

The Role of Honour in *Egils saga*

Abstract: The aim of this text is to assess the role that honour plays in a long prose text composed in Iceland c.1220-1240, *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*. First, we present the main theoretical and historiographical views on honour, both as a general concept and applied specifically to the Icelandic Middle-Ages. Furthermore, we analyze the vocabulary of honour present in the saga in order to identify figures in it which could have been considered as models of honourable behaviour. Finally, we discuss the notion of honour as a commodity and instead propose an alternative view. We hold that honour can be compared with the notion of inalienable wealth and exemplify our stance with a short case study of a scene in the saga.

Keywords: Honour – Inalienable Wealth – Egils saga – Iceland

Résumé: L'objectif de cette étude est d'évaluer le rôle joué par l'honneur dans un un texte en prose composé en Islande entre 1220-1240, *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*. Tout d'abord, nous présenterons les principales positions théoriques et historiographiques sur l'honneur, en tant que concept général mais également appliqué à l'Islande médiévale. Ensuite, nous analyserons le vocabulaire de l'honneur présent dans la saga afin d'identifier les figures qui ont pu être considérées comme des modèles de comportement honorable. Enfin, nous discuterons l'idée selon laquelle l'honneur serait une marchandise et proposerons une vision alternative. Nous estimons que l'honneur peut être comparé à la notion de richesse inaliénable et illustrerons notre position par une brève étude de cas sur une scène de la saga.

Mots-clés: Honneur- Richesse inaliénable - Saga d'Egill - Islande

The Role of Honour in *Egils saga*

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The aim of this text is to assess the role that honour plays in a long prose text composed in Iceland c.1220-1240, and which belongs to a type of sagas, the *Íslendingasögur*, that discuss the life and deeds of the first generations of people who inhabited that insular country. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*¹ (“The saga of Egill, the son of Grímr the bald”) focuses on a family of settlers who migrate to Iceland from Norway during the ninth century. The first third of the story narrates the rise and fall of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, an ambitious man who becomes powerful in the service of the Norwegian king. His nephew, Egill, is the main character of the rest of the saga. Egill is a poet, adventurer and viking, but later in his life he becomes a wealthy farmer and chieftain. However, unlike his uncle and his brother, he remains fiercely independent during most of his life. Unusually for this type of saga, the narrative takes place in many locations around the North Atlantic and the Baltic. The last part of *Egla* depicts Egill as an old man, and it is the only section of the text that is focused on what happens in Iceland.

It is generally acknowledged that matters of honour play a prominent role in the *Íslendingasögur*². Moreover, it is highly likely that in this aspect literature reflects a main concern of medieval Icelanders, at least those of some social standing. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen’s influential *Fortælling og Ære* defines honour as a social norm, a system of unwritten rules which channels social conflict and penalizes antisocial behaviour through its opposite, shame³. This position stands in marked contrast with the earlier ideas of the German

¹ References to the saga the Íslenzk Fornrit edition: S. Nordal (ed.): *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Reykjavík 1933. I list references by chapter and page number. All translations are my own.

² Romantic scholars of the early twentieth century (such as Walther Gehl and Vilhelm Grønbech) insisted on this point, and portrayed honour as one of the characteristic marks of heathen society. A later generation of scholars (influenced by the Icelandic school) focused on the way in which Medieval saga authors criticized these ideas from a Christian perspective. Following a sociological (or anthropological) perspective, Vilhjálmur Árnason argues that the saga emphasis on honor does not stem from religion, but from the social structure, in a line of thought similar to that of Preben Meulengracht-Sørensen. See V. Árnason: *Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas*. “JEGP” 1991. Vol 90 (2), pp. 157-174.

³ “Ære er social norm (...). Den er en del at det system af uskrevne regler, der konstituerer et givent samfund, og sammen med sin modpol, skammen, definerer æren samfundets sociale ideal (...). Ærens normer kan derfor ikke

scholar Walther Gehl⁴, who saw the overbearing *ójafnaðarmaðr* (“man of inequity”) as the embodiment of the competitive honour of “Germanic” peoples. Instead, Meulengracht Sørensen’s view is akin to the stance held by the British anthropologist Julien Pitt-Rivers, who studied honour in Mediterranean societies. Their view presented honour as a stabilizing force in society, which was particularly functional in societies lacking stable authorities, even if honour can remain an important element within more complex socio-political systems. The incarnation of the social ideal in medieval Iceland is, according to this view, the *jafnaðarmaðr* (“man of equity”) who is able to assign each what is due and preserve social order and peace.

Theoretically speaking, it is often held that honour constitutes at the same time an internal and an external phenomenon⁵. On the one hand, it is the personal acceptance of a social ideal of behaviour. On the other (but at the same time), it is the judgement passed by how a certain individual approaches such ideal, this is, the reputation⁶. We might add that it seems likely that the absence of a strict division between public and private space (common to societies with weak institutionalized political authority) promotes the dual and blurry nature of honour.

Standing in partial contrast with Meulengracht Sørensen’s view is the idea that honour functioned more as a desirable goal for competition (as a scarce element) than as a background for integration. Strictly speaking, the views are not mutually exclusive, as nothing warrants that competition for scarce means precludes integration and order. Competition can even constitute the basis of order, as classically argued by the father of modern economics, Adam Smith, in *The wealth of nations*. As it is well known -for Smith and many later economists- competition between agents producing commodities for the market tends, in the long run, to create a state of equilibrium.

beskrives eller systematiseres udtømmende som lovgivningens eller morallærens.”. P. Meulengracht Sørensen: *Fortælling og Ære*. Aarhus 1993, p. 187

⁴ W. Gehl: *Ruhm und Ehre bei dem Nordgermanen*. Berlin 1937.

⁵ Maarten Van den Toorn made two distinctions, resulting in four types of honours reflected in Norse literature. On the one hand, he contrasted “heroic” and “materialistic” honour (as reflected respectively in Heroic poetry and in *Hávamál*). The first is based on the idea of bravery and self-control, while the second is about might, power and the fulfillment of ambition. On the other hand, he distinguished between an internal notion of “doing the right thing” and external esteem. The second distinction is sound, while the first seems harder to accept, as both heroic and materialistic values can be seen also as dishonourable (or at least as outdated) in some texts. M. Van den Toorn: *Ethics and Moral in Icelandic Saga Literature*. Assen 1955.

⁶ See P. Henderson Stewart: *Honor*. Chicago 1994. A similar distinction between personal and social honour is made by H. Þorláksson; *Virtir menn og Vel Metnir*. In: *Sæmdarmenn*. Ed. H. Þorláksson. Reykjavík 2001, pp.15-22 at pp. 20-21, and by Van der Toorn (see footnote 5 above).

A similar metaphor has been used to explain the dynamics of honour in medieval Iceland. William Miller's major work on Old Norse topics, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, writes "honor was a precious commodity in very short supply"⁷. This idea puzzled some scholars, who noticed that it was difficult to apply it in practice, as pointed out in the review of Miller's book written by Gunnar Karlsson⁸. Nevertheless, this idea remains influential within the Old Norse field: for example, the American historian Oren Falk⁹ writes that honour was "a far scarcer commodity than life". In short, the analogy says: as modern companies compete for profit (and this creates a dynamic but functional system), medieval Icelanders struggled for honour (mostly through feud, which is also seen as a dynamic but functional system).

A partially similar picture derives from the application of Bourdieu's notion of *capital* to medieval Iceland. Torfi Tulinius¹⁰ has argued that medieval Icelanders could use economic, symbolic and cultural capital in the game of status much in the same way the Kabyles of Algeria discussed by the French sociologist. Any form of such capital can be earned and spent in a game organized around certain rules (*a field*). According to the Icelandic scholar, in one of these fields (characterized by competing chieftains) what it is a stake is honour, which is again seen as quantifiable (in the sense that it can be earned and lost). Unlike Miller, for Torfi honour is not a commodity but capital (or, more precisely, the effect of capital). While his view is much more refined and nuanced than the "honour as a commodity" theory, it remains essentially economicist in its foundations. That is unsurprising, as Bourdieu's theory itself has been severely criticised for his dependence on the same "economizing" theoretical model preferred by formalist anthropologists and neoclassical theorists. This may explain his reduction of the diverse elements that produced social prominence to an economic simile (capital)¹¹. Moreover, we can argue that the analogy is deeply misleading, as capital (be it in the Marxist or the classical senses of the term¹²) is quantifiable *in absolute terms*, while Bourdieu's non-economic types of capital are

⁷ W.I. Miller: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago and London 1990.

⁸ G. Karlsson: Review of W.I. Miller *Bloodtaking And Peacemaking*. "Alvissmál" 1994. Vol. 4, pp. 125-128

⁹ O. Falk: *Bystanders and Hearsayers First: Reassessing Participant Roles*. In: '*A Great Effusion of Blood?*' *Interpreting Medieval Violence*. Eds. M. Meyerson, D. Thiery and O. Falk. Toronto 2004, pp. 98-130 at p. 106.

¹⁰ T. Tulinius, "Snorri et Bourdieu: Vers une sociologie de la production littéraire en Islande Médiévale?". In: *Itinéraires du savoir de l'Italie à la Scandinavie (Xe – XVIe siècle. Études offertes à Élisabeth Mornet*. Ed. C. Péneau. Paris: 2009, pp. 345-367.

¹¹ D. Graeber: *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value. The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York 2001, pp. 26-30

¹² This is, as either an embodiment of social relationships of an exploitative type that define a specific mode of production organized around commodity production (for the Marxists) or as a fundamental asset in the production of commodities (in mainstream economics).

at best *relatively* quantifiable, and often not quantifiable at all. For example, while we can express precisely (using a given unit of account, such as money or hours of labour spent) how much is the value of farmsteads (“economic capital”), we cannot measure numerically how much knowing poetry (“cultural capital”) or being born in a prestigious family (“symbolic capital”) is worth.

In brief, we have mentioned two main operative notions of honour: one structural view in which honour is a principle that generates order in a stateless society, and one agent-based approach in which honour promotes competition and struggle in the same context, which may (or may not) lead to social change. Furthermore, the Norwegian historian Arnvéd Nedkvitne has criticized both approaches as functional, as they tend to ignore competing ideological constructions which coexisted in medieval Icelandic societies. For example, he argues that honour was honour-driven violence operated very differently for the Icelandic “warrior class” than for courtiers of the Norwegian king¹³. Moreover, Nedkvitne reminds us that we cannot know precisely what the low-ranking peasants which constituted the majority of society thought, as the sagas focus on the elite¹⁴. These are valid points, and there is no reason to assume that the notion(s) of honour seen in saga literature do stem mechanically from social reality. Therefore, it seems less risky to analyse the world of values expressed by any given text as an ideological stance rather than as reflective of a broader mentality, or even as a mentality shared by most members of the elite. Our analysis aims thus to focus only on the particular point of view expressed by *Egils saga*.

¹³ A. Nedkvitne: *Beyond Historical Anthropology in the Study of Medieval Mentalities*. “Scandinavian Studies” 2000. Vol. 25 (1-2), pp. 27-51. His criticism of Meulengracht-Sørensen’s book seems to be excessive. For example, he criticizes the Danish scholar for not giving a definition of honour, but as we mentioned, Meulengracht-Sørensen does provide with a definition (see footnote 3 above). In fact, his own text is ambiguous in what he means when he refers to honour, even if he seems to use it basically as a synonym for distinction, prestige or glory. Furthermore, his arguments for assuming that horizontal-warrior honour and vertical-court honour were not mutually incompatible seem as one-sided as the functionalist interpretations he criticizes. It seems most likely that the worth assigned to each type of honour depended on who was assessing it. For example, it is likely that honours bestowed by kings were met with admiration by some Icelanders, while others could consider them irrelevant or even negative.

¹⁴ A. Nedkvitne, *Beyond Historical Anthropology...*, pp. 49-50

The vocabulary of honour

The saga has a rich range of vocabulary of words related to honour. For the substantives, we find¹⁵:

drengskapr (“manliness, honour”)

mann dómsmaðr (“man of honour”, “decent man”)

mannsómi (“honour, recompense”)

mannvirðing (“worth, honour [of a man]”)

metnaðr (“honour [as a concession], ambition”)

metorð (“esteem, honour”)

uppreist (“upraise”, with meaning ranging from “rebellion” to “honour, concession”)

virðing (“position, esteem, honour”)

yfirlát (“favour, honour”)

heiðr, *vegr*, *sómi* and *sæmd* (all meaning “honour”)

Concerning adjectives, we also find some terms:

göfugr (“noble, honourable”)

skammlaus (“lacking dishonour or shame”)

sæmiligr (“decent, honourable”)

vegsamligr (“honourable”, also found as the adverb *vegsamliga* and substantive *vegsemd*).

However, such broad range of vocabulary does not necessarily imply that honour plays a major role in the motivations of the characters in the saga: honour is often an effect, and often the saga refers only to its external aspect (reputation) when using this vocabulary. It seems meaningful that neither *jafnaðarmaðr* nor *ójafnaðarmaðr* are used to describe anyone in the saga, suggesting that consistent honourable behaviour is not given much weight in the political game. Furthermore, it would also be hard to consider any of the members of Egill’s family as typical *jafnaðarmenn*, as diverse forms of extremism (rather than moderation) characterize all of them, even if this applies more to the “ugly” side of that family than to both Þórólfrs, who are

¹⁵ For this list of vocabulary, we have used the useful glossary in B. Einarsson: *Egils saga*. London 2003. It should be noted that the text in this edition differs in some aspects from the *Íslenzk Fornrit* text that we follow, but regarding our topic there is no substantial variation.

represented as more virtuous and chivalric than their relatives. In any case, all of them lack the combination of moderate behaviour and political wisdom which is typical of *jafnaðarmenn*. Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson, the most virtuous of the members of the lineage¹⁶ does not have an important political impact (his main role being the one of the loyal follower and son) and his virtues are of a more personal type.

Arinbjörn, an honourable man

Egill's best (and only true) friend Arinbjörn is probably the closest figure to a *jafnaðarmaðr* in the saga, this is, a character who combines strong self-standing, ability to mediate in conflicts, impartiality (or at least conscience of his partiality) and a good deal of common sense. His characterization contrasts markedly with the portrait made of all the members of Egill's family. Arinbjörn is able to manage properly (and at the same time) both his personal loyalties and his role as a royal servant, even while both are in conflict, a fact that distinguishes him from both Þórólfrs. He is neither prone to attacks of rage nor shows a greedy, capricious and grotesque behaviour (unlike his friend Egill), yet he does not avoid any risk of integration by remaining in stubborn isolation (as Skalla-Grímr does).

It is thus unsurprising to notice that the saga describes Arinbjörn as honourable. He is first presented while in his youth as “an imposing (or bold, or manly) man, and a most skilful (or accomplished) man”¹⁷. He is briefly described again later, while he is more mature: “Arinbjörn was a great warrior and blessed with victories. He had revenues from the province of Fjordane [in South-Western Norway] (...) Arinbjörn had returned to his homestead in Norway and lived there in great honour”¹⁸. This flattering portrait serves as an introduction for the long poem that Egill dedicates to his friend, in which the main qualities praised are his warrior skills and his generosity, but also his skill to solve conflicts (mentioned in the twentieth stanza of *Arinbjarnarkviða*). Earlier in the saga, we have a hint on how Arinbjörn obtained such high standing. He is said to be the foster-brother of king Eiríkr, foster-father to his children, and the most loved of all his *lendr maðr* by the king, who placed him in charge of Fjordane¹⁹. Arinbjörn

¹⁶ This is argued by Á. Jakobsson: *Egils saga and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family*. “Scandinavian Studies” 2008. Vol. 80 (1), pp. 1–18.

¹⁷ *skǫrulligr maðr ok inn mesti íþrottamaðr*. Egils saga, ch. 41, p. 105.

¹⁸ *Arinbjörn var hermaðr mikill ok sigrsæll; hann hafði at veiðlum Fjarðarfylki (...) Arinbjörn var þá kominn í Noreg til búa sinna ok hann var þá í virðing mikilli*. Egils saga, ch. 78, p. 257.

¹⁹ Egils saga, ch. 59, p. 175-176.

shows at some point that he is conscious that the king is one of the sources of his honour, when he thanks him for pardoning Egill at the court in York; the saga tells that “Arinbjörn thanked the king with beautiful words then for the honour and friendship that the king had granted him”²⁰.

From this picture, we obtain a twofold representation of Arinbjörn’s *virðing*. Part of it comes from the king, and in this aspect, the royal concession of land makes his generosity more likely by endowing such virtue with a material base. However, his honour also derives from his own personal qualities, which precede his high position: these are fundamentally skill in battle and generosity, two classical heroic virtues. It is against this background that the attributes that make him similar to *jafnaðarmenn* are to be understood. By contrast, honour and social standing derived from pure political pragmatism, of the kind exemplified by the ambitious and successful Snorri *goði* in *Eyrbyggja saga*, are absent from *Egils saga*. In *Egla*, the function of honourable men, epitomized by Arinbjörn, seems to be one of providing social stability, not politically-driven changes.

Could honour be understood as a commodity?

We now have to assess the notion that honour was a cause for competition and that it acted as a commodity. It can be argued that the underlying theory for this assumption generally mirrors the kind of analysis formalist economic anthropology could have produced. Such view hails back to variations “rational choice theory”, usually in its milder versions (which postulate a contextually-bound rationality rather than a timeless principle of maximization) but that nevertheless still focus methodologically on the choices of particular agents. While this approach provides an interesting framework to discuss certain scenes of negotiated exchange²¹, we have the impression that it falls short to explain honour transfers in *Egils saga*. The main problem is that in *Egla* transfers of honour are often one-sided. Typically, in these occasions, a king transfers (“shows” or “gives”) honour to a subject²². This does not in any case diminish anyone’s honour, and in fact, it is likely that it also *increases* the honour of the giver. Therefore, the metaphor of honour as a commodity seems to be very inadequate in these cases: the core of such metaphor, this is, that honour is scarce, appears false. Instead, it seems that the king can easily “produce” honour or to endow others with part of his own (non-quantifiable) honour.

²⁰ *Arinbjörn þakkaði konungi með fögurum orðum þá samð ok vináttu, er konungr hefir veitt honum.* *Egils saga*, ch. 61, p. 194.

²¹ The classical illustration is W.I. Miller: *Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid: Case Studies in the Negotiation and Classification of Exchange in Medieval Iceland*, “Speculum” 1986. Vol. 61 (1), pp. 18-50.

²² For example, *Egils saga*, ch. 22, p. 56; ch. 55, p.146; ch. 61, p. 194.

Moreover, the kind of competitive honour that we find in the bloodfeuds common in the *Íslendingasögur* plays a minor role in *Egla*, as feuding among Icelandic farmers is a secondary theme in the saga. In fact, it seems predictable that the only instance of the substantive *ósæmð* (“loss of honour”, “dishonour”) occurs during the feud between Steinarr Qnundarson and Þorsteinn Egilsson²³ in the late part of the saga. In that scene, Qnundr tells Egill that he does not want at all to cause any dishonour to Þorsteinn, while he still supports his own son in the dispute. It is only there that an idea of *scarve* honour appears, of an honour inherent to a man (or a father-son group, or a family) which is lost if someone else wins it.

Dishonour could also be of a different type. The adjective *ósæmiligastr* is used by Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson when discussing with his father which course of action to take in face of the king’s expansionist plans. Þórólfr says, “it seems to me that the most dishonourable thing is to be neither his friend nor his enemy”²⁴. The neutrality chosen by Kveld-Úlfr is depicted by his son as a dishonourable course of action. Here the metaphor of a commodity fails again: inaction is what creates the loss of honour, not an action undertaken (in either direction) for or against the honour of a third party.

The inadequacy of the commodity metaphor to describe honour in Egils saga is a likely outcome of turning a concept that belongs in the domain of political relationships into a modern economic simile. The honour in *Egla* cannot be thought of as a commodity, because it is not an alienable object, but a property of persons, closely bound with them. In this aspect, honour is possibly congruent with gifts, which circulate (like commodities) but that (unlike commodities) are at the same time kept by the original owners. The fact that honour can be transferred into a monetary value, as illustrated by the word *mannsómi* (“honour [of a man]”, “recompense”) which is used once²⁵ as alternative to *fébatr* (“monetary compensations”) only reinforces the impression that the limits between person and thing were not precise, while commoditisation implies exactly the contrary. As it is well-known, gifts are inherently political in nature, because they embody and signify social ties. Full discussion of this complex line of argument would require research beyond the scope of this article, but any reader of sagas knows of the recurrence of gift-giving scenes in them because of their political importance. Commodities, by contrast, do not have such importance, neither in *Egla* particular nor in the sagas in general²⁶. It would be surprising to

²³ Egils saga, ch. 81, p. 284.

²⁴ *Nú þýkkir mér þat ósæmiligastr, at vera hvárki vinr hans né ovinnr.* Egils saga, ch. 6, p. 15.

²⁵ Egils saga, ch. 24, p. 61.

²⁶ We have counted 45 instances of gift-giving (plus 65 references to practices following the same basic principle, such as feasts and hospitality) and only 18 references to commercial commodity exchange in the saga. Moreover,

imagine that the *sagamenn* would understand honour through the dynamics of what is marginally important in their depiction of systems of circulation of goods²⁷.

Honour and inalienable wealth

We have expressed doubts on the possibility that honour can be considered as a commodity. This returns us to the question of how to define honour as a concept. We suggest that honour should be connected to the ideas about property²⁸ and the form of production of goods²⁹. For example, we could think that honour works like an inalienable possession. Inalienable wealth³⁰ is the kind of wealth that preserves a link with the original owner, which often is the producer even when it changes hands by being given away. A somewhat inexact but illustrative example of this type of wealth in our modern society could be a famous painting; if tomorrow *Starry Night* is sold from the Museum of Modern Art to the Louvre, it will however retain the association with Van Gogh in everyone's mind. It is the fact that the painting itself was produced by the Dutch painter is what truly matters: a copy of *Starry Night* it is not the same as

some of the instances of gift-giving occupy a very central role in the narrative, while commercial exchange is almost always mentioned briefly. See S. Barreiro, *La Lógica y el Vocabulario de la Circulación y la Acumulación de Bienes en la Saga De Egill*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Buenos Aires 2014, p. 232.

²⁷ It should be noted that the notions of competitive honour are in most cases based on ethnographical work undertaken in contemporary societies, such as the Montenegrin or Kabyles that are by no means independent from the commodity-based capitalist system, even if they are peripheral to it. The use of such models to the undoubtedly pre-capitalist thirteenth-century Iceland therefore carries a noticeable risk of anachronism.

²⁸ The relative importance of wealth and honour in the Icelandic middle ages has been discussed by Icelandic historians during the last four decades. For example, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has argued that accumulated wealth is determinant and associated with honour, while Helgi Þorláksson found that personal qualities and the use of wealth were originally more important. See J.V. Sigurðsson: *Sæmd, stéttir og steinkast á fjöðveldisöld*, "Saga" 2003. Vol 41(1), pp. 151–164; H. Þorláksson, *Fé og virðing*. In: *Sæmdarmenn*. Ed. H. Þorláksson. Reykjavík 2001, pp. 91-134.

²⁹ The link between particular mental representations and the basic forms of production and circulation has been often emphasized by Marxists, but it also appears in the Durkheimian-Maussian tradition and in Substantivist anthropology (which is closely entwined with the Polanyian reading of Marx). As remarked by Maurice Godelier, these mental representations constitute an element of the social relationships and thus of the basic mode of production (M. Godelier: *The Mental and the Material*. New York 1986, pp. 125-178) and not a mere secondary "superstructure". This is why the emphasis on commodities, so closely associated with capitalism, appears to us theoretically doubtful: it would be surprising if a society dominated by non-commodified forms of production of goods conceived a core social-political notion precisely as a commodity.

³⁰ These are discussed theoretically by A. Weiner: *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving*. Berkeley 1992 and M. Godelier: *L'enigme du Don*. Paris 2002

the original precisely because it is not the product of Van Gogh's own labour (even if the copy still will remind all of us of the original, and thus also of the painter). Moreover, those acquainted with the history (or better said, the "biography") of the painting could also be reminded of the MoMA when they see it in the Louvre. If the object changing hands was instead a commodity, by contrast, it becomes irrelevant who produced it and who were the previous owners. Moreover, copying it makes just another equally valuable object. For example, an exact copy of a hammer is simply another hammer, and it is in all aspects as valuable (and as anonymous) as the original.

We can think of someone's honour as inalienable, as somewhat similar to a famous painting. It is the personal aspect of honour that cannot be transferred, while the social aspect can be: but nevertheless these are aspects of a same entity, honour, which can be distinguished analytically but not empirically separated³¹. Because they are necessarily related, we can still see honour as socially able to circulate without considering it fully transferable (as a commodity is), because it always keeps a tie to the original owner³². Honour is parallel to the gift, precisely because at the same time it can create economic and normative³³ social ties of a similar kind. Moreover, honour demands or generates obligation, even if (unlike typical gifts) this obligation is not mutually binding. The social tie required by honour in Medieval Iceland is one explicitly hierarchical and competitive, even if it can be presented as reciprocal and balanced.

To give an example of the application of our idea, we will return to a scene from *Egils saga*. In chapter twenty-five, Skalla-Grímr, Egill's father, is at the royal court in Norway claiming a compensation for the death of his brother, Þórólfr, who was a member of the king's retinue. Grímr has travelled to the court due to the pressure of his kinsmen and allies. He appears in front of the king with a retinue of twelve men, who are mostly farmers like him. An ally of his family who is also a member of the court, Ólvir, introduces him to the king:

³¹ Social, external honour seems to need personal honour as a prerequisite, while the opposite is not true, as women can possess the second but not the first because they were generally excluded from public political life. See A. Magnúsdóttir: *Kvinnor i Fejd. Ára, Kön och Konflikt i det Nordiska Medeltidssambälle*. In: *Feide og fred i nordisk middelalder*. Ed. Erik Opsahl. Oslo 2007: pp. 73-84.

³² While commenting a scene in *Guðmundar saga dýra*, Gunnar Karlsson brilliantly states: "The honour of the follower is *at the same time* the honour of the chieftain" (*Sæmd þingmannsins er jafnframt sæmd goðans*. Emphasis is ours). G. Karlsson: *Goðamenn*. Reykjavík 2004, p. 159.

³³ Even while the famous Maussian *Essai* is ostensibly about economic concerns, it is better read a reflection on the nature of social ties, and, more specifically on exchange as a fundamental relationship. N.J. Allen: *Categories and Classifications: Maussian Reflections on the Social*. New York & Oxford 2000, p. 97.

“So now Grímr is here, the son of Kveld-Úlfr. We would be grateful, king, if you make his trip till here worth it, as we expect it will be. Many get from you great honour, who are inferior to him, and that are nowhere near as skilled in many tasks as he is”³⁴

Here we can perceive a tension between *personal honour*, here associated with Grímr’s skills and *family honour*, which here is merely alluded to, even if it pervades the whole scene, because Grímr is acting on behalf of his family³⁵, not out of his individual will. It is interesting to note that the saga introduced his father, Kveld-Úlfr, as a man of aristocratic origin, wealthy in both money and land³⁶, while Grímr’s skills are those of a farmer: he is an excellent smith³⁷, angler³⁸ and farm manager³⁹. We can therefore infer from this information that his honour is partly transferred by his lineage and partly derived from his individual attributes. At the same time, Grímr’s honour is here made into a public fact (this is, a reputation) when is declared by Qlvir in the new context of the court. The members of the court, then, obtain an image of Grímr (and of his honour) that does not stem from him: like an inalienable good, like a gift, it paradoxically circulates while being kept by its owner.

Then we have the honour that is asked from the king. There are two reasons for this request: the first is Grímr’s trip, who went to Norway looking for a compensation for his brother’s death on behalf of his family. However, at the same time, the reason to ask is found in Grímr’s personal honour, who makes it stand above average men. The king’s answer is to offer the guest to occupy the same position that his dead brother had at court:

“Then I want”, said the king, “that if you ask compensation for Þórólfr, you become my man and enter here in my service and retinue. I might value your service so well, that I will give you compensation for your brother or another honour, no lesser than what I offered to Þórólfr, your

³⁴ *Nú er Grímr hér kominn, son Kveld-Úlfs; kunnu vér nú auþúsú, konungr, at þér gerið hans fjör goða hingat, svá sem vér væntum, at vera muni. Fá þeir margir af ydr samð mikla, er til minna eru komnir er hann ok hvergi nær eru jafnvel at sér gǫrvir um flestar íþróttir sem han mun vera.* Egils saga, ch. 25, p. 63.

³⁵ By this we mean basically the male members of the family, as women appear (with the exception of the villainous witch-queen Gunnhildr) foreign to the political struggles in *Egla*.

³⁶ Egils saga, ch. 1, p. 4.

³⁷ Egils saga, ch. 30, p. 78.

³⁸ Egils saga, ch. 1, p. 5.

³⁹ Egils saga, ch. 20, p. 50.

brother, but you should act with more caution than him, if I make you a man as great as he was”⁴⁰

The king’s offer is hostile, but it is also perfectly logical from his perspective. In his mind, the fairest compensation would be to transfer to Grímr the honour that Þórólfr obtained from the king. This is literally *the same honour*, not just an equivalent one, and an extension of the king’s own.

That kind of honour is quite different from Grímr’s own personal one: it is a dignity derived from service from the king and obtained (in this case: reassigned) as a royal grace. The king, obviously, would be the big winner in his proposal, because his compensation is in any case intangible. Serving the king, of course, would later imply material benefits for the follower, but those would be the consequence of a pre-existing tie and a sign of it: they are maybe analogous to subsidiary gifts⁴¹. The compensation reclaimed by Grímr is instead a form of wergild: monetary payment for the death of a man that would re-establish peace without creating mutual obligation. In other words, it is a *price*, even if it is not a typical mercantile price.

Grímr reacts to the king’s offer excusing himself. He says that he is a man lacking the renown (*frami*) and the luck (*gæfa*) of his brother, so he could not be a good vassal. This answer infuriates the king. This exchange demonstrates that honour cannot be thought of as a commodity, and that it cannot be fully conceived as just the right to demand respect (the personal aspect of honour referred above). Nothing in the answer is insulting per se, besides the simple fact that Grímr rejects the offer. In these logics, neutral exchange is not possible: this resembles the dynamics of inalienable goods and gift-giving, not of commerce and commodities. To negate royal honour is to negate the king, disrespect him, and thus to get his enmity. We can notice that Grímr does diminish the king, but instead he diminishes himself in his speech. But what matters is beyond words: the honour publicly offered by the king is publicly given back to

⁴⁰ “Eke vil þá,” sagði konungr, “ef þú beiðisk bóta fyrir Þórólfr, at þú gerisk minn maðr ok gangir hér í hirðlög ok þjónir mér. Má mér svá vel líka þín þjónusta, at ek veita þér bætr eptir bróður þinn eða aðra sæmð, eigi minni en ek veitta honum Þórólfi, bróður þínum, ok skyldir þú betr kunna at gæta en hann, ef ek gerða þik at svá miklum manni sem hann var orðinn. Egils saga, ch. 25, p. 64.

⁴¹ Subsidiary gifts in anthropological literature are of very diverse types. For example, in the Kula systems, we find subsidiary gifts used to attract potential partners for proper kula exchange (*pokalala*). But we also find gifts which can be used, among other things, this is, to assure the reproduction of a preexisting tie (*basì*) and also to make third parties notice this. In certain ways, the maintenance provided by lord to the members of the retinue resembles this second form, but it is noticeably hierarchical and redistributive rather than reciprocal. See A. Weiner: “A World of Made is not a World of Born”: doing Kula in Kirivina. In: *The Kula: New Perspectives on Massim Exchange*. Ed. Jerry Leach and Edmund Leach. Cambridge 1983: pp. 147-170.

him. It is a rejected gift, and rejected gifts create enmities, while rejecting commodities generates nothing.

Ólvir quickly understands the situation and asks the visitor to escape. The king's reaction demonstrates the enmity, as he sends his men to chase and attempt to kill the Grímr and his group, saying:

(...) he is full of wolfishness and would damage certain men, who we (this is, the king) would lament losing, if he was nearby⁴².

It is interesting to remark two things here: First, that the king assumes that there is mutual hostility from that moment onwards. The saga will confirm that he was right, as Grímr's family and the royal house will develop a bitter enmity. Second, the substantive used to refer to Grímr as wild, bestial or antisocial, *úlfúð*, has some interesting implications. On the one hand, it associates with the image of the wolf as an outlaw or pariah, which is common in Old Norse literature⁴³. On the other hand, it directly refers to Grímr's family, which has clear wolfish traits⁴⁴, even if that association is ambiguous⁴⁵. By his speech, the king manages to invert the image presented by Ólvir, rejecting any personal worth in Grímr, to the extent that he turns him (discursively) into a savage and bestial enemy. This serves to illustrate the fact that there is no external, objective value in honour, which is by necessity contextual⁴⁶. As with gifts, the judgement passed on the honour of a person exceeds the claim to a right or mercantile price, as it is fundamentally a sign of the social tie between that person and the broader community.

⁴² *hann er fullr upp úlfúðar ok hann verðr at skaða þeim mönnum nokkurum, er oss mun þykja afnám í, ef hann náir.* Egils saga, ch. 25, p. 64.

⁴³ See M. Jakoby: *Wargus, vargr - 'Verbrecher' 'Wolf' : eine sprach- und rechtsgeschichtliche Untersuchung.* Uppsala 1974 and A. Guðmundsdóttir: *The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature.* "JEGP" 2007. Vol. 106 (3), pp. 277-303.

⁴⁴ A. Gurevich: *The Origins of European Individualism,* London 1995, pp. 65-66.

⁴⁵ Á. Jakobsson: *Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in Egils saga.* "Scandinavian Studies" 2011. Vol 83 (1), pp. 29-44.

⁴⁶ Richard Bauman has argued that honour needs to be performed publicly, and therefore it is helped by skilful uses of verbal art. His argument is hard to deny, but it seems to apply more specifically to reputation rather than to the internal component of honour. See R. Bauman: *Performance and Honor in 13th century Iceland.* "The Journal of American Folklore" 1986. Vol. 99 (392), pp. 131-150.