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Speech Acts and Violence in the Sagas*

“Tunga er höfuðs bani”

(“The tongue is the death
of the head”)

Old Icelandic proverb

The American sociolinguist William Labov, who has been collecting and studying anecdotal narratives of street life among gangs of black youths in Harlem and the Philadelphia slums, also published a short paper (Labov, 1981) on the interaction of verbal behavior and violence in the experiences of white informants of his from other areas. As I have pointed out once before (Amory, 1980), but without denting the surface of Old Norse narratology,¹ both the materials and the methods of Labov are highly relevant to the Icelandic sagas and their folk narratives. In this paper Labov has addressed himself to the very contemporary social problem of “senseless violence” in American life, in the hopes of pinning down wherever he can some of the verbal clues to its psychological causes in the story-telling of his white informants – above all, in any of the spoken words between them and their assailants that might have led to blows. Such an approach to violent actions through narrative and dialogue would miss of its mark were the words that led to blows not “loaded”, i.e., possessed of the social or psychological force to make certain things happen under appropriate conditions. Words that “do things” this way are in the category of speech acts,² and Labov’s paper draws

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¹ At present a medley of American structuralism (after Alan Dundes), Russian functionalism (after Vladimir Propp), and old-fashioned Nordic philology (after Marius Nygaard). A welcome alternative: K. Kossuth’s study, “The Linguistic Basis of Saga Structure” (1980). See J. Glauser, “Narratologie und Sagaliteratur” (1989) for further alternatives.

² On speech-act theory and practice see J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (1962); J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (1969); the volume on speech acts in *Syntax and Semantics* 3 (1975); S. E. Fish, “How to do Things with Austin and Searle” (1976); M. L. Pratt, *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1977); J. Culler, *On Deconstruction* (1986), pp. 110–34; D. Kurzon, *It is Hereby Performed* (1986); A. Schwarz, “Text als Handlung” (1988a) and “Gibt es in der Fiktion Sprechakte?” (1988b).

on speech-act theory to formulate some of the rules of provocative language. He does not rest with pure linguistic formalism, however, but also delves into a root-cause of “senseless violence” – loss of social status (Labov, 1981, pp. 240–43).

Labov’s inquiry into the explosive chemistry of language envisages primarily special American cases of “senseless violence” out of all proportion to anything that was said or done to provoke it. By contrast, the sagas weave in the whole legal and social fabric around violence that at once permitted it to burst out and reabsorbed it in medieval Iceland, and they rarely afford examples of the incomprehensible and often stupefying crimes which beset Americans today. In the saga world the most brutal killings will usually be well enough motivated psychologically or circumstantially. As one conscious object of an attack in *Vápnfirðinga saga* 2 remarks to his attacker: “You are bent on confronting me, and *not without cause* [eigi ørendislaust – my italics]” (*Íf* X, 25).

This difference between the reasonability of the sagas and the senselessness of Labov’s special cases is partly reflective of the artistic superiority of the sagamen over Labov’s rather inarticulate informants, but principally of the historical gulf which divides a small, homogeneous, traditional and rural society, rent only by feuds, in medieval Iceland, from the huge, heterogeneous, ultra-modern and technological one that covers the North American continent at present and ceaselessly ferments within itself what we call “senseless violence”. Nevertheless, Labov’s contention that status loss is at the root of much seemingly senseless violence has a wider application beyond his American materials, to eruptive scenes in the sagas.

Take as an example the unclarified scene in *Guðmundar saga dýra* 14 (*Sturlunga saga* I, 154)³ of the burning of Önundr Porkelsson’s estate in Langahlíð, in 1197, by Guðmundr dýri of Öxnadal and Kolbeinn Tumason and their retainers. At the climax of the scene a would-be negotiator steps forth from the rising flames – Galmr Grimsson – who has friends on both sides of the fray, although he has chosen to speak for Önundr from his farmhouse. Galmr and Kolbeinn, with whom he is friendly, parley:

Hann gékk at durum, at mæla við þá, ok var þá enn eigi svá sótt af eldi, at eigi myndi borgit verða öllu. Hann bað þá Guðmund ok Kolbein, at þeir skyldu frá hverfa at því sinni; ok bauð þeim til þess öll fé sín – en hann var vell-auðigr maðr, ok átti it bezta bú. Kolbeinn svarar, ok kvezk gefa mundu Galmi svá mikit fé sem hann vildi til þess at hann gengi út. Galmr svarar: “Lengi hafið ér hlegit at

³ See in this context J. Simpson, “Advocacy and Art” (1961), 332–3; J. Byock, *Feud* (1982), p. 111; and T. M. Andersson and W. I. Miller, *Law and Literature* (1989), p. 197, fn. 133, where the parallel between the incandescent scene in *Guðmundar saga dýra* 14 and the averted burning in *Ljósvetninga saga* 10/20 is imperfect for the most part.

því, at mér hafi þótt það gótt, ok ek hafa opt drukkit mjöð [Cd ms.: mjog]. Nú mun kostr þaðs, en mér þykkir ósýnt hversu um mjöðdrykinn ferr.” Ok gékk hann eigi út.

He went to the door to speak with them, and by then the fire was still not so far advanced that they could not all have been saved. He requested of Guðmundr and Kolbeinn that they should desist at this time, and he offered them in return all his wealth, for he was an extremely wealthy man and owned the finest farm. Kolbeinn answers him, and declares he would give Galmr as much wealth as he desired if he should come out [of the burning house]. Galmr replies, “You have laughed a long while over the fact that I have a liking for [hot] baths, and that I have often drunk mead [or, a lot]. Now I will have the opportunity for a bath, but it looks uncertain to me just how the mead-drinking will be managed.” And he did not leave [the house].

In this tragicomic passage, which from the authorial point of view was penned as a tribute to the light-hearted courage of Galmr Grimsson, Galmr’s real motives for perishing voluntarily in the flames with Önuendr are under a pall. He is named to *Sturlunga saga* only once, as in this passage of *Guðmundar saga dýra*. A pleasure-loving country squire with fine tastes that run to imported mead, he was a kind of *arbiter elegantiarum* in the Eyjafjörðr district whose popularity as “the friend of everyone” (“vinr þeirra allra”) has moved him to mediate in the armed clash between the chieftains Guðmundr dýri and Önuendr Porkelsson when, indeed, the latter’s cause seems almost lost. So why did this endearing moth commit himself to the flames in the end, having every reason to stay alive as well as a clear avenue of escape before him?

Merely to say that Galmr has the courage to die by fire with a jest on his lips, or more vaguely, that a sense of honor restrains him from fleeing, will beg this question. One must at least find out the earnest in his jesting which caused him to give up his life so nonchalantly, and this lies, not in a supposititious sense of honor, but in Galmr’s concern for his social position, if anywhere. Kolbeinn, for his part, was not only refusing a request of Galmr’s – to lift the siege in return for his whole fortune – but also attempting to outbid him, as it were, with the lure of yet vaster wealth – “as much . . . as he desired” – for his well-being. Since Kolbeinn was one of his old friends, the counteroffer could be sincere, however extravagant in actuality; but evidently Kolbeinn had either envied or disapproved of Galmr’s sybaritic existence, which he used to belittle, and hence Galmr now reasserts himself to the full against him, both as a *bon vivant* and a brave man, jokes about the burning, and steps back into the flames enveloping Önuendr’s house. Was self-immolation mandatory on spurning Kolbeinn’s counteroffer? It seems uncalled for under the circumstances, but through

Galmr's bravado we can feel a firm effort to regain status in the eyes of Kolbeinn and justify a luxurious way of living as manly. Irrational as it may be, Galmr thus hopes to prove his manhood or even demonstrate his qualifications to be a selfless mediator by letting himself be incinerated without a qualm. In the absence of other known motives such a reaction is only explicable by the psychological impact of loss of status on a pivotal minor figure in the fiery drama.⁴

The nearest parallel in Labov's published materials to this saga incident is an Appalachian tale of "senseless violence" (Labov, 1981, Narrative 3, pp. 223-4), related of the grown son of a woman who gave him a few dollars to buy peaches with, but then suspiciously trailed him and took the dollars back when he stopped to buy corn liquor with them from a neighboring distiller. The retrieval of the money in this case was naturally a much unkindler cut to the son's self-esteem than the promise of any untold wealth could have been to the well-to-do mediator's prestige in the saga incident (on account of its uncomplimentary overtones). The son's wrath vents itself on the head of the distiller, who, reclining on the ground, guffaws at his discomfiture: "'Ah hah', he says, 'that's another dollar you won't get to spend for a drink, hah?'" Rushing into the distiller's house, the son seized a double-bitted axe from among his tools, returned and hit the man fatally twice on the head with it, then dropped the axe, and ran off into the woods. This story ends logically with murder rather than self-destruction, but the erratic motivation of its pivotal figure is about the same as for the saga character – psychological lowering of social status, with impulses to irrational aggression (= "senseless violence"), either against oneself or against others.

The mutual conformity of the Appalachian axe-murder and the Icelandic self-immolation to the cross-cultural criterion of status loss encourages me to believe that Labov's sociolinguistic methods have yet more to tell us about the sagas, in application to their narratives. We shall be concerned this time around with a finite set of linguistic devices – violence-provoking speech acts and their appropriateness conditions – rather than with any larger narrative framework that may control them, though of course one must always be conscious, as Labov cautions of the adventures of his white informants, that "we are dealing with reported events, not the events themselves" (Labov, 1981, p. 243),⁵ and, I may add, with reported or even invented speech acts in the sagas. Speech-act theory no longer weeds out fictional or poetic speech

⁴ The pathological craving for painful death and suffering in the Sturlung age has been attributed by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (*The Age of the Sturlungs*, 1953, pp. 79-82) to a religious motive – the *imitatio Christi patientis* – but this is not the worldly Galmr's motive.

⁵ Pratt also adverts (1977, pp. 85 and 142) to the wider scope of speech-act mechanisms "at the level of discourse".

acts as “parasitic” from everyday speech acts in ordinary language usage,⁶ but for the purposes of illustration it will be advisable to select instances of verbally provoked violence from saga texts with a minimum of fiction and a maximum of social content in them. By “fiction” I mean especially the folk- and fairy-tale elements in the later sagas, with their otherworldly strain of narration and characterization.⁷ The mere presence of the supernatural in the sagas does not of itself disqualify them as realistic works, if only because visions and apparitions quickened the daily life of medieval Icelanders,⁸ but the seeds of fiction were sown in this literature through the otherworldly folk- and fairy-tale motifs that diversify the patterning of the saga invariants of family affairs, feuds, adjudications or arbitrations, outlawry, movements in the districts, forays abroad, and final reconciliations or revenges. In the fictionalized atmosphere of *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Finnboga saga ramma*, and the like, speech acts, however compelling in form, have the illusory force of words and gestures delivered soundlessly as in a dream. The abstract conventionality of popular fiction ensures the smooth delivery of them with a “no-sooner-said-than-done”, but this automatism also deprives them of social substance and psychological coherence, and of course prevents them unrealistically from ever “misfiring”, or *not* taking effect.

We shall avoid vacuous and artificial speech acts by concentrating on the word-provocations to violence that are reported of persons and events in the family sagas and *Sturlunga saga*. As I calculate, those sorts of speech acts are

⁶ See J. Culler’s résumé (1986, pp. 110–34) of the controversy between Searle and J. Derrida (in *Glyph* I, 1977, 186–208) over the “parasitism” of literary speech acts. Culler sides with Derrida in upholding the indispensability, not to say the primacy, of literary speech acts as conventionalized phrases that can be repeated, but this line of argument does not avail without sophistry: “Imitation is not an accident that befalls an original but its condition of possibility . . . and thus the iterability manifested in the inauthentic, the derivative, the imitative, the parodic, is what makes possible the original and the authentic” (p. 120). The intentionality of speakers and the appropriateness conditions of ordinary-language speech acts are by Derrida’s and Culler’s critique of speech-act theory swallowed up in the pure conventionality of art and its seemingly boundless contexts. Obviously, theirs is an overstatement of the exemplarity of literary speech acts, just as Austin’s depreciation of them as “parasitic” (1962, pp. 21–2) was an understatement. Cf. Pratt (1977, pp. 91–99), in favor of a “possible-worlds” basis for them in art. Against the deconstruction of speech acts, A. Schwarz would retribute to authors of as well as characters in literary texts their proper linguistic intentions (1988a, pp. 153 ff., and 1988b).

⁷ On saga fiction see M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind* (1973), pp. 39–43, and “From Saga to Novel” (1982), and on the narrative style and depiction of persons and things in the European folktale, the chapters in M. Lüthi’s *Das europäische Volksmärchen* (1976), “Abstrakter Stil” and “Isolation und Allverbundenheit”, pp. 25–62. For some stylistic features of the Icelandic folktale, cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Um íslenskar þjóðsögur* (1940), pp. 241–50.

⁸ One example among many of the intermingling of the supernatural and the natural in the everyday lives of medieval Icelanders: in *Grettis saga* 16 the companions of the young Grettir discount his pretense that a “cragtroll”, and not he, killed one of them, for, say they, “a troll would not have grabbed the man in broad daylight” (“sögðu ekki mundu troll hafa tekit manninn um ljósan dag”, *Íf* VII, 47). By “crag-troll”, in fact, Grettir refers, kenningwise, to the axe with which he did the slaying, but what they, unenlightened, have in mind, is the uniformity of the “known” ways of trolls.

five in number, more or less, in the discourse of these genres of sagas: refusals of requests, breaches of contract, threats, insults, and challenges. Other irritating tricks of speech can easily be imagined (e.g., mimicry of an opponent's manner of speaking), but either they do not enter into saga discourse or they are not technically speech acts by any definition. There remain, on the one hand, speech acts with violent potential (e.g., vows, oaths, and magical spells) which are marginal to or unprovocative in the classical sagas, and on the other, speech acts such as the act of summoning a person to court which do not normally invite violence, except in the sagas.⁹ Summoning, therefore, must exceptionally be numbered among the violence-provoking speech acts in them, perhaps under the heading of challenges (SA 5 below).

When word-provocations do not terminate directly in violence between saga characters, they may be met with aggrieved silence (a huff) or outward complacency (a smirk, a shrug), for interspersed in saga dialogue are pregnant silences to balance the loaded words. But silence or a mirthless grin only serves to maintain the tenseness of the situation, not to relieve it, until it is eased by more soothing words from someone, or devastated by an explosion of the pent-up violence itself.

The full range of muted expressions is extended for us in a domestic scene of the *Njáls saga* (ch. 44) where Njáll and his sons have heard, unmoved, that they have been defamed in a verse as "the Beardless" and his "Dung-Beards" (as if needing dung to make their beards grow). Displeased at this equanimity, the mother of the family, Bergþóra, stirs them up by letting them know that even the cool-tempered Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, the versifier's kinsman and patron, was outraged on their behalf. Her invidious comparison sends a slight emotional tremor through the sons of Njáll, who are doubly insulted by it as laggards and lesser men than Gunnarr:

"Gaman þykkir kerlingunni at, móður várri," segir Skarpheðinn ok glotti við, en þó spratt honum sveiti í enni, ok kómu rauðir flekkar í kinnr honum, en því var ekki vant. Grímr var hljóðr ok beit á vörinni. Helga brá ekki við. Höskuldr [Njáll's illegitimate son] gekk fram með Bergþóru . . . (*Íf* XII, 114).

"The old lady our mother is amused by something", says Skarpheðinn and grinned, but nevertheless sweat broke out on his forehead, and red spots came into his cheeks, which was unusual. Grímr was quiet and bit his lip. Helgi's expression did not change. Höskuldr stepped out with Bergþóra . . .

⁹ Cf. J. L. Byock's analysis of summonses in *Feud* (1982), p. 72: "Initial acts of conflict are often followed by summoning which in itself is an act of conflict. When one man went through the procedure of publicly summoning another, it established a posture of legal opposition and presented a challenge that had to be answered."

Barely a tremor, but it is enough to unleash the family's revenge against the luckless versifier, Sigmundur Lambason, who could not hold his tongue. Njáll has the last word, philosophically, on their revenge: "Kemsk, þó at seint fari . . ." – "It will happen, however slow in coming . . ." (*Íf* XII, 114). Like some ancient peoples the medieval Icelanders thought that the sweetest revenge was that which was delayed,¹⁰ though it might wait too long.

Now, to be red in the face and speechless under great provocation, as in the above scene, hints in the sagas at suppressed hostility towards other persons rather than at any shame for one's own shortcomings (cowardice, indecision, etc.).¹¹ It was, after all, the business of the female inciter in the feuding process to anger the menfolk against their enemies, not to make them feel sorry for themselves. Since these degrees of restrained reaction only protract the revenge, which will eventually turn violent unless otherwise defused, they should be reckoned among the milder consequences of the above-listed five violence-provoking speech actions, which I shall be taking up one by one in a moment.

It will be seen at a glance that the first two speech actions of refusing a request and breaching contract are unlike the other three of threatening, insulting, and challenging, in that they are dissenting from or going back on some previous arrangement between two or more parties, which was cemented by a speech act too, whereas the other three are self-determining verbal actions, provoking in and of themselves. So the first two involve an infelicity or a "hitch" in some antecedent speech act (a request, a promise), while the others as independent performatives incur their own felicities or infelicities, in accord with their appropriateness conditions. Speech-act theory has foreseen that some performatives (bequests, marriage vows, enactments of laws, as in Kurzon, 1986, ch. 4) are reversible, and that the most heavily-loaded words of the greatest provocations may "misfire" on occasion, and thus not touch off violent explosions.¹²

Theoretically, one should stipulate, with lawyer-like thoroughness, all the appropriateness conditions for each of the word-provocations in the quintet, including the conditions for the antecedent speech acts to the first two, but these blocks of stipulations would only obscure the overall presentation in

¹⁰ Cf. with the maxim in *Brennu-Njáls saga* 88, "En goðin hefna eigi alls þegar . . ." (*Íf* XII, 215: "But the gods do not take revenge all at once . . ."), the lines in *Iliad* IV, 160–2, and of Solon's first elegy, 25–32, on the slowness of the justice of Zeus.

¹¹ P. A. Goedecke, *Die Darstellung der Gemütsbewegungen* (1933), p. 24: "Erröten häufig Zorn verrät." In the repressed emotional life of the saga characters, "Es überwiegen durchaus die stark erregenden Affekte: Zorn, Unwille, Freude, Kummer", p. 59, i.e., *reiði*, *gnadd*, *gleði*, *áhyggja* in Goedecke's tabulation of Old Icelandic affective terms, p. 57.

¹² J. Culler (1986), p. 114: "Something cannot be a performative [i.e., in Austin's sense] unless it can go wrong." The "misfiring" of speech acts is an index of what I would call their "realism", or nonfictionality.

hand of provocative speech acts and violence in the sagas, and therefore I shall adduce the appropriateness conditions very sparingly,¹³ as for the first two complex speech actions.

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SA 1: *Refusals of requests*. Requests have been regularized by Labov and Erving Goffman (Labov, 1981, pp. 237 f.; cf. Goffman, 1983, pp. 24, 71–2) in sequences of conversational “moves” (as in chess), leading to two extremes either of violence if the request is refused, or of gratitude if it is complied with. In another, more roundabout routing of the “moves”, a refusal may be recycled by being satisfactorily accounted for to the requester, who will then acquiesce tranquilly in noncompliance with his request, but if the refusal goes unaccounted for, then the requester will be in a huff, and ready to offer the refuser violence. Labov has proposed (1981, p. 239) that accounted-for refusals are inherently more likely to be successful if the need for doing what the requester wishes and the refuser’s capability of doing it are called into question; moral protests against the requester’s right to make requests of the refuser and the refuser’s obligation to comply will be less successful.

In Labov’s rule-schema of requests and refusals the appropriateness conditions for requests entail, as to needs and abilities,

- (a) that X-action should or must be done, and
- (b) that the person asked is able to do X;

and, as to rights and obligations,

- (c) that that person is obliged to do X, and
- (d) that the requester has the right to ask him or her to do it.

To refuse a request, one has several options, besides a flat “No!”:

- (e) to niggle over the “existential status” of X;
- (f) to demur at the duration T, or the location P, of X;
- (g) to pick out infelicities in the request conditions (a-d) and invalidate one or more of them.

An accounting for the refusal could be subjoined under (g), the broadest option.

The *Eyrbyggja saga*, a saga rich in refusals of requests, contains examples of them which fit into Labov’s schema nicely. The most elementary kind of refusal, an unaccounted-for negative, with violence, is given by the regional freebooter Óspakr Kjallaksson to Þórir Gull-Harðarson, a farmer and the agent of a chieftain in his district, who intercepts Óspakr and his band in the midst of a house robbery and requests the stolen goods (ch. 58). Þórir is still

¹³ Specimen appropriateness-conditions in Searle (1969), pp. 57–64, Pratt (1977), pp. 81 ff., and Schwarz (1988a), pp. 135 ff., 147 ff., and 157 ff.

smarting from a blow to the head which he received from Óspakr earlier in the year when the freebooter took some whale meat by force from the farmers of Bitra (ch. 57). But now Þórir has caught up with him, and his posse outnumbered the robber band.

Þórir spurði, hvaðan þeir hefði fong haft. Óspakr segir, at þeir höfðu ör Pambárdal. “Hvern veg kómusk þér at því?” segir Þórir. Óspakr svarar: “Hvárki váru gefin né goldin né solum seld.” “Vili þér þá laust láta,” segir Þórir, “ok fá oss í hendr?” Óspakr sagðisk eigi því nenna. Síðan hljópusk þeir á, og tóksk þar bardagi . . . (*Íf* IV, 161).

Þórir inquired where they had got their baggage. Óspakr says that they had got it from [Alfr inn litli's farmstead at] Pambárdal. “By what means did you procure it?” asks Þórir. Óspakr answers: “Neither by gift, nor by payment, nor by transfer of sale.” “Will you release it then”, asks Þórir, “and hand it over to us?” Óspakr said he was averse to that. Thereafter they attacked each other, and the battle began . . .

Blunt refusals like Óspakr's before an attack are nothing unusual in the sagas. Rather, it is noteworthy if a request sets time limits (T) to an action (X) and these are contested in the refusal, as with option (f).¹⁴ In *Eyrbyggja* 28 two berserker suitors for the hand of a high-born lady will be refused by being tricked into undertaking on her father's estate extensive land developments for which no precise time limits are set¹⁵ and death is the reward; but elsewhere, in chs. 39 and 41, time is a definite factor in a marriage suit which is aborted by the suitor's refusal of a request.

Þorleifr kimbi, the suitor here, had been ludicrously bespattered three years before the suit, in an altercation with another Icelander, while they were cooking dinner together on an island, during a voyage in a Norwegian ship to Norway. They had but one kettle between them, in which the other Icelander was slowly stirring his porridge. Since Þorleifr had to cook that evening for the Norwegian crew as well as himself, the Norwegians grew restive and reproached him with Icelandic tardiness. Þorleifr at once snatched the kettle away from his companion, who retaliated by smacking him on the nape of the neck with a ladleful of burning-hot porridge. Not to

¹⁴ On Old Icelandic time-measurements, see K. Weinhold, *Altnordisches Leben* (1944), pp. 256 ff.; Steblin-Kamenskij (1973), pp. 127 ff.; and Árni Björnsson, *Saga daganna* (1980), pp. 11–14. Time in saga narrative is segmented in years, yearly seasons, months, weeks, days, or canonical hours (but not the solar hours as computed by Stjörn-Oddi Helgason) – units which measure rather the net lapses of time than cumulative and discrete increments of the same. Over long intervals the passage of time will seem as insensible to the saga characters as it does to modern saga-readers. On the whole, time is not of the essence in the sagas.

¹⁵ Perhaps because the road-building of the berserker suitors was a blurred mythological overlay of the “masterbuilder tale”, on which see J. Harris (1976), pp. 82–4.

demean the two of them by fighting in front of the Norwegians, Porleifr postponed the reckoning with his companion until “when we are [back] in Iceland” (“þá er vit erum á Íslandi”, *Íf* IV, 106).¹⁶ After they have both been back on Snæfellsnes for a year, still at peace with each other, one of the brothers of the woman that Porleifr wishes to marry – Þórðr blígr Þorláksson – requires of him that the now three-year-old porridge-burns on his neck be effaced, viz., by a stroke of vengeance, before he can marry his sister Helga, but the unavenged Porleifr repudiates this prerequisite of her brother’s with an offensive comment on the time factor.

Ok er þetta mál kom fyrir hann [Þórðr blígr], svarar hann svá: “. . . ok er þat þér at segja, Porleifr, hér af, at fyrr skulu grónir grautardílmir á hálsi þér, þeir er þú brannt, þá er þú vart barðr fyrir þrim vetrum í Nóregi, en ek myna gipta þér systur mína.” Porleifr svarar: “Eigi veit ek, hvers þar verðr um auðit, en hvárt þess verðr hefnt eða eigi, þá mynda ek þat vilja, at eigi liði þrír vetr, áðr þú værir barðr.” Þórðr svarar: “Óhræddr sit ek fyrir hótum þeim” (*Íf* IV, 112).

And when this matter was brought up before Þórðr blígr, he responds as follows: “. . . and that much is to be said to you henceforth, Porleifr, that the landmarks of porridge on your neck, the marks which you scalded yourself with when you were beaten up three years ago in Norway, must be healed before I shall ever give you my sister in marriage.” Porleifr replies: “I don’t know what is in store for me there [i.e., on his neck] and whether this will be avenged or not, but I would like for another three years not to pass before you had a beating.” Þórðr answers: “I remain unfrightened by your threats.”

Needless to say, the marriage suit was forgotten, and at the next opportunity, in the midst of a game of clod throwing, they came to blows.

The menacing demurrer of Porleifr kimbi is unaccounted for by him, and like the flat “No!” of Óspakr Kjallaksson was deliberately intended to provoke, but not every refusal of a request in *Eyrbyggja* is so rebarbative. In chapter 18 a compromising request is to be refused diplomatically by questioning the “existential status” of the pending action (option (e)) and its localization (option (f)). The refusal is not unsuccessfully accounted for (under option (g)), and the request gives way to futile accusations. A horse-theft is behind this stand-off. Þorbjörn digri Ormsson has demanded entry to the farm, at Mávahlíð, of a rightly-suspected horse-thief, Þórarinn svarti Þórólffson, in order to search with his men for missing horses of his. With those horses sequestered somewhere in his fields, Þórarinn is not going to let Þorbjörn on the place, nor is he going to admit his guilt, but he is also not

¹⁶ According to the *Landnámabók* S86/H74, a source of the saga incident, Porleifr kimbi “took it [i.e., the scalding] playfully” (“Kimbi brá á gaman”, *Íf* I, 1, 128); but his mood is serious in the saga, and the speech act threatening his companion has apparently “misfired”.

disposed to dispute Þorbjörn's right to stand in judgement over him. What he *does* question in the requested search is its legal basis (= its "existential status") in the *Grágás* law code (I b, 166–68), along with its locus of action (Mávahlíð). That Þorbjörn has neglected to execute the provisions in *Grágás* for farm-searches and that he has not searched for his horses at other farms are the alleged reasons for Þórarinn's refusal of his request. By way of accounting for his refusal he impugns the validity of condition (a) under option (g): the search-action, being illegally executed should not be carried out, nor, he implies, would it even be necessary at Mávahlíð.

... Peir kvöddu Þorbjörn ok spurðu tíðenda. Síðan mælti Þorbjörn: "Þat er vart ørendi hingat, Þórarinn," segir hann, "at vér leitum eptir hrossum þeim, er stolin váru frá mér í haust; vilju vér hér beiða rannsókna hjá yðr." Þórarinn svarar: "Er rannsókn þessi nokkut með lögum upp tekin, eða hafi þér nokkura lögsmánda til kvadda at skynja þetta mál, eða vili þér nokkur grið selja oss í rannsókn þessi, eða hafi þér nokkut víðara farit til rannsókna?" Þorbjörn svarar: "Ekki ætlu vér, at víðar þurfi þessa rannsókn at fremja." Þórarinn svarar: "Þá vilju vér þverliga þessar rannsókna synja, ef þér vilið aflaga eptir leita ok upp hefja." Þorbjörn svarar: "Þá munu vér þat fyrir satt hafa, at þú sér sannr at sökinni, er þú vill þik eigi láta undan bera með rannsókninni." "Gerið þat sem yðr likar," segir Þórarinn (*If IV, 35*).

They [Þórarinn and his household] greeted Þorbjörn and asked what was up. After them Þorbjörn spoke: "It is our errand coming hither, Þórarinn", says he, "to search for the horses which were stolen from me in the fall. We would request here [permission] to conduct an investigation around your place." Þórarinn answers: "Is this investigation lawfully undertaken, or have you summoned legal witnesses to look into this case, or would you grant us a truce during this investigation, or indeed have you gone to investigate any farther on?" Þorbjörn answers: "We don't expect that there's need to carry the investigation farther on." Þórarinn answers: "Then we will flatly refuse this investigation, if you want to go ahead and make a search illegally." Þorbjörn answers: "Then we will hold it for certain that you are guilty in this affair, when you would not allow yourself to be cleared by investigation." "Do whatever you please about it", says Þórarinn.

Þórarinn's final indifference is an invitation to Þorbjörn to convoke at his door a drumhead court – the so-called *duradómr*¹⁷ – to charge him with theft of the horses.

This summary proceeding is objectionable, however, to Þórarinn's mother, who intrudes herself on the gathering to egg her son on to disrupt the door-court. Then the stand-off soon dissolves into a bloody free-for-all

¹⁷ On this proceeding see Byock (1982), pp. 12–13 and 129–30. The "door-court" looks like a legal archaism, being attested only in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Sturlubók* (ed., 1900), p. 150.

between Þorbjörn's search party and Þórarinn's household, but until Þorbjörn's right to pass judgement on Þórarinn has been challenged by a separate speech-act of Þórarinn's mother (her *eggjan*), his accounted-for refusal is greeted with nothing more untoward than the impromptu legal proceedings outside his door. As calm fact-finding and not moral protest, questioning whether the farm search could legally be conducted by Þorbjörn at Mávahlíð was tactically a success in this incident: the search was headed off and the investigator peaceably constrained to take other legal action against the horse-thief. Any disturbance afterwards was the work of the mother of the thief.

* * *

SA 2: *Breaches of Contract*. Breaches have the same two-dimensional structure as refusals – an initial speech act (a promise or an agreement) and an invalidating second act (the breach). Oral contracts may be breached violently in the sagas as in the above-cited tale of the two fatally tricked berserker suitors in *Eyrbyggja* 28, or in the anecdote of the cheated Norwegian merchant in *Ljósvetninga saga* 1, who was paid for his goods with an Icelandic spear through the body; but for specific illustration I shall narrow down the contractual breaches in saga life to broken betrothals (*brigðmæli*) in the *skáldasögur* about famous poets, and to the marital estrangements in the *Laxdæla saga*.

First, briefly, the *brigðmæli*: the antecedent to breach of promise is a promise to marry, and the essential condition of a promise, according to John Searle (1969, pp. 58 and 60), is a self-commitment to perform certain things for someone else's benefit. The absence of this commitment, e.g., to consummate the marriage, would constitute breach of promise, as in *Kormáks saga* 6. The thin and often fanciful saga of the poet Kormákr Ögmundarson and his love Steingerðr Þorkelsdóttir begins with their ill-fated betrothal, which no human power, only superhuman, could break off. A witch, whose sons Kormákr had killed in self-defense, lays a curse on him for their deaths, dispelling his sexual desire for Steingerðr and unsettling the wedding arrangements:

Nú biðr Steingerðr Kormák stunda til fōður hennar ok fá hennar, ok fyrir sakar Steingerðar gaf Kormákr Þorkatli gjafar . . . ok þar kom um síðir, at Kormákr bað Steingerðar, ok var hon honum fōstnuð ok ákveðin brullaupsstefna . . . Nú fara orð á milli þeira, ok verða í nōkkurar greinir um fjárfar, ok svá veik við breytliga, at síðan þessum ráðum var ráðit, fannsk Kormáki fátt um, en þat var fyrir þá sök at Þorveig seiddi til, at þau skyldi eigi njótask mega (*Íf* VIII, 223).

Now Steingerðr asks Kormákr to curry favor with her father [Þorkell] and marry

her, and so for the sake of Steingerðr Kormákr gave Porkell gifts . . . and finally it happened that Kormákr asked [him] for Steingerðr's hand in marriage, and she was betrothed to him and the bridal day was fixed . . . Now a discussion ensues among them, and there was some dissension about money-matters [= the dowry], and thus it turned out strangely that after these matters were settled Kormákr was less than enthusiastic, but that was because [the witch] Þórveig cast a spell, so that Kormákr and Steingerðr should be unable to have intercourse.

Hence on the appointed day of the marriage the bewitched poet does not appear for the ceremony, and Steingerðr's family, in a huff, proceeds to marry her off to another man with whom they hope to be revenged on Kormákr. Their hopes are not much more effectual than his retaliations. His immediate reaction to news of the marriage is to knock the bearer of such ill tidings off his horse. Later on (chs. 9–10), he thrusts himself upon the hated husband with a challenge to a formal duel (*hólmganga*), which they fight, but his adversary wins on a technicality, when his sword shatters, and bloodies the poet's thumb (first blood shed loses out). The witch, meanwhile, has been expelled without incident from the district.

The conjunction of betrothal, breach of promise (plus or minus deception), and challenge to a duel was a periodic chain of speech events in the *skáldasögur*, with a terminus in violence. If there was to be any deception in the breach of promise, however, it must be practiced by a poetic rival of the hero, as in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* 5 and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* 11; if none, the breach might be imputed to witchcraft, as above in *Kormáks saga*. But even when the poet hero is partly answerable, as Gunnlaugr ormstunga clearly was, for the nonfulfillment of the conditions of the betrothal, he is not blameworthy, at least in the eyes of his beloved. In *Gunnlaugs saga* the star-crossed lovers carry on as if they were always meant for each other, and Gunnlaugr's breach of promise in not arriving from abroad on time to be married were of no force whatsoever against their love. In short, the moral immunity of the *skáldasaga* hero from blame and the sheer persistency of romantic passion both interfere with the free functioning of breach of promise in the sagas about famous poets.

The nonappearance of the bridegroom at the wedding and/or sexual apathy in him are the recurrent breaches of promise in these poets' biographies, but much more than these could be a contractual breach of marriage, and become grounds for divorce, in saga literature: "a slap, a family feud, incompatibility, an Icelandic variety [?] of nonconsummation, a compromising wound [on the buttocks], a fatal illness, the wearing of inappropriate clothing [by the wife], and a mocking verse", in Roberta Frank's list, which is not exhaustive (Frank, 1973, p. 478). The *Grágás* law code (I b, 39–44, 235–6; II, 168–73, 203–4) only recognizes, as grounds for divorce, consan-

guinity (the canonical “forbidden degrees”), severe physical maltreatment, transporting of the wife abroad against her will, economic failure of one or both parents to provide for their family (a statute later revoked), and a common desire in the married partners to separate, with the bishop’s consent (a catch-all plea of incompatibility). As between Frank’s list and the law code, we would say that the sagas display something like the amplitude of marital discord, which the handful of breaches in *Grágás* do not capture, except in one or two articles (e.g., the plea of incompatibility). The Christian and canonical orientation of the *Grágás* codifiers must have greatly restricted the actionable grounds for divorce in the thirteenth century. But in the old days of the saga age divorce was much easier – if one had a grievance against one’s spouse, of whatever kind, one simply named witnesses to the action and declared oneself divorced.

The speech act of divorce operates on tacit postconditions to marriage which have been unfulfilled or breached, as in the sagas and the law code above. Consummation is universally a *sine qua non* of marriage in traditional societies, and its nonperformance was of such consequentiality as to annul the marriage at once – which in effect happens in *Kormáks saga* 6 – without the instituting of a divorce (cf. Kurzon, 1986, pp. 43 f., 46 f.). Compatibility and kindly treatment (i.e., no physical abuse, or coercion) are further marital postconditions of weight in the saga age and the later Christian period of saga-writing. Finally, in traditional marriages like the medieval Icelandic, it is understood that the woman must not dress or deport herself like a man, and the man must adequately provide for the material wants of the woman and their offspring, if shame is not to hound the married partners everywhere in public, or worse befall them in private at each other’s hands. These are the two marital postconditions that are breached in *Laxdæla saga* by a wife’s mannishness (ch. 35) and a husband’s desertion (ch. 30), with violent repercussions.

In chapters 29 to 30 of the saga the patriarch Óláfr pái Höskuldsson sails home to western Iceland from Norway with a boatload of timber and an uncongenial Norwegian passenger, the intractable Viking, Geirmundr gnýr,¹⁸ who was so wealthy that, against Óláfr’s better judgement, he and all his possessions had to be accommodated on board. Once brought ashore as a guest on Óláfr’s estate of Hjarðaholt, Geirmundr kept aloof from his host’s household and swaggered about with a sword always in his hand – until, whether by accident or design, he succumbed to the attractions of Óláfr’s

¹⁸ Since Geirmundr is not named to any other saga, he probably was not a historical character. It was the opinion of the late Hans Kuhn that of all the Scandinavian Vikings who reportedly visited Iceland in the saga age only the amorous berserkers in *Eyrbyggja saga* 25–8 (cf. *Heiðarvíga saga* 3–4) were historical characters (“Kämpen und Berserker”, 1971, pp. 528–9), and yet even they have been partially mythologized (cf. fn. 15 above).

daughter Þuríðr, and asked him for her hand in marriage. (To form a family tie with Óláfr was most likely the secret purpose of Geirmundr in accompanying him to Iceland.) Óláfr at first would have none of it, but the girl's mother was persuaded by a bribe to speak up for him, and Óláfr listened to her. The marriage, however, was most unhappy, and in three years time when the child of this union, a daughter, was only a year old, Geirmundr departed for Norway again in a ship outfitted for him by his father-in-law; but wealthy as he was, he disdained to make any financial provision¹⁹ for his wife and child, whom he left unsupported to the care of his in-laws, if anyone, thereby shirking all his responsibilities.

Þuríðr's revenge for this desertion was facilitated by a coastal calm which kept Geirmundr's ship from sailing far away for a couple of weeks. Early one morning she had several housecarls of Hjarðaholt row her and her daughter out to the ship where it was moored to an offshore island, awaiting the wind. The captain and crew were still sleeping on board. Boarding the vessel, Þuríðr deposited the child beside her husband, removed his inseparable sword, and before quitting the scene took the precaution of having the ship's tender perforated, so that it could not be used for pursuit. The little girl presently woke her father up with her crying to the removal of the sword, but over the black waters of the sound, from his ship, there was absolutely nothing he could do about it but beg and threaten Þuríðr, safely off in her boat, to restore his weapon and reclaim her daughter:

Þá kallar Geirmundr á Þuríði ok bað hana aprt snúa ok fá honum sverðit Fótbit, – “en tak við mey þinni ok haf heðan með henni fé svá mikit, sem þú vill” . . . Hon mælti: “Þá skaltu aldri fá þat; hefir þér mart ódrensiliga farit til vár; mun nú skilja með okkr.” Þá mælti Geirmundr: “Ekki happ mun þér í verða at hafa með þér sverðit” (*Íf* V, 82).

Then Geirmundr calls out to Þuríðr and begged her to turn back and bring him the sword Leg-Biter – “accept [for it] your girl and convey hence with her as much money as you wish” . . . She spoke out: “Then you shall never have that [viz., the sword]; you have behaved towards us very unlike a man; now there will be a parting between us.” Then Geirmundr spoke: “No good will come to you if you retain the sword.”

The ill-luck prophesied by him descended on the innocent head of Kjartan Ólafsson, Þuríðr's brother and the notorious Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's some-

¹⁹ It is a little uncertain in chapter 30 whether Geirmundr is *inter alia* absconding with Þuríðr's dowry, bride price, and morning gift, owed to her in any divorce settlement, or whether he is simply discontinuing his financial support of his wife and child, which would be grounds for divorce from him in itself. The question, then, is: did either of them by their words or actions initiate a divorce on parting, and if so, which of them did it? Both?

time lover; he was slain with the sword by Bolli Þorleiksson, a kinsman of Þuríðr's, who acquired it from her; but Geirmundr and his infant passenger were luckless too, for the ship that he captained to Norway foundered on the Norwegian coast, at Stadlandet, and they drowned with all hands at the end of their voyage. Though Þuríðr's substitution of her daughter for the sword exposed the child to this peril of the sea, the vindictive gesture did lay the responsibility for the child's support on Geirmudr's shoulders, where it belonged. Her words of farewell, "mun nú skilja með okkr", have the ring of a declaration of divorce, or some permanent separation.

The official divorce of Þórðr Ingunnarson from his wife Auðr, nicknamed "Breeches-Auðr" (Bróka-Auðr), took a vicious turn likewise, in chapters 32 and 35 of the same saga. As Auðr's nickname would indicate, the woman in this family wore the pants. This mannishness in a woman gave Þórðr grounds for divorce, and with a little prompting from the mischievous Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, he duly divorced himself from Auðr at the Althing in the presence of witnesses. The couple were not very fond of each other, and Þórðr was as wax in the hands of Guðrún, who refashioned him into her second husband. Auðr, however, did not take the divorce and Þórðr's remarriage lying down, but, once having ascertained that he was alone on Guðrún's estate, she walked into his bed-alcove where he was fast asleep, and awakening him, slashed his right hand and his chest with a short sword, cutting him across the bare nipples. It was a stroke aimed purposefully at the bodily signs of a divorce action, inasmuch as, when a man donned a low-necked shirt uncovering his nipples, it signified publicly that he was going to be divorced.

"Vel es ek veit þat", Auðr exclaims in verse at Þórðr's divorce, "vask ein of látin" (*Íf* V, 96: "It's just as well I know about it – I was left all alone."). But no matter what distressed her as a woman in the divorce, the saga author only regards her as a woman behaving always like a man throughout the incident: "... ok var hon þá at vísu í brókum", (*Íf* V, 97: "and then she was certainly wearing the breeches"), he characterizes her in pursuit of her former husband.²⁰ It may have been her "manliness" in avenging herself which earns her at last the respect and recognition of her wounded, divorced husband, who will not let her be punished for the assault. The *ex post facto* appropriateness conditions of their marriage had nonetheless been violated by Auðr's mannish dress or behavior, and this impropriety of gender enabled Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir to instigate Þórðr's divorce, which in turn precipitated the violence on him of Auðr's assault.

In saga society, we may generalize from our materials, the "hyperevent"

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 98, where Þórðr, awaking, mistakes her for a male intruder: "... er hann sá, at maðr var kominn" ("when he saw that a man/someone had come in"). On Auðr's transvestite role in the episode see Helga Kress, "Ekki höfu vér kvennaskap" (1977), I, 312 f.

of betrothal and marriage, as it is termed in speech-act theory (Kurzon, after Dell Hymes, 1986, p. 47), is articulated in successive steps, verbal, economic, physical, etc., and it subsumes three sets of conditions before, during, and after the wedding. The omission of any of these marital steps or the nonfulfillment of any of these unspoken conditions will either annul the marriage as in *Kormáks saga*, or furnish grounds for separation and divorce as in *Laxdæla saga*, and probably be attended with violence as well; for violence, manifestly, is not only the concomitant of saga courtships (so Frank, 1973, p. 476), but also of saga divorces and estrangements within marriage.

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SA 3: *Threats*. Searle gracefully states the obvious (1969, p. 58): “a threat is a pledge to do something to you, not for you”, unlike a promise, which “is a pledge to do something for you, not to you.” Threats go with speech acts like insults and challenges which galvanize hearers to sudden violence or stiff resistance. Technically speaking, this trio of violence-provoking speech acts seems to exert an extra perlocutionary force on the hearers’ emotions, together with the basic illocutionary force of all speech acts. Thus a threat will not just pledge some kind of violence to someone (its illocutionary force, which “does something” in the form of a pledge) but will further alarm the threatened hearer by affecting him with fear and apprehension (its perlocutionary force, or emotional charge). Through the stylization of the sagas, however, the perlocutionary force of threats (*hót*) may be dampened or disguised, because of the programmatic unemotionality of the saga characters; but still it will be discernible. In the above example of Geirmundr’s faithlessness (under SA 2, p. 71) a veiled threat is appended to his entreaties for his sword, which he prophesies will be the bane of an outstanding member of Puriðr’s family (i.e., Kjartan Ólafsson), if she withholds it from him. Though the fearless Puriðr shrugs off his threat (“she said she would risk that” – “Hón kvazk til þess mundu hætta”, *Íf* V, 82), her unemotional response belies its perlocutionary force.

More palpable threats are reciprocated in *Droplaugarsona saga* 8 between the two feuding Helgis, the *goði* Helgi Ásbjarnarson and Helgi the son of the widow Droplaug. In the course of their long feud, which culminates in a pitched battle fatal to the widow’s son, that Helgi of hers happened as a lawman to make a slip of the tongue in reciting the law-processes at the Thing, a slip at which the assembly laughed and the other Helgi smiled. Stung, the speaker taunted his namesake with a disfavor he once did him (ch. 4), when he tricked him into sharing his *goðorð* – his priestly and political office – with Hrafnkell Þórisson (grandson of the celebrated Hrafnkell Freysgoði), who had coveted it. Hence Hrafnkell in this taunt is said “to

stand behind” Helgi Ásbjarnarson as co-chieftain with him, and his homosexual partner, perhaps:

Helgi Droplaugarson fann þat [the other Helgi’s amusement] ok mælti: “Þar stendr Hrafnkell at baki þér, Helgi.” “Þat eru mér engi brigzli,” kvað Helgi Ásbjarnarson, “en þat skaltu þó vita, at sá mun verða okkarr fundr, at vit munum eigi báðir heilir skilja.” Helgi Droplaugarson sagði: “Eigi hræðumk ek þessi hót, þótt þau sé allægilig, fyrir því at ek ætla mér at hlaða hellum at hofði þér á þeim fundi.” Ok skildi svá þeira tal þar at sinni (*Íf XI*, 156).

Helgi Droplaugarson perceived [the other Helgi’s amusement] and spoke: “Hrafnkell’s standing in back of you, Helgi.” “Those are no words of reproach to me”, said Helgi Ásbjarnarson, “but you ought to know that we will have such an encounter that both of us shall not part [from it] in one piece.” Helgi Droplaugarson replied: “I am not frightened by these threats, even though they may be very terrible, because I intend to heap stones on your head [for a burial cairn] at that meeting.” And thus they ended their conversation there for the present.

Notwithstanding that he is the Helgi who will be killed in the battle of Eyvindardalr, Helgi Droplaugarson’s lofty disregard for his namesake’s threats is prescribed by the unemotional program of heroism in all saga writing; even so, he is not so resistant to threats to his life that he does not register their perlocutionary force as something “very terrible” to him, and he threatens in turn to bury the other Helgi at Eyvindardalr (a vain threat).

Cruder threats in the sagas can be reinforced with a brandished weapon or a shaken fist. In *Bandamanna saga* 4, Oddr Ófeigsson physically threatens his business agent Óspakr Glúmsson with an axe to enforce an order to relinquish the *goðorð* of Oddr; and in an often-quoted passage of *Ljósvetninga saga* 11/21 (*Íf X*, 58–9) a farmer, Ófeigr Önundarson, comically humiliates the chieftain Guðmundr inn ríki Eyjólfsson at table by intimidating him with threatening allusions to the hard first of a son of toil, the mere sight of which before him is enough to dislodge Guðmundr from the seat of honor, which Ófeigr aspires to as his right-hand man. In these drastic examples a show of physical force accomplishes what the perlocutionary force of words may not be able to do in threats to the heroic life, which pretends to be impervious to them.

SA 4: *Insults*. If the true saga hero minimizes threats to his existence, *a fortiori* he aggrandizes the slightest insult to his honor or his manhood. Insults indeed jeopardize his very position in society, and for every one of them he must have satisfaction in blood from his calumniators, not to forfeit

this position. The perlocutionary force of insults is therefore a good deal more upsetting to saga characters than that of threats, and will spark a flush of anger in the cheeks of the most impassive hero, whether his revenge be swift or slow. In the northern history of law (Meulengracht Sørensen, 1983, ch. 2), the provocativeness of insults had necessitated legislation very early in west Norway, and subsequently again in Iceland, against the grossest libels on manhood and male sexuality, the *níð* insults; but the Old Norse-Icelandic libel laws only provided legal remedies for the insulted plaintiff; they did not visibly impede the irrepressible composition of *klámvísur* (obscene verses), or spoil the fun, risky as it was, in saying nasty things in public about one's enemies; and to this license the extant *níð* poetry and many a fulsome anecdote in the sagas are themselves testimony.

Insults and the violence that sprang from them were rife in the iron age of the Sturlungar. A whole region, and not solely one family or an individual, might be blanketed with the insults of another, nearby region, as were the inhabitants of Miðfjörðr by their neighbors in Viðidalr, up in the west Húnavatn district of northern Iceland. The war of words between these two regions, which is narrated in *Íslendinga saga* 38 of *Sturlunga saga* (I, 229–30), started with the circulation of scurrilous verses²¹ by a *níð* poet of Miðfjörðr on the shortcomings of five sons of a prominent Miðfjörðr family, who “were not well brought up” (“ólusk ekki dála”, I, 230, as in B mss.). Predictably, the insulted sons requited these verses by killing a man who is not named, nor aligned with either side (indiscriminate, if not “senseless”, violence).

Laughing over the squabble as *tertius gaudens*, the Viðidalr men grossly caricatured the Miðfirðingar, the poet Tannr Bjarnason and the sons of Gísl by likening them to the body and limbs of a mare, a domestic animal to which any human-male comparisons had once been expressly forbidden in the west Norwegian *Gulaping* law code (prohibition in Meulengracht Sørensen, 1983, pp. 16, 100).

Þá hófu Viðdælir þat spott, at þeir kölluðusk göra meri ór Miðfirðingum, ok var Þorbjörn Bergsson hrygggrinn í merinni, en Gísl broðir hans gregrin; en synir Gíls [B mss.: Gísls] fætrnir, Óláfr Magnússon lærit, en Tannr Bjarnason arsinn; hann sögðu þeir dríta á alla, þá er við hann áttu, af hrópi sínu (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 230).

Then the Viðidalr men began their ridicule by saying that they would create a mare from the Miðfirðingar, and Þorbjörn Bergsson was to be the backbone of the mare, but his brother Gísl the belly, and Gísl's sons the feet; Óláfr Magnús-

²¹ The obscene “punch line” of these verses has not been preserved but has been cleverly conjectured by J. Louis-Jensen in “En nidstrofe” (1979). Her text of the *níð* poem is far superior to Guðbrandur Vigfússon's in his edition of *Sturlunga saga*.

son was to be the mare's flank, but Tannr Bjarnason its rump, for, they said, he befouls with his scurrility everyone who has anything to do with him.

The two regions were soon at each other's throats on account of this caricature, and when the southerner Snorri Sturluson was called in to reconcile them, to his discredit they attacked each other no longer with words but with weapons.

Besides this group insult, we may recall of the burning of Langahlíð (cf. above, pp. 58–9) that a constant spur to the outwardly imperturbable Guðmundr dýri to besiege his enemy Önundr Porkelsson on his estate was the insulting comparison of Guðmundr to a hornless ewe with its wool falling off, by which Önundr's followers stigmatized his passivity and inactivity in not budging from his "peace-stool" ("frið-stóll", *Sturlunga saga*, I, 149, 151). Though Guðmundr would not tolerate insults from his men of Önundr's followers when, as in *Guðmundar saga dýra* 12, the two forces chance to cross each other's paths, this comparison must have rankled in his mind, for he repeats it mockingly to Önundr as he and Kolbeinn Tumason lay siege to Langahlíð (ch. 14):

"... hér er nú komin ærin kollótta, gengin ór dal ofan, ok þó af ullin harðla mjök; ok er eigi forystusauðrinn fengilegri en svá; en þó ætlar hún nú, at annat hvart skal vera, at hún skal láta af sér allt reyfit, eðr ganga með fullu reyfi heim" (*Sturlunga saga*, I, 153).

"The hornless ewe has arrived here, descended from the dale, and yet with its wool very nearly gone; the bellwether is no more useful than she is in this condition; but she has expectations now that one of two things shall be [decided] – either she shall discard all of her fleece [i.e., by fighting a losing battle], or she shall wend her way home with a full fleece [= victorious]."

This speech to the besieged Önundr resonates with the perlocutionary force of his followers' insult to Guðmundr, which Guðmundr has further elaborated in order to repay it with interest – a rhetorical maximization of the insult.

The individual and group insults in *Guðmundar saga dýra* and the *Íslendinga saga* of *Sturlunga saga*, with their comparisons of men to domestic animals, and females of the species to boot, are almost of the strongest in the Old Norse-Icelandic repertoire, because of their connotations of homosexuality.²² Only explicit homosexual aspersions could have been more insulting. But farther down the scale of provocation come the lighter, nonviolent,

²² This kind of insulting cross-referencing has been overlooked by E. Leach in his paper on "animal categories and verbal abuse" (1964), which correlates the edibility of animals with human sexuality, pp. 42 ff., but does not treat of sexual deviancy, save for a preliminary word on British "queans", pp. 25 f.

and yet cruel pleasantries in verse – the “hnæfil-” and “keskiyrði” – which were bandied about at the memorable wedding in Reykjahólar, the social event of 1119 chronicled in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* 10, also of *Sturlunga saga* (I, 17–19).

The butt of these bad jokes was an elderly invalid, the *goði* Þórðr Porvaldsson, who suffered from palsy and poor digestion, and whose breath smelt. Though an honored guest at the wedding, the old fellow had had an inkling that he was in the wrong company when he sat down to the drinking, but on being reassured that he was among friends, he put the best face he could on the fun that people poked at his malodorous breath, even twitting others cheerfully with the same infirmity as his. But when his verses in this jocose vein were answered in kind by an outlaw securely in the protection of another guest of honor, Þórðr’s cheerfulness vanished. Since the outlaw could not very well be ejected, Þórðr himself arose with a sigh and withdrew from the festivities with his men. Possibly, if he had been younger and healthier, he would have struck down the outlaw, who was killed thereafter by someone else whom he insulted (*Porgils saga* 11). The drunken ribaldry of the wedding guests at Reykjahólar, however, did not warrant physical violence from Þórðr, not only because of the festiveness of the occasion, but also, alas!, because their quips on his infirmities rang depressingly true in his ears. Hence the perlocutionary force of these insults, which the outlaw drove home with his verses, induced in Þórðr silent resignation rather than violent rage.

As Einar Ólafur Sveinsson put it succinctly (1953, p. 91): “The whole country seethed and bubbled with gibing and jeering like a witches’ cauldron.” Everyone spat in this witches’ brew of calumny, but seldom was anyone as revolted by it as the old man, Þórðr Porvaldsson.

* * *

SA 5: *Challenges*. This last assortment of provocative speech acts and that of breaches of contract (SA 2) are probably the largest and the most miscellaneous of the five. The word-provocations of this set consist predominantly in the sagas of one-way incitements to vengeance and two-way challenges to and acceptances of duels. The verbal preliminaries to a duel have two dimensions like the refusals of requests and breaches of contract (SA 1–2), but the thrust of the latter is contrary to challenges to duels, being negatively retroactive and not anticipatory of acceptance. And duels themselves were historical curiosities of paganism to the sagamen, remote from humble requests and mundane contracts. Female incitements of men to vengeance, on the other hand, were always central to the feuding society of medieval Iceland, and they have an illuminative cultural background.

The prose “egging-on” (*eggjan*) and poetic “whetting” (*hvöt*) of men by

women have been convincingly reconstituted by Carol Clover (1985, pp. 141–83) as the literary vestiges of a Europeanwide ambivalent funeral ritual of lamentation for and vindication of slain feud victims, whose deaths must neither go unwept nor unavenged by their survivors. Traditionally, it was the women's office in Iceland, as on the continent,²³ to incite male mourners at funerals to avenge their dead kinsmen. This office must have been spontaneously expanded to the denunciation of lesser outrages too – e.g., insults and bodily injuries. With the advent of Christianity in Norway and Iceland, when the funeral services of the Church superseded the pagan rites of mourning, inflammatory demonstrations of grief with mementoes of the slain were moderated in most *eggjanir* and *hvatir* of Old Norse literature, but which then gave voice, without reserve, to the unslaked thirst for revenge of the women. Christianity could not muffle their “cold counsels” to kill.

The classic example of female *eggjan* is Hildigunnr Starkaðardóttir's tearful and sanguinary conjuring of her uncle, Flosi Þórðarson, to avenge her husband, Höskuldr Þráinsson, who was murdered in cold blood by the sons of Njáll – a challenge exceptionally heavy with the funereal atmosphere of its latent background (*Njáls saga* 116). A complementary poetic example of *hvöt* is found in the heroic lay of *Guðrúnarhvöt*, in which Guðrún “whets” her sons to revenge themselves on King Jörmunrekkr for commanding their sister (Svanhildr) to be trampled to death by horses. The *hvöt* tails off in a long lament over a string of woes in Guðrún's life, reverting again to the funerary background of Old Norse female incitements.

Both these examples are sufficiently conservative to retain a measure of lamentation with the whetting and the egging-on, but the majority of saga examples of female incitement are dry-eyed and bloody-minded (cf. *Heiðarvíga saga* 22, or *Laxdæla saga* 60). Even for lesser outrages, such as insults or wounds, only eagerness for redress and displeasure at delay are evinced in the women, as in Bergþóra on hearing of the insult of beardlessness to the men in her family and observing the indifference of her sons (*Njáls saga* 44, as above p. 62). No tears are to be wasted.

Challenges that egg on a second party to attack a third are relayed incitements to violence, but challenges to and acceptances of duels are in a closed circuit of formal hostilities. *Hólmgöngur* or island duels were abolished, we know, by the Althing in 1006, a couple of years after the establishment of the Fifth Court of appeals in last resort, when duels were no longer relied on to settle unresolved differences at law in the Quarter Courts. They are refought infrequently by the historical actors in the saga narratives of pre-eleventh century feuds (Byock, 1982, pp. 107, 266–7), and in the Chris-

²³ Clover's mainly Greek and Albanian instances (“Hildigunnr's Lament”, 1985) could be supplemented from medieval north European sources like those cited by M. Bloch in *Feudal Society* (1968), p. 126.

tian era the opinion of them was low: “I disapprove of the fighting of island duels”, says a Christian stalwart in *Ljósvetninga saga* 20/30, “that’s what the heathens did” (“Illa læt ek yfir því, er hólmgöngur haldask uppi, ok er þat heiðinna manna”, *Íf* X, 102). But when dueling was an approved quasi-judicial practice,²⁴ Old Norse-Icelandic duels were either fought on islands with much rigamarole, which later excited the antiquarianism of some sagamen, or they were fought anywhere with no rules at all, as *einvígi* (“single combats”).

The *locus classicus* of the code duello for *hólmgöngur* is a passage in *Kormáks saga* 10 (*Íf* VIII, 237–8), which retails the formalities, or the appropriateness conditions, to fighting an island duel – a very circumstantial matter indeed, which I will not go into in detail. Compared to this, the protocol of ordinary single combats was simplicity itself as in *Porsteins þáttur stangarhögg*s. “Þú skalt til einvígis ganga við mik í dag . . . á hól þenna, er hér er í túni” (*Íf* XI, 74: “you shall engage in single combat with me today . . . on this knoll, which is here in the home field”) runs the informal challenge of Bjarni frá Hofi to Porsteinn stangarhögg in *Porsteins þáttur*; cf. the shorter, wholly formulaic challenge of Kormákr to the hated husband of his beloved in *Kormáks saga* 9: “Ek býð þér . . . hólmgöngu á hálfsmánaðar fresti í Leiðhólmi í Miðdølum” (*Íf* VIII, 233: “I offer you . . . an island duel in half a month’s period of grace, on Leið Isle in the Middales.”). In the *þáttur* the conditions of the challenge are so loose that it can be brushed aside before it is finally accepted, while under the stricter conditions in the *skáldasaga* the challenge is taken up unhesitatingly. The *einvígi* of Bjarni and Porsteinn readily lends itself to humor, the *hólmganga* rather to earnest antiquarianism, which in *Kormáks saga* 10 still only succeeds in making the combatants slightly ridiculous to us.

There are in saga discourse doubtless other likely speech-act candidates for the title of challenges, of which one worth mentioning has been suggested by Jesse Byock (as in fn. 9), namely, the court summons. The summons, however, may not only have the force of a challenge but also of an insult or even a threat, an overlapping of speech acts which stands in the very nature of challenges, miscellaneous as they are.

In *Hænsa-Póris saga* 8 the process-server of Þórir the poulterer summons Þórir’s enemy, Blund-Ketill Geirsson, to court for allegedly stealing hay from the poulterer to distribute to needy tenants, although Blund-Ketill had

²⁴ The older scholarship on the medieval European and Scandinavian duel conceived of it as both a physical trial of strength and a spiritual ordeal or “judgement of God” (W. Goetz, “Über Fürstzenweikämpfe”, 1967, 139 and fn. 24), but most recently the consecration of the Old Norse duel as the vehicle of divine judgement has been contested by P. Foote (1984, p. 80), W. I. Miller (1988, 191 f.), and Andersson and Miller (1989, pp. 182–3, fn. 107, and p. 269, fn. 245). The *hólmganga* nonetheless retained a quasi-judicial value in connection with the Quarter Courts.

in fact handsomely compensated him in silver for the hay. The falsely-accused farmer turns beet-red with anger at what he regards as an insult, but a Norwegian guest in his household takes the summons as a challenge and fires an arrow into the troop around the process-server, killing a chieftain's son. This first deadly shot brings on a concerted attack of Þórir's men, who burn Blund-Ketill and his household to death in his farmhouse.

Again, in *Valla-Ljóts saga* 3 a brash young newcomer to the Svarfaðardalr region, Halli Sigurðarson, undermines the authority of the regional chieftain Valla-Ljótr by faulting him for surveying and partitioning land on a Christian holiday (Christianity had just been introduced to the country in this story), and then threatening him with a summons if he did not pay up (to Halli) a fine of fifty ounces of silver. As a token of friendship and Christian humility, Valla-Ljótr handed over the silver, but the pagan old Adam in him nursed a resentment against Halli, whom after the usual period of waiting he ambushed on his new-bought farm lands and shamed into fighting an impromptu and illegal duel, in which the younger man died (ch. 4). In this tale of overweening ambition, the summons of Halli is cast in the imperative either/or form of threats, "Do one of two things – pay me 50 ounces of silver, or else I will summons you" ("ger annathvárt, gjald mér hálf tundrað silfrs, eða ek mun stefna þér", *Íf IX*, 242).

How, then, with these examples before us shall we disentangle the challenge of a summons from its threatening and insulting aspects? We might sooner ask how we shall harmonize them together, since threats and insults can second challenges as subtexts of them. Every challenge holds over one's head the moral threat of a contingent humiliation or disgrace which one can only evade by accepting the challenge; and if the male challenger or female inciter wants to press the challenge, he or she may goad their man on insultingly to fight, as Valla-Ljótr does Halli, or Bergþóra her sons (as above, p. 62). Hence challenges may be *heard* as threats or insults, among their perlocutionary effects. But in themselves of course insults are unconditional and do not really dare anyone to do anything; they merely affirm some degrading attribute or other of a person, true or not, and short of retraction they cannot be entirely evaded as by the honorable acceptance of a challenge. Threats, however, *are* conditional, threatening physical harm or mental woe *if* such and such things are not done, and in this regard they are somewhat more akin to challenges which propose a test of manhood to the challenged – the test condition *par excellence* in the Old Norse duel.

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To review our findings in this paper, the relevancy of Labov's and Goffman's sociolinguistics, and of speech-act theory, to saga discourse and the violence engendered in saga dialogue should now be patent if it was not before,

notably so in the first set of violence-provoking speech acts, refusals of requests. The intricacy and explosiveness of these, either in Labov's materials or in ours, would scarcely have been revealed except by his, and Goffman's, linguistic methods. Moreover, even in the murky depths of the psychosocial motivation for violence, Labov's concept of sudden loss or lowering of social status sheds a ray of light on the senselessness of much violent behavior, be it in a suicidal scene of *Guðmundar saga dýra* 14, or in a modern Appalachian tale of axe murder. But as between our notions of senseless violence in late-twentieth-century America and the incipient sado-masochism of the age of the Sturlungs, other things are by no means equal, historically or sociologically.

The five sets of provocative speech acts discussed and illustrated above seem on review to exhaust the lot for the family sagas and *Sturlunga saga*, although one must not forget that vows, oaths and magical spells are also potentially violent speech acts but with negligible representation in this literature,²⁵ and conversely, that a speech act like the court summons will be much more provocative in the sagas than it would routinely be in a less litigious literature.

Depending on whether two or more distinct speech acts are conjoined in an ongoing verbal exchange, or just one speech act is performed before violence erupts, the quintet subdivides into two sets of complex speech actions (SA 1–2), two of unitary speech acts (SA 3–4), and one mixed of both (*eggjanir* and summonses vs. challenges to and acceptances of duels, in SA 5). Of the complex speech actions, the first two (refusals of requests and breaches of contract) undo prior speech acts with posterior, while those in the fifth set (i.e., challenges to duels) complete initial proposals with final agreements (as acceptances of challenges complete the arrangements for a duel). Unitary speech acts such as threats, insults, incitements, of summonses not only “do things” with illocutionary force, like all speech acts, but because of their directness as one-way communications can also arouse people with perlocutionary force – violently. The psychological linkage

²⁵ The excluded magical spells are the object of an informative anthropological study by Gísli Pálsson, “The Name of the Witch” (1991); cf. W. I. Miller's paper, “Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery” (1986). Although in the family saga corpus there are over a hundred passing references to witchcraft, there are virtually none in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation; and of the seventy-eight persons named as witches in the family sagas a third are inactive, having merely the reputation as witches. Witchcraft is most prominent in *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*, of the family sagas. In the last, the malefic incantations of the Hebridean Kotkell and his sons on their spell-binding platform (*Íf* V, 99, 105–6) are as destructive to others as the Icelandic backlash is to the Kotkells, but this colorful example of the magical power of words is almost unique in saga literature (cf. the platformed and venerated witch in *Eiríks saga* 4). In itself magic was no drawback to the pagan Icelanders, and their persecution of witches in the saga age was fundamentally a reflex of their social and economic intolerance of ethnic outsiders (like the Hebrideans), or propertied single women.

between provocative words, violent emotion, and murderous deed is more indirect (but not therefore weaker) in complex speech actions ending in social disorders.

Last but not least, one disclaimer of Labov's should be reiterated (cf. 1981, p. 243): the flash point of violence in a heated exchange of words, or after an individual word-provocation is largely unpredictable, particularly in the face of the perpetual possibility that the violence-provoking speech acts will "misfire" on account of some "hitch" or other. At all events, not in loud words so much as in silences – those pregnant and ominous silences that interspace words and deeds in saga narrative – are any emotive intimations given of the belligerence of the provoked heroes and heroines of the sagas. And when there is no more to say in a dispute, as Labov observes (1981, p. 240), the silence will often be broken by violence.

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