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## Some Types of Ambiguities in the Sagas of the Icelanders

### 1. The Role of the Paradox in the Creation of Meaning

It seems reasonable to expect that everyone would instantly recognize Skarphéðinn Njálsson without ever having laid eyes upon him.<sup>1</sup> He is, after all, a celebrated saga-hero; not only on account of his extraordinary feats in battle — most prominent among these the famous “skating to kill” scene — but distinguished also by his battle-axe, his grin and numerous memorable one-liners. In fact, *Njáls saga* prepares its audience for an extraordinary character from the outset, in Skarphéðinn's introduction in chapter 25:

Skarphéðinn hét inn ellsti; hann var mikill maðr vexti ok styrkr, vígr vel, syndr sem selr, manna fóthvatastr, skjótráðr ok øruggr, gagnorðr ok skjótorðr, en þó lǫngum vel stilltr. Hann var jarpr á hárf ok sveipr í hárinu, eygðr vel, fólleitr ok skarpleitr, liðr á nefi ok lá hátt tanngarðurinn, munnljótr nokkut ok þó manna hermannligastr. (Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 70)

(Skarphedin was the eldest, a big and strong man and a good fighter. He swam like a seal and was swift of foot, quick to make up his mind and sure of himself; he spoke to the point and was quick to do so, though mostly he was even-tempered. His hair was reddish-brown and curled and he had fine eyes; his face was pale and sharp-featured, with a bent nose, a broad row of upper teeth and an ugly mouth, and yet he was very like a warrior.) (Cook 2001b, p. 44)

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Robert Cook, Sverrir Jakobsson, Birna Bjarnadóttir, Lára Magnúsdóttir, the late Hermann Pálsson, Trine Buhl and Kári Gíslason for invaluable criticism.

This is actually one of the most extensive descriptions in the whole saga genre. It includes a somewhat typical remark on swimming abilities (abilities which do not figure later in the saga) while his skating abilities are not mentioned at this stage. Prominent teeth and an ugly mouth catch our attention in the physical description, along with pale skin and unruly hair. This suggests that Skarphédinn is not a hero without blemish. The description of his character is confined to his wit, which also seems to have a dark side; he is said to be quick-witted and, significantly, is able to control himself most of the time. The word “lǫngum” conveys some significance, most of the time is not always and in this case it might lead an experienced audience to wonder about the exceptions to this rule. Indeed, Skarphédinn seems to lose control over his temper altogether later in the saga and, while in this bull-like mood, manages to cause havoc among major chieftains.

An extensive description is fitting for an important character in a saga which contains many of the longest introductory descriptions of the genre. What is less expected is that the author took pains to describe Skarphédinn for a second time in chapter 120. But even that is not unparalleled. In fact, lengthy descriptions of saga heroes can be found near the close of several saga narratives, when the hero's finest hour is at hand. The nature of Skarphédinn's finest hour is admittedly unusual: a verbal skirmish between him and several powerful men. Weapons are not used, although Skarphédinn's axe makes an appearance in the end.

The second detailed description of Skarphédinn also includes at least one inconsistency which merits further discussion. The full description is as follows:

Skarphédinn glotti við ok var svá búinn, at hann var í blám kyrtli ok í blárendum brókum, ok uppháva svartu skúa; hann hafði silfrbelti um sik ok øxi þá í hendi, er hann hafði drepit Þráin með ok kallaði Rimmugýgi, ok tǫrgubuklara ok silkihlað um höfuð ok greitt hárið aptr um eyrun. Hann var allra manna hermannligastr, ok kenndu hann allir ósénn. Hann gekk sem honum var skipat, hvárki fyrr né síðar. (Brennu-Njáls saga, 304)

(Skarphedin grinned. He was dressed in a black tunic and blue-striped trousers and high black boots; he had a silver belt around his waist and in his hand the axe with which he had killed Thrain — he called it Battle-hag — and a small shield, and around his head he had a silk band, with his hair combed back over his ears. He looked the complete warrior, and everybody recognized him without having seen him before. He walked in his assigned place, neither ahead nor behind.) (Cook 2001b, 203)

As attentive readers observe, this is also an introduction, though not of Skarphédinn but of his mighty axe, the Battle-Ogress, which is introduced as the slayer of Þráinn. The author clearly sees no need to repeat anything about Skarphédinn's seal-like swimming or his ugly mouth, but concentrates on his clothes and his hair. The only repetition from the earlier description is that Skarphédinn was warrior-like in appearance, to which is added that he was recognized even by those who had not seen him before.

Logical enough in itself, the remark about Skarphédinn being recognized constitutes the paradox of this scene, for the very episode in which this description is placed centres on the opposite, the non-recognition of Skarphédinn. Chapters 119 and 120 of the saga describe how the sons of Njáll, lead by Njáll's old friend Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, march from tent to tent to seek the aid of chieftains. Those are Gizurr *hvíti* ("the white") and Skapti Þóroddsson from the South of Iceland, Snorri goði from the West, and Guðmundr *inn ríki* ("the powerful"), Hafr *inn auðgi* ("the wealthy") and the aptly named Þorkell *hákr* ("bully") from the north of Iceland. Apart from Gizurr, all these prominent men refuse to help the sons of Njáll in any way. Having first refused to give their support, every single one of the five non-helpful chieftains goes on to ask about the identity of one of the group, the person who is the fifth in line. Each then adds a detailed description of the man they fail to recognize, Skarphédinn. Thus, he is described five times in this episode, by five chieftains and once by the saga narrator, which we can add to the one given when Skarphédinn is first introduced.

All five chieftains remark that Skarphédinn is pale. Three find him harsh, three mention that he is large, while two call him evil-looking instead. Three observe that he looks out of favour with fortune and two compare him to a troll or a demon. None of these prominent men seems to recognize Skarphédinn, not even the law-speaker Skapti Þóroddsson who nevertheless comes from the next shire (*sýsla*). This would mean that none appear ever to have noticed Skarphédinn at the Alþing before, despite his obviously striking appearance, yet he must be quite old at this point in the narrative. The author claims one thing but at the same time demonstrates the opposite. This might, of course, simply be an inconsistency without any greater meaning. But, given the general artistry of the saga, it is to my mind more fruitful to view it as a paradox consciously put in the saga by the author to draw the attention of the reader to an important point he wishes to make. It may be described as

*punctum*, to borrow a word from Roland Barthes, that is, a point, or sting, speck, cut, or a little hole (1981: 27).

It is, however, unclear what that point is. The easiest solution would, perhaps, be to regard this scene as vital in establishing Skarphédinn's heroic stature. This hero never gets the chance to defend himself against a group of enemies like Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, Kjartan Ólafsson, and Egill Skalla-Grímsson. But when the chieftains fail to recognize him and mock his appearance, Skarphédinn proves himself to be more than their match. Even though they do not know him, Skarphédinn knows everything about them, and uses the opportunity to remind them of their most humiliating experiences. He emerges from this verbal duelling as a man of wit, as well as spirit and courage. In fact, by venting his anger on those who have refused him assistance and derided him, he achieves what a more diplomatic approach has failed to do, to achieve the support of Guðmundr *inn ríki*. This great chieftain decides to assist the sons of Njáll after hearing of the unparalleled humiliation suffered by Þorkell *hákr* at the hands of Skarphédinn. And yet, even if Skarphédinn is worthy of admiration, we may feel there is something unnerving about his performance in this scene: even if he has our admiration, he seems to be a bit of a loose cannon.<sup>2</sup>

The chieftains' failure to recognize Skarphédinn also draws our attention to his peculiar status in Njáll's family and in society at large. Even though Skarphédinn is the eldest son, Njáll has put more effort into ensuring that Helgi, his other son, has a handsome marriage. Unlike Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, Skarphédinn never goes abroad to seek honour in battle. Njáll works hard to get a *godord* ("chieftaincy") for his adopted son, Høskuldr, but Skarphédinn stays at home with an uncertain status until he has become middle-aged. No children of his are mentioned in the saga. Skarphédinn never has an important part to play in proceedings at the Alþing up until this scene. The author may wish to emphasize this peculiarity: Skarphédinn is unfamiliar to the noble men of Iceland because Njáll has withheld a place in society from him. Skarphédinn's interaction with the noblemen would seem to justify this course of action by Njáll. On the other hand, one might conclude that Skarphédinn is unable to act in anything but a childlike fashion precisely because he has been kept at home all his life. When confronted with some of the most distinguished chieftains of Iceland, he throws tantrums

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<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have noted how Njáll repeatedly bypasses his oldest son, favours his younger sons and has other favourites as well. Jóhann Sigurjónsson drew attention to this in his play *Løgnern* (1917). See also Kristján Jóhann Jónsson (1998, 66, 128, and 171).

and acts in a manner which might be thought to wreck all possibility of success in the family's legal struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Such an interpretation would hardly do Skarphéðinn justice, though (Cf. Miller 1983).<sup>3</sup> His outbursts may be the only way to achieve best possible outcome for their support-seeking. In addition, it fails to explain why the author asserts that everyone recognizes Skarphéðinn whilst demonstrating the opposite. A possible explanation is that the chieftains' questions are rhetorical: they recognize Skarphéðinn but question his identity in order to mock him, or perhaps to pass judgement on him. But why should they all wish to do so? A feasible explanation of this does not leap to mind.

There remains the possibility of irony: the narrator asserts that everyone knows Skarphéðinn, whereas the scene reveals the opposite, an argument which would suggest that the audience is not to take every narratorial statement at face value. This paradox suggests that even if character descriptions in the saga are as a rule to be trusted, there remains considerable room for doubt.<sup>4</sup> The ambiguity of the scene also leads us to doubt the whole premise of the narrative: whilst we have been led to believe that Skarphéðinn is a great hero and should thus be instantly recognizable,<sup>5</sup> the chieftains fail to recognize him and thus reveal that one of the central claims of the saga — that Skarphéðinn is a famous hero — is not universally accepted. Thus, this paradox reveals an even larger one: even though Skarphéðinn is a great hero, he is not recognized as such by the community at large. In fact, to one of the chieftains in the civilized milieu of the Alþing, he resembles an ogre that has sprung out of sea cliffs.

We are left with at least two possible evaluations of Skarphéðinn. He has been depicted as a hero, but to some our hero is a misfit, even on the borders of humanity. The paradox in chapter 120 is the author's way of conveying that all is not what it seems. It forces us to ponder Skarphéðinn's character more deeply and we inevitably come up against the fact that there are two conflicting truths about him: our beloved hero is not a hero to all. What, then, happens to our evaluations of other saga heroes? And what about the villains? The paradox

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<sup>3</sup> As Miller demonstrates, Skarphéðinn has both reason and rights for his behaviour in the saga.

<sup>4</sup> For example, there are some arguments in favour of the villainous Mörðr Valgarðsson (Cook 2001a).

<sup>5</sup> Previously in the saga, Kári Sölmundarson claims that the sons of Njáll and their father are well known (Brennu-Njáls saga, p. 204).

reveals the flexibility of the meaning of the text: the reader has been alerted and must remain on his guard. The main point here is not about which solution is the best one, but rather how the paradox activates the mind of the audience. Like Barthes' *punctum*, it disturbs and "pricks" the audience and has a power of expansion which is often metonymic (Barthes 1981, 45). The audience is forced to invent the meaning of the saga, and link the episode to others in the saga. The paradox opens the text to different interpretations, but the audience must decide which is the correct one, if any.

## 2. The Importance of "þó"

In the case of the recognition of Skarphéðinn, a fully fledged paradox serves as the prick which demands the attention of the audience. But even a small and apparently insignificant word may be used for this purpose. This applies to the word *þó*, as used by the author of *Laxdæla saga* when dispensing with Bolli's father, Þorleikr, who has been the source of much trouble in the saga, mixing with sorcerers and evil men and causing the death of a young boy. Finally, Þorleikr moves to Sweden and, the saga goes on to say: "Þat er flestra manna sǫgn, at Þorleikr ætti lítt við elli at fásk, ok þótti þó mikils verðr, meðan hann var uppi. Ok lúku vér þar sǫgu frá Þorleiki." (*Laxdæla saga*, 111) ("According to most people, Thorleik was not one to grow old comfortably, but was nevertheless respected as long as he lived. The story of Thorleik ends here.") (Kunz 1997, 56)<sup>6</sup>

What is the author trying to convey by the phrase *ætti lítt við elli at fásk*? Does he simply mean that Þorleikr died before old age crept upon him, in which case he must have died soon after leaving Iceland? Or does it imply that age was kind to Þorleikr and that he enjoyed good health until he died? And why does the author add *ok þótti þó mikils verðr*? His use of the word *þó* seems to imply a contradiction between Þorleikr's early death and the good health and respect which he enjoys. But this contradiction would seem strange: why would lack of senility lead to lack of respect? Is the text implying that there was something unnatural about Þorleikr's lack of *elli*? After all, Þorleikr had been mixing with sorcerers and is consequently a slightly sinister character. Is the author

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<sup>6</sup> A more prosaic explanation might be that Þorleikr suffered a loss of mental abilities in his old age but remained respected. Kunz seems to interpret it in this way, translating the passage as: "Thorleik was not one to grow old comfortably."

implying that Þorleikr did not grow old like ordinary people but that he was kept young by sorcery?<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps this is not meant to be an enigmatic phrase at all. This brings us to a problem the modern scholar will inevitably face, namely the loss of a context which formed part of the reading consciousness of the mediaeval audience. The audience may have known all about Þorleikr's old age, and why the *þó* was necessary. However, since this context is lost to the modern scholar, we must consider the ambiguity to be a deliberate one and that this is another instance of the author playing games with his audience. Perhaps the author of *Laxdæla saga* only intends to give his audience an eerie feeling about Þorleikr. One notices the author's playfulness when he makes an appearance in the following sentence, using the first person plural *vér*, perhaps giving his audience a wink: "Do you see how I tease you?"<sup>7</sup>

In the case of characters not recognizing Skarphéðinn, and the use of the word *þó* in Þorleikr's farewell scene, the authors use paradoxes and contradiction to prick their audience and activate them to think about the text. In the first case, an authorial statement contradicts the scene in which it is placed. In the second, the word *þó* is used to imply a contradiction which does get stated expressly. The pricks in the sagas may also be hidden in the remarks of saga characters and may lead us to a closer relationship with them. It is not least in these types of ambiguities that the authors of the sagas excelled.

### 3. Ambiguous Last Words

"Þeim var ek verst, er ek unna mest." (*Laxdæla saga*, 228) ("Though I treated him worst, I loved him best.") (Kunz 1997, 119). This short utterance has captivated the minds of generations. The speaker is the heroine of *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, now aging and near-blind. After four husbands, a frustrated love affair and several killings, she is asked by her son, Bolli Bollason, to tell him who was the greatest love in her life, indeed the crucial question in any love story. The saga is nearing its end and these words are made more significant by the fact that they are Guðrún's last in the narrative. When asked, Guðrún begins by evading the question and extolling the merits of three of her husbands: Þórðr

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<sup>7</sup> The use of *vér* ('we') may, of course, be interpreted as part of a standard formula, but I would maintain that when the author makes the rare choice of using the first person pronoun in the wake of a *punctum* phrase, there may be an element of playfulness in it.

Ingunnarson, Bolli Þorleiksson, and Þorkell Eyjólfsson; Þorvaldr, Guðrún's first husband, appears to have no redeeming features. The young Bolli is, of course, not satisfied. He asks again and ends up with Guðrún's enigmatic reply.

One may ponder endlessly to whom Guðrún is referring by the pronoun "þeim", and many theories have been proposed (see e.g. Aðalsteinn Davíðsson 1964; Hermann Pálsson 1986, 9–24, and Kolbrún Bergþórsdóttir 1989; Svava Jakobsdóttir 1999, 60–61). Guðrún uses the dative of the pronoun, which is the same in the singular and the plural. Consequently, the "þeim" in her answer could signify several things. The first possibility is that she is referring to the heroic Kjartan Ólafsson. Kjartan and Guðrún are an ideal couple, and everyone assumed that they would marry. Instead, Guðrún is led to believe that Kjartan intends to wed a Norwegian princess and she is tricked into marrying Bolli, Kjartan's cousin and foster-brother, who had been in Kjartan's shadow. Yet Bolli is also a great man, and, when he is killed, Guðrún takes pains to avenge him. Thus Bolli is also a prominent candidate for the part of Guðrún's greatest love, second only to Kjartan (in death as in life). It is also possible that Guðrún is referring to her beloved second husband, Þórðr Ingunnarson, who drowned before she met Kjartan, or to both Kjartan or Bolli (using the plural form), perhaps even to herself. A possible interpretation is that she is stating a general truth and that, in her old age, she has come to believe that she always treated worst those she loved best, a common paradox of love.

All these theories are perfectly feasible, if not equally attractive. What is particularly interesting is how readers and scholars continue to advance theories about the meaning of Guðrún's last words. They are enthralled by the riddle. The endless debate about the answer may be exactly what the author of *Laxdæla saga* expected of his audience. But what does the text actually say? Only *þeim*: there is no statement as to who Guðrún loved most and the audience must supply the answer. There is no single correct interpretation: one cannot state conclusively to whom Guðrún is referring, though the utterance reveals a lot about her character (see Ármann Jakobsson 1999).<sup>8</sup> The author is involved in a game with his audience. The answer is never in the text, only in the mind of the reader. The author of *Laxdæla saga* is a master of a game that every author wants to play, that of captivating the imagination of

<sup>8</sup>The ambiguity of the words has also been discussed thoroughly by Bouman 1962, 140–47. Recently, Frölich (2000, 65–67) has argued that Guðrún's words are reminiscent of the legiac poems of the *Edda*.



the audience and prompting them to create their own text. For more than 700 years, the audience of *Laxdæla saga* has created and will go on creating its own solution to the enigma of Guðrún's love. By not revealing the answer, the text keeps the audience under its spell.

The purpose of this ambiguity may be to give additional emphasis to the drama of Guðrún's life, in particular to the saga's love triangle. It also keeps the audience on their toes during the long-drawn finale of the saga, possibly the most important part of the saga (cf. Bjarni Guðnason 1999). Last but not least, it holds the saga in an unfinished state and the audience is left to debate Guðrún's love life.

*Njáls saga* offers another instance of ambiguous, if less spell-binding, last words. When Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi is fighting shortly before his death, he turns to his wife for help. The scene goes as follows:

Hann mælti til Hallgerðar: "Fá mér leppa tvá ór hári þínu, ok snúid þit móðir mín saman til bogastrengs mér." "Liggr þér nokkut við?" segir hon. "Líf mitt liggr við," segir hann, "því at þeir munu mik aldri fá sóttan, meðan ek kem boganum við." "Þá skal ek nú," segir hon, "muna þér kinnhestinn, ok hirði ek aldri, hvárt þú verr þik lengr eða skemr." "Hefir hver til sins ágætis nokkut," segir Gunnar, "ok skal þik þessa eigi lengi biðja." (Brennu-Njáls saga, 189)

(He spoke to Hallgerd: 'Give me two locks of your hair, and you and my mother twist them into a bowstring for me.' 'Does anything depend on it?' she said. 'My life depends on it,' he said, 'for they'll never be able to get me as long as I can use my bow.' 'Then I'll recall,' she said, 'the slap you gave me, and I don't care whether you hold out for a long or a short time.' 'Everyone has some mark of distinction', said Gunnar, 'and I won't ask you again.')

The audience must be puzzled by Gunnarr's over-generous comment about everyone's merits. Why should he utter this proverb precisely at that instance? Is it a sarcastic illustration of Hallgerð's wickedness? Does he mean: "Everyone has merits, so you must have some too, though I cannot recall any of them at the moment?" Crediting Gunnarr with such irony is certainly not out of the question, even if he is no match for Skarphéðinn when it comes to wit. Or is Gunnarr praising his wife in sincerity?

A recent interpretation of the scene has suggested that when Gunnarr asks Hallgerð for hair the couple are joking, knowing perfectly well that the hair of a middle-aged woman is not good material for a bowstring

(Kristján Jóhann Jónsson 1998, 131–33). Another thing to keep in mind is that the author was well aware of the fact that Gunnarr was not a Christian. In fact, Gunnarr is last seen in his mound, reciting ghostly verse. Is it possible that Gunnarr truly admired Hallgerðr for having nursed her grudge for decades, and for using this opportunity of revenge? In her relentless pursuit for revenge, Hallgerðr somewhat resembles Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, the heroine of the Eddic lays. From the point of view of one for whom forgiveness is unimportant, her revenge proves her mettle. It is indeed possible that Hallgerðr gains Gunnarr's respect by refusing to give him the much-needed lock of hair and by contributing to his death.

The ambiguity of Gunnarr's retort might have lead the audience to speculate about the relationship between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr, and about the morality of these characters. While they would probably not have admired Hallgerðr's revenge, they were probably aware of the fact that, to some, her behaviour could imply a kind of greatness. What is important here is that Gunnarr's retort is unexpected. Whether it is said ironically or out of admiration, the Gunnarr's last words (alive) give his characterisation an edge of unpredictability, leaving the audience to ponder the character of the hero.

#### 4. The Fiddler on the Rock of Law: Ambiguous Characterisation

A third type of ambiguity which the saga authors use to prick their audience does not depend so much on words but rather on the actions of the characters in the saga and the general situations in which they find themselves. The very first sentence of the *Njáls saga* is a *punctum* achieved, to some extent, by the very first word. While most family sagas begin either with King Haraldr Fine-hair or with the ancestors of the main characters, or both, *Njáls saga* begins with the introduction of a grand-uncle of one of the protagonists and the grandfather of the saga's chief villain:

Morðr hét maðr, er kallaðr var gigja; hann var sonr Sighvats ins rauða; hann bjó á Velli á Rangárvöllum. Hann var ríkr hofðingi ok mála-fylgjumaður mikill ok svá mikill lögmaðr, at engir þóttu lögligir dómar dæmðir, nema hann væri við. (5)

(There was a man named Mord whose nickname was Gigja. He was the son of Sighvat the Red, and he lived at Voll in the Rangarvellir district. He was a powerful chieftain and strong in pressing lawsuits. He was so

learned in the law that no verdicts were considered valid unless he had been involved.) (Cook 2001b, 3)

His daughter is introduced next, and then the saga moves on to the Dalir, that is, from the South of Iceland to the West. Hǫskuldr and Hrútr are introduced and there is a scene which ends in Hrútr noting that Hǫskuldr's daughter, Hallgerðr, has "thief's eyes".

Hallgerðr is the first leading character of the saga to be introduced. Yet the saga does not begin with her ancestors, nor those of Njáll or Gunnarr (although Mǫrðr is Gunnarr's grand-uncle). Nor does the narrative begin with the settlement; in fact, it is one of a handful of family sagas which neither depict the migration from Norway or the British Isles to Iceland. Instead, the saga begins firmly in Iceland at a time after the Alþing has been established. Uncharacteristic of the genre, the saga has no historical prologue and key plot events begin in chapter two when Hrútr proposes to Unnr and the story of their marriage is given.

By beginning his narrative with Mǫrðr, the author sets the scene firmly in Rangárvellir, where his protagonists live, and by mentioning Mǫrðr's role in lawmaking, he also introduces the Alþing. In addition, Mǫrðr plays an interesting dual role in the story. He is simultaneously Gunnarr's grand-uncle and Njáll's precursor as the greatest lawman in Iceland (the saga claims that sentences are valid only if Mǫrðr is present). Mǫrðr almost seems to incarnate the abstract notion of the law itself. The unusual beginning of the saga immediately captures the attention of an experienced saga reader, a single-word *punctum*. The name Mǫrðr literally means "ferret" or "weasel": as dangerous a beast as you find in Iceland. But it has an added significance, as this character is the namesake and grandfather of Mǫrðr Valgarðsson: danger is present in the saga from its very first word.

There is a further ambiguity. Mǫrðr, a powerful chieftain and the finest lawman is, implausibly, nicknamed *gigja* ("fiddle"). At first, the nickname would appear to border on the ridiculous. Why would such a distinguished figure be called fiddle (a problem which has irked many translators of the saga)?<sup>9</sup> In a mediaeval mind, the nickname would not suggest a well-dressed violinist in a symphony orchestra, but a clown or a man who plays for common people at informal balls. Such a hobby would seem inappropriate for the mighty Mǫrðr. Whilst, as Iceland's

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, the name Mörðr *gigja*, would have come to the saga author from tradition but in placing it at the beginning of the text, he makes full use of its inherent ambiguities.

foremost lawyer he is respectable almost to the point of dullness, *fiddle* suggests another side to Mǫrðr the crowd-pleaser and entertainer, who, having settled disputes between Icelandic noblemen, takes his fiddle in hand and starts making music for the entertainment of the crowd at Þingvellir. Mǫrðr's nickname makes his character ambiguous: the fiddle and the law would not be expected to mix, but in this one name — and by implication in the man — they do. As a result, the readers of *Njáls saga* have their work cut out for them from the very beginning of the saga, to supply the sense which is lacking in his characterisation. Only then can the narrative move west to the Dalir.

In *Njáls saga*, nothing is really what it seems, not even the blonde hero Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. He has only just been introduced when he disguises himself as a rough merchant, Kaupa-Héðinn, in order to trick Hrútr to part with Unnr's dowry. He is helped by Njáll who, like Gunnar, has been presented as courteous, generous, even-tempered, true friends, wise and prophetic, modest, noble-spirited and kindly (*Njáls saga* 52–57). And yet, when they first join forces they are involved in the tricking of a noble chieftain who has been described in the most favourable terms and portrayed as a virtuous man (as is proved later in the saga when Hrútr gives Gunnarr good advice before he marries Hallgerðr). Why must the hero disguise himself? According to the saga, this seems to be an admirable method of getting one's way: Njáll's councils are, as a rule, met with approval by the institution of “al-mannarómr” at the Alþing, as well as by society at large. Yet a man in disguise must signify some duplicity: he is himself and another at the same time (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2001). Gunnarr's is introduced as a perfect hero, but from his first appearance, his actions reveal him as more ambivalent. He must look for help if he wants the upper hand in the quarrel with Hrútr, and the solution offered to him involves disguise and deception.

Gunnarr's deception of Hrútr as Kaupa-Héðinn is a curious episode and suggests that the role of hero is a more ambivalent one than some scholars would have it. Gunnarr's behaviour at this point seems to link him to Skarphéðinn: the name he assumes is a variation of Skarphéðinn's, and Gunnarr as Héðinn is “maðr skapillr ok margmæltr, þykkisk einn vita allt; hann rekr aptr kaup sín optliga ok flýgr á menn, þegar er eigi er allt gort sem hann vill.” (Brennu-Njáls saga, 59–60) (a bad-tempered and loud-mouthed man, a know-it-all, that he often reneges on his deals and assaults people when things don't go the way he wants.) (Cook 2001b, 37) Such a description, is, of course, in stark con-

trast to Gunnarr's own even temper and modesty. While Kaupa-Héðinn is a classic case of a comic supporting figure, the loud-mouthed plebeian, and precursor to the boastful Björn of Mörk (who makes a memorable appearance much later in the saga), the name and the behaviour of this character allude to Skarphéðinn (who has also not been introduced): the blond Gunnarr disguises himself as the dark hero of the saga. Why does he do this? There is no easy explanation.

The portrayal of Gunnarr and Njáll is in fact very ambiguous, sexually as well as morally (see further Ármann Jakobsson 2000). This applies to these two heroes and to many of the secondary characters in the saga. For example, Práinn Sigfússon (he is Gunnarr's uncle and Hallgerðr's son-in-law) has a son, Hǫskuldr, who is Hallgerðr's grandson but Gunnarr's cousin: a very ambiguous position. Práinn himself is ambivalent in many ways. He is originally introduced as Gunnarr's closest ally, but at his wedding, he somewhat hot-headedly divorces his wife and asks for the hand of Hallgerðr's 14-year old daughter. This uneven match allies him to the Hliðarendi household in a strange, dual way. In one, his role as Hallgerðr's son-in-law, he takes part in Hallgerðr's feud with Bergþóra (much to Gunnarr's chagrin) and is present at the killing of Þórðr the freedman's son (Skarphéðinn's foster-father). His role in the saga is far from simple.

After Gunnarr's death, Práinn becomes the chief antagonist of the sons of Njáll. He is portrayed as a valiant man, and noble in appearance, but there is always something dubious about him. He appears to have a wild streak which leads him, first, to the impetuous divorce at Gunnarr's wedding, and later to a curious choice of friends which eventually leads to his death. He befriends the villainous Hrappr, even when doing so antagonizes his friend and benefactor, Earl Hákon. He has never seen Hrappr before and yet succumbs to his influence: Hrappr has but to complain that he will be killed in front of Práinn's eyes and that Práinn will endure scorn for this, and Práinn betrays his lord for this unworthy if charming villain.

Many important characters in *Njáls saga* have a dual roles. Gizurr hvíti ("the white") kills Gunnarr but later becomes one of Njáll's closest allies, a situation which is more a rule than an anomaly. For instance, in the second part of the saga, after Hǫskuldr Práinsson's death, the bulk of Gunnarr's family turns against the sons of Njáll. Likewise, Flosi of Svínafell kills Njáll and his sons but nevertheless ends his days as Kári's new uncle-in-law. Ketill of Mörk, Práinn Sigfússon's brother, is Njáll's son-in-law, while (along with his brothers and nephews) he is one of

Njáll's main antagonists. At the climax of the saga, Ketill stands outside Bergþórshvöll with Flosi, just about to set a fire to Njáll's farm, while his wife is inside along with her doomed family.<sup>10</sup> This may seem far-fetched, but everything is believable in *Njáls saga*. The ambiguous status of many of the leading characters draws our attention to the tragedy and uncertainty of the world represented by saga. As in a prophecy known from *Völuspá*, the feud is between friends and relatives, and the division between friend and foe is made unclear.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

What then, do we gain by focusing on the ambiguous words, scenes and characters of a saga? Do these examples, taken from just a few sagas, allow us to generalize about the genre as a whole? Naturally, not all sagas are equally intricate. The author of *Njáls saga* is a master of ambiguity, not least when it comes to characterisation.<sup>11</sup> While not all the saga authors equal the authors of *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* in their mastery in activating the reader, in many sagas the reader is clearly given a role in working out or providing the meaning of the text. Cook (1984–1985) has discussed the role of the reader in *Grettis saga* (cf. Viðar Hreinsson 2000), and Buhl (2000) believes *Hrafnkels saga* is gradually “opened” to the audience, partly by the use of ambiguities. Similarly, the death of Vésteinn remains a murder mystery in the longer version of *Gisla saga*: the audience has been left to work out who the killer is and scholars have followed suit (Holtmark 1951; Strömback 1952; Andersson 1968; Thompson 1973; Hermann Pálsson 1974; Hermann Pálsson 1975; Eiríkur Björnsson 1976; Clover 1977; Birgitte Spur Ólafsson 1980; Sørensen 1986; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1990–1992; Niels Valentin 1993; Vésteinn Ólason 1994).

What these few examples show is that saga authors can and do use ambiguous words or scenes to involve their audience in the creation of

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<sup>10</sup>This is so strange that Rósa B. Blöndals (1987) has used it as a major argument for her theory that it was not Ketill's wife who was inside at the time, but rather her sister who bore the same name. Rósa argued that this sister is actually the centre of the events of the saga; her book being a classic example of how ambiguities and uncertainties in the saga lead to fruitful speculation. Even if not many have published their findings, Rósa is doubtless only one of generations of readers who have speculated about the saga, as she says herself (p. 138).

<sup>11</sup>Even very minor characters in the saga may have an ambiguous role, worthy of further consideration, see Judd 1984.

the saga text. Readers are sometimes less suspicious of mediaeval texts than of modern ones: we often accept a myth that the past was more simple or primitive than the present and that mediaeval texts are consequently more simple than modern ones (cf. Bloch 1990). But close examination of saga texts is needed to distinguish the meaning of the texts themselves from the simplifications made by generations of readers. I believe that ambiguities are the tools used by author to involve his audience in the text.

Here, I have tried to examine the *how* rather than the *why* of saga writing, to my mind a somewhat neglected issue. The strategies used by the saga authors to involve their audience in the creation of the meaning of their narratives may be one of the most important aesthetic features of the saga genre. These few examples hardly suffice as a basis upon which to generalize, but show that we must not overlook the ambiguities of the texts. Many modern readers and scholars have been far too ready to jump to conclusions about the sagas' meaning. While it is important to discern what the saga authors intended to say, we must pay also a close attention to how they said it.

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