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THE HEART OF HRAFNKATLA AGAIN

Since Sigurður Nordal's famous monograph on Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða,<sup>1)</sup> most scholars have ceased to regard the saga as a reliable historical source and have begun to investigate its literary qualities. These studies have concentrated on the meaning or "moral" of the saga and those literary techniques which seem related to the saga's ethics.<sup>2)</sup> The chief issue in these works is the author's attitude to Hrafnkell. Is he an overbearing killer who misuses his power as chieftain? Are the torture he suffers and his banishment from Aðalból just punishments, and does his killing of Eyvindr prove that his apparent reform is only superficial?<sup>3)</sup> Or does he change his manner of living after the move to Fljótisdalur and kill Eyvindr in response to

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1) Hrafnkatla, Studia Islandica, No. 7 (Reykjavík, 1940), trans. by R. George Thomas, Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða: A Study (Cardiff, 1958).

2) Hermann Pálsson, Siðfræði Hrafnkels sögu (Reykjavík, 1966), and Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga (Copenhagen, 1971); Pierre Halleux, "Hrafnkel's Character Reinterpreted," Scandinavian Studies, 38 (1966), 36-44, and "Some Aspects of Style in Hrafnkels Saga," Scandinavian Studies, 38 (1966), 98-101; Anne Saxon Slater, "From Rhetoric and Structure to Psychology in Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða," Scandinavian Studies, 40 (1968), 36-50; Davíð Erlingsson, "Etiken i Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða," Scripta Islandica, 21 (1970), 3-41; W. F. Bolton, "The Heart of Hrafnkatla," Scandinavian Studies, 43 (1971), 35-52; my "Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða and Type-Scene Analysis," forthcoming in Scandinavian Studies.

3) Halleux, "Hrafnkel's Character Reinterpreted," 41.

aggression? Another issue is how the author regards Sámr, Þorkell, and Þorgeirr. Most important, what is the author's ethical basis for viewing his characters? Answers to these questions would aid our understanding of medieval Iceland, because they offer insights into how one medieval author viewed his world.

In order to answer these questions one must understand the role of the saga's fourth chapter, which narrates the happenings at the Althing. The scene's most obvious purpose is to introduce Hrafnkell's principal adversaries, Þorkell and Þorgeirr, to depict their alliance with Þorbjörn and Sámr, and to describe their victory at the Althing. More important, the chapter portrays Þorbjörn's and Sámr's changing motives for opposing Hrafnkell, and offers a full treatment of Þorkell's and Þorgeirr's reasons for entering the unpromising case. A crucial incident in defining each character's attitude towards the lawsuit is the toe-pulling episode in Þorgeirr's búð, which allows full expression of the personal and moral reasons for clashing with Hrafnkell.

All recent critics recognize the importance of this episode for its characterization of the conspirators, the definition of ethical issues, and the explanation of the characters' motives, but they have reached very little agreement on these problems. Sigurður Nordal sees the episode as part of Þorkell's strategy in persuading his brother to join the conspiracy. Þorkell's idea is to make Þorgeirr "blaze up in real anger and then wait for the inevitable reaction" (p. 54). Hermann Pálsson also believes that the incident is part of Þorkell's design to involve Þorgeirr, but argues instead that Þorkell's object is to awaken his brother's sympathy for Þorbjörn. Þorgeirr proves, however, "callously impervious" to Þorkell's arguments and reveals a harsh and unattractive nature (p. 68). Anne Saxon Slater says that the scene reveals Þorbjörn's ethical growth,

Sámr's self-interest, Þorkell's ambition, and Þorgeirr's compassion for his brother. She argues that Sámr deceives others and perhaps himself and that Þorkell relinquishes control of the action to Þorgeirr. Þorgeirr emerges as a foil to Hrafnkell, who are both regarded sympathetically by the author (pp. 40-43, 45). W. F. Bolton, in the most detailed examination of the fourth chapter yet to appear, views Þorkell as an "amoral wordsmith" (p. 51) whose verbal cleverness suggests dominance of the action despite the apparent control exercised by Þorgeirr. In Bolton's opinion there is no ethical hero in the saga, which he regards as the Icelandic Heart of Darkness, fundamentally a pessimistic work (p. 52).

All these studies regard the toe-pulling incident as straightforward and serious, consistent in tone with the objective narration of the saga's other events. The present essay will argue that a comic tone pervades the scene and that a recognition of this comedy allows us to understand Sámr, the Þjóstarssynir, and their ethical positions. First, I will attempt to demonstrate the existence of the comic elements, and then I will discuss how they aid our appraisal of the saga as a whole.

## II

The first comic element in the fourth chapter is Sámr's reaction to the toe-pulling device, which Þorkell explains to Þorbjörn and Sámr:

"Gangi sá inn gamli maðr fyrir ok svá innar eptir búðinni. Mér sýnisk hann mjök hrymðr bæði at sýn ok elli. Þá er þú, maðr, . . . kemr at húðfatinu, skaltu rasa mjök ok fall á fótafjglina ok tak í tána þá, er um er bundit, ok hnykk at þér ok vit, hversu hann verðr við." (4)

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<sup>4</sup>) "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða," Austfirðinga Sögur, Vol. XI (Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag: Reykjavík, 1950), p. 113. Subsequent page references in my text are to this edition.

Many readers seem to think that this proposal reveals Þorkell's imaginative genius, but the author never wants us to be deceived by this plan. This point is apparent from Sámr's comic response: "Heilráðr muntu okkr vera, en eigi sýnisk mér þetta ráðligt" (113). Sámr's reaction is amusing because in his attempt to flatter Þorkell ("Heilráðr muntu okkr vera") he insults him by failing to disguise his apprehensions ("en eigi sýnisk mér þetta ráðligt"). Equally amusing is Þorkell's testy reply: "Annar hvárt verði þit at gera, at hafa þat, sem ek legg til, eða leita ekki ráða til mín" (113). Having explained his masterful scheme, he is abashed by Sámr's lack of confidence and must use threats to cow him. In danger of losing an ally, Sámr reconsiders: "Svá skal gera sem hann gefr ráð til" (113). This unseemly and unheroic bickering controls our reaction to the ráð. Because Sámr, who is shrewd and wily despite his overweening ambition, pride, and vanity, doubts the plan, we must also question its value. The comedy lays the foundation for a turn of events in the next scene that the overconfident Þorkell has not anticipated.

Þorbjörn's performance immediately follows Þorkell's instructions:

Þorbjörn karl gekk fyrir ok fór mjök rasandi. En er hann kom at húðfatinu, þá fell hann á fótafjöglinu, ok þrífr í tána, þá er vanmátta var, ok hnykkir at sér. En Þorgeirr vaknar við ok hljóp upp í húðfatinu ok spurði, hverr þar foeri svá hrapalliga, at hlypi á foetr monnum, er áðr váru vanmátta. En þeim Sámi varð ekki at orði (113).

The comedy in this passage lies not in Þorgeirr's reaction to Þorbjörn's attack, but rather in Sámr's and Þorbjörn's silence. They have nothing to say, because they have no idea what Þorkell has up his sleeve. The close verbal parallels between the above passage and Þorkell's earlier description of these events underscore his domination of the action up to this point. This is his moment of high drama, and at this moment he breaks

the tense silence ("þá snaraði Þorkell inn í búðina") and launches into an explanation:

"Ver eigi svá bráður né óður, frændi, um þetta, því at þik mun ekki saka. En morgum teksk verr en vill, ok verður þat morgum, at þá fá eigi alls gætt jafnvel, er honum er mikit í skapi. En þat er várkunn, frændi, at þér sé sárr fótr þinn, er mikit mein hefir í verit. Muntu þess mest á þér kenna. Nú má ok þat vera, at gomlum manni sé eigi ósárari sonardauði sinn, en fá engar boetr, ok skorti hvetvetna sjálfr. Mun hann þess górst kenna á sér, ok er þat at vánum, at sá maður gæti eigi alls vel, er mikit býr í skapi" (113-114).

Nordal praises Þorkell's daring and skill in drawing the analogy between Þorbjörn's mental anguish and Þorgeirr's physical pain (p. 54). Bolton likewise observes that Þorkell is lying to conceal his own ambition, but he also finds the speech "daring but safe, egocentric but self-effacing" (p. 42). Pálsson, as we remember, admires Þorkell's sympathy for Þorbjörn (p.67), and Davíð Erlingsson agrees with Pálsson (p. 15).

These views are not perhaps at odds with Þorkell's own conception of his role, but are they close to the author's attitude to the speech? In my opinion the author intends this as a comic piece in which the analogy drawn by Þorkell is absurd, far-fetched, and unconvincing. In an attempt to appear sophisticated he indulges in amateur psychology, calling on Þorgeirr to forgive Þorbjörn in the same way as he forgives Þorgeirr for his burst of anger ("En þat er várkunn, frændi, at þér sé sárr fótr þinn . . ."). But what has Þorgeirr done that needs forgiving? He has merely asked, undoubtedly in a thoroughly peevish tone of voice, who crashes around tromping on his sore feet. He neither strikes nor insults Þorbjörn, and Þorkell manufactures Þorgeirr's offense in order to forgive him. If we put ourselves in Þorgeirr's place, who presumably hops about the búð on his good foot and writhes in agony from the pain in his sore foot, we would have to be annoyed at Þorkell's long-winded nonsense. In a speech which extolls the

virtues of compassion, Þorkell does not once offer his sympathy for his brother's discomfort, which Þorkell himself has caused. His speech is similar in many ways to the griðkona's later harangue urging Hrafnkell to kill Eyvindr:

"Satt er flest þat, er fornkveðit er, at svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk. Verðr sú lítil virðing, sem snimma leggsk á, ef maðr lætr síðan sjálfir af með ósóma ok hefir eigi traust til at reka þess réttar nokkurt sinni, ok eru slík mikil undr um þann mann, sem hraustr hefir verit. Nú er annan veg þeira lífi, er upp vaxa með fœður sínum, ok þykkja yðr einskis háttar hjá yðr, en þá er þeir eru frumvaxta, fara land af landi ok þykkja þar mestháttar, sem þá koma þeir, koma við þat út ok þykkjask þá hefðingjum meiri. Eyvindr Bjarnason reið hér yfir á á Skálavaði með svá fagran skjöld, at ljómaði af. Er hann svá mennt, at hefnd væri í honum" (126-127).

Both speeches begin with proverbial wisdom (Þorkell: "En morgum teksk verr en vill"; griðkona: "svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk"); both make their points by indirection (Þorkell's analogy, and the griðkona's comparison of Hrafnkell and Eyvindr); both attempt to conceal the speakers' ulterior motives but fail to do so; and both urge a course of action that leads to violence.

These similarities exist to call our attention to the more important differences between the two speeches. The griðkona's speech is not funny, and she is not lying. Her advice, though motivated by ill-will--as Hrafnkell observes: "Kann vera, at þú hjalir helzti margt satt -eigi fyrir því, at þér gangi gott til" (127)--is not absurd, and Hrafnkell is forced against his will to act on her advice. He knows that Eyvindr represents a threat, and he cannot ignore the griðkona's public insult without suffering considerable shame. Þorkell's strained analogy, on the other hand, fails even to embarrass Þorgeirr, who responds laconically: "Ekki hugða ek, at hann mætti mik þessa kunna, því at eigi drap ek son hans, ok má hann af því eigi á mér þessu hefna" (114). Those who would attribute superior wit

to Þorkell miss Þorgeirr's brilliantly comic retort which cuts through Þorkell's airy nonsense. More than anything else in this scene, Þorgeirr's wry remark indicates the author's attitude to Þorkell and Þorgeirr, and exemplifies the famous saga humor in its apparent dead-pan irrelevance that hits the nail on the head.

### III

The primary function of comedy in this scene is to characterize Þorkell and Þorgeirr. We mistake the tone of the scene if we assume that Þorkell represents the author's spokesman or ethical ideal. We should not be dazzled by his personal appearance nor taken in by his own theatrical conception of his role, and we must not listen uncritically to his extravagant language. We ought to recognize that behind this brilliant characterization stands an author controlling not only Þorkell's rhetoric but our responses to it. The key rhetorical control is humor: the absurdity of Þorkell's plan, Sámur's tactless response to it, and Þorgeirr's caustic wit. In the humor we find the attitudes of the author, skillfully showing us a slick con-artist failing to convince his wiser, more sober, and more experienced brother that justice will be served by supporting Þorbjörn and Sámur.

And just as the comedy reveals Þorkell as a deceiver, it depicts Þorgeirr's control of the action. Bolton argues, as we remember, that although Þorgeirr appears to dominate the lawsuit, the real power remains with "the arch-manipulator," Þorkell; his power derives from his command of language, which demonstrates "a mastery of his environment" (39). But, as we have seen, the comedy exposes Þorkell's lack of verbal control over not only Sámur but also Þorgeirr. From early in the toe-pulling episode until the saga's end, Þorgeirr makes all the key decisions for the conspirators, except to spare Hrafnkell, an act that Sámur lives to regret. After shredding Þorkell's

comparison, Þorgeirr asks Sámr what support he needs, requests him to visit Þorkell before arguing the case in court, and instructs him to keep the alliance secret. A list of Þorgeirr's major contributions to the action shows his commanding role: he instructs Sámr, presumably the legal expert, that Hrafnkell must be outlawed by a féránsdómur; he suggests going eastward from the Althing on little-travelled roads to avoid detection; with Sámr serving as guide he surprises Hrafnkell and conducts the Court of Confiscation; he warns Sámr not to free Hrafnkell; he orders Freyfaxi killed and the mares preserved for use on the farm; and, finally, he refuses Sámr aid, reminds him of his earlier warning, and approves Hrafnkell's strategy in killing Eyvindr before attacking Sámr. During all these events Þorkell speaks only twice,<sup>5)</sup> and it is difficult to see his mastery of anything. Even after the toe-pulling scene, Þorgeirr's superior verbal skill and wit overcome Þorkell:

"Eða hvárt viltu, Þorkell, nú gera: at sitja hér hjá Hrafnkeli ok gæta þeira, eða viltu fara með Sámi ór garði á brott í þrskotshelgi við boeinn ok heyja féránsdóm á grjóthól nökkurum, þar sem hvárki er akr né eng?" (120).

Þorgeirr here indulges in pedantic humor at Þorkell's expense, and rubs Þorkell's nose in his ignorance of legal terminology. Þorkell responds meekly: "Ek vil hér sitja hjá Hrafnkeli. Sýnisk mér þetta starfaminna" (120). It seems possible that Þorkell's answer betrays his ignorance of law and serves once again as a cover for his actual reasons.<sup>6)</sup> And again it is Þorgeirr's

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5) "Þat hófum vér heyrt, at þú hafir lítt verit leiðitámr þínum óvinum, ok er vel nú, at þú kennir þess í dag á þér"; "Ek vil hér sitja hjá Hrafnkeli. Sýnisk mér þetta starfaminna" (120).

6) Helga Kress, Lektor in the University of Iceland, suggests this interpretation.



comic language which reveals a key deficiency in his brother's superficially confident manner. Þorgeirr's language is both a two-edged weapon and the ideal means of expressing his pragmatic thought. It unmistakably reveals his "mastery of his environment."

A secondary role of the comedy in the toe-pulling scene is to define the motives of Þorkell and Þorgeirr for opposing Hrafnkell. Sámur's comic skepticism, as we have seen, prepares us to believe that not everyone will be deceived by Þorkell's ruse. Þorgeirr's witty response to the plan strengthens our suspicions and reveals that he recognizes Þorkell's bluff. Even while in the grips of excruciating pain, he knows his brother well enough to realize instinctively that he has something on his mind besides the abstract similarities between physical and mental suffering. Þorgeirr's barbed retort also forces Þorkell eventually to drop his transparent charade and to confess his real interest in supporting Þorbjörn: "Ok þóetti mér mikit vaxa mín virðing eða þess hǫfðingja, er á Hrafnkel gæti nokkura vík róit . . ." (114-115). Þorgeirr's wit diverts Þorkell's argument and forces a more honest account of motive, simple and naked ambition,

The comedy also aids our understanding of Þorgeirr's motives for supporting Þorkell. Þorgeirr is too wise and worldly to risk his honor in a clash with an opponent as formidable as Hrafnkell: "Svá mun mér fara sem ǫðrum, at ek veit eigi mik þessum mǫnnum svá gott eiga upp at inna, at ek vilja ganga í deilur við Hrafnkel" (114). His wit is a weapon with which he fends off Þorkell's irrepressible urgings to oppose Hrafnkell. Just as his half-amused answers cause Þorkell to confess his real motive, Þorgeirr's humor forces Þorkell's ultimate weapon, a petulant display of bad temper: "Kann vera, at Þorkell leppr komi þar, at hans orð verði meir metin" (115). Beautifully economical in capturing Þorkell's vanity and in reminding us of the author's earlier description of

him, the peevish complaint also recalls Þorkell's ultimatum to Sámur (" . . . hafa þat, sem ek legg til, eða leita ekki ráða til mín"). All of Þorkell's finely spun comparisons, appeals to winning fame, and specious utterances of sympathy reduce themselves to one childish whine. In the end Þorgeirr is won over by the tactic, and he "agrees to help Þorkell because they are brothers,"<sup>7)</sup> which Þorgeirr's capitulation makes clear: "Sé ek nú, hversu horfir, frændi, at þér mislíkar, en má þat eigi vita, ok munum vit fylgja þessum mönnum, hversu sem ferr, ef þú vilt" (115). Þorkell's appeal to family ties is from the first unmistakable, for he refers twice to Þorgeirr as frændi in his opening speech in the húð. Þorgeirr echoes this appeal above when he addresses Þorkell in return as frændi.

If we fail to see the comedy in this scene, then we are in danger of misunderstanding the motives of the two chief conspirators. Þorgeirr's reason for mixing in the affair is not perhaps the most noble one available, but it is ethically superior to Þorkell's impulsive longing for fame. Moreover, it has the virtue of being shared by numerous other saga heroes who are driven by family obligations to act against their better judgments. The comedy causes us to sympathize with Þorgeirr's dilemma but strips bare Þorkell's venial nature.

#### IV

What do we learn from the toe-pulling scene? First, we realize that Hrafnkell's enemies oppose him not because of his killing of Einarr but because of their own personal interests. Þorbjörn wishes to be Hrafnkell's social equal, Sámur desires the prestige attending the legal victory over Hrafnkell, Þorkell wants the honor of humiliating so powerful a chieftain, and Þorgeirr cannot

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<sup>7)</sup>Slater, 40.

bear the disappointment of his brother. Consequently, the conspirators' own personal biases hinder their ability to deal justly with Hrafnkell.

We learn also that Hrafnkell's enemies commit the same mistake he has already confessed to, talking too much: "En vit munum opt þess iðrask, er vit erum of málgir, ok sjaldnar mundum vit þessa iðrask, þó at vit mæltim færa en fleira" (106). He recognizes his own excessive conduct, not only in admitting that Einarr's death is his worst act but also in pointing to his binding oath to Freyr as the cause. Hrafnkell is the first to sound the theme expressed by the proverb skömm er óhófs ævi (122). The toe-pulling episode shows the danger of verbal excess: extravagant words carry heavy consequences for the speaker as well as the hearer. Þorkell's performance in the búð is the reductio ad absurdum of the evils of words used to persuade and deceive. When Þorkell tells Þorgeirr that "Hrafnkell goði hefir vegit son hans Þorbjarnar saklausan" (114), he falsifies Sámr's report: "vit eigum málum at skipta við Hrafnkel goða um víg Einars Þorbjarnarsonar" (112). Sámr never considers whether Einarr is innocent, which is of course irrelevant legally, but Þorkell, who is not interested in legality but in persuading Þorgeirr to join in, uses the concept to strengthen his appeal. Only Þorgeirr attempts to break free from this web of words, and although he fails, his honesty in facing his and Þorkell's actual motives shows that he is morally superior to the other conspirators.

When we view the toe-pulling scene as an example of excess, we recognize a pattern. Every action occurring before Eyvindr's death is characterized by excess. Hrafnkell's devotion to Freyr, his killing of Einarr, Þorbjorn's demand for arbitration and his irrate verbal abuse of his kinsmen, Þorkell's plan, the torture and dispossession of Hrafnkell, Eyvindr's lavish display of wealth when riding past Hrafnkell's farm, the griðkona's exhortation, and Sámr's complacency in victory. Seen in the context of these excessive acts, Hrafnkell's attack on Eyvindr does not seem extreme

especially when we remember that he does not torture Sámr but allows him to live in peace. We therefore tend to look with sympathy on Hrafnkell's explanation of his revenge. Moreover, Þorgeirr's remarks at the saga's end justify Hrafnkell's conduct:

"Er þat nú auðsét, hvern vizkumunr ykkarr hefir orðit, er hann lét þik sitja í friði ok leitaði þar fyrst á, er hann gat þann af ráðit, er honum þótti þér vera meiri maðr. Megum vit ekki hafa at þessu gæfuleysi þitt" (132-133).

Hrafnkell's conduct naturally seems more sympathetic when praised by his noblest enemy, especially when that enemy assumes the role of foil to the hero. In addition, Þorgeirr has warned Sámr more than once of the possible consequences of opposing Hrafnkell, and his speech suggests that Sámr gets exactly what he deserves. Those who see the hero as condemned at the saga's end must ignore or somehow minimize the importance of the author's final appraisal of him:

Var nú skipan á komin á lund hans. Maðrinn var miklu vinsælli en áðr. Hafði hann ina somu skapsmuni um gagnsemð ok risnu, en miklu var maðrinn nú vinsælli ok gæfari ok hoegri en fyrr at öllu (125).

Here is the author's final evaluation of Hrafnkell, who emerges triumphant and rewarded in full because he amends his earlier ójafnaðr. The saga condemns excessive conduct and shows the dilemma of a man whose enemies refuse to act moderately. In depicting the failure of religion, law, and family to regulate and moderate behavior, Hrafnkels saga offers as an alternative the individual's devotion to and reliance on the virtues of restraint, personal integrity, and proportion.