

Sturlaugs saga starfsama: Humour and Textual Archaeology

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There is a stage in the development of late medieval Icelandic prose literature which is both more flamboyant and more complex than the literary histories might have one believe.

In the context of trying to come to a better understanding of its mechanisms of humour, I will discuss the medieval version of *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (*Síst*),¹ which survives in some 26 manuscripts and is normally included in the *fornaldarsögur* corpus where it is often described as being of the 'abenteuer' type. In this saga, just as Viðar Hreinsson has shown for *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (Viðar Hreinsson, 1990), the audience is, I maintain, invited into a game world in which some conventional aspects of Old Norse story-telling are consciously being manipulated. I will be suggesting that the saga adopts a satirical attitude to, or at least pokes fun at, some classically 'heroic' and, to a lesser extent, 'romance' poses, and that it makes deliberate use of incongruous personal reactions and events in the construction of its burlesque. There is also undoubtedly a potentially more macabre strand of humour, which can be problematic for us 'moderns'.

Working on from Viðar's approach to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, there are, in the case of *Síst*, key elements to be looked at: there is, besides a well-developed literary awareness and literary self-consciousness, without which the playful spoofing of episodes or events borrowed from other sagas would not be possible, considerable incongruity.

As background material, the blatant humour of the shorter version of *Gautreks saga* and *Bósa saga* can be referred to. Although little has been written about it, humour of various types has always been a feature of some 'less heroic' and more 'adventure-like' types of *fornaldarsögur*. Rather than risk a definition of humour, specifically medieval Icelandic humour, against which the text is to be assessed, I will attempt here to demonstrate a number of ways in which comic potential to my mind is being exploited.

In the medieval version of the saga, Sturlaugr (variant spelling: Styrlaugr), the eponymous hero, starts out as something of an unpromising type; although rich in *riddarasaga*-like attributes he is, egged on by his father to seek either a bride or fame, turned down at his first attempt to woo the highly eligible Ása. On being snubbed, he sets off on an extended Viking raid, assumedly to prove his worth, and he returns in prosperity. After countless further adventures and tests of heroism, including gaining Ása's hand, Sturlaugr, at the end of the saga, is a subordinate or liege king in Sweden. He and Ása have two sons, who both themselves become kings. He has become a man of considerable standing, and the progression towards this status is the outward frame of the narrative.

¹ The A version, printed from AM 335 4to, c.1400 (ed. Zitzelsberger, 1969), and from a paper manuscript, AM 173 fol. (GJ III, 103-160); the apparently post-reformatory B version (Zitzelsberger, 1969, 6) is not discussed here. Quotations are from Zitzelsberger's AM 335 4to text, but with reference to and the normalisation, punctuation, etc. of GJ III.

Within this very broad outline, *Stst* is both loosely and tightly structured: 'loosely' in that towards the end of the saga, some of the series of events are rather precariously linked to one another, 'tightly' in that within sets of episodes (see the handout), and sometimes across the boundaries of the episode-units, there are structuring verbal links which point to a considerable textual awareness, and perhaps to a deliberate parodying, or at least conscious manipulation, of the highly-structured nature of the standard folktale, conventionally arranged for the most in partly-repetitive groups of three.

But first a look at the textual and publication history of this saga and its relation to the surviving medieval *rimur*. The manuscript transmission of *Stst* is not optimal, but it could be much worse. The most readily available text, that chosen for all the standard editions since Rask's in 1830, is that of a paper manuscript, AM 173 fol., copied by Ásgeir Jónsson for Torfæus from another paper manuscript; this text often has slightly different wording from the vellum manuscript AM 335 4to from c.1400, which was chosen by Zitzelsberger as the base text in his 1969 edition. Zitzelsberger suggests that the saga can be assigned 'to the early part of the fourteenth century' (Zitzelsberger, 1969, 6). *Sturlaugs rimur*,² clearly based on a saga text, are preserved in two late medieval vellums, dated to c.1500-1550 and c.1550 respectively, but these datings do not as such give any clear indication of the age of the *rimur* themselves. There is scholarly agreement that the *rimur* derive from a more original version of *Stst* than that found in AM 335 4to (Björn K. Þórólfsson, 1934, 400-402); apart from the saga's opening remarks about Óðinn, which are probably a later addition (*Allir – ætt til*, cf. p. 6 below), it is significant that the concluding chapters, including the vows to undertake memorable tasks and all that follows, are absent from the *rimur*, and it is reasonable to regard these episodes as accretions to a more original and now-lost saga text. There is no absolute proof that the elements in question were not in the prose text from which the *rimur* derived (Krijn 1925, 8), yet it does seem likely that an earlier version of *Stst* would have diverged in a number of ways from the surviving AM 335 text: apart from differences in names, family relationships and other, smaller details, a passage in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* quotes an ending to a *Sturlaugs saga* which would correspond better with the *Sturlaugs rimur* than with the principal surviving saga texts.

Structure

We can see from the handout that the main body of the saga consists of four requests for marriage (unit I: *bónorðsferðir*) followed by three duels (unit II: *hólmgangar*) which lead to the quest (unit III: *sendifarir*) for the *úrarahorn* (aurochs horn), which in turn takes the form of three searches for information involving three encounters with helpful troll-women or giantesses (unit IV). Finally there are vows of undertakings which are three in number (unit V: *heitstrengingar*), and their consequences. The symmetry of the building blocks (with the exception of the fourfold content of unit I) is considerable, and this can be seen as underlining a game function. We note, apart

² Ed. Finnur Jónsson, 1905-1912; cf. English translation (Zitzelsberger, 1969, 412-440); for a text of the *rimur* with Modern Icelandic spelling see http://www.staff.hum.ku.dk/chris/Stst_rimur.htm

from a number of clear verbal similarities and echoings within each of the elements or episode-units numbered I-V, that the utterance at Ic, '*hverjum er ek nú gift?*', with its inferential use of the adverb *nú* is apparently the model for the question which is an extension to IIc, '*við hvern skaltu nú á hólmganga?*', and that IIc in itself, '*er hólmsstefna á hendi þér?*', is a good candidate as the model for the introductory question to unit III, '*er sendiför á hendi þér?*'. Elsewhere in the text there are other internal verbal echoes and parallels which further give the sense of a well-etched and, on the surface at least, quite carefully thought-out text. Even the casual hearer or reader probably sensed the contrived nature of this stage of the plot structure, and this undertone of 'game' forms the backdrop against which some of the saga's verbal antics are played out.

Behavioural patterns – incongruity

A common feature of the saga is the way in which characters do not behave as their apparent roles and correspondingly anticipated patterns of behaviour would lead the audience to expect; this is part of a larger incongruity, which might perhaps be called 'the absurd'.

The first and most successfully structured section of the text is a variation on a bridal-quest theme, Sturlaugr's acquiring of Ása, the daughter of Hringr jarl (cf. Kalinke, 1990, 33). Sturlaugr is flatly turned down by Ása on the first request on the grounds that he is nothing more than a common farmhand who stays at home with his mother (*Við þessi orð varð Sturlaugr reiðr mjök ok reið í brott ok heim* 9.23 / GJ III, 110), and we note Ása's father's behaviour on facing the next, and second, request for her hand, which comes from King Haraldr. Reluctantly and under pressure Hringr gives way and accepts:

Jarl er eftir ok unnr heldr litt við sinn hlut, stendr þá upp ok gengr til skemmu dóttur sinnar sezt niðr ok blæs mæðiliga. Ása mælti þá: 'Hvat er þér at meíni, faðir minn, er þú ert svá fákátr, eða hefir þú nokkur ný tíðindi oss at segja?' (10.2 / GJ III, 111)

This is not the way a *jarl* in a *fornsaga* is expected to behave, and it is verbally paralleled by his reaction when a third suitor, Kolr krappi, puts in his bid – and now the role of Hringr jarl, Ása's father, is really being made fun of:

Jarl unnr illa við sinn hlut ok sitr eftir nokkura stund, stendr þó upp ok gengr til skemmu dóttur sinnar ok sezt niðr hjá henni ok má varla mæla. Ása mælti: 'Ertu sjúkr, faðir minn?' (10.30 / GJ III, 113)

In both instances the comic ambience is pointed up by Ása's concerned responses, enquiring as to his state of health and mind. Other examples of similar incongruity of action or reaction include the behaviour of Sturlaugr's father on being invited to the king's feast: King Haraldr is at a loss as to who shall fight a duel for him against the third suitor, and therefore invites Sturlaugr and his father *til hálfsmánaðarveizlu ... með svá margan mann sem þeir vildi* (11.43 / GJ III, 116):

Þessi orð komu til þeira feðga. Þá spyrr Sturlaugr föður sinn, hvárt þeir skulu þiggja veizluna eða eigi. Ingólfr segir: 'Þat vilda ek, at vér sætim heima ok færím hvergi.' (11. 44 / GJ III, 116-117)

which may be taken as an ironic exposition of failure to adopt the appropriately heroic stance and accept every challenge as it comes along (and it is countered and contextualised by a comment from Sturlaugr that reflects the literary self-consciousness of the text:) *'Mun lítill saga fra oss verða, ef vér skulum eigi koma til annarra manna.'* (12.2 / GJ III, 117), a comment which lends itself to comparison with the famous remark in *Bósa saga*:

Bósa sagðist ekki vilja at þat væri skrifat í sögu hans at hann ynni nokkurn hlut með sleitum, þann sem honum skyldi með karlmennsku telja. (GJ III, 285).

In a similar vein, that is to say by pointing out an incongruity between anticipated performance on the one hand and actual behaviour on the other, the king and his own lack of self-esteem is made fun of. Desperate as he is to find someone appropriate to fight his duel for Ása's hand against Kolr, he applies to Sturlaugr who insists on receiving from Haraldr the right to betrothal with Ása (*festar*):

Sturlaugr mælti: 'Sel mér í hendr festar þær, er þú tókst af Hringi jarli, ok mun ek þá til hætta hversu til ferr með okkr ok Kol.' (12.14 / GJ III, 117).

It is fundamentally incongruous that the king, out of fear for Sturlaugr's followers (*Konungr gerði svá ok heldr nauðigr, því at honum sýndist óauðligir flokkir þeira fóstbræðra.* (12.20 / GJ III 118)) makes such a concession, since the only possible consequence is exactly what subsequently happens: Sturlaugr marries Ása before even defeating Kolr in the duel, as he ought to have done. Now, by extension, it is apparently the honour system itself that is the object of fun – for where is the king's honour when he opts to submit and take the line of least resistance and lose the girl, rather than keep an eye on his reputation and his *eftirmæli*? Again, it is the lack of a heroic, or perhaps in this case monarchical, stance that is being highlighted.

One of the points at which the structure of the saga becomes less controlled is where the bridal-quest section has given way to further, rather loosely tacked-on adventures. After the third of the duels (IIc on the handout), Sturlaugr and his followers ride back to his father-in-law, Hringr, only to find King Haraldr in the act of burning down the property in an attempt to rid himself of Hringr and Ása (again a comment on Haraldr's code of honour). The murderous incineration is thwarted, and Sturlaugr, instead of avenging himself on the spot, which would have been an appropriate reaction, accepts the king's imposition of a quest, that of finding the lost *úrarnhorn*. There is, in other words, no pretence at this stage of logicity of plot, yet the continuation of the narrative is ensured.

Needless to say, the *úrarnhorn* is captured (after help is obtained from the three helpful *trollkonur*, unit IV), and as a way to continue the narrative even further, vows to perform memorable tasks (*heitstrengingar*, unit V) are made.

It is in connection with the execution of these vows, especially the wooing by Franmarr (who becomes a member of the *fóstbræðr* after losing his duel with Sturlaugr) of Ingibjörg (or *Ingigerðr* in the GJ text), daughter of the king of Garðaríki, that major instances of incongruity and absurdity arise.

As has been pointed out by Zitzelsberger, and Jan de Vries, the *heitstrengingar* passage must be intended to remind the audience of the boastful vows made in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, 1969, 162-164; subsequently *Jvs*). Whereas in *Jvs* the vows have some chance of being carried out and the consequences of the

vows have important implications for the subsequent development of the narrative, Sturlaugr in *Stst* gives himself hardly a chance of success. It is already the first day of Christmas when he announces:

'Nú skal ek hefja heitstrenging, en hún er með því móti, at ek skal viss verða, af hverjum rökum úrarhorn er upp runnit, fyrir in þriðju jól eða deyja ella.' (24.2 / GJ III, 146),

so he has effectively passed his own death sentence with only a few days' reprieve; there also seems to be an extra element of comedy in that the promise involves the acquisition of knowledge, as opposed to a heroic act. The oath-session continues:

Þá stendr Franmarr upp og strengir þess heit, at hann skal kominn í rekkju Ingibjargar (GJ: Ingigerðar), dóttur Ingvars konungs í Görðum austr, ok hafa kysst hana einn koss fyrir in þriðju jól eða deyja ella (24.4 / GJ III, 147)

Cf. *Jvs*, 163:

Vagn svarar ... : og það læt eg fylgja, segir hann, minni heitstrenging, ef eg kem í Noreg, að eg skal komið hafa í rekkju Ingibjargar dóttur Þorkels leiru í Vík austur ön [i.e. án] hans ráði og allra frænda hennar, áður en eg koma heim aftur í Danmörk

The final oath in *Stst* is also clearly calked on *Jvs*, yet in *Stst* all that happens is that Christmas elapses without notice; the vows have an essentially comic function and little more:

Nú er eigi getit fleiri manna heitstrenginga. Líða nú jólin, ok verðr eigi til tíðenda, en eftir veizluna ferr hverr heim með góðum gjöfum (24.8 / GJ III, 147),

so again, as in Sturlaugr's acceptance of the quest for the *úrarhorn*, there is no attempt to simulate logicality of plot, or, in contrast to *Jvs*, to integrate this episode fully in a narrative progression. It is quite likely that what we observe here is on the one hand the result of a perhaps gradual increase in the number of episodes that the saga contains, and on the other a certain recognition on the part of scribal or editorial extenders that the zaniness already present in the 'core saga' lent itself rather well to consciously illogical or incongruous extension.

One of the vows undertaken at the Christmas feast gives considerable opportunity for more foolery. Franmarr, ignoring, like Sturlaugr, his self-imposed deadline, perseveres in his attempts to get close to Ingibjörg, yet she sees through all his ruses, and one day, lurking around, hoping to find a way of getting into her otherwise impenetrable compound, he sees one of his foster-brothers, Guttormr, in full battle array but holding onto his stomach. Guttormr asks how far it is to Ingibjörg's '*skemma*':

Franmarr segir: 'Þangat er nú dærganga.' 'Þat er harðla langt,' segir Guttormr. Franmarr segir: 'Hversu lengi hefir þú svá gengit?' Hann segir: 'Tvö dægr áðr vit fundumst.' Franmarr mælti: 'Mikill er munr hreysti okkar. Ek syrgi eina jungfrú ok fæ ek hana eigi, ok hefi ek þó nokkura bragða fleitat, en þú gengr, sem sjá má, at úti eru á þér iðrin.' (27.48 / GJ III, 156-157)

Because of the sense of a reference to classic situations in other types of sagas where brave men have fought on with their stomachs hanging out – the best known is

probably Bolli in *Laxdæla saga* – this is maintainably absurd (rather than just incongruous or grotesque). What caps the episode's 'debunking' or reductive function is the manner in which it is one of Ingibjörg's handmaidens who needs to go out to pee or defecate (*[hún var] gengin út í garðinn sinna erenda* (28.9 / GJ III, 157)) who finds Guttormr, takes pity on him and lets him in, giving Franmarr an opportunity to gain access to the *skemma* where he manages to fulfil half, and only half, his oath – to kiss Ingibjörg. The mock-heroic (and for that matter mock-romantic, close as it is to *fabliau*) is clear to see and contributes to the general burlesque.

Playful borrowings – narrative flamboyance

Part of the flamboyance of the saga, as it is preserved in the principal texts, lies in the ease with which it feels free to borrow – and adapt – elements from earlier works, often with comic effect. These are, apart from the spilling-gut motif just mentioned, *Snorra Edda* or *Heimskringla*, *Völsunga saga*, some form of *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, and, as discussed above, *Jvs*. There is also a parallel with *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (Kalinke, 1990, 33).

The saga starts:

Allir menn, þeir sem sannfróðir eru at um tíðendi, vita þat, at Grikkir ok Asiámennt byggðu Norðrlönd. Hófst þá tunga sú, er síðan dreifðist um öll lönd. Formaðr þess fólks hét Óðinn, er menn telja ætt til. (8.1 / GJ III, 107),

a rather sardonic way of starting a saga, containing as it does a topos, which, with its clear reference to *Snorra Edda* and/or the opening sections of *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla*, has partial parallels in *Sörla þátr* (GJ I, 367) and *Bósa saga* (GJ III, 281), and as mentioned above, may well be a later addition to an earlier form of the text.

One's first impressions, well established by this opening sentence, that something deliberately out of the ordinary, and therefore potentially comic, is going on in *Sst*, is confirmed within the first pages of the text by the reference to Ása's foster-mother, the wise old witch, Vefreyja, who observes everything from a building with two doors, moving her position from door to door with each new day (8.38 / GJ III, 109), apparently a flashback to counterparts in *Snorra Edda* (Óðinn and Loki).

A further parallel is to a motif that is as well-known in the Sigurðr/Brynhildr/Gunnarr complex (*Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, stanzas 4 and 68, cf. *Völsunga saga*, ch. 33), as it is in the Tristan legend, reproduced in *Tristrams saga og Ísöndar*, where two lovers place a sword between them as they lie and sleep in the woods. In *Sst* the sword, in the case of Vefreyja and Sturlaugr, has become a *stokkr*, but the reference is clear. The scene is comically well-formed in itself, but the extra effect of ostensibly aiming to ensure chastity with the help of a log (possibly a tree-trunk) probably produced an extra laugh.

There is also a clear parallel to *Völsunga saga* – but here potential humorous effect is underplayed: the description of the underground prison in which Sturlaugr and his foster-brothers are incarcerated, and their escape by cutting through stone with a smuggled blade (20.30 / GJ III, 139-140) are probably modelled on Sinfjötli and Sigmundi's experiences in *Völsunga saga* (GJ I, 126-127). A further reference to

Völsunga saga may possibly be intended in the identity switch on a bridal night in the Mjóll/Franmarr episode, paralleled with Sigurðr's wooing of Brynhildr in Gunnarr's shape (GJ I, chs. 27 and 29).

Some of these intertextual references are certainly more fully exploited in terms of their comic potential than others, but they all contribute to an accumulative effect – that of signalling that this, the recipient text, is a game. By parading its own freedom it incidentally pokes some fun at the donor texts, lightening the tone even further.

This particular freedom taken with what must for a contemporary audience have been at least known, and in literary terms possibly older, material from other saga texts, is also at times matched by the natural ease with which a narrator in *Síst* unabashedly intervenes with an explanatory comment. When Sturlaugr and Áki, one of the *fóstbræðr* and a childhood companion of Sturlaugr's, arrive in Hundingjaland, Áki recognises the queen as his relative and embraces her before greeting her. She is not displeased, but the scene enrages her husband:

En nú má ætla hversu grimmt honum mundi í hug, er einn útlendr maðr
hljóp á háls henni ok kyssti hana fyrir augum honum ok gerði slíkt
óðæmi. (19.47 / GJ III, 138).

Our *sögumaður* here is not shy about his activities or about intervening in person, self-confidently pulling the strings to suit himself.

Macabre burlesque

Alongside the effects named so far, which appear to be mainly of a literary mode, there is also a clear amount of slapstick entertainment that is less sophisticated; some of it is also apparently quite macabre, and much of it is actually dependent on the supernatural (fantastic or marvellous) aspects of the saga in the form of troll-women and the like. The juxtaposition of different types of humour is salient, and could perhaps be aimed at a mixed audience – with mixed taste, but it most likely tells us more about an open aesthetic which it is something of an exercise to adjust to (the fantastic fight between Jökull and Frosti (15-16 / GJ III, 127-128) would be a case in point). When the *fóstbræðr* start on their encounters with the troll-women (unit IV on the handout) they enter into a convention in which insulting troll-women and poking jibes at their sexuality is a commonplace. The insults commence with the formulaic questioning of whether the troll in question is actually a man or a woman, and the encounter-episodes continue in this vein; the last of the three troll-women, Hornnefja, is so anxious to see Hrólfr nefja, one of the *fóstbræðr*, that Sturlaugr decides to dress Hrólfr up as a complete monster and place him up on a cliff as a lure. Despite the grotesque costume, Hornnefja is still impressed; but then she becomes so forward in her approaches to Hrólfr, swelling up in size in her attempts to reach out for him, that Sturlaugr unhesitatingly kills her – with the magic *atgeirr* she gave him, the *atgeirr* that will save his life on two other occasions. There is no doubt about comic intent here. Whether or not we moderns think it is funny is perhaps another matter.

The capturing of the *úrarhorn* from Bjarmaland, the episode that follows shortly after this, is a bizarre portrayal in which humour may certainly be intended, but it is hardly unequivocally successful today (better so in the *rimur*); as elsewhere in the

fornaldarsögur corpus, it is especially the figures of Þórr and Óðinn that are so unconvincing that it is surely intentional.

The rather violent tone is upheld. Hrólfr nefja, by whom the *trollkona* was so impressed, dies himself during the recovery of the *úrarhorn*, with the standard comment *Lét Hrólfr nefja þar líf sitt með mikilli hreysti* (22.20 / GJ III, 143; cf. the conventional approbative battle commentaries cited below); the *hofgyðja*, the protectress of the *úrarhorn*, is killed, also unhesitatingly, by Sturlaugr, just as two minor characters, Mjöll and Frosti, are later sacrificed, mainly, it might seem, in the interests of obtaining knowledge – of getting to know what the origins of the *úrarhorn* were (24 / GJ III, 147-148).

So here, another perspective could be introduced: the unabashed killings just mentioned can be seen as elements of a gradual intensification of the macabre: Sturlaugr and those of the *föstbræðr* who remain come by chance to Hundingjaland, where they kill the two doorkeepers of the castle. This is done partly because the doormen deny them access, but in the world of this section of the text the killing seems to be partly justified by their dog-like appearance:

ok stóðu þar menn í dyrum, ok var haka þeira gróin í bringuna. Þeir gjöltu sem hundar. Þóttust þeir nu vita hvar þeir voru komnir. Þeir bönnuðu þeim inngöngu ...' (136.41 / GJ III, 138).

The macabre tone continues with the recapturing of the *úrarhorn* and the imprisoning of the *föstbræðr* in the hollowed-out stone, mentioned above. Once Sturlaugr has thrown the horn at King Haraldr's nose causing it to bleed, Sturlaugr and his companions wreak havoc on Bjarmaland and Hundingjaland, and now it is interesting to note how this 'revenge' is described:

þeir koma til Bjarmalands, ok brenna allt ok bræla, þar er þeir mega, ok gerðu hvert illvirki at öðru ... (23.10 / GJ III, 145)

þar mátti sjá mörg stórhögg, skjöldu klofna, en brynjur höggnar ok spjót af sköftum brotin, en margan höfuðlausan til jarðar felldan ... (23.15 / GJ III, 145)

En eftir þetta verk it mikla leggr Sturlaugr undir sik allt Bjarmaland (23.18 / GJ: 145)

Ok er þessum inum miklu stórvirkjum var lokit, þá ætlar hann at búa her sinn til Hundingjaland á hendr Hundólfi konungi. (23.20 / GJ III, 145)

drepa menn en taka fé, brenna byggðir, þar sem þeir koma (23.24) ~ Þeir drepa menn, en taka fé, brenna bæi ok byggð alla, þar sem þeir koma. (GJ III, 145)

Sturlaugr ... hefir báðar hendr blóðugar til axla, greiðandi þeim sterklig högg, steypandi mörgum höfuðlausum til jarðar. (23.27 / GJ III, 146)

Then comes the episode in which Mjöll and Frosti are sacrificed (mentioned above). Let us first note that the troll-women and sorceress Mjöll, together with Frosti, the *hofgyðja*, and the dog-like door-keepers, can all be characterised as belonging in some way to the category 'the Other'. Secondly we should note that a number of the passages in question have their rather macabre or serious tone punctuated with light dialogue quips, such as the nonchalant *Hverju stakk þar afnan kálfann á mér áðan, þá er vér várum flettir klæðunum.* (20.36 / GJ III, 140), and *Þat mæli ek um, at nú komi*

byrr sá, er Hrimhildr hét mér.' (22.33 / GJ III, 143), and in the midst of the Mjóll/Frosti episode we have:

'Ertu nú þá búinn, Frosti minn?' segir hún. 'Fyrir löngu em ek búinn,' segir hann ... (25.4 / GJ III, 149)

Another rather sudden modulation between the light comic on the one hand and the violent and macabre on the other is seen when, immediately after Franmarr's managing to kiss Ingibjörg, we have chapter 27, in which Sturlaugr now takes revenge on the king of Garðaríki for refusing Franmarr Ingibjörg's hand in the first place:

'hlaupa þeir upp með hernaði, brenna ok bræla þar til er þeir fara yfir landit, drepa menn ok fénað' (28.41 / GJ III, 159 – similar in expression to 23.24 / GJ III 145 cited above).

And now the saga is almost over. The light and the macabre are served up side by side or in close proximity and probably to some intended effect. Thirdly, in a number of the 'revenge' citations quoted above, there are stylistic features which have previously been largely missing from the text. Why should it be that it is in these descriptions of violent acts of vengeance that we have, for the first time, concentrations of alliterating pairs, present participles, and another rhetorical device, the trope *þar mátti sjá ...?* Is it simply because the nature of the narrative has changed and a different style is therefore appropriate? Why are these acts described in ostensibly approbative stereotypes: *þetta verk it mikla* and *ok er þessum inum miklu stórvirkjum var lokit*? Is this portrayal a critical underlining of the fact that it is only through aggression that Franmarr finally gains Ingibjörg?

As often with Old Norse literature, the changing modes and tones are admittedly difficult to fit into the homogenous concept of a work that we as modern recipients unconsciously expect or hope to find. Given that there is one feature of the text that is more or less a constant – a consistent lightness of some of the repartee, distributed fairly evenly throughout the saga, also in its more macabre and violent sections – it is not automatically necessary to attribute shifts in style, and therefore in tone, in what is mainly the last third of the saga, to simple incompetence (i.e. the work of a remanieur who didn't realise what pattern he might be disturbing by making unthinking additions). Inaptitude or failure to coordinate may be a factor, yet there is something in the conventionally rhetorical tone of these descriptions of, and therefore comments on, violence that contrasts so much with the rest of the discourse that one is forced to ask whether, albeit as part of a process of extending an earlier, shorter, text, they might constitute a thoughtfully-constructed continuation of a mock-heroic undertone that was already established in the saga.

While trying to look at the mechanisms of humour in this text, I am not suggesting that *Stsst*, which is understandably something of an underdog in the literary canon, should necessarily be given higher literary status than it probably has at the moment. I do, however, maintain that a good deal of its humour reflects a sophistication and playfulness that deserves credit and recognition, while there is clearly also a darker side, the potentially grotesque and macabre humour, which, partly perhaps because of its complex cultural background, is harder to come to grips with.

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