Chapter 6
The Burning: Njáll and Skarpheðinn

6.1 Introductory

The burning of Njáll, together with members of his family and household, is an act of vengeance for the killing of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði, and as such, marks the reappearance at the saga’s tragic climax of the old ethic of ‘eye for eye’. This study has argued that the author of Njáls saga was ideologically opposed to that ethic (as evidenced in his attitude towards the revenge killing committed by the blind Ámundi Hóskuldsson)\(^{607}\); it has also been argued that his account of the moment when Flosi yields to Hildigunnr’s demands for revenge shows Flosi’s soul to be in mortal danger\(^{608}\). The conclusion was reached at the end of 4.7 above that Flosi will act against the Njálssons with justice, but without mercy; it was further suggested there, that if divine justice were also to operate alone and without mercy, then the Njálssons would be spiritually, as well as physically doomed. If the old ethic were to triumph at the burning, therefore, the ending of Njáls saga would indeed be bleak, with the physical and spiritual destruction of so many at Bergþórshváll and, later, the doom of Flosi.

As was argued above, however, from the examples of Hrafn the Red at Clontarf, and Ingjaldr of Keldur\(^{609}\), under the new law, where there is repentance, mercy will always operate, justice in these cases not being simply retributive, but purgative, preparatory to reconciliation through mercy. If, therefore, mercy could be shown to be working together with justice in this way during the burning, the reader would be left with the hopeful sense that, despite all the physical suffering and loss, the souls of Njáll and Bergþóra, and even of Skarpheðinn and Flosi, should at the end of their lives be safe. It will be argued in this chapter that the episode of the burning of Skarpheðinn is the saga’s finest expression of the collaboration between justice and mercy, and that the author articulates their cooperation through what are now familiar Scriptural passages and in terms of the saga’s principal metaphors of growth and productivity. It will also be argued that Njáll, by his actions, enables this cooperative act of mercy and justice, and that he is able to do so because he is divinely inspired.

\(^{607}\) See 3.11 above.
\(^{608}\) See 4.7 above.
\(^{609}\) 3.3 and 3.10 above; see also 3.12.
6.2 Background: Njáll welcomes Christianity.

Before Þangbrandr’s mission arrived in Iceland, news had already reached the country of the new faith that had been adopted in Óláfr Tryggvason’s Norway. *Njáls saga* mentions Icelanders’ discussions as to the merits and demerits of that new faith, a debate which was to culminate in the threatened division of the state between heathens and Christians at the Alþingi. In chapter 100, the author describes the reactions of Njáll and others to the reports from Norway.

Dá mæltu margir, svá at Njáll heyrði, at slíkt væri mikil firn at hafna fornum átrúnaði. Njáll sagði þá: “Svá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr muni vera miklu betri, ok sá mun sél, er þann fær heldr. Ok ef þeir menn koma út hingat, er þann sið bjóða, þá skal ek þat vel flytja.” Hann mælti þat opt. Hann fór opt frá þrum mýnum ok þulði

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Hann fór opt frá Qðrum m Qðnnum ok þulði, einn saman. (p. 255)

(Many people were saying, and Njáll heard them, that it was absurd to reject the old faith. Then Njáll said, ‘It seems to me that this new faith is much better, and sæll will be he who accepts it. If the men who preach this religion come out here, I will speak in favour of it.’

He said this often. He often went apart and murmured to himself.)

Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson says of this passage:

The sentence about Njál’s “mumbling” is considered an interpolation in the section on Christianity in *Njáls saga*. But whatever the origin of the sentence, whether the author received it from oral source or a written text or composed it himself, he included it in the firm belief that Njáll could gain information about the nature of Christianity by withdrawing from others in order to “mumble”. The author also knew that his readers would accept this account of Njál’s conduct as valid611.

Jón Hnefill notes that the verb þylja, when used in the context of prophecy, is also found in the phrase þylja í feld sinn (‘to mumble into one’s cloak’), and therefore regards Njáll’s ‘mumbling’ as parallel behaviour to that of Þorgeirr the Lawspeaker, lying under his cloak at the Alþingi612. He concludes that:

all over the North of Europe people lay down in a similar fashion to Þorgeir ... they did so in particular to undergo metamorphosis or to send their minds in some way out of the body to investigate what could not be learnt by other methods ... Þorgeir did not stay under the cloak to think but to carry out an ancient soothsaying ritual.613

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610 3rd pers. sg. pret. of þylja, ‘to speak or recite, but especially to murmur, mutter, mumble’ (*Under the cloak*, p. 112).
611 *Under the cloak*, pp. 112-3.
612 *Under the cloak*, pp. 112-22.
613 *Under the cloak*, pp. 122-23.
The verb *þylja* clearly had associations traditionally with soothsaying, but it will be argued here that the author of *Njála* uses it with a specifically Christian meaning, in a Christian context which rules out ritual metamorphosis or ecstasy. Lars Lönnroth has made the point that the tone of the passage under discussion suggests that the author of *Njáls saga* intended his readers to recognise the superiority of Christianity, when compared with the old religion. According to Lönnroth the passage is:

[a] beautiful example of a well-concealed partiality. The indoctrination for the new faith and against the old one is present already in the first few lines, where the disgraceful death of the last pagan ruler is contrasted to the success of the new and Christian king. ... [the] Old Icelandic audience ... would most probably associate the first of these two men with evil, black magic and “bad luck”, while the latter would be associated with great heroism, nobility and “good luck”. ... [Njáll’s] prediction that Christianity will bring happiness - here roughly equivalent with “luck” - to its converts, will be immediately accepted by anybody previously acquainted with his second sight. The wisdom of the prediction is further emphasised through its gnomic form (*sá mun sæll, er þann fær heldr*). And the final comment about the mumbling, strange as it is, seems to further underline Njáll’s contact with the supernatural, hence also his credibility.

Lönnroth’s first point is well made, that the rhetoric of the passage guides the reader to accept that the new faith is preferable to the old. And there is at least one other passage in *Njáls saga* where the word *sæll* seems to mean ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate’, apparently justifying Lönnroth’s interpretation of Njáll’s prediction, ‘that Christianity will bring happiness - here roughly equivalent with “luck” – to its converts’. In chapter 47 Otkell Skarðsson’s brother, Hallbjörn, gives him an unpleasant slave:

Hann [Hallbjörn] flutti út þræl einn, er Melkólfr hét; hann var írskr ok heldr óvinsæll. Hallbjörn för til vistar með Otkatli ok svá Melkólfr. Þrællinn mælti þat jafnan, at hann þœ ttisk sæll, ef Otkell ætti hann. (pp. 120-21)

(Hallbjörn ... brought to Iceland an Irish slave called Melkólfr, who was not much liked. Hallbjörn came to stay with Otkell, bringing Melkólfr with him. Melkólfr kept saying how happy / fortunate he would think himself if Otkell were his master.)

Lönnroth’s translation makes good sense here. But when used in a thoroughly Christian context, the word *sæll* expresses an entirely different sort of happiness from that which

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614 Cf Hávamál, st. 3: *Mál er at þylia þular stólí á* (It is time to recite on the sage’s seat).
615 ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, pp. 87-88.
principally connotes good fortune. Njáll’s words are formulaic, but they are not ‘gnomic’. His prediction, that the person who accepts Christianity will be sæll, accords well with occurrences of that word in Norse religious literature, where it is frequently used in the syntactic formula in which it appears in Njáll’s speech: \[er/mun/verðr + sá/hverr/peir + sæll + (often) a relative clause beginning with er and describing an aspect of Christian belief].

Sæll er sa maðr, er aa hann truir, þviat hann mun hafa eilift lif ok lifa um allar veraflæði.616

(Sæll is the man who believes in him, because he will have eternal life and live throughout all ages).

To believe in God is to fear him, to love his commandments, and to walk in his ways:

Sæll er sa maðr er ræðesc guð ok fysisc mioc til boðorða hans (Beatus vir, qui timet Dominum, in mandatis ejus cupit nimis).617

(Sæll is the man who fears God and is greatly eager for his commandments).

And:

Aller ero þeir sæler er ræðazt guð oc hans veg oc vilia gera (Beati omnes qui timent Dominum, qui ambulant in viis ejus).618

(Sæler are all they who fear God and wish to perform his ways).

In New Testament terms, ‘to walk in God’s ways’ is to live one’s life after Christ’s example:

Þat sagde byskup hinn fyrra friadag at sa konungr er allz a ualld þoldi skapraun ok er sa sæll er helldr ma þar j nockuru eftir likia.619

(On the previous Friday, the bishop said that that king who has power over all things suffered grief, and he is sæll who may imitate him somewhat.)

He who seeks virtue is also therefore sæll. The author of Konungsskuggsjá twice used the formula in the speech he gave to Wisdom, the personified virtue who is ‘begotten of God’s own heart’, and who ‘proceeded from the mouth of the Highest’.620

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616 Petrs s. post. I, ch. 128 (Post., p. 116). The speaker is the Apostle Paul.
617 Ps. cxi, 1; Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 67.
618 Ps. cxxvii, 1; Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 74.
619 Óláfs saga helga., ch. 174 (Flat. II, p. 232).
620 Larson, The King’s Mirror, p. 300.
Sæll er sa er dræcr af minu borðkeri ... Sæll er sa er gengr til mins snaðings.  

(Sell is he who drinks from my cup ... Sæll is he who goes to my meal).  

Further examples of the formula include translations of the Beatitudes (Matt. v, 3 ff):

Sælir eru þeir er sýta (Beati qui lugent); Sælir eru þeir, er hungra ok þyrstir til rjettlætis (Beati qui esuriunt et sitiunt iustitiam); Sælir eru þeir er hafa hreint hjarta (Beati mundi corde); and finally, to compare with Njáll’s use of the future, through the modal munu (Njáll’s: “mun sá sæll, er ...”), see sæler mono þeir er nú grata (Beati qui lugent).  

It will be seen that wherever a direct Latin equivalent has been found, sæll regularly corresponds to Latin beatus, ‘blessed’. As used within this formula, ‘chosen by God’ and ‘dwelling close to God’ come near to expressing the particular blessedness connoted by sæll:

Sæll er sa, er þu valdir ok hoft upp, drottinn, þviat hann mun byggia i þinum landtjólldum (Beatus quem eligisti et assumisti; habitabit in tabernaculis tuis).  

(Blessed is he whom you have chosen and raised up, Lord, because he will dwell in your tents).

And:

Sæler ero þeir dróttteN er bua i húse þíno (Beati ... qui habitant in domo tua, Domine).

(Blessed are they, Lord, who dwell in your house).

And:

Þa verðr hverr sæll, er a hann hefir truat, oc hefir sa eilift lif oc sælu.  

(Then every man who has believed in him will be blessed, and he will have eternal life and blessedness).

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622 There is no direct Latin equivalent. The Norwegian is based on Wisdom’s words at Prov. ix, 5: venite comedite panem meum et bibite vinum quod miscui vobis. For discussion of this passage, see Bagge, Political Thought, p. 91; Hamer, ‘Searching for Wisdom’, p. 60.
623 See Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, pp. 144-45 for references and other examples.
624 Ps. lxiv, 5; Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 54.
625 Ps. lxxxiii, 4; Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 60.
626 Tveggia postola saga Petrs ok Pals (Post., p. 313).
Lönnroth’s suggestion that sæll ‘is roughly equivalent with “luck”’ simply cannot be accepted in this formulaic context (the souls of the saints can hardly be said to exist in a state of eternal ‘good luck’).

Njáll applies the epithet sæll to those of his countrymen who will accept the faith preached by Óláfr Tryggvason’s missionaries. A similar point, namely that Icelanders are now sælir as a result of King Óláfr’s mission, is made in Ólafss saga Tryggvasonar in mesta, where human missionary activity has taught the people to know God:

Firir ualld ok verdlæika þessa guds astuinar Olafs konungs Trygguasonar eru sælir Noregs menn ok æigi at æins þeir helldr íafnuel þeir er her byggia Island ok oll þau lond er undir Noreg liggia ... erum ver fullkomliga sæler þess fagnadar er hann [Óláfr Tryggvason] gaf oss þessa heims at kenna uornn skapara Jesum Cristun.627

(Because of the authority and merit of this beloved friend of God, King Óláfr Tryggvason, the people of Norway are sælir – and not they alone, but rather those equally who dwell here in Iceland and in all those lands which lie under Norway … we are entirely sæler of this joy which he [Óláfr Tryggvason] gave us in this world: to know our creator, Jesus Christ.)

The obvious difference between this passage and the one under discussion from Njáls saga is that, whereas the author of Ólafss saga Tryggvasonar was referring to societies that had long since been converted, Njáll recognises the superiority of Christianity before Þangbrandr has arrived in Iceland. No human missionary has taught Njáll about the Christian faith, so his recognition of its true value must therefore presumably have come as a gift direct from God. Scripture provides in the Apostle Peter a familiar example of this type of particular blessedness. To Peter’s words, spoken at the moment of revelation: ‘You are Christ, son of the living God’, Christ replies:

Sæll ertu Simon dufu sonr, þviat eigi vitraði þer þetta holld ok bloð, helldr faðir minn er a himnum er,628 (Beatus es, Simon Bar Iona, quia caro et sanguis non revelavit tibi, sed Pater meus qui in caelis est.)

(You are blessed, Simon son of the dove, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but rather my father who is in Heaven).

Njáls saga (ch. 105) presents the conversion of Iceland as principally involving a change to a radically new system of law, founded upon belief in the Trinity. Njáll argues against

627 Ólafss saga Tryggvasonar, ch. 406 (Flat. I, pp. 517-18).
628 Petrs s. post. IIA, ch. 3 (Post., p. 161). For two other translations of these words from Matt. xvi, 17, see Kirby, Biblical Quotation I, p. 170. The first begins exactly as the text here quoted (sæll ertu, Simon dufu sonr); the second is closer to the Latin: sæll ertu, Simon Jonsson.
the views of those die-hard heathens who are most opposed to the new faith, and
withdraws from the company of others in order to ponder the benefits of this new law.
One of the most familiar of all Scriptural beatus passages, the opening words of the book
of Psalms, refers to a similar type of withdrawal from the company of the ungodly:

sá er sæll, er eigi gengr eptir óráðum, ok eigi samþykkir illa luti með
syndugum, ok eigi dæmir ránga dóma, ok jafnan geymir guðs laga.
(He is blessed, who does not go after bad counsel, and does not consent
to an evil thing with the sinful, and does not judge with wrongful
judgements, and always keeps God’s laws.)

The psalm text on which the Icelandic is based reads as follows: Beatus vir qui non
abiti in consilio impiorum, et in via peccatorum non stetit, et in cathedra pestilentiae non sedid; sed in lege Domini voluntas ejus
(Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, and does not stand in the street of sinners, and does not
sit in the seat of pestilence; but his inclination is in the law of the Lord). It will be
seen that the Old Icelandic translation is here rather free. Augustine interprets ‘the
seat of pestilence’ as ‘hurtful doctrine’, and given the importance of his commentary
on the Psalms, it may well be that the Icelandic translator of this verse was influenced
by it, rendering in cathedra pestilentiae non sedit by eigi dæmir ránga dóma (does not
judge with wrongful judgements).

For Augustine, the Psalmist’s choice of preposition was significant: in lege,
rather than sub lege (i.e. in rather than under the law).

It is one thing to be in the law, another under the law. Whoso is in the law,
acts according to the law; whoso is under the law, is acted upon according
to the law: the one therefore is free, the other a slave. Again, the law,
which is written and imposed upon the servant, is one thing; the law, which
is mentally discerned by him who doesn’t need its letter, is another
thing.

In the Middle Ages, and following Augustine, these verses were seen as an Old
Testament prophecy of the coming of Christ and the New Dispensation, an interpretation
that was constantly reinforced by the subject-matter of the large decorated initial B of
the Beatus vir that usually marked the opening of Psalm 1 in psalters of the Roman

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629 Ps. i, 1-2; Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 31.
630 En. in Ps. 1: PL 36, col. 67.
usage\textsuperscript{631}. Among the standard themes depicted, for example, was the Tree of Jesse\textsuperscript{632}, which both illustrates the fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaias xi,1: ‘there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots’, and ‘interprets the opening words of the Gospel [of Matthew] which describe the generations of Christ’\textsuperscript{633}. The \textit{beatus vir} passage was therefore seen to link the Old and New Testaments, and to predict ‘the establishment of the New Covenant that replaces the Old Dispensation’ \textsuperscript{634}.

Njáll’s prophetic use of the \textit{sæll er sá} formula also refers to the transition from the old religion to the new, of course, and it therefore seems likely that the author of \textit{Njáls saga} had the opening words of Psalm 1 in mind when he wrote this passage. Unfortunately, there is no extant Icelandic translation of the second verse of the psalm (\textit{sed in lege Domini voluntas ejus et in lege ejus meditabitur die ac nocte}), which might also have been compared with the saga’s words concerning Njáll’s prophesying. It is noteworthy, however, that the verb \textit{meditari} of this verse has, as well as its central meaning ‘to meditate upon, to muse over’, a secondary meaning ‘to murmur, utter a sad cry’\textsuperscript{635}. The combined meaning: ‘to meditate upon and murmur’ is perfectly translated by the Icelandic verb \textit{þylja}, which the author of \textit{Njáls saga} uses to describe Njáll’s behaviour. This seems more than coincidence, and supports a conclusion that the opening words of the Psalter lie behind the saga’s account of Njáll’s reaction to the first news of the change of faith in Norway.

If the suggestions made here are correct, concerning the meaning and source of the word \textit{sæll} in this formulaic context, then the episode of Njáll’s welcoming the new faith is not based on traditional material, but is ‘literary’, the invention of the author. Njáll should not be seen as some kind of soothsayer, mumbling a ritual in order to produce a ‘gnomic’ prophecy. Rather, he is a godly man who, while still a pagan, is divinely inspired to recognise the true nature of God. The path he follows to conversion complements that of Síðu-Hallr, in that both are equally the beneficiaries of grace. But whereas the latter’s response to Þangbrandr’s teaching is immediate and

\textsuperscript{631} Calkins, \textit{Illuminated Books}, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{633} Haney, \textit{The Winchester Psalter}, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{634} Calkins, \textit{Illuminated Books}, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{635} See Lewis and Short, s.v. \textit{meditor}. For Scriptural examples of the second meaning, see Isaias xxxviii, 14, and lix, 11, where it is used of the sound made by a dove.
total, no man’s words guide Njáll to his vision of the truth. He is instead a divinely inspired lawyer, who muses and murmurs alone in God’s law, and recommends its acceptance.

6.3 Njáll’s fatal decisions

After one unsuccessful attempt to set fire to the house at Berghórs hváll, Flosi and his men take the pile of chickweed636, and soon the whole roof is ablaze. Njáll comforts the women in their suffering (pp. 328-29):

Njáll mælti til þeira: “Verðið vel við ok mælið eigi æðru, því at él eitt mun vera, en þó skyldi langt til annars słíks.”

(Njáll said to them, ‘Be of good heart and speak no words of fear, for this will be a passing storm, and it will be long before another like it comes.’)

Robert Cook’s translation of él eitt, ‘brief storm’, is closely similar to that of Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (‘passing storm’)637, but él (literally ‘snow-shower, snow-storm’) also has the metaphorical meaning of ‘battle’, and it will be argued below that the author of Njálssaga intended the reader to interpret the fire metaphorically as both blizzard and battle. There is in fact no physical battle at Berghórs hváll, although there are two brief confrontations: first, when Helgi Njálsson attempts to escape the fire disguised as a woman, wounds one man and is then speedily killed; and later, when Skarpheðinn knocks out the eye of Gunnarr Lambason (p. 333), by throwing at him the tooth of Þráinn Sigfússon that he had kept as a trophy.

The reader might in fact have expected more of a battle. Flosi’s plan (ch. 124) had been to attack the Njálssons at Berghórs hváll ‘with fire and iron, and not to leave before they are all dead’. When he and his party arrive there, they find Njáll, his sons, Kári, and the male servants all standing outside the house, ‘almost thirty in all’ (p. 325). The two sides size each other up, and Flosi sees immediately that he is confronted by a potent fighting-force: ‘I don’t think that we’ll ever be able to overcome them if they stay out here’. On the other side, Skarpheðinn recognises that Flosi commands ‘a tough force … and large too’, but that Flosi’s hesitation suggests that he thinks that ‘they will have a

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636 Ch. 129: for a discussion of the significance of these weeds, see 3.6 above.
hard time defeating us’. At this point in the narrative, it looks as though a hard-fought, bloody battle is inevitable, with many casualties on both sides. As Flosi remarks: ‘not many will live to say which side won’.

Njáll now decides on a course of action which he insists that his sons agree to, despite Skarpheðinn’s protests: ‘I want everyone to go inside’. As a plan of battle, this decision is a terrible, decisive, fatal blunder, since it traps the Njálssons’ party inside the house where, as Skarpheðinn points out, they will be vulnerable to attack from fire as well as weapons, but where they will not be able to use their own weapons to full effect. Njáll’s response is to remind his sons that they had been accustomed to obey him when they were younger, ‘and things went better for you then’ (“ok fór yðr þá betr.”)

This simple argument is enough to convince Helgi, who recommends obedience, answering Njáll’s betr with best: “þat mun oss best gegna” (‘that will be best for us’). Skarpheðinn agrees to accede to Njáll’s wishes, although he clearly sees that their father is ‘doomed’ (feigr). As they enter the house, Skarpheðinn’s assessment of the situation is shared by Flosi: “Nú eru þeir feigir, er þeir hafa inn gengit” (‘Now they are doomed, for they have gone inside’). Two questions need answers: why does Njáll retreat inside the house, despite the misgivings of Skarpheðinn and others? And why does Skarpheðinn agree to a decision that enables Flosi and his men to burn the house?

For Robert Cook, Njáll’s decision: seems almost perverse in view of the fact that he has foreseen the coming conflagration. Like Gunnarr when he changed his mind about leaving Iceland, Njáll just seems to give up.638

Cook also points out that the burning is carried out ‘by men who take no risks’. But it is, of course, Njáll’s advice to his sons and servants that they go inside the house that minimises the risk of injury or death to Flosi and his party.

When the household is trapped inside, and the building is burning fiercely, Njáll and Bergþóra are offered safe passage outside by Flosi, (‘for you do not deserve to be burned’). In a simple statement of loyalty to Njáll, Bergþóra says she will not leave without him (ch. 129):

“Ek var ung gefin Njáli; hefi ek því heitit honum, at eitt skyldi ganga yfir okkr bæði.”

(‘I was young when I was given to Njáll, and I promised him that one fate

638 Njal’s Saga, p. xxi.
should await us both.’"

Njáll now takes his second fatal decision: he also refuses to leave. But whereas love prompts Bergþóra to speak, Njáll’s words have been interpreted as being motivated by impotent enmity. He declares:

“Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skómm.”

(‘I do not wish to go outside, for I am an old man and little prepared to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live with shame.’)

The issues to be discussed now are whether Njáll’s decision not to confront Flosi and his men on equal terms out of doors, and the reason he gives for refusing Flosi’s offer of safe exit, can be shown to be parts of a pattern also seen in his meditations upon, and welcoming of, Christianity. It was argued in 6.2 above that Njáll was divinely inspired at that time. Can he also be said to be divinely guided during these climactic events?

Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson translate litt til búinn at hefna sona minna as ‘ill-equipped to avenge my sons’ (p. 267), while Robert Cook’s version (p. 221) reads ‘hardly fit to avenge my sons’; Ursula Dronke comments that Njáll ‘dies himself with them [his sons], because he is too old to avenge them’. Dronke’s discussion has also very well demonstrated that Njáll engineers the deaths of his sons, and has indeed been doing so since the lawsuit following the killing of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði:

Njáll, who claims to have foreseen all the disaster which is to arise from this lawsuit … has been deliberately manipulating the gossip of the region for his own purposes. He placed the ambiguous garment upon the compensation pile. He did not answer Flosi’s repeated question and explain his gift. When the case against his sons for the murder of Hóskuldr had been defeated on technical grounds … it was Njáll who rose to his feet, asking that compensation be accepted for the slaying, because the dead man, his fosterson, Flosi’s nephew by marriage, was dearer to him than his own sons … and he would rather he had lost all his own sons and Hóskuldr were still living … So Njáll himself provokes the burning, forces his sons – against their better tactical judgement – to go into the house to be burnt like foxes in a hole, and dies himself with them, because he is too old to avenge them … Njáll … wins blood-vengeance for her [Hallgerðr’s] grandson Hóskuldr.

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639 See also Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Literary Masterpiece, pp. 81 and 175.
These translations and comments reflect the dominant critical view that Christian values have a relatively small presence even in the latter part of *Njáls saga*. Vésteinn Ólason takes a somewhat different view. While he agrees with other critics in suggesting that the old ideology of family loyalty and feud, ‘so governs Njáll’s thinking that ultimately he chooses to die rather than live on in shame, knowing that he is unable to avenge his sons’, he also goes on to comment:

[B]ehind Njáll’s own explanation of his conduct, which he knows will be understood by those able to hear him, there lies a more profound impulse. He wants to die with his sons in the hope that they will all receive forgiveness for their sins. His death signals a rejection of the old order and marks a step into the new one … Christianity reveals itself in several ways … in Njáll’s benevolence and, especially, in his eagerness to persuade his sons to burn with him inside the farmhouse\(^\text{641}\).

In what is of necessity a brief discussion of *Njáls saga* Vésteinn Ólason does not develop further his reasons for making this suggestion, and he does not explain how a Christian whose thought is ‘so governed’ by ‘the demands of a vengeance culture’, can realistically hope for forgiveness from God. The author of *Njála* had, however, made plain in his story of Ámundi the Blind\(^\text{642}\) his attitude towards the ethic of blood-vengeance, as it persisted among Christians after the conversion of Iceland. If this author wished to suggest that his central hero really was good enough to enter Heaven, he could not jeopardise his soul by having him destroy himself and others for the sake of that ethic.

Indeed, Njáll’s previous speech to Flosi, uttered only minutes before, had been an attempt to preserve the lives of his sons. This attempt had been unsuccessful, however, as Flosi had already determined that all the Njálssons must die (p. 329):

> Nú taka öll húsín at loga. Þá gekk Njáll til dyra ok mælti: “Er Flosi svá nær, at hann megi heyra móði mitt?” Flosi kvezk heyra. Njáll mælti: “Víllt þú nokkut taka sættum við sonu mína eða leyla nokkurum munnur útgöngu?” Flosi svarar: “Eigi vil ek taka sættum við sonu þína, ok skal nú yfir lúka með oss ok eigi frá ganga, fyrr en þeir eru allir dauðir.”\(^\text{643}\)

(Now the whole house began to burn.

Njáll went to the door and said, ‘Is Flosi near enough to hear me?’

Flosi said he could hear.

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\(^{641}\) *Dialogues*, pp. 200, 204.

\(^{642}\) See ch. 3.11 above.

\(^{643}\) These words closely echo his own earlier words (p. 318), uttered when he tells his party that they will “attack the Njálssons with fire and iron, ok ganga eigi fyrr frá en þeir eru allir dauðir.”
Njáll said, ‘Are you at all willing to make a settlement with my sons, or let some people leave the house?’

Flosi answered, ‘I will not make any settlement with your sons – our dealings with them will soon be over, and we won’t leave here until they’re all dead.’

Vésteinn Ólason sees pressure from the old ideology, together with an embracing of the new, in Njáll’s ‘own explanation of his conduct’; and Njáll’s words to Flosi, when he refuses to leave the burning house, are indeed ambiguous. The word búinn can certainly mean ‘physically equipped’ (with weapons, tools, strength etc.), but it also has the meaning: ‘emotionally willing’. It is ambiguous in the same way as the English prepared, or the Latin paratus that búinn frequently translates, as in the following two examples. The first is from Scripture:

Petrus mælti: “Minn herra, með þer em ek buinn at fara i myrkvastofu ok i dauða.”

(Peter said: ‘My Lord, I am prepared to go with you into prison and to death.’)

The second is from a Latin saint’s life:

“Eigi at eins er ek buinn til bana helldr ok at þola allzkyns píslir fyrr en ek lata af guðligum kenningum.”

(‘Not only am I prepared to die, but rather also to suffer all kinds of tortures, before I leave off from my divine preaching.’)

Búinn may also translate Latin promptus, where the reference to spiritual readiness is explicit:

“Vakit þer enn ok biðiz fyrir, at eigi fyrirleggiz þer i freistni. Andi yðvarr er buinn at pinaz fyrir mer, en nu birtiz ustyrkleikr likama yðvars.”

(‘Watch and pray, so that you don’t be given up to temptation. Your spirit is ready to be tortured for me, but now the weakness of your body is revealed.’)

Njáll’s last words to Flosi should therefore be seen to have, in addition to the meaning

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644 Dialogues, p. 200.
646 Andreas saga postola II, ch. 24 (Post., p. 378); the Latin source for the sentence is as the version of the passio sancti Andreae apostoli, ed. M. Bonnet, p. 375: “Ego non solum intericti sed et diversis modis ineundi paratus sum quam recedere a praedicatione divina.”
647 Petrs. saga postola I, ch. 15 (Post., p. 13), slightly changed from: “Vigilate et orate ut non intretis in temptationem; spiritus quidem promptus est, caro autem infirma”: Matt. xxvi, 41; Marc. xiv, 38.
traditionally given them, the second one of: ‘I am an old man, and spiritually unwilling to avenge my sons’. To live on after his sons would indeed be shameful, but the shame to which Njáll refers is not that of a geriatric viking, desperate to take revenge but too infirm to do so.648 Rather, the shame in living on would come from his having broken his earlier promise, made following the killing of Hóskuldr, that he would never abandon his sons (p. 295): “því at þat er sómi minn at skiljask eigi við yður mál, meðan ek lifi” (‘because it is a point of honour not to quit your cause while I am still alive’). Vésteinn Ólason, Dialogues, p. 227, suggests: ‘If we believe that … Njáll completely turns his back on his duty to take revenge when resigning himself to the fire, and that he is insincere in claiming that he has no wish to live on in shame, then we will not believe that the old ideology of honour is taken seriously’.649 ‘Honour’ as a concept is certainly taken seriously, but this is no longer the honour of the old code; the ethical basis on which the term is defined has now been changed.

When Njáll’s reply to Flosi is interpreted in this way, his words are seen to have the same motivation – love – as his decision to go into the house and not to fight in the open, thereby preventing an open battle and minimising the risk of death and injury to Flosi and his followers. Njáll will not retaliate himself, and is determined to minimise the opportunities for his sons to do so. Metaphorically, he disarms them, and his behaviour in so doing parallels the self-sacrificing peaceableness of his foster-son Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði, who casts away his sword when attacked by the Njálssons. In both his last words to Flosi, and his decision to go indoors, Njáll shows love for his enemies, the opposed ethic to that which governs the system of blood-revenge.

For a medieval reader, it would have been impossible to imagine that these actions of Njáll’s were not motivated by love. Aquinas states the orthodox position as follows:

fidei actus non est meritorius, nisi fides per dilectionem operetur, ut dicitur ad Galat. Similiter etiam actus patientiae et fortitudinis non est meritorius, nisi aliquis ex caritate hæc operetur, secundum illud I ad Cor., Si tradidero ...

(The act of faith is meritorious only if faith works through love, as it says in Galat. v, 6.651 Nor again are the acts of fortitude or endurance meritorious unless one performs them put of love, according to the text

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648 For a discussion of this character type, see Paul Schach, ‘Generation-GapTheme’.

649 Dialogues, p. 227.


651 Galat. v, 6 reads, in part: ‘the only thing that counts is faith active in love’.
of 1 Cor. xiii, 3: ‘If I deliver my body to be burned, and have no love, it
profits me nothing’.)

6.4 Skarpheðinn and the chieftains

Chieftains who meet Skarpheðinn after the killing of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði
provide the reader with a number of descriptions of him. He had always been ‘pale and
sharp-featured’ (fölleitr ok skarpleitr, chapter 25), but after the killing of Hóskuldr, his
pallor is mentioned five times (chs. 119-120), the author employing on each occasion a
compound adjective, the first element of which is fól-: (fölleitr (three times), inn fölleiti,
follitaðr). Now his paleness seems to be part of a generally troll-like appearance (ch.
119). Skapti Þóroddsson describes him (p. 298) as “mikill maðr ok fólleitr ok
ógæfusamligr, harðligr ok trollsligr” (a big man, pale-faced and ill-starred in
appearance, fierce-looking and troll-like), while Hafr Þorkelsson asks (p. 301):

“en þó vil ek spyrja, hverr sá er inn fólleiti, er fjórir menn ganga fyrr ok
er svá illiligr sem genginn sé út ór sjávarhölmrum.”

(‘but I would like to know who that pale-faced man is, fifth in the line,
who looks evil enough to have come straight out of some sea-cliff?’)

Skarpheðinn’s evil appearance clearly sets him apart, as something demonic and
inhuman (p. 301):

“Maðr er sá einn í liði þínu, er ek hefi horft á um hríð, ok lízk mér ólíkr
flestum mǫnnum, þeim er ek hefi sét.”

(‘There is one man in your group that I have been looking at for some
time, and he seems to me unlike most men I have seen.’)

Skarpheðinn is described three times as ógæfusamligr: by Skapti Þóroddsson and
Guðmundr enn ríki in chapter 119, and by Þorkell hákr in chapter 120; in chapter 119,
Snorri goði opines (p. 300): “at þrotin sé nú þín in mesta gæfa, ok skammt get ek eptir
þínrar ævi” (my guess is that your gæfa is at an end and that you have only a short time
to live). Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has characterised the force of the word gæfa as:

A sort of physical and spiritual capacity which makes it possible for an
individual to accomplish what he undertakes to do; it enables him to attain
to wealth and prosperity, health of body and soul, and other natural benefits
and blessings … We come closest to the essence of ógæfa if we call it mein
(hurt, harm, damage, disease, sore), a word which encompasses every
aspect of this complex of ideas, including the connotation of sin in the
Christian sense of the word … Ógæfa is like an infectious disease, which is
carried from one individual to another … Ógæfa infects and corrupts
everyone who crosses its path and does not possess a sufficient power of resistance to it.\textsuperscript{652}

The chieftains who recognise that Skarpheðinn is now damaged and \textit{ógæfusamli\rlong{gr}}, meet him because he and the other Njálssons and Kári, with three supporters and under guidance from Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, have come to them to ask for their support in defending themselves in the law-case that is brought against them for the killing of Hóskuldr. The repeated application of this epithet to Skarpheðinn is a strong indication that the author intends the reader not to see that killing as in any way ‘justified’\textsuperscript{653}.

\textbf{6.5 Skarpheðinn and Víga-Hrappr Qrgumleiðason}

\textit{Njál\rlong{s} saga} provides one other example of a man who has committed a heinous crime seeking help as the forces of justice close in upon him. This man, Hrappr Qrgumleiðason, is the only character in \textit{Njál\rlong{s} saga}, apart from Skarpheðinn, to be described as possessing \textit{ógæfa}. He is introduced into the saga (ch. 87) during what Carol Clover\textsuperscript{654} has termed ‘the Atlantic Interlude’, that part of the narrative that ‘involves the foreign journeys of several men and lies between the two Icelandic halves of the saga’. Clover admires the complexity of design in this interlude, whose elements either look back to the earlier, or forward to the later, Icelandic parts:

> the individual stories [which together make up the Atlantic Interlude] are plain enough … each story traces a familiar plot … Hrappr’s [being] an Outlaw tale … The completeness of these stories, as well as the fact that there are not one or two but five of them and that they have been elaborately synchronised, proves the author’s aesthetic intention. There is no effort to simplify the story; on the contrary, it is deliberately complicated.\textsuperscript{655}

For Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, on the other hand, the elaborate detail in Hrappr’s story is unnecessary, an indication that the author has allowed one of the ‘minor characters’ to occupy more space in the saga than he really should:

> Hrappr was intended, of course, to become an outlaw in Norway, and the composition and economy of the story require that this incident be related rather briefly. But the author soon becomes so intrigued with this villainous

\textsuperscript{652} Literary Masterpiece, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{653} Skarpheðinn’s demonic appearance, and the comments passed upon it by the chieftains, offer little support for the view put forward by Miller, ‘Justifying Skarpheðinn’, that the killing of Hóskuldr would have been seen as the inevitable and politically necessary consequence of a local power struggle. For other objections to Miller’s argument, see above, 4.4 and 5.6; see, too, Cook, ‘Mörður Valgarðsson’, pp. 70-71, quoted at 4.4.
\textsuperscript{654} The Medieval Saga, pp. 28-29.
\textsuperscript{655} The Medieval Saga, pp. 32-33.
creature of his that he devotes two precious chapters to him … It is not at all unusual for great artists to lose control over their creations … [Hrappr] is shrewd and slippery as an eel when it comes to wriggling out of just punishment. He is shameless, impious (he is the only atheist in the whole story), and he dies with words of scorn about himself on his lips.\(^656\)

Hrappr’s story is certainly elaborated, but it is neither simply ‘an Outlaw tale’, nor has the author lost control of his character. Rather, his story demonstrates that justice will inevitably be meted out on the unrepentant man of ógaef. When Hrappr first meets the powerful Guðbrandr of Dalarna, the latter’s reaction to his appearance is reminiscent of the reactions of the chieftains who encounter Skarpheðinn. Guðbrandr comments (p. 210): “Ekki lízk mér svá á þik sem þú munir gæfumáðr vera” (You don’t look to me like a man of gæfa). Guðbrandr’s words are partly echoed by those of Helgi Njálsson, when he first meets Hrappr (p. 216): “Ógaefusamliga lízk mér á þik, ok mun sá betr hafa, er eigi tekr við þér”. (You seem to me to be ógaefusamligr, and things will go better for the man who does not take up with you).

Hrappr impregnates Guðbrandr’s daughter, kills his overseer, and desecrates, loots, and finally burns the temple that Guðbrandr shares ownership of with Norway’s ruler, Earl Hákon Sigurðarson. The adventurous manner in which Hrappr escapes from Hákon and Guðbrandr certainly justifies Einar Ólafur Sveinsson’s remark, that he ‘is shrewd and slippery as an eel when it comes to wriggling out of just punishment’. But ironically, the last weapon in his self-protective armoury, and a most powerful one, is his threat to cease attempting to escape and to face his pursuers.

When he sees Helgi Njálsson and Þráinn Sigfús, with a ship conveniently ready to sail, he at once rushes to meet them and begs for their help. Recognising him to be a man of ógaef, they at first refuse to help him, whereupon Hrappr declares (p. 216): “Hér mun ek nema staðar, ok skal mik hér drepa fyrir augum þér, ok munt þú þá bíða af hvers manns ámæli” (I’m going to stay here and be killed in front of your eyes, and for that you will receive blame from all men). Hrappr admits to his crimes readily enough, and gives a catalogue of them to Helgi and Þráinn, but in this pre-Christian world he is able to challenge their sense of honour and reputation in order to cheat justice, by predicting ámæli for them if they refuse to help him.

Among Hrappr’s crimes, as noted above, is the desecration and spoliation of a temple and its gods, the counterpart, in a pagan world, of a sin against the Christians’

\(^{656}\) Literary Masterpiece, pp. 99-100.
God. Earl Hákon remarks, before he knows the identity of the perpetrator (p. 215): “En göðin hefna eigi alls þegar, ok mun sá maðr braut rekinn ör Valþóllu ok þar aldri koma, er þetta hefir gort” (The gods are in no hurry to avenge themselves, but the man who did this will be banished from Valhalla and never enter there.) Hrappr, for all his slipperiness, will not be able to slide out of every punishment for his wrongdoings: at the moment of his death there will come a reckoning, and in a pagan equivalent of the Christian last judgement, Hrappr will pay for his crimes eternally. He dies fighting against the Njáls sons, and his last words acknowledge the justice of his fate. Before he receives the coup de grâce, he is disabled by a blow that sweeps off his arm. He remarks (p. 234):

“Þetta hefir þú mikit nauðsynjaverk unnit, því at þessi hæð hefir morgum manni mein gort ok bana.”

(‘You have performed a greatly necessary deed in this, because this hand has brought harm and death to many men.’)

6.6 Skarpheðinn and the universal debt

At the Alþingi following the killing of Hóskuldr, Snorri goði predicts that Skarpheðinn won’t have long to live (p. 300). “Vel er þat,” segir Skarpheðinn, “því at þá skuld eigu allir at gjalda. En þó er þér meiri nauðsyn at hefna fjóður þíns, en spá mér slíkar spár.” (Skarpheðinn says: ‘Well and good, for death is a debt we all have to pay. But you would be better employed avenging your father than making me such prophecies.’) Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has pointed out that the concept of death as the universal human debt is a medieval commonplace, taken from ecclesiastical literature.657 The author’s concern at this point in the narrative is not simply with debt, however, but rather with the relationship between justice and debt. A few lines earlier, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson had asked Snorri goði whether he would assist Njáll and his sons in their difficult legal defence. Snorri had refused, giving as his reason the fact that he had enough problematic legal cases of his own (p. 299), “ok eru því trauðir at taka vandreði manna í aðra fjóðunga” (‘and so we’re not eager to take on the troubles of men from other quarters’). Ásgrímr’s reply graciously acknowledges that Snorri is under no obligation to help them: “Várákunn er þat, því at þú átt oss ekki varlaunat” (‘It is to be excused, since you have no debt to us’).

657 ’úr klerklegum ritum’, ÍF 12, p. 300, n. 1, and references there.
Ásgrímr’s words point to a potential problem for a legal system that is based solely on the principle of equity, where *aequitas* in fact had the meaning: ‘justice’\(^{658}\), namely that people might interpret the law literally, and only act when obliged by debt to do so: the letter of the law rules out any generosity of spirit that may result in the free giving of services or payment over and above what the law demands. A further serious ethical problem, of particular relevance for the world of *Njáls saga*, is that a society which defines good law as that which balances the scales of justice, sees the taking of revenge as a type of debt-repayment\(^{659}\). From this point of view, therefore, it is perfectly logical that Skarpheðinn’s riposte to Snorri should explicitly link debt and vengeance. Seen from the Christian perspective, however, as is proven by the story of Ámundi the blind, such an ethic can lead only to actions that are directly opposed to the will of God.

In his parable of the unjust steward (Matt. xviii, 23-35), Christ stated the need for generosity of spirit, and warned that the merciless insistence on the repayment of debts will lead to damnation.

Wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you asked me to. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you. And his lord was angry, and handed him over to the torturers, till he had paid the whole debt. And my heavenly father will act in the same manner to you, if you do not, each of you, forgive his brother from your hearts (vv. 32-35)\(^{660}\).

The need to be willing to remit others’ debts was a message constantly reinforced in the *Pater Noster*: *Oc fyrgefþuoss sculder órar svasem vér fyrgefom sculorum órom.* Kirby\(^{661}\) gives four Old Icelandic versions of this verse with the reading *skuldir* / *scul(l)der skvllder* – ‘debts’, two with *sakar* – ‘offences’, and four more with *syndir* / *synþer* – ‘sins’. These alternative translations reflect the belief that sin itself is a debt – a debt owed to God\(^{662}\) – and that eternal death is the price we should all have had to pay to meet the demands of justice, if God’s mercy had not offered the sacrifice of Christ crucified as repayment of the debt.

\(^{658}\) See above, 2.2 and 2.7.

\(^{659}\) See above, 2.2.

\(^{660}\) (*serve nequam, omne debitum dimisi tibi quoniam rogasti me; non ergo oportuit et te misereri conservi tui sicut et ego tui misertus sum; et iratus dominus eius tradidit eum tortoribus quoadusque redderet universum debitum; sic et Pater meus caelestis faciet vobis si non remiseritis unusquisque fratri suo de cordibus vestris*).

\(^{661}\) Biblical Quotations I, pp. 151-52. The Vulgate reads: *Et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris*.

\(^{662}\) ‘Whatever we owe as a result of our sin we owe to God and not to the Devil’ (*Cur Deus Homo* 1.7; 2.19): Russell, *Lucifer*, p. 168 and n. 22.).
By the time that Njáls saga was written, the theology of the debt of sin, inherited from the original sin of Adam by each individual, was that found in the works of Augustine and Anselm, particularly in the latter’s Cur Deus Homo. And reading the saga in the light of Anselm’s work offers the possibility of hope for Skarpheðinn. For Anselm, even the smallest sin against God is greater than the whole world, so that, whatever his sins may be, each individual shares with the whole of human kind an infinite debt to God. Paradoxically, this means that Skarpheðinn, guilty as he is of a heinous crime, is as much the potential recipient of God’s grace as is the least sinning of individuals. This theology of debt does hold out hope, therefore, that Skarpheðinn might be saved, but before a sinner may be saved, he must first repent, and the ‘pale, luckless, fierce and troll-like’ Skarpheðinn who confronts the chieftains at this Alþingi seems to have no thoughts of repentance.

There is some evidence, however, that the author does intend to show some hope for Skarpheðinn at this stage of the narrative. When Snorri goði explains why he is unable to lend his support to Ásgrímr and the Njálssons, Ásgrímr replies (p. 299): “Várkunn er þat … því at þú átt oss ekki varlaunat” (‘It is to be excused … since you have no debt to us’). The author has Skarpheðinn echo Ásgrímur’s phrase Várkunn er at the moment he acknowledges the justice of the censure he now suffers (p. 302): “Ek hefi ámæli af vígi Hóskulds Hvítanessgoða, sem várkunn er” (‘I have blame, as is to be excused, for the killing of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði’).

Unlike Hrappr, who seeks to escape from justice by laying society’s condemnation (ámaeli) at the door of Helgi and Þráinn, Skarpheðinn accepts that the ámaeli is justly his own. Recognition of the justice of the charges laid against one (which Hrappr also shows), together with an acceptance of one’s moral responsibility for the crimes one has committed (which Hrappr does not show), marks the first step towards repentance. To the Middle Ages, the most familiar example of a criminal who comes to this point of self-recognition was Scriptural: the penitent thief who is crucified with

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663 ‘Anselm’s conception generally prevailed in the Middle Ages, particularly after the beginning of the thirteenth century’: Pannenberg, Jesus – God and Man p. 43. See also Russell, Lucifer, pp. 171-72: ‘[Anselm’s] satisfaction theory has generally prevailed since the thirteenth century’.

664 ‘Man’s inability to make amends to God for his sin is seen to be due to the greatness of even one single sin against God’: McIntyre, Anselm, p. 78, referring to Cur Deus Homo 3.1.1.2

665 ‘Without denying the difference between coveting your neighbour’s ass and murdering his brother, St Anselm does intend to make it plain that there are no simple sins which God easily condones without compromising His honour, and from the effects of which we can readily escape with a little penance and a few good works’ (McIntyre, p. 80).
Jesus. When the other criminal, executed at the same time, mocks Christ on the cross, the penitent thief rebukes him (Luc. xxiii, 41):

Neque tu times Deum, quod in eadem damnatione es. Et nos quidem iuste, nam digna factis recipimus.

(And you do not fear God, because you are under the same sentence as he. And we, indeed, justly, for we receive just payment for our deeds.)

If Skarpheðinn is to be saved, it will be through the power of the Cross, the same power that saved the penitent thief, crucified with Christ.

6.7 Skarpheðinn and the berserk Ótryggr

When the fire is beginning to take hold at Bergþórshváll, and all the exits have been blocked by the kindling of other fires, the women of the household start to panic:

Njáll mælti til þeira: “Verðið vel við ok mælið eigi æðru, því at él eitt mun vera, en þó skyldi langt til annars slíks. Trúið þér ok því, at guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði láta brenna þessa heims ok annars.” (pp. 328-29)

(Njáll said to them, ‘Be of good heart and speak no words of fear, for this will be a passing storm, and it will be long before another like it comes. Believe this also, that God is merciful, and he will not let us burn both in this world and the next.’)

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has recognised that Njáll here ‘speaks about the mercy of God, but not about the justice of God’.

Njáll also says, however: “Trúið þér …” (‘Believe …’). He sees the fire, therefore, as a test of the household’s faith in the mercy of God.

There is one other episode in Njáls saga where a character’s death is associated with burning, and where fire is used as a test of faith. It comes in the Conversion chapters (ch. 103), and takes place in the house of Gestr Oddleifsson, where it marks a confrontation between the missionary Þangbrandr and a berserk, a man who ‘feared neither fire nor sword’.

Þangbrandr sets up an experiment in order to demonstrate to the household that Christianity is the true faith.

“Kosti mun ek gera yðr,” segir Þangbrandr, “at þér skuluð reyna, hvár betri er trúan. Vér skulum gera elda þrjá; skuluð þér heiðnir menn víjava einn, en ek annan, en inn þrjóði skal óvígðr vera. En ef berserkrinn hræðisk þann, er ek vígða, en vaði yðvarn eld, þá skuluð þér taka við trú.” “Þetta er vel

666 Literary Masterpiece, p. 169.
667 hræðisk hvárki eld né egg. Flosi attacks the Njálssons ‘with fire and iron’ (með eldi ok jóarni).
mælt,” segir Gestr, “ok mun ek þessu játa fyrir mik ok heimamenn mínna.” (pp. 267-68)

(‘I will give you a chance,’ said Þangbrandr, ‘to prove which faith is the better. We will build three fires – you heathens bless one, I’ll bless another, and the third will be unblessed. If the berserk fears the one which I blessed but walks through your fire, then you must accept the faith.’
‘That’s well spoken,’ said Gestr, ‘and I’ll agree to this for myself and my household.’)

The contest between Þangbrandr and a berserk exists in two other versions, found in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta668 and Kristni saga669, as well as in ch. 103 of Njála. A comparison of the three versions suggests that the author of Njáls saga made significant changes to the account he had from his source. In the other two versions, for example, but not in Njáls saga, the berserk challenges Þangbrandr to a duel; and in the other two versions, but again not in Njála, he dies by falling on his own sword, which had been blessed by the missionary.

Only in Njáls saga, also, does Þangbrandr set up the experiment that makes of fire a test of faith. The other two versions mention only one fire, which Þangbrandr blesses, and which burns the berserk as he attempts to walk through it, so that he falls onto his sword. In Njáls saga, the berserk walks unharmed through the fire that the heathens had hallowed, but when he ‘came up to the fire which Þangbrandr had blessed … did not dare to walk through it and said that he was burning all over.’

The berserk of Njáls saga does not fall onto his own sword. Instead:
Hann høgr sverðínu upp á bekkínn, ok kom í þvertréit, er hann reiddi hátt. Þangbrandr laust með róðukrossi á høndína, ok varð jartegn svá mikil, at sverðit fell ór hendi berserkinum. Pá leggr Þangbrandr sverðí fyrir brjóst honum (p. 268).

(He swung his sword towards the benches, but on the upswing it stuck fast in the crossbeam. Þangbrandr struck him on the arm with his crucifix and a great miracle happened: the sword fell from the berserk’s hand. Then Þangbrandr drove his sword into the berserk’s chest …)

It is hardly surprising that in Njáls saga the power of God should so spectacularly destroy the berserk, given the values that he embodies. Whereas he is anonymous in the other versions, which describe him simply as ‘Norwegian’ (nóren: Kristni saga), or as ‘a certain foreign berserk’ (berserkr nokkurr utlendr: Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in

668 As at Flat. I, p. 425.
669 Hauksbók, pp. 137-38.
mesta)\textsuperscript{670}, the author of *Njáls saga* gives him the apparently generic name Ótryggr ('Faithless'). He seems to have invented this name, since it is not recorded elsewhere\textsuperscript{671}.

Þangbrandr fights with sword and crucifix, that is to say, with weapons of St Michael, as these are familiar from the iconography of the Archangel\textsuperscript{672}. The author of *Njáls saga* therefore makes of him a much more active warrior for the faith than he had inherited from the source narrative. The berserk in *Njála* dies through a combination of three things: fire, sword and crucifix. The first two of these, it will be noted, are the weapons which will be used by Flosi against the Njálssons; if Skarpheðinn has any chance of being saved, it can only be through the third, the Cross, over which Flosi can have no power.

The fate of the berserk in *Njáls saga* shows parallels and contrasts with that of Skarpheðinn. Shortly before their deaths, each of them drives his weapon into the timbers of the house. In each case, moreover, the timbers function as a trap. The berserk attempts to strike at the spectators on the benches, but his sword sticks fast in the crossbeam (*þvertréit*), leaving him exposed to the blow from Þangbrandr’s crucifix. Skarpheðinn drives his axe into the gable (*gaflaðit*), and he is trapped by the collapse of the roof:

\begin{quote}
þá varð brestr mikill; reið þá ofan ǫll þeðjan. Varð hann þá í millum þess ok gaflaðsins; mátti hann þaðan hvergi hveðrask ... Hann hafði rekít óxina í gaflaðit svá fast, at gengit hafði allt upp á miðjan fetann, ok var ekki dignuð. (pp. 333, 343)
\end{quote}

(then, with a great crash, the whole roof fell in. Skarpheðinn was pinned between roof and gable, and could not move an inch ...He had driven his axe into the gable with such violence that half the full depth of the blade was buried in the wall, and the metal had not softened.)

The trapping of the berserk’s sword gives Þangbrandr time to use his crucifix as a weapon, which in turn brings about *jartegn svá mikil* (so great a miracle: p. 268). These events are therefore unambiguously marked by the author as a sign of divine intervention\textsuperscript{673}. And since it is the trapping of Skarpheðinn that leads him, too, to his fate, the reader is led to speculate whether a second miracle will follow from this

\textsuperscript{670} Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (ÍF 12, p. 267, n. 2.) considers it ‘likely’ that the berserk in the original story was foreign.

\textsuperscript{671} ÍF 12, p. 267 n. 2.


\textsuperscript{673} ‘Throughout the Middle Ages miracles were unanimously seen as part of the City of God on earth’: Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind*, p. 2.
second entrapment. The only other occurrence of the word jartegn (‘miracle’) in Njáls saga is when the bodies of Njáll and Bergþóra are found undamaged by the flames (p. 342): ‘They all praised God for this and thought it a great miracle’ (stór jartegn).

6.8 Skarpheðinn’s death

The berserk who confronts the missionary Þangbrandr dies by fire, sword, and a crucifix. Skarpheðinn is attacked with weapons, and killed by fire. The Cross also plays a role in his fate, however, since two cross-marks are found branded on his dead body.

Síðan gerðu þeir svá ok fundu þar líkama Skarpheðins, ok hafði hann staðit upp við gaflaðit, ok várú brunnir fæðr af honum mjök svá neðan til knjá, en allt annat óbrunnit á honum. Hann hafði bitit á kampi sínum. Augu hans várú opin ok óþrútin … Þá var Skarpheðinn færðr af klæðum, því at þau várú ekki brunnin. Hann hafði lagit hendr sínar í kross ok á ofan ina högrri, en þá dila fundu þeir á honum, annan meðal herðanna, en annan á brjóstinu, ok var hvártveggi brenndr í kross, ok ætlðu menn, at hann mundi sík sjálfr brennt hafa.

(They did and found the body of Skarpheðinn; he had been standing up against the gable wall, and his legs were burned off almost up to the knees, but the rest of him was unburned. He had bitten into his upper lip. His eyes were open and not swollen … Skarpheðinn was then stripped of his clothes; they had not been burned away. He had folded his arms in a cross, with the right arm above, and they found two marks on him, one between his shoulders and the other on his chest, and in both places a cross had been burned, and people thought he had probably burned these marks himself.)

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson sees in this apparent self-branding an example of syncretism of paganism and Christianity:

Heathen warriors branded themselves with the point of a spear, thus dedicating themselves to Óðinn. It is just as if Skarpheðinn brands himself in a similar way, but with a Christian mark, thus dedicating himself to Christ. At the same time he expiates the heinous crime he committed against Hóskuldr by burning it away.674

This view sees the dying Skarpheðinn as still the warrior, although a Christian one, branding himself, and using the fire to cleanse himself from his crime. But it is Njáll, who had foreseen the manner of his own death (p. 139), and therefore knew beforehand of the burning, who engineers the use of the fire for this cleansing purpose. It was he who trapped Skarpheðinn indoors, against the latter’s judgement.

674 A Literary Masterpiece, p. 155.
and it was his action, therefore, that permitted the possibility that the power of God might work in the fire.

William Miller takes a more strongly non-Christian line than does Einar Ólafur Sveinsson:

There is in fact an exemplum in Skarpheðinn’s death, but it is not God’s doing … It is the creation of Skarpheðinn’s own unfathomable will, a will that manages to keep him standing in the face of his enemies, even when dead, even without feet. Now that’s a miracle and manmade too, and a greater one than the moralists find in the radiance of Njáll’s corpse, unremarkably preserved by the skin of an ox as much as by the hand of the Lord.

Margaret Cormack does recognise Christian influence, but avoids taking what Miller would term a ‘moralist’ approach:

Skarpheðinn’s arms are crossed on his breast (another attitude associated with devotions), and the crosses burned on his chest and back are thought to be self-inflicted … While death by fire may have been a sufficient purgatory for the rest of the family, Skarpheðinn undoubtedly bore the greatest burden of sin. In view of his troll-like appearance (to say nothing of the verses heard emerging from the smoking ruins of the farm) an unambiguous sign of religion on his part was probably considered necessary.

It is unclear what the ‘devotions’ are with which crossing the arms on the breast is associated. The motif is certainly rare in Norse literature. The following case, from a hagiographic text, might be interpreted as an example, although a more likely interpretation would be that the arms are held outstretched, and not folded across the breast:

Aptan þann er hann andadiz, fra elliftu tid ok til andlatz hans, þa lagdi hann hendr sinar i cross ok badz fyrir.

(On the evening that he died, from the eleventh hour until his death, he held his arms in a cross-shape and prayed).

The motif of holding the arms in the shape of the cross just before death is also found in Icelandic secular literature. After a battle, in which Eyjólfr Kársson defends himself superbly, and after he has saved the life of his kinsman Áron Hjörleifsson, and helped him, badly wounded, to escape, Eyjólfr’s pursuers track him to a skerry.

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676 ‘Saints and Sinners’, p. 190, and n. 18.
677 Ambrosius saga byskups (HMS I, p. 49).
Hnekði hann þá á sjóinn, ok lagðisk í sker eitt; þat var tólf faðmar. Hljópu menn Sighvatz þá á skip. En er þeir kómu í skerit, lá Eyjólfr á grúfu, ok hafði lagt hendr í kross á sér.678

(He then limped to the sea and swam to a certain skerry; it was twelve fathoms. Sighvatr’s men then raced on board a ship. But when they arrived at the skerry, Eyjólfr was lying face down, and he had placed his arms in a cross on himself.)

This is a more likely example of a signing made by crossing the arms on the breast than the example quoted above from Ambrosiús saga byskups. But another version of the same story gives a different penitential posture:

En síðan fell hann allr til jarðar, ok breiddi hendr frá sér, ok horfði sjálfr í austr svá sem til bænar.679

(But afterwards he utterly fell to the ground, and stretched his arms out wide, turning himself towards the east as if to his prayers.)

And in another example from Íslendinga saga, it is clear that the arms are not crossed on the breast. A man has been seized by his enemies, and knows he is about to be put to death:

Þá lagðisk Þórðr niðr annars-staðir, ok rétti hendr frá sér í kross.680

(Then Þórðr lay down in another spot, and stretched out his arms in a cross.)

While crossing the arms on the breast is rarely found, it is commonplace in hagiographic texts for individuals who are about to die to commit their souls to God, and to make the sign of the cross in some way; and the posture may be held after death:

Oc sem .vii. salmar ero lyktaðir ok kennimaþrinn segir vers Per passionem et crucem tuam libera eam domine, hefr hon upp sina högrir hönd ok með krossmarki, ok í þvi sama gengr vt hennar ande blezaðr, sva at höndin stendr í lopt vpp, eigi sic beygiande niðr at likannvm heldr orðsyndae hueria leiðð oðndin för vt af holddin.681

(And when seven psalms are ended, and the priest is speaking the verse ‘Through your passion and cross release her, Lord’, she raises her right hand with the sign of the cross, and in the same instant her blessed spirit departs, leaving the hand standing upright in the air, not bending down to the body, but rather pointing out in which direction the soul went out from the flesh.)

678 Íslendinga saga, cap. 49 (Sturlunga saga I, p. 256)
679 Árons saga, cap. 8 (Sturlunga saga II, p. 325).
680 Íslendinga saga, cap. 329 (Sturlunga saga II, p. 265)
681 Maríu Jarteignir II, cap. 60 (Maríu saga I, p. 194).
What all the examples taken from Norse secular literature indicate is that the original audience of *Njáls saga* would have interpreted Skárphédinn’s act of crossing his arms on his breast not merely as what Cormack calls ‘an unambiguous sign of religion’, but as a plea for divine mercy from a man who knows he is about to die. Skárphédinn could not, however, have caused the other branded cross-mark, the one on his shoulders:

þá varð brestr mikill; reið þá ofan őll þekjan. Varð hann þá í millum þess ok gaflaðsins; mátti hann þaðan hvergi hrœrask.

(then, with a great crash, the whole roof fell in. He [Skárphédinn] was pinned between roof and gable, and could not move an inch.)

The saga is explicit that when the gable end of the burning house collapses, he is pinned in an upright position against the timbers, and can’t move, so that it is certainly not, as Miller would have it, his ‘own unfathomable will … that manages to keep him standing’. Those timbers form a burning cross for Skárphédinn, and as he dies they brand their image across his shoulders. A source for this image will now be suggested, and it will be argued that comparison of the saga with the source shows that the author intended this cross-mark to indicate that Skárphédinn’s self-branded mark on his breast, the outward sign of an inward plea for mercy, has been answered by a divinely branded mark on the shoulders.

6.9 Skárphédinn and the penitent thief

This argument will depend on the reader of *Njáls saga* being given the knowledge that Skárphédinn repents of his sins before he dies, since in order for God’s mercy to operate, a sinner must be fully and sincerely penitent. Skárphédinn has already publicly acknowledged that he is guilty of a terrible crime682, the killing of Höskuldur Hvítanessgoði, and this admission of guilt marks the first stage of repentance. But the fact that he fights on in the flames for as long as he is able, even using as a weapon the trophy tooth he had removed from the fallen Þráinn Sigfússon683, suggests that repentance is far from his thoughts while he can remain active. It would follow, therefore, that, if the self-branded cross is indeed the mark of a plea for God’s mercy, it comes from repentance that is very much last-minute. The issue to be addressed now is whether such last-minute repentance is sufficient to allow the operation of God’s mercy

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682 See 6.6 above.
683 See 6.3 above.
on a justly condemned killer, or whether Skarpheðinn’s soul is to suffer eternal damnation.

The Middle Ages certainly believed that it was possible for the soul of a justly condemned criminal to be saved at the eleventh hour, taking as the Scriptural example the penitent thief, who having admitted his own guilt while on the cross, also recognised Christ’s divine majesty (Et dicebat ad Jesum: Domine, memento mei, cum veneris in regnum tuum), and received in return the instant promise of salvation (Et dixit illi Jesus: Amen dico tibi, hodie mecum eris in Paradiso (Luc. xxiii, 42-43)). The penitent thief was also the great medieval example of how a condemned criminal might be cleansed of his sins through a painful death:

Discipulus: Hafa þeir nokkra von þjálpar er fundnir verða í glæpum og dæmir til dauða, en þeir íðrast synda á sjálfrí dauðastundu?
Magister: Mikla von hafa þeir, því að sumir hreinsast fyrir dauðakvol, sem þjóður á krossi, en sumir leysast úr þíslum fyrir bænin heilagra.684

(Pupil: ‘Have they any hope of salvation who are found guilty of crimes and sentenced to death, but they repent of their sins at the very hour of their death?’
Master: ‘They have great hope, for some are cleansed by their death torments, like the thief on the cross, while some are released from their tortures through the prayers of saints.’)

The account of the fate of Skarpheðinn shares other details with versions of the story of the penitent thief. The cross-mark divinely branded on Skarpheðinn’s shoulders is taken from Niðrstigningar saga, the Norse version of the Descensus section of the ‘profoundly influential’685 apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, a text which purports to give an eyewitness account of the Harrowing of Hell:

684 Elucidarius II, section 83 (Gunnar Ágúst Harðarson, Þrjár þýðingar, p. 97).
685 Hall, ‘The Euangelium Nichodemi’, p. 37. See also 0.5 above.
handar …” Þu er hófuðfeþr oc spamenn heyrdó þetta, er ilvirkenn sagði, þa toco aller senn at meða: “Lofaþr ser þu almategr guþ, es svir miscunnsamr ert, at þu veiter overþum.”

(It was while Enoch and Elias were discussing such things with God’s saints that there came walking an extremely wretched man; he had a cross-mark on his shoulders. They asked who he was. He replied: ‘I was an evil-doer, and did every kind of evil on earth. And the Jews crucified me with Christ. But it was when I saw the wonders that occurred that I thought I knew that Christ must be the Creator of all that is made. I therefore began to pray for mercy, and spoke in this way: “Remember me, Lord, when you come into your kingdom.” Immediately, he received my words favourably, and replied: “I tell you certainly that today you will be with me in Paradise.” He then gave me this cross-mark, saying: “If the angel who is the guardian of Paradise prevents you from entering, show him the cross-mark, and tell him that Jesus Christ, who is now crucified, has sent you there.” I now did this, and spoke with the guardian of Paradise as I was commanded. He straightway unlocked the gate of Paradise for me, and led me in on the right hand …’ When the patriarchs and prophets heard what the criminal said, they all at the same time began to say: ‘May you be praised, Almighty God, who are so merciful that you give to the undeserving.’)

A Norse version, rather than the Latin, must be the source, since the latter has the thief carrying Christ’s cross on his shoulders, rather than being given a cross-mark on his shoulders. Version II of Niðrstigningar saga follows the Latin (cross a herþom … er þu ber cross a herþom) 687, while Version III has krossmark aa herdum ser 688. The speech of the patriarchs and prophets that closes this passage (‘May you be praised, Almighty God, who are so merciful that you give to the undeserving’), may be compared with the fate of Hrafn at Clontarf 689: the God of Njáls saga, like that of Niðrstigninga saga, is a merciful God, as Þangbrandr had explained to Síðu-Hallr, when describing the Archangel Michael (p. 257): “hann skal meta allt þat, sem þú gerir, þæði gott ok illt, ok er svá miskunnsamr, at hann metr allt þat meira, sem vel er gört” (‘he shall weigh all that you do, both good and evil, and he is so merciful that he gives more weight to all that is well done.’)

Two further details suggest that the author of Njála may also have had in mind, in addition to this description in Niðrstigningar saga, the description of the penitent thief in Gregory’s universally known commentary on the Book of Job (Moralia in Iob).

686 Niðrstigningar saga I (HMS II, p. 8).
687 HMS II, p. 13 (but also here: mark; crosmark).
688 HMS II, p. 16.
689 See 3.3 above.
The first of these details, Skarpheðinn’s helplessness as he is pinned to the cross-timbers, may well be borrowed from Gregory:

> On the Cross the nails had bound fast his hands and feet, and there remained nought in him that punishment left free, but the tongue and the heart.

With his only free organs, tongue and heart, the thief prays to Christ for mercy. If Skarpheðinn’s plea is to be heard, it too must come from the heart, and must use every free part of him.

The second detail concerns the nature of the crime being punished. Skarpheðinn is condemned for the death of his fosterbrother Hóskuldr, while according to Gregory (though not in Scripture) the penitent thief was another fratricide:

> It is good herein to recall the eyes of the mind to that robber, who from the jaws of the devil ascended the Cross, and from the Cross mounted to Paradise ... He came bound by his brother’s blood, he came bloodstained.

At the moment when Skarpheðinn is pinned helpless to his burning cross, the author verbally anticipates his account of the battle of Clontarf, and the apocalyptic ‘breaking-up of the world’ (p. 447: heimsbrestr):

> þá varð brestr mikill; reið þá ofan oll þekjan. Varð hann þá í millum þess ok gaflaðsins; mátti hann þaðan hvergi hrœ rask.

(then, with a great crash, the whole roof fell in. Skarpheðinn was pinned between roof and gable, and could not move an inch.)

The battle of Clontarf was fought on Good Friday, the ecclesiastical anniversary of Christ’s crucifixion between the two thieves. After the crucifixion, Christ opens the gates of hell and releases the souls of the just, and that of the penitent thief, from the power of the devil and his angels; of the other thief, nothing more is heard. The latter thief receives only justice – death - while the penitent thief is treated with justice and mercy: he justly dies for his crimes, and is mercifully reborn in Christ. Skarpheðinn has come to his own final judgement, and justice must be allowed to act first, in order that mercy, too, can operate. He dies, justly, for his crime, and his legs are burnt away below the knees.

His legs are destroyed, but he has other burns on his body: the cross-marks on his shoulders and breast, the latter of which he had branded on himself. These cross-marks

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691 Ibid.
may be seen as cleansing, since during the medieval period, it was standard medical practice to cauterise septic flesh with cross-shaped burns:

Þorgils hét maðr, er hafði meinsemi þá, at allr líkamr hans þrótnaði, bæði höfut hans ok búkr, hendr ok fætr. Hann kom á fund Hrafns … ok bað hann lækningar; en Hrafn brenndi hann marga díla, bæði í kross fyrir brjósti, ok í höfði, ok í meðal herða. En hálfum mánaði síðar var allr þróti ór hans hörundi, svá at hann varð alheili.

(There was a man called Þorgils, who had a sickness that caused his whole body to swell up, both his head, his trunk, arms and legs. He came to meet Hrafn … and asked him to heal him. And Hrafn branded many marks on him, in a cross both on the front of his breast, on his head, and between his shoulders. And half a month later all the swelling had gone from his flesh, so that he became completely healthy.)

When Þórhallr Ásgrímsson begins the battle at the Alþingi, he does so by cutting out the corruption in his own system. It was argued at 3.9 above that Þórhallr’s actions, first driving a spear into the abscess on his leg and then hurling it from him, reflect a medieval interpretation of the injunction given at a verse from the Gospel for Michaelmas: Matt. xviii, 8: ‘If your hand or your foot is your undoing, cut it off and fling it away; it is better for you to enter into life maimed or lame, than to keep two hands or two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire’. Þórhallr, innocent of all offence, strides without a limp to the battle, but Skarpheðinn, whose legs are partially burnt off, must be maimed before he may enter Paradise.

Once he has received his just punishment, mercy can act, and Skarpheðinn receives the cross-mark between his shoulders. This is the symbol which will allow him, undeserving as he is, to enter into eternal life, as is made clear in the passage from Niðrstigningar saga quoted above:

“Our gaf hann mer þetta crossmarc oc melte: Ef angelus, sa er vörrr er paradisar, bannar þer inngongu, þa synod honom crossmarc, oc seg honom þat, at Jesus Cristr, sa er nu er crossfest, hafe (þic) þangat sent. Nu gorða ec sva, at ec melta viþ paradisar vörr sem mer var boþet. Hann lauc þegar up fyr mer paradisar hilþ oc leide mic inn til hegre handar.”

(‘He then gave me this cross-mark, saying: “If the angel who is the guardian of Paradise prevents you from entering, show him the cross-mark, and tell him that Jesus Christ, who is now crucified, has sent you there.” I

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692 Hrafns saga, ch. 4 (Sturlunga saga II, p. 279); also at Biskupa sögur I, p. 644. See also Grágás II, p. 129: ef þrótnar hörund.
693 Compare the case of another last-minute penitent, Ingjaldr of Keldur, discussed at 3.10 above.
now did this, and spoke with the guardian of Paradise as I was commanded. He straightway unlocked the gate of Paradise for me, and led me in on the right hand.’

Version II of Niðrstigningar saga\[^{694}\] identifies the angel who guards Paradise, and who unlocks the gate and leads the penitent thief inside, as indeed the Archangel Michael. In version III of Niðrstigningar saga\[^{695}\]: ‘Our Lord commanded Michael to accompany Adam (Drottin varr baud Michaele at fylgja Adam) and all his saints, to lead them into Paradise’. When Síðu-Hallr had spoken out at the Alþingi, it had been in the spirit of the message he had heard at Michaelmas, when he was given Michael as his friend and fylguengill. And now, in accordance with the teaching of the same Gospel reading, and following the penitent thief, Skarpheðinn too has the Archangel to accompany (at fylgja) him during his own battle.

There remains one more battle to compare with the él at Bergþórshváll. In the saga’s first battle (ch. 5), the invisible presence of Gunnhildr, whose supernatural powers are the result of witchcraft, fights beside Hrútr and engineers the destruction of her own officer, Úlfr óþveginn. Gunnhildr in this battle may be seen as the evil counter-type to the Archangel Michael, whose unseen power protects and accompanies Skarpheðinn in his own struggle.

Skarpheðinn’s body is found with the legs partially burnt away, and with the flesh of his upper body cauterised by cross-marks (p. 343). Augu hans váru opin ok óþrútin (his eyes were open and unswollen). The cleansing power of branded cross-marks was noted above:

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\text{Hrafn brenndi hann marga díla, bæði í kross fyrir brjóstí, ok í hofði, ok í meðal herða. En hálfum mánaði síðarr var allr próti ór hans hórundi, svá at hann varð alheill}
\]

(Hrafn branded many marks on him, in a cross both on the front of his breast, on his head, and between his shoulders. And half a month later all the swelling had gone from his flesh, so that he became completely healthy.)

The word for ‘flesh’ in this passage is hórun. When Unnr tells her father about the sexual problem in her marriage with Hrútr, she says: “Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hórund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik” (‘As soon as he comes

\[^{694}\] HMS II, p. 13.  
\[^{695}\] HMS II, p. 16.
close to me his flesh is so large that he can’t have any satisfaction from me’). Skarpheðinn, his eyes unswollen and bearing in his flesh the branded symbol of the Cross, is in his death the anti-type of Hrútr, who is given Gunnhildr’s gold bracelet to wear at the same moment that she curses his marriage, and whose flesh, as a result of that curse, is swollen into useless sterility.

Attention was drawn in section 5.7 above to the contrast between the last words of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði: Gunnarr’s stanza, uttered in his grave-mound, celebrates the values of the old ethical code; the prayer of the dying Hóskuldr exemplifies the values of the new. To Hogni Gunnarsson and Skarpheðinn, who witness Gunnarr speaking his verses, ‘it seemed that the mound was open’ (þeim sýndisk haugrinn opinn): the boundary between this world and the pagan otherworld had momentarily dissolved.

Skarpheðinn’s last words, too, are a stanza. The burners, who have ‘stayed at the fire all night, until well after dawn’, hear the verses coming í eldūnum niðri (‘from down in the fire’). This time the witnesses include Gunnarr’s other son (p. 337):

Grani Gunnarsson mælti: “Hvárt mun Skarpheðinn hafa kveðit vísu þessa lífs eða dauðr?”
“Engum getum mun ek um þat leiða,” segir Flosi.

(Grani Gunnarsson said, ‘Did Skarpheðinn speak this verse alive or dead?’
‘I won’t make any guesses about that,’ said Flosi.)

The second part of the stanza is obscure, and has never been satisfactorily interpreted. But the first part, which speaks of a woman weeping when she hears about the fight, suggests that the stanza is a valediction, spoken on the boundary between this world and the next. For unlike Gunnarr, Skarpheðinn does not remain sublunary. It was noted at 3.7 above that the Gospel reading for Michaelmas, Matthew xviii, 1-10, ends with Christ’s words to His disciples:

“Never despise one of these little ones; I tell you, their angels in heaven look continually on the face of my heavenly Father.”

With the cross-mark on his shoulders, Skarpheðinn has been led into Paradise by his fylgiuengill, St Michael, who is commanded by God to guard that place. There, with eyes open and unswollen, he will join in the Archangel’s contemplation, and gaze eternally on the face of his Redeemer.
6.10 Njáll’s death

When the bodies of Njáll and Bergþóra are searched for among the ashes of the burning (p. 342), they are found beneath the now shrivelled ox-hide.

(They lifted it off and underneath lay the two of them, unburned. They all praised God for this and thought it a great miracle.)

A further examination of the bodies reveals just how great that miracle is:

(Njáll was carried out, and then Bergþóra. Everybody came to look at their bodies.

Hjalti spoke: ‘How do these bodies seem to you?’
They answered, ‘We’ll wait for what you have to say.’

Hjalti spoke: ‘I’ll be frank about this. Bergþóra’s body is as I would have expected, though well preserved. Njáll’s countenance and body seem to me so radiant that I’ve never seen a dead man’s body as radiant as his.’
They all agreed that this was so.)

Commenting on the radiance of Njáll’s body, Margaret Cormack suggests that the source for it lies in the generalised imagery of martyrs’ passions: ‘Njáll’s body, like those of the martyrs, is preternaturally bright’. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson notes that ‘we find many parallels in medieval legends’, and cites as an example the case of Bishop Guðmundr Árason: ‘All those men who saw the body said they had never seen the flesh of a dead man so radiant and fair as his’. This parallel with Guðmundar saga is particularly striking in view of a motif which is found in both Guðmundar saga and Njála, and which concerns the little boy, Þórðr Kárason, who died under the ox-hide with Njáll and Bergþóra. His body is found almost undamaged, except that ‘one finger, which he had stretched out from under the hide, had been burned off’ (p. 342).

This description may be compared with that of a little girl who sets out one Saturday with Bishop Guðmundr and his companions on a journey over the mountains. The party is caught in a terrible blizzard, with a cruel frost and darkness (svá sterkt
However,

meyjan sú hin litla, er vér gátum, var grafin í snjá með þeim búnaði, at
hun var sveipuð með kyrtli síra Guðmundar ... En af meynni, þeirri er á
fjallinu var sveipuð kyrtli síra Guðmundar, er þat at greina, at hún fannst
á mánadaginn eptir heil ok ókalin, utan litt á fótinn annan, er tók undan
kyrtlinum; svá hlífði henni guðs vinar klæði, at hvárki frost né hungr náði
hennar lífi.

*(Guðmundar saga, chapter 16)*

(The little girl, whom we mentioned, was buried in the snow in such
dress that she was wrapped in the gown of the reverend Guðmundr …
But concerning that girl who was wrapped in the reverend
Guðmundr’s gown on the mountain, there is to record that she was
found on the following Monday healthy and unfrozen, except for a
little part on one foot, which had come out from underneath the gown.
The clothing of God’s friend so sheltered her, that neither frost nor
hunger took her life.)

Njáll describes the fire at Bergþórshváll as an *él* (literally ‘snow-shower, snow-storm’,
but with the metaphorical meaning also of ‘battle’)*. The *él* of the burning was seen as
a metaphorical battle at 6.9 above, where events that occurred during the burning of
Skarpheðinn were compared with other battles in the saga, especially the battle at the
Alþingi. Now, the discovery of the body of the little boy Thórðr Kárason, with the
hagiographic motif of the slight damage to it, defines the *él* at Bergþórshváll as a
metaphysical blizzard as well as a battle. Moreover, the fact that the little boy is
protected during the blizzard by Njáll’s ox-hide proves that Njáll must be considered to
be, like Bishop Guðmundr, ‘God’s friend’.

The issue of the immediate source for Njáll’s posthumous radiance may now be
returned to. Andersson suggests that this phenomenon has little relevance for the saga as
a whole:

How well does the miracle of Njáll’s saintly glow and unsinged state jibe
with the rest of the saga? … Christian sentiment cannot be the core but
only a small excrescence, external to the substance of the saga … Where
the Christian bias becomes apparent, we are dealing with a
superimposition, or at least with two layers.

In a reply to Andersson, Richard Allen points out that:

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698 Bisk. II, p.28.
699 See 6.3 above.
700 See also 3.8, 3.9 above.
Since we know next to nothing about what traditions concerning Njáll the composer of *Njáls saga* had available to him and nothing about their transmission, it is not even safe to assume that the saintly glow and unsinged state are late additions to the tale.\(^{702}\)

The evidence given above from *Guðmundar saga*, which suggests that Njáll should be seen as a friend of God, points to the likelihood of a Christian source also for Njáll’s radiance, though this is probably best identified through an examination of how the appearance of Njáll’s body fits the saga’s thematic and imagistic concerns.

The powers of divine justice and mercy act in three battles that have been discussed, and apparently through the Archangel Michael in two of them. First: Þangbrandr, who fights with Michael’s weapons of sword and Cross, justly destroys his enemy - there can be no mercy, since the berserk who opposes him is ‘Faithless’\(^{703}\). Second: the words of the Gospel for Michaelmas lie behind the actions of both Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, who begins the battle at the Alþingi with justice, and Síðu-Hallr, who brings it mercifully to an end\(^{704}\). Third: at Clontarf, a three-part paradigm, comprised of Bróðir, Hrafín the Red and Óspakr, demonstrates the justice and mercy of God. There is no mercy shown to the apostate Bróðir, who persists in his anti-Christian aggression, despite being given supernatural warnings. Hrafín the Red, a Christian in spiritual danger, repents, and is spared. Mercy is also shown to Bróðir’s erstwhile heathen companion, Óspakr who, like Hrafín, and in contrast with Bróðir, does heed the signs, and repents of his former life.\(^{705}\)

God’s justice and mercy were present in these three physical battles, and have been shown to be so again in the metaphysical él at Bergþórshváll. Njáll’s fatal decision that his sons and their men go indoors, the decision which results in the burning, determines that the demands of justice are met: the malignant harvest of Móður Valgarðsson’s sowing is burnt away, along with the weeds at Bergþórshváll. Mercy responds to the plea of Skarpheðinn, and saves his soul. Njáll had rightly recognised that the burning was a test of faith\(^{706}\), and at the eleventh hour Skarpheðinn passes safely through that test.

When Njáll urges his household to have faith, he also tells them: “*guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði látar brenda þessa heims ok annars*” (‘God

\(^{702}\) *Fire and Iron*, pp. 119 and 219 n. 27.

\(^{703}\) See 6.7 above.

\(^{704}\) See 3.8, 3.9 above.

\(^{705}\) See 3.3 above.

\(^{706}\) See 6.7 above.
is merciful, and he will not let us burn both in this world and the next.’) Where there is no faith, and the victim of a deliberate burning ‘in this world’ is so evil that he is denied the mercy of God, the temporal burning might be seen as the precursor to the eternal torments of hell. Evidence for this suggestion comes from Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta\(^707\), where the phrase vargr undir sauð (‘wolf in sheep’s clothing’) is an indirect reference to Matt. vii, 15: ‘Beware of false prophets, men who come to you dressed up as sheep while underneath they are savage wolves.’ This reference can be identified because the Norse goes on to translate the continuation of this Scriptural passage, which reads (vv. 18-20): ‘A good tree cannot yield bad fruit, neither can a bad tree yield good fruit. Every tree that does not yield good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire’.

var ok þess uon at illr auoxstr mundi upp renna af illri rot þuiat Sigurdr jall var hin mesta gildra ok snara tion ok tapan Hakonar konungs med kugan annarra hofdingia ok sialfs hans ueikkleika. sua at þat ma sannliga segiazst at Sigurdr jall uar at uisu uargr undir saud hia Hakoni konungi ok suæik hann med sleligu yfirbragde ... ok þui var þess uon at ill rot munde illan auoxst gefua sem fyr sagda ek. þuiat illt tre ma æigi godan auoxst gefa helldr skal þat vera upp hoggit ok þ elld kastat. þess hafde fyr nefnndr Sigurdr jall fullar raunir þa er hann var inne brendr af vvinum sinum ok suikinn adr slægliga. galtt hann svo sinn glæpa þessa hæims ok mun ælifuliga brenna j oslokkuiligum loga.

(It was to be expected in this that evil fruit would grow up from an evil root, because Earl Sigurðr was the greatest trap and snare, loss and perdition for King Hákon, with the tyranny of other chieftains and his own weakness, so that it may truly be said that Earl Sigurðr was certainly a wolf in sheep’s clothing at King Hákon’s side, deceiving him with a cunning surface …And so it was to be expected in this that an evil root would give evil fruit, as I said before, because an evil tree cannot yield good fruit, but it must rather be cut down and thrown into the fire. Of this the aforementioned Earl Sigurðr had full proof, when he was burned in his house by his enemies, having previously been cunningly betrayed. So he paid for his wicked deeds in this world, and will burn eternally in unquenchable flames.)

A source for the preternatural radiance of Njáll’s body and face may now be suggested. It is not a generalised hagiographic motif borrowed from saints’ or martyrs’ lives\(^708\), but is traceable to another Scriptural reference to the Last

\(^707\) Chapter 269 (Flat. I, p. 324).
\(^708\) Descriptions of saints as having, like Njáll, a radiant face and body, are apparently very rare in hagiographic literature. An examination of 150 saints’ and martyrs’ lives and deaths yielded no exact parallel to Njáll’s case.
Judgement. It will be recalled that the court-case that followed the killing of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði becomes paralysed, inevitably, in Njáll’s opinion (p. 309):

“Svá sýnisk mér sem þetta mál sé komit í ónýtt efni, ok er þat at líkendum, því at af illum rótum hefir upp runnit.”

(‘It appears to me that this case has reached an impasse, which is to be expected since it has sprung from evil roots.’)

Njáll’s comments contain the same metaphor that occurs in the above passage from Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta,709 and when seen retrospectively, in the context of Njáls saga’s principal metaphor of growth and productivity, become a statement of the justice of the burning. It was noted in 4.3 above that Njáll’s metaphor complements the one spoken by Flosi, when he speaks of the killing of Hóskuldr (p. 288):

“Þat hefir nú víst at hóndum borit, at ek mynda gefa til mína eigu, at þetta hefði eigi fram komit; er ok illu korni sáit orðit, enda mun illt af gróa.”

(‘It’s true that I would give everything I own if this matter had never arisen. And evil grain has been sown, and therefore evil will grow.’)

The source for these words was traced to Matt. xiii, 24-30, the parable of the tares among the wheat. Christ’s own explanation of the parable states that tares and wheat will be harvested together, at which time, when ‘the tares are gathered and burned in the fire’ (v. 40), tunc justi fulgebunt sicut sol in regno Patris eorum (then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father: v. 43)710. At Bergþórshváll, the ‘hay-rick of weeds’711, the arfasátr, is burnt to destruction, but Njáll’s radiance is proof that he is with his heavenly father.

6.11 Conclusions

If the arguments put forward in the present chapter are correct, it can no longer be maintained that Njáll is motivated by anything other than love, when he orders his sons and their men to retreat inside the house at Bergþórshváll712. He certainly engineers the deaths of his sons, but does so, not in order to ensure revenge for the killing of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði according to the old ethic, but, as the case of Skarpheðinn demonstrates, in order to impose purgative justice upon them, the necessary preliminary to the mercy of that God who, Njáll is confident, will not allow the household to burn in

709 See 4.2 above.
710 For Norse translations of this verse, see Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 168.
711 See 4.5 above.
this world and the next. The burning, with the injuries to Skarpheðinn’s legs\textsuperscript{713}, are the results of this purgative justice, while Skarpheðinn’s branded cross-marks show the operation of reconciliating mercy.

Earlier in this study it was argued that one of Njáll’s foster-sons, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, acts with justice to purge what is corrupt at the Alþingi following the burning, and that a second foster-son, Høskuldr Hvítanessgoði, acts with love and mercy in his refusal to retaliate against the Njállssons’ attack, and to pray for them instead\textsuperscript{714}. It is noteworthy that Njáll’s actions to bring about the burning, and with it his own death, combine the justice of one foster-son with the self-sacrificial love of the other. It would seem that the author of \textit{Njáls saga} has Þórhallr inherit the lawyer Njáll’s insistence upon the integrity of the new law, while Høskuldr who, like Njáll, seeks to spare his attackers from injury, has apparently inherited the peacemaker Njáll’s love for others.

\textsuperscript{713} Compare the cases of Ingjaldr of Keldur and the Lawspeaker, Skapti Þóroddsson (3.10 and 3.12 above).

\textsuperscript{714} See 3.9 and 5.5 above.