

## SVARFDÆLA SAGA: THE NORWEGIANS VERSUS THE SWEDES

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One reason why so few scholars have shown an interest in *Svarfdæla saga* is its fragmentary condition.<sup>1</sup> In addition to several lines missing from the manuscript on which modern editions are based, a large gap in chapter 10 poses difficulties: while the Norwegian viking named Þorsteinn Þorgnýsson in chapters 1-10 is probably the father of the Icelandic settler named Þorsteinn *svörfuðr* (the 'unruly') of chapters 11-19 (Kristjánsson 1956, lxxv),<sup>2</sup> a knowledge of Þorsteinn II's birth and youth would, among other things, explain his suggestive nickname; the abrupt appearance after the gap of additional important characters without the usual biographical introductions impedes an analysis of a work so deeply concerned with family relationships; the lack of transition between the events in Norway and Sweden on the one hand and those in Iceland on the other obscures the relation between the four main parts of the saga. A second reason for the saga's relative lack of prestige is its classification as a "post-classical saga," that dubious label which suggests that works thus categorized—with the obvious exception of *Grettis saga*—are less worthy than the classical sagas.<sup>3</sup> The field still suffers from the notion that the origins, the flowering, and the decline of the extant *Íslendingasögur* can be traced. This view implies that lateness entails inferiority, an equation tantamount to the converse of "better late than never." Jónas Kristjánsson's generally informative introduction to his edition of *Svarfdæla saga* in the Íslenzk fornrit series does not provide any reason to question this implied value scale. He endeavors not so much to explain the saga as to explain it away. A third and final reason why so few scholars are interested in the saga is perhaps that it, like other post-classical sagas, reports on the wild goings on of Icelandic settlers on home turf: Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*, after whom an Icelandic valley is named, is a shape-shifter; his nephew, Klaufi, is both a *berserkr* and a violent *aptrganga*, who returns from the grave to kill a prominent *goði*; Karl *inn rauði*, Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*'s unappealing son, tortures and so disfigures a slave named Skíði that his injury plays an allegorical role in the last part of the saga; Karl *ómáli*, the grandson of Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*, abuses a female character, Yngvildr *fagrkinn*, in a manner quite unprecedented in an *Íslendingasaga*. The only apparent reason to regard this saga along side, say, *Valla-Ljótis saga* is that both deal with some of the same characters mentioned in *Landnámabók*. It seems that *Svarfdæla saga*'s lack of restraint, dignity, and "high seriousness" puts off many scholars.

The purpose of my essay is to make a case for the saga. For one thing, despite its poor preservation, its structure is clear: the first part of the saga (chapters 1-10) presages the fourth part (chapters 23-28), and the third gives us a fairly clear idea of some of the events missing from part two. For another thing, the saga efficiently characterizes minor and major figures with the deft brush strokes of saga writing at its best. Moreover, nu-

<sup>1</sup>Theodore M. Andersson omits *Svarfdæla saga* (and *Fljótsdæla saga*), because they "are not complete enough to permit structural analysis" (Andersson 1967, vi).

<sup>2</sup>In addition to the reasons listed by Kristjánsson for regarding both Þorsteins as two separate characters, I would add that they are two different types: Þorsteinn I is a *kolbátr*, whereas Þorsteinn (II) *svörfuðr* is a shape-shifter. Þorsteinn I is never described as a shape-shifter nor is there any suggestion that he has supernatural powers.

<sup>3</sup>Vésteinn Ólason (Ólason 1993, 334) offers a list of post-classical sagas: *Bárðar saga*, *Finnboga saga ramna*, *Fljótsdæla saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Harðar saga*, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Króka-Refs saga*, *Svarfdæla saga*, *Vígundar saga*, and *Þórðar saga hreðu*; to which I would add, *Þorskfirðinga saga*. Andersson (see note 1 above) deals only with the sagas in volumes II-XII of IF, thus excluding the post-classical sagas with the exception of *Grettis saga* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*. Given the widespread influence of this book, this exclusion may well have contributed, through no fault of Andersson's, to the lackluster reputation of this group of sagas.

merous incidents in the saga are narrated with great economy and panache. Finally, the structure, the adept characterizations, and the well narrated episodes contribute to the development of a theme, which initially we might posit in its crudest form as something like, "endogamous Norwegian forbearers are preferable to exogamous Norwegians, especially if they mix with Swedes." One of my assumptions in developing this notion is that the saga does not expect us to regard it as historically reliable.<sup>4</sup> In fact, something like the opposite seems to be the case: the story is so obviously a fabrication that readers appear to be invited, as in regarding a fairy tale, to think of the saga's meaning in the most abstract and general terms. Further, I am not altogether sure that the author might not be parodying the themes so central to the *Íslendingasögur*: concern with genealogy, feud, reconciliation, and the legal fabric so necessary to such a society. The saga attempts to account for the fact that some Icelanders, both in the settlement period and the time of writing, are occasionally unpleasant, even downright nasty characters, and the trail leads towards the ancestry of the characters. Some sagas account for the evil that people do by showing the defects of the religion they practice (*Hrafnkels saga Freysgöða*); other sagas suggest that the fault is a bad gene (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*); and still others, in addition to these and various other causes, opt for "motiveless malignity" (*Grettis saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*). If some of these solutions strike us as simplistic, perhaps we ought to reconsider our own psychology-based explanations of sociopathic behavior. *Svarfáæla saga's* version of history at least has the virtue of provoking thought. In addition, the saga seems designed to flatter our generous hosts, the inhabitants of the city of Trondheim on the occasion of its noble anniversary, the entire state of Norway, and Norwegian descendants throughout the world. I am pleased to have an opportunity to show how the saga works out its message, and I will consider my task completed if I merely demonstrate the patterns in the saga.

## 2.

Before I begin with a discussion of the saga's structure, characters, events, and themes, a summary of its plot might prove useful: Þórólfr and Þorsteinn live with their parents in Norway until one day Þórólfr persuades Þorsteinn to accompany him on a trading expedition abroad. Soon growing bored of the mercantile routine, they attack and kill the fearsome viking Ljótr *inn bleiki*, but at the cost of Þórólfr's life. Þorsteinn proceeds to Sweden, where he spends the winter with the ageing Jarl Herröðr, who has been challenged either to fight a duel against a "half-berserk," Moldi (Ljótr's brother), or to accept him as son-in-law. Þorsteinn kills the intruder, marries the Jarl's daughter, and, on the point of taking leave of the court, disappears into the gap in the manuscript, part two of the saga.

Part three begins abruptly in the middle of a skirmish between the forces of Þorsteinn *svörfuðr* and a chieftain named Ljótólfr. Þorsteinn wrests land away from Ljótólfr and, adding insult to injury, gives the valley his nickname, but somehow they make peace. Gríss, Ljótólfr's relative, fosters Klaufi, Þorsteinn's nephew, who spreads terror throughout the valley. Klaufi rescues Þorsteinn's son Karl *inn rauði* from a band of vikings and together the cousins engage in a feud with Ljótólfr that consumes Klaufi, Gríss, and Þorsteinn. Karl then tortures Ljótólfr's slave, Skíði, for whom Ljótólfr arranges a marriage with his former mistress and Klaufi's widow, Yngvildr. An attempted settlement between Karl and Ljótólfr founders when Yngvildr questions Skíði's manhood in agreeing to the settlement. Thus goaded, Skíði kills Karl.

Part four begins with the birth of Karl *inn rauði's* son Karl. Because he never speaks during his early childhood, he is considered to be an idiot and is nicknamed Karl *ómáli* ('Speechless'). Although warned by his foster-father Ljótólfr, Þorkell Skíðason taunts the twelve-year-old Karl and receives a painful thrashing. Karl throws off his disguise

<sup>4</sup>Robert Cook (Cook 1994, 122), following a suggestion by Helgi Guðmundsson, states that "the author [of *Kjalnesinga saga*] didn't expect that his saga would be taken as true; ... the author slights literal truth because he is interested in a different kind of truth." Cook also studies the saga's "conception of settlement history" involving "a sharp opposition between Irish Christians and Norwegian pagans."

and quickly assumes his new role of avenging hero, taking Skíði and Yngvildr unawares and killing their three sons. Karl then outlaws Skíði, paying for his passage abroad. Leaving Ljótólfr in charge of his farm and livestock, Karl *ómdli* travels abroad with Yngvildr, and sells her into slavery. He repurchases her much the worse for wear and returns to Iceland, but once again he commits her to bondage. When he buys her back the second time, she is a broken woman. Karl saves Skíði from defeat in a battle in Ireland, and they conclude a settlement. When Skíði repudiates Yngvildr, Karl takes her back to Iceland where he and Ljótólfr settle their differences. Yngvildr is said by some to have committed suicide, and Ljótólfr is found stabbed to death by Klaufi's spear. Karl cremates Klaufi's body, marries Ljótólfr's daughter, fathers many children, leaves the valley towards the end of his life, and dies at a ripe old age in Óláfsfjörðr.

### 3.

The following outline will highlight the most important parts of the saga and provide a basis for discussing the saga's structure:

#### Part I (Norway)

- I. Þorsteinn I *kolbítur*
- II. Þorsteinn I Viking (Chapter 4)

#### (Sweden)

- III. Þorsteinn I Hero

#### [Part II: Gap]

- [IV. *Þorsteinn II's Birth*
- V. *Þorsteinn II svörfuðr*
- VI. *Þorsteinn I's Death*]

#### Part III (Iceland)

- VII. Þorsteinn *svörfuðr's landnáam*
- VIII. Feud
- IX. Failed Settlement

#### Part IV (Iceland/Norway/Denmark/Sweden)

- X. Karl *ómdli's* Revenge
- XI. Reconciliation (Karl: Yngvildr and Skíði/Ljótólfr)
- XII. Karl *ómdli's* Death in Óláfsfjörðr

A saga with a structure this balanced would ordinarily be considered analyzable, even if one third of this outline is conjectured (Part II). But if we assume that there are two Þorsteinn's in the saga, this guess-work is not as farfetched as it seems, for it then follows that Þorsteinn II was born and acquired a nickname and that Þorsteinn I died. This structure gives the saga coherence: four parts narrate the deeds of four generations of this family. In addition, Parts I and II concentrate on characters named Þorsteinn; likewise, Parts III and IV are concerned with the exploits of characters named Karl. An analysis of these parts will demonstrate the soundness of the saga's structure.

The first part of the saga establishes Þorsteinn I as the exemplary progenitor. Foreshadowed by his unpromising childhood spent lying before the hearth fire,<sup>5</sup> he

<sup>5</sup>See also *Porskfjörðinga saga*, ÍF, XIII, 197: *Grímr Eyjúlfsson var mikill ok eldsætr ok þótti vera nær afglapi* ('Grímr Eyjúlfsson was large and a fire-sitter and was considered to be virtually a fool'); *Landnámabók*, ÍF, I, 287: *Óðr var eldsætr í æsku ok seinligr ok var kallaðr kolbítur* ('Óðr was a fire-sitter in his youth and retarded and was called a coal-biter'); *Gautreks saga*, Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, IV, 15: *Hann [Starkaðr] var himaldí ok kolbítur ok lá í fleti við eld* ('He [Starkaðr] was a lout and a coal-biter

quickly achieves fame as a viking. This episode with Ljótr *inn bleiki* is merely part of the heroic polish Þorsteinn necessarily acquires before he arrives in Sweden, where he is destined to achieve his greatest acclaim. The many analogues to the saga's treatment of these incidents, including the parallels to *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, have been pointed out (Kristjánsson 1956, lxxii-lxxxvii), but the differences have been largely ignored. Þorsteinn begins as if he will develop along Egill's lines, but Þorsteinn, unlike Egill, can also make himself agreeable when the situation demands. As I will demonstrate later when I discuss the characters in the saga, Þorsteinn comes as close to representing a model warrior hero as possible. Importantly, his parentage is Norwegian on both sides.

Moreover, Part I establishes a negative attitude towards Swedes: they have grown weak under an ageing ruler, the court is comprised of retainers simply not able to support their leader, and they have fallen prey to evil elements in the kingdom. We need only consider two incidents to see how skilfully the saga discredits Herröðr's men. The first is the stock situation in which the hall guards receive the newly arrived strangers, Þorsteinn and his men. The guards explain that it is customary for strangers to enter the hall unarmed, but even before they can utter a challenge or issue a command, Þorsteinn brushes all this aside, saying, „ok hogg ek þar hvern, sem kominn er, ef þit farit eigi frá“ ('I will strike down anyone in my way if you two do not step aside,' 140). They move out of his way, we are told, because he terrified them and they dared not stand in his way. The second is the fact that although no shame is attached to Herröðr for not fighting the duel—he is after all an old man—blame is meted out to his retainers for not accepting the challenge. Moldi moves from one man to another in the hall asking them in turn whether they consider themselves his equal in courage until he reaches Þorsteinn, who replies that he would not think of comparing their valor, equating Moldi's with a mare's. When Þorsteinn leaves them, they apparently deteriorate even further, so that his daughter, who apparently returned to Sweden with her brother Þórólfr, is defenceless against Ljótr the Pale's son, Snækollr. From this union comes Klaufi, the source of much trouble in Part III.

My assumptions in reconstructing Part II are that Þorsteinn *svörfuðr* is Þorsteinn I's son and that Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*'s mother is Ingibjörg Herröðsdóttir. Naturally, these points may be untrue. While structural elegance supports the assumption that the two Þorsteinns are father and son, there is no structural reason to believe that Ingibjörg is Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*'s mother. I would maintain, however, that such an assumption is in keeping with the saga's negative attitudes towards Swedes.

Part III of the saga shows the complete deterioration of family fortunes. This decline results from the feud that Karl *inn rauði* and his cousin, Klaufi, wage against the forces of the chieftain Ljótólfr. The blame for the feud rests clearly on the malice and imbalance of these cousins, with the additional help of Klaufi's foster-father and Ljótólfr's kinsman, Griss. Nothing that Ljótólfr does in any way justifies the various acts which his opponents commit in an effort to provoke this mild-mannered chieftain. The narrative makes it clear that peaceful coexistence with Ljótólfr is not a difficult matter, as Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*'s dealings with him before the feud and those of Karl *Ómáli* afterwards demonstrate. Among his other sins, Karl *inn rauði* loses popularity in the district. We must remember that Karl *inn rauði* is the son of a man with a Norwegian father and a Swedish mother. Klaufi, abandoned by first his father and then by his mother, is the son of a woman with a Norwegian father and a Swedish mother and of a man who is the son of a (presumably Swedish) viking, Ljótr *inn bleiki*. In addition, Klaufi's father's uncle

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and lay in the ashes by the fire'); *Hárðarsaga*, ÍF, XIII, 16: [Hörðr] var svennma mikill vexti ok vænn at áttú, en ekki dálíga bráðgerr fyrst í því, at hann gekk eigi einn saman, þá er hann var þrjúvetur at aldri ('[Hörðr] even at an early age was very large and handsome in appearance, but slow to develop physically; for one thing he could not walk by himself until he was three years old'); *Grettis saga*, ÍF, VII, 36: *Grettir Ásmundarson var ... ekki bráðgerr, meðan hann var á barnsaldri ... Grettir óx upp at Bjargi, þar til er hann var tíu vetra gamall; hann tók þá heldr við at gangask* ('Grettir Ásmundarson was ... slow to develop as a child ... Grettir grew up at Bjarg until he was ten; he began slowly to mature'). In *Víga-Glúms saga* it is said that *Glúmr skipti sér ekki af um búsyslu; þótt heldr óbráðgerr í uppruna* ('Glúmr did not pay much attention to the farm work; he was considered rather slow to develop at first,' ÍF, IX, 15). We should not forget, of course, that Beowulf is also a *kolbfr*.

(Moldi) was a Swedish berserk. The saga seems to throw up its hands at this point, asking the reader what can be expected from such blood lines.

Part IV begins with the striking correspondence between the childhoods of Þorsteinn *kolbítir* and Karl *órnáli*, characters who might be considered two sides of the same coin, the late-blooming male Cinderella figure. Þorsteinn's period of inactivity, as far as the plot is concerned, is unmotivated, whereas Karl's slow development is a ploy apparently adopted by the boy to lull his enemies into complacency. In other words, Þorsteinn is a real *kolbítir* whose nature plays no significant role in his history, whereas Karl's imitation of an idiot unsettles, confuses, and fascinates his adversaries. As a signpost to guide the reader, however, the link is clear: it places the two figures at opposite poles of a narrative line or, to vary the metaphor, depicts them as segments that begin and complete a circle. Something represented by Þorsteinn the *kolbítir* anticipates Karl who, in turn, develops some aspect of his great-grandfather's character. Both function as purifiers of the land, characters who perform acts that restore order in the community. Both in their own ways represent aspects of model conduct.

#### 4.

Despite a few incomplete genealogies that apparently result from the poor condition of the manuscript, the characters are fully realized saga types. Each of the characters in the central family represents a chapter in the family fortunes, beginning with its heights in the figure of Þorsteinn *kolbítir*, moving through a slight falling off with Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*, reaching its nadir in Karl *inn rauði* and Klaufi, and concluding with a partial restoration with Karl *órnáli*.

As mentioned earlier Þorsteinn I is the prototype of the good warrior. He is not only brave and, for a *kolbítir*, unusually solicitous of his brother, but also courteous, witty, modest, and clever by turns. He very well deserves the accolade bestowed upon him when Herröðr (in one of the conjectured reconstructions of the missing narrative) calls him 'the greatest man to have come to Gautland in my lifetime.' We can immediately imagine that he died a comfortable death in old age surrounded by loved ones and mourned by the community at large.

His son Þorsteinn *svörfuðr* is a shadowy figure in Part III, no doubt because much of his character is established in Part II during the gap. There is nothing really wrong with him, except that he is not the man his father once was. Thus we are surprised when he appears during a battle in Chapter 19 in the shape of a bear, a feature of his character that otherwise plays no significant role in his behavior, but this inherited trait is a sign that all is not well in the blood lines. The decline in the family has not really begun in earnest, but the seeds have been planted by the marriage with a Swedish princess. More significant are the character traits he has inherited from his father: agreeableness—he gets along with Ljótólfr—and cleverness, as can be seen in his keen insight into Gríss's character, something which I will analyze later. Shortly before his death Þorsteinn *svörfuðr* gives his son Karl *inn rauði* the standard but nevertheless useful advice to be kind to his friends.

The rot sets in with the son, Karl *inn rauði*, and his cousin, Klaufi. Karl is a model of intransigence, an enemy of Ljótólfr for no discernible reason. In fact, the beginning of their feud, as described briefly at the beginning of Chapter 16, seems chiefly motivated by the necessity of having the feud start somewhere: Ljótólfr's fault, if he is at fault, is perhaps listening to Gríss's bad advice, whereas Karl bristles at the notion that he owes Ljótólfr money and reacts immoderately. At every turn thereafter Karl *inn rauði* acts in character for the role the saga has determined that he play: virtually that of the *óþagnaðar-maðr mikill*, except that his lack of political power, popularity, and influence does not allow him to go as far as he might otherwise choose. We observe his ethics when he stops Klaufi, overcome by a berserk fit, from killing Ljótólfr and his entire troop:<sup>6</sup> Karl

<sup>6</sup>(Karl states: „Þat skaltu eigi meala, frændi ... því at Ljótólfr á marga frændr göfuga um allt Ísland, ok mundim vit sitja fyrir afarkostum ef honum væri nökkut til meins gert, ok sel honum nú sjálfkæmi fyrir allan saman óþagnað þann, sem þú hefir gert honum“ (“You should not say such things, kinsman, for Ljótólfr has many worthy kinsmen all over Iceland, and we would be in serious trouble if any harm were

does not preach moderation for its own sake but because immoderation is too risky. After Klaufi's death, however, he forgets his father's good advice, a lapse which leads to his own death (see below). Here is a great falling away from the heights reached by his grandfather, Þorsteinn *kolbfr*.

Klaufi is a fitting companion for his cousin Karl *inn rauði*. Indeed the two are reminiscent of the uncle and nephew Þorbjörn and Vagr in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, of whom we are told that Vagr's presence made Þorbjörn's evil conduct that much worse. Klaufi is the saga's attempt to portray sociopathic behavior, the conduct of individuals for whom no normal restraints are possible; in this respect he resembles a full-blown berserk, and on at least three occasions, he succumbs to berserk fits. At ten years of age Klaufi kills his first victim, one Þórör *fangari* (the 'wrestler'), who made the mistake of insultingly challenging Klaufi to a wrestling match. Not satisfied with merely thrashing the man, he kills him with an axe. A succession of killings cuts heavily into Gríss's resources until he finally is able to divest himself of responsibility for Klaufi's conduct. He then becomes Karl *inn rauði*'s responsibility. Karl then tricks Yngvildr's father into betrothing her to Klaufi, and only the wit of Yngvildr—an incident I will take up below—is able to dissolve her union with this undesired and undesirable husband. In retrospect, it is easy to understand why Þorsteinn *svörfuðr* received Klaufi and his sister with such little enthusiasm.

The opposition between the two chief characters of Part IV, Ljótólfr and Karl *ómáli*, concludes the saga's study of the clan. Ljótólfr is a type of *moderate adversary*, in every respect the opposite of the hot-headed Karl *inn rauði*. This type runs the risk of being considered too passive at best and a coward at worst by the community at large, as Ljótólfr's conduct in several situations proves.<sup>7</sup> But this repeated passivity grooms him as a fitting adversary for Karl *ómáli*, who in turn must earn the heroic stature necessary to meet Ljótólfr half way in seeking a reconciliation. On the one hand, Ljótólfr must be a character disposed to reconciliation, rather than one bent on blood revenge, and he must also be prepared to withstand the criticism of others for his reluctance to take this revenge. On the other hand, Karl *ómáli*, as a type of *kolbfr* similar to his great-grandfather, is from the beginning a character who is destined for heroic deeds, one who must be seen as a man capable of taking revenge before he approaches an enemy with a peaceful solution in mind. It is one of the paradoxes of feuding that in order to effect a peaceful settlement, a character must have a demonstrated capacity for shedding blood. Karl *ómáli* is partially a parody of such a figure, so that when he kills Skfði's and Yngvildr's three sons, he makes it clear that he will stop at nothing in enforcing the letter of the revenge law. Ljótólfr had guessed Karl's true nature by cautioning his foster-son to be careful of him,<sup>8</sup> and this prescience demonstrates that Ljótólfr suspects that Karl has some plan in mind. If Ljótólfr were a different kind of man, he would kill Karl, but this is not his type. When Karl throws off his disguise, forces his brothers into relinquishing their inheritance to him, tricks his *þingmenn* into attacking Skfði, and finally takes revenge upon him,

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done to him, and give him self-judgment now for all the injustice that you have done him,' 171-72). All quotes from *Svarfúsla saga* are from the ÍF edition. Arabic numerals refer to pages.

<sup>7</sup>Because Karl *inn rauði* does all the talking when the two dispute the alleged debt over their formerly jointly owned ship, Ljótólfr looks passive (163-64); although Klaufi kills two of Ljótólfr's shepherds, we learn merely that Klaufi had to take up residence elsewhere without being told that Ljótólfr, as must have been the case, was the force behind this move (164); Ljótólfr refuses to come out of the house at Brekka and face Karl *inn rauði*, thus allowing Karl publicly to brand him a coward (168); Ljótólfr pretends not to hear (*lastr eigi sem hann heyrir*) Karl *inn rauði* jeering at him across the river that they have Yngvildr in tow, even though Ljótólfr has double the force of his opponent (170); at a battle in which fifteen of Ljótólfr's men fall, it is Karl *inn rauði*, rather than Ljótólfr who negotiates with Klaufi in an attempt to compose these killings (171-72); Ljótólfr refuses once again to exit a building in which Karl *inn rauði* has trapped him (182); a settlement between the two enemies favors Karl, even though Ljótólfr is a chieftain (183); Ljótólfr is helped into his saddle during a battle with Karl and told to ride away (186); Karl kills one of Ljótólfr's men, but Ljótólfr pretended he knew nothing about it („Eigi lét Ljótólfr sem hann vissi, hvat í hafði gerzt," 187).

<sup>8</sup>„Heimskr sýnist yðr hann vera, en mér lízt hann hyggjarni en þér, ok svá mun reynast" ("he may seem stupid to you, but I think he is cleverer than you, and so it will be proven," 194).

these actions all partake of the fairy tale. No one imagines that we are to take all this activity literally, but then no one has apparently thought much about what it means metaphorically. My suggestion is that the saga makes a statement about the revenge ethic as it is pursued in some of the classic revenge sagas. In looking at some of the incidents in which the saga's concerns become most obvious, I will develop the notion that seeking peace at a time when everyone expects the adversaries to be shedding blood demands courage more admirable than knowingly facing death.

Each of the satellite figures—Gríss, Skíði, Yngvildr—contributes in some way to this family chronicle. Gríss, a subtly rendered character, is greedy, meddlesome, unreliable, and posturing. He is a type of *trouble-maker*, a figure who acts as a catalyst between two sets of feuding characters. He is responsible first for introducing Klaufi into the saga, an act he commits out of greed (see his deal with Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*'s sister, 154). Second, Gríss plays a major role in igniting and stoking the feud: he drives a wedge between Karl and Ljótólfr by provoking both to argue publicly over a long-forgotten debt;<sup>9</sup> and at his own wedding he proposes that his guests play the game of *mannjafnaður*,<sup>10</sup> a contest that leads to immediate trouble. Characters like Gríss thrive for a while, because they place themselves stage center, but in the end this type receives its just desserts. Gríss gets his comeuppance with a spicy dash of saga-typical *Schadenfreude*: cutting him in two, Karl quips that this is the way piglets (*gríss* means 'piglet') are butchered (179). Gríss's true nature becomes only gradually clear because the cameo biography usually accompanying a character's introduction into a saga apparently fell victim to the gap. Þorsteinn *svörfuðr*'s initial coolness towards Gríss<sup>11</sup> hardens into animosity when he recognizes Gríss's motives in landing him with his niece and nephew,<sup>12</sup> and his change of attitude is sustained by Gríss's subsequent conduct.

Skíði, a runaway slave who finds support from Ljótólfr, is drawn into the feud because of loyalty to his master. He initially plays a minor role in the proceedings that justifies the narrator's comment that he is a slave in name only (163). Once, as we have seen (see note 9), he comments sagely on Gríss's conduct, and once he advises Karl *inn rauði* to give Ásgeirr *rauðfeldr* some land at the conclusion of a settlement (183), showing that Skíði enjoys a standing in the community that a slave would ordinarily never acquire. This early promise merely prepares him for his major role in the saga as a pivotal figure in the study of the feud ethic, which I treat in the next section.

Yngvildr, like Hallgerðr and Bergþóra in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, may be regarded as a type of *woman scorned*. Surely the saga's most controversial creation, her characterization lacks the anticipatory comment that sagas often provide in introducing a character. Instead, a series of events in her life give her substance. Beautiful, clever, and strong willed, she is first Ljótólfr's mistress, apparently with the approval if not connivance of her father and brothers, then the prisoner in a *Rauðehe*, and finally the wife of a man whom she marries in order to take revenge on Karl *inn rauði*. Without being second-sighted, she twice utters words that spell doom for male characters: once when caring for her infant brothers, she predicts that a scratch on Þorsteinn's leg symbolizes the mark of

<sup>9</sup>„Hygg at því, Gríss, at þú leggir þat eina til með mönnum, at þá sé eigi verr með mönnum eptir en áfr“ (‘Be sure, Gríss, that you suggest nothing that will make everyone unhappier than they were before,’ 163.)

<sup>10</sup>Þorsteinn comments on Gríss's suggestion as follows: Þorsteinn sagði þat óvitriliga til lagit, — „ok mun þaðan jafnan margt koma, sem Gríss er“ (‘Þorsteinn said that this suggestion was unwise, “but Gríss can always be counted on for such ideas,”’ 165).

<sup>11</sup>Nú leitar Gríss þar til, sem Þorsteinn er, en hann tekur honum ekki sljótt, en sagði þó, ef Gríss kynni hof sitt, at hann mundi ekki amast við byggð hans (Then Gríss approached Þorsteinn, but he did not take to him right away, but said nevertheless that if Gríss behaved properly, he would not oppose his settling there, 153).

<sup>12</sup>It is for this reason that Þorsteinn, after testing the children's mettle by slapping them (a test reminiscent of Signý's much more exacting test of the three sons, which only Sinfjötill passes, in Chapter 7 of *Völsunga saga*), tricks Gríss into fostering Klaufi: he intuits the boy's nature and correctly anticipates that he will cost Gríss a lot of money later.

a spear;<sup>13</sup> and, more importantly, when she destroys the peace negotiations between Ljótólfr and Karl *inn rauði* by insisting on a life for a lip (see below). Any interpretation of this saga must come to terms with the significance of Yngvildr's role. The question is simply why the saga portrays her in such an unsympathetic light. This matter, too, is a subject of the final section.

## 5.

The saga is rich in skilfully narrated incidents, many of which I would gladly comment upon as part of my campaign to rescue *Svarfdæla saga* from obscurity, but I will restrict my discussion to three incidents which best develop the saga's attitudes towards feud and the concomitant theme of honor. These incidents are Klaufi's death scene, Karl *inn rauði*'s death scene, and Karl *Ómáli*'s treatment of Yngvildr, including his killing of her three sons. I will deal with them in turn.

Klaufi's death scene (172-74) can be briefly summarized: married to Klaufi against her will, Yngvildr first beguiles him, then complains that her brothers have slaughtered her ox, and finally goads her husband into fetching the carcass. In a berserk rage, he carries the "dressed" hide from her brothers' farm all the way home. Exhausted by his labors and his fit, he slumps at the door of his house where Yngvildr "delays" (*dvaldi fyrir*, 174) him until the brothers kill him with his own sword. The special comedy of the scene is that Klaufi has transported his killers wrapped up in the hide and that they take him while he is in a state of symbolic post-coital lethargy. This comic scene serves three ends. First, his humiliating demise is the fitting severing of the Swedish connection; nothing deflates heroic pride more than a comic death. Second, this narrative type calls to mind the manner in which Víga-Styrr dispatched two Swedish berserks who were, like Klaufi, unwisely brought to Iceland (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF, IV, 72-75).<sup>14</sup> The similarity consists in having the berserk perform an incapacitating task that prevents him from defending himself. The suggestion is that Klaufi's presence in the valley has grown every bit as troublesome as that of the other two berserks; "divorce saga style" matches "marriage berserk style." Third, the incident characterizes Yngvildr favorably. Any woman in her position, her act seems to say, would be justified in behaving as she does, even if only a few could contrive such a feat with equal daring and wit. At the same time the incident preconditions our response to the harsh treatment she later receives at Karl *Ómáli*'s hands. By depicting in a positive light Yngvildr's revenge upon a man who gets what he has coming to him, the saga, in effect, contrasts this behavior with her later conduct. The contrast seems to suggest that there are limits circumscribing how far one can go in exacting revenge, even for a woman who has the enormous grievances of an Yngvildr. Having Klaufi killed is one thing, but having Karl *inn rauði* killed is another.

Karl *inn rauði*'s death scene is also worthy of analysis for what it contributes to the saga's attitude towards honor. Chapter 22 begins (189) with one Óláfr collecting his two sons from Karl in order, he says, that they take care of him in his old age. In fact, this represents the saga equivalent of rats leaving a sinking ship, for not only has Karl been losing popularity with his neighbors (188), but the attempted peace settlement sabotaged by Yngvildr has just fallen through. A sympathetic hero would not have such potential support withdrawn at this crucial stage in a feud. Another sign that Karl's days are numbered occurs one morning when, standing outside with a Norwegian named Gunnarr, Karl suddenly turns pale. He tells Gunnarr that he saw a vision of them both in a sleigh pulled by a grey horse and driven by Klaufi. Gunnarr expresses disappointment at Karl's cowardice, saying that he too saw the vision but without blanching. Klaufi then calls out to Karl, expressing his wish that his kinsman come home with him that same night. At Gunnarr's repeated insistence that they proceed to his ship that same day, Karl takes leave of his wife, specifies the placement of his burial mound, and requests that the child in her womb, if a boy, be named after him in the hope that it will bring good luck. He departs with six others, and all are killed by the combined forces of Ljótólfr and Skíði. It

<sup>13</sup>A prediction that does not come true in the saga but rather in "Porleifs pátr jarlsskálds," Chapter 7, ÍF, IX, 226.

<sup>14</sup>This same incident is also told in *Heiðarvíga saga*, ÍF, III, chapters 3 and 4.



is difficult to establish which element in this scene is most important in making Karl look unheroic, but fortunately there are so many contributing elements that we need not concentrate on just one. Now there is no denying that this scene in some other saga might contribute to the heroic stature of the dying hero, but one of the features of such type-scenes is their flexibility (Heinemann 1974; 1975, 449-51; 1993). That is, the use of a given type-scene in different contexts gives the elements in a scene a slightly different meaning, in the same way that a word's context conditions the meanings of that word. In order for this scene to portray the character's death as sympathetic, the character must be regarded positively, which is not the case with Karl *inn rauði*. For this reason, all of the *topoi* appear in a different light. Moreover, the *topoi* in this scene are given subtle twists that alter their function. For example, it is one thing for a character to brush aside requests that he remain where he is for the night, refuse help in the face of certain danger, or deny that armed men lying in ambush or charging head on towards him are in fact bent on violence. But it is quite another for the man himself to be accused of cowardice („ekki ertu svá mikill fyrir þér sem ek ætlaða": 'you are not the man I thought you were,' 189) and then to express reluctance to meet his fate resolutely („Ekki er annat um þat, því at ekki er byrlligt": 'there is no hurry, because the winds are not favorable,' 191). Moreover, in one saga in which the man knows of his wife's pregnancy before she does (*Völsunga saga*; Chapter 12), he also knows the child's sex (Sigurðr). Karl seems to know both too much and too little at the same time. Likewise, in the face of the absolute certainty as to Karl's fate, Þorgerðr's statement that the vision fills her with foreboding („... ok er mér ekki at skapi fyrirburðr sjá," 191) might just be a bit of dramatic irony intended to add a comic touch to the scene. (That is, this is a case of the lady's protesting too little, given that all the signs tell us that Karl is doomed.) To Karl's response to his wife,<sup>15</sup> there are several good answers: "Stay home until you can gather more men," "Ignore this ridiculous Norwegian; hasn't his advice already gotten you in enough trouble?" or "Let him commit suicide if he is so disposed, but why follow his example?" The question in this scene is one of tone: is the saga not asking us to see Karl as someone whose own folly has backed him into a corner that he cannot now get out of without losing more face than he can afford? The saga has shown us repeated instances in which Ljótólfr has refused to be baited by taunts about his masculinity. True, some people have uttered doubts that he is afraid of Karl *inn rauði*,<sup>16</sup> but he is still alive and thriving. There can be no doubt that the saga has more respect for Ljótólfr than for Karl, and thus it would seem strange to prefer Karl's attitude towards honor over Ljótólfr's. Just to make this point one more time, the saga has Karl goad Skíði with the remark that his lip will never be healed if he does not kill Karl single-handedly. Skíði brushes this taunt aside,<sup>17</sup> and kills Karl. The message: "Karl, you can make all the taunts you want to, but from now on you will be making them from beneath a pile of rocks." Karl is in the wrong saga, or he is confusing his role with that of Gunnarr in *Atlakviða*. The saga suggests that the age for the grand gesture has passed: in the present day, sometimes honor is better honored in the breach than in the observance.

The incidents in which Karl *órnili* takes revenge upon Yngvildr can be summarized as follows: Karl takes Skíði and Yngvildr by surprise and asks her at sword point what the gap in Skíði's lip is very large (197), to which she replies that there is no gap whatsoever. He then presumably beheads her two oldest sons,<sup>18</sup> asking the question once again

<sup>15</sup> „Ekki verðr at gert; svá verðr at vera sem vera vill“ ('Nothing can be done; things will happen as they must,' 191).

<sup>16</sup> „Váru um þat almæli um dalinn, at Karl bæri ægishjálm yfir Ljótólfrí ...“ ('It was common talk in the valley that Ljótólfr was terrified of Karl,' 170).

<sup>17</sup> „Njóta mun ek nú líðsmunar, ok mun nú verða at leggja til slíkt hvern, sem sýnist; kalli sá fullt skarð Skíða, sem þat vill, en sá öðruvísu, er þat vill mæla“ ('I am going to take advantage of the difference in numbers, and everybody can say what he wants to about that. Whoever wants to call Skíði's lip healed may do so; he who does not can say otherwise,' 191-92).

<sup>18</sup> There is a gap in the saga at this point, as well as a contradiction of what we are told in Chapter 20, page 187, about the relative ages of the sons.

before executing the third son. He wipes his sword on her shirt<sup>19</sup> and asks the question again. As before, she claims that Skíði's lip has healed. He outlaws Skíði, paying his passage abroad, giving him careful instructions about the route he must take to his ship, and cautioning him not to seek out Ljótólfr. He makes Yngvildr his mistress, repeatedly threatening her and asking her about Skíði's lip. Karl twice sells her into bondage when she refuses to admit that the lip has not completely healed. Finally, after suffering at the hands of many owners, she confesses that the lip will never heal. What is the significance of this episode?

We must begin by recognizing the symbolic value of Yngvildr's original stipulation that before she marries Skíði, he must within five years and to her satisfaction have healed the wound that Karl *inn rauði* has inflicted upon him. That she is not merely objecting to his appearance becomes clear when she sabotages the settlement over Klaufi's death by stating that „seint mundi verða fyllt skarð í vör Skíða, ef sjá sætt skyldi takast“ (‘the gash in Skíði's lip would be a long time in healing if this settlement is agreed upon,’ 188). Both Skíði and Gunnarr the Norwegian are scandalized, responding to her remark with words reminiscent of “cold are the counsels of women.” She, like Hildigunnr in Chapter 116 of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Clover 1986, 141-46), seems to be saying that only blood revenge is a fitting response to Skíði's injury. Moreover, this injury has been seen as a symbol of his deficient masculinity.<sup>20</sup> Yngvildr's repeated insistence that his lip has healed thus means that she is satisfied that he has restored his damaged honor by killing Karl *innrauði*. It further signifies that she regrets nothing. Now when Karl *ómáli* sets out to take revenge, it is obvious that he cannot lay hands on Yngvildr. He thus kills her sons, outlaws her husband, and sells her into slavery so that others can punish her physically.<sup>21</sup> But before he does these things, he asks her, in effect, whether she regrets having been a party to killing his father. Both Skíði and Ljótólfr readily express their misgivings prior to being reconciled with Karl *ómáli*, but Yngvildr is made of sterner stuff and must be subjected to years of mistreatment as a slave before she finally caves in. Are we to read the saga here as saying that a woman has two choices, “marriage or death” (Kress 1993, 152)? Or does the saga seem to be saying that if it is the case that “[i]n the feud situation, women's (and old men's) words are the equivalent of men's deeds” and that “it is incumbent on a woman to urge vengeance as it is incumbent on a man to take it” (Clover 1986, 145), then women should also expect harsh terms in return? I think that in light of the saga's invitation to think of the actions as unrealistic, we should view Karl's treatment of Yngvildr in allegorical terms, in much the same way as we ought to regard women's revenge in *Völsunga saga*. The acts of women who sacrifice their children to obtain revenge on husbands are not presented to characterize women as monsters but as statements about women's condition. This is the saga world's representation of the dark night of the female soul—the subconscious gratification of a longing to strike back, an indication that women have grievances that cannot be expressed in ordinary terms. I personally have considerable sympathy with Yngvildr, but more importantly I think the saga shows her grudging respect. She, like the men in the saga, is a prisoner of a harsh code that dictates that honor is best maintained by revenge. She has good reason to take such revenge, but finally the system destroys her too. In a feud society the threat of blood vengeance may sometimes make peaceful solutions possible, but in this saga peaceful solutions are shoved into the background. Those who prefer peace, such as Ljótólfr, Skíði, and, at the end, Karl *ómáli*, are regarded with scepticism. They survive longer than the others, but they pay a high price: insults to their pride, dignity, and character, as

<sup>19</sup>The analogue with *Laxdæla saga* contributes to the brutality of his act, although it would hardly seem necessary to add this detail to the gruesome ones already portrayed.

<sup>20</sup>So far so good, but one wonders how many readers will accept, as I do, Helga Kress's intriguing suggestion that the gash in Skíði's lip is likened to the female genitalia (Kress 1993, 149). She also suggests that Yngvildr “had been promised revenge” before she marries Skíði, which means, if I understand Kress correctly, that at the time Yngvildr insisted on the five year interim in which the lip must have healed “to her satisfaction,” all parties to the agreement understood that she was calling for blood.

<sup>21</sup>We should notice that the men who mistreat her are presumably Swedes and Danes, as he goes to these countries to sell her in each case. Does this suggest that if an Icelandic man wants a woman mistreated, then any Swede or Dane, but the uglier the better, will do?

well as physical abuse and even violent death. Not all sagas by any means come down quite so hard on feuding, but *Svarfðæla saga* seems to favor the man of moderation, Ljótólfr. It is not an accident that Karl *Ómáli* must finally leave the valley because he could not get on with Ljótólfr's son, Valla-Ljótr. That *Svarfðæla saga* leaves us with an uneasy feeling is perhaps the best testimony to its narrative brilliance.

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