Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur* Round-Table Discussion

At the final session of the conference 'Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed' (Schæffergården, Denmark, 25–28 August 2005), a lively discussion about the generic definition of the *fornaldarsögur* took place. It was agreed during the session to present the range of perspectives voiced there in a printed round-table discussion in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* to which all participants were invited to contribute. After initial contributions were submitted, the discussion was circulated for comments and rejoinders and some further contributions were made. I am grateful to Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson, the organizers of the conference, for their permission to publish this phase of the discussion here.

Judy Quinn

Marianne Kalinke

The terminology used by scholars of medieval Icelandic literature to classify the sagas has been understood by most to be an indicator of genre. In the case of the *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, I have maintained that the sagas assigned to each of these groups do not constitute a single genre but belong in fact to different narrative types. A case in point are the translated *riddarasögur*, which designation is used for works that have been recognized by scholars of continental literature as belonging to such distinct genres as romance, heroic epic (*chanson de geste*), and Breton lai. The *chansons de geste*, in fact, are to French literature, or the originally German tales compiled in *Þiðreks saga* are to German literature, what the

fornaldarsögur are to Icelandic literature, that is, if one understands these as embracing narratives of an epic *forn öld*.

While the modifier *riddara-* serves to identify the protagonists in the former sagas (though this too is problematic: the protagonists of some texts identified as such are not knights) and the modifier *fornaldar-* locates the time of the action of the latter, these designations are not indicative of narrative types. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, for example, is traditionally included among the *fornaldarsögur*, yet the only reason for this appears to be the setting in a northern *forn öld*. The designation does not take into account such aspects as structure and the nature of the quest. The saga is, in fact, a bridal-quest narrative, a subtype of romance.

Scholars seem to be obsessed with the designation *fornaldarsögur* and have tried to fit every saga thus named into the collective attributes of the group. Complicating the issue is the fact that while a saga may be known by one title, it may be transmitted in redactions that belong upon analysis to different genres. A case in point is *Gautreks saga*, the original redaction of which, as Michael Chesnutt has argued, is a *Märchen*. What has led to the inclusion of a work known as *Gautreks saga* among the *fornaldarsögur* is the *Víkars þáttr*, which was interpolated by a later redactor. Hence, in a case like *Gautreks saga*, we confront a work that is transmitted in two different genres, and how the saga is classified depends upon the redaction that is under discussion.

If scholars are to advance our understanding of the sagas subsumed under the designation *fornaldarsögur*, they need to go beyond the setting of content in a Nordic or Northern *forn öld* and also take into account such other indicators of genre as form, style, structure, context, nature of the protagonists and their quests, and function. We should cease to equate an ossified designation with genre, which forces us to accommodate every deviation from the norm, such as the inclusion of religious elements, in our self-created generic straightjacket. The identification of a narrative as a *fornaldarsaga* implicitly suggests a generic designation. It might be useful to accept Jauss's suggestion (1977, 110) that genre should not be understood in the logical sense of the word but rather as applying to groups or historical families that are underivable and indefinable and that can only be determined, delimited, and described in their synchronic and historical context.

Margaret Clunies Ross

There are two fixed points to my thinking about this question. The first is the lack of generic definitions, within medieval writings themselves, for medieval European vernacular literary texts in prose, including Old Icelandic ones. This may be

taken to reflect the fact that fully agreed criteria based on sets of conventions representing the shared literary expectations of both writers and audiences did not exist during the formative period of the *fornaldarsaga* and other saga kinds. This situation is clearly in contrast with the usually readily discernable generic affiliations of medieval Latin literature or medieval vernacular literature modelled directly on classical or Christian ecclesiastical sources, such as annals, saints' lives, hymns, and genres that were associated with the medieval schoolroom.

The second point contrasts expectations about prose and poetry in vernacular medieval literatures, and particularly in Old Icelandic. There is good evidence that vernacular poetic genres in most medieval European languages could often be classified generically using contemporary technical terms of indigenous provenance. The evidence is particularly strong for Old Norse-Icelandic, and I have recently reviewed it (Clunies Ross 2005, 29–68). The initial development of prose writing in medieval Scandinavia seems to belong to the twelfth century, particularly its second half, and, aside from translations from Latin and other non-Scandinavian languages, or in technical manuals, it involves the prosimetrum form, that is, the combination of poetry and prose in varying proportions. (We find this too in Saxo Grammaticus.)

If, as Anne Holtsmark, Torfi Tulinius, and others have proposed, most of the various prose kinds that we and medieval people call *saga* (the one secure generic term for this kind of writing) began their evolution about the same time, then we can see their distinctiveness from one another as something of gradual and variable development, just as the kinds of fiction for which they served as vehicles developed gradually. At the core of the different kinds of saga were the different kinds of poetry around which these prosimetra developed: sagas of Icelanders and kings' sagas evolved around skaldic poetry, or perhaps in some cases only appeared to do so, while *fornaldarsögur* evolved around what we call eddic-style poetry. This is clearly the situation with some of what are probably the earliest *fornaldarsögur*, like *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Heiðreks saga*.

At some point the new verse-prose combination took off, from a literary point of view, and sometimes moved away altogether from its traditional poetic base. In this process, the saga form was labile and could assume one or more of a number of guises, borrowing from this or that foreign or indigenous model (hence some of the parallels that Carol Clover discusses in *The Medieval Saga* (1982) or which, on a micro-level, Lars Lönnroth has urged in a number of his writings). Hence, although we can often articulate properties that belong more to one kind of saga than to others, we cannot differentiate them in a water-tight fashion, as classical genre theory requires. As far as the *fornaldarsögur* go, we can see that certain dis-

tinguishing characteristics are usually to be found in them (they are usually set in prehistory and outside Iceland, but deal with figures who are ancestors of historical Icelanders), but some of them have clear affinities with other kinds of literature, like the romance, the saint's life, and learned literature of encyclopedic type.

We must accept that the term *saga* is the only generic signifier of this literature. The various subgroups we — and doubtless medieval people too — recognize cannot be given secure generic definitions. They are fuzzy categories: we recognize them when we come across them, as medieval people must have, but there will always be exceptions or partial exceptions to the rule. I don't think we should get too upset about this. The fact is that medieval European vernacular literatures were different from the clear-cut genres of classical and Christian Latin literatures. The vernaculars borrowed from the latter, but they eventually developed new, often hybrid literary forms. The Icelandic saga and its various subtypes, including the *fornaldarsaga*, was one of the most original of these new developments.

Carl Phelpstead

All language use, including that in written texts, relies upon generic conventions: such conventions both assist in the production of discourse and help the addressee in making sense of it. It is inevitable that when we begin to read a text, we approach that text with what is known in hermeneutic theory as a *Vorverständis*, a set of preconceptions about what kind of text it is, how it will resemble other texts with which we are familiar, and consequently what kinds of meanings we may expect from it. As we read we may modify those preconceptions in the light of our encounter with the text, but this process will always involve reclassification: it is not possible to read a text as if we had never encountered any other texts.

In the case of Old Norse-Icelandic literature we lack the kind of information that would enable us fully to reconstruct the 'ethnic' genre system, that is, the system of groupings of texts that a medieval Icelander would recognize (whether or not his/her awareness of the distinctions was consciously articulated). Since a partial reconstruction necessarily falsifies the system as a whole, we are obliged to use an 'analytic' system, one constructed by modern scholars (though no doubt with due regard to what is known of the ethnic system). It follows from this that the sole meaningful criterion for the adoption or retention of a generic label is its usefulness: does the term help us understand the text (or Old Norse literature as a whole) better? Does it 'work' to enable new, more insightful readings of the individual text and/or of the group of texts? If not, we are free to discard it and substitute something more useful.

Like most of the terms used to classify Old Norse prosimetric literature, *fornaldarsaga* is a modern label, part of the analytic genre system. However, the fact that it is still in widespread use more than 175 years after C. C. Rafn put it into circulation suggests that it is still found to be useful in the way outlined above. We are free to discard it if a more effective terminology can be found, but none of the alternatives that have so far been suggested has recommended itself to as large a number of scholars as continue to use the term *fornaldarsaga*.

This is certainly not to say that the *fornaldarsögur* comprise an entirely uniform, homogeneous group of texts. Recent work on genre theory usefully draws on Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance': like the members of a family, the texts in a given genre will resemble other texts in that 'family' in various ways, but it may well be that no one text shares all the defining features with any other one text.

The term *fornaldarsaga* is useful as a kind of shorthand to indicate that texts such as, for example, *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* have important features in common which they do not share with, say, *Maríu saga* or *Sverris saga*. But it does not necessarily follow that Rafn's label, or his criteria for assembling the corpus ('Söguflokkr sá [. . .] er tilætlað at innihalda skuli íslenzku sögurnar, er greina frá atburðum þeim, er orðit hafa hér á Norðrlöndum, áðr enn Island bygðist á 9du öld' (Rafn 1829–30, I, v)) are perfect. His definition of *fornaldarsögur* may be refined, or at least tested, by considering whether marginal texts such as *Yngvars saga víðförla* or *Ynglinga saga* should be classified as *fornaldarsögur*: this focuses attention in a fruitful way on what it is that the texts in the genre as a whole have in common.

Torfi Tulinius

I think that a minimal definition of the *fornaldarsögur* as genre is actually quite good: '*Fornaldarsögur* are the sagas that C. C. Rafn published under this blanket title.' At least, whenever one tries to describe them in more detail it becomes a bit like the three blind men who all came into contact with an elephant and all described it in wildly different ways: one touched the trunk and thought the elephant was supple and winding like a snake, another a tusk and said it was cold, hard, and sharp like a pointed stick, the last embraced one of the feet and described the animal as strong and thick like a tree trunk. In the same way, for the *fornaldarsögur*, the definition seems to depend on which particular saga you have in mind. *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Hálfdanar saga* are quite different, as are *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*.

Therefore I also tend to agree with Marianne Kalinke who found generic distinctions within the corpus by isolating a particular type of romance (bridal-quest romance) and finding that it had representatives within at least two separate corpuses, the *fornaldarsögur* and the indigenous romance. Marianne's approach, however, implies that the *fornaldarsögur* are not a genre but a corpus, and we are back to the minimal definition. As I have already said, I can live with that. I do however believe that there is a distinct danger in trying to ascribe different *fornaldarsögur* to different genres, and that is to miss out on the hybrid nature of these sagas, something to which Lars Lönnroth has drawn our attention . At least many of them are multimodal (or multigeneric), that is, you sometimes have the impression in the same saga that you are switching genres (from the heroic mode to the comic, for example in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, or from Viking tale to wonder tale, for example in *Qrvar-Odds saga*). The best example of such hybridity or generic switching is to my mind *Samsons saga fagra*, which does not belong to the corpus edited by Rafn but is called a *riddarasaga*. Indeed, it starts off within a world of Celto-courtly romance, but then events bring the characters to the far North and the story's world changes and it becomes the same as in many *fornaldarsögur*, such as *Bósa saga* or *Hálfdanar saga Brǫnufóstra*.

This leads me to propose to define genre in the way Tzvetan Todorov does (1970, 12): 'Les genres sont précisément ces relais par lesquels l'oeuvre se met en rapport avec l'univers de la littérature' (Genre is the way a work engages itself with the world of literature). *Samsons saga fagra* engages with literature by distinguishing between two separate genres (or worlds): continental romance and *fornaldarsögur*. However, by bringing them together in the same text, it also challenges their boundaries.

Gottskálk Jensson

Scholars have for the most part accepted as *fornaldarsögur* the sagas published under this rubric in modern collections, starting with C. C. Rafn's edition of 1829–30, where the generic label was introduced. Leaving it to the experts to critique the soundness of the editorial choices made by Rafn and his followers, I shall take it as a *rezeptionsgeschichtliche Faktum* that this group of sagas, indeed, forms a genre of its own.

Rather than debate Rafn's legacy, I wish to speculate about the possible origins and history of this genre. From another academic area of interest, the Ancient Novel, I know that twentieth-century scholarship on that genre, likewise, harks back to seminal work done by nineteenth-century philologists; in the case of the

Greek novel, to Erwin Rohde's *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (1876). Rohde approaches the history and nature of the Greek novel — a genre for which he had little admiration — genetically, in the sense of proposing out of what other kinds of literature the genre in question arose and deriving its main qualities from these. To Rohde the Greek novel was sentimental, because of its origin in erotic poetry; fabulous, because of its origin in fantastic travel literature, or *Reisefabulistik*; and stylistically pretentious, because it was written in the Second Sophistic (second century AD). His organic idea of genres — they are born, mature, and die — which is still pretty much the idea of genre we still labour under, was both romantic and philological at the same time.

Applied to the *fornaldarsaga*, we may recognize that, in a manner, we already possess a description of the end, or, as it were, the death of the *fornaldarsaga*, in Matthew Driscoll's study of the Post-Reformation sagas (1977). To write an organic account of the whole corpus, however, we would first have to work the approximate dates of individual sagas into a 'biography' of the genre. Dating individual texts is of paramount importance for such an account. (The main reason why the particulars of Rohde's model of the Greek novel are now obsolete is his dating of the texts, which in some cases were overthrown by scraps of papyri reappearing from the sands of Egypt.) After getting the texts in chronological order, we would ask what characterized the genre of *fornaldarsaga* in different centuries, and what the relationship of our genre to other genres with which it came into contact may have been during different stages of its 'life'. We could also, in the manner of Rohde's source-critical probing, ask out of what pre-existing genres the *fornaldarsaga* was born.

To give examples, at the 2001 conference, 'Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi', I argued that *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* (dated by Lagerhom to 1325), displayed several characteristics typical of fourteenth-century frame-narratives, such as Boccaccio's *Decamerone* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. More important for the overall history of the genre, we have the hypothesis, discussed in 2005 by Karsten Friis-Jensen in his paper on Saxo Grammaticus, regarding the development of prose *fornaldarsögur* out of heroic poetry, with an all-important intermediary phase in the prosimetric specimens of the genre. (Will an updated chronology of the texts support or overthrow this hypothesis?) This is also where Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* becomes important, a prosimetric history of the Danes, written around 1200, in a beautifully learned and ambitious Latin style, and yet based in part on Old Norse heroic poetry. Whole episodes of Saxo's very extensive Latin text should indeed be included under the rubric *fornaldarsaga*.

The parallels between Saxo and certain Icelandic sagas (for example *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Gautreks saga*), as well as the Danish author's use of the same or similar poetic sources, show that accounts of the origin of the genre will be incomplete without consideration of the *Gesta Danorum*. Furthermore, we should ask what consequences it will have for our account of the origin to accept with Hoffmann (as many scholars now have) the evidence at the end of *Yngvars saga víðförla* that the original of that text was written in Latin by Oddr munkr Snorrason at the monastery of Þingeyrar (most probably before 1200). This evidence makes the lost first version of *Yngvars saga* the earliest known written *fornaldarsaga* — although not in C. C. Rafn's original collection, it *is* found in Guðni Jónsson's often reprinted four-volume collection, *Fornaldar sögur norðurlanda* (1950) — and shows, together with the specimens of the genre in the *Gesta Danorum*, paradoxically, that the origins of the kind of literature that we now call *fornaldarsaga* are perhaps not to be sought in Old Norse but in Latin texts. What significance, then, are we prepared to assign to this apparent fact, when we construe the genetic events of our account of the genre of *fornaldarsaga*?

Ármann Jakobsson

It is normal and healthy that scholars should be suspicious of the subgeneric term *fornaldarsögur*, as a legacy of the early nineteenth century (Rafn's edition), since many of the early nineteenth-century conceptions of medieval literature must now be regarded as obsolete. On the other hand, the term has now become integrated into our way of thinking about sagas. Thus the term *fornaldarsaga* will continue to be used, if only because it is a part of saga scholarship and it is neither possible nor profitable for current or future scholars to try to separate themselves entirely from their scholarly heritage.

The debate between Harris and Lönnroth in *Scandinavian Studies* in 1975 drew forth most of the classical arguments in the genre debate. On the one hand, there was Lönnroth's maxim of using the medieval reception and terminology as an indicator. On the other, there was Harris's focus on a similar structure and common traits. Both approaches are perfectly valid, although I do fear that looking at the manuscript tradition may not yield us conclusive evidence of generic boundaries. And the danger of seeking common traits of pre-existing groups is that they often exist in other texts as well, and then the argument becomes less than conclusive.

In every generic debate, I think critics must attempt two things: (1) to deal with every single text as a unity (without dismissing the notion that parts of the

said text may belong to a separate genre), and (2) to rid themselves of preconceived ideas as far as is possible, using the principle of Occam's razor which is well illustrated by Descartes's well-known argument for his own existence. Sadly, it seems that genre commentary often reveals a lack of awareness of these principles. Instead scholars work with predefined groups, such as *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, or *Íslendingasögur*. They compare the groups to each other, find common traits, etc. but the pre-existence of the groups skews the deductions that can be made. To my mind, it would be more convincing to start by assuming that the groups do not exist and then argue from there why we need them.

Harris's influential studies of the *þættir* in the kings' sagas revealed structural affinities, common motifs, and perhaps even a shared ideology. However, many narratives in the kings' sagas that have not been called *þættir* but which may share these characteristics were never drawn into the debate. Thus, while the study certainly proved something, it did not necessarily prove that the *þættir* should be regarded as a subgenre of the sagas. The same might be said about attempts to compare the vocabulary of *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, for example. There might be common traits and substantial differences, but in itself the comparison proves nothing if pre-existing groups are being compared instead of individual sagas. On the other hand, Marianne Kalinke's discussion in the Introduction to her *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland* (1990) is a fruitful approach to the generic question, in that it tries not to be constrained by pre-existing generic boundaries. That, I think, is a good start.

Annette Lassen

Most generic divisions are to some extent problematic. Individual texts within the same genre may have characteristics that are reminiscent of other genres and they can therefore be regarded as being situated on the periphery of the genre. The sagas which we designate 'fornaldarsögur norðurlanda' can properly be divided up into a range of subgenres. But the modern generic classification, which is concerned with the time-setting and geographical space of the narrative, is pragmatic and probably does not accord in every detail with the medieval conception of these narratives. One method of investigating the boundaries between different genres, their similarities and differences, is to consider one element — a figure, person, or god — who appears in many texts across genres. In connection with my study of Óðinn (Lassen 2005), I have investigated such patterns across the genres of Old Norse literature. In the Christian Middle Ages, the heathen god Óðinn was a figure loaded with meaning, both negative and positive. A review of

different representations of him and attitudes towards him in texts would seem to offer the possibility of grouping texts into different genres and, beyond that, of dividing genres into subgenres.

A quick survey of Óðinn's appearances in Old Norse literature reveals that he does not appear at all in Icelandic hagiographic works. He never turns up in the stories of Icelandic heroes in Iceland, whereas he occasionally appears when they have travelled far from Iceland (for example, in *Harðar saga* and *Bárðar saga Snæfellssáss*). Within kings' sagas, Óðinn plays a significant role as a diabolical figure of temptation in the sagas of the two missionary kings, Saint Óláfr and Óláfr Tryggvason. In the *riddarasögur* (both translated and Icelandic), Óðinn plays no part in the narrative, a fact which can be explained by the sagas' southern European setting. In the *fornaldarsögur*, the background setting is most often Scandinavian, and the period the sagas are set in is mainly before the settlement of Iceland and the Christianization of Scandinavia. It is in these sagas that Óðinn appears most often, and in the greatest range of roles. In many *fornaldarsögur*, the representation of Óðinn appears to be free of Christian interpretations, but nevertheless Óðinn is understood in a Christian light in many sagas of the genre. (Perhaps it ought also be mentioned that the representation of Óðinn varies from one version to another of the same saga.)

In this way, one can use the varying depictions of Óðinn to identify subgenres within the corpus. A brief consideration reveals that, on the one hand, there is coincidence between dynastic sagas' paganizing representations (as in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Vǫlsunga saga*, and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*) and *fornaldarsögur* in which the hero is a noble heathen (as in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, and *Ketils saga hængs*). Different subgenres seem to have marked out certain guidelines for the manner in which Óðinn could appear in the narrative. Obviously I do not wish to claim that people in the Middle Ages were conscious of the modern genre distinctions that scholars make today. But Icelandic saga-writers or redactors may have had a sense of what possibilities were available for the depiction of, for example, Viking kings, Icelandic heroes, or missionary kings. In the same way, geographical space and the time-setting of a narrative may have marked out certain bounds.

Elizabeth Ashman Rowe

Alastair Fowler's theory of genre (Fowler 1982) can help us understand the *fornaldarsögur*, now classified by subject and when and where they take place. Fowler agrees that these features signal genre, but he argues that generic identity

also comprises representational aspect, external structure, size, scale, subject, values, mood, occasion, attitude, setting, characters, plot structure, style, and task for the reader. Using his theory means not only distinguishing between the corpus of *fornaldarsögur* and the abstract definition that determines whether a particular work 'really' is a *fornaldarsaga*, but also describing how the genre changed over time.

As early as 1119, Icelanders were composing stories about *fornaldarsaga* material, but written texts came later, with romance influence already present (1250–1300). By 1300, the genre had two branches. One told of legendary heroes such as Hrólfr kraki, whose tale was modelled on that of King Arthur. The other told of 'new' heroes such as Qrvar-Oddr, who illustrated the quality of freemen. The generic markers distinguishing them from other kinds of sagas are the following:

Markers	**Heroic Legends**	**Adventure Tales**
Scale	Several generations	One generation
Subject	Heroic adventure	Heroic adventure
Setting	The pagan world of Scandinavian legend	The known world before the discovery of Iceland
Values	Heroic	*Stórbondi*
Mood	Tragic	Comic
Attitude	Admiring	Admiring
Characters	Noble heroes (often two sworn brothers), kings, monsters, supernatural beings	Non-aristocratic heroes (often two sworn brothers), kings, monsters, supernatural beings
Plot structure	Episodic / folktale	Episodic / folktale
Style	Influenced by romance	Influenced by romance

In the fourteenth century the distinction between *fornaldarsaga* and romance began to fade, with *fornaldarsögur* that are strongly influenced by romance and vice versa. It is these texts that should be called 'legendary fiction'. Their generic markers are those of the adventure-tale *fornaldarsögur*, but with aristocratic values, noble heroes, episodic or bridal-quest plot structures, and romance style.

These considerations produce a different corpus. *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Hálfs saga*, *Heiðreks saga*, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, *Ragnarssona þáttr*, and *Vǫlsunga saga* are the heroic legends. *Bósa saga*, *Egils saga einhenda*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Hálfdanar saga Brǫnufóstra*, *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar*, *Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*, *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, *Ketils saga hængs*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, *Sǫrla saga sterka*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, and *Qrvar-Odds saga* are the adventure tales. *Gautreks saga* and *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns* are the 'second-generation' adventure tales, and *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*, *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga*, *Hjálmþés saga*, and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* are works of legendary fiction. *Áns saga bogsveigis* is arguably an *Íslendingasaga-fornaldarsaga* hybrid. *Eiríks saga*

víðfǫrla and *Yngvars saga víðfǫrla* are omitted because they are fundamentally didactic texts. In characterizing the latter as didactic I follow Cormack (1994, 38–39) who calls it 'a christianized *lygisaga* which comes perilously near to becoming a saint's life; its final section contains an argument in favour of the sanctity of Yngvar, who had however worked no miracles'. That the moral tale has an adventure-quest structure does not change its basic nature. *Frá Fornjóti ok hans ættmǫnnum* is learned mythography related to Snorri's *Edda*. *Helga þáttr Þórissonar*, *Norna-Gests þáttr*, *Sǫrla þáttr*, and *Tóka þáttr Tókasonar* are conversion *þættir*. *Sǫgubrot af fornkonungum* and *Af Upplendinga konungum* are derived from *Skjǫldunga saga* and therefore should be classed with the *konungasögur*.

Fowler's theory thus provides for early and late works that differ from each other but that both can be called *fornaldarsögur*. It also objectively determines whether any so-called *fornaldarsögur* truly differ from Icelandic romances.

Stephen Mitchell

In modern scholarship, genre analysis is generally held to be more than simply defining the characteristics of a body of works and situating the texts within a narratological framework — it also locates narratives within social contexts. The debate in recent decades over the usefulness of this approach by scholars of literature and society may make us want to throw up our hands in line with Stith Thompson's famous warning that such distinctions were generally not of great importance to the men and women who listened to such tales. Thompson's common-sense admonition notwithstanding, as modern students, we naturally look for patterns and want to understand how the treasures literary history has bequeathed to us are related. But if students of medieval literature conclude genre analysis offers us possibilities for investigation, then we must decide how such distinctions are to be determined. Are these categories to be prescriptive (i.e. imposed on the texts) or descriptive (i.e. derived from them)? Another way of posing the question, as folklorists are accustomed to asking, is whether such distinctions are real or nominal, that is, would their creators and users understand our views of them? And should, for example, the system relate our texts to those of archaic Greek and other earlier civilizations, or only to other narrative forms within the culture? And must such categories have broad value and application, or can they be narrowly defined by something as specific as a particular plot line?

The highly eclectic tales we call the *fornaldarsögur* draw on many different sources — ecclesiastical learned lore, adjacent folk literature from home and abroad, the creativity and interventions of individual writers and tellers, and, not

least, tradition. And the social production of these sagas, the factors that contribute to their shape, sponsorship, reception, and preservation, is at least as critical as are the various sources used in the composition of the extant tales. Our colleagues working in living traditions possess an advantage, of course, in that we can interrogate neither the teller of these tales nor their audiences, only the textual middens they have left behind. Still, those who made and used these texts have provided valuable indications of their views in the form of manuscript collocations, textual asides, and other data that may reasonably be interpreted as showing that medieval Icelanders understood that these tales were cut from very different cloth than the historical matter of Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* or Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, but that does not mean that a medieval Icelander would agree completely with our modern assessments. For all of these reasons, I have advocated (Mitchell 1991, 9–32) a synoptic view of these texts that underscores both emic *and* etic approaches, situating them and other saga genres according to their relationship to traditionality and factuality. In such a scheme, the *fornaldarsögur* are those texts with the highest degree of traditionality on the Icelandic literary landscape and the lowest degree of factuality as we moderns would judge such matters.

There are, of course, other ways to draw genre distinctions; if, for example, our main interest were simply to show as efficiently as possible how the *fornaldarsögur* can be distinguished from other varieties of saga writing, we could content ourselves by saying that they are the sagas that contain eddic-style poetry. Finally, it should be noted with Stith Thompson that while it probably mattered to a medieval Nordic audience if the story entertaining them belonged to one genre or another, perhaps it did not always matter in ways we moderns assume. Whether eddic poem, *rímur*, ballad, or saga, the story of Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer, for example, entertained and nourished Nordic audiences across time and space. 'The tale's the thing', Albert Lord's (1960, 68) well-known palimpsest on Shakespeare's 'the play's the thing' (*Hamlet*, II. 2), subordinates the means of oral epic singing to the purpose of its presentation: the idea has application here as well. The tale is indeed the thing.

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir

I am assuming in this contribution to the debate that the *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda* constitute a specific genre. As I have previously discussed the problem of the genre of the *fornaldarsögur* in a broader context (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2001, cxlvi–clxi), I will concentrate here on a single, but important, factor: the

foundation of the genre. In the twelfth/thirteenth to fourteenth centuries there was a distinctive story-telling tradition that flourished in Iceland, traditional legends told about the past of the Nordic countries, now referred to as the *fornaldarsögur*. The base of this tradition is a certain source of legends that was fundamentally common to the Nordic people with roots in oral tradition and oral poetry of former times. The roots of this legacy are usually considered to be old, not least since a part of it is the main foundation of the old heroic material of *Snorra Edda*, which presumably built upon even older material. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Icelanders began to reshape the material of the old poems and to write them down, along with other related material from the oral tradition, in prose. In this way, they used the ancient source of legends as a base for a literary novelty that later became known as *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda*. Material from the same tradition found its way into *Gesta Danorum* by the Dane Saxo Grammaticus around 1200, but there was an important difference: Saxo did not write his stories in his mother language as the Icelanders did, but in Latin. This approach was in accordance with contemporary methods in writing learned history, and the purpose of Saxo's saga writing was different from the writing of the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur* as it was not intended as an entertainment for an audience. The third party who dug into the same source of material were authors of *kappakvæði* (heroic ballads), mostly Norwegians and Faeroese — even though they began somewhat later, as it is considered likely that the oldest *kappakvæði* date from the beginning of the fourteenth century. This indicates that the *fornaldarsögur* are founded upon an age-old legendary tradition, a well that Nordic people also drew from for other genres.

The genre of the *fornaldarsögur* is disputed mainly because the issue has been examined from different points of view. I believe that it is necessary to understand the nature of the material at an oral stage and to consider how it developed into literature. Most things point to the fact that the authors of the written sagas were well aware of the nature of their source, the oral tradition. Their sagas were based upon heroic legends that they took from what we might think of as a full well, from which they also drew deeds that could be attributed to certain heroes, or motifs that could be associated with more than one hero. Understandably, the material was malleable, as it was part of a living story-telling tradition. It is therefore important to acknowledge that *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda* is first and foremost a genre that builds upon a common story-telling tradition, and hence should perhaps be defined as 'booklore' rather than literature (see, for example, Westerdahl 2004, 116), though certainly the written version usually bears strong characteristics of its author.

Those who have defined *fornaldarsögur* as a specific genre have usually mentioned three common features of the sagas: scene, time, and style; they usually take place in the Nordic countries (but certainly, the protagonists travel outside these boundaries), they mostly happen before the colonization/settlement of Iceland, and they are characterized by the native Icelandic saga style, such as we find in the traditional Icelandic family sagas. To this we might add a couple of minor details, such as the Nordic name tradition (with a kernel of common names), and the fact that all of the sagas were later rewritten as *rímur*. Not least, we should mention that more or less all of them seek out material from oral tradition as I have described, and therefore many of them are connected to one other. I believe that all these factors are important considerations in interrogating the genre of the *fornaldarsögur*, but that the traditional nature of the narrative material is especially important.

Those who doubt that the *fornaldarsögur* are a distinct genre choose to examine other factors, characteristics that the sagas have in common with other saga genres, such as structure, influence from other kinds of literature (where we can find many points of contact), loan-words, etc. Here, we should note that these are factors that concern the outer appearance of the sagas, how the material was moulded, mostly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but not their core contents. Repeatedly, scholars have mentioned relations to chivalric romances, and some have even gone so far as to count 'chivalric' words in the *fornaldarsögur* texts. It might be more useful to look at the *fornaldarsögur*-tradition in context, and the origin of the sagas. It is unlikely that chivalric characteristics had already influenced the legends at an oral stage, for example in the twelfth century. Admittedly, the written manuscript is the first evidence of each saga, but the literary genre as a whole is of such a kind that we should not look at individual texts, but rather at the tradition behind them. A literary text cannot but reflect contemporary influences as well as the fashions around its time of writing.

The most important question is whether or not the subject matter of a text composed in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries but drawing on ancient and ongoing oral traditions should influence the way we name the phenomenon. In other words, is a saga that draws from the Nordic *fornaldarsögur* source still a *fornaldarsaga*, even if the author of its written form has given it the resemblance of contemporary literary works, both regarding how he moulded the core contents and the outer appearance of the saga? This is a characteristic of the *fornaldarsögur* and all of them bear witness to their time of writing. Nonetheless, their common kernel is so strong that it must be considered to be the basic raw material of the tradition; and this kernel does not change, even though the authors of the written sagas chose to cook it according to the latest fashion and to use, for that matter, new spices.

Gottskálk Jensson

Reducing the genre of the 'fornaldarsaga' to an oral 'source', as Aðalheiður does, neglects, as far as I can see, to explain how the texts we know from the modern *fornaldarsaga* collections, and on which we build our idea of the genre, arose. Stressing a vernacular oral 'origin' may appear to salvage the native purity of the genre, but, at the same time, it obscures some accepted facts about the production of medieval literary texts. The composition of prosimetric as well as prose histories in the Middle Ages, even in the vernaculars, was surely the outgrowth of Latin learning and letters. Saxo shows only too well how the genre of *fornaldarsaga* is a learned, medieval, and Latin form, notwithstanding its other source in vernacular poetry — and its general vernacularization in later centuries.

Elizabeth Ashman Rowe

Happily, some consensus is emerging. Many agree that the genre evolved over time and that it tends to hybridize, yet nonetheless a kind (or 'flavour') of saga persists that is different from other kinds of sagas: the *fornaldarsögur*. Moreover, several hold that the corpus should be modified to fit our understanding of the genre, not vice versa, and that that understanding of the genre should include the many possible indicators of genre, not just a few.

Aðalheiður and Steve raise related points that I must respectfully dispute. Aðalheiður suggests that content, regardless of how it is deployed, is the most important factor in distinguishing *fornaldarsögur* from other kinds of sagas, whereas Steve suggests that distinguishing different kinds of sagas is less important than recognizing that many kinds of narrative, both prose and verse, were deployed for the same purposes. But in the late Middle Ages, Icelanders had trouble with just these issues when stories from pagan oral tradition were used to teach Christian morality. The author of *Norna-Gests þáttr* thought the two could be reconciled (Rowe 2006), but Einarr Hafliðason, Grímr Hólmsteinsson, and Jón Þórðarson rejected stories about pagan heroes, no matter how virtuous, as appropriate for Christians (Rowe 2005, 195–96). The author of *Norna-Gests þáttr* would probably disagree with Aðalheiður and say that his story was a didactic one, not a *fornaldarsaga* fable, and Einarr, Grímr, and Jón would probably disagree with Steve and say the kind of saga told most certainly did make a difference.

Stephen Mitchell

In response to Elizabeth's comments, let me say that it is not clear to me where anyone, let alone those of us who have eagerly and consistently promoted socially and historically situated interpretations of medieval Nordic cultural monuments, has suggested that such diverse narratives as the *fornaldarsögur*, certain commonalities notwithstanding, were, as *she* writes, 'deployed for the same purposes'. When I write that we should consider the degree to which the narrative production is subordinated to purpose, my point is, in fact, exactly the opposite of what Elizabeth suggests I have meant. Meaningful readings of such works, especially of their historical and cultural value, are apt to reside elsewhere than in an exaggerated concern for the specific genre in which the story is 'performed'.

And although I agree with much of Gottskálk's vision of the evolution of the *fornaldarsögur*, I question the a priori privileging of Latin learning over other possibilities his comments suggest: why, for example, must 'the composition of prosimetric as well as prose histories' *surely* be an outgrowth of Latin learning? I accept that it may well have been and that such a relationship can be identified and traced, but that is not the same as what seems to be taking the relationship as an article of faith. Here again, we do our texts a disservice if, in attempting to identify certain unifying qualities, we fail to acknowledge each of them as a unique cultural monument with complex, individual relationships to popular and learned influences.

Ralph O'Connor

Margaret's point about the inapplicability of classical genre-theory to the Icelandic sagas can, I think, usefully be extended to tie together some of the separate points made by the participants in this debate. Classical genre-theory uses a given set of criteria to prescribe a set of labels, resulting in a system of pigeonholes and promoting a sense that certain works are 'central' to a given genre and others are 'peripheral'. Normally, only one label per text is allowed; deviations from this norm are today labelled 'hybrids', a biological term implying the pre-existence of purer types. For Aristotle, the genre *was* the corpus, a viewpoint which prevented him from appreciating the distinctive qualities of a generic 'monster' like the *Orestes* of Euripides. Aristotle was not the last literary critic to hold different priorities to those of the writers he pronounced upon: the same situation obtained in mediaeval European letters (vernacular or, to a lesser extent, Latin).

By contrast with Aristotle, most of the participants in the present debate agree on the need to distinguish between genre and corpus, and have no problem with the heterogeneity of many Icelandic sagas. Concepts such as Jauss's 'horizon of expectations' have proved more useful here than classical genre-theory: if we are concentrating on the expectations which a given text satisfies or frustrates, rather than trying to assign it to a pigeonhole, then texts which answer to more than one set of expectations no longer insult the system. Nevertheless, vestiges of the classical approach linger on in the persistent anxieties about whether or not we ought to jettison labels like *fornaldarsaga*, and whether or not this label 'really' has generic value.

On one level, these worries can be answered by Gottskálk's comment that 175 years of scholarly debate have made this term a de facto generic category which has to be reckoned with. More fundamentally, with respect to Carl's point about 'usefulness', the identification of one useful generic category in relation to a given text does not necessarily entail 'discarding' other categories as if they were the losers in a Darwinian struggle for existence. Our fatal attraction to the idea of mutually exclusive literary categories reflects the classical drive for generic purity (one label per text), which has since been reinforced by the nineteenth-century 'scientific' method of studying literary works as biological species, each one classified with a Linnaean taxon and slotted into an evolutionary scheme 'as calmly as [. . .] ticketing a fossil in a museum' (Stephen 1877). We may no longer approve of nineteenth-century accounts of generic evolution, but the scientism of the underlying biological metaphor continues to hold us in thrall.

I am not trying to suggest that our taxonomic urge is misplaced; on the contrary, it is a vital part of literary criticism. But literary criticism is not a branch of natural history, and its classifications serve different purposes. When the giant fossil teeth of the *Iguanodon* were identified in 1822 as belonging to a herbivorous reptile, the then-current interpretations that they belonged to an extinct wolf-fish or a huge mammal had to be dropped (Dean 1999), because these categories were by definition mutually exclusive. On the other hand, when *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* is found to belong to the category 'bridal-quest romance' (Kalinke 1990), this does not necessarily mean that the category *fornaldarsaga* ceases to have generic value when describing the same text. The same might be said of attempts to define some kinds of sagas as 'fiction' and others as 'history' (O'Connor 2005 [2006]). In our quest to find meaningful patterns in the literature, both sets of categories have been found to be 'useful' from different viewpoints. Many of the differences of opinion in these pages are simply the result of scholars using different generic groupings, as we use different lenses to photograph the literary

landscape before us. No single photograph can hope to capture the whole landscape, but it can bring salient features into view better than the naked eye. The resulting photograph is a two-dimensional and partial, but extremely useful, representation of its subject. An album of photographs of the same landscape, taken with different lenses and from different viewpoints, is more useful still.

Rather than worrying over the adequacy of labels like *fornaldarsaga*, then, it seems worth following Marianne's lead and trying out as many different lenses as possible, but continuing to use the old ones in new ways. As Margaret points out, the term *saga* is our only stable taxon. Given the radically hybrid nature of almost every individual saga, there can be no single and adequate generic model by which to describe the corpus, or any of its subgroups; no equivalent to the Linnaean system. We have to deal not only with texts belonging to multiple genres and with genres shifting across time, but also with individual sagas changing their generic identity across time, whether in different recensions or in terms of their characteristic manuscript surroundings. There are hundreds of possible viewpoints from which to make sense of this heterogeneous corpus, so why stop at Rafn's? Marianne is right to protest against the 'straitjacket' of Rafn's terminology, and although Carl has suggested that the continuing currency of the category *fornaldarsaga* indicates its superior usefulness, I suspect that in many cases this currency is due to simple inertia. As Ármann points out, the pre-existence of these categories risks skewing our perceptions, not always usefully. The old categories are indeed useful, but only insofar as we continue to interrogate them, rather than merely accepting them as integral and natural parts of the cultural landscape they claim to represent. Long may the discussion continue.

Matthew Driscoll

The problem with generic distinctions in literature, or indeed any area of the arts, is that they are imposed from outside, based on the (perceived) presence (or absence) of certain features. Once the 'suite of features' necessary for a work to be identified as being of a certain type has been identified, it is perfectly possible for someone deliberately to set out to make, say, a road movie, but it is unlikely that it was the intention of the creators of the first road movies (Bob Hope and Bing Crosby's *Road to Singapore* from 1940?, Jean Rouch's *Jaguar* and Fellini's *La Strada,* both from 1954?, Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*) from 1957?) to create a new genre. Nor are generic distinctions mutually exclusive: Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* from 1975 is, in its way, both a road movie and a western,

or at least exhibits many features common to those genres, while at the same time being a typical 'Bollywood' film. What's more, the relative weight of the various 'suites of features' will vary according to the audience. To Indian viewers, *Sholay* must principally have felt like a western, while for viewers in the west it is the 'Bollywood' features which are the most salient.

What features may be regarded as salient is fairly arbitrary. I have a book at home entitled *Cluck!: The True Story of Chickens in the Cinema* (Fink 1981) in which every movie in which a chicken — living or dead — appears, or in which words such as 'chicken', 'hen', or 'rooster' are mentioned, is listed and rated. Although rather extreme (and not entirely serious), is this really any more far-fetched than grouping narratives according to where and when they take place? It is at least not possible to claim that there is no such thing as a 'chicken flick', although one might well wonder how useful a category this might be. And so it is with *fornaldarsögur*.

The principal features (allegedly) distinguishing the *fornaldarsögur norðurlanda* from other types of saga narrative are inherent in the name they were given at the outset, with the publication of Rafn's three-volume edition in 1829–30: the events they purport to depict took place in an age which was perceived as distant, before the settlement of Iceland (*fornöld*), and the scene of the action is principally Scandinavia (*norðurlönd*), rather than continental Europe. They also share a number of other features, as pointed out by a number of scholars at the Saga Conference in Munich in 1979 (there was an especially useful survey by Peter Hallberg later published as an article (Hallberg 1982)) and more recently by Stephen A. Mitchell (1991) — and more recently still by the contributors to the present discussion. Not all the sagas normally classed as *fornaldarsögur* will exhibit all these features, and some of the features will also be found in sagas normally regarded as being of other types. This is, after all, the nature of all such generic distinctions, which does not, in my opinion, render them any less useful.

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