Lois Bragg, Associate Professor
Gallaudet University
Washington, D.C. 20902 USA

Ninth International Saga Conference
Akureyri, 1994

Disfigurement, Disability, and Dis-integration in *Sturlunga saga*

Near the end of *Sturlunga saga*, an enigmatic, harelipped figure bursts onto the scene as an arrogant, rebellious, altogether insufferable child, goes on to a career of fomenting murder and mayhem among his own kin, and dies a saintly martyr's death just a few years before the end of Icelandic independence, an end that he did so much to bring about. He is Þorgils skarði Boðvarson, a great-grandson of Hvamm-Sturla through Þórðr Sturluson and Boðvarr Þórðarson, the eldest brothers in each case and, ironically, the quietest. His first appearance in the compilation is in *Íslendinga saga* , chapter 152, where he is put out as a hostage to Gizurr jarl by his own father, who would rather hand his eldest son over to his mortal enemy than swear a loyalty oath to him -- a not uncommon saga preference for truth in public speech over all other values, including blood kinship. Here, Þorgils bears his by-name, skarði, without explanation.[1] In the first chaper of *Þorgils saga skarða*, however, we have the following description:

> Þorgils var vænn maðr yfirlits, herðimikill ok gerviligr, hvítr á hár ok hörund, eygðr manna bezt, miðmjór ok herðibreiðr, þunnt hár ok fór vel. Hann var hraustr ok harðgerr, syndr vel ok inn mesti harðfari í hvívetna, fámæltr ok fastheitinn. Hvárt sem hann hét góðu eða illu, þá var hann örr í at efna. Í efri vör var skarð þat, er hann var alinn með, -- því var hann kallaðr Þorgils skarði.[2]

The dilemma posed by the birth of a child with a harelip in a society engaged largely in subsistence farming must have been resolved most often by exposure. Because such infants cannot nurse efficiently and must therefore be hand-fed, caring for them during their first year would have required the release of one grown woman from nearly all other duties for that length of time, a major investment on a major gamble, since hand-fed infants had a slim chance of survival.[3] We note, however, that the narrator has been careful to state that

---

1 Since 'skarði' means only 'notch,' it need not refer to a harelip and apparently rarely does. Cf. Þorgils Dalluson, whom his brother Kormákr calles skarði (*Kormáks saga* verses 53-55) but who is nowhere described as disfigured, and the character Eiríkr skarði in this saga. Clearly, 'skarði' must refer usually to gat-toothedness or a cleft chin.

2 All quotations from *Sturlunga saga* are from Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, eds. (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946).

3 A harelip is often accompanied by a cleft palate, a condition that truly makes it impossible for the infant to feed without the intervention of modern technology. An infant with a harelip alone, however, is merely unable to suck efficiently, and could be spoon- or horn-fed. ('Baby horns,' unlike modern baby bottles with nipples, allow the liquid to dribble out

Þorgils was an eldest son, thus establishing the rationale for what must have been an heroic effort to save him -- and a needless one, since, as it happens, Boðvarr fathers two other, normal sons on his wife. In any case, we must surmise that the harelip was a rarely seen disfigurement in this period in Iceland. We should also note that there is no reason whatever to second guess the narrartor's assessment of Þorgils as 'handsome.' Medieval Nordic peoples were well capable of awareness of disfigurements and disabilities without it affecting their judgment of a man's other assets.[4]

It seems that the only effect of Þorgils's harelip of note in this introductory portrait is his penchant to say little, but to make his words count. (The assertion that he was always true to his word is of course not borne out by his subsequent career.) The inability to articulate labials ([b], [p], and [m]) would not have prevented Þorgils from being understood speaking Icelandic, but certainly would have prevented him from being called eloquent (an asset in the pursuit of power and advancement) or from becoming a lagamaðr (another, and related, avenue to both material gain and honor). Like other speech-impaired characters who are blocked from ordinary paths to power, Þorgils cultivates an image of boldness and a hair-trigger temper to resolve his disputes and to acquire the respect -- or fear -- and the property of others.

In addition to his temper and related to his taciturnity, a third alternative strategy that Þorgils employs to get around his impairment is writing, and this, too, has important consequences for his character and for the saga:

> Þá er skip tóku at búast um várit, lét Þorgils rita á vaxspjöld ok sendi konungi. Var þat þar á, at hann beiddi, at konungr leyfði honum at fara til Íslands eða ella til annarra landa, kvaðst eigi lengr vera vilja í ófrelsi.
>
> En er konungr sá þetta, virði hann svá sem Þorgilsi gengi til stærð ok metnaðr, er hann vildi eigi sjálfr flytja við sik sem aðir menn. En þó sendi konungr eftir honum. (ch. 5)

The result of this interview is that Þorgils becomes the king's retainer and the recipient of valuable gifts: fourteen ells of leaf-green cloth, a shield, and a bymie. In having his choice of writing over speech misinterpreted as pride, Þorgils not only gains these furnishings, but also increases his reputation as hot-tempered, impetuous, and arrogant -- personality traits that Hákon admires. Although his facial disfigurement and speech impairment are *in*

---

without sucking action.) The low survival rate is surmised based on the likelihood of bacterial infection from the handling of the milk, whether the mother's hand-expressed milk or cow's or sheep's milk. In the latter case, the child would in addition suffer from dietary deficiencies and the lack of immunities to common bacteria that are conveyed in mother's milk.

[4] Ian McDougall ('The Third Instrument of Medicine: Some Accounts of Surgery in Medieval Iceland' in *Health, Disease, and Healing in Medieval Culture*, ed. Sheila Campbell, Bert Hall, and David Klausner [NY: St. Martin's, 1992], p. 59) is simply wrong to read the sagaman ironically, since Þorgils's good looks are everywhere noted.

themselves of little consequence in his social and political pursuits, the character expressed in them and the behavioral modifications they cause certainly are -- as alternative assets in the pursuit of power at any cost. It is in pursuing power against the interests of his own kin that Þorgils emerges as a man of unnatural character: the bird in Jóreiðr's dream 'er í sitt hreiðr skíta' (*Íslendinga saga*, ch. 190).

That meeting with King Hákon is, of course, the determinant of Þorgils's subsequent career, for not only does Hákon make Þorgils his man, but he also gives Þorgils a new face.[5] Surgery to correct a harelip was known as early as the tenth century in England, where it is the only kind of plastic surgery the mention of which is extant[6] and must have been practiced in the Nordic countries as well by this time, at least among people who could afford to raise such a child, of whom there would have been few in Iceland. Why the surgery was not done back home probably had more to do with the lack of qualified surgeons than any cultural difference. In any case, it is Hákon who normalizes the disfigurement and impairment that has shaped Þorgils's character, it is Hákon who becomes the father figure in whose name Þorgils attacks his own natural kinsmen, and it is Hákon who will be the voice behind which Þorgils functions, having the king's letters read to the bœndr he is about to rob rather than speak ineloquently to them himself (for surely without therapy some speech impairment would have persisted after the surgery).

This essay undertakes to examine the theme of disfigurement and disability in *Sturlunga saga*, a work that traces the history of the disintegration of the Icelandic republic in the thirteenth century through the destruction of its society over four generations of internal violence. A theme neither large nor conspicuous, it remains nevertheless decisive for the compilation. As we have seen in the case of Þorgils skarði, deficiencies of this sort are treated with an exceptionally light touch. As is typical of saga style, they are in fact foregrounded by being mentioned only once, only in passing, ostensibly only to explain an episode or a by-name. In many cases, as with the harelip, the reader is left to extrapolate the consequences. Here, we see disfigurements and disabilities functioning as metonymies in the compilation: the literal twisted speech is part of the larger picture of values that include the twisting of oaths and of kinship ties. I call this particular kind of metonymy an incarnation, a figure in which the ethical dimension is embodied in the physical. On a literal

---

[5] The motif of the recognition of and gifts to a superior Icelander by the Norwegian king is well established in the extant literature, particularly in the þættir where it is so very prominent. As always, we find in *Þorgils saga skarða* an ambiguous attitude, in the narrative though not usually in the principals, toward gifts from this remote authority figure.

[6] M.L.Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* , Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 169.

level, as we have seen, the disfiguring and disabling harelip prevents the integration of character, which in turn causes the 'dis-integration' of society that is played out in this work. On a figurative level, the harelip, the 'split,' the 'dis-integrating' properties of society.

In the more stylized, fictionalized sagas set in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, one can find very many disfigured or disabled characters, perhaps even more than one finds in *Sturlunga saga*, but they do not function in the way they do here. In the Íslendinga sögur, these Dark Figures -- the ugly, the eigi einhamr, the surly and uncanny bœndr destined as traditional literary motifs to return as draugar -- appear most often with their fair foils: Egill with his brother Þórólfr, Kormákr with his brother Þorgils; Þórólfr bægifótr with his son Arnkell; Grettir with his better self. The presence of the Fair Brother in these sagas is one of the many devices that insulate the reader from the full impact of the horror that the Dark Figures embody. However revolting Egill's projectile vomiting may be, he is clearly an exceptional man -- that is, *an exception.* There is a norm in his saga evinced by other members of his family, and the narrative world is still a safe and familiar place where sunny decency can be found *and conflicts can be resolved.* Darkness and disfigurement and mental exceptionalities are thus bounded in the Íslendinga sögur.

In the *Sturlunga* compliation, on the contrary, the absence of the reassuring norm in the motif of the Fair Brother is one of the devices that force us to face the disfigured and disabled characters as incarnations of the component sagas' dark and disfigured narrative reality. With relatively little narrative guidance, with no fictional bright side in the form of the Fair Brother, for example, the disfigurement, disability, and dis-integrity of body and soul seem to have run wild. Whereas in *Egils saga* readers are filled with awe at the uncanny darkness of this famous skáld, we are simply repulsed by the gratuitous grossness and incommensurate violence of some of his twelfth- and thirteenth century descendants. Whereas the Íslendinga sögur provide a varied array of memorable moments -- moments like Gunnarr's fall from his horse and his first meeting with Hallgerðr, as well as those like Hallgerðr's refusal to give him a strand of her hair -- we remember nothing of *Sturlunga saga* so clearly as the blinding and gelding of Órækja Snorrason, or the plea of Kristrún, the beggarwoman, during the attack on Sauðafell that she be allowed to keep the salve because '[h]on sagði . . . konu þá, er brjóstin bæði váru af höggvin, yfrit þungt at tekna' (*Íslendinga saga*, ch. 71) In fact, rarely does a stage of the feuding close without a maiming of some sort, and the motif of mutilation quickly becomes a theme in the compilation as a whole. Like the random, congenital disfigurement or disablity, the random, *intentional* mutilation incarnates the dis-integration -- the loss of wholeness -- of the society through the loss both of its key members, like Snorri, and of its key values, like

the inviolability of an oath. Congenital disfigurement or disability, therefore, is not the only incarnation in *Sturlunga saga*, and the support our theme gets from and gives to the better recognized mutilation theme is important to keep in mind.

While the theme of disfigurement and disability is functioning on a literal level both to incarnate and to cause the societal breakdown that *Sturlunga saga* depicts, this theme is also a reflex of the mythological overlay of the compilation. As is well known, the Norse gods are remarkable for the frequency of disfigurement and disability among them, with Týr, Hoðr, and possibly Heimdallr in addition to him who springs first to mind: Óðinn. Óðinn is a sort of nexus for a variety of motifs that occur in various combinations in the Dark Figures of the Íslendinga sögur: disfigurement/disability/mutilation, skáldship, shape-shifting/disguise, and berserksgangr, that is to say, hideous, unpredictable, uncontrolable violence. After all, it was Snorri Sturluson, an historian and one of the principal actors in *Sturlunga saga*, who has told us much of what we know of Óðinn, so it is not at all far-fetched to posit a mythic overlay to the contemporary historical compilation. Here, one example will suffice:

> Þorbjörg, kona Páls, var grimmúðig í skapi ok líkaði stórilla þóf þetta. Hon hljóp fram milli manna ok hafði knif í hendi ok lagði til Sturlu ok stefndi í augat ok mælti þetta við: „Hví skal ek eigi gera þik þeim líkastan, er þú vill líkastr vera, -- en þar er Óðinn?" (*Sturlu saga*, ch. 31)

This seems quite close to an explicit statement of a mythic overlay to the societal dis-integration that Sturla is carrying out, as well, of course as to its incarnation in mutilation. Like the Æsir, the Sturlungs have created the conditions of their own demise, have borne their own unnatural Fenrisúlfr.

*****

Misleadingly like those more stylized, fictionalized sagas, *Sturlunga* opens in the immigration past, establishing the genealogical credentials of the principals as a kind of invocation of the sagaman's muse: a search for and establishment of themes and tone. And as is sometimes the case, the first-generation, founding father or mother turns out not to be the forebearer of the principals at all, but is rather someone historically tangential but associationally and thematically apropos to them, in the manner of Auðr djúpúðga, in *Eiríks saga rauða*, to her spiritual, though not blood, descendant Guðriðr. In *Sturlunga saga*, the tone-setting, theme-establishing immigrant is Geirmundr heljarskinn, the blood ancestor of the compiler, but the spiritual ancestor of the principals. And he is grossly disfigured:

> Geirmundr heljarskinn var sonr Hjoðs konungs.... Annarr sonr Hjörs konungs var Hámundr, er enn var kallaðr heljarskinn. Þeir váru tvíburar. . . . Þeir váru báðir ákafliga miklir vöxtum ok báðir furðuliga ljótir ásýnis. En þó réð því stærstu um ófríðleika peira á at sjá, at engi maðr þóttist hafa sét dekkra skinn en á þessum sveinum var. Drottning felldi lítinn hug til sveinanna, ok sýndist henni þeir óástuðligir. (*Geirmundar þáttr heljarskins*, ch. 1)

An ætiological account, not so simple minded as the unlikely toponymic ætiologies that we find in the corresponding sections of the Íslendinga sögur, yet far more unlikely in that pigmentation darker than either of one's parents is genetically impossible.[7] The queen, in short, has given birth to miraculously monstrous children, monstrous in four respects: extraordinarily big, hideously ugly, dark skinned, and, of course, twins. The boys are a double face that even a mother cannot love, for the mother here is no savvy Icelandic húsfrú familiar with the traditional ugly duckling motif and thus fiercely protective of the hideous and homicidal child who has, as Bera says of her son Egill, 'víkingsefni' (*Egils saga*, ch. 40).

'Þess er við getit eitt sinn, at Bragi skáld' was the one to recognize that character was a truer indicator of blood than physical features (ch. 2) -- a nice fairy tale that, since the opposite is the factually, though not archetypally, truer. The boys are playing on the straw-covered floor of the hall watching the false heir, the pretty and effete Leifr, play with a gold ring. Observed by Bragi though believing themselves alone,

> Þá mælti Geirmundr til bróður síns: „Viltu, at vit farim til Leifs ok takim af honum gullit? -- ok leikun okkr at nökkura hríð."
>
> „Búinn em ek þess," segir Hámundr.
>
> Síðan hljópu sveinarnir innar at hásætinu ok tóku gullit af Leifi, en hann glúpnaði ok æpir eftir.
>
> Þeir mæltu: „Heyr á" sögðu þeir, „hvat konungssonr tekr til ok æpir eftir einum gullbaugi. Ok er þat satt at segja, at þat er illa komit, er þú fórr með."
>
> Þrífa nú sveinarnir til Leifs ok ráku hann ór hásætinu ok hlæja at.

At this point, Bragi announces his recognition of the boys to the queen.

Here, returning to the very beginning of the compilation, we feel back in familiar, fictional territory, in a world where justice reigns and the truth will out. The disfigurement so monstrous as to cause a mother to disclaim and abandon her own children is not in fact an indicator of base character! As soon as the children's character is discovered, they are restored to the high position into which they were born and their disfigurement 'er ór sqgunni,' so to speak: never mentioned again and no impediment to success. Its significance *in the narrative world of the þáttr*, has been lowered to insignificance. Further reassuring to the reader is the message that it takes a skáld, and a legendary one at that, to

---

[7] Let us not confuse the (fictional) disfigurement of hypermelanism with the association between complexion and socio-economic status asserted in *Rígsþula*, as the queen seems to have done, or with racism, a construct peculiar to our own era. Recall that while swarthy complexions were considered both unattractive and indicative of a less than noble ancestry or character, these notions appear not to have been connected with the African, who was exotically blár rather than declassé dökkr, or with the heljarskinn twins, whose disfigurement causes them to be named for a supernatural being. Cf. 'tjörskinn' as a by-name for a more ordinarily blemished character in *Prests saga Guðmundar góða*, ch. 2.

see essential character through the veil of disfigurement.[8] Ordinary people like the queen cannot be blamed for mistaking a disfigured appearance for a disfigured character, the tale seems to say. But what exactly are the character traits indicative of nobility? Obviously, they are *not* those connected with any Fair Brother:[9] loyalty, cheerfulness, honesty, fairness, generosity, good judgment, eloquence, wisdom. No. The character traits necessary and proper to the ruling class are, not to put too fine a point on it, the desire and the ability to rob others of their possessions on a whim and for Schadenfreude. That is, not even for greed or personal advancement.[10] The theme is set for *Sturlunga saga*: despite a surface reading to the contrary, physical disfigurement really does appear as the incarnation of character dis-integrity: here, specifically, disloyalty and disrespect to the authority figure (Leifr, admittedly unimpressive but nevertheless the person í hásæti), the choice of violence over other available alternatives, and instant, individual gratification (the gold ring becoming other men's wives among the adult characters). And these character traits, in turn, are reflexes of the societal dis-integration narrated here, for although Geirmundr and Hámundr are a king's sons, they do not inherit or even return to their father's kingdom after their adoscent adventures as vikings, but rather sail, first, 'í Nóregskonungs ríki,' whence they are expelled by Haraldr hárfagri, who fears, reasonably enough, that they have come to depose him, and then Iceland, where Geirmundr settles down to become a wealthy bóndi and to keep a force of never less than eighty fighting men, though there is now no one to fight.

The fairy-tale aspects of the first two chapters are obvious, but additionally the mythic overlay is hinted at in the boys' by-name, heljarskinn, which they receive from their father when their identity is finally revealed to him: '„At vísu ætla ek, at þessir sveinar sé minnar ættar, en þó hefi ek eigi sét slík heljarskinn fyrr sem sveinar þessir eru.'" (ch. 2). And thus likened to the goddess Hel are they named for her.

*****

To sharpen some of the observations made thus far, we might look at the single counterexample in *Sturlunga saga*, Guðmundr góði, bishop of Hólar, who figures so prominently in the affairs of the second generation of Sturlungs. Although Sturla

---

[8] This is an interesting point (which unfortunately cannot be pursued here), considering the relationship between disfigurement and skáldship, a relationship that we have already glanced at a couple of times above in the characters of Egill and his patron, Óðinn.

[9] Part of the interesting reversal here has to do, of course, with there being no Fair Brother: the brother is an identical(ly ugly) twin.

[10] If one has ever felt in reading *Sturlunga saga* that the adult Sturla Sighvatsson or Órækja Snorrason were behaving like two-year-olds, here we have the template, presented in the literal two-year-old heljarskinn twins.

Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* probably gives us the more accurate information about Guðmundr biskup's character and actions, it is to *Prests saga Guðmundar góða* that we must look for the counterexample, since this piece is modeled on the imported genre of hagiography and evinces a continental Christian attitude toward disfigurement much different than that to be found elsewhere in the compilation. This foreign attitude is that disfigurements and disabilities derive from Satan; therefore they appear in narrative only where they are evidence of sin or where they are to be cured by saintly people as evidence of their saintliness. Guðmundr appears in this saga largely as a miracle-working healer of disfigurements on the model of Jesus, but it is his own disfigurement that we shall look at here.

At the age of nineteen, Guðmundr sets out on a journey abroad, is ship wrecked, and injured, his right foot crushed and 'horfðu þangat tær sem hæll skyldi' (ch. 6). Like the foot of a devil, his foot is backwards. The next morning, when it becomes clear that they must abandon the ship, there is a great deal of discussion about how to remove Guðmundr. 'Ok tók til orða sá maðr, er Bersi hét ok var kallaðr valbráð, því at kinn hans önnur var kolblá: „Hví munum vér fara með fótbrotinn mann, er vér megum eigi bjarga sjálfum oss, -- ok skjóti fyrir borð.''' Guðmundr is brought safely to shore, however and his foot is eventually healed -- medically, not miraculously -- though not before he makes a trip three weeks before Easter, 'at úti stóðu leggjabrotin . . . in passione domini' (ch. 6). In later years, 'en í annat sinn þóttust menn mestan mun á hafa fundit, at skap hans hafði skipazt vetr þann, er hann lá eftir skipbrotit á Ströndum' (ch. 11).

Among the several remarkable aspects of this story (and we will not touch on the archetypal sexual image of the foot injury here), is the satanic imagery connected with disfigurement: the foot with the toes where the heel should be and the man with the coal-black birthmark who offers to toss Guðmundr overboard. Equally important here are the facts that the disfigurement is completely cured (an outcome unlikely in fact though expected in hagiographical writing) and that the cure marked a noticeable change of character, a motif not common elsewhere in *Sturlunga saga* or Icelandic saga writing in general. Compare this episode, and its thematic funtion in *Prests saga*, with the very different treatment of the heljarskinn twins and of Þorgils skarði, each of whose disfigurements is impossible to imagine as a 'Cross to bear,' like Guðmundr's. Recall that unlike the satanic imagery here that occurs with the *onset* of the disfigurement, the heljarskinn acquire their underworld connection as a badge of *acceptance as they are* from their father. The main point of this counterexample, however, is that here disfigurement is an evil that Guðmundr *overcomes* (i.e., he is cured) *to become a better man.*

In contrast to this hagiographical treatment of Guðmundr's laming, disfigurements and disabilities are not otherwise treated as humiliations or as social barriers as that are in most modern societies. Nordic peoples have long lacked that sense of shame over disfigurements and disabilities that bleeds other Western societies of considerable human resources. While the hard of hearing English were withdrawing from friends to avoid the shame,[11] and Christian Europe everywhere was institutionalizing the blind in monasteries and the facially disfigured, even the psoriasitic, in leper hospitals, the Icelanders in particular continued their habits of minumizing any impact of such exceptionalities. Again, this is not to say that such things went unnoticed, for certainly they did not. The extant documentation of this fact extends to hundreds of men whose by-names distinguish them by their disabilities. A glance through *Sturlu saga*, just as an example, gives us Ásbjorn daufi (ch. 1), Skeggi skammhǫndung (3), Halldórr slakkafótr (7), Eyjólfr halti (29).[12] The point is that deafness, a withered hand, or a crippled leg are features on the same order as those designated by other common by-names such as digri, rauði, auðgi, dyri, froði. Complimentary or denigrating, these by-names all identified the Guðmundr or Ásbjǫrn in question, and there is no indication in *Sturlunga* or elsewhere that by-names such as daufi were insulting. Guðmundr is the only character in *Sturlunga saga* who is threatened with death *for being disabled*, who accepts disability as suffering, and does so with Christ-like humility, and whose character is seen by others as strengthened by the adversity overcome.

Precisely how well disfigurements and disabilities were tolerated is shown in the one well narrated episode in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, an episode doubtless there because of the verses it contains. This narrative, comprising Chapter 10, is set at a wedding and concerns Þórðr Þorvaldsson of Vatnjǫrðr, one of the most prominent men in the district, but a man with a chronic disease that produces a set of socially embarrassing dysfunctions:

> Þórðr var ekki mikill drykkjumaðr, nökkut vangæft um fæðsluna, sem oft kann at verða þeim, er vanheilsu kenna, því at maðrinn var á efra aldri ok var þó enn hraustr. Hann kenndi nökkut innanmeins ok var því ekki mjök matheill ok nökkut vandblæst at eta slátr, því at hann blés svá af sem hann

---

11 Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London: Dent, 1977), p. 107.

12 These names all appear in thumbnail genealogies, leaving the modern reader in doubt as to exactly what they imply. It is possible that some refer to a single episode in the man's life, or were to be understood figuratively. For example, Ásbjorn daufi might 1) be congenitally deaf, 2) have been deafened by a head injury or illness, 3) have been temporarily deaf due to an ear infection at some crucial event in his life, 4) be normally hearing but absentminded, 5) have failed to have heard something important at one time, or 6) ironically, have acute hearing or be extraordinarily attentive and sharp. It should be noted that by-names suggesting disabilities are a male phenomenon, perhaps because women were by virtue of their sex already disfigured or disabled with regard to the male norm and so acquired no further labels of this sort.

hefði vélindisgang ok varð þá nökkut andrammr. Þórðr var mikilúðligr maðr, eygðr mjök, ok lágu vel augun, framsnoðinn ok stýrhærðr, sá upp mjök ok riðaði lítt at.

As we shall see in the continued, lengthy quotation, the inclusion of some elements of this description is necessitated by the story that follows -- the digestive problem causing gas and halitosis, the receding hairline, and perhaps even the imposing appearace (to prevent an otherwise likely though erroneous assumption that Þórðr is weak in character). The scene that follows provides a standard for the attitudes toward his disgusting dysfunction and his consequent stench, a 'disfigurement' in its deviation from the normal or acceptable:

> Þeir drukku nú ákafi, ok fær á þá alla nökkut. Gerast nú málgir, ok má kalla, at hverr stingi annan nökkuru hnæfilyrði, -- ok er þó fátt hermt af þeira kerskiyrðum í þessari frásögn.
>
> Þess er getit, at Ingimundr prestr laut at sessunaut sínum ok mælti við hann, svá sem hinn spyrði:
>
> 4. Hvaðan kennir þef þenna?
> Þórðr anda nú handan.
>
> Ok verðr at hlátr mikill, ok er næsta gerr at þessu gyss mikill. Ok er því léttir, þá kveðr Þórðr í mót:
>
> 5. Andi es Ingimundar
> ekki góðr á bekkjum.
>
> Ok af þessum áköstum tekr heldr at grána gamanit, ok koma kviðlingar við svá. Þá var þetta kveðit til Þórðar:
>
> 6. Rymr í barka
> ríkismanni.
> Glitar skallinn við
> á goða yðrum.
>
> Hér hlær Þórðr mjök at þessum kviðlingi ok kveðr þegar í mót:
>
> 7. Vaxa blástrar
> á bekk þáðra.
> Raunillr gerisk þefr
> at ropum yðrum.
>
> Þorgils brosti nú at, en lagði aldri til um áköstin.
>
> Ingimundr mælti, at nökkurr þeira bekkjunauta skyldi sjá í móti við Þórð. Þá var þetta kveðit:
>
> 8. Þat es válitit,
> þótt vér reptim
> búðunautar
> af bolakjötvi, --
> reptir Þórðr
> Þorvalds sonr,
> Kjartans sonar,
> af kana sínum.
>
> Þórðr lítr eftir kviðlingi þessum, ok þótti honum mjök bera hljóðit þar yfir, sem maðr sat á forsætinu, mjok þrekligr ok allvel hærðr. . . .
>
> Þórðr mælti: „Eigi munum vit báðir sitja at veizlu þessari lengi, ok send þú hann á brott á anna bæ, ellegar munum vér riða á brott.“

The modern reader may be surprised at the high threshold at which Þórðr's hearty (or hardy) laughter turns suddenly to angry, hasty departure. It is clear, however, that in the world of the Sturlungs, taunts about such dysfunctions and 'disfigurement' are well

tolerated,[13] and Þórðr becomes angry only when the verses turn their attention from pointing out these disfigurements to insinuating a scatological cause. Whatever 'kani' means in this context, the implication of verse 8 is that Þórðr's breath smells like farts.[14] Thus does this episode delineate the extent to which disfigurements and teasing about them were socially acceptable.

*****

Several characters in *Sturlunga saga* would repay the analysis of their disabilities or disfigurements and of the incarnation of character traits and societal conditions in these features. Most prominent among these, in addition to Þorgils skarði, are the myopic and lisping Einarr Þorgilsson (Hvamm-Sturla's nemesis in *Sturlu saga*), the myopic Guðmundr dýri Þorvaldsson, and the stammering Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson.[15] It is my contention that these particular disfigurements -- those of vision and speech -- incarnate the moral blindness and crooked speech that are the root and branch of the disintegration of society that we witness in this compilation. With just a glance at Guðmundr dyri, who can see but cannot recognize ('Guðmundr sá mennina ok kenndi eigi, því at hann var óskyggn,' *Guðmundar saga dýra*, ch. 23) and a short remark on Þórðr kakali, who stammers until his tongue is smoothened by demogoguery ('En nökkut þótti mönnum hann stirt tala í fyrstu. En þess at djarfari ok snjallari var hann í málinu, er hann hafði fleira mælt ok fjölmennara var við.' *Þorgils saga kakali*, ch. 4), we shall take a closer look and make a longer comment on Einarr, who stands as a chronological bookend opposite Þorgils in *Sturlunga saga*.

If, as I shall contend, Einarr Þorgilsson's disfigured speech and distorted vision dominate Hvamm-Sturla's agenda in *Sturlu saga* and are at least partly and perhaps largely responsible for the continuation of the feud and the number of deaths and volume of destruction, it is another's disability that had got the feud underway, back before Einarr

---

13 Note the pun in verse 6 on 'skalli' (bald-head), 'skall' (noise), and its plural, 'sköll' (derision), a pun that compares Þórðr's receding hairline with the roar from his windpipe as he belches, and both with the mocking verses.

14 Verse 8 is one of the many defamatory verses with punch lines that are ambiguous to modern readers because they may have been intended as double entendres based on informal usage that has not elsewhere survived (and that may have been misunderstood by later copyists). The 1946 edition glosses 'kani' as '(sennil.) skoltur, munnur,' while Jan de Vries (*Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* [Leiden: Brill, 1961]) gives 'schüssel.' The key here seems to lie in the intended, and perhaps ironic, parellelism of the 'af' phrases: 'af bolakjötvi,' meaning '*because* of bullmeat' and 'at kana sínum,' which appears to mean '*from* a part of the body, i.e. the bowels,' but may in fact mean '*because of* what Þórðr has eaten: clearly something deeply taboo and certainly not bullmeat.' Cf. Latin 'caenum.'

15 For 'kakali,' Vries gives 'gackern . . . Wohl schallnachahmende bildung.'

inherited the goðorð from his father. The feud between these two centers of power -- the Sturlungs and the goðorð at Staðarhóll -- was in fact begun by a couple of the most marginal people to be met with in the entire compilation: Aðalrikr, the son of a foreign priest who lived by hiring himself out for wages, and Vigdís, a mentally retarded woman un-integrated into any household and living in sheephouses near the coast.[16] When she steals linen from the bóndi by whom Aðalrikr is then employed, and Aðalrikr subsequently axes his employer to death, both Sturla and Þorgils Oddason (Einarr's father) are drawn in to support their clients and wind up at odds with one another. 'Þessi váru af Sturlu upphöf fyrst, er hann átti málum at skipta við menn' (ch. 5). Vigdís does not come into the saga again, and we leave her beachcombing, an incarnation of the dis-integration of the society that cannot integrate a disabled woman and thus allows her to become the cause, along with a vagrant foreigner, of the death of a good bóndi and the setting of goðar against one another.

Einarr Þorgilsson was born during the year that his father was in full outlawry, the second of two sons among seven daughters. His elder brother, Oddi, bore the name of the boys' paternal grandfather and was 'vitr maðr ok manna snjallastr í máli' (ch. 6). When Oddi died without issue in an epidemic that also killed their father,

> Einarr tók þá fé sitt ok goðorð, ok gerðist hann höfðingi, því at margar stoðar runnu undir hann, frændr ok mágar ok vinir, er Þorgils, faðir hans, hafði fengit sér. Hann skorti ok eigi kapp né áræði. Engi var hann lagamaðr ok blestr í máli. (ch. 6)

Thus are we introduced to Einarr Þorgilsson: while his elder brother was wise, he is daring; while his brother was eloquent, he is lisping. Had the saga picked up these characters earlier, we would have had the traditional and familiar pair of dark and light brothers, a motif that would have allowed the narrator to play Einarr off as a Kormákr against his emotionally stable and physically sound Fair Brother. By picking up the thread after Oddi's death, however, the narrative presents the disfigured Einarr without context, a kind of mutant who acts as the irritant that will drive the first Sturla to greatness and set the tone for the Age. We might read his portrait thus: Einarr has a lisp, which mitigates against his pursuing his conflicts in a court of law not only because of his lack of eloquence in pleading but also because he could be cited for procedural misarticulation and see his cases dismissed or lost by default. He therefore, like Þorgils skarði, cultivates an image of boldness to resolve conflicts in his favor out of court. He further capitalizes on his father's and brother's reputations and asssumes their friends, followings, and affines, as the necessary correlate to assuming their enemies (not least among them the Sturlungs), and all

---

16 'Hon var skillítil kona ok var þá vestr í sölvafjöru í Saurbæ ok at herbergi í sauðahúsum frá Hvítadal,' ch. 4.

the more necessary in that while legal resolution is difficult of access for him due to his lisp, vengeance is also difficult of access due to his myopia. Einarr therefore gets around his deficiencies by choosing other styles of play, such as the use of a surrogate:[17]

> En um vetrinn eftir jól fór Einarr Ingibjargarson norðr til Eyjafjarðar. Ok er Einarr Þorgilsson frétti þat, þá fór hann við átta mann suðr í Tungu. Hann kvaddi til sín Þorgeir Grímsson ok kveðst vilja, at hann ynni á Lofti, fóstra Guðnýjar Brandsdóttur, ok lézt vilja gera þeim nökkura ákenning sinna verka.
>
> Þá er þeir kómu í Tungu, gengu þeir í stofu, ok var þeim heilsat ok spurðir tíðinda. Þeir settust niðr. En er Einarr sá, at ekki varð tilræði Þorgeirs, þá stóð hann upp ok gekk útar á gólfit. Hann var nærsýnn ok þekkti eigi, hvar Loftr sat. Hann sneri at þeim manni, er Þórólfr hét, ok lagði spjóti í lær honum, svá at út skar ór, ok var þat svöðusár.
>
> Þá hlaupa upp allir menn, þeir er inni váru, ok helt hverr á öðrum. Þar var Guðfinna Sveinsdóttir, ok helt hon Einari. Þau sendu konu eina út í Hvamm at segja Sturlu, en konur ok karlar heldu þeim, þeir er þar váru, ok myndi þeir eigi á braut komast, ef Sverlingr Starrason veitti þeim eigi. Hann lét þá lausa ok kvað eigi hæfa, at þar yrði meiri vandræði, ok kom hann þeim í braut. Hann var þar heimamaðr. (ch. 11)

To be myopic to the extent that one cannot distinguish one man from another across the short width of an Icelandic hall is, today, to be legally blind. We understand now why Einarr summons one of his men to be the assassin. Contrary to the usual procedure of bribing a man to do one's killing so that one can arrange to be elsewhere as an alibi, Einarr leads the expedition and appears to have intended to take the credit for the killing. It's just that he needed another man to do it. Not only does this scheme fail, however, but Einarr is further humiliated in the aftermath.

Sturla, with his habitual perspicacity, attempts to capitalize on Einarr's myopia in an episode in which we see the latter already in a spot of trouble. Never one to miss a chance or shirk an expedition, Einarr sets out with a party to steal sheep from a kinsman of Sturla's. Aided by a light snowfall that covers their tracks, his men round up the sheep successfully while Einarr himself blindly rides into a pothole, falls off his horse, and is injured (ch. 20). When the news of the theft reaches Hvamm, Sturla and his men arm themselves and mount up two men to a horse in pursuit of Einarr. The men of Einarr's party spot the pursuers and debate the size of the party and whether they should stand or run. Depending for his long-distance vision on his men, Einarr makes the wrong guess about relative numbers and consequently the wrong decision.[18] When the parties meet and do battle, Einarr is at first protected from blows by one of his men, but is eventually among

---

17 Recall Þorgils skarði's use of a surrogate to read King Hákon's letters aloud, a case of double surrogacy.

18 Note that this episode is a negative version of the 'watchman motif,' which features correct interpretation of reported (sharp) sightings.

the wounded, though apparently among the very few who *do* no wounding. This episode in the continuing feud is ended by arbitration, but 'var þat mál flestra manna, at á þeim fundi skipti um mannvirðing með þeim Sturlu ok Einari' (ch. 22) -- that is to say, decisive in Sturla's favor.

Other episodes demonstrate Einarr's avoidance of legal action. Sturla and Einarr are each on their way to the Þing at a time when the most recent salvo has redounded to Sturla's honor, when Einarr decides to double back and burn Hvamm (ch. 10). In this episode, Einarr is faced with no opposition in the form of peers, that is, other adult males, to his use of force, so the scheme comes off with out a hitch, for once, and even Sturla has to admit that 'Einar mundu elt hafa frýjulaust eina nótt' (ch. 10). In another episode, Einarr even makes a joke about his preference for force over law. When a certain Oddr will not sell the property that Einarr wants to own, Einarr makes this remark: '„Þat hefi ek heyrt menn segja, at þú munir eigi vera skilgetinn, ok mun þat vera réttara, at þú hafir ekki af"' (ch. 16). The unfortunate Oddr misunderstands what was actually a threat to rob him of his property and instead, fearing legal action on the question of his legitimacy, offers to bear iron to prove it. He ends up robbed of everything he has, Einarr even taking the ring off his finger in a scene recalling the heljarskinn twins.

It would not be true to say, however, that Einarr is an incompetent lawman. He is 'eigi lagamaðr' in the sense that he avoids legal resolution where it is possible to use force instead, but he does go to court on occasion, the most memorable being the suit over his sister's abduction. Yngvildr Þorgilsdóttir is a widow (having forced her husband out of the house and onto an arduous trip during which he dies), and has set up housekeeping with a certain Bǫðvarr when she initiates a liaison with a third man, Sturla's kinsman Þorvarðr Þorgeirsson. In an elaborate scheme involving advance planning with many conspiritors, Ingvildr secretly bears Þorvarðr's child and subsequently escapes Bǫðvarr by cutting her hair and dressing as a man (ch. 9).[19] Despite the unmistakably voluntary, apparently even initiatory, nature of Ingvildr's role in the elopement, Einarr brings suit against Snorri Sturluson, of all people, for being privy to the abduction plot. The result was that 'gengu hvár tveggja málin fram, ok urðu báðir sekir fjörbaugsmenn, Sturla ok Einarr' (ch. 9). And the two of them tie again in outlawing each other a second time in Chapter 19.

---

19 Ingvildr's behavior and her unnatural dress constitute a kind of disfigurement or self-mutilation, which incarnates her societal dysfunctioning (from her brother's point of view): acting independently of her brother's approval, Ingvildr, like the vagrant woman Vigdís, fissures the social structure.

It is often observed that the various authors of the *Sturlunga* compilation, not least Sturla Þórðarson himself, showed remarkable restraint and objectivity in recounting events in which they and their close kinsmen played major roles. In the case of Einarr Þorgilsson, like the other characters we have examined, the remarkably light touch with which his distorted vision and crooked speech, and their historical consequences, are treated serves in fact to forground them for us. The sagaman is selecting and eliding to show us the results rather than the causes. Sturla, a man not remarkable for his honor, has nevertheless gained a good deal of this finite commodity at Einarr's expense. We are shown Einarr falling off his horse, misjudging the numbers of his adversaries, unable to kill anyone but the wrong and utterly defenseless man or to terrorize anyone but women and children, but we are not reminded of why. Einarr's disfigurement of speech and impairment of sight are no causes of shame in and of themselves and are thus no barriers socially or legally to his assumption and maintenance of the goðorð and as such are of no particular interest to the narrative. Yet these disabilities result in certain character traits and styles of play that in turn drive the action in *Sturlu saga*. Einarr, as the first adversary of the patriarch of the family that gave the age (and the compilation) its name, shapes the character and style of both Sturla and the saga. Because Einarr's disabilities block him from more peaceful routes to the resolution of conflict, and because his character has been shaped by his need to strike a compensating figure of boldness, he chooses alternative approaches to conflict resolution -- more violent and more deceitful -- which in turn only raise the volume and the stakes of the conflict. As Einarr becomes a magnet, and increasingly a template, for anyone having a grudge against the initially bland Sturla, and as the narrative world mimics his brotherless state by becoming increasingly and unidimensionally dark, Einarr Þorgilsson truly begins, as Þorgils skarði ends, the Age of the Sturlungs.[20]

[20] The writing of this essay was supported in part by a generous grant from the Gallaudet Research Institute.

of social control. Thirteenth century Island was a society out of balance in which clear changes had occured which shunted aside important elements of social control articulated earlier by the *Grágás*. This loss of balance was particularly clear in questions of violence. Violence had of course occured during the age of sagas, but it took on completely new forms during the *Sturlunga* age. Apart from common assault there now appeared flogging, stone-throwing, maiming, putting out of eyes, bone-breaking and throat cutting. In addition, chieftains began to apply for the first time the death penalty against opponents, something which violated existing law, further confirming that violence also began to be hierarchial. (Chap. 4.1. Punishment and violence; 4.3. Outlawry as spatial and social expulsion)

According to the *Grágás*, maiming was considered to be an outrage and only slaves could be punished in that way. Yet it became frequent in the *Sturlunga* age, appearing in such forms as the lopping off of hands and feet. This indicates a change in attitudes, even a disintegration with regard to concepts of honor. And though in the *Sturlunga saga* it is said that women should be spared, cruel violence against them appears. This differs from the family sagas, where assault against and murder of women were considered to be acts of outrage. (Chap. 3.8.1. Slaves; 4.1. Punishment and violence)

In both main handwritten codes of the *Grágás*, paragraphs describing crimes differ in a decisive way, something hitherto unnoted in the scholarly literature. The types of crime appearing in the *Sturlunga saga* are not named in the older manuscript of the *Grágás*, while in fact they appear in the newer version. This confirms the picture of thirteenth century expressions of violence as given in the *Sturlunga saga* and simultaneously confirms the reciprocal dating between the manuscripts. (Chap. 2.1 Law in Islandic society)

A crucial change occured in expressions of violence. Blood feuds can be seen as a horizontal way of thinking in a society of equals. In conflict resolution, blood feud were normally directed against one's equals. During the *Sturlunga* age a 'vertical violence' appeared, with the death sentence and maiming expressing a changing social hierarchy; that is, a change from blood feud to the implementation of penalties of death. (Chap. 4.1. Punishment and violence)

As violence increased so did the need to secure social balance. One way of doing this was through oaths and promises of different types. During the age of sagas there was the *fóstbræðralag*, an oath sworn to by equals, yet during the *Sturlunga* age even such oaths changed. The *fóstbræðralag* as an example of a horizontal way of thinking was replaced by vertical ties founded in oaths of allegiance as expressions of solidarity with a chieftain. With this relations based on kinship as a collective source of support weakened. Blood ties were replaced by ties of dependency, a factor which did not allow for the type of loyalty articulated by blood feuds. Vertical ties became more evident and expressions of subservience more frequent, while gestures and rituals with

characteristics of vassalage appeared between chieftains and others. Even a *friðarkoss* ('a kiss of peace') appeared as a sign of friendship between chieftains and their men. (Chap. 3.6. *Fóstbræðralag*, oaths of loyalty and gestures.)

Oaths of different types had great importance, as well as verbal threats, which during the age of sagas were of a character which threatened the manly honor. Particularly outrageous were threats which likened a man to the female roll in a homosexual relationship could lead to the accuser being condemned to outlawry. In fact, the accusation of homosexuality does not appear in the *Sturlunga saga*, yet the recorder of the *Hvamm-Sturlas saga* remembers a time of great outrage, when an enemy was likened to a mare and the enemy one wanted to avenge most, would be likened to the horse's hindquarters, a triple outrage. To be likened to a female animal took from the accused both masculinity and humanity as well as attributing to him both dirt and dung. Indeed an assault against one's honor. (Chap. 3.2.4. Unmasculine/unfeminine?; 3.2.5. The Verbal threat)

Following christianization, slander came in new forms with a vocabulary of curses and invocations. For the most part it appears as if over time verses and outrages lost some of their ability to threaten and violate honor. Actions became more threatening than words.

The attitudes and norms of a society are often mirrored through its marginal groups. Actions and sanctions against them can be used to measure a society's understanding of itself. Certain groups or individuals were felt threatening, for example individuals who had knowledge of magic or witchcraft, who could compose verses, and those who were lazy. One of these categories was composed of beggars. Such a negative image and view of beggars was constant during the entire period analyzed. Only in the later legal codes from the end of the thirteenth century does one notice a certain humanizing. Examples of the function of beggars is given in both the family sagas and in the *Sturlunga saga*; female beggars would spread gossip while male beggars were used as couriers. During the *Sturlunga* age beggars achieved a new role as an element in the chieftain's escort. (Chap. 3.7.2. Beggars)

Those who had magical powers were also marginalized, and were handled with suspicion and violence, and these uncontrollable elements, as well as everything else which occured clandestinely required elimination. Fear of those with magical powers was constant; even in later legal codes a noteworthy worry is evident when confronted with the arts of trollery, especially if these were thought to promote heathenism or could predict the future. (Chap. 3.7.3. Knowledge of magic and witchcraft)

Another marginal category usually connected to the pre-christian time is the *beserks*, yet they were in a manner an accepted group. Because society was thought better able to deal with violence and brutatity than with beggary and magic. *Beserks* were often in the king's escorts and played an important role in

his battles. When the time of the *beserks* was past this role passed on to the armed knight, a change which can be seen as a transition to controlled violence. (Chap. 3.7.4. *Beserks*)

From the ninth to the thirteenth century, Island was a society in transition, with considerable shifts in social relations. The overarching hypothesis of this dissertation; whether changes in Icelandic society were similar to changes in other European societies can be answered in the affirmative. By the thirteenth century Iceland was a society which can be characterized by a weakening in the functions of kinship and affines, an accelerating social stratification with increasing ties of vertical dependency, increases in the division of labor, appearance of constant escorts and warrior groups. Additionally, important changes in the fundamental principles of a chieftain's power occured with the shift from a personal power base to a territorial one. At the top of society's pyramid there was now a royal power element as well as a christian and feudalistic ideology which changed societal attitudes and norms. All are signs of the process of a transition from a society of communities to a state-dominated society.

Victor Hugo as a Reader of the *Edda* : *"Han d'Islande"*

by
G.Brugnoli (University of Roma 'Tor Vergata')
C.Santini (University of Perugia)
F.Stok (University of Salerno)

1. On the 12th March 1823 Charles Nodier on a review of the anonymous novel *Han d'Islande*, published a few weeks beforehand, for the Parisina paper *La Quotidienne* , presented the author as a sure rival to Ch.R.Maturin and claimed that he had effected «une bonne lecture de l'*Edda* et de l'histoire» (quoted in *Victor Hugo raconté* II p. 220). The novel was then re-published in July of the same year with a preface by the author himself. The critical edition published by B.Levilliot in 1981 is based on this second edition.

The most important among the various subjects Hugo dealt with in this novel is undoubtedly the strange story of Han d'Islande himself. According to Hugo's account, Han was a semi-human monster coming from Iceland and living in the Norwegian mountains in the late 17th century. Han used to drink in his father's skull the blood of men he killed during his raids against the Danish King's soldiers in order to avenge his son's death.

The evidence that Nodier gives of Hugo's having read the *Edda* before writing the novel is of primary importance as it comes from a person who was close to Hugo; the epigraph to chapter 44 in the 1st edition (from Kotzebue) was in fact later substituted by Hugo by a saying of Nodier's «c'était le malheur qui les rendait égaux». On the other hand some of the chapters in Hugo's novel have epigraphic quotes from *Edda*, which should be proof enough that Hugo read it. Notwithstanding this the critics do not seem to have ever closely examined in what ways *Han d'I.* may have been influenced by the *Edda.*

In reality *Han d' Islande* did not encounter great favour on the critic's part although it was quickly and greatly appreciated by the reading public. It is a work which belongs to the author's youth when Hugo was influenced by the gothic novels of Sir Walter Scott, above all, (whom Hugo discusses in *La Muse française* in the same year) and Maturin, the author of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), whom Nodier mentioned. There are no doubts about the influence of this genre, which was so fashionable at the time, on Hugo's work. It is also significant that he revisited some of the ideas taken up in his