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Berserks Behaving Badly:

Manipulating Normative Expectations in *Eyrbyggja saga*

INTRODUCTION

A common thread running through the present volume is the consistent highlighting of the flexibility, negotiation, and pragmatism that is so apparent in narrated descriptions of law, legal norms, and legal practice in the medieval Scandinavian milieu. However, developments in the social sciences provide inspiration for scholars of medieval Scandinavia to go further still and undertake a more holistic examination of medieval Scandinavian normativity.[1] After all, it has long been remarked by scholars such as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Theodore Andersson that particularly the *Íslendingasögur* often fixate on situations where competing values – law and honour, for example – collide to manifold literary effects.[2] Studies such as these pick up on an under-researched tension evident in the sagas between competing normative expectations and, in light of the progress made in the social sciences, medieval Scandinavian concepts of normativity should be explored more holistically. In this vein, the following paper makes a close reading of a short vignette in *Eyrbyggja saga* – the attempted forced marriage between the Swedish berserk Halli and Víga-Styrr's daughter Ásdís – exploring the ways that various norms and normative expectations are deliberately manipulated by the characters in question to further their own social goals in the narrative.

[1] Norms, normativity, and deviance have all long been areas of special interest in sociology, legal scholarship, criminology, and anthropology. A detailed account of the development of this subject area is contained in Downes/Rock (eds.) 2003. Though its focus is expressly criminological, it provides an extensive theoretical analysis for the study of norms and normativity as well as for understanding social deviance and its value as a "resource for the understanding of social order and social change" (Downes/Rock 2003, p. 369). For an especially useful recent volume on the topic that juxtaposes legal and social norms to enlightening effect, see Baier (ed.) 2013; and especially Banakar 2013, pp. 15–38.

[2] Further discussion of these competing social interests and pressures, as well as analysis of their role in the narratives of the sagas can be found in Meulengracht Sørensen 1988, pp. 247–266; for an excellent refutation of the *Íslendingasögur* as myopically concerned with issues of personal honour, see Andersson 1970, pp. 575–593.

A SPECTRUM APPROACH TO NORMATIVITY

As many previous studies have opted to interrogate social values or ethics, [3] rather than norms as such, an effort must first be made to set definitions and parameters for the present study. Reza Banakar helpfully teases out the distinction between norms and normativity from the perspective of legal sociology, namely: "norms provide standards of conduct which guide expectations and coordinate action and interactions, thus engendering normativity, behavioural regularities and social order".[4] To provide a simple working definition, normativity can be understood as the degree to which behaviour aligns with a particular norm or norm-set. Banakar takes this definition further arguing that normativity broadly, and legal normativity in particular, "is not necessarily reducible to the effects or functions of individual norms".[5] That is to say that, while sometimes adherence to norms can be a conscious decision of an individual, there are systemic or macro-level social imperatives that motivate actions.[6] Thus, to return to our simple working definition, groups of norms or norm-sets, as standards of behaviour, generate systemic social pressures for expected behaviour and, thus, externally encourage social order.

Banakar's distinction that normativity can be both externally motivated, by way of these social pressures, or internally generated, which he sees as the root of moral obligations, is important in his discussion as he uses this dichotomy to narrow the focus of his investigation to legal norms and normativity.[7] However, for the task at hand, this broader definition of normativity is essential as it highlights the occurrence of many mutually independent scales of normativity to be considered in any given society at any given time. As highlighted above, the sources from medieval Scandinavia routinely demonstrate that law was far from the only norm-set that had a bearing on the literary imagination and, by extension, the wider society.

[3] As is the case with both Andersson 1970 and Meulengracht Sørensen 1988.
[4] Banakar 2013, p. 16.
[5] Banakar 2013, p. 16.
[6] Banakar 2013, p. 20.
[7] Banakar 2013, p. 18.

Therefore, before exploring the case study below in detail, an effort should first be made to tease out normative metrics that clearly operate in the sources in question.

Though interested in feud mechanics rather than normative forces, William Ian Miller highlights two normative pressures that demonstrably function in the world of the sagas: one governed by legal norms,[8] and a second governed by norms relating to honourable conduct.[9] Miller also briefly acknowledges a moral component to the social economics of feud, but largely leaves this avenue unexplored in his study.[10] In light of more recent attempts to grapple with medieval Scandinavian moral attitudes,[11] the scale of normativity governed by morality is a third normative metric that should be considered here. That being said, it is important to note that, due to the nature of the surviving sources, specifically here the *Íslendingasögur*, the morality that can be considered in a close reading is not actually the same as that described by Banakar.[12] While the morality discussed by Banakar is internally generated, the *Íslendingasögur*, famous for their apparent detachment and perceived objective narrative tone,[13] do not convey internal justifications for actions; rather, they demonstrate a morally-grounded systemic social pressure or societal expectation to behave in certain ways that conform to contemporaneous moral concepts. Thus, the moral normativity that can be examined in the *Íslendingasögur* is, like law and honour, a normativity that is encouraged by external social pressure. However, this is a boon to the present investigation rather than a methodological challenge. Readers are confronted with three observable, distinct – though interrelated – scales of normativity, each arising from an external rather than internal locus, which can be used to interrogate social action in the sagas.

[8] Miller 1990, pp. 116–117.
[9] Miller 1990, pp. 26–41.
[10] Miller 1990, pp. 98, 108.
[11] For example, see Bagge 2008; Guðrún Nordal 1974.
[12] It should also be noted that for these types of enquiry, sagas need not be seen as conveyors of even semi-historical events and personages; rather, they convey conceivable interactions governed by social forces that are inherently conservative and resistant to change. For a further discussion of the viability of especially the *Íslendingasögur* see Miller 1990, pp. 43–51.
[13] Discussed and problematised by, for example, Andersson 1970, p. 577.

These scales can be helpfully conceptualised as three spectrums of normativity with abstract concepts like lawfulness, honourableness, and moral-rightness on the positive extremes and lawlessness, dishonourableness, and moral-wrongness on the negative extremes. The Old Norse lexicon is remarkably rich in words that describe especially these negative normative extremes with words like *lagalauss*,[14] *ójafnaðr*,[15] and *illr*[16] being just three examples of vernacular adjectives that help flesh out the contemporary conceptual associations behind normative transgressions on these spectrums.

Structuralists in particular have had a strong interest in early Scandinavian social structures and concepts, favouring the use of "related oppositions" or binary pairs of concepts to define a certain "Old Norse worldview".[17] One such oppositional pair that Kirsten Hastrup discusses is "us" and "the others"[18] and, at first glance, this could easily be mistaken for a normative population and the non-normative individuals perceived to be on its fringes; however, the picture is much more complex. From a social perspective, every action or reaction is rooted in complex normative understandings that are constantly being negotiated by the actor and the society they are acting in. Therefore, in the face of the three observable scales of normativity identified above, scholars would do well to remember that norms do not have a clear hierarchy amongst themselves and normative pressures can often compete, stressing the importance of articulating that these are interrelated, rather than independent, scales. [19] Thus a given action can be considered normative on one scale, but non-normative, even deviant, on any number of others under certain conditions. Furthermore, while normativity and deviance might form something of an oppositional pair conceptually, sociologists are very careful to

[14] "Lawless".
[15] "Unevenness", for a fuller discussion of the legal and honour repercussions of *jafn* and *ójafn* conduct, see Miller 1990.
[16] "Evil", for a fuller discussion of the semantic field, see *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 318.
[17] See especially Hastrup 1990, pp. 25–43. Further discussion can be found in Gurevich 1969, pp. 42–53; and Meletinskij 1973, 1, pp. 43–57, and 2, pp. 57–78.
[18] Hastrup 1990 pp. 25–43.
[19] For further discussion on the sociological and criminological approach to studying the pluralism and diversity of non-normative and deviant behaviours and the competing normative pressures in society, see Downes / Rock 2003, pp. 2–23.

distinguish that binary thinking here is especially dangerous when considering social action due to the inherent ambiguity and many shades of grey that separate the two.[20] In this way, the following study will examine the actions of the characters involved and consider them against each of these normative spectrums, comparing and contrasting the perceived normativity and the social reception of those actions.

BERSERKS BEHAVING BADLY?

The vignette in question is neatly contained in chapter 28 of *Eyrbyggja saga*, but the important contextualising information comes somewhat earlier. The events of the case study revolve around Arngrímr Þórgrímsson, introduced in chapter twelve as the overbearing and unjust second son of Þórgrímr Kjallaksson.[21] In fact, we are told that Arngrím's behaviour was so difficult to accommodate that he was renamed "Styrr", the word for a disturbance or brawl.[22] Despite this characterisation, we learn that Styrr is intelligent and hardy, two qualities that seem to have drawn many men to his service.[23] Styrr's disposition is interesting in and of itself from the perspective of normativity. His intelligence and station as a member of the Kjallekling kin-group set him up well to be a powerful householder, or *bóndi*, but his ruthlessness has apparently led to several fatal disputes with his neighbours, and his *ójafn* tendencies have resulted in these killings going uncompensated.[24] Despite this anti-social behaviour, he has managed to accumulate quite the following of fighting men, whose force he uses to bully his neighbours, and even other members of his kin-group, in order to

[20] Downes / Rock 2003, pp. 4–6.
[21] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 21. By way of introduction, the saga says of Arngrímr that "hann var ofstopamaðr mikill ok fullr ójafnaðar" ("he was a very arrogant man and unjust", *Eyrbyggja saga* (transl. by Hermann Pálsson / Edwards 1989), p. 40) For a fuller discussion of the social problem of the *ójafnaðrmaðr* see Miller 1990; and for a full treatment of the narrative uses of *ójafnaðrmenn* in the saga corpus see Shortt Butler, unpublished doctoral thesis 2016.
[22] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 21.
[23] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 33. In the words of the saga author, "hann var vitr maðr ok harðfengr" ("[he was] and intelligent and ruthless man", *Eyrbyggja saga* (transl. by Hermann Pálsson / Edwards 1989), p. 49).
[24] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 33.

accomplish his goals.[25] It is this combination of factors that appears to have allowed Styrr to carve out a substantial power-base for himself in the district.

Styrr's estranged brother, Vermundr put out by Styrr's bullying tendencies, asks Earl Hákon Sigurðarson of Norway to allow him to bring Halli and Leiknir, two brothers from Sweden known to be powerful berserks, into his service before he returns to Iceland.[26] This exchange is structured as a gift intended to increase Vermundr's prestige and augment both Vermundr and Hákon's honour.[27] The saga relays that these berserks make good allies, but the earl warns that their tempers need to be kept in check.[28]

However, upon returning to Iceland with Halli and Leiknir in tow, Vermundr begins to realise that, despite the desirability of their fellowship in combat and other disputes, the berserks are more than a match for him. In fact, the value of their companionship seems to be entirely utilitarian as, when Halli asks Vermundr to help him find a wife, the saga relays that Vermundr "knew of no respectable woman who wanted to be landed with a berserk for the rest of her life".[29] This exclusion from even the basest unit of domestic life, marriage, marks these two out as a special type of social outlier and it becomes a bone of contention between the berserks and Vermundr. Relations between the two become increasingly strained until it is suggested that Vermundr give the *ójafn* berserks to his *ójafn* brother Styrr and, after some discussion between the parties, it is agreed that Styrr will take the berserks as a gift to return Vermundr and himself to friendly terms.[30]

However, not long after the brothers come into Styrr's service, Halli attempts to change his social status in a dramatic way. He takes to talking with Styrr's daughter Ásdís, whom Styrr

[25] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 61–62.
[26] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 60–61.
[27] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 60–63.
[28] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 61.
[29] *Eyrbyggja saga* (transl. by Hermann Pálsson / Edwards 1989), p. 70. The translation above retains much of the character of the original Old Norse, "eigi vita ván þeirar konu af góðum ættum, er sik myndi binda við berserk, né sín forlög", *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 63.
[30] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 63–64.

was especially protective of, and when Styrr attempts to intercede, Halli declares his love for her and issues a proposal of sorts.[31] In stereotypical berserk fashion, Halli claims that the physical support of him and his brother makes him a better match for Ásdís than the wealth or power of any *bóndi* in the district; furthermore, not only will they cease to be friendly if Styrr denies his request, he threatens "then each of us will just have to take what's coming to him. In any case there's not much you can do to stop me talking with Asdis".[32] Though his efforts are far from elegant, Styrr agrees to consider the issue and takes three days to think and discuss the issue with his neighbour Snorri goði, the local chieftain who, despite being young, is known for his cunning in difficult social situations. [33] Having saught Snorri's council, Styrr returns to the brothers and Halli manages to negotiate an agreement with Styrr that he and his brother will undertake three especially difficult tasks so that he might demonstrate his worthiness to marry Ásdís.[34]

There are several interesting factors at play here which deserve momentary exposition before moving on. First, Halli and Leiknir, though certainly somewhat difficult to get along with at times, are noted on multiple occasions to be loyal and powerful allies. Despite this, they seemingly carry a heavy social stigma. This stigma they bear does not seem to be rooted in their identity as Swedes, a common trope in the sagas,[35] nor does it appear to arise from any supernatural or monstrous associations, traits which are often associated with berserks when they appear as antagonists,[36] but which the brothers never actually demonstrate in the saga. Rather, this stigma, which purportedly keeps them from establishing themselves as members of the elite populations with which they rub shoulders, seems to be the result of two distinct

[31] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 70–71.
[32] *Eyrbyggja saga* (transl. by Hermann Pálsson / Edwards) 1989, p. 76. The original Old Norse is, "munu þá ok hvárir verða at fara með sínu máli sem líkar; mun þá ok raunlítit tjóa at vanda um tal okkart Ásdísar", Einar Ól. Sveinsson/Matthías Þórðarson (eds.) 1935, p. 71.
[33] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 73–74.
[34] The brothers are instructed to clear a path from Hraun to Bjarnarhafnar over the lava field, to set up a boundary marker between the two farms, and to build a sheep-shed on Styrr's side of the boundary, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 70–72.
[35] Foote 1993, pp. 9–42; Dale 2014.
[36] For a full discussion of the roles of *berserkir* in Old Norse literature, see Dale 2014, pp. 162–182.

factors. The first of these is that they are destitute, *félitill*,[37] while the second is their – for lack of a better term – berserk-ish way of doing things.

These two factors should be explored in turn. As William Ian Miller demonstrates, the poor did have a place in the normative society of medieval Iceland, though they were unable to achieve the status of householder, *bóndi*, until they had livestock or land of their own.[38] *Grágás* stipulates that if a man had neither land nor livestock he had to place himself in the legal care of the householder on whose land he lived.[39] While this social structure certainly limits an individual's agency, it in no way inherently excluded them from a normative existence in their respective social station. In fact, from a purely structural understanding of legal normativity, this model suggests that Halli and Leiknir are to be understood as servants in Styr's household.

However, this position in the social hierarchy, paired with the threatening language of Halli's marriage proposition, is most likely the reason for Styrr's aversion to the proposal. That is to say that the proposition that Halli, a servant under common contemporary socio-legal understandings, should marry Ásdís, the daughter of an important *bóndi*, would have been seen as a social transaction entirely in Halli's favour and greatly impinging on Styrr's honour, the honour of his household, and that of his kin group and wider social network.[40] Therefore, this is not something Styrr could sit idly by and let happen.

The second aspect of the stigma that the brothers carry relates not to their identity as berserks, but their specific way of acting. Possessed of great strength and an inhuman fearlessness in the face of battle, berserks appear throughout the sagas to various literary effect, though they

[37] *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 72.
[38] Miller 1990, pp. 116–117.
[39] *Grágás* 1, p. 132; *Grágás Text 1*, pp. 136-137.
[40] See Miller 1990, p. 82, for more on social economics in the saga world. See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017 for a discussion of the wider networks of friend relationships that could equally be impacted by such honour slights.

most commonly appear as stock characters who typically antagonise saga protagonists.[41] That being said, there are important understandings to be gleaned from these vignettes, especially when viewed through the lens of Miller's model of the social economics of law and honour in the saga world. One of the various social transactions highlighted by Miller is *rán* or "robbery".[42] This is the social transaction that best characterises Halli and Leiknir's interactions with those around them. Their threatening, anti-social dispositions go beyond the usual in the sagas and, while they are loyal enforcers to those feeding and housing them, their loyalty comes with none of the courtesy that typifies the householder-servant relationship. This is even overtly stated as the reason that Vermundr seeks to give them to Styrr in the first place: their threatening, anti-social, and bullying dispositions line up very well with Styrr's own character and approach to social transactions in the district.[43] Their social interactions, especially Halli's marriage proposition, demonstrate a profound interest in forcibly seizing honour and social standing with no regard to payment or mutual gain. Indeed, the deal struck between Halli and Styrr certainly seems to have the ring of coercion rather than mutual agreement. Therefore, it is entirely predictable that, once the berserks complete the tasks they have been given, Styrr invites them to have a bath in his new bath-house where he traps them, burns them with scalding water, and, when they subsequently break out of the structure, slays them.[44] This plan, hatched with the help of Snorri goði's adviced,[45] culminates with Snorri marrying Ásdís, rather than Halli. When analysed through Miller's model of social economics, Styrr's killing of the brothers can be understood as a rectification of the social balance after the attempted *rán* of his daughter and his honour.

[41] For example, consider the berserks that oppose Grettir in chapter 19 of *Grettis Saga* (ed. Guðni Jónsson 1936, pp. 61–71).
[42] Miller 1990, pp. 77–84.
[43] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 61–64.
[44] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 74–75.
[45] *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 73–74.

Utilising models of social economics in this way aids in understanding the actions of Halli and Leiknir, as well as Styrr's subsequent reaction. This analysis of social economics is also helpful for pinpointing some of the more normative behaviours exhibited on both sides, such as Halli's wish to conform to Icelandic structures of domesticity and Styrr's seeking of Snorri's help despite being notoriously *ójafn*. However, we can use the spectrums of normativity, discussed above, to further reflect on the deeper implications of these exchanges. For example, Styrr, as a powerful *bóndi*, uses his wealth and position to facilitate a policy of utilising legally non-normative and morally ambiguous actions, such as uncompensated killings, to force, coerce, and bully his neighbours and rivals into bending to his wishes. Despite being intensely anti-social, the successes Styrr enjoys under this policy yield a dramatic increase in his honour and power in the district, despite both the saga narrator and other characters in the saga commenting on the problematic nature of these actions. That is to say, by intentionally disregarding moral and legal normative pressures, except where absolutely necessary, Styrr is able to maximise his focus on the contemporary honour economy. The power and honour that he accrues through this aggressive behaviour allows him to cement his station, while his kinship ties, his wealth, and the large following he has gathered to him gives Styrr the social freedom to disregard legal and moral normativity to accrue honour in ways that other characters in the saga cannot.[46] Halli and Leiknir lack Styrr's power, influence, and social safety, but use the same sorts of behaviour and martial prowess to rise in power and honour, eventually coming to rub shoulders with kings and chieftains. Yet the stigmas they carry exclude them from a truly normative existence, and, when they push too hard, too fast, in an attempt to change that, there are lethal consequences due to their more precarious social state.

[46] Consider the freedman Úlfar as a counter example who is constantly undermined by his neighbours despite strictly adhering to contemporary normative pressures, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 81–89.

That being said, the true normative genius of Snorri's counsel to Styrr takes some unpacking. First, despite the fact that Styrr's killing of the brothers could conceivably be understood as legally non-normative, in reality there can be no case made against him. No one will seek to prosecute the case, as the berserks' only kin in Iceland was each other, and for someone else to attempt to take on the case would be a serious swipe at Styrr, a now even more powerful force in the district. Furthermore, as the servants of Styrr, the only person who could even conceivably prosecute their wrongful deaths is Styrr himself.[47] In this way Styrr maintains, and arguably strengthens his legal normativity, given the complex legal manoeuvrings of the case, increases his honour normativity in getting the best of the social transaction, and even boosts his moral normativity in ridding the district of two troublesome and anti-social individuals and saving his daughter from an ill-fated marriage.

While Styrr certainly comes out on top in this exchange, the big winner is undeniably Snorri. These outcomes are utterly eclipsed by the normative manipulations that he deftly employs. Of course, the saga relays that the plan is hatched with Snorri's council, but Styrr's victories are made all the better by Snorri's betrothal to Ásdís, as he and Styrr are mutually bettered in honour by the joining of their kin-groups. In fact, using Miller's models of social economics once more, in hindsight, the exchange of Snorri's counsel for betrothal to Ásdís can be understood as an important and valuable exchange of gifts between two leading men from respected kin-groups, further solidifying their statuses in the spectrums of contemporary normativity.[48] Even beyond this, Snorri's plan has also put to rest a multi-generational dispute that festered between their families and, by bringing Styrr back into the normative fold of the district, has tempered his bullying and "fullr ójafnaðar" attitude for the foreseeable future now that their kin groups are linked – or at the very least ensured that Styrr is obligated not to turn his *ojafn* sights on Snorri. Snorri's ability to accomplish all of this without having

[47] *Grágás* 1, p. 132.
[48] For further discussion, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2017, especially pp. 11–47.

to undertake aggressive action demonstrates a nuanced understanding of normative expectations and a tactful knack for manipulating them which tilts the social scales in his favour.

This incredibly intricate and elegant navigation of social exchanges and normative expectations tells us a great deal about the mechanics of normativity as represented in the sagas. First, it shows that normativity and the alignment of particular actions and reactions in relation to norms had very real, sometimes serious repercussions in the social systems of medieval Iceland. Second, the ways in which those actions lined up with contemporary normative pressures could, under the right circumstances, dramatically change the ways the individual was perceived, for better or worse. Third, an intimate working knowledge of how to manipulate social interactions in relation to contemporary understandings of normativity, like that masterfully demonstrated by Snorri goði, was vital to successfully navigating the intrigue of saga-age Iceland. Perhaps most importantly, this is a preliminary step toward showing just how vital considerations of normativity are in the complex social world of medieval Iceland, and how they can be used to better understand the lives of those who inhabited it. However, to return to the common thread running through this volume, one thing that is especially clear is that to only pay attention to law and its place in these narratives is to only see part of the larger tapestry of the social complexity of the medieval Scandinavian world.

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Lemma List

Ásdis Styrsdóttir

Halli, Swedish Berserk
Hákon Sigurðarson, Earl of Norway
Leiknir, Swedish Berserk
Snorri goði
Vermundr Þórgrímsson
Arngrímr Víga-Styrr Þórgrímsson
Þórgrímr Kjallaksson