

Satire and the Heroic Life:

Two Studies

(*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 18
and Björn Hítðælakappi's *Grámagafli*)

Scholars like Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, and Jan de Vries have pointed out a remarkably rigid patterning in the lives of many legendary “heroes,”¹ and one of the most interesting recent tendencies in the study of heroic legend pursues such patterns to the influence of myth or ritual or, at least, to tradition in an oral culture.² Another route to what might be called “heroic conformity” begins with the elusive background in a heroic ethos, and George Fenwick Jones’ *The Ethos of the Song of Roland* can stand as a good representative of this more sociological (and hence less exact) scholarly direction.³ Strangely the two approaches—the one from traditional narrative structures and the other from the real-life ideological matrix supporting such

1. Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: a Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*, tr. by F. Robbins and S. E. Jelliffe (New York, 1955); Lord Raglan, *The Hero: a Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (London, 1936); Jan de Vries, *Betrachtungen zum Märchen...*, FFC 150 (Helsinki, 1954) and in more popular form in *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, tr. B. J. Timmer (London, 1963), ch. 11.

2. A few examples: Otto Höfler, “Das Opfer im Semnonenhain und die Edda,” in *Edda, Skalden, Saga: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Felix Genzmer*, ed. by Hermann Schneider (Heidelberg, 1952), pp. 1–67; Franz Rolf Schröder, “Mythos und Heldensage,” *GRM*, 36(1955), 1–21 and revised in *Zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage*, ed. by Karl Hauck (Bad Homburg, 1961), pp. 285–317; Jan de Vries, “Das Motiv des Vater-Sohn-Kampfes im Hildebrandslied,” *GRM*, 34(1953), 257–74 and expanded in Hauck, pp. 248–84; Georges Dumézil, *From Myth to Fiction: the Saga of Hadingus*, tr. by D. Colman (Chicago, 1973).

3. (Baltimore, 1963); another good example: George Clark, “The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem,” *Speculum* 43(1968), 52–71.

structures—are never combined. As a general assignment the task would be too large for the present small contribution to the honor of Professor Lord; but if I focus here on a single neglected feature common to both approaches, perhaps the results, though minor, will be suggestive.

The connection of satire with the hero-life, its role in a *Helden-leben*, may not appear obvious at first glance. We are accustomed to thinking of our heroes as shining figures, glowing with a generous inner passion for heroic accomplishment; in this we are still seeing through idealistic nineteenth-century eyes, eyes like those of a Carlyle who could make even the treacherous, contradictory, and, arguably, neurotic Odin an object of "hero-worship." But there is evidence that heroic society embodied a strong dash of paranoia, that conformity to social ideals was achieved partly through fear of criticism and, especially, of satire—criticism in comic form. In such a "shame culture," which Jones contrasts with the predominant modern "guilt culture," a Roland's quintessentially "heroic" act, his refusal to blow his horn for help, arises largely in his fear of "male chanġun," satirical songs that might be composed to his shame.⁴ At the Battle of Maldon in 991 Earl Byrhtnoth's men voiced a number of varied reasons, some as old as Tacitus, for fighting on to the last man; among them was Leofsunu, who promised not to flee but to advance because the "steadfast heroes around Sturmere" were not to be given cause to "criticize [him] with words," alleging that he turned from battle now that his lord lay dead.⁵ Leofsunu's *wordum ætwitan* may or may not imply verse satire, but his probable pun on *stedefæste hælæð*, where "steadfast" could mean "unswerving" or "stay-at-home," certainly looks like a satirical preemptive strike.⁶ No formal satire has survived in Old English, but in early Old English times the major word for poet, *scop*, must have carried connotations of its origin in "scoffing" and derision. In the closely related Old Frisian, *skof* meant "mockery," and Old High German *scof* embraced both

4. Jones, pp. 89, 96–98, and *passim*.

5. *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 246–53a, esp. 249–50, in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, VI, ed. by E. van Kirk Dobbie (New York, 1942).

6. I have not seen this (probable) pun pointed out, but on the topic generally cf. Roberta Frank, "Some Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse," *Speculum* 47(1972), 207–26.

“poet” and “derision.”⁷ A favored etymology for Old Norse *skáld* “poet” relates the word to these unromantic concepts, and English *scold* (“to abuse verbally,” etc., or “an abusive person, especially a woman”) is probably borrowed from Old Norse. The Scandinavian institution of *níð* (roughly: “legally culpable insults”) is closely linked with poets and poetry.⁸ Many of the heroes of the realistic family sagas are intimately involved with various forms of satire, either as its victims or its perpetrators, and such mudslinging extends more often than one would expect to the heroes of tradition, the “heroes” *par excellence*.

I. *Óneiss sem kattar sonr: Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, 18*

Notable for their satirical components are the first and third Helgi poems in the *Poetic Edda*; called *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II*, they tell different but overlapping segments of the same heroic biography.⁹ The most likely explanation of the historical relationship between the two poems is that both derive chiefly from an “Old Lay of the Vǫlsungs” (*Vǫlsungakviða in forna*).¹⁰ Both poems (along with the more distantly related *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*) contain long *sennur*, formal exchanges of abuse equivalent to the English and Scottish flytings, between the antagonist and Helgi’s representative Sinfjǫtli, a certified specialist in billingsgate. Helgi himself intervenes only to put an end to the flyting, but other heroes, including the sterling Beowulf,¹¹ speak for themselves. Helgi’s valkyrie heroine

7. Cf. further MDu *schop*, ON *skop*, *skaup*, Dan. *skuf*, and MHG *schelte*, and see C. T. Onions, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford, 1966), s.v. *scop*, *scold*; F. Holthausen, *Altenglisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1963), s.v. *scop*; Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd ed. rev. (Leiden, 1962), s.v. *skald*; and Klaus von See, “Skop und Skald. Zur Auffassung des Dichters bei den Germanen,” *GRM*, 14 (1964), 1–14.

8. The great study of *níð* is Bo Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning: traditionshistoriska studier i versmagi*, vol. 1: *Nid mot furstar* (Uppsala, 1965) and vol. 2: *Nid mot missionärer. Senmedeltida nidtraditioner* (Uppsala, 1974) (= Nordiska texter och undersökningar, 21 and 23).

9. Eddic poems are quoted from Gustav Neckel, ed., *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 3rd ed. rev. by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962); the major Helgi poems are abbreviated *HH* and *HHII*.

10. The best study nevertheless presents an unclear picture of these relationships: Jan de Vries, “Die Helgilieder,” *ANF*, 72 (1957), 123–54.

unleashes her sharp tongue in a curse directed at her brother, Helgi's slayer (*HHII*, 31–33); her first words to Helgi have a sarcastic edge (*HH*, 17); and in *HHII*, 25 she has the poor taste to jeer at Helgi's dying rival. Helgi himself bluntly blames Sigrún for the death of her father and brother (*HHII*, 26–29) and is even presented as jibing unsportingly at his enemy Hundingr when they meet in Valhöll after death (*HHII*, 39)—this last passage has seemed so offensive that many commentators brand it a late interpolation.

The remarks I wish to examine here are of this kind but more cryptically satirical. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* Sigrún, accompanied by other valkyries and dramatic celestial lighting effects, has sought out the victorious young Helgi on a battlefield to complain that she has been betrothed against her will to Hǫðbroddr; it is up to Helgi to save her, and the rest of the poem narrates the preparations for and approach to battle, the insults before battle, and the enemy's preparations; the concluding stanzas describe Helgi's victory in the words of his valkyrie consort.

In the problematical stanza 18, Sigrún protests:

Hefir minn faðir	meyio sinni
grimmon heitit	Granmars syni;
enn ec hefi, Helgi,	Hǫðbrodd qveðinn,
konung óneisan,	sem kattar son.
(My father has pledged	his daughter fair
As bride to Granmar's	son so grim;
But, Helgi, I	once Hothbrodd called
As fine a king	as the son of a cat.) ¹²

The groundwork for a full understanding of this debated passage has been laid by Anne Holtsmark's definitive establishment of the basic

11. Two recent articles study the "Unferth-Intermezzo" as a flying: Carol Clover (forthcoming) ["The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode," *Speculum* 55 (1980), 444–68; rpt. in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 127–54. Eds.] and J. Harris, "The *senna*: From Description to Literary Theory," *MGS*, 5 (1979), 65–74.

12. Unless otherwise noted, translations are those of Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda* (New York, 1923); Bellows' stanza numbers often differ from the standard Neckel-Kuhn; this is Bellows' st. 19.

meaning of *óneiss* and her discussion of *kattar sonr*,¹³ and Bjarne Fidjestøl has added an interesting further ramification.¹⁴ It remains to offer a clear statement of the primary meaning of the last line and to suggest a number of more problematic refinements.

The difficulty in fully capturing the primary sense of the second helming or half-stanza has apparently been caused by the lack of a close parallel, having the structure: adjective + *sem* + an animal, where the adjective is complimentary and the comparison derogatory. In other words, something like “as fierce as a lion” or “timid as a mouse” is of no use as a parallel since there must be an ironic discrepancy between the adjective and the comparison; the apparent absence of anything like “as fierce as a mouse” elsewhere in Old Norse poetry has made scholars very cautious about accepting the fairly obvious irony here. An analogue that fulfills these conditions and should remove the remaining skepticism about the irony is to be found in Björn Hitdælakappi’s satire *Grámagaflím*, where Björn claims that his enemy Þórðr is *jafnsnjallr sem geit* “just as bold as a she-goat.”¹⁵ Here there can be no doubt

13. “Kattar sonr,” *Saga-Book*, 16(1962–65), 144–55. Older references are given in full by Holtsmark; translations and commentaries appearing since her article seem to have taken little note of it: Hans Kuhn, *Edda...*, II. Kurzes Wörterbuch (Heidelberg, 1968): “óneiss: ohne tadel”; Ólafur Briem, ed., *Eddukvæði*, Íslenzk úrvalsrit 5 (Skálholt, 1968), p. 269: “óneis: sem ekki þarf að blygðast sín, frægur, ágætur”; Patricia Terry, tr., *Poems of the Vikings: the Elder Edda* (Indianapolis and New York, 1969), p. 111: “but I, Helgi, have said that Hodbrodd, famed for his courage, is a feeble kitten.” Terry seems to have been following F. Detter and R. Heinzel (*Sæmundar Edda mit einem Anhang*, II. *Anmerkungen* [Leipzig, 1903]) who, while not defining *óneiss*, says plausibly enough that it is to be taken as “concessive” here. L. M. Hollander, tr., *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd ed. rev. (Austin, 1962) goes his own way with “callow like a kitten” (p. 183) and equally arbitrary translations at *Atlakviða* 12 (“faithful”), 18 [=19] (“brave and bold”), and *HH* 23 (“mighty”). Not cited by Holtsmark: B. Kummer, ed., *Die Lieder des Codex Regius (Edda) und verwandten Denkmäler*. B. II. *Heldendichtung*. Erster Teil: Die Dichtung von Helgi und der Walküre (Zeven, 1959), p. 60, agrees with B. Sijmons and H. Gering (*Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, II [Halle, 1931]) that irony is intended; but he seems to have in mind a sexual context for his translation “keck, wie ‘nen jungen Kater” in view of his comment “hier ist an den jungen, werbenden und noch nichts vermögenden Kater gedacht” and the parallel he cites from *Hávamál* 96ff. (the scorn of *Billings meý*). But a sexual sense is quite impossible for the other instances of *neiss* and *óneiss*. Holtsmark has shown that Gering was wrong about the meaning of *óneiss* in his *Wörterbuch* and *Kommentar*, but it is interesting that earlier in his translation (1892) Gering had rendered the phrase ironically while omitting *óneiss*: “... dass er wie kater zum König tauge.”

14. “Kattar sonr. Ein merknad til Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, str. 18,” *MM*, 1971, pp. 50–51.

15. *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, in *Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and

about the scornful intention and the ironic discrepancy between the adjective and the term for comparison since at least one well-attested traditional quality of the she-goat was cowardice.¹⁶ The parallel confirms, in essentials at least, results to which Anne Holtsmark seems to have come with a sense of surprise and also Sijmons' much earlier guess that *óneiss* was ironically intended.¹⁷

Sigrún's scorn, then, is explicit, damaging, and couched in a wittily memorable phrase, and it seems at least possible that it was imagined as having been expressed as verse since there seems to be a special formality and prominence in *queðinn* here. This is arguable not only from the frequent technically poetic meanings of the verb and its derivatives¹⁸ but also from the structure of the stanza, where the main elements in the first helming answer to elements in the second: *faðir/lek hefir heitit/hefi queðinn, grimmr/óneiss, Granmars sonr/kattar sonr*. The parallelism is sufficient to establish the expectation that *queðinn* must answer in precision and weight to *heitit* ("engaged"). The point cannot be proved; but I suspect that if *kveða* here does not mean "I have stated in a *kviðling* (satirical verse)," it must be at least as

Guðni Jónsson, *Íslenzk fornrit 3* (Reykjavík, 1938), pp. 168–69; and cf. R. C. Boer, ed., *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* (Halle, 1893), pp. 45–46, 99–100). A comparable ironic comparison seems to be present in Hallfreðr's *lausavísa 1* (*Hallfreðar saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit 8* [Reykjavík, 1939], pp. 146–47, prose order): "Reiði sannargs allheðins sökkrvis margra troga verðr mér svá nokkvi ægilig fyr augum, sem ólítill, gamall búrhundur stúri úti fyr búi alls mest við fõr gesta; stærík brag." Hallfreðr's verse means: "the wrath of Gríss (his rival) seems to my eyes approximately as fearsome as if a big old housedog should be barking hard at strangers."

16. *HHII 37*: "Svá hafði Helgi hrædda gorva / fiáðr sína alla oc frændr þeira / sem fyr úlfí óðar rynni / geitr af fialli, geisca fullar" ("Such the fear that Helgi's foes / Ever felt, and all their kin, / As makes the goats with terror mad / Run from the wolf among the rocks," Bellows, st. 36.) Cf. *Qrvar-Oddr in Biálkaland* (= *Eddica minora* . . . , ed. by A. Heusler and W. Ranisch [Dortmund, 1903], p. 75): "sem fyr úlfí geitr argar rynni." Other associations with she-goats in poetry are contemptuous in a general way: *HHII 22*, *HH 43*, *Skírnismál 35*, *Hávamál 36*, *Rígsþula 12* (perhaps also in Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* [Copenhagen, 1912], I(B), 167 Anon. (X), I(B) and II(B), 252–53 [Vers af Ragnarssaga, II, 5]); or else insultingly associated with lasciviousness: *Hyndluljóð 46*, 5/8.

17. Holtsmark, p. 150: "No, twist it and turn it as much as we like, a cat never becomes *óneiss*. . . . It is not possible to understand Sigrún's words as anything but scorn: Hqðbrodd is as fearless as a cat!" Cf. Gering-Sijmons, *Kommentar*, II, 82.

18. An example parallel in several respects comes from the saga of Magnús the Good in *Morkinskinna*, ed. by C. R. Unger (Christiania, 1867), p. 28 (my translation): "King Haraldr thought it a dishonor to drink with Þórir and 'spoke' (*queþr*) the following to him: 'Be silent, Þórir, / you are an unreasonable thane; / I heard that your father / was called Hvinngestr.' Þórir was a proud man and was displeased by the 'squire' (*quipling*)."

formal as “I have pronounced.” However, the *Völsunga saga*, quoted below, supports this deduction only to the extent that its paraphrase presents Sigrún as making a formal vow (“*heitit*”) in contradiction to her father.¹⁹

Anne Holtsmark established the meaning of *óneiss* through the formally positive *neiss* which, however, is shown to have the negative meaning “defenseless,” especially in the (proverbial?) phrase *neiss ok nökkviðr*, “defenseless and naked.” The formally negative (semantically positive), then, would be “not defenseless.” The implication of Holtsmark’s discussion is that from this point the meanings generalized to “afraid” and “fearless”; but since she also showed that *neiss* is especially found in contexts of clothing, including particularly war-gear, it seems worthwhile to point out that the cruder “not defenseless” has the advantage of carrying the sense of its opposite “defenseless” close to the surface as *óneiss* apparently does in its five Eddic occurrences.

This is most obvious in *óneiss sem kattar sonr* “as ‘un-defenseless’ as a kitten,” which suggests rather “defenseless as a kitten,” while “fearless” or other generalized interpretations would mask this reference to the base *neiss*. After all, a kitten may well be fearless; the point seems to be that, fearless or not, it is weak and helpless. There is a second occurrence of *óneiss* in *HH*; when Helgi’s forces are gathering for the assault on Hǫðbroddr, Helgi asks his ally Hjǫrleifr: “Hefir þú kannaða koni óneisa?” (23, 7/8) (“Hast thou counted the gallant host?” 24). The *konir* are Helgi’s own men; their numbers and arms make them *óneisir* “not defenseless,” i.e., litotes for “well-defended.” But *konr* is also a “son,” and *óneiss* has just before appeared in a pregnant sense collocated with *kattar sonr*; it seems almost certain that the reference (with litotes) in stanza 23 to *konir óneisir* is intended to recall the reference (with irony) in stanza 18 to the enemy who is *óneiss sem kattar sonr*, i.e. *neiss*.

In *Atlakviða* 17 *óneiss* again has this quality of suggesting its opposite:

langt er at leita	lýða sinnis til,
of rosmofiðl Rínar,	recca óneissa (17, 3/6).

19. *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. by R. Finch (London and Edinburgh, 1965), pp. 14–15; translations from *Völsunga saga* (= *VS*) are Finch’s.

Ursula Dronke translates: “it is a long way to seek/ for an escort of men/ from the hills of Worms on the Rhine,/ for *valiant* fighters,”²⁰ but in this interpretation “valiant” becomes otiose since there is no question of Gunnarr and his companions being unvaliant or having left just the valiant men at home. However, if we substitute the ungeneralized, more primary sense of *óneiss* as established from *neiss* (*ok nǫkkviðr*) the passage gains in precision and depth. Indeed, the meaning “unprotected,” specifically by adequate arms, ought to be clear from the preceding stanza where Guðrún says: “Betr hefðir þú, bróðir, at þú í brynio færir, / sem hiálmom aringreypom, at síá heim Atla” (16, 1/4) (“You would have done better, brother, if you had come in coat of mail / and hearth-encircling helmets to see Atli’s home,” Dronke, p. 6). That Gunnarr and his party come relatively unarmed (Hǫgni uses his sword in stanza 19) is further suggested by stanza 14 where the Hunnish guards were “to watch for Gunnarr and his men, lest they should come here seeking with shrill spear to make war against the tyrant” (Dronke’s translation); in other words, the guards’ task was to determine whether they were coming equipped for peace or for war; and since they are subsequently received with a hypocritical show of friendship (the implicit narrative underlying st. 15), Atli and his guards must have determined that Gunnarr’s men came with peaceful intentions and equipage. So by saying in stanza 17 to his sister that “it is a long way to seek . . . for warriors who are not defenseless,” Gunnarr is implying that he and his followers at Atli’s court are *neiss* “defenseless,” specifically lacking the arms mentioned in stanza 16. The *Atlakviða* poet, a consummate artist, seems also to be recalling his other, earlier use of *óneiss* in stanza 12 of the poem:

Leiddo landrǫgni
grátendr, gunnhvata,

lýðar óneisir,
ór garði húna (12, 1/4).²¹

20. Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1969), p. 7; Dronke’s translation of the adjective is consistent with her assumption that Gunnarr and Hǫgni set out unaccompanied. However, I prefer Detter-Heinzel’s notion of this as “Held statt Held und Begleitung” (their commentary to *Atlakviða* 13, 1 [= 12, 1], *Vǫluspá* 47, 1 [= 50, 1]; they further point to *Vafðrúðnismál* 17–18 and *Fáfnismál* 14); and Dronke’s translation seems to capitulate to the logic of this view when “at varða þeim Gunnari” (14, 13) appears as “to watch for Gunnarr and his men,” not “Gunnarr and Hǫgni” as a consistent application of her reading would require.

21. Adopting Dronke’s *húna* for Kuhn’s *Húna*; Dronke’s translation follows.

(They led the prince of the land,	valiant people
weeping led the war-keen men	from their children's courts.)

At home the Burgundians were *óneisir* with reference perhaps to the storehouses of swords mentioned in stanza 7; the stay-at-homes are, therefore, “not defenseless,” yet weeping, just at this point probably to imply that the departing party are *neisir*. Certainly that is one’s impression on rereading stanza 12 after careful attention to the context of the adjective in 16–17.

A fifth occurrence of *óneiss* (as *óneisinn*) in *Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja*, stanza 4, agrees fairly well with the four usages just examined. Guðrún has been falsely accused of adultery with Þjóðrekr (Theodorich, Dietrich). Speaking to her husband Atli she offers oaths and an ordeal and denies the charge “except that I embraced the governor of hosts (Þjóðrekr), the prince *óneisinn*, a single time.”²² Even here some version of the primary sense “not defenseless” seems preferable to Holtsmark’s generalized “fearless,” for the point in this passage seems to be that Guðrún admits to having embraced Þjóðrekr once *in armor* and not in bed. I pointed out the connections of *óneiss* with armor in *Atlakviða*, and Holtsmark’s discussion established a special connection with clothing. Here the specific form of the accusation is:

at þit Þjóðrekr	undir þaki svæfit
oc léttliga	líni verðiz (2, 5/8).
(... that you and Þjóðrekr	slept under cover
and tenderly	wrapped yourselves in linen.)

In bed lovers are *neiss ok nøkkviðr* “defenseless and naked”; thus Guðrún denies the charge of having been in bed with Þjóðrekr by admitting that she once embraced him *óneisinn*, in a not-defenseless condition, that is, wearing armor and, of course, not *nøkkviðr*. Thus all five occurrences of *óneiss* seem to conform to a common pattern of usage; and this seems to be shared by Björn’s *jafnsnjallr* since in the collocation with *sem geit* it surely suggests *ósnjallr*, a

22. This translation and the next from *Guðrúnarkviða III* are mine; Bellows has the sense wrong; cf. Kuhn, *Wörterbuch*, s.v. *nema*.

grave insult ranging in meaning from "cowardly" and "inarticulate" to "impotent."

In view of the rather specific associations of *neiss* and *óneiss* it appears that *kattar sonr* should be regarded not as equivalent to "cat" (so Holtsmark²³) but to "kitten." This interpretation is supported by the paraphrase in *Völsunga saga*: "Hogni konungr hefir heitit mik Hoddbroddi, syni Granmars konungs, en ek hefi því heitit, at ek vil eigi eiga hann heldr en einn krákuunga." ("King Hogni ... has promised me in marriage to Hoddbrodd, King Granmar's son, but I have vowed to have him no more than I'd have a fledgling crow as a husband.") It seems that the paraphraser found the second helming obscure or too complex; in any case, he substituted a simple promise and a more obvious comparison for the parts of the helming under discussion, *queðinn* and *óneiss sem kattar sonr*. However, the new comparison makes clear his understanding of the original; a *krákuungi* "fledgling crow" is undesirable as a mate not because it is, for example, ugly but because it is contemptibly weak and defenseless. This is perfectly clear in the only other citation of the word in Fritzner: "siðan tók Erlingr 2 bræðr mína ok festi annan upp sem krákuunga en lét hoggva annan."²⁴ ("Then E. took my two brothers and strung the one up like a fledgling crow and had the other killed.")

Bjarne Fidjestøl has, further, suggested that *kattar sonr* is an allusion to Hóðbroddr's father: *Gran-marr* was interpreted as a kenning "bewhiskered horse," i.e. cat. At first glance this seems unlikely since it would compare Hóðbroddr with himself ("Hóðbroddr is as *óneiss* as the son of Granmarr"); but wordplay cannot be reduced to simple paraphrase, and double reference—having one's semantic cake and eating it too—is the essence of paranomasia.²⁵ The phrase could mean "son of a cat, kitten" and at the same time constitute an allusion to Granmarr; but if so, the only evidence is in the passage itself since

23. Perhaps influenced by the only parallel to *sem kattar son* she cites: *sem kqtr í breysi*.

24. Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, 3rd ed. rev. by D. A. Seip and Trygve Knudsen (Oslo, 1954–72), s.v. *krákuungi*; my translation.

25. Fidjestøl calls this wordplay a *hoveskenning* (occasional kenning); but although it is based on a (perceived) kenning, I cannot see that any established poetic term fully accounts for it. It resembles *ofljóst* and name-kennings in requiring a shift based on homophony but reverses the internal order of stages; cf. generally B. Fidjestøl, "Kenningsystemet. Forsøk på ein lingvistisk analyse," *MM*, 1974, pp. 32–34; Roberta Frank,

the *Vǫlsunga saga* paraphraser simplified the wordplay—if he recognized it as such—out of existence, and Fidjestøl has not offered any supporting parallel.²⁶ A further bit of support for Fidjestøl's proposition can, however, be extracted from the passage itself. I have pointed out above how a certain symmetry informs the stanza; the second helming, linked by the adversative sense of *enn*, partly replicates the first, contrasting the actions of father and daughter in a framework of parallelism. The syntactic symmetry ends with the different types of object after each verb, but in place of a grammatical parallelism we find a combination of lexical repetition and symmetrical placing in the last line of each helming: l. 4 *Granmars syni*: l. 8 *sem kattar son*. Though final proof is impossible, I think Fidjestøl is correct in perceiving wordplay here.

The possibility has been raised by Holtsmark that the Icelandic poet and storyteller Stúfr blindi was alluding to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 18 when he told King Haraldr harðráði: “Kattar son em ek” (I am [a] *kattar sonr*).²⁷ Like the paraphraser of *Vǫlsunga saga*, Stúfr could simply have by-passed the putative pun, which would have been irrelevant to his situation. However, the evidence for Stúfr's acquaintance with the poem is not strong, depending entirely on this phrase and

“Onomastic Play in Kormákr's Verse: the Name Steingerðr,” *MScan*, 3 (1970), 7–34; and “Anatomy of a Skaldic Double-Entendre: Rǫgnvaldr Kali's *lausavísa* 7,” pp. 227–35 in *Studies for Einar Haugen Presented by Friends and Colleagues*, ed. by E. S. Firchow et al. (Mouton, 1972).

26. The parallel offered, *nosgás* = duck (*Heiðreks gátur* [st. 27, 2] in *Eddica minora*), seems inadequate. I have not found a fully convincing parallel, but cf. A. Kjærs' idea that *gofugt dýr* is a similar wordplay on *Sig-(f)røþr* (“Zu Fáfnismál str. 2,” pp. 54–60 in *Festschrift, Eugen Mogk zum 70. Geburtstag ...* [Halle, 1924]), which Gering-Sijmons reject abruptly. Bugge (*The Home of the Eddic Poems, with Especial Reference to the Helgi-Lays*, rev. ed., tr. by W. H. Schofield [London, 1899], pp. 38–40) also thought *kattar sonr* a kind of surname, but the context (Irish influence) of this agreement with Fidjestøl is generally rejected. Ordinary name-puns (e.g., *Skúta* = *skuti*, in *Víga-Gríms saga*, Íslenzk fornrit 9: 54) seem distant, and the mysterious insult in *arfr Fiðrsunga* (HHII 20), though perhaps related to the present passage, explains nothing. The most secure parallel I have found is offered by Gerd Weber's clever interpretation of the Altuna-stone (“Das Odinsbild des Altuna-steins,” *BGDSL*, 97 [1972], 332–33) where a name is interpreted as a kenning to a referent in ordinary life, which is then produced as a symbol for the name: Arn-fastr = an eagle on his *fastr* or prey, so that a picture of an eagle on his prey in turn = Arnfastr; as Gran-marr = (metaphor for) a cat, so that the word *køttr* can refer back to Granmarr.

27. Quoting the independent and superior version, Íslenzk fornrit 5: 280–90; the short version in *Morkinskinna* gives “Ek em kattar sun”; basic discussion in Holtsmark, pp. 151–55.

being tempered by the facts that Stúfr's father really was called *kotttr* "cat," his nickname, and that a sufficient motive for calling himself *kattar sonr* instead of *Pórðar sonr* is supplied, in the context of Stúfr's story, by Stúfr's wish to touch very obliquely on King Haraldr's father's nickname *sýr* ("sow"). It seems unlikely that this part of Holtsmark's discussion can profitably be taken further. Nevertheless, I cannot resist the speculation that *if* Stúfr was playing on the passage from *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and the king's knowledge of it, then he may also have been expecting Haraldr to remember the adjective *óneiss* "not defenseless"; for the purpose in Stúfr's story of the witty hero's naming himself *kattar sonr* is to indicate subtly to Haraldr, whom tradition characterized as given to lampooning the people around him, that the Icelander's tongue could be dangerous, that he was not without defenses.²⁸ Thus this very indirect and finally quite doubtful allusion to *óneiss* would fall in line with that of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 23, 7/8 where a litotic sense of *óneiss* ("undefenseless" = very well defended) is evoked by reference to an ironic use (*HH* 18: "undefenseless as a kitten" = defenseless).

II. Grámagaflím

The saga about Björn Champion-of-the-HítDALers tells how Björn and his life-long *bête noire* Þórðr engaged in a series of mutual provocations and attacks that at last culminated in Björn's death, and many of the hostile acts are satirical sallies, especially in verse, since both men were adept skalds of the "serpent-tongued" variety. In fact the structure of the saga itself resembles an acting out of the alternating dramatic exchanges of a flyting. At one point Björn had composed a lampoon ...

And not long before Björn had composed a lampoon (*flím*) about Þórðr; and it was at that time rather well-known to certain men. But

28. This interpretation of dramatic tension between the king and the Icelander is based on the longer, independent version where it is more pronounced than in the condensed king's saga version; for Haraldr's concern with fathers in a context of satire, cf. *Hreiðars þáttir heimiska* and Haraldr's encounter with Magnús the Good and his brother Þórir in *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók* (ref. and discussion in Erik Noreen, "Studier i fornväst-nordisk diktning," *Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift*, 1922, Filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskap 4 [Uppsala, 1922], pp. 50–51).

its contents were to the effect that Arnóra, Þórðr's mother, had eaten the kind of fish he called a *grámagi*, and he claimed that it had been found on the shore and that from eating it she had become pregnant with Þórðr, and so he was not entirely of human origin on both sides of his family. And this is in the lampoon:

1. The flood went up on the sand, and a fish went up on the land. Like to a lump-sucker, slime was on its flesh. The wolf-bitch-of-the-gown (= Arnóra, the mother) ate the "gray-belly," carrion blended with poison. There is much that's evil in the sea.²⁹
2. The bride's belly rose down from her breast, so that that oak-of-the-scarf (= Arnóra, the mother) would walk bent quite backward and painful in her gut. She became much too fat.³⁰
3. A boy came to light. The lady said to her collector-of-wealth (her husband) that she wished to raise it up. As he lay there he seemed to her a dog-biter, just as bold as a she-goat, when she looked in his eyes.³¹

29. *einbaga ylgr* is a scornful kenning that suggests the animalistic hunger of Arnóra. Cleasby-Vigfusson treats *grámagi*, *grámaga* as the female of the lump-sucker, just as *rauðmagi* is the male; but the male gender in the poem argues against this as does the phrasing *hrognkelsi glíkr*. Boer seems to have the right explanation: "hrognkelse: ... das männchen dieses fisches heisst, wie mir Finnur Jónsson mitteilt, rauðmagi, was Björn durch grámage ersetzt, um eine gewisse ähnlichkeit, doch nicht vollständige identität mit dem rauðmagi anzudeuten" (p. 99). I would add that the replacement of *rauð*- "red" by *grá*- "gray" may be conditioned by the secondary meaning of *grár* as "evil, malicious," a meaning that is conspicuous in the opening lines of *Bjarnar saga* itself: "Ekki var Þórðr mjök vinsæll af alþýðu, því at hann þótti vera spottsamr ok grár við alla þa, er honum þótti dælt við" (p. 112); but since the female of the lump-sucker is regularly called *grásleppa*, Björn may simply have combined the first morpheme of the female with the second of the male—cf. the androgynous Loki myth cited below. The quaint resemblance of this stanza to the verse on the front panel of the Franks Casket is presumably due to the limited language of Old Germanic verse.

30. The lump-sucker is a bloating fish that feeds on the "garbage" of the ocean floor. Is this not a fitting model for Arnóra, who is pictured as feeding off carrion on the beach and then swelling in pregnancy? I understand from Icelandic friends that lump-suckers are actually caught on the beach after a storm (Cleasby-Vigfusson gives *hrognkelsa-fjara* as the name of such a "fishing" expedition) and that the female is actually eaten in a ripe condition (like the delicacy *hákarl*, rotten shark).

31. *auðar gildir* may be no more than a colorless kenning for "man" (so *Lexicon poeticum*); but both editors agree in giving it a primary sense "increaser-of-wealth" (Nordal and Guðni Jónsson: "[sem eykur gildi e-s]: mann-kenning"; Boer: "vermehrer des reichthums, ein mann"), and since we expect the equivalent man-kenning to be constructed on the pattern "destroyer-of-wealth," i.e. "generous man," I think there is reason to believe that Björn meant to construct a satirical inversion: "increaser-of-(his own)-wealth," i.e. "miser." For the formula *líta í augu* ("look into the eyes") cf. *Völuspá* 28.

The *Grámagaflím* is best understood as a parodistic version of the kind of hero-life we find in the Helgi poems or at least in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, for several of the conventions of the life of the hero of tradition are exploited here in satirical form. In stanza 1 there are the topoi of supernatural conception and the riddle of fatherhood. Readers of Rank, Raglan, and de Vries will remember that the paternity of many heroes is ambiguous since there may be a divine father and a human husband; or the god’s intervention may be rationalized as an adulterous or incestuous relationship.³² The “hero” Þórðr, however, is not the putative son of, say, an Óðinn or a Zeus; rather the supernatural conception here takes the comic form of a well-worn motif in which a woman conceives through eating some special food (T511, Conception from eating; cf. J1532.1, The Snow Child). In fact Björn may well have had in mind a particular version of this motif, the myth of how Loki became pregnant by eating the half-burned heart of an evil woman:

A heart ate Loki,— in the embers it lay,
And half-cooked found he the woman’s heart;—
With child from the woman Lopt soon was,
And thence among men came the monsters all.³³

Strengthening this possible allusion to Loki (or Lopt) is the similarity of *meinblandit* (*hræ*), “poison-mixed (carrion)” to the *lævi blandit*, “poison-mixed (heavens)” of *Völuspá* 25, 6, another Loki reference.

Stanza 2 is a comic description of the resulting pregnancy, a phase which is decently passed over in most serious heroic legend. However, heroes occasionally cry out in the womb (cf. T570–579, Pregnancy); Þórðr apparently lay there like a lump. Stanza 3 gives the birth itself. The doting mother’s decision to rear the boy (“sagt hafði drós ... at hon ala vildi”) must be understood as a decision *not* to expose the infant; but such a decision was properly that of the father. And by specifying the decision at all Björn manages to imply that Þórðr’s was

32. Cf. Stith Thompson motifs Z216, Magic conception of hero; A511.1, Birth of culture hero; A112, Birth of gods; A511.1.3.3, Immaculate conception of hero; T500–599, Conception and birth generally.

33. *Hyndluljóð* 41; Bellows, st. 43.

one of those poor families for which the possibility of exposing its infants, a practice frowned on even during the pagan period, was a real alternative; the phrasing further suggests that Þórðr was actually a marginal case—the decision could have gone either way!³⁴ Perhaps these lines also remind us that traditional heroes were often exposed at birth (typically by the father or maternal grandfather, according to Raglan).

The birth of the hero of tradition is often attended by prophecies of future greatness, and our Þórðr is no exception, for his mother could see at once that he would be a *hundbíttr*. The editors differ on the exact sense of the word; Nordal and Guðni Jónsson give “someone who kills dogs (and eats them),” while R. C. Boer interpreted “wer, wie ein hund, von hinten angreift und beisst, ein feigling.”³⁵ In any case, “dog-biter” is no flattery, and this prophecy is expanded by the phrase discussed above, “just as brave as a she-goat.” This heroic prophecy is based on baby Þórðr’s eyes in parody at the convention of “funkelnde augen ... als das kennzeichen edler geburt” which Gering and Sijmons demonstrate from prose and verse.³⁶

Beyond these general features of a satirical treatment of the “myth of the birth of the hero,” the *Grámagaflím* bears some special resemblances to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. Both are partial hero-lives; *HH* ends with Helgi’s youthful deeds while the *Grámagaflím* does not progress beyond Þórðr’s birth. Whether the poem is a fragment, as is usually assumed, is unclear; the saga author knew only the preserved three stanzas, but does he imply that there were once more stanzas (“en þetta er í flíminu” [“and this is in the lampoon”])? The simile makes a rather satisfactory conclusion, but one would like to think the poem originally went on to a satirical *Heldenjugend*, perhaps working out the consequences of the piscine paternity.³⁷ Apart from

34. Boer translates *at hon ala vildi* as “dass sie gebären wollte (d.h. dass ihre stunde gekommen war),” but Icelandic *ala* means both “give birth” and “rear, bring up (literally: nourish).” Here the collocation with *vilja* tells against “give birth,” nor would Arnóra need to announce the wish to give birth to her husband after the boy has already been born (*sveinn kom í ljós*). See the second meaning (II, 1) in Cleasby-Vigfusson.

35. I think the interpretation of Nordal and Guðni Jónsson is preferable, but the parallels cited below from *HH* and *Rígsþula* do not settle the question.

36. *Commentar*, I, 360.

37. Cf. Thompson motifs B635.1.1, Eaten meat of bear-lover causes unborn son to have bear characteristics; and J1532.1, The Snow Child.

the ultimate origin of all the Völsungs, according to *Völsunga saga*, in a fertility-bringing apple, nothing explicitly supernatural is reported about the conception of Helgi Hundingsbani, though Sigrínn, mother of Helgi Hjörvarðsson, appears originally to have been a valkyrie, and the confused paternity of the Hundingsbani is a late development occasioned by his integration into the Völsung line.³⁸

However, the other points of a hero-life are present in *HH*. Helgi's birth is accompanied by impressive supernatural attendants, meteorological effects, and prophecies or blessings (2, 5/8; prophecy of the raven in 5–6, including 6, 7/8 "sá er varga vinr, við scolom teitir": "He is friend of the wolves; full glad are we"). The prophecy is partly based on Helgi's heroic eyes (6, 5/6 "hvessir augo sem hildingar": "His eyes flash sharp as the heroes' are"). Both *Grámagafli*m and *HH* focus special attention on the hero's mother (*HH* 5, 1/4, a difficult passage that may refer to a premonition of Helgi's tragic greatness and so resemble, *mutatis mutandis*, the insight of Þórðr's mother); and both associate the birth of the hero with light (*HH* 6, 4). Finally, two rather far-fetched points of comparison: Helgi was given gifts at birth, apparently by his father (7, 5/8–8),³⁹ while Þórðr's "father" is mentioned as *auðar gildir* ("collector-of-wealth") at the corresponding moment but gives nothing. With Thompson motif T585.7 ("Precocious hero leaves cradle to go to war, etc."), the raven says of Helgi: "*Stendr í brynio burr Sigmundar / dægrs eins gamall*" ("In mail-coat stands the son of Sigmund, / a half-day old"). Can the recumbent and unprecocious Þórðr be compared: "henni þótti sá / hundbítur, þars lá" ("he seemed to her a dog-biter there where he lay")?

The focus on the mother, the light, and the heroic eyes are impressive similarities, and one might be tempted to see the prophecy *hundbítur* as an ironic inversion of the prophecy *varga vinr*. However, these parallels probably should only be taken as evidence that Björn's satire is also a parodistic treatment of elements of a certain *kind* of poem, not as a direct dependence on *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. Many of the relevant elements are also present in the conception and birth

38. It is not even certain that the attenuated form of the motif of supernatural conception found in T682 ("Hero a posthumous son") applies in Helgi's case; for the legendary-historical development, cf. de Vries, "Die Helgilieder."

39. Cf. ANF, 41(1925), 277–80, and MM, 1966, pp. 1–10.

of Karl and Jarl in *Rígsþula*, including the divine and human father, pregnancy, and the *accouchement* itself. *Rígsþula* also conjoins the topos of heroic eyes in the infant with an animal simile: “ǫtul vóro augu sem yrmlingi” (34, 7/8). (“Grim as a snake’s were his glowing eyes.”)⁴⁰ The parallel here with “jafnsnjallr sem geit, / es í augu leit” (“as bold as a goat when she looked in his eyes”) is striking, and we can add that the list of the young Jarl’s boyish skills includes *hundom verpa* (35, 10: probably “to egg on the dogs”)⁴¹ while the anti-hero Þórðr will become a *hundbíttr*. These almost equally impressive similarities to *Rígsþula* confirm our suspicion against the postulation of a direct dependence or allusion by Björn to the Helgi poem.

The “heroes” of the two studies presented here have little more than their connection with satire in common. Helgi is a hero of tradition comparable to Sigurðr, Moses, Arthur, and the others; with a little ingenuity he might score fairly high in Raglan’s scale. Formal satire and free-form insults echo around him at several points, and in the passage examined here Sigrún’s caustic characterization of the rival Hǫðbroddr is also her declaration of alliance with her chosen hero Helgi. Björn and Þórðr were historical figures, Icelandic farmer-folk who were never far from the nitty-gritty facts of ordinary life. Yet for them poetry is largely a “martial art,” and satire plays a part in shaping their life and death. Despite the differences between Helgi and Björn our two studies present complementary aspects of a single problem. For the Sigrún passage comprises an incursion through satire of the homely detail of daily life into the lofty career of a semi-mythic hero, while in the satire *Grámagaflím* motifs associated with gods and legendary heroes intrude into the prosaic pattern of real life.

40. Cf. *Völundarkviða* 17, 5/6.

41. So Kuhn, *Wörterbuch*, s.v. *verpa* (with query); Bellows gives “and hounds unleashed.”

