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Misplaced Trust and Failed/False Friendship – Betraying the Poet in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* and *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*

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In two of the four ‘core’ skald sagas, as defined by Clunies Ross (2000: 27),¹ *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* and *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*,² the protagonist loses his promised bride through his antagonist’s interference. In both sagas, this is preceded by a period of friendship between the two male characters – or at least that is what the protagonist is led to believe. This paper discusses the relationship between the two figures – how it is established, develops, and leads to the betrayal or sabotage of the protagonist’s marriage and beyond – in the context of homosocial behaviour and saga masculinity.³

In his monograph, Evans discusses different manifestations of masculinity (“masculinities”, Evans 2019: 16–23) and its performance in the *Íslendingasögur*; with an understanding of performance based on Butler’s concept of the performativity of gender independent of biological sex (see Butler 1999: 171–180, esp. 178–179; Evans 2019: 6–7). The author describes hegemonic masculinity as “the crystallisation of the masculine ideal” (Evans 2019: 16), and formulates the following “working model”:

a character: must be of fine physical appearance; must act heroically (which includes the display of physical and martial prowess); must be bold, sincere, and responsible (actions must have good cause, the person must not be overly domesticated, and must not prefer sexual relations to physical labour), must act according to the dictates of honour at all times (must be both willing and able to exact due vengeance, and must act amicably with kinsmen); must adhere to alimentary taboos; and must not take part in ‘irregular’ sexual practices (Evans 2019: 25).

Superiority over other men is highlighted as a frequent goal, but also as a highly problematic element of the performance of masculinity in these sagas (see Evans 2019: 17–18). This can partly be regulated by certain social factors with an inherent established structure, for example family integration or status, which allow for subordination without loss of face, as in a son’s being subordinate to his father or a retainer to a ruler

1 On the definition and issues of this (not contemporary) category, see Clunies Ross (2000: 40–49).

2 Henceforth *Gunnl* and *BjH* in bibliographical citations. Translations are my own.

3 On homosociality, see Evans (2019: 28–33).

(see Evans 2019: 40). In contrast, forced subordination bears negative connotations for the person affected (see Evans 2019: 17).

When saga characters pursue it aggressively and uncompromisingly, the masculine ideal devolves into hypermasculinity, which proves detrimental to their environment and, particularly in the long run, also to the pursuers themselves (see Evans 2019: 107). This distorted form can be observed with the protagonist of *Grettis saga*. Virtually possessed during and after a troubled childhood by the “extreme assertion of dominance” (Evans 2019: 115), Grettir is hypersensitive to any possible male competition, which also prevents him almost completely from entering into positive homosocial relationships unless the counterpart acknowledges his superiority (see Evans 2019: 134). Such a form of masculinity is “coded as anti-social” (Larrington 2008: 153).

Although competition and superiority are thus essential aspects of the ideal, they have to be mitigated in some way. Characters can then become valuable members of society and their performance of masculinity remains constructive: they are able to enter productive homosocial relationships and participate in established support structures as well as forming new ones.

To solely pursue an ideal of superiority, on the other hand, renders characters disruptive and destructive. The excessive homosocial competitiveness inherent in hypermasculinity leads to contentiousness and incessant conflicts, in the worst case creating ‘bonds of aggression’, i. e. feud instead of support structures, and this can ultimately destabilise society as a whole.

In both skald sagas, one central figure displays certain traits of hypermasculinity from the outset: in *Gunnlaugs saga* it is Gunnlaugr, in *Bjarnar saga* the antagonist Þórðr. In Gunnlaugr’s case, this manifests mainly as rashness and hyperindividualism, and in the context of premature goals which not only improve social standing (see Clunies Ross 2000: 47), but which can also be considered elements of traditional masculinity: going abroad and marriage.⁴ In contrast, Þórðr is primarily concerned with the domination of his fellow men, establishing his superiority by taunts and harassment. In both cases, not much is told about positive homosocial relationships in Iceland, and both are described as troublesome figures: Gunnlaugr as “hávaðamaðr mikill í öllu skaplyndi ok framgjarn snimmendis ok við allt óvæginn ok harðr ok skáld mikit ok heldr níðskár” (*Gunnl*: 59; “a very overbearing man in his whole disposition and ambitious from an early age, obstinate and hard in everything, a great skald and rather prone to níð”),⁵ while on Þórðr it is said that “Ekki var Þórðr mjök vinsæll af alþýðu því at hann þótti vera spottsamr ok grár við alla þá er honum þótti dælt við” (*BjH*: 112; “Þórðr did not have many friends among people because he

4 See Evans (2019: 72) and Larrington (2008: 152) for the significance of autonomous travelling in the context of adulthood. Larrington (2008: 153) also observes a connection between areas of adolescent anxiety and male saga youths’ aspirations. On the *útanferð* (journey abroad) as *rite de passage*, see also Poilvez (2019: 259–261).

5 In light of Gunnlaugr’s early success in using an offensive stanza in his conflict with a farmer (*Gunnl*: 63), Whaley’s (2000: 287) translation of *níð* as “versified insult” would be fitting here, although the term itself denotes other forms as well. The negative aspects *níð* encompasses are intimately connected to the concept of masculinity and can be taken as manifestation of “what a man *must not* be” (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983: 24, italics original).

was thought to be prone to mocking and malicious against all those with whom he thought it would be easy to deal”).

There is a marked difference, however: young Gunnlaugr does not seek conflict merely to prove his superiority, but usually has concrete and (relatively, if not necessarily situatively) reasonable goals. Þórðr, in contrast, is depicted as a vigorous but cruel and disruptive character who attacks without a specific reason. And while this certainly conforms to his function as an antagonist, Þórðr also targets specifically weaker men (“er honum þótti dælt við”), while Gunnlaugr predominantly gets into conflict with stronger ones.

Initially, Þórðr is remarkably successful, to a point where Björn stays with his kinsman Skúli to escape from his attacks (*BjH*: 112). Gunnlaugr, by contrast, is not. In fact, his repeated failures to assert himself demonstrate a gap between ambition and ability,⁶ which proves an important source of disruption throughout the saga. His deficiencies are voiced clearly by his older opponents: he is erratic and seeks to appear more impressive than he is (*Gunnl*: 66–67). Furthermore, as his adversaries here are his own father and his father’s friend, Gunnlaugr is moving within hierarchies which would rather see him defer to the older, accomplished men. Instead, he attempts to establish a superiority he does not possess, especially when he attempts to go abroad at the age of twelve (*Gunnl*: 59). Meulengracht Sørensen (1988: 251) observes: “the young man is obliged to show his elders a certain respect, and that is precisely what Gunnlaugr fails to do”. Hence, in these situations subordination without loss of status would not only have been possible, but appropriate. Moreover, despite his obstinacy, it is also made evident that Gunnlaugr has neither the means nor the strength of will to support his claims or threats against these two men and he yields every time. However, as Falk (2020: 29) notes:

especially coded as culturally masculine was fiercely independent, aggressive resourcefulness, an unwillingness to back down in the face of challenge or adversity, and conversely an eager readiness to act precipitously to assert one’s own will.

While Gunnlaugr thus possesses the rashness and aggressiveness, he nevertheless lacks the resolve (on this topic, see Cook 1971, who provides a list of incidents).

For both characters things change as time passes: Gunnlaugr improves in his behaviour (*Gunnl*: 64) and develops into a respectable warrior and poet, while Þórðr learns that his former victim, Björn, has caught up with him both physically and martially. Björn has so far been depicted as a much more even-tempered figure and also markedly less prone to inciting conflicts. Whaley (2000: 286) remarks on the distribution of topical character traits: “the difficult temperament and the status as skald belong to the rival, Þórðr Kolbeinsson” and this also sheds light on the similarities between Gunnlaugr and Þórðr despite their different narrative roles.

In both sagas the ensuing meeting of protagonist and antagonist on the neutral and slightly precarious ground of a foreign court sees them bond. This positive homosocial relationship is soon shattered for different reasons, however, and in both cases the basic motif can be traced back to the idea of superiority. In *Gunnlaugs saga*, the enmity originates in the skalds’ rivalry for the king’s attention and esteem. Both the protagonist and his

6 See Cook (1971) for a more psychological reading of Gunnlaugr’s youth and character, especially p. 12.

competitor Hrafn vie for it with praise poems, but the altercation starts even before, when Gunnlaugr demands to be the first to recite (*Gunnl*: 79–80). The friendly relations between the two figures thus deteriorate as soon as the king becomes involved. In Evans' (2019: 33) terms, theirs is a triangular relationship with the ruler as the third party through which their homosocial desire is mediated. This mediation may be positive or negative and both forms appear in the saga: in the beginning, Hrafn and Gunnlaugr, not yet in direct competition, find common ground in their shared experiences as travelling Icelanders at court (*Gunnl*: 79). As soon as the third, ruling party becomes the decisive factor, however, competition sets in, not least because Gunnlaugr pushes to the front, and because, while he mentions his father's pre-eminent status, he lists no achievements of his own,⁷ reminiscent of his earlier statements in Iceland (*Gunnl*: 80), and insults Hrafn's father. Despite the offence, his rival reminds him to stay courteous and proposes having the king decide; Gunnlaugr agrees. Especially after he relents, their dispute could be taken as somewhat normal competition at court in the charged context of a newcomer getting the measure of his environment – and the host the measure of him. Besides, this scene illustrates once more that Gunnlaugr is indeed a *hávaðamaðr mikill* (“very overbearing man”), as did the previous altercations at Jarl Eiríkr's court, in which Gunnlaugr offended both the jarl's retainer and then the jarl himself (*Gunnl*: 69–70).

By contrast, Hrafn with his suggestion to lay the decision into the king's hands appears much more level-headed – or at least more conscious of protocol. What the antagonist lacks is Gunnlaugr's hypermasculine overeagerness to prove superior in every encounter. Instead, Hrafn utilises structural hierarchy to avoid needless competitive escalation.⁸ Since the king also displays little interest in the current rivalry,⁹ Gunnlaugr appears overly sensitive about his status and potential underappreciation. This would be another trait he shares with hypermasculine figures: Every slight, real or perceived, if unanswered, bears the threat of a loss of status which induces a kind of hypervigilance and a tendency towards – often violent – overreaction. The underlying anxiety is revealed in one of Gunnlaugr's stanzas (*Gunnl*: 84–85, st. 10), where he admits to being afraid of not being considered “as valiant” (*jafnrǫskr*) as Hrafn.

With the recitations and the opponents' assessing each other's poems, the exchange becomes a public performance for the court and the verdicts have the potential to influence public opinion. Hrafn does not take advantage of this opportunity. His critique proves rather generic and the *ad hominem* attack remains confined to reflecting the purported flaws of Gunnlaugr's poem back upon its creator, with no greater implication than their emphasis: “þat er stórt kvæði ok ófagrt ok nokkut stírkveðit, sem Gunnlaugr er sjálf í skaplyndi” (*Gunnl*: 80; “That is a high-sounding poem and not beautiful, and a bit stiffly

7 Meulengracht Sørensen (1988: 252) highlights the crucial difference the skald ignores: “In the world of the sagas inherited status is a prerequisite for honor, but it is not in itself sufficient”. On Gunnlaugr's preoccupation with fathers, see Cook (1971: 15–17).

8 A secondary function of the use of those hierarchies to escape continuous rivalry is its affirmation of the *status quo* by submission to the higher authority; hence it can be seen as another socially stabilising factor in both its aspects – affirmation and non-competitiveness. Due to the differences between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn, Whaley (1997: 664) argues that the antagonist “[partially] acts as a foil for [Gunnlaugr]”.

9 Meulengracht Sørensen (1988: 253) reads his response as “a judgment on [Gunnlaugr's] lack of self-control”.

executed, as Gunnlaugr himself is in disposition”). In other words, both poem and poet are ugly and pretentious.

Gunnlaugr, however, goes beyond that with his verdict: “þetta er fagrt kvæði, sem Hrafn er sjálf at sjá, ok yfirbragðslítit. Eða hví ortir þú flokk um konunginn, segir hann, ‘eða þótti þér hann eigi drápunnar verðr?’” (*Gunnl*: 80; “That is a beautiful poem, as Hrafn himself is in appearance, and insignificant. But why did you compose a *flokkr* about the king,’ he says, ‘or did he not seem worthy to you of a *drápa*?’”). From a manifest deficiency in Hrafn’s poem, namely its less prestigious *flokkr* form, Gunnlaugr draws social conclusions that serve to erode the trust between his rival and the king, insinuating a lack of appreciation or even hidden contempt for the ruler. This suggestion carries great weight in an environment where loyalty and honour, as well as *being* honoured, are essential social currencies.¹⁰ As skaldic praise poems served as status marker and modifier, and especially as derision ‘hidden’ in poetry was considered a threat great enough to be prohibited by law (see *Grg*: II, 183), Gunnlaugr’s insinuation is severe. His attack is hence aimed on Hrafn himself, not his poetic creation, seeking to undermine his rival’s trustworthiness and honour in terms of reliability, sincerity and loyalty, which, as noted, are important elements of hegemonic masculinity. As traits, they have not been questioned so far, and Hrafn is described very positively: “var Hrafn fyrir þeim í hvívetna. Hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr, manna sjálígastr ok skáld gott, ok er hann var mjök rosknaðr, þá fór hann landa á milli ok virðisk hvervetna vel, þar sem hann kom” (*Gunnl*: 61; “Hrafn was ahead of them [his brothers] in every way. He was a tall man and strong, the most handsome of men and a good skald, and when he was fully grown, he travelled from one land to another and was highly esteemed in every way wherever he arrived”). Nevertheless, Hrafn will prove undeniably dishonourable in his final encounter with Gunnlaugr, albeit only in interaction with him, and not towards the king. It hence remains unclear if the protagonist’s imputation in this scene has the function of a foreshadowing or a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Hrafn’s immediate, public reply to postpone the quarrel (*Gunnl*: 80–81) seems composed, but afterwards he ends their friendship because of Gunnlaugr’s attempt at “slandering” (*hræpa*) him. This careful separation of social spheres corresponds to his previous consideration of hierarchies and again draws him as a circumspect character who performs masculinity differently from Gunnlaugr, but in a form that is just as valid. It also conveys that his restraint at court is no sign of trepidation or subservience. Hrafn moreover does not dissemble, but openly threatens to put his rival to “no less” (*Gunnl*: 81; “eigi minnr”) shame in revenge, which highlights the competitive aspect, while Gunnlaugr’s defiant retort indicates that his homosocial interest has shifted from the fellow Icelandic skald to the much more prestigious relationship with the foreign ruler.

Hrafn’s threat therefore accords with the masculine ideal, expresses his boldness and fighting spirit, and encompasses many of the central elements of saga masculinity. Its basic motivation is competitiveness, dominance (or at least drawing level) is the goal, while honour/shame, and thus a potential loss of status, constitute the positive/negative currency as well

10 See Baumann (1989: 140): “stories and poems were not only a means of gaining honor for the verbal artists who created and performed them, but were also potent instruments for bestowing honor on others [...] They were also [...] equally effective means for denying honor, by impugning the honor of others”.

as the means by which revenge is to be brought about. His utterance also gives an idea of how hegemonic masculinity can become a kind of social vortex strong enough to drag in even restrained characters.

And while Hrafn's betrayal in the final duel can be taken as far worse than Þórðr's deadly attack,¹¹ he does not win Gunnlaugr's promised bride through deceit: Hrafn acts candidly, openly proclaims his intent (*Gunnl*: 81), and then takes advantage of Gunnlaugr's delay in England to marry Helga without resorting to questionable means.

Thus, from the perspective of masculine rivalry and the performance of masculinity, the events up to the marriage – while certainly socially disruptive in their effect – do not cast either of the two figures in a particularly negative light.

Interestingly, it is Helga who later calls herself “svikit” (“betrayed, deceived”) when she learns of Gunnlaugr's arrival after the marriage.¹² Her statement suggests an alternative, female perspective on the events: that of a person who has been deceived in order to forestall resistance, as the narrative voice indicates repeatedly that she was still in love with Gunnlaugr. No other character uses *svíkja* in this context – but then, the other ones involved in the marriage are all male. It thus appears that from their point of view, Hrafn's marriage to Helga is, despite Gunnlaugr's love, more a case of masculine competition with no element of deception.

In *Bjarnar saga*, the relationship between protagonist and antagonist is established much earlier and is negative from the outset. Although the balance of power is reset when Bjørn comes of age and distinguishes himself as a strong and courageous warrior, a residual feeling of distrust has to be explicitly set aside before the homosocial relationship with Þórðr can be renegotiated. Besides, and in contrast to Hrafn, Þórðr is depicted as a destructive force from the beginning; he is openly domineering at first and then resorts to lying and scheming. Later he also proves to be a coward, and is denounced for his dishonesty.

As in *Gunnlaugs saga*, upon meeting at the jarl's foreign court, friendship apparently begins to grow between the two Icelanders. Then one day both are drunk, but, as the narrative voice diligently notes, Bjørn more than the other (*BjH*: 117). In this state, Þórðr succeeds in making Bjørn give him the ring *Jarlsnaut* to have it delivered to Oddný as a token of Bjørn's love. Þórðr's words appear empathetic, he emphasises his honest intention and loyalty, and – unless this is to be read as a warning sign – the narrative voice gives little indication if this is feigned or not. It merely states that “Þórðr [...] talaði þá allfagrt við Bjørn ok hét allgóðu um at vera honum trúr” (*BjH*: 119; “Þórðr [...] spoke very beautifully to Bjørn and promised nothing but good about being faithful to him”) – which could also be read either way. Even so, as Þórðr is depicted negatively both before and after and Bjørn himself voices doubts because of their past, his laboured honesty seems questionable. This is further

11 Hrafn explicitly reaffirms to Gunnlaugr that he does not intend to deceive him, but does so immediately afterwards, deliberately breaking his word (*Gunnl*: 102).

12 See the line “hafi þér illa svikit mik” (*Gunnl*: 88; “you have badly deceived me”). The term *svíkja* is found five times in the saga; all other instances occur in the context of Hrafn's betrayal in the final duel (*Gunnl*: 102 and 105). It also remains unclear if the addressee of Helga's accusation is Hrafn alone or all people involved in her marriage as the second person plural pronoun *þér* can be used in both cases (if referring to one single addressee it has a polite connotation).

compounded by Bjørn's later impression that he has trusted and told Þórðr too much (*BjH*: 119).

Upon meeting Oddný, Þórðr does indeed deliver the ring – the narrative voice pointedly observes that he carried out his task well “þat sinni” (*BjH*: 119; “that time”) –, but also falsely claims that Bjørn had transferred his marriage rights to Þórðr in case he did not return, thereby preparing his betrayal. When Bjørn is so severely wounded in Russia that he is unable to return in time, Þórðr pays travelling merchants to spread rumours about his death, and also tells that lie himself. Here, the narrative voice remarks that Þórðr was deemed “ólíkligr til lygi” (*BjH*: 122; “incapable of lying”), and thus highlights the characteristic incongruence between word and deed that led de Looze (1986: 482) to call him “the incarnation of language as deceit”.

Eventually, Þórðr wins Oddný with this strategy, purposely deceiving bride and public, and deliberately betraying Bjørn, exploiting his rival's double vulnerability – drunkenness and love – and feigning friendship to deprive him of that which matters most to him.¹³ Since the duel for King Valdimar in Russia, in which Bjørn proves much more heroic than even Valdimar's close retainers who shirk the battle, is immediately followed by Þórðr bribing and scheming, the narrative implicitly juxtaposes Bjørn's continuous masculine distinction – honour, fearlessness, martial prowess – with Þórðr's deficits in this area. And while Bjørn's actions mainly take place in the open, Þórðr now, and later, operates with an element of secrecy which lends his actions an additional negative connotation in a society in which preference is given to direct confrontation.¹⁴

Þórðr eschews this direct confrontation with Bjørn again after the marriage: at Óláfr's court he asks, again “í hljóði” (*BjH*: 127; “in secret”), about his rival's whereabouts in order to avoid him. When confrontation becomes inevitable, he lies about his name, then orders his men to lie to conceal his presence, and finally even physically hides from Bjørn in what Jochens (1999: 118) aptly calls “one of the most unheroic [encounters] in Norse literature”. Thereby he is depicted repeatedly as a dishonest, and now also notably cowardly figure, although the groundwork for this has already been laid in his first description. With his aggressive attitude towards those he deems easy to handle, his open enmity and violence are directed downward, while he prefers intrigue against equal and stronger opponents and avoids direct conflict on equal terms. This is a recurring pattern in the quarrel with Bjørn.

Þórðr's dishonesty, by contrast, proves independent of social hierarchies and extends even to the highest figures: When the king asks him about the marriage, he again claims to have been told his rival was dead (*BjH*: 131). The triangular relationship between protagonist, antagonist and king is thus in disbalance: Þórðr's interactions with the other two figures are marked by dishonesty, while the king and Bjørn are honest throughout, even towards Þórðr.

In the narrative Þórðr's deceit is implicitly contrasted with the growing mutual estimation between Bjørn and the ruler as some withheld truths about the events between

13 Bjørn gives an idea of the importance of Oddný when he explains that he does not want to return to Iceland for fear of being unable to leave her again soon (see *BjH*: 118).

14 Secrecy was relevant for the legal assessment of a crime's severity: According to *Grágás*, a killing (*víg*) has to be published (see *Grg*: I, 152), whereas murder (*morð*) is defined by an element of secrecy – for example, hiding the corpse or denying the deed (see *Grg*: I, 154) – and theft (*þjófskapr*) is punished more severely than taking something without concealing it (see *Grg*: II, 162).

him and his rival come to light, which culminates in Óláfr calling him “vaskligan mann ok góðan dreng” (*BjH*: 134: “a valiant and honourable man”), affirming that Bjørn conforms to all his social expectations of masculinity.¹⁵

In contrast, when Oddný later learns of Bjørn’s return and deduces Þórðr’s betrayal, she uses the same denotation the king had chosen for Bjørn, but negates it: “‘ok enn górr veit ek nú,’ segir hon, ‘hversu ek em gefin; ek hugða þik vera góðan dreng, en þú ert fullr af lygi ok lausung’” (*BjH*: 135; “‘And now I know for certain,’ she says, ‘in what way I have been given; I thought you were an honourable man, but you are full of lies and falsehood’”).¹⁶ Þórðr is *not* a *góðr drengr* and does not live up to the ideal of masculinity in most relevant ways, which accords with his overall image in the narrative. He is presented as neither trustworthy nor righteous, but as a devious, craven manipulator driven by unscrupulous self-interest and the competition that underlies this social sphere as a whole. Consequently, for him the ends justify all means, from the use of lies, intrigue and instrumentalisation up to hiring an assassin (see *BjH*: 165). Þórðr’s ruthless attitude is symptomatic of his interactions and affects even figures with whom he is on good terms – or should be. An example of this can be found in his lying to his men in order to facilitate an assault on Bjørn with greatly superior forces. Even his own kinsmen tellingly call the plan “óðren-giligt” (*BjH*: 157; “not fit for an honourable man”) and refuse.¹⁷ Another instance is Þórðr’s striking Oddný in a quarrel (see *BjH*: 140), which shows Þórðr using domestic violence as a double provocation: since the act takes place within Bjørn’s sight, it serves as an aggressive performance of the husband’s power over his wife. Evans (2019: 58) reads it as surrogate domination of Bjørn “mediated through” Oddný. Simultaneously, the act constitutes a demonstrative maltreatment of the woman Bjørn loves, but has no right to defend in the situation.

While the antagonist thus superficially acknowledges social bonds and obligations, he is ultimately revealed as loyal only to himself. And even though self-reliance constitutes an important element of hegemonic masculinity, the shape it takes with Þórðr’s insidious disloyalty is as distorted as it is disruptive, to the detriment of others, even kin and (unilateral) friends.

In summary, while all four characters display certain inconsistencies in their performance of masculinity, it is only Þórðr who manifestly and recurrently falls short, damaging others, and this is addressed by other figures as well as by the narrative voice. His performance consists of little more than unbroken aggression and the will to have his due and prove superior, cowardice notwithstanding. However, even otherwise exemplary Bjørn is influ-

15 Evans (2019: 23) counts *drengskapr* among the terms that “seem to fulfil a similar semantic function to Modern English ‘masculinity’”.

16 Like Helga, Oddný describes herself (not without good reason) as an object: she, too, is “given” because of male figures’ decisions and competition and has to suffer the consequences of their rivalry. In Old Norse the term “gefin” is commonly used for married women, and in Oddný’s statement this more specific meaning of “given” (“in marriage”) appropriately reflects both the narrative events and the woman’s objectification in the process.

17 The term *óðren-giliga* is also used by Gunnlaugr after Hrafn treacherously strikes him down (see *Gunnl*: 102).

enced enough by his actions to become more contentious and contribute to their exchange of aggressions himself.

Gunnlaugr, in turn, has obvious deficits; his overbearing manner in particular has its share in inducing the ‘bridal revenge’, but unlike Þórðr, he is also depicted as brave and honourable. And Hrafn, despite his role of antagonist, often draws level with both protagonists: his words and actions are mainly in accord with hegemonic masculinity, to a point where he appears more responsible than rash Gunnlaugr. In the final conflict, his betrayal is indisputably deeply dishonourable, and even Hrafn himself agrees when Gunnlaugr accuses him of *svíkja*, confirming “Satt er þat” (*Gunnl*: 102; “That is true”). But before that, he gives little cause for criticism. This might also be one of the reasons the narration has the public mourn both Hrafn and Gunnlaugr alike, disregarding the finer details of their demise.

Finally, it is noteworthy that in *Bjarnar saga*, despite its much clearer distinction between the traits of protagonist and antagonist, the conflict still comes to be driven by Björn almost as unrelentingly as by Þórðr – a reminder that while in the saga environment masculine competitiveness serves as an important incentive to surpass oneself, it can still get out of control even with the *bestir drengir*.

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