

DISPOSABLE OUTSIDERS AND NARRATIVE LIABILITY IN  
*NJÁLS SAGA*

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Feud in the Sagas of Icelanders involves collective liability. To some extent, all parties involved are depicted as responsible for perpetuating a feud, and retributive justice can be aimed in various ways. In the give and take between feuding groups, the initial offender may not be the direct focus of the vengeance that follows. In physical encounters, first and last wounds become vital in determining which side began the attack, who gave the mortal wound, and how punishment should be meted out. In shaping the way the feud will continue, retribution can fall on those only indirectly involved in the initial dispute, as the saga feud tends to escalate up social ranks and from the communal periphery inward. This reassignment of accountability can allow the feud to be manipulated within the saga through shifting blame. Blame here is broadly conceived of as a way both of determining the proper target in a legal suit and of selecting the next target in the feud's cycle of retributive justice. This reassignment of blame as an authorial narrative move is especially useful in shifting responsibility to and from outsiders in *Njáls saga*. The use of this narrative strategy allows the main characters in the saga to avoid immediate vengeance in the next step of the feud, to redirect their own vengeance; and they may use the shift in blame to ensure a better, typically a more socially equitable, settlement for their losses. Of course, retribution must ultimately catch up with the main players in the feud, and the audience is always well aware of this. Through the redirection of blame and the targeting of outsiders in *Njáls saga*, the feud cycle is restrained within the written narrative, and the saga author can subtly manage audience anticipation.

In the Sagas of Icelanders, it is possible for the character at fault for the action to avoid direct initial blame even when it seems that the character might deserve it. This can happen through a shift in blame from either side of the feud, for there is much to be considered in determining efficient retribution. The character who is attacked, or whose immediate associates are attacked, might take revenge on a more advantageous target. However, the character responsible for the attack might also let someone else take the blame if it seems prudent, especially if it seems narratologically practical. Either method can be

used in the narrative to delay and heighten tension within the feud, which, in turn, allows the narrative to unfold through postponed or deferred action. Theodore M. Andersson has suggested,

The purpose and effect of the escalation techniques [used in the sagas] are to tease the reader's interest and concentrate his mind on the outcome of the story. Since the outcome is a foregone conclusion, either well known to the reader or clearly predictable, any delay of it has not the effect of fogging the issue, but the opposite effect of focusing it more clearly since the reader is given more time and better indications for his projections. (40-41)

Several aspects of saga feud appear to conform to this heightened sense of narrative delay, and Andersson points out that the section of *Njáls saga* dealing with Gunnarr's demise uses escalation technique to amplify the tension through a series of increasingly serious encounters (38-39). Throughout these linked episodes, the audience remains constantly aware that the perpetrators of the feud must be punished and that Gunnarr's downfall is imminent even as the narrative paces itself to reach this climax. In fact, there is often little apparent reason why the feud cannot continue in a direct and straightforward fashion other than an authorial interest in drawing out the tension before the dénouement. Why not simply redirect vengeance to the most obvious target? Any number of associates may be blamed and suffer retribution from the opposing side before the principal players in the feud ultimately resolve their conflict. In this postponement, feuds can be seen to embody the very essence of escalation narrative in the sagas. They frequently begin with characters on the outskirts of the mounting feud whose actions drive the narrative forward while simultaneously staving off the climax of the feud until the internal narrative pressure has been adequately built.

Central to several of these initial conflicts leading to Gunnarr's death in *Njáls saga* are outsiders, or characters only tangentially involved in the feud itself. In many of the Sagas of Icelanders, outsider characters may be distant relatives or kin by marriage. However, they are also commonly social outsiders, slaves whose participation in the feud reflects on their owners and foreigners, especially Norwegian merchants who find themselves involved on behalf of their Icelandic hosts. Both problems are especially evident in *Njáls saga* as part of the

escalation narrative and shifting of blame that leads to Gunnarr's death (ch. 47-77). The main features of this feud are these:

1. Hallgerðr's theft brings about Gunnarr's confrontation with Otkell.
2. Gunnarr's spur wound leads to the killing of Otkell and Skammkell.
3. The trouble at the horse-fight initiates a skirmish between the men.
4. An attack on Gunnarr fails.
5. An attack ends with the death of Otkell's son, and Gunnarr is outlawed.
6. Gunnarr refuses to leave Iceland and is killed when men attack him at home.

In almost every phase of this feud cycle, a social outsider is present. The Irish slave, Melkólfr, is the one who actually performs the theft although Gunnarr's wife, Hallgerðr, sends him. The Norwegian, Auðólfr, is present when Gunnarr receives the spur wound, and he is killed in the ensuing fight. Although Þórir the Norwegian is not present at the horse-fight, he does get involved in the subsequent battle killing Gunnarr's brother, Hjótr. Finally, Þorgrímur the Norwegian is the first to launch the direct attack on Gunnarr at his home. We can examine the role of these men, who are specifically identified as outsiders, to further our understanding of the way the *Njáls saga* narrative functions.

An important feature of the role of slaves in saga narratives is that they provide some way of influencing the plot. We would not generally expect that slaves would be heroes in medieval literature; however, their distinctive anti-heroics in the sagas are noteworthy. They provide lulls in narrative action, especially in moments of escalating tension. Used to influence the saga plot, often through their anti-heroics, slaves act as ordered by their owners, and they often take the fall for their owners in the sagas. Ruth Mazo Karras, for instance, has noted that "in a violent society where killings were frequent, a slaveowner might well send his slaves to do the dirty work for him, especially when there was a high chance of the would-be killer being killed first" (111). Karras, furthermore, explains that in such killings, the saga narrative makes it clear that the owner is ultimately to blame, and the proper target for revenge should be the owner not the slave (112). The slave in Old Norse society had no rights to compensation, his death would not be

avenged, and he would generally gain nothing from these acts. He could not be cleared of his crimes even if they were performed at the instigation of an owner. Slaves, like most stereotyped saga characters, can be killed without legal recourse. Action need not follow the killing of a slave. At the same time, however, slaves are important because their actions reflect on their owners, and owners were responsible for the actions of their slaves. Retribution for actions performed by slaves is expected from their owners and is legally obligated by a number of law codes including the Gulaping law, the Frostaping law, and the Jutland law (see Karras 107-12). In a narrative, assigning action to a slave is an easy way to shift explicit blame to or from another character, one who is often nonetheless implicitly responsible for the outcome of the action. We see this in the reassigning of a slave's action to his owner and in the owner's reassigning action to the slave. This distinction between explicit and implicit blame seems vital in determining the subtle nuances of responsibility in saga feuds, especially when balancing losses and weighing proper reactions.

This issue can be clearly seen in the role of the Irish slave Melkólfr in *Njáls saga*. The feud that ultimately ends with Gunnarr's death begins when Otkell refuses to sell provisions to Gunnarr during a time of need. Gunnarr clearly states that he will not steal to provide food and hay for his people. He approaches Otkell to obtain these goods, but Otkell refuses to sell goods to Gunnarr. Otkell instead sells his Irish slave, Melkólfr, to Gunnarr (ch. 47). Gunnarr's wife, Hallgerðr, then sends a rather unwilling Melkólfr back to Otkell's farm to steal food and burn the storage building. When Hallgerðr offers Gunnarr the stolen food, he is so enraged by being linked to the theft that he slaps Hallgerðr (ch. 48). This, of course, is the infamous slap that eventually leads to his death as Hallgerðr will refuse to offer up her hair to make another bowstring for Gunnarr's broken bow during the final attack on him (ch. 77). To return to the slave, Melkólfr, he has performed the theft, but he is rather inept as might be expected given the typical saga slave stereotype. Owners might use slaves in feuds, but they are rather incompetent killers, according to many of the saga narratives. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, we find a number of instances where incompetent slaves bungle their missions. Thus, it is no surprise in *Njáls saga* when Melkólfr loses some items that Otkell and his associates recover and recognize the lost objects. They eventually summon Gunnarr to account for Melkólfr's theft. We also need to keep in mind, of course, that Gunnarr is being drawn into this feud by his

wife's ambition and sense of pride as well as his slave's incompetence. He is now the unwilling victim in the early stages of this feud cycle. Regardless, he is the most prominent player on his side of this feud. His death is therefore ensured in the final act of the feud, and the well-informed medieval Icelandic audience would likely have understood this initial act by Melkólfr and Hallgerðr as the beginning of Gunnarr's ultimate demise. This opening situation with Melkólfr leads to an escalation of problems throughout the first part of the saga. It also shows that slaves can function as vital characters in mobilizing saga plots. Melkólfr's early role as an instigator in this feud starts to move the narrative towards its logical end. Subsequent acts in the feud then provide the proper pacing for the escalation of tension within the narrative. However, slaves generally do not remain in the saga long. The last mention of Melkólfr in *Njáls saga* is during a court case when he is given back to Otkell. After this, his essential narrative function is over. Although the actions that he has set in motion continue, his character has been summarily written out of the story. Nonetheless, Gunnarr must continue to deal with the problems set in motion by the actions of his slave.

The other outsider characters drawn into the Icelandic intrigues in *Njáls saga* are the Norwegians. The term *austmaðr* ("Easterner") in the Sagas of Icelanders refers to a Norwegian character within the Icelandic milieu almost without fail, and the *austmaðr* like the slave is an endemic feature of the Sagas of Icelanders. Though the status of these characters is higher, the role of the Norwegian guest is not entirely dissimilar from that of the slave. Although ostensibly more independent in his actions and motives, the typical Norwegian guest is at the mercy of his host's ongoing intrigues. Unlike the slave, the Norwegian may be skilled in weapon use and relatively useful in physical feuding. Nonetheless, the Norwegian guest is rarely a challenge for the intrepid Icelandic saga character, and the presence of a Norwegian character within a saga feud often indicates this character will be among the first killed. The reasons for this are likely varied, but all seem to point to the essential disposability of the character. His actions are important, but his person is largely incidental. In many sagas, there is no pretext for the Norwegian presence in the narrative. These characters appear as routinely as the trading ships that would have plied the North Atlantic, and they commonly remain during the winter with wealthy Icelandic hosts. In return, they are expected to support their hosts without question. Their presence in the home of an

Icelander is enough to signal the side they will take in the feud and to establish their support. Their death is typically ensured. Nonetheless, the plots set in motion by the actions of these characters are frequently central to the saga, making their familiar presence fundamental as part of the narrative structure (Callow 325).

These Norwegian characters are fundamental to saga structure in part because of their narrative flexibility. The Norwegian merchant as a character is malleable within the saga narrative and can readily be used to fill narrative gaps, shift action within a scene, and commence feuds and individual battles among Icelanders. As with slaves, the key narrative advantage of Norwegian characters in the sagas is that they can be dispatched in some manner without retribution. Their lack of ties to Iceland allows them to be killed off, sent away, or otherwise disposed of with impunity. Furthermore, they are both historically available and adaptable. Norwegian merchants are an acceptable part of the historical landscape of Iceland and can function as conventional characters within saga narratives. They blend seamlessly into the environment. These characters can be constructed at will, and they do not need to conform to the same historical expectations of other characters in the sagas. Their lack of Icelandic genealogy means there were no contemporary descendants to be appeased. Norwegian merchants are in many ways ideal as narrative constructs within the sagas. They do not need a genealogy, and while they are frequently taken to court for their actions in Iceland, generally no action needs to be taken following their demise, and the saga can return to the interests of the Icelandic characters with minimal fuss. The Norwegian, then, can be dropped into a saga with nominal set-up and removed from the saga with as much ease. These stock characters were designed to be disposable, to serve a purpose, and then to be discarded. Their fleeting existence should, however, by no means undermine their essential value in the Sagas of Icelanders. Many of these disposable characters appear at pivotal moments and perform crucial roles in furthering saga actions, as *Njáls saga* demonstrates.

The very fact that these Norwegian merchant characters have no past and no future—they exist in the saga moment—perhaps highlights their status as among the most fictional of the saga characters. Their historical verisimilitude, if any, rests on the idea that such people could plausibly have existed. Chris Callow writes,

The appearance of Norwegians in the saga narratives represents a conscious choice by the author to mention *austmenn*. The fact that Norwegians and Icelanders had similar names meant that a term like *austmaðr* could be used, or not, by the storyteller depending on whether a certain kind of narrative warranted it. And often the appearance of a Norwegian character tends to be used to explain how bad events could have taken place in Iceland or within a given locality. (329)

The disposable Norwegian is a versatile character and vital to the construction of the Sagas of Icelanders as this character allows for manipulation of the historical past. Unsurprisingly, when a character is needed to drive the action of a plot forward or to splice two seemingly unrelated plot points, it is often one of these stock foreign characters who is put into action doing the dirty work in the saga. The Icelanders who commissioned, composed, and received these sagas from the thirteenth century onward were well aware of the possible actions that could be acceptably attributed to their forebears just as they were conscious of the narrative restraints of the saga form that called for actions to develop in a predictable manner. Callow sees the mistakes and easy defeat of the Norwegian characters in the sagas as showing their “social incompetence” (327). However, these narrative mistakes equally display the social competence of the saga authors, who ascribed actions to the Norwegians that could not have been performed by Icelandic characters. Foreign stock characters were an effective means of filling the gap when the saga narrative called for an action that could not be performed by a known character—that is, a character with historical and genealogical ties to Iceland.

The most important function of these characters is to support Icelanders physically. The typical trajectory of the Norwegian in Iceland in the sagas is one that seems familiar. He arrives by ship bearing goods and news, at which point he joins an Icelandic household. By joining a household, the Norwegian merchant is now obligated to support his host in times of trouble. This host-guest relationship commonly leads to the Norwegian’s being involved in some attack on one or more Icelanders, most often the heroes of the saga narrative or men closely related to them. Having served his purpose, the Norwegian is frequently killed by the saga hero whose person or kin have been attacked. Another option open to the

Norwegian is to escape to Norway either secretly or openly. In either case, the return trip to Norway often necessitates bringing along Icelanders who wish to escape Iceland, visit the courts of the Norwegian kings, or both.

However, *Njáls saga* is distinctive among the Sagas of Icelanders in its use of these characters, especially in the feud cycle involving Gunnarr and his enemies. Its distinctiveness results not so much because of the actions the Norwegians perform, as these are fairly commonplace, but because *Njáls saga* appears to be the only Saga of Icelanders in which the author conscientiously attempts throughout the narrative to give the Norwegians a motive beyond simply acting as the willing puppets of an Icelandic host. As noted above, most of these Norwegian encounters in Iceland in *Njáls saga* involve attacks on Gunnarr following the problems initiated by Gunnarr's wife, Hallgerðr, and the Irish slave, Melkólfr. Chapter 52 of *Njáls saga*, for instance, introduces the Norwegian Auðólfr, a big, strong man who is staying with Otkell. Auðólfr falls in love with Otkell's daughter, Signý, which is then used as a motive for his actions on Otkell's behalf when they attack Gunnarr (ch. 54). When Auðólfr aims a spear at Gunnarr, Gunnarr unsurprisingly returns Auðólfr's spear, killing him; the spear-catch-and-return maneuver is a favored (and effective) Icelandic method for killing Norwegians in the sagas.

As the actions shift forward following Auðólfr's death, the narrative attention centers on Egill—also part of the group of men arrayed against Gunnarr at this point—and the two Norwegians with him, Þórir and Þorgrímr (ch. 58). Þórir marries Egill's daughter, giving him a stronger connection to the action. After the doomed horsefight, another attack on Gunnarr is planned. The Norwegians with Egill do not want to become involved, as they have no quarrel with Gunnarr; the Norwegians were not present at the horsefight, and they point this out. Þórir further comments to Egill regarding the planned attack that he “must need a lot of help...if so many men are going to attack three other men” ‘enda þarf hér mikils við ... er fjöldi manns skal fara at þrim mǫnnum’ (ch. 61). At this Egill leaves, but his wife Steinvör gets involved. She chastises Þórir for refusing to support his father-in-law and calls him a coward. Following this provocation, Þórir agrees to go with Egill, but, in a moment that is reflective of the Norwegian fate in the sagas in general, he predicts that he will not return, saying to Þorgrímr,



Take the keys to my chests, because I will never unlock them again. I invite you to take as much of our property as you want. Go away from Iceland and do not think about taking revenge for me. And if you do not leave Iceland, then it will be your death. Tak þú við kistuluklum mínum, því at ek mun þeim eigi lúka optar. Bið ek, at þú eignisk slíkt af fé okkru sem þú vill; en far utan ok ætlask ekki til hefnda eptir mik. En ef þú ferr eigi utan, þá mun þat verða þinn bani. (ch. 61)

Þórir joins the men, but does not actively involve himself in the skirmish until Egill is killed. At this point, Starkaðr taunts him for not supporting the man who is both his host and his father-in-law (ch. 63). Here, we can see the saga author relying on the close legal and familial bond that is commonly established between father- and son-in-law. Guðrún Nordal has suggested that this bond is “highlighted in those cases when the son-in-law bears the burden of vengeance” (131). Starkaðr’s criticism exploits Þórir’s dual loyalties to Egill as father-in-law and as his host in Iceland, and Þórir throws himself into the attack killing Gunnarr’s brother, Hjörtr, only to be killed—hacked in half at the waist—by Gunnarr in return.

In the lawsuit that follows, the killing of Kolr Egilsson and the Norwegian are balanced against the killing of Hjörtr. The decision to charge Kolr with the killing when it was, in fact, the Norwegian who killed Hjörtr is also questioned by other characters in the narrative. However, Njáll contends that this is legal, as Kolr was chosen as the responsible party before witnesses. In the end, Þórir does not bear the legal blame for the killing of Hjörtr as this culpability is successfully shifted from the Norwegian Þórir to the Icelander Kolr Egilsson. Why is this shift in blame important within the framework of the saga? Here, the altered blame gives Gunnarr an edge in the legal case that follows. It balances the value of the men who are slain as Gunnarr’s brother is determined to be the equivalent of both Kolr and the Norwegian Þórir. In addition, this shift in blame for the wounding and death of Hjörtr fuels the feud between Gunnarr and his enemies. Gunnarr has exacted further retribution for the injustice at the horse fight earlier in the saga. Gunnarr has also now directly established potential Icelandic targets for further vengeance by reassigning the killing of his brother from the Norwegian to the Icelander. Simultaneously, Gunnarr’s enemies resent his successful maneuvering in this legal case, and their resentment parallels the sentiment expressed

following Gunnarr's self-judgment in the theft case involving Otkell as well. In both, the continuation of the feud is foreshadowed through the animosity of the opposing side.

Unfortunately for Þórir's Norwegian companion Þorgrímr, he does not heed Þórir's advice, and he also finds himself entangled in this feud when Steinvör asks him to stay and take over Egill's property following his death. When Þorgrímr resists, determined to return to Norway, she sweetens the deal by offering up Þórir's widow, her daughter Guðrún. So, Þorgrímr remains in Iceland, finds himself embroiled in the feud, and is the first to be killed in the final attack on Gunnarr. Unlike Þórir, who holds back, Þorgrímr is the first to approach Gunnarr's home. Gunnarr wounds Þorgrímr, who then returns to Gizurr to report before dying, in a classic moment of ironic understatement, that he does not know if Gunnarr is at home, but Gunnarr's halberd certainly is (ch. 77). The attack on Gunnarr continues, and his attackers eventually succeed. The Norwegians here not only play roles in much of the main action and the climax of the conflict cycle involving Gunnarr, but they are well integrated into the narrative as husbands and love interests of some of the main players arrayed against Gunnarr. In keeping with the more general problems with women exhibited quite clearly in this saga, the Norwegians are obligated through their marriages to join the feuds of their hosts and in-laws. They are further goaded to do their duty to their hosts and in-laws by the women in their Icelandic homes. While most of the Sagas of Icelanders recognize the right of Icelandic hosts to expect and use the services of the Norwegians in their homes, *Njáls saga* goes further in providing Icelandic kin, at least through marriage, and thereby a nominal genealogy for these Norwegians. This inextricably binds them to the actions of their hosts. Yet, the actions of the Norwegians are as conventional as their deaths, and Norwegians in other Sagas of Icelanders perform similar actions with less motivation.

The added incentive of marriage and kinship in *Njáls saga* is particularly odd because the Sagas of Icelanders often show that Icelanders want to keep Norwegian merchants away from their women. While a Norwegian of high birth might be a favorable match for an Icelandic woman, and a prominent Norwegian background can help to solidify a character's standing in Icelandic society, a Norwegian merchant's interest in an Icelandic woman is rarely met with favor, regardless of his standing or wealth. Examples of this can be seen in the relationships of Þórný and Skíði in *Finnboga saga* (ch. 1), Geirmundur

and Þuriðr in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 29), and Helga and Hrafn in *Bárðar saga* (ch. 5-7). So, why add the extra details in *Njáls saga*? It is difficult to know with any certainty. These details could merely reflect the widely-acknowledged heightened narrative development in *Njáls saga*. They could also extend the theme of provoking women that recurs throughout the saga. They could reflect the strong legal interest of the saga by specifically defining the ties of these Norwegian men as a further method of binding them to the feud at hand. Perhaps all these extra details simply highlight the uniqueness of *Njáls saga* within the broader saga corpus.

Finally, I want to look a little more carefully at the legal shift in blame from Þórir to Kolr and the role of witnessing in affecting the shift. The Sagas of Icelanders frequently shift blame from one man to another in terms of what we might call blood retribution; that is, characters can target different men than those originally directly involved when vengeance is taken. This type of action is not uncommon and typically happens rather informally; men simply define their target and take action. It is also not uncommon to use bribery as a way to get others to tell blatant lies, avoid the truth, or pass on false tales. However, *Njáls saga* is unique in its use of blame shift within a legal case and in using witnesses to create the blame shift. After the horse-fight, Gunnarr and his brothers are attacked by Starkaðr and his men (ch. 63). Men on both sides are killed, and Gunnarr approaches Njáll for legal advice (ch. 64). Njáll's advice includes turning several lawsuits over to Gunnarr to place him in a better position vis-à-vis the men he will face in the lawsuit. In addition, Njáll says that Gunnarr should uncover the bodies of the dead men, declare them outlaws for their conspiracy and assault on him and his brothers, and name witnesses to the wounds (ch. 64). Naming witnesses to the wounds is not unusual in itself. It happens fairly regularly in the sagas as a court case is being prepared. However, this particular instance is exceptional, because Gunnarr assigns different men to the wounds. It should be noted here that the old Norse idea of witnesses differs markedly from our own. Witnesses were, for the most part, simply men who were willing to testify to what was claimed or decided. They were not necessarily, or even commonly, eye-witnesses to the event. The witnesses were available to confirm a story, an act, an oath, or a decision. In taking Njáll's advice, Gunnarr is able to shift blame in the killing of Hjqrtr by assigning witnesses to attest that Kolr Egilsson instead of Þórir mortally wounded Hjqrtr. We know from the narrative,

however, that Kolr Egilsson did not kill Hjqrtr (ch. 36). Nonetheless, this is how Gunnarr chooses to allocate the responsibility. Although Mqrðr challenges this choice on behalf of the other side when the case is brought to court, it is deemed legal because the wounds were assigned before witnesses.

The act of witnessing generally is something that *Njáls saga* seems particularly concerned with compared to other Sagas of Icelanders. (See the Appendix, which details the relative frequency of the various terms for witnessing and witnesses in the Sagas of Icelanders). The witness words show up far more frequently in *Njáls saga*. When we examine, for instance, the *vátrr* (“witness”) terms, we find that other sagas employing these terms use them an average of three times while *Njáls saga* uses them 165 times. More specifically, comparing *Njáls saga* to *Laxdæla saga*, the frequency of the *vátrr* terms in *Njáls saga* is approximately .15% of the total word count, while in *Laxdæla saga*, which is fairly typical in its use of these terms, the frequency is only about .01%. It should not be surprising that the general preoccupation of *Njáls saga* with the law and with legal procedure can also be found in its attitude toward witnessing. In particular, it may be another way in which the saga inserts Njáll yet again into Icelandic history. His anachronistic involvement in creation of the Fifth Court has been noted by a number of scholars, and Njáll’s involvement in the early Christian movement through his support of Þangbrandr is also well known. Njáll’s role as a great man of the law, too, is attested in the saga several times. In this legal case, his advice to Gunnarr to reassign the wounds is said to be in accordance with the law. Thus, when Mqrðr questions Njáll about the validity of the case, we are again told that this transfer of blame before witnesses is legal. In fact, it is likely legal according to *Grágás* where similar provisions occur in the addenda, not that the *Njáls saga* author was always careful with his laws, as Karl Lehmann and Hans Schnorr von Carolsfeld have shown. What is unusual is that Njáll’s manipulation of the law is lauded in the saga. *Bandamanna saga*, as an example, notes an occasion when witnesses are used to testify that an unjust court sentence has in fact been correctly delivered (ch. 6). This is accomplished by bribing the court. Conversely, Njáll’s subtle manipulation of the witnesses, which ultimately affects the blame, the outcome, and the eventual retributive justice, is praised as showing his legal acumen. Njáll’s careful manipulation of the law here moves Gunnarr’s feud forward. The blame is transferred, Gunnarr

profits from the case, and his enemies are more embittered than ever. The next stage of the feud is primed, and the audience knows it.

William Ian Miller has written that “the chief way in which the laws governing the right to kill and actual feuding custom differed was in the size of the class of people upon whom the avenger’s axe could justifiably fall” (197). He further claims that the laws limited vengeance to the people or person directly involved in the “liability-producing conduct,” while the sagas allow characters to cast a wider net (Miller 197). In the sagas, vengeance can fall on characters simply associated with the offender. Often, this will be a close family member. However, as we have seen, this is not always the case. It is possible that the disjunct Miller identifies between the laws and the sagas suggests an inherently narrative aspect to the moments of redirected action in the saga feuds. The use of both slaves and Norwegians in *Njáls saga*, and more broadly the use of foreigners in the native feuds across the Sagas of Icelanders perhaps gives us insight into the structure of saga narrative. These characters are social outsiders. They generally lack personal historical identity. They exist as easily manipulated narrative constructs within the saga. Their main purpose as such seems to have been to advance feuds between Icelanders by moving the action of the saga toward its ultimate climax and resolution. These social outsiders in Iceland function as the great pawns of the Icelanders in their sagas. It is never expected that these men will be the heroes of the saga; rather, they exist to fulfill specific functions by providing lulls and delays in narrative action, especially in moments of escalating tension. These interludes heighten the narrative tension as the audience anticipates when the final confrontation between the main players will occur. While these social outsiders may be individually disposable, their actions are narratologically essential.

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Appendix: Witness Terms in the Sagas of Icelanders.

<b>VÁTR, VÁTTA, VÆTTI AND RELATED TERMS IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS</b>	
<b>SAGA</b>	<b>CHAPTER (FREQUENCY)</b>
BANDAMANNA SAGA	6 (1)
BJARNAR SAGA HÍTDÆLAKAPPA	19 (1)
DROPLAUGARSONA SAGA	4 (1); 6 (1); 9 (1)
EGILS SAGA	84 (2); 85 (1)
EYRBYGGJA SAGA	14 (1); 32 (1); 44 (2)
FINNBOGA SAGA	40 (1)
GÍSLA SAGA	9 (1); 37 (1)
GRETTIS SAGA	25 (1); 87 (1)
GUNNLAUGS SAGA ORMSTUNGU	4 (1)
HEIÐARVIGA SAGA	9 (1); 30 (1); 32 (2); 43 (1)
HRAFNKELS SAGA FREYSGOÐA	11 (1)
HÆNSA-ÞÓRIS SAGA	8 (1); 9 (1); 10 (1)
LAXDÆLA SAGA	35 (1); 45 (1); 47 (3); 60 (1); 78 (1)
LJÓSVETNINGA SAGA	4 (2); 11 (2); 12 (1); 14 (1); 22 (1)
NJÁLS SAGA	2 (1); 7 (2); 8 (2); 13 (1); 24 (5); 34 (1); 38 (1); 55 (1); 56 (4); 64 (1); 65 (2); 66 (1); 68 (2); 73 (3); 91 (1); 105 (1); 112 (1); 121 (4); 123 (1); Ch. 135 (10); 138 (1); 141 (5); 142 (66); 143 (14); 144 (34)

<b>VÁTR, VÁTTA, VÆTTI AND RELATED TERMS IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS</b>	
<b>SAGA</b>	<b>CHAPTER (FREQUENCY)</b>
REYKDÆLA SAGA	20 (1)
SVARFDÆLA SAGA	11 (1); 15 (1)
VIGA-GLÚMS SAGA	9 (1); 14 (1); 23 (2); 24 (1)
VOPNFIRÐINGA SAGA	5 (1); 7 (1)
ÞÓRDAR SAGA HREÐU	4 (1); 5 (1); 13 (1)
ÞORSTEINS SAGA HVÍTA	4 (1)

<b>VITNI, VITNA, AND RELATED TERMS IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS</b>	
<b>SAGA</b>	<b>CHAPTER (FREQUENCY)</b>
BJARNAR SAGA HÍTDÆLAKAPPA	9 (1)
EGILS SAGA	9 (2); 15 (1); 16 (1); 17 (1); 57 (3); 64 (2)
FINNBOGA SAGA RAMMA	42 (1)
FLÓAMANNA SAGA	7 (1); 17 (1)
FÓSTRÆÐRA SAGA	11 (1)
GÍSLA SAGA	6 (1)
GRETTIS SAGA	72 (1); 88 (1)
HEIÐARVÍGA SAGA	7 (1); 33 (1)
LAXDÆLA SAGA	21 (1); 26 (1); 46 (1); 59 (1); 60 (2)

<b>VITNI, VITNA, AND RELATED TERMS IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS</b>	
<b>SAGA</b>	<b>CHAPTER (FREQUENCY)</b>
LJÓSVETNINGA SAGA	14 (1); 15 (1); 29
NJÁLS SAGA	6 (2); 23 (1); 53 (1); 97 (1); 150 (1)
SVARFDÆLA SAGA	11 (2)
VÍGA-GLÚMS SAGA	9 (1)
ÞORSTEINS SAGA SÍÐU- HALLSSONAR	3 (2)



*Sterling*

Note

<sup>1</sup>I quote and summarize primary saga texts from the standard Íslenzk Fornrit editions; translations are mine.

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