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MEN AND SOCIETY IN HRAFNKELS SAGA FREYSGOBA

For many years, now, my own area of special study has been Sturlunga saga. When I was much younger I believed that an intense study of the political history and social and economic problems of the Sturlung Age would, in time, provide a new slant on the aims and activities of the writers of sagas. This view I still hold, but with considerable modifications. They are principally these. First, since only a few sagas survive which can confidently be attributed to the Sturlung period, and since the collation of such early versions with later versions of the same sagas frequently reveals considerable re-writing, one must hesitate to treat even the oldest versions of any sagas as precise records of the climate of opinion during the Sturlung Age. I use the word "precise" in the sense that Skelton's Magnificence is a contemporary artistic comment on Cardinal Wolsey or that Jane Austen's Persuasion is one necessary viewpoint which is essential to any complete understanding of Regency England. The second modification is this. Most of the Family Sagas, as we now know them, were actually written after the loss of the independence of the old republic. Some of these post-Sturlung sagas have a claim - a legitimate claim - to be considered as part of the select body of world literature. (I am thinking here, in particular

of Njála and Grettla). It is just possible that the authors of such sagas grew to manhood during the last bitter clashes of the Sturlung civil war. So one may argue, a knowledge of the institutions, aspirations and dashed hopes of the Sturlung Age may help us to understand the point of departure, at least, of some of the greatest saga writers. For we must remember the power of oral memory in a small compact society which has received a deep shock to its constitution and, by implication, to its view of its own past history.

I believe that many small compact societies have utilised historical interest - disguised in fictitious, literary clothes - in order to revitalize themselves. In such societies, periods of past magnificence are easily recalled and when the accuracy of memory is worn by the passage of time and changing literary taste, then invention supplies the defects of memory. Even then, a hard core of fact can survive the activities of the fabricator. Following this gleam of hope I have slowly learned to link my study of Sturlunga to one group of Family Sagas which have come out of a very isolated community - the Eastfirths - whose real isolation in winter time was forced on my attention during the last War when I was stationed for some time at Seyðisfjörður.

Some day, I shall bring together my scattered thoughts on Droplaugarsona saga, Brandkrossa þáttur and Fljótsdæla saga (late though it is) - but today, I wish to examine

the most perfectly executed (and one of the more fictitious) of the short sagas: Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða. This talk will be an examination of the social relationships between the characters in the saga as the author presents them to us. Concern with this narrow and minor problem is forced on me, partly because Sigurður Nordal and others have left any other student of this saga with practically nothing to say; partly, too, because this is the one saga which, in its extant form, is so largely a work of fiction. Therefore we can legitimately ask questions about the author's intention in writing the saga, because we know that he was not an historian who had to make his characters act according to the facts as they had come down to him.

Fortunately (because of its inclusion in Arnold Taylor's revised Gordon's Reader) we are all familiar with the story. At first glance we can say one thing about it: this is no Family saga. Remove the almost obligatory introduction (based on Landnámabók) and the pious conclusion, and we are left with a saga which hinges exclusively around one remarkable man - Hrafnkell Freysgoði: his family simply do not exist within the context of the saga's vital action. But we must first consider the possibility that our author's intention was constrained by oral tales. If any oral tradition about this Hrafnkell had survived until the last quarter of the thirteenth century, our author used only those fragments of it which throw light on his eponymous hero. His worship of Frey is in no way presented to

us as a laborious antiquarian study of old pagan ideas. The close bond between Hrafnkell and the god's foster-horse has no religious overtones, unless it is a half-memory of Snorri Sturluson's revival of Yule-tide at Reykholt: it merely supplies a reason for the one inevitable act which could lead to Hrafnkell's downfall. This relationship is used for implicit comment. Until this moment in his life Hrafnkell had been quite capable of ordering his life and shaping his own destiny. His father, Hallfreðr, we remember, believed in dreams and acted on their supernatural promptings. But from early adolescence Hrafnkell has made all his own decisions until, in pursuit of his ambition to cement his secular and religious function as a goði, he makes an oath to the god Frey. It is as a result of this oath that his career suddenly moves out of its controlled orbit; Hrafnkell is compelled to make a choice, which he knows to be wrong, and which leads to the cold-blooded killing of a very promising and well-connected young man.

In the end it is more satisfactory to deny the author any serious antiquarian interest in tales of the old pagan religion of Frey and, instead, to accept the simpler explanation that all these picturesque details which are introduced into his tale draw their significance from the light they throw on the character of the saga-hero. The same conclusion applies to our author's use (or misuse) of place-names and the mysteries that surround the various

references to Hrafnkell's spear. Such examples of our author's handling of possible relics of oral material - at least they all are of the Stoff of folk-tales - suggest where his true interest lay and in what area of interest he deliberately concentrates our attention. None of these things are of value to him in and for themselves as they are, for instance, to the author of Eyrbyggja saga: they have no intrinsic interest for him if they do not help to throw light on the character and achievement of Hrafnkell Freysgoði. (The same results could prove fruitful if a structuralist approach was made to the saga.)

Ostensibly the author emphasizes Hrafnkell's achievement and not his nature: he is presented to us as a man of action. Almost everything that he does in the saga is performed quickly and described speedily. The actions of the other characters are related in a careful and thrifty fashion: the author lingers over the minutest details of their acts (not, I suggest, as Nordal thinks, in order to create the utmost impression of realism; but in order to slow down the pace and contrast it with Hrafnkell's spring-like energy).

There is special significance in the contrast of narrative speed and tone between the description of Hrafnkell's exile from Aðalból, his second rise to power and prominence - borrowing money, building a house, raising new stock and carving out new areas of authority (over

recently-arrived settlers) - and the sudden return of our story to Sámur and the sons of Þjóstarr. They are still engaged in carrying out the necessary formalities of the court of execution and coping with the destruction of Freyfaxi and the temple-buildings. Here, as elsewhere in the saga, our author places side by side two ways of life - or two attitudes towards life - the one petty and destructive, and the other forceful and creative. He does so without direct comment: the manner of narration is the only possible clue to his intention. A similar differential in narrative speed (speed of relation) is used when Eyvindr sails into Reyðarfjörður. The author devotes ample time and leisure to details of packhorses, of fine clothes and armour, and of the minute twists and turns of the journey Eyvindr has to traverse. Even the female servant's actions are itemized. But once Hrafnkell is goaded into activity he acts quickly; catching up with Eyvindr - whose progress over difficult terrain accounts for most of this part of the story - Hrafnkell goes straight into the attack. When the long-standing account against Sámur has been well and truly paid, he rides off and, although riding tired horses, he escapes from Sámur's pursuit. At this point in the knife-edge balance of Hrafnkell's fortune, our author allows only the details of action to point his moral: Sámur waits until morning before setting out on his punitive expedition; Hrafnkell assembles his men at once. In next to no time, and without much waste of detailed relation, the balance of

power has been upset and Hrafnkell is back in the saddle at Aðalból with his younger son. The wheel has come full circle; at once the tension of the narrative slackens, and the lesser character of Sámur is presented to us. The loose ends left over - the power and attitude of Þorkell and Þorgeirr to this re-emergence of a defeated rival - are worked into a slightly comic episode; Hrafnkell's new, enlarged authority is mentioned and, almost before we know what is happening, Hrafnkell has died and is buried.

Now, judged by the actual space given in the saga to Hrafnkell's own deeds, he does not dominate the saga's action. He is no mature Njáll; unlike Egill, we are not asked to witness his declining years. The unhappy, haunted last years of Grettir are beyond our author's interest. His attention, it seems to me, is concentrated on the problem of power - its exercise and its abuse. Everything in the saga is shaped to illustrate this problem, and I have found very few details in the saga which cannot be interpreted in terms of this single authorial intention.

Such a view of the author's intention in writing this story is not diminished, but strengthened, if we consider the inordinate amount of dialogue in Hrafnkells Saga. For though Hrafnkell acts quickly and effectively, he talks at great length, as though he were own brother to Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Chaunticleer. On a rough count, Hrafnkell

speaks a quarter of the dialogue in the saga: Sámr and Þorkell are the other ready talkers, but few of the characters are silent. The incidence of Hrafnkell's speeches has some interest. Two-thirds of them occur in the first quarter of the saga: i.e. when we first need to understand him. I believe that this need to give the listener a point of entry into a character's motivation is part of the inherited technique of any oral narrator. (I am thinking especially of the early speeches of Pandarus, Troilus, and Criseyde in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, as well as, say, the early soliloquies of Hamlet and Shakespeare's early clowns. This is an argument that could be extended from the medieval drama generally, and also from the works of Malory.) Once the legal action goes against him at the General Assembly and then at Aðalból, Hrafnkell makes one short speech and the cryptic comment that he thinks it folly to believe in pagan gods. Again, when the moment comes to take revenge, he replies to the servant woman's thirteen-line tirade with five lines, sharply to the point. But he virtually takes his leave of the listener with twenty-five lines of talk while he is deciding Sámr's fate. These four long speeches of Hrafnkell - three at the beginning and one at the end of the saga - are responsible for our sense of knowing him as intimately as, say, we know Richard II or Bully Bottom. All three characters are presented to us through the medium of soliloquies, by direct address to the listener, by an appeal to the judgement of all men who read

the tale or hear the play. For Hrafnkell's speeches are about himself and his views on life. Ostensibly they concern practical things: prohibitions, dispensations of justice, or the execution of legal redress; actually, they are self-revelatory speeches and, at times, self-exculpations. The saga writer consistently presents Hrafnkell to us as a man who exercises power consciously, naturally, and according to fixed principles, even though his principles may undergo alteration. For this hero is vocal to a high degree and it is this verbal quality which tempts me to call this a political saga about a hofðingi and the exercise of power. I don't really understand my own thought-processes here very clearly. Except that, as I read and translated and collaborated on a translation of Sturlunga with Professor Julia McGrew, I was most impressed by the need of the compilers of that book of sagas to explain themselves at length. Thirteenth-century Icelandic rulers and churchmen seemed to be very concerned about the politics of "dominion".

Of course, Hrafnkell is not the only character in the saga who is burdened with the gift of loquacity: the other speakers, however, fall more neatly into the character of Goodman Verges in Much Ado About Nothing who, according to Dogberry (that prince of ambiguous critics), "speaks a little off the matter. A good old man, sir; he will be talking: as they say, when the age is in the wit is out. God help us! it is a world to see." To understand the difference between their speeches and Hrafnkell's it is

necessary to make a fine, yet necessary distinction. Consider Sámur. He is a notorious blab; and he is conceived in comic terms, as he must be if we are to take the central action of Hrafnkell's downfall and recovery with any seriousness. But the effect of Sámur's speeches is to fill in the outlines of his character as they are delineated for us by the author's comment or by the reports of other characters. When Sámur has spoken we seem to know more about Sámur, about what kind of a man he is, than we did before. And yet our knowledge of his inner character is not gained merely, or solely, through his words: rather, he confesses to the character we already know him to possess. In sharp contrast it is Hrafnkell who actually provides the very words and ideas by which we are to judge his own conduct. This distinction may be too finely drawn, but I think it exists. The saga writer manipulates Sámur's speeches - as many other saga writers do - in order to fill out aspects of his character that are not fully brought out in the action of the saga; Hrafnkell's speeches, on the other hand, manipulate and direct our opinion of the hero. Þorkell, the other great talker, is much more of a fairy-tale character and the washerwoman, too, is a mere stock figure. Theirs is the kind of flat character that abounds in medieval Miracle plays, in the comedy of Ben Jonson and in Restoration comedy generally. She supplies motives for the conduct of others, but she, herself, is a mouthpiece with no character development of her own. One could say that

while Hrafnkell (and Sámur and Þorkell) make speeches, she gives tongue to functional, conventional patter.

If I seem to have paid too much attention so far to the author's intention, it is merely to try to indicate the great care with which our author has moulded every detail in his tale in order to achieve one particular end: that is, to define the nature of a hofðingi by describing a speculatively conceived goði of the Saga Age. The author's sense of symmetry, and his polemical aim, are so intense that he cuts across one of the staple saga conventions - the proliferation of characters - at least, saga conventions as we have so far accepted them. Not many sagas are played out with so few actors as there are in Hrafnkatla: and only a mere handful of this depleted cast carry and sustain the action. Nordal has already analysed their characters. My single concern here is to suggest that all these actors are placed unerringly in their social setting. The entire social structure of an imaginary Fleetsdale district is outlined for us, with ramifications reaching backwards in time and ranging far afield from Iceland or Norway.

Let us consider the layers in this geological time-cake. Very much in the background - though in the saga's opening words - are the kings of Scandinavia; then, from time to time in this saga we are made aware of Byzantine rulers, too. Then there is Hrafnkell; the very mention of whose full title, Freysgoði, is used significantly like

an Honours Roll-call. At the General Assembly we hear of other leaders (hofðingjar) and meet two sons of Þjóstarr, with a goðorð between them. In this way our author fills in the top layer of his hierarchy. Nearer home, in the East-firths, and much more down to earth, is Bjarni, an ordinary farmer with two differently gifted sons and an over-burdened, poverty-depressed brother, Þorbjörn. But we are not left free to imagine Þorbjörn as a beggar. He explains to Einarr, in the language of decayed gentility, why it is that he has been forced to send Einarr to seek menial jobs. The same care is shown over Einarr's jobs with Hrafnkell: we learn that Hrafnkell's estate has many avenues open for employment and that while, for the present, Einarr must tend sheep and fetch wood, this is only a temporary measure. This close attention to Hrafnkell's magnificence is not left to the chance working of the reader's imagination. When Freyfaxi escapes to Aðalból he arrives at a manor house where the lord and master has servants to do his every bidding, as in the royal courts of Norway or York. In this phase of the story Hrafnkell's only personal actions are talking, mounting horses, and using weapons.

For our author never slips up on this point. Certain people in his tale possess the money (and position) which buys them servants, and absolves them from menial work. His omissions of this fact are as significant as his inclusions. When Þorbjörn rides to ask his brother, Bjarni, for assistance we are told that they meet: there is no

account of servants. But when Þorbjörn arrives at Leikskálar, the door is opened by a servant who is dispatched to bring Sámur out of doors. We now notice that Sámur always has his horse caught for him and that Hrafnkell sends men on messages around his thing-district, and that Sámur can only get "landless men" for his journey to the General Assembly. Certainly, the long exchange between Sámur and Þorkell Lock has its elements of comedy, but it equally serves to emphasize the author's (and our) conception of a goði and a goðorð. In one single chapter, after we have learned about the behaviour of chieftains at the General Assembly we encounter the words goðorðsmaðr, bóndi, einhleypingr and we meet a man who was a courtier of the Greek Emperor. I think that too much has been made of the so-called "image-clusters" in studies of Shakespearean imagery, but this concatenation in one passage of similar words of status written by an author who is so careful over details surely has some connection with that author's purpose in writing the saga.

One notable exception to the rule (that great men do not perform menial tasks) shows how careful our author is in its application. He is, above all things, eager to rehabilitate the fallen Hrafnkell in our eyes. Yet he records that Hrafnkell had to work with his hands while the new farm was being built at Hrafnkelsstaðir. At this point Hrafnkell is a bankrupt and an outcast. There is no artistic blemish here. Everything is consonant with

Hrafnkell's low estate: even the name of the house is based on a personal name; nothing grandiose-sounding like Aðalból. And in sharp contrast to Hrafnkell's toil - back at Aðalból, Sámur and the sons of Þjóstarr are sending men to fetch and carry and destroy for them. This is one of many slight touches: but it is very effective. Yet, in order to erase the necessary fact of Hrafnkell's loss of social status we are told in advance of Hrafnkell's second rise to prosperity as a prelude to an account of his changed character. The reality of his new power is not placed concretely before us until the washer-woman triggers off the revenge. She is outside washing; Hrafnkell is asleep, at 9 a.m.; there are some favoured retainers lying in the hall and the farm labourers have long been out to work. Add to this picture the strange non-Icelandic flavour of Eyvindr's skósveinn, the use of the word húskarl in this latter part of the saga, and the final position of Sámur as Hrafnkell's undirmaðr, and it becomes somewhat clearer that in this very short saga the author seems to cover all the possible kinds of social and economic relationships that could have existed in his fanciful picture of the Saga Age. For the purposes of his tale he has placed side by side conditions and titles which, I suspect, belong to different periods in the first 400 years of the history of the Icelandic Republic.

A fuller understanding of this author's vital interest in the ordering of society will benefit from a thorough

study of the development and use of the word hofðingi in the sagas. (I should begin such a study with the two versions of Bandamanna saga, but this is too big a topic to be touched on here.) Compared, say, with Bandamanna saga we must accept our good fortune in possessing one single early version of Hrafnkatla which leaves no doubt about the certainty with which the author draws the boundaries of his world picture. Nordal has shown - over-demonstrated, perhaps - how this firm disposition of places, men and events, stems from the author's steadfast refusal to be bound by anything so intractable as historical fact; though he admits that fragments of oral tradition and the memory of other sagas have a powerful, if subconscious, influence on his finished work of art. As free as Ariel - within the Prospero-like limits of the laws of oral tradition - our author presents his hofðingi, an unhistorical Priest of Frey, within the most suitable context of a society designed to show off his unique qualities as a leader of men in a frontier community. These qualities were so unique and memorable that the author of Brandkrossa þátr incorporated them into his work as fact of equal value with the historical record of Landnámabók.

Now to come closer to the central position held by Hrafnkell in our saga. Hrafnkell has five competitors for our attention beside himself: his father, Hallfreðr; Sámrr; Þorkell and Þorgeirr; and Eyvindr. All five throw much

light on Hrafnkell's fitness to be a leader in this particular community.

Hallfreðr is an original settler, a man who obeys dreams and is lucky in ordinary affairs. A friendly father who lets his ambitious son have his head. Otherwise he is a cipher. In this he is very like Bjarni and Þorbjörn (who occupies an apparently more central place to provide comic relief). These are necessary "props" to the setting of a stage which Hrafnkell can dominate. We have met their kind in most sagas. The formula begins: "There was a man called X, the son of Y" - and at once we know that either X is to push the tale forward by killing, or being killed, or this initial account of his family connections will have repercussions later on in the saga during the eptirmál. But there is a slight but significant difference in Hrafnkels saga. Hallfreðr, Bjarni and Þorbjörn are also used to convey the sense of a tight community with really close family relationships. They are used economically to point to one of the saga's many concealed themes: that there are outstanding individuals from time to time, who attract history to themselves, but behind them, as the normal pattern of life in society, is the small family or district group. This is a very powerful sub-theme in Sturlunga saga.

Sámr reinforces our interest in the small-time community group. For Sámr is a typical "one-horse-town" product. He has made a pile of money; how, we are not

told. (My guess is that his prosperity came from two sources: (1) small-scale legal actions pursued for quick profits, and (2) gifts from successful plaintiffs who had benefited from his skill in petty legal affairs.) We are left to infer that Sámur was a good farmer: while he managed Aðalból, the stock multiplied. Characteristically, Hrafnkell allows Sámur to keep his brother Eyvindr's cargo, i.e. his trading profits: similarly, the sons of Þjóstarr, knowing Sámur of old, believe that they can placate Sámur's sulky reception of their final refusal of help by offering him a substantial present. Sámur, who is now an ex-goði, refuses the proffered gifts and treats them like petite bourgeoisie. He is annoyed because they have read his character aright. We treat it as a comic scene.

Sámur, I suggest, is presented throughout with an edge of comedy; his special function in the saga is to underline rather heavily Hrafnkell's natural qualities as a born leader of men. For Sámur gains the very real trappings of power solely because of the aid Þorkell and Þorgeirr give him; not because of any quality in himself. Once Hrafnkell is safely exiled, Sámur maintains a majority rule (there were a significant number of dissenters) by using kindness, joviality, bribery, and by being all things to all men. Above all, Sámur seizes on the opportunities for self-display which his new dignity affords him and, thereby, he earns Hrafnkell's profound contempt. For Hrafnkell, the genuine man of power, allows Sámur to keep his shadowy authority

until Eyvindr, the one really worthwhile man in Sámrr's family, appears on the scene: and then Hrafnkell strikes at him and takes a fitting revenge. After his defeat, Sámrr's forlorn visit to Þorskafjörður convinces us that Sámrr's character has not really changed during his stay at Aðalból: he is no Hrafnkell who develops in adversity. Once more Sámrr seeks a return to power with aid external to this closed Eastern community in which he lives. Once this aid is refused, he relapses into the position of Hrafnkell's underling. Looking back we can see that although his life and deeds are neatly caught up into this fictitious life of Hrafnkell, his special function in the saga is a thematic one: to show what happens when an unworthy man apes (or usurps) the position of a genuine aristocrat or leader.

For our present purpose, the sons of Þjóstarr can be taken together. They are absolutely central to the action of the saga: without them, Hrafnkell would have remained an entry in Landnámabók and very possibly (?) a touchline spectator in two or three other sagas. They add nothing to our knowledge of Hrafnkell's character, although the author is careful to give each of them a separate and recognizable identity which is quite superfluous for the necessary acts they have to perform. But novels concerned with ideas (as well as things) require some active men to sustain the reader's interest. (This is very true of sagas or poems intended for oral relation.) In Njáls saga,

Gunnarr, Skarpheðinn and Kári, in turn, supply the springs of action while Njáll's personality becomes the battleground for the central ideological struggle. Þorgeirr and Þorkell belong to this class of activist saga character. They supply us with an effective commentary on Hrafnkell's stature among other leaders of men. More significantly, they share an inherited goðorð; they are well connected by marriage and, between them, they give a fairly clear picture of the wide range of authority of a goði in the Saga Age - I mean, of course, as that office and its function were conceived by later thirteenth- and fourteenth-century writers in their literary attempts to reconstruct the Golden Age of the early Republic.

Though he is accurately located in place and time, Þorkell is the easily-recognized adventurous viking hero of the opening chapters of many sagas who eventually settles down to manage his affairs in Iceland; Þorgeirr is the equally well-known stay-at-home careful manager. Together they are able to provide an acceptable, if unexpected, opposition to Hrafnkell. We are left to infer that only such a combination of the best strains of ancient goði authority could bring about the downfall of our superman-hero. They - and not Sámur - are his formidable opponents with a widespread authority in the Westfirths; and at the General Assembly they attract a large, unexpected following. (Unexpected, that is, to Hrafnkell and to us; in fact, unexpected to all

of those who, following the author's guidance, have viewed the world and its affairs from the restricted and narrow angle of life in the Eastfirths!) Eventually, we are made to understand the kind of popular opinion which alone could force Hrafnkell to mend his ways, reform his nature, and change his outlook on the proper exercise of power in an isolated community, cut off from the checks and balances of more populous districts. They, too, destroy the temple which is one sanction of Hrafnkell's authority as goði. And then, their function in the saga is clear and completed. They have no desire to take on the new Hrafnkell and this, the author implies, is the true measure of Hrafnkell's successful rehabilitation.

Similarly, Eyvindr throws much light on this saga's concentration of interest on the possible ways of attaining distinction and leadership. He is first introduced to us in perfunctory, economical fashion, although the chords of our memory of him are stirred when Porkell says that he has returned from Byzantium. When Eyvindr puts in at Reyðarfjörður, a new note is struck. His obvious worldly success and martial prowess are treated as common knowledge. (They had reached the slave-woman, on the bush telegraph: the whinbush.) The saga writer, at this point, is eager to develop Eyvindr's quixotic qualities rapidly. He had adopted his poor, distant cousin; he offers lofty, quixotic replies

to those who urge him to run away from the pursuing Hrafnkell; he interferes so little in ordinary, everyday things that he really believes that Sámur and Hrafnkell have achieved a permanent state of social equilibrium. Gradually we are forced to recognize that his quixotic ineptitude is an effectual foil to Hrafnkell's new return to the realities of power. When the testing time comes, Eyvindr, quite naturally, will fight well and courageously: this is his occupation. But he does not dispatch the boy in order to fetch Sámur: he does it merely to save the boy's life. In political understanding, in the ability to appreciate the closely-knit feelings and enmeshed hatreds of the Eastfirths, Eyvindr is woefully deficient. He is as deficient in this respect as many other men of good will during the Sturlung civil war. He pays for this deficiency with his life; while Hrafnkell, as ruthless and as self-justified in this death as in the original killing of Einarr, climbs once more to the top of Fortune's wheel. We realise, once again, that the saga writer has an obvious admiration for Hrafnkell's qualities and, when he makes his final award to Sámur, we are made to feel that Eyvindr, despite his splendid esoteric qualities, does not count for much within the context of Fleetsdale district. Like Sámur, he lacks the accidental qualities of birth and good connections: a fact which is never overtly stressed in the saga, perhaps because an interest in sound genealogy is a

shared sine qua non between saga-man and saga-listener. Thematically, he stands for the outsider - someone who represents a foreign, yet irrelevant, mode of success which already has been exemplified for us in the ruthless conduct which Porkell displayed in torturing the humiliated Hrafnkell. But, on this final occasion, it is Hrafnkell who tackles the problem of revenge with Byzantine grimness and promptitude; and, as a result, he dies prosperously in his bed and, so we are led to believe, he leaves an established future to his sons. The mood in which our saga writer conceived his fictitious life of Hrafnkell must have been close to that of the author of Vatnsdela saga who says, in an explanatory aside, "at that time it was usual for important men's sons to have some kind of job". The author of Hrafnkatla, too - I am suggesting - was conversant with a privileged way of life led by a small aristocracy; his tale was designed to show how such privileges could be obtained, enjoyed, maintained, and passed on to sons.

In conclusion, I would like to retrace the principles that lie behind this preliminary discussion of a very fine saga. First of all, there is the belief that different versions of the same saga can be made to yield some reflection of the tastes and preoccupations of their authors and the readers for whom they were first intended. Hrafnkatla is a special case here, since all the known versions apparently stem from the same source. If Professor Dorothy

Whitelock will forgive the plagiarism, this talk is a first essay towards understanding the "Audience of Hrafnkatla". Then, secondly, there is the assumption that the best saga writers knew precisely what they were doing when they composed and adapted an old tale. Consequently, patient analysis of their treatment of oral reports, topographical details, ancient customs, and the inter-relationship between major and minor characters should give some clues to the artistic purpose of the saga writer, although not as much as was once thought by the inspirers of the Islenzk Fornrit edition to which we are all heavily indebted. Thirdly, that not every saga is worth such close critical or scholarly attention, and we should be bold to say so. But those that are worth such scrutiny - and Hrafnkatla is one of them - extend our knowledge of human nature and deepen our experience of life in this world. Lord David Cecil once made a significant comment on the novels of Charles Dickens: "It is Dickens' peculiar triumph that he has created a world as solid as it is soaked in imagination. Dickens' London may be different from actual London, but it is just as real, its streets are of firm brick, its inhabitants genuine flesh and blood. For they have that essential vitality of creative art which is independent of mere verisimilitude. It does not matter that Dickens' world is not life-like; it is alive." The author of Hrafnkels saga draws his essential vitality from a profound understanding of the secular struggle for power in a closed, self-contained and isolated

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community. He has laid the foundations of this understanding so deeply in observed human nature that his tale can still interpret the present-day reader's self and world to himself. His world may not be historically accurate, it is magnificently and imaginatively alive.