



SEX, LIES AND THE *ÍSLENDINGA SÖGUR*

DAMIAN FLEMING

Even though the Icelandic Family sagas as we have them were composed by Christians, possibly clerics, there has nevertheless been much debate over the role or level of influence Christianity and Christian ethics have in them.¹ The sagas were originally transmitted orally and it is conceivable that portions of them can be traced back to before the conversion (traditionally dated to the year 999 or 1000); some scholars claim that the sagas can give us an accurate glimpse into pre-Christian Germanic mores. This is an ongoing debate within the field.

It is within this context that I wish to explore notions of lying in the *Íslendinga sögur*, in particular in *Njáls saga*. As the narrative style of sagas is notoriously terse – almost never providing motives or discussing intent or offering any sort of commentary on the events portrayed – teasing out any sense of morality or judgment concerning the actions of the characters is necessarily problematic. For this reason, my analysis of *Njáls saga* will rely solely on the internal evidence of the saga itself.

The notion of lying does not rest comfortably in discussions of heroic and Germanic literature. This sentiment is reflected in Saxo Grammaticus, the twelfth-century Danish historian, who in his *Gesta Danorum* tells us concerning pre-Christians:

Plurimum quippe deformitatis olim ab illustribus viris in mendacio reponebatur.
(Saxo 95; bk. 4, ch. 3)²

Similarly, his contemporary Gerald of Wales tells us specifically about Icelanders:

Gentem hæc [Yslandia] brevilloquam et veridicam habet. Raro namque brevique fungens sermone, juramento non utitur; quia mentiri non novit. Nihil enim magis quam mendacium detestatur. (Gerald 95-6; distinctio 2, ch. 12)³

But such statements are obviously part of their rhetoric and tell us more about Saxo's and Gerald's worldviews and moral outlooks than that of pre-Christian Scandinavians. These clerics probably would have been aware of the standard Christian views on lying promoted most famously by Augustine. We need only mention Augustine's conclusion: there is no such thing as a justifiable lie and a lie is defined primarily by the intent of the liar, not by the



objective content of what is said (*De mendacio* col. 488-9).⁴ All lies, even those with a most just purpose, are unacceptable in Augustine's ethical system.

Of course, brief reference to Augustine cannot hope to show how the average medieval Christian was likely to view lying. Surely many men, including churchmen, would not adamantly defend a position as severe as Augustine's.⁵ His influential view, however, does at least provide at least the extreme Christian standpoint.

More relevant, perhaps, with regard to the sagas are the comments on lying and truthfulness in the Eddic poem *Hávamál*. One can reasonably say that *Hávamál* represents a sort of wisdom-literature based almost certainly on a non-Christian world-view.⁶ Quite unlike the Christian philosophers, the ultra-pragmatic wisdom of *Hávamál* recommends lying (emphasis added):

Vin sínom scal maðr vinr vera
oc gialda giöf við giöf:
hlátr við hlátri scyli hölðar taca,
enn lausung við lygi. (stanza 42)

Ef þú átt annan, þannz þú illa truir
vildu af hánom þó gott geta:
fagrt scaltu við þann mæla, *enn flátt hyggia*
oc gialda lausung við lygi. (stanza 45)

Þat er enn of þann, er þú illa truir
oc þeir er grunr at hans geði
hlæia scaltu við þeim oc *um hug mæla,*
glíc scolo giöld giöfom. (stanza 46)⁷

These stanzas not only suggest lying, but even recommend how to go about it, by keeping your words distinct from your thoughts. In fact, this is exactly how Augustine defines lying, but for him it is a grave sin.

The characters in the sagas are, not surprisingly, much more in line with the thought of *Hávamál* than with Augustine. Despite Gerald of Wales' comments, lies abound in the Icelandic sagas. Of the thirty *Íslendinga sögur* I have surveyed, only three short sagas contain



no occurrences of characters' lying.⁸ A variety of characters in the vast majority of sagas lie in a multitude of situations: men (and women) lie to protect themselves, to protect others, to get close to others, to kill others, to hide shameful deeds, but also to help others and to save others' lives. Likewise, people in all kinds of relationships lie to each other; enemies often lie to enemies, as *Hávamál* recommends, but men also lie to their brothers, to their mothers, to their sons and fathers; husbands lie to wives and vice-versa, and lovers lie to each other.⁹

By contrast, Njáll, the eponymous hero of *Njáls saga*, who is celebrated for his wisdom and his proto-Christian sense of morality even before the Conversion, is perhaps uniquely singled out in Icelandic sagas for not lying. Högni says of him to Skarpheðinn, “*þat er sagt at hann ljúgi aldrei*” (“it is said that he never lies” *Njáls* 194; ch. 78). And yet not even Njáll is wholly innocent of taking part in deception. One of the first incidents in the saga involving Njáll tells of his inventing an elaborate and deceptive scheme to help his friend Gunnarr reopen a court case (ch. 21-2). He also later purposefully gives bad advice in order to promote the career of his foster-son, Höskuldr (ch. 97). Although this scheme results in nothing but good for his foster-son and even all of Iceland, the use of deception would still be considered unacceptable according to an Augustinian conception of lying (*Contra mendacium* col. 540, ch. 10; Colish 31-4). It seems, then, that since the author of *Njáls saga* is able to reconcile lying with the character of so great a man as Njáll, the ethical principle guiding this saga (and the majority, if not all of the sagas) would not be ready to condemn lying outright.

The first strand of the story told in *Njáls saga* is that of Hrútr, the half brother of Höskuldr and thus the uncle of Hallgerðr (ch. 1-8). Hrútr is engaged to Unnr the daughter of Mörðr gígja. Before his wedding, Hrútr is forced to go abroad on business and attracts the attention of Queen Gunnhildr, the widowed Queen Mother of Norway, who takes Hrútr under her wing and into her bed, and Hrútr's stay in Norway is made all the more productive on account of his relationship with her. Their association with each other is jointly beneficial. Hrútr gains the inheritance he came to collect with the help of the queen and even becomes a member of the king's household by her wish. She, on the other hand, receives a sexual companion and presumably a friend. The sensuality of the aging widow-queen is a well-known part of her personality¹⁰ and perhaps all she sought from her relationship with Hrútr was satisfaction and the companionship of a man she felt worthy. Given the fact that we see nothing but kindness between these two characters, it is not fitting with the saga to impose a personality on



Gunnhildr which is not presented here as some scholars have.¹¹ The description of their parting in *Njáls saga* begins thus:

Hrútr var með konungi um vetrinn í góðu yfirlæti. En er váraðisk, gerisk hann hljóðr mjög. Gunnhildr fann þat ok mælti til hans, er þau váru tvau saman: “Ert þú hugsjúkr, Hrútr?” sagði hon. “Þat er mælt,” segir Hrútr, “at illt er þeim er á ólandi er alinn.” “Vilt þú til Íslands?” segir hon. “Þat vil ek,” sagði hann. “Átt þú konu nökkura út þar?” segir hon. “Eigi er þat,” sagði hann. “Þat hefi ek þó fyrir satt” segir hon. Síðan hættu þau talinu. (emphasis added, 20; ch. 6)¹²

This lie, this terse denial of the fact that he does have a woman waiting for him out in Iceland, is incredible especially since it seems wholly unnecessary.¹³ We are given no reason to believe that Gunnhildr seeks this information for any other reason than her curiosity about the life of a friend whom she will probably never see again. Although she does respect him and enjoy his company, she presumably will find other lovers and would expect Hrútr to do the same. As is often the case in *Íslendinga sögur* the questioner, here the queen, suspects the real answer before the question is even asked, and the lie is useless; it is immediately perceived as a lie and called as such. Next, Gunnhildr and Hrútr’s final parting is described, and Gunnhildr herself reveals the source of her anger:

Hon leiddi hann á einmæli ok mælti til hans: “Hér er gullhringr, er ek vil gefa þér” – ok spennti á hönd honum. “Marga gjöf góða hefi ek af þér þegit,” segir Hrútr. Hon tók hendinni um háls honum ok kyssti hann ok mælti: “Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur. Ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel; þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins.” Hrútr hló at ok gekk í braut. (emphasis added, *Njáls* 20-21; ch. 6)¹⁴

Many commentators overlook the fact that Hrútr’s marriage is cursed because of the lie, that is, his disrespect for a woman who has given him nothing but good things.¹⁵ The author of *Njáls saga*, a master of foreshadowing, lets us know that this is the reason; it is the last thing Gunnhildr says, and Hrútr’s laugh serves as a means of highlighting the scene’s significance: the lie is the reason and the curse will be successful. Since the saga-author makes it clear that Hrútr’s lie is significant, he can then more subtly develop the theme of truth versus honesty in sexual matters.

The curse is effective and sexually humiliating: Hrútr is unable to consummate his marriage and thus gives his wife legal grounds for divorcing him and demanding the return of the full dowry (*Njáls* ch. 6-7). Although Hrútr successfully retains the dowry, he has to resort to



bullying (by challenging his elderly father-in-law to a duel, ch. 8). But after this we are shown gradually that Hrútr has learned his lesson. He is able to accept gracefully enough the trickery of Njáll and Gunnarr (in order to reopen the prosecution of Unnr's dowry case), as well as his subsequent defeat at the Alþing by Gunnarr (ch. 22-4). More important for this study are Hrútr's dealings in sexual matters. We know from *Laxdæla saga* that Hrútr remarries two more times after the failed first marriage and fathers a number of exceptional sons (*Laxdæla* ch. 19). This is not mentioned in *Njáls saga*; rather the only further dealings in marriage that Hrútr has in *Njáls saga* are those of his niece Hallgerðr. In the course of the arrangements for her marriages Hrútr is shown to be the paradigm of honesty and fair-dealing. The saga-author seems to be showing that Hrútr has learned his lesson: not to lie about sexual situations and to beware the ability of a powerful woman. The only of Hallgerðr's marriages in which Hrútr plays no part is her first one, when Mörðr attempts to marry Hallgerðr off without consulting her in advance. Hrútr predicts that no good will come of such a marriage and is proven right when Hallgerðr has her husband killed (*Njáls* ch. 9-12).

Hrútr is immediately part of the negotiations for her next marriage. As soon as they begin, it is obvious that Glúmr, the suitor, is so smitten that he is unlikely to be dissuaded from the match; but before things can go too far Hrútr interrupts, offering practical advice and making sure everyone involved is equally informed:

Þá mælti Hrútr: “Gefa mynda ek yðr til ráð, ef þér vilið eigi þetta láta fyrir ráðum standa, er áðr hefir orðit um hagi Hallgerðar [. . .] Skal nú ok eigi svá fara sem fyrr, at Hallgerðr sé leynd; skal hon nú vita allan þenna kaupmála ok sjá Glúm ok ráða sjálf, hvárt hon vill eiga hann eða eigi, ok megi hon eigi öðrum kenna, þó at eigi verði vel; skal þetta allt vélalaust vera.” (emphasis added, *Njáls* 43; ch. 13)¹⁶

Hrútr's greatest concern is that Hallgerðr be made aware of everything, that the deal is free from deceit (*vélalaust*). For, he tells us, if the woman knows all the information she has a right to know, then she cannot blame others for her unhappiness. If we cast Hrútr's assertion in negative terms we find Hrútr's situation with Queen Gunnhildr reduced to its essence (that is, if a woman is willfully deceived and information is kept from her in sexual matters, then she is justified in blaming others and acting accordingly). Also at Hrútr's request, more power is granted to Hallgerðr when she has agreed to the marriage, and she declares her own betrothal. Hrútr has learned his lesson. The saga-author, who does not condemn all kinds of lying and



deception, goes to great lengths to show that Hrútr's mean, petty, pointless lie to his lover is wrong, deserving of punishment, and that he is a better man for having atoned.

Hrútr is involved in one more marriage arrangement, now between Hallgerðr and Gunnarr. Although Hrútr bears his legal defeat at the hands of Gunnarr well enough, he is not happy with Gunnarr; rather he is just practical enough to know there is nothing to be gained from holding a grudge with this particular man. When the proposal is brought up, Hrútr controls the conversation even more than in the previous arrangement, and he is even more forthcoming. He tries to deny Gunnarr the match out of concern for Gunnarr's safety – he genuinely believes Gunnarr to be too good a man for his niece:

”Því mun ek svara þér um þetta, *er satt er*; þú ert maðr vaskr ok vel at þér, en hon er blandin mjök, ok vil ek þik í engu svíkja.” (emphasis added, *Njáls* 86; ch. 33)¹⁷

Hrútr wishes to avoid a deceptive situation at all costs, even if it means offering good advice to a man who has publicly humiliated him. Gunnarr naturally suspects that the opposite is the case, that Hrútr would dissuade the match out of enmity, but Hrútr insists that this is not the case and makes an extraordinary offer:

”Eigi er þat [. . .] meir er hitt, at ek sé, at þú matt nú ekki við gera. En þó at vér keyptim eigi, þá vildim vit þó vera vinir þinir.” (emphasis added, *Njáls* 86; ch. 33)¹⁸

and further:

”Hrútr segir Gunnari allt um skaplyndi Hallgerðar ófregit.” (87; ch. 33)¹⁹

Hrútr can do no more. He has been as honest and forthcoming as possible and nevertheless the betrothal occurs, with Hallgerðr approving and declaring it herself.

If this were the last scene involving Hrútr, one could conceivably argue that Gunnarr's assessment was accurate, that Hrútr's protesting was just a lame attempt to keep Gunnarr from something he desires. But, in order to assert the probity of the “reformed” Hrútr, the author of *Njáls saga* provides one more encounter with Hrútr which seems to have no other narrative purpose than to prove the validity of Hrútr's sincere wish not to deceive Gunnarr. After Gunnarr's proposal, the saga's focus follows Hallgerðr, and Hrútr is left behind, with the introduction and rise in prominence of Njáll and Gunnarr. So it is quite surprising that in chapter 51, at the height of Gunnarr's trouble with a man called Otkell, Gunnarr seeks out Höskuldr and Hrútr.



Although Gunnarr is Höskuldr's son-in-law, and this is the pretense for why Gunnarr might seek their help (“*fyrir venzla sakir*” ‘because of kinship’), Hrútr is the man Gunnarr needs to see (*Njáls* 131; ch. 51). There are a number of factors in this case which suggest that the episode has a narrative function other than what meets the eye. Njáll is Gunnarr's advisor, and in all other cases in this saga, if Njáll cannot solve a problem, it cannot be solved. I do not know of any other case of Njáll referring anyone to a “second opinion.” In addition, the advice that Hrútr offers has become such a commonplace in this saga as to border on comic:

“Þú skalt skora á hólmi Gizuri hvíta, ef þeir bjóða þér eigi sjálfðæmi, en Kolskeggr Geiri goða; en fásk munu menn til at ganga at þeim Otkatli, ok höfu vér nú lið svá mikit allir saman, at þú mátt fram koma slíku sem þú vill.” (131; ch. 51)²⁰

The advice can be paraphrased as: “you young men challenge the old men to a duel, and they will have to back down.” Of course this is Hrútr's advice; it worked for him against his father-in-law and it worked against him for Gunnarr. The advice can stand seriously in the saga because it is not going to be used – it is not even necessary: Gunnarr is immediately offered self-judgment, and the situation, which was never as serious as Gunnarr believed, is immediately resolved. The absolute last we hear of Hrútr in this saga is that he and his brother are sent for to serve as witnesses to the oaths (“*Þá var sent eptir Höskuldi ok Hrúti, ok kómu þeir þangat til*” ‘Then Höskuldr and Hrútr were sent for, and they came there’ 131; ch. 51).

The oddest part about this chapter is the unnecessary advice that Hrútr gives Gunnarr. I do not know of any other occurrences in *Njáls saga* or any other saga where a plan is detailed which is not really required. In the narrative economy of saga-literature, especially in a saga as well-composed as *Njáls saga*, a scene such as this must serve another purpose. The reason that this scene is here and that Hrútr makes a final appearance in the saga has nothing to do with Gunnarr's current problem. Rather, it fulfills a narrative protocol to which the saga-author needs to bring some closure: he needs to offer a final assessment of the character of Hrútr to Gunnarr, and by this, to the audience. Recall that while negotiating the marriage deal for Hallgerðr, Gunnarr suspects Hrútr to be reluctant on account of a grudge. It is imperative that Hrútr let it be known that this is not the case, because his reluctance actually stems from his need to be truthful in all sexual dealings. He is still atoning for the lie that he told Gunnhildr. The only purpose of Hrútr's involvement in this scene is to fulfill a promise he had made to Gunnarr during the betrothal in chapter 33, “*en þó at vér keyptim eigi, þá vildim vit þó vera vinir þínir.*” One would think that since the marriage does occur, this comment becomes



insignificant, but this is not the case. In order for the saga-author to show that Hrútr's motives were and are wholly honest, Hrútr must fulfill this vow, and show himself to be Gunnarr's friend.

Carol Clover has noted the seeming disjunction between the story of Hrútr and the rest of *Njáls saga*:

[T]he story is considerably overdeveloped in proportion to its function. The author appears yet again to have pursued it for its own sake and for its proleptic value on the question of failed marriages. (38)

I suggest that in Hrútr's tale we have a sort of *exemplum*.²¹ Whether the ethic behind it is pagan or Christian is difficult to say; it depends on how broadly one classifies Hrútr's sin. Hrútr lies. This is however too general a way to define his wrongdoing; as was shown above, even the quasi-Christian and truthful Njáll is allowed to exercise some well-meaning deception. Hrútr lies to his lover for no reason. This is the wrongdoing. Based on all the lies I have encountered in the *Íslendinga sögur* and the wide variety of people who lie, it is unlikely that the thirteenth-century saga audience would necessarily condemn every lie (as Augustine would). Lies are a crucial part of the discourse of sagas, and men and women characters are always ready both to recognize a lie and to produce one when necessary. A combination of the character of the liar and the motivation for the lie is likely to be the basis for a moral assessment of the lie. The advice of *Hávamál* does not recommend constant lying, but instead suggests lying in specific contexts, such as when faced with a deceptive enemy. *Hávamál* does not suggest a free-for-all; no discourse (or society) could endure with unrestrained lying and no regard for truth. The moderate, pragmatic wisdom of *Hávamál* respects that there are only certain occasions that call for lies. Hrútr's situation with Gunnhildr is not likely to qualify. There is no explanation in the text why Hrútr would show such disrespect to his lover and friend at their parting. A characterization of Gunnhildr as jealous is false; the text offers nothing to suggest this. Quite the contrary, unlike Hrútr, Gunnhildr explains her motivation, "*pú trúðir mér eigi til málsins*" ("you did not trust to speak with me" *Njáls* 21, ch. 6).

It appears then that the author of *Njáls saga* felt some degree of sympathy for the character of Gunnhildr and felt that while lying was an accepted part of pre-Christian Iceland, Hrútr's foolish lie is something to be condemned.



NOTES

¹ There has been much work done in this field and the debate is far from settled. Oddly, none of the scholars who have investigated this issue have considered the morality of lying/truth-telling. See, e.g., Andersson, Fulk, Hermann Pálsson, Lönnroth, Thompson, and Vilhjálmur Árnason. The older scholarship on the subject (cited within the above works) also neglects the topic of lying.

² (Once upon a time illustrious men considered lying the height of bad form). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ (This Iceland contains a people who say little, but always the truth. Indeed, using scant and brief speech, they do not employ oaths, because they do not know how to lie. Nothing do they detest more than a lie).

⁴ The tracts by Augustine, probably the most influential works concerning lying in the Middle Ages, are *De mendacio* and *Contra mendacium*. Both works are translated with useful introductions in DeFerrari. The best survey of classical and medieval views on lying I have discovered is Colish.

⁵ For a brief history of discordant Christian theories of lying which were more lenient, and the theory of “mental reservation,” see Fecher 81-101; see also *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “lying” and “mental reservation.”

⁶ Cf. Andersson’s view, “In dealing with classical literature we can test our feeling about the moral temper of literary works against the theoretical statements of moral treatises. In Iceland the closest we can come to a moral treatise is the Eddic poem *Hávamál* and it may be worthwhile to compare the sense of this poem with the sense of the sagas” “Displacement” 588. While citing Andersson as an authority, I must also point out that he presents an opinion which might contradict my use of *Hávamál*, claiming that, among others, stanzas 42, 45 and 46 (which I quote presently) are “not pertinent to an ethical outlook” 590. This is only true if one fails to recognize lying as a subject that requires ethical consideration, a fact that Andersson and other scholars who examine “saga-ethics” have not yet considered.

⁷ (St. 42, A man must be a friend to his friend, and repay gift with gift; men must accept laughter for laughter, *but deceit for a lie*; St. 45, If you know a man whom you don’t trust, but



there might be some gain in his company, let your speech be fair with this man, *but thoughts deceitful, and repay deceit for a lie*; St. 46, And further concerning that man, whom you do not trust and whose intentions you suspect, you must laugh with him, *but speak other than your thoughts*, such is the repayment for gifts).

⁸ The sagas taken into consideration in this study are *Bandamanna saga*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Fóstbrœðra saga*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Grænlandinga saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, *Hænsa-Póris saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Reykðæla saga ok Víga-Skútu*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*. All citations from these sagas are taken from the *Íslenzk Fornrit* series. The sagas that I found which contain no lies are *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*.

⁹ As there is not space in this context to provide examples of all the sorts of lying which occur in *Íslendinga sögur*, a few examples of the sorts of lies that occur in sexual relationships will demonstrate the range of possibilities: men lie to women concerning other men who are still abroad in order to get the woman for themselves (usually successfully), e.g., *Laxdæla* ch. 42, *Hallfreðar* ch. 9, *Bjarnar* ch. 3 and 10; men slander others to ruin relationships, *Kormáks* ch. 20; less seriously, a wife lies to her husband about an outlaw she is hiding, but only until they are alone, then she tells him the truth, *Flóamanna* ch. 19; and a wife defies her husband's order to expose their child, and lies and says the deed is done; six years later the man praises his wife when he discovers his beautiful daughter, *Gunnlaugs* ch. 2. This brief list does not begin to do justice to the diversity of motives and situations where lying occurs in the sagas. It will be clear that response to a lie discovered can produce a full range of emotions, from disgusted rage to complete joy.

¹⁰ See Nordal; for a recent bibliography on interpretations of the queen, see Jochens, "The Female Inciter" 116.



¹¹ Consider, e.g., Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson's note to the scene of Hrútr and Gunnhild's parting in *Laxdæla*, where they draw on other Icelandic traditions beyond *Njáls* and *Laxdæla* and unwarrantedly influence the reader's perception of the queen: "In *Njáls Saga* (Chapters 3-4) Hrut's relationship with Queen Gunnhild is described more explicitly. The nymphomaniac queen laid a spell on him that ruined his first marriage to Unn" (82). Such a reading is a poor, misogynist reduction of the scene in *Njála*; see below.

¹² (Hrútr was with the king during the winter in good honor. But when spring arrived, he was very quiet. Gunnhildr noticed this and said to him, when the two were together, "Are you anxious, Hrútr?," she said. Hrútr says, "You know what they say, that it goes ill for him who dwells abroad." "Do you yearn for Iceland?" she says. "That I do," he said. "Do you have any kind of woman out there," she says. "*That's not the case,*" he said. "*Nevertheless, I think it's true,*" she says. Afterwards they broke off their conversation).

¹³ In the only detailed examination of lies in Icelandic literature of which I am aware, Taylor notes that: "a terse denial of fact is relatively rare in the sagas [. . .] the most telling denial is Hrut's concealing from Gunnhild that fact that he has a woman waiting for him in Iceland (*eigi er þatt*) when she asks him. Hrut's is the only flat denial of a known truth I can find in *Njáls saga*" 291.

¹⁴ (She led him aside for a private conversation and said to him, "here is a gold ring, which I wish to give you," and clasped it on his arm. "I have received many good gifts from you," Hrútr says. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him and said, "If I have as great power over you as I think, then I pronounce this against you, that you shall have no sexual pleasure from that woman on whom your mind is set in Iceland; but you may fulfill your desire with other women. And now neither of us two will be well; *you did not trust to speak with me.*" Hrútr laughed and went away).

¹⁵ See, e.g., Andersson, 1971: 585-6, "The prefatory matter concerning Hrútr characterizes a man distinguished in every way, who, *through no fault of his own*, is cursed with a bad marriage, compromised by a divorce, and humiliated when his wife's dowry is extracted at sword point by Gunnarr" (emphasis added).

¹⁶ (Then Hrútr said: "I'm going to give you some advice, if you will not be put off from this marriage because of what has happened before in Hallgerðr's affairs...This time this must go



differently than before, not hidden from Hallgerðr; she must know now all the parts of the arrangement, and look upon Glúmr and decide for herself whether she will have him or not, and she will not be able to impute another, should it not work out well; *this must be completely free from deceit*").

¹⁷ ("I will answer you about that thus, *which is true*; you are an excellent man and well accomplished; but she is rather a mixture, *and I do not want to deceive you in any way*").

¹⁸ ("*That is not the case...*it's more this, that I see that you are not able to control yourself right now. But, even should the marriage not occur, we both wish to be your friends"); note Hrut's ironic echoing of his lie to Gunnhildr, but now he is telling the truth.

¹⁹ (Hrut tells Gunnarr all about Hallgerð's temperament without being asked).

²⁰ ("If they don't offer you self-judgment you must challenge Gizurr hvíti to a duel, and Kolskeggr [challenge] Geirr goði; and we shall gather men to take care of Otkell and his men, for we now all together have so great a troop that you are able to do whatever you want").

²¹ On the *Íslendinga sögur* as *exempla* see Hermann Pálsson, 1971: 70, "I have tried to show that the purpose of *Hrafnkel's Saga* was not so much to describe life in pagan Iceland as to exemplify certain moral problems which were relevant to the author's own times and environment, the Christian society of thirteenth century Iceland;" especially relevant for the story of Hrut as I have read it is Hermann Pálsson's discussion of "justice" in the sagas 51-6. For the sagas as *exempla* for specifically sexual concerns, consider Jochens' bold assertion, that both the *Íslendinga sögur* and the *Biskupa sögur* "should be considered as *exempla*, designed to instill proper behavior in the face of troublesome, contemporary problems of marital fidelity and clerical celibacy" "The Church and Sexuality" 389.



WORKS CITED

- Andersson, Theodore M. "Ethics and Politics in *Hrafnkels saga*." *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988): 293-309.
- . "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas." *Speculum* 45 (1971): 575-93.
- Augustine. *Contra mendacium*. Ed. J-P. Migne. Patrologia Latina vol. 40. Paris, 1887. Col. 517-48.
- . *De mendacio*. Ed. J-P. Migne. Patrologia Latina vol. 40. Paris. 1887. Col. 487-517.
- Brennu-Njáls saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. (= Íslenzk Fornrit 12). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954.
- Clover, Carol J. *The Medieval Saga*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982.
- Colish, Marcia L. "The Stoic Theory of Verbal Signification and the Problem of Lies and False Statements from Antiquity to St. Anselm." *Archéologie du signe*. Ed. Lucie Brind'Amour and Eugene Vance. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982. 17-43.
- DeFerrari, Roy J. ed. and trans. *St. Augustine: Treatises on Various Subjects*. New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1952.
- Fecher, Vincent John. *Error, Deception and Incomplete Truth*. Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1975.
- Fulk, R.D. "The Moral System of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*." *Saga-Book of Viking Society* 22.1 (1986): 1-32.
- Gerald of Wales. *Topographia Hibernica et Expugnatio Hibernica*. Ed. James F. Dimcock. *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera* vol. 5. Rolls Series vol. 21. London, 1867.
- Hávamál. Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius*. Ed. Hans Kuhn. Heidelberg: Winter, 1962. 2-44.



Hermann Pálsson. "Icelandic Sagas and Medieval Ethics." *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 7 (1974): 61-75.

---. *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's saga*. Munkgaard: Scandinavian University Books, 1971.

Jochens, Jenny M. "The Female Inciter in the Kings' Sagas." *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 102 (1987): 100-119.

---. "The Church and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland." *Journal of Medieval History* 6 (1980): 377-92.

Laxdæla saga. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. (= Íslenzk Fornrit 5). Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934.

Lönnroth, Lars. "The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas." *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969): 1-29.

"Lying." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. 1st ed. 1907-17.

Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans. *Laxdæla Saga*. New York: Penguin, 1969.

"Mental Reservation." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. 1st ed. 1907-17.

Nordal, Sigurður. "Gunnhildur konungamóðir." *Samtíð og saga* 1 (1941): 135-55.

Saxo Grammaticus. *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*. Ed. J. Olrik and H. Ræder. 2 vols. Copenhagen, 1931.

Taylor, Paul Beekman. "Wielders and Wasters of Words: Bare Lies and Garnished Truths in *Njáls saga*." *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*. Ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Rudolf Simek and Hans Bekker-Nielsen. Vienna: Hermann Böhlau Nachf., 1986. 288-96

Thompson, Claiborne W. "Moral Values in the Icelandic Sagas: Recent Re-Evaluations." *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*. Ed. Harald Scheller. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977. 347-60.

Vilhjálmur Árnason. "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90 (1991): 157-74.