

ARTIFICIAL GODS: THE TEXT-CONSCIOUSNESS OF PROPHETIC CHARACTERS
IN *LAXDÆLA SAGA*

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The degree of interaction between saga composer, saga characters, and the structure of a saga itself has been a matter of debate for some decades. Lines have been drawn and redrawn between oral and written traditions; the argument between sagas as reasonably faithfully recorded oral traditions and sagas as later written inventions has been tempered somewhat to a compromise between the two: that of oral traditions influencing or being refined into later written inventions. Further, the *Íslendingasögur*, Icelandic family sagas, are subject to a prevailing style of understatement which can obscure the fact that the sagas were the products of, at the very least, several authors and scribes, even if only on the written and not the oral end. This tangled question of authorship often overshadows the degree of interaction between a saga's narrator and his characters; specifically, when a narrator chooses to pass control of the saga's arc to certain characters, and why. To go more deeply into this relation between narrator and character agency, we will focus on one *Íslendingasaga* – the well-known *Laxdæla saga* – and the prophecies of two characters therein, Gestr Oddleifsson and Ósvífr Helgason.

These two characters are distinct in origin but thematically linked through their comparable prophetic ability and contrasting spheres of authority in the saga. Gestr Oddleifsson is a recurring supporting character in five *Íslendingasögur*, as well as *Landnámabok* and *Kristnisaga*, a wise and powerful man whose advice and patronage is always sought after.¹ While the saga tells us he is a *frændi*, a kinsman or friend of the saga's female protagonist Guðrún, we are given no further information on this; this lack of detail on their exact relationship, coupled with his fair play towards both sides of the coming conflict he will

¹ Alita Putnam, "Gestr the Wise: Prophetic Characterization in the *Íslendingasögur*" (M.A. diss., University of Iceland Háskóli Íslands, 2010).

foresee, may mean he is not subject to prejudice stemming from familial ties.² Gestr is also arguably a part of a group of minor characters in the sagas who act much like the Norse god Óðinn when he walks the earth: his dress, weapons, wisdom, and especially given name – Old Norse for “guest”, but also on the list of Óðinn’s known *heiti* [aliases] – conform to the typical Óðinnic figure.³ Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, he is a prophet of unusual breadth and accuracy. On his habitual visit to a farm near Guðrún and her father Ósvífr’s early in *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún meets Gestr at a nearby spring and, after a lengthy chat, she invites him, ostensibly on her father’s invitation, to stay at their home. While Gestr declines, she continues: “I’ve had many dreams this winter... No one has yet been able to interpret them to my satisfaction.”⁴ Gestr, perhaps recognising the inevitability in fulfilling the strong-willed Guðrún’s desire, or even the inevitability of railing against visions of the fated future, agrees to do so, and she describes a series of four dreams, in each of which a special accessory of hers comes to grief. When she finishes, he says, “I can see clearly what the dreams mean...” and goes on to interpret them as a series of omens about her forthcoming marriages.⁵ At length, the saga audience realises Gestr’s detailed descriptions are of more than her marriages and their endings; during his lengthy interpretation, Gestr also predicts the conversion of Iceland to Christianity – an event which actually did occur in 1000 and is corroborated in several other *Íslendingasögur* – and warns her that her third husband will be killed violently. The word ‘feud’ is not mentioned, but, as Theodore M. Andersson points out, may be inevitably implied by the stereotypical

² *Laxdæla saga, Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar, Stúfs þáttur*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1934), 88.

³ The *heiti* Gestr appears in the eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*; see also a disguised Óðinn’s *heiti* of Gestumblindi in *Heiðreks saga ok Hervarar*. Kevin J. Wanner, “Gods on the Margins: Dislocation and Transience in the Myths of Óðinn,” *History of Religions* 46.4 (2007): 328, accessed July 8, 2016, doi: 10.1086/518812.

⁴ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and Bolli Bollason’s Tale*, trans. Keneva Kunz, ed. Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 65.

⁵ *Laxardal*, 66.

Íslendingasögur set-up of romantic and familial relationships gone awry.^{6 7} Guðrún turns “blood-red”, but thanks him, and repeats her invitation for him to stay at their farm, “saying he and Ósvífr would have many interesting things to discuss.”⁸ Gestr responds with another prophecy: “I will ride onwards...but...tell him that the time will come when the distance between our dwelling places will be shorter than at present. It will be easier for us to carry on a conversation then...”⁹ Gestr is referring to his and Ósvífr’s ultimate fate, to be buried together in the same mound, linked forever. Leaving Guðrún, Gestr meets a servant of Óláfr Höskuldsson, the leader of the other side of the blood feud he has just foreseen arising out of Guðrún’s unhappy third marriage; when the servant invites him to visit Óláfr, Gestr quickly agrees, but stays only long enough to bestow another prophecy upon Óláfr before leaving. He essentially gives an equal warning and fair start to both sides of the coming conflict before removing himself from the action.

Compare Gestr to Guðrún’s father, Ósvífr Helgasson, a much more worldly, earthy character, and much closer to the narrative action in both blood and deed. Ósvífr is a very wealthy man, reportedly very wise, and a friend of both Gestr and another famous recurring supporting character in the sagas, Snorri the Goði. Ósvífr also seems markedly stubborn, to the point of practically forcing the strong-minded Guðrún to marry Bolli Ólafsson, brother of Kjartan, the man she truly loves, while the latter is still abroad – and under very prophetic terms, too: “As long as I’m still alive, I intend to direct my children’s actions in matters where I can see more clearly than they.”¹⁰ Ósvífr even hosts the wedding before Kjartan can return. He thus indirectly sets in motion Guðrún’s revenge, the blood feud which will drive and

⁶ Laxardal, 66.

⁷ For further definition on conflict and revenge as essential tenets of the *Íslendingasögur*, see Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), especially 11, 19.

⁸ Laxardal, 67.

⁹ Laxardal, 67.

¹⁰ Laxardal, 96.

eventually destroy almost everyone involved by the end of the saga. Ósvífr further seems to be either half-hearted or short-sighted in his attempts to calm down the feud; he remains on good terms with Kjartan's father Óláfr by inviting his clan to several feasts, but these feasts are staging-grounds for arguments between his daughter Guðrún and Kjartan's new wife. Ósvífr advises Guðrún and Bolli to buy the property of a neighbour, but neglects to send the proper amount of legal witnesses to the transaction; as a result, Kjartan snatches it up instead, and it becomes yet another bone of contention between the warring factions. It is Ósvífr's sons who finally ambush and murder Kjartan, on Guðrún's encouragement; how much about it Ósvífr knew beforehand is debatable, even hearkening back to his "I intend to direct my children's actions" remark, but it is his statement after his sons' murder trial which not only tacitly condones his sons' actions, but also most directly concerns us as a prophecy. A previously - and subsequently - unheard-of character in this saga named Auðunn *festargarmr* or *festarhundr* [dog leash] attends the Ósvífssons' murder trial, and says, "It could turn out that [the Ósvífssons] will be treated as much as outlaws in Norway [which they are leaving Iceland for] if Kjartan's friends there are still alive." Ósvífr snaps back, "You...will not prove much of a prophet, as my sons will gain the respect of worthy men, while you'll be wrestling with the trolls...this summer..."¹¹ The next line confirms that it is Ósvífr who is the *sannspár*, the prophet, and not Auðunn, as Auðunn's boat goes down the next summer with all hands. The narrator of the text further witnesses that "...people said that Ósvífr's prophecy [*spá*] had certainly been proven true."¹²

Between Gestr and Ósvífr we have two very different things going on behind the guise of similar prophecies of violence. Gestr is tied to Ósvífr and his daughter Guðrún as a *frændi*, but he attempts to avoid becoming entangled in the coming feud, merely prophesying for both

¹¹ Both *festargarmr* and *festarhundar* are used in the Old Norse text, the latter perhaps as a demeaning diminutive. *Laxdæla*, 158-9; *Laxardal*, 119-20.

¹² *Laxardal*, 120; *Laxdæla*, 159.

sides and then leaving. We see Gestr's popularity and his respected position in the invitations he is offered, as well as his wisdom in his diplomatic handling of said invitations – and we believe it. We listen to his incredibly detailed prophecies, similarly diplomatic even when offered almost under duress, and we believe them, too – and not just because the strong-minded Guðrún accepts them as the final, truthful interpretations of her dreams. We believe them because the text treats him with deference, portrays him well, even gives him an Óðinnic sheen in his attributes and subtle wielding of power. And we have our own belief in his predictions validated, as we witness Gestr's prophecies here – and, to a lesser degree, elsewhere in the text – completely borne out, defining the course of the rest of the saga. Yet Gestr never seems to revel in his power; rather, he distances himself from its inevitable tragedies because he feels them too strongly. As he rides away from his visit to Óláfr's farm, his son notices him crying, and coaxes Gestr into admitting that he foresees doom for Óláfr's sons, but couldn't bring himself to wholly confess to their father – merely hint.¹³ But in so hinting, he assuages his conscience for speaking the prophecy of ill fate aloud to Guðrun – and now his son - and evens the playing field between the sides of the coming feud. Gestr, we see, is aware of the power of his words, and so honourably softens the truth, so that he may warn of coming harm but not in such a brutal way that the volume and weight of his words makes the approaching doom seem too unbearable. He may even be engaging directly with the structure of the saga by using the power of words to gently make the power on both sides of the approaching conflict symmetrical.¹⁴

In Ósvífr, we find a man who, far from distancing himself and the power of his words from looming events, actively involves himself with one side of the feud, in various ways helping to coax it into being and then, ultimately, using his prophecy to defend his sons and his

¹³ *Laxardal*, 68.

¹⁴ *Andersson*, 43.

side from the watershed murder in the saga, the killing of Guðrún's true love Kjartan. Though the text tells us he is "very wise" and "[enjoys] great respect in his district", his actions are short-sighted and could be interpreted as meant to stir the pot. The text might be toying with us in regards to his characterisation: telling us one thing but letting us witness another, casting a pall of suspicion around Ósvífr in the saga audience's mind, like a lawyer convicting a man out of his own mouth. The audience can be grateful that Ósvífr's prophecy is as short-sighted as his attempts at feud manipulation: it focuses on and affects one event and one minor character, instead of the entire saga and the lives – and religious preference – of everyone in it. Ósvífr's prophecy is also brief; unlike the lengthy, tormented recital from the honourable Gestr, it does not draw the audience in and emotionally nearer to the unpleasant Ósvífr. Also unlike the reserved Gestr, he uses a denigrating phrase in his prophecy – "you'll be wrestling with trolls" – which further alienates his audience, both at the *þing* [assembly] where he announces this and in the saga's audience.¹⁵ Such language may also undermine the verisimilitude and, thus, power of his words; to wrestle with trolls is, overall, a rather unlikely event, and to predict a near-impossibility may throw a pall over the credibility of the prophecy and Ósvífr, at least in the time before it comes to pass. "Wrestling with trolls" is also slang, and thus may cheapen the message; then again, perhaps it is this difference in tone which gives Ósvífr his unique prophetic ability. Ósvífr is not as genteel or gentle in word or deed as Gestr, nor as broad in scope, but his bluntness is effective in its own way. Perhaps the most interesting difference between the two men is that Ósvífr uses his prophecy as a weapon of status; it is a direct rebuttal of Auðunn's scathing prophecy of disaster for the Ósvífssons, a defensive over-assertion that he, Ósvífr, the well-known local leader, is the correct one and the wielder of power, and not the unknown trader Auðunn. And Ósvífr is proved to be in the right in this duel of status by prophecy; he is correct and Auðunn is not. And Auðunn dies in the process. One can't help but

¹⁵ *Laxardal*, 120.

think that if Ósvífr had predicted the course of *Laxdæla saga* instead of Gestr, events might have taken on a very different colour.

And so we see the meanings behind Gestr and Ósvífr's prophecies begin to tie in to the larger structure of the saga. Just as Ósvífr won his superiority over Auðunn in a head-to-head prophetic duel, Gestr wins over Ósvífr through sheer scope in his prophecies, and in drawing the saga's audience and their loyalties and belief along with him. Carol Clover noted the similarity of saga structures to old Icelandic legal proceedings; the chronological reconstruction of events, with each described fact supported by witnesses or skaldic poetry.¹⁶ In *Laxdæla saga*, the saga audience is the witness for all of Gestr's prophecies; we are already inclined to trust him through his characterisation, but when we move through the rest of the saga, we see more and more the breadth and truth of his vision. One can imagine an oral presentation of the saga to an audience; the inclination to trust Gestr's words must have been even more powerful than they appear to a reader, because an oral recitation would place the reciter, already the acknowledged expert on *Laxdæla saga*, into the role of Gestr, and he would recite the prophecies directly to the audience as Guðrún, Óláfr, or Gestr's son Þórðr. The audience would be under the sway of Gestr's trustworthy personality, and believe him as a witness they were hearing from directly, instead of a character on a page whose words, written down, would be difficult to forget as filtered through the pen and mind of the scribe and authors. An oral performance would add a sheen of the expert witness, of legality. But further, as the storyteller inhabits Gestr, then the audience listening to him would be thrust into inhabiting Guðrún's role in the scene, momentarily transported to the level of the story, and believe the reciter not just because he was charismatically inhabiting the role of Gestr, but because they would be personally involved in the plot at that moment. Lars Lönnroth calls this effect the "double

¹⁶ Carol J. Clover, "Composing Facts: Evidence and Narrative in *Njáls Saga*," in *News from Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture*, ed. Merrill Kaplan et al. (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012), 109-133.

scene” and draws further comparison to the setting of the saga story and the setting of the saga telling; just as Guðrún and Gestr spoke near a spring, so the story could be conceivably retold near one, perhaps during a communal washday, and lend further credence to the audience’s momentary belief and involvement in the story.¹⁷ The storyteller, as Gestr, would begin interpreting Guðrún’s dreams, and the audience would be drawn from a familiar setting into one charged with something new, a magic unseen but powerfully felt, with the storyteller/“Gestr” suddenly their only trustworthy tie to the safety of their reality.¹⁸ Guðrún’s future would be their future, and Gestr’s prophecies would prophesy their future, and now it would be tremendously important that those prophecies *must* be good, or at least gently cast. The audience would move beyond the role of jury listening to a witness, into the role of plaintiffs themselves, with the witness testifying *for* them instead of merely *to* them. And the audience would *want* to lose themselves in the fiction for that moment, because, even though the events Gestr prophecies are frightening and horrible – death and despair – the *way* he prophesies them is, if not benevolent, than at least determinedly neutral, both in the way he phrases them and the way he conscientiously delivers them to both sides of the future feud. Gestr cannot change the future or the probably well-known events of *Laxdæla saga* – after all, the audience might already know what happens, and he couldn’t *lie* to them - but he has the ability to shape his telling of said events to be as evenly-matched as he can.¹⁹ The audience/“Guðrún” has been drawn into the story, first as witnesses, then as participants, and must now trust the storyteller/“Gestr” to bring them home safely to their own reality with his words; and part of that trust is belief in and a longing for him to use his ability to wield words

¹⁷ Lars Lönnroth, “Old Norse Text as Performance,” *Scripta Islandica* 60 (2009), 57, accessed July 1, 2016, url: <http://www.academia.edu/download/30853646/FULLTEXT01.pdf#page=48>

¹⁸ Terry Gunnell, “Narratives, Space and Drama: Essential Spatial Aspects Involved in the Performance and Reception of Oral Narrative,” *Folklore* 33 (2006), 13-14, accessed July 16, 2016, doi: 10.7592/FEJF2006.33.terry

¹⁹ For more on the collective recollection of an event, e.g., the number of witnesses verifying a particular version of a story, see Ulf Palmenfelt, “Narrative and Belief: Contemporary Life Histories and the Grand Narrative of the Vikings,” in *News From Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture*, ed. Merrill Kaplan et al. (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012), 175-198.

to shape not only Guðrún's future in the saga but their own future back in their own reality into something better.

Again, we compare this to the very partisan, very involved Ósvífr, with his invective-fuelled prophecy – death curse, almost – and his self-conscious status grab. Where Gestr does not address Guðrún by name during his long, absorbing flood of prophecy – he addresses her only as “þú”, “you”, the better to draw in the saga's audience – Ósvífr, in his single sentence to Auðunn, uses his nickname not once but twice: *festarhundr* and *festargarmr*.²⁰ It is impossible for the saga audience to believe itself in the story world within Ósvífr's prophecy as it did in Gestr's; so while the audience can sit as a witness to the later truth of Ósvífr's prophecy, it cannot participate in it on the same level as Gestr's. Perhaps a listening saga audience breathed a sigh of relief, especially when it heard of Auðunn's death at sea; *they* were not cursed by Ósvífr like *he* was.

In a way, although he proved his superiority to Auðunn, Ósvífr's prophecy is nonetheless lessened in stature by its own poor form as we again compare the relatively measured prophecies of Gestr to Ósvífr's heated one. Ósvífr's prophecy comes directly after the trial of his sons, and the idea of proper legal formulas, with cause and effect, witness and proof, presented in measured, professional tones, is fresh in the mind of the saga audience. We wonder why, if Ósvífr is trying to prove something, he is not using the correct, almost legal form, but instead a brief invective, hastily fired off. In comparison, it lends even more lustre to Gestr's relative dignity and logical progression of prophecy from dream to dream with almost bullet-point clarity.

Between the two prophets, then, while Ósvífr is much closer to Guðrún and the narrative events and would logically be the man to foresee how they would develop in the

²⁰ *Laxdæla*, 89-90, 159.

future, it is Gestr whom the saga composer foregrounds -- though description, action, tenor, flow, expertise in speech, and sensibility -- and so grants the opportunity to describe and thus shape the rest of the saga. Gestr is not a mouthpiece of the composer, a mere tool of exposition explaining dispassionately what is to come like a Greek chorus, uninvolved with the course of the plot; instead, upon prophesying for Guðrún and seeing the future of the saga, he goes to speak to the other side of the feud and warns them as best he can, privately admitting afterwards how moved he is by the coming tragedies. Gestr is, by action and feeling, involved with the story -- and part of his involvement is a need to speak these prophecies in as fair a way as possible. The tenor of the prophecies, which draw in the audience as witnesses and participants, shapes the course of the saga as much as what is said in the prophecies themselves. And Gestr senses this, and so was the best man to do it; his careful use of words of power, using them to hint rather than over-exposit and make fate even more unavoidable, is proof of his suitability.

Perhaps this explains Guðrún's remark to Gestr when she first asks him to interpret her dreams: "No one has yet been able to interpret them to my satisfaction." It is unusual that her father, Ósvífr, the "very wise" man with an apparent talent of his own for prophecy, could not do so for her. Or maybe Guðrún rejected his interpretation, not because it was incorrect, but because the way he shaped the prophecy was brief, partisan, unfair, unprofessional, overblown, and deadly, and she feared the saga, and the minds and lives of audience, would have followed suit.

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