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Cursing with trolls in Njáls saga.

Taking Hallgerðr seriously

1

When I was a child, I felt uncomfortable when adults cursed (sometimes violently) in my vicinity, even invoking the devil and hell.[1] Unlike the adults, I took heaven and hell seriously and felt that their names should not be bandied about. Even when told that the profanity was meaningless, I was not convinced, found it hard to accept that vacuity and still felt that any mention of these two might have sinister consequences. Perhaps people who study languages are somewhat childlike in their refusal to accept that parole is meaningless; perhaps being a scholar in itself constitutes a stubborn refusal to accept the essential inanity of discourse, of society, and even of the universe. Nevertheless, as an author and professor of literature, I still cling to the belief that words, including curses, do indeed mean something, although the meaning is more variable than I would probably have imagined as a child.

For one thing, many of us were taught that profanity was vulgar and unsophisticated. But when studying profanities, the conclusion, highlighted by many contributions to this special issue, is that they are often highly sophisticated and immersed in culture. Many

[1] This article originated as a keynote lecture at the conference *SwiSca 7: Swearing and Society*, in Reykjavík, 2 December 2021. As a study of Njáls saga, its scope is narrow, but it does serve a different purpose as a case study of how the meaning of words can be better understood by examining each attestation in detail.

Orð og tunga 25 (2023), 1–12, https://doi.org/10.33112/ordogtunga.25.2

swear words and vulgar phrases have a long and illustrious history, for which the changing cultural context is of much significance. They are particularly significant to the history of religion since many of them originally had a religious or ritual significance, much like knocking on wood so as not to tempt fate, a custom that is commonly believed to be old; even though it is not attested in Scandinavia until the Modern Age, it may possibly have very ancient heathen roots and even be connected with pagan beliefs in cosmological trees (Ármann Jakobsson 2023).

For a twenty-first-century rationalist and atheist, saying the devil's name out loud may indeed be meaningless. However, in the universe of folklore and fairy tales, invoking a paranormal being might result in the appearance of said being, and this should be an excellent reason never to mention the devil, in case he takes it as a summons and arrives and wants to make a deal– one of those deals that cannot end well for anyone but the devil himself. The same would seem to apply to the devil's servants. They are essentially him, and he is them (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2018).

Whether mentioning demons is also understood as a summons in Old Norse texts is a matter of debate but worth investigating. This study is concerned with two instances where a well-born, tenth-century Icelandic lady invokes evil spirits, on this occasion, trolls. Nothing seems to happen as a result – but is that so? In these cases, the curse may be innocent, or it may not.

I have been for the last decade and a half working on the medieval and post-medieval concept of the troll. The reason the troll turned out to be a good topic for a book is that the word has a variety of meanings, that alter over the course of time. Thus, a modern Icelandic reader of a medieval Icelandic work will possibly recognise the word 'troll' in the text and feel they know what it means. If this reader is thinking too much about the contemporary meaning of troll, they will probably misunderstand the medieval text (see in particular Ármann Jakobsson 2017). This is also true of other cultures. In the other Nordic countries, trolls tend to be small and impish; in Iceland they are large and brutish. And then there is the influence of Tolkien, also pervading the works of J.K. Rowling and other popular authors of the day, wherein the troll is a wild, strong, large but relatively dumb and bestial creature.[2]

[2] The notion of the troll as a strong but dumb antagonist more associated with nature and bestiality than culture and refinement is prevalent in modern fantasy and

The main difference between the common image of trolls and what we can discern from medieval texts is that the troll is now understood as a particular category of otherworldly being, although its nature may differ in the various Nordic cultures, and it has also changed somewhat in the last two decades. In the medieval Norse texts, on the other hand, the word 'troll' definitely does not denote a particular category of otherness, and this is precisely the issue that modern readers often have with medieval words: they are in some cases used less to categorise, although that does not mean they have a less fixed signification (Ármann Jakobsson 2013).

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The medieval meanings of 'troll' are several, but one of them is that it may appear in a curse. One such instance, the topic of this study, is from possibly the most renowned of all sagas, Njáls saga (composed c. 1275–1280), when the heroic Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, who has made a name for himself abroad but then returned and entered into a misguided marriage with Hallgerðr, rides to the annual summer parliament in Iceland, probably around the year 975. He admonishes his new wife to be pleasant in his absence and not to attack his friends in the region – mainly Njáll of Bergþórshváll, his wife Bergþóra, and their son Skarpheðinn and his three brothers, all of whom have already turned out to be his friends but not necessarily hers. This advice is not well received by Hallgerðr, who responds very promptly and eloquently: "Troll hafi þína vini" (The trolls take your friends) (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:92).

Gunnarr can see that it is useless to waste more words on her and simply leaves without further ado. Hallgerðr, however, has no intention of being nice and follows up on her strong words by arranging the slaying of a farmhand from the region, which in the end leads to multiple killings of various labourers and a feud between Hlíðarendi and the neighbouring Bergþórshváll that lasts for years.[3] The escalat-

probably owes as much or more to the interpretations of the trolls in Scandinavian folklore by influential authors such as Tolkien and C.S. Lewis than to the actual folklore itself.

[3] On this episode in Njáls saga and on the structure of the saga in general, see e.g. Lönnroth (1976); Kristján Jóhann Jónsson (1998). The first scholars to discuss the gender discourse of Njáls saga in a critical manner, paving the way for fruitful research, were Helga Kress (1979) and Dronke (1981).

ing feud provides a compelling narrative for various reasons but of main interest to those interested in cursing is its very beginning, or preamble, which is the curse itself: "Troll hafi þína vini".

What sort of speech act is Hallgerðr committing with this curse? Her most obvious gain by the outburst would seem to be a release. Hallgerðr is full of frustration and disappointment; the marriage is not going as planned, and thus she vents her anger with this retort. Furthermore, she is conveying her hostility to Gunnarr. She is not only angry but wants him to know it and to take her anger seriously.[4] He does not react but should perhaps have done so, since one may see Hallgerðr's profanity as a sign that she is not going to settle for words.

Her words are, however, pithy and quite elegant, in the style of Njáls saga itself, perhaps the best written of all the sagas and noted in particular for the elegant dialogue of the characters. Hallgerðr's riposte is forceful in its brevity. Hallgerðr could have launched into a lengthy diatribe about her reasons for hating Gunnarr's friends, but she wastes no time on it; she simply curses them by invoking the troll or trolls. Given that the singular and the plural forms are the same, it remains unclear if it is one or more trolls she is calling upon to seize Gunnarr's friends.[5]

Obviously, as is characteristic of all conversation, she could have said many things, but this is as good a statement as any. Her curse is not only cathartic but clearly dysphemistic and abusive as well. Hallgerðr sees no need to plan to make peace with anyone or indeed to behave as her husband would have wished. This is one of the things she makes clear when she calls upon the trolls to come and take Gunnarr's friends. We later learn she is ready to follow her curse into action as well, but at first it is only her will that is clear.

But why trolls, and what is a troll? In my original study of the word (Ármann Jakobsson 2008), I listed thirteen meanings. Of course,

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[4] Hallgerðr's anger was analysed masterfully some years ago by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1943:94–112). There is no paranormal dimension to his analysis since Icelandic scholars of the mid-twentieth century were interested in the 'realism' of the sagas and, although they acknowledged their paranormal incidents, hardly ever discussed them at length. Lönnroth (1999) was among the first scholars to draw attention to the fundamental role of the paranormal in the medieval sagas.

[5] The comment was made at the conference from which this paper stems that it must be singular. This seems likely, as in most such invocations, the singular is used rather than the plural, but I remain somewhat unsure. The actual structure of the sentence does not make it entirely clear since 'troll' is the same in the singular and the plural.

these meanings are interconnected and similar, and some may be older than others, but the 'core meaning' of the word would have been of little interest for those thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders who used the word. The word's various meanings all co-exist in the minds of the saga audience, who may not have regarded any single one of them as the core meaning. So it is interesting to look at those diverse meanings floating around in late-medieval Icelandic culture.

In thirteenth-, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sagas, the word troll was used for heathen demigods (in Jómsvíkinga saga), berserks (in Sörla saga sterka), cannibals (in Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar), heathens (in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar), heretics (in law codes), possessed animals (in Hrólfs saga kraka), strongmen from distant countries (in Kjalnesinga saga), antisocial defilers of wells and springs (in Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka), giants (in Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls), vampires (in Harðar saga), witches (in Eyrbyggja saga) and unidentified hostile beings on a killing spree (in Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar). Last but not least, people referred to their enemies as trolls (in Grettis saga) without necessarily specifying which of the aforementioned twelve types they mean.

What is abundantly clear from the list of diverse significations of this single word is that a troll is not always a particular species or race of humanoids. The list includes animals, paranormal beings and humans of other races as well as Icelanders. A troll might, therefore, be human. There are trolls in several of the noble genealogies of Landnámabók and the Sagas of Icelanders. A troll may be a Sámi or a Finn but does not have to be. A troll might be an undead person who used to be your neighbour. A troll might also be the pleasant-looking lady who is your current neighbour.[6] Today some may believe that the trolls live in the mountains, but in medieval sagas they can also be found on your doorstep, making every day slightly more dangerous for everyone.

The only attributes all these beings share are a connection with magic and their fundamental hostility. Medieval trolls may not all be large, savage or physically strong, but they are all dangerous, and they all either practise magic or are created by the magic of others. Law codes from the late thirteenth century include a ban both on awakening or raising a troll and on having supper with one (*Diplo-*

[6] All these examples are taken from Ármann Jakobsson (2008), and further cases can be found in the online dictionary of the Arnamagnæan Commission, *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (= ONP online).

matarium Islandicum 1857–1872:2; see Lára Magnúsardóttir 2022). The former stricture obviously refers to a paranormal spirit or possibly one of the undead that is made to walk again by a magic ritual. The second ban would seem to refer to a witch or possibly a heretic or pagan who might live in your region and could both awaken the dead and send its neighbours invitations to supper.

The troll curse from Njáls saga is among a score of medieval Icelandic examples of curses that invoke a troll or trolls. There are also two examples in the early thirteenth-century kings' saga Morkinskinna ('a troll take you and your cunning' is one instance) and further examples that, at least on the surface, seem comparable in Kormáks saga, Ljósvetninga saga, Bandamanna saga, Vatnsdœla saga, Völsunga saga, Örvar-Odds saga and Parcevals saga. A variation of the curse is 'troll togi tungu úr höfði þér' (a troll pulls the tongue from your head), which appears in Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs although it is never used as a direct curse.[7] In none of these invocations is it apparent what sort of trolls are meant to come and take the cursed person (demi-gods, ghosts, witches) or pull the tongue out of their head. In fact, such a statement could refer to any paranormal entity.

So which of the trolls might Hallgerðr be referring to in her curse? The author of Njáls saga is famously economical with words, and one result is that Hallgerðr does not expand on the signification of her words nor inform Gunnarr or the saga audience which trolls she means. It would seem obvious, nevertheless, that these trolls are fiendish and demonic beings, who are either imbued with magic powers or have been designed or summoned by someone who possesses said powers. It may not be all that important which hostile beings Hallgerðr is invoking. The audience recognises her hatred and spite and her will to create a disturbance. They only need to know that she is at heart summoning fiendish spirits against Gunnarr's friends. Whatever her powers are, this does not bode well for her enemies or indeed for peace in the region.

Does Hallgerðr actually summon evil spirits with her curse? Much mischief happens after her words are spoken, but those deeds are never attributed directly to the trolls. Nor is it made clear whether the trolls have such powers, even though that seems fairly likely. The reason for the non-appearance of trolls in the feud that arises from Hallgerðr's action is certainly not that there are no trolls in Njáls saga.

[7] Some further examples of this particular variant can be found in the *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP online).

On the contrary, there are plenty. One of the very first characters introduced in the saga is Hallgerðr's maternal uncle Svanr, who lives in the Westfjords and who is a magician. Shortly thereafter he begins to perform a magical ritual to aid Hallgerðr's fugitive servant Þjóstólfr and in this way is able to create actual fog to throw his enemies off Þjóstólfr's scent (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:36–39). The paranormal fog is a good example of what may happen if trolls are summoned. Magicians are among those referred to as trolls in the Sagas of Icelanders; indeed, it could be said that the two main species of medieval Icelandic troll are the witch and the ghost.[8] Thus we have a foul troll on the prowl from the very beginning of the saga, and the audience knows that trolls are not to be trifled with.

Svanr is dead (and has gone into the mountains) by the time Hallgerðr marries Gunnarr and begins to make mischief in the Rangárvellir region, but it is possibly no coincidence that the niece of a magician should invoke trolls in her curse. If magicians and other trolls are feared, that means that there is reason to fear her as well, since who knows what her powers might be? With her mention of trolls, Hallgerðr is reminding Gunnarr of her habitus as someone with links to the old culture,[9] someone who a short while ago might actually have summoned a working magician to do her bidding. Such links are important in a story world that is replete with trolls and monsters.

3

Wicked uncle Svanr is far from the only troll of *Njáls saga*. There are also ghosts in Njáls saga, one of them Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi himself after his death; this noble and kind man is surprisingly seen as a ghost in his mound (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:192–194). Later in the saga, we may find demonic ravens, chanting valkyries, sinister figures in dreams, a black fire-starting apparition; one character running from battle even has a vision of demons from hell coming to try to drag him down to that accursed place. He manages to invoke the Apostle Peter, and then the demons release him (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:452). There are even more examples of trolls in the saga, but it serves no

[8] This is discussed at length in Ármann Jakobsson (2017:61–67 and 77–80).

[9] On the complicated relationship between the netherworld, witchcraft, paganism and the past, see Ármann Jakobsson (2021).

purpose to name them all; this should be enough to ascertain that in Njáls saga, fiends and demons walk the earth and have an impact on the narrative. Consequently, one may conclude that it is far from meaningless or harmless to summon the trolls with a curse.

The close interaction of trolls and regular humans is also noteworthy, and it is not only Hallgerðr who has such interactions or is accused of fraternising with the trolls. In another verbal skirmish late in the saga, Skarpheðinn Njálsson, one of Hallgerðr's many enemies from the Rangárvellir region, accuses his antagonist Flosi of having performed a sex act with – presumably being anally penetrated by – the god or elf of Svínafell, a taunt that once uttered precludes all possibility of settlement and peace. While the accusation might be blatantly untrue, and we do not even know if Skarpheðinn means it literally or intends it as an colossal exaggeration, it can nevertheless hardly be denied that Skarpheðinn is conjuring up a vision of a sexual relationship between a man and a demon. If a magnate on Svínafell can be buggered by a troll, then clearly it could be hazardous to summon them in a curse (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:314).[10]

Skarpheðinn is not the first, nor indeed the last, Njáls saga character to attribute demonic acts to his adversaries; in fact, this could be a trick he picked up from his own enemy, the aforementioned Hallgerðr. The feud between Hlíðarendi and Bergþórshváll reaches its zenith when Hallgerðr indirectly suggests that magic was involved in Skarpheðinn himself growing a beard and that his father is a witch, that is to say, another type of troll. The reason for this was the old man's skilled usage of dung to make the grass grow, and Hallgerðr plays on this by calling his sons, Skarpheðinn and his brothers 'dung-beardlings', thereby associating the symbol of their manhood with faeces in the face. Like most other things I am mentioning here, faeces are also far from innocent in medieval Iceland or medieval Europe, having rather a close connection with the devil himself and hell.[11] So the taunt about the dung-beard is not only a humiliation – in the Middle Ages, much like today, the posterior and references to it are often used to humiliate an opponent in various ways – but also an accusa-

[10] The Old Icelandic habit of ridiculing men by referring to them as female livestock or insisting they were 'the passive' partner in a sex act was analysed by Sørensen, (1983).

[11] The relationship between faeces and the demonic is discussed, for example, in Ármann Jakobsson (2017:127–131), building on the studies of Davíð Erlingsson (1994).

tion of trollish behaviour. She is implying that the trolls do not even need to take Njáll and his sons since the beards of the sons are clear proof of magic: they are themselves trolls.

Whether Hallgerðr's veiled accusation of witchcraft gained currency in the whole of South Iceland cannot be said, but much later in the saga, Skarpheðinn encounters Skapti Þóroddsson the lawspeaker (or "attorney general" in modern parlance). Skapti immediately asks who this trollish man is, leading Skarpheðinn to react promptly, angrily and cleverly (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:298–99). Why would Skarpheðinn be trollish? Not just because he is a big man – Skapti has already mentioned that – but rather because Skapti sees 'something of the night about him'.[12] Possibly this is because he has heard the dungbeardlings slur, which most definitely exacerbates Skarpheðinn's reaction to the question.

The impression I may have given of what Njáls saga is like is certainly correct: the saga characters hurl accusations of trollish behaviour at each other, and few seem exempt from being linked in this way to the dark place itself. And the presence of trolls is not limited to accusations; they also figure as characters in the saga.

Given the presence of all these trollish accusations and demonic figures in Njáls saga, it seems natural to interpret Hallgerðr's curse as rather more than mere words. Indeed, Gunnarr's courageous indifference to her response seems ill-advised, given how trolls walk the earth in this saga. Some of these paranormal others may appear to people and frighten them and, in some cases, harm them. People are accused of interaction, sexual and otherwise, with these trolls, as well as of other foul and magical activities, and this leads to battle and bloodshed, precisely because the characters of the saga take these accusations seriously. They are living in a storyworld that contains trolls, and these trolls are dangerous to both one's physical and spiritual health. Therefore, people should take care in invoking and summoning them.

To sum up: When Hallgerðr asks the trolls to take Njáll and his family, the sense of her words is multi-layered and the cultural context complex. Hallgerðr is certainly expressing her anger and venting her feelings, making threats and ensuring that the feud will continue. That she does this by mentioning trolls is all the more threatening

[12] The complicated portrayal of Skapti in various thirteenth-, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sagas and how the sagas in general treat traditional or historical figures is discussed in Ármann Jakobsson (2014).

since this is a narrative replete with trolls and accusations of trollish behaviour – a saga that indeed not only takes place in the Rangárvellir region of Iceland but concerns the much bigger struggle between heaven and hell, a story of heroes and villains, angels and demons.

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Interestingly, Hallgerðr is not the last person in Njáls saga, nor indeed the last wife, to invoke the trolls in a curse. Close to the end of the saga, we meet her counterpart, the noble Valgerðr, who is related to Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. Clearly a good woman, she has made an unfortunate marriage to a braggart and mountebank called Björn, whom Kári Sölmundarson – Njáll's son-in-law and his and his sons' avenger – visits during his lengthy campaign of revenge. Kári mentions the possibility that Björn could be his sidekick in the latter part of the campaign, and the latter is swift to solicit the job with a barrage of self-advertisement. This angers his wife, who says, "Troll hafi þitt skrum ok hól" (The troll take thy boasting and bragging) (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:425).

In this instance too, the invocation clearly has a cathartic function. Valgerðr is long tired of her husband's empty bravado, and it is her anger that releases the troll into her parlance, but of course she also wishes to warn Kári against Björn, who is clearly not as brave as he professes to be. The clever Kári has already realised this, and he manages to find good use for Björn, who in the end acquits himself better than expected and certainly better than his long-suffering wife expected. Hence, when they return and Valgerðr icily asks how Björn performed, Kári gives him a glowing report which leads to husband and wife making up in the end.

The trolls did not really take Björn's boasting and bragging. A swankpot and a rodomont he remains, and yet in spite of all his puffing and showing off, he is also a man of good faith who stays true to Kári. For this he is rewarded by Kári in multiple ways, most importantly by the praise that puts him back into the good graces of his wife. Unlike Hallgerðr, who summoned the trolls to take Njáll and his family, Valgerðr's frustration was with Björn's behaviour rather than with the man himself. She in the end gives him a chance, and they are reconciled.

While the presence of the two troll curses, the two husbands and

the two aristocratic ladies with somewhat similar names in the same saga could simply be a coincidence, it is tempting to see these two scenes as mirroring each other. In the former case, the curse is fuelled by anger and frustration that is never quenched or satisfied; in the latter case, there is ultimately reconciliation and harmony. There is also the difference that lies in Hallgerðr's having an actual relationship with trolls whereas Valgerðr seemingly has no such connections.

Nevertheless, Björn seems to take the threat more seriously than Gunnarr. In spite of all his braggadocio, Björn is clearly a somewhat henpecked husband, scared of his wife, eager to please her, and he even pleads with Kári to give him a good testimonial. Gunnarr, on the other hand, ignores his wife, and this leads to no good (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954:436).

My childhood worries that cursing is potentially dangerous turn out not to be totally unfounded. Swearing is far from meaningless. It reflects the world view of the people involved and the culture the words are uttered in. The culture depicted in Njáls saga is one where the paranormal has a large presence and great significance. Thus, invoking trolls is threatening and sometimes indicative of much wickedness to follow. The troll, once summoned, may not actually appear on the scene, and yet evil spirits hover over the events, infusing them with a scope far beyond the regional feud taking place.

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Lykilorð

bölv, hjátrú, trúskipti, djöflar

Keywords

cursing, superstition, conversion, demons

Útdráttur

Rætt er um tvö tilvik í Njáls sögu þar sem tröll eru ákölluð til að greina betur merkingu blótsins, tilgang og hverjir blóta. Eins er rætt um trúskiptin, stöðu hjátrúarinnar og seiglu fornra yfirnáttúrulegra vætta í nýkristnu samfélagi.

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