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Source: *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (Apr., 1991), pp. 157-174

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27710482>

Accessed: 24/10/2013 09:24

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Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas*

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The Icelandic sagas describe conflicts between individuals, the reasons for the disputes, and the process of their resolution. As a rule the narrative proceeds as a series of killings with its action structured by the duty to exact revenge for death or for offense inflicted on oneself, a friend, or a family member. This pattern is shot through with ethical threads because fundamental values and interests are at stake for both individuals and the community. The morality of the sagas has, I believe, always interested the general reader but it has not been a major subject of investigation for saga scholars.¹ The theoretical approaches that have traditionally taken up most of the writings on saga morality can be divided into two major categories. Following Hermann Pálsson, I shall call them the *romantic* and the *humanistic* interpretations.² In this paper I first argue that the two traditional interpretations provide inadequate understanding of the morality of the sagas because they do not recognize its social roots.³ I then consider a third, more *sociological* interpretation of saga morality and show why this recent approach leads to a richer understanding of the matter, although it is not without problems of its own.

I

The romantic view is the older of the two traditional approaches. It has been followed in some form by the majority of past saga scholars

*Earlier versions of this paper were delivered in Salt Lake City at the meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study in May 1989, and in Victoria, Canada, at the invitation of the Richard Beck Society and the Vancouver Medieval Symposium in June 1989. I thank my friends Ástráður Eysteinnsson and Helga Kress at the University of Iceland, Vésteinn Ólason at the University of Oslo, and Janet Rasmussen at Pacific Lutheran University for helpful comments and criticism.

¹ I talk about *morality* rather than the *ethics* of the sagas, because although there is an implicit structure of norms and rules of conduct in the sagas (morality), there is no ethical analysis or theory (ethics) presented in the text.

² Hermann Pálsson, "Heitstrenging goðans á Aðalbóli," *Skírnis*, 144 (1970), 31.

³ Some of the ideas in this paper were presented in an article I wrote in 1984 entitled "Saga og siðferði: Hugleiðingar um túlkun á siðfræði Íslendingasagna," *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 46 (1985), 21–37.

Journal of English and Germanic Philology—April
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and seems still to prevail in the public consciousness about the sagas. According to this interpretation, the Icelandic sagas are regarded as stories of individual heroes whose values and virtues are of Nordic heathen origin, fundamentally different from Christian ideals. The morality of the sagas is analyzed primarily in terms of personal qualities and attitudes. The physical and moral strength that enabled individuals to fulfill their duty of vengeance is the main criterion by which their characters are measured. This view was popular among non-Icelandic scholars in the early decades of this century, when writers such as Walter Gehr and Vilhelm Grønbech emphasized the relationship between saga morality and heathen ideas.⁴ Several Icelandic scholars hold similar views on saga morality without grounding their analyses as strictly in a heathen religion. Ólafur Briem, for example, echoes the romantic view of the sagas when he states that the sense of honor and pride is the pivot of most Icelandic sagas. He observes that almost all disputes started when somebody's sense of honor was hurt and he or his family had to make up for it. In the sagas, Ólafur Briem argues, a life without honor was worthless, and the only thing of a lasting value was an honorable reputation.⁵

According to the romantic view, the Icelandic word *drengskapur* (nobility/manliness) signifies best the excellence of the heroic character. *Drengur* (young man) is derived from the word *drangur*, which means an erect rock. *Drengskapur* is the sort of moral substance which you can rely on in a person, man and woman alike, whatever the circumstances; they are upright and honest in all their dealings. Sigurður Nordal pointed out that the closest term of equivalence to *drengskapur* is goodness-based-on-strength (*máttargæði*). This is contrasted with goodness-based-on-fear (*hræðslugæði*), which is exemplified by the despicable kind of person whose "goodness" is only skin-deep and on whom one can never rely.⁶ A good example of a hero from the romantic point of view would be Gísli Súrsson as described in *Gísli saga*

⁴ Walter Gehr, *Ruhm und Ehre bei den Nordgermanen: Studien zum Lebensgefühl der isländischen Saga* (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1937); Vilhelm Grønbech, *Vor folkeæt i oldtiden*, I-IV (Copenhagen: V. Pio, 1909–12).

⁵ "Sómatilfinningin er burðarásinn í flestum Íslendinga sögum. Nær allar deilur risu af særðri sómatilfinningu, sem ætt eða einstaklingur hlaut að reyna að rétta við. Án sæmdar var lífið einskis virði, og orðstúrninn var í raun og veru hið eina, sem gaf því varanlegt gildi" (Ólafur Briem, *Íslendinga sögur og nútíminn* [Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1972], pp. 32–33).

⁶ Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk menning*, I (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1942), p. 195. The kinship with Nietzsche's pair of master and slave is obvious; cf. his *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1886), §260, and *Zur Genealogie der Moral; eine Streitschrift* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1887), first essay. Aristotle's notion of the "great-souled man" (*megalopsychia*) in the *Ethica Nicomachea* (1169a) also comes to mind.

Súrssonar.⁷ Gísli was a great man, who in his killings was fulfilling his duty to his fosterbrother and defending his family honor. Gísli does what a man must do even if it means killing his sister's husband, who is also his brother's best friend and the family's chieftain, that is, their political mainstay. The "romantics" are not saying that this is "a good thing to do." On the contrary, it is important to understand that the heroic situation is tragic because there is no good solution and the hero will lose his life because he will never give up his honor. Moreover, the "romantics" evaluate morality in terms of individual character traits rather than classes of actions that are deemed right or wrong.

The humanistic view of saga morality is best understood by its opposition to the "romantics." Hermann Pálsson, the major spokesman for the humanists, has argued in several books and articles that the romantic conception of saga morality is misleading if not positively wrong.⁸ He invites us to concentrate on the moral ideas of the text rather than the qualities of individuals.⁹ If we do so we will see, he argues, that the sagas are to be understood as Christian lessons about the well-deserved defeat of those who show excessive pride and arrogance. The sagas were not written in order to glorify the so-called pagan heroes but rather to preach peace and moderation in the spirit of medieval Christianity. They have the conscious moral objective to teach people what to aim for and what to avoid in their own lives. The duty of vengeance, which in the romantic view is the vehicle of the heroic virtues, becomes from the humanistic perspective a cruel criminal act which is far from honorable. From this humanistic viewpoint Gísli Súrsson is a cold-blooded criminal who murders his brother-in-law and therefore justly deserves his defeat.¹⁰

On the surface, at least, these are diametrically opposed interpretations of morality in the Icelandic sagas. Nevertheless, it is possible to try to reconcile the two by pointing out that they simply are not interpreting the same thing. While the "romantics" focus on the moral

⁷ "Gísla saga Súrssonar," *Íslendinga sögur*, v, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1946), pp. 1–100. In English: *The Saga of Gísli the Outlaw*, trans. George Johnston with notes and introduction by Peter Foote (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1963).

⁸ See, for example, Hermann Pálsson, *Síðfræði Hrafnkels sögu* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1966); in its English version, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkels saga* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971); "Icelandic Sagas and Medieval Ethics," *Medieval Scandinavia*, 7 (1974), 61–75; and *Úr hugmyndaheimi Hrafnkels sögu og Grettlu*, *Studia Islandica*, 39 (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1981).

⁹ Hermann Pálsson, *Úr hugmyndaheimi Hrafnkels sögu og Grettlu*, p. 15.

¹⁰ Hermann Pálsson, "Icelandic Sagas and Medieval Ethics," pp. 64–65.

reality of the sagas as it appears in the deeds of the characters, the humanists are trying to unfold the ethical intention of the author. From the romantic point of view, the sagas preserve heathen ideals by describing the historical ethos of the Icelandic Free State. In the humanistic reading the text is loaded with normative judgments about the morality of this time from the viewpoint of a Christian author, well versed in medieval ethics.¹¹ It has been argued that the major source of the differences between these traditional interpretations lies in their stubborn one-sidedness. The “romantics” turn a blind eye to Christian influences in the sagas whereas the humanists Christianize every “positive” and peaceful view in the sagas in spite of evidence to the contrary.¹² The opposition between the “romantics” and the humanists could then be reconciled by showing how Christian and heathen influences abound in the various sagas and to what extent.¹³

Reconciling the differences between these two viewpoints in this manner, however, is not a satisfactory solution to the question of morality in the sagas. It oversimplifies the issue by concealing and sharing the basic *problems* and the common *presuppositions* of these interpretations. The basic problem remains because the focus is still on the relative influence of heathendom and Christendom upon the morality of the sagas. This question has dominated the research of traditional scholars of saga morality and they have been strikingly unaware of the influences that this *Problemstellung* has had upon their interpretations. Representatives of both the romantic and the humanistic view seem to believe that the morality of the sagas can be unfolded by

¹¹ Most of the sagas were probably written in the thirteenth century. There has been a major debate among scholars about the authenticity of the sagas and on that topic theories have been divided into two main schools: The free-prose theory which holds that the sagas are true accounts of historical events, and the book-prose theory which teaches that the sagas are fiction, the creation of individual authors. There is no strict relationship between holding one of these views on the historical authenticity of the sagas and maintaining one of the moral interpretations. In recent decades saga scholars have tended to take a middle route between these two theories, seeing the sagas as narratives rooted in historical events, but recorded by individual authors whose creative contribution is also of major importance.

¹² See, for example, Jón Sigurðsson, “Hrafnkatla: Sinnaskipti eða samfélagsskipan,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 36 (1975), 357–63, and Bjarni Guðnason, “Þankar um siðfræði Íslendingasagna,” *Skírnir*, 139 (1965), 65–82.

¹³ A good example of such an attempt is M. C. Van den Toorn’s *Ethics and Moral in Icelandic Saga Literature* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1955). Van den Toorn argues that the sagas can be divided into three categories according to whether a Nordic heroic ethic, a Christian ethic, or the common moral wisdom of *Hávamál* is the ruling moral view. For a criticism of this view and an analysis of saga morality which goes beyond the heathendom/Christendom dichotomy, see Theodore M. Andersson, “The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas,” *Speculum*, 45 (1970), 575–93.

a presuppositionless reading of the text. Hermann Pálsson clearly states this hermeneutical neutrality when he maintains that what is needed is to read the story thoroughly and then discuss its ideas without prejudice.¹⁴ This emphasis on letting the story speak for itself can be an important guiding idea of attentiveness and fairness to the text, but it can also lead to a naive and dogmatic claim to a correct meaning which is to be grasped independently of the ideas that the interpreter brings into the research. In Novalis's words, "hypotheses are nets: only he who casts will catch."¹⁵ There is no reading free from presuppositions and prejudgments about the subject matter. Interpretation is a process of interplay between questions and answers. The meanings of the text are disclosed only in terms of the theoretical hypotheses that formulate the questions to which the text is bound to respond and without which it would tell us nothing.

In spite of substantial differences the "romantics" and the humanists have agreed upon the decisive issue of which question is the most important to ask when they are trying to unravel the morality of the sagas. This hermeneutic agreement is implied in their substantial disagreement. The major issue of debate is whether the ethics behind the sagas is heathen or Christian; the common agreement is that the answer to this question provides the key to understanding saga morality. It is of major importance to recognize this common prejudice and try to see its effect upon the quality and variety of these interpretations. The predominance of this question in investigations of the matter has not only seriously narrowed their scope but has also been responsible for the limited ability of such lines of investigation to provide a theoretical account of saga morality. In order to flesh out this accusation I will try to show how this question has led to an impoverished notion of morality, which is, after all, the issue both humanists and "romantics" are attempting to understand.

II

When researchers ask whether the morality of the sagas is heathen or Christian, they tacitly presume that there is a close relationship between morality and religious beliefs. In effect they see morality primarily as a set of beliefs and ideals which are a part of a system of

¹⁴Hermann Pálsson, *Síðfræði Hrafnkels sögu*, p. 23.

¹⁵Karl Popper makes this phrase the motto of his book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

religion. The task before them, therefore, is to inquire into the moral ideas of Old Norse mythology and/or medieval Christianity and attempt to understand the words and deeds of the saga characters in their light. This is a worthwhile task and it has provided many remarkable insights into the sagas. Sometimes analyses of the ethical/religious ideas provide clues to answering the question of authorship of individual sagas, a topic traditionally of great interest to many saga scholars. Indeed, romantic and humanistic attempts to understand saga morality are often closely linked with arguments about what the authors intended with their sagas. Was the author displaying the glory of the past, portraying the great heroes of the Free State who lived according to heathen ideals and thrived without both king and Christ? Or, alternatively, was the author attempting to persuade his readers of the moral advantage of the Christian virtues by showing the defeat of arrogant and cruel characters?

Even though the answers to these questions may sometimes point toward the moral of the story, they do not tell us much about the morality of the sagas. When interpreters praise or blame saga characters in light of a system of moral beliefs, their judgments often stand in the way of understanding the moral structure of the text. My suggestion is that instead of trying to see the morality of the sagas through the spectacles of religious beliefs, we need to understand it in terms of the social structure depicted in the sagas. In order to substantiate this claim two things in particular need to be considered: the nature of the saga texts and the nature of morality. It is a common failure of the “romantics” and the humanists to attempt to unearth the moral meaning of the sagas merely through the words and deeds of their individual characters and/or the intention of their authors. The text has depth and dimensions of meanings that go far beyond the conscious intention of their authors, and the characters are merely one thread in the web of the text and need to be interpreted in light of its context as a whole. This linguistic context is imbued with the cultural significations of the society where the text is created and must be discerned in terms of them.

It remains a question, however, how radically the influence of the author can be ignored in this matter. It has often been pointed out that the saga narrative is objective in that for the most part it lets the characters speak for themselves in words and deeds. Nevertheless, the objective narrative of the sagas has ways of favoring one character while showing another in a disapproving manner. Besides, the authors presumably provide the structuring principles to the text which

may sometimes imply some sort of moralizing in the spirit of medieval exempla.¹⁶ To this extent, ethical views or judgments are woven into the text. But even when that is the case, the actions of the saga characters still need to be explained in terms of the cultural norms and sociomoral principles that were operating in the Icelandic Free State. Although the authors could have arranged the events of the sagas in a way which reflects their ethical/religious viewpoints, they could not have created the sociomoral reality that is always there in the background. Therefore, if we are to explain the duties, virtues, and moral principles at work in the sagas, they need to be understood against the social context of medieval Iceland, the moral reality that nourished both the saga characters and the saga writers.

A distinction between two senses of morality can be helpful at this point. Hegel distinguishes between *Moralität*, which refers to the conscientious moral beliefs of the individual who is typically critical of the social norms, and *Sittlichkeit*, the objective ethical order that is the structure of rules, obligations, and normative principles which people internalize by living in a particular ethical community.¹⁷ This objective ethical substance needs to be analyzed in terms of the moral institutions of the society—such as the family, social organizations, and the state—and not the subjective moral vision of individuals. The individuals belong to these moral institutions, which assign them their roles and identity. Hegel teaches that in traditional societies the bonds of *Sittlichkeit*, or customary ethical life, are much stronger than in modern societies where the idea of the morally autonomous individual becomes predominant. In a closed, traditional society the individual is preoccupied with acting out his or her customary role and reflective ethical questions do not even arise. A wavering Hamlet would be impossible in such a society.¹⁸ Typically saga characters accept what they have to do and do it without moral reflection. This does not mean that individual qualities are not important, but it is the unreflective character of the virtues, shaped by particular social practices and cultural circumstances, that matters rather than the ideas of consci-

¹⁶For recent examples of such arguments, see Theodore M. Andersson, "Ethics and Politics in Hrafnkels saga," *Scandinavian Studies*, 60 (1988), 293–309, and Davíð Erlingsson, "Höfðingsskaparspegill og skilningsstýri," *Tímarit Háskólans*, 3 (1988), 19–41.

¹⁷Georg Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1821). For an interpretation of Hegel see, for example, Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

¹⁸This point came up in a discussion I had with the Canadian writer William Valgardson in Victoria.

entious individuals. This lack of moral reflection is indicative of a deep-rooted social practice and moral norms which are constitutive of the heroic character of the sagas.

It seems to me that the type of morality we need to understand in the Icelandic sagas is one of *Sittlichkeit*, objective ethical order, rather than subjective moral beliefs. By this I do not mean that the ethical order of the Icelandic Free State was a homogenous moral substance which bred only one type of values and moral characters. To the contrary, I will argue that the saga *Sittlichkeit* is characterized by an aporia that creates a sociomoral conflict which is of the essence in the sagas. At this point I only want to emphasize that every individual quality, value, or ethical judgment, whether that of the saga characters or of the saga authors, is dependent upon the objective ethical substance portrayed in the sagas. The romantic and humanistic interpretations of saga morality are both attempts to deal with the subject matter without tracing its roots to this moral substance, the social duties and rules of conduct that were peculiar to the Free State. Instead, either they look to an imaginary ethical/religious superstructure which is not to be found in the sagas or they see morality merely in terms of individual moral qualities and sentiments, as if the sagas could be understood without reference to the social network of which they are a part. The individualistic and religious presumptions of both the romantic and the humanistic views are responsible for the inability of these schools to explain saga morality. They fail to come to grips with the existing and nonexistent social institutions of ancient Iceland; they ignore the sociomoral substance and cultural significations which are the soil of the peculiar ethos of saga society.

III

The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has argued along Hegelian lines that in so-called heroic societies—among which he includes the society described in the Icelandic sagas—morality and social structure are one and the same. There is no morality distinct from social roles because what one is obliged to do is implied in what one is: “For the given rules which assign men their place in the social order and with it their identity also prescribe what they owe and what is owed to them and how they are to be treated and regarded if they fail and how they are to treat and regard others if those others fail.”¹⁹

¹⁹Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 116.

In this passage, MacIntyre appropriately uses the verb to “owe” in relation to the moral obligation that is dominant in what he calls heroic societies. In Icelandic the verb is *skulda*, from which the words *skyldur* and *skylda* are derived, the former meaning “blood-related” and the latter meaning “duty” or “obligation.” As in English it also points to the obligations we have toward those to whom we are indebted in some way or other.

Ties between individuals still imply moral duties, even in societies where various social institutions and agencies are specifically designed to protect the rights and welfare of the citizens. In a society which had no such official institutions, the obligations implicit in the ties that bound the individual to family, friends, and alliances were not only important from a sociomoral point of view; they were also of vital importance, because individuals could rely only on other individuals if their lives were threatened. The single most important factor that accounts for the specific features of the morality of the sagas is the absence in the Icelandic Free State of most social institutions that are today generally perceived as necessary in order to maintain law and order. It had its laws—there are intricate descriptions of legal procedures in the sagas—but it had no executive power or public institutions to enforce court decisions, which were “stylized vengeance,”²⁰ rather than an exercise of justice. The primary objective of court decisions was to reinstate order and secure peace, which meant that the more powerful party to the case was likely to receive the lion’s share.²¹

One of the most interesting and important questions in this context is how the Icelandic Free State managed to function without central law enforcement authorities and institutions. A fruitful account of this is to be found in Jesse Byock’s *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*.²² Byock argues that the Icelandic sagas demonstrate how an original system of decision-making and conflict-solving functioned as a governmental process. He describes this as a “system of advocacy” which structured feuds in the Free State and brought them to a resolution. Thus feud in Icelandic society was a socially stabilizing process because the sys-

²⁰ Andreas Heusler, *Das Strafrecht der Isländersagas* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1911), p. 103.

²¹ Gunnar Karlsson, “Frá þjóðveldi til konungsríkis,” in Sigurður Línal (ed.), *Saga Íslands*, 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1975), p. 31.

²² References to Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1982) appear in parentheses within the text. Byock’s new book *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988) is also of interest in this respect, but the argument in *Feud* pertains more directly to the subject at issue. See also his paper “Valdatafl og vinfengi,” *Skírnir*, 162 (1988), 127–37.

tem of advocacy directed disputes into socially accepted channels and prevented them from escalating to the point where the social fabric would be ruptured. Clearly this was in everybody's interest, but it also served the special interests of those powerful men, usually the chieftains (*goðar*), who acted as intermediaries on behalf of the fighting farmers: "The intrusion of advocates turned private feuds into community concerns. . . . The system of advocacy worked to keep a lid on random violence, while at the same time giving ambitious men the opportunity to prosper by brokering what power and influence they were able to acquire" (pp. 37–38).

This is a very brief statement of Byock's central thesis and I will have to assume general acquaintance with his work. What interests me here are the implications this perspective has for the whole discussion of morality in the sagas. Compared to the humanistic and the romantic viewpoints, Byock seems to have a radically different understanding of saga morality. What is most striking, perhaps, in Byock's account is the absolute displacement of individual heroism in the sagas: "In saga literature brokerage is characterized as a form of worldly societal interchange rather than as the heroic actions of an individual" (p. 42). Besides, some of the most cherished heroes of the sagas, like Gísli Súrsson, Gunnar of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*, and Grettir Ásmundarson in *Grettis saga* are characterized as socially inept individuals who do not know how to employ the socially accepted and available tools.²³ They appear to be misplaced vikings who are unable to honor the norms of an agrarian society where peace and order are vital. Gísli, for example, makes a deadly mistake by following "the traditional Norse code of family honor which was no longer appropriate to the settled conditions of Icelandic society" (p. 193).

It is instructive in this regard to compare Byock's view of saga morality with that of the humanists and the "romantics." Byock sides with the "romantics" in seeing Gísli Súrsson's intent as honorable, but he is closer to the humanists in judging Gísli's attempt to uphold the family honor as socially threatening. Byock does not morally condemn Gísli's actions in light of medieval ethics but rather points to his "failure to gain brokerage" and attributes his tragedy to "an exaggerated social

²³"Njáls saga," *Íslendinga sögur*, XI, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1947), pp. 1–434. In English: *Njáls saga*, trans. Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1955). "Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar," *Íslendinga sögur*, VI, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1946), pp. 1–295. In English: *Grettir's Saga*, trans. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974).

flaw," namely, his "idealized honor" (p. 193). This makes sense in light of Byock's analysis of social interchange in the sagas where the central moral virtue is that of *hóf* or moderation. The essence of *hóf*, according to Byock, is moderation in seeking personal power. "A man of power," he writes, "was expected to curb his ambitions. *Hóf* was more than an ethical judgment; it specified the kind of conduct looked for in those who held power" (p. 218). The opposite of *hóf*, and hence the most serious social vice of saga characters, is *ójafnaður*, immoderate or overbearing conduct which threatened the social balance. An *ójafnaðarmaður*, according to Byock, is "[a] man who ignored the terms of his contractual agreements, or who aggressively imposed his will on those around him. . . . He consistently flouted the norms of moderation and compromise in social, legal, and financial dealings. His conduct, marked by greed and ambition, went beyond acceptable limits" (pp. 217–18).

There is certainly nothing new in seeing the pair *hóf* and *ójafnaður* as important to saga morality. The novelty of Byock's analysis lies in his social grounding of these phenomena through the system of advocacy and brokerage which distributed political power and maintained social order. In these original ideas lie both the strengths and the weaknesses of Byock's position. The main strengths of his theory become apparent when it is compared to other interpretations of saga morality. Instead of abstracting individuals from their social conditions, Byock undertakes a careful analysis of these conditions in order to make sense out of people's actions, thus giving saga morality some social rationale. By analyzing the social systems and life-processes that channel and condition individual actions in the sagas, Byock has plowed the social ground in which every fruitful investigation of saga morality needs to be rooted.

IV

The main problem that I have with this structural perspective on the sagas is its tendency to explain morality away and reduce it to a function of social processes. Again, we must keep in mind the inherent limitations of every theoretical perspective, the nets it casts and the catch it receives. Admittedly, the theoretical framework that Byock employs in order to understand the actions of farmers and chieftains in the sagas is intended more as a social than a moral analysis. However, if MacIntyre's observation about the virtual identity of social and moral structure is correct, this may be a moot point. In any event,

Byock's theory has major implications for a better understanding of saga morality, even though it neglects important aspects of the moral dimension of the sagas. In particular it does not account for the conflict that exists between the unconditional morality of personal honor and the social need for peace which promotes more conciliatory values. Byock's analysis thus eschews an aporia which is at the core of the objective ethical order of the Icelandic saga society.

Byock's account of the ruling norms of conduct in the Icelandic Free State severely downplays the element of moral virtue and emphasizes in its place the social and political role of *hóf* (moderation), *vinfengi* (friendship), and *góðgirni* (benevolence). From this perspective, the most important aspect of friendship is the way it was used to gain power by forming political alliances. Like the value of moderation, friendship is explained primarily in terms of social expediency and personal prudence, and benevolence is publicly displayed by arbitrators mediating conflicts and arranging for their resolutions. These are important social values and I am not saying that they are antithetical to moral virtue, but rather that the latter implies goodness and strength of character which is never fully captured as a mere function of social processes. Byock's description of those powerful men who best exemplified *hóf*, *vinfengi*, and *góðgirnd* shows that these were above all shrewd brokers and politicians: "Such persons are accurately described [by Heinrich Beck] as social heroes with 'clear insight into the existing social rules' and with 'the reputations, wealth, and authority to guarantee a balance, like Óláfr pái,' or as bargainers aware of 'all the shrewd ways of handling social affairs, like Snorri Goði'" (pp. 90–91). In Byock's view, the skillful use of power and of socially available tools distinguishes the socially successful from the losers. They know the rules of the game and they know how to exploit them. Even Mörður Valgarðsson fares better in Byock's account than Gísli Súrsson because Mörður "skillfully uses the political tools of his society to his own advantage" (p. 200).

It is clear from this that Byock applies a purely strategic or political measure of success to individuals in saga society. In the sagas, however, the criterion of success is also a moral one where the individual virtue of manliness and the social norm of reputation play major roles. Moral virtue, as Aristotle pointed out, is a state of character which has been habituated in such a way that the virtuous deed becomes like a natural disposition.²⁴ This shaping of character takes place in a social context of praise and blame which is conditioned by

²⁴ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, Book II.

social usefulness and expediency, but its result is an individual who has acquired a second nature of virtuous dispositions. As Nietzsche has noted, one difference between a morally virtuous man and a merely prudential man is that in the virtuous man there is no difference between *esse* and *operari*.²⁵ He is all in his actions, while the prudential man uses virtues more as social tools to succeed or as cloaks to cover up his real intentions. It may not be realistic to apply this distinction to the social reality of the Icelandic Free State, but it makes perfect sense in the context of the sagas. Perhaps this is one indication of the literary and ideological character of the sagas. The morality of heroic manliness, integrity, and honor may then have to be dealt with not only as virtues bred in a particular social form of life but also as an idealized myth of the crisis-ridden Icelandic nation which was losing its independence in the thirteenth century.²⁶

Although this ideological aspect of the heroic morality must not be overlooked, it must not be blown out of proportion either. Halldór Laxness, for example, has argued that the heroes described in the sagas are purely literary figures and the heroic morality is an elevated dream of a downgraded nation.²⁷ This is certainly true insofar as the heroes are endowed with superhuman physical qualities, but there is no reason to see the morality of nobility and manliness as a mere literary fiction although it is glorified in the context of the sagas. Sometimes, as in *Fóstbræðrasaga*, the heroic character is ridiculed, but that does not destroy the notion of heroic morality either.²⁸ The virtues that constitute the substance of *drengskapur*, manliness, courage, and integrity, are always important in human relationships, but they are exercised differently in different times and places. Friendship could be much more costly in the Icelandic Free State than it is in modern Iceland and that is why true friendship takes on a heroic character. Friendship always implies reliability in times of need, a test of a friend's character, but it is the situation which decides the nature of the test. And the force of circumstances in the Free State was certainly conducive to heroic friendship in a real rather than an ideological sense of the term.

²⁵ See, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht: Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe. Nachgelassene Werke* (Leipzig: C. G. Naumann, 1901), §304.

²⁶ Vésteinn Ólason argued for this interpretation in his paper "The Ideology of the Free Man in the Icelandic Pætur" (annual meeting, Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, Salt Lake City, May 1989).

²⁷ Halldór Kiljan Laxness, "Vandamál skáldskapar á vorum dögum," in *Dagur í senn. Ræða og rit* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1955), pp. 205–6.

²⁸ Cf. Helga Kress, "Bróklindi Falgeirs: Fóstbræðrasaga og hláturmenning miðalda," *Skírnir*, 161 (1987), 271–86.

One example of such genuine acts of friendship is Gísli Súrsson's relationship to Vésteinn. Although mutually profitable, Gísli's friendship to Vésteinn can never be fully explained as a formation of an advantageous alliance. The entire drama and destiny of Gísli is, in fact, inconceivable without the unconditional character of heroic personal friendship which requires stubborn moral courage in spite of danger to the individual as well as the community. He may lose because his actions are socially threatening, but they can nevertheless be genuinely straightforward and honest. This heroic feature of the sagas does not fit well into the model of the feud structure, as Byock clearly recognizes (Chap. 10). His emphasis is on social and economic issues and not on moral characteristics. The question is, however, whether these phenomena can be separated without missing an important point about the sagas. If the moral dimension of friendship, for example, is not seriously taken into account, one loses sight not only of an important aspect of human relations in the sagas but also of some of the basic reasons behind saga feuds.

v

In order to pursue further the moral implications of Byock's analysis, it is worthwhile to take a look at the losers in saga feuds as he describes them. They are mainly of two types. One type is the overbearing *ójafnaðarmaður*, like Brodd-Helgi in *Vápnfirðingasaga*, who is motivated by greed and ambition. The other type is the romantic hero, like Gísli Súrsson, who acts according to his ideas of family honor and blood vengeance. What these two types have in common is a lack of diplomacy and cunning which, in Byock's view, was necessary in order to make proper use of the social resources. The two characters are radically different in most other respects, however. The most important difference is that of moral character, one is an *ójafnaðarmaður* and the other a *drengskaparmaður*. While the overbearing man is unreliable and rude in his dealings, the romantic hero is a man of honor and integrity whose word can be trusted. Such persons are typically not engaged in prudential reasoning, aimed at securing their individual or communal interests; it is their honor that is at stake and it is the mark of the hero not to bargain with the basic duty of defending his reputation.

This unconditional character of saga heroism is at variance with the diplomatic process of decision-making and conflict-solving that Byock sees as the core of the sagas. Because his analysis focuses on the function of social processes rather than the actions of individuals, who are

the bearers of moral virtue, Byock tends to disregard the important roles that the duty of vengeance and family honor play in the Icelandic sagas. The “romantics” are right in describing saga ethics in terms of honor, *drengskapur*, and the duty of vengeance, although their understanding of these terms is far too individualistic. This does not refute Byock’s account of the importance of moderation and advocacy; rather it is indicative of one of the basic reasons why advocacy did not always work successfully.²⁹ It is not that a few anachronistic heroes were unready for a peace-seeking agrarian society; the system of advocacy was necessary because the Icelandic Free State was a society where heroic ideals were widely accepted but could not be afforded. Perhaps one could say that there was an interplay of conflicting social means which reinforced each other. The system of advocacy was a governmental device aimed at securing a workable order in a society without central institutions. The important point is that advocacy was called for because this society bred the heroic morality of honor and blood vengeance. At the same time, however, Iceland with its fragile agriculture and northern climate could afford only limited violence. The political structure of advocacy and the heroic morality are thus not at odds, but are rather reciprocally related. In fact, they create the tension that is the very core of the sagas: the social importance of maintaining peace and the moral importance of upholding one’s honor.

Byock is right in emphasizing the material interests that are often behind saga feuds, both the petty interests of the fighting farmers and the monetary and political interests of the mediating chieftains. But it is important to remember, as Vésteinn Ólason has pointed out, that in the last analysis the farmer is “much more interested in getting revenge than ‘his money back.’”³⁰ This is because honor is at stake and sometimes that is the only reason behind saga feuds.³¹ “Honour is conferred by one’s peers and without honour a man is without worth,” writes Alasdair MacIntyre.³² Honor is thus an important personal investment in saga society and sometimes it can only be upheld through blood vengeance. The sagas are full of examples indicating that the duty of revenge was strongly sanctioned by public opinion and one

²⁹ Byock himself points this out in *Medieval Iceland*, p. 4. See also Helgi Þorláksson, “Mannfræði og saga,” *Skírnir*, 163 (1989), 231–48.

³⁰ Vésteinn Ólason, “Family sagas,” unpublished manuscript. Byock takes this into account in *Feud*, pp. 43–44.

³¹ See, for example, Helga Kress, “Eigi hofu vér kvennaskap,” in *Sjöttu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Arna Magnússonar, 1977), pp. 293–313.

³² MacIntyre, p. 118.

who did not fulfill this obligation was a useless person. The diplomatic art of compromise, exercised in the system of advocacy, often attempts to temper the effects of this morality but the chieftains also exploit it for their personal gain.³³ In the end these two aspects of saga morality cannot be clearly separated, both because they are tightly interwoven in the sagas and because the standing of many important characters is ambiguous. This is understandable in light of the aporia of the ethical order of saga society which engenders conflicting duties. Even Njáll, whose words and deeds often exemplify the spirit of conciliation and moderation, makes it known when he is offered a chance to leave his burning house that he is too old to exact revenge for his sons and will not live in such shame.³⁴

This idea of honor is fully consistent with a sociological perspective on saga morality. The sense of honor, which the “romantics” nostalgically describe as a character trait of proud pagan individuals, was a facet of the social structure of saga society and was glorified by the saga narrators. The heroic character was bred by a society where reliability and courage were the most important characteristics of the person, not so much because they were part of a heathen moral code but because they were matters of life and death. It is also important to note that this morality is part of a society which had no conscious ethical/religious value system and where human conduct is not sanctioned by a divine system of retribution. This absence of a “moral superstructure” may be just as important as the absence of a worldly sovereign.³⁵ There is no divine nor worldly “sword,” as Thomas Hobbes would put it, over people’s heads, scaring them to reflect on their actions and compare them to an external criterion of justice. The sociomoral bonds between people are so strong in the sagas precisely because they are accepted without question. It is not a question of whether one is to or should take vengeance for a slain brother—but of how and, primarily, when. In this lies the unreflective character of the morality ingrained in a traditional *Sittlichkeit*. The actions are genuinely virtuous because they flow spontaneously from a strong character. As Nietzsche would put it, reflection breeds the art of dis-

³³ Cf. Gunnar Karlsson, “Dyggðir og lestin í Þjóðfélagi Íslendingasagna,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 46 (1985), 9–19. See also Byock, *Feud*, pp. 24–46.

³⁴ *Njáls saga*, Chap. 129. Robert Cook brought up this point in an instructive paper, “A Reading of *Njáls saga*” (annual meeting, Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, Salt Lake City, May 1989).

³⁵ Johan Hovstad argues in *Mannen og samfunnet, studiar i norrøn etikk* (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1943) that the combined elements of increased centralization of political power and the moral teachings of Christianity served to dissolve the unreflective moral consciousness of traditional family society.

simulation which sunders the reliable moral substance of the heroic character. The reflective character of the prudential art of advocacy thus undermines heroic morality, although the two are reciprocally related.

When the sagas are viewed in this light, we see better than before why the moral duties are so unconditional in the sagas. They were not generated by a quasi-Kantian sense of duty ingrained in the hero's heart; duties are absolute in the sense that everything of worth in life is at stake. And heroes are those who find themselves in situations where there is no choice other than betraying life or accepting death. That is why the heroic condition is one of fate; the whole weight of circumstances brings about destiny which can only be accepted with humorous courage and stoic serenity. *Þórðar saga hreðu* provides a good example of the heroic attitude. Þórður and Eyvindur are being attacked. Þórður suggests to Eyvindur that he should ride home. Eyvindur responds: "Illa helda ek þá félagsskap við góðan dreng, ef ek skylda þá renna frá þér, er þú þyrftir helzt manna við. Skal þat ok aldri verða, at mik hendi þá skömm."³⁶ This may be an arrogant response when it is measured on the scale of Christianity; it may also be a foolish act from the viewpoint of prudential self-interest. But it is the kind of response that makes the sagas great. In this also lies the greatness of the hero. To be sure, Eyvindur seems only to be thinking about *himself and his reputation*. Yet it is different from the petty egoism of an *ójafnaðarmaður*. It is the self-respect of a strong character who is so concerned about his honor that he sets absolute limits to his options in life.

Byock is right in showing that this ethic threatened the social order, but there is more to be said about its importance in the sagas and its role as a necessary counterpart to the system of advocacy. And the humanists are right that some of the sagas imply Christian criticism of this heroism, although Christian values have not been integrated as social norms in the sagas. Besides, the humanists often confuse Christian influence with the social values of conciliation and moderation which are classical premises for peace and prosperity.³⁷ Most importantly the "romantics" are right in maintaining that the code of honor was basic to the moral structure as it is described in the sagas, even though their traditional analysis of saga morality is highly inadequate.

³⁶"Þórðar saga hreðu," *Íslendinga sögur*, VI, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1947), Chap. 15, p. 441.

³⁷Theodore M. Andersson brings up this point in "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas."

Social analyses of the sagas, therefore, need to focus more on the role of the moral virtues within the social setting. In the last analysis, the moral structure cannot be understood without reference to the social structure, and saga society cannot be analyzed without the moral virtues that enable individuals to carry out their roles. The social need for peace and order calls for ways of acting which are in conflict with the heroic morality of honor, personal integrity, and vengeance. It is this tension which creates the moral drama of the Icelandic sagas.