

**BETWEEN FICTION AND FALSEHOOD: THE ETHICS OF LYING IN THE  
SAGAS OF ICELANDERS**

**ENTRE FICTION ET FAUSSETÉ: L'ETHIQUE DU MENSONGE DANS LES SAGAS  
D'ISLANDAIS**

*Dr. Brian McMahon*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper discusses a series of episodes from the Sagas of Icelanders in which one character attempts to deceive another. In each case the presentation of the incident is explored to establish whether the deception can be justified according to the internal ethics of the semi-fictionalised Saga Age depicted. On the basis of these examples, drawn from a range of sagas but with a particular emphasis on *Grettis saga* and *Njáls saga*, it goes on to argue that the saga authors consistently distinguish between the ethical justification for different attempts to deceive based on: the circumstances in which they take place, the degree to which they might be described as audacious, and the level of success which their instigators enjoy. It posits a distinction between “active” deception (incorporating slander, oath-breaking and *níð*) and “passive” deception (entrapping an interlocutor into deceiving himself), and concludes with a comparison of the saga hero's skill in bending the truth and the saga author's attempt to be truthful to his source material while also sustaining his reader's interest.

**Keywords:** Truth, Lies, Fictionality, Sagas.

**Resumé:** Cet article traite d'une série d'épisodes des Sagas d'Islandais dans laquelle un personnage tente de tromper un autre. Dans chaque cas, la présentation de l'incident est explorée pour établir si la tromperie peut être justifiée en fonction de l'éthique interne de l'Age Saga semi-fictionnalisé représenté. Sur la base de ces exemples, tirés d'une série de

---

<sup>1</sup> Somerville College, Oxford, UK, OX2 6HD. E-mail: [brian.mcmahon@some.oxon.org](mailto:brian.mcmahon@some.oxon.org)

sagas mais avec un accent particulier sur *Grettis saga* et *Njáls saga*, il continue à soutenir que les auteurs de saga distinguent systématiquement la justification éthique des différentes tentatives de tromper sur la base de: dans lequel ils ont lieu, le degré auquel ils peuvent être appelés audacieux, et le niveau de succès dont jouissent leurs instigateurs. Il pose une distinction entre la tromperie “active” (qui incorpore la calomnie, la rupture de serment et le *níð*) et la tromperie “passive” (piéger un interlocuteur pour faire une erreur) et conclut par une comparaison de l'habileté du héros de la saga à plier la vérité avec l'habileté de l'auteur d'être fidèle à son matériel source tout en soutenant l'intérêt de son lecteur.

**Mot-clés:** Vérité, les Mensonges, Fictionnalité, les Sagas.

The society depicted in the *Íslendingasögur* (“sagas of Icelanders”) is an honour-based culture in which characters regularly announce their recent deeds and demand acknowledgement for them from their peers and the wider public. Even when such openness is bound to provoke intergenerational feuding and sustained ill feeling, it is typically presented as preferable to secrecy and omission on the basis that the proper functioning of society depended in large part on everyone knowing where he or she stood in relation to everyone else. Yet despite this emphasis on a Saga Age culture of openness, the surviving medieval law codes make clear that dishonest conduct incurred a heavy penalty, thus indicating that truth-telling was no more a given in the Middle Ages than it is today. The saga authors, whoever they were, had a strong vocational interest in the obligation to report truthfully on the deeds of their subjects, and it therefore comes as no surprise that the tension between truth, falsehood and the grey area of “fictionality” should frequently appear as a subject for consideration, and indeed a source of anxiety, in their work.

In 1986, Paul Beekman Taylor attempted to construct a taxonomy of types of untruth told across the *Íslendingasögur* corpus. He proposed a list of ten distinct kinds of falsehood in which a saga character might engage:

1. Denial of fact;

2. Refusal to address a fact;
3. Changing the account of a fact;
4. Pretending ignorance of a known fact;
5. False flattery;
6. Invention of a fact for personal gain;
7. Slander to incite bloodshed;
8. Slander to belittle the fame of someone;
9. Literal fictions which interpret fact;
10. 'Being untrue' (oath-breaking / identity concealing). (Taylor, 1986)

This list represents a welcome starting point for examining the vexed subject matter of lying (often, though not always, with the intention do to harm) and how the sagas engage with the moral implications associated with truthfulness, however its suitability as a critical tool is limited. For one thing, the list does little to distinguish lies from true statements on the basis of intention. A lie, like any other communicative act, involves a transmitter and a receiver. Thus "false flattery," as perceived by its object, may have been intended as genuine praise by the speaker who stands accused of dissembling. Must a speaker intend deception if we are to treat his words as false, or is honourable intent sufficient to exempt him from this discussion? Another limitation of this list is its categorical expression, which fails to account for a lie told in pursuit of an uncertain outcome: what if a speaker were to slander a third party while indifferent to the consequences – be they violent or otherwise? Should we place that lie in category 7 or 8? How should we deal with miscommunication or impersonation? Are shapeshifters "lying" when they assume an altered form, perhaps concealing their true selves like Satan in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-22)? Does it matter whether they are empowered to change shape at will or subject to forces beyond their control? And isn't category 10 – "being untrue" – an unhelpfully broad, catch-all repository for acts of intended deception which, while they may not fit the general *schema*, are among the most interesting and significant in the sagas precisely because they represent deviations from normal behaviour?

We must ask these questions not to undermine the value of attempts like Taylor's to make some sense out of the saga authors' vested interest in different modes of deception, but rather to call attention to the great variety of deceptions which can be practised in a society so thoroughly aware of the weight words carry and the importance of conducting your affairs in a public and open way. This description fits the depiction of Icelandic culture in most if not all of the *Íslendingasögur*, but in what follows we will examine several episodes taken in particular from two of the apparently later sagas – *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga* – in order to explore how the act of lying can have very different moral implications depending on the circumstances. In selecting these episodes it is important to note that they cannot be taken as uniformly representative of a whole genre. That said, it is undoubtedly the case that authors of *Íslendingasögur* were subject to a particular pressure from which writers of other sagas such as *fornaldarsögur* (“sagas of ancient times”) were largely exempt, that is, the need to appear to bear truthful witness to the deeds and behaviour of Saga Age Icelanders while also sustaining their readers' interest. The desire to elaborate on a dramatic incident had to be balanced against a responsibility to the truth of inherited tradition, and the conceptual boundary between a lie and an elaboration would have been much in their minds. Both *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga* are regarded as being among the most accomplished examples of *Íslendingasögur*, and the literary artistry of their authors frequently leads them away from the strictly impartial style of the chronicler. As such, they provide important insight into how these medieval authors balanced their apparent fidelity to the truth against the imperative to entertain their audience.

In Chapter Nineteen of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* the narrator recounts an episode in which Grettir encounters a group of *berserkir* (“berserkers”) on the island of Háramarsey. At this point in the story, Grettir is staying as the guest of Þorfinnr Kársson shortly after Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson has ordered the expulsion of *berserkir* from Norway. One morning, when Þorfinnr is away on the mainland, a boatload of *berserkir* arrives, intending to surprise and kill him. Instead these would-be assailants are met by Grettir who gains their trust before persuading them to surrender the majority of their weapons, plying them with drink, luring them into a storehouse and slaughtering them there. Grettir's conduct throughout this entire episode is clearly and wilfully deceptive – involving, at the very least, both “false flattery”

and “identity-concealing” – two of the forms of lying identified by Taylor as typically reprehensible. It is worth examining this chapter in some detail, however in order to assess how these deceptions may be justified or excused in the context of Grettir's otherwise honourable character and the rather extreme circumstances in which he finds himself. Þorfinnr's wife is certainly supportive of Grettir's behaviour, subsequently telling him, “hefir þú... mikla frægð unnit ok leyst mik ok hjú mín frá þeiri skemmð” (*Grettis saga*, 1936, p.69) [“you have... won great fame and secured me and my household against this shame”], and the saga gives us no reason to regard his actions as unheroic, since he was acting in the defence of these vulnerable women and under obligation to his host.

The notion that Grettir won fame through deception might initially seem counter-intuitive, but it is nevertheless true, and serves to demonstrate that the saga is at least ambivalent on the question of whether lying is an inherently immoral – or even unheroic – act. When the *berserkir*, led by the brothers Þórir þömb and Ögmundr illi, first arrive on the island, Grettir questions them about their identities, indicates that he recognises them by reputation, but volunteers no information about his own agenda. When Þórir infers that Grettir is Þorfinnr's retainer the saga's hero neither confirms nor denies this claim (“refusal to address a fact or statement” being one of Taylor's categories of deception), responding instead with an apparent non sequitur: “ef ek þœttumk nökkurn mótgang eiga at gjalda, þá vilda ek þann veg at koma” (*Grettis saga*, 1936, p.64) [“If I had any score to repay [to Þorfinnr], then I would want things to turn out [as they have]”]. The characteristic circumlocution of saga style can easily obscure the importance of the conditional tense here, and indeed we may presume that it does just that so far as Þórir is concerned, since neither he nor his followers make any further enquiry into the motivations of this apparently serendipitous ally. On the contrary, Þórir expresses his gratitude that Grettir should be so forthcoming, when, in fact, he has said nothing of substance and offered only a hypothetical summary of his position based on a condition which the saga's audience knows to be untrue. Grettir replies, “Orða sinna á hverr ráð” (*Grettis saga*, 1936, p.66) [“Everyone decides his own words”]. Like the technique of circumlocution, a propensity for gnomic adages is common to saga protagonists, and it seems therefore natural, within the bounds of the genre, that the cautionary subtext of this statement should go unnoticed by the brothers. To an attentive

saga reader, however, its function would be clear: to underscore the care Grettir is taking in allowing the brothers to deceive themselves, rather than resorting to the technique of lying to them explicitly.

Diverging briefly from Taylor's scheme, we might prefer to describe Grettir's technique here as an example of "passive deception" rather than "active deception" insofar as it involves laying traps rather than springing them. As the chapter goes on, Grettir continues to employ his evasive strategy of speaking conditionally to avoid directly answering Þórir's invitation to name a price for his supposed assistance:

Grettir svarar: "Eigi ætla ek hér til launa fyrir at svá göru, en ef vér erum þvílíkir vinir, þá er þér farið á brott, sem nú horfisk á, þá mun ek ráðask til lags með yðr; en þó at ek mega minna en einhverr yðar, þá mun ek eigi letja stórræðanna" (*Grettis saga*, 1936, p.65).

Grettir answers: "I have no plan now to receive payment for this, but if we are still such friends when you depart from here, as matters look like turning out, then I would desire to travel with you; although I can accomplish less than any of you, I would not impede your great deeds."

Once again, close examination reveals that Grettir has taken great care in phrasing this reply – indeed, to Taylor's list we might usefully add the term "false modesty," which is on the whole uncharacteristic of this rather forthright saga hero. It might be thought ironic that a man later legendary for his outlaw status should be so conscientious a lawyer in his own pre-emptive defence, but perhaps it is unsurprising when we consider that the practice of law in the sagas is elsewhere held up as a supremely honourable pursuit.<sup>2</sup> There are several components to this ingenious answer. First, Grettir states that he does not expect immediate recompense – rather, as we infer, that will come later when the opportunity to kill the brothers arises. Next, he reverts to his familiar tactic of speaking hypothetically: *if* they remain friendly (as we confidently expect they will not) *then* he would like to travel with them. His final statement, belittling his own prowess, is perhaps the only outright lie told here, although arguably such a statement is inherently subjective, and might therefore be defended as an example of good manners rather than an explicit untruth.

---

<sup>2</sup> Although there are exceptions, such as the famous lawyer Njáll deliberately and calculatingly turning a blind eye to his sons' lawlessness in *Njáls saga*, Chapter Forty-Four.

Thus far we note that Grettir has not lied once, according to the letter of the rules which govern truth and falsehood – that is, he has not literally denied or invented any facts about himself or his circumstances, although he is certainly less than forthright in addressing the reality of his relationship to Þorfinnr and the *berserkir* brothers. Although he has shown no hesitation in transgressing the spirit of openness which the *berserkir* clearly expect him to observe, we note that the saga clearly places the blame on them for their lack of care when dealing with an unknown interlocutor rather than on Grettir, who is simply using a canny lawyer's trick. The noteworthy change in Grettir's evasive tactics occurs when Þórir, now deep in his cups, proposes an oath of friendship. Swearing such an oath in bad faith would clearly contravene Grettir's moral and heroic ethos, and so he elegantly evades this test by reciting the proverb “öl er annarr maðr” (*Grettis saga*, 1936, p.66) [“ale changes a man”], and causing the discussion to be deferred until the morning. It is significant that the mention of oaths should be included in this passage, thereby escalating the tension of the scene by raising the possibility that Grettir will later be forced to break his word, but this is a verbal trap which he avoids with considerable poise. His change in tactics, however, should alert us to his limitations as a liar: he is prepared to bend, amend and conceal the truth, but not to be forsworn. The encounter with the *berserkir* represents not only a martial challenge for Grettir, but also a moral one: how to preserve his honourable character while simultaneously practising a deception. It is worth noting the presence of witnesses to Grettir's words in the form of the *húsfreyja* (“mistress of the house”) and her women, who can subsequently attest to his honesty when Þorfinnr returns. This observation lends additional weight to Grettir's rebuke when he next speaks to Þorfinnr's wife and criticises her for lacking faith in his loyalty: “Ek þykkjumk nú mjök inn sami ok í kveld, er þér töluðuð hrakliga við mik” (*Grettis saga*, 1936, p.69) [“I think I am now the same man I was earlier this evening when you spoke with me so disgracefully”]. This is true both in a literal sense and in that he has avoided the temptation to compromise his honour by lying “outright” to the *berserkir*, remaining constant in his intentions (thus, the same man) and largely allowing them to hear and see what they chose to and draw their own conclusions. Ultimately it is they who construct the lie that he is their ally, and they who suffer the consequences for not enquiring with sufficient care into his motivation.

The example of Grettir demonstrates that deception is not inherently presented as a moral failing in the sagas but, like anything, it can be done well or badly; it may be justified as a means, not an end. Later in the saga this point is further illustrated when Grettir presents himself at an assembly under an assumed name and in disguise. The farmers who encounter him there swear a truce with him and then, when his identity is revealed, consider whether Grettir's act of deception constitutes sufficient grounds for them to break their word. In the event, the truce holds, and the justification given reinforces the importance of keeping one's oath. Hjalti Þórðarson summarises the farmers' position:

halda skulu vér grið vár, þó at vár hafi orðit hyggendismunr; vil ek eigi, at menn hafi þat til eptirdæma, at vér sjálfir höfum gengit á grið þau, sem vér höfum sett ok seld (*Grettis saga*, 1936, p.235)

We will hold to our truce even though we have not been equally clever; I do not want people to look back and judge that we reneged on a truce which we ourselves arranged and pledged.

One deception here allows the saga's hero to avoid falling for another, and the respect shown by the farmers for Grettir's cunning – though grudging – reinforces our sense that lying well, like fighting well or reciting poetry with skill, could be a heroic quality in the Saga Age. *Grettis saga* is acutely aware of the vulnerability of the hero in this situation, and implicitly praises his ingenuity in escaping with both his life and honour intact. It is surely significant that both these episodes present Grettir encountering a threat to his life and oblige him to secure his safety through the use of his wits, thus compounding our admiration for his heroic strength by also demonstrating his mental quickness.

If the concern with the unstable but culturally essential boundaries between truth, lies and fiction demonstrated by these episodes were unique to *Grettis saga* it would be an important characteristic of that text, but one whose broader importance might be easily minimised on account of that saga's reputation for being an outlier of the genre in any number of ways. As Laurence de Looze (1991, p.102) has written, “what has *Grettis saga* been accused of if not of being a stranger and foreigner discovered in the midst of true Icelandic sagas?” In fact, however, the same preoccupation reoccurs throughout the *Íslendingasögur*,



which often draw the reader's attention to a character's nuanced choice of words. Grettir's careful reticence and successful attempt to trap others into making false assumptions concerning him is paralleled and commented on in *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, when King Mýrkjartan is obliged to interrogate Óláfr Höskuldsson with scrupulous care, having recognised him as a man prone to give away no more than has strictly been asked: “Ok enn spyrr konungr vandligar um ætt Óláfs en fyrrum, því at konungr fann, at þessi maðr var ríklátr ok vildi eigi segja lengra en hann spurði” (*Laxdæla saga*, 1934, p.56.) [“Then the king asks more carefully about Óláfr's family than before, since the king felt that this man was proud and would not say more than he was asked”].<sup>3</sup> There is no suggestion here that Óláfr should be viewed as dishonourable because he is careful with his words – on the contrary, it is frequently the case that such reticence is praised in a saga hero. It is far more common that speech acts, rather than loaded silences, are the catalyst for some hostile action.<sup>4</sup> In this case, both men emerge positively from the exchange: Óláfr has displayed wisdom in not being over-anxious to reveal information about himself; but Mýrkjartan has been similarly wise in continuing the interrogation until he is certain he has heard the full story.

Another instance in which the precise formulation of a question to elicit not only an accurate but also a comprehensive answer is significant occurs in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* during an exchange between Geirr and his chief slave, Kolr. The scene occurs at a point when Geirr is actively looking for the brothers Helgi and Gunnarr who are thought to be in hiding near to his farm. One evening, the farmer asks his slave for news, and Kolr responds that he has nothing to tell “því að mér þykja það engin tíðindi, sem eg sé” (*Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, 1959, p.349) [“I never think what I see to be newsworthy”]. Recognising the ambiguity in his slave's reply, Geirr rephrases his enquiry to ask specifically what it is that Kolr has seen today, whereupon the latter relates a sighting of the refugee brothers, and thus Geirr locates his quarry. This is a very brief episode, receiving no further commentary from the saga author (indeed, the text immediately cuts away to another scene), and may have been included for any number of reasons, not least as a potentially comedic interlude. It

---

<sup>3</sup> There is some variation between manuscripts here (*Laxdæla saga*, 1934, p.56 n.2).

<sup>4</sup> This is a point made forcefully in *Hávamál*, stanzas 6, 19, 27, 29. The heroic injunction to keep your hostile thoughts hidden is issued explicitly in stanza 46.

is significant, however, in that it draws our attention once more to the sagas' fixation on the care which must be taken when expressing and interpreting the laconic speeches of their Icelandic subjects, thereby indirectly highlighting the verbal and linguistic skill involved in their own retelling. Depending on the reception of the saga, Kolr's reticence might appear to be the product of a reluctance to do more than was strictly asked of him, as a kind of one-upmanship on his master, or simply taken at face value as evidence that he did not apprehend the importance of what he had witnessed. Regardless, the significant detail is Geirr's perceptive interrogation which clarifies the situation, much as the *berserkir* in *Grettis saga* might wisely have done had they been less eager to jump to conclusions and indulge their sympathetic prejudice towards their new acquaintance. Wisdom is shown to involve taking no statement at face value, but always considering its meaning with care. Again we may detect in this the legal prowess of a cohort of saga-tellers much obsessed by the law courts and much admiring of those who demonstrated a particular talent in their apt choice of words.

If Grettir is an heroic liar, who uses deception sparingly in the defence of the vulnerable and to achieve glory for himself, then the sagas implicitly juxtapose him with an altogether less honourable cast of characters for whom lying and deception – still the means to an end – are employed as the tools for laying great men low. Among this group Mörðr Valgarðsson, a central antagonist of *Njáls saga*, is pre-eminent. In the court case following the burning of Njáll and his family, Mörðr is the advocate on the prosecution side, despite his complicity in Njáll's death, and his startling hypocrisy is clear for all to see. His opposite number, however, Eyjólfur Bölverksson is scarcely more honest, having been illegally bribed to take on the defence. When they clash at the Fifth Court, one aspect of proceedings is particularly noteworthy. During a series of exchanges, Mörðr perjures himself by swearing that the witnesses he has produced are legitimate when, in fact, this is not only untrue but so blatantly false that the attempt at deception is immediately apparent to everyone present. Here is an example of “bad” lying: artless, self-serving and ultimately unsuccessful. When we contrast this episode with Grettir's skilful conduct in deceiving the *berserkir*, Mörðr's ploy seems all the more contemptible. Whereas Mörðr has sworn oaths before the court and is dishonoured in the breach of them, Grettir's deceptions were all passive, with the *berserkir*

vulnerable to the charge of having practised a deception on themselves. Grettir skilfully avoided binding himself with an oath, whereas Mörðr, having done so, is forced to break faith with the court and thus to undermine himself. The key point, however, is that it is not the act of lying *per se* for which Mörðr is condemned, but the intention behind it, the context in which it takes place, and the singular lack of success which its author achieves.

To illustrate further the important relationship between the effectiveness of a deception and the gloss placed on it by the saga author, we may contrast Mörðr's performance with an earlier episode in *Njáls saga* during which Gunnarr, disguised as the humble peddler Kaupa-Héðinn, wins the right to prosecute the legal case against Hrútr by speaking a summons under his breath. This episode is the central concern of the much maligned Chapter Twenty-Two, which Heusler famously dismissed as "das Monstrum," since he felt it jarred stylistically with the rest of the saga (Heusler, 1922, pp.14-15). Thematically, however, its examination of a deceptive act is entirely in keeping with the saga's broader preoccupations. In this case, Gunnarr's use of the legally correct form of words is found to be binding, despite the fact that Hrútr was unaware they had even been spoken. Ostensibly, Gunnarr's conduct should arouse in readers a similar sense of ire as Mörðr's does during the trial scene: not only has he concealed his true identity from Hrútr, thereby lulling him into a false sense of security, but he has also misrepresented his intentions in order to trick him into liability in a legal case. As William Miller puts it, "Njal did not play fair beating Hrut; he took advantage of his hospitality, of his trying to have an entertaining evening with a stranger he took in, who is a stranger only under false pretences." (Miller, 2014, p.71). Once again, however, as in *Grettis saga*, a close examination of the text offers us a more favourable interpretation of Gunnarr's deceptive conduct at this juncture. The entire course of the exchange between Gunnarr and Hrútr is anticipated by Njáll, who instructs his friend accordingly:

"Stefn þú nú þá," skalt þú segja, "en ek mun í annat sinn." Þá mun Hrútr stefna, ok skalt þú hyggja at því vandliga, hver atkvæði hann hefir. Þá mun Hrútr mæla, at þú skyllir stefna; þú skalt þá stefna, ok skal stefna rangt, svá at eigi sé meir en annat hvert orð rétt. Þá mun Hrútr hlæja, ok mun hann þá ekki gruna þik, en mæla þó, at fátt sé rétt í; þú skalt kenna förunautum þínum, at þeir hafi glapit þik. Þá skalt þú biðja Hrútr, at hann mæli fyrir þér, ok biðja, at hann leyfi, at þú mælir eptir; hann mun þat leyfa þér ok stefna sjálfr málinu; þú

skalt þegar stefna eptir ok mæla þá rétt ok spyrja þá Hrút, hvárt rétt sé stefnt. Hann mun svara, at þat megi eigi ónýta; þá skalt þú mæla lágt, svá at förunautar þínir heyri: “Stefni ek handseldri sök Unnar Marðardóttur” (*Njáls saga*, 1954, p.62).

“Recite the summons,” you should say, “and I will repeat it after you.” Hrútr will then recite the summons – pay careful attention to every bit of his wording. Then he will ask you to repeat the summons; do so, but do it so badly that no more than every second word is correct. Hrútr will laugh and have no suspicions, and he will say that not much was correct in your summons. Blame your companions and say that they distracted you. Then ask Hrútr to recite it again and to let you recite it after him. He will grant this and recite the summons himself. Recite it after him and say it correctly, then ask Hrútr if the summoning was correct. He will say that no one could fault it. Then say softly, but so that your companions can hear, “I hereby make this summons in the suit turned over to me by Unnr the daughter of Mörðr [Gígja].”

Setting aside *Njáll's* extraordinary clairvoyance in describing the precise ebb and flow of this conversation, we may see here shades of the same technique used by *Grettir* to give the brothers *Pórir* and *Ögmundr* just enough rope with which to hang themselves. The deception is cunningly conceived, audacious in its complexity and reliance on several moving parts and – crucially – designed to play on its subject's failings as a paragon of heroic virtues. Read one way this trick, like *Mörðr Valgarðsson's* act of perjury, reflects negatively on those who conceive and enact it, since by doing so they open themselves to the charge of dishonourable conduct; but in fact this charge is a reductive and inaccurate assessment of the “honour” concept as this saga's author understands it. Throughout the text both *Njáll* and *Mörðr* are repeatedly praised for their skill in law which relies on their verbal dexterity, and a trick such as this one is simply an extension of that skill. The fault lies with the credulous *Hrútr* who might have saved himself had he been sufficiently alert and perceptive. Whereas perjury – the denial of fact; the breaking of an oath – deserves censure, here *Hrútr* is at least as culpable for incompetence as *Gunnarr* is for subterfuge; and in cases such as these the well constructed untruth is presented as simply another weapon in the hero's arsenal, and not an ethical misstep.

There is a more than cursory resemblance between the story of *Gunnarr's* gulling of *Hrútr* in this chapter and the peculiar case of a pretend betrothal described in Chapter Four of *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu* (p.60). In this latter episode, the titular *Gunnlaugr* ingeniously attempts to outmanoeuvre his rival *Hrafn Önundarson* by making a public declaration of his

betrotal to Helga in fagra [“the fair”] in the presence of witnesses, prefaced by a disclaimer from her father to the effect that this speech is merely the rehearsal of a legal formula, and does not constitute a formal engagement. Since it is clear from what follows that no one at the time believes Gunnlaugr's statement to have the force of law behind it, we may wonder about the saga author's motive for including it in the story – on the face of it, the episode has no consequences, and any attempt to play the same trick as Gunnarr would seem to have failed. This is possibly true, but it might equally be the case that Gunnlaugr has no such explicit object in mind, meaning merely to sow doubt in the thoughts of those present about any future rival's claim to Helga's hand. This “rehearsal” can hardly be described as a deception *per se*, and would certainly be exempt from any of the categories on Taylor's list, since the fact that it is not binding has been clearly asserted. However, such is the power of oaths, even when sworn in jest, that the poet may at least be said to be capitalising on the ambiguity of the situation to further bolster his future claim to Helga.

In view of these examples we may suggest two criteria which distinguish a creditable lie from an affront to the honour code as presented in the sagas, and these are that it must succeed in its object, and that it must be audacious. The sagas are not uniformly dismissive of characters who decline to act or speak truthfully, but what distinguishes them is the manner in which they do this. The subject of deception is an intricate and often subtextual theme in many sagas, and it would be precipitous to argue that these criteria are equally applicable to every text and every redaction in the genre. Nevertheless, close scrutiny of such examples as these may incline us to believe that our habit of assessing saga heroes in terms of their honourable credentials could only be improved by acknowledging that the well-crafted lie can, in some circumstances, be as heroic and impressive a feat as any martial or judicial success. Crafty liars who are otherwise perceived as weak, such as Mörðr Valgarðsson, are not redeemed by their cunning, but they do deserve some credit for it. Similarly, figures like Grettir and Gunnarr are enhanced and not reduced in our imagination by their audacious ability to cloud the perceptions of other characters and so achieve their desires by subterfuge.

The necessity of scepticism in a social context where the precise measure of words is carefully weighed is also the subject of comment in several sagas, and failure to be sufficiently sceptical of an unknown interlocutor is frequently the cause of misadventure. In

several cases, the onus to discover the truth appears to rest on the party who is deceived, more than the onus to be strictly truthful appears to burden the deceiver. The criteria by which the truth of a statement might be ascertained are rarely stated directly, but the following example is a convenient demonstration of how one saga character prudently probes the word choice of another in order to ascertain a deeper truth. It is an episode from *Heiðarvíga saga* in which Þorgísl Arason exhibits what appears to be characteristic modesty by denying that he has any special skill in pronouncing legal formulae. This is arguably a form of deception, since it conceals his true qualities, however it does not appear on Taylor's list (perhaps it is a kind of false modesty, or it might be that Þorgísl genuinely fails to recognise his own ability). Undeterred by Þorgísl's protestations, Snorri goði insists that his reputation as a skilled lawman is not in dispute, commenting, "mikit mun til haft, er einmælt er um" (*Heiðarvíga saga*, 1938, p.312) ["there must be much in it, since all men agree"]. Here we see the paramount importance of public consensus. A single report of Þorgísl's qualities might warrant scepticism, but acclaim from multiple sources makes the tale more plausible. Such comments as this might easily be disregarded were it not for the fact that there is no other clear reason for the saga authors to include them so frequently except in the context of this broader discourse about truth and the means of authoritatively establishing what is true. Sagas are conventionally economical with detail, and it would be uncharacteristic to dwell on such exchanges if they did not reflect such an important socio-literary theme.

The same may be said of comments made by the narrative voice adopted by saga authors which concern the veracity of certain reports. Such comments are typically brief but nonetheless significant because it is rarely clear what function they serve except as a kind of indirect authentication for the version of events recounted in the saga itself. Thus, for example, the author of *Gull-Þóris saga* (also known as *Þorskfirðinga saga*) interrupts the progress of his narrative in the closing moments to address reports that Guðmundr Þórisson had died in a battle one summer, summarily dismissing these as a lie (*Þorskfirðinga saga*, 1991, p.226). This statement is abrupt and without context, encouraging us to suppose that at one time the saga author was keen to dispel a genuine rumour. Its persistence in the text, however, once again attests to the prevailing concern that truth could easily be lost in the oral *milieu*, and that proactive deception was by no means the only cause of this. As much as

the saga authors admired scepticism in their heroes, they were also intent on ensuring that their own works would pass this test when the careful reader applied it.

Another kind of deception which Taylor's list does not engage with but which clearly preoccupies a number of sagas is the inevitable slippage in meaning which is characteristic of an oral tradition, and against which the authors of the written sagas often take pains to indemnify themselves by citing sources, tying their heroes' deeds to recognisable features of the landscape, and deferring to popular consensus in place of an individual's imperfect recollection. This anxiety about misrepresentation through imperfect transmission is aptly explored in Chapter Fifty-Four of *Njáls saga*, in a highly ironic sequence of events which lead to the ultimate demise of the would-be successfully audacious liar Skammkell. In this chapter the narrative recounts how Skammkell's criticism of Gunnarr is brought to the latter's attention by a convenient shepherd informant. However, although the shepherd relates the substance of Skammkell's slur, he is not quite quoting his source verbatim. In the previous chapter we heard that Skammkell criticised Gunnarr as follows: "Þat myndi mælt, ef ótiginn maðr væri, at grátit hefði" (*Njáls saga*, 1954, p.135.) ["It would be said, if he were an ordinary man, that he cried"]. Certainly, the tone of this remark is derogatory, but the speaker is also at pains to indemnify himself twice over: first, by attributing the (hypothetical) slur to a depersonalised public consensus, and second by inserting a crucial subclause indicating that Gunnarr is not an "ótiginn" ["ordinary"] man. This comment is altogether more nuanced than the report which Gunnarr subsequently receives. In the mouth of the shepherd, Skammkell's words are rendered thus: "því at Skammkell sagði austr í Dal at þú grétir, þá er þeir riðu á þik ofan" (*Njáls saga*, 1954, p.136.) ["Skammkell said over at Dal that you cried when they rode at you"].

Although the reported speech resembles the original closely, it is shorn of the indemnifying caveat that Gunnarr is no ordinary man, and is directly attributed to Skammkell, without any acknowledgement that he phrased his remark – whatever his tone – as a hypothetical. The question now arises as to whether the shepherd is aware of the significance associated with these changes. If so, the saga is not explicit about his motivation. Were this shepherd a man of status, possessed in the saga of a name and a history, we might feel a more natural obligation to read some hostile agenda into this apparent distortion of

Skammkell's words – an act of relatively minor significance, perhaps, to the mind of the modern reader, but one which nonetheless precipitates Skammkell's death. Might those caveats have saved his life? And should we trust the shepherd's words when he then goes on to justify his action on the hypocritical grounds that he hates it when men make such false reports (as Skammkell had of Gunnarr)? The cynical mind might suspect that this distortion was engineered specifically to achieve the reward which, the saga tells us, later comes his way, but if so the lie is sufficiently subtle to escape detection. We might usefully note the kernel of truth in this story, however: Skammkell did, indeed, make a disparaging remark, just not precisely the one with which he is credited. This incident once more reinforces the importance which saga authors regularly attribute to the precise choice of words which they and their characters utter. This same preoccupation may go some way towards accounting for the characteristically laconic and aphoristic statements which we associate with saga heroes. A careless word, or a report which goes unexamined, can easily lead to bloodshed. The *berserker* in *Grettis saga* might have lived had they been less credulous, and this incident arguably presents a similar assessment of Skammkell. In one sense the shepherd is lying in the account he gives to Gunnarr (potentially falling into categories 3, 7 and 8 on Taylor's list), but so subtle is the difference between his statement and Skammkell's that the latter bears some burden of blame for speaking too unguardedly and allowing himself to be so easily mischaracterised.

It is especially ironic that the words of this shepherd should prove to be Skammkell's undoing, since Skammkell himself, acting as Otkell's messenger to his powerful kinsmen, will later attempt a similar trick by distorting their advice in the transmission of it (well beyond the subtler, potentially self-serving tweaking done by the shepherd), and thereby initiate the escalation in hostilities which culminates in his death. The saga stresses that Skammkell is widely thought to be deceitful, with Hallbjörn calling him “inn lygnasta mann” (*Njáls saga*, 1954, p.128.) [“the most false man”], and indicates that his reputation as a liar, as much as the lie itself, is to blame for his demise. By contrast, the shepherd who betrays him to Gunnarr enjoys no such repercussions, but rather sinks quietly back into obscurity, somewhat the richer for the carefully finessed message he delivered to his master. This incident thus demonstrates that the success of a lie may depend on a speaker's reputation for



truthfulness. Grettir strikes the *Berserkir* as a sympathetic figure and so they let their guard down around him; Gunnarr makes for an unlikely Kaupa-Héðinn and so his deception is unexpected. Skammkell, by contrast, is known to be a liar, and so his ability to practise a constructive deception to his own advantage is compromised.

One final aspect of deception with which the sagas are notably preoccupied is the theme of disguise as a form of “identity concealing” (number 10 on Taylor’s list). We have already noted the episode in *Njáls saga* in which Gunnarr presents himself in the likeness of Kaupa-Héðinn so as to enact a ploy as ingenious as it is improbable. Yet, remarkably, the sagas are strewn with examples of still less plausible disguises which again invite readers to consider the implications behind an act of deception and, in particular, the issue of who is at fault should it succeed: the party who adopts a disguise or the insufficiently sceptical party who fails to see through it. Like Gunnarr, the titular hero of *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* assumes the guise of a beggar – a disguise which he enhances by colouring his eyelids black (*Hallfreðar saga*, 1939, p.164).<sup>5</sup> Þorleifr jarlsskáld makes an even greater effort to achieve a similar effect, as we learn from *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, which describes his adoption of a goat’s beard and two spiked crutches (*Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, 1956, p.288). Moreover, a disguise need not be visual to have the intended deceptive effect. In a memorable episode from *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, Þórólfr starri almost succeeds in his plan to assassinate Refr by imitating the voice of one of his servants to gain access to him in the night. Although their exchange ultimately goes badly for Þórólfr, this verbal ability is presented as an attribute rather than as evidence of an unheroic or conniving nature. Strictly speaking, Þórólfr’s successful attempt to disguise his voice could not be described as an example of “lying,” although it is deceptive, and indeed he is commended in the saga for his skill as a mimic. By contrast, when he lies “actively” by identifying himself as the shepherd his dishonourable conduct becomes plain to the reader, and his subsequent demise does not then surprise us.

One performer especially gifted in the art of disguise is Gísli Súrsson who, in Chapter Twenty-Six of his saga, performs a virtuoso deception for which he receives no negative reproof but which rather enhances his reputation. Apparently cornered on a remote stretch

---

<sup>5</sup> This description is present only in the redactions of the saga associated with *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and does not appear in *Möðruvallabók*, AM 132 fol.

of land, and encouraged to make a valiant last stand there by the loyal Ingjaldr, Gísli instead decides to row out and meet his pursuers dressed in a slave's garments and acting the part of Helgi the fool. So audacious and convincing is his performance that he escapes with his life, prompting this expression of grudging admiration from Þorkr, his adversary: "...ok mun Gísli þer verit hafa á bátinum hjá oss ok mun hafa látit eptir fíflinu, því at hann er við hvárttveggja brugðinn ok er in mesta hermikráka" (*Gísli saga*, p.85) [...and that must have been Gísli who was in the boat with us, who must have played the fool, because he is ready in everything and is the best mimic]. His life on the line, Gísli lights on the idea of an intrepid deception to save him and his companions. Like Grettir and Gunnarr, Gísli is submitting himself to a test of his abilities in which the stakes are high. Rather than the act of a coward like Mörðr Valgarðsson, this is a bold and ambitious deception, and as such it carries none of the negative stigma which the modern English word "lie" typically imputes.

There is an important distinction to be drawn in the sagas between an artful deception and an explicit lie, which brings dishonour to whoever utters it. This difference, easily dismissed as too subtle to concern the casual reader, is in fact central to an appreciation of the social and artistic constraints of which Old Norse authors were perpetually conscious. As Paul Bibire writes,

Old Icelandic had no term which can be translated as 'fiction', though it has words translated as 'true' (*sannr* 'true, trustworthy, trusty'), and 'lie' (*lygi* 'deliberate falsehood'). Of these the second seems uncontroversial; the first, *sannr*, certainly includes factual accuracy, but is a wider word embracing notions of trust and trustworthiness as well. A narrative that is described as *sannr* must certainly be literally true, but it is also likely to be worthy of trust in other ways as well, most obviously perhaps exemplary. (Bibire, 2007, pp.9-10).

Saga authors laboured under the twofold obligation to show fidelity to traditional narratives and to frame their work in an original way, so as to edify new generations of readers and receivers. Preoccupied as they were by this dual purpose, it is unsurprising that the nature of honesty and deception is frequently the subject of discussion and exemplification in their work.

The examples discussed here collectively demonstrate that deception was a theme of persistent interest to the medieval saga writers. Audacious and effective attempts to conceal

the truth frequently do as much to enhance a subject's reputation as oath-breaking may do to reduce it, and there is no reason to conclude that just because a saga depicts one character attempting to mislead another they should necessarily be regarded as ethically compromised. On the contrary, just as the saga authors had a vocational interest in balancing their social responsibility as historians against their vocation as entertainers, so too the characters whose lives they depict are forced to balance competing imperatives and make use of their wits and performative talents when raw strength alone cannot serve their purpose. It is not clear that the sagas present a common ethical vision on the subject of when and where a lie might be told in preference to the truth, but the admiration of one class of storyteller (the saga authors) for another (whom we might loosely term "the liars") is frequently attested and, in several cases, even celebrated.

#### **Bibliographical references:**

##### *Primary sources:*

HALLDÓRSSON, Jóhannes (Ed.). *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag 14, 1959.

HALLDÓRSSON, Ólafur (Ed.). *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1958-2000.

JÓNSSON, Guðni (Ed.). *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag 7, 1936.

KRISTJÁNSSON, Jónas (Ed.). *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag 9, 1956.

NORDAL, Sigurður and JÓNSSON, Guðni (Eds.). *Heiðarvíga saga*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritfélag 3, 1938.

NORDAL, Sigurður and JÓNSSON, Guðni (Eds.). *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag 3, 1938.

SVEINSSON, Einar Ólafur (Ed.). *Laxdæla saga*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag 5, 1934.

SVEINSSON, Einar Ólafur (Ed.). *Hallfreðar saga*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritfélag 8, 1939.

SVEINSSON, Einar Ólafur (Ed.). *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag 12,

1954.

VILMUNDARSON, Þórhallur and VLIHJÁLMSOON, Vlihjálmssoon (Eds.). *Harðar saga*.

Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag 13, 1991.

VILMUNDARSON, Þórhallur and VLIHJÁLMSOON, Vlihjálmssoon (Eds.). *Þorskfirðinga saga*.

Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag 13, 1991.

ÞÓRÓLFSSON, Björn K. and JÓNSONN, Guðni (Eds). *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. Reykjavík: Hið

Íslenzka Fornritafélag 6, 1943.

*Secondary sources:*

BIBIRE, Paul. "On Reading the Icelandic Sagas: Approaches to Old Icelandic Texts". In:

Beverly Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor and Gareth Williams (Eds.). *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian sea-borne expansion and settlement before 1300 - a festschrift in honour of Dr. Barbara E. Crawford*. Leiden: Brill, 2007, pp.1-18.

DE LOOZE, Laurence. "The Outlaw Poet, The Poetic Outlaw: Self-Consciousness in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*". *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 1991, 106, pp.85-103.

HEUSLER, Andreas. "Einleitung." *Die Geschichte vom weisen Njal*. Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1922.

MILLER, William Ian. *Why is your Axe Bloody?: A reading of Njáls saga*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

TAYLOR, Paul Beekman. "Wielders and Welders of Words: Bare Lies and Garnished Truths in *Njáls saga*". In: Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Eds.). *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*. Vienna: Hermann Böhlau Nachf, 1986, pp.287-96.