

Torfi H. Tulinius

# Gaining control and “losing it”.

Masculinity and Trauma in a 13<sup>th</sup> c. Icelandic Saga





# Eyrbyggja saga – The Saga of the People of Eyri.



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*Gisli Sursson's Saga  
and The Saga of the People of Eyri*



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*Eyrbyggja Saga*

- An Icelandic saga from the mid-thirteenth century.
- Set in the Settlement period and the transitory period before the Conversion to Christianity (9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries)
- Chronicle of events in that period focusing on the first settlers in the area and the generation that is about to convert.





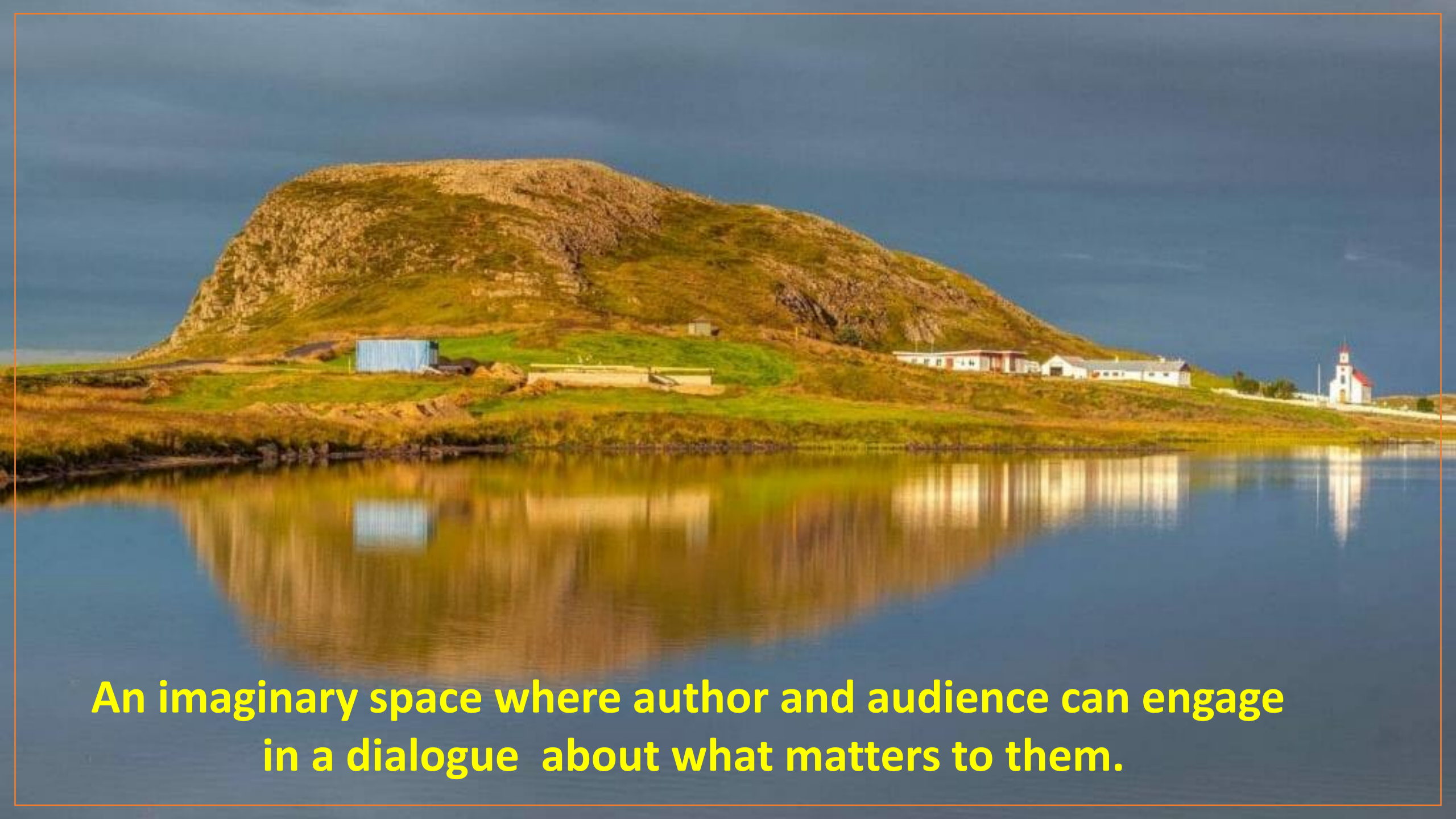
# Breiðafjörður



25 Kilometer







**An imaginary space where author and audience can engage  
in a dialogue about what matters to them.**



# Snorri Þorgrímsson: The narrative contract

“He maintained a temple and was afterwards called Snorri goði. He became a great chieftain, but many envied his rank, because they felt they were equal in birth to him, and they had more strength and confirmed willingness to use force to achieve their ends.”



# Themes inherent in the narrative contract

- Struggle for control over the community.
- This power is transmitted from generation to generation, usually by fathers:
  - “fyrir ættar sakar” (because of their birth)
- But you need other qualities too:
  - “fyrir afls sakar ok prófaðrar harðfengi” (more strength and confirmed willingness to use force).
- You have to struggle to become what your fathers were.

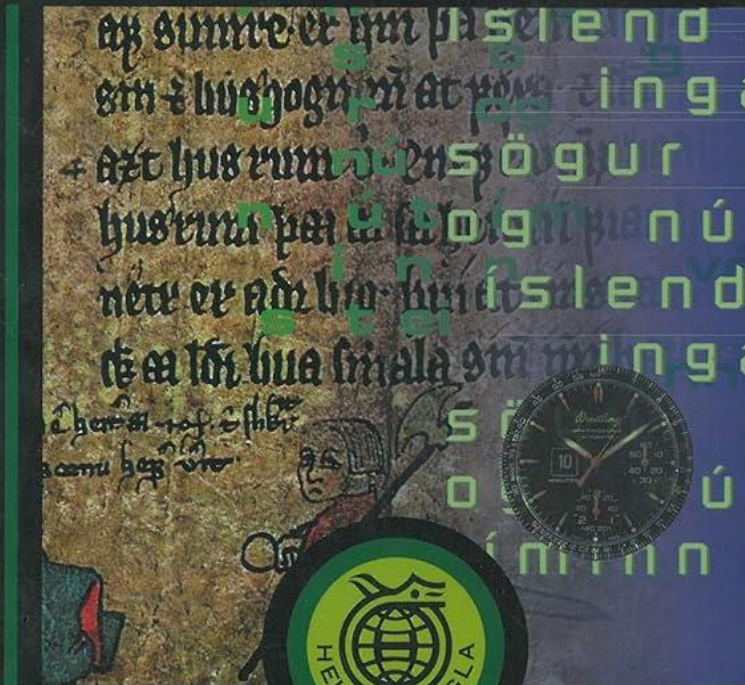




VÉSTEINN ÓLASON

# Dialogues with the Viking Age

Narration and Representation  
in the Sagas of the Icelanders



## Relevance for 13th c. Iceland?

- Dialogue about a dialogue
  - The saga is a dialogue with a generation which also is in dialogue with an older generation.
  - How to carry the burden of inheriting power.
- Obvious connections to the restructuring of Icelandic society in the period of composition of the saga, when there were many people competing for power though they were equally entitled to power by birth.
- The saga author and her/his audience are thinking about that.



# Traumatic period

Upp skaltu á kjöl klífa  
Köld er sjávardrífa.  
Skafl beygjattu skafl  
Þótt skúr á þig falli.  
Kostaðu huginn at herða  
Nú muntu lífið verða.  
Ást hafðir þú meyja.  
Eitt sinn skal hver deyja.

*Þórir jökull*





# Traumatic period

Onto the keel you climb,  
Cold is the ocean brine.  
Keeping courage though,  
Locked in a deadly throe.  
Baldhead, show no fear,  
showers fall on you here.  
With maidens you had a way,  
All must die one day.

*Anonymous translator*







# Eyrbyggja's problematic structure

- Saga scholars have had difficulties understanding the structure of this meandering narrative
- Medieval aesthetics?
- Influenced by the form of skaldic poetry?
- One scholar has used the metaphor of an Icelandic glacial river, coming down in one stream from the mountains onto the alluvial plain, where it separates into different strands, that criss-cross until they merge before flowing out into the ocean.
- **Why use this structure?**

# Complex structure and repression.

- This complex structure is the only way to say this story.
- Fragmentation/projection because the truth cannot be said aloud.
- It is repressed.
- The repression is played out in the narrative.
- The return of the repressed in the sub-plots of the saga.

➔ Interpreting the saga as if it were a dream.

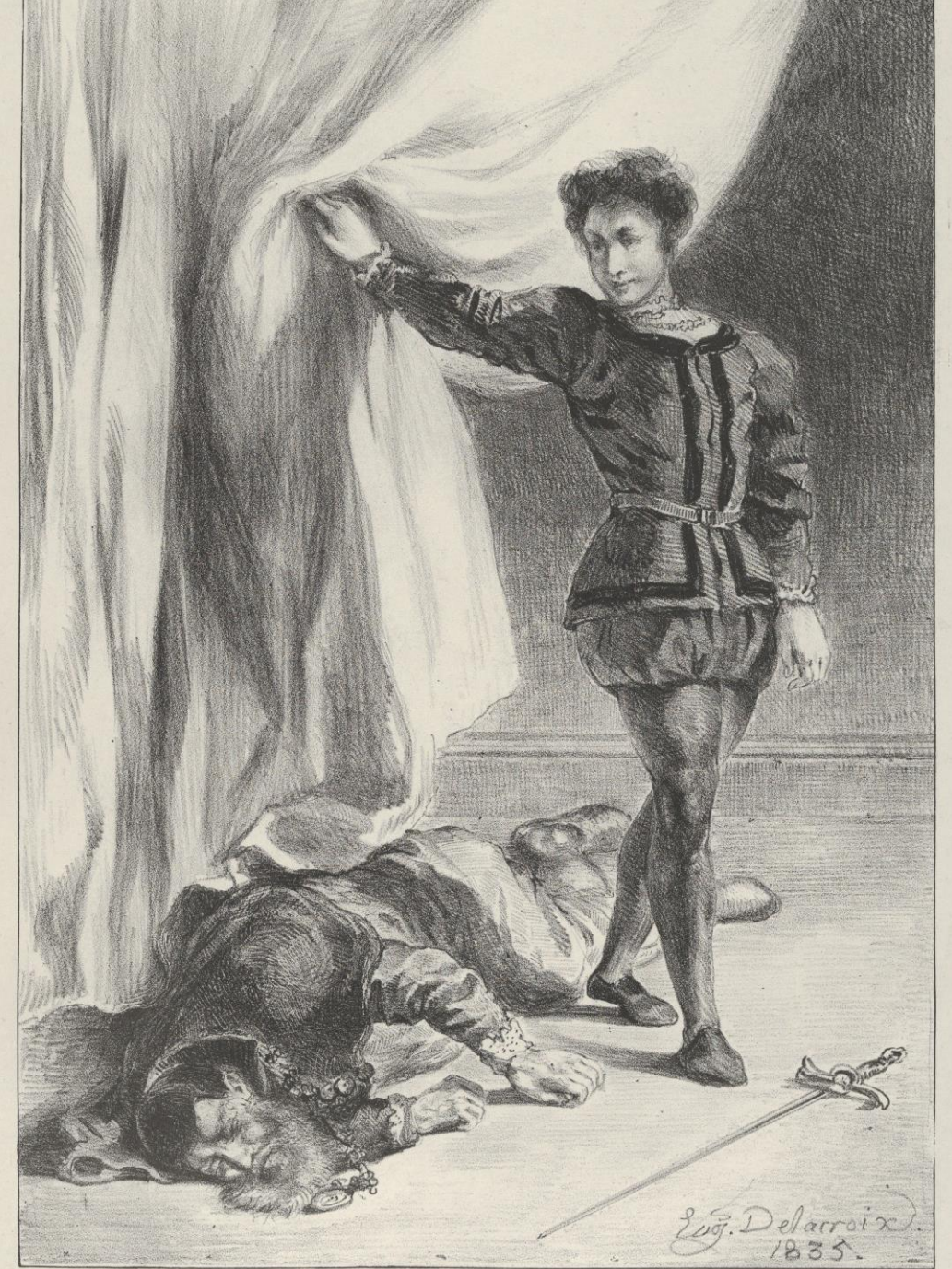




# An Icelandic Hamlet?

- Snorri is the son of a dead father who was the main chieftain.
- Originally named Þorgrímur, like his father, his new name means unruly child.
- His widowed mother has married his paternal uncle, who has taken over the chieftaincy and the ancestral domain.
- Snorri becomes the central character in the saga when he shows restraint, foresight and an ability for dissimulation and long-term planning.
- He tricks his step-father (uncle) out of the ancestral farm.
- His mother then divorces the step-father and lives with Snorri for the rest of her life.

➔ A Hamlet story without the tragedy.



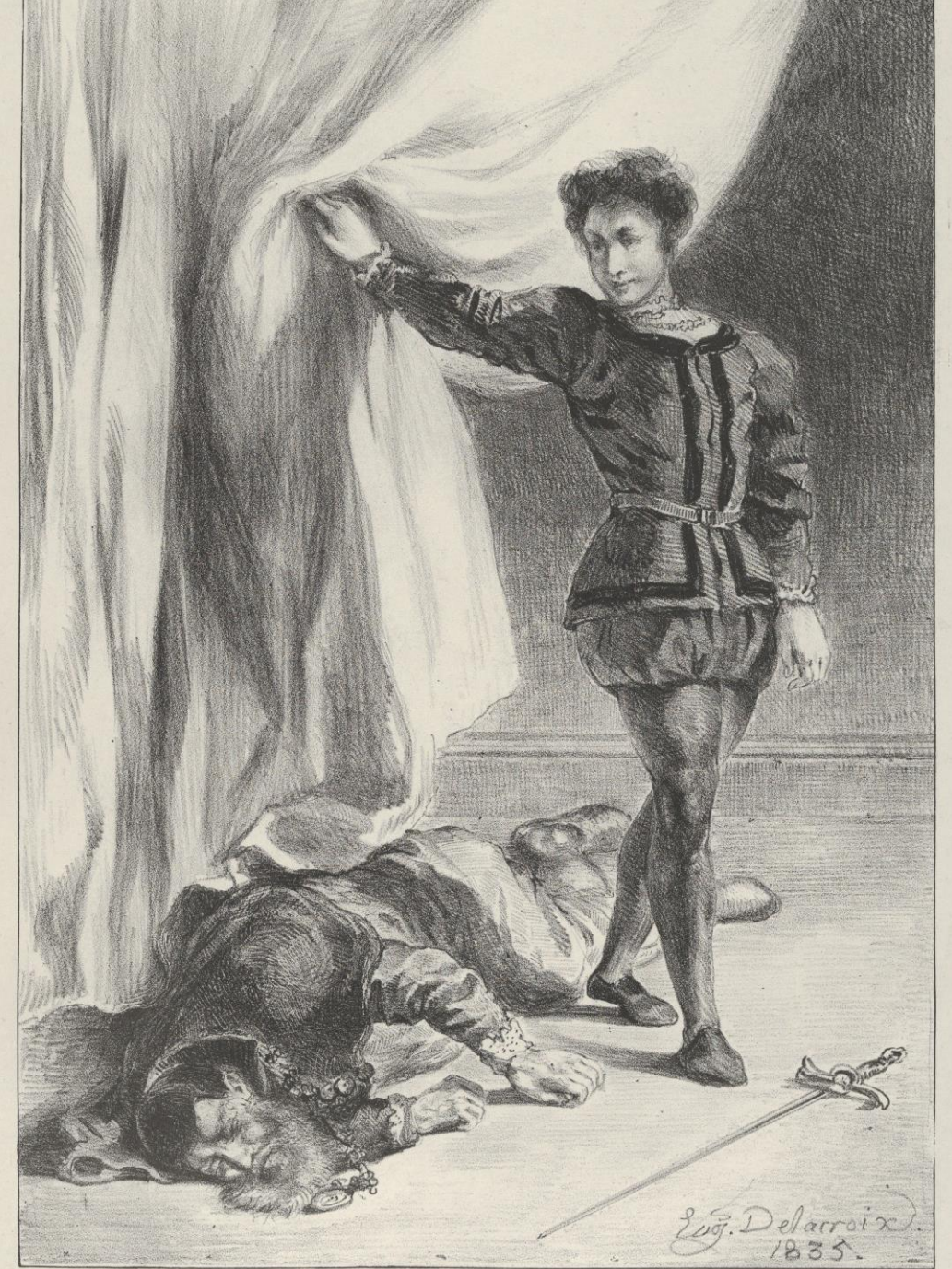
Vraiment ce conseiller est maintenant bien silencieux, bien discret, bien grave, lui qui dans sa vie était le drôle le plus bavard du monde.



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➔ Freud contemplated naming his most famous complex, the Hamlet complex.



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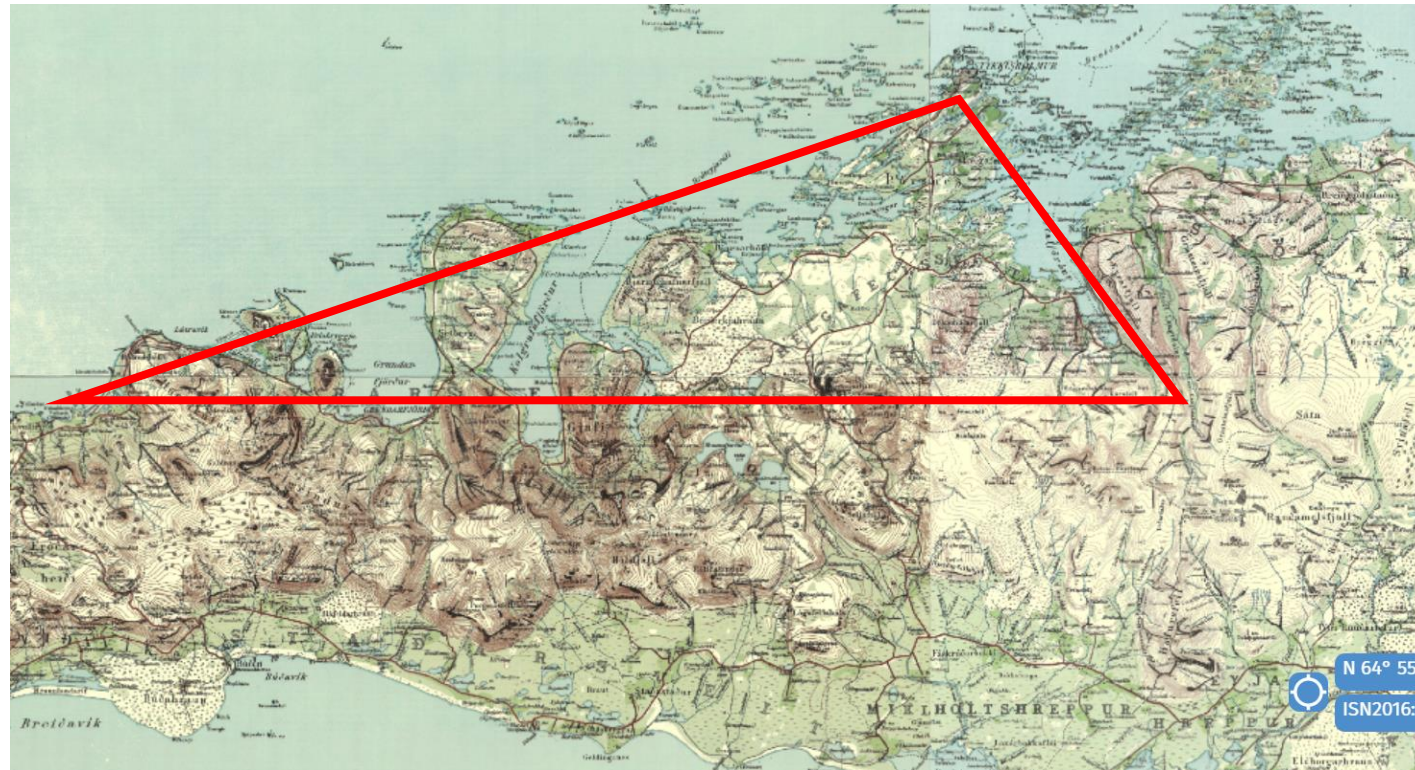
- Fathers as models
  - For Snorri: Þórólf mostrarskegg
- Castrating fathers
  - Arnkell's father: Þórólf lamefoot
- Absent fathers
  - Þórarinn's father: Þórólf holkinrazi
- Mothers who stay with their sons
  - For Snorri: Þórdís
- Lascivious women (mothers)
  - Þórarinn's mother:
  - Oddr's mother: Katla
  - Snorri's half-sister: Þuríðr
  - Þórgunna the Hebridean woman.

## The Oedipus triangle structures the saga



# It also structures the space of the saga

**Snorri occupies the place of symbolic power  
Founded by his great-grandfather**



Lascivious mothers

Castrating fathers

Snorri extends his power from the center to the periphery



# First sub-plot of the saga: Þórarinn the Black

- Mávahlíð is to the west of Helgafell.
- Þórarinn the Black lives there with his mother, Geirrid, and his wife Aud.
- He is a peaceful man, some say he has the temperament of a woman.
- Snorri's brother-in-law lives nearby.
- He accuses Þórarinn's mother of using witchcraft to maim his son.
- In fact is the witch Katla who has transformed into a „kveldriða“.





# Alleged theft of horses

- Snorri's brother-in-law now accuses Þórarinn of having stolen his horses and demands to search his home unlawfully (rannsaka – ransack).
- Geirrid reminds her son of what people say about him.
- He attacks.
- Aud intervenes by throwing blankets on the weapons.
- Her hand is cut off.





# A traumatic encounter.

- Discovering his wife's wound, Þórarinn follows his assailants.
- Hears them laughing about him having cut off his own wife's hand.
- Attacks them in a fit of rage
- Kills Snorri's brother-in-law by cleaving his skull with his sword.
- One of his men panics and runs, and has to be kept from throwing himself from a cliff.
- Afterwards, Þórarinn only expresses himself in poetry.





# Simone de Beauvoir

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- On ne naît pas femme on le devient.
- You are not born a woman, you become one.
- *Womanliness as a masquerade (Joan Riviere).*



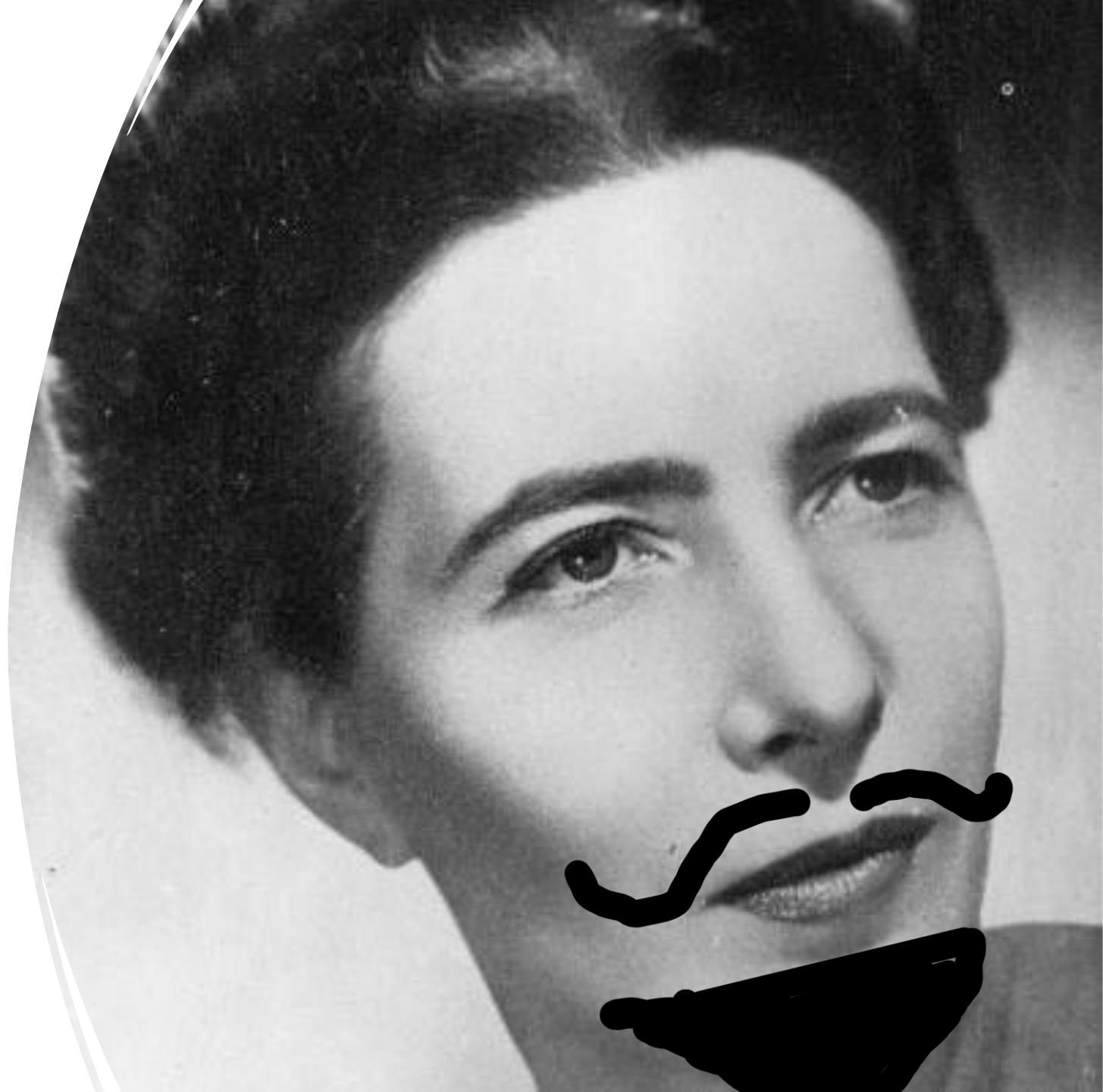


# Manliness as a masquerade

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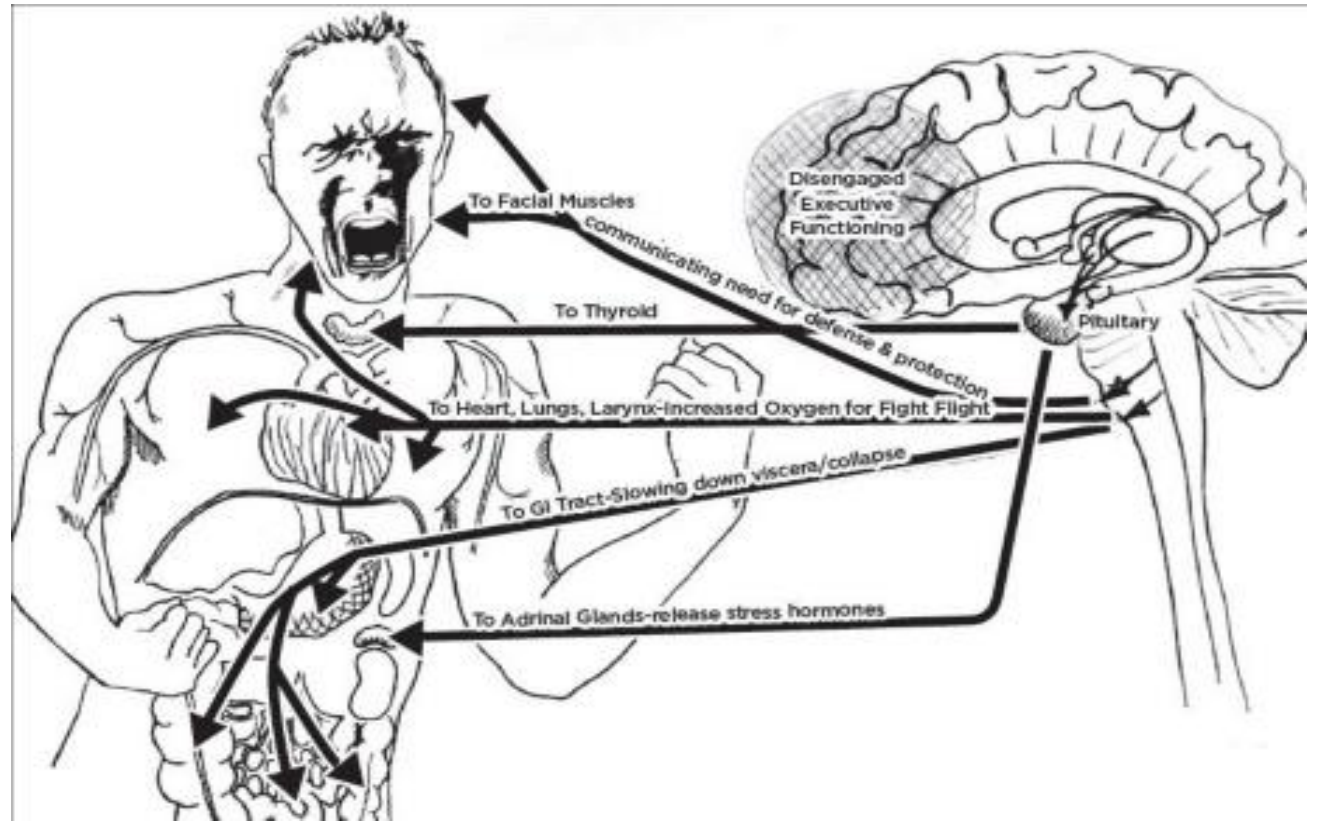
- On ne naît pas ~~femme~~ **homme** on le devient.
- You are not born a ~~woman~~ **man**, you become one.

➔ You have to perform your masculinity.



# Losing it: fight or flight

- Þórarinn is accused of not being masculine enough
  - Public opinion
  - Mother
- When prodded, he loses it and over-performs his masculinity
  - Kills neighbour
  - ~~Chops of his wife's hand.~~
- His companion under-performs by panicking and losing it.



Bessel Van der Kolk: *The Body Keeps the Score*





# Traumatic masculinity

- The first narrative digression of *Eyrbyggja saga* stages an opposition between over-performed and under-performed masculinity.
- To become a dialectic, a balance will be found later in the saga, f.ex. in the next narrative strand.
- Shows what the author and her/his audience are thinking about in a time when young men from the upper layers of society are being forced to perform their masculinity.

→ The experience can be traumatizing.

# Þórarinn's poetic frenzy

Knátti hjör und hetti,  
hræflóð, bragar Móða,  
rauk um sóknar sæki,  
slíðrbeittr staðar leita.  
Blóð féll, en var voði  
vígthjalds náar skaldi,  
þá var dæmisalr dóma  
dreyrafullr, um eyru.

*Þórarinn the black from Mávahlíð*





# Representing battle trauma in art.

The sword of the poet [my sword] razor sharp, found a spot under the helmet; corpse-torrent [blood] flowed over the warrior; Blood fell over [his] ears and yet the danger of the battle tent [sword] was near the poet. Then the judgement hall of decisions [the head] was full of gore.

*Pórarinn the black from Mávahlið*



# Traumatized masculinity and regression.

- The saga repeatedly introduces and weaves together narrative elements that rehearse aspects of the oedipal trauma:
  - Illicit love affair of and Björn.
  - Doubtful paternity of Kjartan.
  - Castrating dead fathers.
  - Mature women lust for younger men.
  - Resolution through the combination of strength and wisdom.
    - Episode of the berserks resolved on Helgafell mountain.





# The love-sick berserk





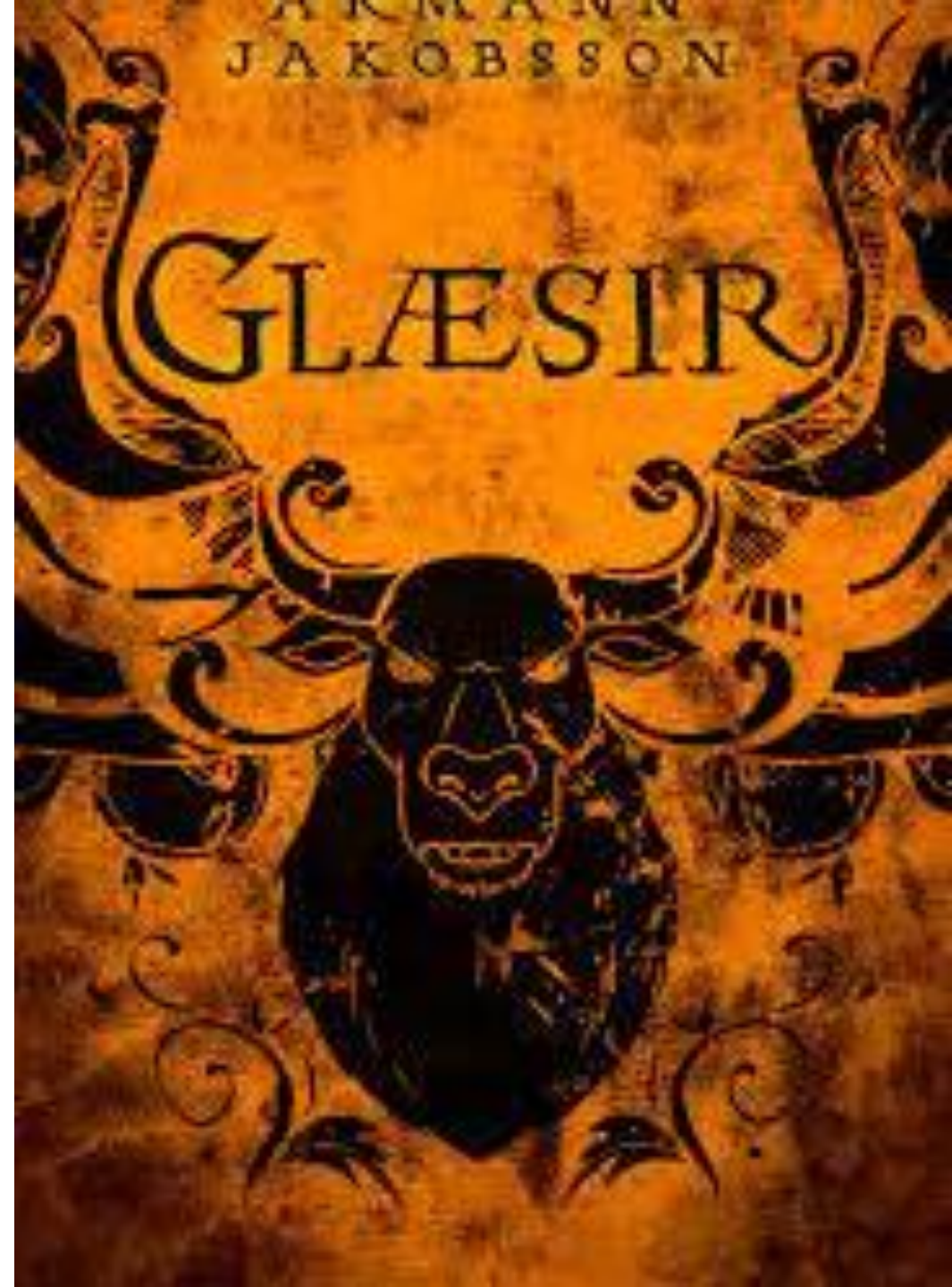
# How the saga resolves the trauma

- The saga ends with three accounts that put an end to the drama
  - The paranormal bull Glæsir
  - The mysterious old warrior in the land across the sea.
  - The excavation of Snorri's bones.



# The castrating father comes back from the dead as a bull

- Thorolf Lamefoot dies and comes back as a revenant and haunts Álftafjörður.
- His body is taken from its grave, first moved and then burned.
- A cow licks the ashes and then gives birth to a big and beautiful male calf.
- The calf grows paranormally into a huge bull who kills one of Thorolf's enemies before disappearing into the ground.



# Kjartan's dubious paternity resolved.



ÞÓRODDR



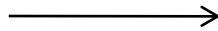
BJÖRN



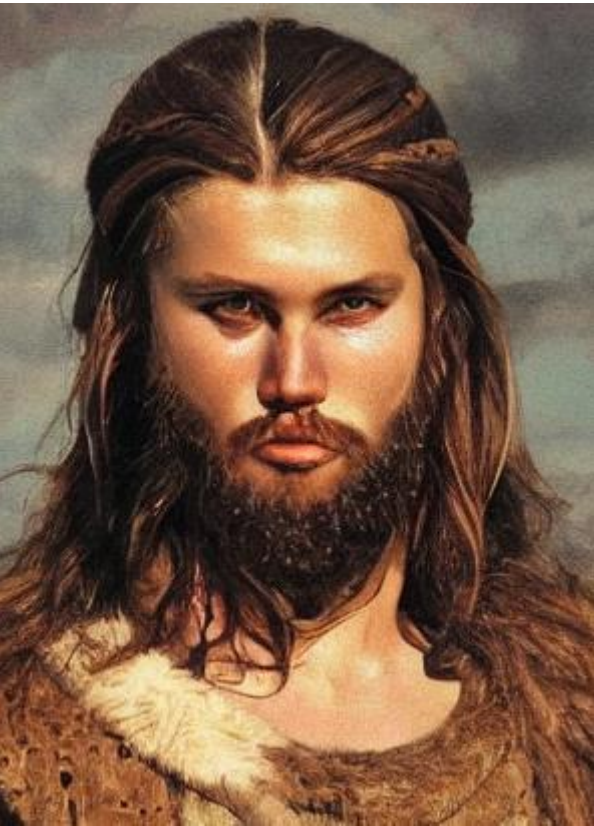


# The adulterous mother symbolically wed to the biological father

ÞÓRODDR



BJÖRN



Kjartan



Þuríðr



Snorri's bones lie between those of mother and  
stepfather





# Snorri's bones lie between those of mother and stepfather



The persistence of the Oedipal trauma that lies dormant, but comes back to haunt us in times of crisis



Snorri's bones lie between those of mother and  
stepfather





## Final thoughts: losing control and taking control.

- An impressive work of narrative art.
- Great artists allow their Unconscious to shape their works.
- Þórarinn's poetic frenzy is – paradoxically – an exercise of control over a loss of control.
- It mirrors the art of the saga-writer, who allows his Unconscious to inspire and shape his account of the history of his community.
- A community traumatized by recent power struggles and which needs to redefine itself.



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*Eyrbyggja Saga*



Thank you!