ISSN 2568-9967

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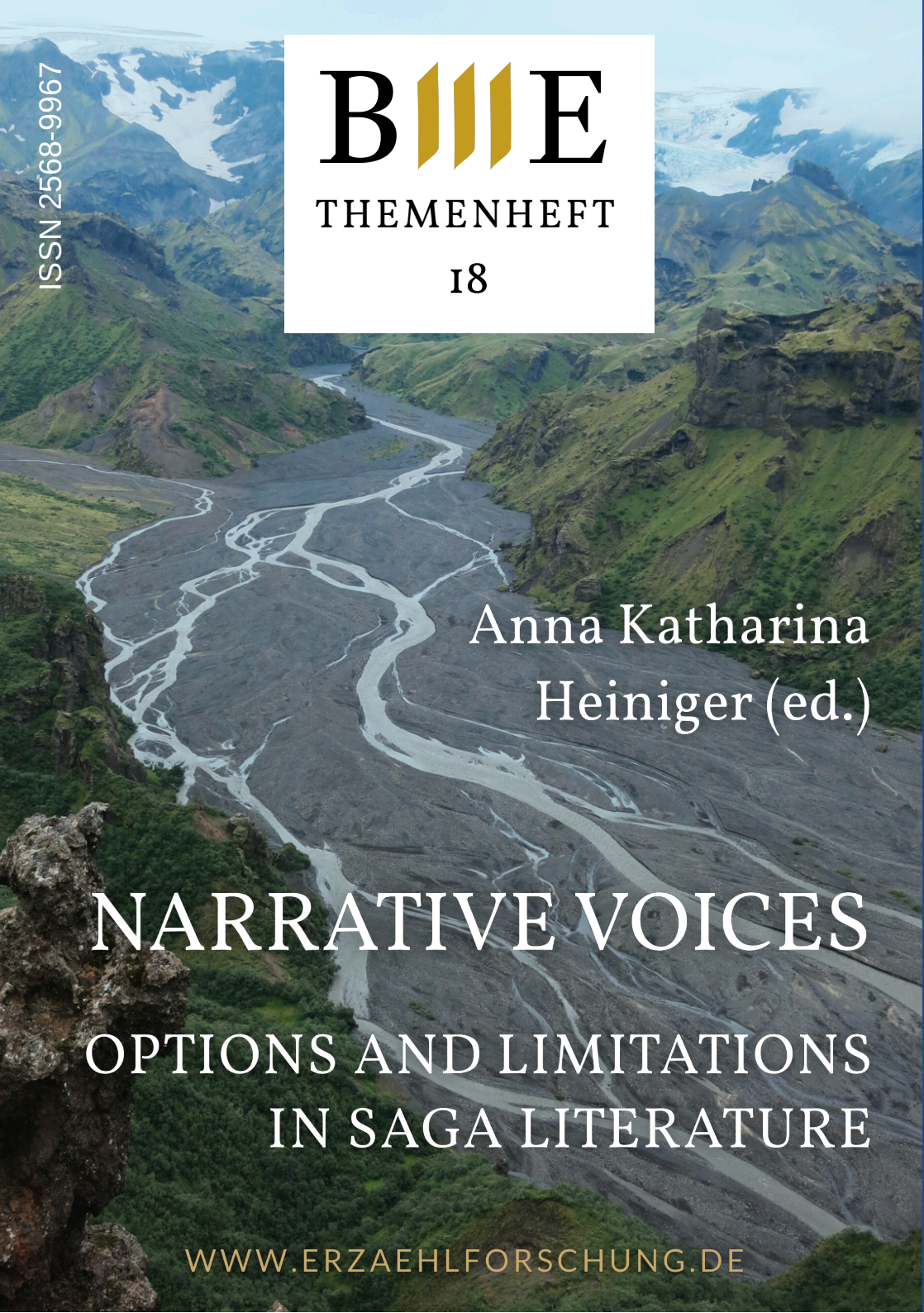

Anna Katharina Heiniger (ed.)

NARRATIVE VOICES

OPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS IN SAGA LITERATURE

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SPECIAL ISSUE 18

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Narrative Voices:

Options and Limitations in Saga Literature

Published June 2025.

Senior Editors: Prof. Dr. Anja Becker (Bremen) and Prof. Dr. Albrecht Hausmann (Oldenburg).

http://www.erzaehlforschung.de – Kontakt: herausgeber@erzaehlforschung.de
ISSN 2568-9967

Suggested citation:
Heiniger, Anna Katharina (ed.): Narrative Voices: Options and Limitations in Saga Literature, Oldenburg 2025 (BmE Themenheft 18, online).

Cover photo: View of the Markarfljót River in Þórsmörk in southern Iceland.
(c) Photo: Anna Katharina Heiniger

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Anna Katharina Heiniger

Introduction

Narrative Voices, their Effects in Saga Literature, and the Case of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹

1. Options and Limitations in Saga Narration

In the Old Norse-Icelandic saga ›Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss‹ (›The Saga of Bárðr, the Guardian Spirit of Snæfellsnes‹), a rough-going wedding party takes place in the cave of Kolbjörn, a type of giant (*þurs*).[1] The cave is described as *bæði fúlt ok kalt* (ÍF 13, p. 150; ›both foul and freezing‹, CSI 2, p. 256). Soon, the guests, most of them paranormal beings, begin to drink and eat without moderation. Though the bridegroom, Þórðr, is human, the saga mentions that both horse and human flesh are on offer, a clear sign to any saga audience that we are in the realm of paganism, since eating horse meat was forbidden when Iceland was Christianised (ÍF 1, p. 17), and the paranormal, since trolls and giants are known to eat people – meaning it also stands as a warning that Þórðr is not safe in their company. The party goes well, and it gets louder and louder in the cave:

> *Var nú matr borinn […] var þat bæði hrossa kjöt ok manna; tóku þá til matar ok rifu sem ernir ok etjutíkr hold af beinum. […] drykkr var par áfengr ok lítt sparaðr. […] Nú tóku menn Kolbjarnar at drekka með lítilli stillingu, ok urðu þeir skjótt allir svíndrukknir ok váru ekki lágtalaðir, en hellirinn hljóðaði mjök undir.* (ÍF 13, pp. 152–153)

> Food was brought […] There was both horse and human flesh. They began to eat, ripping the flesh from the bones like eagles and hunting bitches. […] The

> drink was strong and little spared. […] Kolbjörn's men began to drink with little moderation, and they quickly became as soused as swine and made such a row that the cave resounded. (CSI 2, p. 257)

After this gluttony, the host suggests playing a game and Gestr – one of the guests and an outsider to the group, who has offered to accompany Þórðr to protect him – quickly proposes two games: *Gestr segir, því at hann varð skjótari til andsvara: ›Hafi þat þínir menn helzt til gamans, sem þeim er skapfelldast; hafið þá hvárt þér vilið, knútukast eða glímur‹* (ÍF 13, p. 153; ›Because he was quicker to answer, Gestr said, »Let your men do for fun as they would like best. Let them have a go at joint-throwing or hold wrestling matches«‹, CSI 2, p. 257). The wedding party opts for the former option, throwing the bones from the feast at one another. As soon as the first injuries occur due to the unruliness of the game, the narrative voice mentions again how loud it is in the cave: *Þenna áverka sér Ámr, fóstbróðir hans,* [Gláms] *ok tekr þegar knútuna ok lætr fjúka at Þorvaldi. Þetta sér Þórðr ok tekr í móti ok sendir aptr. Knútan kemr á kinnbein Áms, svá kjálkinn brotnaði í stykki. Varð nú óhljóð mikit í hellinum* (ÍF 13, p. 154; ›His foster-brother Am saw this wound, took the bone, and let it fly at Thorvald. Thord saw this, grabbed it, and sent it back, the knuckle bone hit Am's cheekbone so that it broke his jaw into bits. Now there was a huge uproar in the cave‹, CSI 2, p. 258).

It is only when Gestr breaks another guest's thighs and arms during the game, however, that the other guests begin to howl with immense noise. The loudness becomes so unbearable that it is beyond verbalisation for the narrative voice: *Þursarnir gera nú miklu meira óhljóð en frá megi segja, því at svá má at kveða, at þeira hljóð væri líkari nágöll en nökkurs kykvendis látum* (ÍF 13, p. 154; ›Now the ogres made more noise than can be described because it may be said that their howls were more like the screaming of corpses than any living thing‹, CSI 2, p. 258). At this point, Kolbjörn, the host, decides to stop the game in order to protect the guests and prevent an escalation: *Kolbjörn mælti þá: ›Gefið upp þenna leik, því*

at af Gesti munum vér allir illt hljóta; var þat ok þvert í móti mínum vilja, at hann var hingat boðinn.‹ ›Svá búit muntu þat hafa‹, segir Gestr (ÍF 13, p. 154; ›Kolbjörn announced: »Give up this game, for at Gest's hands we will all be harmed. It was against my advice that he was invited here to the banquet.« »That's the way it goes«, said Gest‹, CSI 2, p. 258). Gestr's statement is ambiguous: it can be read either as a simple confirmation of Kolbjörn's decision, or as an underlying threat by Gestr. Kolbjörn seems to understand that Gestr suggested the bone-throwing game in order to gain an opportunity to harm as many of the *þursar* as possible. Gestr soon finds an alternative plan, beheading the drunken ogres once they fall asleep after the feast, but at this moment in the narrative, his true intentions are known only to him.

The narrative account of the festive episode illustrates the versatility of saga narration. As in any other (*Íslendinga*-)saga, the narrative of ›Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss‹ is told through multiple voices. The main narrative voice, located on the extradiegetic level, assumes a primarily organisational function: it sets the scene, introduces the characters, structures the narrative, and details the action of lively scenes, such as the bone-throwing game discussed above. What is more, the narrative voice includes less obvious information that explains the logic of the story to the audience, such as the detail that Gestr was able to determine the type of game played because he was quicker to answer than the other guests. Interestingly, the limitations of what is known and what can be told verbally are also addressed by this voice; in the above example, the narrative voice declares it impossible to describe the loud noise in the cave with words, and thus resorts to a vivid image in order to give the audience an impression of the situation. Evaluative comments are also offered, as when the wedding guests are said to eat and drink without moderation.

Yet the saga is narrated through multiple voices. In addition to the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrative voice, the events of the saga are told through further voices, such as those of the saga characters, on both the

extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels. While these voices are orchestrated within the narrative by the extradiegetic narrative voice, they are also associated with particular entities in the story, and are thus distanced from the speaking voice of the narrative voice itself.

All of these voices are crucial for shaping a complete saga narrative; they all introduce different qualities, and at times are used to provide different kinds of information. The narrative voice thus has various options at hand, but also faces some limitations regarding how the plot can be told. Since every element in the narrative can be narrated in various ways, the narrative voice needs to decide which elements are relevant for the narration, and how they are best narrated in order to create the desired effect in the audience. Only the sum or the orchestration of all these voices is ultimately able to tell the whole saga. Hence, studying the narrative voice in the sagas goes beyond technical inquiry in the process of narration. Indeed, the choices made by the narrative voice are also (self-)reflective on the process of narration, and thus invite aesthetic considerations.

This special issue results from a workshop entitled »*miklu meira óhljóð en frá megi segja:* Narratorial Potential and Boundaries in Old Norse Literature«, which took place on October 21, 2022 at Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen, Germany.[2] In the course of preparing this special issue, I decided to alter our terminology slightly: instead of discussing »potential and boundaries«, it can be more helpful to speak of »options and limitations« in saga narration (see final title of this issue). For the terms ›potential‹ and ›options‹, the former refers to a possibility, something that could be developed in a given situation, while the latter suggests that a specific way for further proceedings or development has already been established. In case of the sagas, it is more apt to talk about options, because saga writing does not develop any further, and it is possible only to study the techniques applied. The term ›boundaries‹ has been replaced with ›limitations‹, as the first term suggests that something is imposed externally, for instance, by

conventions or laws. In the case of saga narration, such boundaries are set by the Old Norse-Icelandic understanding of the genres; hence, the sagas do not include runic script or text passages in Old French. ›Limitations‹, on the other hand, may denote an internal restriction, something that cannot be achieved because it would go beyond what is acceptable for the narrative and thus also the audience. As seen in ›Bárðar saga‹, the narrative voice reaches a point where the verbalisation of the noise is limited by the saga's formal constraints, and thus it becomes necessary to leave the scene – assisted by imagery – to the audience's imagination.

This special issue thus focuses on the options and limitations of saga narration. It explores how multiple narrative voices can be identified in a saga, how these voices present the selected material, and how their choices or preferences influence the effect on the audience. The contributions show that the narrative voices of the sagas are enormously versatile in the way they structure and curate the process of saga narration. Countless features, particularities and subtleties, and surprising moves can be identified, so that it can seem as if there were plentiful options and hardly any limitations to saga narration. In our final discussion at the workshop, we referred to this observation as the ›frame of acceptability‹ of saga narration. Since the narrative voices prove rather playful and versatile in their way of curating the sagas, the frame of acceptability is flexible and adaptable, and some narratorial elements can be used for different purposes and effects. The contributions in this issue further suggest that the frame of acceptability does not apply only to the *Íslendingasögur*, but also to other saga genres such as the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas) or the *þættir* (›threads, short stories‹). This special issue aims at inviting further research on and in-depth explorations of the frame of acceptability. Considerably more research on the topic is necessary in order to fully understand the role the narrative voice plays in the sagas in curating the material, and thus creating literary artworks.

But what are sagas?[3] The term *saga* derives from the Old Norse verb *at segja* (›to say‹, ›to tell‹, ›to report‹), and refers to prose (or in some cases prosimetric) narratives that originated mainly in medieval Iceland and Norway.[4] All the sagas are written in the vernacular (i.e. Old Norse) and transmitted anonymously. There are several genres of sagas. Most prominent are the family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), which depict events that (allegedly) took place in the context of the Icelandic settlement (870–1050).[5] Other than that, there are sagas painting a picture of prehistoric Scandinavia (*fornaldarsögur*); the *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas), which present translated or adapted versions of continental courtly literature; sagas offering (quasi-)historical biographies of the Norwegian kings (*konungasögur*); sagas dealing in a literary fashion with events from mid-thirteenth century Iceland (*samtíðarsögur*); and sagas portraying (often Icelandic) saints (*heilagra manna sögur*) or bishops (*biskupasögur*).[6]

The sagas are products of a complex narrative tradition. Not only did saga literature develop its own idiosyncratic features, it also adapted various elements from continental European literature. Moreover, the sagas intertwine oral and written sources, and most of the extant sagas exist in several versions; consequently, no original versions (German: *Urtext*) are available, if the concept of an original version was even important to the writers and audiences of sagas. Each saga version offers an idiosyncratic presentation of the plot, to varying extents, as each anonymous scribe chose a different way to shape the narrative. In addition, the manuscript transmission of sagas continued for a long time: the earliest preserved manuscripts date to the twelfth century, while the youngest paper manuscripts were written as late as the twentieth century. Most surviving manuscripts, however, can be dated to the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.

The following parts of this introduction pursue four main aims. Section 2 offers a short presentation of the research aim and model of the Collaborative Research Centre ›Different Aesthetics‹, which sets the larger frame of

reference for both the workshop and this publication. In section 3, the term ›narrative voice‹ is discussed, both from a general narratological angle and in the context of Old Norse-Icelandic literary studies. In section 4, I illustrate how these ideas can be applied to analysis of the sagas, taking ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ as a case study, with a particular focus on the usefulness of annotation software in tracing the functions of the various voices encoded in the text. Section 5 introduces the contributions of this special issue.

2. The Different Aesthetics of Saga Literature

The larger thematic background of both the workshop and this issue is defined by the Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) 1391 ›Different Aesthetics‹, which explores notions of aesthetics in premodern European culture.[7] In premodern Europe, ideas of aesthetics were quite diverse and were not subjected to a unified view.[8] Rather, art was often produced through collaborative effort and conceptualised in terms of practical everyday aspects or utility. Consequently, premodern aesthetics require and deserve a different approach for studying them.

In order to delineate and explore a variety of premodern notions of aesthetics, the CRC works with a praxeological model. This model envisions a close relationship between the heterological aspects of social practices and the autological elements associated with aesthetics. Both dimensions are mutually influential, and thus impact the creation of art. At the intersection of these two spheres are what we term the figures of aesthetic reflection.[9] These are the particular elements of an act or artefact that reflect both its heterological and autological dimensions. Due to their intermediary position, figures of aesthetic reflection have the potential to be (self-)reflective on the processes of creation of the respective act or artefact. Since the praxeological model is fixed neither in time nor space, it proves fruitful for analysing acts and artefacts originating from various historical, cultural,

and social contexts. Consequently, this approach can also be applied to Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature (see section 4).[10]

The style of the *Íslendingasögur* is often described as objective or fairly neutral. The extradiegetic narrative voice neither strives to present itself prominently, nor does it offer lengthy digressions discussing aspects of the plot. Nonetheless, it intersperses the plot with short comments such as *nú er at taka til* (›now it will be told‹), *sumir segja* (›some [people] say‹), or *sem fyrr var sagt* (›as was told before‹).[11] Such narratorial comments assume different narrative functions: they are used to structure the plot, to evaluate characters and their actions, and to establish intertextual links. The importance of these comments goes beyond the presentation of the plot: they mark the positions where the narrative voice, through intervening in the flow of the narrative, becomes (self-)reflective on the process of narration. Hence, the narratorial comments are crucial for exploring the question of literary aesthetics of the *Íslendingasögur* in particular and saga literature in general.

3. Narrative Voice: Theoretical Considerations and Applications to Saga Literature

For the French structuralist Gérard Genette, the term ›narrative‹ (French: *récit*) is ambiguous, and can assume three different meanings. First, it refers to what is being narrated (*histoire*, in contrast to *discours*, which refers to how something is narrated); second, it refers to a series of real or fictional events that are being told (*récit*); and third, it refers to the act of narration, when someone tells someone else a story (*narration*) (Genette 2010, p. 1, and Antor 2004, p. 226). For Genette, the narrative voice (*voix*) mediates among these three levels of narration.[12] Genette considers the narrative voice to be part of a triad together with mood (*mode*), the grade of distance and perspective of the voice, and indications of tense (*temps*). The combination of these three aspects determines the *discours*, that is, the way

in which a story is told. While Genette considers the narrative voice to be the answer to the question ›who speaks? ‹, more recent scholarship considers voice to be more complex because of its relationship to other parts of the *discours*.[13] Rüdiger Zymner (2006, p. 322) argues that it is the multiple meanings of Genette's understanding of narrative (*récit*) that cause difficulties with the concept of narrative voice, which becomes »metaphorisch unscharf und begrifflich mehrdeutig«[14] (›metaphorically unspecific and conceptually ambiguous‹) as a result. Navigating and mediating among the three different levels of narrative, the narrative voice simultaneously fulfils several functions on each level (Zymner 2006, pp. 322–323). Due to these complexities, the concept of narrative voice is bound up with and determined by a variety of aspects, and thus more recent scholarship claims that narrative voice »cannot be simply reduced to the question of ›who speaks‹ or to the subcategory of person« (Fludernik 2001, p. 620).

Genette's understanding of voice is itself determined relationally, and results from – or rather depends on – three aspects, namely, the time of narrating, the narrative level, and the extent to which the narrating persona is involved in the narrative. While the relational character of voice has not been contested by scholarship, the third aspect of the persona has stirred many debates. Genette had already realised that this aspect would be problematic. In ›Nouveau discours du récit‹, he states: »Le chapitre de la voix est sans doute celui qui a provoqué les discussions pour moi les plus cruciales, au moins à propos de la catégorie de la p e r s o n n e« (1983, pp. 352–353; his emphasis, ›The chapter on voice is unquestionably the one that (for me) provoked the most crucial discussions, at least apropos of the category of p e r s o n‹, 1990, p. 79). It is particularly the personalisation of the narrative voice that has been criticised, first, because Genette initially strived to detach voice from psychological undertones,[15] and second, because it is not clear in Genette's works whether voice refers to an (extradiegetic) narratorial authority or to the characters within the narrative.[16]

The narrative voice remains »a complex and problematic category« (Aczel 1998, p. 467). The most fundamental criticism on the concept comes from linguistic and post-structuralist perspectives (Blödorn/Langer/Scheffel 2006, p. 3). Monika Fludernik (2001, p. 619), for instance, considers narrative voice a »metaphoric extension of the grammatical voice«, because the triad of voice, mood, and tense are reminiscent of grammatical categories for inflecting a verb. She also objects to Genette's tendency to personalise the narrative voice: »Attributions of voice are interpretative moves« (p. 636) that are nothing but »mimetic illusion« (p. 623), and thus run into danger of »treat[ing] the text as a real-life instance of narrating« (p. 623). In Fludernik's opinion, the most important task of a narrative is to convey »the optimum of information« (p. 636), which does not necessitate the identification of a particular kind of narrative voice. Consequently, she suggests the concept of nonnatural narratives (p. 624), which do not feature an (explicit) narrative voice, because »[it] does not really *matter* to a reader who is speaking« (p. 636, emphasis in the original).

Arguing from a post-structuralist perspective, Richard Aczel focuses on two aspects of narrative voice that Genette did not consider. The first of these is the qualitative properties of voice, which need to be explored before one can venture to attribute an identity to a voice (Aczel 1998, p. 468).[17] The quality of voice can be measured by such parameters as tone, idiom, diction, or speech-style (pp. 469–473).[18] In addition, Aczel maintains that the expressive potential of style produces »a voice effect« (p. 472). Second, Aczel turns to a topic ignored by Genette, namely, the question of polyphonous narratives. He approaches these two issues by defining the narrative voice not as a personalised entity, but as a textual function and effect (p. 467).

Aczel distinguishes between the ›narrator‹ as »an umbrella term for a cluster of possible functions« and the ›narrative voice‹ as an effect (p. 492).[19] Aczel's understanding of functions in a narrative are inspired by

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony.[20] While some, such as the selection and organisation of material, are necessary for every narrative, others are optional, such as commenting on the narrative or addressing the audience directly.[21] Aczel's narrative voice, on the other hand, denotes the effect the narrative functions have. Since the narrative voice depends on the existence and detectability of the functions (combined under the term ›narrator‹), the narrative voice is an »actively configured« compound (p. 483), and relative in its appearance (p. 490). It is the main task of the narrative voice to detect, describe, and identify the different functions involved in a narrative. In this way, Aczel manages to differentiate among the different functions without personifying or psychologising them. Aczel's approach ensures that the narrative voice not only addresses the question ›who speaks?‹ more extensively than Genette's voice does by allowing for a polyphonous character of a narrative, but also reveals the qualitative aspects of a narrative voice by including several functions, another extension of Genette's work. For Aczel, the narrative voice thus becomes »a heuristic metaphor«, which is »best identified contextually as an alterity effect« (p. 494).

In a later article, Aczel (2001) focuses on the metaphorical and performative aspects of narrative voice(s): »There are, to be sure, no voices in written texts; there are only ways – some more useful than others – of metaphorically conceiving texts as voiced in the act or play of reading« (p. 704).[22] Aczel's narrative voice thus becomes a »staged presence« (2001, p. 705).[23] So, unlike ›real‹ communicative situations where the place of production and the place of articulation are identical, literary narratives often embrace the possibility of telling a story from removed points of view (Roggenbuck 2020, p. 2). Moreover, it is also possible for several voices to curate the process of narration, another aspect that Genette did not consider (Roggenbuck 2020, p. 14). Multivocality in a narrative often entails that the voices involved do not contribute to one and the same ›message‹ (Roggenbuck 2020, p. 3), not least because of the diverging place of production and the place of articulation: »Grundsätzlich anders verhält sich

die Frage nach einer möglichen Mehrstimmigkeit im Medium der Schrift, da hier eben keine Identität von Produktionsort und Artikulationsort der ›Stimme‹ besteht und somit auch keine grundsätzliche Einstimmigkeit gegeben ist« (›The potential multivocality in the medium of writing is fundamentally different, because in such cases, the places of production and of the articulation of the ›voice‹ are not identical, and hence there is generally no unanimity‹). Narratives can thus offer a polyphonous construction with partly contradictory, or at least complementary, narrative voices on different levels.

For the discussion below on the narrative voice in the sagas, the following aspects are important. Expanding on Genette's initial definition of ›narrative voice‹, more recent scholarship suggests that the narrative voice can be read as an impersonal, yet creative, narrative authority. This is helpful with regard to the sagas, since they are handed down anonymously. In this context, it becomes less a question of attributing a particular (historical) identity to the narrative voice(s) than of identifying different narrative voices with different narrative qualities. By studying the narrative voice, or rather the multivocality of the sagas, it is possible to unlock which literary means are used to tell a narrative (that is, to identify Aczel's functions), and what effect, in Aczel's terms, the narrative has on the audience.[24]

Before exploring how the concept of the narrative voice has been discussed in Old Norse-Icelandic literary studies, it is worth revisiting the previous scholarly endeavours in Old Norse scholarship to attribute particular sagas to historically attested persons from the upper class of medieval Iceland, even though the texts in question were handed down anonymously. Most prominent in this attempt were the members of the so-called ›Icelandic School‹ in the early twentieth century, who showed a strong interest in aspects such as an »individual saga's literary sources […], use of skaldic stanzas, manuscript transmission, dating, authorship and provenance« (Clover 1985 [2005], p. 241). Though often referred to as a ›school‹, the

Icelandic School elaborated their approach neither systematically nor theoretically. Their most programmatic publications are the introductions to their linguistically standardised editions of the sagas (Íslenzk fornrit). These often feature a chapter titled »höfundur« (modern Icelandic for ›author‹), which reflect the importance of authorship to the Icelandic School (Glauser 2021, pp. 35–36).[25] The Icelandic School worked from the premise that the sagas are mainly written products, and thus can be read and analysed in a similar way to modern novels (Clover 1985 [2005], p. 242). Consequently, they reproduced the modern concept of the independent, creative genius, which is reliant on the identification of saga authors.[26]

This »game of authoring«, as Glauser (2021, p. 36), calls it is problematic not only because it is inherently anachronistic (Clover 1985 [2005], p. 246), but because in most cases, we lack extended biographical information about potential medieval authors in Iceland and know little more than their names. Despite these circumstances, scholars have pursued different approaches in the »game of authoring«. Some investigate how the content of a saga might connect to potential authors;[27] others scrutinise linguistic features and hypothesise that shared features between different texts may be attributed to a particular author;[28] still others analyse and compare the handwriting in manuscripts. Even though all these sagas are transmitted anonymously, and in many cases are preserved in various versions across several manuscripts, scholars have not been deterred from finding the author of a potential *Urtext*, an original version to which medieval Icelanders may not have assigned as much importance as we often tend to do.

Old Norse did not have a term or concept for either author or authorship in the modern sense, which is itself influenced by an aesthetics of autonomy. Although the term *höfund(u)r* (see above) already existed in medieval times, its modern meaning of ›author‹ emerged only in the mid-nineteenth century (Glauser 2021, p. 23). The only term of medieval provenance denoting a type of narratorial authority is *sagnamaður* (literally ›saga-man‹), but this refers not to the person who composes or writes a

saga, but to one who recites a saga orally (Glauser 2021, p. 32).[29] Because of the different notion of authorship in saga literature, Clunies Ross (2010, p. 18) suggests that »the role of the [saga] author was considered less creative, more compilatory«. It is thus more apt to speak of a saga ›creator‹ in order to emphasise the aspects of retelling and rewriting, since we are not necessarily dealing with the aspiration or expectation to invent something completely new.[30] Hence, the focus of saga narration is less a celebration of individual narrative invention and achievement than of the ability to select and reuse well-known saga elements, fashioning them into a new version of the saga by bringing out »the best of its aesthetic and artistic potential« (Gropper 2021, p. 93). If we consider the process of literary creation and narration from this perspective, the need to identify an author disappears, but without reducing the potential literary value or artistry of the sagas.

Nonetheless, scholars were eager to extract more information about the persons behind a saga. In the course of their search, they soon turned to the narrator – here, in the popular understanding of a person or personified agency telling a story: »From our modern perspective, the ›narrator‹ is as close as we can get to the author of an anonymous text« (Gropper 2021, p. 87). In the 1970s, the first few scholars pondered the difference between saga author and saga narrator, though the term ›narrative voice‹ did not enter the discussion. Dietrich Hofmann (1972), for instance, differentiates between the *Erzähler* (›narrator‹) and the *Verfasser* (›writer‹). With the former term he refers to the oral transmission of the sagas: with the latter, to the written tradition. His usage of the terms is tied to medial aspects, and does not consider different narrative levels. Hofmann does not explore the possibility of a narrative authority on the intradiegetic level, but is mainly interested in the *Verfasser*, whom he tries to identify on the basis of how geographical knowledge is presented in the sagas. Similar observations can be made in Anne Heinrichs' article (1976), in which she uses the terms ›author‹ and ›narrator‹ synonymously, without discussing the different narrative levels to which the terms pertain. On the aspect of intertexture in

the sagas, she writes: »It may give us information about the question of how far the author or narrator was conscious of the technique of intertexture« (p. 141, emphasis added).

Some scholars still tend to conceive of the narrator as a personified agency that may, at times, also reveal personal impressions or thoughts on the saga narrative. Vésteinn Ólason (1998a, p. 101; 1998b, p. 78) speaks of the ›narrator‹ or the modern Icelandic equivalent *sögumaður*.[31] In general, Vésteinn (1998a, p. 101) ascribes to the narrators of the family sagas a distinct impersonal style of narration, »marked by its formal objectivity and discretion«. He identifies »more personal« utterances by the narrator only in dramatic scenes, such as when Arnkell, an important character in ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, is killed and the narrator underlines how esteemed and distinguished Arnkell was. Despite these seemingly personal sentiments, Vésteinn Ólason (1998a, p. 101) is aware that the way the narrator tells the saga is not as a »coincidence but is rather a function of how the story is told«. This statement is reminiscent of Aczel's understanding of narrator as a narrative function.

Nowadays, investigating the question of authorship is no longer as strongly bound up with this »search of the culprit«, in the sense of a personified author, as it was a few decades ago.[32] In more recent times, the term ›narrative voice‹ has been introduced into narratological saga studies. While some scholars use ›narrative voice‹ synonymously to ›narrator‹, others prefer to use it to refer to an impersonal narratorial authority. Heather O'Donoghue (2021, p. 3), for instance, writes: »By narrator – or more impersonally, narrative voice – I mean what Paul Ricœur sees as an abstract unity of consciousness which we as audience apprehend, allowing us to experience the narrative.« Though she does not differentiate between function and effect as Aczel does, O'Donoghue sees the narrator/narrative voice as being responsible for the creative curation of a saga narrative. In contrast to Vésteinn Ólason, O'Donoghue identifies several functions that the narrator/narrative voice employs in order to create a variety of effects,

and thus engage the audience in the creation of a saga narrative. What is more, O'Donoghue is one of the first to differentiate between narratorial functions on the extradiegetic and the intradiegetic level. She shows that on both levels, the narrative voices can be ›heard‹ in various contexts, for example, when it comments on events and characters, contextualises single elements, or when it withholds information for dramatic effect (pp. 132ff.). While O'Donoghue does not distinguish so strictly between ›narrator‹ and ›narrative voice‹, her understanding of the terms is reminiscent of Aczel's work.

Because of the anonymity of the *Íslendingasögur* and the strong focus on the narrator/narrative voice as the creative functions, »[t]he role of a creative author is squeezed out« (p. 3).[33] What is more, the narrative voice is not equally prominent throughout a saga, and can seem absent – or non-detectable – in some parts of the text. O'Donoghue speaks of the self-effacing narrative voice, which refers to the repeated moments in the sagas where the narrative voice chooses to be silent in situations that may be considered disturbing, both by saga society and the audience (pp. 115ff.).[34] O'Donoghue's study shows it is neither possible nor necessary to deduce a particular personality behind the narrative voice, because the sagas are told through a variety of narratorial functions with different narrative qualities.

Only rarely have scholars looked into the polyphonous and qualitative aspects of the narrative voice(s) in the sagas. Gropper (2023, p. 278) and Rösli/Gropper (2021, p. 10) have observed that, despite the publication of several studies on the manner in which the sagas are narrated, some of these studies ultimately return to the identification of single historical persons as authors (e.g. see Ranković 2016 and 2019). Nonetheless, a few studies have been published that are interested in the multivocality – or, to use Aczel's terms, the narrative functions clustered around the ›narrator‹ – and their narrative qualities. Rebecca Merkelbach (2017), for instance, differentiates between three narrative functions and their effect in the sagas. She suggests that the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator (*Erzähler*) is the

main narrative authority in a saga, which quotes other kinds of voices when appropriate. Interestingly, the quoted voices do not necessarily need to confirm the opinion of the main narrator (Merkelbach 2017, p. 253).

The notion of ›plural voices‹ or ›polyphony‹ has also been taken up by Stefanie Gropper (2023). Similarly to Merkelbach, Gropper (2023, p. 279) not only argues for the multivocality of saga narration, but also connects this feature to the anonymity of the sagas. Gropper identifies three co-narrating voices situated both on the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels. First, the main narrative voice, located on the extradiegetic level, orchestrates the multiple voices in the text by organising and structuring the whole narrative (pp. 283–284). Second, the extradiegetic voice of the narrative tradition comments on the plot. Third, statements of public opinion are spoken on the intradiegetic level. Again, these three voices do not necessarily represent the same perspectives on events or characters; hence, the voices are complementary, offering alternative information.

This section has shown that even though most theoretical discussions of the narrative voice were developed based on modern literature, the concept nonetheless proves fruitful for narratological studies in medieval literature, and thus also in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Particularly intriguing are Aczel's expansions of Genette's understanding of the narrative voice by exploring its qualitative and polyphonous aspects. Furthermore, Aczel's distinction between narrative functions and effects appear promising for narratological analysis of saga literature. The case study of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ in the following section is partly influenced by Aczel's work, and demonstrates the validity and applicability of his concepts to Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

Sagas are essentially polyphonous: in addition to the voices of the characters, there are various non-personified voices on both the extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels that co-create the narrative (see Gropper, Merkelbach, and O'Donoghue above). It is, however, the extradiegetic narrative

voice that features as the main voice orchestrating the polyphonous narrative. In sum, these voices are responsible for the narrative effect, which is as distinct as each individual version of a saga. The literary artistry of a saga results from the effect these voices create with their different expressive qualities. Studying the narrative voice, along with the other voices in a text, thus allows us to look, first, into questions of authorship without searching for a particular author, and second, into questions of literary creativity in the context of saga narration.

4. Narratorial Comments in the *Íslendingasögur*: A Case Study of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹

This section demonstrates the usefulness of applying some of the concepts discussed in the previous section to saga literature. Its foundations lie in my current research project on the use of narratorial comments in the *Íslendingasögur*; I illustrate my approach by drawing on ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ as a case study.[35] Following the praxeological model developed by CRC 1391 (see section 2), I argue that the narratorial comments function as figures of aesthetic reflections: in creating a momentary distance between the narrative and the narration, these comments both reflect formal literary conventions (the autological dimension) and engage with the expectations the audience has about the *Íslendingasögur* (the heterological dimension). Hence, the comments assume a mediating function and open up a space of (self-)reflection (Heiniger et al. 2022, p. 289). My research shows that the importance and potential of the narrative voice and its comments thus goes beyond formal and narratological aspects.[36] The comments allow us to study the aesthetic norms and expectations of the sagas, not least because there is no extant medieval Old Norse-Icelandic poetics that could inform us about the literary ideas and concepts behind saga narration.[37]

So far, my analyses have revealed that narratorial comments can be divided into five main categories, with various subcategories to capture more

subtle narratorial features. Though partly deduced from the content of the sagas, all five categories have been primarily developed from theoretical/narratological considerations, as the sagas neither mention nor specify these categories as literary tools. While earlier studies have described and discussed some of these (sub-)categories (see e.g. O'Donoghue (2021), Merkelbach (2017), Jakobsen (1983), Heinrichs (1976)), and Andersson (1966), this study constitutes the first systematic analysis of narratorial comments in the sagas. The five categories of narratorial comments I work with are the following:[38]

- Intratextual comments: These organise the plot and create coherence by, for example, referring backwards or forwards in the narrative, marking the beginning and ending of episodes, offering indications of time, and introducing new characters. In ›Reykdœla saga‹, we read: *Þá konu átti Steingrímr Ǫrnólfsson, er fyrr var nefndr* (ÍF 10, p. 163; ›Steingrímr Örnólfsson, who was mentioned before, was married to this woman‹).
- Intertextual comments: This category marks both covert and explicit references to other narratives. In the case of the former, the narrative voice refers to a named or a non-specified textual or personal source, as happens in ›Eyrbyggja saga‹: *Ari Þorgilsson inn fróði telr hana eigi með hans börnum* (ÍF 4, p. 12; ›Ari Þorgilsson the learned does not count her among his children‹). An explicit reference to a specified source can be found in ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹: *Þessa víga getr Þormóðr í Þorgeirsdrápu* (ÍF 6, p. 156; ›Þormóðr mentions this killing in [the poem] ›Þorgeirsdrápa‹‹).
- Evaluative comments: The narrative voice often evaluates both single characters and actions. In ›Njáls saga‹, a woman called Unnr is described and evaluated as follows: *Hon var væn kona ok kurteis ok vel at sér* (ÍF 12, p. 5; ›She was a beautiful woman, courteous, and gifted‹). In ›Laxdœla saga‹, when Bolli attacks Án and stabs him between the shoulders, which causes Án's death, the narrator comments on the

likelihood of the killing: *Fékk hann þegar bana sem ván var* (ÍF 5, p. 167; ›He [Án] died from this, as was to be expected‹).

- Statements of public opinion: These types of comments appear frequently, both on the intradiegetic and extradiegetic level. On the intradiegetic level, statements of public opinion mostly concern events and individuals; on the extradiegetic level, however, statements of public opinion should rather be considered expressions of the narrative tradition.[39] An instance of an intradiegetic statement of public opinion can be found in ›Reykdœla saga‹: *Ok þótti mönnum þetta illa orðit* (ÍF 10, p. 208; ›It seemed to people that this [the interaction of two characters] had ended badly‹). An instance of the extradiegetic narrative tradition reads as follows: *Ok er þat sumra manna sögn, at þessi Þorgils hafi komit til Íslands fyrir Fróðárundr um sumarit* (ÍF 4, p. 210; ›And some people say that this Þorgils had come to Iceland in the summer before the wonders of Fróðá [happened]‹).
- Extratextual references: The narrative voice repeatedly refers to extratextual aspects and objects, such as (predominantly Icelandic) toponyms, historical rulers, and contemporary mindsets and traditions. For instance, this is the case when Skalla-Grímr builds and names his farm Borg, an established location within Iceland: [Hann] *flutti um várit eptir skipit suðr* […] *ok setti þar bæ ok kallaði at Borg*, (ÍF 2, p. 73; ›In spring, [he] sailed to the south […] and built a farm and called it at Borg‹). In ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, the narrative voice details the architecture of a house, and specifies that its more unusual features are due to past customs: *At Fróðá var eldaskáli mikill ok lokrekkja innar af eldaskálanum, sem þá var siðr* (ÍF 4, p. 145; ›At Fróðá, the firehouse was spacious, and at the far end of the room were the bed-closets, as was the custom back then‹).

This list shows that each category has a distinct narrative quality, with the combination of these implicit and explicit voices contributing to the polyphony of the sagas. What is more, all five categories can be found in all

the *Íslendingasögur*, albeit in different proportions. The extradiegetic narrative voice is the most prominent, and orchestrates and shapes the whole process of narration. Intradiegetic statements of public opinion and the extradiegetic narrative tradition are impersonal voices that complement the overarching narrative voice.

While the categories of narratorial comments – some of the functions that make up the narrator, as Aczel would have it – are the same throughout the *Íslendingasögur*, the effect that the comments create – to adopt Aczel's term again – is distinct for each saga. The (artistic) imprint that the comments leave on the process of narration varies depending on how frequently and in what contexts each of the categories appears. By creating such a variety of effects, the narratorial comments thus contribute to the literary aesthetics of the sagas.

Methodologically, my research is informed by the Digital Humanities (DH), and I employ a software-based annotation.[40] Although the DH have become increasingly prominent over the past few decades, the application of DH-informed methods other than online editions and databases are still underrepresented in (medieval) literary studies. Especially quantitative analyses are often met with scepticism, as numerical and statistical data may appear difficult to combine with traditional qualitative literary analysis. Indeed, quantitative analysis requires a different approach to the main research interest, since quantifiable elements need to be defined and then processed with the help of a digital tool. In my project, the narratorial comments are studied in both a quantitative and a qualitative capacity in order to explore their role and importance in saga narratives.

In addition to pre-defined, enumerable entities, a software-based annotation requires a machine-readable corpus.[41] In order to collect and analyse the selected data, so-called annotation guidelines need to be pre-defined.[42] Annotation guidelines list and specify the aspects or elements that are crucial for the study. In my case, the definitions of the (sub-)categories of the

narratorial comments are the annotation guidelines. In the ensuing annotation process, which entails a careful reading of the narratives, only words, phrases, or sentences that meet one or more categories of the pre-defined guidelines are annotated (i.e. marked). The process of annotation is an iterative one, and can be conceptualised as a hermeneutic circle: following each round of annotating a text, it is essential to evaluate the resulting annotations and the guidelines with regard to the research aim. Are the annotations collected adequate and sufficiently specific in order to pursue the overall research question? Depending on the evaluation, annotations guidelines can be modified, for example, by refining, adding, or deleting categories. The next round of annotation then begins, targeting the same corpus. Each round of annotation covers the same steps as in the first instance. The annotation process ends when the resulting annotations are considered refined and precise enough to answer the research question. The quantified annotations are not the final answer to the research question, though, as the annotations still need to be examined qualitatively. All the same, the quantifiable results often serve to direct us towards interesting interpretative analyses.

To illustrate how narratorial comments can be analysed with the help of software-based annotation, I turn here to ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ as a brief case study. ›Gull-Þóris saga‹, also known as ›Þorskfirðinga saga‹, is an *Íslendingasaga* that tells the story of the Icelander Þórir Oddsson. As a young man, he travels to Norway where he experiences adventures together with his companions. Later on, having won fame and fortune, the group returns to Iceland. Þórir settles down, marries, and, mostly through no fault of his own, becomes involved in a series of hostilities with three main antagonists. It is assumed that the extant version of the saga was written based on an older, now-lost version that is referred to in some versions of ›Landnámabók‹ (›The Book of [the Icelandic] Settlements‹) (ÍF 13, pp. CXIII–CXIV). It was most likely during the reworking phase that paranormal elements, such as the presence of dragons, were added to the text.

These elements are otherwise mainly known from legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and chivalric sagas (*riddarasögur*). Because of the vicinity to these two subgenres, ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ is sometimes considered to be an atypical *Íslendingasaga*. Nowadays, only one version of the saga is preserved in the vellum AM 561 4to, which is dated to roughly 1400; all later paper manuscripts derive from this single copy.[43]

The basic quantitative analysis of the narratorial comments shows that all five categories introduced above can be found in ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ (see Table 1 below, column on the far right): Intratextual comments account for 44 %, immediately followed by evaluative comments at 43 %. Much rarer are the extratextual references at 7 %, statements of public opinion at 6 %, and the intertextual references at 1 %. The distribution of the five categories shows that the narrative voice in the saga is configured both to present a well-structured narrative and to offer the audience pointers on how to evaluate and understand single episodes. By and large, the saga narrative is thus dependent on the account given by the extradiegetic narrative voice, rather than extensive intertextual and extratextual connections. The other two voices – the statements of public opinion and by the narrative tradition – are fairly infrequent by comparison.

These basic quantitative results from ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ mirror the findings for the *Íslendingasögur* regarding the distribution, the ranking and the frequency of the five categories.[44] The overall figures for my reference corpus of *Íslendingasögur* show that the intratextual comments are used most frequently (ca. 46 %), followed by the evaluative comments (ca. 39 %), statements of public opinion (ca. 10 %), extratextual references (ca. 3 %) and last, intertextual comments (ca. 2 %). Even though ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ does not feature the exact same percentages, the numbers are comparable all the same and show that the main pattern employed by the (narrative) voices is the same. Hence, ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ moves within the range of expected results – or the frame of acceptability – of the *Íslendingasögur*.

The only aspect that could be considered slightly unusual is the high percentage of evaluative comments, which is almost as high as the intratextual comments. My preparatory work for the project has revealed that a high number of evaluative comments are found mostly in the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. In the case of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹, this could be interpreted as the saga being within the literary vicinity of these two saga subgenres; as mentioned above, the saga features paranormal elements primarily known from these subgenres. We may thus ask to what extent a shift in genre can be identified here.[45]

For this purpose, I divided the saga into three parts depending on the main setting. While the first (ch. 1–2) and third (ch. 6–20) parts are located in Iceland, and thus pertain to the *Íslendingasögur*, the second part (ch. 3–5) is mainly set in the legendary geography of the far north of Norway, and is reminiscent of the *fornaldarsögur* or *riddarasögur*. It is therefore interesting to explore whether the second part also shows narratological features that point to one of the other subgenres, for instance, by prioritising evaluative over intratextual comments. The distribution of the five categories in these three parts reads as follows:

	ch. 1–2 ›*Íslendinga-saga*‹	ch. 3–5 ›*fornaldar-saga*‹	ch. 6–20 ›*Íslendinga-saga*‹	›Gull-Þóris saga‹ (complete) ›*Íslendinga saga*‹
intratextual references	57 %	50 %	39 %	44 %
intertextual references	0 %	0 %	1 %	1 %
evaluative comments	39 %	39 %	44 %	43 %
statements of public opinion	1 %	9 %	7 %	6 %
extratextual references	3 %	2 %	9 %	7 %

Tab. 1: Three sections of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ as well as a computation of the narratorial comments over the complete saga.[46] The generic affiliations are kept in quotations marks as the affiliations are under consideration here. All figures are relative.

The distribution of the narratorial comments in the first part of the saga (ch. 1–2) adheres to the pattern typical of the *Íslendingasögur*. The high percentage of the intratextual comments also results from the fact that the first chapter introduces a number of new saga characters and adds their genealogy, as is often the case in the *Íslendingasögur*. Some of the newly introduced characters are also provided with a short (evaluative) description regarding their physical appearance, their character, and/or their social status. After this introductory chapter, the focus shifts to a group of young men headed by Þórir. They become sworn brothers, and soon have the opportunity to travel to Norway. So far, the saga moves within the generic realm of the *Íslendingasögur*.

The second part (ch. 3–5) begins when the young men are sent to northern Norway to fish. From then on, the narrative transitions step by step into the realm of the *fornaldarsögur* as the band travels further north. Yet none of these transitions is accompanied by narratorial comments that indicate some kind of caesura. The young men experience their first adventures in Þrándheimr, before travelling to Dumbshafr, where they complete heroic deeds and win fame and fortune.

Although the setting and events – travelling to Dumbshafr, the mysterious far north of Norway and fighting dragons – in the second part is reminiscent of the *fornaldarsögur*, the narrative voice prefers intratextual over evaluative comments (see Table 1, third column on the left). This is both an expected and unexpected finding. On the one hand, it is expected because by and large ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ reproduces the key elements of an *Íslendingasaga* (e.g. the settlement of Iceland, young men traveling to Norway to win fame and fortune, dream foreshadowing future events, fights and feuds including legal proceedings among Icelandic upper-class families); on the other, the finding is unexpected, since the second part (ch. 3–5) features some elements in its content mainly known from the *fornaldarsögur* (i.e. magic potion, Dumbshafr, dragons).

At the beginning of the third part (ch. 6–20), the narrative transitions back to the realm of the *Íslendingasögur*. Again, this change is not marked with narratorial comments. Þórir and his companions are back in Iceland. Through no fault of his own, Þórir repeatedly becomes involved in conflicts. Featuring »local disputes, feud, armed conflict and revenge« (Cardew 2004, p. 23), this section is typical for *Íslendingasögur*. Nonetheless, a few elements typically found in the *fornaldarsögur* can still be spotted; there are two shapeshifters, powerful weapons, and even a dragon in Iceland, which is highly unusual for the *Íslendingasögur*. Despite the setting in Iceland, this part features more evaluative comments than intratextual comments (see Table 1), and thus leans more towards the *fornaldarsögur* in the way it presents the plot.

So, considering the distribution of the five categories of narratorial comments, in combination with other narrative elements, the saga appears to be a hybrid text, featuring characteristics of both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*. While the slightly higher number of intratextual comments can be read as being more similar to the *Íslendingasögur*, the difference between the intratextual and evaluative comments is negligible, and the prominence of the evaluative comments can be read as more reminiscent of the *fornaldarsögur*. The ›truth‹ about what genre the saga belongs to probably lies somewhere in-between, and we may read ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ as having what Clunies Ross (2010, p. 96) calls a »mixed modality«. She (p. 28) defines sagas as a »modally mixed literary form« because »individual sagas cannot always be cleanly slotted into this or that sub-group, but may display characteristics of more than one«. Assumedly, all the post-classical *Íslendingasögur*, which generally show some affinity with the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, feature mixed modalities on the level of narration. Proving this assumption, however, goes beyond the scope of this introduction.

Having considered some quantitative findings, we turn to the qualitative analysis, with a focus on the category of evaluative comments made by the

extradiegetic narrative voice. Three out of the seven sub-categories of evaluative comments appear especially frequently in the context of Þórir and contribute mainly to his depiction. These are evaluative comments relating to his personality, his social interactions, and his thoughts and feelings, these. In chapter 1, Þórir is introduced among numerous other characters. When first mentioned, neither Þórir nor his family are singled out or described in a particularly extensive way. Þórir is described simply as *manna mestr ok fríðastr* (ÍF 13, p. 178; ›the greatest of men and the most handsome‹). It is only in chapter 2 that Þórir assumes a more prominent position, when he is elected leader of a group of sworn brothers due to his exceptional accomplishments: *Þeir fyrir sunnan Þorskafjörð gerðu Þóri at fyrirmanni fyrir örleiks sakir ok allrar atgervi* (ÍF 13, p. 181; ›Those from the south of Þorskafjörðr made Þórir their leader due to his generosity and all his accomplishments‹). While Þórir's heroic deeds (*atgervi*) are emphasised at the beginning of the saga,[47] his generosity (*örleikr*) towards his companions bears out throughout the narrative. Þórir's election by the young men testifies that his social advancement is, in large part, determined by public evaluation, an aspect quite common in the *Íslendingasögur* (see Merkelbach 2017, p. 252).

The first crucial moment in Þórir's life to be accompanied by evaluative comments is his dream, which he experiences while staying in Þrándheimr with his companions. Although it is Þórir who is dreaming, the dream is related by the extradiegetic narrative voice: *Þá dreymdi Þóri, at maðr kom at honum, mikill* (ÍF 13, p. 184; ›Then Þórir dreamed that there came towards him a large man‹). The dream and what follows is crucial for the rest of the saga and for Þórir's life, as the man he encounters in his dream is his uncle Agnarr, now an undead mound-dweller. Þórir agrees not to loot the burial mound if Agnarr helps him find greater treasure. Agnarr points him to the cave of Valr and his sons, explaining that they have transformed into dragons and guard an enormous treasure.

This dream determines Þórir's next adventure and has a crucial impact on his whole life. Apparently in preparation for the trip to Valr's cave, Agnarr offers Þórir a potion and cautions him not to drink all of it: ›*Nú er hér kalkr, er þú skalt drekka af tvá drykki, en förunautr þinn einn drykk, en þá verðr eftir þat sem má*‹ (ÍF 13, p. 185; »Now, here is a goblet, from which you shall drink two sips, but your companion one sip, and some [of the potion] will be left as intended«). This scene is remarkable for several aspects. Not only does the extradiegetic narrative voice relate the dream and the dialogues held in the dreams, but Agnarr, though appearing in the dream only, is also aware of the world outside the dream. His statement reveals what the narrative voice has not yet disclosed at this point, namely that Þórir's companion Ketilbjörn partakes passively in Þórir's dream, as he hears the conversation between Þórir and Agnarr. Only when Þórir wakes up after Agnarr's instruction does the narrative voice mention Ketilbjörn: *Ketilbjörn vaknar ok hafði heyrt allt þeira viðrmæli ok svá sét, hvar Agnar fór* (ÍF 13, p. 185; ›Ketilbjörn wakes up and has heard all of their conversation and thus seen where Agnarr went‹). What is more, while both Agnarr and the narrative voice seem aware that drinking too much of the potion will have fatal consequences for Þórir later in his life, neither shares this knowledge with Þórir or the audience. Since what will happen to Þórir if or when he drinks the last sip is not specified, it is up to the audience to connect the events at the end of the saga, where Þórir's personality changes and he most likely transforms into a dragon, to the effects of the potion.

The first explicit statement about how Þórir feels occurs after his heroic deed of killing the dragons in the cave and robbing their treasure. Þórir is overjoyed by his deed and, even more so, by the fact that he receives the largest share of the dragons' treasure. Despite several attempts to divide the loot equally, Þórir seems incapable – not necessarily unwilling – of doing so, with one part always greater than the others. Since Þórir's companions are so impressed by his bravery, they not only assign him the largest share, but also forfeit their own portions. He is delighted by these gifts, and the

narrative voice comments on his feelings: *Þórir varð allléttbrúnn við þetta ok varðveitir nú féit* (ÍF 13, p. 189; ›Þórir was very content with this [outcome], and now keeps the money‹).[48] These events are immediately contrasted with the division of the money that Agnarr gave Þórir, which he easily divides into equal portions: *En skipt var gullinu Agnarsnaut með félögum Þóris, ok hefir hverr þeira mörk gulls; hann gaf ok sinn grip hverjum þeira* (ÍF 13, p. 189; ›And Agnarr's gold was divided among Þórir's companions, and each of them got a mark of gold; in addition, he [Þórir] also gave each of them a precious object‹). By contrasting these two divisions, the narrative voice makes it clear that the two treasures are connoted differently: while Agnarr's gold is unproblematic, the problem with dividing up Valr's gold points to it probably being cursed, even though the saga does not state this explicitly.

Þórir demonstrates his social side by showing empathy to his companions and expressing emotions, as can be seen in various episodes that mostly contain evaluative comments. The evaluation of Þórir's actions is often expressed implicitly by offering explanations or justifications for his motivation. In chapter 8, he assists his companion Hyrningr when he leaves his father because of an argument over manliness and money. As Hyrningr does not possess adequate financial means, Þórir proves his *örleikr* (›generosity‹) by stepping in to provide ample money to make a living: *En síðan gerði hann bú á Hyrningsstöðum ok bjó þar til elli. Hann helt jafnan vingan við Þóri, ok þat fé hafði hann mest, er Þórir gaf honum, því at hann náði engu af Halli feðr sínum* (ÍF 13, pp. 195–196; ›And then he [Hyrningr] lives at Hyrningsstaðr, and he lived there until an old age. He and Þórir remained friends, and most of the money he had was from Þórir, because he did not receive any money from his father Hallr‹).

Þórir is not only considerate towards his friends, but also endeavours to entertain good and fair relationships with other people, and he repeatedly strives to find good compromises. In chapter 16, Þórir avoids a dispute when his sheep graze on meadows of the farmer Hrómundr by arranging it

with his neighbour so that the sheep can graze on Hrómundr's meadows, which Þórir compensates him for with two lambs every year: *Kvikfé hans gekk mjök í landi Hrómundar í Gröf, en þar fyrir var Þórir því vanr, at hann gaf Hrómundi gelding hvert haust, en lamb á várum* (ÍF 13, p. 214; ›His [Þórir's] cattle grazed extensively on the property of Hrómundr of Gröf, and because of that Þórir used to give Hrómundr a gelding every autumn and a lamb every spring‹).

Evaluative comments also express Þórir's feelings towards his wife Ingibjörg and his best friend Ketilbjörn respectively. On returning to Iceland after his adventures in Scandinavia, Þórir intends to marry Ingibjörg Gilsdóttir, whom he has fallen in love with at an earlier opportunity: *fannst honum mikit um hana* (ÍF 13, p. 192; ›he was quite taken by her‹). When married, they soon develop deep feelings for each other (*tókust þar ástir góðar*, ÍF 13, p. 197; ›a strong love developed‹). The saga does not reveal more about this relationship, but leaves the audience with this implicitly positive evaluative comment on their marriage.

Throughout the saga, Ketilbjörn is Þórir's closest and most loyal companion and friend. Towards the end of the saga, Þórir's enemies kill Ketilbjörn in a battle. After this battle, Þórir is not seen mourning and weeping; rather, his grief is reflected in his determination to find his enemy Steinólfr and take revenge for Ketilbjörn: *Þórir sat nú um kyrrt, ok var honum allmikill hugr á at finna Steinólf* (ÍF 13, pp. 221–222; ›Þórir sat now quietly, and it was his greatest intention to find Steinólfr‹). As with the usage of *alllétbrúnn* (›to be overjoyed ‹) above, the narrative voice uses the intensifying particle *all-* (*allmikill hugr*) to emphasise his determination. Eventually, Þórir finds an opportunity to attack Steinólfr and deals him a lethal wound, thus both taking revenge for Ketilbjörn and eliminating his main adversary.[49]

With the help of evaluative comments, the extradiegetic narrative voice thus portrays Þórir as a respected and prudent leader, who is considerate about the wellbeing of his companions, and who is interested in and able to

cultivate sustainable and emotional relationships. Although he becomes involved in various arguments in Iceland, it is notable that Þórir does not initiate these conflicts, but only reacts to animosities and hostilities. While he does not express his feelings in direct speech, the narrative voice implicitly communicates how he feels in (highly) emotional situations. Despite the numerous evaluative comments used to describe him, Þórir is not quite comparable to the much more sensitive and changeable characters of the *riddarasögur*, as his portrayal by the extradiegetic narrative voice remains stable and favourable throughout the saga. Þórir thus lives the life of an ›average‹ *Íslendingasaga* protagonist: not only does he do what is expected of an Íslendingasaga protagonist – go abroad as a young man, return to Iceland wealthy and set up a farm, get involved in feuds and fights – but he is also a considerate leader without being portrayed as particularly sensitive.

Yet ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ would not be the same without its plot twist. We recall the ominous third sip that Þórir took from the potion and the warning that Agnarr spoke: that Þórir will pay for this extra sip later in life. The saga does not explicitly revisit the foreshadowing from the dream at the beginning of the saga, but instead provides a few pointers to initially only subtle changes in Þórir's character. The extradiegetic narrative voice is mostly silent in these situations and provides only few and rather descriptive hints. It is the intradiegetic voice of public opinion and the extradiegetic voice of narrative tradition that comment explicitly on the changes. The comments made by these voices are not always assertive or specific, as the following examples demonstrate, but the collaboration of the three voices underlines how each has a different function or task that it contributes to the process of narration. In ›Gull-Þóris saga‹, the extradiegetic narrative voice presents the innocuous version of the saga narrative, while the more problematic aspect of Þórir's transformation and its public perception are left to the other voices.

The collaboration of voices commenting on the change Þórir undergoes can be identified several times in the saga. The first example is in chapter 4, when the band of young men arrive at Valr's cave. Having cut down a tree in order to bridge a cliff and reach the entrance of the cave, Þórir invites, or rather urges, the men to enter the cave and collect as many valuables as possible. To most of the men, however, this seems too risky, and Þórir announces that he will go alone: *hafa ek fé skuldlaust, slíkt er fæst* (ÍF 13, p. 187; »I (will) rightfully get the money that is to be had«). The focus then shifts to his companions, with a mixture of evaluative comments and the voice of public opinion expressing their perspectives and thoughts, as they already notice a change in Þórir's demeanour: *Þeir fundu, at Þórir var allr maðr annarr en hann hafði verit* (ÍF 13, p. 187; ›They thought that Þórir was an entirely different man than he had been before‹). This observation is not explored further at this stage, with no other mention of Þórir's (temporary) behavioural change.

Þórir's transformation is next noted towards the end of the saga in chapter 18, when the last battle between Þórir and his adversaries takes place and Ketilbjörn is killed. The narrative voice uses two evaluative comments, each with the intensifying particle *all-*, in recounting how Þórir becomes *allreiðr* (ÍF 13, pp. 219 and 220; ›very angry‹) on hearing about Ketilbjörn's death, and so attacks his opponents more fiercely. On the third occasion that the saga mentions Þórir's temperament in the battle, it is the voice of the extradiegetic narrative tradition that takes over, as it mentions that Þórir physically transforms: *Þórir hljóp þá af baki, ok er svá sagt, at hann hamaðist þá it fyrsta sinn* (ÍF 13, p. 221; ›Þórir leaped then from the [horse's] back, and it is said that he shapeshifted for the first time‹). Again, however, this transformation is not evaluated by the narrative voice.

After Ketilbjörn's death and the last battle against Steinólfr, the narrative voice uses evaluative comments to highlight a change in Þórir's disposition: [*e*]*n eftir þenna fund tók Þórir skapskipti. Gerðist hann þá mjög illur viðfangs* (ÍF 13, p. 223; ›And after this meeting [the battle], Þórir

undergoes a change in his nature. He became very difficult to deal with‹). The saga then mentions that the treasure chests containing the dragon-gold had mysteriously disappeared, but it is the voice of public opinion that comments on the aftermath of this event: *Þat haust hurfu kistur þær, er hann hafði gera látit at Valshellisgulli, ok vissi engi síðan hvat af þeim var orðit* (ÍF 13, p. 224; ›This autumn those chests disappeared that he [Þórir] had had made for the Valshellisgold, and nobody has known since then what had become of them‹).[50] This statement suggests that the transformation undergone by Þórir is linked to, or even triggered by, Valr's gold.

The last example of the collaboration between these voices occurs at the very end of the saga. Þórir has become an old man, and the extradiegetic narrative voice repeats that he became increasingly difficult in social interactions: *Hann gerðist illr ok ódæll viðskiptis æ því meir er hann eldist meir* (ÍF 13, p. 226; ›He became increasingly vicious and hard to deal with the older he got‹). The intradiegetic voice of public opinion (underlined with a perforated line) and the extradiegetic voice of narrative tradition (underlined with a block line) take over at this juncture to relate the rather enigmatic end to Þórir's life:

> *Þat var sagt eitthvert sumar, at Guðmundr, son hans, hafði fallit í bardaga, en þat hafði þó logit verit. Þóri brá svá við þessi tíðindi, er hann frétti, at hann hvarf á brott frá búi sínu, ok vissi engi maðr, hvat af honum væri orðit eðr hann kom niðr, en þat hafa menn fyrir satt, at hann hafi at dreka orðit ok hafi lagizt á gullkistur sínar. Helzt þat ok lengi síðan, at menn sá dreka fljúga ofan um þeim megin frá Þórisstöðum* […]. (ÍF 13, p. 226, emphasis added)

> One summer, it was said that his [Þórir's] son Guðmundr has fallen in battle, but this was a lie. When he heard the news, Þórir reacted so strongly that he disappeared from his homestead, and nobody knew what had become of him and where he had ended up. And people consider it true that he had become a dragon and was lying on his gold chests. For a long time afterwards, it also

> happened that people saw dragons flying over the mountains of Þórisstaðir [...]. (emphasis added)

This passage suggests that some of the events mentioned here are related to Þórir's dream. It is interesting, though, that the two alternative voices are more active and vocal about Þórir's fate later in life, even though neither was involved in the narration of the dream; the extradiegetic narrative voice related Þórir's dream, and thus seemed to have more access to information about the fate that awaits Þórir. We may suppose that this knowledge has somehow been invested also into the voices of public opinion and the narrative tradition, which now seem to be well-informed about Þórir's backstory and the bad omen.

At the same time, the narrative voice remains in charge of what is recounted, since it corrects the extradiegetic narrative tradition when the death of Þórir's son Guðmundr is wrongly reported by emphasising the falseness of the information (*en þat hafði þó logit verit*; ›but this was a lie‹). This evaluative comment calls the veracity and reliability of the other two voices into question, thus reinforcing the extradiegetic narrative voice as the main narratorial function in the saga. On the level of content, the ›fake news‹ of Guðmundr's putative death makes Þórir's end of life even more tragic: had he been better informed, he would presumably not have left his farm, and might have escaped his transformative fate.[51]

The quotation above also demonstrates the frame of acceptability for ›Gull-Þóris saga‹, and hence for the *Íslendingasögur* more broadly. While the narrative voice corrects one of the statements made by another voice, it neither objects to other voices partaking in the process of narration, nor comments on, or even rectifies, all the statements by the other voices. The narrative voice corrects the statement of the intradiegetic public voice about Guðmundr's death, a comparatively ›factual‹ claim, but the rumours of Þórir allegedly transforming into a dragon, thereby succeeding Valr, and guarding the same treasure he previously claimed are left uncommented, even though the presence of dragons in Iceland is rather improbable in the

more naturalistic *Íslendingasögur*. Despite the dragon's appearance and several other narrative elements mostly known from the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ does not fully disrupt generic expectations (see also Cardew 2004, p. 22). The same holds true for the ways in which these voices shape the process of narration. None of the voices highlights narrative caesuras or transitions, nor do they mark the introduction of elements associated with other saga subgenres in any particular way. What is more, the high number of evaluative comments throughout the narrative, and particularly in the context of Þórir's depiction, does not automatically imply a *discours* reminiscent of the *fornaldarsögur* or *riddarasögur*. Hence, ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ remains firmly rooted in the *Íslendingasögur*, both on the level of *discours* and *histoire*.

The case of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ shows that the frame of acceptability of *Íslendingasaga* narration is flexible enough to include and adapt narrative elements and narratorial features that are usually attributed to different genres. The intratextual community accepts what we might see as unusual elements for the *Íslendingasögur*, such as the appearance of dragons in Iceland, and this seems to be reflected in the extradiegetic level by the voice of the narrative tradition. While the extratextual audience would have been aware that ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ draws on other subgenres of saga, its content nevertheless fulfils the implicit narrative norms of an *Íslendingasaga* sufficiently for it to remain within this subgenre. As the term *Íslendingasaga* originated only in post-medieval times, however, it is safer to say that in fulfilling the expectations of its audiences, ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ became embedded in the wider nexus of saga narration. Consequently, the scribe(s) had some liberties as to how they could shape the plot. The frame of acceptability of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹, and indeed any *Íslendingasaga*, is flexible as it allows for a variety of literary means from various generic sources.

Moreover, this case study illustrates that the initial quantitative assessment of the results from the software-based annotation can offer interesting pointers for qualitative analysis, but it is still crucial also to scrutinise

these results qualitatively. The relatively high number of evaluative comments, for instance, need not inherently represent generic hybridity. The qualitative analysis of the evaluative comments used to describe Þórir, for instance, reveals that this portrayal, on the level of *discours*, is the collaboration of three qualitatively different voices. On the level of *histoire*, Þórir's depiction in the plot fulfils the typical expectations of a *Íslendingasaga* protagonist: he assumes a leading position early on; like many other young men, he goes on an *útanferð*, a journey ›out‹ to Norway or mainland Europe; he earns fame and fortune through heroic deeds; and on returning to Iceland, he settles down, establishes a farm, marries, and has children, while remaining involved in various disputes that emerge at home.

As many other protagonists in the *Íslendingasögur*, Þórir does not generally change in a substantial way, at least not according to how he is portrayed by the evaluative comments.[52] The only change in character, which is mentioned when he is young, but which remains diffuse and nondescript at first, seems to be triggered by his encounter with Valr's gold. It is with this change that the two additional voices of public opinion and narrative tradition come into play to nuance the depiction of Þórir. Despite being framed as potentially unreliable in the passage quoted above, the statements of these two voices are nonetheless necessary, because they provide new and otherwise inaccessible information to the audience. Hence, the collaboration of three narrative voices demonstrates the polyphony of voices with different qualities, and thus bears witness to a multifaceted and complex process of narration.

5. Introducing the Contributions

The approach I have selected for my project, as demonstrated in the previous case study, is, as so often the case in scholarship, only one possible approach to Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature. The following contribu-

tions illustrate that there are various ways for exploring the process of narration and its literary effects.[53] Common tendencies in the following contributions are that saga narration is essentially polyphonic, and that all the voices involved feature different narrative qualities. This is true not only of the *Íslendingasögur*, but also (at least) for the saga subgenre of the *samtíðarsögur* and for the short prose narratives known as *þættir* (›threads, short stories‹). In view of the fact that systematic modern narratological studies on saga narration are still lacking, this special issue aims to spur on interest in narratological questions by showing how multifaceted this branch of research can be, and for its findings to develop our understanding of saga narratives. The contributions thus offer a variety of stepping-stones for exploring the frame of acceptability in saga narration. What is more, the range of contributors to this special issue reflects the fact that the topic of saga narration is an enticing one for people at all stages of a scholarly career, from professors, to postdoctoral researchers, to doctoral students.

The first two articles in this issue are interested in the aspects of omniscience and silence, or rather the withholding of information. Heather O'Donoghue focuses on the extradiegetic narrative voice and the *totum simul* (›everything at once‹) perspective it assumes in the saga narratives. On the basis of three short episodes from *Íslendingasögur*, she discusses what effect the narrative voice creates by withholding vital information while narrating an episode. This narrative silence invites, or rather forces, the saga audience to engage more actively with the text, in order to work out how to deal with gaps in the narrative. Hilkea Blomeyer's contribution also focuses on silence and looks into the nature, significance, and effect of silence and silencing on various narratorial levels in a selection of prose *þættir*. There are different kinds of silences that are situated both on the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic levels and thus create a variety of effects. While the narrative voice may fall silent in an episode, characters' voices at times take over and provide the required information and thus fill the gap.

Regardless of the type of silence, the narrative level and the inclusion of other voices, all silences require the audience to engage more intensively with the text.

The articles by Alexander Wilson and Stefanie Gropper both centre on the prosimetric form, which is quite prominent in the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur*. Wilson introduces a new paradigm for categorising and analysing the single stanzas (*lausavísur*) that are frequently interspersed in the prose narration of sagas. He dismisses the long-standing dichotomy of these stanzas as being either provided as (pseudo-)objective evidence for an event (authenticating stanzas) or as a spontaneous comment on a situation (situational stanzas). Instead, he suggests it is more useful to focus on what diegetic level the stanzas are embedded, and shows that several stanzas in the corpus mix diegetic reference and extradiegetic quotation, which complicates our understanding of saga prosimetrum. Stefanie Gropper focuses on two versions of a dialogue in ›Njáls saga‹ between a father and daughter about her marital issues. In one of the versions, both characters formulate their statements in prose; in the other version, the daughter, Unnr, communicates her replies as stanzas. These different presentations emphasise distinct narrative aspects. When Unnr formulates her answers in stanzas, she appears much more sensitive than when replying in prose. While the identity of the speaker stays the same, the quality of the voice changes, and thus creates a different narrative effect.

Finally, the topic of multivocality is also important to Thomas Morcom's article on dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour. In view of his main source ›Íslendinga saga‹, which belongs to the subgenre of the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*), he is mainly interested in the saga's intricate relationship of narrative authority and narratorial identity, because these two functions must navigate between historical and literary aspects in creating the literary product of ›Íslendinga saga‹. This is because, unlike most sagas, ›Íslendinga saga‹ is accepted to be the work of a named author, Sturla Þórðarson, who is also a character in the text and associated strongly with

the extradiegetic narrative voice. In light of the complications that this causes for the text – a supposedly objective political history of the internecine conflicts in thirteenth-century Iceland, but in which Sturla himself participated – Morcom investigates how dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour are used in the saga to introduce alternative narratorial perspective that provide a counterpoint to the main narrative voice, which allows the saga to be framed as an apparently objective narrative history.

Before turning to the articles, I want to thank a number of people whose support has contributed greatly to the success of the workshop and to the making of this special issue. My thanks go to Mia Meike and Yvonne Meixner, who made sure that there was always ample coffee and snacks at the workshop; Marion Darilek, Stefanie Gropper, and Rebecca Merkelbach, for dedicating their time to the peer-review process of the issue; and my greatest thanks are due to Alexander Wilson for his very comprehensive commentary and proofreading of the entire issue, with great dedication and attention to detail. *Kærar þakkir*!

Notes

1 The terms saga and ›saga literature‹ will be explained further below. – The workshop, which lead to this publication, was organised in the framework of the Collaborative Research Centre 1391 ›Different Aesthetics‹ (= Sonderforschungsbereich 1391, ›Andere Ästhetik‹), located at the University of Tübingen and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – SFB 1391 – Project-ID 405662736. The CRC's website can be found online (last accessed 12 February 2024).

2 This quotation is taken from ›Bárðar saga‹, and translates to ›more noise than can be described‹ (CSI 2, p. 258).

3 What follows here is a cursory outline of saga literature. For an introductory reading to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and the sagas, see e.g. Bampi (2020), Ármann Jakobsson/Sverrir Jakobsson (2017), Clunies Ross (2010), Glauser

(2006), McTurk (2005), Vésteinn Ólason (1998a, 1998b), and Clover (1985 [2005]).

4 In the context of saga literature, the prosimetric form means that poetic stanzas are embedded in the prose narrative. The stanzas are introduced for several purposes and can be spoken by various voices in the text. In this issue, prosimetrum is explored by Alexander Wilson and Stefanie Gropper.

5 Note that the term ›Icelandic saga(s)‹ is non-specific, and merely denotes sagas generally produced in Iceland. The (Icelandic) term *Íslendingasögur* refers to the genre of the ›family sagas‹, as described above. ›Íslendinga saga‹, on the other hand, is the title of a specific saga narrative that belongs to the genre of the *samtíðarsögu*r, and which is discussed by Thomas Morcom in this issue.

6 Although it is a longstanding convention in the field to refer to these saga genres, their definitions and terminology are not uncontested (see e.g. Rösli 2019).

7 For a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework of the CRC, see Gerok-Reiter/Robert (2022).

8 Since roughly 1800, the concept of an aesthetics of autonomy has dominated the European notion of aesthetics and significantly influenced ideas about and the reception of art. Introduced by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartner, the aesthetics of autonomy considers the sole creator of art to be the independent, and often divinely inspired, genius figure.

9 For a concise description of figures of aesthetic reflection, see Gerok-Reiter/Robert (2019, esp. pp. 19–23), and Gerok-Reiter/Robert (2022, esp. pp. 29–32).

10 The webpage of the CRC project »Narrative (Self-)Reflection in the Icelandic Family Sagas«, which focuses on Old Norse texts, is accessible online (last accessed 7 December 2023).

11 Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations are my own.

12 Genette introduced the term ›narrative voice‹ in the 1970s and 1980s. The most influential work is ›Narrative Discourse‹ (originally ›Discours du récit‹). In translation, the book often includes two works by Genette, namely ›Figures III‹ (= ›Discours du récit‹), first published in 1972, and ›Nouveau discours du récit‹, first published in 1983.

13 The question of ›who speaks?‹ is not coterminous with ›who sees?‹. While the former aims at the identification of the voice, the latter belongs to the aspect of focalisation; see e.g. Blödorn/Langer/Scheffel (2006, p. 1); Fludernik (2001, p. 620).

14 Zymner refers to the German term ›Text‹, but this does not completely reflect the word choices in the French original (*récit*, 1983) or the German (*Erzählung*, 2010) and English translations (›narrative‹, 1980) of ›Discours du récit‹.

15 Blödorn/Langer/Scheffel (2006, p. 2). The psychological aspects were the reasons why Genette (1983, p. 31) preferred the term ›voice‹ over ›person‹, because the former implies a larger conceptual extension.

16 See e.g. Zymner (2006, p. 322). To some extent, Zymner reproduces Genette's slightly blurred terminology when employing the German ›Person‹.

17 Aczel (2001, p. 703) objects to Fludernik's opinion that non-identifiable voices can be ignored.

18 Aczel (2005, p. 635) specifies, however, that »[d]istinctive idiomatic traits – from readily identifiable sociolects to highly ornate narrative styles – are not seen as indicators of voice«.

19 Indeed, Aczel (1998 p. 492 and 2005, p. 634) understands both ›narrator‹ and ›narrative voice‹ as umbrella terms: the former for all narratorial functions, the latter for narrative effects.

20 The concept of polyphony is best known from Bakhtin's ›Discourse in the Novel‹ (1981). Bakhtin (1981, p. 261) states that »[t]he novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice«. The various narrative voices are not introduced in a haphazard way, but are actively configured and »artistically organized«, and thus result from craftmanship (pp. 262 and 259).

21 Zymner (2006, pp. 322–323; his emphasis), on the other hand, considers the voice of the narrator to be muted, since it is mainly »Text-*Struktur*« that is responsible for selecting and structuring the narrative. The voices of characters, however, are clearly audible in a narrative.

22 Aczel (2001, p. 704–705) invokes the image of a ventriloquist to illustrate that narrative voices do not necessarily need to be connected to a particular identity, but can be understood metaphorically in a more abstract sense. The ventriloquist projects the illusion of the dummy speaking; at the same time, the audience is aware of the artifice behind this illusion. The speaking voice is thus between the ventriloquist and the dummy, rather than associated only with one of these entities. Irrespective of their identity, the ventriloquist's voices only come into existence when they are staged, and hence can be heard and interpreted by the audience.

23 Due to the nexus of voice and a dialogic communicative system, questions of orality and of the sensory aspects of voice are evoked. Scholars thus discuss

whether voice, a term originally firmly rooted in the realm of orality, can actually be used in a written context; see Blödorn/Langer/Scheffel (2006), and Zymner (2001).

24 While Aczel's terms of function and effect are helpful in the saga context, I refrain from adopting his usage of ›narrator‹ in favour of the term ›narrative voice‹; however, I understand this to refer in a more neutral sense to an impersonal narratorial authority.

25 One of the earliest and most famous attributions is the case of ›Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar‹, a so-called classical *Íslendingasaga*. Based on several factors, it was suggested that Snorri Sturluson – the most prominent medieval Icelandic author, poet, and politician – wrote this saga, not least because Egill is allegedly one of Snorri's forefathers. The importance of this authorship is also reflected in the introduction to the Íslenzk fornrit edition of this saga (ÍF 2, pp. LXX–XCV), where, under the heading »Höfundur« (›author‹) and guided by twelve assumptions on how the saga author is potentially connected to the saga, the introduction devotes twenty-five pages to the question of the potential author of *Egils saga*. The two most recent studies on this topic were published by Torfi H. Tulinius in 2004 and 2014.

26 This position is still partly reproduced by some Icelandic scholars to this day. Sverrir Tómasson (2012, p. 250), for example, refers to »Old Norse writers«, not to an impersonal narrator or narrative voices, and states that »they [Old Norse writers] regarded their own role as a creative one«.

27 It was, for instance, argued that the author of a saga should ideally stem from the same region as the saga is set in, or that the author may have explored genealogical connections when writing about their forefathers; see e.g. ÍF 2, p. LXXI.

28 Peter Hallberg (e.g. 1962 and 1968) was among the first to analyse the sagas stylometrically to identify phrases and formulations that could point to individual authors. Useful stylometric analyses continue to be published (see e.g. McPherson/Tirosh 2020 and Sigurður Ingibergur Björnsson/Steingrímur Páll Kárason/Jón Karl Helgason 2021), but these modern analyses often focus primarily on the relationship between several versions and/or manuscripts of a saga.

29 For discussions of the Old Norse terminology for authorship and for writing or composing a saga, see Glauser (2021) and Gropper (2023 and 2021).

30 Jakobsen (1983, p. 4) speaks of the *forfatter* (Norwegian for ›author‹), a term he implicitly understands as the narrative authority that first composes a saga, in contrast to the *avskriver* (›copyist‹), who has only very limited liberties that they can take in curating the text when copying it.

31 In 1998, Vésteinn Ólason published an introductory book on the *Íslendingasögur* in both Icelandic and English. In both versions, he speaks of a personified narrator, and in the Icelandic version, he refers to the narrative authorities with the masculine pronouns.

32 This quotation refers to the title of one of the most recent publications on medieval authorship: ›In Search of the Culprit‹, edited by Rösli/Gropper (2021).

33 O'Donoghue (2021, p. 3) employs the term ›saga author‹ only when referring to »more distantly compositional issues«.

34 Clunies Ross (2010, p. 26) maintains that the »self-effacing impersonal stance [...] is by far the most common« in saga literature, and strongly contrasts with often found »highly personalised stance of a large number of medieval European historians writing in Latin«.

35 The initial results of my project are published in Heiniger (2023) and Heiniger et al. (2022).

36 These narratorial comments have often been ignored by scholarship. In the early twentieth century, and later in the 1960s and 1970s, some scholars looked into some types of narratorial comments and were mostly interested in aspects of literacy and orality, especially formulations such as *sem var sagt* (›as was told before‹) and *sem var ritat* (›as was written ealier‹) (e.g. Anderson 1966), and, as already explored above, whether the comments are helpful in identifying specific authors (e.g. Ranković 2019 and 2016).

37 Indeed, there is no extant poetics on saga narration. In general, there are very few Old Norse-Icelandic sources that can be categorised as literary textbooks. Discussing Old Norse phonology, and how to write Old Norse with the Latin alphabet, the four ›Grammatical Treatises‹ touch only briefly on the composition of poetry, while the section ›Skáldskaparmál‹ in ›Snorra Edda‹ offers a guideline of how to compose skaldic poetry.

38 The subcategories are not listed at this juncture, but a selection of the relevant subcategories will be introduced below when they become relevant for the case study.

39 Despite their different functions and points of reference, these two types of narratorial comments are subsumed under the heading of ›public opinion‹ because they both express knowledge that is shared and imparted in a public space. For a discussion of how the two types of statements of public opinion interact and shape the process of narration, see Gropper (2023).

40 The paragraph on the methodology is adapted from Heiniger (2023).

41 I use the software Atlas.ti (online)(last accessed 14 February 2023) and the machine-readable saga texts from the open source Snerpa (online)(last accessed 15 March 2024).

42 For an elaborate introductory reading on the annotation process, see e.g. Reiter (2020), Gius/Reiter/Willard (2019), Rapp (2017).

43 Margrét Eggertsdóttir (1993), ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ (s.v.). The vellum of ›Gull-Þóris saga‹ features two lacunae. The first, larger lacuna spans from the middle of chapter 10 to almost the end of chapter 12; the second comprises one leaf in the middle of chapter 20. Since all paper manuscripts are based on the same vellum manuscript, the lacunae cannot be reconstructed. For the estimates on how many lines or leaves are missing in the saga, see ÍF 13 (p. CX).

44 The following quantitative results on how frequently the five categories are employed in the *Íslendingasögur* are based on analyses conducted in the context of my project on narratorial comments in the *Íslendingasögur* (see also note 35). The analysis is based on eleven sagas that represent the main aspect of the variety of this genre.

45 For a discussion of genre in ›Gull-Þóris saga‹, see Cardew (2004).

46 Both chapters 2 and 6 are transition chapters, that is, in each chapter, the band of Icelanders travels out from or back to Iceland. For the time being, both chapters are considered part of the *Íslendingasaga* section.

47 Þórir's physical capabilities are mentioned at the very beginning of chapter 2: *Þórir Oddsson var sterkastr jafngamall, ok allar íþróttir hafði hann umfram sína jafnaldra* (ÍF 13, p. 181; ›Þórir Oddsson was the strongest of all his peers and he excelled in all sports‹).

48 The term *allléttbrúnn* (›to be overjoyed‹), is a rare finding in saga literature: Only two instances of *allléttbrúnn* and four occurrences of *léttbrúnn* (›cheerful‹) without the intensifying particle *all-* can be found in the saga corpus across all subgenres. It is also unusual for the sagas to express such strong positive feelings.

49 It is notable that the origin of the central conflict in the saga, the strife between Steinólfr and Þórir, remains unexplained. Neither the saga characters nor the narrative voice discloses why Steinólfr despises Þórir. Þórhallr Vilmundarson (ÍF 13, p. CXXXI) reckons that the explanation for this hostility was lost in the process of rewriting, and that previous versions of the saga were probably conflated into the version we have today.

50 The disappearance of the chests is comparable to ›Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar‹, where the elderly protagonist rides into the mountains and hides two chests of silver, because he does not want to give them to anybody else. When

Egill does so, the narrative voice also describes him as an old man who is increasingly difficult to deal with.

51 The element of a father withdrawing from human settlement after assuming that his child is dead can also be found in ›Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss‹, where the protagonist Bárðr moves into the mountains because he is convinced that he has lost his beloved daughter Helga. While he later discovers that Helga is still alive, he does not change his whereabouts.

52 That some people become more difficult to deal with in old age can also be seen in other sagas (e.g. ›Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar‹).

53 Not all of the contributors were part of the workshop; conversely, not all of the workshop participants are represented in this special issue. Massimiliano Bampi and Elena Brandenburg were unfortunately unable to contribute to this issue, but at the workshop itself, they offered rich analyses of works like ›Parcevals saga‹ and ›Eufemiavisor‹. Both scholars explored how these narratives were translated and the adaptation strategies that guided the transmission process. In addition, they also addressed media-theoretical aspects, and considered how oral and written versions of the texts refer to and influence each other.

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Creating Time

The Saga Narrator as God

Abstract. We often perceive stories in a similar way to our real life: for a moment, man-made time is suspended, and we become part of a divine eternity in which we see the past, present, and future as a simultaneous whole. Boethius referred to this double temporality as *totum simul* (›all at once‹). The narrators of the Old Norse *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas) also adopt a *totum simul* perspective. In this way, they control both the narrative itself and the experience of the audience. The narrator thus actively shapes and curates the time of narration, a concept which Ricœur studied intensively. Despite their omniscience, the saga narrators rarely draw attention to themselves, and hardly intervene in a saga in a noticeable way. It is only when we are already familiar with a saga that it becomes possible to see how it has been shaped and directed by the narrator through various means.

The fundamental premise of this piece is that a text – in this case, a saga narrative – not only represents a stretch of time, that is, sets the story in some time frame or historical context, but also creates a stretch of time: that is, put at its simplest, the time it takes for an audience of readers or listeners to experience the narrative, the time the narrative takes up. It is in this sense that we can speak of a narrator, and perhaps ultimately an author, performing the divine act of creating time.[1] The French philosopher and literary theorist Paul Ricœur, in his monumental three-volume work ›Time and Narrative‹, explores this concept of a time constituted by narrative, which he calls the ›third time‹ of narrative.[2]

It is conventional to distinguish two opposing concepts of time. On the one hand, there is cosmological time, what Aristotle calls ›the time of the world‹, that is, time as measured by the detached and impartial movements of the cosmos – the sun measuring the passing of our days, the moon measuring our months, and so on. On the other hand, there is phenomenological time, time as experienced by the human mind: essentially, how it feels to live in time, which may seem to pass more slowly, or faster, or even, in times of drama or emergency, to stop altogether.[3] As an account of phenomenological or internal time, we might take St Augustine's celebrated meditations on the nature of time in Book XI of his ›Confessions‹. For Augustine, famously, this human experience of time renders the concept of time itself an inexplicable logical impossibility. Faced with what Ricœur calls an *aporia* in our experience of time – the past is no longer in existence, the future is not yet in existence, and the present has no duration, but is always already over – Augustine articulates the concept of the ›time of the soul‹, which comprises memory, expectation, and the present moment of attention.[4] This might be contrasted with an Aristotelian view of time that is measurable and has an existence independent of human consciousness – the ›time of the world‹.[5] But I want here to focus on another, linked, distinction, which rests not on how human time is defined (or not), but on what it is like to see it from the outside, on the one hand, and the inside, on the other.

There are two very different perspectives on human time, one supposedly divine and the other recognizably mundane. According to Boethius, God's perspective on human time allowed Him to apprehend human time as a whole, with its past, present, and future all co-existing at the same time: *totum simul*. Ricœur describes God's knowledge of the world as a perspective from which »the successive moments of all time are copresent in a single perception, as of a landscape of events«.[6] But for humans, living in time means that we may remember the past and live through the present, but the future is yet to take shape, and its shape is unknown to us. Somewhat

similarly, pre-human time is beyond our understanding, and furthermore, we cannot separate ourselves from time, to step outside its passage, as it were. The idea I want to work with here is that what Ricœur calls the third time of narrative allows us as the audience to apprehend the time produced by narrative from both a human and a quasi-divine perspective. In our engagement with any literary narrative – the process of listening to or reading a text – we can view the stretch-of-time-that-is-a-narrative either externally, as a discrete entity, or live through it and in it. This theory of Ricœur's is characterised by William Dowling (2011, p. 11) as the »double temporality of narrative«. We can apprehend the whole text as a piece of time, with its own past, present, and future existing simultaneously, and separable from its surroundings, either physically, in the shape of a book or manuscript, or conceptually, as a story we already know. This is easiest to understand if we think with the physical model of a book: its opening chapters and concluding pages are always there, between its covers. And just as Augustine imagined human time as nestled in and surrounded by God's eternal timelessness, so we can envisage a physical book or a finite story as part of, but readily separable from, its context in what we know as the ›real world‹. But when we pick up a book, or sit down to listen to a story, we can experience the third time of the narrative completely differently: we can live through the stretch of time represented by the text, much as we live through life itself, remembering what has passed, living in the present moment, and not knowing – but perhaps anticipating or speculating on – the future. Augustine re-figures the three logically impossible divisions of human time in ways that very distinctly recall the process of engaging with a narrative: as memory, attention, and expectation. Our present moment of attention is always on the move, making its way through the text like the dot on a karaoke screen.

From this brief exploration of the experience of a saga audience, I want now to turn to the role and stance of the saga narrator, crucial factors in our understanding of how the authors of family saga narratives create their

third time. This brings us to Wayne C. Booth's classic analysis of fictional narrative, ›The Rhetoric of Fiction‹ (1961). Chief among the techniques Booth collects under this head is the assumption of omniscience by the author, most obviously manifested by accounts of what characters are thinking and feeling – an illusion of privileged epistemic access, which cannot normally be known in the real world outside a fictional narrative.[7] Another major topic that might be included under the heading of fictional rhetoric (although the terminology varies from theorist to theorist) is focalisation – relating the narrative from the perspective of one of the characters in it (Genette 1980; Genette 1988). This, too, entails privileged epistemic access, and again offers the audience more information than could be known in a real world, although some of it might reasonably be surmised. The most prominent structural technique in fictional discourse is the transformation of *fabula* (the order in which events would have taken place if they had happened in a real world – roughly speaking, chronological order) into *sjuzhet* (the order of events as presented in the narrative itself). Other stylistic techniques include what Mieke Bal calls ›colouring‹ – the way an author guides reception of the text through, for example, telling adverbs – or more overt authorial comment on the narrative (Bal 2009, pp. 18 and 48).

Family saga narratives are strikingly low on all these characteristically fictional devices, although, by the same token, any deployment of what might collectively be known as the rhetoric of fiction is concomitantly significant (O'Donoghue 2004, pp. 34–36; O'Donoghue 2021, pp. 150–151). This does not of course mean that their substance is historical, rather than fictional, but only that their narrative mode is more like that of history than that of fiction. It also means that even without the withholding of crucial pieces of information, the saga reader or listener's present moment of attention is unusually under-informed. The reader or listener may learn more as he or she passes through the time of the narrative, but even at the end of the narrative, when a revelatory denouement might be expected, some

knowledge may remain unrevealed, as we shall see.[8] But the paradox of family saga narrative is that it scores very highly on narrativity – that is, readability, or the audience's engagement with the story and the ability and eagerness to follow it. I shall argue here that maintaining an audience's imperfect knowledge about character and event through the third time of narrative is a crucial aspect of the evident and even compelling narrativity of family sagas.

Family saga narrators are always extradiegetic, that is, they stand outside the story they are telling, and thus outside the time they are representing and creating. Like a Boethian divinity – but, importantly, rather unlike a conventional storyteller – they do not openly warn their audiences of what may be about to happen, and only on very rare occasions do they openly comment on their own narrative.[9] And yet, like our Boethian divinity, saga authors do know what is about to happen, and can see the stretch-of-time-which-is-a-narrative as a whole, from beginning to end.[10] My primary interest in this piece will be the degree to which saga narrators betray, reveal, or flaunt this quasi-divine knowledge of narrative future time, and how they offer or withhold information about it. But I want first to clarify what I will take ›saga narrator‹ to designate.

It is conventional, in literary criticism, to distinguish between the ›real‹ author of a text – the flesh-and-blood historical person, such as Charles Dickens or Mick Herron – and the narrator of the text, the voice we as listeners and readers hear in our heads telling the story. I have never found this to be a useful distinction in saga studies. The extradiegetic narrator of the saga is not part of the story, and so not a fictional personage created by the saga author (unlike, say, David Copperfield). There is, furthermore, very little sense of an individual personality attaching to the voice we hear transmitting the story to us. And the ›real‹ flesh-and-blood author is anonymous and irrecoverable, and so hard to imagine or to distinguish from the narrator. Ricœur's definition of a narrator, the »projection of a unifying consciousness existing independently of the words on the page«, whom we

identify as the »abstract unity of consciousness« transmitting the story to us, is especially useful here (Dowling 2011, p. 97). I will use the familiar terms ›saga author‹ and ›saga narrator‹ more or less interchangeably, the former when fundamental issues about the narrative are being discussed, the latter when it is more a matter of the style or a detailed focus on the actual mechanics of the telling.

The saga author has a stance very like the Boethian *totum simul* perspective on the time that is the saga text. They know at the beginning of the saga what its end will be. This is partly because they are creating the text; the saga author has control over it as its author. But there may also be some aspects of the story which are known because they are historical fact or established, incontrovertible tradition, and not the fictional creation of the saga author: Njáll was burnt inside his farmhouse, for example, as, we may assume, many people knew then, and readers know now. So we have another crucial distinction to draw: between those who know the story – the narrator, and those who are already familiar with some version of this saga, or the events it may be based upon – and those who are experiencing it or hearing about it for the first time. What particularly interests me about the duality is the stark contrast between the two in terms of the reader or listener's knowledge of event or character in the narrative. The *totum simul* allows for full knowledge of whatever is contained in the narrative as a whole. In almost all cases, this is what the author of the narrative knows.[11] First-time readers or listeners can envisage – and may actually look forward to – being in this position in due course, but will not actually occupy it until they come to the end of the narrative. Moving through the narrative on the present moment of attention, then, the first-time reader or listener will be moving in a state of what Ricœur (1984, pp. 70–87) calls imperfect or unfulfilled knowledge. Clearly, this knowledge is primarily imperfect because the end of the narrative has not been reached. But knowledge may also be imperfect because the author or narrator is withholding knowledge

that a reader or listener might otherwise expect to have at some particular stage in the narrative.

So, as I have explained, I want to look at how much *totum simul* knowledge the saga author decides to share with the reader or listener, not forgetting how much difference there might be between the experience of those who know the story – the author, and an audience informed at least to some extent – and those readers and listeners who are living through the time of the narrative for the first time.

One final point: the saga author's quasi-divine perspective on the narrative is not the only privileged knowledge they have. As we have seen, as omniscient narrators, they ›know‹ – or choose – not only what will happen, but also what motivates their characters, and what their characters are thinking, simply because these characters are to some extent their own creations. In literary criticism, the term ›omniscient narrator‹ tends to be used of narrators who actively and habitually (and sometimes annoyingly!) display this privileged epistemic access to the inner lives of their characters. But the conventional wisdom is that saga authors do not intervene in the narrative to pass comment on the text or tell us what characters are thinking. So what we are dealing with here is omniscient narrators who nevertheless tell the story as if they know no more than anyone else what will happen or what characters think. The result of this is that the experience of the audience can be surprisingly like how real-world people live through real-world time, not knowing what is about to happen, or what those around them think, privately, about it.

Now in fact, most saga authors do betray their omniscience, but in fascinatingly oblique ways. For example, they may displace judgements on to other characters in the story, using formulations along the lines of: »Everyone thought this was a bad thing to have done«; «She said that no good would come of it«. This in itself is a very rewarding and revealing area of study, but it is not my primary concern here. There are also some extremely interesting examples – in ›Hrafnkels saga‹, especially – in which the saga

author does tell us what characters are thinking, to extraordinary effect; I have argued elsewhere that this decisively and dramatically controls and suppresses audience speculation about character and event, which is more usually encouraged by saga authors, in the distinctive absence of narratorial comment or explanation.[12] But what I am interested in here are the effects created when omniscient narrators withhold from their audiences matters of fact that, because of that actual, if unexpressed, omniscience, they could have known, and might therefore have revealed. And as we shall see, this act of withholding information may have the effect of drawing the audience into speculation (and, although I hate to speculate about actual saga-age audiences, possibly even discussion and argument). This withholding strategy also raises the question of how an audience familiar with the events of the saga may respond differently to an audience hearing a version of it for the first time. The difference in response is particularly important in saga narratives, because of the high likelihood that an audience will be familiar with the outlines of saga stories. This is partly due to the degree of historicity in the events related, and partly because of what we (as modern scholars) usually assume to be a high degree of familiarity with the material of saga narrative – fictional and/or historical – amongst a medieval Icelandic audience. It is perhaps worth noting here that family sagas are not novels, whose very name alludes to the new fictions from which they are made, even though they seem to resemble novels in being extended naturalistic prose narratives about people in society. In fact, not only the events, but also the characters, topography, *mores,* material culture, and indeed fictional rhetoric of family sagas are likely to have been familiar to medieval Icelandic audiences.

I propose to focus on three questions, two from ›Laxdœla saga‹ and a third from ›Gísla saga‹:[13]

1. Who is the mysterious female slave Höskuldr buys?
2. Who stole Hrefna's headdress?
3. Who killed Vésteinn?

Although the first question is ultimately answered in the narrative, the narrator never provides an answer to the remaining two. But my interest is not to suggest answers to these questions, but rather to explore firstly how the saga narrator contrives to manage the narrative in a way that avoids answering these questions, and then, perhaps more intriguingly, to explore the effect of not telling us, with, as I have said, an eye to how our experience may change if we already know the story.

1. Who is the Mysterious Slave Höskuldr Buys?

In chapter 12 of ›Laxdœla saga‹, we see Höskuldr Dala-Kollsson at a big trading market associated with a royal assembly in Norway. Looking around with a group of companions, Höskuldr stops at the imposing tent of a Russian merchant called Gilli. Interestingly, this episode is focalised through Höskuldr: *sá hann tjáld eitt* (ÍF 5, p. 22; ›he saw a certain tent‹) and entered it, and when the curtain is drawn back, *Sá Höskuldr, at tólf konur sátu fyrir innan tjáldit* (ÍF 5, p. 23; ›Höskuldr saw that twelve women were sitting inside the tent‹).[14] He carefully scrutinises one of the women Gilli has on sale. As is often the (unremarked) case in family saga narrative, the saga author is not simply describing the scene in the narrative voice, but rather telling us what Höskuldr himself observed. Although such internal focalisation is usually understood as affording us an artificially extended viewpoint, in some cases, our view is actually restricted if the character is blinkered or unreliable in judgement, because the narrative is limited to his or her perception of what is happening. There is also an interesting physical limitation: we can only see what one individual might have in visual range. In this episode, we are drawn right into Gilli's tent via Höskuldr's individual visual perspective, but the degree to which we can trust the situation as focalised through him naturally depends on the degree to which we trust him as a character. And Höskuldr is not an exemplary protagonist, as we shall see from what follows.

Höskuldr challenges Gilli to provide him with anything he might want to buy, and, when invited to elaborate, specifies a slave woman. Gilli implies that Höskuldr does not really want a slave woman, but is only showing off in front of his companions, making himself look impressive by asking for something the trader does not have. Their conversation is completely unmediated by the saga author, so it is left to us to judge whether Gilli's interpretation is unfair, or whether Höskuldr is indeed just showing off. Höskuldr is not a wholly impercipient character: he judges the woman he is scrutinising to be good-looking in spite of her shabby dress, and spots at once that the price Gilli is asking is extortionate. He is not completely the innocent abroad. Nevertheless, our confidence in Höskuldr's judgement is at least a little shaken by Gilli apparently calling his bluff, and their next exchange increases any doubts we might have. Gilli offers Höskuldr a cheaper slave woman, but Höskuldr – perhaps stung by Gilli's insinuation that he is not rich enough to buy the woman he has taken a fancy to – ignores the offer and waves his purse in the merchant's face. In response, Gilli warns Höskuldr that the woman cannot speak. Höskuldr again ignores Gilli and simply presses him to weigh the silver in his purse. We may read this as Höskuldr's fixation with proving that he is a man with enough money to buy even the most expensive slave woman. But the saga author leaves us with an important question unanswered: why has Gilli put such a high price on her if she cannot speak – a failure that Gilli himself calls a major flaw? Neither the saga author nor his focaliser Höskuldr – his narrative stand-in – addresses this.

It is also rather difficult to read a moral dimension to this episode – as is often the case with saga narratives. It is hard to know what a contemporary audience might have thought about a married man like Höskuldr buying, and sleeping with, a slave woman. Any disapproval we might feel may be simply anachronistic. The issue is not raised explicitly at this point in the narrative, and indeed we might even have forgotten about Höskuldr's wife Jórunn back in Iceland, were it not for Höskuldr's ostentatious action

in dressing the slave woman in some fine women's clothes from a chest – surely clothes he planned to take back to Iceland for his wife. But the appearance of the slave woman in rich clothes serves another purpose. The saga author now presents the slave woman not from his own or from Höskuldr's perspective, but in the displaced judgement of public opinion: *var þat ok allra manna mál, at henni semði góð klæði* (ÍF 5, pp. 24–25; ›and everyone said that fine clothing suited her‹). This is of course a significant, if oblique, clue to her identity – she does not look like a slave woman in fancy dress – but the saga author manages to avoid intruding with his own opinion, while maintaining Höskuldr's ignorance. We – if we are a first-time audience – are kept in a tantalising state of what Ricœur calls imperfect knowledge. It is not until later in the saga that the identity of Höskuldr's mysteriously over-priced slave woman is revealed. The information is withheld by means of Melkorka's elective mutism – her refusal to talk. This contrivance is played off against the clues about her real identity, which are carefully placed in the narrative. The pleasure is different, but perhaps not less, if we know the story in advance; we can enjoy knowing more than some of the characters, and sharing the knowledge of others – in this case, Melkorka – who are empowered by their control of silence. A first-time audience shares Höskuldr's ignorance; those who know the story share what has not been expressed in the diegesis: the superior knowledge of Melkorka.

We are never told why Gilli priced Melkorka so highly. Perhaps he knew her real identity (and would have disclosed it if Höskuldr had asked, rather than being distracted by showing off how much silver he had). Perhaps he wanted to keep her for himself – or not give her to this Icelandic show-off. Perhaps the saga author expected his original audience to know the answer, and felt he did not need to spell it out. Perhaps he simply forgot to tell us. I am well aware that speculation about what is not stated in the narrative contravenes the usual literary critical strictures laid down by most narrative analysts.[15] But I would argue that precisely because of the saga author's

withholding of knowledge, such speculative responses are not only justified, but even required. I would argue that this implicit invitation to speculate is a consistent and characteristic feature of family saga narrative, and part of the way the audience is drawn in to engage with the narrative in the absence of the conventional rhetorical devices of fiction. The sheer volume of unanswered questions throughout family saga narrative strongly suggests that keeping the audience in a state of imperfect knowledge by withholding crucial information is a purposeful literary technique in the Icelandic family saga, whether as a device for enlisting audience engagement or as an aspect of emplotment.

Before leaving the story of Melkorka, it is worth noting that although the revelation to Höskuldr of her real identity and history, as a beautifully crafted narrative scene, constitutes a sort of closure, it nonetheless does not actually bring this particular storyline to a conclusion. The narrative continues with Höskuldr in turn revealing Melkorka's identity to his wife Jórunn, the tension it creates in their household, and ultimately the birth of the character on whom the saga narrative focuses as its dominant protagonist, Melkorka and Höskuldr's son Óláfr. The onward progress of the narrative – like life – continues, and is not tidied away like a plot.

2. Who Stole Hrefna's Headdress?

I want now to consider another instance in ›Laxdœla saga‹ of knowledge conspicuously withheld by the saga author.[16] Before Kjartan Óláfsson travels to Norway with his foster-brother and cousin Bolli Þorleiksson, in chapter 40, he quarrels with his prospective bride Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, who accuses him of having made the decision to go abroad too hastily, and is evidently angry that he has failed to consult her. He promises to do anything else she might want, and at once she asks to go abroad with him, which he flatly refuses. He asks her to wait three years for him, but she will not promise. The narrative silence that hangs over the eventual outcome of

Kjartan's trip to Norway – essentially, his failure to return within the three years and, more especially, his failure to send a message back to Guðrún to explain or excuse his delay – prompts us to supply some speculation of our own about Kjartan's double shortfall. Perhaps he was, as Bolli accuses him, distracted by his relationship with the beautiful Princess Ingibjörg, and did not want to tell Guðrún about it. Perhaps, irritated or ashamed by Bolli's jibe about his relationship with Ingibjörg, he chose not to entrust Bolli with a personal message for Guðrún. Perhaps he is simply too proud to concede to an obligation to which Guðrún herself has refused to agree. Without the guiding voice of the narrator, Kjartan's unspoken motivation remains a matter for speculation – part of the characteristic reading or listening experience of saga narrative. This is not the kind of withheld information that, over time, we will get to know; it will remain an unarticulated subtext. Our interpretation of Kjartan's silence will depend on, or form, our view of his character, something that, in other literary genres, we might expect an author to suggest to us or guide us to, either at the time or in due course.

Before Kjartan leaves Norway for Iceland, Princess Ingibjörg gives him a lavishly decorated gold headdress, instructing him to offer it to Guðrún as a wedding gift (ÍF 5, p. 131). We have not – until now – been told that she knows about Kjartan's informal betrothal to Guðrún. Kjartan and his friend Kálfr duly return to Iceland, and on arrival, Kálfr tells his sister Hrefna that she can have anything she likes from the goods he has brought back from Norway; Kjartan tells his sister Þuríðr the same. But the weather suddenly turns bad, and the two men are urgently called away to make their ship secure. At the very moment of their return to the farm, Hrefna has discovered and is trying on the golden headdress. When Kjartan sees Hrefna in the headdress, he remarks that it suits her, and that perhaps he should own both the headdress and the woman.

Whilst these two moments of chance coincidence – the men being called away, and returning just as Hrefna has donned the headdress – give the narrative a degree of drama and immediacy, they are not strictly necessary

for the furtherance of the sequence of events in the saga. Nothing could be more natural – inevitable, even – than for Kjartan to marry the sister of his best friend, given that Guðrún has apparently rebuffed him by marrying Bolli. But now the headdress is a potent symbol of Kjartan's betrayal of Guðrún, and her jealousy of Hrefna.

Kjartan duly marries Hrefna, and at a feast at his father's farm, Guðrún, again by chance coincidence, hears Kjartan organising the seating at the feast so that Hrefna will be placed in the seat of honour – a place which Guðrún felt to be rightfully hers. The attention here is sharply focused on Guðrún and Kjartan: *Guðrún heyrði þetta ok leit til Kjartans ok brá lit, en svarar engu* (ÍF 5, p. 139; ›Guðrún heard this, and looked at Kjartan, and changed colour [i.e. flushed], but makes no comment‹). Again, this tense scene has no actual causal function; Guðrún might just as well have got to hear from someone else that Hrefna had been given the high seat, or even found out when the guests sat down to the feast. But by creating another moment of coincidence, the saga author has directed our attention to the private – and again, unspoken – relationship between Kjartan and Guðrún.

Similarly, the next day Guðrún asks Hrefna to put on the headdress. Again by chance, Kjartan happens to be passing, and forbids his wife to wear it. We can speculate about why Guðrún wants her rival to wear the headdress, but we are not told. But the next day, Guðrún asks Hrefna to show her the headdress in private. This is a significant violation of Kjartan's prohibition: he has told Hrefna not to wear the headdress because he does not want it to be regarded as *augnagaman* (ÍF 5, p. 140; ›something for people to gape at‹). Hrefna shows Guðrún the headdress, however, and Guðrún looks at it but says nothing. Shortly after, Hrefna is urged by Kjartan's mother to take the headdress to a return feast at Laugar, where Bolli and Guðrún live. The headdress is carefully stored away when they arrive, but the next morning, it has disappeared.

Of course, although we are not told who stole the headdress, the identity of the culprit is obvious. Guðrún has made plain her jealousy of Hrefna. She

has not commented on the excellence of the treasure, nor expressed any wish that she had it, but we do not need any explicit acknowledgement of this to identify her as the culprit. We might note that in asking to see the headdress, she has also conveniently found out exactly where it was kept. She unhelpfully and unconvincingly suggests that maybe Hrefna left it at home, or lost it as she travelled to Laugar – even though the saga author specifically states that the headdress had gone from the place in which Hrefna had put it. Finally, in an indirect confession, she alludes to the possibility that someone from Laugar may have taken the headdress, but that in doing so, they have only taken back what properly belonged to them, and furthermore that she herself is pleased that Hrefna has been deprived of it. Significantly, however, no one accuses Guðrún of the theft, and although we are not told directly by the narrator what became of the headdress, *þat höfðu margir men fyrir satt* (ÍF 5, p. 144; ›many people believed‹) that Guðrún's brother Þórólfr burned it on his sister's instructions. The saga author has again displaced what would otherwise be authorial judgement on to what is claimed to be popular opinion.

Before moving on to my final example, it may be worth pausing to summarise the various effects of these two rather different narratorial silences. There is no open indication in the saga of Melkorka's identity until the narrator reveals it. By contrast, it is made perfectly clear who has stolen the headdress. One might also note that there is no other obvious suspect. We do not need to be told who the culprit is, but the narrator nevertheless withholds the information. Possibly, using this narrative silence protects the saga author from making a direct accusation against a figure with whom some of his original audience might have had ancestral kinship. And yet silence is maintained about a number of issues throughout the family sagas (Aune 2015; O'Donoghue 2005, pp. 36–179; O'Donoghue 2021, pp. 153–182). I would argue that, through these carefully maintained silences, the saga author is putting his audience in the same position as the characters in the narrative. Like Höskuldr, we do not know who the overpriced slave

woman is until the revelation later in the narrative. And like the guests and hosts at Laugar, we know very well who has stolen the headdress, but the culprit is not named, either in the storyworld or by the narrator. In effect, we are living through the third time of narrative along with the characters, sharing their own imperfect knowledge and experiencing the passage of events with them. But in the first instance, the information about Melkorka's identity is only withheld for a time, so there's a big difference in the experience of those who do not know the story and those who do. As I have said, those who do not know the story will experience the familiar literary pleasure of revelation, a key element in emplotment, while those who do can enjoy watching or hearing about Melkorka's power over Höskuldr, and knowing more than he does about what is going on. In the second instance, our knowledge is never explicitly perfected, so it does not matter how many times we hear or read the story; our response is the same.

And finally, I think it is quite remarkable that in both of these instances, the saga author has re-worked the same narrative dynamic: male travellers to Norway returning to Iceland with rich female attire that ends up with the ›wrong‹ woman. The apparent naturalism of saga narrative, which an audience is steered towards accepting largely because of the way saga narrators recount their stories in matter-of-fact, non-novelistic, and apparently self-effacing style, in fact disguises a very high degree of artifice, thematic echoing, and what I have elsewhere called *figura* (O'Donoghue 2018).

3. Who Killed Vésteinn?

There is, as I have said, only one suspect in the case of the stolen headdress. But in ›Gísla saga‹, there are two prime suspects for the killing of Gísli's brother-in-law Vésteinn, and again, the saga author creates a careful and highly effective balance between withholding and disclosing the identity of the killer. We are never told whether it was Gísli's brother Þorkell or their brother-in-law Þorgrímr who killed Vésteinn, and in this case, there is no

obvious inference to be made about which of the two was the culprit. In ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, we are casually and openly told in passing that Þorgrímr killed Vésteinn (ÍF 4, p. 20); that Þorgrímr killed Vésteinn; it is tempting to suppose that the author of ›Gísla saga‹ has by contrast purposefully maintained a non-committal stance in order to create the kind of imperfect knowledge I have been discussing so far.[17] I shall therefore look particularly closely at how the saga author creates and maintains the uncertainty, and what effect the non-disclosure of the culprit has, both inside and outside the storyworld.

The killing of Vésteinn is presented from the outset as being so inevitable as to be predestined. Everybody predicts trouble every step of the way. Gísli resigns himself to the apparent inevitability of some unspecified fate: *ok þat mun fram koma, sem auðit vera* (ÍF 6, p. 34; ›and whatever is meant to happen will happen‹). When Vésteinn returns to Iceland from abroad, he makes his way to Gísli, but hearing of Vésteinn's arrival, Gísli sends out an agreed warning – one half of a coin – and the saga author elaborately demonstrates the truth of what Gísli has maintained about fate: that it cannot be averted. Vésteinn at first narrowly misses the messengers with the token – but is delayed on his journey, and they manage to catch up with him and present the half-coin. Vésteinn, however, is fatalistic in his turn: he says that if they had met him the first time, he would have heeded the warning, but ›*nú falla vötn öll til Dýrafjarðar*‹ (ÍF 6, p. 40; »now all waters flow down towards Dýrafjörðr«), and he continues on to Gísli. Three times along the way, he is warned of the danger, even though there has been no indication that violence is being planned. It is notable that there have been no direct threats, insults, or skirmishes, just a heavy and unshakeable sense of tragedy ahead.

It has only very recently occurred to me that insistently blaming Vésteinn's death on fate, instead of providing a specific motivating incident, is another contrivance for concealing the identity of the murderer: no spe-

cific motive, no evident suspect. The saga author next produces a conspicuous silence: Gísli refuses to tell anyone what his recent nightmares have been about. And then Vésteinn is murdered in his bed; the grammatical structure of the subjectless sentence allows the narrator to describe the killing without giving the least hint about the identity of the killer: *Nú er gengit inn nökkut* (ÍF 6, p. 43; ›now [the farmhouse] is entered somehow‹).

The obvious suspects are either Þorgrímr or Þorkell. As we have seen, Þorkell's jealousy of Vésteinn would provide a motive, but without any intervening move or threat from him, the connexion to overhearing his wife's early fondness for Vésteinn seems a tenuous one. Gísli's wife Auðr urges a cowardly slave to pull the lethal spear out of Vésteinn's body, and she might have had some legal reason to do this; the narrator claims that at the time the person who withdrew a weapon was obliged to take on the revenge (ÍF 6, p. 44). Gísli claims he learned the identity of the murderer in his bad dreams – so any vengeance taken by Gísli would reveal that identity; perhaps Auðr realises this and that is why she wanted the slave to be legally committed to take vengeance. Certainly, Gísli shows that he knows it was one of the two, Þorkell or Þorgrímr, for he immediately sends his foster-daughter over to Sæból, the farm they share; she reports back that the men in the household are all fully armed and on the alert – just as, Gísli says, he expected. But only Þorgrímr speaks: to ask for news that, we must presume, he already knows. When he is told of Vésteinn's death, Þorkell wryly implies that this is not news – *›Tíðendi myndi oss þat hafa þótt eina stund‹* (ÍF 6, p. 45; »There was a time when we would have regarded that as news«) – but stops short of admitting that he already knows; he could conceivably be referring simply to the generally accepted fateful inevitability of what has happened.

Þorgrímr responds in a dignified and apparently wholly proper way, calling Vésteinn's death a great loss, and helping with the funerary rites (ÍF 6, p. 46). Is this astonishing hypocrisy? Most remarkably in the narrative, we are told that he sits and talks with Gísli beside the gravemound, and

they both agree that it is *allólíkliga, at nökkurr viti, hverr þenna glœp hefir gört* (ÍF 6, p. 46; ›highly unlikely that anyone will know who committed this crime‹). Is this a covert agreement to let the identity of the murderer lie? In the absence of open naming of the perpetrator, we are left with Gísli's claim to know, and he makes it clear to his brother Þorkell that he knows. Þorkell asks how Gísli's wife Auðr is taking the loss of her brother. Why does he want to know this? In the narrative itself, Gísli makes it clear what an inappropriate enquiry this is: ›*Opt spyrr þú þessa, frændi* [...] *ok er þér mikil forvitni á at vita þetta*‹ (ÍF 6, p. 47; »You keep asking this, brother [...] and you are very curious to know [the answer]«). Does Þorkell perhaps keep on asking because he needs to know whether Auðr, as the only possible witness to Vésteinn's death, has revealed the identity of the intruder, and accused him of the murder?

All these unspoken – and, in fact, unsayable – resentments and suspicions are ostensibly set aside when Þorkell and Gísli agree to behave as if nothing has happened. Is this because it is in both their interests that Þorkell should not be revealed as the murderer? A subsequent ball game is a symbolic rehearsal of the murder and due vengeance sequence. Gísli brings Þorgrímr to the ground with a vicious tackle, and Þorgrímr fixes his gaze on Vésteinn's burial mound and recites two lines: ›*kannkat þat lasta*‹ (ÍF 6, p. 50; »I cannot find fault with that«), the implication being ›I'm not sorry‹. Gísli then knocks Þorgrímr to the ground and repeats the same phrase. This is structured as and looks like a perfect tit-for-tat exchange, but in fact, there is no actual admission or accusation of guilt. Þorkell rushes in to defuse the situation, but this could be because he does not want an escalation which might in the heat of the moment lead to the revelation of either himself or Þorgrímr as the murderer. In the end, Gísli does murder Þorgrímr, but after their increasingly acrimonious dealings, this does not completely convince as unequivocally revealing Þorgrímr as the killer. Finally, much later on in the saga, the sons of Vésteinn carry out a bold re-

venge attack on Gísli's brother Þorkell (ÍF 6, pp. 90–91). Does this implicitly identify Þorkell as Vésteinn's murderer – an identification Gísli could never openly make, because after all, the fraternal bond, however fragile, is ultimately sacrosanct?

There have been several attempts by saga scholars to make a case for one or other of the two suspects as being the culprit. My interest here is not to identify the culprit, but to consider how and why it is that his identity is withheld from the saga audience. What is very clear is that the saga author has gone to a great deal of effort to create and maintain ambivalence. What is the effect withholding the identity of the murderer? Most obviously, the saga author is again engaging the audience in speculation about the narrative and the motives of the characters in it. Knowing the story in advance only deepens our connection with it, since, as with the story of Hrefna's headdress, there is no revelation. The saga author takes us deep into the third time of narrative, forcing us to slow or even halt our forward movement through its time, and to reach further into the complexity of the characters' interrelationships. And as with the scandal of Hrefna's headdress in ›Laxdœla saga‹, we can experience from the characters' perspective the social and psychological necessity of silence – of not making open accusations, but living with suspicion and doubt, rather than bringing matters to a head, from which there may be no return. I would like to propose a thought experiment: imagine a narrative which identified either Þorkell or Þorgrímr as the murderer. Significantly, it hardly matters to the course of the narrative which of them is named. The psychological depth of the narrative is reduced either way once the implicit invitation to speculate is removed. I would argue that the saga author's aim here is to convey the experience of living in a tightly-knit – as I have described it elsewhere, over-bonded – community (O'Donoghue 2005, p. 142), in which theft or murder is such a dangerous threat to society that its perpetrators cannot be named. For the narrator to break the silence would be to cut off the saga audience from that experience, to present it from the outside.

So, to return to Ricœur's double temporality, readers or listeners may imagine a saga narrative as a block of time, presented as a *totum simul,* but they may also experience the passage of this third time along with the characters. Ricœur calls this process »a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit a world foreign to us« (Ricœur 1984, vol. II, p. 149). Further, this third time of narrative provides a decidedly collective experience – it is always available, and ideally it causes a sort of alteration of consciousness – a gradual or sudden insight into what the world looks like to others, and an insight that will stay with us (Dowling 2011, p. 51). For an original Icelandic audience, living through the third time of saga narrative must have created a sense of extraordinarily close engagement with their forebears, and even today, the distinctive narrative strategies of the *Íslendingasögur* seem to bring us very near to figures from a distant past.

Notes

1 What follows here is based on ideas explained more fully in my book ›Narrative in the Icelandic Family Saga: Meanings of Time in Old Norse Literature‹ (2021). The analyses of three family saga episodes are taken from chapter 5 of that book ›Withheld Knowledge‹ (pp. 153–182).

2 Paul Ricœur developed his theories of narrative time across three volumes entitled ›Temps et Récit‹ (1983). All three volumes were translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer as ›Time and Narrative‹ (1984). All references in this piece are to that translation (Vol. III, p. 245).

3 In a very useful short piece on time in saga literature, Carl Phelpstead considers other more recent concepts of time, such as Einstein's theory of relativity. See his chapter entitled ›Time‹ (2017).

4 For Ricœur's exhaustive analysis of Augustine on time, see ›Time and Narrative‹ Vol. I, chapter I, ›The Aporias of the Experience of Time: Book II of Augustine's Confessions‹ (pp. 5–30).

5 ›Time and Narrative‹ Vol. III, Section I, ›The Time of the Soul and the Time of the World: The Dispute between Augustine and Aristotle‹, pp. 12–22). For an account of Aristotle's views on time in his ›Physics‹, see Coope 2005.

6 For Ricœur's views on Boethius's *totum simul*, quoting the work of Louis O. Mink, see ›Time and Narrative‹ Vol. I, p. 160 ff.

7 For a fascinating exploration of the religious concept of privileged epistemic access and its application to the literary detective story, see Carney 2014.

8 ›Withholding‹ and ›revealing‹ are not ideal terms to use, since they presuppose the existence of a prior reality, while in a fictional or semi-fictional narrative, all may be invented. What the author is actually doing is creating an item of non-knowledge. But the clumsiness of the resulting formulae makes otherwise unsatisfactory terms preferable.

9 In marked contrast to, for example, the poet of ›Beowulf‹, who frequently alludes to a usually doom-laden narrative future. Open negative foreshadowing is also quite common in the Middle High German ›Nibelungenlied‹.

10 Unless you believe (as I do not) authors who claim not to know what will happen to their characters, or how the story will end.

11 See note 10.

12 I discuss both of these issues in ›Narrative and the Icelandic Family Saga‹, in the chapter entitled ›The Voice of the Silent Narrator‹.

13 These two sagas are both family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), and as such are naturalistic accounts of society in the Saga Age, that is, the lives of the first few generations after the settlement of Iceland in 870. ›Laxdœla saga‹ follows the fortunes of several Icelandic settler families who jostle for power, prestige, and prosperity. Rather differently, ›Gísla saga‹ focuses more narrowly on its antihero Gísli, who murders his sister's husband in revenge for the killing of his wife's brother, Vésteinn, and is sentenced to live as an outlaw in Iceland.

14 All further references to this and other family sagas are to Íslenzk fornrit editions, as specified. Translations are my own.

15 Speculation most famously mocked by L.C. Knights in his essay (1964).

16 For a useful account of the theory of conspicuous silences in narrative, see Ruth Rosaler 2016. It is worth attending to a distinction in saga narrative between instances in which the narrator explicitly draws attention to the act of withholding, and unremarked omissions. In Rosaler's work, any silence evident to the reader is designated as conspicuous.

17 Sagas often deal with the same stock of narrative material and historical events. In the case of ›Gísla saga‹ and ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, both sagas mention Þorgrímr's son, Snorri goði, in some capacity, and both sagas relate to the same event. It is not possible, however, to establish a chronological priority. The absolute dating

of surviving versions of family sagas is almost impossible, with even relative dating being uncertain because of the unknowability of the possible oral versions of sagas. My suggestion here is that some story – oral or written – about who killed Vésteinn was in existence, and that the author of ›Gísla saga‹ chooses to retell it while withholding the identity of the killer, unlike the author of ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, who choose to reveal it.

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Hilkea Blomeyer

The Polar Bear Conspiracy

The Narrative Voice and Strategies of Silence in ›Brands þáttr örva‹, ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹, and ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹[1]

Abstract. This article focuses on the silence of the narrative voice and of silent characters, as well as the consequences this silencing has for the plot of saga narratives. By analysing three Old Norse short stories (*þættir*), it can be shown how the narrative voice uses silence to steer the audience's attention and to enhance its enjoyment of the narrative. Silence is only noticeable when the narrative voice leaves gaps unexplained or describes an episode differently than the characters do. Silence appears on different narrative levels and is employed through various voices. It is thus not a phenomenon restricted to modern works, but can also be identified in premodern texts as a way to direct the audience's attention.

1. Introduction

Picture the following scene. In the hall of a farmer at midday, an old man sits in his chair, with a woman next to him and a child playing on the ground. Suddenly, the child stumbles, and the man begins to laugh. He then tells the young boy that his parents are not who he thinks they are. Has the audience missed something?

This paper focuses on how the narrative voice uses silence, and what effect this has on the audience in selected *þættir* (›short stories‹, lit. ›threads‹; sg. *þáttr*). The above scene belongs to ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹,

and the events described here, as well as the question of what the audience has been told, are revisited below in section 3.2. To read or listen to a story leads the audience to focus on the outspoken parts, which means the audience often does not notice when something is left untold – that is, until the story no longer makes sense, and obvious gaps in the narrative give rise to interpretative questions. Explicit silence, such as when a vocal character falls silent, is noticeable, unlike the silence of the narrative voice, which is more implicit and remains unnoticed until it creates contradictions within the wider narrative. To look for this kind of silence is to look for gaps in the narrative, to see what is hidden between the lines. While some kinds of silence are obvious to detect, others are more difficult to find.

This article discusses how we can identify moments where the narrative voice is silent, and how this silence may influence both story and audience. Scholarly research suggests possible categories and reasons for narrative silence, which are adapted here to fit the analysis of Old Norse literature. I will introduce various strategies for identifying narrative silence in *þættir* and demonstrate their usefulness in three case studies: ›Brands þáttr örva‹, ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹, and the two versions of ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹.

2. Silence in Narration

Silence is colloquially defined as »the absence of speech« (Mayar/Schulte 2022, p. 5), but this definition captures only a fraction of what silence is.[2] Silence is a (temporary) suspension and interruption of a conversation, and even a relationship. It can be a spontaneous reaction, such as shocked silence, or result from a conscious decision, a signal to others that their statement was not met with support. A person can be silent of their own volition; they can be forced to be silent; or they can choose to break the silence. Mahshid Mayar and Marion Schulte (pp. 2–3) speak not only of ›silence‹ and the active ›silencing‹ of others, but also of ›keeping‹ and ›breaking‹ silence. Because silence is multivalent, in the sense that there are various kinds of

silence, it conveys meaning, and it can accordingly be analysed in different ways (p. 2).

As regards the depiction of silence in literary studies, it is important to note that modern literature theories and questions are only partly suitable for the analysis of medieval texts, and may need to be adapted to new contexts (Schnyder 2003, p. 21). Ruth Rosaler (2016, pp. 2–5) explores the meaning of conspicuous silence in Victorian novels, showing how silence on the intra- and extradiegetic levels is perceived by the audience as gaps in the narrative.[3] Such gaps, which require interpretation to be made sense of, can result from restrictions arising from social and textual conventions (pp. 7–8). Rosaler terms interpretation via implicit statements as ›implicatures‹ (p. 3). She subsumes the silence itself and the resulting gaps in the text under the umbrella term ›unnarratable‹, and introduces various categories to distinguish these elements (pp. 5–7).[4] ›Subnarratable‹ elements are the parts of the text that are mundane enough that they need not be narrated, such as the tasks of daily life (p. 6). When these are narrated, however, the fact that they are mentioned seems unusual to the reader. The ›supranarratable‹, conversely, is beyond the scope of narration; the narrative voice can refer to it only by highlighting how it cannot be narrated (p. 6). For example, the effect of an object of extraordinary beauty would be diminished if it is described; therefore, the narrative voice evades this by explaining why a description is impossible. Other types of silence are theoretically narratable, but there are restrictions on how they can be narrated; for instance, social norms prevent ›antinarratable‹ elements, taboos that can be addressed only indirectly, from being explicitly narrated (p. 7). In such cases, the author relies on the audience to fill in the gaps with background knowledge in order to grasp the text's meaning (p. 7). Finally, restrictions that result from formal external conventions, such as the genre or medium of the text, are referred to as ›paranarratable‹ (p. 7).[5] Describing a brutal murder in detail, for instance, is suitable for a crime novel but might seem disturbing in a romance story; similarly, a reader expects

certain conventions to be fulfilled in a letter that seem unusual for fictious texts. The elements are distinguished because they are either not typically narrated or even impossible to narrate (subnarratable, supranarratable), or because they result from external social or textual restrictions (antinarratable, paranarratable) (pp. 6–7). Sub- and supranarratable elements are sometimes commented on and by doing so, the narrative voice breaks (subnarratable) or highlights (supranarratable) an existing silence. Anti- and paranarratable elements, however, are less likely to be commented on because they depend on external restrictions. Rosaler's distinctions are important for the following case studies, as the different reasons for introducing silence into a text shapes the kinds of comments made by the narrative voice.

While Rosaler focuses on Victorian novels, Heather O'Donoghue (2021) discusses the figure of the ›silent narrator‹, in several variations, in relation to the *Íslendingasögur*.[6] The silent narrator offers no explanation or commentary on events that we would otherwise expect it to comment on (O'Donoghue 2021, p. 115). Consequently, the audience, unguided by the narrator, must engage in discussion or speculation about the possible causes or significance of these events (p. 118). In some cases, the narrative voice displaces the responsibility of narrating to other voices, such as the voice of public opinion, which can direct the audience to sympathise with certain characters while allowing the narrative voice to appear objective (pp. 123–124).[7] This displacement is especially relevant in the case of supernatural encounters, which the narrator may be hesitant to describe, because explanation or judgement of the paranormal can be outsourced to a specific character or to public opinion (pp. 124 and 127). The notion of the silent narrator, who shifts their narrative obligations to public opinion or to intradiegetic characters, thus displacing responsibility for providing explanations and judgement on events, is important for the present analysis, as it necessarily influences our perception of the story.

Though Rosaler and O'Donoghue use different approaches, both authors show that silence has different effects. Various possibilities exist to analyse and categorise silence, both on the intra- and extradiegetic levels. Yet there is considerable work to be done in developing the silence of the narrative voice as a topic of discussion in Old Norse literary studies,[8] which may be down partly to the difficulty of identifying such silence. While it is easy to notice when a character falls silent, the same is not true for the narrative voice. To look for narrative silence means to seek out gaps, omitted information, or unexplained leaps in the narrative, rather than the more explicit elements of the text. The following case studies discuss how silence can be seen in the way the narrative voice operates in Old Norse *þættir*, linking research on the characteristics of the narrative voice in Old Norse texts to previous work on the effects of narrative silence. The analysis focuses on passages where the narrative voice does not provide comments where we might expect it to, and where its silence on the events of the narrative contradicts statements made by the characters, thus shaping the audience's response by encouraging them to consider how they might make sense of these gaps in the text.

3. The Ways of Silence: Three Case Studies

I propose that the narrative voice uses different strategies of silence to transmit underlying themes and sentiments in the *þættir*. It stays silent, works together with silent characters, or actively silences the characters in the story. The categories proposed by Rosaler and O'Donoghue are used to differentiate further between these strategies, in particular when looking at possible motivations for the appearance of silence in the narrative: Silence may result from a hesitance to report on some events, such as paranormal encounters, from a need to follow social restrictions, or from an intentional focus on certain themes, such as responsibility and truth-telling. The intention of the narrative voice, in turn, influences the effects that silence has on

the story and on the audience. The themes the narrative voice wants to put into focus are highlighted through silence, inviting the audience to enjoy the narrative on a deeper level.

To observe how silence is used as a tool in Old Norse literature, I present here case studies of three Old Norse-Icelandic short stories, *þættir*. The corpus of *þættir* contains about one hundred narratives, which are mainly preserved as embedded narratives in the kings' sagas (*konungasögur*), particularly the compilations of Flateyjarbók and Morkinskinna (Rowe 2017, p. 152; Rowe/Harris 2005, pp. 462–463 and 467).[9] The *þættir* deal with the relationship between Icelanders and Norwegian kings, with religious tensions between Christianity and pre-Christian beliefs, or with legendary heroes, and have been studied both separately and together with the sagas in which they are embedded (e.g. Rowe 2005, Würth 1991).[10] I will discuss ›Brands þáttr örva‹, ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹, and ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹, each of which adds a different element to the study of silence, both on the extra- and intradiegetic level. In ›Brands þáttr örva‹, we see the influence of a silent character on the narrative voice; ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹ shows how the silence of the narrative voice concerning supernatural encounters can be broken; and the analysis of ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹, a text transmitted in two versions, sheds light on the distinction between silence, textual variation, and active silencing.

3.1 Silent characters: ›Brands þáttr örva‹

Although Rosaler and O'Donoghue mainly focus on the extradiegetic narrative voice, the silence that is most noticeable in this *þáttr* is that of a character on the intradiegetic level. As silence in a conversation can be distinguished by whether it occurs ›before‹, ›during‹, or ›after‹ talking (Schnyder 2003, p. 35), we tend to think of silence in relation to talkative characters who become silent, or silent characters who become talkative. Yet protagonists who do not verbally express themselves at all are unusual, as is

the case for Brandr, the main character of ›Brands þáttr örva‹.[11] The short story tells of his encounter with the Norwegian King Haraldr harðráði, who tries to find out whether Brandr is as generous as his friend, the poet (*skáld*) Þjóðólfr, claims he is. The king orders Þjóðólfr to bring him valuable possessions belonging to Brandr, which Þjóðólfr reluctantly does. Each time Þjóðólfr asks his friend to hand over a desired object, Brandr silently obeys. In the end, when Þjóðólfr presents the king with a tunic from which Brandr has removed one of the sleeves, King Haraldr reflects on his own hypocrisy in not reciprocating Brandr's generosity. He interprets the modified tunic as if he himself had only one hand that always took and never gave. Haraldr thus recognises Brandr as the more generous man, since he only gave without expecting anything in return.

Brandr's silence throughout these events is ambiguous. It is unclear whether being silent reflects his own choice or whether it is somehow forced upon him. He is first introduced by Þjóðólfr, who *hafði mart sagt Haraldi konungi frá Brandi, hvé mikill mætismaðr hann var ok vel at sér* (ÍF 4, p. 189; ›had told King Harald a great deal about what a worthy and accomplished man Brand was‹, CSI 1, p. 374).[12] But Þjóðólfr does not mention that Brandr is unable to speak or that he chooses not to. The only explicit detail of Brandr's silence comes in the comments made by the narrative voice, which mentions how he acted *svaraði engu* (ÍF 4, p. 190; ›without answering‹, CSI 1, p. 374). Þjóðólfr remarks after returning from his first errand that *Brandr hafði engi orð um* (ÍF 4, p. 190; ›Brand had not said a word about it‹, CSI 1, p. 374), which leaves open the question of whether it is unusual for the friends not to exchange words outside of Þjóðólfr's messages from the king. Keeping the cause of Brandr's silence unresolved leaves an ambiguous gap in the story.

If we assume that Brandr is able to speak, we may read his silence as voluntary.[13] I will argue that his silence is not a weakness, but rather a powerful means of signification. Since Brandr does not defend or explain his actions, this task falls to another character, as well as to the extradiegetic

narrative voice. While Þjóðólfr mentions in the aforementioned indirect speech *at Brandr hafði engi orð um* (ÍF 4, p. 190; ›that Brand had not said a word about it‹, CSI 1, p. 374), the narrative voice tells the audience that Brandr *svaraði engu* and *mælti ekki* (ÍF 4, p. 190; ›[acted] without answering‹, ›[acted] without saying a word‹, CSI 1, pp. 374–375). It is thus unclear whether Brandr's silence pertains only to him answering the questions relating to the king's orders, or whether he was entirely silent in his interactions with Þjóðólfr. Either way, both Þjóðólfr's account and the narrative voice work together to present Brandr as a silent figure to both the king and the audience – in Þjóðólfr's case, perhaps because Brandr could have placed himself in danger were he to reproach the king verbally for his own lack of generosity. Being Icelandic, Brandr is an outsider with less secure ties to the court; anything he might say in response to the king's orders could be seen as an insult or as being in defiance of his demands. By following the demands without comment, yet with conspicuous silence, Brandr remains safe from retaliation, but can simultaneously present an implicit challenge to the king. His silence thus frames him not as a mere subordinate, but as a potential peer: in choosing to act, instead of talking, he displaces the responsibility to explain his actions, and leaves it up to the king to interpret them. By inverting Haraldr's test and mirroring it back to him, he inverts the power relation between them through the use of silence, forcing others to explain his responses.

Being silent strengthens Brandr's position, but Þjóðólfr weakens his own standing by talking, as his praise of Brandr places him in a precarious situation. Only by becoming silent and refusing to interpret his friend's actions can he save himself from the predicament of falling into disfavour with the king. It is Þjóðólfr's fault that Brandr must undergo the test in the first place, as the skald boasts of his friend's generosity in front of the king (*hafði mart sagt Haraldi konungi frá Brandi*, ÍF 4, p. 189; ›he had told King Harald a great deal about […] Brand‹, CSI 1, p. 374). He regrets this when he is sent to retrieve the items, however, and when Haraldr orders him to fetch

more items from Brandr, he pleads with the king not to ask more of him: *›Ekki er mér mikit um, herra, at fara optar‹* (ÍF 4, p. 190; »I am not keen, my lord, on going to see him again«, CSI 1, p. 374). The poet fears for his friendship with Brandr: *›Veit ek eigi, hversu hann vill þat virða, ef ek kref vápns ór hendi honum‹* (ÍF 4, p. 190; »I don't know how he'll take it [if I demand the weapon out of his hands]«, CSI 1, p. 374). Once it is made clear that Þjóðólfr must continue retrieving the items, he no longer tries to explain Brandr's silence. While Brandr strengthens his position by becoming silent, Þjóðólfr invalidates his own by talking, perhaps losing respect as a court poet whose position is contingent on his verbal skill. In addition, Þjóðólfr's response to Brandr's silence weakens their friendship. Where a character is unable to defend himself, the role of protector should fall to a friend, as in chapter 59 of ›Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar‹, where Arinbjörn helps his friend Egill by mediating between him and King Eiríkr blóðöx, and by protecting Egill while he composes a poem for the king (ÍF 2, pp. 181 and 183). This does not happen here: punished for talking, Þjóðólfr stops commenting or expressing his opinion, falling silent and being reduced from an active character to a passive bystander. It is thus the king who must take over in interpreting the significance of these events.

At the same time, King Haraldr transforms from an active leader to a passive figure controlled by Brandr's silence. Giving the order to confiscate Brandr's belongings, the king expects him to refuse, or at least to respond: *›Mun vera mikils háttar maðr, er honum þótti eigi þurfa orð um at hafa‹* (ÍF 4, p. 190; »This man [...] must be very distinguished if he felt no need to say anything about it«, CSI 1, p. 374). When the Icelander does not resist the demands, Haraldr himself falls silent. Only at the beginning of the *þáttr* (*›Víst er sjá maðr skapstórr‹*, ÍF 4, p. 190; »This man certainly is magnanimous«, CSI 1, p. 374) and towards the ending (*›Auðsét er mér, hví hann hefir erminni af sprett; honum þykkir sem ek eiga eina höndina, ok þá þó at þiggja ávallt, en veita aldrigi‹*, ÍF 4, p. 191; »It is obvious to me why he tore off the sleeve. He thinks that I have only one arm that always

takes and never gives«, CSI 1, p. 375) does he try to make sense of Brandr's actions. Interestingly, the king does not comment further on Brandr's silence.

Because the story is brief and the cast restricted to three characters, a tight network of relations and power is first established, then inverted, through the course of the narrative. At the beginning, there is a clear hierarchy with King Haraldr at the top, the court poet Þjóðólfr in the middle, and the Icelander Brandr at the bottom. Over the course of the *þáttr*, through Brandr's silent cooperation, this structure shifts. As long as Brandr does not talk, only his actions are available for interaction and interpretation. His silence thus offers the king the opportunity to reflect on his demands, and later to withdraw from the situation without severe consequences. In interpreting the events, Haraldr is forced by Brandr's wordless compliance to play along, to confront and reflect on his own shortcomings. This is the best outcome: Brandr earns himself honour (*ok þá af honum góða virðing ok fégjafar; ok var þetta gört til raunar við hann*, ÍF 4, p. 191; ›and [he] received honour and fine gifts from him. This was done in order to test him‹, CSI 1, p. 375), while Haraldr does not lose face, but still learns a valuable moral lesson. In the end, with Haraldr comparing his generosity with Brandr's, the social hierarchy between the characters is levelled out, with each one becoming more closely connect to the others. Both the king and Þjóðólfr are influenced by Brandr's silence, and the strict hierarchy between them is momentarily destabilised.

Furthermore, the story suggests that in some cases, it is best to keep silent. Brandr's silence does not destroy the close-knit relationships between the men, unlike similar silences found elsewhere in the sagas, but encourages Haraldr and Þjóðólfr to re-evaluate their connections with him and each other.[14] Þjóðólfr's thoughtless boasting places both Icelanders in a potentially dangerous situation, but they are ultimately saved by Brandr's silence. Not only that, when Haraldr realises that his ploy has backfired, it is the king who must make amends, rather than forcing Brandr to concede.

While each figure struggles with the dilemma placed on them by unnecessary talk, silence emerges as the solution. Brandr not only protects himself by not talking, but also offers Þjóðólfr a way out of his predicament. Haraldr, meanwhile, is able to interpret Brandr's silence as a form of obedience, and thus to read it according to his own wishes. The silence therefore acts as a means for the characters to overcome the distance between them created by the social hierarchy of the Norwegian court.

The role of the narrative voice in this case is of a supporting nature, in that it offers a solution to the dilemma of the characters by reversing their active and passive involvement in events. It foregrounds Brandr's silence to the audience by not explaining or excusing his behaviour, which leaves room for the audience, like the characters, to make sense of the silence. Brandr presents himself as in some sense equal, if not superior, to the king. Conversely, the king does not receive the flowery praise he expects, but instead asks for approval by the conclusion of the text. Through his self-assured silence, Brandr forces the king to read the ›correct‹ meaning out of his gifts, which leads Haraldr in turn to reflect on his own shortcomings.[15] While the king explains the significance of this silence, the narrative voice, along with Brandr himself, stays silent. The narrative voice and Brandr work together to achieve the same goal: to invert the conventional expectations of gift-giving between a monarch and their subject without ultimately destroying the social order. Thus, Brandr's silence is not broken by the narrative voice through explanation or by resolving the silence. Instead, it is left to the other characters, primarily Haraldr, and to the audience to interpret the meaning of the silence.

3.2 The Silence of Gaps and Changes: ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹

Silence can result in abrupt changes that create unexplained gaps in time or plot. This can be seen especially in narratives that progress through different stages of the protagonist's life. In such cases, it is interesting to see

how the transition is explained by the characters, through direct and indirect speech, and by the narrative voice, through comment or reaction.

The *þáttr* of Þorsteinn uxafótr, preserved in Flateyjarbók (see Ármann Jakobsson et al. 2020, p. 451), serves as a case study for how the narrative voice constructs silence by declining to comment on these shifts in the life course of its protagonist. The *þáttr* narrates the life of Þorsteinn, the illegitimate son of Ívarr ljómi,[16] who grows up with his grandfather in Iceland, travels to Norway, fights trolls, and dies beside King Óláfr Tryggvason in the Battle of Svöldr. Scholars have mostly focused on the *þáttr*'s depiction of conversion and its supernatural elements,[17] but my focus lies on the narrative voice and its dealings with an overlooked part of Þorsteinn's life: his childhood and the start of his heroic journey.

At the beginning of the *þáttr*, Þorsteinn is not yet a hero, and not even part of his biological family's household; he is fostered by the couple Krummr and Þórgunna. The audience are informed how this came to be: after the retainer Ívarr ljómi rapes the Icelander Oddný, who is unable to speak,[18] he refuses to acknowledge the conceived Þorsteinn as his child. Oddný's brother Þorkell then orders that the child be abandoned against her will (ÍF 13, p. 348). The slave Freysteinn makes sure the baby survives by giving him a piece of meat before he leaves Þorsteinn in the forest (ÍF 13, p. 348). The farmer Krummr, Þorkell's friend, finds the child and takes it in as his own. But this poses a problem: for Þorsteinn to be acknowledged by his father, and thus become legitimate, he must first be recognised by his mother's family. This is difficult to achieve; at this point only the narrative voice, the audience and presumably the speech-impaired Oddný know of Þorsteinn's actual parentage. The story needs to resolve the problem, in that the knowledge of his parentage must be transferred from the extradiegetic level to the intradiegetic level of the characters. The following scene, in which the narrative voice describes Þorsteinn's visit to Krossavík, the home of his biological family, achieves this:

> *Þat var einn dag sem optar, at Þorsteinn kom til Krossavíkr; hann gekk til stofu. Þá sat Geitir, faðir bónda, á palli ok þuldi í feld sinn. En er piltrinn kom í stofuna, þá fór hann mjök geystr, sem börnum er títt; fellr hann á stofugólfinu. Ok (er) Geitir sér þetta, skellir hann upp ok hlær. En er Oddný sér piltinn, setr at henni grát mikinn.* (ÍF 13, p. 350)

> One day Þorsteinn went to Krossavík as he had often done before. He went to the main room. The farmer's father Geitir, was sitting on the cross-bench and murmuring into his cloak. And when the boy came into the main room, he was rushing as is usual with children. He fell onto the floor and when Geitir saw that, he burst into resounding laughter. But when Oddný saw the child, she burst into tears. (CSI 4, p. 344)

As the narrative voice comments, it is not unusual for children to rush about (*sem börnum er títt*, ÍF 13, p. 350; ›as is usual with children‹, CSI 4, p. 344), implying it is also not unusual for them to trip. Yet Þorsteinn is confused by Geitir's reaction, and he questions the old man:

> *Piltrinn gengr innar at Geiti ok mælti: ›Hvárt þótti þér þetta allbrosligt, er ek féll áðan?‹ Geitir svarar: ›Þat er satt, því at ek sá þat, er þú sátt eigi.‹ ›Hvat var þat?‹ sagði Þorsteinn. ›Þat má ek segja þér. Þá er þú komt í stofuna, fylgði þér einn hvítabjarnarhúnn, ok rann fyrir innar á gólfit. En er hann sá mik, nam hann staðar, en þú fórt heldr geystr, ok féll þú um húninn, ok þat er ætlan mín, at þú sér eigi son Krumms né Þórgunnar, heldr mantu stærri ættar.‹* (ÍF 13, p. 350)

> The boy went on into the room and asked Geitir: »What seemed so laughable to you when I fell just now?« Geitir answered: »In truth because I saw what you did not see.« »What was that?« said Þorsteinn. »I can tell you. When you came into the main room, a polar bear cub followed you and ran on ahead into the room. But when he saw me, he stopped and you were going along in a rush and fell over the cub and it's my belief that you are not the son of Krummr or of Þórgunna, but instead are of a greater family.« (CSI 4, p. 344)

At first, Geitir's explanation seems to align with what the narrative voice already mentioned: the child came into the hall and fell. Yet one aspect dif-

fers from the first description, namely the polar bear cub. While the narrative voice describes Þorsteinn's behaviour as ordinary – he is still a child, after all – Geitir conversely claims not only that a bear cub is to blame, but that only he witnessed this bear entering the hall behind Þorsteinn. For Geitir and the rest of the household, this is a perfectly reasonable explanation as to why Þorsteinn cannot be the son of Krummr and Þórgunna. Still, various things do not line up for the audience. No one else can see the animal, but Geitir's statement is accepted without question by the other characters, and the narrative voice does not comment on his version of events, staying silent on the matter. As the story goes on to describe Þorsteinn being acknowledged by his uncle, there is no mention of a bear; instead, Þorkell asks Krummr, Þórgunna, and Freysteinn to disclose what they know about Þorsteinn's origins. As the title of this article implies, there seems to be a common goal between the different voices, a silent conspiracy that the audience has to solve.

Regarding the nature of the polar bear, it is more likely to be a paranormal element rather than an actual animal. Since Oddný and Þorsteinn do not react to the presence of the cub, it cannot be corporeal. Furthermore, Geitir explicitly says that he laughed *›því at ek sá þat, er þú sátt eigi‹* (ÍF 13, p. 350; »because I saw, what you [Þorsteinn] did not see«, CSI 4, p. 344). In his doctoral thesis, Thomas Morcom (2020, p. 181) remarks on the use of ›punctum‹ – an element that disturbs the flow of the narration, but which is not necessarily relevant for the plot itself – in the *þættir* of Morkinskinna. The polar bear cub may be read as a similarly charged element, in that it forces the audience to pause momentarily, but in contrast to the optional element of punctum, the cub's appearance significantly influences the plot. An alternative answer to the question may lie in the phrase ›[hann] *fylgði þér*‹ (ÍF 13, p. 350; »[it] followed you«, CSI 4, p. 344), which alludes to a different kind of paranormal entity, the *fylgja*. These spirits often appear in dreams and visions, where they symbolise a person and represent their imminent, often deadly, future (Röhn 2010,

p. 289). The interpretation of the polar bear cub as a *fylgja* has generally been accepted.[19] This then leads to the question of why the narrative voice does not comment on the unusual appearance of the cub, as well as why it provides an alternative explanation by implying that the fall is a consequence of childish behaviour.

By staying silent, the narrative voice showcases a selection process that positions the audience on the level of the protagonists. According to O'Donoghue (2021, p. 124), when confronted with paranormal elements, the narrative voice is hesitant to comment on them.[20] This can be observed only partially for ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹. While the narrative voice itself does not mention the polar bear, it still describes and evaluates other creatures, such as trolls or mound-dwellers.[21] Instead, Þorsteinn's fall is linked by the narrative voice to the usual behaviour of children, which frames the action as one of Rosaler's subnarratable elements, in that it is notable only because it would otherwise be too ordinary to describe. In not mentioning the polar bear, the narrative voice actively selects which knowledge is shared with the audience. The audience is told of the circumstances around Þorsteinn's birth, but the narrative voice then withholds information concerning the incident at Krossavík, with the introduction of an unknown, paranormal element posing questions left unanswered. Though the narrative voice is imbued with a sense of narratorial authority, it displaces the responsibility to explain what happened to Geitir, a character in the story. But in this way, the narrative voice maintains its authority: rather than verifying Geitir's account or contradicting him, which would undermine the claims about Þorsteinn's parentage, the narrative voice's refusal to comment leaves the audience without guidance in how they are to interpret the scene. The audience is placed in a state of uncertainty, and consequently finds itself with the same degree of knowledge as the characters have.

Geitir's statement also serves as an important plot point. As long as the characters in the story do not know who Þorsteinn really is, he cannot begin

his journey toward becoming a hero. It can be argued that Oddný's emotional reaction upon seeing her child (*henni grát mikinn*, ÍF 13, p. 350; ›she burst into tears‹, CSI 4, p. 344) is an indication that she recognises him, there is still a need for someone to acknowledge Þorsteinn verbally, for this visual to be confirmed through language. Geitir, Oddný's father, steps into this role, and becomes an authority figure on the intradiegetic level, substituting for the narratorial authority of the narrative voice. Since none of the other characters contradict his account, it is given plausibility, and it later leads to a formal inquisition by Þorkell into Þorsteinn's parentage (*Þorkell kveðst eigi kunna at synja, – ›skulum vér hér fá sannar fréttir af.‹*, ÍF 13, p. 351; ›Thorkel said that he did not know how to deny it – »We must get reliable information on this«‹, CSI 4, p. 345). Not to trust Geitir's account would mean the end of the story, with Þorsteinn continuing to be the son of destitute farmers rather than developing as a heroic figure. In a sense, then, the description of the polar bear cub is the impulse for the main plot, a catalyst for reuniting the family that ultimately leads Þorsteinn to travel to Norway to meet with his father.

For the narrative voice, the silence serves two functions: first, it displaces the responsibility to narrate certain events, and second, it encourages the audience to rethink and reflect on how the events are narrated. As a result, the audience is able to enjoy the story on a different level. While Oddný's silence is explained by her not being able to speak, the silence of the narrative voice is made visible only when Geitir breaks it. The audience notices the silence only when they stumble over the previously uncommented gap of the polar bear and its importance for the plot, which may motivate them to reflect not only on the story, but also on a metanarrative level about how truth is communicated and their dependence on narratorial authorities. Even though the audience have witnessed the events of Þorsteinn's birth, the silence of the narrative voice, where one might expect it to at least comment on Geitir's observation of the polar bear, creates ambiguities in the text. In this instance, the narrative voice fulfils the categories described by

both Rosaler and O'Donoghue: it is notably silent, outsources the explanation, and shows hesitation towards paranormal events. Yet, it does not lose its authority. Instead, the narrative voice retains its position of authority by apparently giving it up to a character, which has the consequence of inviting the audience into a further layer of interpretative engagement when they notice the silence (O'Donoghue 2021, p. 118).

The silence and its subsequent breaking functions as self-protection for both the characters and the narrative voice, albeit in different ways. The episode concerns not only a paranormal entity – an antinarratable aspect for the narrative voice, which is hesitant to address it – but also the topic of an exposed child, itself antinarratable for the characters involved. Exposure is framed in the text as having been looked down upon at the time of its setting (*En þat var þá lög í þann tíma, at út skyldi bera óríkra manna börn* […] *ok þótti þó eigi vel gert*, ÍF 13, p. 348; ›It was legal at that time for poor people to expose children […] but it was thought to be a bad thing to do‹, CSI 4, p. 343), which makes it difficult for Þorsteinn's relatives to recognise him without acknowledging the social taboo. Still, the audience and the characters desire an explanation for the polar bear. Thus, both sides have opposite goals: the narrative voice chooses to stay silent, while other voices in the text choose to break the silence. The narrative voice cannot validate nor confirm the paranormal element, while the characters would struggle to acknowledge the social taboo of exposure if they voice their suspicions about Þorsteinn unprompted, no matter how much they want to. As the characters and the narrative voice stand in opposition to each other, the solution presents itself by each side becoming silent about certain things. While the silence forces itself on everyone involved through external restriction, the combination of distinct silences, and the displacement of narratorial duties for certain kinds of events to either the narrative voice or the voices of the characters, at the same time protects each side. The narrative voice does not need to provide all the information in the story, and the characters can remain silent about the circumstances of Þorsteinn's exposure

when Geitir breaks the silence to focus instead on the paranormal aspects of the situation. Consequently, the account of the polar bear becomes a kind of narratorial conspiracy, in which silence connects the characters and the narrative voice in both communicating and keeping the secret.

3.3 The Double Silence: The Two Versions of ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹

While the previous case studies focused on silence found in the behaviour of the characters or the comments made by the narrative voice, the final case study concerns differences between versions of the same story and the question of how we define silence. When confronted with two or more versions of a narrative, new opportunities present themselves for the study of the narrative voice, especially when we focus on episodes where different versions align with or differ from one another. In more extreme cases, parts of one version may be absent from or expanded on in another.

It can be tempting to read a comment present in one version of the story, but absent in another, as representing silence on the part of the narrative voice in the second version. But first, we must ask ourselves: when is it accurate to speak of silence instead of difference? Even though versions of a story may diverge because they focus on different aspects of the narrative, this does not necessarily mean that the resulting absences must indicate silence about the missing elements. When these differences result in the interruption or removal of a character's speech, however, it is still possible to read this as silence on the part of the narrative voice, if not as an active silencing of the character. While Rosaler and O'Donoghue primarily speak of silence in the sense of ›being silent‹, referring to those who let others speak, or to that which is not narrated, we may also consider the act of ›silencing‹, where silence is forced by one subject upon another. This can be achieved through different means, some of which are more readily visible than others. For instance, while interruption is usually marked out clearly

in a text, the removal of speech emerges only when comparing two or more versions of the same story.

In this section, I focus on ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹, which details the life of the Icelandic poet (*skáld*) Sneglu-Halli at the court of King Haraldr Sigurðsson of Norway. The story features Sneglu-Halli's adventures, including his ongoing dispute with another Icelander, Haraldr's court poet Þjóðólfr. The narrative is transmitted in the compilations Flateyjarbók (F) and Morkinskinna (M), but the two versions differ substantially in length, with the final chapters of F missing in M. The differences in the narrative voice between the two versions have been discussed, among others, by Stefanie Gropper (2021) and Anna Katharina Heiniger (2022). Gropper (2021, pp. 90–92) concludes that F focuses on displaying Sneglu-Halli's cunning wit and mischievous nature, foregrounding his place in the court's social hierarchy, while M emphasises his poetic skills in an intellectual hierarchy involving Haraldr and Þjóðólfr. Conversely, Heiniger (2022, p. 119) analyses the quantity and categories of the narrative comments in each version of the story. She concludes that each version shows a different focus in its narration: F structures the story like a saga, with the narrative voice more active in using comments and evaluations to orientate the audience, while M incorporates more scenic detail in ways that represent the story's themes more dynamically (Heiniger 2022, p. 125).

This indicates a difference across versions in how comments are used by the narrative voice, and raises the question of whether this points to a potential form of silence observable only through comparison. In terms of the numbers, there are more comments in later chapters and in F in general (Heiniger 2022, pp. 121 and 124). In addition, there are differences in style; the narrative voices may fall or stay silent at different points in the story. Some of these instances are best read simply as differences between versions, rather than silencing, but others are more ambiguous. Finally, it is notable that the narrative voice in each version does not stay silent, but actively silences Sneglu-Halli's main opponent, Þjóðólfr.

Differences between versions often involve the omission of information, which is common in references to characters or timeframes. But this does not necessarily entail a form of narrative silence, and can instead be understood as a restructuring of the story's focus. For example, the varying descriptions of the character Túta and the king's armour, named ›Emma‹, in ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹ show the different interests pursued in each case by the narrative voice. When one of Haraldr's servants, Túta, is fitted into the king's armour, M introduces the armour as *brynjuna Emmu* (ÍF 9, p. 269, M; ›the armour Emma‹, my translation), while F adds more background information, giving not only the armour's name, but also its origins (*er hann* [konungr] *kallaði Emmu; hann hafði látit gera hana í Miklagarði*, ÍF 9, p. 269–270, F; ›which he [the king] called Emma. He had had it made in Byzantium‹, CSI 1, p. 345). Similarly, the description of the dwarf Túta is structured differently in each version. F begins with his appearance (*dvergr einn er Túta hét, hann var frískr at ætt,* ÍF 9, p. 269, F; ›a dwarf called Túta, he was Frisian by descent‹, CSI 1, p. 345), while M mentions his origin first (*frískr maðr* […] *lágr sem dvergr ok digr,* ÍF 9, p. 269, M; ›a Frisian man […] short as a dwarf and fat‹, my translation). Additionally, the dating of events is changed from one version to the other. The main escalation between the two poets, which I return to later, occurs on *jólaaptann* in M (ÍF 9, p. 275, M; ›the eve of Yule‹, my translation), but in F, it is simply said to take place *einn dag* (ÍF 9, p. 275, F; ›one day‹, CSI 1, p. 347). In M, the staging of competing poetic abilities is more central to how the story is told, so it makes sense that the poets' competition is set on a specific date; in F, where this element of the text is foregrounded less strongly, it becomes one event among others. Interestingly, a different adventure, Halli's confrontation with the character Einarr, is dated to Yule in F (*Einarr kemr at jólunum*, ÍF 9, p. 282, F; ›Einarr came that Yule‹, CSI 1, p. 350), but not in M. It is not especially productive to consider these differences in the timeframe of the story, as well as the variation in the descriptions of objects and servants, as a form of narrative silence. They can

be more easily attributed to structural decisions that make sense in the context of each version, reflecting the interest in poetic ability in M and the more adventurous storyline narrated in F.

In some cases, however, differences between versions can be seen both as structural decisions and as potential silences. A notable example is the introduction of the protagonist, Halli, and his opponent, Þjóðólfr. In each version, Halli is described similarly, though the description in M focuses on his poetic skill and directness (*hann var skáld ok foryfldisk heldr fás í orðum sínum*, ÍF 9, p. 263, M; ›he was a poet and rather refrained from decorating his words‹, my translation), and that in F focuses on his appearance and family ties (*skáld gott ok orðgreppr mikill. Halli var hár maðr ok hálslangr herðilítill ok handsíðr ok ljótlimaðr; hann var ættaðr ór Fljótum*, ÍF 9, p. 264, F; ›good poet and a very impudent person. He was a tall man, long-necked, with narrow shoulders and long arms and was rather ill-proportioned. His family was from Fljót‹, CSI 1, p. 342). As Halli is the protagonist, it is to be expected that more narrative attention is devoted to him. Yet the introduction of Þjóðólfr differs substantially across versions. While M mentions him only in passing as part of the *hirð*, the king's retinue (*þar var ok Þjóðólfr skáld með konungi ok þotti vera nökkvat öfundsjúkr við þá menn er kvamu til hirðarinnar*, ÍF 9, p. 266, M; ›the poet Þjóðólfr, too, was with the king and he seemed to be somewhat jealous of those men who came to the court‹, my translation), F introduces Þjóðólfr first, and in more detail (*hann var íslenzkr og ættaðr ór Svarfaðardal, kurteiss maðr ok skáld mikit* […] *kallaði konungr hann höfuðskáld sitt ok virði hann mest allra skálda*, ÍF 9, p. 263, F; ›He was an Icelander whose family came from Svarfaðardal. He was a well-mannered man and a great poet […] The king called him his chief poet and honoured him above all his other poets‹, CSI 1, p. 342).[22] The variation of Þjóðólfr's introduction changes the audience's perception of him. His cursory introduction in M, in contrast to the lengthy description of F, signals to the audience that he is not as important as Halli. This is surprising in light of M's focus on poetic ability, as Gropper (2021,

pp. 90–92) has shown. Consequently, Þjóðólfr does not seem like a significant threat or opponent for Halli, which reinforces Halli's standing as the protagonist.

In another episode, both poets are saved from public embarrassment when confronted with past mistakes, namely the composition of their first poems ›Kolluvísur‹ and ›Soðtrogsvísur‹, by the silence of the narrative voice. King Haraldr orders them to recite the verses, but in each case, the narrative voice only mentions the performance instead of quoting the poetry (*svá var nú gört at þeir kveða kvæðin*, ÍF 9, p. 277, M; ›it was then done so, that they performed the poems‹, my translation; *kvað þá hvárr sitt kvæði*, ÍF 9, p. 277, F; ›then each of them performed his poem‹, CSI 1, p. 348). As the king proclaims afterwards, the poems are not of particularly high quality, meaning that the narrative silence serves to preserve their reputations. Esteemed poets being shown reciting bad poems would not only do damage to their image, but would also weaken the story's capacity to showcase their poetic abilities. The silence in regard to the poems could be read as paranarratable, in the sense that the poetry has been deemed unfit for a narrative of this type.

Comparing the versions of the *þáttr* thus highlights differences that may be read as creating certain kinds of narrative silence, but it is also important to consider the more active silencing of Þjóðólfr in each version. While both versions downplay Þjóðólfr's voice and his presence at court, they do so in different ways, which showcase a variety of narrative strategies being used to highlight Halli's superiority in comparison with his principal antagonist. One episode, in particular, stands out. After Halli gets into a disagreement with the king about porridge, he throws down his cutlery in annoyance. In F, the narrative voice describes Þjóðólfr's reaction, which is to compose a verse (*Þjóðólfr kvað þá þetta*, ÍF 9, p. 273, F; ›Then Þjóðólfr recited this‹, CSI 1, p. 346). As the narrative does not contain many verses by Þjóðólfr, this instance is notable for being a rare showcase of his skaldic abilities. Yet the scene is treated differently in M, where the verse is attributed not to

Þjóðólfr, but to Halli himself (*þá kvað Halli þetta,* ÍF 9, p. 273, M; ›then Halli recited this‹, my translation). Þjóðólfr is downgraded in a narrative sense from a skilled *skáld*, reflecting his role as the court poet, to a passive witness, whose reaction to the poem is recorded only indirectly by the narrative voice (*ok þykkir Þjóðólfi þetta hlœgligt er Halli hefir til tekit*, ÍF 9, p. 273, M; ›and Þjóðólfr found this ridiculous what Halli had done‹, my translation). Similarly, in another scene, Halli composes a verse for the king about his servant Túta. While it is implied in F that the rest of the *hirð* are present while Halli talks with Haraldr, Þjóðólfr's presence is silenced in that he is not mentioned by name, and thus is not distinguished from the anonymous crowd of the *hirð*, despite the discussion involving poetry. In M, however, his opinion on Halli's verse is mentioned (*Þjóðólfi fannsk fátt um*, ÍF 9, p. 271, M; ›Þjóðólfr did not think much of it‹, my translation), though here Þjóðólfr is still reduced to the role of spectator. At the start of the previously mentioned skaldic contest, where Halli and Þjóðólfr recite the poems they composed in Iceland, the narrative voice of F comments that *þar var þá Þjóðólfr ok mart annarra manna* (ÍF 9, p. 275, F; ›Þjóðólfr and many other people were there‹, CSI 1, p. 347). In M, however, it is the king who reveals the court poet's presence to the audience, as he turns to Þjóðólfr and asks him *›eða hvat sýnisk þér ráð, Þjóðólfr?‹* (ÍF 9, p. 276, M; »or what do you advise, Þjóðólfr?«, my translation).[23] Even though Þjóðólfr plays an important role in both versions in the poetic contest that follows, his presence is more of an afterthought in M, where it is left to the king to address him, in contrast to F, where the narrative voice mentions him first. Though the direction of silencing is not consistent across versions, with each downplaying Þjóðólfr's presence more at different times, the comparison between the versions foregrounds how he is silenced by the narrative voice in each case, with his status and role incrementally diminished in contrast to Halli's prominence at the centre of the narrative.

The silencing of characters goes a step further than other forms of silence. In each version, the narrative voice's focus on showcasing Halli and

his qualities leads to other characters actively being diminished or sidelined, but the reduction of Þjóðólfr's role in the text by the narrative voice, albeit in different ways, becomes clear only when the two versions are compared. The silencing of Þjóðólfr by the narrative voice does not fit the categories suggested by Rosaler and O'Donoghue, presumably because these two scholars focus on silence as passive reaction rather than an active intention. When a character chooses to fall silent, as Brandr does, this can open up new interpretative possibilities, both within and outside the story. By contrast, the active silencing of a character puts them at the mercy of the narrative voice, as the diminution of Þjóðólfr indicates. Despite his status as court poet, his narrative presence is downplayed in favour of the protagonist Halli, to the extent that even the poetry attributed to Þjóðólfr in one version of the text is assigned to Halli in the other.

4. Conclusion: The effect of silence on the recipient

›Silence‹ and ›silencing‹ are found on all levels of narration. The narrative voice can become silent when it apparently withholds an interpretation or evaluation of a certain event, instead inviting the audience to draw their own conclusions. A character falling silent can function as a marker for the audience to listen closely for additional nuances. On the other hand, silencing is characterised by the narrative voice downplaying the action or speech of a character, which is particularly apparent when multiple versions of a text exist.

This paper presented three case studies to showcase the versatility of how silence is used by the narrative voice in Old Norse texts, specifically the *þættir*. The analysis shows that silence appears in various ways on different narrative levels. There is a more evident form of silence when characters or the narrative voice do not comment on the plot; there is implicit silence when the narrative voice does not provide information itself, but allows

characters to speak instead; and there is the possibility of an active silencing of character voices when a narrative exists in two or more versions. The resulting effects are different: implicit silence leads to a highlighting of the omitted information, while active silencing attempts to direct and structure the audience's perception. The use of different silences also influences the audience in various ways. As O'Donoghue argues, the construction of silence can lead to heightened engagement with the narration and its context, prompting the audience to discussion and debate, and it also opens up another level of enjoyment for the narrative, as the audience's focus is shifted from the events of the story itself to the values and themes it incorporates. For instance, in the case of ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹, the question becomes not whether the polar bear actually exists, as Geitir claims, but rather whom the audience can trust.

The findings of the analysis suggests that the categories put forth by Rosaler and O'Donoghue are only partially adaptable to the *þættir*. While we can see in the *þættir* the hesitation of the narrative voice to report on paranormal encounters, as O'Donoghue observes, in the case of ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹, how paranormal events are narrated is dependent on their context in the story. In addition, the narrative voice sometimes keeps silent to displace responsibility. In terms of the different types of narratability suggested by Rosaler, it can be difficult to classify moments of silence in the *þættir* as categorised as supranarratable. It is not always possible to decide whether the gaps that indicate silence occur as a result of the normalness of the omitted events, and while we would expect the supranarratable to be indicated by comments on its unnarratability, such comments do not appear in the texts. Nor is there a common pattern indicating that these instances of silence are of a paranarratable nature. But the term antinarratable may be useful when looking at these examples in terms of certain social or narrative taboos. The appearance of the *fylgjur*, the discussion of exposure, or open criticism of a king's behaviour all have the potential to

activate one of these taboos, a tension that can be resolved only through narrative silence, which creates gaps to be filled by the audience.

In terms of future research, the analysis presented in this article suggests that there is more to do in terms of investigating the use of active silencing by the narrative voice in the Old Norse sagas and *þættir*. These ideas should prompt us to look more closely into instances where we seem to have narratorial gaps or abrupt changes, where we appear to receive too little or too much explanation, which in turn creates ambiguities around what has just been narrated. The difficulty for us, as modern readers, lies in locating the passages where the narrative voice can be said to use silence intentionally for creating specific literary effects.

Notes

1 This paper was originally presented under the title »Fylgði þér einn hvítabjarnarhúnn: The Mystery behind the Polar Bear in ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹«, at the 14th International Postgraduate Symposium in Old Norse Studies, Bergen, 17–20 April 2023. My thanks go to Stefanie Gropper, Anna Katharina Heiniger, Rebecca Merkelbach and Alexander Wilson for their feedback on earlier versions of this article.

2 Silence has been studied in various fields, see Bao (2023), Santos (2023), Magnusson et al. (2023), Dingli/Cooke (2019). It is part of all aspects of human interaction and its culture (Schnyder 2003, p. 32).

3 Wolfgang Iser (1984, pp. 284–285) also mentions the idea of gaps in the narrative, which the reader closes with their imagination.

4 Rosaler (2016, pp. 7–8) bases her categorization on Warhol (2006), but takes a critical stance.

5 Rosaler (2016, p. 8) sees this critically since it partly invalidates the other categories: if something is seen as sub- or antinarratable in one text, it may simply be paranarratable in other contexts.

6 Other studies of silence and silent characters in Old Norse studies include Goeres (2014) and Jakobsson et al. (2020). O'Donoghue (2021, pp. 120, 130, 154) distinguishes more types of silent narrator than presented here, such as the impas-

sive narrator, who describes violent events without judgement, and the conspicuously silent narrator, who discloses information only after a certain amount of time.

7 This distinction of narrative voice and other voices has been supported by others, e.g. Merkelbach (2017).

8 For a discussion of the characters' silence in courtly literature, see Schnyder (2003).

9 On the transmission and compilation of the *þættir*, see Rowe (2017, p. 158).

10 While early research focused on defining and interpreting the corpus of *þættir* (Rowe 2005, Würth 1991), more recent research discusses the question of genre in relation to the term *þáttr* (e.g. Rowe 2020, p. 260). Other studies, such as Thomas Morcom's (2020) doctoral dissertation, look into the connections between the *þættir* and their interweaving into the sagas with which they are transmitted.

11 See for a more thorough analysis of Brand's silence, Morcom 2020, p. 55.

12 The following translations are taken from the edition ›The Complete Sagas of Icelanders‹ (= CSI). Translations, emendations, or additions in square brackets, as well as the translation of the Morkinskinna version of ›Sneglu-Halla þáttr‹, are my own.

13 Brandr is not the only silent character in saga literature or the *þættir*; Melkorka in ›Laxdœla saga‹ (ÍF 5) and Oddný in ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹ are also silent, though for different reasons. An interesting analysis of Oddný's inability to speak and her character is found in Ármann Jakobsson et al. (2020, p. 451), which also comments on Melkorka who, in contrast to Oddný, is not unable to speak since birth, but explicitly chooses not to talk or to speak a different language than her captors (p. 452).

14 In ›Gísla saga Súrssonar‹, for instance, the silence of the extradiegetic narrative voice and the intradiegetic characters concerning Vésteinn's death leads to the killings of Þorgrímr Freysgoði and others. The narrative voice describes the murder of Vésteinn without disclosing the identity of the murderer: *Nú er gengit inn nökkut fyrir lýsing, hljóðliga, ok þangat at, sem Vésteinn hvílir. Hann var þá vaknaðr.* […] *Ok því næst gekk maðrinn út. En Vésteinn vildi upp standa. Í því fellr hann niðr fyrir stokkinn dauðr* (ÍF 6, pp. 43–44; ›Then someone comes in a little before dawn, quietly, and goes over to where Vestein is lying. He had woken up then. […] And then the man went out. Vestein tried to stand up; but he fell beside the bed, dead‹, OS, p. 22). The narrative voice may not know who killed Vésteinn because it was dark, but this should have no influence on an

extradiegetic function, or it might know what happened and choose not to disclose this information. The latter kind of silence can be seen as explicit, since the narrative voice does actively not tell the audience the answer. In the aftermath, the silence of the characters merges with that of the narrative voice: neither discloses who they think the killer is. The only sign the audience receives of the characters' suspicions are their actions, which culminate in Þorgrímr's death and Gísli's outlawry. O'Donoghue (2021, p. 167) analyses this scene and its consequences, as well as its relation to ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, which names Þorgrímr as the culprit. She argues that the narrative voice withholds this information to allow the audience to experience »living in a tightly knit [...] community in which theft or murder is such a dangerous threat to the stability of society« (p. 171).

15 Thomas Morcom (2020, p. 58) offers another explanation for the tension and the conflict's resolution through the king's interpretation, suggesting that »the conventional social hierarchy is disrupted, with Brandr and Haraldr facing off as rival figures of regal authority«. This hierarchy is then reinstated with Haraldr's judgment of Brandr's gesture (p. 60).

16 Ívarr plays a prominent role in another short story, ›Sörla þáttr‹ (Flat 1, pp. 275–283).

17 See e.g. Rowe/Harris (2005, p. 475), Rowe (2004). The trolls of ›Þorsteins þáttr uxafóts‹ are mentioned in Sävborg (2018, esp. p. 199).

18 Ármann Jakobsson et al. (2020, p. 453; citing Waugh 2017, p. 239) agree on this reading.

19 For example, by Else Mundal (1974, p. 55), who describes it as »det mest morsame av dyrefylgjemotiva i sagalitteraturen« (›the funniest of the animal *fylgja* motifs in saga literature‹; my translation).

20 The discussion about what exactly the paranormal in sagas is and how it can be defined, extends the scope of this article. Instead, I refer to Sävborg/Bek-Pedersen 2018 and Ármann Jakobsson 2017.

21 Concerning the description of the trolls, see ÍF 13, p. 359; for the first appearance of the bull, see ÍF 13, p. 367.

22 Similarly, it can be observed with King Haraldr. M introduces him in a closing sentence (*þar var Haraldr konungr er orðum skipti við Halla*, ÍF 9, p. 266, M; ›there was King Haraldr who exchanged words with Halli‹, my translation). In F he is described in the first chapter, which is not transmitted in M, as *allra manna vitrastr ok ráðgastr* [...] *Hann var skáld gott. Jafnan kastaði hann háðyrðum at þeim mönnum, er honum sýndisk* (ÍF 9, p. 263, F; ›a very wise and very

shrewd man [...] He was a good poet and always mocked whoever he pleased‹, CSI 1, p. 342).

23 The king also addresses Þjóðólfr in this way in F, but his presence there has already been acknowledged by the narrative voice.

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Alexander Wilson

Authenticating Voices?

Diegesis and Stanza Quotation in the *Íslendingasögur*

Abstract. Stanzas in saga prosimetrum are often differentiated as authenticating stanzas, quoted by the narrative voice to evidence the prose account, and situational stanzas, spoken by characters as part of the plot. Yet in implying that only some types of stanza quotation authenticate events, the dichotomy conflates two questions: the narrative function of the stanza, and who speaks it in the text. I propose a new model based on diegetic level, which more accurately describes how sagas quote stanzas. I then analyse other functions of extradiegetic quotation in the *Íslendingasögur*, showing how it is used to control poetic voices, preserve narrative momentum, and construct complex forms of metalepsis.

1. Introduction

Many Old Norse sagas are prosimetric, in that they mix poetic and prose forms to some degree.[1] This prosimetrum typically takes the form of skaldic poetry, composed in the ninth to eleventh centuries (or presented as such), being preserved in prose texts that narrate events of the earlier period associated with the poetry, but which were themselves written later in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As Judy Quinn (1997, p. 61) points out, this means that saga prosimetrum »almost invariably […] involves the quotation of poetry«, in the sense that poetry that predates the written saga, and which was already in circulation via oral tradition, is embedded within the prose framework. Such quotation could encompass a single *lausavísa*

(›standalone stanza‹),[2] a short sequence of stanzas, or even the inclusion of a long poem, such as Egill Skalla-Grímsson's ›Höfuðlausn‹. The extent to which sagas are prosimetric varies across subgenres and texts, but in the subgenre of *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas), twenty-six texts (about two-thirds) contain at least one stanza, and at least twenty have five or more (Nordal 2007, pp. 220–221).

Scholars have conventionally divided the stanzas quoted in the sagas into two categories: those cited by the narrative voice as evidence corroborating the prose account, and those incorporated into the story itself as direct speech, spoken by the characters. Various terms have been used for this dichotomy; I refer to the categories as authenticating and situational verses, following the terminology coined by Diana Whaley (1993), which is common in contemporary scholarship.[3] While this distinction has been promoted as a means of tracing the textual development of saga literature (Males 2020), as well as assessing the usefulness of the sagas as historical sources, it has come under scrutiny in recent years from academics working in both literary and historical studies. As I argue in this article, the distinction, especially the idea that only certain kinds of stanza quotation can authenticate events, conflates two distinct questions about poetic quotation in the sagas: the narrative function that a particular stanza has in a saga, and the narrative level on which it is embedded. The term ›authenticating‹ derives from the idea that such stanzas have a primarily evidentiary function – but, as discussed below, these stanzas are typically identified grouped together not because of the reliability of their content, but by h o w they are embedded in the prose. By contrast, situational stanzas are defined only by the fact that they are integrated into the representation of narrative events within the plot of the saga. Nothing is explicitly stated about their function, but the dichotomy implies that, unlike authenticating stanzas, they are not used to evidence the prose account.

In this article, I suggest an alternative conceptual framework that facilitates literary analysis of this facet of the sagas. I begin by discussing how

the authenticating–situational paradigm has been applied to skaldic quotation in the sagas and previous critiques of how this model has been used. I then outline the narratological concept of diegetic level, which I suggest is better suited for characterising how verses are embedded in prose without making claims about the poetry's broader narrative function. I argue that focusing on diegetic level in itself, rather than conflating it with questions of narrative function, facilitates more accurate analysis of the textual strategies adopted by saga writers for embedding poetry into their narratives. In the final section, I outline the varieties of extradiegetic quotation used in the *Íslendingasögur*, including those edge-cases that do not fit easily into the authenticating–situational model.

2. The authenticating–situational paradigm

Saga scholars have distinguished between poetry quoted as evidence and poetry woven into the events of the narrative since at least Alois Wolf's (1965) article on the role of skaldic quotation in the sagas, with a focus on the subgenres of the *Íslendingasögur* and the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas).[4] Bjarni Einarsson (1974, pp. 118–119) differentiates these kinds of quotation by how essential the verses are to the plot:

> It follows that a reader of a saga cannot omit stanzas of the latter kind [i. e. situational verses, A. W.] without damage to his understanding of the context as a whole. On the other hand, stanzas quoted as evidence [i. e. authenticating verses, A. W.] may be leapt over without loss to the story told, but certainly not without impairing the artistic enjoyment of the work in question, because these stanzas are not mere footnotes, but have also their artistic value.

In other words, situational verses are spoken by characters within the narrative, and are thus to be read as plot elements. By contrast, authenticating verses are not staged as being performed within the story, but are presented as if they were spoken by the narrative voice. They are thus distanced from

narrative events, even though they implicitly originate in the saga's story-world, hence why Bjarni regards such stanzas as inessential to the plot, if not to the telling of the story.

This modern distinction – which, as we will see, does not appear in the medieval sources – is often associated with the different ways in which the stanzas are introduced in saga prose. It is common for formulas such as *þá kvað N. N. vísu* (›then [the poet] recited a verse‹) to be used when a character in the story speaks a verse, while formulas like *svá segir N.N.* (›as [the poet] says‹) or *þessa getr N. N. í vísu* (›[the poet] mentions this in a verse‹) frame the poetry as being quoted by the narrative voice; I refer to these formulas as ›inquits‹.[5] Inquits of the former type are necessarily situational, following the modern distinction, in that they locate the performance of the poetry within the story, while the latter formulas are seen as key indicators that a stanza is being presented as evidence and can therefore be termed authenticating.[6] The distinction is clear in two examples from ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹, which uses formulas of each type. Each passage quotes poetry attributed to Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, one of the protagonists, but while the first stanza is spoken by Þormóðr as a character, the second is quoted by the narrative voice:

> *Þeir spyrja, hvárt hann hefði unnit á Þorgrími. Hann kvað þat satt vera. Þeir spurðu hann tíðenda eða hversu mikill vera myndi áverkinn. Þormóðr kvað þá vísu:* [Fbr, st. 23][7] (ÍF 6, p. 234, emphasis added)

> They ask whether he had killed Þorgrímr. He said it was true. They asked him for news [of it] and how great the blow had been. Then Þormóðr recited a verse: [Fbr, st. 23] (emphasis added)

> *Þau urðu endalok þessa fundar, at Þorbrandr fell fyrir Þorgeiri, en Ingólfr fyrir Þormóði. Tveir menn fellu af liði Þorgeirs. Húskarlar Ingólfs urðu sárir mjök, þess at þó batnar þeim. Þessa getr Þormóðr í erfidrápu Þorgeirs:* [Fbr, st. 3] (ÍF 6, p. 139, emphasis added)

> This was the conclusion of their meeting, that Þorbrandr fell before Þorgeirr and Ingólfr before Þormóðr. Two men fell from Þorgeirr's troop. Ingólfr's housecarls were seriously wounded, but they recover nonetheless. Þormóðr mentions this in his funerary poem for Þorgeirr: [Fbr, st. 3] (emphasis added)

In the first instance, the stanza is presented as part of a conversation, with Þormóðr reciting the poetry as a response to his companions asking him about how he killed Þorgrímr. In the second passage, the stanza is clearly distinct from the diegetic context: it is associated with a funerary poem composed by Þormóðr about his sworn-brother Þorgeirr, but Þorgeirr is still alive at this point in the saga, and will not be killed until several chapters later. The verse is best understood as being quoted on the level of narration as a means of corroborating the prose account.

It is commonly held that authenticating verses are typical of the *konungasögur*, the genre of historical texts centred on the kings of Norway, and situational verses of the *Íslendingasögur*.[8] Medieval discussions of the evidentiary function of poetry also focus on the *konungasögur*, usually in the form of prefaces to these works. A particularly extensive discussion, quoted below in part, can be found in the prologue to ›Óláfs saga ins Helga inni sérstöku‹ (›The Separate Saga of Óláfr helgi‹):

> *En þó þykki mér þat merkiligast til sannenda, er berum orðum er sagt í kvæðum eða öðrum kveðskap, þeim er svá var ort um konunga eða aðra höfðingja, at þeir sjálfir heyrðu, eða í erfikvæðum þeim, er skáldin færðu sonum þeira. Þau orð, er í kveðskap standa, eru in sömu sem í fyrstu váru, ef rétt er kveðit, þótt hverr maðr hafi síðan numit at öðrum, ok má því ekki breyta. En sögu þær, er sagðar eru, þá er þat hætt, at eigi skilisk öllum á einn veg. En sumir hafa eigi minni, þá er frá líðr, hvernig þeim var sagt, ok gengsk þeim mjök í minni optliga, ok verða frásagnir ómerkiligar. Þar var meirr en tvau hundruð vetra tólfrœð, er Ísland var byggt, áðr menn tœki hér sögur at rita, ok var þat löng ævi ok vant, at sögur hefði eigi gengizk í munni, ef eigi væri kvæði, bæði ný ok forn, þau er menn tœki þar af sannendi frœðinnar.* (ÍF 26–28, vol. 2, p. 422)

> And yet that seems to me most noteworthy as far as accuracy is concerned which is said in plain words in poems or other verse that was composed about kings or other rulers so that they themselves heard them, or in memorial poems that the poets presented to their sons. The words that stand in verse will be the same as they were to begin with, if it is constructed correctly, though each person has later learned it from someone else, and it cannot be altered. But as for the stories that are told, with them there is the danger that they will not be understood by everyone in the same way. But some have no memory, when time has passed, of how they were told to them, and frequently they change a great deal in their memory, and the accounts become meaningless. It was more than two duodecimal hundred [i. e. 240, A.W.] years that Iceland had been settled before people began to write stories here, and this was a long period, and impossible for stories not to have changed in oral tradition if there had not been poems, both recent and old, from which people could obtain accurate history. (Snorri Sturluson 2014, pp. 280–281)

In contrast to the more malleable stories of oral tradition, poetry is conceptualised here as an enduring link to the past precisely because of its strict poetic form, which the preface claims cannot be altered as long as the poem is correctly composed.[9] It is worth noting, however, that while the passage presents poetry as plausible documentation for historical events, it does not associate this capacity exclusively, or even predominantly, with stanzas cited by the narrative voice, as the modern distinction would have it.

In this sense, the modern distinction between authenticating and situational verses is not equally weighted. The term ›authenticating‹ strongly implies a particular narrative function for the stanza – that is, to corroborate the prose account – while the broader concept of ›situational‹ verses refers only to how stanzas are presented in the text. While it is true that verses introduced with formulas like *svá segir* N. N. have an evidentiary function in most cases, to refer to them as authenticating stanzas implies that poetry must be quoted using such formulas for it to have a documentary function. Presumably this is why Mikael Males (2020, p. 216) suggests that the »near absence« of these formulas in the *Íslendingasögur* indicates

that »the historical veracity of such local lore was not deemed to be of crucial importance«, an interpretation that assumes stanzas spoken within the narrative play little to no role in corroborating the prose.[10] Similarly, while Bjarni notes that authenticating verses also have artistic value (see above), he associates the use of poetry as evidence exclusively with this form of stanza quotation.

As Margaret Clunies Ross (2005, p. 78) observes, however, no skaldic stanza as it existed in oral tradition was inherently authenticating or situational, because these terms are relevant only for discussing how stanzas were subsequently integrated into saga prose:

> The reason why the opposition of ›authenticating‹ and ›situational‹ verses is somewhat fuzzy [...] is that this distinction is what one can call a second-order distinction, that is, it is a perception of difference in the use of skaldic stanzas by saga writers and other prose authors and not necessarily a distinction valid for the poetry itself as it existed in the oral tradition. (emphasis in the original)

Indeed, some stanzas are presented either as authenticating or as situational depending on the context in which they are quoted. In ›Grettis saga‹, for instance, the outlaw Grettir is saved from execution by the intervention of Þorbjörg in digra, the wife of the chieftain Vermundr inn mjóvi. Grettir later recounts the episode to Vermundr in a series of stanzas (Gr, stt. 39–42; ÍF 7, pp. 170–172), in which the verses are framed as situational responses to Vermundr's questions. Yet the third of these stanzas is also preserved in the *Möðruvallabók* version of ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹ (Fbr, st. 1; ÍF 6, p. 122), where it concludes an abbreviated version of the episode.[11] In ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹, Vermundr does not appear as a character in this chapter, and the stanza is quoted without a specific performance context; the saga says only that *af þessum atburð kvað Grettir kviðling þenna* (ÍF 6, p. 122; ›Grettir spoke this ditty about these events‹).[12] The stanza is not inherently authenticating or situational; rather, its narrative function varies depending on how it is quoted across different contexts. We may think of Russell Poole's

(2001, p. 13) concept of a »medieval double vision«, where »the audience of a particular performance of a saga might well have been aware that a verse used there was also to be found embedded in some totally different context, say within a different saga (ascribed to a different poet) or as part of a free-standing poem«, and thus »to work variations on the contexts for verses may have entered into the artistry of saga narration, an artistry that would depend on what we should now call intertextuality«.

As Clunies Ross (2005, pp. 79–80) notes, the decision to incorporate a stanza into the events of the plot need not mean that its content was seen as less suitable for authenticating the prose; instead, there may be compelling stylistic reasons for presenting the poetry in this way. A stanza containing an address to a person featured as a character in the saga, for instance, lends itself to being framed as direct speech, rather than quoted by the narrative voice. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (2001, p. 188) similarly suggests that the role played by a skald as a character would also have influenced whether their poetry was framed as dialogue, with saga protagonists more likely to have their poetry presented as part of the narrative, given their presence in the story.

Forms of stanza quotation can also be influenced by genre conventions, as is apparent from how the ›Máhlíðingavísur‹ (›Verses about the People of Mávahlíð‹) are presented differently in ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, an *Íslendinga-saga*, and the historiographical text ›Landnámabók‹ (›The Book of Settlements‹). The ›Máhlíðingavísur‹ narrate the battle between the poet Þórarinn svarti and his enemy Þorbjörn inn digri at Mávahlíð, Þórarinn's homestead. In ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, the verses are incorporated into the story. Þórarinn speaks the majority of them to Vermundr inn mjóvi the day after the battle; the verses are staged within the narrative as responses to the questions posed by Vermundr and Þórarinn's sister Guðný (Eb, stt. 6–13; ÍF 4, pp. 41–46). The other stanzas are spoken by Þórarinn in conversation with his mother Geirríðr, his wife Auðr, and his kinsman Arnkell (Eb, stt. 3–5, 14–19; ÍF 4, pp. 38–40, 47–50, 56). By contrast, ›Landnámabók‹

gives a much abridged summary of the events and quotes only a single stanza, which is framed as being spoken by the narrative voice:

> *Hans son var Þorbjörn hinn digri, er barðisk við Þórarin svarta ok fell sjálfr ok þrír menn með honum. Um þat orti Þórarinn Máhlíðingavísur, eptir því sem segir í Eyrbyggja sögu. Þessi er ein:* [Eb, st. 11] (ÍF 1, pp. 113 and 115)
>
> His son was Þorbjörn inn digri, who fought with Þórarinn svarti, and he himself fell and three men with him. Þórarinn composed the ›Máhlíðingavísur‹ about that, according to what it says in ›Eyrbyggja saga‹. This is one [of the verses]: [Eb, st. 11]

In ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, which focuses on these events in more detail, it makes sense for the verses to be staged within the narrative, as they contribute both to Þórarinn's characterisation and the building of suspense as he assembles allies in anticipation of a violent response. In addition, as Paul Bibire (1973, pp. 10–12) notes, the integration of the stanzas into various conversational contexts means the poetry can be incorporated into the narrative without halting the progression of the plot, as would happen were the poem to be quoted in full. By contrast, in ›Landnámabók‹, which covers a large number of events and genealogies from early Icelandic history, it is rarer for a single episode to receive as much narrative attention as it would in a saga. For its concise summary of events, it is enough that a single stanza of the ›Máhlíðingavísur‹ be quoted without a detailed performance context.

Given that the verse is used in ›Landnámabók‹ as evidence, it is also worth questioning whether the narrative integration of the ›Máhlíðingavísur‹ in ›Eyrbyggja saga‹ should preclude the poem from also having a documentary function in that context. Indeed, Þórarinn recites the poem to the household as evidence for the events of the battle. His presence as a character complicates matters, as his poetic performance influences subsequent events and reflects his motivations as a character within the story, but should this additional context mean that the poetry is stripped of its capacity to authenticate events when embedded within the story? We also

see this dynamic in the earlier example of a situational verse from ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹, which Þormóðr speaks as a response to his friends asking him how he killed his enemy Þorgrímr trolli: *Þeir spurðu hann tíðenda eða hversu mikill vera myndi áverkinn. Þormóðr kvað þá vísu*: [Fbr, st. 23] (ÍF 6, p. 234: ›They asked him for news [of the killing] and how great the blow had been. Then Þormóðr recited a verse: [Fbr, st. 23]‹). As with Þórarinn's recital, the verse necessarily gives Þormóðr's subjective experience of these events, but it is nevertheless staged as having been performed in order to provide evidence for what happened earlier in the narrative, albeit not primarily for the extratextual audience.

Finally, the distinction between authenticating and situational verses struggles to account for instances of stanza quotation where a verse is mentioned in relation to the story, but the poetry is quoted by the narrative voice, rather than spoken by the character(s) to which it is attributed. Heather O'Donoghue (2005, p. 58) characterises such stanzas as being »composed in response to a narrative situation, but not presented as dialogue in the saga narrative«. She notes that one of Whaley's (1993, p. 254) own examples of a situational stanza – a *níðvísa* (›insulting verse‹) composed about the Danish king and his steward, in response to events detailed in the saga – is in fact not presented as being spoken within the narrative:

> *Þat var í lögum haft á Íslandi, at yrkja skyldi um Danakonung níðvísu fyrir nef, hvert er á var landinu, en sú var sök til at skip, þat er íslenzkir menn áttu braut í Danmörk, en Danir tóku upp fé allt ok kölluðu vágrek ok réð fyrir bryti konungs, er Birgir hét. Var níð ort um þá báða. Þetta er í níðinu:* [...] (ÍF 26–28, vol. 1, p. 270, emphasis added)

> It was made law in Iceland that an insulting verse should be composed about the king of the Danes for every nose [i.e. every person, A. W.] that was in the country, and the reason for this was that a ship that Icelandic men owned was wrecked in Denmark, and the Danes appropriated all the goods and claimed it was flotsam, and it was the king's steward called Birgir who was responsible for this. The insult was composed about them both. This is in the insult: [...] (Snorri Sturluson 2016, p. 167, emphasis added)

In this example, the prose details the circumstances behind the stanza's composition: that the *níðvísa* was composed about both the king and his steward, that it stemmed from an incident in which Icelandic cargo was apparently wrongly appropriated, and that the stanza was part of a larger insult, perhaps an assemblage of similar verses. The verse is not a detached witness, but an integral part of the episode, which concerns the composition of this poetry. Yet the stanza is not staged in the narrative: no performance context is given, and its quotation by the narrative voice is indicated by the introductory formula *þetta er í níðinu*, which is comparable to others used by the narrative voice elsewhere in the sagas to curate the quotation of verse – apparently to reaffirm the narrative authority of the prose account by constraining how much of the poetry is quoted (Quinn 1997, esp. pp. 67–70). As the above example shows, it is possible for poetry to be attributed to a figure in the story, but actually quoted by the narrative voice.[13]

There are thus a number of issues that arise when characterising verses quoted in the sagas as authenticating or situational. In particular, it is notable that several uses of this framework focus on the content of the poetry itself, rather than the activity of the saga writers who chose how to use it. In fact, the content of a stanza seems to have been less important in determining its quotation in saga prose than broader stylistic and generic motivations, as is apparent from those instances in which the same verse is quoted differently across distinct literary contexts.

3. Diegetic level and saga prosimetrum

The issues outlined in the previous section suggest a need for an alternative approach to verse quotation in the sagas, one that does not conflate the separate inquiries concerning, on the one hand, how poetry is integrated into the prose account and, on the other, the narrative functions of quoted stan-

zas. In my view, narratology offers more suitable terminology for characterising how stanzas are quoted without ascribing them an inherent narrative function. As noted above, Bjarni Einarsson (1974) distinguishes authenticating and situational stanzas by how integral they are to the plot, that is, whether or not they are part of the story (rather than the text). The distinction lends itself to being reformulated in terms of diegesis, which concerns whether an element of a text is depicted within the storyworld itself, or is presented as part of the textual apparatus accessible to the audience but not to the characters in the story. The narratological use of the term ›diegesis‹ has a complicated history, especially regarding research in English. In contemporary scholarship, the term is used in two ways: (1) to contrast *mimesis* (showing, imitation, representation) with *diegesis* (telling, narration), a distinction derived from classical philosophy; and (2) to refer to the world in which a story takes place, and by extension to the different narrative (diegetic) levels in the story (Prince 2003, p. 20).[14] Both uses are described by Gérard Genette in his foundational narratological works, though Genette makes a distinction between ›diégésis‹ and ›diégèse‹, referring to the first and second meaning respectively. This distinction is lost on translation into English, where ›diegesis‹ is used for both meanings.[15]

This creates a terminological problem, in that each usage characterises the same element of a text in directly contrasting ways. In the first sense, the term ›diegetic‹ refers to the narrative modes of presenting speech in which the narrator's mediation is foregrounded, in contrast to ›mimetic‹ techniques, which background the role of the narrator (Herman 2009, pp. 183–184). For stanza quotation in the sagas, we could characterise stanzas framed as direct speech, and thus part of the narrative action, as mimetic, and those presented on the level of narration as diegetic. In the second sense, however, the diegesis refers to what happens within the world of the story, rather than on the level of primary narration. This results in stanzas framed as direct speech being classified as diegetic, and those quoted on the level of narration as being outside the diegesis (extradiegetic).

This inconsistency means that a (somewhat arbitrary) decision must be made over which sense of diegesis to prioritise for a particular line of inquiry. In this article, I follow the latter usage, which regards diegesis primarily in terms of narrative level, as this is the meaning that Genette prioritises in his discussion of narrators in ›Narrative Discourse‹ (›Discours du récit‹), a relevant concern for stanza quotation by the narrative voice. This usage also intersects with considerations of storyworld, though the relationship of diegesis to storyworld is not clearly delineated in most scholarship; I return to this issue below.

Genette (1980, pp. 227–231) distinguishes various diegetic levels in relation to the story. Any narrative consists of at least two levels: that of the story being told and that of the level of narration. As Genette puts it, »any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed« (p. 228), in which the first level is that of the primary narrator. Genette refers to this as the extradiegetic level and to events on the secondary level (the primary story narrated) as diegetic. Subsequent levels of diegesis can be introduced by further narratives being embedded within the primary diegesis; these are termed metadiegetic (and meta-metadiegetic, and so on).[16] For Genette, »the narrating instance of a first narrative is [...] extradiegetic by definition«, where this status is separate from the historical or fictional nature of the narrating entity: »We shall not confound extradiegetic with real historical existence, nor diegetic [...] status with fiction« (p. 229). He notes that the terms »designate not individuals, but relative situations and functions«, meaning that individuals are not exclusively diegetic or extradiegetic, but may fulfil functions on different diegetic levels.

In addition to characterising narrators by the level on which they speak, Genette (1980, pp. 243–252) distinguishes between narrators that appear in the story they tell (homodiegetic) and those that do not (heterodiegetic). In the *Íslendingasögur*, the narrative voice is never individuated as a character on the diegetic level, and would thus be classed by Genette as an

extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, that is, »a narrator in the first degree who tells a story he is absent from« (p. 248).[17] Simone Elisabeth Lang (2014) argues that Genette is inconsistent in how he uses the term ›homodiegetic‹, because it is sometimes unclear whether he treats the ›diegesis‹ as referring specifically to the story or more widely to the storyworld. This does not affect the description of the narrative voice in the *Íslendingasögur*, which is not coded as an individuated figure on the diegetic level,[18] but the question of whether diegesis maps onto storyworld is relevant for the extradiegetic quotation of skalds, who may also appear as characters in the story.

A cursory glance at the scholarship indicates that ›the diegesis‹ is often used as a synonym for the wider storyworld of the text, meaning the expansive world projected by the narrative. Lang (2014, pp. 374–384) conflates world and diegesis in her approach. She argues that the distinction between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators »must refer to an ontological [rather than thematic] difference« (p. 374), and suggests that the term homodiegetic refers to elements that belong to the storyworld regardless of whether they appear in the story itself. Yet this conflation misconstrues the relationship between storyworld and diegesis, the latter being a much narrower concept. In fact, the diegesis refers not to the storyworld in its totality, but to the specific depiction of the storyworld; in other words, it encompasses only what we, the audience, are explicitly shown of this world through the lens of the narrative.[19] The term ›extradiegetic‹ conceptualises the level of primary narration as being situated outside the story that it narrates, but this does not mean that it necessarily occurs in an ontologically different world, as Lang's argument would imply. Consider the example of an autobiographical narrative presented as having been produced only after the events narrated. The extradiegetic and diegetic levels are ontologically identical, because the narrator is a character in their own story. What separates these levels is their thematic relationship to the story, that is, whether they are presented as part of events in the narrative

or as part of the external apparatus used to narrate the story. Elements that belong ontologically to the storyworld, but which are not part of the story, are thus heterodiegetic; those that meet both ontological and thematic criteria are homodiegetic. When it comes to stanza quotation in the sagas, skalds are always presented as ontologically part of the storyworld: either explicitly, if they are a character in the story, or implicitly, if their poetry is cited to corroborate the prose account, because it must be part of that world in order to stand as evidence for it. When a poet's verse is quoted only on the level of narration, however, that voice is thematically separate from the diegesis.

This raises a further question about how to deal with poets who appear as characters on the diegetic level, but whose verse is quoted elsewhere in the saga by the narrative voice without it being staged in the diegesis in that instance. The quotations in the previous section of Þormóðr's poetry in ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹ are a good example of this; Þormóðr recites poetry as a character, but other verses attributed to him are spoken by the narrative voice. Does the fact that the skald is a character in the story mean that these latter stanzas should be viewed as implicitly diegetic, despite the lack of a performance context? After all, any stanzas spoken by a poet whose birth and death are mentioned in the saga could be inferred to have been composed and performed at some point during the timespan of its narrative, even if the saga does not situate the processes of composition or performance in a particular time or place. Two factors that are important here, however, are that the diegesis refers to the storyworld only insofar as the world is presented in the text; and that textual elements are not restricted to a single narrative level, with metaleptic movement between diegetic and extradiegetic levels being possible. A textual element depicted as diegetic at a given moment may be presented extradiegetically later in the text; its ontological relationship to the world is unaffected, but its thematic relationship changes. Consequently, not all speech associated with a diegetic character need be consistently framed as diegetic, and we can recognise

Þormóðr's poetry as being quoted on both the diegetic and extradiegetic level.[20]

The advantage of considering stanza quotation in relation to diegesis, then, is that it allows us to characterise the textual strategies used to embed poetry in the sagas without assuming a particular narrative function, thus avoiding the aforementioned conflation of distinct questions. Where poetry is not staged in a diegetic performance context, we can interpret it simply as being quoted on the level of narration. Quotation on the diegetic level provides narrative context for the poem's content, while extradiegetic quotation removes this context, with stanzas embedded in this way lacking a spatiotemporal reference that could situate their recital at a given moment in the story. The voice that speaks the stanza is thus disembodied from any diegetic presence, even if it is attributed to a character in the narrative, and similarly dislocated from the diegesis with which the content of the poem is associated. Poetic voices are necessarily framed in distinct ways depending on which diegetic level they are quoted, but this does not mean that only verses quoted extradiegetically have an authenticating quality. Rather, it indicates that different textual strategies are available to balance the integration of the poetry with the broader demands of the narrative.

4. Extradiegetic stanza quotation in the *Íslendingasögur*

An advantage of focusing on the diegetic level on which a stanza is embedded, rather than its textual function, is that it facilitates the description of verse quotation not easily categorised as authenticating or situational, which allows connections to be drawn across otherwise disparate verses. In this section, I thus give an overview of extradiegetic quotation in the *Íslendingasögur*, with an emphasis on edge-cases of this kind.[21] The *Íslendingasögur* feature a variety of narrative strategies for embedding skaldic verse, and many of these involve extradiegetic quotation, even if they do not

look like straightforwardly ›authenticating‹ stanzas. In some cases, references to diegetic performance contexts are combined with extradiegetic quotation in ways that distance the verse from the diegesis, thereby aligning it more firmly with the narrative voice.

In comparison to the *konungasögur*, the *Íslendingasögur* do not often include sustained use of formulas like *svá segir N. N.* to introduce poetry. Two exceptions are the quotation of stanzas from the poems ›Illugadrápa‹ (Eb, stt. 1–2; ÍF 4, pp. 31–32) and ›Hrafnsmál‹ (Eb, stt. 20, 26, and 33–35; ÍF 4, pp. 67, 102, 124, 156, and 168) in ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, and from ›Þorgeirsdrápa‹ (Fbr, stt. 2–7 and 10–18; ÍF 6, pp. 130, 139, 146–147, 152, 156, 160, 181, 186, 191–192, 200–201, 203, and 207–210) in ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹. As an example of how these stanzas are integrated into the prose, the inquits of the ›Eyrbyggja saga‹ verses are listed below:

Svá kvað Oddr skáld í Illugadrápa: [Eb, st. 1] (ÍF 4, p. 31)
So said Oddr skáld in ›Illugadrápa‹: [Eb, st. 1]

Svá segir Oddr í Illugadrápa: [Eb, st. 2] (ÍF 4, p. 32)
So says Oddr in ›Illugadrápa‹: [Eb, st. 2]

Þormóðr Trefilsson kvað vísu þessa um víg Vigfúss: [Eb, st. 20] (ÍF 4, p. 67)
Þormóðr Trefilsson spoke this verse about the killing of Vigfúss: [Eb, st. 20]

Um dráp Arnkels kvað Þormóðr Trefilsson vísu þessa: [Eb, st. 26] (ÍF 4, p. 102)
Þormóðr Trefilsson spoke this stanza about the killing of Arnkell: [Eb, st. 26]

Svá segir Þormóðr Trefilsson í Hrafnsmálum: [Eb, st. 33] (ÍF 4, p. 124)
So says Þormóðr Trefilsson in ›Hrafnsmál‹: [Eb, st. 33]

Um þessa tíðendi […] orti Þormóðr Trefilsson í Hrafnsmálum vísu þessa: [Eb, st. 34] (ÍF 4, p. 156)
Þormóðr Trefilsson composed this verse in ›Hrafnsmál‹ about these events: [Eb, st. 34]

Svá kvað Þormóðr Trefilsson í Hrafnsmálum: [Eb, st. 35] (ÍF 4, p. 168)
So said Þormóðr Trefilsson in ›Hrafnsmál‹: [Eb, st. 35]

The most important factor for determining that these stanzas are quoted extradiegetically is the absence of spatiotemporal markers that would place the stanza's recital within the events on the diegetic level. While the skalds and their poetry are associated with the world of the saga, their voices are not staged as being spoken from a specific standpoint in the diegesis, which implies to the reader that the verses are being quoted primarily on the level of narration. In these examples, the role played by the narrative voice in curating the poetry is foregrounded through the use of cataphoric and anaphoric markers, such as *þessi* (›this‹) and *svá* (›so‹, ›thus‹), which highlight the intertextual connection between the poetry and prose, either by connecting the poetry with the preceding events or by drawing attention to the verse as a corroborating account. While the demonstrative forms *þetta* and *þessi* also appear in connection with poetry quoted on the diegetic level, the use of *svá* to indicate a correspondence between the content of a verse and events depicted in the prose appears to be restricted to extradiegetic quotation. *Svá* appears in some relative clauses of diegetically integrated stanzas, where it gives additional information about the performance of the stanza – as with the stanza spoken by Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld in the presence of King Óláfr Tryggvason: *Hann kvað þetta, svá at konungr heyrði einn tíma* (ÍF 8, p. 157: ›He spoke this so that the king heard it on one occasion‹) – but this usage does not connect the content of the poetic and prose accounts in an intertextual sense.

In the examples from ›Eyrbyggja saga‹, the lack of spatiotemporal reference reflects the fact that neither Oddr skáld nor Þormóðr Trefilsson appears as a character in the narrative, as they are named only in connection with their poetry. This manner of quotation also occurs in some other *Íslendingasögur*, including two *lausavísur* by Þorkell elfaraskáld and Þormóðr Óláfsson, quoted in ›Njáls saga‹ (Nj, stt. 26–27), and a stanza from Þórðr Kolbeinsson's ›Gunnlaugsdrápa‹, quoted in ›Gunnlaugs saga‹

(Gunnl, st. 21).[22] R. D. Fulk suggests of the stanzas in ›Njáls saga‹ that »it is peculiar that [they] are attributed to persons who play no role in the saga narrative (unlike all the other stanzas in the saga)« (Nj, p. 1256), as skalds in the *Íslendingasögur* tend to appear as characters in the story. Yet this is not to say that poetry attributed to a diegetic character need always be staged diegetically. Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld and Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson are the protagonists of their eponymous sagas, and most of their poetry is spoken within the diegesis, but each of them has a stanza quoted with no reference to it being spoken in a particular diegetic context:

> *Þetta sannar Hallfreðr í kvæði því einu, er hann orti um Óláf konung:* [Hallfr, st. 7] (ÍF 8, p. 154)
>
> Hallfreðr confirms this in that poem that he composed about King Óláfr: […]
>
> *Þat var ok jafnt látit, víg Gríms eyrarleggs ok áverki við Guðmund, ok unði Glúmr illa við málalok, sem hann kvað í vísu þeiri, er hann orti síðan*: [Glúm, st. 13] (ÍF 9, p. 96)
>
> The death of Grímr eyrarleggr and the wound against Guðmundr were also declared to be equal, and Glúmr thought badly of the conclusion to the case, as he said in that verse that he later composed: […]

Each inquit refers to the composition of the verse, but neither the process of composition nor the performance of the stanza is clearly staged on the diegetic level. The only spatiotemporal marker in either case is the reference to Víga-Glúmr having composed his stanza at a later stage than the events described in the narrative. While an audience can infer that the stanza must have been composed before the death of the skald, which is mentioned at the end of the saga in each case, the poetry is not strongly integrated into the diegesis, but rather associated with the level of narration.

Yet the skald's presence as a character may implicitly situate their poetry in relation to events in the diegesis, even though the poetry is itself quoted

extradiegetically. In ›Grettis saga‹, Grettir speaks much of the poetry attributed to him on the diegetic level, but the narrative voice quotes some of his stanzas, apparently as evidence for his own deeds. An example is the stanzas of his first ›Ævikviða‹ (Gr, stt. 22–24) about his dispute with Sveinn jarl, in which he is supported by his friends Þorfinnr and Bersi and his brother Þorsteinn drómundr. The events are recounted in the prose, followed by a narratorial comment on how the outcome affected Grettir's supporters, before his poetry on the matter is introduced:

> *Luku þeir jarli fé, svá at honum gazk at, ok skilðu með engum kærleikum. Fór Grettir með Þorfinni; skilðusk þeir Þorsteinn, bróðir hans, með vináttu. Varð Þorfinnr frægr af fylgð þeiri, er hann hafði veitt Gretti, við slíkt ofrefli, sem hann átti at eiga. Engi af þeim mönnum komsk í kærleika við jarl þaðan frá, þeira er Gretti höfðu lið veitt, nema Bersi einn. Svá kvað Grettir:* [Gr, stt. 22–23] (ÍF 7, pp. 85–86)

> They give wealth to the jarl to his liking, and parted with little love between them. Grettir went with Þorfinnr; he and his brother Þorsteinn parted with friendship between them. Þorfinnr became renowned for the support that he had given to Grettir against such great odds as he had to face. None of the men who gave support to Grettir, apart from Bersi alone, had good relations with the jarl from that point. So said Grettir: [Gr, stt. 22–23]

The first two verses are introduced with the formula *svá kvað Grettir* (›so said Grettir‹), while the third is separated by an additional inquit, *ok enn þessa* (ÍF 7, pp. 86–87; ›and also this‹).[23] The stanzas are not explicitly staged, as no spatiotemporal information is given to situate them within the diegesis. Yet Grettir's presence in the preceding prose account may have been read by audiences as an indication that he also recited the verses around this time, even though no performance context is given. Another example is Grettir's verse about his meeting with Gísli Þorsteinsson (Gr, st. 48). Gísli attacks the outlawed Grettir, but Grettir handily defeats him and flogs with a tree-branch. There follows a narratorial comment that many thought Gísli had been rewarded for boasting about how he would

kill Grettir, before the quotation of a stanza by Grettir about the events: *Grettir kvað þetta um sameign þeira* (ÍF 7, p. 193; ›Grettir said this about their dealings‹). The stanza is again dislocated from a particular diegetic standpoint, even though Grettir's immediate presence is reaffirmed in the verse itself by the reference to the events having occurred that day: *Enn fyrir mér um Mýrar | margneninn dag þenna | […] físandi rann Gísli* (Gr, st. 48; ›And the very energetic Gísli ran farting before me today across Mýrar‹). While the quotation of the poetry is extradiegetic, the metaleptic juxtaposition of Grettir as character and poetic narrator complicates the encoding of his voice. By mediating Grettir's poetic stance through the narrative voice, the saga creates some distance between his diegetic standpoint and the speaking voice of the poetry, thereby allowing Grettir to comment on the (apparently) earlier events as a textual authority, rather than as a character.

Also ambiguous are references to a skald having composed a stanza at a particular time or place, but not necessarily having performed it there. In ›Egils saga‹, Egill is said to compose a stanza (Eg, st. 65) at a feast hosted by his friend Arinbjörn, commemorating his generosity. The scene appears in both the A- and C-redactions (Chestnutt 2006, p. 123; Bjarni Einarsson 2001, p. 129), but the stanza is quoted only in the A-redaction using the following inquit: *Þá orti Egill vísu* (ÍF 2, p. 213; ›Then Egill composed a verse‹). No mention is made of whether Egill also recited the verse at this point; the reader may infer that this is the case, but the text does not guarantee it. In the *Íslendingasögur*, such references appear especially frequently in ›Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa‹, where five stanzas, two by Björn Hítdœlakappi and three by his rival Þórðr Kolbeinsson, are introduced with this formula (BjH stt. 2, 24, 33, 38, and 39; ÍF 3, pp. 123, 161, 193, 204, and 205). In these cases, it is ambiguous whether it is the diegetic figure or the narrative voice that should be understood as ›speaking‹ the verse, given that no mention is made of a performance context to accompany the compositional reference.

In other cases, a saga may provide a diegetic performance context for a longer poetic work that is mentioned as part of the narrative, but quote only select stanzas on the extradiegetic level as evidence for the work itself. These stanzas are usually preceded by formulas such as *þetta er í [kvæði]* (›this is in [the poem]‹) or, for a *drápa* (a long poem with a refrain), *þetta er stefit í* (›this is the refrain in it‹). In ›Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu‹, for instance, Gunnlaugr is said to have performed a poem before King Aðalráðr of England, but the saga quotes only the refrain (Gunnl, st. 3): *Gunnlaugr flutti fram kvæðit vel ok skörulíga; en þetta er stefit í* (ÍF 3, p. 71; ›Gunnlaugr delivered the poem well and manfully, and this is the refrain in it‹). The stanzas of Gunnlaugr's ›Sigtryggsdrápa‹ quoted later on are introduced with similar formulas (Gunnl, stt. 6–8; ÍF 3, p. 75), as are the verses in ›Egils saga‹ from Egill's ›Aðalsteinsdrápa‹ (Eg, stt. 21–22; ÍF 2, pp. 146–147), ›Skjaldardrápa‹ (Eg, st. 126; ÍF 2, pp. 272–273), and ›Berudrápa‹ (Eg, st. 128; ÍF 2, pp. 275–276). Further examples include the stanzas quoted from ›Grámagaflím‹ in ›Bjarnar saga‹ (BjH stt. 26–28; ÍF 3, p. 168), ›Bjarkamál in fornu‹ in ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹ (Fbr, stt. 32–33; ÍF 6, p. 262), ›Hallmundarflokkr‹ and ›Hallmundarkviða‹ in ›Grettis saga‹ (Gr, stt. 46–47 and 51–56; ÍF 7, pp. 184–185 and 203), and ›Óláfsdrápa‹, as well as an unnamed poem about Eiríkr jarl, in ›Hallfreðar saga‹ (Hallfr, stt. 30 and 31; ÍF 8, pp. 194–195). This seems to be a particularly common form of extradiegetic quotation within the subgenre, where the narratorial curation of the verses suggests they are intended to verify the prose staging of the poetry without slowing narrative momentum, as would happen were the poem to be diegetically integrated in full (see Bibire 1973, pp. 10–12), or without ceding the anonymous narrator's textual authority to the individualised skald (see Quinn 1997).

Finally the anonymity of a stanza's performer or composer is unimportant for determining the diegetic level on which the stanza is quoted. Most anonymous stanzas in the *Íslendingasögur* are quoted extradiegetically using a formula like *þetta var kveðit um þat* (›this was spoken

about it‹). These include the anonymous verses quoted about Ingólfr in ›Hallfreðar saga‹ (Hallfr, st. 1; ÍF 8, p. 141),[24] Vetrliði in ›Njáls saga‹ (Nj, st. 36; ÍF 12, p. 260), and Þorgeirr Önundarson in ›Grettis saga‹ (Gr, stt. 6–7; ÍF 7, pp. 27 and 31). Yet some stanzas are also anonymously spoken within the diegesis, as in ›Eiríks saga rauða‹, which includes the inquit *þá kvað einn maðr kviðling þenna* (Eir, st. 3; ÍF 4, p. 432; ›then a certain man spoke this ditty‹). An interesting case is found at the conclusion of ›Bárðar saga Snæfellsness‹, where the sons of Hjalti Þórðarson ride together to a legal assembly. After a narratorial comment that *váru þeir svá vel búnir, at menn hugðu þar væri komnir æsir* (›they were so well dressed that people thought that the gods had arrived there‹), an anonymous verse is quoted: *Þá var þetta kveðit* (Bárð, st. 6; ÍF 13, p. 171; ›Then this was spoken‹).[25] Whaley's model would treat this stanza as authenticating, as it is not associated with any group of poets, but the saga stages the verse within the diegesis, the temporal adverb *þá* situating its recital in proximity to the events. While the stanza corroborates the reaction in the prose, reiterating the comparison between men and gods, it is simultaneously presented as part of the scene – perhaps itself an example of the emphatic nature of the reaction. The poetry is purposed both as evidence for the events and part of the events themselves, both documentation and affective response.

5. Conclusion

The distinction between authenticating and situational verses in modern scholarship is beset by a number of methodological issues, not least the assumption that stanzas must be quoted in a certain way for them to have evidentiary force in a saga. As I have argued in this article, the use of these terms conflates the question of how verses are embedded in a prose text with their broader narrative function, a reductive approach that downplays

the documentary potential of diegetically integrated poetry and oversimplifies the source situation. Notably, this dichotomy is not attested in the medieval sources, where no distinction is made between verses quoted on the level of narration and those integrated into the events of the narrative.

By focusing on diegetic level, we see that, in addition to formulas associated with so-called authenticating verses, there are a number of other strategies in the *Íslendingasögur* that involve the quotation of poetry on the level of narration. Saga writers used extradiegetic verse quotation not only to corroborate the prose account, but for a variety of functions: to contain authoritative poetic voices by curating how much poetry appeared in a text; to preserve narrative momentum without having to integrate longer poems fully into the diegesis; and to construct complex forms of metalepsis so that skalds could act as quasi-narratorial witnesses to their own lives. Using narratological terminology can also enable more accurate descriptions of ambiguous stanzas that combine diegetic reference to performance or composition with extradiegetic quotation, in ways that imply these verses have both documentary and plot functions. Rather than evidencing a strong dichotomy of authenticating and situational verses, the examples discussed here point to a more fluid form of polyphony in the sagas, with writers making varied use of diegetic level to shape the complex interplay between prose and poetic voices in their works.

Notes

1 The research presented in this article was undertaken as part of the AHRC–DFG project ›The *Íslendingasögur* as Prosimetrum‹, a collaboration between the Universities of Cambridge and Tübingen. The project is supported by a bilateral grant funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [AH/T012757/1] and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [GR 3613/5–1].

2 Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Old Norse prose are my own. All quotations and translations of skaldic poetry are derived from the authoritative recent edition by Clunies Ross et al. (2022). When citing to this edition, I refer to stanza numbers for the verses, which are also accessible online (https://skaldic.org), and to page numbers in the printed edition for critical material.

3 Other scholars use different terms to express this idea. Alois Wolf (1965, p. 462) distinguishes between poetry used as »historisches Belegmaterial« (›historical evidence‹) and scenes »wenn die Strophen den Beteiligten selbst in den Mund gelegt werden, wenn nicht mehr von außen eine *vísa* eines Skalden als Fußnote hinzugefügt wird« (›when the stanzas are placed in the mouths of the participants themselves, when a skald's stanza is no longer appended from the outside as a footnote‹). Other scholars distinguish between stanzas as ›evidence‹ or ›part of the story‹ (Bjarni Einarsson 1974), ›substantiating‹ and ›non-substantiating‹ stanzas (Foote 1976), and stanzas as ›reports‹ or ›speech acts‹ (Jesch 1993). Judith Jesch also refers occasionally to skaldic quotation in terms of its encoding on the text's ›diegetic‹ or ›extradiegetic‹ level, a conceptual framework to which I return in the next section. Heather O'Donoghue (2005) refers more narrowly to ›dialogue verses‹ rather than situational verses, a category encompassing stanzas framed as part of the dialogue, but not those staged more broadly as having been composed in response to a situation.

4 The most influential studies in this regard are Whaley (1993) and Bjarni Einarsson (1974). See also Males (2020), O'Donoghue (2005), Jesch (1993), and Foote (1976).

5 This term is not my own, but is commonly used across the publications of the project ›The *Íslendingasögur* as Prosimetrum‹, where it refers specifically to the main clause of the sentence that directly precedes the quotation of a stanza in a saga.

6 These formulas, which are commonly cited by scholars distinguishing between authenticating and situational verses, are not universal, but are meant to be broadly representative of the kinds of wording used in the sagas to introduce stanzas in these ways. In practice, saga writers used a variety of phrasings and formulations to frame poetry either as being spoken by characters or as being quoted by the narrative voice as evidence.

7 For references to editions of skaldic poetry, I follow the abbreviations for primary sources used by the ›Dictionary of Old Norse Prose‹ (https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php).

8 Mikael Males (2020, p. 216), however, argues that this division more accurately describes the *Íslendingasögur* than the *konungasögur*, as the latter subgenre also features a high number of stanzas integrated into the plot.

9 This claim should not be taken at face value; the susceptibility of skaldic verse to (often productive) variation in oral and scribal contexts has been discussed extensively (Goeres 2013, pp. 194–197; Marold 2005, pp. 256–268; Abram 2001; Poole 1993; Fidjestøl 1982, pp. 45–60). ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹ even depicts Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld altering his poetry to suit different contexts. The accuracy of claims about poetry in the prefaces to the *konungasögur* are persuasively critiqued by Margaret Clunies Ross (2005, pp. 72–78) and Shami Ghosh (2011, pp. 50–63). It is also uncertain how consistent the writers of historiographical sagas were in their use of poetry. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (2016, p. xi) suggests that the redactor of ›Heimskringla‹ was »more discriminating in his choice and more skilful in his interpretation of verses« than other redactors, as well as »more systematic than his predecessors in citing both the name of the poet and, very often, the longer poem from which the stanza cited has been extracted«. If we accept, as Ghosh (2011, pp. 16–17) notes, that there is »sufficient correspondence between [›Heimskringla‹] and [›Óláfs saga ins Helga inni sérstöku‹] to assume that both were composed by a single author«, it is possible that the claims made in this passage reflect the views of a particular authorial figure or school, rather than a more general approach.

10 This interpretation is no doubt influenced by Males' (2020, pp. 212–215) findings that authenticating stanzas in the *Íslendingasögur* are almost always authentic, in the sense that some of them seem to have been composed in the context of the prose events (usually 9th–11th c.), while situational stanzas are more likely to be spurious, in that some of them were composed in the later period during which the sagas were written (ca. 13th–14th c.), despite being presented as earlier compositions. It makes sense that saga writers would avoid inventing poetry for a skald who did not enter into the text as a character, while scenes involving poets within the plot may have offered more leeway for creative composition. Yet this does not mean that all stanzas spoken as dialogue must have lacked an evidentiary function; as Males notes, many stanzas quoted in a situational manner also seem to be authentic.

11 In the print volume of Clunies Ross et al. (2022), stanzas 31–41 of ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹ redirect the reader to the editions of the same verses in the earlier editions of poetry from the kings' sagas (Þorm, stt. 16 and 18–25) and from poetic treatises (Bjark, stt. 1–2). On the online edition of the volume (https://skaldic.org),

the stanzas are accessible as part of ›Fóstbrœðra saga‹. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to these stanzas using their numbering in relation to Fbr.

12 The stanza is also quoted in the R-redaction of the saga, now attested only in the 17th-century copies AM 142 fol and AM 566 4°, where the inquit conversely presents the stanza as part of the narrative events: *Þá kvað Grettir vísu* (Björn K. Þórólfsson 1925–1927, p. 3 [normalised, A.W.]: ›Then Grettir spoke a verse‹). No other details are given about the circumstances in which Grettir spoke the stanza, nor is a dialogue staged with Vermundr as in the ›Grettis saga‹ episode.

13 Whaley's (1993, p. 254) treatment of anonymous stanzas, which she calls »a special, and difficult, group«, is inconsistent. She suggests that »if the identity of the speaker was unknown, or mattered so little to the prose writer that he did not name him, the verse cannot be situational«, despite her characterisation of the above example, which is not attributed to a specific poet, as a situational stanza.

14 As Stephen Halliwell (2014) notes, however, the modern distinction between ›mimesis‹ and ›diegesis‹ does not precisely reflect how these terms are used in Platonic or Aristotelian thought. In Plato's ›Republic‹, diegesis refers to all forms of narration, and thus encompasses both speech on the level of narration and the more mimetic direct speech of characters: »The fundamental point [is] that mimesis is not opposed to, but is one type of, *diegesis*« (p. 131). By contrast, in his ›Poetics‹, Aristotle generally takes mimesis to be the overarching category, though his use of the term is not always consistent (pp. 133–134).

15 Stefano Castelvecchi (2020) provides an excellent overview of the development of the classical term ›diēgēsis‹ into modern (especially narratological) concepts of ›diegesis‹, including an account of Genette's (inconsistent) understanding of these concepts and how he changed his approach to them over his lifetime.

16 Metadiegetic proliferation in saga literature can be seen in the many dream-worlds across the corpus, which are accessible to other characters and to the audience only when recounted by the dreamers who experience them. These dreamers can be understood as experiencing a form of metalepsis – that is, a shift between diegetic levels – in that they function both as characters within the metadiegesis and narrators within the primary diegesis. For a discussion of dream-worlds as storyworlds with a focus on their ontological properties, see Wilson (2025).

17 It is notable that Genette, like many other narratologists, tends to speak of individuated ›narrators‹ rather than impersonal narrative functions, such as those that appear throughout the sagas. As Genette (1980, p. 214) notes, however, »the [narrating] instance does not necessarily remain identical and invariable in the

course of a single narrative work«, which nuances the underlying conceptualisation in his work of narrators as individuals.

18 Stefanie Gropper (2022, p. 282) observes that even in those rare instances where the narrative voice speaks in the first person in the *Íslendingasögur*, it cannot be concretely associated with a historical individual, in the sense of a verifiable author figure. She suggests such instances of first-person narration can be seen as »stellvertretend für die Autorstimme« (›substituting for the voice of the author‹), but argues that this voice is not »die Stimme eines namentlich identifizierbaren und historisch kontextualisierbaren Individuums« (›the voice of an individual who can be identified by name or contextualised historically‹).

19 This formulation loosely paraphrases that of Guido Heldt (2013, p. 61) in his assessment of extradiegetic film music (specifically, music which is only ever presented as extradiegetic) as being »essential to the depiction of the fictional world [but] not [essential] to the fictional world as depicted in the film, because the music is not a part of the fictional world, but a means of its depiction«.

20 A useful modern analogy here is the use of voiceover in film and television, through which speech associated with a diegetic character can be presented extradiegetically, in the sense that it is accessible only to the audience, and not to the characters in the story itself.

21 Some of the examples discussed here are addressed in a previous collaborative article (Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir et al. 2022, pp. 68–70). I expand on those findings here to present a more comprehensive overview of extradiegetic quotation in the *Íslendingasögur*.

22 Diana Whaley classifies this stanza as an authenticating verse (Gunnl, p. 858). As Laurence de Looze (1986, p. 492) notes, however, »that a poem attributed to Þórðr Kolbeinsson should be chosen to vouch for the validity of events may be a deliciously ironic intertextual joke«, given that Þórðr is depicted as a particularly duplicitious figure in ›Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa‹.

23 The inclusion of a second inquit interrupting the sequence probably indicates the »poetic evidence [being] orchestrated in such a way as to draw attention to the saga-narrator's presence« (Quinn 1997, p. 62).

24 The stanza is edited only as part of ›Hallfreðar saga‹ in Clunies Ross et al. (2022), but appears in much the same context in ›Vatnsdœla saga‹, where it is also quoted anonymously (see ÍF 8, p. 100).

25 The verse is also quoted in ›Landnámabók‹ in the context of the same episode. The inquit there reads *þar um er þetta kveðit* (›this is recited about it‹) (ÍF 1, p. 238), which conversely suggests an extradiegetic quotation.

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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).[1] 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 *Íslendingasögur*, 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 δ 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).[2] 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 ›þáttr‹ (›Bolla þáttr‹) as a continuation of one of the sagas.[3] 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.[4] 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 *aukavísur* (›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.[5] 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.[6] 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.[7] 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 Mörðr: *hon var væn kona ok kurteis ok vel at sér, ok þótti sá beztr kostr 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).[8] 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*[9] *sína, en tillagagóðr inna stœrra 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)[10]
>
> 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 Hrut. 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.‹ Hrut 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 Hrut, 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.[11] 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 gørningum
— 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 fyr 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 Mörðr'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 drýgja.
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 — <u>skilit segja.</u>
(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. Mörðr], 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. Mörðr].

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. Mörðr]. 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. Mörðr], 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.[12] In her first stanza, when she refers to Hrútr as a *geystum geirhvessanda* (›valiant spear-sharpener‹), she uses a warrior-kenning 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 Mörðr asking about the details of Hrútr's condition:

> *›Hversu má svá vera?‹ segir Mörðr, ›ok seg enn gørr.‹ Hon svarar: ›Þegar hann kemr við mik, þá er hörund hans svá mikit, at hann má ekki eptirlæti hafa við mik, en þó höfum vit bæði breytni til þess á alla vega, at vit mættim njótask, en þat verðr 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)

Mörðr 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 Sigmundr 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,[13] 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.[14] 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 ›þáttr‹), ›Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds', ›Laxdœla saga' (including ›Bolla þáttr'), and ›Fóstbrœðra 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 þáttr‹ (ÍF 11), ›Hallfreðar saga‹ (ÍF 8), ›Laxdœla saga‹ and ›Bolla þáttr‹ (ÍF 5), and ›Fóstbrœðra 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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Dreams, Slander, Gossip, and Rumour

Sturla Þórðarson and Challenges to Narratorial Authority in ›Íslendinga saga‹

Abstract. This article studies instances in which the conventionally unassailable narrative voice of the saga form has its authority undercut by subordinate narrative modes offering alternative epistemologies in relationship to narrated action. The selected text is ›Íslendinga saga‹ due to the particularly fraught relationship between narrative authority, narratorial identity, and the narration of contemporary events in this *samtíðarsaga*. The subordinate modes relevant to the present study are dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour, all of which have different discursive functions. They are united, however, in providing a mechanism for perspectives not aligned with that of the narrative voice to appear within the narrative, without the saga ceding its construction of a seemingly objective narrative history.

1. Introduction

At a foundational level, who speaks, where they speak from, and what they know or see are core issues of narratology (Stinchecum 1980). The matters of narrative and narrator have, therefore, long been considered as closely interrelated and interdependent. In Gérard Genette's classic narratological distinction, the issue of narration is most fully discussed as a component of the discursive category of voice, which concerns the relationship, in terms of distance of removal, between the narrative voice and the matter which it

narrates. Genette (1972, pp. 231–238) initially distinguishes voice according to narrative level: when the narrative voice operates from within the storyworld of the text, the narrative is intradiegetic; when the narrative voice is distinct from the tale it narrates, it is extradiegetic. Genette (1972, pp. 245–253) further distinguishes the heterodiegetic narrative, in which the narrative voice is not assigned to a particular character, from the homodiegetic, where the narrative voice is associated with a figure active within the plot. When these two axes are combined and applied to the issue of saga literature, the text is analogous to the formulation Genette employs to describe the narrative voice of Homer, in following a »extradiegetic-heterodiegetic paradigm: [...] a narrator in the first degree who tells a story from which he is absent« (Genette 1972, p. 248).

In a narrative where the narrative voice is associated with a character within the storyworld, or where it operates from outside it yet is clearly identified or invested with personality, it is unavoidable that the narrator is ascribed with specific person-like qualities during the act of reading (Walsh 1997). Tied to this process are important issues such as the reliability and the authority of the narrator in relation to a specific narrative. This is due to the credentials of a personalised narrative voice to recount the events in question being evaluated in relation to their status, character, perspective, and tone (Pinar 1997). More interesting, for the purposes of discussing narration in relationship to the sagas, is the degree to which this process of the assessment of narratorial authority occurs when the narration is instead in the impersonal mode, as is overwhelmingly the case in saga prose. The consistency of this impersonal narration is maintained on multiple grounds, the first being the persistent anonymity of saga narrators and their lack of distinguishing features from which a fuller persona could be constructed, thereby providing narratorial information against which elements of the saga could be read (McTurk 1990).[1] From this anonymity, there extends a stylised detachment from the matters at hand, as narrators of this sort »generally seem disinterested in the events they describe« (Ordower 1991,

p. 41).[2] This feature is often exacerbated by the implied diachronic relationship between narrative voice and saga action. Generally, the narrative voice's non-participation in saga events is ensured by a large span of intervening time and/or distance between the saga's major chronotope and the implied point in time and location from which narration occurs (Bahktin 1990, pp. 84 and 252). This spatiotemporal separation of diegetic levels is by no means exact, as the precise location and time from which the narrator is taken to speak is unclear. The axiom is generally demonstrated, however, by the broad compartmentalisation of material to distinct eras and regions, reflected in modern genre categories – *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas) occurring in the legendary past, *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas) occurring from the Icelandic settlement era (c. 870–930) through into the late eleventh century (otherwise referred to as the Saga Age), or *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas) occurring outside the bounds of Scandinavia (Orning 2020, p. 119).

The narratorial distance from narrative action operates in conjunction with other aspects of the narrative discourse when building up a portrait of the narrative voice in saga literature, particularly with regard to its tone, which must convey a complete mastery of content that allows it to narrate events with an implacable objectivity. Taken together, these features produce a form of narrative voice foundational to the saga style. Judith Jesch (1992, p. 339) characterises it as »an anonymous and omniscient persona who narrates in the third person,« while McKinnell (1987, p. 36) more evocatively typifies this mode of narration as »the fiction that what is being said is objective history – narrated fact dominates to the almost total exclusion of such comment as we legitimately expect in a real historian«.[3] The topic of this article will be a set of examples drawn from ›Íslendinga saga‹, in which this authoritative narrative voice is destabilised or challenged in the prose. This article discusses four discursive methods by which said challenges are regularly introduced: dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour. Each has a different effect on the authority of the narrative voice and a different

function within the saga and they will, consequently, be treated separately from one another. Overall, this article demonstrates that these four discursive modes, in offering perspectives and accounts unavailable in the standard narrative mode, have the power to briefly undermine the epistemological authority otherwise enjoyed by the narrative voice.

2. Narrative Voice and Constructions and Challenges to Narratorial Authority

The form of narrative voice outlined above is so consistent across the saga corpus that it is rare to find such sustained exceptions to this mode of narration. When they do occur, they tend to be enacted through shifts in focalisation, that is, the implied point of perspective from which the narrator operates.[4] This temporary limiting or shifting of perspective is notable for its contrast with the more robust omniscient mode that the sagas typically exhibit. Examples include characters entering dark or unknown spaces and the narrator simulating their restricted vision, or narrators ›playing along‹ with characters' disguises by referring to them in terms of the persona they have adopted (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2020, p. 82). Such narrowing of perspective tends to be brief and rather self-conscious, however, as the effect is clearly for the narrator's limited field of vision to render the discourse compatible with a character's incomprehension in a matter relating specifically to subterfuge or uncertainty. This sort of ›sympathetic‹ focalisation is not a true ceding of narratorial authority, particularly when the narrative voice swiftly and repeatedly returns to a state of practical omniscience, reasserting its mastery of narrative material and the extreme congruence between narratorial representation and the storyworld's reality (Jesch 1992, pp. 339–345).

If there were one set of Old Norse texts in which we might expect this narratorial façade of anonymity, omniscience, and objectivity to be most fully challenged, however, it would be in the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary

sagas), due to their composition and compilation by witnesses to, if not participants in, the events these texts narrate, which are set in Iceland in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries (see Rohrbach 2017). The primary subject of this article, ›Íslendinga saga‹, forms the central sections of the ›Sturlunga saga‹ compilation, completed shortly after 1300, possibly by Þórðr Narfason (Úlfar Bragason 2017, p. 168). The compilation offers a complex rearrangement of thirteenth-century texts, which together narrate events in Iceland from the 1100s up to the 1260s, particularly in relation to the protracted, escalating series of conflicts between powerful elite Icelandic families, the clergy, and the Norwegian crown, commonly referred to as the Sturlung Age (*Sturlungaöld*). ›Sturlunga saga‹ is thus best understood as a work of narrative history, converting recent events into a work of literature and necessarily intermingling fictive elements with attempts to represent contemporary memories.

A number of the constituent sagas in the compilation of ›Sturlunga saga‹ were written by witnesses and participants to the events they narrate, and with regard to ›Íslendinga saga‹, we have a reasonably reliable claim (or at least one with an extensive pedigree) to its authorship by Sturla Þórðarson. This is evidenced by Sturla's composition of the text being referenced in the earliest extant manuscripts, Króksfjarðarbók and Reykjarfjarðarbók, both from the mid to late fourteenth century (Úlfar Bragason 2004, p. 440). Sturla Þórðarson was not merely a witness to the key events of this period, but, as a member of the Sturlung family, was himself an active political participant in the escalating instability that typified the era; consequently, he is also portrayed as a character in the saga (see Úlfar Bragason 1994). If the account of events in ›Íslendinga saga‹ is taken as broadly accurate, Sturla participated in an extremely protracted and complex period of feuding and a number of his close family members were violently killed. As such, he can be assumed to have held strong opinions on both the participants and events of the Sturlung Age. Nor can Sturla as an author have any claim to omniscience, as he is only described as being present for a limited number

of events in the narrative and must have sourced the majority of his information regarding other key matters from a range of other contemporary sources with equally partisan positions on this tempestuous age.

It seems natural, given the persistent claims of Sturla's authorship and the corroborative value of his participation in the events of the Sturlung Age, to unite the statuses of author and narrator and to assign Sturla Þórðarson the latter role if the former is taken as a given. This is certainly how W. P. Ker (1896, p. 10) understood Sturla's relationship to ›Sturlunga saga‹ in his classic treatment of the text:

> The Icelandic narrators give the succession of events, either as they might appear to an impartial spectator, or (on occasion) as they are viewed by someone in the story, but never as they merely affect the writer himself, though he may be as important a personage as Sturla was in the events of which he wrote the Chronicle.

Úlfar Bragason (1986, p. 86) has described the text in similar, if more emphatic terms: »The author, Sturla Þórðarson, is also the narrator in the saga, one of the sources of the story and an actor in it«. It is important to note, however, that the ›Íslendinga saga‹ narrator must be considered as ontologically distinct from Sturla Þórðarson, the historical figure and author of the original text. This is partly a narratological issue, in that voice as a feature of narrative discourse is synthetic and textual, and thus cannot be fully mapped onto the values or biography of a given individual – particularly in discussions of the saga form, where said narratorial voice remains largely impersonal, and the medieval period, in which biographical information is often vague. Furthermore, on a practical level, it is worth bearing in mind Guðrún Nordal's warning that we do not have access to Sturla's authorial text of ›Íslendinga saga‹, as it has been altered through the process of its incorporation into the larger ›Sturlunga saga‹ compilation, and repeatedly so, given the two substantially diverging manuscript traditions that must predate our two earliest extant versions of the text (Guðrún

Nordal 2010 and 2006). In this case, the narrative voice is thus perhaps most accurately thought of as a collaborative construct that has been developed and revised by a series of redactors and scribes, rather than an authentic preservation of Sturla's own ›voice‹.

While it might be assumed from the above argument that it is, therefore, unnecessary to maintain the traditional association of Sturla with the narrator of ›Íslendinga saga‹, the issue of narratorial authenticity is not the same as that of narratorial authority, and it is with regard to authority that Sturla can still be meaningfully discussed in relation to narrative voice. In his excellent work on omniscient narrators, Paul Dawson (2012, p. 105) writes that »narrative authority is not a purely immanent feature of a text, to be recuperated from a formalist study of narrative conventions such as privilege or level. The authority of these conventions is historically contingent and must be granted by readers«. From the fourteenth century to the present, Sturla's status as an accomplished historian and first-hand witness has been central to a sequence of audiences' reception and treatment of ›Sturlunga saga‹, irrespective of shifting interpretative norms and their relationship to the compilation itself. This is evidenced by the preface to ›Íslendinga saga‹, in which Sturla's reliability is emphatically centred as demonstrating the testimonial quality of the narrative itself: ›*Ok treystum vér honum bæði vel til vits ok einurðar at segja frá, því at hann vissa ek alvitrastan ok hófsamastan*‹ (ÍF 20, pp. 139–140; ›And we can well trust both to his wisdom and his assessment of what to speak of, because I know him to be the very wisest and most moderate of people‹).[5] Indeed, his ability to convert highly dramatic and assumedly distressing moments from his own life into the detached narratorial mode typical of the saga form has been cited as a testament to both his skill as an author and his diligent commitment to historical impartiality, as noted by Helgi Þorláksson (2017, p. 200):

> Scholars have found Sturla Þórðarson to be an exceptional politician. They usually see him as wise, moderate and peace loving. There is also a general consensus that as an author Sturla shows these same qualities. It is quite common that scholars when expressing their opinions about Sturla use words like ›factual, accurate, unbiased, impartial, objective‹.

›Íslendinga saga‹ is more recognisable both as a saga and as a historical source if Sturla is maintained as the narrator, and this tradition has, consequently, been upheld consistently among later generations of readers.

Narratorial authority over the hyper-complex, high-stakes, and extremely partisan events of the Sturlung Age is not, however, solely established in ›Íslendinga saga‹ by an association with Sturla. Instead, the effect of authority is produced by the combination of this implied historical authority with many markers of a pseudo-omniscient narrative mode within the text. Such markers include: access to information concerning private or secret events; the narration of events that occur from impossible perspectives (such as viewing geographically disparate locations with near-simultaneity); the utilisation of extreme detail in the narration of chaotic and rapid events like battle, which not even a participating individual could be expected to have observed.[6] Authority in this case might therefore be said to be generated at the interface between (1.) the narrative voice capitalising on an association with a uniquely privileged personal perspective, associated with a participating elite figure, and (2.) the detached assertion of the events in question, as is typical of the saga style. While this authority has a clear utility in ›Íslendinga saga‹ as a mechanism for asserting credibility, however, I will argue that a secondary effect is produced by constructing the narrative voice in this manner, which specifically relates to the text's status as a *samtíðarsaga*.

When the matters being narrated are positioned as nearly contemporary to the construction of the saga narrative itself, the façade of implacable objectivity is less secure and more open to readerly scrutiny. This is because the association of the narrative voice with Sturla has other implications for

narratorial authority beyond the establishment of historical credibility, as it necessarily aligns the perspective of the narrative voice with a single partisan actor in a political crisis. This has the potential to increase scepticism in an audience, particularly one sensitive to the fractiousness of the Sturlung Age, as to whether the events as depicted in the text represent only one of many possible perspectives. A conventional response would be to state that the flat objectivity of the narrative voice is intended to quash such scrutiny, but I will argue that, in addition to this, ›Íslendinga saga‹ also exhibits other, more self-conscious narrative techniques that express the limits of narrative authority when presenting the recent past. Through these techniques, alternative responses and conflicting reports on events are placed within the saga as a means of caveating the report provided by the narrative voice, yet without fully delegitimising it.

Challenges to the impersonal objectivity of the narrative voice are not uniform throughout the saga, but occur in response to scenarios that more overtly call into question how a narrator aligned with the persona of Sturla has access to the information in question or the authority to narrate it as a ›historical fact‹ (see O'Connor 2005; Kalinke 1984). Examples where this scepticism is most pronounced include: (1.) The narration of unknowable events and states, particularly secret actions or a character's initial motivation for a significant course of action; (2.) Cases where substantially conflicting reports exist concerning a given event; (3.) Cases where there is difficulty in providing conclusive moral evaluation, or doing justice to a multiplicity of contemporary moral opinions, as to what constitutes approbated and contemptible conduct in complex disputes; (4.) The recounting of particularly scandalous actions perpetrated by elite figures.

In instances within the narrative that feature one or more of the issues above, the text regularly makes use of embedded narrative or unreliable second-level narrators to impart the controversial or contested information in question (see Pier 2014). Practically, this involves the insertion of instances of dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour into the saga narrative.

Dreams are often described upon waking by the dreamer as direct dialogue or reproduced as an embedded narrative, in which they function as a distinct storyworld (see Merkelbach 2022). Slander, gossip, and rumour are represented by both direct and indirect dialogue and may be attributed to named or anonymous individuals or expressed as the consensus opinion of a non-specific collective. Through these means, the narrative material present in dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour is held in at least partial, if not complete separation from the account of events provided by the first-level narrative voice in operating on a distinct diegetic level.

This separation is accentuated by the information provided in dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour being generally tonally distinct from other means of recounting events: more overtly uncanny, scandalous, and humorous material tends to be sequestered in these mediums. Material with these tonal qualities, which more readily calls attention to its own dubious or subjective quality, is less compatible with the authority of the narrative voice as utilised elsewhere in the text. The compartmentalisation of such contested discourses avoids their inclusion in the text having a direct impact on the credibility of the narrative voice. Through the sectioning of material into these four necessarily contested or subjective modes of discourse, ›Íslendinga saga‹ is able to simulate the presence of a range of competing and conflicting perspectives in response to fraught events in the storyworld. In doing so, the text demonstrates the impossibility of a narrator's actual omniscience in relation to contested recent history, but without superseding or invalidating the objectivity of the narrative voice so central to the saga style. The presence of dreams, slander, gossip, and rumour in ›Íslendinga saga‹ also allows for the intrusion of non-normative perspectives on Sturlung Age action, which are crucial in representing and contextualising the fraught and fragmentary quality of the era. This article will now proceed to discuss each of these four categories in turn.

3. Dreams

The category of dreams, while perhaps the most ontologically difficult of the categories considered here, particularly in the relationship of action occurring in the dreamworld and the world of the first-level narrative, is also both the best studied and arguably the least impactful on narrative authority. Dreams operate on a distinct diegetic level, often with their own altered ontologies (Wilson 2025), but their semiotic force is granted by their relationship to the first-level storyworld – in this case, significant political affairs in thirteenth-century Iceland. Guðrún Nordal (2006, p. 305) was largely correct when she argued in relation to ›Sturlunga saga‹ that

> dreams are vehicles of moral assessment of events and key persons on the scene, and provide the author with an opportunity, in the guise of the dream person, to present the audience with an ethical evaluation of the unfolding action. A stanza spoken in a dream articulates a different point of view on the action which is difficult to convey in the prose narrative.

This possibility of alternative perspective and the capability for moral evaluation comes from the capability for dreams to insert figures disruptively into the storyworld whose presences would otherwise be precluded, via their alternative, frequently supernatural logic. This is because dreams often introduce mythic, legendary, or simply anachronistic characters who are not depicted as actual participants in the social network of thirteenth-century Icelandic society. If such figures were presented by the narrative voice as actually engaging in the real-world events of the Sturlung Age, the authority of its report of thirteenth-century events would understandably be diminished through the overt presence of anachronism or overt supernatural intrusion (McCreesh 2006; McTurk 1990).

Literary dreams, especially those depicted in the sagas, are necessarily ominous, either in acting as a symbolic analogue to future events or imparting significant information that would otherwise be inaccessible to characters. They therefore take a key role in the narrative patterning of the saga

in foreshadowing moments of narrative and historical significance. In the highly symbolic ontological bounds of the dream, key figures and events can be foregrounded in the narrative without disrupting the strict chronology of the saga. This capability is not otherwise available to the saga narrator, as one of the foundations for their authority is that they do not generally offer proleptic judgements on matters that are still in the process of unfolding. Evaluation of the morality or political significance of an event by the saga narrator is rare, and when it does occur, it is largely provided in retrospect, in accordance with the facsimile of historical testimonial that the sagas often generate. Ominous dreams, alternatively, allow for the prior establishment of important figures and deeds, without the narrator having to offer a qualitative opinion on their significance that would seem unsupported until a later point in the diegesis. In this manner, estimations of characters and the foregrounding of key events can be deployed at opportune literary moments without substantial impact on the authority of the narrative voice. An excellent example of this phenomenon is the inclusion of dreams that feature preeminent figures from Iceland's past with distinct ideals, such as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who pass disparaging judgement on the later generations embroiled in the Sturlung Age. In the case of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, he appears in a dream to Egill Halldórsson of the Mýramenn (the family who traditionally owned the farmstead), frowning and pronouncing an ominous warning about the ambition of their kinsman Snorri Sturluson, who goes on to vie for complete overlordship of Iceland, either for himself or for Hákon Hákonarson, the Norwegian king:

> *Egill dreymði at Egill Skalla-Grímsson kæmi at honum ok var mjök ófrýnligr. Hann mælti: ›Ætlar Snorri, frændi várr, í brott heðan?‹ ›Þat er satt,‹ segir Egill. ›Þat gerir hann illa,‹ segir darummaðrinn, ›því at lítt hafa menn setit yfir hlut várum Mýramanna þá er oss tímgaðist, ok þurfti hann eigi ofsjónum yfir þessu landi at sjá‹ Egill kvað vísu:*

Seggr sparir sverði at höggva,
snjóhvítt er blóð líta,
skæruöld getum skýra,
skarpr brandr fekk mér landa,
skarpr brandr fekk mér landa.

Ok sneri þá í brott. En Egill vaknar. (ÍF 21, p. 78)

Egill dreamed that Egill Skalla-Grímsson appeared in front of him and was frowning deeply. He said: »Does Snorri, our kinsman, wish to go away from here?« »That is what's said,« says Egill. »He does ill in doing that, « says the dream man, »because men have rarely been able to set themselves above us Mýramenn when we thrived, and he needn't look down upon this land«. Egill spoke a verse:

A man spares the sword to strike,
Blood is snow-white to behold,
A strife-age can explain this,
A bitter flame won the land for me,
A bitter flame won the land for me.

And then he turned away. Then Egill awoke.

The episode is instructive in revealing the alternative forms of narrative information that can be imparted within the saga form via dreams and the uncanny connections they can foster. The familial relationship between the two Egills is accentuated by their shared name, which acts as a symbolic bridge between two distant kinsmen. Their temporally impossible conversation allows the elder Egill to pass judgement on a crisis gathering momentum long after his death, and in which the younger Egill is embroiled. He offers an authority and insight distinct from both the narrator and the characters from thirteenth-century Iceland, in a manner that neither the ostensibly impartial narrative voice nor the characters of the first-level storyworld would be capable of as ›contemporary‹ witnesses. Egill Skalla-Grímsson's perspective is that of a valorised Icelandic past with different values, which allows for a detached, pointed, and authoritative judgement

on Snorri's conduct; as a result, Egill need not fear any repercussions for his candour. The elder Egill's verse also utilises the evocative and obscurant qualities of skaldic verse to impart forms of information that saga prose is ill-suited to conveying (Nordal 2001, pp. 117–144). The verse conveys thematic information regarding the nature of the Sturlung Age, evoking imagery of apocalyptic violence and destruction (Hultgård 1990). In one sense, the poem could serve as invective against the kind of cowardice that Egill Skalla-Grímsson scorned in his own life and which is conveyed by the sword that fails to strike and the snow-white blood potentially denoting the cowardice of thirteenth-century men. Furthermore, Egill may be punning on the dual meaning of *brandr* as both a flame and a sword; implicitly contrasting, therefore, the role of fire in land-claiming ceremonies by Egill's contemporary's during Iceland's settlement versus the use of the sword to seize land through violence in the Sturlung Age (for land-claims involving carrying a flame around the area's perimeter, see Phelpstead 2014, p. 1). But the violent imagery can also be read as depicting natural laws being turned on their head (for other uses of eschatological imagery in Norse literature, see Abram 2019, pp. 148–170) to demonstrate the degree of social upheaval that the Sturlung Age occasions. This is achieved using riddling forms of inversion and paradox to emblematise cultural expectation being upended, such as striking a blow without a weapon or someone possessing snow-white blood. The dream sequence thus suggests that from the perspective of even the notoriously hyper-violent Egill Skalla-Grímsson, the violence of the Sturlung Age appears truly senseless, and also strikingly introduces moral and social commentary on the qualitative difference between the Saga Age and the Sturlung Age.

In a similar manner, dreams allow for the association of characters living in the Sturlung Age with supernatural entities, forming a system of allegiances and parallels within the paranormal sphere that embellishes the broader political crisis.[7] Take the example of Þorgrímr Hauksson, who, while preparing to lead a large-scale raid against his enemies in Dalr,

recounts a dream of him riding with his host in the same area, where he meets a large, broad-faced, foul-smelling woman who speaks the following verse:

> *Mál er at minnast*
> *Mörnar hlakkar.*
> *Vit tvau vitum þat,*
> *viltu enn lengra?*
> (ÍF 21, p. 179)
>
> It is time to recall
> the shriek of Mörn [= battle].
> We two know that,
> will you know more?

This dream, like the one featuring Egill Skalla-Grímsson, utilises its prosimetric form to impart information in verse that prose would be ill-suited to conveying (Quinn 1987, pp. 65–68). In this case, the dream adds a new member to Þorgrímr's band: an ogress or troll woman, a sort of figure regularly associated with impermissible violence (Motz 1987). This is compounded in the verse itself where the kenning used for the forthcoming battle, *Mörnar hlakkar*, makes use of the proper name of the giantess Mörn, also mentioned in ›Grímnismál‹ (*Eddukvæði* I, p. 64). In a sense, the dream-ogress casts the upcoming battle as her own vocalisation and renders herself Þorgrímr's violent collaborator, accentuated later in the verse by her use of the first-person dual pronoun *vit*. In the final line, the ogress echoes the repeated question of the *völva* (seeress) to Óðinn in ›Völuspá‹, linking the forthcoming events to both eddic and eschatological traditions (*Eddukvæði* I, p. 14).[8] In this manner, the ruinous, even doomed quality of Þorgrímr's sortie is rendered emphatic by mythological allusions that the narrative voice could not offer, and which heighten the stakes and significance of this particular endeavour within the wider tapestry of violent encounters.

Dreams are also used to convey information at a juncture where it would not otherwise be available to characters within the narrative. Take, for instance, Guðný Böðvarsdóttir's dream of her daughter-in-law Halldora's complicated labour with Sturla Sighvatsson (ÍF 21, p. 90). She dreams that a man comes to tell her that a baby has been born and that his name is Vígsterkr (meaning strong in slaying or in battle). The next morning, the same scene repeats almost exactly in the waking world, with a man coming to tell Guðný of the birth, but in this case, the name is given as Sturla. The dream and the reality are placed parallel to one another and offer complementary accounts of Guðný first learning of her grandson's birth. The only difference, of course, is his two different sobriquets, which reveal different elements of his character at the earliest moment of his introduction into the narrative: what he will be known as (Sturla), and what he will be known for (being *vígsterkr*). Marlene Ciklamini (1983, p. 210) puts it well when she writes:

> The imagined name, Vígsterkr, prefigured the boy's character and fate. In the brief, sharply drawn vision, she foresaw Sturla Sighvatsson's violent arrogation of power and the fulfilment of the Biblical dictum that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Religious-minded contemporaries would be reminded of this when, in 1238, Sturla encountered a savage death rendered even more brutal by the violation and despoilation of his corpse.

As Sturla goes on to be one of the most ambitious and violent chieftains of the Sturlung Age, his symbolic name, revealed only in the dreamworld, aptly prefigures his violent potential, and indicates an aspect of his character crucial to the narrative that will not be apparent in the first-level storyworld for many years. Given Sturla's importance to the overall narrative of ›Íslendinga saga‹, however, establishing his association with bloodshed at this juncture has clear literary utility, with the dream offering a rubric for reading his subsequent growth to his full violent potential.

4. Slander

Slander and insult are commonplace throughout saga literature, wherein they act as a means of catalysing violence and provide the logic as to why disputes escalate, despite the best efforts of intervening parties or even the rational interests of the belligerents (Falk 2021, p. 28; Morcom 2020). In ›Íslendinga saga‹ specifically, insults convey the escalating degree of tension between rival parties and, most interestingly, provide a space for subjective assessments of the characters' qualities by their enemies within the narrative. Extremely negative alternatives to respected characters' legacies can therefore be inserted into the narrative as insults without impinging on the narrator's credibility and ostensive impartiality.

The manners in which minor squabbles can erupt inexplicably into full-scale feuds is crucial to the wider themes of ›Íslendinga saga‹ as an exploration of how ruinous elite infighting, which comes to encompass the whole of Iceland, may arise from even the smallest disputes. When Kálfr Guttormsson gets into a contest over rights for a beached whale with Hallr Kleppjárnsson, the narrator provides a broadly neutral discussion of their mutual dislike and the irresolvable complexity of the case between two equally matched and highly eloquent individuals: *Þeir deildu ok um hvalmál nökkut ok færðu þat til alþingis, ok var hvárr tveggi inn mesti fulltingsmaðr síns máls. Þótti þat æ sannara er sá talaði er þá flutti sitt eyrindi* (ÍF 21, p. 72; ›They also disagreed on a claim to a particular beached whale and prosecuted that at the *alþingi*, and each of the two was the greatest proponent of their own cause. It always seemed more truthful, when whichever one of them who was speaking related his account‹). From the two men's initial interaction, there seems to be little ground for the explosive violence that ensues, with the exception of a group of anonymous supporters of Hallr offering a sequence of insulting verses that provides a competing layer of ridicule alongside the otherwise dignified conduct of Kálfr and Hallr. Kálfr's previous status as the most powerful farmer in Eyjafjörðr

is inverted in the last of these verses, in which he is accused of petty greed when he is represented as an avaricious beggar claiming more than his fair share of food-alms:

> *Hefir um hrepp inn efra,*
> *hann er gerr at þrotsmanni,*
> *þat er kotmanna kynni,*
> *Kálfr matgjafir hálfar.*
> (ÍF 21, p. 74)
>
> Kálfr carries off half the food-donation
> across the upper part of the district.
> That is the cottager's habit;
> he is accomplished as a beggar.

Both sides are reduced in stature by the insertion of insults into the episode: not only in their rash and undignified utilisation by Hallr's camp, but also in the uncertainty that the slander introduces over the reality of Kálfr's previously established valour and nobility. In the case of Kálfr, an alternative ontology is briefly but evocatively generated through the logic of the outrage of Hallr's supporters at his conduct, in which he dramatically falls from a preeminent position in the social hierarchy to the extremely precarious one of a vagrant. Even in his new ignominious status as a beggar, however, Kálfr is implied to contravene social expectations, as he takes more than his fair share of the allotted food for the poor. The three insulting verses do not, however, offer precise moral commentary of the dispute. Their purpose is instead to reveal the interpersonal tensions and raw emotions that the genteel account offered by the narrator initially conceals: we are given a glimpse of the affective turmoil that is revealed to lie beneath the prose account. Kálfr eventually kills Hallr, and following his death, Sighvatr Sturluson composes a counter-poem redressing the insults in a triumphalist tone. Here, mockery of Sighvatr and Kálfr's opponent is achieved in an inverse manner to the rhetorical impoverishment of Kálfr in the above stanza; Hallr is described, with a hyperbolic skaldic bombast that appears

to serve as irony, as *inn forsnjalli guðhraustr gunnmáva grennir* (ÍF 21, p. 77; ›the exceedingly wise one, valiant feeder of the battle-gull [= carrion-bird, i.e. a raven; its feeder = warrior]‹) upon his defeat. The verses can therefore communicate affective information that subtly contravenes the established reputations of high-status figures.

This use of slander is extended further, however, when it is used to demonstrate the volatility of different near-contemporary accounts of events and figures from thirteenth-century Iceland. ›Íslendinga saga‹ codifies and promulgates a particular perspective on Sturlung Age affairs by investing it with narrative authority. Simultaneously, Sturla was likely aware of a large number of dissenting perspectives on events that offered if not different accounts of how matters transpired, then at least radically different affective responses to them. Take, for instance, the moment in which Snorri Sturluson composes a verse praising Jarl Skúli, his Norwegian patron who has recently bestowed on him the rank of *lendr maðr*, with the *klofastef* quoted as follows:

> *Harðmúlaðr var Skúli*
> *rambliks framast miklu*
> *gnaphjarls skapaðr jarla.*
> (ÍF 21, pp. 122–123)

Skuli was hard-mouthed to the bright glint of the high-rising land [= mountain; its glint = gold; one who is hard-mouthed (i.e. intractable) towards gold = a generous man], the foremost in form among jarls.

The verse features a somewhat tortuous initial kenning relating to Skúli's generosity, wherein the first line can readily and ironically be understood as a criticism of Skúli's unrelenting nature (Grove 2007, p. 15). In light of both Snorri and Skúli's unpopularity among other Icelandic factions, the verse is subject to direct parody, with ›Íslendinga saga‹ going on to depict how, immediately afterwards, Þóroddr of Selvag paid an unnamed man a sheep to compose an insulting rejoinder:

Oss lízk illr at kyssa
jarl, sás ræðr fyr hjarli,
vörr er til hvǫss á harra,
harðmúlaðr er Skúli
Hefir fyrir horska jöfra
hrægamms komit sævar,
þjóð finnr löst á ljóðum,
leir aldregi meira.
(ÍF 21, p. 123)

We little like to kiss the jarl,
that one who rules over this land,
the lord's lip is too sharp,
hard-mouthed is Skúli.
Never before has more
mud of the vulture of the carrion-sea [= battle; its
vulture = eagle; its mud = bad poetry]
been brought before wise rulers;
people find fault with the verse.

The historical compositional relationship between these two verses is intriguing, albeit difficult to reconstruct, but in terms of their position in the text, the placing of a sharp insult after lionising praise, in relation to a key political moment, provides a deft means of demonstrating the range and strength of opinion on controversial issues such as Skúli's increasing influence in Iceland. The insulting verse's counter-narrative may contradict Snorri's account, but it is complementary to the project of the narrative voice in providing balance to the panegyric praise of Skúli and maintaining authority through a pointed demonstration of its ›evenness‹ of perspective. The verse demonstrates open Icelandic suspicion of increased intimacy and political alignment with Skúli via the metaphor of the jarl delivering a sharp and wounding kiss to Icelanders, thus literally, violently, and humorously justifying his ›hard-mouthed‹ status. Snorri's verse is similarly reconstrued, being revealed to be eagle's dung, a reference to the myth of the mead of poetry, wherein Óðinn in eagle form carries the mead of poetry in

his mouth – being pursued by the giant Suttungr, from whom he has reclaimed the stolen mead – and defecates all defective and ill-crafted verse in the course of his journey (Quinn 1994a and 1994b). The relationship between noble lord and virtuoso poet has been upended into one between tyrant and hack, a stinging insult that reveals how far the dissatisfied people (*þjóð*) differ from the intellectual elite in their assessment of contemporary matters. Insulting verse of this sort may not be a medium with much in the way of cultural capital, but its capability to offer radical dissent from an anonymous collective allows it to fulfil a vital role in ›Íslendinga saga‹ in ensuring a place, however subordinate, for non-elite perspectives within the narrative (Wanner 2008, pp. 30–52).

The reporting of an anonymous insult, therefore, provides a means for scandalous material to be included into the narrative without the narrator having to imply that the insulting claims constitute an objective feature of the storyworld. This maintenance of something akin to plausible deniability on the part of the narrator regarding particularly venomous insults serves as a method of maintaining narrative authority, specifically on a tonal level. This is due to the equivocation of the narrative voice with Sturla as a member of the contemporary Icelandic intellectual elite, which necessitates a degree of distancing from cruder material. One such instance is a piece of mockery attributed to the inhabitants of Víðdælir and directed at the powerful men of Miðfjörðr, who are described as making up all the most shameful areas of a mare together – Þorbjörn Bergsson is the back, his brother Gísl the belly, Gísl's sons the feet, Óláfr Magnússon the thigh, and Tannr Bjarnason the arse (ÍF 21, p. 123). Tannr is singled out for the most shameful role with humorous logic: *Hann sögðu þeir skíta á alla, þá er við hann áttu af hrópi sínu* (ÍF 21, p. 101; ›They said he shit on everyone who dealt with him through his slander‹). While crude, this insult conveys a range of important sociopolitical information in a rich format: the strength of the enmity between Víðidalr and Miðfjörðr; not only the shaming of preeminent men, but the comparative strength of insult each man deserves;

and, in recapping a set of political allies, the construction of a rough symbolic hierarchy of their relationships. While such scurrilous insult of powerful men would undercut the studied dispassion of the narrative voice, the problem can be avoided by the attribution of the mockery to the collective inhabitants of a region or district, both to avoid individual culpability and to preclude investigations of the authority or reliability of the insult's source.

5. Gossip

Gossip generally operates in a similar manner to insult, as described above, wherein it provides a lower-status discursive mode by which incendiary or controversial opinions can feature within the narrative while a degree of distance is maintained from the narrator. Counter-narrative can thus take a subordinate yet striking position within ›Íslendinga saga‹, while simultaneously avoiding any implication that such views are upheld as objective features of the saga's action. This is particularly the case when providing ambivalent presentations of the affective sub-currents within households, families, and communities that act as the motivations for conflict and bloodshed, which gossip has the capability to communicate (Sayers 1990). Gossip has been traditionally classed as a mode of discourse exclusively associated with women,[9] but it is also employed by male characters in ›Íslendinga saga‹, although the wider point that gossip is »as much a weapon for the powerless as for the powerful – indeed, more so, as the powerful had more to lose in a society with such an emphasis upon honour« remains true (Cochrane 2012, p. 55, see also Kress 1991). In this vein, and unlike insult, gossip is therefore also a vital component of consensus-forming within the saga, through its operation as a subtle background mechanism by which groups of characters slowly turn against a powerful or arrogant individual and begin to plot their downfall. Gossip is thus often presented

as indirect speech used to punctuate, formalise, and express a rising negative sentiment within a community, and in a more muted manner than dreams, to foreshadow an individual's eventual fall from grace. One such example occurs when the notoriously fractious Bishop Guðmundr Arason employs outlaws or petty miscreants to levy fines against opposing farmers during his conflict with Kolbeinn Tumason (see Walgenbach 2021, pp. 99–126). The farmers' response is described as follows:

> *En þeir er fyrir voru þorðu eigi annat en gjalda slíkt er þeir kröfðu ok kölluðu rán. Nú var illr kurr í bóndum, þóttust hafa látit höfðingjann ok farit sjálfir sneypu, látit frændr sína ok vini, en sumir limu, ok gjalda fé á þat ofan. Kalla þeir þetta allt hernað ok rán.* (ÍF 21, p. 61)
>
> But they did not dare do anything except pay up what was demanded of them, and [yet] they called it robbery. Now there was ill-tempered grumbling among the farmers, as it seemed to them that they had lost their chieftain and fallen into disgrace themselves, lost their family and friends – and some their limbs – and had to pay fines on top of that. They said it was altogether looting and robbery.

Clearly this overt opposition to an ecclesiastical authority such as a bishop (and one with a tentative claim to sainthood) is not a position that can be fully adopted by the narrative voice (see Skórzewska 2011, pp. 165–205). Nonetheless, Guðmundr's actions are, at the very least, highly acquisitive, and the presence of gossip provides a way of priming an audience to consider alternative perspectives to the hegemonic norm. The use of the word *kurr* (›murmur‹, ›grumbling‹, but also ›a rumour‹) in the passage is of particular note, as its precise meaning blurs together senses of complaint and dissatisfaction with that of an unsubstantiated report, underscoring the close relationship between gossip and counter-narrative in ›Íslendinga saga‹. The farmers' gossip has a transformative function in reconstruing the results of a legal settlement as a violent crime and the bishop himself as gang-leader. Furthermore, the gossip qualifies the previous legal arbitration, at which the farmers feel they have not been satisfactorily represented,

by providing an informal avenue to advance their own perspective on their dealings with Guðmundr in bombastic terms. This counter-narrative is hyperbolic and portrays Guðmundr in a manner that could never be fully endorsed by the narrator himself. It does, however, both foreshadow Guðmundr's escalating political machinations and, crucially, provide the narrator with some justification for the later ambivalent portrayal of the bishop as he becomes increasingly embroiled in violent, secular power struggles, in contrast to his hagiographic portrayal in the *biskupasögur* (sagas of bishops) (Stefán Karlsson 1985). The narrative voice is thus able to position itself in an enlightened middle ground between critical gossip and panegyric, accentuating its authority.

Another form of gossip present in the saga is closely entwined with the saga style itself. Saga literature often makes use of litotes; when combined with hearsay, this produces a particular form of obfuscating understatement by which the loose and vague report of important events via anonymous gossip leads to them being misconstrued or sensationalised, often resulting in further violence. One such case is this brief episode at an assembly, centering on a follower of Snorri Sturluson called Herburt (likely a German):

> *En er hann kom út hafði hann Herburt brugðit sverði ok vildi höggva Hjaltinn. Magnús tók berum höndum sverðit ok stöðvaði höggit. Hann skeindist mjök á höndunum. Þá var sagt Sæmundi at unnit væri á Magnúsi.* (ÍF 21, p. 107)
>
> And when he had come out, Herburt had drawn his sword and wanted to cut down Hjalti. Magnús grabbed the sword with his bare hands and stayed the blow. He was badly scratched on his hands. Sæmundr was then told that Magnús had been injured.

Here, the narrative voice has access to comprehensive information about an unusual encounter, which it conveys to the audience. The report that reaches Sæmundr, however, is stripped of much of the important detail,

focusing simply on the injury dealt to Magnús Guðmundarson. I believe this constitutes gossip, as it represents the imperfect or loose transmission of information about an event, in which the looseness of the communication itself has consequences for how a third party understands the event in question. The gossip communicates an unspecified injury to Magnús Guðmundarson, a respected member of a powerful family, without the qualifying details of him intercepting the blow himself or the relative superficiality of his injuries. The brief and vague form of the account given in gossip justifies subsequent violent escalation in a manner that full details of the encounter might preclude. Gossip, therefore, provides a mechanism to introduce misapprehension and the conveyance of limited information into the narrative, without contravening the simulated omniscience of the narrative voice.

6. Rumour

Rumour is the most unusual of the four discursive modes discussed in this article, as it has the unique function of directly challenging the authority of the narrative voice and introducing to the text the possibility of an actuality of events different to those which the narrator reports. This feature is what most markedly distinguishes rumour from gossip; a central element of the present article's understanding of rumour is that of the contested veracity and multiplicity of accounts about a single action. Gossip has an altogether subordinate status to the account provided by the narrative voice, while rumour often intrudes into the narrative in sections where the narrative voice forfeits a degree of its authority in admitting that objective report is impossible, due to a secret or concealed event occurring or incompatible reports of a matter being circulated. It is of note that this low-status mode of communication is invested with such status in ›Íslendinga saga‹; after all, it is most prominently associated with »women and lower-class people, the kind who are represented often enough in saga literature

as conveying tittle-tattle, rumour, and superstition« (Clunies Ross 2010, p. 29). Dreams and slander, although not approbated discourses, are utilised by higher-status individuals in certain circumstances; conversely, gossip and rumour are united in their association with the more marginal members of Icelandic society or, most typically, with anonymous collectives.

In some cases, the admission of the limitations of narrative authority is only partial, as in the following example:

> *Sá maðr var kominn til Sauðafells er Sveinn hét, ísfirzkr. Hann hafði tekit lokur frá hurðum ok gengit út, ok segja Dalamenn at hann væri njósnarmaðr, en hann duldi þess, ok hyggjum vér sannara vera, því at hann ver kominn at útan af Snæfellsnesi.* (ÍF 21, p. 186)
>
> A certain man named Sveinn from Ísafjorðr had come to Sauðafell. He had taken the locks off the doors and left again; the men of Dalr said he was a spy, but he denied this, and yet we think it to be more likely to be true, because he had come from Snæfellsness.

The intermingling of that which can be reported as ›objective‹ and that which cannot is instructive in this example. Sveinn's actions, which are key in allowing for an upcoming assault on the farmstead to succeed, are presented objectively, but the possibility of his malicious intention, which would confirm his status as a hostile agent, is contested. The sagas delve obliquely into issues of psychological interiority and are particularly opaque in relation to character motivations (Sif Ríkharðsdóttir 2017, p. 38). Consequently, Sveinn's physical behaviour within the storyworld can be presented as a concrete fact, but the reasons for his conduct are presented as a matter of rumour. This is particularly the case here because Sveinn and the men of Dalr disagree about his motivations; as a result, the matter can initially be presented only as two sets of competing rumours, both possibly accurate. Ultimately, in this case, the narrator swiftly reclaims authority by arbitrating between the two conflicting rumours, siding with the men of

Dalr, and providing additional locational information to corroborate their claim. The use of the first-person plural by the narrator is also interesting, and perhaps gestures to a conception of the narrator as a collaborative or iterative construct at some points within the text, or as a feature that gains its authority via communal consensus, which is reflected here at a moment of contested action. At some junctures, however, the relationship between rumour and narrative voice is even more discordant. Sighvatr Sturluson and Hafr, the brother of Einarr skemmingr, are in an ongoing dispute when a new character is introduced – a lower-status farmhand called Gunnarr kumbi, who was rumoured to have been poorly treated by Hafr (ÍF 21, pp. 136–137). The narrator then states that Gunnarr goes to Sighvatr for counsel. Shortly afterwards, Hafr's guard dog disappears and the next night Hafr is found dead, killed with his own axe. The action of Hafr's slaying is itself absent from the narration, but at the ensuing assembly organised to arbitrate the killing, Gunnarr kumbi confesses to the crime and is taken captive by Sighvatr, after which he mysteriously dies during the winter (ÍF 21, pp. 137–138).

Up to this point, the above might seem to be a swiftly resolved mystery of the sort the sagas sometimes engage in, with the narrator withholding some information momentarily for the sake of tension, before resolving the matter conclusively for the audience (Burrows 2009, p. 41; Harris 1993, p. 84). The final lines of the episode, however, read as follows:

> *En um sumarit eptir kom Jón Birnuson í Stafaholt til Snorra og sagði Sighvat hafa sent sik […] Lagðist sá orðrómr á at han hafði vegið Hafr, ok helzt sá orðrómr lengi síðan.* (ÍF 21, p. 138)
>
> But during the next summer, Jón Birnuson came to see Snorri in Stafaholt and said Sighvatr had sent him. […] A certain rumour circulated that he had killed Hafr, and that rumour persisted for a long time afterwards.

The information provided here is stressed as being communicated via anonymous rumour, and strikingly undercuts the narrative offered up to this

point by the narrative voice. Rather than a concealed killing by the poor and disgruntled shepherd, the rumour instead suggests an elaborate conspiracy on the part of the Sturlungs, and Sighvatr in particular, who have set up Gunnarr as an expendable scapegoat to conceal their assassination of Hafr via an agent whom they go on to support and protect (see North 2009, pp. 259–260; Nordal 1998, pp. 59–60 and 224–227). Furthermore, the position of this information at the conclusion of the narrative sequence elevates it from being simply a competing, but not seriously entertained, theory concerning the events in question, to something more akin to a twist ending in overturning all previously established information (Ryan 2009, p. 57). For this narrative effect to work, however, the narrative voice must itself simulate conviction concerning the credibility of Gunnarr's guilt. It may even be possible to extend this so far as to say that at this juncture, ›Íslendinga saga‹ exhibits play in relation to the concept of narratorial authority. By this, I mean that the audience's trust in the narrator's otherwise consistent commitment to objective report is here utilised to foster an uncritical acceptance of Gunnarr as the murderer. The narrative voice achieves this by presenting a range of circumstantial evidence aligning around his culpability, while omitting anything that might even suggest another course of events had transpired. The success of the Sturlung's stratagem is therefore also extrapolated onto the audience as well, as they are similarly hoodwinked through the manipulation of narrative authority.

Given the association of the narrative voice with Sturla Þórðarson, himself a member of the Sturlung family, this narrative device is particularly fitting, as he too participates in his family's scheme, albeit on a different diegetic level. What is more interesting, perhaps, is the clash between Sturla the narrator's association with a particular family and his simultaneous reputation as a reliable historian, with the latter role seeming to cause his inability to fully excise the scandalous actuality from the narrative altogether. Rumour, with its unverified and low-status connotations, thus becomes the mechanism by which this information re-enters the discourse –

that is to say, the fact that Sighvatr did not simply condone Hafr's murder, but actively commissioned it, operates in a form of epistemological limbo as a persistent rumour, neither fully accepted nor dismissed.

7. Conclusion

The authority of the narrative voice in ›Íslendinga saga‹ is a consistent artifice and a feature of the narrative discourse that has clear utility in concealing the fraught epistemological issues of constructing a cohesive, coherent narrative from the hotly contested recent political crisis of the Sturlung Age. To achieve this, the narrative voice is closely entwined with the persona of Sturla Þórðarson, to capitalise on his personal connection to the events in question and his enduring reputation as an authoritative mediator of thirteenth-century Icelandic events. At certain occasions, however, the façade of flatly objective report that the narrative voice offers is acknowledged to have limitations to the forms and quality of narrative it can recount. The presence of dreams, insults, gossip, and rumour, distinguished from the general narrative voice in being delivered by partisan inhabitants of the storyworld, provides a productive but generally subordinate narrative mechanism by which alternative renditions of, and perspectives on, the events and figures of the Sturlung Age can briefly intrude into the narrative. At their most forceful, these narrative modes reveal information and radically alter the tone or mood of the narrative, in a manner not permitted by the heavy authority demanded of the narrative voice.

Notes

1 Saga narrators occasionally address an implied audience for various reasons, be it moral instruction, clarifying the source of information, or defending some particularly improbable sequence: see O'Connor (2005). Even in such cases, however, little personalising information about the narrators in question is revealed.

2 It should be noted that Ordower (1991) follows the wider consensus in saga studies in noting this disinterest as simulated, rather than real. Saga narrators may more subtly demonstrate strong moral, political, or familial alignment with various figures and factions within their narratives.

3 As to what McKinnell means by a ›real historian‹, I take him to be referring to the degree of epistemological uncertainty that underpins the modern discipline of history, where one must maintain a degree of scepticism as to what can be known or said about the past. Even realist historians must caveat their claims about the past to a degree to make clear that there are limits to what can be reconstructed of past events (see Kinloch 2018) – an admission that the sagas do not demonstrate a comparable need to make.

4 For the most thorough conceptualisation of focalisation, see Jahn (1996).

5 All English translations are my own.

6 The meaningfulness of omniscience as a category of narration has been both critiqued and defended, but its relationship to the generation of authority is clear (see Culler 2004).

7 For a fuller discussion of the intrusion of the mythic into ›Íslendinga saga‹, see Clunies Ross (1994).

8 In ›Völuspá‹, Óðinn's repeated requests for knowledge about Ragnarök, the Old Norse apocalypse, from the *völva*, a supernatural seeress, trigger a similar refrain from the seeress as both a rebuke for and a warning against probing for further knowledge of the future.

9 For general discussions of gossip and its relationship to medieval women, see Phillips (2010); Lochrie (2003); and Wickham (1998).

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