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## Narrative Voices

### Options and Limitations in Saga Literature

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*Stefanie Gropper*

## Unnr's Story

### Interaction between Prose and Poetry in ›Njáls saga‹

*Abstract.* ›Njáls saga‹ is one of the most famous works of the Icelandic Middle Ages, yet very little scholarship on the saga deals with it as a prosimetric text or considers the stanzas preserved in its narrative. Although the combination of verse and prose has been acknowledged as a generic feature of saga literature, stanzas are not often considered as an integral element of their narrative aesthetic. By comparing two versions of ›Njáls saga‹, my article demonstrates how the stanzas influence the narrative aesthetic and structure of the text, and how verse and prose interact both in their immediate context and in the broader picture of the saga.

#### 1. Introduction

Probably no other *Íslendingasaga* has triggered so many interpretations and analyses as ›Njáls saga‹, but in general it is studied as a prose narrative, and only very few articles deal with ›Njáls saga‹ as a prosimetric text or with the poetry that the saga contains (mainly Nordal 2005a and 2005b).<sup>1</sup> Although many judgements have been made in praise of ›Njáls saga‹, its poetry is usually not listed among the reasons for the saga's quality. The poetry in ›Njáls saga‹ is considered to be late, and not of the same quality as the poetry in other sagas (Fulk 2022). The most important aspect of the poetry seems to be that it helps to identify the saga's different recensions (Fulk 2022; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir/Lethbridge 2018).

This neglect of the poetry within a saga narrative is true not only for ›Njáls saga‹, but for scholarship on the *Íslendingasögur* in general. Scholarship has been principally concerned with different aspects of the prose narratives of sagas, with the verses quoted usually set aside and discussed separately in the context of poetic traditions. While verse quotation has always been recognised as an important aspect of the genre and intrinsic to its literary style (Males 2020; Clunies Ross 2022), only a few scholars have dealt with the *Íslendingasögur* as a prosimetric corpus (Harris 1997; Poole 2001; Sørensen 2001; Tulinius 2001; O'Donoghue 2005). To the extent that verse from the sagas has been studied, it has generally been in the context of establishing the authenticity of the *lausavísur* (›individual verses‹) attributed to characters in the sagas and of postulating possible dates for their composition. As a result, the integral role played by verse in almost all genres of the medieval Icelandic saga has often been overlooked or discounted as an inconvenience; quoted verse has been regarded either as redundant to the course of the narrative, or awkward because it contradicts the prose narrative or impedes its flow. In addition, other complications in the tradition have often been ignored. For instance, the manuscripts of ›Njáls saga‹ differ in their preservation of quoted verse, and this variance of the distribution of verse in the manuscript transmission has consequences for the meaning of texts (Nordal 2008; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir/Lethbridge 2018; Gropper 2025). Only gradually has recognition been growing of the importance of verse as a constituent generic element of the saga form (Nordal 2008 and 2015; Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir et al. 2022; Quinn 2023).

Nevertheless, stanzas still play only a minor part when it comes to the literary characterisations of the *Íslendingasögur*. The particular diction of skaldic poetry, which is so distinct from more typical direct speech, does not accord well with the notion that the sagas are realistic narratives, or that they are »creating a feeling of reality«, as Daniel Sävborg (2017, p. 119) puts it. Stanzas fit into the supposedly realistic setting if they are spoken at

court as praise poems, or if they are quoted by the narrative voice as authentication of what has been previously narrated. In the sagas, however, stanzas are presented as direct speech – either as intradiegetic speech by a character in the saga, or extradiegetically, when the narrative voice quotes a stanza either by a poet who is not part of the saga's diegesis. This kind of direct speech contradicts the understanding of direct speech as one of the stylistic features that strongly creates the impression of realism in the sagas, and which is thus a »proportionally prominent characteristic of the *Íslendingasögur*« (Sävborg 2017, p. 117). Yet direct speech – and especially the stanzas spoken as such – quite often leads to a conflict of voice within the narrative, a generic aspect of saga prosimetrum that has a bearing on the concept of authorship in these texts (Glauser 2007; Heslop 2008; Gropper 2021; Wilson 2022; Quinn 2023).

## 2. »Njáls saga«

»Njáls saga« is one of the most famous medieval Icelandic sagas. It is the longest, and perhaps also the most complex, of the *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas), which were written between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries and which narrate events from the ninth to eleventh centuries. The central conflict of »Njáls saga« is a feud between families that begins with a seemingly petty conflict, yet which escalates over the years to cause the deaths of many people. As with many other *Íslendingasögur*, the prose narrative of »Njáls saga« contains skaldic stanzas, although the number of these stanzas differs between the versions of the saga. Not all of these stanzas have been considered as original, in the sense of belonging to the archetype of the saga.

Elsewhere, I have shown that the additional stanzas in one recension of »Njáls saga« change the narrative structure of the whole saga, creating a counter-narrative that runs parallel to the plotline in the prose (Gropper 2025). In this chapter, I will look at the episode concerning Unnr's marriage

problems in chapters six and seven of the saga as an example of prosimetric aesthetics. The comparison of this episode across two recensions of the saga will serve as an example for the impact that poetry has on its narrative aesthetics and structure and how the stanzas interact with the prose, both in the immediate context and in the overall scope of the saga. Previous studies of Unnr's stanzas have already shown that the poetry attributed to her deepens her character (Nordal 2005b, p. 68), revealing Unnr's sense of shame (Clunies Ross 2022, p. 164), and that interpreting her stanzas demands more attentiveness from the listener than her prose responses in other recensions (Margrét Eggertsdóttir 2018, p. 222). Building on these findings, I would like to look at the narrative consequences that arise when sections of direct speech are rendered in poetry.

›Njáls saga‹, dated to the 1280s, is one of the best-preserved *Íslend-ingasögur*, with some sixty to seventy manuscripts or fragments; about one-third of these date to the medieval period (Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir/Lethbridge 2018). The unusually high number of manuscript witnesses attests to the popularity of ›Njáls saga‹, which evidently has a very productive reception history. The number of manuscripts and their complicated relations have made it difficult to edit the saga. Although the ›Njáls saga‹ manuscripts are commonly divided into three chief recensions – X, Y, and Z – a large number of manuscripts contain a mixed text, meaning it is very difficult to establish a stemma of their textual relations (Hall/Zeevaert 2018). The five oldest extant manuscripts were written in the first half or around the middle of the fourteenth century (Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir/Lethbridge 2018, p. 2). Reykjabók (AM 468 4to), Kálfalækjarbók, and Þormóðsbók (AM 162 B 8 fol.) all belong to the X group of manuscripts, which contains about twice as many stanzas as the other two manuscript groups, Y and Z. Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.) represents the Y group, while Gráskinna (GKS 2870) belongs to the Z group. Although, in his opinion, both X and Y are very close to the presumed original text of

›Njáls saga‹, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson chose Möðruvallabók, and thus a representative of the Y group, as the basis for his 1954 edition. Eighty years earlier, Konráð Gíslason used Reykjabók, and thus a representative of the X group, as the main manuscript for his 1875 edition.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's Íslenzk fornrit (ÍF) edition has become the standard edition used by scholars, and since then – that is, for the last seventy years – the additional stanzas not in the Y group have been relegated to the appendix, following Einar's approach, »even though they belong to the first stage in the transmission of the saga« (Nordal 2005a, p. 227).<sup>2</sup> Einar chose the recension that, in his opinion, is closest to the presumed original of ›Njáls saga‹, but this does not represent the preference of the fourteenth century, when most of the extant manuscripts were written. Ten out of thirteen manuscripts or fragments from the fourteenth century belong to the X recension (Nordal 2005b, p. 63). The choice to prioritise one recension as the ›best‹ or standard recension, upon which all the scholarship of at least one generation is then reliant, is not only a philological decision, but also the selection of one specific codified version of the past. In the case of ›Njáls saga‹, several recensions were in circulation from very early on. Möðruvallabók was written in the middle of the fourteenth century; it contains eleven *Íslendingasögur*, as well as one ›þátrr‹ (›Bolla þátrr‹) as a continuation of one of the sagas.<sup>3</sup> The manuscript is relatively well preserved and legible. Since many of its sagas are preserved as a complete text only in Möðruvallabók, it has served as the principal manuscript for many editions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Möðruvallabók has also shaped our ideas of the characteristics of the *Íslendingasögur*, although, as the example of ›Njáls saga‹ shows, it may not be representative for the sagas in general, which are characterised by variance in how they represent »diverse versions of the past« (Glauser 2007, p. 21).

When Einar Ólafur Sveinsson examined all the manuscripts, he came to the conclusion that the variance of ›Njáls saga‹ was to be found on the micro, rather than the macro, level of the text – apart from the different

number of stanzas across recensions (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1952, p. 121; see also Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir/Lethbridge 2018, p. 10). In total, sixty-four stanzas are preserved in versions of ›Njáls saga‹, but no manuscript contains all of them. Even within each of the three recensions of the saga, the number of stanzas is not consistent across all manuscripts (Fulk 2022, p. 1210). This can be seen as a first indication that the decision to include the stanzas in the narrative reflects a deliberate, and probably aesthetic, choice.

Although Reykjabók is the oldest extant manuscript, the majority of its stanzas are considered to be ›additional‹. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson considered only those stanzas that are common to all three recensions as belonging to the presumed original, and regarded what he called the *auka-vísur* (›additional stanzas‹) in manuscripts of the X recension as a later interpolation. Various arguments led him and other scholars to this conclusion. For instance, the thirty additional stanzas appear only in a comparatively limited selection of manuscripts. Some of these manuscripts belong to the oldest witnesses, like Reykjabók, but no manuscript contains all additional stanzas, generally due to the fragmentary status of the manuscripts. Reykjabók is a special case, because more than half of the additional stanzas are written in the margin, by a different hand than that behind the main text, from chapter 44 onward. Although the additional stanzas are well attested in the X branch of manuscripts, they do not appear in manuscripts of the Z branch; in the Y branch, they appear only in two closely related manuscripts. By contrast, the stanzas that are considered to be original to the saga are usually witnessed in all the manuscripts that contain the relevant chapters.

In most cases, the content, and sometimes the wording, of the additional stanzas agrees with the corresponding prose passages in the other manuscripts. Accordingly, it is generally assumed that the additional stanzas were composed in the late thirteenth century, on the basis of what is said in the pre-existing prose, and were then added to some manuscripts (Nordal

2005a, p. 225). Since the presumed ›original‹ of ›Njáls saga‹ is dated to the 1280s (Nordal 2005a, p. 218), these stanzas must have been more or less contemporary with the prose. This indicates that among the medieval audience there was a common understanding about the ›identity‹ of the saga, which did not prevent later scholars having different opinions about whether the saga should contain more or less poetry.<sup>5</sup> The question has therefore less to do with ›original‹ and ›additional‹ stanzas, and more to do with different aesthetic choices and individual ideas about the aesthetic narrative representation of a story.

In Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's ÍF edition, ›Njáls saga‹ contains twenty-three *lausavísur* within the prose text, as well as the longer poem ›Darraðarljóð‹ (eleven stanzas). The thirty stanzas found in other manuscripts are printed in an appendix. The main text of ›Njáls saga‹ contains only the stanzas that Einar Ólafur Sveinsson considered as original, but footnotes referring to the appendix mark the places where other manuscripts have the additional stanzas.<sup>6</sup> In the following, I want to compare the episode about Unnr at the *alþingi* (›general assembly‹) in its prosimetric version – represented in Konráð Gíslason's edition from 1875 – with the version without stanzas, as edited in Íslenzk fornrit. In this edition the Unnr episode does not contain any stanzas, but there is a lacuna at the beginning of ›Njáls saga‹ in Möðruvallabók corresponding to chapters 1–25 (line 9). Einar Ólafur Sveinsson filled this lacuna mainly with text from Reykjabók, but leaving out the stanzas he considered as additional.<sup>7</sup> However, the lacuna may have contained poetry, although it seems unlikely (see Fulk 2022, p. 1208). My aim is not to make any claim over which version is more ›original‹ or ›better‹ than the other; rather, I wish to show that they are different representations of the same story, with a different emphasis on voices that results in a different narrative and aesthetic focus.



### 3. Unnr's story

The story of Unnr and Hrútr's problematic marriage is told in the first chapters of ›Njáls saga‹ as a prelude to the central conflict of the saga, which is caused by marital problems that result in an escalating feud between two families. Unnr is introduced in the first chapter of ›Njáls saga‹ as the daughter of Mördör: *hon var væn kona ok kurteis ok vel at sér, ok þótti sá beztr kost á Rangarvöllum* (ÍF 12, p. 5; ›She was beautiful, well mannered, and gifted, and was thought to be the best match in the Rangarvellir‹, CSI 3, p. 1).<sup>8</sup> Immediately after this sentence, the narrative shifts to another region of Iceland to introduce the noble family of Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson, whose half-brother is Hrútr: *Hrútr var vænn maðr, mikill ok sterkr, vígr vel ok hógværr í skapi, manna vitrastr, harðráðr við óvini<sup>9</sup> sína, en til-lagagóðr inna stærra mála* (ÍF 12, p. 6; ›Hrut was a good-looking man, big and strong, a good fighter, and even-tempered. He was a very wise man, harsh towards his enemies but ready with good advice on important matters‹, CSI 3, p. 2). In chapter two, Höskuldr and Hrútr ride together to the *alþingi*, where Höskuldr recommends Unnr to his brother as a possible wife. When Höskuldr asks his brother what he thinks about her, Hrútr answers: ›*Vel*‹, *sagði hann*, ›*en eigi veit ek, hvárt vit eigum heill saman*‹ (ÍF 12, p. 8; ›Well enough‹, he said, ›but I don't know whether we'll be happy together‹, CSI 3, p. 3). Despite Hrútr's pessimistic evaluation, Unnr is engaged to him. The marriage contract involves a lot of money from Unnr's side and a large estate from Hrútr's. The saga does not say what Unnr thinks or how she feels about this marriage. Shortly after the engagement, Hrútr receives an offer to participate in a voyage abroad that promises rich trading profits, an opportunity he cannot turn down, and Unnr's father agrees to a three-year waiting period for his daughter. As in similar cases in the *Íslendingasögur*, this is a signal for the audience that there will be problems associated with the journey. When the men arrive in Norway, Queen Gunnhildr – known from other sagas as a wicked and treacherous

woman – invites Hrútr and his fellow travellers to spend the winter at the royal court, and they dare not reject the offer. Gunnhildr, who is especially interested in Hrútr, orders him to sleep with her, and threatens to kill his men if they tell anyone about it. When, after two years, Hrútr wants to sail back to Iceland, Gunnhildr asks him whether he has a wife waiting for him there. He denies it, but Gunnhildr does not believe him, and when the ship is ready to set its sails, she lays a spell on Hrútr:

*Hon leiddi hann á einmæli ok mælti til hans: ›Hér er gullhringr, er ek vil gefa þér‹ – ok spennti á hönd honum. ›Marga gjöf góða hefi ek af þér þegit‹, segir Hrútr. 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. (ÍF 12, pp. 20–21)<sup>10</sup>*

She took him aside and said to him in private, ›Here is a gold armlet which I want to give you‹, and she put it around his arm. ›Many a good gift have I had from you‹, said Hrútr. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him and said, ›If I have as much power over you as I think I have, then I place this spell on you: you will not have any sexual pleasure with the woman you plan to marry in Iceland, though you'll be able to enjoy yourself with other women. Neither of us will come out of this well, since you did not trust me with the truth.‹ Hrútr grinned and went away. (CSI 3, p. 9)

Hrútr's reaction seems clear: he does not take Gunnhildr seriously. Six weeks after his arrival in Iceland, he and Unnr are married. He gives her all the responsibility for matters inside the house, and everything seems well in public, but *fátt var um með þeim Hrúti um samfarar, ok ferr svá fram allt til várs* (ÍF 12, p. 22; ›there was little intimacy between her and Hrútr, and so it went all through the winter‹, CSI 3, p. 9). When Hrútr prepares to ride to the spring assembly, Unnr declares that she wants to come with him to meet her father. This is the first time that Unnr appears in the text as an acting, speaking character; until this point, she has been mentioned only as

a desirable object of marriage. She presents herself as a self-confident woman, who does not plead to be taken to the assembly, but who decides her course of action for herself: ›*Ek vil ríða til þings*‹, *segir hon*, ›*ok finna föður minn*‹ (ÍF 12, p. 22; »I want to ride to the Thing and see my father«, she said«, CSI 3, p. 9).

At the assembly, Unnr meets her father Mörðr. He notices that she has something on her mind, and when he asks her, she answers: ›*Gefa munda ek til alla eiga mína, at ek hefða þar aldri komit*‹ (ÍF 12, p. 23; »I would give everything that I own never to have gone there«, CSI 3, p. 10). Mörðr sends for Hrútr and his brother Höskuldr, and when he asks Hrútr why Unnr is unhappy to be living with him, Hrútr answers: ›*Segi hon til, ef hon hefir sakagiptir nökkurar við mik*‹ (ÍF 12, p. 23; »Let her speak, if she has any charge to bring against me«, CSI 3, p. 10). At this point, however, Unnr stays silent.

The following winter, things become worse between Unnr and Hrútr, and she decides to see her father again at the assembly, even though Hrútr does not attend that year. When her father asks about her husband, she answers that she cannot really complain about him, yet Mörðr is concerned when he sees that his daughter is still preoccupied with something. He takes Unnr to a quiet place where nobody else can hear them, and asks her again. Now, Unnr answers that she wants to get divorced, because her husband is unable to fulfil his marital duties. When Mörðr asks her to explain more exactly, she tells him that her husband gets an enormous erection when aroused that makes it impossible for them to have sexual intercourse. Their conversation ends with Mörðr instructing Unnr on how to divorce her husband.

Both recensions tell this scene in almost exactly the same words, except that, in the KG text, Unnr's answers – with the exception of the last one – are in verse.<sup>11</sup> The first stanza contains Unnr's answer to her father's question about her husband:

**ÍF 12**

*Hon svarar: >Gott má ek frá honum  
segja þat allt, er honum er sjálfrátt.<*  
(ÍF 12, p. 24, emphasis added)

She answers: >I can say only good things about him in the matters over which he has control.< (CSI 3, p. 11)

**KG**

*hón kvað vísu:*  
*Víst segik gott frá geystum  
geirhvessanda þessum,  
þat er sjálfráðligt silfra  
sundrhreyti er fundit.  
Verðk, þvít álmr er orðinn  
eggþings fyr görningum  
— satt er, at sék við spotti —  
segja mart eða þegja.*  
(KG, p. 29, emphasis added)

She spoke a stanza:

Certainly, I speak well of this valiant spear-sharpener [= warrior, i.e. Hrútr], that which is found to be voluntary for the scatterer-apart of silvers [= generous man]. I must say much or be silent, because the elm of the edge-assembly [= battle; its elm = warrior, i.e. Hrútr] has met with sorceries; it is true that I am on my guard against ridicule.  
(Nj, p. 1220)

The underlined lines here show the verbal correspondence between verse and prose, but the whole stanza not only contains more information than the short prose response; its different rhetorical mode also changes the weight of this reply, and Unnr's subsequent responses, in the narrative. The ÍF text presents the meeting between Unnr and Mörðr as an intimate dialogue between a concerned father and his daughter, telling him about her marital problems. When Mörðr asks about Unnr's husband, she says that she cannot complain about anything *er honum sjálfrátt* (>over which he has control<). The audience, knowing of Queen Gunnhildr's spell, understands the implicit meaning of this answer, but Mörðr does not. Unnr, however, does not explain this any further for the time being.

The first stanza spoken by Unnr contains additional details and nuances compared to the ÍF text. It becomes clear that she suspects her husband as being the victim of sorcery (*[hann] er orðinn fyrir gørningum*; ›[he] has met with sorceries‹). She does not say where she acquired this information, whether Hrútr told her it himself, or whether she has heard rumours about Hrútr's stay in Norway. It becomes clear, however, that Unnr is worried about the gossip and ridicule to which she and her family may be subjected because of her husband's problems. The *víst* (›certainly‹) at the beginning of the stanza suggests her hesitation, and that there may be two ways to look at the situation. The stanza implies that Unnr does not resent her husband as much as the consequences that Queen Gunnhildr's spell may have for public opinion concerning their marriage.

Unnr's second and third stanzas respond to Mördr's request: ›*Seg þú mér nú allt þat, er á meðal ykkar er, ok lát þér þat ekki í augu vaxa*‹ (ÍF 12, p. 24; »Now tell me everything that's happened between you two, and don't make things worse than they are«, CSI 3, p. 11):

#### ÍF 12

›*Svá mun verða*‹, segir hon. ›*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.‹  
(ÍF 12, p. 24, emphasis added)

›So be it‹, she said. ›I want a divorce from Hrut, and I can tell you what my main grievance 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.‹ (CSI 3, p. 11)

#### KG

›*svá mun vera verða*‹, segir hón ok kvað vísu:

*Víst hefr, hringa hristir,  
Hrútr líkama þrútinn  
eitrs, þá er línbeðs leitar  
lundýgr munuð drýggja.  
Leita ek með ýti  
undlinna þá finna  
yndi okkars vanda,  
aldræðr boði skjaldar.  
ok enn kvað hon vísu:  
Þó veitk hitt, at hreytir  
handfúrs, jökuls spannar,  
meiðr, er jafnt sem aðrir  
ýtendr boga nýtir.  
Vilda ek við öldu  
jókennanda þenna,*

— *rjóðr, lít orð ok íðir,*  
*undleggs — skilit segja.*  
(KG, pp. 29–30, emphasis added)

›This shall be done‹, she says and spoke  
a stanza:

Certainly, Hrútr has a body swollen  
with poison, shaker of swords [=  
warrior, i.e. Mörrðr], when the  
passionate one seeks the linen-bed  
to engage in love-making. I seek  
then to find the pleasure of our  
matrimonial bond with the launcher  
of wound-serpents [= swords; their  
launcher = warrior, i.e. Hrútr],  
elderly messenger of the shield [=  
warrior, i.e. Mörrðr].

And she spoke another stanza:

Yet I know this, that the flinger of  
hand-fire [gold; its flinger =  
generous man, i.e. Hrútr] is just like  
other capable launchers of bows [=  
warriors], tree of the glacier of the  
span [= silver; its tree = warrior, i.e.  
Mörrðr]. I should like to declare  
myself divorced from this guider of  
the stallion of the wave [= ship; its  
guider = seafarer, i.e. Hrútr];  
reddener of the wound-limb [=  
weapon; its reddener = warrior, i.e.  
Mörrðr], consider words and deeds.

(Nj, p. 1221 and 1223)

In the ÍF text, Unnr immediately asks for a divorce, and gives as a reason her husband's inability to fulfil his marital duties – even though his sexual inability seems to be restricted to her. In the KG text, however, Unnr does not seem so certain, since her second stanza again starts with the caveat *víst* (›certainly‹). She describes Hrútr's body as *þrútinn eitrs* (›swollen with

poison<») when he tries to make love to her and to bring them both sexual satisfaction. The *eitr* (>poison<») implicates an evil source outside Hrútr, linking his sexual inability back to ideas of sorcery. Unnr does not accuse or blame her husband, but rather speaks positively of him. In all three stanzas, she uses kennings (a form of metaphorical periphrasis) to describe only her husband and her father.<sup>12</sup> In her first stanza, when she refers to Hrútr as a *geystum geirh vessanda* (>valiant spear-sharpener<»), she uses a warrior-kennung that, in the context of the stanza and the episode, can also be read as a sexual innuendo. The kennings in the other stanzas are less ambiguous, describing Hrútr as a brave warrior and a generous man. For her father, Unnr also uses similar conventional warrior-kennings, but in her second stanza, she contrasts her husband with her father, referring to the latter as an already elderly warrior (*aldræðr boði skjaldar*), which frames Hrútr as virile and energetic. While, in the ÍF text, Unnr clearly accuses Hrútr of causing their marital problems, in the stanzas of the KG text, the accusation is directed against the poison – and thus the sorcery – that makes her husband's body swell. When read as a continuation of the first stanza, Unnr seems to be at least as concerned about public opinion and the ridicule that these problems might cause as she is about her husband's sexual abilities: Hrútr is a good man who is not to be blamed for being a victim of sorcery. It is only in the second half of Unnr's third and last stanza that she mentions her wish for a divorce (>*vilda ek [...] skilit segja*<; »I wish to [...] declare myself divorced«»), but only after she has vindicated Hrútr in the first half of the stanza by declaring him not to be any different from other men.

Where Unnr's answers in the ÍF text consist of rather short and direct sentences, in the KG text, she elaborates in three stanzas on her internal conflict, her ambiguous feelings, and her hesitation to decide. Although her prose-answers in the ÍF text contain neither any explicit animosity nor an unfriendly attitude towards Hrútr, Unnr's wish for a divorce is clear. The stanzas in the KG text, however, display her ambivalence and her internal

conflict, as well as the pressure she feels from the outside world and its interference in private matters. Her versified answers imply that, were it not for the fear of gossip and public shame, she would probably not feel the need for a divorce. Unnr is suggested to feel trapped between public opinion – and thus the reputation of her family – and her respect and feelings for her husband; she must choose between reason and emotion.

After the stanzas, both recensions continue with the same wording, with Mörrðr asking about the details of Hrútr's condition:

*›Hversu má svá vera?‹ segir Mörrðr, ›ok seg enn gorr.‹ Hon svarar: ›Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hörund hans svá mikít, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik, en þó höfum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at vit mætum njótask, en þat verður ekki. En þó áðr vit skilim sýnir hann þat af sér, at hann er í æði sinu rétt sem aðrir menn.‹ (ÍF 12, p. 24)*

›How can this be?‹ said Mord. ›Give me more details‹. She answered: ›When he comes close 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 that he's as normal physically as other men.‹ (CSI 3, p. 11)

Mörrðr then thanks his daughter for her openness, and instructs her how to divorce herself from her husband in a legally correct manner. Despite the verbal correspondence across the recensions, the passage takes on a different meaning in each case, depending on the previous narrative context. In the ÍF text, Unnr gives her father a final confirmation that her wish for divorce is justified. Her graphic description almost seems to satisfy a sense of voyeurism in her father – and in the audience – and proves that the fear of being ridiculed is real. Unnr and her husband have tried everything, but to no avail; the fact that he is like a normal man only when they separate is proof that their marriage is not meant to be. In the context of the KG text, however, Unnr explicitly states what she had previously expressed in a much more complicated, hesitant, and ambiguous way in the stanzas. She therefore seems to be still hesitant and ambivalent towards her husband.



While they have tried everything, there may yet be hope since he is, after all, like any other man – aside from during their attempts at sexual intercourse.

In both recensions, this scene concerning the meeting between Unnr and her father is important for future developments in the plot, when Unnr later wants to reclaim her dowry from Hrútr, and turns to Gunnarr for legal help. The episode about Unnr and Hrútr is the first of several in which an unlucky marriage develops problems that reach beyond the individual couple's relationship, leading to legal cases and feuds. But whereas the ÍF text focuses on the legal and familial aspects of the unlucky marriage, the stanzas in the KG text highlight Unnr's personal situation, alluding to dark and dangerous forces, such as sorcery or public opinion and gossip, that she is unable to control. The stanzas introduce the ambiguity of her emotions, caused by the tension between the couple's private struggles and the danger of their problems being made public by the transmission of gossip, which plays a major role throughout ›Njáls saga‹.

The stanzas also accentuate Unnr's voice in the dialogue, since she speaks in a quite different mode to her father. Until this scene, Unnr has hardly spoken in the saga, other than a few sentences to her husband or to Sigmundur Özurarson before her journeys to the assembly. The three stanzas in this scene thus place a strong emphasis on her voice and on what she has to say. Although we must keep in mind that the poetry is not laid out in the manuscripts in a way that separates it from the prose, unlike in the editions cited above, the readers of the text are made aware by the typical inquit – that is, the formulaic sentence that introduces the verse quotation (*hon kvað vísu*; ›she spoke a verse‹) – that there will be a change in the narrative mode as a result of the poetry's different pacing, as well as its use of rhythm, rhyme, and diction, including kennings. The stanzas are like static islands within the flow of the narrative, and they give Unnr a different narrative position and a different narrative space than her father. In the KG text, the focus is thus less on the questions posed by Mörðr than on the

responses offered by Unnr. The syntactic complexity of the stanzas and their riddle-like kennings reflect Unnr's complicated feelings, as well as the difficulties of finding a solution to her problems, and the obfuscation of these poetic strategies enhances the intimacy of the situation. The stanzas function as a sort of time-out in the narrative,<sup>13</sup> giving Unnr, as well as the audience, the time and opportunity to reflect on this difficult situation. The strict metre of the *dróttkvætt* contains the strength of the emotions expressed by Unnr, which must fit within the narrow frame required by the poetic rules, while the complexity of the skaldic diction itself mirrors the tangled complexity of Unnr's situation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Unnr's stanzas, as well as other stanzas in ›Njáls saga‹ or elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur*, represent far more than the remnants of oral tradition or some quasi-mannerist decoration, composed at a later date, inserted into a realistic prose narrative. Rather, the stanzas can be thought of as stumbling stones, hindering narrative progression in ways that encourage deeper reflection on events – both by the characters and by the audience. It has been observed before, in relation to ›Njáls saga‹ and to other sagas, that poetry is important for expressing emotions (Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir 2020), permitting the reader a glance into the characters' internal lives, which are quite often more contradictory than their actions within the plot suggest. This holds true not only for the stanzas in ›Njáls saga‹ (Gropper 2025). Emotions expressed in the skaldic poetry quoted in the sagas tend to be negative: these stanzas most often refer to rage, anxiety, insecurity, and doubts.<sup>14</sup> Yet verse is not only about emotions. In Unnr's stanzas, the emotions are as ambiguous as her situation, and this ambiguity reaches far beyond the specific context in which Unnr quotes her stanzas. Ambiguity caused by the tension between private life and public appearance, between individual aims and the demands of the family, are topics that appear over

and over in ›Njáls saga‹, but this kind of ambiguity is addressed less directly and explicitly in the prose narration.

From a literary point of view, neither the ÍF text nor the KG text of ›Njáls saga‹ is inherently better or worse than the other; rather, each is a different realisation of the same story with a different aesthetic and different narrative focus. The ÍF text is more focused on following the plotline, and on the practical and legal consequences of individual actions and decisions for a family or for society. Individual actions usually have far-reaching consequences: Hrútr's flirtation with Queen Gunnhildr leads to marital problems, which lead to his unusual divorce, which leads to Unnr claiming her dowry, which leads to Gunnarr meeting Hallgerðr, which leads to further marital issues, which lead to a long-lasting feud between two families that started out on friendly terms. Unnr, and her decision to seek a divorce, represents just one cog in this massive narrative machinery. The KG text, however, interrupts the narrative flow much more often than the ÍF text does through the stanzas it quotes, which reflect hesitation and doubts about the supposed causality of events in the prose and their apparent inevitability. As Unnr's reflections and her hesitation show, each individual decision can have far-reaching consequences, both for the individual character and for her friends and kinsmen. Unnr is torn between her own wishes and her obligation towards her family and their reputation. The intricate form of the stanzas is thus as important as their content, because their syntactic and semantic complexity likewise mirrors the difficulties and complications of the characters' situations. The poetry fundamentally changes the narrative's pace and rhythm, preventing the narrative from unfolding as smoothly as it otherwise might, and forcing the audience to stop and reflect, together with the characters, on the complexities of the events narrated. By highlighting specific voices and specific situations, the poetry in a saga is able to tell a story different than that conveyed by the prose alone, centering different points of view in ways that ambiguate the events underpinning the narrative.

## Notes

- 1 The research presented in this article was carried out within the framework of subproject B5: ›Narrative (self-)reflection in the Icelandic family sagas‹ of the Collaborative Research Center 1391 *Different Aesthetics*, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), project no. 405662736.
- 2 Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson's (2004) more recent edition of Reykjabók, with modernised orthography, did not have as much impact on scholarship.
- 3 These sagas are: ›Njáls saga‹, ›Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar‹, ›Finnboga saga ramma‹, ›Bandamanna saga‹, ›Kormáks saga‹, ›Víga-Glúms saga‹, ›Droplaugarsona saga‹, ›Ölkofra saga‹ (or ›þátrr‹), ›Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds‹, ›Laxdæla saga‹ (including ›Bolla þátrr‹), and ›Fóstbræðra saga‹.
- 4 These Íslenzk fornrit editions are based largely or in part on Möðruvallabók: ›Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar‹ (ÍF 2), ›Finnboga saga‹ (ÍF 14), ›Kormáks saga‹ (ÍF 8), ›Víga-Glúms saga‹ (ÍF 9), ›Droplaugarsona saga‹ (ÍF 11), ›Ölkofra þátrr‹ (ÍF 11), ›Hallfreðar saga‹ (ÍF 8), ›Laxdæla saga‹ and ›Bolla þátrr‹ (ÍF 5), and ›Fóstbræðra saga‹ (ÍF 6).
- 5 For the question of textual identity in a transmission history characterised by variance, see Müller (1999).
- 6 In the Y recension, there are only a few stanzas in the first half of the saga, when the main plot is unfolding (see Gropper 2025).
- 7 These are the three stanzas spoken by Unnr and Gunnarr's first four stanzas (ÍF 12, p. 465–468).
- 8 In the following, I quote the prose text following Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's edition (= ÍF 12). Where there are variants in the Konráð Gíslason's edition (= KG) I quote them in the footnotes. All translations of the text of the ÍF edition are taken from ›The Complete Sagas of Icelanders‹ (= CSI 3).
- 9 The KG text has *vini* (KG, p. 2; ›friends‹).
- 10 The KG text shows slight variance in Gunnhildr's speech, but without changing its meaning: *ef ek á svá mikit vald á þjer, sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við þá konu, er þú ætlar þjer á íslandi at eiga, en fremja skalt þú mega við aðrar konur vilja þinn. ok hefir nú hvártki okkat vel: þú trúðir mjer eigi til málsins* (KG, p. 23; ›If I have as much power over you as I think I have, then I place this spell on you: you will not have any sexual pleasure with the woman you plan to marry in Iceland, though you'll be

able to enjoy yourself with other women. Neither of us will come out of this well: you did not trust me with the truth.<.).

- 11 All translations of skaldic poetry are derived from the authoritative recent edition by Clunies Ross et al. (2022). I have adjusted the formatting of these translation to italicise and explain kennings (a kind of metaphorical circumlocution) in order to assist with readability for those unfamiliar with the diction of skaldic verse.
- 12 As Margaret Clunies Ross (2022, p. xxxvii) explains, kennings »in their simplest form are two-part noun periphrases for commonly referenced poetic subjects, such as ›man‹, ›woman‹, ›warrior‹, ›sword‹ or ›ship‹, which substitute for that subject without explaining directly what it is«.
- 13 For an elaboration of the idea of stanzas as a time-out or condensation of narrative time, see Heather O'Donoghue's article in the present volume.
- 14 See the results for the category EMOTION in the database of our project ›The *Íslendingasögur* as Prosimetrum‹ (= ÍSPM, last accessed 3 January 2024), which evidence this trend in skaldic poetry.

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ÍSPM = The *Íslendingasögur* as Prosimetrum, project database ([online](#))

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