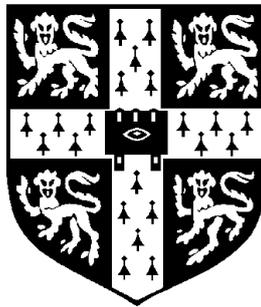


E. C. QUIGGIN MEMORIAL LECTURES 21

WILLIAM IAN MILLER

**Of cursing, prophesying, advising, and
anxieties of causation:
Laxdæla saga ch. 75 and beyond**



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Edmund Crosby Quiggin (1875-1920) was the first teacher of Celtic in the University of Cambridge, as well as being a Germanist. His extraordinarily comprehensive vision of Celtic studies offered an integrated approach to the subject: his combination of philological, literary, and historical approaches paralleled those which his older contemporary, H. M. Chadwick, had already demonstrated in his studies of Anglo-Saxon England and which the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic continues to seek to emulate. The Department has wished to commemorate Dr Quiggin's contribution by establishing in his name, and with the support of his family, an annual lecture and a series of pamphlets. The focus initially was on the sources for Mediaeval Gaelic History. Since 2006 the Quiggin Memorial Lecture is on any aspect of Celtic and/or Germanic textual culture taught in the Department.

Of cursing, prophesying, advising, and anxieties of causation:
Laxdæla saga ch. 75 and beyond

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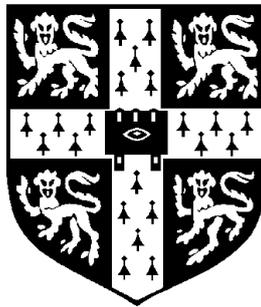
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WILLIAM IAN MILLER

It is hardly contentious that formal curses and blessings are prayers. ‘God damn you’ no less one than ‘God bless you’, the former probably being the most frequent prayer offered up in English, with not even the ‘Bless you’ generated by a sneeze sufficient to close the gap. Nor is it always easy to tell the difference between a curse and a blessing. So twinned are they that the translators of the Hebrew bible, even the earliest glosses, trouble themselves about how to understand Job’s wife;² did she tell Job to bless God and die, or to curse God and die? The Hebrew uses the standard word for ‘bless’, which is derived from the word for ‘knee’, indicating to bend the knee, to bow down, or more aptly with nary an iota of orientализing, to grovel, an act that subsumes petition, propitiation, humiliation, and even on occasion threat, all in one. Our word ‘bless’ is bloodier, it being etymologically related to blood more readily observable in OE *blédsian*. But whether it is to bend the knee or slit carotid arteries,³ both are acts meant to propitiate a Force or a God you fear can, if it or He cared to, control your future: the default setting being ‘bleak’.⁴

Being cursed is pretty much unambivalently a bad thing, but being blessed is not unambivalently a good thing. Think for a moment how even educated largely rational souls like yourselves might worry about drawing too frequently on your finite store of good luck. Might you not find that a run of good luck makes you rather more nervous than a run of bad luck about what the future holds in

¹ I have retained the style in which I presented this to the live audience in Cambridge. Many of the footnotes were meant to be asides and digressions if I was not running over respectable time limits, so they too might deviate from the strict norms of tone for a journal article. I have kept the piece as it was presented live.

² Job 2.9. See also Job 1.5 where b-r-kh as ‘bless’ makes much harder sense than it does in 2.9. Most English translations favor ‘curse’ (e.g. the Authorized Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and more; the Jewish Publication Society has ‘blaspheme’); Douay-Rheims has ‘bless’. Brown-Driver-Briggs, s. v. b-r-kh 5, list seven instances where they gloss ‘curse’ of which four are in Job among hundreds of occurrences of b-r-kh in its proper sense of ‘bless’.

³ *Blédisan* may also share kinship with Old Norse *blót*, sacrifice; see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. bless, v.1.

⁴ You can love as well as fear that Force too, but with the Deity as an object of love it is not clear that Fearing and Loving God can operate independently of each other and the Hebrew bible quite aptly does not recognize much difference between the two when it comes to loving/fearing God. Jacob names God the ‘Fear of Isaac’ in Gen. 31.42.

store?⁵ Has the day quite passed when such as we might not resort to some small gestures of apotropaic magic to ward off a not improbable misfortune as when someone relays good news to us, almost too good to be true, the very proverbial quality of ‘too good to be true’ capturing quite accurately the anxiety I am describing? Many cultures think it as important to provide defenses against occurrences of good fortune as against bad, for good luck is the very manufactory of bad luck. I cannot tell you how worn my knuckles are by knocking on wood for ‘earning’ a law professor’s salary teaching Icelandic sagas. I fear it might all be a setup, even though I have nearly made it home safely having reached 74, suffering only the usual loss of physical and mental acuity that comes with old age, which is enough of a curse in itself. Some few of you might be familiar with the Yiddish apotropaic mantra, one-third German two-thirds Hebrew—*keinahora* (meaning ‘no evil eye’)—said to defend yourself against compliments and good wishes. Should someone praise the beauty of your child or her intelligence, congratulate you on your newborn baby, which the wise congratulator knows only to whisper in the mother’s ear, and even then the newly delivered mother hurries to ward off the evil eye borne by the good wishes. Haven’t some of you worried whether watching or not watching your favorite football team will affect the outcome of the game? There is what I call a ‘narcissism of negativity’ in such beliefs, that the universe should care that much to screw little old you or me.⁶ Or that your mere wishes and hopes have such perverse causal powers. It is thus hardly surprising that saga characters worry about prophecy and dreams or simple predictions. It is not any more medieval of them than it is of you or me.

Curses and blessings are often bound together in a kind of zero-sum game, for your blessing is a curse to your enemy and vice versa.⁷ Many of the psalms⁸—about a third of them are openly curse prayers—equate your blessing with the discomfiture of your enemies and your being cursed with their triumphant laughter at your expense. When Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* is the first woman to learn the psalter in Iceland she will find in that holy book more than enough warrant for not having to change her moral commitments one iota.⁹

⁵ Proverbs that advise one not to press one’s luck are standard in any culture I have any knowledge of: see *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ch. 38 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 96), where Skalla-Grímr advises his son Þórólfr not to go to Norway a second time after one successful trip: *en þat er mælt, er ýmsar verðr, ef margar ferr* (‘and that is said that many voyages yield rather different outcomes’).

⁶ I expand on these themes in the first two chapters of my *Outrageous Fortune*.

⁷ Or there are not enough blessings to go around as in the Jacob vs. Esau problem.

⁸ Especially Ps. 109, a perfect exemplar of the ancient Mesopotamian and particularly western Semitic genius for cursing.

⁹ Ármann Jakobsson wryly notes ‘it is not difficult to believe that [Guðrún] is worried about her salvation’, in his engaging ‘Laxdæla dreaming’, p. 46. Guðrún does not strike me as the type to second guess much of what we would think she might have to repent for, but there is no reason to doubt her piety in old age as long as we recognize that her piety is still quite fiercely

Curses need have no set formulae and can be voiced in any of several grammatical moods: imperative, subjunctive, optative (are not ‘to wish’ and ‘to hope’ two of the most frequent verbs used to curse—I sure hope you know what I mean or I will wish you all in...), and even declarative: ‘You’re finished.’ They might inhere in predictions, warnings, and threats, in counseling and ‘friendly advice’, all of which share considerable overlap with each other. Curses can thus inhere in any number of speech acts meant to deal with the future, but not just the future either, for they can, because they contain a prophetic element of which more in a moment, also work as reinterpretations and thus restructurings of the past, so that your present can take on an entirely different meaning from what your previous complacent interpretations of the past would have it understood to have been.¹⁰ A curse is a risk that simply lurks and inheres in everything in a world never quite disenchanted or remotely disenchantable, no matter what Weber said.

One domain, almost fully congruent with cursing and blessing, figures prominently in *Laxdæla saga*: prophecy. Prophecy, like cursing, is promiscuous in the forms it can take. It can be verbal, or it can inhere in omens, as in a stumble, the flight of birds, or, in the contours of a kidney, in an eclipse, the weather, and most assuredly, nearly everywhere, in dreams. But all these require interpretation and hence some explicatory words as accompaniment. And the role of the interpreter often ends up as a formal office, or some kind of proto-profession, like say a Freudian psychoanalyst no less than a biblical prophet or Babylonian omen reader. The interpreters, the prophets, are often forced to be messengers bearing bad tidings, which is exactly what, by the prophet Jeremiah’s theory, distinguishes a true prophet from a false one. A true one tells you what you don’t want to hear. He bears bad news and thus his truthfulness works manifestly against his self-interest, for he becomes the messenger bearing evil tidings and is thus asking to get whacked.¹¹ You bear good news you are rewarded, you bear bad news....?¹² So there are powerful inducements for fiddling with the message, and thus it would be unwise to trust completely the truth of good news, not only because it

competitive (of which more later), and her psalter can more than accommodate and even justify her score-settling.

¹⁰ On the prophetic mode working to restructure the past, see Southern, ‘Aspects of the European Tradition’, p. 49.

¹¹ Jer. 28.9: ‘The prophet which prophesieth of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the LORD hath truly sent him’. Prophets prophesying bad things can be trusted, but those prophesying peace can only be known to be true, ex post, if the future bears out their predictions.

¹² One might think that the better to sell the truth of his good news Jesus had to show he could die in its defense, and he made sure to leaven his own good news with dire prophecies of the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24.2, Mark 13.2) better to show himself a true prophet according to Jeremiah’s requirements.

may be too good to true, but that it has been purposely or unconsciously falsified by its bearer.¹³

When Guðrún turns blood-red at Gestr Oddleifsson's reading of four dreams she had asked him to interpret, that redness is not indicating maidenly blushing at hearing a prophecy of a lifetime of marital bleakness, three times a serial widow, and the first marriage leaving her a 17-year-old divorcée from a risible mate who is laughed out of the saga as a cuckold and crossdresser.¹⁴ Her redness surely, in part, marks the urge to lash out at the bearer of these tidings, which is what Gestr is. Is there a single emotion term that captures the combination of anger, disappointment, self-defense, and despair that motivates blaming the messenger, not for ruining your day, but for your belief that he is part of the causal mechanism that will be responsible for the dire events he foretells? Especially in this case, for Gestr never gets it wrong; he is as close to an official interpreter of dreams and omens as we get in the saga-world in which he bears the title of a true prophet.¹⁵

But Guðrún's show of redness is bad manners and thus needs some excusing, for Gestr is a kinsman and a family friend¹⁶ and, besides, Guðrún asked him to read these dreams and told him up front that though others had not interpreted them to her liking, she did not mean by saying that to pressure him into whitewashing his interpretation.¹⁷ In effect, she apologizes for her reddening by immediately absolving Gestr of any responsibility for the darkness of the prophecies he just gave her (prophecy, *spá*, is Guðrún's word).¹⁸ She takes the blame on herself for having not provided better dream material and renews an invitation for Gestr to stay the night, to make sure he understands that she bears him no hard feelings.¹⁹ Notice that Guðrún is not a prophet for having prophetic dreams, but Gestr is one for knowing how to read them. The interpretation of the dream becomes a *spá*.

¹³ See the extraordinary text recording the petition of an interpreter of omens, a hapless prophet in the Neo-Assyrian period, imprisoned for faults in his omen reading, vowing to improve or find his king a bevy of able substitutes, if he is released (*Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project*). Thanks to Eva Miller for calling my attention to this text.

¹⁴ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 33 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 88-91). How to treat Old Norse names in English is always vexing. I have kept the nominative masculine endings in oblique cases as preferable to suffering the anxiety of the names looking naked where the nominative would have been appropriate were I to have dropped the endings.

¹⁵ On the limits of Njáll's ability to predict and read the future see my 'Why is your axe bloody?', pp. 62-65, 68-69, 71-72, 96, 100, 131, 167, 217, 228-229.

¹⁶ Guðrún is Gestr's first cousin twice removed.

¹⁷ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 33 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 88): 'Dreymt hefir mik margt í vetur ... en engi maðr hefir þá svá ráðit, at mér líki, ok bið ek þó eigi þess, at þeir sé í vil ráðnir.'

¹⁸ She uses the verbal form of *spá*.

¹⁹ See Sayers, 'The Honor of Guðlaugr Snorrason', who convincingly reads Guðlaugr's blood-red complexion in *Heiðarvíga saga* ch. 12 as a sign of deep embarrassment, disputing a reading that saw it as a sign of holy illumination. Guðrún is not *rauðr sem blóð* as Guðlaugr is but *dreyrrauð*.

Two chapters earlier Óláfr the Peacock had a disturbing dream; he shops around for a reassuring interpretation, and when none is forthcoming, he decides to believe those who said it was a false dream.²⁰ What solace Óláfr took in such wishful thinking we cannot know for sure, but Óláfr is not as given to complacent self-deception as most of us are, for he remains nervous that bad things are homing in. And if dreams can be dismissed and thus discounted for not always, or even regularly, being true, or if true, properly interpreted, they must also be discounted for how truthful or accurate the dreamer is when recounting or remembering his dream. I bet more than a few of us have narrated dreams we never had, often in matters of courtship and clumsy seduction.²¹ Note that Óláfr did not ask Gestr to interpret his dream. That is a fairly good indication he really did not want to know what he feared it portended, unlike Guðrún, who wanted hard truth, even at the risk that adding Gestr's interpretation to the causal mix would lock in her future.

What a tricky world this is: those who believe in prophecy know that prophets, like dreams or their interpretations, can be false or true, bought and sold, but they also know that false prophets can get it right some time, and that true ones have every incentive not to tell the truth of their doom-laden prophecies, or get themselves killed as bearers of bad tidings. The discount rate is high enough that it is perfectly rational to ignore all prophecy. As a thought experiment, imagine Caesar not going to the forum on the Ides of March, when he must have already endured endless soothsayers issuing similar warnings for every Kalends, Nones, and Ides of each month. The heroic trope of the hero defying augury is not as willful or as stupid as it may seem, given the sheer amount of augury in the air that has to be ignored, or life would come to a halt. Yet another literary trope that makes perfect psychological sense and should not be dismissed as 'merely' literary.

Uncannily, almost eerily, interpreting dreams, giving advice or counsel, planning, foreseeing, devising, plotting, governing, making contracts, these overlapping types of future-managing activities and future-directed mental states

²⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 31 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 85): *Ólafi þótti mikils um vert drauminn ok segir vinum sínum, ok varð ekki ráðinn, svá at honum líki. Þeir þóttu honum best um tala er þat mæltu at þat væri draum-skrök, er fyrir hann hafði borit.* Notice that Guðrún also asked others to interpret her dreams before putting them to Gestr.

²¹ Ármann Jakobsson raises the issue of whether Guðrún is making up her dreams ('Laxdæla Dreaming', p. 40). This is hardly a silly question. Consider what Gísli, in his saga (chs. 13–14) might be doing when he withholds telling the content of his dreams that people can see he has had a couple of nights in a row, or was faking having, as he tosses and turns in his sleep. He doesn't tell his dreams but holds them in reserve and only tells them to indicate whom he suspects killed Vésteinn *after* he had been killed, and thus they serve not to postdict Vésteinn's murder but to *predict* who will be murdered in revenge for Vésteinn. The truly predictive part of Gísli's narration of his dreams, the threat of revenge, does not suffer from the postdictionism that characterizes so much prophecy. His brother Porkell certainly reads Gísli to be making a threat. Porkell could care less whether Gísli actually had those dreams or whether he is making them up. Either way the threat is understood.

all converge in one Old Norse lexeme: *ráða*, which also ominously extends its meanings to killing, to planning or plotting death, and, almost comically, to marriage and setting up a household. Cursed be the polysemousness of *ráða*, producing a myriad of homonyms for some of the most crucial and common activities we engage in.

We somehow think, or at least, *feel*, that all these various activities, from malign cursing to benign planning, even simple message-bearing, have causal power of varying probability, either positive, as when we make wise plans and carry them out, and the world obliges by confirming our prudence, or, negative, as when our best laid plans ‘gang aft agley’ when the universe simply doesn’t cooperate no matter how well-laid our plans were. Or is it that the grimly ironical universe makes the very well-laidness of our plans serve as the smirking vehicle of jinx, that it was the wise planning itself that screwed us?²² Is this not one of the main tropes of tragedy, and of comedy too?

In our contemporary English cursing the F word now basically functions as a contraction of ‘God damn’ as a kind of curse of first instance. Funny, is it not, that one might see it as a pious refusal to take God’s name in vain, or, in contrast, as an even more blasphemous turning him into a rapist, the implicature of ‘F you’ being a condensed ‘May God F you’, *fuck* merely having replaced *damn* when *damn* became old and impotent. ‘Fuck’ is ‘damn’ on Viagra.

Formal curses are mostly motivated by anger or frustration. Their real virtue is that they are therapeutic for the curser, and that therapeutic release is not merely a byproduct of cursing but also sometimes, along with the rage, part of its motivation.

All three—anger, frustration, and venting—help explain why formal cursing is characterized by hyperbole. The horrors of the curses in Deuteronomy ch. 28 are a test of the curser’s inventiveness, concluding with the ingenious curse of reducing your value to less than zero when you end up in a slave market with no one willing to buy you (or thus think it worthwhile for your kin to redeem you even should you be had for free).²³ If the hyperbole provides the horror in Deuteronomy, it enables the comedy in Sterne’s treatment of Bishop Ernulfus’s curse in *Tristram Shandy*.²⁴ But then hyperbole can function as an aspirational

²² The normal prudence of buying insurance is, in the economic literature, claimed to bring with it the ‘moral hazard’ of your decreased vigilance and increased carelessness because a good portion of your careless losses will be borne by other insureds rather than solely by yourself as was the case when you were uninsured.

²³ Note that the value of a slave is used as the measure to determine the value of free people in the Icelandic marriage market; *Grágás* (ed. Finsen, Ib, p. 35). Men no less than women had to measure up to the slave standard of value; see *Grágás* (ed. Finsen, Ib, pp. 21-22).

²⁴ Ernulf, Bishop of Rochester, d. 1124, surely did not think he was joking. He is dear to Anglo-Saxonists for his connection to the Textus Roffensis, the sole source of the earliest English laws; see Little, *Benedictine Maledictions*, pp. 1–8, and the interesting discussion in Little, ‘The Separation of Religious Curses’, p. 38, on Ernulfus’s curse’s use by English Protestants in the seventeenth century to show the crazed vengefulness of papism. Sterne is of course nesting his

dare; no need to go back to the ancient or modern Near East, we need only look to our 20th century, where no hyperbolic metaphor of extermination was not realized, drawing some to seek to re-realize it in the 21st by denying it took place in the 20th.

Hyperbole thus raises the issue of how much we mean our curses or exactly what we mean them to mean. This is what Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* takes on so cleverly. And Chaucer is anticipated by a century and a half in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 75 when Halldórr curses and threatens Þorsteinn Kuggason employing the prophetic mode:²⁵

'Something else will happen before I agree to something against my will,' said Halldórr. 'What will that be?' asked Þorsteinn. 'An axe will be buried in your head by the worst man possible, putting an end to your insolence and injustice.'

And then moments later Halldórr goes prophetic again to Þorkell Eyjólfsson when Þorkell says:

'I think you have given more than enough grounds, Halldórr, for forfeiting your land and getting nothing at all for it.' Halldórr replied, 'You'll be embracing the seaweed in Breidafjord before I'm forced to sell my land against my will.'

These will be the short texts I intend much of the rest of the talk to focus on; for now, I only want you to note that formally each of Halldórr's italicized speeches is a hyperbolic statement that occupies the terrain of prophecy and curse. Though in grammatical form these two curses are identical, one is wittily parodic the other is not. More on this soon.

Most all of us have damned a lot of people to hell, but with rare exception, do we actually *mean* for God to put them there, and even when I *do* mean to have Him put them there, I have to factor in that I do not even believe that there is such

hyperboles, the length of the curse itself playing havoc with what might work as an acceptable interpolation in the standard form of novel as it was then understood. Just how such over-the-top execrations are meant or not not meant is raised generally in glosses of Swift, Shaw, and Conrad in Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide*. We can reasonably worry about how serious Swift was: did he really mean rationalists to entertain the question that the eminently rational Houyhnhnms debated in their general assembly: 'whether the Yahoos should be exterminated from the face of the earth?' And going so far as to give good reasons for doing so, and unnerving the reader by convincing her or him of the reasonableness of the idea?

²⁵ I mostly follow Hermann Pálsson's translation, still, to my mind, the best translator of the sagas, but I make some small changes that I do not note; see Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson, transl., *Laxdæla Saga*.

a place, though this world has many worthy simulacra.²⁶ But when I damn you to hell I do not mean it either. I want something bad to happen to you of some modest duration of not so modest intensity.

Hostile or loving intentions have various half-lives depending on complex matters of context. Some intentions (and meanings) lock themselves in, some are gone in less than a second. As another thought experiment, consider saying to your misbehaving kid ‘don’t do that and I mean it’. The ‘I mean it’ is utterly otiose since the order not to do X is obviously meant. But even with that ‘and I mean it’ you are not obeyed, so you reissue the order and say ‘and I *really* mean it’. Just what does ‘really’ mean in that sentence? Or what does ‘mean’ mean in both sentences for that matter? The ‘really’ is hyperbolic in one sense, but it shows also that hyperbole can function without irony as a softener, not as an intensifier at all, because it signals impotence and defeat, self-parodying as it might be. The kid knows she is home-free and that, at best, you have vented some anger.

An issue related to formal cursing, formal prophecy, indeed to Austinian performatives in general, is when an utterance might still retain its performative power when said without Austin’s felicity conditions. Does the mere saying have a power independent of the speaker’s intention? It turns out that Halldórr’s second curse, the one directed to Þorkell, raises this issue, the nuance to be added later. Certain expressions retain their magic, and inverted commas are without effect to cancel the power. The mere saying of the tetragrammaton is said to be lethal no matter what: even adding the vowel points when writing it in Hebrew might get you zapped.²⁷

One last general matter before we get to the particular texts: self-cursing, that is of combining two distinct selves in one body, both as curser and cursed, a splitting not unlike Oðin sacrificing himself to himself.²⁸ These may arise from speech acts intended to be heard by others or said silently to oneself (yes, in this context, these silent utterances count as *speech* acts)—thus the anathemas or penalty clauses that accompany vows, or oaths, the standard stuff of contracts for the past 6,000 years: May God cut out my tongue if I do not speak truth, or cross my heart and hope to die, or a pound of flesh if I do not buy back my bond by a year and a day next. Or the very frequent case of self-damning as when you might mutter, or say silently to yourself: God damn you, Miller, you stupid ass. If apotropaic magical rituals allowed you to defend yourself against the implicit or

²⁶ God is understood to be there, by necessary implication, when you decide to finesse the issue of taking his name in vain by shortening the utterance to ‘go to hell’. You are hardly understood to be claiming for yourself the divine power to damn.

²⁷ Lev. 24.10ff, but which Philo extends beyond overt blasphemy and taking the Name in vain to include anyone who should merely *say* the Name without the privilege of saying it, a privilege, it appears, only belonged to the high priest, and then only once a year: ‘If any one, I do not say should blaspheme against the Lord of men and gods, but should even dare to utter his name unseasonably, let him expect the penalty of death’; *Life of Moses* II.38 (206), Philo, *On Abraham* ... (transl. F. H. Colson, p. 551).

²⁸ *Hávamál*, st. 138 (ed. Neckel and Kuhn, p. 40).

explicit curses of others, religions and legal systems develop procedures to cancel self-curses that regularly and often mandatorily accompanied vows. That is what the Yom Kippur Kol Nidre prayer means to do in Judaism, and Dante claims that any vow and accompanying curse can be bought back by paying damages at the rate of 6:4 (Par. 5.58-60).²⁹

I need to burden you with some details crucial to understanding the action which will give access to the ironies that arise from the large overlap among dreams, predictions, threats, curses, and mere angry imprecation in the events in ch. 75. The *dramatis personae* are Þorkell Eyjólfsson and his first cousin Þorsteinn Kuggason on one side, and Halldórr Ólafsson, Óláfr the Peacock's son, on the other. At issue is the fine estate Hjarðarholt that Halldórr inherited, and which Þorsteinn wishes to buy; he thinks the time is propitious because Halldórr has just had to pay out a large settlement to put to rest claims arising from the killing of Guðrún's third husband twenty years earlier.³⁰ As part of that settlement Halldórr and his brothers agreed to pay any price the arbitrators set as long as their farms and chieftaincies were exempted. But that means that Halldórr is now very short on livestock, and Þorsteinn gives this as the reason why the time is right to make an offer for Hjarðarholt, which it is already clear from the limits put on the arbitrators' award that Halldórr values very highly.

Þorkell has been staying with his cousin Þorsteinn during Lent. In the preceding chapter (ch. 74), Þorkell had returned that autumn from Norway, where he had obtained wood for a church he intended to build at his, actually his wife's, farm. Þorkell, like all the Laxdale men in this saga, is held in unaccountably high esteem by the incumbent Norwegian rulers, this one Óláfr Háraldsson, who gives him the wood he needs for the church. Þorkell, however, angers the king by measuring the church King Óláfr himself was building in order to reproduce it in Iceland. Óláfr tells him—more properly *orders* him—to shorten each dimension by two ells; Óláfr notes that even so shortened Þorkell's church would still be the largest in Iceland. Þorkell refuses quite rudely—'take back your wood, then, if you think you've given too much and regret it'. This remarkable rudeness might tell us something about Óláfr's tone in making the order to shorten his measurements or about Þorkell's obtuseness, or a little of both. King Óláfr, none too pleased, offers up what is in part a reprimand but what soon morphs into what we might euphemistically call a prediction, a prophecy, said *allstilliga* (very calmly), the *all-* suggesting observable restraint, a style we readily associate with a certain kind of ominousness when someone makes a cool threat, when the very

²⁹ I have written about this more fully in my *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, pp. 77–79, where I suggested that the generous offer Hrafnkell makes to Þorbjörn, father of the shepherd, Einarr, whom Hrafnkell killed for violating his vow regarding riding Freyfaxi, probably reflected the price Hrafnkell could have offered Frey to free himself of the vow.

³⁰ It is the *aðalból*. Does it fall to Halldórr because he is understood to be the 'leader' (*mjök fyrir þeim bræðrum*) of the brothers, or is he thought to be the leader because Hjarðarholt fell to him? See *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 51–52 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 159–60).

restraint is itself felt as a threat. And the content of Óláfr's message does nothing to hide his anger, quite the contrary:

You are a notable man, Þorkell: but now you are getting above yourself, for it is sheer effrontery (*ofsi*) for a *bóndi*'s son to vie with us. It's not true I begrudge you the wood—if you are destined to build a church with it: for it will never be large enough to contain all your arrogance. But I have an inkling that people will have little benefit from this wood, and that you will be most unlikely to build anything with it at all.

Were Óláfr to have raised his voice saying this, his anger, its meanness, the ominousness, would be weakened. Óláfr is not just predicting as narrowly understood but is prophesying, that power rather ubiquitously distributed in the sagas but which manifestly belongs to Norwegian kings, especially when named Óláfr Tryggvason or Óláfr Haraldsson. Do not, Þorkell, get engaged in a piety contest with a king who is destined to be a saint. You will lose big time—the good saint will help make sure of that with a prediction, a barely sublimated curse.³¹

Make no mistake that the competition for piety was every bit as hard fought as the competition for honor, piety and honor being very much the same thing in certain contexts, and *Laxdæla saga* gives us two instances: Kjartan winning first place in Lenten fasting, the first to dry fast in Iceland, (a diet of fish, vegetables, fruit, with whale meat thrown in, classified as a fish for these purposes, mortification of the flesh lite)³², and yes, Kjartan draws crowds to ooh and ah, a motive, the glorying in adulation, hardly ever far from the surface for the Kjartan we know, and incredibly, some manage to love. Some recent critics ask us to read these gestures of piety straight; there are surely some instances in the sagas where

³¹ This scene has been piously misread by recent Christianizing critics to show Óláfr's saintly patience. Andrew Hamer, regarding Óláfr's speech just quoted, writes: 'These words should not be interpreted as the speech of a Viking ruler who is suffering from injured pride: when read against the Gospel text for Maundy Thursday they become a Christian warning' (*Njáls saga and its Christian Background*, p. 39). The saga does take care to put Þorkell's drowning on Maundy Thursday, and it is surely within reason to ask what that might be meant to mean, but that is hardly a guide as to how to read Óláfr's speech delivered some ten months before that lethal Maundy Thursday. Nothing in that speech gestures toward that day or its liturgy. But for the sake of argument let's concede that Óláfr's clear irritation is not a matter of Viking pride. Hamer quite simply ignores the pride manifested in holiness competitions, as well as the fact that it is impossible to read this passage without seeing Óláfr offended by the presumption of a mere Icelander daring to compete with him in the pious work of a church-building. Viking pride could more than find its match in the pride driving Christian saintly competitive piety. Keneva Kunz is also afraid to offend the future saint by rendering (laundering?) *allstilliga* as 'said in a pacifying tone' in her Penguin translation (*The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, p. 165). Much better is Siân Grønlie (*The Saint and the Saga Hero*, p. 234): 'very quietly', who thus captures the threateningness in Óláfr's restraint, even as she fully accepts Hamer's reading, which is rather surprising given her penetrating and nuanced treatment of church matters in her introduction to her *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga*. See further below n. 40. I treat holiness competition more fully in my *Outrageous Fortune*, ch. 3.

³² *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 45 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 138); *Grágás* (ed. Finsen, Ia, pp. 32, 36).

we are meant to take piety straight, but it is risky to do so in a genre so given to layered irony, wit, and ambiguity, especially this saga or *Njáls saga*. Here the hedges are hard to ignore. We already noted Guðrún securing first place in the psalm-learning competition; even in old age she would yield precedence to no other woman and only takes up the game of competitive humility once she is too old to play the usual social and political game she was so good at. Piety provides a fertile ground for an old woman still unable to resist playing in some kind of honor game.

Porkell unloads the wood in the north and in the spring goes to collect it, staying with his cousin Þorsteinn Kuggason, whom he accompanies to Halldórr's to assist in Þorsteinn's attempt to purchase Halldórr's farm. They travel in a group of more than twenty.

Switch now to Halldórr, who sees them riding up and says to Beinir, an old reliable slave:

I know quite well what these kinsmen want: they're going to make me an offer for my land, and if I'm right, they will call me out for a talk. I presume they will seat themselves one on either side of me, and if they give me any trouble you must attack (*ráða*) Þorsteinn and I will take Þorkell ... I've also sent word to the neighboring farms for men ...

Everything plays out as Halldórr predicts, but this prediction functions purely as prediction, a different kind of prolepsis than the ones offered up by prophecy and dreams; there is little prophetic uncanniness about it.³³ This is just what we expect from characters who understand the meaning of social action, given what can be read from who the parties are, when they decide to visit, what path they might take, how they are dressed, how large an accompaniment they bring, and so forth. This is not prescience but plain social knowledge.

Why can Halldórr know what this visit portends? Some two generations and sixty chapters earlier, the rights to Hjarðarholt, or at least to half of it, were in dispute. Hjarðarholt was assembled a generation earlier by Óláfr the Peacock from two near-lying farms. At issue was the title to Goddastaðir, one of the farms that came to make up Hjarðarholt. The legal issues involved would take me too far afield, but suffice it to say that the grandfather of the cousins Þorkell and Þorsteinn lost out on a claim of some merit to that property when he was outmaneuvered by Halldórr's grandfather.³⁴ The title to the Goddastaðir portion of Hjarðarholt is flawed, and Halldórr knows that these two people together represent the inheritors of that two-generation-old claim. What better time for those kinsmen to reassert that claim than when the present possessor is in a weakened financial condition

³³ Compare the frequent movie and television narrative topos in which a scene of planning morphs into the actual implementation of those plans.

³⁴ Höskuldr Dala-Kólsson vs. Þórðr Gellir; see *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 16 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 37-38).

and might be willing to sell if the price is right? Halldórr can tell, too, by the troop of more than twenty riding up, that the would-be purchasers are prepared to make an offer he cannot refuse, for that force is well in excess of the number needed to witness a sale.³⁵

Halldórr positions the old slave Beinir, armed with an axe, behind Þorsteinn, who is unaware that he is standing there. Þorsteinn makes reasonable offers, and Halldórr acts as if he is not unwilling to conclude a deal, but as time passes it becomes clear to the two cousins that Halldórr is stalling and is not going to sell. Halldórr finally says exactly that. Þorsteinn then gives him the typical saga two choices: either sell willingly (*með vild*)—‘willingly’ taking on a rather special sense here—or, since we have an advantage in numbers, we will force you to sell it. If such a Hobson’s choice is a saga trope, so is Halldórr’s response. He leaps up, and the brooch securing his cloak is ripped away because his interlocutors have been squeezed up tight on each side of him, sitting on his cloak. I requote the passage that so cleverly deals with the pragmatics of cursing:

‘Something else will happen before I agree to something against my will,’ said Halldórr.

‘What will that be?’ asked Þorsteinn.

‘An axe will be buried in your head by the worst man possible, putting an end to your insolence and injustice.’

Þorkell responded, ‘That is evilly prophesied (*spát*), and we trust it won’t come true. And now I think you have given more than enough grounds, Halldórr, for forfeiting your land and getting nothing at all for it.’

Halldórr replied, ‘You will be embracing the seaweed in Breidafjord before I’m forced to sell my land against my will.’

Halldórr, his reinforcements having arrived, hence his dragging out the negotiations, walks away. Þorsteinn wants to attack him, but Þorkell tells him not to: ‘For it would be an outrage during this [holy] season (*á slíkum tíðum*).’

As the cousins, disappointed, ride away, Þorsteinn asks Þorkell why he was reluctant to attack Halldórr. Þorkell replies:

Didn’t you see Beinir standing behind you with his axe raised? ... [I]t was a very dangerous situation, for he would have driven the axe into your head as soon as I made a move of any kind.

³⁵ This is hardly the faceless market of today. In the saga world, except perhaps at those ad hoc markets where a Norwegian ship puts in, buyers and sellers and even the goods have histories that often add costs to a transaction. Hjarðarholt certainly has a history, it being a good part of the actual substance of *Laxdæla saga*; and at least half of Hjarðarholt is cursed by one of its former owners, Hrappr, and the other half has a flawed title which Þorsteinn and Þorkell mean to reassert. If the curse operates in the realm of the uncanny for the Hrapprstaðir half of the farm, the flaw in the Goddastaðir part is not uncanny at all, just a reasonable claim that still is attached to half the soil of Hjarðarholt.

Given the matters I raised to begin this talk, you can see what I find worthy of consideration. Halldórr issues two curses mobilizing the prophetic form, one for Þorsteinn, one for Þorkell, each condemning them to death should he be forced to sell his farm. But one prophecy is completely rigged, a parody of a prophecy. It has moved fully into the category of threat, a threat merely dressed in a prophecy costume. Yes, evil prophecies always share DNA with threats, but the threatening aspect of a dire prophecy is always subject to a large discount rate.

Three discounts apply. One: the time between utterance and fulfillment. This might take decades, as when the accursed dies thirty years later falling off his horse; sometimes it occurs generations later; for some people, the wait is more than two millennia. The second: whether the prophecy is true or false, and sometimes that is very hard to discern, given the generous allotment of time granted for it to come to fruition. The third discount features as the substance of the Jonah story, to Jonah's great annoyance: that the threatened party fulfills an ameliorating condition of penance as did the people of Nineveh. But Halldórr's prophecy is 99% certain. I would say 100%, but then Beinir could, I suppose, suffer a heart attack before he delivered the axe blow or refuse to follow his script. This prophecy has no prayer-like tinge to it at all. One nod from Halldórr and Þorsteinn is dead meat. It is a faux curse, a faux prophecy, even though it adopts the standard formal properties of a prophetic curse, but the falseness is hidden from the target of it. It is meant with utter literalness, the usual hyperbole in this case being faux hyperbole, but matching perfectly the hyperbolic style of a common cursing expletive. Beinir, not named in the curse, not even called a slave, is recast in a negative hyperbolic superlative: 'the worst man possible'. To die at the hands of such would be a most shameful death.³⁶

The second curse, directed to Þorkell—that he will be embracing the seaweed in Breidafjörð—is no different from a 'You'll burn in hell before I sell' and thus not meant to drown him but meant to employ the hyperbolic style of a conventional formal curse as a way of making his refusal to sell and his anger as emphatic as he can make it. Yet this hyperbole, meant to be read only as a hyperbolic venting, becomes literally true, though literally unmeant (let's not be fussy of the 'literally': the metaphor of hugging seaweed means nothing more nor less than drowning).³⁷

³⁶ Compare, for instance, the threat a nasty slave named Bursti makes to kill Hákon Sigurðsson, later Jarl, with a dung fork, the irony being that years later as jarl he would die by a slave slitting his throat. Bursti's threat seems to figure uncannily as part of the causal mechanism that produces Hákon's shameful death. See *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, chs. 5 and 21 (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, pp. 142 and 202).

³⁷ As some pragmatic linguists point out, pure literalism is a near impossibility, it always requiring some disambiguation by explicature or implicature, and there are no sharp lines dividing literal, loose, and figurative usages; see Wilson and Sperber, *Meaning and Relevance*, especially chs. 1 and 3. I am reminded of a joke a colleague told me: Q: Can you tell me the difference between semantics and pragmatics? A: Yes, I can.

Porkell, who sees perfectly well that the first curse directed at his cousin is a frighteningly credible threat, calls it a prophecy, playing along with the form rather than what he knows is the actual pragmatics of the speech act. His reason is partly practical. He wants to keep Þorsteinn from making any sudden move by letting him believe it is your standard not fully meant hyperbolic expletive. Partly Porkell's calling it a prophecy may be apotropaic, hoping to subject it to the same discount rates that apply to real prophecies.

Halldórr's rigged curse adds another layer of irony. Cursing is a weapon mostly the weak are reduced to. So much cursing is classically a call to God or the gods by the weak praying for revenge for wrongs the strong have done to them for which they are without practical remedy.³⁸ Halldórr's curses thus position himself as the weaker party, the party suffering an injustice, but as regards Þorsteinn, he holds all the cards.

As I noted, prophecies are subject in the real world, if not in *Laxdæla saga*, to a substantial discount rate. Most are false or by some apotropaic ritual can be defended against. They are often conditional, with opt-out clauses. In this case, and with some irony, the magic used to save Þorsteinn's skin is an invocation of the holy season, not cynically invoked, but more as Haki Antonsson sees it, 'a somewhat calculating pretext'.³⁹ Piety can be mobilized for all kinds of purposes. But before we blame Porkell, as some recent Christianizing critics are wont to do, for his sin of pride, for his bearding of the holy blissful martyr Óláfr, and condemn him either to hell forever or purgatory for some indefinite period, it surely cannot be because he saves his cousin's life by invoking the sacred peace of the holy season.⁴⁰

³⁸ In the Hebrew bible the crying out unto the Lord, nearly invariably takes the form of cursing; these are the cries of weak victims, particularly victims of injustice perpetrated by the strong; see Ben-Dov, 'The Poor's Curse'. It is that crying out, in cry after cry, that is captured so chillingly in that most powerful of poems:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

³⁹ Haki Antonsson, *Damnation and Salvation*, p. 163. Even Haki's formulation might be too harsh. There is no indication that the ambitious would-be church-builder Þorkell is not a believer; he is not invoking a holiness he does not himself accept. The 'pretext' is not improperly motivated, even if not perfectly motivated. For uncompromising cynicism, recall Böðvarr Ásbjarnarson in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, ch. 16 (ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, pp. 32–33), even if Böðvarr is also saving lives by his invocation of a holy day, because Böðvarr, with self-delighting blasphemy, makes sure we know how little he is committed to any pieties, except when they can be mobilized for tactical purposes. See also Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Heaven Is a Place on Earth', pp. 13–14, discussing well-known examples of honoring or not heeding the peace of holy days.

⁴⁰ See Hamer, *Njáls saga and its Christian Background*, pp. 37–39. Both Grønlie and Haki are very much influenced by Hamer's way of looking at the sagas. Sometimes this involves hunting down water imagery that can mean either X or –X, damnation or salvific baptismal purification,

Now the second curse, this one is not parodic or rigged, or at least not rigged in any way that Halldórr could be aware of. Yet that curse is surely also over-determined, almost as much as if had been overtly rigged, for it is preceded by three prophecies which seem magically to provide Halldórr with this hyperbolic curse's imagery, as if a demonic muse were using him as a mouthpiece. There is no reason for Þorkell, who can see exactly what is up with the faux curse directed at cousin Þorsteinn, to read much of anything prophetic in the one directed at him. But oh the ironies. This one, to reiterate, comes true, *and the speaker does not intend that it should!*

Return to the matter of 'meaning it' for the 'performativeness' of the speech act to work. To what extent do the words of Halldórr's curse have to be meant to have them become true? Halldórr in no way means for Þorkell to embrace the

depending on whom you want to reward or damn, though it is not just the critics but the sources themselves that make water play both sides of the salvific fence. Even Grønlie, more aware of ambiguities than is Hamer, damns poor Þorkell for his pride: 'St Óláfr's friendship with Þorkell cannot save him from the consequences of his pride' (*The Saint and the Saga Hero*, p. 236). But then what were the nine men who drowned with the sinfully prideful Þorkell guilty of? They had not dared to compete with King Óláfr in a holiness contest. It is hard not to see a kind of ungenerous Sunday-school moralism in this kind of criticism, hardly less excusable than the all-too-usual disproportional punitiveness of prideful saints and Deities. Hamer has Þorkell die not only because he is 'guilty of pride' but also, partly, because he 'is never seen to enter any church' (*Njáls saga and its Christian Background*, p. 39). Imagine what would happen to the masterful pacing of most of the sagas if we had to follow every important character to Mass. Þorkell is indeed ambitious, and he is foolish for engaging in a kind of *imitatio Olavi*, but alas he is merely an Icelander and not the brightest of guys, even if Ari Þorgilsson is not averse to claiming him as his great-great-grandfather. He lacks the obvious social knowledge that should prevent him from bearding a famously tetchy King. His sin is less of pride than of stupidity, manifested also when he insists on setting sail from Þorsteinn's in bad weather. *Mea culpa*: Hamer et al. have driven me to the sin of querulousness, but I have one more nit to pick. He argues that the *Laxdæla* author Christianized Þorkell's drowning by having it occur on Maundy Thursday, which to Hamer means that instead of ferrying wood to build a bigger church than Óláfr's he should have been following Christ's example of washing his disciples' feet (*Njáls saga and its Christian Background*, p. 38). Water imagery again. Christ and the Pope can wash feet on Maundy Thursday without suffering any shame or dishonor, quite the contrary. They are understood to be stooping (to conquer), a ritualized act by the high to play at faux humility for the nonce, as Óláfr the Peacock does in a subtler way when he offers to foster Þorleikr's son Bolli, for always the lesser man fosters the child of the greater. Washing feet once a year is a gesture confirming and ratifying the secure superiority that the ritual is in fact constituting. Imagine the presumption of, say, an average farmer, or you or me, if any of us were to dare to wash the feet of a fellow churchgoer or the cleaning staff on Maundy Thursday. Would we not then run afoul of Jesus's condemnation of the ostentatiously pious (Matt. 6.5)? Not even Þorkell Eyjólfsson would be so arrogant. It may be of some interest that the Gulathing law §269 treats Maundy Thursday rather secularly in one important context as the day appointed to pay to redeem contested odal land (*Norges Gamle Love*, ed. Keyser and Munch, p. 90). It is sometimes necessary to remember that 'redeem' is first a mercantile term and takes on its holier meanings by extension of its root sense. Maundy Thursday could properly accommodate very different sorts of social and legal action.

seaweed in Breidafjord—he is just employing hyperbole to register his adamance about not selling his farm. Halldórr's curse works independently of his meaning it. But he has been given a power he does not know he wields. Indeed, had he known Þorkell would drown in a few days, fulfilling his prophecy, he would have wanted to recast it, because now the condition he thought put the likelihood of his selling Hjarðarholt at near zero has been met, much against his interests.⁴¹

But this is really not a pure case of the words being able to exert their magic independently of the speaker's intended meaning. There are those three earlier prophetic utterances that have already met the felicity conditions for prophesying Þorkell's doom: 1) the fourth dream of Guðrún's that condemns her fourth husband to drown in Hvammsfjord; 2) a dream of Þorkell's before he set out for Norway in which he dreamt his beard covered Breidafjord, with contrasting interpretations of it, one offered by himself (a favorable omen regarding the future reach of his authority) and one by his wife Guðrún (a negative omen that tracks her knowledge of Gestr's interpretation of her dream two decades earlier, that he will end up *in* Breidafjord). One might wonder how much Schadenfreude motivates Guðrún's caring to contradict her husband's self-serving interpretation with her ratification of a prophetic curse only she is privy to.

But if we rank these inputs, the most powerful actualizing input to Halldórr's conditional curse is the third prophecy: King Óláfr's prediction regarding the uselessness of the wood he gifted for Þorkell's church. Óláfr's curse avoids focusing much on Þorkell, a mere *bóndi*'s son; it says nothing about his drowning or water; instead it makes the wood the primary object of the curse: the poison is in the gift, the very gift of wood that Þorkell rudely threw back in the king's face were any strings to be attached to it, instead ends up with something of a noose attached to it. Óláfr's is the only prophecy/curse/prediction of these that is actually 'meant'. For Óláfr voices his prediction fully consciously, not asleep in a dream where the dreamer is a passive vehicle for whomever is playing dream-master on that occasion, and significantly he eschews hyperbole, opting for understatement and indirection.

Maybe these portents are not to be understood as mere repetitions one of the other, mere reminders that an end is drawing nigh as so many Grendels to Heorot or trees to Dunsinane, but each raises different ironies and mordancies that speech act theory and linguistic pragmatics would formalize much later. The author's wit depends not only on the multiplicity of illocutionary forms a curse can take, from dreams with dire interpretations, to predictions from an angry prideful saint jealous that his acts of piety are to stand alone in first place in any holiness contest, to a purely emotional outburst from a man who does not want to

⁴¹ Note too that his curse is strangely one of self-binding, where instead of the anathema being directed at himself—may my hands wither if I should sell—he directs the self-binding anathema outward as an ever-so-remote condition that must occur before he will entertain the idea of selling.

sell his farm, but also on the gap between what we mean and what we say, and what others understand us to be saying.⁴²

Forty chapters earlier, a colloquy takes place between Óláfr the Peacock and his son Kjartan. Óláfr notices that Kjartan and Guðrún have been meeting frequently at the hot springs, and it is clear to everyone that they are drawn to one another:

On one occasion Óláfr spoke to Kjartan: ‘I don’t know why,’ he said, ‘something always troubles me (*hugstætt*, sticks in my mind) when you go over to Laugar and talk to Guðrún. It’s not because I don’t think Guðrún superior to all other women, and she is the only woman I look upon as an equal match for you, but I have an uneasy feeling (*hugboð*), but I do not want to make it a prophecy (*spá*), that we kin are not fated to have much luck in our dealings with the Laugar people.

Óláfr clearly has forebodings, which may be no more than the heebie-jeebies or inklings or uneasy feelings or qualms (notice how we grade this family of related internal states with a variety of terms marking varying degrees of seriousness and anxiety), but these kinds of disturbances of the spirit cannot always be ignored with impunity, for there is an insistent, near universal belief that such disturbances are telling us something. Even Horatio, the stoic, thinks it wise that Hamlet give heed to the foolery about his heart before the fencing match—‘If your mind dislike any thing, obey it’. But to give voice to these forebodings or inklings also has its dangers, and what Óláfr the Peacock vividly reveals is that he cares not to have his enunciation of his anxiety, his *hugboð*, become locked in as a *spá*. He wants to voice his misgivings as simple *advice* to go it slow with Guðrún.⁴³ A *spá*, clearly denominated as such, Óláfr believes, significantly augments the risks of conferring causal force on that foolery about his heart, even discounting for the error rate in prophecy. Recall his forum shopping for benign dream interpretations earlier. Óláfr is careful about his dealing with this uncanny domain. Though he cannot be sure a mere qualm will not also have malignant causal force, he does not want to increase the causal force it would take on if it became a prophecy.

Finally, consider mere advice, a *ráð*, morphing into a *spá*. This from *Njáls saga*. After his first batch of killings, Gunnar asks Njáll for some useful *ráð*: *Ráð þú mér heilræði nökkur*, that is, ‘Advise some helpful counsel for me’. Njáll answers with his famous counsel, not to kill twice in the same lineage, and if Gunnar should not avoid that, then to make sure to honor any settlement that good

⁴² But let me call myself back down to earth from such airy abstraction. Typical of the saga penchant for ambiguity, irony, and plausibility, we are given an alternative naturalistic explanation for Þorkell’s death; he, as I have said, is stubborn, impatient, and not very bright. Add to that Óláfr’s curse qua prediction and the other prophecies, and we get the same outcome, naturally (by drowning in a stormy sea) and preternaturally: a dead Þorkell.

⁴³ If it were anyone but the rather unbearably self-satisfied Kjartan, one might attribute his going abroad and not taking Guðrún with him as acting on his father’s advice.

men adjudge for the killing (ch. 55).⁴⁴ But twelve chapters later Mörðr refers to Njáll's counsel as a *spá*—*Njáll hefir spát Gunnari*.⁴⁵ What is *ráð* to one person can be *spá* to another. The membrane separating the categories is permeable, as we noted, and sometimes they are fully congruent, as in dream interpretation where reading, 'ráð-ing', IS 'spá-ing'. But Gunnarr and Njáll, like Óláfr, mean to keep this in the more mundane domains of *ráð*, though when such as Njáll gives a *ráð*, given his reputation as a talented predictor of the future, Mörðr is not quite lying to call it a *spá*. But he does so for rhetorical purposes that I need not go into here.⁴⁶

To conclude. I confess that I am in awe at the comic genius of ch. 75 with Halldórr's cursing of first Þorsteinn and then Þorkell, neither of them meant as curses, for one is rigged, and the other just a venting of steam. The first is full of focused intentionality, the other just an accidental finding of an image that magically linked up with prior prophecies he could know nothing about. This is rather sophisticated psycholinguistics, and I am not reading this into the text. The wit of ch. 75 did not come out of nowhere. How inspired it is to have put this grim comedic episode near the end of a saga that centers on a series of prophetic dreams qua curses, qua forebodings, with one telling scene we just discussed dealing expressly with the anxiety of avoiding the perlocutionary (damn Austin's impossibly pretentious labels) effects of future-oriented talk, a nervous attempt to keep the heebie-jeebies from becoming a *spá*. To engage in some hyperbole myself, if not to curse, let me suggest that our author anticipates not only Austin and Searle but also Gricean pragmatics to a tee. The wit of ch. 75 depends on it. Might it be that the preacher in Ecclesiastes was right when he said there is really nothing new under the sun, including that very statement, which was most assuredly proverbial wisdom in his own day?

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⁴⁴ Compare “‘Hvat *spáir* þú fyrir mér?’ segir Kári”, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 111 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 281), italics mine.

⁴⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 67 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 167).

⁴⁶ Mörðr is trying to induce the nogoodnik Þorgeirr Starkaðarson into setting up poor Þorgeirr Otkelsson. To sell the first Þorgeirr on the soundness of his plan Mörðr gives it the imprimatur of a *spá* made by Njáll. Mörðr will get his wishes satisfied no matter which Þorgeirr gets killed since Gunnarr has killed the fathers of both of them.

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