CHAPTER 3

No Sense of Humour? ‘Humour’ Words in Old Norse

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As several contributions to this Handbook demonstrate, the word ‘humour’ is fraught with difficulty.\(^1\) Even for native speakers of Modern English, the Modern English word is difficult to define in a way that satisfies everyone. Although it is undoubtedly a useful term, even more problems surface when trying to apply it to historical (and contemporary) contexts in which there is no equivalent native word. Does that absence mean that that culture does not have the concept? The same is true for subtypes of humour such as satire, wit, or farce. Do we project too much onto the subjects of our study if we impose terms that native speakers would not recognise (or be able to translate easily into their own language)?

A simple answer is: not necessarily—and there are many illuminating studies of ‘humour’ or subtypes of humour in historical contexts that explicate their subject using familiar modern terminology to facilitate communication and analysis. Nonetheless, understanding the ways in which a culture, or a group of language-speakers, categorises its own experience lends another dimension to fully understanding that experience. This chapter examines a range of Old Norse words that relate to the various phenomena we connect with the rubric of ‘humour’ in English. In doing so it begins to map the shape of Old Norse’s ‘sense of humour’, but also aims to demonstrate the difficulties that can arise both in determining nuanced semantics and in identifying whether or not particular scenarios arising in texts should be thought of as humorous, or

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otherwise. For that reason, it is intended that this chapter serves as a case study that can be applied to other languages and cultures, and should not be purely of interest to Old Norse specialists.

Humour’s relation to emotion has been a contentious issue. The purpose of this chapter is not to try and settle these debates, even for the historical context on which it focuses, although trying to understand the emotions felt and elicited by agents and targets of humour in the examples that emerge contributes to interpreting the semantic value of the words investigated here. For now it may be observed that the historical study of humour shares a methodological problem with the historical study of emotions: ‘emotion’, too, is a modern, Anglophone word, expansive in scope and with contentious definition, that is not always easily translatable. It has frequently been pointed out that understanding ‘emotion words’ in their own context, and not simply translating them into familiar modern terms, is an important step in understanding how those emotions were experienced. The investigation of emotions in historical and cross-cultural perspective has developed various methods to study emotion words, such as the historian Barbara Rosenwein’s advocacy of seeking contextual collocations: ‘we can be fairly sure a word is an emotion word if it is paired with—or appears as a transformation of—terms of affect known to have been considered as such’ or the linguist Anna Wierzbicka’s pioneering use of Natural Semantic Metalanguage as a tool. From a cultural history perspective, vocabulary is at the heart of Stephen Halliwell’s monumental study Greek Laughter, where he is particularly interested in ‘cultural self-definition and conflict’. This study borrows from these various methodologies where appropriate, but its scope, function, and body of research data are different from theirs. There is not room in a single chapter either to exhaustively map all the potential ‘humour words’ of Old Norse or to analyse each word comprehensively. Instead I wish to sketch out the main contours of the Old Norse vocabulary relating to what we now label as ‘humour’. My major resource has been the online Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (ONP). For any given headword, ONP provides ‘supporting quotations’ instances of that word in its immediate textual context excerpted from the corpus of extant Old Norse prose texts. The citations are selective, not comprehensive: so as to present the various semantic and syntactic usages within each signification and to illustrate the headword’s occurrence in a variety of genres and cultural settings. ONP’s earliest example of each headword (in terms of the age of the manuscript in which it is found) is always included.

The number of citations is thus not a definitive record of all occurrences of any given word, but the editors have been generous in what is included: citations for common words number well into the hundreds. The number of citations also provides a guide to the relative frequency of occurrence of words in comparison to one another.

My examination of each vocabulary item included here conforms to the following structure. The headword, in bold type, heads each entry; I have chosen
nominal forms as headwords and follow ONP's orthography. Underneath, the number of ONP citations is given, followed by the definition construed by ONP. The dictionary is as yet incomplete with regards to definitions; in addition, it construes its definitions separately in Danish, which work is more advanced, and English. Where the English definition is available, that is provided; where it is not, the Danish is given, followed by an English gloss. This is supplemented by the definition given in the older standard An Icelandic-English Dictionary, by Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfusson (abbreviated here CV). (The first edition of this work was published in 1874; the glosses given there are sometimes outdated compared to modern usage.) Next, related words, where extant, are provided in bold: this section includes other parts of speech (verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and other nouns) with the same stem; it does not include compounds, though those are sometimes mentioned in the analysis. Except in instances where ONP's English definition has been completed, only CV's definitions are routinely provided here.

Following the presentation of each word and its definition, I offer some discussion of the item’s use in context, based on examples from ONP's supporting quotations. This contextual commentary aims to demonstrate something of the range and nuance of a word and/or differences between members of a word family. Other vocabulary terms are introduced here where relevant (highlighted in bold type), for instance when a quotation includes multiple words of interest and there is not space to analyse them all separately. Contexts that exemplify the phenomenon in question have been prioritised (e.g. examples of ‘jokes’ or other speech acts or actions). However, as should now be clear, this chapter is not primarily an analysis of the literary or narrative functions of ‘humour’ in Old Norse literature, nor primarily of how it works. Rather, as stated above, its purpose is to highlight some of the Old Norse vocabulary for items that we might now label as ‘humour’ or a related term. In doing so it aims to highlight the problems and complexities of translation and interpretation from a linguistic and cultural context in which there are often no easy one-on-one correspondences with Modern English vocabulary and terminology, as well as to show where continuities with Modern English can be found.

hlátr, n.
47 citations. ONP: ‘latter’ [laughter]. CV: ‘laugh’. Related words: hléja, vb. 80 citations. CV: ‘to laugh’; hlógja, vb. 12 citations. CV: ‘to make one laugh’; hlógi, 7 citations. CV: ‘ridicule’; hlóg(i)liga, adv. 2 citations. CV: ‘ridiculously’; hlóg(i)ligr, adj. 13 citations. CV: ‘ridiculous, laughable’.

Though a conflation between laughter and humour has been a persistent hindrance both to historical studies of humour and to humour studies more widely, that their relationship is not simply a straightforward one of effect from a cause is by now widely accepted. Nonetheless, terms for laughter are clearly
relevant to a consideration of humour in historical texts, and have already
received considerable attention in the context of Old Norse, particularly as part
of a literary trope. Due caution as to what textual representations of laughter
might signify is expressed by Sif Rikhardsdottir in her recent book *Emotions in
Old Norse Literature*. She emphasises that:

> physiological responses are […] misleading when understood as kinetic reactions
> and need instead to be contextualised and interpreted as a performative gesture.
> The smile or laughter in this case becomes a signifying token intended not to
> articulate emotive interiority but to convey a narrative message.\(^{12}\)

Kirsten Wolf takes a similar approach, but points out that ‘nonetheless, one
must assume that this literary laughter would seem to have had at least some
affinity with the reality of laughter in medieval Iceland for it to be properly
understood’.\(^{13}\) Laughter is often socially performative, and literary laughter,
mediated by an author, doubly so. Saga laughter should not be taken as a
straightforward indicator of the presence of ‘humour’, yet neither should the
two be separated entirely.

In 1978–1979 M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij differentiated between ‘directed’
laughter, in which there is a target that is laughed at or ridiculed, and ‘non-
directed’ laughter, where there is no such object.\(^{14}\) He asserted, somewhat
flying in the face of the available evidence, that ‘directed’ laughter is ‘of com-
paratively recent origin’ and thus that any instance of ridicule, satire, mocking
and suchlike in Old Norse texts was ‘meant to provoke mirth’ and to ‘have
merely entertainment value’.\(^{15}\) Hugh Magennis, on the other hand, suggested
in 1992 that ‘scornful laughter is the most characteristic kind of laughter found
in Old Norse and other heroic poetry’,\(^ {16}\) which Wolf later found also to be true
for Old Norse prose, in the most extensive (article-length) treatment of Old
Norse laughter to date.\(^ {17}\) Wolf categorises c. 80 instances of laughter in the
Sagas of Icelanders into the following groups: an expression of joy or relief, an
expression of triumph or scorn, an expression of defiance, a way of camouflag-
ing discomfort, and a reflection of folly. Laughter as an expression of amuse-
ment, as a reaction to a joke or something funny, is notably absent here. There
is, however, some overlap between amusement and scorn, where a target is
made the butt of a joke. Indeed, echoing three of the common ‘theories’ of or
explanations for humour, Wolf reports that ‘scornful or mocking laughter […]
is often prompted by the juxtaposition of things that do not fit together, and
surprise is frequently a condition’.\(^ {18}\)

The Old Norse lexicon does not radically distinguish laughter based on its
cause or intention (whether it is ‘directed’ or ‘non-directed’; ‘laughing at’ or
‘laughing with’), in the way that, for example, Latin and Greek can.\(^ {19}\)
Nonetheless, it was possible to signal specific types of laughter. *Brigzlanahlátr*
is found in a religious text to denote ‘scornful laughter’ (*ONP*; cf. *brigzli*, 90
citations; *ONP*; (i) ‘reproach (for s[ome]th[ing].) (from s[ome]b[od]y),
recrimination, denigration, insult’; (ii) ‘ignominy, shame, disgrace’; (iii) ‘(of a
person) object of scorn, disgrace (to sb)’. In Old Icelandic law, ‘Ef maðr bregðr manne brigzلوم’ [if someone makes a defamatory statement against someone else], the penalty was lesser outlawry (three years’ exile).20

Elsewhere, kaldahlátr is used in Njáls saga during Hildigunnr’s efforts to get her kinsman Flosi to avenge the death of her husband: as Flosi negotiates Hildigunnr’s intentions, we are told, ‘Hildiguðr hló kaldahlátr’ [Hildigunnr laughed cold laughter].21 This is not laughter prompted by amusement, but by bitter determination. Skellihlátr (4 citations) does not give any clues to the provocation of the laughter but rather describes its manifestation: roaring laughter.

The compound athlátr (9 citations; ONP: ‘mockery, ridicule’) would seem from its form to denote ‘targeted’ laughter, literally meaning ‘at-laughter’ or ‘towards-laughter’. Rather than denoting a type of physiological behaviour, however, it has a metaphorical application indicating taunting or jeering. For example, one instance from the Heilagra feðraǽfi [Lives of the Holy Fathers] has St John speak to the devil ‘sem med nockurs konar athlátri’ [as with certain kinds of athlátri].22 That the athlátr can take various forms suggests that it is not physiological but verbal. The related athlógi (12 citations; ONP (i) ‘ridicule, derision’; (ii) ‘source of amusement, object of derision’) functions like English ‘laughing stock’, as for example in this instance from Gautreks saga: ‘Þá er [Refr] var ungr, lagðizt hann í elldaskála ok beit hrís ok børk af trjám […] Refr varð frægr mjoðk at øngum snotrleik né frama, helldr at því at hann gjörði sik athlægi annarra sínna hraustra frænda’ [When Refr was young he lay by the fire and chewed twigs and bark from trees … Refr became very famous not for any wise acts or distinction, but rather because he made himself a laughing stock (athlægi) among his other, more intrepid kinsmen].23

The two citations of the adverb hløg(i)liga (CV: ‘ridiculously’) appear in context to denote amusement rather than derision. Fagrskinna relates the aftermath of a battle thought to have taken place c. 985, between a Norwegian force led by Hákon jarl [earl] Sigurðarson, and an invading Danish army, on whose behalf the semi-legendary band of mercenaries known as the Jomsvikings are fighting. Though such a battle probably did take place, the saga does not provide an eye-witness account but, like many sagas, blends oral tradition and poetic source-material with authorial licence. The Jomsvikings are known in this text and elsewhere as having a strict code of conduct based around ideals of bravery and strength. We join the story as the victorious Norwegians are executing the surviving Jomsvikings:

Því næst var einn til høggs leiddr ok mælti svá: ‘Hrútri!’ Þeir spurðu: ‘Hví mælir þú svá?’ Hann svaraði: ‘Moðg á hefir af yðrum mónnum nefnd verit í dag, ok vil ek því fá hrútinn til’. Þetta þótti mælt hlægiliga ok óhræðiliga. Jarlinn spurði, ef hann vildi grið, ok lézk hann vilja.24

Next thing one was led forward to be struck executed and spoke thus: ‘Ram!’ They asked, ‘Why do you say that?’ He answered, ‘Many a ewe has been named by your men today, and for this reason I want to give them the ram’. That was
thought to be said *hlægiliga* and fearlessly. The *jarl* [Eiríkr, Hákon’s son] asked if he would want quarter, and he said he did want that.

Alison Finlay explains the humour succinctly: ‘The word á, accusative of ær “ewe”, is also an exclamation, “ow!”’. The young man’s pun implies that the Norwegians cried out with pain in the battle’.25 As badly as this witticism flops in translation, the narratorial comment, ‘Petta þótti mælt hlægiliga ok óhræðil–
iliga’ [That was thought to be said *hlægiliga* and fearlessly], suggests that the saga compiler had his own problems grappling with historic humour and thought that even his native-speaking audience might fail to be moved by, or even notice, the Jomsviking’s joke. Jarl Eiríkr is impressed, however, as he grants the young man his life.26

Finlay, the saga’s most recent translator, renders the narrative interjection slightly more periphrastically, if more idiomatically in English: ‘That was considered a funny and fearless thing to say’.27 The adverbial construction is difficult to translate literally; to derive the meaning of the adverb from the verb, we would end up with something like: ‘That was bravely and “laugh-causingly” said’. The other instance of the same adverb, which occurs in the Flateyjarbók manuscript of *Magnúss saga góða ok Haralds harðráða*, produces a similar result. The saga claims that the Byzantine empress Zoe (lived c. 978–1050) asks for a lock of hair from King Haraldr harðráði of Norway, who at that time is going by the pseudonym Norðbrigt. Norðbrigt/Haraldr replies that to make things equal, she should give him one of her pubic hairs. Again the narrator explains, ‘Petta þótti hlægliga mællt uera og þo diarfliga vid þuilika konu’ [This was thought to be ‘laugh-causingly’ said, and yet boldly, to such a woman].28

CV’s definition seems to me inadequate here: although there is an element of mockery in the humour of both instances, the tone suggested by Finlay’s ‘funny’ is clearly appropriate. There is more than just scorn in these utterances, and the speakers of the ‘jokes’ are admired for their quick and bold wit and wordplay.

Wolf takes the verb *glotta* (24 citations; CV: ‘to grin’) to be essentially synonymous with *hlæja*.29 This premise works in terms of an examination of performative gesture and certainly seems to overlap with *hlæja* in terms of its literary function. Old Norse literature’s most famous grinner is Skarpheðinn Njálsson of *Njáls saga*, whose unsettling facial expression is notorious for its ‘mirthless content’.30 It commonly appears in the phrase *glotta við tynn*, defined by CV ‘to smile scornfully, sarcastically, so as to shew the teeth’. In *Karlamagnúss saga*, the phrase ‘Karlamagnus kongr glotti’ [King Charlemagne *glotti* in the A redaction appears in the B redaction as ‘Karlamagnus kongr brosti’ [King Charlemagne smiled], suggesting a similarity between the two gestures.31 Interestingly, however, in a late manuscript of *Gibbons saga*, AM 585c 4to of c. 1700, we find, ‘þä glotte dvergr hatt, so bulde j klettunum’ [then the dwarf *glotti* (‘glotte’) loudly, so it echoed in the crags].32 In this instance there appears to be a vocal element to the gesture. Indeed, other, earlier redactions have ‘skeller d(vergr) vpp <og> hlær’ [the dwarf kicked up his heels and laughed].33
Perhaps physiognomic verisimilitude is less important in the usage of this word than the attitude behind it. As Low concludes, ‘in Old [Icelandic] gæt there is none of the warmth of shared amusement; the tone is one of contempt for fools not suffered’.

skemmtun/skemmtan, n.
49 citations. ONP: (1) ‘underholding, fornøjelse, tidsfordriv, festivitas, glæde’ [(about sexual amusement)]; (2) ‘om seksuel fornystelse’ [(about sexual amusement)]; (3) ‘pragt, overdådighed, herlighed’ [splendour, opulence, glory]; (4) ‘jubel, jubelråb’ [jubilation, cheer]. CV: ‘an entertainment; amusement, entertainment’.

Related words: skemmta, vb. 83 citations. CV: ‘to amuse, entertain’; skemmtanarsamlígr, adj. 2 citations. CV: ‘amusing’; skemmtilígr, adv. 38 citations. CV: ‘amusing, interesting, pleasant’.

Skemmtan is related to skemma, ‘to shorten’, giving the sense ‘pastime, diversion’. It covers a broad range of entertainments or ‘amusements’, such as hunting, shooting, wrestling, drinking, feasting, dancing, board games, and story-telling. It is not often connected to humour specifically, although an instance in (most manuscripts of) Heimskringla demonstrates it could be used to refer to amusement in that (humorous) sense. The captured jarl Finnr Árnason is offered truce by King Haraldr Sigurðsson, but refuses to accept it “af hundinum þínun” [‘from a dog like you’]. He is asked whether he will accept it from Haraldr’s son, Magnús, but replies “Hvat mun hvælp sá ráða gríðum?” [‘Why would that puppy be offering truces?’].

The narrator then states: ‘Pá hló konungr ok þótti skemmtan at erta hann’ [Then the king laughed and thought it amusing (skemmtan) to tease him]. Whether it is Finnr’s canine-themed responses that the king finds funny, or simply the opportunity to humiliate his opponent, is not clear.

In the Fríssbók manuscript of Heimskringla (AM 45 fol), gaman (see below) stands in place of skemmtan here, suggesting an overlapping if not (near-) synonymous meaning in this context. Similar variation between manuscripts occurs in a handful of ONP’s other skemmtan citations. The two words are also juxtaposed in a number of instances. While these cases might suggest the words have similar but not identical meanings, precise distinctions are difficult to draw based on the contexts in question, and the terms may instead be collocated for emphasis, for example: “Segja mun ek þér þriðja æventýr þér til gamans ok skemtanar” [‘I will tell you three romances for your amusement and pleasure’]. Further comparison with gaman will be made in the discussion of that word, below. The prefix skemmtanar- forms several, rarely attested compounds, such as skemmtanarmaðr [entertaining man] and skemmtanarferð [pleasure trip].
gaman, n.
136 citations. **ONP**: (i) ‘fun, amusement, pleasure’; (ii) ‘(a form of) entertainment (for others), play’; (iii) ‘(of erotic exploits)’. **CV**: ‘game, sport, pleasure, amusement’.

**Related words**: gamansamligr, adj. 11 citations. **CV**: ‘amusing’; gamanssamr, adj. 6 citations. **CV**: ‘gamesome, merry’.

Like Modern English ‘amusement’, *gaman* covers a range of meanings from something that is funny to a diverting entertainment or pastime. An example of the former, more humour-related sense can be found in *Njáls saga*, when the eponymous Njáll gives his friend Gunnarr advice on how to dissolve his kinswoman’s marriage by tricking her husband into thinking he is legally inept. Njáll advises Gunnarr initially to make a mess of legal terminology: “Þá mun Hrútr hlæja ok þykkja gaman at” [‘Then Hrútr will laugh and find amusement in it’].\(^39\) The collocation with *hlæja* [to laugh] (see above) reinforces the interpretation of *gaman* here as suggesting funniness.

By contrast, an instance in *Egils saga* demonstrates the other end of the ‘amusement’ spectrum, cautioning against uncritically taking the word *gaman* as a possible indicator of the presence of humour: “var þá mest gaman Egils at ræða við [Þordís]’ [It was then the greatest pleasure of Egill’s to speak with Þordís]. At this point in the saga, Egill is in his eighties and blind: he takes pleasure in conversing with his stepdaughter, not in laughing at or teasing her.

*gaman* forms part of a variety of compounds, each rarely attested in the corpus. These include, by way of illustrative examples, *gamanferð* (2 citations; **CV**: ‘pleasure trip’); *gamanleikr* (6 citations; **CV**: ‘a game’); *gaman(s)vísa* (4 citations; **CV**: ‘comic ditty’). Of particular interest is *gamanmál* (3 citations; **CV**: ‘merry talk, joking’). Like English ‘joking’, the word seems to cover a range from ‘making jokes’ to ‘not being serious’.

One instance comes in *Jómsvíkinga saga* to highlight another of the Jomsvikings’ fearless responses to Norwegian capture. This young man, who has long golden hair, asks that someone hold it out of the way while he is executed so that it does not become bloodstained. As his executioner strikes, the Jomsviking jerks his head so that the sword instead falls onto the man holding his hair, severing his arms at the elbow. “En hann sprettr up enn ungi maðr ok bregðr á gamanmál ok mælti: “hverr á sveina”, segir hann, “hendr í hári mér?”” [He sprang up, the young man, and took to joking (gamanmál) and said, ‘To which boy’, he says, ‘do the hands in my hair belong?’].\(^40\) The lighthearted implications of the word—the Jomsviking is joking rather than being scornful—emphasise his blithe detachment from the horrors of combat.

In an example from *Laxdæla saga*, *gamanmál* rather conveys a lack of seriousness than something actually funny. Two brothers are witnessed plotting what turns out to be an attack, and are asked what they are discussing: “þat muni hvárki hégómi ne gamanmál, er þit munuð lengstum um tala”\(^41\) [‘it will be neither nonsense nor joking around (gamanmál), when you spend so long talking about it’].
Gaman appears in a variety of phrases, such as hafa gaman/hafa at gamni/hafa til gamans ‘to have (as) entertainment’, henda gaman ‘to take pleasure in’ and þykkja gaman ‘to find (something) fun/amusing’. It can indicate that something is to be taken as a joke, that is not seriously, rather than as an insult (or that someone chooses to react in such a way), for instance in Porgils saga skarða. Porgils has been accused in the strongest possible terms of behaving unmanfully: the word ragr is used, a term over which the target had the right to kill with impunity in Icelandic law.42 Instead of challenging his interlocutor, however, Porgils says, “‘[Hart] þotti [mér] þv at mer kveða […] ok veit ek, [at] þer var þat gaman, en engi alþvgi, ok þvi tek [ek] þat firir gaman’” [‘It seems to me you have spoken harshly, but I know that it was in jest, and not your innermost conviction, and so I will take it as a joke’].43

In several texts it is collocated with gleði (162 citations; ONP: (i) ‘happiness, gladness, joy, glee’; (ii) ‘(in conn. with festivity) merriment, festivity, amusement, entertainment’), for example in the Norwegian Homily Book: ‘þar er gleði ok gaman með guði siolfum’ [in that place is joy and pleasure with God himself].44 Overall, most instances of the word suggest the broader senses of pleasure and amusement than the specifically humorous. However, gaman seems more likely than the similar skemmtan (see above) to be used when something is not only fun but funny.

leikr, n.
325 citations. ONP: (i) ‘forlystelse, tidsfordriv, underholdning’ [amusement, pastime, entertainment]; (ii) ‘(om musikalisk tidsfordriv: sang, dans, spil)’ [(about musical activities: singing, dancing, playing)]; (iii) ‘nydelse, fornøjelse’ [enjoyment, pleasure]; (iv) ‘(item pl. leikar) organiseret kampleg, dyst, støvne’ [(in plural, leikar) organised fight, jousting, contest]; (v) ‘konfrontation, kamp, slagsmål’ [confrontation, fight, brawl]; (vi) ‘(om ridderturnering)’ [(in relation to knights’ tournaments)]; (vii) ‘det at lege, (borne)leg’ [to play, (children’s) play]; (viii) ‘(om ondskabsfuld leg)’ [(in relation to malicious play)]; (ix) ‘(med seksuel undertone) elskovsleg, flirt’ [(with sexual undertones) lovemaking, flirting]; (x) ‘(om noget der foregår ubesværet, som en leg)’ [(in relation to something effortless, like a breeze)]; (xi) ‘trolldom, trylleri’ [sorcery, magic]; (xii) ‘spot, skæmteri, spog’ [mockery, joke, jest]; (xiii) ‘forløb, procedure, gerning, handling’ [course, procedure, deed, action]. CV: ‘a game, play, sport’.

Related words: leika, vb. 483 citations. CV: ‘to play, sport’; ‘to delude, play a trick on’; ‘to perform’; ‘to move, swing’; ‘to lick, of flame, to catch’; ‘to be […] bewitched’; ‘to ill-treat, vex’; in various phrases/forms with specific meaning; leikandi, adj. 2 citations. CV: ‘a sport, jest’; leikari, n. 42 citations. CV: ‘a player, esp. a fiddler, jester’; leikarakasp, adj. 4 citations. CV: ‘scurrility, histrionic manners’; leikinn, adj. 15 citations. CV: ‘playful, gay’.

The number of definitions put forward by ONP gives a good indication of the range of this word; the ones most relevant to this chapter are definitions (i) and (xii), and they will be focused on here.
In the citations under *ONPs* definition i, *leikr* is used in a similar way to *skemmtan* and *gaman* (see above). Indeed, it is several times used in conjunction or interchangeably with *skemmtan* in particular. For instance, in the *Gylfaginning* section of Snorri’s *Edda*, Gangleri asks: “Eða hvat er skemtun einherjanna þá er þeir drekka eigi?”*45* [*What is the entertainment of the Einherjar [Odin’s army] when they are not drinking?*]. The response, that they fight, is followed: “Þat er leikr þeira” [*That is their pastime*].*46* In four of *ONPs* citations it is collocated with *blátr* [laughter] (see above), but those cases give a sense of general merriment.

The phrase *gera leik* can imply ‘to make a joke (of something or someone)’, but it does not necessarily do so. For instance, in *Fôrgils saga ok Haflíða*, one Grímr is physically weak and ill-matched in sports against stronger and rougher contenders, for which he receives ‘gár ok gys’ [derision and mockery].*47* The narrator relates: ‘Grímr ræðir, at þeim væri þat lítilmenska at gera hann at atharnarmannin ok gera leika til hans’ [Grímr said that it was mean of them to turn him into a laughing stock and make a joke (*gera leika*) of him].*48* Compare, however, the following instance of the phrase in *Bósa saga ok Herráude*: ‘hírðin hafði soppleik […] ok gerðu þeir nú leik til Bósa’ [the kings’ men had a ball-game … and they directed the play (*gerðu … leik*) now towards Bósi].*49* There is no element of mockery in the latter instance; the phrase utilises the more common meaning of *leikr* as referring to sport, game, or play.

Other citations highlight the difficulty caused where context is ambiguous. An interesting case occurs in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. A flock of sheep belonging to the farmer Þorbjörn goes missing and cannot be found. Þorbjörn asks his father-in-law Skeggi for advice, who replies, “þat hafa troll tekit einhver, ok hafa huldu yfir; mun þat ekki öðrum vinnast en sonum þínum, at ná því aprtr, þvíat til þeirra mun leikr gerr” [*trolls have taken them and made them hidden; it will be the case that no-one apart from your sons will be able to get them back, because *leikr* will be aimed at them*].*50* For this last clause, containing *leikr*, the standard English translation of the sagas says simply ‘this is all aimed at them’.*51* *Leikr* could be translated as ‘deed or action’ (cf. *ONP* sense xiii), or as ‘pastime’ (sense i), but the sense ‘joke’ or ‘prank’ works equally well if taken as a comment on the trolls’ motivation or perspective.

In an instance in *Fôstþreðra saga*, a search is made of people’s trunks to attempt to discover some property that has gone missing. A character called Vegglagr objects to being searched like a thief, to which the response is: “Þetta er ecki til eins manz leikr gerr, því at varar kistvr hafa fyst verið ransakaðar” [*This *leikr* is not done only to one man, because our chests have been searched with willing permission*].*52* The standard translation of the first clause reads, ‘You’re not the only one in this […]’.*53* Equally, it could be translated, ‘This jest is not done only to one man […].’ Although the situation is taken seriously by all participants, the latter reading subtly changes the tone of the response to a more sarcastic one that acknowledges that all are involved in a game-like situation where the stakes are high and no-one is having much fun. The published translations are not incorrect, but opportunities to consider grim humour in
these situations, very much in keeping with the sort of understated black humour found across the saga corpus, are lost in them.

**glens**, n.
28 citations. **ONP**: ‘fun, jest, gibing, mockery’; **CV**: ‘gibing, fun, a gibe, jest’.
Related words: **glensa**, vb. 7 citations. **CV**: ‘to jest, gibe’; **glensan**, n. 1 citation. **CV**: ‘gibing’; **glensligr**, adj. 2 citations. **CV**: ‘gibing’;

**ONP** notes that ‘the word covers a wide range of meanings from “innocent fun” to “mockery”’. Interestingly this word often seems to function like ‘joke’ does in the Modern English phrase ‘it was only a joke’, when someone is trying to claim or explain that they did not intend offence. Whether or not the actual ‘humour’ is fun(ny) or malicious often remains ambiguous. For example, in *Heiðarvíga saga*, a woman throws a cushion at her husband ‘sua sem með glenzi’ [as if it were a joke];54 the situation rapidly escalates into domestic violence and divorce. A good illustration that the word was used to signal a contrasting intent to mockery comes in an incident from *Ólaf’s saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (AM 61 fol), in a passage containing several humour words. The context is that Þorkell *dydrill* [tail], the uncle of King Óláfr Tryggvason, has been spying on the king, who is known to leave his ship at night without anyone seeing him do so. Þorkell suddenly finds himself seized and thrown into the harbour while wearing expensive clothes, including a fine fur-and-velvet cloak:

Þá mælti konungr er hann saa at Þorkell leít aa skickiuna. hvat er nv frændi. huart hefir vōknat dydrillinn þinn. Pörkeli þotti hann spotta sik ok suar(aði) engu. en kastaði af ser skickiuni helldr hermiliga. konungr m(ælti). Ver en kátr ok glaðr frøndi. þviat ek gerði þetta fyrr glennz ok gaman. en ekki til haðungar við þik.55

Then the king said, when he saw that Þorkell was looking at the cloak, ‘What is it now, kinsman? Has your tail got wet?’ Þorkell thought he mocked him and did not reply but cast the cloak off rather angrily. The king said, ‘Be cheerful and glad again, kinsman, because I did this for fun and amusement, and not out of scorn for you’.

Whether or not we (never mind Þorkell) would class throwing someone into a body of water as ‘innocent fun’, the word *glens*, here found in conjunction with *gaman* (see above) and opposed to *háðung* (see below), is clearly meant to convey a sense of something lighthearted and funny—‘banter’ might be a good rendering, with a (purported) intention of ‘laughing with’ as opposed to ‘laughing at’.

The narrator of Flateyjarbók’s redaction of *Ólaf’s saga Tryggvasonar* uses *glens* to point out that potentially malicious words are said jokingly, although again, whether the parties involved really believe the truth of the claims (and therefore whether the jokes are meant to ridicule rather than tease mildly) is left ambiguous. In this instance, a mysterious, well-built red-bearded stranger...
(who turns out to be the god Þórr [Thor]) comes aboard King Óláfr’s ship and begins play-wrestling with the king’s men. In addition, ‘uæittu huorir òdrum j glenzse hadulig ord ok athlar’ [they exchanged with each other in fun (‘j glenzse’) abusive words and ridicule]. The episode turns out to be a cautionary tale about failing to recognise demons in attractive guise.

**fleymingr**, n.
11 citations. **ONP**: ‘hån, spot, latterliggørelse, sjov’. **CV**: ‘jest, sport’.
*Related words*: **fleymi**, 1 citation. **CV**: ‘jest, sport’.

In context, many instances of *fleymingr* carry a sense of mocking one-upmanship and perhaps a satirical tone. In *Íslendinga saga*, the servant of Sighvatr Sturluson’s wife Hallóra kills a rival to Sighvatr’s household, and we are told, ‘Sighvatr hafði miok i fleymingi, oc kallaði svmrvngana odóla, oc ekki radlig at hallda kavpi þeira’ [Sighvatr made great sport of it, and said summer-workers to be difficult, and that it was not advisable to buy them]. Drawing on stereotypes about temporary itinerant workers, Sighvatr pretends to be critical when in fact the servant did exactly what he had hoped for. His ironic distancing of himself from the killing smugly draws attention to the fact that he has got what he wants but is untouchable for it. (On the other hand, Guðrún Nordal has pointed out that Sighvatr often hides behind jokes or pretends to take things í fleymingi (as a joke) ‘whenever he is most deeply moved’.)

*Laxdæla saga* has a poignant example that suggests people did not react well to being the target of such jesting attitudes. In a sequence of romantic entanglements, Kjartán is gifted a fine headdress by his Norwegian princess lover to give to Guðrún, his childhood sweetheart back in Iceland, as a wedding present. However, his friend Bolli has told Guðrún about Kjartan’s relationship with the princess, and she marries him instead. Kjartán turns his attention to Hrefna and gives her the headdress as a bridal gift. Guðrún, realising it was meant for her, is jealous of the headdress and secretly steals and destroys it. Discovering the theft, Kjartán goes to Bolli’s household to humiliate them by preventing them from leaving the house for three days. Upon his return, the saga tells us:

*Ìá mélti Hrefña ok brosti við: ‘pat er mér sannliga sagt, at þit Guðrún munið hafa við talazk, ok svá hefi ek spurt, herusu hon var búin, at hon hefði nú faldit sik við motrinum ok semði einkar vel’. Kjartan svarar ok roðnaði mjók við—var munnun auðsynt, at hann reiddisk við, er hon hafði þetta í fleymingi.*

Then Hrefna said with a smile, ‘I was reliably informed that you and Guðrún had a chat, and I also heard how she was dressed: that she’d wrapped herself in the headdress and it suited her exceptionally well’. Kjartán answered and went very red—it was obvious to people that he was angry that she made sport of this (*hafði þetta í fleymingi*).
Hrefna is battling with (justified) insecurity that Kjartán still loves Guðrún: her words, disguised as a joke, test her husband, revealing her suspicions about Guðrún’s involvement in the disappearance of the headdress and looking for reassurance both that he did not speak to Guðrún and that he is willing to critique his former sweetheart. For his part, Kjartán’s reaction reveals his hidden heartbreak and his inability to emotionally side with Hrefna over Guðrún. Neither of them can take any real amusement in the situation: *fleymingr* captures the bitter irony of this situation in which no-one is happy.

\[
\text{háð}, \text{n.}
\]

42 citations. \(\text{ONP}: \text{‘hán, spot’ [scorn, mockery, derision].} \) \(\text{CV: ‘scoffing, mocking’}.
\]

*Related words:* \(\text{háðsamr}, \text{adj. 4 citations.} \) \(\text{CV: ‘scoffing’;} \) \(\text{háðsemi}, \text{n. 4 citations.} \) \(\text{CV: ‘mockery;} \) \(\text{háðuligr}, \text{adj. 53 citations.} \) \(\text{CV: ‘scornful, contemptible’;} \) \(\text{háðuliga}, \text{adv. 43 citations.} \) \(\text{CV: ‘shamefully’;} \) \(\text{háðung}, \text{n. 78 citations.} \) \(\text{CV: ‘shame, disgrace’}.

Probably the most famous instance of the word *háð* comes in Snorri Sturluson’s Prologue to *Heimskringla*, his collection of sagas about the kings of Norway. He aims to dispel doubt about the validity of using poetry composed by the kings’ own court praise-poets as reliable sources of history:

\[
\text{En þat er háttr skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá crú þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálflum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrok, ok svá sjálf r hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof.}^{60}
\]

It is the habit of poets to praise most the person they are standing before, but no-one would dare to relate to his face deeds that everyone in hearing would know to be falsehoods and inventions, as would he himself. That would then be mockery, and not praise.

Nonetheless, Snorri’s nephew Óláfr Pórdarson cites just such a practice that Snorri claims not to exist in his definition of *ironia* [irony] in his *Third Grammatical Treatise*, a work on poetry based on Latin textbooks:

\[
\text{Ironia gerir gagn-staðlict mál þvi, er hon vill merkia […] her er oxiginlig fram-}\
\text{færing ok liking, þvat lof ær fyrir háði sætt. Pæsi figyr Ær aifnan sætt i skalldskap.}^{61}
\]

Irony gives the opposite meaning to what is denoted […] here there is improper translation and comparison, because praise is used for mockery. This figure is frequently used in poetry.

Indeed, *háð* often occurs in connection with poetry, but that is less likely to indicate anything inherent about the form of *háð* and more likely because poetry was a key means of communication and entertainment, which tended to be exploited for the purpose of insulting one’s rivals. The practice of composing poetic praise in order to mock someone (*til háðungar*, see further below)
is condemned on penalty of outlawry in Grágás, the Icelandic law code used up to c. 1271.62

In Modern Icelandic háð still means ‘irony’.63 In Old Norse it seems also to have a broader range of meanings, including what we might rather classify as sarcasm, parody, and satire, but it often involves false representations. In Gunnlaugs saga, Gunnlaugr comes across a mock-duel in which the participants have been given the names Gunnlaugr and Hrafn (Hrafn is Gunnlaugr’s poetic and romantic rival, and the pair had earlier fought a famous but inconclusive duel). The players are said to ‘hyggi smátt’ [strike weakly] and Gunnlaugr ‘fann at hér fylgdi mikit háad ok her var mikit spott at dregit’ [found that there was great háad and much ridicule was taken from it].64 The use of both háð and spott (see below) here suggests they may have had different shades of meaning, and háð might best be translated here as parody or even farce.

On the other hand, háð is several times collocated with spott (see below) or gabb (56 citations; CV: ‘mocking, mockery’), possibly for emphasis rather than for contrast.65 Where the action or speech act in question is not described, it is not possible to say for sure whether ‘mockery’ broadly or something more specific is meant; however, when more detailed context is given, a more particular meaning than the dictionaries suggest can be ascertained, denoting a false representation with the intention to mock.

Háðung has a still broader range and carries a more emphatically derogatory force. One could prosecute or be prosecuted for it under Icelandic law; in Grágás, ‘Ef maðr mælir við maðn háðung eða gerir ýki vm’ [if a man speaks with mockery (háðung) against someone or makes an exaggeration about him] the penalty is lesser outlawry (three years’ exile)].66 Actions such as shaving someone’s hair off, tearing their clothes, making them dirty, or ‘allt þat er maðr görir til haðung avðrom mann huerng veg er hann fer at þvi’ [everything that someone does in mockery of another whatever way he goes about it] are subject to full outlawry.67 There are specific regulations about the composition of poetry: one is not to take offence about a couplet ‘nema last mæle se i’ [unless there is defamatory speech in it], but if two people conspire together to each compose two lines and put them together, the penalty is full outlawry ‘ef löstr er i eða háðung’ [if defamation or mockery is in it].68 Even composing poetry about someone else ‘þot eigi se háþung i’ [though there is no mockery in it] is subject to either a fine or lesser outlawry, depending on the length of the composition.69 The penalty is increased to full outlawry if there is háðung in it, as is also the case for spreading poetry ‘er til haðungar metz’ [if it is deemed in mockery].70 In the later law-code Járnísða, háðung is collocated with heipt/ heift (55 citations; CV: ‘deadly hatred, spite’), and with níð (39 citations; CV: ‘contumely’ [invective, defamation, opprobrium], ‘a libel’), a particularly heinous form of insult.71 It is difficult to draw lines here around what may be considered under the umbrella of ‘humour’ and what is simply abuse.
spott, n. 79 citations. ONP: ‘drilleri, spot, forhånelse, hån’ [teasing, mockery, scoffing, derision, scorn]. CV: ‘“sport”, mock, scoff’.

Related words: spotta, vb. 61 citations. CV: ‘to mock, make sport of’; spottsamr, adj. 4 citations. CV: ‘mocking, sporting’; spottsamligr, adj. 3 citations. CV: ‘mocking’.

Despite the similarity to Modern English ‘sport’, the words are not etymologically related; the Scandinavian forms are related to ‘spit (upon)’, although the Old Norse usage is already metaphorical. The Modern Icelandic means ‘mockery, ridicule’, with the phrase hafður að háði og spotti meaning ‘made the butt of jokes’.72

In some instances the word is used to describe incidents of trickery or insincerity; fooling or making a fool out of someone. For instance, in Heimskringla King Ædalsteinn of England sends a valuable sword by messenger to King Haraldr in Norway, who takes it by the hilt. The messenger immediately responds that Haraldr has, with this gesture, made himself a retainer of Ædalsteinn’s. The text comments: ‘Haraldf konungr skildi þa at þetta var með spotti gert til hans. þvát hann uilldi engis mannz þegn uera’ [King Haraldr realised that this was done in mockery (með spotti gert) towards him, because he wished to be no man’s retainer].73 In Fóstbrœðra saga, the character Pormóðr requests to buy an old, rag-tag and louse-ridden cloak from the vagrant Lusa-Oddi [Oddi Louse]. Thinking there could be no reason for the wealthy merchant Pormóðr to want his cloak and that his request must be insincere, Oddi replies, ‘“Eigi þarftv at spotta at mer?”’ [‘Do you have to make fun of me?’].74 Pormóðr reassures him, ‘“Eigi er þetta spott”’ [‘This is not making fun’];75 he needs the cloak as a disguise.

On other occasions, however, the word has a more inclusive sense. An interesting example in Íslendinga saga uses spott in connection with the enemies of Snorri Sturluson making fun of his poetry: ‘Svndlendingar drogo spott mikit at kveðvm þeim, er Snori hafið ort vm iarllinn, ok snoðar afleiðiz’ [The southern- ers drew great sport from these verses that Snorri had written about the jarl and distorted them].76 An example is given of one of the parodic verses composed in mockery of Snorri, which plays on the words and concepts used in his original poem.

Elsewhere in Íslendinga saga, spott appears as a catch-all term for various forms of mockery and disparagement performed by one party against a rival: ‘Ok her með førðv Breidbælingar Lopt i flimitan, oc gerðo vm hann danza marga oc margskonar spott annat’ [The Breiðbælings also taunted Loptr in lampoons (flimitan, see below), and made up many dance-lyrics about him and many other kinds of mockery (spott)].77 The word dans (25 citations; ONP: ‘dancing, dance (prob. with singing)’; ‘dance-lyric, ballad’) here suggests that comic songs were composed and performed as accompaniment to dancing. CV suggests that in this sense dans is synonymous with flimit(an), on which see below. Compare hopp (10 citations; ONP ‘dans, lystighed, tant og fjas’ [dance, merriment, pleasurable activity]) and mansøngr (8 citations; CV: ‘love song’),
which was banned in Icelandic law, and which Edith Marold has comprehensively investigated in connection to obscene and/or offensive songs or dance-ballads.  

*Spott* could certainly describe a form of mockery that could be deeply offensive: Guðrún Nordal observes that it is used in all four instances in *Íslendinga saga* ‘where serious mockery in poetry becomes a source for conflict’.  

**skaup**, n.

16 citations. *ONP*: ‘spot, hán’ [mockery, ridicule]. *CV*: ‘mockery, ridicule’.

Of the many words denoting mockery in Old Norse, *skaup* is highlighted here because its Modern Icelandic form, *skop*, is translated as ‘humour’. (The other word so translated, *kimni*, is not attested in Old Norse before 1700 according to *ONP*.) It can securely be understood as having exclusively mocking or derisive force in Old Norse, however. It is frequently collocated with *skömm* [shame] and used synonymously or as a variant for *spott* and *fleymingr* (see above). In an instance in *Vatnsdæla saga*, it is contrasted with less malicious forms of humour: ‘Þorkell kvað meiri kurteisi at láta gleði ok gamanræður koma í mótt beinleika en skaup eða atyrði’ [Þorkell said it would be more courteous to meet hospitality with merriment and good cheer rather than with *skaup* or abusive words].

**flimtun/flimtan** n.

7 citations. *ONP*: ‘(most often about verse) spot, hán [(most often about verse) mockery, ridicule]’. *CV*: ‘a lampooning, quizzing, satire’.

*Related words*: *flim/flim/flimt/flimtr*, n. ‘a lampoon, libel (in verses)’ (7 citations); *flimberi*, n. ‘a flouter [one who mocks]’ (1 citation); *flimska*, n. ‘mockery’ (1 citation); *flimta*, vb. ‘to flout, lampoon’ (8 citations); *flimtari*, n. [one who mocks] (1 citation).

As the dictionary definitions suggest, *flim* and *flimtun* refer to mocking verses. They seem to differ from verses that could be described as *háð* in that those verses have double meanings or offer ironic praise in order to highlight the failings of the target, whereas a *flimtun* is straightforwardly critical. In terms of form, the word can describe both short, simple ditties (e.g. *Morkinskinna* st. 21), and sophisticated compositions in complex skaldic metres (e.g. *Egils saga* st. 8).

Although its use as synonymous with *danz* (see above; also *Þórðar saga kakala* ch. 29) suggests an entertaining aspect, it is not always clear whether the translation of ‘lampoon’ or ‘satire’, suggesting as it does an element of humour, is accurate in every case. Of course, this difficulty could be a result of modern audiences lacking details necessary to ‘get the joke’, but in some cases there are few markers or contextual clues to suggest that humour is intended. Take for example an instance in *Njáls saga*. We are introduced to Þórhildr skáldkona [poetess], who is said to be ‘órðgífr mikit, ok fór með flimtan’ [a word-witch and went about composing *flimtuns*]. At a wedding,
Þórhildr’s husband Þráinn begins eyeing up the teenage daughter of the bride. Þórhildr ‘reiðisk’ [became angry] and composes the following couplet (kviðlingr, see below):

Era gapriplar góðir,  
gægir er þér í augum.  

Gawpers aren’t good; goggling is in your eyes.

At this, Þráinn jumps up and declares himself divorced from her, saying ‘vil ek eigi hafa flimtan hennar né fáryrði yfir mér’ [I won’t have any more of her flimtuns or acrimonious words hanging over me]. Þráinn insists that he will not stay at the feast while she is present, and Þorhildr leaves (or is sent away). We are then told, ‘ok nú sátu menn hverr í sínu rúmi ok drukku ok váru kátir’ [and now everyone sat in their own seat and drank and were cheerful]. Intent to critique and to highlight a flaw is apparent in the verse, but whether it is done in a humorous way seems doubtful. The alliteration and wordplay (Þórhildr uses two words not otherwise attested in this form) could suggest humour, but those are both intrinsic features of most Norse poetry and so would not automatically assume a comic effect. Pórðr juxtaposes the word flimtun with fáryrði [acrimonious words], which has little implication of humour. Furthermore, it appears that no-one present finds the exchange funny; people become ‘cheerful’ after the incident has died down and the festivities recommence. It should not be assumed, then, that the label flimtun/flimtan offers an indication of the presence of satire as we understand it in Modern English.

Compare here kviðlingr, n. (21 citations; CV: ‘a ditty, esp. of a satire or lampoon’), which is sometimes used synonymously with flimtun. ONP specifies it as a ‘digt bestående af én strofe’ [poem comprised of one stanza]. In this case the word describes the form rather than the content: a kviðlingr is not necessarily mocking in intent, though in practice, the examples recorded often are so (see the example under kverskiyrði).

kerski/kerska, n.  
8 citations. ONP: (1) ‘spøg, vittighed’ [prank, joke]; (2) ‘glæde, lyksalighed’ [joy, bliss]. CV: ‘cheerfulness, mirth, fun’.

Related words: kerskifimr, adj. 1 citation. CV: ‘witty’; (all-)kerskiligr, adj. 1 citation. CV: ‘very sarcastic, biting’; kerskilæti, n. 1 citation. Undefined; kerskimál, n. 4 citations. CV: ‘a jest’; kerskimáll, adj. 1 citation. CV: ‘facetious’.

In the Hauksbók redaction of Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks, the seventh of eight pieces of advice given to King Heiðrekr by his father is: ‘at eiga jamnan kerski við komanda gest’ [always to have kerski with a newly-arrived guest]. To translate kerski as ‘cheerful conversation’ works well here, although as Christopher Tolkien observes, this counsel might have been added to the story to foreshadow a later plot-point in which Heiðrekr gives a poor welcome to the god Óðinn [Odin] in disguise, and later attacks him, for which he is cursed by
Óðinn. There is a nice double meaning in the choice of word, since in-between these events Óðinn and Heiðrekr compete in a riddle-match. Kerski, and the advice, could be equally well understood as the more specific ‘always exchange witticisms with a newly-arrived guest’. In this case, there is an indication that a riddle could be classed as kerski.

The citation for kerskiyrði (1 citation. CV: ‘jokes’ [lit. kerski-words]) in Þorgils saga ok Haflíða, part of the Sturlunga saga collection of so-called contemporary sagas, relates to a tantalising episode containing several humour words. In an account of a wedding feast in Reykjahólar, Iceland, which took place in 1119, people are drinking heavily and ‘hverr stingi annan nökkruru hnæfilyrði, ok er þó fátt hermt at þeira keskiyrðum í þessari frásögn’ [each stings the others with taunting words, but little is reported of their kerskiyrði in this account]. Although the narrator appears to be holding out on his audience here, some at least of their kerskiyrði are recounted, and it is worth quoting more of this episode at length. To provide some necessary context, the wedding is attended by, amongst others, two notable chieftains: the local chieftain Þorgils Oddason and one from another district, Þórðr Porvaldsson. The guests are seated along two long benches, with Þórðr and his retinue opposite Þorgils and his, which includes a priest named Ingimundr and a man named Óláfr Hildisson, who has been outlawed but given three years to leave the country and is under Þorgils’ protection. We learn that Þórðr suffers from various health issues, including a condition that makes it difficult for him to eat meat, and gives him rather bad breath. In what follows, humour words are highlighted in bold on their first occurrence.

Þess er getit, at Ingimundr prestr laut at sessunaut sínum ok mælti við hann, svá sem himn spyrði:

‘Hvaðan kennir þef þenna?   Þórðr andar nú handan’.

Ok verðr at hlátr mikill, ok er næsta gerr at þessu gyss mikill, ok er því léttir, þá kveðr Þórðr í mot:

‘Andi es Ingimundar ekki góðr á bekkjum’.

Ok af þessum áköstum tekr heldr at grána gamanit, ok koma kviðlingar við svá. Þá var þetta kveðit til Þórðar:

‘Rymr i barka glitar skallinn við
rákismanni, á góða yðrum’.

Hér hlær Þórðr mjók at þessum kveðlingi ok kveðr þegar í móti:

‘Vaxa blástrar rauníllr gerisk þefr
á bekk þaðan af ropum yðrum’.

Þorgils brosti nú at, en lagði aldri til um akostín. Ingimundr mælti, at nökkrur þeira bekkjunauta skyldi sjá í móti við Þórð. Þá var þetta kveðit:
It is mentioned that Ingimundr the priest bowed towards his benchmate and spoke to him as if he’d asked a question:

‘Where does this smell come from? Þórðr breathes now from there’.

And much laughter arose at this, and the next thing is much mockery is made of it, and when it lightens off Þórðr says this in response:

‘Ingimundr’s breath is not good for the bench’.

And from these taunts the entertainment begins to grow coarse, and ditties came forth. Then this was said to Þórðr:

‘Din in the windpipe of the powerful man; the bald head shines at it: that of your chieftain [i.e. Þórðr]’.

Here Þórðr laughs greatly at this ditty and says immediately in response:

‘The blasts of breath increase onto the bench from there; the smell gets very bad from your belches’.

Þorgils now smiled at that, but put nothing forward in response to the taunt. Ingimundr said that some other of their benchmates should respond to Þórðr. Then this was said:

It is harmless Þórðr belches – though we belch, son of Þórvaldr we booth-mates, son of Kjartan – from beef. from his food-bowl.

This latter verse turns out to have been uttered by the outlaw Óláfr Hildisson. Þórðr asks the hosts to send Óláfr away; Þorgils, as the local chieftain, refuses to allow this to happen, saying Þórðr may leave if he wishes but that Óláfr is under his protection. Þórðr and his party leave, to the accompaniment of two more insulting verses being recited, and this departure is thought to be ‘íbros-ligt’ [comical (lit. ‘smilable’)].

The word kerskiyrði in the opening to this exchange signals the presence of a type of ‘humour’, and the descriptions of laughter suggests that the verses were well received. But what is a modern audience to make of the nature of that humour? Leaving aside the fact that much of the ‘humour’ described here seems somewhat juvenile (‘you stink’), if not merely cruel (given that the taunts
levelled at Þórðr seem to be true), the dynamics of this encounter are complex, and somewhat obscure. Why does Þórðr take such offence at Óláfr’s verse but not before?

We know that poetry was particularly potent because of its memorability and ease of transmission (proven in that verse is what is recorded in the saga, above more prosaic exchanges). We also know that couplets, such as the two exchanged between Þórðr and Ingimundr, are not to be seen as offensive. According to the law at least, Þórðr could perhaps have chosen to take offence at the four-line kviðlingr, but he is able to give as good as he gets (cf. the genre of senna, or exchange of poetic insults). What is likely to have caused such umbrage in Óláfr’s verse is that not only Þórðr but his father and grandfather are named in it. There is no hiding who the verse is about; it brings shame to three generations of his family. Since Þórðr does not immediately know who the author of the verse is, he is unable to retaliate in kind. And finally, Óláfr is of lower social standing than Þórðr and an outlaw (legally, a non-person). To be bested by an inferior would have lowered Þórðr’s own status, and honour, considerably.

**Conclusions**

The well-known cliché that there are 50 so-called ‘Eskimo’ words for snow is controversial, but it barely seems so to conclude in this investigation that there are at least approaching 50 Old Norse words for ‘mockery’. Many of these now survive in only one or two citations, and it is impossible here for reasons of space and lack of data to analyse them in further depth. To list just some of those further words—and I restrict myself here to nouns: ákost, dár, dáruskapr, frýja, fyndi, gabb, gár, gletta/glettr, gymsing, gyss, hróp, heðni, høpréiði, kalls, skalk, skeitun, skelkni, skeypi, skimp, skopun, skoll, skúti, spé, spýting. Modern English does not have an adequate vocabulary to be able to translate all these words and their shades of meaning differently: we have to make do, in most cases, with ‘mockery’. Then there are words such as skomm [shame], skadí [scathe, harm, damage], hatr [hatred, spite, animosity], and the legal category fullréttisorð [words requiring full personal compensation], which in English and in contemporary Western contexts we would instinctively be likely to categorise as different from ‘humour’; but clear lines are often difficult to demarcate. If even the most heinous insult is delivered in a clever, inventive, and witty way, or is formally recognisable as having a ‘joke’ structure, it is not humour? If it makes people (if not the target) laugh, is it not humour? And of course, the very obscene or offensive may be found funny precisely because it is outrageous or taboo. These issues throw up a methodological problem in a semantic study of ‘humour words’: what should be included and what should be left out?

Such gradation was a problem for the honour culture of early Scandinavian society, too. Stephen Halliwell writes (of ancient Greece, but the point is transferable):
the need to know how (to try) to distinguish between insults and jokes, together
with an awareness of how easily the latter might slip into or be mistaken for the
former, was a matter for recurrent unease in a culture where the dynamics of
maintaining or losing status (or impugning the status of others), of suffering or
avoiding shame (or wielding its public power against others), were so
fundamental.97

For speakers of Old Norse, in most cases linguistic labels would perhaps not
have helped much with this distinction. Manifestations of the speech acts and
actions examined in this chapter slide along the scale from benign to malign-
"ant; it is not always possible to predict whether a target will be amused or take
offence, nor which reaction was intended. Old Icelandic law decreed brígði,
lostr, nið, and háðung to cross the line, but even then, in many cases these were
not particular, clearly defined acts, but depended on whether or not háðung
(CV: ‘shame, disgrace’) was intended, which remained subject to discretion.
Society acknowledged that most types of mockery could be done or said ‘fyrir
glennz ok gaman [eða] til háðungar’ [for glens and gaman, or for háðung].98 A
degree of subjectivity, of variable emotional reaction, is acknowledged even in
the law. On name-calling, for instance—if someone is given a mocking nick-
name—the law prescribes a penalty of lesser outlawry ‘ef hann vill reiðaz við’
[i.e. the target wants to get angry about it].99

Certainly, to make something an offence in all senses of the word, legally
and emotionally, is to make it a serious matter. However, that such instances
are not benign and for that reason are not always found ‘funny’ is not necessar-
ily to say they should not be considered as forms of ‘historical humour’. Take
Bremmer and Roodenburg’s definition of humour as ‘any message […]
intended to produce a smile or a laugh’.100 Halliwell points out that ‘there is no
cogent reason to suppose that laughter erupts from, or is reducible to, a single
type of feeling, mood, or psychic state’.101 Whether a ‘message’ is intended to
provoke a laugh of amusement, or of contempt or scorn or schadenfreude or
anger, it would still fit Bremmer and Roodenburg’s definition. For one thing,
the laughter and emotional reactions of the target are likely to be very different
from the laughter and emotional reactions of other audiences of the ‘message’.
For another, as we know, one person might feel amused by something that
another finds only offensive or distasteful or silly; that person might them-
selves feel different levels of amusement at any given time, depending on a host of
other factors.

So what does all this mean for ‘humour’ as a conceptual category in early
Scandinavia? I distinguish humour as a conceptual category here from humour
as a phenomenon: clearly people joked, quipped, played with words, bantered,
played pranks, engaged in whimsy and even self-deprecation, without animus
towards others. Words for these activities are likely to be underrepresented in
the extant written corpus, while mockery and insult, which tend to be more
important to saga plotlines, are likely to be overrepresented. Ephemeral joking
moments ‘er […] fátt hermt’ [are little reported], as Þorgils saga puts it.102
Moreover, there are no theoretical treatises on ‘humour’ or laughter; much of what might be deemed ‘humorous’ is not explicitly labelled by authors and scribes.

From the evidence considered here we can envisage for Old Norse a category containing a spectrum with glens towards one end and hâðung towards the other. Níð, fullréttsorð, and other forms of ‘hate-speech’ sit at the extreme, past hâðung, noticeably different in degree but ultimately not fully separable or easily distinguished in form. Would puns and wordplay, say, be part of this category? Wordplay need not be funny, and so it is difficult to categorise even in the Anglophone concept of humour. It is a key feature of most Old Norse poetry and was clearly valued in its own right—but it could also be used in mockery, so intention and effect are as important to understand as they are in contemporary usage. The characteristic understatement of the sagas, often recognised as humorous by modern readers, could also find a place on the spectrum: there might not be a convenient Old Norse term for it, but in modern parlance, it often slides into ‘throwing shade’.

It is difficult to think outside the tyranny of the umbrella term ‘humour’, but it is also difficult to propose an obviously different category or set of categories for early Scandinavia that would include or exclude items very differently to English. Perhaps it is easier to suggest a different ‘focal point’ for such a category. While we would perhaps think of ‘funniness’ and the ‘emotion’ or feeling of amusement at the centre of the Anglophone concept of ‘humour’ (and I acknowledge that not everyone will agree with me here), we could think of a form of ‘mockery’ and perhaps feelings of scorn at the centre of the early Scandinavian mental analogue. The Scandinavian concept might encompass more and more extreme forms of mockery, which might be pushed out of the Anglophone concept of ‘humour’ at a different point. A more comprehensive study than has been possible here would need to be undertaken to map such a category in full. However, this preliminary examination has suggested some of the methodological and conceptual complexities in considering ‘humour’ in non-Anglophone linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts and has begun to map the contours of the Old Norse ‘sense of humour’.

Notes

1. See especially Condren, this volume. I am grateful to Ralph O’Connor for his helpful comments on a draft of this chapter.
2. See, for example Dixon, “Emotion”. See also Tierney-Hynes, this volume.
3. For example, Rosenwein, ‘Emotion Words’, 96–97.
4. Rosenwein, ‘Emotion Words’, 101; Wierzbicka, Emotions.
5. Halliwell, Greek Laughter, ix.
6. ONP, User’s Guide, § I.D.i.
7. Ibid.
8. Items are presented with semantic considerations in mind, rather than in alphabetical order.
9. A revised edition, supplemented by W. A. Craigie, was produced in 1957, but I have been unable to access this work during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. In any case, since it is online, the older edition is the more widely accessible.

10. Such literary-critical studies for Old Norse specifically, which generally utilise modern terms for humour or subtypes of it, include: Abram, ‘Trolling’; Anderson, ‘Form’; Ashurst, ‘Elements of Satire’; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Young Love’; Bartusik, ‘Saró’; Classen, ‘Sarcasm’; Clover, ‘Hárbarðsljóð’; van Dijk, ‘Amused’; Durrenberger and Wilcox, ‘Humor’; Gronlie, ‘Preaching’; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘Gender’; Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘On Humour’; McKinnell, ‘Pórr as Comic Hero’; North, ‘gød geyja’; Vésteinn Ólason, ‘List og tvísa’; Willson, ‘Parody’.

11. See, for example Stewart, ‘Laughter and the Greek Philosophers’, 29.

12. Sif Rikhardsdottir, Emotions, 118.

13. Wolf, ‘Laughter’, 94.

14. Steblin-Kamenskij, ‘On the History’, 154. A division along similar lines is common; for other contexts cf. Burde, ‘The parodia’, 215; Halliwell, ‘The Uses’, 280.

15. Steblin-Kamenskij, ‘On the History’, 157, 160.

16. Magennis, ‘Images of Laughter’, 196.

17. Wolf, ‘Laughter’.

18. Ibid., 98.

19. See, for example Burde, ‘The parodia’, 215.

20. Finsen, Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog, Ib, 182 (K §237).

21. Finnur Jónsson, ed. Brennu-Njálsaga, 264. All translations are my own unless explicitly stated otherwise in text.

22. Unger, Heilagra, II, 438.

23. Ranisch, Die Gautreksaga, 26–27.

24. Bjarni Einarsson, Ágrip-Fagrskinna, 135.

25. Finlay, Fagrskinna, 107.

26. The story is told differently in Jómsvíkinga saga, where the narratorial comment is absent and the executioner is not amused, calling the Jomsviking ‘manna armastr’ [most wretched man] and putting him to death. Blake, The Saga of the Jomsvikings, 31.

27. Finlay, Fagrskinna, 107.

28. Guðbrandr Vigfússon and Unger, Flateyjarbók, 291.

29. Wolf, ‘Laughter’, 94; cf. Le Goff, ‘Laughter’, 162.

30. Low, ‘The Mirthless’.

31. Loth, Karlamagnús saga, 288.

32. Page, Gibbons saga, 26.

33. Ibid. The late date of AM 585c 4to does not necessarily imply language change; modern Icelandic glotta means ‘sneer, grin, smirk’ (Sverrir Hólmarsson et al., Íslensk-ensk orðabók: glotta).

34. Low, ‘The Mirthless’, 102.

35. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla III, 154.

36. Ibid., 155.

37. Ibid.

38. Gering, Islendzk æventyri, 178.

39. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Brennu-Njáls saga, 61.

40. Normalised from af Petersens, Jómsvíkinga saga, 125.
41. Kålund, *Laxdæla saga*, 261.
42. See Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, especially 17–20.
43. Kålund, *Sturlunga*, II, 170–71.
44. Indrebo, *Gamal norsk Homiliebok*, 38.
45. Faulkes, *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 34.
46. Ibid.
47. Kålund, *Sturlunga*, I, 23.
48. Ibid.
49. Jiriczek, *Die Bósa-Saga*, 7.
50. Guðbrandr Vigfússon, *Bardarsaga*, 28.
51. Anderson, ‘Bard’s Saga’, 254.
52. Björn K. Pórólfssson, *Fóstbrædra saga*, 93.
53. Regal, ‘The Saga of the Sworn Brothers’, 360.
54. Kålund, *Heiðarvíga saga*, 107.
55. Ólafur Halldórsson, *Óláfs saga*, 233.
56. Guðbrandr Vigfússon and Unger, *Flateyjarbók*, 397.
57. Kålund, *Sturlunga*, I, 355.
58. Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics*, 78.
59. Kålund, *Laxdæla saga*, 180.
60. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I, 5.
61. Olsen, *Den tredje*, 113–14.
62. Finsen, *Grágás: Islandernes Lovbog*, Ib, 183 (K §238).
63. Sverrir Hólmarson et al., *Íslensk-ensk orðabók: bád*.
64. Finnrur Jónsson, *Gunnlaugs saga*, 52.
65. On the borrowing of ON *gabb* into Old French and its development there, see Grigsby, *The Gab*, especially 7–29.
66. Finsen, *Grágás: Islandernes Lovbog*, Ib, 182 (K §237).
67. Finsen, *Grágás: Efter*, 380–81 (St §361).
68. Finsen, *Grágás: Islandernes Lovbog*, Ib, 183 (K §238).
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. On *níð* see especially Ström, *Níð*; Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*.
72. Sverrir Hólmarson et al., *Íslensk-ensk orðabók: spott*.
73. Ólafur Halldórsson, *Óláfs saga*, I, 15.
74. Björn K. Pórólfssson, *Fóstbrædra saga*, 169.
75. Ibid.
76. Kålund, *Sturlunga*, I, 51.
77. Ibid., 342.
78. Marold, ‘*Mangsngr*’. On later Nordic comic ballads see Hansen, this volume.
79. Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics*, 172.
80. Sverrir Hólmarson et al., *Íslensk-ensk orðabók: skop*.
81. Finnrur Jónsson, *Vatsdelasaga*, 100.
82. For discussion of the requirement of an element of humour in the definition of satire, see Marshall, *The Practice of Satire*, 2.
83. Cf. Derrin’s introduction to this volume.
84. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 87.
85. Ibid., 89.
86. Ibid.
87. Jón Helgason, *Heiðreks saga*, 37.
88. Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks konungs*, xvi.
89. Kålund, *Sturlunga*, I, 19–20.
90. Ibid., 20.
91. Ibid., 21.
92. Even if mockery (*brigzli*) were true it was subject to lesser outlawry in *Grágás*. See Finsen, *Grágás: Islandernes Lovbog*, Ib, 182 (K §237).
93. On the *senna* see, for example Abram, ‘Trolling’; Swenson, ‘Performing Definitions’; Harris, ‘The *senna*’.
94. See, for example Krupnik and Müller-Wille, ‘Franz Boas’.
95. See for instance Blake, ‘Taboo Language’.
96. On the honour culture of early Scandinavia, see, for example Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortelling og ære*.
97. Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 25.
98. Olafur Halldórsson, *Óláfs saga*, 233.
99. Finsen, *Grágás: Islandernes Lovbog*, Ib, 182 (K §237).
100. Bremmer and Roodenburg, *A Cultural History*, 1.
101. Halliwell, *Greek Laughter*, 10–11.
102. Kålund, *Sturlunga*, I, 19.

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