

ALAN J. BERGER

## TEXT AND SEX IN GÍSLA SAGA

CHAPTER II of *Gísla saga* is not a pretty story. The action begins with a rumor: 'some people said that Bárðr was seducing Þórdís,' the sister of Gísli and Þorkell. The father objects, but Bárðr says he pays no attention to the words of a weakling—'and I shall do as before.' Gísli's opinion is the same as his father's, but Þorkell is a good friend of Bárðr, and 'lent him a helping hand,' *var hann í bragði með honum*. Gísli kills Bárðr, but Þorkell is so displeased he goes to a certain Holmgang-Skeggi—'he was closely related to Bárðr'—and encourages him to avenge Bárðr and marry his sister. Skeggi responds to the latter suggestion, but when he arrives to ask for the sister's hand, the father refuses, and moreover, 'it was said that Kolbjörn was intimate with (*í þingum við*) Þórdís.' Skeggi challenges Kolbjörn to a duel, but Kolbjörn turns out to be a coward. Skeggi orders wooden figures made of Gísli and Kolbjörn, 'and the one should stand behind the other.' Gísli steps forward and fights Skeggi, cutting off his leg. Þorkell now goes home with Gísli, 'and the kinship between them now went well, *ok þykkir Gísli mikit hafa vaxit af þessum málum*.'

Several things are wrong with this story. No other sister in the sagas is courted by a scoundrel, a coward, and a near-berserkr in such rapid succession. No other brother in the sagas is abnormally involved with his sister's villainous boyfriends. No brother seeks revenge the way Þorkell does. Apart from this, Þorkell's change from enmity to friendship with his brother is entirely unmotivated.

No objections on moral grounds have been made in the published commentary on this chapter. On the contrary, the chapter has been found psychologically and narratively satisfactory, principally because of certain parallels found between these events and later ones in the saga. Anne Holtsmark said of the events of chapter II, 'they set the tune, and the tragic discord between the three children of Þorsteinn

Surr is heard as a basso ostinato throughout the whole Saga.<sup>1</sup> Þorkell's peculiar behavior is to Franz Seewald, 'was der Hauptteil der Saga im Großen abwandelt: Eigensein und Sippe geraten in Widerstreit.'<sup>2</sup> Oddly enough, when objections or suspicions are raised to these events, they fall on Gísli. T. M. Andersson suspects that Gísli's defence of his sister's honor, against her wishes and Þorkell's, is a stolid knee-jerk conservatism.<sup>3</sup> Hermann Pálsson sees Gísli's later revenge for Vésteinn on his sister's husband as a sign of a peculiar relationship between Gísli and Vésteinn, and cites the wooden figures standing one behind the other as support for this interpretation. Pálsson finds the slaying of the suitors is indicative that 'Gísli is incestuously in love with Þórdís,' and the manner of Gísli's revenge for Vésteinn—he kills his sister's husband sleeping beside her—also indicates a twisted sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Since chapter II is distasteful in itself, and leads to distasteful interpretations of later events, every effort should be made to avoid it. Gísli's story is by no means enriched if we imagine him improperly involved with his sister and/or Vésteinn. His sister's poor taste in men and his brother's odd urges are no gains in meaning, but rather a lowering of tone and a confounding of our nobler sentiments.

Fortunately there is another version of chapter II which provides no opportunity for debasing the characters of Gísli, Þorkell, and Þórdís. AM 149 fol. also begins with a rumor concerning Þórdís and her boyfriend, who is here named Kolbeinn. The father speaks not to the boyfriend but to Gísli, who responds with a testimonial to Kolbeinn's innocence; Gísli also rebukes his father for heeding idle rumor. Nevertheless, Gísli apologetically asks Kolbeinn to leave off visiting for his father's sake. Kolbeinn insists on his innocence, but Gísli then appeals to the friendship between them. Kolbeinn then makes his visits less frequent. Þorkell and Þórdís are glad of them, but the father is not. Again the father demands that Gísli act, and again Gísli speaks to Kolbeinn, appealing to their friendship. Kolbeinn again insists on his inno-

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in the Gísla saga*, Studia Norvegica No. 6 (Oslo, 1951), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Gísla saga Surssonar: Untersuchungen*, Diss. Göttingen 1932; (Göttingen, 1934), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> 'Some Ambiguities in *Gísla saga*: A Balance Sheet' *BONIS* (1968), 14 f. Andersson's article contains masses of bibliographical information.

<sup>4</sup> 'Death in Autumn: Tragic Elements in Early Icelandic Fiction,' *BONIS* (1973), 19.

cence and friendship, but refuses to halt his visits, so Gísli kills him. Þorkell is very displeased.

This version of the slaying of the first suitor is superior to the other in that his innocence does credit to his courting and thus to Þórdís. The friendship with Þorkell, and Þorkell's displeasure at the slaying, are natural and intelligible. On moral grounds, therefore, we should prefer this alternate version.

After the slaying of the first suitor, AM 149 fol. and related MSS have a lacuna. The other events in chapter II are lost. Nevertheless, it should be clear from the arguments above that we should prefer the lacuna on moral grounds.

However, there are other grounds for preferring the lacuna: it is more original, and it is in fact the source of the distasteful version. The copyist of AM 556a 4to, the morally inferior version, found a lacuna like that in AM 149 fol. in his source, and tried to bridge the gap with an excessive economy of means. The subsequent distortions of character and event are not to be attributed to *Gísla saga* but to an abbreviator of the fifteenth century.

That AM 556a 4to is an abbreviation of a version like 149 fol. should be clear from comparing the two accounts of the suitor's death. 556a tells of the death in far less space than 149 does because it omits the rather lengthy delineation of the suitor's innocence and worthiness for friendship. Instead, the suitor is made merely a sneering opponent of Gísli and his father. Although the abbreviator omits the worthiness of the suitor, he retains Þorkell's (and apparently Þórdís's) friendship with him, thus distorting their characters.

The two principal texts of *Gísla saga* are most different in the opening chapters, but the order of events is the same in both, except, significantly, on the edges of the lacuna. The relationship may be schematized thusly:

X X X X X A B C X X X X X  
X X X X X y . . . . z X X X X X

X represents events in common, y and z represent the two fragmentary episodes bordering the lacuna, and A, B, and C represent events which have no parallel in the text with the lacuna. Faced with the lacuna, the abbreviator excised the fragmentary episodes and endeavored to patch

the hole remaining between the whole X's bordering the lacuna. Of the fragmentary episodes he preserved only a key phrase in each.

In the text with the lacuna, the slaying of the suitor ends a chapter. A new chapter begins, '*Nú er at segja frá Þorkatli, at hann unir eigi heima.*' He leaves home and travels east. He hears that men have been disappearing from the road he intends to travel. He refuses to be put off by the danger—and the lacuna begins. When the text resumes, Gísli and Þorkell are returning from a profitable voyage of some sort, and this fragmentary chapter ends with the same phrase that concludes chapter II in the other version, '*ok þykkja þeir enn mikit hafa vaxit í þessi ferð.*'

The first whole episode the abbreviator found after the lacuna was an attack on Gísli's family by two previously unmentioned men who force another (previously introduced) to accompany them. The abbreviator could discover from later events that the two men are brothers, their father's name was probably Skeggi, and there was hostility between Skeggi and Gísli (or Gísli's family). The minimal bridge, then, needed only to motivate Skeggi's hostility, explain the role of the man forced to accompany them, and show the consequences of the slaying of the suitor.

The expedient of making Skeggi a kinsman of the slain suitor (*hann var mjök skyldr Bárði*) should have served the abbreviator for two-thirds of his bridge, but he witlessly preserves Þorkell's displeasure at the slaying, links it with Þorkell's departure from home (*eigi vildi hann heima þar vera*), and presents Þorkell travelling immediately to Skeggi to urge him to kill Gísli. Thus Þorkell's villainy is not a function of his character but rather of the abbreviator's need to bridge a gap. The abbreviator then rushes toward his final task, explaining the role of the man forced to accompany Skeggi's sons in the attack on Gísli's family. This he accomplishes with Þorkell's unprecedentedly outrageous suggestion that Skeggi also should marry his sister. Thus the revenge motive is dropped when it has served its bridging function, and the new motive of courting the sister is introduced. The new motive provides for a conflict with the sister's new suitor, the man who later will accompany Skeggi's sons. The abbreviator at this point has managed to introduce the accomplice, but he has dropped the revenge motive which was to have involved Skeggi and Gísli in hostility. Therefore he has the

future accomplice drop out of the conflict by pleading cowardice, and he re-motivates hostility between Skeggi and Gísli with the wooden figures standing one behind the other. The duel between Skeggi and Gísli is described with terms borrowed from a duel in the first chapter. The abbreviator had omitted the terms there, and so could use them here. The chapter concludes with a restoration of friendship between Gísli and Þorkell, as the abbreviator's source required, but the abbreviator neglected to explain how Þorkell's fratricidal displeasure was dispelled. Once the lacuna is over, the stories run roughly parallel, with no further instances of perversion.

The lacuna probably contained some material relating to a conflict between Gísli's family and the Norwegian king. In the text with the lacuna, Gísli kills Skeggi's sons when they are returning from collecting the king's taxes, and Gísli's family then emigrates. A great deal of material on the emerging Norwegian kingship contained in the text with the lacuna was omitted by the abbreviator, so Skeggi's sons are killed when they are returning from collecting their land-rents, and no motive whatever is given for the emigration. Holtsmark thought it was because Gísli 'finds the soil burning under his feet.'<sup>5</sup>

Seewald deduced that 'Gislis Familie zählte nicht zu den stärksten,'<sup>6</sup> and had to flee the consequences of killing Skeggi and his sons, but neither text shows that Skeggi's connections are more powerful than Gísli's. In the opening chapters, all is clear in the text with the lacuna, but several things are unclear in the other.

In chapter I of the abbreviated version, five sentences report five pieces of information. Gísli's uncle Gísli kills a berserkr, he marries his brother's widow, he 'takes all the property' and becomes a '*mikill maðr fyrir sér*,' his father dies and he takes all that property, and finally, he kills all the men who had accompanied the berserkr. The berserkr's companions had not been mentioned before, and several editions and translators (Guðni Jónsson 1956, Munch 1845, and Bååth 1909) drop the reference to them. The longer version introduces them at the proper place, and disposes of them in orderly fashion, before the wedding and the funeral. The abbreviator preserves the berserkr's companions as an afterthought.

<sup>5</sup> p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> p. 61.

In chapter I of the shorter version, the berserkr kills Gísli's uncle Ari, and Gísli's uncle Gísli challenges the berserkr. The sentence following the challenge is, '*há tók til orða Ingibjörg [Ari's widow]: Eigi var ek af því Ara gipt, at ek vilda þik eigi heldr átt hafa.*' This stunning revelation is the abbreviator's way of economizing on the fuller, clearer, and more tasteful presentation of the longer version's introduction of the sword Grásíða.

Other examples of abbreviation in the opening chapters could be cited, but since no water-tight demonstration is possible, the argument that AM 556a 4to is less original than AM 149 fol. (and related MSS) should rest here. After the opening chapters, the two versions run fairly close together and little or nothing would be gained by a closer examination. Nevertheless, 149 and its sister MSS should be taken more seriously when it comes to such questions as whether or not Vésteinn committed adultery with Gísli's sister-in-law. Chapter II should not be used to interpret later events because it is a clumsy and tasteless attempt to fill a gap in an older text. We shall probably never know whether the longer version preserves a style of saga-writing antedating the classical style, or whether it is a post-classical expansion which the fifteenth-century abbreviator tried to restore to purity and wholeness. Most probably neither text is the original version, since the penultimate chapter in the longer version is demonstrably less original than the corresponding chapter of the abbreviated version.