

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Two of Þórr's Great Fights according to Hymiskviða', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 20 (1989), 7-27

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Leeds Studies in English
School of English
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Two of Þórr's Great Fights according to *Hymiskviða*

Margaret Clunies Ross

Both in his writings, notably in 'Beowulf's Three Great Fights' (1955)¹, and in his teaching over the years, Leslie Rogers has always promoted a view of *Beowulf* as an Anglo-Saxon poem in which the structural seams show, even though its Christian poet was guided by a moral purpose in reworking older heroic material. He has also consistently advocated the possibility of a relatively late date for *Beowulf*, in his 1955 article following Schücking's dating of about 900, long before the present decade in which it has become fashionable to propose a date in the Viking Age, possibly as late as the reign of Cnut.² Palaeographical studies of the *Beowulf* manuscript³ have strengthened the hand of those who suggest that the poem as we have it is contemporary with the manuscript itself, which Neil Ker assigned to the late tenth or the beginning of the eleventh century.⁴

Perhaps it was Leslie's knowledge of things Norse that gave him a nose for the nature of *Beowulf*'s composition and for the possibility of its Viking Age date. At any rate, the hypotheses he espoused are of considerable interest to students of medieval Scandinavian literature, both of the Viking Age and of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As most of the extant literature comes to us in Icelandic manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, even though it may have had older antecedents, we look with renewed interest on an eleventh-century *Beowulf* composed in a Viking context, or even, as Roberta Frank argues, in an Alfredian or post-Alfredian Viking context.⁵ Both a relatively late date and a Scandinavian context allow us to compare *Beowulf*'s reinterpretation of pre-Christian literature in the light of a Christian view of history with the way in which Icelandic poets and story-tellers of the Middle Ages reinterpreted their inherited traditions. On both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels one can see similarities between the *Beowulf* poet's handling of his disparate material and the changes wrought by Icelandic poets on their traditional myths in response to shifts

in ideology and *mentalité* that had occurred in the conversion period and the two hundred years that followed (c. 1000–1200).

The corpus of Icelandic poems known as the Elder or Poetic Edda offers us a group of mythological and heroic texts of uncertain age whose subject matter is traditional and Germanic, like *Beowulf*s. Like *Beowulf* also, these poems are in the common Germanic alliterative verse-form. Most are extant in a single manuscript from c. 1270, the Codex Regius (GkS 2365 4^{to}) which used to be in the Royal Library, Copenhagen, until its return to Iceland in 1971. The text of the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (composed c. 1225) also contains poetry in eddic verse-forms, and one of the manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* (AM 748 1 4^{to}), which dates from the early fourteenth century, contains part of a collection of eddic poems, most of which are also in the Codex Regius.

One of the eddic poems in both the Codex Regius and AM 748 1 4^{to} is *Hymiskviða*. It is not possible to date the work, except in the context of the two manuscripts that contain it, but most scholars have been inclined to view it as the literary product of the latest period of composition in the eddic mode in Iceland, without being able to define this period precisely.⁶ However, the poet of *Hymiskviða* has worked together several myths which are probably quite a lot older than the text as we now have it and, like the *Beowulf* poet, has created a new synthesis and therefore a new interpretation of earlier narratives.

Just as *Beowulf* juxtaposes three great fights of its hero and suggests their interrelationship on the paradigmatic level, so *Hymiskviða* joins two major exploits of the god Þórr, his acquisition of a brewing cauldron from the giant Hymir on behalf of the gods and his fight with the World Serpent, Miðgarðsormr. We have no other example of the myth of Þórr's fetching of the brewing cauldron, so cannot judge the extent of the *Hymiskviða* poet's innovation, but there are a number of extant versions of the god's struggle with Miðgarðsormr, both from the Viking Age and from the thirteenth century, in verbal and visual media. Meulengracht Sørensen has recently undertaken a comparative analysis of all these variants and has made suggestions about the development of the myth in the Viking Age, which this article takes up.⁷ However, it is only in *Hymiskviða*, as far as we know, that the myth of Þórr's fishing for the World Serpent has become part of the cauldron-fetching narrative, in which it functions as one of several tests of the questing deity, with significantly altered meaning from that which it has in independent narration.

A poem like *Hymiskviða*, whose composite nature comes apart relatively easily under analysis, provides an interesting test of the extent to which earlier mythic meanings might be subverted by literary artists of the thirteenth century in

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the interests of a different semiotic code. In the case of the *Miðgarðsormr* myth, other variants give us a reasonable idea of the range of meanings it had for Scandinavian people of the Viking Age and the following centuries and some indication of changed interpretations of the myth in response to changes in *mentalité*, mainly occasioned by the ideological challenge of Christianity to native modes of thought. If we assume, as is usually done, that *mentalité* is relatively resistant to rapid change to the extent that it is an unreflective mental phenomenon,⁸ then the degree to which the meaning of an established myth may be changed or downgraded may give us some measure of general changes in people's ways of thinking that must have been necessary to allow such a subversion of myth to take place. In the field of early Norse studies, where most texts in their extant form date from the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, composite texts like *Hymiskviða* offer a cautiously useful guide to changes in *mentalité* which are not otherwise recoverable.

Old Norse eddic poetry presupposes a pagan world, even though some of the compilatory prose link passages of the Codex Regius indicate both compiler's and audience's distance from its beliefs and imagined activities.⁹ The group of mythological poems in the codex, of which *Hymiskviða* is one, projects a society in which deities and other supernatural beings such as giants, dwarves, and elves, together with a group of monsters that includes the World Serpent, are the normal inhabitants of the world. These texts do not exclude the human race from their consideration, but the status and fate of humanity is peripheral to and contingent on the supernatural beings' activities. Some of the poems deal with the early period of the world's history, in which supernatural beings performed acts of creation and instituted a social and intellectual order. Another focus of these poems is upon the disintegration of divine society and its destruction by a group of monsters and fire-giants at Ragnarök. Other poems again narrate or allude to hostilities between the gods and the giant race, and *Hymiskviða* presupposes such a situation.

Meletinskij has described how the Old Norse mythological world-picture comprises two spatial codes, the horizontal and the vertical, and two corresponding temporal sub-systems of cosmology, which he called the 'cosmogonic' and the 'eschatological'.¹⁰ It was the vertical model of the world that incorporated explicit reference to chronology, for it concerned the relationship between life and death both for the individual and for society. The horizontal model, on the other hand, concerned itself with oppositions between the two major social and intellectual forces in the cosmos, the gods and the giants and monsters. It assumed a state of constancy rather than change; although one side might temporarily gain the upper

hand, the model inscribes a steady state in which both exchange and exploitation between the two parties continue to occur.

The vertical model of Norse cosmology, as it incorporated a notion of the world's creation and destruction, was much closer than the horizontal model to Christian concepts of world history. A study of the variant versions of the story of Þórr's struggle with Miðgarðsormr indicates how a myth whose primary location lay in the horizontal model could be reinterpreted as if it were more concerned with the vertical dimension, in particular with concepts of eschatology and the destruction of the world in a final holocaust. Many scholars have pointed out the relationship between this myth and Christian notions of Satan's rivalry with Christ at the Harrowing of Hell, a relationship facilitated by the positional equivalences between Christ and Þórr and Satan and Miðgarðsormr in the two systems.¹¹ Meulengracht Sørensen has proposed that the earliest versions of the myth, in skaldic poetry of the Viking Age and picture stones of the same period or possibly earlier, express a balance between two mighty cosmic forces, represented by the hammer-wielding Þórr on one hand and by the World Serpent in the ocean on the other.¹²

Arguably, then, the early Scandinavian versions of this myth, which certainly have Indo-European cognates,¹³ belong firmly on the horizontal plane. In versions of the myth from the conversion period (c. 1000), however, a vertical orientation becomes evident, for in them Þórr actually kills the World Serpent, who is represented as a negative force. In Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, a synthesizing mythology from the early thirteenth century, the fishing expedition may be read in the context of that whole work as Þórr's attempt to avert Ragnarök. *Hymiskviða* also shows a familiarity with the eschatological dimension of the story, which the poet alludes to by means of kennings for his protagonists, but, as we shall see, his recasting of Þórr's struggle with Miðgarðsormr in the form of a test of the god's worthiness to gain a magic object necessarily requires him to downplay the cosmic implications of the myth.

Þórr's fishing for Miðgarðsormr belongs to a group of myths in which the god enters into conflicts with giants or monsters, usually travelling away from the divine home, Ásgarðr, to meet his rivals.¹⁴ All these encounters take place upon the horizontal plane of the cosmos. Another group of Norse myths which are also predicated on the horizontal model are myths that take the form of quests, undertaken by the gods to appropriate a desired object. An example of this type is Óðinn's quest for the mead of poetry. It is probably not possible to make a watertight distinction between myths of the quest type and those in which Þórr is involved as policeman of divine society, because he frequently acts to recover what

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the giants have stolen from the gods. Thus the element of questing is built into most of these myths, though the direction of desire is variable, sometimes emanating from the gods to the giants' world and sometimes coming from the reverse direction. In a few cases, for example Þórr's visit to the giant Geirrøðr, it is not clear from existing variants why Þórr undertakes a journey to giantland, though even here there is a strong possibility that a quest for his hammer is involved.¹⁵

The main narrative of *Hymiskviða* belongs to the quest group. The gods recognize that they lack an important necessity of social life, ale, and a vessel in which to brew it, and so they put pressure on the sea-giant, Ægir, to prepare ale for their feasts. Ægir declines on the ground that he does not have a big enough cauldron, and so Þórr, accompanied by Týr, travels to the home of Týr's father, the giant Hymir, to obtain an appropriately sized brewing vessel. In order to secure the cauldron, Þórr must pass a series of tests which form the main body of the poem.

This narrative is not known from any other Norse source, but Ægir's association with the gods' feasting is acknowledged in both the eddic poem *Lokasenna* and in *Snorra Edda* (*Skáldskaparmál*, 42).¹⁶ In the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, *Lokasenna* forms a sequel to *Hymiskviða*, and Klingenberg has argued that the two poems are linked quite fundamentally through the transcendent idea of Ragnarök and especially through the notion of Loki and his brood as the ultimate cause of the gods' destruction.¹⁷ I believe, and I think the argument of this paper will clarify the matter, that Klingenberg has placed on centre stage concepts that the *Hymiskviða* poet had relegated to the wings. Yet he is on firmer ground with respect to the compiler of the Regius manuscript and, in all probability, with *Lokasenna*, where Ragnarök is an overt *leitmotif*. In this context it is also worth noting that whoever assembled the eddic poems in AM 748 1 placed the Prose Introduction to *Völundarkviða* immediately after *Hymiskviða*. Hence, for at least one medieval Icelandic compiler, there was no compelling link between *Hymiskviða* and *Lokasenna*.

Comparative and structural studies of Indo-European mythology indicate that the story of the gods' acquisition of Hymir's ale-cauldron belongs to a complex of myths often referred to as 'the cycle of the mead'¹⁸ or 'the ambrosial cycle'.¹⁹ The best known manifestations of the mead myth are in Indian, Iranian, Greek, and Scandinavian sources, which, with variations, all deal with the origin of the precious, intoxicating liquid and with how, after conflict, it becomes the exclusive possession of the gods. In many cases the gods' representative wins the mead from members of distant social groups who inhabit an 'other world'. The custodians of the divine fluid in the Norse tradition are dwarves and giants; those who wrest it

from them are gods, and in the best-known mead story in Norse, it is Óðinn who acquires it from a giant. The mead itself is symbolically polyvalent in the corpus of Norse myths,²⁰ but its central values have to do with immortality and with the intellectual gifts of wisdom and the capacity to compose poetry.

Female figures play an important mediating role in the mead myths, whether they are victims like the giant Suttungr's daughter, Gunnlöð (*Hávamál*, 104–10; *Snorra Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, 5–6), or willing helpers, like Týr's mother in *Hymiskviða*. Indeed, maternal relatives of the gods generally assist them to acquire the mead, while paternal relatives are unhelpful or hostile. In one version of the Norse mead myth, Óðinn received a draught of mead from his mother's brother, named as Bölþorn's son (*Hávamál*, 140; *Snorra Edda, Gylfaginning*, 5). We may contrast the suspicious and hostile behaviour of Hymir towards his son Týr and the latter's companion Þórr in *Hymiskviða*.

Although female figures and maternal relatives of the gods play an important part in assisting them to acquire the mead, they do not play any part in its production or use. That remains a largely male affair (Oosten, p. 64). Indeed, as Schjødt has suggested (pp. 92–93), the most detailed mead myth in Old Norse, Snorri Sturluson's narrative of the transformation of Kvasir in *Skáldskaparmál*, represents Óðinn's winning of the mead as a kind of pseudo-procreation. But, instead of bringing forth physical life as women characteristically do, the questing male gods bring forth and repotentiate the life of the intellect from the giant world where it lies unused. So Óðinn, by spewing out the mead he has drunk in giantland, makes it available as an active, creative power to gods and men.

The story of Hymir's ale-cauldron conforms to the 'cycle of the mead' myth-type in many respects. The usual dichotomy between the worlds of gods and giants obtains; the object of the gods' desire is an alcoholic liquid and the container in which it is to be brewed. The cauldron in *Hymiskviða* is owned by Hymir, the skill of ale brewing apparently commanded by Ægir. Though we deal here with two giants rather than one, each is marked as 'other' and hostile, each resists the gods' plan to capitalize on his skills or possessions, and each ultimately fails to outsmart the gods and their representatives, Þórr and Týr.

Týr, like Loki, is the product of a union between a giant and a female who, while her family ties are unstated, may reasonably be assumed to be at least sympathetic to the gods if not a member of their group. Most unions between gods and giants in Norse mythology operate in the reverse direction, with a divine male cohabiting with a giantess. Meulengracht Sørensen has shown how a 'wrong way marriage' and its offspring is often symbolically associated with ideas of

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disharmony and the anti-social.²¹ In Loki's case his ambivalent status in the gods' world is reflected in the roles he often plays in myths, as go-between, scapegoat, or feminized shape-shifter. In *Hymiskviða*, Týr also mediates between the world of the gods and giantland, for it is he who discloses the cauldron's whereabouts and capacities to Þórr (strs 4–6). However, he sides firmly with his father's enemies and himself has to undergo the final test of strength Hymir sets for the two gods (str. 33). Indeed, unlike Þórr, he fails to carry the giant cauldron out of Hymir's hall. Týr's mother also plays a significant role in helping the gods; she intervenes to save them from Hymir's shattering glance (strs 9–12) and later provides Þórr with the information he needs to smash the magic cup against the giant's skull (strs 30–31).

Hymiskviða does not clarify the symbolic power of the cauldron nor of the ale it brews, except to indicate that it is implicated in the establishment of complete cultural conviviality (str. 1) and the celebration of an orderly annual round of festivals (str. 39). Apparently the gods do not themselves possess the skills necessary to brew their own ale. As a group of hunters they need to exploit the resources of the other world peopled by giants to gain access to alcoholic liquor and its social advantages. The giants are represented as practising a mixed economy of hunting, fishing, and pastoralism. As with several symbolic values of this narrative poem, its paradigmatic dimension focuses some of the concepts developed by its somewhat ersatz syntagm. The symbolic values associated with the brewing cauldron and its product are among *Hymiskviða*'s central paradigms.

The syntagm of Hymiskviða

The *Hymiskviða* poet incorporated two important Norse myths into his text, which are not linked in any other known work, and he united them within an overall structure that can best be described as a quest for a magic object, in this case the brewing cauldron. The Þórr-Miðgarðsormr encounter functions as only one, and arguably not the most important, of a series of tests of Þórr's strength, a quality for which he was globally renowned in Old Norse myth. Klingenberg has characterized *Hymiskviða* as 'an episodic series of Þórr's exploits — the enumeration of arduous feats',²² but has paid no attention to the sequencing of these episodes which, as a schema, conform to the structure of the European wundertale, as it has been analyzed by Vladimir Propp.²³ Earlier scholars, such as von der Leyen²⁴ and von Sydow,²⁵ observed the close connexions between *Hymiskviða*

and folktales on the level of individual motifs, but were not concerned with the coherence of the poem's wondertale structure with respect to its observance of the correct sequence of functions, the expected relationships between its protagonists, and the themes it develops.

The wondertale form seems to have emerged at some time during the early Middle Ages in Europe as a transformation of pre-existing mythic structures. The process of transformation ensured both the continued life of old myths and their incorporation into literary structures which came to be regarded as not incompatible with Christian ideology. *Beowulf* is again a case in point; here several tales about a monster-fighting hero were brought together in such a way as to fit a Proppian wondertale syntagm without straining or major omissions.²⁶ Within early Norse literature, Lindow has demonstrated the presence of international folktale structures in an early *þátttr*,²⁷ while Harris has done the same for two sagas and a story in *Snorra Edda*.²⁸ A number of Snorri Sturluson's mythic narratives in his *Edda* can be shown to conform to a wondertale format.²⁹

Unlike *Beowulf*, which fits neatly into the wondertale syntagm, *Hymiskviða* uses it as a kind of walking stick. Although the poem's burlesque qualities help it along, it is easy to see that it contains material extraneous to the wondertale syntagm (strs 4–5, 37–38) and offers a number of instances in which characters perform functions not accounted for in a Proppian structure. An example is Týr's mediating role at the beginning of the poem, when he supplies Þórr with information on the cauldron's whereabouts (strs 4–5), and later when he mediates in a more general way between the societies of gods and giants by virtue of his kinship with both. Again, some functions are displaced (e.g., G, str. 7), one pair (M and N) is repeated many times, and others are passed over but must be assumed (e.g., D²–E, str. 8). Table 1 displays *Hymiskviða*'s wondertale structure in schematic form, and the comments in the right-hand column direct the reader to apparent anomalies.

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Table 1 — *Hymiskviða's* Wondertale Syntagm

Strophes	Summary Description	Function	Comments
1-2	[The Initial Situation in Ásgarðr.] Lack of a Brewing Cauldron.	Aa – VIII Lack.	[The Preparatory Part of the syntagm is missing.]
3	Ægir despatches Þórr to fetch Cauldron.	B ² -IX The Hero is despatched.	Ægir's motive is given as vengeance (3/3), not a wondertale motive, but nevertheless he functions as Mandateur.
[4-5]	[Gods are ignorant of whereabouts of cauldron. Týr supplies information that Hymir owns it.]		[Not part of wondertale syntagm.]
4-6	Þórr and Týr accept their mission to obtain cauldron from Hymir.	C-X Beginning of counter-action.	
7	Þórr and Týr depart from Ásgarðr [leaving their goats with farmer Egill].	↑-XI Departure.	[Egill material is not part of wondertale syntagm.]
7	The heroes journey to giantland.	G-XV Journey.	This function is out of its normal place in the syntagm.
8	The heroes are presumably interrogated by the two women at Hymir's house.	D ² -XII First Function of the Provider. [E-XIII The Hero's Reaction.]	Hymir's beautiful lover, who is also Týr's mother (8/8), acts as Provider.
9	The beautiful woman offers help to the heroes and hides them from Hymir's shattering glance.	F ⁹ -XIV Help Received.	c.f. strophe 30.
10-14	Hymir returns home from hunting and discovers his natural enemy, Þórr, there, together with his own son, Týr.		Difficult to accommodate to syntagm; at some point, heroes should state their request for cauldron before Hymir subjects them to tests.

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Strophes	Summary Description	Function	Comments
14-16	Ordeal by food and drink.	M-XXV Difficult Task.	
	Þórr eats two oxen supplied from Hymir's herd.	N-XXVI Task accomplished.	Here follows the paired functions M-N, 7 times repeated.
16-18	Þórr must find suitable bait for fishing expedition.	M	
18-19	Þórr gets a bull's head from Hymir's herd.	N	
20	Hymir tests Þórr's strength at rowing far out to sea.	M	
	Þórr outrows Hymir.	N	
21-24	Fishing competition: Hymir catches two whales but Þórr hooks Miðgarðsormr.	M N	This contest could also be classed as H-XVI Combat between the Hero and his Antagonist, but here functions as an M-N pairing.
26-27	Hymir subjects Þórr to the test of carrying the boat and its contents home.	M	
	Þórr does so.	N	
28-29	Þórr subjected to apparent test of strength: break glass goblet.	M	This test is unlike the others, in that goblet cannot be shattered by strength alone, hence return to F ⁹ and Function of Provider, who advises that Hymir's head is only thing that will break it.
	He fails to break it.	N-	
30	Hymir's mistress tells Þórr to break the goblet against Hymir's skull.	F ⁹ -XIV Help received.	
31	Þórr breaks the goblet against Hymir's skull.	N+	
32	Hymir agrees to surrender cauldron,		[Request and promise are nowhere stated.]

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Strophes	Summary Description	Function	Comments
33-34	on condition that heroes pass final test of strength: carry cauldron out of hall. Týr fails to move it twice. Þórr carries it away on his head.	M N- (x2) N+	
35-36	Þórr and Týr travel back to Ásgarðr. They are pursued by a troop of giants, including Hymir. Þórr kills all the giants with his hammer, Mjöllnir.	↓-XX Return. Pr-XXI Pursuit Rs-XXII Rescue/Escape assimilated to H Combat.	
[37-38]	Reference to laming of Þórr's goat, Loki's role in this, and the price Egill had to pay Þórr (hand over both his children).		[Presumed to be an allusion to material otherwise known from prefatory part of Þórr's journey to Útgarða-Loki, as told in <i>Snorra Edda, Gylfaginning</i> 26-31.]
39	The gods obtain the ale-cauldron.	K-XIX Reparation assimilated to F, Magic Object Received.	

Themes and Paradigms in Hymiskviða — towards a reinterpretation of myth

If the syntagm of *Hymiskviða* is something of a patchwork, the poem's dominant paradigms offer us a key to the way in which its thirteenth-century audience may have understood this composite narrative. On a stylistic level, some of the main paradigms are marked by the consistent use of kennings. In an eddic poem, kennings constitute a marked discourse register, as they are usually found as consistently used elements only in skaldic verse. Peter Hallberg has contrasted the *Hymiskviða* poet's use of kennings 'to refer to the narrative itself in a rather narrow sense' with the way in which kennings are used in *Völuspá* to deepen that poem's central eschatological theme.³⁰

This difference between the use of kennings in two eddic poems with respect to eschatology is to be explained in terms of their respective development along the horizontal and vertical mythological planes. We have seen how *Hymiskviða*'s horizontal wondertale syntagm degrades the cosmogonic and eschatological dimensions of its components. With reference to the myth of Þórr's struggle with the World Serpent, we find that the cluster of periphrases in strophes 22–24 inscribe Miðgarðsormr's position in the cosmos (22/7–8) and the hostility that exists between him and the gods (22/6; 23/3), especially Þórr (22/3), as well as his kinship with another of Loki's monstrous offspring, the wolf Fenrir (23/8). Yet these kennings, with their clearly eschatological implications, work in *Hymiskviða* not by contributing to its main narrative but by providing a kind of shorthand reference to other versions of the myth. Further, the poem's terms of reference to Miðgarðsormr simultaneously vilify and degrade him: he is the being that all the gods hate (22/6) and a mere fish (*sá físcr*, 'that fish', 24/6).

The chronological placement of *Hymiskviða*'s narrative is also perfunctorily indicated. The opening scene in which the gods begin their search for a brewing cauldron happens in early times (*ár*, 1/1); Hymir, like many giants, is old and grey (13/6; 16/1–2); the ancient earth (*in forna fold*, 24/3–4) shudders at Þórr's and Miðgarðsormr's cosmic struggle. But these adverbials and epithets are quite conventional and play no vital part in the narrative as a whole, which has no specific chronological entailment. Like the allusions to the narrative of Þórr's lame goat and its sequel in strophes 7 and 37–38, these semantic elements demonstrate the self-conscious poet's knowledge of other stories which have some relevance to the one he has chosen to tell. *Hymiskviða* is unlike *Völuspá*, in which a set of allusive narratives, cast as visions, are directly related in a chronologically conceived

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framework of world history and bear fundamentally upon its eschatological denouement.

Yet, although the chronological and eschatological references in *Hymiskviða* are shallow, not all the poem's imagery is similarly lacking in complexity and depth. Its head-kennings, for example, as Hallberg noted (pp. 63–64), are grotesque but also central to one of the poem's main paradigms. They utilize the resources of skaldic diction to define a head in terms of something that grows or sprouts from it.³¹ In this poem heads are both prominent, signifying power and intellectual capacity in line with one of the dominant themes of the 'cycle of mead' myths, and also potentially vulnerable. In the various tests of strength Þórr undergoes he is obliged to hit heads and hunt with heads. He eats two of Hymir's oxen after they have been decapitated (15/1–4), goes fishing for Miðgarðsormr with an ox's 'stronghold of two horns' for bait (19/3–4), and hits Miðgarðsormr's 'high mountain of head hair' (23/5–8) with his hammer. After he has received helpful advice from Hymir's mistress, he shatters a glass goblet by throwing it against the giant's skull. Finally, having succeeded in lifting up the great cauldron he has come to acquire for the gods, he makes off with it on top of his head (34/5–6).

In many of the Old Norse myths in which Þórr fights with giants he kills them by smashing their skulls with his hammer, Mjöllnir. The *Hymiskviða* poet alludes to one of his victims when he refers to Hymir as *Hrungnis spialli*, 'Hrungnir's friend' (16/2), and endorses Þórr's generally destructive attitude to giants when Hymir is made to call him *briðir berg-Dana*, 'smasher of rock-Danes' (17/7). Þórr also acts in character towards the end of the poem, when he kills 'all the lava-whales' (*hraunhvala alla*, 36/5–6) with Mjöllnir after they have pursued him and Týr as they make their way back to Ásgarðr with the cauldron. The poet does not say so explicitly, but we infer from the fact that Hymir is said to be one of this many-headed crew (35/5–8) that Þórr killed him too, even though he was unable to injure him physically within his own hall.

Within the hall Þórr is not concerned to kill the giant but to obtain his most precious possession, the ale-cauldron. Nevertheless, the poet's consistent use of head-imagery and certain details of the storyline suggest that Þórr's winning of the cauldron is equivalent to his capture of Hymir's head and its intellectual powers. The events inside the hall propose an equivalence between the cauldron and Hymir's head, both of which have to be kept intact during Þórr's visit. The giant's mistress, in her role as Provider, protects Þórr and Týr from her lover's shattering glance but cannot prevent him destroying seven out of eight cauldrons hanging at the end of the hall and a hall-beam and pillar into the bargain. Later, when Þórr tries to break the

giant's goblet in the penultimate test of his strength, he also causes considerable damage to the hall, but is only able to break the goblet against Hymir's skull, which itself remains intact:

heill var karli hiálmstofn ofan,
enn vínferill, valr, rifnaði. (31/5–8)

The fellow's helmet-stem stayed whole above, but the round
wine vessel shattered.

Thus the two things in the hall that remain whole are the cauldron and Hymir's head. The inherently fragile goblet is magically safe unless it meets an object of greater power, the giant's head. Breaking the goblet allows release of the cauldron, for Hymir is thereby compromised. Hence Þórr's quest for Hymir's cauldron is a kind of head-hunting expedition, in terms of the poem's paradigms, and the way in which Þórr removes it from the hall, up on top of his own head with the rings that suspend it jangling at his heels, reinforces the symbolic value of his trophy.

The paradigm that equates Hymir's cauldron with his head is consonant with the values of supernatural power and knowledge accorded to giant sources of numinous wisdom in other versions of the 'cycle of the mead'. As in the myth of Óðinn's theft of the mead of poetry, the gods do not possess this source of knowledge but must steal or otherwise obtain it from the giant world. In the giant world the power of the supernatural knowledge remains latent; it takes a male agent from the world of the gods to bring it out into 'this world' where it becomes intellectually productive (Schjødtt, pp. 91–92).

Several other paradigms in *Hymiskviða* support the notion of the brewing cauldron as a source of cultural sophistication for the gods. One of these has to do with food and drink, their provision and preparation. Here we find a Lévi-Straussian opposition between the raw and the cooked, which in this poem includes the brewed. A cauldron is, as the poem reminds us, a 'liquid boiler' (*lögvellir*, 6/2). According to *Hymiskviða* both gods and giants live in a society in which most of their food is obtained by hunting and fishing. The gods live by hunting (1/1–2), and Hymir, in a memorable description, comes home at night from hunting with his beard hung with icicles (10/4). One of the tests Þórr undergoes is a fishing contest with Hymir. Yet Hymir and perhaps the shadowy Egill, to whom Þórr entrusts his goats, are also herdsman. Hymir keeps a herd of oxen and supplies from it both a meal for the travelling gods and also the bait for Þórr's fishing expedition. His

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possession of eight cauldrons indicates his household's concern with the tasks of cooking and brewing. Ægir also has a range of cauldrons at home (1/8), though he claims none of them is big enough to satisfy the gods' gargantuan appetites.

The poem establishes a contrast between Hymir's world, in which both hunting and herding supply the necessities of life, and the world of the gods, in which the gods, who live by hunting alone, are great consumers of food and drink (1/3) but appear not to have mastered the skills of herding and brewing. They form, in terms of the poem, a hunter-gatherer aristocracy exploiting the resources of a subordinate group of pastoralists. They desire the products of a more elaborate economy which they are unable or unwilling to produce for themselves. They are opportunists, living by their wits (6/3–4), their physical strength, and their mobility. Numerous periphrases for Þórr reinforce the last two qualities (c.f. 1/1; 3/2; 19/2; 19/5–8; 20/2; 31/1–2; 33/2). Even the gods' resort to divination, as a means of discovering the whereabouts of a suitable cauldron, is another manifestation of their capacity to exploit alternatives.³²

The divine qualities of quickwittedness, strength, and mobility are further expressed through the well-known travel pattern of Norse mythology,³³ in which divine protagonists journey away from Ásgarðr, over some kind of *limen* (here the dwelling of Egill) and beyond to the other world where their giant antagonists and the objects they seek are to be found. *Hymiskviða* repeats the travel pattern within the narrative of the fishing expedition. Here a land–sea dichotomy is heavily underlined by the diversity of kennings for Hymir's ship, where the base-words are terms for land animals (e.g., 20/1; 26/5; 27/4), and played on in the main narrative as well (e.g., 27/8; 33/4; 36/5). Such grotesqueries depend on the conventional skaldic pairing of opposed terms, such as sea and land, water transport and land transport as the basis for many kenning types.

A final point concerns *Hymiskviða's* excursus on the visit to Egill (str. 7), the reference to Þórr's half-dead goat, and the recompense Þórr extracted from him for letting the animal go lame, even though Loki is said to have been the cause of it. It is generally acknowledged that the poet has alluded to a story which is otherwise known only as the preparatory part to Snorri Sturluson's narrative of Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki in *Gylfaginning*, 26–31. Here Þórr and Loki visit a farmer on the first night of a long journey. Þórr slaughters his goats to provide dinner for the household but is later able to revive them, having first instructed the family to preserve the skins and bones. Disregarding instruction, the farmer's son breaks a bone to get at the marrow, and the result is that one of the goats becomes lame in a hind leg. Þórr then takes the farmer's two children, Þjalfi and Röskva, as his

servants in recompense for the son's misdemeanour, but Loki is not implicated in it as far as we can judge from Snorri's narrative.

The *Hymiskviða* poet's direct appeal to his audience's knowledge of this story (38/1–4), which, as a rhetorical device, is unparalleled in eddic verse, suggests not only their familiarity with its broad outlines but also their ability to recognize deviations from its standard form. The question is, why did the poet include this material along with the reference to Loki? Klingenberg has argued (p. 140) that it was because he wanted to place *Hymiskviða*, like *Lokasenna*, in the larger, eschatological context of the enmity between Loki and Þórr. While this suggestion may have some plausibility in the context of the Codex Regius, the strophe occurs in the same place in *Hymiskviða* in AM 748 1, where there is no connexion with *Lokasenna*. It is more plausible that the reference to Loki is a reflex of the poet's awareness of the structural and thematic similarities between his version of the cauldron quest and the story of Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki.

Loki has a role to play in that myth, and it follows a similar structural pattern to the cauldron quest. Þórr and Loki go on a journey and leave their goats with a farmer; they then proceed to giantland where they are subjected to a series of tests of strength. This myth attributes to Þórr no obvious reason for his journey; he is unaware of the nature of the tests and of the chthonic power of his opponent. It turns out that Loki vies with the power of wildfire, Þjalfi with the swiftness of Thought, while Þórr attempts to drink the sea, lift up the World Serpent, and wrestle with Old Age. The Útgarða-Loki contest shows a thematic relationship with the other main *Hymiskviða* myth, Þórr's struggle with Miðgarðsormr, in that both represent the god's encounter with a natural force in which the outcome is the reinforcement of a sense of checks and balances rather than the successful passing of tests and the acquisition of a numinous object. In fact, one could regard the Útgarða-Loki myth as an elaboration of the idea at the centre of the story of Þórr's fishing expedition.

Thirteenth-century evidence that Icelanders saw it that way comes not only from *Hymiskviða* but from the fact that the Æsir from Troy in *Gylfaginning* are made to perceive the links between the two by having the fishing expedition follow the Útgarða-Loki story as a kind of sequel to it. The discussants of *Gylfaginning* present the fishing expedition as Þórr's attempt to redress the humiliation he suffered at the hands of Útgarða-Loki, but this interpretation is somewhat compromised by the Áss narrator's endorsement of the version of the myth that allows the World Serpent to survive and live still in the ocean. It is possible that Snorri got the idea of juxtaposing Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki with the god's fishing expedition from his

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knowledge of a version of *Hymiskviða* in which there was already an allusion to the episode of the laming of the goat. If so, in his usual manner he has built upon inherent similarities of theme and structure between the two myths to produce a discourse about Þórr's relationship to chthonic beings that suggests a coherent pagan counterpart to Christian eschatology.

Hymiskviða, on the other hand, veers away from the vertical model of Norse myth with its chronological dimension that could be aligned with Christian concepts of mutability and impairment of the world. Its reinforcement of the horizontal model by its adoption of the wondertale syntagm, so that Þórr's fishing expedition could be incorporated into the ale-cauldron myth, strengthens and gives renewed life to a fundamentally atemporal view of human concerns for order and the social and intellectual control of numinous forces. The poet's decision to adopt a comic, if not burlesque, presentation of his material reminds one of other eddic poems such as *Þrymskviða* and the modality of many modern Scandinavian folktales which have preserved some of the concerns of the horizontal model of Old Norse mythology largely untouched by the doctrines of Christianity.

NOTES

- 1 *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 6 (1955), 339–55.
- 2 *The Dating of Beowulf*, edited by Colin Chase (Toronto, Buffalo, and London, 1981).
- 3 Tilman Westphalen, *Beowulf 3150–55: Textkritik und Editions-geschichte* (Munich, 1967); Kevin S. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1981).
- 4 N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 281–82.
- 5 Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', in *The Dating of Beowulf*, edited by Colin Chase, pp. 123–39, and see, most recently, her 'Did Anglo-Saxon Audiences Have a Skaldic Tooth?', *Scandinavian Studies*, 59 (1987), 338–55.
- 6 Franz Rolf Schröder, 'Das Hymirlied: Zur Frage verblasster Mythen in den Götterliedern der Edda', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 71 (1955), 1–40.
- 7 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Thor's Fishing Expedition', in *Words and Objects. Towards a Dialogue Between Archaeology and History of Religion*, edited by Gro Steinsland (Oslo, 1986), pp. 257–78.
- 8 Lars Lönnroth, 'The Effects of Conversion on Scandinavian Mentalité', in *The Christianization of Scandinavia*, edited by Birgit Sawyer, Peter Sawyer, and Ian Wood (Alingsås, 1987), pp. 27–29.
- 9 To cite one instance of several, the coda to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana*, II, reveals an attitude of scepticism to ideas about reincarnation in the Helgi poems: see *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, edited by G. Neckel, revised by H. Kuhn, fifth edition, Heidelberg, 1983, p. 161. All citations from eddic poetry are from this edition.
- 10 E. Meletinskij, 'Scandinavian Mythology as a System', *Journal of Symbolic Anthropology*, 1–2 (1973), 43–58 and 57–78.

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- 11 Otto Gschwantler, 'Christus, Thor und die Midgardschlange', in *Festschrift für Otto Höfler*, edited by H. Birkhan and O. Gschwantler (Vienna, 1968), pp. 145–68; E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North. The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London, 1964), pp. 75–76.
- 12 Sørensen, 'Thor's Fishing Expedition', pp. 274–75.
- 13 V. Ivanov and V. Toparov, 'Le Mythe Indo-Européen du dieu de l'orage poursuivant le serpent: reconstruction du schéma', in *Échanges et communications. Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss*, edited by Jean Pouillon and Pierre Maranda, 2 vols (The Hague and Paris, 1970), II, 1180–206.
- 14 Well-known members of this group are Þórr's encounter with Hrungnir (Þjóðólfr of Hvin, *Haustlög*; *Snorra Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, 25–26), his visit to Geirrþóðr (Eilífr Goðrúnarson, *Þórdrápa*; *Snorra Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, 27), and his journey to the home of the giant Þrymr to get back his stolen hammer (*Þrymskviða*).
- 15 Margaret Clunies Ross, 'An Interpretation of the Myth of Þórr's Encounter with Geirrþóðr and his Daughters', in *Speculum norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, edited by Ursula Dronke, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Odense, 1981), pp. 370–91.
- 16 All references to Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* are to chapters as numbered in Finnur Jónsson's edition (Copenhagen, 1931). Margaret Clunies Ross, in *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language* (Odense, 1987), pp. 138–40, discusses the relationship between *Lokasenna*, its Prose Introduction, and *Skáldskaparmál*, 42. Ægir's role as brewer of ale is mentioned in Egill Skallagrímsson's poem *Sonatorrek*, strophe 19. E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 39–40, discusses interpretations of the relevant kenning.
- 17 Heinz Klingenberg, 'Types of Eddic Mythological Poetry', in *Edda. A Collection of Essays*, edited by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg, 1983), pp. 134–64.
- 18 Franz Rolf Schröder, 'Das Hymirlied'; Jarich G. Oosten, *The War of the Gods. The Social Code in Indo-European Mythology* (London, Boston, Melbourne, and Henley, 1985).
- 19 Georges Dumézil, *Le Festin d'immortalité* (Paris, 1924).

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- 20 Jens Peter Schjødt, 'Livsdrik og Vidensdrik. Et problemkompleks i nordisk mytologi', *Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift*, 2 (1983), 85–102.
- 21 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Starkaðr, Loki og Egill Skallagrímsson', in *Sjötú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. juli 1977*, edited by Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík, 1977), II, 759–68.
- 22 Heinz Klingenberg, 'Types of Eddic Mythological Poetry', p. 138; see also Gryte van der Toorn-Piebenga, 'Om Strukturer og Motiver i *Hymiskviða*', *Tijdschrift voor skandinavistiek*, 6 (1985), 54–70.
- 23 Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, translated by L. Scott, second edition (Austin and London, 1968).
- 24 Friedrich von der Leyen, *Das Märchen in den Göttersagen der Edda* (Berlin, 1899).
- 25 C. W. von Sydow, 'Jätten Hymes bågare', *Danske Studier* (Copenhagen, 1915), pp. 113–50.
- 26 T. A. Shippey, 'The Fairy-Tale Structure of *Beowulf*', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 16 (1969), 2–11; Daniel R. Barnes, 'Folktale Morphology and the Structure of *Beowulf*', *Speculum*, 45 (1970), 416–34.
- 27 John Lindow, 'Hreiðars þáttur heimska and AT 326. An Old Icelandic Novella and an International Folktale', *Arv*, 34 (1978), 152–79.
- 28 Joseph Harris, 'The Masterbuilder Tale in Snorri's Edda and Two Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 91 (1976), 66–101.
- 29 Margaret Clunies Ross and B. K. Martin, 'Narrative structures and intertextuality in *Snorra Edda*: the example of Þórr's encounter with Geirrþøðr', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, edited by John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, 1986), pp. 56–72.
- 30 Peter Hallberg, 'Elements of Imagery in the Poetic *Edda*', in *Edda. A Collection of Essays*, edited by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg, 1983), p. 63.

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31 Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden. Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik* (Bonn and Leipzig, 1921), pp. 126–29.

32 See Georges Devereux, 'Considérations psychanalytiques sur la divination', in *La Divination*, edited by A. Caquot and M. Leibovici (Paris, 1968), II, 449–71.

33 Lars Lönnroth, 'Skirnismál och den fornisländska äktenskapsnormen', in *Opuscula Septentrionalia: Festskrift til Ole Widding*, edited by Bent Chr. Jacobsen, Christian Lisse, Jonna Louis-Jensen, and Eva Rode (Copenhagen, 1977), pp. 154–78.