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## Þórsdrápa and the “Sif’s Hair Episode” in Skáldskaparmál as Transformations

An Interpretative Experiment in  
Old Norse Mythology

### Introduction

The following analysis of two well known mythological sources, *Þórsdrápa* (Þdr) and the “Sif’s hair episode” (*Hvi er gull kallat haddr Sifjar?*) in *Skáldskaparmál* 35 (Sif), is intended to provide new perspectives and examine some of their consequences. The analysis is rooted in an interpretation of Þdr as a myth illustrating the emergence of Þórr’s hammer. As is well known, there exists another such myth within the Old Norse corpus, of an entirely different character, i.e. Sif. A comparison of the two should be of interest, not the least considering the extent to which they differ. The analysis will be framed by Lévi-Strauss’ *transformation* concept, a key feature of his great comparative work *Mythologiques* I–IV (1964–1971). The Poetic Edda and Prose Edda will be referred to by way of Jón Helgason’s edition (1971) and that of Anthony Faulkes (1982, 1998), respectively. As to Þdr, if not otherwise specified, I will be utilizing the edition of Finnur Jónsson (1908). The inquiry is organized along the following lines. The first part focuses on the interpretation of Þdr as a hammer aetiology. In the second, the two sources are analyzed with the aim of demonstrating that the one forms a transformation of the other, on the basis of which it will be inferred that they share semantic categories. The third part concerns the development of a hypothesis placing the two sources within a common framework. Finally, the implications of this hypothesis will be discussed, with the intention of providing an account of the semantics involved.

## Transformations & Semantic Contagion

It is necessary to circumscribe some of Lévi-Strauss' terms as these will be applied in the present context. Since clarity has rarely been on Lévi-Strauss' agenda, the following statement about *structure* and *transformations* has to be considered as exceptionally straight forward:

the notion of transformations is inherent in structural analysis. [...] it is impossible to conceive of structure separate from the notion of transformation. Structure is not reducible to a system: a group composed of elements and the relations that unite them. In order to be able to speak of structure, it is necessary for there to be invariant relationships between elements and relations among several sets, so that one can move from one set to another by means of a transformation (Lévi-Strauss & Eribon 1991: 113).

Elsewhere, illustrating the transformation concept, he says that “myths of neighbouring peoples coincide, partially overlap, answer, or contradict one another. The analysis of each myth implied that of others”; he likened this to a “semantic contagion” (p. 128).

The way in which this will be understood here is as follows: there are two sets of systems involved, i.e., Þdr and Sif. When relations within Þdr can be referred systematically to relations within Sif, or vice versa, then either configuration of relations will be viewed as a transformation of the other. Configurations of parallels and inversions will be the most salient transformations involved. The consequence I will draw from Lévi-Strauss' “semantic contagion” is that sources which are shown to be transformations share semantic categories. Mapping the “semantic contagion” between Þdr and Sif is the ultimate goal of this paper.

### 1. Þdr as a Hammer Aetiology

Since Þdr is not normally perceived as a hammer aetiology a few comments are in order. Consider the famous lines in strophe 18 describing the culmination of Þórr's confrontation with the giants (Þdr 19: 1–2):

Glaums niðjum fór gorva  
gramr með dreyrgum hamri;  
*I sin vrede tilintetjorde han ganske jætteynghen med sin bloddryppende  
hammer* (F. Jónsson 1908 B: 143).

As is well known, this striking passage finds no parallel in Snorri's version of Þórr's journey in Skm. According to Snorri, Þórr left his hammer at home when he embarked on the trip to Geirrøðr and consequently it plays no part in the ensuing struggle. This glaring discontinuity between the two sources has made this otherwise straightforward passage a thorny issue, prompting commentators, biased by Snorri's version, to seek ways around the hammer. A notable exception, however, is Margaret Clunies Ross; in her exposition of the passage she cites Turville-Petre saying that "according to the most natural interpretation, the god was equipped with Mjöllnir [...]" (1981: 388). I entirely agree with Clunies Ross that the attempts made to circumvent the hammer are unconvincing (ibid.).

One such attempt is Vilhelm Kiil's. In his treatment of the strophe Kiil resorts to explain the hammer away by claiming that *með dreyrgum hamri* is *attributive*: "Subjektet [...] er *gramr* med det attributive komplementet *með dreyrgum hamri* [...]" (1956: 158). That *með dreyrgum hamri* might be read plainly as an instrumental complement for the verb *fór*, which is indeed its obvious grammatical-syntactical function, is not seriously considered by Kiil. In his opinion, that would contradict the basic motif involved: "Men dette står i direkte strid med mytens grunnmotiv at Tor skulle dra til Geirrød uten hammer" (ibid.: 159). It is solely on the grounds of this supposed "basic motif" that Kiil justifies his rejection of the instrumental reading. There are several difficulties with this. Although Kiil fails to mention the source of his *grunnmotiv* it can only be derived from Snorri's version in Skm. This leaves a question suspended in mid air: why should Snorri rank higher than Þdr where the two disagree? Such asymmetry is by no means determined *a priori* as if it were a matter of natural law. Also, no logical necessity prevents Þdr and Snorri's version — or, for that matter, any other narratives that can be considered as variants — to convey varying motifs. Hence, the mere fact that Snorri and Þdr contradict each other is no argument for rejecting a straight forward reading of *með dreyrgum hamri*. In my opinion, any such rejection should be rooted in a prior investigation into the possibility of using the plain reading; should it turn out to be impossible to maintain, its banishment could be considered.

One way of assessing the plausibility of Þdr being an aetiology concerning the hammer is to see whether this resolves any of the problems surrounding the poem. One difficulty with Þdr is that it doesn't seem to conform to narrative conventions, as Roberta Frank has emphasized in her interpretation (1986). Frank draws attention to Eilifr's kennings

(which, according to her, primarily denote Gríðr's staff and Geirrøðr's iron bolt). In her account, the kennings do not suggest any development or evolution from stanza to stanza; the order of the kennings, in most instances, could be reversed: "The staff does not grow consistently in any direction; its material changes within a single stanza from wood to iron and back" (p. 100). She admits, though, that "The movement in stanzas 15–19 from molten metal through iron bolt to hammer comes closest, perhaps, to a linear sequence [...]" (ibid.). Frank undermines the significance of this by drawing attention to the strophe that immediately follows: "Eilífr seems to have gone out of his way to frustrate narrative expectations: Thor, endowed at last with Geirrøðr's iron missile in stanza 19, is still swinging his wooden branch [...] in stanza 20" (ibid.). Now, if interpreting the poem as a hammer aetiology could alleviate these difficulties by revealing a narrative structure that interpretation should be the preferred option.

While I agree that Frank has a point I do think she has overstated her case. Even though she is probably right about the lack of linearity in the juxtaposition of kennings, that in itself is not a compelling argument for the lack of narrative structure in the poem. A fluidity in kennings does not have to reflect on the stability of what is circumscribed, nor the sequential order of the events in which the kennings take part. Maybe this preoccupation with the details of kennings is blocking our view. For instance, it might be significant that in strophe 19, despite applying elaborate kennings throughout most of the poem, Eilífr alters his preferred strategy: he applies a simple *noun*, not an elaborate circumscription, to designate the object wielded by Þórr — the giants are killed, quite simply, with a *hammer*. The context of this change in referential strategy is also striking: strophe 19 is the culmination of the fight between Geirrøðr and Þórr, strophes 15–19 being a passage that shows clear *sequential continuity* whether one considers the confrontation itself or the metamorphoses of the object at its centre — as even Frank has a difficulty denying (cf. the above citation) there is something inherently sequential about the transition from molten metal to iron bolt to hammer. Why should Eilífr divert from difficult kennings precisely here? And why this clear context of a linear sequence? In the light of Þdr as a hammer aetiology, this would be the climax of the poem for it is here that the hammer emerges. By making Þórr's quintessential weapon emerge in a clearly discernable sequence (molten metal-iron bolt-hammer) and by referring to it with a noun (hammer) Eilífr puts this central passage into relief, thus clearly differentiating it from the rest of the poem. Thus, the "ham-

mer viewpoint" enables one to perceive a narrative structure, at least in strophes 15–19.

However, Frank's point about strophe 20 seems untouched — i.e., that Eilifr thwarts all narrative expectations by equipping Þórr with a wooden branch after the fight with Geirrøðr. What she has in mind is *hógbrotningi skógar* (20:2), translated by F. Jónsson as "skovens myge gren" (1908 B:144). Of course, one could object by saying that the change from hammer (19) to branch (20) only reflects a change in the mode of designation, not a change in object designated; hence, the wooden branch would be a circumscription for the hammer. Even so, one would be forced to admit that *skovens myge gren* is a rather pathetic and implausible way to designate the most destructive murder weapon in the known universe. Hence, allowing the hammer in strophe 19 forces one to reconsider strophe 20. This is precisely what the Icelandic independent scholar Eysteinn Björnsson does in his recent edition of the poem (2000<sup>1</sup>), which is the first, as far as I am aware, that incorporates the hammer explicitly. He detaches *skógar* from *hógbrotningi* taking it to be a genitive qualifying *kálfar*; he interprets *skógar kálfar* (wood-calves) as a circumscription for wolves and a reference to the giants. He provides a novel interpretation of *hógbrotningi*:

"one who easily crushes", or perhaps "handy crusher". The word is difficult, but in the poem's context (see former stanza) it must refer to Thor's hammer. The poet obviously made up this word, and expected his audience to understand it as an equivalent to Mjöllnir [sic]. Regardless of the "correct" etymology of the name Mjöllnir, it is apparently related to the verbs *mala* "grind", *mylja* "crush", the passive *molna* "crumble"; and the nouns *mjöl* "(ground) flour" and *möl* "pebbles (i.e. ground rock)". Such association of words might easily have prompted the poet to create the word *brotningr* as a synonym of Mjöllnir, basing his word-play on the verb *brjóta* "break, smash" (past participle *brotið* "broken"); the passive *brotna* "break, crumble"; and the verbal adjective *brotinn* "broken" (ibid.: [www.hi.is/~eybjorn/ugm/thorsd37.html]).

It is notable, that *brotningr* is found as a sword-name in the *þulur* in Skm (Faulkes 1998: v457/5). Faulkes acknowledges the possibility of an active meaning: "**brotningr** *m.* sword-name, 'broken' or (?) 'breaker'" (1998, 2: 252; emphasis in original). Of course, it is difficult to say anything

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<sup>1</sup> Note, that strophes 16–20 in F. Jónsson's edition are numbered 53, 16–19 in that of E. Björnsson.

more conclusive. However, given the nature of swords as offensive weapons, the active “breaker” would seem more likely than the passive “broken”. Be that as it may, the existence of *brotningr* as a sword-name does add support to the plausibility of the new reading of *hógbrotningi* offered above. In E. Björnsson’s translation we get:

The worshipped Hel-striker [Þórr] [...] slew the wood-calves of the subterranean refuge from Elf-World’s gleam [giants] with the easy-crusher [Mjöllnir].  
 Hel-blótinn vá -hneitir  
 hógbrotningi skógar  
 undirfálfrs [...] ]  
 álfheims bliku kálfa;

In his edition, from strophe 15 to the conclusion of the poem, there is a linear sequence illustrating the emergence of Mjöllnir and its subsequent use as an “easy-crusher” against the giants.

My conclusion is that Þdr is best understood as a hammer aetiology. The reason for preferring this option is that it solves a series of salient problems surrounding the poem. This interpretation does not require any disappearing acts with the hammer in strophe 19 by enabling us to understand *með dreyrgum hamri* as it is written; also, it makes the surrounding context of the strophe readily understandable as a passage illustrating the emergence, and immediate use, of the hammer; further, it enables one to step back from the complexity of the kennings to perceive a narrative structure, at least from strophe 15 and onwards. It is this understanding that prompted the following comparison between Þdr and the (undisputed) hammer aetiology found in Skm.

## 2. Þdr & Sif as Transformations

It is now possible to turn the attention to the systematic ways in which Þdr and Sif transform each other; this demonstration is a prolegomena of sorts as the relations between the two sources will be viewed as signifying shared background semantics, the exposition of which will occupy the remainder of the paper. Spatial dimensions are reduced to *Ásgarðr* (centre) and the *periphery*.

## 2.1. Transformations

(a) *Loki, the prime mover.* In both Þdr and Sif, Loki initiates the sequence as is so often the case in Old Norse mythology. On the one hand, he lies to Þórr, enticing him to travel to Geirrøðr, on the other, he cuts off Sif's hair, thus angering her husband, a situation that forces him to travel outside Ásgarðr. Given the fact that one of Loki's most frequent functions is that of prime mover, this parallel has no significance on its own; however, its value is in place when it is considered in the context of the other systematic relations that follow.

(b) *The roles of Þórr and Loki.* The first inversion to which I want to draw attention is that in Þdr, it is Þórr who journeys to the periphery as a result of *Loki's* enticement, while in Sif it is *Loki* that crosses Ásgarðr's boundaries after being threatened by Þórr. On the one hand, Loki causes Þórr to travel, on the other, Þórr causes Loki to travel. Thus, in Þdr Loki relates to Þórr as Þórr relates to Loki in Sif:

Loki : Þórr :: Þórr : Loki

Another inversion related to travel outside Ásgarðr is that Loki travels alone while Þórr goes with another, his loyal servant Þjálfí.<sup>2</sup> This can be formulated as:

Þórr : company (+1) :: Loki : solitude (+0)

(c) *Periphery-beings.* There are two classes of periphery-beings: in Þdr giants and in Sif dwarves; the presence of the two involves both a parallel and an inversion.

I adhere to the view put forth by Tryggvi Gíslason (1984) that dwarves, like giants, are primeval chthonic beings<sup>3</sup> and, as Vésteinn Ólason has suggested, that they might even be viewed as brothers of the

<sup>2</sup> Another possible inversion is that while Þórr travels to the periphery through *water*, Loki does so through *air* — cf. his epithet *Lopttr* and his air travel ability in his magic shoes or in the guise of a bird (Skm 35; Þrkv). Although this actually finds resonance within Sif when Loki flies in his shoes escaping Brokkr there is not a single word on his mode of travel earlier in the narrative.

<sup>3</sup> T. Gíslason says: "Mangt tyder på at dvergene [...] var blant de urvesener som eksisterte før jordens tilblivelse og lenge før mennesket ble skapt [...] Dvergene synes å stå i samme stilling som de høyhellige guder og de allkloke jotnene (jfr. Grimnismál 43 og Alvissmál)" (1984: 86).

The purpose of T. Gíslason's article is to solve the problems of Vsp 9–10 and thereby create a connection to strophes 17–18. To this end, he proposes a new reading of Vsp 9: 5–6: *hverr skyldi dverga dróttir skepia*. This is normally translated as "who should create the dwarf host" (taking *dverga dróttir* as an accusative and *dverga* as qualifying *dróttir*), in the

giants considering their possible emergence from the earth (Ólason 1992: 87). Significantly, this close affinity between dwarves and giants finds support in Þdr 15:8, where Eilifr refers to Geirrøðr himself as *áttuðr Suðra*, rendered by E. Björnsson as “Suðri’s kinsman” (2000) and by F. Jónsson as “dværgens ætling” (1908 B: 143), Suðri being a dwarf name.

The inversion has to do with the way in which the groups of periphery beings appear: Loki encounters two friendly groups of a single sex (male), while Þórr deals with a single antagonistic group of both sexes:

Loki : 2 friendly groups of single sex (m) :: Þórr : 1 antagonistic group of both sexes

(d) *Conflict*. The conflicts in the two sources show interesting inverse relations.

The first inversion has to do with the *character* of the conflict — in Sif it is *hidden* or *indirect*, while in Þdr is *open* or *direct*. Essentially, the conflict in Sif is a contest between the two groups of dwarves, initiated by Loki through his deceitful head-wager; the circumstances surrounding it give it an indirect character since one of the groups, the Ívalda synir, is not aware of it happening (as it appears, Loki’s decision to represent them is his own). It is indirect in another sense, since it involves the *quality* of what is *produced*, rather than physical strength or agility in battle. This indirect quality is further emphasized in the scene inside the workshop when Loki, deceitfully, in the form of a wasp, unknown to the dwarves, interferes with the production of the artefacts by pricking the smith’s assistant Brokkr. The scenes in Þdr have a different flavour altogether; they are characterized by being direct and open: both parties are aware of each other and Þórr, quite characteristically, never attempts to obscure his identity.

Other inversions appear when one considers the means by which the conflicts are resolved: in Þdr by *violence*, in Sif by *arbitration* — the ingredient in the one is *overpowering anger*, in the other *rational meditation*.

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sense that the Æsir are proceeding to create the dwarves. T. Gislason suggests taking *dverga* as a *genitivus partitivus*, and *dróttir* as an accusative meaning “humans in general”; thus we get “who of the dwarves should create humans”. His reading provides a persuasive solution to the continuity of strophes 9–10 to 17–18 — i.e., that among the *manlíkon* (man-images) the dwarves create in strophe 10 are the first humans, Ask and Embla, the lifeless bodies of whom the gods find in strophe 17, giving them life in strophe 18. The year before T. Gislason, Gro Steinsland (1983) put forth an interpretation of the same strophes also aimed at the continuity between them; although her conclusions in many respects parallel those of T. Gislason, there remain fundamental differences esp. as regards the dwarves.



One could also note, that the outcome in Þdr is *clear*: the victorious Þórr and his valiant companion live while the miserable giants lie flat in their blood. Sif, on the other hand, is characterized by *compromise*: Loki keeps his head and Brokkr's only compensation is to seal his foul mouth. Possibly, this finds a reflection in the means involved, for violence has little room for compromise while one might characterise arbitration as the very domain of concession. These relations can be summarized in the following binary pairs:

direct : indirect :: anger : contemplation :: violence : arbitration :: clarity : compromise

(e) *The hammer and blacksmith motifs*. We now come to those motifs which, in my opinion, bring these relations into a coherent configuration, making it possible to argue that they are more than just a coincidental figment of my imagination: these are the striking parallels of the *hammer* and the *blacksmith motifs*.

In both conflicts, the hammer is the *central item*, in a twofold sense: it is the *immediate result* of the conflict and the *decisive element* in its *conclusion*. In Þdr, the ingot that Geirrøðr throws at Þórr becomes the hammer; in Sif, the forging of the hammer takes place at the height of Loki's interference, and in fact it is *only* in the case of the hammer that he is successful — its handle becomes too short; also, it is clearly stated that the hammer was nearly ruined (*Þá lagði hann járn í aflinn [...] ok sagði at ónýtt mundi verða ef blástrinn felli. [...] at nú lagði nær at alt mundi ónýtask*). In Þdr, it is the hammer that decides the conflict, as is graphically expressed in the poem (19) — *með dreyrgum hamri*; in Sif, the decision of the judge panel is based on the hammer's qualities, thus the hammer decides the conflict there also. There is an interesting inversion found in the way the hammer decides both conflicts: in Þdr it *via* its *actual quality* (as an "easy-crusher") while in Sif it *via* its *potential quality* (as a future protection against frost giants).

As I stated above, it is this striking appearance of Mjöllnir as the central element in the conflict in both sources — the hammer resolves the conflict after emerging at its climax — that fixes the above relations into a coherent configuration.

(f) *Loki vs. Brokkr, Brokkr vs. Loki, Geirrøðr vs. Þórr*. As an addition to the analysis of the conflict, I want to draw attention to curious details found in both sources.

In Þdr, in the duel between Geirrøðr and Þórr, we have a *dwarf's kinsman* casting an ingot at the *mouth* of an *Áss* (15: 5–8: *laust [...] sega [...]*)

*í gin* [...], rendered by E. Björnsson “thrust a morsel [...] at the mouth”; 2000), while in *Sif*, in the struggle between Brokkr and Loki towards the end, we have a *dwarf* sowing together the *lips* of an *adopted Áss*. It is noteworthy, that in *Þdr* you have a person *related* to a dwarf, dealing with a proper Áss, while in *Sif*, you have a proper dwarf dealing with an *adopted* Áss. There is also a further inversion, since Brokkr works on the outside of Loki’s mouth, while Geirrøðr attempts to thrust something *into* Þórr’s mouth, and Brokkr wants to silence Loki while Geirrøðr is intent on killing Þórr. This can be summarized as ( $\approx$  isomorphism):

dwarf’s kinsman : proper Áss’ mouth (inside) :: proper dwarf : adopted Áss’ mouth (outside)

dwarf’s *kinsman*  $\approx$  *adopted* Áss :: proper dwarf  $\approx$  proper Áss

Geirrøðr : death :: Brokkr : silence

death  $\approx$  silence

In strophe 18, where Þórr strikes the iron bolt back, killing Geirrøðr, the poet applies the kenning *meina nesta*, “the injurious brooch (pin)”, for the glowing piece of iron. Thus, metaphorically speaking, Þórr thrusts an ornamental pin into Geirrøðr. In *Sif*, in the clash between Brokkr and Loki, we have the former working the latter’s lips with an *alr*, a pin or a needle; earlier in the narrative, Loki pricks Brokkr with a wasp sting. Thus, the *ornamental pin* of the *Þdr* kenning is in *Sif* transformed, on the one hand, into a *biological pin*, and on the other, into a *tool pin* — in all three cases, this happens in the context of a struggle between a dwarf’s kinsman/dwarf and an Áss/adopted Áss.

*Þdr*: Áss + dwarf’s kinsman + pin (ornamental)

*Sif* 1: adopted Áss + dwarf + pin (biological)

*Sif* 2: dwarf + adopted Áss + pin (instrumental)

These configurations are significant, for they show that the transformations involved in *Þdr* and *Sif* are not limited to their main structures, but find expression as well in details — thus, they reinforce the hypothesis that the two sources should be considered as transformations.

(g) *Summary*. The main points of the transformations above are graphically summarized in *figure 1*.

Sif	L initiates	P }	effects that	{ L }	travels	{ alone }	meets	{ 2 }	group(s) of
Þdr		L }		{ P }		{ +1 }		{ 1 }	
{ ☺ }	periphery beings	{ of 1 sex (m) }	engages in	{ an indirect/ hidden }	conflict	{ a direct/ open }			involving blacksmith motifs
{ ☹ }		{ of both sexes }							
in which M is formed.	Conflict decided by	{ arbitration procedure }	in which M is the decisive element	}	via its	{ potential }		{ actual }	quality.
		}		}					

Figure 1. Þdr and Sif as transformations. P=Þórr. L=Loki. M=Mjöllnir. ☺=friendly. ☹=antagonistic.

## 2.2. Conclusion

One can naturally object to the above analysis by writing the whole thing off as a coincidence. In my view, such a brush-off would not be justified given the systematic way in which these relations appear. Therefore, I will argue that the transformations established suggest a real semantic continuity between Þdr and Sif.

What sort of a historical scenario could provide a background to this continuity? My suggestion is that Þdr and Sif are instances of independent traditions concerning the hammer akin to different schools of thought, as John McKinnell has suggested in connection with other sources (1994). The range of coherent relations along with the details discussed in part (f), suggest to me that these traditions coexisted and influenced each other. Whether they are genetically related, rooted in an earlier tradition, is of course possible but not necessary. Such historical scenarios naturally do not amount to much more than speculation, and without a doubt, other suggestions could be made.

The consequence I will draw and commit to throughout the following parts — in accordance with Lévi-Strauss' concept of transformation and "semantic contagion" — is that Þdr and Sif have categories of meaning in common; it is the teasing out these that will occupy the remainder of this paper.

### 3. Hypothesis about the Shared Semantics of Þdr & Sif

The forgoing preliminary analysis had the purpose of enabling, and justifying, the development of a common interpretative framework for teasing out the semantics of Þdr and Sif. The next step will involve a forgotten insight of Viktor Rydberg which he put forth in connection with Sif. My intention is to restate his idea in the immediate context of the source itself and develop a guiding hypothesis, placing both sources within the same framework.

#### 3.1. Rydberg's Interpretation of Sif

Doing any sort of justice to Rydberg's interpretation of Sif would involve entering the amazing maze that is *Undersökningar i Germanisk Mythologi* (1886–89), something I will refrain from doing since it is neither necessary nor purposeful. My understanding of Rydberg's interpretation boils down to this: *Sif represents a transition from the carefree primeval golden age (represented in Vsp 7–8) to the ever more precarious historical period that finds its conclusion in ragnarök, and the single most important event in this transition is the judgement passed by the gods on the work of dwarves (cf. 1886–89 I: 655 ff.).* The concern of my project is whether Rydberg's insight can be justified when considered in the *immediate context of the source itself*. To consider the issue I want to pose two questions which will be dealt with subsequently: (a) is the judgement passed by the gods significant, and is it conceivable that it differentiates radically between the initial and final situations in the narrative? If so, (b) what is the character of the initial and final situations, do these stand for a *more ideal primeval period* and a *more precarious historical one*, respectively?

#### 3.2. The Significance of the Judgement Passed in Sif

Immediately, as Rydberg also points out (p. 655), the judgement passed by the gods on the dwarves' artistry is suspicious because it is thrust upon them by Loki, whether willingly or not; after all, the activity of Loki is often doubtful and its consequences, direct or indirect, frequently ambiguous. However, on its own, this circumstance has little weight. More interesting are the immediate circumstances of the judgement itself: it is passed on the work of two groups of artists, and it forces

the gods to *differentiate* between the them. The group that suffers directly by the god's arbitration is Ívaldi's sons.

Little is known about the sons of Ívaldi outside Sif. Snorri mentions them as the builders of Skiðblaðnir in Gg 43; it is likely that he based his information on Grm 43 where they are mentioned in the same capacity (he cites the strophe in an overview of Freyr kennings in Skm 7). What the Grm strophe allows us to infer is that Ívaldi's sons were a group of important primeval artists, and not the mere invention of Snorri. In Sif, this importance is reflected in the excellent things they make for the gods. Thus, considering the standing of Ívaldi's sons as important primeval artists worthy of divine attention, the judgement passed on their work can hardly be viewed as trivial. In this context, we should note the cultural background of the mythology, and the more immediate context of medieval Iceland and the society portrayed in the sagas. This is not to say that there is a simple mirror-image relationship between myth and society but rather that the two share a common set of classificatory mechanisms, as Jens Peter Schjødt has suggested (1991: 304). Whether one considers medieval or saga Iceland, it was a society driven by honour (cf. Miller 1990: 26 ff., *passim*):

Status had to be carefully maintained or aggressively acquired: one's status depended on the condition of one's honor, for it was in the game of honor that rank and reputation was attained and retained. Honor was at stake in virtually every social interaction. (Miller 1990: 29). [...] honor was a precious commodity in very short supply. The amount of honor in the Icelandic universe was perceived to be constant at best [...]. Honor was thus, as a matter of social mathematics, acquired at someone else's expense. When yours went up, someone else's went down. (p. 30).

When considered in the light of the honour driven society that produced the myths, the judgement passed on the sons of Ívaldi gets an altogether sinister flavour. There are several things we must consider. First, the sons of Ívaldi were dwarves, and dwarves' mission in life was artistry, and here we have the gods saying that they are not as good at fulfilling their life's mission as Brokkr and Eitri. The god's judgement constitutes, in a sense, a libel directed against the dwarves' professional reputation — something that people, up to the present date, have never taken too lightly. Such an attack on their *raison d'être* must have been humiliating for Ívaldi's sons, a clear *negative* in the mathematics of honour. The circumstances reinforce this interpretation: the judgement is not only made in the absence of Ívaldi's sons, it is made without their consent (as

it appears, Loki appoints himself on his own accord as their representative), and, significantly, it is *public*. Thus, in the light of the social game of honour and the public humiliation of Ívaldi's sons at the hands of the Æsir, my conclusion is that the judgement passed on their work must have been highly problematic. But there is more.

The immediate consequence of the judgement is that Brokkr is entitled to his price, Loki's head. Here we come to the other problematic aspect: *the Æsir cheat Brokkr of his price*, for Loki, after all, belongs to the Æsir, and even Þórr himself, after having caught Loki, stands passively by as Loki humiliates Brokkr (pointing out that he may very well be entitled to his head, but not to his throat). Brokkr's anger is clear as he proceeds to sew Loki's lips together. By cheating Brokkr of his price the Æsir are going back on a promise, something that is never trivial in the Old Norse sources (other examples would include Vsp 26 where Þórr is implied in oath braking and Hávm 110 where Óðinn is accused of violating a *baugeiðr*). Thus, while the judgement itself humiliates the sons of Ívaldi, its immediate consequences spell out an insult to Brokkr.

Does the judgement thus differentiate between the initial and final situations in the narrative? Here we have to consider that (1) initially both dwarf groups are on friendly terms with the gods (cf. the splendid things they make for the Æsir), and (2) the humiliating and offensive nature of the judgement and its immediate consequences. In this light there appears an *initial scenario* in which the Æsir reap the benefits of the artistry of their allies (the dwarves), and a contrasting *final scenario* in which the gods, at the instigation of Loki, humiliate and offend those same allies, in the very act of accepting their gifts.<sup>4</sup>

I conclude that the judgement is significant since it differentiates radically between the initial and final scenarios.

### 3.3. The Nature of the Initial & Final Situations in Sif

Now the second question: does Sif concern a transition from a *more ideal primeval period* to a *more problematic historical one*? In the present con-

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<sup>4</sup> As Lindow has pointed out (1994a: 62 f., n. 13) there seems to lie latent in the mythology a trace of an antagonism between the gods and dwarves (he points out Alvm, the killing of Kvasir and Þórr's killing of Littr); he continues, "if the feud between gods and dwarves still simmers, the dwarfs must be classified, like the giants, as the enemies of the gods" (p. 63). But, as Lindow points out, it is difficult to say much more since the mythology focuses only on the conflict between Æsir and giants. However, in the light of the above interpretation, Sif may provide a rare glimpse since, in effect, it provides an account of the origins of the enmity between the Æsir and dwarves.

text, *primeval ideal period* denotes the epoch following the Æsir's cosmogony, before the *historical period* (so called because it includes the span of human history) in which the Æsir start experiencing the various crisis that ultimately lead to ragnarök. In the model proposed by Clunies Ross, the ideal and historical periods correspond roughly, on the one hand, to *the past of active creativity* and, on the other, to *the mythic present and near future* (these are periods 2, 3 and 4; they are preceded by *the beginning*, and followed by *the distant future*; 1994: 235 ff.).

That in the beginning we find ourselves in the ideal primeval period is likely, since here the gods are without their characteristic implements; this can be supported by the previously mentioned Grm 43: 1–3: *Ivalda synir gengo í árdaga Skiðblaðni at skapa*. That we find ourselves in the historical period by the end is less clear, although the gods' acquisition of the symbols that characterise them throughout the mythology should indicate that. However, these hints can be reinforced by looking more closely at Mjöllnir.

Mjöllnir is essential to the survival of divine and human society and the key to the Æsir's dominion over the world around them. This is not only implied but also directly expressed in the sources: Prkv 18: if Þórr doesn't recover his stolen hammer the giants will soon occupy Ásgarðr; Hrbl 23: There would be no humans in Miðgarðr if Þórr did not keep the giant population in check (Mjöllnir is implied since Þórr is equipped with it, cf. 47: 6); among the Þórr kennings in Skm 4 are found "director and owner of Mjöllnir" (*stýrandi ok eigandi Mjöllnis*) and "defender of Ásgarðr, Miðgarðr" (*verjandi Ásgarðs, Miðgarðs*); the reason advanced by the Æsir for favouring the hammer in Sif, is that it will provide protection against frost giants. In a word, the existence of the gods and their creation depends on Þórr wielding Mjöllnir.

However — and here comes the crucial point — in the beginning of Sif the Æsir are alive and well *without* Mjöllnir. And since the hammer is inseparable from the category *giant*, an aspect emphasized by Clunies Ross (cf. 1994: 45), it can be inferred that the period represented in the beginning of Sif was a time in which the divine world was *not under external threat*, and therefore *did not need to defend itself against the giants* — i.e. an ideal period, reminiscent of the epoch portrayed in Vsp 7–8. But have we reached the historical epoch when Sif draws to a close?

That which differentiates the final situation from the initial one is the appearance of Mjöllnir and the damaging activity of the gods (the judgement), the latter closely associated with the former (cf. 2.1.e). The judgement, as has been related above, casts a sinister shadow over the

final situation which is not present in the beginning of the narrative, and the advent of Mjöllnir correlates to that: Mjöllnir brings forth a subversive category not present in the ideal period, i.e. *giant* — which is explicit in Sif: *Þat var dómr þeira at hamarrinn var beztr [. . .] ok mest vörn í fyrir hrimþursum*. Another subversive category brought into play is *violence*; Mjöllnir is explicitly associated with violence in numerous places (c. Hym 36:3–4: *veifði hann Miöllni, morðgiornom fram*; here Mjöllnir is called *morðgjarn*, “eager/accustomed to murder”); we should also remember the many instances of Þórr’s unstable temper, and how eager he is to use Mjöllnir (e.g. Þórr and Loki in Ls 57–64; Gg 49 when the gods prevent him from killing Hyrrokkin at Baldr’s funeral). In short, the associations that Mjöllnir brings into play are in stark contrast to the primeval ideal period — this indicates that Mjöllnir signals the end of the ideal period, and thus the beginning of the historical one. This can be supported by considering (a) that it is *the* weapon that characterizes Þórr throughout the mythology and (b) that Þórr’s acquisition of Mjöllnir signals his entry into maturity (cf. Clunies-Ross 1981), i.e. the assumption of his quintessential role as the *defender* of creation against *disorder*.

My conclusion is that by the end of Sif, the ideal period that saw the establishment of divine society has ended, and what lies ahead in a troubled future is the historical period. That which separates the two epochs is the problematic judgement passed by the gods, coupled with the appearance of the murder weapon Mjöllnir, which signals the entrance of Þórr into his role as the gods’ defender against the giants. Mjöllnir, along with the other divine implements, signals the new identity forced upon the gods with the arrival of the historical period. It is the *absence* and *presence* of Mjöllnir that is the key issue:

– Mjöllnir : – external threat :: + Mjöllnir : + external threat

### 3.4. The Interpretation of Sif Extended to Þdr

As has been mentioned, according to Lévi-Strauss, narratives that are transformations can be considered in each others light and thus compared should reveal shared semantic categories. Therefore, I will restate the questions posed above: (a) is there anything in Þdr to suggest a radical separation between the initial and final situations; if so (b) do these represent a more ideal primeval period and a more problematic historical one, respectively?

As regards (a), the initial and final situations are separated by



sequences of extreme violence, esp. strophes 19–20. In the light of the cycles of vengeance and violence so well known from the Old Norse literature, the final situation in Þdr — which sees Geirrøðr and his kin lying in their blood — has to be more problematic than the initial situation, in which Þórr is safely within the boundaries of Ásgarðr. The circumstances in the poem — the fact that the trip to Geirrøðr is at the instigation of Loki, clearly depicted by Eilifr in his deceitful guise, and how eager Þórr is to go and cause havoc, a reminder of his dangerously unstable temper so often depicted as problematic in the mythology — harmonize well with this conclusion.

As to (b), the central issue is again Mjöllnir and the same argument applies here as previously (3.3.) taking the absence and presence of the hammer as the key issue, coupled with the problematic activity of Þórr (violence), the latter being closely related to the former (cf. 2.1.e).

The conclusion is, therefore, that Lévi-Strauss' principle of "semantic contagion" proves applicable in the present context, and that Þdr, seen in the light of its transformation Sif, concerns a transition from a more ideal period to a more unstable historical period, signalled by the advent of Mjöllnir.

### 3.5. Conclusion

As was stated in the beginning, my intention with this chapter was to develop a hypothesis concerning the shared semantics of Sif and Þdr. My conclusion, and hypothesis, is as follows: *the hammer aetiology in Old Norse mythology* (according to the two radically different accounts in Þdr and Sif) *is closely associated with a transition from a more-ideal-primeval-period* (in which divine society is free from the external threat of giants) *to a more-precarious-historical-period* (in which the gods have to defend themselves, ultimately leading up to ragnarök), *and the key, so to speak, that opens the door between the two epochs is Mjöllnir, coupled with the activity connected with its acquisition*<sup>5</sup>; this is graphically summarized in figure 2. This hypothesis, which brings Þdr and Sif within a common framework, will be the guiding paradigm for the following discussion.

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that important mythological themes (such as the transition discussed here) were only represented by rival myths dealing in related semantics (such as Þdr and Sif). There might well have been other myths presenting entirely different solutions — the famous ending of the golden age in Vsp 8 by the giant maidens might represent the same transition as Þdr and Sif; but if that is the case, it probably rests on a different semantic basis.

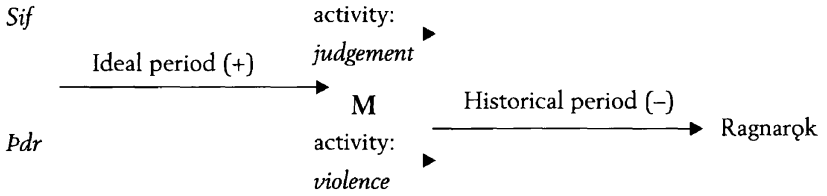


Figure 2. A hypothesis concerning the shared semantics of *Sif* and *Þdr*. *M* = *Mjöllnir*.

## 4. The Shared Semantics of *Þdr* & *Sif*

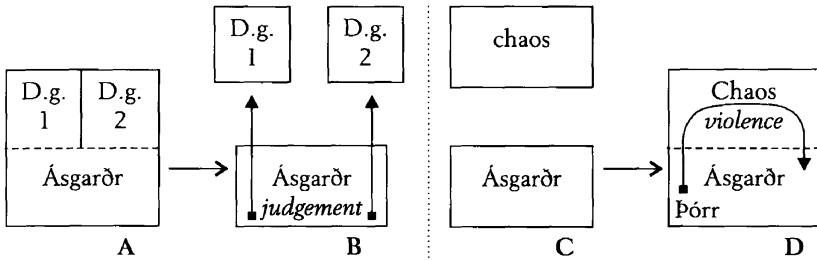
The following concerns the above hypothesis and what it entails. Ultimately, the intention is to provide a penetrating account the semantic layers of *Þdr* and *Sif*. Dictated by context, the term *chaos* will refer to the enemies of the divine order in general, and to the giants and dwarves in particular; this is admittedly a simplification but it will suffice in the present context.

### 4.1. The Transition in *Þdr* & *Sif* — a Transformation

*Þdr* and *Sif* provide a solutions to the same problem: how chaos became a force threatening creation — in other words, how the *transition* from the ideal period to the historical period came about. In *Sif*, *Loki* travels to the periphery, procures *Mjöllnir* (indirectly), and in the process causes a rift between the gods and the two dwarf groups, which before were allied with the gods; consequently, in the final situation *Ásgarðr* is *weakened*. In *Þdr*, at the instigation of *Loki*, *Þórr* travels to the periphery, acquires *Mjöllnir*, and in the process kills *Geirrøðr* and a host of other giants; thus, *Þórr* breeches the boundary which up to this moment made *Ásgarðr* immune from chaos; as a consequence, in the final situation *Ásgarðr* is *weakened*.

In both *Sif* and *Þdr*, the solution to the problem of how the ideal period (and the absolute status it conferred on the *Æsir*) ended and how chaos became a threatening force, is that *Ásgarðr* is *weakened in the process of acquiring *Mjöllnir**. However, there is an inversion involved in how this weakening comes about: in *Sif*, you have allied categories (*Ásgarðr* and the dwarves) that become alienated from each other — i.e. *Ásgarðr loses vital elements* (the dwarves). In *Þdr*, you have isolated categories (*Ásgarðr* and chaos) that become intermixed — i.e. *Ásgarðr comes in contact* with subversive elements (chaos). This weakening process —

which, in my opinion, reflects a transformation between Þdr and Sif at a deeper level — is summarized in *figure 3*.



*Figure 3. Sif:* A: The initial situation: Ásgarðr strong; the two dwarf groups allied with the Æsir. (D.g.=Dwarf group.) B: The final situation: Ásgarðr weakened; the two dwarf groups alienated from the Æsir via the latter's judgement.

*Þdr:* C: The initial situation: Ásgarðr strong; it is isolated from Chaos. D: The final situation: Ásgarðr weakened; it is no longer isolated from Chaos because of Þórr's violent incursion into the realm of Chaos.

How did this transition affect the balance between Ásgarðr and the forces of chaos? Of course, the sources do not allow anything but speculation in this regard, nevertheless, plausible solutions can be proposed. As was pointed out previously (n. 4), in the light of the present analysis, Sif can be viewed as an aetiology of enmity between the Æsir and the dwarves. Thus, the dwarves might have joined the forces of chaos working actively against the gods. The other possibility is that the dwarves simply withdrew their support, thus making the gods vulnerable. Thus, the possibilities in which chaos might have benefited from the weakening of Ásgarðr are in Sif expressed in terms of *feud* (active enmity) and/or *absence* (withdrawal of support). As regards Þdr we are in more familiar waters. A plausible solution here is that Þórr's killing of Geirrðr and the giant host surrounding him prompted the giants to work actively against the gods — i.e., Þórr's incursion into the chaos realm starts the feud between gods and giants that lasts throughout the mythology.<sup>6</sup> That the killing of a whole family should initiate a feud between the two groups is very plausible in the light of what we know of

<sup>6</sup> But — considering the issue in a larger context — didn't it start with the killing of Ymir? That may well be. In any case, the two episodes (killing Ymir and Geirrðr as initia-

Old Norse society. Indeed John Lindow has proposed an analysis of the whole of Old Norse myth in the light of blood feud (1994a).

Although the alienation of the Æsir's allies in Sif sufficiently explains how Ásgarðr is weakened (it loses vital elements), the case is not as clear in Þdr. Þórr's breach of the boundary between Ásgarðr and chaos does not in itself explain *how* that results in the gods' weakening. What follows is a proposition.

#### 4.1.1. *The Possible Impurity of Mjöllnir in Þdr*

Is the weakening of Ásgarðr in Þdr related to impurity? Þdr 19–20 articulates a striking scene of Þórr slaughtering the giant host after having killed Geirrøðr; note the graphical appearance of Mjöllnir in 19:1–2:

Glaums niðjum för gørva  
gramr með dreyrgum hamri;  
*I sin vrede tilintetgjorde han ganske jætteynglen med sin bloddryppende hammer* (F. Jónsson 1908 B: 143, emphasis in text mine).  
The furious one [Þórr] slaughtered the descendants of Glaumr [giants] with his *bloody* hammer (E. Björnsson 2000; emphasis mine).

This “splatter scene” is followed up, and echoed, in the following strophe (20: 2), where Þórr kills the giants with “the easy-crusher” (*hógbrotningi*), i.e. Mjöllnir (cf. 1 *supra*). Þdr ends without any reference to Þórr's return to Ásgarðr; however, his return home must be implied, and since he acquires his characteristic weapon (Mjöllnir) in his fight with Geirrøðr, we can assume that he brought it with him to Ásgarðr. In this context the following narrative structure can be suggested: (a) Þórr leaves the safety of Ásgarðr, (b) intermingles directly with contaminating chaos-elements in the process of acquiring his hammer, and finally, (c) brings his *blood-dripping hammer* to Ásgarðr, thus *defiling* its pristine condition; in other words, by bringing *contaminating blood* into Ásgarðr Þórr violates the boundary that earlier rendered it immune to chaos, thus initiating the weakening of Ásgarðr, making it vulnerable to chaotic influence.

Contaminating blood is not unknown to Old Norse sources. In Gg 34,

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tion of feud) need not be mutually exclusive. These may well be instances of two competing and/or complementary traditions concerning the feud between gods and giants. If one insists on placing these within a single chronological system, which is by no means necessary, the following solution is possible: after the murder of Ýmir, most of the giants drowned in his blood (Gg 7); therefore, presumably, they weren't up to the job in the ideal period. Then, suddenly and unprovoked, Þórr infringes upon the giants by killing Geirrøðr and his people, thus activating their slumbering vindictive urge.

the Æsir refrain from killing Fenrir because they don't want to spoil their sanctuaries with the wolf's blood (*Svá mikils virðu goðin vé sín ok gríðastaði at eigi vildu þau saurga þá með blóði úlfisins*); in Ls, the probable reason why Þórr doesn't kill Loki is that Ægir's hall, according to the prose introduction, is a sanctuary (*þar var gríðastaðr mikill*). In saga Iceland — and presumably in Old Norse society at large — a thing was a sanctuary, an arena of both secular and sacred activity. In Eyrb (IV–X), the local thing arena arranged by Þórólfr Mostrarskegg was revered as highly sacred and it was forbidden to contaminate it with either *heiptarblóð* (blood of fierce anger/hatred) or excrement (*þar var ok svá mikill helgistaðr, at hann vildi með engu móti láta saurga völlinn, hvárki i heiptarblóði, ok eigi skyldi þar álfrek ganga*; E. Ó. Sveinsson & M. Þórðarson 1935: 10). When *heiptarblóð* is spilt later on the thing arena has to be moved elsewhere because it is contaminated — “the ground is no holier than any other”, i.e., it is *profaned* (*völlinn kallar hann spilltan af heiptarblóði [...] ok kallar þá jörð nú eigi helgari en aðra [...] sagði þar ok eigi þing skyldu vera síðan*; *ibid.* pp. 17 f. These events are related in Lnb in similar terms; J. Benediktsson 1968: 124 ff.).

In the context of Þdr, it is Ásgarðr that is the sanctuary and the blood Þórr has dripping from his hammer is *heiptarblóð*. I find the idea very suggestive that Eilifr's construction *gramr með dreyrgum hamri* — The *furious one* [Þórr] [...] with his *bloody* hammer — is meant to imply *heiptarblóð* directly — Þórr is designated as *gramr* (furious/very angry) corresponding to *heipt* (fierce anger/hatred), while his instrument of fury, the hammer, is qualified with *dreyrgum* (derived from *dreyri*, blood); hence, the blood which the *furious one* has on his *bloody* hammer is *heiptarblóð*, the blood of fierce anger/hatred. Accordingly, the solution I propose to the above question is that Ásgarðr's weakening is a direct consequence of the contamination brought to the divine sanctuary by Þórr, the catalyst being Mjöllnir stained in *heiptarblóð*. It is worth pointing out that it is quite in character for Þórr to violate sanctuaries; e.g., this is emphasized by Clunies Ross in her comments on the funeral of Baldr: “This section [...] shows Þórr acting in the same way as he does in *Lokasenna*; he violates a place of sanctuary by killing or attempting to kill [...]” (1994: 79; *et al.*).

In this light (and the discussion in 4.1.), there are two semantic layers, so to speak, found in Þdr: one concerned with the mode by which the Æsir are weakened, which is related to “hygiene”, and another concerned with the ensuing conflict between the gods and giants, related to feud; the former is expressed in terms of “sacred vs. profane” (at least if we

allow the context of *Eyrb*), while the latter is expressed in terms of “unilateral violence”, characteristic of the blood feud in Old Norse mythology (i.e. only the gods are inflicting violent death, cf. Lindow 1994a: 58).

#### 4.2. The Paradox of Mjöllnir

As was expressed in the hypothesis above, the present optics make Mjöllnir the key to the transition between the ideal and historical periods. The implication is that Mjöllnir and chaos are mutually dependent categories (cf. 3.3.) not because of the hammer’s role in the crushing of giant skulls but because Mjöllnir signals the weakening of Ásgarðr, which makes it vulnerable to external chaos. Mjöllnir is thus a *mediator of chaos* and a marker of the new identity forced upon the gods in the new precarious historical era. But are there other instances in the Old Norse corpus that might support this interpretation?

##### 4.2.1. *Mjöllnir as a Mediator of Chaos*

That Mjöllnir is problematic harmonizes well with the characterization of Þórr as having an unruly temper, e.g. in *Ls* and Baldr’s funeral, where Þórr proves dangerously unstable in a delicate situation — what makes his behaviour potentially hazardous is Mjöllnir.

Probably the best example is Þórr’s fishing for Miðgarðsormr. The sources are not unanimous, but a motif well represented in both the earlier and later literary sources is that the outcome of the clash between the two results in a draw. In an excellent overview and analysis of the sources, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has reached the conclusion that Þórr is represented as a threat to cosmic balance which is only just saved when the serpent escapes back into the sea by the skin of its teeth (1986). What makes this conclusion likely, if not inevitable, is the fact that Miðgarðsormr is consistently represented, in both the earlier and later sources, as closely related to the earth which it encircles (cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1986: 271). About the semantics involved Meulengracht Sørensen says:

Thór’s fishing is an attempt to dissolve the cosmic order, and in the attempt itself, and especially in its failure, lies a confirmation of that order. This is the fundamental meaning of the myth [...]. Thór, the protector of gods and men, travels to the furthest limits of the world to meet the monster and the undecided battle between them demonstrates the cosmic balance (ibid.: 271 f.).

This is well expressed in Hym. In strophe 22 the serpent is called "the girdle of all lands" (*umgiörð* [...] *allra landa*); in the next strophe Þórr proceeds to hit it with the hammer; and in strophe 24, immediately before the serpent sinks back into the sea, we hear a phrase with an unmistakable eschatological ring to it: *för in forna fold ǫll saman, sökðiz síðan sá fiskr í mar*, which is rendered by Meulengracht Sørensen as "The World is about to founder, but, as the fish sinks back into the sea, creation settles down again" (ibid.: 270).

What I want to emphasise is that Þórr, with Mjöllnir in hand, is not only a threat to the giant world but to the whole of creation. As Meulengracht Sørensen makes clear, what is at stake is the universe itself including *both* giants and gods. Again, what makes the unstable character of Þórr dangerous is Mjöllnir. All of this is well in keeping with the characterization of Mjöllnir that has emerged in the present analysis, viz. as a mediator of chaos.

#### 4.2.2. *Mjöllnir as Impure in Essence?*

As a final comment, I want to consider whether the relationship between Mjöllnir and chaos is even more fundamental. Lindow (1994b) has suggested that there is a reference to Þórr and his hammer "in a kenning related to the skaldic formula 'worked with a hammer'", and that in this connection there appears "the participle of the verb *þæfa* 'to full' (of cloth; i.e., to beat and sometimes shrink it)" (p. 494); Lindow points out that significantly, this verb appears in Bragi's Rdr 14, the first stanza of which deals with Þórr's encounter with Miðgarðsormr (Lindow refers to F. Jónsson):

Þat erum sýnt, at snimma  
sonr Aldaföðrs vildi  
afis við úri þæfðan  
jarðar reist of freista.

(It is clear to me, that soon the son of Alföðr wished to test his strength against the moisture-filled engirdler of earth.) (p. 494).

Lindow says that in F. Jónsson's translation, which is the basis for his English rendering, *úr* "drizzle" refers to the sea while *þæfðr* is applied in the sense of "to shrink", and the "serpent has been beaten by weather or waves, not a hammer", he continues:

but in light of the formula *hamri þæfðr* ["worked with a hammer"], we can easily recall the hammer that Thor is about to cast at the beast and

which is indeed mentioned as the first word of the next stanza — in the dat. *hamri*, thus recalling the formula explicitly. It may even be possible that we are dealing here with a pun on a homonym or second sense of *úr*, which the poet of the Norwegian rune poem (late thirteenth-century) understood as the name of the u-rune and characterized as dross or slag metal (*[úr er af illu járne]* [...]) Since in this case the hammer apparently did not do its job, it performed as an *impure metal* [...] (pp. 494 f.; final emphasis mine).

In the light of the above interpretation — cf. esp. the discussion of the contaminating blood that stains the hammer in Þdr (4.1.1.) — the (possible) characterization of Mjöllnir in Rdr as *impure metal* may have nothing to do with its lack of performance but may instead refer to the hammer *itself* as being impure — a fitting allusion to the instrument that defiled Ásgarðr. What is more, should this be the case, the implication is not that the hammer is defiled by something else (e.g. impure blood), but (being impure metal) that it is *impure in its essence*. Þdr supports this understanding, since the molten iron that becomes Mjöllnir is prepared by Geirrøðr; i.e., Mjöllnir's substance emerges in the forge of the prime representative of chaos, right in the midst of the chaotic realm, and subsequently it is hardened in giant blood — in this light, *impure metal* becomes a striking, and most fitting, reference to Mjöllnir.

My intention here (as was Lindow's in his article), was only to present a possibility. Nevertheless, in the light of how the allusion to Mjöllnir as impure metal harmonizes with Þdr, I find it very suggestive.

### 4.3. Social Commentary

I am conscious of the difficulties involved in trying to expose what social commentaries might lie latent in mythological narratives, not the least when so much of the social context is lost. Those difficulties notwithstanding, I would like to make a few suggestions.

It is well known, at least on the basis of the saga evidence, that blood feud, law and arbitration were woven into the very fabric of Old Norse society. For reasons of convenience, I will allow myself to abbreviate these issues to *violent processes* and *legal processes*; I realise, of course, that this is a simplification, for violence and law form intricate patterns throughout the saga literature involving all kinds of complications; nevertheless, I feel that it is adequate for the present purposes, which aim primarily at suggestion (for a lucid exposition of these and related issues cf. Miller 1990, esp. cap. 6, 7, 8). Such belligerent and legal struc-



tures were closely associated with dispute resolution, and thus important mechanisms for holding society together. In stateless saga Iceland, in the absence of an executive power, people had to enforce legal resolutions themselves, and here blood feud came into its own. More generally, as social mechanisms, legal and violent processes concerned creating, maintaining and enforcing boundaries of various kinds. My contention is that Þdr and Sif provide a troubled view of these social mechanisms.

As has been pointed out, it is the gods’ *activity* in the process of acquiring Mjöllnir that results in the weakening of Ásgarðr; in Sif this is the *judgement*, in Þdr, it is Þórr’s *violence* (possibly in conjunction with the hammer as impure metal stained with *heiptarblóð*); what I am proposing here is that these two types of activity correspond, respectively, to legal and violent processes. Consequently, both narratives show the central social mechanisms of law and blood feud in a problematic light, for these, in mythological guise, hurt the integrity of divine society, thereby forcing it into the precarious historical period, with disorder waiting in the wings.

In itself, this is not surprising and fits well with what we know of legal and violent processes in the sagas which often give rise to more problems than they solve. What is interesting, however, is that this social criticism should be encoded in the only two hammer aetiologies handed down to us; this becomes striking considering the fact that the hammer, like these social mechanisms, is associated with enforcing and maintaining boundaries (between the gods and chaos). As a cautious conclusion I would like to suggest that the aetiology of Mjöllnir was closely associated with people’s understanding of mechanisms that marked social boundaries; this would imply a pessimistic view of legal and violent processes, in the sense that these were prone to sever the very boundaries they were supposed to maintain — an aspect which is reflected in the ambiguities of Mjöllnir as analysed above.

This social commentary reveals both a parallel and an inversion between Þdr and Sif — both sources articulate a troubled semantics of central social mechanisms, but simultaneously, focus the attention via two different “codes”: a “code” of *violence* (Þdr) and a “code” of *law* or *arbitration* (Sif). In a sense, this catches the essence of the analysis as a whole, which has alternated between parallels and inversions, collected under the rubric of transformations.

## 4.4. Summary

An outline of the above discussion is provided in *table 1*.

*Table 1. Summary. M=Mjöllnir. Ásg.:=Ásgarðr. Þ=Þórr*

Cap.		Sif	Þdr	Ref.
4.1. & 4.1.1.	The advent of chaos & end of ideal period:	The weakening of Ásg.		
	Weakening of Ásg.:	Æsir alienate their allies	Þ breaches the boundary isolating Ásg. from chaos. Ásg. defiled by <i>heiptarblóð</i> ; "hygiene" (sacred vs. profane).	Figure 3. Eyrb IV-X. Þdr 19.
	Ásg.-Chaos relations:	Feud (active enmity) and/or absence (withdrawal of support).	Blood feud.	
4.2.	M & chaos as mutually depended categories:	M signals the weakening of Ásg.; it is a marker of the new identity of the gods in the historical period		
4.2.1.	M as a mediator of chaos:	Support in other sources: cf. Þ & the Miðgarðsormr.		Hym 22 ff.
4.2.2	M as impure in essence:		M is impure metal; it emerges in the furnace of Geirrøðr.	Lindow on Rdr 14; cf. Þdr.
4.3.	Society; M's aetiology was:	Associated with people's understanding of social boundary mechanisms.		
	A pessimistic view of:	Legal processes (arbitration, law).	Violent processes (blood feud).	

## 5. Snorri's Version

It has hardly escaped notice that Snorri's version of Þórr's journey to Geirrøðr (Skm 18) is absent in the above discussion. And clearly, his turn of phrase would be impossible to fit the interpretation of Þdr offered above. According to Snorri, Þórr already owns the hammer, he just leaves it at home when he pays his visit to Geirrøðr — obviously, this

challenges my interpretation of Þdr, the fact that there is such a different version cannot be ignored. In the following I intend to defend the exclusion of Snorri from my discussion and suggest some possible explanations for the disagreement between his narrative and Þdr.

Excluding Snorri from the discussion is a deliberate violation of a significant methodological principle of Lévi-Strauss' structuralism, i.e., that each and every version of a narrative must be compared if one is to gain access to the underlying myth. While this approach may apply in some cases, depending on the aim of one's analysis, I find it as a generic methodological principle very problematic. The reason has to do with the assumptions that lurk beneath the surface, assumptions that have serious consequences both for the understanding of the mythological corpus and the treatment of the empirical material.

It is assumed that myth is a kind of an *a priori*, transcendental phenomenon; i.e., narratives that can be considered as different versions of each other are viewed as instances of a single, underlying myth — they are versions of *the Myth* with a capital *M*. This makes the analysis of mythological narratives into a kind of a mathematical operation aimed at *approximating* the Myth that lies behind them — the more versions you can bring into the crux of your calculations, the closer you get to the underlying Myth. This is a sort of a "mytho-statistics", the Myth being the average outcome of the variants.

The consequences for the treatment of the empirical material can be dire. To be sure, as anyone familiar with Lévi-Strauss will know, due attention is paid to empirical detail, almost to the point obsession. However, that is only to sacrifice it later on for the greater good of *the Myth*, for which the versions are but different expressions — a Myth is the sum of its variants. This is explicit in Lévi-Strauss' famous treatment of Oedipus, where he even suggests that Freud's Oedipus complex might be considered a part of *the Oedipus Myth* (1963: 217 f.). Of course, Lévi-Strauss was reacting to the obsession of earlier mythologists with deciding which version was the *original*, and his admittedly brilliant solution was simply to do away with versions. However, in my view, he didn't remove the concept of the original from mythology, he just transferred it to a more abstract plane, one of quasi-mathematical relations between versions: it is the *a priori* Myth that becomes the original. Now, I am in not suggesting a return to the obsessions of the 19th century. All I am saying is that this approach blinds us to the idiosyncrasies of the mythological narratives we're treating and to the very real possibility that these might be instances of different traditions representing different semantic

preoccupations. In the Lévi-Straussian crux different narratives, which very well may involve semantics all their own, are treated as instances of *the same Myth*, which inevitably involves ignoring their idiosyncrasies or balancing them out in analytical equations.

Then there is the implicit assumption about the nature of the myth corpus itself; i.e., that the once living mythological traditions that lurk behind it were a unified mythological system — a system that can be approached by adding up the versions that make up its remains. As I hope is expressed in the discussion above, I am of the opinion that the living mythology was made up of various traditions, traditions that must have competed as well as complemented each other; traditions that were malleable, that represented different outlooks, and that must have been interpreted in various ways. I have treated Þdr and Sif as instances of such independent, albeit interacting, traditions concerning the emergence Mjöllnir.

This criticism, of course, applies to treating Þdr and Snorri's narrative as two versions of the *same Myth*. In my opinion, the two sources exhibit all the signs of having an idiosyncratic semantic import. If the above understanding of Þdr holds, its central element (the appearance of the hammer) is absent in the account in Skm. Given this glaring fact, my suggestion is that Þdr and Skm should be viewed as instances of two different traditions concerning Þórr's journey to Geirrøðr; one that emphasizes semantics involving the appearance of Mjöllnir, and another, possibly instigated by Snorri himself, emphasizing something else, conceivably Þórr's relations to the opposite sex as Clunies Ross has suggested (1981).

There are of course several possibilities as to why Snorri's version differs so much from Þdr. Þdr need not have been among Snorri's sources; his account could be based on an entirely different rendering of Þórr's journey. Assuming his source was Þdr, we have no way of knowing the condition of the poem as Snorri knew it; the version(s) he had access to might well have been incomplete; that might indeed be the reason why the passage found in Þdr 19–20 (where Þórr wields the hammer) is not represented in Snorri's version. If there was such a hammer tradition associated with Þdr as I have argued above it is entirely possible that Snorri knew it; should that have been the case, why did he not carry it further instead of removing its central element (the emergence of the hammer)? It is more or less undisputed that Snorri strove towards a systematization of the material in his Edda, as is especially apparent in Gg. Þórr's journey to Geirrøðr and Sif are both part of Skm, the latter deal-

ing with the hammer. Given his tendency for systematization, one can surmise that Snorri felt unable to present two contrasting narratives about the same theme, i.e., the appearance of the hammer — having used the “slot”, so to speak, for the hammer aetiology, there simply was no room for another such narrative; hence, in his version of Þórr’s journey the theme dealt with in Sif (and Þdr) is lacking. Conversely, Snorri might have been confronted with different traditions and for whatever reason decided against the one concerned with the hammer. One could carry on indefinitely, but the point has been made: there are several plausible scenarios that can be suggested as explanations for the way in which Snorri’s version differs from Þdr.

## Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this interpretative experiment, as was stated at the outset, has been to furnish new perspectives and examine some of their consequences. In the course of this pursuit, the argument has moved from the assumption that Þdr is a hammer aetiology, to establishing Þdr and Sif as transformations, to the creation of a common interpretative framework or a hypothesis including both sources, and finally, reaching its conclusion in a discussion of the shared semantics involved, as implied by the hypothesis — semantics entailing intricate compromises between purity, impurity, order, chaos, law and violence, branching out from mythological structure to the fabric of society, and converging about Þórr and his ominous hammer.

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## Abbreviations

Alvm	Alvísmál.	Ls	Lokasenna.
Eyrb	Eyrbyggja saga.	Rdr	Ragnarsdrápa.
Gg	Gylfaginning.	Sif	Skm 35; “the Sif’s hair episode” ( <i>Hvi er gull kallat haddr Sifjar?</i> ).
Grm	Grimnismál.		
Hávm	Hávamál.	Skm	Skáldskaparmál.
Hrbl	Hárbarðsljóð.	Vsp	Völuspá.
Hym	Hymiskviða.	Þdr	Þórsdrápa.
Lnb	Landnámabók.	Þrkv	Þrymskviða.

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