

The Impetuosity of Þráinn Sigfússon

Leadership, virtue and villainy in *Njáls saga*

“Kemsk, þó at seint fari, húsfreyja” (Everything works itself out, woman, though it may take time) (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1954: 114).¹ Thus Njáll of Bergþórshváll, one of the main protagonists of *Njáls saga*, urges patience and moderation. He possesses both virtues himself. On the other hand, the subject of this article, Þráinn Sigfússon, is an embodiment of haste and impetuosity. What follows is an in-depth analysis of this supporting character in *Njáls saga*.² Þráinn Sigfússon is a somewhat curious and ambiguous character who has a profound impact on the

¹ English translation from Cook; this is the translation used throughout this article.

² The main action in *Njáls saga* studies gravitated towards structure in the 1970s, and characters were often discussed mainly from the perspective of Proppian role analysis (see esp. Lönnroth 1976: 61–68). Likewise, Clover’s excellent and elaborate study of the episode in *Njáls saga* where Þráinn has the biggest role (1982: 28–34 and 73–75) includes no analysis of his character. With the decline of “new criticism” one gets the feeling that character analysis that focuses on all aspects of the character (its role, psychology, symbolic function etc.) is regarded as a bit old-fashioned, and this unspoken objection is what I wish to challenge with this article.

Having said this, there have nonetheless been published some excellent studies of individual saga characters in recent decades, among them some that pertain to *Njáls saga* characters, e.g. Judd 1984; Low Soon Ai 1996; Cook 2001. The following study is one half of a project of mine that involves the close reading of the ideological and moral function of supporting characters in Sagas of Icelanders, the other article has Þórólfr Skalla-Grimsson as the focus of attention (Ármann Jakobsson 2008).

Jakobsson, Á., Reader, Department of Icelandic, University of Iceland, Reykjavík. “The Impetuosity of Þráinn Sigfússon. Leadership, virtue and villainy in *Njáls saga*”, *ANF* 124 (2009), pp. 53–67.

Abstract: This article examines the character of Þráinn Sigfússon in *Njáls saga*. Although Þráinn is a supporting character in the saga, he is an ambitious one and manages to dominate the events briefly in his quest to take over the role of his nephew Gunnarr. Þráinn does not succeed in his efforts, in spite of some showy displays of heroism, he is not heroic like Gunnarr and he ends up as no more than a mock chieftain of an unruly gang. The article explores the reason for his failure and how the saga uses Þráinn as an example of someone who lacks leadership virtues, mainly patience and generosity.

Keywords: *Njáls saga*, supporting character, leadership, virtues, vices.

events depicted in *Njáls saga*. I will argue here that he also serves a didactic function in the saga, as a figure of unwise spontaneity.

For most of the first half of *Njáls saga*, Þráinn Sigfússon is a somewhat prominent supporting character and keeps to his place as such. Eye-catching he may be but firmly in the background, eclipsed by his more heroic and more dashing nephew Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. But after the death of Gunnarr, he suddenly, even accidentally, or that is the feeling created by the narrative, becomes the main focus of attention, from chapter 87 to chapter 92, when he is dramatically killed by Skarphéðinn Njálsson. In *The Idiot*, Dostoyevsky mused at some length about the problematic existence of the supporting character, characterised by his ordinariness but far too intelligent for the supporting role and even inflamed with a desire to be original (pp. 537–43). This is not far off the mark where Þráinn is concerned. It could be argued, albeit somewhat light-heartedly, that he is a supporting character with a firm ambition to become a main one, and actually succeeds in this, briefly. Not everyone can survive all this attention and Þráinn is duly killed, but his story does not end with his end. His killing foreshadows the killing of his son Hǫskuldr and is the indirect cause of the climactic event of the saga, the burning of Njáll and his sons. Thus the Þráinn episode of *Njáls saga* is clearly very important to the overall structure of the saga, although it also works well as an episode, a *þáttur*.³

Given that Þráinn is important for *Njáls saga*, although his moment in the limelight is short, I want to pursue the notion that his story is a moral one, that his character is, in fact, an interesting study of immorality, ambition, and, most importantly, of impetuosity, where Þráinn serves as a counterpoint to Njáll, the real hero of the saga.

The hasty divorce

Þráinn Sigfússon is introduced in chapter 34 of *Njáls saga*, with the following description: “Hann var frændi Gunnars ok virðingarmaðr mikill. Hann átti Þórhildi skáldkonu; hon var orðgífr mikit ok fór með flimtan. Þráinn unni henni lítit” (He was Gunnar’s uncle and a man of great

³ See Clover, *ibid*. The *þættir* were for most of the 20th century analysed mostly as independent narratives (see esp. Harris 1972; Harris 1976). My own approach (but not mine exclusively) has been that it is more fruitful to analyse the *þættir* as episodes, with their own integral structure but, no less importantly, with a very important function in the larger narrative (see esp. Ármann Jakobsson 2002: 61–108). Thus from my point of view the episode of *Njáls saga* where Þráinn suddenly becomes a leading character is no less a *þáttur*, than, say, *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka* or *Sneglu-Halla þáttur in Morkinskinna*.

worth. His wife was Thorhild the Poetess; she was harsh with words and made up mocking verses. Thrain had little love for her) (p. 87). As Þráinn is introduced before his brothers and only he merits a description, even a short one, it can be assumed that he is the most eminent of Gunnarr's numerous uncles. That is also evident from Njáll's summary of his merits later in the same chapter: "Þat er frá manni at segja, at maðr er auðigr at fé ok gorr at sér um allt ok it mesta mikilmenni, ok megið þér því gera honum kostinn" (About this man it can be said that he is well off for property and skilled in every way and very powerful, and you may well make this match with him) (p. 90). To go back to Dostoyevsky's theory of supporting characters, this is a clear portrayal of a supporting character too intelligent not to wish for more. And Þráinn indeed shows his naked ambition in this first appearance, when he makes his nephew's wedding his own, in the most literal sense.

Þráinn, who is sitting next to Gunnarr, begins to stare at the bride's nubile daughter Þorgerðr, fourteen years old at the time. His wife Þórhildr becomes angry and recites an opaque verse on the subject of inappropriate staring, to which his immediate reaction is to stand up and divorce her on the spot, giving this reason: "Vil ek eigi hafa flimtan hennar né fáyrði yfir mér" (I won't take any more of her mocking and malicious language). The saga adds that he was so "kappsamr um þetta, at hann vildi eigi vera at veizlunni, nema hon væri í brautu rekin" (vehement about this that he would not stay at the feast unless she was sent away). Thus Þórhildr has to leave, to an unknown destiny (p. 89). When she has left the wedding, after a brief spell of feasting, Þráinn asks Þorgerðr's grandfather for her hand in marriage. Njáll vouches for his character, and the wedding now becomes a double wedding, with Þráinn suddenly the son-in-law of his niece by marriage.

It is easy to criticise Þráinn's behaviour, both from a modern and mediaeval standpoint. As he is Gunnarr's uncle, he cannot be less than forty, in fact, he could easily be fifty. His lust for a fourteen-year old is not very commendable to the modern eye, even though the reactions of a mediaeval audience would probably have been more mixed, as it was quite common to marry noble girls off at an early age, even to much older men, although this occasionally attracted strong criticism.⁴ On the

⁴ In *Egils saga*, such an alliance between the aging Björgólfr and the young Hildiríðr (Sigurður Nordal 1933: 16–17) indirectly results in the death of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson. In *Hrólfs saga kraka* the marriage between an old man and a younger woman is twice referred to in very negative terms by young women, who must be voicing a somewhat popular opinion (Finnur Jónsson 1904: 48–49 and 96–97).

other hand, this liaison does create a strange situation since Þráinn is now both Gunnarr's uncle and step-son-in-law, making his future son at the same time Gunnarr's cousin and his step-grandson. One might wonder whether the author or a mediaeval audience would have responded positively or negatively to the complexities of these relationships.

From a mediaeval point of view, Þráinn's second marriage would have been palpably morally objectionable. It takes place, of course, in a heathen society and the audience would have been aware of the difference in morals, between the saga age (c. 1000) and the age of saga composition (the late 13th century). However, that does not mean that a thirteenth-century audience would not have thought its own morals applicable to heathens as well. And it was clearly contrary to good Christian practice to divorce a healthy wife and get a second one. In an official letter from archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson to the Icelandic bishops Þorlákr and Brandr (dated to 1189), he instructs that when a man has taken a wife and found her poorer than he expected, or in worse health or less pleasant, and therefore taken a second one, that is not a real cause for divorce, and in that case, the man is actually still married to the previous wife: "þa skal hann vit skiliaz þa konu er hann tok sidar. En taka hina fyre. eda se j forbodum" (he shall then divorce from the second wife and take the first, or be excommunicated) (Jón Sigurðsson 1857–1876: 286–87). The moral here is clear, a groundless divorce is highly immoral, and the character flaws of the first wife do not in themselves constitute grounds for divorce. Thus what Þráinn is doing is contrary to the morality of the late 13th century, when *Njáls saga* was composed, and for those who believe in Christian morals, as most of the audience would have felt required to do, the fact that he is a historical character and not Christian cannot change that.

In addition, Þráinn reacts hastily and is so vehement that his wife must be driven away immediately. This demonstrates an unattractive lack of moderation, an important virtue in *Njáls saga*.⁵ Þráinn shows no generosity towards Þórhildr and, as we are given no real insight into his possible previous sufferings in this loveless marriage, it is hard not to side with her. Þráinn actually seems to be governed more by lust than by prudence in this instance: there is no real reason for him to marry Hallgerðr's daughter when the two families are already united and this

⁵ There is a detailed analysis of this in Ármann Jakobsson 2007. Moderation was, of course, one of the four main "worldly" virtues in mediaeval Christian scholarship, see e.g. the 13th century Icelandic translation of Alcuin's *De virtutibus et vitiis* (Gunnar Hårdarson 1989: 156–57).

second marriage only complicates things. Furthermore, with this very public rift, followed by a spontaneous marriage, he might seem to be attempting to steal Gunnarr's day from him, which admittedly does not cause any visible resentment from Gunnarr, but one might argue that in a saga that celebrates wisdom and foresight, this impatience is hardly praiseworthy. Why does Þráinn need to get married in the middle of his nephew's wedding? Even if he could not contemplate another day with Þórhildr, could he not easily have waited to ask for Þorgerðr's hand in marriage for a few weeks or months? Why is he in such a hurry? It is thus possible to regard his actions in the wedding as shameless attention-seeking, at the expense of his much more accomplished nephew, who is the acknowledged leader of the family (see also Maxwell 1957: 29).

Thus, in spite of Njáll's praise of him, which has to be taken at face value, given that Njáll is consistently depicted very positively in the saga and it is indeed once remarked that he never lies (p. 194), Þráinn cannot be said to emerge well from his first appearance. His divorce and second marriage are morally dubious. The whole union is based on lust and Þráinn acts on his own, which he is entitled to do, but the saga still puts a strong emphasis on wise counsel. His lack of moderation and generosity are the character traits that stand out, and it is at least possible to argue that his nephew's wedding is an inappropriate venue for the little family drama that he creates on the spot. Officially Þráinn is not condemned but his behaviour does not reveal him in the best light. Þráinn is clearly not moderate like Gunnarr, or a careful planner like Njáll. Based on this episode alone, the best word to describe him would perhaps be *hasty*. Þráinn is a man in a hurry, and that is not a good thing.

In the hero's shadow

After this episode, Þráinn is relegated to the sidelines, where he remains until chapter 87. He is next shown when asked by Hallgerðr to be present at the killing of Þórðr Freed-man's son. This is a good example of the strange double allegiance he now owes to his nephew and his wife, who is also Þráinn's mother-in-law. Þráinn's part in this killing is also likely to cause bad blood with the sons of Njáll, especially Skarpheðinn, who much later kills Þráinn. The killing is also an unheroic one, two against one, and although Þráinn partly redeems himself by calling the killing "illt verk" (a bad deed), he is still tainted by this.

Even more peculiar is his role a short while later, when talkative

itinerant women come to Hlíðarendi and amuse Hallgerðr in her boudoir, where, curiously enough, Þráinn and his kinsman Sigmundur Lambason are listening to gossip, the only men along with the women (pp. 107–9 and 112). Þráinn is somewhat superfluous in this scene and his presence is therefore all the more curious. He is an ambitious and manly man who later assumes Gunnarr's mantle as a chieftain and a hero. What on earth is he then doing in the women's room, listening to gossip? And why does the author insist on placing him there, when he does not really have anything to do in this scene? Does he wish to make Þráinn sexually ambiguous, given that there is much interest in the saga in male and female roles (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2007)? Gunnarr himself does not take part in this, he is outside and only enters the room to scold everyone present and pour his scorn over this malicious gossip. It is not related what he said to his uncle, but as inappropriate as Gunnarr feels the festivities are, it follows that the same must apply to his uncle's presence in Hallgerðr's boudoir.

Þráinn's presence as a part of Hallgerðr's entourage is, of course, explained by his dual role as uncle and son-in-law to the Hlíðarendi couple. Both roles are obviously of much value to him. It must be kept in mind that by marrying Hallgerðr's daughter he is, along with his nephew, entering a much more prestigious family, that of Høskuldr Dala-Kollsson and the descendants of Unnr the subtle, the Laxdœlir. His marriage is not only hasty but also very ambitious, and his new status as a member of the Laxdœlir clan is then reflected in the fact that his son gets his name from there and is called Høskuldr. Ambition and haste are two character traits that dominate the life of Þráinn. As will be seen, they do not really fit well together.

Þráinn is next seen in his nephew's entourage when visiting Otkell to ask for food and hay. His impatience and immorality resurface; after Otkell's unwise refusal, his suggestion is that Gunnarr and company should take food and hay anyway and just leave money. Gunnarr refuses this, demonstrating yet again the difference between the two kinsmen (p. 121). This is Þráinn's last appearance during Gunnarr's lifetime, although it is later mentioned that he is planning a trip abroad, in the wake of the assembly where Gunnarr has been outlawed (pp. 181 and 184). Gunnarr in the end does not go abroad and is killed, but Þráinn does and a new chapter in his life begins.

When Þráinn arrives in Norway, he is immediately welcomed by Earl Hákon who remarks that he is particularly pleased to see a relative of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. Still in his nephew's shadow, Þráinn now finally

has a chance to become his own man. He must be at the very least about sixty when this happens, if he is only fifteen years older than his nephew. He could, of course, be even older, but is in any case acquitting himself quite well for someone his age. When Kolr, a viking outlaw, has killed a royal retainer, the king remarks that if Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi were there, he would take care of the man. This is apparently too much for Þráinn Sigfússon, who replies: “Eigi em ek Gunnarr, en þó em ek skyldr honum, ok vil ek játask undir þessa ferð” (I’m not Gunnarr, but I’m kin to him, and I’m ready to take on this venture) (p. 199). And, thus provoked, Þráinn performs his one and only unambiguously heroic act in the saga, leading the attack to kill the viking. Having done this, he is unequivocally the earl’s favourite, although the saga does insist on the earl’s respect for Gunnarr as a partial explanation of the favour Þráinn now enjoys (cf. Maxwell 1957: 34).

And there is a snag. Although Þráinn is a hero now, the earl also refers to him as a dandy (“skrautmenni mikit”) (p. 200). Later in the saga, he and his companions are called “oflátar” (show-offs) (p. 231), and even before, in his moment of triumph, there is a touch of vanity about Þráinn Sigfússon, the man who wanted to inherit the mantle of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi.⁶ But, as he has put it himself, he is not Gunnarr, he is more of a mini-Gunnarr, and in spite of the saga’s neutral tone, that is made abundantly clear before Þráinn suddenly becomes a leading character in the saga.

Fatal attraction

What happens next is the strangest moment in Þráinn’s career, one which could easily be characterised as both his finest hour and his biggest mistake. But if there is some ambiguity as to whether what Þráinn does now is a good deed or a bad one, he is very unambiguously controlled again by a sudden impulse.

The catalyst that suddenly propels Þráinn into the limelight is a new supporting character in the saga, Hrappr Örgumleiðason. The name

⁶ It is interesting to compare Þráinn and Mörðr Valgarðsson who are both in Gunnarr’s shadow. However, there is a fundamental difference between their ambition: Mörðr could be characterised as jealous but Þráinn could not. What Þráinn actually wants is to be like Gunnarr. He wants what Gunnarr *is*, while Mörðr wants what Gunnarr *has*, his role in society. Unlike Þráinn, Mörðr shows no desire to emulate Gunnarr, he is quite secure in his own identity and has great confidence in his own abilities.

Hrappr literally means ‘scoundrel’, and that is indeed what Hrappr is.⁷ He is, however, an attractive scoundrel, witty, brave, defiant of authority, to the point of being nihilistic. Several previous scholars, no aficionados of punk, have disapproved of Hrappr, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson among them (1943: 79).⁸ And yet, even the righteous have to admit that there is something strangely attractive about this villain. He is on the run when first seen, promising money to the captain of a merchant ship for his fare abroad. Later it turns out that he doesn’t have it, to which the captain’s reply is strangely indulgent. On the voyage, he has apparently succumbed to the charm of Hrappr, who goes on to infiltrate himself into the household of the magnate Guðbrandr, seduce his daughter, kill his foreman and maim his son. When asked about his wicked deeds, he merely jokes and seems particularly proud of his popularity with the women. Then he burns down Guðbrandr’s temple,⁹ and is an outlaw, literally on the run, when Þráinn is suddenly faced with him (pp. 209–16).¹⁰

When relating Hrappr’s escapades, the saga seems to create a certain sympathy for him, and he does get opportunities to demonstrate his sense of humour and his attractiveness to women. The point of view often shifts to him, especially when he is breaking laws and has become

⁷ There are several known men called Hrappr in 10th and 11th century Iceland but only two other significant characters in the Sagas of Icelanders, both in *Laxdæla saga* and both, like Hrappr in *Njáls saga*, are at some point called Víga-Hrappr. The former of the *Laxdæla* Hrappr’s is the Hrappr who lives at Hrappsstaðir, descended from Scotland and the Hebrides. He is said to be a bully and a difficult neighbour, who, like Þórólfr twistfoot in *Eyrbyggja saga*, becomes a ghost after death through sheer maleficience (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1934: 19 and 39). The other is a small, shifty eyed man who asks to be included in the assault on Helgi Hárðbeinsson (p. 190). He seems to be a comic character, boastful and talkative, and Helgi is quick to dispense with him.

⁸ Einar Ólafur’s analysis of the four main villains in *Njáls saga* (Skammkell, Þjóstólfr, Mǫrðr and Hrappr) is to my knowledge the most ambitious study of villainy in this saga. It is a very mixed affair, on Skammkell Einar Ólafur is brilliant, quite good on Þjóstólfr, adequate on Mǫrðr but does not seem to have any sympathy for Hrappr, although he makes the interesting point that Hrappr is like a child, a complete egoist who never stops to consider the consequences of his actions: „Hann breytir hverri girnd sinni óðara í athöfn og er alltaf á flótaferli undan afleiðingum þeirra.“ It might also be argued that Hrappr just does not care, since it is hard to find anyone who is less prone to try to justify his actions or make himself look any better than he is. I myself feel that Einar Ólafur’s observation is a better description of Þráinn than Hrappr.

⁹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson disapproves and calls Hrappr a “guðníðingr” (1943: 79).

¹⁰ In his study of outlawry, Turville-Petre (1977: 778) discusses the word “vargr”, commonly used for outlaws, and makes this interesting point about wolves (and outlaws): “The wolf has two sides to his character. On the one hand, he is, like the fox, the sly vicious thief, but he is also brave and has qualities which many men would desire.” It might be added that no serious discussion on Hrappr can really ignore those qualities that make him a character to be empathized with.

an outlaw, and this makes the average reader want him to escape his pursuers. Hrappr is also very candid about his evil-doings, taking an immoral but somewhat seductive delight in them. From our modern point of view, he much resembles the later type of romantic villains from 19th century novels (such as Long John Silver and Rupert Hentzau), that you are forced to disapprove of whilst being simultaneously seduced by their charm.¹¹ Closer to the point of *Njáls saga's* composition, there is the picaresque anti-hero who cannot really be admired but is still the protagonist of the narrative. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1943: 78 and 84) has indicated that the author of *Njáls saga* had a somewhat black and white frame of mind, in discerning between hero and villain. Perhaps that is so, but it still leaves the audience some room to be engaged by the scoundrels. It is possible to admire clever and resourceful Mǫrðr Valgarðsson to a degree, in spite of his wickedness, and there is even a case to be made that the saga does give him his due (Cook 2001). Hrappr, on the other hand, may charm us by his honesty, his wit, and his utter lack of any moral reservations.

But it is not merely the audience that is seduced. More significantly for the plot of *Njáls saga*, Þráinn Sigfússon is. When Hrappr comes running towards the shore, he sees the ships leaving Norway, among them the vessel of the sons of Njáll, Helgi and Grímr, and Þráinn Sigfússon's ship. First he asks the sons of Njáll to save him but they very prudently refuse, feeling that he would bring bad luck. While they are justified by both past and future events in doing so, their refusal is not heroic and neither does it seem more admirable from a modern standpoint. Is prudence more important than mercy? Perhaps the original audience of *Njáls saga* felt the same; in the 13th century, it became customary for people to seek shelter from their enemies in churches, and it was apparently un-Christian to turn them out (see Sverrir Jakobsson 1998: 24–29). Then Hrappr goes to Þráinn Sigfússon and this time gets lucky. He confesses that he has killed some men and burnt the temple of Earl Hákon, Þráinn's benefactor. Then he offers Þráinn money and finally he resorts to being pathetic, and tells Þráinn that now he will run no further, but be killed in front of Þráinn, and the latter will be blamed for his cruelty, and lose honour for standing by and seeing another man get killed (p. 216). Þráinn gives in and takes him on.

This decision may at first seem illogical and unexplained. It is not only

¹¹ Long John Silver appeared in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883); Rupert Hentzau in Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894).

a pivotal moment in the saga but also a prick or a point that has to be discussed and explained and continues to draw our attention by its very strangeness.¹² To a degree, it is characteristic of the *Práinn* that we met in Gunnarr's wedding. As *Práinn* is beholden to the Earl in a way that the sons of *Njáll* are not, this is an impulsive decision, to say the least. He is, effectively, betraying his overlord (as *Hrappr* has already done), a serious crime in the feudal ideology dominant in 13th century Europe. But it cannot be overlooked that he is being noble, too. Not only modern readers would sympathise with him, *Helgi* and *Grímr* are also sufficiently in understanding of his motives to then refuse to divulge to the Earl what he has done, when he asks them what has happened with *Hrappr*. So do all the other captains present, thus creating a firm consensus that saving *Hrappr* was, at least partially, a good action. Apparently, *Hrappr*'s plight does strike a chord in the hearts of the saga characters. *Práinn*, too, is not merely convinced by the money — though it may be an added incentive, or so the saga author makes us believe by including this offer in his narrative, to *Práinn*'s detriment — but seems to have a conviction that helping a fellow human in need is the correct thing to do. Furthermore, *Práinn* now gets an opportunity to demonstrate his cleverness, when he hides *Hrappr* from the Earl, who has to use his magical second sight to see through *Práinn*'s tricks, and only when it is too late (pp. 216–20; cf. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 51–54).

On the one hand, *Práinn* emerges from this episode in a better light than before. He demonstrates both the quality of mercy and a cleverness matching that of *Mqrðr Valgarðsson* and even *Njáll* himself. Although the Earl is being betrayed, it is difficult to side with him. But, of course, it cannot be denied either that *Práinn* is both playing a risky game and being ignoble, as he was the Earl's man and had benefitted from his graces. He is also jeopardizing his future travels to Norway; for him there will be no return. And it must be kept in mind that *Hrappr*, for all his charms, is not an innocent victim but a shameless scoundrel.

As *Práinn* is an experienced man and probably in his sixties, this uprising against the Earl is somewhat perplexing, to say the least. But *Práinn* still comes into his own in a manner he has not done before. He has finally emerged from the shadow of his nephew Gunnarr, not by being considerably heroic but still not quite so heroic as Gunnar had been, but

¹² I am consciously echoing Barthes' depiction of the *punctum*, see Ármann Jakobsson 2004. It is, in this case like in many other, impossible to decide to what extent the audience of the saga is meant to ponder this decision.

by being cunning and clever and rebellious, by taking on the Earl of Norway himself by helping someone who was in trouble, a stranger who appealed to his honour, and by escaping with his dignity intact.

The rebellion against the Earl also has another side to it. Showing mercy is virtuous, and mercy is furthermore a virtue that is particularly important for kings and chieftains (Ármann Jakobsson 1997: 232–36). Thus Práinn is appropriating for himself the power of kings and chieftains by taking Hrappr under his wing. It is understandable that Grímr and Helgi hesitate, they are not kings and showing mercy is not a part of their role.¹³ Taking on Hrappr is Práinn's first act as a chieftain, as the self-proclaimed successor of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. Unfortunately, that is a role that keeps eluding him.

Things fall apart

After this moment of unexpected and morally ambiguous triumph, Práinn's life starts going downhill, although he probably does not realise that until his moment of death. It all starts in chapter 91, when the sons of Njáll ask him for compensation for the tribulations they had suffered at the hands of Earl Hákon, who had persecuted them in Práinn's place, or as his supposed accomplices. Their brother-in-law is Práinn's brother Ketill and he arbitrates on their behalf, but is refused. Their new friend Kári, who, like Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, is valiant, modest and righteous, then speaks to Práinn and does not get anything out of him either. Práinn now has a chance to show the sons of Njáll the same nobility that he had shown when hiding Hrappr from the earl, but somehow this seems to be beyond him. Kings and magnates should be magnanimous, but the magnanimity that a nobleman must possess has passed Práinn by. It seems to be easier for him to be kind to strangers than to his neighbours, a somewhat wry but insightful observation of human nature by the saga author. And refusing to be noble to the sons of Njáll has serious consequences for Práinn. It is the first indication that he is not a real chieftain.

When Práinn returns home, he is the new leader of the Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi clan, or, as the saga has it: "Allir frændr Práins heldu hann

¹³ Grímr and Helgi presumably go abroad for a "grand tour", in the fashion of European princes. However, they fail to come into their own. Skarpheðinn, who stays at home for some reason, continues to be the undisputed leader of the brothers, and they are furthermore outshone by Kári Sölmundarson whom they befriend and who is much more impressive than they are from the outset.

fyrir hofðingja” (All of Thrain’s kinsfolk saw him as a chieftain) (p. 220). The word “halda” has several meanings (Fritzner’s Old Icelandic dictionary (1973: 692–702) lists more than 100), and one of the possible meanings of this sentence is ‘to believe that someone is a chieftain’, another would be ‘to have him as a chieftain’. There is a sense of disdain: unlike Gunnarr, Þráinn is not a real chieftain but he can be held for chieftain for a while. It is hard not to see Þráinn as being slightly inadequate in this new role, especially when he is then described: “Þráinn var skrautmenni mikit ok reið jafnan í blári kápu” (He was a great one for show and always rode out in a black cloak) (p. 227). It seems a logical conclusion that Þráinn is not a real chieftain, but a vain and foppish old man who is being used as the figurehead for a gang.

In chapters 91 and 92, Þráinn’s entourage indeed comes across as a gang, more than anything else, with Hrappr acting as the lieutenant who is actually in charge. The servant dominates his master, and this is made very clear soon. Hrappr is apparently having an affair with Hallgerðr (p. 220),¹⁴ and when Skarpheðinn leads the sons of Njáll on a visit to Grjótá, most of the gang members hurl insults at them (making it easier for the sons of Njáll to later kill them), while Þráinn inadequately tries to stop them: “allir urðu sekir þessa orða, þeir er fyrir váru, nema Þráinn; hann þekti menn af orðum þessum” (all those who faced them, except Thrain, had made themselves guilty of using those words. Thrain tried to restrain them from using those words) (p. 229). Even if it must be acknowledged that Þráinn is by far the cleverest person in his own gang, he is not its actual leader; the other gang members do not care whether he tries to shut them up or not. He is held as a chieftain, but is not really a leader.¹⁵ The role he has claimed requires him to be in control but he is not.

Even though the killing of Þráinn, soon after, is a spectacular scene in the saga, it reveals little about his character. He is uncharacteristically guileless when he is attacked and killed, and his surprise is natural enough since Skarpheðinn has to cross the icy Markarfljót at the speed of a bird to reach him. Þráinn apparently does not have the imagination to expect

¹⁴ It could be argued that the saga author mentions the affair to further blacken Hallgerðr’s character, but it must also be kept in mind that Hrappr has previously seduced almost everyone else he has come into contact with, including perhaps many in the 13th century audience, as well as later readers of *Njáls saga*.

¹⁵ This is made very clear in the dialogue of the saga. Hrappr has far more direct speech in chapters 82–92 than Þráinn has (27 lines to Þráinn’s 20) and his lines are more witty and memorable. Even in his own part of the saga, Þráinn is eclipsed by his henchman.

such an attack. But he is also rather valiant, refusing to choose another time to travel, because then he would be allowing fear to guide his actions. It is hard not to get the impression that Þráinn is no longer a man in control. It might even be argued that he has been the victim of a monster of his own creation, as the savior of Hrappr. The latter is now the real antagonist of the sons of Njáll and he manages to crack some good jokes before he is killed, and goes out with the same bravado he has shown all along. Hrappr dies almost heroically, fighting against two and making pointed and reflective comments about how he really deserves his fate. Þráinn, on the other hand, is just killed without famous last words (pp. 229–34). His death mainly illustrates Skarpheðinn's extreme athleticism and bravery. The person who dies would not seem to be of much significance, if it wasn't for the fact that he was of a good standing and had not given the sons of Njáll any lawful cause to kill him, which means that his death in turn marks the beginning of their bad luck.

Chieftain without substance

I have argued that Þráinn Sigfússon is depicted in *Njáls saga* as a clever and accomplished man, who still falls short of his own ambition. In the end, he is no Gunnarr and ends up losing control over his own men. He is more than once in the saga referred to as a “skrautmenni”, a dandy or a fop. One might conclude that his fatal flaw is a lack of substance. If Gunnarr and Njáll are regarded as the heroes of this saga, which seems reasonable, their main virtues may be listed as follows: cleverness, foresight, bravery, firmness and integrity. But Þráinn lacks the foresight of Njáll; he ditches first his wife and then his king on the spur of the moment. He also lacks the loyalty of Gunnarr, who remains a close friend to Njáll and his sons through endless provocation and mockery. While Gunnarr was brave, Þráinn wants to appear brave. Gunnarr would never stoop to robbing people or taking part in ignoble killings but Þráinn has no such scruples. And while Njáll is always in control of his own fate, and most of the time in control of his sons, Þráinn ends up as a mere figurehead of a rabble.

Þráinn's lack of integrity may be regarded as tragic, not only because it indirectly leads to the tragic death of Njáll and his sons, but because he is an accomplished man, who can, on occasion, be intelligent and resourceful, brave and noble, even to the point of taking on Earl Hákon and emerging unscathed.

But although he hands out mercy like a king on that occasion, he falls short on most other virtues necessary for a ruler or a chieftain, two of the most important being strength and moderation (Ármann Jakobsson 1997: 212–28). In an age of charismatic rulers, Þráinn fatally lacks the necessary charisma to be a real chieftain. In spite of his ambition to become a leading figure, he constantly gets eclipsed by others, even after the death of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. In Old Icelandic, the word “mildi” is frequently used for the mercy of rulers. But the word is also used about generosity and magnanimity (Ármann Jakobsson 1997: 236–39). Þráinn’s magnanimity is put to the test when Helgi and Grímr ask for compensation for their tribulations, and he fails.

Þráinn is not generous, as befits a ruler. He does not have the strength to rule either, as his gang acts like a leaderless rabble with Þráinn its leader in name only, whereas Hrappr is the leading spirit. And, last but not least, Þráinn is not temperate nor moderate as a ruler must be. It is interesting (and slightly ironic) that after Þráinn has failed spectacularly to become Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi’s heir, his son Hǫskuldr is actually successful in the same quest (much to Mǫrðr Valgarðsson’s chagrin). Unlike Þráinn he enjoys the support of Njáll (who, as related above, always had a soft spot for Þráinn and was never his enemy until he was forced to). And unlike Þráinn, Hǫskuldr is both firm and modest and never makes an impetuous decision.

Þráinn is a man governed by impulse and this leads to his failure and eventually to his death. His first impulsive deed results in him becoming the son-in-law of Hallgerðr, and, to a degree, her stooge. The second turns out to be lethal: in rescuing Hrappr, he ends up becoming beholden to him and more controlled by his new servant than in control over him. Thus Þráinn’s virtues are negated by the fact that he is always in a hurry and lacks the moral commitment to make the right choices. Þráinn becomes an example. He is an important case study of what happens to those who do not consider the consequences of their own actions.

References

- Ármann Jakobsson 1997. *Í leit að konungi: Konungsmýnd íslenskra konungasagna*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.
- Ármann Jakobsson 2002. *Staður í nýjum heimi: Konungasagan Morkinskinna*. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.
- Ármann Jakobsson 2004. “Some Types of Ambiguities in the Sagas of Icelanders.” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 119, 37–53.

- Ármann Jakobsson 2007. "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*." *Viator* 38, 191–215.
- Ármann Jakobsson 2008. "Egils saga and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family." *Scandinavian Studies* 80, 1–18.
- Clover, Carol 1982. *The Medieval Saga*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Cook, Robert 2001. "Mörður Valgarðsson." *Sagnaheimur: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 80th birthday, 26th May 2001*. Ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek. Wien: Fassbaender, 63–77.
- Cook, Robert, transl. 2001. *Njal's saga*. London: Penguin.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor 2004. *The Idiot*, transl. by David McDuff. London: Penguin.
- Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed. 1934. *Laxdœla saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 5. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1943. *Á Njálsbúð: Bók um mikið listaverk*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag.
- Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed. 1954. *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 12. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, ed. 1935. *Eyrbyggja saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Finnur Jónsson, ed. 1904. *Hrólfs saga kraka og Bjarkarímur*, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 32. Copenhagen: S.L. Møller.
- Fritzner, Johan 1973. *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog*, 4th edition. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Gunnar Harðarson, ed. 1989. *Þrjár þýðingar lærðar frá miðöldum*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag.
- Harris, Joseph 1972. "Genre and Narrative Structure in Some Íslendinga þættir." *Scandinavian Studies* 44, 1–27.
- Harris, Joseph 1976. "Theme and Genre in some Íslendinga þættir." *Scandinavian Studies* 48, 1–28.
- Jón Sigurðsson, ed. 1857–76. *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn, sem hefir inni að halda bréf og gjörninga, dóma og máldaga, og aðrar skrár, er snerta Ísland eða íslenzka menn*. Copenhagen: S.L. Møller.
- Judd, William E. 1984. "Valgerðr's Smile." *Scandinavian Studies* 56, 203–12.
- Low Soon Ai 1996. "The Mirthless Content of Skarphedinn's Grin." *Medium Aevum* 65, 101–8.
- Lönnroth, Lars 1976. *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press.
- Maxwell, I.R. 1957. "Pattern in *Njáls saga*." *Saga-Book* 15, 17–47.
- Sigurður Nordal, ed. 1933. *Egils saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 2. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Sverrir Jakobsson 1998. "Friðarviðleitni kirkjunnar á 13. öld." *Saga* 36, 7–46.
- Turville-Petre, Gabriel 1977. "Outlawry." *Sjöttú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. Júlí 1977*. Ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Einar Gunnar Pétursson. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 769–78.