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THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS AS DRAMAS OF THE WILL

The center of interest in the Sagas of Icelanders is their realistic portrayal of character. This is particularly evident when we consider the sagas in the light of other medieval literature. The heroes of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, for example, take their character from the story in which they exist. The story carries the meaning and thus comes first; the personages come second. Lancelot is interesting only as the extreme of the adulterous courtly lover, and Chrétien's poem about him is a lesson in the effects of immoderate devotion. Yvain's career, falling from a pinnacle of fame and happiness through foolish neglect, and then winning his way back to his wife's love through acts of prowess and charity, is clearly shaped by medieval conceptions of the progress of the soul through stages of love. This is a different kind of literature from the sagas, where Grettir and Egill are important, not for what they stand for, but because of who each one is. The characters in the sagas exist in their own right, not for their usefulness in a certain kind of fiction. Even Chaucer's Wife of Bath or Miller or Host, thought to be unusually realistic in medieval literature, fit artistic patterns and didactic purposes seldom imposed on saga characters. It is not too much to say that the primary

tendency in the sagas is toward realistic biography.

The realism of the sagas derives from their foundation in traditional material and the fact that the saga-writers chose to assume the role of historian with regard to this material - and played this role even when dealing with fictions. In a small country with a strong sense of its history in terms of individuals, families, and places, it is easy to understand that the core of the traditional material must have been a distinct sense of character - of Egill as proud and wilful and greedy, of Snorri goði as shrewd and cunning. Around these characters stories could be told and elaborated, but the characters must remain alive and real.

All persons, of course, once they are dead and exist in memory, tend to become fictions. If they are set into patterns of love and heroism, the pressure to fictionalize and idealize is especially strong. But the sagas seem to have experienced little of this pressure, and a common error in reading them is to see them as less mimetic than they actually are, to read them as tales of love and heroism, or in terms of still other abstractions. In fact, the writers of the sagas had very little interest in the abstracting or idealizing process necessary to produce fiction. They took their characters as they were, or in whatever realistic mould they chose to see them, with all their faults and inconsistencies.

Björn Hítðelakappi is a good example of a saga

character in whom the ideal of heroism and the demands of literary consistency have been sacrificed in favour of complex realism. In Russia, when he accepts the challenge to fight for his host Valdimarr, he says that he would rather die nobly than live with shame (Bjarnar saga Hít-dælakappa, Íslenzk Fornrit 3, ch. 4). Here, and when he slays a dragon in France, we feel that we are reading heroic literature, but when Björn spends a long winter at the farm of Þórðr and Oddný, bickering fruitlessly with his rival Þórðr, the tone is more petit bourgeois than heroic. There is still another surprise, however, for at the end of the saga Björn regains his original stature and dies a hero's death.

But it would be a mistake to go too far in asserting the realism of the characters in the family sagas. They remain, after all, figures in a particular literature, and one which is very conventional and circumscribed. If we ask ourselves what kind of people these saga characters are, and how they relate to each other, we notice above all that they are unusually given to self-assertion, and either display some form of it themselves or react to it in others.

That the sagas depict an individualistic, competitive society, and that conflicts between men are the essence of the action, is an obvious fact, put succinctly in three words by Árni Magnússon, recorded by Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík: "bændur fljúgast á" ("farmers fight"). Jón

Helgason has put it more fully: "[The sagas] depict especially the relations between men, with a fondness for the harsh encounters in which honor, life and property are at stake" (Norrøn Litteraturhistorie, Copenhagen 1934, p. 135). But the actual combats, in which the hero or his opponent loses his guts or his head, are merely the most striking expression and the culmination of conflicts in a wider sense, which make up the typical action of the sagas: offences, challenges and other forms of overbearing behavior; attempts to get around or persuade another.

Borrowing the medieval division of the soul into three faculties - reason, emotions, will - we can say that the saga treatment of character centers almost exclusively on the will, to the neglect of the other two faculties. It is hard to think of another literature where so much time is spent persuading, bargaining, advising, whetting, cajoling, bullying, being obstinate, and so forth; where the range of human activity is so severely restricted to the elements of competition and the expressions of wilfulness or its opposites. When there is love or reason in the sagas, these are usually presented in their volitional aspect: love turns into a question of making up one's mind or of competition; advice becomes a matter of imposing one will on another.

For example, when Bergþórshváll is being attacked by Flosi and his men, Skarpheðinn and his father argue about

whether to go inside the buildings or defend the farm from outside. Each gives a reasonable opinion, Njáll that the house is strong and that they can defend themselves from inside with greater success than Gunnarr did, Skarpheðinn that the men who are attacking them are less honorable than those who attacked Gunnarr and are likely to set fire to the house if they stay inside. Rather than continue the argument on reasonable grounds, however, Njáll turns it into a struggle for supremacy: "Now you are going to override my advice and show me disrespect, my sons - and not for the first time. But when you were younger you did not do so, and things went better for you then." To this sort of petulance there can be no logical response, and so the sons simply give in:

"Let us do as our father wishes," said Helgi.

"That will be best for all of us."

"I am not so sure of that," said Skarp-Hedin, "for he is a doomed man now. But still I do not mind pleasing my father by burning in the house with him, for I am not afraid of dying."

(Íslenzk Fornrit 12, ch. 128; English by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson)

Wilfulness and self-assertiveness are, of course, to be expected in heroic literature and in an unpoliced society like medieval Iceland. But the amount of wilfulness in the sagas goes beyond the ideal demands of heroism or the practical demands of maintaining one's integrity and

property. It could, in fact, be argued that the brand of decadent heroism that characterizes the sagas is precisely what results when heroic values are contaminated by excessive wilfulness. As for honor, Theodore M. Andersson has shown ("The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas", Speculum 45, 1970, 575-93) that the notion of the primacy of honor in the sagas has been greatly exaggerated, that, for example, the aggressive behavior of Halli Sigurðarson (in Valla-Ljóts saga) is condemned, while the conciliatory attitude of Blund-Ketill (in Hensa-Póris saga) is admired.

If honor is not predominant in the sagas, neither are a sense of beauty, deep convictions, inner anxieties and conflicts, religious piety and love of God or country or one's neighbor. When present, such things lie under the surface, erupting only occasionally; in fact the tension created by their suppression accounts for much of the warmth and humanity in the sagas. Grettir's and Gísli's fear of the dark and Guðrún's recollection of Kjartan are unforgettable. But in the typical actions of the sagas the inner life is played down in favor of manifestations of the will.

With their restriction as well as their suppression of many possible forms of human activity, the sagas do not display the wide variety of the world of Dante or Chaucer, with their scholars and sensualists and lovers and saintly

religious and hypocrites and idealists and assorted misguided souls. Saga characters express themselves and relate to each other primarily on the level of will.

A literal fists-on-the-table scene from Ljósvetninga saga may serve as a kind of exaggerated paradigm for the relationships of men in the sagas. Guðmundr inn ríki of Mjðruvellir, late in his life, is on a visit to one of his thingmen at Tjornes. He is offered the high-seat, while another visitor, Ófeigr Járngerðarson, is shown the next seat in.

When the tables were set up, Ófeigr put his fist on the table and said, "How big does this fist seem to you, Guðmundr?"

He said, "Certainly quite big."

Ófeigr said, "Then you would expect there to be some power in it?"

Guðmundr said, "I would guess so."

Ófeigr says, "Do you think it could deliver a hard blow?"

Guðmundr says, "Very hard."

Ófeigr says, "What harm do you think it could do?"

Guðmundr said, "Broken bones or death."

Ófeigr answers, "How would you like such a death?"

Guðmundr said, "Not at all, and I am not eager to have it."

Ófeigr said, "Then don't sit in my place."

Guðmundr says, "So shall it be," and sat on the other side.

Then it came out that Ófeigr wanted to be the most esteemed there (vildi þar mest vera metinn) and had occupied the high-seat before, and did not hold back when something occurred to him.

(Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch. 11)

It is hard to go further than this in raw assertiveness, both in motive and method. Though Ófeigr had reluctantly opposed Guðmundr in a battle early in the saga, he was his thingman and could have yielded his favorite seat with honor. But he simply vildi þar mest vera metinn, wanted to be top dog, and he prevailed in the most direct way.

This urge to prevail, to have one's way - quite apart from the demands of honor and in fact just for its own sake - is very frequent in the sagas. In Laxdæla saga we are told of Þorkr inn digri and his brother Þorgrímur that they "wanted to be the biggest and most important men there" (Íslenzk Fornrit 5, ch. 18). Halli Sigurðarson in Valla-Ljóts saga moves from his own district to Svarfaðardalr, simply because he thinks his chances of being mestr maðr ("biggest man") are better there than at home (Íslenzk Fornrit 9, ch. 2).

In its extreme form this aggressiveness produces the ójafnaðarmaðr or inequitable man, whose designation

describes his insistence on getting on top. A partial listing of such characters would include Þórólfr bægifótr in Eyrbyggja saga; Þórðr in Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs; Steinarr Sjóónason in Egils saga; Eysteinn Máanason, Þorbergur hoggvinkinni and Þorsteinn varastafr in Reykðæla saga; Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson in Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings; Víga-Styrr in Heiðarvíga saga; the brothers Sölmundur and Söxólfr in Ljósvetninga saga; Hrolleifr and Bergr inn rakki in Vatnsdæla saga. These men, usually minor characters, come close to being stock figures, distinguished chiefly by their need to assert themselves; we cannot even accuse them of an Iago-like malice. Yet it is characteristic of the sagas that these men initiate a major share of the action.

The ójafnaðarmenn exemplify the most overt form of assertiveness. But there are other ways of imposing your will on others, for example by persuasion, or advice, or trickery, or obstinacy, or flattery. Some of the major characters in the sagas display unmistakable signs of wilfulness: Grettir's obstreperousness, particularly as a young man; Egill's and Víga-Glúmr's persistence in out-doing others even to the end of their lives; the imperiousness of Brodd-Helgi in Vápnfirðinga saga, expressed both by his greed and by his cruel refusal to stay overnight with his dying ex-wife Halla; the relentless quarrelsomeness of Vémundur koggurr in Reykðæla saga; the competitiveness and homicidal excess of Þorgeirr Hávarsson in Fóstbræðra saga.

The very presence of a character like Snorri goði in Eyrbyggja saga shows a fondness for men who are able to get their way, by whatever means. Even Njáll, along with his far-seeing wisdom and restraint, shows a tendency toward wanting to master others, particularly his sons.

Some characters, on the other hand, surprise us by their renunciation of aggressiveness, their refusal to accept provocation. Among these are such admirable figures as Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi (Njáls saga), Ingimundr inn gamli (Vatnsdæla saga) and Blund-Ketill (Hensa-Póris saga).

Detailed discussion of individual characters and character types would be one way of demonstrating the prevalence of the element of will in the sagas. Another would be to analyze a particular saga or sagas, showing how events which turn on the will form the shaping episodes in the story. A third way - and the one which will be attempted in the remainder of this paper - is to survey some typical non-violent saga scenes, with a view toward showing how frequently they are a matter of overcoming or testing the will.

Whettings

Whettings, by which the will of a character is aroused or sharpened toward a particular action, are the scenes which come most readily to mind. A good whetting scene occurs at the very beginning of Vatnsdæla saga.

Ketill raumr is blamed by his people for doing nothing about the deaths on the highway between Raumsdalr and Jämtaland; too old to take action himself, he rouses his eighteen-year-old son Þorsteinn in a lengthy harangue, pointing out that things were better in the old days when sons followed their fathers' example and risked their lives to gain honor, instead of sitting at the fire, drinking beer. This speech angers Þorsteinn and he soon sets out to clear the forest of danger (Íslenzk Fornrit 8, chs. 1-2).

Another case of a father whetting a son occurs in Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings. Here too the father is old and a former viking. Óláfr Hávarðarson has generously rounded up the lost sheep of Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson for two autumns and received no thanks. When he refuses to do this a third autumn, Þorbjörn spreads the story that Óláfr is stealing the sheep.

One evening, when father and son sat at table, there was a leg of mutton on the table before them. Óláfr picked it up and said, "This leg is quite big and thick."

Hávarðr said, "But it's my guess, son, that it's from one of our sheep, and not one of Þorbjörn's - and such unfairness (Ójafmaðr) is much to endure."

Ólafr laid the leg on the table and turned red. It seemed to those who were sitting there that he pushed against the table so hard that the leg of

mutton broke and one piece flew against the wall and stuck fast there. Hávarðr looked up and said nothing, but smiled.

(Íslenzk Fornrit 6, ch. 2)

Another whetting over food occurs in Heiðarvíga saga, when Puriðr serves breakfast to her sons Barði and Steingrímur, whose brother Hallr has been slain by the sons of Hárekr. She serves them an ox-leg broken in three parts, saying that Hallr was broken even more and little was said about it. She also serves them a stone, saying they have digested much worse by not daring to avenge Hallr (Íslenzk Fornrit 3, ch. 22).

Sometimes other objects are used in whettings. Especially memorable is the bloody cloak in which Høskuldr Hvítanessgoði was slain, which his widow Hildigunnr throws around the shoulders of her uncle Flosi Þórðarson, charging him to avenge the slaying (Njáls saga, Íslenzk Fornrit 12, ch. 116).

Flosi's response, köld eru kvenna ráð, "cold are the counsels of women" - echoed by Þorkr in Gísla saga when Þórdís has prompted him to kill Gísli (Íslenzk Fornrit 6, ch. 19) - reminds us that it is women more often than men who do the goading. Njáll's wife Bergþóra goads her sons into three killings, those of Sigmundur Lambason (ch. 44), Þráinn Sigfússon (ch. 91), and Lýtingr of Sámstaðir (ch. 98).

Droplaug Þorgrímsdóttir tells her sons how she has been slandered by Þorgrímr torðyfill, but then says that they are to do nothing about this (Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 3). It may be that, since they are still young, she does not want them to risk their lives, but it is more likely that this is a piece of persuasion by negative psychology.

Wives are more frequent whettors than mothers, however. In Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings Bjargey rouses Hávarðr from a year's bed-rest on three different occasions (Íslenzk Fornrit 6, chs. 5, 6, 8) to seek compensation for the slaying of their son Óláfr. Eventually her egging takes effect and the aging Hávarðr, almost miraculously rejuvenated, seeks effective revenge.

In Ljósvetninga saga Þorvarðr Hǫskuldsson has a troublesome son named Hǫskuldr who stirs up new trouble with the Mǫðrvellingar. When the son asks for help in fighting Eyjólfur Guðmundsson, Þorvarðr is unwilling until his wife puts pressure on him, saying "I won't raise another son if you abandon this one in battle." Þorvarðr remarks grimly that women often have their way and goes to aid his son in the large-scale battle at Kakalahóll (Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch. 14).

Another wife who threatens to withhold her favors is Þórhildr Bersadóttir, the aunt of Björn Hítðalakappi. As Björn rides off with only two companions into danger which

she foresees, she tells her husband Arnórr, "If any harm comes to Björn today, we will not share the same bed to-night." With this Arnórr rides off with eight others to give Björn necessary aid against an ambush (Íslenzk Fornrit 3, ch. 18).

Servants too can do the whetting, as in Reykðela saga when Steingrímur Örnólfsson is whetted by his overseer Hrafn to take vengeance against Vémundr kpgurr for prodding a man to strike him with a ram's head (Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch.13). A better-known egging by a servant is that of Hrafnkell by the woman who noticed Eyvindr riding in splendor from his ship (Hrafnkels saga, Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 8). In similar fashion an unnamed woman in Njáls saga provokes Lýtingr of Sámstaðir by telling him of the ofláti ("gaudy person", i.e. Höskuldr Njálsson) who has just ridden past the farm (Íslenzk Fornrit 12, ch. 98).

Finally, under whetting we can point to several instances in which a person is clearly whetted against his deepest wishes. Bjarni Helgason in Vápnfirðinga saga is prompted by Þorgerðr silfra to slay Geitir Lýtingsson; immediately after he does so, Bjarni regrets it and throws Þorgerðr out of the house (Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 14). Similarly Bolli Þorleiksson is prompted by Guðrún to slay Kjartan in a memorable passage in Laxðela saga. With the killing done, and Bolli supporting the dying Kjartan in his lap, it is said that he regretted the deed (Íslenzk Fornrit 5, chs. 47-49).

Requests for aid

Another frequent form of persuasion in the sagas is the request for aid, usually in a legal cause but sometimes in a military one. The most elaborate request is found in chapters 119 and 120 of Njáls saga when the sons of Njáll have slain their foster-brother Hǫskuldr and are at the Althing seeking friends to support them in their unpopular case. With the help of Helgi Njálsson's father-in-law, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, they go successively to the booths of Gizurr hvíti, Skapti Þóroddson, Snorri goði. Hafr inn auðgi, Guðmundr inn ríki, and Þorkell hákr. Only Gizurr promises aid, and Skarpheðinn repays the others for their refusal with stinging insults (one of which, curiously enough, wins him the support of Guðmundr ríki who is delighted to hear how his rival Þorkell hákr was slandered).

After the settlement fails and Njáll and his family have been burnt to death, Flosi is in the same position of needing support in a suit. He and his followers go by foot through most of the eastern part of Iceland, asking for help at eight powerful farmsteads. In all cases but one (Sǫrli Brodd-Helgason), Flosi is successful; in four cases he offers money, and once (with Þorkell fullspakr and Þorvaldr, the sons of Ketill þrymr) the money is accepted (Íslenzk Fornrit 12, ch. 134).

In Hrafnkels saga Sámr and Þorbjörgn seek aid and are turned down by most of the chieftains in the land before

they finally get help from the sons of Þjóstarr (Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 3).

In Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings Bjargey, Hávarðr's wife, goes in succession to her three brothers, Valbrandr, Þorbrandr, and Ásbrandr, to gather forces for vengeance against Þorbjörn. She puts her request enigmatically, asking for nets and turf-axes on loan; her brothers get the message and loan her their sons (Íslenzk Fornrit 6, ch. 8).

These are cases of multiple requests, but usually the petition is to just one person. When this person is a relative or a goði, aid is more readily granted. But not always: in Hrafnkels saga, for example, Sámur is very reluctant to take the case against Hrafnkell from his brother Þorbjörn and tries to persuade him to accept Hrafnkell's offer of compensation. When Þorbjörn refuses and in fact whets Sámur by insulting him, Sámur agrees to take the case (Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch.3).

Sometimes aid is enlisted by first establishing a bond of obligation. In Vápnfirðinga saga Brodd-Helgi visits Digr-Ketill in Fljótisdalur and makes a pact of friendship with him; only afterward does he get to the real point of his visit and ask Ketill for his help in prosecuting Þorleifr inn kristni for non-payment of his temple tax. Ketill's reaction, not surprisingly, is "I wouldn't have made a pact of friendship with you if I had known that this was behind it"(Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 5).

In Hensa-Póris saga there is an elaborate three-stage persuasion by this means. Following the burning of Blund-Ketill, Þorbjörn stígandi goes with his foster-son Hersteinn, the victim's young son, to seek aid. They begin by getting the support of Þorkell trefill, though he is reluctant at first. Þorkell in turn takes them to Gunnarr Hlífarsón, whom they rouse from bed and take outside, where they sit down on the ground so close that they are sitting on his cloak. (For a similar use of sedentary pressure, see chapter 75 of Laxdæla saga.) Gunnarr does not understand their haste when his visitors tell him that they have come to ask the hand of his daughter Þuríðr for Hersteinn, but he agrees to the engagement. Then they go inside and Gunnarr asks for news - nothing much lately, he is told, apart from the burning of Blund-Ketill! Then of course he realizes that he has been tricked. The third stage is that Gunnarr takes his new allies to his uncle Þórðr gellir at Hvammr and asks him his opinion of the match. Þórðr approves and gets the assent of Þuríðr, whom he is fostering. The bargain is sealed and the wedding is set for a week off; only then does Gunnarr tell Þórðr the news about the burning and he realizes that he too has been implicated in the action (Íslensk Fornrit 3, chs. 10-11).

In Ljósvetninga saga Guðmundr inn ríki employs a similar trick with his brother Einarr, with whom he has not been on good terms. His aim is not to gain his aid, however, but to prevent Einarr from aiding his friend Þórir

Helgason, against whom Guðmundr is preparing a suit. Guðmundr gives his brother a cloak and has him shake hands to affirm that they will be on the same side in lawsuits. Later, when Þórir comes to him for aid, Einar realizes that he has been tricked (Íslensk Fornrit 10, ch. 6).

Trickery

Such scenes as these last three testify to the great fondness in the sagas for getting the better of somebody, or getting somebody to do something, by any possible means - the more elaborate, the better. A memorable example (which might also have been included above) is Porkell Þjóstarsson's scheme in Hrafnkels saga for getting the support of his brother Þorgeirr: old Þorbjörn, acting on Porkell's instructions, stumbles at the entrance of the booth and grabs Þorgeirr's ailing toe as he falls; Porkell then uses this as a way of persuading his brother to aid in alleviating Þorbjörn's pain (Íslensk Fornrit 11, chs. 9-10). Even more ingenious is Njáll's scheme for forcing Hrútr to relinquish Unnr's dowry, an elaborate trick by which Gunnarr disguises himself as a pedlar in order to make the legal summons in Hrútr's presence (Íslensk Fornrit 12, chs. 21-24).

Several other examples of getting around someone by trickery: in Ljósvetninga saga Guðmundr inn ríki intends to burn down Saurbær in order to kill Eilífr skyti. Hlenni, the blind old farmer at Saurbær, talks Guðmundr out of

burning the farm by promising to send Eilífr and his companions to Eyrarskógr. Hlenni keeps his word, but Guðmundr does not find his enemies at the appointed place because Hlenni sends them there concealed in peat-baskets (Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch. 10) In Reykðæla saga Vémundr kǫgurr wants to buy some choice wood that his rival Steingrímur Þrúnlófsson has already contracted to buy. When the Norwegian merchant who is selling the wood refuses Vémundr's insistent request and even bribery, Vémundr pays a man to spread a lie to the effect that Steingrímur has decided to buy his wood elsewhere, and thus he has his way (Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch. 9).

Persuasion of reluctant persons

A special class can be made of incidents in which a person is talked into something against his will. Such giving-in usually leads to trouble. In Droplaugarsona saga Droplaug gets her second husband Hallsteinn to invite her son Helgi to spend the winter. Hallsteinn is very reluctant, but gives in and in consequence is slain by his slave Þorgils, obviously at the prompting of Helgi (Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 7).

In Ljósvetninga saga Guðmundr arranges a marriage for his overseer, who then requests that he attend the feast. Guðmundr is ófúss ("unwilling"), but agrees to go. At the feast his wife hears slanderous rumours about Guðmundr's weakness, including sexual failings, and this causes a

long history of conflict between Guðmundr on the one hand and Þórir Helgason and Þorkell hákr on the other (Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch. 5).

In Víga-Glúms saga Þórarinn Þórisson is unwilling to take action against Glúmr for the slaying of Sigmundr Þorkelsson (Þórarinn's brother-in-law), feeling that only dishonor can come of quarrelling with Glúmr. But his brother Þorvaldr krókr persuades him to prepare a case. The outcome is as Þórarinn predicted: Glúmr prepares a counter-suit and not only gets Sigmundr declared unhallowed but has his father Þorkell outlawed (Íslenzk Fornrit 9, ch. 9). Þórarinn is a good example of a well-meaning man (he is described as "wise and popular") with a less peaceful brother (Þorvaldr krókr is described as "a fighter of duels and overbearing") who gets dragged into difficulties reluctantly but repeatedly - like Geitir Lýtingsson in Vápnfirðinga saga. Þórarinn's reluctance is manifest at four additional points in Víga-Glúms saga, in chapter 21, twice in chapter 22, and once again in chapter 24.

In Laxdæla saga Vigdís prevails over her unwilling husband Þórðr goddi in the matter of sheltering the murderer Þórólfr. Though it does not lead to his death, this causes considerable difficulty, which Þórðr gets out of by offering to foster Óláfr pái (Íslenzk Fornrit 5, chs. 141-6).

Also in Laxdæla saga, the scrcerer Kotkell, who was evicted from the district for having contrived the

drowning of Þórðr Ingunnarson, persuades Þorleikr Höskuldsson to give him a place to live in Laxárdalr. Þorleikr is naturally opposed at first, but changes his mind when offered fine horses, "for he thought the horses were excellent animals, and Kotkell pleaded his cause cleverly" (ch. 36; Hermann Pálsson's translation).

Warnings

There are in the sagas many attempts to influence another's will by warning him of danger; the point of these scenes is usually to demonstrate the strong, unyielding will of the person who is warned. Since these warnings are seldom heeded, this is a good place to turn our subject around and treat some of the forms of refusal. This negative side is as important as the positive, for along with the many attempts at influencing someone, there are as many efforts at resisting. Stubbornness and assertiveness are two sides of the coin of wilfulness.

Among those who ignore warnings of danger, Bárðr Hallason in Víga-Glúms saga stands out for ignoring three warnings (from his father, from Hlenni Örnólfsson, from his servant) of Vigfúss Glúmsson's threat to his life if he goes out to fetch his timber. He does go out, and of course is slain by Vigfúss (Íslenzk Fornrit 9, ch. 19).

In Njáls saga Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði is advised by Flosi to move from the farm at Ossabær to a safer place

at Skaptafell, but he refuses and is slain by the sons of Njáll (Íslenzk Fornrit 12, ch. 109). In a similar case in Reykðæla saga Bjarni, who has killed a relative of Víga-Skúta, fails to heed his uncle Víga-Glúmr's advice to stay with him for the winter, and of course he is slain (Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch. 23).

In Hrafnkels saga Eyvindr is urged several times to ride away from the impending attack by Hrafnkell, but he refuses (Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 8). Vésteinn, in Gísli saga, also recently returned from abroad, rides into Dýrafjörðr with the same indifference to his impending death (Íslenzk Fornrit 6, ch. 12).

Sometimes the warning comes through a dream rather than from another person. Helgi Droplaugarson has a dream of being attacked by wolves, whereupon Þorkell tries to persuade him to go home with him, thus avoiding the route foreshadowed in the dream. But Helgi refuses, saying "I will go the way I planned," and rides to his death (Íslenzk Fornrit 11, ch. 10). In Vatnsdæla saga Þorkell silfri has a dream which his wife Signý interprets to signify that he will be slain, but he does not heed it (Íslenzk Fornrit 8, ch. 42). Other unheeded dream-warnings occur in Vápnfirðinga saga and Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa.

Obstinacy

The sagas have many cases of obstinacy, and many forms, from Þorgeirr Hávarsson's persistence in returning to Ísafjörður after he has been banished from that district, to Hensa-Þórir's refusal to sell some of his hay. Obstinacy is especially common in family relationships: Grettir as a young man deliberately mismanages the tasks assigned him by his father; Gunnlaugr takes supplies for a trip out of the storage shed after his father expressly refused to send him abroad.

In several cases one member of a family refuses to go along with something that others in the family had agreed on. Helgi Droplaugarson is opposed to the marriage between his mother and Hallsteinn, though his brother Grímr accepts it (Íslensk Fornrit 11, ch. 4). Later, as we mentioned above, Helgi kills Hallsteinn. Similarly, Halli Sigurðarson in Valla-Ljóts saga is the only one of three brother opposed to the marriage of their mother to a wealthy but not prominent farmer named Torfi. When he has the excuse of a provocation, Halli kills Torfi (Íslensk Fornrit 9, ch. 1).

In Laxdæla saga the dying Høskuldr Dala-Kollsson calls together his two legitimate sons to ask them to share his estate three ways with the illegitimate Óláfr pái. Bárðr agrees to this, but Þorleikr refuses to go along with his father. Høskuldr then tricks Þorleikr (another case of getting around somebody with a trick) by giving Óláfr gifts

of golden objects that weigh twelve ounces instead of the twelve ounces of silver legally allotted to illegitimate children (Íslenzk Fornrit 5, ch. 26).

These three stubborn brothers remind us of a common phenomenon in the sagas: two or more contrasting brothers, one of whom is distinguished by his greater wilfulness. Other pairs are Þórarinn and Þorvaldr krókr in Víga-Grúms saga; Grúmr's two sons, Már and Vigfúss, in the same saga; Þorsteinn and Jökull, the sons of Ingimundr inn gamli in Vatnsdæla saga; and Egill Skalla-Grímsson and his more peaceable brother Þórólfr.

Wise refusals

Finally we can point to the firm refusal for the good, a wise firmness which the reader admires. This would be the opposite of those cases where a reluctant person is talked into something which leads to trouble.

Áskell Eyvindarson in Reykðæla saga wisely refuses to be dragged into trouble on several occasions. When Vémundr kǫgurr offers him part of a stolen whale he turns it down and scolds him for the theft (Íslenzk Fornrit 10, ch. 8). Later he refuses oxen stolen by Vémundr (ch. 11). In general, Áskell's discretion and patient efforts at peace-making offset the trouble caused by the wilful Vémundr in this saga.

Ljótr in Valla-Ljóts saga refuses to let Björn Þorgrímsson and Sigmundr talk him into slaying Þoðvarr,

the innocent brother of Halli Sigurðsson (*Islenzk Fornrit* 9, ch. 6). Víga-Glúmr does not let himself be talked into attending a wedding where he expects trouble (Víga-Glúms saga 9, ch. 20). More generally, Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Njáll and Ingimundr inn gamli exemplify this kind of strength, as mentioned earlier.

These are just a few of the possible categories, with only a few examples within each category, of scenes which dramatize the will, but enough has been presented here to show that in the typical and central actions of the sagas it is primarily the will that is at stake.

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The narrative form of the sagas is remarkable for its economy, for what it does not do, and a good analysis of saga style should describe the way in which the writers, who were surely familiar with other literatures, disciplined themselves not to use the narrative possibilities available to them: the interior monologue, the authorial comment, the didactic model, for example. This paper has shown that the writers also practised considerable economy in their treatment of character, curtailing whole areas of human experience.

The sagas call to mind a relationship between two people which has degenerated to a struggle for the upper hand. In such a fists-on-the-table relationship there is

little room for affection or concern or rational discourse. But just as the persons in such a relationship are no less real or human for acting under circumscribed terms and having to suppress or neglect certain forms of expression, so the realism of the saga characters does not suffer from the comparatively narrow range of their activity. It may in fact be that it is precisely this concentration on the will which - like the economy of language and description - increases the apparent realism in the sagas. Reason can so easily become abstract; love, as happens usually in medieval literature, can become idealized or stylized. But when people are engaged with each other on the level of will there is not much scope for idealization.