

Frigg's Cunning

Initiation in the Framing Myth of *Grímnismál*

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SUMMARY: *This article applies the initiation model, developed by Jens Peter Schjødt as a tool to identify themes of initiation in Old Norse myths, to the prose introduction of the eddic poem Grímnismál. After having introduced Schjødt's initiation model, the article contextualises the prose introduction within the themes of the myth found in the poem; then, it applies the initiation model to the prose text's figures of Geirrøðr and Agnarr; and, lastly, it focusses on the cunning role of Frigg in the prose. This leads to the suggestion that the myth that frames Grímnismál may be a story about contextualizing war and warrior ways in a society of peace, with initiation as an ideal tool of 'civilizing' the ruling powers.*

RESUME: *Denne artikel anvender initiationsmodellen, udviklet af Jens Peter Schjødt som et værktøj til at identificere initiationstematikker i norrøne myter, på prosaintroduktionen af eddadigtet Grímnismál. Efter at have introduceret Schjødts initiationsmodel, kontekstualiserer artiklen prosaintroduktionen inden for de mytiske temaer, der findes i digtet, dernæst anvender den initiationsmodellen på prosatekstens figurer Geirrøðr og Agnarr og slutteligt fokuserer den på Friggs listige rolle i teksten. Dette leder til forslaget, at myten, der omrammer Grímnismál, kan være en fortælling om at kontekstualisere krig og krigeres adfærd i et samfund bygget på fred med initiation som et ideelt værktøj til at 'civilisere' de herskende magter.*

KEYWORDS: *Initiation; Grímnismál; prosimetrics; Frigg; cunning; pre-Christian Nordic religion; Nordic mythology*

Jens Peter Schjødt successfully argues in his doctoral dissertation of 2003¹ that initiation, as a universally comparable phenomenon of religion, was part of the cultural set-up in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and that it finds expression in Old Norse mythology as a symbolic and structural model – 'the initiation model' – detectable in a large group of extant myths. He proceeds to show how the model can be used to deduce common semantic meaning of particular features and elements from their position and function in the general structure of these myths. His inspiring investigations lead to the conclusion that "the initiation model as a whole does seem to form an interpretative framework that can shed light on various elements in the sources, elements that could not be understood to the same extent from the use of any other model." (Schjødt 2008, 352)

My subject matter for this article is the myth that encompasses the poem *Grímnismál* and the prose text that frames it. Seemingly, the two parts are at odds. The prose appears to be a narrative of cruel and capricious deities that ruthlessly manipulate their human protégés, while the poem consists of a divine transmission of mythical lore and wisdom. The prose part thus seems to undermine the trustworthiness of the poetic part, loading it as 'fake knowledge' of false gods. Assuming that this myth somehow deals with matters of a religious nature, and that it once provided these matters with some kind of meaning to its Old Norse audience, I have found this semantic 'mismatch' unlikely and hard to understand. In order to solve the puzzle, I obviously need what the initiation model promises to offer: "an increased understanding of a series of otherwise incomprehensible features in those narrative entities that constitute our corpus" (Schjødt 2008, 455). So I take Jens Peter Schjødt's word for it and use his model here as a narrative schema for my analysis of the myth.

Before presenting my reading, I shall first give an introduction to the initiation model and my reflections on the points and meanings that it inspires for the following observations and speculations.

The Initiation Model

The religious phenomenon of initiation is known predominantly from ritual contexts across the world, the transitional *rites de passage*, typically performed when the person to be initiated – the initiand or initiation subject – is accepted into a new personal state (e.g. adulthood, marriage, death) or societal position (warrior, king, seer, etc.). As a sequential structure, initiation is also detectable in certain narratives, which reflect the

¹ *Initiation, liminalitet og tilegnelse af numinøs viden* – edited and published five years later as *Initiation between Two Worlds* (Schjødt 2008) in an English translation that does not adequately do justice to the quality of the Danish original. Initiation has been a phenomenon about which Schjødt has written throughout his scholarly career. The present article is written in celebration of this career, this scholar – and friend. Hence the uninhibited abundance of footnotes, which according to 'JP' often are the most interesting part of an article to read.

semantic universe that frames and explains the rituals (and, in a wider scope, also the associated worldview). The initiation model concerns these narratives, here exemplified in Old Norse texts.

In various degrees of completeness, the initiation structure manifests in Old Norse myths and legends as storylines – often adventurous otherworld quests or journeys of the initiand – or as accounts of imagined or fictive rituals.² The structure and the symbols associated with the model make it possible to read these narratives as variations or transformations of each other, each lending different pieces of a larger complex to the interpretational puzzles. Together these myths can therefore be seen to form a 'transformational group'.³

The Sequential Structure

In the context of religion, ritual, and myth, then, initiation is defined as an event or process of a particular change that unfolds as the initiand (real or fictional/representational) makes a symbolic 'journey' (mental or de facto) structured in five stages or phases:

- The initial phase – the hitherto state or status in which a desire for initiation occurs.
- The separation phase – the departure from the prior worldly circumstances.
- The liminal phase – the experiences and acquisitions that cause the desired change.
- The reintegration phase – the acceptance and move into an altered position.
- The final phase – the implementation of the initiate's new insights and skills.⁴

As a qualitative result of going through this process, the initiand will achieve a 'higher' status as initiate in the final phase than the status or state defined by the initial phase. Critically based on a large body of research worldwide by Arnold van Gennep, Mircea Eliade, Victor Turner, and others, four criteria can be deduced that, in Jens Peter Schjødt's own words, "are crucial in determining whether we can talk of initiation:

² 'Fictive rituals' are representations of rituals that are performed in a story by its fictive characters, but not necessarily relating to a type of rituals performed in lived religion of historical contexts. The idea of discerning fictive rituals as a category on its own was introduced by Catharina Raudvere (2012, 99-102), who helped me coining the capsule definition here.

³ To the extent applicable to Old Norse mythology, Schjødt (2008, 425ff, 460ff) offers an important discussion on transformational groups of myths in the structuralist sense used by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Schjødt suggests that diversity within a mythology in many cases may be seen as transformational variants of a semantically coherent discursive field, rather than originating in regional, temporal, social, or cognitive differences.

⁴ The phases and characteristic aspects are structurally related as ordered here, but may not always be played out in sequence or even made explicit, neither in rituals nor in narratives (Schjødt 2008, 12f, 73f).

- 1) irreversibility with regard to the final phase;
- 2) a defined sequence, in which the actual event is played out in agreement with van Gennep's model, together with an initial phase and a final phase;
- 3) a series of oppositional pairs, which characterises the relation between the non-liminal and the liminal, and which often, but not always, is thematised in spatial terms; and
- 4) the criterion which qualitatively separates the initial phase from the final phase is the acquisition of numinous power, which takes place in the liminal phase." (Schjødt 2008, 81f)

A Philosophy of Change for the Better

It may seem out of order to mention the final irreversibility as the first criterion, but it actually emphasizes what I see as probably the most important point of the five-phased initiation model here suggested by Jens Peter Schjødt. The earlier model by van Gennep (mentioned in the second criterion)⁵ only encompasses the three central phases – the separation (or transitional) phase, the liminal phase, and the reintegration (or incorporation) phase – focusing on initiation as transitional processes rather than semantic content. The addition of an initial and a final phase redirects the focus to the qualitative difference that initiation is supposed to make: an existential transformation of the initiation subject (Schjødt 2008, 26).

For the entire sequence to pass as initiation, the final status of the initiate must be not only 'higher' than the initial, but also 'irreversible'. With this criterion the initiation model can be used to reveal what I would call a philosophy of change or transcendence, in which certain acts and conditions are thought to govern the occasioning of a particular, irreversible (i.e. progressive⁶) improvement. An idealistic or religious philosophy like that would then be about ensuring that development of fundamental changes will not just be different, but will decisively be for the better. The existence in a certain community of such a philosophy, whether implicit or explicit, can be expected to affect basic cultural views in a wide semantic field that includes movability, fate, creation, development, destruction, existence, meaning – more or less everything, actually. These are views that we may possibly be able to discover in the extant Old Norse myths by means of the initiation model, which perhaps more generally could also be understood as a model of progressive improvement or reformation.

⁵ The model proposed by van Gennep is presented and discussed by Schjødt (2008, 22-26; 58-62).

⁶ Irreversibility may be characterized as 'permanent change' (Schjødt 2008, 72f), but it does not mean that the improved status of the initiate is permanent as such. Rather, the occurred change cannot be undone. However, initiation is part of the ever forward-moving progress of life.

A Process of Creative Destruction

The acts and conditions releasing the actual initiatory change are thought to occur in the liminal phase, a state or situation that the initiand reaches by standing on, and eventually crossing, the 'threshold' (*limen*) between the initial and final phases surrounding it, both of which can then be designated 'non-liminal'. Liminality thus holds a transcendental quality. When used in a narrative context, the liminal is mostly represented by encounters with something 'otherworldly' – transcendent entities such as characters, creatures, objects, environments, scenarios, anomalies of any kind – which are characterized by being in antithetical opposition to the preceding non-liminal or 'worldly' state of the initiand.⁷

The initiation 'journey' through the five phases can thus be described as dialectic (Stanner 1966, 39),⁸ a back-and-forth course between the being and becoming of dichotomies. Various concepts and their opposites negate in confrontation and/or connection and transform into improved versions of the said concepts. As I see it, it is the recognition and (more or less) conscious mastering of these processes that constitutes the qualitative competence and authority behind the new 'higher' status of the initiate.

As codes or identifiers of the initiation model, the dichotomies may be described as existential axes like life–death and masculine–feminine, but also the axes of manifest–latent, active–passive, and several others are noted as relevant to initiation. Most of them are associated in spatial terms with a symbolic upper world–underworld axis (Schjødt 2008, 410–425). How these axes are thought to reflect the process of change is shown by a schematic example of the life–death axis: If the initial phase is characterized by 'life', the separation phase is 'dying', the liminal phase is 'death', the reintegration phase is 'born again', and the final phase is 'a better life' (cf. Schjødt 2008, 76ff). An aspect of destruction here marks the separation phase, while the reintegration phase contains an aspect of creativity and re-creation.⁹ The dialectic negation is precisely thought to be such a process of transformation through 'creative destruction' or 'creative disruption'.

A Raising of Consciousness

What make this particular kind of transformative change happen are the recognitions gained through the initiation process – recognitions that in narratives are represented by insights acquired in the liminal phase. They are expressed either in words or as symbolic objects. Presumably in order for the change to turn out as an improvement, the insight or object must be of a transcendent (spiritual, sacred, holy, runic, numinous,

⁷ The concepts of the liminal are largely developed by Victor Turner, and are presented and discussed by Schjødt (2008, 34–43, 74ff).

⁸ Schjødt (2008, 41) only uses the term 'dialectic' in reference to Turner.

⁹ In mythical narratives, the aspects of destruction and (re)creation are often represented by a killing and a sex act, respectively, not necessarily in any logical order, while accounts of fictive rituals almost always involve some kind of symbolic death of the old, and in some cases a symbolic birth of the new.

mystic, mythical) nature or origin – i.e. invested with the 'power or wisdom of the gods'. Jens Peter Schjødt does attribute these insights to 'religious consciousness' and prefers (with Jere Fleck) to label them 'numinous knowledge' or 'numinous power' (Schjødt 1988, 32).¹⁰

Even though the numinous knowledge per definition must be something crucial to the status of the initiate in the final phase, it generally does not have a definite content.¹¹ Rather, it appears to be a function of selective accessibility, often characterized as secrets or mysteries only known to the fellowship of initiates. Therefore, it consists of something that transcends the world of everyday experience known to all – an 'otherworldly' knowledge obtainable only through a particular, conscious effort or ordeal.¹² In this way the knowledge content as such is inessential to the ritually important part. It is the ordeal of learning esoteric secrets that marks the initiation as a transformation of the initiand from ignorant to knowing, according to Jens Peter Schjødt (2008, 78-81).

However, in the case of Old Norse myths seen in perspective of the initiation model, the knowledge content actually does seem to me to be of considerable importance in itself. Several mythical poems¹³ – for example *Grímnismál* – set aside a few stanzas to sketch a narrative frame of initiation, while the main chunk of stanzas are concerned with the dissemination of 'numinous knowledge'. Though varying in topics from poem to poem, the overall impression is almost that of an education in cosmic or mythical structures, functions, origins, and reasons in relation to their organizing or exemplary impact on worldly matters. This open publishing of the covert knowledge seems to fly against the ritual 'ordeal-necessity' of breaking secrets and mysteries. It may therefore not always be the knowledge itself that is secret to non-initiates, but the interpretation of it. The wisdom extracted from the lexical information may constitute an exposition that grants the initiand an expanded, operational comprehension or awareness of the semantic layers of the knowledge – a transformation from knowing to understanding. At least in some cases, the liminal

¹⁰ Schjødt uses the term numinous "in a relatively broad sense which includes that which is not quite definable: the spiritual, the esoteric, the supernatural – in other words, that which in religious consciousness cannot be precisely pinpointed in everyday language, but which nevertheless has to use this language out of necessity. The numinous thus designates the content of a fundamentally *other world*, a world which is categorically different from that in which everyday life takes place" (Schjødt 2008, 13).

¹¹ The general, symbolic content has in particular been explored by Mircea Eliade, also presented and critically discussed by Schjødt (2008, 28-34).

¹² The 'otherworld stamp' is thus of more significance to the knowledge as such than to the initiation journey, which actually only serves to frame and structure the acquisition of the knowledge.

¹³ I here categorize the poems according to content rather than form ('skaldic') or history of reception ('eddic').

acquisition behind the new initiated status is then not just a raising of knowledge, but rather of consciousness.¹⁴

The Problem of *Grímnismál*

Using the initiation model (as presented above) for analyzing the framing myth of *Grímnismál* in order to discover heathen content and meaning (as I intend to do below) may at first seem like an uphill battle, since Jens Peter Schjødt has already rejected the myth as a valid example of initiation (Schjødt 1988; 2008, 218). However, on closer inspection of its narrative – told in both the prose and the poetry – I find indicia enough for the model to work also in the case of this myth.

Narrative and Composition

The myth is about two young sons of a king who are fostered by disguised deities, Agnarr by the goddess Frigg, and Geirrøðr by her husband, the god Óðinn, who confides secrets to him. On leaving their fosterage, Geirrøðr sends his brother Agnarr to his death and becomes a respected king. Frigg tricks Óðinn to visit King Geirrøðr incognito as 'Grímnir', and then she tricks Geirrøðr to seize his disguised guest and torture him between fires. Geirrøðr's young son – also named Agnarr – approaches 'Grímnir' to give him a drink. This prompts 'Grímnir' to recite poetry of numinous knowledge, first a series of visions of the mythical world, then a listing of names that reveals his identity. Drunk, Geirrøðr realizes that 'Grímnir' is Óðinn and dies. Óðinn disappears, and Agnarr becomes king.¹⁵

The core of the myth is the mythological knowledge, to a large degree communicated through the significances of names, and organized in two poetic sections – the visions for Agnarr and the list of names for Geirrøðr. The knowledge is little more than lexical information (Wellendorf 2014).¹⁶ What make it semantically productive are the several layers of contexts that frame it. In the present article, I shall focus on these contexts and only sporadically touch on the core. For now, I shall just note that the various mythological topics and names of the core can be demonstrated

¹⁴ Cf. the first 'pre-five-phases' description by Schjødt (1983, 97) of the life–death axis: 'life without knowledge'–'death/underworld journey'–'life with knowledge', i.e. 'unconscious of being'–'subconscious ordeal'–'conscious of being'.

¹⁵ The full text of the myth, a poem of 54 stanzas framed by a prose narrative, is preserved independently with very little variance in two scripts, *Codex Regius GkS 2365 4to* (R) and *AM 748 I 4to* (A). The prose, told in the third person, is titled *Frá sonom Hraðungs konungs* or *Fra Hraðungi konungi*, and the title *Grímnismál* marks the beginning of the stanzas, which throughout are told in a first-person monologue.

¹⁶ "What *Grímnismál* offers is mythological *information* and partly organized mythological knowledge rather than wisdom. [...] The superior insight or formidable understanding that we might connect with wisdom is not found in *Grímnismál*." Jonas Wellendorf presented his paper on "The wisdom of *Grímnismál*" at the *Myth and Knowledge* conference in Aarhus 2014. The paper remains to be published in some form, but Jonas has kindly allowed me to read and refer to his manuscript 'draft of Nov 18 2014', encouraging me to develop my own reading.

to be linked together by allegoric and symbolic associations that create a flow of coherency (McKinnell 2013;¹⁷ see also Larrington 2002, 68–75). The flow interweaves the topics with the immediate framing situation within the poem itself – Grímnir/Óðinn sitting between fires – and 'with compositional finesse' it builds up a narrative tension toward a climatic conclusion, in which all the various parts come together and peak in the transcending moment when Óðinn reveals himself and Geirrøðr dies (Kragerud 1981, 43–48; cf. Olsen 1933, both reading from a literary perspective; and Gunnell 2016, 92–113, reading the same narrative build from the perspective of drama and ritual performance). Further layers of contexts – the fosterage of the brothers, Frigg's cunning in favor of Agnarr, and Óðinn's visit to Geirrøðr, all recounted in prose – inform the selection and presentation of the poetic knowledge core, adding both sociological and psychological or spiritual perspectives and relevance, as I shall argue in the following by means of the initiation model.

An Initiation of Óðinn?

The rejection by Jens Peter Schjødt of this myth as an example of the initiation model is occasioned by Franz Rolf Schröder, Jere Fleck, and other scholars, who read the myth as a rite of shamanistic trance-inducing asceticism and torment (or ecstasy) that invokes Óðinn's mythical visions of the poem (Schjødt 1988, 30–34; Nygaard 2019b 107–109). Accordingly, Óðinn's purpose of such a ritual 'fire ordeal' is to generate supernatural abilities for himself, perhaps in order to inflict divine punishment, or in relation to matters of royal succession. Whatever the reason, he is either thought to actualize the numinous power acquired in his self-initiation rite described in the poem *Hávamál* sts 138–141, or to be (further) initiated in what is seen as a parallel rite.

However – and actually by using the initiation model – Jens Peter Schjødt effectively refutes any such notions of an initiation of Óðinn. 'Grímnir' does not acquire numinous knowledge in this myth, nor does he end up with an irreversibly changed status – both decisive criteria of an initiation. It is observed (Schjødt 1988, 32f, 37) that Agnarr acquires the numinous knowledge of the poem rather than Óðinn, who is its procurer. However, Agnarr is not stated as the subject of the fire ordeal, and the acquisition of knowledge does not take place in an 'otherworld' of any kind, but instead, according to the scholars, by the fireplace in Agnarr's everyday home, the hall of his father, King Geirrøðr. So, yet an argument excludes *Grímnismál* from being part of a transformational group of initiation myths: the apparent lack of liminal space (Schjødt 2008, 218, 397).

An Initiation of Agnarr

Though agreeing on the point that the myth is not about an initiation of Óðinn, Simon Nygaard (2019a, 64; 2019b, 110) contests Schjødt's rejection of *Grímnismál* as an

¹⁷ In a handout for this 2013-conference paper, John McKinnell presents a preliminary sketch of the chain of associative links between the topics of the poem. The paper is yet to be developed into a proper article.

example of initiation altogether. Agnarr makes an irreversible transition from initially being just the son of a ruler to the higher status of becoming a ruler of lands himself (st. 2), and at some point between these two positions, he acquires what irrefutably can be termed 'numinous knowledge', all pointing to an initiation of Agnarr. On the basis of these observations, Simon Nygaard reads the poem from the perspective of ritual performance, as suggested by Terry Gunnell.

Rather than a work of fiction, Terry Gunnell basically reads the poem as a transcribed oral performance. He shows how the poem employs its narrative build to convey the process of perceptual transformation of space and identity in the minds of the performance participants that commonly leads to a suspension of disbelief (Gunnell 2016, 99f, 103ff; see also Nygaard 2019b, 92–97). Thus, the supposed everyday hall and the audience temporarily transform first into the imagined hall of Geirrøðr and his retinue, and then into Valhöll and its otherworldly inhabitants of fallen warriors and valkyries brought about by the poetic visions. In other words, a basic function of performance creates by itself a liminal space, and turns the ritual specialist performing the poem into Óðinn, i.e. an otherworldly agent. To this argument Simon Nygaard adds that the lack of hospitality on Geirrøðr's part (torturing his guest) may be seen as an inversion of social norms – i.e. a negation of opposites – another possible marker of liminality (Nygaard 2019a, 66; 2019b, 112). A similar negation of 'numinous capacities' may be represented by the way that the torture of fires seemingly augments and transforms the 'suffering Grímnir' to the 'avenging, knowledge-imparting Óðinn' (even though it is noted that ritual suffering would be expected for the initiate rather than the initiator). Still, by stating that Agnarr offering Grímnir/Óðinn a drink may constitute a separation phase, and the death of his father a reintegration phase, Simon Nygaard observes that the poem on all points actually matches the initiation model in regard to Agnarr as the initiate, and Grímnir as his initiator (Nygaard 2019a, 64ff; 2019b, 110–114) and proposes that *Grímnismál* may be a partly representation of an actual, pre-Christian initiation ritual of a ruler (Nygaard 2019b, 115).

Text and Context

I fully agree on the initiatory roles of Agnarr and Óðinn in the poem,¹⁸ but from its perspective of ritual performance of poetry, Simon Nygaard's proposition does not offer any answer to my question about the way in which the framing prose informs the poetic content. The two parts of the myth still seem to be at odds. The framing prose part compromises the divine mythagonists,¹⁹ and thus the numinous knowledge

¹⁸ Unbeknown to each other, both Simon Nygaard and I worked simultaneously in 2018 on this idea – Simon for his excellent article (2019a) and PhD-dissertation (2019b), and I for my conference presentation at *The Feminine in Old Norse Mythology and Folklore* conference 2018 in Uppsala, which became the genesis of the present article. While Simon Nygaard reads from the perspective of ritual performance, I read from the perspective of story analysis – approaches that seem to complement each other well.

¹⁹ I use 'mythagonist' for any mythical character that cannot be defined unambiguously as either protagonist or antagonist.

of heathen lore and wisdom (and possibly also an underlying initiation ritual) presented in the poetic part is marked to be of a duplicitous nature. Jonas Wellendorf rightly concludes in his lucid reading of the myth:

"From a medieval Christian perspective, we could simply say that the text is a testimony to the inadequacy of the Norse gods and the futility of putting one's trust in them."
(Wellendorf 2014)

The Old Norse myths were put into writing by learned Icelanders over two centuries after the culmination of the conversion to Christianity. Their purpose was to interpret the heathen past and culture in the Christian context of their own time. Thus, the written preservation of hitherto orally transmitted myths was also a perspectival transformation from one worldview to another, as is clearly stated in the principal 13th century work on Old Norse mythology, Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Faulkes 1983; Kure 2010, 19–34). So, the probably most likely reading of the myth as it is preserved is, in my opinion, the one proposed by Jonas Wellendorf. Accepting the late medieval version to be all there is to the myth, my question regarding the way in which the prose informs the poetry would thus be answered. The two parts being at odds is not a mismatch – it is the point: heathen gods and their teachings are not to be trusted.

Throughout the myth's history of research,²⁰ most scholars have nevertheless attempted to seek further back, beyond the Christian perspective. The method has been one of hack and slash: rejecting the coherency of the myth such as it is preserved in the Old Norse texts (and read by Wellendorf), and instead identifying almost every part of it in isolation as 'influences', 'interpolations', and 'loans'. Even though such classifications cannot per se define any part as alien or 'unoriginal' to the myth, they are used to argue why at least the prose text (and sometimes even parts of the poem) should be dismissed as insignificant and of no consequence to the 'original' poem.²¹

In spite of this, selective elements of the prose part are still prerequisite as contexts for the readings of the poetic part by all of the above-mentioned scholars, whether acknowledged or not. The notions of a hall setting, of torment by fires, of revenge, and of (in)hospitality as a theme, are all derived from the prose narrative, and would not be compulsory if based on the poetic part alone.²² Furthermore, these contextualizing notions are in turn dependent on some kind of narrative to bring them together. Explaining away anything important to the plot is actually not so easy (Schjødt 1988, 40) and is also methodologically questionable.

²⁰ For an overview of the past scholarship on *Grímnismál*, see KLE 1185–1193; and Nygaard 2019b, 78–82.

²¹ Actually the separation of the myth into independent parts (KLE 1186f) has led to the suggestion that the entire narrative originally was compiled from a mix of older lore and classical or biblical inspirations by learned 13th century Christians (McKinnell 2013), perhaps in order to communicate the message proposed by Jonas Wellendorf (though that is not the point of his paper).

²² Cf. Larrington (2002, 68f): "the prose context is crucial [...] because it points up the central, organizing idea of the poem: Geirrøðr's hospitality and its significance."

To me, all of this indicate that the frame narrative conceptually is an intrinsic part of the myth and largely belongs with the poetic part. On the other hand, learned Christian influence in the transmission of the myth is likely to be expected, and is perhaps even signaled by the apparent 'mismatch' between the prosaic and poetic parts. However, comparison with other examples of such influence in the transmission of Old Norse myths indicates that, rather than full scale pseudo-mythical composition, we should instead look for subtle manipulations of 'game-changing' details that do not render the myths unrecognizable to the cultural memory at the time (Kure 2013, 90). To do so, we need another discriminating method.

Prose and Poetry

The extant myths are preserved in written texts of both prose and poetry, but the two forms 'remember' content in different ways. The common experience of remembering a poetic expression verbatim far more easily than a prose expression has been confirmed by recent research into discourse processing and the psychology of memory and cognition (Rubin 1995, 2009; and further Tillmann & Dowling 2007; Lea et al. 2008; Atchley & Hare 2013). Remembering poetry is based on form – rhyme, rhythm, meter – rather than content. Poetic form therefore often serves an important function in preserving a cultural memory of the past. Of course the mnemonic property of poetic form does not mean that a poem automatically is transmitted verbatim. However, when used in the referential context of ritual – a significant purpose of which is to preserve cultural memory – poetry proves to be an effective container of memorized semantic content. This seems to be the case also in regard to Old Norse mythical poetry.²³

Prosaic form, on the other hand, is more susceptible to change than poetry. In a mnemonic perspective, prose essentially is a complete reconstruction at every retelling, based on content as recalled and therefore inevitably interpreted. This distinction becomes important when reading the Old Norse mythical text corpus. As mentioned, a certain Christian influence or agenda informing the heathen content is to be expected, but significantly more so in the prose texts than in the poetry. This may offer a way to find and identify details decisive to our reading of the myth encompassing *Grímnismál*. As noted above regarding the composition of this myth, the function of contexts is to inform what is contextualized – here the core of numinous knowledge – and put it into a particular semantic perspective. This is a normal function for narrative contexts in general, but in this case the core is preserved in poetry and the contexts mostly in prose.

²³ See Pernille Hermann 2020, 48-49, for references and a clear capsule presentation of this corner of the wide field of memory studies; and Nygaard 2019b, 37-41, for further examples and references.

A 'Poetry First' Method

The general relation between the Old Norse mythical texts in poetry and prose is the relation between source and interpretation. Therefore, as a methodological working model (which is simplified, and so perhaps also 'amplified')²⁴ I have chosen a priori always to read the poetic texts of the scripts in full as valid expressions of exclusively heathen semantic content, and all of the prose texts as later influenced interpretations of poetic sources, whether still extant or not.

When looking for heathen content in the text corpus, this means that congruent information in the prose can be used to supplement and support the poetic content, but not the other way around. If we use heathen poems to support (or even prove) the 13th century prose interpretations of them, we put the cart in front of the horse. All we will achieve is actually just recycling the interpretational thinking of the learned prose text authors in a circular argument without getting beyond their 'pseudo-heathen' scope²⁵ (Kure 2013, and references therein; see also Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1991) for *the* fundamental discussion of these source-critical matters).

Consequently, in my opinion, the poetic sources must be analyzed separately in their own right,²⁶ and only then, on the context-basis of such primary analyses, concurrent parts of the prose texts are to be sifted out and analyzed as valuable secondary sources to 'fill the gaps' and add further or broader perspectives.²⁷ The point of my reading method is thus not to dismiss the prose texts, but rather to find fresh ways to read them in the context of the poetic sources.

This also goes for the framing myth of *Grímnismál*. Its prose contexts inform the poetic core, which as mentioned is what contexts are supposed to do, but methodologically, for an analysis in search of heathen content and informing Christian manipulation, we have to inverse the informing direction. If the poem is, for instance, about Agnarr's initiation as Simon Nygaard proposes, how does that inform our reading of the framing myth? And coming from that direction, where do we bump into decisive 'game-changing' details? In order to answer this, we need to establish the poem's content independently of the prose text to be examined by means of it. Nygaard's proposition is based in part on this text – can the same result be reached solely based on information emic to the poetic record? – Yes, it can.

²⁴ A tip of the hat to Jan A. Kozák for that perspective.

²⁵ As pointed out by Roberta Frank, the "ultimate goal is not to be one up on the author of the *Prose Edda*, but to clear a path through his mythological underbrush towards a less confused overview of how skaldic kennings actually functioned." (Frank 1981, 158). The same can be said for mythical content.

²⁶ It has often been repeated that without Snorri's *Edda* we would not be able to understand the mythical poetry. This is a tired truism, however – countless studies have proven otherwise. In some cases, Snorri's *Edda* may even obfuscate our understanding of the poetry.

²⁷ In a methodological experiment, Schjødtt shows how putting the poetic text first 'clears a path through the mythological underbrush' of the prose prologue of *Rígsþula* towards comparisons that can lead to a more likely interpretation not only of the poem, but also the mythology in general (Schjødtt 2017).

Between Fires – The Poetic Frame of *Grímnismál*

At a glance, the bulk of the poem consists of the transmission of mythological knowledge (beginning in st. 4) from Óðinn to Agnarr. The knowledge is clearly of a numinous nature, the informant is an otherworldly/liminal being, and the human recipient of the knowledge is in a transitory state on his way to achieving an irreversibly higher status (sts 2–3). The transmission takes place between fires after eight nights of 'fire-sitting' (st. 2), i.e. on the ninth night of the ordeal. Drinks and drinking (Agnarr's drink to Óðinn, st. 3, the over-drinking of Geirrøðr, st. 51, as well as several references in-between) serve throughout as metaphors for numinous knowledge and its acquisition, and are causal symbolic elements in the transits surrounding the transmitted content. The acquired numinous knowledge is procured from the underworld (by the gods drinking in Ægir's hall) and is intended to awake 'desirable helpfulness' (*vilbiörg*), a skill that makes a qualitative difference for the future ruling function of the recipient (including the warrior class he represents, st. 45). And the destruction of the old (the death of Geirrøðr, st. 53) is a creative act of making room for the new.

This summarized reading of the poetic frame of *Grímnismál* is broadened and explored further in the detailed arguments of another article (Kure, forthcoming) too large to be included in the format of the present article. However, the summary should be enough to demonstrate that the poem on its own holds everything needed for a description of a fictive ritual in accordance with the initiation model. Yet, of particular relevance to the present article, two concluding points need further elaboration here.

The God in the Fires

The performatory transformation of an everyday hall into the liminal space of an initiation ritual is central to Nygaard's argument above, but actually there is no mention in the poem of a hall-setting for the framing situation. The poem opens with the hot flames revealing the speaker between the fires, as they burn off the masking fur-cloak he has held up before him. Where the fires are situated is not stated at all. Certainly a hall cannot be excluded, but apparently it is not significant enough to be mentioned.

There is no indication that Óðinn leaves the 'inside' space between the fires at any point during the entire poem. This space remains the singular scene throughout. Towards the end, Óðinn asks Geirrøðr to approach him (st. 53), implying a nondescript outside world that emphasizes the separate nature of the inside space. Óðinn knows Geirrøðr's life is past, so his call may be seen as an invitation for Geirrøðr to die and join his god between the fires. This lends the fires an aspect of a funeral pyre. Passing the flames surrounding a pyre in order to enter a space between the fires and meeting an otherworldly being there clearly associates fire with ritual death.²⁸ The space between

²⁸ The fiery-framed encounter between initiand and otherworldly informant in *Grímnismál* has a close parallel in *Sigrdrífomál*, where Sigurðr Fáfnisbani as initiand meets his informant, Sigrdrífa the valkyrie. The scene of their encounter is situated inside a *skjaldborg*, a funeral

the fires (rather than a hall) may thus constitute the ritual space of liminality that separates and shields the initiand from the worldly surroundings.

Agnarr seems to have gone to Grímnir between the fires and here (*milli elda hér*) offered him a drink – a *blót* that may oblige the informant to speak (cf. Larrington 2002, 73; Nygaard 2019a, 64). This may indicate that Agnarr, as the only 'outsider', has entered this space – 'taken on the flame' (st. 42) – and separated himself from his initial state outside. Entering this ritual space may then constitute the initiatory separation phase that has occurred immediately prior to the poem proper.

The reintegration phase for Agnarr following Geirrøðr's death is foreseen (st. 2) to happen right after the end of the poem. The poem as a whole therefore seems to constitute the liminal phase of the initiation model. This part of the myth – the *Grímnismál* proper – is entirely in poetry, the language of liminality, while the contextual and circumstantial narrative framing the poem is in prose. Also in its form, the myth then characterizes the relation between the liminal and the non-liminal phases.

A Change of Guard

In the initiation model, the death of Geirrøðr represents the act or element of 'creative destruction' that often characterizes the separation phase, and in this case will clear the path for Agnarr in preparation for his reintegration. The sequence is given weight by its sheer volume, hinting that there may be more to it than simply clearing the path. Óðinn's functions are to facilitate Agnarr's acquisition of numinous knowledge and Geirrøðr's demise within the same ritual framework. There are no indications in the poem of torture or any other reason for his presence between fires, so his ritual functions may reasonably be assumed also to be his purpose and intent. When Óðinn calls Geirrøðr his friend, the poem gives us no reason to read otherwise. Óðinn may not be there to ironize, scorn, humiliate, punish, or wreck vengeance as many readers have it (KLE 1472), but rather to fulfil his ritual role. In the case of Geirrøðr he warns about the risk of losing the eternal fame that comes with being part of the fellowship of Óðinn's *einherjar*, the chosen slain of Valhøll, if Geirrøðr forgets what Óðinn has told him, which I presume to be the numinous knowledge that once made a qualitative difference to his rulership. Geirrøðr is drunk with over-drinking (*ofdrukkit*, st. 51), which in the metaphorical use of these terms established throughout the poem is likely to mean that he is over-achieving and probably therefore forgetting his ultimate goal or obligation, a glorious death.²⁹

When read on its own without prosaic bias, and with initiatory functions and values in mind, Óðinn's vision of Geirrøðr's sword lying drenched in blood (st. 52) may be seen as a similar reminder. The vision indicates that the sword has just been used in battle, slaying an enemy, but is no longer wielded by its owner, who fell with

pyre hung with shields and swathed in fire. The description of Sigrdrífa's pyre is given in *Fáfnismál* 42-43. Sigurðr's own funeral pyre (*borg*) similarly hung with shields is described later in *Sigurðarkviða inn skamma* 65-66 (see further in Kure, forthcoming).

²⁹ See Kure, forthcoming, for arguments and references on this reading.

honor. Geirrøðr's life will soon be past, and Yggr ('dread', Óðinn in his fear-provoking role as psychopomp) shall have his chosen, sword-weary warlord. Yet, as I read it, there seems to be a choice involved for the vision to come true. Death is unavoidable, the 'dísir are aware', the feminine powers – traditionally associated with fate, death and the underworld (Kure 2010, 282-286; 2019, 19) – are paying particular attention, perhaps even readying themselves to receive Geirrøðr. However, Óðinn has now revealed himself to his friend and invites him to come closer – if he still might (st. 53). Even in the end, it is up to Geirrøðr to make the choice of not only living, but also dying as a warrior. A choice of retaining honor by turning inevitable fate into undying fame. Rather than effecting revenge or punishment, Óðinn here seems to mediate quite another concern: the preservation of Geirrøðr's fame – his afterlife in the memories of the living.³⁰ By 'dying by the sword', Geirrøðr will pass on the eternal fame of the rulership status, associating it with honor and dignity that may 'live on' in Agnarr's reign.

This of course is a hypothetical reading, but if true, both Agnarr and Geirrøðr would participate in a ritual that primarily does not appear to be concerned with the positions of individuals, but rather with the overarching continuity of ruling power. In a sense, the institution of rulership may be the initiation subject proper. The ritual, or at least the ideal story about it, holds the promise of a transfer of power that allows room for the old ruler to retain his honor – turning fate into fame – with Óðinn as the mediator. The initiation in this myth, then, is not just any initiation, but may be confirmed as a model 'change of guard' and part of an inauguration of a king, as proposed by Simon Nygaard (2019b, 115).

Óðinn and Geirrøðr – The Prose Frame of *Grímnismál* (I)

If the poem as a whole, with its elements of 'didactic' content and an immediate layer of 'dramatic' context, represents the liminal phase of Agnarr's initiation as a ruler, as argued above, it seems reasonable to approach the surrounding prose as an account of the contextualizing non-liminal phases, signifiers, elements, and circumstance that surround and characterize this particular initiatory phase.

It is, for instance, easy to identify the final phase of an irreversibly changed status for the initiand in the short piece of 'epilogic' prose following the end of the poem: *En Agnarr var þar konungr lengi síðan* – 'and Agnarr was king there for a long time' – leaving us in no doubt about who is being initiated. The epilogue also confirms the actual death of Geirrøðr foretold by Óðinn (sts 52–53), representing the reintegration phase. Actually, most of the epilogue describes in contrived tortuous detail how Geirrøðr accidentally handles his sword in a way that ends up killing him.³¹ Though not

³⁰ On Óðinn's semantic concern with fame and its relation to fate in Old Norse myths, see Kure 2019.

³¹ Geirrøðr was sitting with his half-drawn sword lying on his lap (for no apparent reason other than accommodating the 'accident'). When he rose, the sword slid out of hand and landed hilt down. Geirrøðr stumbled and fell so the blade pierced him. The poor storytelling and the

semantically impossible, the details of this incident have no grounding in the poem proper and are more in line with the Christian reading of the prose account preceding the poem, such as suggested by Jonas Wellendorf. He notes that "the characterization of Geirrøðr as an outstanding or eminent man is unambiguously positive," and that Geirrøðr's two alleged 'misdeeds' (killing his brother and torturing his guest) are both prompted by the divine intervention of Óðinn and Frigg respectively, rather than an evil disposition. This 'northern Job', as Wellendorf calls him, heeds the divine guidance he receives, and yet he is punished. Geirrøðr is thus almost a tragic character, and his downfall serves to reveal the true nature of his gods to the audience of the poem. This view of the gods is exactly what is communicated by the exposition of Geirrøðr's disgraceful death.

Allowing the poem to be informed by this prose text, leads to readings in which Óðinn either must be understood as sarcastic and scornful, or as capricious and false. Inverting the direction, and instead allowing the poem to inform the prose, leads to the identification of an instance of possible Christian editing. In order to determine which is the more likely reading, we need to read from the beginning of the myth, informed throughout by the semantic needs of the poetic plot and subject matter – i.e. initiation as defined by the initiation model.

The Initiation of Geirrøðr

The myth begins with the story of how Geirrøðr became king in the first place. And the journey beginning with the two young brothers rowing out to sea matches all the criteria and phases defining the initiation model as suggested by Jens Peter Schjødt:

- *The initial phase:*
The scene with the boys on a fishing trip displays a glimpse of the carefree life of childhood, yet also hints at a desire to land a 'catch from the deep'.
- *The separation phase:*
The agency of the wind (often associated with the world of gods and giants) takes the boys away from home in 'this world' and wrecks them on 'the other side', far beyond the sea.
- *The liminal phase:*
In this place of 'night' and 'winter', the deities (Óðinn and Frigg incognito as peasants) foster the boys, taking care of their otherworld education. Geirrøðr is singled out by a confidential one-on-one talk (*einmæli*) with Óðinn.
- *The reintegration phase:*

contrived nature of these 'epilogic' details contrasts those of the 'prologue', which "is a concentrated narrative written with considerable verbal economy, and one will therefore do well to pay attention to the details of the tale." (Wellendorf 2014)

Again the agency of a fair wind returns the boys to their fatherland. In this transition, Geirrøðr sends Agnarr off to "where *smyl*³² can have him" (i.e. to his death), representing the ritual element of destruction.

- *The final phase:*

Upon his return, Geirrøðr is accepted into the status of kingship and becomes an appreciated man.

Geirrøðr rules the land for many years, a sign of the irreversibility of his change for the better (*criterion I*). Through the five phases (*cr. II*), dialectic processes between this world and the other world, between masculine and feminine powers, and between life and death qualifies his initiation (*cr. III*). And finally, the defining sequential structure identifies the decisive acquisition of numinous knowledge during the liminal phase to be the *einmæli* (*cr. IV*). It is – not surprisingly – the secret sayings of Óðinn that singles out Geirrøðr as the initiand and likely qualifies him to become king (cf. Fleck 1970, 46; Steinsland 2002, 97).

Transformational Initiations

With two initiations and two different initiands, the myth as a whole does indeed seem to concern the theme of changing guard between generations of rulers, at least at some level. Rather than a singular event, the framing story may contextualize the kingship initiation as part of a series of power transfers, in which life and death take turns.

At a narrative level, the first part of the prose story can be seen as a 'spirit journey'-version of an initiation, which introduces the topic and complements the account of the fictive ritual of the poem. Two different genres present each their set of storytelling tools – the otherworld journey establishing structure and theme in a larger semantic universe, and the testing ordeal focusing on the mediation of the mythical content.³³ This difference is reflected figuratively by the liminal space of the journey version being 'outside' this world, beyond the sea, while the liminal space of the fictive ritual is characterized as 'inside', between fires – both of them on a horizontal level (cf. the worlds that become 'open around' (*opnir um*) the warrior initiands, st. 42). And in both cases, Óðinn repeats his role as numinous informant with variations in accordance with the circumstances. He may in fact have recited most of the poem to Geirrøðr, too, in the *einmæli* (cf. Hermann 2017, 212).

³² Old Norse *smyl*, cognate with *mola*, 'grind, crush, crumble, disintegrate', is also part of Norwegian place names for rock islands and skerries (KLE 1231). There is no reason to interpret *smyl* as an otherwise unknown mythological species, as has often been done – Agnarr is simply sent off to his destruction and death.

³³ The two versions are thus in a transformational relationship. A similar construct is seen in the two versions of Óðinn's acquisition of the mead of poetry, brought together in *Hávamál* st. 138-141 (the ritual version, Óðinn hanging on a tree) and st. 104-110 (the journey version, Óðinn's journey to Suttungr and Gunnlōð on which Snorri expatiates in *Edda, Skáldskaparmál* G58) – both narratives sharing the same structure and content in widely different settings and plots (cf. Kozák 2021).

If the one-on-one talk actually does represent Geirrøðr's acquisition of numinous knowledge, as the story structure strongly suggests, it makes me question the modern readings of the *einmæli* as an instigation by Óðinn of nefarious fratricide (cf. KLE 1206), which also would contradict the ideals of justice described by him in the poem proper (Larrington 2002, 70). By sending Agnarr to his demise (*smyl*), Geirrøðr may actually not heed divine advice or instructions, but rather be acting on his own according to what he believes is necessary for the task of kingship presumably just assigned to him by Óðinn. Geirrøðr administers his own fate for better or worse – an attitude toward fate also generally expressed in saga literature. In the literary context it is also striking that Geirrøðr is not condemned for his act by the authorial voice of the narration, but throughout described as an 'appreciated man'.³⁴

Rather than a misdeed of fratricide, the initiation context points to Geirrøðr's act as belonging to 'the ritual order of things'. Agnarr's death fulfills the semantically required element of destruction in Geirrøðr's initiation, just like the same situation – but in reverse – is required and accepted a generation later by Geirrøðr's death in the initiation of Agnarr, as seen above.

Frigg and Agnarr – The Prose Frame of *Grímnismál* (II)

Of the myth's layers of contexts, the poetic frame layer has been well investigated from several analytical angles by many scholars, and the prosaic Óðinn/Geirrøðr-layer by some, but concerning the likewise prosaic Frigg/Agnarr-layer all the scholars I know of have practically remained silent. A more detailed summary of this part is therefore in order, beginning a generation after Geirrøðr became king:

Watching from on high,³⁵ Óðinn observed that Agnarr was making offspring with 'the concealed cavewoman' (*elr börn við gýgr í hellinum*³⁶), while Geirrøðr was ruling the land. Frigg replied that Geirrøðr was a wretched, 'food-stingy' host (*matníðingr*), who tormented his guests. Óðinn called that a lie, and they took a wager on it. Óðinn then visited King Geirrøðr incognito as 'Grímnir', but Frigg had let the king be cautioned by her treasure-maid Fulla lest a certain wizard (*fiðlkunnigr maðr*, a 'much-knowing

³⁴ "When one bears in mind the importance of kinship in medieval Scandinavia and Old Norse literature, it is striking that the text in no way indicates that Geirrøðr's disregard of fraternal obligations and his betrayal of his brother should be considered blameworthy by the intended audience. On the contrary, the characterization of Geirrøðr as an outstanding or eminent man is unambiguously positive" (Wellendorf 2014).

³⁵ The deities are sitting in Hliðskjálf, 'peak-gate', i.e. a point of 'elevated access'. In *Skírnismál*, Hliðskjálf is occupied by the god Freyr watching the beautiful maid Gerðr in the worlds of giants, and Frigg may be called 'rival of Gerðr' (*elia Gerðar*, in *Skáldskaparmál* 19). Apparently the deities take turns at sitting in Hliðskjálf.

³⁶ The definite form *í hellinum* marks a particular 'cave' (the underworld? Hel?), which in turn may define the *gýgr* ('concealed/chthonic woman', cf. de Vries 1962) as a particular mythagonist. In *Völuspá* 42 the term *gýgr* seems to be used for Hel (which also means 'concealing'); and in skaldic poetry it is common to describe the death of a king or a hero in erotic terms as 'bedding Hel' (Steinsland 1992; Kure 2002, 166f). Making offspring – i.e. having sex – with a chthonian may be a circumlocution for being dead.

man') should bewitch him. It was the grossest lie that Geirrøðr was not a good host, and yet he had 'Grímnir' seized and tortured between fires in order to make him speak (*pína til sagna*). Geirrøðr's ten-year-old son, also called Agnarr, then went up to (*gekk at*) 'Grímnir' and offered him a drink. Just as his cloak caught fire, 'Grímnir' drank and began to recite the stanzas of *Grímnismál*.

World between Two Initiations

Between the initiations of Geirrøðr and Agnarr, this part of the frame story about Frigg's cunning forms a transitional sequence of its own. The movements within the two initiation sequences – differentiated respectively as 'outside' and 'inside' – are both horizontally oriented, while the events engineered by Frigg move vertically from the abode of the deities above to Geirrøðr's hall and the abode of a cavewoman below. This domain forming between the two initiations constitutes a threshold and an interface between gods and humans – in other words: a liminal space – in which Frigg is in control.³⁷

Frigg is described in the Old Norse sources as the goddess of love and empathy, and she is also associated with the powers of fate (Simek 1993, 94). She cries for Balder in *Völuspá* 33, she shows concern for Óðinn in *Vafþrúðnismál* 1-4, and her name means 'love', cognate with words for 'freedom' and 'peace'. In the present myth, Frigg is introduced as the fosterer of Agnarr, and her deeds in words and actions lead to yet an Agnarr becoming the king at the end of the myth. Regardless of possible historical naming traditions, Geirrøðr's brother is mythically linked by name and age in a continuity of shared or transferred identity with Geirrøðr's son. The initiation model actually unites Agnarr and Agnarr in a full five-phase initiatory sequence. The gap of worldly absence between the disappearance and reappearance of the once and future Agnarr at the age of ten may then be seen as an extended liminal phase of their shared initiation, taking place in the liminal space controlled by Frigg. Her role here is an integrated part of the initiation structure. Regardless which Agnarr, Frigg can be seen as his initiation-helper throughout a myth that from beginning to end is a story told in prose and poetry about his initiation.

Frigg's initiatory function is confirmed by the closely parallel role of Freyja in the poem *Hyndlolióð*. Here, the goddess of feminine power³⁸ acts as the initiation-helper of Óttar, whom Freyja calls *ver minn* ('my man, lover', st. 7). He has gained her favor by performing a worshipping sacrifice (*blót*), and in the shape of a spirit animal, a boar, he carries her along as his rider on the initiation journey to the underworld cave of the giantess Hyndla ('bitch'). Here, Freyja succeeds to trick Hyndla into the role of an

³⁷ A similar vertical space of liminality is the 'windy tree of unknown roots' on which Óðinn hangs during the fictive ritual of his self-initiation in *Hávamál* 138-141. On the further meanings of horizontal and vertical axes in Old Norse myths, see Schjødt 1990.

³⁸ The name Freyja probably means 'lady', a representation of the power of womanhood and the feminine in general, which in my opinion fits Freyja's actual roles in Old Norse myths better than the traditional categorization of her as a goddess of love, which (more fittingly) is the meaning of the name Frigg.

otherworldly informant of numinous knowledge and provider of a 'memory drink', in spite of her reluctance and threat of fire (cf. Quinn 2002, 265ff).

A different (and likely transformational) mix of the same elements is present in the same sequential structure seen in the framing myth of *Grímnismál* as I have sketched above (and explicated in Kure forthcoming): Agnarr's *blót*, the offering of a drink, the act of sex, the animal hide, the chthonic woman in the cave, the fire – and of course, the initiation helper that tricks the initiation informant into enlightening the initiand. Frigg's role as an initiation-helper is not alien to Old Norse myths, and like Freyja, she is not using cunning out of malice.

The Art of Cunning

Cunning as such does not generally seem to be held in bad standing in Old Norse myths, and is often used by mythagonists for purposes of a greater semantic good. For instance, the acquisition and transmission of wisdom by Óðinn in his encounters with Gunnlǫð (*Hávamál*), Vafþrúðnir (*Vafþrúðnismál*), and the dead *völva* (*Baldrs Draumar*), all involve cunning on his part. Like elsewhere in the world, tales of tricksters are popular, and cunning is usually seen (and sometimes even admired) as a positive, creative strategy of action where more direct forms of persuasion for some reason seem unwise. In Christian retellings of myths, the employment of cunning by heathen gods instead presents an opportunity to demonstrate them as evil,³⁹ which may also be the case in the implicit portrayal of Frigg in the *Grímnismál* frame story. However, Frigg puts Óðinn into a specific ritual role, which she clearly cannot take on, herself. So rather than conjugal rivalry, jealousy, vengefulness, or other 'evil' intentions often ascribed to this goddess of love (by means of comparisons with hardly-made-relevant Homeric myth-inspired literature, KLE 1192, 1206), her need for the functions of this ritual role might actually be her reason for doing it.

Frigg's function as initiation helper can be seen to motivate her actions throughout the myth. That may be why she does not interfere when Agnarr's brother sends him off to *smyl*, destruction. This 'kill'-part of Geirrǫðr's initiation actually just sends Agnarr onward into his own extended liminal phase. The separating element of the kill is often matched with the regenerating element of an act of sex. Agnarr is involved in both elements – first destruction, and later Óðinn observes that Agnarr has ended up making offspring with 'the concealed cavewoman', as mentioned above.⁴⁰ Agnarr's act of re-creation in the liminal underworld of death is part of the semantic structure,

³⁹ The prime example of this may – in my opinion – be Snorri's version of the Baldr myth in *Edda*, *Gylfaginning* 49-50, in which Loki's traditional role as a trickster, such as it is documented in many other myths, is twisted into a portrait of a malicious devil driven to Judas-like betrayal by envy, which then retrospectively is made to inform the reading of other Loki myths.

⁴⁰ Agnarr's situation may have a parallel in Óðinn's intercourse with the giant maid Gunnlǫð in an underworld cave, which poetically symbolizes the acquisition of knowledge and/or the conquering of land/the worldly world. Cf. also the indications of the initiand Óttar having sex with Freyja in *Hyndlójóð* 7.

and will ensure his future reintegration, even if it is in the shape of a generational update.

Preparing for Agnarr's acquisition of numinous knowledge (i.e. the poetic part of the myth), Frigg can be seen to manipulate events in order to situate Óðinn as an informant between the fires. This idea is paralleled by Óðinn situating the valkyrie Sigrdrífa in the same role, also between fires, which prepares for the initiation of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (*Fáfnismál* 43, *Sigrdrífomál* 4p). Sigrdrífa even parallels Frigg by previously having favored yet an Agnarr in opposition to another favorite of Óðinn. Again, this can be seen as transformational elements distributed in diverse orders, signifying the same semantic field – the initiation of a king – but perhaps also pointing up different aspects of kingship, which may be important to the reading of the myth.

War and Peace

As noted above, this myth of two initiations seems to concern the theme of changing guard between generations of rulers, contextualizing kingship initiation as part of a series of power transfers, in which life and death take turns – almost like the cyclic change of seasons. The theme may have ancient roots in the pan-Germanic culture.

According to *De origine et situ Germanorum* (usually called *Germania*) written a. AD 90 by the Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus, Germanic societies seem to have had a system of dual leadership, in which warlords (*duces*) took turns with 'peace lords' (*reges*), none of whom were intended to wield absolute power.⁴¹ Supposedly, the two types of rulers were 'in office' according to the changing seasons of war campaigns and peaceful farming, thus representing the two fields of killing and cultivation.

The change of guard between Geirrøðr and Agnarr might be a faint, prolonged echo of such societal concerns behind the choice of leaders – choices that could then be semantically represented and legitimized by different gods.⁴² There is little to distinguish Agnarr and Geirrøðr in the frame myth of *Grímnismál*. Both are part of the ruling warrior class, sons of King Hrauðungr. The main difference between the two seems to be expressed by their mythical associations. Being a 'friend' of Óðinn, Geirrøðr would naturally be a warlord. Agnarr participates in the same otherworldly journey as his brother, but he is fostered by Frigg instead of Óðinn. He is set up for a different set of values, which may be revealed by the history of his initiation ordeal.

⁴¹ *Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt. nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas, et duces exemplo potius quam imperio* – 'Kings are chosen for noble descent, warlords for merits. Kings do not have unlimited or arbitrary power, and warlords lead more by example than by authority' (Tacitus *Germania*, ch. 7).

⁴² This idea may also be echoed in the 7th-century origin myth of the Langobardi people, in which the deities Godan and Frea (cognate with Óðinn and Frigg) represent groups of warriors and farmers respectively. In a forthcoming article, I shall explore this myth further in context with the themes of *Grímnismál*.

The Peacetime King

Values such as fertility and prosperity may actually be associated with Agnarr in the mythical metaphor of making babies with the *gygr* in the cave, a chthonic force with whom Agnarr represents underground fertility in a very literal manner. Being sent off to 'where *smyl* can have him' could perhaps even associate Old Norse *smyl* ('crumbling, disintegration') with composting, the process of fertilizing earth by 'creative destruction'. Through his liminal ordeal, Agnarr must symbolically 'become' what he shall later represent – a notion possibly confirmed in the poetic part, when 'Grímnir' gives praise to Agnarr in st. 3: *Heill skaltu ... vera* – 'Prosperity you shall be' – which may indicate the future king as an embodiment of the *heill* of the land.⁴³ In support of this (though of course not a decisive argument), the name Agnarr may even be etymologized as 'seed-host'.⁴⁴ Agnarr would accordingly represent values of a dominantly farming society – fertility, prosperity, protection, and peaceful living. Values that are expressed in the Old Norse formula *tíð árs ok friðar* ('for prosperity and peace', see *ár ok friðr* in Simek 1993, 18).

As part of the 'ritual order of things', Geirrøðr's initiatory act of sending Agnarr off to *smyl* actually ensures that such a fertility function of the 'peace lord' is stored and matured for later use – a balance of the actual with the potential. Likewise, the fame and honor of Geirrøðr's function as warlord is 'stored', not in the earth, but in the cultural memory as part of Agnarr's initiation. None of the brothers gets such a bad deal after all. Summed up by Gro Steinsland (2002, 97), Geirrøðr has secret *runekunnskap* whispered into his ear, while for Agnarr there is *bryllup og eros* – one gets runes, and the other gets laid. However, Agnarr actually ends up getting both when he acquires numinous knowledge, 'runes', from Óðinn between the fires. Doubly blessed like this, he represents a change of kingship for the better. The double blessing requires two deities. King-making seems to belong to Óðinn's jurisdiction or 'function field', which may be why he is indispensable to the success of Frigg's plot. In turn, it seems to be a function of Frigg (as a power of fate) to set the place and time for the change of guard – not only between old and new, but possibly also between seasonal leaders of war and peace, reflecting concerns of both honor and prosperity.⁴⁵

⁴³ *Heill* can be (and usually is) read as an adjective here, but the substantive is also grammatically correct.

⁴⁴ The name Agnarr is usually etymologized *agn-* < ON *agi* ('fear, awe') + *-arr* < *harjaR*, *herr* ('army, host') < **agana-harjaR* ('fear-army' according to de Vries 1962), apparently looking for a suitable warrior name. However, *agn-* may perhaps more likely be cognate with OHG *agana*, GERM *ahanō*, LAT *agna* < IE **aken-* > ON *ogn* ('glume, chaff') a heiti for 'seed'.

⁴⁵ The idea of peacetime in a cyclic exchange with wartime makes it tempting to consider folklore traditions of a seasonal 'spring king' killing a 'winter king', which may echo the myth's transition at springtime (*at vári*) between King Hraufungur and his son Geirrøðr, who had been fostered by Óðinn 'over the winter' (*um vetrinn*). This kind of imagery could be seen to continue between the 'summer king' and the 'harvest king' – old King Geirrøðr and new King Agnarr, the 'seed' of who was put underground with the coming of spring. However, this model does not satisfy all the various layers of the myth, and the demonstrable presence

Frigg's remark to Óðinn on seeing Geirrøðr's meanness with food (*matníðingr*) may actually demonstrate these concerns. She knows the fates of all (*Lokasenna* st. 29), so behind her remark may lay a foresight rather than an observation. This can of course only be speculation, but what Frigg sees from Hliðskjálf could be the future consequences for the land and people of a warlord remaining in power for far too long. In spite of being an appreciated man, Geirrøðr is perhaps now burned-out, his *heill* spent – the natural wear and tear of time and usage mythically reflected (perhaps in anticipation of Geirrøðr's demise) by Grímnir's vision of Yggdrasill's ash (sts 32–35). Geirrøðr is no longer capable of securing the prosperity and good fortune of his 'guests', his people. Going with this flight of thought, Óðinn's denial of Frigg's vision (after all, his field of concern is fame, hers fate) makes her aware that her husband has not yet seen what is coming. In other words: He needs a new perspective.

The Way of the Goddess

In this way the method is also the message: cunning – at least in this context – can be seen as a non-violent strategy of approach and persuasion, i.e. a way of foresight and *fríðr*. Mastering it is a meta-skill that works through reciprocal respect, making room for concession or acceptance.

As I read it, Frigg is trying to make Óðinn aware of a particular situation in the frame myth of *Grímnismál*. Here she pulls the strings to place Óðinn between fires, safe in the knowledge that they will cause him no harm.⁴⁶ She tricks her husband into a wager on Geirrøðr's continued suitability as king, a wager that predictably will prompt Óðinn to visit his protégé incognito. Frigg then sends her treasure-maid Fulla, whose name and titular function (*eski-mær*) reflect both the plentitude of 'filling up', and the 'fulfillment' of what once has been set up. She lets Geirrøðr know that his coming guest – without revealing his identity – is a *fiðlkunnigr maðr*, a man versed in supernatural arts and knowledge. The tone of the prose text hints at a sorcerer with evil intentions, who ends up being tortured – a tinting of an imagined fear of 'heathen magic'. This may possibly have been the explanatory guess by the learned 13th century editors recording the myth, and thus were included in their retelling of what they apparently saw as a 'comedy of evil'.⁴⁷ At least, I suspect this tinting to be the 'game-changing' detail that adapts and informs the myth in accordance with a Christian perspective.

Sticking with reading the prose from the semantic perspective of the poem – and thus bearing in mind where this plot is actually heading – I think it a more likely and qualified guess that Geirrøðr here sees an opportunity to get a suitably powerful ritual specialist for the upcoming initiation of his son. Unwilling to resist or reveal himself due to the pending wager, 'Grímnir' is ritually placed between fires in order to report

of the initiation model with its irreversible change, points beyond the calendric repetitions of an imagined fertility cult (cf. Schjødt 2008, 46f).

⁴⁶ According to *Hávamál* 152, Óðinn knows a spell to control the flames.

⁴⁷ In the same context, the authorial voice of the text does not hold back on the condemnatory tone in describing Frigg's 'evil' ruse to provoke Óðinn into a wager: *En þat var inn mesti hégómi at Geirrøðr væri eigi matgóðr*. 'And that was the grossest lie that Geirrøðr was not a good host.'

(*til sagna*) the visions of numinous knowledge that he, as a *fiðlkunnigr* man, is able to see in the flames. A parallel of particular interest in this case is the fire-sitting ritual described in *Færeyinga saga* 41, where the fires attract or manifest ghost informants of hidden knowledge – a property of fires that may have encompassed other supernatural beings as well.⁴⁸ Subsequently Agnarr's *blót* – the ritual offering of a drink – obliges Óðinn to take on the role of initiatory authority, and implicitly thereby he also accepts Frigg's perspective. In fact, Óðinn may even acknowledge that he is acting under the observance and jurisdiction of Frigg, if we can assume her to represent the *dísir*, the collective feminine powers (just like the 'sons of victory-gods' seem to be a generalizing of Agnarr, st. 45). Óðinn points out to Geirroðr that 'the *dísir* are aware' (*varar ro dísir*, st. 53),⁴⁹ which may then be the only reference to the role of Frigg within the poetic part. Óðinn has room to guide his old friend to honor and fame, but he is acting within the framework of a 'feminine space'. However, he does not seem opposed to his position. His words and deeds are complementary rather than oppositional, reflecting the liminality of the situation.⁵⁰

Óðinn's willing acceptance of the role allotted to him by Frigg may also be reflected in the numinous knowledge that he (as 'Grímnir') chooses to pass on to Agnarr. It is Grímnir who points up the *heill* – the prosperity and good fortune of the people – that the king must embody (*vera* 'be'). Grímnir goes on to list the deities at home in their divine abodes (sts 4–24), all described in terms of wealth and plenty, peaceful activities, lack of hurt and hostility, safety of protection, reconciliation, justice, respect, honoring of duties, drinking, and more drinking. Even the fallen warriors are 'at home' in Valhøll, celebrating their fame. As noted by Carolyn Larrington (2002, 70), Grímnir here "envisages the ideal and splendid world of the gods" – an exemplary elitist society of *ár ok friðr*, prosperity and peace. The same deities that represent these values bestow their *hylli* on Agnarr, their favor and acclaim, when he as the first among peers has 'taken on the flame' (st. 42). These acts presumably sanctify his land, which becomes *heilagt* through the nearness of the divine beings (sts 3–4).

Curiously, however, apart from the initial fosterer-aliases of Frigg and Óðinn (perhaps striking a thematic opening note?) no farming people seem to be around in

⁴⁸ Like in *Færeyinga saga*, the number of fires (*eldar*) is unspecified in *Grímnismál* in both the poetic part (st. 2) and the prose part of the A-script version, but in the prose of the R-script only, the fires are specified to two, which may have been added in order to associate the situation particularly with torture instead, cf. *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* 3, *Ála flekks saga* 17, *Þjalar-Jóns saga* 11 (KLE 1240).

⁴⁹ Critical editions of the poem are mostly based on the R-script version, but as a singular exception, the relatively straightforward *var* (> *varar* 'aware') of the R-script is here in st. 53 often replaced with the *vár* of the A-script, deciphered as an orthographic variant of *úfar* 'hostile'. By means of such 'extended' emendations, content is thus attributed to the text rather than deduced from it. The results are not necessarily wrong, but in my opinion they need discussion every single time we choose to use them.

⁵⁰ On the fundamental importance of complementarity to Old Norse myth, see Kure 2010, 287–317.

these descriptions. Their presence is only implied by the obligations imposed on Agnarr and his peers.

Human Conduct

The stated purpose of the numinous visions of Grímnir is to awake the 'desirable help' (*vilbiörg*) of the young warriors (*sigtíva synir*, st. 45). In spite of the emphasis on *ár ok friðr*, the poem seems addressed to them, initially represented by Agnarr. The shift from individual to group may indicate the presence of an audience – perhaps the listeners of the *skáld* or storyteller, or a group of ritual participants whether imagined or actual in a performance of the myth. Terry Gunnell (2016) argues for the latter, and inspired by him, Simon Nygaard (2019a+b) offers a reading of the poem as more or less a 'transcription' of an actual ritual, as noted above. The young warriors are perceived as ritual participants identifying with the (unmentioned) retinue in Geirrøðr's hall, who transform into the einherjar in Valhöll. A ritual specialist⁵¹ takes on the identity of Grímnir, who gradually transforms into Óðinn. Combining this with the ritual theory of Roy Rappaport, Nygaard (2019a, 53, 56f, 67ff) suggests that the purpose of the poem is to create and secure the loyalty and the social and moral obligation to the leader and the other members of the warrior-band. This is achieved by participation in the ritualized performance – perhaps centered on an individual initiation – making everybody feel the unison of being part of the group. Even though this makes the content and meaning of the myth secondary, it is a highly interesting perspective in which to read the poem. For instance, it seems obvious to me to align the ritual purpose of creating loyalty and social obligation with the mythical purpose of 'desirable help' in an attempt to understand both.

With Frigg being the one to set up the liminal phase of Agnarr's initiation, this is probably not just for his own sake, but also of benefit to his community. And the thematic emphasis on peace and prosperity may suggest that this community does not only consist of a band of warriors, but of a complete society. If so, it makes sense (to me, at least) that the myth, and in particular the poetic part of it, is addressed to the young warriors. As Nygaard observes (2019b, 77), the poem features "a pre-Christian code of ethics, or behaviour that was publicly and socially condoned and acceptable," just as Larrington (2002, 63) perceives that "in *Grímnismál*, a program for human conduct will be offered." A purpose of initiation is seemingly to 'awaken' behavioral attitudes and skills in individuals – a pro-social conduct that will benefit society as a whole. The poem's slightly obscure term for these skills, *vilbiörg* (literally 'desirable help') may actually be understood as 'desirable conduct'.

The initiation may have the function of an 'exam' in the education of how a warrior ideally should behave in the society that he or she is supposed to protect. Much of the

⁵¹ Nygaard (2019a, 68f/2019b, 103-107) suggests the ritual specialist to be a *pulr* (a 'teller' of tales and names), which is a reasonable guess. I also consider the possibility of a *skáld*, i.e. of the profession later known as composers and performers of praise poetry, but perhaps originally an equivalent to the medieval court-jester, cf. *skáld* possibly meaning 'scolder' – the one to put people in their proper places.

teachings of the poem *Hávamál* can be read in the same way. The creation of social and moral obligations by participation in ritualized performances of initiation as suggested and discussed by Nygaard, would thus render warriors and other persons of power obliged not only to their leaders, but also to the people. As documented by Tacitus in *Germania* ch. 7, warriors and rulers may not have been thought to have a divinely granted right to their status, but would have had to earn it by honoring the obligations that went with the job. I find the same idea demonstrated in the Old Norse poem *Rígsþula*, which I think is about instituting the obligations of the king to mediate the *heill* owed to all levels of society, as demonstrated by the divine example of Rígr (Kure 2003).

The myth that frames *Grímnismál* may be a story about contextualizing war and warrior ways in a society of peace, with initiation as an ideal tool of 'civilizing' the ruling powers. I am speculating here, of course, but if true, it is an interesting conclusion for a society we traditionally understand in terms of warrior values.

An Increased Understanding

By employing his model, Jens Peter Schjødt promised me "an increased understanding of a series of otherwise incomprehensible features in those narrative entities that constitute our corpus" (Schjødt 2008, 455). As showed above, the initiation model does not only provide explanations of otherwise incomprehensible details. It also makes it possible to pin down crucial 'game-changing' details in the Christian transmission of the myth that lead to an apparent semantic 'mismatch' between its prose and poetic parts. And it provides a ritual and narrative framework that facilitates a satisfying coherent reading of the myth as an expression of a semantic heathen worldview.

Jens Peter Schjødt's experience was that "several of these myths 'opened up' when the initiation model was used as an analytical tool" (2008, 12). I can only concur.

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