

INTERTEXTUALITY IN *BJARNAR SAGA HÍTDELAKAPPA*

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Works like *Landnámabók* (a chronicle), or *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* (a family saga), or *Völsunga saga* (a legendary saga), or Snorri's anomalous prose *Edda* (a treatise on religion and poetics) differ from each other in so many ways that we normally do not see them linked in the same sentence. Yet aside from their common language, their narrative passages resemble each other in one respect: the narrative voice is one and the same, the reticent, so-called objective narrator who poses as the sole authority for the information imparted. If we restrict our attention merely to this one aspect of narrative rhetoric, we must admit that the authors of these works apparently knew only one way to tell a story. Wherever it came from—oral tradition?—Icelandic writers stuck to it through thick and thin. In contrast to the variety of narrative modes developed hundreds of years later in novels, the narrative voice so often praised by Icelandic scholars does at times seem decidedly Johnny-one-note. Wouldn't we all like to read a parody of a saga à la John Gardner's *Grendel* whose narrator, say one of the colorful haridans, or an *Ólafnadrmaðr mikill*, or a sexually ambiguous viking, puts paid to this ubiquitous, conservative, and phlegmatic voice?

Such thoughts merely acknowledge that all narrative styles have certain limitations. Now it is clear that sagas are more than their narrators profess them to be, namely naturalistic records of the settlement of Iceland, fantastic stories of mythical heroes, the history of kings, and so on. Equally clear, the meanings we draw from sagas are not restricted to those transmitted by the literal sense of the narrative, for sagas as works of fiction additionally communicate a coded (and a perhaps more important) message the unscrambling of which requires the reader's willingness to hold in suspension a number of elements that achieve significance only in relation to each other.¹ The saga code, like all literary codes, derives its meaning from a narrative tradition. Because sagas can be read in relation to their tradition, each saga has a dimension extending beyond itself. As many readers have remarked, sagas consist of stereotyped characters, a limited stock of actions, and a fixed repertoire of conduct.² The reading process consists of *déja lú* experiences in which characters, events, and conduct—many of which cannot properly be understood apart from the tradition—are weighed against the composites drawn from the corpus at large. We may call the process defining the interrelations among sagas *implicit intertextuality*, a saga's mostly unconscious relations to other sagas.³ In what follows I will analyze how implicit intertextuality informs Chapter XI of *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*. Specifically I will argue that the narrative code in the chapter (here quoted in full) communicates a message that contradicts the literal sense of the text:

Nú er þat sagt, at Þórðr spurði Oddnýju, hvé ráðligt henni þœtti at bjóða Birni til vistar, (1) ok kvazk eigi vilja at menn gengi milli þeira ok rægði bá saman. — (2) „ok vil ek svá reyna skap Bjarnar ok trúlyndi við mik.“ Hon latti, kvað þat óráð at því

¹See David Lodge, "Analysis and Interpretation of the Realist Text," *Poetics Today*, I (1980), 5-22, for an excellent discussion of how such a process works.

²See T. M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: an Analytic Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 31-64; Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga* (London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), pp. 95-127; Carol J. Clover, "Scene in Saga Composition," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 89 (1974), 57-83; Fredrik J. Heinemann, "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða and Type-Scene Analysis," *Scandinavian Studies*, 46 (1974), 102-119; Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1976, pp.42-103).

³For an excellent discussion of the various meanings of *intertextuality*, see Hans-Peter Mai, "Bypassing Intertextuality: Hermeneutics, Textual Practice, Hypertext," forthcoming in *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991).

sá niðr af fjallinu at húsunum heim. Pat hófðu þau at sýslu þann dag, Björn ok móðir hans, at þau breiddu niðr lérept ok þurrkuðu, er vát hófðu orðit. (III) Hon tók til orða: „Maðr riðr þar,“ segir hon, „í blári kápu ok er alllíkr Þórði Kolbeinssyni, ok hann er ok, (IV) ok mun hans ørendi óþarft.“ (V) „Eigi mun þat,“ segir Björn. (I) Þórðr kom þar. Þeir kvæðjask ok spyrjask almæltra tíðenda. Síðan mælti Þórðr: „Pat er ørendi mitt hingat, at vita, hvárt þú vill halda sættir við mik, þær er konungr gerði milli okkar, ok skuli nú hvárgi eiga óðrum at bæta, ok er þat merkiligt, er skilríkr maðr hefir samit milli okkar; en var mér þat í hug um hríð, at vit myndim ekki sættask.“ Björn kvæð þat einsætt, at halda sættir, þat sem þeir hófðu um mælt. Þórðr mælti: (3) „Ek hefi þann hluta haft mála, er vegligri bótti, ok mun ek nú þat sýna, at ek vil, at vit sættimsk heilum sáttum; ek vil bjóða þér þangat til vetrvistar til mín, ok skal ek vel veita þér; vænti ek ok, at þú munt svá þiggja.“ Þórðr fór þar um fogrum orðum. (VI) Þórdís mælti: „Pat mun sýna, at ek mun ekki mjök talhiýðin. Hugðu svá at, Björn,“ segir hon, „at því flára mun Þórðr hyggja, sem hann talar sléttara, ok trú þú honum eigi.“ Pá kemr Arngeirr at ok spyr, hvat þeir ræði. Þórðr segir honum. „Svá sýnisk mér,“ segir Arngeirr, „sem sá sé þeim meiri vinr, er þessa fýsir, ef þeir væri þá sáttari en áðr, ok fýsa vil ek Björn at fara, ok mun Þórðr þat efna, sem hann mælir,“ ok stenzk heldr í móti með þeim hjónum. Björn mælti: „Pat hefi ek ætlat, at vera með fòður mínum, ok mörpum mun kynligt þykkja heimboð þetta sakar orðróms manna.“ Þórðr mælti ok kvæð, at Björn væri honum eigi trúr, ef hann þægi eigi boðit. Ok nú hét Björn at vera þar nokkura stund ok kvazk þó mundu dveljask fyrst með fòður sínum. Þórðr reið heim ok segir Oddnýju, hvert hann hafði farit um daginn, ok kvazk nú hafa þat ørendi fengit, er hann vildi. „Hvert er þat?“ segir hon. (4) Hann segir, at þangat hafi hann boðit Birni, ok kvazk þat hafa gort til vfiðbóta við hana. „Pat hygg ek,“ segir hon, „at nú ljúgir þú, ef þú kannst það.“ Þórðr segir: „Eigi verðr einn eiðr alla.“ Skilja þau nú hjalit.⁴ (pp. 136-138)

Now it is said that Þórðr asked Oddný whether she considered it a good idea to invite Björn for a visit, and said that he didn't want people going back and forth slandering them. "I also want to test Björn's mettle and his loyalty to me." She disagreed, said it was inadvisable in light of all that had been said. Þórðr did not let that stop him and set out for Hólm in Hítardalr. He rode alone in a blue coat. Now a mountain stands behind the house at Hólm, and a ridge leads down from the mountain to the farm. Björn and his mother were busy that day spreading wet linen out to dry. She spoke: "There is a rider in a blue coat who is a lot like Þórðr Kolbeinsson, and that's who it is, and his visit will likely cause trouble." "No, it won't," says Björn. Þórðr arrived. They greet each other and exchange the latest news. Then Þórðr spoke: "My purpose in coming here is to find out whether you wish to honor the settlement that the king made between us and that requires neither of us to pay compensation. It is remarkable that such a trustworthy man has made peace between us. And I thought for a time that we would never arrive at a settlement." Björn said it was obviously best to keep the settlement as they had agreed. Þórðr said: "I got what seemed then the best terms in the case, and now I would like to show how much I desire that we be settled on the very fairest terms. I want to invite you to be my guest for the winter, and I will offer you my finest hospitality. I think also that you will gladly accept." Þórðr continued with flattering speech. Þórdís said: "It will be obvious that I am not easily duped by flattery. Remember, Björn, the sleazier Þórðr's thoughts, the slicker his speech. Don't trust him." At that moment Arngeirr arrives and asks what they are talking about. Þórðr tells him. "It seems to me," says Arngeirr, "that any one who advocates this is their true friend if they then become better reconciled than before. I urge Björn to go and Þórðr to keep his promises." Arngeirr and Þórdís continue arguing back and

⁴All saga citations are from the Íslenzk Fornrit edition, ed. Sigurður Nordal, III (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1938). The bold and underlined print, as well as the numerals, are explained below.

forth. Björn said: "I am inclined to agree with my father, but many will find this invitation strange because of the rumors going round." Þórðr spoke and said that Björn would not be his friend if he did not accept the invitation. And then Björn promised to spend some time there and said, though, that he would stay first with his father. Þórðr rode home and tells Oddný how he had fared during the day, and said that he had finished the errand as he had desired. "What is that?" she says. He says that he had invited Björn to visit them, and said that he had done so to please her. "I think," she says, "that you are now lying, if ever you knew how." Þórðr says: "One broken oath does not cancel all others." They now break off their discussion.

The chapter's literal sense is sufficiently plain. Before inviting Björn, Þórðr asks his wife what she thinks of his plan, which she regards skeptically. Undeterred, he rides over to Hólm and extends the invitation, which Björn reluctantly accepts in the face of conflicting advice from his mother and father. Þórðr returns home and informs Oddný of the impending visit, which, he claims, he has arranged for her pleasure. She accuses him, not for the first time, of lying. Readers who respond only to the literal sense of this passage tend to accept virtually everything at face value. One such reader,⁵ for example, interprets Þórðr's invitation as a gesture of reconciliation, and another views Björn's acceptance as a token of "good faith."⁶ Further, the ensuing action becomes either an attempt to resolve differences gone astray, or "polite feuding" gotten out of hand, or deadly conflict caused by abusive poems (Andersson, 139). Even more unacceptable, literal-minded readers may find the saga lacking where it is most subtle.⁷ By failing to pick up the signals the code imparts, they almost certainly miss part of its message.

As I read the code in Chapter XI, Þórðr's invitation is a challenge that Björn accepts to renew their feud. Björn recognizes, as does an initiated reader, that Þórðr's plan (which Björn terms the *kynligt heimboð*) will enable them to conduct the feud without fear of outside interference. Correctly interpreting this passage influences how we see the rest of the saga, both what comes before Chapter XI and what happens afterwards. If true that "of all the sagas, *Bjarnar saga* comes nearest to the pure conflict pattern" (Andersson, 137), then perhaps the saga will seem more consistent if we regard Björn in the beginning as an appealing and clever young man, but one who, as a result of his dealings with Þórðr, has become insatiable in his desire for revenge.

Before we examine the intertextual topoi operating in Chapter XI, we should place it in the context of the saga as a whole. In light of this context, we must harbor suspicions as to the two enemies' motives in spending the winter together. Þórðr Kolbeinsson is introduced as a great poet whose craft won him favor abroad among royalty but unpopular-

⁵Laurence de Looze, "Poet, Poem, and Poetic Process in *Bjarnar saga Hítuðelakappa* and *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*," *JEGP*, 85 (1986), 483, believes that "Oddný even refuses to believe her husband when he is telling the truth—as, for example, when Þórðr has (strange as it may seem) invited Björn to stay with them in order that the two men might be reconciled (Ch. 11)." De Looze implies that Oddný's accusation refers to the reasons Þórðr gave at the beginning of the chapter before he invited Björn—where it might be inferred that his stated motive is reconciliation (but see my later discussion)—whereas she, in fact, brands him a liar because he pretends to have had her wishes in mind (*kvazk þat hafa gort til yfirbóta við hana*). She might be thinking that her husband is incapable of considering her interests, given his deception of her in the past. De Looze's thesis, that Þórðr's and Björn's conflict is "presented as an opposition between two attitudes toward language" (481), though attractively argued, must be rejected. Both Þórðr and Björn seem to agree that poetry makes a fine weapon. Once de Looze begins to analyze the text after Chapter XI, especially where he discusses the poetry, his discussion improves measurably.

⁶Andersson, p. 138. For the most part I agree with his analysis of the saga despite my departure from his reading of Chapter XI.

⁷Nordal, for example, regards chapters 10-26 as "mjög í molum, óskipulegt og samhengislaust" (ÍF, III, p. LXXVI).

ity with the homefolk, especially with those whom he bullied with scurrilous verse;⁸ he is not exactly an *óþafnaðrmaðr mikill*, but a tough customer nevertheless. Björn, on the other hand, comes equipped with virtually all the charm a saga can give a young hero (*Björn var snimma mikill vexti ok rammar at afli, karlmannligr ok sæmiligr at sjá*, p. 112—Even as a boy Björn was large, strong, manly, and handsome). Trouble begins in earnest, as often in the sagas, over a woman. Björn agrees to allow Þórðr to deliver a pledge of love to Oddný. Þórðr deceives Oddný, first, by claiming that Björn authorized Þórðr's marriage to her if Björn dies or fails to return and, second, by having people spread rumors of Björn's death, and, third, by asserting that he had heard of his burial. Björn's retaliatory attack on Þórðr in Norway—he spares Þórðr's life out of deference to the king—induces King Óláfr's forced settlement that introduces a temporary cessation of hostilities into the feud. Now some saga grievances are scarcely resolvable short of violence or some other drastic form of reprisal.⁹ In such a situation an arbitrated settlement forced upon the disputants by more powerful forces scarcely ever proves lasting. Peaceful composition is even less likely when the guilty party cannot be forced to relinquish the fruits of his offence.¹⁰ Such is the situation prior to Chapter XI. Now back in Iceland their decision to spend a winter together suggests that they are either deceiving themselves or are playing at some clandestine game, for neither has reconciled himself to the forced settlement, as Þórðr implies when urging Björn to accept his invitation. Björn still rankles at the loss of his betrothed, especially when he must now experience Þórðr in possession of Oddný's wealth and body, whereas Þórðr has also lost face (and money) in acceding to the king's wishes. More immediately, Þórðr requires a means of working off the effects of Oddný's stinging rebuke delivered when she learns of Björn's unexpected arrival in Iceland („*Víst eru þat tíðendi, segir hon: „ok enn gørr veit ek nú,“ segir hon, „hversu ek er gefin; ek hugða þig vera góðan dreng, en þú ert fullr af lygi ok*

⁸The original beginning of the saga has been lost. What now comprises the first four and part of the fifth chapters is preserved in a version of *Óláfs saga Helga* contained in *Bæjarbók*. See Nordal's discussion, pp. LXIII ff. and XCV ff. This textual history may account for some of the peculiarities at the beginning of the saga. Aside from the unusual use of first-person narration, Björn's meetings with Oddný, as Nordal points out (n. 1, p. 113), cause none of the usual censure. In addition, the narrator's statement that the early quarrels of the two poets do not belong in the saga may have been appropriate to *Óláfs saga Helga* but is here distinctly out of place:

Björn hafði enn sem margir aðrir orðit fyrir spotti Þórðar ok áleitni; var hann því með Skúla, frænda sínum, meðan hann var ungr, at hann þóttisk þar betr korninn sakar áleitni Þórðar Kolbeinssonar en hjá föður sínum. En því get ek eigi þeirra smágreina, sem milli fóru þeira Bjarnar ok Þórðar, áðr Björn kom til Skúla, at þær heyra ekki til þessarri sögu. (p. 112)

Like many others he had suffered Þórðr's scorn and abuse, and that was why he lived with Skúli, his kinsman, while he was young, for he thought he was better off there because of Þórðr Kolbeinsson's abuse than at his father's. But nevertheless I won't mention the trifles that occurred between them before Björn came to Skúli's, because they do not belong in this saga.

I would gladly hear more of these *smágreinir*.

⁹Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's *The Unmanly Man* (Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 1983) is an excellent study of such insults.

¹⁰See the following articles by William Ian Miller for excellent studies on, among other matters, dispute settlement and revenge taking: "Avoiding Legal Judgment: The Submission of Disputes to Arbitration in Medieval Iceland," *American Journal of Legal History*, 28 (1984), 95-134; "Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England," *Law and History*, 1 (1983), 159-204; "Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid: Case Studies in the Negotiation and Classification of Exchange in Medieval Iceland," *Speculum*, 61 (1986), 18-50; "Justifying Skarpheðinn: Of Pretext and Politics in the Icelandic Bloodfeud," *Scandinavian Studies*, 55 (1983), 316-344.

lausung,“ p. 135—“Indeed this is news; I now realize how I am married; I thought you were a man of honor, but you are full of lies and deceit”). In addition to branding him a pathological liar, she implies a preference for Björn. Thus, the narrative situation in which Chapter XI occurs makes it highly unlikely that either Þórðr or Björn desires reconciliation or seek each other’s friendship, and the scene is bound to puzzle those who accept it as naturalistic.

In addition to the narrative context several unique features of the text give us the feeling that whatever Þórðr and Björn say to the contrary, their agreeing to spend the winter together was never designed to increase mutual esteem or trust. Anyone who doubts that Þórðr is lying ought to re-read the saga. Of the four reasons¹¹ he offers for extending the invitation—(1) to prevent third-party slander from driving a wedge between the two of them; (2) to test Björn’s loyalty; (3) to rectify an imbalance in his favor in the settlement already reached; (4) to please Oddný—none is convincing. The first argument, in itself plausible in another’s mouth, loses all force for being uttered by Þórðr. Aside from its challenging nature—the best way to lose a friend’s loyalty is to test it gratuitously—the second argument lacks credibility because of his niggardly conduct later as host. The third requires giving back something acquired through prevarication and enjoyed excessively. As to the fourth, Oddný so forcefully squelches it that we can give it no credence. Perhaps most important of all, by this time in the saga, like Oddný and Þórdís, we believe Þórðr incapable of uttering the truth.

Admittedly, demonstrating Björn’s acquiescence in Þórðr’s charade requires more subtlety, because the saga generally demands our faith in his frank probity but in this chapter requires our acceptance of his ironic posing without accounting for it. The literal level characterizes Björn as conciliatory and even naively foolhardy. How could he refuse to accept his mother’s shrewd advice? (How the text establishes the quality of her advice will be dealt with below.) We must move beyond the naturalistic and recognize Björn’s stated motives for accepting the invitation as cold-blooded and duplicitous rather than simple-minded. He, like Þórðr, plays a role in a farce staged for the benefit of the community at large. We cannot believe that Björn has swallowed his old enemy’s slick arguments, for he himself labels them ‘strange’. Moreover, this scene echoes an earlier scene (in Chapter III) in which Þórðr dupes Björn for the last time. While drinking (*vðru þeir þá drukknir báðir, ok þó Björn meir*, p. 117—they were both drunk, but Björn more), Þórðr feels out Björn as to his plans for the summer. Björn explains that he hopes to go raiding. Þórðr urges him to return home in order to claim his bride, but when Björn insists on his undertaking, the dialogue continues as follows:

Þórðr mælti: „Send þú þá Oddnýu, festarkonu þinni, hringinn jarlsnaut ok fá mér í hönd, því at þá veit hún enn gørr elsku þína ok alvöru til sín, ef þú sendir henni þvílíkan grip, ok mun henni þú þá enn hugkvæmmi en áðr, ok þér því stór afhuga verða; en ef þú kemr til Íslands út, sem vér væntum, þá tekr þú bæði hring ok konu ok allan fjárlut, er þér var með henni heitit; ok satt er þat,“ segir Þórðr, „at slíkt kvánfang getr eigi á Íslandi, sem Oddný er.“ Björn mælti: „Satt segir þú þat, Þórðr, at Oddný er in scemiligsta kona ok fullboðin mér í alla staði, ok hefðir þú jafnvel verit til mín, þá er vit várum á Íslandi, sem nú, þá mynda ek þetta allt gera, sem nú hefir þú; en vant ætla ek, at mér verði at trúa þér, ok þat mun mælt, at ek halda laust jarlsgjöfinni, ef ek læt hringinn koma þér í hendr.“ Þórðr bað hann vitja ráðsins. Björn kvezk hafa setta menn til þess at gæta, — „og seg þú, Þórðr, satt til um ferðir mínar, er þú kemr út; en ek þykkjumk enn of lítt reynt mik hafa í framgöngu ok óvilda kannat hafa góðra manna síðu, en ef ek fer þegar til Íslands, þá mun ek eigi nenna at fara svá skjótt frá ráðahag mínum.“ Þórðr het því, — „en því beiddumk ek gripa, at sanna sögu mína, ok eigi þarftu, Björn, at gruna mik, því at ek skal þér trúv vera.“ „Til þess skal nú ok hættu,“ segir Björn, „um sinn; en ef þú bregzk mér, þá trúi ek þér aldri síðan á mína daga.“ Fær nú Björn hringinn jarlsnaut í hendr Þórði ok bað hann færa Oddnýu. Þórðr hét

¹¹All four are underlined (thus) in the chapter quoted above and numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals.

því ok talaði þá allfagrt við Björn ok hét allgóðu um at vera honum trúr ok reka vel hans ærendi; skildu þeir Björn talit at sinni. Ok þá er Björn var ódrukkinn, þóttisk hann nógu mart fyrir Þórði talat hafa ok honum of vel trúat hafa. (118-119)

Þórðr said: "Send Oddný, your betrothed, the ring Jarl's-Gift—let me have it—because if you send her such a treasure, she will more clearly appreciate your love and sincerity towards her. You will be dearer to her than ever before and she will be thus less likely to forget you. And if you return to Iceland, as we expect you will, then you can have the ring, the woman, and all her accompanying wealth promised to you. For it is true," says Þórðr, "that there is no match like Oddný in Iceland." Björn said: "You are certainly right, Þórðr, that Oddný is a most beautiful woman and a good match for me in every respect. Had you always been to me in Iceland as you are now, then I would do all that you request. But I find it difficult to bring myself to trust you. And people might well say that I do not value the Jarl's gift if I entrust it to you." Þórðr urged him to attend to his wedding. Björn said he had had this taken care of—"and, Þórðr, tell the truth about my expedition when you get back home. I think I have too little tested my valor and too little experienced the customs of honorable men, but if I return immediately to Iceland, then I would find it hard to leave so soon after my wedding." Þórðr promised to do so—"which is why I requested the token, to confirm my story. You have no reason, Björn, to suspect me, for I shall be true to you." "I will have to risk it this time, but if you deceive me now, I will never trust you again all the days of my life." Björn then places the ring Jarl's-Gift into Þórðr's keeping and requests him to present it to Oddný. Þórðr promised to do so and then spoke pleasantly to Björn and swore by all that was holy that he would be true to him and carry out his mission faithfully. With that they ended their discussion. But when Björn was sober, he thought he had said quite enough to Þórðr and had trusted him too much.

In some respects this deception-scene mirrors Chapter XI. That is, in the first scene Þórðr, by means of fraud and flattery, prevails upon Björn to adopt an obviously ill-judged course of action. In Chapter XI he embarks on a similar undertaking, to persuade Björn to risk visiting him for the winter. The earlier scene also dramatizes Þórðr's charge (the glibber Þórðr's language, the more pernicious his lies) and predisposes our acceptance of her accusation. Moreover, it provides another key to the code in Chapter XI by programming the reader to respond to Þórðr's sweet reasoning, no matter how plausible, with the greatest of skepticism. We come to learn that whatever Björn decides when confronted by Þórðr at his most appeasing, acceding to his request is fraught with danger. Björn arrives at the same conclusion after his inebriation subsides but too late to ward off disaster. This brief suspension of his inherent suspicion of Þórðr causes a loss that no one would be likely to forget.¹²

But the contrast between the two scenes perhaps tells us more than do the similarities. In the earlier scene the two are alone (*ekki vissu menn goria tal þeira Þórðar ok Bjarnar*, p. 119—no one knew for sure what they had said to each other), whereas later they perform in front of an audience which keys our responses. (More on this point below.) Most important, Björn in Chapter XI is no longer the untried, inexperienced and gullible eighteen-year-old of Chapter III. A lot of bile has flowed under the bridge, and he is both eager to redress the score and no longer receptive to Þórðr's blandishments. Besides, he has apparently learned that the more he objects, the subtler Þórðr becomes.

So far in my discussion, I have been posing as the ideal reader who has cracked a code without demonstrating how I pulled it off. The key to the code is to be found in the saga's intertextuality. The most prominent intertextual *topoi*¹³ operating in Chapter XI that

¹²Of course, this incident is part of the *topos* "The hero becomes engaged before going abroad," where he will then make a mistake that will either preclude marital happiness or prevent his marriage. We need only think of Hrútr in *Njáls saga* to see how the *topos* can be varied.

¹³The six *topoi* are printed in bold type (thus) in the chapter quoted above and are numbered consecutively in Roman numerals.

contribute to dramatic irony are: (I) an inauspicious visit to a neighboring farm; (II) a rider dressed in a blue coat; (III) the description of an approaching rider; (IV) predictions of doom; (V) the hero's denial of impending danger; and (VI) the garrulous woman's wise counsel. The first of these is perhaps best known from *Njals saga* where Gunnarr visits Otkel's farm or from *Hænsa-Póris saga* where Blund-Ketil visits Hen-Pórir. Naturally, not all visits to neighboring farms end disastrously, for there are, of course, numerous examples in the sagas of neighbors visiting each other back and forth who do not "fall at loggerheads." Only a saga's narrative requirements will determine how a visit develops. Indisputably, Þórðr's visit to Hólm, on the literal level, does not seem to involve hostility—aside from Þórdís's acid tongue. But topos II signals that Þórðr is in a "killing mood."¹⁴ While he kills no one, his blue attire betokens his frame of mind and portends disaster. Instead of directly attacking a physically superior enemy—a virtual suicide mission—Þórðr's chooses as his weapons deceit and falsehood. Perhaps the most important indication that we ought to shift to the ironic level, this topos at least raises our sensitivity to the ambiguous character of this scene. For a reader who misses such signals, or fails to acknowledge them when they are pointed out, the sagas lose much of their charm and narrative brilliance. Moreover, they shed meaning.

Thus, when Þórðr appears dressed in blue on the mountain ridge, Þórdís, Björn, and the reader recognize his hostile intention. Her description of Þórðr's approach (topos III) re-enforces our apprehension, as does her prediction of doom (topos IV). There is often a difference between the narrator's and a character's descriptions of another character's movements about the community, especially when the rider approaches the speaker and when predictions of doom follow. Björn's gratuitous denial (topos V) of his mother's forecast adds further cause for suspicion, for even without knowledge of the tradition we would surely ask ourselves how he can be so sure. Experienced readers, on the other hand, recognize that such comments serve more as invitations to question characters' motives than as insights into their thinking. Such denials tend to verify the assertions they negate; here we automatically upgrade Þórdís's estimate of impending trouble from the probable to the virtually certain. She has not misread Þórðr's hostility, but, unfortunately for Þórðr and Björn has made it public. This is, in fact, why Björn quickly contradicts her. In effect, by politely silencing her (and at the same time tacitly agreeing with her), he wishes to preserve a facade of secrecy in which his negotiations with his enemy can take place. Now while obvious that Björn cannot read Þórðr's mind, the blue clothes announce that the visit bodes evil. Björn bides his time until the nature of Þórðr's scheme becomes clear. Indeed, neither adversary wishes the true nature of their discussion to become public, for as Arngeir makes clear, all vested parties in the feud would immediately intercede should they suspect Þórðr and Björn's true motives. Feuding may well satisfy various inner needs of those at the center of the storm, but those on the periphery usually attempt to avoid its destructive winds. Moreover, neither feudant wishes to be seen breaking a settlement made by a king, for although King Óláfr has no official power in Iceland, his arms reach further than those of normal men. Thus, both participate knowingly in a charade whose true purpose is to provide them with a theater for the next round of feuding where they will not have to endure interruption from well-meaning busy-bodies.

In choosing his own farm as feud-arena, Þórðr hopes to renew his *spott ok áleitni* so vexing to his adversary in his youth, while devising additional rules to the game in the expectation that Björn, bound to stay the winter, must sit and take what is dished out. And what better audience than his own wife to whom he can demonstrate his imagined superiority. On the other hand, Björn has an even greater score to settle, his loss of Oddný. For this reason, Þórðr's unexpected invitation can be easily fitted into his plan, no doubt as yet unformed, to get even. Whereas as an untried youngster, he was forced to submit to Þórðr's insults, Björn has in the meantime acquired the craft of poetry, the means of striking back. Moreover, his increased experience abroad has added self-confi-

¹⁴Paul Acker, "Introduction to *Valla-Ljóts saga*," *Comparative Criticism*, 10 (1988), 209, provides a comprehensive list of the topos's occurrence in the sagas.

no doubt as yet unformed, to get even. Whereas as an untried youngster, he was forced to submit to Þórðr's insults, Björn has in the meantime acquired the craft of poetry, the means of striking back. Moreover, his increased experience abroad has added self-confidence to the many positive qualities he displayed as a promising young man. We can imagine that, as returning hero whose masculine luster shines brighter than ever, he welcomes the opportunity to parade his added charms before Oddný. Although she was blameless in marrying Þórðr, nothing in Björn's character suggests the modesty necessary to restrain an overwhelming impulse to demonstrate the enormity of her error in choosing the wrong man. Thus, both men, in competing for Oddný's favor, have reason to keep their conflict dark. Björn can best aggravate her by feigning indifference, at least in the beginning, whereas Þórðr cannot afford to betray his anxiety at Björn's return to Iceland. We might wish to view these two adversaries as if they were courtly lovers in that the objects of their desires, in this case a woman *and* revenge, must be sought under the veil of secrecy and by enacting an elaborate ritual. The winter of discontent at Þórðr's farm provides the venue for such an exercise.

One final note on how intertextuality points the way out of a potential ambiguity. We can imagine a naive reader's perplexity at the contradictory advice mother and father give their son. Þórdís cautions her son not to believe a word Þórðr says, and Arngerrir applauds the plan as a fitting means to preserve the peace. How do we know that Þórdís is right? To be sure, when she maintains that the slicker Þórðr's arguments, the corrupter his motives, the cogency of her judgment sways us for the reason mentioned above. Moreover, contentious women¹⁵ in the sagas are never shown to be mistaken, whatever their motives. Þórdís's function contrasts with the usual role of the goading woman (topos VI), for she urges deliberation rather than headlong action. Of course, she fears for her son, not unjustly as the course of the saga shows. Arngerrir, on the other hand, simply fails to understand what is going on, and voices the standard litany on how to keep the peace. Arngerrir apparently believes Þórðr, but, as we saw above, the saga has already implied the father's ineffectuality in helping his son against Þórðr: *hann [Björn] þóttisk þar [at Skúli's] betr kominn sakar dleimni Þórðar Kolbeinssonar en hjá foður sínum*. As so often when men and women disagree with each other, the advice advocated by the latter proves more cogent.

What does the code teach us that we need to know in interpreting the saga? Recognizing the function of Chapter XI alters the notion propagated by some readers—can we posit a standard reading of the saga on the basis of Nordal's, Andersson's and de Looze's remarks?—that Björn is drawn willy-nilly into the conflict. On the contrary, he seeks the opportunity for revenge as passionately and deviously as does Þórðr. Björn's desire for revenge explains his feeding his dog at table and spoiling the hay set aside for his horses: to provoke Þórðr and escalate the feud. What then happens occurs by design not by accident. Before Chapter XI Þórðr is clearly the offending party, but in deciding who bears more responsibility in breaking the peace, there is little to choose between the two. The saga portrays feud, what ignites it, what feeds it, and what can end it. Moderation, if this virtue can be said to play any role in this saga at all, serves merely as a tactic to win a temporary advantage. What counts is humiliating, injuring, and finally destroying one's opponent.

¹⁵See Carol J. Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, eds. J. Lindow, L. Lönnroth, and G. W. Weber (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 141-183, for a thorough study of the goading woman. On historical circumstances governing the status (or the two statuses) of women in Scandinavia/Iceland as reflected in the sagas, see also her article, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, eds. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 100-134. Rpt. from *Scandinavian Studies*, 60 (1988), 147-188.