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**The Folk Tale Perspective and Political Reality in *Hrafnkel's Saga***

*Hrafnkel's Saga* concerns the fate and fortunes of a tenth-century pagan chieftain; but for thirteenth-century audiences, the cautionary message at its heart is glimpsed in the folkloristic situations in which a seemingly fortuitous opportunity bodes ill for those who take advantage of it. The saga author's focus on pragmatic decisions, his dismissal of the utility of heroic gestures, and his exposure of the futility of folk tale solutions, all suggest a prevailing ambivalence in the collective mind of the contemporary audience regarding their own situation. *Hrafnkel's Saga* does not chronicle the end of the Icelandic republic, but it does reflect some of the economic hardships and the political weaknesses which were inherent in that society from the beginning and which ultimately led to the independently-minded Icelanders swearing allegiance to the King of Norway.<sup>1</sup> The saga author's anxieties concerning contemporary events involving pride, power and politics, are to be found at those points where entertaining folk tale elements intersect with the cold reality of thirteenth-century politics.<sup>2</sup>

The folk tale elements in *Hrafnkel's Saga* may be isolated and identified by comparative literary techniques; however, for contemporary audiences, such details likely remained just within the realm of credibility. This credibility is established by a masterful blend of realistic details such as place names and geographical descriptions - as well as a skillful delineation of characters and their motives - creating a setting which absorbs supernatural elements and lends realism to pivotal plot developments rooted in folk tale devices.<sup>3</sup> The saga author employs the individual folkloristic motifs of a son who is sent out into the world to seek his fortune at an inopportune time; a willful and apparently supernatural horse who is the object of a pagan taboo<sup>4</sup>; a foolish farmer who demands to be treated as an equal by a chieftain; and a stranger who appears unexpectedly when all hope of a benefactor has been abandoned. Larger units of folk patterns are also discernible in the saga, such as tests of character, and the

theme of role reversal. These folk tale elements and patterns acquire an air of verisimilitude when they are combined with characters who are motivated by the all too human failings of foolishness, pride, and complacency.

The test-of-character motif sets the events leading to feud in motion, and with the exception of Hrafnkel, the characters in the saga fail that test in whatever guise it assumes. It is never explicitly stated, but the god Frey appears to test Hrafnkel's oath that he will kill anyone who rides Freyfaxi. The skittishness of the rest of the herd together with Freyfaxi's willingness to carry Einar, and the actions of the horse after being ridden, all combine to suggest supernatural forces at work. Hrafnkel's unflinching resolve to abide by his oath eventually results in a temporary reversal of his fortunes, as well as the death of the horse, but that is not to say that Hrafnkel has some heroic or romantic notion that a man's word is his bond and must always be honoured. Hrafnkel is the character in the saga who is least associated with the type of wishful thinking often evident in folk tales. His actions are the result of cool-headed pragmatism and rational rejection of heroic gestures. Indeed, he consistently takes advantage of heroic posturing of others, as Einar, Eyvind, and Sam all learn to their disadvantage. Hrafnkel's decision to accept exile rather than death is determined not by cowardice, but by concern for his sons and confidence in his own ability to overcome this temporary setback. Hrafnkel puts aside his pride, rejects heroic gestures, and sets to work to rise above his misfortunes.

Hrafnkel's time in exile represents another test of character, and he succeeds in demonstrating not only his capacity to endure hardship but also his shrewdness in finding ways to prosper in difficult circumstances. His matter-of-fact approach to the lessons of his exile is demonstrated when he hears of Freyfaxi's death and the burning of the temple: he has no comment except that "Ek hygg þat hégóma at trúa á goð," (I think that it is nonsense to believe in gods)<sup>5</sup> after which he vows that he will never sacrifice again. Hrafnkel does not suffer any supernatural repercussions associated with

forswearing Frey. He actually seems to be aided in his return to power by the kind of success in fishing and farming that normally would have been attributed to the auspices of the fertility god. The combination of the cyclic fertility of the land and Hrafnkel's resilience in the face of adversity may be seen as reflecting thirteenth-century wishful thinking that if the Icelanders had held out a little longer or been a little more resourceful, they could have avoided coming under the domination of the King of Norway.<sup>6</sup>

The temptation offered by the stallion also tests the character of Einar who had previously stated that he would never be so foolish as to ride Freyfaxi. Einar's lack of resistance to temptation reveals that like his father, Thorbjorn, he is subject to poor judgment. The audience would have been aware - even if Einar appeared to be oblivious to the possibility - that news travels fast in such a society; the gossip of the shepherds to whom he spoke while riding the horse would soon have reached Hrafnkel. Einar does nothing to protect himself even after he knows that the horse has run off to his master in a condition which reveals that he has been ridden. There is a suggestion of the heroic in Einar's stoicism when he confesses that he has ridden Freyfaxi, but such honesty is not rewarded by the pragmatic chieftain who refuses to let the possibility of extenuating circumstances confuse the issue. Einar has taken advantage of an apparently opportune solution to the problem of finding the sheep, and he has to suffer the consequences for his lack of forethought. The consequences, of course, extend beyond the death of the shepherd and set off a chain of events which have repercussions for the whole district.

The folk tale elements which advance the plot of the saga have a destabilizing effect on the status quo of the society within the saga, and also undermine the standard patterns of feud which saga audiences were accustomed to expect. The abject poverty which afflicts Thorbjorn and his family seems to be an accurate reflection of thirteenth-century conditions for those at the lower end of the social scale;<sup>7</sup> however, Thorbjorn

is the character in the saga who is most closely associated with folk tale motifs due to his foolish pride and lack of common sense. Within the context of thirteenth-century political reality, Thorbjorn's rejection of Hrafnkel's generous offer of compensation must have appeared extremely foolish, and his demand to be treated as an equal by a chieftain - foolhardy. He receives harsh criticism from his kin in the saga and his own brother refuses to help him. However, not only does the poor farmer, with the help of his nephew Sam, take on the powerful chieftain, but together they ignore the usual procedures and instead of seeking brokerage from the local leaders, proceed to the Althing on their own, hoping to find support there.<sup>8</sup>

Predictably, Thorbjorn and Sam fail to find anyone who is willing to risk helping them until the princely figure, Thorkel Thjostarsson, suddenly appears as if in answer to Thorbjorn's tears. The timing of Thorkel's appearance has the suggestion of the kind of fortuitous coincidence frequently encountered in folk tales, and he cuts a dashing figure as well, dressed "í laufgrænum kyrtli ok hafði búit sverð í hendi" (in a leaf-green tunic and carrying an ornamented sword in his hand).<sup>9</sup> Thorkel's decision to support their case is unusual because he does so "for reasons neither of obligation nor of payment".<sup>10</sup> His decision is also remarkably impetuous since he does not know the full details of the case and he does not ask for them. He is aware of Hrafnkel's reputation for refusing to pay compensation for his killings, but he remains unaware of Thorbjorn's rejection of Hrafnkel's generous offer. Thorkel represents the figure of an irresponsible and uninformed outsider dabbling in local politics. Thorbjorn and Sam are desperate and grasping at straws when they solicit Thorkel's assistance. In accepting Thorkel and his brother Thorgeir as benefactors, they fail to consider the possible disadvantages of such a relationship in the long term. The thirteenth-century Icelanders had been careful to include a clause in *Gizurr's Treaty*, which ended the Icelandic republic, releasing them from their vow of allegiance to the King and his

heirs if the Norwegians did not uphold the terms of the treaty.<sup>11</sup> Thorbjorn and Sam lack the forethought to look beyond the events at the Althing.

Jesse Byock describes Thorbjorn as the folk tale equivalent of "the stubborn peasant, [who] through tenacity and cunning and luck, locates a donor-benefactor".<sup>12</sup> This assessment of his character is generous, however, considering that the folk tale type which Thorbjorn most closely resembles is that of the fool. His brother Bjarni criticizes him for being "vitlfill" (lacking in wit)<sup>13</sup>, and Sam states outright that he considers himself to be helping a fool when he agrees to take on Thorbjorn's case. Thorkel doesn't say anything of the sort, but he instinctively casts Thorbjorn in the role of a fool when he puts forth his plan to engage his brother Thorgeir's support. The plan which Thorkel devises has the aspect of a test about it in that Thorbjorn and Sam have no choice but to follow blindly his bizarre instructions. Thorbjorn pretends to stumble and awakens Thorgeir by grabbing his sore toe. Thorkel tries to avert Thorgeir's anger by comparing his pain to Thorbjorn's loss of a son; he is eloquent but unsuccessful.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately it is Thorkel's threat to stalk off in a state of high dudgeon that sways Thorgeir, rather than his sympathy for Thorbjorn's plight. After the Thjostarssons become involved in his case, Thorbjorn is never mentioned again, and we are left with the image of a foolish old man who has dried his tears, believing that his troubles are over now that he has found a benefactor. The main effect of Thorkel's plan is that it casts Thorbjorn and Sam in the role of beggars who attract their benefactor's attention by grasping at the extremities of his person. Their relationship with Thorkel and Thorgeir is not based on the ties of kinship or obligation; consequently, it is precarious and subject to whim.

Theodore M. Andersson sees *Hrafnkel's Saga* as "participating in a general medieval dialogue on the limits of authority, one that oscillated between forceful expressions of divine right and an increasing emphasis on royal responsibilities."<sup>15</sup> He believes that it is both Hrafnkel's right to rule and his subsequent responsibilities to his

subjects which are being debated in the saga. Andersson states that in *Hrafnkel's Saga* "the principles of Christian kingship" are projected onto "a Saga Age chieftain".<sup>16</sup> However, Hrafnkel's character may also be seen as a composite of thirteenth-century chieftains while the figure of the king is represented elsewhere in the saga. Some irony may have been intended in that the violent actions and questionable ethics of thirteenth-century Christian chieftains do not seem out of place in the pagan past. Sigurdur A. Magnússon observes that during the period from 1220 until the fall of the republic, the six most powerful families "fought it out using every means at their disposal: treachery, assassinations, burnings and mutilations as well as pitched battles."<sup>17</sup> Anachronistically, Hrafnkel as a tenth-century chieftain is forced to deal with the type of complex political relationships current in the thirteenth-century Icelandic politics when political relationships were no longer strictly a local affair. Under such conditions it is difficult to gauge one's adversaries and to predict their actions merely by the quality of their reputations. Hrafnkel's mistake is not that he underestimates Thorbjorn and Sam, but that he fails to realize the quality of the help which they have attained.

Ironically, Hrafnkel's accurate assessment of Sam's character lulls him into complacency which enables Sam and the Thjostarssons to catch him off guard while lying in bed. At the beginning of the saga, Hrafnkel's father, Hallfred, was saved from death by a dream which criticized him for "lying incautiously" in bed at a time when he had no reason to suspect danger.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, both Hrafnkel and Sam are caught lying in bed when events realistically warranted caution. The three situations would have elicited different emotions from the audience, ranging from affirmation of a perceived historical fact in the first instance, anticipation at the prospect of Hrafnkel's comeuppance in the second instance, and perhaps, resignation to the inevitability of Sam's carelessness in the last instance. The lying-incautiously-in-bed motif also provides comic relief in the folkloristic plot twist which involved Thorgeir sleeping

with his sore toe sticking out of the covers - a ready target for Thorbjorn to grab in an effort to engage Thorgeir's help in their lawsuit against Hrafnkel. These incidents indicate a fear of letting one's guard down, as well as a concern that an exposed weakness will be seized upon by others to their own advantage.

The Thjostarssons have no personal ambitions to seize Hrafnkel's property for themselves, but nonetheless they are the most likely candidates to model the problems associated with kingship in regard to Iceland - specifically absentee kingship. The major long-term disadvantage to the alliance, which Thorbjorn and Sam have made with the Thjostarssons, lies in the great distance between their districts. Sigurdur A. Magnusson observes that during the Age of the Sturlungs, all of the six most powerful families in Iceland "sought assistance from the Norwegian King, who was only too happy to encourage the internecine warfare within the country".<sup>19</sup> The pernicious effects of long distance meddling by outsiders is well illustrated in *Hrafnkel's Saga*.

The involvement of the Thjostarrsons in the dispute results in the feud between Sam and Hrafnkel going well beyond the point which the ineffectual Sam would have pursued it. They also are responsible for the torture of Hrafnkel which he later cites when he explains why he will not pay compensation for killing Eyvind. Sam's lack of political awareness is partly to blame for Eyvind's death; even Hrafnkel's servant woman and Eyvind's servant boy can see that Eyvind is an expendable victim if Hrafnkel is to regain his former property. Eyvind, himself, refuses to accept that his life is in danger because he does not believe that he is involved in local politics, and he refuses to flee from the unbeatable odds represented by Hrafnkel's larger numbers. Eyvind accepts death heroically, but Hrafnkel treats the killing as an expedient solution to the problem of regaining his property, and a necessary chore: he doesn't even speak to Eyvind before he attacks. Eyvind may have defended himself "vel ok drengiliga" (bravely and manfully),<sup>20</sup> but in realistic terms he has behaved as foolishly as the other members of his family - Thorbjorn, Einar, and Sam.

The distance between districts and the resulting lack of knowledge concerning local affairs is evident in the Thjostarsson's grasp of the situation. They are aware of Hrafnkel's reputation, but are unaware of the kind of man that Sam is - thus they are responsible for helping Sam attain a position to which he is not suited by nature. Sam manages for a time, but ultimately fails the test of character to which his time as a chieftain submits him. When Hrafnkel does regain his former position, the Thjostarssons are reluctant to ride to Sam's rescue despite the fact that when they originally took leave of Sam - "mæla til fullkominnar vináttu með sér ok skiljaz allgóðir vinir" (they promised each other loyal friendship and parted very good friends).<sup>21</sup> When Sam journeys to their district seeking help, they beg off on the excuse that it is too far to travel; they magnanimously and condescendingly invite him to come and live with them. In a manner of speaking, they invite him to come to 'court'.

The pattern of failed or rejected benefactor relationships in the saga underscores the ambivalence towards this relationship as a solution to the hardships of poverty. The implicit tyranny in such a relationship is made explicit within the saga; Einar disobeys Hrafnkel and dies for his mistake; Sam ignores the Thjostarsson's advice to kill Hrafnkel and finds that they are unwilling to help him again when the need arises. To accept such a relationship is to become subservient, and it is not surprising that pride plays a role when benefactor relationships are rejected, but such rejections appear foolish within the context of the saga. Thorbjorn's family would likely have prospered if he had accepted Hrafnkel's offer; they no doubt enjoyed the benefits of Sam's brief stand-in as chieftain, but like Sam, they must have suffered when Hrafnkel regained his position. Likewise, Sam's rejection of the Thjostarssons' offer is couched in terms of wounded pride and childish anger rather than objective consideration for the good of his family. The desire to be independent versus the reality of accepting the kind of



help that compromises that independence is clearly illustrated within *Hrafnkel's Saga* and it presents no easy answers.

The demand by foolish individuals to be treated as equals by chieftains occurs twice in the saga. The first instance, of course, is when Thorbjorn asks for arbitrators to settle the compensation for Einar's death; the second instance is when Sam appeals to the Thjostarssons for help a second time. The Thjostarssons have had time to assess Sam's character and have come to the realization that he lacks what it takes to survive as a chieftain. With their rejection, Sam's humiliation is complete and he is doomed to a life of chronic frustration: "Reið Sámr heim við svá bðit ok bjó þar til elli; fekk hann aldri uppreist móti Hrafnkeli, meðan hann lifði." (Sam rode home without more ado and lived there until old age: he never got redress against Hrafnkel, as long as he lived.)<sup>22</sup> From the thirteenth-century vantage point Sam would have been better off in their era when the laws contained in *Jónsbók* were introduced:

For the country's population as a whole the monarchy meant first and foremost an improvement of law and order in comparison with the conflicts of the Sturlung period. The right to private feud was abolished; the king took over the execution of the law and the collection of fines for murder and other crimes. In *Jónsbók* a desire to protect the weakest groups against the infringements of the strong is apparent.<sup>23</sup>

In *Hrafnkel's Saga* the need of the weak for protection against the strong is also apparent, but so is the national preoccupation with the need for respect and the reluctance to be considered anyone's inferior. Hrafnkel mocks Sam when he cautions him that he will be allowed to live at his old farm as Hrafnkel's subordinate only so long as he doesn't let his pride be his downfall, but Sam has no reason to be proud anymore.

The ending of *Hrafnkel's Saga* has always presented a difficulty for those readers who search for a moral or ethical conclusion. The theme of inversion which reversed the roles of farmer and chieftain has asserted itself once more and the tenth-

century status quo has been re-established. The events set in motion by Einar's impulse to ride a forbidden horse have played themselves out to no one's advantage but Hrafnkel's; Thorbjorn and Sam's lucky discovery of princely benefactors has not only come to naught but has also resulted in Sam's humiliation; and Hrafnkel is back stronger and richer than ever. The possibilities for change suggested by the wishful thinking of folkloristic situations have been crushed by the reality of the resilience of the strong and unscrupulous. Kirsten Hastrup remarks that the last sentence of *Gizurr's Treaty*: "We shall be released from [the treaty] if the best men consider it to have been broken [on your part]"<sup>24</sup> is ironic because it represents:

a final, although perhaps naive, statement of the faith that the 'best men' would always do what was most beneficial for the country. Even though this reference to chosen representatives was commonly made in this way, here perhaps it showed a last vestige of the belief in an absolute standard of national good, realized in a treaty which relinquished national autonomy!<sup>25</sup>

*Hrafnkel's Saga* suggests that the 'best men' - chieftains such as Hrafnkel who enjoyed "great prestige" until the end of his days - were in reality self-centered and ruthless. Moreover, the saga's anxieties concerning benefactor relationships and the short term benefits of opportune solutions reveals the fear that the much needed help from the Norwegians might ultimately prove unreliable. If *Gizurr's Treaty* was ever revoked and the chieftains regained their power then many Icelanders would wind up looking as foolish and weak as Sam. Folkloristic patterns persist in a culture because of the basic truths or basic fears which they represent. Surely it is significant that so many folk tale elements should emerge in a saga, written at the end of the republic, concerning the political career of a tenth-century chieftain.

<sup>1</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, "Ethics and Politics in Hrafnkels Saga" in *Scandinavian Studies Norse Values and Society*, 1988, 304, remarks that "Because the saga appears to have a deficient grasp of the law of republican Iceland, it is now considered to be a late work dating from the last quarter of the thirteenth century, after Iceland passed under the Norwegian crown in 1262-64 (Jón Jóhannesson LV-LVI; Sigurdur Nordal 38, 58-59, 73 [n.45]; Opet)."

<sup>2</sup> Carol Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (fslendingasögur)," in *Old Norse - Icelandic Literature* ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 262, when summarizing mainstream saga studies says that "the paramount sociopolitical issue of the last decade and a half has been the one implied by Sigurdur Nordal's view: if the sagas are fictional constructions of the thirteenth century, they must at some level reflect the attitudes and even the events of the thirteenth century. Or, as Einar Ol Sveinsson put it in his early program essay entitled "The Icelandic Family Sagas and the Period in Which Their Authors Lived," the sagas must 'bear the imprint of the age and place in which they were written down.' At the most basic level, this imprint consists of material projection - the reassignment in masked form of contemporary events to the tenth century."

I don't think that material projection in the basic form of specific masked events is behind the plot of *Hrafnkel's Saga*, but a general mood of anxiety and insecurity regarding difficult decisions made in desperate times does lie beneath the surface of the saga. Although, Hermann Pálsson, preface, *Hrafnkel's Saga and other Icelandic Stories*, (London: Penquin, 1971) 29 - 30, suggests that it was based on "a series of tragic happenings that overtook the Freygydling [family] during the period 1248 to 1255."

<sup>3</sup> Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 201, notes that "*Hrafnkels saga* has more epic and folkloristic pretensions than most of the other family sagas that narrate feud in Iceland. Perhaps because of these enriching literary elements, critics have viewed this saga as a masterpiece of saga writing. Ironically, it is one of the few tales of feud set in Iceland which cannot be taken as an exemplar of traditional saga narration."

<sup>4</sup> Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 201, remarks that "In *Hrafnkels saga* the feud is engendered by a religious interdiction, a highly folkloristic element and an unusual cause of saga conflict."

<sup>5</sup> *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*, trans. Frank Stanton Cawley, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1932) 26..

<sup>6</sup> Perbrn Meulengracht Sorensen, *Saga and Society*, ([Odense]: Odense University Press, 1993) 72, notes that even if the Sturlung's had managed to keep peace, the nation was still doomed: "Neither in economics nor in foreign policy was there a basis on which to construct the continuation of the free state."

For a detailed description of the difficulties which brought about the end of the republic see Kirsten Hastrup, "The Fall of the Freestate" in *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 223 - 237.

<sup>7</sup> Pálsson, *Hrafnkel's Saga and other stories*, 12. Also see Kirsten Hastrup, "Social Classes" in *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, 107-118.

<sup>8</sup> Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 202 and 246.

<sup>9</sup> *Hrafnkel; Saga Freysgoða*, 14

<sup>10</sup> Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, 233.

<sup>12</sup> Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 203.

<sup>13</sup> *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða* a 11.

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- 14 Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga*. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971) 67-68, believes that "in terms of medieval humanism [Thorkel's plan] makes excellent sense ... It is by sharing in other people's pain that we are moved to compassion and pity." Pálsson's view would be convincing if Thorkel's ploy had succeeded, but as it fails it is difficult to see what function it serves in the plot other than to make Thorbjorn look foolish.
- 15 Theodore M. Andersson, "Ethics and Politics in *Hrafnkels Saga*" in *Scandinavian Studies Norse Values and Society*, 1988, 302. Andersson refers to Fritz Kern *Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht im früheren Mittelalter: Zur Entwicklungsgechichte der Monarchie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1954) 175 -212, esp. 189 - 90.
- 16 Andersson, "Ethics and Politics in *Hrafnkels Saga*", 305.
- 17 Sigurdur A. Magnusson, *Northern Sphinx*, (Montreal: McGill - Queen's Press, 1977) 102.
- 18 Hallfred is not told specifically what the danger is, but he is advised to move his household to a new location. He does so and a landslide falls on his previous farmstead. The lying-incautiously-in-bed motif does not appear in Inger M. Boberg's *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, *Bibliotheca Arnarnagenseana* 27, (Munksgaard: Hafnise, 1966) 163, although "wisdom (knowledge) from dream" does.
- 19 Magnusson, *Northern Sphinx*, 102.
- 20 *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*, 31.
- 21 *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*, 26.
- 22 *Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*, 34.
- 23 Sorensen, *Saga and Society*, 67.
- 24 Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, 233.
- 25 Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, 235.

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