



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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**Agency and Free Will in the Icelandic
Sagas**

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Melissa Mayus

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Abstract 2013

Much has been written about the conversion to Christianity as it took place in medieval Iceland and the way it is presented in the Icelandic sagas. Likewise, the topics of the conception of fate in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the social structure which locked people into particular roles in medieval Iceland have been well documented. This thesis brings all three of these strands—religious attitudes toward free will, conceptions of fate, and social structures—together in order to gain a better understanding of how human agency is fostered or constrained in case studies from three different sagas. Thus this study first considers the passages most relevant to teachings on free will found in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* in order to establish what types of religious ideas about free will were likely to have been in common enough circulation to affect the way saga authors portrayed free will in their works. It then turns to a brief survey of the secondary literature in order to understand the basic social principles that are illustrated in the sagas and the fatalistic tradition which also informed the sagas. From there, the thesis turns to particular case studies from three of the sagas in order to determine how these varying forces affected the saga authors' portrayal of human agency and free will. The first example considered is *Laxdæla saga*, with a focus on the build-up and confrontation between the characters Bolli and Kjartan; this episode reveals how characters could have their agency severely curtailed just by social pressures with very little reference to religious teaching. The next case study, *Njáls saga*, offers a mix of ideas about agency. *Njáls saga* characters are somewhat affected by fate and religious concerns, but again are ultimately constrained largely by social pressure in the most prominent episodes. The final case study draws on *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which offers an understanding of agency that is much more steeped in religious teaching than the other examples. In this saga, the author uses fatalistic portents and social pressure on the main character to emphasize a Christian understanding of free will.

The thesis ultimately finds that although belief in fate and religious teachings about free will certainly have some impact on how agency is portrayed in the sagas, particularly in the more didactic and overtly pious *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, the

examples drawn from *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* show that the social pressures placed on characters have a startlingly constraining effect on their agency, forcing them to both make decisions they would rather not face and seriously limiting the number of options open to them in those decisions. I argue that these sagas show an understanding of human will and agency which is informed by Christian teaching and thinking but which also acknowledges a messy social reality that can impinge on characters' agency. This nuanced view of free will and human agency raises the possibility that the authors purposely intended to offer theological or moral instruction on free will to their audience.

Sjálfræði og frjáls vilji í fornsögum

Margt hefur verið ritað um kristnitökuna á Íslandi og hvernig henni er lýst í fornsögnum. Sömuleiðis hefur forlagatrú í norrænum miðaldabókmenntum verið könnuð ítarlega ásamt því hvernig félagsgerðin bindur fólk við ákveðin hlutverk. Í ritgerðinni er þessum þremur þáttum—trúarlegum viðhorfum til frelsi viljans, hugmyndum um forlög og félagslegum formgerðum—fléttað saman til að öðlast betri skilning á því hvernig sjálfræði birtist í þremur fornsögum. Í fyrstu er sjónum beint að *Íslensku hómiljubókinni* og því sem þar stendur um frelsi viljans, til að glöggva sig á því hvaða hugmyndir um frjálsan vilja voru líklegar til að hafa haft áhrif á þá mynd sem dregin er upp af sjálfræði í fornsögnum. Þá er gefið stutt yfirlit um rannsóknasöguna til að skilja meginreglur samfélagsins sem sögurnar birta, auk hugmynda um forlög sem einnig móta sögurnar. Að þessu loknu er sjónum beint að einstökum dæmum úr þremur fornsögum til að skilgreina hvernig þessir mismunandi kraftar höfðu áhrif á þá mynd sem söguhöfundarnir drógu upp af sjálfræði og frelsi viljans. Fyrst er litið til *Laxdæla sögu*, sérstaklega á átök Bolla og Kjartans. Sú atburðarás sýnir hvernig svigrúm persóna til sjálfræðis takmarkast af félagslegum þrýstingi án þess að mikið sé vísað til trúarsetninga. Persónur *Njáls sögu* eru bæði undir áhrifum forlaga og trúarhugmynda en láta að lokum undan félagslegum þrýstingi. Loks er litið til *Hrafns sögu Sveinbjarnarsonar* sem sýnir skilning á sjálfræði sem stendur fastari fótum í kennisetningum trúarinnar en hinar sögurnar. Hér notar höfundur

fyrirboða forlagatrúarinnar og félagslegan þrýsting sem aðalpersónan verður fyrir til að draga fram kristilegan skilning á frelsi viljans.

Niðurstaða ritgerðarinnar er sú að forlagatrú og kristnar hugmyndir um frjálstan vilja höfðu nokkur áhrif á mynd sagnanna af mannlegu sjálfræði, sérstaklega í *Hrafns sögu* sem boðar opinskátt kristilegan skilning. Eigi að síður sýna dæmin úr *Laxdæla sögu* og *Njáls sögu* hvað félagslegur þrýstingur sem persónurnar verða fyrir setur sjálfræði þeirra furðulega miklar skorður, því þær neyðast til að taka ákvarðanir sem þær síður vildu taka. Því er haldið fram í ritgerðinni að þessar sögur beri vott um skilning á mannlegum vilja og sjálfræði sem mótast af kristinni hugsun og kenningu, en einnig á því að félagslegur veruleiki er óræður og getur haft áhrif á sjálfræði persónanna. Viðhorfin til frelsi viljans og sjálfræðis eru því blendin. Það opnar fyrir möguleika á því að höfundarnir hafi ætlað sér að leiðbeina viðtakendum sagnanna í trúarlegu eða siðferðislegu tilliti.

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Introduction

Much has been written about the conversion to Christianity as it took place in medieval Iceland and the way it is presented in the Icelandic sagas. Likewise, the topics of the conception of fate in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the social structure which locked people into particular roles in medieval Iceland have been well documented. This thesis brings all three of these strands—religious attitudes toward free will, conceptions of fate, and social structures—together in order to gain a better understanding of how human agency is fostered or constrained in case studies from three different sagas. Thus this study first considers the passages most relevant to teachings on free will found in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* in order to establish what types of religious ideas about free will were likely to have been in common enough circulation to affect the way saga authors portrayed free will in their works. It then turns to a brief survey of the secondary literature in order to understand the basic social principles that are illustrated in the sagas and the fatalistic tradition which also informed the sagas. From there, the thesis turns to particular case studies from three of the sagas in order to determine how these varying forces affected the saga authors' portrayal of human agency and free will. The first example considered is *Laxdæla saga*, with a focus on the build-up and confrontation between the characters Bolli and Kjartan; this episode reveals how characters could have their agency severely curtailed just by social pressures with very little reference to religious teaching. The next case study, *Njáls saga*, offers a mix of ideas about agency. *Njáls saga* characters are somewhat affected by fate and religious concerns, but again are ultimately constrained largely by social pressures in the most prominent episodes. The final case study draws on *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which offers an understanding of agency that is much more steeped in religious teaching than the other examples. In this saga, the author uses fatalistic portents and social pressure on the main character to emphasize a Christian understanding of free will. Overall, these three sagas show an understanding of human will and agency which is informed by Christian teaching and thinking but which also acknowledges a messy social reality that can impinge on characters' agency. This nuanced view of free will and human agency raises the possibility that the authors purposely intended to offer theological or moral instruction on free will to their audience.

Íslensk Hómilíubók

It is, of course, impossible to say exactly how sophisticated the religious knowledge of any one saga writer was, nor is it possible to say exactly what religious teachings or beliefs a writer had in mind while he was composing a saga. Yet, a general idea of the religious teachings on free will which were in circulation in medieval Iceland during the time when the sagas in this study were written is available in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók*. Gaining some idea of how saga writers were likely taught to regard free will and the moral responsibility arising from it will provide a first step toward understanding how the agency of their characters is operating in the sagas. (Throughout this study I distinguish between the terms free will and agency by using free will only in context of Christian religious thought, while agency is used more generally.) A handful of scholars have already considered some of the religious teachings, patristic and otherwise, which were likely to be available. Some, such as Lars Lönnroth, even investigate how religious thinking influenced the composition of the sagas.¹ However, before considering what these scholars have written, it will be useful to provide a brief survey of what the sermons in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* (“Icelandic Homily Book”) collectively have to say on free will and human agency.² The *Íslensk Hómilíubók* is by no means the only extant collection of Christian teachings that was in circulation in Iceland, but it is—along with the “Norwegian Homily Book”—one of the most important compilations of Old Norse-Icelandic homilies which we still have and both compilations attest “to the early phases of Christian literary production in their respective countries.”³ Also, the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* can be dated to the beginning of the thirteenth century and contains texts that were likely composed earlier. Thus, taking into account what the extant Old Norse-Icelandic homilies have to say about free will and agency will in turn allow a comparison with the sagas in order to determine whether or not the literary portrayals of free will and agency they contain match what is found in the homilies.

¹ Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

² Sigurbjörn Einarsson, Guðrún Kvaran, and Gunnlaugur Ingólfsson, ed., *Íslensk Hómilíubók: Fornar Stólræður*. eds. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1993).

³ Christopher Abram, “Anglo-Saxon Homilies in their Scandinavian Context,” in *The Old English Homily: Precedent, Practice, and Appropriation*, ed. Aaron J. Kleist. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007), 426.

A number of the homilies in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* are translations from other sources, but what concerns this study is not where the homilies come from, but rather the fact that they were demonstrably available in Iceland by the early thirteenth century. There are, unfortunately, no homilies in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* which specifically take up the idea of free will in any length or great detail. However, in reading through the homilies, it is easy to find examples of general calls to avoid sin or to do good works, which indicate moral responsibility and therefore some sense of human agency. For example, the “Passio Domini” sermon ends with the call, “Höldum vér í hjörtum órum minning píslar Krists og dauða, *sicut* Jósef huldi líkam *Domini* hreinum dúki og lagði í gröf. Hirtum vér oss frá syndum, að vér séim dauðir frá girndum heimsins og vér lifim fyrir Guði, til þess að vér megim öðlast þann fögnuð á upprisutíð vorri, er *Dominus* gaf oss í písl sinni og sýndi í upprisu sinni. Sá er lifir og ríkir.”⁴ Likewise, the sermon “Stundlegt og eilíft” contains the statement that “Guð skapaði menn og leysti þá, og setti hann hræðslu dauðans á mót munúðum þeirra, að þeir, er fýstist að lifa, leitaði annars lífs, þess er eigi þyrfti þar að hræðast dauðann, þar er réttlátir hafa eilífan *veg*, en ranglátir eilífa *píning*.”⁵ This is one of the clearer and more uncomplicated statements affirming free will in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók*, but the examples given here are only a couple out of many exhortations toward right thinking and avoiding sin which point toward a relatively unencumbered idea of human agency. These examples will be interesting to compare to any instances in the sagas where religious rhetoric is used but where agency seems to be nonetheless constrained in some fashion.

In addition to simple calls for the audience of the sermon to avoid sin and do good works, there are also a few instances which point toward some idea of the necessity of grace. For example, the end of the “Resurrectio Domini” sermon says “Það hæfir oss, góð systkin, meðan vér erum hér í heimi, að samþykkja hugarfar vort við Guð Drottin svo sem vér megum framast. Fögnum góðlífi allra manna, en látum oss illt þykja bæði vort illlífi og svo annarra manna. Felum oss í bænahaldi óru á alla vega sem mest undir miskunn Guðs á hverjum degi lífs vors.”⁶ This statement at first seems like it might fall into the same category as the previous examples and illustrate a more or less uninhibited sense of free will, but it is followed immediately by “Biðjum nú þess

⁴ Sigurbjörn Einarsson, “*Íslensk Hómilíubók*,” 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

einkum á þessi tíð, að Guð Drottinn efli oss til þess að svo megim vér halda upprisutíð Krists lausnara vors, er vér náim öll fegin hann að líta á upprisutíð vorri.”⁷ This is not simply an exhortation to do good, rather it is an exhortation to pray for the strength to do good, which sounds much like a reference to the need for grace which would be familiar to any medieval Christian writer who knew the relevant and well-traveled works of St. Augustine of Hippo or some of the works of St. Gregory the Great. The idea that a gift of divine grace was first necessary for anyone to do good was also in circulation in Anglo-Saxon England, so the idea would be unlikely to be totally foreign to the religious community of medieval Iceland. Regardless, since the listener here is free to pray for strength as well as do good, the sense of human agency in this sermon remains relatively uncomplicated. A similar sentiment is found in the sermon “Assumptio Sancte Marie” which closes with the statement “En Drottinn vor sjálfur mun að ráðnu vera með oss, ef hann sér góðfýsi vora, og efla oss til alls ins góða, svo að hver góðgerningur vor mun betur lúkast en vér hafim upp hafið og vaxa verðleikur vor við Guð dag frá degi, meðan vér erum þessa heims, en í öðru lífi veita oss meiri dýrð en vér kunnim nú biðja.”⁸ In this passage as well, dependence for the strength to do good rests on divine help, but humans still bear the responsibility to have and foster the right desire for that help.

Another homily that not only stresses the importance of divine grace and aid but also alludes to an extremely sophisticated understanding of the balance between free will and grace is “Resurrectio Domini.” This homily includes an extended section on the dating of Easter, which may not seem to have an obvious connection with questions of free will, but the two ideas were in fact intimately bound together by a number of early medieval writers, including Bede and Ælfric, who worried about sects of Christians incorrectly calculating the time of Easter and celebrating it before the spring equinox. Such theologians argued that “celebrating people’s redemptions before light outweighs darkness—that is, before the spring equinox—is tantamount to saying that people can be saved apart from Christ’s grace.”⁹ Thus the timing of Easter in regard to the equinox took on heavy symbolic meaning and assuring the correct timing became a

⁷ Ibid., 113.

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Aaron J. Kliet, *Striving with Grace: Views of Free Will in Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 67-8.

way of teaching that human will was unable to affect anything good without divine help. The sermon in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* is thus appropriately insistent about the dating of Easter and ends with a passage that seems to echo the teaching on the importance of divine grace:

Tungl jarteinir jafnan helga kristni, fyr því að svo sem það lýsist af sólu, en hefir ekki ljós í sér sjálfu, því glíkt tekur og heilög kristni allt ljós, er heitir sól réttlætis og er ið sanna ljós, það er lýsir hverjum manni komanda í heiminn. Fylling tungls, sú er verður áður páska megi halda, merkir fylling heilagrar kristni, þá er verða skal fyrir ina efstu upprisun, fyr því að eigi mun dagur koma, fyrr en það manntal er til loks fullnað, er Guð hefir valið til eilífrar dýrðar með sér sjálfum.¹⁰

Of course, those listening to this homily did not necessarily know the teaching about free will and grace that such an example was supposed to illustrate. Indeed, a priest who was not terribly well-read could even have preached this sermon without knowing the full possible theological implications surrounding the dating of Easter. Its presence in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* does raise the tantalizing possibility, though, that some form of the teaching may have reached medieval Icelandic hearers, including those writing sagas. Thus this example will be interesting to keep in mind when we turn to case studies of the sagas, particularly *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which purposely takes a didactic position on free will.

One more, particularly interesting, example from the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* is found in the sermon “Oratio Domini.” The sermon as a whole is an explication of the Lord’s Prayer, and the relevant passage is part of the interpretation of the line “Og eigi leið þú oss í freistni” and includes a scene taken from the story of the Fall of Man in the biblical book of Genesis:

Adam var frjáls skapaður og til sælu, svo ef hann vildi sínu sjálfræði halda til hlýðni við sinn skapera, þá mundi Guð hann svo styrkja, að hann stæðist freistni djöfulsins og vissi aldregi til illis né vesaldar, svo að hann reyndi. En nú er hann hugði að sinni einni sælu og gáði eigi síns skapera, hlífði Guð honum eigi, og gat djöfull yfir hann stigið og varð hans illsku þræll. Því varð hann fyr svikum og syndum, sóttum og sorgum og allri þessa heims meinsemi.¹¹

¹⁰ Sigurbjörn Einarsson, “*Íslensk Hómilíubók*,” 108.

This is a clear statement that Adam was created free and had a chance to keep that autonomy, “sjálfræði,” and receive strength from God to do so, but instead he chose poorly and lost it. This statement offers further evidence for the existence of some teaching about the necessity for grace permeating Iceland, but more importantly for the purpose of this study it shows that listeners in medieval Iceland could be used to hearing direct statements about free will in church and could carry some of what they heard there into the writing and reading of the sagas.

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

Review of secondary literature

In a selective survey of previous work it is perhaps useful to consider the most general first, and so I start with Úlfar Bragason's chapter "Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga Saga*): Texts and Research" in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. In addition to basic background information on the *Sturlunga saga*'s composition, Úlfar gives a rough sketch of the shape of current secondary literature and focuses on the fact that studies of the contemporary sagas as literature are relatively new compared to philological studies of those sagas or studies of their historical content. He also provides information on how these sagas have been taken as historical sources and argues that "the *Sturlunga* compilation in all its complexity can be a mine of information on the culture and mindset of the century that created it."¹² This claim will be useful to keep in mind as it could be supported by a study which determines that the authors of the sagas had a clear idea of free will which they incorporated into their writings. Another author to take a general look at the contemporary sagas is Guðrún Nordal in her chapter "The contemporary sagas and their social context." Guðrún gives historical as well as social background on the texts, and argues that "events in *Sturlunga saga* are interpreted and foreshadowed according to the recognized traditions of historiography in the thirteenth century: human life was to be understood and interpreted in terms of a larger religious and moral framework."¹³ These general studies and others like them provide the justification for examining conceptions of free will in the sagas, as they hold that such religious or philosophical ideas can in fact be uncovered.

In order to tease out what the literature itself has to say about free will and how it works, one must also consider what Latin influences may have entered the literature and then consider how those influences were changed in the Old Norse. Though I could not find any specific studies on which patristic and other Latin teachings on free will were available in medieval Iceland, previous scholars have provided the beginnings of such a study by examining which Latin authors were known to various medieval Icelandic authors. One such work which is particularly relevant is Régis Boyer's "The

¹² Úlfar Bragason, "Sagas of Contemporary History (*Sturlunga Saga*): Texts and Research," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk. (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 442.

¹³ Guðrún Nordal, "The Contemporary Sagas and their Social Context" in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 221.

Influence of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues* on Old Icelandic Literature," as Gregory the Great's teachings on free will influenced the writings of other medieval cultures such as the Anglo-Saxons. Boyer begins with the claim that Old Icelandic writing was necessarily influenced by Latin writing, and that influence was weighted toward religious literature. He notes that the patristic writers, especially Gregory the Great, must have been particularly important, though his only evidence for this is that Gregory the Great carried great weight in the rest of Europe. Helpfully, Boyer gives a brief list of patristic writers and works that were known in Iceland (Augustine, Jerome, Ambrosius, etc.). Boyer notes that the patristic writers likely had an impact on the ethical and philosophical viewpoints of the saga authors and argues that Icelandic writings contain obvious influences from Gregory's homilies and other works, and in particular his *Dialogues*. He spends much of the rest of his article listing instances where the *Dialogues* have influenced the contemporary sagas. His list is rather general, however, Boyer (and a few other scholars he mentions) does provide a jumping off point. Also, the list of examples of Gregory's influence in the sagas serves to support Boyer's final claim that Icelandic literature could be deeply influenced by Latin sources, but that the Icelandic literature grew "not by servile copying but by elaboration" and saga authors could shape the patristic and other sources as they saw fit.¹⁴ This leaves open the possibility that although saga authors were influenced by earlier sources, they could also inject their own understandings of free will and agency into their works.

Lars Lönnroth has also touched on this concept in his *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*, noting scholarly agreement that the sagas combine native traditional and folkloric material with influences from Christian literature and arguing that while such influence varied between individual saga writers, to "the extent that they were well versed in foreign literature and theological concepts, they probably had received some formal clerical training; but this does not necessarily mean that they were priests or monks. Even a layman in thirteenth-century Iceland may have had a 'clerical mind'... a mind formed by the Christian culture of medieval Europe."¹⁵ Lönnroth was speaking

¹⁴ Régis Boyer, "The Influence of Pope Gregory's *Dialogues* on Old Icelandic Literature," in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, (London: Viking Society for Northern Research/University College London, 1973), 25.

¹⁵ Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga*, 105.

particularly of *Njáls saga*, but his statement applies equally well to *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*.

There are also a few scholars who have ostensibly taken up the idea of free will in the sagas. One such scholar is Robert G. Cook, in his article “The Sagas of Icelanders as Dramas of the Will.” However, Cook defines “will” as the imposing of desires, not as the creation and enforcing of human volition. He notes that the characters in the sagas are particularly caught up with self-assertion, always either trying to put themselves forward or worrying about how to respond to someone else who has put himself forward. Cook argues that by borrowing “the medieval division of the soul into three faculties—reason, emotions, will—we can say that the saga treatment of character centers almost exclusively on the will, to the neglect of the other two faculties.”¹⁶ Yet, when Cook discusses human will, he seems mostly to mean the way characters impose their wills on other people; he sees will in the sagas as simply a matter of having one’s own way. However, I will argue that, as we can see in *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, the sagas could have an understanding of human will which was much more complicated than a simple determination of which character was the most powerful. Instead, the sagas could also give very nuanced views of how characters’ wills could be influenced, as *Laxdæla saga* does for the character of Bolli.

Another author who has taken up an exploration of free will in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and provided an example of a more rigorous approach to the topic is Hermann Pálsson in his book *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga*. Pálsson’s main claim is that the author’s intention was not to provide historical information to his thirteenth century audience about their ancestors, but rather to teach them about their own moral responsibilities and thus “the story has a serious moralistic purpose and must therefore be interpreted in terms of medieval ethics.”¹⁷ Pálsson focuses specifically on the issue of agency when he calls the saga “an exposition of the difficulty of making the right choice.”¹⁸ He supports this claim by citing medieval ethical authorities, such as Hugh of St. Victor, and giving examples from the saga which illustrate points these authorities

¹⁶ Robert G. Cook, “The Sagas of Icelanders as Dramas of the Will,” in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, (London: Viking Society for Northern Research/University College London, 1973), 91.

¹⁷ Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga* (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

made. For example, Hugh of St. Victor said that swearing unnecessary oaths was a wrong action, and Hrafnkel does just that when he swears to kill anyone who rides Freyfaxi. Pálsson pulls several other examples from the saga which illustrate identifiable points in medieval ethical teachings or which parallel biblical scenes in order to demonstrate the moral outlook of the saga author. When combining these examples with the lack of fatalism in the saga he comes to the conclusion that human will and subsequent actions are to blame for everything that happens in the story and the importance of policing one's own will and volition is the lesson that the author is trying to impart to his thirteenth century audience. Pálsson's approach seems a useful one when taking up conceptions of free will in medieval literature. The way in which he uses possible sources that might have influenced the theological thinking of the saga author and the way in which he nuanced and carefully defined what he included in the idea of "free will" are both good approaches for addressing the conceptions of free will in a wider range of sagas.¹⁹

In considering agency in the sagas we must also consider how that agency is constrained by notions of fate. The prominence of fate in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and medieval Germanic literature in general, is too well documented to require another in depth look here. A standard approach to the problem of fate in the early Germanic world—and an approach that is particularly interesting for this study—is Bertha Phillpotts' 1928 article, "Wyrð and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought." Phillpotts writes that early Germanic literature often presents human choice as constrained by fate; humans are fated to land in situations where they have only two choices and both choices are undesirable. She briefly surveys a large number of Old Norse-Icelandic, Old High German, and Old English texts and comes to the conclusion that in "each story there is thus a situation entailing a choice between conflicting alternatives, both of which are felt to be evil."²⁰ The characters are nonetheless able to

¹⁹ Another author who has considered the possible moralistic intent behind relevant Old Norse-Icelandic literature is Marlene Ciklamini in her article "Veiled Meaning and Narrative Modes in *Sturlu þáttir*," *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 99.1 (1984): 139-150. She argues that in *Sturlu þáttir* "the selection and arrangements of facts reveal that a religious, moral purpose and a eulogistic intent guide or color the narration of events" (139). She continued to write about the moral implications found in *Íslendinga Saga* in "The Christian Champion in *Íslendinga Saga*: Eyjólfur Kársson and Aron Hjörleifsson," *Euphorion* 82.2 (1988): 227 in which she argues that in "characterizing Eyjólfur and Aron, Sturla Þórðarson modified the Germanic tradition by harnessing the champion to the Christian moral order."

²⁰ Bertha S. Phillpotts, "Wyrð and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought," in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Robert D. Fulk (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 3.

pick which of those two choices they will follow and can even outwit fate by exhibiting great determination in following their chosen course of action, thus earning a lasting reputation which will live on after them. The most obvious illustrations of this view of fate and human choice appear in *Völsunga saga* and the eddic poems from which it draws. For example, Phillipotts mentions Signý in the *Völsunga saga*, claiming that the character provides an example of celebrating free will by holding to a choice between the only two (bad) options that fate has left open to her. Though as we shall see in the case studies to come, characters can be limited to two choices by more than just fate and a careful look at the sagas shows that social pressures can force characters into equally difficult binary choices.

The concept of social constraint applied to characters' choices will also prove important to any study of agency in the sagas, and must be balanced against the religious and fatalistic elements already mentioned. Indeed, Guðrún Nordal has stressed this very point and argued that "even though the teachings of the Church were accepted as spiritual guidance for private worship, they were resisted when they undermined traditional social values."²¹ It is the particular "traditional social values" which could limit a character's agency which I shall turn to now. A few scholars have already made observations relevant to any idea of social constraint. One is Alasdair MacIntyre who wrote a detailed examination of virtue in heroic societies, among which he counts medieval Iceland. He writes, "Every individual has a given role and status within a well-defined and highly determinate system of roles and statuses. The key structures are those of kinship and of the household. In such a society a man knows who he is by knowing his role in these structures; and in knowing this he knows also what he owes and what is owed to him by the occupant of every other role and status... But it is not just that there is for each status a prescribed set of duties and privileges. There is also a clear understanding of what actions are required to perform these and what actions fall short of what is required. For what are required are actions. A man in heroic society is what he does."²² MacIntyre also argues of the social framework in heroic societies that

²¹ Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 20.

²² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 122. Another scholar who has specifically examined how both moral virtues and social roles can limit characters' perceived options in the Icelandic sagas is Vilhjálmur Árnason in his article "Morality and

“All questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework itself therefore cannot be chosen.”²³ Thus a person living in a heroic society lacks “the capacity to detach oneself from any particular standpoint or point of view, to step backwards, as it were, and view and judge that standpoint or point of view from the outside.”²⁴ Case studies from the sagas, particularly from *Laxdæla saga*, will illustrate how this concept could be given concrete form. Finally, MacIntyre also writes that “Identity in heroic society involves particularity and accountability. I am answerable for doing or failing to do what anyone who occupies my role owes to others and this accountability terminates only with death. I have until my death to do what I have to do.”²⁵ This statement also holds true for the characters in the sagas, and many of them in the case studies to follow find themselves trapped in situations where they simultaneously occupy two social positions with mutually exclusive obligations and must choose between them—such as Bolli in *Laxdæla saga*—or in situations where doing what they are socially obligated to do is repugnant to them in some way but choosing to avoid that social obligation carries repercussions that are too high—such as Flosi in *Njáls saga*.

Another scholar to look specifically at the issues surrounding social constraint of actions is William Ian Miller in his book *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, in which he makes the crucial point that there was no executive branch of government to carry out legal decisions in saga age Iceland. Although there was certainly social stratification, there was no king or other authority figure who could force legal decisions to be carried out amongst people of roughly equal standing; the only thing that came close to such authority was the tide of public opinion. Thus it was left “up to the litigants to serve process on their opponents, maintain order in court, and enforce court judgments in their favor. Ultimately, the sanction behind legal judgment and arbitrated settlement was self-help, most often appearing in the guise of the bloodfeud.”²⁶ Another crucial point is made in the section on “Status, Rank, and the Economy of Honor,” in which Miller describes the economy

Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90.2 (1991): 157-174.

²³ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁶ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 20-21.

of honor in medieval Iceland as a zero sum game. The opinion of the rest of society was a very mutable thing and so “Status had to be carefully maintained or aggressively acquired: one's status depended on the condition of one's honor, for it was in the game of honor that rank and reputation was attained and retained. Honor was at stake in virtually every social interaction.”²⁷ In addition to the social pressure to constantly maintain honor, Miller also explains the social pressures created by kinship ties. People had a strong inducement to keep up with their kin because the rest of society might hold them responsible for what that kin did; thus the “cultural fact that others assumed a person was acting as part of group meant that there were strong inducements for those who were linked to him by others to take an active interest in his affairs.”²⁸ Thus people were motivated to consult their kin groups when facing any important decisions, and those kin groups could easily be insulted or worried when a decision was made without their input. Kin groups could also include those bound together through fostering, “blood brotherhood” or religious sponsoring, and Miller gives multiple examples from both the law codes and the sagas to show how kin groups could be called upon for support, whether financial, legal, or violent. Nor were social obligations surrounding feuds limited to kin groups. Miller also explains that the sagas even suggest that the on-lookers to a feud, who are judging the relative honor of the combatants, have a duty to try to pacify the fighting parties and “third parties of all classes had some obligation to prevent violent confrontation. In fact, the sagas are consistently clear that more than warnings were expected from uninvolved parties. There existed a strong expectation, bordering on the obligatory, that nondisputants who lived near to or were present at an affray were to separate the parties.”²⁹ The overall impression one is left with after reviewing the evidence which Miller puts forth is that, at least as far as feuds were concerned—both in the sagas and in the society which produced them—multiple and very strong social pressures all affected each other and all worked to limit the agency that actors in those feuds had, or at least to limit the agency the actors believed themselves to have.

²⁷ Ibid., 29.

²⁸ Ibid., 164.

²⁹ Ibid., 259.

Laxdæla saga

A good initial case study on issues of agency in the sagas is provided by *Laxdæla saga*, especially if we focus mostly on Kjartan and Bolli's interactions which culminate with Kjartan's death. *Laxdæla saga* is a useful starting place because it focuses on the social pressures confining the character's actions with, as we shall see, less focus on the religious dimensions of decision making than some of the other sagas. In particular, the character Bolli's options are steadily narrowed until he can only do one of two things, either attack Kjartan or be attacked himself. The duality of his choice calls to mind Bertha Phillpott's early article which talks about just such situations in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and which seems to haunt a good deal of the later secondary literature dealing with ethics in Old Norse-Icelandic sources.

The idea of characters' being forced to make an unwanted and constrained choice appears early in *Laxdæla saga*, near the beginning of chapter two just after the initial, usual character introductions. The narrator tells us that the first protagonist, Ketill Flat-nose, faces the increased power of King Harald Fair-hair in Norway and realizes that the king will soon demand his submission and that he (the king) has no intention of offering compensation for the adversaries he has already killed. Ketill immediately rejects any notion of attempting to sue for peace with the king and sees only two options open to him, neither of which is attractive. He tells his followers,

Sannspurðan hefi ek fjándskap Haralds konungs til vár; sýnisk mér svá, at vér munim eigi þaðan trausts bíða; lízt mér svá, sem oss sé tveir kostir gørvir, at flýja land eða vera drepnir hvern í sínu rúmi. Em ek ok þess fúsari, at hafa slíkan dauðdaga sem frændr mínir, en eigi vil ek yðr leiða í svá mikil vandkvæði með einræði mínu, því at mér er kunnigt skaplyndi frænda minna ok vina, at þér vilið eigi við oss skiljask, þótt mannaun sé í nokkur at fylgja mér.³⁰

Two points about this early declaration of choice are important to note for comparison with later episodes in the saga. The first is that Ketill sees his options as being drastically limited, presumably by social pressures. His mention of his kinsmen who have died through fighting with the king shows that he is acutely aware of his responsibility to get vengeance or compensation for them, and since vengeance is

³⁰ *Laxdæla saga, Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar Stúfs þátrr*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslensk fornrit V, Reykjavík 1934, p. 4.

impossible and the king refuses compensation any choices that would involve him living in Norway are immediately discarded. The fact that he sees only two possible options open to him also brings to mind Bertha Phillpotts' argument that characters in medieval Germanic literature are constantly forced by fate to choose between two undesirable options, though fate gets no mention here. Forced binary decisions is a theme that will return in the *Njáls saga* case study as well. The second important point about this episode is that which of the two options Ketill chooses is not a foregone conclusion. He says that he would prefer to stay and defy the king, but he allows his sons to make the decision to go to Iceland instead. Despite the limited options, there does not seem to be any sense of fate in this episode and the characters are free to change their minds; we will see similar examples later in *Laxdæla saga*. This is a marked difference from several episodes in *Njáls saga* and others.

This is not to say that there is no idea of fate is at play in *Laxdæla saga*. For example, the end of the relationship between Kjartan and Bolli is foretold by Gestr Oddleifsson who answers his son's question about the still young Kjartan and Bolli by saying, "Þarfleysa er at segja þat, en eigi nenni ek at þegja yfir því, er á þínum dögum mun fram koma; en ekki kemr mér at óvörum, þótt Bolli standi yfir höfuðsvörðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá ok höfuðbana, ok er þetta illt at vita um svá mikla ágætismenn."³¹ Yet, that prophecy is unknown to the principal characters and is not referenced by the narrator in the crucial scenes when Bolli and Kjartan are wavering between and making the decisions that will lead to Kjartan's death. Instead, this prophecy acts less like an intrusion of fate into the plot and more like a narrative device used by the author to foreshadow the crisis and thus pique the reader's/listener's interest. By offering up this portent and then not referring to it later and instead focusing on Bolli's unwillingness to decide what to do, the author manages to foreshadow the tragedy to come but still uncouples fate from the characters' agency. The same might be said of King Olaf Tryggvason's cryptic statement when Kjartan leaves Norway, "Mikit er at Kjartani kveðit ok kyni hans, ok mun óhægt vera atgørða við forlögum þeira."³² There is no sense here that the king has suddenly become a

³¹ Ibid., 92.

³² Ibid., 132.

prophet, but rather the author is building the suspense and reminding the audience that given Bolli and Guðrún's marriage, Kjartan's homecoming is bound to be tense.

The episode in the saga that most interestingly illustrates human agency and the limits that are placed on it is the final confrontation between Bolli and Kjartan when both make considered and deliberate decisions on how to deal with their irreconcilable grievances. However, the seeds for that episode are sown earlier in the saga by Bolli's initial decision to sue for Guðrún's hand in marriage despite his knowledge that she would rather wait for more news of Kjartan. When Bolli brings the idea forward to his uncle Óláfr, his uncle simply says “Þær eru flestar konur, at vér munum kalla, at þeim sé fullboðit, þar er þú ert; muntu ok eigi hafa þetta fyrr upp kveðit en þú munt hafa statt fyrir þér, hvar niðr skal koma” and then, despite his misgivings about the match, “Óláfr kvað hann með mundu fara, sem honum líkaði.”³³ As Óláfr says, Bolli is in control of the situation at this point, and has a remarkable degree of latitude to exercise whatever decision he sees fit. Even Guðrún's reluctance is not a real hindrance to his plan. However, once he has decided to marry Guðrún he enters into a social situation that will steadily erode his personal agency until he faces the same type of distasteful, binary decision discussed above.

After Kjartan returns to Iceland and marries Hrefna, relations between the two couples deteriorate with mutual recriminations, charges of theft, and even a temporary siege where members of Bolli's household are not allowed to get to their outhouses. Kjartan finally undercuts a land deal Bolli had made, telling the previous owner of the land “Ekki skal þik í skaða, þó at Bolli kaupir eigi landit, því at ek mun kaupa þvílíku verði, ok ekki mun þér duga mjök í móti at mæla því, sem ek vil vera láta, því at þat mun á finnask, at ek vil hér mestu ráða í héraði ok gera þó meir eptir annarra manna skaplyndi en Laugamanna.”³⁴ Kjartan's take-over of the land deal is important to note because it leads directly to a tell-tale exchange between Guðrún and Bolli: “Þá mælti Guðrún: ‘Svá virðist mér, Bolli, sem Kjartan hafi þér gort tvá kosti, nökkuru harðari en hann gerði Þórnarni, at þú munt láta verða hérað þetta með litlum sóma eða sýna þik á einhverjum fundi ykkrum nökkuru óslæra en þú hefir fyrr verit.’ Bolli svarar engu ok

³³ Ibid., 128-129.

³⁴ Ibid., 146-147.

gekk þegar af þessu tali.”³⁵ In this exchange Guðrún specifically points out the narrowing of Bolli’s options. She already sees him facing the kind of binary choice we saw Ketill flat-nose run up against at the very beginning of the saga; once again social events have narrowed the options for a character so that the only two viable options to him are both unwanted. Interestingly though, Bolli pointedly refuses to acknowledge what Guðrún says and simply walks away. For as long as possible, Bolli avoids actually making the choice which Guðrún presents to him. Indeed, when she later complains to both Bolli and her brothers that no one dares thwart Kjartan’s offences, we are told “Bæði var hjá tali þeira Guðrúnar Bolli ok synir Ósvífrs. Þeir Óspakr svara fá ok heldr til áleitni við Kjartan, sem jafnan var vant. Bolli lét sem hann heyrði eigi, sem jafnan, er Kjartani var hallmælt, því at hann var vanr at þegja eða mæla í móti.”³⁶ Thus Bolli is very aware of the mounting social pressures that will eventually goad him into unwanted action, but he is trying to stave off that decision for as long as possible.

The build-up between Kjartan and Bolli comes to a head in chapter 49 of *Laxdæla saga*, and what is particularly interesting is the way that Kjartan’s death does not seem to be fated there; certainly he does not consider it so, as at the end of chapter 48 he says, “Eigi mun Bolli, frændi minn, slá banaráðum við mik; en ef þeir Ósvífrssynir sitja fyrir mér, þá er eigi reynt, hvárir frá tíðendum eiga at segja, þó at ek eigi við nokkurn liðsmun.”³⁷ Also of note is the way that Bolli’s indecision is continually highlighted. It takes Guðrún’s insistent goading to get him to even agree to join the expedition against Kjartan. He at first demurs and it seems that he will decide to face whatever hurt his honor may receive rather than attack Kjartan. It takes a direct threat from Guðrún before he agrees to go. When he argues that it would be wrong to attack the man he was raised with, she tells him, “Satt segir þú þat, en eigi muntu bera giftu til at gera svá, at öllum þykki vel, ok mun lokit okkrum samförum, ef þú skerst undan förinni.”³⁸ Here we see Bolli simultaneously occupying two social positions, both as Guðrún’s husband and as Kjartan’s foster-brother. This becomes problematic when we remember the argument from MacIntyre’s book, quoted earlier, that individuals in a heroic society are obligated to fulfill all of the duties of their social

³⁵ Ibid., 147.

³⁶ Ibid., 148.

³⁷ Ibid., 151.

³⁸ Ibid., 150.

roles without exception. Bolli is particularly troubled because the duties of his two social roles are at odds. As Guðrún's husband and head of their household he is obligated to recognize her grievances and maintain their honor by avenging Kjartan's insulting siege, but at the same time he is Kjartan's foster-brother and therefore bound to protect him rather than attack him. His only choice here is which role he will fail to uphold and he naturally struggles as he attempts to comply with competing obligations. Even once he is officially part of the expedition against Kjartan his companions are none too sure about his resolve. In chapter 49 they go out of their way to control him so that he cannot warn Kjartan of their presence: "En í annan stað gruna þeir Ósvífrssynir, hví Bolli mun sér hafa þar svá staðar leitit, er hann mátti vel sjá, þá er menn riðu vestan. Þeir gera nú ráð sitt, ok þótti sem Bolli myndi þeim eigi vera trúr, ganga at honum upp í brekkuna ok brugðu á glímu ok á glens ok tóku í fœtr honum ok drógu hann ofan fyrir brekkuna."³⁹ This small episode shows that Bolli is still trying to avoid choosing between attacking Kjartan or accepting all of the social ills that would accompany backing down. If he can warn Kjartan away from the area before the ambush begins then he can at least postpone the final decision of whether or not to kill his foster-brother. Furthermore, this episode shows that although they will not or cannot acknowledge it, Bolli's brothers-in-law are fully cognizant of his conflicted loyalties and his unwillingness to attack Kjartan. Yet they also know that Bolli cannot defy them directly now that he is in the ambush with them, and they take advantage of his indecision to pull him out of sight. Bereft of this opportunity to warn Kjartan away, Bolli is once again faced with the choice of whether or not to attack him directly.

Bolli is continually goaded into action, first by Kjartan himself, who accosts Bolli directly, "Þá mælti Kjartan: 'Bolli frændi, hví fórtu heiman, ef þú vildir kyrr standa hjá? Ok er þér nú þat vænst, at veita öðrumhvárum ok reyna nú, hversu Fótþítr dugi'."⁴⁰ Even with Kjartan laying out the now constrained choice before him, (constrained in that he must pick one of the two sides), still "Bolli lét, sem hann heyrði eigi."⁴¹ This determined non-response of Bolli's not only serves to highlight his unwillingness to face the choice, but it also calls attention to the binary nature of the choice by giving multiple other characters the chance to describe it. First Guðrún says

³⁹ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 153.

⁴¹ Ibid., 153.

he must pick between two possibilities, then Kjartan, and then finally his companions in the ambush, who point out the ramifications of what will happen to him if he does not act. When one of the attackers, Óspakr, finally realizes that they will not be able to defeat Kjartan without Bolli's help, "þá eggjar hann Bolla á alla vega, kvað hann eigi mundu vilja vita þá skömm eftir sér, at hafa heitit þeim vígsgengi og veita nú ekki, — 'ok var Kjartan oss þá þungr í skiptum, er vér höfðum eigi jafnstórt til gort; ok ef Kjartan skal nú undan rekask, þá mun þér, Bolli, svá sem oss, skammt til afarkosta'."⁴² In addition to adding to the number of characters goading Bolli into action, this statement of Óspakr's combines the themes outlined in both Phillipott's and Miller's analyses, both of which we have seen throughout the build-up of hostility between Bolli and Kjartan. First, though initially a much more free agent, Óspakr and the other characters before him state clearly that Bolli now has only two choices, both of them undesirable, as in the examples described by Phillipotts. Óspakr also notes that unless Bolli fully joins in the attack he will face shame and future attacks himself, as in the examples described by Miller. It is not until this point that Bolli takes any definite action, and we are finally told that "Þá brá Bolli Fótbit ok snýr nú at Kjartani."⁴³ Thus Bolli's social obligations to Guðrún and his brothers-in-law, and the fear of what will happen to him if he fails in those obligations, finally outweigh his obligations to Kjartan as his foster-brother.

Yet, Bolli's decision is still a decision, however limited or coerced, and he as an agent is still considered fully responsible for making it. This is made clear by the final statement and actions of Kjartan, who accepts the fate that Bolli is apparently trying to avoid. When Bolli finally decides to advance on Kjartan, "Þá mælti Kjartan til Bolla: 'Víst ætlar þú nú, frændi, níðingsverk at gera, en miklu þykki mér betra at þiggja banaorð af þér, frændi, en veita þér þat.' Síðan kastaði Kjartan vápnum ok vildi þá eigi verja sik, en þó var hann lítt sárr, en ákafliga vígmóðr. Engi veitti Bolli svqr máli Kjartans, en þó veitti hann honum banasár."⁴⁴ Kjartan's indictment and Bolli's immediate and lasting regret show that both of these characters at least believed that Bolli was responsible for his choice in the situation no matter how constrained it was.

⁴² Ibid., 153.

⁴³ Ibid., 153-154.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 154.

The main limiting factor placed on human agency in *Laxdæla saga*, particularly in this major conflict, seems to be social pressure. This becomes more interesting when we consider other factors, such as religious belief or fate, which do not have a prominent place in this key episode from the saga, though they do operate to affect human agency more openly in other sagas. This is not to say that religious concerns or a sense of fate are not found in *Laxdæla saga*. For example, both Kjartan and Bolli have been baptized, and that episode itself is permeated with talk of making choices and whose will is stronger. When faced with King Olaf Tryggvason's initial demand that the Icelanders convert, Kjartan's response is, "Engis manns nauðungarmaðr vil ek vera," segir Kjartan, 'meðan ek má upp standa ok vápnum valda', a statement that is particularly fascinating given that he later very deliberately lays down his weapon when facing Bolli; Kjartan threatens to burn down the king's house, but the king responds with a surprising statement of forbearance and references a very Christian notion of free will.⁴⁵ He calls Kjartan to a meeting and gives him a speech which includes the words,

kann ok vera, at þú haldir því betr trúna, sem þú mælir meir í móti henni en aðrir; kann ek ok þat at skilja, at þat mun skipshöfnum skipta, at þann dag munu við trú taka, er þú lætr ónauðigr skírask... Farið nú í friði ok í griðum, hvert er þér vilið af þessum fundi; skal eigi pynda yðr til kristni at sinni, því at guð mælir svá, at hann vill, at engi komi nauðigr til hans.⁴⁶

Kjartan and Bolli and all of their followers do indeed decide to be baptized a little later, but any religious concerns they may have had seem to be ignored when they decide how to face each other. Looking back to the Christian teachings of free will that are in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók*, we find little consideration for them here. Guðrún Nordal has stated that "A collection of sermons, The Book of Homilies, preserved in a manuscript from c. 1200, provides examples of the teachings of the early Icelandic Church. But even though the teachings of the Church were accepted as spiritual guidance for private worship, they were resisted when they undermined traditional social values."⁴⁷ This episode from *Laxdæla saga* neatly supports her point and shows that religious

⁴⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁷ Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action*, 20.

understandings of free will were not uppermost in the characters' minds when they faced difficult decisions.

As noted earlier, there are also fatalistic elements in *Laxdæla saga*, but in the confrontation between Kjartan and Bolli those elements are few and the actual episode does not emphasize them even when it would be very easy to do so. For example, when he leaves Norway, Kjartan is given a sword by King Óláfr, who also makes this prophetic statement: “Hér er sverð, Kjartan, er þú skalt þiggja af mér at skilnaði okkrum; láttu þér vápn þetta fylgjusamt vera, því at ek vænti þess, at þú verðir eigi vápnbitinn maðr, ef þú berr þetta sverð.”⁴⁸ Kjartan does indeed keep the sword close to him until it is stolen after a feast by people in Bolli's party and left in a bog as a prank or insult. Though Kjartan got the sword back, “Var nú látit kyrrt yfir þessu, en umgørðin fannsk aldregi síðan. Kjartan hafði jafnan minni mætur á sverðinu síðan en áðr.”⁴⁹ Thus he does not have the preternaturally protective sword with him when he faces the ambush. Yet, although the inferiority of the sword he does have is commented on, the author resists any temptation to attribute Kjartan's death to the lack of the king's gift or to the fate which might have made him leave it behind. Instead, Kjartan holds his own in the fight just fine, and although wounded he is in no danger of being killed until he stops fighting entirely and presents himself to Bolli. Indeed, the possibly fated sword actually serves to underline the social aspects of the episode, as it was members of the same household that Bolli lived in who stole the sword and Kjartan was presumably unwilling to carry it because it was a reminder that he had suffered an insult in the theft which was never answered for.

The author offers a final look into what drives Bolli's decision by narrating his homecoming after the ambush. After hearing about the battle and remarking upon what they have both done that day, Guðrún notes with approval that Bolli will follow her directions, “Guðrún fann þá, at Bolli reiddisk, ok mælti: ‘Haf ekki slíkt við, því at ek kann þér mikla þökk fyrir verkit; þykki mér nú þat vitat, at þú vill ekki gera í móti skapi mínu’.”⁵⁰ Guðrún is actually trying to placate Bolli here, as her previous satisfaction at Kjartan's death and gloating over the distress of his widow drew an angry outburst from Bolli, but saying that Bolli will not go against her wishes actually just emphasizes

⁴⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 131-132.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

how the circumstances have reduced Bolli's agency to almost nothing. After all, when he killed Kjartan he was not consciously choosing to please Guðrún, he was reacting to fear and the knowledge that he had been backed into a corner and would face life-long scorn and even physical danger for failing to kill him. Bolli has been unable to withstand any of the social influences that surrounded him, and as a consequence social pressure forces him to make a decision that he knows he will regret. Thus the author of *Laxdæla saga* shows a world where the confines of the characters' agency seem to be primarily social rather than fatalistic or religious.

Njáls saga

In order to gain some understanding of how human agency is seen to work in *Njáls saga*, we must consider a number of scenes but focus on the burning of Njáll's farm. Of particular interest in this saga is the way in which characters' choices are highlighted despite the prevalence of both fate/foreknowledge and social constraint. It is particularly interesting to consider instances where characters use language which makes it seem as if they are bowing to fate when what they are really doing is acknowledging social pressure. Thus some claims of constrained agency can be seen as the result of characters recognizing social determinism; and by social determinism I mean simply any set of social circumstances that inhibit or limit characters' agency. Characters see their own choices, both present and future, constrained by social forces and react accordingly. *Njáls saga* may contain numerous instances of fated events, but it also contains 'prophetic' statements based solely on social circumstances, such as Flosi's declaration of constrained choice just before the burning of Njáll's farm. Examining examples such as this, in which characters speak about social determinism in fatalistic or theological terms, allows us to re-evaluate the conception of human agency that lies behind *Njáls saga* and show that the author understood social forces to be at least as constraining as fate or providence.

That some concept of an overarching fate constrains the characters' choices in the saga is a topic that has been well covered in the secondary literature. Indeed, from the moment that the title character Njáll enters the saga it is clear that he is gifted with occasional knowledge of future events. His initial description states that he is not only a very skilled lawyer who can give excellent legal advice, but he is also prescient and willing to use his gift of discerning the future to aid others who come to him for help. There are also several instances of obviously fated events in the saga and just as importantly, the characters openly accept those fated events. For instance, at one point the character Þórðr sees his fetch, a goat, lying dead and asks Njáll what it means. Njáll responds by explaining that it is his fetch and that he should be on his guard since seeing his own fetch must mean that he is now doomed. Þórðr responds by saying that being on his guard is useless if he is doomed to die anyway. Later in the story the character Sæunn, Bergþora's foster-mother, foresaw the burning of Njáll's farm and started attacking the chickweed that the burners would use for kindling. She demanded

that it be destroyed, but Njáll's son Skarpheðin tells her not to bother with the chickweed because even if she takes it away she will not help matters because the burners will simply find something else to use. There are many more such examples scattered throughout the saga and I will not belabor the point any more, but the important thing to keep in mind from these examples is that the characters acknowledge and accept that fate makes some choices pointless.

Thus there is definitely a strong concept of fate running through the saga which results in some measure of constrained agency in the characters, but fate is not the only force limiting the characters' choices; they are also constrained by social determinism. There are many scholars who have written fairly recently about how social pressure influenced medieval Icelanders and the literature they produced. For instance and as noted above, William Ian Miller has written extensively about how one's status in society could rise or fall according to one's wealth, actions, and above all the opinion of the rest of society. To reiterate the point from Miller's work which was mentioned earlier, "Status had to be carefully maintained or aggressively acquired: one's status depended on the condition of one's honor, for it was in the game of honor that rank and reputation was attained and retained. Honor was at stake in virtually every social interaction."⁵¹ Complicating the matter further is the idea that honor was in limited supply and could only be acquired by taking it from someone else. Thus it was extremely rare that any socially aired grievance did not involve some loss of honor from at least one of the parties involved. I've referenced Miller again here because his explanation of the phenomenon is particularly clear, but many scholars have made similar points and noted that maintaining social standing and always taking into account what your neighbors or relatives might think had a pronounced effect on what characters in the sagas could reasonably choose to do.

There is also a third force, the sense of religious obligations or imperatives, which also serves to influence the characters' choices and indeed, the very way their choices are framed. In his previously mentioned work, Lars Lönnroth investigates this frame of reference when he says that both the writer of *Njáls saga* and its characters are invested with a "clerical mind." That is, a mindset formed by medieval Christian culture whether that mindset is openly recognized and acknowledged by the author or

⁵¹ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 29.

not. His discussion is worth keeping in mind as the religious aspect of the characters' decisions will necessarily come into question in any discussion of their agency.

Though fate and social determinism both serve to limit characters' agency, they are nevertheless distinguished from each other in the saga, as we can see using examples from the text. *Njáls saga* contains two parallel scenes which illustrate the difference I am attempting to draw. In both scenes Njáll is providing Gunnar with legal advice. In the first example, from chapter 22, Njáll gives Gunnar very detailed instructions for how to handle the recovery of his kinswoman Unn's dowry from Hrut. Njáll directs Gunnar to dress and behave like an untrustworthy trader named "Kaupa-Héðinn" and not only tells him how to serve a legal summons against Hrut, but also gives detailed descriptions of exactly where each person will be, what they will say, and how long they will hunt for Gunnar after he has left. The account is so detailed and happens so exactly in accordance with Njáll's prediction that it seems a clear case of Njáll demonstrating his prescience. In the second example, from chapter 64, Gunnar again comes to Njáll for legal advice, this time after he has been forced to make his first killings. Njáll walks away to think of a plan, just as he did in the previous example, but this time his directions are much shorter and less detailed. He assigns Gunnar a couple of cases against one of the dead men in order to counter-balance the charges against Gunnar and then gives his actual "prediction" of what will happen at the trial, saying: "En ef þetta er prófat á þingi ok því sé við lostit, at þú hafir áðr lostit Þorgeir ok megir hvárki sækja þína sök né annarra, þá mun ek svara því máli ok segja, at ek helgaða þik á Þingskálapingi, at þú skyldir bæði mega sækja þitt mál ok annarra, ok mun þá verða svarat máli því."⁵² Njáll's language here shows that he is merely anticipating and planning according to what he knows must happen given the situation and the characters of the people involved; he is speaking not with divinatory foresight, but with the skilled planning of an experienced lawyer. These parallel examples are but two of many that show a dual sense of forces that combine to limit characters' choices in the saga: fate/(Providence) and social determinism. Nor is this the only saga with such a dualistic outlook, for example, William Sayers notes of *Hrafnkels saga*: "whether our critical reading of the saga is of ethics or politics at work, of personal moral reform or a behavioral make-over, we must acknowledge the principals' own

⁵² *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk Fornrit XII, Reykjavík 1954, p. 161.

recognition of two determining forces in their lives: happenstance, fortune, fate, supernatural malevolence, or however they or we might chose to label effects whose causality seems beyond understanding, and the dynamics of, and adherence to, the honor system, as these affect the intentions and actions of the principals, be these, in turn, essentially ethical or essentially political.”⁵³ Yet although these forces can be differentiated, as in the parallel examples of Njáll giving legal advice to Gunnar, there are other instances in which they are interwoven.

Of particular interest for this study are places where fate and prescience are blended with moments of social determinism, such as when Gunnar is challenged to a horse fight between his horse and Starkad’s and he asks the prescient Njáll what the outcome of such a match will be. The passage is worth quoting here:

Gunnar reið at finna Njál ok sagði honum hestaatit ok hversu orð fóru með þeim — ‘eða hversu ætlar þú, at fari hestaatit?’ ‘Þú munt hafa meira hlut,’ segir Njáll, ‘en þó mun hér af hljótask margs manns bani.’ ‘Mun nokkut minn bani hér af hljótask?’ segir Gunnarr. ‘Ekki mun þat af þessu,’ segir Njáll, ‘en þó munu þeir muna fornan fjandskap ok nýjan at þér fœra; ok muntú ekki annat mega en hrökkva við.’⁵⁴

Here the existence of a set fate can hardly be denied, as Njáll is once again avowedly foresighted and everything that he says comes true later in the chapter. Yet, it is not only an impersonal fate that is constraining Gunnar’s future. Njáll tells Gunnar that he will have no choice but to retaliate, so clearly some form of determinism has been activated, but it is the enmity and abusive actions of Gunnar’s enemies that Njáll says will constrain his future choices. It should be noted too that Njáll specifically says that those enemies will remember their old hatred thus choose to attack; they are being assigned some form of agency in this scenario and are thus not simply the tools of an implacable fate.

Thus the episodes that center on Gunnar make it clear that characters can react as they will, even though there may only be a limited number of outcomes that can happen no matter what they choose. Another example may be useful here, specifically the episode in which Gunnar decides to remain on his farm despite being sentenced to

⁵³ William Sayers, “Ethics or Pragmatics, Fate or Chance, Heathen, Christian or Godless World? (*Hrafnkels saga*),” *Scandinavian Studies* 79 (2007): 401.

⁵⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 149.

outlawry. Earlier in the saga, Gunnar is very reluctantly forced to begin killing his enemies. Indeed, his very reluctance speaks to how narrow he felt his options were. His foresighted friend Njáll warns him about how to proceed, saying that once started Gunnar will have little choice but to keep killing, but that he should take care not to kill more than one person within a single family. Gunnar is grateful enough for this advice, but he is eventually caught in an ambush and forced to go against it. It is the aftermath of this ambush that concerns us. When Njáll and Gunnar meet to discuss Gunnar's defense at the inevitable Alþingi trial, Njáll offers a warning about following the eventual settlement to the letter, and Gunnar expresses quite clearly his intention to do so: "Þeir Njáll fundusk ok Gunnarr ok tóluðu um bardagann. Þá mælti Njáll til Gunnars: 'Ver þú nú varr um þik. Nú hefir þú vegit tysvar sinnum í inn sama knérunn ok hygg nú svá fyrir hag þínum, at þar liggr við líf þitt, ef þú heldr eigi þá sætt, sem gǫr er.' 'Hvergi ætla ek mér,' segir Gunnarr, 'af at bregða, en þó mun ek þurfa liðsinni yðvart á þingi'." ⁵⁵

After the settlement at the Alþingi, Gunnar is temporarily outlawed and thus clearly faced with a straightforward choice, either he can keep the settlement and go abroad or ignore it and stay in Iceland. He initially remains as determined to follow the settlement as he was before the Alþingi took place. In one of his prescient moments, Njáll tells Gunnar just what the outcome of each possible decision will be:

Þá mælti Njáll til Gunnars: 'Gerðú svá vel, félagi, at þú halt sætt þessa ok mun, hvat vit höfum við mælzk,' segir hann. 'Ok svá sem þér varð in fyrri utanferð þín mikil til sœmðar, þá mun þér þó sjá verða miklu meir til sœmðar; muntú koma út með mannvirðingu mikilli ok verða maðr gamall, ok mun engi maðr hér þá á sporði þér standa. En ef þú ferr eigi utan ok rýfr sætt þína, þá muntú drepinn vera hér á landi, ok er þat illt at vita þeim, er vinir þínir eru.' Gunnarr kvazk ekki ætla at rjúfa sættir. ⁵⁶

Yet, despite knowing what will happen, Gunnar famously changes his mind and decides to return home instead of taking ship. After he and his brother Kolskeggr have taken their supposedly final leave of Gunnar's household,

Hann stingr niðr atgeirinum ok stiklar í sǫðulinn, ok ríða þeir Kolskeggr í braut.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 177-178.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 181.

Þeir ríða fram at Markarfljóti, þá drap hestr Gunnars fœti, ok stókk hann ór sōðlinum. Honum varð litit upp til hlíðarinnar ok bæjarins at Hlíðarenda ok mælti: ‘Fōgr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfōgr sýnz, bleikir akrrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi.’ ‘Ger þú eigi þann óvinafagnað,’ segir Kolskeggr, ‘at þú rjúfir sætt þína, því at þér myndi engi maðr þat ætla. Ok máttú þat hugsa, at svá mun allt fara sem Njáll hefir sagt.’ ‘Hvergi mun ek fara,’ segir Gunnarr, ‘ok svá vilda ek, at þú gerðir.’⁵⁷

Later writers have been eager to offer various reasons for Gunnar’s change of heart, citing fate, Gunnar’s love for his farm and family, and his pride, among other reasons for his refusal to get back on his horse and continue to the ship. Lönnroth’s explanation is particularly worth noting in context of this study. Lönnroth calls attention to how strange Gunnar’s choice is by comparing the fall from his horse and decision to return home with a similar incident in *Grænlandinga saga* involving Eiríkr the Red, with the crucial difference that Eiríkr has every incentive to stay home, while Gunnar has every incentive to leave. Lönnroth then draws another parallel, this time to *Alexanders saga*, to argue that the reason Gunnar turned back is that he is seduced by the worldly riches and concerns represented by his pale cornfields, “bleikir akrrar” just as Alexander is driven to conquer the beautiful landscape, including pale cornfields, that he finds when he leaves home. Lönnroth includes Hallgerðr among the worldly concerns which pull Gunnar back as well and argues that a Christian writer with a “clerical mind” would see Gunnar’s decision to return home as a capitulation to temptation. He argues that the author offers a negative view of Gunnar’s decision which is given voice in Kolskeggr’s disapproval and thus “Gunnarr is not *merely* a ‘Siegfried type’ but, like Alexander, is a chivalric hero with romantic passions which must be tempered by asceticism in order to merit our approval.”⁵⁸ However, while this argument is particularly interesting in that it brings a possible religious element into Gunnar’s decision making, I do not wish to argue for a specific psychological explanation for Gunnar’s change of heart. Rather I would call attention to the fact that the way in which his change is staged shows that while his options were limited, he was quite free to choose between them and was able

⁵⁷ Ibid., 182-183.

⁵⁸ Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga*, 160.

to ignore both social and presumably cultural and moral pressure. He was not moved by fear of retaliation, nor by fear of losing honor, nor by fear of breaking his word.

Many instances of social determinism are not difficult to find in *Njáls saga*. Moving to the build-up to the burning scene, we see Skarpheðin referencing just such an unseen audience, “Qllum fannsk þá mikit um oðrum en Skarphéðni; hann bað þá ekki syrgja né láta oðrum herfiligum látum, svá at menn mætti orð á því gera; — ‘mun oss vandara gort en oðrum, at vér berim oss vel, ok er þat at vánum’.”⁵⁹ The other side of that social pressure falls on the (still potential) burners, as Skarpheðin soon after says “Gunnar sóttu heim þeir hofðingjar, er svá váru vel at sér, at heldr vildu frá hverfa en brenna hann inni. En þessir munu sækja oss með eldi, ef þeir megu eigi annan veg, því at þeir munu allt til vinna, at yfir taki við oss. Munu þeir þat ætla, sem eigi er ólíkligt, at þat sé þeira bani, ef oss dregr undan.”⁶⁰ Nor is *Njáls saga* or even Old Norse literature unique in this respect. In his article “Choice and Consequence in Irish Heroic Literature” Philip O’Leary gives a number of similar examples from medieval Irish literature, arguing that “At virtually every key moment in that literature explicit reference is made to a vigilant and judgmental audience intent on assessing a person’s actions by the most rigorous standards, but with little knowledge of—and less interest in—his or her motivation.”⁶¹ So we have a literary background for the saga in which social constraints on agency are common.

Thus examples of social determinism in *Njáls saga* are not in themselves surprising, but what is surprising is the specific moment when Flosi actually acknowledges that it is social pressure—not Fate or anything else—which overrides the burners’ other motivations, even their religious convictions (however admittedly tenuous those religious convictions might be at that time). It is this specific example that I will turn to next, as it reveals a surprising outlook on a character’s self-perceived agency. At the end of chapter 128, after the first attack on Njáll’s house fails, Flosi makes a fascinating statement, saying:

Vér hofum fengit mikinn skaða á mǫnnum várum; eru margir sárir, en sá veginn, er vér myndim sízt til kjósa. Nú er þat sét, at vér getum þá eigi með

⁵⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 324.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁶¹ Philip O’Leary, “Choice and Consequence in Irish Heroic Literature,” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 27 (Summer, 1994): 49.

vápnunum unnit. Et sá nú margr, at eigi gengr jafnskarpliga at sem ætluðu. En þó munu vér nú verða at gera annat ráð fyrir oss. Eru nú tveir kostir, ok er hvárrgi góðr: sá annarr at hverfa frá, ok er þat várr bani, en hinn annarr at bera at eld ok brenna þá inni, ok er þat stór ábyrgð fyrir guði, er vér erum kristnir sjálfir. En þó munu vér þat bragðs taka.⁶²

Flosi openly acknowledges the social factors limiting his agency in the situation. Just how constrained he perceives himself to be is obvious, in that he see only two bad choices that are open to him. Further complicating Flosi's declaration is his acknowledgement of the burners' relatively new Christianity. As Torfi Tulinius has noted when writing about *Völsunga saga*, "the problem of intentionality loomed large in thirteenth-century Icelandic thought. This is not surprising, for the time had arrived when the Christian religion was dominated by a theology of intentionality, i.e., an approach to sin and absolution in which intentions are considered as important as deeds and in which sinners are encouraged to examine their consciences to detect the desire to sin, and are encouraged to obtain absolution through confession."⁶³ This observation is also a valid lens to apply to the late 13th century *Njáls saga*.

In order to gain a better understanding of Flosi's rather strange declaration of intent, I would like to take a moment to examine it through modern conceptions of human agency, specifically through Charles Taylor's idea of strong and weak evaluations. This differentiation between different types of evaluations proves a very useful concept when talking about human agency. Charles Taylor wrote a book entitled *Human Agency and Language* in which he first explains the difference between first and second order desires with first order desires being an immediate want and second order desires being attempts to control first order desires, so a second order desire is a will to will something. In order to clarify this distinction it is perhaps useful to consider a concrete example, such as that of a smoker who wants to quit smoking. In that case, the smoker's first order desire would be to smoke, but his or her second order desire would be to not want to smoke. The important part to this distinction is that humans have the ability to *evaluate* their own desires, to see some as good and others as bad.

⁶² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 327-328.

⁶³ Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), 158.

This is where the idea of weak and strong evaluations comes in. Basically these are two different ways of evaluating desires. Weak evaluations are made when conflicting choices are judged to have the same worth, or the same moral weight, while strong evaluations are “concerned with the qualitative worth of different desires.”⁶⁴ I will give Taylor’s official definition and then an example that will make it clearer. Taylor distinguishes between these weak and strong evaluations by explaining that the distinction “doesn’t simply turn on that between quantitative and qualitative evaluation, or on the presence of absence of second-order desires. It concerns rather whether desires are distinguished as to worth. And for this we can perhaps set out two interlocking criteria. (1) In weak evaluation, for something to be judged good it is sufficient that it be desired, whereas in strong evaluation there is also a use of ‘good’ or some other evaluative term for which being desired is not sufficient; indeed some desires or desired consummations can be judged as bad, base, ignoble, trivial, superficial, unworthy, and so on. It follows from this that (2) when in weak evaluation one desired alternative is set aside, it is only on grounds of its contingent incompatibility with a more desired alternative.”⁶⁵ So a weak evaluation would be going to the cafeteria and choosing between different kinds of sandwiches, or choosing between going on vacation to Hawaii or to Italy. It is possible to step back and evaluate desires in either case, but the decision carries no moral weight. One would not consider a desire for one type of sandwich or one vacation destination as having more worth than another. A strong evaluation, on the other hand, might come into play if one were choosing between spending time watching a movie or spending time visiting a friend in the hospital; both options might be desirable, but the desire to visit the hospitalized friend is judged to carry more worth. With strong evaluations we make choices based not on immediate desires, but on how worthy we judge our motivations to be.

Bringing this all back to Flosi’s declaration of intent before the burning of Njáll’s farm begins: Flosi uses the language of religious intentionality when he says that setting fire to the house is “a grave responsibility before God, since we are Christian men ourselves,” but that language rings hollow coming from him. Flosi is clearly making what Taylor would term a strong evaluation of choice; he has assigned

⁶⁴ Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 16.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

relative moral worth to each of the options open before him and is considering his options accordingly. However, even though he considers the desire to burn down the farm to be unworthy or ignoble, he decides to do it anyway, as social pressure has forced him to think that this is what they have to do. In this case, the strong evaluation implied in the acknowledgement of Christianity should be a determining factor, but it is the social pressure that proves even stronger as Flosi and the others feel that they cannot back down once they have begun the attack. Nor is Flosi being held back by fate—despite how strongly fate runs through the saga—as his statement contains nothing to make us believe that he is fated to take one course over another. Rather, Flosi is hemmed in by his position as a leader of other men. Here it is helpful to remember MacIntyre’s argument, outlined and quoted earlier, that individuals in a heroic society are bound to fulfill the duties assigned to their role in society and that in knowing what his or her role is, an individual also knows “what he owes and what is owed to him by the occupant of every other role and status.”⁶⁶ If this is the case, then Flosi is bound to continue on with the attack on Njáll’s farm, not just for the sake of his own honor or safety, but because once the attackers are at the farmstead then the honor and safety of all of them depends on a successful attack. If they were to back down or fail at that point then they would be open to retaliation from any survivors, (as indeed happens). So no matter how morally problematic Flosi may find the attack from a religious standpoint, he must also weigh his moral responsibility to the men he is leading. He owes it to them to continue the attack. Thus social determinism in a saga is not a new idea, but what is interesting here is that at such a pivotal moment in the saga social determinism is the strongest force constraining the characters’ decisions, even more so than fate or Christian duty.

⁶⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 122.

Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar

Neither *Laxdæla saga* nor *Njáls saga* mention free will explicitly. Indeed, the *Íslendingasögur* famously do not comment on the actions of their characters. There is, however, an exception to this worth noting in chapter three of *Fóstbræðra saga* which comments on the young Þorgeir's slaying of his father's killer by invoking the free will he was given by God, saying,

...eigi undarligt, því at inn hæsti höfuðsmiðr hafði skapat ok gefit í brjóst Þorgeiri svá øruggt hjarta ok hart, at hann hræddisk ekki, ok hann var svá øruggr í öllum mannaunum sem it óarga dýr. Ok af því at allir góðir hlutir eru af guði gørvir, þá er øruggleikr af guði gørr ok gefinn í brjóst hvötum drengjum ok þar með sjálfræði at hafa til þess, er þeir vilja, góðs eða ills, því at Kristr hefir kristna menn sonu sína gørt, en eigi þræla, en þat mun hann hverjum gjalda, sem til vinnr.⁶⁷

This statement picks up the term *sjálfræði* found in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* and adds in the theme of God having made men his sons and not his slaves. Unfortunately *Fóstbræðra saga*'s complicated textual history means that it falls outside the scope of this study. Yet it is worth mentioning here as this passage echoes not only the *Íslensk Hómilíubók*, but also the prologue to one of the contemporary sagas, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which I will turn to for a final case study. This saga offers yet another way of understanding free will and takes a very different approach to the problem than the previous case studies. *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* is found both in the *Sturlunga Saga* compilation and in a longer separate version. For the purposes of this study I am working from the longer version which has been edited by Guðrún P. Helgadóttir. The religious element has a far greater effect on free will and agency in *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* than in *Laxdæla saga* or *Njáls saga*. This is perhaps unsurprising as the characters in *Hrafns saga* are Christian from the beginning of the story instead of changing religion partway through, as the major players in the other two sagas do. As *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* is a demonstrably pious work, in order to gain a full understanding of what the saga teaches about free will and human agency one must consider both the author's direct statements as well as the topological

⁶⁷ *Fóstbræðra saga*. Eds. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson. Íslensk fornrit VI, Reykjavík 1943, p. 133.

layer of meaning which encompasses the actions of the characters. And to say that the saga does try to offer a particular teaching about free will is not an overstatement; the saga starts with a didactic prologue informing the audience that the saga will explicitly illustrate free will. If we take both this prologue and the events subsequently narrated in the saga together, the teaching about free will which emerges is similar to the teaching on free will found in some of the homilies in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* which stress the importance of seeking and accepting divine grace. Thus *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* takes a different direction than the previous case studies and privileges a religious understanding of free will over any social concerns that may affect Hrafn's decisions.

As Guðrún Nordal has noted the sagas of Icelanders, "...actions and behavior in society are clearly superimposed by a topological layer, which has clear implications for the interpretation of events in *Íslendinga saga*."⁶⁸ Although a contemporary saga, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* offers an excellent illustration of this statement. In the prologue the author purports to be setting down the story in order to preserve the truth of recent events before they become distorted by the passage of time. The prologue also claims that these events illustrate God's gift of free will to the people depicted and divine patience with the choices those people subsequently make: "Í þeim atburðum mun sýnask mikil þolinmæði guðs almáttigs, sú er hann hefir hvern dag við oss, ok sjálfraði þat, er hann gefr hverjum manna, at hvern má gøra þat, sem vill, gott eða illt."⁶⁹ This early and direct statement would suggest not only that the author wished to call particular attention to the question of free will in the saga, but that he considered human free will to be unhampered by any notion of predestination. Also telling is the fact that the prologue uses the same word for free will, *sjálfraði*, which is applied to the pre-fallen Adam in the "Oratio Domini" sermon from the *Íslensk Hómilíubók* and which is used in *Fóstbræðra saga*, as discussed earlier. The prologue implies that the author wishes to put forward a vision of free will that is total; that is, free will that is unencumbered by fate or providence or social force.

However, the saga includes some instances that complicate this relatively straightforward understanding of free will, such as when bishop-elect Guðmundr's

⁶⁸ Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action*, 15.

⁶⁹ Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, ed., *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1.

prayers seem to calm the sea, yet the men on the ship give credit to luck while the bishop-elect gives credit to providence: “Kaupmönnum varð öllum eitt á munni: ‘Betr fór en líkligt var,’ sögðu þeir, en biskupsefni þakkaði guði ok kvað fara at líkendum.”⁷⁰ By alluding to a providential force which can step in and affect what happens to the characters, the author complicates the unalloyed statement of free will that he made in the prologue. The conception of free will in the saga is further complicated not just by the idea of providence brought forth by bishop-elect Guðmundr, but also by a fatalistic strain that runs throughout the saga. The multiple portents of Hrafn’s death are obvious examples, as is Ragnheiðr’s prediction when Þorvaldr first comes to stay with Hrafn. When Hrafn talks to her about Þorvaldr, the saga tells us that “Ragnheiðr segir: ‘Enga stund mun ek á hann leggja, því at ek ætla, at þú hafir þar úlf at fœða, er hann er’.”⁷¹ In this scene much still depends on Hrafn’s free choice to befriend Þorvaldr, but the existence of such prescient statements implies that characters may not have the absolute choice that the prologue states if they cannot help but bring certain events to pass. The portents of Hrafn’s death undermine the prologue’s statement further, as any such intimations of fate necessarily limit what the characters can choose. And yet just as in *Laxdæla saga*, the fatalistic elements in this saga often seem more literary in nature, as if they were meant to increase the suspense through foreshadowing and underline Hrafn’s holiness rather than point to an actual overarching fate governing the events.

Instead, we get some evidence of an idea of free will that involves dependence on grace, harkening back to some of the more sophisticated teachings on free will in the *Íslensk Hómilíubók*. In chapter four the still young protagonist makes pilgrimages to the shrines of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury, St. Aegedius (otherwise known as St. Giles) in Ílansborg, and St. James at Compostela before going on to Rome. It is at the shrine of St. Giles in particular that we are told “Þaðan fór hann suðr um haf ok sótti heim inn helga Egidium í Ílansborg, ok er hann kom þar, þá minntisk hann þess, er mælt er af alþýðu, at guð veiti hverjum manni, þeim er kemr til Egidium, eina böen, þá er maðr vildi helzt biðja, af verðleikum Egidii.”⁷² The importance of the prayer Hrafn utters here is highlighted because he has heard and believes that the shrine of St. Giles has some particular heavenly connection and all prayers offered there are answered,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁷¹ Ibid., 17.

⁷² Ibid., 4.

(though the same may be said of other saints' pilgrimage sites, this one is considered in the most detail in the saga). Tellingly, the prayer that Hrafn utters at this shrine is that no earthly matters will prevent his entrance into Heaven. The author informs us directly that “Þá bað Hrafn þess guð almáttkan, at af verðleikum Egidii skyldi hvárki fjárluti né þessa heims virðing svá veita honum, at þeir hlutir hnekkki fyrir honum fagnaði himinríkis dýrðar.”⁷³ Hrafn here specifically asks for help, or grace, to strengthen himself against earthly temptations that he might make virtuous decisions in the future. As the saga's editor Guðrún P. Helgadóttir has noted, after the prologue the author continually calls attention to the way that Hrafn willingly lives according to Christian virtues, whether or not his resultant lifestyle suffers socially or fiscally because of it. He determinedly has “his mind set on Heaven, not on this world's wealth or glory. Hrafn's prayer at the shrine of St Giles, that neither possessions nor renown should be so granted to him that they keep him from attaining celestial joys, is the key.”⁷⁴

The author shows us the fruits of this prayer after the main antagonist Þorvaldr's first attack on Hrafn. Þorvaldr is forced to give up the attack when Hrafn proves to be well prepared and have a much greater number of men than Þorvaldr was anticipating. When Þorvaldr leaves, several of Hrafn's men urge him to pursue and kill Þorvaldr while he has the chance, since someone who has attacked once would surely try to attack again when the odds are better. However, Hrafn firmly refuses to do so and we are told: “Nú vildi hann eigi gøra eptir þeim Þorvaldi né drepa hann, svá sem hann átti þá kost, ef hann vildi, því at hann vildi eigi vinna þat til fára vetra virðingar, sem opt kunnu manna ráð verða, heldr vildi Hrafn hafa svívirðing af mōnnum í orðlagi fyrir guðs sakir ok hætta svá lífi sínu til eilífrar miskunnar almáttigs guðs.”⁷⁵ Here Hrafn is specifically disregarding the honor and potential loss in social standing that loomed so large in the minds of the characters in *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*. Instead, he focuses entirely on the religious ramifications of his decision. He does in fact suffer some loss if social standing for this decision, as we are told that “Fyrir þessa tryggð Hrafn's ámæltu honum margir menn, fyrir þat er hann hafði Þorvald látit undan ganga.”⁷⁶ It is little wonder that Hrafn's men might question this decision of his, as by letting Þorvaldr

⁷³ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁴ Ibid., xxii.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 32-33.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 33.

go unpunished he is opening not only himself but all of them to Þorvaldr's later hostilities and thus as a leader of other men Hrafn makes the opposite decision from what Flosi made in *Njáls saga*. This is perhaps unsurprising; the author shows that he is aware of possible social pressures on decision making by including this scene of men questioning Hrafn's decision, but given that the author has also stated that the entire saga is meant to illustrate the right, most Christian use of free will, the main character must necessarily choose salvation over any social concerns.

This brings us to the question of why the author of this saga chooses to lay such stress on free will. As Guðrún Helgadóttir notes in the introduction to her edition, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* is often hagiographical in tone, and the end result of the author's prologue is to highlight the choices which made Hrafn more saint-like. In addition to Hrafn's disarmingly generous nature, the penultimate scene where he is killed is presented with all the careful staging of an author who is trying to make a saint. Indeed, in her chapter "Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, Pilgrim and Martyr" in the book *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*, Ásdís Egilsdóttir argues that the saga itself should be read as an incipient piece of hagiography and Hrafn's death should in fact be seen as a martyrdom that is just waiting to be recognized.⁷⁷ Hrafn is given a chance to confess to his priest and receive the Eucharist before he is killed, thus according to his own beliefs, he dies in a state of grace and will be allowed to enter into Heaven. After some discussion about who should actually kill Hrafn—Þorvaldr does not do it himself and the first man he orders to take up the task refuses—we are told that, "Þá lagðisk Hrafn niðr á kné ok ǫlboga ok lagði hálsinn á eitt rekatré, ok Bárðr hjó af honum höfuðit þar við trénu. Hrafn hrærði hvárki hönd né fót, er hann sæfðisk, heldr lá hann á knjánnum ok ǫlbogunum, sem hann var vanr at liggja til bœnar."⁷⁸ That he died in the same attitude in which he was accustomed to pray enhances the hagiographical aspect of the scene, and the author labels the area as pre-determined to become sacred by noting that a miraculous light had previously appeared in the part of the farmstead where Hrafn died. Furthermore, a miracle takes place there the next summer, re-enforcing Hrafn's near martyr status: "Sá atburðr varð þar undir virkinu, er ljósit hafði sézk um vetrinn áðr. Þar var þá jörðin, er Hrafn var höggvinn, hrjóstrug, en um sumrit eptir var þar grœnn

⁷⁷ Ásdís Egilsdóttir, "Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, Pilgrim and Martyr," in *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*, eds. Gareth Williams and Paul Bibire, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 29-39.

⁷⁸ Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, ed., *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, 43.

völlr.”⁷⁹ As Ásdís Egilsdóttir has already noted, this detail parallels the miracle that takes place after the martyrdom of St. Magnús of Orkney from *Orkneyinga saga*, where the previously rocky ground where he died became afterwards green.⁸⁰ To this example I would add another from *Guðmundar saga A* which also contains a miracle about miraculous plants growing. It is not a direct parallel, but it is still worth noting here as Bishop Guðmundr was Hrafn’s friend and figured in his saga. In *Guðmundar saga A*, we are told that while Guðmundr was saying mass one day, “EN hann þó ser eptir þionostu tekiuna ofan apalmana. EN þa voro þeir upp tecnir. er hann mël(te) at þa skyllde annars staðar uarð ueita. EN þa var humle sprottinn a palmun(um) ok lauf.”⁸¹ The important part of this quotation, at least for this study, is that the miracle of the flowering palms takes place in an already sacred space during the ceremony which makes that space sacred. After killing Hrafn, Þorvaldr and his men loot the whole farmstead but accidentally leave behind a sunstone and a costly cloak, both of them former presents to Hrafn from Bishop Guðmundr. The saga leaves open the possibility that this was simply oversight on the part of the looters, but also notes that “Þann atburð virðu menn svá, at því mættu þeir Þorvaldr eigi þessa gripi í brott hafa, er Guðmundr biskup hafði átt.”⁸² The idea that Guðmundr’s gifts function almost as secondary relics that the transgressors are unable to carry away from the farmstead is attractive, and further supports the idea that Hrafn is meant to be seen as a saint, and as such a role model for any listeners or readers of the saga. Therefore, as Hermann Pálsson argued for *Hrafnkels Saga*, I would argue that one of the author’s goals in *Hrafn’s saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* is to give moral instruction to his audience. However, it is not just general ethics he’s teaching; he is particularly trying to stress each individual’s personal responsibility for their moral decisions, and in order to do that he puts forward the example of a character whose consistently good moral decisions—sometimes made even in defiance of social pressure—resulted in making him almost a saint. This is not to say that the author’s attempt at hagiography is an unalloyed success, he struggles somewhat to reconcile contradictions in Hrafn’s behavior that

⁷⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁸⁰ Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, Pilgrim and Martyr,” 34.

⁸¹ *Guðmundar Sögur Biskups I: Guðmundar Saga A*. ed. Stefá Karlsson (København: Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, 1983), 76.

⁸² Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, ed., *Hrafn’s saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, 44.

come from trying to fit an existing story into a new hagiographic mold, and the question of how well he succeeds is still open. For example, Hrafn's decision not to kill the malevolent Þorvaldr when he had the chance was the correct moral decision to make in the abstract, but it ignores the fact that this decision meant putting all of his followers in danger. However, the author does succeed in intertwining hagiography and free will in order to promote a religious understanding of free will and broadcast the idea that his audience could choose sainthood as well. Thus *Hrafn's saga* provides an example showing how religious duties and providence can be inextricably knotted to a conception of characters' agency.

Conclusion

This study ultimately finds that although belief in fate and religious teachings about free will certainly have some impact on how agency is portrayed in the Icelandic sagas, particularly in the more didactic and overtly pious *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, the examples drawn from *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* show that the social pressures placed on characters have a startlingly constraining effect on their agency, forcing them to both make decisions they would rather not face and seriously limiting the number of options open to them in those decisions. Even in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, the author shows himself aware of the social ramifications of Hrafn's decisions, even as he emphasizes Hrafn's ability to ignore those social ramifications. Overall these sagas show that, consciously or not, the saga authors were capable of producing extremely sophisticated portrayals of human agency which were inextricably bound up with the social world their characters inhabited. This offers us another lens through which to view the rest of the Old Norse-Icelandic saga corpus and shows that some fatalistic or religious statements may need to be re-evaluated to understand the extra social content they carry. By examining whether or not a character gives into social pressure and why, we can gain some understanding of what kinds of behavior the saga author was trying to privilege and how he viewed the society he was writing about. Thus a statement of religious duty, such as Flosi makes before burning Njáll's farm, may contain as much information about what the author thought the character's right social response to the situation should be as well as the right religious response. Carefully examining the way in which characters' agency works—instead of simply accepting that the characters are driven by fate or providence—can give us a better understanding of the social world which the sagas inhabit and what their authors were trying to accomplish.

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