

Eyrbyggja Saga. English

©
EYRBYGGJA SAGA

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES BY

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©



PENGUIN BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1813, Sir Walter Scott says that 'of all the various records of Icelandic history and literature, there is none more interesting than *Eyrbyggja Saga*'.¹ It is not surprising that a novelist as fascinated by the past as Scott should so respond to the world of *Eyrbyggja Saga*, which indeed is in many respects akin to that of the romantic imagination. There are antiquarian elements, such as the detailed (though largely invented) description of the temple at Thor's Ness and of the duties of a pagan priesthood; there are gothic elements, such as the eerie hauntings at Frodriver and the unquiet graves of the malevolent dead; and along with these there are violent encounters with vikings and berserks and a pervasive heroic spirit. But the author of the *Waverley Novels* must have been still more powerfully fascinated by the elaborate structure of a narrative in which the lives of many remarkable and varied individuals are set against a background of actual historical events to produce an imaginative view of history. For it must be stressed at once that although the saga often seems to be recording history, its true spirit is imaginative and interpretative, a thirteenth-century view of the past. As Magnus Magnusson remarks,

These Sagas of Icelanders . . . were written in the vernacular, in prose, and can best be described as historical novels – the first novels to be written in Europe. They were not, strictly speaking, histories; they were imaginative works of art created around an historical framework and using many different sources: written records and genealogies, traditional oral stories, earlier sagas, fragments of remembered verses uttered on special occasions. Their purpose was to

1. Sir Walter Scott, 'Abstract of the Eyrbyggja-Saga', in M. Mallet, (ed.), *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities* (Edinburgh, 1814). Our reference is to the edition of 1847, p. 517.

entertain and edify their audience, like the great novels of the nineteenth century.²

It is interesting that Scott's appraisal of *Eyrbyggja Saga* as a proto-historical novel was written at Abbotsford in 1813, one year before the publication of the first of the *Waverley Novels*. Later Scottish novelists have also borrowed from *Eyrbyggja Saga*: R. L. Stevenson in his tale *The Waif Woman*, and Eric Linklater in his enjoyable pastiche-saga, *The Men of Ness*.

On the surface, *Eyrbyggja Saga* reads like an historical record, tracing the lives of several generations from the late ninth century to the early eleventh. The narrative opens with the pagan anarchy of the Viking Age, but moves rapidly to an account of the settlement of Iceland and the beginnings of an organized society. A period of internal strain and violence, as the laws are hammered out on the lives of spirited and inflexible individuals, closes with the arrival of Christianity and the gradual establishment of the ordered civilization of medieval Iceland early in the eleventh century. Later we shall examine the artistic pattern of the saga in some detail and shall have more to say about its historical framework: at this point, however, we might generalize and say that *Eyrbyggja Saga* describes a community progressing from lawlessness to collective responsibility. But by the time the saga was written in the thirteenth century, Icelandic society was both politically and economically in decline, and so it could be seen as essentially nostalgic, reflecting pride in the past rather than in the author's own times, though that nostalgia shows no trace of sentimentality, and the past is seen as in many respects harsh and uncompromising.

The precise date and provenance of *Eyrbyggja Saga* are matters for speculation; and, as with the other Sagas of Icelanders, its author is unknown. All the same, it seems likely that it was composed not long after the middle of the thirteenth century, and quite probably at Helgafell, the focal place of the

2. Magnus Magnusson, *Iceland Saga* (London, 1987), p. 21

story. It is tempting to speculate that it may have been written in the Augustinian house founded at Helgafell in 1184 and an important intellectual centre and scriptorium right through to the end of the medieval period. A number of manuscripts still extant were written by priests who were either inmates of the house, or had been trained there. Two of the heads of the house were direct descendants of Snorri the Priest, the main figure of *Eyrbyggja Saga*: these were Thórfinn Thorgeirsson (1188–1216) and Ketil Hermundarson (1217–30). It was at Helgafell, too, that Ari Thorgilsson the Learned, Iceland's first vernacular historian, was born. There was a considerable library there of nearly 120 books around the year 1186, and towards the end of the fourteenth century about 120 books in Latin and 35 in Icelandic. It has been suggested that *Laxdæla Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga* were composed at about the same time by two members of the house at Helgafell, and that they used each other's work, for each saga shows knowledge of the other. This would explain why Helgafell becomes the focal place of *Laxdæla Saga* precisely at the point where it ceases to be that of *Eyrbyggja Saga*.³

The structure of the saga is so complicated that many readers have compared it unfavourably with *Njal's Saga*, *Gisli's Saga*, or *Grettir's Saga*, in which the hero's life is so central to the narrative that it provides a clearly defined structural core, no matter what the surrounding complexities may be.⁴ Once *Eyrbyggja Saga* is read in its own terms, rather than in terms of the organization of other, deceptively similar sagas, distinct patterns begin to emerge. These patterns display an interrelation of families and individuals in two dimensions. First

3. Late in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (Chapter 56) we are told that 'in the spring Snorri exchanged farms with Gudrun, Osvif's-daughter . . .'. *Laxdæla Saga* (Chapter 56) records Gudrun's move to Helgafell.

4. These sagas explore a central eponymous tragic figure, but *Eyrbyggja Saga* might be said to differ from them in the way that Shakespeare's tragedies differ from the great tetralogy of history plays, in which figures such as Richard II or Hotspur play potentially tragic roles, but the focus of the plays is on the land itself.

there is the linear movement from the ninth to the eleventh century, from the first settlers to their great-grandchildren. Then there are all the complex social relationships between these people living in a small community, bound by duties often arising out of marriage ties, or out of enmities caused by the grabbing of land or the killing of a kinsman. The pattern could best be illustrated by guiding the reader initially through the events of the saga and pointing out the landmarks. The saga might be broken down into eight sections, as follows:

1. *Prologue* (Chapters 1–8). This describes the rise of Harald Fine-Hair, King of Norway, and the pressure placed upon certain powerful and rebellious chieftains and landowners who are unwilling to accept Harald's rule. Under these pressures a number of them leave Norway, some going to the newly discovered, uninhabited land called Iceland. Two of these in particular are described, Thorolf Mostur-Beard and Bjorn the Easterner. Thorolf is a priest of Thor, and establishes strict rules of conduct:

Thorolf gave the name Thor's Ness to the region between Vigra Fjord and Hofsvag. On this headland is a mountain held so sacred by Thorolf that no one was allowed even to look at it without first having washed himself, and no living creature on this mountain, neither man nor beast, was to be harmed until it left of its own accord. Thorolf called this mountain Helga Fell and believed that he and his kinsmen would go into it when they died.

Thorolf used to hold all his courts on the point of the headland where Thor had come ashore, and that was where he started the district assembly. This place was so holy that he would let no one desecrate it, either with bloodshed or with excrement; and for a privy they used a special rock in the sea which they called Dritsker [literally, 'Dirt Skerry'].⁵

Bjorn's respect for the old gods is also made clear, and at this point in the narrative there is no reason to expect anything but

5. See pp. 29–30.

friendship between the descendants of these two founder-fathers, Thorolf and Bjorn the Easterner.

2. *Quarrels between Thorsnessings and Kjalleklings* (Chapter 9–28). In the next generation, however, trouble begins between the people of Thor's Ness, who are descendants of Thorolf, called the Thorsnessings, and the sons of Kjallak, Bjorn the Easterner's grandchildren. Both families have become very powerful, and family pride leads to conflict. Quarrels begin over what might appear at first sight a trivial and rather comical matter, the refusal of the Kjalleklings to go out to Dritsker to ease themselves. But the descendants of Thorolf take their attempted desecration of the holy place very seriously indeed, and tensions build up, in spite of efforts at peacemaking, to a series of clashes. In due course a battle is fought between the followers of Thorarin the Black (related by marriage to the Kjalleklings) and Thorbjorn the Stout (related by marriage to Snorri the Priest, descendant of Thorolf Mostur-Beard). Once again the basis of the quarrel, the alleged theft of some horses, hardly seems to justify the bitterness of feelings and the killings that follow. But the very triviality of the surface causes of conflict only serves to emphasize the undercurrents of unreasoning pride and smouldering neurotic violence. This particular sequence of quarrels slowly resolves itself, mainly as a result of the skilful manoeuvrings of Snorri, who ends up giving advice and aid over two troublesome berserks belonging to Styr, one of the leading men of the Kjallekling clan. The berserks are killed; Snorri marries Styr's-daughter; Thorarin the Black goes overseas and is, we are told, 'now out of the story'. This, however, is only a lull, and a new set of tensions has already begun to develop, to explode into violence in the next part of the story. Indeed, the enmity between the descendants of Thorolf and those of Bjorn rears up from under the surface of many a subsequent conflict.

3. *The Conflict between Snorri and Arnkel* (Chapters 29–38).

Arnel is the virtuous but strong-minded son of a malicious viking settler, Thorolf Twist-Foot, and, like Snorri, a great man and a temple priest. Since he and Snorri are the two greatest men in the district, people with lawsuits naturally come to them for guidance and support. The seeds of conflict have earlier been sown over Snorri's killing of a man called Vigfus. With the support of the Kjalleklings, Arnel had taken up the case against Snorri on behalf of Vigfus's kin. Now once again it seems that pride and honour will not allow two cocks to crow in the same district. Arnel had inherited the fighting qualities of his viking father, without his malice, for he also has the generosity of spirit shown by his grandmother Geirrid:

She built a hall right across the main road, and every traveller was expected to pass through it. In the hall stood a table always laden with food, which all were welcome to share, and for this people thought her the finest of women.⁶

It is inevitable that a man as great-hearted and as firm-minded as Arnel should come into conflict with the cunning and ambivalent Snorri, about whom we shall have more to say in due course. In his purity of motive and his strength of purpose, Arnel is what Snorri is to become in the later stages of the narrative. Tensions culminate in the heroic last stand of Arnel, alone against Snorri and his blood-brothers, the trouble-making Thorbrandssons. Arnel is killed, but his death is lamented as a great loss, and as an indication of what is wrong with this society:

Arnel was mourned by everyone, for of all men in pagan times he was the most gifted. He was remarkably shrewd in judgement, good-tempered, kind-hearted, brave, honest, and moderate. He came out on top in every lawsuit, no matter with whom he had to deal, which explains why people were so envious of him, as is shown by the way he met his death.⁷

6. See p. 33.

7. See pp. 100-102.

Since Arnel leaves no male heir to take legal action over his killing, Snorri gets off very lightly. That the death of a man as outstanding as Arnel should be so neglected in law is seen as a social disgrace, and the author makes the point that in consequence the law was changed. So we are made aware of the growing social responsibility underlying all the violence and pride. However, another sequence has been completed, Arnel is dead, and Snorri's power continues to increase.

4. *Snorri and the Thorbrandssons versus Bjorn and the Thorlakssons* (Chapters 39-48). Yet another set of enmities has been developing during the previous sequence of events. Snorri's blood-brothers, the Thorbrandssons, who aided him in the attack on Arnel, are now in conflict with a group called the Thorlakssons, who are living at Eyr. Snorri is also at odds with a man from Breidavik, Bjorn Asbrandsson, who has been having an affair with Snorri's married sister Thurid. It is generally known, though apparently not talked about, that Thurid's son, Kjartan, is the child of Bjorn, not of her husband Thorodd. In his disgrace, Thorodd has appealed to Snorri for help, so that now these new conflicting groups are ranged against one another. The surface causes of tension are as usual quite trivial - a blow with a hot porridge-ladle, a piece of turf thrown in a game - but the cuckolding of Thorodd sharpens the tension; Snorri secretly sends a slave on a mission to kill one of the men of Breidavik; Bjorn and his brother catch and kill the slave; and once more violence breaks out. There are two major battles, Alfta Fjord and Vigra Fjord, and the strain which is being put on society is clearly marked by the dilemma of Styr, who is not only a Kjallekling, related to the Thorlakssons, and so tied by blood to Snorri's enemies, but is also Snorri's father-in-law, and indebted to him for help given against the troublesome berserks. At the Battle of Alfta Fjord, Styr is fighting on the side of his kinsmen the Thorlakssons against Snorri. But when Snorri's twelve-year-old son (and so Styr's

own grandson) is wounded, Snorri exaggerates, telling Styr that the boy is dying:

[Styr] claimed the first victim when he killed a man on Snorri's, his own son-in-law's, side. Snorri saw it happen. 'Is this how you avenge your grandson Thorodd,' he asked, 'when he's dying of the wound Steinthor gave him? You're no better than a traitor!'

'I can soon make it up to you,' said Styr, and with that he changed sides. He joined Snorri with all his followers, and the next man he killed was one of Steinthor's.⁸

Yet again the author draws attention to the enormous pressure these conflicts are placing on society. In due course, peace terms are agreed – 'The killings by Styr, one on each side, cancelled each other out,' we are told – but the matter of Bjorn's affair with Thurid is still to be settled. In a brilliant dramatic episode Snorri sets out to kill Bjorn, dressed in the blue cloak characteristically worn by the killer in the sagas:

Bjorn watched the riders coming down from the moor into the meadow and recognized them at once, with Snorri the Priest in the lead wearing a blue cloak. Then Bjorn made a daring move. He picked up the knife and walked straight towards them. When he got to Snorri, he took hold of his cloak-sleeve with one hand and pointed the knife right at Snorri's chest with the other, ready to drive it home directly. He greeted them, and Snorri returned his greeting, but Mar lost his nerve when he saw how easily Bjorn could stab Snorri if anyone tried to rush him. Bjorn walked them on their way and asked the news, without relaxing the firm grip he had on Snorri.⁹

Still, Snorri gets his way without violence, for he manages to persuade Bjorn to leave Iceland; and so Bjorn is to all intents 'out of the story', though he is to reappear right at the end of the narrative in a brief, mysterious episode set in an unknown land across the sea.

8. See pp. 117–18.

9. See p. 126.

5. *Christianity and the Ghosts* (Chapters 49–55). Christianity now reaches Iceland, and the mode of the story undergoes certain changes. It is Snorri, lawyer, warrior, killer, priest of Thor, who now does more than anyone to persuade the Icelanders to embrace Christianity. There is an entertaining episode in which two women briefly take a central place in the story: Thorgunna, a rich, middle-aged immigrant from the Hebrides, and Thurid, Bjorn's mistress and Snorri's sister, who has taken a liking to Thorgunna's fine clothes and splendid bed-furnishings. But the tone of the episode grows increasingly ominous as Thorgunna's death introduces a series of hauntings which have been hinted at earlier in the death and burial of Arnkel's evil-hearted viking father, Thorolf Twist-Foot. Now the ghosts of old Iceland take the centre of the stage, confronting the new religion. There are a number of echoes from the pagan past; Thorodd and the drowned men who visit the Christmas home-fires of Frodriver will remind the reader of the fires and feasting of the drowned Thorstein the Cod-Biter and his men inside the holy mountain of Helga Fell early on in the story.¹⁰ But Snorri gives advice, and the ghosts are banished by a significant combination, the old law and the new religion. First of all the ghosts are summoned to a 'door-court' and leave reluctantly when they are found legally guilty of trespassing. Then prayers are said, holy water is sprinkled, and the land is disinfected of its unholy past. But there is another element of the pagan past which has to be exorcized along with the ghosts, and that is the world of the vikings, the violence and crime that have bedevilled society's struggle towards order. This is the subject of the next episode.

6. *Snorri against Ospak and the Vikings* (Chapters 56–62). A viking called Ospak begins to raid and kill, grabbing loot wherever he and his men can lay hands on it, and causing havoc in the farming community, where people are neither

10. See p. 38.

powerful enough nor violent enough to defend themselves effectively against this arbitrary onslaught from the past. At first Snorri, characteristically, does little but wait – 'he let people talk' – but the crafty lawyer and killer has been undergoing a slow change towards social responsibility. He now acts on behalf of society against lawlessness, leading the farmers in battle against the outlaws, killing their leaders and coming to terms with the rest.

7. *Echoes from the Past* (Chapters 63–4). The scene is set for the dying cadences of the narrative, remembrances of the past as it fades with a distant rumble of the ancient thunder. The blackened, uncorrupted corpse of the villainous Thorolf Twist-Foot rises from his grave, and is the last of the ghosts to be laid, taking with him Thorodd Thorbrandsson, another old trouble-maker, a survivor of the Battle of Vigra Fjord and one of Snorri's companions in the killing of Thorolf Twist-Foot's son, the noble Arnkel. As Thorolf's spirit, in the form of a demonic bull, takes the life of the farmer Thorodd and vanishes for ever into a swamp, remote echoes of jealousy and violence fade from the narrative. An entirely new figure, Gudleif, meets a mysterious old chieftain in a strange, undefined country where his ship has been driven in a storm, and it turns out that this is none other than Bjorn, the lover of Thurid and father of Kjartan. But he will not declare his name openly, insists that no one must ever visit him – indeed they cannot, for the land where he lives is never precisely located – and vanishes from the naturalistic part of the narrative just as Thorolf's ghost has vanished from the supernaturalistic.

8. *Epilogue* (Chapter 65). The narrative from which Snorri has emerged as the principal figure, illustrative of the best and the worst, growing in stature throughout the story, ends with the listing of his kin, his sons, his daughters, their children, and the farms on which they live. But the bones of the dead no longer rise to create trouble amongst the living:

Snorri the Priest died at Tongue in Sælingsdale a year after the killing of King Olaf the Saint, and was buried at the church he himself had built. When the graveyard there was changed, his bones were removed to the site of the present church. Gudny, Bodvar's-daughter, was present, the mother of the Sturlusons, Snorri, Thord, and Sighvat, and she said that Snorri the Priest's bones were those of a man of average height, not very tall. She also said that the bones of Snorri's uncle, Bork the Stout, had been dug up and that they were exceptionally big. The bones of old Thordis, Sur's-daughter, were dug up too, and Gudny said they were those of a small woman, and black as if they had been singed. All these bones were buried again at the place where the church now stands.¹¹

Snorri has been the outstanding, most ambivalent figure in the story. His very name means 'turbulent' and is given him in place of his original name Thorgrim because he is 'a very difficult child'. He is born in violence, for only a few days before his birth, his father is killed in the course of a vendetta by Gisli, the hero of *Gisli's Saga*. Snorri's mother Thordis marries his father's brother, Bork, and as in the story of Hamlet there are further tensions here. Snorri takes sides with his mother against his stepfather, and indeed husband and wife are locked in conflict, for Gisli, the killer of Snorri's father, is also the brother of Thordis, his mother, and she, like her son, is torn between conflicting duties. Snorri exhibits contradictory impulses throughout his life. He can fight bravely and honourably, but he is also capable of sending a criminal to kill his enemy by stealth. He is a peacemaker one moment, a man of blood the next. The narrator regularly speculates on Snorri's motives: at one point, when Snorri is making peace, the narrator adds that people believe Snorri only did so because he saw distant reinforcements on the way to join his opponents. The Thorbrandssons send a slave, Egil, to kill Bjorn and his brother, but the narrator adds that 'some people think Snorri the Priest was behind the plot.' Snorri is a pagan priest, yet as we have said, he does more than anyone to persuade the Icelanders to embrace Christianity. Though he emerges from

11. See pp. 165–6.

the tale as a distinct personality, little about that personality is unambiguous, as the narrator suggests in this description of Snorri:

Snorri was of medium height and rather slight build, a handsome, regular-featured man with a fair complexion, flaxen hair, and a reddish beard. He was usually even-tempered, and it was hard to tell whether he was pleased or not. He was a very shrewd man with unusual foresight, a long memory, and a taste for vengeance. To his friends he gave good counsel, but his enemies learned to fear the advice he gave. As Snorri was now in charge of the temple he was called Snorri the Priest. He became a man of great power, and some people envied him bitterly. . . .¹²

In fact, he is the very epitome both of the stresses within early Icelandic society, and of its growth from lawlessness to order and discipline. To Walter Scott, Snorri was the most fascinating figure in the most fascinating of sagas:

That such a character, partaking more of the juriconsult or statesman than of the warrior, should have risen so high in such an early period, argues the preference which the Icelanders already assigned to mental superiority over the rude attributes of strength and courage, and furnishes another proof of the early civilization of this extraordinary commonwealth.¹³

Eyrbyggja Saga, of course, was not created in a vacuum, and it belongs to the main stream of medieval Icelandic literary tradition. As we have said, it was probably written shortly after the middle of the thirteenth century at a time when many sagas had already been composed. The author uses a number of written sources: several chapters derive from the *Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók*), probably the version, now lost, of Styrmir Kárason (d. 1245). The earliest extant version of the *Book of Settlements*, that of Sturla Thordarson (1214–84) in turn added material taken from *Eyrbyggja Saga*, and so one text

12. See pp. 44–5.

13. Scott, 'Abstract of the Eyrbyggja-Saga' in Mallet, op. cit., pp. 539–40.

cross-fertilizes another. Several sagas are referred to in *Eyrbyggja Saga*: Chapter 24 gives a summary of part of *Eirik's Saga*,¹⁴ the killing of Snorri's father and other elements in the story refer to *Gisli's Saga*, and the author also uses *Laxdæla Saga*¹⁵ and *Heidarviga Saga*. Thus, while *Eyrbyggja Saga* draws upon historical records, it also belongs to the great tradition of story-telling, and must be seen as fictionalized history. It would be a mistake to think of it as a factual historical account, and elements of authorial fancy and design can easily be demonstrated. At the same time, it is useful to see the framework of chronology upon which the events of the tale are founded, as they are recorded in the *Icelandic Annals*:

874 Ingolf Arnarson goes to Iceland.¹⁶

918 Thorolf Mostur-Beard dies.

938 Thorgrim the Priest (father of Snorri) is born.

952 Thorbjorn Sur (father of Thordis, Snorri's mother) comes to Iceland.

963 Thorgrim the Priest is killed, Snorri is born.

986 Eirik the Red colonizes Greenland.

1000 Christianity is adopted by law.

1008 Styr (Snorri's father-in-law) is killed.

1031 Snorri dies.

1112 Thurid Snorri's-daughter dies aged 88.

Well-informed people like old Thurid would offer the twelfth-century Icelandic historian a long unbroken link with the past; and she was in fact one of the informants of Ari the Learned (1068–1148), author of the *Book of Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*) and co-author of the first version of the *Book of Settlements*. As already mentioned, a later version of the latter was probably used by the author of *Eyrbyggja Saga*, and his imaginative and inventive powers would be able to play with confidence upon

14. In *The Vinland Sagas*, (Penguin Classics, 1963).

15. *Laxdæla Saga* (Penguin Classics, 1969).

16. Compare account in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (Chapter 3, p. 27) of Thorolf Mostur-Beard's emigration: 'This was ten years after Ingolf Arnarson had sailed off to settle in Iceland.'

such firmly based history and chronology as this and the *Icelandic Annals*.

As we have already observed, however, the author takes pleasure in the antiquarian as well as in the more specifically historical. His attempt to describe the temple of Thor (Chapter 4) illustrates the fascination which the past held for the thirteenth-century Icelander much better than it records pagan customs, and indeed when we come to the great hauntings at Frodriker it is apparent that the author's gothic imagination is excitedly at work. Again and again, however, we hear such phrases as 'it was the law in those days', or 'as people did in those days', or 'according to ancient custom'. The author is interested in omens, in the speaking head on Geirvör, in the black cloud that rains blood before the death of Thorgunna, and he regularly organizes scenes in such a way that they have a quality of inevitability which is splendid drama, but hardly acceptable as history. But he is interested, too, in the actual physical landmarks of the past: of the berserks' wall he says, 'you can still see traces of it'; of Thor's Stone, 'you can still see the blood on the stone'; of the wall built behind Thorolf Twist-Foot's grave, 'you can still see traces of the wall there'. The geography is another accurately recorded feature, and a strong contributory factor to the impression of realism is the description of everyday activities, of farming and fishing, tools, techniques, and the organization of domestic routines. Though in some respects the world of *Eyrbyggja Saga* was remote from that of its author – the vikings, the old gods, the witchcraft, for example – in others it was still close, for the methods of farming, the kind of homes people lived in, the assemblies they attended, were still much the same. But perhaps more than anything else, the delineation of character persuades us of the reality of this mixed world of the marvelous and the commonplace, the historically accurate and the artfully designed.

We have seen already in the case of Snorri how the author is interested in complexities of character and the relationship

of character to background. The virtuous Arnkel, Snorri's opponent in a major section of the narrative, is more simply drawn, but even here one recognizes the author's sense, not only of what men inherit from their parents, but also of what they reject. Arnkel displays his father's best qualities as a fighting man, but reacts against his malicious trouble-making, inheriting the generosity and openness of his grandmother Geirrid, who built her hall across the road and had tables ready-laden with food for hungry travellers. Thorolf Twist-Foot himself can be seen as reacting against the best qualities of his mother:

Thorolf thought the land which his mother had taken not nearly extensive enough, so he challenged Ulfar the Champion to single combat for the land he owned, Ulfar being old and childless.¹⁷

And the narrator tells us that Thorolf 'was a very hard man'. So tensions within the family are being established which will not only become crucial to the development of the plot, but also lead to acute observations on human conduct. Thorolf tries to persuade Arnkel to take action against Snorri over a stretch of woodland. Arnkel refuses (even though he wishes to take action and indeed does so after his father's death), simply because his father urges it, and he must react against him. Thorolf goes off home in a rage, and appropriately it seems to be of rage that he dies:

Thorolf went back home in a rage for he could see how difficult it was going to be for him to get what he wanted. It was evening when he reached home and he sat down on the high-seat without uttering a word to anybody. He ate nothing all evening and stayed in his seat when the rest of the household went to bed. In the morning, when they got up, Thorolf was still sitting there, dead.¹⁸

The author's pleasure in less grim aspects of character can be seen in the relationship between Thurid and Thorgunna, with Thurid unable to keep her eyes, and ultimately her hands, off

17. See p. 33.

18. See p. 92.

Thorgunna's fine and fashionable clothes and her magnificent bedding. Thorgunna herself, by no means a major figure in the story, is splendidly presented:

Thorgunna spent every day weaving, unless there was haymaking to do, and when the weather was good, she used to work at drying the hay in the home meadow. She had a special rake made for her which she would let no one else touch. Thorgunna was a massive woman, tall, broad-built, and getting very stout. She had dark eyebrows and narrow eyes, and beautiful chestnut hair. Her manner was always very proper, and she used to go to Mass every morning before starting work, but she was hard to get on with and wasted little time on conversation. People thought she must be in her fifties, though she was a woman who still had a lot of life in her.¹⁹

The last sentence particularly takes on a sharper significance when we learn that Thorgunna has taken a fancy to someone:

Kjartan the farmer's son was the only one there Thorgunna took to, and she liked him a lot, but he kept his distance, which she found extremely irritating. Kjartan was thirteen or fourteen at the time, a big lad, and very manly.²⁰

This domineering, irascible, ageing, still sexually active woman with an eye for a likely lad is sketched here in a few precise strokes. It seems appropriate that when the dead Thorgunna is being taken some distance for burial, her corpse should rise up and cook a meal for the coffin-bearers, stark naked, and as domineering as ever.

19. See p. 130.

20. See p. 130.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

The present translation is based on Einar Olafur Sveinsson's standard edition in *Íslensk Fornrit*, vol. 4 (Reykjavík, 1935). Earlier translations and editions are listed in the Bibliographical Notes on pp. 174-7.

We first translated this saga for Southside (Publishers) Ltd in 1972, but in the present version we have made extensive revisions.

Edinburgh, 1988

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