

The Man who Launched a Hundred Other Men

In the thirteenth century, an anonymous Icelandic writer wrote down the Saga of Burnt Njal, a story of manliness and revenge. It became arguably the most popular of the Icelandic Sagas. The central event, the burning of Njal and his sons, is revenge for the earlier killing of Hoskuld, Njal's adopted son, by Njal's blood sons. Hoskuld's wife Hildigunn fundamentally desires social status within the Icelandic world. When asked if she would marry Hoskuld, she replies that she will only marry anyone if he is a Godi. Hildigunn does not shed tears at Hoskuld's death, and manipulates Flosi, one of the most powerful chieftains in Iceland, to pledge to avenge Hoskuld's death with blood vengeance. Although there may be other motivations, many of Hildigunn's actions explicitly advance her status as an Icelandic woman. Most of her status comes from the status of her husband. Hildigunn works to increase Hoskuld's status in death by securing Flosi's support to avenge him outside the law. Hildigunn's gambit succeeds; Flosi spurns six hundred ounces of silver, higher than any other compensation, in order to avenge Hoskuld's killing by blood.

Hoskuld is the son of Thrain, who Njal's son Skarphedin kills. Njal adopts Hoskuld in an effort to avoid a blood feud. Once Hoskuld comes of age, Njal sets off to find a wife for him. Seeking to tie his family further to the Sigfussons in

order to prevent conflict, he suggests that Hoskuld marry Flosi's brother's daughter Hildigunn. Although at first Flosi is worried about the “precipitous” relationship between Njal and Hoskuld, he passes Njal's offer on to Hildigunn (97). When Flosi asks, Hildigunn cites Flosi's promise not to marry her to anybody who was not a godi (97). The saga author immediately shows that Hildigunn thinks about status first. Hildigunn wants to be a godi's wife, but she doesn't care which godi she's the wife of. In fact, once Njal gets Hoskuld a goddord, she readily consents to marry him, and they “got along well” the following year. No strife between them is ever mentioned, and we believe that Hildigunn has achieved the status she desires.

Hildigunn and Hoskuld live happily through the conversion, and reject Mord's attempts to cause strife between them and the Njalssons. The Njalssons are less steadfast, and kill Hoskuld at Mord's bidding. Once Hildigunn awakes to find Hoskuld gone, she feels foreboding and begins to search for Hoskuld's body. Upon finding it, she remarks of the killing: “A manly deed this would have been...if one man had done it”(112). She sheds no tears, and lingers little. Her first remark seeks to insult and emasculate the Njalssons for bringing such disproportionate force. At the same time, she acknowledges that she would consider a warrior manly if he could slay her husband on his own. Although this is a testament to her belief in Hoskuld's manliness, it suggests that she views her marriage as a status

relationship. She is emotionless even by saga standards, and seems to lament the loss of Hoskuld's status far more than the loss of Hoskuld himself. She immediately saves Hoskuld's bloody cloak, for she will have need of it in the days to come.

After Hoskuld's slaying, Flosi and his band rode around, gathering news. As soon as they return to Hoskuld's home, Hoskuld's wife Hildigunn prepares an elaborate feast for Flosi and his band of men, as if he were a lord. An elaborate feast is a statement of Flosi's importance, as well as Hildigunn's. When Hildigunn is elaborately preparing a rich feast for Flosi and his band of men, she is implicitly making a statement that Flosi is powerful enough to exact blood vengeance. Flosi realizes the implications of the gesture, saying that there's "no need to fix up the high seat for me, and no need to make fun of me." (116) The high seat that Flosi is referring to is the seat of a lord. Flosi sees that Hildigunn wants him to be a lord, in order to convince him that he has the power to take blood-vengeance. Flosi lets Hildigunn know that he realizes what she's doing, and tries to humble himself to avoid incurring the obligation.

Flosi's intuition serves him well. The first recorded words he hears from Hildigunn are: "What action can I expect from you for the slaying, and what support" (116). Hildigunn has shown without words that Hoskuld was an important and valuable man. She immediately and pragmatically moves to consolidate Flosi's

support. In response, Flosi pledges less than full support. He only promises to prosecute the case to the full extent of the law, or obtain an honorable settlement.

By pledging to prosecute the case to the full extent of the law, Flosi is denying Hildigunn blood vengeance. Flosi is familiar with feuds, and he knows that the pledge of vengeance that Hildigunn wants will lead to many deaths. Flosi wants to avoid promising vengeance, for his safety, and the safety of his men.

As soon as Hildigunn hears Flosi omit a pledge of blood vengeance, she questions his manliness in retaliation. First, Hildigunn compares Flosi's manliness to Hoskuld's: "Hoskuld would have extracted blood-vengeance if it were his duty to take action for you." (193). She then calls Flosi's two brothers manlier than him, saying that they killed a man for a lesser insult. Hildigunn's assertion that Hoskuld would have taken blood vengeance if he were alive is dubious at best, since Hoskuld remarkably peaceful. Hoskuld is in fact so peaceful that he does not fight it out with the Njalssons, and even asks God to forgive them (111). Since anybody who knew Hoskuld would have sincere doubts that he would ever take blood vengeance for anybody, Hildigunn's insult must not be a comment about Hoskuld. It must be an insult to Flosi's manhood. When Hildigunn calls Flosi's brothers manlier than he, she is trying to constrain him within honor culture. Flosi's brothers killed a man for insulting their father. For Flosi to let the killing of Hoskuld go unpunished

would be disgraceful. Anybody who was willing to take vengeance would be manlier, more respected, and more feared than Flosi, if he were to let matters stand as they are. It's Hildigunn's invocation of relative status which goads Flosi the most up to this point, but Flosi still does not promise his unqualified support to exact blood vengeance for Hoskuld. He seems willing to let his manliness be questioned, rather than join an all-out blood feud.

After calling other men manlier than Flosi, Hildigunn places Hoskuld's bloody cloak on Flosi. She charges him: "In the name of God and all good men I charge you, by all the powers of your Christ and by your courage and manliness, to avenge all the wounds which he received in dying- or else be an object of contempt to all men"(116) Here, Hildigunn makes explicit some of her earlier, subtler insults. She explicitly challenges Flosi's manliness, saying that either he will take blood vengeance for Hoskuld, or he is not a man, but a creature deserving of contempt. By saying "your Christ" instead of "Christ", Hildigunn separates her gods from Flosi's. She invokes the powers of Christ in favor of vengeance, implying that failing to exact vengeance will call into question Christ's manliness, as well as Flosi's. Hildigunn can hardly make any charge more strong than direct challenge to Flosi's manliness and the manliness of Flosi's gods. Her challenge makes a settlement seem unmanly, and vengeance the only option.

As soon as Flosi hear Hildigunn's challenge, he is furious. He calls Hildigunn "the worst monster" and charges her with "wanting to take the course that is the worst for us all", but he does not promise blood vengeance outright(116). He is furious because he is aware of how Hildigunn just constrained him. Because of her goading, Flosi will lose manliness, and lose status, if he does not avenge Hoskuld. This was Hildigunn's goal, and she used every weapon at her disposal to force Flosi to take vengeance. Flosi knows that killing the Njalssons will lead to many deaths. However, we will see that this dim prospect does not stop Flosi from eventually following the path that Hildigunn sets out for him, for Hildigunn has tied his honor to the retaliation in Hoskuld's name. Flosi's fury at Hildigunn is a measure of how constraining her words are. He recognizes that Hildigunn is trying to start a feud which will lead to many deaths, and he recognizes that his part is only now to take vengeance. Flosi retorts: "'Cold are the councils of women'", and his face "was, in turn, as red as blood, as pale as grass, and as black as Hel itself."(116). Flosi can see disaster fast approaching, and because of Hildigunn's goading, Flosi's honor has been tied to the retaliation in Hoskuld's name.

Hoskuld's death does incite tremendous amounts of bloodletting. At the Althing, Mord Valgardsson sabotages the suit brought against the Njalssons for the killing. Njal reacts by naming a panel of arbitrators, headed by the formidable

Snorri the Godi. Instead of outlawing the Njalssons, Snorri decides to set the compensation to be “so huge that no man in Iceland will ever have been more costly than Hoskuld”(123). Snorri is affirming Hoskuld's important status by fixing his compensation to be so high, which shows that no man who has ever been killed was worth more than Hoskuld. However, Snorri is also snubbing Flosi, since the Njalssons will not be exiled or outlawed, and might continue to menace Flosi and his allies. Since Hildigunn tied Flosi's honor to the outcome of the settlement, and the Njalssons will go free, Flosi feels insulted. When presented with the compensation, Flosi sees a cloak atop the silver. This may be an insulting gesture, but this is not known. He asks whose it is, and when nobody replies, he slanders Njal for his silence (123). Flosi is looking to emerge with honor. Once Flosi has insulted Njal, either the Njalssons will bear the insult and be ridiculed in front of the Allthing, or they will retaliate and the settlement will break down. Flosi has now fixed the situation so that he emerges with honor whatever the Njalssons do.

The Njalssons chose to retaliate. Skarphedin slanders Flosi, who refuses to take a penny of the settlement afterwards (123). After such a strong insult, many men will stand with Flosi if he chooses to attack the Njalssons. When Flosi decides to gather men together to surprise the Njalssons, many come, enough to overwhelm them. However, the Njalssons and Kari are heavily outnumbered but unmatched in

single combat. Flosi must chose to attack and lose many men to their hands, reminiscent of Gunnar's stand, or to pragmatically burn them in their house. Since Hildigunn tied Flosi's honor to Hoskuld's vengeance, he cannot leave, but since his men aren't willing to face heavy losses, he cannot attack directly. So, Flosi choses to burn the Njalssons in their house.

Why does Hildigunn challenge Flosi so strongly? Is she distraught over the death of her husband, and lashing out against his attackers? Surely she would be distressed, or weeping, or sulking during the meeting. That is simply not the case; Hildigunn is reserved and articulate, and effectively pins Flosi into pledging his support for blood vengeance. Throughout her marriage to Hoskuld, Hildigunn was highly conscious of her status as a Godi's wife. Now that her husband has been killed, she insists that her husband's allies exact blood vengeance on his behalf. An insistence this strong from status-conscious Hildigunn suggests that she views the vengeance for Hoskuld's death as a status symbol. Part of Hoskuld's status is how his death will be avenged, and Hildigunn seems to feel like accepting a settlement for Hoskuld would discredit his status. Her insistence is effective: Hoskuld becomes the man Iceland tears itself apart over, and the man for whom Flosi refused six hundred ounces of silver in compensation. This is Hildigunn's husband.