

Choices of Honor: Telling Saga Feud, *Thátttr*, and the Fundamental Oral Progression

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The transition from a semiotic system of textual comprehension to a system of internal structural boundaries constitutes the basis for the generation of meaning. This condition, above all, intensifies the moment of play in the text: from an alternative mode of codification the text acquires features of a more sophisticated conventionality.

(Lotman 1994:380)

The family and Sturlunga sagas are not only narratives of “sophisticated conventionality,” but it is precisely the unclear combination of mundane and refined that has made these medieval texts so hard to classify.¹ On the one hand the sagas are a sophisticated written phenomenon. On the other, they are stories filled with repetitions and other conventions of oral, ethnographic narration recounting the social past. Can we determine the elemental, generative structure of the Icelandic texts? The answer is yes, since the sagas themselves, despite their overlay of sophistication, retain this primary repetitive progression. With our question in mind, let us look at just such a progression.

Toward the middle of *Vápnfirðinga saga*² is a small *thátttr* (short story)³, relating a petty dispute with large implications for the people involved. Two farmers, each a thingman of a different local chieftain, quarrel over grazing and tree-cutting rights in a woodland they own in

¹ This article expands a preliminary study (Byock 1994) published in Iceland. My thanks are due to the editor of *Oral Tradition* for his interest in the essay.

² *Vápnfirðinga saga* in Jóhannesson 1950; for bibliography, see Cook 1993.

³ The plural of *thátttr* is *thættir*.

common. Up to this point the two *bændr* (farmers)⁴ have shared the use of the property, but now one of them, Thórðr, is threatened by his more aggressive and wealthier neighbor Thormóðr.⁵ Intimidated by Thormóðr, Thórðr seeks support. As is the custom, the free farmer goes to his *goði*⁶ Brodd-Helgi and asks the chieftain's help in solving the problem.

But the *goði*, the head of one of the two major families in the saga, is a hard man. Brodd-Helgi refuses to help his thingman Thórðr unless the latter hands over all his property and comes to live on the chieftain's farm. The saga makes this point clearly:

Brodd-Helgi declared that he had no intention of quarreling over his [Thórðr's] property and would take no part in the matter, unless he [Thórðr] transferred to him all the property and moved everything of his to Hof [Brodd-Helgi's farm].

Brodd-Helgi kvask eigi nenna at deila um fé hans [Þórðar] ok engan hlut mundu í eiga, nema hann handsalaði honum féit allt ok færi til Hofis með allt sitt (ch. 7).⁷

Caught in a dilemma, Thórðr accepts Brodd-Helgi's offer and legally assigns his patrimony to the chieftain: "He [Thórðr] chose that and surrendered to Helgi his inheritance." (Hann [Þórðr] kaus þat ok seldisk Helga arfsali.)

Later in the saga the reason for including this seemingly unimportant incident becomes clear. The dispute over the woodland merges into an ongoing conflict between two chieftains, Brodd-Helgi and his rival Geitir Lýtingsson, who champions Thormóðr's position. The incident is a step in

⁴ The singular of "farmer" is *bóndi*.

⁵ Alas for the non-Icelandic readers of the sagas, a large proportion of the names in the Icelandic texts are Thórr names, a tradition that finds its roots in a connection with Þórr, the god of farmers.

⁶ Chieftain. The plural of *goði* is *goðar*.

⁷ *Vápnfirðinga saga*, in Jóhannesson 1950:38.

the escalation of the saga's major feud,⁸ a contest between two local "big men," each of whom illustrates different personal behavior and leadership style.⁹ As the purpose of including the episode of the two *bændr* is clearly to advance the main feud, neither Thórðr's personal tragedy nor his motivation is explored. In fact, the saga shows little interest in the character of Thórðr; instead, it focuses on the role this incident plays in a chain of events eventually leading to the death of the overly ambitious Brodd-Helgi.

In terms of the saga's basic structure, the conflict between the two farmers sets in motion a series of actions, which we find repeated throughout the sagas, and which are recognizable as a distinct narrative story. In the sagas, many such *thættir* (short stories) are worthy of investigation.¹⁰ The episodic *tháttir* at hand is a primary structure in saga narration of dispute and feud set at home in Iceland. It shoulders the burden of directing the narrative, that is channeling the escalation of events, especially the contentious relationships of Icelandic farmers (men, women, and children) and their chieftains. This pattern serves as an essential building block of saga story. Here I consider this primary structure in a semiotic mode, abstracting the conflict as it moves from a dispute between farmers to a feud between chieftains. My goal is to provide a means for loosening the Gordian knot of saga studies, the convergence of social and literary norms.

By designing tools to analyze the basic grammar of saga narrative, we advance two studies: that of the narrative and that of the society. The primary building blocks of saga structure are small, discrete particles of action. These active particles are easily visualized and hence easily held in

⁸ Although it may seem rather late in the game, the general realization that feud forms the "bedrock" of early Icelandic society and literature is only now gaining wide acceptance. See for example Vésteinn Ólason's (1993) excellent summary article on the family sagas. Helgi Thorláksson (1994) offers a major reconsideration of the role of feud in early Iceland, including a critical review of previous scholarship treating saga feud.

⁹ For a discussion of this long feud see "Vinfengi: A Mechanism of Power" (Byock 1988: ch. 10). The operation of Icelandic feud in general is explored in Chapter 6, "Consensual Governance."

¹⁰ Harris 1972, Ólason 1985, Egilsdóttir 1982. Previous structural analysis of *thættir* has concentrated principally on the numerous short stories of the journeys of Icelanders abroad, especially to the princely courts of Scandinavia.

mind. They may be represented symbolically and pictorially, as I do later in this article.¹¹ Reducing the action particles to their most abstract level, stripping them of names, places, and details, reveals the fundamental simplicity of saga form. Structurally, there is only a limited number of actions that the sagateller draws upon. The initial scene—even one as seemingly small and insignificant as the confrontation between farmers Thórðr and Thormóðr—has far-reaching consequences: it directs the progression of the elaborate feud to follow. This progression resembles a flowchart. Each choice presents another dilemma, necessitating that a new choice must be made before the action can move forward. Following the choices is something that I do not think has been done before but is a method that provides much insight into the social, narrative, and intellectual processes of medieval Iceland. As manifestations of culture, the sagas are a consequence of the combined mentalities of sagateller and medieval audience. Just how the related processes of creation and reception worked is the crucial issue.

With this in mind, I illustrate a small section of the major feud chain in *Vápnfirðinga saga*. Each step, critical to the progression of the unraveling story, may be diagrammed very simply. Although the saga must move relentlessly forward, the sagateller in each instance draws on the same underlying elements of advocacy, conflict, and resolution. The actions are simple, basic, few, and easily visualized. It is not by chance that they fit so easily together to form the narrative structure of feud tales. Saga narration is an example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts: small oral narrative elements are linked together by the logic of Icelandic feuding into a complex chain of events suitable as written narration.¹²

¹¹ I have explored aspects of these action particles elsewhere. In Byock 1982, I referred to them as *feudemes*. See especially the analogy of feudemes with linguistic terminology (57-60). As their name suggests, the role of these particles in feud is similar to the role of morphemes in language. The feudeme forms a relatively stable, indivisible unit of action within the context of both saga and society. These discrete action particles and their patterned groupings are the oral narrative elements upon which the structure of the later written saga is based.

¹² In the sagas, silence can also be a narrative “instrument.” Cf. Österberg 1991. Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir (1990) considers the place of verse in the mainly prose sagas. The twelfth-century transition to literacy, in light of the political competition between lay and clerical leaders, is explored in Sigurðsson 1994.

Consider again Thórðr's small, sad story. The saga has little to say about the background of his troubles or the motivations of the people involved. Instead, basic action is tersely described in a few sentences. Here is a core social pattern, one that, with different variations, structured episodic *thættir* throughout the sagas. In some sagas, such narrative units are embroidered with portents, local history, genealogy, connivings, ghosts, and killings, but the episode of farmer Thórðr and his lost land has no such embellishments. It is cut to the bare bones, exposing the elemental configuration of incidents, progressing from stability, proceeding through disruption, and arriving at temporary resolution. The word "temporary," of course, is the key to building long saga narrative from such a rudimentary progression.

The individual actions and their patterned arrangement serve as a system of signs, channeling the teller/author's prose and fixing the audience's attention. They triggered the rich social understanding that the medieval listener/reader shared with the sagateller. This vital, semantic contract between sagateller and audience dominates saga narration, maintaining the element of oral tradition in the text and furnishing the sagas as a genre with their characteristic sense of homogeneity.

The modern reader might simply see a beleaguered man seeking protection. The medieval audience, however, knowing that Thórðr's options are limited, considered his choices. If Thórðr should reject the chieftain's offer, he chances losing his life to his bullying neighbor. By handing over his land to a *goði*, the farmer gains the immediate protection of a powerful advocate. Yet, in doing so, Thórðr loses his autonomy and the status—both for himself and for his heirs—that come with being a landholder.

Honor, as it so often does in the sagas, invigorates the issue of choices, providing an intellectual as well as an emotional bridge between otherwise patterned and repetitive social actions.¹³ Here, in the bargain between *goði* and *bændr*, honor plays a crucial background role.¹⁴ The medieval audience would surely note, and probably comment upon, Thórðr's small victory, for if this poor farmer loses his land, he

¹³ In a fine article (1986), Richard Bauman considers honor in the sagas in light of performance.

¹⁴ There are different ways to look at honor in the sagas and the view presented here is at times at odds with more traditional concepts of saga morality, honor, and ethics. Vilhjálmur Árnason (1991) offers a philosophical discussion of these differing views.

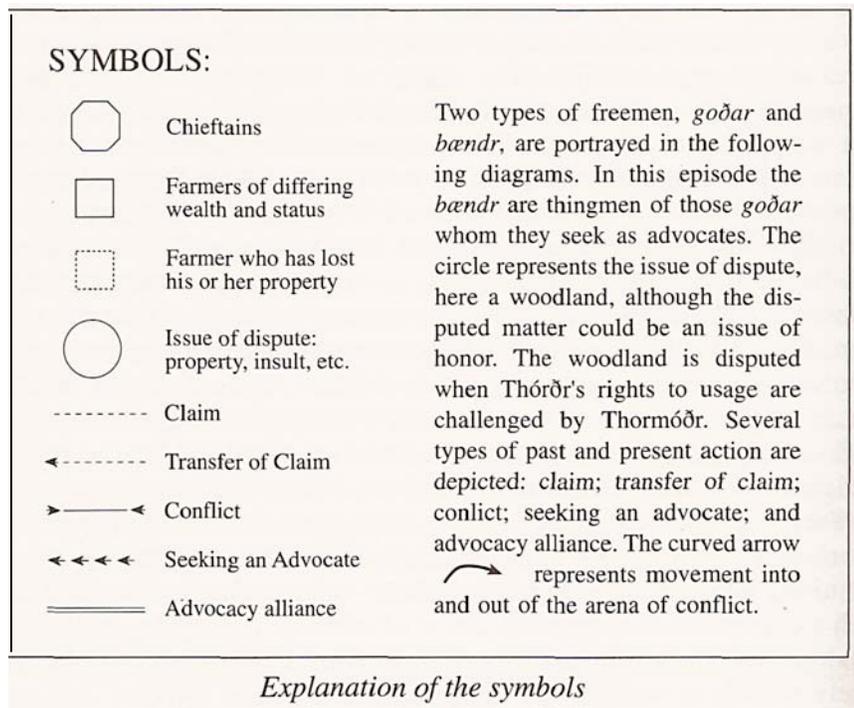
nevertheless does so in a manner that partly assuages his honor. Indeed, Thórðr gets the last bitter laugh in his dealings with his neighbor Thormóðr. In choosing to transfer his land to Brodd-Helgi, Thórðr, for a brief instant, takes control of the direction of the action. He exits from the quarrel with the knowledge—shared by the community—that his opponent Thormóðr is now embroiled in contention with a powerful antagonist. Thormóðr, in return for his determination to bully a neighbor, will now have to defend his person and property against Brodd-Helgi, a dangerous and motivated *goði*.

Honor, in fact, has been in the background the whole time. Despite the danger, honor made it difficult for Thórðr to do nothing. Faced with a humiliating situation, the farmer would have been mocked and probably goaded by others into challenging and perhaps even attempting to kill Thormóðr—a risky venture. Instead, Thórðr turns to an advocate, proving himself a difficult man to humiliate. Once Thórðr has transferred his land, he cannot be intimidated into dropping his claim. To the contrary, he is relieved of responsibility. The rights of prosecution that come with ownership have been assumed by Brodd-Helgi. With the *schaden Freude* that we so often see in the Icelandic texts, Thórðr can enjoy, from a distance, the dangers (and death) that await Thormóðr in the escalating feud between the *goðar*, Brodd-Helgi and Geitir.

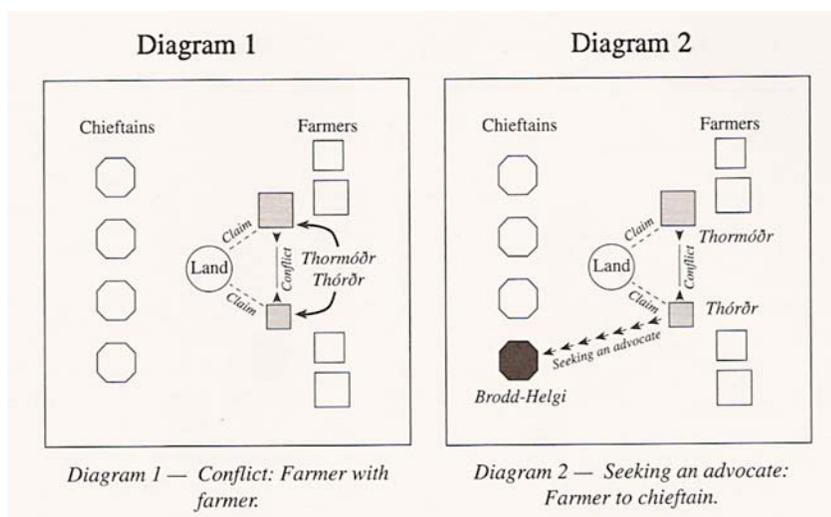
Inherent in the exchange between Brodd-Helgi and Thórðr is the fact that Brodd-Helgi also has choices. As an aggressive chieftain he is always interested in increasing his wealth and power. Before taking on the *bóndi*'s case, Brodd-Helgi must consider the risk and weigh the costs of his involvement. Again nothing is said in the text, but the simple, repetitive nature of the action focuses the reader's mind on the available choices. Reflection on these choices was a critical undertaking for the medieval audience, who knew in advance that Brodd-Helgi fails in the end. In this instance, because Brodd-Helgi is already engaged in an escalating feud with his rival chieftain Geitir, he apparently does not mind taking the risk. Acquiring a claim to a valuable woodland—along with the possibilities that such a case offers for harassing Geitir's thingman Thormóðr—will enhance Brodd-Helgi's position. At least that is what Brodd-Helgi thinks. He is surely willing to weather the disapproval and public dishonor that comes with his greedily snatching up Thórðr's land rather than coming with moderation (*hóf*) to the assistance of a distressed thingman. The audience,

however, is aware that Brodd-Helgi's death will be caused by just such immoderate rapacity for wealth and power.

The following diagrams are vehicles for analyzing dynamics on all levels of the feud spectrum. We map the path of the medieval storyteller as he fashions his tale within the social and economic realities of his society. The diagrams reveal a chain of actions largely devoid of the particulars of a single saga. They delineate the thematic blocks of saga story, while tracing the path of a disputed parcel of land in an escalating feud between chieftains. By deconstructing the story in this way, we see social patterns within the context of the rural society; we recognize the constraints placed upon the sagateller by the knowledge and expectations of his audience. This is the process of "creating" story within an already established tradition of social memory.¹⁵

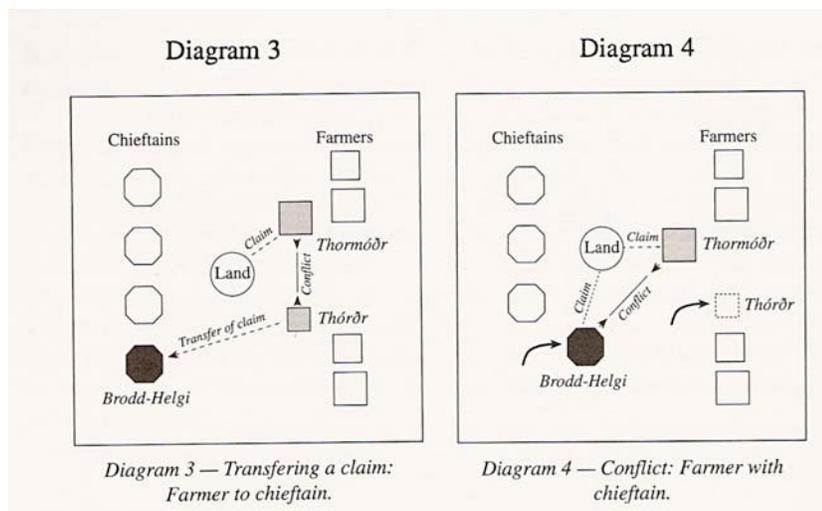


¹⁵ For an important study of this subject and one that includes the sagas, see Fentress and Wickham 1992.



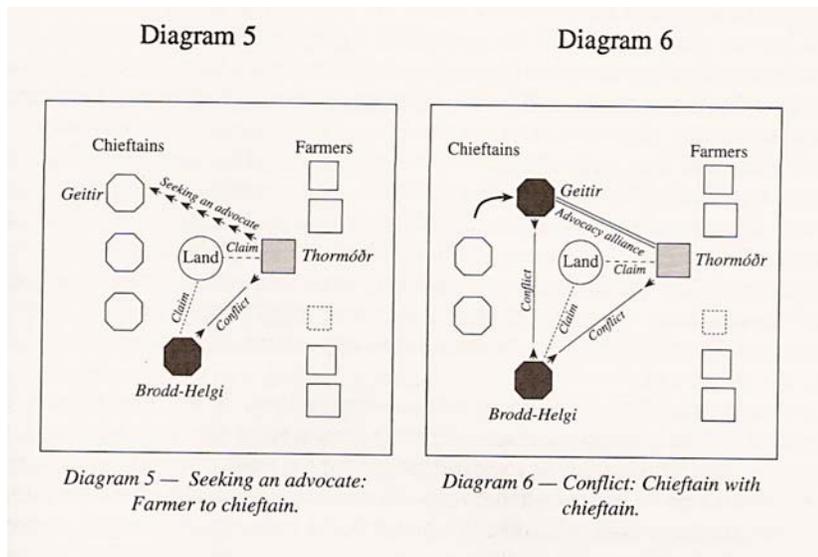
The first diagram portrays the initial phase of the dispute between Thórðr and Thormóðr. At this stage, the conflict is limited to the farmers, with chieftains having no reason to intervene. There is, however, movement within the system. As a result of Thórðr and Thormóðr's quarrel, the land has lost its place as a securely owned possession; it has moved into the liminal area of contest. Not yet a prize for the *goðar*, the woods are no longer safely owned by farmers. Here the social reality is well-known to the medieval audience but again left unsaid. Chieftains do not replenish their wealth by regular and open means such as taxation; rather, they amass property in a predatory manner, taking advantage of the troubles of farmers like Thórðr.

At the stage of this first diagram the confrontation could have been settled between the two farmers. If a settlement had been arranged, the property would not have remained in play. Thormóðr, however, is unreasonable, and Thórðr is forced to seek the aid of an advocate (diagram 2). As a result, the property moves within the reach of a chieftain. In this instance the dispute is over a piece of land. In different *thættir*, the quarrel may be over chattels such as items of a dowry, or more intangible matters such as insult or other offenses to honor.



Thórðr finds a powerful advocate, but as noted earlier, Brodd-Helgi demands the payment of Thórðr's property, including the farmer's clouded interest in the woodland. Caught between his threatening neighbor and his grasping *goði*, Thórðr has little choice. Negotiations are quickly completed. The farmer's claim to half-ownership of the land is transferred (diagram 3), and Thórðr and his family move to Brodd-Helgi's farm. In demanding Thórðr's farm, Brodd-Helgi allows his greed for property to submerge his role as protector of his thingmen and arbitrator of local disputes. Decisions such as this one have much to do with the ultimate success or failure of individual chieftains. The outcome of all these choices makes it clear that Thórðr's loss of his land to his chieftain signals a change in the dramatic tension of the story. The honor and the prestige of a chieftain are now engaged in a public dispute.

With Brodd-Helgi replacing Thórðr, the dispute advances from the private to the public realm. The stage is now set for a conflict between Thormóðr and the chieftain, Brodd-Helgi (diagram 4). While ownership of the land remains in dispute, other larger issues are at stake. A chieftain's honor and reputation are not just his own but represent the power and standing of his thingmen. In this instance, the dispute becomes a major test of political strength. Because Thormóðr is unwilling to stand alone against Brodd-Helgi, he now also seeks the assistance of a powerful advocate. Thormóðr goes to his chieftain, Geitir, Brodd-Helgi's rival (diagram 5).



Geitir accepts the case from Thormóðr, his thingman. The chieftain does not demand the farmer’s ownership interest in the parcel of land as payment; therefore Thormóðr, unlike Thórðr, remains in the picture. The medieval audience is aware that Geitir, in accepting the case, has considered a number of factors. Among them are the effect his action will have on his position in the community, his reputation with his thingmen, and his ability to gather support if the case goes to the thing or if it turns into a fight. Brodd-Helgi, who is presented as a capricious and impetuous individual, has, unlike Geitir, ignored the nuances of these issues. Through such detail, the sagateller draws a fine distinction between the two rivals.

Taking stock at this point of the progression of the narrative, we see that the sagateller, guided by the convergent path of the social and narrative patterns, has logically and with seemingly little contrivance escalated his story into a conflict between *goðar*. The intrinsic interest of the story has increased as the tale changes from a dispute between petty farmers to a clash between major rivals in the Vápnafjord area. The conflict is poised to spread to Iceland at large as it escalates to the level of the Althing, involving other chieftains and farmers as supporters, judges, and arbitrators.

As soon as a chieftain has taken on a case involving a confrontation, he leaves the security of his established position. In this instance, two professional advocates, Brodd-Helgi and Geitir, have exercised their options to intervene in a dispute originating between farmers. As a result, they enter into the arena of contest, risking the loss of everything from reputation to life (diagram 6). Land, status, honor—all the tangibles and intangibles of medieval Icelandic society—are at stake. The woodland also remains in play. The property, although claimed by several parties, is possessed by no one. As the contest advances to an open feud, the uninvolved *bændr*, as well as other *goðar*, watch from the sidelines. These interested parties follow the action carefully, knowing that the outcome might provide them with a range of possibilities, from unanticipated opportunity to a threatening shift in the balance of power.

We can discern a basic rule of sagatelling. If the sagateller was guided and restrained by the underlying structure of the social patterning, he was, nevertheless, free to selectively adapt a pool of common material and characters to his own exigencies. In the instance of *Vápnfirðinga saga*, the sagateller works with the famous contest between Geitir and Brodd-Helgi. Remaining within “historical” tradition, the storyteller adjusts cadence and focuses audience attention by, for instance, repeatedly drawing character distinctions between the two leaders. The sagateller did not, however, attempt to alter the underlying social patterning. There is no creative expansion of the steps (or possibilities) of Icelandic feud by, for instance, having one of the characters appeal to God for divine intervention, a common feature in other medieval narratives.¹⁶ Rather, the narrator stays within the actions of realistic Icelandic dispute, repeatedly concentrating on socially based choices. In so doing the teller offers the audience the opportunity not only to evaluate individual behavior but also to savor emotion. Presented, as we see from the diagrams, in incremental steps of action, memory of past events comes alive, serving the medieval community as both entertainment and as a crucial tool of socialization. The

¹⁶ For example, the Old French hero Roland does this when caught at Roncesvalles, a story that the thirteenth-century Icelanders surely knew.

narrative may well contain fact, but it is not dominated by the requirement that it be factual, a consequential distinction.¹⁷

The small pattern that we have abstracted here is the most basic and most frequently repeated progression of conflict in saga narrative. The intervention of advocates in a dispute sets in motion events that determine the success or failure of the society's big men. If the dispute advances, the chieftains engaged will be forced to call in or purchase favors from other chieftains and influential farmers. The disputed land is no longer the most important issue, but it remains the trophy in the contest. If the conflict ends here, the chieftains return to the security of their defined positions, accepting such readjustments of power and reputation as have occurred. The ownership of the land will be settled, with the property returning to the unambiguous status of a defined possession.

If a settlement is not achieved, a new series of patterned actions commences based on the flow chart of possible decisions, and this is what happens in *Vápnfirðinga saga*. The narrative continues with new acts of conflict and of advocacy-seeking, but, as with the chain of events that we have abstracted, the number of moves on the chessboard of Icelandic feud is limited.¹⁸ Over and over in the sagas, we see the same pattern of dispute escalation. The diagrams presented here can, with little variation, be used in saga after saga to abstract a fundamental progression, providing a much-needed analytical tool for exploring a core social drama. Focusing on the cultural roots of repetitive action shifts the discourse of saga studies. It lays the foundations for a methodology that analyzes the convergence of social and literary norms and allows us to confront directly the issue of social memory. Surely, as the diagrams show, we will see that a sagateller's art was based less on invention than on skill in describing traditional actions.

The sagas are a literature famed for economy of style. Through tersely described action, the texts harmonize the private and public aspects of Icelandic life, capturing the intellectual and emotional attention of the

¹⁷ Just why the fact-fiction issue has been of such importance in saga studies has long interested me. For a discussion of the cultural background to this issue, see Byock 1990-91. Although the sagas are surely not a body of factually accurate texts, some parts of some sagas nevertheless display remarkable evidence of oral memory; see for example Byock 1993.

¹⁸ These are not moves in the Proppian sense, but rather are more fluid and adaptable.

medieval audience. This convergence served the medieval storyteller well, providing an underlying structure for the narrative. The repeated presentation of incident after incident of dispute and settlement, all so similar in essential elements but so varied in specifics, was bound by strict social convention. Conflict, the heart of dramatic narration, had to be controlled and presented in light of social norms. In following the patterns of traditional action, the sagateller could embellish character and add detail, giving the story a particular stamp without violating social realism. The attentive and knowledgeable medieval audience, aware of the inherent possibilities of the drama, was partner to the author in the creation of the text. The sagateller chained together the choices in the story; the audience interpreted the choices in a social context.

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