

The Proverbial Heart of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: “*Mér þykkir þar heimskum manni at duga, sem þú ert.*”

RICHARD L. HARRIS

ABSTRACT: This essay considers the thematic force of a proverbial allusion in *Hrafnkels saga* when the political dilettante Sámur Bjarnason reluctantly agrees to help his uncle Þorbjörn seek redress for the killing of his son by Hrafnkell Freysgoði. “*Mér þykkir þar heimskum manni at duga, sem þú ert*” [I want you to know that in my opinion I am helping a fool in helping you], he comments, alluding to the traditional proverb *Illt er heimskum lið at veita* [It’s bad to give help to the foolish] setting one theme of this short but complex and much studied narrative. Examination of the story suggests that nearly all of its characters behave with varying degrees of foolishness. Further, it can be seen that Sámur’s foolishness dictates his fall after defeating Hrafnkell in legal proceedings and that, conversely, Hrafnkell’s rehabilitation is the result of correcting that unwise social behaviour which led to his initial defeat.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article examine la force thématique derrière une phrase proverbiale trouvée dans l’œuvre *Hrafnkels saga*. Lorsqu’un dilettante politique, Sámur Bjarnason, accepte à contrecœur d’aider son oncle, Þorbjörn, à obtenir réparation pour le meurtre de son fils aux mains de Hrafnkell Freysgoði, il déclare, « *Mér þykkir þar heimskum manni at duga, sem þú ert* » [je veux que vous sachiez que, selon moi, j’aide un abruti en vous aidant]. Son commentaire fait allusion au proverbe traditionnel, *Illt er heimskum lið at veita* [il est mal d’offrir de l’aide à un sot]. Ce proverbe fixe un des thèmes que l’on retrouve dans ce texte bref mais complexe et largement étudié. L’analyse de l’histoire proposée par cet article suggère que presque tous les personnages commettent des sottises et manquent, à différent niveau, de bon sens. De plus, l’analyse démontre que le manque de jugement de Sámur provoque sa chute après la défaite de Hrafnkell lors d’une poursuite judiciaire; inversement, la réhabilitation de Hrafnkell dépend éventuellement de son habileté à corriger son comportement social irréfléchi qui l’avait mené initialement à sa déconfiture.

Richard Harris is a Professor in the English Department of the University of Saskatchewan.

No Saga of equal length is studded with so many wise and well-applied saws. These saws are to a Saga what the gnomic element is to a Greek play.

(Guðbrandur Vigfússon, commentary on *The Story of Hrafnkel... the Priest of Frey*.¹)



My purpose here is to show how one meaning of *Hrafnkels saga*, or *Hrafnkatla* as it is affectionately known, can be approached through our awareness of an explicit, though oblique, allusion early in its text to a traditional Icelandic proverb, *Illt er heimskum lið at veita* [It's bad to give help to the foolish]. This is the saying that Sámur² has in mind when he makes the remark to his uncle Þorbjörn that provides my subtitle: “Mér þykkir þar heimskum manni at duga, sem þú ert” [In my opinion I'm helping a fool in helping you] (108; 46).³ Much of the story has to do with the ill that can befall the foolish and the folly of attempting to help such people, a belief of unsurprisingly wide proverbial distribution.⁴

I use the phrase “one meaning” out of respect for a significant body of literary criticism with *Hrafnkatla* as its focus, a body which in its various published forms has become a good deal larger than this comparatively short member of the Íslendingasögur itself. Since 1939 this saga has been the subject of much literary critical debate. It was indeed a primary text in the argument waged between those who advocated the essentially literary nature of the genre and those who wanted to emphasize its oral origins and historical reliability.⁵ Thus both E. V. Gordon in 1939 and Sigurður Nordal in 1940, though on slightly different grounds, found much in the saga that could not be true, arguing rather that the saga is primarily a literary production which should be read and appreciated as an artistically composed work of fiction, rather than as orally distorted history. In the 1970s, apart from the important exception of Hermann Pálsson⁶ with his emphasis on the continental and Christian influences, much of the interest in *Hrafnkatla* turned from doubts over its historicity and a focus on its author's literary skills to a reading of the saga against the background of a tradition termed the Oral Family Saga which emphasized the survival of historically reliable material though acknowledging literary influences. This reinterpretation of the so-called Free Prose theory was perhaps most lucidly summarized by Theodore M. Andersson, a summary that led him to the observation that to his knowledge “no one has asked what the point of a saga is” (1970 576). Yet Andersson had himself proposed a partial answer in a 1966 essay which pointed the way towards a renewed search for the oral backgrounds of the sagas, urging a focused attention on feud as the primary topic of interest in the oral tradition.⁷

With this renewed traditionalist vision came other discussions of what themes the composers of the extant sagas had in mind as they drew materials from oral and other backgrounds to the written page. The comparative brevity of *Hrafnkels saga*, and the fact that its composer seems to the modern reader more preoccupied

with describing details of terrain and travel routes than with signaling the moral direction of his story, again made this work a challenging subject for discussion. As Paul Schach remarks: “It is truly remarkable that a literary work so carefully crafted in structure and composition should elicit so many widely divergent interpretations” (297).

Guðbrandur Vigfússon was happily unhindered by today’s relatively vast array of critical endeavour as he approached the saga in 1878, finding it “admirably composed and skilfully told,” which seems to imply a conscious, individual hand at work in its extant form. “Hrafnkell, in his great devotion to his god Frey, who had prospered all his undertakings, makes a reckless oath, the keeping of which leads him into manslaying against his will, whence trouble and disaster come upon him” (1878 I Prolegomena lviii note). “Oft er gott er gamlir kveða” [often the counsel of the old is good] we are admonished in “Hávamál” 134, a maxim worth bearing in mind when one consults past scholars like Guðbrandur Vigfússon, especially when their erudition is accompanied by that perspicacity so often found in his observations:

There is no Saga of more perfect plan than this, its unity; its simple but powerful plot, turning, as so often in life itself, on the trouble that comes of a presumptuous devotion springing rather from pride than love; its aristocratic sympathy, a natural and rightful ingredient in this stratum of literature; its disdain for the blind security of the upstart whose fortune is founded on cunning and luck; its justice which never admits of excuse, but never over-punishes fault or folly; and the character of its hero, whose dross is burnt out of him by the fire of sudden affliction, and who is restored, like Job or Prospero, to such higher position as he is now worthy of,—all these traits make it a work singular among its fellows, and rank it among the best Sagas that have come down to us.
(1905 II 492)

The “perfect plan” of *Hrafnkatla* to which Vigfússon refers—and how this plan might have come to be realized in a saga based partially on historical events—lies in the background of most twentieth-century discussion of this work, but it is not of primary concern in this essay.

It is easy to read too simply Vigfússon’s assertion a few pages earlier that

Sagas of the good type such as this are always true, but they may be true in one of two ways: true to some popular legend which we cannot localise or exactly fix down ... or true to some historical fact ... though the details are of course rounded off into artistic shape by the chiselling and planing they undergo from the epic tongue of the regular trained story-teller. This Saga we take to be true in the latter way.
(488)

Vigfússon goes far beyond these first generalizations, finding *Hrafnkatla*

based firmly enough on historical facts, but having, in the course of six or seven generations, through whom it was transmitted till it was put into writing, been so artfully handled that it comes to us as a work of art with a complete plot wrought out with Shakesporean appreciation, not only of character, but of the growth and decadence of character, and in accordance with the most absolute poetical justice. (488)

It is clear that Vigfússon's vision of the transmission of oral tradition allowed for the conscious and potentially artistic shaping of narrative in the process, and this is not very far from what readers of the sagas think today, although our major concern tends now to be with what the writer of the saga—drawing upon oral tradition and written material—intended to say with the narrative as he wrote it down, that is, what the *point of the saga* as he wrote it was meant to be.

In seeking the answer to the question posed of the saga by Pierre Halleux, “What was the author's intention?” (1966a 37) modern scholars have sometimes been troubled by the thought that they might be committing the “intentional fallacy.” See, for example, Edward I. Condren's essay (517), which specifically raises this issue. Or consider Peter Hallberg's criticism of Frederik Heinemann's “subjective interpretations” in his article “The Heart of *Hrafnkatla* Again”: “It is no small problem to define that ethical basis in literary works where the authors are as reticent about revealing their personal attitudes to the characters as in the Icelandic sagas” (463).

But surely what seems to us an annoyingly laconic treatment of the sagas' meaning by their composers is a result of the fact that the latter and their audience knew perfectly well what they were talking about; saga tellers shared with their audience commonly accepted standards of value, opinions of individual characters, and also a sense of what was humorous. Much of the purpose of saga interpretation today is the discovery of what the composer intended with his material, and that in turn depends on the careful analysis of his society and its literary expectations. One of the means of discovering the standards of value enshrined in sagas is their use of proverbial wisdom. Paying attention to the use of proverbs by the saga writer will allow us to join Vigfússon in daring to enunciate “what was the author's intention.”

* * *

Vigfússon was the first to allude to Hrafnkell's pride and its redress as the subject of the saga. Crucial to this idea of a “Shakesporean appreciation” of the “growth

and decadence of character” has been the contested reading of one particular word, here italicized, in a portion of the text central to my argument:

Hrafnkell spurði austr í Fljótsdal, at Þjóstarsynir höfðu týnt Freyfaxa ok brennt hofit. Þá svarar Hrafnkell: “Ek hygg þat hégóma at trúa á goð,”—ok sagðisk hann þaðan af aldri skyldu á goð trúa, ok þat efndi hann síðan, at hann blótaði aldri. Hrafnkell sat á Hrafnkelsstöðum ok rakaði fé saman. Hann fekk brátt miklar virðingar í heraðinu. Vildi svá hverr sitja ok standa sem hann vildi. Í þenna tíma kómu sem mest skip af Nóregi til Íslands. Námu menn þá sem mest land í heraðinu um Hrafnkels daga. Engi náði með frjálsu at sitja, nema Hrafnkel bæði orlofs. Þá urðu ok allir honum at heita sínu liðsinni. Hann hét ok sínu trausti. Lagði hann land undir sik allt fyrir austan Lagarfljót. Þessi þinghá varð brátt miklu meiri ok fjölmennari en sú, er hann hafði áðr haft. Hon gekk upp um Skriðudal ok upp allt með Lagarfljóti. Var nú skipan á komin á *lund* hans. Maðrinn var miklu vinsælli en áðr. Hafði hann ina sǫmu skapsmuni um gagnsemð ok risnu, en miklu var maðrinn nú vinsælli ok gæfari ok hœgri en fyrr at ǫllu.

(*Austfirðinga sǫgur* 1950 124-25.)

[East in Fljotsdale, Hrafnkell heard what the Thjostarssons had done, the killing of his Freyfaxi and the burning of the gods and the temple in Hrafnkellsdale.

Then Hrafnkell said, ‘I think it’s a vain thing to believe in the gods.’ He declared he wouldn’t worship them any longer, and he kept his vow, for he never held any sacrifices again.

Hrafnkell lived at Hrafnkellsstead and got very rich. He soon gained a position of power in the district, and everyone was eager to stand or sit, just as Hrafnkell wished. In those days there were regular sailings from Norway to Iceland, and most of the district was settled in Hrafnkell’s time. No one was allowed to live there without Hrafnkell’s leave and every farmer had to promise him his support; in return Hrafnkell gave them his protection. He gained authority over all the districts east of Lagarwater, so his new chieftaincy soon became much larger in area and contained a greater number of people than the one he had controlled before, for it reached as far as Selwater and south into Skridudale, covering the entire Lagarwater region.

Hrafnkell was a changed man now, and much better liked than he used to be. He could still be as helpful and generous as before, but he’d become gentler and quieter in every way.]

(*Hrafnkel’s saga* 1971 61-62.)

In this passage, the narrative seems to shift its focus from 1. settlement of the district and those parts of it controlled by Hrafnkell to 2. changes in the hero’s behaviour, if not in his character. This shift compounds the interpretive problems created by the word italicized in the Fornrit edition cited above—*lund*—where it is accorded the following brief footnote: *lund* svo leiðrétt í útgáfum, misritað *land* í hdr. [*manner (behaviour?)* so corrected in editions, mistakenly written *land* in mss.]. That is, manuscripts agree on the reading *land* [land], making the sentence

pertinent to the former subject, the changes in settlement. But most editors have followed the silent emendation to *lund* of P. G. Thorsen and Konráð Gíslason in their 1839 edition,⁸ a reading which directs the significance of the sentence to the material following it, the change in Hrafnkell. An exception to this editorial practise was Jakob Jakobsen whose 1902-1903 edition of *Hrafnkels saga* leaves *land* unchanged and fails to comment on the emendation of his predecessors, but offers among its variants that from ÁM 551c, 4to,⁹ which omits altogether the phrase “*á land [lund?] hans,*” but adds “*brátt mikil*” [very quickly]. If adopted this would connect the *skipan* [change] to the next sentence. As Randolph Quirk observes, “the scribe of D [the ms. in question] by his phrasing, shows that he understood that the change took place in Hrafnkell, not merely in his property. It would be easy for *land* to creep into the text as an easier reading here, since the preceding sentences have been dealing with Hrafnkell’s property. This would then be another error arising from a contraction” (28).

Pierre Halleux, who was the first to question seriously the view that a moral improvement occurs in Hrafnkell following his fall from pride, blamed this traditional, we might term it the “redemptivist,” interpretation—on Konráð Gíslason’s silent emendation—which “unfortunately and wrongly replaced the word *land* (territory) by the word *lund* (state of mind) in spite of the fact that all manuscripts have *land*” (1966a 43). Halleux argues that the only change in Hrafnkell lies in his increased popularity and notices that the saga reports him remaining the same as regards “*gagnsemð ok risnu*” [approx. helpfulness and hospitality]. He cites the C-V interpretation of *gagnsemð*¹⁰ as “usefulness, profitableness,” so that the comment “appears in fact as a sort of restriction” (1966a 43). Rather than having his pride tempered, Hrafnkell has learned to hide those harsher aspects of his character which made his neighbours dislike him and which thus contributed to his downfall. Since there is no significant moral change, Halleux translates the sentence: “The man was still keen on acting in his own interest and kept his inclination to munificence.” So Hrafnkell gives up his pagan faith not through spiritual disillusionment or enlightenment, if one were to see Christian interest at work here, but rather finding it to have been unprofitable; he has come to realise the usefulness of winning the support of his neighbours “through his behaviour, just because this may serve his own interest.” Halleux concludes: “The main features of this pagan chief are self-interest and pride, somewhat tempered after his downfall, yet through selfish motives. The author of the saga does not feel sympathy for such people” (1966a 44). This radical “behaviourist” departure from traditional views of the redemption of Hrafnkell was to undergo further modification in subsequent treatments of the saga.

In 1971 W. F. Bolton attempted to approach *Hrafnkatla* through analysis of what he called its “heart,” that is, the fourth chapter, or passage at the Alþingi, first noticed by Slater for its density of “dialogue and of detail” (37). There Bolton observed that power is represented in the voice of the rhetorically most skilled.

In a series of scenes, individuals embedded in ever more persuasive rhetoric seek help—by means of obfuscation and lies—from successively more powerful figures in the struggle to get the better of the overbearing Hrafnkell. At the height of this persuasive process Þorkell Þjóstarson, working to enlist the support of his chieftain brother Þorgeirr in the suit, stages an encounter that will gain his brother's sympathy: he has the elderly, needful plaintiff Þorbjörn “accidentally” yank Þorgeirr's sore toe as the latter lies sleeping, intending thereby to strengthen his argument that Þorgeirr's physical pain should make him sympathetic to Þorbjörn's analogous legal distress. Yet he accomplishes nothing with this ploy. To no effect, he “runs over with proverbial wisdom” (Bolton 41) as he makes his verbal assault upon his brother's determined resistance. In the end he gets his way by threatening to desert his brother if he will not help the hapless farmer of Lagarfljót to humiliate his enemy Hrafnkell. “As each verbalizes his relationship with the ‘trouble at Aðalból’ he falsifies it” (Bolton 51). Bolton sees a dark world in which Sámur wins “by force, not by legal process,” and “there is no principle of stability in the victory” (46). “The language of *Hrafnkatla* speaks from the heart, but it is a heart of darkness” (52).

After Bolton the list of the redemptivists dwindles significantly, as readers adopt ever subtler approaches to the crucial passage about Hrafnkell's change quoted above and to their appraisal of that change's illumination of the succeeding episodes of the story. Edward I. Condren sees him “abandoning those primitive traits which made him much feared throughout Iceland” (531) and yet retaining others, such as his good husbandry and his qualities of leadership. As he moves decisively to the vengeance killing of Eyvindr and his reinstatement of himself, “the chieftain's character is now to be identified with the epitome of physical and social excellence in the sagas” (532). In this excellence he is “instinctively and strongly opposed to Sámur whose inherent inferiority he abhors” (533).

Also among the behaviourists, Frederik Heinemann in his type-scene analysis of the saga finds Sámur's act in sparing Hrafnkell's life “foolish and motivated by vanity,” whereas Hrafnkell “demonstrates his new moderate behaviour” when he spares Sámur. In the same way, Eyvindr is “foolish to expose himself to Hrafnkell's might for the sake of delivering an insult” (114) by riding past the humiliated chieftain's farm in his newly acquired continental splendour. As opposed to the actions of these men, Hrafnkell's killing of Eyvindr shows wisdom, as Þorgeirr explains at the end, and it is legitimate retribution: “the author suggests that judgment and strength are also requisites for the successful Icelandic chieftain” (115).

In succeeding decades, as the behaviourist principles of *Hrafnkatla* criticism evolved, the sympathy for Hrafnkell builds significantly. Peter Hallberg, for instance, sees no moral judgment in the narrative. Rather, Hrafnkell has “outwitted Sámur, he has turned out to be too clever for him” (464). Others agree about Sámur's inferiority. Klaus von See, acknowledging that he makes a good chieftain, remarks

nevertheless on his crucial shortcomings in that position: “Es fehlt ihm das Zeug zum Häuptling, die selbstgewisse Art, Macht zu üben. So rechtfertigt die Saga schliesslich den politisch-sozialen status quo, die Zweiteilung der Gesellschaft in die Schicht der Häuptlinge und die Schicht derer, die von den Häuptlingen die *smámenn* genannt werden ([Íslenzk fornrit] XI, 117)” (56) [He is lacking the stuff of a chieftain, the innate skill in exercising power. Thus in the end the saga justifies the socio-political status quo, the division of society into the class of chieftains and the class of those who were called by the chieftains the *smámenn* (people of no consequence)]. Henry Kratz, too, though acknowledging that “pride, haughtiness and arbitrary exercise of power are berated and the rights of the weaker subject are championed,” sees that the saga’s composer is also aware of “the untenable position of the little man who has come into power beyond his capabilities” (443).

In an innovative approach to a moral system in the saga, R. D. Fulk distinguishes between two groups of characters: on the one hand, there are the “ideologues,” who are “overzealous” in the “prosecution of their honour” where “the old Germanic code of honour and vengeance is naturally the proving ground for the moral opposition explored in the saga” (3). On the other hand, significantly differentiated from these figures, there are the “pragmatists,” who “also live by the Germanic ethics of honour and vengeance, but who regard them as good only insofar as they accomplish practical, social ends” (4). These, for instance, pursue vengeance not merely to satisfy offended honour—rather, “some larger benefit must always accrue to such grave action” (4). In this version of events, Hrafnkell is seen to change in the sense that he moves from a rigid ideologic world-view to that of the pragmatists. And it is as a pragmatist that he kills Eyvindr, “not for the sake of any supercilious sense of honour, but rather for the sake of retaining the confidence of servants and supporters, and nurturing peace in his home” (20). There are echoes of Condren in this study, those “primitive traits” he identifies clearly related to the “rigid ideology” that Fulk says Hrafnkell must relinquish as he adopts more effective methods of leadership.

The most positive response so far to the character of Hrafnkell is that of Jan Geir Johansen (1995) who doesn’t accept the traditional change of *land* to *lund* in the passage on Hrafnkell’s land and behaviour. “We are not meant to see a development of Hrafnkell’s character in this saga” (282). “*Hrafnkels saga* demonstrates that men of quality, such as Hrafnkell, cannot be suppressed by those of lesser mettle, like Sámr. Conversely, men like Sámr will not triumph long over men of quality, inherent defects in character make it impossible” (283). This perspective on the situation, “very much the view of the medieval world with a hierarchical conception of the universe and of society” (284), probably comes as close to the sanctification of Hrafnkell as is possible in the behaviourist school, and Johansen’s defense of the killing of Einarr might seem extreme. Certainly, however, it is doubtful that Hrafnkell, by the time of his reinstatement, is a man

who would allow himself to become entrapped by that rigidity of character that led to this first killing.

Revisiting the debate over this chieftain's character in 2006, Theodore M. Andersson offers a matured revision of that redemptivist sketch found in his first treatment of the saga in 1967, where he perceived "the most obviously moralistic of the sagas ... the history and reform of [Hrafnkell's] personality; he is purged by the action" (282). Here his view of the hero was optimistic: "The phenomenon of the defective chieftain is familiar, but nowhere else is he remade into an effective chieftain" (282). Now, however, Andersson asks, "can we say that Hrafnkell is truly reformed?" He finds the answer in the last comments of Þorgeirr, to the effect that Hrafnkell is more intelligent than Sámur. "The debate," observes Andersson, "is in effect between those who construe the story morally and those who construe it politically. The problem of the moralists is that Hrafnkell kills Eyvindr after his apparent change of heart" (181). Seeing no justification for the killing of Eyvindr, he contends—presumably against Johansen—"It is not only a modern readership that would find Hrafnkell's killing of Eyvindr repugnant" (182). "*Hrafnkells saga* is about two chieftains, both of them unfinished, each defective in his own way." While some other sagas might be regarded as "positive blueprints" for the good chieftain, this saga should not: "Whether we look at it through a moral lens or a political lens, it appears to offer only an array of the deficiencies that afflict the Icelandic chieftaincy." Thus, Andersson's thoughts at this point seem close to the heart of darkness whose language Bolton attempted to penetrate as he first noticed the lack of congruency between rhetoric and reality in the central scene, as also in the rest of the saga.

* * *

Since the time of Guðbrandur Vigfússon interpreters of *Hrafnkatla* have occasionally visited the proverbs of the saga in a search for its meaning, or else for clarification of its methods of narration, or for its use of paroemia, that is, proverbs, to lend rhetorical weight to an argument even when that argument is specious.¹¹ In particular, those who follow a redemptivist line of interpretation have found support in such admonitions as *sá er svinnr, er sík kann* [he's a wise man who knows himself] and *skömm er óhófs ævi* [brief is the life of excess], of which saw Andersson (1970) remarks "We need not look far for the moral in this story; it is contained in the old proverb 'skömm er óhófs ævi'" (585). Though strongly stated, Andersson's position here is more widely shared than that of Wezel, who comments "The proverbs do not give access to the meaning of the saga; they are merely embellishment, a display of knowledge to spice up the story, and they do not form an integral part of the saga" (182). Yet this observation is a useful reminder that we should not take proverbs simply at face value, as advice

meant to be of moral or ethical significance to our understanding of the work's characters and their actions, and, in Hrafnkell's case, our understanding of his own moral development. It will prove instructive to examine the text yet again in this essay to see what other directions the proverbial material may take us in our approach to understanding part of what *Hrafnkatla* is about.

Early in the narrative there are signs that Þorbjörn doesn't manage his responsibilities too well. Possessing “fé lítit, en ómegð mikla” [slender means but a large family] (100; 38) which is not a promising indication in itself of wise husbandry, he is in addition late telling his oldest son, Einarr, that he must seek work away from home, “því at ek þarf eigi meira forvirki en þetta lið orkar, er hér er, en þér mun verða gott til vista, því at þú ert mannaðr vel” [My other children are getting big enough for work now and you'll be able to get better employment than ever they could] (101; 39). From Einarr's first reaction to the news, “Of síð hefir þú sagt mér til þessa, því at nú hafa allir ráðit sér vistir, þær er bestar eru, en mér þykkir þó illt at hafa órval af” [You're rather late in telling me this, now all the best jobs have been taken by others. I don't like the idea of getting something no one else wants] (101; 39), it is clear he's disconcerted over his father's inexplicably tardy pronouncement which has placed him at a disadvantage on the job market. When he goes to the local chieftain, Hrafnkell, as a last resort, the latter's immediate response, “Hví leitaðir þú þessa svá síð, því at ek munda við þér fyrstum teki hafa?” [Why are you so late in asking this? ... I'd rather have hired you than anyone else ...] (101; 39), reinforces the reader's awareness of Þorbjörn's lack of foresight. And it is then, because of his father's poor or at least slow judgment, that Einarr enters service in the position and household where he will find his death.

The condition laid upon him, never to ride Freyfaxi upon pain of death, is motivated by Hrafnkell's regrettable yet apparently irrevocable oath, “at hann skyldi þeim manni at bana verða, sem honum riði án hans vilja” [to kill anyone who rode the stallion without his permission] (100; 38). Past readers have noticed other instances of horse owners who behave irritably towards those who ride their horses without permission, but in this case the owner claims to be sharing his horse with Freyr, which is further justification for the stringency with which he enforces this prohibition.¹² Those who would defend Hrafnkell's later actions can point to his proverbial justification of himself as he warns his new shepherd about Freyfaxi: “Ger nú sem ek mæli, því at þat er forn orðskviðr, at eigi veldr sá, er varar annan” [Do as I tell you, for it's an old saying that 'warning wards off blame'] (102; 40). And Einarr emphatically expresses his willingness to comply with this clearly pronounced stricture.

Given that the story was committed to the written page in the later thirteenth century and was not by any means a pagan production, the information it contains about Hrafnkell's devotion to Freyr and love for their mutually shared horse may not be without a humorous and uncomplimentary side. Both Gordon (17) and

Nordal (26) find the destruction of the pagan temple in the saga to represent values incompatible with those that must have prevailed at the time of the action.¹³ One critic has suggested that Hrafnkell's nickname, Freysgoði, is meant by the composer to be taken as a joke.¹⁴ It is also possible that we should read Einarr's difficulty in finding a horse willing to be ridden less as a consequence of Fate—or of the malevolently stationary Freyfaxi—than as a darkly humorous description of the way Einarr moves, seemingly oblivious of the threat to his safety, towards his demise. He is worried over the great territory he must cover in search of thirty lost sheep and “hyggr, at Hrafnkell mundi eigi vita, þótt hann ríði hestinum” [thinking that Hrafnkell would never find out] (103; 41). Having failed to catch any of the permitted mounts, he rides the forbidden Freyfaxi into a lather: “vátr allr af sveita, svá at draup ór hverju hári hans ... mjök leirstokkin ok móðr mjök ákafliga” [all running with sweat; and every hair on his body was dripping] (103; 41). Perhaps we should be amused to see this cherished horse humiliated,¹⁵ his reaction is certainly unexpected for he “tekr ... á mikilli rás ofan eptir goðunum” [started to race down the path] (104; 41) to report to his master. Hrafnkell rises from where he is sitting “yfir borðum” [at table] (104; 41) asking “Hvat mun garprinn¹⁶ vilja, er hann er heim kominn?” [What could the champion want? Why has he come home?] (104; 42). “Illa þykki mér, at þú ert þann veg til goðr, fóstri minn, en heima hafðir þú vit þitt, er þú sagðir mér til, ok skal þessa hefnt verða. Far þú til liðs þíns” [It grieves me to see how you have been treated, my fosterling. You had your wits about you when you came to me, and this shall be avenged. Go back to your herd] (104; 42). The remarkably clever Freyfaxi understands this speech and goes obediently “þegar upp eptir dalnum til stóðs síns” [immediately ... up the valley to his mares] (104; 42).

In the brief interview with his condemned employee, Hrafnkell makes clear how much more he values the pristine sanctity of Freyfaxi than the recovery of thirty lost sheep: “Hann kvazk ekki at slíku telja. ‘Eða hefir ekki verr at farit?’” [Hrafnkell said he didn't mind about the sheep. ‘But hasn't something more serious happened?’] (105; 42). “En hefir þú ekki nokkuð riðit Freyfaxa mínum... ?” [Is it true that you rode my Freyfaxi yesterday?] (105; 42). Many have remarked Hrafnkell's verbal reluctance here and his regret later at the killing of Einarr: “En við þann átrúnað, at ekki verði at þeim mǫnnum, er heitstrengingar fella á sik, þá hljóp hann af baki til hans ok hjó hann banahogg” [in the belief that nothing good could happen to people who break their solemn vows he leapt down to him from his horse and struck him a death blow] (105; translation my own).¹⁷ To the thirteenth-century Christian audience of the saga, surely, Hrafnkell's affirmation of the sanctity of Freyfaxi in the inflexible yet seemingly reluctant adherence to his oath must have appeared at least unsympathetic. Some critics have seen in it signs of pride, and I would add the foolishness of overweening pride, the proverbial outcome of which is never good, particularly in medieval Germanic literature.

The acknowledgement of the foolishness of this act, even by the perpetrator himself, is compounded in the very next scene, where he now laments the perceived necessity of killing Einarr even as he seeks to console the aggrieved father, Þorbjörn, “En vit munum opt þess iðrask, er vit erum of málgir, ok sjaldnar mundum vit þessa iðrask, þó at vit mæltim færa en fleira” [How often we regret saying too much, and how seldom saying too little!] (106; 43). “En þó læt ek svá sem mér þykki þetta verk mitt í verra lagi víga þeira, er ek hefi unnit” [I’m going to show how much worse I consider this killing than all the others I’ve done] (105; 43). It is in this mood, with these regrets, in recognition of having exceeded the bounds of wise behaviour, that he breaks his no-compensation policy for the first time in his life and offers Þorbjörn what is probably a better deal than can be found for a similar killing anywhere else in the *Íslendingasögur*.¹⁸

The improvidence of Þorbjörn, the fecklessness of Einarr, together with Hrafnkell’s foolishly proud adherence to arbitrary loyalties and authority pave the way for this often visited scene between the latter and Þorbjörn in which Hrafnkell’s offer is refused. “Ek vil eigi þenna kost” [I will not accept this offer] (106; 44), responds Þorbjörn to Hrafnkell’s amazing generosity. Instead he insists “at vit takim menn til gørðar með okkr” [I want us to choose arbitrators to settle the issue between us] (106; 44). Hrafnkell objects that this would support the false assumption that the two men are equal, which is clearly not the case. The first to comment on Þorbjörn’s utter foolishness is his brother Bjarni, who refuses to support him in his legal struggles against the invariably successful tyrant. Despite being a wealthy man, he won’t take on Hrafnkell, justifying himself—and by extension blaming his brother proverbially when he comments—“ok er þat satt, at sá er svinnr, er sik kann” [for it’s a true enough saying that he’s a wise man who knows himself] (106; 44). Observing that the adversary has “marga málaferlum váfit, er meira bein hafa í hendi haft en vér” [been known to crush wealthier opponents than me] (106-07; 44), he speaks bluntly: “Sýnisk mér þú vitlíttill við hafa orðit, er þú hefir svá góðum kostum neitat” [In my opinion you’ve acted very stupidly, refusing his generous offer] (107; 44).

The traditionally accepted “objectivity” of saga narrative is clearly broken here by Bjarni’s comments. Even readers who lack sufficient perspective on saga narrative to sense the foolishness of Þorbjörn, which is revealed by his own behaviour and statements, will find the saga writer’s judgment stated explicitly by his brother, who should legally be first to come to his defense in this situation. This verdict is affirmed by Sámur, Bjarni’s well-to-do son, “uppivözlumaðr mikill ok lögköenn” [a skilled lawyer and very conceited] (100; 38), who is unsurprised by the killing itself, but astonished when he learns of Hrafnkell’s exceedingly generous offer, and most eager to return and see if the local bully can be brought to reinstate it. Þorbjörn, though, maintaining his foolishly proud stance, by means of insults and insinuations of cowardice manages to inveigle Sámur into committing himself to a legal challenge to Hrafnkell. But in agreeing, Sámur makes the

statement that is at the centre of my argument: “Ófúss geng ek at þessu. Meir geri ek þat fyrir frændsemi sakar við þik. En vita skaltu, at mér þykkir þar heimskum manni at duga, sem þú ert” [I’m very reluctant to bring an action against Hrafnkell ... I’ll do so only because we’re kinsmen, but I want you to know that in my opinion I’m helping a fool in helping you] (108; 46). Called “vitlítill” [stupid] by his brother and by his nephew “heimskr” [foolish], the improvident Þorbjörn must seem to readers an unlikely object of sympathy when he admits to Sámur: “Þó er mér þat mikil hugarbót, at þú takir við málinu. Verður at þar, sem má” [It would mean a great deal to me if you were to take this case ... no matter what comes of it] (108; 45). Given his social standing, it is not fitting that he should seek redress for the killing in this way. And without the backing of men far more powerful than Sámur and himself, chances of success are nil.

The realistic but unflattering observation of my paper’s subtitle with which Sámur accompanies his reluctant agreement to assist his foolish old uncle, Þorbjörn á Hóli, in seeking redress from Hrafnkell Freysgoði for the slaying of his son, Einarr, may seem to the casual reader of sagas nothing more than the fatalistic pessimism with which a man sometimes undertakes to help an unpromising relative or carry out some obviously ill-fated errand. However, an analysis of the narrative with reference to this allusion may well be helpful to our understanding of what this saga is about. Sámur and the audience know, after all, that Þorbjörn has already rejected an offer which is generous, given the conditions and the perpetrator of the slaying, and which cannot be asked for again, given the arrogance with which this penurious farmer has turned down Hrafnkell’s unprecedented magnanimity. Though wronged and irate, Þorbjörn by any account is nothing here but a *heimskr maðr* [foolish man], a fact made ever more obvious as the suit progresses. The significance of Sámur’s remark, however—that he thinks he is helping a fool in helping his uncle—lies in its obvious allusion to the proverb, *Illt er heimskum lið at veita* [It’s bad to give help to the foolish]. While some readers might find strained the use of this reference to the proverb as the means of seeking a conceptual centre of the saga that will allow us the most comprehensive and coherent view of the point of the work, proverbial allusion is a cognitive process which we all recognize and use at some level of consciousness, and such references can have the same psychological weight as fully articulated proverbs themselves.

Proverbial allusions are first discussed, so far as I know, by Erasmus, who in the Preface to his *Adages* remarks that their use and appreciation in literature necessitates a comprehensive knowledge of proverbs in their base form in order to understand more fully what one is reading:

Even if there were no other use for proverbs, at the very least they are not only helpful but necessary for the understanding of the best authors, that is, the oldest. Most of these are textually corrupt, and in this respect they are particularly so, especially as proverbs have a touch of the enigmatic, so that they are not

understood even by readers of some learning; and then they are often inserted disconnectedly, sometimes in a mutilated state ... Occasionally they are alluded to in one word, as in Cicero in his *Letters to Atticus*: “Help me, I beg you; ‘prevention,’ you know,” where he refers to the proverb “Prevention is better than cure.” (Erasmus 18)

Certainly it seems most likely that competence in a culture’s proverbial inventory is the best way to be prepared for an awareness, or understanding, of such allusions.¹⁹ “Earlier scholars have overstated the fixity of proverbs,” observes Wolfgang Mieder: “In actual use, especially in the case of intentional speech play, proverbs are quite often manipulated” (7). He refers us to Norrick’s comments in *How Proverbs Mean*, where—speaking of the didactic quality of proverbs—the latter notes that “mention of one crucial recognizable phrase serves to call forth the entire proverb. Let us designate this minimal recognizable unit as the *kernel* of the proverb ... Proverbs bear much greater social, philosophical and psychological significance for speakers than do other idiomatic units.” The semantic density of proverbial material thus impresses such texts on our consciousness. “Consequently a speaker can call forth a particular proverb for his hearer with a brief allusion to its kernel” (45). The kernel of the proverb in *Hrafnkels saga* would be the word *heimskr* [foolish] with the secondary phrase at *veita lið* [to give help]. It will be instructive to see how the theme of this proverbial wisdom is played out in the rest of the saga.

However little wisdom accompanies Sámur as he proceeds to give notice of charges against Hrafnkell, it is partially the foolish pride of the latter that is apparent in his amused complacency when he hears of this move, “ok þótti hlægiligt, er Sámur hefir tekit mál á hendr honum” [and thought it amusing that Sámur had started proceedings against him] (108; 46). And again when he arrives at the Alþingi to learn that Sámur is already present there and is thus obliged to save face by continuing his suit, “Honum þótti þat hlægiligt” [he thought it vastly amusing] (109; 47). His sophisticated appraisal of Sámur’s disadvantages might well be tempered by thoughts of the potential danger of underestimating one’s enemy, but the composer at this point indicates with these remarks that no such anxiety troubles him.

The foolishness of Þorbjörn and Sámur in launching a suit against Hrafnkell becomes yet more apparent at the Alþingi when chieftains universally refuse to help: “einn veg svöruðu allir, at engi kvazk eiga svá gott Sámur upp at gjalda, at ganga vildi í deild við Hrafnkel goða ok hætta svá sinni virðingu” [they all gave the same answer: that they did not stand in such debt to Sámur that they were willing to get involved in a quarrel with Hrafnkell the Priest and so risk their reputations] (110; 47), in particular because of his 100% success rate in litigation: “at hann hafi alla menn hrakit af málaferlum þeim, er við hann hafa haft” [Hrafnkell had got the better of it in every single lawsuit which had been

brought against him] (110; 47). The foolishness of Þorbjörn's original intransigence, which led them to this pass, is reiterated by Sámr when Þorbjörn wants to abandon the suit and flee home: "þat er vel, af því at þú vildir ekki annat en deila við Hrafnkel ok vildir eigi þá kosti þiggja, er margr mundi giarna þegit hafa, sá er eptir sinn náunga átti at sjá" [That's very interesting, for it was you who insisted on bringing this lawsuit against Hrafnkell and refused an offer which would have satisfied any other man taking action over the killing of a kinsman] (110; 48). Þorbjörn's tears of hopeless frustration add to the poignancy of their situation.

Since Bolton's analysis of Chapter 4, many have accepted the lack of integrity in the actions and arguments of Þorkell: "Hrafnkell goði hefir vegit son hans Þorbjarnar saklausan" [Hrafnkell the Priest has killed Thorbjörn's son for no reason] (114; 52). The chieftain's brother does not include information about Hrafnkell's prior oath, nor about his warning Einarr, nor about his offering unheard-of compensation to Þorbjörn. His assertion—"Er honum þetta nauðsyn, en eigi seiling, þó at hann mæli eptir son sinn" [it's necessity and not greed that makes him take legal action over the killing of his son] (114; 52)—hardly captures Þorbjörn's motives. And the claim that the refusal of the chieftains to provide help "sýna í því mikinn ódrengskap" [only shows how small-minded they really are] (114; 52) is a distortion of their understandable unwillingness to tangle with a Hrafnkell with whom they have no quarrel of their own. But "Hávamál" stanza 45 would seem cynically to urge just such dishonest strategies in securing help: "Ef þú átt annan,/þannz þú illa trúir,/vildu af hánom þó gott geta:/fagrt scaltu við þann mæla,/en flátt hyggja/ok gialda lausung við lygi" [If you've another, whom you don't trust,/but from whom you want nothing but good./speak fairly to him but think falsely/and repay treachery with lies] (*Edda* 24; *Poetic Edda* 20). But the apparent reference to this stanza in *Bjarnar saga*, shows that this wisdom actually functions as a warning against cozenry.²⁰

In the end, Þorgeirr Þjóstarson yields to his brother's urgings, but not on these specious grounds, rather because of Þorkell's irrational appeal to their relationship and its fragility in this matter: "Kann vera, at Þorkell leppr komi þar, at hans orð verði meir metin" [But it's quite possible that Þorkell Lock may go somewhere else, where his word will carry more weight than it does here] (115; 53). Wisely, however, Þorgeirr is not optimistic about their success: "Munu þit þá hafa annat hvárt fyrir ykkart þrá, nõkkura huggan eða læging enn meir en áðr ok hrelling ok skapraun" [You'll then reap something from your stubbornness, one way or the other, either some comfort or else even greater humiliation, disappointment and disgrace] (115-16; 53). Like Sámr in his dealings with Þorbjörn, Þorgeirr gives in to his brother for the wrong reasons, and he clearly sees the folly of the cause itself.

In the ensuing legal process, Sámr argues the case as competently as he has insisted he will do. Meanwhile Hrafnkell, who wants to discourage petty folk from litigating with him, intends "at hleypra upp dóminum fyrir Sámi ok hrakja hann

af málinu” [to break up the court by force and so put an end to Sámur’s action] (117; 54). He loses because a crowd of people, arranged by the Þjóstarsons, makes it impossible for him “at fœra lögvoŕn fram fyrir sik” [to present his legal defence] (117; 55). Given what we know of him and have come to expect, it is only predictable that, in response to their judicial success, Sámur would be jubilant: “En Sámur var á þingi ok gekk mjök uppstertr” [Sámur remained behind at the Alþing and went about with a swagger] (117; 55). His ignorance of the next steps of prosecution is surely more helpful to the literary intent of the narrative than accurately reflective of legal knowledge typical of Hrafnkell’s time, especially in one who has been described as “lögkœnn” [skilled in the law].²¹ “Þorgeirr spurði Sám hlæjandi hversu honum þœtti at fara” [Þorgeirr laughed and asked him what he thought of the outcome] (118; 55). To Sámur’s expression of pleasure at it, Þorgeirr responds: “Þykkisk þú nú nokkuru nær en áðr?” [Do you really think you’re any better off now than you were before?] (118; 55). But Sámur is content with their immediate victory and peculiarly unaware of the necessity for the *féransdómr* [court of confiscation] by which Hrafnkell is to be deprived legally of home and property and made a full outlaw.

In addition, when the *féransdómr* is held on the initiative and with the full support of the Þjóstarsons, they and Hrafnkell are mutually surprised that Sámur doesn’t have his enemy executed. Hrafnkell himself, pleading for the lives of his men, adds “þat er mér engi ósœmð, þótt þér drepið mik. Mun ek ekki undan því mælask” [but you can kill me without any discredit to yourselves. I’m not going to plead for my life] (120; 57). Critics are divided as to whether Sámur’s decision is an act of foolish vainglory or compassion.²² He himself says that it is because Hrafnkell has many dependants that he will not have him killed, if he will accept the degradation of a diminished life: “far þú af Aðalþóli með allt lið þitt ok haf þú eina fémunu, er ek skal skef þér, ok mun þat harðla lítit ...” [he’s to leave Adalbol with his entire household and take away with him only such goods as I let him, which will be very little indeed] (121; 58). One of the brothers then comments on the foolishness of Sámur’s self-described leniency: “Muntu þess iðrask sjálf, er þú gefr honum líf,” [You’ll have good reason to regret you’ve spared Hrafnkell’s life] (121; 59) and as usual the wisdom of chieftains far outweighs the judgment of this well-to-do novice in the world of power, whose motives, whatever they actually are, lead him to this crucially self-destructive decision.

That insubstantial ground of character, of excellence in Condren’s terms, is hinted at when Sámur holds a gathering of Hrafnkell’s old supporters and “býzk til at vera yfirmaðr þeira í stað Hrafnkels. Menn játuðusk undir þat ok hugða þó enn misjafnt til” [offered to be their chieftain in his place. They accepted this but some of them had misgivings about it] (123; 60). Meanwhile, Hrafnkell Freysgoði turns suddenly atheist when he hears of the destruction of his temple and gods and the horse he shared with Freyr. “Ek hygg þat hégoma at trúa á goð,” [I think it’s vain to believe in the gods] (123; 61) he exclaims, realizing that whatever

power is to be achieved in his world will be obtained only in so far as he helps himself to it.

It is clearly and explicitly with the regaining and maintenance of power in mind that he gives in to the heroic whetting of the *gríðkona* [housemaid] who goads him into the killing of Eyvindr. Sámr's rather ostentatious successful merchant brother, having just come from abroad and thus innocent himself of the workings of the feud, is an ideal target, as she herself states: "Eyvindr Bjarnason reið hér yfir á á Skálavið með svá fagran skjöld, at ljómaði af. Er hann svá mennt, at hefnd væri í honum" [Eyvindr Bjarnason was just crossing the river at Skala Ford carrying a bright shield that shone in the sun. He's a worthy target for revenge, an outstanding man like him] (127; 64). The validity of her thinking is affirmed at the end of the saga by the chieftain Þorgeirr when he rejects Sámr's plea for help: "Er þat nú auðsét, hverr vizkumunr ykkar hefir orðit, er hann lét þit sitja í friði ok leitaði þar fyrst á, er hann gat þann af ráðit, er honum þótti þér vera meiri maðr" [Now it's clear how much shrewder Hrafnkell is than you, for he left you in peace until he could first get rid of the man he knew to be wiser than you] (132-33; 70). Disciplined but in no way morally reformed, Hrafnkell has waited to exact a strategic vengeance on the ideal victim in Sámr's family, and with that the possibility of the latter's reinstatement in power.

Readers are unaccountably puzzled by Eyvindr's obliviousness to the threat as Hrafnkell and his men appear and bear down on him for the kill. The composer has motivated this complacency by declaring him "fáskiptinn" [little meddling, quiet] (125; 62) when explaining his response to the news of Sámr's legal adventures during his absence: "lét hann sér um þat fátt finnask" [he didn't say much about it] (125; 62). If there was ever a valid subject of type-scene analysis of the sort undertaken by Heinemann, certainly the approach of Eyvindr's killers and his death is one. The identification of the approaching enemy by a shepherd or servant, the ascertainment of their intention, is balanced by the victim's insistence on his innocence and then, with belated acknowledgement of the danger, his heroic determination not to appear cowardly by taking flight. In the face of such recognizable stereotypes it is futile to attribute Eyvindr's speech and actions to any desire on the composer's part to render details of his character or intentions here. He is the stock victim of a stock vengeance scene.

At the end of the saga, then, a rehabilitated and again dominant Hrafnkell returns to Aðalból after having killed Sámr's brother, the only member of that family who might have presented any significant opposition. When Sámr seeks help from his powerful friends in Þorskafjörðr, he is kindly rebuffed by Þorgeirr, who observes, "Fýstum vit þik, at þú skyldir Hrafnkel af lífi taka, en þú vildir ráða" [We urged you to have Hrafnkell killed—that seemed the sensible thing to do—but you insisted on having your own way] (132; 70). "Megum vit ekki hafa at þessu gæfuleysi þitt. Er okkr ok ekki svá mikil fýst at deila við Hrafnkel, at vit nennim at leggja þar við virðing okkra optar." [We've no wish to have anything

more to do with your bad luck and we are not so eager to clash with Hrafnkell again that we want to risk our position for the second time] (133; 70), he adds, refusing to pursue further the development of Sámur's original undertaking, upon the folly of which the latter himself had commented at his commencement of the project.

Although the proverb, *Illt er heimskum lið að veita* [It's bad to give help to the foolish] is never explicitly formulated in the narrative of *Hrafnkatla*, its paroemial—that is, proverbial—force is clearly present in Sámur's reference to it and indeed helps to inform the thematic unity of the plot. Hrafnkell loses power because he exercises it foolishly, and Sámur wins only because he has benefit of the cunning and wisdom of the Þjóstarsons. Then again, Hrafnkell wins after losing because he is clever, and Sámur loses ultimately because he is unwise in granting life to his opponent. The fact that he could never have outwitted Hrafnkell in the first place without the help of the aristocratic chieftain brothers from Þorskafjörður is underscored by another unspoken proverb, although there is no clear proverbial allusion to it in the narrative: *Illt er að setja heimskum hátt* [It's bad to establish the foolish in high positions].²³

These observations are by no means intended to provide the so far elusive key to the point of *Hrafnkels saga*, and indeed our developing critical consciousness of a lack of consensus on this subject may by now suggest to us that, as with most great narrative art, there is no single key to its meaning. It can, however, be seen that much of the misfortune in the story results from the foolishness of its actors and that Hrafnkell's wise recognition of his own foolishness is what enables the changes in his behaviour that lead to his restoration. Critics who have emphasized a moralistic lesson in the correction of Hrafnkell's pride fall short in attempting to explain how a chieftain whose pride is reformed can nevertheless undertake a gratuitous vengeance killing of the sort he exacts on Eyvindr. Most would acknowledge that the hero's initial overweening pride is foolish, but it seems reasonable that the last killing is more closely related to the stark practicality of his desire to regain his position than it is to pride or a rigid adherence to the maintenance of heroic honour. A more persuasive common denominator would thus seem to lie in reference to the paroemia of foolishness than to the moral flaw of pride.

In closing, I would like to consider how in their origins proverbs arise from the need of society to formulate, preserve and transmit its collective wisdom.²⁴ Numerous early societies have incorporated such paroemial wisdom in their law codes, it is commonly used in the rhetorical discipline of public address and political persuasion, and indeed it survives even today in legal argument and judicial decision. Secondary to their main function in the preservation of wisdom, however, proverbs are used in saga narrative for multiple purposes extending far beyond the impulse of their origins—applied for emphasis, the definition of character, the delineation of moral value. Occasionally they are used in the sagas

with ironic sophistication, as in *Grettis saga* and in *Fóstbræðra saga*, and their force in intertextual signalling is also a subject upon which there could be fruitful discussion.²⁵ In extant written texts, then, proverbs in their various categories and sub-categories have widely varying significance, depending on the quality of the saga narrative in question and the intentions of its composer, for the expression of his own views, or of views most important to his tale. As Guðbrandur Vigfússon recognized long ago, it makes good critical sense to pay attention to their occurrence as we study Old Icelandic literature.

As the opening quotation of this essay playfully suggests, Guðbrandur, who was a keen etymologist, recognized that in saga and saw we are dealing with an etymological doublet (and hence cross-referenced in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). A saga is an extended *saying*—spoken narrative—so extended indeed as to have become a byword for lengthy story telling; a saw is a pithy *saying* which, because it condenses the wisdom of a culture into memorable, iterable form, can expand into illustrative stories of precisely saga-length. *Hrafnkels saga* richly explores this last point, which may be precisely why it has occasioned so diverse a critical heritage. For although proverbial sayings may seem to foreclose the need for thought, they actually propose a world of moral implications to those who pause to consider them.

NOTES

1. *Origines Islandicae* 492
2. I have adopted the systematic policy of using the Old Icelandic nominative form and spelling in all English references to saga characters and institutions, for example Hrafnkell rather than Hrafnkel and Sámur rather than Sam, Alþingi rather than Allthing; as appropriate I add the English possessive ending to this base. When necessary I emend quotations from scholars who do not follow this practice; only in the References do I allow the original printed form to stand.
3. Of the various editions of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* that are available I have chosen that contained in the Íslenzk fornrit edition of 1950, *Austfirðinga sögur*. Of the various translations, I have adopted that of Hermann Pálsson, first published in 1971. There are many ways of translating the sagas, Hermann Pálsson's familiar prose has introduced generations of students to these works.
4. See TPMA 8. NARR/fou/fool, especially 8.6.2. *Narren Lassen sich nicht belehren (hassen den, der sie belehrt)* [Fools don't allow themselves to be instructed (hate those who instruct them)], where this text is cited from Kålund 74, also in Jónsson (1913-14) 172 and Jónsson (1920). See as well 10.5.3 *Narren soll man nichts Gutes tun* [A person shouldn't do good for fools] and 10.6. *Rat an Narren ist verschwendet* [Advice is wasted on fools]. Vilhjálmsson and Halldórsson (138), from Kålund (154), who cites also Jónsson (1830 183) "Illt er heimskum lið að leggja (holl ráð kenna)." See Concordance, http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/proverbs_HKLS.html.

5. See the 1983 essays of Larsson and Fidjestøl for full bibliographies of criticism and scholarship to that date. More recently, Danielsson in 2002 discusses the extensive body of writing on this saga. See Andersson (1964) for discussion of the intellectual and critical backgrounds of saga scholarship.
6. Much of Hermann Pálsson's argumentation employs proverbial evidence which deserves more critical attention than it has so far received, but it is not directly relevant to the argument of this essay.
7. "[References pertaining to feud] comprise more than half of the total number of genuine references to oral tradition in the family sagas ... If the saga as a form has oral antecedents, these antecedents must have been very largely concerned with conflicts" (22). Byock, as well as Andersson and Miller, among others, represent the natural outgrowth of these earlier observations.
8. First published in 1839. Followed by Gíslason 1847, with a shift in editorial emphasis to a different set of manuscripts, again without annotation.
9. ÁM 551 c, 4to, also known as Mánaskálarbók, was written by Þorleifur Jónsson, Grafarkot; its early eighteenth-century copy was by Jón Magnússon, brother of Árni, ÁM 451 c, 4to (cf. Jakobsen 1902-3 XXXIX-XL).
10. C-V 187 GAGN, n. [a Scand. word, neither found in Saxon nor Germ.; only Ulf. has the root verb *gageigan* = κερδαίνειν; Swed. *gagn*; Dan. *gavn*; Engl. *gain* is prob. borrowed from the Scand.]: 1. sing. *gain*, *advantage*, *use*, *avail* ... 2. *gain*, *victory*... 3. *produce*, *revenue* ... 4. *goods*, *such as luggage*, *utensils*. *gagn-samr*, adj., *useful*, *profitable*. *gagn-semi* and *-semi*, f. *usefulness*, *profitableness*. C-V 498 RISNA, u, f. *hospitality*, *munificence* *risnu-maðr*, m. *a hospitable man*.
11. See, for example, Slater (49), Erlingsson (33-36), Bolton (41-43), Taylor (131).
12. Hávarr Bersason of *Fóstrbræðra saga*, ch. 2, comes to mind with his fatal inflexibility in demanding from Jøðurr Kloengsson the immediate return of his horse.
13. The reader may be reminded of the similarly insulting and sacrilegious desecration of land consecrated to Þórr in chapters 9 and 10 of *Eyrbyggja saga* (14-18). Another such attack occurs in chapter 88 of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (214-16). There is a humorous aspect to all these acts of desecration, no doubt motivated by the Christian perspective of the composers and their audience.
14. Wilken. Cited by Halleux (1966a 39).
15. Fulk, discussing the possibility of humor in *Hrafnkatla* (31), cites generally the 1972 University of Iowa Dissertation by Fritz H. König, *The Comic in the Icelandic Family Saga*. A similar story of a horse owner who takes his animal more seriously than do composer and audience is Ásmundur Þorgrímsson in *Grettis saga*.
16. Variants to *garprinn* in the manuscripts are *greppren* and the more appropriate *griprinn*. C-V 214: GREPPR [perhaps akin to *garpr*] ... II. *a strange creature*, *a monster*. C-V 192: GARPR, m. *a warlike man*, but often with the notion of *a bravo*. C-V 215: GRIPR, m. ... [akin to *grípa*, *to hold*, *to seize*, cp. A.S. *gripe* = *manipulus*]: - prop. *anything possessed*. ... 2. *value*, *money's worth*. ...
17. Hrafnkell certainly has the backing of Eddic precept, although whether it was ever intended for such an oath is another matter. See *Sigrdrifumál* 23: "Þat ræð ec þér annat,

- at þú eið né sverir,/nema þann er saðr sé;/grimmir símar ganga at trygðrofi,/armr er vára vargr” [That I advise you secondly, that you do not swear an oath/unless it is truly kept;/terrible fate-bonds attach to the oath-tearer;/wretched is the pledge-criminal] (*Edda* 194; *Poetic Edda* 170).
18. The closest offer could be in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhoggss* (*Austfirðinga sögur* 1950 77). Bjarni makes a similar offer to Þorarinn, pretending he’s killed his son in a duel. See Bonner and Grimstad (21).
 19. An example of mistaking proverbial allusion for proverbial citation is found in Gottfried Kallstenius’s note to proverb 1965, “Kölld er Kvenna Rád” [cold are the counsels of women] mentioned in Ólafsson *Thesaurus Adagiorum* (96). Specifically, in *Laxdæla saga* when the gullible Þorgils Hølluson, suddenly and harshly disabused of the notion that he is going to marry Guðrún Ósvifsdóttir, sees the source of the deception in the craftiness of Snorri goði, he complains: “Görla skil ek, hvaðan alda sjá rennr undir; hafa mér þaðan jafnan köld ráð komit; veit ek, at þetta eru ráð Snorra goða” [I know all too well where this comes from, for I have always felt the brunt of cold counsels from that quarter: I know that this is Snorri’s doing] (*Laxdæla* 1934 195; *Laxdæla* 1969 210). Though a woman is at stake, the counsel comes from a man. It is interesting, too, that the most recent English translation of *Njals saga* remarks in its notes on chapter 116 and the confrontation between Flosi Þórðarson and Hildigunnr Starkaðardóttir, that “This phrase also appears in *The Saga of Gisli* and *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*” (*Njal’s saga* 2001 330). Robert Cook, like Kallstenius, is not in fact in error, but remembers the phrase in *Laxdæla* which refers to the proverb by its kernel, rather than recalling the proverb itself in this context. See *Concordance*, http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/proverbs_LDS.html for details of this proverb’s occurrence.
 20. *Borgfirðinga sögur* (138): “Þórdís mælti: ‘Þat mun sýna, at ek mun ekki mjök talhlýðin. Hugðu svá at, Björn,’ segir hon, ‘at því flára mun Þórðr hyggja, sem hann talar sléttara, ok trú þú honum eigi.’” Note: “Það er því líkast, sem þessi orð Þórdísar sé bergmál af Hávamálum (45. vísu)” [Thordis said, “It will be seen that I’m not very easily swayed by talk. Bear in mind, Bjorn, that the more fairly Thord speaks, the more falsely he thinks, so don’t you trust him.”] Note: It is therefore most likely, that these words of Thordis recall those of Hávamál (str. 45)] (Finlay 171). Translation of note my own.
 21. Oddr Ófeiggsson, the nouveau riche inexperienced chieftain of *Bandamanna saga*, though adept enough at business, is similarly clueless as a politician, and is only saved by his poor but astute old father, who knows how to manipulate members of the hereditary chieftain class.
 22. Cf. Johansen (278); Pálsson (1971 55).
 23. Vilhjálmsón and Halldórsson (138). Jónsson (1830 181).
 24. See Taylor (1930); Whiting (1931) and (1932), and reprint (1994). Ayensu (1997 143) provides interesting illustrations of the significance of proverbs among the Ashanti, whose gold weights are shaped in figures representative of proverbs or proverb clusters, and he displays a photograph in which “Chiefs sit in state, with their linguists displaying their staffs of office. The various figures on the staff-top all have symbolic messages” pertinent to the community’s storehouse of oral wisdom.

25. See *Concordance to the Proverbs and Proverbial Materials in the Old Icelandic.*, under files on proverbs in *Grettis saga* http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/proverbs_GRS.html and in *Fóstbræða saga* http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/proverbs_FBRS.html. I am currently working on ironic uses of proverbs in particular by composers of these two sagas and hope to write on this soon.

ABBREVIATIONS

C-V: Cleasby-Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*.

Concordance: *Concordance to the Proverbs and Proverbial Materials in the Old Icelandic Sagas* Compiled by Richard L. Harris <http://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/>.

Saga-Book: *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research*.

TPMA: *Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi*.

REFERENCES

- Andersson, Theodore M. 1964. *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1966. "The Textual Evidence for an Oral Family Saga." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 81: 1-23.
- . 1967. *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- . 1970. "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas." *Speculum* 45: 575-93.
- . 1988. "Ethics and Politics in *Hrafnkels saga*." *Scandinavian Studies* 60: 293-309.
- . 2006. *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Andersson, Theodore M., and William Ian Miller. 1989. *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland. Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press.
- Austfirðingar sögur*. 1902-1903. Ed. Jakob Jakobsen. Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur.
- Austfirðingar sögur*. 1950. Ed. Jón Jóhannesson. Íslenzk fornrit 11. Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur.
- Ayensu, Edward S. 1997. *Ashanti Gold. The African legacy of the world's most precious metal*. London: Ashanti Goldfields.
- Bolton, W. F. 1971. "The Heart of *Hrafnkatla*." *Scandinavian Studies* 43: 35-52.

- Bonner, Maria, and Kaaren Grimstad. 1996. "'Munu vit ekki at því sættask': A closer look at dialogues in *Hrafnkels saga*." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 111: 5-26.
- Borgfirðinga sögur: Hoensa-Póris saga. Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu. Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa. Heiðarvíga saga. Gísla þátrr Illugasonar.* 1938. Ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson. Íslenzk fornrit 3. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Brennu-Njáls saga.* 1954. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit 12. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Byock, Jesse. 1982. *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.
- Cleasby, Richard, and Gudbrand Vigfússon. [1874.] 1962. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon. With a supplement by Sir William A. Craigie.
- Condren, Edward I. 1973. "On Civilizing Hrafnkell." *Modern Language Notes* 88: 517-34.
- Cook, Robert. 1973. "The Sagas of Icelanders as Dramas of the Will." *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*. Ed. Peter Foote et al. London: Viking Society for Northern Research. 88-113.
- Danielsson, Tommy. 2002. *Hrafnkels saga eller Fallet med den undflyende traditionen*. Hedemora: Gidlunds förlag.
- Dubs, Kathleen E. 1977. "The Discourse of Persuasion in *Hrafnkatla*." *Scandinavian Studies* 49: 464-474.
- Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern. I. Text.* 1983. Ed. Hans Kuhn. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. 1982. *Adages Ii1 to Iv100*. Trans. M. M. Phillips. Annot. R. A. B. Mynors. Collected Works of Erasmus 31. Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press.
- Erlingsson, Davið. 1970. "Etiken i *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*." *Scripta Islandica* 21: 3-41.
- Eyrbyggja saga.* 1935. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson. Íslenzk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Fidjestøl, Bjarne. 1983. "*Hrafnkels saga* etter 40 års granskning." *Maal og Minne* 1-2: 1-17.
- Fljótsdæla hin meiri eller den længere Droplaugarsona-saga.* 1883. Ed. Kristian Kålund. Copenhagen: Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur.
- Fulk, R. D. 1986. "The Moral System of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*." *Saga-Book* 22: 1-32.
- Gordon, E. V. 1939. "On *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*." *Medium Ævum* 8: 1-32.

- Grimstad, Kaaren, and Maria Bonner. 2003. "Sá er svinnr er sik kann: Persuasion and Image in *Hrafnkels saga*." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 118: 5-28.
- Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar. Bandamanna saga. Odds þátrr Ófeigssonar*. 1936. Ed. Guðni Jónsson. Íslenzk fornrit 7. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Hallberg, Peter. 1975a. "Hrafnkell Freysgoði the 'New Man'—A Phantom Problem." *Scandinavian Studies* 47: 442-47.
- . 1975b. "Hunting for the Heart of *Hrafnkels saga*." *Scandinavian Studies* 47: 463-66.
- Halleux, Pierre. 1966a. "Hrafnkel's Character Reinterpreted." *Scandinavian Studies* 38: 36-44.
- . 1966b. "Some Aspects of Style in *Hrafnkels saga*." *Scandinavian Studies* 38: 98-101.
- Heinemann, Frederik J. 1974. "*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and Type-Scene Analysis." *Scandinavian Studies* 46: 102-119.
- . 1975a. "The Heart of *Hrafnkatla* Again." *Scandinavian Studies* 47: 453-62.
- . 1975b. "*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: The old problem with the new man." *Scandinavian Studies* 47: 448-52.
- Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. 1932. Ed. Frank Stanton Cawley. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. 1964. Ed. Jón Helgason. Nordisk filologi. Tekster og lærebøger til universitetsbrug, A. Tekster 2. Bind. Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard.
- Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories*. 1971. Trans. Hermann Pálsson. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Johansen, Jan Geir. 1995. "The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*." *Scandinavian Studies* 67: 265-84.
- Jónsson, Finnur. 1913-14. "Oldislandske ordsprog og talemåder." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 30: 61-111; 170-217.
- . 1920. *Íslenskt málsháttasafn*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fræðafélag í Kaupmannahöfn.
- Jónsson, Guðmundur. 1830. *Safn af íslenskum orðskviðum, formmælum, heilræðum, snilliyrðum, sannmælum og málsgreinum*. Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenta-félag.
- Kratz, Henry. 1978. "Poetry and Truth: The Poetic Source of *Hrafnkels saga*." *Wege der Worte: Festschrift für Wolfgang Fleischhauer*. Ed. Donald C. Riechel. Cologne: Böhlau.
- . 1981. "*Hrafnkels saga*: Thirteenth-Century Fiction?" *Scandinavian Studies* 53: 420-46.

- Kålund, Kristian. 1886. "7. En islandsk ordsprogsamling fra 15de århundrede." *Småstykker 1-16; udg. af Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur*. København: S.L. Møllers bogtrykkeri [1884-1891]. 131-84.
- Larsson, Inger. 1983. "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða. En bibliografi." *Scripta Islandica* 34: 47-61.
- Laxdæla saga. Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar. Stúfs þátr.* 1934. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit 5. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag.
- Laxdæla saga.* 1969. Trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. London: Penguin.
- Lönnroth, Lars. 1970. "Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas." *Scandinavian Studies* 42: 157-189. Reprinted in *Sagas of the Icelanders*, Ed. John Tucker. New York and London: Garland. 1989. 71-98.
- Mieder, Wolfgang. 2004. *Proverbs: A Handbook*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Nordal, Sigurður. 1940. *Hrafnkatla*. Studia Islandica. Íslenzk fræði 7. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs.
- Norrick, Neal R. 1985. *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic studies in English proverbs*. Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 27, Ed. Werner Winter. Berlin: Mouton Publishers.
- Ólafsson, Guðmundur. 1930. *Gudmundi Olai Thesaurus Adagiorum Linguae Septentrionalis Antiquæ et Modernæ*. Ed. Gottfrid Kallstenius. Skrifter utgivna av Vetenskaps-Societeten i Lund 12. Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup.
- Pálsson, Hermann. 1962. *Hrafnkels saga og Freysgyðlingar*. Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga.
- . 1966. *Siðfræði Hrafnkels sögu*. Reykjavík: Heimskringla.
- . 1971. *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
- . 1981. *Úr hugmyndarheimi Hrafnkels sögu og Grettlu*. Studia Islandica. Íslenzk fræði 39. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs.
- The Poetic Edda.* 1996. Trans. Carolyne Larrington. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Poole, Russell. 2006. "Counsel in Action in *Hrafnkels saga*." *Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th-12th August, 2006*. <http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/poole.htm> (Accessed June 15, 2007).
- Quirk, Randolph. 1951. "Textual Notes on *Hrafnkelssaga*." *London Medieval Studies* 2: 1-31.

- The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardale People*. 2000. Trans. Alison Finlay. Enfield Lock, Middlesex: Hisarlik.
- Sagan af Hrafnkeli Freysgoða*. 1839. Ed. P. G. Thorsen and Konráð Gíslason. Copenhagen: Trykt hos B. Luno.
- Sagan af Hrafnkeli Freysgoða*. 1847. Ed. Konráð Gíslason. Copenhagen: Det nordiske Literatur-Samfund.
- Schach, Paul. 1993. "Poetic Prose in *Hrafnkels Saga*." *Ring of Words in Medieval Literature*. Ed. Ulrich Goebel and David Lee. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen. 291-303.
- See, Klaus von. 1979. "Die Hrafnkels saga als Kunstdichtung." *Skandinavistik* 9: 47-56.
- Slater, Anne Saxon. 1968. "From Rhetoric and Structure to Psychology in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*." *Scandinavian Studies* 40: 36-50.
- Taylor, Archer. 1930. *The Proverb*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, A. R. 1957-1959. "A Source for *Hrafnkels saga*." *Saga-Book* 15: 130-37.
- Thesaurus Proverbiorum Medii Aevi. Lexikon der Sprichwörter des romanisch-germanischen Mittelalters*. 1996-2002. Ed. Kuratorium Singer der Schweizerischen Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften. 13 volumes and Quellenverzeichnis. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Thomas, R. George. 1973. "Men and Society in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*." *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*. Ed. Peter Foote et al. London: Viking Society for Northern Research. 411-33.
- Vigfússon, Guðbrandur. 1878. *Sturlunga Saga including the Islendinga Saga of Lawman Sturla Thorðsson and Other Works*. 2 volumes. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Vigfússon, Guðbrandur, and F. York Powell, eds. 1905. *Origines Islandicae. A Collection of the More Important Sagas and Other Native Writings Relating to the Settlement and Early History of Iceland*. Trans. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Vilhjálmsson, Bjarni, and Óskar Halldórsson. 1982. *Íslenzkir Málshættir*. Reykjavík: Almenna Bókafélagið.
- Wezel, Lars van. 2001. "On the Impossibility of Interpreting *Hrafnkels saga*." *Germanic Texts and Latin Models: Medieval Reconstructions*. Ed. K. E. Olsen, A. Harbus, and T. Hofstra. Louvain: Peeters. 173-83.
- Whiting, B. J. 1931. "The Origin of the Proverb." *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 13: 47-80. Reprinted in Whiting 1994.

- . 1931. “The Nature of the Proverb.” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 13: 273-307. Reprinted in Whiting 1994.
- . 1994. *When Evensong and Morningsong Accord*. Cambridge, Mass.: Department of English and American Literature and Language, Harvard University.
- Wilken, Ernst, trans. 1909. *Altnordische Erzählungen (Sagas): sechs Erzählungen von den Anwohnern der Ost-Fjorde Islands*. Leipzig: Verlag für Literatur, Kunst und Musik.