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“Vera varð ek nǫkkur”:  
The reader, the women, and the berserks  
in *Grettir's Saga*<sup>1</sup>

Though widely regarded as the finest vernacular prose narratives of the Middle Ages, the Icelandic family sagas have been ignored by most standard works on narrative theory. A notable exception is Scholes and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative*, which describes the sagas as “almost miraculously precocious” (43); but even here the discussion is confined to questions of orality and saga origins rather than the subtle, controlled, and sometimes wickedly comical effects of the family sagas. When a work such as *Grettir's Saga* does become the object of scholarly attention, it is often mined for *Beowulf* analogues rather than appreciated for its deft narration.

Occasional efforts to remedy this neglect have been repaid. A good example is Robert Cook's article, “The Reader in *Grettis saga*,” which argues that the reader's own uncertainty about the protagonist is a key element in the saga's design. “The reader of *Grettla*,” Cook notes, “has an exciting role to play: faced with a confusion of fragmentary perspectives on the hero's actions, both the contradictory actions of Grettir himself and the comments and attitudes of others, he has a hard time making up his mind about Grettir” (133). Cook's article traces the psychic reception of the text as the reader “moves from bewilderment and uncertainty about Grettir to a position of relative clarity by the time Grettir begins his outlawry” (133). Although Cook's nomenclature reflects his interest in reader-response and New Criticism, his conclusions chime well with W.P. Ker's view of saga technique offered almost eight decades earlier:

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The story for [the Icelandic authors] is not a thing over and done with; it is a series of pictures arising in the mind, succeeding, displacing, and correcting one another; all under the control of a steady imagination, which will not be hurried, and will not tell the bearing of things till the right time comes. The vivid effect of the Saga, if it be studied at all closely, will be found to be due to this steadiness of imagination which gives first the blurred and inaccurate impression, the possibility of danger, the matter for surmises and suspicions, and then the clearing up (236–37).

What Ker claims for the sagas generally, or at least the better ones, Cook explicates in detail by tracing the reader's developing attitude toward Grettir.

But how exactly does a narrator create and then slowly clear up these inaccurate impressions and suspicions? The question does not lend itself to summary treatment; as Ker points out, "it is not possible to do much by way of illustration, or to exhibit piecemeal what only exists as a complete thing, and can only be understood as such" (235). Nor is a more sustained effort recommended by Ker, who thought it "laborious and superfluous to follow each of [the sagas] with an exposition of the value of each stroke in the work" (236). Cook's exposition of *Grettir's Saga* is neither laborious nor superfluous, however, and one might reasonably hope that an even more focused investigation would prove worthwhile. I propose to take a closer look at one part of Cook's study, his explication of Grettir's encounter with the berserks, with a special interest in the narrative techniques employed in this pivotal episode. By doing so, I hope to show that these effects are crucial to our understanding of both Grettir and saga narration generally.

Cook himself attributes special significance to the berserk episode, which narrates the arrival of Thorir Paunch and his brother Ogmund the Evil, as well as Grettir's deception and subsequent slaying of the berserks. The episode is interesting for many reasons, not the least of which is the way it parodies both medieval chivalry and the hospitality topos. The man of the house, Thorfinn, is away, while Grettir remains behind with Thorfinn's wife, daughter, and household help. In a droll sendup of saga hospitality, Grettir receives the berserks warmly despite their announced desire to seek vengeance against Thorfinn for having had them outlawed. Grettir's cordial reception, which extends to an implied offer of female company for the night, provokes a round of denunciations and lamentations from the women of the house.

Cook relates the reader's response to that of the women: "In this episode, the question of the reader's response is paramount, for the reader is in a position comparable to that of Thorfinn's wife and daughter — he doesn't know for certain what Grettir is up to" (142). The pattern of the housewife's response — initial shock, subsequent suspicion and sarcasm, and eventual gratitude — does indeed offer an excellent example of "the inaccurate impression, the possibility of danger, the matter for surmises and suspicions, and then the clearing up" mentioned by Ker. Cook further argues that the cruelty and incorrigibility of the earlier chapters is better understood as a reflection of Grettir's just sense of his own worth, which "is an attractive quality, though it is often taken for arrogance by lesser men" (141). Lesser women as well, one might add, with Thorfinn's wife serving as the prime example.

Lingering uncertainty about Grettir's character is no doubt displaced to the women in this chapter. Long before the episode's denouement, however, the reader knows very well that the women have misjudged Grettir; indeed, this knowledge is a major source of the episode's humor. Consider the moment when Thorir gallantly offers his sexual services:

Pórir mælti þá: "Ver eigi stygg, húsfreyja; engi missir skal þér í verða, þó at bóndi sé eigi heima, því at fá skal mann í stað hans, ok svá dóttur þinni ok öllum heimakonum." "Slíkt er karlmannliga talat," sagði Grettir; "megu þær þá eigi yfir sinn hlut sjá." Nú stukku fram konur allar, ok sló á þær óhug miklum ok gráti (64–65).<sup>2</sup>

[Then Thorir said, "Don't be upset, lady. You won't lack anything, even though your husband isn't home, because you'll get a man in his place — and so will your daughter and all the other women." "Spoken like a true man," said Grettir. "They can't be dissatisfied with their lot." Then all the women rushed away in great despair and wept.]

Certainly the reader does not think, even this early in the episode, that Thorir's offer enjoys Grettir's approbation. Grettir's response is clearly parodical, and the women's panic only heightens the comic effect.

A similar scene occurs after Grettir offers the berserks plenty of Thorfinn's beer:

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<sup>2</sup> All citations are from the Íslenzk Fornrit edition unless otherwise noted; translations are my own.

Þá sér Grettir, at þeir gerask moeddir nokkut af drykknum. Hann mælti þá: “Þykkir yðr eigi mál at fara til svefns?” Þórir kvað svá vera skyldu, — “ok skal efna þat, er ek hét húsfreyju.” Grettir gekk fram ok mælti hátt: “Gangið til sængr, konur,” segir hann; “svá vill Þórir bóndi skipa.” Þær báðu honum ills á móti; var inn mesti úlfabytr til þeira at heyra (66).

[Then Grettir sees that they stupefy themselves somewhat with the drink. Then he said, “Don’t you all think it’s time to go to sleep?” Thorir said that is was — “And I shall do what I promised for the housewife.” Grettir walked out and said in a loud voice, “Go to bed, women,” he says, “for Farmer Thorir will have it so.” They cursed him in reply; there was a great howling from them.]

Again, the reader is not likely to miss the beginnings of Grettir’s plan to do in the berserks. (This recognition may be related to the horizon of expectations created by berserk episodes in earlier sagas; for discussion, see Sprenger 1991: 285.)

What is less apparent, perhaps, is the method by which the narrator subtly reveals Grettir’s intentions without suggesting that the women’s view is groundless. Two narrative cues in particular help set up the dramatic irony in this episode. The first cue concerns narrative perspective; the relevant question in this passage, as so often in the sagas, is not “who speaks?” but “who sees?” (cf. Genette 1980: 186). The second cue is central to the linguistic structure of saga narrative. Scholars have long observed that saga narrators manipulate the verbal category of tense to signal the relative significance of different events and descriptions. Discourse analysts investigating the same phenomenon in modern conversational narrative have labeled such signaling “internal evaluation” (Schiffrin 1981: 59); this sort of directed perception is usually contrasted with external evaluation, which consists of the narrator’s direct commentary on the action. The sagas are notorious for their lack of such commentary, a characteristic that makes internal evaluation all the more crucial to their narrative effects.

Taking the question of perspective first, we notice that this episode is narrated exclusively from Grettir’s point of view and not the women’s. Point of view is established with a relatively small repertory of perception verbs, as can be seen in the description of the berserks’ arrival:

Þá sá Grettir, at skip reri at eyjunni; þat var ekki mikit ok skarat skjöldum milli stafna; skipit var steint fyrir ofan sjá. Þeir reru knáliga

ok stefndu at naustum Þorfinns, ok er skipit kenndi niðr, hljópu þeir fyrir borð, sem á váru. Grettir hafði tólu á mǫnnum þessum, at þeir váru tólf saman. Ekki *bótti* honum þeir friðliga láta. Þeir tóku upp skip sitt ok báru af sjá. Eptir þat hljópu þeir at naustinu; þar stóð inni karfinn Þorfinns, sá inn stóri. Hann settu aldri færi menn á sjá en þeir tigur, en þeir tólf rykkðu honum þegar fram á fjörugrjótit. Síðan tóku þeir upp sitt skip ok báru inn í naustit. Þá *þóttisk* Grettir *sjá*, at þeir myndi ætla at bjóða sér sjálfir beina (63).

[Then Grettir *saw* a ship making for the island. It wasn't big, and it had a line of overlapping shields from stem to stern; the ship was painted above the water line. The men were rowing fast toward Thorfinn's boat shed, and when the ship grounded they jumped overboard. Grettir counted the men, and they were twelve altogether. They did not *seem* to him to comport themselves peacefully. They took up their ship and carried it off the water. After that they ran to the boat shed where Thorfinn's big ship was standing. It had never been launched by fewer than thirty men, but the twelve pulled it quickly to the shingle. Then they took up their own ship and carried it into the shed. Then Grettir *thought* he *saw* that they were planning to offer themselves hospitality.]

This passage in particular relies heavily on focalization (Genette 1980: 189), or what Ker calls "indirect description." The perception verbs here (*sjá* and *þykkir*) do not merely report what Grettir sees and registers; they also require the reader to envision the action from Grettir's perspective. According to Ker, this technique is characteristic of the saga. "No medieval writers, and few of the modern, have understood the point of view as well as the authors of the story of *Njal* or of *Kjartan*," Ker points out (236). Indirect description "is really the most vivid of all narrative forms, because it gives the point of view that is wanting in an ordinary continuous history...In that way the important things of the story may be made to come with the stroke and flash of present reality, instead of being prosed away by the historian and his good grammar" (239).

The decision to narrate from Grettir's point of view naturally has important consequences for the reader's response. Such indirect description is often an invitation for the reader to identify — however partially or temporarily — with the characters who occupy those same points of view (see Renoir 1962, Lumiansky 1952, and Richardson 1997; for cinematic analogues, see Clover 1992: 8, and Metz 1982: 55–56). In the berserk episode, this would mean identifying with a

character who has already exhibited the supposed incorrigibility, cruelty, and arrogance mentioned by Cook. Although the previous chapters may have instilled in the reader a budding trust in Grettir, Cook maintains that the blurred impressions and suspicions still surround Grettir in this episode: "With respect to basic questions about his character, his potential for good or evil, his range of possible action, we are still feeling our way" (143). The invitation to identify with an unlikely hero is not peculiar to *Grettir's Saga*; *Egil's Saga* also asks its audience to warm up to an unconventional (stingy, ill-mannered, ugly) protagonist. That the sagas frequently succeed at forging such identifications is no small part of their achievement.

Ker's passing comments about "present reality," "pictorial vividness," and even "good grammar" suggest the second factor in this analysis, the use of the historical present tense, which is also characteristic of — but not unique to — the family sagas. As in many narrative traditions, tense alternation is used to structure and ground sagas by dividing them into scenes and signaling the relative importance of the narrated events (Lehmann 1939, Sprenger 1951, Kossuth 1980, and Richardson 1994). This account squares well with similar tense phenomenon in a wide range of narrative traditions, contexts, periods, and genres (for examples, see Wehr 1984, Fleischman 1991, Richardson 1991, Wolfson 1981, Silva-Corvalán 1983).

Tense alternation in *Grettir's Saga* conforms to what Sprenger regards as the late pattern, in which the historical present is used to highlight and accent (1951: 75). If Sprenger is correct, what is accented by historical present verbs in the berserk episode is not the fighting; in fact, the slaying of the berserks is narrated in the preterite. Instead, the present tense is used to frame and stage less obvious events, observations, and exchanges. For example, a good deal of the passage describing Grettir's offer of beer is narrated in the present tense:

Grettir *spyr*, hvárt þeir vildi hlita hans forsjá ok umgangi; berserkirnir létusk þat gjarna vilja. Grettir *ferr* til ok *sækir* ǫl ok *gefr* þeim at drekka; þeir váru mjök móðir ok sulgu stórum. *Lætr* hann óspart ǫlit, þat er áfengast var til, ok gekk því lengi; hann *segir* þeim ok margar kátligar sǫgur; varð af þessu ǫllu saman háreysti til þeira at heyra (65).

[Grettir *asks* whether they wanted to trust him to oversee and manage things. The berserks said they would gladly do so. Grettir *goes* away and *fetches* beer and *gives* it to them to drink. They were very tired and drank heavily. He *grants* them the strongest beer unspar-

ingly, and this went on for a long time. He *tells* them lots of funny stories, so that altogether there was a lot of racket from them.]

The berserks' diminished state is crucial to Grettir's plan, and this consideration probably accounts for the cluster of present verbs here. This probability is increased by the fact that the present tense is used later to describe Grettir's observation that the berserks are getting drunk: "Þá sér Grettir, at þeir *gerask* mæddir nokkut af dryknum" (66) [Then Grettir *sees* that they *stupefy* themselves somewhat with the drink]. This sentence combines Grettir's point of view with the present tense to highlight this perception. Although previous lines have hinted at Grettir's disposition toward the berserks — consider the rich understatement that the berserks did not seem to comport themselves peacefully — this sentence provides the first solid clue that Grettir is trying to incapacitate the berserks, not join their ranks.

The passage cited by Lehmann is perhaps just as illustrative and even more important to Cook's argument. After Grettir locks the berserks in the storehouse (a key event also narrated in the present), he returns to the farmhouse and addresses Thorfinn's wife:

Grettir *flytir* ferðinni heim at boenum, ok þegar hann *kemr* í dyrrnar, *kallar* hann hátt ok *spyr*, hvar húsfreyja væri. Hon þagði, því at hon þorði eigi at svara. Hann mælti: "Hér er næsta veiðarefni, eða eru nokkur vápn, þau sem neyt eru?" Hon *svarar*: "Eru vápnin, en eigi veit ek, til hvers þér koma." "Tölum síðar um þat," *segir* han; "dugi nú hverr, sem má; eigi mun síðar vænna." Húsfreyja mælti: "Nú væri gud i garði, ef nokkut mætti um boetask várn hag. Yfir sæng Þorfinns hangir krókaspjót it stóra, er átt hefir Kárr inn gamli; þar er ok hjálmr ok brynja ok saxit góða, ok munu eigi bila vápnin, ef þér dugir hugrinn." Grettir *þrifr* hjálminn ok spjótit, en *gyrðir* sik með saxinu ok *gengr* út skjótt. Húsfreyja *kallar* á húskarla ok bað þá fylgja svá göðum dreng (67).

[Grettir *hurries* back to house, and when he *comes* in the door he *calls* in a loud voice and *asks* where the housewife was. She kept silent because she didn't dare to answer. He said, "There's a chance to make a good catch here. Are there any usable weapons around?" She *answers*, "There are weapons, but I don't know what use they would be to you." "We'll talk about that later," he *says*; "Now each should do as he can; the opportunity will not come again." The housewife said, "It would be God's mercy if this situation could be put right. Over Thorfinn's bed hangs a big barbed spear that used to belong to Kar

the Old, and there's also a helmet, coat of mail, and the good short sword. The weapons won't fail if your courage is sufficient." Grettir *seizes* the helmet and the spear, *straps on* the short sword, and *goes* out quickly. The housewife *calls* to her servants and ordered them to follow so good a man.]

If tense alternation is used for internal evaluation, this passage should be especially important. Certain narrative exigencies obviously obtain here; Grettir must procure weapons in order to kill the berserks, for example. But the historical present verbs also highlight the exchange between Grettir and the housewife, whose sarcasm shades into an inchoate hope that Grettir will save the day.

The dialogue between Grettir and the housewife after the killings shows a similar pattern of tense alternation:

En er hann kom í dyrnnar, gekk húsfreyja at honum ok bað hann vera velkominn, — “ok hefir þú,” *segir* hon, “mikla frægð unnit ok leyst mik ok hjú mín frá þeiri skemmð, er vér hefðim aldri bót fengit, nema þú hefðir borgit oss.” Grettir *segir*: “Ek þykkjumk nú mjök inn sami ok í kveld, er þér tölðuð hrakliga við mik.” Húsfreyja mælti svá: “Vér vissum eigi, at þú værir slíkr afreksmaðr sem nú höfu vér reynt; skal þér alt sjálfboðit innan bæjar, þat sem höfir at veita, en þér soemð í at þiggja; en mik varir, at Þorfinnr launi þér þó betr, er hann kemr heim.” Grettir *svarar*: “Lítills mun nú við þurfa fyrst um launin, en þiggja mun ek boð þitt, þar til er bóndi kemr heim; en þess væntir mik, at þér megid sofa í náðum fyrir berserkjunum” (69–70).

[And when he came in the door, the housewife went toward him and welcomed him. “You have won great fame,” she *says*, “and kept me and my household from disgrace. We never would have gotten any help if you had not saved us.” Grettir *says*, “I seem to myself now very much the same as I was in the evening, when you spoke to me so harshly.” The housewife said, “We didn't know until now that you were so brave. You shall have anything you want in the house that is fitting for us to give and honorable for you to accept. And I expect Thorfinn will reward you better when he comes home.” Grettir *answers*, “There is little need to discuss rewards now, but I accept your offer until the farmer comes home. As for the berserks, I think you can sleep in peace.”]

The tense shifts suggest the importance of this exchange, which clears up any lingering suspicion about Grettir's character and standing. The



chapter concludes with one last historical present verb when Thorfinn's wife acknowledges Grettir's new status: "Setr hún hann í öndugi ok gerði til hans alla hluti vel; leið nú svá fram, unz Þorfinns var heim van" [She *puts* him in the seat of honor and treated him well in every way; and so it went on until it was time for Thorfinn to return].

Two caveats regarding tense alternation: it varies slightly across manuscripts, and scribes often abbreviated common verbs of speech and motion, a practice that occasionally requires modern editors to infer the intended form of a verb. This scribal practice certainly makes tense analysis more difficult and provisional than in other narrative traditions. Some scholars will no doubt be dissatisfied with the uncertainty surrounding these abbreviations. Not all abbreviations are ambiguous, however, and even the stubbornly indeterminate forms do not finally disrupt the general correspondence between tense and grounding in *Grettir's Saga* and the saga corpus generally. (For discussion, see Richardson 1995.)

Here this correspondence between the verbal category of tense and narrative grounding suggests that the relationship between Grettir and Thorfinn's wife is a primary concern in this episode. The reason for this is surely related to Cook's point. The housewife's transformation parallels that of the reader, who is initially put off by Grettir's anti-social behavior only to be reminded that first impressions can be deceptive. When the housewife expresses relief and gratitude at this realization, Grettir rightly points out that it is she who has changed and not he. The reader has also changed — or been changed — though this transformation begins slightly prior to the housewife's, and is concluded long before Thorfinn's doubts about Grettir are put to rest in the next chapter.

This episode's spare, sophisticated narration would be admirable but not extraordinary if it did not serve some larger purpose. I have already mentioned the episode's parodical elements, especially the play on medieval chivalry and the hospitality topos. Still another concern in this episode is related to — but distinguishable from — what Ker calls "the habit of correcting the heroic ideal by the ironical suggestion of the other side" (242). In the berserk episode, this habit is reversed; it is "the other side" that stands in need of correction, while the hero waits patiently for his due recognition from the reader and the other characters. This recognition is orchestrated in part through the manipulation of narrative perspective and tense.

Much later in *Grettir's Saga*, Thorbjörg asks Grettir why he com-

mits violence against her men. "Eigi má nú við öllu sjá; vera varð ek nökkur," he replies (169) ["I can't anticipate everything; I have to be somewhere"]. This response encapsulates Grettir's problem, which the saga succeeds in extending to its readers. Saga technique demands that we readers be somewhere too, which means that we also cannot anticipate everything. We are strongly encouraged, however, to do the next best thing: displace and correct the pictures arising in our minds, and enjoy the dramatic enactments of this same activity.

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