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“Pur sarriþu þursa trutin”: Monster-Fighting and Medicine in Early Medieval Scandinavia¹

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Intoduction

Healing does not feature prominently in those medieval texts canonically associated with what has traditionally been termed ‘Old Norse mythology’. Although healing powers find mention,² medical texts themselves are little attested in our medieval Scandinavian manuscript record, while illness and healing are not presented as central themes of medieval Scandinavians' mythical understanding of the world. Healing in this tradition has, accordingly, also received little attention from scholars.³ This image contrasts with the medieval Christianity with which non-Christian Scandinavian traditions co-existed: miracles and metaphors of healing are central not only to the New Testament, but also to the many saints' lives which it inspired, putting the healing of the sick at the centre of Christian ideologies—as the considerations of the relationships between Christianity and healing in later periods by Eilola and Hokkanen in this volume emphasise.⁴ We need not doubt that the differences in emphasis between traditional Scandinavian mythological texts and Christian ones do reflect different ideological concerns. But I argue here that interactions between ideas about health and healing on the one hand, and wider belief-systems, encompassing morality, on the other, were more important in traditional Scandinavian beliefs than our manuscript record would suggest.

The core evidence from which I argue comprises two texts in Old Norse (the medieval Scandinavian language), written using runes, and both surviving outside the

- 1 The bulk of this paper was written during a research fellowship at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, and partly prompted by my students in the University of Helsinki's Renvall Institute for Area and Cultural Studies. Their influence on this paper will be apparent in its Finnic perspectives, and I thank them accordingly. The paper has benefitted from comments made by a number of my colleagues at Leeds; Malin Grahn, Sari Kivistö, Edith Grüber and Monica Sonck; and most especially, of course, Douglas Aiton, Marrku Hokkanen and Jari Eilola.
- 2 Most prominently in the Eddaic poems *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*. All references to the Poetic Edda in this article are to NECKEL, G. and KUHN, H. (eds) (1983), *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, 5th edn, Heidelberg, Winter; accessed from <<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/germ/anord/edda/edda.htm>>.
- 3 See LARSEN, Ø. (1993), “Medicine and Medical Treatment”. In PULSIANO, P. (ed.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, New York, Garland, s.v.; KAISER, CH. (1973–), “Heilkunde (Norden)”. In HOOPS, J. (ed.), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd edn by BECK, H. et al, Berlin, De Gruyter. The principle recent exception is DUBOIS, T. (1999), *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*, Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, pp. 94–120 which, in a reversal of the usual pattern in the study of medieval Germanic-speakers' non-Christian beliefs, leans heavily on our richer Anglo-Saxon evidence.
- 4 For a prominent recent study emphasising this theme see REFF, D. (2005), *Plagues, Priests and Demons: Sacred Narratives and the Rise of Christianity in the Old World and the New*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

mainstream of our Scandinavian textual record: one in an English manuscript, the other archaeologically. Each of these is a medicinal charm intended to counteract illness, and directed at beings called *pursar* (singular *purs*). In themselves, these texts are well-known, but I suggest that the attitudes to illness which they imply are more deeply connected than has been realised to the wider world-views more prominently attested in medieval Scandinavian mythological texts. If so, we can situate beliefs about illness and healing in a broader cultural—and therefore moral—context, to understand more fully the interactions between these spheres in medieval Scandinavia’s non-Christian traditions. One of my main methods in making this argument is to argue that the meanings of the words which we find in our texts contain revealing evidence about past cultural categorisations. In doing so, I draw on the methods of comparative philology, which recognises that, where we lack detailed evidence for the meanings of a word in one language, the meanings of its cognates in closely related languages can provide useful additional indicators for what it is likely to have meant. The main source of comparisons here is Old English, a language not only closely related to Old Norse, but in which medicinal terminology is well-attested. I argue that *purs* can be understood at some level not only to denote a kind of monster (as has traditionally been recognised) but also, at one and the same time, an illness. This implies a discourse in which healing and illness can be understood as a transformation of one of the fundamental themes of medieval Scandinavian mythologies: the cosmological struggle of the human in-group and its gods against the barbarians and monsters which threaten the fabric of society.

My arguments introduce connections between morality and health into our understanding of medieval Scandinavian world-views. The place of moral transgression specifically, however, is harder to identify, because the evidence on which I focus here does not present clear correlations between moral transgression and the aetiology of illness. The final stage of my argument, then, aims only to sketch a possibility, on the basis only of a small part of the available medieval and comparative evidence. Some evidence concerning *pursar* does include indicators linking their activities to people’s moral transgressions, the most prominent text being a mythological poem called *Skírnismál*. Moreover, the nineteenth-century Finnish folk-poem *Riiden synty*, an aetiological text about the origin (literally, the birth) of rickets, describes the activities of a *tursas*—*tursas* being a Finnish loan-word deriving from *purs*. This text provides (in keeping with the spirit of the present collection) a modern anthropological parallel to the medieval material which helps to illustrate the kinds of networks between moral transgression and health which beliefs in *pursar* might have promoted.

What is a *purs*?

purs is an Old Norse word with cognates in all the medieval Germanic languages, prominently Old English *pyrs* and German *Turse*.⁵ In addition, it was borrowed from the Common Germanic language from which all these languages descend into Finnish, as *tursas* (and possibly, at later times or with developments within Finnish, as *turso*, *turilas* and *turisas*, but the case here is less clear).⁶ Dictionaries define it with terms such as ‘ogre’ and ‘giant’, while also mentioning the fact that *purs* was the name of the rune *þ*.⁷ This is consistent with the cognate evidence: Old English *pyrs*, and the

5 BOSWORTH, J. and TOLLER, T. (1898), *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, London, Oxford University Press, s.v. *pyrs*; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *thurse*; GRIMM, J. and GRIMM, W. (1854–1954), *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Leipzig, Hirzel, s.v. *Turse*.

6 See HAAVIO, M. (1967), *Suomalainen mytologia*, Porvoo, WSOY, pp. 102–24; XXXXSANAKIRJA; each of these words could, and in some contexts probably should, also be taken as a personal name rather than a common noun.

7 To cite some standard definitions of the Norse term, SVEINBJÖRN EGILSSON (1931), *Lexicon*

early forms of the German *Turse*, gloss Latin terms like *cyclops*, *Orcus* and *Colossus* (though not these alone), indicating meanings similar to the Norse *þurs*.⁸

There are, of course, more subtle aspects to *þurs*'s (doubtless changing) meanings, which have yet to receive a full analysis. Cleasby and Vigfusson specified the 'notion of surliness and stupidity'.⁹ In our canonical mythological texts, *þursar* invariably appear evil, but the *þurs Þórir* in *Grettis saga* chapter 61, born of mixed giant and human parentage, is a sympathetic character.¹⁰ Another connotation, omitted by the lexicographers but which I discuss somewhat below, is one of sexuality, which emerges most clearly from a line in the Icelandic rune-poem, first attested in manuscript around 1500, explicating the rune-name *þurs*: 'þ er kvenna kvöl ok kletta íbúi / ok Valrúnar verr' ('þ[urs] is women's torment and crags' inhabitant, / and Valrún's mate').¹¹ This description is fairly well paralleled by Norwegian sources: the Norwegian rune-poem, whose earliest surviving copies are from 1636 but were based on a lost, earlier manuscript, describes *þ* with 'þurs vældr kvenna kvillu' ('þurs causes women's illness'), which parallels the Icelandic texts' *þurs er kvenna kvöl*.¹² Meanwhile, Jonna Louis-Jensen has argued that the cryptic runic inscription 7 from Bø church in Telemark, from around 1200, uses the phrase 'fialsibui' (in normalised spelling, *fjalls íbúi*, 'mountain's inhabitant') to denote the rune *þ*, which seems to indicate that a characterisation of *þursar* like the *kletta íbúi* of the Icelandic text was already current centuries before our manuscripts of the rune-poems, perhaps suggesting that the rest of the characterisation was also old.¹³

Understanding the connotations of *þurs* may be particularly important for understanding how far it was synonymous with words of related meaning. There has long been a tendency to regard our words for mythical beings in Old Icelandic to represent a lexical set like *robin*, *sparrow* and *hawk*, in which each word's meaning is mutually exclusive of the others', but it is also possible that *þurs* belongs (as well or instead) to a more common kind of lexical set, which can be exemplified by *monarch*, *king* and *ruler*.¹⁴ It would be possible to find people who could only be described with one of these words, and people who could be described by all at once—and this seems fairly clearly to be true of words like *þurs* and other words for monsters. Thus stanza

poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis/Ordbog over det norsk-islandske skjaldesprog, 2nd edn by FINNUR JÓNSSON, Copenhagen, Møller, accessed from <<http://www.septentrionalia.org>>, defined *þurs* as a 'turs, jætte'; FRITZNER, J. (1886–96), Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog, 2nd edn, Kristiania, Den Norske Forlagsforening, accessed from <<http://www.edd.uio.no/perl/search/search.cgi?appid=86&tabid=1275>>, as 'Troid, Halvtroid'; CLEASBY, R. and VIGFUSSON, G. (1957), *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn by CRAIGIE, W., Oxford, Oxford University Press, as 'a giant'; and DE VRIES, J. (1961), *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Leiden, Brill, as 'riese, unhold'.

- 8 Our English evidence also shows connections with water, which may correlate with the Finnish tradition, discussed below, in which the *tursas* is a sea-dwelling monster: WHITELOCK, D. (1951), *The Audience of Beowulf*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 72–73, 75; DICKINS, B. (1942), "Yorkshire Hobs". *Transactions of the Yorkshire Dialect Society*, 7, 9-23 (at p. 14).
- 9 For which see further DICKINS (1942), p. 12.
- 10 Ed. GUÐNI JÓNSSON (1936), *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar; Bandamanna saga*, Íslenzk fornrit, 7, Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritfélag, p. 200; cf. DICKINS (1942), pp. 13–14 for this and English parallels. Cf. SCHULZ, K. (2004), *Riesen: Von Wissenshütern und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda and Saga*, Skandinavische Arbeiten, 20, Heidelberg: Winter, pp. 42–43.
- 11 Ed. PAGE, R. (1998), "The Icelandic Rune-Poem". *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 42, 1-37 (at p. 27).
- 12 Ed. LINDROTH, H. (1913), "Studier över de nordiska dikterna om runornas namn". *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 29, 256–95 (at p. 261).
- 13 (1994), "Norrøne navnegåder". *Nordica Bergensia*, 4, 35–52 (at pp. 35–38), cited by PAGE (1998), pp. 31–32.
- 14 Cf. HALL, A. (2007b), *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England: Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, *Anglo-Saxon Studies*, 8, Cambridge, Boydell, pp. 22–23; SCHULZ (2004), pp. 29–37.

25 of the poem *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, one of the collection of mythological and heroic poems known as the Poetic Edda, has the hero Atli refuse a request by the giantess Hrímgæðr, who wants to take compensation for her father's killing by sleeping with his slayer, with the insult

'Loðinn heitir, er þic scal eiga, leið ertu mann-kyni;
sá býr í Þolleyio þurs,
hundvíss jotunn, hraunbúa verstr;
sá er þér macligr maðr.'

'He is called Loðinn ['hairy'], who will have you, you are loathsome to humans;
the *þurs* that lives on Þolley,
a very wise *jötunn* ['giant'], worst of *hraunbúar* ['rock/lava-dwellers'];
he is a man well-suited to you'

Atli refers to Loðinn with *þurs*, *jötunn*, *hraunbúi*, and even *maðr* ('person').¹⁵ One reason for the variation in terminology in this and similar texts is of course the metrical and aesthetic requirements of poetry, but equally Snorri Sturluson supported his prose claim, in the earlier thirteenth century, that 'ættir hrímpursa' ('the races of the frost-*þursar*') descend from Aurgelmir/Ymir by quoting the statement in stanza 33 of the Eddaic poem *Hyndluljóð* that 'jotnar allir frá Ymi komnir' ('all *jotnar* ['giants'] come from Ymir').¹⁶ The variation between *þurs* and *jötunn* is also paralleled in Old English, where the poem *Beowulf* refers to the monster Grendel by the cognate terms *þyrs* and *eoten* (and a good deal besides).¹⁷ Once more, there is a likelihood here that we are dealing to some extent with figurative rather than literal language, but the evidence is sufficient to put the burden of proof on those who would assume that words like *þurs* and *jötunn* denoted distinct races.

My argument in the next section extends this kind of thinking to another aspect of the meanings of *þurs*, to argue that we must not only be willing to see different words for monsters as partial synonyms, but to be able to denote things which are in our world-views members of entirely different ontological categories—specifically illnesses.

Monsters and illness

As my summary above shows, senses relating to illness have not been recognised for *þurs* in Old Norse lexicography. Tellingly, our principle evidence for such associations derives from a text-type which enjoys little direct representation in our medieval Scandinavian corpus, but which references in Eddaic poems like *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, alongside the evidence of neighbouring medieval regions and later texts, suggest was widespread: healing charms. Though written in Old Norse and in runic form, the most relevant of these survives not in Scandinavia, but in a portion of the English manuscript British Library, Cotton Caligula A.xv, from Christ Church Canterbury and dated to around 1073×76; it is known accordingly as the Canterbury Rune-Charm. Linguistic evidence suggests that the charm is likely first to have been written down by about 1000, by a speaker of East Norse (the ancestor-language of Danish and Swedish); it runs: 'kuril sarþuara far þu nu funtin istu þur uigi þik / þorsa trutin iuril sarþuara uipr apruari'. This can be standardised as 'Kuril sárþvara far þú nú, fundinn ertu. Þórr vígi þik þursa dróttin, luril (leg. Kuril) sárþvara. Viðr áðravari (leg. -vara)' and translated as 'Kuril of the wound-spear, go now, you have been found. May Þórr consecrate you, lord of *þursar*, Kuril of the wound-spear. Against ?vein-pus'. The charm

¹⁵ Likewise, *Vafprúðnismál* stanza 33 refers to Aurgelmir both as a *jötunn* and a *hrímpurs*.

¹⁶ Ed. FAULKES, A. (1982), *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 10.

¹⁷ Lines 426 and 761 respectively, ed. KLAEBER, FR. (1950), *Beowulf*, 3rd edn, Boston, Heath, pp. 16 and 29.

is not without its problems, but it clearly envisages Kuril both as a supernatural being (and specifically lord of *pursar*), and as the root cause of poisonous fluid in the veins.¹⁸ Finding and attacking Kuril seems to be a means to deal with this symptom. Trying to decide whether Kuril is to be classified in our own world-views as a being or an illnesses will not greatly help us to understand this text: what will is to recognise that illness could in some sense be conceptualised as a being, and interacted with on that basis.

Þórr's role as a god to be invoked for healing in the Canterbury Rune-Charms is not well paralleled in our manuscript evidence. However, about seventy-five pendants in the form of hammers survive from early medieval Scandinavia, and have been associated with Þórr on account of his possession of the hammer Mjöllnir in a wide range of texts. Meanwhile, they have also been assumed to have had amuletic functions, a suggestion which gains support from the existence of hammers inscribed with crosses, worn alongside crosses in burials, or cast alongside crosses in moulds, suggesting that the hammers may have had similar functions to crucifixes.¹⁹ Moreover, an early eleventh-century copper amulet from Kvinneby in Sweden seems to invoke Þórr in healing, with the text 'þorketihansmírþemhamrisamhyr' (i.e. *Þórr gætiXXXXXCHECKXXXXX hans méRXXXXXcheckXXXXX þæm hamri [e]s Ám hyrr*, 'may Þórr guard him with that hammer which strikes Ámr'), connecting both Þórr and his hammer with (amuletic) healing.²⁰ These points would link Þórr with amuletic protection against day-to-day threats, whether from monsters, illnesses, or other misfortune.

Moreover, there is an important analogue for the Canterbury Rune-Charms in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, book 4, chapters 26–27, written around 1075:²¹ XXXXXcontextualise a bitXXXXX

Nobilissimum illa gens templum habet, quod Ubsola dicitur, non longe positum ab Sictona civitate. In hoc templo, quod totum ex auro paratum est, statuas trium deorum veneratur populus, ita ut potentissimus eorum Thor in medio solium habeat triclinio; hinc et inde locum possident Wodan et Fricco. Quorum significationes eiusmodi sunt: 'Thor', inquit, 'praesidet in aere, qui tonitrus et fulmina, ventos ymbresque, serena et fruges gubernat ... Thor autem cum sceptro lovem simulare videtur...

Omnibus itaque diis suis attributos habent sacerdotes, qui sacrificia populi offerant. Si pestis et famis imminet, Thor ydolo lybatur, si bellum, Wodani, si nuptiae celebrendae sunt, Fricconi.

That folk has a very famous temple called Uppsala, situated not far from the city of Sigtuna. In this temple, entirely decked out in gold, the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wodan and Fricco have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds

18 Ed. and trans. FRANKIS, J. (2000), "Sidelights on Post-Conquest Canterbury: Towards a Context for an Old Norse Runic Charm (DR 419)". Nottingham Mediaeval Studies, 44, 1–27 (at pp. 2–5, with comments on problems pp. 3–4 and on dating p. 4); cf. MCKINNELL, J., SIMEK, R. and DÜWEL, K. (2004), *Runes, Magic and Religion: A Sourcebook*, *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia*, 10, Vienna, Fassbaender, p. 127 [O 17]; for images see the record at Skaldic Project homepage, <<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/>>, at <<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php?table=mss&id=15291>>.

19 WAMERS, E. (1997), "Hammer und Kreuz: Typologische Aspekte einer nordeuropäischen Amulettssitte aus der Zeit des Glaubenswechsels". In MÜLLER-WILLE, M. (ed.), *Rom und Byzanz im Norden: Mission und Glaubenswechsel im Ostseeraum während des 8.–14. Jahrhunderts*. Internationale Fachkonferenz der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft in Verbindung mit der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz Kiel 18.–25. September 1994, 2 vols. Stuttgart, Steiner, I pp. 83–107 (esp. pp. 89–97).

20 Ed. MCKINNELL–SIMEK–DÜWEL (2004), p. 65.

21 Ed. SCHMEIDLER, B. (1917), *Adam von Bremen: Hamburgische Kichengeschichte*, 3rd edn, *Scriptores rerum germanicarum in usum scholarum*, 2, Hanover, Hahnsche, pp. 257–59; trans. TSHAN, F. (2002), *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, new edn, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 207–8.

and rains, fair weather and crops ... Thor with his scepter apparently resembles Jove...

For all their gods there are appointed priests to offer sacrifices for the people. If plague and famine threaten, a libation is poured to the idol Thor; if war, to Wodan; if marriages are to be celebrated, to Fricco.

The reliability of Adam's account has long been doubted: to name the main issues, he was operating in an ideologically and politically charged Christian community, which is likely to have strongly coloured his understanding and reporting of pagan traditions; he clearly Classicised his material to some degree, and perhaps considerably; and he was not an eye-witness to what he described, while the proximity of his oral sources to events is not clear either.²² It is worth emphasising, however, that the passage in question is part of Adam's original *Gesta*, to be distinguished from the infamous *scholia* 138–41, which provide more lurid and accordingly less plausible further details about the temple.²³ Meanwhile, Adam's source value relative to our other material is rising, insofar as we are increasingly aware that our later, vernacular Icelandic sources—most especially Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*—are themselves compromised by similar problems.²⁴ Moreover, Perkins has pointed out that Adam's attribution to Thor of power over the wind, though not apparent in Snorri's mythography, is well attested in sources which must be independent, most strikingly Dudo of St Quentin's *Gesta Normannorum*, of around 1060, and so is surely reliable.²⁵ In the same way, we can see Adam's association of Thor with the aversion of plague to be consistent with the evidence of the Canterbury Rune-Charm, which invokes Þórr against Kuril, the *pursa dróttinn*, to cure *áðravari*.

Returning now to the Canterbury rune-charm's representation of *pursar* as sources of illness, this is consistent with their portrayal in the Norwegian rune-poem as the cause of 'women's illness'. As I have mentioned, this evidence is late; but roughly contemporary with the Canterbury rune-charm is the Sigtuna Amulet, found during excavations in 1931. This may represent the kind of form in which the text of the Canterbury Rune Charm found its way to Christ Church, Canterbury; at any rate, it is roughly contemporary with Adam, and comes from the area which he described. The amulet is a thin copper plate with an inscription on each side. Despite Høst's claim that 'side B har intet tilXXXXXcheckXXXXX felles med Canterburyinnskriften' ('side B has nothing in common with the Canterbury inscription'), it is not self-evident whether the inscriptions are to be read consecutively or as two separate texts, and it is worth quoting both:²⁶

A: þur × sarriþu × þursa / trutinþunuf[bind rune uf]untinis

**B: afþirþriarþrarulf×
af þir niu nöþir ulfr iii +
isiR [þ]is isir aukis unir ulfr niut lu ·fia**

22 The most detailed, but not the most plausible, criticism is Janson 1997; for an English summary see JANSON, H. (2000), "Adam of Bremen and the Conversion of Scandinavia". In ARMSTRONG, G. and WOOD, I. (eds), *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, *International Medieval Research*, 7, Turnhout, Brepols, pp. 83–88. For a balanced appraisal see SUNDQVIST, O. (2002), *Freyr's Offspring: Rulers and Religion in Ancient Svea Society*, *Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis: Historia Religionum*, 21, Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis, pp. 117–35.

23 Ed. SCHMEIDLER (1917), pp. 257–60.

24 This conclusion is similar to that of SUNDQVIST (2002), for a neat statement of changing attitudes to Snorri see GUNNELL, T. (2007), "How Elvish were the *Álfar*?". In WAWN, A., JOHNSON, G. and WALTER, J. (eds), *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T. A. Shippey*, *Making the Middle Ages*, 9, Turnhout, Brepols, pp. 111–30 (at pp. 111–16).

25 PERKINS, R. (2001), *Thor the Wind-Raiser and the Eyrarland Image*, Viking Society for Northern Research, Text Series, 15, London, Viking Society for Northern Research, pp. 18–26, available at <<http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/>>; cf. 27–52.

26 HØST, G. (1952) "Til Sigtuna og Canterbury formlene". *Norsk tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap*, 16, 342–47 (at p. 342); ed. MCKINNELL–SIMEK–DÜWEL (2004), p. 126 [O 16].

A: Þórr (or Þurs?) sárriðu, þursa dróttinn;
Flý þú nú, fundinn es!

B: [H]af þér þrjár þrár, úlf[r]!
[H]af þér níu nauðir, úlf[r]!
iii ísir þess, ísir eykis, unír úlf[r]!
Njót lyfja!

A: Þórr/Þurs of wound-fever, lord of þursar,
flee now; you have been found.

B: Have for yourself three pangs of deprivation, wolf!
Have for yourself nine constraints/*n*-runes, wolf!
?Three ices/*i*-runes, these ices/*i*-runes drive on, the wolf is content!
Benefit from the medicine!

Besides the uncertainty as to the relationship between the two inscriptions, these texts present a number of complications, and the translations (and indeed normalisations) of the inscriptions are necessarily tentative. Two things are clear, however. The inscription on the second side seems unambiguously to associate itself with *lyf* 'medicine', encouraging us to suppose that the shorter inscription on the first side was also—like the Canterbury Rune-Charms—intended for medicinal purposes rather than, for example, helping the bearer in other kinds of encounters with supernatural beings. Meanwhile, the inscription on the first side is verbally similar enough to the Canterbury Rune-Charms to suggest that they represent a wider tradition of similar incantations, involving the idea that the cause of an illness might be a 'lord of *þursar*'. Whether the 'lord of *þursar*' on the Sigtuna Amulet should be identified as the pagan god Þórr or simply as a *þurs* is hard to judge.²⁷ Either way, however, the prospect that a *þurs* could in some sense be synonymous with an illness is clear.

As a proportion of our complete corpus of earlier medieval Scandinavian charms, the Canterbury Rune-Charms and the Sigtuna Amulet are significant enough to suggest that discourses associating *þursar* with causing illness were prominent; but in finite terms, they admittedly afford rather slight evidence for traditions associating supernatural beings with illness. However, wider parallels are easily come by. One set is provided by medieval Christian thought, in which possession by a demon—whereby monster and illness are again effectively identical—was a reasonably prominent aetiology of certain kinds of illness.²⁸ In such cases, the illness is usually identical with the supernatural being, insofar as it commences with its possession and ceases with its expulsion.

Analogues can also be found, however, in the non-Christian traditions of Germanic-speaking cultures. The strongest case is that of *dvergr* and its Old English cognate *dweorg*. The modern English reflex of this word is *dwarf*, and in our medieval English and Icelandic texts it indeed denotes small beings, usually, at least in the

²⁷ It was conventional in runic inscriptions, when two identical consonants appeared next to each other, to write only one rune, and HØST (1952), p. 345 cites examples where this occurs despite intervening punctuation, while the vowels distinguished as *ó* and *u* in standardised Old Norse spelling were not distinguished in runic writing, meaning that the first word of the inscription could be read as *Þórr* or *Þurs*. If we read *Þurs sárriðu*, the metrical requirement for alliteration would be met by repeating the word with *Þursa dróttinn*, which from the point of view of literary merit is not promising; but if we read *Þórr sárriðu* we must probably envisage the demonisation in an increasingly Christianised Scandinavian culture of the traditionally benign god Þórr such that he becomes aligned with his traditional enemies the *þursar*.

²⁸ See CACIOLA, N. (2003), *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, pp. 228–43; DENDLE, P. (forthcoming), *Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon England*.

Scandinavian tradition, supernatural.²⁹ We have, however, just enough evidence in Scandinavia to discern a quite different side to the word's meaning, in the form of a fragment of a human cranium from Ribe inscribed, around the eighth century, with the text 'ulfURAUkUpinAUkHUTIUR ·HIALbburiisuiþR / þAIMAUIARKIAUKtuirkuninn [hole] buur', which can be standardised as *Ulfr auk Óðinn auk Hó-'tiur'*. *Hjalp 'buri' es viðr / þæima værki. Auk dverg unninn. Bóurr.* This we might tentatively translate as 'Ulfr/Wolf and Óðinn and high-tiur. buri is help against this pain. And the dvergr Bóurr (is) overcome'.³⁰ This evidence is consolidated by Old English material: by contrast with the other earlier medieval Germanic languages, surviving writings in Old English include a large number of medical texts, ranging from poetic charms though mundane but apparently local prose remedies to translated Latin medical writing. Without this corpus, the meaning of *dweorg* would have seemed limited to short people. However, the medical texts tell a different story. By the eleventh century, at least, *dweorg* seems fairly unambiguously to denote fever, and need not (always) have connoted beings, as in the CXXXXX ed boyle [History of Science B-3 CAM XXXXX](#) Old English translation of the *Peri didaxeon*, where a remedy for asthma mentions the symptom 'hwile he riþaþ swilce he on dweorge sy' ('sometimes he shakes/writhes as though he was on dweorge') probably for 'interdum et febriunt' ('sometimes they also suffer fever') in the Latin original.³¹ As with the Norse lexicography mentioned above, the recent *Dictionary of Old English* divides citations of *dweorg* neatly into the two senses 'dwarf, pygmy' and 'fever, perhaps high fever with delerium and convulsions'.³² However, the two senses are surely bridged by usage of *dvergr* on the Ribe Cranium, and by a text in the early eleventh-century manuscript British Library Harley 585, which contains a range of medical texts, the last of which comprises a miscellaneous collection of remedies known as *Lacnunga*. *Lacnunga* includes a charm for an illness identified in the prose as *dweorh*, which explicitly conceives of the illnessness in terms of a being (*wiht*) treating the sufferer of the disease as its horse (*hæncgest*).³³ Although there may be instances of *dweorg* which belong under the sense 'fever', there is also at least one occasion where the distinction is not a helpful one. Moreover, the image of the *wiht* treating the sufferer of the illness as its horse in turn recalls well-attested traditions in our medieval and later evidence from Germanic-speaking cultures in which the female supernatural beings called *mǫrur* in Old Norse (singular *mara*) and *maran* in Old English (singular *mære*), who give their name to the modern English *nightmare*, ride their victims, causing illness, injury or death, and particularly hallucinatory experiences which might be categorised alongside the fevers mentioned above.³⁴

29 See generally BATTLES, P. (2005), "Dwarfs in Germanic Literature: *Deutsche Mythologie* or Grimm's Myths?". In SHIPPEY, T. (ed.), *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 291/Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, 14, Tempe, AZ, Arizon Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, pp. 29–82 .

30 Ed. MCKINNELL-SIMEK-DÜWEL (2004), p. 50 [B 6], where a further selection of translations is provided.

31 Ed. LÖWENECK M. (1896), *Peri Didaxeon: Eine Sammlung von Rezepten in englischer Sprache aus dem 11./12. Jahrhundert*, Erlanger Beiträge zur englischen Philologie und vergleichenden Litteraturgeschichte 12, Erlangen, Junge, p. 31 See further BATTLES (2005), pp. 34–35; CAMERON, M. (1993), *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 7, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 152–53XXXXX.

32 *Dictionary of Old English* (1988–), Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies for the Dictionary of Old English Project, Center for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto.

33 Ed. PETTIT E. (2001), *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: 'the Lacnunga'*, Mellen Critical Editions and Translations, 6a–b, 2 vols, Lewiston, NY, The Edward Mellen Press, I pp. 72–74; on the numerous obscurities of the charm see also II pp. XXXXX and CAMERON (1993), pp. 151–53.

34 See generally RAUDVERE, C. (1993), *Föreställningar om maran i nordisk folketro* (Lund Studies

Myth, health, and moral transgression

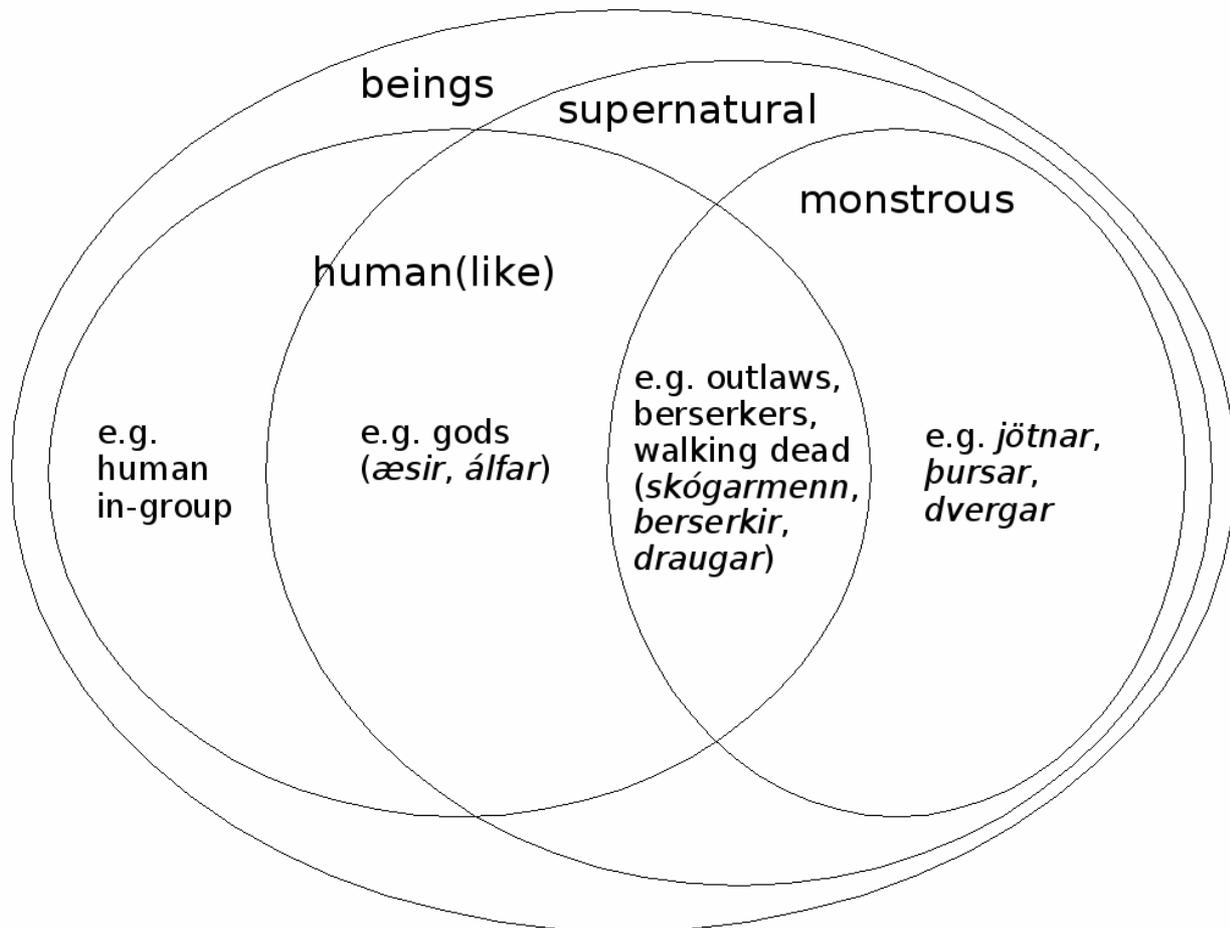


Figure 1: SEMANTIC FIELD DIAGRAM OF OLD NORSE WORDS FOR BEINGS

Reinterpreting *þursar*, then, as potentially not only causes of illness, but to be at some levels synonymous with illness, is plausible, and moreover seems to be representative of a larger and more widespread, if only patchily attested, medieval Scandinavian discourse. Recognising this affords us, in turn, an opportunity to situate these discourses in a wider cultural—specifically mythological—framework. Our unusually rich mythological evidence from medieval Scandinavia allows us to argue that an individual’s experience of a *þurs* as a cause of illness could be reinterpreted as a microcosm of a larger, mythological struggle, aligning the experience of the sufferer with a wider world charged with moral meaning. To begin explicating this claim at a lexical level, it is possible to situate the term *þurs*, as a word denoting monsters, in a wider semantic mapping of Old Icelandic words for supernatural beings, for which I have argued elsewhere mainly on the basis of our early poetic records, and which itself correlates with narrative evidence for traditional medieval Scandinavian world-views.³⁵ As figure 1 [‘SEMANTIC FIELD DIAGRAM OF OLD NORSE WORDS FOR BEINGS’: SEE ATTACHED FILE, “FIGURE 1.PPT”] shows, the world of male supernatural beings³⁶

in *History of Religions*, 1 (Lund, Religionshistoriska Avdelningen, Lunds Universitet); also HALL (2007b), pp. 124–26. On the Old English evidence, see HALL, A. (2007a), “The Evidence for *maran*, the Anglo-Saxon ‘Nightmares’ ”. *Neophilologus*, 91, 299–317, available at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11061-005-4256-8>>.

³⁵ HALL (2007b), pp. 11–12, 21–53, esp. 28–29, 32–34, 47–53; cf. 54–74 for Anglo-Saxon comparisons.

³⁶ Females are excluded from the analysis as being less paradigmatic examples of beings in Old

can be divided into beings whose actions are fundamentally aligned with the interests of the human in-group, whom we might term gods, and those whose actions fundamentally threaten the fabric of the human in-group's existence, whom we might term monsters. Questions of the relationship of humans to supernatural beings are not ones which I can go into at length here—the seventeenth-century Scandinavian witches, the topic of Eilola's contribution to this collection, provide one example of the complexities which these questions can entail. I have argued elsewhere that the ontological distinction between people and their gods may never have been sharp, to the point at which we should perhaps understand gods as a sub-category of humans (or at least humans of the in-group), while some categories of people could be monstrous.³⁷ Notwithstanding these complexities, however, the diagram still represents the fundamental lineaments of a world view.

The semantic field diagram in turn represents one of the basic structuring principles of medieval Scandinavian world-views, in which the human in-group and their gods were locked into a cosmic struggle with the monsters which threatened their society.³⁸ Monster-fighting occurs widely in medieval Scandinavian narratives of all kinds and carries great ideological significance; the point is epitomised by the fact that the guiding framework for our surviving Scandinavian mythological texts is the inevitability of the Ragnarök, a cataclysm in which gods and men will fight against the monsters and, to at least a significant extent, die.³⁹ Of all the gods, it is Þórr who is pre-eminent as a fighter of monsters. This being so, his invocation against a *þurs* in the Canterbury Rune-Charms represents the local application of a global mythological concept. If we are willing to connect the wider evidence for Þórr's invocation against illness and for the conceptual association of (some) illness with monsters, we can begin to perceive a discourse in which the cosmological framework of medieval Scandinavian worldviews was applied at a day-to-day level to provide a medium for healing. If Þórr was the gods' bulwark against monsters, and if monsters were potentially, in some sense, illness, he might also be people's bulwark against illnesses. Having reconstructed this discourse, we can in turn posit that it gave meaning and structure to the experience of illness, not least in allowing potentially debilitating ailments to be interpreted in terms of a model of heroic struggle against external forces whose threats to individuals were symptomatic of the threat they posed to society as a whole (Eilola, this volume).

As in the Central African context described in this volume by Hokkanen, it is possible, then, to perceive external, supernatural forces as causes of illness in early medieval, and to some extent pre-Conversion Scandinavian society. Given our limited evidence for this society, this is a significant achievement. Moving beyond it to link illness with moral transgression specifically—as in the 'diseases of men' discussed by Hokkanen—is a greater challenge again. Links between morality and health were prominent in medieval Christian thought—albeit that the idea of illness as punishment for sin, or purgation of sin, had to compete with a range of other aetiologies—but texts like the Canterbury Rune-Charms provide little basis for linking the assault of a *þurs* with moral transgressions.⁴⁰ We must be ready to accept the possibility, then, that

Norse world-views than males: HALL (2007b), pp. 22–23; on my use of the category supernatural, see pp. 11–12.

37 HALL (2007b), pp. 49–51; HASTRUP, K. (1985), *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 142–45; cf. Þórir the *þurs* mentioned above.

38 CLUNIES ROSS, M. (1994–98), *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization, 7, 10, 2 vols, Odense, Odense University Press, pp. 42–143; HASTRUP (1985), pp. 147–49.

39 For a convenient survey of monster-fighting in the sagas, see HUME, K. (1980), "From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature". *Studies in Philology*, 77, 1–25 (at pp. 3–7); for the Ragnarök, see DE VRIES, J. (1956–57), *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, Grundriss der germanischen Philologie*, 12, 2nd edn, 2 vols, Berlin, de Gruyter, II pp. 392–405; SCHULZ (2004), 110–12.

40 On competing aetiologies, see for example KROLL, J. and BACKRACH, B. (1984), "Sin and

moral transgression was not a (prominent) aetiology of illness—which, if so, would be a noteworthy feature of pre- and non-Christian medieval Scandinavian culture. There is, however, enough evidence to connect assaults by *þursar* with moral transgression to establish the possibility that this kind of discourse existed. The key text for this discussion is the Eddaic poem with the most extensive attestations of *þurs*, *Skírnismál*.⁴¹

Unlike our material concerning Þórr, which emphasises only the martial hostility between the *Æsir* (the main group of gods) and the *jötnar*, *Skírnismál* is a paradigmatic text for a more complex side of their relationship. As Clunies Ross, in particular, has argued, the medieval Scandinavian mythological world allowed for marriage between mythological groups, but only according to patterns determined by group status (as perceived from the perspective of the in-group—mythologically the *Æsir*, mundanely the culturally and linguistically Scandinavian in-group). The group of highest status was the *Æsir*; a group of gods from a different tribe, the *Vanir*, are of second highest status; and the lowest status group is that of the monsters, prototypically the *jötnar*. From the point of view of the *Æsir*, it was unacceptable for women to marry men of a lower-status group, but it was acceptable for men to have sexual liaisons with women of a group lower in status than their own, and for *Vanir* men to marry giantesses.⁴² *Skírnismál* is the pre-eminent example of this process: in it, the *Vanr* Freyr falls in love with the *jötunn* Gerðr, and Freyr sends his servant Skírnir to woo her. Skírnir begins his attempt by offering Gerðr wealth, but she refuses. He threatens to behead her, which gets him no further. Finally, then, he pronounces an eleven-stanza curse—or perhaps we should say threatens Gerðr by describing the curse which he can put on her, since the status of his speech act is somewhat ambiguous within the poem—which is sufficient to convince her to accept Freyr. It is the content of the curse, however, which is my main concern here, and I quote the most pertinent stanzas (stanzas 30–36):

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Tramar gneyþa þic iotna gøðom í; til hrímþursa hallar kranga kosta laus, kranga kosta vön; grát at gamni oc leiða með tárom trega. | scolo gerstan dag þú scalt hverian dag | Monsters [<i>tramar</i>] must humiliate you the whole day in the farmsteads of <i>jötnar</i> ; to the hall of <i>hrímþursar</i> you must creep, every day, without choice, creep lacking choice; you must have weeping in return for pleasure and accompany grief with tears. |
| Með þursi þríhöfðoðom eða verlaus vera; þitt geð grípi, þic morn morni! ver þú sem þistill, í önn ofanverða. | þú scalt æ nara, | You must live forever with a three-headed <i>þurs</i> or be without a man; may your lust grip may ?consumption ?consume you; become like a thistle— one which was crushed in ?the last part of harvest. |
| Til holtz ec gecc gambantein at geta, gambantein ec gat. | oc til hrás viðar, | I walked to a wood and up to a young tree to get a ?magic wand, |
| Reiðr er þér Óðinn, þic scal Freyr fiásc, in fyrinilla mærl, enn þú fengit hefir | reiðr er þér ásabragr, a ?magic wand I got. | Óðinn is angry with you, the best of the gods is |

Mental Illness in the Middle Ages". *Psychological Medicine*, 14, 507–14.

41 Although *þurs* occurs as a simplex six times in *Þrymskviða* but only four in *Skírnismál*, *Þrymskviða*'s attestations are limited to the formula *þursa dróttin*.

42 CLUNIES ROSS (1994–98), 93–102. For similar medieval Scandinavian narratives see MCKINNELL, J. (2005), *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, Brewer) pp. 62–80.

gambanreiði goða.

Heyri iotnar, heyri hrímpursar,
synir Suttunga, síalfir áslíðar,
hvé ec fyrbýð, hvé ec fyrirbanna
manna glaum mani,
manna nyt mani.

Hrímgrímnir heitir þurs, er þic hafa scal,
fyr nágrindr neðan;
þar þér vílmegir á viðar rótom
geita hland gefi!
Oðri dryccio fá þú aldregi,
mær, af þínom munom,
mær, at mínom munom.

Þurs ríst ec þér oc þriá stafi,
ergi oc oði oc óþola;
svá ec þat af ríst, sem ec þat á reist,
ef goraz þarfar þess.'

angry with you,
Freyr must hate you,
the amazingly bad girl, and you have gained
the ?violent anger of the gods.

Let the *jötnar* hear, let the *hrímpursar* hear,
the sons of the Suttungar, the troop of the Æsir
themselves,
how I forbid, how I exclude,
the merriment of people from the maid,
the enjoyment of people[’s company] from the
maid.

Hrímgrímnir is the name of the *þurs* who must
have you
down below the corpse-gates;
there may farm-boys give you goats’ urine
at the roots of the tree.
Never get another drink,
girl, from your wishes,
girl, at my wishes.

I carve *þurs* [rune-name] at you and three letters:
ergi [perversion] and *oði* [madness] and *óþoli*
[unbearability];
thus will I cut it away, just as I carved it on,
if there should be need of it'

At this point, Gerðr capitulates, welcomes Skírnir, and agrees to *unna* ('love') Freyr.

In a sense, this curse is a response to Gerðr’s transgression of the will of the gods; much the same reading is demanded of the story told by Saxo Grammaticus around 1216×23 of Odinus (Old Norse *Óðinn*) being repeatedly rebuffed by Rinda (Old Norse *Rindr*) in his attempts to woo her (partly by afflicting her with a fever), whose similarities to *Skírnismál* McKinnell and I have independently emphasised, and which consolidates this reading.⁴³ Admittedly, Skírnir’s moral probity in the text is open to question: if nothing else, Gerðr’s successful resistance to the conventional exercise of patriarchal power (wealth and violence) reduces Skírnir to turning to the unmasculine and morally dubious method of using magic, and similar criticisms can be levelled at Odinus in Saxo’s narrative. Meanwhile, Bibire has shown that Snorri Sturluson was able to develop the story of Freyja and Gerðr (which he derived at least partly through a text similar to our version of *Skírnismál*) into a tale in which ‘the gods bring about their own downfall through their own explicit moral failure’.⁴⁴ All the same, Skírnir’s demands represent the will of the in-group, to which Gerðr is expected to accede: as Larrington put it,

the gods—the collective patriarchal powers Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr—will be furiously angry with Gerðr. Far from being a ‘good girl’, colluding with male wishes, Gerðr’s resistance marks her as an ‘uppity woman’, literally an anathema to patriarchal society. She is condemned, as we have seen, to be marginalized, disempowered, victimized, both sexualized and desexualized; a familiar range of strategies for keeping women in their place.⁴⁵

43 MCKINNELL (2005), pp. 158–59; HALL, A. (2004), “The Meanings of *Elf* and *Elves* in Medieval England” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Glasgow), available at <<http://www.alarichall.org.uk>> <<https://dspace.gla.ac.uk/handle/1905/607>>, pp. 147–50.

44 BIBIRE, P. (1986), “Freyr and Gerðr: The Story and its Myths”. In SIMEK, R., JÓNAS KRISTJÁNSSON and BEKKER-NIELSEN, H. (eds), *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 65th Birthday, 28th May 1986*, Wien, Böhlau, pp. 19–40 (at pp. 34–39, quoting p. 37).

45 LARRINGTON, C. (1992), “ ‘What Does Woman Want?’ *Mær* und *Munr* in *Skírnismál*”. *Álvissmál*, 1, 3–16, available at <<http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~alvismal>>, p. 10.

Skírnir mentions *jötnar* and *tramar* in his curse, but (-)*þurs* is the most prominent monster-word, both in terms of the number of repetitions (five) and the fact that as a rune-name (perhaps polysemically denoting the monster), *þurs* begins the culminating stanza of Skírnir's curse.⁴⁶ *Þursar* here, then, are effectively invoked as a potential punishment for resisting the will of the gods; and this gives us a framework for supposing likewise that there could also be a moral dimension for the affliction of someone by a *þurs* in the sense of an illness.

Dronke considered that

it is apt, succinct, integrating, to use the ogre-world as her [Gerðr's] hell, since proverbially *þurs er kvenna kvöl*, 'Ogre is women's torment', *þurs vældr kvinna kvillu*, 'Ogre causes women's illness'. This is the motto applied to the *þ*-rune in the Icelandic and Norwegian Runic Poems. Precisely what torment or illness of women is meant can hardly be determined, nor why a *þurs* should cause it.⁴⁷

The comparanda which Dronke adduced are surely important, but her final statement that 'precisely what torment of illness of women is meant can hardly be determined' seems a little over-cautious (if not, indeed, coy).⁴⁸ Regarding the *þurs* as a *kvilla*, although our evidence is sparse, it is fairly clear that *þursar* were associated with causing some kind of poisonous fluid in the veins, apparently by means of (metaphorical?) projectiles, and with inflicting *sár-riða*. Frankis drew attention to the similarity of a *þurs* causing illness with a *sár-þvara*, a 'wound-spear', to the phenomenon of *ælf*e ('elves', along with *ese* 'pagan gods' and *hægtessan* 'witches/valkyries') causing illness with *scotu* ('projectiles') in the Old English charm *Wið færstice*—to which we might add that *Wið færstice* envisages that the patient may have been 'on blod scoten' ('shot in the blood'), recalling the use of the Canterbury Rune-Charms against *áðravari*.⁴⁹ I have admittedly taken pains elsewhere to show that Anglo-Saxon *ælf*e, the best-attested traditional supernatural agents of illness in our Anglo-Saxon evidence, need not have been synonymous with illness, nor necessarily aligned with monsters in our Old English medical texts.⁵⁰ While I still think that my argumentation holds, the perspectives adopted in the current article discourage its dogmatic assertion or overextension, in favour of accepting a degree of ambiguity concerning the position of supernatural beings.⁵¹ It is noteworthy, then, that the symptoms associated with *þursar* are similar to the range attributed to the *ælf*e, which are most frequently associated with fevers. Despite the sparsity of the data, then, it is plausible that our two texts linking *þursar* with illness are roughly representative. Meanwhile, Skírnir's curse leaves little doubt that one sort of *kvöl* that a *þurs* might inflict on a woman was rape. That *þurs* as sexual *kvöl* might overlap conceptually with the *þurs* as *kvilla* is consistent to some extent with the comparisons adduced above for the concept of monster as illness: the image of *dweorgas* and *maran* inflicting fever by riding their victims arguably has sexual connotations, while the *ælf*e .

Alongside *Skírnismál*, another stimulating if less proximate analogue for the idea of afflictions by *þursar* as related to moral transgression is provided by the Finnish folk-poem *Riiden synty* ('The Birth/Origin of Rickets'), collected in the nineteenth century

46 Cf. the polysemy of *kostr* in stanza 30: LARRINGTON (1992), p. 9.

47 DRONKE, U. (1962), "Art and Tradition in *Skírnismál*". In DAVIS, N. and WRENN, C. (eds), *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien*, London, Allen and Unwin, pp. 250–68 (repr. in DRONKE, U. (1996), *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands*, Aldershot, Variorum, ch. 9), p. 257.

48 She cited REICHBORN-KJENNERUD, I. (1924), "Eddatidens medisin". *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 40, 103–48 (at pp. 115–16), but he knew of neither the Canterbury nor Sigtuna texts.

49 FRANKIS (2000), p. 3.

50 HALL (2007b), pp. 96–156, esp. 105, 116–17, 127; cf. the diagram above.

51 On this kind of variation among the later medieval Scandinavian counterparts of *ælf*e, the *álfar*, see now GUNNELL (2007).

by Elias Lönnrot, and one of the main texts in the canon of Finnish folk-poetry to mention a *tursas*, the Finnish cognate of *purs*. Parallels for *Skírnir*'s charm have been noted, particularly from Old Norse and Old English texts, showing that it was neither unique nor solely a literary phenomenon,⁵² but *riiden synty* has been little discussed, if at all, in connection with *pursar*, nor with *Skírnismál*. Lönnrot's edition is not, admittedly an ideal source—he was inclined to conflate different oral variants which he had collected, and archival investigation of our recorded variants of the poem would be illuminating—but it suffices here to show the potential of the material:⁵³

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Riiden synty.</p> <p>Neitonen norosta nousi, Hienohelma heiniköstä, Jok' on kaunis katsellessa, Ilman ollessa ihana; Se ei suostu sulhasihin, Mielly miehiin hyvihin. Tuli yksi mies turilas, Meritursas paitulainen, Kyllä kehno keinon keksi, Arvasi hyvän asian: Pani tuolle painajaisen, Saatti nurjan nukkumahan, Laitteli lepeämähän, Nurmelle mesinukalle, Maalle maksan karvaiselle. Siinä neitosen makasi, Teki neien tiineheksi, Kostutti kohulliseksi, Itse ottavi eronsa, Läksi kurja kulkemahan, Vaivainen vaeltamahan.</p> | <p>The Origin of Rickets, Atrophy</p> <p>From a dell [v. the sea] a maiden rose, a 'soft skirts' from a clump of grass, who was lovely to behold, the delight of the world; to suitors she paid no regard, for the good men no fancy had.</p> <p>A giant (<i>turilas</i>) came, a shirted monster (<i>tursas</i>) of the sea, the wretch to be sure had planned a scheme, had thought upon a fine affair: a nightmare he put down on her, he caused the unwilling one to sleep, brought her to seek repose on a honey-dropping sward, on the liver-coloured earth. There he lay with the girl, made the maiden with child, quickened her into pregnancy, himself his departure took, the scoundrel started to go away, the wretch to wander forth.</p> |
|---|--|

The text goes on to describe how the girl wakes to find herself pregnant and how God banishes her, describing her as a *portto* ('harlot'), but that she chooses not to go where she has been sent; the child which she begets winds up being christened by evil women, using water in which they have washed their filthy clothes, as *riisi* ('rickets').

The passage quoted presents us with a similar narrative to the one implied by *Skírnismál*. A beautiful woman refuses the offers of suitors; the collocation of this detail with the subsequent description of how the *meritursas* has sex with her, and God's immediate indictment of her immorality, implies a causal connection between

⁵² Most importantly the runic love-charm from Bergen ed. MCKINNELL-SIMEK-DÜWEL (2004), p. 131–32; also HARRIS, J. (2002), "Cursing with the Thistle: *Skírnismál* 21, 6–8, and OE Metrical Charm 9, 16–17". In ACKER, P. and LARRINGTON, C. (eds), *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, New York, Routledge, pp. 79–93 (originally published as in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 76, 1975, 26–33). On the place to which Gerðr is to be banished, HALL, A. (2007), "Constructing Anglo-Saxon Sanctity: Tradition, Innovation and Saint Guthlac". In STRICKLAND, D. (ed.), *Images of Sanctity: Essays in Honour of Gary Dickson, Visualising the Middle Ages*, 1, Leiden, Brill, pp. 207–35, available at <<http://www.alarichall.org.uk>> (at pp. 223–30) now supplements HALL, A. (2002), "The Images and Structure of *The Wife's Lament*", *Leeds Studies in English*, 33, 1–29, available at <<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/2882/>>, at pp. 10–11 and the references given there. Cf. the stanza of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* quoted above.

⁵³ Ed. LÖNNROT, E. (1880), *Suomen kansan muinaisia loitsurunoja*, Helsinki, Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura, pp. 320–21; trans. ABERCROMBY, J. (1898), *The Pre- and Proto-Historic Finns, Both Eastern and Western, with The Magic Songs*, 2 vols, London, Nutt, II pp. 356–57 (no. 215).

the events (though the text is not explicit on the point): the moral failing facilitates the rape (or perhaps seduction?) by the *meritursas*. This in turn leads to the girl's banishment by God. (A further moral transgression—this time not paralleled in *Skírnismál*—is that she refuses to undertake the exile prescribed, and this in turn implicitly contributes to the dire outcome of her liaison with the *meritursas*, the disease of rickets.) If Finnic traditions concerning *tursaat* were similar to those concerning *pursar*, *Riiden synty* would support the argument that there could have been a moral dimension to the harm inflicted by *pursar*.

Conclusions

It is possible, then, to understand some Old Norse words—I have focused here on *purs*—to denote not only monsters, but also illnesses. Moreover, it is at least at times helpful to understand these words as presenting monster and illness as identical—as one and the same category. Reading the evidence in this way helps us to interpret the presence of the term *purs* in two runic charms in relation to the occurrences of the word in mythological texts: it becomes possible to posit a discourse in which the mundane experience of an ailment could be transformed, partly through the polysemy of words, into a struggle between man and monster. This discourse connected illness with a struggle deeply encoded in the mythology of medieval Scandinavian culture, most clearly in stories of the *ragnarøk*. Reading *purs* in this way also allows the prominent role of the god Þórr as a monster-fighter to be linked with his less prominent but nonetheless well-attested associations with healing, giving his attributes a greater degree of conceptual coherence than has hitherto been recognised, and suggesting a greater role for beliefs in gods in ideas about health than has hitherto been recognised.

It is reasonable to say that the wider range of cultural meanings with which I have connected illness had a moral dimension: it had implications for defining proper and improper behaviour. To this extent, my association of mundane ailments with mythological beings also implicitly associates morality with health. Bringing our patchy evidence this far is an achievement, and to take it further is a speculative exercise: certainly our medical texts concerning *pursar* offer no clear evidence that they might afflict people specifically in response to moral transgression. But the broader historical and anthropological context of the present collection, supplemented in my own article with reference to nineteenth-century Finnish tradition, makes it clear that affliction by *pursar* might have been associated with moral transgression. Moreover, the Old Norse poem *Skírnismál* does provide some encouragement for this reading, since it prominently invokes affliction by *pursar* as part of a curse, uttered in an effort to bring about actions desirable to the gods. This is a fleeting glimpse of a possible world of moral meaning in medieval Scandinavian medicine.