

Gunnlogi and Hraefrakki

Two ditties in the shorter version of *The Saga of Gísli*

I

Signs and their interpretation – the responsibility of a Christian interpreter confronted with a multifaceted world. Much implies that this is one of the major topics of the shorter version of *Gísli* saga, in the manuscript AM 556a, and that its purpose among other things is to stir its readers to envisage themselves the difficulty of interpretation. With this in mind let us review two of the saga's *niðkviðlingar* (ditties) and their surrounding prose. I shall attempt to reveal their complexity, hopefully offering a novel reading, paying attention to the meanings of single words as well as their position within the structure of a ditty or a story. From the smithies of three 20th century scholars writing about metaphor I have also borrowed tools to attempt to enrich the analysis of metaphoric kennings. I.A. Richards provided the concepts of "tenor" and "vehicle", Max Black "focus" and "frame" and Paul Ricoeur supplied "tension".

Metaphor, in Richards' opinion, is created by the concurrence of "tenor" and "vehicle". He never actually defined these concepts, but broadly speaking, an idea that forms when metaphoric word or words are understood literally is the vehicle, the tenor, however, being the idea the vehicle transports into the readers view to understand in context (Richards 1936:93-96 and *passim*).

Black built on and improved Richards' design, maintaining that what made a metaphor was an assertion in its entirety where the attention was being focused on at least one word which was used metaphorically. Instead of the words „tenor“ and „vehicle“, he therefore preferred „focus“ and „frame“, focus being the metaphoric word (or the metaphoric words) itself and frame the rest of the assertion (Black 1962:27-28 and *passim*). The concept of frame will not be strictly followed, on one hand I shall presume the frame of the ditty, on the other the frame of the prose.

In Ricoeur's speculations about metaphor he emphasised „tension“ (Ricoeur 1977:247). Imitating his manner we can assume the significance of four different kinds of tension in metaphoric kennings:

1. tension within the kenning: tension between its metaphoric and non-metaphoric segment(s).
2. tension between tenor and vehicle within the statement, between the focus and the frame of the ditty.
3. tension between the statement and the prose: between the focus and the frame of the prose.
4. tension between the different interpretations offered by the text.

Although I use the concepts of these 20th century scholars, I of course continue to view metaphoric kennings as signs in their medieval context.

II

The first time we hear from Gísli Súrsson the poet in the shorter version of his saga he is confronting Skeggi, Þórdís' suitor in a duel on the Norwegian isle *Saxa*. Precisely as his first words are a *brigsli* – words of blame – about the masculinity of his brother Þorkell¹ – so is his

¹ See Bergljót Sofía Kristjánsdóttir. 2001. „Hinn sekí túlkandi. Um tákn, túlkun og sekí í styttri gerð Gísla sögu Súrsonar.“ *Gripa* XII:10.

very first poetry *níð*, lampoon. His tendency to use signs for pernicious purposes, at least in his youth, is thus emphasised right from the start.

The story of the dealings between Skeggi and Gísli form part of the saga's escalating conflict from Gísli's first manslaughter until his and his family's flight from Norway. One of its most intriguing elements, however, is how it deepens the characterisation of the brothers Gísli and Þorkell and awakens diverse thoughts about the human responsibility of interpretation.

Skeggi being a kinsman of Bárður the man Gísli killed, Þorkell seeks his aid as he leaves home for the first time. According to the saga Þorkell importunes him "to avenge Bárður [...] but take Þórdís as his wife".² It is up to the reader to envisage precisely where Þorkell wishes the retribution to strike. On the other hand it is obvious to the reader that Skeggi, for the most part, pays heed to his advice. He proposes to Þórdís and when rejected challenges a young man, Kolbjörn of Hella to a duel. The explanation given for this turn of events is Skeggi's belief that Kolbjörn caused the refusal. This kindles several questions, e.g. did Þorkell and Skeggi disagree or did Skeggi choose to avenge himself on Kolbjörn on Þorkell's exhortation whose purpose would then have been to spare his own kinsmen.

It is *said* that Kolbjörn and Þórdís were having an affair. The wording of the tale of the gossip about Kolbjörn reminds us of the former sayings about Bárður. Yet, there is a significant difference:

Some said that Bárður was seducing Þórdís Þorbjarnardóttir.

Það töluðu sumir menn að Bárður fyllði Þórdísi Þorbjarnardóttur.

[...]

It was said that there was a liaison between Kolbjörn and Þórdís Þorbjarnardóttir.

Það var talað að Kolbjörn væri í þingum við Þórdísi Þorbjarnardóttur." (5, My italics BSK).

In the former sentence Bárður is the active offender, the agent of the negative transitive verb *að fylla* (to persuade or entice into a sexual relationship) and Þórdís its victim. In the latter, however, a non-transitive verb and prepositional phrase is used *að vera í þingum við*, (to be in a relationship, a sexual liaison). The phrasing describes a condition, the word *þing* even evoking thoughts of society's law and order. Furthermore, the beginnings of the two sentences, taken together, imply that certain individuals thought less of Bárður than Kolbjörn. It is clear that the attitude of the brothers Súrssynir to the two youths differ markedly. Þorkell supports Bárður, "is in this with him", "er í bragði með honum" (5), but there is no indication that he dislikes Skeggi challenging Kolbjörn. Gísli, who killed Bárður swiftly and without hesitation, is, however, surprisingly tolerant towards Kolbjörn. He does him no harm whatsoever, although he is unwilling to fight to win Þórdís; he goes no further than giving him a piece of his mind – and does the challenging himself. The readers are left with plenty to think about. They may consider that gossip, seduction and honour depend indeed on interpretation; that Gísli and Þorkell are the interpreters of honour and on their interpretation depends who lives and who dies.

The ditties *darting* between Gísli and Skeggi and their short combat are firmly underpinned. We are told that when Skeggi arrives at the duelling point he "announces the rules of duel and marks out the field" ("segir upp hólmgöngulög og haslar völl" (6)), but can not see Kolbjörn or any other opponent. He therefore spurs his carpenter on to make *trénið*,

² The Icelandic text is as follows: „að hefna Bárðar [...] en ganga að eiga Þórdísi“ (*Gísla saga Súrssonar* 1999:5) From now on this edition will only be cited in the main text with pagination in brackets.

scorn-pole purporting to be Gísli and Kolbjörn engaging in sexual intercourse; Gísli in the 'male' role and Kolbjörn the 'female'. For a moment this might perhaps stop in their tracts readers who realize Gísli's determination to fight. But the story continues. Gísli hears Skeggi's words and comes forward with considerable bravado:

Your farmhands must have more useful things to do, behold a man who defies you.

Annað munu húskarlar þínir vinna þarfara og máttu hér þann sjá er þorir að berjast við þig. (6)

The duelists then immediately start, both presumably highly agitated; Gísli has barely escaped being defamed (*níddur*) – and perhaps also suspects Skeggi to be in league with Þorkell, and Skeggi is unable to revenge himself on Gísli as he intended and is equally unable to rejoice in a victory that a moment ago seemed his for the taking. But Skeggi still has tricks up his sleeve. His words are no less wounding than his weapons. According to the saga:

Skeggi has a sword called Warflame, and he swings it at Gísli so that it makes a loud whistle; then says Skeggi:

'Warflame whistled,
Wild sport for Saxa.' (*The Saga of Gísli* 1963, 4)

Skeggi hefir sverð það er Gunnlogi hét og höggur með því til Gísla og gall við hátt. Þá mælti Skeggi:

Gall Gunnlogi,
gaman var Söxu. (6)

Skeggi's ditty is complex. Considering „Gunnlogi“ (Battletorch, warflame) a proper noun it could mean: The weapon Gunnlogi roared, the surroundings, the isle Saxa is amused. If we, on the other hand, assume *gunnlogi* to be a common noun, more precisely a metaphoric kenning (gunn (valkyrie: battle) logi (fire): sword) shapes may start shifting. It is also useful to keep it in mind that in Icelandic medieval literature the sword sometimes is phallic symbol (cf. *Grettis saga* 1994:183). If we in this context scrutinise the verb *ad gella* (sing, roar) and the double frame of the metaphor – on the one hand the paragraph/ditty; on the other the prose above it – we can interpret Skeggi's words as a reply to Gísli's former bluster meaning: 'böllur (phallus) (Gísli) roared, the surroundings (Saxa) were amused'. In this case *gunnlogi* would not only be a metaphoric kenning of sword (i.e. a phallic symbol) but simultaneously what in rhetoric is called *pars pro toto*.

The word *Saxa* has caused much speculation not least because of not being a known place name in the Norway of reality. Therefore, some have assumed it to symbolise a weapon in the 'original' version of the saga. In his book *Norrønt nid* Meulengracht Sørensen – following in the footsteps of Anne Holtmark (1951) – believed that *Saxa* was originally used about Gísli's weapon and at a much later date transferred as a name to the island where Skeggi lives. Meulengracht Sørensen did also point out that the word "gaman" (amusement, delight), is a sexual innuendo on Skeggi's part and connected to Gísli's feminised weapon is a hint: the duel is like a sexual act where Gísli is the woman (Meulengracht Sørensen 1980:72-74).

If the purpose is to attempt an understanding of the *shorter* version of the saga of Gísli as it stands, following Meulengracht Sørensen's example in explaining the word *Saxa* is not quite sufficient. It may be useful to consider the meaning and use of the word in Icelandic. Doing so reveals among other things its existence as a placename not only of an island but also of a 'stone with a hole in it', as per this description in the "Register of Placenames":

Saxa is at the head of Saxabay. It is a circular opening in the rock in front of which is a stonebridge, ca 2 m in width [...]

(„Saxa er í botni Söxuvoga. Það er hringlaga gat uppúr klettunum. Fyrir framan þetta gat liggur steinbrú, ca. 2 m á breidd [...]“³)

Conferring this meaning on the word, the ditty not only becomes a crude reply to Gíslí's words as it relates to Skeggi's sword. It also becomes a vile lampoon of Gíslí's masculinity by hinting at his sexual practises and most likely also by connecting his symbol of masculinity (sword = phallus) to a feminine figure, a valkyrie. The lampoon is all the cruder as the ditty works as a fairly accurate description of sexual orgasm. The standardised ideas carrying the swordkenning *gunnlogi* (valkyrie/battle-fire) gain a new meaning connected to sexuality and physical function, not to mention how the verb *að gella* gains a second wind of meaning. The tension between tenor and vehicle, focus and frame multiplies, Skeggi's sword roars and simultaneously Gíslí and his phallus. It is noteworthy how a precise choice of words, different word formations and opposites serve the ditty's meaning. The composite word *gunnlogi*, perfectly at home in the poetic language of scaldic poetry and may therefore evoke images of gleaming armour and great battles, meets the simple word *Saxa*, kin to a plain, homely weapon/tool (sax/scissors) and simple housework (i.e. *saxa* (chop, mince) vegetables) simultaneously implying flesh colliding with stone – an attempt to throw doubt on Gíslí's masculinity, to „mince' it.

In old Norwegian as well as in Icelandic Commonwealth laws, *níð* whether sculpted in wood *trénið* (scorn-pole) or verbal/written, *tungunið* (lampoon), carried heavy penalty (NGL:57; Grágás: 273-74). It is therefore Gíslí's right to take legal action against Skeggi. His choice, however, is to pay him back in kind. It is hardly surprising to find that suggestive poetry comes easy to him. He is in fact so nimble that he seems to triumph as he, unlike Skeggi simultaneously strikes with weapon and words.⁴

Gíslí struck back at him with a halberd and took off the point of his shield and one of his legs, and he said:

'Hack went the halberd
Hewed down Skeggi.'

Skeggi bought himself off from the duel and from then on went on a wooden leg. (*The Saga of Gíslí* 1963, 4)

Gíslí hjó í móti með höggspjóti og af sporðinn skildinum og af honum fótinn og mælti:

Hrökk [H]ræfrakki,
hjó eg til Skeggja.

Skeggi leysti sig af hólni og gekk ávallt við tréfót síðan. (6)⁵

In this ditty Gíslí's method is much the same as Skeggi's, the topic being his opponent's masculinity. He pretends the subject matter is the duel, but brandishes the verb *hrökkva* that can mean both 'to move swiftly', 'to recoil' or 'fall back' (cf. Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989:384; OGNŠ: 74-75; Lexicon Poeticum:290) – as well as using the name of a sword "[H]ræfrakki", known from *þular* (Edda II:619), carrying several possible interpretations.

We are familiar with the word "frakka" from *þular* meaning 'javelin', maybe a Frankish one (Edda I:570) The word *frakki* on the other hand is only known in its singular form in composite words such as *ryðfrakki* and the plural in the meaning 'frankar' (Franks). *Frakki* has, therefore, variously been thought to mean 'a French sword' (Holtmark 1951:27)

³ I turned to Svavar Sigmundsson, the Director of the Icelandic Institute of Placenames. He found this information and kindly sent me.

⁴ „Þá“ in the sentence „Þá mælti Skeggi“ suggests that Skeggi composes his ditty after he strikes with the sword.

or 'Frankish javelin', although some have thought it simply meant 'a French weapon' (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989:204). Taking the last interpretation as our starting point a similar ambiguity appears in Gísli's and Skeggi's ditty. On the one hand Gísli speaks of his own weapon, saying something like: 'My spear moved swiftly and hotly, I struck at Skeggi'; on the other hand he speaks of Skeggi's sword/phallus. It is possible to explain the composite word *hræfrakki* by taking into consideration that *hræ* (carcass, carrion), in old Icelandic could mean 'the remains of something that has lost its use' (cf. OGNS:71). Keeping that in mind Gísli could simultaneously be saying 'Skeggi's sword recoiled, I struck at him' and 'The leavings of Skeggi's symbol of masculinity flinched, I struck at him'. There is every reason, in fact, to understand the prose as meaning that Gísli had struck more than only the foot from under his opponent so that 'the leavings' had actually fallen off *hrokkið* af. The wording "af sporðinn skildinum og af honum fótinn" ("the tail of the shield and his leg off") where the shield with its tail and the man and his foot almost become one, supports such an interpretation.

If so, Gísli must be considered more than vicious; it does not suffice him to lampoon his opponent's masculinity in verbal signs, he must literally cut his primary sign of masculinity off his body. Doing so he demonstrates symbolically his superiority over Skeggi and in fact behaves in the manner of several chieftains in medieval Icelandic king and contemporary sagas – who blind and castrate their opponents to make their vulnerability and impotence physically obvious (see: Snorri Sturluson 1991:324; Sturlunga saga I 1988:381).

Gísli Súrsson is a pagan when he and Skeggi duel and hurl lampoon at each other. Later in the saga after he has given up pagan rites he has a similar confrontation with his brother-in-law Þorgrímur goði where ditties serve as weapons. That detail should be quite informative in determining his attitude to religion and signs and how sincere his "conversion" was originally.

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