

THE NARRATIVE STRATEGY OF SMALL FEUD STORIES

Jesse L. BYOCK

One of the most interesting narrative forms in the family sagas is the succession, one after the other, of small feud stories¹. Many times these feud stories end as abruptly as they began, often covering only a few pages. The observation that the sagas contain many of these small stories raises two questions: What binds together the action within any of these tales so successfully? What is the rationale for including in them information such as genealogies, relationships to neighbours and kin, and indications of wealth and power?

I suggest that the answer to these questions lies in a cohesive element that is present in the tales. This element arises from a social process that was vital to the operation of medieval Icelandic society and translated into a narrative element in the sagas. I call this element *brokerage*; it occurs constantly in the sagas and has about it the air of a bargain in which support is usually bought or traded.²

In the first part of this article I consider the background and nature of *brokerage*; in the second I turn to an example from the sagas which illustrates the place occupied by *brokerage* in the narration of small feuds.

Brokerage depended almost entirely on the self-interest of persons with knowledge, expertise, or power who were willing to advocate the claims of others in times of trouble. Whatever the reason for a feud—honor, passion, or disputed wealth—the Icelandic patterns of feud escalation and dispute resolution relied on the intervention of brokers. These power brokers often manipulated the concerns of others to their own advantage. In the sagas the actions of middlemen such as Njáll Þorgeirsson, Helgi Droplaugarson, Þórðr gellir, Snorri goði, Mörðr Valgardsson, Guðmundr dyri, and Sámr Bjarnason either continued, expanded, or settled a dispute, depending on their motivation and the current status of feuds in their respective regions.

Again and again in the sagas, characters in need of assistance turned to important persons who frequently were *goðar*. Since a person requiring help could not necessarily rely on his *goði* for support, at times he or she had to solicit several brokers before finding one willing and qualified to do the job. The descriptions of such meetings are integral parts of the small feud stories with which we are here concerned; they often contain details of the negotiations, including the cost of the forthcoming assistance. The inclusion of such descriptions was possible because a contract of

vrausemblance existed between the medieval Icelandic audience and the sagaman. This contract was based on a mutual understanding of, and interest in, the ways the island society functioned. The nature of such a contract is apparent in the various descriptions of the process of recruiting brokers and of the type of help they gave.

The sagas suggest several alternative means by which one party could induce another to act on his behalf. He could call upon existing obligations, among them kinship or fictitious kinship bonds such as fosterage, marriage, or blood brotherhood. Obligations could be kept alive by giving gifts and feasts³; the prudent man created obligations ahead of time so that he would have someone to turn to in time of need. The importance of giftgiving as a means of creating an obligation to reciprocate can be discerned in the line from *Hávamál* 48, "Sýtir æ glöggr við giðfom" ("a stingy man always groans at gifts").⁴

Payment was another way of obtaining support. Usually wealth was transferred to the broker in the form of land, chattels, silver, or profit from a legal case. The penchant toward mundane dealings by many of the major characters in the sagas has left its stamp on the literature and is one of the distinctions that separates the sagas from the continental epic.⁵

Compensation could also be in terms of power. Men of equal power often allied themselves through contractual pledges of mutual support and friendship, called *vinfengi* or *vinátta*, or bonded their families in marriage alliances. Men of lesser status often forged bonds of support by fostering a child of a more powerful man. This practice was usually advantageous to the latter, for the foster father might promise to endow the child with an inheritance⁶. One outcome of these transactions in the sagas is the creation of a network of contractual relationships which gives a sense of cohesion to the individual feud story and often binds the small stories together.

Brokerage worked because the society had no public institutions to satisfy an individual's needs. When asked to intervene in disputes between individuals, even chieftains, the society's only local governmental officials, usually acted as private parties. Brokerage is not a complex process. It is a form of advocacy which is found in all societies in one way or another. Iceland was unusual in that the recourse to advocacy, especially brokerage, became so pervasive that it was the accepted way Icelanders dealt with one another. The creation of a state form based on the systemization of advocacy is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Old Icelandic society - an aspect that sets it in sharp contrast to other contemporary European cultures. As a standard form of Icelandic action brokerage served to guide dispute and violence into the social arena of the courts. In this way it helped to maintain order in a society that lacked military and governmental chains of command and possessed only minimal social and political hierarchies.

Rather than being hampered by the lack of a central executive

authority, Icelandic society for centuries thrived on an extraordinary governmental process. The establishment in the tenth century of a complex and well-conceived apparatus of local and national courts with fixed dates for sitting and with set responsibilities provided the Icelanders with forums for negotiating. The simultaneous development of legal practices stressing negotiation, arbitration, and compromise strengthened and gave legitimacy to those persons who played the role of advocate. The social and governmental order that brokerage reinforced made Icelandic feud possible, and descriptions of feuds are the stuff of the sagas.

From the tenth through the thirteenth century the presence of brokers tended to cool hotheadedness by placing many decisions about feud in the hands of persons who chose not to risk their power recklessly. The intrusion of brokers turned private feuds into community concerns which were closely watched by farmers in the local districts. If a feud mushroomed, it became a concern at the Althing - that is, a concern of the entire island. The systemization of brokerage worked to keep a lid on random violence, while at the same time giving ambitious men the opportunity to prosper by exerting what power and influence they were able to acquire.

The study of brokerage arises from an interdisciplinary approach ; it cannot be successfully undertaken by regarding the sagas simply as history or as literature. Historians of medieval Iceland have often regretted that the wealth of information in these stories cannot be considered factual because the sagas are a created, and therefore a fictional, literature. From the viewpoint of another discipline, literary scholars lament that the sagas are filled with superfluous social, genealogical, and legal information. These problems - which arise from early twentieth-century concepts of history and literature and of the roles that academic disciplines should play in the study of the medieval world-- seem much less serious when we remember that the medieval Icelanders had no such difficulties. They told the tales of their people, not as history or literature, but as narratives about the conflicts and the anxieties inherent in their society.

Let us turn to an example from *Droplaugarsona saga* (ÍF 11, ch. 5)⁷. By plotting the movement within a specific occurrence of feud instead of looking to larger sequential schemas we begin to discern the strategy the sagaman used to develop feud stories, a strategy that illustrates the narrative utility of brokerage. Set in the East Fjords, *Droplaugarsona saga* narrates a series of feuds stemming from insult, seduction, property dispute, disputed claim to a *goðorð*, stealing, and killing, all typical reasons for feud in the sagas.

By dividing this example from *Droplaugarsona saga* into segments, I demonstrate how the feud story is constructed of three active narrative elements - conflict, advocacy, and resolution - and the nonactive element of information⁸. Information, including such matters as genealogies and kin relationships, describes obligations and ties of reciprocity that will be

operative among the characters in the coming action. Information may be as short as one sentence, or it may be a long descriptive block, often appearing at the start of a feud or at the introduction of a new character. As noted earlier, the primary form of advocacy in the sagas is brokerage, but advocacy also takes other forms. One of these, which is found in this example, is information passing, a minor but nevertheless useful form of advocacy. It usually occurs when someone - often not necessarily involved directly in a dispute - offers information that fuels the action. The distinction between the nonactive element of information and the act of information passing is the distinction between narrations of descriptive background material and narrations of action. In a well-turned example of information passing from *Njáls saga* (*IF* 12, ch. 54), a shepherd rides up to Gunnarr and informs him :

"Ek vilda vera þér trúlyndr, " segir hann ; "ek sá menn ríða ofan með Markarfljóti átta saman, ok váru fjórir í litklæðum." Gunnarr mælti : "þar mun vera Otkell." "Ek hefi opt heyrt, " segir smalamadrinn, "mörg skapraunarorð þeira, því at Skammkell sagði austr í Dal, at þú grétir, þá er þeir ríðu á þik ofan, ok sagða ek þér af því, at mér þykkir illt orðtak vándra manna." "Ekki skulu vit vera orðsjukir, " segir Gunnarr, "en þat eitt skalt þú vinna, er þú vill, heðan í frá."

An example of information comes from the same saga :

Skapti hét maðr ; hann var þóroddsson. Móðir þórodds var þórvör ; hon var dóttir þormóðar skapta, Óleifs sonar breiðs, Ölvis sonar barnakarls. Þeir váru höfðingjar miklir feðgar ok lögmenn miklir. Þóroddr þótti nokkut grályndr ok sloegr. Þeir veittu Gizuri hvíta at hverju máli.

The sagaman's ordering of active and nonactive elements is not based on a fixed saga-long or episodic schema. Instead, as a creative storyteller the sagaman arranged the constituent parts of saga prose in accordance with the type of tale he wanted to fashion. His use of these basic narrative elements was governed chiefly by the requirement that each be employed in a way that is logical within the context of Icelandic feud. We can discern his compositional technique in the example of feud taken from *Droplaugarsona saga*.

When the small feud begins another feud is already underway in the saga. It began when a freedman of the chieftain Helgi Ásbjarnarson insulted a woman named Droplaug. Her son Helgi kills the freedman, but then he is made to pay a fine to the *goði*. The imposition of the fine angers the young man. Seeking vengeance, he learns the law from Þorkell Geitisson, a man famed for his legal knowledge, and begins to take part in legal actions that others want to bring against Helgi Ásbjarnarson and his followers. The example we are considering develops into the second legal case against the chieftain in which Helgi Droplaugarson participates. Like

most of the small feuds in *Droplaugarsona saga*, this one concerns the problems of a local farmer. Saga feud usually begins with information about a few or all of the characters introduced into the feud. Helgi Ásbjarnarson has already been introduced in the saga, but the two *boendr* who initiate this new quarrel have not.

Saga text : Information

Eptir um vetrinn gerði hallæri mikit ok fjárfelli. Þorgeirr, bóndi á Hrafnkelsstöðum, lét margt fé. Maðr hét Þórðr, er bjó á Geirólfseyri fyrir vestan Skriðudalsá. Hann foeddi barn Helga Ásbjarnarsyni ok var ríkr at fé. Þangat fór Þorgeirr ok keypti at honum fimm tigu ásauðar ok gaf fyrir vöru. Ásauðar þess naut hann illa, ok gekk brott frá honum.

The relationship of fosterage between one of the farmers and the goði Helgi Ásbjarnarson suggests that a brokerage obligation probably exists. Also, the stage is set for a conflict over possible stealing of livestock. In the sagas, lost horses or livestock are not simply lamented but are usually recovered and become part of an ongoing feud. The background information continues.

Saga text : Information

En um haustit fór Þorgeirr sjálf at leita fjár sins ok fann í kvíum á Geirólfseyri átján ær, er hann átti, ok váru mjólkaðar.

What happens next is typical of the sagas. Information that fuels the fire of conflict - whether presented as goading or simply as the passing of information - is introduced.

Saga text : Advocacy - Information passing

Hann spyr konur, hvers ráð þat væri.
En þær sögðu, at Þórðr réði því.

Armed with this evidence, Þorgeirr confronts Þórðr directly.

Saga text : Resolution (rejected)

Þa fór hann til móts við Þórð ok bað hann boeta sér ok mælti vel til, bað hann gera hvárt, er hann vildi, fá sér tvávetra geldinga jafnmarga eða foeda ærnar eptir um vetrinn. En hann kvazk hvártki vilja.

Even though Þorgeirr's proposed resolution is rejected, it still indicates an action and therefore is an active element in the narrative. The issue, insofar as the formal characteristics of the tale are concerned, is whether an attempt at resolution was made, not how the resultant

settlement came about or whether it was initially successful or long-lived. Very few resolutions in the sagas were final: on the contrary, most of them engendered further violence. Often a feud was placed in the hands of more powerful men who were able to deal with each other directly. We assume that in many, perhaps most, instances issues of potential dispute among medieval Icelanders, not just saga characters, were settled directly and even amicably. At other times an aggressive Icelander was interested not in settling a dispute but in carrying out vengeance or acquiring property. Real or imagined resolutions involving such characters sowed the seeds of further saga feud. In this instance Þorðr's rejection engenders a new stage in the dispute. The fosterage relationship between the bóndi Þorðr and the child of the goði Helgi Ásbjarnarson is the reason given for Þorðr's stubbornness.

Saga text : Information

(Þorðr) kvazk lítt njóta þess, er hann foeddi Helga Ásbjarnarsyni barn, ef hann skyldi hér fé fyrir gjalda.

Saga text : Advocacy - Brokerage

Síðan fór Þorgeirr á fund Helga Ásbjarnarsonar ok sagði honum til. Hann segir : "Ek vil, at Þorðr boeti þér, ok hefir þú rétt at tala, ok ber honum til orð mín."

Saga text : Resolution (rejected)

Þorgeirr fann þorð ok fekk ekki af.

As this attempt to resolve the matter fails, the feud continues. Þorgeirr tries another local leader who, although not a chieftain, is experienced in the law and is Helgi Ásbjarnarson's rival.

Saga text : Advocacy - Brokerage

Fór hann (Þorgeirr) síðan til móts við Helga Droplaugarson ok bað hann taka við málinu; "ok vil ek, at þú hafir þat, er af fæsk." Ok at þessu tók Helgi málit.

Earlier in this saga example, when Þorgeirr went to Helgi Ásbjarnarson, there was no talk of payment. Þorgeirr was seemingly hoping that reason would prevail, but Helgi Ásbjarnarson did not lend the full force of his power nor did he accept payment. To do so would have created an obligation. If Helgi had failed to negotiate a compromise between the two antagonists, he would have had to renege on one of the two obligations. By the time Þorgeirr went to Helgi Droplaugarson the nature of the dispute had changed. Þorgeirr was fully aware that the matter would not be settled easily, and he offered Helgi Droplaugarson whatever compensation he could get from the case. The two men struck a bargain. Helgi Droplaugarson

wanted the case because of his ongoing feud with the *goði*, and Þorgeirr sweetened the prize by offering the entire profit to Helgi. For his part, farmer Þorgeirr received a much needed service.

In turning over the right of prosecution to Helgi Droplaugarson, Þorgeirr realized that he would not be compensated materially for his sheep. There are many analogous incidents in the sagas, with an injured party transferring his right to material compensation to a broker. Two of these, one in *Vápnfirðinga saga* (ÍF 11, ch. 7) and one in *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4, ch. 31), begin with similar disputes over the use of land or its produce. Like the feud that builds out of Þorgeirr's problem, these incidents initiate tight narrative segments that feed into ongoing feuds.

At this point one might well ask: Why is farmer Þorgeirr, who has expended so much effort in trying to recoup the value of his lost sheep, now willing to give up his rights to compensation? There could be many reasons. One might be the knowledge that his opponent Þórðr, in return for his determination to cheat a neighbor, will now have to defend his person and property against Helgi Droplaugarson, a dangerous and motivated antagonist. Another could be Þorgeirr's awareness that, if he leaves the case open, his honor is at stake. Faced with a humiliating situation, he might be goaded by others into challenging and attempting to kill Þórðr - a risky venture. Instead, Þorgeirr turns to a broker and proves himself a difficult man to humiliate. This rational defensive action on the part of one whose rights are being disregarded is Þorgeirr's advertisement that he is steady in the face of adversity. In the future the demonstration of willingness to defend himself may make others reluctant to violate his rights. Nor can Þorgeirr, once he has contracted with a broker, be intimidated into dropping the case. The right of prosecution has been assumed by Helgi Droplaugarson, and Þorgeirr is relieved of all responsibility. Within the context of the saga, Þorgeirr plays a secondary but important role. He introduces a dispute that starts a chain of events which links up with other chains in the saga, and now he is out of the tale.

Why does a broker like Helgi receive the entire reward? The answer is tied to risk and honor: Helgi, a farmer, puts his reputation and perhaps his life on the line when he goes against a chieftain. He assumes the expensive burden of bringing a large following to the local springtime assembly or to the summer Althing. A group of followers was often necessary if one feuding party was to show enough force to equal his opponent's. To be successful, Helgi Droplaugarson will have to depend on others for support. He will need either to generate new obligations or to call in previous commitments.

Saga text: Conflict

Um varit fór Helgi Droplaugarson á Geirólfseyri ok stefndi Þórði til alþingis, kallaði hann leynt hafa ásaudnum Þjóflaunum ok stólit nytinni.

Helgi's prosecution of Þórðr for both the stealing of the sheep and the use of the milk is in accordance with *Grágás* (Ib, 162).⁹ As brokers preparing for the Althing, the two Helgis call upon those obligated to them so as to be well represented at the court. At times the process of collecting followers forms an entire narrative segment in a saga, as when Flosi and Kári in *Njáls saga* (*ÍF* 12, chs. 133-140) travel around the countryside gathering support for the case resulting from the burning of Njáll. At other times a saga simply states that a man has gathered followers, and it may name the important ones. As in this example of feud between Þorgeirr and Þórðr, the initial conflict over disputed wealth often recedes into the background. The confrontation engenders new acts of feud and becomes one more step in the development of the saga, which, as the sum of small repetitive narrative parts, focuses the audience's attention on questions of honor, of the strength and influence of brokers, and of their ability to gain supporters. The saga next presents information about the support drummed up by the two Helgis.

Saga text : Information

Síðan fór málit til þings, ok váru þeir Helgi Droplaugarson ok Þorkell Geitisson allfjöldmennir. Var þar með þeim Ketill ór Njarðvík. Helgi Asbjarnarson hafði ekki lið til at ónýta mál fyrir þeim.

The situation has now become potentially dangerous to a large number of people, not least to the supporters of the two Helgis. The dispute has advanced to the Althing, and the feudists are at loggerheads. The stalemate persists until third parties intervene.

Saga text : Resolution

Þá báðu menn þá sættask, en Helgi Droplaugarson vildi ekki nema sjálfdoemi. Ok sú varð sætt þeira, en Helgi gerði svá mörg kúgildi sem ærnar höfðu verit, þær er Þórðr hafði nytja látit. Skilðusk nú at svá mæltu, ok Þótti Helga Droplaugarsyni þetta mál hafa at óskum gengit.

This example is typical of saga feud. A mundane dispute over livestock starts off the quarrel. A resolution fails before the injured party turns to a broker ; when the second broker responds aggressively, the feud grows. The eventual resolution of the specific matter of sheep stealing clearly does not end the longer feud of the saga, but it does complete a chain of events that form a small feud. Often such resolutions did not hold, and the process would begin again. Within saga narrative instances of resolution usually signaled a change in the feud, since they frequently led to new disputes. The more tangential parties were often compensated or mollified in some way and, like farmer Þorgeirr, disappeared from the feud at hand. Generally, when resolutions were final, all parties remaining in the

feud agreed to some form of compromise. In the above example, even if we did not know that the saga continues with several more feud chains, we could guess it. Not only has Helgi Droplaugarson won a case from the other Helgi, but, in forcing his opponent to pay the value of cows for the loss of sheep, he has broadcast his scorn for Helgi Asbjarnarson's authority. A response by Helgi Asbjarnarson is called for.

Although the story of the feud between the two Helgis was probably well known to the medieval audience, the form and elaboration of the responses of one Helgi to the other and the decision of whether or not to have an intervening small story were in the hands of the sagaman. As part of his narrative strategy, a sagaman fashioning such a tale would often employ advocacy in the form of brokerage as the "breathing space" between clashes, cooling potentially violent responses by channeling them into community issues and sometimes legal avenues. Descriptions of brokerage may also have served to retard the action of the tale, for engaging a broker as an advocate was a way in which the sagaman fed smaller stories of feud into the quarrels of more powerful men. In some instances this narrative device developed into a detailed description of individuals negotiating terms or into a recounting of a series of brokerings. In others the act of brokerage simply led into the coming action.

Brokerage in its many facets seems to be important to the sagaman's art of storytelling. Through a strategy of building on small feud stories and describing this repetitive but plausible form of action, the sagaman built a complex and cohesive narrative, weaving in background information and new characters and events. By coming to grips with the process of brokerage, we will acquire a better understanding not only of the sagas but also of the relationship between the sagas and the society that produced them.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 These small stories have been variously divided up into scenes, episodes, or have been considered parts of larger saga-long structures. In the last three decades a number of scholars have contributed to the discussion. Among these are M.C. van den Toorn, "Zur Struktur der Saga," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 73 (1958) : 140-168 ; I.R. Maxwell, "Pattern in Njáls saga," *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 15 (1957-1961) : 17-47 ; T.M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga : An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1967) ; R.F. Allen, *Fire and Iron : Critical Approaches to Njáls saga* (Pittsburgh : University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971) ; C.J. Clover, "Scene in Saga Composition," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 89 (1974) : 57-83 ; J.C. Harris, "Genre and Narrative Structure in Some Íslendinga þættir," *Scandinavian Studies*, 44 (1972) : 1-27 ; L. Lönnroth, *Njáls saga : A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1976).
- 2 This essay concentrates on one form of the cohesive element of advocacy, brokerage. Other forms of advocacy are discussed in my forthcoming book, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1982).
- 3 Gift-giving in Scandinavia in general with references to the Icelandic sagas is discussed by A. Ya. Gurevich, "Wealth and Gift-Bestowal Among the Ancient Scandinavians," *Scandinavica* 7, (1968) : 126-138.
- 4 "Hávamál," *Edda : Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 4th reworked edition, ed. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg : Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1962), p. 24.
- 5 Scholars have long recognized the presence of mundane hardnosed bargaining. As W.P. Ker noted, "The sagas differ from other 'heroic' literatures in the larger proportion that they give to the meannesses of reality," *Epic and Romance : Essays on Medieval Literature* (London, 1896 ; New York : Dover, 1957), pp. 200-201.
- 6 The family sagas offer many examples of fosterage connected to financial arrangements. Two of these are Hoensa Þóris's offer to foster Helgi, the son of Arngrímr goði and to give half of his goods to Helgi in exchange for the chieftain's *vinátta* (*Hoensa-Þóris saga*, *ÍF* 3, ch. 2) ; and Þórðr goddi's fostering in *Laxdøla saga* (*ÍF* 5, ch. 16) of Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson's illegitimate son Óláfr pái as a means of

gaining Höskuldr's support.

- 7 Throughout this article I refer to the standard *Íslensk fornrit* edition (abbreviated *ÍF*) of the family sagas (Reykjavík : Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933-1968).
- 8 Information is not the only nonactive element in saga prose. Travel is another prominent nonactive element.
- 9 The standard edition of *Grágás*, the books of Old Icelandic law, was edited by Vilhjálmur Finsen and published in three volumes. Ia and Ib : *Grágás : Íslændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift* (Copenhagen : Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852) ; II : *Grágás efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók* (Copenhagen : Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1879) ; and III : *Grágás : Stykker, som findes i det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 351 fol. Skálholtsbók og en Række andre Haandskrifter* (Copenhagen : Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1883).

