2022

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Michael S. Nagy

HON-491

11/17/20

Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs, or "The Tale of Thorstein Staff-Struck" is an atypical piece of Norse short prose that likely originates from a mid-13th century oral tradition.[1] Although the tale employs many of the common saga motifs, such as elaborate genealogies, and the plain prose of the genre, this perceived simplicity and objectivity is deceptive. Early 20th century scholars in particular, such as Vilhelm Grønbech, in their efforts to define the essence of the Icelandic Sagas, rightly identify numerous key themes in Icelandic literature but fail to acknowledge those themes as anything more than "aesthetic indulgence".[2] Such themes as honor, fate, and warrior heroism are likely more meaningful than Grønbech asserts in the sagas at large, but the way *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs* and its indirect prequel, *Vapnfirðingasaga*, or *The Saga of the Vapnfjord Men*, wield the concepts of honor, masculinity, and warriorship directly challenges assertions in the vein of Grønbech. In these two stories, strong and respectable men seek parley; aggressive and warlike men meet disappointing ends; and heroes emerge from conflict without spilling a drop of each other's blood. *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs* diverts from common saga outcomes so sharply, that the notion that this eccentricity is meaningless seems nigh impossible. This *þáttr*, or tale, contains clear moral messages that reflect upon a society deeply wounded by cyclical violence and offers conscious and pragmatic alternatives to slaughter in defending one's masculine honor.

To grasp the existential importance of honor to the Old Norse almost requires one to read the many volumes of their stories, yet Walther Gehl captures the centrality of honor to Old Norse life with exceptional brevity: "Ehre ist die innerste Triebkraft altgermanischen Lebensgefühls".[3]

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[1] According to Gwyn Jones in the foreword of his translation.
[2] Vilhelm Grønbech, *Vor folkeæt i oldtiden* (Copenhagen, 1955), I, 91.
[3] Walther Gehl, *Ruhm und Ehre bei dem Nordgermanen: Studien zum Lebensgefühl der isländischen Saga* (Berlin, 1937), p. 7.

[Honor is the core motivating force behind Old Germanic lived-experiences].[4] Much like honor bound their later continental counterparts to the chivalric codes, the demands of *drengskapr* pervaded every aspect of the lives of Icelandic men, and by extension, the women and children tied to them. To borrow the word from Old Norse is more appropriate, as simply translating it to "honor" does the specificity and prevalence of the concept no justice. Theodore Andersson summarizes Grønbech's astute description of *drengskapr* as "a feeling of personal integrity vital to the individual".[5] Andersson goes on to describe how when a man's *drengskapr* is challenged or damaged, he must restore it through violent retaliation in order to preserve not only his own integrity but that of his entire family. "This revenge is an automatic response. It does not spring from a sense of justice, or retaliation ('an eye for an eye'), or vindictiveness, but from a man's feeling of responsibility to himself and his sense of his own honor, which is an unnegotiable standard".[6] The rigidity of this concept is alien to a modern Western audience, but one has only to read a handful of Norse literature to understand the weight of this moral construct.

In *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs* Bjarni's *þingmenn*, men sworn to his service, still jabbingly refer to their *goði*, or chieftain, as Killer-Bjarni referencing his cowardly assassination of Geitir, his kin, in his younger years. They also insult him for his violent clash with Thorkel at Bodvarsdal.[7] This deriding nickname, not unlike the one Thorstein bears, follows Bjarni from his young adulthood into the middle age the *þáttr* finds him in. For a goði such as Bjarni, missteps in the delicate dance of maintaining one's *drengskapr* permanently damage one's authority as a

[4] All German-language translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.
[5] Theodore M. Andersson, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas", *Speculum*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Oct. 1970), pp. 575
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs, Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones, Oxford University Press (New York 1961). p. 81; *The Vapnfjord Men, Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones, Oxford University Press (New York 1961). p. 65

lord. When *þingmenn* vow their service to a *goði*, they promise their armed support on the expectation that the *goði* will protect the honor of his *þingmenn* as well as be honorable himself. In effect, Bjarni's past kin-killing and assassination damage the integrity of his entire household indefinitely.

Naturally, this concept of *drengskapr* and manliness are intimately connected to sexuality and gender. To be unmanly is to be effeminate, and in medieval Iceland, effeminacy is one short step from cowardice. To behave with perceivable effeminacy or display a feminine nature as a man, even in the minutest of manners, was to invite *nið*. *Nið* is an Old Norse word with no precise translation or English definition, but Preben Meulengracht Sørenson states that "… accusations with sexual import form the core of the meaning…".[8] Such accusations customarily initiate a violent encounter. Not only could a man kill those who make *nið* against him, but society demands that he do so to preserve his standing. Sørenson points to a scene in *Njáls saga* for example, where at the *alþing* Skarpheðinn is to offer wergild, a monetary settlement, to Flosi, for the killing of Hǫskuldr. Njáll seemingly innocently places a silk cloak on the pile in addition to the silver already on offer. Flosi takes offense upon finding it simply because of the cloak's delicacy and effeminacy. This ignites a verbal conflict between Flosi and Skarpheðinn in which among other sexual defamations, Skarpheðinn claims that Flosi is "the bride of Svinfell's troll every ninth night".[9] What is abstract, schoolyard bickering to a modern audience, rules out any hope of peace between the families at hand, for of all things, *nið*, this vicious attack on Flosi's masculinity, cannot rest without retaliation.

[8] Preben M. Sørenson, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre, Odense University Press (Odense 1983) p. 11
[9] *Ibid*. p. 9

While such accidents as Njál's poor choice of gift already carry significant weight to medieval Icelanders, deliberate accusations of *nið* are matters of such severity that Skarpheðinn endangered himself legally by uttering such fantastic slander. The West Norwegian *Law of Gulathing* outlines the consequences for those who falsely make *nið*.

> No one is to make an 'exaggeration' (ýki) about another or a libel. It is called an "exaggeration" if someone says something about another man which cannot be, nor come to be, nor have been: declares he is a woman every ninth night or has born a child or calls him *gylfin* (a werewolf, an unnatural monster?). He is outlawed if he is found guilty of that.[10]

Skarpheðinn makes an exaggeration precisely as the law defines the offense, as he essentially accuses Flosi of being a woman every ninth night, in that he serves as the troll's bride on that schedule. Were the *alþing* to have prosecuted him on that statement, he could have become an outlaw. This means that not only would Flosi and his supporters seek his death, but anyone who encountered him would be entitled to kill him if they wished. The *Law of Gulathing* has even further provisions dictating resolutions and consequences surrounding verbal offense. This shows that *drengskapr*, *nið*, and manliness are not just social concepts, mutual expectations and ideals, taboos and offenses, but rather they are guiding principles of life in Icelandic society. Furthermore, the provisions of *The Law of Gulathing* illustrate that the behaviors surrounding *drengskapr* and *nið* are not the base instincts of primitive cavemen, but conscious legal codes extending beyond the realm of fiction, binding the society that created the sagas. By now one should understand how essential, and ironically delicate, *drengskapr* was in medieval Iceland. Every single act and gesture these people made had to be deliberate and calculated in the interest of avoiding offense, to preserve peace and the social standing of all around them. In this powder-keg social climate, accidental offenses immediately create volatile and dangerous stand-offs.

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[10] *Ibid.* p. 15-16

An accidental offense is precisely what begins *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs*, as Þorstein, a man described as "a big man, strong and calm tempered, who worked so hard on his father's farm that the labour of three other men would not have stood them in better stead.",[11] finds himself a reluctant participant in a feud. The instigating event comes during a horse fight, when Thord, the opposing stable-master, a *þingmaðr*, or liegeman, sworn to Bjarni, strikes Þorstein over the eyebrow with a staff: "Once he saw his horse was getting the worst of it, Thord struck Thorstein's horse a great blow over the nose, but Thorstein saw this and struck Thord's horse a far greater blow… With that Thord struck at Thorstein with his horse-staff…".[12] Þorstein did not act on this offense then and there, despite being in full view of an audience. The brothers Thorvald and Thorhall, two other *þingmenn* of Bjarni's gave him the pejorative epithet *Stangarhǫggs*, meaning "Staff-struck". When Þorstein's father, Þórarin, an old viking long past his prime, confronts him about the incident a year later, Þorstein replies, "I saw no gain in honour, by reckoning it a blow rather than an accident".[13] Although Þorstein's independent mindedness on the matter is admirable, by leaving the incident lie for so long he has given such busy-mouthed provocateurs as Thorhall and Thorvald grounds to dismantle his already meager social standing as the farmer-son of an aging viking.

Nearly every sentence of these first four paragraphs pose dire social implications. Þorstein's *drengskapr* demands that he retaliate upon receiving the blow from Thord, but he instead walks away. His father calls him *ragr*, an effeminate coward, yet he does nothing.[14] Thorvald and Thorhall grant him a humiliating epithet, *Stangarhǫggs*, which according to

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[11] *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs, Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones, Oxford University Press (New York 1961). p. 78
[12] *Ibid.* p. 78-79
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] *Ibid.* p. 79

William Ian Miller in *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, is derived from *Klámhǫggs* or "Shame-stroke". The *Klámhǫggs* was "the intentional stabbing or cutting of a man's buttocks and the shame of the stroke was clearly the shame of *ragr*, the shame of being sodomized".[15] This means that Thorhall and Thorvald have made *nið* against Þorstein, granting him legal authority to kill them both, but instead, he "asked them to keep this from his father…".[16] Despite Gehl's claim that: "In der Saga gibt es keinen 'moralischen Überbau, ' von dem aus die einzelnen Gestalten beurteilt werden; …"[17] [In the sagas there is no 'moral framework' from which each single figure would be judged; …], I have established that the sagas do contain a moral framework, it is called *drengskapr* and according to its mandates, Þorstein has done everything wrong. Thorvald and Thorhall have made *nið* against him, and the reader should be laughing at this man for all the ages, yet the tale seems to deliberately preserve his dignity on his behalf.

The opening description of Þorstein, a strong worker worth three other men, is obviously an intensely positive one, which is not typical when a tale introduces a character who will soon be subject to *nið* and ridicule, and fail to stand up for himself as an Icelander should. While the tale praises Þorstein's work ethic, strength, and temper, it has the following passages to say about his aggressors: "Thord was a very overbearing sort of person; he also made many aware that he was a great man's servant, yet he was none the better man for that, and became no better liked".[18] The tale introduces Thord, Þorstein's assailant, as an obnoxious, boastful nuisance, who makes frequent attempts to elevate his standing by invoking the name of his *goði* and is oblivious to the counter-productive results. The two who coined Þorstein's epithet are "… one named

[15] William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago 1990). p. 63
[16] *Ibid.* p. 79
[17] Gehl, p. 75
[18] Jones, p. 78

Thorhall and the other Thorvald, great mouthers-over of everything they heard in the district".[19] The tale introduces Thorhall and Thorvald as the premiere gossipers of the region. Jabbering mouths in the hall imply backsides firmly planted on the bench, and swords idly sheathed in their scabbards. The fact that they have the spare time to embroil themselves in others' matters and that they are too bored to leave said matters lie paints these two men as quite useless. Þorstein's father, Þórarin, perhaps his most vicious critic of all, whom the tale never depicts out of bed, reveals himself at the end of the tale to be a miserable old cur, incapable of the violence he instigates throughout the story, even with the aid of most shameful deception:

> "Now come over here to where I am in bed–you will have to come close for the old fellow is all a-tremble in his legs for age and sickness, and never believe that my son's death has not pierced my old heart!"
>
> Bjarni now went up to the bed and took old Thorarin by the hand and found him fumbling for a big knife which he wanted to stick into Bjarni.[20]

The tale suggests in this manner throughout that Þorstein's aggressors are lesser men than he is; an abrasive braggart, gossiping servants, and a bitter old husk. Þorstein dispatches the former three with great ease, never suffering a wound himself; not only that but he is immensely fair in his dispensing of violence. Þorstein offered Thord a chance to walk away when he first made nothing of the blow in the arena, although he had every right to kill Thord on the spot if he was able. Under Icelandic law, it is the offender's duty to declare his offense accidental and make amends: "If a man does worse than he intends to do and damage results from his clumsiness that is not punishable at law and he shall make amends for the damage within two weeks' time as it is evaluated by five neighbors. Otherwise it shall not be judged as an accident",[21] Yet, despite this

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[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Jones, p. 87

[21] *Grágás efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr, 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók,* ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen. II 208, Copenhagen: Gyldendal. Re-print: Odense University Press (Odense 1974)

fact, Þorstein, the clear victim, takes it upon himself to declare the blow an accident in a shocking display of mercy. This context adds meaning to Þorstein's reply that he "saw no gain in honour, by reckoning it a blow rather than an accident".[22] Once one sees the peerless bravery in Þorstein's actions in the arena, that Þorstein is not cowering from Thord's insult should be apparent. Rather he is sparing Thord's life despite his insolence by virtue of Þorstein's restraint. His bold disregard of customs that he deems senseless is his heroic virtue; the tale does not depict him agonizing over his loss of face after he receives this blow, it simply moves along leaving the reader to assume that Þorstein carries on with his life. Þorstein is so certain of his worth and manliness that he does not allow others to thus appraise him nor does he move to appease the other members of his society, for it is he, the lowly farmer, who spares the braggart *þingmaðr* of Bjarni that day. Þorstein appears not to ask Thorhall and Thorvald to keep news of the event from his father because he is ashamed, but rather because he knows his father is an unreasonable man filled with hatred, who would compel him to transgress against his values.

Þorstein is so noble that what drives him to at last pursue the feud against Thord is his loyalty to kin, yet another of his virtues. At his father's prodding, Þorstein sets off to resolve his conflict. Þorstein explicitly offers Thord an extra-legal opportunity, given the two-week expiration date on accidents, as Miller notes,[23] to call the blow an accident and remain alive: "I want to know, friend Thord, whether it was by accident that I got a blow from you last summer at the horse-fight, or did it come about intentionally— in which case are you willing to pay reparations for it?".[24] In response to which, despite all Þorstein's respectfulness and clemency, the unsavory Thord arrogantly mocks him with an analogy about sticking one's tongue in either

[22] Jones, p. 79
[23] Miller, p. 62
[24] Jones, p. 80

cheek, calling one an accident and the other intentional.[25] Þorstein dispatches him, a killing so deft that it occupies a mere quarter of a sentence. Although the focus remains on Þorstein's non-violent character, this first display of martial prowess reinforces his manliness and superiority over his aggressors. After the woman he directs to inform Bjarni of Thord's end does so, Bjarni outlaws Þorstein: "But Þorstein went on living in Sunnudal and working for his father, and Bjarni let things lie the same".[26] Þorstein's nonchalance about having killed Thord and his status as an outlaw act to remind the audience that Þorstein is no passive man, and to remind those who would keep him from his peaceful life that they do so only in the grace of his tolerance and in ignorance of his ferocity. At this point in the tale, the outlawing seems mere procedure, and Bjarni appears to have no intention of disturbing Þorstein further. In the minds of Bjarni and Þorstein, Thord's death alone lays the matter to rest, the loud-mouthed Thorhall and Thorvald feel differently, however.

Discontent to allow Bjarni to ignore Þorstein's killing, Thorhall and Thorvald taunt Bjarni:

> We did not expect when we came to live with Killer-Bjarni that we would be singeing lambs' heads here, while Thorstein, his forest outlaw, should singe the heads of wethers. It would be no bad thing to have been more sparing of his kinsmen in Bodvarsdal, and his outlaw not sit as high as he is now in Sunnudal. But, "E'en doers are done for once wounds befall them", and we have no idea when he proposes to wipe this stain from his honour".[27]

An unnamed man in Bjarni's hall says:

> Such words are better swallowed than spoken, and it sounds as though trolls must have plucked at your tongues. For our part, we believe that he has no mind to take the food out of the mouth of Þorstein's blind father or those poor creatures who live at Sunnudal. And

[25] *Ibid.*
[26] *Ibid.* p. 81
[27] *Ibid.*

> I shall be very surprised if you are singeing lambs' heads here much oftener, or gloating over what happened in Bodvarsdal.[28]

Through this anonymous man's use of plural pronouns, he suggests that this disdainful view of Thorhall and Thorvald's remark is the opinion of many in Bjarni's household. Information on the public perception of Þorstein and this feud is very limited in the tale, but this passage suggests that at least a handful within Bjarni's household have no interest in carrying the feud beyond Thord's death. This man also suggests that Bjarni knows Þorstein to be a pillar of the Sunnudal community, and his father's only support, two roles that Bjarni is unwilling to leave vacant over the squabbling of his *þingmenn*. Finally, the unnamed man issues a warning to the brothers, that their lifespans will become quite short if they embroil themselves in Þorstein and Bjarni's business. With this statement, this man is reminding Thorhall and Thorvald to stay in their place, implying that their place is beneath the matters of Þorstein and Bjarni. All those in Bjarni's hall at Hof appear to know that for any less-than-exceptional man to act against Þorstein is a fool's errand at best, a death sentence at worst. In response to Thorhall and Thorvald's goading Bjarni sends them to do just that the next morning, borrowing a phrase from their gossip which they thought he had not heard: "In the morning he routed out Thorhall and Thorvald, bidding them ride to Sunnudal and bring him Þorstein's head, divorced from his trunk, by breakfast-time. 'For you appear to me the likeliest to remove this stain from my honour, considering I have not the courage for it myself.' They now felt they had opened their mouths too wide for sure…".[29] The insight from the anonymous man's testimony and Bjarni's repetition of the brothers' words allow me to assert with confidence that Bjarni does not intend for the brothers to succeed in his bidding, nor does he wish them to. Each man knows as well as the other that Bjarni is sending

[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Ibid.*

Thorhall and Thorvald to their deaths in retaliation for their blatant disrespect, and that any who dares to repeat their sentiments about Þorstein or Bodvarsdal shall follow in their footsteps to Sunnudal. In no way does Bjarni intend to do any harm to Þorstein. Bjarni is simply whipping his own *þingmenn* back into file and ridding himself of these most tiresome firebrands.

Meanwhile, the brothers march off to Sunnudal, to present Þorstein with yet another opportunity to prove himself fair at heart. When they approach Þorstein, he is standing in his doorway sharpening a short-sword as if to say "do not try it". In this way, Thorhall and Thorvald find him ready to defend himself, but Þorstein makes no displays of malice towards them. Þorstein must know they have come to kill him, for these brothers are the *þingmenn* of Bjarni who outlawed him, yet he does not give voice to this knowledge. Instead, he simply asks them what they are up to.[30] Perhaps, given that Þorstein is in the business of offering second chances, this is to offer the brothers an opportunity to speak truthfully about why they have come, and let their combat (or deaths, rather) be honorable. The foolish firebrands instead try to deceive and lure him outside by saying "they had the job of looking for stray horses", attacking their quarry when he steps out of the door to lend advice. Þorstein summarily slaughters them for their conniving efforts and returns to his daily matters. From the moral framework of the sagas, and even a modern viewpoint divorced from such ideas as "honorable deaths", Thorhall and Thorvald meet pathetic deaths to match their pathetic characters. For comparison I shall offer the death of the great villain Glam, an undead terror, at the hands of Grettir the Strong:

> Suddenly Grettir sprang under his arms, seized him round the waist and squeezed his back with all his might, intending in that way to bring him down, but the thrall wrenched his arms till he staggered from the violence. Then Grettir fell back to another bench. The benches flew about and everything was shattered around them. Glam wanted to get out, but Grettir tried to prevent him by stemming his foot against anything he could find.

[30] *Ibid.*

> Nevertheless Glam succeeded in getting him outside the hall. Then a terrific struggle began, the thrall trying to drag him out of the house, and Grettir saw that however hard he was to deal with in the house, he would be worse outside…[31]

This fight continues thus, a desperate struggle between hero and villain, with the advantage teetering back and forth with each sentence. Ultimately Grettir, although exhausted, pins Glam down on the porch, and before mustering the strength to finish the sinister ghost, Glam utters an ill-prophecy:

> You have expended much energy, Grettir, in your contest with me. Nor is that to be wondered at, though you will have little joy thereof. And now I tell you that you shall possess only half the strength and firmness of heart that were decreed to you if you had not striven with me. The might which was yours till now I am not able to take away, but it is in my power to ordain that never shall you grow stronger than you are now. Nevertheless your might is sufficient, as many shall find to their cost. Hitherto you have earned fame through your deed, but henceforward there shall fall upon you exile and battle; your deeds shall turn to evil and your guardian-spirit shall forsake you. You will be outlawed and your lot shall be to dwell ever alone. And this I lay upon you, that these eyes of mine shall be ever before your vision. You will find it hard to live alone, and at last it shall drag you to death.[32]

Grettir's enemy clearly pushes him to the limits of his might in this destructive battle, the result of which is not clear until its resolution. "What with fatigue and all else that he had endured, when he saw the horrible rolling of Glam's eyes his heart sank so utterly that he had not the strength to draw his sword…"[33] Even as Grettir kneels atop Glam, seemingly about to deliver the death-blow, the chilling gleam of his enemy's eyes in the pale moonlight strikes him with such terror that he nearly cannot manage to end the fiend. Grettir summons the necessary strength to at last decapitate Glam, but not before hearing his despairing curse, that Grettir shall die an outlaw and a hermit, exiled and forgotten. Memories of his fight with Glam continue to haunt Grettir's mind long after. "… He had become so frightened of the dark that he dared not go

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[31] *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, trans. George A. Hight, University of Toronto (Toronto 1913) p. 97-98
[32] *Ibid.* p. 98
[33] *Ibid.*

anywhere alone at night. Apparitions of every kind came before him."[34] Such a fearsome and terrible foe was Glam that the battle seems to have cost Grettir some of his mind. Meanwhile, Thorhall and Thorvald fall to Þorstein's short-sword, weak in the knees at the prospect of facing him honestly:

> So Þorstein came outside, and when they had come down into the home-field Thorvald hoisted up his axe and ran at him, but Þorstein gave him such a shove with his arm that he fell headlong forward, and Þorstein drove the short-sword through him. Then Thorhall would have attacked him, but he too went the same road as Thorvald. Þorstein then bound them both on horseback, fixed the reins on the horses' necks, got the whole outfit headed in the right direction, and the horses made their way home to Hof.[35]

Despite the brothers' target having willingly relinquished every advantage to them, Þorstein makes short work of them and sends them back to Bjarni like grain tied to a donkey. Þorstein is hardly armed, bearing something likely akin to a seax, and yet he seems not to need a weapon at all, as he sends Thorvald sailing face first to the ground with a mere shove. The text does not afford miserable Thorhall the honor of having "attacked" Þorstein, stating that he "would have attacked him", but the action seemed unworthy of further description as he fared no better than his brother. Unlike Grettir's desperate and fearful struggle to overcome his foe, the short fight with Thorhall and Thorvald does not exhaust Þorstein, nor does it seem to trouble him. Thorhall and Thorvald demonstrate in their miserable attempt on Þorstein's life that they hold little value as warriors and are hardly worth remembering. In this encounter the tale shows Þorstein's true ferocity for those who he does not respect and refuse his mercy. For testing Þorstein's patience and Bjarni's, the brothers earned themselves a cold grave, and the tale holds no mention of mourners for those "great mouthers-over of all they heard…"[36]

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[34] *Ibid.* p. 99
[35] Jones, p. 82
[36] *Ibid.*

Last of his aggressors is old Þórarin, his father who calls him *ragr* for not violently retaliating and wishes for the death of his own son to redeem himself of the perceived wound to his lineage.[37] The combination of his calling Þorstein *ragr* and his wishing his son dead places Þórarin on the vilest end of the moral spectrum. *Ragr*, often translated as "coward", carries heavy implications of effeminacy and is one of the three words which grants the target and any man near him the privilege to kill the man who cast the insult. "If a man calls another *ragr, stroðinn,* or *sorðinn*… a man has the right to kill in retaliation for these three words".[38] This means that Þorstein has the legal right to kill his father when he utters this insult, but while his father wishes him dead, Þorstein refuses to kill his kin and brushes off the abuse as the ramblings of his aging father. While others who fail to accept Þorstein's good-natured mercy do so at the peril of exhausting his patience, Þórarin enjoys the immunity of family. Þorstein's calm temper and loyalty to his kin save the father the bite of his son's sword.

Pity too, may play a role in Þorstein's dealings with his father, since Þórarin is a blind old warrior whose old age betrays his own sense of *drengskapr*. On no good authority could Þórarin call Þorstein *ragr* when by his own standards he himself is a womanly invalid. Ármann Jakobsson in comparing Þórarin and Þórólfr Lame-foot suggests "They are both men who have been dangerous and powerful. Indeed, their past strength serves to accentuate their present fragility".[39] Jakobsson's assertions on Þórarin's long lost *drengskapr* are brilliant. The tale clearly depicts him as a bitter old man who projects his own insecurities in old age onto his son.

[37] *Ibid.* p. 84-85
[38] *Grágás,* 2, 392.
[39] Ármann Jakobsson, "Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Jul. 2005) p. 309

With the characteristics of the above offenders in mind, one could not possibly believe that the tale favors them over Þorstein, despite his initial passivity in resolving his conflict.

Aside from a few swift, justified killings though, Þorstein has yet to perform any of the true heroics that are hallmarks of the saga genre. One last man to take up the conflict would offer him that chance in the form of a duel. Bjarni of Hof, *goði* to the slain Thord, Thorhall, and Thorvald, initially paid little mind to the quarrels of Þorstein, a poor farmer, and his servants, and felt it best to leave him be. However, with each *þingmaðr* of his fallen to Þorstein, pressure to act mounted against him within his household. After Þorstein lays Thord low, his first killing of the tale, Bjarni recognizes that he must take some visible action to preserve his authority, but he is reluctant to regard the matter as a blood feud. Bjarni outlaws Þorstein, Þorstein remains in Sunnudal however, and Bjarni "let things lie the same".[40] Even when Bjarni finally sends men to deal with Þorstein, as I explained previously, he sends them knowing that they will die, and his sending them is less an act against Þorstein, and more a punishment for Thorhall and Thorvald's gossiping about him in the hall. Furthermore, the fate of the brothers he sent serves as a warning to his household against raising the matter of Þorstein of Sunnudal again. As it seems no goading of men will persuade him to avenge Þorstein's killings, his wife Rannveig finally broaches the topic:

> Well, the most frequent subject of gossip is this, men just cannot imagine what Þorstein Staff-Struck must do for you to decide you need take vengeance on him. He has now killed three of your housecarles, and it seems to your followers that there is no hope of support where you are concerned if this is left unavenged. You do all the wrong things and leave the right undone.[41]

[40] Jones, p. 81
[41] *Ibid.* p. 82

In this passage Rannveig offers another rare insight into the broader public concern with the conflict between the house of Bjarni and Þorstein Stangarhǫggs. By her assessment, it seems that Þorstein's theatric delivery of Thorhall and Thorvald's corpses has finally drawn the public attention, and that social pressure for Bjarni to retaliate is mounting. She mentions a sentiment among his supporters that applies immense leverage, that they feel Bjarni will not protect them in their affairs as they have sworn to do for him. This fear threatens that Bjarni's *þingmenn* might withdraw their support if he does not prove that he is committed to protecting their lives and honor. Even so, given his reluctance to kill Geitir and engage in senseless violence in *The Saga of the Vapnfjord Men*, it seems unlikely that his opinion would have changed in response to this pressure. However, what is also demonstrable in that saga is that Bjarni tends to capitulate to the goadings of women in his family.

> There was a heavy snowstorm out of doors, and Bjarni asked what he should wear. Thorgerd Silver brought out a bundle and handed it to Bjarni. He took it and unrolled it, and it was Helgi's cloak, all bedabbled with blood. Bjarni struck her. "Take it, you wicked woman, you!" … and was going out hurriedly. "You need not ask why I do this", she said. "My loss was no less than yours…[42]

This gesture from his stepmother is what persuades Bjarni, in a fit of impulsive anger, to reignite a feud he had ignored for many seasons. While a somewhat inverse scenario in which the men involved were not keen on taking up Helgi's killing, it is similar in that the prodding of a woman moves him to action. Bjarni does not offer Geitir a chance to defend himself and shows immense remorse over doing so. "As soon as he had struck Geitir, he repented of it and sat himself down

[42] *The Vapnfjord Men, Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones, Oxford University Press (New York 1961). p. 64-65

under Geitir's head, and he died on Bjarni's knees".[43] The saga states that "This deed was strongly condemned and held most base in its execution".[44] Not only was the deed considered dishonorable and beyond doubt troubled Bjarni for the duration of his life, but it led him to battle with Geitir's son Thorkel, in which many of his kinsmen died on both sides.[45]

Bjarni, now an older and more mature man, demonstrates that he has learned from his past mistakes in dealing with feuds. He agrees to settle the matter but expresses his favor of Þorstein by saying "…Þorstein has killed few without good reason".[46] In the morning, he reveals to Rannveig that while he intends to do battle with Þorstein, he has not chosen the path Rannveig would have him. When Rannveig asks "How many men are you taking with you?",[47] he replies "I shall not lead an army against him. I am going alone".[48] That Bjarni chooses the duel is alarming to Rannveig and with good reason. By the German philologist Gerd Sieg's metric, the sagas contain three dueling archetypes, two of which involve an enemy of supernatural ferocity and the belligerents fighting through grievous wounds such as dismemberment:

> "Eine Gruppe, die ein gutes Drittel aller Zweikämpfe umfaßt, hebt sich durch ihre besonders stereotype Darstellung heraus. Es sind die Fälle, in denen der Gegner des Helden ein *berserkr* oder *víkingr* ist."[49]
>
> [One group, that covers a good third of all duels, raises out of itself a particularly stereotypical picture. It is the instances in which the enemy of the hero is a berserker or viking.]

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[43] *Ibid.* p. 65
[44] *Ibid.*
[45] *Ibid.* p. 73-74
[46] *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs, Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. Gwyn Jones, Oxford University Press (New York 1961). p. 83
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] Gerd Sieg, "Die Zweikämpfe der Isländersagas*", Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur,* 95. Bd., H. 1. S. Hirzel Verlag (Feb. 1966), pg. 2

In Sieg's assessment these "warlike villains" are often fiery and unpredictable, possessing supernatural strength and present an especially dangerous threat to the hero.[50]

> "Durch ihre übernatürlichen Kräfte bieten sich die Berserker als ungewöhnlich gefährliche Gegner an; sie zu besiegen, zeichnet einen Mann besonders aus."[51]
>
> [Through their supernatural might, the berserkers make an ideal extraordinarily dangerous enemy; to defeat them, marks a man as extraordinary.]

Þorstein certainly possesses extraordinary martial might, but he is not a fiery, warlike, and unpredictable foreigner who poses a threat to Bjarni's people. Bjarni in turn, is not a young hero who needs to prove himself, for he is already a well-liked chieftain in middle age, otherwise Thord would not have bragged about serving him so. Although Rannveig clearly fears a duel of these types, begging Bjarni not to "expose [himself] all alone to the weapons of that fiend",[52] Bjarni has a much different duel in mind. Sieg describes the eccentricities of the upcoming duel thus:

> "Der Kampf unterscheidet sich in mehreren Punkten von allen anderen Zweikämpfen: niemand außer den beiden Gegnern ist anwesend; zwischen ihnen besteht keine Feindschaft, sondern sie behandeln einander mit Achtung und Wohlwollen; in dem (anscheinend langen) Kampf wird keiner verwundet."[53]

[50] *Ibid.*
[51] *Ibid.* pg. 6
[52] Jones, pg. 84
[53] Sieg, pg. 2

> [The fight distinguishes itself in several points from all other duels: no one other than the opponents are present; no animosity exists between the two, rather they treat one another with attention and good will; in the (evidently long) fight none are wounded.]

These qualities are indeed peculiar; Bjarni summons no one to witness the glory of the duel or the resolution of this feud, so that others may know his honor is restored. Rather Bjarni holds it on Þorstein's private land seemingly to avoid attention. This decision could convey that both men are tired of the meddling of others, and that they seek to resolve this matter privately between the two of them. Unlike the venom shared between a young hero who challenges a raping and pillaging fiend to single combat, Bjarni and Þorstein express no verbal hatred beyond a few cheeky jests, such as Bjarni stating "Now I grow thirsty, for I am less used to the work than you",[54] which is clearly prodding at Þorstein's lowly status as a laborer. Þorstein's jest comes after he allows Bjarni to drink from the brook, as Þorstein examines Bjarni's sword. He says, "You will not have had this sword in Bodvarsdal",[55] yet another reference to Bjarni's battling with his kin. In this passage come two important messages, firstly, Bjarni's mutual expression of trust and good will, that he allows Þorstein to examine his weapon, certain that he will not turn it on him while he is unarmed and drinking water. Secondly, Þorstein's observation implies that Bjarni brings a blade so blunt that it could not kill, as his blade did in Bodvarsdal. The tale does not clarify whether Bjarni's blade has grown dull in the fight, or if he brought a blunt blade with him, but if the latter is true this implies that despite their "fighting in deadly earnest",[56] Bjarni has chosen to disadvantage himself, knowingly endangering his life. If he has entered single combat with Þorstein, an affair from which only one man walks away, yet he

[54] Jones, p. 85
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Ibid.*

brings a blunted sword, then he clearly expects an unconventional outcome unless he harbors a secret death-wish. The final peculiarity is that by the end of their duel, neither man wounds the other. The fact that both men escape death or dismemberment in this fight subverts the very definition of the Icelandic duel, suggesting that this battle is something else entirely, and the words exchanged with the blows reveal the true nature of this fight.

Bjarni seems to have arranged this duel as a guise to speak and negotiate with Þorstein. In this way, the fight is less of a duel and more of a parley and justification for peace. Sieg argues that this pseudo-duel reveals the true theme of the story:

> "Thema des. Þorst. st. ist die Auseinandersetzung zweier zwar kampftüchtiger, aber friedfertiger Männer, die erst durch andere gegeneinander getrieben werden, sich schließlich aber versöhnen."[57]
>
> [The theme of *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs* is the struggle between two battle-hardened, but peaceable men, who are first pushed against one another by others, but at last reconcile themselves.]

This phrasing of the theme supports the idea that by holding the duel privately, the two men have finally decided to disregard external opinions on the matter and resolve it themselves. These men cannot remove the voices of others from the feud entirely though, and so they perform a careful dance. Bjarni places himself in several positions of vulnerability before Þorstein, such as when he stops to drink water, leaving his sword on the ground next to him, or when he requests to stop and tie his shoe.[58] Bjarni seems intent on displaying through these actions his good will towards

[57] Sieg, pg. 10
[58] Jones, pg. 85

Þorstein and his willingness to trust him. Bjarni places his trust rightly, as Þorstein never moves to capitalize on Bjarni's moments of vulnerability. Rather he uses these moments to build rapport, such as when he directs Bjarni to a water source from which to drink, and although a poor man, replaces Bjarni's blunt sword and ravaged shield from his own possessions:

> Here is a shield and sword which my father sends you. The sword will not prove blunter in the stroke than the one you have owned so far. Besides, I have no heart to stand defenceless under your blows any longer. Indeed, I would gladly give over this game, for I fear that your good fortune will show better results than my ill luck. And if I could have the say here—well, in the last resort, every man loves his life.[59]

Given that these weapons come from his father, Þorstein is loaning family heirlooms to the man who by all general assumption is trying to kill him; lending him such weapons is a saintly display of generosity in the spirit of fair-play. Both men are careful to ensure that these concessions to one another do not incur pity or scorn though, as in-between these strange pauses and discussions, they fight furiously. This furious exchange is what gives Þorstein cause to bring forth fresh shields, as they rather quickly smash each other's shields to splinters.[60] At no point before Bjarni calls off the fight does Þorstein kneel before this mighty chieftain. Any pleading Þorstein performs for a peaceful resolution he does on his feet, weapons in hand. Bjarni likewise smashes away Þorstein's shield with a blunt sword, ensuring that the magnitude of his might does not evade Þorstein's notice. Heinrich Matthias Heinrichs remarks on the disparity between the escalation of their battle, and the unchanged state of their health:

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[59] *Ibid.*
[60] *Ibid.*

> "Von Wunden ist nicht die Rede, aber Schutz- und Trutzwaffen werden zerwirkt. Þorsteinn kämpft anfangs verhalten — er will Bjarni nicht töten; sein Kampf wird aber von Gang zu Gang schärfer. … Beide streiten sehr ritterlich."[61]
>
> [There is no mention of wounds, but offensive and defensive weapons are cut to pieces. Þorstein fights in the beginning in such a manner—he does not want to kill Bjarni; but his fight becomes from blow-to-blow sharper. … Both fight very chivalrously.]

Oren Falk comments on the same piece from Heinrichs, likening the theatric destruction of their equipment to a modern combat sequence in a film in which "the protagonists are certain to weather all disasters, at the expense of stage settings and sidekicks".[62] Falk notes that such insights are important in understanding the author's use of aesthetic violence between the protagonists, but he does not explicitly raise the possibility that Bjarni himself is employing this aesthetic violence to justify the survival of both men in their duel. In this line of thinking, it is important to note that Heinrichs and Sieg use the words "ritterlich" and "Ritterlichkeit" in their analyses respectively; these words reference the comparatively modern concept of chivalry or knightliness that would come into being among the warrior class of mainland Europe. While the bounds of *drengskapr* do not allow both men to survive honorably, chivalric sensibilities have room for these men to face each other in fair and courteous single combat, and finding each other of equal worth, concede to one another with honor and respect. Such knightly sensibilities show themselves in their mutual surrender to one another:

61

Heinrich M. Heinrichs 1966. „Die künstlerische Gestaltung des Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs", in *Festschrift Walter Baetke, dargebracht zu seinem So. Geburtstag am 28. März 1964*, ed. Kurt Rudolph, Rolf Heller, and Ernst Walter, Weimar: Böhlau

62 Oren Falk, "Did Rannveig Change Her Mind? Resolve and Violence in "þorsteins Þáttr Stangarhǫggs"." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005): 22.

> It was now Bjarni's turn to strike, and they were both quite defenceless. Said Bjarni: 'It would be a bad bargain to choose a foul deed in place of good hap. I shall count myself fully repaid for my three housecarles by you alone, if only you be true to me.'
>
> 'I have had opportunity enough today to betray you, if my weak fortune was to prove stronger than your good luck. No, I will not betray you.'
>
> 'I see,' said Bjarni, 'that you are past question a man. Will you now give me leave to go inside to your father, to tell him just what I like?'[63]

Once again, Þorstein never kneels nor brags, and Bjarni never deprecates himself, but praises Þorstein's proven prowess. The end of this duel brings with it an amicable arrangement in which Þorstein uses his great might in Bjarni's service, rather than one of them dying and the feud carrying on.

While Þorstein indeed fills the place of the three *þingmenn* Thord, Thorhall, and Thorvald, as the tale states earlier is his worth,[64] his father Þórarin, ever the defender of the vicious old ways, further dishonors himself through his failed attack on Bjarni. Bjarni provokes this attack by allowing Þórarin to assume his son perished, since Bjarni now stands before him:

> 'What news have you to tell me, Bjarni mine?'
>
> 'The slaying of Thorstein your son.'
>
> 'Did he show fight?' asked Thorarin.
>
> 'In my opinion, no man was ever brisker in battle than your son Thorstein.'[65]

He offers to Þórarin that he may live with him at Hof, at a seat of honor and with Bjarni in place of his son, yet presumably, believing it his duty now to avenge his son, Þórarin tries to kill Bjarni with a knife concealed in his blankets. Although Bjarni could simply kill Þórarin for this, he likely sees no honor in killing a blind old man, no matter how cantankerous, and instead sends slaves to work his farm, and leaves Þórarin where he lies.[66] As Jakobsson asserts, Þórarin's

[63] Jones, pg. 86
[64] *Ibid.* pg. 78
[65] *Ibid.* pg. 86
[66] *Ibid.* pg. 87

senseless aggression stems from his lost power and status as a warrior. “He has no real role in society, as he is not rich enough to become a respected chieftain. He is, in fact, a nobody. A former viking is almost an ex-human being”.[67] By the measure of *drengskapr*, had he succeeded in killing Bjarni there, perhaps he may have found glory in his old age, slaying the mighty chieftain who killed his son, but given that he is mostly blind and bed-ridden, this is a hopeless objective. If a warrior survives long enough to grow old and impotent, he must either become a rich man or a wise man, otherwise he loses his worth; Þórarin is clearly neither. If the reader is to perceive Þórarin as the embodiment of the old honor, *drengskapr*, then the juxtaposition of this scene directly following Bjarni and Þorstein’s peaceable resolution demonstrates the absolute ruin that following the old ways brings, which in this instance, only Bjarni’s mercy mitigates.

In a society that holds bloody and violent honor to be paramount, one inevitably suffers a bloody and violent existence to various extents. In a literary context, the scholar sees in *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs* a breaker of the mold brushing shoulders with counterculture, a tale which judges its characters through a different set of moral tenets from its peers. In a historical context, the scholar hears a dissenting voice speaking against the senseless killing of feuds, *drengskapr*, and violence rendered only to combat perceived social slights. The tale does not denounce such concepts as honor and manliness in general, nor does it dissuade the reader from the use of violence in defending such sensibilities, but rather introduces a moral and social framework resembling chivalry, a comparatively futuristic idea, in place of the Iron-Age savagery of *drengskapr*. The characters Þorstein and Bjarni teach men how to be honorable, yet flexible, manly, yet tempered, competent in the art of war, yet not so quick to kill. Meanwhile the fates of the characters Thord, Thorhall, Thorvald, and especially Þórarin warn of the ruinous

[67] Jakobsson, pg. 309

consequences should one fail to mature past *drengskapr*. While the source of these ideas, whether they be Christian or otherwise European influence, or truly born of weariness with Norse customs in isolation from the outside world is a topic for another paper; but through *Þorsteins þáttr Stangarhǫggs* an undeniably Icelandic voice, in the saga style, touts these alternatives for their society.

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