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FEAR, SUPERSTITION AND BARGAINING: A CURSE AS A THREAT IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE[1]

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Abstract: The power of words is a special topic in the Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The extant corpus, including prose and prosimetric sagas as well as poetry, creates an impression of a culture in which language was both respected and feared. Those who knew their way with words could exercise power over both human and supernatural characters of myths, legends and sagas. Among the ways to use words a prominent place is taken up by curses, especially the versified ones. The variety of sources in which the curses are found – ranging from medieval sagas to later folktales – and the diverse social roles of the speakers as well as the addressees of the curses are briefly discussed in the introduction to this paper.

However, curses did not always have to be fulfilled in order to be effective. The main question to be addressed in the present paper is, whether the very belief in the power of words – and specifically of the versified curses – could give a clever magician or witch a chance to bend someone to their will with a mere threat of a curse. The rules of an effective curse-threat and the role of various elements – such as supernatural creatures and runic inscriptions – are taken into account in this discussion. The two specific cases explored here are *Skírnismál*, a poem about gods and other supernatural creatures from the *Elder Edda*, and *Busluboen*, a curse extant in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* – a legendary saga about human kings and heroes.

Key Words: Old Norse poetry, curse, sagas, Elder Edda, medieval literature, runes

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INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF WORDS

Even fleeting acquaintance with Old Norse literature would show how much power this culture gave to words – both spoken or written, and especially poetic. Verses could bring great wisdom and great shame, could insult and enchant. People like skalds, who knew their way with words, were perceived as partly supernatural beings. They knew their own power – and people around them also knew what these enchanters were capable of. The sagas of Icelanders include episodes in which curses chanted by skilled court poets have dire consequences to the people who have insulted or wronged the poet. For instance, one of the most famous sagas of the thirteenth century, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, recounts how the Icelandic poet confronted the Norwegian king Eiríkr *blóðøx* (Blood-Axe) and the king's wife, the witch-queen Gunnhildr. Egill expresses his hostility in the verses directed against the royal couple; in addition to this, chapter 57 of the saga describes a magic ritual performed by the poet. He mounts a pole, topped by a horse's head and inscribed with runes, on the sea-shore, facing the king's land, and utters a curse (Thorvaldsen 2011: 173–182; see also Raudvere 2005). As a result of the poet's actions and his words evoking the spirits of the land, Eiríkr and Gunnhildr are banished from their own kingdom. Elsewhere in the saga we learn that Egill is indeed well-versed in magic, especially in rune magic: he inscribes runes on a drinking horn (ch. 44) to avoid getting drunk or poisoned, and on one occasion he treats a sick girl by correcting the badly inscribed runes that caused her illness (ch. 72). His skill as a poet is closely connected with the knowledge of verbal magic and rune-magic. Egill was a model skald of his time and the story of his life was well-known, so it would not come as a surprise if people who knew about the magical episodes of Egill's life also expected other professional poets to have certain supernatural powers.

The episodes recounting Egill's magical exploits usually contain *lausavísur* – loose stanzas composed and performed by the poet. In other cases, the skalds skilled in magic composed long poems which were curses in themselves and had immediate devastating effect on those to whom they were addressed. A notable example of this is the central episode of *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskáld* – a short story extant in the great Icelandic manuscript from around 1400 called *Flateyjarbók*. The main character Þorleifr was an Icelandic poet and trader who came to Norway and suffered terrible wrongs from the jarl Hákon of Hlaðir: Þorleifr's goods were taken from him by force and all his men were hanged. The Icelander is not overhasty with his revenge; all alone, he goes away to Denmark and gains good reputation as well as considerable wealth as a court poet there. Later on, Þorleifr comes to the court of jarl Hákon. The Icelander

is disguised as an old man and purposefully lets everyone in the hall make fun of him. Drawing the jarl's attention, the ridiculed stranger claims that he can make praise poetry – and Hákon, anticipating further entertainment, graciously agrees to listen to him. The praise poem, however, turns out to be a disguised insult and a curse (see Heslop 2012). Not only does it subtly debase the jarl, but it also causes him physical discomfort, making his thighs itch. Culminating in the so-called *Þokuvísur* (Fog verses), the curse causes havoc at the feast: the room goes dark, weapons come alive and injure many men, and when the light comes back, the mysterious guest is gone. It is noted that jarl Hákon lost half of his hair and half of his beard as a result of the curse – a terrible slight to a Scandinavian man's dignity. This episode, even more dramatic than the better-known curse of Egill, shows how a poet could repay injustice and physical violence with powerful words.

The idea of a talented and skilful poet using versified curses against his enemies has persisted in Iceland well into the twentieth century. An example of this persistent tradition in the more recent times is the image of *kraftaskáld* ("power-poet") present in Icelandic folklore. These characters have a sort of spontaneous skill with words. A versified curse they would utter on the spur of the moment would always come true. For example, one such poet throws a short verse at someone, promising that the addressee's vile tongue would be eaten out by shrimps. However unlikely and even ridiculous this curse may seem to modern city-dwellers, the threat was quite real: the following year the poet's enemy went fishing and drowned, and when the body was found – it turned out that the tongue was gone (see Bauman 2004: 16–20). In any age, this kind of stories would warn anyone, from an Icelandic fisherman to a Norwegian king, against quarrelling with a poet.

The power of poetry could manifest itself in the ways more subtle than a straightforward curse. In the medieval law codes of Iceland and Norway we find specific clauses that reflect the popular belief in the power of poetry – and in fact make this belief official. Composing an offensive verse – a *níð* (sometimes rendered in English as 'slander'), such as *Jarlsníð* attributed to Þorleifr in Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds, was a serious crime that could get the poet outlawed and eventually even killed (for a detailed discussion of *níð*, see Meulengracht Sørensen 1983). Moreover, the same treatment was reserved for what we would call love poetry – in Old Norse, *mansǫngkvæði* (from *man* – 'slave' or 'maiden' – and *sǫngr* – 'song'). Such a harsh attitude is partly explained by the damage such poetry caused to the reputation of the poem's addressee. In case of *mansǫngkvæði*, the male guardian of the woman for whom the poet composed such verses would also be gravely offended, as the poetry praising a woman's body and character suggested a certain degree of intimacy between her and

the poet. Is she then cheating on her husband, or is her father not capable to guard her honour? However, the significance of both slandering verses and love poetry might have run deeper than that. As Margaret Clunies Ross puts it, the core belief behind the phenomenon of the poetry of insult and slander is "the idea that poetry has the power to affect its victims with physical harm and mental hurt as well as to damage their reputations"; in case of love poetry, "there is no doubt that it was thought capable of turning a woman's affection to a particular man, without her knowledge and against her will" (Clunies Ross 2005: 41). With his poetry, a skald was apparently believed to influence other people's bodies and minds – not only in the metaphorical way in which any art influences its audience, but also in a very practical, magical way.

The connection between medieval skalds and magic was an intimate one. The very skill with which they arranged words according to the rules of complex metres and their seemingly effortless use of intricate and baffling metaphoric language (much of it rooted in the stories about the gods and other mythological and legendary characters) could create a mysterious image for the poets. Understanding their poetry was a privilege that required certain skill and was not readily available to just anyone. Composing poetry was an even more privileged and mysterious craft, and its source was often attributed to the supernatural sphere. In the sagas we find stories about aspiring skalds learning their craft from the dead (Þorleifr *jarlsskáld*, mentioned above, posthumously passed on his poetic skill to a fellow Icelander who persistently came to his grave mound every night and once fell asleep there) or from eating a magic fish (this was the alleged source of talent for Sighvatr Þórðarson, who started out as a rather useless simpleton and then came to be one of the favourite poets of king Óláfr Haraldsson).[1] Last but not least, skaldic poetry was associated with the god Óðinn. The story about the supernatural origins of the mead of poetry and about Óðinn stealing the mead from the world of *jötnar* is told, most prominently, in the *Elder Edda* – thirteenth-century treatise that also explains many intricacies of the poetic metre and language.

In the Old Norse-Icelandic sources Óðinn comes forward as a very versatile figure (Lassen 2006). Aside from his connection with poetry and poetic language, he is also an archetypal ruler, a god of war and a patron of warriors. Intertwined with these "social" roles is his image as a wise old man, a trickster and a magician. When in Old Norse-Icelandic narratives professional poets, such as Egill or Þorleifr, manifest magic skills, they fulfil the expectations of the audience by proving the poets' affinity with their patron, Óðinn. The magic associated with Óðinn is first and foremost the magic connected to words – in varying forms. As we have seen above, Egill Skalla-Grímsson, in addition to being an exceptional poet, also possesses the knowledge of rune-magic – and

this magic is associated with Óðinn in mythological and legendary sources. In the actual runic inscriptions available to us from archaeological sources there is neither a predominance of the magical over the more mundane or practical purposes, nor a prevailing presence of Óðinn's name over other gods; however, in poetry and sagas the magical and mysterious uses of the runes are an established theme. In the Eddic poem *Hávamál* the list of charms known to Óðinn is preceded by a cryptic account of the god hanging on the tree, sacrificing himself to himself, and picking up the runes during or in the aftermath of this ordeal. The knowledge of charms is, furthermore, associated with the ability to carve and colour the runes (st. 144).

Another instance of detailing the magical use of runes in the *Elder Edda* is found in *Sigrdrífumál* – a poem of the second, "heroic" part of the compilation. Here the young hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani awakens a valkyrie named Sigrdrífa, who has been punished by Óðinn for her disobedience. The valkyrie imparts the knowledge of runes to Sigurðr – possibly also remarking on the connection between Óðinn and the runes (st. 14). The rune magic is mostly positive and potentially useful for a young warrior: the charms and rituals of rune-carving can, among other things, protect him against poisoning or treason, heal wounds and help in battle. Some of the runes can also bring him wisdom and prudence and protect him against evil-doers; somewhat bafflingly, the list also includes the runes of midwifery that do not fit in so neatly with the image of a great warrior and wise ruler – however, their importance for the well-being of society and for the continuation of the hero's bloodline would no doubt be recognized by the medieval audience.

As the examples from *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (cited above) show, at least some of the magical uses of runes appear in the sagas of Icelanders. The tradition knows of both beneficial and harmful applications of this magic. In chapter 72 of *Egils saga*, the illness caused by badly carved runes may be classified as unintentional harm, while it also reveals the potential power of runic curses. Two of the prominent examples illustrating how runes could be used for curses can be found in the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* and in the legendary saga *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*. These two cases will be discussed in detail further in the present article. However, both in *Skírnismál* and in *Bósa saga* we do not see an immediate magical effect of the runes. To assess the power of rune magic, we can go to yet another of the sagas of Icelanders – namely, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. The main character of the saga, Grettir the Strong, is a formidable man who, even though outlawed for many years, demonstrates amazing survival skills. The very idea of outlawry is tested, as Grettir manages to fare quite well in the wilderness, get help from powerful friends even though he is banished from the society, and repeatedly elude the murderous

schemes and attacks of his enemies. In the end, his downfall is brought about by a series of supernatural encounters – and the fatal blow is dealt by a malevolent witch called Þúriðr. She curses Grettir twice, and the first curse, spoken orally in prose form (ch. 68), does not seem to bring immediate harm. The hero manages to defeat the witch using purely physical force – at least for the time being. However, later on (in ch. 79) Þúriðr comes back, more malevolent and determined than ever. She carves magical runes on a piece of wood and colours the symbols with her own blood. This curse cannot be easily refuted, and very soon Grettir finally meets his death, after many years of eluding it. If this formidable hero could be defeated by a feeble old witch with the help of runes, anyone would do well to fear the rune magic. And of course it is not hard to imagine that if runic curses were combined with powerful poetry, the effect could be devastating.

BARGAINING AGAINST A CURSE: TWO CASE-STUDIES

The examples cited above testify to a lively tradition about verbal charms and curses. These include, in particular, runic inscriptions imbued with magical meaning, and verses or formulaic utterances that often contain references to the powers of nature and to supernatural beings. While the descriptions of curses attributed to witches or magicians could be limited to striking and easily recognizable physical activities (such as "magical mooning" and "goatskin twirl" discussed by Gunnell 2014), both poets well versed in magic and magicians or witches not known as professional poets could use verbal curses. The characters living in the world of Old Norse narratives were aware of the power of words and presumably could feel its effect first-hand at any given moment. We can expect this awareness to influence their decisions – for instance, producing unwillingness to quarrel with a poet or a witch, – and their disposition – as when a person of particular reputation chants a curse or carves runes, other characters in the story would manifest fear or at least caution. It is a commonplace in the stories of different cultures and different ages that the awareness of a prophecy often leads to its fulfilment, often as not the attempts to avoid it being instrumental to make the prophecy true. At least to a certain extent, a charm or a curse is also given power by the awareness and belief of the one subject to it. The forms taken by the power that was born out of belief, however, are not necessarily limited to a literal fulfilment of the uttered words. An interesting form of this power – specifically relevant to curses – is the effect of the object's attempt to placate the speaker and to avoid the fulfilment of the magical words. In fact, some of the examples found in the Old Norse literature show that even when

a curse is averted its agent might still gain the upper hand in the encounter. Sometimes it is even dubitable if the fulfilment of the curse would have been as productive as its cancellation proved to be – or, in other words, whether those were not in fact cases of calculated blackmail, and whether the character threatening to curse someone was not bluffing on the basis of the object's belief in the power of a curse. On the following pages, I am going to look into two cases when horrible curses were chanted but not fulfilled, study the nature and effect of threats they contain, and question whether characters reciting them were truly going to carry out their threats.

The first case is *Skírnismál*, the poem of the *Poetic Edda* (or *Elder Edda*)[2] in which Freyr's servant Skírnir woos the *jötunn* maiden Gerðr for the sake of his lovesick master. Neither *Skírnismál* nor other extant sources on Old Norse mythology testify decisively to the nature of Skírnir. Whether he is human (like Þórr's servants Þjálfi and Röskva) or a deity, his rank is lower than Freyr's. However, he is skilled with magic as well as with weapons; moreover, before the journey he receives from Freyr not only the god's own sword, but also a steed capable of travelling to the hostile world of the jötnar. Thus equipped, Skírnir uses all means to win the unwilling maiden. When neither promising her various boons nor threatening Gerðr with violence work, Skírnir curses her at length and carves maleficent runes. And although in the beginning Gerðr proudly refuses rich gifts, and when Skírnir threatens her with the sword, she proudly states: "Ánauð þola // ek vil aldregi", ("oppression tolerate will I never", st. 24), the eloquent and detailed curse, coupled with the physical presence of the runes, finally makes her change her mind and promise to spend a night with Freyr. Interestingly, at one point Skírnir informs Gerðr that he can "carve off" the runes just as he had carved them on, "ef görast þarfar þess"("if that is needed to be done", *Skírnismál* 36).[3] So, if Skírnir has sufficient reasons, he would invalidate the terrible and powerful words directed at the distressed giantess, thus turning the curse into a bargain, which can be resolved more or less to the benefit of both sides.

Skírnismál is an emotional and highly entertaining poem, one of the most popular nowadays and perhaps equally successful in the Middle Ages. Vast scholarship has been dedicated to understanding its nature and meaning. Does it contain memory of an ancient fertility cult, as Magnus Olsen suggested in 1909? More specifically, perhaps it hints at *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage), as suggested by Ursula Dronke? However, it is quite likely that *Skírnismál* is not a creation of heathen culture at all, but a masterpiece belonging in Christian era (see Sävborg 2006 for an overview of the dating problem). The curse, taking up the central part in the poem, might be a genuine specimen of magical tradition (Mitchell 2007, 2011). But, whether connected to ritual (religious or

magical) or completely fictional, this poem was very likely more than a literary work: as Terry Gunnell shows persuasively in his writings (see Gunnell 2006) and real-life experiments, *Skírnismál* could be a good show. This would mean making the audience live this story themselves rather than simply learn about the sequence of events; laughing earnestly or being genuinely afraid. The audience should believe in what is happening, even if for a short while, take the performers for the characters they play and take the magical ritual depicted in the poem for a real one, even though it cannot harm anyone in the audience. If we go further in this direction, can't we suggest that *Skírnismál* was more than an elaborate illusion, that it could be one illusion inside another? While an actor might be pretending to be Skírnir for spectators' entertainment, isn't Skírnir making a performance for Gerðr, pretending to curse her to make her accept the deal he proposes? The maiden apparently believes him, but does Skírnir himself believe in what he is saying, or is he bluffing?

A deal quite similar in structure (though not in purpose) occurs in chapter 5 of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, when the witch Busla comes to the bed of King Hringr, who intends to execute Busla's foster-son Bósi and his own son Herrauðr. In chapter 3 of the saga Busla is introduced as a woman who "kunni margt i töfrum" ("knew much of charms"). Ironically, Bósi is reported in the same chapter to be unwilling to learn from her, for he did not want people to write in his story that he gained anything "með sleitum" ("by trickery"). Now, in chapter 5 Busla, eager to save her foster-son, threatens king Hringr with a curse so awful that the Christian narrator appears reluctant to repeat it in full. The curse is introduced as follows:

> "Þetta kveld it sama kom Busla í þat herbergi, sem Hringr konungr svaf í, ok hóf upp bæn þá, er síðan er kölluð Buslubæn, ok hefir hún víðfræg orðit síðan, ok eru þar í mörg orð ok ill, þau sem kristnum mönnum er þarfleysa í munni at hafa, en þó er þetta upphaf af henni" ("That same evening Busla came to that room, in which king Hringr slept, and started that prayer, which is since called Busla's Prayer, and it has become famous after that, and are therein many words that are needless for Christian men to utter, and yet here is its beginning").

From this description we learn several important things about Busla's magical act. First of all, she intrudes the king's privacy and gets him alone in his bed chamber; in a similar way, Skírnir was an intruder in the world of Gerðr, and yet managed to catch her alone and unprotected. Second, the curse is called a "prayer", thus indicating an invocation of some supernatural powers on the part of the speaker. Its force does not rely solely on Busla's magical skills, but

on her contact with the unknown and terrible powers or creatures. Third, part of the authority is also the reputation of the curse which became widely known ever since – this remark clearly aims at impressing the listeners of the story, rather than the characters. Furthermore, the Christian scribe manifests his unwillingness to quote the curse in full (this unwillingness resurfaces more than once in the course of this episode). Paradoxically, some verses are still cited – though we are given to understand that they are not all and most likely not the most terrible ones either. It is worth noting that *Jarlsníð* receives a similar – although less eloquent – treatment in Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds. The praise-poem turning out to be an insulting curse is described, and so are its effects, but no verses are quoted from it. The culmination of Þorleifr's performance, the Þokuvísur, are also described, and only its beginning is quoted ("[karl] hóf þá upp vísur og heita Þokuvísur og standa í miðju Jarlsníði og er þetta upphaf að" – "[the old man] began then the verses, and they are called Fog Verses and stand in the middle of Jarlsníð, and here is the beginning of those", followed by four lines of actual verse). The unwillingness to quote a powerful curse may, of course, be explained as an act of Christian piety. However, considering the themes of these narratives – especially Bósa saga ok Herrauðs with its wealth of bizarre supernatural and obscene episodes – the narrator's comment contributes to the idea of powerful verbal magic, rather than to the image of a pious Christian scribe. The narrator is prudent, but the foundation of this prudence is the belief in Busla's magic – or at least a manifestation of such belief for the sake of the story.

Buslubæn received much less scholarly attention than *Skírnismál*, as the poem from the corpus of legendary sagas (Old Norse *fornaldarsögur,* "sagas of ancient times") – the corpus little valued by scholars for the most part of the twentieth century. Lee Hollander, characteristically, places this poem much lower in aesthetic sense than "the "classic" curse of Skírnir", but admits that it is "perhaps the most instructive of its kind in literature" (Hollander 1936: 76). One of the most intriguing questions concerning *Buslubæn* is how old and how authentic these verses are. Andreas Heusler and Wilhelm Ranisch pointed out that at least a part of the poetic text is considerably younger than it is presented in the saga. Some grammatical forms, obviously immanent to the metre, show rather late stages of language development (Heusler & Ranisch 1903: xcviii). The earliest copies of *Buslubœn* are extant from XV century[4], but already at that time the variants differ from each other considerably at some points, adding to the impression of the scribes being rather creative in writing down this text. However, whether it was a deliberate creation or a vestige of oral lore, it was not based entirely on Christian tradition. *Buslubæn* has much in common with accounts of other curses performed by Scandinavian witches,

both literary (Þuriðr cursing Grettir; witches of Icelandic folktales collected by Jón Árnason) and historical (like Ragnhild, the witch from Bergen tried for cursing the man she loved and his young bride; see Mitchell 2011: 170–171). In a concise and at the same time far-reaching analysis of *Buslubæn*, Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo shows that the poem "may be interpreted as a sort of *pot-pourri* of ancient curse formulas derived from such diverse sources as truce-oaths, verbal *níð* and some accounts of hostile magic in the sagas. It shares with them both stylistic and thematic features, but integrated into a new system" (Lozzi Gallo 2004: 135). According to *Buslubæn*, terrible disasters would happen to anyone who hears it, but especially to king Hringr. However, there are two ways for the king to avoid the effects of the curse. First, he can solve the runic riddle Busla gives him in the last part of her curse (*Syrpavers*). But it's apparently unsolvable for him. Secondly, he can let Busla have her way, that is to let his two prisoners live and send them away on a dangerous mission, so that they can manage their own destiny. As soon as Busla wrestles this promise out of the king, she leaves assuring him that her spell would now do him no harm.

Both in *Skírnismál* and in *Buslubæn* the powerful curses are in effect cancelled when their speakers get what they want. The curses are thus not fulfilled in the literal sense, but Busla and Skírnir still have their way with the terrified victims. These episodes seem to involve a mixture of fear, knowledge of tradition and prudent calculation based on both, rather than literal magic power. In this way they still testify – perhaps even more strongly – to the power attributed to words in the Old Norse tradition. It would seem that all ends well, as both Hringr and Gerðr avoid the terrible dangers promised by Busla and Skírnir, respectively; however, the situation is changed through the curses – changed in favour of the one who performs the curse and then cancels it at will. Let us now examine what it is that Skírnir and Busla do to their victims, how they do it and why their curses are powerful even when (or especially when) revoked.

CALLING UPON THE WORST HUMAN FEARS

Ursula Dronke notes that in Skírnir's curse quite human fears are called upon. The *jötunn* maiden is treated not as a specifically supernatural being, but as a normal girl, who values her own sanity of mind, health, social ties and womanhood (Dronke 1997: 392). If we suppose that a mystification is going on, it is in fact crucially important that for the audience of the poem (whoever that may have been, they were definitely humans at all times) the threats were perfectly understandable. Showing how universal and pervasive they are, Joseph Harris divides threats in *Skírnismál* into four categories. Skírnir systematically curses

the following large domains of maiden's life: Social Life, Private Life, Mental Life and Physical Life (Harris 2002: 86). While the content of some threats may be bizarre and supernatural, the fears addressed here are universally understandable – especially to young women. It does not really matter that Gerðr belongs to another race and another world, as long as we can relate to her plight and understand the decision she makes in the end. The object of *Buslubæn,* on the other hand, is not separated from humankind in the same way as the jötunn maiden; however, Hringr is a mighty king, and his life is in many ways different from the lives of ordinary people. But when it comes to cursing, his fears seem not dissimilar to fears of any man. The whole range of Busla's threats is perhaps unknown to us (Hollander, for instance, believes that *Buslubæn* is really fragmentary, as the narrative suggests), but we can discern in it traces of a system similar to the one Harris finds in *Skírnismál*. Let us now look at the patterns of fear and threat in both curses.

Threats to Hringr's Physical Life start even before the curse is chanted. As we learn after the first third of the curse is quoted, the king has been made motionless, so that he cannot stop Busla nor do something to stop hearing her evil words: "Konungr vildi þá upp standa, ok var þá fastr við sængina" ("The king then wanted to get up, but was he stuck fast in bed").[5] In stanza 4 the threats of the physical kind become more sinister, as the witch wishes his eyesight and hearing to decline, and his heart to be eaten out by snakes:

Svá skal ek þjarma
þér á brjósti,
at hjarta þitt
höggormar gnagi,
en eyru þín aldregi heyri
ok augu þín
úthverf snúist
("So shall I hit your breast, that vipers will gnaw at your heart, and your ears will never hear, and your eyes will turn to the inside")

As the curse develops further, it seems that the life of the king would always be in danger – from natural elements, wild animals and supernatural creatures alike. Moreover, even in the seeming safety and luxury of the man-made halls Hringr would not find simple comfort, as we hear in stanza 7:

Sé þér í hvílu
sem í hálmeldi,
en í hásæti
sem á hafbáru

("May it be for you in rest like in a fire of seaweed, and on the high seat like on a sea-wave")

The Physical Life of Gerðr is also the first thing endangered, as Skírnir tries to frighten her with the sword before resorting to magic. In the curse itself, in stanza 27, Gerðr is promised that food would become as disgusting to her as snakes are to others. From this point on, the physical threats become only worse: Gerðr would become terrible to look upon, starve and suffer horrible diseases, and her best drink would be "geita hland" ("goat's urine", st. 35). Unlike king Hringr, she can keep her eyes and hearing, but she would lose her bodily beauty: "Að undursiónom þú verðir" ("A wondrous sight you'll become [meaning it in the negative sense, as some kind of disgusting monster]", st. 28). This specific emphasis on ugliness is even worse for a maiden, undermining her womanhood and feminine attractiveness as well as her health.

The position of the victim is rendered even more intolerable as the threats to his or her Mental Life come into view. Both Physical and Mental Life of king Hringr are further threatened in *Syrpavers,* which is rendered as a separate verse, but continues *Buslubæn* logically:

þá skulu þig hundar
í hel gnaga,
en sál þín
sökkvi í víti

("Then shall hounds in Hell gnaw you, and soul of yours would sink in punishment")

Apart from these supernatural dangers, the king is also faced with a loss of power to make his own decisions – crucial to his status as a ruler. His will over his actions and even over his feelings is being taken from him. This powerful threat, that would cause great loss of face for a man, and especially for a king, is in the very heart of *Buslubæn* and looms large in the refrain. The wording changes slightly from one stanza to another, but the main idea remains the same:

nema þú Herrauð
heipt upp gefir
og svo Bósa
biðjir til sátta.

("But you give up deadly hatred for Herrauðr, and leave Bósi in peace.")

Not only would Hringr lose the power to capture or kill the young men. He would even be unable to hate them. If Busla is appeased and the curse taken

off, Hringr would also have to give up some of his power, but still be a master of his feelings, and retain the superficial independence of actions.

Skírnir is even more vicious in enumerating his threats to Gerðr's Mental Life than in threatening her body. An accurate summary of the howling madness that awaits her can be found in stanza 29:

Tópi ok ópi,
tiösull ok óþoli –
vaxi þér tár með trega!
("Madness and weeping, longing and lusting – let tears of woe grow in you!")

But the real centre of Skírnir's curse, as well as *Buslubæn,* is not madness, but submission of will. Gerðr would have to yield to Freyr or to be disgraced by total loss of control over her lust:

Þig geð grípi,
þig morn morni!
("Let passion capture you, let pining make you pine away!" st. 31)

The uncontrollable desire and longing are probably among the things that were feared in connection with *mannsǫngkvæði*, as I have noted above. The curse of Skírnir, however, works more subtly: the submission of the maiden's will to be attained in any case, Gerðr is given a choice. The options are fairly narrow: either she is reduced to an ugly roving madwoman with her desires undirected and unfulfilled, or she keeps her good looks and normal life, but returns the affection of Freyr (or, at least, "willingly" yields to his desire). Just as king Hringr, she chooses the lesser evil and accepts the proposal made by Skírnir – thus saving both her physical and mental health and a semblance of dignity.

Fears of Gerðr and Hringr in the domain of Social Life are also unsurprisingly different and still universal. Busla, having made the authority of king Hringr problematic (even if only in particular case), has already threatened his social position as a ruler. Stanza 5 is directed at destroying the king's skills as a seafarer in the following fashion:

Ef þú siglir,
slitni reiði,
en ef stýri,
stökkvi krókar
("If you sail, may rigging break, and if you steer, may tholepins spring")

Stanza 6 similarly threatens his horse-riding skills. These threats further undermine Hringr's status of an able king, as his warrior (perhaps also trading) skills are dubious, if he can neither sail a ship nor ride a horse any more. The

horror of such loss of face and competence, and the subsequent shattering of the victim's social status would be understandable to the audience – and almost any man would very likely choose to give way in one conflict, rather than become an inadequate member of his society (or even an outcast) for the rest of his life.

A woman's pride and social prestige do not require sailing ships or riding horses. But her reputation and her position in the society depend to a certain extent on marriage. The menacing words of Skírnir draw a picture of loneliness for his headstrong victim, who would be too terrible for men or gods to look upon anyway. Moreover, if she rejects the fair and powerful god Freyr, she will either stay a spinster or have to settle with a despicable partner. For a young beautiful maiden (whether she is human or not), either of these options is undesirable, to say the least:

Með þursi þríhöfðuðum
þú skalt æ nara,
eða verlaus vera
("With a three-headed thurs [giant] forever will you linger, or stay without a husband", st. 31)

In addition to promising the destruction of health and social position, both Skírnir and Busla specifically emphasize the threat to their victims' Private Life. Of course, such emphasis is quite logical in *Skírnismál*, where Gerðr's sexual life is the main concern of the whole situation. Dramatically calling upon a multitude of supernatural beings to witness this particular part of the curse, Skírnir proclaims:

Heyri jötnar,
heyri hrímþursar,
synir Suttunga,
sjalfir ásliðar,
hve eg fyrirbýð,
hve ek fyrirbanna,
manna glaum mani,
manna nyt mani.
("Hear, jötnar, hear, frost-giants, sons of Suttungr, and the hosts of the gods, how I forbid, how I prohibit to the maiden the women's joy, to the maiden the women's pleasure", st. 34)

However, king Hringr is also threatened with the loss of his sexual power. Interestingly, in stanza 7 Busla suggests that this might be a greater trouble than those she foretold him before:

þó skal þér seinna
sýnu verra,

en ef þú vilt við meyjar
manns gaman hafa,
villist þú þá vegarins;
eða viltu þulu lengri?
("But later will it be worse for you, and if you want to lie with maidens and have a man's pleasure, you will lose your way then; or do you want a longer list?")

Specific preoccupation with Private Life in these curses probably reflects general human fear, only in part rational and only in part controllable, that was widely thematized in Old Norse-Icelandic literature: the loss of honour and delight, of future heirs and, in effect, the loss of gender identity itself. The sexual failure seals the physical, mental and social destruction of the female victim of Skírnir and the male victim of Busla, and neither the supernatural origin of the jötunn maiden nor the initially high status of the human king can protect them from this ultimate plight.

THE LANGUAGE OF MAGIC

As it turns out, if Gerðr doesn't accept Freyr's wooing, the fulfilled curse would effectively ruin her whole life, leaving her mad, sick, deprived of social connections, and a complete failure as a woman. King Hringr, if Busla's curse has its full effect on him, would lose his will and senses, warrior faculties and royal power, in return acquiring numerous supernatural enemies and embarrassing problems with women.

However, would it do any good to the enchanters? Neither Skírnir nor Busla are brutal maniacs, nor are they fighters for justice. Simply making another person suffer is not their goal. Skírnir needs to bring his master the desired maiden, and Freyr would hardly be grateful to him for making Gerðr an ugly, demented and continuously menstruating wreck. Busla wants the king to release the young men who have been sentenced to death. This wish is indeed a part of the curse, but if this refrain alone was powerful enough, why threaten the king with all other terrible disasters? As discussed above, the whole curse undermines Hringr's authority considerably, so, ultimately, it can even prevent him from being useful for Busla's protégés. The thorough and genuinely frightening threats posed in *Skírnismál* and *Buslubæn* might thus seem either superfluous or even contradicting the actual intentions of their conjurers. Rather than doing actual harm, it's much more useful for both Skírnir and Busla to show their magical power without applying it. In fact, even if Skírnir could

not do any magic at all, and Busla was only able to immobilize her victim for a short while, they could still succeed, for the main condition for the success here is the one subject to the curse (real or feigned) believing in its power and fearing it, so that the enchanter can have his or her way. The magician must primarily be cunning here: if he (or she) is caught at inability to deliver the curse, he will of course fail, but if he artlessly employs his power and delivers the curse, he will fail in a different way, perhaps not spoiling his reputation, but still not getting what he wanted in the first place.

Even if powerful and potentially harmful magic really exists in the world of the narrative, knowledge of superstition should be demonstrated, more than knowledge of real magical art. The curses of Skírnir and Busla are prudently thought-out. A rational design seems to underlie them – unlike, for instance, the effective curses of the later Icelandic *kraftaskáld*, always conjured on the spur of emotion. Not only are the worst possible fears evoked and cleverly exploited – a number of elements also signals unequivocally that what's going on is not an empty threat, but a valid curse. For instance, imagery used in curses is quite distinctive: it creates an atmosphere of cold dark world filled with terrible creatures – both natural and mythological, but invariably malevolent and dangerous to the victim of the curse. Particular animals (like snakes) and particular plants can be given specific prominence.[6] Moreover, as Stephen Mitchell puts it, the conjurer of a spell invokes the supernatural world to persecute the victim in natural, realistic ways, and then calls "on the natural world to do unnatural things" (Mitchell 2011: 56). The first category is represented in *Skírnismál* by the hideous monster Hrímgrímnir, Gerðr's promised lover (*Skírnismál* 35), while in *Buslubæn* supernatural creatures are instigated to kill king Hringr as soon as they lay their hands (or whatever) on him. Gerðr would also suffer terribly from such natural things as food and sexual intercourse, while king Hringr would be attacked by natural elements, objects and animals. This contortion of natural and supernatural spheres makes the victim even more powerless before the enchanter. It is habitual for a maiden to be disgusted by dirt or worms, or for a king to fight against living, human (or at least human-like) enemies, but what to do if food repels one, or if one has to fight against rabid animals and malevolent rigging? This seems almost more disruptive for the mind than for the body. The victim, threatened from all directions (as was discussed above), is also deprived of habitual logic and thus completely broken psychologically. Then the magician inflicts the final blow, sealing the curse with a runic inscription.

Both Skírnir and Busla make runes an important part of their rituals. The culmination of Skírnir's curse is carving of four runes. The first of them, Þurs, is supposed to destroy the maiden's sexual health (Dronke 1997: 393), while three others (in *Skírnismál* 36) invoke *ergi* (lust), *æði* (frenzy) and *ópola* (restlessness),

making Gerðr long for sexual pleasures she is deprived of. Busla, on the other hand, puts runic symbols to a different use: she carves a riddle, encrypting names of six magical entities in a sequence of symbols. They are at the same time part of the curse and a theoretical salvation for Hringr, if he manages to solve the riddle. Interestingly, he does not seem to even try that – perhaps knowing that would be a hopeless undertaking, perhaps so frightened that he is unable to think straight. It seems important that *Syrpavers,* introducing the riddle, is said to be a traditional curse. Its suggested reputation should add to the victim's informed fear in case he hadn't had enough yet. The runes are an immensely convincing argument in both cases, and this is unsurprising, for a long tradition, stemming from the introduction of literacy (Spurkland 2005: 11) and reinforced by influence of Christian book culture, seems to suggest that curses or insults carved on wood are even worse than those said aloud; and for most powerful effect these must act together (Mitchell 2007: 84–85).

We have already seen some examples of magical use of runic symbols and inscriptions in the introduction to the present paper. However, it is important not to over-interpret such instances found in Old Norse-Icelandic prose and poetry. In his concise guide to the runes, Michael Barnes dedicates a separate chapter to such literary evidence, as well as its re-use and re-interpretation (or, often as not, misinterpretation) in modern culture and politics. Barnes rightly cautions the scholars against leaping to conclusions and against seeing the rune magic of the sagas and Eddic poetry as ready evidence to the popular belief and ancient magical practices. At the same time, while people who used runes on daily basis as a script would hardly believe in the magic power of runic symbols as such, "the Icelanders might (or might at least have been disposed to exploit such notions as literary motifs)" (Barnes 2012: 192). In other words, the people living on a remote island, who were probably not exposed to rune-carving in their daily life, could entertain certain superstitions concerning the runes or at least let their imagination run loose and use the strange symbols as a literary device.

Furthermore, the instances of runes in Old Norse-Icelandic literature are diverse: for example, in the same *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonnar* the main character uses runic script to carve his own poem and thus let other people know that Grettir has killed a giant and found some bones in the giant's cave. Grettir brings the bones together with the rune-stick to the church, and the next morning the priest reads the inscription (ch. 66). While the supernatural is present in this episode, runes as such do not have any direct supernatural connotations – they are simply a means of passing on the information. At the same time, the episode in *Grettis saga* demonstrates two important ideas connected to the runes – not necessarily seen as magic, but as a script. First,

when the poem is inscribed on a stick, its transmission is ensured: the words will not simply perish after our hero utters his poem, unheard by any living being. Second, the ability to carve and read runes implies specific knowledge, specific kind of literacy, which is available both to the poet and to the priest. As *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonnar* reminds us, this knowledge was not readily available just to anyone: badly carved runes could even cause harm. At the very least, if the inscription is garbled or if the recipient is unable to read it for some other reason, the purpose of the runes would not be fulfilled. For example, in the Eddic poem *Atlamál in grænlensku*, that deals with the fate of Guðrún, the widow of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and her brothers, malevolent intent is achieved partly with the help of runes – but no magic is involved. Guðrún's second husband, king Atli, invites her brothers to a feast; Guðrún knows that he has planned treacherous murder, and she sends a warning, including runes carved on wood. The royal messenger, however, changes the runes so that no one can make sense of the inscription: "rengdi þær Vingi" ("Vingi distorted them [the runes]", *Atlamál in grænlensku*, st. 4). This undermined communication adds to the doom that pervades the poem.

In *Skírnismál*, Skírnir uses the presupposed belief in the power of carved symbols; at the same time, he precludes any possible misunderstanding, as he carefully explains the meaning of the symbols he is going to carve. The inscription on a stick does not add much to the curse in terms of content; however, it seals the threat, creates a lasting, tangible sign of it. The runes that the curse of Skírnir will linger even after he finishes his speech – and even if Gerðr used to be ignorant about the meaning of the particular symbols, from now on she is all too well informed. The significance of knowledge is reversed in case of Busla and king Hringr. In fact, the inscription carved by the witch is not a curse at all. It is an encrypted text – a phenomenon quite well attested in various writing systems, including the runic scripts. The form of Busla's inscription, in which several symbols are repeated in a certain sequence, is even reminiscent of actual runic inscriptions known to us from archaeological evidence (see Barnes 2012: 148–152). It is not a curse, but a riddle to be solved; Busla even gives a sort of a hint in verse, telling the king that she encrypted six names in her cipher. It is understandable that the king is in no condition to solve riddles by that point. Moreover, as no single uncontested solution for Busla's riddle has been suggested up until now, it might be safe to say that king Hringr had no real chance to solve it. However, the riddle lends a tangible presence to Busla's threats. And, even more clearly than in *Skírnismál*, the act of carving the runes turns the curse into a bargain. Sealing a curse with an inscription has a paradoxical effect, as it is impossible to unsay something, but quite easy to "uncarve" runes: we have seen how Egill did just that in the

saga, and Skírnir himself promises to uncarve the terrible inscription if Gerðr reconsiders her feelings towards Freyr. This is precisely what makes the bargain both possible and visually clear in *Skírnismál*. Somewhat frustratingly, we know nothing about the fate of Busla's runes: she simply "unsays" the oral curse, while the carving is forgotten altogether. However, the very presence of the runes (placed, like in *Skírnismál*, in the culminate end of the exchange) and the effect they have on king Hringr support the hypothesis of runic inscription as an ultimate argument in the violent magical bargaining. The act of carving the inscription, while orally explaining its power and the consequences that are connected to it in various ways, the speaker of a curse invokes his or her victim's belief in the magical power of the runes; at the same time, however, the victim's common sense is invoked. The terrible consequences of a curse have been spelled out in utmost colourful detail; but now the victim is shown a way out. However unequal the bargain might be, it is still better than the curse – at least this is clearly the conclusion at which both the jötunn maiden and the powerful human king arrive at the end of their respective encounters with the cunning users of magic.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

As we have seen, the belief in the power of words was such an overwhelming presence in the Old Norse-Icelandic literature that some of the characters portrayed in the sagas and poetry needed only to threaten their victims with this power in order to get whatever the speaker wanted. The effective substitution of a threat for a fulfilled curse depended on belief, and the belief itself was built on the basis of clever psychological manipulation and the use of certain established features to construct a "correct" poetic curse. It is very likely that the poetic form itself contributed to the believability of a curse, for the connection between poetry and magic was a well-established idea. The reputation of the speaker also played an important role, and so did the reputation of the separate elements he or she included into the curse. The examples presented in this article suggest that the construction of a curse included the use of certain natural and supernatural imagery – including certain animals and plants, natural disasters and elements of the material world (rigging of a ship, the land itself) gone wild and hostile. Runes often added to the power of a curse, making it more tangible, but also increasing the feeling of the bizarre and unknown (as we have seen in *Syrpavers*, where the runes *per se* are not given any magic power). A closer examination of more numerous examples of curses would yield a more detailed inventory of the traditional curse imagery and tools; however,

even the modest selection presented here shows that different curses – spoken in a variety of situations and involving speakers of differing status, gender and even race – bear an unmistakable family resemblance.

To use the stock of traditional elements for attaining his or her goal, the conjurer of a curse had to demonstrate the ability to manipulate people on natural as much as on supernatural level. In fact, the ways by which the manipulation is attained – especially in cases when the curse is not literally fulfilled – makes an interesting case not only in the study of ideas about magic, but also in the study of medieval psychology and mentality. To be effective, a carefully crafted illusion of a curse had to address not only what people believed (or at least what the literary characters would believe and the medieval audience would find believable enough), but also what they feared (and it is my belief that no qualification or division between literature and life is really needed here). The magician who wanted to threaten the victim with a curse, as well as the storyteller who told of this magician, manifest their skill at playing upon the worst human fears, threatening the major domains of the victim's life. In particular, the most intimate and the most vulnerable sphere of gender identity and sexual relations could be used to construct an effective curse or to achieve a powerful illusion. The ways in which the audience could relate to the victim's fears and sympathize with them (perhaps not always feeling sorry for the victim, but definitely feeling thrilled or anxious about the danger the curses seemed to involve) give us a valuable glimpse into the minds of this audience.

At the same time, it might be worthwhile not to take the episodes from *Skírnismál* and *Buslubæn* strictly at face value. We have seen how the curses in these case-studies turn out to be effective threats and how they are a tool in bargaining. In both stories, the bargain served the speaker of the curse better than the literal fulfilment of the curse could, and both Busla and Skírnir achieved their goals. The "victims", to whom the curse was addressed, have to abide by the others' terms, while attaining barely a shred of dignity: in an almost comical turn, Gerðr suddenly finds herself liking Freyr, and king Hringr, paralyzed and helpless, allows an old woman to dictate his royal decisions. But could these blatantly unequal instances of bargaining actually include bluff on both sides? It is obvious that Skírnir and Busla intimidate their victims; however, what they are doing just might be the right strategy to allow the "victims" to make a certain decision. A proud maiden would think of her honour before yielding to a man's desire (even if the man is actually a god), and selling the honour for rich presents would not make her look good. However, what if she receives an offer that she cannot possibly refuse, if she is threatened with things that no one could protect her from (thus, things mightier than a sword)? And the powerful and obstinate king, who has to think about his honour and his

authority, cannot really afford to keep forgiving his ruthless (and potentially dangerous) son. However, what if a different power takes care of protecting the prince, what if the king meets the limits of his authority, but these limits are so bizarre and otherworldly that they would not really shake his reputation for the purposes of day-to-day human rulership? In such conditions, the maiden would have to yield, and the king would have to forgive his son. They are both left with no alternative, but to show prudence and submit to a powerful Other. Seen from this point of view, the bargain may be much more profitable for all parties, and the seeming loss of face for the "victims" may actually become the saving of face. And in case someone has to be blamed for the ambiguous behaviour, the Other, armed with his or her magic and reputation, is conveniently there to take the blame.

NOTES

[1] See Faulkes 1997 on the significance of divine and magical sources of poetic inspiration and the cross-cultural references this theme envokes.

[2] Preserved in the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda* and in AM 748 4to; also referenced in *Snorra-Edda (Younger,* or *Prose Edda)*.

[3] All quotations from *Skírnismál*, as well as stanza numbers, are cited by Ursula Dronke's edition (1997, see bibliography in the end). The translations from Old Norse here and onwards are mine – A.S.

[4] AM 586 4to, AM 510 4to, and AM 577 4to.

[5] For quotations and stanza numbers, I use the editions of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* by Guðni Jónsson (1954) and by Árni Björnsson (1971). A complete (although not always literal) translation of *Buslubæn* can be found in: Hermann Pálsson & John Edwards. *Seven Viking Romances.* London: Penguin, 1985 [also printed in the Appendix to Lozzi Gallo 2004, parallel to the Old Norse text]. The translations in the present article are mine, but I have consulted with the existing English translation.

[6] Among the plants that are prominent in curses thistle stands out, having been puzzling the scholars for decades. Reviewing the comparison of Gerðr with dry thistle (*Skírnismál* 31) and its possible meaning is not the subject of this essay. However, it is interesting to note that according to a possible interpretation, *thistill* (and it is equally frustrating companion *mistill*, mistletoe) might also show up in the solution of Busla's riddle (Hollander 1936, 79).

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