

The Advantage of Self-Possession: Knowledge and Advice in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*

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Fiction may be imbued with a truth to life which is equal to if not superior in value to any factual truth. But when the public demand not only human, but also historical reality, if they are to take a story and the message hidden behind the story seriously, they must have that reality too or at least the semblance of it. This consideration became one of the rules of the game, more or less difficult to obey, more or less conflicting with the pure art of story-telling, but all in all beneficial. (Nordal, *The Historical Element* 35)

The issue I have become interested in is the relationship between the problem of authorship in Old Icelandic scholarship and attempts which are made to draw a social history of medieval Iceland out of the family and contemporary sagas. The idea of a medieval Icelandic author is a difficult one to define, and it is not surprising that narrative theory has become an important component of many saga scholars' work. Narrative models shift attention away from the author, making analysis less reliant on a clearly defined conception of the author-type.

So, in Úlfar Bragason's thesis on *Sturlunga saga*, we see a strong emphasis on the structural similarities between the sagas of that compilation and the family sagas, and his discussion of changes made by the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* has helped to refocus our attention onto the artistic features of the compilation, especially structural elements which have much in common with the family sagas.

At the same time, some saga scholars have attempted to define a social reality of medieval Iceland by discussing the social and political relations embedded in the sagas: this has ranged from what may be called a contextual approach to the literary history of Iceland, evident in Theodore Andersson's paper on what he terms the saga school at Munkaþverá, to analyses of intellectual outlook, such as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's approach, through to the social and political histories of Guðrún Nordal, Sverre Bagge and Jesse Byock, and the historical and cultural anthropology of William Miller and Kirsten Hastrup.

Despite the many differences in the approaches taken by the scholars I have mentioned, I think it is true to say that they share an emphasis on the common features which can be identified across the family and contemporary sagas, rather than their differences. As such, these scholars probably enjoy a shared resistance to the artistic status and rather sophisticated historical conception which was attributed to the saga authors by the Icelandic School, apparent, for example, in Sigurður Nordal's essay on the historical element of the family sagas. Hastrup writes that "behind genre there is life" (9), Miller insists that the "sagas for the most part ring true" (46), and together Andersson and Miller have stated that it is not "adequate to suppose that the sagas were made up by inventive writers in the thirteenth-century" (xiii): these outlooks tend to diminish our appreciation of the author as source of creation, interpretation, and emphasis. Historical approaches often seek a very close alignment of the text and narrative techniques, the author, and the actual world content of the saga.

On the other hand, Vésteinn Ólason's approach can be seen to carry on many of the underlying assumptions of the Icelandic School, in particular our ability today to unpack saga authors' individual interpretations of history and humanity. In Ólason's recent paper on *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, he discusses the search for an implicit authorial voice of that saga, and some of the difficulties of that search (163-5). Ólason's detection of a dialogue between the author of *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and past values, in which the author engages in a "sympathetic effort to investigate their meaning and limits in concrete dramatic situations" (174), is an interesting expression of an approach which connects authorial perspective and the particular stylistic features of an individual saga.

My aim in this paper is to look at *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða (ÞsH)* with this debate about the capacity of the saga authors in mind, as well as the accompanying struggle between differentiating and unifying approaches to the saga corpus. My investigation is not premised on assumptions about any

particular level of authorial capacity, but rather the conviction that if there is an author there to be seen, we must look him in the eyes. This discussion is part of a larger project regarding the historical outlook of medieval Icelandic authors, and I would stress that in this paper I am using *PsH* as a single case study, rather than as a representative work. Much of my analysis will concentrate on the author's portrayal of the character of two key protagonists, especially through the representation of the advice which is given to them by their friends and their reception of that advice. Naturally, any attempt today to define the authorial voice of a particular saga will avoid the kind of biographical search common before the narrative theory of the 1950s and 1960s. It must also carefully differentiate our values today from those of medieval Iceland: much of Stephen Tranter's analysis of *PsH* is undermined by his analysis of the saga according to modern notions of justice, disintegration, degeneration, and a confusion of the compiler's outlook with an historical reality (see 56 – 72).

I would like to abstract my approach with six overlapping questions, three regarding character and three plot, which inform my study of the saga.

Regarding character, i) how does the author position characters in relation to dialogue and events in the saga which relate strongly to social issues and historical interests; ii) do characters' decisions about social and historical issues affect the final outcomes of the plot; for instance, does the author create links between particular ethical decisions made by characters and those characters' success or failure in the dispute which is being narrated; iii) does the author allow for reflective moments, not by the author but by characters; that is, where characters momentarily step outside their function as movers of the plot to reflect on an historical, social, or ethical theme which is raised by the events around them?

Regarding plot, i) what events or types of events resonate throughout the saga after they have occurred? That is, are there events, types of events, or themes which continue to influence characters' choices for some time after they have occurred, or which form points of reference for the remainder of the action and against which the remaining action is cast; ii) how is knowledge and information about important social and historical events related, and does the method by which they are related provide any insights into the authors' conception of the past; iii) how does the author punctuate the movement of the plot? Are there repetitive methods of punctuation which are used to form focal points of social and historical analysis? For instance, are there moments when the plot is moved forward at the same time as the saga engages with important social or historical events, that is, coincidences of plot movement and important historical events which together generate a dramatic effect?

PsH does stand apart from the other works of *Sturlunga saga*: it is quite short, the plot is easy to follow, at the heart of the saga is a dispute between two chieftains, and it moves in clear steps towards a climactic confrontation (albeit one without a final fight [Brown "Preface" xvi]) in much the same way as

identified by Andersson in relation to the family sagas. When the dispute moves to the assembly, the author is able to slow down his narration by introducing a greater amount of dialogue, and through the dialogue to increase the references made to the ethical standards of the time. The Alþing, which in many of the sagas forms the focal point of the Icelandic commonwealth, is the natural place to set this. It is during the assembly that legal rights are asserted, laws are enacted, that the relationship between the Church and the secular is most evident, and where individual reputations can be made or lost. Indeed, the Alþing is where words, knowledge, information, and advice are most crucial. And this is an author who appreciates well-crafted words: in another part of the saga, he shows a strong interest in the stories, and insults, which take place at the famous wedding at Reykjahólar (chapter 10; see generally Bragason “Ok”), and this pleasure in words is equally apparent during the confrontations at the Alþing (Brown “Preface” xvii – xx, xxii - xxiii regarding dialogue and the perspective of those who follow the two main characters).

In the way of a family saga, the author spends some time introducing the protagonists and outlining their dispositions (Bragason *Poetics* 44 - 45): one, Hafliði Másson, is a well-known and powerful chieftain: he comes from an established kin group and enjoys considerable popularity and support in twelfth-century Iceland. Þorgils, on the other hand, is in the process of becoming a chieftain of substance; his genealogy is not as well-known, his reputation remains to be made, and his position amongst the most prominent chieftains appears to depend on his ability to agitate for power at others’ expense, much in the way of Miller’s analysis of honour-exchange.

Their quarrels, which form the basic structuring units of the saga, start with the unruly behaviour of Hafliði’s close kinsman Már, and Þorgils’ involvement in the conflicts which Már stirs up. In fact, both men have unethical allies to deal with: just as Hafliði is troubled by his kinsman Már, Þorgils’ honourable position is exposed to doubt because of his association with and use of an unpleasant figure named Óláfr. Yet the author’s construction of the past seems to accommodate contradictions like this. In a sense, the noble dispositions of Þorgils and Hafliði are contrasted with the coarser company they must at times keep: at the very least, it opens up a range of possibilities in which the author can juxtapose his picture of the past with two honourable protagonists engaged in a conflict of that time: because the author does not comment openly about his view of past, the points where the main characters negotiate the ethical standards which the author brings in are key moments of historical representation. In this instance, the plot is developed, and the conflict escalates, at the same pace as the gap widens between Þorgils’ and Hafliði’s stated desire for peace and their tolerance and encouragement of their followers’ violent tactics. The tit-for-tat killings in *Brennu-Njáls saga* come to mind, during which Njáll and Gunnarr are successful in communicating to each other that they share an ethical distance from the acts of their kin and followers. On the other hand,

in *PsH* the dispute between the chieftains moves forwards quickly enough to raise doubts about a desire for peace. The ambiguity which surrounds the chieftains' intentions is designed to sharpen our focus on the personal strengths and motivations which come into relief when ethical standards are raised.

Haflíði's nephew, Már, is described in the most unflattering terms: "He was unpopular and ill-tempered and unlike his good kinsmen, had some wealth but held onto it poorly."¹ Yet Haflíði is bound to Már by kinship; at least, that is the justification which Haflíði gives us for his support of Már. This tie enables the author to position Már closely to Haflíði without necessarily detracting from Haflíði's position as a character who is to be admired. What it adds to the narrative is a relationship of ethical strain and controversy. So, whilst interesting historical issues about kinship are raised, Haflíði's behaviour in dealing with his troublesome kinsman may well increase Haflíði's stature. Whilst he is portrayed as intent on protecting his position from the threat posed by Þorgils, he is seen to make attempts to right the wrongs committed by his kinsman and avoid the escalation of the matter into a wider and more damaging dispute. Haflíði's aim is to neutralize Már at the point in the disputes when his family's honour has been least affected.

Már's closeness to Haflíði provides the opportunity for us to see Haflíði condemn his kinsman for his acts and for the author to situate Haflíði's conduct of his part of the wider dispute in the context of his private disapproval of his kinsman; for example, after Már kills a minor character called Þórsteinn, we are told:

Then Már went to meet with Haflíði, his kinsman, and told him of the killing of Þórsteinn and all that had followed, such as the case now stood. Haflíði showed his displeasure at the work and declared Már long to have been completely useless and declared that such men as he were most surely called a shame to their kinsmen."²

Hneitir, who takes up the case for compensation for the killing of Þórsteinn, is compensated for the killing immediately upon making his request to Haflíði, indicating once more Haflíði's desire to moderate the extent of the problems caused by Már. Later, though, Haflíði has to deal with the killing of the same man, Hneitir, which is orchestrated by Már. He again condemns his kinsman's behaviour but honours their kinship by giving refuge to Már. Þorgils, who has been off-stage throughout the description of Már's trouble-stirring, is now seen to receive a request for help from Hneitir's widow: she turns to him for help, and he is in a position to take up a legitimate action and a strong case against Haflíði because of Haflíði's failure to control Már (chapter 7). This brings us to

¹ Hann var óvinsæll ok illa skapi farinn ok ólíkr góðum frændum sínum, hafði nökkurt fé ok helzt illa á (13).

² Síðan fór Már á fund Haflíða, frænda síns, ok sagði honum víg Þorsteins ok þar at allan atburð eftir því, sem málavöxtr stóð til. Haflíði lét yfir verkinu ok kvað Má lengi hafa verit mikinn ónyttung ok kallaði slíka menn helzt mega heita frændaskömm. (22)

the first legal case between the chieftains, a case which has developed alongside an historical interpretation of the ethical obligations associated with kinship.

At the legal assembly where the matter is heard and judged, both men announce their distance from the merits of the case, citing instead their obligations to kin (chapter 7). Clearly, though, Þorgils has the most to gain. When he succeeds in the case against Hafliði and Már, he wins a large judgment for the killing and, on top of the compensation to be paid to Hneitir's widow, he personally profits nine hundreds. Three verses follow the description of the case to emphasize the win (chapter 8). Þorgils has succeeded in outmanoeuvring Hafliði, and this has occurred because of Hafliði's inability to control Már, a failing which has been tied closely to a representation of the ethical world of twelfth-century Iceland.

It is interesting that even at this early stage of the saga, the characters are justifying their actions along ethical grounds: both men cite the grounds of kinship, and yet it is clear that the power relations between them are of concern to both. It may be that the author is undermining the reality of the ethical obligation to support one's kin, and indeed the characters' belief in that obligation. Yet this is an ethical issue which is cited by the characters as motivating them to produce dispute, and it is this dispute which drives the plot. I think the author is quite deliberate in creating ambiguity and tension around their motivations, partly to create dramatic suspense over what course Þorgils and Hafliði will take (Brown "Preface" xvii), but also as means of playing different interpretive schemas off one another, particularly the conceptualization of historical events either in terms of the personal strengths of key characters or as part of broader national and religious narratives. Brown has noted that *PsH* is similar to the kings' sagas in its use of dialogue to raise ethical issues ("Preface" xxiii - iv) and, more recently, Andersson ("Snorri" 15 - 20, "Politics"), Bagge, and Tómasson ("Hagiography" 52 - 54, 61 - 62) have commented on the centrality of characters' personal qualities and the question of overall historical interpretation in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. As in *Heimskringla*, the author of *PsH*'s success in using the theme of personal strengths as a vehicle for historical interpretation is closely linked to the way characters engage with the complex political and ethical concerns of the world the author creates for them.

The loss of family honour caused by Már is taken one step further with his clumsy attempt to ambush and kill Óláfr (Þorgils' awkward ally). When Már returns from his unfortunate expedition, having been chased away by women disguised as men, Hafliði prudently bans Már from any more forays. Óláfr and Grímr are the next associates of the central protagonists to move the plot forwards. Óláfr has already been involved in the conflict as Þorgils' hired killer. Now, in much the same way as Þorgils had earlier prompted Óláfr to kill for him, Hafliði offers his complete support to Grímr (chapter 11) if he takes up an action against Óláfr. It follows that Óláfr is killed by Grímr and, in return,

Þorgils arranges the revenge killing of one of Hafliði's men. This killing is then used by Hafliði as the basis of a legal claim against Þorgils. We see that by controlling Már and by organizing his followers in a more ordered way, Hafliði is able to regain some ground in his dispute with Þorgils.

Þorgils and Hafliði are not condemned for their association with villains: what seems to be more important, and certainly what effects the end results in their disputes, is their ability to retain control of their strategic positions and maintain their self-possession in the face of the unpredictable acts of their less scrupulous and sometimes unwanted allies. Þorgils and Hafliði are given very benign introductions³ and these are not necessarily challenged by their use of violence or desire for conflict. What seems to matter is their ability to order the carriage of the dispute, and at the core of that skill, and what the author repeatedly raises to the fore of the narrative, are self-possession, decision-making, and the sound evaluation of the knowledge and advice they receive.

As with the earlier conflicts which were advancing by proxy, the author's interest here is focused on the chieftains' conduct of their feud and their responses to varying types of personalities and authorities. What we have during the second legal case is a method of narration which binds representations of ethics and reality (made by the secondary characters of the story through the advice they give) with the protagonists' response. Viewed as a whole, this collection of representations and responses tags many of the ethical and historical issues interpreted by the saga. Two examples come to mind. One is Böðvarr Ásbjarnarson's advice to Þorgils to abandon an attack:

[Böðvarr said:] "You do not view things correctly. Consider where we have come, in order to make peace with God, who we have sought in church service, and prayed to for mercy. The church peace would now be broken by this, and it would for that reason be an outrageous deed. Another thing: the holy day is binding, during which we all have hope for salvation, and God Almighty Himself lets His mildness and mercy shine so greatly and brighten this day. This is also to be said, that the truce and peace are established over the þing while the þing ground is hallowed, and so this would be the greatest of legal breaches."⁴

The other piece of advice I would point to is that which Rannveig gives to her husband Hafliði, in the same chapter as Böðvarr's insightful warning:

Then Rannveig his wife said: 'What is in this, Hafliði,' she said, 'that you now bear a

³ Hafliði bjó at Breiðabólstað í Vestrhópi ok var bæði forvitri ok góðgjarn ok inn mesti höfðingi. (13, Hafliði lived at Breiðabólstað in Vestrhópi and was both prescient and kind and the greatest of chieftains.) Þorgils' good character is attested by his genealogy (chapter 2) and his friendship with the poet Ingimundur prestur Einarsson and the saga man Hrólfr (15-6).

⁴ [Böðvarr mælti]: "Eigi lítr þú rétt á. Hygg at þú, hvar vér erum komnir, at þetta skal vera sáttarfundr við guð, er vér höfum á kirkjuhelgi sótt, ok biðjum oss miskunnar. Nú er í þessu ok kirkjufrið raskat, ok er þetta fyrir þá sök ódæmaverk. Hitt er ok annat, at yfir stendr dagshelgrin, er vér höfum alla hjálp af hlotit, ok sjálfr guð almáttigr lét sína mildi ok miskunn svá mikla skína ok birta á þessum deginum. Þat er ok til at telja, at grið ok friðr er settr um þingit ok þinghelgrin stendr yfir, ok er þetta fyrir því it mesta lagabrot." (47)

weapon when before you did not? Hold on to your own habits!” She was a wise woman and understood a great deal. He replied somewhat angrily and declared it had no bearing on her and threw at her various other words.”⁵

In both instances, the chieftains are given advice which is later vindicated. Böðvarr’s warning, and it is advice which is quite out of character, is enough to put Þorgils off his planned attack. The attack, it turns out, would have been a hopeless one, and Böðvarr gave his advice as a way of making Þorgils back out of their awkward position. The ethical arguments which are cited in the warning, arguments about making peace with God and the sanctity of the church, the holy day, and the truce, are a play on the claims of the church and the assembly, and their ideals of civil order. Here, *PsH* incorporates a narrative of Christian and legal sanctity, but holds that narrative at a distance, as what makes Þorgils heed the warning is the fact of its source rather than, as Brown has suggested, the finer moral side of Þorgils’ nature (“Preface” xvii). The man least likely to raise such objections, such ethical gestures as these, has raised them, and we can safely say that it is this incongruity which guides Þorgils’ reaction because he raises this very same point with Böðvarr afterwards.⁶ And it is Þorgils’ fine judgment, rather than moral standing, which guides us in our understanding of the social and political world being depicted in the saga, a world which the author suggests is most centrally concerned with friendship, kinship and self-possession. Þorgils is rewarded for his observance of these values: he is not swayed by the surface concerns of God and law, but he understands the urgency of his friend’s message and he takes heed of it.

In contrast, Hafliði does not have the good sense to heed the advice of his wife, although he has the good sense to repent later that he did not.⁷ It leads to a breakdown in negotiations and a complication and extension of the dispute, neither of which is in Hafliði’s interest. Rannveig’s warning, given as it is in private (like Hafliði’s earlier rebuke of Már), is not created with a surface ethical distraction to save face. Rather, she gives the warning in words which

⁵ Þá mælti kona hans, Rannveig: “Hvat er í þessu, Hafliði,” sagði hon, “at bera nú vápn heldr en fyrr ertu vanr at gera? Ok halt þú háttum þínum.” Hon var vitr kona ok vel at sér um margt. Hann svaraði nökkut styggliga ok kvað þat ekki till hennar koma ok kastaði at henni nökkurum orðum. (48)

⁶ Ok er þeir gengu heim til búða, þá mælti Þorgils til Böðvars: “Þat mæla menn, at þú sér trúlauss, mágr, ok meðallagi góðgjarn, - en eigi lýstir þú nú þat.” (47-8: And when they went back to the booth, then Þorgils said to Böðvarr: “Men say that you have little faith and average benevolence - but you do not show that now.”)

⁷ “Ok þá er hann gekk inn í búðina ok þar at, sem sat Rannveig, kona hans, mælti hann svá: “Oft hefi ek þat reynt, at ek em vel kvángaðr, ok enn hefir þar raun á orðit, at þú ert allvitr kona, ok hefir þú nær forspá verit, af því at eigi mynda ek fyrir þessum vansa orðit hafa, ef ek hefða þín ráð haft.” (50: And when he went into the booth where Rannveig, his wife, sat, he said this: ‘It has often be shown to me that I am well married, and again it has turned out that you are a very wise woman, and you have been close to prophesying, in that I would not have suffered this disgrace if I had taken your advice.’”) Both the scene of Hafliði’s regret and of Þorgils’ fuller understanding of Böðvarr’s motives for aborting the attack occur back at their booths.

are true to the ethos of this saga: stick to your own ways, maintain your self-possession. By failing to observe this message from so close and so trustworthy a source, Hafliði shows that he is not quite the chieftain Þorgils is: his weakness is that, at this point, he lacks some of the strength of character which marks Þorgils' steady and determined advancement of his case. Hafliði certainly learns by his mistake and his ability to avoid further losses in the dispute comes about because of the attention he pays to advice given during the remainder of the story. Indeed, the pleasure which the author appears to take in the various levels of representation found in advice shapes a new balance and resolution between the protagonists which the saga now moves towards.

Hafliði wins the second case, Þorgils is outlawed, and it falls to Hafliði to execute the order against Þorgils. This involves holding a court of execution at Þorgils' property, a very difficult task. At this point, Guðmundr Brandsson emerges: he is a wise man and as a force for reconciliation. He gives Hafliði a lengthy piece of advice about how to carry forward the action, and then counsels Þorgils to limit his defence to his farm property. By stressing the strengths of both men to the other, Guðmundr is able to urge them to see the honour of taking their violence only to a certain and limited point. In effect, he maps a course for both chieftains and marks a point between them where they can both honourably stop, and as a step towards the mutual self-possession which will bring about the ultimate reconciliation of the chieftains, they are both able to accept the advice.

Thus honour, and the historical nature of honour, is represented by a situation which the author has devised and by the nature of these two men as it is reflected in advice and their reactions to advice. Honour is defined in the moment by Guðmundr's words and by the measured acceptance of them by Þorgils and Hafliði. The narrative is arranged in a way which allows the author to situate his interpretation of the past in that moment of advice and response: these moments, when the idea of self-possession resonates in the acts of the protagonists, are moments when the narrative can move from its exposition of the conflict to the causal steps towards its resolution. The author demonstrates that Þorgils' and Hafliði's personal strengths, particularly an ability to measure and order their dispute through their appreciation of their relative tactical positions, is the pivot on which reconciliation rests.

As I have said, *PsH* incorporates the family sagas' most conspicuous trait, that is, a movement towards a climax, and the author orchestrates the action in a way which most effectively directs our interest towards the central climactic event. The climax is reached during the major and final stand-off of the two sides near the Alþing (chapters 22-30). We have followed the way in which precipitating disputes between Hafliði and Þorgils develop throughout the saga: these leading disputes have been carefully staged both at the legal assembly and outside it, and the characters of the protagonists have developed alongside this escalation of the dispute.

Now the dramatic tension leading into the final climax is narrated through our view of the calm resolution of Þorgils as he rides on, as an outlaw and as the lesser man in the feud, to this confrontation near the Alþing. Þorgils says: “And I wish to ride to the assembly, whatever the cost, with those men who wish to follow me, and those should turn back, who consider that more manly.”⁸ As with much of the dialogue in this saga, it is unclear whether Þorgils himself holds to the spirit of his speech. It is more likely that Þorgils is aware of the level of hostility which must be communicated to his followers in order to develop the momentum needed to produce an honourable point of settlement. Þorgils’ decisions to keep moving forward are repeatedly described and this gives the narrative a tense and difficult forward momentum: each attempt by third parties and by his friends to temper his advance, and even false reports that his messengers have been killed are dismissed by Þorgils because of his inner strength and conviction. The incremental progress of the narrative alongside his troop has the effect of repeatedly harnessing the focus of the action to decision-making: the decision is a still frame, caught in the surrounding action of uncertainty about whether Þorgils will keep moving on, or will there be a relieving pause. The author takes a considerable interest in the attempts to temper Þorgils’ advance on the Alþing and the advance of his troop is staged in order to bring his statements of conviction into relief. On the other side, the reactions to Þorgils’ advance and the last minute negotiations to avoid a confrontation stress the role which that advance performs: it is Þorgils’ movement forward, his strength of character, which prompts the reactions of those already at the Alþing, anticipating the confrontation. We see their apprehension, their posturing, and their negotiations through Þorgils’ provocation of those things, his test of their mettle. Þorgils’ decisions are at the centre of the climax, and they bind together the saga’s interest in the supposed sanctity of the assembly, the role of the church in resolving secular feuds, and the special self-possession and resolve needed to hold a chieftaincy. Of course, Hafliði’s choices are similarly under scrutiny: he is a noble man under threat from a protagonist who is on the rise, and the way he negotiates the pressure which is put on him as a result of Þorgils’ advance reveals not only his strengths and weaknesses, but his manipulation of the broader political situation and the ethical concerns of those around him.

The final instance of this interaction of advice and judgment occurs during the encounter at the Alþing, transmitted by third parties, between Þorgils and Hafliði. Just as Þorgils’ self-possession is thrown into relief by the discomfort of his supporters who want to temper his advance, so a keen sense of judgment on the part of Hafliði is made clear during the protestations of the holy man, Ketill, and by Hafliði’s bowing to them. Ketill’s *dæmisaga* is well-crafted

⁸ “Ok vil ek at vísu ríða til þingsins, hvat sem kostar, með þá men, er mér vilja fylgja, - en þeir hverfi aftr, er þykkir drengiligra.” (65)

(Brown xx) but of even more importance is the timing of Haflíði's acceptance of its message. First he resists advice by refusing to be swayed towards peace under the threat of excommunication made by the Bishop (chapters 22 and 27). He then decides that he will accept Ketill's advice, which comes in the form of a story, a story of pride and of peace before God, and one which creates an opportunity for the ordered resolution of the situation at hand, in the same way as Þorgils' decision to take up Böðvarr's warning about a fight at the Alþing, and the chieftains acceptance of the advice given by Guðmundr.

The author constructs a moment of excessive ambition during which it is natural that ethical issues are raised by the protagonist's advisors. In Haflíði's case, as with Þorgils' reaction to Böðvarr's speech during the second law case, the true state of affairs is unraveled at a later point of time. At the close of the reconciliation, when Haflíði and Böðvarr exchange insults (chapter 31), we see that Haflíði has not been reformed by Ketill's wise words, but that he chose wisely to curtail the extent of his dispute with Þorgils at a point when such a solution was sensibly open to him. Haflíði does not take up Kolbeinn's message but rather the opportunity which his words have afforded. He remains antagonistic, and his enmity towards Böðvarr is, we are told, an enduring one.

This is an author who values strength of character above the ethical obligations which characters refer to during the saga. It is strength of character, in this case consisting of self-possession and resolve, which is seen to produce order, certainty, and the successful resolution of a dispute. This author is quite deliberate in his ironic use of the ethical standards at play during the time in which his saga is set. We see a gap between what characters say or accept and what they believe to be the case, and their understanding and view of the dispute is expressed by the course of their actions rather than by the ethical norms they refer to. This does not mean that we have clumsy author, but rather one who has a clear idea of the ethical tensions of twelfth-century Iceland and an even firmer view on what the true motivations for action at that time were. I think that in the case of *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, we have an author who takes pleasure in the ambiguity and dramatic tension of the gap between ethics and action.

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