Coprophagy in the Fields

Njáll’s missing beard which makes his gender ambiguous becomes a significant issue when the feud between his wife Bergþóra and Hallgerðr of Hlíðarendi has escalated to the extent that the latter has commissioned verses in which Njáll is referred to as “karl inn skegglausí” (the beardless codger). In these same incendiary verses his sons are called “taðskegglingar” (dung-beardlings), insinuating that their beards are makeshift, that underneath it all they are as beardless as their queer father and that he has made them cover their chins with faeces, as he has cleverly used natural fertilizer on his own fields, to help them each sport their own beards. These insinuations lead to multiple killings. The notion of Njáll having lost his beard through the queer practices of witchcraft is bad enough, his sons’ wearing faeces to make up for it exponentially worse.\(^\text{258}\) Not only because faeces are disgusting, but because the insinuation is also a demonic one.

As mentioned above (“Trollspeak”), the human rear end and its products frequently signify the demonic to the degree that a bottom can hardly be innocent; folktales and literature from many cultures provide a myriad of examples of this connection. The disgust associated with excrement is perhaps sufficiently universal to preclude a detailed discussion of the subject here;\(^\text{259}\) all that is necessary is to note briefly the extent to which the human body frames our ideas of the universe,\(^\text{260}\) also apparent in the relationship between the anus, including its occasional stench and its products, with the netherworld. With this in mind, however, we can focus on the demonic aspect of the Njáls saga’s
dung affront. Just as Þorbjǫrg’s attack on Sturla is not only meant to make him lose the function of one of his eyes but is also intended to mark him as a demon, Hallgerðr’s nefarious, tacit suggestion of coprophagy is intended to stigmatise Skarpheðinn and his brothers permanently as odorous trolls. This is not the only or final attempt described in Njáls saga that others make to brand Skarpheðinn as a demonic other, and it is to this cosmological insult, no less than the affront against their manhood, both inextricably linked to the suggestion of necromancy, that the brothers are compelled to react with force. Their supposed dung-beards are deemed not only indicative of the brothers’ queerness and the femininity they purportedly mask but also their practice of witchcraft with which ergi is as intertwined as it is with a lack of manliness.

Consuming faeces is not only inadvisable for health reasons, indeed that may have been the least of people’s concerns in medieval Iceland, it is also a means of turning the human body and, as it is the microcosm of the world, the universe itself along with it on its head, causing confusion between what is up and down, and, given the supposed directions of the hinterlands, the holy and the unholy. When faeces covers the mouth, face and rear have been symbolically interchanged, and the humans who have brought about this change imitate the behaviour of trolls and demons whose chthonic nature makes them naturally prefer the infernal. Indeed, the troll’s anus may become its most familiar face in a troll narrative.

In Vatnsdœla saga, for example, we are introduced to yet another foul immigrant, although her alien origins are unspecified; she may or may not be Hebridean. The woman, Ljót, is another witch-mother, particularly of the benevolent magnate Ingimundr’s future assassin Hrolleifr, and, like Katla, she is introduced as an unpopular woman: “litt var hon lofuð at skaplyndi, ok ein var hon sér í lýzku, ok var þat líkligt, því at hon var fám góðum mónnum lík” (Her temperament received scant praise and she was singular
among humans and this was only to be expected as she was unlike any good men). Again unpopularity is here a sure sign of the witch. The saga’s audience is thus clearly expected to respect popular wisdom and despise the extraordinary and unaccepted alien.

Apart from once presenting her son with an impregnable tunic and having been rumoured to have performed a pagan magic ritual referred to as “blót,” Ljót makes her mark near the end of the saga, when after her son has killed his aged benefactor Ingimundr in a dastardly manner, Ingimundr’s sons seek their revenge. When they have arrived to kill Hróleifr, they see a strange sight:

Ok er þeir brœðr kvámu at, mælti Hǫgni: „Hvat fjanda fer hér at oss, er ek veit eigi, hvat er?“

Þorsteinn svarar: „Þar fer Ljót kerling, ok hefir breytiliga um búizk."
Hon hafði rekit fǫtin fram yfir hǫfuð sér ok fór ǫfug ok rétti hǫfuðit aprt milli fótanna. Ófagrligt var hennar augnabragð, hversu hon gat þeim trollsliga skotit.

(And when the brothers arrived, Hogni asked: “Which demon comes here at us, that I cannot recognise?”

Þorsteinn replies: “This is the crone Ljót, and has transformed her appearance.”

She had pulled the clothes over her head and proceeded backwards and had the head between her legs. Her glance was far from pretty, how she could gaze at them trollishly.)

Ljót’s queer, topsy-turvy stance, her head positioned between her legs and her clothes pulled over her head, presumably leaving her naked in the nether regions, is rather fitting given common association between infernal beings and the lower regions of the human body, with anus replacing the human face. As in the aforementioned passage from Óláfs saga (“Trollspeak”), this association with
the human rear end signifies the infernal nature of the troll.

The powers of this witch-demon are not taken lightly in the saga, although they are ultimately conquered by Ingimundr’s sons’ good fortune. She in fact tells them that if they had not seen her, she had intended to “snúa þar um landslagi ǫllu” (transform the whole landscape) and craze them in the manner of Óðinn so that they would run with the wild beasts. But as she has been spotted, she dies “í móð sínum ok trǫldómi” (in her transmogrified trollish state), which might indicate that her sorcery, having failed to hit its mark, was ultimately turned against her in the end.

The use of the word móðr here is in some respect typical for the ways in which the Old Icelandic textual sources treat the topic of shapeshifting. While a variety of glosses for the word can be found in modern dictionaries,263 it is not easy to say precisely what it signifies, no more perhaps than its English variant “mood.” Something is happening with the mind or the soul, a kind of movement, but what exactly is it? Content with suggesting to their audience that some kind of magical transformation that pertains to the essence of the individual is taking place, there is no precise description of the process; there never is, and that may even be the point. The audience can only guess and be disgusted, and know that the violence of this procedure is such that Ljót herself is killed, presumably by her own inverted magic gone wrong.

The depiction of Óðinn found in Heimskringla only alluded to queer magic. Vatnsdœla saga’s depiction of the aged witch Ljót, her naked posterior meeting her face in some kind of demonic ritual, her trollish glances serving as virtual laser beams that can demolish the entire landscape, may well constitute an attempt to portray queer magic rituals in practice. Her contorted stance, reinforced by her threat to turn the land all awry, demonstrates not only the power of her magic but also its eventual aim. In this grotesque scene, the troll is inversion itself. It is not
only evil but also queer, and the queer stance that Ljót must assume to practice these dark arts exemplifies the threat of chaos encapsulated in the actions of the troll. The troll here emerges as the ultimate destroyer whose actions instigate such chaos that nothing can emerge unscathed.\textsuperscript{264}