

Høðr's Blindness and the Pledging of Óðinn's Eye: A Study of the Symbolic Value of the Eyes of Høðr, Óðinn and Þórr

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The idea of studying the symbolic value of eyes and blindness derives from my desire to reach an understanding of Høðr's mythological role. It goes without saying that in Old Norse literature a person's physiognomy reveals his characteristics. It is, therefore, a priori not improbable that Høðr's blindness may reveal something about his mythological role. His blindness is, of course, not the only instance in the Eddas where eyes or blindness seem significant. The supreme god of the Old Norse pantheon, Óðinn, is one-eyed, and Þórr is described as having particularly sharp eyes. Accordingly, I shall also devote attention in my paper to Óðinn's one-eyedness and Þórr's sharp gaze.

As far as I know, there exist a couple of studies of eyes in Old Norse literature by Riti Kroesen and Edith Marold. In their articles we find a great deal of useful examples of how eyes are used as a token of royalty and strength. Considering this symbolic value, it is clear that blindness cannot be, simply, a physical handicap. In the same way as emphasizing eyes connotes superiority

and strength, blindness may connote inferiority and weakness. When the eye symbolizes a person's strength, blinding connotes the symbolic and literal removal of that strength. A medieval king suffering from a physical handicap could be a *rex inutilis*. The expression, found in juridical papal documents from mid-thirteenth century, refers to a king, who causes a disaster in his kingdom, due to weakness or incompetence.¹ Saxo Grammaticus uses blindness several times in his *Gesta Danorum* as a sign of decrepitude and old age, and thereby indicates that the blind king cannot sustain power in his own kingdom.² In medieval sources, blindness also frequently connotes a lack of insight and judgement.

An example of deliberate blinding occurs in the *konungasögur*. King Magnús the Good was to share power with his brother, but soon a struggle arose between them, and Magnús was captured, and the decision was made:

to deprive Magnús of his kingdom in such a way that he could not be called king from that time on. Then he was given to the royal thralls, and they maimed him. They put out his eyes, chopped off one of his legs and finally he was castrated.³

Blinding as a punishment is not exclusively a Norse phenomenon. It is known from Byzantium, for example. The blinded Byzantine kings also lost their political power and their kingdoms.⁴ In Old Norse literature contemporary with Snorri's *Edda* and Codex Regius of *The Poetic Edda* the punishment of blinding is often followed by castration, as in the example of King Magnús. In *Sturlunga saga*, Gizurr decides to mutilate his enemy either by blinding him or castrating him.⁵ In the power struggle among the Sturlungar, these two forms of mutilation seem to be used together or interchangeably.⁶ Through blinding and castration the victim is deprived of his social position, exactly as Magnús the Good. Power and masculine sexuality are thus linked.

In Old Norse culture, as in other traditional cultures, kin ranks higher than the individual. It was common to marry for tactical reasons. It is therefore not surprising that power and sexuality are linked in the sagas, since they were in fact inextricably linked in Old Norse culture. Accordingly, the most severe accusations towards a man's honour and position in society were of a sexual character. The Old Norse notion of invective, *níð*, is based on accusations of

¹ This political type was defined juridically by Innocent IV in 1245, but it has existed back to the year 700. Edward Peters: *The Shadow King*, 20-21.

² E.g. in the story about Wermundus and Uffo in the fourth book of *Gesta Danorum*.

³ "taka Magnús svá frá ríki, at hann mætti eigi kallask konungr þaðan í frá. Var hann þá seldr í hendr konungs þrælum, en þeir veittu honum meizlur, stungu út augu hans ok hjoggu af annann fót en síðarst var hann gelldr." *Heimskringla* III, p. 327.

⁴ John Julius Norwich: *Byzantium. The Decline and Fall*, pp. 337; Edward Peters: *The Shadow King*, p. 185. According to Edward Peters only one king did not lose his kingdom when blinded, namely Louis the Blind. Edward Peters: *The Shadow King*, 185.

⁵ *Sturlunga saga* II, p. 217.

⁶ Cf. *Sturlunga saga* I, p. 485.

sexual misconduct. However, even though sexuality is targeted in such accusations, the kernel of the *níðingskapr* is not sexual. For this reason the physical punishment of castration, with its obvious sexual overtones, also has implications beyond sexuality. The *níðings*-mark further pointed to the immorality of the *níðingr* and thereby to the danger of lacking ability, or will, to live up to the demands of civilisation.

The question then arises whether blinding also has sexual implications and is thus connected to *níð*. Several examples where blinding and castration are linked point to a connection between blinding and *níð*. In a number of examples, both blinding and castration are used as a punishment for sexual offences, but there are also examples where blinding is used exclusively.⁷ These examples show a connection between blinding and castration, and show furthermore that blinding could function as a symbolic castration. In *Grágás* we find blinding, castration and *klámhogg* (a stroke on the buttocks) in juxtaposition.⁸

As an example of the sexual connotations of blinding, I refer to a passage in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* where the masculinity of Egill and his men is tested. They have spent the night at a place, where the host has continually served strong beer, even after Egill's men have become sick. In the end, Egill has to drink also what his men cannot drink. The morning after Egill goes to the host in his bed and cuts off his beard and pokes out one of his eyes. To understand Egill's motives, we should remember, that it was a sign of masculinity to be able to drink a lot without getting too drunk.⁹ When the host forces Egill and his men to drink in this way, he is putting their masculinity to the test. Only Egill passes the test. Egill's revenge is carefully thought out. To cut off a man's beard is *níð*. Accusations of beardlessness were accusations of femininity.¹⁰ At the same time Egill pokes an eye out, that is, he symbolically castrates his host. Egill responds to the attack on his own masculinity by marking his attacker with physical signs, that, in the language of *níð*, would equal accusations of effeminacy.

Despite the debilitating symbolic value of blinding, in mythology one often finds the blind associated with wisdom and prophecy. The one-eyed Óðinn is wise above all. Nevertheless, Hqðr's blindness does not seem to suggest any supernatural powers. We only know Hqðr from the myth of Baldr's death. In *Snorri's Edda* and *Vqluspá*, Baldr's death is the tragic event that leads to Ragnarok.¹¹ In these sources Hqðr's only accomplishment is fratricide. A very

⁷ Cf. *Heimskringla* III, p. 383; *Sigrarðs saga ok Valbrands*, 185-186.

⁸ *Grágás* I, pp. 147-8.

⁹ In *Hávamál* 19, one is advised not to get too drunk, and when Þórr goes to see Útgarðaloki, one of the tests is how much he is able to drink. *Snorra Edda*, *Gylfaginning* 31.

¹⁰ In *Njáls saga* *níðvísur* are composed about Njáll, where he is called beardless. *Njáls saga*, p. 113.

¹¹ In the Hauksbók-edition of *Vqluspá* Baldr's death is not mentioned at all. When, in the

different account of Hǫðr, in the role of a human hero, is found in the third book of *Gesta Danorum*. Considering the scholarly attention paid to the Baldr-myth, surprisingly little has been said about Hǫðr.

In 1881, Sophus Bugge argued that the presentation of the myth in *Gylfaginning* was mainly inspired by legends about Jesus. He argued that Hǫðr's blindness was an outward sign of his inner blindness. In Bugge's opinion, his blindness was not a feature of the original myth, but instead borrowed from Christ's crucifixion. Hǫðr would thus correspond to the blind Longinus who pierced Jesus in the side with a spear. By touching the blood of Jesus, Longinus regained his sight and upon discovering what he had done, grieved the deed.¹² If, with Sophus Bugge, we read Christian symbolism into the myth, Hǫðr takes on a somewhat benign if naive character. In Christian texts, blindness commonly symbolises spiritual darkness or disbelief, which can be healed by exposure to Christianity.¹³ Accordingly, Hǫðr's blindness would point to his ignorance and lack of insight into his action. However, in the context of *Gylfaginning*, if Hǫðr acts exclusively out of ignorance, it becomes difficult to explain, why his and Baldr's reunion after Ragnarøk is stressed, since if Hǫðr did not have any ill will towards Baldr, their reconciliation would be rather pointless.

I therefore prefer to read Hǫðr's blindness in the context of the complex system of meaning associated with eyes and blindness in Old Norse literature. In that context Hǫðr's blindness is a symbol of his *níðingsskapr*. As *níðingr* Hǫðr is susceptible to accusations of sexual depravity, effeminacy and unmanliness in the form of *níð*, despite the fact that we know from Snorri, that Hǫðr possesses great physical strength.¹⁴ By killing his brother, he commits a *níðingsverk*. Hǫðr's blindness is the sign, not of his physical weakness, but of his moral blindness, which is the precondition for his crime. In Snorri's version of the Baldr-myth, Loki is the one who orchestrates the killing. Loki acts on ill will, and the fact that Hǫðr, without consideration, lets himself be used by this ill will, shows Hǫðr's moral depravity. Hǫðr is blind, as it were, to the fact that he aims the missile at his brother. He is blind to his fraternal feelings and has no appreciation for the foundational principle of the family. Symbolically, the blind Hǫðr stands outside the divine community as he stands outside the ring of the gods in *Gylfaginning*. When he is finally given the opportunity to participate in the joint game of the gods, this has fatal consequences. By killing his own brother, he destroys his possibility of entering the community, because fratricide violates its most sacred principle. This brings the world of the gods to its ruin. The blind Hǫðr, an easy prey to the forces of chaos, is strong enough to

following, referring to Baldr's death in connection with *Völuspá*, I am referring to the Codex Regius of *The Poetic Edda*.

¹² Sophus Bugge: *Studier over de Nordiske Gude- og Heltesagn*, 34-39.

¹³ Cf. *Heimskringla* III, 230; *Postala sögur*, 581 and *Mariu saga*, 965.

¹⁴ "Hǫðr heitir einj assij; ærit er hann sterkr [...]". *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, Gylfaginning*, 15, 33.

bring the world to its ruin.

Contrary to Høðr, Óðinn is no outsider in the community of the gods. He is the supreme god, he is wise and possesses second-sight, and he is, as is well-known, one-eyed. The pledging of Óðinn's eye is mentioned in *Völuspá*, stanzas 27-28, and *Gylfaginning* in Snorri's *Edda*.¹⁵ According to *Gylfaginning*, Mímir's well is under the root of Yggdrasill which points in the direction of the realm of the rímpursar. Here wisdom and reason are hidden. It is furthermore told, that Mímir is wise, because he drinks from the well every morning. Moreover, we hear that Óðinn once asked for a drink from the well, but did not receive anything until he pledged his eye.¹⁶ Snorri's words about Óðinn's eye do not appear in our manuscripts of *Völuspá*.

Most scholars agree that Óðinn, by the pledging of his eye, receives access to Mímir's knowledge. Several things indicate that Mímir may be a giant or at least connected to the giants.¹⁷ The giants pose a threat against civilisation, while the gods most often try to sustain order. Due to their geographical placement in the mythical world, the giants are connected to the uncivilised: they live far away from the centres of civilisation, Ásgarðr and Miðgarðr, and they are associated with cold and frost.¹⁸ Being connected to the realm of the giants, Mímir would thereby be connected to this concept of the uncivilised.¹⁹

Furthermore, Mímir is dead: in *Ynglinga saga* we are told, that the Vanir decapitated him and sent the head to Óðinn. There is, therefore, no doubt that Mímir is, in some way, connected to the underworld. The water in Mímir's well is thus also connected to the underworld. In fact the element of water in Old Norse mythology is generally a symbol of forces that cannot be confined.²⁰ Furthermore, water is connected to the female deities: Frigg lives in Fensalir, Sága lives in Sökkvabekkr and Urðr lives in Urðarbrunnr. In addition sacrifices made in water are made to the Vanir.²¹ The associations of water therefore relate well to the chthonic character of the Vanir.²² Mímir is, accordingly, of the

¹⁵ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, Gylfaginning* 8, 22.

¹⁶ There is remarkable difference between the wording of *Völuspá* in Codex Regius of *The Poetic Edda* and the manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*. The Hauksbók-version of *Völuspá* only has stanza 27. The allusive stanzas are obscure, and this is why all scholars do not believe that the stanzas revolve around a pledge. Cf. Jan de Vries: "Ginnungagap", 47-48; Jere Fleck: "Óðinn's Self-Sacrifice - A new Interpretation. II: The Ritual Landscape", 400. I agree with Sigurður Nordal and Margaret Clunies Ross, that the meaning of the stanzas of *Völuspá* seems to be that Valfaðir's pledge is Óðinn's eye. Sigurður Nordal: *Völuspá*, 66; Margaret Clunies Ross: *Prolonged Echoes* I, 221.

¹⁷ Cf. Finnur Jónsson: 1912, A I, 654-655; 1910, B I, 658-659; M. Ciklamini: "Óðinn and the giants", 152.

¹⁸ H. A. Molenaar: "Concentric Dualism in Scandinavian Mythology", 34.

¹⁹ Cf. Jens Peter Schjødt: "Horizontale und vertikale Achsen in der vorchristlichen skandinavischen Kosmologie", 48.

²⁰ Margaret Clunies Ross: *Prolonged Echoes* I, 53.

²¹ Britt-Mari Näsström: "Stucken, hängd och dränkt", 95.

²² Jens Peter Schjødt: "Aser og vaner: Historie eller struktur", 62.

same nature, and so is the wisdom in his well.

In one of the two versions of how Óðinn came in possession of Mímir's knowledge, Mímir is decapitated, which can be read as his removal from his chthonic origin.²³ But in the other version, which is the focus of this study, Óðinn pledges his eye to get possession of Mímir's knowledge. Thus an act of approaching takes place in both versions of the myth, either Mímir must approach Óðinn symbolically or vice versa, in order that Óðinn achieve access to Mímir's knowledge. We must assume that Óðinn, in the pledging version, wishes to get possession of knowledge connected to the Vanir, the feminine and the chthonic. In her study, *Prolonged Echoes*, volume I, Margaret Clunies Ross shows that qualities such as intellectual creativity, civilisation, and life are connected to the realm of the masculine in Old Norse mythology, while disorder, death and sexuality are connected to the realm of the feminine.²⁴ The knowledge that Óðinn wishes to achieve would thus be connected to the feminine realm. This agrees with Jens Peter Schjødt's interpretation of the myth of Óðinn's conquest of the skaldic mead: the wisdom, represented by the skaldic mead, does not become fruitful for Óðinn until it has been in the possession of a woman in the underworld.²⁵

To achieve this specific knowledge, Óðinn sacrifices an eye. Given the symbolic value of eyes (masculine strength and status), it seems that Óðinn indeed surrenders a part of his masculinity to achieve a share in the chthonic and feminine knowledge hidden in Mímir's well. In general it seems that civilisation, which is associated with the Æsir and the masculine, is represented in Old Norse mythology as being superior to the earthly and watery elements of the uncivilised, associated with the Vanir and the feminine. But surprisingly enough the myth also shows that Óðinn, by sacrificing a part of his masculinity, achieves supreme wisdom from a feminine source. The numinous wisdom is, therefore, created by uniting the feminine and the masculine. Óðinn's connection to the feminine realm cannot be read as an indication of weakness. Else Mundal has interpreted the alliance with the forces of chaos as a way to release the creative potential of these forces.²⁶ The transgression of taboo contributes to the constitution of Óðinn as the supreme god of the Old Norse pantheon.

Nevertheless, despite the sacrifice of one of his eyes, one of Óðinn's heiti is Báleygr, the fire-eyed. The eye, that Óðinn still has, is powerful: with his gaze Óðinn can frighten his enemies, blind or deafen them in the struggle, and stop weapons in the air.²⁷ Thus Óðinn's missing eye symbolises his femininity, his

²³ Margaret Clunies Ross: *Prolonged Echoes* I, 215.

²⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross: *Prolonged Echoes* I, 187-188.

²⁵ Jens Peter Schjødt: "Livsdrik og vidensdrik", 94-95.

²⁶ Else Mundal: "Androgony as an Image of Chaos", 5.

²⁷ *Völuspá* 28; *Hávamál* 148 og 150; *Ynglinga saga*, *Heimskringla* I, 17.

connection to the feminine realm, while his remaining eye symbolises the connection to the masculine realm. The one-eyedness is a symbol of Óðinn's duality and thereby of his indisputable position as the utterly invincible, supreme god.

Óðinn's two-sided knowledge contrasts with Þórr's one-sided masculinity. Even though Óðinn is called the fire-eyed, his one eye is not stressed in the myths in the same way as are Þórr's eyes. We meet the strong eyes of Þórr several times: in the myth of Þórr's fishing trip,²⁸ in the myth of his journey to Útgarðaloki, and finally in the myth of how he got his stolen hammer back. It is common in these descriptions to emphasise the terrifying aspect of his gaze. The assumption that Þórr's sharp eyes are an important feature of his physiognomy is supported by findings of Þórr's hammers, from about AD 1000, with distinct eyes depicted on the hammer itself.²⁹

In *Þrymskviða* Þórr awakes one morning and lacks his hammer, Mjöllnir. It has been stolen by the giant Þrymr, who demands to marry Freyja before he returns the hammer. Freyja for her part refuses categorically, because by marrying a giant she would be considered *vergjörn* or oversexed. In the end, the supermasculine Þórr has to dress up and impersonate Freyja as bride to regain his Mjöllnir. This, of course, causes him to fear that the other Æsir will accuse him of *ergi* or effeminacy. When Þórr is finally sitting in Jötunheimar in his bridal costume, the giant lifts the veil to kiss the bride, but jumps back frightened:

‘Hví ero ondótt
augo Freyio?
icci mér ór augom
eldr of brenna.’ *Þrymskviða* 27

[Why are Freyja's eyes foul? Me thinks a fire burns from her eyes.]

Since the strong gaze was a sign of masculine strength, the giant does not expect such a gaze from his bride. Even though Þórr is forced to act in an unmanly manner by dressing in the bridal costume, he never jeopardises his masculinity. In contrast to both Loki and Óðinn, Þórr never willingly impersonates a woman. Add to this his uninhibited behaviour in Jötunheimar: Þórr eats and drinks like a real man and his gaze alone is enough to make the giant jump back in fright. When the hammer finally is within Þórr's reach, he does not hesitate to take revenge for his humiliation as well as the theft of the hammer, by fiercely killing the giant and his family.

²⁸ This myth plays a part in three skaldic poems (*Ragnarsdrápa*, *Húsdrápa* and apparently in a fragment of a poem by Gamli Gnævaðarskáld), but Þórr's gaze is only mentioned in *Húsdrápa* and in Snorri's Edda.

²⁹ John Lindow: *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods*, 15; cf. illustration no. 17 in E. O. G. Turville-Petre: *Myth and Religion of the North*. In addition to this, we also have mention of Þórr's sharp gaze in *Heimskringla*; *Heimskringla* II, 234.

Þórr is not as complex a character as Óðinn. Physically he represents strength but mentally he is somewhat naive.³⁰ He functions as the protector of humans and gods, as is demonstrated by a number of kennings (e.g. *Hrunnis haussprengir*, *Fjall-Gauts fellir*, *Miðgarðs véurr* and *jǫtna ótti*).³¹ In Þórr's temples oaths were sworn by a ring,³² which leads to the assumption that Þórr may have guaranteed the observance of these oaths. His hammer was used in the ritual of marriage, as in *Þrymskviða*. By his guaranteeing the observance of oaths and marriage contracts, Þórr obviously has a role to play in maintaining order and civilisation among gods and men.

By struggling against giants and giantesses, Þórr struggles against the chthonic forces of chaos that threaten civilisation. Contrary to Óðinn, Þórr's relationship and connection to this realm is unambiguously antagonistic. If we view the myths in the light of the opposition between the masculine and feminine realm, Þórr is without reservations located in the masculine realm. The myth of Þórr's journey to Geirrøðr contains a good example of the overwhelming destructiveness of the feminine as represented in the mythology. As you will recall, in this myth the giantess Gjálp almost drowns Þórr with her unrestrained urinating.

Þórr's fierce gaze is therefore in full harmony with his one-sided connection with the masculine realm, and the repetitive emphasis on his two strong eyes is not surprising: Þórr is after all the chief representative of masculine values in the Old Norse pantheon.

The one-sided relationship to only one realm does not give supernatural creative powers. Høðr and Þórr are respectively connected to the feminine and the masculine realm, and none of them ever approaches possessing anything reminding of Óðinn's numinous wisdom and superiority. Only Óðinn of the three gods in this study is connected to both the feminine and the masculine realm. Óðinn's one-eyedness shows his crossing the limits, his connection to both realms, as Høðr's blindness and Þórr's sharp eyes respectively show their relationship to the feminine and masculine realm.

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³⁰ Cf. *Hárbarðsljóð*, where Þórr cannot compete with Óðinn's knowledge, and on the journey to Útgarðaloki he spends the night in a glove, which Loki mentions as shameful in *Lokasenna* 60.

³¹ For further examples, cf.: Rudolf Meissner: *Die Kenningar der Skalden*, 254.

³² H. R. Ellis Davidson: *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*, 76-77.

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