

# Leeds Studies in English

New Series XLIII

2012

Edited by

Alaric Hall



Editorial assistant  
Victoria Cooper

*Leeds Studies in English*

<[www.leeds.ac.uk/lse](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse)>

School of English  
University of Leeds

2012

# The Devil in Disguise? Scribal Remarks on Valgarðr inn grái in *Njáls saga*

Susanne M. Arthur

## 1. Introduction

Scribes and readers of the almost sixty extant *Njáls saga* manuscripts occasionally comment on the saga's protagonists, such as Njáll, Gunnarr, and Hallgerðr. Valgarðr inn grái, the father of Gunnarr's and Njáll's enemy, Mǫrðr, is mentioned only seven times in *Njáls saga*. Nonetheless, this minor character captivated the readers and copyists of the saga to such an extent that his soul has been damned to rot in hell in eight *Njáls saga* manuscripts dating from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Despite this definite interest in Valgarðr within the corpus of medieval and post-medieval manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, no detailed study of his character exists and he is generally mentioned only in connection with his son Mǫrðr in scholarly research. This article sheds more light on this character — seemingly disregarded by modern readers and researchers — by examining the various scribal remarks concerning Valgarðr inn grái and the reason why he received attention from scribes and readers.

## 2. Valgarðr inn grái in *Njáls saga*: A Summary

*Njáls saga* tells that Valgarðr inn grái Jörundarson lives at Hof at Rangá and traces his lineage back from his father Jörundr goði to Hrærekr slöngvanbaugi.<sup>2</sup> Some of the same information about Valgarðr's place of origin and ancestry is found in *Landnámabók*, *Kristni saga*, and *Egils saga*.<sup>3</sup> *Landnámabók* and *Egils saga* mention that Þorlaug Hrafnadóttir was Valgarðr's mother, but the texts provide no further information about him.

<sup>1</sup> Research for this article was conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation on manuscripts containing *Njáls saga*, which is connected to a research project, entitled 'The Variance of *Njáls saga*', a collaborative effort by a group of Old Norse-Icelandic scholars to study the manuscripts and reception of *Njáls saga* from different angles in preparation for a new edition of the text. More information about the project can be found at <<http://njals saga.wordpress.com>>.

<sup>2</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), pp. 68–70.

<sup>3</sup> *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), p. 351; *Biskupa sögur I*, ed. by Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Peter Foote, Íslenzk fornrit, 15, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2003), II, 6; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by

*Scribal remarks on Valgarðr inn grái*

*Njáls saga* gives more details about Valgarðr. The text says that Valgarðr marries Unnr Marðardóttir, the aunt of Gunnarr Hámundarson. Unnr enters the marriage agreement with Valgarðr inn grái without consulting her male relatives, a decision that is not well received by Gunnarr and Njáll, since Valgarðr is ‘maðr grályndr ok óvinsæll’ (‘a devious and unpopular man’).<sup>4</sup> Ólafur Hansson suggests that Valgarðr’s nickname ‘inn grái’ is derived from *grályndr* ‘devious/hostile’, and in her study of the color grey, Kirsten Wolf comes to a similar conclusion about Valgarðr’s by-name.<sup>5</sup> Wolf argues that the common translation of Valgarðr’s nickname as ‘the Grey’ is inaccurate, since *grái* does not refer to Valgarðr’s physical traits, but to his unpleasant character. Valgarðr and Unnr have a son called Mǫrðr, who is ‘slægr maðr í skapferðum ok illgjarn í ráðum’ (‘cunning by nature and malicious in counsel’).<sup>6</sup> Jon Geir Høyesteren believes that Mǫrðr may have inherited these negative character traits from his father, arguing that Mǫrðr’s parents may be responsible for their son’s malicious character.<sup>7</sup>

Valgarðr inn grái is mentioned next as a guest at Gunnarr’s and Hallgerðr’s wedding.<sup>8</sup> He and his brother Úlfr arguði, as well as their sons Mǫrðr and Runólfr, are invited to the festivities and seated on the same side of the table as Gunnarr’s uncle, Þráinn Sigfússon. Robert Cook points out that ‘the seating arrangement, with Njal and his family on one side of Gunnarr, and the Sigfussons and their allies on his other side, foreshadows the major conflict in the saga’, in which Njáll and his family represent Gunnarr’s allies, whereas the people sitting on the side of the Sigfússons will cause Gunnarr’s ultimate demise.<sup>9</sup>

Later, the saga reports that Þorgeirr Starkaðarson meets up with Mǫrðr and his father Valgarðr in order to receive help from them to prosecute Gunnarr for injuring Þorgeirr and his father Starkaður and killing many of their followers during a sneak-attack on Gunnarr. Valgarðr and Mǫrðr offer Þorgeirr their support only after receiving a high sum from him. The decision to assist Þorgeirr consolidates their roles as adversaries of Gunnarr and Njáll.

When Gunnarr is successfully outlawed, but refuses to leave Iceland, Gissurr hvíti, Mǫrðr’s father-in-law, calls together all of Gunnarr’s enemies at the Althing, amongst them Valgarðr inn grái and Mǫrðr.<sup>10</sup> While Mǫrðr is present when Gunnarr is ultimately attacked and killed, the saga does not mention Valgarðr inn grái as being one of the attackers.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, his presence at the meeting with Gissurr hvíti indicates at least an indirect involvement in Gunnarr’s death.

Valgarðr is mentioned again when Þangbrandr tries (unsuccessfully) to convert Iceland to Christianity. The saga reports that Njáll accepts the new faith, but ‘þeir Mǫrðr ok Valgarðr gingu mjök í móti trú’ (‘Mord and Valgard fought hard against the faith’).<sup>12</sup> Considering that

Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk fornrit*, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 70; *Njal’s Saga*, trans. by Robert Cook (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ólafur Hansson, ‘Grátt’, *Mánudagsblaðið*, 7 November 1960, p. 2; Kirsten Wolf, ‘The Color Grey in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 108 (2009), 222–38 (p. 234).

<sup>6</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 70; *Njal’s Saga*, trans. by Cook, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Geir Høyesteren, *Personlighet og avvik. En studie i islendingesagaens menneskebilde — med særlig vekt på Njála* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 2000), pp. 100, 136; see also Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga. A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> *Njal’s Saga*, trans. by Robert Cook, p. 316; see also Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron. Critical Approaches to Njáls saga* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), pp. 102–3; Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 183–84.

<sup>11</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 185–91.

<sup>12</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 261; *Njal’s Saga*, trans. by Cook, p. 175.

neither Mǫrðr nor Valgarðr appear in any other account of the Christianization of Iceland,<sup>13</sup> it seems probable that the author adds this information to contrast the ideal Christian character, Njáll, with the two malicious pagan antagonists, who later become responsible for Njáll's death. Einar Ól. Sveinsson points out that some manuscripts of *Njáls saga* leave out Valgarðr's name in this passage.<sup>14</sup>

Valgarðr's last appearance is towards the middle of the saga in chapter 107, which begins by reporting Valgarðr's return to Iceland from abroad.<sup>15</sup> His son, Mǫrðr, recently lost many supporters after Njáll managed to establish a new *goðorð* for Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, his foster son. Hǫskuldr is depicted as a Jesus-like figure, a martyr and saint, whose dying words are 'Guð hjálpi mér, en fyrirgefi yðr!' ('may God help me and forgive you!').<sup>16</sup> This is in stark contrast to the description of Mǫrðr and Valgarðr. Valgarðr is outraged that his son did not take better care of his *goðorð* and lost power and supporters. He demands his son goad Njáll's sons into killing Hǫskuldr, which would ultimately lead to the deaths of Njáll's sons and Njáll himself. Mǫrðr is doubtful about his ability to accomplish this task, but Valgarðr provides him with a plan to gain the trust of Njáll's sons through gifts and therefore turn them against Hǫskuldr by spreading slander. They agree that Mǫrðr will put this plan into action and he does so successfully later in the saga.

After this conversation, Mǫrðr, who appears to have accepted the Christian faith with the rest of the country in 1000 A.D., asks his father to convert. Valgarðr refuses and asks his son to renounce Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Mǫrðr, however, stays true to the new faith. An infuriated Valgarðr destroys all of Mǫrðr's crosses and holy objects. Shortly thereafter, Valgarðr falls ill and dies, a sign of God's supremacy, according to Lars Lönnroth.<sup>18</sup> The composer of *Njáls saga* concludes Valgarðr's story by stating that 'þá tók Valgarðr sótt ok andaðisk, ok var hann heygðr' ('then Valgard fell sick and died and was buried in a mound').<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Recent Old Norse Scholarship on Valgarðr inn grái and Mǫrðr Valgarðsson

Modern scholarship generally focuses its attention on Valgarðr's son, Mǫrðr, only referring to Valgarðr in connection with his son. Robert Cook points out that Mǫrðr has often been compared to antagonistic characters, such as Iago in *Othello*, Loki, or the devil himself. He mentions, furthermore, that Mǫrðr's name is 'so infamous in Iceland that it fell into centuries-long disuse'.<sup>20</sup> Cook, who tries to paint Mǫrðr in a somewhat less diabolical light than other scholars, mentions that Mǫrðr — to a certain extent — plays an important role in the saga, particularly his goading of the son's of Njáll into killing Hǫskuldr.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, he does

<sup>13</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 261 n. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 261 n. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 274.

<sup>16</sup> Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, pp. 114, 148; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 281; *Njal's Saga*, trans. by Cook, p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 275.

<sup>18</sup> *Njáls saga*, p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 275; *Njal's Saga*, trans. by Cook, p. 184.

<sup>20</sup> 'Mörður Valgarðsson', in *Sagnheimur. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 80th birthday, 26th May 2001*, ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek, *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia*, 6 (Wien: Fassbaender, 2001), pp. 63–77 (p. 63).

<sup>21</sup> 'Mörður Valgarðsson', pp. 70–71.

not emphasize the fact that Valgarðr is the one who gives his son the idea in the first place. He mentions Valgarðr's incitement, but without highlighting that this illustrates Valgarðr's important involvement in his son's actions. Cook concludes that Mǫrðr starts out as an evil character, but later redeems himself.<sup>22</sup> It seems no coincidence that Mǫrðr begins to redeem himself only after Valgarðr's death. He carries out his father's last evil plan, but is subsequently freed from his devilish father's influence and ready for redemption.

While most scholars focus their attention on Mǫrðr or Valgarðr and Mǫrðr as a tightly connected father-son duo, some scholars refer to Valgarðr more individually, emphasizing his evil and malicious character. Jon Geir Høyersten describes Valgarðr's plans to goad Njáll's sons into killing Hǫskuldr as 'diabolske instrukser' ('diabolical instructions'),<sup>23</sup> an interpretation that relates to Richard F. Allen's theory that the medieval readership of *Njáls saga* would have associated Valgarðr's plans 'with a pagan malice' because of his refusal of the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup>

Lars Lönnroth maintains that in the father-son duo, Mǫrðr is 'even more villainous' than Valgarðr. Lönnroth considers Valgarðr's behavior 'irrelevant to a fair judgment of his son', arguing that Valgarðr is merely a tool used by the narrator to emphasize Mǫrðr's evil character, since most readers 'are susceptible to such arguments as "like father, like son", and "by their fruits ye shall know them"'.<sup>25</sup> This interpretation might, however, be based on the fact that Mǫrðr plays a larger role in the story. As mentioned above, Mǫrðr must be seen as a product of his father's and mother's bad character traits. Moreover, Lönnroth calls Mǫrðr 'an agent of demonic conspiracies', since his father Valgarðr, who has given his son instructions on how to put an end to Njáll's family, is depicted as destroying Christian objects.<sup>26</sup> The use of the word 'agent' for Mǫrðr, someone who acts on behalf of another (in this case Valgarðr), negates Lönnroth's earlier argument that Valgarðr's behavior is irrelevant, and strengthens the interpretation put forth in this article, that Valgarðr is the diabolical puppet-master, possessed by the devil, whereas Mǫrðr is merely a pawn in his father's hands.

#### **4. Scribal Remarks and Readers' Comments On Valgarðr inn grái**

The composer of *Njáls saga* concludes Valgarðr's story by stating that 'þá tók Valgarðr sótt ok andaðisk, ok var hann heygðr' ('Then Valgard fell sick and died and was buried in a mound').<sup>27</sup> Most of the almost sixty extant manuscripts of *Njáls saga* let Valgarðr's life end with these words. In *Oddabók* (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 466 4to),<sup>28</sup> a fifteenth-century copy of *Njáls saga*, the scribe, however, adds 'ok fari bannsettr' (fol. 38r) at the very end of the chapter. Sverrir Tómasson very colloquially translates the phrase as 'fuck him',<sup>29</sup> though a more literal translation would be 'and may he be dammed'. *Oddabók* contains other such variants. Gunnarr's enemies, including Valgarðr's son Mǫrðr, are called

<sup>22</sup> 'Mörður Valgarðsson', p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> *Personlighet og avvik*, p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> *Fire and Iron*, pp. 117–18 n. 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Njáls saga*, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> *Njáls saga*, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 275; *Njal's Saga*, trans. by Cook, p. 184.

<sup>28</sup> Hereafter, all manuscripts are held in Reykjavík's Stofnun Árna Magnússonar unless otherwise stated.

<sup>29</sup> Sverrir Tómasson, 'The Textual Problems of *Njáls Saga*. One Work or Two?', in *On Editing Old Scandinavian Texts: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. by Fulvio Ferrari and Massimiliano Bampi, Labirinti, 119 (Trento: Università Degli Studi di Trento, 2009), pp. 39–56 (p. 53).

*skækjusunir* ‘sons of whores’ (fol. 25<sup>v</sup>) when they gather to attack Gunnarr,<sup>30</sup> and Mǫrðr is referred to as a ‘þurs(?) ærulaus’ (‘dishonorable numskull’; fol. 39<sup>r</sup>).<sup>31</sup>

Jón Karl Helgason considers these variants in Oddabók ‘a belated literary revenge for the death of individual saga characters’, arguing that ‘they testify more generally to the tendency of the Icelandic audience to think about the saga-plot in terms of heroes and villains’.<sup>32</sup> Sverrir Tómasson maintains that ‘additional variants or comments are part of the work’s reception’.<sup>33</sup>

Valgarðr’s reception as an evil old man who shall rot in hell is not only illustrated in Oddabók by the added ‘ok fari bannsettr’, but also in other, younger copies of *Njáls saga*. AM 396 fol. and AM 163 d fol., both seventeenth-century manuscripts, are clearly related to Oddabók.<sup>34</sup> AM 163 d fol. could be a direct copy of AM 396 fol. or vice versa. Neither manuscript has a precise dating, but my ongoing research indicates that AM 396 fol. is earlier (early-mid seventeenth century), while AM 163 d fol., is later (mid-late seventeenth century). Both manuscripts omit the *skækjusunir*-variant found in Oddabók (AM 396 fol., fol. 118<sup>r</sup>; AM 163 d fol., fol. 19<sup>r</sup>), but — like AM 466 4to — refer to Mǫrðr as *ærulaus* (‘dishonorable’; AM 396 fol., fol. 127<sup>v</sup>; AM 163 d fol., fol. 25<sup>r</sup>). The fact that neither manuscript preserves the noun preceding *ærulaus* is presumably due to the fact that it had become illegible.<sup>35</sup> They show a clear connection to Oddabók in the section where Valgarðr dies. Both manuscripts end the chapter with ‘ok var hann þar heigðr hundheiðinn ok þrífist hann alldreí. Bannsettr!’ (‘and then he was buried in a mound, the despicable heathen, and he will never thrive. Damned one!’; AM 396 fol., fol. 127<sup>r</sup>; AM 163 d fol., fol. 24<sup>v</sup>).

Similar sentiments are found in GKS 1003 fol., a vellum manuscript written by Páll Sveinsson in the South of Iceland in 1670, textually related to Oddabók, AM 396 fol., and AM 163 d fol. Páll Sveinsson also lets Valgarðr die with the words ‘ok var þar heigðr hundheiðinn og þrífist hann alldreí’ (fol. 92<sup>r</sup>), but omits *bannsettur*, possibly because the manuscript was written as a prestige object for the farmer Jón Eyjólfsson of Múli and other pious men in the Rangárvellir district of southern Iceland.<sup>36</sup> Páll Sveinsson may have regarded such foul language inappropriate for the intended readership of GKS 1003 fol.

<sup>30</sup> See also Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga*, *Studia Islandica*, 13 (Reykjavík: Leiftur, 1953), p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> See also Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Studies in the Manuscript Tradition*, pp. 18–19. The word *þurs* is almost illegible in the manuscript today, which explains why Einar Ól. Sveinsson relates his doubts about his reading by adding the question mark: *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 281 n. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *The Rewriting of Njáls saga: Translation, Ideology, and Icelandic Sagas*, *Topics in Translation*, 16 (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1999), p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> ‘The Textual Problems of *Njáls Saga*’, p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> For a printed discussion of the manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, see Jón Þorkelsson, ‘Om håndskrifterne af Njála’, in *Njála udgivet efter gamle håndskrifter af Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab*, ed. by Konráð Gíslason and Eiríkur Jónsson, Íslendinga sögur, udgiven efter gamle haandskrifter af Det kongelige nordiske oldskrift-selskab, 3–4, 2 vols (Copenhagen: Thiele, 1889), II, 765–83; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson; and Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Studies in the Manuscript Tradition*. The participants of the research project ‘The Variance of *Njáls saga*’ (see n. 1 above), including myself, are in the process of reexamining the relationships of the various manuscripts to establish a new stemma.

<sup>35</sup> See n. 31 above.

<sup>36</sup> For the history of GKS 1003 fol., see Desmond Slay, ‘On the Origin of Two Icelandic Manuscripts in the Royal Library in Copenhagen’, *Opuscula*, 1 (1960), 143–50; Susanne Miriam Arthur, ‘The Importance of Marital and Maternal Ties in the Distribution of Icelandic Manuscripts from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century’, *Gripla*, 23 (2012), 201–33 (available at <[http://www.academia.edu/2323169/The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Marital\\_and\\_Maternal\\_Ties\\_in\\_the\\_Distribution\\_of\\_Icelandic\\_Manuscripts\\_from\\_the\\_Middle\\_Ages\\_to\\_the\\_Seventeenth\\_Century](http://www.academia.edu/2323169/The_Importance_of_Marital_and_Maternal_Ties_in_the_Distribution_of_Icelandic_Manuscripts_from_the_Middle_Ages_to_the_Seventeenth_Century)>).

A more poetic way of sending Valgarðr to hell is found in London, British Library, Add. 4867 and Reykjavík, National and University Library of Iceland, Lbs. 222 fol., both written by Jón Þórðarson, likely for Magnús Jónsson at Vigur in the Westfjords of Iceland, between 1690 and 1698. After the mention of Valgarðr's burial, Jón Þórðarson writes the verse: 'en sálin fór í sælu þrot, af sannri trú hafði allrei not' ('but the soul went to a place lacking salvation (=hell), never having used the true faith'; BL Add. 4867, fol. 58<sup>r</sup>; Lbs. 222 fol., fol. 302<sup>v</sup>).

The wording of the unknown scribe of Copenhagen, Royal Library, Kall 612 4to, written in 1753 in Seyðisfjörður (Westfjords), is more straightforward. He simply notes that Valgarðr 'var heigður og fór til skrattans' ('was buried in a mound and went to the devil'; Kall 612 4to, fol. 127<sup>r</sup>). In a similar fashion, Jakob Sigurðsson, scribe of Copenhagen, The Arnamagnæan Institute, AM Acc. 50 (1770, north-east Iceland), concludes that Valgarðr 'dó l:þar tók skrattinn við eign sinni:| og var hann heigður' ('died l:then the devil took what was his:| and he was buried in a mound'; fol. 82<sup>r</sup>).

It is possible that the additions by some of these scribes and readers have to do with the fact that Valgarðr refuses to accept Christianity and destroys holy objects. His being referred to as a *hundheiðinn* ('despicable heathen') in AM 396 fol, AM 163 d fol., and GKS 1003 fol. and Jón Þórðarson's short verse in BL Add. 4867 and Lbs. 222 fol., which offers comments on Valgarðr's rejection of Christianity, can be interpreted in this way. Nonetheless, it is likely that Valgarðr's malicious behavior and his indirect involvement in the killing of Gunnarr and Njáll and his family is also responsible for people wishing him a life in hell. This assumption is supported by the fact that three of the seventeenth-century manuscripts, AM 396 fol., AM 163 d fol., and GKS 1003 fol., add or copy another comment. After Valgarðr and Mǫrðr agree to goad Njáll's sons into killing Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and, thereby, eventually cause Njáll's and his sons' deaths, the three manuscripts add in parentheses 'fái þeir skamm báðir' ('shame on both of them'; AM 396 fol., 127<sup>r</sup>; AM 163 d fol., 24<sup>v</sup>; GKS 1003 fol., fol. 92<sup>r</sup>). The eighteenth-century scribe Jakob Sigurðsson directly tells Valgarðr 'l:Bölvaður vertu fyrir ráðin:|' ('be cursed for your advice'; AM Acc. 50, fol. 82<sup>r</sup>), after Valgarðr orders Mǫrðr: 'vil ek nú, at þú launir þeim því, at þeim dragi öllum til bana' ('now I want you to repay them in a way that will drag them all to their deaths').<sup>37</sup> The copyists and readers of *Njáls saga* were obviously enraged by Valgarðr's malevolent character and behavior.

## 5. Conclusion: The Reception of Valgarðr inn grái

The description of Valgarðr shows that the composer of *Njáls saga* used him as the ultimate antagonist. His refusal of the Christian faith and his attempt to convince his son to revoke his new-found belief portray Valgarðr not only as a mean and hostile man looking for revenge, but as a devil-like figure using his son as a tool in his evil plans. Valgarðr and his son stand in stark contrast to the ideal Christians, Njáll and the messiah-like Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, whose deaths Valgarðr wants to cause. The readers of *Njáls saga*, well-versed in Christian tradition, would certainly have picked up on this contrast of good versus evil.<sup>38</sup> There are even subtle indications that at least one of the aforementioned scribes may have considered Valgarðr and Mǫrðr to be not only bad humans, but in fact evil demons.

<sup>37</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 275; *Njal's Saga*, trans. by Cook, p. 183.

<sup>38</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, *The Rewriting of Njáls saga*, p. 23.

When Valgarðr is first mentioned in chapter 25 and his son Mǫrðr is born, Páll Sveinsson, the scribe of GKS 1003 fol., adds in the margin: ‘illur vættur kemur hér við sögu’ (‘an evil supernatural being comes here into the story’; fol. 71<sup>r</sup>). The marginal note likely refers only to Mǫrðr. Nonetheless, the fact that Valgarðr’s son is described as a *vættur*, ‘a supernatural being’, implies that Valgarðr himself was also seen by Páll Sveinsson as an otherworldly being. The citations of the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* lists fifty examples of *vættur*.<sup>39</sup> The examples reveal that *vættur* can refer to heathen gods, usually suggesting that these *heiðnar vættir* (‘heathen supernatural beings’) should not be worshipped;<sup>40</sup> troll-like supernatural beings; and evil spirits associated with the devil. The latter is clear from *Niðrstigningar saga* (*The History of the Descent into Hell*), where *illar vættir* refers to evil spirits living in hell,<sup>41</sup> and in Hauksbók (AM 544 4to), where it says that the sign of the cross is a defense against ‘dioflum oc illum vettum’ (the devil and evil spirits’).<sup>42</sup> Considering the close connection between the devil and his evil spirits (*vættir*) it is reasonable to assume that Mǫrðr and Valgarðr were in a similar fashion linked to Satan by Páll Sveinsson. Other manuscripts, such as Kall 612 4to and AM Acc. 50, make the same connection by relating that Valgarðr ‘went to the devil’ after his death and that ‘the devil took what was his’.

While modern readership and researchers focus their attention merely on Mǫrðr, it appears that medieval and post-medieval readers of *Njáls saga* noticed the importance of Valgarðr and his strong involvement in his son’s action. Even though Valgarðr does not play a dominant role in *Njáls saga*, his actions are a driving force behind the saga, since Valgarðr’s influence on his son’s affairs leads to the deaths of Gunnarr, Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and ultimately Njáll and his sons. While Mǫrðr starts out as an evil character, but has a chance to redeem himself,<sup>43</sup> Valgarðr never achieves redemption and dies — likely due to God’s supremacy — after committing his final act of evil: the destruction of holy, Christian objects. It is, therefore, understandable that the readership of *Njáls saga* showed a particular dislike for Valgarðr inn grái, the malicious old man, the pagan, possessed by the devil and responsible for the deaths of the saga’s most virtuous heroes, and he was for these reasons damned by scribes and readers to rot in hell for all eternity.

<sup>39</sup> The citations are accessible via <<http://dataonp.hum.ku.dk>>; the dictionary itself has not yet reached v-: *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose/Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* (Copenhagen: Arnamagnæan Commission/ Arnamagnæanske kommission, 1983–).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, *Hauksbók udgiven efter de Arnamagnæanske håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675, 4° samt forskellige papirshåndskrifter*, ed. by Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Thiele, 1892–96), p. 157 (accessed from <<http://www.septentrionalia.net/etexts/hauksbok.pdf>>).

<sup>41</sup> *Heilagra Manna Sögur: Fortællinger og Legender om hellige Mænd og Kvinder*, ed. by C. R. Unger, 2 vols (Christiania: Bentzen, 1877), II, 5 (accessed from <<http://books.google.com/books?id=IAEDAAAQAAJ>> and <<http://books.google.com/books?id=emcJAAAAQAAJ>>).

<sup>42</sup> ed. by Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson, p. 169.

<sup>43</sup> Cook, ‘Mörður Valgarðsson’, p. 75.