

**Narratives of Possession:
Reading for Saga Authorship**

**By
Kári Gíslason**

The work in this dissertation is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Signed.....*Kari Hirsanen*.....

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to show how character analysis can be used to approach conceptions of saga authorship in medieval Iceland. The idea of *possession* is a metaphor that is adopted early in the thesis, and is used to describe Icelandic sagas as works in which traditional material is subtly interpreted by medieval authors. For example, we can say that if authors claim greater possession of the sagas, they interpret, and not merely record, the sagas' historical information. On the other hand, tradition holds onto its possession of the narrative whenever it is not possible for an author to develop his own creative and historical interests. The metaphor of possession also underpins the character analysis in the thesis, which is based on the idea that saga authors used characters as a vehicle by which to possess saga narratives and so develop their own historical interests. The idea of possession signals the kinds of problems of authorship study which are addressed here, in particular, the question of the authors' sense of saga writing as an act either of preservation or of creation. While, in that sense, the thesis represents an additional voice in a long-standing debate about the saga writers' relation to their source materials, I argue against a clear-cut distinction between creative and non-creative authors, and focus instead on the wide variation in authorial control over saga materials. This variation suggests that saga authorship is a multi-functional activity, or one which co-exists with tradition. Further, by emphasising characterisation as a method, I am adding to the weight of scholarship that seeks to understand the sagas in terms of their literary effects.

The Introduction and chapter one lay out the theoretical scope of this thesis. My aim in these first two sections is to inform the reader of the type of critical

questions that arise when authorship is approached in relation to characterisation, and to suggest an interpretive framework with which to approach these questions. In the Introduction this aim manifests as a brief discussion of the application of the term “authorship” to the medieval Icelandic corpus, a definition of the scope of this study, and an introduction to the connections, made throughout this thesis, between saga authors, the sagas’ narrative style, and the style of characterisation in the sagas. Chapter one is a far more detailed discussion of our ability to make these connections. In particular, the chapter develops the definition of the analytical term “secondary authorship” that I introduce in order to delineate the type of characterisation that is of most interest in this thesis.

“Secondary authorship” is a literary term that aims to sharpen our approach to saga authors’ relationship to their characters by focusing on characters who make representations about the events of the saga. The term refers to any instance in which characters behave in a manner that resembles the creativity, interpretation, and understanding associated with authorship more generally. Character analysis cannot, however, be divorced from socio-historical approaches to the saga corpus. Most importantly, the sagas themselves are socio-historical representations that claim some degree of truth value. This claim that the sagas make by implication about their historicity is the starting point of a discussion of authorship in medieval Iceland. Therefore, at the beginning of chapter one I discuss some of the approaches to the social context of saga writing. This discussion serves as an introduction to both the culture of saga writing in medieval Iceland and to the nature of the sagas’ historical perspective, and reflects my sense that literary interpretations of the sagas cannot be isolated from the historical discourses that frame them. The chapter also discusses *possession*, which, as I note above, is used alongside the concept of secondary authorship to describe the saga authors’ relationship with the stories and characters of the past. At the close of chapter one, I offer a preliminary list the various functions of saga authorship, and give some examples of secondary authorship. From this point I am able to tie my argument about secondary authorship to specific examples from the sagas.

Chapter two examines the effect of family obligations and domestic points of view in the depiction of characters' choices and conception of themselves. The examples that are given in that chapter – from *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Íslendinga saga* – are the first of a number of textual analyses that demonstrate the application of the concepts of secondary authorship and possession of saga narratives. The relationship between narratives about national and domestic matters shows how authorial creativity in the area of kinship obligation provides the basis for the saga's development of historical themes. Thus, the two major case studies given in chapter two tie authorial engagement with characters to the most influential social institution in early and medieval Iceland, the family.

The remaining chapters represent similar attempts to relate authorial possession of saga characters to central socio-historical themes in the sagas, such as the settlement process in early Iceland and its influence on the development of regional political life (chapter three). Likewise, the strong authorial interest in an Icelander's journey to Norway in *Heimskringla* is presented as evidence of the author's use of a saga character to express an Icelandic interpretation of Norwegian history and to promote a sense that Iceland shared the ownership of regal history with Norway (chapter four). In that authorial engagement with the Icelander abroad, we witness saga characterisation being used as a basis for historical interpretation and the means by which foreign traditions and influence, not least the narratives of royal lives and of the Christianisation, are claimed as part of medieval Icelanders' self-conception.

While saga authors observe the conventions of saga narration, characters are often subtly positioned as the authors' interpretive mirrors, especially clear than when they act as secondary authors. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which contains many characters who voice the author's claim to interpret the past. Even Hrútr Herjólfsson, through his remarkable perception of events and his conspicuous comments about them, acts as a secondary author by enabling the author to emphasise the importance of the disposition of characters. In *Laxdæla saga* and *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, authorial interest in characters'

perception is matched by the thematising of learning, from the inception of knowledge as prophecy or advice to complete understanding by saga characters (chapter six). In *Þorgils saga skarða*, a character's inner development from an excessively ambitious and politically ruthless youth to a Christian leader killed by his kinsman allows the author to shape a political life into a lesson about leadership and the community's ability to moderate and contain the behaviour of extraordinary individuals. The portrayal draws on methods of characterisation that we can identify in *Grettis saga Ásmundarson*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, and *Orkneyinga saga*. A comparison of the characterisation of figures with intense political or military ambitions suggests that saga authors were interested in the community's ability to balance their strength and ability with a degree of social moderation.

The discussion of these sagas shows that character study can be used to analyse how the saga authors added their own voice to the voices passed down to medieval Icelanders in traditional narratives. Authorial engagement with characters allowed inherited traditions about early Norway and Iceland and records of thirteenth century events to be transformed into sophisticated historical works with highly creative elements. Through secondary authorship, saga authors took joint-possession of narratives and contested the power of tradition in setting the interpretive framework of a saga.

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Preface

I have quoted from the Íslenzk fornrit editions of the family and kings' sagas, and from Guðni Jónsson's edition of *Sturlunga saga*. In the case of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, however, I have quoted from Ursula Brown's 1952 edition. Variation in the use of Icelandic letters reflects the different approaches taken by these editors. When referring to saga characters and place names, I uniformly use the Old Icelandic nominative case.

Unless otherwise noted in parenthetical citations, translations are my own. I would draw the reader's attention, in particular, to the selective use of translations of *Brennu-Njáls saga* by Robert Cook, *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, and *Gísla saga Súrssonar* by George Johnston.

Introduction

His writing was a mechanical game,...but it was not – he thought – “creation,” for creation had to be inspired by love of someone who is not ourselves. (Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum* 56)

Authorship

There is no Old Icelandic word with the modern associations of textuality, originality, distinctive or individual intellectual voice, artistic intention, and creativity that are generally connoted by *authorship*.¹ The terms used to describe saga writing in medieval Iceland emphasise quite different values, such as the value of repeating (as opposed to creating), the value of putting together (as opposed to interpreting), and the value of telling (as opposed to writing). Tómasson, in an engaging analysis of prologues written in Iceland during the Middle Ages,² discusses the Old Icelandic descriptors of what might be regarded by us as creative and individual acts of story-telling or, alternatively, as the work of a scribe. Noting the terms previously listed by M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij – *rita* (“to write”), *skrifa* (“to write”), *setja á bók* (“set in/on a book”), *setja saman* (“to put together”), *semsetja* (“to put together”), *segja*

¹ Consider, for example, the *Shorter OED* definition of an *author* as “the person who originates or gives existence to anything” (134) and *authorship* as the “occupation or career as a writer of books” (134; the modern Icelandic term with very similar associations is *höfundur*). This idea of *authorship* as a professional pursuit and one centred around the creativity of the individual is generally attributed to the desire of authors in the eighteenth century to make a living from their writing (see, e.g., Jaszi; Woodmansee; Saunders and Hunter). See also Barthes, “Death;” and Foucault, “What is an Author?” The latter argues for a functional approach to authorship which properly accounts for the problematic status of concepts of authorial individuality and unity in literary works.

² Tómasson’s aims are rather different to my own: he “sets out to interpret [literary] conventions [derived from classical sources] and illustrate how European education put its stamp on vernacular literature in Iceland during the Middle Ages” (*Formálar* 398).

fyrir (“dictate”)³ – Tómasson asks whether it is appropriate for us to use the term *author* as we use it today to talk about Old Icelandic writing, telling, and setting together (see *Formálar* 182).⁴ It is a question that this thesis will tackle: the terms *author* and *authorship* are in a sense used as “search words” with which we might, tentatively, approach the sagas’ reflexive signs of their own composition.

While this thesis aims to read for Old Icelandic conceptions of authorship, I discuss the application of authorship study in Old Icelandic literature with a number of modern assumptions in mind, particularly about the aims of saga writers to engage in a meaningful way with the characters and the stories they narrate and, further, with postmodern assumptions about the complex discursive positions created by narration itself. My central question in this regard will be whether the saga authors sought, through the use of a sophisticated narrative voice, to control and interpret historical reality? That is, did they aim to re-create the traditions they inherited in such a way as to replace or complement them with their own interpretations of the past? Such active reception of tradition would create complex narratives which accommodate a number of seemingly contradictory narrative voices, most especially, those of tradition and its medieval interpreters. It would also imply that saga authorship was, to the extent that it involved varying degrees of interpretation and creativity, a multi-functional activity.

I argue that the sagas are *narratives of possession*, an argument based largely on the proposition that the sagas are texts in which the ownership and control of the past is subtly balanced and, at times, contested.⁵ In the sagas,

³ For example, in the rubric at the head of a text of Snorri’s *Edda* (Faulkes, Introduction xiii) is a statement of the name of the text and that “hana hefir saman setta Snorri Sturluson” (“it has been put together by Snorri Sturluson”). It is also commonly noted that the noun *saga*, which can mean both “story” and “history”, is derived from the verb *segja* (“to tell”), a correlation that appears to link the *saga* to oral performance.

⁴ f. Sørensen, “Some Methodological Considerations,” who writes that “the author takes on the role of the writer – the mere communicator of tradition – and his text gives the impression of being ‘written down’ (from the oral tradition) and ‘copied’ (from already extant manuscripts), to use modern expression” (40; see also 27-28).

⁵ *Possession* is given a more detailed definition in chapter one (see “Possession of Saga Narratives”), esp. 39.

characters of traditional stories are re-positioned as the joint possessions of tradition and of medieval authors in order that the past might find added meaning for medieval Icelanders.⁶ Thus, to raise topics in authorship in medieval Iceland is to study the changing balance of possession and control between authors and traditions, changes that I suggest can be identified and analysed in the narrative voice of the sagas. *Authorship* is a convenient term around which to develop these topics and it is not fatal that the term finds no exact match in medieval Icelandic literature; following Vésteinn Ólason, this thesis “discusses each saga as a ‘work’, and refers unblushingly to ‘author’ in full awareness that these concepts have a somewhat different meaning when applied to sagas rather than to modern novels” (*Dialogues* 11).⁷

Authorship can be abstracted as a set of opposing functions or, in Julian Barnes’ more eloquent expression of the issue, as:

the argument that every writer and reader has with himself or herself, the argument art never ceases to have with itself:
Beauty v. Unity, Contemporary Relevance v. Future Durability,
Primacy of Form v. Urgency of Message, Style v. Content, The
Artist as Controlling Creator v. The Artist as Played-Upon
Instrument, and so on. (*Something to Declare* 217-18)

Despite the self-apparent modernity of Barnes’ formulation of an author’s inner dialogue, I do not think it is too much to suggest that these oppositions, and especially the last of them, have relevance in the context of Old Icelandic literature. While I am (like many scholars interested in the distinctive poetics of individual sagas) content with the idea of the sagas’ links with oral tradition and their debt to structuring formulae, there is sufficient complexity, variety, and

⁶ In this thesis, *early Iceland* is synonymous with the commonly used “saga age,” “Viking age,” or “saga world,” that is, the period that is described in most detail in the *Íslendingasögur* (i.e., between 870-1050). *Medieval Iceland*, unless otherwise noted, is used to describe the so-called “writing age,” or from the twelfth to fourteenth century (note, however, that I refer to *medieval Europe* in the customary sense of covering the much wider period, 400-1400). Readers familiar with these terms will also have encountered the idea of an Icelandic “golden age,” a period associated with the composition of what are felt by many to be classic Icelandic sagas (like *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*). Given the term’s assumption of a high-point in saga writing, and indeed Icelandic literature, I have avoided its use here.

⁷ See also the interesting comparison of the saga and historical novels made in Harris, “Saga.”

sophistication in the treatment of saga episodes to suggest that each saga author came to the process of writing with his own response to these “arguments” and, especially in the case of outstanding dramatic achievements like *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, had answers to many more questions than are apparent on the surface of the texts. For example, how was the author to represent Gísli’s inner life in a way that reflected his poetry but also upheld the saga tradition of allowing the characters of early Iceland to speak in their own, often taciturn, way about the events around them? As Lars Lönnroth has observed of the author of *Njáls saga*, authors may know much more than they are prepared to concede.⁸ With the possible exception of the more consciously arcane *Eyrbyggja saga* (discussed in ch. 3), the “argument” over authorship tends to simmer in the background.⁹

Perhaps the most significant challenge to this kind of reading for authorship comes from Steblin-Kamenskij, who suggests that because the medieval Icelandic outlook on the past is one of “syncretic truth,” the saga authors are not in a position to analyse the past in a critical way.¹⁰ Steblin-Kamenskij’s challenge is a worthwhile but answerable one.¹¹ The saga authors

⁸ Lönnroth suggests that we “may compare the work of our author with that of an architect designing a house. Tradition and the demands of the public largely determine what should be in the house, and certain sections leave very little room for innovation. Other sections, however, and the overall design are left to the architect, even though he may often have to compromise his basic vision to make room for all the things which are felt to ‘belong’” (*Critical* 39).

⁹ Cf. Andersson’s position in *Icelandic Family Saga*, in which he writes that “the saga comes very close to pure narrative without ulterior motive of any kind, much closer, for example, than the modern practitioners of objectivity, whose work is, after all, socially and philosophically loaded” (32). Cf. more recent scholarship by Andersson (e.g., “Displacement,” esp. 40, and “Politics”).

¹⁰ Steblin-Kamenskij writes that “whoever reported syncretic truth about the past strove simultaneously for accuracy and for reproduction of reality in all its living fullness” (*Saga Mind* 24). Attributing this approach to the past means looking beyond modern distinctions of fiction and truth. He writes that a “literary work is not something in and by itself, but something in which a certain interpretation is implicit. A work of conscious artistic invention is as a rule intended to be understood as artistic invention. But the family sagas obviously do not belong among such works....Fiction in the sagas is, so to speak, ‘latent’ fiction, fiction which the saga creators regarded as permissible, remaining within the limits of truth.” (31)

The quotation reflects the author’s commitment to a fixed and unified sense of saga authorship, one in which the author functions as the expression of a rather limited intellectual conception of truth and representation.

¹¹ See Hallberg, “The Syncretic,” Clover, “Icelandic” 260-62. Also note Tómasson’s comments: “Hugmyndir Steblin-Kamenskij eru skyldar skoðunum sagnfestumanna og álit hans á starfi

are capable of inscribing both a sophisticated recognition of historical difference and the layers of irony and authorial self-consciousness forced by that recognition. Thus, we must read for the differences between sagas and their non-syncretic features as well as their similarities, an approach which places this thesis on the literary side of an ever-narrowing gap between literary scholars and social historians of early Iceland. Social historians and cultural anthropologists have, particularly in the past fifteen years, challenged the critical inheritance of Icelandic School scholars like Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Further, a general sociological approach might be said to be emerging through the criticism of historians like Sverre Bagge, Jesse L. Byock, Jenny Jochens, and William Ian Miller.¹² Joined with the work on the structure of medieval Icelandic thought (e.g., Margaret Clunies Ross; Kirsten Hastrup; John Lindow; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen; Guðrún Nordal) and on the structural patterns of the sagas (e.g., Úlfar Bragason; Carol Clover), we might say that in the past two decades a “New Historicisation” of Old Icelandic studies has diminished our interest in the distinctiveness of the sagas. In that sense, something of the spirit of Steblin-Kamenskij’s criticisms has carried through to the present state of saga studies and, while the critical apparatus for saga analysis has changed greatly, there is a sense in which the sagas have been reclaimed as the cultural source materials they were once, much less problematically, assumed to be.¹³

höfundarins stendur nærri formalistískri bókmenntaskoðun. Tungumálið er skapandi bókmenntanna, en ekki lífið sjálft – það er ekki einstaklingurinn er semur heldur fjöldinn; frumleiki er ekki til, aðeins framleiðsla” (*Formálar* 182).

¹² These scholars have been influenced by socio-anthropological approaches to the text. In this regard, see also Bauman’s argument about the application to Old Icelandic literature of Geertz’ concept of performance (esp. 131-34). Bauman, like the other scholars noted, attribute the beginning of anthropological approaches to the sagas to Turner’s 1971 essay, “An Anthropological Approach.”

¹³ My M.A. thesis (Reid, *Er þat satt*) is in large part a discussion of social historical and cultural anthropological approaches to the sagas. There, I am quite critical of these approaches, a view I no longer hold to firmly. After having spoken, in the past four years, to historians and scholars informed by structuralist approaches to culture and narrative, I no longer see social history and structuralism as necessarily opposing a premise, that I put forward in that thesis, that saga authors had individual artistic goals and aims of interpretation.

We can return to conceptions of authorship in medieval Iceland in chapter one, which with chapter two discusses the theoretical questions associated with authorship in Old Icelandic literature. It suffices now to say that, for the purposes of this thesis, *authorship* is to be understood in the first instance textually, that is, in terms of the authorial position implied by the saga narratives, rather than by immediate reference to the known literary and social history of Iceland. While this thesis nevertheless aims to contribute something to the literary history of Iceland – I hope that the observations I make about conceptions of authorship will be of use to scholars who do not share my approach – a textual approach to Old Icelandic literature allows us to demonstrate the possibilities of saga authorship without being held back by the understandable but often distracting philological debates about authors’ identities, the time and place of composition, the sources of sagas, and which are the sagas’ most authentic or oldest versions.¹⁴ A textual approach to authorship can be described variously as an analysis of a saga’s distinctive narrative voice, of a saga’s construction of speaking positions (like addresser and addressee), or of the discursive positions of authority and ownership that are reflected in a saga’s point of view, its thematic development, its characterisation and representation of reality, and in other aspects of its composition. In this thesis, such issues will centre on the question of the saga authors’ ability to develop historical themes and influence the audience’s conception of the past through creative and highly interpretive characterisation.

¹⁴ It is important to note a textual approach can never replace historical and philological readings of the sagas, and in many cases it relies heavily on these disciplines. A study such as this one would not be possible without the Íslenzk Fornrit editions, which are based on the close comparison of surviving versions of the sagas and are accompanied by discussions of manuscript tradition, time and place of authorship, and place in the development of Icelandic literature. Similarly, historians have been able to look for connections across sagas of all genres so that, despite the retrospective point of view of many of our sources, we do often get something like an overall sense of social conditions between 870 – 1260s. For instance, while there has been considerable debate about the exact nature of the relationship between chieftains and their followers (the *goði-þingmaðr* relationship), there is no denying that it formed an important point of reference for Icelanders for a very long time. It is often difficult to know where to draw a line between difficult to prove but acceptable facts about early and medieval Iceland and what may be the nostalgic invention of thirteenth and fourteenth century authors. See further below, 18.

Thus, I will be emphasising educative, interpretive, and creative functions of saga authorship.

To say much more about authorship as a feature of the intellectual outlook of medieval Iceland at this stage will be to beg the question that is put throughout this thesis. However, it is important to note that I will address the question mostly against the backdrop of a dichotomy between authorship as an interpretive and essentially creative function of a received narrative and authorship as a receptive function that preserves or tells (i.e., *segja*) a pre-existing narrative (Barnes' distinction of "The Artist as Controlling Creator v. The Artist as Played-Upon Instrument"). A list of authorial functions could be given to divide saga authorship into those roles which reveal a controlling, creative author (a.-d.) and those that reflect the more conspicuous, and probably more deliberate, rhetorical mode of the sagas, which implies that the saga author is acted upon by his saga inheritance, by tradition, and by his sense of the saga as a social document (e.-g.). That is, authorship creates the potential to:

- a) possess, order, consume, understand, and enforce knowledge;
- b) convey reality, as if encapsulated by text, across time;
- c) synchronise the universality of Christian belief and the localness of Icelandic culture;
- d) form a bridge between the royal heritage of Norway and the new elements of Icelandic social organisation;
- e) replicate, in narrative, the genealogical and mythic shape of history;
- f) preserve stories that, in a sense, define particular parts of the land as much as they do regional communities; and
- g) give expression to the fame of early Icelanders.

The list gives us some sense of the competing interests of saga authorship. Yet, to discuss authorial functions on the basis of a division between authorship as "controlling" and "acted upon" is in some respects a fraught activity as each of the conceptions of authorship listed above involves both individual creative will and the influence of the received material *upon* the author. A further complication is introduced when we add as an aim of

authorship, not listed above, the expression of the author's pleasure of observation, creation, and story-telling and the pleasure that an audience gains from the sagas' entertainment value, their dramatic force, and their extremely complex operation as ideological documents. Such pleasure is an important function for our analysis of the way in which the sagas helped to define and collate the values of a society that lacked a centralised form of governmental control and so lacked a clear unifying or centralising voice of authority. It would be a mistake to read saga authorship only in terms of oppositions and competing levels of narrative control. Much like the early Icelandic *þing* structure, the Icelandic sagas are sometimes characterised by a lack of clear-cut structural divisions, artistic aims, or binaries.

Nevertheless, distinguishing the concepts as above, and moving from there to a functional approach to saga authorship, does enable a working definition of authorship that marries a number of analytic approaches; it is vital not to conceive of these distinctions as rigid or unchangeable. Rather, we can focus on the changing relationship between the functions of saga authorship and the competition of narrative voices which this dynamism entails. In particular, I explore the dialogue between the creative voices of saga authorship and those narrative voices which seem to be in the service of a transparent historical reality, that is, between the saga's function as a document and performance of the past and its ability to create interpretations that are sensitive to ethical differences and which educate readers about those differences.

While this thesis is not a postmodern study of the problem of Old Icelandic authorship, it draws on recent narrative theory, particularly Hayden White's insistence on the *content* of form and the complexities of representation which that relationship raises. My reading of the sagas has, like that of most twenty-first century students, been influenced by the general precepts of discourse theory (and a sense of the author as a *function*) that we find in Barthes' and Foucault's influential articles on authorship. It has also been shaped by the emphasis on textuality that we see in narrative analyses (in

particular, Genette), by the semiotics and hermeneutics of Eco, and by the interest in dialogics and voice in Bakhtinian scholarship.

It will be necessary, particularly in the first two chapters of this thesis, to develop an analytical framework for a discussion of authorship which is more specifically focused on the narrative complexities of Old Icelandic literature. Scholars of Old Icelandic literature, while influenced by theoretical developments outside the field, have had to develop focused approaches to saga authorship that account for the particularly complex relationship between saga authors and the traditions upon which they drew. I discuss these approaches in detail before I commence readings of particular sagas. Nevertheless, the more general approaches mentioned above inform our discussion of how saga authors claimed sufficient control over their narratives to classify them as authors in the modern sense that they formed a creative vision for their works and understood that a distinctive historical interpretation was implied by their creativity. The authorship that they practised was the authorship of interpretation and learning, in which both the author and his audience sought not only to hear traditional stories performed well but to reach a better understanding of the motives that lay behind the events in the near and distant past, and the factors that influenced the success and failure of the famous members of Scandinavian society. Inherited traditions became part of a medieval desire to learn about and teach human behaviour in a range of contexts, and so became the possession of a new type of saga performance. And, in the context of a narrative style that values objectivity, the most compelling evidence for an interpretive authorship function in medieval Iceland comes in the saga authors' treatment of and engagement with their characters.

It remains the case that saga authors observed many of the conventions associated with tradition and adopted rhetorical devices that blurred the distinction between tradition and historical interpretation. Yet, despite the apparent objectivity of saga narration, in the authors' development of certain characters we glimpse a strong interest in early Icelandic society and in the meaning of past events for contemporary audiences. When characters make

major decisions, such as Vésteinn's decision to ride to Gemlufallsheiði in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, or when characters respond conspicuously to the events around them or comments by others, they may represent themselves in ways which overcome generic restraints on authorial intrusion. The authors are given an opportunity to place historical events in the context of directly expressed emotional and psychological reactions. This not only adds an intensity and insightfulness to the narrative that are difficult to achieve by an exterior perspective; it provides the opportunity for the audience to view events with sympathy, empathy, and with a sense of the "drama of will" that is unfolding.¹⁵ In such moments, characters perform a *secondary authorship*; that is, while they may not express directly an author's view of the events of the saga, characters' conspicuous statements about events may give us indications of both the range of authorial concerns and an author's conception of saga writing.

The style of saga authorship and the medieval possession of saga narrative that results are highly accommodating; that is, the saga form permits a wide range of material and modes of narration to be included. Saga authors deploy a mix of narrative voices in order to produce a literature that is sophisticated in its conception of historical figures but which is also sensitive to a social need to preserve and perform traditional modes of narration. Saga authorship is a performative, responsive, and creative pursuit. It is practised in a way that sees the co-existence of apparently oppositional aims: objectivity and interpretation, thematic development and traditional narration, education and preservation, history and creativity.

Scope

This thesis does not attempt a complete discussion of concepts of authorship in medieval Iceland. Rather, it seeks to develop a single argument within that broader issue: that our understanding of saga authorship can be enhanced and deepened by greater attention to the saga authors' relationship

¹⁵ I am adopting Robert Cook's phrase to describe the relationship between characterisation and plot development in the sagas; see his "Sagas."

with certain characters and by examining more closely the methods of characterisation in the sagas. My particular interest lies in two areas: the authors' ability to control characters as agents of the authors' own intellectual and creative concerns, a process I discuss more completely, in chapter one, in terms of *secondary authorship*; and the author's joint possession of saga narratives with their traditional sources. The argument is framed by my interest in the saga form's ability to accommodate a variety of authorial functions, both documentary and interpretive in nature.

I will be concerned only with the following secular historical works: the family sagas,¹⁶ *Heimskringla*, *Orkneyinga saga*, and the *Sturlunga saga* compilation,¹⁷ and general references in this thesis to "the sagas" should be taken as references to these works. The family sagas discussed in most detail are *Víga-Glúms saga* (ch. 1), *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* (ch. 1), *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (chs. 1-2), *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 3), *Brennu-Njáls saga* (chs. 4-5), *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 6), *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, and *Fóstbræðra saga* (ch. 7). My interest in *Heimskringla* is directed particularly at the portrayal of Icelandic characters when they are abroad, and I have chosen to pay special attention to Hjalti Skeggjason's characterisation in Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs saga helga* (ch. 6). *Sturlunga saga* is discussed at length in chapter two, especially the question of narrative voice in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*, and I discuss *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* and *Þorgils saga skarða* in chapters six and seven respectively. *Orkneyinga saga*, a saga with elements in common with family sagas, kings' sagas, and sagas of *Sturlunga saga*, is analysed in chapter seven with a view to what it can tell us about the characterisation of Þorgils skarði in the saga about his life. While this sample does, I think, provide a

¹⁶ I uniformly refer to the *Íslendingasögur* ("sagas of the Icelanders") as *family sagas*. This is a very broad generic designation, a fact reflected most recently in the organisation of the sagas in the collected translation of the sagas, *Complete Sagas of the Icelanders*, which lists the sagas in terms of their categorisation as epics, outlaw sagas, heroic sagas, poets' sagas, and so on. So far as it suggests modern generic consciousness, this thematic division may be misleading and obfuscates the important point that these sagas are common in their emphasis on kinship and similar relationships of obligation (see also chapters one and two of this thesis). In that sense, the term *family saga* is justifiably broad. See Andersson, *Icelandic Family Saga* for his list and summary of family sagas (see also Andersson, "Why").

¹⁷ Herein referred to as either *Sturlunga saga* or the *Sturlunga* compilation.

sufficient range of texts from which to abstract an argument about authorship in medieval Iceland, some important omissions must be noted: I will not discuss the bishops' sagas, saints' lives, the *fornaldarsögur*, or the *riddararsögur*.

The focus here is on the *possible* functions of saga authorship which, at various times, were conceived by the authors. There is an obvious danger in reading distinctive sagas or saga episodes as evidence of common authorial functions: a saga's dramatic excellence, for instance, may be a sign that it exceeds the general possibilities of saga writing, and the sagas we find most interesting today may well be atypical and, like much good literature, represent an innovative breach of the accepted conceptions of authorship. Thus, while I have chosen to analyse sagas and saga episodes that seem to me to be representative of saga authorship more generally, I am also tentative in making claims about what all, or even most, saga authors may have seen as the role of authorship.

As I have indicated above, a common theme of *possession* runs through this thesis, but it is a metaphor I deploy in the broad sense of *control*. For instance, the term is useful when discuss what happens when writers, through narrative, take creative and/or intellectual possession of past reality? Thus, I use *possession* when I wish to emphasise ways in which traditional narratives were altered by a thirteenth century, interpretive function of authorship. In that sense, *possession* is put forward as a term with which to conceive the interpretive changes to tradition that the authors made, or a function of saga authorship that permitted interpretation. As a corollary to this notion of *possession* as authorial intrusion, I employ the word to describe the influence of tradition, that is, how authors were controlled by, or in the possession of, narratives as received. As such, *joint possession* covers the relationship between authors' control of their narratives and tradition's control of their saga writing.

Character and Narrative

A limit on the scope of this thesis comes as a result of my strong interest in characterisation and its place in narrative, an interest that I would also

identify in the predominantly literary focus of scholars such as Bragason, Cook,¹⁸ Foote, Ólason,¹⁹ Schach,²⁰ and Sveinsson (all of whom have a strong interest in saga characterisation).²¹ I have also been influenced by the sense of authorship developed by Bagge in his various studies of medieval historiography, particularly his discussions of the educative strand in these works, the effect of their episodic structure, and the close connection of character and history in the sagas.²² The most important implication for this thesis is the value which Bagge believes medieval Icelanders attached to

¹⁸ Cook stresses that the characters of the family sagas are interesting “in their own right” (“Sagas” 88), a view that resonates with the attempt in this thesis to examine the agency of characters and the effect of interpretive characterisation rather than merely their function as part narrative development. See also his “Women,” “The Character,” “Reading for Character.” For an early example of a psychological approach to the sagas, see Hight, who observes that despite the minimal vocabulary of inner life in the sagas, “an act here, a word there, will often reveal to the attentive reader the whole secret of a situation” (70). See also Wilson “Comedy and Character.”

¹⁹ See, e.g., Ólason, *Dialogues*, esp. 98-99, 101-06. On Ólason’s desire for increased scholarly attention to characterisation, see 135-38.

²⁰ See esp. “Character Creation,” in which he lists the main forms of character portrayal in the sagas, including introductions, contrast, juxtaposition, descriptive passages, and what is described as “character by instalments” (see 254-57) or the repetition of a characteristic for a particular effect. See also “Some Observations” and “Character Transformation” for slightly earlier indications of Schach’s scholarship, which can be regarded as a leading attempt to shift focus from structure to sophisticated saga characterisation.

²¹ Sveinsson’s discussions of *Brennu-Njáls saga* are the best illustration. Cf. Lönnroth, “Rhetoric,” esp. 155-58; Gurevich, “From Saga to Personality;” and Miller, “Emotions,” esp. 105. Both Gurevich and Miller argue for disposition-based characterisation in the sagas. See also the socio-linguistic approach to emotions in Heinrichs, “Apposition,” esp. 25-28; and Dronke’s interpretive method in her discussion of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*Role*, esp. 5).

²² Bagge, in his study of *Heimskringla*, argues that Snorri Sturluson was more than a compiler because he “reflected on what to include or not” (Bagge, *Society* 31), a definition which would see the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* in the category of author (see, e.g., Tranter’s comparative analysis of *Hrafnis saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*; Vigfusson, *Prolegomena* xcix-cxii) and which certainly dispels any doubt about Snorri Sturluson’s status as author, or the “fundamental creativity” behind the *Edda* (Clunies Ross, “Conservation” 129). As Andersson points out, narrative control of history (and for what end that control is sought) is an important metaphor for Bagge: concerning the account of the Battle of Fimreite in *Sverris saga*, Bagge writes, “the author not only fails to give an account of Sverrir’s strategy but narrates the events in a way that directly seems intended to obscure it” (*Gang Leader* 43; see also “Ideology”). These historians are active in promoting particular points view and, as is suggested by the combined structuralist/social analyses done in the field (e.g., Lönnroth, *Critical*), Icelandic authors were not immune to European influence or a medieval tendency to be heavy-handed in pushing a particular bias, ethical point of view, or to writing with a distinct aim in mind (e.g., *Gang Leader* 91-93 in relation to Sturla Þórðarson’s authorship, in 1265, of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*). In this regard, the sagas are not a special case; the objective veil created by saga style is often very thin indeed (Lönnroth, “Rhetoric;” Schach, “Some Forms;” Whaley, “A Useful Past”). Especially in later works, saga authors are capable of taking a morally instructive point of view (Ólason, *Dialogues* 180-86).

characterisation and its relationship to success: “Snorri’s world is one in which human intelligence is the most important determining factor” (Andersson, Rev. 280).²³ For example, Bagge considers Snorri’s biography of Saint Óláfr (in *Óláfs saga helga*) a success because of Snorri’s integration of persuasive tools drawn from the world of literature and of ethics, whereby stranding and scene shifting are combined to heighten both coherence and the possibility of reader empathy or distaste (e.g., *Society* 42).²⁴ Further, Bagge’s observations about *Heimskringla* can be set alongside the implied conceptions of authorship drawn from the *Snorra Edda*, a work which “cleverly fulfilled the twin objectives of medieval as well as modern discursive writing, namely, to instruct and entertain” (Clunies Ross, “Conservation” 129). I suggest that Bagge’s approach to the nature of historical writing in medieval Scandinavia can be productively combined with a literary focus on characterisation in the sagas.²⁵

In chapters one and two, I will provide a more detailed outline of what a character- and narrative-oriented approach to saga authorship entails, but for the moment I should point out that I focus mainly on secondary authorship in terms of characters’ knowledge and interpretation: these form a valuable parallel to what saga authors set out to do themselves. This is not to say that the saga authors saw themselves in the situation of their characters – naturally, saga authors are more skilled than to make a direct correlation between themselves and historical characters – but rather to suggest that certain processes of understanding and interpreting the world were, perhaps anachronistically, part of the saga authors’ sense of the past, and that such themes are particularly relevant to a study of authorship. As such, this thesis is particularly concerned with the glimpses which saga authors give us of their characters’ inner lives,

²³ See also the character-basis of historical writing in *Morkinskinna*; as Andersson and Gade observe, their careers are described “less in terms of political history as in terms of character study” (2; see also 62-63 for Andersson and Gade’s discussion of reflexive literary comments in *Morkinskinna*).

²⁴ Cf. the approach to medieval historiography in Wallace-Hadrill, esp. 46 and 54-57.

²⁵ See further Bagge, “Individual,” esp. 45-50: Bagge’s approach to *Sverris saga* reflects his approach to the relationship of objective characterisation in the historical sagas and the saga authors’ conception of history as the history of individuals who are driven by genealogical or supernatural forces to conduct themselves in a more successful way, and whose tactical ability makes them singular and exceptional if not individual in the modern sense of the term.

that is, when moments of reflection are emphasised, indications are given of character development, when characters' knowledge or ignorance is stressed, when there are signs of the characters' sense of their place in the world, and so on. One might say that such inner concerns form an axis of contemplation and engagement with reality which, despite important historical differences, saga characters share with their authors.

While character analysis may allow for some narrowing in the focus of this thesis, an interest in the narrative techniques of saga composition brings with it expansion and digression. I follow Clunies Ross in the view that the sagas are less modally or generically confined than nineteenth and much of twentieth saga scholarship has suggested ("The Intellectual Complexion"), and that saga narratives are capable of creating sophisticated layers of meaning through their allusion to and incorporation of various mythic and genealogical paradigms.²⁶ A thorough working out of the genealogical side of this intertextual world is present in G. Nordal's impressive study of *Íslendinga saga (Art and Ethics)*; she reveals historical narratives that are as complex in their patterning of associations as the skaldic verses are in their patterns of meaning, metaphor, and word order. At a more theoretical level, Torfi Tulinius and Stefanie Würth have recently demonstrated that sagas' thematic development is better conceived in terms of dialogic and discursive relations, a further challenge to our sense of the boundaries on narrative form and meaning that is, in modern literature, imposed by generic expectations.

The result of this focus on narrative and characterisation is a thesis that argues for a reading of saga authorship as a complex meeting point of authorial creativity and narrative control, historical interpretation, and the sagas' self-performance as narratives in possession of the past. The act of creativity, in particular the creation of characters' inner concerns and development, places the saga narratives in a sophisticated dialogue with the traditions of saga Iceland and the records of the medieval intellectual, political, and clerical community. The inner worlds of characters that are sometimes glimpsed are key indications

²⁶ See also her *Prolonged Echoes* (esp. Vol. 2), and "Development."

of the authors' role in establishing and defining that dialogue and point to a conception of authorship as a multi-functional activity.

Chapter 1: Reading for Authorship

So I seemed to have arrived at this: doubtless I have methods, but they begot themselves, in which case I am only their proprietor, not their father. (Samuel L. Clemens, ["The Art of Authorship"] 217)

The Authorship Question

There are few direct comments by medieval Icelanders about conceptions of authorship, or about the role of saga authors in the Icelandic community, which we might consider in relation to our knowledge of the development of the saga form, the composition of the sagas, or the nature in which the sagas were received by thirteenth and fourteenth century readers and compilers. While prologues to a number of medieval Icelandic works other than family sagas provide some help in understanding the compilation process and its aims,¹ a medieval statement on the role and position of the sagas written about early Iceland is missing. Naturally, however, issues of authorship are often to be found at the fore of discussions about sagas, and some of the key debates in Old Icelandic studies have been defined by the different intellectual and creative aims that are attributed to saga authors. That is, the absence of medieval Icelandic comments on the role of the family sagas and the nature of the narrative voice in the sagas have meant that we have generally had to develop a clear position on the creative and intellectual ambit of saga writing

¹ See, for example, Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise*, Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, and the prologues to the compilations *Heimskringla* and *Sturlunga saga*. See further Tómasson, *Formálar*.

before we can move on to discuss other aspects of interpretation. Topics in medieval Icelandic authorship are often very strongly contested; perhaps the chief question has been the historical, as against the literary, nature of the sagas, a major concern in the various debates that surround the question of the sagas' relationship to the oral traditions of early Iceland.

This chapter responds to these concerns about authorship by proposing an approach that acknowledges and considers the sagas' uncertain historicity, the scholarly debate about the intellectual context of saga writing, and the studies that have been made of the generic constraints on saga authors' creativity and analysis. This broad-based approach, which emphasises the multi-functional nature of saga authorship, requires a relatively large amount of theoretical founding, and I have found it necessary to delay the more specific readings that I will undertake in the thesis until after I have discussed the most relevant approaches to the sagas. This thesis conceives of saga authorship as encompassing a range of possibilities rather than as either a predominantly documentary or inventive pursuit. As a result, I have found scholarship on both sides of the literary/historical divide, and indeed the old book-prose/free-prose debate, to be instructive.

As I have already suggested in the Introduction, my approach is based largely on characterisation and the ways in which it reflects conceptions of authorship. I also note there that the sense of authorship that we gain from the sagas as narratives with specific styles and conventions must be borne in mind when we analyse characterisation. This issue will be taken up in chapter two, where I will offer an introduction to and review of the singular importance of narrative technique in saga studies. It will be seen that structural approaches to the sagas, and especially the sagas' complex narrative voice, support an analysis of the sagas' function as *both* documentary and interpretive works.

Towards the close of this chapter, I suggest that some acts and representations by characters are indications of the possibilities of authorship in medieval Iceland. I have called these acts and representations *secondary authorship*: while they may not be actual instances of authorship, they involve

qualities and activities that are traditionally associated with it. For instance, a character's internal perception of the events around him or her may share a number of the creative and interpretive steps that we associate with the author's arrangements of the events of the saga. Naturally, this is not a correlation that can be made lightly, but in chapters three to seven I am able to illustrate fully the analytical step that moves from characters' acts of representation and interpretation and the aims of saga authors. The present chapter lays down some of the essential components of the character-based approach and refers to *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, *Gisla saga Súrssonar*, and *Víga-Glúms saga* to illustrate the concepts raised.

Before I turn to *secondary authorship* and patterns of authorship that we find reflected in saga structures and narrative patterns, I discuss some of the recent approaches taken to the social, cultural, and intellectual contexts of saga writing. In particular, I am interested in whether we can view intellectual life in medieval Iceland as characterised by historical evaluation and interpretation. The identification of these intellectual qualities will help to support the proposition put in this thesis that the saga authors sought to understand and empathise with characters of the past in a way that broke saga conventions associated with the objectivity of narrative voice and the self-performing function of traditional saga telling. Social concern with the past and with the development of literary genres provided the basis for historicity and creativity to co-exist in saga writing in a way that paralleled the *joint possession* of sagas by tradition and creative authorship.

The question of the social context of saga writing frames the more literary-based approach to authorship in Old Icelandic literature. The discussion will lead me to introduce some key metaphors and concepts that can help us to conceptualise and describe authors' relationships with their materials: I suggest that relationships of *possession* in the sagas allow us to describe the sagas' development of social and textual relations, and that our detection of an intellectual and cultural *distance* or *closeness* in the sagas' conception and narration of the past is central to our understanding of their authorship. My aim

is to highlight the co-existence in Old Icelandic literature of contradictory positions in the sagas – for instance, the co-existence of formal truth and actual falseness in characters’ statements, or the authors’ simultaneous affinity with saga characters and distance from them – and to question what the aesthetics of these contradictions may be.

The major terms that I introduce in this chapter are *possession* and *secondary authorship*; they reflect the steps in the argument put in this thesis:

- a) saga authors are in the complex position of jointly controlling (with tradition, audience expectations, and stylistic norms) the form and content of the sagas;
- b) the joint possession of saga narratives requires the adoption of a sophisticated narrative voice that can, through changes in the historical perspective that is adopted, signal underlying truths, and a narrative voice that can shift quite radically from closeness to the characters and events described (i.e., a state of being *in their possession*) to a critical distance from them (i.e., taking *possession of* them);
- c) it is also a narrative voice that engages, in a proto-humanist way, with the difficulties of living in the times described in the sagas; thus, characters are not merely functions of plot but give voice to an authorial sympathy with characters of the past. Characters’ reactions to knowledge, their representation of truth or reality, the manner in which they give or accept advice, their comments on themselves, and so on, form possible points of empathy between saga authors and characters.

As I have indicated, these steps require preliminary consideration of the social context of the writing age, and how the people of that society might have thought about the difference of the saga age.

The Context of Saga Writing

Barthes' warnings about using the lives of authors to discern their intentions could be seen as largely irrelevant in saga studies, as we have little knowledge about the real persons who may have been the saga authors except, that is, as we find them portrayed in texts we seek to interpret. This is a long-recognised circularity in saga studies, and dissuades us, for the most part, from trying to draw up biographies of Snorri Sturluson, Sturla Þórðarson, and the early Scandinavian poets as a means of ascertaining their artistic and more broadly social and intellectual aims (Reid, "Er þat satt" 7-22). That is not to say that scholars of Old Icelandic have altogether avoided the so-called "intentional fallacy," and one might argue that more than enough time has been spent on the question of who wrote which saga. Perhaps the main contribution of such discussions is what they tell us about the evolution of saga writing,² something that can in turn help in a discussion of literary influence, the extent of a literary milieu in medieval Iceland, and give us a broader understanding of the type of people involved in saga writing. Some of the well established questions in this respect are:

- a) Were saga authors mainly clerical figures, or was saga authorship an activity that was undertaken by a broad cross-section of the medieval community?³
- b) Were there discrete centres of saga production (e.g., the monasteries in the North, Þingeyrar and Munkaþverá,⁴ and at the two medieval

² That is, the development of objective saga style may become clearer if we are surer about who wrote sagas and when. See Andersson, *Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* and Clover, *Medieval Saga*.

³ See, e.g., Lönnroth, *Critical* 105-23. Lönnroth's study of *Brennu-Njáls saga* suggests that that author took a critical viewpoint of the ideological, textual, and religious influences around him, that is, "[i]n relation to the clerical and chivalric literature of the Middle Ages, he stands as free and independent as he does in his relation to the native saga tradition. He does not copy from "sources" but uses from memory whatever fits his own plan: to write a saga that incorporates both the traditional style of sagas and Christian values and ideas" (123).

⁴ See, e.g., Andersson, "Snorri."

bishoprics, Hólar and Skálholt) or were the sagas equally the concern of secular figures?⁵

- c) It is doubtful that we can speak of the *evolution* of saga style towards the family sagas without imposing a modern or highly retrospective sense of the relative quality of different saga genres, but is there nevertheless a movement in saga style that can be traced historically and which acts to define broad parameters of interpretation?⁶
- d) What is the nature of the sagas' debt to pre-existing oral traditions?
- e) Did the saga authors pick and choose between various accounts of well-known incidents?
- f) Is there a connection between a possible medieval sense of the loss of independence to Norway and the creativity of the thirteenth century?⁷
- g) In particular, do the family sagas reflect a thirteenth century desire to reclaim the values of independence, honour, and order that were felt to characterise the saga age?
- h) How widely were sagas read aloud for the purpose of entertainment and information?

With respect to the last of these questions, the oft quoted saga reading, or saga entertainment (*sagnaskemtan*) at a wedding feast at Reykhólar,⁸

⁵ Given the enormous cost of manuscript production in medieval Iceland, one must assume that, even if the sagas were enjoyed by a large number of people, they were owned in manuscript form by only a few.

⁶ See, e.g., Clover's analysis of the development of saga style in *Medieval Saga*. It is generally accepted that the family sagas are, in a sense, caught in time between the economical style demonstrated, for instance, by the early secular work *Íslendingabók* and the later, more European, style of sagas that display a consciousness of Romance literature, a more clearly defined moral agenda, and a re-modelling of Germanic heroic figures to fit the interests of Christian authors who may have been troubled by the extent of violence and social disruption in the Sturlung Age (see Ólason, *Dialogues* 180-84 regarding *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* as a cautionary tale). Further, later sagas like *Grettis saga* appear to incorporate elements of the *fornaldarsögur* ("stories of ancient times"), a group of sagas more concerned with the fantastic than with the tragic aspects of domestic life in Iceland. On the late quality of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, see Ólason, *Dialogues* 186: "in the sagas written during the fourteenth century heroes move to – and sometimes beyond society's margins." See also below, ch. 7.

⁷ Ólason, *Dialogues* 9 considers the sagas in terms of dialogues with the past about loss.

described in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, suggests that certain sagas could be used as entertainment during celebrations and other important gatherings. The author of that saga also informs us:

Frá því er nokkut sagt, er þó er lítil[1] tilkoma, hverir þar skemtu eða hverju skemt var. Þat er í frásögn haft, er nú mæla margir í móti ok látask eigi vitat hafa, því at margir ganga duldir ins sanna ok hyggja þat satt, er skrökkvat er, en logit þat, [er] satt er. Hrólfr af Skálmarnesi sagði sögu frá Hröngviði víkingi ok frá Óláfi liðmannakonungi ok haugbroti Þráins berserks ok Hrómundi Gripssyni, ok margar vísur með. En þessarri sögu var skemt Sverri konungi, ok kallaði hann slíkar lygisögur skemtiligastar. Ok þó kunnu menn at telja ættir sínar til Hrómundar Gripssonar. Þessa sögu hafði Hrólfr sjálf samansetta. Ingimundr prestr sagði sögu Orms [B]arreyjarskálds ok vísur margar ok flokk góðan við enda sögunnar, er Ingimundr hafði ortan, ok hafa þó margir fróðir menn þessa sögu fyrir satt. (17-18)

Something is reported about such things, although unimportant, about who told stories or about whom stories were. This is found in a tale of the past that many now contradict and make themselves out to not have known, because many go against the truth and think it true, what has been invented, and it a lie, what is true. Hrólfr from Skálmarnes told a saga about the Viking Hröngviðr Gripsson and of Óláfr the king's retainer and of the cairn breaker, Þráinn the berserk, and Hrómundr Gripsson, and many verses as well. And these sagas were told to King Sverrir, and he said that such lying sagas were the most entertaining. And yet men could reckon their genealogies back to Hrómundr Gripsson. Hrólfr himself composed this saga. Ingimundr the

⁸ See further Foote, “*Sagnaskemtan*,” Bragason, “Ok þó;” Bauman 135-37. See also Andersson and Gade’s discussion of *Morkinskinna* (esp. 963, and *Morkinskinna* ch. 42).

priest told the saga of Ormr Barreyjarskáld and recited many verses and good *flokkar* at the close of the saga, which Ingimundr had composed, and many wise men have claimed these sagas to be true.

While this comment about the nature of the sagas, and their truth value, does not go into detail about the particular problems that were raised by the co-existence of invented and inherited compositions, it does indicate that such issues were part of a thirteenth century discussion of the sagas and their place in popular reckonings of the past. Throughout *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, the author displays an interest in the truthfulness or otherwise of words, and in the nature of their influence, and his discussion of the entertainment at Reykhólar can be viewed in light of a more general concern with representation and the reliability of words. An amusing exchange of verses concerning Þórðr Þorvaldsson's bad breath precedes the author's list of the entertainment at the feast. The author's apparent pleasure in this spiteful banter, and his later concern about what people think about the old stories, are candid acknowledgments of a world of thinking about words and their performance. The thematising of truthful representation can, in turn, be identified in many of the sagas, and one must ask whether many of the saga authors did not have a sense of the problems of representation and of historical narration similar to that which we see expressed in the comments by the author of *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*.

Taken with other cultural indicators, the sagas suggest that medieval Icelanders were obsessive about representation and precise documentation: the medieval literary and historical corpus, especially considering the size of the medieval population, is exceptionally large and varied; the law code *Grágas*, *Landnámabók*, and *Íslendingabók* attest, in their frequent use of stories, to the fact that Icelanders associated precision with narration; the political economy of honour in the family sagas indicates that Icelanders were, at the very least, influenced by a Germanic ideal of fame as the ideal form of afterlife. In addition, the impressive genealogical knowledge that is implied by the sagas suggests that genealogy formed part of a general current of information that

connected family life with history (see further below, ch. 2). The intellectual activity of the thirteenth century represented an enormous social commitment to the preservation of traditions, historical knowledge, and to the forming of unified written documents about them.

There is an understandable desire on the part of most saga scholars to know as much as possible about the world which produced such a variety of works, to know how much difference existed between the society of medieval Iceland and that of the saga age, and to understand how Icelanders conceived of that difference and the role of the sagas in expressing and interpreting it. The issue is important here because it goes to the question of the sagas' character as historically interpretive texts.⁹ The first extant written account of Icelandic history, Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, post-dates the last events of the saga age (870 – 1050) by seventy years, and the bulk of saga age events (in the tenth century) by more years still. There is a gap of another hundred years before the earliest of the family sagas, in the form that we have received them, is composed,¹⁰ and the remainder of the family sagas were probably written during or after a troublesome period of Icelandic history leading to the loss to Norway of Icelandic independence in the mid-1260s.¹¹ By that time, almost

⁹ The question of the difference between early and medieval Iceland is discussed in more detail below, 27.

¹⁰ It is generally accepted that the *Heiðarvíga saga* was written in about 1220 (e.g., Einarsson 136). In the twentieth century, S. Nordal's dating of the sagas, which emphasises Snorri Sturluson's role in the development of secular writing (see S. Nordal, *Formáli*) and a generic division of the sagas based on the period of history they describe ("Sagalitteraturen"), has held sway until quite recent re-evaluations; see, for example, Andersson, "The Emergence" and "Snorri", Andersson & Miller, "Introduction;" and Byock "History." See also Andersson's earlier *Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins*. On S. Nordal's generic divisions, see also below, ch. 2.

¹¹ Because of the dominant political position of the Sturlung family, the period is often referred to as the Sturlung Age. From a modern point of view, the Sturlung family is as remarkable for its intellectual output as its political power: three of Iceland's best-known intellectual figures belonged to the family, Snorri Sturluson (author of, at least, *Heimskringla* and the *Snorra Edda* or *Prose Edda*), his nephew Sturla Þórðarson (known to have written *Íslendinga saga*, versions of *Landnámabók* and *Kristni saga*, and a saga about King Magnús), and Sturla's older brother Óláfr, who wrote the *Third Grammatical Treatise*. Óláfr demonstrates an extensive knowledge of the written works known in his day, referring to 34 poets and 123 examples of poetry (Sigurðsson, "Óláfr" 99). One of the most interesting aspects of Óláfr's text is the absence of certain poets, "such as major poets from the *Íslendinga sögur* who never became court poets, like Gísli Súrsson," perhaps an "indication that the common poetic tradition had its centre at royal courts in other countries rather than at the Althing" (109-111). It might also indicate that

three hundred years lay between saga authors and some of the most famous incidents of the saga corpus, ample time, one would think, for stories to change, for traditions to speak more about contemporary matters than the concerns of the saga age, and for information about the past to be viewed in terms of the religious, political, and intellectual aims of medieval writers.

Yet, there are a number of factual matters about early Iceland, drawn largely from thirteenth century family sagas, that are seldom disputed by scholars of Old Icelandic literature. For example, there is widespread agreement that the National Assembly (Alþing) was established in around 930 (that is, 56 years after the first settler Ingólfr Árnason arrived in Iceland) and that, by the time of its founding, Iceland had become fully settled, in most part by migrants from Norway. A wide range of connected matters are disputed, such as the ethnicity of the settlers' dependants and slaves, the nature of power relations amongst the settlers, the early development of local assemblies, and the political and religious function of the heathen chieftains. Further, it is important to recognise that the rate of social change between 874 and the 1260s was perhaps less dramatic than from the 1260s on:¹² although the Sturlung age was a violent time, the difference in the representation of disputes in early Iceland and those of the thirteenth century lies not so much in the number of deaths as in the number of fighters present,¹³ as well as in the execution style killings that we find in *Sturlunga saga*. These differences, together with an obvious difference in the tone of narration in the family sagas and *Sturlunga saga*, may lead

Óláfr wrote with an intellectual outlook in mind which he associated with royal courts, in a sense steering his scholarship in a direction approved of, or even relevant, there. Sørensen regards the Icelanders in Norway as “a kind of literary Swiss Guard” (“Social Institutions” 13).

¹² Here I am thinking of the influence of the Norwegian crown, and of central government, on Icelandic society.

¹³ The battles in *Sturlunga saga* consist of much larger forces than those of the family sagas, but the disputes in *Sturlunga saga* are subjected to more complex negotiation procedures (for quarter, compensation, and so on) – to the extent that the armies at times appear to function mainly as a show of force – and the number of fatalities tend not to be higher than those in family saga disputes. This is, however, a general observation, with exceptions. Regarding Sighvatr's and Sturla's Grímsey expedition, for instance (*Íslendinga saga* ch. 44), we read: “Þat er sögn manna, at þrír tigur mann ok tveir men létist af þeim, er farit höfðu at byskupi með þeim Signvati, þá er fóru ór Grímsey” (109); “Men say that, of the men who went with Sighvatr against the bishop at Grímsey, thirty-two died.”

modern readers to exaggerate the differences between the saga age and the Sturlung age (Miller, *Bloodtaking* ch. 2). We ought also to note that saga authors quite often point out the changes that occurred, particularly changes brought about by the Icelandic conversion to Christianity in 1000.¹⁴ That is, we must be careful in identifying social change that the saga authors themselves do not point out.

The scholarly debate in this area suggests that it will remain difficult to be precise about the differences between the Sturlung and saga ages.¹⁵ The difficulty is closely related to the multi-functional nature of saga authorship itself: the authors are not precise about their historical point of view, and the narrative voice of the sagas seems to embody both critical and objective perspectives. In this context, divergent scholarly views about the sagas' historical reliability emerge, especially with regard to the sagas' position in the social and ethical history of early and medieval Iceland. In the family saga in particular, points of view drawn from the two periods overlap in complex ways. The ambiguity of perspective that results is an important indicator of the sagas' ability to function in a variety of ways, from highly interpretive to traditional.

In terms of the interpretive content in the historical narratives about early Iceland, one can only assert that a) the society of the family sagas is probably an idealised representation of a culture that was relatively stable from the settlement to the loss of independence, and b) the saga authors can, to an extent, be trusted to indicate important changes that occurred. That is not to say that the saga authors did not make mistakes – anachronisms have been identified in the family sagas – but it would be incorrect to say that saga authors conceived of their task as an altogether inventive one. At the heart of our

¹⁴ See below, ch. 2, where I discuss the *Eyrbyggja saga* author's regular recognition of the differences in social and religious values prior to Christianity. Note that I am not now concerned with whether the saga author is factually correct about heathen practice, rather the nature and extent of his interest in historical differences.

¹⁵ On the vexed question of defining the differences between the Sturlung Age and early Iceland, see esp. Sveinsson, *The Age*; Byock, "The Age;" Miller, *Bloodtaking* 40, 319; Kristjánsson, "Íslendingasögur." It is important to remember that the "relative proximity to the events is in itself no guarantee of veracity" (Clover, "Icelandic" 233; see also Clunies Ross, "Myth" 675).

acceptance of some saga facts over others is a fair assumption, although a difficult one to prove, that family saga authors did not write an entirely fictional history of early Iceland in the way that medieval authors might write a fantastic depiction of events in one of the lying sagas (*lygasögur*).¹⁶ The problem for our discussion of medieval Icelandic authorship, then, is not so much whether aspects of the family sagas can be said to reflect reality – clearly they can – but whether there are indications in the sagas of where the saga authors, and consequently we as modern readers, can draw a line between saga authors' desire to represent the real and their wish to write an enjoyable narrative that contains a number of ideological and thematic currents that the audience would recognise and respond to in something like a critical fashion. The best resolution of this issue involves a recognition of the saga authors' performance of what seem contradictory functions, and their ability to write in a way that accommodated competing voices.

Competing Voices

A major contribution of new historicism has not so much been that it accepts the multiple, scattered, and relative elements which constitute meaning, but that new historicism as a general approach implies that there can be more detailed understanding of the historical past which *coexists* with our differentiation of past perspectives and an appreciation of the distortions that may arise when scholars attempt to create unified historical narratives. This is a powerful development for approaches to Old Icelandic literature: it points the way for a discussion of cultural practices, such as authorship, in positive terms, despite the texts' uncertain relation to tradition, historical reality, and social developments of the thirteenth century. Although the historical point of view in the sagas does not exist apart from the contingency of their complex production (but, to an extent, through it), we are still able to identify certain points in the authors' understanding of historical events. There remains a discernible social

¹⁶ The term *lygasögur*, as we see from the description of *sagnaskemtan* above, is a medieval term that appears to recognise that some sagas could be categorised as more truthful than others.

energy through which art and meaning do speak, not as a “blazing genesis” but “complex, ceaseless borrowing and lendings” (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 7), in this case of tradition, of contemporary events and genealogies, myth and poetry, and religious discourse. Although “there can be no single method, no overall picture, no exhaustive and definitive cultural poetics” (19), there does remain the possibility of analysis and discussion of authorship and its relation to an historical period. While it may not be possible for us to trace the development of a classic style which embodies an eternal, universal meaning, a meaning remains, apart from our own, which must inform our interpretation of the sagas and the concepts of authorship they reflect. Importantly, variation in the narrative voice does not mean that we cannot identify an overarching, if diverse, functions of saga authorship. A functional approach to saga authorship need not to attempt a reconciliation of historical and literary readings of the sagas. But, by conceiving of saga authorship as a multi-functional activity, we may be able to avoid the often simplistic designation of the sagas as either historical or fictional works.

As Anne Middleton observes, medieval literary-critical and historical scholarship are becoming less distinguishable, “not only in the interpretations both kinds of scholars offer but in the kind of evidence they adduce and what they do with it and, more fundamentally, in the kind of texts that invite their attention” (25). The line between history and fiction has seldom been altogether clear in saga studies, but Middleton’s comments do apply to recent developments there. The positioning of the Middle Ages as the “irretrievably ‘other’ in relation to the organs of political rationality and progress, and the canons of critical inquiry” has existed awkwardly alongside historical narratives of European origins (25). When combined with social historical concerns, this interplay of origin and dislocation point Middleton towards the author:

Literary scholars must now engage some of the fundamental questions to which social and cultural historians have led them, while attempting to understand why the latter have fallen short of

providing sufficiently nuanced answers – questions such as Foucault’s in “What Is an Author”: “How, under what conditions, and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse?” (118-19). Such questions might lead to a refiguring of the expository shape of historical literary criticism, which thus far has remained argumentatively centered on a relatively small number of canonized texts and authors. As long as inquiry into specifically literary operations and conflicts is construed as a flight from the socially and historically “real,” rather than the critical pursuit of distinctive medieval modes for shaping it, literary historians can have nothing of substance to offer to a cultural criticism that has for the most part been strangely obtuse about the formal properties and social dispositions of the medium in which its objects are given to inquiry – a medium of almost infinite variety before the age of print. (27)

Middleton’s challenge – to undertake literary analysis of the medieval corpus in a way that contributes to a broader historical understanding of the intellectual complexion of the period – is, in this thesis, approached through an emphasis on the historical interpretation that was permitted by the saga authors’ joint possession of traditional narratives. What, for example, is the link between a conception of past narratives as sagas owned by community traditions and character development that seems to link figures of early Iceland with intellectual and social concerns of the medieval writing age? As we will see, this mixture of tradition and innovation can justifiably be described in terms of a medieval dialogue with the past, and my interest in the medieval possession of saga narratives, and the role of secondary authors in that possession, can be seen as a development of that dialogical approach. That is, in their dialogues with the Viking past, the medieval authors partly wrested possession of the saga narratives away from tradition in order that they might more freely develop their own, distinctive concerns. Authorship study in the Old Icelandic context

can contribute to a more general discussion of medieval intellectual history by demonstrating the sophisticated interaction of traditional and creative voices in the sagas. Rather than setting historical inquiry aside while we examine sagas' formal characteristics, discussion of the sagas' sophisticated literary effects – and interpretive function of saga authorship – can be seen as a part of a wider debate about the intellectual complexion of medieval Iceland.

Approaching the Interpretive Function of Saga Authorship

We can develop the issue of different functions in the sagas by looking at the role of authorship in recent approaches to the sagas' historical narration of events in early and medieval Icelandic. In the first place, one might accept the Icelandic School's presumptions of authorial creativity and focus one's research on the many individual questions of interpretation and meaning which could be addressed by new audiences in new situations. The Bakhtinian approach favoured by Ólason can be taken as a case in point, one which equates some of the emotional and intellectual content of modern dialogues with the medieval corpus to the literary creativity which formed the initial impulse to write sagas.¹⁷ Ólason's recent discussion of authorial viewpoint in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* is an example of an attempt to gain an overall idea of the particular authorial viewpoint in an individual saga, especially in relation to medieval Icelandic notions of honour. Ólason's approach can be seen to carry on many of the underlying assumptions of the Icelandic School, in particular our ability today to unpack saga authors' individual interpretations of history and humanity. Ólason's detection of a dialogue between the author of *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and past values, in which the author engages in a "sympathetic effort to investigate their meaning and limits in concrete dramatic situations" (174), is

¹⁷ In what seems to be a refutation of the drive in the 1970s and 1980s to read for strong thirteenth century moral statements in the sagas, Ólason insists that "efforts to transform the sagas into...parables or moral tales, almost always end up obfuscating what matters most and diminishing the artistic and emotional impact of the works" (*Dialogues* 10-11). On Bakhtinian readings of medieval Icelandic literature, see Würth, "Dialogizität" and, of medieval texts more generally, see Farrell.

a subtle and convincing expression of an approach which connects the author's interpretive voice and the particular stylistic features of a saga.

The end result of Ólason's analysis is that we must attribute considerable artistic and ethical distance between the author and the world and characters he represents. Whilst allowing that the author was ethically concerned and self-consciously connected to that world, he remained at a significant critical distance from the social content.¹⁸ The saga author is interested in a different world to his own and wishes to understand the ambit of world-views which his characters express.¹⁹

I agree with the assumptions concerning authorial involvement that accompany such an approach, particularly that we are dealing with very sophisticated texts with interpretive content which will always elude empirical statements of meaning. I find the Icelandic School's interpretations, while at times too ready to read for an author who is in command of his sources, engaging because they conceive the sagas as highly developed literary texts that were conscious representations of changing social norms. A re-formulated Icelandic School approach supports our argument for the thematic function of characterisation. However, a working out of this approach today is balanced by a greater sensitivity to the historical context of saga writing, both in terms of the sagas' Christian content and their authors' ongoing connection to the myths and values of a heathen past. By aiming for such a balance, we are brought closer to two approaches which have taken shape in the 1980s and 1990s, and which, in saga studies, reflect something of the overlap of literature and history that Middleton refers to. These two approaches share a desire to describe something

¹⁸ Cf. Árnason's approach as stated in his study of morality and social structures in the sagas ("Morality," "Saga"). He discusses the application of romance, humanist, and sociological approaches to the question (see esp. 157-60), and favours an approach which is directed towards studying the ethical power of social institutions to which individuals in the saga belong (163-64), the basis, that is, of the "sociomoral conflict which is of the essence of the sagas" (164). On the sagas' historical stance, see also Bagge, "From Sagas to Society," esp. 63-64, and his *Society and Politics* 30. On the saga authors' recognition of changing ethical landscapes, see also Sayers; Lönnroth, "Noble Heathen;" Schach, "The Theme;" Allen, *Fire and Iron* 91-96.

¹⁹ Regarding the critical reception of the *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, see esp. Sørensen, "Murder;" Andersson, "Some Ambiguities;" and Ólason, "Gísli" and *Dialogues* 167-74; see also the beginning of chapter two of this thesis.

more “socially and historically ‘real’” (Middleton 27) than shifting points of literary interpretation.

The first of these is to read the sagas in terms of the *mentalité* which is represented in both the act of saga composition and the worlds which the sagas portray.²⁰ This has been a particularly useful approach in relation to mythical aspects of the Icelandic literary imagination (e.g., Gurevich; Clunies Ross; Sørensen), and has come to be part of a broadly accepted philological apparatus which also blends historical linguistics, source-analysis, and studies in folk lore. In *Prolonged Echoes*, Clunies Ross has discussed Sørensen’s approach as a new historicist one, an accurate assessment of his attempt to define a social picture, drawn from a range of texts like the very ones under examination, for juxtaposition with literary texts. This approach enables us to differentiate self-conscious literary aims of saga authors and the underlying values in their work, or the unconscious authorial self-expression that helps to shape, at a fundamental historical level, the interpretive function of saga authorship.

A further alternative comes with the use of a number of related approaches which we might gather under the general grouping of cultural studies in the context of Old Icelandic literature. Here, I am thinking of the work of scholars who have approached various aspects of Icelandic society with the tools of cultural and comparative anthropology, social history, and studies in ideology and culture that have been adapted from Marxist literary and cultural criticism. Unlike the inquiry into *mentalité*, which celebrates the silent revelation of social concerns in literary works, cultural studies, at least in Old Icelandic studies, seeks to subtract the literary quality of the sagas in its search for reality itself: the question ceases to be about the outlook behind saga composition, and instead asks how to account for the sagas’ literary affectations

²⁰ *Mentalité* describes the existence, or retrospective abstraction, of a common intellect at a given time; its proponents seek out “evidence of collective intellectual purpose” (Gurevich, “Historical” 4). That is, “a chaotic and heterogeneous stream of perceptions and impressions is converted by consciousness into a more or less ordered picture of the world which sets its seal on all human behaviour. The subjective side of the historical process, the manner of thinking and feeling particular to people of a given social and cultural community, thus becomes part of the objective process of history” (8).

in the process of the greater goal of describing a culture and the way it constructs itself. For example, Hastrup comments that “behind genre there is life” (“Text and Context” 9) and Miller argues that, despite the sagas’ retrospective point of view, they do, for the most part, “ring true” (Miller, *Bloodtaking* 46).

Such comments may seem, at first blush, to reflect strong opposition to the literary approach to the sagas that I give above. Yet, it is also the case that few literary scholars would be so strict in their literary emphasis as to suggest that the sagas cannot be used as a collective source of information about some aspects, both factual and social, of early and medieval Iceland. Certain facts and dates are deemed reliable, or at least acceptable, by almost all, perhaps because there is little to be gained from an argument about the exact date, for example, of the establishment of the fifth court at the Alþing. This kind of historical information would also appear to be unquestioned by the contemporary reading audience, although we must be careful to allow that credibility to medieval readers is different to historical actuality.²¹ Nevertheless, interpretation in the sagas is necessarily limited and defined by the historical material which the sagas document, and social historical analysis can be seen as an attempt to focus on the documentary functions of the sagas as the key points in the sagas’ analysis (see further below, “Multiple Functions of Saga Authorship”).

Yet, it may equally have been the relationship between the agency of the audience and saga conventions that gave historical power to certain incidents, for instance, incidents like the warrior-poet Egill’s recovery (through poetic composing) from the death of his son (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* ch. 78). Whatever medieval readers might have thought of the plausibility of the incident, the *Sonatorrek* is consistent with both Egill’s earlier characterisation

²¹ Credibility in this respect is closely tied to the sagas’ appearance as traditional narratives. See the recent discussion by Quinn, “From Orality,” esp. 32-37; and Sigurðsson, “Methodologies,” in which the author discusses the evolution of the debate about oral tradition and “where the oral and written meet in a written text” (183). It is likely that the oral form was, in many respects, similar to the narrative style of saga episodes. This adds weight to the presumption that fixed forms of narration and conventions of characterisation made up part of the audience’s view of the sagas’ credibility.

and the saga as a whole, a biography of an egoist who can drink from the cup of Óðinn and fight like the greatest of Vikings. This blend of mythic and heroic narratives makes Egill's response to his son's death a credible one, even if no-one in medieval Iceland had ever seen a large, ugly, and violent fellow like Egill commemorate the death of a son in verse. The portrayal does not breach the terms set by the imaginative world of the sagas in general (see further below, 55).

The figure of the poet which medieval Icelanders cherished is only one in a range of literary *types* which scholars have identified; others include the Icelander abroad, the fair hero, the outlaw, the woman who goads, the noble heathen (e.g., Lönnroth, "Noble Heathen"), and the wise man of good will (e.g. Jesch, "Good Men"). Some of the critical implications of this research are exemplified in Lönnroth's analysis of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, a study of the culture of literary production in southern Iceland in the late thirteenth century. Lönnroth emphasises the predictability and consistency of stock characters as part of his larger argument about the sagas as persuasive tools in the construction of local history and the consolidation of the power of families (*Critical*; see also Lönnroth, "Rhetorical Persuasion"). While such broad categorisation of the characters who populate the sagas does carry the danger of reducing sophisticated portrayals to the level of cruder narratives that are mainly interested in characters as a basis for making abstract moral observations or political judgments,²² it does help us to see just how formal some aspects of saga narratives are.

Thus, stories and characters may read as lifelike because they are intended to be read as generically credible, not because they are meant to be a realistic portrayal, real or imagined, nor because they allow a realistic portrayal to slip through in spite of their goal to create a fictional narrative. This line of argument creates some uncertainty about the historicity of representations of

²² This is a particularly important consideration in the study of *Hrafnkels saga*; see, e.g., Ólason, *Dialogue*; H. Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*; Hallberg, "Hrafnkell" and "Hunting;" Heinemann, "Hrafnkels;" and Fulk. See also the description of the debate about *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* by Bonner and Grimstad 6-7.

feuding in the sagas, and the ethical norms commonly associated with the feud process, particularly the notion of honour (see further P. Sawyer, "The Bloodfeud;" Bauman 139-46), and we are brought back to Ólason's interest in attempts by saga authors to engage with past values in a critical and sympathetic way. A question arises whether the ethical world of honour, prominent in works like *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, is a sign of the success of a literary genre and the common acceptance of the genre's techniques and style. Does it reflect a degree of homogeneity and consistency in Icelandic culture from 874 to the loss of Icelandic independence in the 1260s, or is it a reflection of an individual author's historical sensitivity and artistic ability?²³

This question is, ultimately, one about where to draw a line that marks off a gallery of ethical norms and social practices which all readers of the sagas privately collect and treasure as the real saga Iceland. Just as we accept certain dates and factual accounts as either true, or beyond debate, so we must accept that some of the sagas' representations of society and culture are basically narrative reflections (with all the distortions that implies) of Icelandic society at the time of the sagas' composition and, most probably, of a society that was relatively stable for some time before their composition. Most readers would, for instance, accept that some of the narratives in *Eyrbyggja saga* reflect the pressures caused by the limited farming land that is available in the area around Helgafell and Álftafjörðr: Snorri's cunning acquisition of the farm at Helgafell and the fight over Úlfr's farm would appear to support the straightforward assumption that good farming land was at a premium during the tenth century and that disputes probably arose as a result (see Byock, *Medieval Iceland* 185). That is, the interpretive function of saga authorship responds to the known reality of some saga referents.

²³ As recently argued by Miller, the quest for honour in the sagas is made more urgent by the fact that the *amount* of honour available at any one time is limited. The frequent use of superlatives and comparatives to describe characters would seem to reflect this (see *Bloodtaking* chs. 1-2). For example, *Bandamanna saga* eagerly takes part in this comparative evaluation of worth.

The result, however, is not an uncomplicated reflection of early and medieval social codes. For instance, for all it tells us about competition for land, *Eyrbyggja saga*'s account of the elaborate means by which Snorri acquires the Helgafell farm functions, primarily, as a humorous story that adds early colour to the portrayal of the saga's central character. The point it makes is that Snorri's ability to deceive is remarkable. *Eyrbyggja saga* takes great pleasure in Snorri's thoughtfulness and scheming, traits which make it difficult for the other characters of the saga to predict how he will run his affairs. Like Njáll Þorgeirsson in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Snorri reflects on the situations before him and makes his presence felt by virtue of his influence on the actions of others. When Snorri acquires Helgafell, he does so by creating the impression that Þorkr has the chance to cheat Snorri, and Snorri's ultimate success comes as a result of his ability to create a deceptive facade of a failed man. This is not the most complicated sting in world literature, or indeed the sagas, but it is enough to convince us that the author is alive to the deceptive light that can be caught in impressions, and our basic proposition, that there was competition for land, is shown to be extracted from a complex set of related discourses about settlement, character, and the nature of knowledge.

The great difference in the narrative points of view of the settlement narratives in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* gives us a vivid example of how distinctive the balance of authorial functions can be. Episodes which involve negotiation and persuasion in *Eyrbyggja saga* are narrated with great sophistication, each character, or side of the exchange, being given ample opportunity to make themselves look good or bad.²⁴ In a sense, it is this objective distance – here I mean objective saga style rather than a truly unbiased story – which makes the narration of Snorri's Helgafell purchase a bitter one for Þorkr. The author purports simply to watch him make a fool of himself in front of Snorri, and the lack of overt narrative sympathy or antipathy, whereby the

²⁴ This is consistent with Ólason's view that saga characterisation is essentially humanist in tone, i.e., that characters are never *necessarily* good or bad, but rather have the opportunity or luck that allows them to behave well or poorly. See further below, ch. 2.

exchange seems to create its own moral discourse, has the effect of mocking Þorkr without the author having to cast him as internally immoral or, perhaps more importantly, having to justify Snorri's moral nature. The author steps lightly to the side of the action in order to allow the morality of the incident to be borne by the incident itself and the audience response that is likely to be set in train. A similar narrative process is underway in the exchanges of negotiation and persuasion which occur during the Swedish berserks episode, in the story of the Fróðá marvels, and in the account of Þórólfr's ongoing influence in the region (see further below, ch. 3).

Vatnsdæla saga is quite different. The author sets himself a different task, certainly in terms of the rhetoric of the saga, than the author of *Eyrbyggja saga*. I sense that he feels that he must help the narrative to reach fully into the mind of his characters and, indeed, his readers. Situations are not given the chance to speak for themselves, and the author's regular recourse to proverbs suggests that he is unsure of the effect action can have in a reader's mind if it is not accompanied by commentary of some sort. Generational tensions feature in this saga, as they do in many, but the author adopts the theme clumsily in his characterisation of Þorsteinn and Ingimundr (for example, when the former is thinking of his father's harsh words as he takes on the preterhuman Jökull).²⁵ The representation of the relationship between Ingimundr and his father Þorsteinn actually suffers from too much authorial interest: a falsely ominous air surrounds Ingimundr's youthful arrogance at the same time as his egoistical comments are praised, and it seems that the author struggles to find the right balance between his portrayal of Ingimundr's foolhardy youth and his desire to illustrate that there is general community approval of Ingimundr's heroic qualities. The author has not abandoned objective saga style altogether but, perhaps when his confidence in the ability of the scene to carry the saga's moral rhetoric falters, he attempts an internal dialogue. This openness on the part of

²⁵ Regarding generational tensions in the sagas, see Schach, "Some Observations," and Bragg, "Generational." Bragg observes that "literary themes and motifs having to do with father-son relations are quite common in the saga literature in general and must therefore have been of wide interest in the society that produced the sagas" (8). See further below, chs. 2 and 3.

the author of *Vatnsdæla saga* contrasts vividly with the ability of many saga authors to develop their characters in understated ways, an important point to remember when we move to an attempt to identify the role of characters in establishing themes in the sagas. For example, many of the saga authors show a complex awareness of ambiguity, in terms of both narrated material and the implied audience position and response. For our discussion of the role of characterisation in the sagas, a degree of deliberate ambiguity suggests that some saga authors invited their audiences to share the process of interpreting characters' actions and motivations or, on the other hand, were unwilling to alter ambiguous stories inherited through tradition.

Inconsistencies in point of view and authorial voice in the sagas are especially clear when we introduce the *Sturlunga* compilation, and a comparison of family and contemporary sagas reveals that the two bodies of work were representational – and interpreted historical events – in different ways. In particular, the ethical assumptions which underlie the unity of the family sagas as a corpus appear to be different to the political focus of secular disputes found in the *Sturlunga* compilation. This does not prove that *Sturlunga saga* and the family sagas cannot be used together to produce histories of Icelandic society, but it does add an element of uncertainty to suggestions a) that the family sagas reflect patterns of behaviour in early and medieval Icelandic society, and b) that there was a high degree of cultural continuity from the time of the settlement to the thirteenth century. Together, these matters form an important part of any discussion of the relationship between the thirteenth century authors and the characters of the sagas because they go to the level of creativity and interpretation that was needed to make family sagas work as unified literary texts. Major differences in the saga authors' conception of the two periods will suggest that the interpretive function of authorship was more pronounced in the case of the family sagas.

There are similarities and differences in both style and content in the family sagas and contemporary sagas. At times, it is impossible to avoid some correlation of the events described in these two groups of sagas, for instance,

between the life of Aron Hjörleifsson (*Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*) and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*,²⁶ the burning at Flugumýri in *Íslendinga saga* and the burning at Bergþórshvöll in *Brennu-Njáls saga* (see, e.g., Barði Guðmundsson, “Nú taka”), or the characterisation of Snorri goði in *Eyrbyggja saga* and the sense that we get of Snorri Sturluson from *Íslendinga saga* (see, e.g., Þorláksson, “Snorri”). The two groups of sagas share a number of stylistic traits and discourses (see below, ch. 2). For example, the author of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* appears to be deeply concerned with the role of advice that is given by third parties to protagonists in the mediation and ordering of disputes; the author represents advice as a community obligation with a clear community benefit. This interest in the negotiation of disputes is a common feature of the family sagas, particularly those, like *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Ljósvetninga saga*, that depict legal matters at length.²⁷ These cross-overs illustrate that authorial interests and interventions cannot be identified by using one body of contemporary texts against a corpus that describes more remote times and cultural values. Importantly, they also point to the fact the medieval Icelandic authors were not only interpretive in their approach, but they also wrote with a wide variety of interpretive aims: we ought not to approach the interpretive function of saga authorship as a unified category.

One of the overarching interpretive aims of some of the saga authors was to place Icelandic history in the context of the Christianisation of Northern Europe. As we would expect of any medieval European society, the vast majority of the sagas incorporate a religious discourse in their characterisation of individuals, of relationships, and society as a whole. The Christian conversion of Iceland in 1000 demands a reading of a number of the family sagas as bipartite in structure (that is, in terms of events before and after the Christianisation), especially “conversion sagas” like *Brennu-Njáls saga*,

²⁶ On the characterisation of Aron in *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, see Porter, “Some Aspects.”

²⁷ The issue of the moderation of ambitious political figures is discussed in more detail below, ch. 7.

Laxdæla saga, and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Christian influences do, at times, create a sense that the struggles and conflicts in the sagas ought to be balanced and resolved,²⁸ but the changes brought by Christianity are also seen to have an unsettling effect, for example, in the generational gap I mentioned earlier (see also below, chs. 2 and 7). Here, the individualistic, honour-based excesses of an older generation must end so that a new order of moderation can be ushered in, a change that angers those who wish to “to act the warrior’s part”, as Egill Skalla-Grímsson puts it when the law fails to secure him his rights immediately (*Egil’s saga* 147; see also, e.g., *Vatndæla saga* ch. 2, *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* ch. 7). A religious discourse is also evident in *Sturlunga saga*, but there the claims of the church are expressed in a more aggressive and explicit religious language than we find in the speeches of moderate people in the family sagas. Excommunication is used regularly by the church as a coercive tool, and Bishop Guðmundr Arason, in particular, introduces a Christian vehemence that we might expect to find in much of the medieval literature which deals with contemporary events on the Continent.

Yet, there is some incongruity in the saga authors’ incorporation of a Christian discourse. Despite the evident religious discourse in the family sagas – and I will generally accept that the sagas contain a strong if not overriding Christian element – we can also see a desire on the part of medieval Icelandic authors to document the past in its own terms. As we noted above, there is a sympathetic desire to understand saga characters from the point of view of the ethical, non-Christian world they occupied, that is, without judging characters from a contemporary viewpoint. The difference in the religious tone of the family sagas, *Sturlunga saga*, and the, at times, hagiographical mode of the kings’ sagas underlines the saga authors’ ability to recognise and honour ethical difference. Such historical consciousness represents a major obstacle to the use of the sagas as historical documents. Indeed, saga authors’ highly developed

²⁸ The narrative movement towards balance may equally be the result of the feud-based structure of many sagas, a form that requires an eventual resolution of the dispute (Andersson, *Icelandic Family Saga*) and a sense that honour is once again properly distributed (Miller, *Bloodtaking*).

historicisation of their stories reflects a critical distance on their part that is a precursor to interpretation of events (as opposed to their repetition alone) and empathy with characters (as opposed to an uncritical acceptance of their position in a syncretic, historical whole).

We can say, therefore, that there are variations in the interpretive function of saga authorship. At times, the narrative voice seems close to or part of the traditions out of which the sagas emerge, moments that suggest the author is possessed by the saga's self-performance and does not give his own sense of events. Moments later, a distance between narrator and saga allows the author to possess – that is, to personalise, to control, and to interpret – the events he describes. It is to this changing relationship of joint possession that we will next turn. We will see that the possible variations in historical perspective that I have discussed above parallel variations in the saga authors' control of their characters. As will be considered throughout this thesis, during moments of empathy a character may act as a secondary author and connect readers to the author's intellectual world. In these moments, possession appears to pass out of the hands of tradition and into the hands of the author. With the secondary author's expression of his/her inner life, it is the saga author's *interest* in the tradition that governs the dramatic and narrative possibilities of the situation. The saga author possesses the character, and the types of knowledge and understanding at hand become thematised in terms of the saga authors' concerns. In the effort to empathise with figures of the past, the interpretive function is most clearly expressed.

The Possession of Saga Narratives

In a well-known passage in *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Þórðarson relates that, during a time of “kyrrt ok friðr góðr á Íslandi” (194), “quiet and good peace in Iceland,” Sturla Sighvatsson exchanges manuscripts with Snorri Sturluson. It is difficult to make any generalisations about physical possession and about the exchange of sagas in medieval Iceland from this short glimpse of literary traffic between two Sturlung chieftains. Yet when the exchange is taken

together with the large amount of literature that was produced during the writing age and the fact that manuscripts were very expensive, we get some feeling for the high value of texts in this time and the probable importance that attached to their ownership.²⁹ Of course, the desire on the part of wealthy medieval Icelanders to own manuscripts, the relative value of different sagas, and the status that attached to libraries is difficult to gauge, but possession, in the broader cultural sense of ownership and control of textual content, is nevertheless a useful idea to bring to our discussion of authorship. In particular, it is a useful term to describe the relationship between the saga authors as creators and saga authors as instruments of the narrative, acted upon by the stories they narrate and the traditions inherited by the community as a whole.

An interest in the possession and control of saga narratives leads us to a number of questions about authorship, in particular, whether the saga authors felt that the representation of reality was constrained by the fact that a saga was, in a sense, “performing itself” through the voice of the saga teller. While there are a number of narrative *intrusions* by saga authors (Schach, “Some Forms”), it may nevertheless be the case that authorship was conceived as part of the action of the saga, and that the saga was capable of absorbing occasional authorial insights and explanations (as a kind of marginalia) while it performed itself as a *said* thing. As I mention in the Introduction, the term *saga* is derived from *segja* (“to tell”), and it is conceivable that saga authorship was regarded as essentially the facilitation of the saga’s telling of itself. Such an argument can be supported by the anonymity of saga authors, and the absence of statements about authorship can be read as an indication of the purpose of saga writing. There can be little doubt that authorial anonymity, for instance, is closely related to the truth value or credibility of the sagas to their contemporary audiences, and this credibility may well be grounded in the practices of a socially valued and trusted process of oral transmission of the past.

²⁹ The question, as Andersson develops it, is whether we can talk of a “literary network” in medieval Iceland (see his “Literary Prehistory” 22).

Frequently, in impersonal stock phrases like *nú er at segja* (“it is now to be said”), the narrative voice appears to accept the fact that a saga is an act that performs itself. Many of the narratives were, of course, alive as traditions prior to their preservation in manuscripts. For example, in *Víga-Glúms saga*, when Eyjólfur returns to Iceland with his wife Ástríðr, the author begins a new section of the saga, and introduces members of the Icelandic family at the centre of the saga, in a way which carefully acknowledges the power which the story *as received* has in determining the events that will follow:

Börn þeira Eyjólfis ok Ástríðar vǫru fjögur nefnd. Þorsteinn hét sonr þeira inn ellsti, ok var hann leystur af arfi, þá er hann kvændisk, ok bjó hann at Hólum í Eyjafirði, meðan hann lifði, ok verðr hann lítt við söguna riðinn. Vigfúss hét annarr; hann fekk Hallfríðar Þorkels dóttur ins háva frá Mývatni. Glúmr hét inn yngsti sonr þeira, en Helga dóttir. Hon var gipt Steingrími í Siglúvík. Þeira sonr var Þorvaldr tasaldi, er síðar kemr við málit. En Vigfúss andaðisk litlu síðar en hann kvánaðisk ok átti barn eitt, ok lifði þat litlu lengr en hann....Eyjólfur var andaðr, þá er hér var komit. (14)

Eyjólfur and Ástríðr had four children. Þorsteinn was the name of their eldest son, and his part of the inheritance was dissolved to him when he married; he lived at Hólar in Eyjafjörður while he was alive, and he is not of much concern in this saga. Vigfús was the name of the second son. He married Hallfríðr, daughter of Þorkell the tall from Mývatn. Glúmr was the name of their youngest son, and Helga the name of their daughter. She was married to Steingrímur in Siglúvík. Their son was Þorvaldr tassel, who later comes into the matter. But Vigfús died a little after he married and had one child that lived only a little longer than him....Eyjólfur was dead by the time the story had got to this point.

Here, there is an apparent acceptance, by the saga author, of the sagas' self-performance. The word has power as the bearer of historical reality and meaning.³⁰

Bakhtin's ideas of polyphonic narrative voice may help us to understand how the diffuse voice of saga narration does not undermine the power of the texts (see further Würth; Phelpstead; and my discussion of Sturla Þórðarson's narrative voice in *Íslendinga saga*, below ch.2). Competing voices are accommodated within the saga form's ability to order material in a way that also supports digression, division of information, the sectionalisation of themes and narratives, and the indirect questioning of what is asserted in more direct terms.³¹ That is, sagas are perfect vehicles for a large amount of information, for quite dense narration, and for the performance of a variety of functions (see further below, "Multiple Functions"). We see this reflected at a narrative level in sagas' easy transition from episodes dealing with the law, religion, genealogy, feuding, and domestic matters, and their ability to represent ironic dialogue without overt indications to that effect by the author. For example, the trickery of Víga-Glúmr in *Víga-Glúms saga* reflects an interest on the part of the saga author in how apparent opposites, like truth and falseness, internal and external worlds, peacefulness and aggression, guilt and innocence, can co-exist. Through the co-existence of law and lawlessness or of plain and veiled meaning (cf. Ciklamini, "Veiled Meaning") the sagas at a narrative level stress the nature of speaking positions and the variety that is possible in the ownership and the control of expression.

The changeability of meaning and the idea of context as a guide to meaning are certainly of interest to the author of *Víga-Glúms saga*. In a memorable prelude to the main conflict, the author relates an encounter in which Oddbjörg angrily defends herself against the author's and Saldís'

³⁰ Regarding the power of the word, see further Ólason, *Dialogues* 120-29.

³¹ The last of these ideas is adapted from B. Sawyer, "Valdemar" 690, which offers a useful discussion of the ability of medieval Scandinavian historians, in this case Saxo Grammaticus and Sven Aggesen, to develop thematic, political, and familial lines of argument in their histories.

accusation that her prophecies vary according to the level of hospitality she is given (ch. 12). Likewise, Glúmr's instruction to Ingólfr to declare that he has killed Hloðu-Kálfr and the subsequent admission of the killing, establish different levels of significance and truth (ch. 14). Glúmr is not the only one in the saga to deceive others. Víga-Skúta disguises himself as a shepherd (and veils his identity with a riddle) so as to avoid detection by Glúmr's men, although Glúmr, an expert in deception, immediately recognises Skúta's trick. Both characters are able to distinguish formal truth from more important meaning, and the ability to construct a barrier of formal meaning is a valued skill; it allows them to use representation as a tactical weapon in their disputes. Glúmr displays similar awareness when invited to a farmer's wedding feast, and the highpoint in Glúmr's ability to place truth and deception alongside one another comes in an oath that denies his killing of Þorvaldr krókr ("hook"). In that instance, there appears to be some community anticipation that Glúmr's oath will need to be analysed carefully for hidden meaning: "Margrœtt var um þetta mál, hversu eiðar Glúms myndi vera eða fram fara" (85); "There was a lot of discussion of this case, what Glúmr's oaths would be and how they would be made."

The community of the saga knows that it must look behind the overt narration and we as modern readers must do the same thing. I have observed that there is little in the way of express comment by saga authors that might indicate their artistic intentions and historical point of view, but we can overcome this lack of direct information by considering, in particular:

- a) the sagas' interest in different levels of representation;
- b) how we might approach the sagas' differentiation of the saga age from the writing age;
- c) and by viewing that differentiation as a process in which the saga narratives and saga characters are in the joint possession of tradition and creative authorship.

In developing this approach to the saga authors' relationship with their material, I am suggesting a saga authorship that combines a contemporary aim to own

and control saga narratives with a desire to perform the saga as though it existed in its own right. Icelandic sagas witness a complex assimilation and competition of traditional and contemporary functions, or a *joint possession*, as I have expressed it. The variety of voices in the sagas is related to the multiple functions which saga authorship performs.

Multiple Functions of Saga Authorship

If we regard the sagas primarily as texts that perform themselves, and the saga authors as servants of that performances, we stress the *functional* role of authorship; that is, that the author is a function of the text's delivery of its narrative. However, other possibilities of authorship existed, not least the those enabled by the medieval possession of saga narratives and that suggest that saga authors sought to develop the epistemological, documentary, interpretive, empathetic, sympathetic, and artistic nature of the sagas.

Epistemological and Documentary Functions

The desire to preserve and to define obligations, situations, land, power relations, social status, and so on, can be placed at the very heart of a sociological, or literary anthropological, approach to medieval Icelandic literature and its authors. Such an approach reveals that the sagas functioned as sources of information and education. The settlement, the introduction of Christianity, and "the Icelanders' self-identification as the custodians of their own and all Scandinavia's traditional history and culture" (Clunies Ross, "Conservation" 117) motivated Icelanders to produce a large amount of literature with what appears to be a range of functions that reflect medieval Icelandic notions of what different literary modes could achieve. For example, *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, and *The First Grammatical Treatise* (written during the first half of the twelfth century) can be understood as having "an ordering, authoritative aim, one in which the country is viewed as an independent entity, a kingdom without a king" (Sørensen, "Social Institutions")

14).³² In particular, *Landnámabók* “gave written form to the very act of taking over empty and nameless territories” (16), while *Íslendingabók* demonstrated both Icelandic independence and the nation’s origin in the Christian world (17). Historical writing was, then, the means by which Iceland, in its religious and culturally self-conscious projects of preservation, came to be expressed and incorporated into useful narratives, and “if one were to choose a single proof of the usefulness of Icelandic historical writing, it would probably be the dominance of genealogical lore” (Whaley, “Useful Past” 192). It is a fitting example because it demonstrates the close ties which saga authors could make between readers’ material concerns in lineage and property and a saga’s ultimate performance as a complex and interpretive narrative (see below, ch. 2).

Interpretive and Educational Functions

If writing is to be useful in the summation, containment, and preservation of the past a degree of critical distance from the subject matter is necessary. We can claim, for instance, that an assertive process of authorship is under way when the sagas are made use of in the medieval Icelandic community’s understanding of the past, its formation of a national identity, and in its interests in documenting genealogical history, the history of disputes, land ownership, and religious change. And the often impressive reach of saga narratives beyond Iceland to Norway and farther afield suggests that saga authors used the sagas to draw Iceland closer, at least intellectually and culturally, to Scandinavia and the rest of the Christian world.³³

Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, although in some respects atypical (and having the flavour of a late saga), exemplifies this authorial ability to draw wide arcs of knowledge and information around the sagas’ central, domestic

³² See also Faulkes, Introduction xvi, in which the author discusses Snorri’s *Edda* in terms of its participation in two lines of textual and intellectual development, the concern with language and the interest in myth and tradition. Faulkes attributes to Snorri a concern to show the early culture as a highly developed art (xvi-xvii) and describes the *Edda* as a “treatise on poetry” (xviii).

³³ That is, in contrast to Icelandic resistance to increased political connections with Norway. See Andersson, “Politics.”

narratives, an approach that necessarily implies considerable textual and historical distance from the action (that is, the narrator is not part of the events described but rather stands back as a function of a wider, evaluative point of view). Grettir Ásmundarson's life can be connected to the events in the beginning and end of the saga, and in this sense the author's inclusion of foreign material boosts Grettir's status as a character.³⁴ There is probably a more powerful impulse at the heart of this expansion of the story, especially, I think, the desire to bring both wider European and early Scandinavian worlds within the sphere of Icelandic textual or narrative possessions. These narrative treasures, like the weapons and ornaments that are found in the family sagas, form the focal points of an Icelandic ability to capture and possess the royal and aristocratic traditions of Scandinavia, and to interpret its own world and history as a narrative framed by the heroic Scandinavian tradition and Christian world in the East. That is, the medieval possession of saga narratives enables the interpretation of those narratives in both local and more broadly European terms.

Sympathetic, Empathetic, and Artistic Functions

We are moving towards an approach to saga authorship that looks for the processes by which intellectual ownership is signalled and distanced and that aims to understand the balance that may emerge during the contest between the author's control over a saga and a saga's control over him. At one extreme, we might argue that an author has been very true to an anonymous, community-oriented status as the conveyor and preserver of a pre-existing tradition; at the other, that the author has merely confirmed a number of commonly accepted facts in order to begin his own interpretation of Icelandic society and its historical development. Such questions, and the related issues of saga authors'

³⁴ Most importantly, the opening of the saga adds depth (in advance of his actual appearance in the narrative) to Grettir's characterisation by linking family traits and the family's migration to success in Iceland. The conclusion of the saga is taken up with the elaborate process of revenge for Grettir's death, a process that embellishes Grettir's reputation and ties his life to the greater Christian world.

creativity, of the pleasure which they take in stories, of their historical outlook, and of their relationship with their readers can be approached in terms of contested possession.

I would like now to connect these introductory comments about historical interpretation in the sagas to *secondary authorship*: this connection will help us to link a functional approach to authorship to the emphasis that in this thesis is placed on characterisation. That is, *secondary authorship* is regarded as a kind of interpretive writing. Thus, when we discuss the presence of authorial sympathy and empathy in the sagas we are raising specific examples the critical distance implied by the broader notion of interpretation. It will be recalled that *secondary authorship* refers to statements by characters that appear to carry with them a degree of self-reflection about either themselves or the events in the saga. My aim here is to begin to think about characterisation in the sagas as a process that can involve both the internal and external world of the characters, and as a process that allows authors to occupy the complicated positions of receiving and recording characters' stories, fame and reputation, and of observing the saga conceit of objective characterisation, *while* they engage in a humanist desire to understand people of the past and those people's inner lives.

Secondary Authorship

It would seem that in the context of a textual approach to authorship, characters who are themselves engaged in some kind of *authorial behaviour* are especially important. Because characters, in these moments, may invoke historical backgrounds, may offer statements of the context of their decisions, persuade others, and manipulate the truth of the matters at hand or a particular point of view, they can be observed as engaging in activities that bear strong resemblances to authorship itself. That is, characters who react to knowledge, who are contemplating their position in events, who are commenting on the state of affairs in the saga, and who are expressing themselves in relation to

these affairs, may indicate that a link is implied by the saga author to exist between the medieval world of reception and interpretation and the saga world.

A number of objections can be made to assuming such connections are developed in the sagas. Firstly, saga characters often inhabit a very different social context to saga authors, and are confronted with choices which an author must only be able to imagine. Such an author may never be forced to decide on whether to accept a sentence of outlawry or go into hiding in the Icelandic highlands. This, in itself, does not constitute an obstacle for our study, as this thesis does not ask whether the lived reality of early Icelanders, Sturlung chieftains, and of Scandinavian kings and earls was the same as that of medieval Icelandic authors. Even if that were the case, we would still have to avoid any automatic correlation of outlook between characters and authors. Rather, the aim here is to see whether the saga authors recognised such distances of time and place, and whether they then sought to reach across those distances in order to meet, to understand, and to possess the figures of the past. In that sense, we can claim that the textual and narrative processes that we read for are more important than basic socio-historical analogies or differences.

A second objection, and one that often lies behind structural or formal readings of sagas, is that we ought not to exaggerate the individual creativity behind saga characterisation. This argument is based on two sensible propositions: first, that saga authors were often the inheritors of traditions about figures of the past, and so may not have had much in the way of creative freedom,³⁵ and secondly, the fact that there are discernible character *types* in the sagas suggests that conventions or patterns governed the representation of some events (e.g., the reception of Icelanders abroad). This objection is part of a larger methodological divide in literary studies between unifying approaches to literature and readings that concentrate on difference.³⁶ My position is that

³⁵ Such an argument finds support in the fact that some saga figures are characterised in a consistent way across different sagas, for instance, Gestr Oddleifsson, Snorri goði, and Hjalti Skeggjasson.

³⁶ We might follow Harris's observation and suggestion that "one of the sacred paradoxes of literature, or at least of narrative literature, is that of multiformity within uniformity, and

the identification of character types is a fair caveat to place on reading for character, but I would also stress that although some characters – a good example is Snorri goði – are portrayed in a consistent way in a number of sagas, the author still has scope to offer his own understanding of that character. It is these instances of understanding, or authorial empathy and sympathy, that are of most interest here.

A third objection, at the other extreme, is that to look for reflections of medieval authorship in the way characters represent themselves is to downplay the authors' creative abilities, that is, their sophistication in creating highly differentiated characters who have their own integrity. Again, I accept that medieval authors' creativity, in some instances, restricts our study of authorial connection with characters, and my tendency in this thesis is to presume a high level of literary competence. I would also stress, once more, that this thesis is concerned with just this type of variation in the closeness and distance of saga characters from the authors, and it will be of equal interest here when authors create characters who are portrayed as different to them or when authors suggest that characters belong to another world or ethical era.

Types of Secondary Authorship

Despite the differences between saga authors and saga characters, during rare moments in which we glimpse a character's inner and dramatic world of perception, thought, and decision-making, saga authors draw us further from the objectively narrated realms of history and tradition and closer to their sense and interpretation of the people of the saga age. Saga characters' statements about themselves do evince significant variation; yet, in the critical perspective of this thesis, they will share a conspicuousness of representation, one that demands attention both in terms of the narrative at hand and the

properly understood uniformity is not a criticism but a tool of criticism for coming to terms with conflicting claims of the Many and the One" ("Genre" 27).

conceptions of representing reality and meaning that the representation reflects.³⁷

For instance, persuasion and advice often involve quite detailed expressions of how characters in the sagas interpret events and other characters (see below, ch. 6). Likewise, insults provide characters with the opportunity to sum up and represent important features of another character's life. A remarkable case of a saga character insulting others is Skarpheðinn's self-destructive verbal abuse of chieftains in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, when Njáll attempts to secure support after the killing of Hǫskuldr Þráinsson. Insults seem very much in the part possession of the saga authors' creativity, and can be read as a reflection of their interest in characters' fame and their pleasure in a form of characterisation that juxtaposes the action of a saga with a character's re-constructed saga world reputation.³⁸

Cook observes that a great deal of the impressive rhetoric in the sagas is given to women ("Women" 40), not least in some female characters' ability to incite men to violence. The power of female whetting, and incitements to violence by other characters dependent on men, are predominantly to be found in the family sagas, but they are also present in *Sturlunga saga* (e.g., in *Íslendinga saga*, the whetting of Eyjólfur prior to the burning at Flugumýri), and

³⁷ Compare Cook's emphasis on will in the family sagas in his "Sagas of the Icelanders": "in the typical actions of the saga the inner life is played down in favour of manifestations of the will" (93). Such expressions of the will include whetting (97-101), requests for aid (102-05), trickery (105-06), persuasion and reluctance (106-08), warnings which demonstrate the object's unyielding will (108-09), and wise refusals (111-12).

³⁸ There has been considerable discussion of sexual libel, or *níð* (e.g., Gade, "Homosexuality;" Jochens, "From Libel;" Sørensen, *Norront Nid*). Clunies Ross ("Concepts") examines the ways in which truth is thematised by virtue of the saga society's closeness to oral art, and considers the development of complex poetry as a means of veiling criticism and maintaining a poetic elite. Of course, here, the legal regulations of *níð*, some of which are to be found preserved in the medieval law code *Grágas*, can be viewed as a regulation of authorship and speech, and reflect a sensitivity to honour quite as elaborate as modern defamation laws. The situation "favoured the development of an elaborate formal means of slandering others while appearing to produce quite innocuous utterances" (Clunies Ross, "Concepts" 65). Finlay ("*Níð*") discusses the role of insults in the so-called *ástarsögur* (romantic sagas), in which insults are structured as part of a feud narration (see esp. 170-71). See also Swenson.

indicate to us something of the power that well-timed or highly-charged language could give to those otherwise disenfranchised.³⁹

Dreams, another type of secondary authorship, often contain intertextual allusions to the mythical world or to the past more generally, a configuring of historical and mythical characters that can be performed in order to vocalise a prediction, understanding, and interpretation of the meaning of events in the saga. Saga characters themselves recognise these functions of dreams and, as we shall see in the case of Guðrún's discussion with Gestr in *Laxdæla saga* (below, ch. 6), the meanings possessed and generated by dreams must be interpreted by those who, perhaps rather like saga authors, are wise enough to understand the significance of the appearance, in narratives, of mythical beings and other famous characters of the past.⁴⁰

Reports, like dreams, often function to relate information from a character's perspective or in a way that reflects the disposition of the characters listening. Important saga characters, especially kings who are assisted by a large body of retainers, rely on less central characters to inform them of events

³⁹ Miller notes that women "had to shame and importune to get a hearing, since relative differences in power prevented them from being included as equals in deliberative sessions. The social significance of goading was complex. Beside validating power and status differences, goading actually did allow the relatively disenfranchised to participate in group decision making, even if the range of views they could express was severely narrowed by the conventions governing the terms of their participation. We should not, however, assume that they were incapable of giving a more nuanced message within the structure imposed by the conventions of this kind of discourse, by, for example, varying the timing, the tone, and the type of insult that accompanied the performance" (*Bloodtaking* 212-13). See further Clover, "Hildigunnr's Lament;" Jochens, *Old Norse Images* and "Medieval Icelandic Heroine;" Frank, "Marriage;" Kress, "Ekki." Cf. Cormack, "Women;" S. Nordal, "Gunnhildur;" Scott, "The Woman." See also B. Sawyer, "Kvinnor," "Women;" Ólason, *Dialogues* 147-56.

⁴⁰ Significant dream narratives feature in the family sagas, the kings' sagas, and in *Sturlunga saga* (see Glendenning's two studies of Sturla Þórðarson's dreams in *Íslendinga saga*, and, regarding *Porgils saga skarða*, ch. 7 below). As Clunies Ross observes, intertextual aspects of characterisation in *Íslendinga saga* help to enhance the status of thirteenth century political figures like Snorri ("Myth" 680-83; cf. Boyer, "Paganism"). Central characters' relationship with the past in *Heimskringla* are more problematic. For those who, like the two Óláfrs, are pressing for conversion to Christianity, the heathen past represents an opposition force, one that must either be negotiated or overcome. One of Óláfr Tryggvason's victories over his heathen opponents comes when he is able interrupt the relationship which the *bændur* conceive between themselves and the heathen gods: Óláfr insists on a sacrifice of the leading men in the district (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 67, 315-16). For our study of secondary authorship, Óláfr's discussion of the past is interesting because it appears to recognise a difference of past and current heathen practice, and manipulate that difference in order to achieve a political point.

that will affect them. In *Sturlunga saga*, too, spies are employed to discover the movement of opposing forces, and the ability to judge the accuracy or inaccuracy of their reports appears to be one of the key skills of a thirteenth century chieftain. As such, we may be able to read chieftains' responses to reports as indications of more commonly held attitudes towards well-known action given in report form.

Elevated direct speech, or dialogue between characters that carries great significance for the plot, can be regarded as a key aspect of saga characterisation and as a moment in which an author's conception of the society of early Iceland comes to the fore. I have in mind characters' speech during critical moments, such as when key decisions are made, when final words during battles are spoken, in death scenes, or in those moments when saga authors appear to betray something of a character's inner world (e.g., in the brief utterances that characters make when faced with the most trying situations – Gunnarr's enigmatic “fögr er hlíðin” is perhaps the most famous).⁴¹

Le Goff suggests that laughter can be analysed as “an introduction to the connection of a society with its past” (“Laughter” 165), and we can include laughter as a very ambiguous form of secondary authorship. Le Goff goes on to list some types of laughter in the sagas, the most interesting of which, at this point, is a laughter that implies a sense of resignation and defiance in the face of fate or grave danger. While this kind of laughter is connected to a conceit that the heroic characters will not fear, but rather laugh at, death, I think the response also offers audiences an opportunity to pinpoint and analyse the time at which a character perceives the overall meaning of the events in which he/she is caught. It is the sense of a character's recognition of fate that can give

⁴¹ Lönnroth's study of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for instance, makes it clear that the author of that saga was well-read, and that such comments as this one by Gunnarr, and Njáll's beautiful expression of his grief at the loss of Höskuldr – “when I heard that he had been slain I felt that the sweetest light of my eyes had been put out” (Cook, *Njal's Saga* 207) – indicate something of his reflections of how Christian writing might be used in a local context (see Lönnroth, *Critical* 153-57 concerning connections with *Grænlandinga saga* and *Alexanders saga*, 102-05 on a clerical influence, esp. 116-26 regarding the influence of Romance literature on Gunnarr's characterisation; see also the note to Cook, *Njal's Saga* 332).

to laughter the features of secondary authorship: laughter can express a crystallisation in a character's perception of his/her fortunes (G. Clark, for instance, suggests that Hallgerðr's laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga* represents her assurance that Þjóstólfr must die; 184).⁴²

Oration has the potential to provide examples of the saga authors' interpretation of major political lives and episodes. For instance, we can relate the saga authors' interest in kingly speech to an argument, put by Bagge in his study of *Heimskringla*, about the educative aim behind saga composition.⁴³ If, as Bagge suggests, the kings' sagas functioned to inform leaders about how to conduct their political careers, then the oratorical skill of saga characters must have been particularly valuable for the simple fact that its forms and structures could, in like situations, be replicated. Similarly, patterns of advice in the kings' sagas can be regarded as part of the sagas' overarching function as paradigms of advice.⁴⁴ In this sense, advice and oration reveal rhetorical models that were familiar to the authors, and suggest, in the context of persuasive dialogue, links between representational acts by saga characters and the saga author's conception of characters and the historical roles.

I do not use speech act theory as a discrete method of analysis here, but its usefulness to our understanding of the sagas has been raised by Amory, and his categories of saga speech acts, namely refusals of requests (64-68), breaches of contract (68-73), threats (73-74), insults (74-77), and challenges

⁴² For Clark's argument for dynamic characters in the sagas, see especially 175-76. Consider, too, how much is captured by Snorri Sturluson's response to Hallveig Ormsdóttir in *Íslendinga saga*: "En þat var Hallveig Ormsdóttir, er þá var færikust á Íslandi. Snorra þótti hennar ferð heldr hæðilig ok brosti at" (120); "And it turned out to be Hallveig Ormsdóttir, who was then the richest woman in Iceland. To Snorri, her mode of travel seemed rather ludicrous, and he smiled at it." Sturla Þórðason, the author of this account and Snorri's nephew, could well have enjoyed this story, and the rather amusing reflection of Snorri's wit that it suggests. The story is given added bite by the fact that Snorri is outdone by Sturla Sighvatsson in the quest for Solveig – "þótti mönnum sem hann [Snorri] hefði annars ætlat" (122; "it seemed to men as if he [Snorri] had other plans" for a union with Solveig) – and by Snorri's eventual partnership with Hallveig: "Hafði Snorri þá miklu meira fé en engi annarra á Íslandi" (129) – "Snorri then had much more property than anyone else in Iceland." On Snorri's relationship with Hallveig, see Jochens, "Wealth and Women" 459.

⁴³ See also Knirk's detailed study of the rhetoric of the kings' sagas.

⁴⁴ Speeches of this kind are rare in the family sagas, but, as Brown argues in her "Preface," *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* does share the kings' sagas' pleasure in kingly rhetoric.

(77-80) are reasonable starting points for an analysis of the sagas that is, although with a sociolinguistic emphasis, similar to my analysis of secondary authorship.⁴⁵ Speech act theory does not stress the authorial nature of words but their relation to other modes of social performance and various performance structures. It is this interest in words as social functions, anthropologically aligned with physical actions rather than ironic narratives, that distances speech act theory from my notion of secondary authorship, and I do not consider Amory's formulation of social exchanges in the sagas to be immediately applicable here.⁴⁶ Yet, the use of speech act theory to discuss prominent or powerful speeches in the saga reflects the general acceptance by saga scholars that speech in the sagas can carry a greater social and ethical significance than its brevity or lack of overt interpretive content might first suggest.

Spells and curses offer a case in point. While they function in part to unify and shape biographical sagas (e.g., *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*) we can also look to the power of these words for evidence of the power of speech more generally. Likewise, prophecies (e.g., Gestr Oddleifsson's prophecies in *Gisla saga Súrssonar* and *Laxdæla saga*) carry the dual function of structuring narratives and depicting the saga world as one in which the future can be captured in the words of the wise and prescient. Legal arguments are also capable of bearing performative force and, despite their at times formulaic and repetitive nature, they can be used creatively in a way that suggests the possible individualisation and thematising of characters' skill in manipulating inherited representational models for their own purposes.⁴⁷ Such a process of

⁴⁵ See also Bonner and Grimstad, who have collaborated as linguist and literary scholar on a dialogue analysis of *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* (5); they develop a performative approach that can be linked to arguments by Amory and Bauman.

⁴⁶ Although, as in my discussion of laughter, I am interested in oblique, non-verbal expression, I am hesitant about the cross-cultural basis of Amory's approach, which, like the use of comparative anthropology, has the danger of diminishing the distinctive aspects of the Icelandic sagas (see esp. 60).

⁴⁷ Regarding legal advocacy in the saga age, see, for example, Lönnroth, *Critical* 88-102, and, more generally, Miller, *Bloodtaking*; Byock, *Medieval Iceland and Feud*; and Berger, "Lawyers" and "Old Law."

secondary authorship is of interest because the ability to re-shape old legal patterns and spells parallels the authors' skill in altering traditional narratives.

The composition of poetry is perhaps the clearest type of secondary authorship in the sagas. As one would expect, it has received a great deal of attention to date, and will not be the subject of intense study here.⁴⁸ However, I would like to look briefly at two well-known verses in order to give an indication of how we might connect conspicuous comments by characters to the notion of secondary authorship and to the argument, developed in this thesis, about the joint possession of saga narratives by saga authors and tradition:

Mjök erum tregt
tungu at hrœra
eða loptvætt
ljóðpundara;
esa nú vænligt
of Viðurs þýfi
né hógdrœgt
ór hugar fylgsni. (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*
246)

Egill tók at hressask, svá sem fram leið at yrkja kvæðit, ok er
lokit var kvæðinu, þá færði hann þat Ásgerði ok Þorgerði ok

⁴⁸ Even post-war scholarship about Old Icelandic poetic composition is immense (see generally Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*; R. Frank, *Old Norse*; Poole, *Viking Poems*; Clunies Ross, "Rites" and *Prolonged Echoes* vol. 1; and regarding the characterisation of poets, see, e.g., Ólason, *Dialogues* 144-45). In a recent article ("Prosimetrum Form"), Tulinius emphasises the creative and intellectual links between saga events, poetic composition and the outlook behind it, and the nature of saga narratives (see esp. 192-94), and discusses possible meanings behind the presence of both complex meaning and a conceit of God-given poetic talent (see 198). See also Larrington, *Store of Common Sense*, which examines Old Icelandic wisdom poetry; especially interesting is her discussion of wisdom and knowledge in *Hávamál*, the guide to honourable conduct (see 4-36; see further Toorn): Old Icelandic wisdom poems defy normal narrative or chronological patterns (65), suggesting that in certain contexts knowledge and guidance are sufficient functions of textuality. That is, "an aesthetic impulse is always at work in the organisation of the wisdom poem: with no inherent logical or chronological order, its structure becomes symphonic in character. Themes are taken up, allowed to drop, returned to in a different key or tempo, modulated until resolution is finally reached" (220). This description could fairly be given of some of the less chronologically ordered sagas, especially *Eyrbyggja saga*.

hjónum sínum; reis hann þá upp ór rekkju ok settisk í ǫndvegi;
kvæði þetta kallaði hann Sonatorrek. (256-57).

“My mouth strains / To move the tongue, / To weigh and wing /
The choice word: / Not easy to breathe / Odin’s inspiration / In
my heart’s hinterland, / Little hope there.” (Pálsson and
Edwards, *Egil’s Saga* 204)

As the poem progressed, Egil began to get back his spirits and
when it was completed he tried the poem out before Asgerd,
Thorgerd and his household. Then he got out of bed and took
his place on the high-seat. He called the poem ‘Lament for My
Sons’.” (209)

The verse that I have quoted is the beginning of *Sonatorrek*, in *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, and the prose a comment which follows the poem as a whole. It suggests, I think, an authorial conception of what the poem means to the character Egill. In itself, the first verse signals a range of concerns regarding both the internal and bodily nature of composition, as well as the objects of the act of composition. In addition, there is a relationship between the internal and physical struggle of the poet and the object of the poem: Bǫðvarr’s death is the cause of grief as well the poem’s supposed object, whilst grief creates both Egill’s dumbness (or the poetic theme of dumbness) and a very eloquent stream in the narrative within the *kvæði*. The *kvæði* successfully blends the physical and the psychic, the subject and the object. The prose comment, and the narrative of Egill’s loss frame the *Sonatorrek* as a whole and can be said to stand outside Egill’s personal and physical space. That is, the poem appears to look in, just as Egill’s daughter wishes to look in, to view what effect the poetic performance is having on the mood of the utterer.

The prose narration around the poem creates a chamber that is, in ironic terms, the same as the distance which the physical chamber represents for Egill’s relationship with his world and his various losses: the loss of poetic fluency, the loss of a son, and the loss of his youth and former strength. The prose comment about the poem goes on to follow the early life of the poem,

that it is read to Ásgerðr and Þorgerðr, that Egill then resumes his place as head of the household, and that Egill himself names the poem *Sonatorrek*. The narration recognises the life of the *skáld* and how the poetic act affects the *skáld*, and watches the *kvæði* move, firstly, from Egill to a discourse with himself within his room, secondly, an exchange with his family, and thirdly, into an expression of his household. Egill is being commented on in a way that emphasises his belonging to an older, past world; at the same time, the surrounding prose codifies the poem as a character's private statement of self that *acts on* the author. Taken together, the poetry and prose combine to form a dialogue between saga author and Egill, the poet of a saga, about the nature of loss.

We might compare Egill's poem with one that is attributed to Gísli Súrsson:

Nú sækja þeir Eyjólfir at fast ok frændr hans; þeir sá, at þar lá við sœmð þeira ok virðing. Leggja þeir þá til hans með spjótum, svá at út falla iðrin, en hann sveipar at sér iðnunum ok skyrtunni ok bindr at fyrir neðan með reipinu. Þá mælti Gísli, at þeir skyldi bíða lítt þat, - "munu þér nú hafa þau málalok, sem þér vilduð." Hann kvað þá vísu:

Fals hallar skal Fulla
fagrleit, sús mik teitir,
rekkilöt at rökkum,
regns, sínum vin fregna.
Vel hygg ek, þótt eggjar
ítrslegnar mik bíti;
þá gaf sínum sveini
sverðs minn faðir herðu.

Sjá er in síðasta vísa Gísla. (*Gísla saga Súrssonar* 114-15)

They attack him fiercely, Eyjolf and his kinsmen; they saw that their honour was at stake. They wound him then

with their spears, so that his bowels begin to come out; and he gathers the bowels in with his shirt and ties them underneath with the cord. Then Gisli told them to wait a little – “You will finish up the case as you want to.” He spoke a verse: “Sheer goddess of shower / Of spear-shaft’s hall, cheer-heart, / Brave, bids of her lover, / Bold one, the cold tidings. / Fain am I though finely / Forged bright edges bite me; / My sire’s true sword temper, / Shows in his son’s life-close.” This is Gisli’s last verse. (Johnston, *Saga of Gisli* 58)

When Gísli requests a moment to speak before his death, he is granted it. Importantly, before Gísli is killed, the saga author and the characters give Gísli the time to form a statement of his ethical outlook and his sense of belonging. Gísli’s death is, I think, defined as much by the fact that he is given a final act of authorship as by the actual words he utters; that is, underlying this episode is a generically-informed conception of Gísli’s life as a narrative which he authors himself. When Gísli gives up his final pronouncement, he himself defines the final space which is to be made for him. “That is the last poem of Gísli / Gísli’s final verse,” says the prose which brackets the verse, pausing in much the same way as Gísli’s attackers must pause in order to allow and to observe a decisive moment in his own definition. The Old Icelandic *síðasta vísa Gísla* is a rather beautiful construction: it is made so by having common long front vowels “i,” final vowels “a” (marking the genitive), and middle consonants “s,” by the soft rhythm of the three words, by the slight irregularity of rhythm created by the “l” in Gísli, and by being placed in a short and syntactically simple sentence. The beauty of the phrase and its placement, this lingering of the prose narrative, encourages us also to dwell on two points.

Firstly, the sentence contrasts so sharply with the tone of the *vísa* itself that we can read for an authorial distance, a looking back on the *vísa* as it were. Secondly, the simple eloquence of the sentence, and the emotional as well as narrative finality that could be connected with it, may reflect the author’s claim

to the complete possession of Gísli's poetry. *Síðasta vísa Gísla* is a phrase with a cyclical quality, made up of three words which are phonetically and grammatically tied together, each word is in the possession of the other, an interconnectedness which reflects, in contrast, the positioning of Gísli's poems as the total possessions of Gísli. These are poems which are situated separately and yet inside the world constructed by the author, much as Egill's chamber is located separately and within the totality of the farmstead at Mosfell, a secret, private, and safe place that is created, in part, in opposition to the exposed communal spaces of the household. So, too, Gísli's poetry (like his dreams) performs a distinct part of the meaning of saga as a whole; they are private statements of a world of thought that we can tie to Gísli's self-conception, but which also form part of the character's social world and part of that overall meaning developed and controlled by the saga author. It seems that the saga represents a polyphonic, multi-functional authorial process, one that includes changing levels of distance and closeness between modes of narration, types of representation, and types of characters.⁴⁹ Naturally, this is executed in a tone, a manner, and a form that is consistent with other aspects of saga style, like objectivity or exteriority of characterisation. But the function of this objectivity is, of course, persuasive in many respects: for example, it helps to convince the audience that the saga is based on an inherited tradition, it is capable of being educative (and may help the reader to understand the specific historical context of Gísli's choices), and it may silently persuade readers of the author's credibility by suggesting that he is acted upon by the story and its characters.

Gísla saga Súrssonar is a particularly good – and widely appreciated (see Sørensen, “Murder” 236-37) – example of the complexities of point of view that the sagas can perform. It forms a useful bridge between the observations I have so far made about reading for character and authorship and

⁴⁹ Note that the author of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, like most saga authors, assists his readers in understanding Gísli's world; he contextualises Gísli. By the time Gísli kills Þorgrímr, the act is “a moral and aesthetic necessity” (Ólason, “Gísli” 169). The author is in effect arguing out an ethical case for Gísli by virtue of his sympathy for the character and his world; the author's coaching of his audience is exemplified during an exchange between Gísli and his wife, narrated shortly after Þorkell has overheard Auðr's conversation with Ásgerðr (see 30-31).

the more extended consideration we must now give to the peculiar characteristics of the sagas' narrative form. We will, in particular, have to give some thought to the sagas' well-known reticence about characters' inner lives, and consider how much of an obstacle this exterior narrative point of view is to authorial engagement with saga characters.

Chapter 2: National and Domestic Narratives

Þá mælti Gizurr: “Páll frænda,” segir hann, “hér máttu nú sjá Ísleif, son minn, ok Gróu, konu mína.” Ok fann Páll, at hann leit frá, ok stökk ór andlitinu sem haglkorn væri. (*Íslendinga saga* 445)

Then Gizurr spoke: “Páll, kinsman,” he says, “here you can now see Ísleifr, my son, and Gróa, my wife.” And Páll noticed that he turned away, and that tears fell across his face as hailstones would.

Relating National and Domestic Narratives

In chapter one, I made some observations about approaches to the context of saga writing, and about the type of descriptors that we can use in discussing notions of saga authorship that are implied by the saga narratives themselves. It was possible for saga authors, through characters that I describe as *secondary authors*, to engage in a sympathetic way with the social and ethical world of the sagas, and such engagement can be viewed as an attempt by the saga authors to exercise a higher degree of control in the joint possession, with tradition, of saga narratives.

I now develop this argument by discussing an aspect of the early and medieval Icelandic social world that is central to all the family and contemporary sagas set in Iceland – the family – and the associated representations of home life and of relations between families.¹ As scholars have pointed out, the sagas suggest a community which depended heavily on kinship ties for social cohesion, for the prosperity of the community as whole,

¹ As Clunies Ross observes, fundamental “to the medieval literary and historiographical tradition of which *Íslendinga saga* forms the conclusion is a conception of history as family generated and family linked” (“Myth” 676).

and for the welfare of individuals. Family is a key, arguably the central, cultural concern of saga authors and their contemporaries. As one would expect, the intensity of their concern about family relations is reflected in the manner in which the sagas integrate family matters at all levels of narration, description, and exposition, from genealogical information, to individual episodes which deal with kinship obligations and the tensions associated with them, through to sagas which are dominated structurally by the author's interest in the history of a particular family. I argue that the centrality of domestic narratives in the sagas reflects a broader social interest in the family as the centre of political development, and that authors' interpretation of characters' domestic lives allows authors to engage in a national dialogue about the defining moments in Icelandic history.²

Four characters in two sagas dominate the discussion that follows, Vésteinn and Gísli in *Gísli saga Súrssonar* (herein *Gísli saga*) and Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Sturla Þórðarson in *Íslendinga saga*. *Gísli saga* betrays an authorial obsession with patterns of obligation. As Sørensen observes in one of his essays about the saga, "the psychological and the social are two sides of the same coin; when the central characters' feelings are described or hinted at, they are the literary expression of the social conflict in which the characters find themselves" ("Murder" 261). Indeed, much of the saga's narrative tension is created by the juxtaposition of relationships of choice (such as friendship and sworn-brotherhood) with family relationships created by marriage and with relationships of blood kinship. Similarly, an elaborate interweaving of family and national history is a key part of *Íslendinga saga* by Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284). This saga develops its story of Gizurr Þorvaldsson's accession to the Icelandic earldom from the point of view of various members of the Sturlung family, Gizurr's most significant rivals for national power. Sturla, himself a

² Thus, this chapter responds in part to Ólason's suggestion that more ought to be done to evaluate the political significance of the "power play" described in *Íslendinga saga* (see his "Political Element" 802).

member of the Sturlung family,³ endeavours to tell the saga in the same mixed style of objectivity and authorial insight that we find in the family sagas and the kings' sagas. Nevertheless, the weight of his familial point of view is such that Gizurr is generally positioned as the saga's outsider, at least until the burning at Flugumýri (ch. 172), when Sturla and Gizurr are on the verge of creating family bonds. Sturla probably wrote *Íslendinga saga* some years after the burning, but here, as often, he narrates events as though without hindsight. In this sense, Sturla is in a complex relationship with his sources and "his younger self within the story" (Bragason, *Poetics* 87). Sturla's characterisation of himself demands a multiplicity of narrative voices and authorial functions, and allows Sturla a perspective that connects the internal difficulties in the Sturlung family to Gizurr's success, to the patterns of conflict in the thirteenth century, and to other aspects of Icelandic history and literature, such as the mythical past.

Both sagas are interesting because of the polyphonic narrative voices they contain. For instance, Sturla's ability to fracture and divide the point of view that he adopts indicates, I think, that his narrative position with regard to the events in the saga was capable of considerable variation, particularly in terms of the historical tone he used to sum up those events. At times, Sturla is very close to his story, while at other times he seems to adopt a distant viewpoint that is capable of appraising events critically. Here, there, is a striking example of the saga form's ability to accommodate changes in possession. On many occasions, one senses that Sturla's narrative performs an annal-like

³ For an attempt to describe Sturla's life, see Vigfússon, Prolegomena xcvi; Grímsdóttir, "Sturla," "Um Sárarafar;" Stefánsson, "Drottinsvik;" Þorláksson, "Var Sturla"). Vigfússon's portrayal is dated in the sense that it aims to create a authorial biography to use in interpreting *Íslendinga saga*, but the description reflects a common perception of Sturla as a peaceful and moderate intellectual (see xcvi-xcviii). For example, Vigfússon writes that until the death of Þorgils skarði in 1258, "Sturla was in a good position, and enjoyed a brief rest from the deadly struggle, into which he had been drawn against his will" (xcviii). Ciklamini, "Biographical" suggests that *Íslendinga saga* "bears the imprint of his [Sturla's] moral bearing" (205), reflected especially in his portrayal of family members (208-11), especially his father Þórðr (212-18). Cf. Thomas, "The Sturlunga Age" 54; Ker, "Sturla," esp. 179-80. Thomas and Ker admire Sturla for his impartiality, a conclusion that is doubted after more recent discussions by Bragason; Bragg; Gade, "The Naked;" G. Nordal, *Ethics*; and Tranter. See also Reid, "Er þat satt" ch. 3.

function to document important events and list the people involved.⁴ In the same way, *Gísla saga* realises both authorial interpretation and the saga author's function as the mediator of the saga's "self-performance." As I discussed at the close of chapter one, Gísli's voice in the saga is a powerful one; it appears to signal the author's desire to let the characters speak for themselves, and yet the narrator of *Gísla saga* is conspicuous in his reception of Gísli's voice. The variation in narrative voice points us towards the author's engagement with his characters, or towards his empathetic development of secondary authors. The link between authors and characters, which comes to the fore when we explore the nature of domestic obligation, allows us to connect important political events of early and medieval Iceland to intersecting authorial functions of documentation, interpretation, and artistic creation.

Friendship, Family, and the Inner Life

In comparison with modern prose forms, the family and contemporary secular sagas of medieval Iceland give relatively few express indications of the inner lives of characters. On the other hand, from the structure of saga plots, we can be sure that saga authors were interested in characters' decision-making, and the unexpressed reflections which characters make in response to the often escalating problems in their lives. When Vésteinn, in *Gísla saga*, returns to Iceland and travels to visit his sworn brother Gísli, he is met by two of Gísli's servants, some distance short of Gísli's farm, at Gemlufallsheiði, the high ground between Qnundarfjörðr (where Vésteinn lives) and Dýrafjörðr. They deliver an urgent message that Vésteinn must not come to Gísli's farm, and present half a coin, the other half of which is held by Vésteinn. Vésteinn is faced with a difficult decision, and his response to the situation gives us a taste of the complicated mixture of emotional expression and repression that is found in many of the sagas, particularly during moments of personal crisis that, like this one, take place shortly before a major event:

⁴ A less functionally-oriented reading might say that the annalistic mode of some of the writing indicates something of Sturla's relationship with his sources.

Hann tekur nú annan pening úr fégyrðli sínum ok roðnar mjök á at sjá. “Satt eitt segi þit,” segir hann, “ok mynda ek aptr hafa horfit, ef þit hefðið hitt mik fyrr, en nú falla vötn öll til Dýrafjarðar, ok mun ek þangat ríða, enda em ek þess fúss.” (40)
He now takes the other penny from his belt-purse and reddens greatly at seeing it. “You speak the truth,” he says, “and I would have turned back if you had met with me earlier. But now all the rivers flow towards Dýrafjörður, and I will ride there. In any case, I am of a mind to do so.”

Can we interpret this passage as an indication of Vésteinn’s inner life? We are probably safe in arguing that Vésteinn’s allusion to rivers running to Dýrafjörður represents a stoic resignation to fate, that to turn around at this point would require a resistance to the course of things (*falla vötn öll til Dýrafjarðar*) which he is not prepared to mount. But what of Vésteinn’s *sense* of fate up to this point, or his sense of himself and the life he would lead, or like to lead: was he waiting for this news, for a token of danger from Gísli, or has the idea of danger, and of death, come upon him suddenly? Is Vésteinn frightened by the danger ahead, or perhaps simply surprised? We cannot be sure that Vésteinn senses that he will be killed, but the fact that he “reddens greatly” is an indication both that he is experiencing strong emotions and that he is aware that the threat is a great one.⁵

Similar, although more difficult, hermeneutical problems arise around Gísli’s inner development in the saga. For example, an understanding of both Gísli’s inner and outer lives is complicated by his command of difficult skaldic poetry, poems which appears to introduce an emotive, or at least deeply personal, element to a narrative that is famous for being cryptic and elusive (see Andersson, “Some Ambiguities”). Harris, in a study of the relationship of verse and prose in *Gísla saga*, and the levels of comprehension intended for both, observes that Gísli’s poems are related to the saga’s prose style in terms of an authorial commitment to epistemological objectivity:

⁵ On reddening in the sagas, see Miller, “Emotions.”

What saga prose and skaldic riddles have in common may lie at the level of bare epistemology. The sagas are famous for their severe limitation to the observable; psychology, for example, is presented through outward and visible signs – W. P. Ker called it face-of-the-clock psychology. A secret that could only be known between two persons is reported in the only form everyone else could know: they were observed to be talking alone....Reality is a kind of epistemological puzzle; the elements for solving it are there, but each person and the reader has to solve it for himself. *Gísla saga* is full of such small epistemological riddles, and the narrative turns of a murder which is never firmly credited to anyone and is still a source of disagreement. (“The Enigma” 189)⁶

Clearly, the study of authorial engagement with secondary authors must account for the “epistemological puzzle” that underlies characterisation, and our analysis of characters’ perception and understanding ought not to be undone by the fact that that inner world is often only briefly glimpsed or ambiguously portrayed. Importantly, these moments of inner development are instances when the author exceeds his role as the narrator of tradition and forms a connection between himself and the saga world, a link which has the potential to unveil the conceptions behind the composition itself. Despite its brevity, Vésteinn’s comment at Gemlufallsheiði is precisely the kind of representation that allows the author and his audience to interpret the events of the saga in an empathetic way.

Family Problems

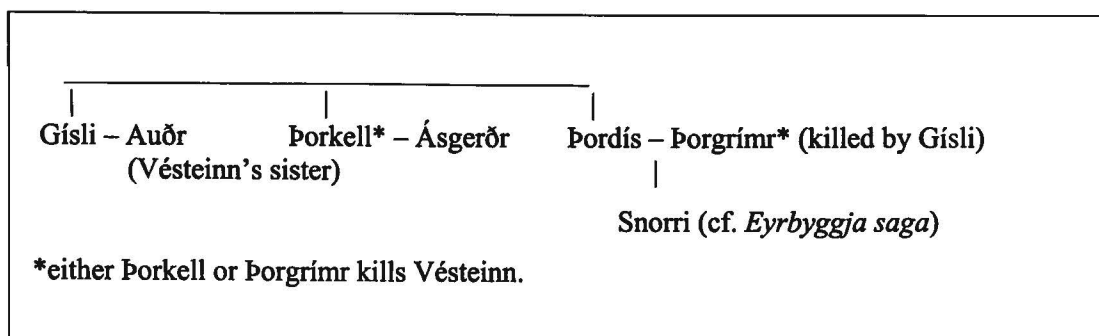
As a family saga, *Gísla saga* creates an aesthetic landscape out of the relationship between family life and individual desire. Gísli and other central characters are never seen entirely in their own right. Indeed, a saga character without family ties, without complicated and often conflicting family

⁶ See also Clunies Ross, “Concepts” 62-64.

obligations, and without genealogically-derived character traits, could not function long in a family saga, either in terms of plot structure or in the sense of surviving the social world of the sagas. The narration of Vésteinn's reaction to Gísli's coin and Gísli attempt to save Vésteinn is framed, and to some extent defined, by *Gísla saga*'s still more complicated narrative of domestic life. At this point in the saga, the most important of these relationships is a deteriorating one between Gísli and his brother Þorkell, who has distanced himself from Gísli and become more closely aligned to their sister, Þordís, and her husband, Þorgrímr. Both Þorgrímr and Þorkell pose a threat to Vésteinn; while there is a degree of ambiguity about the identity of Vésteinn's killer, there is no doubt about the fact that Gísli's siblings and his other brother-in-law resent Vésteinn.

The author takes pleasure in the various causes of this resentment, particularly in reporting an insinuation that Vésteinn and Ásgerðr (Þorkell's sister) have been sexually involved. The revelation of this dishonour in Þorkell's presence is a major event in the saga, not just because it creates a possible motive for Þorkell's murder of Vésteinn (if he is the killer), but also because it may explain Gísli's inability to create a blood-brotherhood between himself, Þorkell, Þorgrímr, and Vésteinn earlier in the story. At that point, the basis of tensions is left unexpressed.⁷ Furthermore, by emphasising the history of family's disputes and tensions (including those in Norway before the family migrates to Iceland), the author shows us that the threat to Vésteinn is exacerbated by various hostilities directed at Gísli, and which come to be deflected from him and onto Vésteinn. Gísli has, it seems, created a ruptured family and one which is ready to kill his friend.

⁷ Þorgrímr states, as they are about to shake hands on blood-brotherhood pact, “Ærinn vanda hefí ek, þótt ek gera þetta við þá báða, Þorkel og Gísla, mága mina, en mik skyldir ekki til við Véstein” (23) – “I have enough difficulty if I do this with both Þorkell and Gísli my brother-in-law; I will not be bound to Vésteinn.”



The family in *Gísla saga*

As in the case with Eyvindr's reaction in *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*, when he is chased down by Hrafnkell, our reading of Vésteinn's response at Gemlufallsheiði is informed by the early, and perhaps medieval, Icelandic idea of group liability in feuds (or at least its function as a topos in medieval Icelandic literature). Even if Vésteinn has not committed an offence, the nature of his ties to Gísli make him a target of the family's dislike of Gísli. The attack by Þorgrímr and Þorkell is permissible, if not morally justified, in that its object lies just outside the immediate family, while the emotional effect on Gísli is as sharp, and its basis in the patterns of feudal behaviour is as clear, as an attack on an immediate member of an opposing family in a feud. Vésteinn's incongruous role as a fairly minor figure who is nevertheless the subject of great attention from more central players also makes more sense when viewed in this domestic context. Prior to getting Gísli's coin, Vésteinn's position is much like that of Eyvindr, in that both characters state a belief that they have no cause for concern.⁸ When others try to give warning, Vésteinn and Eyvindr recoil from an assumption of hostility in favour of a naive assumption (perhaps stated ironically or heroically) that they are not in harm's way. Such assumptions are perhaps made credible by the characters' absence during most of the saga but are easily undermined, and turned into the basis of a tense narrative climax, by the main players' interest in the characters and by the audience's probable

⁸ When Hrafnkell kills Eyvindr, he effectively states his perception of Sámr's worth as an opponent – Miller describes it as the “vengeance worthiness of the target” (*Bloodtaking* 200) – a statement of perception which ties in with the saga's themes of arrogance and political competence. Such a reading appears to confirm the idea that Eyvindr, despite his outward show, ought to be, or most probably is, aware that there is some danger in Hrafnkell's advance.

knowledge of the nature of liability in early Icelandic disputes. Thus, whilst Vésteinn's appearances in the saga are brief, his characterisation is elaborated by a network of domestic interests, by his noble-minded assumption about the actions of others, and by the understated manner in which the reader is reminded (*roðnar mjög; ef þið hefðuð hitt mig fyrr*) that Vésteinn understands the danger.

Clearly, Vésteinn's speech at Gemlufallsheiði leaves some major questions unanswered: when Vésteinn makes this decision, does the author want us to feel that Vésteinn is aware of the grave danger ahead? Does Vésteinn understand the extent of the threat and, if so, why does he continue to ride to the feast? Does the author see Vésteinn as he brave, foolhardy, or does he not imagine that he has the choice to turn back? Further, does the author approve of Vésteinn's decision, or is the question of approval secondary to the issue of the author's pleasure in the aesthetics of the situation, that is, of a character's ability at once to catch onto and give some indication of the sharp reality of danger and to suppress the discomfort he feels at its knowledge? We know from an earlier exchange between Gísli and Vésteinn that the half-penny, together with an order *not* to come to Gísli's farm, represents a message to Vésteinn that he (i.e., not Gísli) is in some kind of danger. Clearly, Vésteinn is aware that he faces a real threat.

But does he know that he will be killed at the autumn feast? If so, Vésteinn's allusion to streams running to Dýrafjörðr may represent his stoic resignation to fate, that to turn around at this point would require a resistance to the course of things which he is not prepared to mount. But what of Vésteinn's sense of fate up to this point, or his sense of himself and the life he would lead, or like to lead: was he waiting for this news, for a token of danger from Gísli, or has the idea of danger, and of death, come upon him suddenly? Certainly, Vésteinn (like the reader) knows that there have been tensions between him and Þorkell, but (unlike the reader) Vésteinn is unaware of the sexual insinuations that have been made about him and Ásgerðr while he has been abroad. There is

an epistemological gap there, one which appears to be solved (at least for the narrator) by the persuasiveness of the rivers running to Dýrafjörðr.

Is Vésteinn frightened by the danger ahead? Is he shocked? We are told that he “reddens greatly,” and that he would have turned back had he met the messengers earlier. This suggests that he is experiencing strong emotions, and that he is aware that the threat is a great one. But Vésteinn seems to catch himself out a little by betraying this recognition, and his final statement that he is “of a mind to keep going” suggests a quick recovery of an accustomed coolness or insistence on desires that are based on what is clear rather than on what is feared. Vésteinn knows for certain that there is danger, although the gravity and the nature of the danger have not been clearly stated to him. His response to the ambiguity is an insistence on viewing life on the face of things, a perspective which he shares, of course, with saga style itself. In this context, the reference to the direction of the rivers may be a reference to the possible depths of knowledge, depths which Vésteinn (like the saga narrators) broaches in a cryptic and enigmatic way. A connection between Vésteinn and the narrator exists only briefly, but it is enough for us to see the author’s interest in Vésteinn’s emotional response to the demands of loyalty and action that we see in many of the sagas.

As I suggested earlier, *Gísla saga* is not alone in this style of representation. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Gunnarr’s turning to the natural world at his moment of crisis, for example, appears to offer the author a means of complicating Gunnarr’s characterisation without intruding directly into his thoughts.⁹ In *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*, when a spectacularly described chase is brought to a conclusion on a barren knoll, Eyvindr is in a similar position to Vésteinn in so much as a) both cannot, objectively, be sure about the danger they face even if they *do*, in subjective terms, know; b) they are both geographically caught in-between places of safety and places of danger; and c)

⁹ See also below, ch. 5, where I discuss Hrútr Herjólfsson’s characterisation in *Brennu-Njáls saga*.

they both respond to an epistemological lack by maintaining their own pace and pre-set travel routes.

The Ethical Significance of Vésteinn's Decision

When, ultimately, Gísli kills Þorgrímr in revenge for Vésteinn's death, he orphans one of the most important national figures of the saga age, Snorri goði, a character we will turn to in chapter three. A series of events is set in train which will lead to the narrative of Gísli as an outlaw, one of the two most important outlaw narratives in a country that was obsessed with the question of law and the private enforcement of legal judgments. In this legal and ethical context, Gísli's fraught family life represents the passing of an ethical order in early Iceland, whereby Gísli's insistence on an heroic, predictable, and uncompromising code of behaviour is contrasted with his relations' changing sense of their duty to him; perhaps they do not possess the steady, self-determined pace that marks the decisions by Vésteinn, Gunnarr, and Eyvindr (although, in Þordís' case, matters are made still more complicated by the obligations for revenge that might fall onto her son Snorri). Vésteinn's decision to ride to Dýrafjörðr is one of the few acts in the saga with a direct ethical equivalence to the way in which Gísli acts; like Gísli, he is guided by fate and by a conception of his own honour, and does not shy away from his obligations (including his obligation to maintain his reputation). The point of connection between the two men offers an alternative, positive relationship between an heroic character and another member of the Icelandic community, one which this saga, in the end, develops for the sake of the tragic possibilities of the plot.

Although Snorri goði is Gísli's nephew, the central character of *Eyrbyggja saga* seems, in ethical terms, to be far removed from the heroic code that informs Gísli's decisions. If we compare Gísli and Snorri, we certainly get an idea of the metonymic and thematic possibilities that attach to characterisation in the family sagas. While Gísli's eventual isolation from his family, and his legal non-status as an outlaw highlight the uneasy place of the strong individual in a small, kingless society like Iceland, Snorri illustrates how

a pragmatic character, who can use the law and craftiness as a weapon against most of the difficulties he encounters, will eventually acquire the community's respect. Snorri's ability to understand and control the supernatural, legal and tactical aspects of life on Snæfellsnes guarantees his personal success. Perhaps more importantly for our sense of the ethical point which *Eyrbyggja saga* as a whole makes, his rise is associated with the development of a new social order in the district, one which emphasises negotiation and law over the heroic individualism of people like Gísli (see further ch. 3). We are moving, then, to a sense of saga characterisation as a function of authors' attempts to understand ethical codes and the historical changes that the author's imaginative interaction with characters suggests. Characters' family roles, it seems, lie at the heart of this interest in the past: characters' expression of family obligations is a marker of their position in the national history.

To return to a point that I made at the start of this chapter, while Vésteinn's response at Gemlufallsheiði is made more complete by our understanding of the domestic and national narratives which frame it, and by our sense of it as a symbolic reference to an ethical world that is different to the author's, it is nevertheless the case that the author avoids a clear and detailed expression of Vésteinn's inner development. This authorial point of view is tied to generic conventions, and in that sense may reflect formal constraints and ideological assumptions rather than authorial discretion; yet, the underlying conception of authorship can still be described in terms of the idea of joint possession that was raised above. In the context of the argument that is being developed in this thesis about the relative closeness and distance of saga authors to their material, and their control of it, we can observe that the generic constraint of objective narration creates a textual environment in which authorial understatement of contemporary interest in certain characters can nevertheless appear clearly enough to allow a link between the saga and writing ages to emerge. In effect, we are suggesting that the structure and generic patterns of saga narratives is such that authors *can be* very economical in character development. Further, because of the impact of generic constraints,

narrative structures are as important in interpreting authorial engagement with saga characters as the historical discourses which develop within those structures.

The Structure of Authorial Engagement

It is difficult to imagine that the skilled authors of the family sagas were not engaged on an emotional level with their characters. We are, I suggest, justified in reading for a far more detailed and complex conception of characters than authors explicitly reveal in the sagas. A number of social and emotional concepts in the sagas appear to be drawn from life in medieval Iceland, concepts which the author need not explain. On the other hand, the individual traits of characters, such as distinctive emotional outlooks, are developed so that, in the context of a saga's structure and the situations which the saga describes, characters are seen to behave in a credible way. At times, saga authors make limited but noticeably educative comments to the reader to ensure that the credibility of their characters is not undermined when they do something out of step with a thirteenth century view of believable behaviour. The shorter version of *Gísla saga*, for instance, uses the word *sið*, or "custom," five times and it appears on two occasions in the longer version of the saga in dialogue between characters. On both occasions, the intention appears to be to ensure the reader will know that the characters' actions, while perhaps strange to medieval readers, are not obscure or unreasonable:

Ok er Gísli var á leið kominn, þá fara þeir Þorgrímr með marga menn til haugsgörðarinnar. En þá er þeir höfðu veitt Vésteini umbúnað sem siðr var til, gekk Þorgrímr at Gísla ok mælti: "Þat er tízka," segir hann, "at binda monnum helskó, þá er þeir skulu ganga á til Valhallar, ok mun ek gera þat við Véstein." (45)

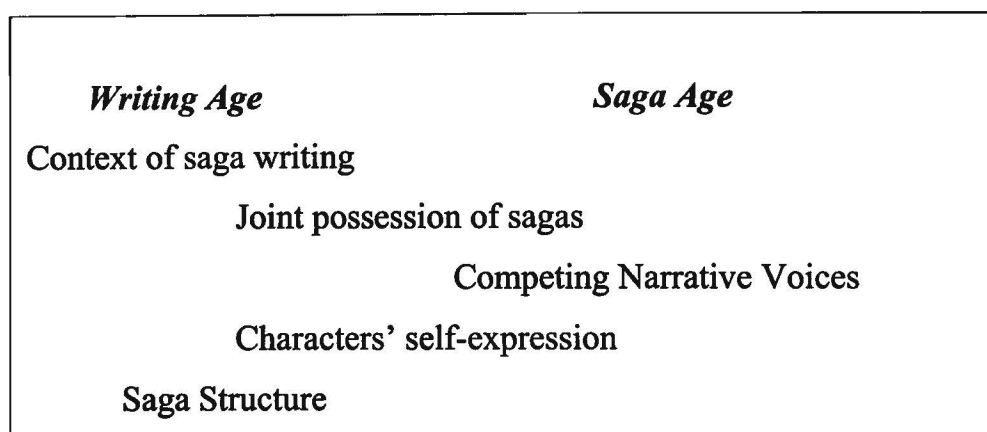
And when Gísli had arrived, then Þorgrímr went with many men to the burial ceremony. And when they had given Vésteinn a burial in the way of the custom then, Þorgrímr went up to Gísli and said: "It is the custom," he said, "to bind hel-shoes on

men, in which they will walk to Valhalla, and I will do so for Vésteinn.”

As we see here, the saga author must reveal his distance from the saga age in order for characters to be understood in early Icelandic social and historical terms, or in terms of the traditions associated with the community of the saga. That is, the author reveals his critical point of view in order to create a textual environment that is sympathetic to historical differences, one in which he and his readers may fully understand and take possession of an inheritance that is passed down to them in stories that, without a degree of interpretation and contextualisation, might be obscure. Saga authors and saga readers may desire a direct dialogue with the past, but the result of this authorial intervention in the dialogue is that inherited traditions are placed into a textual reality which is not altogether characterised by the historical purity of an oral tradition nor the social reality of the medieval present. In this context – of sagas that exist in between textual inheritance and a contemporary social space – the author’s desire to create an enigmatic surface to the narrative may be read as a reflection of a creative *mentalité* that is comfortable with seemingly contradictory social and personal possibilities. In the author’s engagement with the people of the saga age, it is possible for tradition and invention to co-exist. It is worth recalling that Vésteinn is caught, in a liminal sense, between safety and danger, and also between the temporal division of his knowledge and ignorance of danger. The co-existence of calmness and deep disturbance parallels the ability of authors to inscribe the saga with contradictory impressions of their historical credibility and their imaginative reception of tradition.

This notion of the generic centrality of socio-historical borders and divisions allows us to read for contradictions in narrative voice and point of view without attributing artistic clumsiness to saga authors. The situation is not a straightforward conflict between oral tradition and authorial intrusion: there is a more complex co-existence of past and present voices, interpretive and documentary functions, under way. Earlier, I signalled this idea in terms of a joint possession of saga material. The problem can also be addressed,

structurally, in terms of the sagas' various narrative points of view. We are drawing in a further component of an approach to authorship that stresses that the sagas are limited in their narrative voice because narrative voice is, in a sense, owned by tradition. The question that we can add to those raised in chapter one about the context of saga production is: how does saga structure reflect variation in the joint possession of saga narratives? Thus, in reading for authorship, we can move from a contextual analysis (of the writing age and its cultural connection with the saga age) towards textual analysis through the metaphor of possession, and the connections between characters' statements and general conditions of representation, and, finally, to the nature of the saga authors' engagement with the past as that engagement is reflected in saga structures:



A multi-faceted approach to the functions of saga authorship

Structural patterns are particularly meaningful in the Old Icelandic context, and structural approaches may have greater ongoing relevance in saga studies than in other fields.¹⁰ The lack of open authorial comment in the sagas, raised above in relation to characters' decisions in *Gísla saga*, requires scholars to look for authorial intention in narrative patterns.¹¹ For example, parallels in

¹⁰ As with its application in other literary fields, in Old Icelandic scholarship structuralism has seen an attempt to abstract and define the component parts of narratives and discern the meaning which can attributed to patterns which occur in and across certain genres.

¹¹ However, I agree with Ólason's warning that schemas and structural simplifications "can never account for every element in the text" (*Dialogues* 94); they may "help to define the broad characteristics of particular groups of sagas, but are of little avail in identifying the distinctive

plot structures allow us to read for comparisons between characters and actions, patterns in the escalation of feuds help to clarify plot climaxes, and the structuring of action and episodes around major national events, such as the conversion to Christianity, gives some indication of the connections which authors make between their characters and the historical period they occupy.¹² Saga authors themselves seem especially conscious of the signifying power of patterns and the relative integrity and relatedness of saga episodes (e.g., Maxwell, “Patterns;” Clover, *Medieval Saga*).¹³ We ought of course to seek

artistry of individual sagas” (94). An example of the possible heavy-handedness of the structural approach can be seen in Arent, *The Laxdoela saga: Its Structural Patterns*, where the author discusses the “intriguing” ability of the author “to individualise the elements he has made into stereotypes in the first place, enabling him to conceal his patterns” (164), surely a circular argument in that the evidence for the normal and the “intriguing” aspects of the text are the same.

¹² Andersson’s *Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins* and *Icelandic Family Saga* can be viewed as initiating complementary components of the structural approach in Old Icelandic studies, and much of the scholarship about structure and meaning in the sagas which has followed can be viewed in light of the twin concerns of saga origin and saga form. The contextual approach to authorship which Andersson develops in his article about Munkaþverá (“Saga School”), and Andersson’s use of source-analysis to discuss Snorri Sturluson’s authorship in an article about Snorri’s alterations of *Morkinskinna* in the composition of *Heimskringla*, are two more recent articles that illustrate the literary historical orientation of structuralism in Old Icelandic studies. Miller and Andersson, in the preface to their collaboration, explain the contact between social history and literary theory in the context of Old Icelandic literature, particularly with regard to the desire, on the part of both structuralists and social historians, to correct the emphasis by S. Nordal and the Icelandic School on the uniquely Icelandic elements of the sagas, on their fictional nature, and on the creative skill of individual authors. “Both literary and social critics reacted against the Icelandic School’s idea of free fiction by tying the sagas more closely to medieval literature and oral literature at large or the specifics of Icelandic life, that is, by reemphasising the historical connectedness of Icelandic literature. The collaborators in this volume represent the two prongs of rehistoricisation. One is a literary historian (Andersson), the other a social and legal historian (Miller). One has his point of departure in the postwar attempt to define the sagas generically and locate them in a continuous tradition. The other represents the more recent attempt to define the relationship between the sagas and the social systems in which they evolved and is much influenced by American legal realism and law-and-society scholarship. Neither of us suppose that it is adequate to suppose that the sagas were made up by inventive writers in the thirteenth century” (xii-xiii).

¹³ Clover’s *Medieval Saga* is, like Andersson’s scholarship, organised as a structural approach to Iceland’s literary history. Clover argues that the Icelandic sagas are not constructed according to classical ideas about unity, but that like other medieval authors, saga writers use “coherent multiplicity rather than unity,” conceive “of a plot as parallel and interlocking subplots,” and weave together “simultaneous lines of action,” or *strand* the narrative (16). This observation is consistent, in structural terms, with the argument developed here about multi-functional authorship: both discussions are premised on the possibility of the sophisticated textual variation. Clover’s suggestions about the sagas’ diffuse and interlaced narration add to the structural approach put forward by Andersson: while Andersson’s observations about the saga climaxes are valid, Clover’s observations help to explain the aesthetic part played by such medieval tools as proliferation, entailment, and the reflexive expansion of the plot (20-33). By

meaning in their very medieval interest in the aesthetics of narrative cycles, interweaving, digression and suspension, as well as in adoptions and modifications of Romance styles. Of particular relevance to the book-prose versus free-prose debate of the first half of the twentieth-century, saga structure is probably related to the nature and role of oral traditions and skaldic poetry in the Viking Age and to traditions of reading aloud in medieval Scandinavia.¹⁴ In that sense, saga patterns may reflect the origin and evolution of the sagas, the organisation of saga narratives around pre-existing oral tales and poetic accounts (e.g., Poole, "Origins"), the formal qualities of Scandinavian poetry, and medieval Icelanders' conception of the sources of their early history. Narrative theory and structural analysis may also give us tools with which to discuss the sagas' relative interest in various topics, events, or people without relying heavily on a separately drawn up social history of medieval Iceland. This helps us to limit the circular arguments which result if we interpret particular incidents in the sagas according to a model of Icelandic society which is drawn from the sagas themselves. To an extent, such circularities of interpretation are inevitable in Old Icelandic studies; yet, they can be anticipated in a reflective way. For example, an analysis of feud from the point of view of theme and narrative focalisation will help us avoid drawing simplistic connections between feud in the sagas and dispute patterns in

comparing the sagas with other medieval literature, it is clear that there is a "firmly defined system of coherence" at the heart of most of the sagas. For instance, the use of expansive beginnings and endings in the saga form is rooted in an aesthetic of intersection, and of interweaving links across characters and events. Clover's observations about family saga structure are paired with a discussion of structural aspects of medieval Romantic literature and medieval rhetoric. "[Icelandic authors'] enthusiastic use of 'digressive' material in all denominations witnesses to the sagas' participation in the aesthetic manifested in the literature and formulated by the rhetoricians of the time. A saga, like the prose romances, is conceived as an acentric bundle of interlocking sub-plots. Its 'own brand' of unity, like that of the prose romances, is not the traditional unity of theme (where each part is related to the main action), but the characteristically medieval cohesion of themes (where each part need only relate to another part), the formal result being a brachiate plot including a considerable portion of matter which is neither strictly necessary nor strictly superfluous but something in between. Narrative overloading to this degree is not associated with folk narration, nor is the interweaving of story lines it presupposes. From the evidence of their composition, it would appear that the sagas were literarily conceived along common medieval lines" (53-54).

¹⁴ Regarding book-prose and free-prose schools, see further Byock, "History;" Sveinsson, "Icelandic" 74-77; Clover, "Icelandic."

medieval and Viking Age Iceland (cf. P. Sawyer, "Bloodfeud;" for examples of narratological approaches, see Jesch, "Narrating;" McTurk, "Approaches" and "Supernatural").¹⁵

A good example of the application of structural analysis to the medieval Icelandic corpus can be found in the study of *Sturlunga saga*. There has been a shift in the past twenty years in scholarly perceptions of the compilation, prompted not only by closer analysis of the structure, tone, and style of narration in the sagas of the compilation, but also by a greater sensitivity to the historical viewpoints which these narrative features appear to reflect. *Sturlunga saga* is still felt to consist of works which are different in tone and meaning to the family sagas and, as the authors of the sagas seem to make less effort to make the sagas dramatic, *Sturlunga saga* is seen as more historically reliable than the family sagas. The fact that only a small amount of scholarly interest has been shown in *Sturlunga saga*'s literary features (relative to that shown in relation to other sagas and to skaldic verse) is a consequence of this historical categorisation. Yet, critical approaches to historical writing by scholars such as White, and developments in narrative theory more generally, offer us a basis on which to re-evaluate the historical function of *Sturlunga saga*. Further structural analyses, such as Bragason's *Poetics*, allow us to place the compilation in the intellectual and cultural sphere of the family sagas and kings' sagas. Such broad-based readings require something of a shift in attention, away from using structural analysis for the purpose of the generic classification of the Old Icelandic corpus and the plotting of its literary history, to a discourse-oriented approach that analyses saga structures in terms of a) the social and cultural themes they appear to encode, and b) the cultural conceptions of authorship they express. By stressing the link between the structural patterns of historical

¹⁵ Byock is particularly ardent in his emphasis on the social basis of feud-based narratives. He argues that "[i]t is impossible to understand the Old Icelandic sagas without comprehending the function of feud in medieval Iceland. Feud stands at the core of the narrative, and its operation reaches into the heart of Icelandic society. The dominant concern of this society - to channel violence into accepted patterns of feud and to regulate conflict - is reflected in saga narrative" (Byock, *Feud* 1).

themes in the sagas and characters' role in perceiving, expressing, and emphasising aspects of early Iceland that are important to saga authors, we form a dual approach to the interpretive function of saga authorship (see also above, Introduction, "Character and Narrative").

Discourse and Genre

Reading the sagas for discourses about character and character traits, as well as the possible dialogues between authors and their characters, can quickly become entangled with a debate about the generic classification of the sagas. The genre-debate in Old Icelandic studies took off in earnest in the 1970s, when scholars, responding to classification of the saga corpus by Victorian scholars like Guðbrandur Vigfússon (see his "Prolegomena" to *Sturlunga saga*) and the Icelandic School, led by S. Nordal (see esp. "Sagalitteraturen;" and his "Formáli" to *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, sections 5-6; cf. Andersson, "Snorri"), as well as to Andersson's 1967 structural-analytical approach to the family sagas as a corpus, attempted to identify patterns of persuasion and ethical development in the sagas (e.g., Lönnroth's study of *Brennu-Njáls saga* as a social and political text, and his "Rhetorical Persuasion"). The debate has transformed from one about where we ought to draw up generic divisions into an assessment of genre itself as meaningful to saga interpretation (e.g., Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*), and ultimately into a more expansive debate about which discourses can be traced across increasingly fragile, if not altogether dissolved, generic lines.¹⁶

It is difficult to determine whether the wide range of referents in the sagas – the "modally mixed" aspect of saga composition as Clunies Ross describes it ("Intellectual Complexion" 449) – is an indication of generic fluidity or of more self-conscious attempts by saga authors to use the features of one style of saga writing to create such effects as disjuncture, poignancy, and

¹⁶ See, for example, Byock, *Medieval Iceland* ch. 3; Cardew, "Hamhleypur;" Clunies Ross, "Intellectual Complexion;" Hastrup, "Text and Context;" Mitchell, *Heroic*; Miller, *Bloodtaking* ch. 2; Phelpstead, ch. 2; Tómasson, *Formálar*; Tulinius, "Landfræði," esp. 144-45, "Saga as a Myth," esp. 527-28; Ólason, "Íslendingasögur;" Würth).

moral emphasis in others.¹⁷ If it is the latter, we might argue that the dramatic impact of marking different points of view is reflected at a generic level, as well as in key episodes, such as that of Vésteinn at Gemlufallsheiði, in which characters are faced with difficult decisions about their obligations. As I have suggested above, the dramatic energy of Vésteinn's choice lies in the parallels and tensions created between a) the topographical choice between Dýrafjörðr and Qnundarfjörðr; b) the choice between danger and safety; and c) the choice between fatalism and resistance to fate. In a similar way, we could argue that texts incorporate a range of discourses – mythical, historical, ethical, social, religious, and so on – that are placed together for the sake of the generic disjuncture which their interaction may create. Such a conclusion would, of course, confirm generic consciousness: artistic tensions caused by the co-existence of (modern categories of) mythic and historical discourse would otherwise be lost. Thus, generic interplay is potentially a powerful part of the authors' creation of characters who interpret events in the saga; it allows saga authors to portray their characters through a wider range of references than in traditional forms and so emphasise the interpretive function of saga writing.

In general terms, I suggest that our approach to the generic distinctions conceived by saga authors and their audiences ought to be flexible, and that variation in generic consciousness is a more fruitful point of discussion than the identification of universally applicable forms. We can be certain that saga compilers were conscious of the types of works they had received and were producing. Some sagas, like *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Íslendinga saga*, and *Heimskringla* can be classified as compilations with a noticeably wide range of referents (although they are less expansive than large fourteenth century compilations like *Flateyjarbók* and *Möðruvallabók* or thirteenth century collections of local history and settlement narratives like *Landnámabók*). In addition to obvious differences in content, these three sagas vary significantly in tone, style, dramatic emphasis, and their probable social and political function.

¹⁷ I will return to this question in chapter four, when I look at the family saga-style characterisation of an Icelandic character, Hjalti Skeggjason, in *Heimskringla*.

This variation is reflected in their style of characterisation, which is made “objective” in quite different ways in each (compare, for instance, the level of subjectivity implied in the characterisation of three ambitious men, Snorri goði in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri Sturluson in *Íslendinga saga*, and Saint Óláfr Haraldsson in *Heimskringla*). Yet, at points, each saga appears to borrow from the generic style of the other: dreams in *Íslendinga saga*, for example, are as important as those in *Gísla saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga* but rare in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Glendinning, “Saints”, “The Dreams”; G. Nordal, *Ethics* 25, 43, 48-51), Icelandic characters are received with equally improbable grace in *Heimskringla* as in family sagas like *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* and *Laxdæla saga*; and an idealisation of an heroic past, or saga age, seems, particularly in Snorri goði’s pragmatism, to be undermined in *Eyrbyggja saga* in a way that resonates with the brutal way in which some of the events in *Íslendinga saga* are represented. We must remember that generic cross-overs are abundant enough to cast doubt a sense of saga authorship that relies heavily on modern identification of generic differences.

Modern structural and generic divisions must be applied with care to the Icelandic corpus. Even when using a term like *family sagas*, we remain aware that it is modern shorthand for a group of sagas that are in many ways very different. Yet, while there is no sure way, as Andersson expresses it, to “split” the sagas (“Splitting”), the sagas’ focalisations of time and character, common aspects of tone and style, and the relationship of saga events with thirteenth century cultural and political concerns do, I think, leave the broad generic categories set up by S. Nordal intact. At the same time, certain discourses cross these boundaries, and intertextual references and generic play increase the relationships between texts and the potential for saga authors to interpret saga events in subtle, structural ways. This thesis argues that the level of control that saga authors seek over tradition varies, and that variation in narrative voice is helpful in identifying intertextual relations and generically conscious functions of authorship. Variations in the level of control that is sought, or conceded, by the author is the particular author’s understanding of historiographical

discourse. Analysing this understanding requires a sensitive approach to the balance between an author's individual interpretive aims and the broader social function of saga writing.

Historical Discourse

A strength of structuralism is its ability to shift research beyond the search for real life saga authors, an aspect of traditional comparative Germanic philology which has been important, and perhaps too dominant, in Old Icelandic studies. Both sides of the debate about the role of oral tradition in medieval Icelandic saga writing sought to find support for their arguments in the identification of authors and the lives they led. Just as the Icelandic School maligned free-prose theory for its modern presumptions and nationalistic underpinnings, the Icelandic School is now viewed along similar lines. Compare, for instance, comments by S. Nordal in 1957 and by Byock in 1992. The comments are worth quoting at length because they illustrate the, at times, unnecessarily broad criticisms that are made of both authorship-based approaches to sagas and broader social contextualisation of their creation:

When the Sagas first began to attract attention outside Iceland, in the seventeenth century, they were valued only as historical sources....It so happened that the first Sagas to be printed were just some of the Sagas from the far past. They were published in Sweden, then one of the great European powers, and the editors were eager to welcome and vindicate every contribution which they could lay their hands on to the far too little known ancient history of their glorious country....The so-called "free prose theory" is based on the assumption of 'oral Sagas', composed shortly after the events, thereupon transmitted almost verbally from generation to generation, and finally – also almost word for word as they were told – committed to vellum by the Saga-writers, who are supposed to have worked like the trained collectors of folklore in modern times! We must not, however,

be misled by the protestations of the upholders of this theory that they are not concerned with historical truth, because after all it is impossible to contend for the fixity of oral tradition without adducing reliability as the main argument. (S. Nordal, *Historical Element* 12-13; cf. Byock, *Feud* 7-10)

In many ways the work of the Icelandic school is a process of integrating Icelandic aspirations into a European context, while filtering out the influence of Danes and the claims of other Scandinavians. The outcome was a theory of saga origins, in which the family sagas went from being the historical memory of all Scandinavia, including the farmers in Iceland, to becoming scarcely anyone's history – not even Iceland's before the thirteenth century. As the creative product of thirteenth-century Icelandic fiction writers, the sagas now belonged to Icelandic inventiveness alone, a position that explains the prominence of the fact-fiction dichotomy in bookprose writings. The Icelandic school, in redefining the sagas as the fruit of a late literary movement, reassessed the national heritage in a way that ultimately stunted its own cultural maturity. (Byock, "History" 58)

In both cases, approaches to the sagas are criticised along lines which do not do justice to the scholarship which is addressed. For both scholars, the social and political desires associated with the sagas undermine the sagas' standing as cultural records, for S. Nordal of the distinctiveness of medieval Icelandic creativity and, for Byock, of the importance of Icelandic literature as text sources of a much wider Viking history.¹⁸ My position as I have outlined above, and one which suggests a flexible approach to generic divisions, aims to avoid an either/or approach to the relationship of creativity and tradition in the

¹⁸ A useful outline of S. Nordal's, and the Icelandic School's, influence on the debate about the family sagas' historicity is given in Aðalsteinsson, esp. 303-07.

sagas, instead reading saga structure as an element of the saga authors' distinctive combinations of narrative voice. In a sense, a multi-functional approach to saga authorship is given support by the fact that scholars have identified such different aims behind saga writing.

Just as we can find similarities in the type of criticism which has been levied against the free-prose or book-prose points of view, both the literary studies of around the time of the World War II and more recent sociological studies share a number of difficulties in dealing with the sagas' historical element. It is important, I think, to note that a feature of S. Nordal's interest lies in the question of historical credibility during the writing age:

Fiction may be imbued with a truth to life which is equal to if not superior in value to any factual truth. But when the public demand not only human, but also historical reality, if they are to take a story and the message hidden behind the story seriously, they must have that reality too or at least the semblance of it. This consideration became one of the rules of the game, more or less difficult to obey, more or less conflicting with the pure art of story-telling, but all in all beneficial. (*Historical Element* 35)

That is, variations and possibilities of credible narration were at the heart of saga authors' creative freedom, and the interpretive function of saga authorship developed alongside a rhetoric of fidelity to tradition. S. Nordal's conception of saga writing as a "game" – here, the authors' ability to provide the semblance of reality forms the basis of authorial creativity – can be related to my argument that saga authorship is multi-functional activity. The paradox of saga authorship is that it is required, for the sake of the saga's credibility, to "create" a transparent reality upon which to project a dramatic, interpretive narrative. At once, the author is a servant of tradition and the creator of its meaning. This, in J. Barnes' terms, is an "argument" about authorial roles, one that is especially marked in the context of Old Icelandic literature because the saga authors seem especially conscious of the obligation to maintain the tone of traditional narration. But the paradox also suggests a degree of authorial

freedom: the saga authors could adopt different functions within the saga, both preserving and documenting the past and possessing tradition in order to understand and interpret the past.

The freedoms that we find in our study of narrative voice are, therefore, tied closely to broader thirteenth century conceptions of the saga age; that is, what were the basic historical requirements of saga credibility? Aside from the clear problems with using the family sagas as sources of institutional history, the distinction which S. Nordal forces is one between an underlying truth which the saga authors tap into in order to give to their works the credibility required and a fictionality which is a necessary part of the conditions for the writing of the family sagas (especially given the time gap between the saga age and the writing age). If we were to speak, as S. Nordal does, of saga authorship as a “game,” then one aspect of that game is the possibility for both a credible saga reality *and* a connection between human, familial, and genealogical elements and the broader national narratives that contain them. *Sturlunga saga* is a particularly interesting example of how multi-functional authorship, reflected in narrative voices that express a variety of aims and modes of narration, creates a sophisticated interplay of social reality and historical interpretation.

History in *Sturlunga saga*

Bragason’s analysis of *Sturlunga saga* suggests that it can be viewed as a unified compilation that will be better understood using the kind of structuralist approach that was applied to the family sagas by Andersson and Clover. His thesis about *Sturlunga saga* focuses our attention on the work as an important point in the current debate about authorship and narrative structure in Old Icelandic studies, especially in regard to the similarities which he identifies between *Sturlunga saga* and the family sagas. Similarities between the two bodies of work suggest that the structural features of the family sagas were also felt to suit the narration of much more recent events. Some of the features in common that Bragason identifies are:

- a) travel episodes and elevated prose to describe births add importance to a character (*Poetics* 105-8);
- b) proverbs and characters' discomfort can cast a certain light on events (110);
- c) characters' behaviour may be judged or emphasised through the use of comparisons with other characters;
- d) dreams and the pairing of similar scenes add significance to events;
- e) characters' posturing, and conspicuous or strange events, are related to thematic development, such as excess and fall (112-17); and
- f) the "ethical temper" of *Sturlunga saga* is akin to the family sagas in its "sense of proportion and moderation" (120; see further below, ch. 7), the use of introductions and conclusions (44-5, 77, 80), narrational levels consisting of primary units and episodes, sequences, and overall compositional levels (46, 56, 81), as well as in parallels, symmetry, and stock scenes (49-56).

In place of content, temper, and style as means of categorising different sagas, Bragason argues for a textual analysis which focuses on both very broad and specific scenic conventions of saga writing. In the compilation we can identify conventions of composition which have already been suggested by research about the family sagas, and which can stand in, as steps in saga analysis, for the lack of other, more overt, indications of authorial intention. Working back from the text to observations about intention, Bragason finds that the individual parts of *Sturlunga saga* were conceived as historical works along much the same lines as the family sagas. And because the methods underlying their compilation resonate with medieval European literary conventions, including medieval writers' use of the method of cyclic composition, we sense the presence of an intrusive compiler who was sensitive to form, tone, and genre, and who was prepared to alter individual works in order to create a coherent and unified compilation.

Bragason recognises the contribution which Sørensen and Byock have made in the interpretation of social norms and thematic bridges which connect structural units in different sagas and genres. What these two scholars share with Bragason, and the link between historicism and structuralism in general, is a concern for the similarities, rather than the differences, which exist across the saga texts. The sensitivity to literary structures which Sørensen and Byock incorporate in their approaches must be quite close to what Bragason envisages when he writes that the literary character of *Sturlunga saga* “is of key importance, for it bears directly on the question of historicity. Without analysing and recognising *Sturlunga*’s poetics its documentary value cannot be gauged” (36). Bragason adds:

It is difficult to say in what way a narrative pattern is related to real life, although we can presume that selection of narrative material and its patterning reflect the interest of the audience. On the other hand, it is obvious that the conflict or feud pattern, that Andersson abstracted from the family sagas and, indeed, is to be found more generally in the sagas, prescribed what was told and how it was presented in the narratives of life in medieval Iceland. (41)

We see here that Bragason presents something of a middle ground between the historical structuralism of social historians and the literary approaches to structure that are favoured by Andersson and Clover and that imply a degree of artifice to the family sagas and, if extended, to the contemporary sagas as well. His study can be incorporated into the argument developed in this thesis that the sagas can be read as both historical and literary texts, and that the historical credibility of the sagas was partly due to the sagas’ rhetoric of tradition and self-performance. Yet, our interpretation of general structural patterns must be balanced by a sensitivity to the particular aims of saga authors, and the possibility that they used existing literary conventions and historical paradigms in novel ways.

History in *Íslendinga saga*

The certainty of historical scholarship, particularly the aim to find set patterns of development and evolution, has been greatly undermined by Popper's observations about the nature of historical objectivity and causal laws, by French theory of the 1970s and 1980s and, recently, by White's postmodern narrative theory of historical prose and the claim to objectivity. For the historian of intellectual and creative developments in thirteenth century Iceland, such theoretical movements demand we exercise caution when trying to attribute meaning to our reconstruction of constant features and literary change in family and contemporary sagas. The attraction of measuring the evolution of saga style in terms of a set of steps and elaborations which were made during the development of a genre must be balanced by an awareness that scholars have, in the past, sought to impose diachronic models of development on the saga corpus.

G. Nordal argues that, if we are to understand the literary and historical meaning of *Íslendinga saga*, we must chart in close detail the network of kinship relations which exist in the work. She writes that "every individual in the saga, of social importance or of little means, has a well-defined role to play and the exact family and social relations underscore the action at every level" (*Ethics* 24); her study lends support to readings of the sagas which emphasise the aesthetic and signifying role of non-linear narrative connections and the determining nature of the family bonds, both semantically and socially. The index of family relationships which G. Nordal draws up at the close of her book gives the precise kinship relations which exist in *Íslendinga saga*. Much as in the case in *Gísla saga*, indexing characters' relationships allows for a more systematic comparison of their personal positions (see *Ethics* 27, 43). Such connections form the basis of G. Nordal's understanding of the ethics of the saga (for instance, the family loyalty between Sturla Þórðarson and his father that can be read in Sturla's portrayal of his father, Þórðr; *Ethics* 44-46).

The magnitude of family connections in *Íslendinga saga*, to some extent predictable in the Icelandic social context, nonetheless indicates to what extent

the saga form is capable of absorbing information, and how it can give meaning to an enormous cross-over of actors and events. That facility for accommodation is, in essence, the kind of authorial pattern that we can read for in *Íslendinga saga*, and it would seem that the relatedness of domestic detail, conflict, and national meaning is a possibility of meaning to which the saga form is particularly adaptable. Non-linear relatedness seems to be a central function of the saga. *Íslendinga saga*'s ability to contain a great deal of information and suggest many connections between characters and events is, in turn, directly related to the audience's ability to absorb the information and subsequently read for connections and conflicts. It entails an intensity of interpretation which is impossible today without the help of guides such as G. Nordal's *Ethics and Action* and the apparatus that Örnólfur Thorsson provides with his edition of the saga.

A great deal of the saga's meaning is generated by the connections that arise out of these intertextual relationships. G. Nordal's reading of the structure of *Íslendinga saga* suggests that its dramatic and political movement is towards the success of Gizurr jarl, a reading that seems to be compatible with the structural observations made by Bragason (i.e., because Bragason's comparison with family saga structure suggests that *Sturlunga saga* moves to a climax in the feud and, ultimately, resolution). G. Nordal finds a thematic unity amid the multiplicity of components which characterise the compilation and its largest and central work, and she is able to carry Clover's and Bragason's structural analyses through to a genealogically-driven argument about the particular ethical meanings which emerge from a textual reading of this compilation. Two of the strengths of this approach lie a) in the level of descriptiveness which, in Popper's terms, insures it against an *intuitive* reading, and b) in a meaningful recognition of the literary elements which form the historical discourse in *Íslendinga saga*. For example, we see that Sturla Þórðarson employs mythical analogues, as well as allusions to the family sagas, so as to comment on events and characters (27, 51, 56-58), such as in the juxtaposition of characters and heathen gods or heroes of other sagas, and the use of animal imagery (especially

166-71). Nevertheless, literary structures and social codes cannot be given clear-cut equivalence:

The sagas were written over a period of more than two hundred years, during a time in which Icelandic society underwent dramatic structural changes and therefore it is likely that the authors had different views on the sagas they were depicting, even though the structure of that society may adhere to similar rules in many sagas. An assimilation of the society of the family sagas and that of *Íslendinga saga* is also problematic: the society of *Íslendinga saga* is a historical reality, not an idealization of a fixed pattern of behaviour. (22)¹⁹

While they certainly recognise differences between the family sagas and those of *Sturlunga saga*, taken together, structural approaches share a resistance to the clear divisions in meaning and purpose that are implied by S. Nordal's formulation of Old Icelandic genres. But is the divide between family and contemporary sagas to be dissolved altogether? Clearly not: it is impossible to ignore the influence that differences between the time of events and their

¹⁹ A weakness in G. Nordal's study is its commonsense notion of Sturla Þórðarson's intentions. For instance, she explains his use of mythical allusion in terms of Sturla's wish to get around his intention to be objective, that he desires "*Íslendinga saga* to be fundamentally a faithful documentation of historical events" (27). Given that G. Nordal aims to incorporate contemporary literary concerns in her approach, this may beg the question. A similar circularity arises when she moves from explaining the narrative as it appears in the text to explaining characters' subjectivity by citing personal desires of characters, or more general social concerns, that are not explained by *Íslendinga saga* or otherwise referenced. For instance, one of G. Nordal's two case studies of peaceful settlements between a killer and the victim's father leads her to speculate that the father (Þorvaldr) accepted a peaceful settlement for his son's (Björn's) death as he may have "considered a self-judgment in the case more rewarding than a long drawn-out revenge" (51). There does not appear to be any literary or factual basis for this conjecture. G. Nordal regularly cites a large number of examples from the family sagas which reflect a point she is making about *Íslendinga saga* (e.g., pages 52, 53, 59, 64, 68, 84, 99, 113, 131, 151-52). While Miller downplays the tone of *Íslendinga saga* as an exaggeration of the level of disorder in medieval Iceland, G. Nordal adopts the saga, and relationships between members of the most powerful and probably most treacherous families of the time which are depicted in it, as representative of relationships between kin (cf. Sveinsson, *Age of the Sturlungs*; Tranter 1-9, 59-60). For instance, regarding the bonds between Sighvatr and his son Sturla, and between Þorvaldr and his son Gizurr, she writes that the "author's careful portrayal of these two most powerful men and their relationships with their fathers illuminates the way a father was perceived to influence his grown-up son, especially since the two cases are very different" (53).

composition as historical narratives have had on the tone of the two bodies of sagas. Given that many of the formal qualities of family and contemporary sagas are essentially the same, tonal difference would appear to be especially important. The difference in tone incorporates the closeness of events to the time of composition, the scale and conduct of the disputes, and the partial absence of the glamourisation of past events that we find in many of the family sagas. What matters most is that the tone of narration in *Íslendinga saga* finds expression in the voice of Sturla Þórðarson, our narrator, a Sturlung man, and one of the major players in the crisis of Icelandic political life that led to the loss of independence and the ascension of Gizurr Þorvaldsson to the Icelandic earldom.

In structural terms, *Íslendinga saga* could probably be called one of the family sagas. At the same time, the difference in authorial voice and the complexity of the narrator's point of view isolate this saga. It may be the narrator's fight with his own closeness to events which creates much of the saga's density and variation in narrative fluency. Using the ideas that I have outlined above, the density and brutality of events in *Íslendinga saga* can be thought of in terms of Sturla Þórðarson's lack of possession of his narrative; in contrast to the family saga authors, Sturla is greatly acted upon by the events themselves, an influence which we might assume to have been made more intense by the fact of his involvement in the events of the saga. Sturla's tone of narration is obviously not a *necessary* product of the difficult period in which he lived (after all, many of the family sagas are from that period), but it may be the case that the tone of narration is influenced by the recent nature of the events depicted in the saga – perhaps this is a world that is less able to be controlled in narrative form?

What Sturla shares with all the authors discussed in this thesis is an ability to perform the different functions of authorship in a way that allows him to both document and interpret the past. While tonally different to that of the family sagas, the narrative voice that results is related to the family sagas because it seems to engage with tradition and reality in a transparent way while

interpreting and dramatising events. As in the family sagas, a process of joint possession is under way, whereby the author seems to both possess – or be enabled to interpret the saga – and be possessed by the text, that is, simply act as the teller of a reality already in narrative form. The analysis of *Íslendinga saga* that follows will be framed by five key areas that I have discussed so far: 1) possession, 2) authorial distance and closeness, 3) generic divisions and intertext in the sagas 4) characters' expression and representation of themselves and their perception of the world and 5) authorship as revealed by narrative patterns (and the connection between these patterns and social codes like family obligation).

Competing Voices and Multiple Functions of Authorship in *Íslendinga saga*

Íslendinga saga is an important national narrative which connects domestic and national themes so closely that each exists as a corollary of the other. My approach to *Íslendinga saga* is an attempt to extend the studies by Bragason and G. Nordal that I have discussed in some detail above, although my focus will rest less on structural patterns and genealogy than on narrative voice and characterisation.²⁰ I suggest that saga authors position history as a human affair that involves choices and decision-making, albeit that humans are in a constant interaction with circumstances that are beyond their control. In this sense my comments here can be tied to Ólason's view of the humanist nature of characterisation in the sagas and Bagge's reading of some sagas as deeply concerned with human ability and the rules of success. The representation of Gizurr Þorvaldsson's emotional life is an excellent example (like Vésteinn's relationship with Gísli in *Gísla saga*) of a saga author's conception of national history as a domestic matter, and that saga humanism extends to the saga authors' conception of genealogical, national, and historical structure. Thus, characterisation and the biographical element in the sagas are elemental parts of medieval Icelanders' ability to capture history – to *possess* it – as textual “reality.” Without the stories of individuals, without anecdotes,

²⁰ For a discussion of prior scholarship on *Sturlunga saga*, see Bragason, *Poetics* 16-33.

individual desires, conflicts of interest, difficult decisions, and so on, there can be no history; for the medieval Icelander, to have a history is to have a portrait of human qualities.

Because, like a family saga, it represents major political events as events in the lives of conflicting families (e.g., the killing of Snorri Sturluson, the attack on Sturla Sighvatsson's farm, the Battle of Qrlyggstaðir, the burning at Flugumýri), *Íslendinga saga* is a text which, although different to the family sagas, can be read with them in mind. Sturla writes his history in a way that combines the dramatic features of the family sagas and the rhetorical features of the kings' sagas with modifications in tone that reflect his retrospective point of view, his literary interests, his sense of himself as a member of the Sturlung family, and his desire to record events in Iceland in as much detail as the dispute structure can hold. Due to the saga conceit of objectivity, which encourages an author to omit the lessons of hindsight, Sturla accurately represents views that he held in the past.

There may be a point at which the narrator draws nearer to Sturla the character and perhaps becomes more closely aligned to the authorial tone adopted in the work as a whole: as events become contemporaneous with Sturla Þórðarson's own greater role in political affairs, the narrative becomes more detailed and the characterisation more complete. This is particularly noticeable when the saga moves towards the torture of Órækja: the prose broadens and becomes more detailed and the point of view more focused. Sturla stratifies the action into a variety of viewing positions and temporalities, and the dense narrative voice of the early chapters disappears altogether. Shift in narrative tone and strategy at this point may be said to mark a point at which the narrative becomes more openly reflexive; that is, the authorial position becomes more explicit because of the complexity of the narrative and its relationship to the reality it represents.

Sturla's involvement in *Íslendinga saga* develops gradually. As a character, he does not appear in the saga until he feels, as an author, that he is relevant in terms of the objective narration of Icelandic history. He quietly

records his own presence at Christmas festivities held at Snorri Sturluson's farm (126), as well as his father Þórðr's use of him as a messenger during the disputes over the Snorrunga *goðorð* (146-47; see also 226 and ch. 118 where Sturla again acts as messenger). When Sturla narrates the relaying of a dream to him and his brother Óláfr (156), he enhances a predisposition that one has, as a modern reader, to Sturla as an observer and recorder, or one who is sensitive to the various accounts of, and perspectives on, the events in progress, a sense that helps to explain the number of verses that Sturla can quote after the attack on Sturla Sighvatsson's farm (ch. 73). But Sturla, perhaps unavoidably given the tumultuous period in which he lived, is drawn into the Sturlung feuds, and he takes part in his father's raid on their kinsman Órækja's farm at Saurbær (ch. 101). Órækja is a major headache for the Sturlung family, and Sturla's actions against him, including the summoning action undertaken with Óláfr (ch. 106), are carefully justified. For instance, we are told of Órækja's raiding and of the killing of Einarr, "góðr bóndi" ("a good farmer"). The prose of *Íslendinga saga* becomes very clear as we get to the torture of Órækja, a scene which Gade regards as a largely fabricated one ("Órækja"), and which certainly announces the author's involvement as a creative and interpretive function of the text as well as an influential character (he goes on to take up one third of the Snorrunga *goðorð*; see ch. 145).

One of the climaxes of *Íslendinga saga* is the burning at Flugumýri, an episode that I will soon use to tie together the various strands developed in this chapter and which we might regard as a highpoint in Sturla's activity as a creative author. It is worth noting, first, that Sturla's use of multiple narrative voices, or the split identity of the narrator in the saga, appears early. These voices are in a constant state of interaction. Sturla seems especially comfortable in intermingling domestic detail with both a national perspective and an impressive textual awareness, manifest in his grasp of Icelandic history and his pleasure, as a compiler of sorts, in incorporating a wide range of sources. We begin to see the complexity of Sturla's interests in the early

chapters of the saga, including a concern for domestic details to the role of the church in defining sexual relationships:

Þá hafði Þorvaldr Gizurarson fengit Jóru, dóttur Klængs
byskups ok Ingvildar Þorgilsdóttur. Þeim var meinuð samvista
af kennimönnum. Fór Þorvaldr útan nökkuru síðar, ok leyfði
erkibyskup, at þau skyldi ásamt vera tíu vetr þaðan frá. En at
liðnum tíu vetrum skyldi þau skilja, hvárt er þeim væri þat þá
blítt eða strítt. En þau unnust allmikit, ok þó játar Þorvaldr
þessu.²¹ (*Íslendinga saga* 3)

Þorvaldr Gizurarson had then taken to him Jóra, the daughter of
Bishop Klængr and Ingvildr Þorgilsdóttir. They were forbidden
to live together by the priests. Þorvaldr went abroad a little later,
and the Archbishop permitted them to be together for ten years
from that point in time. But after the ten years had passed, they
were to separate, regardless of whether they were then happy or
unhappy together. But they were greatly in love, Þorvaldr
agreed to this.

The information here seems of a documentary nature, functioning to preserve well-known stories about important people and events. Immediately after this description, Sturla includes a brief dialogue between Þorvaldr and the famous Jón Loftsson, a discussion which, like Hrafnkell's class attitudes in *Hrafnkels saga freysgoði*,²² betrays a distinctly open level of class consciousness in the saga and reflects Sturla's interest in the rules which govern the conduct of disputes:

Þorvaldr fór á fund Jóns Loftssonar ok leitaði ráða ok liðveizlu.
Jón svarar: "Þat eitt var vinfengi okkart Einars, at mér er fyrir
þá sök engi vandi á þessu máli. En þó þykkir mér í óvænt efni
komit, ef þat skal eigi rétta, er skillitlir menn drepa niðr

²¹ As noted in the Preface, quotations are from Guðni Jónsson's edition of *Íslendinga saga*, which uses "ö" in place of "o".

²² Ólason also identifies a class consciousness in *Eyrbyggja saga* (see his introduction to the forthcoming Penguin edition of *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Gísla saga*).

höfðingja, ok vil ek því heita þér minni liðveizlu um þetta mál, þá er til þings kemr.” (3)

Þorvaldr went to meet with Jón Loftsson and sought his advice and support. Jón answers: “The friendship between Einarr and me was such a one that I would not for its sake take part in this case. However, it seems to me that matters are in a bad way if it is not corrected when lowly men kill chieftains, and so I will promise you my support in this case at the Þing.

Thus, even when the act of documenting information appears to be the dominant function of authorship, emphasis on key speeches helps to establish the political tone of the saga, in this case incorporating a division between political classes. In chapter five, one of Sturla’s annal-like intrusions appears, a method of shaping, or perhaps punctuating, the saga that provides the expansive point of view that is necessary for Sturla’s national voice of narration:

Þau misseri eftir váru dylgjur miklar með mönnum ok ófríðr á landi. Um haustit var veginn Markús á Rauðasandi, en um várit eftir var brenna Önundar í Langahlíð. En sættt var á brennumálit um sumarit á þingi, ok gerði Jón Loftsson. (9)

The year after, there were many conflicts between men and strife in the land. In autumn, Markús of Rauðasandr was killed, and the burning of Önundr in Langahlíð occurred in the following spring. But the case of the burning was settled at the þing during the summer, by Jón Loftsson.

The extract reminds us of the ability of the saga form to accommodate a variety of narrative voices and functions, in this case an apparent desire to document as many historical matters as possible. That is, an important aspect of the documentary function of saga authorship is that it allows a quantity of facts to be included that would not be possible if the narrative was limited to facts which aided historical interpretation. By chapter ten, Sturla’s desire to

interweave family history is clear, and the link between the domestic lives and overarching political themes begins to emerge:

Snorri Sturluson fæddist upp í Odda með Jóni Loftssyni, meðan hann lifði. Var Snorri þá nítján vetra, er Jón andaðist. Var hann þá með Sæmundi, fóstbróður sínum, þar til er þeir Þórðr Sturluson báðu til handa honum Herdísar, dóttur Bersa ins auðga frá Borg á Mýrum. Hann átti átta hundruð hundraða. En Snorri var þá félauss, því at móðir hans hafði eytt fjórum tígum hundraða, þeim er hann tók eftir föður sinn. Lagði Guðný þá Hvammsland til kvánarmundar Snorra ok var brúðkaup þeira í Hvammi. (14)

Snorri Sturluson grew up at Oddi with Jón Loftson, while he lived. Snorri was nineteen when Jón died. He was then with Sæmundr, his foster-brother, until Þórðr Sturluson requested on his behalf the hand of Herdís, the daughter of Bersi the rich from Borg in the Mýrar district. He had eight hundred hundreds. But Snorri was at that time without means, because his mother had spent forty hundreds, which he had got from his father. Guðný then transferred Hvammsland to Snorri as dowry, and their marriage was in Hvamm.

The inclusion of this information is annal-like at a specific familial level, a focus that is in keeping with the saga's positioning of the Sturlung family as a key player of political developments in most of the thirteenth century. The foregrounding of Snorri's early family life signals the author's desire to understand and interpret Snorri's life as fully as possible, an aim which recognises Snorri's political importance, the centrality of kinship rivalry in the disputes of the thirteenth century, and the ultimate failure of the Sturlung family to maintain unified opposition to other kin groups.

Finally, Sturla's textual awareness, or his ability to draw connections between the historical concerns of *Íslendinga saga* and specific myths, sagas,

and events is also apparent early, with Egill Halldórsson's dream in chapter sixteen:

Maðr hét Egill Halldórsson. Hann var af Mýramanna langfeðgum. Hann var heimamaðr Snorra....Egill dreymdi, at Egill Skalla-Grímsson kæmi at honum, ok var mjök ófrýniligr. Hann mælti: "Ætlar Snorri, frændi várr, í brott heðan?" "Þat er mælt," segir Egill. "Brott ætlar hann, ok þat gerir hann illa," segir draummaðrinn, "því at lítt hafa menn setit yfir hlut várum Mýramanna, þá er oss tímgæðist, ok þurfti hann eigi ofsjónum yfir þessu landi at sjá." (22)

There was a man named Egill Halldórsson. He was long descended from the people of the Mýrar district. He was a home-man of Snorri's....Egill dreamt that Egill Skalla-Grímsson came to him, and was frowning greatly. He said: "Does Snorri, our kinsman, intend to leave here?" "That's what is said," says Egill." "He is going away, and that is a poor thing to do," says the dream-man, "because seldom have men stood over us Mýrarmen, when we thrive, and he has no need to look badly upon this land."

The interweaving of dreams is one of *Íslendinga saga*'s most notable artistic achievements, and central to its ability to allude intertextually to family saga narratives and give contemporary political events added symbolic significance (see Glendenning, "Dreams").²³ Dream narratives are effective vehicles of historical interpretation because they allow objective narration to co-exist with a character's extended sense of the events of the saga. The expression of characters' understanding in dream narratives and through allusion to mythic texts alerts us to the possibility that saga episodes may be coloured by an equivalent intertextual element.

²³ See also Clunies Ross, "Myth" 675, 678, and 683, in which she discusses Sturla's use of models from the family sagas for his history. See also her "*Íslendinga saga* as Family History."

In the representation of Órækja's torture, for instance, we see that Sturla organises the narrative in a manner which produces an historical interpretation, even an historical lesson. If, as Gade suggests, the torture of Órækja is not a credible course of events (Gade, "The Naked and the Dead"), we can argue that at this point Sturla adopts the kind of narrative voice that is able to produce a symbolic episode, perhaps even a moral tale, about the loss of political power in a narrative about torture.

Sturla's performance of various authorial functions and his adoption of different narrative voices suggests an ability to contain and preserve a complex and interrelated set of characters and episodes alongside a narrative that is capable of moral, metaphoric, and historical significations. In that context, multiple narrative voice is not so much a complication of the story as a part of its performance. The overall narrative mode appears to be one of universal containment and inclusion; it indicates a great ability to register, to contain, and to interrelate meaning across a variety of texts, perspectives, and styles of literary expression. This is an overarching possibility of saga authorship, one which can in fact be differentiated from the multiplicity of narrative voices which the saga adopts. Such differentiation is possible because, at least in Sturla's case, we do witness a conception of authorship through the fact of its complex relationship *with* a number of possible narrative positions.

In fact, Sturla's writing style is an excellent example of the saga form's ability to capture various narrative voices at once, a feature of saga style that enables the joint possession of saga narratives because it allows authors to both be empathetic and objective in their writing. One of the most striking complexities in *Íslendinga saga*'s narrative voice occurs during a dialogue between Sturla Sighvatsson and his father in chapter 125. Here, a description of familiarity and humour creates a noticeable gap between the overall authorial position and the narrative voice at hand. The episode is an example of the author's ability to situate a very close, and in this case domestic, point of representation in a way that is removed from his own viewing position. Even in the context of the varied narrative voice in *Íslendinga saga*, this exchange

between Sturla and his father Sighvatr seems out of step with the tone of the saga as a whole. This is due largely to the fact that it contains a narrative (setting up the farm) with a marked ethical kernel, and thus combines a moral purpose with an allegorical clarity that is unusual in the sagas. In general terms, the passage would seem to point us once more to the conclusion that the saga author views his task on a number of different levels, here, ironic and morally symbolic. In his assembly of farm workers, Sighvatr acts as a secondary author, and each character is introduced with a specific narrative and moral purpose in the same way as saga characters are brought onto the dramatic stage in the sagas more generally. Of course, the point that Sighvatr is making to Sturla is one that is frequently made about the *ójafnaðarmaðr*: you must curtail your arrogance before it becomes unsustainable and brings about your humiliation. The idea that Gizurr, Sturla's eventual killer, will work for Sturla is a ridiculous suggestion that functions to mock the extent of Sturla's ambition; in the context of the saga as a whole, it may be an early signal that Sturla does not comprehend the strength and ambition of his enemies.

The discussion between father and son has the flavour of a family joke. We are not told who is present during their conversation, but we might guess that someone acted fairly quickly in circulating the story of the exchange between Sturla and Sighvatr, and the intelligent political humour of Sighvatr's remarks no doubt aided in their remembering and transmitting. While Loftr and Böðvarr clearly have reason to be upset by their lowly positions on this imaginary farm, it is of course Sturla who is most insulted, both by Sighvatr's ironic description of his arrogance and by the position he is given in *Íslendinga saga*'s description of the conversation. When the two men begin to talk, Sturla feels himself to be part of a banter that is shared (“kvað Sturla ok svaraði við brosu”; “said Sturla and replied with a smile”); but as the conversation unfolds and Sighvatr allows his metaphor full reign, Sturla becomes aware of the nature of their talk, he becomes taciturn (“lét sér þá fátt um finnast”), and finally he jumps up and leaves the room (“spratt Sturla upp ok gekk út”). It may be understandable that Sturla should be taken by surprise by his father's joke, yet a

subtle insinuation that Sturla is a little slow to cotton on nevertheless abides in the saga's narration of the talk. Sighvatr, by contrast, is given the role of the wise man who cautions his headstrong kinsman, and it is important to note that it is not until Sturla reveals the extent of his arrogance and ambition (with the words "Hví mun eigi svá þó?") that Sighvatr's rebuke is delivered. That is, Sighvatr's warning cannot be seen as altogether unsolicited; the farm makes an amusing metaphor with a spiteful element, but Sighvatr nevertheless seems to make a serious attempt to deal with and mitigate the outcomes of a dangerous situation. He wants to control his son, and he turns to a narrative form of metaphor to do so.

In the central value that understatement can have in a character's allusion to the difficulties that s/he and her/his friends face, Sighvatr's approach to his son's political will is similar to a wide range of saga characters' responses to danger, not least the comment made by Vésteinn at Gemlufallsheiði. Common to both Vésteinn's and Sighvatr's creative summing up of the situations they face is the concomitant existence of a) a kind of emotional restraint (on the character's part) in the face of danger and b) a narrative undercutting (through the way events unfold) of that restraint by the understanding that kinship and friendship ties modify all modes of existence and feeling, be they emotional, psychological, physical, political, or religious. Both Vésteinn and Sighvatr wish to draw attention to the dangers they face and their understanding of the events in their lives. They do so through ironic references to obligation that are enabled by the observation of ordinary things like farm life and the direction of rivers. It is obligation that most often commands action in the sagas, a fact that is important to remember when we examine the obligations and emotional lives that are explored by Sturla Þórðarson during the narration of the burning at Flugumýri.

Flugumýrabrenna

In revealing the narrative impact of obligation in framing characters' inner lives and the possibility of authorial engagement with the past, Gizurr

Porvaldsson's words on the morning after the burning at Flugumýri in 1253 (given at the beginning of this chapter) are highly significant. By today's standards, they do not seem to reveal a great deal about his shock and grief at the loss of his wife and sons, but in the context of the saga, they are striking for their emotional directness. Gizurr is later seen to compose a verse about his grief, and about the vengeance he will exact for the murders of his loved ones. He goes on to achieve his vengeance, and the attack on him and his household at Flugumýri marks the last serious challenge to his authority before he gains complete control over all of Iceland in the 1260s, when he becomes, on behalf of Norway, the first earl of Iceland.

The burning at Flugumýri is so dramatically intense that one finds oneself posing questions similar to those asked about episodes in the family sagas: how much control and discretion did the author enjoy in relation to his subject matter and the story line? Did he feel free to make changes to a story in order to invest it with a number of characteristics which would place the saga in the broader context of the many myths and stories already captured by a large body of vernacular literature about the Icelandic past? And was the desire to depict reality and truth compatible with the desire to create dramatic tension and engage in historical interpretation? The episode seems connected, at an authorial level, with the narrative techniques of the the family sagas and seems, in the manner of a family saga, to go beyond the functional and documentary roles of saga authorship.

By the time of the burning at Flugumýri, Sturla Þórðarson the character has seen his kin group severely put down by Gizurr. The bulk of *Íslendinga saga* has dealt with the rise of Sturla's family to a position of dominance in Iceland. Yet, the three most powerful men in this group, the author's uncles, Snorri and Sighvatr Sturluson, and his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson, have by now all died at Gizurr's hands. Whilst there is enormous resentment towards Gizurr, it is balanced, in some quarters, by a desire to see ongoing violence between the factions end. Sturla Þórðarson, in particular, is willing to be reconciled with Gizurr, and indeed accepts a proposal that Gizurr's son Hall marry Sturla's

daughter Ingibjörg. On the eve of the burning at Flugumýri, a wedding feast is held, celebrating a new union and a new peace. The author, and father of the bride, is present at the feast, but leaves the farmstead before an attack begins.

Sturla's account of the episode is drawn from the many friends, on both sides, whom he must have consulted about the events that followed. The episode is a remarkable example of Sturla the author's organisation of a number of voices – no doubt Gizurr's, his daughter Ingibjörg's, those of Gizurr's enemies, and the many others who were there. The account also represents Sturla's choices about how to depict an event which was very dramatic, which was of national significance, which ultimately justified Gizurr in becoming more domineering over other Icelanders, and which represented a deep wound in Gizurr's emotional life.

It is in this last aspect, regarding Gizurr's loss of his wife and son, that we get some idea of how Sturla amplifies the burning in a way which will do justice to its national significance. By turning to the more personal, less documentary, style of narration which we find at its best in the family sagas, and by concentrating on the domestic loss which the attack brings about, Sturla is able to link this episode to the interpretive function of saga authorship associated with the family sagas. The generic markers of family saga narration raise the episode to an historical level analogous to the great events of early Iceland. Unlike much of the violent behaviour in *Íslendinga saga*, presented in its pragmatic and dull ugliness, the burning at Flugumýri is a grand narrative in which the will of characters is given the time and literary space to be remembered.

Perhaps the most brilliant aspect of the episode is that Sturla appears to shift between and interrelate different narrative voices with great ease. Each voice appears to serve a somewhat different purpose, each has a very different tone and pace, and each encodes a particular kind of critical distance, allowing the information to be summed up and interpreted to varying extents and at a range of historical levels. Sturla is able to interweave a number of generically distinct tools in order to produce more than one history in the one text: the

chronicle and annals, a history of kin groups, and a family saga of honour and daring, of individual decision-making, and the literary depiction of emotional life. While this may suggest a degree of fluidity, in the sense that these different narrative voices co-exist within the same episode, it remains the case that their dramatic and historical effect is more powerful because they retain something of their generic distinctiveness. The episode is not narrated as a synthesised polyphony of voices. Rather, by retaining points of discreteness in various related voices, the narrative presents knowledge which can be depicted and read in light of the family saga tradition, whilst at the same time being bracketed by a narrative that is far less elevated and involves less critical distance, but which does give the story a compelling contemporary edge.

The contemporariness of events in the saga may even be said to bring with it a dialogic conflict between the voices. On the one hand, the burning represents focal point of Sturla's interest in the political development of his own lifetime. On the other hand, the dramatic mode of representation that Sturla adopts places the burning in the context of Icelandic history more generally. Paradoxically, the event is immediate and real while it is being placed in a more complex interpretive grid associated with the bravery of heroic figures of early Icelandic history. At an ideological level, the tension in the intertextual relationship between Flugumýri and saga age Iceland may reflect a desire to represent Iceland's worsening political situation in terms of heroic, individualistic disputes of the past. What is certain is that when Gizurr's domestic life is given national significance the author's function becomes critical and historically aware in a very self-conscious way.

By varying critical distance at key moments, the author makes sense of distinct yet related items of information which are being brought into the text at once (and need to be related at the one time), both in terms of their meaning and the narrative form which seems most suitable to represent them. The dominant narrative voice is one which portrays the saga as an objective, realistic, and chronological assembly of reports and eye-witness accounts. For example, in the lead up to the attack on Flugumýri, as the attackers make their way to the

farm, the narrator states: “Hafa menn þat ok á orði haft síðan, hversu skjótt þá bar at, þeir er grun höfðu af reiðinni (432); “Those men who witnessed the riding afterwards reported how quickly they rode.” The narrator’s emphasis on the words and opinions of witnesses creates an objective effect that is akin to the family sagas’ objectivity of tradition.

Perhaps this objective narrative voice is used to express a kind of common sense, or community wisdom:

Sáu menn þá eldinn þaðan ok víða um heraðit. Hljópu menn hvarvetna saman, þá er vísir urðu, en engir svá, at þeim yrði at gagni, er fyrir urðu vandræðinu. (432)

Men could see the fire from there and widely about the district. Men rushed everywhere together, those who knew the news, but none in such a way that the words were of aid to those in trouble.

Yet, this voice gives relatively little scope for broad historical interpretation; at this point, the narrative’s impact arises through its closeness to the events it describes: it is possessed by those events. That is, the narration emanates from the event and the information itself: it speaks of the event, within the event, and because the saga appears to narrate itself this sense of objectivity and historical grounding is crucial for the overall credibility of the account. A related narrative voice is seen to be assessing and remembering. As the attackers gather, the narrator lists them, very openly drawing attention to his counting out:

Þessir menn váru með Eyjólfí: Ásgrímr, bróðir hans, Kolbeinn grön ok Ari Ingimundarson, fimmti Eiríkr Brandsson, sétti Ingjaldr skart Eyjólfsson, Kvistungar tveir, Steindórr ok Jón, þeir bræðr Hámundr ok Kollgrímr, - ok eru nú tíu, - Þorgeirr káti, Ófeigr Eiríksson, Andréas Brandsson, Jón af Bakka ok Ljótr, sonr hans, ok eru nú fimmtán, - Hafsteinn ok Þórarinn Ljótsungi, Þorgilsar þrír, - ok eru nú tuttugu, - Þorsteinn genja ok Fótar-Örn, Steingrímur Naddsson, Einarr ór Gaddsvík, Skraf-Oddr, - ok eru nú hálf þriðji tigr. (430)

These men were with Eyjólfur: Ásgrímur, his brother, Kolbeinn grön and Ari Ingimundarson, the fifth Eiríkr Brandsson, the sixth Ingjaldr skart Eyjólfsson, the two Kvistungar, Steindórr and Jón, those brothers Hámundur and Kollgrímur, - and now they are ten, - Þorgeirr káti, Ófeigr Eiríksson, Andréas Brandsson, Jón of Bakki and Ljótr, his son, and now they are fifteen, - Hafsteinn and Þórarinn Ljótsungi, the three Þorgils, - and now they are twenty, - Þorsteinn genja and Fótar-Örn, Steingrímur Naddsson, Einarr from Gaddsvík, Skraf-Oddr, - and now they are twenty-five.

We see that there is no anonymous band of followers behind one or two identified leaders. The narrator deliberately documents all those involved, and makes the process by which he achieves precision very visible. The narration here is self-reflexive but its aim is to bind together the act of narration and reality as closely as possible, reducing the critical distance between the narrator's viewpoint and the information to a minimum, to create the effect that the saga speaks itself in the manner that a traditional narrative might. Although the narrator is openly counting the participants, he draws attention to memory rather than to understanding or interpretation; the regularity of his interruptions means that the audience is continually made aware of the author's function as a receiver rather than interpreter of knowledge about the past.

The critical distance expands when the narrative takes on the stylistic conventions of the family sagas, conventions which were developed to chart the achievements of the early Icelanders. The shift to the dramatic intensity of the burning signals an historical moment of a different order, the older order of early Iceland as it is found in the memories of the thirteenth century authors. Several family saga conceits mark this out for us in the preliminaries to the attack: Eyjólfur, the leader of the burners, is turned away from reconciliation with Gizurr by a sharp attack on his courage by his wife (ch. 168), strange cries are heard in the area (167), there is illness at Flugumýri (170), characters who are caught between both sides are depicted in their failed attempts to warn

Gizurr of a coming attack (170), and as the attackers make their way to the farm, those who should raise the alarm fail to do so (171). These portents are common literary features of the family saga corpus, used to heighten the drama of a climactic event. Sturla brings them in at this point in order to signal the national meaning of the events to follow. They are to be viewed in the context of all four hundred years of Iceland's history.

As the attack begins, the narrator turns to the sleeping quarters at Flugumýri, to Gizurr's swift reaction, to Gróa, his wife's, instant response, which is to pass him his weapon, and to Hall, Gizurr's son, and Ingibjörg, his newly wedded wife and the author's daughter (172). The Flugumýri household puts up a brave defence, attested by those who were there:

Þeir börðust lengi nætr ok höfðu svá harðan atgang, at því er þeir menn hafa sagt, er þar váru, at eldr þótti af hrjóta, er vápnin mættust. Ok svá sagði Þorsteinn Guðmundarson síðan, at hann kvaðst þess hvergi komit hafa, at menn hefði jafnfræknliga varizt. Ok allir hafa vörn þá ágætt, er varð á Flugumýri, bæði vinir ok óvinir. (435-36)

They fought long into the night and had such a hard fighting, that those men who were there have said that fire seemed to fly when the weapons clashed. And Þorsteinn Guðmundarsson said this later, that he declared that never before had men defended themselves so bravely. And all at Flugumýri, both friends and enemies, have praised the defence.

This narrative voice, which reports through others' observations, now interacts with a far more dramatic and exciting voice that depicts the deaths of Gróa, Gizurr's wife, and their sons, and the remarkable escape made by Gizurr. In the dialogue between these voices, we see a very sophisticated ability to harness different traditions and an exchange of generic conceits. Each voice gives to the other what it would otherwise lack: the family saga gives its literary colour, the chronicle its truth. With an attack by force making no headway, the assault turns to fire. The farmstead quickly fills with smoke, and we hear:

Gizurr lagðist niðr í skálanum með setstokkinum öðrum megin ok lagði nasirnar ok höfuðit við gólfít ok þar Gróa, kona hans, hjá honum. (438)

Gizurr lay down in the hall by the partition beam on the other side and placed his nose and head against the floor, and there (also) Gróa, his wife, beside him.

Gizurr expects that Gróa will probably be allowed out:

Gizurr gekk at henni Gróu ok tók fingrgull tvau ór brókarbeltis pungi sínum ok fekk henni í hönd, því at hann ætlaði henni líf, en sér dauða....Gizurr fann þá á Gróu, at henni fannst mikit um skilnaðinn þeira. (439)

Gizurr approached Gróa, took two gold rings out of his pouch attached to his belt and put them in her hand, as he expected life for her, but death for himself....Gizurr found that Gróa was greatly affected by their parting.

The level of private detail that we see in these quotations exemplifies the use which this saga is making of family saga techniques. The narrative's concentration on individuals' actions and choices gives definition and meaning to the events, just as in the family sagas, where characters are empowered to speak, to act, and to live through the choices and allegiances that they make. In that idealised world of early Iceland which the thirteenth century cherished in the family sagas, there is time and there is space for the fullness of a great decision and a momentous act. Domestic detail, so vital to the power of the family sagas, elevates the burning at Flugumýri to the highest national historical level.

The mode of possession that we witness is the author's ownership of the past, realised through the intimacy of domestic detail. In Sturla's case, the domestic scene is, through his daughter's presence, his own. Yet the closeness of some of the domestic detail in this scene does not limit the meaning of the episode to Sturla and others directly implicated in the events. On the contrary, it expands the possible connections that could be made between Icelanders and

the recent past, and between the textual worlds with which they were familiar. As in the family sagas, the domesticity of the violence is anchored to its function in signifying the national importance of the story.

The domestic closeness of the episode is much like that in *Gísla saga* in that it allows the reader to see beyond the author's objective stance and to share, with the author, an imagined world of family tensions and difficult decision-making. Such decisions take the saga away from its role in preserving Gísli's poems and in recording the known events in his life. Instead, the author is able to take creative control of Gísli's life through the depiction of his dramatic domestic world, a possession of tradition which marks out Gísli as a figure whose importance goes beyond the basic function of the saga as a *telling* and becomes part of the author's interpretation of the past. Vésteinn, Gísli, and Gizurr are secondary authors: their perception of their domestic lives becomes a central element of an authorial desire to capture and interpret the events in which they took part.

Gísli remains a possession of tradition – that is, a traditional figure whom the author characterises as part of his function as the preserver of the saga – and the prominent position of topography in the saga creates an impression that Gísli belongs quite specifically to the West Fjords. Yet, Gísli is consistently characterised as a thoughtful and expressive character, a character who has developed a system by which to internalise and understand the events around him, or, in the terms adopted in this thesis, a very active secondary author. This allows the author of the saga to thematise Gísli's comments as creative acts that take place within the particular context that is supplied by the traditions of the time and place in which the events occur.

It is this joint possession, between author and tradition, which makes the saga such a rewarding one for modern readers: at once, the saga is a medieval attempt to understand the thoughts of a man who was unfortunate and courageous, and to do so in the terms set by saga Iceland, that is, the terms of tradition. Just as domestic and national narratives form dual components of a unified story about conflict, the inherited traditional and the invented situations

of *Gísla saga* are unified by Gísli's position as a secondary author, a role that provides the basis of the readership's empathy with Gísli, a figure from a different ethical and social order. Gísli is the focus of a joint possession: in his expression of past ethical values, he facilitates both a communal memorising of the great people of early Iceland and a thirteenth century understanding, and possession, of those people. In the same way, the narratives of Gizurr's heroic acts and his love for his family become the vehicles for an authorial desire to communicate the importance of the burning. Sturla achieves that aim through a subtle performance of different authorial functions, from that of genealogical chronicler to one intimately linked to the interpretive nature of the family sagas.

Domestic Lives and National Significance

Thus, characters' perception of their domestic obligations can signify both the national significance of the events and the author's desire to represent those events in an empathetic way. Vésteinn's decision is a decision about obligation; it has drawn us into a discussion about the saga authors' desire to empathise with the ethical world of early Iceland. I have suggested a number of connections between the author's ability to explore Vésteinn's inner life while maintaining the objective narrative style associated with tradition and Sturla Þórðarson's ability to create multiple narrative voices in *Íslendinga saga*. In both cases, the narration of domestic detail enables the author to explore the emotional impact of events in more detail, not merely because domesticity and emotion are thematically linked but because he achieves a greater sense of immediacy between audience and author on the one hand and the events of the past on the other. The saga form, in its expansive description of family history, allows nationally significant narratives to have both historical credibility and emotional impact.

I have aimed to show that it is possible to reconcile socio-historical, structural, and interpretive approaches to the sagas by viewing saga authorship as a multi-functional activity. As we have seen in chapters one and two, literary and historical approaches must, especially in the context of a traditional form in

the process of a medieval reception, be regarded as complementary methodologies. Taken together, they allow us to see the rich variety in saga writing and the subtle nature of the sagas' historical function: Sturla's use of different narrative voices has been a key example. If isolated, the approaches carry the danger of over-emphasis of one or two of the functions of saga authorship, especially the documentary on the one hand and artistic on the other. This thesis will, in the following chapters, focus on the artistic, empathetic, and interpretive functions of the sagas because it is in performing these functions that authors develop complex narrative structures, sophisticated characters, secondary authors, and historical themes. This focus signals particular interest in the interpretive function of characterisation rather than a desire to downplay the functions of saga authorship that are related to the performance of tradition and the faithful documentation of well-known events, genealogies, and regional histories.

As a link to the next chapter of this thesis, which suggests that family saga characterisation is sometimes linked to the nature of the Icelandic settlement process, we might observe that Vésteinn's decision and the burning may also have been more immediate to the audience by virtue of the sagas' topography. For Vésteinn to travel on means that he crosses the highpoint between his farm and Haukadalr, and his movement into Dýrafjörðr parallels his re-entry into the complex disputes in Gísli's family. Flugumýri, a wealthy farm located at the crossroads of North and West Iceland, could also be regarded as meeting point of competing political desires (those of the North and West). In both sagas, the land is a powerful element in the movement of historical narrative, and the desire for unsettled and ungoverned land that brought on the extensive settlement between 874 and 930 forms a theme in *Sturlunga saga* through the competition for land ownership and farmers' allegiance. The land is the material corollary of the sagas' ethical concerns, and forms a focus not only for characters' ambitions and disputes, but also for readers' response and understanding of the saga.

In a metaphorical sense, the land – the focal point of many traditions – also owns the sagas, a possession which appears to have been honoured by the saga writers in the connection between characters, events, and specific districts and farms. But when the land is drawn into the text as a referent, it seems to become one of the narrator's identities, that is, directed in large part by the thirteenth century author. While this narrative identity, comprised of the the land and its traditions, inevitably runs towards the saga's historically pre-determined end, it is subject to an authorial gaze which, like Vésteinn's gaze at the rivers running to Dýrafjörðr, seems to alter its purpose and effect. The Icelandic landscape may be one of the narrational levels of the sagas set in Iceland, forming a point of connection between the people of the past, what they saw and how they responded to it, and the authors of traditional stories.

Saga characters' desire for land and their ability to harness its resources effectively is a less emotional parallel to their ability to succeed in family relations. In the family saga, Iceland is foremost a place of land and family, and the success of a family group means the success of a farm. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, family is the central ideological concern of the sagas, and we have seen in the course of the chapter that disputes offer the clearest measure of family obligation. The land and the settlement of Iceland link these two features of the sagas. Narratives of the land reflect the authors' attempts to understand the demands of life in early Iceland and to educate the audience about the type of person who could have create order and achieve political success in early Iceland.

Chapter 3: Settlement Patterns

For Europe is absent. This is an island and therefore
Unreal. And the steadfast affections of its dead may be bought
By those whose dreams accuse them of being
Spitefully alive (W. H. Auden, "Journey to Iceland")

New Land

Many of the family sagas include a settlement narrative.¹ These consist of a series of episodes that describe the movement of the ancestors of a saga's main protagonists from Norway to Iceland, as well as that of other notable figures who came to areas of interest to the author. Settlement narratives may give quite specific reasons for migration; for example, a migration may be tied to the reign of King Haraldr hárfagri (r. 870-930), who is represented by a number of saga authors as a severe leader who led Norwegian aristocrats to find other, less oppressive societies to join or, as was the case in Iceland, to form. But the Norwegians and their fellow migrants did not necessarily see the formation of Icelandic society as the formation of a new social order. If the mood of the migration to Iceland was marked by some bitterness felt at the changes forced by King Haraldr, it is possible that the migration was a reactionary and thus conservative re-formation of a type of society being lost to nationhood, Christianity, and a more clearly defined European order.

This chapter discusses the relationship between the old and new worlds in the sagas' representation of the settlement of Iceland. I will concentrate my

¹ Regarding post-colonial theories of settlement and their relevance to Icelandic saga tradition or medieval history and creativity, see further Frakes; Smith; Clunies Ross, "Land-taking" and "From Iceland."

analysis on narrative voice, point of view, and characterisation in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and suggest that Snorri goði personifies the saga author's interest in the transition from old to new, not only in terms of place (Norway to Iceland), beliefs (heathen to Christian), and social expectation (conflict to moderation), but also in relation to modes of social control, in particular, the issue of political control from afar. All these factors have significant narrative or narratological implications. I will also stress that *Eyrbyggja saga* is written by an author who is aware of the thematic dimensions of his work, and that the saga witnesses a tension in the various possibilities of new and old social conduct in early Iceland – tensions caused by the co-existence of residual and emergent social forces. Ultimately, the author's representation of Snorri is a complex portrayal of the type of personality that could succeed in such a time. My main interest lies at the thematic and interpretive levels, and I question whether Snorri is a focal point of an author's interest in the social codes and practices of the settlement period and the age in which the forces behind settlement impacted socially and politically. My discussion of *Eyrbyggja saga* suggests that in some cases saga authors could be open about the interpretive and historically self-conscious functions of saga authorship, and that in such cases the role of secondary authors may have been less crucial.

The argument put in this thesis is that the understanding and usefulness of the past was possible and artistically rewarding because of the saga authors took part possession of saga characters, most especially the characters I have termed secondary authors. Characters such as Gísli Súrsson, who come out of the saga age but who are also prepared to comment upon their place in it, facilitate a joint possession in which the integrity of the saga tradition is matched by a sophisticated system for its analysis. That is, the saga must function as both a credible account of a tradition and a means by which the past is understood and made useful to the medieval reader.

However, Snorri is not a secondary author in the same way as Gísli; Snorri's reticence ensures that he will not comment on events with the same depth of feeling as Gísli and, while events seem continually to conspire to undo

an earnest and determined Gísli, Snorri is a tactician who is in quiet command of the situations he faces. Such a character dominates the narrative to the same degree as Gísli without appearing as clearly to the reader: one sense Snorri's presence as keenly as Gísli's but Gísli is painted with clearer strokes. Snorri expresses more in his actions than he does in words, and it is often left to the saga author to explain events to the contemporary audience. That is, given that Snorri's taciturn nature and ambiguous conduct are two of his strengths, the author's characterisation of him is often oriented towards the context of Snorri's behaviour rather than key statements by Snorri himself. We might say that Snorri's characterisation is an elemental part of the author's development of historical themes but that it relies heavily on the author's explanation of differences between the saga and writing ages.

The contrast between Snorri's quiet manipulation of events and the relatively open and informative mode of narration provides an example of intrusive narration and complex characterisation in one saga. Thus, we see what happens when the main character's decisions do not provide easy points of empathy with the reader. In his preparedness to interrupt the narrative with historical information, and organise the saga's episodes with a clear regional perspective, the author creates a possibility of medieval possession of the material that, in other sagas, is achieved through reader empathy with a secondary author. In this context, the author's desire to understand the region and its early history as a whole becomes more clear.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* we witness an educative author at work. He is an author who understands a saga as a set of episodes connected by conflict, family history, and topography, a relationship that we saw expressed in comments made by the characters in *Gísla saga* and *Íslendinga saga*. For the author of *Eyrbyggja saga*, the newness of Iceland, the social and supernatural forces that defined early life on Snæfellsnes, and the development of new modes of dispute resolution appear to unify the educative function of saga writing with the pleasure of repeating local stories. Snorri's distance from the rest of the saga community is emblematic of a new kind of chieftaincy in Iceland, one marked

by political sensitivity and tactical superiority rather than by bravery in combat. Snorri is the central character in an educative exposition of a new style of leadership, or in a highly informative narrative that connects Snorri's success to changing social patterns in early Iceland.

Terms

“Settlement forces” is a term that describes aspects of the early Icelandic community which have been shaped by the nature of the settlement. The settlement of Iceland was regarded by later Icelanders as a kind of reaction to King Haraldr's rule, and Iceland was generally seen as an attractive prospect for Norwegians in the ninth century. Settlement forces are ideologies which, like the ideology associated with independent-minded chieftaincy, are connected with the settlement and have a strong ongoing influence in the medieval Icelandic self-conception. “Supernatural forces” and “supernatural elements” are aspects of saga societies (i.e., the societies represented in sagas) which are derived from the Old Norse mythical world and from other beliefs in divine power, including Christianity. These concepts overlap on many occasions. For example, one could discuss the introduction of heathen worship to Iceland as both a settlement and supernatural force. “Social forces” are those which have developed as a result of the social practices of the saga societies, in particular, those practices which appear to have developed in response to circumstances peculiar to Iceland, such as the farming conditions, the size of the population, Iceland's geographical isolation, and the absence of an executive power in the period before Iceland's loss of independence in the 1260s. For example, one might argue the extent of the desire for moderation and negotiation in disputes that is expressed in the sagas is a social force which results from a peculiarly strong reliance on the law (instead of royal intervention).

Old and New Worlds

In the imagination of saga authors, Iceland in the settlement period (874 – 930) was perhaps less a *terra nova* than a world of reclamations (cf. Schier).

According to the sagas, real power existed at the local level, and assemblies ensured that local power was mediated through a complex judicial and legislative process (see Byock, *Medieval Iceland* 62-63 (Map 2) for the assembly sites from 930-1264 and, further, Miller, *Bloodtaking*; Andersson and Miller). In the absence of centralised royal power, Iceland failed to produce, or chose not to develop, a uniform executive arm of government. According to the family sagas, for up to 130 years after the initial settlement Iceland was not only a place of heathen worship but was also free of the regular domestic pressure to adopt Christianity (or at least abstain from heathen practice) characteristic of other European nations. It is no wonder that some scholars have regarded the period from Iceland's settlement to its loss of independence as witnessing a new, free society (e.g., see Byock, *Medieval Iceland* ch. 4 and Tomasson; cf. Sørensen, "Social Institutions").

It would, however, be a mistake to associate the settlement of Iceland with the kind of pioneering aims which are often attributed to much later expansions of Western civilisation. Certainly, Iceland was different to its parent culture in Norway, and the saga authors give the appearance that Iceland was, for a long while, exempt from many of the reforms underway in Europe. Likewise, the Icelanders' interest in genealogies was probably "bound up with the emigrants' heightened awareness of new social formations and needs to establish claims to power and land" (Quinn, "From Orality" 49, citing Hastrup, *Culture* 185; see also Tulinius, "The Matter of the North" 249 and 252). On the other hand, much of the saga literature suggests that both early and medieval Icelanders had an enduring commitment to Norse identity, even if it underwent development in Iceland. And the family sagas suggest the conceptual framework used to understand and describe the new country was partly drawn from a much older world of myth and poetic art.

We ought not to be surprised to find that saga authors conceived the process of settlement as being about both preservation and change, and that the characters in a settlement narrative may embody qualities that are drawn from both old and new worlds. While modern readers may associate exploration and

discovery with the new and the unknown, the authors of the family sagas represent the settlement of Iceland differently. It is also seen to involve acts by Norse settlers that are intended to turn an empty place into a Norse country, that is, to define the new Iceland in the settlers' terms. The building of a *hof*, or temple, the definition of the land according to Norse boundary practices, the introduction of exotic livestock, and the ownership of highly symbolic items such as well-known weapons, ensure that the local culture and the Icelandic natural world are, for the most part, understood and described according to a Norse world-view. These are material items which help to define Iceland as part of Norway.

Material goods and treasures are aspects of Icelandic society which the saga authors represent as being known: no matter how special, or powerful, some of these goods are, they are categorised as part of a well-developed and accepted social system of status, meaning, and historical development. In particular, they allow the saga authors to craft and represent an intricate definition of the nature of Icelanders' relationship with the Norwegian society they have left behind. For example, when Skalla-Grimr breaks an axe that has come to Iceland as a gift to him from King Eiríkr (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* ch. 38), the broken gift might indicate in a metaphorical way that the Norway that he has left is no longer the place for the type of Norwegian who has moved to Iceland. The incident seems to express a tension between a tough, older ethos of independence, which was regarded as the basis of the settlement of Iceland, and a growing historical trend in Scandinavia associated with a Christian world-view and an increasing acceptance of the guiding role of national community leaders, such as kings, law speakers, and bishops. We might also interpret the incident in terms of what the saga authors felt to be unique about conditions in Iceland. If the broken axe symbolises the fact that conditions are more difficult in Iceland than they are in Norway, we may have an indication of the sensitivity of the settlers, and subsequent generations, to the distinctive features of the Icelandic natural environment, which could not be

readily understood or described in the terms of the parent culture or the type of land which had been left behind.

Ultimately, any such sense of novelty would come to be expressed from a Norse migrant perspective, but it would nevertheless reflect the fact that the relationship with the new land included an awareness that Icelandic conditions led to a different value system, formed out of adapting values brought from Norway (for instance, in the relative value of ornate and strong objects), or developing new values altogether. In the account of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's settlement given in *Eyrbyggja saga*,² Þórólfr is advised by the god Þórr, with whom he has a close relationship, to travel to Iceland. Þórólfr pulls down his temple to take with him and, on reaching Icelandic waters, throws high seat pillars overboard, intending to settle where the beam is led by Þórr (ch. 4). Þórólfr and his crew define the settlement, here their choice of land, in terms of a religious outlook brought from Norway. Implicitly, Þórólfr looks for an area which is suited to both his physical needs and his belief system, a process which combines the attribution of Norse mythic beliefs to the land with a desire to understand the land and make practical judgments about it.

As far as possible, the saga authors describe early Iceland in a way that reflects a conception of Norway prior to King Haraldr's rule. Perhaps the clearest indication comes in the spirit of egalitarianism and directness of speech which characterise relationships in Iceland and between Icelanders and the aristocracy in Norway. Consider, too, the suggestion in the sagas that Iceland was heavily forested at the time of settlement, almost certainly a great exaggeration. It is difficult to assess whether the saga authors believed in Iceland's earlier forestation, but their pleasure in it suggests that they were looking for connections with the appearance of Norway. *Vatnsdæla saga* even betrays a conception of ninth and tenth century Iceland as a materially more wealthy place than Norway. Ingimundr's determination not to go to Iceland, his clearly stated bias against it, and the anticipation of and delays in reaching Vatnsdalr combine to give his eventual arrival a euphoric air. In this case,

² *Mostrarskegg* means "the beard [i.e., man] of Mostr" (Cleasby and Vigfusson 435).

Iceland is strongly differentiated from Norway, both in Ingimundr's presumption that it will be an unpleasant place to end up and in his subsequent vision of Iceland as a place of beauty and wonder (see esp. *Vatnsdæla saga* ch. 15). In a similar vein, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the quality of the Icelandic land is said to earn Ingólfr's voyage fame:

Þat var tíu vetrum síðar en Ingólfr Arnarson hafði farit at byggja Ísland, ok var sú ferð allfræg orðin, því at þeir menn, er kómu af Íslandi, sögðu þar góða landakosti. (7)³

That was ten years after Ingólfr Arnarson had gone to settle Iceland, and that journey had become very famous because those men who returned from Iceland reported the condition of the land to be good.

Thus, the sagas suggest that Iceland is a notable place and, perhaps in a defensive way, that the settlers were impressed by it. Yet, although the qualities of the new country are praised and it appears to be populated by the best of the Norwegian aristocracy, Icelandic society is an inferior version of Norse society in terms of size and importance to its regional neighbours. In this context, such praise as we find expressed about Vatnsdalr, and particularly the effusive nature of that praise, may in fact indicate a degree of authorial defensiveness about Iceland. It was surely difficult to represent Iceland as either the new land of bounty, or indeed as a world in which the heroic society of ancient Scandinavia could be fully reclaimed. Later generations of Icelanders, who desire to travel to Norway, seem less committed to the ideals expressed by their parents and grandparents; for them, it is not enough that Iceland is a place of freedom and opportunity (see *Vatnsdæla saga* ch. 31). They wish to sample the courtly life their ancestors had come to dislike (e.g., on the Icelandic poets abroad, see

³The word *landakostr* or *landskostr* ("the best of the land," "choice land," or "quality of the land;" Cleasby 371-72) is found most regularly in *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, appearing seven times in each, or nearly half the occurrences in the corpus of family sagas (Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir *et al* "Orðstöðulykill"). In the former, there is a similar reference to the widespread interest in Ingólfr's voyage, while the latter appears to be directed at illustrating the interest in the land.

Gade, "Poetry," esp. 77-84).⁴ Their travels towards the "centre" of Scandinavian power may represent recognition on their part of a kind of central authority that their ancestors abhorred. On the other hand, the saga conceit of Icelanders' achievements at the Norwegian court would appear to reinforce the accounts of their ancestors' superiority. Iceland is a place of aristocratic Vikings who, by virtue of their lineage and personal worth, maintain an heroic, old world, tradition that has been lost in Norway, ensuring that Icelanders will stand out when they visit mainland Scandinavia (see further ch. 4).

Eyrbyggja saga

Because of the connection that *Eyrbyggja saga* makes between the settlement of the area and the subsequent inhabitants of Snæfellsnes, and given the episodic structure of the saga, I suggest that *Eyrbyggja saga* as a whole can be classified as a narrative that is concerned with the nature and effects of settlement. Of course, Iceland was thought to be fully settled by 930, and I am not contending here that *Eyrbyggja saga* contradicts this version of events. But the narrative style of the saga and the events it chooses to describe are, as a whole, similar to the settlement narratives which form only part of other sagas. *Eyrbyggja saga* is not typical in this respect. In general, the family sagas move into a "narrative present" which, while never completely free of the influence of the settlement age, forms the defining moments for the sagas' overall effect. The episodes with most dramatic effect are often marked by more sophisticated narrative techniques and in-depth characterisation. For instance, in *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, Egill's characterisation owes a great deal to the qualities he shares with his father and grandfather, but Egill's personality is the more vivid and more important for the effect of the saga than the generational relationships

⁴ Generational differences do not stop there. Scholars have discussed disagreements across generations in terms of the ethical changes they reflect. A memorable example can be seen in Arnkell's dispute with his father Þórólfr (indeed his father's spirit) in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where the ferociously independent and warrior-like farmer confronts more civic-minded individuals who desire the moderation and ordering of disputes, and some of whom appear to act with community, not just personal, interests in mind (cf. Miller, *Bloodtaking* 289-294; Byock, *Medieval Iceland* ch. 9 and "Inheritance;" see also Bragg; Schach, "Generation Gap").

which enhance Egill's portrayal. While Snorri is certainly a central figure in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and I will return to his characterisation later, he does not dominate the pace and mood of the narrative in the way Egill does. That is, while Egill's characterisation is a function of the author's biographical interests, it seems that Snorri's function is tied to a more broadly defined aim to explain the history of a particular area and to suggest connections between the spirit of the settlement and later events.⁵

Eyrbyggja saga is for the most part written in an informative mode, and this has led to some discussion of what seems, at first blush, to be a lack of unity in the saga's composition. The tone and organisation of the saga are suited to its aims as an expositional narrative, and one might say that the saga never seems to gain much dramatic momentum. The key to the saga's unity lies in the thematic coherence of the saga's description of the settlement and its effects. The author aims to describe the settlement and early history of the area around Eyri, Helgafell, and Álftafjörðr. He does so in a way which would be understood by the saga's medieval audience and in a narrative form which would accommodate stories with a noticeably wide range of historical, educational, and spiritual meanings. The saga privileges historical information over the dramatic possibilities of the plot, and most of the saga's dramatic success comes within individual episodes rather than through the way in which the episodes relate to each other (the connections between episodes are created by the author's informative modes of narration and historical stance rather than by the plot structure). *Eyrbyggja saga* is an informative narrative which is held together by its focus on the ability of inhabitants to understand and adapt to the forces brought with the settlement (e.g., supernatural power) and to form new social modes to deal with those forces (e.g., legal skills). The saga's coherence and authority come from its successful use of a sophisticated voice of historical reflection to describe this process, especially the marked distance which is

⁵ Garmonsway even suggests that Snorri is outshone by Arnkell and Steinþór (81). This is a fair point, but their ability to overshadow Snorri ought to be thought of in terms of the glamour associated with their more traditionally heroic traits, which, while more clear-cut than Snorri's qualities, are not necessarily more important for the historical themes developed in the saga.

created between the saga's medieval point of view and the life on Snæfellsnes during its settlement and during the lead-up to Christianity. The possibilities of Snorri's characterisation are, to some extent, limited by the historical point of view, but Snorri is also an appropriate figure to illustrate the tensions and contradictions that arise during the period of historical change from the settlement to Christianisation.

Before turning to Snorri's characterisation in more detail, I wish to pause to consider two aspects of the informative expansiveness of the saga, or its ability to contain a wide range of material: a) the author's inclusion of supernatural material and b) the educative mode of much of the narration. The saga is greatly affected by the author's desire to accommodate, and to possess, as much of the history of Snæfellsnes as possible. Yet, as in the case of *Íslendinga saga*, this inclusiveness does not necessarily undermine the impact of Snorri's characterisation. Rather, it provides the potential overlap of socio-historical interest and documentation, preservation of history, and characterisation in a way that reflects the author's overarching view of the inception of Icelandic society as a convergence of old and new forces. Once again, we witness a saga that speaks to us with competing voices betraying different functions of authorship; tradition, creativity, and education converge in a way that produces a sophisticated statement of both the nature of the past and the capacity of the medieval world to capture and interpret it.

The Supernatural

One of *Eyrbyggja saga*'s most distinctive features is the close attention it pays to early heathen practice in Snæfellsnes. The area's ability to attract and cultivate various divine, heathen, or supernatural forces is central to the author's interest in the region, and perhaps even its character prior to settlement (see Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* 34-35). I mention above that Þórólfr Mostrarskegg's decision to settle there is determined by Þórr; this early characterisation of the land is given added depth when Björn Ketilsson, who considers conversion to Christianity to be *litilmannlegur* ("unmanly"), moves to

Breiðafjörður with Þórólfr's permission (chs. 5-6). The spiritual significance of Helgafell in particular is enforced when Þorsteinn Þorskabítr ("cod-biter") makes his entrance to the feast in Hel through an opening in the side of the hill (19). While the types of supernatural and divine forces may change with the conversion to Christianity, this magnetism remains a constant feature of the saga's representation of the area.

The supernatural and spiritual aspects of Snæfellsnes exist in a changing relationship with other social events and forces. Attempts by characters to gain power appear to be tied to their ability to tap into, or deal with, the supernatural forces at work in the area. Þórólfr represents something of the threat which the supernatural can pose to the community at large (see Ólason, "Máhlíðingamál" 193), and Arnkell's inability to control his father while he is alive, or completely lay his spirit to rest after his death, is a sign that Arnkell's nobility of character is not virtue enough (cf. Byock, *Medieval Iceland* 200-02). Arnkell's fight with his father is one which he is always on the verge of losing, suggesting that he fails to understand the older settlement forces that are part of the region and which are an elemental part of his domestic life.⁶ The family fight between Arnkell and Þórólfr has features in common with two other episodes, that of the Swedish berserks and of the Fróðá marvels (see esp. *Eyrbyggja saga* 141). Each illustrates the complex relationships which develop when supernatural and preternatural aspects of early Icelandic society intersect with other aspects of that society, such as family relations, the breaking of promises, and the desire for material goods.

The author appears to relish Vermundr's stupidity in bringing the berserks to Iceland (done in order to get the better of his bullying brother Styrr). Much of the humour of the situation lies in the transparency of Vermundr's

⁶ That is, Þórólfr is representative of the early settlers and of settlement forces, in the sense that he appears to be connected to an heroic past characterised by unswerving personal ambition and supernatural modes of existence. His son, Arnkell, is forced by virtue of kinship obligations to contend with this difficult figure of the old world, and capability in this respect has an impact on his position in society. Here, settlement and supernatural forces combine in the figure of Þórólfr to challenge the social balance that can be created by predictable inheritance procedures, and Arnkell is not able to reconcile the various forces at work.

claims, in his apparent lack of self-knowledge, and in the fact that the dialogue is between brothers: having a discussion about berserks in a domestic setting creates an amusing incongruity, and takes away something of the brittle, and often formal, quality of gift exchanges that we see in some saga episodes. In offering the berserks to Styrr, Vermundr breaks a promise that he has made to Earl Hákon that he will honour the berserks, and indicates that he is not able to control older forces, like the berserks, which have not yet been calmed in Norway (a lack of control similar to Arnkell's inability to temper his father's excessive personality). The steps which Vermundr takes in order to become more powerful than his brother or to create more equality between them – he introduces older forces which belong to the royal world – reflect the difference between his ambition and his ability, an unflattering comparison which is made clearer when Snorri is seen to succeed not only in using the berserks' old world strength for new world development, but also in killing them and thus ridding the area of a kind of power which it cannot sustain. The berserks represent a dangerous re-introduction of the older, mythical world. They lie beyond the implied borders of a developing *Eyrbyggja saga* community and constitute an alien element capable of disrupting the models of conflict and negotiation which are coming to be established in the district.⁷

Educational Narration

Eyrbyggja saga is more than an account of Snorri's power, and the author sets himself a more ambitious project than a biography of a powerful and interesting character. Snorri's characterisation is a function of the broader educative aim of discussing the historical character of Snæfellsnes. At times, Snorri is made to seem a rather distant figure because of the author's conscious use of him in a didactic dialogue with his audience. In contrast to the way that

⁷ Earl Hákon himself draws attention to the incongruity of berserks in a farming community (see *Eyrbyggja saga* 62), a statement that places the berserks squarely in the realm of an older world of conflict, and in the realm of the Icelandic literary imagination which can be an elemental part of the saga authors' interest in the Scandinavian mainland but which, in this saga, signifies a foreign threat and an aspect of the old world which is not part the new.

Njáll Þorgeirsson is allowed to stand clear in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Snorri's function diminishes his ability to stand clear of the expository prose which is of most concern to the author. As a result, the author's view of Snorri, like his view of the district, comes to be expressed in a voice that is at once ironic, educative, and curious.⁸

On a number of occasions it is clear that the author senses gaps in his audience's knowledge about early Iceland; for instance, when the slave Egill is killed, the author explains:

Þat vǫru lög í þann tíma, ef maðr drap þræl fyrir manni, at sá maðr skyldi fœra heim þrælsgjöld ok hefja ferð sína fyrir ina þriðju sól eptir víg þrælsins; þat skyldu vera tólf aurar silfrs. Ok er þrælsgjöld vǫru at lögum færð, þá var eigi sókn til um víg þrælsins. (118)

At that time it was the law that if a man killed another man's, slave that man should deliver compensation for the thrall and begin the journey before the end of the third day after the killing of the slave. It should be twelve *aurar* of silver. And if the compensation for the slave was legally carried out, then no case was available for the killing of the slave.

This open contextualisation of events reflects the author's willingness to give his audience the necessary information to understand the plot and the themes he wishes to associate with it; in other words, they are given enough to understand an historical interpretation.⁹ It is because of his command of the thematic and

⁸ See also Kennedy, "Friends" 30; Slusher 22-30; Greenway 25; Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece* 182-83, 196-99; Berger, "Lawyers" 78. See further below, "Snorri goði." Although Njáll and Snorri are characterised in different ways, they share an ability to conceptualise the events around them at a tactical level; consider, in this regard, Árnason's distinction between the virtuous saga individual who "is all his actions, while the providential man uses virtues more as social tools to succeed or as cloaks to cover up his real intentions" (169). Both Njáll and Snorri could be said to belong to the latter category of characters.

⁹ The author is again helpful during the narration of the dispute over the defiling of the þing (chs. 9 and 10). He explains one of Þórarinn's verses as being directed at Snorri – "Þessu veik hann til Snorra goða" ("He directed this at Snorri goði," 47) – and at the same time creates a dialogue between Arnkell and Vermundr which functions to explain, to the medieval reader, the

historical value of his material and his willingness to be helpful that the author succeeds with such a diffuse historical project as *Eyrbyggja saga*: there is open recognition of the author's and his readership's distance from the time and society portrayed in the saga. The repetition of phrases like *sem þá var siður til* (e.g., 117), "as was then the case," or *í þann tíma* (e.g., 66), "in that time" (e.g., about outdoor privies), makes it clear that the author is not only comfortable with historical change but that he is also confident that his audience will tolerate, and more probably applaud, what has been termed by Vigfússon, the saga's "archaic, measured, quietly serious and stately character" (qtd. in Ólason, "Máhlíðingamál" 187),¹⁰ or the self-conscious and antiquarian flavour of the author's prose.¹¹ A number of the author's comments tie a practice or event from the past to something in the author's own time or society. Such comments reflect a pleasure on the part of the author, and one modern readers generally experience too, in seeing a landmark or social practice preserved, even partly, long after the period of its significance has passed. With the story of Þórólfr's settlement in Breiðafjörður comes an interest in the origin of the place names which remain, for example, "þat var síðan kallað Þórsnes" (8); "it was later called Þórsnes." Likewise, the author points out that one can still see the path built by Swedish berserks through the lava field near Bjarnarhöfn (72). Inevitably, this style of writing persuades the audience that the author is alert to the nature of his contemporary (medieval) gaze and the historical distance which it entails, a perspective which necessarily puts him in a position of evaluating or making decisions about different accounts of the district.

duty which they owe Þórarinn. Likewise, for example, he tells the reader why the Þorbrandssynir are displeased with an agreement over Úlfr's farm (84), that the woods at Krákunes were the best in the district (85).

¹⁰ See also Vigfússon's comments about the political character of the saga in Vigfusson, *Prolegomena* xlv.

¹¹ Similarly, phrases like *þat váru þá lög* (56), "it was then the law," *sem fornir menn* (72), "as men in the past," *fornum sið* (10, 103, 122), "past custom," *en þá var enn* (148), "then there were still," *sem þá var títt* (161), "as was then the custom," and *meðan hann var heiðinn* (165), "while he was heathen" even witness an author who is a little boastful of his knowledge of the past.

By explaining the different nature of social practices of the past, the author betrays a world of inquisitiveness and research which he occupies when he is not writing. The author is willing, through the type of phrases I have mentioned above, to expose his own intellectual processes. That is, there is an intrusiveness to his prose style that suggests that his audience will not balk at open recognition of the interpretive and educational functions of authorship; they do not feel that the author should merely be transmitting a story that belongs in the time and place which this author is narrating as long past. Before the killing of Arnkell, the author describes an autumn feast held by Snorri:

Annat haust eftir að vetrnóttum hafði Snorri goði haustboð mikit ok bauð til vinum sínum. Þar var ǫldrykkja ok fast drukkit. Þar var ǫlteiti mǫrg; var þar talat um mannjǫfnuð, hverr þar væri gofgastr maðr í sveit eða mestr hǫfðingi; *ok urðu menn þar eigi á eitt sáttir, sem optast er, ef um mannjǫfnuð er talat.* (98, my emphasis)

The next autumn, at the time of the winter nights, Snorri goði held a great feast, and invited his friends to it. There was ale drinking there, and [the ale] was drunk in a hard way. There was a lot of cheer along with this drinking, and [people] made comparisons between men – who might be the most honourable man in the district or the greatest chieftain. *But people were not of the one view, as most often is the case when comparisons between men are made.*

The last sentence reveals an author who pays close attention to the way people interact and relate and who reflects on and draws generalisations from his observations. This may well be a necessary characteristic of any good author, but here we see that the saga author is prepared to go beyond saga style in order to point to his own world of contemplation, a reflexive act that suggests that his role in the story-telling is considered to be a meaningful one, both for himself and for his audience. Saga writing not only relates events, it speaks about events in a way that allows structure and meaning to emerge. In this sense, the saga

author's own world of contemplation is a precursor to a literary performance which, in addition to preserving and accommodating stories, provides a text that educates the audience about the nature of the settlement in Snæfellsnes.

Again, when the author describes Steinþórr's feats at the Battle of Vígrafjörðr, he heightens the narrative voice in order to add credibility to his account and to the saga through which he presents it: "ok þessa þrjá hluti lék hann senn, sem nú váru talðir" (128) – "and he did these three things, just as now related." The same impulse to add credibility, through open references to the author's research and writing process, lies behind the type of comments to general historical views in chapter 46. The phrases *ok er þat flestra manna sogn*, "and it is according to most men," and *er eigi getið*, "there is no account," during the description of Snorri's attack on Arnkell (131) suggest an author who is scholarly in his desire to create an accurate and well-researched account of the area. Such phrases also suggest an author whose credibility depends, to some extent, on being open about the uncertainty which surrounds some events, much as a modern scholar might confess doubts that remain about aspects of his or her argument. Of course, the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* is not a modern scholar, but we see some indication that the author's interest in Snæfellsnes was accompanied by a rigorous attitude to information and to knowledge.

This rigour is reflected, at an intertextual level, in the author's use of an imaginative landscape formed by allusions to other sagas.¹² Such allusions broaden the saga's scope by framing the account with other significant events which occur in the district at or around the same time, and which instruct the reader that the author's omissions are not made in ignorance. These references also help the author give local events in *Eyrbyggja saga* an equivalence with perhaps more significant and far reaching developments in early Icelandic history, such as the movement of the Norse people to Greenland and to Vínland, and the movement of Christianity which the expansion of the Norse world will

¹² That is, the narration is embellished by the audience's ability to associate events in *Eyrbyggja saga* with the history of early Iceland more generally.

ultimately bring.¹³ The author betrays a desire to explain more than is usual for the genre. This is even true of information concerning the natural setting of saga events. Just before the Battle of Vígrafjörðr, for example, the author makes Steinþórr's cold, wet, and ill-prepared position very clear:

Þeir Steinþórr gengu inn í Þingskálanes og drógu skipit ór naustinu; þeir tóku bæði árar ok þiljur ór skipinu ok lögðu þar eptir á ísinum, ok svá klæði sín ok vápn, þau er þyngst váru.

(126)

Steinþórr's party went along Þingskálnes and dragged the boat out of the boat house. They took both oars and the benches out of the boat and left them there behind on the ice, and so too their clothing and weapons that were heavy.

The quotation exemplifies the relatively precise and informative style of narration in the saga. In this case, the dramatic tension of the episode is enhanced by the difficulties faced by Steinþórr's group. But, at the least to the modern reader, the author sometimes exceeds the saga form's ability to contain a great deal of documentary information.

Eyrbyggja saga can be difficult to read because the author's aims seem varied. The author wishes to inform his readers and help them to see historical developments as he sees them, more so than in most sagas. This suggests an author who regards education as a central function of the saga. On the other hand, the author also tries to let the story unfold in its own terms, as though, like the land and its forces, the narrative can exist in its own right, as a collection of sketches which inhabited a communal space of ownership and memory prior to his acts of collection, of recording, and of interpretation. This aim might explain the author's respect for what Maxwell describes as the "integrity" of saga episodes, a stylistic trait which is taken to an extreme in *Eyrbyggja saga* and

¹³ Quietly, the spiritual history of Helgafell is compared with events like the killing of Þorgrímur in *Gísla saga* (*Eyrbyggja* ch. 12), with Eiríkr rauði's discovery of Greenland (chs. 24, 25, 48), and with the conversion to Christianity. We ought also to note the author's references to Ari Þorgilsson (ch. 7), and to events which have come down to us in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Bandamanna saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Heiðarvíga saga* (see the open reference to other sagas on page 180).

which does, on occasion, undermine the saga's clarity. The episodic approach creates the impression that stories are somehow linked to a literary and historical geography, much like in *Landnámabók*, whereby each story is akin to a landmark, or a settled area, in an otherwise unfamiliar world. It is an approach which, for a saga author, has the great advantage of appearing to delegate some of the saga's concreteness, credibility, and sense of reality to the land and to inherited traditions. In that sense, the saga author subtly confirms that the saga's function as the bearer of tradition is performed.

The existence of an educative function of saga authorship would appear to contradict the traditional authority or credibility of the saga. However, it is important that we do not claim *Eyrbyggja saga* as altogether atypical simply because it develops an educational strand more openly or because the credibility or generic cohesiveness of the story is not tied as clearly to the development of a feud. Rather, we should view *Eyrbyggja saga* as reflecting one manifestation of a more widely held desire to integrate tradition and medieval conceptions of early Iceland, and to allow characters to represent the authors' interpretations of the saga age. If we follow this line of argument, we will be more open to each saga as an individually crafted expression of narratives informed jointly by tradition and the intellectual concerns of medieval Icelanders. We will be able to regard saga authorship as balance between the controlling force of tradition and the possessive creativity of reception.

Snorri goði

Snorri appears to be at a distance from the saga community, a distance which, paradoxically, helps to create a strong impression of him. That Snorri does not speak very much rather strengthens this sense of Snorri as existing somewhat apart from the saga community. Because of his silence, his desires are less obvious to the reader and to the saga community than the desires of many of the less central characters. It is difficult to know Snorri and, inasmuch as Snorri's success is extraordinary, it is to be expected that the community of the saga would feel threatened and perhaps confused by him. Snorri's silence

and the complexity of his desires draw attention to his difference and suggest that Snorri is never to embody the perfection of the values the community cherishes, such as bravery, physical strength and dexterity, and forthrightness.¹⁴ At the same time, Snorri is never a victim of his own desires, and this self-possession gives him a noticeable advantage in his dealings with others because it makes his actions difficult to predict; his self-command defeats assumptions about him. One presumption (that he is poor) is seen to fail, in an amusing way, when Snorri outwits Þorkr in order to make a profitable purchase of the land at Helgafell (24-25). That sale enables Snorri to acquire, in a single transaction, both valuable farming land and a significant spiritual site.

Snorri illustrates success in a period of the area's history when the old and the new worlds overlap. His nature is clear from chapter 14, but the actions which result from it are difficult to be sure of. Snorri is like Njáll Þorgeirsson in the sense that he is wise and able to draw up intricate plans, and people are quick to detect the influence of both figures in the actions of others;¹⁵ but Snorri's reactions are generally less predictable, and often more politically ambitious, than Njáll's. The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* creates the impression that the community in Snæfellsnes is unsure about the nature of Snorri's aims and the ethical outlook which informs his behaviour. Njáll's good will, on the other hand, is not doubted by other characters in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. And while both characters offer the community a degree of order in their disputes, Snorri's actions are seldom matched by the moral rhetoric, and dialogues of good will, friendship, or moderation which mark many of Njáll's speeches. For instance, Snorri's dialogues with Styrr – which connect the man of thought and the man

¹⁴ At the close of the saga, the author implicitly confirms the reader's impression that Snorri was not popular during most of his lifetime by suggesting that Snorri became more popular later in life (180).

¹⁵ Some of the uncertainty surrounding Snorri results from the long range influence which he is felt by other characters in the saga. The author represents this distance very well, particularly through Snorri's steady, but rather quiet, acquisition of power. At times, Snorri is violent, but he is violent without his own direct participation (see, for example, chs. 41-44). While leaders of the past are guided by their religious and ethical beliefs and their desire for independence, Snorri's path is determined by what he can see for himself, by what he can draw from the circumstances around him, and by his manipulation of the conflicting social and ethical patterns of his day.

of action – are not imbued with the moral rhetoric of Njáll's discussions with Gunnarr.

If the author of *Brennu-Njáls saga* presents us with morally significant characters, the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* appears to be content to represent an ethical and historical situation in a particular area, one in which a range of forces are meeting: a) settlement forces associated with the introduction of heathen worship, the immigration of difficult and violent individualists, the desire to acquire land and material goods, and various supernatural elements, and b) social forces which are often odds with these settlement forces, such as the tension created by the limited amount of good farming land in the area, the social desire to moderate and create order in disputes, and rivalries and tensions in family affairs. Snorri has a highly specialised ability to make sense of the convergence of these forces. A powerful feature of his characterisation is the fact that he is able to govern and control such forces in order to make them work to his benefit, not only materially but also in terms of the approval which he eventually acquires from the community. Snorri's skill in his negotiations with Þórólfr (Arnkell's father), a figure who represents an older world of values, is a case in point. Snorri is attuned to the differences between father and son, and is able to manipulate the ethical schism to his advantage. As a result, Snorri gains more from a relationship with Þórólfr than Arnkell does. Snorri is equally able to act against Arnkell – a character who represents the saga's potentially heroic mode of narration – as he is against the settler Þórólfr, or indeed the supernatural forces at Fróðá. It is this tactical agility which gives him an edge over others.

Snorri's great skill is that he is in command of apparently oppositional forces. Snorri understands the potency of the area's supernatural forces, signalled by Þórólfr mostrarskegg's decision to settle there, and he understands that saga society can be controlled by other forces drawn from a new social order and which can match the supernatural. Snorri acquires power through his intelligence, self-possession, patience, trickery, and his strategic vision. In his case, these skills overlap and are used in all dealings. For instance, in his

handling of the spirits at Fróðá, Snorri shows that legal skills can be applied successfully to supernatural problems.¹⁶ Miller writes that in “the ghost’s willingness to comply we must be seeing a model for the behaviour of the living” (*Bloodtaking* 229). Just as importantly, I think, Snorri is able to use new social forces to control aspects of the supernatural world. By understanding both the supernatural and socio-political aspects of life in Snæfellsnes, Snorri guarantees his personal success and, perhaps more importantly for our sense of the ethical point which the saga as a whole makes, is associated with the development of a new social order in the district. In that sense, Snorri characterises the interplay of old and new forces in Snæfellsnes, and offers us some insight into the relationship between the two.

Education and Possession

The educational element of *Eyrbyggja saga* undermines what seems at first blush to be the documentary function of the saga, that is, to collect and record the inherited traditions of Snæfellsnes. Because of the author’s educative aims, his possession of his material seems at times to be greater than the command that tradition has over him. The author’s scholarly attitude has given him the skill, the historical awareness, the breadth of outlook, and the patience to write a whole saga as an extended discussion of settlement and its effects. The attention to Snorri and the events of the saga function as examples for the audience and guide its understanding of the area’s early social development. In the saga’s movement across the region, seemingly taking into account as many stories as possible, *Eyrbyggja saga* mirrors, in narrative terms, the division and possession of Iceland, and the impulse to order and understand the land which accompanied that act of possession, and which is manifest in *Landnámabók*, *Íslendingabók*, and the grammatical treatises. Its dual interest in settlement forces and emerging social codes is, like the wide ambit of interests in

¹⁶ Regarding the environment and law in the sagas, see also Berger, “Bad Weather.” On the natural environment of the sagas more generally, see McGovern.

Íslendinga saga, an indication of the author's careful balance of competing traditional and medieval authorship functions.

Eyrbyggja saga is a self-conscious collection of stories which represents an intellectual act of ownership as instinctive and self-affirming as the *landnám* and the impulse to regional control which accompanied it. The central impulse behind the settlement, to possess land, orders the region in the same way as the author's attempt to understand the past orders the traditional narratives of the area. In both cases, the desire to own and to order is accompanied by a curiosity about the existential nature of what prompts possession and what types of forces remain after possession has occurred. It seems that, just as Þórólfr, during his re-incarnation as a bull, cannot be completely possessed, the saga author cannot completely possess the past, and he highlights his problematic position of knowledge and historical reflection while he seeks to comprehend the character of an area through an understanding of its ethical transitions. In the author's intellectualism, we see a sensitive curiosity about the qualities which the settlers brought to Iceland and which could not easily be forced away or beaten by later Icelanders.

For our study of authorship, we can say that the *Eyrbyggja saga* author's impressive control of the intellectual and thematic ambit of his work has the interesting effect of giving us a more obviously self-conscious representation of early Icelandic society than *Gísla saga*, which takes possession of Gísli through a more opaque method of developing a character's inner life. None of the sagas that we will examine in the following chapters will show the same command of tradition as we witness in *Eyrbyggja saga*, but this author's posture in relation to tradition and community knowledge demonstrates the considerable potential for thirteenth century possession and control.

Clearly, the level of possession that saga authors enjoy varies, not only in terms of the extent of their creative control, but also the authorial function which that possession enables. The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* seems especially in command of the historical shape and importance of his material, but the antiquarian tone that he adopts would not be an historically or artistically

credible mode of narration in, for example, *Laxdæla saga*, in which the characters seem far more in command of the pace and the dramatic effect of the saga. To concede control to saga characters does create its own set of difficulties for the saga author. He must be able to create the sense that a character's inner development and perception of events is part of the saga tradition that has been inherited. This a complication of objective saga style that is not attempted in Snorri's characterisation, but which is central in the sagas that we will discuss in chapters four to six. While Snorri as an historiographical figure can be said to be in the hands of the author, and an important part of the author's educative aims, he has a less open role in perceiving and internalising early Iceland on behalf of a medieval readership than characters like Gísli Súrsson, Gizurr Þorvaldsson, and Hjalti Skeggjason.

In contrast to Snorri, Hjalti Skeggjason is an eloquent speaker who excels in situations in which he is called upon to represent himself or to express the wishes of another character. In his sense of timing, verbosity, ease with others, religious commitment, and perceptiveness, Hjalti is every bit a secondary author. His comments, in other words, are conspicuous for the thoughtfulness and intellectual engagement which they display, and suggest that he functions to unite the author's interpretive concerns to the episodes in which he dominates. While Snorri is a master of the limited farming conditions in Snæfellsnes, Hjalti is equally in his element abroad and at home. If, as I have suggested, Snorri reflects an author's desire to own and understand early Icelandic history, Hjalti personifies an attempt to bring Norwegian history, and the development of Christianity in Scandinavia, within the textual world of medieval Iceland. The saga author sees Christianisation in Norway, and its influence in Iceland, through Hjalti's Icelandic eyes, thus attributing a wider European agency to traditional characters. This possession of Norwegian history through Hjalti's role in it will provide us with another example of the possession of historical narratives through sophisticated character development. The saga authors' interest in Hjalti will also allow us to further develop the argument that the interpretive, educative, and empathetic functions of saga

authorship co-existed with the sagas' preservation of tradition and their fidelity to the medieval community's conception of the historically "real" saga Iceland.

Chapter 4: The Icelander Abroad

Þessi svörtu, íslenzku augu hafa, kona, vísað oss langan,
erfiðan veg til hins glitrandi hrings. (*Óláfs saga helga*
140).

These black Icelandic eyes, woman, have brought us by
the long and hard road to the bright ring. (Sighvatr skáld,
1018)¹

Icelandic Eyes

This thesis has now made a number of significant points about the nature of the ownership and control of Icelandic history that saga authors exercised and, I have argued, shared with the tradition. In particular, I have argued that secondary authors are a powerful means by which saga authors can take greater control of the saga material and create a more meaningful dialogue between the people of early Iceland and the medieval audience of the sagas. In the absence of a clear secondary author, as is the case in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the nature of ownership changes, from favouring creative composition to an open, educative recognition of tradition, placing the land and a geographical focus as the central points of empathy across the ages. In the absence of a character who expresses authorial concerns, the author may adopt a more intrusive narrative voice, one which strikes some modern readers as antiquarian and educational in tone.

In other sagas, the guidance of an antiquarian narrative voice is replaced by the rhetorical eloquence of saga characters, not least that of the Icelanders abroad. Sighvatr's celebration of his "black Icelandic eyes," given above, is

¹ *Óláfs saga helga* ch. 91, verse 73. The version of Sighvatr's verse given here is Aðalbjarnarson's rendition of it into modern Icelandic prose.

preserved in Snorri Sturluson's well-known collection of kings' sagas,² probably written at his farm Reykholt in the mid-west of Iceland, at some point before his death in 1241, possibly around 1230.³ My interest in *Heimskringla* is focused on whether it can be read as an Icelandic attempt to take joint possession of the history of Norway, and whether there are any characters who, acting as secondary authors, form links between early Icelandic society and the Norwegian royalty and, consequently, between the aristocratic society of Norway and medieval audience of the sagas.

Heimskringla is a means by which medieval Icelanders can claim Norwegian history as part of their own. This is not to suggest that the saga authors did not understand the difference between their own history and that of the other countries that they wrote about. Rather, it is to focus our analysis of the writing of kings' lives in terms of the historical and thematic concerns about Iceland and its relations with Norway that the saga authors were able to develop. Such an approach emphasises the positive aims of the authors rather than their reactions to Icelandic relations with Norway. While I do not wish to ignore the scholarship which has examined the role of these political matters in Snorri's approach to Norwegian history, the questions I address are directed to the intellectual concerns which pre-date the specific political issues of the thirteenth-century. For instance, could Icelandic authors acquire Norwegian history by placing early Icelanders in conspicuous narrative positions and, if so, did that acquisition allow medieval Icelanders to view themselves as party to the historical events that defined the lives of kings?

² For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to Snorri as an *author* in the sense that we know that he was responsible for the overall shape and meaning of *Heimskringla*, not that he was solely responsible for all the content of the compilation. Note, in particular, that Snorri drew on earlier histories of the Norwegian kings, especially *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and Styrmir Káráson's now lost history. Andersson regards *Heimskringla* as a "final fusion" ("Snorri" 12) of the various Icelandic histories of Norway which predate Snorri's royal biographies, and Aðalbjarnarson suggests that the *friðgerðasaga* ("peace-making saga"), which I will discuss in detail, is drawn from Styrmir's writings. See also Andersson, "Politics;" and Bagge, *Society* 57-63.

³ For a discussion of Snorri's authorship of *Heimskringla*, see Aðalbjarnarson, *Formáli* to Vol. 2; Vigfusson, *Prolegomena* lxxiii-lxxx; Andersson, "Snorri."

In chapter five I will look in detail at the characterisation of Hrútr Herjólfsson in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, a case study that will help us to see how a strong character like Hrútr can, through his travels abroad and return to Iceland, bring the Icelandic perspective to the fore of the Viking world that is represented in the sagas. Like Hrútr, Hjalti appears to enjoy a special status; his perception of the world around them offers something of a centralising and, arguably, symbolically Icelandic consciousness through which the reader can perceive the events. By making the perception of key characters a distinctly Icelandic one – through “black Icelandic eyes” in Sighvatr’s case – the author gives his reader the opportunity to empathise with the Icelanders who viewed the history of Scandinavia as an Icelandic story, and so to possess an otherwise remote past as an Icelandic experience. These are secondary characters who enable the author to interpret Norwegian affairs from an Icelandic perspective.

According to Snorri, Sighvatr’s verse is composed after a difficult journey made on behalf of the Norwegian King Óláfr helgi (“the saint,” also known as *digri* or “the stout”), to Earl Rognvaldr Úlfsson’s farm in West Gautland, on the border of Norway and Sweden. Earl Rognvaldr is in the unenviable position of governing an area which is disputed by the two nations, and his loyalty to Óláfr of Norway – the Swedish king’s name is also Óláfr – has been questioned at the Norwegian court. Sighvatr defends the Earl and suggests that he, Sighvatr, should travel to speak with Rognvaldr about the matter. When the Earl gives Sighvatr a gold ring (the bright ring in the verse), it is in recognition of the effort which Sighvatr has made in order to see him, and confirms the greater success of Sighvatr’s mission: to be sure of Rognvaldr’s support for the Norwegian king. Sighvatr relates this success to a sense of himself as an *Icelandic* traveller, with the distinctive perception of the world which that appears to signal.

Sighvatr’s verse comes only 150 years after the beginning of the settlement of Iceland, and it might seem unusual that Icelanders developed a sense of themselves as very different to their parent culture in Norway in such a

short time.⁴ On the other hand, Icelandic social institutions developed quickly: as I noted in the preceding chapter, by 930 Iceland was a fully settled island; it had a national parliament, which met once a year to enact and recite laws, and to hear legal disputes, and similar local assemblies met throughout Iceland. These assemblies allowed the Icelandic farming class a relatively high level of participation in local and national affairs, not least because farmers were obliged to form a relationship with a *goði* which included a number of mutual obligations in relation to legal matters. The family sagas suggest that Icelanders of the tenth and eleventh centuries enjoyed an equality and directness in their dealings which, in Scandinavia, was challenged by the increasing centralisation of power in the royal court and the Church.⁵

However, as I note in chapter one, these accounts are unreliable in their representation of early Iceland, and say more about the attitudes of their authors and the cultural and intellectual milieu in which they lived (see Sørensen; Gurevich; cf. Miller, *Bloodtaking* ch. 2). The same is probably true of much of *Heimskringla*. Snorri's inclusion of Sighvatr's "black Icelandic eyes" tells us most about Snorri and his contemporaries' attitudes to Icelandic-Norwegian relations, and represents a medieval, rather than Viking Age, discourse of Icelandic distinctiveness. By the 1220s, Snorri was one of a few players who were powerful enough to participate in a violent struggle for the control of Iceland, framed in the contemporary record, *Íslendinga saga*, as a contest for the Norwegian earldom of Iceland.⁶ The contest was ultimately about who would be able (or trusted by the Norwegian king) to transpose governmental structures from Norway to Iceland, and how that transposition would account

⁴ Here, I deliberately avoid a loaded term like *ethnicity* in favour of a more general investigation of the cultural distinctions which seem to be significant in the characterisation of Icelanders abroad.

⁵ Note, however, that while, in comparison to Iceland, Norway had a very developed royal court and system of kingship, it was not a *nation* in the modern sense of the term. See Bagge, "Nationalism," esp. 8, and "From Sagas to Society" 65-66 regarding Snorri's interest in individual conflicts over larger ideological concerns.

⁶ Regarding the structure and ideology of *Íslendinga saga*, and the *Sturlunga* compilation in which it is contained, see Bragason, *Poetics*; G. Nordal, *Ethics*; Tranter; and above ch. 2.

for the peculiarities of Icelandic culture and society (see *Íslendinga saga* chs. 162, 182, 193-200).

Hjalti Skeggjason (b. 970s) was well-known and well-regarded during the thirteenth century writing age. He figures as a contemporary of Sighvatr, and as an equally prominent Icelandic voice in *Heimskringla*. Hjalti's fame was a result of his role in the Icelandic conversion to Christianity in 1000, known to Snorri through Ari Þorgilsson's historical work, *Íslendingabók* (*The Book of the Icelanders*).⁷ Hjalti is of particular interest because, in *Heimskringla*, he succeeds in harmonising two, perhaps conflicting, historical themes: the desire of Norwegian kings to influence affairs in Iceland, and the ability of Icelanders to serve kings whilst preserving a self-conception of equality with them, in terms of personal qualities, and what appears to be a distinctively Icelandic ease and directness of speech.⁸ Hjalti's ability to reconcile these historical developments suggests certain parallels in his characterisation and the characterisation of Snorri goði. That is, both figures represent something of the authors' interest in the conflict or tension that is created by opposing, or perhaps incompatible, political and cultural modes. Just as certain saga characters appear as excellent fighters or great mediators, Hjalti and Snorri are renowned

⁷ *Íslendingabók*, known also as *Libellus Islandorum*, is the earliest extant prose work written in Icelandic. Composed some time between 1122 and 1133, it describes the settlement of Iceland and the conversion to Christianity. In his *Prologue to Heimskringla*, Snorri describes Ari as "the first man in Iceland to write historical works in Norse;" "ritaði fyrstr manna hér á landi at norrœnu máli frœði" (5). In Ari's account of the conversion, Hjalti insults the Norse goddess Freyja at the Alþing (15), displaying something of his verbal cleverness, but for which he is outlawed from Iceland. See Duke for a recent evaluation of *Heimskringla* as a source of *Kristni saga*. Cf. B. Sawyer, "Scandinavian," who describes Ari's history of the conversion as an attempt "to give the main credit for the conversion to his own family and friends" (46).

⁸ That is, equality in the sense that Icelanders regarded themselves as descendants of royal or aristocratic Norwegians. Hjalti's ancestry is given in *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*): on his father's side, Hjalti is descended from a first settler Þorsteinn, a Norwegian, and a great traveller, who was told he would die in an unsettled land (366), and the early settler Már Naddoddsson (382-83), grandson of the pirate Qlvir *barnakarl* ("child's friend," Cleasby 52). We are also told that Hjalti is the great-great-grandfather of Bishop Magnús Einarsson (366). Hjalti marries Vilborg, the daughter of Gizurr Teitsson *hvíti* ("the white"), a fellow advocate of Christianity (*Íslendingabók* ch 7) and kinsman of King Óláfr Tryggvason (Sturluson *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 328-29; *Landnámabók* 214-15). Gizurr is the father of Ísleifr, first bishop of Iceland (*Íslendingabók* 26; *Landnámabók* 386).

ethical adaptors. They are rewarded for an ability to make the most of the various ethical currents with which they are engaged.

In his role as an Icelandic traveller between Iceland and Norway, and Norway and Sweden, Hjalti is portrayed as one who is able to a) own and absorb foreign influences in an Icelandic way, and b) exert an influence, again Icelandic in nature, on the conduct and affairs of a powerful court. Consideration of Hjalti's political agility will lead me to a brief discussion of what Bagge has identified as the pragmatic political lessons at the heart of *Heimskringla*, and the relationship between this educative style of historical writing and medieval Icelanders' absorption and ultimate possession of foreign influence. In terms of this thesis as a whole, Hjalti offers a case study of a) how significant Norwegian royal narratives could be affected by the presence of a major Icelandic figure in Norway, and b) the saga authors' ability to analyse relations with the Norwegian crown through the narration of early Icelanders' travels abroad. At the heart of such a discussion are questions about authorship raised in earlier chapters. For instance, did the saga authors take control of their characters in order to explore contemporary issues, that is, as part of their performance of educative, interpretive, and empathetic functions of authorship? And could certain characters – secondary authors – create a connection between the authors and readers of the thirteenth century that allowed those functions to be performed?

Hjalti and *Brennu-Njáls saga*

We see something of Hjalti's iconic role for medieval authors and readers by looking at Hjalti's characterisation in *Brennu-Njáls saga*,⁹ an work generally dated to the last quarter of the thirteenth century, or some fifty or sixty years after Snorri composed *Heimskringla*.¹⁰ The author of *Brennu-Njáls saga*

⁹ See also *Laxdæla saga* ch. 41, where Hjalti is in the thick of King Óláfr Tryggvason's attempts to force Iceland to become a Christian nation; and *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 49.

¹⁰ See Sveinsson, Formáli lxxv-lxxxiv; Vigfusson, Prolegomena xliii-iv; Lönnroth, *Critical*, esp. ch. 4 and pages 215-26. Regarding the author *Brennu-Njáls saga*'s sources, particularly in relation to Hjalti's role in events, see Sveinsson, Formáli xliii-xlv, and note the connections

shares Snorri's interest in Hjalti's eloquence and sense of timing, qualities which are evident when he steps forward and asks Gunnarr if he will accept an arbitrated settlement of the case at hand in exchange for his friendship (*Brennu-Njáls saga* ch. 66). Such a gesture of good will probably reflected a commonly held sense of Hjalti's commitment to Christian values, in this case the moderation of individual will in the interest of social harmony. In light of a guiding ideology of moderation and lawfulness which can be identified in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, these words of harmony guarantee, or perhaps confirm, medieval readers' approval of Hjalti and his influence on Iceland.

We see this approval reflected more completely when Kári Sölmundarson, an heroic figure who survives the attack on Njáll and his family and who carries out vengeance for their deaths, asks Hjalti to accompany him to care for Njáll's corpse. He suggests that everyone will believe the account of the dead which Hjalti gives. The request reflects the high esteem in which Hjalti is held by those loyal to Njáll, as well as the particularly intense mix of legal and cultural matters which attached to the dead and to dealing with dead bodies in early and medieval Iceland.¹¹ It is important to Kári that Njáll's condition is witnessed by a wise and trustworthy figure, but also that the witness is a Christian man who has the divine or mystical vocabulary to give voice to what they find; in Kári's words, "því at allir munu trúa því, er þú segir frá ok þér sýnisk" (342); "everyone will believe what you say about it and the way it seems to you."

In what is effectively Njáll's final scene and a crucial one for the readers' understanding of his life as a whole, Hjalti expresses the author's interest in Njáll's mysterious role in Iceland's social and religious transition during the two or three decades before and after the conversion. Like Njáll,

between *Heimskringla* and *Brennu-Njáls saga* which Lönnroth draws in relation to the development of Icelandic literary traditions (*Critical* 209-210).

¹¹ In many of the family sagas, ethical responsibilities and questions of guilt and honour are given added emphasis near to the bodies of the dead. *Gísla saga* is a good example; see ch. 14, when Þorgrímur ties up Vésteinn's Hel-shoes, ch. 17, when Gísli's places a stone into Þorgrímur's burial boat, and the authorial intrusion, in ch. 13, when we are told that in the time of the events, "sá væri skyldr at hefna, er vápni kippði ór sári" (44); "the person who took the weapon from the wound was obliged to take revenge."

Hjalti is not characterised anachronistically, so as to appear as devout or as a pacifist. His initial response to Njáll's death makes it clear that while Hjalti is a force for religious change, he is also at home in an ethically unchanged, feud-based society: "Hann tók illa á verkum þessum ok kvað ǫllum nauðsyn at ríða eftir þeim ok drepa þá alla." (340, "He was appalled by news of the deed and declared that they must ride after them [Njáll's attackers] and kill them all"). While the Icelandic writing age, some two hundred years later, was not a peaceful one, this automatic call to revenge is typical of the ethical norms, particularly the concept of honour, attributed by saga authors to early, or Viking, Iceland. Yet, Hjalti's characterisation, in ethical terms, is mixed – partly governed by an older, heathen, ethical order and partly by newer, Christian sensibilities. The following passage, which appears directly after Kári's request to Hjalti to accompany him to Bergþórshvöll, stresses the non-violent, symbolic, and interpretive types of knowledge which Hjalti also appears to embody:

Hjalti kvezk þat fúsliga mundu gera at flytja bein Njáls til kirkju. Síðan riðu þeir þaðan fimmtán menn. Þeir riðu austr yfir Þjórsá ok kvøddu þar menn upp með sér, til þess er þeir höfðu hundrað manna með nábúum Njáls. Kómu þeir til Bergþórshváls at hádegi. Hjalti spurði Kára, hvar Njáll mundi undir liggja, en Kári vísaði þeim til, ok var þar mikilli ǫsku af mokat. Þar fundu þeir undir húðina, ok var sem hon væri skorpnuð við eld. Þeir tóku hana [húðina] upp, ok váru þau bæði óbrunnin undir. Allir lofuðu guð fyrir þat ok þótti stór jartegn í vera. Síðan var tekinn sveinninn, er legit hafði í meðal þeira, ok var af honum brunninn fingrinn, er hann hafði rétt upp undan húðinni. Njáll var út borinn ok svá Bergþóra. Síðan gingu til allir menn at sjá líkami þeira. Hjalti mælti: 'Hversu sýnask yðr líkamir þessir?' Þeir svöruðu: 'Þinna atkvæða vilju vér at bíða.' Hjalti mælti: 'Ekki mun mér verða einarðarfátt um þetta. Líkami Bergþóru þykki mér at líkendum ok þó vel. En Njáls

ásjána ok líkami sýnisk mér svá bjartr, at ek hefí engan dauðs manns líkama sét jafnbjartan.’ Allir sǫgðu, at svá væri. (342-43) Hjalti replied that he was most eager to move Njáll’s body to a church. Then fifteen of them ride away. They ride east over Þjórsá (Bull River) and there summonsed men to join them so that, with Njáll’s neighbours, they numbered a hundred men. They arrived at Bergþórshvöll at midday. Hjalti asked Kári where Njáll lay, and Kári directed them. There was a great deal of ash to be cleared. Underneath, they found the ox-hide, and it appeared to have been damaged by the fire. They lifted it [the ox-hide] up, and beneath it both of them were unburned. Everyone praised God for that, and believed it to be a great miracle. Attention then turned to the boy who had lain between them; one of his fingers, which he had pushed out from under the blanket, was burned off. Njáll was carried out, so too Bergþóra. Then all the people come to examine their bodies. Hjalti said: “What do you think of these bodies?” They answered: “We wish to wait for your judgment.” Hjalti said: “I will be frank about it. Bergþóra’s appearance looks to me as one would expect it, although good. But Njáll’s countenance strikes me as being so bright that I have never seen another like it.” Everyone agreed that this was so.¹²

The burning of Njáll is revenge taken for the killing of Hǫskuldr Þráinsson by Njáll’s sons, and one of the tragic elements of *Brennu-Njáls saga* is based on the strong affection Njáll has for Hǫskuldr. Before the burning, Njáll tells Hǫskuldr’s avenger that he loved Hǫskuldr more than his own sons and that, with his death, he felt that the sweetest light of his eyes was extinguished: “*slökkt* it sœtasta ljós augna minna” (309). I have emphasised the verb *slökka*; it translates well as “extinguished” in that it is principally used of

¹² I have adopted Cook’s translations of *húð* as “ox-hide” and *ekki...einarðarfátt* as “frank”; see Cook, *Njal’s Saga* 229.

fire but carries a related meaning of loss (Cleasby and Vigfussion 570). Hjalti's reference to Njáll's bright countenance is perhaps a postscript to the despair and darkness which Njáll feels after Hǫskuldr's death: Hjalti perceives that the burning of Njáll has re-awakened the light in his countenance, and that Njáll's Christian redemption has been achieved. We are told that all who witness the remains give praise to God, and believe the state of the bodies to be a great *jartegn*, "miracle" or at least "token of holiness" (Cleasby and Vigfusson 324). Hjalti's function has been to witness and affirm Njáll's status as a major religious figure, and to give a type of recognition which Njáll, of the *bóndi* or farming class, does not appear to have been given in other Icelandic writing.¹³ By his presence, Hjalti, an agent of King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway and his plan to spread Christianity and Norwegian influence westwards, and a member of early Iceland's aristocratic elite, imbues Njáll's death with a profound importance and poignancy for Hjalti and the group who witness the miracle (and by extension for Iceland). While modern readers probably know Njáll better than Hjalti, the author's construction of a miraculous episode suggests that Hjalti's fame was used to raise Njáll's status.

Kári, the most significant character in the rest of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, represents an ever-fading heroic code and is moved out of view during this appraisal of Njáll's remains and confirmation of his religious significance. For the time being, it is Hjalti's dialogue with a chorus of onlookers which defines the meaning of Njáll's death. It is only when the group finds Skarp-Heðinn with his axe that Hjalti talks to Kári, thereby giving an early signal of the part which Kári will play in taking revenge on the burners. Kári is clear about who should be given Skarp-Heðinn's axe and, by implication, responsibility for avenging his death. Yet, the author does not associate Hjalti with the culture of bloodfeud, and therefore Hjalti is not authoritative on questions of revenge and kinship (343). The switch from Hjalti to Kári at this point is a strong indication of their function as representatives of different ethical outlooks, or possibly

¹³ For a recent discussion of *Brennu-Njáls saga* and the Icelandic sense of the conversion it reveals, see Sayers, "Gunnar."

different balances of outlooks, and helps confirm the argument put here, that characters are possessed by authors in order to emphasise certain historical themes.

It is difficult to be sure about how Hjalti was regarded in the thirteenth century, but it is likely that the author of *Brennu-Njáls saga* adopted a feeling about Hjalti which was then common, which may well have been current in oral as well as written tales, and which ultimately stemmed from his role as controversial and iconic figure in conversion narratives. Hjalti is not a central character in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, but is used selectively in order to add weight to the author's concerns about the social and religious changes underway in the saga's timeframe. Given that Hjalti's farm in Þjórsárdalur is close to the saga's key sites and he is related to a number of the saga's more central characters, we can say that his role in the saga is not forced. At the same time, Hjalti's function is deliberately crafted, for it is almost certainly a self-conscious attempt by the author to articulate European perspectives in connection with Icelandic history at the time of the conversion. In this sense, Hjalti represents a set of values which are special by virtue of being introduced to Iceland during a period of change. In this mode, Hjalti stands for an Icelandic acceptance of the new, the royal, the Norwegian, and the divine. He is the local figure who is seen to internalise the change to Christianity, to describe the world from a Christian point of view, and to alter Christianity from the image of a hostile belief, which discredits and marginalises Old Norse religion, into a local interpretation of domestic history. His voice of transformation helps the people of the saga understand Njáll and guides the medieval reader towards a possession of the past that is defined by his or her relationship to Christ.

We can view Hjalti as an emblematic figure for medieval Icelanders thinking and writing about Iceland, its relationship with greater Scandinavia during the saga age, and what differences between the countries meant for Icelanders in their own times. I have argued that in *Brennu-Njáls saga* Hjalti gives voice to the influence which political and religious events in Norway had on Icelanders' self-conception at the turn of the millennium. A number of

Hjalti's qualities are common to both *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Heimskringla* – one thinks especially of his eloquent and insightful speech, his sense of timing, and his perceptiveness. In the latter saga, extra detail about Hjalti abroad is given in order to distinguish the Icelander and his qualities from those of the Norwegian aristocrats around him. Through Hjalti, Snorri implies that Icelandic society had maintained qualities (like directness of speech) and values (such as a greater degree of equality between chieftains and farmers, and the importance of laws relative to royal decree) which had come to Iceland at the time of settlement but which had been partly lost in Norway. I will return to Hjalti's role in *Heimskringla* in a moment. Before I do so, I wish to make two, more general, observations which need to be kept in mind when we read for the interpretive function of authorship that is reflected in Hjalti's characterisation.

Common Discourses

While I argue that Hjalti seems distinctively Icelandic when he travels to and around Scandinavia, and while this contrasts with his apparent embodiment of new, Christian values in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, a discourse of cultural distinctiveness and influence which we identify in the two sagas may be very similar. Hjalti seems to possess Norwegian qualities when he is in Iceland, and Icelandic qualities when he travels to Norway and Sweden. To a certain extent, this can be read as a natural consequence of the influence of both cultures on his temper and beliefs, and of the author's pleasure in representing cultural influences which come into relief in a foreign context. In both sagas, Hjalti enables a certain kind of "cross-border" historical possession, on the part of the authors and their audiences, to take place. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Hjalti provides the interpretive framework which allows the possession of Icelandic history, perhaps near history as well as distant, through the work of Christ. Here, Christ's possession of Njáll parallels both a) Christ's possession of Iceland, and b) the audience's (or Iceland's) possession of Njáll as an historically significant figure (that is, a figure who represents the relationship between social themes or aspects of early Icelandic culture of interest to the author and the passage of

time). In *Heimskringla*, Hjalti provides an Icelandic lens through which the reader sees the growing power of King Óláfr (indeed the expansive nature of royal power), the spread of Christianity in Scandinavia, and the influence which Icelanders, living in a kingless state, are able to exert when they are placed in the context of a more powerful kingdom. Christ's possession of Óláfr and, through him, of Norway, equates, in a similar way to *Brennu-Njáls saga*, with a) the development of Christian power in Norway and, by extension, to Iceland and, b) the symbolic possession, through Hjalti's activities at the Norwegian court, of King Óláfr's narrative as part of Iceland's local history and self-conception.

We see, then, that discourses of cultural distinctiveness and influence are common to both sagas, albeit manifest in different ways. A second general consideration relates to the generic conventions which underlie both sagas.

The Conceit of the Icelander Abroad

Scholars have long observed the distorted portrayal of Icelanders in Norway as we find it in the family sagas. There are many instances when Icelandic farmers are received by Norwegian kings with more honour than is probable. It seems that, in the case of the family sagas, a generic convention insists that Icelanders abroad will stand out when they are at court and attract the attention of the great and the famous.¹⁴ While the authors of the family sagas have succeeded in creating many sophisticated, well-delineated characters, they do at times resort to character types which, if not clichéd, are easily recognised by virtue of the author's emphasis on Icelanders' aristocratic and royal ancestry, on noble qualities like wisdom and foresight, heroic assets

¹⁴ See, for example, the discussion of travel episodes that Madelung gives in her book on *Laxdoela saga*, especially 130-34. Madelung's approach reflects saga scholars' strong interest, during the 1960s and 1970s, in saga structure, and carries the danger of downplaying the distinctive features of individual sagas. Nevertheless, her analysis offers a useful guide to the common features of travel narratives in the sagas. See also Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction* 71-76, and Hieatt. For a discussion of structural approaches to saga literature, see Clover, "Icelandic" 272-94. An historical account of the rights of Icelanders in Norway in the eleventh century is given in Jóhannesson, *History* 109-14.

such as luck and daring, or the poet's gifts of articulation, insight, and the ease with which poets appear to approach kings.¹⁵

While *Heimskringla* is not entirely free from this type-based characterisation, Hjalti's reception in Norway and Sweden in *Heimskringla*, although remarkable, is different to that of the Icelanders who travel abroad in the family sagas.¹⁶ Snorri does not simply repeat a family saga conceit of inflating the status of Icelanders while they are overseas. *Heimskringla* certainly attributes certain qualities, like daring and eloquence, to Icelanders which we see in the family sagas, and I think the world which we find in the family sagas is also at the heart of the portrayal of Icelanders in *Heimskringla*. However, in contrast to the family sagas, an Icelandic element is brought into a narrative which involves much grander subjects (like kings and large battles). The heightened role of Icelanders brings about a narrative incongruity which, in the context of the family sagas, is a conventional method of increasing the stature of central Icelandic characters by narrating their extraordinary achievements abroad. In terms of the overall focalisation of *Heimskringla*, the Icelandic character can be said to be seen by the Norwegians to arrive and be situated amid the development of their independently existing, and more significant and textually dominant, narratives. In fact, the prominence which Hjalti achieves through his eloquence, initiative and bravery, seems all the more remarkable in this context.

Heimskringla and the family sagas also differ in the extent to which their narratives are able to settle on one character, and follow that character's development and fall. The family sagas' dramatic effect is most strikingly achieved by the diffuse working up of action and character into climactic moments, some psychological and others heightened moments in plot, while kings' sagas are biographical in nature and thus justified in a more narrow

¹⁵ On the other hand, medieval Icelanders were genuinely accomplished travellers as, by definition, were Icelandic settlers of the ninth and tenth centuries. They had a conception of the world extending as far as the Caspian sea, Byzantium, and Jerusalem in the East and Greenland and Vinland in the West. Regarding the Norse explorations of Northern America, see the recent discussion by Frakes. He examines saga representations of the Vinland journeys in relation to their connection to "European colonization and conquest narratives, but also to the larger genre of Eurocentric representations of the Outland or Other World" (168).

¹⁶ According to Snorri, Hjalti's travels in Scandinavia take place from 1017-1018.

focus. However, in *Heimskringla*'s treatment of the Icelander abroad we see a weakening in the observation of this generic difference and the narrative discipline which comes with it. Rather than overshadowing the Icelanders in Norway, at times the biographical momentum of Óláfr's life opens the way for an Icelander's elevated role in events (Tómasson, "Hagiography" 61-62). In a sense, the Icelander at the Norwegian court of *Heimskringla* is portrayed with the same sensitivity as family saga travellers like Egill in *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, Hrútr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, or Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga*. Hjalti's desires are as clearly narrated as Saint Óláfr's subjectivity determines the events by which those desires are contextualised. In effect, Snorri creates a sense of the Icelanders' prominence without making a clumsy or ill-fitting repetition of a family saga conceit, thereby suggesting a degree of ethical consistency across the genre without undoing the biographical momentum of a king's saga. As I will show in a moment, this positioning of the Icelander abroad is achieved by portraying Hjalti's boldness and fluency in the context of widespread fear about speaking up, particularly the ability to speak before kings who are in the process of expansion and who are under attack. Hjalti appears to transcend this nervousness and speaks to kings, or to kings' wishes, firstly, in a clear and very knowing way and, secondly, in a manner which suggests that he shares a degree of equality with the kings.

Hjalti Abroad

While the narrative of *Heimskringla* does not move to Hjalti's step in exactly the manner which a family saga might, Hjalti nevertheless makes a major impact during his presence in the saga. I have noted Hjalti's position in the literary imagination and historical consciousness of medieval Iceland, his role in a discourse of cultural distinctiveness and influence, and a trend in medieval Icelandic writing to exaggerate the achievements of Icelanders abroad. I would now like to turn to *Heimskringla*'s representation of communication and advice between King Óláfr, the Icelander, and the Norwegian aristocracy, and consider the social and literary functions of Hjalti's superiority in his

dealings at court. My focus will be on Hjalti's journey from Norway to Sweden, which occurs in the episode of *Óláfs saga Helga* known as the *friðgerðasaga* (lit. "peace-making saga").

The *friðgerðasaga* narrates Hjalti's attempt to create a peace agreement between King Óláfr and his namesake, the king of Sweden. King Óláfr of Norway has a very dominating personality, both in the character portrayal which Snorri builds and in terms of the narrative momentum which develops as his personality is cast in the light of increasingly impressive achievements. He seems consumed by his fight for the control of all of Norway, much like Haraldr hárfagri, the only king before Óláfr to exercise stable and lengthy control of the entire nation (r. 860-930, d. 933), and in whose name Óláfr claims his right to rule Norway (ch. 36). In the biographies of both, royal resolve and determination make sense of the sagas' narrow focus on their lives; their dominating characters justify their dominant position in the narrative, and realises the close relationship between narrative momentum and character construction in their sagas.

The entry of Hjalti interrupts Snorri's description of events when the Norwegian *bændr* are demanding that someone speak to King Óláfr to persuade him to settle matters with his Swedish rival and end the hostilities which are causing hardship to the farming class. Bjørn is the unfortunate marshal who agrees to approach the king with a plea for settlement, but he is fearful of his task and predicts that the king will take any suggestion of compromise badly. Snorri turns to Hjalti:

Pat sumar kom útan af Íslandi Hjalti Skeggjason at orðsendingu Óláfs konungs. Fór hann þegar á fund Óláfs konungs, ok tók konungr vel við honum, bauð Hjalta með sér at vera ok vísaði honum til sætis hjá Birni stallara, ok váru þeir mǫtunautar. (86)
That summer Hjalti Skeggjason came out from Iceland at the request of king Óláfr. He went immediately to meet king Óláfr, and the king welcomed him well, asked him to stay with him, and showed him to a seat near Bjørn *stallari* (king's marshal),

and they were table-mates. There quickly developed a good friendship.¹⁷

The interruption is a powerful one because it places Hjalti and his perception of events in the middle of a situation that is becoming dangerous for the king's retainers and all the more interesting for the audience.

And immediately Snorri returns to Björn. Bringing Hjalti in at this point, after Björn has bowed to the pressure of his friends but before he has made his submission to the king, places him at the point of contact between the king and his followers and the boundaries of communication which exist between them. When Björn steps forward and speaks, the king's followers give him support for the suggestion of peace, but the king himself replies by assigning Björn the responsibility of approaching the Swedish king with Óláfr's message of peace. The king assures Björn that if his advice is sound, he will have the advantage of it when in Sweden, while it will only turn out badly for the messenger should the advice be poor. Thus the general reluctance to confront the king, or even to make suggestions for peace, is justified by the regal response. Björn is aware that he has been charged with the task of conveying a hostile message to the king of Sweden, who is already deeply offended by Óláfr's claims for territory along the border of Norway and Sweden. The prospect of the mission depresses Björn, a mood which his table-mate, Hjalti, questions:

“Hví ertu ókátr, maðr? Ertu sjúkr eða reiðr manni nokkurum?”

Björn segir þá ræðu þeira konungs ok segir þetta forsending.

Hjalti segir: “Svá er konungum at fylgja, at þeir menn hafa metnað mikinn ok eru framar virðir en aðrir menn, en opt verða þeir í lífsháska, ok verðr hváru tveggja vel at kunna.¹⁸ Mikit má konungs gæfa. Nú mun frami mikill fásk í ferðinni, ef vel teksk.” Björn mælti: “Auðvelliga tekr þú á um ferðina. Muntu

¹⁷ “Table-mates” is Monsen and Smith's translation of *mætunautr* (Sturluson 266), an appropriate variation of Cleasby and Vigfusson's “messmates” (414).

¹⁸ My translation of “verðr hváru tveggja vel at kunna” is drawn from both Cleasby and Vigfusson, who translates the phrase as “one must take one or other of the two” (358), and Monsen and Smith's rendering as “with both lots they should be well content” (Sturluson 267).

fara vilja með mér, því at konungr mælti, at ek skylda mína sveitunga hafa í ferðina með mér.” Hjalti segir: “Fara skal ek at vísu, ef þú vilt, því at vannfengr mun mér þykkja sessunautrinn annarr, ef vit skiljumk.” (87)

“Why are you unhappy, man? Are you sick or angry at someone?’ Björn then tells him about his talk with the king and calls it a death mission. Hjalti says, “So it is to follow kings, that such men have great honour and are more valued than other men, but they often come into life’s danger, and must take one as well as the other. Great is the king’s luck. Now great renown will be gained in the journey, if it goes well.” Björn said, “You make light of the journey. Would you like to go with me, because the king said that I should have a following with me on the journey?” Hjalti says, “Certainly I shall go, if you wish, because it seems to me it would be difficult to have another bench-mate, if we part.”

As we see, Hjalti not only enjoys good relations with the king but also with his fellow courtiers, and he is able to give sound advice to them. He is able to translate the king’s rather harsh statement of will into forms of actions that the kings’ followers find more acceptable. And Hjalti seems to possess an innate sense of the honourable course of action: his gentle rebuke is later echoed in much stronger terms by the powerful Swedish lawman, Þorgnýr, who is asked by Björn and his supporter Earl Rognvaldr Úlfsson (whom I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter), to protect Björn at the Swedish assembly when he delivers Óláfr’s message to the Swedish king (ch. 79). Þorgnýr is obliged to help Rognvaldr, and is angry at him for having undertaken the mission if he is unable to see it through on his own. Þorgnýr is formidable but is nevertheless troubled by the prospect of speaking to the king, and says as much to Rognvaldr:

“Hví skyldir þú eigi hyggja fyrir því, áðr þú hétir þeiri ferð, at þú hefir ekki ríki til þess at mæla í mót Óláfi konungi? Þykki mér

þat eigi óvirðiligrá at vera í bóanda tǫlu ok vera frjáls orða sinna, at mæla slíkt, er hann vill, þótt konungr sé hjá.” (114)

“Why did you not consider, before you promised to make this journey, that you do not have the power to speak to King Óláfr? It seems to me no less honourable to be counted among the farmers and have the freedom to say what one likes even if the king is present.”

The touch of panic in Þorgnýr’s response echoes Rognvaldr’s earlier response to Björn:

“Hvat hefir þik, Björn, þess hent, er konungr vill dauða þinn?...Miklu er Óláfr Sviakonungr maðr skapstærri heldr en fyrir honum sjálfum megi þær roeður hafa, er honum sé í móti skapi.” (89)

“What has happened to you, Björn, that the king wishes you dead?...Óláfr, the Swedish king, is more arrogant than to allow men to raise in his presence talk that is against him.”

The situation, then, is very tense and words are treated with great care. Those in power, with property, must be able to choose the precise moment to speak and the weight of their words is judged assiduously. The Icelander, too, may lose a great deal in the exchange with kings: honour, status and wealth are at stake, and he shares an intimacy with the kings which an insubordinate but tolerated farmer does not. Unlike the local farmers, the Icelander in *Heimskringla* is in a position of persuasion and does alter the course of events. Amid this tension between rival states, Hjalti has acquired prominence very quickly, making the most of the opportunities afforded by Óláfr’s ambition, which to Hjalti is catalyst for his own daring and fame. Óláfr approves of Hjalti’s part in the mission, and makes the following comment:

“Boeta mun þat til um þessa ferð, at þú farir með þeim, því at þú hefir opt reyndr verit at hamingju. Vittu þat víst, at ek skal allan hug á leggja, ef þat vegr nokkut, ok til leggja með þér mína hamingju ok ǫllum yðr.” (88)

“It will help them on this journey if you go with them, for you have often been shown to have luck. Know for certain that I shall put all my thoughts towards it, if that means anything, and give my good luck to you, and to you all.”

The modesty of the phrase *ef þat vegr nokkut*, “if that means anything,” is out of step with Óláfr’s dialogue so far, and seems strangely unguarded. Unlike Óláfr’s tactical and political speeches, which are precise and unchallengeable in tone, his farewell to Hjalti is imbued with a conditionality and hesitation which suggests an unusual level of connection between the men. This connection has the potential to produce a link between Icelanders and the figures and events associated with Norway’s conversion to Christianity.

Hjalti’s peace mission is delayed at Rognvaldr’s estate but Hjalti is able to move the matter forward. He suggests that he travel to Sweden where, as an Icelander, he will be received more openly than a Norwegian. This tactic will allow him to discover the Swedish king’s mind, according to which the overall mission can be tailored. An eleventh century undercover operation follows, carried out by an enterprising Icelander, during which time Hjalti becomes friends with both the Swedish King Óláfr and his daughter Ingigerðr. He is introduced to the king by the Icelandic poets, Gizurr and Óttar, both nicknamed *svarti* (the black).

En er Hjalti hafði þar dvalizk nokkura hríð ok gort sér menn kunna, þá virðisk hann vel hverjum manni. Skáldin váru opt fyrir konungi, því at þeir váru máldjarfir. Sátu þeir opt um daga frammi fyrir háseti konungs ok Hjalti með þeim. Virðu þeir hann mest í ǫllu. Gerðisk hann þá ok konungi málkunnigr. Var konungr við hann málrœtinn ok spurði tíðenda af Íslandi. (91-92)

And when Hjalti had stayed there some time and made himself known to the men, everyone thought well of him. The skalds were often before the king, for they were bold of speech. They often sat in the daytime before the king’s high-seat and Hjalti

with them. They [the skalds] regarded him with the utmost respect in all things. He was then also on familiar terms with the king, who often talked with him and asked him for news of Iceland.

The king's interest in events in Iceland not only concerns the Icelanders at court; rather, it confirms the impression that has been given throughout the episode that Icelanders are important to the political developments in Scandinavia. Hjalti finds added favour with the king by offering to pay to him taxes which are due to Norway, and after which, Snorri tells us, "þótti konungi, sem var, at hann var vitr maðr ok orðsnjallr." (95) – "it seemed to the king, as it was, that he was a wise and eloquent man." Despite his eloquence, Hjalti is unable to move the Swedish king towards a reconciliation with Óláfr. He persuades the king's daughter to make an approach, and this also fails to soften the king's immense anger towards his Norwegian rival. Yet Hjalti's charm and word-craft do enable him to begin a process of courtship between Ingigerðr and Óláfr, undoubtedly his most enduring achievement because it sets in place a chain of events which culminates in Óláfr's marriage to one of the Swedish princesses, albeit a different one to Ingigerðr. In doing so, he demonstrates the ability of Icelanders to take part in the major events of Scandinavian history and, as the author's agent, he adds those events to narratives possessed by saga authors.

An Icelandic Voice?

Bagge argues that *Heimskringla* reflects a medieval Scandinavian belief that important events ought to be recorded, partly to preserve the great deeds of the past but also as an exercise in pragmatic history, whereby examples are recorded for the purpose of educating people about general principles of political life, and to give illustrations of those principles (*Society* 192-208). Earlier in this thesis I have described such an aim in terms of the documentary and educational functions of saga authorship. At the same time, Bagge rejects the notion that Snorri aimed to produce the type of overall historical

interpretation of events in Norway, marked by a theory of causation and development, which we would expect from a modern historical work. In Bagge's view, the historical outlook is episodic, whereby Snorri measures particular events in isolation and largely in terms of the characters at hand.¹⁹ This conclusion about *Heimskringla* resonates well with the observations I have made in chapter three about the author of *Eyrbyggja saga*, and I find Bagge's recognition of the importance of characters' qualities, and individual episodes, especially compelling. As I have sought to show throughout this thesis, characterisation consistently plays a key role in the sagas' development of an interpretive framework. A socio-historical approach to the sagas that shares this sense of the importance of characterisation can be intergrated into a textual approach to authorship. However, I would emphasise that, in the case of Hjalti, Snorri makes a subtle comment about the way in which aristocratic Icelanders could become part of the Norwegian court system while retaining personal qualities which Snorri regards as distinctively Icelandic. In this sense, Snorri adds an Icelandic voice to the voices of Norwegian history and thus asserts an interpretive function in his re-figuring of the kings' lives.

In particular, Snorri attributes to Hjalti a great desire for honour, considerable flexibility, and a degree of self-possession, attributes which resonate with favourable character portrayals in other secular literature from medieval Iceland. What distinguishes Hjalti from the Norwegians around him is his ability to make decisions and to act out of his sense of self, and not just from a sense of obligation to the king. It is tempting to read this as the author's deliberate glamourisation of an independent outlook, an interpretation that invites connections to be made between Hjalti's role in *Heimskringla* and Iceland's troubled relationship with Norway in the thirteenth century. It is difficult to substantiate a feeling we might have that Hjalti represents the author's desire to see Icelanders resist Norwegian claims to Iceland – Hjalti is,

¹⁹ Cf. Andersson, "Politics," who identifies more marked ideological strands in the kings' sagas, and von See's argument that *Heimskringla* contains a moral message about the responsibility of kings to peasants and to the aristocratic farming classes (377-84).

after all, a willing subject of the king. In relation to the more specific question of authorship in medieval Iceland, we can confidently assert that the author uses Hjalti in order to represent international affairs in a way that raises the voice and role of the Icelander abroad.

An Icelandic ideal is threaded into *Heimskringla*, and a deliberate comparison between Icelanders and Norwegians results. As I hinted at the beginning of this chapter, such a comparison emanates from the thirteenth century writing age rather than the eleventh century in which the events occur. It is made by someone who is conscious of the role which local histories, particularly family sagas similar to *Brennu-Njáls saga*, play in thirteenth century Icelanders' conception of themselves. That cultural and historical role is reflected in the type of Icelander we see in Norway during Óláfr's reign, highly differentiated from the king's men around him.

Yet, underlying Hjalti's characterisation in both *Heimskringla* and *Brennu-Njáls saga* is a rhetoric of inclusion. Through figures like Hjalti, Norwegian history and culture are made part of the Icelandic world-view and sense of self, and *vice versa*. The two historical trajectories are possessed and incorporated as complementary voices in Snorri's exposition of kingship and achievement. Both sagas celebrate Hjalti's role as a local intermediary, an Icelander who acquires the confidence of the Norwegian king while he retains his integrity as the representative of a less stratified society. In this light, it becomes difficult not to tie Hjalti's rhetorical value to events in the life of Snorri Sturluson, a powerful chieftain who sought to rule Iceland in Norway's name. Certainly, Hjalti's role in the two sagas offers an insight into how the authors, in optimistic mode, saw Iceland's participation in the affairs of a powerful neighbour, in *Heimskringla*, to provide the basis of greater Icelandic involvement in Europe and, in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, to help create the cultural and spiritual framework with which to understand events at home.

As a secondary author, Hjalti allows the author of *Heimskringla* to possess Norwegian history, and Hjalti's Icelandic eyes – his egalitarian sense of his role in events and his straightforward manner – embellish that possession

with the symbolic meaning of national differences. Thus, the fineness of Hjalti's characterisation defines the sophistication of Snorri's possession of Norwegian history; we see that Snorri's possession of the saga narrative is held jointly both with tradition and with Norway. That is, Snorri negotiates a shared history, and one which sees an Icelandic perspective given credence and a great deal of relevance. We might, on the basis of the account of Snorri's life in *Sturlunga saga*, speculate that this sharing of the Norwegian past suited him very well in that it promoted the idea that Icelandic chieftains were special subjects who were worthy of particular attention. However, this chapter has aimed to argue a less ambitious point, namely that Hjalti's characterisation and his function as a secondary author, are instrumental parts of the author's ability to own and develop a distinctive interpretation of Norwegian history. The author's private gain from this possession will probably remain a moot point, but I have shown that Hjalti provides a powerful link between early Norway and the literary consciousness of medieval Icelanders, a link that suggested that they could, in a uniquely Icelandic way, influence the Norwegian kings.

Thus far in this thesis, we have discussed characters who represent the saga authors' interest in the connections between domestic lives and events with national significance, the individuals who could lead the Icelandic community during its settlement phase, and the impact of notable Icelanders who travelled to Norway. In different ways, Vésteinn and Gizurr, Snorri goði, and Hjalti allow saga authors to both preserve traditional narratives and, through a subtle investigation of these characters' desires, form interpretations of the world in which they lived. I have argued that a multi-functional authorship is at the heart of such characterisation: while most literature requires different narrative viewpoints to be incorporated, the sagas are a particularly powerful example of the tensions between the idea of an author as a function of his/her pre-existing material and his/her function as the creative and interpretive controller of the work.

My argument about the multi-functional nature of saga authorship has been expressed in terms of the saga authors' creation of secondary authors, or

characters who at times engage in authorial behaviour. At these moments, characters' traditional role seems to be replaced by the authors' desire to foreground his own interpretation the significance of the events at hand. Possession of the narrative shifts out of the "hands" of tradition to the authors'. In Hjalti's case, the author's possession of Hjalti's story appears to reflect an authorial interest in the relations between Norway and Iceland and the ideological tensions that came with the relationship. In other words, Hjalti's role as a secondary author reflects the author's subtle positioning of the text as both traditional and interpretive, and his adoption of an authorial role that functions at both documentary and creative levels. The saga form's connection to tradition demanded this multi-functionality.

The characterisation of Hrútr Herjólfsson in *Brennu-Njáls saga* is similar to Hjalti's: Hrútr's travels abroad lead to complex problems, while in Iceland he is a brave and wise member of early Icelandic society who comments on the significant events around him and often tells other members how they should view those events. More openly expressive than Vésteinn and Snorri goði, Hjalti and Hrútr offer us clear instances in which the authors' subtle development of traditional characters facilitates the interpretive, empathetic, and creative functions of saga authorship.

Chapter 5: Hrútr's Laughter: A Recognition Scene in *Brennu-Njáls saga*

Njála er allt annað en einkennalaus saga. Þótt höfundurinn nefndi ekki nafn sitt í henni, fór ekki hjá því, að hann setti mark sitt á hana: ættarbragð hans ber hún. Það má vita nokkuð um hann af sögunni. Nokkuð um hæfileika hans, hugarfar hans. (Sveinsson, *Formáli* ci)

Njála is anything but a saga without a distinctive character. Whilst the author did not give his name to it, it does not follow that he did not leave his mark. The saga bears his disposition and background. It is possible to learn a lot about him from the saga, his intellectual background and outlook.

It is strange how unrelated events collide in such a way as to bring about other, unforeseen events, yet a close parallel to this can be found in the inner lives of the characters. (Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece* 55)

Thematic Development in Hrútr's *páttr*

A remarkable aspect of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*Njáls saga*) is its narrative haste. As we have it, the saga takes us immediately into the rather complex story of Hrútr's life. While it is some time before the saga introduces the major figures of Gunnarr and Njáll, the saga's opening episodes are nevertheless intense and suggest an author who is anxious to move directly to the concerns of the society about which he will write. In contrast to *Eyrbyggja saga*, this is a saga that moves rapidly to the narrative present and gives no space to the settlement that precedes the present time. All the major figures of the saga are alive when Hrútr meets Unnr, and the contemporaneity of Hrútr's experiences ensures that the position of all the characters in the world of *Njáls saga* is inflected with the social and psychological themes established in the first eight

chapters.¹ In that sense, I regard the opening chapters of *Njáls saga* as being especially significant to the saga's overall meaning. The characters of that part of the saga give an early warning of the author's interest in characters' subjective sense of the events of which they are a part and the social norms they help to maintain and define.

The opening episodes prefigure the narratives to come. This is made clear by the relationship of the events that feature in the early episodes and the rest of the saga, connections which have been noted by a number of scholars.² What is more difficult to gauge is the extent to which the early episodes set the intellectual tone for the saga or resonate thematically with the events that follow. Can we say, for instance, that the opening chapters function partly to signal to the audience that the author is engaged in an analysis or re-evaluation of the past rather than a relatively uncritical expression of historical facts? Whilst both goals are ultimately concerned with the truth, the type of truth which is established in the text - and in relation to which the text constructs its various meanings - is different: one is interpretive and persuasive (events are understood through an interpretive schema established by the text), the other referential (whilst events are related and organised in an historically coherent form, they are free from an intrusive critical viewpoint).

¹ Maxwell views Hrútr's story both as part of a longer section intended to introduce the strength of the bond between Gunnarr and Njáll and as the story of Unnr and Hallgerðr (23, 26). I have limited my analysis of the saga's "prologue" or "prelude" to the first eight chapters a) because of the narrative pause at that point ("ok nú er lokit þætti þeira Marðar"), and b) because I think a remarkable number of the saga's thematic concerns are raised by the end of *þætti þeirra Marðar*: these chapters deserve close analysis in terms of their own "integrity" (Maxwell 25) as well as in terms of its (the *þátr*'s) relation to the saga as a whole. See also Sveinsson, *Formáli* cxxiii-cxxv; Lönnroth, *Critical* 24; and Bååth 91.

² Maxwell describes Unnr and Hallgerðr "as the two strands to be taken up in Gunnarr's story" (27). Similarly, Lönnroth points out connections between the characters and their temperaments (e.g., between Gunnarr, Hallgerðr, and Unnr, 23-25). Lönnroth's connections form part of a larger argument which he makes about the morality of events in *Njáls saga* (e.g., the saga's repositioning of events in order to, at least partly, vindicate Flosi's part in the events of the saga, *Critical* 177-178) and the probable cultural and political milieu out of which the saga came (see esp. 200-210). I will make a similar connection between the thematic importance of Hrútr's characterisations and medieval Icelandic conceptions of authorship. See further Bååth 93; Allen 61-62 and 89-90; Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece* 52-55. On the author's awareness of a tradition of Unnr and Hrútr's marriage, see Lönnroth, *Critical* 34-41.

Here, we are returning to questions that I raised above, in chapter two, about saga narratives creating reflexive discourse. The inherent difficulty in reading *Njáls saga* is that (in White's terms) it is neither a discourse that *narrates* ("openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it") nor one that *narrativizes*, that is, "feigns to make the world itself and speaks itself as a story" (*Content 2*). In fact, it is caught somewhere between the two, an in-between discourse in which representation involves both a degree of attachment to the past (a belonging or presence in the past) and a distance, perhaps born out of thirteenth-century historical consciousness, that I raised as a possibility of saga authorship in chapter one.³ *Njáls saga*, which seems to be the most ambitious of all the sagas, conflates literary and historical modes to a sufficient extent that, "like metaphoric speech, symbolic language, and allegorical representation, [it] always means more than it literally says, says something other than it seems to mean, and reveals something about the world only at the cost of concealing something else" (White, *Figural 7*).⁴

What conception of authorship underpins such a conflation? The key to answering that question, as in the co-existence of old and new in *Eyrbyggja saga* and local and foreign in *Heimskringla*, is the thematic scope afforded to

³ I am drawing a distinction between two types of historical truth, interpretive and referential, and suggesting that *Njáls saga* may fall (and indeed aim to fall) somewhere between the two. This is in contradiction to Steblin-Kamenskij, who describes such an in-between narrative state as being "as impossible as a cross between a camel and a tiger" (*Saga Mind 24*). Just as modern genetics probably could enable such a synthesis, so too postmodern literary theory suggests that referential truth and artistic interpretation are not the polar opposites Steblin-Kamenskij assumes them to be. His application of syncretic truth to saga authorship, whereby the authors "strove simulataneously for accuracy and for reproduction of reality in all its living fullness" (24) is different to my approach: I will suggest that some kind of conscious and co-existing intention to produce exact and artistic representation of the past can be identified in *Njáls saga*; see Greenway; Fox; Bolton's close reading approach two of the key episodes in the saga, the attack on Gunnarr at Hlíðarendi and the burning at Bergþórshvöll; Allen 45-46; and Lönnroth, *Critical 160-162* on the representation of reality (and the application of Auerbach's *Mimesis*) in *Njáls saga*; and Sørensen, *Fortælling og Ære*; Clunies Ross, "Intellectual Complexion," *Prolongued Echoes*, and "Concepts of Truth" 62, 66.

⁴ This tone or mode of narration is identified by Lönnroth as an author who knows (and perhaps suggests) rather more than he actually reveals in explicit terms (for one list of the author of *Njáls saga*'s likely store of knowledge, see Formáli to *Brennu-Njáls saga* ci and H. Pálsson, *Uppruni Njálu*), but by Dronke as the inventive novelty of the saga: "For the critic, *Njáls saga* seems as slippery as an eel the size of Miðgarðsormr. Its skin glistens with a myriad [of] themes, all familiar, yet all precisely different from any seen elsewhere. The alternation of familiarity and surprise gives a remarkable illusion of reality" (*Role 3*).

the author through characterisation.⁵ Perhaps enough scholarly attention has now been paid to what has been seen as the problematic structure of *Njáls saga* and to placing *Njáls saga* as part of the historical development of the family sagas.⁶ Maxwell is partly right when he writes that it is “in the *form* of history” that the sagas told “their more substantial stories” (18): this is an appealing idea because it goes some way to explaining the nature of the saga’s credibility to its audience.⁷ But it is fairer to *Njáls saga* to say that it is in the form of a number of related biographies⁸ that it relates a history.⁹ That is, the worthwhile investigations of the structure of *Njáls saga* can be matched by a more

⁵ For a discussion of characterisation in these two sagas, see above chs. 3 and 4.

⁶ For historical sketches of this scholarship, see Lönnroth, *Critical* 3-22; Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece* 9-12 and *Um Njálu* 3-17.

⁷ Related to this is Maxwell’s idea that, in terms of the limited scope for character creation in the sagas, “the saga’s silence may be the silence of history” (19): this is better conceived as the author’s engagement with the audience’s notions of what is known or knowable and what is an appropriately objective tone for known facts (a question of credibility). This may lead to a more subtle positioning of information about characters, and open up the text for greater intertextual characterisation (Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece* 33-34; Clunies Ross, “Intellectual Complexion”), but does not imply a silence of history or even the author’s recognition of the distance between him and the events he describes.

⁸ However, I do agree with Sveinsson that *Njáls saga* is more than a biography of an individual or family (*Literary Masterpiece* 54). As he points out, the narrative of *Njáls saga* enables more complex connections than would a pure biography. Yet this does not detract from my central point that the sharpness of characterisation in *Njáls saga* is the basis of its interpretive coherence and unity, and indeed Sveinsson’s subsequent discussion of characterisation in the saga (chs. 4-7) is consistent with my emphasis on characterisation. See further Ólason, *Dialogues* 111-119, 135-136, 146 on the relation between characterisation and narrative style in *Njáls saga*.

⁹ Similarly, in *Laxdæla saga*, the social world is painted by “characters who are important in their own right” (Cook, “Women” 35) as much as the literary structures which operate. I agree with L. Auerbach’s suggestion that the characterisation of Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* is more powerful than the love-triangle motif, although I am not convinced of the central importance which Auerbach attaches to Kjartan’s refusal to take Guðrún to Norway (38-39; cf. Hight, “Psychology” 72). I am more inclined to read this along the lines of Cook’s analysis, according to which Guðrún is an equal protagonist who is, like many male figures in other sagas, constantly in pursuit of greater social standing. Certainly, it is clear that the author understands (or at least portrays) “women from the inside and men from the outside” (L. Auerbach 44), a conclusion which we can well extend to an idea of the audience’s greater empathy for the women of the saga if we recall that the outer finery of the male figures was associated with their courtly, foreign bearing (perhaps regarded by the audience as hollow, Cook 45-47). The audience’s view of Guðrún is internal both psychologically and nationally, as against the distance that the narrative creates between itself and the male characters (analysed in detail by Cook 45-56). On the author of *Njáls saga*’s use of *Laxdæla saga*, see Sveinsson, *Um Njálu* 106-120, esp. 112-116 regarding Gunnhildr and Hrútr, and Allen’s discussion of their relationship in *Fire and Iron* 85. On Snorri Sturluson’s portrayal of Gunnhildr, see Jochens, *Old Norse* 180-82. See further below, ch. 6.

searching discussion of the interesting characterisation that the saga's structural complexity allows.

Lönnroth and Maxwell have gone some way to showing that the structure of the saga is made more coherent through characterisation. Yet this aspect of our analysis can be taken further: it is the characters that are primarily responsible for authoring the social world of *Njáls saga*. Their observations and reactions make up a large amount of the social content, suggest links between saga events, and indicate how we are to read for the more subtle aspects of meaning in the saga world.¹⁰ I am interested in moving away from analysis of the saga characters' in terms of the character *types* that the author adopted as part of an overall design towards a discussion of characters as individuals who take shape in a relationship with the particular dynamics of the saga texts. Sveinsson's idea of Gunnarr as a "light-haired hero" and Njáll as bearing the "family mark of Óðinn" (*Literary Masterpiece* 32),¹¹ and Lönnroth's view of Hrútr as a hero type and Unnr a type of *prima donna* (*Critical* 66)¹² should, I think, be balanced against an understanding of the author's particular skills of characterisation. While it is helpful in demonstrating the fictional nature of the sagas, the emphasis on character types downplays a character's self-conceived, or inner-life, relationship with the events of the saga. Generic types may well have influenced the author, yet it remains the case that he adopted and adapted them in distinct ways. Hrútr may be a hero but, as Sveinsson has suggested, it is unlikely that any author before or after the author of *Njáls saga* would have drawn him so imaginatively (*Literary Masterpiece* 108).

If we concentrate on the author's peculiar use of Hrútr, I think we will get a better understanding of how the author places and perceives his characters

¹⁰ As Ólason suggests, "in order that the saga could seem a convincing whole and engage the attention of readers unfamiliar with such material, the author needed to tell the tales in a much more detailed way than before; he needed also to animate the characters by descriptions and dialogue" (*Dialogues* 212).

¹¹ Note, however, that Sveinsson himself observes that whilst categorisation can assist in analysing the saga's characters, it remains the case that compared with each other, each character "is found to have his own individual stamp" (*Literary Masterpiece*; see also page 97 for Sveinsson's two-fold distinction of characters in *Njáls saga*).

¹² Similarly, Allen writes that "Hrútr is the first appearance of a type which is brought to perfection in Gunnarr and Kári, warriors who combine strength with magnanimity" (85).

in the midst of a complex narrative world filled with many contradictory, sometimes parallel, and often interlocking desires and forces. For example, the narratives we have explored so far in this thesis appear to embody the uncritical expression of a broad social will, and this is no less the case in the opening of *Njáls saga*.¹³ In addition, desires and expressions of will are voiced by (or implied in the actions of) Hǫskuldr, Mǫrðr, Gunnhildr, and Unnr, thus introducing a drama of the will.¹⁴ As I will argue in a moment, Hrútr's narrative is also subject to the weight of the anticipation of future ill luck, or a narrative force that expresses both the power of an external fate as well as Hrútr's inherent luck.¹⁵ Hrútr must contend with all of these wills, and his dialogue with them necessarily incorporates his perception of the forces around him and the statements he makes in response to those forces. In my view, Hrútr's characterisation is marked by such a visible interplay of perception and representation that we should attempt to tie it to the author's sense of his task as a saga writer. In this chapter, I will be suggesting that in formulating a sense of saga writing as a process of joint-possession between authors and traditions, we can view the author of *Njáls saga* as rather more controlling than many saga authors. Paradoxically, the creative activity by which this authorial control can be measured is the way the author highlights the agency of his characters and the role of their perception in the unfolding of events.

Perception

Hrútr's most conspicuous skill is his perceptiveness. It is represented in at least three ways: a) it is one of his skills as a fighter and adventurer, b) it is an indication of his wisdom and good judgment and, most profoundly, c) it creates a visible connection between the external world of action and Hrútr's self-knowledge and sense of fate. The third is the most difficult to interpret, but

¹³ For example, at both the beginning and near the end of the *páttr*, the author incorporates public perception of Mǫrðr (5 and 28).

¹⁴ See Cook "Sagas of the Icelanders."

¹⁵ On luck, fate, and anticipation in *Njáls saga*, see Bääth; Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece*, esp. 183; Lönnroth, *Critical* 130-135; Ólason, *Dialogues* 81, 97-99.

there are a number of indications – examples are given below – that the author intends to use Hrútr’s inner world of perception as a feature of the plot.¹⁶ All three aspects of Hrútr’s perceptiveness offer some insight into the author’s representation of the relationship between socially and individually determined meaning (including the relationship between general meaning and observations of detail), and of the practice of authorship itself.

Perception and Skill

As an instance of Hrútr’s perceptiveness as a fighter and an adventurer, we can look to his exchange with Úlfr *óþvegin* (“unwashed”), one of Gunnhildr’s followers and an ally so awkward that he may pose a threat to Hrútr’s honour.¹⁷ In the heat of battle, Hrútr performs the role of warrior brilliantly enough to attract a challenging remark from Úlfr: “Bæði er nú, Hrútr, að þú hæggr stórt, enda átt þú mikit at launa Gunnhildi” (18); “Hrútr, you both strike hard and have much to owe to Gunnhildr.” The pointed nature of Úlfr’s comment is softened to the extent that Hrútr’s affair with Gunnhildr is viewed by the saga’s audience as augmenting rather than lessening his heroic quality, and his response (which is less witty than Úlfr’s) is nevertheless elevated by its value as a prediction: “Þess varir mik,” segir Hrútr, “at þú mælir feigum munni.” (18) “I suspect,” says Hrútr, “that you speak with fated lips.” (Dronke, *Role* 6) Úlfr’s subsequent death confirms Hrútr’s role as both an accomplished fighter and person who is in command of the situations he is in.

¹⁶ Traditional epistemological theory recognises three modes of perception, that is, *perception of a thing*, *perception de re*, and *perceiving that* the thing signifies something beyond itself (Audi). Naturally, the author of *Njáls saga* does not spell out anything like a categorisation of this kind, but quite often we do see a difference between those characters who perceive the significance of an object and those who merely see the object.

¹⁷ In many of the family sagas, honour is represented as a form of social currency, limited in quantity but capable of exchange. Thus, honour can be gained by diminishing the stature of another, effectively robbing him/her of some of their social standing. Miller has discussed the social exchange model of honour at length (*Bloodtaking*). Miller’s analysis is often insightful but tends to confuse the *representation* of honour in the family sagas with the social outlook of thirteenth century Icelanders (for a more detailed criticism of Miller’s approach, see Reid, *Er þat satt*; and Ólason, *Dialogues* 226-27).

The difference between Hrútr and Úlfr is that, while Hrútr is sufficiently in command of the situation and of himself to see Atli's imminent attack, Úlfr is lost to his greed for honour. While this greed may not be regarded as unethical by the author (after all, Hrútr is himself in pursuit of honour), there is a practical consideration which Úlfr overlooks and which makes him appear foolish: he ought to have been more certain that he could support such a pause in the action before he insulted Hrútr. Although Úlfr makes an interesting representation of the type of relationship which Hrútr and Gunnhildr have, particularly because it plays a part in informing the audience about the significance of their relationship for the events to come by establishing Gunnhildr's "long-ranging power" (Dronke, *Role* 8), Úlfr chooses the wrong moment to speak. As such, his comment (although of some use for the movement of the plot) does not rebound favourably on himself. Rather, it serves to show Hrútr's ability in finding the perfect moment to perceive and to represent the situation at hand.

A number of the artistic practices that we can identify in the family sagas are reflected in the scene. In particular, we can observe that conciseness (which is related to the notion of objectivity) is connected to the breadth and timing of an author's (or speaker's) perception. The focus of Úlfr's perception is Hrútr's ability in battle *so far*, whereas Hrútr's perception is wide enough to include Úlfr, Atli, the near future (what Atli intends to do with his spear) and, by implication of Hrútr's ability in battle, his own safety. Hrútr's words, as a result, take on great authority, and this cogency gives him a basis for conciseness. On the other hand, Úlfr's representation - whilst it *may* be accurate - is premature.¹⁸

Úlfr's authority as a person making a representation is undermined because the narrative draws attention away from his words and onto his inadequate or mistimed performance of them. The sharpness of his words seems to be inconsistent with his limited perception of the battle and his eagerness to deliver the insult. His particular character interferes with his attempt to unnerve

¹⁸ It is difficult to discern the exact effect that Gunnhildr has on Hrútr. There is no reason why Hrútr should not be a capable fighter in his own right.

Hrútr and undermines the certainty of his position and of what he has to say. In the context of Hrútr's relationship with Gunnhildr - one which is not adequately explained by Gunnhildr's magical powers alone (Dronke, *Role* 8-9) - Úlfr's words cannot be a conclusive statement of Gunnhildr's influence on Hrútr. As Dronke has pointed out, their relationship is taking place in secret (9); at best, Úlfr's comment is an outsider's impression. It does not represent real knowledge, and this offers another basis upon which to judge Úlfr in medieval terms: because Úlfr's claim to knowledge is unfounded, the sharpness of his words (and Atli's spear) turns in on himself. We might say that Úlfr is the very opposite of the *Njáls saga* author. He speaks too soon, he fails to observe the entire situation at hand, he does not anticipate or estimate the future, and he draws too much attention to himself by making his remark just moments before his somewhat comical death. His credibility is undermined by his greedy personality and humorous excess. Úlfr's lack of ability demonstrates how important it is to perceive and represent matters at the right time, and so acts as a significant foil for the author's thematic interests of timeliness and inner understanding.

Humour and Adventure

Naturally, some of Hrútr's adventures in Norway are tinged with humour, not least this exchange with Úlfr. It is not difficult to imagine the confused look on Úlfr's face as he pondered Hrútr's words (in the brief moment before Atli's spear found its mark). Just as Andersson has observed in relation to the siege at Hlíðarendi, we find that humour is created by exaggerations of social norms or expectations ("Character and Caricature" 2), and the audience, no doubt, expected a humorous strand to run through the saga (Lönnroth, *Critical* 196; Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece* 76-77). In the case of Úlfr's death, a fighter's desire for greater social standing is exaggerated in the foolish timing of his remark, a loss of self-possession and self-knowledge that kills him and heightens the audience's awareness of Hrútr's perceptiveness during

battle.¹⁹ This aspect of Hrútr's characterisation can be related back to the observations we made in chapter four about the conceit of the Icelander abroad; humour is a feature of that portrayal, as much in *Heimskringla* as here.²⁰

But Hrútr's adventures in Norway do more than amuse the saga audience or artificially increase Hrútr's heroic stature. They give the author an opportunity to add depth to aspects of his characterisation which have been established in the relatively sober world of Iceland and will be developed further when Hrútr returns. Naturally, the thirteenth-century audience of *Njáls saga* saw Hrútr more clearly (that is, as more individualised) than the other characters in this early travel narrative. An important function of Hrútr's appearance in the world of the Norwegian court is that the narrative can expand certain aspects of his character, points of characterisation which are helping to establish the saga's early themes. For instance, while Gunnhildr may be well known to the audience independently of her connection with Hrútr, her function in this narrative is to suggest aspects of Hrútr's character and to give thematic depth to his troubles in Iceland. In this sense, the travel narrative is an important step in the saga's overall thematic development and not merely decoration or indulgence of the audience's interest in the exotic world of adventure. In particular, Hrútr's ability to correct Úlfr indicates something of the extent of his wisdom, and establishes a link between perception and wisdom that is as relevant to authorial outlook as it is to characterisation.

Perception and Wisdom

Hrútr's role (and his perceptive skills) as a fighter or adventurer are rather removed from the author's world and that of his audience. The situation in which Hrútr speaks to Úlfr is difficult to relate directly to the author's own

¹⁹ A parallel can be drawn with the comic treatment of the lawyer Eyjólfur, whose lack of self-knowledge is at the heart of others' amusement (Durrenburger and Wilson 111). See also Ólason, *Dialogues* 161-65.

²⁰ For example, see the amusing exchange which develops between Óláfr *helgi* and Þórarinn about the exile of Óláfr's difficult kinsman Hrærekr (*Óláfs saga helga* ch. 85).

intellectual outlook. This role is, after all, one of high adventure and is used to capture something of the flavour of another distant Viking world.

Even so, Hrútr's ability to put Úlfr in his place (in a sense, to correct his remark)²¹ is an interesting parallel to Hrútr's ability to correct his brother's enthusiasm when Hǫskuldr poses questions in the opening part of the saga. When Hrútr's comments on Hallgerðr's *þjófsauga* ("thief's eyes") and, in a similar vein, that he and Unnr will not enjoy a good relationship, Hǫskuldr has pointed to a female character for Hrútr's opinion and, instead of hearing a confirmation of his own point of view, is set right by Hrútr's disturbing insightfulness.²² Hrútr is able to perceive something that Hǫskuldr cannot or will not. He detects an alternative narrative that will, in fact, come to be realised, and the manner in which he represents his knowledge of it is concise, timely, and sharp.

Throughout these exchanges, the author is able to use Hrútr's corrections as an authorial direction to the audience about how it should see the events, what it might anticipate to come, and the meaning that is to be tied to those events. Hrútr clearly acts as a secondary author, and his wisdom is used to clarify and anticipate the events to come. Through Hrútr, the author informs his audience, establishes the interpretive tone for the saga events that follows, and adds depth to the social and historical portrait implicit in the work.

²¹ Although Hrútr does not directly contradict Úlfr, his response to him is a correction of the manner in which he speaks, particularly the moment Úlfr has chosen to make a comment.

²² Note also that, as at the Alþing, Hrútr's remark about Hallgerðr incorporates the phrase *eigi veit ek* – "en hitt veit ek eigi, hvaðan" (7) – "but this I don't know, from where." In both instances, the phrase emphasises Hrútr's central part in the knowledge in question. However, it is hard to say how meaningfully or perhaps casually the words are used. In his response to Hallgerðr's eyes, the phrase contrasts an uncertainty (*hvaðan*) with a very striking certainty (*þjófsauga*) and thus seems to emphasise the reliability of what *is* known. In contrast, the statement at the Alþing adds an element of uncertainty to the entire statement, not as to whether the prediction will come true (the audience should be sure of this because of their familiarity with the narrative form) but whether Hrútr is sure about it (that is, Hrútr's perception of the value of his prediction). Hrútr is uneasy about the relationship that he and Unnr will have, but he is not clear about the reason for his unease or how that unease will be vindicated.

Gísli saga

A similar dialogue and process of correction can be identified in *Gísli saga*, a parallel with *Njáls saga* that may help us to understand the effect of Hrútr's comments. The discussion in *Gísli saga* comes at the close of preparations that Gísli and Auðr are making for a feast:

Ok þann dag, er menn koma þar, tekur Auðr til orða: “Þat er satt at segja, at nú þykki mér eins manns vant, þess er ek vilda, at hér væri.” “Hverr er sá?” kvað Gísli. “Þat er Vésteinn, bróðir minn; hann mynda ek kjósa til at njóta hér fagnaðar með oss.” Gísli mælti: “Annan veg er mér þetta gefit, því at ek vilda gjarna gefa til, at hann kæmi hér nú eigi.” Ok fellr þetta þeira tal þar niðr. (36-37)

And that day, when people are coming, Auðr says: “This can be said, there seems to me to be one man missing who I would like to be here.” “Who is that,” asked Gísli. “My brother Vésteinn: I would choose him to be here enjoying the feast with us.” Gísli said, “I see it in different way, because I would gladly give anything for him not to arrive now.” And with that their conversation dropped off.

The incident represents a correction of Auðr's familial desire in favour of Gísli's apprehension of the threat to Vésteinn's life. Both Auðr and Gísli express points of view that involve inner feelings about Vésteinn, and a sense of the domestic obligations owed to him, but only Gísli's point of view appears to reflect the urgency of situation as it stands when Vésteinn returns to Iceland.²³ Like Hrútr's correction of his brother, the tone of Gísli's comment is familial, but it may amount to a rebuke. This is suggested here by “fellr þetta þeira tal þar niðr,” and in *Njáls saga* by the coldness between the brothers which follows

²³ That is, I do not mean to suggest that Gísli is generally portrayed as unemotional or that he is not motivated by his love for Vésteinn. Turville-Petre is, I think, right in identifying the concern for the emotional aspects of the saga (“Gísli,” esp. 120-121). Yet, in this instance, Gísli privileges life over physical closeness. See further above ch. 2.

Hrútr's comment about Hallgerðr.²⁴ In both instances, the corrections play an important role in advancing the plot. Yet we can also examine the scenes in terms of the particular dynamic they establish in the distinct moments they occur (that is, in terms of their own integrity). I think Gísli's rebuke depends for its force on an ethical assumption about the power of the word.²⁵ Gísli's sharpness is his way of punishing Auðr for her excessively *stated* love for her brother, not necessarily for how strongly she feels. In the same way, Hrútr's rebuke of Hǫskuldr is based on the latter's inability to contain his pride in Hallgerðr's beauty, a pride which becomes excessive in an unguarded moment with his brother.²⁶ Neither Gísli nor Hrútr will accept a lapse in the ethical obligation to keep such excess to oneself.²⁷ In that sense, Auðr and Hǫskuldr time poorly or misjudge their comments in a similar way to Úlfr.

Relationships

Interestingly, a mixture of intense alertness and curious naivety, perhaps signalling that some level of incapacity accompanies his many talents, marks Hrútr's first appearance in the saga. Despite his foresight, Hrútr turns to Hǫskuldr for advice about his marriage. At this moment, it seems that Hǫskuldr is the senior of the brothers: he is, after all, able to suggest that Hrútr find a match. Mǫrðr's response to the marriage proposal appears to spell out the difference in the brothers' social standing: "Veit ek, að þú ert hǫfðingi mikill, en bróðir þinn er mér ókunnigr" (8); "I know that you are a great chieftain but

²⁴ "...ok var fátt um með þeim bræðrum nokkura hríð" (7); "and there was little contact between the brothers for some time."

²⁵ As Ólason notes, the "hypersensitivity of saga characters to what other people say...lies in the faith placed in the power of the word and, at the same time, in the importance attached to what is said about people in a society which relentlessly measures the deeds and status of men, and which assigns honour or dishonour on the basis of such judgments" (*Dialogues* 121, see also 123 for his comments on *Gísla saga*).

²⁶ Hrútr also corrects his brother before Hallgerðr's marriage to Þorvaldr (32-33). By this stage, Hrútr's role is not really important in itself (rather serving to increase the tension of Hallgerðr's story), but it offers another example of the relationship between the brothers.

²⁷ Both Allen (e.g., 88) and Lönnroth (*Critical* 153-157) have discussed the idea of excess in *Njáls saga* in terms of the Christian strand in the saga or the essentially Christian world-view of its author. I am more concerned with the relation between excess and characterisation suggested by the family sagas' depiction of skill, honour, and feudal patterns. See further below, ch. 7.

your brother is unknown to me.” When Hrútr is faced with the difficulty in the timetable for the marriage, he turns to his brother for advice (and appears to pay him for his help²⁸):

“Hvat skal nú til ráða, bróðir?” sagði Hrútr, “þykki mér nú vandask málit, er ek hefi áðr ráðit brúðhlaup mitt.” (10)

“What course now, brother?’ asked Hrútr. ‘The matter seems a difficult one, as I have already settled my wedding day.’”

Yet, Hrútr’s moments of insight signal that he is the more perceptive, wise in foresight, and self-possessed of the two – he does not lose himself to his pride. In *Njáls saga* at least, Hǫskuldr’s position of seniority is based on formal criteria (such as age and social standing). Hrútr’s personal strengths of foresight, clarity of perception, and tactical skills appear to undercut his brother’s position.

The saga encourages us to move from the relationship between Hrútr and Hǫskuldr to a discussion of the author’s relationship with his audience. In both cases, the relationship involves a degree of formal authority. The audience brings a number of expectations, to which the author is required to make some concessions, just as Hrútr seems to make concessions to Hǫskuldr’s formal seniority.²⁹ However, Hrútr, like a saga author, perceives and foresees the more immediately relevant events where others (whose outlook is based on expectation or supposition rather than knowledge) do not or cannot. This extra knowledge and acuteness of perception guarantee a pre-eminence for Hrútr in his dealings with Hǫskuldr, just as we might say that the author secures a degree of discretion in his dialogue with an informed audience through his artistic control of the content.³⁰ I would also argue that, just as Hrútr corrects his

²⁸ See *Njáls saga* pages 10 and 21.

²⁹ For our purposes, whether those expectations were based on a pre-existing oral tradition, written sources, or contemporary social and political events is largely irrelevant. What matters here is that there was an ongoing dialogue between the author and his audience about credibility, the requisites for which must have varied at least as much as the range of saga accounts of similar events.

³⁰ The distinction between sponsors and audience is important here. Whilst both probably enjoyed a considerable amount of influence (Lönnroth, *Critical*, and “Sponsors”), it may be that the author’s sponsors requested the author to make certain historical corrections or take a

brother, the author has some power in correcting the traditional assumptions of his audience. This dialectical form of education, a kind of aggressive coaching of the audience, can occur through information that is verbalised by important characters during their relations with others. An example is the dialogue between Gísli and Auðr, which I have included above. In my view, the conversation is a fairly clumsy instance of historical coaching, whereby the author, whilst he attempts to add tension to the plot, makes the danger to Vésteinn's life especially clear. The conversation and Gísli's ominous statement that he would pay anything to keep Vésteinn away are superfluous even to a modern reader. The clarification probably indicates an author who aims to steer his audience towards a particular mode of ethical sympathy with the past, in this case, towards an understanding of what is involved for Gísli when he adheres to a rather old world model of retributive justice.

Recognising Dispositions

An exciting aspect of Hrútr's sharp comment about Hallgerðr is that it relates a physical feature (*þjófsauga*) to her disposition (*skap*),³¹ suggesting to us that a mark of Hrútr's wisdom is his ability to use the surface of things, their outward features, to read for their more substantial character.³² Aware that he has little freedom in his relationship with Gunnhildr, Hrútr meets her suggestion that they sleep together with a simple acknowledgment of her power: “Þér skuluð slíka ráða” (15); “You shall decide that.” It is not surprising that Hrútr understands something of Gunnhildr's nature. His kinsman, Qzurr, is just as

particular interpretive stance (cf. Sveinsson, *Literary Masterpiece* 182; Ólason, *Dialogues* 224). That is, we should keep it in mind that there may have been two types of audiences: those he corrected and those for whom he corrected.

³¹ The term *skap* is not used at this point in the saga but is, of course, common in the saga and the corpus more generally. Hallgerðr is later described as “orlynd og skaphorð” (29), of her foster-father, “þat var mælt, at hann væri engi skapbœtir Hallgerði” (30) and her first husband Þorvaldr “nökkut bráðr í skaplyndi” (30). Hǫskuldr warns him that Hallgerðr is *horð í skapi* (31).

³² The term *substantial* (in relation to character) may connote a moral notion of worth that I do not intend it to: I mean it only to express human characteristics that may not be apparent immediately.

aware of Gunnhildr's disposition, likewise her son, Eiríkr (15, 19-20), and most probably every saga author in thirteenth-century Iceland. Qzurr observes:

“Svá lízk mér, frændi, sem nú muni vit hafa gort ráð okkat, því at ek kann skapi Gunnhildar.” (12)

“It seems to me kinsman that we have now decided our course, for I understand Gunnhildr's nature.”

However, it seems in the case of Hrútr and Gunnhildr that each has some ability to predict the disposition of the other. When Gunnhildr learns that Hrútr will accept her help (and so her power over him), she responds: “Slíks var ván, því at Hrútr er vitr maðr ok vel at sér” (13); “That was to be expected, because Hrútr is a wise man and accomplished.” Gunnhildr's comment is another indication of Hrútr's wisdom, incrementally adding to the audience's sense of Hrútr's intelligence. Further, she is making a reflexive comment about her own disposition, that a wise and accomplished man would know not to contradict her. Through the comment, we learn that Gunnhildr has pre-empted Hrútr's sense of who she is, disclosing a curiously sensitive triangle of expectations that interrelate the author's thematic interest in perception with these characters' ability to recognise one another's disposition.

The comment also reflects the essential social skill that is established in the first eight chapters: understanding and predicting how others will act. This is a quality that will resonate throughout the saga's treatment of character and decision-making. Gunnhildr has expected (*var ván*) that Hrútr will make this decision; that is, his decision conforms to her advance perception of his character. He is the type of person, *vel at sér*, to align himself with her and even with her sexuality.³³

³³ Cleasby, Vigfússon and Craigie translate the phrase *vel at sér* (lit. “well of himself”) “thoroughly good in feeling and bearing” (27). It can also suggest physical fineness (692). For a more detailed discussion of the sexual aspects of *Njáls saga*, see Dronke's excellent treatment of the topic in *Role*, esp. 6-9. As Dronke points out, Hrútr accepts Gunnhildr's power but does not identify his will with hers (8). See also Ólason, *Dialogues* 155.

Mǫrðr

Another character Hrútr appears to understand very well is Mǫrðr. The first connection between Hrútr and Mǫrðr is made when the brothers walk past him at the Alþing:

Síðan ganga þeir til lögrettu. Mǫrðr gígja mælti lögskil at vanða sínum ok gekk heim til búðar sinnar. (8)

Then they walk to the law court. Mǫrðr fiddle was declaring the law, as was his habit, and went back to his booth.

Through the phrase *að vanða sínum*, Mǫrðr's over-zealous character is suggested. The brothers' passing view is of a man who is utterly caught up with legal business, *as usual*. And as they look at Unnr, standing outside the Rangæingabúð, Mǫrðr is out of the picture, no doubt busily involved in a case that would not be settled properly without his participation, "engir þóttu lögligir dómar dæmðir, nema hann væri við" (5); "no-one considered their legal settlements binding, unless he was involved." The fineness of Mǫrðr's portrait is, of course, completed by the later conflict with Hrútr. But this first impression is all Hrútr needs in order to assess Mǫrðr's nature, an assessment which will ensure that he is successful in the dispute over Unnr's dowry, at least so long as Mǫrðr is managing it on behalf of Unnr. Mǫrðr's later response to Unnr's unhappiness will be represented in the same mocking tone as the description of his ridicule in this first Alþing narrative.

When Hrútr hears of Unnr's declaration of divorce, he is shocked ("brá mjök í brún") that she has gone but remains composed. Conspicuously, Hrútr speaks to no-one about the divorce (26). His management of the matter is made more remarkable still by his failure to press his case at the following Alþing. The author is careful to point out that "allir" ("everyone") expected Mǫrðr and Hrútr to discuss the matter.³⁴ That is, the author informs his audience about the broader social expectations of the situation, ensuring that his audience understands the matter at hand and differentiates Hrútr's perception from the

³⁴ "ætluðu allir, at þeir myndi tala um mál sín, en það varð ekki." (27); "everyone expected that they would talk about their matter, but it did not eventuate."

more generalised social one. The audience now knows that Hrútr's failure to make a representation about this matter is significant. It says something important about him and his adversary. It is a more sophisticated portrayal than if it were merely intended to indicate a period of brooding, a display of coolness, or a reluctance to fight.

What, then, is the reason for Hrútr's conspicuous lack of words and actions? And what is the authorial outlook that underlies it? The answer to both questions lies, in large part, in Hrútr's perception of Mǫrðr's disposition. Hrútr sees Mǫrðr as a weakened man, and one who is not now able to perform at the level he sets for himself: Hrútr is aware that his most powerful weapon against Mǫrðr will now be Mǫrðr's tendency to respond in a hasty way out of excessive ambition or enthusiasm. As far as Mǫrðr is concerned, he is in his element when involved in litigation, but only, alas, as much Úlfr *óþvegin* is in his element during his exchange with Hrútr. And the result, at least at this stage of the dispute (before the involvement of Gunnarr and Njáll), is much the same as between Hrútr and Úlfr. Lost to his ambition, his love of litigation, and an exaggerated notion of his strength and importance, Mǫrðr embarks on a disastrous course which he is not in a position to sustain. With Hrútr's challenge (27), Mǫrðr's lack of self-knowledge is clear, with respect not merely to his inability to fight but also to his inability to perceive that he is beaten:

Pá þagnaði Mǫrðr og rézk um við vini sína um hólmgöngu.
Honum svaraði Jǫrundr goði: "Eigi þarft þú við oss ráð at eiga um þetta mál, því að þú veizt, ef þú bersk við Hrút, þá muntú bæði láta lífit og féit. Er honum vel farit; hann er mikill af sjálfum sér ok manna fræknastr." (28)

Then Mǫrðr thought about the situation and raised the question of the *hólmganga* with his friends. Jǫrundr goði answered him: "There's no need to have a discussion with us about this matter, because you know that if you fight with Hrútr you will lose your life and your possessions. He is in a good position, he himself is powerful and the most valiant of men."

Jorundr's rebuke points directly to Mǫrðr's superfluous discussion of the matter (*eigi þarft þú*). But Mǫrðr's zealous conduct of the dispute robs him of an awareness of the limits of his claim and abilities.³⁵ He fails to judge the moment and, as a result, exposes himself, his supporters, and Unnr to dishonour:

þá varð óp mikit at lögbergi ok óhljóð, ok hafði Mǫrðr af ina mestu svívirðing. (28)

there was then a lot of shouting and disturbance at the Law Rock, and Mǫrðr suffered the greatest humiliation.

Like the author and his audience, Hrútr has Mǫrðr's measure. Concerns which he seems to have about Unnr's disposition and her response to his sexual excess (discussed below) ultimately dissolve into the contempt he feels towards her father. Hrútr's great quality, a sensitive awareness of his course in life and the nature of others' dispositions, is contrasted with Mǫrðr's inability to see how Hrútr will respond to his plan for Unnr's divorce and his lack of self-possession. The mishaps in Mǫrðr's life accrue from his disconnection from himself, his exaggerated view of his abilities, and his ignorance of the role which fate and luck are playing in these affairs.³⁶

The ridicule of Mǫrðr reaches its apex in his plan for Unnr's divorce, when his eagerness to litigate and to plan legal intrigues is expressed in terms of his concern for his daughter's happiness. His discussions with Unnr, and the

³⁵ Wilson takes a similar approach to Eyjólf's characterisation later in the saga: "Bjarni and Flosi know that Eyjólf's intelligence is undermined by avarice. He himself is completely unaware of his weakness, and it is this lack of self-knowledge that makes him susceptible to comic treatment" (111). I agree with Wilson's argument that comic characterisation can provide us with some evidence of the saga authors' use of conventional character types (e.g., 118; see also Andersson, "Character"), although this should not be seen as limiting the author's ability to create more sophisticated characters.

³⁶ The characterisation of Njáll is, I think, enough evidence that the author is not criticising Mǫrðr simply for his litigiousness or verbosity. Indeed, Hrútr comes to lose Unnr's dowry thanks to Njáll's planning. The faults which the author finds and which he exploits for comic effect are tied to Mǫrðr's ineffectual *conduct* of litigation and the inappropriateness of what is said and when it is said. Njáll, on the other, is much better able to gauge his strengths, weaknesses, the likely outcome of plans, and the right moment to speak. Mǫrðr's plan, designed to ensure that Unnr will escape Hrútr's hands, "ok skalt þú aldregi síðan koma honum í hendr" (25), is remarkably inefficient: she must maintain the marriage for another year, pretend to be happy, feign illness, and then declare her divorce.

general narrative interest that seems to surround her response to Hrútr's sexual problem, introduces two complications in a character's recognition of another's disposition. One is the role which fate or luck has in the relations between characters; the other, the variations in characters' behaviour that cannot be explained directly by their disposition.

Unnr

Hrútr first sees Unnr standing alone outside her family's Alþing booth. It seems that he has a moment in which to observe her, a brief chance to see her and to assess how she will affect his life. This opportunity to perceive her disposition gives Hrútr the narrative space to make a prediction about their relationship. It is difficult to be sure of the extent of his foresight, but he seems to get an impression that they will not enjoy happiness because of whom she is, not because he understands or knows the precise nature of the events that are to follow. It is difficult to imagine that Hrútr would go ahead with the marriage if he knew the exact nature of the problems that are to befall the marriage.

By the time we come to an actual relationship between Hrútr and Unnr, Hrútr knows (through Gunnhildr) that his marriage will be a fraught one. Furthermore, he has been prepared for the worst by his own unease about her when he saw her at the Alþing. His denial of Unnr to Gunnhildr may, again, reflect his concern about Unnr.³⁷ Matters appear to be coming to a head when Unnr asks if she can travel with Hrútr to the Alþing, which effectively begins the heightened level of interest in what Unnr is thinking and feeling.

At this stage there is an increase in the vocabulary of thought and emotion, relating both to Unnr and those who observe her. Hrútr says:

“Ef þér er *jafnmikill hugr* á at fara til þings *sem þú lézt*, þá bú þú þik og ríð til þings með mér.” (22, my emphasis)

“If you are still of the same mind to go the Assembly as you seemed then prepare yourself and ride to the Assembly with me.”

Similarly, when Mǫrðr sees her at the Alþing,

³⁷ On the other hand, Hrútr may keep his commitment to Unnr a secret out of fear of Gunnhildr.

Unnr gekk til búðar föður síns; hann fagnaði henni vel, en henni var *skapþungt nokkut*. Ok er hann fann þat, mælti hann til hennar: “Sét hefi ek þik með *betra bragði*, eða hvað býr þér í *skapi?*” Hon tók at gráta og svaraði engu. (22, my emphasis)
 Unnr went to her father’s booth; he received her well, but she was somewhat burdened by her thoughts. When he noticed, he said to her: “I have seen you looking happier. What is on your mind?” She took to crying and gave no answer.

While it is clear that Unnr has no personal responsibility in Hrútr’s phallic excess, he watches her personal response closely. Everything seems to be directed to an imminent reaction by Unnr.³⁸ It is at the second Alþing after her marriage to Hrútr that Unnr tells her father about Hrútr’s sexual peculiarities. If, for a moment, we omit Mörðr’s side of the conversation, we will get a clearer idea of the representation that Unnr makes:

“Gott má ek frá honum segja þat allt, er honum er sjálfrátt. [...]”³⁹ Ek vilda segja skilit við Hrút, ok má ek segja þér, hverja sök ek má helzt gefa honum. Hann má ekki hjúskaparfar eiga við mik, svá at ek mega njóta hans, en hann er at allri náttúru sinni annarri sem inir vöskustu menn [...] Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hqrund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eftirlæti hafa við mik, en þó hqfum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at við mættim njótask, en þat verðr ekki. En þó áðr vit skilim, sýnir hann þat af sér, at hann er í æði sínu rétt sem aðrir menn.” (24)
 “I can say only good things about him in the matters over which he has control...I want to divorce Hrut, and I can tell you what my main charge against him is – he is not able to have sexual intercourse in a way that gives me pleasure, though otherwise his nature is that of the manliest of men...When he comes close

³⁸ The narrative of Unnr’s response to Hrútr’s sexual problem involves: i) Unnr’s decision to talk to her father, ii) her representation of Hrútr’s problem to Mörðr, iii) the nature of the discussions between them and, iv) and the manner in which she follows Mörðr’s advice.

³⁹ Square brackets indicate points where Mörðr enters their conversation.

to me his penis is so large that he can't have any satisfaction from me, and yet we've both tried every possible way to enjoy each other, but nothing works. By the time we part, however, he shows me that he's just like other men." (Cook, *Njal's Saga* 15-16)

Unnr's representation is erudite and well-crafted. Unnr is fair to Hrútr; she describes his problem without mocking him, and does not use her knowledge to imply a sexual insult above and beyond the actual problem at hand. A remarkable aspect of her description is how she uses a cryptic, poetic tone (particularly though her use of inference) without undermining the accuracy possible through a more explicit or straightforward statement of the problem. Dronke interprets the description as indicating that Hrútr's penis is too large to enter Unnr. In fact, Unnr suggests much more than that. Her reference to Hrútr's ejaculation after they stop attempting intercourse (which she describes as "sem aðrir menn" or "like other men") implies that his phallic excess (earlier in their love-making) is physically abnormal, that it is not "like other men." Importantly, it indicates to Mǫrðr that there is something strange about Hrútr when he is with Unnr, a fact that might be difficult to communicate by a plain statement that his penis is too large.

Mǫrðr and Hrútr respond quite differently to Unnr's decision to make the matter a public one. Both reactions suggest that Unnr's representation is not dictated by fate or by Gunnhildr's spell, albeit that the initial sexual problem is created by the spell. In keeping with Mǫrðr's legal zeal and his obligations as Unnr's father, he is very anxious to hear about the matter.⁴⁰ The ever-eager advocate is keen "til órráða um málit," and presses Unnr to speak to him about the matter. His satisfaction at having a new case to plan is almost palpable, "Vel hefir þú nú gort, er þú sagðir mér" (24); "You have done well in telling me about this." He tells Unnr that she must not deviate at all from the scheme that

⁴⁰ E.g., "Hvað býr þér í skapi, dóttir?" segir hann, "því at ek sé, at þú villt, at engi viti nema ek, ok munt þú trúa mér bezt til órráða um þitt mál" (24); "What dwells in your thoughts, daughter?" he says, "as I see that you want no-one to know but me, and you must trust me most of all to advise about your problem."

he has in mind. I am hesitant to discount the possibility that Mǫrðr is simply acting as a concerned parent, but his immediate recourse to complex legal plans suggest to me that he takes some pleasure in his daughter's distress and the litigation it opens up. Most importantly, though, the exchange between father and daughter, particularly the extent to which Mǫrðr must persuade his daughter to speak to him, indicates that it is probably Unnr's disposition, as opposed to the external operation of Gunnhildr's spell, that determines her decision to carry the matter forward. In that sense, the drama is a combination of fate and character, and there is the possibility that Hrútr's initial impression of Unnr related to her strong disposition rather than the role she was fated to play in his life.

Hrútr's response to the divorce is not a positive one. He is shocked, "brá mjök í brún," a reaction that emphasises Unnr's discretion in the matter. The warning signs have not prepared him for this particular outcome. His surprise suggests that he thought Gunnhildr's spell was only as powerful as its ultimate effect on Unnr's feelings; that is, even though Hrútr is aware that there is a spell on the marriage, he does not expect Unnr to respond to the spell in this way. The precise form of the unhappiness between him and Unnr remained unknown to Hrútr because of the unpredictable nature of Unnr's role in the performance of Gunnhildr's curse. His advance knowledge has not denied Unnr a narrative of her own – or her own possession of the events at hand – or the effects that her decisions can have on the other characters around her.

As I have already suggested, the author of *Njáls saga* makes use of characters' understanding of each other, and moments where understanding is challenged, to suggest something of the social world of the saga. In the instance that I have just discussed (Unnr's decision to divorce Hrútr), the author establishes an interpretive framework for an audience to understand the relationship between a broad expectation of trouble and the particular way in which that trouble comes to be realised. In this sense, disposition is important because it is a basis of a character's expectation of others and of events to come; the failure to recognise disposition or fully to understand it can lead to a loss of

control in relationships. For our study of medieval Icelandic conceptions of authorship, this thematising of character's understanding can be abstracted as authorial pleasure in the complex relationship between disposition, perception of it, and the level of uncertainty in the way that dispositions manifest themselves in characters' actions. But does characterisation in *Njáls saga* also include a portrayal of the way that characters perceive themselves and their own dispositions?

Perception and the Expression of the Self

The question brings us to the third category of perception, which I identified earlier in this chapter, that is, perception and its relation to self-expression. Today, we would recognise that our perception of others or a strong interest in their disposition is only one step from an interest in notions of the self. To consider whether such a step is implied by *Njáls saga*, we must return to Hrútr in Norway, where we left him in Gunhildr's arms. I am most interested in the perception and representation which is implied by one utterance made during his final exchange with Gunnhildr – his laugh:

Hon tók hendinni um háls honum ok kyssti hann ok mælti: “Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur. Ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel: þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins.” Hrútr hló at ok gekk í braut. (20-21)

She put her hands around his neck, kissed him, and said: “If I have as much influence over you as I think, then I put this spell on you: you will enjoy no pleasure with that woman that you intend to marry in Iceland, although from then on you shall be able to express your desires with other women. And now neither of us is in a good position, for you did not trust me in the matter.” Hrútr laughed at this and went away.

This farewell scene unites and gives thematic coherence to the three structural blocks of the opening chapters of the saga. The marriage proposal in Iceland, adventure and (perhaps even) love in Norway, and the forthcoming marriage of Unnr and Hrútr are necessary elements of Gunnhildr's speech and of the value and justification of her spell. Events and themes meet here: marriage (*ætlar þér á Íslandi*), predictions (*legg ek þat*), unhappiness in Iceland (*engri munúð fram koma við konu þá*), Hrútr's as opposed to fate's role, in events (*þú trúðir mér eigi*) and, most cryptically, Hrútr's view of how these things have now converged before him: *hló at ok gekk i braut*. Of course, we do not need to go very far in the corpus to find another (even more tense) interaction of silence and laughter: only as far as Flosi's laughter when Njáll and his party refuse to explain the cloak on top of the settlement money (313).

Both Flosi's and Hrútr's laughter occurs at crystallising moments of the plot, when a series of events alters from having the flavour of background information, or of incremental developments of the plot, to being a living, ongoing part of a future suddenly coming into view. Whilst the audience may already have anticipated the events to come (the divorce, the burning at Berþórshvöll), such crystallising moments are still striking because of the aesthetic edge which the transition from past to present events adds to the narrative.⁴¹ If we recall Lönnroth's idea of the *Njáls saga* author as an architect (see above, Introduction), we might add that these instances of laughter occur when the process by which the author will get us from a series of connected rooms to a vision of the building as a whole becomes clearer. As such, characters' reactions at these points are not only crucial to the development of the plot. They are made all the more dramatic for being points in which a sense of the plot's significant movement is felt (a sense which, in modern literature, we might view as a meta-narrative strategy, or the narrative's implied comment about its methods of depicting reality).

⁴¹ Of course, concentration on change is a modern artistic preoccupation. Nevertheless, the tension and slowing down in narrative pace, which accompany both instances of laughter suggest that a not dissimilar pleasure in the nature of a transition existed for the medieval Icelandic author and his audience.

The two key instances of laughter and silence involve characters whose perception of the world around them is outstanding.⁴² The result is that the narrative crystallises for them too (not just for the author and his audience). Suddenly, Hrútr and Flosi get a picture of the future that ties in with their perception of the events so far. As such, we can extend Sveinsson's view that the author of *Njáls saga* "exists both inside and outside of his characters" (*Literary Masterpiece* 87) to say that, at this point, the author aligns two modes of narration, the external and internal, and produces one moment of a character's understanding of events. This is a more hard-fought understanding than, say, the instant recognition of disposition that Hrútr has about Hallgerðr and Unnr. It involves a gradual awareness of how others' characters, the flow of events, and a perception of one's life will form into an understanding of fate. When Gunnhildr tells him that she intends to spoil his relationship with Unnr, Hrútr connects his first impression of Unnr with his conversation with Gunnhildr: "so that's what it was" he realises, and laughs. The laughter is his recognition that pieces of knowledge are becoming ever more the connected parts of a whole. His question to himself (why is he unsure about Unnr?) moves a step closer to being answered. It only remains to see exactly how Unnr will respond.

The laughter is both recognition of the external world and confirmation of a pre-existing expectation of that world. Like the saga's audience, Hrútr moves from expectation to actuality, from a perception of likelihood to a reality in the form of Gunnhildr's spell. The laughter captures a moment of realisation, a narrative transition as the saga makes clear most of the outcomes it has promised. In a sense, Hrútr's laughter also represents a correction, or contradiction, of Gunnhildr, in much the same way as his correction of Hǫskuldr's pride in Hallgerðr's beauty. In this case, Hrútr appears to aim to contradict and challenge Gunnhildr's excessive display of power, words, and

⁴² This is how we might differentiate the laughter of other, less perceptive characters. Skarpheðinn's laughter, however, is at times difficult to gauge, for instance, when he sees Sæunn beating the weeds (320).

emotions. His laughter and immediate departure suggest that Gunnhildr's words are wasted on him, even superfluous. It seems to deny (perhaps defiantly) her conception of herself as a powerful cause of the events in his life: he has always known that there would be something wrong between him and Unnr. If Hrútr is defiant, it is because he holds the quality of his knowledge and perception above the power and knowledge that Gunnhildr asserts (that is, her influence in the expression of his destiny) in much the same way as he identifies Hallgerðr's true character in opposition to Hǫskuldr's perception of her beauty.

Thus, the course of Hrútr's life is identified with an inner power of perception, and his sense of himself emerges in dialogue with those perceptions. Hrútr recognises that Gunnhildr has added something new to a problem that he did not quite understand, but he at once contradicts her self-expression as a powerful force in his life. The laughter suggests that something else, something more powerful, is involved, perhaps fate, wisdom, or maybe his belief in his own abilities. Regardless of *what* he sees in himself, we are justified in interpreting the opening chapters of the saga as a representation of three connected worlds: action, perception, and reflection.

Hrútr's Perception and Authorial Engagement

Does the role of perception and representation in the characterisation of Hrútr reveal anything about the author's conception of his own perception and methods of representation? In asking this question, we are raising once again the question of the author's use of a character as a secondary author, or as a person who can express the interests of the author while remaining a credible character in the context of the saga and the saga age as a whole.

Sveinsson has emphasised that the author of *Njáls saga* was motivated by an inquisitive pleasure in life, that is, a desire to observe it and represent it, as characterised by:

a mentality which endeavours to fathom the mystery of reality, and we shall have to seek to comprehend this mentality if we hope to approach an understanding of its creation. Wonder at

the phenomena of life is characteristic of this mentality, but it is accompanied by the desire to grapple intellectually with what the eye has seen. It is not at all far-fetched to suggest that the author sought to understand life better and to make it more enduring through his literary re-creation of it. (*Literary Masterpiece* 182)

The “desire to grapple intellectually with what the eye has seen” is to build interpretive representations from one’s perception, to link an inner dialogue with one’s notion of how the external world is put together. Hrútr is a wonderfully useful character in this respect. Through him, the author is able to introduce a number of important themes at the same time as he educates his audience about the type of world he would like them to imagine for the saga. Hrútr, who is a complex and engaging figure, makes an ideal vehicle for the author’s communication with his audience because he goes about perceiving the world and making comments about it. His perceptions and observations form a centralising world of perception through which the dramatic movement, the intellectual dynamic, and the shifting modes of the saga can be measured. Hrútr’s distance from the saga’s audience is revealed by the saga’s movement from points where it emphasises the historical differences between the thirteenth-century and the tenth (e.g., in the figure of Úlfr), to where it seeks to foster a sense of empathy between the audience and the early Icelanders (e.g., in Hrútr’s understanding of events), through to the most sophisticated of all the narrative modes which it adopts: when a contemporary voice is positioned alongside the historical narrative (e.g., in the theme of perception and fate).

In this last mode, a close relationship between the author and the past is fostered, in which distance from, and respect for, the past are accompanied by possession of the past and all the things which possession permits. The author opts for a dialogue with his audience that is able to draw on the audience’s mixed sense of their nearness and distance from Hrútr’s age. Hrútr is a distant, heroic, figure. Yet he is also a perceptive, thoughtful man, conscious of the exigencies of life, who makes the sort of connections between the internal and

external worlds which are associated with the intellectual world of authorship, writing, and the transmission of traditional knowledge into art. Through Hrútr's characterisation, the author indicates that representation in *Njáls saga* is not an unproblematic bridge to the past, to truth, or knowledge. Indeed, I think he assumes that he is engaged in a dialogue (between himself as with the saga material), ongoing throughout the saga, and which does, potentially, undermine the saga's value as tradition because it enables the medieval society's possession of past events. Yet, we end up with what, at the beginning of this chapter, I called an in-between discourse, one which does not altogether aim to *narrate* nor *narrativize* an historically real set of events. Rather, the saga author's ultimate aim was to speak the truth *and* invent and interpret the past (that is, offer an additional voice to those of traditional narratives).

The author is obliged to cast his contemporary dialogue in a suitable tone, one that does not undermine the saga's credibility. Indeed, to establish such a discourse without undermining the audience's confidence in the saga *as a saga* (as a thing said) may have been the most difficult task faced by the author (see further chs. 1 and 2 above). Whether the author of *Njáls saga* actually achieved this effect of traditional saga form is, I think, less important than recognising that his attempts to do so did not appear to require the strict division between inventiveness and truth which we might expect of a post-Enlightenment, pre-Deconstructionist author. The author of *Njáls saga* aims to do what Hrútr certainly manages. He aims to perceive the world clearly, without giving in to the excess of emotions or self-indulgence which Hǫskuldr, Mǫrðr, and even Gunnhildr allow themselves. The author wishes to present his saga as a correct version of events, just as Hrútr corrects those around him. The author also hopes to tie his version to his present world of interpretation (that is, to possess the past as part of the thirteenth-century's culture of writing), just as Hrútr ties his sense of himself (his self-expression) with the external world of action. Thus the narrative seems to be part of the past and the present, and Hrútr at times is viewed simultaneously from within and from the outside. Hrútr is a model by which the author's understanding of the saga world is expressed.

Hrútr changes in the course of the saga as a whole. When we encounter him later, during Gunnarr's pursuit of Unnr's dowry, he is no longer the perceptive figure we came to know in the opening episode. He is a changed man, and certainly less able. Of course, Hrútr's narrative function has changed. He is not used to express the values of perception that I have discussed. Rather, he is one part of the network of characters and events now used by the author to express the combined force of the qualities possessed by Njáll and Gunnarr: wisdom, foresight, strength, and the three kinds of perception I discussed above.⁴³

The in-between nature of the past in *Njáls saga* makes it difficult to dismiss its historical value. Indeed, there is no reason to associate the author's appropriation of Hrútr - the author's possession of his character - with a disregard for his historical validity or his place in the oral traditions of medieval Iceland. Whilst the author gives his own version of Hrútr's story, I think it is a mistake to place authorial inventiveness above the oral traditions or historicity of facts suggested by the saga. As long as we accept White's contention that narrative in itself (that is, the narrative act) creates interpretation as well as knowledge, can we rate certain historical narratives as more truthful than others? Certainly, there is socio-historical value to be associated with the type of truth they offer (e.g., persuasive, emotional, logical, analytical) but, in itself, the element of narrativity in *Njáls saga* is no grounds for dismissing it as an historical document. It is just that, in the medieval Icelandic context, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when objectifiable, historical truth is given.

I have asked whether Hrútr's early characterisation represents the author's understanding and conception of the process of interpretation. Hrútr

⁴³ Neither Gunnarr nor Njáll possess all the qualities that we saw personified (during the prologue) in Hrútr alone. The coincidence of Hrútr's less auspicious role and the successful combining of Njáll's and Gunnarr's skills helps the author to differentiate or individualise these skills. This delineation adds to the apprehension that the author develops in the lead-up to Gunnarr's decision to stay in Iceland: at any moment, Gunnarr may abandon Njáll's advice. In contrast, Hrútr embodies both sides of a marriage of wisdom and strength and, consequently (within the confines of an objective narrative mode which has difficulty representing an inner conflict of these qualities), his narrative does not create an apprehension of a clash between his heroism and his wisdom.

does not represent the author's personality but, as I suggested, his perceptive skills and sense of himself may indicate a close relationship with the author, a tie which involves both closeness (including a degree of empathy) and a distance which remains between the author (and the contemporary audience) and figures of the past. The author does not conceive of his characters in the same way as we are likely to think about the modern individual, but he does share some similar concerns. The emphasis on perception and its relation to the individual's inner development allows for comparison to be made with later notions of human development, particularly nineteenth and twentieth-century pre-occupations with identity, belonging, memory, and even the relative value of truth.

The author's way into these questions demonstrates that even if he did not share the same space and methodology as the modern writer, historian, or philosopher, he was asking some questions related to the ones which have been asked since the thirteenth century. He set out his answers in the midst of a complex grid of undertakings, not least of which was the attempt to give a realistic portrayal of another age whilst satisfying the demands of his audience and the requirements set by his patrons. If he arrived at these questions without the stimulation of the types of cultural and social changes which more recent generations of scholars and artists have encountered, he nevertheless examined major changes in religion, law, Iceland's relationship with Europe, and in literary techniques.

Dealing with this range of changes demands great skill from the author, particularly in relation to characterisation. As the author does not seem to have allowed himself any time to develop his early characters through a genealogical narrative or indeed one concerning the settlement of Iceland, he is dependent on the narrative of the present (his saga's present mode) to outline dispositions and create the anticipation that certain tensions will grow between a number of the key characters or within them. Of course, a certain amount of this tension may have been guaranteed by the audience's pre-existing knowledge of some of the plot and a number of the literary conceits that it employs. Yet, the author's most

conspicuous answer to the narrative problems created by the saga's initial haste was to intensify the level of characterisation: *Njáls saga* is particularly effective in raising the presence of key characters above the narrative of events which are in train. Yet, it is not altogether alone in this respect and, before we move to a discussion, in chapter seven, of individuals who are excessive in their ambition, I would like to continue with the questions about knowledge and interpretation, that have been developed in this chapter, in relation to *Laxdæla saga* and *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*.

Chapter 6: “A terrible thing to know”: Acts of Ignorance in *Laxdæla saga* and *Porgils saga*

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
The great pond and its waste of the lillies, all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires.
(from Wallace-Stevens, “The Plain Sense of Things”)

Character Change and Development

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that the objective tone of saga style, viewed by some scholars as a barrier to our sense of characters’ emotional and psychological development, is better regarded as a reflection of both the medieval Icelandic conception of what constituted an historically credible prose style and the sagas’ complex relationship to the oral traditions of the Viking Age and of medieval Scandinavia. It is often difficult to be sure of saga characters’ inner development, or of authorial intention with regard to characterisation. Yet, studies of the sagas’ rhetorical vocabulary, their structural patterns, and of authorial intrusion in saga narratives make it clear that the authors had more in mind for their characters than for them to function as purely historical figures whose inner lives were unknown, or as the kind of static character-types that one might expect from orally formulated narratives. Rather, saga authors tend to focus on characters’ responses in such a way that interpretation of events becomes a theme of the saga, one that enables a link between the author, his characters, and his audience. I will now examine the way *Laxdæla saga* depicts the part played by its heroine, Guðrún, in the deaths

of two of her lovers, Kjartan and Bolli, and the patterns of knowledge, awareness and understanding which we can identify both in *Laxdæla saga* and in the rather different *Saga of Þorgils and Hafliði*.¹

Þorgils saga was written at about the same time as *Laxdæla saga* and is also set (in part) in Breiðafjörður, but it describes events which occurred about eighty years after the last major event in *Laxdæla saga* (which is around 1060).² *Þorgils saga* is a more discrete tale than *Laxdæla saga*, confined to the relatively brief but serious dispute between two powerful chieftains, Hafliði Másson and Þorgils Oddason (between 1118-1121), and the role which a broad group of third parties plays, firstly in framing and aggravating, but later in regulating and ultimately resolving that dispute. *Laxdæla saga* embraces a much larger time period and a wider subject matter, and is a more thematically intricate work. It develops connections across religious changes, across shifts in land ownership and the different generations of farmers and chieftains, and the main plot develops amid colourful digressions which are formed by supernatural events and travel narratives. Yet the two sagas share an interesting approach to knowledge, especially in the way they depict how characters come to understand the events around them and the point at which that understanding occurs. My focus here is on the quality which the saga authors attribute to human and preterhuman knowledge, and on the broader narrative function of knowledge, especially its consequence for the characterisation and ethical conception of the central figures Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga* and Þorgils and Hafliði in *Þorgils saga*.

As one of the family sagas, *Laxdæla saga* is generically different to *Þorgils saga*, which is part of the compilation *Sturlunga saga* and classified as one of the *samtíðarsögur* in that it deals mostly with events of the twelfth

¹ The *Saga of Þorgils and Hafliði* is herein referred to as *Þorgils saga*. References to the saga are based on Brown's edition in Icelandic.

² *Laxdæla saga* was probably written by a resident of Breiðafjörður (Sveinsson, Formáli xxii), and was most likely composed at some point in the period 1230-1260 (xxv). The composition of *The Saga of Þorgils and Hafliði* is dated by Brown as 1237 or just before ("Preface" ix-xxix).

century.³ As I observed in chapter two, the individual sagas of *Sturlunga saga* are, like the family sagas, concerned with disputes between rival families and chieftains, but the style of narration in *Sturlunga saga* is different. This is probably a product of the relative closeness of the authors to their subject matter. As we saw, one of these authors, Sturla Þórðarson, was a player in many of the events he describes. It is not surprising then that his representation of violence, of disputes, and of social relations more generally tends to be less glamorous and, for the modern reader, often disturbingly brutal.

Take, for example, Bolli's killing of Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 49) and Sturla Sighvatsson's killing of Snorri Þorvaldsson in *Íslendinga saga* (ch. 85). In the latter episode, shortly before Snorri is killed he asks to speak, "Högg þú mik eigi, ek vil tala nökkut áðr" (*Íslendinga saga* 218); "Don't strike me, I want to say something first." Yet he is cut down before he has a chance to say any more. In *Laxdæla saga*, Kjartan taunts his foster-brother Bolli in such a way that he is forced to play a role in Kjartan's death: "Bolli frændi, hví fórtu heiman, ef þú vildir kyrr standa hjá?"; "Bolli, my kinsman, why did you leave home if you wished to stand quietly by?" (*Laxdæla saga* 153). In referring to their close relationship (he addresses Bolli as his *frændi*), and by later referring to the killing as a *níðingsverk* or "foul deed" (154), Kjartan defines the ethical points by which the events can be understood and measured against other events in the saga, for instance, Guðrún's behaviour. This comparison helps to make sense of the killing. While the murder of Kjartan is never transformed into an honourable act, because Kjartan has the opportunity to speak it is defined and ordered in terms of a tragic human experience. Kjartan's performance during his death scene heightens the saga's emotional discourse and, despite Kjartan's criticism of Bolli, helps the reader to read Bolli's violence as an emotional, perhaps desperate, act. While the episodes in *Laxdæla saga* and *Íslendinga saga* are both dramatic, Kjartan's death is made more dramatically intense and less

³ It is generally accepted that, while *Laxdæla saga* shares many characteristics with the other family sagas, it does bear the mark of Continental influence in the form of Romance. Certainly, of all the Icelandic sagas it is the most romantic (see Ker 209; Sveinsson, Formáli v-xxiii).

narratively brutal by the ethical dialogue which accompanies it. In Snorri's death in *Íslendinga saga*, the ordering influence of an ethical and emotional statement is denied (Reid 51-59).⁴

The narration of *Þorgils saga* lies somewhere between the "tough" style of *Íslendinga saga* and the world of honour and moderation that is reflected in the tone of family sagas like *Laxdæla saga*.⁵ In the way of a family saga, *Þorgils saga* focuses on a dispute between rival chieftains, who are both seen to carry on the dispute honourably and intelligently.⁶ The resolution of the dispute at the close of the saga gives the work an exemplary and rhetorical colouring that has also been identified in the family sagas and in Icelandic kings' biographies (the *konungasögur*) like *Heimskringla*.⁷ On the other hand, the eventually large scale of the dispute in *Þorgils saga*, and the degree of intervention by the friends and advisers of the protagonists, take something

⁴ Variation in the tone of narration is a feature of *Íslendinga saga*, and at times Sturla Þórðarson recounts events in the more dramatised manner of the family sagas (e.g., the narration of the burning at Flugumýri, ch. 172; cf. the killing of Snorri Sturluson, ch. 151, and Sturla Sighvatsson at the Battle of Örlygsstaðir, ch. 138). See further Bragason, "The Art of Dying."

⁵ Cf. Tranter ch. 3, who reads *Þorgils saga* as a representation of the first steps in a social and political decline which led, ultimately, to the violence of the Sturlunga age. This interpretation is undermined by a more recently developed sense of the high degree of social order which *Sturlunga saga* reflects, despite its violence (see G. Nordal's *Ethics* on the mythic and genealogical patterns in *Íslendinga saga*, and similarly Clunies Ross, "Myth;" and Miller, *Bloodtaking* 48-51 on the danger of exaggerating the differences in the social patterns of the family and contemporary sagas; cf. Tranter 224). On the generic division of Old Icelandic literature, see Andersson, *Family Sagas*; Bragason, *Poetics* 8-9 and 44-45; Clover, *Medieval Saga*; Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* 44-58, 76-85 and "Intellectual Complexion;" G. Nordal, *Ethics* 15 and 21-22; Harris; Hastrup, "Text" 14-15; Mitchell; Steblin-Kimenskij 33-48.

⁶ For example, while Hafliði is aligned with the disruptive character Már, the author is careful to show that Hafliði condemns Már's violent behaviour (e.g., *Þorgils saga* 7): thus, because Hafliði has the opportunity to criticise Már, Már's function of moving the plot towards conflict does not detract from Hafliði's ethical position (Reid, *Er þat satt* 29-30).

⁷ Brown, "Preface" has noted that *Þorgils saga* is similar to the kings' sagas in its use of dialogue to raise ethical issues (xxiii-iv). More recently, Andersson "Snorri" 15-20; Bagge, *Society*, esp. chs. 5 & 7; and Tómasson, "Hagiography" 52-54, 61-62 have commented on the centrality of characters' personal qualities and the question of overall historical interpretation in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. As in *Heimskringla*, the author of *Þorgils saga*'s success in using the theme of personal strengths as a vehicle for historical interpretation is closely linked to the way characters engage with the complex political and ethical concerns of the world the author creates for them. See Knirk on oratory eloquence in the kings' sagas, M. Taylor on speech in *Íslendinga saga* (esp. 313-14, 316). See Lönnroth's well-known study of *Njáls saga* for a discussion of the rhetorical framework of a family saga; more generally, see his "Rhetorical Persuasion." See also A. Taylor's discussion of authorial involvement and objective saga style; and Schach, "Some Forms."

away from the saga's character development and give weight to the social context for events that is characteristic of *Íslendinga saga*.

Guðrún Ósvifrsdóttir

I would like to turn back to *Laxdæla saga*, in particular to a comment that Gestr Oddleifsson⁸ makes on the same day as he interprets four dreams which Guðrún narrates to him in a conversation they share at the swimming baths at Laugar (ch. 33). After interpreting the dreams, Gestr watches Kjartan swimming with his best friend and foster-brother Bolli in Laxá, in the company of Óláfr, Kjartan's father. Gestr leaves them hurriedly and his son notices that he is crying:

“Hvat berr nú þess við, faðir minn, er þér hrynja tár?” Gestr svarar: “Þarfleysa er at segja þat, en eigi nenni ek at þegja yfir því, er á þínum dögum mun fram koma; en ekki kemr mér at óvörum, þótt Bolli standi yfir höfuðsvorðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá ok höfuðbana, og *er þetta illt at vita um svá mikla ágætismenn.*” (92, my emphasis)

“What does this now mean, father, that you shed tears?” Gestr answered: “There is no use in saying, but I cannot stand to keep quiet about something that will happen in your days. It will be no surprise to me though Bolli stands over Kjartan's dead body, thereby bringing on his own death, *and that is a terrible thing to know* about such excellent men.”

In his role as a figure of insight and wisdom, Gestr sheds uneven light on the events to come, between Guðrún and Óláfr on the one hand, and a privileged sphere of knowledge which the audience occupies on the other.⁹

⁸ Gestr is chieftain from Barðaströnd in the West Fjords, and is travelling through the district on his way to the Alþing. Gestr figures often in medieval Icelandic literature; as Sveinsson remarks, “allsstaðar er honum lýst á einn veg, að hann hafi verið góðgjarn, spekingur að viti og forspár” (*Laxdæla saga* 87, note 2; “in all places, he is depicted in one way – to have been benevolent, wise, and prescient”).

⁹ All Gestr will tell Óláfr is that Kjartan will be thought of more highly than Bolli as long as Kjartan lives.

Through this discussion between Gestr and his son, the audience is given full access to the knowledge which disturbs Gestr but which he says is actually useless to disclose, presumably to any of the protagonists in the love triangle or to Kjartan's father Óláfr. Even though Guðrún has told Gestr that she is not just asking for what Magnusson and Pálsson have translated as “wishful interpretations” (120),¹⁰ implicitly opening their dialogue to the possibility of a full disclosure of her fate, Gestr withholds a great deal from her. Most importantly, Gestr's interpretation of Guðrún's third dream (the one which touches on Bolli and Kjartan) draws attention to a detail of Guðrún's self-awareness (that is, the time when it will be attained) while he conceals from her the nature of her participation in her third husband's death (discussed below). In its precision, the comment reveals how much Gestr knows and, at the same time, it indicates that the narrative of Guðrún's life will be one which moves towards her acquisition of a certain kind of inner knowledge and guilt:

En þar er þér þótti hringrinn í sundr stökkva, nokkut af þinni vangeymslu, ok sátt blóð koma ór hlutunum, þá mun sá þinn bóndi vera veginn; muntu þá þykkjast glöggst sjá þá þverbresti, er á þeim ráðahag hafa verit. (90)

And when you thought you saw the ring broken apart, somewhat from your own neglect, and saw blood come out of the break, then you saw that your husband killed; you will then think that you see clearly the crack that was in that marriage.¹¹

Gestr suggests that Guðrún's understanding of the problems of this marriage will come with Bolli's death and not before, and so positions Guðrún's future understanding as an elemental part of her development as a character. This exchange is the opening bracket of a series of events which will culminate, firstly, in Guðrún's marriage to Bolli instead of the man she loves (Kjartan) and, secondly, in her desire to have Kjartan killed at Bolli's hands, and which will be

¹⁰ Guðrún says that no-one has interpreted her dreams well, “þó eigi þess, at þeir sé í vil ráðnir” (88).

¹¹ I have translated *þverbresti* as “crack” to get across something of the metaphor; *þverbresti* literally means a cross-break, and can be used to describe a break in a ring.

closed by the final episode in the saga, when Guðrún deals with her son Bolli's question about which of her husbands she loved the most, and reveals to him what self-awareness she has ultimately acquired. Guðrún's answer is: "Þeim var ek verst, er ek unna mest": "I was worst to the one I loved most" (228). It is possible to read Guðrún's comment as an enigmatic or even ambiguous statement, although it is important to recognise that Bolli (who is really asking Guðrún whom she loved more, his father or his father's best friend and later rival) appears to understand her response:

"Þat hyggju vér," svarar Bolli, "at nú sé sagt alleinarðliga," – ok kvað hana vel hafa gort, er hon sagði þetta, er hann forvitnaði.
(228)

"We think," answered Bolli, "that everything has now been made clear," and told her she had done well to tell him what he was curious to know.

It is difficult to be precise about what Guðrún feels about the men, but I think it is fairly clear, from her beautiful reply to Bolli's question, that she is in the process of understanding herself.¹² Her answer is an evasive and ambiguous one, but it could not be the answer of a character who does not know the answer to the question that is put to her. Guðrún's response contains a positive assertion that indicates that she has reached a sense of her role in the events described in the saga.

As I have suggested above, Guðrún's biography is bracketed by two powerful conversations, one with Gestr at Laugar and the other with her son Bolli. The former is a man weighed down by knowledge, the latter, the inheritor of the events of the saga who wants to acquire knowledge from Guðrún to give him the complete picture which Gestr hints at much earlier. While Bolli's inquiry functions as a prompt for the reader's closing assessment of Guðrún's

¹² It is not even clear what she knows about herself, but this is an instance, rather like the one Foote identifies in relation to *Færeyinga saga*, where "we have an inkling that he [the author] is fundamentally self-amused and in ironic command of his narrative" (*On the Saga* 15). Thus, the relationship between the "implicit and explicit" (17) is crucial in focusing attention on Guðrún's inner development.

inner life, Gestr's interpretation informs both Guðrún and the reader of *Laxdæla saga* of the broad patterns of her life. Concomitantly, because Guðrún is the central figure in the second half of the saga, the reader is given a sense of how to approach most of the events which occur in her life and which are described to us in that part of the saga, firstly as elements of a tragic story in the sense that her role in the deaths of Kjartan and Bolli unfolds before her in steps; secondly, as a more straightforward biography of a remarkable person; and thirdly, as a broadly constituted civic tale because of the importance of her life and relationships for the Breiðafjörður community as whole. In the process, Guðrún moves from being a character who acts in ignorance of a number of things, from simple facts to fate to less tangible spiritual and ethical matters, through to a character who attains a complete state of knowledge by her reflections in solitude, the related intensification of her commitment to Christ, her subsequent grief and the redemptive power of her guilt and sorrow,¹³ and eventually through the truthful statement elicited by her son that her greatest human love was for Kjartan. Bolli congratulates his mother for her truthfulness, performing what is perhaps an unnecessary confirmation that Guðrún has attained the state of knowledge which Gestr promised at Laugar.

In terms of the saga's tragic narration of the deaths of the male protagonists the most important decision which Guðrún makes is to marry Kjartan's rival Bolli. This decision is made in ignorance of the simple fact that Kjartan, who has travelled to Norway and had a sexual relationship with the king's daughter Ingibjörg, will soon return and that his love for Guðrún is still strong (Guðrún is deceived by Bolli into thinking that Kjartan will stay in Norway and marry Ingibjörg). Guðrún's ignorance of Kjartan's imminent return to Iceland makes her vulnerable to a number of pressures placed on her, by both herself and those around her, not least because the doubts about Kjartan's plans

¹³ The last major part of Guðrún's life, marked by greater isolation, contemplation, and heightening of her religious commitment, begins with her decision to swap farms with Snorri the Priest; that is, to take over his farm at Helgafell. Guðrún's self-possession and spiritual intensity at this time is famously borne out in a brief dialogue with a ghost, and in tears which irritate the spirit of a dead sorceress who is buried under the church floor (*Laxdæla saga* ch. 76, esp. 224: "dropa svá heita," "such hot tears").

imperil a sense of honour and status which she clearly holds dear (Cook, “Women;” L. Auerbach; cf. Steblin-Kimenskij, *Saga Mind* 90-93). Her lack of knowledge about Kjartan undermines Guðrún’s will-power and bolsters Bolli’s influence in equal amounts. When Kjartan returns to Iceland, he discovers that Guðrún has married. Soon after, he marries Hrefna and gives to her a courtly headdress, which Ingibjörg had intended as gift from her to Guðrún. Guðrún becomes jealous of Hrefna and eggs Bolli to kill Kjartan. Subsequently, Bolli is killed in vengeance for Kjartan; two of Gestr’s prophecies ought now to have been fulfilled, Bolli’s killing of Kjartan and Guðrún’s awareness of the faults in her marriage to Bolli.

Whether Guðrún does in fact realise anything of moral or personal significance at this point is complicated by a further suspension of knowledge which the saga now performs. It postpones an open discussion of Guðrún’s inner life and feeling for her husbands until long after she marries for a fourth time, around twenty years later when she discusses the question of love and marriage with her son.¹⁴ Her immediate response to Bolli’s death, to walk towards his killers and talk with them about the fight, is consistent with her characterisation as a very strong person both before and after the event. Despite being a remarkable attestation of her self-possession and constant sense of honour, her action does not reveal a changed perception of herself or her role in the dispute. More significant than Guðrún’s behaviour at this time is, I believe, the dialogue by others about Guðrún’s life which begins immediately:¹⁵

Þat ræddu þeir fõrunautar Halldórs, at Guðrúnu þætti lítit dráp
Bolla, er hon slósk á leiðiorð við þá ok átti allt tal við þá, svá
sem þeir hefði ekki at gort, þat er henni væri í móti skapi.

¹⁴ Sveinsson, Formáli estimates that Kjartan is killed in 1003, that Guðrún’s third husband Bolli is killed in 1007 and their son Bolli is born in the following winter, and that Guðrún moves to Helgafell and marries her fourth husband Þorkell in 1008 (lix). After narrating Snorri goði’s death (1031), *Laxdæla saga* tells that Guðrún become very old, and it is during the period between the death of her famous supporter Snorri and her own death that she and Bolli discuss the men she has loved.

¹⁵ L. Auerbach notes that Bolli’s question at the end of the saga shows that the “men revolve around her, not the other way round” (41), a point about the saga’s emphasis that supports my argument that attention is directed to Guðrún’s development as a character.

Þá svarar Halldórr: “Ekki er þat mín ætlan, at Guðrúnu þykki lítit lát Bolla; hygg ek, at henni gengi þat meir til leiðiorðs við oss, at hon vildi vita sem gørst, hverir menn hefði verit í þessi ferð; er þat ok ekki ofmæli, at Guðrún er mjög fyrir oðrum konum um allan skörungsskap. Þat er ok eftir vánum, at Guðrúnu þykki mikit lát Bolla, því at þat er satt at segja, at eptir slíka menn er mestr skaði, sem Bolli var, þó at vér frændr bærim eigi giftu til samþykkis.” (169)

Those who were travelling with Halldórr said that Guðrún must think little of Bolli’s death, as she walked and spoke with them as if they had not done anything that would upset her. Halldórr answered: “It is not my view that Guðrún thinks little of Bolli’s death. I think it more likely that she travelled and spoke with us because she wanted to know exactly which men took part in this journey. It is not going too far to say that Guðrún far exceeds other women in courage. It is also to be expected that Guðrún is greatly affected by Bolli’s death, as it is fair to say that such men as Bolli are a great loss, although we kinsmen did not have the luck to get on.”

Guðrún’s desire for retribution and her sensitivity to the social patterns of honour do not come at the cost of her inner development. In particular, a perceptive character attributes to her a sense of loss, and it is this loss which will develop into the guilt and understanding which Guðrún expresses in tears of remorse towards the close of the saga. Guðrún’s desire to move to Helgafell after Bolli’s death confirms this state of mind, although all she states directly is that she no longer wishes to live near the people of Hjarðarholt, that is, near to Kjartan’s kin. There is little chance, though, that the medieval audience of *Laxdæla saga* would have misinterpreted a move to such a well-known religious centre (both in Heathen and Christian practice) as anything other than a move to an environment suitable for Guðrún’s earnest reflections and, ultimately, greater self-awareness. Regardless of the reason for the move to

Helgafell, which is not clearly stated in the saga, her desire to live at Helgafell enables an emotional and epistemological development which the saga promised when Gestr interpreted Guðrún's dreams.

Laxdæla saga and *Þorgils saga*

In *Laxdæla saga*, knowledge is positioned as an instrumental narrative device, a feature of narration that the saga shares with aspects of *Þorgils saga*. The most immediate point of contact between these authors is the very similar structure of two entreaties to peace in the two sagas. Both involve a call for restraint, by a friend, when a character calls for an attack, and the entreaties are on the basis that an act of violence would involve a breach of a holy day. The protagonists accept their supporters' advice on apparent face value, but it is latter revealed that there were other reasons for restraint. In *Laxdæla saga*, the incident occurs during a terse negotiation for the purchase of land (ch. 75), whereas the equivalent structuring device in *Þorgils saga* comes when Þorgils wants to attack his rival Hafliði at the legislative Alþing. Þorgils' supporter Bǫðvarr makes the following comment:

“Eigi lítr þú rétt á. Hygg at þessu, hvar vér erum komnir, at þetta skal vera sáttarfundr við guð, er vér höfum á kirkjuhelgi sótt, ok biðjum oss miskunnar. Nú er í þessu ok kirkjufrið raskat, ok er þetta fyrir þá sök óðæmaverk. Hitt er ok annat, at yfir stendr dagshelgin, er vér höfum alla hjálp af hlotit, ok sjálfir guð almáttigr lét sína mildi ok miskunn svá mikla skína ok birta á þessum deginum. Þat er ok til at telja, at grið ok friðr er settr um þingit ok þinghelgin stendr yfir, ok fyrir því er þetta it mesta helgibrot.”

Ok er þeir höfðu [þetta] við mælk, þá heptisk hann af því Þorgils, ok réð hann eigi til Hafliða. (24)

“You do not view things correctly. Think of this, where we have come, and for what purpose: to make peace with God, whom we have sought in church service, and prayed to for mercy. The

church peace would now be broken by this, and it would for that reason be an outrageous deed. Another thing: the holy day is binding, when we all have hope for salvation, and God Almighty Himself lets His mildness and mercy shine so greatly and brighten this day. This is also to be said, that the truce and peace are established over the þing while the þing ground is hallowed, and so this would be the greatest of legal breaches.” And when they had spoken about this, Þorgils held back and did not attack Hafliði.

In both sagas, the attacks (it turns out) would have been hopeless. As in *Laxdæla saga*, Bǫðvarr gives his advice as a way to help Þorgils back out of an awkward position. The ethical arguments which are cited in the warning, about making peace with God and the sanctity of the church, the holy day, and the truce, incorporate the claims of the church and the Alþing, and their ideals of civil order. They suggest a character who uses a narrative of Christian and legal sanctity but who, in fact, used that narrative in a tactical way.

Þorgils' Response to Knowledge

Þorgils heeds the warning on account of its source rather than, as Brown has suggested, because of the finer moral side of Þorgils' nature (Brown xvii). We know this because of the way he raises the issue of Bǫðvarr's entreaty with him:

Ok er þeir gengu heim til búða, þá mælti Þorgils til Bǫðvars: “Þa[t] mæla menn, at þú sér trúlauss, mágr, ok meðallagi góðgjarn, en eigi lýstir þú nú því.” Bǫðvarr mælti: “Þat er ok satt, er þú segir, ok eigi gekk mér trúa til þess, er ek latta þik tilræðis við Hafliða. Heldr hugða ek at fleira en at hjali okkru, ok sá ek, at flokkarnir stóðu á báðar hendr okkr, en vér várum í kvíum, ok sá ek þat, ef þetta fœri fram, at þegar mundi slá í bardaga, ok mundi hvern várr félaga drepinn vera á fœtr orðum. En því sagða ek þér þat eigi til, at ek kunna skap þitt at því, at

þú mundir engan gaum at gefa, ef ek fynda þat til. En ef eigi væri þat, þá hirta ek aldri, þó [at] þú dræpir hann í kirkjufriði eða í þinghelginni.” (24)

When they went back to their booths, Þorgils said to Bǫðvarr: “Men say that you are not a Christian, kinsman, and not very good-willed, but you do not show that now.” Bǫðvarr replied: “It is true, as you say, but my faith did not have such an effect as to make me halt your attack on Hafliði. Rather, I thought about more than we said; and I saw that forces stood on both sides of us, and that we were in a trap. And I saw that if it went ahead, and we fought, each of our fellows would be killed, one on the heels of another.¹⁶ I did not tell this to you, because I know your disposition in such matters, that you would pay no attention if I had brought this forward. If it was not for that, I would not hold back, even though you killed him within the sanctuary of the Church or in the Þing grounds.”

In other words, an unlikely figure has made a number of ethical comments and, even if Þorgils is unsure of the precise reason for Bǫðvarr’s comment, the incongruity of conduct alerts Þorgils. In the exchange, knowledge and understanding manifest in three ways: Bǫðvarr’s perception of the danger of making an attack (because he and Þorgils are surrounded and outnumbered), Þorgils’ understanding of his friend’s normal disposition and the strange quality of his entreaty not to attack, and Bǫðvarr’s knowledge that Þorgils will not be able to abandon the attack if he states the true reason for holding back (that is, his awareness that an ironic or perhaps face-saving dialogue must be created in order for Þorgils to accept his advice). For a period of time, Þorgils is ignorant of the true danger of the situation that they are in, and an interesting although difficult question remains as to when Þorgils actually realises what Bǫðvarr is trying to say. If, as I think, Þorgils’ understands at once that there is a subtext of danger in Bǫðvarr’s advice, we will read Þorgils’ later question at the booth as

¹⁶ The phrase is adopted from Cleasby and Vigfusson 168.

play rather than as genuine interest in the incongruity of Bǫðvarr's speech. On the other hand, the serious tone of Bǫðvarr's reply makes it fairly clear that Bǫðvarr does not share Þorgils' sense of irony at this point. This difference between their responses is consistent with the strongly marked difference in their tempers or dispositions. Bǫðvarr is an old-fashioned character who embodies a distinctive heroic outlook that places physical audacity at the heart of achieving honour (which he mistakenly assumes he shares with Þorgils). In contrast, Þorgils realises both what Bǫðvarr is trying to say about the danger of the situation and that the conduct of his friend is unusual.

The episode says much more about Þorgils' judgment than about his moral sensitivity. Ultimately, it suggests to the audience an approach to the weighing up of knowledge and the demands that may be made for action. Actions, which the author positions as the only clear-cut indication of a character's knowledge and will, ought to be tempered by circumstance. While I cannot identify an unambiguous ideal of peacefulness in *Þorgils saga* (cf. Tranter), it is fair to say that the author's dual interest in knowledge and practical circumstances creates moments when the saga suggests that the ordering of violence is a way to achieve a degree of certainty in disputes between powerful chieftains.¹⁷ Consequently, a lot of attention is paid to the way Þorgils and Hafliði react to their supporters and to figures of good will. Many of the events in the saga occur in ways which make the chieftains dependent on the actions and knowledge of others. Importantly, this connection by knowledge and action stresses not only the contingency of protagonists' awareness of facts (such as being outnumbered), it also highlights the skill of acting well despite acting in ignorance and the central importance (implied both by characters and by the saga as a whole) of *when* knowledge is delivered.

¹⁷ For example, after Hafliði wins the second law case in their dispute, Þorgils is outlawed and it falls to Hafliði to execute the order against Þorgils. This involves holding a court of execution at Þorgils' property, a very difficult task. At this point, Guðmundr Brandsson emerges as a wise man and as a force for reconciliation. His speech stresses the strengths of both men to the other, and Guðmundr is able to urge them to see the honour of taking their violence only to a certain and limited point. In effect, he maps a course for both chieftains and marks a point between them where they can both honourably stop. Thus, the honourable course of action is defined in the moment by Guðmundr and by the measured acceptance of his advice by Þorgils and Hafliði.

Self-Possession and Success

A quality which touches on all of these issues, in both *Þorgils saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, is the self-possession which central characters demonstrate when complete knowledge of important circumstances is denied or deferred. In a sense, Þorgils and Hafliði are regal figures, in a similar position to the Scandinavian kings we find in the Icelandic royal biographies of the time. The extensive advice which is given, the explicit and implied knowledge which is transferred through that advice, and the central narrative position which that advice takes are all reminiscent of the dialogues which we find in the kings' sagas (see above, note 8). Þorgils and Hafliði rely on a variety of people for their advice, for information, and for helpful support and they must be seen to act well when uncertainty arises.¹⁸ A great deal comes down to what is said and done in difficult situations, when a character's ability to maintain a stable sense of self is challenged by the lack of the stability in the world around them. This sense of self, which, given the sagas' objective style, can be difficult to measure, can be described as the balance which a character demonstrates he or she can strike between their desires and the situations in which desires are expressed or tested.

Gaps in a character's knowledge create tensions in the narratives of their lives and their personal development. They do so by forming a nexus between the main action of the saga and characters' understanding of that action, thus

¹⁸ A notable aspect of the prose of *Þorgils saga* is its interest in how speakers and listeners deal with the act of words, their effect, value, their ability to alter resolve and composure. This issue comes up around both minor and major events. Of the minor characters, we read, for example, that "mælti Óláfr [lin]liga til," "spoke quietly," in his approach to Már, and "mælti til vel," "put it politely," but "Már svarar illa" (6), "replies rudely." When Már gives orders to Þorsteinn, "[hann] gaf engan gaum at orðum hans" or "gave no heed to his words" (7). Hrafn mocks Már because "en þegar at ríkra manna orð koma til yðar, þá eru þér þegar limhlaupa," "when powerful men's word comes to you, then you are still [useless limbs]" (8). We also have the famous exchanges at the wedding feast at Reykjahólar, where word play is almost as physical an act as the belching it mocks (15-17; note also the description of story-telling, 17-18; see Bragason, "Ok;" Dronke, "The Saga;" and Foote, "Sagnaskemtan"). And the saga gives a very subtle portrayal of one of Hafliði's assassins, Grímr, a fellow who is somewhat out of step with the world around him, is greatly affected by Hafliði's kindness, and who needs to be encouraged by Már prestur to approach him (19). See Brown, "Preface" xvii-xx, xxii-xxiii regarding dialogue and perspective in the saga.

positioning their knowledge as an instrumental factor in the central contingency of the plot (that is, the audience's suspense or, in a saga context, its lack of knowledge about *how* future events will come to pass). The contingency in *Þorgils saga* centres on whether Þorgils and Hafliði will end their dispute by fighting at the Alþing or through a negotiated settlement. In *Laxdæla saga*, it is concerned with the question of Guðrún's part in the deaths of Kjartan and Bolli. In both sagas, the tension created by the contingency can be resolved if characters move from positions of ignorance to knowledge. Both sagas effect this movement in eloquent ways. I have already referred to the point of resolution in *Laxdæla saga* (Guðrún's discussion with Bolli), and the steps in regaining self-possession which Guðrún takes after the killing of Bolli. All I would add now is that *Laxdæla saga* is, in comparison with *Þorgils saga*, a very focused biography (of Guðrún): it is not too much to say that its principal concern is with her inner development. In *Þorgils saga*, the movement to knowledge (including a self-knowledge analogous to what we find in Guðrún's characterisation) is depicted as part of dispute narrative which gives the viewpoint of both protagonists. This technique, often referred to as objective saga style – Taylor describes it as the “technique of the outside observer” (14) – allows the reader to view the uncertainties from different angles, the focalisation brought about by an overarching narrative voice and each side of the dispute. As a result, the representation of self-possession in the face of ignorance and, indeed, in light of subsequent knowledge is developed in a way that allows ethical comparisons to be made between the conduct of the two protagonists.

During their second law case, for example, Hafliði decides to take a weapon to the hearing, a decision which draws a sharp comment from his wife Rannveig:

“Hvat er í þessu, Hafliði,” sagði hon, “at bera nú vápn heldr en fyrr ertu vanr at gera? Ok halt þú háttum þínum.” Hon var vitr kona ok vel at sér um margt. (25)

“What is this, Hafliði,” she said, “that you now carry a weapon when your custom has been not to. Stick to your own ways.” She was a wise woman and accomplished in many ways.

The suggestion is that inconsistency in the face of uncertainty is a sign of weakness. Þorgils sees Hafliði’s axe, and Hafliði is wounded at the hearing; in a scene which parallels Þorgils’ query about Bǫðvarr’s motives in advising restraint, Hafliði returns to his wife to discuss their earlier conversation:

Ok þá er hann gekk inn í búðina ok þar at, sem sat Rannveig kona hans, ok mælti svá: “Opt hefi ek þat reynt, at ek em vel kvángaðr, ok enn hefir þá raun á orðit, at þú ert allvitr kona, ok hefir þú nær forspá verit, af því at eigi munda ek fyrir þessum vansa orðit hafa, ef ek hefða þín ráð haft.” (26)

And when he went into the booth and to where Rannveig his wife sat, he said this: “It has often been shown to me that I am well married, and again it has turned out that you are a very wise woman, and you have been close to prophesying, in that I would not have suffered this disgrace if I had taken your advice.”

Rannveig’s warning is given in words which reinforce the ethos of this saga, that one ought to be consistent in one’s ways, even in new and difficult situations. Hafliði’s mistake and subsequent humiliation are represented by the saga author in these terms. Success, which can be identified in *Þorgils saga* as resolving one’s disputes in a way which gives one credit, comes from a self-possession which enables characters to know what advice to accept and when to accept it.¹⁹

In the final moments of *Þorgils saga*, which describe the movement towards a potentially catastrophic battle at the Alþing, both Hafliði and Þorgils are pressured to reach a peaceful and lasting resolution. Þorgils’ armed advance

¹⁹ I use the term *credit* to cover as wide a range of beneficial outcomes as possible, from the honour which might be gained by displaying bravery in the face of danger (often associated with the pre-Christian tradition) to the renown due to those who forego their legal rights out of humility or for the benefit of the community as a whole.

on the Alþing proves difficult to temper, although it is doubtful that Þorgils himself believes in the extremity of the position which he adopts. However, Þorgils understands the effect which its extremity can have on his supporters and those awaiting him at the Alþing, including Hafliði, his troop, and a number of peacemakers. A report that Þorgils' messengers have been killed is sensibly dismissed by him, and the incremental progress of the narrative alongside his troop has the effect of repeatedly harnessing the focus of the action to his decision-making (see esp. the attempts to temper Þorgils' advance). In the face of uncertain information, Þorgils is able to maintain the advance of his case and the pressure on Hafliði. The author is interested in the attempts to prevent Þorgils' advance on the Alþing, and the advance of his troop is staged in order to bring his consistency of purpose into relief. Reactions to Þorgils' advance and the last minute negotiations to avoid a confrontation stress the role which that premeditated advance performs. It is his movement forward and his strength of character which prompt the reactions of those already at the Alþing. The episode shows his ability to premeditate, foresee consequences, and make sound decisions under pressure, abilities that are important in developing Þorgils' positive position in the text and in establishing his inner life and sense of self as core components of the plot.

As a further parallel with Þorgils' discussion with Boðvarr, the saga turns to a conversation between Hafliði and Ketill. The latter is a high-minded figure who persuades Hafliði to accept a reconciliation with Þorgils. Hafliði's acceptance of Ketill's advice is an indication that Hafliði has become more adept at accepting advice at the right moment. In other words, his thoughtfulness and insightfulness have developed and he does not repeat the mistake he made when he ignored Rannveig's advice. Of equal importance is the timing of Hafliði's decision to bow to pressure: he resists advice, first put to him by a bishop, that is accompanied by a threat of excommunication: bowing to such a threat will not be to Hafliði's credit (chs. 22 and 27). Ketill's approach to Hafliði is far more conciliatory. He narrates a story of pride and peace before God, whose message Hafliði adopts as a way of ending the dispute through

negotiation (in much the same way as, earlier in the saga, Guðmundr and Þoðvarr offer creditable ways to curtail acts of aggression). Hafliði does not adopt a different philosophical outlook because of Ketill's entreaty. The change in Hafliði is rather more tactical than spiritual.²⁰ He has learnt to act and think more constructively in the circumstances and conditions in which he lives.

Characters' Understanding

In this chapter, I have emphasised the Christian element in saga writing. Particularly in the case of *Laxdæla saga*, such a reading can be criticised for downplaying the author's adherence to more traditional social codes, like honour, and to the form of the saga as it was inherited as tradition. It is certainly the case that Guðrún's religious life comes only at the end of the saga.²¹ The author does not press the Christian discourse to such an extent that the saga's dramatic force as love story, a feud plot, and as a biography of an ambitious and remarkable woman is lost. One thing I do not want to do in this chapter is create an impression of didactic authors who were unable to appreciate their material for its literary value and historical significance in what it told them about the people of early Iceland.

The aim in this chapter has been to stress the role of characters' inner lives in realising that literary value and historical understanding. In that sense, the self-possession which Þorgils and Hafliði demonstrate at the close of *Þorgils saga* is much like the inner knowledge achieved by Guðrún in *Laxdæla saga*. When Guðrún rejects a ghost's report that her fourth husband is drowned in Breiðafjörðr, she shows that part of her sense of self is discernment or an ability to avoid certain information, just as Þorgils knows when to reject the report of his messengers' death, and in much same way that Hafliði is self-assured enough to ignore a threat of excommunication. These characters have achieved a balance between self and situation of which the saga clearly

²⁰ The exchange of insults between Þoðvarr and Hafliði at the close of the saga (chapter 31) is a good indication that Hafliði has not become a more humble figure after Ketill's speech.

²¹ Concerning the relationship of episodes and unity of composition in *Laxdæla saga*, see Madelung, *Structural Patterns*.

approves, and which forms a central part of the saga author's performance of the empathetic function of authorship. We see that the use of deferred or suppressed knowledge expresses an important aspect of the saga's ethical point of view. Various gaps in understanding are created so that the audience, drawn into the gap produced when the authors withhold knowledge from characters, see a character's development or pre-existing strengths come to fill those gaps.

Even if we accept that the two sagas share a similar approach to knowledge and narrative, there nevertheless remains the complicated task of bringing the connection into the argument put here about authorship and characterisation in the sagas. I think the most important link that we can identify is between characters' comments about events with a) the level of critical interpretation which the authors were willing to write into the plot, and b) the positioning of the audience to respond actively and thoughtfully, by weighing up contrasting moral and historical interpretations. The authors' attention to characters' sense of responsibility and understanding places the characters at a point of potential friction with the events around them. They are not altogether carried forward by the plot but exist in a state which makes it possible for them to experience events at a critical distance, in fact in a similar interpretive mode as the author's. Guðrún, for instance, knows about future events because of Gestr's interpretation of her dreams, and the rest of the saga is concerned with the portrayal of her growing sense of the likely impact of these events as well as the occurrence of the events themselves. Her impressions and response are as important for this saga author as the deaths of Bolli and Kjartan. This interest in the inner world of characters does not give us a clear cut statement of medieval Icelandic notions of the relationship between individuals and their world (or circumstances and information which challenge self-possession), between knowledge and the context of its production, but it does give us a fairly clear sense of an authorial interest in the tensions inherent in representing the past, and that stability and change, knowledge and understanding, were seen by these authors as being emblematic of that tension. Although not always expressed clearly, the inner world of saga characters and their sense of self are key

elements in saga writing and important for the authors' ability to empathise with their characters, to use them as historical models of ethical behaviour, and to develop the saga at an interpretive level. Such characters are secondary authors because they express moral and ethical outlooks of interest to the author. In doing so, they come into the possession of the saga author, and can be used in the author's distinctive representation of the past.

Chapter 7: Narratives of Ambition and Excess

Ríðkat rækimeidum
randar hots á móti;
sköpuð es þessum þegni
þraut, ferk einn á brautu (*Grettis saga* 207)

I did not ride to face the tenders
of swords that strike terror into shields;
I tread a solitary path, a life
of tribulation is shaped for me. (Scudder, *Saga of Grettir the Strong* 150)

Individual Ambition and Community Control

The preceding two chapters of this thesis have emphasised the inner world of saga characters, in particular, characters' perception and the knowledge they gain in the course of a saga, an episode, or during a critical moment in their awareness of the circumstances around them. The examination of characters' inner lives in the sagas has supported an argument that certain characters – secondary authors – facilitate saga authors' attempts to take possession of traditional narratives as part of their development of distinctive historical interpretations. Characters' interpretation and understanding are thematised in a way that invites a psychological and emotional connection between saga characters and the audience. The narrative development of characters' inner lives enables the author to develop ethical and moral concerns from the point of view of the famous figures of the past, a viewpoint which imbues contemporary concerns with the symbolic value of major events of the past, like the settlement, Christianisation, and major feuds. Traditional performance and medieval interpretation are interwoven in the saga authors' imaginative deployment of characters who, through their expression of themes

that interest the authors, act as secondary authors and add a contemporary Icelandic voice to the other dialogues underway.

The socio-political context in which characters' inner lives are developed plays a necessary part in defining the personal qualities which mark out certain characters as morally and ethically praiseworthy. We have seen, for instance, that Gísli Súrsson's attachment to an heroic code of strict family loyalty allows the medieval audience to sympathise with him (ch. 2) – the audience is given the opportunity to understand and share the connection between national and domestic narratives. So too, Hjalti Skeggjason's daring and innovation at the Norwegian court invites the audience to view Norwegian history through his distinctly Icelandic eyes (ch. 4), and through this empathy to enter the royal world that Icelandic authors seek to share with Norway.

Difficult Characters

While it is never a straightforward exercise to determine saga authors' attitudes to their characters, figures like Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, Hjalti Skeggjason, and heathens Gísli Súrsson and Gunnarr Hámundarson appear to have support and understanding from their authors for their actions. The authors are ethically sympathetic. A more difficult problem arises when we examine the authorial engagement with characters who, because of their personal ambition or excessive behaviour, challenge the stability and moderation of conduct in the saga age.¹ We might expect some ambivalence in the authorial attitude to disruptive characters because disruptiveness does not appear to have the ethical basis of heroic actions or actions that the author has contextualised within a feud narrative or a narrative of honour. On the other hand, such figures are famous for their deeds and are, in a number of respects, praised by the community of other characters in the saga (a group I call "saga community"). Competing interests and a complex range of ethical concerns are voiced in the

¹ Consider, for example, Andersson's description of Egill Skalla-Grimsson as a character who "can control everything but his own impulse to excel" ("Character" 3; see also his comments about *Fóstbræðra saga*, 4).

sagas of excessively ambitious characters. Like the tensions between old and new, exotic and local, heathen and Christian, and inner and exterior life that we have seen in other sagas, a tension can be identified between the strength and usefulness of overbearing characters and the difficulties they cause. The mixed view of difficult characters that we see in the saga community's attitude to them and the saga authors' contextualisation of their actions is further support for the argument put in this thesis about the competing narrative voices accommodated by the sagas. That is, the saga form is able to accommodate oppositional forces, both in terms of authorial functions and the socio-ethical content of the narratives.

Ójafnaðarmenn, “difficult” or “overbearing men,” are a regular feature of saga narratives.² They are often the cause of difficulties for more moderate characters.³ Unlike an ambitious character who creates order in the community, characters who add a degree of disorder to the saga community may require additional contextualisation in order for an audience to side with them, that is, to give a favourable representation of excessive and difficult behaviour in narratives that support community ideals of balance and proportion in human affairs. Even in the context of a literature that glamorises the exploits of the

² The term indicates a unruly and difficult disposition. See, e.g., *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* ch.2; *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 8; *Grettir saga Ásmundarsonar* ch. 28; *Króka-Refs saga* ch. 1.

³ The idea of moderation has been raised on a number of occasions in this thesis, and has been related to the change in early Icelandic society from Viking Age heathenism to Christianity (see above, esp. chs. 3, 4, 6). See further Thompson 350; Lönnroth, “Noble Heathen;” Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*; Andersson, *Family Saga*; Westhuizen 438-40. I agree with Thompson that our interest in the Christian element in the sagas must be based on the sagas themselves rather than on the basis of an automatic connection between religious attitudes in the thirteenth century and the moderation of disputes in the sagas (356). Further, the desire for moderation can also be attributed to the legal context of events in the sagas. Given the nature of the Icelandic legal system, which relied on the self-enforcement of judgments, and the measurement of honour in Icelandic disputes, it is reasonable to assume that there was considerable pressure on disputants to limit their ambition (see esp. Byock, *Feud*; Andersson and Miller). Regarding the social and authorial desire for the moderation of disputes in *Sturlunga saga*, see also above, ch. 2, and Tranter's view, expressed in his dissertation, that the compiler sought to depict a “slide into anarchy” (52-53; see also 90). Tranter's method of contrasting the social picture of *Sturlunga saga* and the family sagas to gain a sense of authorial attitudes to twelfth and thirteenth century disputes is problematic (see esp. 58-60), but the underlying idea of authorial concern with the moderation of disputes is well founded (e.g., 61-63. 72-78). See also Ciklamini's discussion of the Christian element in characterisation in *Sturlunga saga* (“Biographical,” “Divine Will,” “Sturla,” “The Christian Champion,” and “Veiled Meaning”).

exceptional, violent, and heroic members of the past, the figures discussed here, like the sworn-brothers in *Fóstbræðra saga*, Grettir Ásmundarson (from *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*), Þorgils skarði (*Þorgils saga skarða*) and some of the major characters in *Orkneyinga saga* suggest that ambition was contrasted to strength, daring, and other heroic virtues, and was regarded as a problematic quality.⁴

Given the socially disruptive behaviour of some of the *ójafnaðarmenn*, it is less likely that the saga authors sought to foster empathy for them from the medieval audience. However, it remained open to the saga authors to glamorise some aspects of their behaviour, and in so doing to be selective in their medieval possession of the narratives about them. For example, Grettir Ásmundarson's strength and endurance and the fearlessness of the sworn-brothers are emphasised. The time spent on their achievements makes it clear that the authors appreciate some of these characters' qualities. Naturally, variation in the community view of difficult characters reflects early and medieval Icelandic kinship obligations: disruptive members of society could find protection in powerful family connections. Further, a lack of executive control meant that such people were accommodated and contained by a community that was relatively tolerant of individualistic behaviour. It seems that, to some extent, these characters had to be tolerated, and the desire to emphasise and encourage their socially useful qualities was no doubt a commonsense one.

In the sagas examined in this chapter, we see that the saga form accommodates and gives meaning to the competition between an excessive individual's usefulness and disruptiveness by characterising such individuals in relation to the community's attempts to calm them and utilise their strengths. A thematic interest in the ethics of ambition and success emerges. In their concern for the lives of individuals who stand apart from the broader community, some saga authors display social consciousness in relation to the function of difficult

⁴ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* is herein referred to as *Grettis saga* and *Þorgils saga skarða* as *Þorgils skarða*.

men. While the sagas I have chosen vary in their timeframes and settings, they share a desire to understand and explain the social effects of ambition. Read together, the works suggest that, despite the disruption they cause, excessive characters could function as secondary authors. The characters' positive qualities and the saga authors' interest in their moderation can both be given voice because of the saga form's ability to accommodate varying points of view. As a result, the educative function of these sagas – related to the moderation of excessive political figures – is associated with the great deeds that may come with ambition.

More specifically, I think *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Orkneyinga saga*, and *Grettis saga* provide a framework with which to analyse the author's approach to Þorgils skarði's ambitious nature in *Þorgils skarða*. In particular, these three sagas demonstrate the level of interest that saga authors have in characters who exceed the accepted bounds of political ambition or desire for honour by jeopardising kinship relationships, by demanding too much forbearance from the community when they strive for memorable achievements, or by acting in a way that places a strain on the various allegiances and processes that moderate the conduct of disputes. At the heart of such characterisation is a conception of authorship as partly an interpretive function that sees social relations thematised and understood from an historically self-conscious viewpoint. There is an effort on the part of saga authors to demonstrate that the strengths of excessively ambitious characters can be utilised in a socially beneficial way, and that despite the problems they cause these men can bring honour to those who deal with them thoughtfully.

Grettir Ásmundarson

Grettir Ásmundarson is of particular interest because he is a liminal figure who exists for much of the saga on the border between the saga community and outlawry. Grettir's existence gives definition to and can create ambiguity about the boundaries between socially useful and disruptive behaviour. While Grettir often travels alone (and shuns the company of other

outlaws), he also has regular contact with the community of the saga, for instance, when he is forced to steal or to seek assistance (e.g., ch. 59). In refusing exile abroad, Grettir exists for many years on the fringes of Icelandic social life. When he interacts with chieftains and farmers, community opinion about him is recorded, most interestingly the repeated notion among some that Grettir ought to be relieved of the outlawry sentence and thus contained again by the social codes of inclusion rather than exclusion.

The possibility that Grettir will be included again in lawful society, although not realised, reflects the author's interest in the ability of the community to control Grettir and creates the impression that Grettir ought not to be viewed as a common outlaw. Underlying this tension about Grettir's place, appears to be a broader social concern about whether a person like Grettir, who is extraordinarily strong but difficult to control, can be of use to a farming community that relies on the careful moderation and self-regulation of disputes in order to maintain social order. Thus, containment and belonging, and social and legal exile (established by the saga as powerful forces in Iceland's settlement) link the different parts of *Grettis saga* in the same way as *Eyrbyggja saga* is unified by the author's interest in the supernatural forces in Snæfellsnes and the development of a new social order in that region.⁵

A Difficult Young Man

Like the conceit of the Icелander abroad (see above, ch. 4), a character type of the unlikely hero who is slow to prove himself features in a number of saga narratives. Grettir, we are told, is one of these: “ekki bráðgörr, meðan hann var á barnsaldri” (36); “he was not accomplished while he was in his childhood years.” Like Víga-Glúmr, Grettir is slow in his youth and, like Snorri goði, he is quickly identified as a quarrelsome person who will be difficult to deal with.⁶ Like his father Ásmundr, Grettir does not like to do farm work (*Grettis saga* ch.

⁵ That is, the settlement narrative (dominated by Qnundr tréfót, “tree-foot”) at the beginning of the saga, the story of Grettir's achievements and his outlawry and, thirdly, the narrative of the vengeance taken for him in Byzantium.

⁶ Regarding Víga-Glúmr's characterisation, see above, ch. 1.

14), an indication that he is ill-suited to normal or routine life in Iceland (and more suited to merchant life and raiding abroad). As one might say of a similar case in *Gísla saga*,⁷ his failure to help with farm work reflects hostilities which exist in the family, in Grettir's case between father and son. Like Egill Skalla-Grímsson, Grettir shares many character traits with his father but, as in Egill's relationship with Skalla-Grímr, the two dislike and provoke one another. The hero's initial lack of promise contrasts with later impressive conduct and suggests that Grettir's outward appearance can be misleading. The transition from a despised layabout to hero, repeated a number of times in the saga, focuses attention on shifting social status and the difficulty of understanding ambitious or exceptional characters.

An ironic comment by the author “*margir báðu hann vel fara en fáir aftur koma*” (974), “many wished Grettir well on his travels abroad but few wished him to return,” comes at the beginning of an adult career of troublemaking. It confirms one's impression that the rhetorical stance adopted by the author is in line with the community feeling that the Grettir *type*, while at times remarkable and interesting, is a problem in a place like Iceland.⁸ Grettir's mode of social interaction creates mixed relationships with others in the saga community: it is a pattern of taciturn laziness, disruptiveness, rudeness, followed by intense activity, and this causes both social alarm and a degree of admiration.⁹ It is unclear whether he belongs in the early Icelandic community;

⁷ Þorkell, Gísli Súrsson's brother, uses his laziness around the farm as a pretext for dissolving the joint ownership of the brothers' farm in Haukadalsr. Grettir's feelings about farm labour can be linked to Qnundr's tréfót's sentiments about Iceland: both characters seem to be oppressed by the nature of Icelandic farm life, and capable (like Ásmundr during his youth) of living more exciting and daring lives. This potential for (or, in the case of Qnundr, the memory of) a more adventurous life outside the farm creates a tension that may, ultimately, manifest in what I have termed *excessive* behaviour, or behaviour that is out of keeping with the balance and sense of proportion that is demanded by farm life in Iceland and by Iceland's non-executive legal system.

⁸ In particular, there is a fascination with Grettir's strength, which he acquires at a young age; see ch. 16.

⁹ There are many instances in the saga in which Grettir moves from being a difficult troublemaker to a man of enormous use to the community. See, for example, his efforts during his voyage to Norway (ch. 17), his fight with Glámr (ch. 35), his strength in acquiring fire for his shipmates (ch. 38), his fight with the berserk Snækollr (ch. 40), his fight with a troll woman in Sandhaugar (ch. 65) and her male friend (ch. 66). See also Sveinn jarl's recognition of

perhaps he is too excessive in his ambition and strength to be included. For most, to maintain and contain such a person takes more skill and patience than they possess, and when Þorgils Arason in Reykjahólar manages to house three of the most difficult men in Iceland – Grettir and Þorgeirr and Þormóðr (of *Fóstbræðra saga*) – praise is, naturally, heaped upon him (chs. 50-51). Þorgils shows that it is possible to restrict the violent excess of characters like Grettir, but the community admires his powers of moderation as far beyond what they themselves could achieve.

“Vertu vel stilltr”: Dealing with Grettir

Vertu vel stilltr, which Bernard Scudder translates as “restrain yourself” (Scudder, *Saga of Grettir the Strong* 98), could be seen as a metonym for the saga community’s relations with Grettir: he is always on the edge of behaviour that is too rash and too aggressive for the situations he is in.¹⁰ The comment represents the saga community’s attempt to restrain Grettir and to keep him within the boundaries of acceptable conduct. Grettir is more than a merely difficult or ambitious person; he lacks the self-knowledge of a character like Snorri goði and his temper is beyond containment. As a result, Þórarinn hinn spaki (the Wise) worries about Grettir’s suitability for any important matters, a concern which his foster-son Barði confirms when Grettir confronts him near Þóreyjargnúpr:

Grettir svarar: “Bleyðask þykki mér þú, Barði,” sagði Grettir, “ef þú þorir eigi at berjask við mik.” “Kalla þú þat sem þú vill,” segir Barði, “en í qðrum stað vilda ek, at þú kæmir fram ójafnaði þínum en við mik; er þat eigi ólíkligt, því at nú gengr ór hófi offors þitt.” Gretti þótti illar spár hans, ok efar nú fyrir sér, hvárt hann skyldi ráða til einhvers þeira, ok sýnisk honum þat óforsjálígt, er þeir váru sex, en hann einn. (106)

Grettir’s value to the community when he accepts compensation for the killing of Björn (ch. 22).

¹⁰ The sub-heading is taken from Atli’s comment to Grettir before the horse-fight in ch. 29.

Grettir answers: “You seem craven to me, Barði,” said Grettir, “if you do not dare to fight with me.” “You may call it what you like,” says Barði, “but I would prefer your overbearing nature to be fulfilled in other places than here with me. It is not unlikely, because your insolence now exceeds all moderation.” Grettir thought ill of his prophecy, and hesitates now about whether he ought to attack one of them, but this seemed unwise as they were six in number and he was alone.

At the heart of this confrontation is Grettir’s socially disruptive desire constantly to challenge his own strength as well as that of others, a desire the community must restrain. In Vatnsdalr, for instance, Grettir is warned by Þorvaldr to “hafa sig spakan” (“to keep quiet”)¹¹ and, at the Alþing, Snorri goði indicates that he is aware of the danger that comes in keeping a man like Grettir beyond the community’s reach and moderation. The complex system of allegiances in early Iceland makes it difficult for Grettir to be kept altogether apart from the community.

While some of the toleration of Grettir comes about because of kinship ties, Grettir attracts the approval and advice of those not related to him, and at these times we see that he is respected and at times sought after. For instance, Grettir’s capture by farmers in the West Fjords is undone by Þorbjörg Óláfsdóttir, who demands Grettir’s release. When questioned by her husband Vermundr about her actions, she gives some indication of the reason Grettir is able to remain an outlaw for so long:

“...það fyrst,” segir hon, “at þú munt þykkja meiri höfðingi en áðr, er þú áttir þá konu, er slíkt þorði að gera. Þá myndi þat ok ætla Hrefna, frændkona hans, at ek mynda eigi láta drepa hann. Þat hit þriðja, at hann er inn mesti afreksmaðr í mörgum greinum.” “Vitr kona ertu,” sagði Vermundr, “í flestu, ok haf þokk fyrir.” (170)

¹¹ This meaning of *spakr*, which can also mean “wise,” is rare in the sagas but occurs three other times in *Grettis saga* (see “spakr” in Kristjánsdóttir, et. al., “Orðstöðulykill”).

“...in the first place,” she says, “you will be considered a greater chieftain than before because you are married to a woman who dared to do this. Then, it will be the desire of his kinswoman Hrefna that I should not let him be killed. In the third place, he is the most valiant man in many respects.” “You are a wise woman,” said Vermundr, “in most things, and have my thanks for it.”

Grettir’s strength, his allegiances, and the honour which attaches to the recognition of *hinn mesti afreksmaðr* (“the most valiant man”)¹² combine to keep him on the border of inclusion and exclusion, a border that parallels the community’s division of useful and honourable qualities (like strength and daring) and those traits which it cannot control. There are indications, too, that Grettir is aware that he can be viewed as a figure who can benefit the community or harm it, and at times he seems rather stung by the failure of those around him to see his value at once. When he is praised for his defence of Þorfinnr’s family, for example, he replies, “Ek þykkjumk nú mjök inn sami ok í kveld, er þér tóluðuð hrakliga við mik” (69), “I think I am much the same as in the evening when you spoke to me in a wretched way” – and the offer of an honourable place in the hall is met by the sentiment that he would have accepted their courtesy as happily if it had been given earlier in the evening. Grettir seeks to be honoured and, it seems, does not understand the saga community’s uncertainty about him.

When on Drangey, Grettir experiences the most unified community hostility of his life. Yet, even then the situation is marked by the inability of the community to express a unified view of his status. Indeed, it is not until the local farmers sell their shares in the island to Þorbjörn ǫngull (“hook”), a transfer from the community to another ambitious individual, that Grettir faces

¹² This assessment is to some extent reflected in the final chapter of the saga, in which Sturla Þórðarson’s reckoning of Grettir as the greatest Icelandic outlaw is cited. The reasons Sturla gives relate to wisdom (“vitrastr”), strength (“sterkastr”), and the fact that Grettir is avenged by his brother Þorsteinn *drómundr* (“warship”) in Miklagarðr. While Sturla’s reasoning does not correlate exactly with that of Þorbjörg, there is an equivalent recognition of, firstly, Grettir’s outstanding ability as a man apart from the rest of society and, secondly, Grettir’s nobility.

death. Grettir wants to be part of the community, and his sensitivity to its dislike is well born out in his response to the news of Þorbjörn's acquisition of the shares:

“Nú kvattu þat upp, at ek em ráðinn til at ganga heðan aldri, er þú sagðisk eiga mestan hlut eyjarinnar; er þat vel, þó at vit deilim kálit. En þat var satt, at mér þótti erfitt at hafa alla Skagfirðinga í móti mér, en hér er hvárrgi til sparandi, því at vit munum ekki kafna í vinsældum manna.” (237)

“Now you have ensured, when you said that you won the greatest part of the island, that I am determined never to leave this place. We can't tell what will happen between us.¹³ But it was true that I found it difficult to have all the people of Skagafjörður against me, but there is no need to spare in matters between us because neither of us is popular.”

Grettir prefers to confront a quarrelsome person with a disposition like his own than to fight against the community as a whole. His preference for one-to-one disputes is in keeping with his characterisation as a fighter rather than a political figure and with his willingness to help those around him in situations where strength is needed. Grettir is both a willing fighter and a reluctant outlaw, a combination that parallels the mixed nature of the community's attitude to him. On both sides, there is a concomitant desire for Grettir to be part of the community and to be allowed to use his strength and daring in ways that benefit the group.

In portraying the difficulty which the community of the saga has in controlling Grettir, the saga links the question of social cohesion in early Iceland to the narrative of Grettir's life. Most immediately, his outlawry shows the inability of his enemies to execute the sentence against him. Further, the consequence of that inability is important because it creates a narrative that dwells extensively on the reactions of community members to a

¹³ On the translation of this sentence, see Cleasby and Vigfusson 334.

overbearing person whose strength and endurance are respected. This allows the author to depict early Iceland from the viewpoint a character who seems both to challenge the social and legal norms of ethical conduct and to personify the human qualities which most often define the heroes of the sagas. The saga gives a sympathetic treatment of Grettir's plight, emphasises Grettir's closeness to surviving the outlawry sentence, and flatters with attention characters who recognise his usefulness and stature. Perhaps, in this way, the saga author suggests that Grettir's death marks of a broader community failing in harnessing the good qualities of difficult figures. What is certain is that Grettir's characterisation allows the saga author to develop an historical interpretation of social and ethical relations in the life of a famous, difficult character. The interpretive function of authorship is at times performed in a similar way in *Fóstbræðra saga*.

The Sworn-Brothers

Þorgeirr and Þormóðr, the central characters of *Fóstbræðra saga*, share Grettir's desire to test the boundaries of their strength. We might say, for instance, that the sworn-brothers' refusal to be assisted by their companions when they attack the thieves Ingólfr and Þorbrandr (ch. 5) is made in the same spirit of strength-testing as Grettir's decision to take on Glámr alone.¹⁴ These are characters who wish to test their strength and abilities against the other fighters of their day and pit their reputations against those of warriors who have preceded them on the saga stage.¹⁵

As in *Grettis saga*, an immediately recognisable narrative of ambition, strength, and disruptiveness co-exists with a more subtle discourse concerning the community's ability to accommodate Þorgeirr and Þormóðr and the extent of the sworn-brothers' ability to contain and tolerate each other (so that their

¹⁴ I.e., "þeir [Þorgeirr ok Þormóðr] vildu sjálfir yfir þá stíga" (138); "they [Þorgeirr and Þormóðr] wanted to overcome them by themselves."

¹⁵ Other examples of the immediate inclination of these strong, overbearing figures to take each other on, and to seek tests of strength include Þorgeirr's fight with Butraldi (ch. 6), the fight over the whale in ch. 7, when Þorgeirr refers openly to his desire to test himself against Þorgils ("er mér forvitni á að reyna á þér hver eg er").

friendship can be maintained).¹⁶ Neither the community's nor the sworn-brothers' tolerance is unlimited. For instance, Vermundr, whose appearances in *Grettis saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* suggest a figure who would like to punish excessive or disruptive characters, but who is assuaged by the wiser counsel of those around him, wishes to see the sworn-brothers controlled by force:

Vermundr mælti: “Mjök ganga þeir fóstbræðr nú af sér, er þeir drepa menn fyrir oss, ok mundum vér þat vilja, at þeir dræpi eigi vára menn marga.” Hon mælti: “Þat er sem ván er, að yör sé svá um gefit, en þat munu sumir menn mæla, að þeir hafi eigi þessa menn fyrir yör drepit, heldr má hinn veg at kveða, at þeir hafi þessi víg fyrir yör unnit. En hverr skal hegna ósiðu, rán eða hernað, ef eigi vilið þér, er stjórnarmenn eru kallaðir heraða? Sýnisk oss, at þeir Þorgeirr og Þormóðr hafi þat unnit, er þér skylduð gort hafa eða láta gera, ok mun yör svá sýnask sem ek segi, ef yör gefr eigi missýni í þessu máli. Fór ek af því á yðvarn fund, at ek vilda mennina í frið kaupa, þá er vígin hafði vegit, en eigi fyrir þá sök, at þeir sé bóta verðir, er vegnir eru, því at þeir hafa fyrir löngu fyrirgort lífi sínu ok fé, heldr viljum vér gera í öllu þinn soma, sem vér erum skyld til; ok eru hér nú þrjú hundruð silfrs, er ek vil gefa þér til friðkaups þeim Þorgeiri ok Þormóði.” Nú tekr hon fésjóð undan belti sér ok steypir fénu í kné Vermundi. Silfrit var gott. Vermundr hefr upp brún við fégjöfina; sefask hann af reiðinni, ok heitr hann Þorgeiri ok Þormóði nokkurum friði; sagðisk þó eigi vilja langvistir Þorgeirs þar um Ísafjörð. (140-41)

Vermundr said: “The sworn-brothers go about arrogantly, killing our men, and we do not want them to kill more of our men.” She said: “It is to be expected that you view things this way, but some would say that in killing they haven't gone

¹⁶At times the saga is striking for the openness with which it interprets events, especially in its use of figurative language (see Ólason, *Dialogues* 105).

against you; rather, one can say they have killed for you. But who will punish crimes of theft and plunder if you, who are called chiefs of the district, won't do it. It seems to us that Þorgeirr and Þormóðr did what you should have done or ordered to be done – you would see what I say is right if you weren't blind in the matter. I came to meet you because I wished to buy immunity for the killers, although not because those killed would be compensated by it – they have, for a long time, foregone life and property. Rather, we wish to show you respect in all things, as we must. So here are three hundreds of silver, which I give to you for the immunity of Þorgeirr and Þormóðr.” She now takes the purse from under her belt and pours the money onto Vermundr's lap. The silver was good. Vermundr's eyebrows lift at the sight, his anger subsides, and he promises Þorgeirr and Þormóðr partial immunity; he declared, though, that he didn't want them to stay long in Ísafjörðr.

The author may sympathise with the community's difficulty in dealing with the sworn-brothers – the use of metaphors, drawn from the natural world to describe the effect they have on local people, suggests the author is very aware of the problems caused by such overbearing characters. Nevertheless, the impression one gets from the passage quoted above is that the author admires Sigurfljóð for her ability to use, contain, and control the sworn-brothers. He attributes a certain nobility to her desire to be hospitable to them and to her manipulation of Vermundr's weakness for good quality silver (“silfrið var gott,” or “the silver was good,” appears to function here as free indirect discourse).¹⁷ Vermundr is a powerful figure in the West Fjords, but here he functions mainly as a symbol of the failure of some members of the community to see either the

¹⁷ Vermundr's characterisation in *Fóstbræðra saga* seems highly consistent with his portrayal in *Eyrbyggja saga*, in which he foolishly brings to Iceland berserks he cannot control (see chapter 3).

difference between the sworn-brothers and other overbearing but less honourable characters (such as Ingólfr and Þorbrandr) or to find a way to contain them.

In *Orkneyinga saga*, the narrative is not concerned with just one or two disruptive characters but rather several generations of earls whose ambition undermines social cohesion in the Orkneys. The earls share with Grettir and the sworn-brothers a desire to test their strength and to conquer opposition with little regard to the consequences for themselves or the community more generally. Rather like Grettir and the sworn-brothers, the earls cannot be removed but must instead be moderated and controlled. Despite the difference in the social position of the sworn-brothers, Grettir, and the earls of Orkney, in their characterisation they are connected by an authorial interest in the moderation of difficult figures by the community of the saga. This interest reflects at least three authorial functions: to collate and document the accounts of famous lives, to interpret the impact of their dispositions and lifestyles, and to inform the reader of how difficult and ambitious individuals could be made useful and, if not contained, of how disruptive those individuals might be. Thus, the saga form allows the author to narrate in changing voices, alternately documenting famous characters' lives, interpreting the ethical and moral significance of their lives, and locating those lives in wider historical and ethical discourses about moderation and excess.

Thus, *Orkneyinga saga* allows us to further discuss the role of characterisation in the saga authors' development of ethical and historical themes. It also permits us to return to the question, first raised in chapters one and two, of the saga authors' interest family obligation and discord. Earlier, we saw that empathetic characterisation could signal the national significance of domestic matters: in *Íslendinga saga*, for example, Sturla narrates historically significant matters in domestic, family saga terms as a way of connecting them to the great events of the saga age. The same can be said of parts of *Orkneyinga saga*, which, in its concern with advice, moderation or incitement of violence, negotiation, and family disunity, has much in common with *Sturlunga saga*. In

a way that resonates with the style of narration in the family sagas, *Orkneyinga saga* also contains a high density of dramatically intense episodes. With features typical of kings', family, and contemporary sagas, it can be viewed as a bridge between our discussion of authorial interpretation of excessive characters in the family sagas and of Þorgils skarði's characterisation as an excessive political figure in *Sturlunga saga*.

“Mun ek vilja mjök min ráð hafa”¹⁸

Orkneyinga saga, in its regional focus, its subject matter (especially the fights for the earldom of a Norwegian dependant), and its interest in persuasion and advice, shares a number of features with *Sturlunga saga*.¹⁹ As with our discussion of that saga in chapter two, an analysis of *Orkneyinga saga* will help us to respond to the question of how saga authors represented tension between individual ambition and social order at a more explicitly political level, a major concern when we come to look at Þorgils skarði's role in the civil conflict in medieval Iceland. At a thematic level, the saga shares with the kings' sagas and *Sturlunga saga* an interest in the role of persuasion and advice in the community's ability to temper the ambition and destructive actions of kings, earls, and chieftains. Here also lies a connection with *Grettis saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*: the saga authors stress the actions that can be taken by the community to balance the ambition and strength of leading characters with the moderation required for social stability to be maintained.

Advice is given narrative centrality throughout *Orkneyinga saga*. Very early in the saga, for instance, after the failure of missions sent to Orkneys by Earl Rognvaldr, the earl must decide which son is to be sent next. In an amusing twist, Torf-Einarr (“Turf”-Einarr) suggests himself as the right candidate on the basis of his father's dislike of him. His father's reply, although unflattering to both Einarr and his mother, gives us an example of the possible irony and complexity of persuasion in the saga. The Earl's response is unpleasant:

¹⁸ *Orkneyinga saga* 149: “I wish greatly to have my way.”

¹⁹ Regarding the narration of *Orkneyinga saga* and the historical selection and emphasis it betrays, see Jesch, “Narrating” (esp. 340-45).

“Ólíkligr ertu til hofðingja, fyrir sakar móður þinnar, því at hon í allar ættir þrælborin, en satt er þat, at því betr þætti mér, er þú ferr fyrr á braut ok kemr seinna aptr.” (11)

“It is unlikely that you are suited to be a chieftain because your mother is slave-born on all sides of her family. But it is true that it suits me better that you go away quickly and come back slowly [early and late].”

Nevertheless, Einarr’s ability to persuade his father to send him to the Orkneys shows that he is able to represent his case in a way that makes the most of the low regard in which he is held by the figure of authority. The ability to persuade forms the basis of future achievement. Like Hjalti Skeggjason (see above, ch. 4), Einarr can use the ambition of the earl to his own advantage. Ultimately, he transforms the aggressive ambition of his father into the basis of his own success and the stability of the community in the Orkneys. Even at this early stage of the saga, the author is concerned to show that difficult figures can be moderated in socially beneficial ways.

In its representation of family disunity, *Orkneyinga saga* connects in a powerful way with *Sturlunga saga*. In both sagas, the ambition of the individual is contextualised by the splintering of family and kinship obligation. The portrayal of Ragnhildr, the daughter of Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr, exemplifies *Orkneyinga saga*’s dramatisation of the hostility among members of powerful families.²⁰ She arranges the murder of her husband, marries her husband’s brother, Hávarðr, and later persuades Hávarðr’s nephew, Einarr, to kill his uncle. Thus, persuasion can figure not only as a means of moderating excessive but as its agent. Their extended discussion, “töluðu þau mart” (21), “they talked a great deal,” is summarised by the author in a way that emphasises the socially reprehensible nature of Ragnhildr’s ambition:

Kallaði hon slíkan mann vel til hofðingja fallin ok betr hentan jarldóm en Hávarði, frænda hans, ok kallaði þá honum vel gipta, er slíkan mann ætti. Einarr bað hana ekki taka slíkar ræður,

²⁰ On Ragnhildr’s characterisation in *Orkneyinga saga*, see also Jochens, *Old Norse* 179-80.

kvað hann mann gofgastan í Eyjum ok hana fullvel gipta. Ragnhildr svarar: “Skammar munu verða samfarar okkar Hávarðs heðan frá. Satt er þat, at verða munu menn til [í] Eyjum, þeir er eigi mun allt í augu vaxa, ef þú fyrirmant þér tignarinnar.” Við slíkar fortölur hennar gekksk Einari hugr til ágirni ok svika við jarl, frænda sinn, ok sǫmðu þat sín á millum, at hann skyldi drepa jarl, en hon skyldi giptask honum. (21)

She said such a man was well-suited to be a chieftain and better suited for an earldom than Hávarðr, his kinsman, and then said that the one who married him would be lucky. Einarr asked her not to speak in such a way, and said Hávarðr was the most honourable man in Orkney and that she was very well married. Ragnhildr answers: “Our marriage won’t last for long. It’s true that there are many in Orkney, before whom things won’t seem so great, if you refuse this distinction.” With such persuasion, Einarr’s thoughts turned to greed and betrayal of his kinsman, the Earl, and they agreed that he would kill the Earl and that they would marry.

The author twice reminds his readers of the kinship between Hávarðr and Einarr, thus adding his own emphasis to the implication of Gunnhildr’s immorality that is given in Einarr’s initial response. Einarr’s failure to heed his own better judgment (as well as a prophecy that is given to him) signals his inability to know when to listen and when not to listen to the persuasive words of others. A similar division of character types within the one family comes when Sigurðr requests his mother’s sorcery as an aid in his struggle for power. Her remarks to her son are unsympathetic and the manner of her aid places Sigurðr in the dishonourable position of having to sacrifice his standard-bearers if he wants to win:

Hon svarar: “Ek mynda þik hafa lengi upp fœtt í ulllaupi mínum, ef ek vissa, at þú myndir einart lifa, ok ræðr auðna lífi, en eigi,

hvar maðr er kominn; betra er at deyja með sæmð en lifa með skömm.” (24-25)

She answers: “I would have long brought you up in my wool-chest if I knew that you only cared about living. Fate must decide that, not where you are; it is better to die with honour than to live with shame.”

The rebuke can be connected to a sentiment in many sagas that fear and danger, although understood to exist, ought not to be openly recognised and ought not to influence behaviour. The effect of the assistance he receives from a woman who is *margkunning* (“knowledgeable about many things”) is victory at the cost of dishonour that seems, here, to be associated with the pragmatism and hesitancy caused by fear. Once again, the emotional tension for the character who is dishonoured comes from within his family, thus providing a sharp counter-balance to the honour that might otherwise accrue to him from the victory in battle.

It is not always easy or wise to plead a case before the powerful. In an episode that reminds us of Björn stallari’s and Hjalti’s predicaments in *Óláfs saga helga* (see above, ch. 4), Ámundi refuses to approach Einarr but his son Þorkell is less resolute (29). As is the case when Björn reluctantly agrees to appear before King Óláfr, here a group of community members who desire some influence in local affairs is able to exploit a person’s ambition in order to manoeuvre him into the otherwise undesirable position of being the advocate of a proposition that will be received with offence. The key ethical point seems to be that one ought not agree to do more than one can carry off with honour, and that a failure to observe this practice reveals a fallibility in the object of persuasion. An implied distinction is drawn between two types of receivers of advice. On the one hand, there are those who are open to sound advice and who use advice to achieve prestige. On the other, there are characters with an incoherent or as yet barely formed desire for power that makes them susceptible to pressure from outside. The episode also reflects the fact that unsolicited advice can be taken as a kind of challenge, particularly in the case of the

ambitious characters of interest in this chapter. Þorkell oversteps the mark by requesting leniency for the farmers on two occasions and, although successful at first, is subsequently forced to escape Einarr's anger.

Uniting these episodes is an authorial concern with the practice and implications of advice, especially in cases where very ambitious or disruptive characters are concerned. Another instance of this concern comes in chapter 26, when Þorfinnr is able to persuade Kálfr Árnason to join his force, a late change in allegiance that turns the sea battle in Þorfinnr's favour. The strong rhetoric which Þorfinnr employs reflects a number of issues which the saga as whole appears concerned with, in particular, the strategic importance of Orkney for the kings of Norway, chieftains' resentment at the centralising control of kings, the possibility of island-based resistance to the dominant regional power and what is historically the parent culture, the clash between the desire for local power and *frelsi* ("freedom") and the individual ambition of local chieftains to control all of Orkney, and the ethical problems associated with duties to kin and duties to take some part in action.

The distinction that we see in *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Grettis saga* between disruptive characters and characters of good will and order is also present in *Orkneyinga saga*, especially in the portrayal of Magnús Erlendson and his killer Hákon. A meeting is arranged by Hákon with "falsi ok fagrmælum" (105), "falseness and fair language." Magnús, "fullkommum heiluga án allra grunsemða, svika ok ágirnðar" (106), "suspects no evil, is without falseness and greed for power," agrees to meet. Magnús, in contrast to the characters examined here, is a man who will be beaten not by virtue of vulnerability created by greed but because his lack of ambition gives rise to obliviousness to the danger he is in. The ambition of the saint to do good, to achieve humility before God, and to forgive those who betray him creates an alternative type of ambition and advice. The alternative functions as a model of political life which emphasises the role of religious advice in the achievement of good and the importance of maintaining one's own course in life, not as a result of the warrior's desire for honour, but from the martyr's desire to fulfil

his spiritual destiny.²¹ A distinction between types of political ambition is being developed. As we will see in a moment, in the case of *Þorgils skarða*, the two types of ambition and leadership are explored within the characterisation of a single leader.

The depiction of Magnús' death shares a number of features in common with death scenes in other sagas, especially those in *Sturlunga saga*: i) the high level of negotiation and discussion which takes place before the death reflects the fact that the killing is more political than honour- or feud-based, ii) the killing is done under command, iii) there is the possibility of incarceration and mutilation as tactics in a political dispute, iv) the killing is contextualised by intensely religious writing, and v) the author heightens his own position in the narrative by documenting the source of his account, by signposting the significance of the event, and by placing it within a broader historical picture. Although these features also appear in the family sagas, they are particularly noticeable in *Sturlunga saga*. They reflect the kind of brutality which seems to have been appropriate in the context of a regional dispute for the kings' authority, and suggest that sagas of this kind are deeply concerned with the relationship between ambition, leadership, and religious understanding. These themes are united in a request that Þóra puts to Hákon:

Ok er drykkur fekk á jarl, þá gekk Þóra fyrir hann ok mælti: “Nú ertu einn kominn hingat, herra, en ek vænta ykkar beggja. Muntu nú vilja gleðja mik at guðs vitni ok manna. Ver mér nú í sonar stað, en ek mun þér í móður stað; þarf ek nú mjök þinnar miskunnar ok at þú leyfir mér, at sonr minn sé til kirkju færðr. Ver mér nú svá böena sem þú vill, at guð sé þér á dómsdegi.” Jarl þagnar ok hugsar málit ok fannsk at þessum óverkum, er hon bað svá mjúkliga grátandi, at hon næði son sinn til kirkju at

²¹ Cf. Phelpstead ch. 3, in which the author discusses the creation of dialogue through the different points of view that are included in the saga (esp. 103 & 113-16). Phelpstead concludes that his discussion “of the theme of sanctity in *Orkneyinga saga* suggests, as does Jesch’s narratological analysis [see Jesch, “Narrating”], a high degree of sophistication on the part of both the author and the audience of the saga.” (157) See also Foote, “Observations.”

foera. Hann leit við henni ok felldi tár ok mælti við hana: “Graf son þinn þar, er þér líkar.” (112)

And when the drink took effect on the jarl, Þóra went before him and said: “Sir, now you’ve come here alone, when I expected two of you. Would you now please me, before God and men, by being a son to me; I will be a mother to you. I truly need your mercy – let me take my son to the church. Hear my prayer as you wish God to hear yours on Judgment Day.” The Earl is silent and thinks, and realised the evil he had done. She, with humble tears, asked to take her son to the church. He looked at her and cried. “Bury your son where you like,” he said.

Þóra’s beautifully expressed submission and persuasion is, in its rhetorical sophistication and subtle expression of a character’s inner life, a clear instance of secondary authorship. It has the effect of tying Magnús’ death and elevation with Hákon’s spiritual elevation through his repentance and change (a change, as we see in ch. 52, to goodliness as a ruler) and to the spirit of forgiveness with which she makes her approach. The concern with Hákon’s regret reflects both the author’s desire to elevate Magnús and the interest, expressed throughout the saga, in the links between ambitious character, persuasion, and moderation. The passage is striking for its portrayal of a man who seems mortified by his own acts, and Hákon’s command, at the close of the scene – “bury your son where you wish” – indicates that he has come to understand where political life gives way to the life of the soul and the demands of others. The scene is of particular interest here because it illustrates the potential overlap of a Christian ideology of individual modesty and humility with the desire for moderation in disputes that seems, in many sagas, to be oriented towards a broader community ideal of social balance. We see that the Christian author’s interest in the redemption of the individual connects powerfully with attempts to moderate the behaviour of excessively ambitious individuals for the community good.

Þorgils skarði

In this chapter, I have argued that the characterisation of ambitious men allows saga authors to develop a theme of community moderation of excessive behaviour. The characters in question vary significantly in social position. They have in common enormous strength and such ambition to test that strength that their careers are socially disruptive. *Þorgils skarða* is a work that interprets the life of a contemporary figure in ways that echo the portrayal of excessive individualists like Grettir and the sworn-brothers and the national, domestic, and spiritual tensions portrayed in *Orkneyinga saga*. My focus here will be on the way Þorgils tests boundaries of i) kinship, ii) personal ambition and aggression in dealings with others, iii) relations with authority figures in Norway and Iceland. These categories will allow us to tie the saga author's interpretation of Þorgils' life with the preceding discussion of Grettir, the sworn-brothers, and the earls of Orkney, and to consider again the more far-reaching question of the role of saga authorship in the preservation and understanding of what were felt to be important lives in Icelandic history. All the narratives discussed in this chapter can be understood as attempts to represent the moderation of excessively ambitious figures. In the case of *Þorgils skarða*, the saga author allows Þorgils' better qualities, like his daring, his clear-sightedness and self-possession, his ability to converse with kings, and his usefulness in emergencies to combine with his humility at death to redeem his aggression and suggest a model for the direction of ambitious Icelanders towards common social ends. Þorgils, like Grettir and Hákon, is portrayed as an excessively ambitious character who can, if moderated and properly understood and advised, make a valuable contribution to the community of the saga.

Testing Kinship

Þorgils skarði, like Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*, is marked out for special attention at an early age. Bishop Guðmundr Arason predicts that he will have a young death and, perhaps as importantly, that he would be a great chieftain if he

lived a long time. From the beginning, it is made clear that the full potential of Þorgils' chieftaincy will not be realised, and as a result the saga focuses more on his ambition and early career than his achievements as a leader. Equally important, the saga author characterises the brothers' in terms of opposing traits from the beginning of the saga. This signals the importance of domestic ties in the thematic development of the work, and associates Þorgils' life with the lives of other excessive figures who seem partly defined by their genealogical inheritance.

The quarrel between Þorgils and Sturla Þórðarson is particularly significant. Given what seems to be Sturla Þórðarson's generally amiable nature, it is probably a testament to Þorgils' equally difficult temperament that there are tensions between the two. Sturla's sense of Þorgils from their meeting is a reminder of the family tensions that are portrayed in *Orkneyinga saga*:

Sturla svarar: "Vit fundumst á hausti at Helgafelli, ok kómum vit þá engu ásamt meðal okkar. Máttu ek ekki þat mæla, er eigi tæki hann með forsi ok fjándskap. Munn hann vera þrálýndr í skapi sem faðir hans, en hafa brjóst verra." (207)

Sturla answers: "We met in autumn at Helgafell, and we could not reach any agreement between us. I cannot say that he does not proceed haughtily and in a hostile way. He has the stubbornness of his father, only worse."

The tensions between Þorgils and Sturla do ease, and the saga moves out of the darkness created by the deaths of Snorri Sturluson, the Ormssons, and Sighvatr and Sturla, to the unification of the two remaining Sturlung chieftains. The tragic conclusion of Þorgils' death at the hands of his kinsman Þorvarðr is given extra weight by the fact that the theme of rivalry between kin is established very early and that the author clearly approves of Þorgils' late displays of moderation and interest in the order of the country (as the narrative moves to his death).

Earlier, however, Þorgils states his conception of kinship in the following terms: "þess vinr vera skyldu, sem hann reyndi vináttu at, ok þess frændi, sem hann reyndi frændsemi af" (208); "that one shall be my friend who

had proven friendship, and that one my kinsman who has shown kinship.” Despite having just been warned that he will suffer the same plight as others in the Sturlung family, Þorgils seems at ease with the political ethics which have led to fighting within the Sturlung kin group. The tensions escalate further when Sturla is involved in an attack on Þorgils at Stafaholt, for which Sturla is chastised by Óláfr Þórðarson, and the accusation is aired that Þorgils had accepted a commission from King Hákon to kill Sturla (ch. 17).

Importantly, in Þorgils’ case this pragmatism does not last, or at least begins to co-exist with some recognition of kinship obligations. As matters between him and Sturla improve, Sturla becomes defensive about the disunity that seems, to modern readers, to be a central feature of the Sturlung family’s dominant role of Icelandic political life:

Hrafn kvað aldri mark at, hvat hann [Þorgils] segði, ok kvað hann allt ljúga mundu. Sturla mælti: “Satt mun hann segja, – er þat eigi skap Þorgils eða þeira frænda.” (234)

Hrafn said one could never count on what he [Þorgils] said, and said he would lie about it all. Sturla said: “He will have told the truth, - such is not the disposition of Þorgils or his kinsmen.”

By this point, Sturla has been assured by Þorgils that no attempt on Sturla’s life was planned, and the kinsmen ultimately achieve such good relations that Sturla is, despite the warnings against Þorgils’ offensive that are given by Abbot Brandr, willing to follow Þorgils to the battle at Þverá (ch. 44). These changes in the relations amongst the Sturlung family are developed alongside the improvements in Þorgils’ temperament during the events before his death at the hands of his third cousin Þorvarðr.²² This allows the reader to condemn Þorvarðr’s behaviour without the mitigating influence of Þorgils’ own poor family relations, and helps to guarantee the reader’s sympathy for Þorgils’ fate.

²² See, for instance, ch. 27, in which Þorgils’ relative moderation in the negotiations and his show of willingness to be reconciled with Sturla appears to reflect a greater maturity in his approach to kinsmen and potentially powerful allies. See also chs. 31-35, in which Þorgils’ reconciliation with Sturla is contextualised by a wide range of agreements with powerful figures. See Lönnroth, *Critical* 180-84 regarding the infamy of the killing of Þorgils.

Þorgils' eventual difficulties with his kinsman Þorvarðr not only highlight the corrosive nature of the disputes among kin in thirteenth century Iceland, but they also reflect a character trait which these protagonists share. They both seem to be driven by their political ambitions and their desire for power, and in the sagas this trait leads, it seems inevitably, to a confrontation with likeminded characters. When Þorgils extends his control from Skagafjörðr to Eyjafjörðr, he confronts Þorvarðr. He knows Þorvarðr covets the same region, a fact that his friends and advisers recognise and warn him of (ch. 73). Their dispute, which in many ways is more complex than a disagreement, for example, between Grettir and another *ójafnaðarmaðr*, nevertheless indicates a desire to test their own and each other's strength, which is symptomatic of both Grettir's and Þorgils' dispositions. The difference between Þorgils and Þorvarðr is crucial. Þorgils is seen to test but ultimately bend to the claims of kinship, most noticeably in his relations with Sturla. Þorvarðr, on the other hand, kills his kinsman in pursuit of political ends, an act which characterises his ambition as ethically unsustainable.

Testing Strength

From the beginning of his saga career, Þorgils shares with Grettir and the sworn-brothers a desire to test his strength against other hot-tempered characters.²³ As in the case of Grettir's fight with Auðun (ch. 28), which is broken up by Grettir's kinsman Barði and later arbitrated to the point where the two men enjoy a warm friendship (ch. 34), Þorgils' fight with Sámr is made good by the intervention of Gróa, who takes on the role, as occupied by Þorgils Arason in both *Grettis saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, of moderating host. And, like Grettir and the sworn-brothers, Þorgils accepts that demonstrations of hospitality and kindness are grounds for a person's influence on him.²⁴ A similar plea for restraint and another indication of the place of hospitality in the

²³ See ch.2, in which Þorgils fights with Björn while he is staying with Brynjólfur.

²⁴ See also ch. 43, during which Þorgils may be softened in his attitude to Egill by the fine meal Egill gives.

containment of ambitious and hot-tempered men like Þorgils come from Jórunn, who is clearly concerned that Þorgils will drag her loved ones into unnecessary conflict:

Þá gekk Jórunn húsfreyja út í garðinn ok mælti svá: ‘Þess bið ek þik, Þorgils, ef ek hefi nökkut svá gert, at þér þykkir vel, þá stýr þú eigi þessu máli í svá mikit vandræði, at þú hafir þik í veði eða bónda minn eða aðra góða menn, ef þú átt kost sæmiligra sætta.’ Ok fyrir hennar fortölur hneigðist Þorgils. (193)

Then Jórunn the housewife went out into the yard and said: “I ask this, Þorgils: if I have done anything that you consider worthy, then do not steer this case into such trouble that you bring ill-luck to yourself, my husband, or other good men if you have the choice of an honourable settlement. And, on account of her persuasive words, Þorgils drew back.

The forcefulness of Jórunn’s advice appears to be drawn in part from her status as woman. She seems to have the ability to speak strongly for reconciliation when the men would be dishonoured by pleading for peace. It also stems from the nature of Þorgils’ receptiveness, which may be heightened by a desire to take the conflict only so far. There may be a ritualised quality to some of Þorgils’ behaviour, and it is often the case that when Grettir and the sworn-brothers would kill, Þorgils is engaged in the less dangerous and more protracted process of insults, hostile negotiations, and blows that characterises much of the conflict in *Sturlunga saga*. Nevertheless, Þorgils is consistently awkward and quick to find a fellow hot-head to argue with, and it would be a mistake, on the grounds of the predictability of peacemakers’ interventions, to downplay his nature as the *viðbjörn* (“wood bear”) said to be *heldr ólmr* (“rather savage”) in Sturla Þórðarson’s dream about Þorgils’ return to Iceland (196).

Þorgils’ willingness to press hard for power and fame is a reflection of his personality as an excessive figure and not merely an aspect of his function as a member of a powerful family in Iceland. His comment that he would like

his life to make a good saga, which I discuss further below, reflects his self-conception as a saga hero, and this combines with his difficult nature to give us a particular kind of saga hero, of the Grettir, or the sworn-brothers type. As well as being quarrelsome, Þorgils at times displays a lethargy or laziness in his daily preparedness for conflict that resonates with the laziness that Grettir shows before he goes on to perform great tasks. Prior to Sturla's raid Þorgils is underprepared (ch. 17), and he is caught out again through excessive feasting when a raid is made on him in the north (ch. 21). Þorgils' silence when angry also connects him to excessive characters in the family sagas, in the sense that it is an indication of mood that, like Víga-Glúmr's laughter before killing, has taken on a degree of notoriety: "Þorgils þagði, sem hann var vanr, ef hann reiddist" (178); "Þorgils was silent, as was his custom if he was angry." These traits combine to characterise him as a person capable of a dramatic change from calmness to violence.

There are regular reminders that Þorgils' ambition and sensitivity to insult can lead him to aggressive behaviour, such as his early hostility to the farmers in Borgarfjörðr, the killing of Valgerðr (ch. 30), his determination to control Skagafjörðr (e.g., chs. 36-39), his willingness to go north to fight despite being ill-prepared and under-manned (ch. 44), his bravery at the battle at Þverá (ch. 51), and his ongoing ability to find other ambitious figures to fight with (as in his dispute with Bishop Heinrekr). Yet, it is Þorgils' benign side which is stressed in the lead-up to his death. His good will is joined to the narration of Þorgils' Christian commitment and his role as a force for moderation and order to present the possibility of a character who is as strong and ambitious as Grettir and the sworn-brothers but who may, like some of the earls of Orkney, be brought to use his ambition and strength for the benefit of the community as a whole. Þorgils' testing of strength is matched by an awareness of potential social order for which his strength may be used. Like Hákon jarl's contrition after the killing of Saint Magnús, the strength of Þorgils' self-awareness prior to his death signals an authorial effort to show a successful transition from "savage" ambition to popularity and usefulness to the community. And, like

Saint Magnús' calm acceptance of death, Þorgils shows that his ambition is ultimately directed to the acquisition of God's forgiveness.

Testing Authority

It is difficult to know whether the author of *Þorgils skarða* develops themes of ambition, power, and kinship in relation to wider issues of the time, particularly the question of Iceland's relations with Norway. Certainly Þorgils is difficult person to deal with at court – King Hákon Þorgils as “maðr bráðláttr ok heldr ákaflyndr” (183), “an impatient and rather hot tempered man” – and one is tempted to read for a sub-text of Icelandic resistance to Norwegian influence. In any case, there is an understanding that Þorgils, if he can back up his impatience and ill-temper with bravery and accomplishment, can be useful to authority figures in Norway. Þorgils tests these figures' ability to balance individual ambition and the community's need for order. The help that Þorgils gives in dealing with a fire (ch. 7), “svá at hann [Hákon] þoldi honum betr en flestum öðrum jafnar tilgerðir” (186), “so that he [Hákon] tolerated him better than most others of equal temperament,” must be balanced against the arrogance he displays, for instance, in his dispute with Knútr jarl (chs. 8-9).²⁵

Þorgils' power in Iceland is captured by King Hákon's decision to grant him Snorri Sturluson's inheritance, a manner of authority contested by Þorleifr (198). The resistance to the reading of Þorgils' letter of authority suggests that there is hostility towards the king's interference in domestic affairs, here Snorri's inheritance, and a feeling that the act of opening and reading the letter may produce an effect. To allow words to be spoken is, in this respect, to allow jurisdiction and the possibility of influence. As well as testing the authority of authors, Þorgils tests the extent to which other members of the farming class and Icelandic elite will accept the earl-like dominance of an ambitious man. When, in an exchange with Aron Hjörleifsson, Þorgils deliberately misreads an insult as a jest (ch. 21), his magnanimity appears to reflect a desire, regal in character, to be noble in his relations with his supporters. Perhaps his phrase,

²⁵ See also Bragg, “Generational Tensions” 18.

“ok því tek ek þat fyrir gaman” (232), “and so I shall take it in jest,” connects with something he learnt when King Hákon smiled upon his arrogance at court (ch. 4), and something of the mood behind Þorgils’ smile when he is warned that he will be betrayed by Þorvarðr (ch. 74). Like Grettir and Saint Magnús, Þorgils is killed in a disgraceful way, and the phrase “Þorgils brosti at” (351), “Þorgils smiled at it,” suggests that at the end of his life Þorgils reached a point of self-awareness that is akin to the self-knowledge gained by many of the characters discussed in this thesis. At the same time, knowledge is offered to readers about the moderation of ambition and potential of difficult characters to change and be of benefit to society.

The Success of Þorgils skarði

By the time Þorgils finds himself facing the prospect of an early death at Stafaholt (ch. 17), the author has prepared the reader, through the prediction by Bishop Guðmundr, for the likelihood of such an event. It remains to be seen exactly when Þorgils will die:

Lagðist Þorgils niðr ok fekk eigi sofit. Orti Þórðr orða á hann ok spyrr, hví hann væri svá fár. “Ek hugsa þat,” segir Þorgils, “hvé illt mér þykkir, ef engi skal saga ganga frá mér, áðr en þrýtr líf mitt, svá at ek geta ekki á hefnileið róit um svívirðing þá, er mér nú ger.” Þórðr mælti: “Ger eigi þat í hug þér. Ger þá sem þér sýnist, ef þú þiggr líf, en ef þú skalt nú deyja, þá er þér því betra, sem þú átt færum ábyrgðum at svara.” “Ekki kvíði ek við dauða mínum,” segir Þorgils. (215-16)

Þorgils lay down but could not sleep. Þórðr spoke to him, and asked why he was unhappy. Þorgils says: “I am thinking how bad it will be if no-one tells a saga about me, before I die, if I hadn’t the chance to revenge the dishonour now done.” Þórðr said: “Don’t think that. Do as seems fitting, if you are offered life, but if you die now it will be better as you’ll have fewer things to answer for.” “I am not afraid of death,” says Þorgils.

Þorgils' ambitions are expressed in literary terms – “no one will make a saga of my life” – that require us to read for his self-conception in the same way that he would read the lives of saga characters. Þorgils does not tell us about how he interprets sagas, but the situation implies that a person must reach a certain level, a saga threshold as it were, before a writer will shape a life into a narrative that, like *Þorgils skarða*, gives shape, meaning, and clarity to the subject's most important moment, his or her death. The speech also implies that Þorgils does not feel that he has reached the point of saga worthiness yet.

Does Þorgils ultimately make the saga threshold? Of course, the existence of the saga indicates that he does, and one can only guess at the saga author's pleasure in hearing himself referred to as a future arbiter of fame and judge of a chieftain's historical standing. But what makes Þorgils' life saga worthy? If we discussed its worth in terms of a comparison of *Þorgils skarða* and *Orkneyinga saga*, we might conclude that Þorgils' life after the incident at Stafaholt is saga worthy because it is after this point that he becomes a major player in the regional division of Iceland, in the definition of Icelandic relations with Norway and the nature of the Icelandic earldom, and in the complex working out of rivalries between kin in Icelandic political life. *Orkneyinga saga* also points our attention to the Christian discourse in *Þorgils skarða*, and in particular the capacity of leaders to be affected by the acquisition of knowledge and experience. They change from excessive characters, concerned almost solely with their own ambitions for power and fame, to more humble characters whose behaviour is governed by their desire for social stability and good order.²⁶ In this light, Þorgils achieves saga worthiness because he changes from an ambitious young man intent on achieving fame to a calm figure of authority who is concerned with his spiritual development and the lives and welfare of others.²⁷

²⁶ Regarding the Christian element in *Þorgils skarða*, see also Glendenning, “Saints” 88-92.

²⁷ Cf. Bragg, “Generational Tension” 15, who essentially interprets Þorgils as a negative figure in the saga because of his self-destructive nature. I think Bragg's approach to the saga fails to account for the type of characterisation, based on heroes like Grettir and the Sworn-Brothers,

If we compare Þorgils' characterisation with that of Grettir and the sworn-brothers, he appears to share something of their excessiveness. Their circumstances are by no means identical, but these men all have some of the qualities that make up a "savage bear." In fact, Þorgils is at times more cruel and difficult to deal with than Þorgeirr and Grettir and there is something very disturbing about the pragmatics of Þorgils' political violence. Grettir is no less destructive, but alongside Þorgils he seems driven by disposition rather than by possible gains in status and in power.

The author of *Þorgils skarða* uses the story of Þorgils' life to explore the nature of political life in medieval Iceland. He characterises Þorgils as an excessively ambitious character who tests the strength of others, his kinship ties, and the figures of authority around. His development as a character is a main feature of the author's ability to educate his audience about the usefulness of ambitious and disruptive men, and offers a focal point for the author's interpretation of political events in the thirteenth century.

The interpretive function of authorship is here performed both distinctively – in the author's particular emphasis on Þorgils' point of view – and, more broadly, in a way that connects Þorgils' life with a discourse found in a number of sagas about the nature of individualists' relations with the community. The authors of all the sagas discussed in this chapter appear to interpret the relations between specific communities and ambitious figures. It is a feature of the works that suggests that authors could perform interpretive and educative functions by combining the traditions of difficult characters with a wider, critical perspective. This is another example of where traditional and interpretive functions of authorship co-existed, each partly in the possession of the other. This joint-possession allowed events in early Iceland to be contextualised by thirteenth century ethical concerns. It also meant that the thirteenth century fight for earldoms could be understood in relation to the well-

which is underway in the saga and so fails to give adequate significance to Þorgils' worth to the community.

known narratives concerning early Icelandic family disputes, *ójafnaðarmenn*, and people of good will.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate the important role of characterisation in discussing concepts of authorship in medieval Iceland, and I have approached this task by using the overall metaphor of possession, or more accurately joint-possession, as a way of describing the sagas' relationship to reality, to the past, and to the inherited traditions of medieval Scandinavia. The sagas are sites where authors share the control of the sagas' literary, intellectual, and cultural properties with a) the sagas' self-performance as traditional narratives, b) the sagas' embodiment of past reality, and c) the sagas' historical integrity. The sagas can be described as *narratives of possession*, or as narratives in which possession is in subtle ways contested or shared: in their interest in the people of the saga age, the sagas witness the authors' conception of saga writing as a balance of control and creativity, of distance and closeness, and of understanding and interpretation.

A central feature of the medieval possession of saga narratives is creative characterisation. Most importantly, in instances when characters express themselves in a way that is suggestive of authorship – moments of secondary authorship – we may be able to witness the aims, historical conceptions, and processes of interpretation which informed the medieval possession of the sagas. In many respects, the saga authors present their works as narratives that merely preserve and transmit tradition; this is an important factor in establishing the sagas' credibility as historical documents. Yet, as Vésteinn's and Gísli's enigmatic comments in *Gísla saga* and Gizurr's grief after the burning at Flugumýri demonstrate, the saga form accommodates both traditional narration and highly interpretive characterisation. That is, secondary

authorship enables a creative possession and representation of the past to take place.

The possibilities of saga authorship, at least as far as they are suggested by the studies undertaken here, can be divided into six categories. Firstly, saga authorship is *functional* in its performance of the saga. Often, the sagas themselves suggest that they are self-performed. This is an important feature of the sagas' rhetorical positioning, and we can say that one role of saga authorship is to facilitate the self-performance of tradition. Consequently, the functional aspect of saga performance may have been linked, in the saga authors' mind, to the preservation of distinctive cultural artefacts. That is, by enabling a saga's self-performance, the author gave witness to a heritage held in common by the medieval community. For example, while there is an empathetic relationship between Hrútr and the author in *Njáls saga*, in writing down the complicated and often amusing dispute between Hrútr and Mǫrðr, the author also offered the medieval community a means by which to receive and be influenced by tradition. The author is aware that possession of the narrative is not always his, but must at times remain with tradition.

Saga authorship encodes an *epistemological* function. The sagas are a means by which the past can be known and viewed in its own right. That is, conceived to some extent as transparent references to the past, the sagas allow the reality of the past to have an equivalence to present reality. Þorgils' advance on Hafliði's troops during the Alþing is made real and knowable through the author's narration of the past; that is, the author is able to shape events into a form that allows the medieval audience to know and remember its history. In this sense, the sagas possess reality, and the division between the saga as signifier and the saga's signified is, for its epistemological function, a very fine one. Epistemologically, the sagas *are* the past, and the saga author a facilitator of a saga's possession of the past as historical reality.

Thirdly, and closely related, is the *documentary* function of saga authorship. Particularly in the case of genealogies, land divisions, and legal matters, the saga authors betray a desire to document historical facts. The sagas

have the potential to act as records and annals, a function that seems especially strong in the early parts of *Íslendinga saga*. There, Sturla carefully records all the legal and genealogical information that is required to make the saga a complete document of the past. The author's function, while an active one, is nevertheless in the service of tradition and historical reality; that is, the author is taking steps to guarantee the thoroughness of the traditional, objectively narrated account.

My discussion of characterisation in the sagas has demonstrated that a view of saga authorship as either predominantly traditional or creative fails to appreciate the subtle relationship between these two aspects. In particular, I have stressed the saga form's ability to accommodate a range of narrative voices and historical points of view. This, I think, is a crucial element in their artistic achievement. By shifting quite freely between temporal and spatial spheres, mythical and historical references, and inherited and created episodes, the sagas become the joint possession of tradition, oral transmission, and medieval historiography and artistry. Thus, while we can posit the idea of functional, epistemological, and documentary roles for saga authors, we can also speak of three seemingly inconsistent functions. I suggest that, in order to understand the complicated relationship between tradition and interpretation that the sagas witness, we need to view these as part of a multi-functional saga authorship.

The *interpretive* and *educational* functions of saga authorship respond to tradition. In fulfilling the first three categories that I have listed, saga authors offer an interpretation of events, and some sense of the meaning of events for contemporary audiences. For instance, while in *Eyrbyggja saga* Snorri goði is portrayed in a way that is consistent with his appearances in other sagas, the author contextualises his behaviour so as to present educational narrative about successful chieftaincy in early Iceland. An even more nuanced understanding of the interpretive and educational function of saga writing comes when we consider the sagas in terms of their sympathetic engagement with past ethical values, and their attempt to empathise with the people of the past. This attempt

witnesses a fifth role of saga authorship, that is, its function as a *sympathetic* and *empathetic* dialogue with the people of the past. Such a dialogue seems to play an especially important role in Guðrún's portrayal in *Laxdæla saga*, in which the saga author matches traditions about her with character development and narrative patterns that give emotional depth to her perception and understanding of her life. Likewise, Þorgils skarði's characterisation in *Sturlunga saga* allows the author to both understand Þorgils' ambition and make suggestions to the audience about the moderation of such figures. The author performs functional, epistemological, and documentary aspects of the saga, and yet does so in an interpretive and creative way.

Finally, each of the five categories of authorship that I have listed so far are inextricably linked to the authors' particular *artistic* aims, and one can say they are fulfilled in more striking ways when a saga is self-conscious at a literary or dramatic level. The sagas we as modern readers most often respond to emotionally – especially *Gísla saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Njáls saga* – can be said to deal in a sophisticated way with the competing functions of saga authorship. Their dramatic impact depends on artistic skill *and* the sagas' relationship with historical reality and tradition. Vésteinn's decision to ride Haukadall is dramatically intense not only because of the author's skilled narration and empathy with the character. Literary effects are developed alongside the saga's self-performance as historical reality, adding credibility and the force of tradition to the author's distinctive representation of Vésteinn's decision. The narrative is held in the joint-possession of tradition and interpretive authorship.

In this thesis, I have focused most of my attention on the three functions of authorship that allowed saga authors greater possession of traditional narratives. Many of my observations about the critical nature of saga authorship have, at least by implication, been made as a counter to the tendency to emphasise saga objectivity (what I have listed as the functional, epistemological, and documentary functions of saga authorship). It remains to be seen how these categories might apply in a more extensive study of

authorship in medieval Iceland, especially in the case of more overtly religious works and those sagas more clearly influenced by Continental literature: can one read for a dialogue of possession there? Likewise, the questions I have raised demand a far greater consideration of authorship in medieval Europe than I have been able to give, and it is towards the wider contextualisation of my discussion of the sagas that this study would appear to lead. This study has examined some of the significant links that can be made between the sophisticated nature of characterisation in the sagas and the nature of the saga authors' desire to perform, to own, and to interpret the past.

Works Consulted

Explanatory Note

In the case of Icelandic names, the author's patronymic has been used as the first element of a citation. The list of works consulted has been divided into two groups: primary and secondary literature. A list of abbreviations used in the list of works consulted is given below.

Abbreviations

<i>ANF</i>	<i>Arkiv för nordisk filologi</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>KLNM</i>	<i>Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MS</i>	<i>Medieval Scandinavia</i>
<i>S</i>	<i>Skírnir</i>
<i>Saga-Book</i>	<i>Saga-Book of the Viking Society</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Scandinavian Studies</i>
<i>TMM</i>	<i>Tímarit Máls og menningar</i>

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