

The Culture of the Grotesque in Old Icelandic Literature: *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*

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ABSTRACT: According to scholarly consensus on the development of Old Icelandic literature, *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* (*Fóstbræðra saga*) is an example of the earliest sagas. Such archaic sagas can be distinguished by their repetitious and fragmented or episodic narrations; they are negatively characterized by authorial digressions. Yet in the case of *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* the digressions are actually key to understanding the saga itself. Full of irony and grotesque bodily imagery, they represent a medieval society's culture of the carnival or "grotesque realism." They function as a parody of heroes and heroic ideals in hierarchical and patriarchal societies.

RÉSUMÉ: Selon le consensus de la littérature savante sur le développement de la littérature islandaise ancienne, *La saga des frères jurés* (*Fóstbræðra saga*) est un exemple des plus anciennes sagas. Ces sagas archaïques se distinguent par leurs narrations répétitives et fragmentées ou épisodiques; elles sont négativement caractérisées par des digressions de l'auteur. Toutefois, dans le cas de *La saga des frères jurés*, les digressions sont en réalité essentielles pour comprendre la saga elle-même. Remplies d'ironie et d'images corporelles grotesques, elles représentent la culture du carnaval ou le « réalisme grotesque » d'une société médiévale. Elles fonctionnent comme une parodie des héros et des idéaux héroïques dans les sociétés hiérarchiques et patriarcales.

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I

Traditionally the Sagas of the Icelanders have been defined as a genre of heroic literature that depicts the heroism of Icelandic chieftains, noble farmers, and wise men, as manifested in their feuds and subsequent battles over estates, their travels in Iceland and abroad, and the fame bestowed upon them by foreign kings. The concept behind all of this is honour.¹

One of the standard works on the sagas is Sigurður Nordal's "Sagalitteraturen" in *Nordisk kultur* (1953). In this work he puts forward a general thesis about the development of Old Icelandic literature, a thesis that has served as the basis for all later research. Nordal sees the development of the Icelandic sagas as a curving line. This curve begins in what he calls "frumstæð frásagnarlist" [primitive narrative style] in sagas such as *Heiðarvíga saga* (*The Saga of the Slayings on the Heath*), *Fóstbræðra saga* (*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*), and *Egils saga* (*Egil's Saga*). From there the curve climbs upwards through sagas that are more conscious in style like *Gísla saga* (*Gisli Sursson's Saga*), *Laxdæla saga* (*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*), and *Eyrbyggja saga* (*The Saga of the People of Eyri*). The genre reaches its artistic zenith with the realism and objectivity of *Hrafnkels saga* (*The Saga of Hrafnkell Frey's Godi*) and *Njáls saga* (*Njal's Saga*). After that the curve declines toward sagas such as *Hávarðar saga* (*The Saga of Havard of Isafjord*) and *Grettis saga* (*The Saga of Grettir the Strong*), which Nordal sees as younger and more fantastical versions of their older and better ancestors. The curve finally dwindles into watered-down and incredible fantasies.

The very same approach can be seen in Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's definition of the sagas in his article, "Íslendingasögur" in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon* from 1962. Instead of Nordal's five categories, Einar has three: the archaic sagas, the classic sagas, and the post-classic sagas. In his chapter on the artistry of the sagas he only discusses the category of the classic sagas, and they turn out to be the same as those at the top of Nordal's curve. The characteristics of the classic sagas, Einar says, are "objectivity" and "heroic realism," and those are the values that make a good saga. The many sagas that do not fit into these ideals are relegated to the categories of either archaic or fantasy.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson considers *Fóstbræðra saga* (*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*) to be an archaic saga, as Sigurður Nordal did, and thereby to be one of the oldest. This group of sagas suffers, among other things, from repetitions and digressions, and the narration is fragmented and episodic. The style is rough, and often the authors break the artistic illusion, the objectivity, by interrupting the narration with their own commentaries and explanations (Sveinsson 495–594).

II

The Saga of the Sworn Brothers has been placed among the archaic sagas mainly because of some peculiarities in its style, which scholars have negatively called digressions (“útúrdúrar” or “klausur”). The most obvious feature of the digressions is that they clash with the objectivity of the saga style with lofty comments on, and appraisals of, the manliness, courage, and heroic deeds of the saga’s main characters, the sworn brothers Thorgeir (Þorgeir) and Thormod (Þormóður). A good example is the famous and amusing passage about the heroes’ trip to the highest and most perilous cliff in Iceland, Hornbjarg, to gather angelica:

Það bar til um vorið eftir, að þeir Þorgeir og Þormóður fóru norður á Strandir og allt norður til Horns. Og einn dag fóru þeir í bjarg að sækja sér hvannir, og í einni tó, er síðan er kölluð Þorgeirstó, skáru þeir miklar hvannir; skyldi Þormóður þá upp bera, en Þorgeir var eftir. Þá brast aurskriða undan fótum hans. Honum varð þá það fyrir, að hann greip um einn hvannnjóla með grasinu og hélt þar niðri allt við rótina, ella hefði hann ofan fallið. Þar var sextugt ofan á fjörugrjót. Hann gat þó eigi upp komist og hékk þar þann veg og vildi þó með engu móti kalla á Þormóð sér til bjargar, þó að hann félli ofan á annað borð, og var þá bani vís, sem vita mátti. Þormóður beið uppi á hömrinum, því að hann ætlaði, að Þorgeir myndi upp koma, en er honum þótti Þorgeir dveljast svo miklu lengur en von var að, þá gengur hann ofan í skriðuhjallana. Hann kallar þá og spyr, hví hann komist aldrei eða hvort hann hefir enn eigi nógar hvannirnar. Þorgeir svarar þá með óskelfdri röddu og óttalausum brjósti. “Eg ætla,” segir hann, “að eg hafi þá nógar, að þessi er uppi, er eg held um.” Þormóður grunar þá, að honum muni eigi sjálfrátt um; fer þá ofan í tóna og sér vegs ummerki, að Þorgeir er kominn að ofanfalli. Tekur hann þá til hans og kippir honum upp, enda var þá hvönnin nær öll upp tognuð. Fara þeir þá til fanga sinna. En það má skilja í þessum hlut, að Þorgeir var óskelfdur og ólífhræddur, og flestir hlutir hafa honum verið karlmannlega gefnir sakar afls og hreysti og allrar atgjörvi.

(*Fóstbræðra saga* 1953, 189–91. Orthography adapted to modern Icelandic spelling.)

[The following spring Thorgeir and Thormod set out north for Strandir as far as Horn. One day they went to the cliffs to gather angelica, and on one grassy ledge, known since as Thorgeir’s Ledge, they cut a large bundle. Thormod carried it up to the top while Thorgeir remained where he was. Suddenly the loose ground began to give way under Thorgeir’s feet and he grabbed at the base of one of the angelica plants close to the roots to prevent himself from falling. It was some sixty fathoms down to the rocky beach below. He could not make his way back up, so he hung there and refused to make any attempt to call out to Thormod even at the risk of falling to certain death below. Thormod waited up on the cliff top, thinking that Thorgeir was bound to get himself back onto the ledge. When it seemed to him that Thorgeir was hanging there much longer than could be expected he went down onto the ledge and called out to him, asking him if he had enough angelica now and when, if ever, he was coming back up. Thorgeir replied, his voice

unwavering and no trace of fear in his heart. “I reckon,” he said, “I’ll have enough once I’ve uprooted this piece I’m holding.” It then occurred to Thormod that Thorgeir could not make it up alone and he stepped down onto the ledge and saw that Thorgeir was in great peril of falling. So he grabbed hold of him and pulled him up sharply, by which time the angelica plant was almost completely uprooted. After that they returned to their hoard. One may conclude from this incident that Thorgeir was unafraid as far as his own life was concerned, and that he proved his courage and manliness in whatever dangers he encountered, either to his body or his mind.]

(*The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* 1997, 360–61)

Another good example of “klausur” is in the description of Thordis’ change of mind, when she felt insulted by her lover, the poet Thormod, when he went to see another woman and had composed a poem about her:

Og er vetra tók og ísa lagði, þá minntist Þormóður þess vinfengis, er honum hafði verið til Þórdísar, dóttur Grímu í Ögri; gerir hann þá heiman för sína og leggur leið í Ögur. Gríma tók við honum með miklu gleðibragði, en Þórdís reigðist nokkuð svo við honum og skaut öxl við Þormóði, sem konur eru jafnan vanar, þá er þeim líkar eigi allt við karla. Það finnur Þormóður skjótt og sá þó, að hún skaut í skjálög augunum stundum og sá nokkuð um öxl til Þormóðar; kom honum í hug, að vera mætti svo, að dælla væri að draga, ef hálf hleypti, minnr hana á hið forna vinfengi, hvert verið hafði. Þórdís mælti: “Það hefi eg spurt, að þú hefir fengið þér nýja unnustu og hafir ort lofkvæði um hana.” Þormóður svarar: “Hver er sú unnusta mín, er þú talar til, að eg hafi um ort?” Þórdís svarar: “Sú er Þorbjörg út í Arnardal.” Þormóður svarar: “Engu gegnir það, að eg hafi kvæði ort um Þorbjörgu; en hitt er satt, að eg orti um þig lofkvæði, þá er eg var í Arnardal, því að mér kom í hug, hversu langt var í milli fríðleiks þíns og Þorbjargar og svo hið sama kurteisi; em eg nú til þess hér kominn, að eg vil nú færa þér kvæðið.” Þormóður kvað nú Kolbrúnarvísur og snýr þeim erindum til lofs við Þórdísi, er mest voru á kveðin orð, að hann hafði um Þorbjörgu ort. Gefur hann nú Þórdísi kvæðið til heilla sátta og heils hugar hennar og ásta við sig. Og svo sem myrkva dregur upp úr hafi og leiðir af með litlu myrkri, og kemur eftir bjart sólskin með blíðu veðri, svo dró kvæðið allan óræktar þokka og myrkva af hug Þórdísar, og renndi hugarljós hennar heitu ástar gjörvalla til Þormóðar með varmri blíðu.

(172–74)

[When winter arrived and the lakes, rivers and streams were covered again with ice, Thormod remembered his relationship with Gríma’s daughter, Thordis, and he set out for the farm at Ogur. Gríma received him joyfully, but Thordis was stiff and haughty and held him at a distance, as women do with men whom they dislike. Thormod quickly saw how she looked away and treated him coldly, so he thought he might try to draw her in a little by reminding her of how close they had once been. Thordis said, “I’ve heard that you have a new love and that you have composed a poem of praise for her.” Thormod replied, “Who is this love of mine

for whom you say I have composed a poem?” Thordis answered, “Thorbjorg at Arnardalur.” Thormod said, “It’s a lie that I composed poetry about Thorbjorg. The truth is that I composed a poem in praise of you while I was staying in Arnardalur because I realised how much more beautiful and courteous you are than she. And that’s why I came here – to present those verses to you.” Thormod recited now the Dark-brow verses, turning most of what he had composed about Thorbjorg into praise for Thordis. Then he gave the poem to Thordis so that they might be fully reconciled and that her affection and love for him be re-established. And like the dark mists that are drawn up out of the ocean, dispersing slowly to sunshine and gentle weather, so did these verses draw all reserve and darkness from Thordis’ mind and Thormod was once again bathed in all the brightness of her warm and gentle love.]
(354–55)

Comments like that are unique in the Icelandic sagas, and they have greatly displeased the scholars who have dealt with the saga. They also seem to have displeased the literary establishment of the fourteenth century.

III

The Saga of the Sworn Brothers is mainly preserved in three different manuscripts: Flateyjarbók, Möðruvallabók (M), and Hauksbók (Hb). The younger versions, in Möðruvallabók, and especially in Hauksbók, show a clear tendency to erase the digressions from the oldest version in Flateyjarbók.² Until Sigurður Nordal argued for the theory that the digressions in Flateyjarbók were original to the saga, it was a common view that they were later interpolations from the time of the saga decline. It was impossible for this “row of stupidities” as the seventeenth century philologist Árni Magnússon put it (Íslenzk fornrit VI, Introduction, LXXL), to have belonged to the saga from the beginning. The later philologist Finnur Jónsson calls them romantic, theological, and anatomical nonsense (LXXL), and the saga scholar Björn M. Ólsen is quite sure when he states:

Það væri blindur maður, sem ekki sæi, að þessar málalengingar í M eru ekki annað en klerklegar hugleiðingar (“reflexionir”) út af hinu einfalda efni, sem stendur í Hb. Slíkar hugleiðingar ríða algerlega í bága við hinn einfalda, hlutlausa íslenska sögustíl.
(LXXIII)

[One would have to be blind not to see that these verbositys in the manuscript M are nothing more than clerical reflections around the plain and simple subject matter in the manuscript Hb. Such reflections are in a clear disagreement with the simple, neutral, and Icelandic saga style.]³

In the introduction to the saga in its standard edition, *Íslensk fornrit*, the editor Guðni Jónsson calls its style as clear and polished as the style of the best sagas, “að undanskildum fáeinum mæðarfullum hugleiðingum eða fróðleiksgreinum, sem stinga mjög í stúf við stíl sögunnar að öðru leyti” [apart from some sentimental reflections or learned paragraphs that jar seriously with the genuine style of the saga] (Íslenzk fornrit VI, Introduction, LIII). Sigurður Nordal has a chapter in this introduction where he groups the digressions in three categories according to subject matter, as “skáldlegir sprettir” [poetical escapades], “guðrækilegar hugleiðingar og lærdómsklausur” [theological reflections and learned paragraphs] and “ýmiss konar athugasemdir um líffræði og lífeðlisfræði, oft næsta fáránlegar” [various comments on organs and biology, most often quite absurd], all of them irrelevant to the saga itself (LXXI).

In his dissertation *Um Fóstbræðrasögu* from 1972, Jónas Kristjánsson supports Nordal's view about the digressions as original to the saga: a hard conclusion, he says, that one only regrets. He explains the digressions as a consequence of influence. The author of the saga was, according to Jónas, so impressed by the elaborate style of the legends of bishops and holy men, that he simply lost control of himself in his admiration for the heroes. Contrary to Nordal, he therefore dates the saga as one of the latest (Kristjánsson 238 ff.).

IV

The digressions in *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* clash so clearly with the unheroic deeds in the saga, as well as its disguised objectivity, that they cause a high degree of irony, an underestimated concept in the scholarship and interpretation of the Icelandic sagas. *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* is not a heroic saga, and was never meant to be. It is a comic tale that parodies the heroic ideal as well as the literary genres that support it. The same is certainly the case with other sagas that have been defined as minor. They have been placed in the wrong genre. In reality they belong to the genre of carnival and the grotesque, the medieval culture of laughter.

The sworn brothers, Thorgeir and Thormod, are not the embodiments of the heroic and courageous manhood, “ímynd hinnar hugdjörfu og óbilandi karlmennsku,” as stated in the introduction to the standard edition of the saga (Íslenzk fornrit VI, Introduction, LIII). They are the exact opposite of it. The saga does not admire them, it mocks them. These heroes live in quite another world from most people around them, people who—apart from some unruly gangsters—are described as peaceful and hardworking farmers. Their opinion of themselves differs not only from other people's opinions, but also from the saga, the text itself. This is expressed in the disharmony between the subject matter and form caused by the digressions; the saga is full of both irony and grotesque bodily imagery.

V

In his classic work on the renaissance writer Rabelais, the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin discusses two different cultures during the period with roots in the European Middle Ages. His theories are very useful in the understanding of the literary culture of Medieval Iceland. On the one hand, Bakhtin says, we have the classical, serious, and acknowledged high culture, and on the other the lower culture of carnival, which is characterized by laughter and joy. The classical culture is exclusive and belongs to the upper class. The culture of carnival is common to everybody, with roots in medieval plays and feasts. The main characteristic of carnival is the grotesque. The aim of the grotesque is to lower—or in more modern terms to deconstruct—everything that is elaborate or high, spiritual or abstract, and drag it down to domestic everyday life, to the earth and the body. The core of the grotesque is laughter, that is, a liberating form of laughter that is shared by all. Everyone has a body, has to sleep, eat and defecate, can be sick and feel pain. And everyone dies, no matter how high in society they are. Therefore grotesque imagery shows a great interest in body parts and bodily functions, such as bottoms and noses, eating, drinking and digesting, but also what happens to the body, such as beatings, amputations, and all kinds of suffering and pain. Often people are compared to animals.

One of the most common scenes in grotesque literature, as well as painting, is a feast with all kinds of people who sit at the same table, eating, drinking, and enjoying themselves. A description of a feast of this sort is found in the celebrated account of the historical *Sturlunga* about the wedding at Reykhólar in the year 1119, one of the most reliable sources of story-telling in Medieval Iceland.⁴ This feast turns out to be a very grotesque one, with descriptions of the guests' bad breath and other bodily functions associated with bellies and too much eating.

The Saga of the Sworn Brothers replaces Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's "heroic realism" with Bakhtin's "grotesque realism." This appears in many ways. The sworn brothers themselves are a typical comic couple similar, for instance, to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The one, Thorgeir, is big and strong, and likes neither women nor fun:

Svo er sagt, að Þorgeir væri lítil kvennamaður; sagði hann það vera svívirðing síns krafts, að hokra að konum. Sjaldan hló hann.
(128)

[It is said that Thorgeir was not much of a ladies' man. He said it was demeaning to his strength to stoop to women. He seldom laughed.]
(333)

This fellow pursues battles and is said to be generally unfriendly with people. The other, Thormod, is a poet and womanizer; he is rather small, and not strong, is often bored, seeks amusement, and introduces himself as peculiar looking:

“Auðkenndur maður em eg,” segir Þormóður, “svartur maður og hrokkinhærður og málhaltur.”
(236)

[“I’m an easy man to recognise,” Thormod said, “a black man, with my curly hair and my stammer.”]
(379)

A stammer is an unexpected characteristic for a poet and not very practical in those days of oral culture.

VI

The biological digressions of the saga are hardly the result of the author’s great interest in medicine, but rather the saga’s sense of merriment and fun, which casts a grotesque light on heroes and heroic deeds by reducing them to mere anatomy. In this respect the blunt physical descriptions of the differing hearts of the sworn brothers are remarkable, beyond the metaphorical references to hearts as “a place of fear.” The heart of Thorgeir is taken out of him after his death, slain in a battle in the northern and most isolated part of Iceland. It is examined and turns out to be surprisingly small:

Svo segja sumir menn, að þeir klyfðu hann til hjarta og vildu sjá, hvílíkt væri, svo hugprúður sem hann var, en menn segja, að hjartað væri harla lítið, og höfðu sumir menn það fyrir satt, að minni séu hugprúðra manna hjörtu en huglausra, því að menn kalla minna blóð í litlu hjarta en miklu, en kalla hjartablóði hræðslu fylgja, og segja menn því detta hjarta manna í brjóstinu, að þá hræðist hjartablóðið og hjartað í mannum.
(210–11)

[Some people say, that he had shown so much courage that they cut him open to see what kind of heart lay there, and that it had been very small. Some hold it true that a brave man’s heart is smaller than that of a coward, for a small heart has less blood than a large one and is therefore less prone to fear. If a man’s heart sinks in his breast and fails him, they say it is because his heart’s blood and his heart have become afraid.]
(368)

Thormod, at the king's court in Norway, pulls out bits of his own heart from his dying body, with a funny remark. Unlike Thorgeir's heart, Thormod's is big and fat:

Síðan tók Þormóður töngina og kippti á burt örinni, en á örinni voru krókar, og lágu þar á tágur af hjartanu, sumar rauðar, en sumar hvítar, gular og grænar. Og er það sá Þormóður, þá mælti hann: "Vel hefir konungurinn alið oss, hvítt er þessum karli um hjartarætur."

(276)

[Then Thormod took the tongs and pulled at the arrowhead, but it was barbed and on the barbs lay tissues of his heart, some of which were red and others white, yellow and green. And when Thormod saw this, he said, "The king has nourished us well. White are the roots around this old man's heart."]

(402)

He then composes a poem and dies in a heroic standing position as his sworn brother had done before him.

Another good example of a biological digression is the description of "Fífl-Egill" (229), Egil the Fool, Thormod's companion in Greenland. He is followed by a group of men and thinks he is in great danger:

Egill varð stórum hræddur, er hann sá manna för eftir sér og með vopnum. Og er hann var handtekinn, þá skalf á honum leggur og liður sakir hræðslu. Öll bein hans skulfu, þau sem í voru hans líkama, en það voru tvö hundruð beina og fjórtán bein; tennur hans nötruðu, þær voru þrír tígir; allar æðar í hans hörundi pipruðu fyrir hræðslu sakir, þær voru fjögur hundruð og fimmtán.

(233)

[Egil was terrified when he saw them chasing after him, armed, and when they caught him, he shook from head to foot with fear. Every bone in his body shook, all two hundred and fourteen of them. All his teeth chattered, and there were thirty of them. And all the veins in his skin trembled with fear, and there were four hundred and fifteen of them.]

(378)

There is great humour in this description. Yet in his dissertation, Jónas Kristjánsson took the time to compare this biological description with some medical writings from the Middle Ages, and noted that the saga did not have the number of teeth right. Two were missing! He sees two possible explanations for this; it could either be a "classic scribal error" or that the author had "counted teeth in the mouth of a person who did not have a full set" (Kristjánsson 245).

This is a perfect example of scholars' tendency to take the accounts in the Icelandic sagas literally and miss their humorous point.

Another of Thormod's companions in Greenland carries the honourable name "Lúsa-Oddi" (238), Oddi Louse. Their first meeting is described in this way:

Þormóði þótti dauflégt í hellinum, því að þar var fátt til skemmtunar. Einn góðan veðurdag ræðst Þormóður brott frá hellinum. Hann klífur upp hamrana og hafði öxi sína með sér. Og er hann er skammt kominn frá hellinum, þá mætti hann manni á leið. Sá var mikill vexti og ósinnilegur, ljótur og eigi góður yfirbragðs. Hann hafði yfir sér verju saumaða saman af mörgum tötrum, hún var feljótt sem laki og höttur á upp með síkri gjörð; hún var öll lúsug. Því að þá er sólskin var heitt, þá gengu verkfákar frá fódri hans hörunds á hinar ystu trefur sinna herbergja og létu þar þá við sólu síður við blika.

(238)

[Thormod found the cave dull for there was little for him to do to pass the time and one fine day he left. He climbed up the cliff face, taking his axe with him, and when he had come a short distance from the cave he met a man journeying there. He was a large man with an unpleasant and off-putting appearance, one who would have been hard-pressed to find a companion. He wore a cloak sewn from all sorts of rags and tatters, which overlapped each other like the folds in a sheep's stomach. On his head, he wore a hood made in the same way, and it was covered with lice. Since the sun shone hotly, the fully-fed lice kept their distance from him and nested not in his skin. Instead they bedded down in the reaches of his tatters and baked themselves there in the sunshine.]

(380)

The translation misses the sense of insufficient amusement implied by "fátt til skemmtunar," while "eigi góður yfirbragðs" would be better captured by a more active sense of ugliness. The lice are not baking so much as sunbathing, so some of the saga's grotesque imagery is lost in translation. Still, a grotesque rather than heroic tone is set when Thormod exchanges clothes with this person covered in lice, and takes off for further deeds.

VII

The slayings committed by the sworn brothers generally take place in darkness or in ambush, or as the saga words it, "when least expected." Most often the victims are quite innocent, as for example the tired shepherd at the farm Hvassafell:

Þorgeir hafði riðið undan suður, og er hann kom til Hvassafells, stóðu þar menn úti. Sauðamaður var þá heim kominn frá fé sínu og stóð þar í túninu og studdist fram á staf sinn og talaði við aðra menn. Stafurinn var lágur, en maðurinn móður,

og var hann nokkuð bjúgur, steyldur á hæli og lengdi hálsinn. En er Þorgeir sá það, reiddi hann upp öxina og lét detta á hálsinn. Öxin beit vel og fuk af höfuðið og kom víðs fjarri niður. Þorgeir reið síðan í brott, en þeim féllust öllum hendur, er í túninu höfðu verið. Litlu síðar komu þeir frændur eftir; voru þeim þá sögð þessi tíðendi, og þótti þeim þetta eiga hafa vel til borið. Er svo sagt, að þeir frændur bættu víg þetta fyrir Þorgeir. Riðu þeir síðan til móts við Þorgeir. Hann fagnar þeim vel. Þeir spurðu, hví Þorgeir hefði þetta víg vegið eða hvað Þorgeir fyndi til um mann þenna. Þorgeir svarar: “Eigi hafði hann nokkrar sakir til móts við mig, en hitt var satt, að eg mátti eigi við bindast, er hann stóð svo vel til höggingsins.” (156–57)

[Thorgeir had ridden south ahead of the others and when he came to Hvassafell there were some men there standing outside. The shepherd had just come home from the herd and stood in the hayfield, leaning forward on his staff, talking to the other men. It was a short staff and the shepherd was tired. Thus he was rather hunched over, with his tired legs bent and his neck sticking out. When Thorgeir saw this he drew his axe in the air and let it fall on the man's neck. The axe bit well and the head went flying off and landed some distance away. Then Thorgeir rode off and the rest of the men in the field stood there amazed. Shortly afterwards, Illugi and Thorgils came by. They were told what happened and were not pleased. It is said that they provided compensation for Thorgeir's deed and then rode on to meet him. He greeted them warmly. They asked him why he had slain the man and what possible fault he had found with him. Thorgeir replied, “He had committed no wrong against me. If you want the truth, I couldn't resist the temptation – he stood so well poised for the blow.”] (347)

In Greenland Thormod fights with three brothers, and he kills them all. The first of them he kills in ambush, chopping him with both hands so that his head is cleaved in two. In the chase that follows and ends on the edge of a high cliff, the second brother happens to fall prone. Thormod strikes him immediately between the shoulders so that the axe sinks in up to the shaft. Before he can pull the axe out, the third brother Falgeir arrives and gives Thormod a blow. As he is now without his weapon he turns his thoughts to the holy King Olaf, asking for help:

Fellur þá öxin úr hendi Falgeiri niður fyrir hamrana ofan á sjóinn; þykir honum þá nokkru vænna, er hvorttveggi var slyppur. Og því næst falla þeir báðir fyrir hamrana ofan á sjóinn; reyna þeir þá sunðið með sér og færast niður ýmsir; finnur Þormóður, að hann mæddist af miklu sári og blóðrás. En fyrir því að Þormóði varð eigi dauði ætlaður, þá slitnaði bróklindi Falgeirs; rak Þormóður þá ofan um hann brækurnar. Falgeiri daprast þá sunðið; fer hann þá í kaf að öðru hverju og drekkur nú ómælt; skýtur þá upp þjónum og herðunum og við andlátíð skaut upp andlitinu; var þá opinn munnurinn og augun, og var þá því líkast að sjá í andlitið, sem þá er maður glottir að nokkru. Svo lýkur með þeim, að Falgeir drukknar þar. (240)

[At that moment, the axe fell from Falgeir's hand down over the rocks and into the sea. Thormod was encouraged since neither of them had a weapon now. Then both fell from the cliff into the sea below, and tried to swim and push each other under. Thormod felt his strength waning. He was badly wounded and had lost a good deal of blood, but he was not fated to die then. Suddenly, Falgeir's belt snapped and Thormod pulled at his breeches, making it difficult for him to swim. Falgeir kept going under and swallowed a good deal of water. His buttocks and back rose up out of the water, and then his face suddenly turned upward. He was dead. His mouth and eyes were open and from the look on his face it seemed as if he was grinning at something. Thus their struggle ended with Falgeir drowning there.] (381–82)

King Olaf really is a great help, as he even pulls down the enemy's breeches! Here again elements of comedy, irony, and even absurdity are lost in translation; the saga implies that Falgeir's belt snaps, enabling Thormod to pull down his breeches, as a result of fate. The description of Falgeir's dead face parallels the description of Thorgeir's dismembered head, which his slayers carry with them as a token:

Það var skemmtan þeirra á áföngum, at þeir tóku höfuð Þorgeirs úr belgnum og settu þar á þúfur upp og hlógu að. En er þeir komu í Eyjafjörð, þá áðu þeir. ... Þeir tóku þá höfuð Þorgeirs og settu það upp á þúfu eina, sem þeir voru vanir. Þeim sýndist þá höfuðið ógurlegt, augun opin og munnurinn, en úti tungan og blaðraði. (212)

[Whenever they stopped to rest, they would amuse themselves by taking the head out of the bag, putting it on a mound and laughing at it. When they came to Eyjafjord, they stopped ... and as usual they took out Thorgeir's head and set it on a mound there. But now the head seemed ghastly with its eyes and mouth open and its tongue hanging out.] (369)

Thormod composes a highly graphic verse about his fight with Falgeir describing his enemy's "gínandi rassaklof" [gaping arsehole] (242) rising from the sea. And this verse is thought by Icelandic scholars to be one of the most reliable and genuine scaldic verses attributed to Thormod! As it says in the introduction to the standard edition: "Vart er annað hugsanlegt en lýsingin á drukknum Falgeirs (27 v.) sé eftir sjónarvott, svo sérstök er hún og lifandi" [The description of Falgeir's death is certainly made by an eyewitness, given how extraordinary and vivid it is] (Íslenzk fornrit VI, LX).

The same type of grotesque humour characterizes almost all episodes in the saga. Thormod bandages one of his many wounds with his breeches, and in the barley barn at Stiklestad he hews the buttocks off a boastful and cowardly farmer,

who lets out a loud scream and grabs both buttocks with his hands (“kvað við hátt með miklum skræk og þreif til þjóhnappanna báðum höndum,” 273).

VIII

A grotesque feast and a grotesque killing, a comic carnival of eating and slaying, is described in the conflict between Thorgeir and the villain Butraldi. Visiting the cowardly farmer at Gervidalur, Butraldi is introduced thus:

Hann var einhleypingur, mikill maður vexti, rammur að afli, ljótur í ásjonu, harðfengur í skaplyndi, vígamaður mikill, nasbráður og heiftúðugur.
(142–43)

[He was a loner of no fixed abode, a large powerfully-built man, with an ugly face, quick tempered and vengeful, and he was a great slayer of men.]
(340)

A relative of the chieftain Vermund, Butraldi wanders about with two companions frightening people. The reactions of the farmer show that to him Butraldi and the hero Thorgeir are of the same type. His heart “drepur stall” [skips a beat] (144) at the unexpected arrival of both of them. He invites them to sit at the same table, and the feast can begin:

Frá verðgetum er sagt vandlega: Tveir diskar voru fram bornir; þar var eitt skammrifsstykki fornt á diskinum hvorum og forn ostur til gnættar. Butrildi signdi skamma stund, tekur upp skammrifið og sker og neytir og leggur eigi niður, fyrr en allt var rutt af rifjum. Þorgeir tók upp ostinn og skar af slíkt er honum sýndist; var hann harður og torsóttur. Hvorgi þeirra vildi deila við annan kníf né kjötstykki. En þó að þeim væri lítt verður vandaður, þá fóru þeir þó eigi til sjálfir að skepja sér mat, því að þeim þótti það skömm sinnar karlmennsku.
(144–45)

[There is a detailed report of what they ate. Two platters were brought in; on one of them was some old short-rib mutton and on the other a large quantity of old cheese. Butraldi made a brief sign of the cross, then picked up the mutton ribs, carved off the meat and continued to eat until the bones were picked clean. Thorgeir took the cheese and cut off as much as he wanted, though it was hard and difficult to pare. Neither of them would share either the knife or the food with the other. Though the meal was not good, they did not bring out their own provision for fear that it should be seen as a lack of manliness.]
(341)

The following day Thorgeir got the short ribs and Butraldi the cheese. When they had eaten their fill they left the farm and walked out into the snow, seeking more adventures. The way was tough. Butraldi takes a shortcut and cuts steps in the hard crusted snow with his axe. Thorgeir has chosen another way; he climbs a ridge where he can watch Butraldi working his way through the snow. Butraldi challenges him, asking if he has fled. That starts a contest of manliness, one of many in the saga:

Butraldi mælti þá: “Rann kappinn nú?” Þorgeir segir: “Eigi rann eg; því fór eg aðra leið, að eg þurfti eigi að skora fönn fyrir mér, en nú mun eg eigi renna undan yður.” Þorgeir stendur þá á brekkubrúninni, en Butraldi skorar fönnina. Og er hann kom í miðja brekkuna, þá setur Þorgeir spjótskefti sitt undir sig og snýr fram oddinum, en hefir öxina reidda um öxl, rennir fönnina ofan að Butralda. Hann heyrir hvininn af för Þorgeirs og lítur upp og finnur eigi fyrr en Þorgeir hjó framan í fang honum og þar á hol: fellur hann á bak aftur. En Þorgeir rennir fram yfir hann, til þess að hann kemur á jöfnu, svo hart, að förunautar Butralda hrjóta frá í brott.
(146)

[Then Butraldi said, “So the hero ran off, did he?” Thorgeir said, “I didn’t run off. I simply took a different route so as not to have to cut my way through the snow. There’ll be no running away from you now, though.” Thorgeir stood at the edge of the ridge while Butraldi continued to cut his way through the snow. When Butraldi was about halfway up, Thorgeir placed his spear underneath him, with the spearhead facing forwards, raised his axe to shoulder height and slid down the snow towards Butraldi. He heard the sound of Thorgeir whizzing down and looked up, but before he knew what was happening Thorgeir struck him full on the chest with his axe and cut right through him and he fell back down the slope. Thorgeir continued down over him until he reached flat ground, and moved with such speed that Butraldi’s companions rushed off.]
(342)

This is hardly the act of a hero. Thorgeir slides down the hill with his bottom on the spear and over the stooping enemy, using him as a springboard, and he does not stop until he is safe on level ground.

IX

The grotesqueries in *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* are interestingly enough connected with the saga’s descriptions of women. They all have a similar function, that is to deconstruct the heroic manhood of the main male characters.

Thorgeir does not meddle with women, but Thormod does, and he has great trouble with his competing sweethearts. When he gives the poem he had originally composed about Thorbjorg Kolbrún in Arnardalur to Thordis in Ogur, Thorbjorg appears to him in a dream and asks if he has given her poem to another woman.

He lies and denies this. She knows better and threatens him with such pain that his eyes will pop out of his head unless he confesses to all the world that the poem is hers. Thormod wakes up in great pain and concedes. He takes the poem from Thordis and gives it back to Thorbjorg.⁵

Thorbjorg is the only woman in the saga whose appearance is described, in a peculiar description full of understatement. She is “kurteis kona og eigi einkar væn” (170) [a courteous woman but hardly a beauty] (353), slim and well proportioned, and “útfætt og eigi alllág” (170) [toes out and hardly very low] (353). All the same, Thormod gazes at her and finds her beautiful.

It is characteristic for the women in this saga to be completely indispensable to the male heroes. They give them good advice and often they save them from death. Most of them are single and run their own farms, as do the mothers of both Thordis and Thorbjorg. One of these single women is Sigurfljod. The name means a woman of victory, a name that does not occur in other sagas, and perhaps is meant to be symbolic. The same could be the case with the other names in the saga. For instance the names of the sworn brothers themselves: Þor-móður, Þor-geir. “Þor” meaning courage, “móður” mood, and “geir” a spear.

Sigurfljod has the sworn brothers kill two harassing gangsters for her, who are under the protection of the chieftain Vermund. She takes all responsibility for the killings, and in the reckoning she has to make with the objecting chieftain, we see a remarkable criticism against chieftains who lack control over anything. She says:

Það er sem von er, að yður sé svo um gefið, en það munu sumir menn mæla, að þeir hafi eigi þessa menn fyrir yður drepið, heldur má hinn veg að kveða, að þeir hafi þessi víg fyrir yður unnið. En hver skal hegna ósiðu, rán eða hernað, ef eigi viljið þér, er stjórnarmenn eru kallaðir héraða?
(140–41)

[It was to be expected that you would react like this, though some would say that they have not killed your men but done this slaying for you. Who else should punish ill deeds such as plundering and robbery if you do not who are called chieftain of the district?]
(340)

This social criticism, placed here in the mouth of Sigurfljod, runs through the whole saga and often comes from a woman’s point of view. It is expressed both directly and indirectly. For instance, the saga does not forget working people who are often the victims of Thorgeir’s violence, and the frequent harsh descriptions of nature and weather show an awareness of the hard struggle for life. *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* is not as preoccupied with genealogies as many other sagas. The only person with a genealogy worth mentioning is Thorgeir.

That itself could be a facet of the criticism: it is because of his rich and powerful relatives that he can behave as he does and get away with it.

Thus there is clearly a connection between the grotesque realism in *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* and its social satire. The saga is not only a parody of heroes and heroic ideals, it is also a commentary on a hierarchial and patriarchal society.

NOTES

1. This article is based on a paper given at the Félag íslenskra fræða [Society for Icelandic Studies] in December 1980, originally printed as “Bróklindi Falgeirs: *Fóstbræðra saga* og hláturmenning miðalda,” in *Skírnir* 1987, and is reprinted here with permission of the author. The translation was done by the author, who would like thank Elin Thordarson and P. J. Buchan for their help translating certain passages.
2. In the standard edition, Íslenzk fornrit VI, as well as in the English translation, the text from Flateyjarbók is printed in petit, as irrelevant interpolations.
3. All English translations of Icelandic works quoted are those of the author, with the exception of *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* translated by Martin Regal.
4. See *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, chapter 10, 23–27.
5. For a more detailed analysis about the connection between womanizing and manliness, see Kress 2009.

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