

The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders

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There are numerous old men in the Sagas of Icelanders, and few are nasty. However, as Tolstoy implied in the first lines of *Anna Karenina* (1875–77), happiness is not quite as good a subject for a novel as unhappiness (“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”).¹ Nice old men also need more effort to become memorable saga characters, as they are less likely to cause conflict, battle, and death—the typical ingredients of a saga narrative. The theme of this article is one image of old age in the Sagas of Icelanders. It is not the only possible image, but I contend that it is the most powerful and haunting one—in the literal sense as well, since one memorable nasty old man in the Sagas of Icelanders eventually becomes a ghost.

AN OBJECTIONABLE OLD MAN

One memorable nasty old man is Þórólfr Lam-foot of *Eyrbyggja saga*, father of the kindly chieftain Arnkell and the wise Geirríðr, and grandfather of the silent but valiant Þórarinn the Black. Þórólfr’s main claim to fame is that he is one of the most vicious and powerful ghosts in Icelandic history—which is saying quite a lot, since throughout the ages there has been no shortage of ghosts in Iceland.² Þórólfr’s career as a ghost will be discussed later; it has some significance to his old age. Of more immediate interest is the fact that Þórólfr only starts making his mark on the saga in his old age, after having been in the background throughout a long narrative involving his children and grandchildren.

In chapter 8 of the saga, Þórólfr is introduced through his mother, a settler in Iceland who has her hall built across the public path and offers food to all who want it. She is, not surprisingly, very popular. Þórólfr comes

1. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 3.

2. Ghost stories form one of the largest groups of folktales collected by Jón Árnason in the nineteenth century (*Íslenskar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* I, eds. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson [Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1956], pp. 213–388; *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* III, ed. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson [Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1958], pp. 289–427).

to Iceland later, but he is not satisfied with the amount of land his mother possesses. He challenges an old warrior in the region to a duel for his land and kills the old man but is wounded in the leg and from then on has a limp. This is how bullies behave, and Þórólfr is indeed referred to as an “ójafnaðarmaðr” (“trouble-maker”) in the saga.³ Yet he now settles down in the region and stays out of disputes and quarrels for a long while. In fact, while Þórólfr has still to make much of an impact in the saga, two of his children figure strongly, both as positive characters. The daughter Geirríðr is accused of being a witch and is indeed described as “marg-kunnig” (p. 28), which implies magic knowledge.⁴ Yet the saga takes her side against her rival, the sorceress Katla.

Þórólfr’s son Arnkell is depicted as the noblest man in the region. He certainly seems to cut the most heroic figure of all the chieftains, and he is a *goði* from his youth.⁵ Arnkell and Geirríðr are both involved in regional feuds, along with her mild-mannered son Þórarinn, while Þórólfr remains a shadowy figure in the background.

It is only in chapter 30 that Þórólfr returns and suddenly becomes a main character for five chapters.⁶ The narrative begins with a statement about his age: “Hann tók nú at eldask fast ok gerðisk illr ok æfr við ellina ok mjök ójafnaðarfullr” (p. 81; “He began to age quickly, growing more ill-natured, violent, and unjust with the years” [p. 187]). Thus, while Þórólfr Lam-foot seems to have had a bullying streak from the outset, it is explicitly stated that his wickedness becomes more pronounced when he reaches old age, and it is demonstrably further increased after his demise.⁷ In chapter 8, Þórólfr seems certainly no worse than Víga-Stýrr

3. *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), pp. 13–14. Subsequent references to *Eyrbyggja saga* are to this edition and its translation, *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, trans. Judy Quinn, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), V, pp. 131–218.

4. This is, for example, evident from the Old Icelandic word *ffjolkynngi*.

5. Described at length two times in the saga, Arnkell is said to surpass other men in the region in popularity and valor; he is said to be the wisest of all men, even-tempered, stout-hearted, braver than anyone else, determined, and very moderate (pp. 20 and 103).

6. The structure of *Eyrbyggja saga* is complex and has often been described as episodic, although several scholars have argued for its integrity. Some of the more important studies are Lee M. Hollander, “The Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 58 (1959), 222–27; Paul Bibire, “Verses in the *Íslendingasögur*,” *Alþjóðlegt fornsagnanæging*, Reykjavík 2–8. ágúst 1973. *Fyrirlestrar*, I (Reykjavík, 1973); Bernardine McCreesh, “Structural Patterns in the *Eyrbyggja saga* and other Sagas of the Conversion,” *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 11 (1978–1979), 271–80; Rory McTurk, “Approaches to the Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*,” *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 65th Birthday, 26th May 1986*, ed. Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Vienna: Böhlau, 1986), 223–37; Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir, “Et samfunn preget av kaos: Presentasjonen av Snorri goði og sagaens samfunn i *Eyrbyggja saga*,” *Nordica Bergensia*, 23 (2000), 139–64.

7. Cf. Vésteinn Ólason, “The Un/Grateful Dead—From Baldr to Bægifótr,” *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, The Viking Collection, 14 (Odense: Univ. Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), pp. 153–71, at p. 165.

and other bullies of the region, and even though it should not surprise us that he later turns to evil, the fact remains that he is relatively peaceful until old age sets in: Old age is a definite starting point for the further deterioration of Þórólfr's character.

Þórólfr's nastiness manifests itself in a number of ways. First, Þórólfr is extremely selfish. Worse, there is no subtlety to his selfishness. He is blind to any point of view but his own and has invented a "secondary world" where everything is topsy-turvy, justice is always on his side, and everyone who gets in his way is persecuting and maligning him, whereas in fact the opposite is usually the case. Furthermore, he has developed his own peculiar brand of logic that allows him to interpret every event in his favor.

Second, Þórólfr seems to hate everyone but himself. The prosperity of others makes him miserable, and when he befriends others it turns out to be for the sole purpose of using them as instruments against those people who bear the brunt of his relentless hatred. As if that were not enough, he vehemently loathes his own son and has no qualms about allying himself with Arnkell's enemies to harm him.

Third, Þórólfr fights for nothing except his own greed and selfish purposes. To be sure, he does show proper concern for his own prestige, and yet he never behaves in such a way as would earn him the respect of others.

Fourth, there is no way to please Þórólfr. He is no fonder of those who do his bidding than he is of those who oppose him. He is so ungrateful that it defies description. A phrase used about him more than once in the saga is "*Líkaði Þórólfi stórilla*" (p. 83; "Þórólfr was very displeased" [p. 168]; cf. similar phrases on pp. 84, 87, and 91). He seems to be displeased most of the time.

Þórólfr's selfishness is evident in all his actions in old age. First, he instigates a dispute with his neighbor, the freed slave Úlfarr. The motive seems to be envy: Úlfarr tends his sheep and hay with such care that he has become prosperous. In the dispute, Þórólfr repeatedly refuses to see any point of view but his own (pp. 81–91).⁸ His topsy-turvy logic is best exemplified when he seeks the advice of Snorri goði, claiming that his son Arnkell "*veitir mér nú mestan ágang*" (p. 85; "He's attacking me directly now" [p. 169]). Arnkell has tried to shield Úlfarr from Þórólfr's relentless bullying, and what Þórólfr regards as Arnkell's "attack" is Arnkell thwarting the old man's malicious attempt to kill Úlfarr and hanging Þórólfr's slaves. Later in the narrative, Þórólfr goes to visit his alienated son to explain that he wants the quarrel between father and son to end.

8. For an analysis of this conflict, see Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 183–202.

When Arnkell responds well, Þórólfr goes on to add that he now wants Arnkell to start quarreling with Snorri goði over the wood at Krákunes, which Þórólfr had previously given to Snorri.

When Arnkell realizes Þórólfr's true motive, he accuses him of malicious spite: "eigi vil ek, at þú hafir þat fyrir illgirni þína, at gleðjast af deilu okkarri" (p. 91; "I don't want to see you, through your maliciousness, gloating over a quarrel between Snorri and me" [p. 173]). Þórólfr's hatred of others has been evident from the start of his quarrel with Úlfarr—he seems to resent the prosperity of the freed slave for no clear reason.⁹ He eggs his slaves on to set fire to Úlfarr's home, and later he succeeds in having Úlfarr killed and is finally a little pleased: "þóttisk nú hafa vel sýslat" (p. 89; "considering himself to have done rather well" [p. 171]). He has promised Úlfarr's assassin protection, but as the man is on the run after the killing, Þórólfr just goes home and pays no heed to him.

Neither does Þórólfr care about his slaves as such.¹⁰ When Arnkell hangs them after having caught them trying to burn Úlfarr, Þórólfr turns to Snorri goði and importunes him to start proceedings against Arnkell. His main motive is to obtain compensation, but what he perhaps secretly covets is justification to continue feuding with Úlfarr. In fact, greed seems to be one of Þórólfr's main characteristics. When Arnkell intervenes on the part of Úlfarr, Þórólfr "kvað þræl þann helzti auðgan" (p. 83; "said the slave was much too wealthy already" [p. 168]). When he seeks the support of Snorri goði, Þórólfr admits that the chieftain might think him stingy ("féglogg"), but he nevertheless offers the wood at Krákunes in return for Snorri's aid. Snorri relents, mainly because he wants the woodland, but perhaps he also sees an opportunity to undermine Arnkell.¹¹ Later, when

9. Whenever Úlfarr tries to complain, Þórólfr is "málóði ok illr viðreignar" (p. 82; "started using violent language and became very difficult to deal with" [p. 168]). When others intervene, Þórólfr says he won't be satisfied, "nema versnaði hlutr Úlfars" (p. 83; "make things worse for him" [p. 168]).

10. In fact, nobody seems to care much about them (cf. Vésteinn Ólason, "Nokkrar athugasemdir um Eyrbyggja sögu," *Skírnir*, 145 [1971], 5–25, at p. 15).

11. Vésteinn Ólason, "Nokkrar athugasemdir um Eyrbyggja sögu," p. 19. Snorri is depicted in *Eyrbyggja* as a clever and ambitious man. Even as a teenager he demonstrates an uncommon gift for subtle cunning, and in adulthood his strategies are chilling to his enemies: "óvinir þóttusk heldr kulða af kenna ráðum hans" (p. 26, "his enemies felt the chill of his strategies"; p. 141). In Icelandic historiographical writings of the thirteenth century, Snorri is consistently depicted as clever and sly, rather than noble and straightforward. In *Laxdæla saga*, he devises a trick that enables Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir to get rid of the unwelcome suitor Þorgils Hölluson (*Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 [Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934], pp. 178–79), and in *Kristni saga*, he comes up with a witty counterargument that prevents the heathens from using a natural catastrophe as an argument in their favor (*Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek*, 11, ed. B. Kahle [Halle a.d. Saale: Niemeyer, 1905], p. 39). Snorri's behavior in this instance demonstrates clearly how unethical he can be when he wants to strike a blow against his rival; see Paula Vermeyden, "Bemerkungen zur

Snorri has started using the wood at Krákunes, the old man is furious and asks Snorri to return the wood. He now claims that he only “lent” Snorri the woodlands that he promised him for starting proceedings against Arnkell. Snorri wants to call witnesses but Þórólfr does not; therefore, he obviously has some notion of the fact that others might have a different perception of reality from his own—instead, he decides to visit his son Arnkell. Þórólfr claims that he wants them to be friends, although his real purpose is to use Arnkell to regain the woods.

Þórólfr does care about his prestige. He complains to Snorri about being humiliated by Arnkell and later goes to Arnkell with similar complaints about Snorri (pp. 85 and 91). He obviously believes himself to be more clever than Arnkell, and thus that their alliance might be mutually beneficial: “mér þætti, sem vit myndim miklir verða hér í heraði við harðfengi þína, en ráðagørðir mínar” (p. 91; “It seems to me we could become the most powerful men in the district, with your courage and my plans” [p. 172]). However, few seem to share his inflated opinion of himself. Snorri and Arnkell both treat him as a difficult and annoying child.

Last but not least, Þórólfr’s ingratitude is of gigantic proportions. After he has enlisted Snorri’s aid in chapter 31, the latter manages to obtain a guilty verdict against Arnkell for the killing of Þórólfr’s slaves, invoking an obscure point of law, but when he brings the old man the compensation money, Þórólfr is not pleased. He blames Snorri for a weak prosecution and implies that Arnkell would probably have paid him more than that without a verdict. Snorri is outraged by the magnitude of the old man’s ingratitude (p. 86)—but then, Þórólfr is the man who is never pleased.

Þórólfr is not just an ordinary bully; he embodies a nastiness believed to be connected with old age. What needs to be established is the cause of Þórólfr’s nastiness and how his strategies reflect his status as an old man. Of particular interest is Þórólfr’s later career as a ghost, which may be closely linked to his nasty old age. I also contend that Þórólfr’s depiction is important for the overall portrayal of old people in the sagas.

MEDIEVAL IMAGES OF OLD AGE

The image of old people in Old Norse-Icelandic texts is a somewhat neglected subject. In 1991, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson dedicated the lesser part

Darstellung des Snorri goði in der Eyrbyggja saga,” *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik*: 8. Arbeitstagung der Skandinavisten des Deutschen Sprachgebiets 27.9.-3.10. 1987 in Freiburg i.B (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 162–74. According to Vermeyden, this act of Snorri proves that he is “kauflich” (p. 173). Cf. Vésteinn Ólason, “Nokkrar athugasemdir um Eyrbyggja sögu,” p. 21.

of an article to old people; he had come across only one article on the subject.¹² There are, however, some general studies of old age in the Middle Ages, and they indicate that old age has throughout the centuries been more often than not negatively portrayed. Þórólfr is not unique, and indeed one critic described him as “a fearful, but only too credible, old man, as he goes round alternately wheedling and cursing.”¹³ In her groundbreaking essay “La Vieillesse” (1970), Simone de Beauvoir found it much easier to find examples of a negative view of old age than a positive one.¹⁴ The more extensive study by Georges Minois, *Histoire de la vieillesse* (1987), also offers many examples of old age portrayed in negative terms.¹⁵ And although Shulamith Shahar, in her 1995 book on old age, does her best to stress the diversity of the topos “Old Age” in the Middle Ages, she also demonstrates that negative treatments seem to outnumber the positive ones.¹⁶

From antiquity to the present day, the chief function of the topos of Old Age has been as a metaphor for decline and decrepitude.¹⁷ Even those authorities who took a positive view, such as Cicero himself in *De Senectute*, would stress that old age could easily become miserable, although Cicero’s main point was to emphasize the benefits for those privileged enough to grow old benignly.¹⁸ According to Minois, the Greeks viewed old age chiefly as tragic. Old age meant degeneration, and old people were marginalized in society.¹⁹ This applies even to a figure such as Nestor,

12. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “Börn og gamalmenni á Þjóðveldisöld, *Yfir Íslandsála: Afmælisrit helgað Magnúsi Stefánssyni sextugum 25. Desember 1991*, ed. Gunnar Karlsson and Helgi Þorláksson (Reykjavík: Sögufraeðslusjóður, 1991), pp. 111–30. Jón Viðar discusses old people from p. 124 on, including the case of Egill Skalla-Grimsson, but he does not mention Þjóðólfrur Lam-foot. The article in question is a short overview article, “Alderdom,” by Odd Nordland in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger), I, pp. 69–71.

13. Forrest S. Scott, “The Icelandic Family Saga as a Precursor of the Novel, with Special Reference to Eyrbyggja Saga,” *Parergon*, 6 (1973), 3–13, at p. 11.

14. Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (London: Deutsch, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), pp. 88–215.

15. George Minois, *History of Old Age From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

16. Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: “Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain,”* trans. Yael Lotan (London: Routledge, 1997).

17. See, e.g., Paul Edward Dutton, “Beyond the Topos of Senescence: The Political Problems of Aged Carolingian Rulers,” *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, held 25–26 February and 11–12 November 1983*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), pp. 75–94, at pp. 75–76.

18. Cicero, *De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione*, ed. and trans. William Armistead Falconer (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1923). See also Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 105–11; Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 40–41.

19. Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 47–51.

who remained active into his old age: Although he is on the whole treated with respect and affection, he is also depicted as long-winded, opinionated and vain, and highly critical of the young.²⁰

In the Middle Ages, old people were a marginalized group.²¹ Examples of literature from the High and Late Middle Ages produce abundant evidence for both latent and overt hostility toward the old. Many of the most powerful medieval authorities on the subject describe at length the physical ills of age, noted perhaps most powerfully by Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: The old are "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."²² Shakespeare was drawing from a long line of tradition. French poets dealing with the subject in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries emphasize the sheer ugliness and physical decrepitude of old age.²³ The same trend is clearly visible in Old Icelandic literature, such as in the sagas of the Icelanders and *Sturlunga saga*.²⁴

The dominant medieval view seems to have been that the degeneration was not only physical but also psychological and moral. In the twelfth century *De Contemptu Mundi sive de Miseria Humanae Conditiones* by the future Pope Innocent III, the old are described as being too quick to anger, mean and avaricious, sullen and quarrelsome, and quick to talk but slow to hear, and as censuring the present and praising the past.²⁵ From Roman playwrights of Late Antiquity to English fourteenth-century poets, the focus of medieval literature was very often on similar traits: anger and envy, bitterness and fear. Old men are often depicted as rambling on about the errors of the young; they are choleric and fly into rage for no reason at all,²⁶ and in many cases, not least in comic tales of adultery, old men are depicted as ludicrous and contemptible. They are scorned, rather than pitied.²⁷ There is, however, perhaps not such a wealth of difference

20. Minois, *History of Old Age*, p. 45; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, p. 33.

21. See Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 2.

22. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, eds. Arthur Quiller-Couch and J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1926) [rpt. 1959], p. 39. The example is discussed both by Minois (*History of Old Age*, pp. 281–87) and Thane (*Old Age in English History*, pp. 49–50). Cf. Alicia K. Nitecki, "Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature," *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, held 25–26 February and 11–12 November 1983*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), pp. 107–16, at p. 108.

23. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, pp. 47–51.

24. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson ("Börn og gamalmenni," pp. 127–28) lists examples of loss of memory, loss of teeth, cowardice, weariness, and unsteady legs being attributed to the old.

25. *Patrologia Latina* CCXVII, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1855), col. 706–7. The text is discussed by George R. Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Advantages of an Idea," *Speculum*, 9 (1934), 249–77 (see in particular pp. 254–56).

26. Nitecki, "Figures of Old Age"; Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 92–95.

27. Nitecki, "Figures of Old Age," pp. 112–13.

between hostility and pity. In any case, the old seem to have ample reason to be angry about their present state.

The Middle Ages saw the emergence of the idea of the old man as an image of sin, used by St. Augustine among others, and remaining in currency throughout the medieval period. Related is the notion that those who have grown old have not been able to die because of their mental and spiritual corruption. In the *Roman de la Rose*, old age is even listed among sins such as hate, avarice, envy, and sorrow.²⁸ Another recurring motif is the danger of old men having young wives. The figure of the *senex amans*, a lecherous old fool who lusts after young women, is a popular image of old age in the Middle Ages.²⁹ This motif certainly occurs in Old Icelandic literature, from *Egils saga*'s old Björgólfr, who becomes besotted with young Hildiríðr, to the old and foolish King Hringr in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, who takes a strange young woman as his wife but is subsequently unable to prevent her atrocities to his men, as well as her attempts to commit adultery with his son: The message is clear, nothing good comes from old men marrying young women.³⁰ In *Sturlunga saga*, the young Hallr Þjóðólfrsson is outraged by the fact that a beautiful young woman is married to an old priest, and he abducts her on the grounds that it was intolerable "at gamall maðr flekkaði svá væna konu" ("such an old man ought not to sully so beautiful a woman").³¹ The *senex amans* myth seems to be just as important in Icelandic sources as in the rest of Europe.

To sum up, old men are often depicted as foolish and lustful in medieval sources. Many authors depict them as sinful and physically repulsive. Most importantly, according to medieval sources the marginalized state and physical degeneration of the old leads them to anger and bitterness, envy and fear, and antagonism toward the present combined with a lack

28. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose: Édition d'après les manuscrits BN 12786 et BN 378*, ed. and trans. Armand Strubel (Paris: LGF, 1992), pp. 48–68. See also Nitecki, "Figures of Old Age," p. 115; Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 118–20 and 162–65; Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, pp. 45–47.

29. See, e.g., J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 156–62; Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, pp. 77–81; Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 92–94; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, p. 51; Dutton, "Beyond the Topos of Senescence," p. 90.

30. It must be noted that in *Hrólfs saga*, it is mainly the wicked queen who laments having to sleep with such an old man, while one of the heroes in the saga bites off the nose of a concubine who prefers two twenty-two year olds to one eighty-year old (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, ed. Desmond Slay, *Editiones Arnarnæmæ*, B, 1 [Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960], pp. 55 and 113). Even though the saga thus seems to side with the old husbands, it reveals how they are mocked and cuckolded by young women.

31. *Sturlunga saga*, I, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), p. 78. This example is discussed by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson ("Börn og gamalmenni," p. 126).

of restraint that is also sometimes ascribed to women.³² There is a causal relationship between the humiliating state of the elderly and their subsequent anger: Old men are nasty because old age is nasty.

It seems probable that the figure of the nasty old man in the sagas may owe something to popular medieval conceptions of the old. These might also be reflected in the ghostly fate of Þórólfr Lam-foot. It is a tradition among most medievalists generally to regard Scandinavian literature as entirely different from that of the European mainstream, and often as being more archaic. The same perception applies to the subject of old age. Georges Minois emphasizes Scandinavia's "respect for its old leaders" and believes that old men were held in greater respect in warrior societies than in agricultural circles, even though he does not provide many examples and seems to take those he does have at face value.³³

If we take a closer look at the Icelandic evidence, there are many virtuous old people in the sagas. Njáll of *Brennu-Njáls saga* is a case in point. He remarks, when offered a chance to walk out of the fire at Bergþórshváll, that he is an old man, hardly fit to avenge his sons, and that he does not wish to live in shame. He walks into the house, to his death, and comforts others inside. Then he goes to bed for the last time, prompting his son to remark that his father is retiring early, which is to be expected of an old man. This is a rather nice depiction of a man who has gained a serenity usually denied to the young. Njáll is calm, and his thoughts seem to be mostly for the plight of others. He and his wife Bergþóra are a perfect example of nice old people who accept their lot and, in the end, their death. They thus acquire a kind of heroism in rising above their own infirmity.³⁴

32. See examples in Helga Kress, "Ekki höfu vér kvennaskap: Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu," *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), pp. 293–313.

33. "Far from being despised, the old leaders, like French feudal nobility, enjoyed a prestige proportional to the importance of their past exploits. Once retired, they lived on their lands; people came to consult them, and the young benefited from their experience" (*History of Old Age*, p. 190). Minois does not list much evidence for this conclusion, and his examples are for the most part drawn from *Laxdæla saga*, without perhaps taking enough note of that particular saga's idealistic representation of the noble Laxdælar family (cf. Ármann Jakobsson, "Konungasagan Laxdæla," *Skírnir*, 172 [1998], 357–83). Minois also discusses the portrayal of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, which he sees as an exception, whereas to his mind the narrative of Þórarinn the Viking demonstrated that the emerging agricultural society was less kind to the old than were the warrior societies (Minois, *History of Old Age*, pp. 192–93). I am not sure that this is a legitimate conclusion, as both narratives stem from the thirteenth century, and Egill and Þórarinn are somewhat different characters with different strategies; see the discussion below.

34. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), pp. 328–31. Of course, a more negative appraisal of Njáll's character is perfectly possible. Kristján Jóhann Jónsson (*Lykillinn að Njálu* [Reykjavík: Vaka-

And yet old age is an indirect cause of the death of Njáll and Bergþóra; their death prevents them from seeking vengeance for their sons. In addition to Njáll and Bergþóra, there are a handful of similar characters in the sagas, including Ingimundr the Old in *Vatnsdæla saga*.³⁵

However, we also have examples of old men who do not keep their dignity. In *Borgils saga ok Haflíða*, the old chieftain Þórðr Þorvaldsson suffers from indigestion. He belches so much during a feast that he has to leave the room, while mocking verses about his sour breath and his receding hairline escort him to the door. He gets no compensation for this humiliation, the narrator gloatingly tells us.³⁶ There are also at least two instances in the sagas where old men are accused of being cowardly and their lack of valor is attributed to their advanced age.³⁷

Old women are doubly marginalized, being both old and women.³⁸ However, not all women are daunted by that. Unnr the Wise in *Laxdæla saga* is an example of an old woman who still maintains power and dignity to the very end. It is, however, clearly spelled out in the saga that Unnr is an exceptional woman and that not all can follow in her footsteps.³⁹ In the very same saga, we see a glimpse of another old woman, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who has been using her old age properly to repent and to atone for her sins—yet Guðrún seems to be full of regret and remorse. After all these years, she is still thinking about the man she loved best and treated worst.⁴⁰ Unnr and Guðrún are exceptional women, royal in stature. Unnr keeps her dignity to the very end, and even when old, Guðrún is very much taken seriously—the identity of the man she loved best is a fact of some importance.

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, however, we have perhaps a more typical example of

Helgafell, 1998], pp. 48–49, 128–29, 148–50, 156–58, and 196–99) is one of those who have interpreted Njáll's actions in the entire saga in a less benevolent light. Cf. Ármann Jakobsson, "Ekki kosta munur: Kynjasaga frá 13. öld," *Skírnir*, 174 (2000), 21–48, at pp. 41–43.

35. As he dies, Ingimundr tries to conceal his wounds to help his killer escape; he had previously promised to help the man and wishes to honor that promise (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 [Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939], pp. 61–63).

36. *Sturlunga saga*, I, pp. 24–27.

37. *Þorsteins þátrr stangarhogs*, p. 126; *Viga-Glúms saga*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 9 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1956), p. 62.

38. Cf. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, p. 2.

39. Ármann Jakobsson, "Konungasagan Laxdæla," pp. 365–66. The existence of a few exceptional women, such as queens, was commonplace in European medieval society and has little to do with the equality of the sexes. See also Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 363–87.

40. Rory McTurk has discussed Guðrún's old age in the terms of a folktale motif concerning old women ("Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir: An Icelandic Wife of Bath?" *Sagnaheimur: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 80th birthday, 26th May 2001*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek [Vienna: Fassbaender, 2001], pp. 175–94).

the place of old women in the sagas.⁴¹ The farmer Þóroddr Þorbrandsson has an old nanny who warns him against taking in the calf Glæsir, which turns out to be possessed by the ghost of Þórólfr Lam-foot. This nanny is said to be old and wise in spite of her infirmity: “hon þótti verit hafa framsýn á fyrra aldri, en er hon eldisk, var henni virt til gamalóra, þat er hon mælti; en þat gekk þó mart eptir, sem hon sagði” (p. 171; “In years gone by she was thought to have been foresighted, but when she grew old, whatever she said was treated as the fancies of old age. Nonetheless a lot of what she said came true” [p. 213]). This woman has earned respect. Her age, and perhaps her sex, is the only reason that her advice is not heeded. While Þóroddr is obviously fond of his nanny, nevertheless her repeated warnings are ignored, and she is even tricked into believing that the calf has been killed when actually it has not. In the end, she turns out to have been right, when the calf kills Þóroddr. This nanny episode demonstrates the insignificance of old women in saga society, but at the same time it suggests that lack of respect for the old may be unwise.

The same motif is used in *Njáls saga*, when the old and poor woman Sæunn repeatedly warns against the chickweed that is later used to start a fire at Bergþórshvoll. Although great heed is usually paid to prophecies in the saga and the saga narrator indeed remarks that Sæunn’s prophecies often came true, the warnings of the old woman are mocked, and she is believed to be senile.⁴² Like Þóroddr’s nanny, she ends up in the role of a Cassandra—a prophetess without an audience. Rather hauntingly, Sæunn is also one of the few servants who perish in the fire along with the family of Njáll. Apparently no one, not even she herself, thought that she was worth saving.

Shulamith Shahar has remarked that, unlike in the modern period, where old women are censured and judged more severely than older men, in the Middle Ages the descriptions of old male bodies were just as merciless as were those of old women.⁴³ In fact, old women fare perhaps somewhat better in the sagas than old men. There is the figure of the old woman with supernatural powers that is frequently used for wicked

41. In his article on women in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Forrest Scott does not mention the nanny (“The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of Eyrbyggja saga,” *Parergon*, New Series, 3 [1985], 73–91). This wise woman thus keeps on being ignored even in scholarship. The irony is made even greater by the title of Scott’s article (as she is certainly a woman who knows), as well as by the fact that Scott is perhaps the greatest expert on the saga and is its editor in the *Editiones Arnarnænar* series.

42. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 320.

43. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, pp. 50–51. There were some ancient authorities, who had been extremely vehement about old women who fell in love (e.g., the poet Horace), but according to Minois (*History of Old Age*, p. 99), such bitterness about old women only resurfaced during the Renaissance.

deeds, a figure we see in several sagas, among them *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Harðar saga*. No ordinary old women, however, became as nasty as Þórólfr Lam-foot. They are sometimes ignored, and believed to be insignificant, but somehow—and perhaps not surprisingly—old women seem to find it easier to deal with their insignificance than do their male counterparts.

George Minois does not discuss old Icelandic women at any length in his important study of old age, and neither does he mention Þórólfr Lam-foot. He does discuss two other very angry and nasty old men. One is Egill Skalla-Grímsson, the protagonist hero of *Egils saga*. The other is the old viking Þórarinn, father of Þorsteinn Staff-struck, the hero of the eponymous short saga. These old men have one thing in common with Þórólfr Lam-foot: they are angry and nasty. Their anger is not without reason, and their situation is to a degree similar. While all react with anger against their plight in old age, they use three distinct strategies of their own, all of which merit further discussion.

THE OLD MAN AS AN OLD WIFE

The old viking Þórarinn, father of Þorsteinn Staff-struck, the hero of the eponymous short saga, is a character only seen in the infirmity of old age. He is introduced as a former viking who has become half blind and is tied to his bed. He does not have any riches to speak of but has many weapons—a curious prioritization, but one that is revealing of his character. We are told that he is “eigi dældarmaður þótt hann væri gamall” (p. 69; “not an easy man to get along with, even though he was old” [p. 335]), and it seems safe to assume that he was never a particularly nice man.⁴⁴ It is nevertheless clearly indicated that in his old age he has become even nastier, and he has certainly been forced to develop new ways of making mischief. And yet some lip-service is indeed paid to the idea that old men should be nice in the use of the phrase “þótt hann væri gamall.”

Þórarinn cannot fight anymore, and his main goal in life is to see to it that his son takes up his profession as a warrior. However, Þorsteinn is a peaceful man who will only fight when provoked. Þórarinn thus makes it his business to provoke him by taunting him in every way possible. In this he is not alone: The whole region consists of people who keep mocking Þorsteinn and daring him to take up arms against all those who disrespect

44. *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit, 11 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950), p. 69. Subsequent references to the *þáttur* are to this edition and its translation, “The Tale of Thorstein Staff-struck,” trans. Anthony Maxwell, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, IV, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997).

him. Þórarinn is one of the worst, however, as his tongue is as sharp as ever, and he compares his son to an effeminate hound (p. 70; p. 335) for not drawing blood from those who mock him. He is joined in this goading by the women and servants of the region.

Most of those who goad Þorsteinn into fighting are his enemies, but Þórarinn is his father. Since Þorsteinn has had battle experience, one would expect more understanding from his father than from those who have never themselves fought, but Þórarinn is unrelenting in his criticism of Þorsteinn's lack of action, and when his son goes on his way to the last battle with the chieftain Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, Þórarinn declares that he is glad and that he would prefer to have his son killed rather than have a cowardly or effeminate son. After the battle, Bjarni tricks the old man by saying that Þorsteinn has been killed. Þórarinn consequently attempts to kill Bjarni but comes not even close to achieving that goal, and is simply depicted as fiddling with a sword. Bjarni hardly needs to take him seriously. As a fighter, Þórarinn has simply become ridiculous.

In this very fact lies the cause for Þórarinn's anger. Like Þórólfr Lime-foot, he is a warrior. They are both men who have been dangerous and powerful. Indeed, their past strength serves to accentuate their present fragility. To these men, the humiliation of physical decrepitude is further aggravated by the loss of the esteem they once had, which was based primarily on physical strength and viciousness. Now, no one is afraid anymore. Clearly, a warrior's dignity is fickle, which may be a part of the moral conclusion of *Þorsteins þáttur*. And in the case of Þórarinn the viking and Þórólfr Lime-foot, impotence begets aggression. Both cases seem almost tailor-made to support the assertion of psychologist Rollo May, following in the footsteps of philosopher Hannah Arendt, that "violence is an expression of impotence."⁴⁵ These men are nasty because they are powerless and insignificant, and they feel this lack strongly.

The problem with Þórarinn the viking is not that he is too aggressive—he just simply can no longer find an outlet for his aggression. He has no real role in society, as he is not rich enough to become a respected chieftain. He is, in fact, a nobody. A former viking is almost an ex-human being. With Þórólfr Lime-foot the situation is more complex, as he still runs his farm and is a man of some standing. However, it is his son who is the *goði* and one of the biggest chieftains of the region. In comparison with Arnkell, Þórólfr is insignificant. He lacks Arnkell's youthful strength and charisma, and he is merely an annoying background presence, because he has neglected to die. This may be one of the main causes for his resent-

45. Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 23.

ment of Arnkell. Arnkell's importance highlights Þórólfr's insignificance, just as his youth only serves to accentuate the fact that Þórólfr is not young anymore. In this case, old age is almost like a second childhood; Arnkell treats Þórólfr like a willful child rather than an important figure. He is not afraid of him, and neither does Þórólfr seem to be able to put much fear into his neighbors.

It is perhaps no wonder that old men are often envious of the young, because the young have what the old want, and what everyone usually wants: respect and admiration. They also have a more active part to play in society, whereas the old are expected to retire gracefully, think about their salvation, and not interfere in the affairs of the young.⁴⁶ This is clear in the *senex amans* motif: The old lechers may be disgusting, but their only wish is to take some part in life and love. It is the same with the old vikings: They have lost their role in society and, being vikings, are unable to put their aggression to positive ends.

The sagas provide us with some examples of old people being energetic in a positive way. The protagonist of *Flóamanna saga*, Þorgils Þórðarson, enjoys a vigorous old age ("var nú gamall ok þó hraustr" [p. 317]; "was now old but still vigorous" [p. 301]), complete with a young wife, who at first was reluctant to accept such an old man.⁴⁷ He kills an impudent Norwegian who mocks his age and calls him a "fretkarl" ("old fart"),⁴⁸ which echoes Bjarni Brodd-Helgason's taunt against the old Þórarinn, whom Bjarni calls "allra fretkarla armastr" (p. 77; "you miserable old fart" [p. 340]). *Flóamanna saga* is often regarded as postclassical, and while it is difficult to date with certainty, it is in some ways not very realistic, and the virile old age of Þorgils may owe something to wishful thinking, especially when combined with his triumph over the Norwegian who has alluded to his lack of bowel control.

In addition to Þorgils, there are a handful of other old men who prove themselves to be excellent fighters in spite of their age. Most prominently, old Hávarðr in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, who is also a lame-foot, is jolted out of his miserable old age after his son has been killed. He promptly turns into a hero.⁴⁹ Hrútr Herjólfsson kills a marauder at the age of eighty, a

46. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, pp. 73–76.

47. *Flóamanna saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Íslenzk fornrit 13 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991), pp. 313–18; *The Saga of the People of Floi*, trans. Paul Acker, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, III, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997).

48. *Flóamanna saga*, pp. 322–23. Þorgils immediately regrets this killing as a rash act and later pays compensation.

49. *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), pp. 291–358. Hávarðr is said to be infirm with age, but his sickness seems to be at least partly psychosomatic, as his leap into heroism is preceded by his taking to bed whenever he meets with an obstacle.

celebrated feat.⁵⁰ The similarly provoked Hrómundr the lame also proves his valor in his old age,⁵¹ and in *Sturlunga saga*, there is the case of the ancient Árni Auðunarson, who dies alongside his master, Sigvatr Sturluson, and achieves great renown for his valor, which is said to be uncommon for such an old man—and yet Árni is asked what such an old and small man is doing on the battlefield.⁵² Fighting is, as a rule, not the business of old men, and this is a mean fate for old warriors who have survived for too long and now have to face an ignoble old age.

Few men carry on fighting into old age, however, and there remains the problem of what to do with ex-vikings, impotent but still aggressive—perhaps even more so because of their lack of a role to play. There is, however, more to Þórarinn's portrayal than that. In *Þorsteins þáttir stangarhogg*s, there is a strong sense of a generation gap. Þorsteinn embodies the peaceful and sensible attitude of the younger generation, while Þórarinn has—with some justice—been called a “fossilized relic of the viking past.”⁵³ In the saga, Þórarinn's values are exposed as ancient and inappropriate.⁵⁴ His son keeps him alive by his work, and yet the old man risks losing him only to satisfy the outdated ideas of the warrior society.

Þórarinn represents old and outdated views and has nothing but scorn for the practical ways of modern men. In this he is joined by many other old men in medieval sources, full of bitterness and anger toward the new age in which, in this case, the warrior mentality seems out of fashion. His present inability to fight is further aggravated by the fact that his son has no desire to emulate him. Although personally he has no role in society, Þórarinn does have a strong standing as a reactionary. In *Þorsteins þáttir*, reactionary attitudes are rampant, expounded by women, the lower class, and the old, in the figure of Þórarinn. The new age is represented by the chieftain Bjarni and the sensible Þorsteinn. As a spokesman for the old worldview, Þórarinn is one of the chief villains of the narrative. Yet, despite being vicious and aggressive, Þórarinn is, when it comes down to it, able to cause mischief mainly by going on about old warrior values—when it comes to fighting, Þórarinn is easily overcome. There is thus a strong dis-

50. *Laxdæla saga*, p. 105.

51. *Hrómundar þáttir halta*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939), pp. 313–14.

52. *Sturlunga saga*, I, p. 434.

53. Minois, *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, p. 192.

54. *Þorsteins þáttir* has often been interpreted as a moral narrative, espousing the new chivalric values of the thirteenth century and juxtaposing them with the outdated morals of the past. A recent interpretation in this vein is to be found in Gert Kreutzer, “Siðferðileg orðræða og þjóðfélagslegur boðskapur í nokkrum Íslendingasögum,” *Skírnir*, 178 (2004), 7–33, esp. pp. 12–17.

crepancy between his words and his deeds, or more importantly, between his desires and his potency.

In the *páttr*, Þórarinn sides with the women and servants of the region, who are excused from fighting on account of their lowly status and feebleness. His lofty warrior rhetoric and constant jeers at his son's lack of masculinity might be vain attempts to hide the fact that Þórarinn himself is in a position of powerlessness. To have some say in killings, he has to resort to feminine goading.⁵⁵ Thus, he is the "woman" of the saga—someone who is unable to bear arms but who is instead vocal in encouraging others to fight.⁵⁶

Þórarinn's physical impotence turns out to be echoed by his social impotence. His only way to be active is to be destructive, but he turns out to be unable to cause lasting harm. Þorsteinn and Bjarni Brodd-Helgason make up in the end, in spite of the old man's efforts and his fumbling attempt to use a sword against Bjarni, which earns him the chieftain's derision. The *páttr* ends with Þorsteinn going to Hof to serve Bjarni, which seems to be an honor, and Þórarinn is left with mere slaves to support him. As a nasty but enfeebled man, Þórarinn tries to attain revenge against youth, as personified by his own son, by using the old ideals of feuding and revenge in an attempt to take a last stand in battle. When Þorsteinn tells his father that he will now face Bjarni in battle, Þórarinn claims that he will not mourn for him. He feels it is better to lose Þorsteinn than to have a coward for a son (p. 75). Þórarinn is at last pleased when his son seems to face certain but heroic death. The only way for the son to please his father is to die, thus suggesting that the father desires the son's death.

Þorsteins páttr stangarhöggs may be informed by the myth of Kronos, the god who devoured his own children because he was fearful one of them would supplant him, but who in the end regurgitated them and thus gave a second birth to them. He thus became in a sense their mother as well as their father, while his youngest son Zeus became his heir. Marina Warner has argued that the recent obsession with the Oedipal myth has eclipsed the Kronos myth, which through the ages had been the more potent one. The myths, of course, are both concerned with the generation gap, but from different points of view. This is an important difference: The empha-

55. On goading as a role of women in Old Icelandic society, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingsagaerne* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlag, 1993), pp. 238–46.

56. This line of reasoning presupposes that Carol Clover was right in assuming that in the Norse mind the dividing line was "between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)" (Clover, "Regardless of Sex," p. 380).

sis is either on the father's vulnerability or on parental aggression against their offspring. Warner also draws attention to the fact that throughout the course of history, parents have been much more likely to kill their children than the children to kill the parents.⁵⁷ Thus it seems more fruitful to regard the father-son relationship in the light of the Kronos myth rather than the myth of Oedipus, which may nevertheless have some relevance to our discussion as well. Lévi-Strauss's critic Edmund Leach has remarked that the Oedipus and Kronos myths are in some respects duplicates, that both are an inversion of the act of sexual intercourse, the beginning of life.⁵⁸ The Kronos myth is easily interpreted as a metaphor about birth and death, inverted so that Kronos's devouring of his children results in a second birth.

The myth of Kronos was influential in the Middle Ages. It had its counterpart in the Bible, in the tale of Abraham and Isaac and the narrowly avoided sacrifice of the son by the father. In Iceland, the myth is related in a truncated form in *Hauksbók*, where Saturn kills and eats all his children except Jupiter, who expels him.⁵⁹ An indigenous version of the myth is found in *Ynglinga saga*. The Saturn-like King Aun sacrifices all his sons to Óðinn to carry on living himself. He keeps on sacrificing them even when he has become bedridden from old age, until at last the Swedes stop him and save his youngest son Egill, who eventually becomes his father's heir.⁶⁰

Originally the god Kronos was an old and little-known divinity, whose character is distinguished by internal contradiction and ambivalence in Greek sources. On the one hand he was a benevolent god of agriculture, on the other a dethroned and exiled, solitary god dwelling at the uttermost end of the land and sea and ruler of the nether gods. He was on the one hand the father of gods and men, but on the other he was the devourer of children and castrator of Uranus and was himself later castrated by his own

57. Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), pp. 48–77. Warner quotes George Devereux on the likelihood of parents killing their children ("The Cannibalistic Impulses of Parents," *The Psychoanalytic Forum*, 1 [1966], 114–24).

58. In the Kronos myth it is Gaia who inserts "a phallus into the male mouth as a form of food and thereafter the children are born through the mouth in the form of vomit" (Edmund Leach, *Lévi-Strauss* [London: Fontana, 1970], p. 81).

59. *Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Kongelige nordiske oldskrift-selskab, 1892–96), p. 158.

60. *Heimskringla*, 1, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941), pp. 47–50. See Samson Eitrem, "König Aun in Uppsala und Kronos," *Festskrift til Hjalmar Falk 30. desember 1927* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1927), 245–61; Joseph Harris, "Sacrifice and Guilt in Sonatorrek," *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 11 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 173–96 (see esp. p. 180).

son Zeus. Only later did his figure merge with that of Saturn, the Roman god of field and crops, who seems originally to have been good but who in the Middle Ages had acquired most of Kronos' negative attributes.⁶¹

Saturn was strongly associated with Melancholy in the Middle Ages. The color of Saturn was supposed to be dark and black, and his nature cold and dry. He was also supposed to be the god/planet of the old, as well as of cruelty and avarice.⁶² This is echoed in Icelandic sources such as in *Alfræði íslenzk*, where it is stated that those born in the hour of Saturn are dry and cold, evil and untruthful, secretive, and volatile; furthermore, they tend to become old.⁶³ The prevailing wisdom of European learned sources was that Saturn's children were the unhappiest of mortals, and in the system of the ages of man, Saturn was allotted the last and saddest phase, old age with its loneliness, hopelessness, and physical and mental decay.⁶⁴ In poems from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Saturn is connected not only with old age but also with sorrow, darkness, dryness, and avarice, and sometimes with impotence as well.⁶⁵ It thus seems possible to regard the angry old men in the sagas as figures of Kronos/Saturn.

In the Middle Ages, the name Kronos became assimilated with the Greek word for time, *chronos*. Thus the Kronos story was interpreted as a myth about the onward march of time.⁶⁶ If we examine the significance of the myth to the relationship of Þórarinn the viking and Þorsteinn stangarhogg, we see that Þórarinn wants his son's death, but he also wants Þorsteinn to prove himself in battle and establish his manliness. Perhaps Þorsteinn's role is to affirm Þórarinn's own lost manhood as well. Þórarinn's point of reference is usually himself rather than Þorsteinn: It is his son who has to fight and who must not be effeminate.⁶⁷ Þórarinn himself is old, bedridden, and effeminate, using his own definition of masculinity as

61. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964), pp. 133–35.

62. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, pp. 127–33.

63. *Alfræði íslenzk*, III, ed. Kristian Kálund (Copenhagen: Samfund til Udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur, 1917–18), p. 34.

64. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, pp. 148–49; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, p. 54.

65. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, pp. 186 and 191. See also Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher, *The Age of Saturn: Literature and History in the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 212–36.

66. Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman*, pp. 58–59. Warner argues that this conflation unconsciously collates with the father's intention, the metaphor being that the hours are inexorably swallowed up as time rolls on. Cf. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 177.

67. He makes statements such as: "Ekki mundi mik þess vara, at ek munda ragan son eiga" (p. 70; "I would not have thought that I had a coward for a son" [p. 336]), and "Þykki mér ek betra at missa þín en eiga ragan son" (p. 75; "I would rather lose you than have a coward for a son" [p. 338]).

partaking in battle.⁶⁸ He loathes his situation, and this loathing seems to be projected onto Þorsteinn.

Through Þórarinn the past speaks, with its outdated and aggressive values. Þórarinn may be trying to reverse time by surviving his son, as well as, and in collaboration with the other reactionaries of the *þáttir*, trying to supplant the values of the new age with the values of the old. The conflict in *Þorsteins þáttir stangarhöggs* is between father and son, the old and the new, with the old aggressively trying to devour the new to prolong its own life. As befits a true child of Saturn, Þórarinn is not only old but full of vicious envy and malice. In this version of the myth, Kronos/Saturn loses again. While Þorsteinn does not castrate his father, he moves up the social ladder at the end of the *þáttir* and emerges as his own man, if not Zeus. His father is cast off to live with slaves.

While such mythical reflections are always tentative, the general structure of this father-and-son relationship is borrowed from the Kronos myth. In this instance we have a nasty old father who tries to devour his son, though there is no regurgitating. However, there is another version of the myth in the sagas, complete with vomiting.

FOOD AND THE POET

A nuanced portrait of a warrior grown old and infirm may be found in *Egils saga*, in the depiction of Egill Skalla-Grímsson himself. In his old age, Egill has had a long career as a remorseless killer whose battles have been fought for personal gain, and who throughout his life has relied on his superior strength and warrior skills. In addition, there is a history of aging badly in the family. Egill's ancestors tend to reveal their wolfish streak rather more as they advance in years.⁶⁹ In chapter 40 of *Egils saga*, Skalla-Grímr has started to get old.⁷⁰ At the same time, he becomes in-

68. There is some indication that this is also how the community regards him. An unnamed servant of Bjarni states his belief that Bjarni does not kill Þorsteinn so as not to take the breadwinner from the old blind father.

69. Torfi H. Tulinius has previously drawn attention to some points of similarity between Skalla-Grímr and Þórólfr Lamfoot ("Framliðnir feður: Um forneskju og frásagnarlist í Eyrbyggju, Eglu og Grettlu," in *Heiðin minni: Greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, ed. Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað [Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1999], pp. 283–316 [see esp. pp. 299–301]).

70. "Hann gerðisk þá heldr hniginn aldrí" (p. 99; "he was fairly advanced in age by then" [p. 77]) (*Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 [Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933], p. 99). Subsequent references to *Egils saga* are to this edition and to the translation, *Egils Saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, I, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997).

creasingly vicious, and one evening he makes a life-threatening attack on his son during a game (p. 101). His father, Kveld-Úlfr, is said to become bad-tempered toward evening, which may be a metaphorical description of the same trend (p. 4). Both father and son have a wolfish nature, and night draws out the bestial part of that nature. However, we only learn of Kveld-Úlfr's evening nastiness when he has become advanced in years, and the only instance of Skalla-Grímr turning bestial at nightfall happens when he, too, is getting old.

Close to the end of the saga, Egill has reached old age and is described as “þungfœrr, ok glapnaði honum bæði heyrn ok sýn; hann gerðisk ok fótstirðr” (p. 294; “very frail and both his hearing and sight failed. He also suffered from very stiff legs” [p. 174]). We are shown how he has trouble walking, trips, and is mocked by the women at his farm. He later tries to rest in the warmth of the kitchen, but the cook scolds him and drives him out. In his old age the former warrior hero is in everyone's way and is picked on by servant women. This may be seen as a tragedy, but it is perhaps also poetic justice; in fact, the saga author may have intended his audience to have mixed views on Egill's predicament. But whatever our attitude is to the viking Egill, it is hard not to have some sympathy with the blind, deaf, and wobbly old man that he has become, and to ponder the ironies of fate.⁷¹

Egill Skalla-Grímsson is literally impotent, but mentally perhaps less so than many others of his age, since at least he is able to compose a skaldic poem about the limpness of his penis.⁷² The impotence of old age is a prominent feature in most medieval depictions of old age, and the most explored topic with fourteenth-century English poets.⁷³ Physical infirmity is not surprisingly also one of the most common complaints of the old in medieval Icelandic literature. In *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormaks saga*, the poet and warrior Hólmǫngu-Bersi has become old and composes a verse on how he has become like an infant who cannot use its legs. The only difference is that the infant will eventually be able to walk, but Bersi won't. Bersi is nevertheless able to make a poem about his humiliation, and thus use words to gain some kind of control over his existence. In spite of his predicament, he keeps his dignity. In *Kormaks saga*, Bersi indeed rises from his bed and is able to strike a further blow against his enemies. In

71. Irony may also be detected in the fact that Þórólfr Lam-foot gained his land by challenging a frail old man to a duel, but that he then himself falls victim to a different curse of old age.

72. Like most skaldic stanzas, Egill's half-stanza about his impotence is obscure, but from the thirteenth century on it seems to have been understood as an obscene verse (see *Egils saga*, p. 294, note to st. 58; cf. Erik Noreen, *Studier i fornvästnordisk diktning*, II (Uppsala: Akademiska Bokhandeln, 1922, pp. 35–36).

73. Nitecki, “Figures of Old Age,” p. 112.

Laxdæla saga, there is no mention of that, making Bersi's verse perhaps more poignant and tragic.⁷⁴

Egill resents the young generation; his intolerance bursts out in an angry verse composed about his son's "treachery," after Þorsteinn has taken his silk cloak, a gift from Egill's great friend Arinbjörn, and soiled it (p. 274). When Egill has grown stiff, blind, impotent, and wobbly on his legs, his only wish is to be able to cause mischief to the young. His niece and her husband have to stop him from going to the Alþingi and scattering his silver from a high place to watch the people fight over it. This is the old Egill's way of making himself noticed and remembered, but to his niece and her husband it just seems like a mad scheme of an evil and senile mind. Since Egill has become so frail, his plan is easily thwarted. He is nevertheless still able to hide his silver from his relatives, thus ensuring himself a final petty revenge on the younger generation (pp. 296–98). As it is made clear that Egill loves his niece better than any other living person, this last act estranges him from the most loving relative left in his life (pp. 275 and 296).⁷⁵

Egils saga depicts Egill Skalla-Grímsson's growing infirmity, dependency on others, and marginalized status at his own home. It also reveals to us his dream of once again making his mark in society. In his old age, Egill's idea of fun is instigating a battle he will not even be able to see between people he does not know. The wounds and deaths of others would then provide his only satisfaction. He is a Kronos figure who wishes death on the young generation. Like Þórarinn the viking, Egill's anger is caused by his humiliation, and his reaction is to try to lash out in fury. His wish to go to the Alþingi draws attention to the fact that he has been excluded from decisions of power. Like Þórarinn the viking, Egill is forced to rely on others. This is made even more bitter by the fact that this is a complete reversal of roles: The old vikings used to dominate others but are now doomed to subservience. In the past, Egill has not asked anyone's opinion, but now he is forced to ask his niece and her husband's leave to go to the assembly—and they easily refuse him when they become aware of his evil scheme. Egill used to go where he liked and do as he pleased, without bowing even to kings and queens, except perhaps when absolutely necessary and to save his head. Now the warrior who stood up to King Eiríkr Blood-axe is even driven out of the kitchen.

Like Þórarinn the viking, Egill can only be active by being destructive.

74. *Laxdæla saga*, p. 76; *Kormáks saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939), pp. 260–63.

75. This episode has been discussed by Torfi H. Tulinius in light of the father-and-son conflicts of the saga (*The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik [Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 2002], pp. 266–68 and 274).

But his dream of destruction turns out to be futile. His plan is thwarted by his niece and her husband, who simply ground him like a teenager. The only thing he can do is to revert to a more passive-aggressive protest: He hides his silver from those who have taken him into their home and tried to be kind to him in his old age. Egill turns out to be unable to do anything but harm others, but not even on as grand a scale as he wished.

While Egill's situation is not unusual, and his anger has clear parallels in the cases of Þórarinn the viking and Þórólfr Lam-foot, his wish to stay in the kitchen is very much his own. Egill himself explains his attraction to the kitchen as the need for warmth from the fire. It is nevertheless a bit eccentric that unlike Þórarinn, who is obsessed with battle and heroic death, he turns to the kitchen, synonymous with food and the company of women. In fact, food is an important and recurring motif in Egill's life. His first clash with King Eiríkr happened at the feast at Atley and resulted in Egill's companion vomiting all over the floor. Later, Egill takes revenge on the farmer Ármóðr by regurgitating into his face (pp. 107–11 and 223–27). Thus, in Egill's hands—or mouth, to be more precise—food and drink can be turned into dangerous missiles. As he advances in years, he starts manipulating with food in a slightly different way. When Egill is past fifty and loses his two sons, he attempts to starve himself to death. His plan was only thwarted by his clever and equally manipulative daughter Þorgerðr, who encourages him to compose his masterful elegy *Sonatorrek* (pp. 242–45).

Joseph Harris regards *Sonatorrek* as part of a grieving process and an example of the use of myth and poetry to survive and continue with life.⁷⁶ In rituals of grief, the consumption of food almost universally plays a part. In this context, food represents life and its continuation, as well as a farewell to the dead. By refusing food, Egill is thus turning his back to the restoration process. In addition, food and drink are also closely connected with poetry in the Old Norse tradition, and indeed the myth of the mead of poetry is referred to in *Sonatorrek*.⁷⁷ This myth involves the vomiting of the mead by Óðinn, and thus it must be significant that the poet Egill does his fair share of vomiting in *Egils saga*. While that is in itself a tentative link with the god Kronos, it seems probable that the depiction of Egill as an old man is a vital ingredient of the poet's biography, and that old age, rebirth, and regurgitating are in some way intertwined, not only in the Kronos myth but also in *Egils saga*.

76. Joseph Harris, "Goðsögn sem hjálp til að lifa af í Sonatorreki," *Heiðin minni: Greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, ed. Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1999), pp. 47–70. See also his "Sacrifice and Guilt in Sonatorrek," pp. 193–96.

77. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Trúarhugmyndir í Sonatorreki*, *Studia Islandica*, 57 (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001), pp. 121–22.

Although Egill's grief is not unique for an old man, his reaction is unusual and seems at first somewhat more appropriate for Kjartan Ólafsson's wife Hrefna and other grieving widows of Old Icelandic literature than for the old and rough viking.⁷⁸ While fasting and hunger striking have never been confined to women and have certainly been used by men throughout the ages (most prominently in Ireland), the twin illnesses anorexia and bulimia nowadays occur mostly among female victims, and in the Middle Ages fasting was more prominently practiced by female saints and women in general. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that this reflects the fact that food preparation was often the only control women had in medieval society. To prepare food is to control food, and fasting is an extremely simple and effective form of manipulation. Bynum notes an important difference between modern and medieval fasting: beauty was not connected with thinness in the same way as it is now and was not an issue in medieval fasting. Control, however, was a key issue in anorectic behavior then, as it is now. Those who refuse food are manipulating their circumstances, and fasting was sometimes the only way for a woman to do this.⁷⁹ In a way, Egill Skalla-Grímsson may therefore be seen as a precursor to modern bulimists and anorectics, since he uses both vomiting and starvation as a manipulative weapon.

But why would Egill Skalla-Grímsson choose this female weapon? He is not only a man but a powerful man, a rich man, a warrior, and a chieftain. He is also a master manipulator. His self-starvation makes him the chief mourner for his sons, eclipsing the possible grief of his wife and children for their son and brother. Egill's grief is very much a form of attention seeking. Maud Ellmann argued in her provocative study that "[s]elf-starvation is above all a performance." Anorectics are "starving for attention" and "making a spectacle of themselves, in every sense."⁸⁰ Ellmann also argues that self-starvation is to a certain extent a creative process, often strongly connected with metaphors of rape and imprisonment. This applies to the case of Egill, since his self-starvation after the death of his sons leads to the composition of *Sonatorrek*. Egill retreats

78. In addition to Hrefna, Queen Þyri (in Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*) springs to mind. However, there are other similar examples of grieving old men in the sagas (Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995], pp. 111–13).

79. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), see esp. pp. 94–112 and 189–244. See also Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000 [1st ed. 1988]); Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985).

80. Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 117.

into the confined space of his *lokrekka* ("bed-closet"), which symbolizes a private prison house, analogous to the closed chests where he hides his wealth. Nevertheless, withdrawal from the public scene can also be a kind of performance, and hiding a form of spectacle.

It is tempting to regard Egill's attempt at self-starvation as a form of melancholy. He is aging and there is a strong link between Saturn and melancholy in the Middle Ages. Melancholy has been described by psychologists of the Freudian school as narcissistic, and that Egill certainly is. His grief is exaggerated and obsessive, and it is certainly possible to interpret it in Freudian terms as concealing an aggressiveness toward the lost object.⁸¹ Perhaps more importantly, Egill's retreat into his *lokrekka* and his self-starvation constitute a passive reaction, dramatically different to his wish to scatter silver over Alþingi. Hélène Cixous has argued that passivity has been historically equated with the feminine.⁸² By fasting, Egill is dominating his surroundings in a passive way. He is refusing life, not by actively pursuing death but by a quiet retreat into a confined space, which nevertheless is a form of attention seeking. Perhaps it is possible to regard his problematic relationship with the younger poet Einarr skálaglam as a form of retreat as well. Egill likes Einarr but when the latter gives him a shield, Egill wants to chase him and kill him (p. 272). This may be interpreted merely as lovable eccentricity, but perhaps this scene also demonstrates Egill's denial of his role as a poet. He does not want to compose a *drápa* about the shield. He is too weary, too tired, and last but not least, too old. As with the hunger strike, his reaction against his role as a poet is a symptom of aging.

Egill's passive-aggressive hunger strike is paralleled by his use of his wealth as a fetish rather than something that actively supports his chieftaincy. The fetish has been defined as something that "ought to be merely a reference to something material [but] masquerades instead as a something-in-itself, an autonomous signifier."⁸³ Furthermore, fetishism has been connected with the artistic spirit.⁸⁴ It may be "more an inability to tolerate the necessary incompleteness of experience than a reduction of experience to a mere part."⁸⁵ It may be the artistic side of Egill that makes him, like his father, not flaunt his wealth but choose instead to keep it safe and, in the end, bury it (pp. 296–98). His rage when his son has soiled his silk cloak (p. 274) may be interpreted in a similar vein. It seems strange for a

81. See, e.g., Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 11 and 64.

82. Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: UGE, 1975), p. 115.

83. Marcia Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism and the Fetish* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), p. 82.

84. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (London: W. W. Norton, 1984), pp. 78–88.

85. Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother*, p. 84.

large, aggressive viking like Egill Skalla-Grímsson to become so attached to such a delicate piece of clothing as a silk cloak, even though it is a gift from his late friend Arinbjörn. Even more pronounced is his need to keep it safe and unused, like a hidden treasure.

Egill's strategies in dealing with old age turn out to be vastly different from those of Þórarinn the viking. Instead of boasting and egging others on to violence, Egill increasingly retreats into himself, his *lokrekka* being the strongest metaphor for this. He starves himself, becoming obsessed with money and small things.

Some of Egill's reactions may be described as feminine. In his old age, Egill's best friends are women, his daughter Þorgerðr and his niece Þórdís. He himself desires above all to sit in the warmth of the kitchen with the servant women. He tries to starve himself to gain control over his life and surroundings, as if food control were his only sphere of dominance. It is really impossible to explain why he chooses this way, although Egill largely resembles his father and Skalla-Grímr in that he has an introvert personality. Perhaps Egill feels as if he is gaining more and more control over his personality as he retreats into his own self.

In his childhood, Egill Skalla-Grímsson struggled to catch the attention of his cold and indifferent father. It takes no great logical leap to interpret the father-son conflict of *Egils saga* in the oedipal vein. Torfi H. Tulinius has indeed suggested such an interpretation in an excellent article about father-son conflicts, between Egill and Skalla-Grímr, as well as Arnkell and Þórólfr Lam-foot.⁸⁶ Egill's aversion to his son Þorsteinn may also be interpreted in light of the Kronos myth, especially as the reception and ejection of food have an important role in this narrative. Thus the Kronos myth seems to apply even more strongly to *Egils saga* than *Þorsteins þáttir stangarhoggss*. Both narratives also reveal that old vikings seem to be stuck in a social role that has more in common with the role of women than men. In both cases, this makes the old men resentful and aggressive. The main difference is that while Þórarinn the viking has landed in this situation by necessity, Egill seems to have adopted it himself to a degree. Even though he resents being an impotent and feminized old man, a part of him wants to withdraw to the kitchen and into his bed. Perhaps this marks the difference between a viking and a viking/poet.

THE OLD MAN AS A GHOST

Þórólfr Lam-foot does not ally himself with other reactionary forces in his region to attempt to use old viking ideals against his son. Neither does

86. Torfi H. Tulinius, "Framliðnir feður."

he retreat into a *lokrekka* or bury his wealth. He adopts a third strategy. After having aggressively but ultimately unsuccessfully tried to maintain his dignity, he dies and returns as a ghost. I have already argued that Þórólfr may be regarded as a Kronos figure.⁸⁷ He is filled with anger and hatred of the younger generation, and as with the other nasty old men, his anger may be interpreted as a reaction against his surroundings, brought on by a sense of vulnerability and impotence, and thus revealing of the cruel state of being old, as well as a fear of mortality which takes a strange turn in Þórólfr's case.

The first question that has to be asked about every ghost is: Why does he start to walk again after his death? This should be easy to answer, as Þórólfr is introduced to us in life, which is not always the case with prominent ghosts in literature. That allows for us to study his transformation to ghostliness. A second and less obvious question is: When did Þórólfr become a ghost? That one is perhaps not so easy as it sounds.

As a rule people become ghosts because they are not at peace and not satisfied. It seems obvious that Þórólfr's lack of contentment has something to do with his afterlife as a ghost. But what about the lack of contentment itself? We might keep in mind that Þórólfr was not always a lamefoot. He first came to Iceland a vigorous young viking. However, he arrived there on the coattails of his mother, who had already carved out some land and respect for herself. Þórólfr was not satisfied with his role. It might be precisely his weak status as the son of a female settler, rather than a settler in his own right, that leads him to his aggressive pursuit of the land of others. This view would be supported by the fact that when Þórólfr has acquired his land, he is peaceful right up until the advent of old age. The saga states that it is his old age that leads him to become increasingly unreasonable and aggressive. It is never revealed whether his physical disability plays a part. Is Þórólfr also wreaking vengeance on the world because of his lame foot? We do not know but his disability makes him even more marginalized and might aggravate his envy of the young and fit, and in particular of his son Arnkell.

Þórólfr Lame-foot's refusal to disappear from the scene after his death

87. The Oedipus myth might also be significant to Þórólfr's story, especially in the Lévi-Straussian interpretation, since in his analysis, the meaning of the name Oidipos, "swollen-foot," which is almost the same as Þórólfr's byname, had some importance (Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore*, 68 [1955], 428–44; see also his *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972], pp. 206–31). However, since according to at least Edmund Leach the Oedipus and Kronos myths are in some respects duplicates (Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 80), it seems a bit superfluous to bring Oedipus into this interpretation. The myth would, of course, be inversed in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where the "swollen-foot" is the father who haunts his son, instead of the son who kills the father.

seems caused by his discontent with his life. In his old age, matters never turn out to his liking. He keeps being snubbed, loses most of his cases, and is in the end shunned by everyone. No one sees his point of view, which is admittedly difficult for him. In the end he is unable to turn Arnkell against Snorri, whether he wishes just to get his wood back or whether his wish is more similar to Egill's: By fuelling resentment between Arnkell and Snorri, he could be starting a major conflict.

Just before Þórólfr's death, after being rejected by both Snorri and Arnkell, the old man's mood becomes foul. He goes home and promptly dies. Everyone is afraid of the corpse, which is so rigid that Arnkell has to force it down so that Þórólfr can be buried. Then Þórólfr starts to walk again (pp. 91–93). Having failed in life, it is only in death that he becomes powerful again. Or does he? Þórólfr manages to lay waste to an entire valley, a feat equalled by very few ghosts. As is the nature of ghosts, he haunts his own territory and seems to be much more powerful in his state as a ghost than in life, and yet we may wonder whether Þórólfr was all that potent as a ghost. Perhaps the phrase "a powerful ghost" might even be a contradiction in terms. What powers do ghosts really have, when it comes down to it?

Admittedly, Þórólfr's career as a ghost has a promising start. His first act is to scare sheep out of their wits near his grave. Then birds and more sheep are killed, and finally a shepherd is found blue and battered near the site of Þórólfr's grave. Soon Þórólfr has a whole entourage of ghosts, and when Arnkell breaks open the cairn, he finds the body of his father not decayed but very hideous to behold. The ghost also manages to keep Arnkell from moving him all the way to Vaðilshöfði, so that he has to be buried closer by. From then on, the ghost remains quiet while Arnkell lives, but then he begins his hauntings again and kills both men and cattle. Finally, the body is again disinterred and found to be unrotted and monstrous. Now it is burned, but even that does not work. The fire takes a long time consuming Þórólfr, and he is in the end able to enter a cow and is perhaps reborn as a crazed calf that kills Þóroddr Þorbrandsson.

Þórólfr has a long and dignified career for a ghost indeed, but that does not change the fact that a ghost does not grow or attain life once more. On the contrary, the ghost lacks both life and positive qualities. In fact, the only thing a ghost can do is to frighten and persecute and kill. It can destroy, but it cannot create anything instead. A ghost has only negative power. Þórólfr Lam-foot is able to kill his fellow man, but he cannot return to life. He is, in fact, doomed to live in the shadows, to walk around in a world that does not belong to him anymore, and in this world he can only exist as a parasite on the living, to attack them and try to destroy them, without gain for himself. And even these negative pow-

ers are limited, however, because even as a ghost Þórólfr cannot take on Arnkell. He does not threaten him, he is unable to destroy him or anything in his vicinity, and in the end Arnkell can keep him from haunting for as long as he lives. Þórólfr's ghostly revenge proves futile. He cannot touch the person he hates the most: the son who represents youth, the younger generation, and the life the ghost himself has lost. Þórólfr is able to terrorize unimportant people and secondary characters, to kill the people at his own farmstead and his own sheep, but when it comes down to it, he is almost as impotent in death as he was in his old age.

Þórólfr does not really change all that much in death. Bodily transformed he may be but his state of mind remains the same. His anger is certainly not diminished.⁸⁸ He can no longer argue with his neighbors about hay. He cannot feud or press lawsuits. In fact he can do nothing but kill. But his character is essentially the same: full of maleficence, anger, greed, and bullying. The ghost Þórólfr is just a concentrated version of the man Þórólfr,⁸⁹ which brings us to an important question best exemplified by the answer of Marley's Ghost in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843). When the old miser Scrooge asks: "Who are you?" Marley simply replies: "Ask me who I *was*."⁹⁰ Is the ghost someone who is, or someone who has been? Shall we view a ghost as a separate entity or as an ex-human? In this case, the answer seems to be that the ghost is very much like the man, and may thus be said to exist at once in the past and in the present. Þórólfr the ghost is more an ex-human than a new being.⁹¹

But if there is no substantial difference between the ghost and the old man, what does that indicate about the saga's image of old age? On closer inspection, the medieval image of old age is strikingly similar to the image of ghosts. The old man is a weary, wizened, and decayed person who has lost some of his faculties and keeps on losing more: his wits, his teeth, his sight, his hearing, his potency, and his powers. The old man is, in fact, a

88. Forrest Scott has fittingly described Þórólfr as someone who extends his misanthropy beyond the grave ("The Icelandic Family Saga as a Precursor of the Novel," p. 11), and Vésteinn Ólason calls Þórólfr a person "who is full of resentment towards his surroundings by the end of his life and carries these resentments on into another life" ("The Un/Grateful Dead," p. 165).

89. Cf. Vésteinn Ólason, "The Un/Grateful Dead," p. 165.

90. Charles Dickens, *Christmas Book*, Everyman's Library, 239 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1907), p. 20.

91. According to Jean-Claude Schmitt (*Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998], p. 206), Þórólfr is a macabre ghost, since he appears as a living cadaver. According to Schmitt, this image of a ghost is in contrast to the most common type of ghost in medieval Christian culture (*Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, pp. 12–13). Þórólfr might also be interpreted as a vampire, since most of the characteristics of folklore vampires fit Þórólfr quite well (see Paul Barber, *Vampire, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988]), as well as the ghost Glámr in *Grettis saga* (op.cit, pp. 82–97).

human in decay, almost an ex-human perhaps not quite as a ghost is an ex-human, but definitely in the first stages of being a specter. The old man is a ghost who is not quite dead yet. Þórólfr Lam-foot certainly starts acting like a ghost before he becomes one: like a ghost, his only wish is to destroy and harm others. And when he actually becomes a ghost, this continues to be the only thing he is able to do.

This is perhaps the tragedy of old age, as perceived in the Middle Ages. Old people have already become ghosts in that they are mere shadows of their former selves and do not seem to count anymore. This is what the old Bersi laments as he lies and is unable to help the child that has fallen out of his cradle. This is what makes Þórarinn, Egill, and Þórólfr lash out in fury against their destiny. Each has his own method of handling old age: One becomes an inciter, one withdraws into his bed and stops eating, and the third becomes a ghost. None is able to be active in any way that is not primarily destructive.

In recent years, old age has often been regarded as yet another stage of life with its own merits and compensations, as Cicero tried to argue. There is less emphasis on the things that get lost. Medieval images of old age tended to be more negative—the emphasis was on sickness, decrepitude, and impotence—and this is the image present in the story of Þórólfr Lam-foot. He spends his old age feeling humiliated, impotent, bitter, angry, and eager to avenge himself—a ghost before his death. He starts haunting people long before he dies but is unable to make any positive difference.

The depiction of Þórólfr Lam-foot haunting Álptafjörðr is perhaps the most haunting portrayal of old age in the sagas. In Þórólfr, the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* does not only portray a nasty individual who turns into a ghost but one who embodies the specter of old age—a ghost feared by those who have yet to encounter it but who are very much aware of its cruel presence in the future.⁹²

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