

THE PURLOINED SHIELD
OR
Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar as a contemporary saga.

"En því glosaðe eigi Dauid sialfr psaltrann at hann
vilkdi aðrum þat starf ætla. at skyra með orðum alla
þa luti er hann hugði með sialfom ser skyRingina..."
Korunn Skuggsá (209)

What is a contemporary saga? A contemporary saga or *samtíðarsaga* is a prose account composed in Iceland at some moment in a period stretching from the end of the twelfth century to the end of the thirteenth. It portrays people that really existed and events that actually took place during that same period. My aim in this paper is to propose evidence that this same definition can be used for *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, which was also composed in the 13th century,¹ despite the fact that it seems to tell of events from the tenth. I will attempt to show that it deals directly with strictly contemporary matters, even though they are projected into a more or less fictive past.

My title refers to Edgar Allen Poe's famous short story *The Purloined Letter*. Its hero, Dupin, manages to find a compromising letter which has been stolen from the queen by the minister D. and which the whole of the Paris police force, using the most sophisticated police technology, has been unable to discover in the minister's house despite many months of painstaking efforts. The reason Dupin finds the letter is that he does not think along the same positivistic lines the police do. He does not take apart furniture, raise floorboards, sound meticulously the rungs of every chair, examining them carefully with a microscope looking for hiding places. Instead, he puts himself into the thief's place and goes to visit him with his mind open to every possibility. He thus finds the letter in a most obvious place but which the police have been incapable of discovering because it has been disguised as another letter. Frayed and soiled, addressed to someone quite different and bearing another person's seal, it has been folded anew, turned like a glove inside out. It is placed in a most obvious place and nobody sees it precisely because of its being visible, though disguised, when everyone is looking for something hidden.

My hypothesis is that *Egils saga* is, like the purloined letter, a disguised message. On its hidden inside, just as on the inside of the letter, there is the seal of its author, an individual whose political and social position do not allow that certain information about him be made public. For reasons I will explain, the information must however reach the right ears. The message is therefore urgent but private. It tells of certain real events connected to the author, which can only be written down in a code.

In order to prove this point I must describe how a hidden message can be read from *Egils saga* and what code can be used to decipher it correctly. The code I will use is basically the one Snorri Sturluson describes in his *Edda*. In his introduction to *Skáldskaparmál* he says:

"En þetta er nu at segia ungum skaldum, þeim er girnaz at nema mal

¹ The latest discussion of the age of *Egils saga* is in Jónas Kristjánsson's article: "Var Snorri Sturluson upphafsmáður Íslendingasagna?", *Andvæli*, Nýr flokkur XXXII, 115. á, Reykjavík 1990 (85-105).

skaldskaparins ok heyia ser orþfiolþa með fornum heitum *epa girnaz þeir at kuNa skilia þat, er hullit er qveþit, þa skili hann þessa bok til fropleiks ok skemtunar...*²

Snorri says that his book is for young poets who desire to understand poetry that has been composed in such a fashion that its meaning is veiled. Therefore it is not entirely inappropriate to use it as I plan to do, despite the fact that I focus mainly on the prose in the saga.

I have been working for a certain amount of time on *Egils saga*, particularly on the idea that it is constructed in more or less the same fashion as a skaldic strophe, that is to say that the techniques of skaldic composition as they are described in the *Edda*, can be adapted in order to understand how meaning is produced by the saga. The limited space allotted to me does not allow for a detailed discussion of my results, so a superficial presentation of them will have to suffice.³

A major characteristic of skaldic poetry is that it has to be interpreted. Its meaning is not given, but has to be discovered by the reader through a complex series of intellectual operations. These operations can be divided roughly into three stages:

- The reader must restore the correct syntax of the sentence that has been dispersed in the stanza ("*að taka saman*"). Often there are different ways to do this which lead to totally different meanings.

- He must use his knowledge of the intertext of Norse mythology to find out what the *heiti* and *kenningar* which compose the sentence stand for.

- Finally, he must compensate for the absence and/or ambiguity of connectors in the skaldic sentence and propose plausible logical links between its different parts.

For strategic reasons, I will invert the order of the stages and start with the absence and/or ambiguity of connectors. When applying them to a long prose story, the difference of scale must of course be taken into account. The absence of logical connectors can therefore be between narrative elements which are quite distant in the saga. As in the skaldic stanza, the wider context might however direct or invite the reader to connect these elements into a logical sequence. In order to demonstrate that this is valid for *Egils saga*, I will focus on how the saga depicts the relationship between Egill and his elder brother Þórólfur, isolate five seemingly unconnected episodes in their dealings and show how they can be linked together.

1. At the age of three, Egill refuses to be left home when his father and brother are going to a feast at his maternal grandfather's home. He explicitly states that he has the same right to go as Þórólfur (81).⁴

2. Many years later, Egill refuses to let Þórólfur go to Norway without him (102). Þórólfur is taking Ásgerður Bjarnardóttir back to the home of her father

² *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, útg. Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen 1931 (86).

³ A more detailed discussion of this can be found in my article: "Mun konungi og þykja ekki orðsmjallur". Um margræðni, textatengsl og dulda merkingu í *Egils sögu*", *Skírmit*, Vor 1994. Some of the same ideas have already been developed in my doctoral thesis: *La « Matière du Nord ». Sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIIIe siècle*, Université Paris IV - Sorbonne Paris 1992.

⁴ All references will be made to Sigurður Nordal's edition of the saga in the *Íslensk fornrit* series, the page number being given in parentheses.

who left her in Iceland to be brought up by Egill and Þórólfur's parents.

3. When Þórólfur goes to wed Ásgerður, Egill stays home sick (105).

4. Some years later, while the brothers are on their way back to Norway after a successful viking expedition to the south, Egill learns that Eyvindur skreyja, a brother of Queen Gunnhildur, intends to ambush him and Þórólfur of the coast of Jylland. Without consulting his brother, Egill attacks Eyvindur (126). He thus makes it impossible for the brothers to go back to Norway, where Ásgerður is waiting for Þórólfur. It seems likely that Þórólfur would have preferred them to circumvent the ambush if he had been consulted. The brothers go to England, where Þórólfur meets his death (140).

5. After Þórólfur's death, Egill marries his widow (150) and inherits all of his possessions (147), becoming as well sole heir to Skalla-Grfmur's property, of which he otherwise would only have obtained a part, perhaps half, perhaps less.

There is a logical sequence here which can be put this way: Egill competes with his brother for rights given by their father. This competition also involves Ásgerður. Egill may be considered to be indirectly responsible for the death of Þórólfur, since it was due to his attack on Eyvindur skreyja that the brothers couldn't go to Norway and therefore went to England where Þórólfur is killed in battle. Egill profits doubly by his death, since he gets his wife and his part of their father's heritage. Whether these are the logical connections the author intended his reader to make is of course open to discussion. As will be shown, however, other elements of the saga confirm this reading.

Egill's unwillingness to part with Þórólfur on the morning of the day he dies as well as his manifest sorrow when burying him does not weaken this interpretation. Egill did not wish for Þórólfur's death. However, he was motivated by jealousy when he committed the act which was to lead indirectly to his brother's demise. This jealousy is not apparent but is likely when the reader connects the different parts of the narrative, that is to say Egill's earlier reactions and what he stands to gain from Þórólfur's death.

The legitimacy of this reading becomes more likely if we look at another of the above-mentioned stages in the interpretation of skaldic verse: the restoring of the order of the sentence. In a prose account, the "taking apart" of what should be together in terms of narrative logic would be comparable to the skaldic dispersion of syntactic elements in the stanza. Such an artifice can be seen in *Egils saga* when Þórólfur Skalla-Grfmsson comes back to Iceland after his first stay in Norway. He announces his departure as well as his intention of taking Ásgerður along with him and we are told that he is already aboard ship waiting for the right weather. At this point, the author inserts into his narrative a sort of *flashback*, in which he tells of the arrival of a new colonist, Ketill blundur, the marriage of one of his sons to one of Skalla-Grfmur's daughters and two stories are told from Egill's childhood. After this rather long passage, the story returns to the time of Þórólfur's imminent departure and we are told of Egill's demand to go along to Norway, Þórólfur's refusal and Egill's immoderate reaction. From a narrative standpoint this is an anomaly and can be explained in two different ways which are not mutually exclusive.

The more obvious explanation is that Egill is now for the first time becoming the main character of the story and the author feels the need to give more information about him, information that would explain Þórólfur's refusal to take

him along. Another possible explanation is that the author introduces a pause in his narration in order to draw the reader's attention from what might be the real motive for Egill's wish to go to Norway, that is to say the fact that Ásgerður is going there too. This pause has the same effect as syntactic dispersal in a skaldic stanza: the reader has to put together the different elements ("*taka saman*") in order to discover the link.

"Dispersal" of a sort is also at work in a more obscure fashion in the saga. Egill's responsibility in Þórólfur's death is also suggested there in a symbolic way which only becomes accessible after putting together different elements as in the precedent example. Þórólfur is killed by Aðils jarl, when he and his men jump out of a wood and take Þórólfur by surprise before killing him with their spears (140). This Aðils is one of two brothers and always mentioned after his brother (129, 130 et 136), which indicates that he is the younger of the two. The reason he is fighting Þórólfur is that he has revolted against the king, because he feels he has lost some of the power and wealth he was entitled to by heritage ("*...hétu þeir þá jarlar, er áðr váru konungar eða konungasynir,*" 129).

When all these elements are taken into account, there appears a close parallel between Þórólfur's death on Vínheiði and Egill's later slaying of Berg-Önundur. Egill also jumps out of a wood, takes Berg-Önundur by surprise and kills him with a spear (168). Egill is also the younger of two brothers and he has also revolted against a king who has deprived him of something to which he is entitled by inheritance (151-63). There are also distinct parallels in the way Berg-Önundur and Þórólfur are described. Exactly the same words are used ("*hverjum manni meiri ok sterkar*" 93 and 94) and they both become special friends of Queen Gunnhildur (94 and 152).

After all these analogies that are dispersed throughout the text are brought together, it becomes clear that Þórólfur's death is echoed in some strange way in Egill's slaying of Berg-Önundur, as if the second were a sort of metaphor of the former, much as the image of the giant hammering out a file and using it on the ship's hull in the thirty-second stanza of the saga (*Þél hæggr stórt fyrir stáii, etc.*) is a metaphor for the wind making waves on the sea. This reinforces the suggestion that Egill's responsibility is somehow involved in his brother's death.⁵

This brings us to the final stage of the unravelling of the meaning of a skaldic stanza: deciphering the *kenningar*. In order to understand them, a knowledge of a certain number of stories and characters from Norse mythology and heroic poetry is necessary. It could therefore be said that skaldic diction is a systematic exploitation of intertextuality since knowledge of one textual world is necessary to break the code in which information about another textual world is being given.

There is a certain number of allusions to the world of Norse mythology in the story of Egill. In order to be concise, I will only focus on one of them here. After their confrontation at Guláping, Egill is being pursued by King Eiríkur (160-2). In the semi-obscurity of twilight he throws a spear at the king's boat and kills one of his men, a certain Ketill *hōður*. *Hōður* is also the name of the blind god who threw a spear at his brother Baldur and killed him. Even though

⁵ A similar parallel can be seen in the way Skalla-Grímur and Eiríkur blóðox are portrayed in certain key episodes. In order to develop this point, I would need more space than is at my disposal here.

the situation is inverted, the character bearing this name being killed when a spear is thrown at him and not vice versa, this incident can be seen as an allusion to the theme of fratricide, the blindness of Höður being represented by Egill's difficulty in seeing who he is actually throwing the spear at. (It is hinted that his actual target was the king himself.

The legitimacy of this interpretation is confirmed by certain other aspects of the saga. One of them has to do with Ketill *höður's* name. There are six characters in the saga who are called Ketill and have a cognomen. Of the five others, two are only mentioned in genealogies (3 and 71) and three are colonists in Iceland, Ketill *hængur*, Ketill *blundur* and Ketill *gufa*. Their arrival to Iceland is described at very different moments in the saga, which is in itself an anomaly, since such accounts are usually clustered together in *Íslendingasögur*. This anomaly seems to be willingly contrived, because if one takes a closer look at the position of these three colonisation stories, we can see that they appear at structurally similar points in the narrative. The story of Ketill *hængur* is inserted between Þórólfur Kveld-Úlfsson's death and the revenge taken by his father and brother on trusted men of the king as well as on his close cousins (57-60). Thus it precedes an escalation in the conflict between the Kveld-Úlfur clan and the royal family. The story of Ketill *blundur's* arrival appears in the *flashback* mentioned above. It is also the sign of a rupture in the narrative since it announces Egill's becoming the main character in the saga. It also precedes an account of a conflict with a figure of authority (paternal instead of royal) as well as the killing in revenge of the trusted servant of this figure of authority (Egill kills Skalla-Grímur's foreman after Skalla-Grímur has killed Brák and Þórður, 101-3). This conflict almost leads to Þórólfur's death when Egill cuts loose his ship during the storm, and can be seen as a structural equivalent to the killing of the king's cousins after the account of Ketill *hængur's* colonisation. The story of Ketill *gufa's* colonisation is told much later in the saga, when Egill has come back to Iceland after his final trip to Norway and before the story of his son Böðvar's death (240-2). Like the other accounts, it introduces a rupture into the narrative and like them it also involves the killing of servants (Lambi's killing of his slaves, 241) as well as the loss of a close relative.

The structural similarities of these accounts and their position in the saga, as well as the fact they all involve characters whose name is Ketill and a cognomen, indicate that they are somehow to be *tekin saman*, that is to say considered together when they are interpreted. This is supported by the spuriousness of these accounts when compared to other presumably older sources. This is especially true of what the saga tells us of Ketill *blundur* and Ketill *gufa*, and indicates that these accounts may have been composed for artistic reasons.⁶

The cognomens of these two colonists, *blundur* and *gufa*, are also noticeable because they connote blindness, "*að blunda*" means to close one's eyes and "*gufa*" means steam or smoke, which also impairs vision. This connects them to Ketill *höður's* nickname, that of the blind god. Though it is not a colonisation story, the episode involving him can be shown to be structurally similar with the other two. There is also a conflict with authority, since Egill is pitted against the king. It also involves the killing of a trusted servant of this king, Ketill

⁶ See Bjarni Einarsson's discussion of these episodes in his important book *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga*, Reykjavík 1975 (especially 53 and 73-86).

höður, and it also precedes closely the death of a very close relative of this figure of authority, when Egill kills the king's son, Rögnvaldur (171).

Through our intertextual knowledge of Norse mythology, we know that Höður is the blind god who kills his brother inadvertently. Thus the theme of fratricide is alluded to. Norse mythology is however not the only intertext exploited in skaldic poetry. The rich and varied discourse of the Bible could also be used in this way by poets after the conversion to christianity, as examples taken by Snorri in his *Edda* show amply.⁷ It is therefore interesting to note that blindness is also associated with fratricide in christian texts. I John 2:10-11 is a telling example:

He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. But he who hates his brother is in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

This part of the New Testament is used in one of the homilies of the Norwegian Homily Book,⁸ involving the same condemnation of jealousy or hatred of one's brother: "*Hvær sa er ... hatar broðor sin. hann er manndráps-maðr.*"⁹ It is therefore almost certain that it was known in Iceland at the time of the composition of the saga. It might not be a coincidence that the theme of blindness is alluded to when Egill, who ends his life as a blind man stumbling over his own feet (294-5), comes into the mainstream of the saga and is repeated when his adventures abroad end and he himself is subjected to what those he has been in conflict with (Eiríkur, Skalla-Grímur) have experienced: the loss of a son.

The intertext of the New Testament might also help to understand better an element in the saga which is otherwise bewildering. Shortly after Egill kills Ketill höður and immediately after his slaying of Berg-Önundur, Egill murders King Eiríkur's son, Rögnvaldur who is sailing with twelve companions on a boat (170). Rögnvaldur's presence that night in the proximity of Berg-Önundur's home has been carefully prepared in the saga (164-5). However *Egils saga* is the only medieval source mentioning this character and it is as if the saga itself is telling us that he was created especially for him to be killed by Egill at this point in the narrative. Just before he is introduced, we are told of the birth of Eiríkur's son Haraldur gráfeldur and that his grandfather, Haraldur hárfagri, declares he will be king after his father. Three years later, Haraldur dies and one year after that Eiríkur kills his two brothers in Túnsberg, which we are told happens while Egill is attacking Berg-Önundur (164). Haraldur gráfeldur can only be four years old at the time his elder brother, Rögnvaldur, is killed and it is therefore strange that he should not be chosen to be his father's successor since he is legitimate (son of Eiríkur and Gunnhildur) and a promising young man ("*it frívasta mannsefni*"). This is definitely an inconsistency in the narrative, even though it is quite discreet, and since such inconsistencies are not characteristic of the author it may be surmised that it is there on purpose, an indication to the

⁷ See chapter 65 of *Skáldskaparmál*: "Hvemig skal Krist keNa?" (158).

⁸ See *Gamalt Norsk Homiliebok (Cod. AM 619 4)*, útg. Gustav Indrebø, Oslo 1931 (100).

⁹ I John 3:12: "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding for him."

reader that he may look for a hidden meaning.

What can Rögnvaldur stand for? He is the son of a king and he is accompanied by twelve men on a boat. His name means "he who creates somebody's destiny". It is quite tempting to see in him a figure of the Christ, the Lord's son who travelled on a boat with his twelve disciples. In medieval theology, the killing of the Christ was thought to be a reenactment of the two first crimes of humanity: Adam's crime of revolt against God and Cain's murder of his brother, because the Christ was both God and man. In consenting to his crucifixion, Jesus redeemed humanity by bringing on himself these two crimes and forgiving them. Therefore each sin is in a sense a reenactment of the murder of Christ.

As in a skaldic stanza, the author of *Egils saga* alludes to a different textual world in order to give meaning to what he is saying. Here it is the world of Christian doctrine which must have been familiar to any church-going thirteenth century Icelander, especially one as educated as the author of *Egils saga*.¹⁰ This allusion to fratricide in the murder of Rögnvaldur is consistent with what has been said above about the way the saga suggests Egill's responsibility in the death of his brother. Moreover, it is the last in a series of three killings all of which, as has been shown, have fratricidal connotations: that of Ketill höður refers to the killing of Baldur, Berg-Öundur's slaying to Þórólfur's death and finally the killing of Rögnvaldur to the murder of the Christ.

There seems therefore to be considerable evidence for the fact that the author of *Egils saga* wanted to tell in a veiled way the story of Egill's guilt in the death of his brother, even though only part of this evidence has been exposed here.¹¹ The Christian sense of responsibility that is involved is not inconsistent with Egill's status as a pagan, since he has been prime-signed and is therefore more than half way into the community of Christians.¹² The question thus arises whether the death of Bððvar Egilsson should be regarded as retribution for his sin. There are several clues pointing to this but I will only present one in which intertextuality akin to that exploited by skalds is involved.

In the last part of *Konungs Skuggsjá* from the middle of the thirteenth century there are long narratives about King David and other characters of the Old Testament. These chapters seem to have been used by the compiler of the Old Norse biblical translation, *Stjórn* or vice-versa.¹³ Be that as it may, it is

¹⁰ It is worth quoting extensively what Margaret Clunies-Ross says in *Skáldskaparmál. Snorri Sturluson's ars poetica and medieval theories of language*, Odense 1987 (93), on Snorri's commentary of the possibility of using skaldic art for Christian purposes: "The purpose of Snorri's rounding off the kenning section of *Skáldskaparmál* with kennings whose referents might be either the Divine Ruler or His human representatives is to draw attention to the capacity of the skaldic art to incorporate altered frames of reference so that many of the old kenning-types could still be used by Christian poets, though with different referential values assigned to them. By the time Snorri wrote, it had been amply demonstrated that skaldic diction could be used as a medium of Christian expression, and in chapter 66 he indicates how he understood this accommodation to have taken place. He first notes the potentialities of some kenning-types for dual frames of reference; as he puts it, "there the kennings coincide" (*þar koma saman kenningar*); and he then observes the consequent importance that context assumes in interpreting kennings whose referents may be either the King of kings or earthly rulers: "and he who interprets poetic diction learns to distinguish from context which king is meant" (ch. 66, 160. 1-2)."

¹¹ Further evidence involves the typological construction of the history of the Kveld-Úlfur clan, their flight from Norway and fratricide in the second generation, Egill's dealings with his father and a certain number of characters whose name is Grímur, a creation of parallels between King Eiríkur and Skalla-Grímur similar to those between Berg-Öundur and Þórólfur, etc. They will be developed in a later publication.

¹² For information on the signification of "prime-signing", see J. Harris and T.D. Hill: "Gest's Prime-sign" *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 104, Lund 1989 (103-122).

¹³ For a bibliography concerning this question see Sverre Bagge: "Forholdet mellem Kongespeilet og

most likely that the author of *Egils saga* knew these stories from the Old Testament.¹⁴ When one considers the account of David's life in *Konungs Skuggsjá* there appear a number of striking parallels between David and Egill.¹⁵ Both are poets from a pre-Christian era and their poetry is exceptional for its introspection. Both compose poetry in honour of their friends: David to Saul and Jonathan and Egill to Arinbjörn. This close friend saves both of them from the anger of a king: Arinbjörn saves Egill from Eiríkur and Jonathan saves David from Saul. Both of them desire another man's wife, Egill desires Ásgerður and David Bathsheba. Both of their rivals die when in the front line of a battle: David has conspired to have Uriah killed in this way and Egill is responsible for Þórólfur being in the battle, so both are — in different ways and to a different extent — responsible for the death of their rival. Both lose a son born to them of the union with the other man's wife. In *Konungs Skuggsjá* we are told that David is being punished.¹⁶ In the light of other elements which have been discussed in this paper, it seems quite plausible that the richness of these intertextual links between Egill and David are intentionally contrived to suggest that Egill is also being punished.

If this interpretation of the saga is anywhere near being correct, then it will force us to change radically our perception of *Egils saga* and its relationship to the culture of the thirteenth century.¹⁷ It raises also the question of why anyone should compose such a tale, which tells of a crime but at the same time does its utmost to conceal it, making it comparable to the purloined letter mentioned in the beginning of the paper. An answer to this question will now be proposed. It is proposed only as a possible solution to the enigma and I am far from being sure of it being correct. There is however enough evidence for its being plausible and that is why it is presented here.

In *Konungs Skuggsjá* it is told that David regrets having committed adultery and wants to acquire forgiveness by confessing directly to God but without his crime being made known to others. This desire is directly connected with his status of king and with the fact that it is bad that those who are to obey him learn about his failings (252).¹⁸ This reluctance of leaders to confess openly to their sins in front of their subordinates was a major reason for the institution of secrecy of confession in the provisions of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which also made annual confession an obligation for every Christian.¹⁹ The

Sjóm", *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* 89 (1974).

¹⁴ The rare word *naubrynjærindi* is found in *Egils saga* as well as this part of *Konungs Skuggsjá*. It is otherwise only found in *Heimskringla* and a letter from bishop Páll Jónsson recorded in *Prestsaga Guðmundar Arasonar*. This information was obtained by using the computerized concordance or *Orðstíðulykill* developed by Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson et al. and which has on its database all of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Grágás*, *Heimskringla*, *Sturlunga* and *Landnámabók*.

¹⁵ See *Konungs skuggsjá. Speculum Regale*. Copenhagen 1920.

¹⁶ *Konungs skuggsjá* (253-4): „Nu skalt þú þat vita at eigi let guð sva firi gefna þessa synd Daudi at hann hefndi eigi eptir rettendum því at su var hin fyrsta hefnd er Daudi toc af guði at þann þat er hann hafte getit með Bersabee þa var þat son oc var aver fríðr oc villdi Daudi giarna at barnit hefndi ef en guð villdi eigi unna þannum nytia af því barni er hann sva syndliga getið.“

¹⁷ This revision is already under way and besides Bjarni Einarsson's book on the saga, I would like to mention a ground-breaking article by Margaret Clunies-Ross: "The Art of Poetry and the Figure of the Poet in *Egils saga*", *Parergon*, No. 22 (December, 1978)

¹⁸ "En firi því at regla laganna deombi þessa glep notan lost æf upp kemi firi folkino þa leitaðe David þeirær at hyggi at hann mæti hællr þegia yfir oc sæ guð iðran hans en folkit gengi dalt loghbrota hans. oc tuki eigi hans glep til dæms at þeim þeste þa minna firi at falla iglepi oc loghbrox æf þeir vissi hans glep.“

¹⁹ See for example Pierre-Marie Gy: "Le précepte de la confession annuelle et la nécessité de la confession."

provisions of the council seem to have been known almost immediately in Iceland, since the changes in marital law they permitted were adapted to Icelandic law as early as 1217.²⁰ The ones concerning annual confession and secrecy are applied in a synodal statute issued by bishop Magnús Gissurarson in 1224.²¹

Of laymen who were active in Icelandic politics and culture at this time, no one is more likely to have been acquainted with the provisions of Lateran IV than Snorri Sturluson who was law-speaker in 1217 when the above-mentioned changes were made in the law. As is well known, there is considerable evidence for Snorri being the author of *Egils saga*.²² I will take the risk here of assuming that he is and try to answer why Snorri might have wanted to compose such a narrative, that is to say one which is composed in such an intricate and enigmatic way and one which tells a story of fratricidal jealousy and indirect responsibility in the death of a brother.

The fact that Snorri composed the *Edda* as well as being a proficient and talented skald himself is reason enough to consider whether skaldic techniques had any kind of influence on his handling of prose. Elsewhere I have proposed that he might use the technique he calls *ofljóst* in a chapter of his *Ólafs saga helga*.²³ If anyone had the mental agility to adapt poetic techniques to the prose-form it was Snorri who gave an abstract description of them and whose mastery of prose was unequalled. He also had a taste for ambiguity and hidden meaning as can be seen in his poetry.²⁴ From a formal standpoint, Snorri would seem quite capable of composing such a convoluted and complex narrative that carries greater signification than can be apparent to a naive reader.

We are lucky enough to know a great deal about Snorri's life, especially through his nephew's account of it in *Íslendinga saga*. There are striking parallels between certain events in Snorri's life and those of Egill if my interpretation of *Egla* is correct. Snorri seems to have planned to marry the richest heiress in the country, Solveig Sæmundardóttir, or at least to have her marry his only legitimate son, Jón murtur.²⁵ He was thwarted in this by his elder brother, Sighvat-ur, and Porvaldur Gissurarson who arranged for the son of the former, Sturla Sighvatsson, to marry Solveig in 1223. It is explicitly stated that Snorri was dis-

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²⁰ See the entry in *Konungssannli* for 1217: "Færð frændsemi ok ómegð í lögum", *Annlar og nafnaskrá*. Guðni Jónsson bjó til prentunar, Reykjavík 1953 (33).

²¹ See *Diplomatarium Islandicum. Íslenskt fornbréfaafn*. Vol. I, Copenhagen 1857, (new edition Reykjavík 1957), pp. 436-7: "S. Eggi skal leyfa hauðub synd ok engi a at gera þott bosen so. Um þa cina luti kaus (kfs) hugr umbun er maðr er eigi skyldr at vita. Bioða bera leynda bera synd og leynda skript fyr leyndan laust. Banna berliga j formæli. pasca. dag. þionustu tekio hverium þeim er elgi hefir til skripta gengit. óða. ser veit a hendr leynda stor luti."

²² See Sigurður Nordal's introduction to his edition in the *Íslenskt fornrit* series, Peter Hallberg: *Snorri Sturluson och Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Studia Islandica* 20 (1962), Vésteinn Ólason: "Er Snorri höfundur Egils sögu?", *Skírnir* (1968), Ralph West: "Snorri Sturluson and *Egils saga*: statistics of style", *Scandinavian studies* (1980) 163-193. Bjarni Einarsson makes important additions to Björn M. Ólsen's evidence towards Snorri's authorship in his book on *Egils saga*.

²³ See my article "Á Kálfskinni. Hugleiðing um *ofljóst* í óbundnu máli", *Sagnabing. Helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni niðugum*, 10. apríl 1994, Reykjavík 1994 (801-3).

²⁴ See Guðrún Nordal's article: "Skáldið Snorri Sturluson", *Snorrastefna. Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals*, Reykjavík 1992 (52-69).

²⁵ See *Sturlunga I-II*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson et al., Reykjavík 1988 (286). All subsequent information about the events of Snorri's life comes from Sturla's account. Reference will be given to this edition by the page number in parentheses.

pleased that this should happen. Sturla Sighvatsson moves to the *Dalir* region, on the border of Snorri's domain and takes over the *goðorð* which the three Sturlung brothers, Þórður, Sighvatur and Snorri, possessed together (289). The fact that Snorri loses Sólveig to Sturla as well as Sturla taking over alone what should be divided between the three brothers seems to have led to a conflict between the uncle and the nephew. Snorri invades the *Dalir* region and takes over the *goðorð* (306), Sturla strikes back by taking under his protection the killers of Snorri's son-in-law Þorvaldur Vatnsfirðingur (308). The sons of Þorvaldur attack Sturla's farm in Sauðafell one night and though Sturla is not home they kill several people and steal everything of value they can lay their hands on (311-14). It was a most savage and barbarous attack and it seems that most people believed Snorri to be responsible for this attack and that public opinion condemned him for it (316). *Fjörðráð* or conspiracy to kill someone, especially a close relative, was considered a grave offense.²⁶

So far the similarities between Snorri and Egill are that they are both jealous of a close male relative who has married a rich heiress they desire for themselves and that they are indirectly responsible for an attack on the person of this close male relative. They also have in common the fact that the conflict involves both a woman and the heritage from the father. If Snorri was in fact guilty of having induced the sons of Þorvaldur to attack and kill Sturla, he had committed a most serious sin, nearly the equivalent of fratricide.²⁷

The similarities between the two increase when one considers that both also lose their most cherished sons: Böðvar drowns and Jón murtur dies of an injury in Norway in 1231.²⁸ It is a possibility that must be considered whether Snorri might have interpreted the death of his son as a punishment for his actions against his brother's son in the same way it is suggested in *Egla* that Böðvar's death is retribution for Egill's behavior toward his brother.

The first half of the thirteenth century, especially the period following the Fourth Lateran Council, is a period when confession becomes an increasing part of the life of the Christian, not only on the death-bed, but at least once a year and preferably more often. As has already been mentioned the provisions of this council were known and had already been applied in Iceland at the presumed time of composition of *Egils saga*. A number of examples of confession can be found in the contemporary sagas.²⁹ There is no reason to believe Icelanders were any different from other Christians in this respect and therefore it is likely that if Snorri was convinced of having sinned, he would repent, confess his sin and do something to manifest his contrition and repentance. Even if his regret was only half-sincere he would still go through the confession in order to

²⁶ See the account of Sturla Sighvatsson's attack on his other uncle Þórður's farm and the fact that he is made to pay compensation for *fjörðráð*, even though he did not intend to kill him (304).

²⁷ Even though Snorri did not take part in the attack on Sauðafell, he was responsible in christian terms if he had simply suggested the attack to the sons of Þorvaldur. This is very clearly stated about King David in *Konunga Skuggsjá*: „Damið svaraði lorn er soc min firi Guði at ec geri þat oc þa at ec bioða einum hvarium aðrum.“ (262).

²⁸ In a recent article, Bjarni Einarsson proposes that Snorri Sturluson composed *Sonatorrek* after Jón murtur's death: "Skáðið í Reykjaholti", *Eyvindarhök. festskrift til Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen*. Oslo 1992 (39-40).

²⁹ See for example *Sturlunga* (337): "...þá sendi Sturla Þorkel prest til fundar við þá bræður og bað þá skrifast og búast við ef þeir vildu verjast, segir að þá mun ekki gríða kostur. Og er þeir heyra þetta þá skrifast þeir." and (495): "Þeir segja honum að engi kostur mundi gríða vera, báðu hann rannsaka ráð sitt og tala við prest ..."

save his soul, the alternative between Heaven and Hell being something very real to thirteenth century Europeans.

However, this act of contrition could not be made public because of his position in society. He was still one of the most powerful men in the country and still trying to increase his power. Just like King David in *Konungs Skuggsjá*, he could not afford to humiliate himself publicly. However the synodal statutes of bishop Magnús from 1224 permitted a hidden act of contrition for a hidden crime ("*leyfa ber leynda skrift fyrir leyndan löst*").

The motif of confession appears in *Egils saga* when Arinbjörn persuades Egill to tell him why he is so depressed. Egill confesses his love for Ásgerður first in the convoluted and hermetic form of skaldic verse (148-50) before he makes it explicit after Arinbjörn's reassurances. The confession of a crime in skaldic form appears in *Gísla saga*, when Gíslí admits to his having killed his brother-in-law in a verse so obscure he thinks that nobody will be able to understand it.³⁰

Composing poetry to save one's life is also a motif in the sagas, *Egils saga* in particular. But in the thirteenth century saving one's life also meant saving one's afterlife, i.e. saving one's soul. I propose therefore that the saga of the skald Egill Skalla-Grímsson was composed by his descendant and fellow skald Snorri Sturluson as Snorri's own *Höfuðlausn*. It is a veiled confession of his responsibility in the attack on Sturla Sighvatsson and an act of contrition to preserve his chances of having an afterlife. To use the terms of my introduction: there is a coded message in the saga, it has to do with real events of the thirteenth century and it must reach the ears (or minds) of certain persons, the most important one being God.³¹

That things such as saving one's soul in Christian terms were of import to Snorri can be seen from his behaviour in the year 1236. In the week before Easter that year, Sighvatur and Sturla invade Snorri's domain, the region of Borgarfjörður. This they do despite Þórður Sturluson's admonishments that they are imperilling their souls, especially Sighvatur who was then an old man (377-8). Snorri could have attacked his brother, and is indeed pressed to do so, but will not run the risk of committing such a sin so close to Easter (376: "*Snorri var eigi búinn til þess að fara að bróður stnum á þeim háttum er þá fóru í hönd.*"). This has sometimes been mentioned as proof of Snorri's cowardice. That is not necessarily the correct interpretation. He could simply have judged it more important to save his soul than to preserve his domain.

This interpretation is more consistent with Snorri's earlier behaviour when he did not hesitate to enter Sturla's domain and run the risk of armed confrontation with him. If he has since then become conscious, through the loss of his son, that he has committed a sin, and then atoned for it, achieving forgiveness, he might not want to jeopardize this result.

This might seem a far-fetched theory on the circumstances of the composition of *Egils saga*. It is really not more far-fetched than the theory that the historical novel was invented in Iceland in the thirteenth century or the one that

³⁰ See *Íslendingasögur og þættir I-III*, útg. Bragi Halldórsson, Jón Torfason, Sverrir Tómasson og Órnólfur Thórhsson, Reykjavík 1988 (925).

³¹ The Christian doctrine of penitence is presented in Alcuin's *De virtutibus et vitiiis* which seems to have been known in Iceland at this time (see Gunnar Harðarson: *Þrjár þýðingar lærfrá miðöldum*, Reykjavík 1989, 132-7).

the saga is essentially the recording of traditions which were handed down from one generation to the other. It is in fact consistent with many things we know of the culture of Iceland in the early thirteenth century. However more space would be needed to give a complete demonstration of the viability of this theory and/or to propose alternative interpretations consistent with the analysis of the saga as a complex skaldic composition.

Until such a demonstration can be made, and as a temporary conclusion, I would like to propose that the shield Einar skálaglamm gives Egill is an emblem, a sort of *mise en abyme*, of the whole work:

“... ok var hann in mesta gersemi; hann var skrifaðr fornsögum, en allt milli skriptanna váru lagðar yfir spengr af gulli ok settr steinum.”
(272)

This shield is probably inspired by the one belonging to Achilles and described in *Trójumanna saga*.³² The same word, *skrifaðr*, is used there to indicate that it is decorated with images. However the noun *skript* is not used in *Trójumanna saga* nor in a similar description in *Alexanders saga*.³³ *Skript* is typically a word with two meanings, a *tvíkennit* word as Snorri calls them in the *Edda*.³⁴ Such words, says Snorri, can be used to compose *ofljóst* stanzas, that is to say poetry in which a word means something else than it seems to mean in the given context. *Skript* also means “confession” or “act of penitence”.

Could the story of the shield be an allusion to the real nature of the superb piece of expert craftsmanship *Egils saga* is? The *fornsögur* — the story of Egill — are the *skriptir*, but they are also a veiled confession only to be understood by those who “desire to understand what is composed as an enigma” (“*þat, er hulit er qveþit*”). Even if this confession as a story of ancient times is spoiled (i.e. becomes unreadable) when the purloined shield is put into a barrel of *skyr* (273) the solid gold of pure art remains for everyone to see.

³² See *Trójumanna saga*, edited by Jonna Louis-Jensen, Munksgaard Copenhagen 1963, Editiones Arnamagnæane, Series A, vol. 8, (172).

³³ See *Alexandris þáttur er Alexanders saga mikla*. Reykjavík 1945 (38).

³⁴ See Snorri's *Edda* (147): „Þessar greinir má setja svá í skáldskap, at gera ofljóst, at vant er at skilja, ef öðr skal hafa greinina, en öðr þykki til horfa en fyrri vísu-orr.”