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# Age and Ethics in *Porsteins þátr stangarhoggs*

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One horse-fight; two whettings; three bodies; a duel between an ageing hero and a younger one; an old Viking no longer fit for battle, but still difficult to deal with and displaying an undiminished appetite for violent solutions – these are some of the elements one meets in the intriguing short prose narrative *Porsteins þátr* (or *saga*) *stangarhoggs*. This short narrative has received a remarkable deal of scholarly attention. It has served as a model for the analysis of the structure and conflict-scheme of the sagas of Icelanders (Andersson 1967; see also Ármann Jakobsson 2017). It has been used as a test case for the analysis of tense alternation, as a clue to understand its structure and reception (Richardson 1995). In their theorisation of the *þátr* genre, Rowe and Harris characterise *Porsteins þátr stangarhoggs* as “perhaps the quintessential feud *þátr*” (2005: 471).<sup>1</sup> It has been a convenient sample text for the study of key concepts and themes within saga literature, including feud (Miller 1990: 51–76), violence (Falk 2005 and 2021: 112–166), ethics and literary quality (Kreutzer 2004: 12–17), oral literature and *rittengsl* (Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 146–157), masculinity (Hiltmann 2011: 303–330), and the depiction of certain types of characters (Hermann Pálsson 1971: 75–79; Borovsky 2002: 8; Ármann Jakobsson 2005: 308–315). Still, important aspects of the *þátr*, such as its literaricity and intertextual references, remain underexplored. This article makes a contribution to the discussion of these aspects of the text in focusing on the connection of discourses about age and ethics within its distinctive literary framework. It demonstrates how the *þátr* displays different types of old or ageing characters in order to reflect on age-related ethics, and contends that the discourse of age plays into a dynamic that is central to understanding the ethics and poetics of the *þátr*.

## Staff-struck

This “little gem of Icelandic prose fiction” (Schach 1977: 361) is generally appreciated for its clarity (see Ármann Jakobsson 2017: 128), as well as its literary excellence (see Heinrichs 1966: 167; Falk 2005: 16), hence its use as an ideal sample text for structural approaches to saga narrative. Indeed, in this *þátr*, the saga-world seems to revolve around the spindle of

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<sup>1</sup> Rowe (2017: 153) later came to the conclusion that this subgenre, as addressed by Joseph Harris in the 1970s, could be dissolved entirely and the texts in question be regarded as shorter sagas.

necessity, with the threads of the norns and the narrative being spun with deadly logic. The two protagonists, the mighty local chieftain Bjarni and the poor farmer Þorsteinn, try their best not to let their conflict – first brewing, then open – escalate, but nonetheless end up fighting each other in single combat. The conflict begins when Þorsteinn receives a stroke with a staff across his face during a horse-fight, an attack performed by the arrogant Þórðr, Bjarni's horseman. This incident earns Þorsteinn his derogatory nickname *stangarhogg* ("staff-struck, staff-blow") when he asks people not to tell his father, goes home, and takes no action. Later, Þorsteinn is nevertheless confronted by his old and decrepit father Þórarinn, once a fierce Viking, who now calls his son effeminate (*ragr*) and compares him to a beaten dog in the first of two whetting scenes (on this episode, see Thoma 2021: 98–101). Thus, Þorsteinn is forced to exact vengeance and kills Þórðr. Bjarni has Þorsteinn outlawed, but takes no further action, which leads to him being ridiculed by the same malicious blabbermouths, Þórhallr and Þorvaldr, who coined Þorsteinn's nickname. The next morning, Bjarni sends the two over to slay Þorsteinn, but the latter manages to kill them both. Again, nothing happens until a second whetting scene in which Bjarni's wife Rannveig, during some nightly pillow-talk, criticises his inactivity and the gossip about it. Bjarni leaves the morning after the whetting in order to challenge Þorsteinn to a duel – very much to the dismay of Rannveig, who urges him not to go alone. The single combat, the central scene of the *þáttir*, is depicted at length: step by step and blow by blow, Bjarni and Þorsteinn manoeuvre themselves into a situation in which the duel can be broken off without loss of honour, and a settlement is reached. Bjarni then steps into the house and tests Þórarinn by announcing the death of his son and inviting him to Hof, where he is to be treated with all honours; in response, Þórarinn attempts to trick Bjarni into coming near his bed, then tries to stab him. Þorsteinn moves over to Hof as one of Bjarni's men, while Þórarinn is left behind on his farm, cared for by slaves. Bjarni becomes very pious as he gets old and dies near Rome on a pilgrimage. Finally, several of Bjarni's descendants are listed, many of them chieftains themselves.

### The ageing warrior

The role of Þorsteinn's father Þórarinn goes far beyond that of a mere inciter or trouble-maker. The story literally starts with him, and he is given a decisive scene with Bjarni which marks the end of the feud. He has three confrontations, two with his son and one with Bjarni, which make up one quarter of the entire story, as Paul Schach (1977: 365–366) emphasises. Þórarinn is introduced as "gamall maðr ok sjónlitill" (*PStang*: 69; "an old man and almost blind") – a motif that the *þáttir* shares with *Þorsteins saga hvíta* (see Crocker 2020; for the motif in other sagas, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008: 232–233) – as well as "rauðavíkingr í œsku sinni" and "eigi dældarmaðr, þótt hann væri gamall" (*PStang*: 69; "a marauder in his youth" and "still not easy to deal with in spite of being old"), thus putting an extra emphasis on the age theme.<sup>2</sup> His son Þorsteinn is then introduced, but the narrative switches back to Þórarinn, contrasting his being poor with his owning many weapons. Þorsteinn has to do all the work; later in the text, Bjarni's reluctance to wreak vengeance is rationalised by him not wanting to take support away from Þorsteinn's blind father and the

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Old Norse are the author's own.

other people depending on him (*PStang*: 72). This is mirrored by Þorsteinn in the dialogue with Bjarni prior to the duel, when he suggests that he leave Iceland and expresses the hope that Bjarni would provide for his father (*PStang*: 75). Pórarinn's age is also a topic when he boasts that he would have fought someone like Bjarni when still in his youth (*PStang*: 75). After the duel, Pórarinn is confined to his bed and addresses his physical state in conversation with Bjarni after the duel: “verðr þú nær at ganga, því at karl skelfr nú allr á fótum fyrir elli sakar ok vanheilsu, en eigi trútt, at mér hafi eigi í skap runnit sonardauðinn” (*PStang*: 77; “you should now come close, because the old man is all shaky on his feet from old age and poor health, but it is not true that I am not affected by my son's death”). When Bjarni approaches him, Pórarinn tries to stab him; Bjarni exclaims “Allra fretkarla armastr!” (*PStang*: 77; “You miserable old fart!”). The once fierce Viking has lost his physical strength, enjoys neither a social role nor any esteem, and has been reduced to a “nobody” (Ármann Jakobsson 2005: 309; see also Morcom 2018: 45–47). He now fits very well indeed into the category of “angry old men” (Fichtner 1978: 127 n. 33; cf. Jones 1965) or “nasty old men” (Ármann Jakobsson 2005). Fully dependent on his son in every aspect, Pórarinn uses cunning to make Bjarni approach his bed and take his hand in order to take vengeance, but still fails.

It has been suggested that Pórarinn stands out in this story as the embodiment of a fading warrior ethic. Physically, he might be withering away and too frail to work, but he certainly has kept his violent character and his cunning, character traits that have material counterparts in the many weapons he owns in spite of him being counted among the poorest of the free farmers. By contrast, Pórarinn's hardworking son is “a model of fortitude and integrity” (Schach 1977: 366), a paragon of strength and peacefulness who fights only when it can no longer be avoided. Schach (1977: 367) deals with this stark contrast between father and son in an article on the “theme of the unbridgeable gap between representatives of two generations who embody two antagonistic, diametrically opposed, irreconcilably conflicting cultures”. One might add that each of these cultures has its specific kind of masculinity, following Ásdís Egilsdóttir: “The younger men act in a Christian way as opposed to Þorsteinn's aged father's ways, and this new model of non-violent masculinity is shown to be superior to the older, violent model” (2020: 119; see also Schach 1977: 366 and 380–381).

Still, that is only half the truth. First, the text does not simply present a bipartite division with a gap between a parent generation (e. g. Pórarinn) and a younger one (e. g. Þorsteinn and Bjarni); in fact, Bjarni's age is not identical with Þorsteinn's, as he is portrayed as an ageing chieftain. Second, the chatters and inciters are ultimately mouthpieces for an unspecified general public (which they admittedly help to influence). There is a dissenting voice of reason in the anonymous man who reprimands Þórhallr and Þorvaldr for their dangerous chatter, but social acceptance and esteem seem still to be based on a concept of honour that tolerates no slight without vengeance. Third, there is a dynamic shift in that Bjarni changes with age, becoming milder and more balanced in accordance with a gradual movement away from paganism and towards a Christian worldview and religion. This is explicitly stated in the *þátr*: “Bjarni [...] var [...] því vinsælli ok betr stilltr sem hann var ellri ok var allra manna þrautbeztr ok gerðisk trúmaðr mikill inn síðasta hluta ævi sinnar” (*PStang*: 78; “Bjarni was thus more popular and more moderate when he was old and was the most persevering of all people, and became a truly good Christian in the last part of his

life"). Fourth, in the *pátt*; bloodshed is not unconditionally condemned – Bjarni calls Þorsteinn's killings "not unjustified" – and a settlement is indeed achieved without further bloodshed, but not without violence. Bjarni must fight Þorsteinn, does not accept his offer to leave Iceland, and insists on continuing the fight after Þorsteinn fetches two new shields and a sword – which in the oldest fragment is called "karlsnautr" (*PStang* [JH]: 94; *PStang* [JJ]: xxxvii; "the old man's gift").

It is not explicitly stated that Bjarni is a good deal older than Þorsteinn, but there is a series of indications that he is. Obviously, some time has passed since the battle in Bøðvarsdalr; the two gossipers contrast the 'then' with the 'now' as they speculate that Killer-Bjarni might have lost his masculine mojo due to the injuries he received there, and express surprise to see him changed. During the duel, Bjarni asks for a break so he can drink some water, excusing himself as being "óvanari erfiðinu" (*PStang*: 75; "less used to hard work") than Þorsteinn. Shortly after, he needs another break because of his untied shoelace. In both cases, Þorsteinn has the opportunity to show some decency and 'passes the test' by agreeing to Bjarni's requests and not exploiting his vulnerability, as he refrains from doing throughout the duel, being deferential and using only as much force as is necessary to withstand Bjarni. The saga is not specific about how much trouble Bjarni finds himself in, so it is up to the audience to make the connection, but Bjarni evidently needs the two breaks; at least the first one is clearly owed to his exhaustion, while the second takes place after Bjarni finds things more difficult that he thought on account of Þorsteinn being "vígkoenn" (*PStang*: 75; "skilled in fighting"). These references show the consistently strong focus of the *pátt* on age, linking it to the treatment of the old or aging hero in other texts.

### Fathers and sons

The single combats that the heroes of heroic and epic poetry must fight are often heightened in their dramatic effect by the fact that at least one of the heroes is aware of a serious conflict in his values or duties, which he cannot escape despite his best efforts. Thus, such a heroic challenge, already a fight to the death, is additionally charged and situated within the realm of fateful tragedy. This is realised in literature especially in the form of the duel between kinsmen, whether father and son or brothers. A good example is the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*, which survives as a fragment in a manuscript from around 930 and in which the old hero Hildebrand meets his son Hadubrand in single combat, surrounded by their respective armies. Before the physical battle, the two engage in a flyting in which each asserts his own value and belittles his opponent, especially as regards his respective age (see Schnall 2022). In comparing this early testimony with the late saga scene, a number of parallels can be observed, only with their elements being distributed not among two characters (Hildebrand–Hadubrand), but among three (Pórarinn–Bjarni–Þorsteinn):

- (1) The texts feature a father–son conflict and a battle of an old warrior against a young one. In the *Hildebrandslied*, both aspects coincide; in the *pátt*, they are divided. An age difference between Bjarni and Þorsteinn can be inferred, but is not addressed explicitly; in addition, it is minor and not a subject of remarks in the flyting.

(2) Both Hildebrand and Pórarinn are prepared to sacrifice their son for the sake of their own honour. Hildebrand laments this prospect before the battle, Pórarinn first in his conversation with Bjarni and in the context of a manipulative speech.

(3) In both cases, a moment of cunning is associated with age. In the *Hildebrandslied*, Hadubrand, using verbal aggression, calls Hildebrand cunning and full of guile in spite of his age, and accuses him of wanting to entangle him with words and thus bring him within reach of his weapon to kill him: “du bist dir alter Hun, ummet spaher, spenis mih mit dinem wortun, wili mih dinu speru werpan. pist also gialtet man, so du ewin inwit fortos” (*Hl*: 12, ll. 39–41; “You are, old Hun, full of cunning, spinning me in with your words and then wanting to shoot me with your spear. As old a man as you are, you are still up to guile”), In the *þátr*, this is almost exactly what the old Pórarinn is trying to do: to cunningly spin Bjarni in with words, lure him closer, then stab him (*PStang*: 77).

(4) In the course of the battle, a gift is offered: in the *Hildebrandslied*, golden arm-rings, which Hadubrand refuses; in the *þátr*, a shield and sword, which Bjarni accepts.

(5) Defensive weapons are cut up, offensive weapons rendered useless: the fragment of the *Hildebrandslied* breaks off here, whereas in the *þátr* the weapons are replaced.

(6) In both cases fate is apostrophised, in the *Hildebrandslied* as a desperate look ahead to the tragic alternatives, in the *þátr* dialogically by Þorsteinn and Bjarni during the battle. In the *þátr*, the ambivalence of the hero and his inner turmoil is translated into a narrative dynamic and a dialogical negotiation of values.

The comparison with the *Hildebrandslied* is not meant to suggest a direct influence on the *þátr*, as it is a text rather distant in terms of date and place of origin. Instead, it provides an early example of the age theme in Germanic heroic poetry in the form of a combination of flyting and topoi of old (and young) age. Yet, the parallels above warrant a closer look at the Nordic textual manifestations of the Hildebrand legend. *Ásmundar saga kappabana* (c. 1300; oldest manuscript c. 1400) mentions Hildibrandr’s killing of his own son only in a single prose sentence and a stanza of the so-called ‘death song of Hildibrandr’; the more elaborately narrated tragic fight between kinsmen is between Hildibrandr and his younger half-brother Ásmundr (*Ásm*: 91–100). We find the same narrative pattern with different names in an earlier work, Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200), where Hildigerus has to fight his younger half-brother Haldanus and mourns the killing of his son in his death song, there rendered in Latin hexameter (*Saxo*: I, pp. 504–509 [VII.9.12–16]). It is commonly assumed that both texts ultimately go back to the same source, that is, that Saxo has made use of an earlier Old Norse version of Hildebrandr’s or Hildigerus’ death song (see Jorgensen 2017: 15). Thus, one gets both a *terminus ante quem* – before 1208, when Saxo completed his work – and an indication of a living tradition of that branch of the legend in the North. Even though the age theme is more prominent in the *Hildebrandslied*, with its juxtaposition of old and young within the verbal sparring, it is nevertheless present in Nordic versions (see Finlay 2017: 36). In Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, Hildigerus tries to avoid having to fight Haldanus by accusing him of being inexperienced and thus not a suitable opponent: “pietatem fortitudini pretulit seque septuaginta pugilum oppressione conspicuum cum homine parum spectato manum conserturum negavit” (*Saxo*: I, pp. 504–505 [VII.9.12]; “he set fraternal loyalty before considerations of valour and announced that he would not join battle with a man who had had so little testing, where he himself was famed as the vanquisher of seventy men-at-arms”), in *Ásmundar saga*, the hero calls his opponent “inn hári Hildibrandr / Húnakappi” (*Ásm SkP*: 23, st. 10; “the grey-haired Hildibrandr, champion of the Huns”).

In the *Hildebrandslied*, *Saxo*, and *Ásmundar saga*, this tragic fight between kinsmen is ordained by fate, though the exact workings of fate and the factors of ‘honour’ and ‘fame’ differ (see Ciklamini 1966; on fate in saga literature, see Gropper 2017). A closer parallel regarding the outcome of the single combat in the *þáttr* is in another branch of the legend, which contains the Old Norwegian *Piðreks saga* (c. mid-13th century) and a related Early New High German text, the so-called *Jüngeres Hildebrandslied* (“The Younger Lay of Hildebrand”). In these texts, a verbal exchange of blows is also followed by a physical one, but the wounded heroes recognise each other as father and son and break off the fight (see *Piðr* 348–351; Nedoma 2012).

In *Porsteins þáttr stangarhoggss*, there is a good deal of textual play with father–son roles and other social relations and hierarchies, and elements such as affection, trust, and obligations connected to individual relations. Bjarni’s offer to have Þórarinn move to Hof, to assign him the second seat of honour, and to step in “í sonar stað” (*PStang*: 77; “in his son’s stead”), is in the first place to be viewed as compensation for the loss of his son Porsteinn (see Gschwantler 1975: 243–247), comparable to the compensation Hrafnkel offers Þorbjörn in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, another saga from the same region. Each offer is not only about providing for an ageing or explicitly old father, but has just as much to do with his social integration and status. Where Bjarni offers to fill the void left by Porsteinn and to function as Þórarinn’s ‘son’, Hrafnkel refers to his long, friendly relations with Þorbjörn as neighbours and offers to take care of both him and his children in a hitherto unparalleled, generous way, promising to care for him until his death: “Mun ek þá annask þik til dauðadags” (*Hrafnk*: 106; “I will then love you until the day of your death”). There is a considerable difference between these offers and the basic societal obligations of taking care of the elderly, the poor, and others who could not provide for themselves (*ómagar* or *framfærslumenn*) (see Gerhold 2002: 72–80 and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008: 237–240). This distinction is addressed rather bluntly in Þórarinn’s answer to Bjarni: “En svá eru heit yður hofðingja, þá er þér vilið fróa manninn eptir slíka atburði, at þat er mánaðarfró, en þá erum vér virðir eptir þat sem aðrir framfærslumenn” (*PStang*: 77; “But the promises of you chieftains are such, when you want to relieve a man after such an event, that it is only a month’s relief; then after that we are treated like other paupers”).

According to Heinrich Heinrichs (1966: 168), there lies a potential tragedy in the fact that Bjarni and Porsteinn, so well suited to each other, were brought to fight one another by external circumstances and the whettings of others. Thus, even without the two being related, the *þáttr* borrows the dramatic effect of the duel between kinsmen in heroic and epic poetry, though it results not in the death of one of the men but in a lord-retainer relationship, in which the biological father is replaced with a spiritual one in the form of a Christian lord (see Rowe/Harris 2005: 471–472).

## Ambivalences

Rather than following Ármann Jakobsson (2005: 65–66) in relating the structure of the *þáttr* to the Kronos myth, with Þórarinn ‘devouring’ his son Porsteinn, albeit without regurgitating him again, one might focus on the centrepiece of the *þáttr*, namely the single combat between Bjarni and Porsteinn and the resulting lord–retainer relationship, which aligns the *þáttr* with the narrative pattern of a hero winning a companion after having

fought him. Yet there is more to it than that, as father-son-relations are played out on different levels: the concrete family relation between Þórarinn and Þorsteinn; the social roles and responsibilities implied by caring for the old and other *ómagar*; the lord-retainer or *pater familias* relationship; and the mostly implicit but ultimately explicit relation to the heavenly Father.

The logic of vengeance is ultimately overcome by interpretative narrations of the events and motivations, and Þórarinn's just punishment – as Bjarni says, “Nú mun at maklgleika fara með okkr” (*PStang*: 77; “Now it will turn out between us two as serves you right”) – is triggered by his failing a test, consisting of Bjarni lying about the outcome of the fight and his offering future care for old Þórarinn in order to observe his reaction. Bjarni asks permission from Þorsteinn to see his father and tell him what he wants; Þorsteinn does not object, but adds a warning: “far þó varliga” (*PStang*: 77; “do be careful”). Bjarni announces the killing of Þorsteinn and, when asked about the fight, confirms that Þorsteinn fought in a more manly way than anyone else: “Enganmann ætla ek snarligra verit hafa í vápnaskipti en Þorstein, son þinn” (*PStang*: 77; “I know no man to have fought more keenly in an exchange of weapons than Þorsteinn, your son”). While Þórarinn is punished by being left behind in Sunnudalr, Þorsteinn is released from the duty of taking care of his biological father and enters Bjarni's service.

The *þátr*, in spite of its straightforward feud logic, is laden with ambivalences. Seen not to be telling the truth are not only Þórarinn in his last scene, but also those portrayed positively as working toward the most peaceful resolution possible: Bjarni, who claims Þorsteinn is dead; Þorsteinn, who claims that the weapons were a gift from his father; and the servant woman, who claims that she forgot about Þorsteinn's message. Yet Þórðr and the two loudmouths seem to hit the nail on the head in their remarks. Þórðr rejects the offer of a settlement of the conflict, which would mean defining the staff blow as an accident and paying compensation, and instead replies provocatively: “Ef þú átt tvá hváptana, þá bregð þú tungunni sitt sinn í hvárn ok kalla í qðrum váðaverk, ef þú vilt, en í qðrum kalla þú alvørðu” (*PStang*: 71; “If you have two cheeks, then stick your tongue in each of them and call it ‘accident’ in one, if you like, and in the other call it ‘intention’”). These words by Þórðr relate to a proverb also found in *Alexanders saga*, *Máguss saga jarls*, and *Porsteins saga Vikingssonar*. This sentence can be seen as programmatic in several ways: it points to the difference between what things are and what they are called (the verb “kalla” is used twice); it places focus on alternative ways of looking at the same thing; it emphasises the active role and intentions of someone labelling a thing (“ef þú vilt”); and it thus provides a meta-commentary on the social technique of doing things with words.

Þórðr might be arrogant, as stated when he is introduced into the narrative (see *PStang*: 69), but he describes quite precisely what Þorsteinn is trying to do. The arbitrary play of signs is used to negotiate a peaceful solution. Those driven by good intentions, who actively shape reality through interpretation, through labelling, and at times through remaining silent, finally win over those speaking the truth or what they perceive as such, but without caring for the consequences. Þorsteinn's warning that Þórarinn should say only as much as would not seem to him later to have been excessive – “Mæl þú þat eitt um nú, faðir, [...] er þér þykkir eigi ofmælt síðar” (*PStang*: 70; “Say only that now, father, [...] which would later not seem to you to have been too much to say”) – like Bjarni's words to his wife Rannveig (*PStang*: 74) and the anonymous bystander's comment “Slikt er verr mælt en þagat”

(*PStang*: 72; “Such a thing is worse said than unsaid”) – do not address the truth of what is said, but rather the consequences of the speech act.

As for the *þátr* as a literary work, Þórðr’s mocking words may be read as a meta-poetic comment. The *þátr* shows the reader or listener not only how such a conflict can be defused by adopting an active role in the interpretation of events and signs, but also how a narrative built on the one-directional logic of feud actions and steps within negotiations, in the sense of Miller’s (1990) interpretation, at the same time can employ a multitude of literary allusions that counteract such an interpretation, such as heroic narrative patterns, ideals of manly behaviour, the workings of fate resulting in the tragic fight between kinsmen or kindred souls, and perhaps even the agency of things in the form of Þórarinn’s weapons.

These literary relations challenge the logic of the rational conflict management described in detail by Miller, with its legal, social, and economic aspects, because they contaminate it with different sets of values. The story starts with an old, blind, impoverished Viking – “Maðr hét Þórarinn” (see *PStang*: 69; “There was a man called Þórarinn”); it ends with a longer section on the many descendants, members of the ruling class, of Bjarni, the good Christian and ideal chieftain (see Hermann Pálsson 1971: 75–76). We are told that “Bjarni varð kynsæll maðr [...] Ok hefir margt hofðingsmanna frá þeim komit” (*PStang*: 78–79; “Bjarni became a man blessed with many descendants [...] And many of the chieftains have come from among them”), the latter claim being directly followed by the concluding sentence: “Ok lýkr þar at segja frá Þorsteini stangarhöggi” (*PStang*: 79; “And there [we] stop telling of Þorsteinn stangarhoggr”). Peace is restored; Bjarni is the uncontested and highly respected chieftain of the region; the potential and energy of the Viking descendant and *heljarmaðr* Þorsteinn is tamed and channelled into the manpower of the *familia* at Hof; and the eponymous hero is out of his saga. And yet this hero keeps intriguing us with his kaleidoscope of a story, in which the elements show new patterns with each fresh reading.

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