

# A comment on a textual emendation to *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa*

By Kirsten Wolf

*At the end of Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa, it is related that after Björn has died in a heroic last stand, his adversary Þórðr, at the request of Kálfr, goes to Hólm to give to Þórdís, Björn's wife, an ornament that Björn had worn around his neck. Kálfr hands Þórdís the ornament, but she throws the ornament at Þórðr and tells him to give it to his wife Oddný. At the sight of the ornament, Oddný, Björn's lifelong love, sinks down and loses all consciousness of people around her. By the time the swoon lifts from her, she has lapsed into an illness, from which she eventually dies. The extant manuscripts of the saga report that "hon mornaði ǫll ok þorрнаði ok rǫddi aldri síðan tanna ok lifði þó mjök lengi við þessi óþógindi."*

*The expression rǫða tanna occurs nowhere else in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Accordingly, editors of Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa have sought to emend it. This article presents an assessment of these emendations and proposes an emendation of "rǫddi aldri síðan tanna" not to "rǫddi aldri síðan mikit" or "tǫði aldri síðan tanna," but to "tjáði aldri síðan tanna."*

## 1

At the end of *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa*, it is related that after Björn Arngerrsson, the eponymous hero of the saga, has died in a heroic last stand, alone and almost unarmed against twenty-four attackers, his adversary Þórðr Kolbeinsson, at the request of Kálfr illviti, goes to Hólm to give to Þórdís Þorfinnsdóttir, Björn's wife, an ornament that Björn had worn around his neck. Kálfr hands Þórdís the ornament, but she throws the ornament at Þórðr and tells him to give it to his wife Oddný Eykyndill Þorkeldsdóttir. At the sight of the ornament, Oddný Eykyndill, Björn's lifelong love, who had been married to Þórðr only because Þórðr lied about Björn's death, sinks down and loses all consciousness of people around her. By the time the swoon lifts from her, she has lapsed

into an illness, which brings her restlessness and pain. She is overwhelmed with suffering, and the only thing that brings her comfort is sitting on horseback with her husband Þórðr leading her and the horse to and fro. Eventually, she dies from the illness. The extant manuscripts of the saga report that “hon mornaði ǫll ok þorrnaði ok røddi aldri síðan tanna ok lifði þó mjök lengi við þessi óhógindi” (AM 551 D a 4to fols. 31r–v, Rask 28 p. 75).<sup>1</sup>

The expression *røða tanna* occurs nowhere else in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Accordingly, editors of *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa* have sought to emend it. This article presents a survey and an assessment of these emendations and proposes an emendation of “røddi” (infinitive: *røða*) to “tjáði” (infinitive: *tjá*).

## 2

*Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa* was first edited in 1847. The editor, Halldór Friðriksson, attempts to retain the reading of the two manuscripts and suggests emending “tanna” to “mikit”: “hón mornaði ok þorrnaði, ok røddi aldri síðan mikit, ok lifði þó mjök lengi við þessi óhógindi” (p. 60). In his textual apparatus, he notes that “tanna” may be an error for “til manna,” and in the accompanying Danish translation, Halldór Friðriksson renders the phrase “ok røddi aldri síðan mikit” as “og taleden siden aldrig meget” (p. 73; and since then never spoke much). At the suggestion of Guðbrandur Vigfússon, who reviewed Halldór Friðriksson’s edition in *Ný félagssrit* 18 (1858), pp. 159–62, C. R. Boer retains “tanna” and emends “røddi” to “tøði” (infinitive: *tøja*) in his 1893 edition of the saga: “hon mornaði ǫll ok þorrnaði ok tøði aldri síðan tanna ok lifði þó mjök lengi við þessi óhógindi” (p. 72). Two subsequent editions of *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa* published by Sigurður Kristjánsson and Benedikt Sveinsson in 1908 and 1923, respectively, are based on Boer’s edition and retain his emendation. Boer’s emendation is favored also in the most recent edition of the saga, that is Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson’s 1938 edition in the *Íslensk fornrit* series (p. 206). In addition to noting that the manuscripts have “røddi,” Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson

1. For “ok røddi aldri síðan tanna” Rask 28 has “ok ræddi aldri síðan (meðal) tanna.” These are the only two manuscripts covering the passage in question.

comment that *tója* (*týja*, *tjóa*) usually means to “help” or “assist.” They maintain that *tója tanna* should probably be interpreted as to “neyta tanna” or to be “í fullu fjöri” and suggest translating the phrase (into modern Icelandic) as “bera sitt bar” (thrive, feel comfortable, be happy). Their emendation or suggestion is followed by W. Bryant Jackman, Jr., and Alison Finlay, who translate the phrase “hon . . . tóði aldri sídan tanna” as “joy never returned to her” (p. 215) and “[s]he . . . never afterwards had any joy in life” (p. 301), respectively. The Danish translation edited by Aldís Sigurðardóttir, however, appears to make an effort to retain the manuscript reading: “fra det tidspunkt kom der ikke mere et eneste ord over hendes læber” (pp. 79–80; from that point on not a single word ever came over her lips). The same applies to the Norwegian translation by Stefan Frich: “[h]o . . . rødde mest aldri sidan” (p. 81; she . . . hardly ever spoke since then).

By way of justifying the emendation of “røddi” to “tóði” Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson maintain that the phrase “*tója tanna*” appears in the poetry of two Old Icelandic skalds. One is a *lausavísa* by Kormákr Ögmundarson (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, vol. 1B, p. 77). In the following, the phrase in question is given in italics:

Mákak hitt of hyggja,  
 hví þú skyldir verða,  
 gollhlaðs geymiþella,  
 gefin tindráttar manni,  
 trauðla mák of *tója*  
*tanna*, silki-Nanna,  
 siz þik fastnaði frægja  
 faðir þinn blotamanni.

Finnur Jónsson offers the following translation of the poem: “Jeg kan ikke forstå det, kvinde, hvorfor du blev bortgiven til den tintrækker; jeg kan næppe *trække på læben* (*til smil*) siden din fader fæstede dig, navnkundige kvinde, til den elendige karl.”<sup>2</sup> In his edition of *Kormáks saga*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson does not comment on the phrase, but offers the interpretation of “trauðla mák of *tója tanna*” as “ég er ekki með hýrri há” (p. 264; I am sorrowful). In their English translations, W. S. Colling-

2. “I cannot understand, woman, why you were given away to that tin-smith; I can scarcely smile, since your father betrothed you, renowned woman, to that wretched man.”

wood and Jón Stefánsson render the phrase as “scarce can I smile” (p. 102), and Rory McTurk as “I can scarcely show my teeth in a grin” (p. 207). Both translations would seem to be based on Finnur Jónsson’s definition (“vise tænder”) in his *Lexicon Poeticum*, where the translation is given *s. v. téa*.<sup>3</sup> The verb *tója*, as it appears in *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa*, Finnur Jónsson translates as “vise” (governing the genitive case).

The other is a *lausavísa* by Holmgöngu-Bersi Véleifsson, although according to Finnur Jónsson’s diplomatic edition (1912–15, vol. 1A, p. 94), the primary manuscript uses the verb *telja* (“tel”), whereas the two secondary manuscripts use the verb *tjá* (“té”). In his normalized edition (1912–15, vol. 1B, p. 88), Finnur Jónsson favors the verb *tjá*.<sup>4</sup> In the following, the phrase in question is given in italics:

Nú hefk (en *ték tanna*)  
 Tanngnjóst vegit manna,  
 þau beri menn frá morði  
 mín orð, tøggar fjórða;  
 koma mun Ullr, þótt eldisk,  
 optarr) mara þoptu  
 (litak blóði svan sveita)  
 setrs í heim at betra.

Finnur Jónsson offers the following translation of the poem: “Nu har jeg dræbt Tanngnjost som den en og tredivte – og det er jeg *glad ved*; disse mine ord om drabet føre man viden om; søfareren (jeg) vil komme til et så meget bedre opholdssted; oftere vil jeg farve raven i blod, uagtet jeg ældes.”<sup>5</sup> In his edition of *Kormáks saga*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson comments that the emendation of “tel” to “ték” appears to be necessary and that *téa* (or *tója*) *tanna* is a common expression, which may be interpreted as “láta sjá í tennur (þegar verið er í góðu skapi)” (p. 255; to show one’s teeth [when in a good mood]). Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson translate “ték tanna” as “I smile” (p. 89) and McTurk as “my own teeth I show in a grin” (p. 203).

3. Cf. also the *Lexicon Poeticum*, *s.v. tōm*, where *tója*, *téa*, *tanna* is defined as “vise tænder, o: ved at smile, og så ‘smile’ af glæde.”

4. In his edition of *Kormáks saga*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, too, has “ték tanna” (p. 255).

5. “Now I have killed Tanngnjóst [Tooth-grinder] as the thirty-first – and I am happy about that; my words are used as witness to the killing; the seafarer (I) will arrive at a much better abode; I will more often color the raven in blood, although I grow old.”

Although Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson's arguments in favor of emending "røddi" to "tøði" are persuasive, it is a fact that the only occurrence (a *lausavísa* by Kormákr Ógmundarson) of the phrase *tója tanna* in Old Norse-Icelandic is in poetry and not prose as in *Bjarnar saga Hitdólakappa*.

The expression *tjá tanna* in the *lausavísa* by Holmgöngu-Bersi Véleifsson appears twice in Old Norse-Icelandic prose. According to Johan Fritzner's *Ordbog over Det gamle norske sprog* (*s.v. tjá* [preterite: *tjáði*]), there are a number of occurrences of the verb in Old Norse-Icelandic prose, usually in the meaning "fremvisse, komme frem med noget" and "forestille, foredrage, fremstille i Ord eller Tale" and with the object in the accusative (his definition is given *s.v. tjá* [preterite: *tjáði*]). However, Fritzner (*s.v. tjá*) lists one example, in which the verb appears with the genitive plural of *tönn* and offers the translation or interpretation of the phrase *tjá eigi tanna* as "ikke tage mad til sig, faste." The example is from *Karlamagnúss saga*, which describes Guitalin's reaction to the news from Rollant's messenger that Rollant is on his way to Garmasie with a huge army and intends to conquer his city: "við þessi tíðendi ógladdist mjök Guitalin konungr, svá at hann tjáði eigi tanna" (pp. 381–82; at this news King Guitalin became very unhappy, so that he *tjáði eigi tanna*).<sup>6</sup> Two examples of the expression *tjá tanna* are listed *s.v. tönn*.<sup>7</sup> One is the example from *Karlamagnúss saga*. The other example is from *Bærings saga* (ed. Cederschiöld 1884) in Lucinia's speech to Bæringr: "ok síðan er ek sá yðr it fyrsta sinn, þá hefir minn hugr leikit á yðarri fegrð dag ok nátt, svá at ek má eigi tjá tanna né nokkura gleði hafa" (p. 109; and since I saw you the first time, your beauty has been on my mind day and night, so that I can neither *tjá tanna* nor have any joy). Since in *Bærings saga* it is

6. In his textual apparatus, C. R. Unger notes that this is according to AM 180c fol. AM 180a fol. has "tédi" (instead of "tjáði"), and AM 180d fol. and AM 531 4to, which represent the younger recension, omit the phrase "svá at hann tjáði eigi tanna." Constance B. Heiatt translates the sentence as follows: "These tidings were so extremely displeasing to King Guitalin that he did not smile" (vol. 3, p. 30). Since the exact Old French source for this part of *Karlamagnúss saga* has not been established, it is impossible to ascertain what the Old French phrase might have been.

7. *The Arnarnaganaean Dictionary: A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* does not in its collection of slips have occurrences of the phrase *tjá/tója/týja/tjóa tanna* other than those in *Bjarnar saga Hitdólakappa*, *Karlamagnúss saga*, and *Bærings saga* (Eva Rode, *The Arnarnaganaean Dictionary*, pers. communication November 2009).

maintained that in addition to being unable to *tjá tanna* Lucinia was unable to *hafa gleði*, that is, smile or take joy in life, her inability to *tjá tanna* would seem to mean something other than enjoyment of life and, likely, as Fritznér suggests, (in)ability to eat, although certainly the possibility of pleonasm cannot be excluded.

## 4

The emendations proposed by Halldór Friðriksson and C.R. Boer (and Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson) do not question the fact that Oddný Eykyndill was gravely ill. She certainly didn't thrive, and, according to the editors and translators, she either never spoke or never smiled (that is, enjoyed life). And yet, according to *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa*, she managed to live for a very long time in such discomfort.

As it is presented in *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa*, the illness appears to have been caused by an emotional shock. The symptoms described are syncope (fainting), restlessness, pain (non-descript for location, characteristics, or duration), amelioration of some or all of the symptoms with diversion on horseback, and loss of weight. The subsequent death is assigned etiologically to the condition.

There are many conditions which could combine restlessness and pain. These range from Addison's Disease to Alzheimer's, from Cluster Headaches to Goodpasture's Syndrome to Hepatic Encephalopathy to Hyperthyroidism, or deficiencies of magnesium or sodium. One possible condition is Disequilibrium Syndrome, which can be associated with restlessness and pain; the alleviation by horseback riding would be possible, but atypical; however, it is usually not directly fatal. The condition is most likely on the depression spectrum. With affective disorders, bipolar, (a)typical (chronic) depression, including grief or loss, all of the symptoms described in *Bjarnar saga Hítðólakappa* are possible.<sup>8</sup>

If frank depression, chronic or acute, is the correct diagnosis, both the emendation proposed by Halldór Friðriksson (“hon . . . røddi aldri síðan tanna”) and that proposed by Boer and favored by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (“hon . . . tøði aldri síðan tanna”) could fit. The for-

8. Walter O. Schalick, M.D. Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, pers. communication November 2009.

mer would imply that Oddný Eykyndill retreated into herself, choosing not to communicate. The latter would imply that she became melancholic. However, in light of the fact that *Bjarnar saga Hitdölakappa* reports that Oddný Eykyndill withered and shrank (“mornaði ǫll ok þorrnaði”), an emendation to “hon ... tjáði aldri síðan tanna,” which would imply that Oddný Eykyndill became anorexic, would seem logical. Moreover, the use of the concessional “þó” to introduce the (remarkable) fact that Oddný Eykyndill lived for quite some time in this condition, would make more sense, if it referred to her inability or unwillingness to take nourishment, especially in light of the fact that people with “the dwindles” can survive longer than anticipated without obviously eating. And who knows, if perhaps also the lovesick Kormákr Ögmundarson lost his appetite rather than his ability to smile, when he realized that his true love Steingerðr Þorkelsdóttir was forever lost to him.

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