Svein happily accepts the bear and invites Audun to stay, but after a short time Audun indecorously says he wants to leave. The king’s hackles rise. One does not leave court by one’s own decision; one must obtain leave to leave. But Audun, resourceful as ever, undoes the offense, or more accurately, keeps what is perceived as a proto-offense from crystallizing into a true offense, by coming up with the perfect excuse: a pilgrimage to Rome. Fast forward to the next refusal after Audun returns from Rome and is invited by Svein to become his cupbearer, a high-ranking court position. “That is a fine offer, sire, but I’m going to return to Iceland.” This time Audun comes up with what Svein says is the only acceptable excuse: “I couldn’t endure knowing that while I was living a life of pleasure here, my mother would be treading a beggar’s path in Iceland. The time I funded for her support is now up.” Says the king, “You are certainly one lucky man. That is the only reason that would not offend me for your wanting to leave.”

Audun, by the thinnest of margins, manages to evade a dismissal as devastating as the one that was Aki’s lot. Audun seems both to wish to flatter kings, and to thumb his nose at them. The two may not be inconsistent desires, nor is it the case that the latter cannot be a good way of accomplishing the former. But Audun is not “some fellow/ Who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect/ A saucy roughness, and constrains the garb/ Quite from his nature.” He seems to be incapable of behaving otherwise than by stating his intentions and desires directly. He also seems to be aware that he courts risk by so doing. But that does not mean he can quite help acting in any other way. It is the trait of his, we mentioned earlier, suggested by the idiom—á endum standask—that appeared twice in the tale’s opening which evoked the sense of pushing up against the edge, of coming to a halt right before plunging over the precipice.

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1 Classic travel episodes in the sagas have Icelanders frequently turning down high favor at court in Norway or Denmark in order to return to the spare amenities of home in Iceland. This becomes an unintentionally comic leitmotif in *Laxdaela saga*. It is the distinctive mark of the *Audun* author to examine the motif in more nuanced ways, by explicitly putting the excuses offered for not staying in issue.
But why should that excuse him before kings who can expect, because they are kings, that people will suppress what in other circumstances they might try to excuse by a plea of “I could not do otherwise, for that is just the way I am”? We are rightly suspicious of the truthfulness or sincerity of excuses that claim the offender is disposed, as a matter of indelible character, to offend the way he does. Weakness of the will, a well-worn topic in moral philosophy, comes in a variety of guises, most of which we suspect are imbued with a healthy dose of bad faith.

Audun buys some room for excuse by being young, poor, Icelandic, and perhaps a country bumpkin, but he does not save himself by playing the rube. He saves himself with a sure social sense of what can work as an acceptable, even noble, reason for his decisions. A bare minimum of social competence, however, as well as a modicum of an instinct for self-preservation should be enough to make anyone who wished to refuse a king’s generous offer of hospitality provide the excuses and apologies for his refusal first, and not lead with the refusal—thereby making it an abrupt refusal. And the refusal still qualifies as inappropriately abrupt even though Audun softens it a bit with “That is a fine offer, sire, but…”, a softening that seems so rote as almost to call more attention to the peremptoriness of the, “I’m going to return to Iceland” that follows it. Like Harald, so Audun too plays with the rules, pushes at them, rather than follows them in the interest of smooth and uneventful encounter. One suspects Harald is motivated by a desire to make others more than vaguely nervous in his presence beyond the normal anxiety one might feel before any king. With Audun the motive is more a delight in operating at the edge, testing whether he can save situations by skillful remedial action made necessary by his own violating rules of etiquette he could easily have followed. By virtue of tactlessness, he tests his capacity for poise and aplomb.

The story, however, keeps hinting at another view of Audun’s character, though in the end it rejects it. Audun, I have been claiming, is no fool, not even a holy one, even though he seems strangely blessed. Yet Harald thinks, and Svein for moments wonders, whether or not he may be a little clueless, in the manner of a type whom I shall call the fearless nerd, if one will pardon the colloquialism. The fearless nerd is a person so oblivious to social signals, that he can appear courageous or utterly reckless, yet with no sense at all of his own derring-do mostly because, to repeat, he is without a clue. And though the holy fool can also be characterized as clueless by his being socially out of it, the style of the fearless nerd is different.