

Out-Thoring Thor in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*

Merrill Kaplan
(The Ohio State University)

Óláfr Tryggvason was not a friend to Thor. Numerous passages in the Longest Saga attest to the missionary king's antipathy for the red-bearded god. Several conversion *þættir* pit the King against acolytes of Thor or against the demonic spirit himself. At the Frostaping assembly, the King smashes an elaborate statue of Thor in Járnскеggi's temple (ch. 167 in AM 61, fol.). The episode is expanded in AM 62, fol. and *Flateyjarbók*, in which the King becomes incensed at being called a servant of Thor and waxes eloquent at great volume on just how unfriendly he is towards this evil spirit. In ch. 152 the King even takes the hand of an apparently demonically-animated wooden idol of Thor in a kind of duel and pulls it into a fire. It burns to ashes at once. The antagonism portrayed in *Mesta* between Óláfr Tryggvason and Thor is not news, and it may well reflect the importance of the cult of Thor in the late pagan period. Less remarked upon are the sections of *Mesta* that show the King not just opposed to Thor but also surpassing him by excelling in the Thoronic sphere. In ch. 213 of *Mesta*,¹ Óláfr meets Thor face-to-face and then goes on to show the old god up as a smiter of trolls and female monsters and a cleanser of the land. There and perhaps also in the Akkerisfrakki episode earlier in the saga (ch. 155), we find the missionary king outdoing Thor at his signature activities and replacing him in the cosmic order.

The first section of ch. 213 describes the King's encounter with a being who, though ultimately identified as a demonic entity, is also recognizable as the Thor we are familiar with from eddic poetry and Snorri's writings. AM 61, fol. characteristically, has no heading here, but AM 54, fol. heads the section with *fra þor*, and AM 62, fol. with *ol konungr hitti þor*. King Óláfr is sailing off Hálogaland when a man standing on a bluff (a *hamarr* in fact, a word closely associated with Thor; see Lindow 1994) hails his ship. The fellow is hoping to hitch a ride south. The King takes him aboard. The fellow is young-seeming, powerfully built, and red-bearded. He roughhouses with the King's men, thumping them quite hard at times and to all appearances enjoying himself immensely. He and the men trade insulting words, and he says that they are weaklings, unfit to follow so worthy a king or crew such a magnificent ship (the ship is the ornately-decorated Ormrinn, which the King liberated from Rauðr inn rammi two chapters previously).² Furthermore, he goes on, the ship had been more fearsomely crewed when Rauðr inn rammi owned it, so well crewed that Rauðr had not needed to call upon the strength of such as he was (and the red-bearded fellow means himself) for military purposes but more for entertainment and counsel. But you, he concludes, are all miserable weaklings.

The men bring him before the King, who asks him if he knows any *form fræði*. He replies with the story of how the area they were sailing by had long ago been inhabited by giants. Nearly all of them perished in some event, but two giantesses had

¹ I rely on the text in (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958-2000: II, 134-42).

² My abstract misidentifies the ship as the Long Serpent, but Ormrinn langi has yet to be built at this point in the saga. Finnur Jónsson makes the same error in reference to a verse in ch. 212 in (*Skj.* B I: 169).

survived. These women had caused great trouble to the humans who then settled the region until people learned to call upon 'the Red Beard' for aid (*þar til landz menn toko þat rað at heita aa þetta hit rauða skegg til hialpar ser*). Then he had seized his hammer and struck the giantesses, killing them, and ever since then the people of this region have called on him when they were in need. But now the King has cleared out so many of his friends that it is worth some vengeance. At this he looks back towards the King, grins, and flips himself overboard. He sinks into the water and is never seen again.

Aside from the abrupt exit (and perhaps the performance of *forn fræði*, not normally Thor's forte) the passage attaches nothing but familiar characteristics of the mythological Thor to the red-bearded speaker. Apart from his physical appearance and the wielding of a hammer as a weapon, he is a brawler of great physical strength. This accords well with the Thor of the mythology, who is a brute-force sort of fellow (in *Hymiskviða*, for example, he tears the head off an ox). This Red Beard is a slayer of giantesses, which is a speciality of Thor's over and above his function as a destroyer of trolls generally (Lindow 1988); (McKinnell 2005: 109-25). Thor does in Geirrøðr's daughters Gjálp and Greip; in the last lines of *Þrymskviða* he slays Þrymr's sister. In *Hárbarðsljóð* he boasts of having killed *brúðir þqvisar* and *brúðir berserkia*, and he is credited with the deaths of otherwise unknown giantesses whose names appear in skaldic verse by Vetrliði Sumarliðason and Þorbjörn díarskáld (on which see esp. Lindow 1988). It seems clear that the author of this passage has the mythological Thor in mind, even though he understands Red Beard to be some manner of demonic spirit, and knowing that helps us make sense of the balance of the chapter.

The rest of the chapter describes the attempted revenge promised by the grinning Red Beard. It is a very charming passage, for it makes us privy to the complaints of three very put-upon trolls. All three have tangled with King Óláfr and come out the worse for it. The passage runs as follows: The King is still in northern Norway with his retinue. Rumors are circulating that the nearby Naumadalr is experiencing much *tröllagangr* since the death of Jarl Hákon. Two curious *hirðmenn* sneak off inland in the middle of the night to see if the rumors are true. They come upon a cave in which a group of trolls and evil spirits is having a meeting. The men hide themselves and listen. One troll is clearly the leader, and he asks the assembly whether they know that Óláfr Tryggvason has moved in. The trolls are well aware of their new neighbor and have received bad treatment at his hands. The troll chieftain wants details.

The first troll to tell its tale is a former inhabitant of Gaulardalr and an old friend of Jarl Hákon. He was displeased when Óláfr moved in (the troll calls him *þessi hinn grimmi maðr*), and when Óláfr's men started playing games near his residence, he decided to take action. Twice, having taken on human form, the troll infiltrated the game and broke a few fellows' arms and legs. But the third time the troll tried this, he caught hold of the King, and the King caught hold of him and pressed his arms to his sides with a grip like glowing iron, crushing him so that he cried out. The troll got away, but only barely, and he was badly burned. He thought it best to move house to Naumadalr.

Games are a commonplace of saga, but this scene recalls how Geirrøðr invites Thor to play a game, one meant to be fatal to the god. Not only is that combat with a

giant framed as a *leikr* by Snorri (*Skáldsk.* 26), the same word the troll in *Mesta* uses of the men's games, but the giant gets the worst of it after being burned badly when Thor tosses back the lump of glowing iron Geirrœðr has thrown at him. The detail of the glowing hot iron might be coincidence (it is literal in one case and metaphorical in the other), but in both cases a giant or troll enters a game and intends to harm a god or human with an element of the game itself: at Gaulardalr that element is gripping and grappling, at Geirrœðargarðr it is a kind of ball. The giant/troll is defeated when that element is turned back upon him: Thor throws the ball back at Geirrœðr, and the King overpowers the Gaulardalr troll with a bear hug. The two incidents are not parallel in all ways, but they are close enough to show that the King deals with this troll in a Thoronic way, and in doing so he is no less effective than Thor is elsewhere.

The King's crushing grip also sounds like a wrestling move, which recalls Thor's wrestling match with Elli, a match he did not win (*Gylf.* 46). Óláfr, on the other hand, bests his opponent here. Even without reaching for such specific parallels from the wider mythology, such violent play is identified with Thor in this very chapter. Red Beard knocks the King's men about in the earlier part of the chapter, though it is not enough to drive off the King. However, the King's rough treatment of the disguised troll later in the chapter causes him to pick up and move. As a grappler and cleanser of the land, then, King Óláfr outdoes Thor as he is portrayed here.

The second troll in Naumadalr to recount his woes had taken another approach. He disguised himself as a beautiful woman and appeared at a feast held by the King. The troll brought along a drinking horn and in the horn a drink mixed with poison and many other bad things besides. In due course the King called her over to pour for him, and the troll's heart leapt at the thought that Óláfr would drink the noxious stuff and die. Instead the King took the horn, up-ended it over the troll—who then suffered the evil and poison it contained—and then bashed it into the troll's head, wounding it severely.

The most Thor-like aspect of the King's actions here is simply that he strikes and defeats a female monster, or at any rate a monster who appears female. As already mentioned, dispatching female monsters is a peculiar speciality of Thor. Even if the reader does not recall any of the numerous examples from *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Pórsdrápa*, or other sources on the mythology, he will have been reminded in the earlier part of the chapter that the red-bearded god kills giantesses by Red Beard himself.

The woman/troll defeated here by the King had threatened him with a noxious liquid. There may be another Thoronic parallel here, for Thor is threatened by a giantess with noxious liquid at least once. On his journey to visit Geirrœðr, Thor struggles to cross the dangerous waters of the river Vimur, waters made more dangerous by the giantess Gjálp who urinates into the flow upstream (*Skáldsk.* 18). Thor makes a habit of wading through rivers (*Gylf.* 15, *Grm.* 29). The mythology suggests that rivers, waves, and bodies of water were conceived of as inimical feminine forces and personified as giantesses (Clunies Ross 1981: 373); (McKinnell 2005: 110-11), and so we might understand any or all of these crossings as combats between Thor and giantesses wielding dangerous liquids.³ King Óláfr does not cross a

³ Note also the giantesses who urinate in Njörðr's mouth, reported in *Lokasenna* 34, clearly an agonistic moment between a god and female monsters *cum* noxious liquid, but without any explicit reference to rivers in the reference that survives.

river in ch. 213 of *Mesta*. He is merely handed a drinking horn, and a drinking horn and its contents is not a river. Then again, a drinking horn is not the sea either, except in Útgarða-Loki's hall, where Thor is challenged to drain a horn containing the ocean and finds he cannot (*Gylf*. 36). The King, unlike Thor in Útgarða-Loki's hall, understands that the drink is not what it seems, and he does not drain his horn by drinking it, but instead wisely dumps it over his would-be attacker, so defeating her. We might take away the impression that King Óláfr is at least more perceptive than Thor. Beyond that, the associations among giantesses, bodies of water, and drinking horns may add further depth to the King's resemblance to Thor in this moment, though I would not press the point very hard. Even without them, the King is shown to be at least the equal of Red Beard as he is depicted in ch. 213 of *Mesta* in vanquishing an inimical female.

The third troll's account of his woes is similar to that of the second. This one says he also took on the shape of a beautiful woman. He then entered the King's quarters late in the evening, when the King was preparing for sleep, dressed in his linen pajamas with his bare feet sticking out. By magic the troll caused the King's foot to itch. Seeing the attractive woman, the King called her over to scratch his foot, and as she did so, he drifted off to sleep. Seeing his chance, the troll prepared to do in the King with his evil powers, but the King suddenly woke and struck the troll in the head with a book (presumably a prayer book). The troll fled, and now, he complains to his fellow trolls, he is maimed for life.

Having heard all this, Óláfr's eavesdropping *hirðmenn* sneak away from the troll assembly and return to the ships. The next day they report everything to the King, who confirms that it is all true, even pointing to the spot on his foot where the troll had touched him. Soon after, the King and the Bishop travel from settlement to settlement all over the region, sprinkling holy water on stone, hill, and dale (*vm biðrg ok hamra. dali ok hola*), driving out *illar vættir* and *óhreinir andir*, freeing the populace from their tyranny. In the fall, the King travels south to Trondheim. So ends the chapter.

The third troll, like the second, is in female form, and therefore the encounter is another defeat of a female monster and typically Thoronic as such. Much as I would like to have found another parallel with Thor's encounter with Geirrøðr and his daughters in the King's defeat of the third troll, I do not see one. But a perfect parallel with a specific myth of Thor is unnecessary for the present argument. Indeed, the narrative of Thor that provides the closest parallel to the accounts of King Óláfr's dealings with the trolls of Naumadalr is the first half of the same chapter of *Mesta*. The correspondence becomes quite clear when the events are summarized. In the first half of ch. 213, Red Beard appears, roughs up the King's men a little, and boasts of having slain two female monsters, ending their tyranny (*yfirgangr ok ómaki*) and making the region safe for human habitation. He also makes explicit his intent to do the King harm. In the second half of the chapter, we hear how the King had physically overpowered a troll who was roughing up his men and defeated two monsters in female form. We then see him drive all the evil beings from the area, thus freeing the locals from their tyranny (*ánauðr ok yfirgangr*), and making the region safe for human habitation. Furthermore, Thor has failed to do the King the harm he promised to visit upon him. All the manuscripts of the Longest Saga pair the encounter with Red Beard with the narratives of the trolls (though some, like *Flateyjarbók*, give Thor and the

trolls each their own chapter). They are best understood together, not just as King Óláfr's defeat of Thor (whose promised revenge is thwarted) but as the King's assumption of Thor's cosmic role as destroyer of trolls, especially female ones, cleanser of the land, and protector of humans. King Óláfr is not only the enemy of and victor over Thor—he is also Thor's replacement.

With the King's Thoronic role in ch. 213 in mind, it may be worth taking a look at the Akkerisfrakki episode, earlier in the saga in ch. 155 (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958-2000: I, 347-49). Thor is significant for a fuller understanding of the action here as well. In ch. 213, the King in disguise saves a merchant ship from dangerous conditions in a fjord near Agðarnes. The ship is in treacherous waters in worsening weather, and as the King steers up alongside them, their anchor cable snaps. The King leaps overboard and dives after it, grabs the cable as it shoots downward, and hauls the anchor back aboard.

Lindow ('Akkerisfrakki') has pointed out that the danger faced by the sailors must also be understood as spiritual danger—they are pagans, and they have invoked Freyr, Ódin, and Thor in hopes of getting a wind that will take them away from Norway to a heathen country—and the anchor likely has spiritual significance as an attribute of St. Clement.⁴ Óláfr's retrieval of the anchor is also an example of his athletic prowess, on display throughout the saga, and especially of the strong swimming that might have allowed him to escape a Clement-like grave on the seabed after the battle of Svǫldr.

But the scene also resonates with the story of Thor's fishing expedition in *Hymiskviða* and especially in *Gylfaginning* 48, where Thor drags up the World Serpent, only to have the beast sink back into the sea when the giant Hymir cuts the line. Thor throws his hammer at the Serpent, but we are not certain whether it connects. The encounter in *SnE* is equivocal at best, and the outcome is uncertain exactly because the monster sinks out of sight when the line is cut, and Thor cannot raise it again.⁵ An anchor is not the World Serpent, but the image of the line parting (whether anchor cable or fishing line) and a great weight sinking rapidly into the depths is a striking parallel. Viewed in light of that parallel, Thor's failure to retrieve the Serpent and King Óláfr's success in retrieving the anchor becomes a striking contrast.

Thor may or may not have killed the Miðgarðsormr in that encounter—sources on the myth vary. Snorri acknowledges that there is some disagreement but thinks that the Serpent survived.⁶ However, both *Gylfaginning* and *Vǫluspá* report that Thor and

⁴ Lindow notes that that first church in Niðarós was dedicated to Clement. According to *Mesta*, it was founded and dedicated by Óláfr Tryggvason not long after the Akkerisfrakki incident (ch. 164).

⁵ Thor tries to lift the serpent on another occasion, in the hall of Útgarða-Loki, when the monster appears in the form of a cat (*Gylf.* 46-47). He fails there too, but without an element like the fishing line, the parallel is much weaker.

⁶ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has argued that the version in which the combat ends in a draw and the Serpent slips away is an earlier one and the one in which Thor kills it a later one, and he associates each version with different understandings of time, reversible and irreversible respectively. Which version is represented in *Hymiskviða* is not entirely clear. Snorri, meanwhile, prefers the typologically earlier version because he incorporates the myth

the World Serpent mutually destruct at Ragnarök (*Gylf.* 51, *Vsp.* 55, 56). Thor's final battle is with the Serpent, and he does not survive. There lies another contrast. That King Óláfr is so strong a swimmer that he could raise the plunging anchor back above the surface of the water makes more plausible that he survived his own final battle at Svólör, as later chapters of *Mesta* assert he does. Without contradicting any of the meanings of the Akkerisfrakki illuminated by other scholars, it seems reasonable to assert that here too, the Longest Saga depicts Óláfr Tryggvason outdoing Thor. In raising a sinking object from the sea (contending implicitly perhaps with the giantess Rán?) and in surviving his ultimate conflict, Óláfr surpasses Thor.

In these two chapters of *Mesta*, ch. 213 set in Naumadalr and ch. 155 set off Agðanes, we find Óláfr Tryggvason grappling with trolls, killing female monsters, and performing a feat of strength involving a great weight that sinks suddenly into the depths of the ocean. We find him outdoing Thor at his signature activities and so replacing him in the cosmic order of things. The writers and compilers responsible for the Longest Saga and its overall hagiographical project were medieval Christians who clearly understood figures like Thor to be demons rather than gods or magically-gifted humans. They seem to have known something about the archaic mythology that had portrayed those figures as the allies of mankind. We see here that they knew enough about the characteristics and specific role attributed to one such figure to make literary use of those characteristics⁷ and to show the missionary king stepping into that role. It made sense to them to show Óláfr Tryggvason not only defeating Thor but out-Thoring him as well.

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into a larger history in which Thor must fight the Miðgarðsormr at Ragnarök (Meulengracht Sørensen 1986). Meulengracht Sørensen regards the final combat as secondary (1986: 270), but whether or not it is original to the myth it is integral to both *Gylfaginning* and *Völuspá*, and thus, I would argue, likely familiar to a medieval audience.

⁷ Compare the depiction of pagan gods in saints' lives discussed in Lindow (2001).

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