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ANTIQUARIANISM, POETRY, AND WORD-OF-MOUTH FAME IN THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS¹

A FEW YEARS ago I proposed ‘the characteristic moment’ as a motif in Northern heroic literature (Waugh 1997a),² and I have since found a further aspect of this motif that I believe adds to its importance: the potential transfer of such a moment from one character to another. Analysis of this transfer-idea has in turn suggested a theory concerning the persistence and placement of descriptions of fame by word of mouth in the Icelandic family sagas. These descriptions occur and recur due to strategic attitudes toward oral tradition that the saga writers betray, as I shall show through analysis of a characteristic moment in its process of transfer in *Njáls saga* — a transfer that sparks the career of a skald — and through analysis of rare episodes from Old Norse compositions where conflicts between oral and literate traditions are described openly.

No doubt, many readers are puzzled by the unrelenting occurrence of passages, such as the following ones, throughout the Icelandic family sagas and related Old Norse works:

En er þat fréttisk, at Grettir hafði lagzk viku sjávar, þótti öllum frábærr frækneikr hans bæði á sjá ok landi. (*Grettis saga*:241)

‘When it was learned that Grettir had swum a sea-mile, everyone thought that his prowess was surpassing on both land and sea.’³

¹ Part of this article was delivered as a paper at the twenty-fifth annual meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies in Canada at York University in Toronto, May 2006.

² Characteristic moments occur when individuals in heroic works engage in self-conscious dialogues with the past in order to transcend it, that is, in order to mark their own spots in time. See Waugh 1997a:249, 253.

³ Translations are my own. For discussion of *Grettis saga* and its readers, see Cook 1984-85. Although I discuss fame in the sagas of Icelanders primarily, I refer also to Old Icelandic works outside of this genre, because many of them share fame-values with the family sagas.

Illugi kastaði skildi þá yfir hann, ok varði hann svá rǫskliga, at allir menn ágættu vǫrn hans. (260)

‘Illugi threw a shield over [Grettir], and defended him so valiantly that all present praised his defence.’

This feeling of puzzlement has little to do with the literal meaning of such passages, which is usually clear; nor does the mere existence of them raise problems. This and other family sagas tend to record the onset, progress, and maintenance of reputations exceptionally thoroughly, even compared to other works from similar heroic traditions (for example, the Old English tradition). So, as readers become more familiar with the sagas’ content, they would come to expect the spontaneous reactions of witnesses to fame-worthy deeds, whereupon any initial feeling of puzzlement would likely fade. Renown is, after all, essential to the competitive world-view that dominates the sagas and is a stated goal of many of the major saga-characters: a way of defining their identities and their values to their communities (*Njáls saga*:324).⁴ A reputation is also a fragile, time-sensitive construct — never to be taken for granted, because a character can wreck a lifetime’s worth of reputation-building with just one failed effort (*Grettis saga*:193-194; *Njáls saga*:84, 407). The reiteration of word-of-mouth praise may well take place, then, simply because a reputation requires continual reinforcement.

I have no objection to this understanding of heroic fame. I also realize that fame by word of mouth is a way of including evaluations of saga characters in the narrative while avoiding authorial intrusion (Allen 1971:99-101, 107-112). But my own puzzled reaction to the excerpts above has less to do with their import and more to do with their placement. They appear at the end of *Grettis saga*, when any logical or narrative need for the saga to establish or even maintain the reputations of its major characters has vanished long ago. Only totally atypical actions by Grettir could change his well-established reputation at this juncture. Hence, even if one deems the reiteration of reputations to be typical

Moreover, there is little evidence that Icelandic writers distinguished between saga-genres and between compositions such as *Grettis saga* and *Orkneyinga saga* until the nineteenth century. Also, I examine Old Icelandic works as compositions rather than historical chronicles. For instance, I do not mean to imply that events in the sagas actually occurred: a point that is impossible to prove. See Byock 2004 for an argument that the sagas are not strictly history or literature but both (303).

⁴ For discussion of heroic fame, see Andersson 1970, Harris 1983:219-242, and Simek 2000.

of saga-discourse, an obvious question comes up: why offer such material so late in the narrative? Why spell out the public opinion concerning Grettir's swim instead of just noting that people hear about the deed? Or, to put the point another way, why not write, *Illugi kastaði skildi þá yfir hann, ok varði hann røskliga* (cf. *Grettis saga*:260)? Surely in the last few episodes of a saga a writer can reinforce a character's fame through merely relating heroic deeds, while the audience could assume that the reactions of typical witnesses to such events and behaviours would take place, once the narrator has included a few examples of these reactions. Yet references to word-of-mouth fame persist throughout *Grettis saga* and most others right to their final chapters, and the sheer number of these references would seem to overwhelm any idea that they are meant to appear at strategic junctures of the narrative (*Grettis saga*:69, 71, 72, 72-73, 76, 78, 81, 94, 104, 117, 121, 122, 125, 129, 131, 132-34, 136, 137, 162, 170, 174, 184, 187, 196, 211, 216, 218, 222, 233, 234, 249, 261, 263, 265, 266, 268, 272, 286, 289-290).⁵ Equally, in *Njáls saga*, a general picture of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi's reputation is reproduced many times up to and even after his death, often in the same terms as earlier in the saga, *engi var hans maki*, 'he had no equal' (*Njáls saga*:82; 76, 82, 84, 85, 86, 91, 127, 130, 133, 146, 166, 174, 181, 189, 190, 191, 198, 201, 230, 335). The persistence of these passages has no obvious cumulative effect. They come over as redundant.

One might, then, argue that evaluative episodes recur throughout the sagas because fame-worthiness is a theme or motif of these compositions. Yet puzzlement arises from this theory as well. As the narratives of most of the sagas of Icelanders develop, each starts to include more complex ways of thinking about reputation than simple praise through word of mouth. One sees, for instance, ritualistic declarations of an individual's renown that are more formulaic than spontaneous, as when the dead Gunnarr gets up in his grave and proclaims his deeds loudly in verse (*Njáls saga*:193). One sees the growth of a character's reputation into a kind of social currency, as when Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson in the same saga immediately recognizes a well-executed plan as representative of Njáll's thinking (65). One sees self-consciousness by characters regarding their word-of-mouth fame, as when Gunnarr openly compares his methods of gaining renown with his wife's (189, 83, 139). One

⁵ An example of a strategic moment would be just before a character dies. Theodore M. Andersson notes that a character's reputation often receives a summing up at this juncture (1967:62- 64).

sees doubts concerning the traditional connection between immortality and fame, as when Þorkell Eyjólfsson in *Laxdæla saga* fails to complete a church that he wanted to build as an expression of his glory (*Laxdæla saga*:217-222). One sees questioning of the heroic ideal, as when Hallr of Síða disagrees with his kinsmen over the fame-worthiness of certain accomplishments and declares himself to be *lítilmenni*, ‘a person of little account’ in *Njáls saga* (361-362, 405, 408, 412). One even sees parody of renown and of the fame-tradition, as when the battle-deeds of Björn hvíti, a kind of comic foil to Kári Sölmundarson in the same saga, never live up to Björn’s fulsome boasts (424-435).⁶ Although several varieties of fame might appear for purposes of juxtaposition in a saga, the many examples of simple word-of-mouth praise make an unexpected counterpoise to the more sophisticated attitudes toward the fame ideal that the sagas also relate. So, readers might well conclude that there is a hitherto unrecognised motive for the typical medieval saga-writer to persist in providing so many examples of spontaneous judgements of reputations, and I wish to propose such a motive.⁷

One of the reasons that these instances occur and recur is the retrospective points of view of the sagas. Most of the kings’ and family sagas were written hundreds of years after the action that they purport to describe. Between the settlement-period of Icelandic history when the action of most of the family sagas occurs and the writing of these works, Iceland underwent major social, political, and cultural changes. It accepted Christianity and contacted many ideas, artworks, and other cultural materials from Britain and the continent (Gade 2000:75; Glauser 2000:214-215; Foote 1963:93-99, 116; Clover 1982: 16, 203-204). Therefore, most saga-writers cannot help but take an antiquarian attitude toward their subject matter, even if they perhaps did not do so con-

⁶ Although I concentrate here on *Njáls saga*, the pattern of the development of more complex attitudes toward fame applies to many Old Norse works, including almost all of the family sagas, and much study of each ‘stage’ of fame in these remains to be done. For instance, one might look at skaldic praise-poetry of kings and earls as examples of ritualistic fame. See *Orkneyinga saga*:42, 49, 53, 66-69, 204 and Whaley 2001. For more on self-consciousness with regard to reputation, see Margaret Cormack (1994:188). The most famous example of this kind of self-consciousness is Roland’s. See *Le Chanson de Roland* (1980, lines 1013-16). For parody of fame in one of the sagas, see Waugh 2003, which examines Saint Magnús’s reputation in *Orkneyinga saga*.

⁷ Of course I realize that attributing motives is always speculative and that a variety of motives could exist. It is certainly possible that saga-writers included these kinds of passages because they felt they had to, or, on the other hand, unconsciously, with no thoughts about justification whatsoever.

sciously (Byock 1982:8).⁸ In fact the writer of *Grettis saga* is one of the most openly antiquarian: *Þat var háttir í þann tíma, at eldaskálar váru stórir á bæjum* (38), 'It was the custom in those days that the fire-halls on farms were large;' *Þat var þá háttir, at menn vistuðu sik sjálfir til þings* (45-46), 'It was the custom at that time for people to provide their own meals at the thing;' *Þá var ekki dæluastr á hafskipum* (55; see also 236), 'Back then, there were no pumps on ships.' Snorri Sturluson is another obvious example of an Icelandic prose writer with specifically antiquarian concerns, and his compositions demonstrate the particular kind of antiquarianism that Icelandic writers tend to display. His inventory of oral poetic techniques in the prose Edda, for instance (Snorri Sturluson 1991; Beck 2000:61-71), strongly suggests that Icelandic writers often assumed that the societies that they depicted in their compositions were more conversant with oral than with written traditions (Curschmann 1984:140-151; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004:32-35, 253, 301), as one also sees when the sagas typically record such inherently traditional material as genealogies and settlement stories. Moreover, much of this traditional material associates directly with fame. In both *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* and *Grettis saga*, characters explicitly mention that they will construct memorials to the dead by carving praise-poems onto rune-sticks (*Egils saga*:245-257; *Grettis saga*:203-205; 216-17).⁹ This retrospective viewpoint, I believe, motivated writers in Old Norse to see certain means of expression as oral, to try to depict them that way, and thus to create a precise context for the ideas and experiences of presumably pre-literate characters.¹⁰ This context may have simply been supplied from the saga-writers' sources, either oral or written, and it may have been (re)produced without much consciousness about it, but there are obvious indications of it nevertheless. First, the sagas' tendency to include word-of-mouth reactions to events shows that their authors believed, or knew, or decided to argue that many episodes in these works were 'oral' in that they simply would not exist were it not for the witnesses who could repeat accounts

⁸ Perhaps saga-writers included nostalgic passages because they were part of the stock-in-trade of their mode of composition. Byock argues that the typical saga is a 'rich exploration of sociohistorical memory . . . a well-developed animation of the past' (2004:314, 299).

⁹ The sagas suggest that these poems were orally composed, but they may not have been circulated orally before being carved.

¹⁰ The study of oral traditions now forms a vast and growing discussion. See the book edited by Mark C. Amodio (2005). For the Norse tradition in particular, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's *Fortælling og ære*, where he suggests that the sagas create an illusion of an oral tradition behind them (1995).

of them: saga characters sometimes mention the memorizing of verses that can then become records of events (*Grettis saga*:205). A second obvious indication of an oral context is the emotions that seem to arise in witnesses when they observe certain deeds (249; *Völsunga saga*:40).¹¹ Examples of word-of-mouth praise, then, could be interpreted as one of the most important kinds of communication within the oral societies depicted in the sagas. However, after one notes the interaction and emotion that usually surround fame-worthy actions, one's analysis would seem to come to a frustrating standstill, because typical passages such as my chosen excerpts from *Grettis saga* seem so unrevealing. Most of the time, the narrative voice notes the essentials of a character's reputation without further comment. No wonder that critical study of word-of-mouth fame, the passages that depict it, and the emotions on view during these descriptions have grown so scarce (cf. Waugh 1997a:249-255). Such critical neglect also occurs because of attitudes that dominate literary criticism. Typically, these attitudes arrive from a highly 'literate' understanding of compositions and of the creative process, and literate critical communities have a habit of treating (at least eventually) most of the material and ideas that they analyze (for instance, heroic deeds) as abstract concepts.¹² In contrast, as Walter Ong says, oral societies typically value the 'situational' over the 'abstract'. One might even argue that, for oral societies, actions exist only within their situations (1982:49, 51). Saga-writers who are involved in depicting an oral society, then, if they are conscious of a battle between oral and written traditions as the period in which they are writing suggests,¹³ would perhaps feel justified in including — perhaps, even feel obligated to include — these situations along with their requisite actions. Correspondingly, readers might expect the sagas to spell out relations between actions and situations at significant junctures of a character's reputation-building. However, the saga authors (or narrators) remain remarkably reticent about exactly what happens between a performer and a witness during such a moment, except in a very few instances.

In one of these exceptional instances in *Njáls saga*, Skarphedinn Njáls, a particularly competitive character, leaps across a river and slides along a

¹¹ For more on the emotions that are behind the sharing of stories about heroic deeds, see Caie 1976:31.

¹² Note the abstraction of the concept of the hero in, for example, Frye 1957:33, 319-320.

¹³ Almost certainly saga-writers could not distinguish between oral performance and literate performance in the way that critics can now. Nevertheless, these writers are likely to betray at least some aspects of the clashing of oral and literate traditions.

stretch of ice in order to kill an adversary, Þráinn Sigfússon, with one blow: a display of virtuoso athleticism. Skarpheðinn's comrade, Kári, immediately assesses the deed with *karlmannliga er at farit* (233), 'it was very heroic to do that.' Apparently, this speaker merely voices his knee-jerk response to the events, and the result is a declaration of the obvious. It is not particularly remarkable, original, thoughtful, witty, or well-phrased, especially when it is compared to comments in similar situations. For instance, a comparable judgement appears in the same saga when Kolskeggr assesses one of his brother Gunnarr's athletic feats as *hart ríðr þú* (138), 'you ride fast,' but this rather unoriginal assessment occurs in the narrative for an obvious purpose. It recalls a similar judgement by an adversary of Gunnarr's, Skammkell (135), as Gunnarr makes plain by noting the echo (138), while the inadvertent repetition of his enemy's phrase reminds Gunnarr of an outstanding slight that cannot be forgotten or ignored. And, significantly, any other spontaneous judgements by individual characters of heroes or their acts that occur in Njáls saga also have apparent thematic purposes. The assessments of lawyers during the court-case against the burners of Njáll and his family intensify the see-saw action of this section and thus help to build suspense (363-401). The fact that enemies praise characters in the saga adds to the credibility of these assessments and speaks to the objectivity and fair-mindedness of the speakers (335, 336, 396, 422, 435, 444). The only other spontaneous judgement that seems to lack a thematic purpose in the saga is again an individual assessment of one of Skarpheðinn's deeds by Kári whose phrase again comes over as rather ordinary (327).

Kári's appreciation of Skarpheðinn's great leap is so immediate and unadorned that it sounds like a personal thrill of victory: a rendering not so much of his own thoughts as those of his comrade. The appreciation then represents a moment of direct empathy between these characters: one immediately and apparently effortlessly places himself into the situation of the other.¹⁴ In fact, the appreciation works well as an example of Emmanuel Levinas's idea that empathy involves an awareness that 'The way in which the other presents himself exceed[s] the idea of the other in me' (1969:50), an observation that fits with heroic competition in general and Skarpheðinn's heroic attributes in particular. One of his major functions in the saga is to exceed others. In his case, the saga even associates his competitive abilities, such

¹⁴ Empathy is 'access to an exterior being,' as Emmanuel Levinas calls it, that re-enacts a kind of fundamental 'moral consciousness' (1990:293).

as athleticism and prophecy (70, 104-105), with a particularly Old Norse idea of ‘the other.’ Characters describe him as slightly uncanny and troll-like (298-299), which matches with Levinas’s connection of the ‘idea of the other’ to an essential, and essentially human, inability to know another person’s nature completely.¹⁵

Critics have proposed just this kind of emotional/communicative connection that Kári and Skarpheðinn experience as one of the basic attributes of heroic fame in general. Roberta Frank says that the kind of ‘self-praise’ that is likely to exist in a conventional hero’s mind at the moment of a typical accomplishment (usually of athletic prowess, often in battle), is ‘a rhetoric prized as empowering and strength-enhancing’ by anyone in a society that values oral-heroic tradition (1991:199). So, a fellow-warrior like Kári would not only appreciate a comrade’s achievement but also want to share in it. His comment can substitute for the immediate thoughts on the slaying of Þráinn that Skarpheðinn omits to utter, and it thus confirms that bystanders — and here is how the moment of transfer becomes an ethical concept, that is, an idea that affects an entire community — can partake in and express for themselves the ‘moments of high emotion’ that people like Skarpheðinn, Grettir, and Illugi feel through the performance of their deeds (Opland 1980:262). Of course a character’s emotion is most intense at the death of a rival in heroic works, especially if that character has contributed to the killing, because the victor then possesses the reputation of his slain adversary almost physically (*Völunga saga*:17, 40; Opland 1975:187).

The broader context for Kári’s phrase supports the idea that it amounts to virtual self-praise by Skarpheðinn. In other sagas, great deeds are often celebrated through skaldic poetry, which frequently acts as the vehicle by which news of these events gets disseminated (*Grettis saga*:156, 197-198, 216-217; Poole 1991:3-23; Whaley 2001). Skarpheðinn’s actions in almost any other saga might well have inspired a stanza from either himself or an onlooker.¹⁶ But *Njáls saga* does not follow this tradition. A comparison with *Egils saga* demonstrates that not only does Egill constantly praise himself in poetry, often

¹⁵ See also Levinas 1987:39-44, 93-100; 1981:13-27, 51-56, 115, and the volume edited by Peperzak (1995). The theme of what one might call heroic empathy continues in the saga. Flosi Þórðarson, Kári’s greatest enemy, admits that *ok þann veg vilda ek helzt skapfarinn vera sem hann er* (422), ‘I would want most to have a temperament like his [Kári’s].’

¹⁶ In some manuscripts, verses by Skarpheðinn duly appear at this juncture (*Njáls saga*:479-480).

immediately after he has slain a foe (202-206, 210), but also that this saga contains remarkably few examples of word-of-mouth fame. Possibly, then, certain saga-writers, especially if they knew of other sagas in written form (as seems likely), thought of fame through word of mouth and self-praise as virtually equivalent, so that *Njáls saga* can dispense with the latter because it contains the former.

Kári's reaction, then, would seem to describe rather precisely the transfer, in an almost physical fashion, of an apparent 'message' (in this case, a specific feeling of achievement), from the mind of a performer to that of a spectator. His comment performs the same disseminating function as a stanza of praise-poetry; but, in the instance of the communication of Skarpheðinn's feelings to Kári, the transfer is more immediate, intimate, and direct than verse. This transfer idea is even suggested by the distinct characters of the two men involved. Up to the point of Þráinn's killing in *Njáls saga*, Kári's thoughts, compared to those of other characters, have seldom appeared. He offers no spontaneous praise of Grímr and Helgi, the other two sons of Njáll, when he first appears in the saga (203-204). The killing of Þráinn produces Kári's first assessment of Skarpheðinn; Kári had never seen his oldest brother-in-law fight before. Meanwhile, the saga has openly portrayed Skarpheðinn's sensitivity to public opinion. The latter is in many ways the story's most acute judge of what might benefit one's reputation and what probably will not (324), and he displays a characteristic expression of emotion, grinning, while Kári has no such attribute (114, 327).

The transfer also indicates that situational thinking is at work: each deed in an oral society, together with its spontaneous reaction, amounts to a potential means of communication, a potential composition — even, in its own way, a potential myth of origin.¹⁷ The sagas of Icelanders betray a passive concern with origins by including many settlement-stories and genealogies; they demonstrate a more active concern with origins by including generative constructs — that is, events related allusively in one saga may appear at greater length in another as if one work might be the 'origin' of the other. Hence, any episode of word-of-mouth fame is the potential point of origin for an entire saga.¹⁸ For instance, the transfer of Skarpheðinn's thoughts to Kári is genera-

¹⁷ I use the phrase 'myth of origin' because source-relationships are often very difficult to prove, while the entire strategy of trying to learn about a subject through a search for its origins is now less valued than it used to be (Said 1975:174-175, 197; Derrida 1976:242-243).

¹⁸ Generative passages in the sagas may result from the writers of them drawing upon the same oral tradition and hence demonstrating knowledge of the same figures from the past.

tive in a specific way: the latter has produced no poetry up to this point in the saga, but does so once the feud concerning Njáll's family has reached its extreme.

Unlike many of the other sagas, such as *Grettis saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, that depict their principal characters as prolific and precocious versifiers right from their first appearances in their stories, *Njáls saga* contains little in the way of praise-poetry. Most of the famous stanzas in it are prophecies by minor characters, most verses have associations with death, and they seem to be introduced more schematically than in other sagas.¹⁹ One of the more significant examples, in praise of the great hero Gunnarr's last stand, appears at the very moment that this hero dies, as if his reputation in verse replaces him (190). Gunnarr himself only recites poetry as a ghost, in his burial mound. Significantly, Skarpheðinn witnesses this recitation (193). Just like Gunnarr, he then produces only one poem in the course of his illustrious career, at the burning of himself and the rest of Njáll's family (336),²⁰ and this verse only appears once one of the burners has wondered whether or not Skarpheðinn is alive late in the burning. Since the poem is nearly unintelligible and apparently a depiction of a woman in mourning, it suits the situation of a dying man, striving against impossible odds. A burner even speculates as to whether or not Skarpheðinn was dead or alive when he recited the poem (337). One sees, therefore, a progression in *Njáls saga* from a verse by a dead man to a (half) verse by a half-dead man. And the power of poetry, among other things, seems to be passed on like a legacy.

At the burning, this legacy comes to Kári. Indeed, Skarpheðinn tells him, as a reply to Kári's praise of his great leap, *Eptir er enn yðvarr hluti* (233),

¹⁹ The saga seems to take an unusually critical attitude to skaldic verse in general. Typically, the saga only refers, with a few exceptions, to the work of so-called famous poets without quoting it; for instance the scurrilous verses directed at Njáll and his family. Also, these poems are clearly portrayed in the saga as a negative development in dealings between the feuding parties. The stanzas directly lead to much bloodshed. Much verse elsewhere in the saga is associated with black magic, paganism, or both (264-266, 321, 335-336, 348, 454-460). I largely rely upon Einar Ól. Sveinsson's edition of the saga in my conclusions concerning the poems, because I do not have space to discuss the different patterns of verse that exist in the over 50 manuscripts of *Njáls saga* that are extant. Readers should know, for instance, that sometimes the scurrilous verses directed at Njáll and his family do appear, though every modern edition of the saga leaves them out. See Einar Ól. Sveinsson's notes to the verses, his appendix including and concerning the doubtful ones (465-480), and his discussion of the manuscripts (cxlix-clxiii). For an English translation of *Njáls saga* that includes many of the verses of disputed authenticity, see Dasent 1911:passim.

²⁰ But cf. *Njáls saga* (467-469, 470, 472-473, 474-477, 478-480).

'Now it's your turn,' and Kári duly becomes the guardian and the explicit narrator of Skarpheðinn's reputation later in the saga (443). But Kári has a more complicated legacy than merely following his comrade's example.²¹ As critics have noted, he fights in a way that is similar to Gunnarr, which suggests that he is Gunnarr's 'replacement' (Allen 1971:59). In fact, he replaces both Gunnarr and Skarpheðinn. After the burning of Njáll and his family, Kári takes on the role of implacable avenger and (not coincidentally) becomes the most prolific poet in this text and the only major character who could reasonably be described as an accomplished poet, despite the fact that the audience, prepared for his many physical accomplishments by the descriptions of him, gets no notice of any poetic potential (203-204). He recites on four occasions and produces six stanzas in total.²² Each occasion mentions the burning — that is, each is, in a way, empathetic. He moves from expression of his emotional state in two verses of mourning for Njáll and his family (346, 354) to a poem that follows Skarpheðinn's example by insulting a chieftain at the althing and threatening action (409-411). Finally, he produces a verse that is accompanied, like many of the poems of Egill and Grettir, by a slaying (cf. *Egils saga*:204-206, 210; *Grettis saga*:54, 59, 60). This kind of careful plotting of intensifying action is typical of Njáls saga. Moreover, each of Kári's poems adds progressively to his reputation as is clear from the responses of those who hear him. Only one person, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, hears the first poem. No reaction is recorded. The second verse is delivered before a small group of his allies. One of them comments on it. The third poetic occasion occurs in public at the althing, and Kári's three stanzas provoke loud laughter; however, Snorri goði

²¹ He is Hebridean and in the retinue of the Earl of Orkney when the audience first meets him (203-204, and note 2). Thus, he might be an appropriate person to develop into a poet because he begins as an outsider to the Icelandic society that dominates the saga. He perhaps brings no 'baggage' to his dealings with the feud-prone families, then, and hence is presumably more objective in his reportage of events. He could be a parallel figure to the mostly Icelandic skalds who end up attached to the Orcadian, Norwegian, Danish and other royal courts. Also, Kári is the most conventional heroic figure in Njáls saga. For instance, the motivation for most of his actions, revenge, is fairly uncomplicated by the standards of the saga, and Lars Lönnroth notes that Kári's dress probably betrays chivalric influences, unlike that of most of the other major characters (118). Composition might be regarded as a necessary part of the make-up of a conventional hero. Certainly Kári's development in poetic skill parallels his development into a hero, and parallels the arc of revenge that (perhaps) helps to bring the major feud in the saga to an end with a balance between the two parties.

²² I follow all modern editions of the poem in representing Kári's oeuvre, though the manuscripts may vary.

then produces a quatrain in a soft voice that causes even louder laughter. Snorri's poem would seem to have more force than Kári's efforts (411). At least two patterns emerge in the performance of Kári's verses. One is that his reputation grows in lockstep with his ability to spontaneously compose. A second is that this reputation, which links with the collective reputation of Njáll and his family (as the constant mentioning of Njáll in Kári's poems indicates), grows in lockstep with the number of witnesses to each recitation. In sum, all of the attributes of the moment of transfer that occurs when Kári praises Skarpheðinn's great leap are repeated and gradually intensified during the sequence of Kári's poetry.

The last poem by Kári is, in contrast to the other occasions, a triumph in every way. The social status of his audience has grown. He recites before a king at an earl's court that includes a large group of enemies. Unusually, these foes end up tolerating his revenge by letting him escape. Some commend him. They also approve of the obvious progression, in which the poem participates, from lies to truth-telling during the episode. First, Gunnarr Lambason offers an inaccurate account of Skarpheðinn's behaviour at the burning. The blemishing of his brother-in-law's reputation causes Kári to intervene. Later, Flosi Þórðarson, the man in charge of the burning and therefore Kári's most significant enemy, ends up contradicting his ally Gunnarr's words by providing the court with an accurate version of Skarpheðinn's last actions; but before that, a suggestion of some kind of connection between Kári and Skarpheðinn appears again when the former jumps onto a table, recites his poem, and beheads Gunnarr, which recalls Skarpheðinn's great leap and attack upon Þráinn's head (443). This emphasis of the link between Skarpheðinn and Kári at the height of the latter's heroic career completes the development begun when the former's characteristic moment is first transferred to his brother-in-law. More generally, these progressions suggest once again that Njáls saga is very concerned with how a heroic reputation grows and with exactly how the particular aspects and consequences of reputation operate in the society that it is trying to convey or has reproduced from its sources.

With their rather sophisticated communicative and generative attributes, spontaneous reactions such as Kári's to Skarpheðinn's leap come close to functioning as signs within a kind of language. When saga-writers describe a deed, then, they are very likely to describe also the emotion and the means by which both action and emotion are communicated (witnesses), because all three of these are inseparable as an act of communication for the oral culture on view in — or part of the origin of — the sagas. Moreover, the saga-writers

would have an urgent antiquarian interest in preserving the ‘signs’ within the ‘oral language’ of the societies that they depict because, I would submit, they could observe first hand the effects of the new technology of literacy upon their own largely oral societies (Quinn 2000:30-60; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004). When Christian missionaries arrive in Iceland with the bible, they announce a new treatment of time (salvation history), a new myth of origins (God), and a new theory of origins (history as depicted in Judeo-Christian records). There is also a sudden and overwhelming usurpation of the fame-ideal implied in these Christian texts, and the new mode differs from the old in two ways. First, Jesus’ competitive acts are mainly non-aggressive, and therefore do not register as typical deeds in the traditional, heroic, oral past. Second, competition with the Almighty is (by definition) impossible, so God’s reputation absorbs all of the past and replaces any heroic precursors with Himself and with His inimitable life-story. Hence, He not only usurps the means of receiving a reputation; He also takes its end, because God becomes both the ideal performer and the ideal witness of any deed. In sum, He brings with Him a new order of deeds, competitions, histories, and signs.²³

Rarely is conflict between Christian and pagan tradition conceived as a battle between the old kind of language and the new in the Old Icelandic works, but examples exist, though one has to stray from the canon of the sagas of Icelanders in order to find them. An example occurs in one of the þættir in the *Flateyjarbók* version of Óláfs saga hins helga (*Flateyjarbók* 1944-1945 II:218-219; Schlauch 1931:973, 976).²⁴ When this brief narrative begins with the arrival of an elderly guest of mysterious appearance at King Óláfr’s court, it seems to be about to partake in the Old Norse tradition of Óðinn-like old men who represent the values of the heroic past. In typical fashion, the ruler asks this *djarfmæltr*, ‘bold-spoken’ stranger to entertain him, whereupon the court expects the old man’s entertainment to be accounts of *fornkonungr*, ‘ancient princes’ and their *framaverk*, ‘outstanding deeds.’ These expectations are unsurprising. Mysterious wanderers often impress listeners with their knowledge of legendary heroes in Old Norse works (*Flateyjarbók* II:218; Rowe 2004:468). But this old man asks Óláfr an unusual question: which of these legendary figures he would most like to be. The guest thus brings up the idea of identifying with — that is empathizing with — the heroes of the past,

²³ For more on medieval sign-theory, see Vance 1986:59.

²⁴ This *þáttir* shares attributes with both ‘the Conversion’ *þættir* and the ‘pagan-contact’ *þættir*, to use Joseph C. Harris’s (1980:162, 166) generic divisions.

and the sagas of Icelanders tend to imply this idea rather than mention it explicitly, even though it must be at the heart of the heroic ideal.

With the king's reply, one may note for the first time in the *þáttr* a tendency to condemn the ancient heroes from an overtly Christian standpoint: *ek vilda engi heiðinn maðr vera, hvárki konungr né annarr maðr* (II:219), 'I do not wish to be a heathen, were he a king or another sort of man.' Such condemnations appear in Old Norse compositions much more rarely than one might think, despite the fact that the traditional interpretation of renown as a kind of immortality and its association with Óðinn mean that the Christian church must condemn heroic fame as a false god. Boethius, for instance, writes:

Vos uero immortalitatem uobis propagare uidemini cum futuri famam temporis cogitatis. Quod si ad aeternitatis infinita spatia pertractes, quid habes quod de nominis tui diuturnitate laeteris? (1957 II.vii.14-15)

'You actually suppose that, when you think of your future fame, you create immortality for yourself at the same time. But if you consider the infinite time-periods of eternity what reason have you to rejoice in the durability of your name?'

When the old man in the *þáttr* insists upon a specific answer from Óláfr, the king finally admits that he would like to have the *atferð ok höfðingskap Hrólfs kraka*, 'might and dominion of Hrólfr kraki.' The guest disapproves of this choice:

„hví vildir þú eigi vera sem sá konungr, er sigr hafði, við hvern sem hann átti bardaga, ok svá var vænn ok vel at íþróttum búinn, at engi var hans líki á Norðrlöndum, ok svá mátti öðrum sigr gefa í sóknum sem sjálfum sér ok svá kringr skáldskapr sem öðrum mönnum um mál sitt?“

Konungr settist þá upp ok tók til tíðabókar, er var í sænginni, ok ætlaði at slá í höfuð Gesti ok mælti: „Þú vilda ek sízt vera, hinn illi Óðinn.“ (II:219)

'why do you not want to be that king who accomplished victory over whoever he was fighting, who was so handsome and accomplished at skills that nobody was his match in the Northern lands, who could

grant victory to others in battle just as he gave it to himself, and for whom poetic composition was as simple as normal speech was for other people?’

The king sat up and took his book of hours, which was in the bed, and, aiming to hit Gestr in the head, said: ‘The last man I would want to be is you: the evil Óðinn.’

Upon hearing these words, the old man vanishes. Significantly, Gestr/Óðinn’s declaration concerning poetry versus speech connects heroic (and pagan) values directly with an ability to communicate heroic stories. The usual subject-matter of skaldic poetry confirms these connections. The verses that appear in most sagas are likely to contain self-praise and incitement to revenge, together with mythical figures, such as trolls, valkyries, Þórr, and Óðinn, that figure in pre-Christian Germanic religions (*Egils saga*:210; *Grettis saga*:203-204; *Njáls saga*:264-266; Poole 1991:52-55; Clunies Ross 1998; Meulengracht Sørensen 2001). In *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, the titular character recites a whole series of poems about the pagan gods to Óláfr Tryggvason (1939:156-158), in a typically competitive encounter between a poet and a king (Waugh 1997b:296-299, 300-302, 305-307; Whaley 2001; Poole 2002). Heroic language is inherently competitive, but such king-poet encounters suggest that royal status has grown and that the king now has an advantage in competitions.

Presumably Óðinn’s language, as the language of a god, would be the ideal one in which to communicate heroic tales. The king in the *pátttr*, then, must fight against his guest with an equally powerful (or more powerful) weapon of the same kind: a book of hours, which represents the Christian God’s ideal language, ideas, and stories, together with the daily regimen of duty and the typically Christian idea that time on earth is limited and teleological. Gestr in contrast, with his impossibly old age, represents the eternity of hell (*Flateyjarbók* II:219; Schlauch 1931:973). This narrative thus depicts (among other things) an allegorical battle between oral and written traditions and means of communication. Literate tradition wins in this case. On the other hand, the old god seems to retain his existence, immortality, knowledge, and some power over kings, even if he is reinterpreted in this story as a kind of demon.²⁵ In *Norna-Gests pátttr*, there is another ‘take’ on the old tale-teller

²⁵ The sagas indicate a similar lasting power for aspects of the pagan religion. See *Grettis saga*:132-133, 203-204; *Njáls saga*:264-266. For discussion, see Clunies Ross 1998 and Meulengracht Sørensen 2001.

named Gestr who is a kind of ghost of paganism and a personification of old stories: he converts to Christianity and dies, and thus deliberately lets the written tradition overtake him, in a kind of validation of the Christian belief system. He sacrifices himself like Christ or a saint to the new traditions. Though in the other tale the old god of fame flees, and thus seems to retain some of his power, in this version a kind of exorcism of fame takes place. Gestr brings the past into the present and renounces it.²⁶ Hallfreðar saga also provides evidence that there were ‘spiritually positive’ as well as ‘negative aspects of the heathen age’ (Rowe 2004:461): Hallfreðr’s conversion to Christianity is more of an ongoing, competitive dialogue with Óláfr Tryggvason than a one-time event, and the fame of both men plays a strong part in their dealings.²⁷

The spiritual conflicts that occur in Hallfreðar saga and the þættir help to articulate the new Christian order that attacks the saga ideal of communication during the conversion age: God, by being immortal (an attribute he enacts through the resurrection) produces deeds that nobody can top; heavenly immortality supplants immortality through fame; texts can replace memories, disrupt chronologies, and displace oral histories at any moment; ultimately, all signs are subsumed into Christ, who is the Word. During the clash of literary and oral traditions, then, oral people could interpret the logocentricism of the scriptural sign as a destroyer of the elasticity of the oral tradition, which can produce earlier and earlier, and therefore potentially greater and greater heroes,

²⁶ See *Flateyjarbók* I:384, 398; Schlauch 1931:971. Several critics argue that ‘the pagan world is presented as deserving of Christian regard’ in this tale (Rowe 2004:470; Harris and Hill 1089:103-122).

²⁷ For instance, Hallfreðr praises himself for securing the famous king as his godfather. At one point, the skald even directly connects his Christian beliefs with a praise-poem that he has prepared in Óláfr’s honour. Hallfreðr says that he will lose his Christian instruction if Óláfr does not hear this work, and claims that what he has learned about Christianity is *ekki skáldligri*, 36 ‘not more poetic’ than his praise-poem, which the king then agrees to hear (155). Later, Óláfr voices approval of Hallfreðr’s stanzas that speak of Christ’s dominance and labels the ones that betray nostalgia for the old gods with terms such as *allill vísa*, ‘terrible verse’ (157, 158). But the reader cannot help but notice that these judgements are parallel to the pronouncement that the king made earlier about Hallfreðr’s praise-poem: *gott*, ‘good’ (155), so that Óláfr’s religion and spiritual influence seem to be wrapped up in his reputation. One might note that even the stanzas that depict Christ positively present Him as in conflict with the old gods (*Hallfreðar saga*:158-159; Poole 2002) and that direct evaluations of skaldic verse such as the ones that the king conveys are rare in the sagas. For instance, almost all of the superbly composed stanzas by Egill in *Egils saga* pass by entirely without comment.

by reaching further and further back in time for them, as works like *Völsunga saga* attest by their inclusion of obviously mythical material (*Völsunga saga*:40; *Orkneyinga saga*:1-7).²⁸ The new thinking about fame and a new way of transferring information (texts) are thus not only attacks upon the traditional social practices that one may see in the sagas but also, as Óðinn's mentioning of his poetic powers indicates, upon language practice — upon an oral society's very method of communication. More particularly, since books can replace memories, the tradition of witnesses (and thus Kári's impression of Skarpheðinn's acrobatic slaying) is no longer necessary in order to preserve such a deed and distribute it among a literately-inclined community. A link in the chain of oral communication is broken. Consequently, the prospect of literate thinking, as the saga-writers could see in the very act of composing their works, would threaten to suspend reference from oral sign to oral sign and to undercut (for the moment) the power of such signs; would threaten, like certain more recent approaches to the study of literature, to destroy a cherished belief concerning an entire communication system: that 'the idea that [an utterance or] literature is *expressive*' (Vance 1973:2). The many references to word-of-mouth fame in the sagas thus demonstrate that the Old Icelandic prose writers were at least conscious that such destruction might take place, and the frequency of such references suggests that these early folklorists wished to preserve the expressive qualities traditional, oral, and performative — of their past.

Kári's verbal reaction to Skarpheðinn's great leap in *Njáls saga*, then, represents the description of a direct transfer of emotion from the mind of a performer to that of a spectator; an empathetic moment, a transfer of a characteristic moment from Skarpheðinn to him. This transfer begins a process of poetic development in Kári that parallels his heroic development. The development of Kári's career is also an important indication of the ethics of his society, and not merely in the sense of a traditional conception of the heroic ideal. Through connecting Kári's appreciation of Skarpheðinn's great leap with the former's poetry and with ideas of oral communication, one may see that Kári's praise amounts to a highly sophisticated and revealing kind of empathy that extends to nostalgia for oral communication as described by the antiquarian saga-writers.

²⁸ I grant that oral performers and perhaps the literate authors of these works would not necessarily distinguish legends from chronicles and family narratives.

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SUMMARY

'Antiquarianism, poetry, and word-of-mouth fame in the Icelandic family sagas.'

Keywords: Words-of-mouth fame, antiquarianism in the Icelandic sagas.

The author discusses in detail the function word-of-mouth praise, the ability of characters to compose verses, and the use of antiquarianism in the Icelandic sagas and their relationship with oral tradition.

EFNISÁGRIP

Í grein þessari ræðir höfundurinn rækilega sagnakliff í Íslendinga sögum sem vísa annaðhvort til frægðar söguhetjunnar eða afreka hans eða til þeirrar venju að skýra frá einstökum atburðum eða fornminjum sem sagt er að sjáist enn leifar af á dögum sagnasmíðs. Að lokum ber hann þessa frásagnartækni svo saman við þær venjur sem tíðkast í munnlegum sagnaflutningi.

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