

Scenes from Daily Life in the Sagas of Icelanders: Narrative Function

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This topic may sound trivial, and so it is, in a sense. It should be emphasized, however, that this paper does not deal with scenes from daily life in the sagas from the point of view of folklife studies – although that might in itself be interesting – but strictly from a literary angle. It is – or was – frequently assumed that the saga was a rather simple and pure narrative form – one of the “Einfache Formen” (to quote an old book title) – like the folktale and the heroic song.¹ The saga is in some ways similar to the simple forms: action is all-important, but the saga’s development as a written form has opened up possibilities for the occasional inclusion of elements that enlarge and add new dimensions to the picture drawn by the narrative, thus raising the question of how this might affect the potential that the genre has for expression of ideas and emotions.

In *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, a book that I published in 1998, I attempted to describe the sagas as a kind of literature, outlining their formal characteristics as narratives as well as their relationship to a particular society, a particular culture and its memories. There I maintained that the people who wrote the sagas tried to find their bearings in a turbulent world by conducting a kind of dialogue with their own past by

1 See Jolles 1968. Jolles discusses the Icelandic sagas briefly in the context of *Sage*, pp. 66–75. Although a firm believer in oral sagas, Jolles does not classify them as ‘Einfache Formen’; they are, he says, “an und für sich ebensowenig Einfache Form, wie die Viten, die in den Acta Sanctorum gesammelt wurden. Auch hier haben wir, was wir Vergegenwärtigung einer Einfachen Form oder aktuelle Form genannt haben. Aber darüber hinaus ist auch die gefestigte mündliche Überlieferung, die in den Handschriften schriftlich fixiert wurde, noch keine Einfache Form... auch sie ist *gegenwärtig* und damit in gewissem Sinne schon Kunstform” (p. 71).

telling stories about important and interesting events in the lives of their ancestors. The saga writers were deeply anxious about the changes taking place in their society that presented serious challenges to their traditional values. Christianity offered them a strong world view that answered all questions about matters of morality as well as public life. That world view had never fully gained ground in secular affairs, although this was now occurring as the Norwegian king sought to extend his influence and authority in Iceland. However, Icelanders knew tales and poems from the past that described events, often tragic events, in the lives of people who were considered admirable, although these people did not necessarily behave admirably from the point of view of the Christian morality. The duty to take revenge for certain offences against their families led them into feuds that often had tragic consequences.

Therefore, the Icelanders of the thirteenth century looked nostalgically to a world that was basically tragic, but in which people had the choice to act with dignity at the risk of losing their lives or those who were dearest to them. The thirteenth-century world seemed to offer simpler solutions, but something was missing. The sagas react in different ways to this situation, and there is, in my opinion, a development in the reactions. What is under discussion here may be seen as a side issue in the analysis of the saga genre, but it is usually helpful to approach complex problems from many sides.

A study of one particular kind of literature in a historical context inevitably makes one aware of the interplay of genres, or discourses if you like, that constitute the background of a particular genre and define it. Part of my previously mentioned project was therefore to compare the sagas with other kinds of narrative that could have formed this background, but also to modern narrative. These remarks about daily life in the sagas are to be seen in this context.²

When the sagas started to be known outside Iceland, they were seen primarily as interesting expressions of the spirit of a primitive Germanic or Northern society with a peculiarly developed sense of honour and a fine narrative tradition. Accidentally, many of their characteristics found

2 Another extension or continuation of the argument in *Dialogues with the Viking Age* is to be found in a recent article by the present author, 2007a. See also: Vésteinn Ólason 2007b.

an echo in the literary taste of the nineteenth century, a taste that was formed by the realistic tradition in novel writing. For all the differences between saga and novel, the characterization and restrained style of the sagas was much closer to the nineteenth-century tastes than the style of medieval narrative forms already familiar to people, such as courtly romances or saints' lives. Moreover, the sagas told stories of ordinary people rather than limiting themselves to kings and aristocrats, and this harmonized well with the tastes of new groups of readers. Several scholars declared that there was an unmistakable relationship between the sagas and the novel.³ Historically, it is easy to prove that such affinities as there are between the sagas and the novel must be accidental; there is no direct link. When the modern novel arose in totally different social circumstances, the sagas were totally unknown outside Iceland (the first important novelist who knew anything about the sagas was Sir Walter Scott (Wawn 2000: 66)).⁴ Exactly for this reason, however, it is interesting to study the narrative form of the sagas and ask what it is that has made people compare them with the novel. Scenes from daily life can be interesting from this point of view, because no genre is as rich in such scenes as the novel. The function of such scenes affects the relationship between content and form, and demonstrates that when form is filled with a new kind of content, it will be changed.

Experience shows that when scholars are dealing with groups of texts they often tend to work with simplifications, plot summaries in the case of narrative literature. The scholar looks at one important link after another in the chain of narrative, investigates what is added to what happened previously and what possibilities are opened for further development of the plot. This is practical, but it means that many scenes and episodes, not to mention smaller segments of the text, that seem less important escape attention, although such elements may be revealing and interesting upon a closer look. Many scenes from daily life are of this sort. Although structurally unimportant, they add nuances to the texture of the works that ought not to be overlooked in the analysis and interpretation of these works.

3 See, for instance Ker 1957: 183.

4 See also Simpson 1973.

In *Íslendingasögur*, interest is directed only or almost exclusively to memorable events leading to, advancing and resolving conflicts concerning honour.⁵ Describing daily life for its own sake is definitely not one of the sagas' concerns. Nevertheless, we can find scenes from daily life in the sagas, and the study of such scenes can throw interesting light on their nature as narratives. The Icelandic saga gradually developed into a separate kind of written narrative during the second half of the twelfth and the first half of the thirteenth century. The saga has many roots: on the one hand in the written literature of the Middle Ages, historical works (*historiae*), chronicles, romances and saints' lives, but also in oral narratives such as the heroic lay and the heroic tale, as well as historical or local legends of various kinds. Although the saga developed its own distinct characteristics, it did not sever all its ties to these different kinds of narrative; on the contrary, it developed in constant interaction with the types of texts (written or oral) surrounding it. Inclusion of scenes from daily life may widen the scope of saga narrative and change its nature in the process, and it may offer clues to its interpretation, to our understanding of the fate of the characters not otherwise easily decipherable.

It is well known that many types of traditional narrative are indeed 'closed' texts, that is, they move through conventional steps that lead to a predictable end, and their world is composed of a finite set of elements that can be arranged in different ways but on the basis of fixed or nearly fixed rules, that can be seen as a kind of grammar. These rules govern the understanding as well as the creation of a tale: the tale refers directly only to its own kind. The best known example of this finiteness is the fairy tale or *Märchen*, as analysed by Vladimir Propp (1968). The heroic tale is a much looser concept, and it refers to a more varied group of texts than the fairy tale. Nevertheless, there have been many attempts to describe a basic form of tales about heroes using methods similar to those employed by Propp and his structuralist followers.⁶

5 A thorough treatment of the subject is found in Meulengracht Sørensen 1993: 187–248.

6 A survey of hero pattern studies is found in Taylor 1964. Best known of such studies is probably Lord Raglan's study, *The Hero* (1936); see also de Vries 1959: 194–208.

It is a fundamental feature of both the fairy tale and the heroic tale – or the heroic song – that practically every element in the text serves the action. This is not always obvious when we are looking at descriptive or introductory elements, but in fact they serve either to characterize a type of person filling a certain role, which is necessary for the action, or, perhaps, a type of environment, a conventional setting for such action as will occur. There is, of course, some room for variation in all of these elements, depending upon the convention. We must keep in mind that the world and action of written narrative can be just as conventional or closed as that of oral narrative, although the written form usually allows for more variation.

Íslendingasögur have many conventional elements. They have hero types and typical patterns of action,⁷ but quite often there are elements in the texts that are not easy to classify as belonging to a fixed or finite set of saga-elements. Occasionally, we find scenes from daily life that seem to open a window to the world which surrounds the closed universe of the conventional saga. If such openings are found only exceptionally, the basic structure may remain intact, but if they become more numerous, if one peephole is replaced by many windows, we see a qualitative change in kind, from a closed to an open narrative. This change is most important, because it opens the narrative for new and various interpretations. Such a change towards a more open form was occurring in *Íslendingasögur*, causing them to make a relatively modern impression compared with many other literary works of the Middle Ages. As an illustration, five saga-scenes from daily life shall be discussed here: two describe meals, one describes hair-washing, and two show a man and a woman in the privacy of the bedchamber.

There is hardly a more common act in people's lives than having a meal. How it is done varies greatly depending on time and place and the relationship of the individuals involved, as we all know. In many modern novels we find detailed descriptions of such scenes. They are a convenient frame for dialogue and help to characterize the cultural environment of a place or a period and add local colour. Moreover, for many modern people writing and reading about a meal is a source of

⁷ These are discussed, for instance, by Lönnroth 1976: 61–82.

pleasure in itself. Such scenes are rare in *Íslendingasögur*, and those we find are certainly not included for the purpose of describing the enjoyment of a good meal. A gathering for eating and drinking, a banquet in a hall, is a conventional motif in Germanic heroic poetry as we know from *Beowulf*, the eddic lays about Atli, and from sagas. These banquets are very formal occasions, with emphasis on how people are seated according to status, and quite often a dialogue occurs which is crucial for the action to come. This motif is prominent in Icelandic sagas, such as *Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*. In two sagas, however, we read about a different kind of meal, informal and much closer to daily life than a banquet.

In *Fóstbræðra saga* (“The Saga of the Sworn Brothers”) one of the two heroes, Þorgeirr Hávarsson, has sought quarters with a farmer during his wanderings around a sparsely populated area of Iceland. The farmer already has a visitor, a tramp called Butraldi, whom the saga describes as: “*einhleypingr, mikill maðr vexti, rammr at afli, ljótr í ásjónu, harðfengr í skaplyndi, vígamaðr mikill, nasbráðr ok heiptúðigr*” (ÍF, vol. 6, pp. 142–43). [a loner of no fixed abode. He was a large, powerfully built man with an ugly face, quick-tempered and vengeful, and he was a great slayer of men” (CSI, vol. 2).]⁸

Although Þorgeirr is described in more respectful terms, much of this description actually also fits him quite well. The farmer is a truly comic figure, faint-hearted and niggardly, although he is well off. The laws of hospitality force him to give the travellers shelter for the night and serve them food, but his lack of spirit and generosity is shown by the meal he serves:

“Skammr er skutill minn,” segir Þorkell, “ok gakk þú hingat, Þorgeirr, ok sit hjá Butralda.” Þorgeirr gerir svá, gengr um þvert gólf ok sezk niðr hjá Butralda undir borðs endann. Frá verðgetum er sagt vandliga: Tveir diskar váru fram bornir; þá var eitt skammrifsstykki fornt á diskinum hvárum ok forn ostr til gnœttar. Butraldi signdi skamma stund,

⁸ Quotations in Icelandic are from the editions in the series *Íslenzk fornrit* (abbreviated ÍF), vols. 3 (Reykjavík 1938) and 6 (Reykjavík 1948), while quotations in English are from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (abbreviated CSI), vols. 2 and 4 (Reykjavík 1997).

tekr upp skammrífitt ok skerr ok neytir ok leggr eigi niðr, fyrr en allt var rutt af rifjum. Þorgeirr tók upp ostinn ok skar af slíkt er honum sýndisk; var hann harðr ok torsótttr. Hvárrgi þeira vildi deila við annan kníf né kjötstykki. En þó at þeim væri lítt verðr vandaðr, þá fóru þeir þó eigi til sjálfir at skepja sér mat, því at þeim þótti þat skömm sinnar karlmennsku (ÍF, vol. 6, pp. 144–45).

[“I don’t have much to offer,” said Thorkel, “but come, Thorgeir, sit here beside Butraldi.”

Thorgeir did so. He walked across the room and sat down at the table beside Butraldi. There is a detailed report of what they ate: two platters were brought in; on one of them was some old short-rib mutton and on the other a large quantity of old cheese. Butraldi made a brief sign of the cross [implying that he did not follow this custom at all], then picked up the mutton ribs, carved off the meat and continued to eat until the bones were picked clean. Thorgeir took the cheese and cut off as much as he wanted, though it was hard and difficult to pare. Neither of them would share either the knife or the food with the other. Though the meal was not good, they did not bring out their own provisions for fear that it would be seen as a sign of weakness (CSI, vol. 2, p. 341).]

The scene is repeated the next morning, only with the roles reversed: Þorgeirr grabs the meat while Butraldi tackles the old cheese. They then leave the farm, exchange insults, and Þorgeirr kills Butraldi in a picturesque way that may be either the model for the famous description of how Skarphéðinn kills Þráinn on the ice in *Njáls saga*, or a parody of it, depending on which saga is older and how we interpret *Fóstbræðra saga*. In *Njáls saga*, the hero Skarphéðinn glides on the ice covering the banks of a river, jumps across the river itself where it is not frozen, glides on towards his enemies, chops the head of their leader, and then glides away on the ice; in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Þorgeirr glides on hard snow down a slope and kills Butraldi. Although more exaggerated, Skarphéðinn’s feat is described in an indisputably heroic style without irony, while in *Fóstbræðra saga* this scene is written in an ornate style, more frequently found in this saga than other *Íslendingasögur*, and characterized, i. a.,

by alliteration. This rather ‘high’ style underlines the irony of the passage through the contrast with the matter being related.

It is difficult to appreciate fully the humour and ambiguity of this episode when it is read out of context, and the irony implicit in the style does not come through in translation. The climax is reached with one of Þorgeirr’s ‘heroic’ deeds, and Butraldi is described as a formidable opponent. His killing adds one more trophy to Þorgeirr’s collection. However, the context clearly shows that both ‘heroes’ are nothing but brutal thugs. Their wanderings about the barren regions of northwest Iceland, their meagre meal and their fights, can easily be seen as a parody of the wanderings of errant knights through the greenwood and their encounters with noble knights, their feasts in castles and their single combats, sometimes fought against giants. The description of the meal just given is pure comedy, and Þorgeirr’s heroic image (he certainly tries to live up to a heroic ideal) is undermined by the description of his host, of his adversary, and the meal. The conclusion is that *Fóstbræðra saga* is certainly not a closed, conventional heroic tale but an ambiguous and ironic narrative that maintains a critical distance from the heroic convention. Apart from the style, the contrast between content and form, there are of course other episodes in the saga that support such an interpretation. This does not mean that the saga is pacifistic, that it is contemptuous of heroism, physical bravery or dexterity at arms as such, but it shows that such gifts of God should only be used in the service of a good cause, and the viking ideals that Þorgeirr embodies are rejected and even ridiculed.

In *Heiðarvíga saga* (“The Saga of the Slayings on the Heath”), there is a scene describing how food is served. No less than the scene from *Fóstbræðra saga* it gives us an unexpected glimpse into the daily life of Icelanders in the Middle Ages. To explain the situation for those who do not know this saga, it should be mentioned that the oldest son of the family in question was killed abroad by Icelanders from another district. The killers then perished at sea, but the family honour had to be reclaimed by exerting vengeance. Through a carefully planned series of events Barði, the second son, has created a situation that will allow him, without seeming excessively vindictive, to attack the killers’ kinsmen, people who had nothing to do with the killing of his brother.

The following scene takes place when he and a number of men that he has gathered are prepared to undertake the dangerous ride into the other district to make the attack:

Nú ferr Barði heim ok fǫruneyti hans ok er heima nótt þá. Um morgninn býr Koll-Gríss þeim dögurð; en þat var siðr, at lagðr var matr á borð fyrir menn, en þá váru engir diskar. Þat varð til nýnæmis, at af hurfu þrennar deildirnar fyrir þrem mǫnnum; gekk hann ok sagði til þess Barða. “Hef þú fram borð,” segir hann, “ok rœð ekki um þat fyrir ǫðrum mǫnnum.” En Þuríðr mælti, at þeim sonum hennar skyldi ekki deila dögurð, ok kvazk hon deila mundu. Svá gerir hann, at hann hefr borð fram, borð fyrir mann, ok deilir mat á. Þuríðr gengr þá innar ok leggr sitt stykki fyrir hvern þeira brœðra, ok var þar þá yxinsbógrinn ok brytjaðr í þrennt. Tekr hann Steingrímr til orða ok mælti: “Þó er nú brytjat stórmannliga, móðir, ok ekki áttu vanða til at gefa mǫnnum svá kappsamliga mat, ok er á þessu mikit vanstilli, ok ertu nær óvitandi vits.” Hon svarar: “Ekki er þetta furða nein, ok máttu þetta ekki undrask, fyrir því at stœrra var Hallr, bróðir yðvarr, brytjaðr, ok heyrða ek yðr ekki þess geta, at þat væri nein furða” (ÍF, vol. 3, pp. 276–77).

[Bardi and his companions then went home to spend the night at his farm. The following morning Koll-Gris prepared them a meal. According to the custom of the time food was placed on the wooden platters before the men, as there were no dishes then. Something unusual happened: three servings, intended for three men, had disappeared.

He went and reported this to Bardi, who said, “Lay the platters and say nothing of this to anyone else.”

Thurid said that her sons should not be served breakfast, but that she intended to serve them. Koll-Gris brought forth platters, a platter for each man, upon which his food was served. Thurid then went in along the hall and placed a portion before each of the brothers, which turned out to be the shoulder of the ox, split into three pieces.

Steingrim spoke, saying, “You’ve carved these portions generously, mother, although you’re not usually one to serve food so eagerly.

This is completely out of proportion, and you must have nearly lost your wits.”

She answered, “There’s nothing strange about it, and you needn’t be surprised, as your brother Hall was carved up into larger pieces without me hearing you mention that it was anything strange” (CSI, vol. 4, p. 104).]

This passage introduces a goading-scene, a *hvøt*. The mother is here creating a situation in which she can mock her sons and remind them of the dishonour afflicted on the family, in order to strengthen their thirst for revenge. The scene serves the heroic plot of the saga by opening a dialogue between mother and sons, and it is an attempt to make the narrative more effective by first creating a puzzle, which is then solved by Þuríðr’s speech. The dialogue that follows is indeed part of a conventional heroic pattern, and the scene as a whole functions exactly as Guðrún Gjúkadóttir’s *hvøt* in the eddic lays *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvøt*: the mother is sharpening the will of her sons and making them angry as they are about to ride off on a journey of revenge. It is a stock-scene of heroic narrative, charging the text with emotions and slowing down the action. However, the circumstantial manner in which the preparation for the meal is described gives us a glimpse into the daily life of these people. The narrator also uses the opportunity to mark the distance in time and emphasize the historical nature of his narrative by pointing out that things were done differently at the time when the saga takes place from how they are done in his own age. The saga has a wider scope than the eddic lay, and it can include detail for which there is no room in a *kviða* or lay. The details of this scene are not likely to have been recorded from oral tradition: the author of the saga, who based his narrative on heroic models that he knew from tradition, must have invented the scene with its descriptive detail as well as the dialogue. The broad approach of the saga has called for innovation and attention to detail that inevitably changes the form of heroic legend and opens it up for interpretation. Compared with Guðrún’s direct and dignified approach in the eddic lay, Þuríðr’s circumstantial way of introducing her goading words has a comic ring, and an ambiguous feeling is strengthened when we are told that the following morning, when she tries to accompany her sons on their ride for revenge,

they get rid of her by making her fall into a small stream out of which she crawls and turns back home alone, bereft of the dignity that is befitting the mother of heroes. The goading scene is looked at from a distance, as it were, and it is left to the reader to determine whether it should be taken seriously or as comic relief. In this scene we find the same irony as in the previous scene from *Fóstbræðra saga*: there is an ambiguity here that is much more akin to the novel than the heroic lay. The saga audience might have remembered that Þuríðr's mother, Þorgerðr, the daughter of Egill Skallagrímsson, actually accompanied her sons on a journey of revenge for her son, and in that case no indignity is implied.⁹

Although both *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* can present heroes in a comic light, the attitude to heroic ethics demonstrated by the two sagas is not identical. *Fóstbræðra saga* pays lip service to heroic ideals while it consistently portrays the hero Þorgeirr as a comic figure, and the other hero, Þormóðr, as a man with severe faults mixed with some positive traits. *Heiðarvíga saga* maintains stronger ties to heroic convention, but now and again the author creates distance between the saga and the traditional heroic tale, appearing to be very well aware of the short-sightedness of heroic conduct even if he cannot help but admire it. Two more scenes from daily life illustrate this ambiguity. The first one gives a fine image of heroic splendour, while the other shows that the hero, although calm on the surface, is emotionally tense and unable to return to normal and domestic life after the carnage he has caused.

In the chapter preceding the one already quoted from *Heiðarvíga saga*, the brothers gather their forces, and we find a scene that does not seem to advance the action, and could for that sake be cut with no loss for the plot:

Nú riðr Barði þaðan ok kemr á Bakka, þar sem Þórdís bjó, ok stóð þar hestr sǫðlaðr, ok skjǫldr stóð þar hjá, ok riðu þeir heim mikinn dyn í túnit eptir hǫrðum velli. Þar var úti karlmaðr ok kona, ok þó hon hǫfuð hans, ok vǫru þau Þórdís þar ok Oddr, ok var at vanlykðum

9 Bjarni Guðnason (1993) argues that *Heiðarvíga saga* is younger than *Laxdæla saga*, where the episode in question occurs, but opinions are divided on that issue. In any case, it cannot be excluded that the tale about Þorgerðr was known from oral tradition.

nökkut, er hon þó hofuð hans, ok hafði hon eigi þvegit lauðr ór hofði honum. Ok þegar er hann sá Barða, þá sprettr hann upp ok fagnar honum hlæjandi. Barði tók vel kveðju hans ok biðr konu lúka verki sínu ok vaska honum betr. Hann lét svá gera; ok nú býsk hann ok ferr með Barða (ÍF, vol. 3, p. 273).

[Bardi then rode off and when he came to the farm at Bakki, where Thordis lived, a horse was saddled and waiting, with a shield nearby. He and his following rode with a thunder of hooves into the hayfield across a hard plain. Outside were a man and woman, who proved to be Thordis and Odd. She was washing his hair and had not yet completed the job, as his head was still full of froth. As soon as he saw Bardi he sprang to his feet and greeted him with a laugh. Bardi returned his greeting and asked the woman to finish her work and wash him properly. The man allowed her to do so, then made himself ready and set off with Bardi (CSI, vol. 4, p. 102).]

There is no obvious reason for including this picture of a widow washing her steward's hair in the narrative; it is not *söguligt*, i. e., not really a matter for a story, and it does not seem to have any narrative function other than retardation. Nevertheless, it enlivens the narrative about the gathering of forces and makes it memorable: we can see that the men joining up with Barði are no dirty gangsters, like the thugs of *Fóstbræðra saga*. When Oddr is introduced into the saga, he is thus described: "Oddr . . . var gildr maðr fyrir sér. Ekki var hann eins kostar fégoðfugr eða ættstórr; þó var hann frægr maðr" (ÍF, vol. 3, p. 264). [Odd . . . was a man of some consequence. Though he was neither wealthy nor of good family he was well-known (CSI, vol. 4, p. 98).] Odd has a strange surname: he is called Gefnar-Oddr, which connects him with the goddess Freyja and therefore characterizes him as a ladies' man, although he is not a nobleman. It is likely that his nickname was known from the traditions about the slayings on the heath and inspired the author to create this image of daily life. It illustrates intimacy between the man and the woman, and makes him come alive as a gallant figure. Although Oddr is not a poet, his character is the same as that of the protagonists of the sagas of skalds. In the battle itself he shows his valour and some dexterity with

words when an opponent mocks him for his amorous affairs. We may ask if the adventurous and gallant ladies' man was a traditional type or if it was formed under the influence of romance. Whatever the answer to that question is, this episode shows us how the author of *Heiðarvígja saga* uses a scene from daily life to transgress the limits of traditional narrative. Here this is done in a more elegant and original manner than in the previous example, and no irony is to be found in this scene. It is, however, interesting that this scene, as well as the scene from *Fóstbræðra saga* already discussed, seems to contain an allusion to the world of romance, thus making the meaning of the text more complex.

My last example from *Heiðarvígja saga* is from its final chapter. The protagonist Barði has married a woman of one of the best Icelandic families, Auðr, the daughter of Snorri the Priest. Having lived together for more than a year Barði and Auðr leave for Norway, and there the following, totally unexpected, scene takes place:

Svá bar til einn morgin, er þau váru úti í skemmu bæði, at Barði vildi sofa, en hon vildi vekja hann ok tekr eitt hægendi lítit ok kastar í andlit honum, svá sem með glensi; hann kastar braut, ok ferr svá nökkurum sinnum; ok eitt sinn kastar hann til hennar ok lætr fylgja höndina; hon reiðisk við ok hefir fengit einn stein ok kastar til hans. Ok um daginn eptir drykkju stendr Barði upp ok nefnir sér váttu ok segir skilit við Auði ok segir, at hann vill eigi af henni ofríki taka né ǫðrum monnum; ekki tjár orðum við at koma, svá er þetta fast sett (ÍF, vol. 3, pp. 325).

[It happened one morning that they were both out in a nearby building; Bardi wished to sleep but his wife intended to wake him. She took a small cushion and threw it in his face, as if it were a joke. He tossed it aside and this was repeated several times. Then he threw it at her and let his hand follow [that is, he hit her]. She grew angry, picked up a stone and threw it at him. That same day, after men had gathered for drinking, Bardi stood up and named witnesses and said he was divorcing Aud, on the grounds that he would not stand for her tyranny nor anyone else's. Nothing anyone said could dissuade him, his mind was so set on this (CSI, vol. 4, p. 128).]

The fight between the couple is so real that it could have happened yesterday: an innocent and even flirtatious pillow-fight that gets out of control and ends in disaster. At this point in the story, the heroic plot is finished and the aftermath is being related. Since the hero has still not been killed, the author, according to saga conventions, has to dispose of him in some way. In the rest of the chapter, we are briefly informed of the subsequent lives of the couple: Barði journeys to Constantinople, joins the Varangian guard, earns a good reputation and falls in battle, while “Auðr var gipt ǫðrum ríkum manni, syni Þóris hunds, er Sigurðr hét, ok eru þaðan komnir Bjarkeyingar, inir ágæztu menn” (ÍF, vol. 3, p. 325–326). [“Aud was married to another powerful man, called Sigurd, son of Thorir the Dog. The Bjarkey clan, the finest of men, is descended from them” (CSI, vol. 4, p. 129).]

Barði is here portrayed as a lonely man unable to develop lasting emotional ties to other people, and the path he was forced to choose, the path of the avenger, proves to be a dead end in his personal life. The feeling created is exactly the same as when we see the lonely hero of a western movie ride towards the sunset after he has killed those who had to be killed and lost his friends and allies in the course of the action.

The narrator has here taken leave of the hero and given him the heroic death that is due to him, but he also honours another convention, to name the descendants of some of the main characters, when it is mentioned that Barði’s wife Auðr was married again and had noble descendants in Norway. This is in striking contrast to her former husband, who leaves no offspring. The saga might be asking whether it is better to leave the world nothing but a great reputation or to leave fine descendants. The saga provides no answer, and the question about the inevitability and yet the futility of revenge hovers in the air. *Fóstbræðra saga* mocks the hero Þorgeirr and presents the story of his life as a comedy, while *Heiðarvíga saga* presents Barði as a tragic hero; individual scenes as the goading by Þuríðr function as comic relief, but the overall mode of the saga is tragic, as is shown in the way it takes leave of its main hero.

It is not often that *Íslendingasögur* give us a glimpse into a couple’s bed-chamber, as in the example above. *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (“The Saga of Gísli Súrsson”) is an exception, and the scene now to be discussed ends very differently from the one in *Heiðarvíga saga*. In addition to

two scenes in *Gísli saga* in which important characters are killed in their beds in the presence of their wife or sister, a more mundane, apparently trivial, scene from a bed-chamber is given in one of its chapters. Þorkell Súrsson, the brother of the heroic Gísli, has overheard a chat between Gísli's wife Auðr and his own wife Ásgerðr, during which Auðr suggests that Ásgerðr has more love for Auðr's brother Vésteinn than for her own husband. Ásgerðr agrees, and their words indicate that the affair was more than just a crush. The women realize that Þorkell has heard their words when he rises from his resting place and recites a stanza saying that their words will lead to the deaths of one or more people. The same evening the following scene takes place:

Þorkell neytir lítt matar um kveldit ok gengr fyrstr manna at sofa. Ok er hann var kominn í rekkju, þá kemr þar Ásgerðr ok lyptir klæðum ok ætlar niðr at leggjask. Þá tók Þorkell til orða: “Ekki ætla ek þér hér at liggja náttlangt né lengra banni.” Ásgerðr mælti: “Hví hefir svá skjótt skipazk, eða hvat berr til þess?” segir Ásgerðr. Þorkell mælti: “Bæði vitu vit nú sökina, þótt ek hafa lengi leyndr verit, ok mun þinn hróðr ekki at meiri, þó at ek mæla berara.” Hon svarar: “Þú munt ráða verða hugleiðing þinni um þetta, en ekki mun ek lengi þœfask til hvílunnar við þik, ok um tvá kosti áttu at velja. Sá er annarr, at þú tak við mér ok lát sem ekki sé í orðit. Ella mun ek nefna mér vátta nú þegar ok segja skilit við þik, ok mun ek láta fõður minn heimta mund minn ok heimanfylgju, ok mun sá kostur, at þú hafir aldri hvíluþrõng af mér síðan.” Þorkell þagnaði ok mælti um síðir: “Þat ræð ek, at þú ger hvárt þér líkar, en eigi mun ek banna rekkjuna náttlangt.” Hon lýsti brátt yfir því, hvárr henni þótti betri, ok ferr þegar í rekkju sína. Eigi hafa þau lengi bæði saman legit, áðr en þau semja þetta með sér, svá sem ekki hefði í orðit (ÍF, vol. 6, pp. 32–33).

[Thorkel ate very little that evening and was the first to retire to bed.

Once he was there, Asgerd came to him, lifted the blanket, and was about to lie down when Thorkel said, “I will not have you lying here tonight, nor for a very long time to come.”

Asgerd replied, “Why this sudden change? What is the reason for this?”

“We both know what’s behind this,” said Thorkel, “though I have been kept in the dark about it for a long time. It will not help your reputation if I speak more plainly.”

“You think what you will,” answered Asgerd, “but I am not going to argue with you about whether I may sleep in this bed or not. You have a choice—either you take me in and act as if nothing has happened or I will call witnesses this minute, divorce you and have my father reclaim my bride-price and my dowry. Then you wouldn’t have to worry about my taking up room in your bed ever again.”

Thorkel was quiet for a while, then he said, “I advise you to do as you wish. I shall not stop you from sleeping here all night.”

She soon made clear what she wanted to do, and they had not been lying together for too long before they made up as if nothing had happened (CSI, vol. 2, p. 10).]

The types of characters we meet here are well known from heroic narrative. Þorkell is the anti-hero, an indeterminate and cowardly man who does not do his duty by honouring his obligations to his kinsmen and who generally does not keep his word. Ásgerðr is a female hero, proud, determined and passionate. Obviously, she does not have the fierce pride of Brynhildr, who wants none but the best of men. Ásgerðr, however, will accept no humiliation from her husband, and she has no scruples about using her sexual power over him to ensure this. There are fine psychological nuances here. Þorkell’s lack of character is never directly mentioned, let alone condemned, but is revealed through the contrast between his brave words and his actions, as well as repeatedly through the contrast between his own behaviour and that of his brother.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, both Ásgerðr and Þorkell act according to practical unheroic considerations, but the woman shows strength

¹⁰ The ethics of *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, the evaluation of the characters and their acts, is a controversial subject, especially to what degree an underlying criticism of Gísli’s heroic values is inherent in the text. I have discussed this in Vésteinn Ólason 1999 and 2003; for more or less differing interpretations, see Bredsdorff 1971: 67–81, Meulengracht Sørensen 1986, and Andersson 1968, and 2006: 77–85.

and determination. This scene seems to have more in common with comic narratives of a fabliaux-type than with a heroic lay.

In spite of the conventional traits of this scene, it opens the heroic form towards daily life and invites the reader to compare the saga with different kinds of texts. All the scenes that have been discussed here do this in one way or another. They do not belong to the high points in the narrative, and they would be left out in plot-summaries because they tell of events that in themselves are unworthy of telling according to convention. Nevertheless, they are an integral part of the text, belong to the web of the tale, bring the characters closer to the readers and help them to see through the text. From the finite traditional heroic tale they create one of the sagas' many links to infinite textuality as well as to the extra-textual reality of the past.

Íslendingasögur have come to us as literature, and one of the things that make them fascinating is that we can see how they are formed by conflicting and even contradictory social and textual forces. Inclusion of details from daily life and an ambiguous attitude to heroic ethics – identification and admiration conflicting with critical or ironic attitudes – as well as allusions to other contemporary kinds of narrative, cause the sagas to be seen as foreshadowing the birth of the novel. That being said, it must be repeated that the saga and the novel are two fundamentally different kinds of narrative, not historically related at all.

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