

NÍÐ, ERGI AND OLD NORSE
MORAL ATTITUDES

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THERE IS A PASSAGE IN GÍSLA SAGA WHICH RELATES how its principal character, Gísli Súrsson, suffered a very serious insult during his younger days in Norway. The incident in question and the events leading up to it are described as follows:

Gísli had a sister called Þórdís who was both handsome and intelligent. A man called Hólmgöngu-Skeggi proposed to her but was rejected. The reason would seem to be that Þórdís was more interested in another man, the young Kolbjörn from Hella in Súrнадalr: this at all events was what Skeggi suspected, and he challenged Kolbjörn to a duel (*hólmganga*) on his home island of Saxa. Kolbjörn answered that he would come, saying that he would be unworthy of Þórdís's hand if he did not dare to fight Skeggi. But at the moment of truth he revealed that he was unequal to the situation; he backed out in a cowardly fashion leaving Gísli to appear in his place. 'This will bring great shame upon you, but I will go,' said Gísli to Kolbjörn.

At the appointed time Skeggi appeared on the duelling place with his supporters. They found the place deserted; neither Kolbjörn nor anyone else was to be seen. And this was what happened next: there was a man called Refr who worked as a carpenter for Skeggi. Skeggi directed him to make images of Gísli and Kolbjörn—'and have one stand close behind the other; and that *níð* will always be there to shame them' (*ok skal níð þat standa ávallt þeim til háðungar*). The saga afterwards describes how Gísli overheard these preparations from the adjoining wood, and how he came forward and fought Skeggi in single combat. The fight ended with Skeggi losing one of his legs and experiencing the humiliation of having to buy himself off.¹

The saga uses the term *níð* to describe the insulting action planned by Skeggi. Fritzner defines *níð* as a form of ridicule whereby a person is represented as worthy of universal contempt,

¹ *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, ch. 2.

is given the label of *hvers manns níðingr*.¹ The laws distinguished between *tunguníð*, verbal *níð* (literally 'níð of the tongue'), and *tréníð*,² carved *níð* ('wood-shame'). It is to the latter type, which is defined by Erik Noreen as 'a *níð* which is erected somewhere' and by Bo Almqvist as 'sculptural *níð*',³ that the episode in *Gísla saga* obviously refers. But what explanation can be offered for this *níð* and for the curious form which it takes?

The staging obviously was meant to express mockery of the opposite side's failure to appear for the duel. It also seems that this failure had been anticipated by Skeggi; in other words the *níð* was intended as a response to a piece of undisguised cowardice. But how should we explain the bizarre nature of the arrangement? A modern observer must be struck by its peculiarity.

The meaning of *níð* and the form it takes in *Gísla saga* should be considered in relation to another Old Norse conception with which it is often closely linked, the word *ergi*. *Ergi*, like the adjective *argr* from which it is formed, has a strongly pejorative sense: it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that no other Norse word was able to provoke such violent feelings and reactions. According to the opinion of the time, the application to a man of the term *argr* (or its synonym by metathesis *ragr*) meant that he was 'unmanly' in various ways, and in particular that he was a coward and a homosexual.⁴ The noun *ergi* when used about women is virtually synonymous with nymphomania,⁵ which was a characteristic as much despised in a woman as unmanliness was in a man.

¹ *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog* (1883-96), s.v. *níð*.

² Gulathing Law, §§ 133, 138 (*Norges gamle Love* [= NGL], I, 56-7). Cf. *Grágás . . . efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift* (1852), II, 182-3; *Staðarhólsbók* (1879), p. 392; *Skálholtsbók* (1883), p. 439.

³ E. Noreen, *Studier i fornvästnordisk diktning* II (Uppsala universitets årsskrift, 1922), 40; B. Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning* I (1965), 42-3, 44.

⁴ It would appear that the ancestor form in Common Germanic, adj. **arza* (borrowed into Finnish with the meaning 'afraid', 'cautious'), already had fundamental associations with a morally negative judgment of this kind. N. Beckman gave two examples from Lombardic sources which bear witness to this point, a passage in the *Historia Langobardorum* by Paulus Diaconus and *Edictus Rothari*, § 381 (384); see N. Beckman, 'Ett ställe hos Tacitus (Germ. cap. 12)', *Nordisk tidsskrift för filologi*, 4. R., IX (1920), 107.

⁵ *Skírnismál*, str. 36.

The close conceptual correspondence between *níð* and *ergi* has been emphasized by the Swedish scholar, Erik Noreen. In his frequently quoted studies of old West Norse poetry, Noreen pointed out that those defamatory statements which went under the name of *níð* in Norse almost exclusively had to do with accusations of *ergi*, i.e. the characteristic in a man of being *argr*.¹ Bo Almqvist, in his dissertation on Norse *níð* poetry published in 1965, has criticized what he sees as an internal shift in Noreen's reasoning. When defining *níð* Noreen merely says that it implied a charge of *ergi* in the wider sense of the word (including cowardice and even certain kinds of sorcery, particularly the art of *seiðr*). But Almqvist emphasizes that Noreen, in his subsequent exemplification, practically equates *níð* with *ergi* in its limited meaning of perverse sexuality. The result in Almqvist's opinion is a distorted picture of *níð*.²

Whether or not Almqvist is justified in his comments on Noreen, and whether or not Noreen is justified in imposing apparently narrow limits on the use of *níð*, one thing at least is clear. *Níð* is so intimately and frequently connected with *ergi* that we must establish the meaning of the latter in all its nuances before we attempt a more precise definition of the sense and the uses of *níð*. But first an important distinction must be made. Many observers have noted that the sexual component in the word *ergi* refers chiefly to passive homosexual behaviour.³ Noreen touches on this peculiarity without attempting to explain it.⁴

The old West Norse law texts with their formulation of ancient customary law are of special value as source material; and the passages which deal with the legal consequences of allegations of *ergi* throw light on the prevailing attitude in early times. It is statements specifically implying that the person accused took the

¹ Noreen, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

² Almqvist, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-6.

³ E. Westermarck, *The origin and development of moral ideas*, II (1908), 477, and especially the anonymous author of the article, 'Spuren von Konträrsexualität bei den alten Skandinaviern', *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität*, IV (1902), 246 ff., 249 f.; E. F. Halvorsen in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, IV (1959), s.v. *ergi*.

⁴ Noreen, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

woman's part which are classified as criminal in the law texts. In no case is there any question of an accusation based on *active* homosexual behaviour.¹

Grágás, which is the oldest Icelandic lawbook to have come down to us, mentions three epithets, all of which are so offensive that they entitle the injured party to avenge himself by manslaughter. 'There are three words,' says the law, 'if men's speech becomes so bad, which all carry the penalty of outlawry, namely if one man calls another *ragr* or *stroðinn* or *sorðinn* (*ef maðr kallar mann ragan eða stroðinn eða sorðinn*). And the case shall be taken to court in the same way as with all words liable to the highest personal recompense (*fullréttisorð*). Moreover, one is entitled to kill on account of these three words.'²

The Norwegian Gulathing Law and Frostathing Law do not mention the word *argr-ragr* but only *sorðinn* and *sannsorðinn*, 'demonstrably used as a woman'. It is obvious that both these expressions are used as synonyms or equivalents of *argr-ragr*, or more precisely of the sexual component in the semantic content of that word.³ *Sorðinn* is the participial form of the obscene transitive verb *serða*, principally used in the texts about homosexual behaviour.⁴

A certain difference of nuance has been observed between the form *argr* and its metathesis *ragr*.⁵ It is the latter form which is preferred in connexion with the sexually indecent or carnal aspect of *ergi*: this sense appears with undisguised force in the compound *rassragr* in *Sturlunga*.⁶ But it must be noted that the form *ragr* is by no means exclusively connected with this aspect of the meaning. As in the case of the alternative form *argr* we find that the whole range of meaning of the *ergi* complex can be expressed by *ragr*. Thus the signification 'cowardly' is well exemplified, for example in the compound *hugragr*; and we encounter it in a well-

¹ 'Spuren von Konträrsexualität . . .', pp. 246 ff.

² *Grágas*, *Staðarhólsbók* (1879), p. 392.

³ *NGL*, 1, 70 (Gulathing Law), 225 (Frostathing Law).

⁴ Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. *serða*.

⁵ Noreen, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁶ *Sturlunga saga*, ed. G. Vigfússon (1878), 1, 245. Cf. Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.v. *rassragr*; *rass* is a metathesis of *ars* 'anus, arse'.

known dramatic context in a remark by Óláfr Tryggvason to his forecandle man (*stafnbúi*), Úlfr the Red, in a scene set on board the *Long Serpent* in Snorri's famous account of the battle of Svöld: 'I didn't know that I had a forecandle man who was afraid as well as red.' This is a somewhat euphemistic rendering of the foul alliterative insult of the original, *bæði rauðan ok ragan*.¹

If sexual perversion as such had been the object of contempt and moral disapprobation, the latter would surely have been expressed in the laws dealing with obscene libels. But this is not the case: rather it would seem that it is the feminine sexual role which makes the allegations of *ergi* particularly injurious and in fact intolerable for the recipient. This assumption is further supported by the fact that the Norwegian laws already mentioned include insults likening a man to a female animal (*berendi*) among the words liable to the highest personal recompense. To liken a man to a male animal cost only half as much (*halfréttisord*). Accusing a man of having given birth to a child, i.e. of having performed an exclusively female sexual function, is added by the Gulathing Law to its list of 'full penalty words' (*fullréttisord*), indicating the severest recompense to be paid. In the paragraph which deals with *níð* the law prescribes its most severe penalty, outlawry, for anyone who imputes womanly behaviour to another in the form of *níð*. 'No one shall indulge in verbal exaggeration or defamatory talk about another. It is called verbal exaggeration if one man says about another that which he neither can be nor can become nor has been, viz. that he is a woman every ninth night and has given birth to a child.'²

What is interesting about this legal enactment is not that it characterizes an allegation of sexual metamorphosis as exaggerated—that is, beyond the bounds of possibility—but rather that it takes so seriously what to us is a bizarre charge. I might add

¹ *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ch. 103, in *Heimskringla*. The episode makes an interesting parallel to the altercation between Duke Ferdulf and his officer Argait as reported in the *Historia Langobardorum* by Paulus Diaconus (VI, 24). Ferdulf makes a highly uncomplimentary play on Argait's name, which he pretends is derived from the insulting vernacular word *arga*: he accuses its bearer of cowardice in battle.

² *NGL*, I, 57.

that the existence of the law indicates that insults of this type were by no means rare.¹

The Icelandic family sagas strengthen such a conclusion. One saga features a man who hires an underling to spread the rumour that his enemy, Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson, was a woman every ninth night and had sexual intercourse with men.² In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Skarpheðinn's similar imputation against Flosi marks one of the decisive turning-points of the saga.³

In the mythological poetry we encounter comparable charges that a man has taken the shape of a woman. I am referring primarily to *Lokasenna*. When the gods reply to Loki's words of abuse they find effective points of attack in his mythical past. Three times it is said that he is *argr*, and indeed the matter is well documented: at the dawn of time he mated in the guise of a mare with the stallion Svaðilfari. The fruit of that union is the horse Sleipnir, which thus has Loki as its mother.

It is therefore obvious that Loki is guilty of shameless *ergi*. But he finds a point of counter-attack against Óðinn. Óðinn, he says, has practised witchcraft, and he calls this *args aðal*, that is *ergi*. We must ask ourselves whether he has any grounds for this accusation.

Óðinn is closely connected in mythology with the morally dubious practice of *seiðr*; and since *seiðr* is in principle a female art, this is undoubtedly a burden for the chief of the gods. The information in *Ynglinga saga* about Óðinn's mastery of *seiðr* is well known, as is its statement that 'such *ergi* accompanies this sorcery that it was considered shameful for men to be involved in it; therefore this art was taught to the priestesses'.⁴

Evidences of such a distinction are not confined to myth. Thus Queen Ota, the wife of the Scandinavian conqueror Turgeis, as reported by the Irish annalists⁵, gave oracles (i.e.

¹ Cf. Almqvist, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

² *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ch. 3 (Íslenzk fornrit XI, 1950, 308).

³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 123.

⁴ *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7. Cf. *Gísla saga*, ch. 11, where Þorgrímr carries out his *seiðr*, as it says, *með allri ergi ok skelmiskap*.

⁵ J. H. Todd, *The war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* (1867), pp. XLIX, 13, 226. Cf. G. Turville-Petre, *The heroic age of Scandinavia* (1951), p. 61; idem, *Nine Norse studies*

practised *seiðr*) from the altar of the abbey church of Clonmacnoise in her capacity as a priestess; obviously she did so with the full public approval of her heathen compatriots. On the other hand the shameful death of Rognvaldr rettilbeini, as related in *Historia Norwegiae* and other sources,¹ is an example of what could befall a male practitioner of *seiðr* even if he was of royal birth.

Strophe 33 in *Hyndluljóð*, which mentions the mythical ancestor of the *seiðr* people, is important for our understanding of how *seiðr* was regarded when indulged in by men. The practitioners of *seiðr* are here called *seiðberendr*. The meaning of this compound has been clarified by Dag Strömbäck,² and we have already come across the second element, *berendi*, in a characteristic context in Norwegian law: it means a female animal.³ Strömbäck contends that the word is of an extremely obscene character, 'and was obviously used contemptuously as a name for someone who concerned himself with *seiðr*'.⁴ *Seiðr* was considered to be an unmanly activity connected with *ergi*; in Strömbäck's opinion the word *seiðberendr* should be seen against this background.

The points which we have so far established are as follows. Both the law texts and the instances in the sagas seem to show that the component in the *ergi* complex which can be considered sexually obscene has exclusively to do with the female role in a homosexual act. In *seiðr*—the element in the *ergi* complex related

(1972), p. 155; W. E. D. Allen, *The poet and the spæe-wife* (= *Saga-Book*, xv, 3; 1960), pp. 46 ff.

¹ According to *Historia Norwegiae* Rognvaldr was drowned on the orders of his father, Haraldr Finchair: Sed Rognvaldus rettilbein ob usitatam inertissimae artis ignominiam infamatus jussu patris in Hathalandia fertur ingurgitatus (*Monumenta historica Norvegiæ*, ed. G. Storm, 1880, p. 109). Snorri relates that Rognvaldr was burnt to death in his house by his half-brother Eiríkr Bloodaxe, and that this deed was generally praised (*Haralds saga hárfagra*, ch. 34, in *Heimskringla*). Probably *Historia Norwegiae* represents the more original version, cf. Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd. Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria* (1935), p. 42.

² *op. cit.*, pp. 29 ff.

³ The word really refers to the sexual parts of a female animal, particularly a cow, and there are examples of it in this sense in Swedish and Danish dialects. It is derived from the verb *bera* 'to give birth'.

⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 31.

to sorcery and magic—we find an analogous connexion with the fulfilment of a role that was regarded as specifically female. Thus we may conclude that it is the performance by an individual man of a role normally belonging to the female sex which constitutes perversity in his action and causes it to be branded as *ergi*; and this applies whether we have to do with a sexual relationship or with the carrying out of a magical function.

‘Only a slave retaliates at once, an *argr* man never’—so runs a proverb quoted by Grettir in ch. 15 of *Grettis saga*. A slave lost control of himself in a critical situation and yielded to panic—as a real man would never do. The coward, however, was even worse: he lacked the courage to take vengeance at all. The sagas contain many utterances which are more or less emphatically coloured by *níð* and express contempt for the coward. I shall pass over the verbal category for the time being in order to concentrate attention on the carved form of *níð*, the *tréníð* mentioned in the laws.

Before returning to the *níð* episode in *Gísla saga* I should like to consider another instance of carved *níð*, also motivated by absence from a previously arranged duel. In *Vatnsdæla saga*, Finnbogi inn rammi and Bergr inn rakki challenge Þorsteinn Ingimundarson and his brother Jökull to a duel. When the appointed day arrives there is such a storm raging that Finnbogi and Bergr consider it impossible to travel (it should be added that there is sorcery at work here). Consequently neither of them puts in an appearance. But their opponents have braved the storm and managed to reach the duelling place. Here they wait in vain, and when neither of their challengers appears they repair to Finnbogi’s sheep-fold where some horses are sheltering from the storm. They take a pole and carve a man’s head at one end of it, and make a runic inscription containing an insult to their opponents. Then Jökull kills a mare, opens its breast, sticks the pole into its body and turns it to face Finnbogi’s farm, Borg.¹

It is generally agreed that this arrangement implies an imputation of *ergi*. On the other hand, opinions differ concerning the interpretation of what might be called the inner meaning of the *níð*. While Noreen sees it as implying that the absent person is a mare,

¹ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 34.

Almqvist emphasizes that there are two people involved. He wonders whether the mare might not represent one opponent and the pole with the man's head the other, thus presenting both of them as engaged in an obscene act.¹

One objection to Almqvist's reasoning is that, when the challenge is first presented, Jökull lets it be plainly known that if Bergr, his opponent, does not appear for the duel, he has a mare's nature and not a man's and Jökull will raise a *níð* against him (ch. 33). As far as I can see, the essence of the *níð* is clear and unambiguous. It is primarily aimed at Bergr, who has already been threatened with this insult if he absents himself. But by turning the *níð* to face Finnbogi's farm, which is the place where both Bergr and Finnbogi are staying, the humiliation seems to be extended to Finnbogi. The *níð* evidently suggests that both men have revealed by their absence the pitiful disposition of a female animal. From the judicial point of view the *níð* is equal to a word liable to the highest recompense, a *fullréttisorð*. In other words, we here have a case where the carved form of *níð* corresponds to the legal provisions about likening a man to a female animal.

Another characteristic feature of the *tréníð* in *Vatnsdæla saga* is its symbolic nature.² Would it in fact be best simply to use the term 'symbolic *níð*' when referring to the special nature of the carved or sculptural form of *níð*? I shall leave that question open for the moment and return to the *níð* episode in *Gísli saga*, where the alleged intention is to represent both absent persons as involved in a shameless sexual union. Can we immediately assume that this variant is a figurative allusion to Gísli's and Kolbjörn's lack of manliness, their cowardice as revealed by their absence? Or is this explanation unsatisfactory—even though it seems to represent the author's viewpoint? Is there some further complication in the puzzle that we have failed to notice?

Actually there would seem to be something wrong with the way in which the saga presents the situation. For one thing, it is Kolbjörn alone who is challenged, and there are no compelling reasons, either judicial, moral or of a family nature, why Gísli should act as his stand-in when he fails to appear. It would also

¹ Almqvist, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

² Cf. Noreen, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

seem from the context that Skeggi and his party have not reckoned with Gísli's arrival on the scene: it comes as an embarrassing surprise to them and upsets their plans. On the other hand, the saga in its extant form apparently takes it for granted that rumours of Kolbjörn's cowardice have reached his opponents' ears. This is the only logical basis on which to explain their obviously well prepared plan of action. But it also follows that the *níð* had only one person as its object, namely Kolbjörn, who was already compromised as a result of the rumours. Gísli could not reasonably be blamed for Kolbjörn's deliberate absence.

One is forced to conclude that there is a discrepancy between what actually happened and the account given by tradition (or, perhaps more accurately, by the author of the saga). Our suspicions are particularly aroused by Skeggi's speech, where he says that the *níð* shall stand to the shame of *both* of them, Gísli and Kolbjörn. The context seems to indicate that we here have a secondary addition intended to throw two of Gísli's special characteristics into relief, i.e. to place them in sharp contrast to the insult. These characteristics are his militant, heroic readiness as displayed in all situations, and his limitless zeal for the good name and repute of himself and his family—the object being the glorification of the hero, making his conduct all the more exceptional.¹

A weakness in this argument is immediately apparent. Can a carving of the type which we are discussing—with two people involved—reasonably be taken to be directed against a single person? That seems at first sight to be a rather bold idea. But for a further illustration of the problem, and a possible solution to it, let us look at *Bjarnar saga Hítælakappa*, which offers the only other example in the whole corpus of the family sagas of *trénið* in its specifically obscene form.

First a summary of the preceding events, which is necessary if we are to understand the significance of the *níð* and the motives which lie behind it. The time is the beginning of the eleventh century. Björn Arngerisson from Hítardalr in the west of Iceland

¹ Cf. P. Foote's discussion and his characterization of Gísli in 'An essay on the Saga of Gísli and its Icelandic background' in *The Saga of Gísli*, transl. George Johnston (1963), pp. 108-9.

is engaged to Oddný Þorkelsdóttir, and before his marriage he wishes (like so many other young Icelanders) to try his luck abroad. It is agreed that Oddný shall wait for him for three years, but that after that time her father shall have the right to marry her off to someone else. Bjørn goes off on his travels, and at one period he serves as a retainer of Earl Eiríkr in Norway. There he meets Þórðr Kolbeinsson, an Icelander from his own part of the country who already has an established reputation as a skald. Þórðr does his best to win Bjørn's friendship but does so for his own ends, as we are later to discover. He too is interested in the beautiful Oddný. When Bjørn goes to Garðaríki and is delayed there, Þórðr returns to Iceland and bribes some merchants to report that Bjørn is dead. By means of this deception he succeeds in obtaining Oddný's hand in marriage. Bjørn receives the news of the marriage on his return to Norway. For many years he continues his viking voyages and is also in the service of great men, first with Earl Eiríkr and later with Canute the Great in England.

By a freak of fate the former friends' paths cross in a foreign country. The meeting takes place in circumstances that illuminate yet another side of Þórðr Kolbeinsson's character. Without being aware of each other's presence both men happen to anchor for the night in different bays at Brenneyjar, the junction for ships sailing along the Swedish coast. The inevitable confrontation takes place in a manner extremely humiliating for Þórðr. During a patrol on the island which Bjørn has organized, Þórðr is found trying to hide under a bush. Bjørn strips him of all his goods but spares his life.¹

In due course Bjørn returns to Iceland. He and Þórðr become neighbours and the sources of conflict multiply. Both are poets—Þórðr, the inferior character, is the superior artist—and their enmity, naturally enough, receives poetic expression. Just as was to be expected, Bjørn cannot resist the temptation of alluding to his foe's disgrace at Brenneyjar.

There is a progressive escalation of the conflict; there are legal actions and awards of damages. One fine day something particu-

¹ *Bjarnar saga Hítödlakappa*, ch. 17.

larly remarkable occurs. The saga, with characteristic Icelandic understatement, puts it as follows. It was rumoured that there was something at Þórðr's boundary mark which did not exactly bear witness to friendship. It was two men, one of them with a black hat on his head: they stood leaning forward, the one close behind the other. People thought that it was a bad meeting and that it was not good for either of those who stood there, but that it was worse for the one who stood in front (ch. 17).

I have here reproduced the broad outline of the plot. Certainly the saga is of great psychological interest: it presents the picture of a man obsessed not only by his irreparable loss but also by his sense of moral superiority, and by the remembrance of the triumph which he once enjoyed over his hated rival. It is especially important for our understanding of the *níð* in *Bjarnar saga* that there is no suggestion—either in the prose text or in the numerous *lausavísur*—that any third party was involved. No outside person could reasonably be identified as the active protagonist in the shameful union shown in the carving.

Two alternative interpretations can be considered. The emphasis may lie on the sexual symbolism as such, not on the representation of individual actors. The fact that the carving is placed at Þórðr's boundary mark is enough to identify him as the object of the insult. The *níð*, referring to his proven cowardice, proclaims Þórðr Kolbeinsson's notorious unmanliness; his moral depravity is displayed in such a way that there could be no misunderstanding on the part of contemporary society. But it is also possible that the emphasis lies on the representation of the two persons involved. This would mean that the *níð* represents the two main characters in the saga, Þórðr as the sexually passive and Björn as the active partner.

Such an interpretation may seem paradoxical, but can it be excluded? Examples could be given from other non-Christian cultures of homosexual intercourse being used to humiliate a defeated foe and destroy his social reputation.¹ The victim was deprived of his masculine status and branded once and for all as a female creature.

¹ Th. Vanggaard, *Phallós* (1969), pp. 93 ff. and references there given.

Norse tradition is not lacking in traces of a similar attitude. In the First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani the fight between Helgi and the sons of Granmarr is preceded by a flyting between Helgi's half-brother Sinfjötli and Guðmundr, one of Granmarr's two sons. The dialogue takes the form of mutual recriminations in typical *nið* style. Both combatants exchange obscene accusations and other insults. They claim by turns that the opposite party took the role of a woman or female animal in a sexual act. But the point is that each speaker supports his claim by presenting himself as the male partner in the act. Thus, Sinfjötli declares that he is the father of the offspring which Guðmundr bore in the form of a witch:

‘On Sága’s Ness full nine wolves we
had together— I gat them all.¹

Guðmundr parries this insult with one which is equally abrasive: Sinfjötli has been the bride of the stallion Grani and Guðmundr has himself ridden him (as must be tacitly understood: mounted him).²

These bizarre insults from mythical-heroic poetry may seem to have little to do with the real world. But injurious remarks, even when they are not to be taken literally, always tell us something about the existing set of social values. And as far as the mythical context is concerned, one must bear in mind that the heroic legend and the myth had to reflect prevailing attitudes in order to be understood.

¹ Str. 39: Níó átto vit
á nesi Ságo
úlfa alna,
ek var einn faðir.

² Str. 42: Þú vart brúðr Grana
á Brávelli,
gullbitloð, vart
gør til rásar;
hafða ek þér móðri
mart skeið riðit,
svangri und sǫðli
simul forbergis.

I interpret the words used by Guðmundr in this strophe as an allusion to his own male sexual role vis-à-vis his opponent, a parallel to Sinfjötli's accusation against himself.

Noreen aptly characterizes the strophes which I have just mentioned as 'collections of *níð* strophes transferred to the area of epic and myth',¹ but it is equally important to specify their psychological function in the context. A trial of physical strength is about to take place. Its outcome is uncertain. The confrontation begins on the verbal plane with an exchange of mutual insults, obviously intended to make the opponent seem unmanly and therefore easy to overcome; manly courage cannot be expected of a person who has played the despicable female role in a homosexual act.

There are obvious points of contact between such an example of verbal *níð* and the obscene symbolism of the sculptural *níð* previously mentioned. In *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* the originator of the defamatory carving has been both the cause and the triumphant witness of his foe's moral collapse. With the *níð* he brands his detestable opponent as a person with a woman's temperament and disposition. It cannot be proved that Björn Arngeirsson allotted himself the role of male actor in the obscene performance, but his influence on Þórðr's fortunes was so intimate and personal that the idea might well have been at the back of his mind. At all events, we can again note the characteristic juxtaposition of cowardice—passive homosexuality, unmanly conduct—sexual femininity.

In a deservedly well-known paper on Tacitus and the Norse concepts *argr* and *ragr* Natan Beckman demonstrated the presence of this complex of ideas in a familiar passage in Tacitus's *Germania*.² The passage occurs in the twelfth chapter of the book and deals with the punishment which Germanic tribes meted out for certain grave crimes, and with their treatment of individuals who were guilty of infamous deeds (*flagitia*). Tacitus calls such men *ignavos et imbelles et corpore infames*, literally 'cowardly and unwarlike and infamous with regard to the body'. The fate which befell them was to be drowned in muddy swamps with a wicker-work of branches over their bodies.³

¹ Noreen, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

² Beckman, *art. cit.* (p. 4, note 4 above), pp. 106 ff.

³ Tacitus, *Germania*, ed. R. Much (1937), p. 148.

Beckman points out that in his characterization of these people Tacitus was really giving a definition of the concept *argr*. Contrary to the usual interpretation, the passage does not refer to three separate categories of men who were drowned in a marsh, but to people who were, or were suspected of being, homosexuals and therefore unfit for military action—for this, in Beckman's view, is precisely what distinguishes those men who are designated *ragir* (*argir*) *menn* in Icelandic.¹

In indicating the complexity of the *ergi* concept and its deep roots in the moral outlook and customary law of the ancient Germans, Beckman made an observation of lasting value; but he overlooked or at least neglected to consider an important component in the semantic content, the factor which from the point of view of Norse and certainly of early Germanic society gave *ergi* its altogether special connotation. This was the female nature of the *argr* man, a nature which could manifest itself either through female sexual propensities or through a lack of manly courage. It cannot be doubted that it is the idea of 'unmanliness' in both its physical and its mental sense which lies at the centre of the *ergi* complex and permeates its whole semantic field.² It is the female nature and the female role which are significant. This nature and this role comprehend not only the obvious sexual element with its accompanying characteristics such as childbirth, but also certain mental qualities, not to mention duties, that were considered specifically female.³ Lack of prowess was treated as a typically feminine characteristic within this system of values.

Much could be tolerated in a man, but nothing that might cause his manliness to be called in question. Passive homosexuals embodied the vile qualities which Tacitus stamps as *flagitia*; moral condemnation was not directed in the same way (or at any rate

¹ Beckman, *art. cit.*, p. 106. Cf. the treatment of Røgnvaldr rettilbeini. On drowning as a female punishment see F. Ström, *On the sacral origin of the Germanic death penalties* (1942), pp. 172 ff.

² *Ergjask*, the passive verb formed on *ergi*, shows how firmly fixed this semantic centre was; it means 'to lose one's virility (*karlmennska*)'; cf. the proverbial expression *svá ergisk hvern sem hann eldisk* (of the loss of male potency in old age).

³ Accusations of having performed women's duties are a typical element in the flytings in *Lokasenna* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I.

to nothing like the same extent) at the practitioner of active homosexuality. Strictly speaking there can be no objections to the logic of this standpoint, for as the active partner in a homosexual relationship his male role was evident and unquestionable.

I questioned earlier whether Almqvist was justified in criticizing Noreen for too narrow a correlation of *níð* with *ergi* in the sexual connotation of the latter. I have tried to show that the problem ought not to be put in this way. The sexual meaning cannot be isolated from the other elements which go to make up the *ergi* concept. *Ergi* in its narrower sexual sense merely constitutes the physical side of a personality type that was regarded as deeply contemptible. But the sexual component lent itself to visual illustration in a form which everyone could understand, and could therefore serve as a concrete expression of the corresponding mental quality: that is what we should call a symbolic presentation. Cowardice is an abstract concept, to which the mind tries to give a visual form which is plainly offensive and at the same time generally valid.

If, as I have suggested, we call the sculptural form of *níð* 'symbolic *níð*', such a choice of terminology need not imply neglect of the symbolic properties that verbal *níð* can also possess. Of course the fact remains that visual representation is the better method of symbolizing a process of thought: it is more tangible than mere words. But it cannot be denied that there were numerous ways in which an insult could be given symbolic shape by the use of words. The law texts, however dry they may seem, provide immediate though laconic evidence on this point when they use the obscene verbal form *sorðinn* as an equivalent to *argr-ragr*. And we have found analogous symbolic allusions in the milieu of heroic poetry, a milieu which in social and emotional respects is utterly remote from the everyday existence described in the laws.

If one looks more closely at the various types of verbal *níð*, one is immediately struck by certain recurrent features. I refer for example to the quite frequent suggestions—or sometimes direct accusations—of perverse behaviour like homosexuality and bestiality. Here too it is relatively easy to perceive the symbolic allusion and its correspondence with the characteristic of unman-

liness as variously manifested. In the verbal category our texts offer at least one striking parallel to that direct coupling of cowardice with passive homosexuality which can be seen in *trénið*. The text in question is *Króka-Refs saga*, from the middle of the fourteenth century, but even though it is very late and completely unhistorical it cannot be denied significance as a witness. It reflects a manner of expressing a moral judgment which the author and his public attributed to the people of the saga age, probably not without support in a traditional attitude that was still current in their own time.

The Icelander Refr, who has settled at Hlíð in Greenland, is slandered by a man called Þorgils Víkrskalli and his sons. They gave him the nickname *Refr inn rafi*. Refr is rumoured to have acted in an unmanly way on a certain occasion at home in Iceland, and this is one of their two grounds for the calumny; the other is an incident which I shall now relate.

One winter evening Refr met a polar bear close to his farm. As he was unarmed he returned to his boathouse to fetch an axe, but when he came back again he found that the bear had been killed. The sons of Þorgils happened to have been passing and had noticed the bear; unfortunately they had also seen Refr's footsteps in the snow. They now spread slanderous rumours about Refr's cowardice: he was 'the most sluggish individual who ever came to Greenland'. And the father said that Refr was reputed not to be as other men are—'rather he was a woman every ninth night and needed a male companion at such times, and therefore he was called Refr inn rafi' (*heldr var hann kona ina níundu hverju nótt ok þurfti þá karlmanns, ok var hann því kallaðr Refr inn rafi*; ch. 7). Refr only recovered his good name when he had slain all the scandalmongers, the father and each of his four sons: 'People thought that Refr had effectively repudiated the calumny.'

The society reflected in Old Norse literature possessed a hierarchy of values in which personal reputation or social prestige—what with a positively loaded word can be called honour—occupied the top of the ethical scale.¹ According to this standard, honour could only be won, maintained and defended with the

¹ A. Nelson, 'Envig och ära', *Saga och sed* (1944), p. 74.

primary masculine virtue of unbounded courage that despised danger and death.¹ The idealized system of norms is marked by a masculine, not to say a militant, set of values.

In sharp contrast to honour we have its opposite, the shame of not having fulfilled the primary requirement of manly conduct. Lack of courage, patent physical cowardice, implied such a flagrant deviation from what convention demanded that it could be branded as a symptom of perversion—of an abnormal, that is to say feminine, nature. The emphasis here should be placed on the word *branded*. As a rule the formulaic expressions ('woman every ninth night' and similar clichés) point to established symbols and current phraseology rather than to a genuine belief in the female sexual role of the accused. The symbols and the phrases were intended to strike a man where he was most vulnerable. The concepts of *níð* and *ergi*, corresponding to each other and constituting the nadir of the ethical scale, were heavily emotionally charged. *Níð* was a terrible and effective weapon, especially on account of its connexions with sexuality. The obscene element in an insult conferred on it a defamatory power, a deadly, poisonous sting, which it otherwise would have lacked.

¹ P. Foote, 'An essay on the Saga of Gisli . . .', pp. 103-4.