At first glance, there may seem to be an eerie randomness about the fate of the two competing witches, but on closer inspection the outcome of their conflict is the inevitable result of a social system that is piercingly consistent. Magic and the lower class function in close harmony whereas even magnates and priests are allowed to possess a respectable talent for seeing into the future without any of the accompanying social stigma. The lack of trappings contributes to their respectability. A sinister witch, like Svanr, who appears in Njáls saga, may wave the hide of a goat to cause a cloud of fog, but the famous Gestr Oddleifsson has premonitions instead, and, in the same way modern day scientists interpret the evidence before them, he is able to soberly decipher dreams without being specific about any involvement of the unearthly: he simply possesses the skill of knowing the future.

Unlike Geirríðr, who in spite of her excellent family connections is still vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft, Gestr Oddleifsson is simply, without qualification or mention of magic rituals, “inn spaki,” a wise man, “spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti” (a sage who could foretell many things). Owing to the lack of dramatic performance of his talents, intertwined with his social connections, Gestr is never portrayed as one flirting with the occult or in a sinister light. His skills are never explained, but there is clearly nothing dark about them. Gestr is a good Christian following the conversion and is on good terms with all magnates. Hence his gifts are beneficial to society at large,
and he is, in fact, the very last person who might get branded a troll, despite even his exceedingly special talents.

The good of society is the ultimate yardstick. An elderly wise man that has premonitions has nothing in common with a witch who during the night preys on noble youths. The dichotomy between the real and unreal is important to modern scholars, but in the texts themselves the binary between benevolent and hostile is more plainly fundamental. Gestr’s gifts are never used against others; that is why they cannot have anything to do with magic. When it comes to Geirrīðr, the issue is for society to determine if her knowledge of ancient lore is harmful or not; if it is neither hostile nor anti-social then it cannot be magic.

The same applies to the eponymous hero of *Njáls saga* who is presented more or less as the Gestr Oddleifsson of Southern Iceland. Njáll of Bergbórhsváll is characterised not only by his foresight and gift for premonitions but also by his good will (“heilráðr ok góðgjarn”), alluded to on more than one occasion in the saga. Even though, unlike Gestr, Njáll has certain adversaries who call his powers into question, he is never accused of witchcraft or sorcery. However, his manliness is notably challenged repeatedly in the saga, which may owe something to the well-known connection between magic and the feminine, discussed at greater length below. The people who do this are presented as vile and detestable and are indeed scorned by all the magnates appearing in the saga, who as a rule are all noble and benevolent. There is certainly a fantastical element in *Njáls saga*, manifested not so much in the many occult occurrences described in the narrative, but rather in Njáll’s invincibility. Throughout the story, he is revered by society at large and by all of the respectable members of the community. Even though his sons take an active part in many disputes and brawls, Njáll himself remains above all violence, and before the tragic slaying of his foster-son Hǫskuldr, an attack on Bergbórhsváll itself is never even a possibility. Even when tragedy does strike, it is not di-
rected at Njáll himself, and he is indeed offered immunity from it.

This most famous of sagas seems to turn saga-logic—including the place of magic—on its head, not least in the portrayal of its eponymous hero. Small, beardless, and feminine, of relatively insignificant birth, lacking a goðorð, advisor to a hero constantly under attack, and father to sons involved in several killings, Njáll remains unassailable through it all and enjoys the universal adoration of all of the respectable men of the community. Apparently the reason for this is his immense legal acumen and his benevolence. But to what extent does this reflect actual social practice? Is this the real life or is this just fantasy? How can we believe in the impregnable status of this palpable outsider?

What the saga narrative demonstrates here is the importance of cultural hegemony. Njáll has power, the power of Grágás, and that means that he is a public intellectual rather than a magician. His social standing is far too superior—in the social hierarchy presented in the saga he is equal to such notables as Skapti the lawspeaker and the noble Christian magnate Síðu-Hallr—and that means that nothing he does could possibly be interpreted as magic, accompanied with its nefarious connotations. Sorcery simply does not happen at the summit of social distinction where Njáll safely resides.