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LAST LAUGHS: TORTURE IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC LITERATURE

Stefan Thomas Hall

Medieval Icelandic literature is full of violence, calculated and reasoned violence, narrated in such a way as to focus largely on issues of personal honor and justice, less so on the spectacle of blood so common in the modern Hollywood action film. Fredrik Heinemann writes, “[B]revity is common in fight scenes in the sagas, counteracting the notion that they are merely tales of pugnacious farmers anxious to strike a blow for honor....[S]aga authors appear far more interested in the motives of the fighters than in the details of the fight” (Heinemann 105). Heinemann’s observation is quite perceptive: Icelandic authors rarely dwell on blood and gore. So, for instance, in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, when Hrafnkel discovers his farmhand Einar has ridden his horse Freyfaxi despite Hrafnkel’s oath that he would kill any man who rode the horse, we are not given a description of how Hrafnkel strikes Einar or even where the blade of his axe hits Einar. There is no blood on display: “þá hljóp hann af baki til hans ok hjó hann banahögg” ‘Then Hrafnkel jumps off his horse and dealt him a death-blow’ (86-87). The medieval Icelandic author immediately moves on from the death-blow to what Hrafnkel does next: “Eftir þat riðr hann heim við svá búit á Aðalból ok segir þessi tíðindi” ‘After that he rides home with that done to Aðalból and announces the news’ (87). This killing scene is pretty typical of medieval Icelandic literature.

When a saga character has a grievance (in the *Íslendingasögur* especially), he may announce his grievance and carry out his own justice, as swiftly as possible in the majority of cases. Capital punishment is exacted by the plaintiff-cum-judge-cum-executioner. This is perfectly in accordance with the wisdom in stanza 127 of the *Hávamál* which advises, “[H]vars þú bōl kant, / qveððu þat bōlvi at, / oc gefat þinom fiádom frið” ‘Where you feel grievance, announce that grievance, and do not give your enemies peace’ (*Edda* 37). The events leading up to and following a killing in the majority of medieval Icelandic sagas receive the bulk of the narration. The actual killing, the moment when the spear or axe or sword meets human flesh, usually receives relatively few lines in the narration before the author focuses on consequences. Acts of torture involving detailed description of the

torturer's methods and the prolonged physical pain inflicted on the tortured subject are relatively rare in medieval Icelandic literature. The few torture scenes that do exist in medieval Icelandic literature, therefore, stand out, and while torture is not explicitly condemned by medieval Icelandic writers, the cultural statement these writers seem to make time and again is that nothing good comes to the torturer from his actions. Torture, it would seem, goes against the normal code of punishment. There are only a handful of torture scenes in the whole of the medieval Icelandic literary corpus, and I will try to touch upon as many of them as possible in this short paper. While acts of torture are no laughing matter, as a rule, ultimately, those tortured (or their friends or kinsmen) wind up having the last laugh at the expense of the torturer.

Before I discuss several examples of torture in medieval Icelandic literature, however, let me cite a couple of modern ideas about and attitudes towards torture, because these ideas and attitudes inform my own interpretation of torture in medieval Icelandic literature and because I believe these attitudes towards torture are shared by medieval Icelandic authors and audiences. Part 1, article 1 of the "Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment" of 10 December 1984, for instance, provides a detailed definition of torture as

any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)

Beyond the mere infliction of physical pain, however, Derek Jeffreys points out that "Torturers subtly exploit and undermine...inner dimensions of our being" (5). I believe medieval Icelandic authors

seem most keen to address this inner human aspect of the relationship between torturer and the tortured. Torture “assaults our spiritual nature” (Jeffreys 3) and “affronts human dignity” (5), and such an affront to personal dignity and honor in medieval Icelandic literature demands not only composure and bravery on the part of the tortured subject but also revenge if at all possible. Personal dignity and honor were of great importance to medieval Icelanders, for as Victor Turner writes,

It may well have been directly due to the lack of centralized authority that Icelanders put so much stress on personal dignity, honor, and loyalty.... [E]ven fancied slights might lead to bloodshed and homicide, for this sector of the culture became, as it were, overloaded with value emphases to compensate for the lack of sanctioned legal procedures.... [O]ne can clearly see that if too much is left to personal honour, dishonourable deeds often result. (356-57)

We might also amend Turner’s statement to read that honorable deeds also often result. Revenge was honorable, failure to take it dishonorable. Revenge preserved the dignity of both the dead man and the one who managed to achieve vengeance.

It is not only the act of revenge, however, that preserves human dignity. Medieval Icelanders believed that being able to endure torture and die well, brave and defiant, also preserved the dignity of the tortured man. Heroic “posturing,” as Theodore Andersson has written, directs attention away from the dying man’s fears and toward the dying man’s heroism (62). “Fearlessness at the hour of death,” was “one of the traits of heroism,” according to Úlfar Bragason (457): “To die unprepared, particularly at the hands of a murderer, was to lose dignity” (459). To illustrate this medieval Icelandic preoccupation with the preservation of human dignity under extreme duress, I will discuss a handful of examples from the eddas and sagas. The first few examples involve someone’s being tortured to death and the taking of revenge on the torturer by friends or kinsmen. It is not the tit-for-tat aspect of the story pattern on which I would like to focus but rather on the defiance shown by the tortured man and his ability to maintain dignity while being tortured, for it is this quality that I believe medieval Icelandic writers and audiences admired most in a man. This spirit, courage, and heroic mind set are embodied in the medieval Icelandic word *drengskapr*, which I will discuss further in a moment.

A good example of this story pattern can be found in “Orms þáttir Stórolfssonar,” in which the troll Brúsi tortures Orm’s best friend and blood-brother Ásbjörn in his cave. Ásbjörn suffers a slow, painful disembowelment: “Síðan opnaði Brúsi kvið á Ásbirni ok náði þarmaenda hans ok knýtti um járnsúluna ok leiddi Ásbjörn þar í hring um. En Ásbjörn gekk einart, ok rökðust svá á enda allir hans þarmar” ‘Then Brúsi opened the abdomen of Ásbjörn and grabbed his entrail-end and knotted that round an iron pole and led Ásbjörn there around in a ring. And Ásbjörn walked continuously, and wound out thus to their end were all of his intestines’ (460). The author includes this gruesome description of *kvöl*, or “torture,” not merely for the spectacle, but to highlight just how heroic Ásbjörn is, for, as Ásbjörn’s entrails exit his body bit by bit in his death march, he recites defiant death verses about how brave he had been in life and how his blood-brother Ormr will come to avenge him:

Myndi Ormr
ófrýnn vera,
ef á kvöl þessa
kynni at líta,
ok grimmliga
gjalda þursi
várar viðfarar
víst, ef næði. (464)

Ormr would be angry, if on this torture he could look, and grimly would repay the thurse for this treatment certainly, if he can get here.

The author further tells us, “Síðan lét Ásbjörn líf sitt með mikilli hreysti ok drengskap” ‘Then Ásbjörn gave up his life with great valor and *drengskapr*’ (464). It is worth noting that in his translation of this tale, Matthew Driscoll renders *drengskapr* in this instance as “integrity” (464) and later as “dignity” (466). The word *drengskapr* defies exact translation, as Denton Fox has pointed out—Fox translates it as “manliness” (297n14) as does Richard Bauman (139). *Drengr* could be rendered as “brave man” or “warrior” while *skapr* could be rendered “shape [of the mind]” or “disposition,” “mind” or “attitude,” perhaps even “courage” or “spirit.” Therefore, the compound word *drengskapr* might indeed mean something like “dignity,” more than

just “courage” or “valor” or “bravery,” because it captures the spirit which a man possesses or loses depending on his actions. Richard Bauman argues that *drengskapr* represents a sort of “value system” (142) and is “one of the most ideologically salient and value-laden terms in early Icelandic discourse” (140). Thus, the medieval Icelandic author makes it clear that Ásbjörn defies his torturer by not giving expression to his physical pain and by heroically improvising his own death-song under extreme duress. In the eyes of medieval Icelanders, this would indeed preserve his dignity, his “drengskapr.”

Ásbjörn’s blood-brother, the title hero of the tale, Ormr, of course, does avenge his death, first by killing Brúsi’s coal-black she-cat mother by breaking her backbone after a difficult fight in which he has to call on God and the saints to grant him victory (467-68), and then by killing Brúsi himself. The author’s description of Brúsi’s death is even more gruesome than Ásbjörn’s. Having ripped Brúsi’s beard from his face, Ormr gets the upper hand, and Brúsi begs to be killed quickly and confesses that he had tortured Ásbjörn and that Ásbjörn had died bravely: “‘En þat var satt, at mjök þína ek Ásbjörn þrúða, þá er ek rakða ór honum alla þarmana, ok gaf hann sik ekki við, fyrr en hann dó’” ‘It is true that I greatly tortured Ásbjörn the proud, when I wound out of him all his guts, and he did not give up before he died’ (468). But Ormr refuses Brúsi’s request for a quick death: “‘Illa gerðir þú þat,’ segir Ormr, ‘at þína hann svá mjök, jafnröskvan mann. Skaltu ok hafa þess nökkurar menjar’” ‘Evil have you done to torture him so much, a valiant man. So, you shall have this certain reminder’ (469). Brúsi’s reminder is, of course, to be tortured himself: “Hann brá þá saxi ok reist blóðörn á baki honum ok skar öll rifin frá hryggnum ok dró þar út lungun. Lét Brúsi svá líf sitt með litlum drengskap” ‘[Ormr] drew then his *seax* and carved a blood-eagle on his back and cut all the ribs from the spine and drew out the lungs there. Brúsi gave up his life with little dignity’ (469).

Ormr’s revenge can be seen to be equally as gruesome as Brúsi’s torture of Ásbjörn, and in some sense, Ásbjörn has had the last laugh through Ormr’s vengeance. While Roberta Frank believes the blood-eagle was simply an “antiquarian revival” in thirteenth-century Icelandic literature based on misreadings or overactive imaginations (341-43), the author and audience of “Orms þáttur” would have seen it as fitting retribution for Ásbjörn’s own horrible torture. Like the blood-eagle the sons of Ragnar loðbrók carve on King Ælla’s back in revenge for their father’s torture and death, which I discuss below, this extreme

act, the blood-eagle, represents the ultimate vengeance. Brúsi is humiliated not merely by being tortured himself, however, but also because his mother is described as a more fierce fighter even than he is. Brúsi is also denied a heroic death speech, suggesting that he is unprepared to die or else knows not how to die well. Medieval Icelanders would have noted this. Ásbjörn dies a better, more heroic death than Brúsi, and the medieval Icelandic author paints the two in stark contrast to one another when he describes how Ásbjörn dies with great “drengskapr” while Brúsi dies with little (“með litlum drengskap”). Both die while being tortured, yet Brúsi’s torture is repayment, a reminder that he has done an “evil” thing. Ormr, however, apparently does not commit an evil act when he tortures Brúsi because he is retaliating, avenging his blood-brother who died with great “drengskapr.” Brúsi’s horrific torture of Ásbjörn requires a similar horrific retaliation. The extremity of death by torture gives license to the friends and/or family of the tortured man to retaliate by torturing the initial torturer, and this is the only circumstance in which torture is actually permissible in Icelandic literature.

Turning now to the death-song of Ragnar loðbrók, the *Krákumál*, laughter is actually heard during the torture scene, and further vengeance and last laughs follow as well. While Ásbjörn had recited defiant verses, laughter is not explicit in his death-song, nor is there any laughter when Ormr avenges his death. The end result could be said to be a satisfying resolution, but comedy it is not. In stanza 29 of the *Krákumál*, however, as the snakes bite Ragnar in the English King Ælla’s snake pit, Ragnar manages to deliver the quintessential defiant death-verse, complete with laughter: “Glaðr skal-ek æl með Ásom í ændugi drekka. / Lifs ero liðnar stundir. Læjandi skal-ek deyja” ‘Glad shall I drink ale with the Æsir in the high-seat. / My life passes. Laughing shall I die’ (345). In chapter 15 of the *Fornaldarsaga* prose version, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, he spouts off, “Gnyðja mundu nú grísir ef þeir vissi, hvat inn gamli þyldi” ‘Now would the young pigs squeal if they knew what the old one endured’ (268). This is only slightly altered from stanza 25 of the *Krákumál*: “Gnyðja mundo grísir, ef galtar hag vissi” (350), which T. A. Shippey once translated in a conference paper as, “The little piggies would go oink if they knew how the old boar died” (“Not Nice Anglo-Saxon Humour”). According to the succeeding chapters in *Ragnars saga*, his sons, Ivar the Boneless, Sigurðr snake-in-the-eye, and the rest did indeed “go oink” all over the English, killing Ælla in chapter seventeen by carving a blood-eagle on

his back and eventually conquering most of England. Again, regardless whether we believe the blood-eagle is simply fiction (as Frank does) or a horrific reality of the Viking age (Jones 219 n.2), this sort of retaliation represents not mere bloodthirstiness, but, at least to medieval Icelandic authors and audiences, a justified last laugh.

I am not arguing that we are here dealing with comedy in the sense that there is a happy or joyful and-they-all-lived-happily-ever-after ending, though one might argue that with justice served and conflict and grievance resolved, to the medieval Icelandic culture a sense of relief is provided. The laughter we detect in these stories is aggressive laughter. But are we dealing with humor? Humor might be defined as something that is designed to produce laughter, but in medieval Icelandic literature, it seems to me, at least, laughter often goes hand-in-hand with violence and retribution. People often laugh, as Shippey has pointed out, when someone gets what is coming to him, when things turn out differently than one's adversaries imagined ("Grim Wordplay" 35-38). The torturer is frustrated by his subject's mocking or defying him in some way and dying heroically, with great "drengskapr." He is also frustrated in the ultimate sense of the word when he dies an even more gruesome and dishonorable death than the man whom he tortured. When the torturer dies with little "drengskapr," audiences sigh (and perhaps laugh) with relief that justice has been served.

This frustration of the torturer and triumph of the tortured shows up in *Völsunga saga* and *Atlaqviða in grænlenzca* from the poetic *Edda* as well. Like Ragnar, doomed to die in a snake pit, Gunnar is easily able to defy Atli's desire to learn the whereabouts of the Rhine gold once he knows his brother Högni is truly dead and the secret will die with him (*Völsunga saga* 208-09; *Edda* 244-45). Ridicule and defiant mockery are employed here and elsewhere in medieval Icelandic literature, and the tension caused by this sort of aggressive humor usually finds its release in violent acts. While laughter and humor need not be equated, as E. L. Ridsen has pointed out in "Heroic Humor in Beowulf" (77-78), humor in medieval Icelandic literature, I believe, comes in varieties just as laughter does. Heroic laughter of the sort Ragnar or Gunnar employ, may be seen as defiant, but also as "the laughter of the underdogs...which gives the laughers...an expression of victory over the repressors" (Hertzler 46). Being able to laugh in defiance of one's enemies preserves the dignity of the dying man, and this laughter is often made possible by the dying man's knowledge that

his death will be avenged by friends or kinsmen.

A good example of how defiant humor preserves dignity in the face of death can be found in the executions scene from chapter 36 of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, after Jómsvíkings' capture by Hákon Jarl at the battle of Hjörungavágr. Each Jómsvíking responds in some heroic or humorous way to their Norwegian executioner Þorkell Leira's question, "'Hversu hygg þú til at deyja?'" 'What do you think about dying?' (40). Each Jómsvíking is asked this question to test his bravery and is then executed in turn regardless of his response or antics. Several deliver humorous last words, and the tenth to be executed asks permission to urinate before his execution and then turns and shakes his penis at his executioner, adding that he wishes he could have had sex with Þorkell's daughter before he died (41). When it is Sveinn Búason's turn to be beheaded, he concocts the "hands-in-my-hair" trick, jerking his head back and causing the man who is holding Svein's hair away from his neck to have his hands cut off (41). With hands dangling from his long tresses, Sveinn and the remaining Jómsvíkings laugh at the Norwegian's expense, and Hákon Jarl interrupts the executions at this point because all of the Norwegians are being denied the "pleasure" of killing the Jómsvíkings. Hákon seems disgusted and uneasy at how the defiant humor employed by the Jómsvíkings is able to turn this mass execution and psychological torture into a game, as each Jómsvíking dies with his "reputation" ("orðstír") intact, to the shame ("skömm") of their Norwegian captors (40).

In the case of the Jómsvíkings, we are dealing with execution rather than torture. There is no detailed bloody description of the beheadings, but the manner in which the Norwegians carry out the executions could be considered psychological torture. The Norwegians attack the spirit of the Jómsvíkings, hoping to humiliate them, hoping to see them die with little dignity or "drengskapr." Helpless as they seem when forced to witness the beheadings of their friends one after the next, the Jómsvíkings employ humor to preserve their dignity and to frustrate their executioners. They manage to suppress the fear or anxiety that they surely feel as they watch their comrades executed, in accordance with the laws of the Jómsvíkings as one of them mentions (40), and Hákon winds up becoming the one experiencing humiliation because of their deaths. As Joyce Hertzler further suggests, "To launch a good counterlaugh against your assailants...is to forestall or block or neutralize their attack" (157). Most of the humor in medieval Icelandic literature, whether accompanied by laughter or not, seems to be of this

defiant or insulting sort, humor directed at a person in order to humiliate or ridicule, designed to produce or relieve tension. In other words, Old Icelandic humor need not be “funny” in our modern sense of the word. The tortured man uses it to save face. Torture itself, I believe, falls into this category of humor. It is designed to humiliate and to bring pleasure to the torturer. But time and again, medieval Icelandic authors suggest that this is a twisted sort of pleasure, a twisted sort of humor as well. Torture and humiliation end badly for the torturer, and the last laugh is always at the torturer’s expense. Ragnar’s defiant humor as he is dying, like that of Gunnar or the Jónsvíkings, makes him heroic, and preserves his “drengskapr,” his dignity, his spirit. He laughs and hopes his sons will have the ultimate last laugh at his torturer’s expense (which they do), and he laughs in order to strike fear into Ælla’s heart. This contest of human spirits, of the torturer (Ælla) and the tortured (Ragnar), like that of Brúsi and Ásbjörn or Atli and Gunnar, ends with a triumph for the tortured man whose “drengskapr” is maintained in extreme circumstances.

I turn now to a second story pattern, one in which the tortured man suffers shame and humiliation yet is allowed to live and to take his revenge at a later point in the tale. A well-known instance of this story pattern of torture and humiliation that backfires for the torturer in the long run is in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. Sám’s humiliation (“hrakning”) of Hrafnkell eventually leads to Hrafnkell’s taking revenge. The word *torture* (*hvöl*) is not used to describe Sám’s treatment of Hrafnkell and his men, but the description sufficiently fits the definition: “Þá taka þeir Hrafnkell ok hans menn ok bundu hendr þeirra á bak aftr. Eftir þat brutu þeir upp útibúrið ok tóku reip ofan ór krókum, taka síðan hnífa sína ok stinga raufar á hálsinum þeira ok draga þar í reipin ok kasta þeim svá upp yfir ásinn ok binda þá svá átta saman” ‘Then they take Hrafnkell and his men and they bound their hands behind their backs. After that they broke open the outer building and took rope off of hooks, then took their knives and puncture holes in their Achilles tendons and draw through there the rope and hoisted them up over the beam and then bind thus eight of them together’ (103). We are told that “var þá sigit blóð fyrir augu þeim” ‘blood had dripped into their eyes’ (103), only adding to the suffering and humiliation.

This is not a funny episode to anyone except for perhaps Sám, who takes pleasure in the torture and humiliation of Hrafnkell. He is warned after all by Þórkell Þjóstarsson that he is making a mistake in

torturing Hrafnkell and allowing him to live: “Eigi veit ek, hvi þú gerir þetta. Muntu þessa mest iðrast sjálf, er þú gefr honum líf” ‘I don’t know why you’re doing this. You will most regret this yourself, if you give him life’ (104). Þórkell suggests that it is better to kill your enemies than torture them and allow them to live because it is a safe bet that vengeance will be exacted. Þórkell himself may not explicitly suggest it, but the medieval Icelandic author seems to insinuate that torture is simply bad form. Sámr, however, offers Hrafnkell the choice between life (with shame) and death (with shame also): “Mörgum mundi betr þykkja skjótr dauði en slíkar hrakningar, en mér mun fara sem mörgum öðrum, at lífit mun ek kjósa, ef kostr er. Geri ek þat mest sökum sona minna, því at lítil mun vera uppreist þeira, ef ek dey frá” ‘A quick death to many seems better than such an insult, but for me it will go as for many others, that I will choose life, if it’s an option. I do that for the sake of my sons, because their upbringing will be bad if I die’ (104). Hrafnkel’s statement could mean either that he wants his sons to have a father to raise them, or it could mean that he wants to live in order to take revenge later and set a good example “for the sake of his sons.”

Hrafnkell does, of course, avenge this humiliation by killing Sám’s brother Eyvindr and regaining his property at Aðalból and his reputation (112-15), and the moral of the story manifests itself: One should not humiliate someone unless one is prepared to face the consequences. That kind of tension must have relief in revenge. Sám’s torture of Hrafnkell goes beyond the infliction of physical pain and is clearly designed to humiliate Hrafnkell. This adds an extra dimension to the torture, for it attacks that “inner dimension” of Hrafnkel’s “being,” as Jeffreys would have it (5). It is one thing to have a grievance against someone and to pursue swift justice as Hrafnkell himself does in the scene quoted in the opening paragraph of this article. It is another thing entirely to torture and humiliate someone and try to deprive him of his dignity, and the author of *Hrafnkels saga* suggests that it is ill advised to commit acts of torture. Torture will out, so to speak, and the consequences for the torturer will not be pleasant.

The supreme example of the medieval Icelandic attitude towards torture, however, comes in the story of their ancestors’ pagan gods. Óðinn, the High One himself, might have done well to heed the wisdom he professes in the *Hávamál*, or *Sayings of the High One* from the Edda, which was cited in the opening paragraph of this paper. Instead of killing Loki immediately for orchestrating the killing of his

son Baldr, in the most famous of tortures gone wrong, Óðinn has Loki bound and tortured for what he had hoped would be eternity:

Nú var Loki tekinn griðalaus ok farit með hann í heli nökkurn. Þá tóku þeir þrjár hellur ok settu á egg ok lustu rauf á hellunni hverri. Þá váru teknir synir Loka, Váli ok Nari eða Narfi. Brugðu æsir Vála í vargslíki ok reif hann í sundr Narfa, bróður sinn. Þá tóku æsir þarma hans ok bundu Loka með yfir þá þrjá eggsteina....Þá tók Skaði eitrom ok festi upp yfir hann, svá at eitrit skyldi drjúpa ór orminum í andlit honum, en Sigyn, kona hans, stendr hjá honum ok heldr mundlaug undir eitrdropa. En þá er full er mundlaugin, þá gengr hon ok slær út eitrinu, en meðan drýpr eitrit í andlit honum. Þá kippist hann svá hart við, at jörð öll skelfr. Þat kallið þér landskjálfta. Þar ligr hann í böndum til ragnarökr. (Snorri 49)

Now Loki was taken without truce and he is born to a certain cave. Then they take three stones and set them on edge and they pierce a hole in each stone. Then were the sons of Loki taken, Váli and Nari or else Narfi. The æsir changed Váli into the likeness of a wolf and he rips Narfi asunder, his brother. Then the æsir take his guts and bind Loki with them over the three stones set on edge....Then Skaði took a venomous snake and fastened it up over him, so that the venom should drop from the worm onto his face, but Sigyn, his wife, stands by him and holds a hand-basin under the venom drops. But when the hand-basin is full, then she goes and pours out the venom, and in the meantime the venom drips onto his face. Then he convulses so hard because of that, that the whole earth shakes. You call that a earthquake. There he lies in bonds till Ragnarök.

Loki is both physically and mentally tortured here. He is first forced to witness his son's horrific death at the jaws of his other son, and his torment is further compounded by physical pain which is both prevented by his wife and caused by her when it is necessary to pour out the venom when the bowl is full. Perhaps the argument can be made that Óðinn felt he had been tortured by the death of his son Baldr and, therefore, he responded in kind. Nevertheless, knowing that Loki will become a major player as enemy of the gods at Ragnarök, Óðinn

would have been wise simply to have killed Loki outright.

It can be argued that Óðinn knew all along what lay in store for the gods, but his humiliation of Loki provides justification for revenge to be taken. Óðinn's torture of Loki seems more extreme than the torture of Ásbjörn, Hrafnkel, Ragnar, or Gunnar in that Loki potentially faces eternal pain and humiliation from which there seems no escape. Bound in a cave, his wife sharing in his humiliating situation, Loki is allowed no heroic last words, no defiant or brave gesture, no chance of dying with "drengskapr." It is no surprise, then, that when Loki manages somehow to get free he orchestrates the destruction of all of the gods, a fitting retaliation to such disgraceful and dishonorable treatment. He fights on the side of the giants and the hell-folk against the gods at Ragnarök: "Þar er ok þá Loki kominn ok Hrymr ok með honum allir hrímbursar, en Loka fylgja allir Heljarsinnar" 'There Loki also has come and Hrymr and with him all the frost-giants, and all of the hell-folk follow Loki' (Snorri 50). Had Óðinn killed Loki instead of torturing him, the Old Norse-Icelandic apocalypse might have played out differently, but the last laugh is again plainly had by the tortured, this time on a cosmic level. I cannot excuse the jealous Loki's killing of Baldr through trickery, nor would medieval Icelandic audiences have done so. It might be argued, moreover, that Óðinn, the chief of the gods, maintains his own "drengskapr" by dying in battle, but it must also be argued, then, that Loki too attempts to regain his own "drengskapr" by seeking revenge and dying in battle.

So, torturers do not simply inflict physical pain but also assault the dignity of the tortured. The tortured man (or god) who is defiant under such circumstances wins a sort of victory over his torturer by his very defiance, preserving his dignity, his "drengskapr," and allowing him the last laugh. The tortured man may be seen as heroic and tragic, even in Loki's case, while the torturer receives just retribution. Whether the tortured man himself survives to take his own revenge on his torturer, or the tortured man's friends or kinsmen are able to take revenge for him, either way, this last laugh, this victory of the human spirit, this show of courage, "drengskapr," is what medieval Icelandic writers and audiences admired so much.

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