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BEOWULF AND NJÁLSSAGA

One could make a case on broadly generalized grounds for the potential value of a comparative study of Beowulf and Njálssaga; both texts have their roots in a common Germanic heroic tradition, and in very different social and literary contexts, both works resolve the paradoxes of heroic literature: that human greatness finds its highest point in death and extinction; that fate chooses the hero, but the will distinguishes him. There is, however, a more immediate connection between Beowulf and Njálssaga; in chapter 119 the saga briefly and allusively recreates the basic narrative pattern discernible in the Old English poem. The saga's allusive and indeed ironic development of the Beowulf tale-type controls and modifies the audience's attitudes towards Skarpheðinn at the assembly following Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði's death. An allusive Beowulf analogue in Njálssaga poses problems and opportunities for literary historians; the text presumably predates many of the fictionalizing and legendary sagas usually compared to Beowulf, but the author of the saga counted on his audience's recognition of the motif, an indication of the story's currency, and he made that recognition of the tale-type integral to the development of the audience's response to Skarpheðinn. My purpose now is to examine the aesthetic and hint at the literary-

historical implications of a Beowulf analogue imbedded in the text of Njálssaga.

In chapter 119, the narrator of the saga introduces Þorkell hákr, the last of the chieftains whom Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson and Njáll's sons visit in their search for support at the assembly. Though the other chieftains visited are identified only by name or by name and a brief genealogy, the narrator carefully traces Þorkell's ancestry to the legendary figures of Grímr loðinkinni, Ketill hængur of Hrafnista, and Hallbjörn hálftröll, and the narrator notes that Þorkell hákr hafði farit utan og framit sik í öðrum löndum (to cite, as I shall do when possible, the admirable Penguin translation, Þorkell hákr "had been abroad and won fame in foreign lands"); the narrator briefly sketches Þorkell's exploits and notes their commemoration:

Hann hafði drepit spellvirkja austr á Jämtaskógi; síðan fór hann austr í Svíþjóð ok fór til lags með Sörkvi karli, ok herjuðu þaðan í Austrveg. En fyrir austan Bálagarðssíðu átti Þorkell at sækja þeim vatn eitt kveld; þá mætti hann finngálkni ok varðist því lengi, en svá lauk með þeim, at hann drap finngálknit. Þaðan fór hann austr í Aðalsýslu; þar vá hann at flugdreka ... ok lét hann gera þrekvirki þessi yfir lokhvílu sinni ok á stóli fyrir háseti sínu.

He had killed a robber east in Jamtland Forest, and then travelled east to Sweden, where he joined forces with Sorkvir the Old. Together they harried in the Baltic. One evening, on the coast of Finland, it was Thorkel's turn to fetch water for the crew; he encountered a fabulous monster and was only able to kill it after a long struggle. From there he travelled south to Estonia, where he killed a flying dragon . . . in Iceland he had these feats carved above his bed-closet and on a chair in front of his high-seat.

Olafr pái had famous tales from the past carved on the waintscotting and roof of his parlour, but Porkell hákr appropriately memorializes his own career which resembles a famous tale from the past, the story Beowulf exemplifies.

I think no one has previously identified this episode as a Beowulf analogue or argued that Njálssaga portrays Porkell hákr as a Beowulfian hero in an ironically conceived context. The story does not match the narrative pattern Friedrich Panzer analyzed as the "bear's son" tale-type, and until recently Panzer's analysis provided our model of the essential Beowulf story. In 1959, however, Mrs Nora K. Chadwick published an important though rather knotty article, "The Monsters and Beowulf", in a volume of studies presented to Bruce Dickins entitled The Anglo-Saxons. Mrs Chadwick's study re-examines a number of Beowulf analogues in Old Icelandic and reveals that Panzer's schema does not embrace all

of the recurring parallels between Beowulf and a number of Old Icelandic texts. The new schema Mrs Chadwick's findings imply, a kind of North Germanic version of the "bear's son" story, clearly matches Porkell hákr's adventures as they appear in Njálssaga. The heroes Mrs Chadwick deals with are again and again either members of a princely family of the Gautar, like Beowulf himself, Böðvarr Bjarki, Herrauðr, Oddr skrauti, and Gull-Þórir, or they are members of the "Hálogaland family of Ketill hængr of Hrafnista", including Ormr Stórolfsson, his father Stórolfr, Örvar-Oddr, and Grettir whom Mrs Chadwick calls the "last descendant of the line to whom this adventure is credited". The adventure or the narrative pattern almost becomes a family heirloom, an inheritance to which, in Njálssaga, Porkell has a legitimate or a legitimized claim. Njálssaga traces Porkell's ancestry, through his mother's father, to the right line of Grímr loðinkinni, Ketill hængr of Hrafnista, and Hallbjörn hálftröll; in contrast Ljós-vetningasaga neglects to trace Porkell's maternal ancestry. The Landnámabók does not push Porkell's lineage past Grímr loðinkinni, the last-named point in the line leading to Guðríðr, Porkell's mother.

The inherited Beowulfian adventure includes three combats, or better perhaps three adversaries, themselves often explicitly related and even sometimes descended from other adversaries of earlier Beowulfian heroes. Mrs Chadwick identifies these enemies as first "the draugr

Agnarr and his variants", second "an evil supernatural woman", and third "the dragon Hárekr, a flying dragon, or a variant". Porkell completed his foreign adventures when he killed a flying dragon; his first opponent, the spellvirki, does not notably resemble Grendel for example. He could be any harm-doer, a brigand, a highwayman, or a supernatural adversary like the spellvirki Hálfðan Eysteinnsson encounters in Kolsskógr, namely Kolr who, with his daughter, attacks Hálfðan. The hero kills both, but they renew the battle as revenants, and Hálfðan wrestles for a long time with Kolr before overcoming him. An ingenious reader might argue that Kolr and his daughter parallel Grendel and his mother or the Sandhaugar trolls in Grettis-saga. Another spellvirki in Hálfðan's story, a viking Agnarr, enters a burial mound while still alive and reappears as the draugr Agnarr in Gull-Dórissaga. Njálssaga casts a little more light on Porkell's spellvirki at the moment of truth when Skarpheðinn and Porkell face one another armed. Porkell describes his weapon and probably refers to his first great victory: þetta sax fekk ek í Svíbjóðu, ok drap ek til inn mesta kappu (this is the sword I got in Sweden . . . I killed a great warrior to get it") If we are to take the spellvirki and the kappi as the same, the parallelism between Porkell's story and the Beowulfian tale-type may be clearer: Beowulf took a special sword, a heftmece, into the mere to fight Grendel's mother; he won that battle with a gigantic sword he found in the

monster's lair and brought the ancient weapon's hilt to Hroðgar. Beowulf's rewards included a sword and probably the hæftmece as well. Grettir's booty from the burial mound of Kár the Old included a sword, and he also won a heptisax from the waterfall cave of the Sandhaugar trolls. Hörðr of Harðar saga ok Hólmverja, one of Mrs Chadwick's Beowulf analogues, wins a sword (and other goods) from the burial mound of the draugr Sóti; Gull-Pórir received a sword and other gifts from the draugr Agnarr in Gull-Póris saga. The Jantaskógr spellvirki and Swedish kappi may be the same, or may form a doublet, but in either case, they make a satisfactory version of "the draugr Agnarr and his variants". Þorkell's second enemy, the finngálmn, a monster partly human and partly animal, may be a variant of Mrs Chadwick's "evil, supernatural woman", for example Grendel's mother, even though the text does not specify the monster's gender. Þorkell encountered this adversary when he went to fetch water, and presumably the finngálmn's lair was in or near a body of water; Grendel's mother inhabited a mere or pool, Grettir ventured beneath a waterfall to pursue the female troll who raided the farm at Sandhaugar, and in Örvar-Oddssaga, Ögmundr's mother, called a gýgr and finngálmn, was a water-dwelling monster who at one point attacked Oddr's ships. When Gull-Pórir finally destroyed his old enemy, the sorceress Kerling, he hit her with a rock as she attempted to escape into a waterfall.

Mrs Chadwick finds that the hero's "bear's son" adventures characteristically take place in the Eastern Baltic, including Northern Russia, and Porkell hákr's combats move progressively eastward, the farther east, the more fabulous. The narrator of Njálssaga reemphasizes the eastward movement of Porkell's adventures when he traces Porkell's return from Estonia to Sweden, then to Norway, and thence to Iceland.

Porkell's adventures appear as a narrative sketch, the synopsis of a well-known story, and since the narrator does not give the sketch a detailed retelling, it is unrecognizable in terms of Panzer's analysis, but the overall pattern, the hero's ancestry, the three enemies, and the locale, matches the schema Mrs Chadwick proposes. In his monumental edition of Njálssaga, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson asserts that Porkell's fabulous adventures most probably derive from a written source, some páttur now lost; the book-prose hypothesis, or assumption, assuredly predisposes one to assume that Njálssaga took this narrative from a written source, but Porkell hákr plays a prominent and a heroic part in Ljósvetningasaga, and if literary tradition had credited him with a voyage and adventures abroad, one could only wonder why the author of Ljósvetningasaga should be ignorant or silent on the point. Another hypothesis may accommodate the facts more comprehensively: in order to present Skarpheðinn and Porkell hákr as archetypal

opponents, the author of Njálssaga arbitrarily assigned to Porkell a recognizable story-type ultimately drawn from a tradition of oral narrative. As a written text, Beowulf could not have influenced twelfth- or thirteenth-century Scandinavians: a tradition of oral narrative must ultimately connect the appearances of this tale-type in eighth- or ninth-century England and in thirteenth-century Iceland.

Unlike Beowulf, whose name presumably means "bear", Porkell hákr has no explicit bear's son or animal origin, but Panzer, who did not invent the name of the "bear's son story", notes that in many variants the hero's antecedents are not bearish. Panzer retained the traditional name for the story-type noting that it is metaphorically appropriate to the hero's extraordinary qualities. Icelandic heroes whose careers parallel Beowulf's occasionally have a bearish nature or origin, and a glance at a few Icelandic parallels will help confirm the availability of the "North-Germanic bear's son story" to saga writers and to clarify some of the functions this tale-type served in sagas which aimed at more realism than Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar where wild impossibility becomes the norm. I shall omit Gréttissaga which extends and duplicates Beowulfian motifs but has already received considerable attention.

In Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa the hero's name is "bear" and two of his earlier adventures may claim comparison with Mrs Chadwick's basic story. As a young man, Björn



voyages abroad and in Garðaríki, Russia, he kills a notable champion, a kappi, who has challenged King Valdimar's rule; the kappi is man, not monster or draugr, but the enemy parallels Grendel who in his own way challenges Hroðgar's rule, occupies his royal seat, and almost becomes an antitype of Hroðgar when we learn that Grendel's lair is an underwater hall furnished with at least some of the treasures a royal hall of men would boast. In France Björn kills a flying dragon, and the details of this exploit parallel Beowulf's last fight in several particulars. The dragon attacks another man, but Björn thrusts his shield over the intended victim; Beowulf shields his kinsman Wiglaf from the dragon's fiery breath; Björn seizes the dragon by the tail with one hand and with the other cuts it through behind the wing; Beowulf cuts his dragon in two with a short sword after Wiglaf has wounded the beast. Björn's Beowulfian adventures occupy chapters four and five of the saga, whose main action develops the rivalry between the hero and Þórðr over a woman, Oddný, whom Þórðr marries by treachery and Björn evidently enjoys almost by right. The feud demonstrates Björn's superiority which is only confirmed when Þórðr ambushes and overpowers his old enemy. Björn's adventures abroad mark him as a man destined for greatness, and worthy of it, but he fulfills his heroic nature in Iceland, against human enemies, and in the essentially realistic context of a basic plot as vital now as then, the eternal triangle.

Hávarðar saga Isfirðings similarly finds a Beowulfian narrative a suitable touchstone for a man's potential greatness or innate claim to heroic status. The amiable Ólafr Hávarðarson, after other less spectacular public services, wrestles successfully with the draugr Þormóðr, a bad actor in life and potentially worse in death; as a revenant, Þormóðr haunts his farmhouse which his widow fears will be desolated. Ólafr ends these visitations in a combat scene which closely parallels Grettir's wrestling match with Glámr. Subsequently Þormóðr harasses one Brandr inn sterki who is rounding up his sheep in a winter storm; Ólafr again wrestles with the draugr, breaks his back, and sinks the body deep at sea; the place seems unclean afterwards. One might compare the mere in which Beowulf kills Grendel's mother and decapitates Grendel's body, thus completing the war with the monsters whose lair remains bloodstained and uncanny. Ólafr's second meeting with Þormóðr is probably not taken directly from Grettissaga as the first seems to be, and unlike Grettir, Ólafr partakes of the nature of the bear: Svá segja menn, at Ólafr Hávarðarson hafi haft bjarnyl, því at aldrei var þat frost eða kulði, at Ólafr færi í fleiri klæði en eina brók ok skyrtu gyrða í brökr ("It is said that Ólafr Hávarðarson had bear's warmth since no matter how cold it was, he never put on more clothing than trousers with his shirt tucked in"). An Icelandic folk-belief credits the bear with such natural heat that he never feels cold, and men born on a bear's skin may

share this property. In chapter four of the saga, the Ójafnaðarmaðr Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson ambushes and kills the promising young man, who dies fighting with courage and equanimity against superior numbers, even as Björn Hít-dælakappi did, and this heroic though premature death becomes the apex of a brief career. The real hero of the saga is Hávarðr, the central action the father's revenge for the death of an admirable son. Ólafr's "bear's son" adventures and nature in good part provide the measure of the man his father laments and avenges, and Ólafr's essential worth justifies and motivates the chief action of the story.

Harðar saga ok Hólmverja similarly credits its hero, Hörðr, with a Beowulfian adventure, the raid on the draugr Sóti's burial mound. Mrs Chadwick points out that Hörðr's companions in this exploit include Hróarr, Geirr, and Helgi who correspond to Hroðgar, Heorogar, and Halga, the three sons of Healfdene named in Beowulf. The main action of Harðar saga ok Hólmverja focusses on the hero's career in Iceland, his outlawry, the tension between his innate nobility and his life as an outlaw, his betrayal and last, heroic fight. Although magic enough embellishes the story, its essence conforms to the conventions of Icelandic realism. Hörðr's "bear's son" exploit establishes his worth, but it also motivates his later misfortune; Sóti curses the ring Hörðr seized from the draugr, and the curse has power.

Another saga set chiefly in Iceland illustrates the "emergent hero" function of the Beowulfian theme in Old Icelandic. Gull-Póris saga includes two possible "bear's son" figures. A minor and short-lived character, Björn Beruson boasts a promising name and lineage; "bear, she-bear's son" takes his second name from his widowed mother Bera, and Bera was also the name of Böðvarr Bjarki's mother. During Pórir's raid on the gold-guarding dragons, Björn attempts to rescue or avenge one of the companions whom a dragon has seized. Björn wounds the monster, but its venomous blood gushes into his face fatally poisoning him. Beowulf is bitten in the throat and dies dragon-poisoned, hence Björn's character and death may recall Beowulf's. The central hero of the saga, Pórir Oddsson or Gull-Pórir, naturally survives this youthful exploit.

Mrs Chadwick makes Gull-Pórir's encounter with the draugr Agnarr and battle with the dragons, Valr and his sons, important examples of her thesis, but as in the other sagas I have mentioned, these Beowulfian adventures occupy the heroes' youth and the sagas' early chapters. Of Gull-Pórir's Beowulfian enemies, only the "evil, supernatural woman" of Mrs Chadwick's study, a sorceress called Kerling, plays a part in the main action of the story which again is set in Iceland and turns upon feuds, rivalries, and battles which largely conform to the conventions of realism observable in the family sagas. The "bear's son" theme

establishes Þórir's claim to heroic status; the essence of his saga comes later and finds the essential measure of the hero in conflicts with other men over mundane matters like grazing rights.

Porkell hákr's Beowulfian or "bear's son" adventures, like Gull-Þórir's, Björn Hítðelakappi's, Hörðr's or Ólafr's, introduce a champion, a man of heroic status against whom the saga can measure Skarpheðinn. The "bear's son" motif in Njálssaga ironically precludes the hero's disgrace and the fulfilment of an adversary's greatness. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (in Njáls Saga: a Literary Masterpiece) has characterized Porkell as a "swaggering, puffed up warrior" and an "inflated windbag"; in a very sensitive characterization of Björn of Mörk, Professor Einar asserts, "The story of Porkell hákr deals with a man who imagines he is something other than what he is, and who thereby makes himself ludicrous." I believe that in doing justice to Björn of Mörk, Professor Einar has mistaken the character of Porkell hákr who is not a miles gloriosus but a truly formidable figure. Porkell's foreign exploits do not appear as his own unsupported boast but as the narrator's concise statement of fact; Asgrímur Elliða-Grímsson testifies to the reality of Porkell's prowess as he indicates the hero's booth: Þessa búð á Porkell hákr, kappi mikill, ok væri oss munr, at vér fingim liðsinni hans ("this booth belongs to Thorkel Braggart. He is a great

warrior, and it would make a great difference to us if we got his help"). Besides recording Porkell's boast that he dared venture single combat against any challenger, the narrator states as fact that Porkell dealt harshly in words and deeds with all comers.

When Porkell's will and courage fail before Skarpheðinn, the narrator again states as objective fact that Porkell had never before and never again failed a test of will and courage. The confrontation between Skarpheðinn and Porkell hákr does not expose Porkell as a windbag; the clash illuminates Skarpheðinn's stature. Matched against Skarpheðinn, Porkell collapses as if he were a fraud, but he is not, and the narrator's careful delineation of Porkell's prowess and his failure makes Skarpheðinn's appalling and almost inhuman power startlingly vivid.

The booth to booth progression culminating in Porkell's introduction, test, and discomfiture focusses on Skarpheðinn. Magnús Magnússon attests to the power of this scene: "at the end Skarpheðinn is almost a nightmare figure as he stalks through the Althing, brutal, sardonic, terrible, and doomed." We can give the "nightmare figure" a more precise name. As the narrator prepares for the confrontation between these two enemies, he characterizes Porkell as a "bear's son" hero, and Skarpheðinn as a troll; the clash becomes, and parodies, an archetypal conflict between the hero and the monster.

As the procession moves from booth to booth, the chieftains who refuse Ásgrímr and Njáll's sons support successively ask who the fifth man in the line may be, and each describes Skarpheðinn. Skapti Þóroddsson asks first, and calls Skarpheðinn mikill maðr ok fülleitr ok óþefusamligr, harðligr ok tröllsligr (I will render this as "a big man, pale and unlucky-looking, fierce and troll-like"). Later Hafr inn auðgi describes Skarpheðinn as svá illiligr sem genginn sé út ór sjávarhömrum ("as grim-looking as if he came from a sea-cliff" in my rendering), and the habitat seems appropriate for a Beowulfian enemy, a troll or even a dragon. To cite one example, Mrs Chadwick identifies the marauding brown bear Grettir kills as a variant of the draugr Agnarr; from an English point of view, the bear is a Grendel figure, and its lair was a cave in a sea-cliff. Skarpheðinn evidently understands this hostile description to characterize him as a troll, and as at every challenge he seizes upon a theme in the taunt and hurls it back at his adversary; Skarpheðinn asserts he would gladly meet Hafr or more boys of his sort in combat and then implies that Hafr lacks the courage to rescue his sister, allegedly abducted by Eydís járnþaxa and Steðjakollr, evidently a troll-couple.

To describe Skarpheðinn as a "nightmare figure" or a troll or a Grendel figure captures only a part of the episode's tone and meaning. The allusive art of the saga

characterizes the antagonists as archetypal enemies and makes the audience aware of the characterizations, the event fixes the audience's sympathies on Skarpheðinn; in a clash between Beowulf and Grendel, as it were, we find ourselves delighted with Grendel's moral victory, a victory of will, spirit, courage, and manliness, and a victory innocent of blood. Porkell does not make himself ludicrous by pretending to be what he is not, but he becomes a victim of the ironies the episode develops: that a hero should emerge in a familiar pattern toward a failure of heroism, that an audience should side with the monster not the man, that in a particular context real prowess should suddenly turn counterfeit. Skarpheðinn strikes us as an appalling figure, as he readies his axe, but we almost laugh as Porkell sheathes his sword and sits ingloriously down. The allusive identification as troll and hero, and the comedy of the unprecedented but welcome outcome, gain force as we realise that the opposed weapons recapitulate the troll versus hero theme: Porkell's sax, a traditional prize of the hero's encounter with troll, draugr, or kappi, opposes Skarpheðinn's axe, appropriately named Rimmugýgr, "Battle troll".

The action at the assembly illuminates and evaluates Skarpheðinn's character both in terms of the immediate past, the killing of Höskuldr Hvítaneðsgoði, and the imminent future, the conflict between Skarpheðinn and Flosi which destroys the prospect for a peaceful



reconciliation. The successive challenges to Skarpheðinn, his admissions and his denials, develop the narrator's attitude toward his character. The episode portrays Skarpheðinn as grim and terrible, but not simply as grim and terrible. The killing of Höskuldr compromised Skarpheðinn's courage and perspicacity. Mörðr Valgarðsson's campaign of lies overcame Skarpheðinn's natural shrewdness and scepticism, and in order to distribute responsibility for the killing, and especially to make Mörðr inescapably a party to the subsequent legal proceedings, Skarpheðinn took advantage of numbers rather than offering Höskuldr single combat. Since Mörðr succeeded in deceiving virtually everyone he attempted, Skarpheðinn's failure to see through a masterly web of deceit hardly makes him a fool; similarly the sagas do not seem to regard the use of superior numbers unmanly, but as Skarpheðinn later remarks, a higher standard is rightly expected of his family than of others. The events at the assembly powerfully demonstrate Skarpheðinn's undiminished manliness, and the episode also reasserts his shrewdness. The challenges Skarpheðinn answers and rebuts highlight his alert and sardonic intelligence, his ironic and incisive cast of mind.

Skarpheðinn's ferocious wit wins our intellectual respect; in every hostile description of himself, he finds a weapon against the speaker, and the sharpness of his answers matches the tone of the challenges put to him.

When Skapti Þóroddsson calls him ógæfusamligr, "unlucky", and tröllsliigr, yet professes not to know his name, Skarpheðinn declares that he must be the wiser of the two since he knows both Skapti's name and a discreditable nickname he claims Skapti has earned. When Hafr inn auðgi describes him as illiligr, "grim" or even "evil", and hints that Skarpheðinn is troll-like, the riposte alleges that trolls have previously disgraced and cowed Hafr. Snorri goði predicts that Skarpheðinn has not long to live, but Skarpheðinn asserts that death is an obligation, implying his willingness to discharge it, but he points out that there are other obligations, for example avenging a father's killing, and he observes that Snorri has failed in this duty.

Two recurring themes mark Skarpheðinn's exchanges at the assembly: the concept of luck, gæfa, and the relationship between fathers and sons. Every chieftain visited remarks Skarpheðinn's aura of bad luck, his ógæfa. Skapti Þóroddsson calls Skarpheðinn ógæfusamligr, Snorri goði addresses him saying þrotin sé nú þín in mesta gæfa ("you have now exhausted your store of good luck"), and Guðmundr inn ríki, after evaluating and praising Skarpheðinn as a warrior, adds: Ok er þó maðrinn ógæfusamligr ("But he looks like a man of ill luck"). Skarpheðinn implicitly accepts this appraisal, observing that he justly bears the reproach for killing Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, but Skarpheðinn asserts that Guðmundr inn

ríki's óþæfa and reproach lie in having been slandered by Þorkell hákr. To have killed Höskuldr and not to have killed Þorkell compromise equally the honours of the two men, and both admit the justice of the other's charge. The ensuing exchange with Þorkell hákr illuminates Skarpheðinn's understanding of ánæli "reproach", and óþæfa. Þorkell takes an explicitly moralistic view of the Njálssons' killing of Höskuldr saying that Guðmundr inn ríki must have judged their cause unpopular því at slík hafa verk verst verit unnin ("for it was a hideous crime") and Þorkell's description of Skarpheðinn adds a new adjective to the familiar ones: illmannligr, "ill-looking, rogue-like, cruel, wicked" in Cleasby-Vigfússon's gloss. Skarpheðinn squarely denies the justice of Þorkell's malicious moralism: . . . er þér skuldlaust at velja mér hæðiyrði, saklausum manni (" . . . you have no need to pick on me, an innocent man, with your insults"). This protestation of innocence may seem surprising under the circumstances, especially since Skarpheðinn has just admitted that he bears the reproach for killing Höskuldr, but Skarpheðinn distinguishes moral turpitude and óþæfa and indicates most clearly the center of his ethical system as he defines immorality for Þorkell's benefit: Hefir mik aldrei þat hent, at ek hafa kúgat föður minn ok barizk við hann, sem þú gerðir við þinn föður ("I have never threatened my own father's life as you once did, nor ever fought with him, as you once did").

If Skarpheðinn's ethics have a second principle, it would probably be manly conduct; he repays Porkell's illmannligr with fúlmennska, "baseness" in Cleasby-Vig-fússon, but in context probably "unmanly perversion", and Skarpheðinn concocts a delightfully ingenious and obscene slander against a famous slanderer; no one could pocket Skarpheðinn's insult with honor, but Porkell takes it like a mouse.

Skarpheðinn has not been a partial advocate on his own behalf, but he sees the killing of Höskuldr and its probable consequences as óþæfa rather than moral failure and punishment. I believe the narrator shares this view; when Njáll's

sons bring their father the terrible news, Njáll predicts the result: his death, Bergþóra's, and his sons', but Njáll foresees that Kári, who shares the guilt equally with Njáll's sons, will survive by the power of his gipta, his good luck. Later Ásgrímur asks Njáll how he feels about the case, and the concept of luck dominates the answer: Heldur þungt, því at mik uggir, at hér muni eigi gæfumenn hlut at eiga ("I am uneasy . . . for I fear that there are men of ill luck involved"). That cryptic sentence may number the men who oppose his sons among the unlucky. I suspect that it is his own óþæfa which drives Flosi to choose the bitterest words he can possibly hurl at Njáll's sons; Flosi in fact echoes the slander against Njáll's manliness that led to the death of Sigmundur the lampooning poet, and repeating those words deepened the

disgrace of Hallgerðr's last appearance in Njáls saga. With the possibility of a reconciliation ended, Síðu-Hallr sees what Njáll foresaw: Hér eigu hölztu miklir ógæfumenn hlut at ("There are men of too much ill luck involved in this"), and Flosi may well be included among the ógæfumenn. Þorkell hákr conceives ógæfa moralistically, but I believe the narrator does not. The observation that greatness and good luck do not necessarily go together fits Skarpheðinn.

Skarpheðinn's accusations that Þorkell menaced and fought his own father, and that Snorri goði failed to avenge his father, clarify Skarpheðinn's motives for the killing of Höskuldr and his disruption of the agreement reached with Flosi. Though slow to believe Mörðr's lies, Skarpheðinn found their inner logic inescapable: no good son forgets his father's killing, nor could a good son hear his father's manliness slandered and be silent.

The tragic irony of the situation lies in Skarpheðinn's awareness that Höskuldr is a good man, and therefore a man who would inevitably avenge his father's death. Skarpheðinn does not realize that Höskuldr's ethics are unlike his own, that Höskuldr's goodness moves in the direction of saintliness.

An impression of Skarpheðinn's sinister power, guilt, and inner turmoil does not finally dominate the episode at the assembly. The momentary identification as a troll

or monster might fit Professor Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's analysis of the hero's "misfortune and anguish", but as the saga develops and even parodies the traditional story, a sense of surprise and comedy gives our response to Skarpheðinn another dimension. He may have seemed night-mare-like, compromised, and indiscreet as he overmatched his challengers, but he emerges from Þorkell's booth with Ásgrímur's approval, Guðmundr inn ríki's admiration (coupled with tangible support), and the audience's sympathy. He retains that sympathy to the end of the saga.