How to Recognize an Ogre

Hann var kominn af risakyri í fjóurætt sína, ok er þat vænna folk ok stærna en aðrir mann, en móðir hans var kominn af trollaættum, ok þó Dumbi í hváruveggja sett sína, því at hann var beði sterkr ok vænnum ok góðr viðskiptis, ok kunnu því at eiga allt samblænd við mennska menn. En um þat brá honum í sitt móðurkyn, at hann var beði sterkr ok stórvirk ok umskiptarom ok íllskiptinn, ef honum eigi likiði nokkut; vildi hann einn ráða við þá, er norðr þar varu, enda gáfu þeir honum konungs naðn, því at þeim þótti mikil forstöð í honum vera fyrir risum ok trollum ok óvatnum; var ok hann inn mestí byrgväetr ðíllum þeim, er til hans kolludu (Bárðar saga, pp. 101–2).

This passage, at the very beginning of the late-fourteenth century Bárðar saga, is fascinating in its apparent contradictions, which also make it an interesting starting point for a study of giants. However, the most important ambiguity is not present in the passage itself, which is a straightforward depiction of two groups of supernatural beings called risi (giant) and tróll (troll) and revolves around their antithetical characteristics. However, risi and tróll are often used as synonyms in late mediaeval literature, and so are jötunn and burs, all of which are frequently translated into English as ‘giant’ (see e.g. Pulsiano and Skálfason, pp. 2–5). And in the late mediaeval legendary sagas, risi, jötunn and tróll seem almost interchangeable.¹

On the other hand, in the passage above, the author of Bárðar saga not only claims that risi and tróll are two distinctive races, but that they are at the opposite ends of the binary divide of good and evil. While nothing is said about the size of tróll, risar are supposedly bigger and more handsome than other men – they are, in fact, referred to as ‘menn’ (humans) in the saga. King Dumbir also inherits from his father’s side, the risar, a gentle disposition which makes him easy to deal with. On the other hand, tróll are perhaps not quite so huge but strong, vigorous, unbalanced and nasty, as these character flaws of Dumbir are blamed on the generic makeup inherited from the tróll of his mother’s side. The confusion between giants and trolls in other sources is replaced here by a simple dualism. Giants are big but good, trolls may or may not be big (at least they are strong) but they are bad. And later on in the saga the word tróldómur is used for superhuman knowledge (p. 155).

However, while giants and trolls are distinguishable, they nevertheless intermarry and produce offspring that inherit both of their characteristics. Dumbir is both good and bad, and it is precisely this dual nature which makes him a good king of Dumbshaf, since his set of different qualities makes him the best defender against

¹ To take just one example, in the fifteenth-century Hjálpers saga ok Olvís, one of the leading character spots a risi but two sentences later, this creature speaks and is now a jötunn. The next two times, he is risinn again, but then he is jötunninn (Fornaldar sögur Nordrunda III, pp. 486–88).
giants, trolls and ogres, *risum ok trollum ok övetum*, although it is not specified why the people of Dumbshaf (which, according to the saga, lies just south of Risaland, the land of the giants) should need a defender against the big, handsome and agreeable giants.

It is possible that their enormous size alone might make people afraid of giants, and although the saga distinguishes between giants and trolls, the people of Dumbshaf might not necessarily have done the same. They, like modern translators of the saga and the authors of the *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, may have tended to confuse giants and trolls, and *jótar* and *þursar*, *flög* and *övetir*. And even if we accepted the sharp distinction made by *Bárðar saga*, they would do so with some justification, since the case of Dumbr indicates that the giants and trolls intermarr and produce beings which are both giants and trolls—a mixture which is potentially extremely nasty but in the case of Dumbr produces an able defender against the Otherworld creatures.

Since every translation is also an interpretation, the position of a translator of *Bárðar saga* who runs into trouble distinguishing between a *ríst* and a *tröll* may be compared to that of people of the *Bárðar saga* world who discover themselves to be the neighbours of an Otherworld which includes the said beings. They, too, wrestle with a difficult problem of interpretation, which is: What do you do if you meet an Otherworld being? Is it nice or is it nasty? Is it a giant or a troll? How do you identify the ogre? And this may be said to be a major theme in *Bárðar saga*, which depicts several journeys to the Otherworld, and which also elaborates on the special status of beings who are somehow of two worlds and who may thus be useful intermediaries when fighting ogres. These are King Dumbr, Bárðr himself and his son Geitr.

A Plethora of Monsters

Not only in *Bárðar saga* is there difficulty in discerning who and what the giants are and how to tell *risar*, *jótar* and *þursar* apart. In the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, there seems to be no clear distinction between giants and various other beings, including humans. There is confusion about where the giants live, what their size is, and the terminology used is vague, to say the least. What stands out is the giants’ strangeness. They are different and therefore hard to fathom, and it is very hard to find any source that, like *Bárðar saga*, is able to confidently divide the giants into groups and elaborate on their differences. As we have seen, that does not mean that there is no confusion about the categorisation and the nature of the giant family in the saga.

The royal hero Vilhjálmr sjudr is at one time able to kill ninety trolls by naming them all, reciting the so-called *Álra flagða bulu* (*Vilhjálm saga sjóðs*, pp. 66–68). Apparently, knowing the names of ogres means victory over them—perhaps an ogre that is no longer strange and unknown is no longer an ogre. That may be the reason why giants remain obscure and fuzzy and why those who encounter them never seem to have any alternative but to stare at them in amazement. That may also be why Snorri Sturluson cannot be sure where the giants live, and why sources tend to confuse us by using different terms freely and calling the same creature *tröll, þurs, jótsunn* and *rist*, as

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2 I will discuss this in more detail in a longer version of this article.
if those names are synonymous, while others wish to distinguish between them, usually
unsuccessfully (see Schulz, pp. 41–52). 3

Collecting evidence may lead to more confusion, not less. The sources do not
agree on anything, and some have two or three different versions of the truth.
Therefore it seems to be worth the effort to look at every text and try to understand
what its version of the giants are, rather than to try to analyse evidence collected en
masse from various kinds of sources, as has been the approach of several scholars,
among whom Lotte Motz is perhaps the most accomplished (see e.g. Motz 1982, Motz
1984, Motz 1996). Neither will I attempt to postulate an ancient clearer demarcation of
the various types of giants. 4 I will begin with a further analysis of Bárðar saga and its
depiction of giants. It may not be the whole picture of the giant but perhaps, as Cohen
has suggested (p. 11), the giant is too gigantic for such a picture to be made: ‘the giant
is a body that is always in pieces, since within a human frame, he can be perceived
only synecdochically, never as a totality’. Thus it makes sense to study the giant in
parts.

Near the end of Bárðar saga, Gestr, the son of Bárðr, triumphs over the
macabre ghost Raknarr with the aid of the spirit of King Óláfr, even though Raknarr
has five hundred undead companions in his ship. Gestr probably owes some of his
success as a defender against the Otherworld creatures to his heritage, since his father
and his grandfather also played this role. And yet it is King Óláfr’s aid, less ambiguous
in that it is wholly Christian, which makes the difference. Gestr turns to Christianity as
the most powerful force in the world. Soon after, he meets his end at the hand of
another and more unexpected foe. After he has agreed to be baptised, his father Bárðr
comes to him in his dream, calls him a traitor to the faith of his ancestors and places
his hands on his eyes. Gestr awakens with a horrible eye pain and dies soon after, in
his baptismal clothes (p. 170). The mainly benevolent guardian spirit Bárðr
demonstrates thus in his last appearance how dangerous he can also be.

The episode indeed demonstrates the otherworldly powers of Bárðr Dumbsson,
established as a counterpart to those of the human King Óláfr. But while King Óláfr’s
powers hail from God alone, Bárðr’s are ambivalent. He is able to appear and kill
people in dreams but he is not a ghost, although he has been alive for a long time. His
father is Dumbró and his mother is Mjóll Sunnsdóttir, whose origins are uncertain, but
who is presented as one of a family of nature spirits in Æsbyjarbók (Hversu Noregr
byggðask) and who is said to be the largest of all women who were considered human

3 Some distinction between the giant types have lasted to this day, see the entry risi in
the Cleasby-Vigfússon dictionary: ‘In popular Icelandic usage risi denotes size, jötunn
strength, þurs lack of intelligence; thus hár sem risi, sterkr sem jötunn, heimskr sem þurs’
(Cleasby and Vigfússon, p. 498).

4 Lotte Motz makes a valiant attempt to do just that (1987). She argues that the
mediaeval giant may have been a mixture of four distinguishable categories of supernatural
Others and this is reflected in the various names used for the giant family. These four classes
of beings, each with its own role, were lords and guardians of nature (jötunn), mythical
magicians (tróll), hostile and monstrous beings (þurs) and ‘heroic and courtly beings’ (risi) –
the last group being a recent class and Motz thinks that the word risi ‘did not denote a truly
ancient spirit’ (p. 235). This is highly speculative and while interesting, unsupported by any
convinving evidence. Her approach is, in fact, curiously similar to that of the author of Bárðar
saga trying to explain Bárðr’s ambiguous status.
(kvenna stærst, þeira sem mennskar váru, p. 102). Later Mjöll marries Rauðfeldr, a son of a jötnunr, so she seems more at ease with giants than humans and is perhaps more Other than human, although very hard to categorise. But then, of course, the categories often do not seem mutually exclusive.

His parentage results in Bárðr himself: big, good-looking and incredibly white of skin. As the son of Dómbr and Mjöll, he is superhuman but vaguely so, part giant and part troll on his father's side, while his mother is said to be human and yet she and her family must also be classified as nature spirits. But Bárðr gains a further superhuman heritage while King Dómbr is at war with some beings called þursar who later kill him: he is sent to Dofri at Dofri's mountains (Dovrefjell in Norway). Dofri is a hørgbui, which, if we take the use of a different word seriously, is something different from a risi or a troll. How different is not clear, but the saga suggests that Dofri instructed Bárðr in magic: eigi var trauþ, at hann námi eigi galðra ok fornsektu, svá at bæði var hann forspár ok margviss, því at Dofri var við þetta slúginn.

The opaque tone of the saga (eigi var trauþ) suggests that the lessons of Dofri are clouded in the necessary mystique that all these types of mountain dwellers are veiled in. Since menn are mentioned, this passage also indicates that Bárðr should be regarded as human — but as we see below, the word unfortunately turns out to be ambiguous. Dofri is possibly classified as a human as well, in spite of his knowledge of sorcery and his abode in the mountains. Bárðr is at least able to marry Flautungeðr Dofradóttir who, like Mjöll, is kvenna stærst but not particularly pretty. The saga states then that Flautungeðr was mennsk i móðurætt sina and the trouble with classifying giants resurfaces again. Dofri turns out to be not quite human, and indeed, still later in the chapter, he is not termed a mountain dweller but a giant: kom þar Haraldr Hálfdanarson ok fædist þar upp með Dofra jötni (p. 104).

Confusing? There seems to be no distinction between humans, giants or mountain dwellers in the Mountain of Dofri, and Bárðr certainly can be classified as both human, giant and a troll, not just by birth but also by upbringing. Perhaps it is the mysterious Dofri who instructs him in how to kill traitors in their dreams. Bárðr saga indeed explains his later disappearance into the mountains with reference to his upbringing by Dofri.

While Bárðr is studying with Dofri, King Dómbr is killed by the leader of the þursar, called Harðverkr. Having previously moved from Dofri and lost Flautungerðr, Bárðr avenges his father by killing Harðverkr and thirty þursar. Then he seems to live mainly among ordinary humans until he leaves for Iceland when Dofri's other star pupil King Haraldr láfa becomes too dominating and Bárðr settles in Iceland. The settlement narrative resembles others of the kind, apart from the fact that Bárðr is perhaps no ordinary settler in that many of his followers appear to be super- or subhuman (the hierarchy is far from unambiguous). Among them is his second cousin Porkell skinnefjá who is described as having high cheekbones, large and protruding teeth, being pop-eyed and wide-mouthed, long-necked and bulb-headed, and so on. Also on the ship are Svalr and Þófa who are described as tryld mjók (p. 108). And yet Bárðr seems at this juncture to be comfortable in the human world, even helping to rid

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5 According to Cikipedia (1971), the hero Starkadr was similarly ambiguous. She sees in him a giant humanised by Saxo in his Gesta Danorum, leis so in Gautreks saga.
the region of Svalr and Þúfa when they have metamorphosed completely into trolls (p. 113–14).

After his daughter Helga disappears, Bárðr takes a sudden turn away from the company of humans. The disappearance of his beloved daughter first makes him so enraged that he kills his own nephews, who are only eleven and twelve. Then he wounds his half-brother. He consequently becomes silent and difficult and shortly after disappears with all his possessions. This is explained by the saga not only by his sorrow but also by his upbringing and his parentage: þat var meir ætt hans at vera í stórum hellum en húsun, þvi at hann fæddist upp með Dofra í Dofrafjöllum; var hann trúllum ok likari at afli ok vexti en mennskum mannum (p. 119).

Within the framework of the saga, the explanation seems plausible enough. The very need for it suggests, though, that Bárðr is an ambiguous figure, at the same time human and not quite human — and the difference is at least partly defined by his dwellings. Whereas giants and trolls may live in mountains, Bárðr had hitherto been a part of the human world, so that people had perhaps forgotten his fostering. The ambiguity of Bárðr is perhaps the main theme of the first six chapters of Bárðar saga, and reflected in his ambiguous parentage, his constant moving between the world of men and the world of ogres. It is perhaps also reflected in his role after his disappearance: he becomes a guardian spirit and defender of the region, whom ordinary humans may summon in their hour of need. This is similar to the role that his father, also of mixed parentage, played as king and oppressor of ogres.

It is not just Bárðr who is ambiguous. As we have seen, the same applies to his father and his mother. His daughter Helga is also trúll kolluð af sumum mannum (p. 115). And after Bárðr has moved away from the human world, he inhabits a world full of a variety of ogres that are called by a multitude of names and whom it seems hard to categorise. There is a trúllkona called Hetta, an óvætt or trúll called Torfár-Kolla or Skinhúfa, a trúllkona called Hit, and a þurs, trúll or dölgr called Kolbjorn. The last is described in this manner:

Dessi maðr var mikill vexti ok mjök stórskorinn; bjúgr var hans hryggr, ok boginn í knjáam; ásjónu hafið hann ljóta ok leðiliga, svá at hann þóttist ǫnga slika sét hafa, nef hans brotit í þrim stóðum, ok várú á þvi stórir knútar; söndist þat af því þríbogit sem horn á gömlum brúturn (p. 148).

This primitive and ugly being seems far removed from the big, handsome giants that Bárðr is descended from. And indeed, in the original text of Bárðar saga, Kolbjorn is not a rist or a þóttum but a trúll or a þurs. Like Grendel, he has an ancient mother who is it mesta trúll,6 whereas his companions are usually referred to as þursar or flogð. Even more disturbingly, here and on other occasions, Kolbjorn is even referred to as maðr although that is qualified by the phrase ef svá skai kalla. Thus Bárðar saga conveys some of the confusion of ordinary humans who find themselves suddenly faced with an unidentified foreign ogre. And in spite of the aforementioned qualification, the use of the word maðr also suggests a somewhat disturbing kinship between humans and ogres.

It is precisely this confusion which Óláfr Tryggvason’s appearance in the mound of Raknarr dispels. He, as a Christian missionary king, owes his power to God

and God alone. And even though God may be three characters in one, the power source
is one. Evil, on the other hand, is chaotic, manifold and diverse. That certainly applies
to that group of supernatural beings that includes risar, jotnar, troll and pursar, which
sometimes are referred to as men, and yet they are not men. While Bárðar saga starts
by distinguishing between good and bad members of this family, somehow they all end
up as a single flock, especially in the yuletide party of Hit in Hundadalsur (ch. 13)
where Bárðr and Gestr meet with all kinds of undefined beings, some of which are
pursar (including Kolbjorn) but some are not.

The distinction between giants and trolls seems outdated when Hit throws her
party in Iceland. Bárðr himself is good and bad in turns, defending people against
ogres and heathen gods, but when faced with the true faith of Óláfr Tryggvason he
becomes just as evil as the ogres he has previously defended his region against. All
heathen things must be swept aside, even those previously considered good.8

Four Ideas About the Giant Family

Bárðar saga introduces an important distinction between giants and trolls. Then it
confuses the issue by intermarrying the polar opposites, the union producing the
ambiguous figure King Durnbr, Bárðr's father. Bárðr himself is even more mysterious
since the precise nature of his mother is vague and he becomes the foster-son of a
mountain-dweller. In spite of being descended from giants and trolls and raised and
instructed by the mountain-dweller, Bárðr is clearly at least part human. However,
even though his mother is human, she and her family have an unusually close
relationship with nature and are larger than other humans. Thus Bárðr's human side is
also somewhat monstrous, and in the end he leaves the human world and goes into the
mountains, his ambiguous heritage making him a good defender against the dark arts
of the pursar and other ogres. However, these monsters are nevertheless his extended
family, with whom he feasts at yuletide (see Simic).

The first clear idea about giants that emerges from Bárðar saga is variation.
There are many kinds of monsters that have a family relationship with giants, may
marry them, make war against them and feast with them at yule. Bárðar saga
emphasises that some of these ogres are good but others are bad. And yet they at least
in the end become a single unit, if heterogeneous. The risar that Bárðr is descended
from are handsome, while Kolbjorn the pursar is extraordinarily ugly. Most members of
the family are very large, but so are the humans that Bárðr is descended from. In fact,
while every kind of giant is likely to seem different from regular humans, the exact
nature of that difference is hard to pin down.

The second idea is a close relationship with nature. When Bárðr enters the
mountains, the saga provides the explanation that he must be heeding the call of his
upbringing with Dofri. The phrase þat var meir aett hans may also indicate that his
genealogical makeup contributes to his preference for mountains, since the word aett
can mean 'family', although it may also mean 'direction' (as the word used to describe
North, South, East and West), 'inclination' or 'nature' (Fritzner, p. 1092). Scholars

7 On giants as representatives of chaos, see e.g. Clunies Ross, pp. 197–98, 262–63;
Kroesen, p. 59.
8 This is also a theme in Flateyjarbók, see Ármann Jakobsson 2003.
have frequently noted the relationship between giants and nature (see esp. Motz 1984), and mountains seem to figure strongly, especially in kennings (Meissner, pp. 255–59), although giants also may be found in forests and on the shore. Living in mountains is, of course, a somewhat general attribute of the Other, whether it is supernatural or not. The Other is not a part of civilisation and must thus be located outside it, and in Iceland, mountains would seem to be ideal for that purpose. When Bárðr leaves the human world for the Other World of the mountains, he becomes wild. Only partly wild, though, since he has also lived in the civilised world and is thus uniquely qualified to become an intermediary. This half-wildness of his life is in tune with his ancestry, which is half-human, quarter-giant and quarter-troll.

The third important idea in Bárðar saga is the ambiguous nature of the giants. Snorra-Edda casts jötnar, hrímbursar and bergrisar as the perpetual enemies of gods. If the gods were simply good, then the giants must simply be evil. Of course the situation in Snorra-Edda is far from being straightforward. The giants are not only the matter of the World and the ancestors of the gods, they also provide them with wives such as Gerðr and Skáli (see e.g. Motz 1982, Steinsland 1991). Ancestral links can be found between giants and royal families, and many of the notable protagonists of the sagas of the Icelanders have giant ancestors as well (Schulz, pp. 256–86; Ciklaminí 1966, 136–55). Bárðar saga wrestles with this ambiguity. In the giant family, there are bad attributes which the words tröll and pursar encapsulate. The former of these words, as seen in the phrase tröldóm (troll’s insight) refers to the superhuman powers that the ogres may possess and make them very dangerous indeed. The latter word refers more to the uncouth, uncivilised and barbaric aspect of the giants which make them slightly sub-human and unacceptable companions to civilised men (cf. Schulz, pp. 29–52). Unfortunately, the meanings of the two words are far from fixed, and while this may be the case in Bárðar saga and in several other sources, there is also the case of the extremely wise Mímir who lives with the frost-giants (til hrímbursa) and while Snorri Sturluson does not explicitly state that the is a hrímburs (Edda, p. 22) it certainly seems implied. Consequently, the word purs does not always refer to something that is inferior to humans, but it often does, and in Bárðar saga it probably always does.

In Bárðar saga, the author tries to explain the uncertainty of the nature of the giants in a genealogical manner. There are various types of perhaps large, sometimes ugly but always exotic races that have been living together for a while somewhere in the wilderness, in Dofrafjall, in Dumbshaf and in Snæfellsjökull. These risar, tröll, pursar, jötnar and óvættir have intermarried and produced offspring who may have the vicious, sly and underhanded nature of a troll, or they may be large, handsome and good-natured like a giant. Some of them may be barbaric pursar who bear hardly any
resemblance to civilised men. And even though they may have different names, they have merged to such a degree that they are hard to tell apart. Some are absolutely evil, some only partly so, but they can all be dangerous. And yet they can also be helpful, since their very affinity with evil make them effective helpers against ogres.

And that is the role of Bárðr Dumbsson, his father and his son Gestr in Bárðar saga. When the tröldömr of Svalr and Þúfa starts inconveniencing the people of Snæfellness, Bárðr kills them and this is considered a cleansing (p. 113). He later defends Ingjaldr of Hváll against Hetta the tröllkona and Þórr himself, and Þórir at Qxnakelda against an öttur called Torfár-Kolla (p. 124–29). Against such monsters, ordinary human powers are not enough. The people of the region need someone who lives among them and is not yet totally of them, an intermediary such as Bárðr. The very ambiguity of his nature is what makes him an effective supernatural helper. In the end, however, he has been replaced by a new and better defender against the creatures of evil, God himself, sided by his saints and missionaries.

The fourth and perhaps the most important aspect of giants in Bárðar saga is that they are old and declining. Schulz has remarked that one of the most important functions of giants is not being here any more (pp. 208–9 and 256–60). They may perhaps exist as ancestors of the living – of Egill Skalla-Grimsson and his family, for example. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, most of the second part of the saga concerns Bárðr's futile attempts to further his line (see Ármann Jakobsson 1998). His anger against Gestr is reasonable, since by turning into a Christian, Gestr has taken part in the introduction of a new age where there is no place for giants, trolls and ogres.

Bárðr himself had lived among humans but in the end he chose to become an Other. Gestr makes a different choice, thus terminating Bárðr's link with the human world. When the saga ends, Bárðr has been around for at least 150 years, so that he is very ancient, perhaps the only living settler from the day of King Harold Fairhair. By going to the Other World, he has been able to continue living, but on the other hand he is lost to the civilised world of humans. His place is no longer in the history of Iceland but in the mountains. And he has no grandchildren, no legacy. His giant role provides him with a continued existence for himself but no existence for the offspring he might have had. This is the tragedy of many supernatural Others: they may be immortal or close to immortal but they are not able to multiply themselves in the human fashion and thus provide a lasting legacy. Even while still being around somewhere in the mountains, they essentially belong to the past.

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