

THE STRUCTURE OF EYRBYGGJA SAGA

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It is the general opinion of scholars that Eyrbyggja saga is more "episodic" than any other of the Family Sagas; and the opinion of some, that it is poorly constructed as well.¹

Undeniably, the saga is exceedingly multifarious; which has caused scholars to suspect that we do not have it in its original (more perfect?) condition. Thus, typical of nineteenth-century "higher criticism," Guðbrandur Vigfússon held that a considerable number of episodes are interpolated. Likewise Finnur Jónsson. But neither could give tangible reasons for so thinking. Reading the chapters singled out by them as interpolations, and comparing them with the remainder of the saga, one cannot detect any significant difference in attitude or style.

Eiríkur Magnússon,² on the other hand, thought that the saga was not brought to completion by its author "because it leaves the last eighteen years of Snorri's life a perfect blank," and that such bulky episodes as those of the Fróðá marvels and of the finding of Björn Breidvíkingakappi in the far West were added to make up for this lack.

Indeed, the rather fragmentary treatment of Snorri's later life and the important events in which he played a chief role, as against the elaboration of comparatively trivial ones, has always struck readers of the saga. Thus Sigfús Blöndal,³ after emphasizing that Snorri goði was more written about than any of his Icelandic contemporaries,

¹ The most extreme opinion on both aspects is voiced by G. Turville-Petre (*Origins of Icelandic Literature*, 1953, p. 242): "[Eyrbyggja] has none of those excellencies of construction which are admired in many sagas. It is a series of scenes and stories which follow the disordered course of life itself." Similarly Sigurður Nordal, *Sagalitteraturen*, 1953, p. 247. Cf. also K. Maurer, *Germania*, x (1865), 493; *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. H. Gering, 1897, p. XIV; Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske Litteraturs Historie*, 2nd ed., II, 426 f. (his short *Den islandske Litteraturs Historie* [1907], p. 244 is far more radical in assuming episodes); W. A. Craigie, *The Icelandic Sagas* (1913), p. 61; F. Niedner, Introduction to his translation, *Thule* series VII (1920), p. 4; G. N. Garmonsway, *Sagabook of the Viking Society*, XII (1937-45), 81 f.; J. de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, II (1942), 313. Most moderate, E. Mogk, *Geschichte der norwegisch-isländischen Literatur* (1904), p. 752, who admits the existence of episodes but maintains that we have the saga in essentially its original form.

² Introduction to his translation in the *Saga Library*, II (1892), XXIX.

³ *Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson* (1928), pp. 15-28.

and in fact was about the most important personage of his times, holds that a saga about him should have been *ítarlig og mikil*, but that large portions of the saga about him were lost at an early time and that only the first 47 chapters of it are handed down to us intact; that the lacunae in the latter part were bridged by briefly worded accounts of him, sometimes by mere references to other sagas; and that the last words of the present saga, furnishing the title, were written only after the chief portions of the chapters dealing with Snorri's later life were lost.

All this is highly suppositional; and Blöndal might not have advanced this opinion if he had heeded the cautious words of Konrad Maurer,⁴ who in his searching analysis of Vigfússon's edition had pointed out that the author, without regard to compositional perfection, had the purpose of fixing on parchment, as completely as he was able to, only those traditions of his region which were known to him, to the exclusion of such as were not already familiar to his public from other sagas. But additionally one might ask how it conceivably could have happened that precisely those portions dealing with the most prominent personage in the saga were lost. The probabilities are wholly against that.

Supposing then, following the sense of Maurer and Einar, and dispensing with supercritical hypotheses, we assume that we have the saga essentially as it was written down by the author, let us analyze its contents, scrutinizing its arrangement in order to see whether it really is as episodic and loosely constructed as most students have been inclined to think.

As a rule, the Family Sagas follow a linear construction of one thing after, or leading to, another; with no important or extensive matter intervening between cause and effect, and events chronologically following one another. Not so *Eyrbyggja*. It is not that we can point out any serious fault in the sequence of events in time or that there is poor causal connection. On the contrary. But these fundamental elements of realism are in large measure not evident to us, whether by the ineptitude, as is generally thought, or, as I hope to bring out, by the unobtrusive but conscious art, of the narrator.

After the usual introduction, dealing with the events leading to the emigration to Iceland, the first settlers and their institutions, we are told (chs. 15–16) of the somewhat questionable affair of Gunnlaug, the son of Thorbjörn the Stout. He is described as *námgjarn*

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 493. Similarly Einar Ól. Sveinsson, in his Introduction to the *Fornritafélag* ed., pp. XXXVIII f.

and is in the habit of visiting both Geirríðr, the sister of the noble Arnketil, and a certain widow, Katla, both of whom are *margkunnig*, in order to learn their secrets. Needless to say, these dames are jealous of one another. One time, after passing the day with Geirríðr, Gunnlaug is warned by her not to return home that night. He leaves, nevertheless, and is found next morning, unconscious, bruised and bloody all over. Katla's son, Odd, thereupon accuses Geirríðr of having "ridden" him; and the matter is brought before the Thorsness Assembly by Thorbjörn, who is aided in his suit by his kinsman Snorri. Geirríðr is defended by her brother, Arnketil, and acquitted. Call this action so far *A*.

Now, in the ordinary course of events as sagas go, Arnketil would at once avenge himself, or at least plan to do so, on informer and accusers. Instead, in this case, the author lets intervene⁶ the long chapters 18 and 19 which deal with the important and tragic events leading to Thorbjörn's death at the hand of Thórarin, Geirríðr's son; and subsequently with Thórarin's anxious appeals to his kinsmen for help to avoid Snorri's vengeance sure to follow; and we are tense with wonder how this can be done against such a powerful opponent. Call this action *B*.

But again the author puts us off, for the present, and instead reverts to action *A*, telling us in chapter 20 how Arnketil and Thórarin carry out their revenge on the sorceress Katla and her son Odd. They are both put to death. Only when this is accomplished do we hear that Thórarin chooses to leave the country, rather than risk a dangerous lawsuit which would ruin him financially, even if the defense were successful (ch. 21) (*B*). In other words, just as in Skaldic verse sentences, here two actions are skilfully interwoven (*A B A B*) in this considerable segment of the saga.

Another, and even more telling instance of an interlacing of narrative strands: there is an altercation (ch. 23) between a shepherd of Snorri's and one Björn, a relative of Vigfús, one of Snorri's neighbors. The shepherd is knocked unconscious; whereupon Már, a kinsman of Snorri's, inflicts a severe wound on the aggressor. Before the court at the Thorsness Assembly, matters are settled—to the disadvantage of Vigfús, an overbearing man. And we sense that he is pondering revenge on Snorri. Call this action *C*.

⁶ If indeed the short chapter 17, dealing with the bloody fight between Illugi and Thorgrím and their adherents, is episodic, it may be because of the author's having had two stanzas of Odd skáld available. Moreover it serves to give an example of Snorri's skill as an intermediary—always a feather in the cap of a rising leader—and so is in order.

Instead of revenge being carried out immediately—or at least, while the audience or the practiced reader of sagas uneasily has this in mind as an unsettled affair—we are told briefly about Eric the Red's finding and settling Greenland (ch. 24); and at length, about Thórarin's and his kinsman Vermund's fleeing the country (action *B* again), of the latter's stay with Earl Hákon, and the earl's gift to him of two berserkers. And in the same chapter we learn of Vermund's foisting these troublesome men on his brother, Styr (action *D*). And now we are greatly interested in how Styr will fare with these berserkers. However, we are left in suspense about this while the saga reverts to the disgruntled Vigfús (of action *C*), who inveigles a slave of his into murdering Snorri, and we are told how he fails and how Snorri instantly retaliates by moving on Vigfús and slaying him (ch. 26). In the next chapter (27) Vigfús' widow, Thorgerðr, with Arnketil's help, exacts heavy retribution from Snorri, which ends this episode. Only then does the story revert to action *D*, and we read how Styr rids himself of the berserkers by killing them in their bath and incidentally allies himself with Snorri. So here again we have interweaving, on the pattern *C B D C D*. There is no retaliation in this case, and Thorgerðr, Vermund, and Thórarin are "out of the saga," so all these actions are terminated.

The next case of intertwined episodes is even more intricate, involving most of the remaining two-thirds of the saga—and will be difficult to follow without having the saga before one. Snorri marries off his half-sister Thuríðr, the widow of Thorbjǫrn (of action *B*), whose loss she bears very nicely, especially since, to the mortification of her rather feckless husband, she is carrying on a protracted intimate affair with the gallant Bjǫrn of Breiðavík. Snorri manages to get Bjǫrn to leave the country for three years (ch. 29), but he is not out of the saga. Let us call this action *E*.

Meanwhile, in the long and eventful chapters 30 to 34, we are told of the machinations (too involved to go into here) of that malevolent curmudgeon, old Thórólf Lamefoot, and how he dies, probably of a stroke, after getting his noble son Arnketil still further involved with Snorri, and how the old man spooks dangerously after his interment. Call this complex action *F*.

After Thórólf's ghost is laid, for the nonce, by reburial, the rivalry between Arnketil and Snorri goes from bad to worse (chs. 35–36), until Arnketil finally is slain by Snorri and his foster brothers (ch. 37). Snorri himself comes off lightly in the following suit; but one of his foster brothers, Thórleif, a hothead, is exiled for three years (ch. 38).

On the journey abroad, this Thórleif gets embroiled with Arnbjörn, the brother of Björn of action *E* (let this be action *G*). Thórleif postpones his revenge till he, Björn, and Arnbjörn return to Iceland (chs. 39, 40). There, Björn promptly resumes his dalliance with Thuríðr (action *E*), and Thórleif and his brothers unsuccessfully attempt to overcome Arnbjörn in his house (ch. 42, action *G* again), then send out a slave to murder one of the Breiðvíkings (ch. 43). The attempt fails and leads to the battles of the Alptafjorð and the Vigrafjorð between the Thorbrandssons and the Breiðvíkings (chs. 44, 45). The two parties are reconciled (ch. 46), and we revert to action *E*, to wit, Snorri's trying to slay Björn as the latter refuses to break off his affair with Thuríðr. Snorri for once is outmaneuvered, but Björn voluntarily consents to leave the country for an indefinite time (ch. 47)—but still he is not yet out of the saga!

Next, after brief chapters on Christianity coming to Iceland and the sons of Thorbrand emigrating to Greenland (chs. 48, 49), there follows the long episode of the Fróða marvels, with the renewed spooking of Thórólf Lamefoot (action *F* again), the hauntings of drowned Thórodd and his crew and of Thorgunna. All these ghosts are finally laid (chs. 50–55), though not all for keeps. Then there are a number of chapters on Óspak's piratical adventures and Snorri's expedition against him. And then, after we have almost forgotten all about Thórólf Lamefoot, he spooks still again (action *F*), even though burned to ashes, and in the bull Glæsir takes final revenge on the man who lives on his land. Surprisingly, and quite romantically, Björn, the lover of Thuríðr (action *E*) who is supposed to have perished at sea, is discovered by storm-driven Icelanders as a great chieftain in Hvítramannaland. So, to sum up, in this major part of Eyrbyggja we have the sequence *B E F G E G E F E*.

Unless thus schematized, all these involutions would be hard for us to follow. The modern reader, with a neatly printed text before him, can, to be sure, leaf back at his leisure to disentangle the skein of interbraided events. But one marvels at the mental alertness of Icelandic listeners, ancient and modern, who could do this⁶ and, seeks refuge in the rather lame consideration that, after all, listening, like intelligent reading, is an art which can be acquired; also, that Ice-

⁶ A good example of this attentiveness counted upon by the saga narrator—and many could be adduced—is found in the prediction by the witch Katla before she is stoned (ch. 20), that Arnkel will have worse trouble from his father than her good-for-nothing son Odd has from her; which comes true with a vengeance, but many chapters later, when we have all but forgotten the incident.

landers heard these stories over and over again as our forebears heard the Biblical stories read to them, day in and day out. Even so, the sagas, and more especially this one, cannot be read quasi-passively, as can a unilateral story or a modern novel, but require a certain amount of co-operation on the part of the reader which, as *exempla docent*, our scholars have not shown in this instance. But read thus, I believe we must come to the conclusion that the interbraiding, like the intercalation of sentences in Skaldic poetry, is hardly fortuitous; rather, it shows conscious planning on the part of an author who has in mind an audience that is constantly on the *qui vive* and able to follow this method of presentation. He does not merely string along the traditions of his countryside artlessly—popular tradition does just that—but arranges them to suit his purpose.

Esthetically, it would seem that this technique of interbraiding several strands of action serves to create suspense, similar to the premonitions and predictions which are so frequently used in the sagas. While superficially resembling the scene technique of the drama, its effect is not dramatic at all, but, on the contrary, achieves the leisurely amplitude of the English Victorian novel.