted piglet Halli receives from the king, which I have adduced as a parallel to the golden boar made by the dwarf smith Eitri. The piglet is not given to Halli by the King directly; rather, Harald has it brought to Halli *by his own personal dwarf* (700; ÍF 9:274).<sup>76</sup> In fact, it is as a reward for a well-crafted poem about the king's dwarf—made, like the gods' treasures, under time pressure and penalty of death—that Halli receives the knife and belt as well. Hence, three of the items Halli receives are obtained by means of a dwarf, as are the treasures Loki procures from Brokk, Eitri, and the Sons of Ivaldi. It is perhaps fitting that Halli's poetry should be rewarded in such a manner, since poetry—the vehicle of Halli's upward mobility—is, according to one

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ÍF 12:121 ch. 47); as valuable gifts, see *Gísla saga* (ÍF 6:88, ch. 27) and *Hallfreðar saga* (ÍF 8:166, ch. 6; also ÍF 8:170–71, ch. 7); as supernatural gifts from kin, see *Gull-Þóris saga* (ÍF 13:184, ch. 3). The formula is also attested in *Droplaugarsona saga* (ÍF 11:156, ch. 8) as a gift after a premonition; in *Bjarnar saga hítöelakappa* (ÍF 3:173, ch. 22) as a bribe; and in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, 3:254, ch.32) as a supernatural gift. In *Norna-Gests þátr* (ibid., 1:311, ch. 2), these items are not a gift, but are likewise mentioned in conjunction with a king and his follower. While the *knífr ok belti* (never, it seems, *belti ok knífr*) are typically bestowed in recognition of outstanding qualities, they may also be given to the outstandingly wicked (famously to Melkólfr in *Njáls saga*) or as a bribe to a person of low standing (in *Bjarnar saga hítöelakappa*). Hence Harald's choice of gifts seems in line with his ambiguous treatment of Halli generally. Indeed, the fact that the king dresses up his dwarf with similar items ("gyrði hann sverði"; ÍF 6:270) in the preceding episode might well suggest a tongue-in-cheek gesture behind these gifts, and (as in the case of the potentially sodomitically acquired axe) serve to further underscore Harald's double-edged munificence.

76. The king's Frisian dwarf, Tuta, is Halli's physiognomic opposite, "thick-set" (*digrastr*) and "broad-shouldered" (*herðimestr*), whereas Halli is "a tall man, long-necked, with narrow shoulders and long arms" (*hár maðr ok hálslangr, herðilitill ok handsíðr*) [ÍF 9:264, 269]. Both are "ill-proportioned" in their limbs (*ljótlimaðr*), albeit for wholly opposite reasons. According to R. E. Kaske, Frisians had a reputation for being exceedingly tall in the Middle Ages (a "fact" known to Dante as well in *Inferno* 30, line 64). See R. E. Kaske, "The *Eotenas* in *Beowulf*," in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. Robert P. Creed (Providence: Brown University Press, 1967), 292–93. A Frisian dwarf is hence an ironic figure, not least in the court of a king reported in Snorri's *Heimskringla* (ÍF 28:187) to be some seven feet tall. A short Frisian is an anomaly, much as is a poor Iclander among foreign royalty, such as Halli, or his mythic analogue, Loki: a giant by descent who is nonetheless "reckoned among the gods." The poet's and the dwarf's status as aberrant outsiders who serve at the king's whim adds poignancy to the expressed sympathy of the king's shortest servant for his tallest (ÍF 9:274).



kenning central to Snorri's discussion of poetic language in the *Edda*, the *farkost dverga* or "ship of the dwarves."<sup>77</sup>

### *A Gift Horse "Fit for a King"*

The remaining parallels between Halli and Loki, or examples of mythic allusion in the tale, can be recounted in brief. Let us recall once more Snorri's tale of the Master Builder and how Loki transforms himself into a mare in order to lure away the Builder's stallion from his labors, and how Loki ends up pregnant as a result. Although Halli lacks Loki's first-hand expertise in the finer points of equine courtship, Halli nonetheless shows that he knows a thing or two about horses having sex. When Thjodolf sends a horse from Iceland as a gift for king Harald, "The king went to see the stallion, and it was big and fat. Halli was there when the horse stuck out his prick" (*Konungurrinn gekk at sjá bestinn, ok var mikill ok feitr. Halli var þar hjá, er bestrinn hafði úti sínina*). Halli then speaks this verse:

|  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| Always a young she-pig—                  | Sýr es ávallt,                      |
| Thjodolf's horse has                     | hefr saurugt allt                   |
| wholly befouled his <sup>78</sup> prick; | hestr Þjóðólfs erðr,                |
| he's a master fucker. (711–12)           | hann es dróttinserðr. (ÍF 9:294–95) |

The "master fucker" of George Clark's translation rather masterfully captures the ambiguity of *dróttinserðr*.<sup>79</sup> Parsed as *dróttins-erðr* the word means something like "king-sized penis" (or, more apropos,

77. *Skáldskaparmál*, Faulkes, 1:4.

78. Clark's translation appears to maintain an ambiguity in the original as to whether "his" (i.e., *Þjóðólfs*) modifies "horse" (*hestr Þjóðólfs*) or "prick" (*Þjóðólfs erðr*), leaving open the question of who is being fucked by whom. In a further twist to this bawdy little verse, in addition to a "sow," *sýr* (line 1) is also the nickname of King Harald's father, Sigurðr sýr Hálfðanarson.

79. The Íslenzk fornrit edition of Jónas Kristjánsson gives *dróttinserðr* (i.e., sodomized by his owner, i.e., by Thjodolf, or—potentially—by the king); a few examples drawn from the rich later manuscript tradition of the *þáttr* serve to attest to the interpretive challenge posed by this *hapax*: AM 563 a 4<sup>o</sup> (1650–99) supplies *dróttinsserðr* ("the sodomizer of the king"); ÍB 384 4<sup>o</sup> (1799–1822) likewise reads *dróttinsserðr*; JS 259 4<sup>o</sup> (1825) supplies *dróttins sæti* [?] or "king's throne," which is either a misreading or a nonsensical bowdlerization.

“hung like a horse”). One could also read this *hapax legomenon* along with Finnur Jónsson as *dróttin-serðr*, which in his *Lexicon Poeticum* is interpreted with the passive meaning “sodomized by its owner” (from the verb *serða*, “to use a man sexually like a woman”). Michael Minkov argues that the word has the active meaning of “one that sodomizes or will sodomize his new master.”<sup>80</sup> So understood, the king’s rejoinder seems more on target: Harald chides Halli that Thjodolf’s gift horse will never come into his possession “at this rate” (*at þessu*). Given the ambiguities of *dróttinserðr*, I would offer that the king’s rejoinder can in fact be taken both ways: (1) the king is predicting that Thjodolf will be offended by the suggestion that the gift-giver has been sodomized by his own horse, or vice versa; or (2) the king understands Halli’s prediction that the horse will sodomize his new master, the king—terms to which Harald will not bend.<sup>81</sup> True to form, Halli forces the king into the same dilemma as in the episode of the axe: Harald must either relinquish a valuable possession or admit to being *sorðinn*—used sexually by a man.

As previously recounted, Harald does not “wish to take in bad sense those words of Halli’s which are ambiguous.” Instead, fighting fire with fire, Harald counters Halli’s ambiguity with his own counter-ambiguity, responding, “Tut, tut . . . he will never come into my possession at this rate” (*Tví, tví . . . hann kemr aldri í mína eigu at þessu*).<sup>82</sup> This could either mean that the king predicts that Thjodolf will take offense and revoke the gift, or the king may jokingly be saying “no, thanks, the horse is not my type.” Suggestive of the king’s awareness that he is engaged in a duel based on virtuoso displays of verbal ambiguity, Harald prefaces his ambiguous rejoinder to Halli’s ambiguous slander with the exclamation “tut, tut” or in the Icelandic original “tví, tví.” “Tví” is of course a common “expression to express disapproval”<sup>83</sup> in Old Norse, but it is also etymologically related to the word “two,” and is the standard Icelandic prefix for “double” (cognate to German *zwei/zwei* and Latin *duo*). Thus Harald’s

80. See Michael Minkow, “Sneglu-Halli, 2:11: Dróttinserðr,” *Saga-Book* 22 (1988): 285–86.

81. Unlike King Harald, Minkow insists exclusively on the latter interpretation.

82. 711–12; ÍF 9:295.

83. According to Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), s.v.

exclamation could also be taken literally as “double, double”—an astute commentary on the double entendres of the foregoing scene. In other words, the king jestingly lets Halli know that he gets the joke, and shows his poet that he can give as well as he can take. Either way, Halli should be pleased if Harald refuses Thjodolf’s gift; anyone familiar with Snorri’s tale of the Master Builder will recall that providing a steed fit for a sovereign, such as Odin’s eight-legged horse Sleipnir, is a task properly left to a Loki figure.<sup>84</sup>

### *Halli and Loki: “Out of the Saga”*

A final parallel with Loki can be seen in Halli’s post-skaldic career and ultimate demise back in Iceland. When his fortunes back home have run out, Halli takes up fishing as a career of last resort. Similarly hard pressed at the tail end of mythic history, Loki transforms himself into a fish and even proceeds to invent the fishing net. The *pátrr* tells how one day, after a particularly strenuous row back to land, Halli takes a few bites of porridge and immediately drops dead. The king maintains that Halli “must have burst eating porridge,” but the tale explicitly states that Halli eats only “a few bites,” and it seems highly unlikely that a glutton of such mythic proportions could have died from overeating. This raises the question: Might there be something fishy about Halli’s premature death? Surely Halli had a talent for making enemies, and the king’s warning, “to go warily because of Einar Fly” upon his return to Iceland (712; ÍF 9:295), raises the prospect that a vengeful Einar may have poisoned the porridge. The *fluga* element in Einar’s name is indeed attested as a nickname for an assassin.<sup>85</sup> More prosaically, it is equally possible that Halli dies from simple exhaustion after strenuous rowing, doubtless like many an Icelandic fisherman before him, without any cloak-and-dagger intrigue left over from his days as a courtier. The *pátrr* provides just enough evidence to invite us to speculate about, but not determine, the cause of Halli’s death. Thus Halli even *dies* ambiguously. The fact that Halli perishes after eating only “a few bites” might indeed raise suspicions that

84. The well-known tale of Loki’s brief equine liaison, resulting in the birth of Sleipnir, is recounted in the Master Builder episode in Snorri’s *Edda* (*Gylfaginning*, Faulkes, 34–36).

85. See Cleasby-Vigfusson (note 83 above), 162; E. H. Lind, *Norsk-Isländska Personbinamn från Medeltiden* (Uppsala: 1920–21), col. 85.



Halli was poisoned. Such a poisoning motif would logically extend the association of Halli and Loki, since Loki is punished towards the end of his days with the dripping venom of a poisonous snake. It is notable, moreover, that the tales of Halli and Loki (in *Voluspá* and in Snorri's citation of the latter in his *Edda*) both conclude after their arrival at their final destinations—Iceland and the field of battle at Ragnarök, respectively—by boat.

The indeterminate manner of Halli's death—whether he is slain by an enemy or perishes mysteriously—is an apt, final ambiguity in a poetic career predicated on double meanings.<sup>86</sup> Halli's death poses an interpretive puzzle, and is thus a fitting (if ignominious) ending for a producer of skaldic verse. The indeterminate nature of his death is, however, also paralleled in two different traditions regarding the fate of Loki. According to *Snorra Edda*, Loki is killed by his adversary (Heimdallr); in *Völuspá*, however, Loki “just fades away” without explanation. Thus both possibilities—death at the hands of an adversary or death under ultimately mysterious circumstances—find their counterpart in the extant mythographic tradition. Harald's last words on Halli (i.e., that he must have burst eating porridge), can hence be read as a dismissal of Halli's attempts at self-mythologization (surely Loki, known for his ravenousness, would never have “burst” from overeating). Yet the king's final comment is at the same time a mythologization worthy of Halli himself; the king's jesting explanation—which he himself knows cannot possibly be true—itself constitutes a new “myth” about Halli.

### *The Companion of Thor(ljot's Son)?*

The punctuation of Halli's quotidian follies with allusions to the figure of Loki compels us to ask: Does anything about Halli's antagonist and companion, Thjodolf, recall Loki's companion and antagonist, Thor? I have already discussed in passing the *Por-* element

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86. The “detective's question,” i.e., *how* Halli dies, is perhaps secondary to the more fundamental observation that a court poet cannot survive in isolation from royal patronage. The fact that Halli runs out of money in Iceland (712; ÍF 9:295) underscores the economic dependency of the Icelandic skald on the Norwegian court (addressed by Russell Poole in this volume). Suggestively, we are not told of any compositions by Halli that post-date his return to Iceland.

in Thjodolf's father's name (unique to the Flateyjarbók version), and the generic resemblance between Thjodolf's agon with Halli and the fraught relationship between Thor and Loki. The answer is a reserved "yes"—an affirmation that must remain muted, for the reasons that follow.

A laundry list of resemblances between Thjodolf and Thor might read as follows: Like Thor and Loki, Thjodolf and Halli are antagonists *and* companions. Just as Halli debases Thjodolf sexually, forcing him to perform a woman's duties, Loki compels Thor to play a female role in *Prymskviða*. Loki draws attention to Thor's lowly origins, just as Halli draws attention to Thjodolf's; in *Lokasenna*, Loki lampoons Thor's illegitimate parentage, addressing him as "jarðar burr" (Jörð's son)—that is, the son of his giantess mother—rather than his father's son.<sup>87</sup> Like Halli, Loki continually outmaneuvers his opponent but, in the end (after serving a brief stint as a fisherman), gets his comeuppance. In addition, Thor is associated with Thjodolf's ancestral home in Svarfaðardalr (see note 54 above), founded by Helgi the lean, who famously hedged his bets by worshipping both Christ *and* Thor as the occasion demanded.<sup>88</sup> Finally, Thjodolf composes about Thor in his poem about the blacksmith and the tanner. The resemblances between Thjodolf and Thor are hence perhaps palpable enough, but general and inchoate compared with Halli's feats and their analogues in mythic narratives of Loki. It would seem that the resemblances between Thjodolf and Thor exist in potentiality but that the *þáttr* fails to actualize this potential. This "failure," however, is a highly logical one, as a crucial aspect of the rivalry between Thjodolf and Halli lies in the fact that Thjodolf merely composes *about* mythic narratives but does not "live" them as Halli does. Thjodolf's mythologizing of the mundane, as in his poem about the blacksmith and the tanner, is restricted to his lifeless art, which the *þáttr* playfully contrasts with Halli's artful life.<sup>89</sup>

87. Neckel, *Edda: Lieder*, 108 (st. 58, normalized).

88. Helgi is reportedly guided to this area by Thor; see *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), 250. See further Jonas Wellendorf, "The Interplay of Pagan and Christian Traditions in Icelandic Settlement Myths," *JEGP* 109 (2010): 20–21.

89. In other words, what Margaret Clunies Ross in her brief summation of this episode calls "the mythological referencing potential of the kenning system" and "mundane subjects . . . presented as if they were subjects from myth and legend in order to

The mythological elements one would normally expect to find on display in skaldic verse are in fact almost entirely missing in Halli's poetry; they are instead transposed into the fictive persona of the poet himself. The relationship between the world of the myths and the world of the skald, which is typically only metaphorical, is realized literally in the story of Halli and his mythologized deeds. The substitution of one thing for another in skaldic poetry, translated into the realm of narrative, takes on the character of an indigenous form of reading distinct from but parallel to Christian allegory, and not unlikely shaped by it.<sup>90</sup>

### The Case for a Skaldic Prosaics

*Sneglu-Halla þáttir* is what Torfi Tulinius, discussing the application of skaldic poetics to saga writing in general, has called a "multi-level prose narrative,"<sup>91</sup> a work whose interpretation depends on an audience well trained in teasing meaning out of obscure skaldic verses that allude to mythic narratives. When it came to the sagas, literary-minded Icelanders presumably did not leave their skaldic hermeneutics and mythological learning at the door like a pair of wet boots. When such expertise is lacking, the story, as with all but the most unreadable allegories, still makes sense to those who do not see beyond the literal meaning (its *sensus historicus* or *literalis*). Thus when the saga says Harald thinks "it was fun to set them [his Icelandic skalds] against each other" (*þótti honum gaman at etja þeim saman*),<sup>92</sup> we can take this statement both literally as a portrait of life at the king's court and/or as a commentary on the

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have fun at the expense of the lower social orders" (*History of Old Norse Poetry*, 155, 117) transcends the agon between the two poets and is made an overarching feature of the *þáttir* itself.

90. As Thomas D. Hill notes in the present volume, recapitulation of mythic motifs in the sagas might be seen as cognate to the recapitulation of the life of Christ in medieval hagiography, or (one might add) to the secular appropriation of hagiographic *topoi* in courtly romance, such as in Wolfram's *Parzival*; on the latter, see esp. Arthur Groos, *Romancing the Grail: Genre, Science, and Quest in Wolfram's "Parzival"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), esp. 11, 37–38, 58, 168–69, 210, 211–12. Hence our penchant for locating the echoes of pagan myths in the sagas may, ironically, be predicated on a manner of reading that is decidedly Christian.

91. Torfi H. Tulinius, "The Prosimetrum Form 2," 193.

92. 702; ÍF 9:277.



Norwegian crown's practice of exploiting regional and family feuds in Iceland in order to consolidate royal power and influence over the island.

One final ambiguity in the conflict of Harald's poets worth mentioning is the status of the verses attributed to them: Halli bests Thjodolf in many ways, but is he actually the better poet? The evidence of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* makes it difficult to answer this question in the affirmative. Halli's scant extant verses contain few kennings, none of which are mythological. Aside from one (unveiled!) reference to the sea goddess Rán, his work in fact displays none of the mythographic learning that characterizes skaldic verse, or for that matter his own behavior. His verses could easily be regarded as inferior to Thjodolf's *dróttkvætt* on both formal and thematic grounds: Halli's poems are mostly simple *lausavísur* addressing low topics, such as food, sex, and rural life. (Loki, of course, is not known for his poetry either.)<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, Halli's amusing verses seem to have more life in them than Thjodolf's more workmanlike productions; Halli is at least witty, even going as far as to brag—in verse, no less—about his ability to produce bad poetry:

I composed a thula  
about an earl.  
Not among the Danes  
has a poorer drapa appeared.  
Fourteen mistakes in metre  
and ten terrible rhymes.  
It's obvious to anyone,  
it goes upside down.  
So he has to compose  
Who knows how to—badly.  
(709–10)

Ortak eina  
of jarl þulu,  
verðrat drápa  
með Dqnum verri.  
Fqll eru fjórtán  
ok fqng tíu;  
opit es ok qndvert,  
qfugt stígandi;  
svá skal yrkja,  
sás illa kann.  
(ÍF 9:292–93)

93. Notwithstanding, I am sympathetic to Kevin J. Wanner's recent suggestion that Loki can in some sense be regarded as "a god of poets" (although I would rephrase this assertion less provocatively to read "an embodiment of the art of poetry"), insofar as skaldic poetry is—like its putative "god"—largely a locus of double meanings. My discussion of Halli and Loki might indeed provide grist for this particular mill. See Wanner, "Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth: Loki, Óðinn, and the Limits of Sovereignty," *History of Religions* 48 (2009): 224–25.

The hero of this superficially simple yet multi-leveled tale at times reads as a rehabilitation of the “historical” Halli, whose poetry is less artful, less complex, and far less mythologically learned than Thjodolf’s. Perhaps it is this very artlessness that makes Halli a fitting hero for a tale whose meta-subject is the complex, multi-leveled meaning of the seemingly prosaic and everyday. The only apparently artless Halli is indeed a fitting poster boy for saga narrative as a whole, whose style is outwardly straightforward, but whose surfaces often obscure depths of intricacy, learnedness, and—to recall three of Torfi’s criteria for “skaldic prose”—unity, intertextuality, and ambiguity.

Happily, the skeptical critic need not take my word for it.<sup>94</sup> The presence of complex allegorical structures in the *þáttur*, the “skaldic prosaics” I make the case for here, is rendered explicit in the tale by no less an authority in matters of literary interpretation than King Harald himself. I have already recounted how one day the king strolls by a blacksmith and a tanner at fisticuffs, commanding Thjodolf to compose a verse and “make one of them into Sigurd Fafnisbani and the other into Fafnir, but nevertheless identify each one’s trade.” The king’s final instructions to his poet are, I would now suggest, nothing less than the hermeneutic program of the *þáttur* itself. The “key” to the tale’s allegory is provided in King Harald’s words of advice to his “chief poet” (*höfuðskáld*): “It’s more difficult than you think. You have to make them into altogether different people than they really are” (*Petta er meiri vandi en þú munt ætla; þú skalt gera*

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94. Such as Gísli Sigurðsson, who writes, “The Icelandic Sagas do not contain any key as to how they should be interpreted, such as we usually find in genuine medieval allegories” (*Discourse on Method*, 33). I would argue that “genuine medieval allegories” rarely contain such overt “keys” to their interpretation, or only in the most ham-fisted instances, but instead refer allusively to common cultural frames of reference, afforded in this case by the Norse mythographic tradition. *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, however, seems to satisfy even the most onerous demand for an explicit hypogram, as King Harald’s instructions supply precisely such a “key.” See Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998), 10, for another expression of the anti-allegorical consensus. I readily agree that the sagas are not allegorical in the narrow sense (i.e., not in the manner of *Piers Plowman* or *Le Roman de la Rose*) that Vésteinn and Gísli seem to have in mind. Certain sagas, however, invite other forms of reading in the etymological sense of Greek *ἀλλήγορειν* (“to speak otherwise”), and some, such as *Njáls saga*, were evidently written by authors steeped in the tropes and elliptical reading practices of Christian exegesis. My reading here is nonetheless fully compatible with Vésteinn’s requirement that “the search for meaning [have] a visible path marked out for it in the text” (*ibid.*).

af þeim alla menn aðra en þeir eru).<sup>95</sup> Indeed, it would be difficult to think of a more succinct or programmatic elaboration of a skaldic prosaics.<sup>96</sup>

The king is a fitting mouthpiece to espouse such artistic principles, as *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* is hardly the only tale where Haraldr Sigurðarson's unrivaled interpretive skills are on display. In *Króka-Refs saga* (whose crafty protagonist is cast from a mold similar to Halli's), Harald is portrayed as a hyper-astute decipherer of cryptic meanings, as evinced by his unraveling of Ref's seemingly nonsensical proto-Joycean rantings (620–21; ÍF 14:153–56). Harald is in fact routinely portrayed as the most sagacious of kings, chieftains, and men in general in the northern lands.<sup>97</sup> The king might well serve as an ideal “implied reader,” a model of the kind of hermeneutically sophisticated audience the tale requires (or at least invites), in contrast to those, such as Thjodolf, the queen, and Einar fly, who prove incapable of reading beyond the literal sense.

There is, however, at least one crucial distinction between how skaldic poetry and skaldic prose function to produce meaning—a difference that creates an inverse relationship between the poetic utterance and the prose narrative in which it is embedded. In skaldic poetry complex forms are used to produce simple meanings, as when Thjodolf employs a kenning to refer to the “floor” as the “moor of socks” (*leista heiði*), or a “shoe” as a “sole-bucket” (*ilfat*). (Thus the notoriously

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95. 696; ÍF 9:267.

96. At another point in the narrative (during his ruse against Einar fluga) Halli describes to the king a dream he has allegedly had, stating, “It seemed to me that I was quite another man than I am” (*Ek þóttumk vera allr maðr annar sem ek em*) [ÍF 9:285; 706], in this case the poet Þorleifr, whereas Einar appears in the dream as the target of Þorleifr's poetic barbs, Earl Hákon Sigurðarson. Thus the multi-leveled reading I make the case for here is a practice overtly illustrated in the *þáttr*—one that follows a “visible path marked out . . . in the text,” as required by certain readers (see note 94 above).

97. As the following passages attest: “þat er allra manna mál, at engi konungr hafi verit vitrari á Norðrlöndum” (*Fagrskinna*, ÍF 29:261); “Haraldr konungr var . . . spekingr mikill at viti, svá at þat er alþýðu mál, at engi höfðingi hafi sá verit á Norðrlöndum, er jafndjúpvitr hafi verit sem Haraldr eða ráðsnjallr” (*Heimskringla*, ÍF 28:118); “Haraldr konungr var . . . spekingr at viti, ok þat (er) vitra manna mál at engi maðr hafi verit djúpvitrari á öllum Norðrlöndum en Haraldr konungr ok manna ráðsnjallastr” (*Morkinskinna*, ÍF 23:204). Andersson and Gade translate from the text of *Morkinskinna* as follows: “King Harald . . . had a profound intelligence, and it is the opinion of well-informed men that no one in all the northern lands was more penetrating.” *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)*, Islandica 51 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 204.



long kenning “fire-slinger of storm of giantess of protection-moon of horse of ship-sheds,” upon decryption, simply means “warrior.”)<sup>98</sup> In “skaldic prose” this dynamic is inverted: complex meanings are produced by simple forms. Thus a tale that on the surface recounts the mundane antics of an Icelandic poet at court (e.g., Halli’s “eating contest”) alludes on a second level to mythic narrative (Loki’s eating contest), which in turn suggests further levels of significance, both specific, such as Norway’s relief of famine in Iceland with shipments of wheat, or the politically supplicant position of Iceland vis-à-vis Norway more generally.

Should any of the parallels I have adduced seem far-fetched, one need only recall how frequently saga literature invokes mythic paradigms in order to align or contrast characters with figures from the mythology as a form of commentary not otherwise afforded by the tight-lipped narration of a laconic “saga style.”<sup>99</sup> The best-known illustration of this practice is perhaps afforded by the depiction of Egill Skallagrímsson as an often ironic Odin figure in *Egils saga*. Another ready example is found in *Völsunga saga*, when Sigmund and his son Sigurd slay a wolf and a dragon respectively, thus recapitulating the battles of Odin and his son Thor against the Fenriswolf and the Midgard Serpent at Ragnarök. The list could readily be extended; the practice, an analysis of which has furnished one of the dominant paradigms of Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship of recent decades, has been investigated extensively.

The case for a skaldic prosaics, however, goes beyond the relatively uncontroversial assertion that medieval Icelandic audiences could recognize mythic analogues. There is a difference between occasional, interspersed allusions and “echoes” and the full-scale *Arbeit am Mythos* we encounter in a text such as *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. I would venture to say that when allusion to mythic narrative constitutes a sustained secondary level of meaning—as in the case of Halli’s Lokesque dealings with royal authority—we have left the realm of the occasional mythic analogue and may speak of a “skaldic prosaics.” Mindful of Sigurður Nordal’s earlier-cited admonition, I do not

98. Found in a verse (here quoted in prose order) by the skald Þórðr Sjáreksson: “gimslöngvir drífu gífrs hlémána blakks nausta” (*Heimskringla*, ÍF 26:187).

99. See note 4 below.

consider this to be the case when- and wherever mythic elements are detectable in saga narrative. (Thomas D. Hill's contribution in this volume, for example, identifies a further instance of mythic allusion in *Egils saga*, where, however, such allusion provides periodic and occasional coloring rather than an ongoing secondary level of meaning.) Nonetheless, an examination of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* would suggest that the saga corpus as a whole could benefit from more "close reading" than it has, for reasons perhaps more ideological than philological, traditionally received.<sup>100</sup> The *þáttur*, if nothing else, should cause us to question what Joseph Harris is careful enough to call "the obscure style of skaldic poetry and its *apparent* antithesis in saga prose" (emphasis mine).<sup>101</sup>

The foregoing discussion of narrative doubleness and rhetorical ambiguity returns us to my reading of Halli as Loki figure. As Andy Orchard puts it succinctly, "Loki [is] a wholly ambiguous figure."<sup>102</sup> Loki's ambiguity has long been the subject of critical comment. Jan de Vries long ago described Loki most aptly as a "problem."<sup>103</sup> But scholars have generally stopped short of the insight that it is ambiguity itself which constitutes Loki's essential nature; all other contradictory characteristics attributed to him—male or female, god or giant, helper or evildoer, man or animal—are merely functions thereof, not the products of a misleading identification of him with the "trickster" figure of comparative mythology.<sup>104</sup> (Loki's trickery, like all his

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100. Scholars have tended to assume that the Norse obsession with what John Lindow calls "semantically charged word play," so evident in skaldic poetry, was left at the door when it came to saga prose. This view—which takes for granted substantially different audiences for the two (one originally courtly, the other domestic and humble)—is of course burdened by the fact that most of this poetry is ensconced in the *prosimetrum* of the sagas themselves. See Lindow's "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry," *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975): 319.

101. Joseph Harris, "Obscure Styles (Old English and Old Norse) and the Enigma of Gísla saga," *Mediaevalia* 19 (1996): 91. Harris continues: "Saga prose is open, informal, realistic, and accessible to any audience while skaldic poetry is involuted, stylized, used for ostentation rather than communication, and apparently, to test audiences." In the *þáttur*, the inverse is the case; Halli's poetry is simple and transparent by any standard (and certainly by the standards of skaldic versifying) but his actions, ensconced in myth, are "involuted, stylized," and almost certainly designed "to test audiences."

102. Andy Orchard, *Cassell's Dictionary of Norse Myth & Legend* (London: Cassell, 1997), 237.

103. Jan de Vries, *The Problem of Loki*, Folklore Fellows Communications 110 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1933).

104. *Ibid.*, 254–64. Although scholars have widely recognized Loki's ambiguity as essential to his character, this recognition is, even in the most sagacious analyses, often



double-edged actions, merely serves to maintain his fundamental ambiguity.) Ultimately, Halli and Loki are both figures of ambiguous sexual and social identities: Halli is a despised Icelandic bumpkin *and* an esteemed Norwegian courtier; Loki is counted “among the Æsir” despite the fact that his father was giant, a pedigree that should exclude him from the racially exclusive society of the Æsir; Loki’s dual nature—man and animal, female and male, good (or at least helpful) and evil—is paralleled by Halli’s own dual nature as a poor, porridge-eating Icelander who is also a slanderous yet esteemed praise-poet at the Norwegian royal court. Halli is furthermore accepted into an elite homosocial community and recognized as one of the king’s men, but simultaneously accused by his own royal patron of “unmanliness” (*ergi*).<sup>105</sup> Thus, ultimately, both Loki and Halli strive to attain and maintain their privileged position in a foreign society whose values, rules, and order they simultaneously work to undermine.

The penultimate line of the *þáttur* suggests that the pervasive ambiguity of Halli and his mythic analogue has been thoroughly understood by the literary-minded king Harald. Upon hearing of Halli’s death in Iceland, the king poetically exclaims in alliterative prose, “the *poor wretch* must have burst eating porridge” (*Á grauti myndi greyit sprungit hafa*).<sup>106</sup> The word translated here as “poor wretch” (*grey*) is ambiguous, since *grey* can also mean “bitch” in the sense of “female dog,” as it does in Eddic poetry. The indeterminate biological gender of the word *grey* (which refers to either a “bitch” or a “poor fellow”) is further underscored by the king’s chosen epithet’s neutral grammatical gender (*greyit*). *Grey* occurs only three times in the *Íslendingasögur*: in *Njáls saga*, *Gísla saga*, and *Flóamanna saga*.

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preface to a more traditional view of him as a figure ultimately “hostile” to the gods. Cf., e.g., Jerold C. Frakes, “Loki’s Mythological Function in the Tripartite System,” in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2002), 172. Such a view arguably precludes a more fundamental insight, i.e., that the only statement that can be made about Loki whose opposite cannot be asserted with equal validity is that he is fundamentally *ambiguous*.

105. This sexual ambiguity may be underscored by Halli’s previously cited verse: “This Gulathing’s great / We fuck whatever we fancy” (*Gótt es Guláþing þetta. / Gilju vit, hvat es viljum*). Halli “fucks” whatever (*hvat*, neut. sg.) he fancies” (not *hverja*, fem. sg., or *hverjar*, fem. pl.). While *hverja* would have violated the meter (presumably the poet could have chosen a different one), the use of the grammatically neuter (and sexually ambiguous) *hvat* potentially leaves the gender (or perhaps likewise à la Loki, even the species) of Halli’s conquests open to multiple readings.

106. 712; ÍF 9:295.



Suggestively, in *Flóamanna saga* and *Gísla saga*, *grey* is not simply a “poor wretch” but a term of abuse specifically for a man who refuses to fight—an “unmanly man” (*argr maðr*) who, according to the sagas, behaves “like a woman.”<sup>107</sup> Yet *grey* also occurs in the poetic meaning *bitch*, i.e., “female dog,” throughout the Eddic corpus, specifically in *Hávamál*, *Prymskviða*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, *Skírnismál*, and *Hamðismál*.<sup>108</sup> The word is famously and allusively linked to mythic tradition in the infamous verse allegedly composed by Hjalti Skeggjason at the Alþingi in 998AD, just before the conversion to Christianity—quite literally (or, at least, literarily) Iceland’s “last word” on the pagan past:

|  |                                   |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| In barking at gods I am rich:              | Spari ek eigi goð geyja!          |
| I think Freyja’s a bitch;                  | Grey þykki mér Freyja;            |
| One or the other must be:                  | æ mun annat tveggja               |
| Odin’s a bitch—or else she. <sup>109</sup> | Óðinn grey eða Freyja (ÍF 12:264) |

Hjalti’s intended blasphemy aside, this statement is an accurate reflection of both Freyja’s mythic promiscuity as well as Odin’s practice of the shameful, “unmanly” magic of *seiðr*, both of which are aligned with Norse concepts of the female.<sup>110</sup> Thus, in the space of a single word, Harald encapsulates the dual nature of Sneglu-Halli: the Icelandic bumpkin and “poor wretch,” and the courtier and skald who performs and recapitulates mythic tradition for a living. In calling Halli “grey,” Harald not only reaffirms Halli’s status as a “poor fellow” and social inferior; he couches this slap in the same sexually

107. “Þat kemr til þess, at Sámr *greyit* þorir eigi at berjast við mik” (It appears that Sam is a cowardly dog and does not dare to fight me) [ÍF 13:317; Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *Complete Sagas*, 3:301]; “Þat var ok líkara, segir Gísli, ‘at *grey* þitt mundi eigi þora við mik vápnum at skipta” (“It comes as no surprise,” says Gísli, “that a coward such as you would not dare to cross weapons with me”) [ÍF 6:112; Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *Complete Sagas*, 2:45].

108. Stanzas 101, 6, 13, 11, and 29, respectively, in Neckel’s 4th ed. (see note 43 above). See further Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum* (Copenhagen: Lynge, 1966), s.v.

109. Cited from Robert Cook, trans., *Njal’s Saga* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 177 (modified), which reproduces the text from Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *Complete Sagas*, 3:124–25 (ch. 102).

110. See Meulengracht Sørensen (note 32 above). Like Loki, both of these *grey* (pl.), Odin and Freyja, practice animal shape-shifting. Hence all the gods and goddesses deemed culpable of *ergi*—defined either as feminized magic (Odin), “passive” homosexuality (Loki), or unrestrained sexuality (Freyja)—are animal shape-shifters. Thus if *grey* describes Odin and Freyja, it applies equally well to Loki and to a Loki-esque “bitch” like Halli.

defamatory terms that Halli had been so adept at dishing out in life.<sup>111</sup> In a display of ambiguity worthy of Halli himself, Harald bemoans the “poor fellow” while simultaneously reiterating his earlier accusations of *ergi*, promiscuity, and passive homosexuality. And yet, if Halli is a “bitch” in this sense, he is nonetheless in the company of mythic figures such as Odin and Freyja. Thus the term can also be read as the king’s final, approving nod to Halli’s attempt at self-mythologization. (It is as if Harald, not to be outdone in matters of double meaning, were saying to his departed poet, “Now how’s *that* for ambiguity!”)

The ambiguity of King Harald’s last word on Halli—“poor fellow” or “bitch,” male or female, sly compliment or overt insult—is indeed suggestive of the ambiguous social, sexual, and ethical status of the figure Halli has alluded to throughout the *þáttir*—Loki himself. Harald’s closing words on Halli can be read as a final, posthumous, backhanded compliment, a nod to Halli’s efforts to recast himself as mythic figure and thus figuratively outrank his own royal patron. Yet this homage is ultimately coupled with a reassertion of Norwegian sovereignty over its Icelandic subject. For not only does Harald display the wisdom and mythic competence necessary to detect Halli’s poetic (or should I say “prosaic”?) game; he also manages to express himself ambiguously as to whether Halli is indeed a “Bitch” of mythic proportions, cousin to Loki, Odin, and Freya, or really just another “poor fellow” from Iceland who, like his rival, Thjodolf, would be better off in a barnyard folktale, stuffing himself with porridge, and leaving the realm of myth to those like King Harald, who actually trace their genealogy back to it. Harald’s ability to reduce the social, sexual, and generic uncertainty that pervades the tale to a single, double-edged, ambiguously gendered, insult-slash-compliment is ultimately a reassertion of the wisdom that makes him (or Norway) fit to rule, and makes Halli (or Iceland) fit to be his subject or (in the language of contemporary American slang) his *bitch*.<sup>112</sup>

111. The king alone can tolerate Halli’s sexual defamation since as royal “sire” he is the public heterosexual *par excellence* on whom no accusation of *ergi* can adhere. Because such a figure is lacking in Iceland, the slanderous Iclander can, paradoxically, only be tolerated in Norway. This may be suggested by the setting of Halli’s mysterious death in Iceland (712; ÍF 9:295), where—one is left to wonder—perhaps Halli proved a little too sarcastic?

112. Joseph Harris rightly includes Halli among “a series of underdog heroes who assert themselves against Norwegian court prejudice and hold up their heads in the royal presence.” However, a closer examination of this “projection of contemporary wishes

Hence the risqué *þáttr* is not simply a series of virtuoso vituperations peppered with sexual-cum-barnyard humor, nor “a series of episodes that could have been arranged otherwise as well,” with “a looser and more paratactical construction than most other *þættir*.”<sup>113</sup> On the contrary, it is a text that repays close attention, both for original audiences and for students and scholars of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* presupposes considerable literary connoisseurship, detailed knowledge of mythographic tradition, and a consciousness of genre that reflects concerns of shifting social classes and political powers in Iceland from the thirteenth century onward. Halli’s unflinching superiority within an imagined political reality in which Norwegian and other foreign courts are routinely trumped by the literary expertise of an Icelandic *Hinterwäldler* or “redneck” would have been no small wish-fulfillment to the literary elites that patronized such stories, faced with the task of reformulating Icelandic identity under conditions of encroaching foreign hegemony.<sup>114</sup> But, as I have argued, the tale lends itself with equal credibility to an opposite, more Norwegian-friendly interpretation as well.

### *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*: Texts and Contexts

The ambiguities of Norwegian-Icelandic relations are a pervasive enough feature of the medieval Icelandic experience that the elusive problem of an exact dating of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* has little immediate bearing on my reading here. Nonetheless the textual history of the *þáttr* raises questions about its precise *Sitz im Leben* that repay reexamination in the present context. The text of the *þáttr* follows *Magnúss*

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onto stories set in the past,” can, I argue here, also reveal the ambiguous nature of such “contemporary wishes.” See “Saga as Historical Novel,” in “*Speak Useful Words*,” 258; originally published in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow et al., The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 187–219.

113. Danielsson, “*Sneglu-Halla þáttr*,” 599. Consonant with my arguments above about the ordering of episodes in the *þáttr*, Torfi Tulinius’s first two criteria for “skaldic prose” (see note 19 above), “interlacing of plot lines” and “absent or inconspicuous connectors,” might better account for the tale’s apparently “looser and more paratactical” construction.

114. For more on this “identity crisis,” see Torfi H. Tulinius, “The Matter of the North: Fiction and Uncertain Identities in Thirteenth-Century Iceland,” in Clunies Ross, *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, 242–65, esp. 261.



*saga góða* as the third of the seven additional *þættir* that constitute the late fifteenth-century addition or “younger” Flateyjarbók, which was made while the codex was in the possession of Þorleifr Björnsson.<sup>115</sup> As previously mentioned, there is no consensus on the relationship of the more complex Flateyjarbók version to the shorter text of Morkinskinna; while the text of Morkinskinna (ca. 1275) is roughly two hundred years older than that of Flateyjarbók, Tommy Danielsson aptly sums up the matter when he states that “which version is older has not been definitively settled.”<sup>116</sup> In the preface to the *Íslensk fornrit* edition, Jónas Kristjánsson cites (rather unconvincing) arguments by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson that the Morkinskinna version is a reduction of Flateyjarbók, or alternately (as seems more intuitive) that the Flateyjarbók version is an expansion of Morkinskinna. Both Jónas Kristjánsson and Danielsson believe that Halli must have been a folk figure around whom humorous episodes accreted, and that the material of the *þáttir* is “very old” because of the inclusion of “authentic” skaldic verses. While we cannot know how old the Flateyjarbók version ultimately is, the text aligns closely enough with that of Morkinskinna that one must be based on the other, rather than drawing independently on a common oral tradition (which is not to say that none existed). To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever suggested that the Flateyjarbók version was first composed as late as the time of its recording, which would indeed require a radical rethinking of long-held assumptions about Icelandic literary history. Instead, I would simply offer that either the Flateyjarbók version is older, or its redactor was inspired by the text of Morkinskinna, which already contained a few Loki-motifs, and transformed and augmented these to create an integrated, mythically allusive prose narrative—a process parallel to the art of skaldic composition itself, in which scattered mythic allusions are fashioned into a comprehensive artistic product.<sup>117</sup>

115. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe does not treat these so-called *tilleigs-þættir* (“additional tales”) in her recent book, as her focus is on the social milieu of Flateyjarbók’s original patron, Jón Hákonarson (ca. 1350–1416). See *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 15 (Odense: The University Press of Southern Denmark, 2006).

116. “Sneglu-Halla þáttir,” 599.

117. Referring to the Morkinskinna version, Theodore M. Andersson remarks, “*Sneglu-Halla þáttir* is characterized by a series of farcical episodes at the Norwegian court,

Ultimately such philological questions may not be the most crucial ones. As Joseph Harris has rightly asked, “How can we tell what was an independant literary work, and wouldn’t the notion of independence—so central to our conception of literature—be a historically relative one?”<sup>118</sup> The location of Halli among the additional *þættir* at the end of Flateyjarbók would seem to resist the kind of new-philological analysis of manuscript context that Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (see note 115 above) applies to the 1387–90 compilation. Aside from the tale’s “King-and-Icelander” theme, it is difficult to see an editorial agenda at work in the placement of *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* between *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka* and *Halldórs þáttir*. However, given the central importance of both family lineage and myth in *Sneglu-Halla þáttir*, it is perhaps noteworthy that it is included in Flateyjarbók in the first place, as the contents of this manuscript are organized around the principle of royal genealogy.

Flateyjarbók furthermore contains a single Eddic poem, *Hyndluljóð*, in which two figures compare the nobility of ancestries, and Loki is mentioned explicitly in this context. One of the so-called “additional” Eddic poems not found in the Codex Regius, *Hyndluljóð* depicts the conflict between Freya and the giantess Hyndla (“little Bitch”) as they examine the pedigree of Freyja’s protégé, Óttarr, which must be established in order for him to win an inheritance claim against his opponent, Angantýr. The poem (which in the manuscript also contains the interpolated “shorter *Völuspá*”) refers to mythic narratives about Loki as the mother of the wolf Fenrir, the horse Sleipnir, and the goddess Hel (st. 40), and as the (otherwise unattested) mother of all ogressess (st. 41). The lay (like the *þáttir*?) concludes with a poisoning motif (st. 49). Of greatest significance in the context of *Sneglu Halla þáttir*, however, is the poem’s overarching thematic concern: Óttarr’s ancestry is “mythologized”—his descent

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in which the king plays the autocrat and Halli consistently has the best of it” (*Partisan Muse*, 121). If one assumes that the Morkinskinna text is indeed the earlier version, one might trace an evolution from a less flattering portrait of King Harald to a more ambiguous, Norwegian-friendly portrait in the longer version discussed here. Be that as it may, the Morkinskinna version seems already potentially ambiguous enough to complicate Andersson’s reading of the *þáttir*.

118. Joseph Harris, “Gender and Genre: Short and Long Forms in the Saga Literature,” in *The Making of the Couple: The Social Function of Short-form Medieval Narrative—A Symposium* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1991), 51.

ultimately traced to kings and the gods—recalling Halli’s own efforts to ensconce himself in a network of allusions to a mythic figure, and thereby establish a distinguished “ancestry” for himself so he can better vie for status at court against his rivals. Hence one might say that the “poetization and mythologization of property relations”<sup>119</sup> evident in *Hyndluljóð* are applied to the “cultural capital”<sup>120</sup> of skaldic poetry in *Sneglu Halla þátr*. Moreover, the Eddic poem refers to several of the mythical elements that I have argued are alluded to in the *þátr*, i.e., the golden boar, Gullinbursti (st. 7, 45), the dwarf smiths (st. 7), and, again, Loki’s bearing of Odin’s horse Sleipnir (st. 40). The rivals Freya and Hyndla also exchange sexually defamatory insults that recall the king and Halli’s sexually-barbed volleys. Moreover, *Hyndluljóð* (st. 3) draws a distinction—between those who possess riches, properly speaking, and those who merely possess the cultural capital of skaldic poetry—a distinction that defines the conflict between Harald and Halli. Hence the manuscript context of Flateyjarbók might well lend support to my reading of Halli’s self-mythologizing at the court of King Harald as a kind of *Genealogie-Ersatz* for the kin-poor (*aettsmár*) Icelander.

Flateyjarbók also contains *Sqrla þátr*, another late insertion into the manuscript, which recounts one of Loki’s adventures: his theft of Freya’s gold necklace. The *þátr* tells of four dwarfs who create a precious *gullmen* which Freyja acquires by sleeping with each of them on four subsequent nights. Loki, first transformed into a fly and later into a flea, steals this treasure from Freyja at Odin’s behest. The tale contains several elements analogous to Halli’s “Loki-isms” in his *þátr*: the acquisition of prized possessions through dwarf middlemen; the “fly” element associated with Einar fly (and hence Halli’s and Loki’s previously discussed acquisition of treasures in episodes involving a “fly”); potions of sleep and forgetfulness also play a role in *Sqrla þátr*, which might, more tentatively, be suggestive of the poisoning motif that I locate at the end of *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. Far

119. Aron Gurevich, “*Hyndluljóð*,” in Pulsiano, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, 309.

120. See Kevin Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*, Toronto Old Norse-Icelandic Series 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).



more significant, however, is *Sqrla þáttr*'s recasting of Loki as a wily, sharp-tongued peasant in the manner of a "folktale":

Maðr hét Fárbausti. Hann var karl einn ok átti sér kerlingu þá, er Laufey er nefnd. Hún var bæði mjó ok auðþreiflig; því var hún Nál kölluð. Þau áttu sér einn son barna. Sá var Loki nefndr. Hann var ekki mikill vöxtum, orðskár var hann snemma ok skjótligr í bragði. Hann hafði fram yfir aðra menn visku þá, er slægð heitir. Hann var mjök kyndugr þegar á unga aldri, því var hann kallaðr Loki læviss. (Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, 1:368)

There was a man called Farbausti who was a peasant and had a wife called Laufey. She was thin and meagre, and so she was called "Needle." They had no children except a son who was called Loki. He was not a big man, but he early developed a caustic tongue and was alert in trickery and unequalled in that kind of cleverness which is called cunning. He was very full of guile even in his youth, and for this reason he was called Loki the Sly.<sup>121</sup>

The Loki of *Sqrla þáttr* might indeed be viewed as an intermediary figure or bridge between the Loki of the mythographic tradition (whose exploits are referred to in Flateyjarbók in *Hyndluljóð*) and Halli's mundane reenactments of that god's exploits. The representation of Loki as a clever peasant (*karl*) in *Sqrla þáttr* is neatly inverted in the manuscript context of Flateyjarbók by the representation of Halli, the clever but low-born Iclander, as a Loki figure in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*.

Although the *þáttr* was not added until a generation later, it would hardly be difficult to imagine the appeal of the Flateyjarbók version for someone like the book's original, quasi-aristocratic patron, the wealthy Icelandic farmer Jón Hákonarson. Jón's grandfather, Gizurr galli (1269–1370), played an important role in the conflicts between Icelanders and the Norwegian king in the late thirteenth century, and had been a sworn follower of King Hákon. Gizurr even named his own sons after the Norwegian kings Magnús and Hákon in order to underscore his loyalty to Hákon háleggr. If Rowe is correct that the original agenda behind the Flateyjarbók compilation was to

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121. Nora Kershaw, ed. and trans., *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 44.

inculcate a tolerance for persnickety Icelanders in the court of King Óláfr Hákonarson, it is not hard to imagine why *Sneglu-Halla þátr* might have been left out of the earlier compilation; while its tale is ambiguous enough *in theory* on the question of Norwegian-versus-Icelandic cultural superiority to please even a foreign court, its compilers may have been wary of ascribing the sensitivity for detecting such nuances to *actual* royal persons, as opposed to their idealized fictional counterparts.<sup>122</sup> Be that as it may, if Rowe is correct that Flateyjarbók was designed to speak to the social-climbing ambitions of its original Icelandic patron, particularly vis-à-vis the Norwegian court, then the addition of the tale of the upwardly mobile Halli would seem a belated but ideologically fitting coda to Flateyjarbók as a whole.

Like Loki and Halli, medieval Icelandic patrons and audiences were confronted with their own ambivalence toward foreign powers that both threatened and guaranteed their existence, just as modern Icelanders have been confronted with their ambivalence toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which has generated split feelings in Iceland ever since Páll's birthday on March 30, 1949.<sup>123</sup> For Einar Már Guðmundsson's schizophrenic Páll, the day of Iceland's entry into NATO is a day of public protest; privately, however, it remains an occasion to contemplate the possibilities of birth, survival, and artistic creation in a continued, if compromised, existence. Páll's case is a history of both exoteric and esoteric significance. Like the story of Halli, it tells one tale to the many, but another more meaningful one to an elite interpretive community—be they postmodern savants or skaldic poets—whose business it is to see beyond the literal sense of words and things. In the medieval Icelandic body politic, it is an analogous ambivalence that takes on literary flesh in the mythologized ambiguities of Sneglu-Halli and his tale.<sup>124</sup>

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122. This does not, however, explain why *Magnúss saga góða* was left out of the original Flateyjarbók compilation in the first place; Rowe argues that the saga must have been part of the original plan (see *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, 21).

123. The intensity of feeling regarding this issue has largely subsided since the withdrawal of the United States' Iceland Defense Force from Keflavík in 2006, although passions have since been similarly roused since by referenda on the repayment of international banking debt and on membership negotiations with the European Union.

124. This essay was written in part at the *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum* in Reykjavík with funding from the Icelandic Fulbright Commission, and in part as a guest of the Fiske Icelandic Collection at Cornell University; the support of these institutions is gratefully acknowledged.

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