

**Serial Defamation in Two Medieval Tales:  
The Icelandic *Ölkofra Þáttr* and The Irish  
*Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó***

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Ireland and Iceland in the early medieval period display similarities in cultural development that cannot be simplistically referred to the conditions of insular societies on the European fringe. In both the spread of literacy in Latin was matched by a readier accommodation with the native tradition than in many parts of western Europe. This resulted in two relatively early vernacular literatures, with a keen but not uncritical appreciation of their pre-Christian native cultures and oral traditions serving to generate a rich and varied corpus of texts. The Icelandic family sagas dealing with the period after the Settlement are widely known and admired; the earliest Irish tales, cast in the epic mold and purporting to describe a world more remote than a century or two, have a more limited readership. As a backdrop for the literary scholar and of prime importance for the student of cultures, both islands preserved an extensive body of legal texts, whose value for determining the degree and kind of “historicity” of the literary material is increasingly being recognized. The two societies seem to have been very prone to litigation and to its more violent alternative, feud. Ireland pursued feud through the kin group; Iceland favored political alliances around local chieftainships (Byock 1982). But economy and social organization certainly differed in relatively bountiful Ireland and resource-scarce Iceland. Both had a hierarchical system, at one time with slaves at the bottom, but compared to aristocratic Ireland we might see Iceland as relatively more egalitarian, in that the common social unit, the freeborn, landed farmer, might aspire to a chieftainship, at least during the period depicted in the family sagas. The historical relations of the two parent societies in an earlier era—Viking raids in Ireland and the Western Isles, Norse settlements there, then the fresh emigration some generations later from Celtic lands to newly discovered Iceland—are additional compelling reasons to pursue cultural affinities if not direct dependencies.

Although differences between the two islands may be numerous as points for comparison, some may lead to the identification of further parallels, of a generic if not genetic nature. In notes to his translation of *Ölkofra Þátr* (*The Tale of Ale-Hood*) Hermann Pálsson (1971:90) remarks that Broddi Bjarnason's retort to Eyjólfur Þórdarson contains one of the few references to cattle-raiding in the Icelandic sagas, but that the theme is common in Old Irish epic literature. Both societies were preoccupied with land claims, legal ownership, and forcible occupation. But, in the ideological world of the Irish epic, land could not be dissociated from the extended family without its full consent, so that warfare was more for the enhancement of personal prestige and plunder of transportable goods than for territorial acquisition. The cattle-raid of the epic then provided a narrative context for heroic action much like the social environment of the feud or flawed marital alliance in the Icelandic sagas.<sup>1</sup>

There is another, arguably more compelling, reason for drawing a comparison between *Ölkofra Þátr* and an early Irish epic concerned with cattle-raids, and this is in its special use of *flyting* (from Scots) or trading of insults (ON *senna*; cf. OIr. *comram*, more generally "contention, contest," verbal and other). Broddi's scornful mention of cattle-raiding is made in the course of a series of objections raised by six plaintiffs to partiality in a law case that had been awarded to him for judgment. His remarks are not the battlefield boasts and taunts we usually associate with the term *flyting* but, while they differ from them in significant ways as concerns context, purpose, structure and tone, they are their clear descendants in this minor genre of speech arts. An early Irish tale, *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (*The Tale of Mac Dathó's Pig*), also has the particular feature of a series of verbal confrontations in a setting of formal contention over rights, in this instance the best warrior's right to carve the *curadmír* or champion portion, the choice part of the pig, when it was served in the banquet hall.<sup>2</sup> Like the Icelandic law court, the Irish king's hall was at

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<sup>1</sup> The Icelandic text of *Ölkofra Þátr* is quoted is quoted from Jóhannesson 1950a, the English translation from Pálsson 1971. Additional general comment is found in Baetke 1960. Pálsson notes the cattle raid motif in *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 19. It also occurs in the relatively late *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsson* (Jónsson 1954), suggesting that it may have been more common in reality than as a literary motif. The feud has a long scholarly history (see Byock 1982 for full treatment). More recently, marriages and other unions have attracted rewarding critical attention (Clover 1988).

<sup>2</sup> *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* is cited from Thurneysen's edition, which is reproduced in Lehmann and Lehmann 1975. Gantz (1981) offers a contemporary translation into English. Recent scholarly discussion of the tale includes Ó Coileáin 1978, Buttimer 1982, Sayers 1982, and O'Leary 1984, 1986. Another *locus classicus* of the champion's portion motif in early Irish literature is in *Fled Bricrend* (*The Feast of Bricriu*; see Henderson 1899). Here, too, an external figure, the Loki-like Bricriu ("Venom-tongue"), intentionally creates the circumstances which oblige the Ulster heroes to vie with each other. Even their

some remove from the field of battle, but was no less a formal and to a degree ritualized setting. Verbal confrontation here could function either as a proxy for or prelude to physical martial activity.

A third justification for such a comparison is the relative positions occupied by the two *flyting* scenes on the orality to literacy spectrum. In both these medieval tales, committed to writing or originating in written form, we have the fiction of speech behavior deemed appropriate in the litigation-prone oral culture of the past (cf. Nagy 1986). The resulting verbal performance combines collective societal and personal history, impromptu oral composition (*repartee*), and, as a counterpoint and facilitating environment for extemporaneous production, a traditional formal framework favoring malicious *ad hominem* humor, brevity, balances and oppositions, and wordplay.

The mutual interpellations or “calling out” of *flyting* are performative utterances intended as social judgment according to a cultural code still dominated, at least in the archaizing texts of the family sagas, by honor and warrior heroics. Shame functions within the public sphere. The stylized agonistic dialog of the narrative-dramatic form had a double public—that within the tale, plus the enveloping shell of reader and his audience—but for both it had the same entertainment and lightly didactic value (Lönnroth 1979). A tantalizing question, in the light of the deep historical perspective of the war of words, is the degree to which the medieval written texts record authentic preliterate verbal behavior and traditional patterns of content and form. The liberal use of humor and irony in character-to-character situations (as opposed to their use by an author or his characters, or toward his public) also raises the more formal question of genre, to which we shall return. Naturally, *flyting* is not restricted to these two words in the two literary traditions. Initial considerations will, however, keep a close focus on the technique of defamation in *seriatim* form in these two brief tales.

As the Irish tale is the older and can on linguistic grounds be traced to the ninth century (although some doubts remain), it will be summarized first. The Mac Dathó of the title is a king of Leinster, but has powerful neighbors, kings Conchobar of Ulster and Ailill of Connaught, arch-rivals in the corpus of epic text known as the Ulster cycle. Mac Dathó has a famous dog which guards the kingdom. When his neighbors both ask for it, he can devise no better strategy than to invite each of them to come and fetch it—unbeknownst to them, at the same time. A huge pig is slaughtered for the obligatory banquet. Its size and other extraordinary features led some commentators to think the tale to be in a satirical, Rabelaisian vein, while for others the pig is part of the residue of mythic material in these stories, and the *bruiden* or hostel, where the rivals are received, is an

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wives engage in what is explicitly called a war of words.

Otherworld setting.<sup>3</sup> In an uneasy truce the warriors of Ulster and Connaught take their places in the banquet hall. The kings' initial discussion of how the pig is to be carved is a brief exercise in one-ups-manship and stimulates individual heroes on both sides to lay claim to the carver's right with reference to cross-border raids to steal cattle and engage in single combat. Finally, Cet mac Mágach of Connaught appears to dominate the assembly. He hangs his weapons higher than the others', takes out his knife, prepares to carve the pig, then gives the Ulstermen a last chance: "Find among the men of Ireland one to match me in the contest—or let me have the division of the pig."

At this point we may turn to *Ölkofra Þáttur*, thought to have been composed in Iceland in the latter half of the thirteenth century, and trace its development to a comparable contest scene. The "Ale-Hood" of the title is a wealthy but stingy man named Þórhallr. He is also short and ugly, a good carpenter and smith, and brewer of a poor beer which he sells at the annual assembly, the Alþingi. He shields his weak eyes with a hood, whence the nickname. Here we have the caricature of an Odinic figure, immediately creating a less than fully historical ambiance. Ale-Hood owns a wood near the Alþingi and in the course of burning charcoal the wood-lot catches fire. It spreads to consume a neighboring wood owned by six powerful chieftains, called *Goðaskógr*, suggestive of the chieftains' (*goðar*) earlier status incorporating priestly functions at specific sacral sites. The six men are all known from other sagas and historical documents, although they were not exact contemporaries, while Ale-Hood and the events which he triggers in the tale are not (Jóhannesson 1950a:xxxiv-xxxviii, Baetke 1960:1-8). The *Þáttur* is then of the "tall tale" variety, combining historical material with exaggerated fiction. The chieftains think they can extract money from Ale-Hood by bringing a case against him at the Alþingi, since destruction of such a precious resource as wood in early Iceland was an offense punishable by varying degrees of outlawry. Although on a different social level, Ale-Hood, like Mac Dathó, is caught between the claims of neighbors, here acting collectively rather than as rivals.

Ale-Hood can find no allies among his former customers at the Alþingi until the young Broddi Bjarnason, brother-in-law of Þorsteinn Hallsson (also known from other sagas), apparently on a whim decides to champion the blustering but worried firebrand. In the best saga fashion the audience is not privy to Broddi's counsel and must wait to see it acted out. It involves a duplicitous procedure where Ale-Hood appears to back down from his former arrogance and placate two of the chieftains, thus playing them off against their colleagues. He offers to cede to them

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<sup>3</sup> See Nagy 1981. If Mac Dathó's patronym is interpreted as meaning that he was the son of two mutes, the chthonic associations would be strengthened. Buttimer (1982) argues for an intentional political silence maintained by this king of Leinster *vis à vis* his powerful neighbors of Ulster and Connaught with a view to promoting their mutual attrition.

the right to judge the case (cf. the double invitation to the Irish banquet, devised by Mac Dathó after a discussion with his wife in their bed chamber, significantly in a dialog poem with several exchanges).<sup>4</sup>

As it turns out, after the agreement and handshake, Ale-Hood claims with Broddi's and Þorsteinn's support that he had reserved for himself the right to name the arbitrators in the case. Not surprisingly, at least to the audience of the tale, he names Þorsteinn and Broddi to judge the suit. They agree that the former will announce the verdict and the latter deal with any objections which might arise, a procedure attested in other Icelandic texts. Þorsteinn finds that the woods were worth relatively little and that Ale-Hood was powerless to stop the spread of the fire after his own wood had been burned. He awards the six chieftains as damages a quantity of homespun cloth so insignificant as to be insulting. The mean Ale-Hood thus escapes with a minimum fine. Broddi must then stand down the inevitable cries of outrage and this he is well equipped to do. Like Ale-Hood he appears to be a fictional character, so that some importance can be attached to the name chosen. Broddi can be referred to the ON verb *brodda* "prick, goad, incite" and the noun *broddr* "spike, shaft, sting, front of a column of men" (metaphorically, one might say, an "advocate").<sup>5</sup> Not only is he prepared to respond to objections, he even provokes them with a verbal taunt as demeaning as the petty award, referring to it as *argaskatt*, the tribute due men of *ergi*, roughly "unmanliness" with overtones of sexual deviance. This theme will be developed in what follows.<sup>6</sup> We may now proceed to examine in parallel the series of verbal confrontations involving Cet of Connaught and Broddi Bjarnason. These claims and

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<sup>4</sup> Two recent studies, Lapidge 1985 and Dronke 1986, throw interesting light on the origins and early development of the dialog poem, with specific mention of *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*. The Lehmanns (24) suggest that Norse examples were influenced by Irish models, but the concept of the dialog poem seems too widespread for this; see also Holtsmark 1970. Also related to the *senna* is the extemporaneous contest in poetic composition, well attested in Norse tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Orel (1985) revises Hamp's (1974) proposal and derives OIr. *áer* "satire" from IE *\*aig(h)ra-* "sharp weapon," thence "sharp word," also adducing Slavic parallels. The name Broddi for a satirical commentator then fits well into this semantic field. In this domain of metaphor we may also compare the type-scene of incitation or *hvöt* "whetting," where a woman attempts to shame a male relative into taking overdue revenge (Clover 1986, Jochens 1986, Miller 1984).

<sup>6</sup> *Slikt kalla ek argaskatt* (91). The import of these words is rather muffled in Pálsson's translation: "I call this a tribute to the craven" (89), but is recognized in Jóhannesson's (1950a) footnote and well developed in Sørensen (1983), who has a useful discussion of *Ölkoþra Þáttur* in a chapter entitled "Humiliation and Challenge." For a more recent examination, see Gade 1986.

counter-claims are made in a larger context of legal or quasi-legal contention—the dispute over the dog and the background of rivalry between the two kingdoms in the Irish tale, the court case over the burned wood-lot, and the tensions of the class and clientship system in the Icelandic. The Irish story structures these confrontations according to a more one-sided formal pattern than its Norse equivalent. Each warrior who faces Cet is described in succinct epic terms—“a tall fair warrior,” “a large, grey, very ugly warrior,” and so on—and most make a brief remark to the effect that it is not right for Cet to carve the pig before their very eyes. Cet, however, is allowed a much fuller response. The first Ulsterman to protest is Lóegaire, usually known as “the Victorious.” Cet replies that Lóegaire had crossed the Connaught border on his initiatory foray as a warrior, but had to abandon horses, chariot, and charioteer before Cet, and flee with the latter’s spear through him. “Is that how you propose to take the pig?”—this initial retort is then aimed at the events which launch the adult warrior’s life: the first cross-border raid. Subsequent remarks will focus on later stages of the warrior biography.

Skapti the Lawspeaker (*lögsögumadr*) is the first of the Icelandic chieftains to recognize and respond to the *flyting* posture which Broddi adopts and relatively mildly remarks that Broddi has gone out of his way to get involved in the dispute and to make enemies, and that the chieftains will doubtless have better luck in other court cases. Broddi replies, purposely escalating his tone, that Skapti will need such luck if he is to compensate for damages he was forced to pay Ormr for composing a love-song about his wife. In both cases, the contestant is bested with reference to an earlier dishonoring incident: defeat, flight, and personal injury on the one hand, the always suspect erotic verse-making and unfavorable court decision on the other.<sup>7</sup> In the Irish account, the respondent was personally involved. In the Icelandic, he was not; his personal aggrandizement will hang on these verbal encounters only.

Óengus mac Láme Gábaid of Ulster is next put down by Cet, who recalls that his father got the name Lám Gábuid (“Hand-Wail”) when Cet hurled his spear back at him and struck off his hand, the first of a number of body-specific references. Here the insult pre-dates the warrior’s entry

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<sup>7</sup> As Sørensen remarks (1983:35): “Love-poetry is mentioned in Grágás [“Gray Goose,” a law book] in the same section as lampoons, and it rates the same punishment, outlawry. The reason was that love-poetry was regarded as a gross outrage against the man—father, brother, or husband—who was the woman’s guardian,” as well as compromising the honor of the woman in question. In comments on his translation of Kormák’s saga, Lee Hollander (1949:193) makes reference to Celtic affinities of complexion and temperament as well as the Irish name of the poet. Such traits seem typical of a number of Icelandic poets from the early period, especially those composing erotic verse. The restricted literary use to which such Celtic material was put is discussed in Sayers 1988.

on the martial scene. How can the son of a man with such a nickname challenge Cet? Porkell “Fringe” (*trefill*) now queries the Icelandic decision. He says that Broddi is making a mistake, turning legal opponents into lasting enemies. As in the previous instance, Broddi takes his lead from one of the terms used by his interlocutor, here “mistake.” He cites Porkell’s mistake in letting another man’s stallion mount the mare he was riding to the Alþingi. His cloak was pinned under the horse’s legs and Broddi is unsure whether mare or master was the eventual object of the stallion’s attentions. This further, more scurrilous reference to aberrant sexual activity (an inversion of the more common charge of bestiality), now not only illegal but unnatural, foreshadows a later comment and puts the exchanges on quite a different stylistic level than the heroic but still abusive atmosphere of the Irish tale. Nonetheless, as will be seen, points of contact exist between the two cultures in this sphere as well.

The third Ulsterman contesting Cet’s claim is Éogan mac Durthacht. Cet had earlier met him on a cattle-raid and had thrown back his spear putting out one of Éogan’s eyes, a variant on the spear-and-hand motif. Again the injury and insult are compounded by the use of the warrior’s own weapon. The third chieftain, Eyjólfur Þórdarson, now complains that Broddi is abusing them and cheating. Broddi retorts that he is not cheating, but that Eyjólfur was cheated when he went north to steal Porkell Eiríksson’s cattle, was chased off, and escaped only by turning himself into a mare. Exactly what is meant here may be lost on a modern audience but it is clearly another defamatory reference to sexual transformation and would have recalled the mythological parallel of the god Loki turning himself into a mare. This is far from the warrior’s shape-shifting into ursine or lupine form. Loki is recalled in another way as well, when Broddi takes his place as the master of insult directed against social superiors (cf. *Lokasenna* and Loki’s string of dishonoring references to the gods).

In the Irish hostel Muinremur tries to contest Cet’s claim to the pig but is reminded that less than a week earlier Cet had taken four Connaught heads, including that of Muinremur’s first-born son. Incidents have now escalated to the death of a family member, progeny replacing parts of the body, and reference is to a later point, that is, parenthood, in the life of the opponent. Snorri the Priest next criticizes Broddi, urging the others to remember what kind of friendship Broddi is showing them. Broddi retorts that Snorri must have little sense of priority if he insists on taking revenge on him instead of avenging his own father. In Iceland, then, a similar escalation as family honor enters the scene. In these references to events prior to those of the tale, we have bits and pieces from other sagas (intertextuality), and Pálsson notes that Skarpheðinn makes a similar

insinuation in *Njáls saga*.<sup>8</sup> The antecedents of the Irish episodes are not similarly attested in the extant texts. We shall return to this question of deflating reputations established elsewhere—whether epic or historical—in the concluding remarks on this serial variant of the *flyting* device.

The next pair of encounters offers the closest thematic parallel between the Irish and Icelandic tales, with references to both family involvement and the lasting evidence of wounds, and the two episodes may be given in full to illustrate their stylistic characteristics and degree of affinity.

“In comram beus!” ol Cet. “Rot-bia són,” ol Mend mac Sálchada. “Cía so?” ol Cet. “Mend,” ol cách. “Cid ane,” ol Cet, “meic na mbachlach cusna lesanmannaib do chomram cucum? Ar ba mese ba sacart oc baistiud ind anma-sin fora athair, messe thall a sáil de co claidiub conna-ruc acht oínchois úaim. Cid do-bérad mac ind oínchoisseda cucumsa?” (Thurneysen 1935:12)

“On with the contest!” said Cet. “You will have that!” said Mend son of Salchad. “Who is this?” asked Cet. “Mend son of Salchad,” said everyone. “What next!” said Cet. “Now sons of herdsmen with nicknames are challenging me. I am the priest who baptized your father with that name, for I struck his heel with my sword so that he took but one foot away. What could bring the son of a one-footed man to challenge me?” (Gantz 1981:184)

In this episode, after the formulaic challenge and response, Mend scarcely has the opportunity to establish himself verbally. Cet cuts off his name as given by onlookers and now for the first time makes a socially demeaning reference—to a herdsman father with a dishonorable nickname. Then he ironically moves to the other end of the social scale and identifies himself as the priest at this baptism. Another sobriquet is named, a new weapon is mentioned, and Cet continues his catalog of parts of the body. We have the further vignette of Mend’s father retreating on one foot from Cet, the foot wound itself suggesting a prior attempt at flight. The entire scene is summarized in the last four words of the non sequitur question: “son of a one-footer against me?”

Pá mælti Þorkell Geitisson: “Þetta er líkast, at þú hafit þat helzt af nafni því, er þú ert eptir heitinn, at hann vildi hvers manns hlut óhæfan af sér verða láta, ok þat annat, at menn þoli eigi ok liggir þú drepinn, er stundir líða.” Broddi segir: “Engi vegr er okkr í, frændi, at yppa hér fyrir alþ ýðu ógæfu frænda várra, en ekki skal þess dylja, er margir vitu, at Brodd-Helgi var veginn. Var mér ok þat sagt, at faðir þinn toeki ofarlíga til þeira lauanna, en hitt ætla ek, ef þú leitar at, er þú munir fingrum kenna þat, er faðir minn markaði þik í Böðvarsdal” (Jóhannesson 1950a:92f.).

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<sup>8</sup> It would have been useful to point out that this remark was also made at the Alþingi assembly, although not in court, in the course of similar remarks to other chieftains (ch. 119f.; see below). Typically, Snorri does not rise to the bait.

Thorkel Geitisson said, "It strikes me that all you've inherited from the man whose name you were given is to make all the trouble you can for everyone. Nobody's going to put up with this sort of thing for long, and maybe you'll have to pay for it with your life." Broddi said, "We can't gain anything, kinsman, by shouting in public about our people's bad luck. There's no point in denying what everyone knows, that Brodd-Helgi was killed, but I've been told your own father paid the same high price. I think if you had any sense of touch in your fingers you'd find the scars my father marked you with at Boðvarsdale" (Pálsson 1971:90f.).

Unlike the laconic Mend, Porkell makes a full, confident statement and his measured opinion has a clear temporal axis from past to future, in fact, from birth to death. The English translation cannot convey the economy of the dark but indirect allusion to Broddi's father, the progression to the word *drepinn* "slain," and the casual conclusion "for long." The inheritance metaphor and reference to naming may be compared to the Irish baptism image. Porkell is remarking that future action might follow. Broddi's response is to turn to the past. His opening comment deflates the menace of Porkell's remark, first with its reference to kinship and the undesirability of airing family squabbles in public, then by seemingly conceding the point of Broddi's father's death. *Ógæfa* "bad luck" puns on *óhæfi* "trouble, improper conduct," a variant of the literal repetition of earlier exchanges. The abstract and relatively neutral metaphor of the father having "paid the price" is then contrasted with the concrete but unrealized reference to Porkell fingering scars on his own body, a very different inheritance than the one to which Porkell had alluded. As elsewhere, the mention of a specific site in Iceland where the events occurred serves to situate the shameful incident in historical time and familiar space. But as Porkell is Broddi's kinsman, this is the mildest of the insults, and, unlike the others, wholly contained within the heroic code: Porkell had only been bested in a fight. Broddi later effects a reconciliation with Porkell by presenting him with the warrior's attribute, an ornamented sword.

We may now return to briefer summaries of the encounters. The grey and ugly Celtchair mac Uithechair is the next Ulster champion. He too had exchanged spear thrusts with Cet, who had pierced his thighs and testicles, thus depriving him of further sons and daughters, a variation on the earlier motif of a son killed, and leaving him incontinent like an aged man. Celtchair has been unmanned by Cet, much as Broddi silences his opponents with reference to other, more passive unmanly activity. Broddi's above reply to Porkell Geitisson closed the episode at the Alþingi, although the sixth chieftain had not yet objected. He would meet Broddi the next day and this final encounter will be considered below.

Cet's penultimate contestant is Cúscraid Mend Macha, son of king

Conchobar, and this marks a social escalation. But he too had been maimed by Cet's spear, which pierced his throat, leaving him with a speech defect (*mend* "stammerer"). Thus the sequence of refutations appears to end appropriately with Cet besting an opponent who cannot even compete verbally. This physical blemish would, according to the Irish conception, also disqualify Cúscraid from any future claim to the kingship, although the early Irish pattern was never that of sons directly succeeding fathers. These seven confrontations between Cet and the Ulstermen can be summarized as having moved on ideological spectra from warrior initiation to impotent old age, from base social condition to the kingship.<sup>9</sup>

The contention in the Irish tale concludes with the appearance of the Ulster hero Conall Cernach in the hall. He is a late arrival, and his entry can in narrative terms be compared to Broddi's later encounter with the last chieftain. This episode is structured more elaborately than those preceding and opens with ironically menacing compliments instead of insults. It concludes with Cet prepared to cede the pig to Conall as the better man, but he regrets that his brother Anlúan is not there to contest the issue. But he is, replies Conall, and throws Anlúan's severed head down on the table.<sup>10</sup> The multiple reversals—eulogy instead of scorn, Conall and Ulster dominating Cet and Connaught, the reference to the better brother and his shocking appearance on the scene—mark the climax of the story, as the preceding episodes were much of a single kind and thus only accumulative in effect. In the Icelandic tale the reversal of Ale-Hood's fortunes takes a sudden twist early when Broddi is awarded the judgment, but Broddi's final exchange will be after Ale-Hood has disappeared from the tale. In the hostel, Conall carves the pig, shares out the pieces (miserly

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<sup>9</sup> The injuries which Cet inflicted on his opponents were, firstly, unspecified body wounds, then the loss of a father's hand, the loss of an eye, the death of a son and loss of his head, the loss of a father's foot, emasculation, and the loss of speech. A number of one-eyed and one-handed figures, with Óðinn and Týr the Norse divine prototypes, have been identified in cultures sharing the Indo-European heritage. I would extend these chosen or imposed mutilations, with their reduction of the binary to the unitary, often with compensatory powers accruing, to encompass a third type of injury and would add a third maimed figure, lame or sexually dysfunctional (for a fuller discussion, see Sayers 1990).

<sup>10</sup> On Conall's closing remarks before Cet's concession, see Sayers 1982. Heads are occasionally taken in Icelandic literature as well, although more to demean the figure of the dead man than to enhance the killer's prestige or for magico-religious purposes as in Irish. In *Bjárnar saga Hítadælskappa* (*The Saga of Björn, the Hítadæl Champion*), the story of the enmity between two satirical poets, Þórdr throws Björn's severed head down at his mother's feet. Þórdís' reply outdoes even Þórdr's jeering comment, thus bringing this episode, too, into the sphere of the *senna* (Jónsson 1953:ch. 33). A reply similar to Connall's occurs in ch. 27 of *Heiðarvíga saga* (*The Saga of the Battle on the Moor*) (Jónsson 1953), where Þorgautr says of a noise he hears, "Hasn't Bardi come yet?", a standing joke about Bardi's slowness to seek vengeance. Ketill steps into the forge, throws down his brother's body and says "Your son Gísli found he has come."

to the Connaughtmen, like Þorsteinn's lots of cloth), and the expected general melee follows to wind up the story. Ulster comes off best in the conflict, but Mac Cathó's dog, which had sided with them, is killed and Conchobar himself is humiliated. Thus, despite the outcome of the series of verbal confrontations, the events of the larger political context are eventually inconclusive, as *Ölkofra Þáttr* will also prove to be. The Ulster heroes who suffer ignominy at Cet's hands are not permanently diminished in the epic corpus. Cet's recollections simply point up the fact that they, too, do not always come out on top.

Ale-Hood's tale concludes with Broddi making amends to his kinsman Þorkell Geitisson the day after the judgment. Then as the Alþingi is breaking up, Broddi encounters the last of the six chieftains, Guðmundr Eyjólfsson. Guðmundr asks which way Broddi is riding home and, when told, urges him to keep his promise and ride through Ljósawater pass. Broddi thinks it unlikely that Guðmundr could harm him at the pass, "seeing the honor you lost when you didn't bother to defend the narrow pass in your backside." Broddi's series of defamatory remarks closes with the reference to dishonorable sexual activity, here male rape or at least homosexuality, a very grave accusation in medieval Iceland.<sup>11</sup> Accompanied by his kinsman Þorkell (martially "reinstated" and prepared to risk a fight), Broddi makes his way safely home.

The climax of the Icelandic tale, if, indeed, the term is the proper one, is very different from that of the Irish. Broddi's exchange with the sixth chieftain occurs after the Alþingi has broken up and thus outside the relative security of the law court. It takes place in another time and in another place, once again the menacing, tension-ridden society of rural Iceland. Guðmundr can be the most reticent of the chieftains, but the threat implied in his urging Broddi to keep to his intended path is the most serious. After Broddi's retort, we do not know what to expect: will there be an armed encounter like the many referred to in Broddi's accusations? But other social forces are now also at work and Broddi has the backing of his kinsman. At the end we are left in doubt whether Guðmundr was too shamed to face up to Broddi at the pass, or whether he thought the better of it for more practical, tactical reasons. The moment of greatest tension has passed, whether it was recognized as a climax to the story or not.

We can note an escalation in Broddi's accusations from the first hint of illegal erotic actions to the final insult, passing along the way through other charges of deficient manliness in the area of martial activity and

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<sup>11</sup> Sørensen (1983:37) notes that a similar allegation is made against Guðmundr in *Ljósvetninga saga* (*The Saga of the Men of Lightwater*). The story of Björn and Þórdr also has one of the most explicit examples of such defamation in the instance of the pole with the carving of two men which Björn had set up. For general discussion see Almqvist 1965, Ström 1974, and Sørensen 1983. Almqvist makes briefer mention of *Ölkofra Þáttr* on p. 181.

inadequate defence of personal integrity. All these accusations, paralleling the pedestrian case of the burnt wood itself, are intentionally below the station of the six plaintiffs: Skapti is the Lawspeaker, Snorri is always called “the Priest,” Gudmundr is called “the rich” in other documents, Porkell Fringe “wise and learned in law” (Jóhannesson 1950a, introduction). The incidents that Cet recalls explains epithets and nicknames; the Icelandic events Broddi cites are in contrast to them. In other inversions, those who should generously dispense ale, the chieftains, persecute its brewer, and the attempt to manipulate the law by a former lawman is thwarted by a rank amateur. The whole development of the tale is implicit in the primary event, the reduction of the (once sacred?) “priestly wood” (Goðaskógr) to commonplace ashes. The chieftains’ reputations suffer a similar reduction, although like Ale-Hood’s intended charcoal—if I may force the image a bit—they smolder against Broddi without breaking into open flame.<sup>12</sup>

The story ends with the tensions relieved, power balance restored, untypically for the sagas at the cost of only a wood-lot and not human life, and conventional social values reaffirmed. Like the unidimensional Ulstermen, the more complex Icelandic chieftain figures have not, in terms of reputation, been permanently disabled by the contest with Broddi. The ahistoricity of the tale is perhaps confirmed by Broddi’s getting off scot free after such gravely offensive accusations in the public forum of the Alþingi. As has been increasingly recognized in recent decades of saga scholarship, the purportedly historical tale tells us more about the age in which it was written than about that it claims to depict.

Joseph Harris (1983:219f.) calls the Old Norse battle of words “a stock compositional unit” and provides this summary statement:

The major insults are cowardice, sexual deviances, and unfree social status. The insults and threats are framed in fairly regular alternating exchanges, and it would be possible to consider most extant examples of the *senna* in terms of a single dramatic schema or pattern: a preliminary, comprising an Identification (which may be insulting, factual, or even laudatory) and then a central exchange, consisting of either Accusation and Denial, Threat and Counterthreat, or Challenge and Reply or a combination. . . .the *sennur* are typologically recognizable compositional units: stereotyped but variable in form, traditional in content, repeated in the poetic corpus, structurally (and

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<sup>12</sup> On the use of fire, it is interesting to note that firing a house containing an enemy and his family was not considered dishonorable in early Iceland, apparently since those inside always had the option to come out and fight; see Allen 1971 for the literary use. Numerical strength was seldom a factor in public judgment, except in honoring the valor of a man outnumbered. Early Irish epic literature also has examples of hostels and halls set on fire, the most extreme case being to lure guests into a disguised iron house and then putting the surrounding wood to the torch; see *Mesca Ulad (The Intoxication of the Ulstermen)*, Watson, translated in Gantz 1981).

contextually?) predictable within limits.<sup>13</sup>

As concerns content, we have seen that *Ölkofra Þáttr* is true to form, while the Irish *scél* stresses defeat over cowardice, makes few social allusions, and limits sexual comment to emasculation. Broddi's relatively mild treatment of his kinsman Porkell, distinct as it is from the five other exchanges, is closest to the Irish examples and their heroic ethos.<sup>14</sup> In terms of composition, both tales here considered differ from the Icelandic norm, where the *senna* is typically a poetic device, by having a series of confrontations between a protagonist and a group of rivals, rather than an escalating series of insults traded between opponents and reaching a readily identifiable climax. There is a certain economy of form in the single statements and replies, although Cet's interlocutors in the Irish tale have little latitude to establish their counterclaims. The structure of the Icelandic exchanges is based on Broddi isolating a term from the chieftains' critical and threatening comments, then linking it, often through wordplay, to the example of dishonorable conduct that he cites. The form is succinct, with an apparently casual opening mention, then the malicious point quickly and economically made. Given such formal differences, the Irish tale is nonetheless perhaps closer to the other *sennur* considered by Harris than to the *Þáttr* in the important respect that the verbal duellers are social equals and the context is an explicitly martial one.

Although a free man, Broddi has neither the power nor the rank of

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<sup>13</sup> Harris gives a catalog of other Old Norse examples of the *senna* (236, n. 22). He includes a reference to ch. 35 of *Njáls saga*, an exchange of insults between Hallgerdr and Bergþóra, but in what must be an oversight fails to mention the later scene at the Alþingi (ch. 119f.), where Skaphedinn puts down a number of chieftains who spot him standing among Ásgrím's followers (see below). The woman's war of words over precedence at table and in hand-washing seems to be a set piece, as it occurs as well in *Ljósvetninga saga* (Sigfússon 1940); see further Holtmark 1970. Ellis Davidson also treats *flyting*. As concerns *Hárbarðzliod* and the *senna* with Óðinn and þorr she writes (1983:26): "Nor is it easy to understand why Óðinn's [concluding] reference to a ring to make atonement between them arouses Thórr to intense fury." But this too may be a reference to sodomy. The author also makes interesting observations on the longevity of stylized verbal abuse in Irish tradition as represented by wake games and by the Newfoundland mumming tradition. Like the two rival hosts meeting at Mac Dathó's hostel, these are instances of verbal aggression when the speakers are outside their home or home territory. Useful listings of studies of the *senna* are found in Lönnroth 1986:91n. and Clover 1985:288n. For *flyting* in the Old English tradition, see Olsen 1986.

<sup>14</sup> In the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* the hero Cú Chulainn asks that his charioteer satirize him if he weakens in battle and this he does with a series of disparaging comparisons to domestic life ("your opponent goes over you like a tail over a cat"), but when Cú Chulainn engages in a *flyting* with Fer Diad of Connaught, the praise, then abuse in the dialog poem is the more conventional martial taunts ("nervous lad, you with the heart of a fluttering bird, without valour, without vigour;" O'Rahilly 1976:260f.). Cú Chulainn's opponent here is his former foster-brother, Fer Diad, who had been lured to fight him by Queen Medb of Connaught, their negotiations also given in a dialog poem.

the chieftains. Their opening comments to him need be only veiled threats, neither full-fledged boasts nor insults. In a similar distinction, Broddi is not an established champion and his only asset is his *orðspeki* “verbal wit.” He does not vaunt his own exploits, nor do his observations carry any future menace. What is at stake is simply the enhanced prestige that would result from the successful management of the court case with its meager indemnity and from besting the others in the verbal encounter which all present seem consciously to recognize as a contest.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the context is only symbolically martial, opposing sides in a law court, not on a battle field, although the final exchange takes place beyond these controlling limits. *Ölkofra Þáttr* must then be seen as an evolved example of the *senna*, one with traditional content, but exhibiting a new structure and fundamentally different social dimension. As a literary form, it harnessed discourse contrived with artistic intent (wit, brevity, the shock value of personal information delivered in a socially inappropriate manner) for purposes of open debate on cultural norms and values.

Ellis Davidson and others have observed that the poems of the *Edda* are to a great extent monologs or dialogs, leading Phillpotts in 1920 to posit some kind of ritual drama associated with their public recital. Ellis Davidson rightly dismisses this as speculation and goes on to consider insults and riddles in particular in this context of dialog, finding parallels between the threat and insult on the one hand and the question and answer on the other. This comparison can be pursued beyond the formal resemblances she notes. In the situations in the *Edda* poems, knowledge is power. With riddles and related encounter and testing scenes, it lies in the possession of secret knowledge not open to the uninitiated; in the case of insults, it implies access to and revelation of information which the other would keep hidden. The etymon of *senna* is a verb meaning “to state, prove.” As with the Irish tale, we are invited to think that the factual content of the accusations is correct, although for the accompanying emotional state ascribed to the opponent (fear, submissiveness) equivalent proof is not always available. Exchanges like that between Óðinn and Þórr or those considered here have the intertextual nature of an *Aufreihlied* or catalog poem: brief references to other stories in the tradition, with these insults illuminating the tales from the vantage point of mockery.

The dialogs in the *Edda* often occur in the context of a journey, with the exchange occasioned by some obstacle to continued advance, resulting

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. the explicit use of the word *comram* “contention” in Cet’s taunt. The attestation of the *flyting* topos in the Germanic and Celtic traditions and elsewhere such as Homeric Greece suggests that such exchanges were part of the common Indo-European cultural tradition, but while mythological texts such as *Hárbarðzlióð* offer examples of such verbal contests between the gods, we have no instance of an etiological myth which would explain their origin. Satirical comment could also have a self-fulfilling quality, bringing it closer to other forms of verbal magic; see Ó Cathasaigh 1986.

in liminal situations like the soul's attempted entry to the kingdom of the dead or, more generally, the quest. These are, literally, moments of passage; in quite a different way the "secular" confrontation of Broddi is a kind of rite of passage whereby his credentials for daring and wit are established. In the Irish story the sought-for status is that of supreme champion. In riddling situations the protagonist's life is also frequently at stake. This gives the encounter the nature of an ordeal or judicial combat. Holtsmark remarked that the tales of Ale-Hood and the Confederates (see below) had as chief motif the *senna* moved to a court, but she doubted that it belonged there. But on the analogy of Ellis Davidson's association of insult and riddle we can view the move to the law court, in literary terms, as a realistic development of an integral strain of the traditional verbal contest.

A further point deserves mention. The classic *senna* seems set in the meeting of two champions with no mention of a public in attendance. Even in Loki's attack on the gods, they can be seen as a collective adversary. But in the two tales reviewed here, a public was present: in Ireland, two rival hosts and perhaps the non-partisan Mac Dathó's men; in Iceland, the thingmen of the chieftains and other less committed onlookers. No longer simply a two-way communication, the dialog, now like a staged drama, becomes a polyvalent message affecting the various members of the public in different and individual ways. Gasps, snickers, and guffaws are then to be heard in the background. The environment was a contingent one, reflective of everyday reality, while the formal structure of the exchange—marked by brevity, wit, recalls and wordplay, the requirements of "heightening" (that is, the response "topping" the initial comment), and the larger repetitive pattern—are reminiscent of timeless ritual, and, indeed, replicated the "dialog of the gods." Reputation was at stake to a much higher degree than can be assumed, albeit somewhat artificially, for the one-on-one battlefield *senna*. And here we reach a fundamental point in an honor/shame-oriented society, as opposed to one concerned with guilt: honor was intact until the potentially dishonoring events of the past were made public.<sup>16</sup> When historical fact was unveiled or recalled to the audience, the chieftains, like the Ulster heroes, simply had no further recourse in the immediate social context. Reception of the message by the third-party public constrained the reaction of the person to whom it was nominally addressed. Unlike battlefield insults which served to incite to warlike activity (and thereby served also to advance narrative), Broddi's and Cet's observations were true non-sequiturs.

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<sup>16</sup> This provides an approach to understanding how the nominally heroic could resort to trickery—only the publicly made promise need be kept, and the deception of one man by another without witnesses posed no threat to one's public reputation; see O'Leary 1986.

In Broddi's apparently whimsical assumption of Ale-Hood's case we find further evidence of the Icelandic approach to the containment of violence within a society shaped by law but without an institutionalized and impartial means of law enforcement. The creation of a new alliance and Broddi's mediating role prevent the chieftains' misappropriation of the legal apparatus and convert the potential economic violence, which might have occurred if Ale-Hood has been fined or outlawed, into stylized verbal violence turned back on the chieftains. Broddi's reputation has been enhanced, at relatively small cost to the reputations of the chieftains—although memories were long in Iceland, as in all feud societies. The resolution is the precarious one achieved in so many other feud situations in the sagas (Byock 1982).

A last question that must be considered, however, briefly, is whether the Icelandic story is in any way related to the Irish precedent. In 1968 Michael Chestnutt wrote that "the proposition that Norse literature owes a debt to Celtic, although at one time widely accepted, cannot lightly be advanced by any modern scholar" (124). The overall question has been relatively little pursued since the time of his comment, although a number of closely focused studies have shown the mobility, conceivably in either direction, of literary motifs, while others have continued to argue for the importance of formative rather than determinative Celtic influences on early Icelandic literary art (see the bibliography in Sayers 1988).<sup>17</sup> The first scholars like Bugge who considered the issue were also less well equipped to evaluate the interplay between such possible cross-cultural transfers on the one hand, and biblical and classical models, and the common Indo-European antecedents of medieval Celtic and Norse ideologies on the other. The *flyting* is found in other early Germanic literary traditions, while the Celts' dispute over the champion's portion is similarly attested in early Irish texts and in classical authors' adaptations of Posidonius' ethnographical account (Tierney 1959-60).<sup>18</sup> Other societies with a heroic ideal offer a multitude of parallels to these examples of warring dialog. But while there may be no compelling reason to assume the transfer of an original Celtic genre of martial repartee, we do have the

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that anthropologists have as yet to come up with any conclusive proof of a major Celtic component among the settlers of Iceland. See Pálsson and Schwidetzky 1975, who conclude that the great mass of settlers originated in Norway. This of course does not invalidate the claim that many immigrants may previously have been resident in Ireland or the Hebrides, some the product of mixed marriages.

<sup>18</sup> Athenaeus (IV.40) quotes Posidonius: "And in former times when the hindquarters were served up the bravest hero took the thigh piece, and if another man claimed it they stood up and fought in single combat to the death;" cited from Tierney 1959-60:247. Diodorus Siculus (V.28) adds: "At dinner they [the Celts] are wont to be moved by chance remarks to wordy disputes, and, after a challenge, to fight in single combat, regarding their lives as naught" (*ibid.*:250).

parallel of the evolved serial yet streamlined form evidenced in the two tales here considered, a multi-person series of exchanges replacing the two-party escalation of boasts, threats, and insults. But this too seems a fairly natural evolution in form, a variation on the basic pattern of repetition and accumulation that could easily occur independently, perhaps in the passage from an oral to a dual oral/literate tradition. The ultimate antecedents and extra-artistic congeners of the serial defamation are found in natural dialog and the stylistic devices available to it for making a telling *ad hominem* point, albeit normally in situations of verbal sparring between only two opponents. The transfer of serial structure between the two cultures is then no more likely than that of the motifs of the verbal contest in general or the earlier mentioned cattle-raid.

*Ölkofra Þáttr* does, however, have clear generic affinities within Icelandic literature, more explicit than mere categorization among the *sennur* would suggest. Chapter 10 of *Bandamanna saga* (*The Saga of the Confederates*) quite obviously derives from the earlier tale of Ale-Hood, although the defamation scene is not as streamlined as that reviewed here.<sup>19</sup> The aged father Ófeigr has many of the characteristics of Ale-Hood, but is still able to take on the defence of his son Oddr. He does this by winning over two of the eight chieftains in the collective case. He assumes a role like Broddi in reviewing the background of six of them, before disqualifying them from pronouncing the judgment. Here the chieftains do not speak and the references to them are not especially abusive. Ófeigr reserves his harshest criticism for Egill, with whom he is in fact in collusion. Gellir and Egill are awarded the judgment, the former to pronounce the decision, the latter to justify it. The fine is trivially small and three chieftains protest. Unlike Broddi's more self-contained respondents they actively disprove Egill and he replies in kind with references to cowardice, stinginess, and masturbation. The exchanges are much longer than in the *Þáttr* and are not limited to a single complaint and retort per speaker. While the scene is undoubtedly effective, it does not have the crispness of characterization and form of the tale of Ale-Hood.

Also related to this *Þáttr*, although at a somewhat greater remove, is the visit of Skarphedinn and Ásgrímr in *Njáls saga* (chapters 119-20) to the Alþingi booths of various chieftains in efforts to win support in the case involving the death of Höskuldr. After Ásgrímr's request for assistance and the discouraging reply, each chieftain goes on to inquire concerning

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<sup>19</sup> Magerøy 1981:ch. 10; see, too, Baetke 1960. This saga also drew on that of Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson, Broddi's brother-in-law; for the theme of the contested chieftainship see Magerøy 1957. Coincidentally, Þorsteinn has Irish affinities as well, having fought at the battle of Clontarf in 1014, when Norse power in Ireland was further checked, and eventually dying at the hands of a Celtic slave called Gilli (OIr. *gilla* "servant;" Jóhannesson 1950b). Like *Ölkofra Þáttr* these stories are from the East Friths. See further Sayers forthcoming.

the tall, hard-looking man fifth in line. Skarpheðinn speaks up with the dishonoring and scurrilous replies whose themes we recognize from other examples considered here. Here, the consequences are more serious, since this development effectively cuts the Njálssons off from any possible further support. What we have seen in all these instances is the move of the *senna* from the battlefield to the law court and environs, where the intra-societal battle itself—the law suit—once joined, will be conducted in the same verbal medium. But, typically, such symbolic battles, despite the fact that a victory could have important consequences in terms of prestige and future alliances, are narratively bracketed by continued recourse to physical violence.

*Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* does not permit a ready generic categorization. Ó Coileáin concluded (1978:187): “*Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó* is finally an amused, detached and sceptical interpretation of the heroic milieu” (187), while Gantz goes even further (1981:180): “it is hard to resist the conclusion that ‘The Tale of Macc Da Thó’s Pig’ is a later story, a parody of the Ulster Cycle in general and of ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cúailnge’ in particular.” But in Irish tradition we have little in the way of precedent to convince us that what must have been a traditional tale could be modally recast to serve such an artistic purpose. It seems more likely that, just as the Icelandic chieftains could be mocked for certain deficiencies, the Ulster heroes could be shown to have less than perfect records; transitory amusement and detachment perhaps, but no scepticism. It should be recalled that the “aberrant” situation of Cet’s dominance is righted when Conall arrives. This would still accommodate Buttimer’s (1982) suggestion that the general tone of the tale points to preservation in a pro-Leinster environment.

I earlier noted that the description of Ale-Hood has associations with Óðinn and his disguises, and Óðinn was the Norse riddler par excellence as well as a formidable opponent in a *senna*. In *Ölkofra Þáttur*, the replacement of a verbal duel between two comparable divinities like Óðinn and Þórr by a series of encounters between a relatively untried young man like Broddi (representing the powerless and thus inverted Óðinn, Ale-Hood) and the powerful chieftains serves quite a different end than the traditional Norse *senna*. Not so much a parody of the *senna* as a pastiche for purposes of social criticism, in particular of avarice and the quality of justice in thirteenth-century Iceland, *Ölkofra Þáttur* owes its interest and success less to the none too rapid escalation in its derogatory accusations than to the contrast between the opponents in experience and social standing, as well as the wit and ease with which those nominally superior, with imposing stature elsewhere in the historico-literary tradition, are bested by one who enjoys our natural sympathy if not our full moral approval. Our enjoyment is founded in the conviction that everyone has

something to hide and in the all too human desire to see the mighty get their comeuppance—even if only for a moment. As Irish gnomic wisdom has it: *sochlu cách co áir*—“everyone is fair-famed until he is satirized” (Meyer 1909:36). Perhaps those less bold than Cet or Broddi would do well to heed the Words of the High One (*Hávamál*, in Hollander 1962: st. 31f.).

A wise man he who hies him betimes  
from the man who likes to mock;  
for at table who teases can never tell  
what foes he might have to fight.  
Many a man means no ill,  
yet teases the other at table;  
strife will ever start among men  
when guest clashes with guest.

In summary, the defamation scenes in these two tales exhibit a series of shifts or displacements from supposed archetypes or historical antecedents: 1) verbal contention moved from the battleground to a court or hall, no less a stylized setting; 2) the single duel of words multiplied into a series, with a kind of shooting-gallery effect; 3) intertextual transfer of character and event from other legendary or more temporally proximate history in order to situate the incidents in a credible context; 4) modal and generic lowering—from ribald insult between Norse gods to more onesided coarseness among men, and, perhaps, from more conventionally conceived Irish epic incident to a denser, more self-consciously crafted, “epicized” account; and, lastly, 5) projection of the traditional speech-craft of an oral culture, more specifically its defamatory repartee, into a literate medium.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> My thanks are due the editorial readers of *Oral Tradition* for much helpful comment on an earlier draft of this article; inadequacies that persist are stubbornly my own.

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