History or fiction? Truth-claims and defensive narrators in Icelandic romance-sagas

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Straining the bounds of credibility was an activity in which many mediaeval Icelandic saga-authors indulged. In §25 of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the hero Hrólfr Sturlaugsson wakes up from an enchanted sleep in the back of beyond to find both his feet missing. Somehow he manages to scramble up onto his horse and find his way back to civilisation – in fact, to the very castle where his feet have been secretly preserved by his bride-to-be. Also staying in that castle is a dwarf who happens to be the best healer in the North.[1]

Hann mælti: '… skaltu nú leggjast niðr við eldinn ok baka stúfana.'

Hrólfr gerði svâ; smurði hann þá smyrslunum í sárin, ok setti við fætrna, ok batt við spelkur, ok lèt Hrólf svâ liggja þrjár nætr. Leysti þá af umbönd, ok bað Hrólf upp standa ok reyna sik. Hrólfr gerði svâ; voru honum fætrnir þá svâ hægir ok mjúkir, sem hann hefði á þeim aldri sár verit.

'He said, … "Now you must lie down by the fire and warm the stumps".

'Hrólfr did so. Then he [the dwarf] applied the ointment to the wounds, placed the feet against them, bound them with splints and made Hrólfr lie like that for three nights. Then he removed the bandages and told Hrólfr to stand up and test his strength. Hrólfr did so; his feet were then as efficient and nimble as if they had never been damaged.'[2]

This is rather hard to believe – but our scepticism has been anticipated by the saga-author. At this point the narrator interrupts his[3] own story to address the audience.[4]

[1] *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, ed. C. C. Rafn (3 vols, København 1829–30), III.309. In all quotations from editions of primary sources in this article, I have retained the editors' orthography (except *v* in Latin), including accents (except where their fonts were unavailable to me) but have imposed my own punctuation and paragraph-divisions.

[2] Literally, 'as if he had never been wounded on them'. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise stated.

[3] Despite the insights into feminine experience evinced in some sagas, which are sometimes held to suggest female 'authorship', and despite the importance of women as storytellers in mediaeval Iceland, all references within extant saga-texts to authors, reciters, and scribes use the masculine pronoun *sá* (see the discussion of self-conscious narrators below, pp. 119–24). In this article I accordingly use 'he'.

[4] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.309.

Nú þótt mönnum þiki slíkir hlutir ótrúligir, þá verðr þat þó hverr at segja, er hann hefir sèð eða heyrt. Þar er ok vant móti at mæla, er hinir fyrri fræðimenn hafa samsett.

'Now even if such things seem unbelievable to some people, everyone still has to report what they have seen or heard. It is also difficult in such cases to contradict what the learned folk of old have put together.'

Comments like this occur frequently in the romance-saga corpus. What are we to make of them? It is hard not to think of more modern fantastic narratives like *Gulliver's Travels*, whose fictitious 'editor' plays games with the reader's credulity by insisting that Gulliver spoke nothing but the truth.[5] We, of course, know perfectly well that *Gulliver's Travels* was made up by its author Jonathan Swift; and it is almost as much of a commonplace among saga-scholars to observe that the Icelandic romance-sagas (the so-called *fornaldarsǫgur*, *riddarasǫgur*, and 'post-classical' *Íslendingasǫgur*)[6] are 'fiction', written by authors who knew that the stories which they told were not true. Accordingly, passages like that just quoted may appear to be tongue-in-cheek, mock-scholarly diatribes, veiled indications that the whole saga is completely fictional – an impression reinforced by the fact that, to a modern eye, the sagas in question are worthless as historical sources but are often very funny. Many scholars, notably Sverrir Tómasson, Vésteinn Ólason, Geraldine Barnes, and the late Hermann Pálsson, have accordingly taken narratorial intrusions of this kind as playful signals of a self-consciously fictional narrative.[7]

I suggest that these defensive statements can be read in more than one way. We need to pay attention not only to covert signals (which may or may not underlie these statements) but also to what they say on the surface; and this needs

[5] Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Robert Demaria, Jr. (2nd edn, London 2003), pp. 4–10. On truth-claims and mock truth-claims in the early modern novel, see Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions. The Origins of the English Novel* (New York 1983); Geoffrey Day, *From Fiction to the Novel* (London 1987); C. Rawson, 'Gulliver and others: reflections on Swift's "I" narrators', *Q/W/E/R/T/Y* 11 (2001) 71–80.

[6] In this article I use this standard terminology alongside the coinage 'romance-sagas' purely for convenience, without wishing to imply any necessary generic value. For contrasting assessments of the problem of saga-genre, see Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca, NY 1991), pp. 8–43; Philip Cardew, *A Translation of Þorskfirðinga (Gull-Þóris) saga* (Lampeter 2000), pp. 2–70.

[7] *Hrolf Gautreksson. A Viking Romance*, transl. Hermann Pálsson & P. Edwards (Edinburgh 1972), p. 22; F. Paul, 'Das Fiktionalitätsproblem in der altnordischen Prosaliteratur', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 97 (1982) 52–66, at p. 62; Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum. Rannsókn bókmenntahefðar* (Reykjavík 1988), pp. 250–3; G. Barnes, 'Authors, dead and alive, in Old Norse fiction', *Parergon*, new series, 8.2 (1990) 5–22, at p. 22; Vésteinn Ólason, 'The marvellous north and authorial presence in the Icelandic *fornaldarsaga*', in *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative. The European Tradition*, ed. Roy Eriksen (Berlin 1994), pp. 101–34, at p. 117; G. Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge 2000), pp. 266–86, at p. 275; Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense 2002), p. 173.

to be done in the context of the actual conditions of Icelandic saga-entertainment, as far as these are discernible. This line of inquiry has been sketched out in two important survey-articles by Peter Hallberg (on the *fornaldarsǫgur*) and Marianne E. Kalinke (on romance-sagas). Using the term *apologia* to refer to these defensive statements, Kalinke has suggested that they 'bespeak the authors' awareness of the fictional and alien character of the literature they were propagating': audiences were not always happy to be told untrue stories, and so these *apologiae* functioned, in her view, as attempts to maintain at least the appearance of historical narrative in the face of adverse criticism.[8]

Commentary on the *apologiae* has hitherto been rather limited in scope, mostly restricted to brief outlines and scholarly asides, and so proponents of these two different interpretations have tended not to engage with each other's views. They need not, of course, be mutually exclusive: assuming that the saga-authors were deliberately propagating fiction, we may imagine the *apologiae* functioning both as jokes (for those in the audience who were happy to hear fictional stories) and as cover-up jobs (for those who were not). What nobody has yet considered is the possibility that these writers were not trying to hoodwink anyone but that they meant exactly what they said. This view has not found favour because it requires dropping, or at least adjusting, the common assumption that the romance-sagas were conceived primarily as 'fiction'. I hope to show that a closer and more detailed analysis not only reinforces Hallberg's and Kalinke's suggestions that anti-fiction sentiment was common among mediaeval saga-audiences but also opens up the possibility that the authors of the *apologiae* may have seen the matter which they were transmitting not as fictional but as historical (in the mediaeval sense of *historia*).

By investigating the *apologiae* along these lines, I hope to contribute to the broader debate regarding the legitimacy of 'fiction' in Icelandic sagas. This term has come to occupy an almost unquestioned place in literary-critical analyses and definitive summaries of large sections of the saga-corpus, whether the texts in

[8] M. Kalinke, 'Norse romance (*Riddarasögur*)', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Critical Guide*, edd. Carol J. Clover & J. Lindow (Ithaca, NY 1985), pp. 316–63, at 319 and 318–25. These conclusions echo those of P. Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur as a corpus', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 97 (1982) 1–35, at pp. 6–11, and Peter G. Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan: Reykjahólar 1119', *Saga-book* 14 (1953–7) 226–39, revised in his book *Aurvandilstá. Norse Studies* (Odense 1984), pp. 65–83, at p. 77.

question are viewed as 'historical fiction', 'legendary fiction', or 'pure fiction'.[9] Saga-scholars' appropriation of the term 'fiction' has been both a cause and an effect of the great blossoming of literary criticism in this field over the last fifty years. But fictionality is not a prerequisite for literary qualities, despite the persistence of the nineteenth-century restricted redefinition of 'literature' to include (or at least privilege) only 'imaginative' writings at the expense of non-fiction.[10]

Some definition of the difficult term 'fiction' is first called for. It has a long and involved history in legal and philosophical contexts, where its branching meanings have helped to complicate its usage as a literary concept.[11] In literary criticism today, 'fiction' usually signifies a narrative which, despite relating events which never happened, is not intended to deceive the reader into thinking that all the events described did happen.[12] As such, it is a kind of generic label implying a distinction from 'history', which operates on the understanding that all the events narrated really happened. There is, however, an alternative sense in which 'fiction' is occasionally used by literary critics (and often by literary theorists), which has no special reference to a text's truth-content but instead means something akin to the noun 'construct'. Torfi Tulinius, for instance, in his stimulating study of Icelandic legendary sagas, has defined 'fiction' as any text whose contents are 'chosen and arranged to express a meaning'.[13] While this definition is valuable in drawing our attention to the inevitably constructed nature of all narrative, its usefulness as a category is limited by the fact that it covers not only all narratives but also all structured utterances from prayers to price-tags. Tulinius has indeed acknowledged that, on these terms, 'every historical narrative is *ipso facto* fictional',

[9] For some examples, as well as those listed in n. 7, above, see Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Dating the Icelandic Sagas. An Essay in Method* (London 1958), p. 126; Hermann Pálsson & P. Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland* (Reykjavik 1971); Kalinke, 'Norse romance', p. 327; J. Harris, 'Saga as historical novel', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature. New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, edd. John Lindow *et al.* (Odense 1986), pp. 187–219, at p. 189; R. Kellogg, 'Introduction', in *The Sagas of Icelanders. A Selection*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (London 2000), pp. xv–liv, at p. xxi; M. Driscoll, 'Late prose fiction (*lygisögur*)', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford 2005), pp. 190–204.

[10] On this redefinition see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *literature* 3a; R. O'Connor, 'The poetics of earth science: "Romanticism" and the Two Cultures', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 36 (2005) 607–17, at pp. 611–13.

[11] K. L. Pfeiffer, 'Fiction: on the fate of a concept between philosophy and literary theory', in *Aesthetic Illusion. Theoretical and Historical Approaches*, ed. Frederick Burwick & W. Pape (Berlin 1990), pp. 92–104; Peter Lamarque & S. H. Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature. A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford 1994).

[12] On this definition see D. H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance. Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (Cambridge 2002), pp. 4–17.

[13] Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, p. 187.

but this acknowledgment somewhat weakens his case for the rise of a new and distinctive genre of 'literary fiction'. Indeed, the main body of his analysis makes full use of the more conventional opposition of 'fiction rather than history'.[14] The old meaning of 'fiction', as outlined above, inevitably slips in through the back door, and this is the meaning which I use in this article.

The question whether sagas represent 'history' or 'fiction' is hardly new. This debate has operated on the familiar territory of the *Íslendingasǫgur*, whose (to our eyes) precocious realism has long invited the attentions of historians and literary critics alike. Cross-disciplinary disagreements about the texts' original purposes usually centre on narrative content: those who claim them for 'fiction' emphasise their authors' creative manipulation or invention of the events narrated in order to explore a theme, while those who claim them for 'history' point to the prominence given to genealogies and chronological details. This dichotomy has its roots in the 'bookprose-freeprose' debates of the early twentieth century; it has been starkly expressed in a recent and authoritative survey of the Icelandic sagas, which are defined as *frásagnarlist fremur en sagnfræði* ('narrative art rather than history').[15] This is a false opposition: literary artifice was (and is) central to the practice of historiography, as was the need to convey meanings beyond the literal.[16] For a viable answer we must look not to the narrative content but to the author's intention. Did saga-authors aim to present historical accounts?

The question is nowadays dodged by most literary critics examining the *Íslendingasǫgur*, in part because of a persistent anxiety that admitting a text's historical intent allows no scope for literary analysis.[17] More pragmatically, the *Íslendingasǫgur* themselves are often held to 'lack any statements, explicit or implicit, of [authorial] intent'.[18] But this depends on how one reads the evidence. When the narrator of *Eyrbyggja saga* briefly interrupts his account of the construction-work achieved by two berserks, telling his audience that traces of the wall which they built can still be seen, some critics would view this interruption as part of a

[14] *Ibid*., p. 217. For the more conventional opposition see *ibid*., p. 53 and the first paragraph on p. 217. The confusion of 'fiction = untrue story' with 'fiction = construct' has been adroitly unpicked by Lamarque & Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*.

[15] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Íslendingasögur og þættir', in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, II, edd. Böðvar Guðmundsson *et al.* (Reykjavík 1993), pp. 23–163, at p. 80. On the legacy of the 'bookprose-freeprose' debates see Cardew, *A Translation of Þorskfirðinga saga*, pp. 13–25.

[16] The problems associated with this false opposition have been commented on by Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages. Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge 1991), pp. 1–13, and Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway. Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts* (Leiden 2005), pp. 32–42.

[17] See, for instance, Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, p. 217.

[18] Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A Short Introduction* (Oxford 2004), p. 47.

purely novelistic 'rhetoric of history' designed to 'counterfeit reality', whereas others would see it as an implicit statement of historical veracity.[19] There is no way out of the critical *impasse* as long as it is assumed that fiction itself was generally accepted as a legitimate mode for narrative prose in mediaeval Iceland.

It is this assumption which I intend to question in the present article. I hope to show that the concept of literary fiction, while perhaps not unknown to the learned, was too problematic to be fully acceptable within the social practice of saga-entertainment.[20] The encounter between this new and foreign concept and the strongly traditional practice of Icelandic storytelling was a more difficult process than our casual use of the term 'fiction' implies. Some individual saga-authors may have flirted with this new mode at specific and marginal points in their narratives, but these engagements need to be appreciated as bold and unusual rather than taken as proof of a general currency.

The view that Icelandic sagas are 'fiction' has been contested before, on the grounds of critical anachronism, by Lars Lönnroth, M. I. Steblin-Kamensky, Gerd Wolfgang Weber, Paul Bibire, and the late Preben Meulengracht Sørensen.[21] However, these valuable studies have been focused mainly on the *Íslendingasǫgur* and the *konungasǫgur*, leaving the romance-sagas largely unexamined: indeed, both

[19] *Eyrbyggja saga*, edd. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson & Matthías Þórðarson (Reykjavík 1935), p. 72. On such references compare the views of W. Manhire, 'The narrative functions of source-references in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Saga-book* 19 (1974–7) 170–90, with those of Kellogg, 'Introduction', pp. xxv and xxix (both quoted here), and those of Paul, 'Das Fiktionalitätsproblem', pp. 57–60.

[20] Sverrir Tómasson (*Formálar*, pp. 248–57) has presented the most thorough case for the mediaeval currency of saga-fiction, and in the second half of this article I engage directly with his arguments.

[21] Lars Lönnroth's most detailed exposition of his lexicographical studies is his 'Tesen om de två kulturerna: kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar', *Scripta Islandica* 15 (1964) 1–97, at pp. 15–18; for an English summary, see Lars Lönnroth, *European Sources of Icelandic Saga-writing. An Essay based on Previous Studies* (Stockholm 1965), pp. 9–10. For Steblin-Kamensky's views see 'On the nature of fiction in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Scandinavica* 6 (1967) 77–84, and *The Saga Mind* (Odense 1973), pp. 21–48. Gerd Wolfgang Weber argued against the idea of saga-fiction in '"Fact" und "Fiction" als Mass-stäbe literarischer Wertung in der Saga', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 101 (1972) 188–200, which was a response to F. Paul, 'Zur Poetik der Isländersagas: eine Bestandaufnahme', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 100 (1971) 166–78. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen set out a detailed case along similar lines in *Fortælling og ære. Studier i islændingesagaerne* (Aarhus 1993), pp. 1–78; for his shorter English account, see 'Some methodological considerations in connection with the study of the sagas', in *From Sagas to Society. Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (London 1992), pp. 27–41. Paul Bibire has discussed the problems involved in using the labels 'fiction', 'history', and 'literature' in his forthcoming article 'On reading the Icelandic sagas: approaches to Old Icelandic texts'; the present paper owes much to our discussions on this subject over several years. Attention should also be drawn to the thoughtful discussions of *Heimskringla* by Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla. An Introduction* (London 1991), pp. 112–43, and of *Bárðar saga* by Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the trolls? *Bárðar saga* as an historical narrative', *Saga-book* 25 (1998–2001), 53–71, at pp. 53–60.

Steblin-Kamensky and Meulengracht Sørensen have been content to assume that romance-sagas are, by and large, 'fiction'. This exotic *mélange* of adventure-tales, in which (typically) a hero of improbable prowess encounters an assortment of grotesque monsters, swarthy villains, and accomplished young ladies, is the obvious place to look for evidence of a 'culture of fiction'. These texts are often treated as if they were marginal to Icelandic saga-writing, but they were by far its most popular and fertile branch: several hundred were written from the thirteenth to the early twentieth century, and about a thousand manuscripts survive.[22] If the fictionality of even these unlikely stories can be thrown into doubt, then the case for the fictionality of the more sober forms of saga will be seen to rest on very shaky ground indeed. It is no coincidence that one of the most focused arguments made so far for the fictionality of the *Íslendingasǫgur* (by Fritz Paul) rests on similarities in their narrative procedure to that of *die sicherlich fiktionalen Lügensagas* ('the definitely fictional romance-sagas').[23]

As Ármann Jakobsson has pointed out, it is not enough simply to assume that stories which we find unbelievable today were disbelieved by mediaeval Icelanders.[24] Trolls, elves, monsters, and magic were part of their own lives, while many phenomena which would have seemed incredible in the Iceland of their day might have been believed of the distant past or of distant lands. A proper historical study of such beliefs would be of immense value for the literary scholar. In the absence of such a study, many of the romance-sagas fortunately contain explicit statements of authorial intention, of which the *apologiae* mentioned earlier are particularly revealing. These are, in fact, the passages most often flagged up by scholars as evidence for the widespread currency of saga-fiction. My main purpose in this article, then, is to look more closely at how these passages worked and what they can tell us about saga-fiction. This analysis will also involve a reässessment of the often-cited lexical evidence for the currency of saga-fiction, for example the Norse word *lygisaga* and the various Latin rhetorical terms (for example *fabula* and *figura*) found scattered across the saga corpus.

The *apologia* is one very specific manifestation of the self-conscious narrator, a figure who emerges in various guises in a large number of romance-sagas. Self-conscious narrators also appear widely throughout the genre of foreign verse narratives of which the Icelandic romance-sagas are often seen as direct

[22] For surveys of parts of the romance-saga corpus, see Kalinke, 'Norse romance'; Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*; Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland'; Driscoll, 'Late prose fiction'; J. Glauser, 'Romance (translated *riddarasögur*)', in *A Companion*, ed. McTurk, pp. 372–87.

[23] Paul, 'Das Fiktionalitätsproblem', p. 62.

[24] Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the trolls?', pp. 54–6. See also Nancy F. Partner, *Serious Entertainments. The Writing of History in Twelfth-century England* (Chicago, IL 1977), pp. 114–40.

descendants: the *romans courtois*. Partly because of their authorial self-consciousness, these romances are nowadays routinely referred to as 'fiction' (even more so than the sagas),[25] and this scholarly tendency reinforces the assumption that the romance-sagas are also fiction. Before we launch into the specific case of the *apologiae*, then, it is worth first sketching out the reasons why the term 'fiction' is not altogether felicitous when applied even to the notably self-conscious romances of Chrétien de Troyes. This exposition will provide some historical background to the mediaeval European conception of 'fiction', as well as pointing up some fundamental distinctions between romance-narrative and saga-narrative. With this cautionary example in mind, we shall then turn our gaze northwards again to survey the phenomenon of the self-conscious saga-narrator in late mediaeval Iceland, before homing in on the defensive rhetoric of the *apologia*.

Raising question-marks over commonly-accepted concepts is inevitably a rather negative form of analysis; in the present article I aim merely to clear some ground for a fresh approach to Icelandic saga-entertainment. It is built on the pioneering work of previous scholars who, in promoting the literary-critical discussion of Icelandic 'fiction', have shed much-needed light on a neglected subject. If, in the following pages, small terminological holes are picked in their fabric, this is only to let through a little extra light from elsewhere.

FICTION, ROMANCE, AND THE SAGA

To label a narrative as 'fiction', in the conventional, quasi-generic sense familiar to modern literary critics, is to make the following assertions about its ostensible origins, truth-value and intended reception.

(1) Fiction is made up (*fictum*) by the imagination of an individual author rather than being a product of anonymous communal 'tradition'.

(2) It contains events which did not really happen (sometimes alongside those which did).

(3) Its author does not intend the audience to understand all the events narrated as having really happened.

As I shall now explain, none of these assertions can be made of most verse

[25] For representative examples, see H. R. Jauss, 'Chanson de geste et roman courtois (analyse comparative du *Fierabras* et du *Bel Inconnu*)', in *Chanson de Geste und höfischer Roman. Heidelberger Kolloquium 30. Januar 1961* (Heidelberg 1963), pp. 61–77, at 76–7; R. L. Krueger, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge 2000), pp. 1–9, at 1, 2, 6. For dissenting views, see S. Fleischman, 'On the representation of history and fiction in the Middle Ages', *History and Theory* 22 (1983) 278–310; H. U. Gumbrecht, 'Wie fiktional war die höfische Roman?', in *Funktionen des Fiktiven*, edd. Dieter Henrich & W. Iser (München 1983), pp. 433-40.

romances without considerable qualification.[26]

The first assertion does draw attention usefully to the high level of authorial consciousness pervading many verse romances. Although the concept of individual authorship has changed greatly since the Middle Ages,[27] it is easy to see how it can be applied to named authors like Chrétien de Troyes, who advertised himself within his romances as an individual creative figure. However, this form of 'creativity' must not be confused with the post-Enlightenment concept of the 'creative imagination'.[28] To call Chrétien's narratives 'fiction' can seem to imply that the *matière* (the story) as well as the manner was created by the author, whereas Chrétien and most other early romance-authors regularly gestured towards written sources for their *matière* and insisted on the reliability of such sources.[29] We shall return to this problem below. It should also be noted that by no means all romance-authors named themselves in their texts as Chrétien did.

The second criterion, factual falsehood, expresses a concept well known to those mediaeval scholars who were concerned to set definite boundaries between levels of truth-value. In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville defined *historia* as a narrative containing *res uerae quae factae sunt* ('true things which were done'), a definition with which many historians today would concur. By contrast, he defined *fabula* as a narrative containing things *quae nec factae sunt nec fieri possunt, quia contra naturam sunt* ('which neither were done nor can be done, for they are contrary to nature'). This distinction remained influential in later mediaeval literary theory, as did the concept of *argumentum* positioned between them: this kind of narrative pertained to events *quae etsi facta non sunt, fieri tamen possunt* ('which, though they were not done, yet can [in theory] be done').[30] These and similar divisions of narrative into *historia*, *fabula*, and (sometimes) *argumentum* were used and developed by some scholars in the Middle Ages.[31]

Three cautionary observations, however, should be made regarding such

[26] These assertions of course present a radically simplified version of this complex and difficult concept. For a more nuanced account see Lamarque & Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*.

[27] A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship. Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London 1984).

[28] K. K. Ruthven, *Critical Assumptions* (Cambridge 1979), pp. 102–18.

[29] For an introduction to source-attribution in French romance (albeit from a 'fictionalist' perspective), see Roger Dragonetti, *Le Mirage des sources. L'Art du faux dans le roman médiéval* (Paris 1987).

[30] *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum siue Originum Libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (2 vols, Oxford 1911), I, unpaginated (I.44,5).

[31] Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture. 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge 1994), pp. 234–41; Päivi Mehtonen, *Old Concepts and New Poetics. Historia, Argumentum, and Fabula in the Twelfth- and Early Thirteenth-century Latin Poetics of Fiction* (Helsinki 1996); Green, *The Beginnings*, pp. 1–34.

classification. First, the practice of historiography in the Middle Ages was more nebulous than Isidore's bald formulation suggests, and narrative truth-value was presented in a manner unlike that pertaining today.[32] Questions of truth and falsehood related not simply to the account's accuracy but also to its internal coherence, its moral value, and the personal character and social status of its author.[33] Secondly, such truth-value did not necessarily define the text's genre as it does today: a single text might be seen as passing between several different modes, from *historia* to *fabula* and back again.[34] Third, even if we grant that these learned Latin classifications were known to every romance-author, we cannot assume that they were felt to be significant or relevant to the composition of vernacular narrative.[35] They did not necessarily loom large in Chrétien's mind when he introduced *Erec et Enide* as *une molt bele conjointure* ('a very beautiful composition') built from *un conte d'avanture* ('a tale of adventure'): it is the way in which the matter has been arranged, rather than the nature of this matter, which his prologue foregrounds.[36]

The final criterion in our threefold definition of 'fiction' relates to the presence of an unwritten contract between author and audience, by which the author tells a licensed form of 'lie' with no intention to deceive and the audience accepts it as such. By means of Classical figurative techniques such as *integumentum* ('veil'), moral and religious truths could be rendered palatable or striking by being cloaked in the garb of *fabula*. By this means Christ's parables and Aesop's fables

[32] Jeanette M. A. Beer, *Narrative Conventions of Truth in the Middle Ages* (Geneva 1981); Fleischman, 'On the representation'.

[33] Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, pp. 117–18, 183–90; Morse, *Truth*; Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*, pp. 64–6.

[34] See, for instance, the Latin colophon to a twelfth-century Irish prose saga: *Táin Bó Cúalnge from The Book of Leinster*, ed. & transl. Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin 1967), p. 136. For commentary see P. Ó Néill, 'The Latin colophon to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in The Book of Leinster: a critical view of Old Irish literature', *Celtica* 23 (1999) 269–75; E. Poppe, 'Reconstructing medieval Irish literary theory: the lesson of *Airec Menman Uraird maic Coisi*', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 37 (1999) 33–54, at pp. 36–7; G. Toner, 'The Ulster Cycle: historiography or fiction?', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 40 (2000) 1–20, at pp. 7–8.

[35] On the incommensurability of the rhetoric prescribed by mediaeval scholars in Latin treatises on poetics and the rhetoric employed by early romance-authors, see J. A. Schultz, 'Classical rhetoric, medieval poetics, and the medieval vernacular prologue', *Speculum* 59 (1984) 1–15; M. Zink, 'Une mutation de la conscience littéraire: le langage romanesque à travers des exemples français du XIIe siècle', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale, Xe–XIIe siècles* 24 (1981) 3–27, at p. 23. On later developments see A. J. Minnis, 'The influence of academic prologues on the prologues and literary attitudes of late-medieval English writers', *Mediaeval Studies* 43 (1981) 342–83; Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 160–210.

[36] *Chrétien de Troyes, Erec and Enide*, ed. & transl. Carleton W. Carroll (New York 1987), p. 2. Note that Chrétien's I-narrator explicitly credits his ancient source, not himself, with the story.

were granted their proper truth-value, and these techniques were put to further use in the lively *exempla* found scattered in sermons from the twelfth century onwards. Even outside these strictly didactic frameworks, Latin poets in the Classical tradition (such as the authors of Ovidian elegies or Aesopian beast-epics) followed Ovid and Horace in claiming a *licentia mentiendi et fingendi* ('licence to lie and make things up') and were supported in this by scholars.[37] Nevertheless, the best-known 'theory of fiction' in the Middle Ages was represented by clerical condemnations of *fabula* as lying. Not all churchmen were Ovid-enthusiasts, and the history of mediaeval European 'fiction' – especially in vernacular narrative – is fraught with disapproval.[38]

This disapproval is reflected in the sometimes defensive tone of the romances themselves. The typical romance is characterised by a self-conscious narrator who intrudes on the narrative to offer his or her own opinions, thus drawing attention to the author's skilful manipulation of the narrative and heightening the potential for irony.[39] As with the Icelandic examples to be discussed below, this feature is often taken as *prima facie* evidence for fictionality. Romance narrators (like those of *lais*) may often go on to insist that the story is true and drawn from a reliable learned source or 'book', as in the prologue to Chrétien's *Cligès*:[40]

> Li livres est molt ancïens
> Qui tesmoingne l'estoire a voire;
> Por ce fet ele mialz a croire.

'The book testifying to the truth of the story is very old; hence it deserves more to be believed.'

But these assertions have themselves also been construed as veiled signals of fictionality.[41] Here the argumentation can become circular: while such source-references do work (paradoxically) to heighten the romancer's authority and

[37] See N. Zeeman, 'The schools give a license to poets', in *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge 1996), pp. 151–80; Green, *The Beginnings*, pp. 18–34.

[38] J. Misrahi, 'Symbolism and allegory in Arthurian romance', *Romance Philology* 17 (1963/4) 555–69, at pp. 567–8; P. Haidu, 'Repetition: modern reflections on medieval aesthetics', *Modern Language Notes* 92 (1977) 875–87, at pp. 881–3; F. H. Bäuml, 'Varieties and consequences of medieval literacy and illiteracy', *Speculum* 55 (1980) 237–65, at pp. 255–8; Green, *The Beginnings*, pp. 31–4. Such disapproval persisted into modern times: see W. F. Gallaway, Jr., 'The conservative attitude toward fiction, 1770–1830', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 55 (1940) 1041–59. On the continuing circumspection of early modern novelists on this front, see Davis, *Factual Fictions*; Day, *From Fiction to the Novel*.

[39] D. H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge 1979), pp. 213–49.

[40] *Chrétien de Troyes*, *Cligés*, edd. Stewart Gregory & C. Luttrell (Cambridge 1993), p. 1.

[41] Zink, 'Une mutation', p. 19; Barnes, 'Authors', pp. 8–9.

freedom to invent,[42] the case for their being signals of fictionality still depends on a prior assumption that the romance was intended as fiction. Because the romance was one of the novel's direct ancestors, this is an easy assumption to make. Its associated problems, however, are illustrated by glancing at the work of those scholars who have taken the trouble to argue, rather than merely assert, the fictionality of romance.

Several scholars of French romance have made a case for 'fiction' by citing (often out of context) the opinions of other mediaeval writers who doubted the truth-value of Arthurian stories, and by using their terms of accusation (*fable* or *mençunge*, 'lie') to refer to the romancers' intentions.[43] Such dubious practice cloaks the bare fact that neither Chrétien nor any other early romance-author ever stated that his or her *matière* was made up, unlike the authors of self-evidently fabulous narratives such as the eleventh-century Latin beast-epic *Ecbasis captiui*.[44] A more coherent defence of the romance's fictionality has been mounted by scholars of German romance, notably Walter Haug and Dennis Green, who have shown that Chrétien's German successors Hartmann von Aue, Gottfried von Strassburg, and Wolfram von Eschenbach took liberties with conventional forms of historical authentication in full collusion with (some members of) their audiences. On this basis both Haug and Green have argued with considerable force that *Iwein*, *Tristan*,

[42] Michelle A. Freeman, *The Poetics of* translatio studii *and* conjointure. *Chrétien de Troyes's Cligés* (Lexington, KY 1979), pp. 26–37; Zink, 'Une mutation'; D. F. Hult, 'Author/narrator/speaker: the voice of authority in Chrétien's *Charrete*', in *Discourses of Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Kevin Brownlee & W. Stephens (Hanover, NH 1989), pp. 76–96, at 82–4.

[43] For example, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past. The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-century France* (Berkeley, CA 1993), pp. 62–4 (drawing partly on Zink, 'Une mutation', pp. 18–26). See also R. Guiette, '"Li conte de Bretaigne sont si vain et plaisant"', *Romania* 88 (1967) 1–12.

[44] On the *Ecbasis*, presented as a *rara fabella* ('strange little fable'), see Green, *The Beginnings*, pp. 7–8. A possible exception to this rule may be identified in the late twelfth-century romance *Le Bel inconnu*, whose somewhat inconclusive ending is followed by its author's suggestion that his patroness has some control over how the story might be continued, but that a happy ending for the sequel will depend on her granting the author his own desires: the author flirts with the concept of fiction and, through it, with his lady. On this passage and its atypicality see Jauss, 'Chanson', p. 76.

and *Parzival* were explicitly intended as fiction.[45] But Green has also stressed the brevity and atypicality of this development in European literary history: fiction (if we accept it as such) emerged in the mid-twelfth century only to disappear again in the early thirteenth, remaining dormant until romance underwent a more lasting transformation at the hands of Cervantes.[46] In the Middle Ages, the concept of fictional truth proved unable to dislodge the long-standing assumption that written narratives in the vernacular should be authentic representations of the past.

With the possible exception of a handful of German romances, then, it begs the question to generalise about 'romance fiction':[47] the first word does not necessarily imply the second. Romance nurtured the rise of fiction not by renouncing the historicity of its putative sources but by the subtler technique of sidelining it, of relegating this kind of truth to a position of insignificance by comparison with the truth created by the skill of the individual author, who shaped his or her *matière* into a transcendent and authoritative *conjointure*.[48] This move did not in itself amount to a rejection of historicity. The innumerable protestations, in *chansons de geste* and romances alike, to the effect that 'this story is true', may be read as evidence that audiences wanted to believe in the stories

[45] D. H. Green, *Medieval Listening and Reading. The Primary Reception of German Literature, 800–1300* (Cambridge 1994), pp. 254–64; Walter Haug, *Vernacular Literary Theory in the Middle Ages. The German Tradition, 800–1300, in its European Context* (2nd edn, Cambridge 1997); Green, *The Beginnings*. The case for Hartmann and Gottfried as writers of fiction requires more elaborate argumentation than the case for Wolfram, whose boldness in this respect is more immediately apparent. For a dissenting view see, however, F. P. Knapp, 'Von Gottes und der Menschen Wirklichkeit: Wolframs fromme Welterzählung Parzival', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* 70 (1996) 351–68. Green's case for Chrétien as the founder of romance fiction (*Medieval Listening*, pp. 254–5) seems to me unconvincing, relying as it does on (a) an elaborate and idiosyncratic interpretation of a supposed allusion in *Yvain* to a sceptical passage in Wace's *Roman de Rou*, and (b) the notion that Chrétien claimed to be the originator of the story in the prologue to *Perceval*, although the last lines of the prologue insist that Chrétien 'found' the story in a book given to him by his patron. I hope to address these matters more fully in a future publication.

[46] Green, *Medieval Listening*, pp. 265–8.

[47] Barnes, 'Authors', p. 6; Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, p. 63; the first edition of my own *Icelandic Histories and Romances* (Stroud 2002) contains similar imprecisions (pp. 12, 19), rectified in the second edition (Stroud 2006).

[48] On the term *conjointure* see Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford 1971), pp. 34–7; M.-L. Ollier, 'The author in the text: the prologues of Chrétien de Troyes', *Yale French Studies* 51 (1974) 26–41, at pp. 30–1.

which they heard, and that authors felt bound to satisfy this need;[49] the arrangement of some manuscript-compilations likewise suggests that romances could be read as legendary history, as true stories about the distant past.[50]

If we must be circumspect about applying the term 'fiction' to romance, still more caution is required with Icelandic sagas. Many saga-authors helped themselves liberally to motifs and story-patterns from the *romans courtois*, but romance and romance-saga sprang from different soils and they display sharply divergent conceptions of authorship and narratorial voice.

First, even less than the writers of romances, saga-authors did not (as far as we can tell) see themselves as individual authors.[51] The surviving manuscripts suggest a range of successive authorial figures who, far from being 'conscious of the literary narrative as the product of individual creative imagination',[52] saw themselves as passing on other people's stories in good faith. As Walter Map had remarked towards the end of the twelfth century, *non mentitur qui recitat, sed qui fingit* ('he does not lie who repeats a tale, but he who makes it up').[53] In the sagas, informants were frequently named, for example the Þorvaldr *er sagði sǫgu þessa* ('who told this story') at the end of *Droplaugarsona saga*, a reference from which some scholars have mistakenly deduced that Þorvaldr was the author of the extant saga.[54] Specific literary sources were also often claimed, some more credible than others. But these attributions always refer to other people: the successive redactors

[49] On these protestations in French and English texts see R. Crosby, 'Oral delivery in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 11 (1936) 88–110, at p. 107. On the 'historical' implications of the slippery term *geste*, see J. J. Duggan, 'The *Chanson de Roland* and the *chansons de geste*', in *European Writers. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. William T. H. Jackson (2 vols, New York 1983), I.89–111, at pp. 101–2; J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature, 1100–1400* (Oxford 1986), p. 121.

[50] Sylvia Huot, *From Song to Book. The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry* (Ithaca, NY 1987), pp. 27–32; Green, *The Beginnings*, p. 89.

[51] See M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, 'An attempt at a semantic approach to the problem of authorship in Old Icelandic literature', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 81 (1966) 24–34. Steblin-Kamenskij's work has, however, tended to exaggerate the difference between mediaeval and modern authorship, prompting a critical backlash which has exaggerated the continuities: see P. Hallberg, 'The syncretic saga mind: a discussion of a new approach to the Icelandic sagas', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 7 (1974) 102–17. On the nature of saga-authorship see P. Bibire, 'Old Norse literature', in *British Writers*, ed. Jay Parini, Supplement VIII (New York 2003), pp. 227–44, at 237–8.

[52] Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland', p. 271, commenting on the *riddarasǫgur*.

[53] *Walter Map, De nugis curialum. Courtiers' Trifles*, edd. & transl. M. R. James *et al.* (Oxford 1983), p. 112. Map was perhaps being disingenuous, but the same sentiments were expressed by Bede in the prologue to his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*: he asked the reader not to blame him if any untruth were found in his work, since he was simply following *uera lex historiae* ('the true law of history') in collecting stories from reliable witnesses. See *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edd. & transl. Bertram Colgrave & R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1969; rev. imp., 1991), p. 7.

[54] *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson (Reykjavík 1950), p. 180; see Hallberg, 'The syncretic saga mind', p. 115.

of the surviving saga-texts never named themselves except as 'he who put the story together'. In this sense, unlike Map's compilation, all Icelandic sagas are anonymous. Unlike Chrétien, and still more unlike modern authors, saga-authors claimed no personal ownership of (or finality for) their particular reworking of the received story.[55] In the present article, allusions to 'authors' or 'saga-authors' will refer to these successive authorial-editorial figures, not to the shadowy individuals responsible for lost 'original texts'.[56] In mediaeval Iceland, it seems, distinctions between the 'copying' and 'composition' of a text were rather blurred: the Norse terms *skrifa* ('write') and *setja saman/samsetja* ('put together', 'compose') overlapped considerably and were sometimes interchangeable,[57] while those who commissioned sagas (for example, King Sverrir or Snorri Sturluson) were often presented as no less 'authorial' than those doing the writing. It is partly for this reason that Snorri Sturluson's 'authorship' of some sagas remains a hotly contested point, unlike Chrétien's 'authorship' of *Erec et Enide*.[58]

The second fundamental difficulty with applying the term 'fiction' to Icelandic prose sagas is that they, much more than the verse romances, present themselves as historical accounts. In the West-Norse world, as in thirteenth-century France and Germany, prose was favoured over poetry as a more truthful medium for narrating history in the vernacular; as Green and Haug have noted, the turn to prose in Continental romance in the thirteenth century went hand-in-hand with more stringent truth-claims.[59] The Norse phrase denoting composition, *setja saman*, may be a calque on the Latin *componere*; like the Latin verb, it did not

[55] As late as the nineteenth century, sagas composed by known individuals (for example, Jón Hjaltalín) were not seen by contemporary scribes and readers as being 'by' those individuals or as the artistic 'property' of any one person: see Matthew James Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve. The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (London 1997), p. 55.

[56] On the post-Enlightenment obsession with (and construction of) authored 'originals', see K. K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge 2001), pp. 121–45; for a trenchant critique of this attitude as applied to the sagas see Boulhosa, *Icelanders*, pp. 21–31.

[57] Examples are found in the narratorial intrusions examined below, as well as those cited by Jürg Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas. Studien zur Prosaliteratur im spätmittelalterlichen Island* (Basel 1983), pp. 78–100. This semantic overlap does not, however, mean that writing was always implied whenever the phrase *setja saman* was used.

[58] On Snorri see Boulhosa, *Icelanders*, pp. 6–21, 30–1.

[59] On French and German examples see Spiegel, *Romancing the Past*, pp. 64–9; Haug, *Vernacular Literary Theory*, pp. 251–3; Green, *Medieval Listening*, pp. 266–7. However, the late Antique tradition of Latin verse historiography remained very much alive in the East-Norse world as in Anglo-Norman Britain, giving rise in the fourteenth century to vernacular Norse verse-chronicles. See S.-B. Jansson, 'Chronicles, rhymed', in *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, edd. Phillip Pulsiano & K. Wolf (New York 1993), pp. 83–4; L. Lönnroth *et al.*, 'Literature', in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, I, *Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge 2003), pp. 487–520, at p. 511.

necessarily imply free invention. As Peter Foote has remarked, it was often used 'of professedly historical works, where the writer would not be credited with invention':[60] it refers to the reässembling or reworking of preëxisting narratives to create a new whole. Because of the flexibility of historiographical practice, this process could entail some bending of what we might consider to be 'historical truth': ever since Herodotus, historians had claimed the right to insert dialogue, dramatise situations, and add love-episodes, all in the name of rhetorical embellishment or *amplificatio*, without necessarily compromising the veracity of the underlying narrative.[61] In sacred histories such as saints' Lives, truth did not inhere merely in attested fact but also in what the writer felt to be spiritually or morally appropriate: in the extracts from Styrmir's *Óláfs saga helga* incorporated into the late fourteenth-century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, the narrator insists that *trui menn fastliga at þat mun allt sannazst er fra Olafui konungi er bezst sagt* ('people should believe firmly that all the best things told about King Óláfr must be truest').[62] In this respect mediaeval historiography embraced, to a limited extent, several techniques which we tend to see as belonging to fiction alone.

In sum, then, whereas the *roman courtois* originated in the twelfth century both as an explicitly 'authored' form and in the relatively textually-stable and *fabula*-friendly vehicle of verse, the Icelandic saga originated as a textually fluid form of prose historiography, usually anonymous, and with no place for an individual author. When these two very different literary movements came into contact in the thirteenth century, those saga-authors who were interested in romance did not simply start writing romances themselves. The old roots died hard. Even the Norse translations of *romans courtois*, *lais*, and *fabliaux* assumed 'historical' garb when transposed into saga-prose: many of them sprouted genealogies and

[60] Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan', p. 72, n. 16.

[61] For Classical examples, see T. P. Wiseman, 'Lying historians: seven types of mendacity', in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, edd. Christopher Gill & T. P. Wiseman (Exeter 1993), pp. 122–46, at p. 142. For mediaeval examples, see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 245–60; Morse, *Truth*; Green, *The Beginnings*, pp. 146–52.

[62] *Flateyjarbok*, edd. Guðbrandr Vigfusson & C. R. Unger (3 vols, Oslo 1860–8), III.248; see also Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan', p. 72, n. 16. On the differing attributions for this comment see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók. Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389* (Odense 2005), p. 266. On the complex relations between spiritual and historical truths, see Charles W. Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (Ithaca, NY 1947), pp. 74–9, 118–19; K. Schreiner, 'Zum Wahrheitsverständnis im Heiligen- und Reliquienwesen des Mittelalters', *Saeculum* 17 (1966) 131–69.

relatively specific historical settings,[63] while passing references to a 'true story' in a source-text, such as the allusion to *la verité* in *Le Lai du cort mantel*, expanded in translation to become detailed statements of historicity.[64] At some level, at least, sagas seem to have been expected by their audiences to hand down reliable information about the past and its great men, women, and monsters.[65] This historical imperative could not be ignored, nor should we ignore it.

SELF-CONSCIOUS NARRATORS

Within the bounds of this generic conservatism, however, many saga-authors were happy to experiment with unfamiliar narrative techniques, and it is likely that some of these techniques were gleaned from their encounter with romance. The narrative voice of the romance-sagas is often self-conscious, and this self-consciousness manifests itself in a variety of ways. It often has a comic ring to it, sometimes seeming to approach burlesque or parody. Saga-authors' use of these techniques reflects the self-confident maturity of a well established, capacious literary genre, the Icelandic saga, whose distinctive features were strong enough – or conventional enough – for narrators to send them up, and for audiences to get the joke. Like Chrétien de Troyes, the self-conscious saga-narrator is able to suggest ironic distance between himself and the events narrated, establishing what Geraldine Barnes has called a 'witty complicity between author and audience':[66] the audience is encouraged not to take such sagas too seriously.

This evident playfulness has helped to foster the modern consensus that such sagas were meant to be understood as outright fiction. However, a closer look at

[63] G. W. Weber, 'The decadence of feudal myth – towards a theory of *riddarasaga* and romance', in *Stucture*, edd. Lindow *et al.*, pp. 415–54; Barnes, 'Authors', pp. 10–12. On the transformations made by Norwegian and Icelandic redactors to Arthurian romance, see Marianne E. Kalinke, *King Arthur North-by-northwest. The* matière de Bretagne *in Old Norse-Icelandic Romances* (København 1981), especially pp. 120–4. On the reception and imitation of *fabliaux* in Iceland, see Sverrir Tómasson, 'Hugleiðingar um horfna bókmenntagrein', *Tímarit Máls og menningar* (1989) 211–26; T. H. Tulinius, 'Kynjasögur úr fortíð og framandi löndum', in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, II, edd. Böðvar Guðmundsson *et al.*, pp. 165–245, at p. 212.

[64] *Mǫttuls saga*, ed. & transl. Marianne E. Kalinke (København 1987), pp. 4–5 (including the passage from *Le Lai du cort mantel*, edited by Philip E. Bennett). On this example see also Kalinke, *King Arthur North-by-northwest*, pp. 124–5.

[65] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 'Fact and fiction in the Sagas', in *Dichtung, Sprache, Gesellschaft. Akten des IV. Internationalen Germanisten-Kongresses 1970 in Princeton*, edd. Victor Lange & H.-G. Roloff (Frankfurt 1971), pp. 293–306, at p. 303; Klaus von See, 'Das Problem der mündlichen Erzählprosa im Altnordischen: der Prolog der Þiðriks saga und der Bericht von der Hochzeit in Reykjahólar', *Skandinavistik* 11 (1981) 91–5, reprinted in his *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung. Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg 1981), pp. 506–10 (see p. 508); Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, pp. 52–61.

[66] Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland', p. 271.

precisely how this kind of self-consciousness functions (on its various levels) within these sagas, and how it relates to the more established conventions of saga-writing, will help us to understand its self-imposed limits as well as its comic possibilities. In this section we shall explore what happens in the context of saga-entertainment when a narrator steps into his narrative to offer commentary: we need to be clear about this general phenomenon in order to understand the specific case of the *apologia*.

First, I must offer some cautions in respect of method. Mapping the behaviour of a narrator within a saga-text onto the real-life practice of saga-entertainment is not straightforward. Very little is known, although much has been speculated, about how sagas were communicated to their audiences in mediaeval Iceland; and what the saga-texts tell us about such practices cannot be taken as a complete or impartial picture of what happened. Several different scenarios are possible, in a spectrum ranging from the completely oral to the completely textual, and from public to private: oral improvisation, the oral performance of a memorised narrative (with or without a manuscript-text as a prompt-book), reading a saga aloud in public from a manuscript-text (with or without improvised deviations), reading a saga aloud to oneself, silent reading. The reality was likely to have been more flexible and variable than these discrete categories imply: practice probably varied not only across time, but also depending on the nature of a particular audience, sagaman, or saga, and possibly even within a single saga-reading or performance.[67] Levels of audience-participation must also have varied, as must the form which this took and the extent to which it was welcomed.[68]

Most 'external' references to public saga-entertainment – that is, references not contained within the sagas to which they refer – suggest that manuscripts were often used in some capacity, that full-scale improvisation was rare, and that interruptions were both courteous and welcome. However, since most of this evidence is from the late eighteenth century or later, it remains an open question how far it may be used as evidence for mediaeval saga-entertainment. This evidence is also exclusively concerned with the domestic institution of the *kvöldvaka* ('evening-wake'), thus shutting out private-reading practices from the picture.[69] The evidence of the sagas themselves is also problematic. Third-person

[67] On these practices see Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga* (Reykjavík 1962); Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, p. 318; Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, pp. 92–104.

[68] For some thought-provoking speculations on audience-participation, see J. Allard, 'Oral to literary: *Kvöldvaka*, textual instability, and all that jazz', www.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/pro/indbib.php.

[69] On the *kvöldvaka* in post-Reformation times see Magnús Gíslason, *Kvällsvaka. En isländsk kulturtradition belyst genom studier i bondebefolkningens vardagsliv och miljö under senare hälften av 1800-talet och början av 1900-talet* (Uppsala 1977); Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children*, pp. 38–73.

descriptions of saga-entertainment within sagas, even if we accept them as historically reliable, can and have been used to support widely differing assessments of the 'orality-textuality ratio' in such entertainment: the best-known examples, notably the famous account of the wedding at Reykjahólar in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* and the account of how Sturla Þórðarson recited a troll-saga in *Sturlu þáttr*, are also the hardest to pin down on such matters.[70]

Almost all third-person descriptions of or references to saga-reading clearly represent public performance rather than private reading.[71] We find the same emphasis in first- or second-person statements by narrators within sagas: the narrator of one fifteenth-century text of the bridal-quest romance-saga *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* refers at one point to the person telling the story as *sá er undir bókinni sitr* ('the man with the book on his lap'), putting the text itself into the picture.[72] Of course, such references give only tiny and partial glimpses, and they may bear only an indirect relation to practice: their authors may have had their own agenda for depicting saga-entertainment as a form of public, textually based storytelling, and perhaps for downplaying other forms of entertainment. In short, these passages show us an implied rather than a real audience.[73]

Nevertheless, in an analysis of generic affiliations and authorial intentions, the behaviour of an implied audience is itself of great interest. I am prepared to make a further leap of faith and suggest, in view of the probable continuity of the practice of saga-entertainment between mediaeval and modern times, that narratorial projections of this kind can show us at least a part of the social reality. The present analysis will take little account of such figures as the private reader and the oral improviser, not because they were necessarily unimportant, but because the evidence with which we are dealing is largely silent concerning their

[70] The former passage is quoted in full and discussed below (pp. 133–9). The latter can be found in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Kristian Kålund (2 vols, København 1906/11), II.325–6, and has been discussed by Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, pp. 98–102.

[71] Scholars differ in their assessments of how widespread the practice of private, individual saga-reading (silent or aloud) was. An optimistic view has been offered by Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca, NY 1982), pp. 188–204. For a more cautious appraisal, see Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, pp. 95–6.

[72] *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, ed. Sven Grén Broberg (København 1909–12), p. 12, n. (using apparatus in order to follow AM 579 4to).

[73] See W. J. Ong, 'The writer's audience is always a fiction', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 90 (1975) 9–21; for cautionary remarks on the Icelandic evidence see Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, pp. 92–5. The pitfalls of attempts to reconstruct reception-history from intratextual evidence are regularly aired in connexion with Middle-English romance: see D. Pearsall, 'Middle English romance and its audiences', in *Historical & Editorial Studies in Medieval & Early Modern English for Johan Gerritsen*, edd. Mary-Jo Arn & H. Wirtjes (Groningen 1985), pp. 37–47; R. Field, 'Romance in England, 1066–1400', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge 1999), pp. 152–76, at p. 169.

roles. The scenario projected by the narratorial intrusions discussed below is, almost universally, that of a reciter[74] reading out a saga to a preferably attentive audience from a text (itself often presented as having been rewritten or copied from a preëxisting text).[75]

Let us now examine the ways in which narratorial self-consciousness can subvert the seemingly 'objective' narrative voice so characteristic of the Icelandic saga. The typical saga-narrator speaks as if carrying the authority of a tradition from the past, and he usually expresses himself in passive or impersonal constructions (*frá því er nú at segja*) or, less frequently, in the first person plural (*þar lúkum vér þessi sǫgu*).[76] This impersonal narrative voice unites the roles of saga-author and saga-reciter: the person reading the saga aloud seems almost to have functioned as 'author by proxy' (whether or not he was an author), and he may have enjoyed some freedom to vary the text which he was reading. Furthermore, because this voice directs the audience's attention away from the individual written text of the saga towards the story which it tells, the text becomes subsumed into the story, enhancing its 'traditional' stance.[77] Oral tags like *svá er sagt* help reinforce the text's invisibility: *er svo sagtt ad hann hefr þar ecke leingi verid adr enn Lodver kongur tekur sott* ('it is said that he had not been there long before King Clovis became ill').[78] The narrator therefore frequently avoids making overt value-judgments or direct commentary on the events narrated; instead, he guides our response by showing us the reactions of other characters within the story. In *Orkneyinga saga*,

[74] The English terminology is full of pitfalls. I use the term 'reciter' throughout to refer to someone who recites sagas to an audience, whether or not from a manuscript: in this usage I do not mean to imply that reciters had no freedom to deviate from their received text. I use the term 'sagaman' to refer to writers and reciters alike.

[75] Because these references are not found in pre-fourteenth-century texts, it is impossible to tell how early the practice of reading sagas from manuscripts began. Glauser (*Isländische Märchensagas*, pp. 78–100) has given a richly documented survey of narratorial intrusions referring to the cultural economy of saga-entertainment; he has considered these references to bear a direct relation to mediaeval practice.

[76] There are exceptions: in the mid-fourteenth-century manuscript *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.), a first-person-singular narrator brings both *Finnboga saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga* to a close, although in both sagas the narratorial voice is elsewhere distinctively 'communal'. See *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson (Reykjavík 1959), p. 340; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík 1954), p. 464. On such constructions see P. Schach, 'Some forms of writer intrusion in the *Íslendinga-sǫgur*', *Scandinavian Studies* 42 (1970) 128–56, at pp. 132–5; Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga. A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley, CA 1976), p. 100.

[77] For a detailed study of the 'traditional' presentation of the *Íslendingasǫgur*, see Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, pp. 52–78.

[78] *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Desmond Slay (København 1997), pp. 104–5 (A-text, lines 32–3). On this formula see T. M. Andersson, 'The textual evidence for an oral Family Saga', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 81 (1966) 1–23; Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur', pp. 15–18.

for example, the narrator does not say that the death of Earl Hákon Pálsson was a great loss, but that *þótti mǫnnum þat skaði mikill* ('it seemed to people to be a great loss', 'people felt it to be a great loss'):[79] in such *þótti mǫnnum* formulations the voice of the people is always right, and nothing more need be said.[80]

This unity between text and story is weakened when the narrator becomes self-conscious. Such a narrator steps into the foreground of the text to stress his own (and his audience's) psychological and chronological distance from the 'tradition' which he claims to be relating, foregrounding the fact that he is retelling an oft-told story, perhaps poking fun at characters or conventions within it. The *þótti mǫnnum* convention, for instance, is sent up by the irrepressible narrator of the fourteenth-century romance-saga set within *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, when the death of Earl Hjörvarðr is followed by the information that *þat þótti öllum hans ástvinum … inn mesti skaði, sem var* ('all his closest friends felt it to be a very great loss, which it was').[81] The phrase *sem var* adds nothing to our understanding of the story: its very superfluity both highlights the artificiality of the *þótti mǫnnum* formula and foregrounds the controlling presence of an omniscient narrator. Yet, while such conventions may be mocked, the story's truth is not necessarily being placed in doubt, and the reciter is still functioning as 'author by proxy': such intrusions as the *sem var* just quoted appear to be as much the author's as the reciter's.

This second unity is broken in some later sagas, particularly those from the fifteenth century, whose narrators advanced to a new level of self-consciousness by not only stepping out of the story to offer comment, but also identifying themselves as authors rather than mere reciters. In these brief passages, the narrator's double role in the cultural economy of saga-entertainment stands revealed. In §21 of a fifteenth-century text of the bridal-quest romance-saga *Saulus saga ok Nikanors*, the evil duke Matheus has forced the heroine, Potentiana, to marry him, but he has been tricked by the substitution of a clay dummy in the bridal bed:[82]

uerdr hann nu hardla reidur, þegar ofan skufandi ur sænginni þessari leirkonu so at hon brottnar aull j sundur j sma stycki.

"Enn þat ueit tru min," seger sa sem sauguna hefer skrifat, "at eg þeinki at þessi brúdrin muni

[79] *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson (Reykjavík 1965), p. 115.

[80] On this and other 'intratextual' means of rhetorical persuasion, see L. Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical persuasion in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 42 (1970) 157–89. Needless to say, very few saga-narrators refrain altogether from making explicit value-judgments at particular points, notably when characters are introduced. This happens more frequently in romance-sagas.

[81] *Harðar saga*, edd. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson (Reykjavík 1991), p. 461.

[82] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Agnete Loth (København 1963), p. 53.

bædi hafa haft þurt og kallt huiluneyti. Og þat helld eg fullreyndan kuennamann sem þuilikum giorer barn."

'He now got very angry, shoving this clay woman off the bed at once so that she was completely smashed up into little bits.

"'And I really do believe," says he who has written the saga, "that this bride must have had a dry and cold time in bed. And I'd call him a tried and tested ladies' man who could get such a woman with child.'"

Such intrusions by *sa sem sauguna hefer skrifat* ('he who has written the saga') or *sá er söguna setti [saman]* ('he who put the saga together') are typically humorous.[83] In the example above, the writer-figure muscles in on the story to give it a personal gloss and manipulate the (reciter's) audience directly. Elsewhere he may be comically self-deprecating about his own contribution, invoking thanks for audience and reciter but shame for *sá … er klorat hefer* ('the one who scrawled [the story]').[84]

In making distinct the conventionally-blended roles of author and reciter, these passages underline the text's status as material artefact. This in turn completely severs the already weakened unity between story and text. In the passage quoted from *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, the author-*cum*-reciter sets up an ironic distance between himself and the story being told; but, in the passage from *Saulus saga*, the story is placed at yet another remove because there is both an author and a written text between story and reciter. The illusion of 'traditional' narrative is shattered: whereas the unitary saga-narrator works throughout to conceal his story's own artefactual, authored nature, the narrators just cited put these very features on display. In similar vein, the narrator of the fifteenth-century adventure-saga *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* at one point mentions that he does not have *bokfellit og nenningi<n>a* ('the parchment or the energy') to embark on a full description of all the monsters in a particular king's army.[85]

However, the relative sparsity of these metatextual references suggests that the unitary author-*cum*-reciter remained the generic norm: such references rarely add up to more than a fraction of even the most experimental of sagas. The bulk of *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* (and it is bulky) is told in the traditional unitary manner; in

[83] The second quotation is from *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*, §6, ed. & transl. P. Jorgensen, in *Norse Romance*, I, *The Tristan Legend*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cambridge 1999), p. 260. The comic potential of such intrusions has been noted by P. Bibire, 'From *riddarasaga* to *lygisaga*: the Norse response to romance', in *Les Sagas de chevaliers (Riddarasögur). Actes de la Ve conférence internationale sur les sagas*, ed. Régis Boyer (Paris 1985), pp. 55–74, at p. 63; Barnes, 'Authors', p. 14.

[84] *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, §25, in *Late Mediaeval Icelandic Romances*, III, ed. Agnete Loth (København 1962), p. 66.

[85] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, IV, ed. Agnete Loth (København 1964), p. 98; Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland', p. 271.

many similar sagas this convention is not broken once, even when their narrators are otherwise happy to assert their presence. Against such a powerful norm, explicit references to the writer's creative role stand out all the more strikingly – although it needs to be kept in mind that these glimpses of an authorial role do not amount to admissions of fictionality. These narrators are still posing as historians, even if they offer commentary or admit to leaving out details.

The sparsity of these intrusions is matched by their vulnerable and marginal position in the texts themselves. Because of the nature of saga-composition and saga-transmission, poised between 'oral' and 'literary' modes and lacking fully-fledged individual authors, these texts were rarely fixed; they display many minor and some major variations between manuscripts. Narratorial intrusions were especially unstable: such comments are, by their very nature, external to the story itself, and they can vary enormously in the manuscripts, sometimes being absent altogether.[86] Not only do they hover outside or above the story, but they are often physically located outside the main body of the text, in prologues or epilogues (or colophons, which cannot usually be distinguished from epilogues in saga-texts and which I consider here as a species of epilogue).[87]

In their detachability and variability, these passages serve to underline the sense in which each manuscript, or family of manuscripts, can be seen as bearing witness to a separate performance – whether or not we choose to see this performance as 'scribal' or 'actual'.[88] For this reason, a proper study of narratorial intrusions would require a survey of all the available manuscripts, which would be beyond the scope of the present paper (even if restricted to the *apologiae*).[89] The borderline status of these passages, poised between the world of the story and that of its performance-context, may also be seen as offering scope for admissions of fictionality. Indeed, some of the closest approaches to this concept in Norse prose occur in just these passages. Yet the saga's implicit claims to veracity are seen to remain intact, even in the very few cases where a narrator

[86] On the vulnerability of such intrusions to subsequent 'editorial' adjustment, see Schach, 'Some forms of writer intrusion'.

[87] A detailed examination of the rhetorical *topoi* in mediaeval Icelandic prologues has been given by Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*. On the European background see P. Gallais, 'Recherches sur la mentalité des romanciers français du moyen âge: les formules et le vocabulaire des prologues', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale, Xe–XIIe siècles* 7 (1964) 479–93; Minnis, 'The influence'; Schultz, 'Classical rhetoric'.

[88] See M. J. Driscoll, 'The oral, the written, and the in-between: textual instability in the Post-Reformation *Þjóðsaga*', in *Medieval Insular Literature between the Oral and the Written*, II, *Continuity of Transmission*, ed. Hildegard L. C. Tristram (Tübingen 1997), pp. 193–220, at 219–20.

[89] The survey by Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, pp. 82–100, indicates the diversity found in the manuscript-variants to 'Märchensaga'-epilogues.

explicitly abandons the rhetoric of history for a purely imaginary world. A brief analysis of one such case will bear this point out.

In the epilogue to the text of *Vilmundar saga viðutan* in the late fifteenth-century manuscript AM 586 4to,[90] the narrator reminds us of the sexual escapades enjoyed by two low-life characters from this vigorous adventure-saga: a formidable serving-woman named Öskubuska ('Cinderella') and an enormous trollish slave named Kolr kryppa ('hump').[91]

Og endum uær suo saugu Vilmundar uidutan, med þuj á lyktar ordj af þeim sem skrifat hefir: at sa sem leset hefer, og hiner sem til hafa hlytt – og allir þeir sem eigi eru suo rikir at þeir eigi kongi uorum skatt at giallda – þa kyssi þeir á razen á Auskubusku. Og takit þat til ydar allt sligt sem hia for þa Kolr kryppa sard hana, og sited j þann frid sem þer fáet af henne. Valete.

'And so we end the story of Vilmundr viðutan, with this final word from him who has written [it]: that he who has read it out, and those who have listened to it – and all those who are not so rich that they have to pay tax to our king – are to kiss Öskubuska's arse. Take for yourselves everything that went on when Kolr kryppa mounted her, and enjoy whatever friendship you get from her. Goodbye.'

In the first of these two sentences, the narrator signals the transition from saga proper (ending with the hero's name) to epilogue (the *ályktarorð*) by fragmenting the communal 'we' into its component parts, for the first and last time in the entire text. The narrator here seems to take on a specifically authorial personality, but he does so at one remove, in third-person-singular reported speech. In this guise, tongue firmly in cheek, he instructs both the reciter and (the male members of) the audience to enter the narrative world of the saga. In the second sentence (*Og takit til yðar*) these parameters shift and the reported instruction becomes a direct command in the second person plural. If we imagine how this might have functioned when read aloud, the reciter's role becomes rather complex. In the first sentence he is made to implicate himself in the arse-kissing exercise by reading out the author's instructions; in the second sentence his voice merges again with that of the author to address only the audience. As the content becomes more compromising, so the effect of explicitly reuniting writer and reciter gives a more peremptory tone to their commands.

Despite the crude and obvious form of sexual humour which lies at the heart of this passage, the joke's narrative framing is far from simple. It is of course hard to tell what effect this epilogue would have had on a contemporary audience – without first-hand knowledge of how a fifteenth-century saga-reader tackled it in

[90] I here follow the standard shorthand for manuscripts in the Arnamagnaean collection in Reykjavík and Copenhagen. All manuscript datings in this article are taken from *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog. Registre / A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose. Indices* (København 1989).

[91] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, IV, ed. Loth, pp. 200.18–201.5.

practice. To this twenty-first-century reader, at least, the effect is not only bawdy but also comically disorienting, grotesquely blurring the boundary between the world of the saga and that of fifteenth-century Iceland. Geraldine Barnes has seen this passage as an explicit acknowledgment that *Vilmundar saga* is fictional: she has compared the narrator's gesture with that of a puppet-master handing the strings over to his audience, 'who are invited to pull the strings too, if they like'.[92] But this implied audience does not seem to be in control of the situation at all. It is they, not Kolr and Öskubuska, who are made to appear on the ends of the narrator's puppet-strings – an apt metaphor for a spellbound audience, immersed in his story. Determined to make the most of his privileged position as 'master of ceremonies' before the saga-reading is over, he 'casts' them as Kolr kryppa, taking care to place them in the right position *vis-à-vis* the lady. He then bids them farewell, leaving them to imagine the consequences.

This passage may be seen as a brief flirtation with the world of pure (or not so pure) imagination: we see a narrator flexing his authorial muscles, asserting his authority over his audience and, to an extent, over the story's characters. Yet this is not a signal of the saga's overall fictionality: the actions imagined in the epilogue remain hypothetical and, properly speaking, do not even take narrative form in the text. The story is already over: the passage begins with the words, *endum uær suo saugu* ('so we end the story'). The epilogue thus inhabits a textually and conceptually unstable space poised between the narrative world and the 'real' world, in which these two worlds may momentarily meet. It is made still more precarious by its provocative nature: in the manuscript itself, a later editor has scrubbed it out and replaced it with an invitation to kiss the reciter instead. The original wording may now only be viewed under ultraviolet light.

This case points up the strictly limited sphere which self-conscious fantasy (like *amplificatio*) was allowed to occupy in even the most fanciful of Icelandic sagas, which continued to operate within a purportedly historical mode. None of the intrusions so far discussed, however, has contained any explicit discussion of narrative truth or untruth. For this we must turn to the *apologiae*, whose narrators address such matters openly and sometimes stridently.

TRUTH-CLAIMS AND LIE-SAGAS

For the purposes of definition, the *apologiae* are passages in which a self-conscious narrator protests against his saga being dismissed as untrue, and to this end advances arguments which often focus on the environment and practice of saga-

[92] Barnes, 'Authors', p. 15.

entertainment. These passages share several important features. The separate claims, challenges, and statements of which each *apologia* has been constructed are highly formulaic and recur in several different examples, although in many cases they have been combined to form elaborate arguments. Most *apologiae* make up the bulk of a prologue or epilogue. Their narrators typically express themselves in the first person singular and assume a 'performative' role, which often becomes self-consciously 'editorial'. Like the epilogue to *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, they are textually extremely unstable, sometimes detachable, and should be used cautiously in speculations about a saga's textual history.[93]

The following table shows the *apologiae* which I have identified, listed in chronological order of their earliest manuscript-attestation.

Apologia	Earliest attestation
Prologue to S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (saga attributed to Oddr munk of Þingeyrar)[94]	1300
Prologue to *Sverris saga* (saga attributed to Karl Jónsson of Þingeyrar)[95]	1300
Epilogue to *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*[96]	1300×1325

[93] On the transmission of saga-prologues see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 331–95.

[94] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar af Oddr Snorrason munk*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (København 1932), pp. 1–2. This recension is preserved in Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, isl. perg 4to nr 18 (this section datable *circa* 1300). Oddr is usually thought to have composed his (now lost) Latin life of Óláfr around 1190; it survives in three quite divergent vernacular versions (raising the question how reliable a window upon Oddr's work they represent). The prologue is found only in the S-recension: Sverrir Tómasson (*Formálar*, pp. 347–50) has argued that it is a faithful translation of Oddr's original, but the case is far from watertight.

[95] *Sverris saga etter Cod. AM 327 4°*, ed. Gustav Indrebø (Oslo 1922), p. 1. This version of the prologue is preserved (with minor divergences) in AM 327 4to (*circa* 1300), AM 47 fol. (*circa* 1300×1325) and AM 81a fol. (*circa* 1450×1475). An expanded version of the *apologia* appears in the prologue of the *Flateyjarbók*-recension of *Sverris saga* (København, K.B., GkS 1005 fol., datable *circa* 1387×1395): see *Flateyjarbok*, edd. Guðbrandr Vigfusson & Unger, II.533–4. As Sverrir Tómasson has pointed out (*Formálar*, p. 391), it is unlikely that this *apologia* was present in the saga's putative original prologue. The differences between the two versions have been discussed by Lárus H. Blöndal, *Um uppruna Sverrissögu* (Reykjavík 1982), pp. 73–9; Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 388–94; Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 211–22.

[96] *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Ferdinand Detter (Halle a. S. 1891), p. 78. This epilogue is preserved in Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, isl. perg 4to nr 7 (*circa* 1300×1325) and AM 570a 4to (*circa* 1450×1500), and a shorter, less defensive version occurs in AM 152 fol. (*circa* 1500×1525). It may not be coincidental that one of the earliest manuscripts of *Hrólfs saga*, Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, isl. perg 4to nr 18 (this section datable *circa* 1300×1350) is also the only extant mediaeval parchment-manuscript containing the S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, but since its text of *Hrólfs saga* is incomplete we cannot know whether it ever contained an *apologia*.

Prologue to *Flóvents saga*, recension I[97]	1300×1325
Prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*[98]	1400×1500
Prologue to *Flóres saga konungs*[99]	1450×1475
Prologue to *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*[100]	1450×1475
Prologue to *Bósa saga*, recension I[101]	1450×1500
Epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*[102]	1450×1500
Mid-saga intrusion in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*[103]	1450×1500
Prologue to *Sigurðar saga þögla*, longer recension[104]	1500×1525
Epilogue to *Mágus saga jarls*, recension II[105]	1500×1525

[97] *Flóvents saga*, ed. Gustaf Cederschiöld, *Acta Universitatis Lundensis* 14 (1877/8) 124–67, at p. 124. This prologue is preserved in AM 580 4to (*circa* 1300×1325) and AM 152 fol. (*circa* 1500×1525).

[98] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.. This prologue is present in AM 567 XI β 4to (*circa* 1400×1500) and AM 589f 4to (*circa* 1450×1500), but absent from the texts of this saga in København, K.B., GkS 2845 4to (*circa* 1450) and AM 152 fol. (*circa* 1500×1525): in the latter manuscript the prologue is found instead (with some differences in wording) in *Sigurðar saga þögla*. I have analysed the prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* in more detail in my forthcoming article 'Truth and lies in the *fornaldarsögur*: the prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*', forthcoming in the proceedings of the 2nd International Legendary Saga Conference, edd. Annette Lassen *et al.* (København 2006).

[99] *Drei Lygisǫgur*, ed. Åke Lagerholm (Halle a. S. 1927), pp. 121–2. The prologue is preserved in AM 343a 4to (*circa* 1450×1475) and AM 586 4to (*circa* 1450×1500).

[100] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, IV, ed. Loth, pp. 3–4. The prologue is preserved in AM 343a 4to (*circa* 1450×1475), AM 577 4to (*circa* 1450×1500) and AM 548 4to (*circa* 1543 and 1550×1600).

[101] *Die Bósa-Saga in zwei Fassungen nebst Proben aus den Bósa-Rímur*, ed. Otto Luitpold Jiriczek (Strassburg 1893), p. 3, n.. The manuscripts containing this prologue are AM 586 4to, AM 343a 4to, and AM 577 4to, all written in the second half of the fifteenth century. Only one other pre-seventeenth-century manuscript preserves *Bósa saga*: AM 510 4to (*circa* 1550); this lacks the prologue.

[102] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.363–4. The beginning of the epilogue is preserved in AM 589f 4to (*circa* 1450×1500), and the whole epilogue in AM 152 fol. (*circa* 1500×1525).

[103] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.309(–10), n.. The mid-saga intrusion (from which I quoted at the beginning of this article) is preserved in AM 589f 4to (*circa* 1450×1500) and AM 152 fol. (*circa* 1500×1525); the former preserves a longer version than the latter.

[104] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, pp. 95–6. This prologue is preserved in AM 152 fol. (*circa* 1500×1525) and is also found in some texts of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (see above, n. 98).

[105] *Riddarasögur*, II, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík 1949), pp. 427–9; for a critical edition (currently being prepared for publication) see '*Mágus saga jarls*', ed. John Brian Dodsworth (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge 1963), pp. 239–42. The epilogue is preserved in AM 152 fol. (*circa* 1500×1525) and, in full or in part, in many paper-manuscripts. In one of these, Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, isl. papp fol. nr 58 (*circa* 1690), this *apologia* was used as a prologue and slightly expanded: this manuscript seems to be a copy of the lost *Ormsbók* (*circa* 1350×1400). See '*Mágus saga*', ed. Dodsworth, pp. xliv–xlv and lxxiii–lxxiv.

Prologue to *Þiðreks saga*[106]	1600×1700
Prologue to *Ólífar þáttr ok Landrésar* (from *Karlamagnús saga*)[107]	1600×1700
Epilogue to *Gvímars saga*[108]	1600×1800

The pattern emerging from this preliminary survey is as follows. *Apologiae* first appear in the textual record in four works written between about 1300 and about 1325: two kings' sagas and two romance-sagas. *Apologiae* do not reäppear in the textual record until the fifteenth century. In this later phase, *apologiae* seem to have been associated almost exclusively with romance-sagas, and almost all of them date from after about 1450. Furthermore, all three *apologiae* which make their first appearance in post-Reformation manuscripts appear to be adaptations of foreign originals. However, we must be cautious about how much we read into these distribution-patterns. The survey which I have undertaken is almost certainly incomplete as far as extant manuscripts are concerned, and as we only have a fraction of the manuscripts produced in the Middle Ages there is little room here for confident generalisations about how the *apologia* originated and evolved. Yet it is, to say the least, intriguing that the two earliest-attested *apologiae* appear in kings' sagas traditionally attributed to late twelfth-century clerics of Þingeyrar (Oddr Snorrason and Karl Jónsson). Such matters must await a fuller study.

The length of these passages ranges from a single sentence to several pages. They also vary in the complexity of their arguments: most of their authors avoided making simple claims for the truth of their sagas in favour of subtler devices which we shall explore in the next section. The three shortest *apologiae*, however, are direct truth-claims. As such they serve as a useful starting point for analysing this rhetorical form. *Flóvents saga* opens with this assertion:[109]

Saga sia er eigi saman sett med loklasv, heldr er hvn san; þviat meistari sa, er Simon hett, fann hana skrifaða a Fraklandi …

[106] *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, ed. Henrik Bertelsen (København 1905–11), pp. 1–7; on the manuscripts see *ibid*., pp. i–lxxi. The saga is preserved in a mediaeval Norwegian manuscript, but its prologue only survives in seventeenth-century and later Icelandic copies. The most authoritative of these, AM 178 fol. (*circa* 1600×1700), contains an assertion of derivation from a lost parchment-manuscript, but the latter cannot be dated with any certainty. Sverrir Tómasson has suggested a thirteenth-century date for the prologue – *Bósa saga og Herrauðs*, ed. Sverrir Tómasson (Reykjavík 1996), p. 53; but the presence of this prologue in the post-mediaeval Icelandic manuscripts does not necessarily indicate that the Norwegian version originally had a prologue as well, let alone the same prologue.

[107] *Karlamagnus saga ok kappa hans*, ed. C. R. Unger (Oslo 1860), p. 50. This prologue appears in AM 180d fol. (*circa* 1700) and AM 531 4to (*circa* 1600×1700), both of which contain assertions of derivation from lost parchment-manuscripts.

[108] *Gvímars saga*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke, *Opuscula* 7 (København 1979), pp. 106–39, at p. 138. The only known manuscript for this text, discovered by Kalinke, is Lbs 840 4to (*circa* 1700×1800).

[109] *Flóvents saga*, ed. Cederschiöld, p. 124.

'This saga is not put together from nonsense; rather, it is true, because a scholar named Simon found it written in France.'

Ólífar þattr opens in a very similar vein.[110]

Þessi þáttr er hér byrjast er eigi af lokleysu þeirri, er menn göra sér til gamans, heldr er sagan sögð með sannendum, sem síðan man birtast, því at herra Bjarni Erlingsson or Bjarkey fann hana ritaða ok sagða í ensku máli í Skotlandi …

'The tale which begins here is not derived from that nonsense which people make for their amusement; rather, the story is told truthfully, as will later become apparent, because herra Bjarni Erlingsson from Bjarkey found it written and told in the English language in Scotland.'

In both passages, as in Chrétien's *Cligès*, the citation of a 'found' written source is held up as evidence of the story's truthfulness.[111]

These truth-claims are closely related to the more nebulous appeals to *auctoritates* which occur right across the romance-saga corpus, whose authors often cited specific foreign poets such as Homer (in *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*) and Gautier de Châtillon (in *Ectors saga Artuskappa*).[112] What Geraldine Barnes has aptly nicknamed 'the graffiti sagas' claim to have been found written on walls across the known world: Cologne, Babylon, Lisbon, France.[113] We may smile at the idea of Homer writing *Vilhjálms saga* on the walls of Babylon and thus be drawn to suspect that irony was intended. Indeed, critics sensitive to the humour and narrative self-consciousness of these sagas have suggested that such 'pseudo-scholarly' references to sources deemed today to be 'patently spurious' might be yet another 'deliberate signal to "fiction"'.[114] But this suggestion is problematic on two counts. First, we can never be certain that no foreign source was used. The *chanson de geste* on which *Flóvents saga* is loosely based still survives, but it does not follow that, where this is not the case, the attribution must have been invented. Scholars still disagree on the authenticity of some of these 'pseudo-sources', such

[110] *Karlamagnus saga*, ed. Unger, p. 50 and n. (using apparatus in order to follow AM 531 4to). On this passage see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, p. 249.

[111] *Chrétien de Troyes, Cligés*, edd. Gregory & Luttrell, p. 1, quoted above (p. 111). This strategy resembles the *apologia* in *Sverris saga* in AM 327 4to (*circa* 1300): *þickir os at licara at þær sagnir mune vera við sannyndum er a bokum ero sagðar fra agætismonnum* ('it seems more likely to us that those stories which are told in books about celebrated people must be truthful'), *Sverris saga*, ed. Indrebø, p. 1, lines 22–4. I do not agree with Rowe's suggestion (*The Development of Flateyjarbók*, p. 214, drawing on Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, p. 235) that this sentence betrays its author's uncertainty as to whether the saga is intended to 'entertain or inform' its audience: this seems to me a false opposition, and the passage makes good sense if read literally.

[112] Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 248–50; Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, pp. 86–7. On the European context, see Dragonetti, *Le Mirage des sources*.

[113] Barnes, 'Authors', p. 16.

[114] *Göngu-Hrolf's Saga*, transl. Hermann Pálsson & P. Edwards (Edinburgh 1980), pp. 14–16; Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland', p. 271; Barnes, 'Authors', p. 17.

as the English (or Scots) source of *Ólífar þáttr* and the Latin metrical romance allegedly found on a wall in France and presented as the source of *Clári saga*.[115]

More importantly, even if the source-reference was fabricated, it does not follow that it was meant to be taken as a joke. If modern scholars can still suspect some degree of authenticity in the two cases just mentioned, it seems likely that many Icelanders also took such attributions seriously, and that they were meant to do so. The possibility of learned in-jokes must not be altogether excluded, but it seems equally likely that the authors wanted to overawe their less literate listeners with a display of learning: a fifteenth-century Icelandic farmer did not necessarily know as much about Homer as we think we do, nor would he necessarily have thought Homer, or even a wall in Lisbon, 'patently spurious' as a source. The truth-claims in *Ólífar þáttr* and *Flóvents saga* are so alike that it would seem unwise to label one as a joke and the other as a real source-reference, just because the Old-French *Floovant* happens to have survived.

The author of the prologue to *Bósa saga* took a slightly different tack in order to set this text apart from unlearned *lokleysa* ('nonsense'). Rather than insisting that a written source underlies the saga, the narrator points to the authenticating presence of oral-traditional lore.[116]

Þessi saga hefzt eigi af lokleysu þeirri, er kátir menn skrökva sér til skemtanar ok gamans með ófróðligum setningum, heldr sannar hún sik sjálf með réttum ættartölum ok fornum orðzkviðum, er menn hafa iðuliga af þeim hlutum, er í þessu æfintýri eru skrifaðir.

'This saga does not originate from that nonsense which merry folk make up for their entertainment and amusement in foolish arrangements. Rather, it proves its own truthfulness with accurate genealogies and ancient sayings, which people frequently have [= quote?] from those things which are written in this tale.'

The saga proper then begins at once in the conventional manner, with genealogical notices about the king's ancestors which set the story in the learned

[115] *Clári saga*, ed. Gustaf Cederschiöld (Halle a. S. 1907), 1. On the debate about this source's authenticity see *ibid.*, pp. xxv–xxxi; F. Amory, 'Things Greek and the *Riddarasǫgur*', *Speculum* 59 (1984) 509–23, at pp. 515–16. On the source of *Ólífar þáttr* see H. M. Smyser, 'The Middle English and Old Norse story of Olive', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 56 (1941) 69–84. An analogous dispute concerns the mysterious figure of 'Kyot' on whose work Wolfram von Eschenbach claimed to have drawn in *Parzival*: see Green, *The Beginnings*, p. 79.

[116] *Die Bósa-Saga*, ed. Jiriczek, p. 3, n. (following AM 586 4to and AM 343a 4to). The sense of the clause after *orðskviðum* is somewhat obscure; see also *Bósa saga*, ed. Sverrir Tómasson, p. 50. The semantically capacious term *æfintýr*, like *saga*, bears no necessary connotations of truth or falsehood. See Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* (2nd edn, 3 vols, Oslo 1883–96), s.v. *æfintýr*; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Folk-stories of Iceland* (2nd edn, rev. Einar G. Pétursson, London 2003), pp. 226–7. It seems slightly tendentious to translate it as 'exemplum' (Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, p. 48).

context of Northern legendary history.[117]

Hringr hefir konungr heitit, er réð fyrir Eystra-Gautlandi; hann var son Gauta konungs, sonar Óðins, er konungr var í Svíþjóð ok kominn var utan af Ásíam ok frægaztar konungaættir eru frá komnar hér á Norðrlöndum. Þessi konungr, Hringr, var bróðir Gautreks hins milda at faðerni.

'There was a king named Hringr who ruled over East Gotaland; he was son of King Gauti, the son of Óðinn who was king in Sweden and had travelled out from Asia, and from whom the most famous royal lines here in the Northern lands are descended. This king, Hringr, was the brother of Gautrekr the Generous on his father's side.'

Vésteinn Ólason, in an important and stimulating study of authorial self-consciousness in the Icelandic legendary sagas, has stated that 'it seems quite obvious that these genealogies are a joke, more or less, and would not have been taken seriously by any well-informed audience'.[118] The reason which Vésteinn has given for this conclusion is that the names are not connected with Icelanders or their forefathers: his implication would seem to be that the only sagas worth taking seriously were those which had some direct bearing on Icelandic history. In the prologue, the narrator states that the genealogies 'prove' the saga's non-fictional nature; but Vésteinn has resolutely turned this *apologia* on its head, presenting it as 'further evidence that the whole saga should be understood as fiction: the prologue is part of the parody'.[119] His assertion has not been supported by any demonstration of the prologue's parodic nature: this has been taken to be self-evident, despite the narrator's insistence to the contrary.

Bósa saga is, admittedly, easy to read as fiction. It is a lively and often grotesque story of monster-slaying and sexual athletics in the forests of Permia, containing (as Vésteinn has demonstrated) many humorous exaggerations and parodies of traditional heroic motifs, along with a very self-conscious narrator.[120] *Bósa saga* does not conform in the least to modern ideas of 'history', and it is not difficult to see why the humanist scholar Árni Magnússon categorised this and similar sagas as *fabulae* or *fabulosae historiae*.[121] Beneath such reasoning, however, lies the unworkable assumption that narratives which we find implausible could not

[117] *Die Bósa-Saga*, ed. Jiriczek, p. 3. On similar context-setting passages, see Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur', pp. 11–15.

[118] Vésteinn Ólason, 'The marvellous north', p. 117.

[119] *Ibid.*, pp. 127(–8), n. 22. For a more cautious appraisal see *Bósa saga*, ed. Sverrir Tómasson, pp. 49–50.

[120] Vésteinn Ólason, 'The marvellous north', pp. 119–22. On humorous elements in *Bósa saga*, see also Hermann Pálsson & Edwards, *Legendary Fiction*, pp. 79–84; *Bósa saga*, ed. Sverrir Tómasson, pp. 48–66.

[121] Kalinke, 'Norse romance', p. 325; see also G. Jones, 'History and fiction in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Saga-book* 13 (1946–53) 285–306, at p. 288.

possibly have been believed, let alone intended as 'history'. Hence, when matter which does conform with modern ideas of 'history' crops up in these sagas – genealogies, for instance – it tends to be seen as 'pseudoarchaism' or 'fabrication' in the interests of verisimilitude, like a novel's 'colouring of historicity'.[122] In the nineteenth century, when sagas were primarily valued for their historical content, romance-sagas were accordingly dismissed as 'spurious' or as 'forgeries';[123] in today's more fiction-friendly climate, the saga-authors' artistic integrity is often reclaimed by interpreting such 'pseudo-historical' matter as ironic or parodic, and by labelling the text in which it appears as, generically, 'fiction'.

While mediaeval Icelanders had as lively a sense of the difference between true and untrue stories as we do, this distinction cannot be used as a means of dividing the saga-corpus, text by text, into discrete categories. As a bibliographical tool, such categories are necessary; but their literary-critical value is limited, since individual sagas move between different levels of truth-value as readily as between styles and modes.[124] So the presence of parodic elements within *Bósa saga* does not in itself indicate that the saga as a whole was intended as a parody, still less as fiction. Parodic elements are widespread in this literature, but they seem to obtain at the level of individual motifs, characters, and conventions, rather than of whole texts, let alone entire genres.[125] While *Bósa saga* seems to have represented a form

[122] P. M. Wolfe, 'The later sagas: literature of transition', in *Alþjóðlegt fornsagnaþing, Reykjavík, 2–8 ágúst 1973. Fyrirlestrar* (2 vols, Reykjavík 1973), II, 20 pages, numbered separately (p. 4); F. Amory, 'Pseudoarchaism and fiction in *Króka-Refssaga*', in *Fourth International Saga Conference, München, July 30th – August 4th, 1979* (München 1979), I, 21 pages, numbered separately; Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur', p. 14; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas. Iceland's Medieval Literature* (Reykjavík 1988), pp. 285–7.

[123] Gudbrand Vigfusson, 'Prolegomena', in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Gudbrand Vigfusson (2 vols, Oxford 1878), I.xvii-ccxiv, at pp. cxxxvii and lxiii–lxiv.

[124] See Bibire, 'Old Norse literature', p. 238. On the way in which sagas slip between modes, see T. H. Tulinius, 'Landafræði og flokkun fornsagna', *Skáldskaparmál* 1 (1990) 142–56; L. Lönnroth, 'Fornaldarsagans genremässiga metamorfoser: mellan Edda-myt och riddarroman', in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi. Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala, 31.8–2.9 2001*, edd. Ármann Jakobson *et al.* (Uppsala 2003), pp. 37–45.

[125] Perhaps the strongest case for a saga being a 'parody' of another saga has been made by P. Schach, 'The *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*: summary or satire?', *Modern Language Quarterly* 21 (1960) 336–52, and followed up by Kalinke, *King Arthur North-by-northwest*, pp. 199–213. However, most of the features of the *Saga af Tristram* identified as 'parodic' are entirely typical of the indigenous romance-sagas: it could be argued that any whole-hearted adaptation of a chivalric romance into the indigenous mode of Icelandic storytelling (as opposed to the compromise represented by many of the translated romances) must, by definition, end up appearing parodic. The question remains open whether an Icelandic saga-audience would have been expected to find the contrast amusing. On the other hand, contemporary Icelandic verse-narratives such as the mock-epic *Skíðaríma* and the beast-epic *Skaufalabálkur* are quite clearly parodic: on the latter see F. Amory, '*Skaufalabálkur*, the *fornaldarsögur* and the European beast epic', in *Alþjóðlegt fornsagnaþing*, I, 14 pages, numbered separately.

of 'history' very different from and less serious than the sagas of (say) Saint Óláfr, it is worth considering that its genealogies and defensive prologue were meant to be taken – in some sense – seriously. They suggest, therefore, that the author was aware that what he was writing was certainly liable to be received as untrue, but that he was anxious to avoid such a reception if possible.[126]

Why is there this anxiety in a saga whose main aim was clearly to entertain? The short answer is that, in the absence of a fully-fledged theory of fiction, an untrue story was liable to be dismissed or condemned as a *lygi* ('lie'). But before we move on to see how this problem was tackled in more detailed and sophisticated *apologiae*, it is worth looking more closely at what it meant to dismiss a story as untrue, and in what context stories earned such a label. Some particularly revealing passages of what we might call 'source-criticism' occur in thirteenth-century texts describing events in Iceland and Norway in 'historical' times (as opposed to the more distant past of legend or romance). One of these passages contains the rare term *lygisaga* ('lie-story') and has been taken by some scholars as evidence for the currency of saga-fiction in mediaeval Iceland: it therefore demands our close attention.

From an early date – perhaps as early as the twelfth century – the writers of texts claimed authority over the production of knowledge about the past in Iceland. In this learned milieu, as oral history became increasingly displaced by and subsumed within the written history of the sagas, authors found it necessary to display their scholarly acumen by revealing their critical attitude towards their sources.[127] Oral sources (whether verse or prose) came under particular suspicion in learned circles. Scepticism in itself was not necessarily required of saga-authors; what seems to have been crucial was to be able to suggest or demonstrate that they were capable of weighing up the truth-value of their sources. In this sense, the same end could be achieved by dismissing or accepting a particular account or narrative form.

These developments fostered lively debates concerning specific reports or narratives, as can be seen in the well known description of saga-entertainment at a wedding-feast in Reykjahólar in 1119, contained within §10 of the probably

[126] Kalinke, 'Norse romance', pp. 318–25; Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur', pp. 6–11.

[127] See Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*, pp. 120–42; Sverrir Tómasson, '"Sǫguljóð, skrǫk, háð": Snorri Sturluson's attitude to poetry', in *Úr Dölum til Dala. Guðbrandur Vigfússon Centenary Essays*, edd. Rory McTurk & A. Wawn (Leeds 1989), pp. 317–27; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, pp. 42–51; Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 46–8.

thirteenth-century text *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*.[128] This description is so famous that it may appear superfluous to quote it yet again; but, because it has almost always been translated in a tendentious manner, it is worth quoting in full. The description is framed as something of a digression within the saga and runs as follows (I have split it into three sections for ease of reference).[129]

(1) Frá þvi er nǫkkut sagt, er þó er lítil<l> tilkoma, hverir þar skemtu eða hverju skemt var. Þat er í frásǫgn haft, er nú mæla margir í móti ok látask eigi vitat hafa, því at margir ganga duldir ins sanna ok hyggja þat satt, er skrǫkkvat er, en logit þat, <er> satt er.

(2) Hrólfr af Skálmarnesi sagði sǫgu frá Hrǫ<n>g<vi>ði víkingi ok frá Óláfi liðsmannakonungi ok haugbroti Þráins berserks ok Hrómundi Gripssyni, ok margar vísur með. En þessarri sǫgu var skemt Sverri konungi, ok kallaði hann slíkar lygisǫgur skemtiligastar. Ok þó kunnu menn at telja ættir sínar til Hrómundar Gripssonar. Þessa sǫgu hafði Hrólfr sjálfr samansetta.

(3) Ingimundr prestr sagði sǫgu Orms <B>arreyjarskálds ok vísur margar ok flokk góðan við enda sǫgunnar, er Ingimundr hafði ortan, ok hafa $^{\text{þó}}/_{\text{þá}}$ margir fróðir menn þessa sǫgu fyrir satt.

(1) 'Of that [event] something is said – which has, however, little significance – as to who entertained there and what was used for entertainment. What is related is now contradicted by many, who maintain that they have never accepted it, for many are blind to the truth and [they] think what is fibbed to be true and what is true to be lied.

(2) 'Hrólfr from Skálmarnes told a story about Hrǫngvið the viking and Óláfr liðsmannakonungr and the mound-breaking of Þráinn the berserk and Hrómundr Gripsson, with many verses in it. This story was used to entertain King Sverrir, and he declared that such lie-stories were most amusing; men can, however, trace their genealogies to Hrómundr Gripsson. Hrólfr himself had put this story together.

(3) 'Ingimundr the priest told the story of Ormr Barreyjarskáld, including many verses and with a good *flokkr*, which Ingimundr had made, at the end of the story. Nevertheless/Accordingly, many learned men regard this story as true.'[130]

[128] *Þorgils saga* survives in two fourteenth-century parchment-manuscripts, where its text is defective. The passage quoted here is only extant in post-mediaeval paper-manuscripts. On the manuscripts see *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, ed. Ursula Brown (London 1952), pp. lii–lxii, and *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Kålund, I.i–lxxvi.

[129] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, ed. Brown, pp. 17.26–18.10 (replacing the 's' in *liðsmannakonungi* in [2], and adding the alternative reading *þá* in the final sentence, as discussed below, p. 135).

[130] The first sentence is my own translation. The rest is adapted from that given by Peter Foote in his 'Sagnaskemtan: Reykjahólar 1119', p. 65, n. 1. I have made seven small alterations in an attempt to make this translation still more literal, and to maintain stricter internal lexical consistency, as follows: (1) *skrǫkkvat* is altered from 'false' to the verbal form 'fibbed'; (2) *logit* is likewise altered from 'a lie' to 'lied'; (3) *saga* is translated throughout as 'story' (Foote has translated it variously as 'saga' and 'story'); (4) *samansetta* is translated as 'put together' rather than 'composed'; (5) *ortan* is translated as 'made' rather than 'composed' (these last two alterations maintaining the Norse distinction between prose and verse composition); (6) *lygisaga* is translated as 'lie-saga', not 'lying saga'; (7) I have replaced the variant reading in the last sentence.

As Peter Foote has demonstrated in his seminal article on this passage, its author was concerned to maintain the accuracy of his own version of events against the dissenting views of his contemporaries.[131] Precisely what the author's version of events was, however, is not easy to pin down. Some scholars have claimed that he was dismissing one or both of the stories as historically worthless; some have suggested that he was trying to defend their literary value; others have suggested that this passage was interpolated by two different writers, one a 'believer' and the other a 'sceptic'.[132] This passage has also been used to support widely differing views of the role of texts within saga-entertainment,[133] and it has served as a scholarly origin-legend for literary subgenres such as the *fornaldarsǫgur*.[134] All these views require the admixture of a hefty dose of conjecture.

Before we can draw any conclusions about what this passage has to tell us, we need to be clear about what it does not tell us. First of all, it does not provide a secure basis for identifying the content of the stories told, except that they dealt with Scandinavian events and heroes: mound-breakings and vikings are found in many different kinds of narrative, and the survival of a late mediaeval set of *rímur* on Hrómundr Gripsson proves nothing about the content, still less the generic affiliations, of this lost saga. Moreover, this passage does not reveal whether or not texts were used in this entertainment. More importantly for our purposes, the question of the stories' historicity is left open, and the nature and extent of the two storytellers' creative input is not made clear. As we shall see, this open-endedness is in itself rather suggestive of mediaeval Icelandic attitudes towards what we call 'fiction'.

In (3), it is only the poem, rather than **Orms saga* as a whole, which Ingimundr is said to have made (*ortan*) himself. The word *ortan* does not necessarily imply that Ingimundr fabricated its narrative content (if indeed there was any): rather, poets were seen as the authors of the forms in which they commemorated events. Nor can much be read into the preposition with which the final sentence begins. All other translations and discussions of this passage in the last fifty years have used *þó* ('nevertheless'), which can be made to imply that Ingimundr's authorship of the poem was felt to impugn the veracity of his story; but this is a matter of editorial choice, since *þó* has equal manuscript-authority

[131] Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan'.

[132] For examples of these views see, respectively, Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 103; von See, *Edda*, pp. 506–10; Andreas Heusler, *Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga* (Berlin 1914), pp. 20–7.

[133] Compare Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*, pp. 52–3, with Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, p. 171, n. 20.

[134] J. Jesch, '*Hrómundar saga Gripssonar*', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, edd. Pulsiano & Wolf, p. 305.

with *þá* ('then', 'accordingly').[135] Any implication of untruth must therefore derive from this story's juxtaposition in the passage with Hrólfr's story and/or with the author's general complaint in (1).

In (2), **Hrómundar saga* is said to have been composed (*samansetta*) by Hrólfr himself, but the latter term does not alone imply fabrication: as Foote has observed, it was used of professedly historical works as well. Foote has nevertheless argued, on the basis of the second sentence in (1), that both stories are implicitly accused of being fabricated: he has taken the phrase *þat … er skrǫkkvat er* ('what is fibbed') to refer to the two stories. While it is difficult to see why it should apply to **Orms saga*, this interpretation is certainly plausible as regards **Hrómundar saga*, tarred as that story is with the brush of *lygisaga* ('lie-story').

But what is a *lygisaga*? The way in which this term is framed in (2) does nothing to sharpen our sense of the saga-author's own opinion. He does not directly label **Hrómundar saga* as a *lygisaga* but leaves this to King Sverrir, whose reported remark is itself very difficult to pin down. The term *lygisaga* is attested in only one other mediaeval text, namely the recension of *Jómsvíkinga saga* woven into *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* within the late fourteenth-century manuscript *Flateyjarbók*. Here the word *lygisaga* is thoroughly pejorative, denoting a false report intended to deceive – a 'lie', in fact, whose teller deserves death.[136] Several scholars, however, have held that the term's connotations in *Þorgils saga* are more neutral, equating *lygisaga* with the Latin term *fabula* and using this to imply equivalence to the modern term 'fiction'.[137]

This equation seems slightly tendentious when we consider that the word *fabula* was itself usually a term of mild or strong abuse, at least outside the rarefied world of learned 'theories of fiction'. Certainly, this Latin term was sometimes used non-pejoratively by Icelandic writers to designate stories which were not true; but in this usage it always referred to foreign (and usually poetic)

[135] Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan', p. 66, n. 2 (Foote has chosen *þó*). In his critical edition, Kristian Kålund chose *þá*: see *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Kålund, I.22, line 23.

[136] *Flateyjarbok*, ed. Guðbrandr Vigfusson & Unger, I.184. On accusations of lying in early Eddic verse, see Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, pp. 38–40. The semantics of the terms *ljúga* and *lygi* have been explored in an unpublished lecture by Paul Bibire, 'Truth, Fiction and Falsehood in Medieval Icelandic Texts', Denys Hay Lecture, University of Edinburgh (2003).

[137] Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan', p. 81; von See, *Edda*, p. 509. Sverrir Tómasson seems to have equated the term *lygisaga* with *fabula* in his '"Sǫguljóð, skrǫk, háð"', p. 322, although elsewhere (*Formálar*, p. 253) he has explained that this is in a pejorative sense.

literature.[138] The word *lygisaga*, in any case, is not found anywhere as a gloss on *fabula*. The commonest Norse equivalent of *fabula* was *skrǫksaga*: in non-pejorative contexts both terms were often used to refer to Ovid's poetry, which – being in Latin verse rather than Norse prose – was apparently an 'acceptable' form of fiction in mediaeval Iceland, as in Latin Europe.[139] Far more frequently, however, *skrǫksaga* and *skrǫk* carried a pejorative value, implying deliberate deception and serving to deny authenticity to the text or utterance in question. This terminology appears above all in religious writings, but also in the prologue to *Heimskringla*, usually attributed to Snorri Sturluson.[140] Heretical writings were often referred to by using such terms; so too were forms of popular storytelling, which were made to serve as a morally suspect backdrop against which the value of saints' Lives and homilies could be recommended.[141] No author of an extant mediaeval Icelandic text ever admits to telling a *skrǫksaga*.

It is of course likely that the term *lygisaga* was used on many occasions besides the two recorded in the extant literature. It is also possible that the author of *Þorgils saga* saw this term as synonymous with *skrǫksaga*. It is even possible that the term *lygisaga* had the same semantic variability as *skrǫksaga*, carrying neutral or pejorative senses depending on the context. But, to judge from what is known of the usage of *skrǫksaga*, it would be highly unusual if *lygisaga* were felt to contain no pejorative implication when used to refer to a story in Norse prose. What presumably made King Sverrir's comment worth reporting was that he put any kind of positive value on something so self-evidently worthless as a *lygisaga* (and the author of *Sverris saga* also found the king's taste for fanciful stories worthy of note).[142] It seems hard to credit that the comment was devoid of any sense of mischief or irony.

Whether the term was meant pejoratively or not, it cannot be translated as 'fiction' for the more fundamental reason that the qualitative distinction between

[138] Icelandic saga-authors' interest in and use of these theories are discussed below (pp. 162–5). Norse terms equivalent to *fabula* have recently been discussed by A. Lassen, 'Odin på kristent pergament. En teksthistorisk studie' (unpublished dissertation, Háskoli Íslands 2005), which I have not been able to consult.

[139] Lönnroth, 'Tesen om de två kulturerna', p. 16.

[140] *Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (3 vols, Reykjavík 1941–51), I.5. The term *skrǫk* here clearly denotes barefaced lying and is juxtaposed with *hégómi* ('vanity, nonsense').

[141] See *Postola sögur*, ed. C. R. Unger (Oslo 1874), p. 849 (*Jóns saga baptista* II); *Heilagra manna søgur*, ed. C. R. Unger (2 vols, Oslo 1877), I.126 (*Augustinus saga*). See also Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.vv. *skrök* and compounds; Richard Cleasby & Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (2nd edn, rev. W. A. Craigie, Oxford 1957), s.v. *skrök*; Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, p. 254.

[142] *Sverris saga*, ed. Indrebø, p. 7, lines 2–4. Sverrir's possible motivations for making this comment have been further explored in Paul Bibire's forthcoming article 'On reading the Icelandic sagas'.

truth and untruth, so prominent in mediaeval texts, cannot simply be mapped onto the modern history-fiction dichotomy. King Sverrir may have enjoyed it as a made-up story, but it does not follow that 'Sverrir particularly enjoyed works of fiction',[143] because the person who told **Hrómundar saga* to King Sverrir may have thought it a true story and intended it to be received as such.[144] As Paul Bibire has pointed out, the term *lygisaga*, 'to judge from its use in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, deals not so much with the text itself, as with the response of the audience to the text', and it is with audience-responses that the description in *Þorgils saga* is chiefly concerned, giving us a spectrum of different opinions on the stories in question while remaining deeply ambiguous as to the saga-author's own view.[145] Reception, whether actual or intended, remained central to the Icelandic concept of untrue narrative. The narrator applies the term *lygisaga* to **Hrómundar saga* by means of the verb *kalla* ('to call'), which emphasises that this was the king's personal judgment. This usage is paralleled in other Icelandic discussions of truth-value: wherever a story is said to be *lygi* or *lygð* ('a lie', 'lied'), that term is applied by a verb implying personal judgment, usually *kalla*. Fictionality was not presented as an inherent quality in a text or story: it existed only insofar as the individual listener perceived it and expressed that perception. Despite the fact that many modern scholars have appropriated the word *lygisaga* as a generic term for the allegedly 'fictional' romance-sagas, in a mediaeval context it had no generic value.[146]

Partly for this reason, it seems unwise to use the rhetorically slippery description from *Þorgils saga* as a basis for sweeping claims about the development of prose fiction in mediaeval Iceland. Klaus von See has argued that its author was defending the new genre of *literarische Fiktion* from its detractors; Sverrir Tómasson has suggested that the saga-author was trying to categorise the stories told according to the European 'fictional' categories of *fabula* and *argumentum*; and Torfi Tulinius has gone still further, asserting on the strength of this passage (as well as the work of the two scholars just cited) that 'what occurred between 1190

[143] Kalinke, 'Norse romance', p. 323; see also Paul, 'Das Fiktionalitätsproblem', p. 62.

[144] The importance of taking into account the intention of a story's reteller has been stressed by Lamarque & Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, p. 17, and applies as much to the authors of the extant saga-texts as to the person who entertained King Sverrir.

[145] Bibire, 'From *riddarasaga* to *lygisaga*', p. 55. Margaret Clunies Ross has recently developed this idea in relation to the mixed narrative modes of the *fornaldarsǫgur*, in her paper '*Fornaldarsögur* as fantastic ethnographies', presented at the Legendary Sagas Conference in Copenhagen ('Myter og virkelighed', 25-28 August 2005) and currently being prepared for publication.

[146] This caution has also been voiced by Lönnroth, 'Tesen om de två kulturerna', p. 16. The modern usage of *lygisaga* was defended in *Drei Lygisǫgur*, ed. Lagerholm, pp. ix–xviii, and has been discussed by Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, pp. 17–21.

and 1230 was the foundation of literary fiction and the acceptance of its legitimacy'.[147] In fact it is a matter of pure speculation whether the saga-author considered one or both stories to be *argumenta*, *fabulae*, or precursors of that post-Romantic category, 'literary fiction': as far as he has told us, they were stories whose status and authenticity were both debatable and debated.

The author of *Þorgils saga* was evidently fascinated by such questions: in the embedded saga-narratives which propel the main plot of his saga, he explored more fully the ambiguities of narrative 'truth', in particular how such truth takes shape in the interplay between performance-context and audience-response.[148] This fascination perhaps helps to explain the narrator's seemingly ambivalent attitude towards the stories mentioned in the description quoted above. This is in sharp contrast with his dogmatic presentation of his own account's truth-value in the second sentence of (1). Here he underlines his privileged access to truth by painting the purveyors of alternative accounts as not only mistaken but self-deluding: he implies that they have deliberately turned their backs on the truth.

Such morally polarising rhetoric was often resorted to in the context of the source-critical attitudes mentioned above. In the prologue to the A-recension of the probably thirteenth-century *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, for instance, the narrator makes an observation which almost replicates the sentence in *Þorgils saga* : *trúa … margir, er logit er, en tortryggja þat satt er* ('many people trust what is lied and mistrust what is true'). This statement appears in the context of a discussion of the difficulties which people have in distinguishing false accounts of marvels from true ones. This confusion serves as a backdrop for the privileged access to truth enjoyed by this saga-author: his purpose, the narrator declares, was to set down a true account of Hrafn's life, because *aptr hverfr lygi, þá er sǫnnu mœtir* ('a lie retreats when it meets the truth').[149]

This kind of rhetoric projects a disinterested search after truth, but, in a culture undergoing a gradual transition from an oral to a literary paradigm, representatives of the new written learning would also have had less exalted reasons for wanting to assert their authority over competing modes of telling

[147] Von See, *Edda*, pp. 506–10 (see Foote's response in 'Sagnaskemtan', pp. 76–83); Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 64–5; Sverrir Tómasson, '"Sǫguljóð, skrǫk, háð"', pp. 322–3; Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 253, 316–17.

[148] See, for example, *Þorgils saga*, ed. Brown, pp. 13, 15–17, 24, 41–2.

[149] *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, ed. Guðrún P. Helgadóttir (Oxford 1987), p. 1 (see also p. 57, n.). This prologue survives in post-Reformation copies of a lost mid-fourteenth-century parchment-manuscript.

history as well as competing accounts of the events in question.[150] The weighing-up of truth and falsehood often seems to have been less significant in itself than as part of a strategy for maintaining the superior propriety, usefulness, moral value, and social prestige of their productions.[151] Judgments about truth-value sometimes seem to be a mere front for these broader concerns.

As we shall see, this slippage between truth-value and other forms of value became central to the function of the romance-saga *apologiae* (which, like the prologue to *Hrafns saga*, often focused on the problems posed by accounts of marvels). It comes across with particular clarity, however, in the prologue to the S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.[152]

betra er slict með gamni at heyra en stivp meðra saugvr er hiarðar sveinar segia er enge veit hvart satt er, er iafnan lata konungin minztan isinvm frasognum.

'It is better to enjoy listening to such [a story] than to stepmother-stories which shepherd-boys tell, in which nobody knows what is true, [and] which always make the king the least important person in the story.'

These 'stepmother-stories' are presented as a form of popular oral narrative, perhaps referring to folktales in which a king's second wife casts a spell on, or tries to seduce, her stepchildren.[153] The negative truth-value which the narrator assigns to such stories is subordinated to a larger argument about social acceptability and propriety. The implication is that *Óláfs saga* is a 'better' (that is, socially superior) form of entertainment because (a) its teller is no mere shepherd-boy, (b) its author has taken care to judge his sources according to their truth-value, and (c) its content displays a proper respect for royalty. Concern for truth is presented as one of several prestigious features which are the preserve of saga-authors, and which are irrelevant to the world of unlearned storytelling. These insinuations are directly comparable with those made in *Flóvents saga*, *Ólífar þáttr*, and *Bósa saga*, where the learned world of true storytelling is set off against the vulgar *lokleysa* ('nonsense') enjoyed by the unlearned.[154]

In none of the examples discussed in this section, then, have we found any support for the view that fiction was accepted as a legitimate literary form in the

[150] On literate disapproval of 'lower-class' forms of entertainment, see von See, *Edda*, pp. 508–9; J. Quinn, 'From orality to literacy in medieval Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature*, ed. Clunies Ross, pp. 30–60, at 39–40. On parallel developments in European vernacular historiography, see Fleischman, 'On the representation', pp. 299–301; for Classical analogues, see James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought. Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, NJ 1992), pp. 197–202.

[151] For other examples see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 134–6.

[152] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2.

[153] Such stories are directly alluded to in §7 of *Sverris saga*, ed. Indrebø, p. 7, lines 2–4.

[154] See also Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 130-40.

thirteenth century, King Sverrir's reported enjoyment of *lygisǫgur* notwithstanding. Above all, untrue narrative emerges as something which other people were accused of propagating (it is doubtful whether King Sverrir would have forgiven anyone who called *Sverris saga* a *lygisaga*). Of course we should not read too much into these passages as to how oral storytelling worked in real life: it is not necessarily the case that the tellers of 'stepmother-stories' were of low social origin or were unconcerned with their stories' truth-value. As a polemical portrayal of 'other people's stories', however, these descriptions do suggest that saga-authors felt the need to promote the distinct value of their stories with considerable energy, even aggression, and that casting aspersions on other stories' truth-value was felt to be an effective rhetorical weapon.

In this context, it is not surprising that the authors of the romance-sagas – in many of which full use was made of stepmother-stories of one kind or another – should have been so concerned to display their own learned credentials. This is what we see in the *apologiae* so far examined. What may seem surprising is that most of the longer *apologiae* do not contain direct truth-claims of this kind. Their strategies against those who called such sagas 'lies' took more sophisticated forms.

COMPLEX *APOLOGIAE*

To learn how these complex *apologiae* may have worked, we need to take account not only of the variety of rhetorical *topoi* used, but also of how they were made to fit together into a connected argument. In this section, the central thread of my analysis will follow the argument of a single, relatively detailed *apologia* (from a single manuscript), and I shall illustrate and contextualise its various *topoi* with examples from elsewhere. The *apologia* which provides the greatest variety of argumentation in the shortest space is the epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* as preserved in the early sixteenth-century manuscript AM 152 fol.. This saga is also particularly revealing because no fewer than three separate *apologiae* – at the beginning, middle, and end – are attested in its various mediaeval manuscripts.

I have divided this epilogue into six sections in order to clarify its rhetorical structure. We shall examine each section in turn.[155]

(1) Nú þótt þessi saga þiki eigi samhljóða verða öðrum sögum, þeim er atgánga þessu máli um manna nöfn ok atburði, hvat er hverr vann eða gerði með frægð eðr vizku, fjólkýngi eðr svikum, eðr hvar höfðíngjarnir ríktu, þá er þat líkligast, at þeir, er skrifat hafa ok samsett þessi tíðindi, muni eitthvert hafa fyrir sèr haft, annathvârt forn kvæði eðr fróðra manna sögn.

(2) Munu þær ok fár eða aungvar fornra manna sögur, at menn vilì með eiðum sanna, at svâ

[155] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.363–4.

hafi verit, sem sagðar eru, þvíat flestar verða orðum auknar; verða ok eigi öll orð ok atvik greind í sumum stöðum, því flest er seinna enn segir.

(3) Stendr því bezt at lasta eigi eðr kalla lygð fróðra manna sagnir, nema hann kunni með meirum líkindum at segja eðr orðfæriligar fram at bera;

(4) hafa ok forn kvæði ok frásagnir meir verit framsett til stundligrar gleði enn ævinligs átrúnaðar.

(5) Verðr ok fátt svâ ólíkliga sagt, at eigi finnist sönn dœmi til, at annat hafi svâ orðit. Þat er ok sannliga ritat, at guð hefir lánat heiðnum mönnum, einn veg sem kristnum, vit ok skilníng um jarðliga hluti, þar með frábæriligan frækleik, auðæfi ok ágæta skapan.

(6) Nú verðr hèr endir á þessu máli frá Hrólfi Sturlaugssyni ok hans afreksverkum; hafi hverr þökk, er hlýðir, ok sèr gerir skemtan af, enn hinir ógleði, er ángrast við, ok ekki verðr at gamni. Amen.

(1) 'Now even if this story does not seem to agree with other stories which treat this matter – with respect to people's names and events, what each person did or achieved with renown or wisdom, sorcery or treachery, or where the great ruled –, it is, however, most likely that those who wrote and put together these pieces of information must have had something in front of them, whether old poems or learned folk's tales.

(2) 'There are indeed few stories about ancient people, or none at all, about which people would want to testify under oath that things happened exactly as they are narrated, because most of them turn out to be amplified; also, in some places not every word or detail ends up being noted, since most things are slower than it says [= ? are quicker in the telling].

(3) 'So it is best not to complain at learned folk's tales or call them lies, unless someone knows how to tell [the story] with more likelihood [= with a greater claim to truth][156] or present it in a more eloquent manner;

(4) 'and old poems and narratives have been offered more for transitory cheer than for eternal faith.

(5) 'Moreover, few things are related with such unlikelihood that true examples cannot be found for them where something else happened in that way. It is also written truthfully that God has granted wisdom and understanding of earthly matters – along with outstanding bravery, wealth, and physical beauty – to heathen people, just as [he has] to christian people.

(6) 'Here ends this account of Hrólfr Sturlaugsson and his mighty deeds. Thanks to everyone who listened and enjoyed it, and misery to those who get upset with it, whom nothing will please. Amen.'

[156] There is no evidence for the term *líkindi* ever having been used to denote 'verisimilitude' or 'plausibility'. It is typically used in phrases like *at líkendum*, 'as expected': see Cleasby & Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *glikindi*.

1. Variant accounts and sources

In (1) the narrator insists that, despite the existence of variant accounts, the people responsible for transmitting the story in writing were nevertheless handing down a tradition of good quality. This statement falls into two parts: an acknowledgment of variant accounts, and an assertion about the text's authors.

Registering the existence of variant accounts is a well attested convention of mediaeval historiography (a branch of *ars grammatica* and hence a largely textual discipline), and it had several functions. Sometimes, as in the truth-claims examined in the previous section, such an acknowledgment served to emphasise the learning and critical discernment of the author and the superiority of his favoured account. For instance, the penultimate sentence of the second (and best-known) recension of *Þórðar saga hreðu* reads *Höfum vér ekki fleira heyrt með sannleik af honum sagt* ('We have heard nothing further truthfully told about him'):[157] the narrator in his authorial guise claims to have ignored any inauthentic accounts of Þórðr which may have been circulating (including perhaps some parts of the saga's first recension). Sometimes an account held to be untrue was narrated all the same, adding a subsidiary layer of meaning to the narrative: the narrator of *Bárðar saga Snjófellsáss* infuses the story of Helga Bárðardóttir with mythic overtones by reporting that it was she who stayed at a particular farmhouse, *en ekki Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, þó at þat segi nökkurir menn* ('and not Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, although some people may say that').[158] More often, however, variant accounts were simply cited as alternative possibilities on which the court was still open, as in §31 of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* itself which has two versions of Sturlaugr's death, followed by the authorial comment, *vitum ver eigi, hvârt sannara er* ('we do not know which is truer').[159]

In an *apologia*, the acknowledgment of variant accounts serves to explain apparent inaccuracies, since different witnesses would have observed (or heard about) different details. This argument, implicit in (1) above, is explicit in the prologue shared by *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla* : *þat er optliga annars sýn ok heyrð, er annars er eigi, þó þeir sè við atburð staddir* ('one person often sees and hears what another does not, even though they are both present at the event').[160]

In the second part of (1), we are introduced to the learned authors

[157] *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 226.

[158] *Harðar saga*, edd. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson, p. 123.

[159] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.332.

[160] *Ibid.*, III.237, n.; *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, p. 95. Similar arguments are found in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (*Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78, lines 8–12) and *Mágus saga* (ed. Dodsworth, p. 240, lines 26–30).

responsible for putting together these potentially varying accounts in written form. It should be noted that these authors (those who have *skrifat* and *samsett*) are referred to in the plural: the saga is presented as the product of plural authors over time, and the narrator does not assert any compositional role for himself. Like the citations of written sources and *auctoritates* discussed in the previous section, this reference to previous men of learning seems calculated to inspire confidence in the listeners' minds. So, too, in the foot-surgery passage from the same saga, which I quoted at the beginning of this article, the narrator tackles audience-scepticism by invoking sources which *hinir fyrri fræðimenn hafa samsett* ('the learned folk of old have put together').[161] The epilogue to *Gvímars saga* contains a vivid illustration of the prestige which textual transmission was felt to confer on a story. Sceptics are invited to consider *hvad prijdelega og loflega fyrrealldar menn, og vorer forfedur, hafa sögum og historium up<p> hallded, og þær med störum ervides munum ä bökfell med bleke ritad* ('how magnificently and gloriously people of a former age, and our forefathers, have preserved sagas and stories, and with great exertions have written them on parchment with ink').[162]

Whether sources are presented as oral or written, however, they are given the stamp of authority in the *apologiae* by being associated with age and learning. The reference in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* ([1] above) to *forn kvæði eðr fróðra manna sögn* ('old poems or learned folk's tales') may be compared with the more direct claim in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* that *svá segja fornir menn ok fróðir, at saga sjá sé sönn* ('learned folk of old say that this story is true').[163] It has been suggested that the latter passage implies that the saga-author did not consider the story to be true;[164] but the epithets *forn* and *fróðr* (and their cognates) seem on the contrary to demand respect and assent. They are, moreover, found not only in the *apologiae* of romance-sagas but also in the prologue to the much more serious S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*: its author's disparaging allusion to *hiarðar sveina* ('shepherd-boys') is followed almost immediately by an approving reference to the testimony of *vitrir menn* ('wise people') held to underlie this saga.[165]

[161] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.309.

[162] *Gvímars saga*, ed. Kalinke, p. 138, lines 23–5.

[163] *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78, lines 3–4. This version is preserved in the two oldest texts of the *apologia*, Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, isl. perg 4to nr 7 (*circa* 1300×1325) and AM 570a 4to (*circa* 1450×1500). For parallel references see the prologues to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (*Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.) and *Sigurðar saga þögla* (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, p. 95).

[164] Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, p. 251.

[165] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2.

2. Acknowledgment of potential inaccuracies

In (1), then, the narrator has asserted the learning, antiquity, and good faith of his exemplars. In (2) he now concedes that some degree of inaccuracy may have been accumulated over the course of transmission. Not all saga-authors were willing to take this step. This *topos* is absent from the *apologiae* in *Flóres saga* and *Þiðreks saga*, as well as those of *Flóvents saga*, *Ólífar þáttr*, and *Bósa saga*. Even where concessions were made, they were sometimes rather limited: in the *apologiae* in *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* and *Gvímars saga*, the only items admitted as potentially questionable are geographical details such as the names of cities and castles (the implication being that everything else is accurate).[166] The example in (2), however, leaves more scope for scepticism, suggesting two contrasting ways in which events in the far past become distorted when reported in saga-narrative. On the one hand, events become amplified: the phrase *orðum auknar* (literally 'augmented with words') may indicate the proper practice of *amplificatio*, the surreptitious addition of extra (but untrue) episodes, or the exaggeration of specific feats.[167] On the other hand, some events or details may have been omitted in the interests of narrative momentum (this at least seems to be the implication of the obscure phrase *því flest er seinna enn segir*). Both possibilities, amplification and omission, are suggested in the prologue shared by *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla*.[168]

These are large concessions. Yet, far from denying the saga's authenticity as a whole, these narrators forestall criticism by maintaining that inaccuracies are inevitable in sagas about such distant events. By identifying the kinds of distortion which take place, the saga's overall authenticity is, on the face of it, salvaged. Such rhetoric also serves, like the even-handed references to variant accounts, to underline the author's critical judgment: as in the examples from *Hrafns saga* and *Þorgils saga* cited earlier, displays of source-criticism could help bolster his learned credentials.

On rare occasions, saga-authors went so far as to bring such criticism to bear

[166] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, IV, ed. Loth, pp. 3.10–4.2; *Gvímars saga*, ed. Kalinke, p. 138, lines 26–9.

[167] Poetic exaggeration is examined in the prologue to *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, pp. 2.21–3.14; rhetorical amplification is acknowledged in the epilogue to *Mágus saga*, ed. Dodsworth, p. 241, lines 4–10. On the legitimacy of *amplificatio* in mediaeval historiography generally, see Morse, *Truth*, pp. 63–4, and Green, *The Beginnings*, pp. 150–1; on the problems posed by this device for sagas and other prose accounts, see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 171–9.

[168] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.; *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, p. 95. The risk that stories of marvels may become amplified or shortened was also mentioned by the thirteenth-century Norwegian author of *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen (Oslo 1945), p. 28, lines 1–5 [section xvi].

on specific events in their own sagas. Here we must return to the unlikely story of the dwarf's foot-surgery from *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, quoted at the beginning of this article. As we saw, the narrator here intrudes to defend his reasons for repeating such a story, appealing to the difficulty of contradicting his learned written sources. In an earlier text of the saga, AM 589f 4to (*saec.* xv^2), this *apologia* continues as follows:[169]

hafa þeir ok sumir spekíngar verit, er mjök hafa talat í figúru um suma hluti, svâ sem meistari Galterus í Alexandri sögu eðr Umeris skáld í Trójumanna sögu, ok hafa eptirkomandi meistarar þat heldr *til sanninda fært*, enn í móti mælt, at svâ mætti vera; þarf ok engi meira trúnað á at leggja, enn hafa þó gleði af, á meðan hann heyrir.

'Also, there have been some sages who said a great deal about some matters figuratively, such as Master Gautier [de Châtillon] in the Saga of Alexander or the poet Homer in the Saga of the Trojans, and subsequent scholars have *turned it into truth* rather than denying that it could happen in that way. And no one need put any more faith in it [than that] – but may he have pleasure from it while he listens.'

The crux in this passage is the phrase *færa til sanninda* (here translated literally for the sake of argument) and its relation to the Old-Norse term *figúra*. Several scholars have interpreted this passage as an acknowledgment that this and similar sagas ought to be understood figuratively. Sverrir Tómasson has suggested that, by using the term *figúra*, the saga-author was placing such sagas into the twelfth-century European category of *integumentum* (moral truth concealed beneath a fabulous narrative) and in this way was maintaining that they represented a valid form of fiction. According to this reading, *færa til sanninda* refers to the listener's interpretative act of unlocking the hidden moral truth.[170]

However, if we compare this passage with other late mediaeval Icelandic *apologiae*, especially those found in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, rather than with twelfth-century Continental theories, a quite opposite interpretation suggests itself. As in section 2 of the epilogue and the other examples discussed above, in the passage just quoted the narrator concedes that specific inaccuracies may have been accumulated during transmission as the original written sources were reworked. In the prologue and epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, these redactors or *eptirkomandi meistarar* ('subsequent scholars') are held to have amplified or compressed their sources; here, by contrast, they are held to have misunderstood passages in their sources written in a different, non-literal narrative mode. By referring to two named and foreign poets, Homer and Gautier, the narrator implies that the

[169] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.309(–10), n. (my emphasis).

[170] Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 251–3. For similar interpretations see Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur', p. 9; Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 88. On the European Latin scholarly background to the concept of figuration, see Zeeman, 'The schools'.

sources of the foot-surgery passage in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* might also have been old poems and therefore might have contained a different kind of truth-value.[171] The redactors, however, being unaware of these figurative techniques, had simply found themselves faced with an unlikely-sounding episode: so, unwilling to contradict their learned sources, they preferred to take the episode at face-value and record it as such.

Depending on which of the two senses of *sannindi* was meant, one may translate this passage in two different ways. Taking *sannindi* as 'truth' or 'truthfulness', *færa þat til sanninda* may be glossed as 'turn it into a true story' or 'uphold its veracity'. *Sannindi* was also used in the sense of 'evidence' or 'proof', by which the phrase could be glossed 'turn it into a proof of veracity'.[172] If the latter is correct, the implication would be that the redactors not only took their figurative source literally but used the resulting narrative as a proof that such unlikely things could indeed happen – a *topos* which emerges in section 5 of the epilogue.[173] But whichever interpretation is correct, the narrator's implication is that these redactors were working in good faith, and that the audience ought to be ready to consider that this kind of scribal misunderstanding might underlie the less likely episodes in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. Far from being the *raison d'être* of the sagaman's art, 'fiction' (or at least extended figuration) is seen here as a species of error when transplanted from its natural poetic habitat into prose. It is something to be explained away, held at arm's length rather than embraced; in so doing, the saga-author presents himself as a man of profound learning.

That such rhetoric did not amount to a statement of 'fictionality' may be seen by glancing at two further examples from the kings' sagas, texts with a less light-hearted purpose than *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* but no less of an aim to please.[174] Concerning the extracts from Styrmir's *Óláfs saga helga* in *Flateyjarbók*, the narrator warns that some of the events in the saga might be *falsligr* ('spurious') but

[171] Compare the critical observations made in the prologue to *Þiðreks saga* concerning the metaphorical nature of the saga's poetic sources (*Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, pp. 2.21–3.14). Mistrust in the historical truth-value of Homer's poetry because of his literary mode was widespread in Classical and mediaeval literature (Green, *The Beginnings*, p. 154). In this connection it is worth noting that the only surviving mediaeval Icelandic beast-epic – a self-evidently fabulous genre – is in verse (Amory, '*Skaufalabálkur*').

[172] See Fritzner, *Ordbog*, s.vv. *færa til* 2, *sannindi*; Cleasby & Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.vv. *færa* 3 (*færa e-t til sanns vegar*), *færa* 5, *sannindi*.

[173] See below, pp. 152–5. Compare the phrase *færa sønnunar* ('to adduce proofs') used in the prologue to the S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2) to refer to the process of bringing in comparative evidence to testify to the truth of a particular (alternative) account.

[174] One could also compare the cautionary narratorial comment in *Brandkrossa þáttr* (preserved only in manuscripts from the seventeenth century or later), acknowledging that some people find one particular episode doubtful: *Austfirðinga søgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, p. 186.

nevertheless suggests that Saint Óláfr would not blame anyone for making mistakes because the motive for such falsehood would not have been malicious.[175] In other words, such untruths would not count as 'lies'. Likewise, in the prologue to the S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, the narrator acknowledges that *opt kan þat at at beraz at fals er blandit sonno* ('it can often happen that falsehood is mixed with truth') but urges listeners not to mistrust the whole saga.[176] Later in the saga, in fact, the narrator claims to pinpoint one such unlikely story, remarking after an episode of shapeshifting that *allir vitu hve morg vndr ok sionhverfingar fiandinn hefir gertt* ('everyone knows how many wonders and optical illusions the Devil has performed').[177] This explanation of marvels as demonic illusions, common throughout mediaeval Europe, gives a theological slant to the 'untruth' of such stories, locating their origin (like that of the untruths or *skrǫksǫgur* spread by heretics) in the activity of mankind's original Deceiver.[178]

This argument is closely related to euhemeristic theories current in the Icelandic Middle Ages, according to which the Æsir were sorcerers whose powers were so great that people worshipped them as gods.[179] Indeed, this aetiology of the Æsir was used in the epilogue to *Mágus saga jarls*, where the narrator explains how the saga's hero Mágus was descended from the Æsir and would therefore have learnt their powers of creating *sjónhverfingar* ('optical illusions') which were in truth *eckj utan hiegome* ('nothing but vanity'). The author's choice of example to introduce this argument is rather striking: *suo synnizt sem þeir hogui hendr oc fetr oc leggi sic ij gegnum, oc eru iam heilir sem adr* ('it appears as if they [the sorcerers] chop off hands and feet, then place them together, and they are as whole as before').[180] One

[175] *Flateyjarbok*, ed. Guðbrandr Vigfusson & Unger, III.248. For differing assessments of this passage, see B. Fidjestøl, 'Sjå det som hender og dikt om det sidan. Fotnote til ein historiekritisk prolog', *Maal og Minne* (1980) 173–80; this has been reprinted in translation – Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers* (Odense 1997), pp. 294–302, at 299–300; Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 266–8. A similar remark is made in the epilogue to the M-version (AM 344a 4to, *circa* 1350×1400) of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, ed. R. C. Boer (Leiden 1888), p. 196, lines 14–18: here the narrator acknowledges uncertainty regarding the truth-value of some of his words, but *bið ek þess, at guð almáttigr láti engan gjalda, þann er less eða hlýðir eða ritar* ('I ask that almighty God should not make anyone suffer on this account, [whether] reader, listener, or writer'). A conventional prayer follows.

[176] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2.

[177] *Ibid.*, p. 142.

[178] See Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 245–6. On the difficulties posed to the mediaeval historian by allegedly true stories about demonic apparitions or *fantasmata*, see also *Táin Bó Cúailnge from The Book of Leinster*, ed. & transl. O'Rahilly, p. 136; *Walter Map*, *De nugis curialium*, edd. & transl. James *et al.*, pp. 154–64; Partner, *Serious Entertainments*, pp. 123–9.

[179] See *Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, I.18–25.

[180] '*Mágus saga*', ed. Dodsworth, pp. 241, lines 16–20, and 240, lines 12–13. Compare the examples of demonic possession taken from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by the author of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* to prove the 'truth' of such reports (*Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.).

inevitably recalls the dubious foot-surgery recorded in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. As with the argument about scribal misunderstanding with which that episode was explained away in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, so too the 'demonic/magical illusion' argument exonerates the reporters of such stories from the grave charge of lying – as section 3 of the epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* now demonstrates.

3. Don't complain unless you can improve on it

In section 3, having outlined the possibilities for error, the narrator asks sceptics not to slander his story with the label *lygi* ('lie') but rather to offer constructive criticism if they happen to know better or have more literary skill. This request is introduced by the conjunction *því* ('so', 'therefore'), suggesting that this section follows on logically from section 2:[181] inaccuracies are inevitable in any story about the far past; therefore it is wrong to complain unless critics can offer their own improvements. Very similar arguments are offered in *Þiðreks saga*, *Gvímars saga*, *Mágus saga jarls*, and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*: *Þicki mér ok þeim bezt sama at at finna, er tilfærr er um at bæta* ('It also seems to me most fitting for someone to find fault only if he is capable of improving on it').[182] They have sometimes been misunderstood as admissions of fictionality,[183] despite the fact that similar requests for improvements occur in texts with an unambiguously historical intent, such as *Íslendingabók*, *Sverris saga*, and the S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*:[184]

ef menn verþa til at lasta en eigi vm at beta, oc kvnne ongar sonvnar a sitt mal at færa at annat se rettara, þa þikkir oss litils verð þeira til lǫg …

'if people turn up to cast aspersions and not to improve on it, and can bring no proofs in support of their case that another thing is more accurate, then their comment seems to us worth little.'

Although the negative framing of these requests in the *apologiae* tends to suggest that their authors were hoping not to be corrected, their inclusion of such a *topos*

[181] The word *því* is falsely translated as 'But' in *Göngu-Hrolf's Saga*, transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards, p. 125, implying that section 2 represents a much more serious concession to the audience's scepticism.

[182] This passage is from *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (*Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78). Compare *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, pp. 6.24–7.1; *Gvímars saga*, ed. Kalinke, p. 138, lines 18–21; and '*Mágus saga*', ed. Dodsworth, p. 240, lines 31–3.

[183] Paul, 'Das Fiktionalitätsproblem', p. 66.

[184] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2. For more neutral requests for improvements see *Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavík 1968), p. 3; *Sverris saga*, ed. Indrebø, p. 1, lines 16–19; *Flateyjarbok*, edd. Guðbrandr Vigfusson & Unger, II.534 (*Sverris saga*). On this *topos* see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 155–63.

maintains the image of historical writing as the product of an on-going scholarly dialogue, an image also upheld in sections 1 and 2 above. Beneath this *topos* lies the idea that the truth-content of any given episode was as debatable as its stylistic quality, and that it was up to each listener to assess these individually. This emphasis on individual response, which we have already seen at work in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, appears most vividly in the more doubtful episodes of the S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. The report of Óláfr's alleged survival after the battle of Svǫldr is followed by an intrusion in the authoritative 'voice' of Oddr Snorrason himself: *"Trui ek þesso seger Oddr mvnkr … þott ek vita svma ifa þat"* ("'I believe this," says Oddr the monk, "although I know that some doubt it'"). And the narrator's comments on the shape-shifting episode mentioned above, in which he raises the possibility of demonic illusions, concludes with the non-committal statement, *trvvm þvi af slikv sem oss syniz til þess fallit* ('so let us believe what seems appropriate to us').[185] An almost exact echo of the phrase occurs in the prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* : *enginn þarf trúnað á slíkt at leggja, meir enn fallit þikkir* ('no one need believe any more of it than seems appropriate').[186] In a similar spirit, the compiler of the extracts from Styrmir's *Óláfs saga helga* in *Flateyjarbók* encourages his audience to pick and choose from the various sources gathered together in the manuscript: *hafit nu þat af samsettri sogu Olafs konungs allri saman sem ydr litz sannligt vera* ('now take, from everything which has been put together as the story of King Óláfr, what looks to you to be true').[187]

This rhetoric presents historical truth as a matter of degree, as is further suggested by the common occurrence of the comparative form *sannara* ('truer') in discussions of variant accounts. The simple qualitative distinction between truth and untruth (such as we find in the prologue to *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*) yields in these sagas to a sliding scale of truthfulness or *líkindi* ('likelihood'), gauged differently by each listener and applied anew to each part of the story. It is essential to bear this attitude in mind when we turn to section 4 of the epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*.

[185] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 242 and 143. In the latter case, compare the more sceptical A-recension (preserved in AM 310 4to, *circa* 1250×1275; printed *ibid*., pp. 142–3), whose narrator denies strenuously that such a thing could be true.

[186] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.. The equivalent passage in *Sigurðar saga þögla* is slightly more casual: *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, p. 96.

[187] *Flateyjarbok*, edd. Guðbrandr Vigfusson & Unger, III.248.

4. This story is a mere entertainment

In sections 1–3 the narrator has claimed to be giving the audience the best available text. Having identified the inaccuracies to which all historical writing is prone, in section 4 he reduces the significance of such errors still further by commenting that stories like this are not important enough to justify pedantic complaints. Having been invited to offer constructive criticism, the listeners are now reminded to enjoy the story as well.[188]

The phrase *til æfinlegs átrúnaðar* ('for eternal faith') invites comparison with sacred texts. Stories worthy of eternal faith are to be found in the Bible; to expect them from secular sagas is not only to ignore the risky process of a story's transmission (as outlined in section 2), but also to mistake their purpose, which is to entertain (*skemta*) and provide *stundligr gleði* ('transitory cheer').[189] The narrator's elegant opposition of *æfinlegr* and *stundligr* brings out the literal meaning of the term *skemta*: 'to shorten [the time]', hence (in its profane sense) to make a long evening pass pleasantly.[190] Whereas the Bible points to a life beyond the temporal, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* transcends time in a more mundane, and thus transient, fashion. One might compare the disclaimer in the *apologia* concluding *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* in the same manuscript: this saga is said to be true, *þóat hón hafi eigi … á steinum klöppuð* ('although it has not been hewn in stone').[191] This narrator draws attention to his saga's modest status by opposing it with the supreme image of a 'fixed text' more appropriate to (say) the Ten Commandments, and also recalling the prestigious stories engraved on stone walls in cities around the world.

This contrast between transitory cheer and eternal faith should not, however, be mistaken for a distinction between entertainment and truth. Rather, it reflects a hierarchy of significance, implying different levels of truth. Again in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, a request for improvements is followed by this statement: *hvárt sem satt er, eða eigi, þá hafi sá gaman af, er þat má afverða* ('whether it is true or not, may he enjoy it who can').[192] This passage has been read as an invitation to the audience

[188] Compare the cautionary remark in *Brandkrossa páttr – þótt sumum mønnum þykki hon efanlig, þá er þó gaman at heyra hana* ('although [this episode] may seem doubtful to some people, it is still entertaining to hear it'): *Austfirðinga søgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, p. 186.

[189] Compare the demarcation of such sagas in *Flóres saga konungs* from religious stories which many think are *lítil[l] skemtun* ('not much fun') (*Drei Lygisøgur*, ed. Lagerholm, p. 121, line 4).

[190] In other contexts *skemtan* could also be used to denote divine joy: see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 131–2.

[191] *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78, lines 4–5. These words are found in the earliest extant text of this epilogue, in Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, isl. perg 4to nr 7 (*circa* 1300×1325).

[192] *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78, lines 22–3.

to view the whole saga 'not as history, but as art and entertainment';[193] but such a dichotomy between 'history' and 'art' or 'entertainment' does not apply in any simple way to mediaeval historiography, still less to these Icelandic texts whose authors advocated a flexible and nuanced approach to historical truth.[194] This passage's casual tone does not imply an abandonment of truth-value, but rather a reminder that such profane stories are not worth arguing over with the same intensity as (say) the Gospels are.

In emphasising the stories' relative unimportance, their narrators sometimes present extreme versions of the commoner and more conventional 'modesty' *topos*.[195] The prologue shared by *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla* ends with the statement that people should not complain because *fátt verðr full vandliga gert, þat er eigi liggr meira við* ('few things as unimportant as this are done perfectly').[196] The narrator of *Mágus saga jarls* goes even further, calling his own saga and similar works *hegoma sogum* ('vain stories'): this term refers back to his 'illusionistic' explanation of marvel-stories a few lines earlier (such sorcery being *eckj utan hiegome*, 'nothing but vanity'), but one suspects that the author was also mischievously appropriating the language of clerical disapproval, using the very word which (he has already predicted) will be hurled at him by the hecklers.[197]

5. Many things are possible

Lest this self-deprecating rhetoric be taken as an invitation for the audience not to believe the story at all, the narrator of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* now brings his argument full circle by insisting that the most unlikely-seeming phenomena can be quite possible. He has conceded in section 2 that few stories are devoid of exaggeration; here he insists that, conversely, few apparent exaggerations are devoid of truth, as will be appreciated by those learned enough to know plenty of *sönn dæmi* ('true examples') from other lands and times. This *topos* is very common

193 *Hrolf Gautreksson*, transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards, p. 23. Similar interpretations have been offered by Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 88; Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, p. 173; and in Michael Chesnutt's paper 'Sancta Simplicitas: Remarks on the Structure, Content, and Meaning of *Gjafa-Refs saga*', presented at the Legendary Sagas Conference in Copenhagen ('Myter og virkelighed', 25–28 August 2005) and currently being prepared for publication. For a more guarded assessment see Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the Fornaldarsögur', pp. 8–11.

194 See, for example, the statement in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2) that this saga was intended for *gaman* ('entertainment').

195 On this *topos* see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 151–5.

196 *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.; *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, p. 96.

197 '*Mágus saga*', ed. Dodsworth, p. 241, line 32 (compare p. 241, line 20, and p. 240, line 31). On this passage see also Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, p. 138, n. 73.

in the *apologiae* and often focuses, as here, on the improbable feats attributed to heroes of old, whether mental (*vit*, 'wisdom') or physical (*frábæriligan frækleik*, 'outstanding bravery').

Different authors found different ways of explaining the disparity in abilities between their present-day listeners and past heroes. In the epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and the prologue to *Þiðreks saga*, the narrator manipulates the rhetoric of hagiography, appealing to God's freedom to grant special abilities to whomsoever he wishes, even pagan heroes.[198] In *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* and *Flóres saga konungs* the same power is attributed to *hamingja* ('fate', 'Fortune'): *þann sem hamingian vill hefia honum ma ecki ofært verda* ('nothing can be impossible for him whom fate wishes to raise up').[199] The authors of *Þiðreks saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* enlarged on the biblical idea that giants existed in the distant past (Genesis, VI.4) and suggested that warriors from these *ættir* ('races') would easily have killed several smaller men in a single blow, but that such warriors became rarer as the races mixed and mankind degenerated.[200] Feats of sorcery were, as we saw earlier, explained in *Mágus saga jarls* via a potted history of necromancy, while in the prologue shared by *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Sigurðar saga þögla* the narrator gives specific examples of corpses being given the power of motion *af óhreins anda íblæstri, svâ sem var Eyvindr kinnrifa í Olafs sögu Tryggvasonar* ('under the influence of an unclean spirit, such as Eyvindr Split-cheek in the story of Óláfr Tryggvason').[201]

With these displays of learning, saga-authors were able to assert their superior knowledge of *dæmi* ('examples') over that of the sceptic. In all the *apologiae* just mentioned, these various arguments are coupled with expressions of scorn for those sceptics who are so narrow-minded as to believe only what they themselves have seen. In the prologue to *Þiðreks saga*, for example, the narrator discusses the different kinds of stories then current, moving from stories about feats of wisdom and strength to *mirabilia*.[202]

Annar soghu háttur er þat ath seigia fra nockurzkonar aurskiptum fra kynzlum edur vndrumm þviat a marga lund hefer vordit j heiminum. Þat þikkir j odru lanndi vndarlight er j odru er títt. Svo þikkir og heimskumm manne vndarlight er frá er sagt þvi er hann hefer ei heyrt. Enn sa

198 *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, p. 7, lines 9–12.

199 This passage is from *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, IV, ed. Loth, p. 4, lines 7–8). For the analogous passage in *Flóres saga* see *Drei Lygisǫgur*, ed. Lagerholm, p. 122, lines 7–8.

200 *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78, lines 14–21 (*Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*); *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, pp. 4.4–5.14.

201 *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.; *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, pp. 95–6.

202 *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, pp. 5.18–6.3 (my emphasis). See also *ibid.*, p. 7, lines 3–5.

madur er vitur er og morg dæmi veit: honum þikker ecki vndarlight er skilning hefer til hversu verda …

'*Another kind of story* is that which tells of some kinds of strange things, of marvels or wonders, which have taken place in many ways in the world. What seems wondrous in one land is normal in another. It also seems amazing to a fool to hear what he has not heard of [before]. But that man is wise who knows many further examples: it does not seem amazing to him, who understands how [such a thing] could happen.'

Sverrir Tómasson has asserted that the saga-author was suggesting that these stories were fictional and should not be taken literally: according to him, the italicised phrase *annar soghu háttur* refers to 'another literary mode', namely the European Latin concept of *modus fictiuus*.[203] I know of no other examples of the term *háttr* being used to refer to prose in this way, although it was often used in the sense of poetic 'metre' as well as the more general sense of 'manner'. In any case, it seems plain from the saga-author's subsequent comments that, far from denying truth to such wonder-tales, he was explicitly defending their veracity and chastising sceptics.[204] There is a close parallel to this passage in the prologue to *Flóres saga*, which likewise contains a list of three different kinds of story: here the term used for 'kind' is *hlutr sagnanna*, 'group of stories', rather than *söguháttr*, but its function is identical. As in *Þiðreks saga*, when the narrator reaches the third kind of story he launches an attack on those who *kalla þær sogur lognar, sem fjarri ganga þeirra náttúru* ('call those stories "lied" which [relate deeds which] go beyond their own powers').[205]

This argument, insisting on the potential veracity of marvels and discussing why people doubt them, may ultimately derive from the rhetoric of the *mirabilia*.[206] Its most elaborate expression in Norse literature is found not in an Icelandic saga but in an encyclopaedic collection of *mirabilia* within the thirteenth-century Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá*, framed as a dialogue between a father and son. The son asks his father to entertain him with descriptions of the natural wonders of Iceland, Greenland, and Ireland; before these wonders are described both men discuss the narrow-minded empiricism of those who doubt such accounts, and

[203] Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 247–8.

[204] See Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur', pp. 6–8.

[205] *Drei Lygisogur*, ed. Lagerholm, pp. 121.9–122.8.

[206] A similar argument was advanced by the author of a fourteenth-century version of that most popular of all *mirabilia*-collections, *Mandeville's Travels*: see *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, transl. C. W. R. D. Moseley (London 1983), p. 189. On the Classical background to the problem of truth in tales of distant voyages, see Romm, *The Edges of the Earth*, pp. 172–214; on the problem of testimony in mediaeval miracle-accounts, see C. Watkins, 'Memories of the marvellous in the Anglo-Norman realm', in *Medieval Memories. Men, Women and the Past, 700–1300*, ed. Elisabeth van Houts (Harlow 2001), pp. 92–112.

the father advances reasons for keeping an open mind. He deplores the universal scepticism which, he says, greeted the recent appearance in Norway of *eín litil bóc … þart er callat er at gor var a India landi oc reðir vm Indialandz vndr* ('a little book which is said to have been made in India and treats of the wonders of India'): the allusion is to a version of 'The Letter of Prester John'. He and his son then develop the idea that, although many Northerners find such Eastern wonders impossible, Easterners would no doubt find still more to wonder at in the North, such as the midnight sun and the practice of skiing.[207]

Unlike the Icelandic *apologiae*, this passage is not framed as a narratorial intrusion standing outside the text to address its audience. Rather, it forms an integral part of the narrative's own 'world': the question of belief in marvels is one of several topics on which the father and son converse. However, this passage does seem to have a specific function in relation to the audience's response to the text: with it, the author has both shielded his subsequent descriptions of Irish and North-Atlantic marvels from undue scepticism and (with the example of the *litil bóc*) deplored the reception of literary *mirabilia* as lies. As a shield this passage deserves consideration as an early form of *apologia* and may even have influenced the Icelandic examples: it is first attested in a Norwegian manuscript from about 1260 but also survives in later Icelandic manuscripts which testify to the popularity of *Konungs skuggsjá* in Iceland.

6. Envoi: thanks and prayers

The final section of the epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* adds nothing to its argument but consists of a signing-off or *envoi* in which the critics are assailed one last time. In manuscripts from the late fourteenth century onwards, it was common for sagas to end either with thanks to the writer, reciter, and audience (often in rhyme or in a cheeky manner),[208] or with a brief prayer, ending in *amen* (*Sigurðar saga*

[207] *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. Holm-Olsen, pp. 132.23–133.33 [sections viii–ix]; compare *ibid.*, pp. 13.17–14.28. For a lucid account of the 'relativity-of-wonder' *topos* see C. Larrington, '"Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var": wonder, Vínland, and mediaeval travel-narratives', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 14 (2004) 91–114. As Larrington has pointed out (*ibid.*, pp. 96, 109), the author of *Konungs skuggsjá* was alluding here to Interpolation E in 'The Letter of Prester John', a twelfth-century text with some thirteenth-century interpolations which circulated widely in Latin Europe. See Vselovod Slessarev, *Prester John. The Letter and the Legend* (Minneapolis, MN 1959), pp. 32–54.

[208] For examples see, respectively, *Víglundar saga* in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 116 and n. 2, and *Vilmundar saga viðutan* in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, IV, ed. Loth, pp. 200–1 (on which see above, pp. 123–5). On Continental-romance parallels see Gallais, 'Recherches sur la mentalité', p. 486.

turnara, *Harðar saga*).[209] The narrator of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* humorously combines both gestures, thanking those who enjoyed the saga and mocking with his *amen* the inappropriate seriousness of those who did not. This final put-down recalls the more temperate dismissal found in the epilogue to *Mágus saga jarls*:[210]

heyri þeir [er] skemtan þiker, enn þeir leiti sier annarar gledi er ei uilia heyra. Er þat satt sem mellt er ath 'þat er odrum skemtann er odrum er anngr' … Má … ei frasagnir samann setia eptir allra manna hugþocka.

'Let those who find it entertaining listen, and let those who don't wish to listen find some other amusement. The saying is true that "one man's joy is another man's sorrow". One cannot put together stories to please everybody.'

Both here and in several other complex *apologiae*, this acknowledgment that not everyone finds such sagas entertaining is closely coupled with an invitation to believe as much or as little of the story as may be desired.[211] The emphasis, as always, is on the individual response: one man's history is another man's fiction.

THE IMPLIED AUDIENCE

How might these *apologiae* have worked in practice? Curious as they may seem to us, they are unlikely to have presented much of a surprise for their original audiences, at least not in their late mediaeval heyday. As the comparative examples in the previous discussion have made clear, the complex *apologiae* ring the changes on a set of highly conventional rhetorical *topoi*. They seem to have worked, at least in part, by sheer force of repetition: in the early sixteenth-century manuscript whose text of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* we have been following, AM 152 fol., the same arguments are recycled several times. Here *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is preserved with two of its three *apologiae*: the prologue is missing from this text but appears instead at the head of another maiden-king romance-saga, *Sigurðar saga þögla*. The same manuscript also contains texts of *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, *Mágus saga jarls*, and *Flóvents saga*, all armed with *apologiae* of varying sizes but identical functions. Such a clustering of *apologiae* in a single manuscript was not unusual around this time. AM

[209] For examples see *Sigurðar saga turnara*, in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, V, ed. Agnete Loth (København 1965), p. 232, lines 12–13; *Harðar saga*, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson & Þórhallur Vilmundarson, p. 97, n. 3; Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, pp. 86–92. The concluding prayer is also typical of mediaeval French and English romance: see Crosby, 'Oral delivery in the Middle Ages', pp. 109–10; A. C. Baugh, 'The authorship of the Middle English romances', *Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Research Association* 22 (1950) 13–28, at pp. 20–1.

[210] '*Mágus saga*', ed. Dodsworth, p. 240, lines 18–24.

[211] Compare *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (*Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78, lines 21–2), *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (*Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.) and *Sigurðar saga þögla* (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, IV, ed. Loth, p. 96).

343a 4to (*circa* 1450×1475) contains *Bósa saga*, *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, and *Flóres saga konungs*, complete with their defensive prologues, while in two other late fifteenth-century manuscripts, AM 586 4to and AM 577 4to, similar texts of *Bósa saga* are paired with those of *Flóres saga* and *Vilhjálms saga* respectively. Whatever may be said about the precise relations between these manuscripts, it seems clear that some writers in the hundred or so years before the Icelandic Reformation felt that particular texts should not go into the fray unarmed.

Is it right, however, to use the term 'fray' when describing saga-entertainment? The picture painted by some scholars resembles the harmonious domestic scene of the *kvöldvaka*, famously depicted by the Danish artist August Schiøtt (1823–95) in *Kvöldvakan í sveit*, in which an intelligent-looking audience listens attentively to the sagaman's words.[212] Disruptive elements are excluded: we can see no drunken hecklers, no teenagers mucking around at the back, no furtive gropings in the corner. Faced with such a charming scene, who could doubt that the *apologiae* were meant to be funny, testifying to a 'witty complicity between author and audience'?[213]

Let us look again at *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. The story itself is full of wit, and its self-conscious narrator does invite a certain complicity with the audience by alluding to the hackneyed nature of some narrative conventions: *Þat bar til tíðinda einn dag sem optar, at tveir menn ókunnir gengu inn í höllina* ('it happened one day, as it so often does, that two unknown men walked into the hall'), or again, sending up the conventional interlace-technique, *Víkr nú aptr sögunni þángat, er fyrr var frá horfit, því eigi verðr af tveimr hlutum sagt í senn, þótt báðir hafi jafnfram orðit* ('now the story returns to the point where we left it, for it is not possible to relate two things at the same time, even though they may have happened simultaneously').[214] As Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards have noted, 'the narrative structure is deliberately, emphatically conventional … and the author knows it to be'.[215] If its *apologiae* are also jokes, however, then they are remarkably heavy-handed by comparison. Their humorous nature would need to be argued rather than merely asserted, and in so doing one would need to take account of the whole *apologia* rather than relying on overdetermined readings of isolated *topoi* (such as the 'mere

[212] This painting is held in the Þjóðminjasafn Íslands (Vid. 60) and reproduced by Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children*, p. 39 and front cover, and O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 141. I am grateful to Matthew Driscoll for information on Schiøtt.

[213] Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland', p. 271.

[214] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.262 and 302.

[215] *Göngu-Hrolf's Saga*, transl. Hermann Pálsson & Edwards, p. 16.

entertainment' *topos* in section 4).[216]

When these passages are read in context, and without any prior assumption of authorial irony, they seem not so much facetious as ostentatiously learned, akin in this sense to the encyclopaedic digression on the geography and economic history of England into which the narrator launches shortly before the epilogue.[217] The narrator's tone is generally sober, not witty, didactic and prescriptive rather than complicit: both wit and complicity are reserved for those listeners who do not pester him with allegations of what we would call 'fiction'. His critics are characterised as bores – such as would delight in pointing out the plot-discrepancies in a Hollywood thriller today –, and it is with a virtuoso display of pedantry that he defeats them. Only at the very end does he suddenly recover his sense of humour in order to make them look ridiculous.

The *apologiae* seem designed above all to maintain an environment in which these stories could be told effectively and remain in demand. An unwritten contract seems to have existed by which the reciter was expected to tell an entertaining and edifying story, in return for which he expected his audience to listen attentively. This code of audience-behaviour is inscribed within the sagas themselves, which mark out storytelling as a polite art worthy of the utmost courtesy. When Hringr is about to tell his *ævisaga* ('life-story') in the final chapter of *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*, the hall suddenly becomes *allt hliott og tvýst* ('all silence and stillness'); when he has finished, he is thanked politely for the *goda skemmtan* ('good entertainment'), and everyone in the hall is *gladt* ('happy').[218] The royal heroine of the A-recension of *Mírmanns saga* commands rapt audiences while disguised as the itinerant earl Hirningr: *þess eina lyste þær ad hlijda hanz sögumm* ('all they wanted to do was to listen to his stories').[219] Although the last story told by the nameless Icelandic sagaman in the *Morkinskinna*-text of *Haralds saga harðráða* provokes differing reactions from the king's men – some think it well told, others are dissatisfied –, the king nevertheless *var vandr at at hlyt veri vel* ('ensured that it was listened to well'), and the Icelander prospers as a result.[220] Even the villainous Vilhjálmr in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is invited to tell his self-serving *ævisaga* uninterrupted

[216] Paul, 'Das Fiktionalitätsproblem', pp. 65–6; *Vikings in Russia. Yngvar's Saga and Eymund's Saga*, transl. Hermann Pálsson & P. Edwards (Edinburgh 1989), pp. 14–16.

[217] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.360–1.

[218] AM 109a III 8vo (*circa* 1600×1700), folios 281v–282r; compare '*Hjálmþérs saga*: a Scientific Edition', ed. Richard Lynn Harris (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa 1970), pp. 62–3.

[219] *Mírmanns saga*, ed. Slay, p. 116 (A, lines 27–8).

[220] *Morkinskinna*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (København 1932), p. 200. In this manuscript (*circa* 1275) the tale is entitled *Fra scemton Islendings*; in later manuscripts it is entitled *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða* or *Þorsteins saga sǫgufróða* (in which the Icelander gains a name).

in the king's hall, although everyone in the audience knows that he deserves to hang.[221] It was in saga-authors' interests to surround the act of storytelling with an aura of reverence: they doubtless hoped that their own audiences would behave with similar courtesy.

Like Schiøtt's painting, this image of storytelling is somewhat idealised. Real-life saga-entertainment was probably a rather more precarious affair. Noise seems to have been a common problem, as is suggested by this narratorial intrusion in §4 of *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*:[222]

Nú, góðir menn, leggið niðr … hark ok háreysti, ok hlýðið, hvat sá segir, er undir bókinni sitr, því at betra er at heyra góðar dœmisǫgur ok fǫgr æfintýr frá ágætum mǫnnum sǫgð, heldr en únytsamligt skjal ok skrum, framflutt með úheyrilig<um> hlátri, sem margir heimskir menn gøra. Vili þér ok ei þat gøra, þá er lokit starfi þess, er undir bókinni sitr, því at henni er eigi gaman, útan allir þegi útan sá, sem sǫguna segir, því þat er skemtiligt ok hyggiligt at heyra góðar sǫgur frá ágætum mǫnnum.

'Now, good people, leave off your … din and noise and listen to what the one with the book on his lap is saying, for it is better to hear good exempla and beautiful tales told of celebrated people, rather than the worthless gossip and boasting, delivered with unseemly laughter, with which many foolish people carry on. Please do not do that; then the effort of the one with the book on his lap is wasted, for it is no fun unless everyone is silent but the one telling the story. For it is entertaining and intelligent to listen to good stories about celebrated people.'

If we may take this description literally, sagamen had not only to contend with background-noise but also to compete with other, less respectable and (perhaps) more popular, forms of entertainment.[223] This might explain the tenacity with which saga-reading was promoted in the prologue to *Þiðreks saga* as the cheapest, safest, and most versatile form of entertainment on the market: *þessa skemtan ma og hafa vid fá menn, ef vill; hun er iafnbuinn nott sem dagh, og huart sem er liost eda myrkt* ('one can also use this entertainment for small groups, if one wishes; it is available by night or by day, and whether it is light or dark').[224] Other writers advertised their bookish art by claiming its moral value in teaching correct deportment (a common mediaeval trope),[225] or as a means of distraction from impure thoughts: *menn hugsa eigi adra synndsamliga hlute, medann hann gledzt af skemtaninne* ('people don't

[221] *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.311–14.

[222] *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, ed. Broberg, p. 12. Broberg's main text is from a seventeenth-century manuscript, AM 539 4to; I have here reconstructed the reading from AM 579 4to (*circa* 1450×1475) using Broberg's apparatus. For comparisons see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, p. 306 and n..

[223] Kalinke, *King Arthur North-by-northwest*, p. 26; Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 94.

[224] *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, p. 6, lines 22–4. Compare the similar advertisement in the *Flateyjarbók*-text of *Sverris saga* (*Flateyjarbok*, edd. Guðbrandr Vigfusson & Unger, II.534).

[225] *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, p. 6, lines 9–13; for other examples, see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 136–9.

think of other, sinful things while they are enjoying the entertainment').[226] Claiming the moral high ground made it all the more imperative for sagamen to show that they were not guilty of the sin of lying.

These accusations themselves are presented as no less disruptive than the *skjal ok skrum* ('gossip and boasting') deplored in *Rémundar saga*. In the *apologiae*, the 'implicit sceptic' is constructed as an aggressive heckler who refuses to offer constructive criticism, and whose scepticism (unlike King Sverrir's as presented in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*) is accompanied by *angr* ('gloom') rather than *gleði* ('merriment'). Since such behaviour would undoubtedly cast a shadow over the entertainment, saga-authors were concerned to forestall this form of criticism: in the longer *apologiae*, some grounds for scepticism are conceded in order to invite a different kind of audience-participation from the sceptic, namely, the courteous suggestion of improvements or 'truer' accounts. Better still, sceptics might have the courtesy to think before they spoke: *þat er viturlight ath skoda med skemtan j samvitsku sialf sijns þat sem hann heyrer fyrr enn opeckiz vid edur fyrerlijti* ('it is wise to consider what one hears with pleasure in one's own mind before rejecting it or expressing disgust').[227] Saga-authors acknowledged that what they wrote would not be believed by everyone or in every detail but nevertheless insisted that listeners behave appropriately:[228]

> er þat ok bezt ok fróðligast at hlýða, meðan frá er sagt, ok gera sèr heldr gleði at enn ángr … stendr þat ok eigi vel þeim, er hjá eru, at lasta …
>
> 'It is also best and most intelligent to listen while the story is being told and to enjoy it rather than get upset. Nor is it fitting for those who are around to cast aspersions.'

As we have seen, this insistence appears not only in rollicking adventure-stories like *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* but also in the semi-hagiographic *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. Noisy complaints about truth-value would be equally disruptive to the recitation of either saga.[229]

The accusatory function of the word *lygi* ('lie'), as presented in the *apologiae*, is worth stressing here. Like the term *lygisaga* in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, the designation

[226] This passage is from *Sigurðar saga þögla* (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, p. 96). Compare *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (*Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.), and the prologue to *Adonias saga* (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, III, ed. Loth, p. 74, lines 6–10).

[227] *Þiðriks saga*, ed. Bertelsen, p. 7, lines 1–3.

[228] This passage is from *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (*Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n.).

[229] Requests for critics not to overstep themselves had become conventional as early as the eighth century, as can be seen in the self-conscious use of such rhetoric in the prologue to Felix of Crowland, *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, which according to Charles Jones was written for 'a partially lay audience'. See *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. & transl. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge 1956), p. 62; Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles*, p. 86.

lygi is framed as an individual response, applied by means of the verb *kalla* ('to call').[230] More than this, however, it is presented as a term of abuse which the critic hurls at a story, an insulting accusation rather than a scholarly judgment, serving only *fullt nafn á gefa* ('to give it a bad name').[231] The problem created by hecklers of this kind, then, went beyond mere noise and disruption. Nothing less was at stake than the personal honour of those responsible for propagating the sagas. As we have seen, historical truth was openly defined in part by its *reception* as truth, and the telling of history was seen as an on-going dialogue between individuals exercising their own judgment: if the foul name of *lygi* were given to a story by several people, or even by a single influential person, then dishonour would be brought on those who wrote, recited, and commissioned such stories.

The force of these accusations is illustrated in the detailed discussion of audience-scepticism in *Konungs skuggsjá*. The father is initially reluctant to speak about the wonders of the North, even though he knows that they are true, *er [= ef] ec scal siðan uera callaðr lyge maðr* ('if I am to be called a liar afterwards'). He cites the cautionary example of Prester John's *mirabilia*, which he considers trustworthy, but which foolish people doubt.[232]

Nu hevir sv en litla boc veret þo uiða borenn, við þ*at* at hon have ia*m*nan verið tortrygð *oc* lygi vend; *oc* þicci mer þo engi sømð þei*m* i hava v*er*et … með þvi at æ hevir loget veret callað …

'Now, however, this little book has been widely circulated but has always been doubted and charged with being a lie. And it seems to me that nobody has derived honour from it, because it has always been called a lie.'

The painful sensitivity to matters of honour which drives the plots of many sagas seems to have applied no less to those who circulated them. Even if the mud were thrown by fools, some of it would stick. Hence the rather plaintive tone taken in the prologue to the S-recension of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*: *bið ek goða [menn] eigi fyr lita þessa fra sogn oc grvni eigi framar epa ife sognina en hofi gegni* ('I beg good people not to despise this narrative and not to mistrust or doubt more of the saga than is fitting').[233]

In this light, the complex *apologia* emerges as a sophisticated battery of rhetorical devices for neutralising dishonourable and disruptive accusations. The authors of these passages reinforced the need for audiences to behave properly,

[230] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2; *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.363 (*Göngu-Hrólfs saga*); '*Mágus saga*', ed. Dodsworth, p. 240, line 17; *Gvímars saga*, ed. Kalinke, p. 138, line 14 (here the author used *halda* instead of *kalla*); *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. Holm-Olsen, p. 132, line 37.

[231] '*Mágus saga*', ed. Dodsworth, p. 240, line 31.

[232] *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. Holm-Olsen, p. 132, lines 24 and 35–7.

[233] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 2.

by dwelling on words like *sóma* ('honour') and *standa* (in the sense 'to befit') when arguing this point;[234] they forestalled criticism by discussing and qualifying the grounds for scepticism and showing themselves to be honest scholars; and they sought to shame their own accusers by describing them as narrow-minded or malevolent idiots with no sense of humour or proportion. The accuser was caricatured as an object of mockery not unlike the trolls in their stories: someone whose refusal to behave decently sets him outside the community of reciter and listeners, a misanthrope who hates the idea of other people having fun. The complex *apologia*, in other words, functioned in part as a set of instructions for how to enjoy a saga whose contents were sometimes doubtful. As such, it did, in fact, create a space for the legitimate enjoyment of untrue stories – a space which would later be called 'fiction' when the concept of this kind of enjoyment became less problematic, but which at this stage offered room for 'forgivable' error and exaggeration in historical writing.

This interpretation is, of course, predicated on an assumption that references to reading aloud in the sagas may be taken at face-value. Several scholars have taken a more sceptical view of such references, pointing out that they 'do not themselves provide evidence that public readings were common in medieval Iceland'.[235] Some sagas are indeed hard to imagine succeeding in the storytelling environment sketched out above: *Kirialax saga*, for instance, is more of an encyclopaedia than a story and makes few concessions for the unlearned listener.[236] Might it not be possible that the sagas which we have been discussing were intended not for a general audience but for more learned listeners – perhaps even silent readers – and that the complex *apologiae*, far from having practical value in the face of an audience's conservatism, functioned as a literary trope to entertain clerics learned enough in Latin European theories of fiction to enjoy such stories without giving them any credence?

If this were so, one would expect to find evidence of saga-authors having made use of such theories and applied them to their own narratives. This case has been made most forcefully by Sverrir Tómasson, whose magisterial study of Icelandic prologues provides a thorough analytical grounding for the view that sagas should be seen as a branch of mediaeval European learning rather than an isolated development, and that Iceland's secular and ecclesiastical writings should

[234] *Zwei Fornaldarsögur*, ed. Detter, p. 78, line 21 (*Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*); *Fornaldar sögur*, ed. Rafn, III.237, n., and 363 (*Göngu-Hrólfs saga*); *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, II, ed. Loth, p. 96 (*Sigurðar saga þögla*).

[235] Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas*, p. 95.

[236] See R. Cook, '*Kirialax saga*: a bookish romance?', in *Les Sagas de chevaliers*, ed. Boyer, pp. 303–26.

not be considered in isolation from each other. The parallels which he has amassed between saints' Lives and romance-sagas are particularly suggestive and bear further investigation.[237] However, I think that Sverrir has overstated the case when it comes to fiction. He has asserted that not only were the authors of romance-sagas aware of the Classical categories of *fabula* and *argumentum* but that they assigned their own sagas to these groups, viewing them not as *historiae* possessing literal truth but (in line with some mediaeval Latin European theories) as fictions enshrining purely moral truths.

The evidence for this assertion turns out to be rather thin. In the first place, Sverrir has presented three short passages from sagas in which (he has suggested) the author had European Latin concepts of fiction *í huga* ('in mind').[238] Two of these have already been dealt with in the analysis of the complex *apologiae* above: these are the quotation from *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* in which learned folk of old are said to have asserted that the story was true, and the passage in *Þiðreks saga* concerning *annar soghu háttr* ('another kind of story', namely, wonder-tales). Sverrir has asserted that these passages constitute evidence for the currency of *argumentum* and *modus fictiuus* respectively, but, as we have seen, the context suggests a quite opposite interpretation.[239] His third piece of evidence is the passage from *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* about saga-entertainment at Reykjahólar, quoted and discussed above.[240] Here Sverrir has suggested that the story told by Ingimundr was viewed by the author of *Þorgils saga* as an *argumentum*, on the grounds that the author says that many learned folk *hafa … þessa sogu fyrir satt* ('regard this story as true').[241] It is, however, difficult to see why 'regarding a story as true' must imply a denial of its literal truth.

In these three cases, the leap from saga-text to rhetorical theory has not been argued, only asserted: invoking Latin labels, and suggesting that Continental scholars might have considered these sagas *argumenta* or *fabulae*, is not enough to demonstrate that these concepts were in the saga-authors' minds. A more promising approach would be to examine the occasions on which the authors of romance-sagas employed Latin rhetorical terms. Sverrir has cited two such cases, both from late fifteenth-century texts; but, as we shall now see, both terms were clearly defined by the authors as referring to foreign and essentially poetic literature, not to Icelandic sagas. The first example is the Augustinian term *figura*,

[237] Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*.

[238] *Ibid*., p. 248.

[239] *Ibid*., pp. 251 and 247–8; see above, pp. 144, 153–4.

[240] See above, pp. 134–41.

[241] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, ed. Brown, p. 18, lines 9–10; Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 215 and 253 (where similar reasoning has been used to label Hrólfr's story as an *argumentum* as well).

often used in its theological sense by Icelandic hagiographers. In fact its mediaeval connotations are so exclusively theological that, on the single occasion when a secular saga has this term, Sverrir has suggested that its author in fact had a different rhetorical technique in mind, namely *integumentum*. The passage in question is the narratorial intrusion in a fifteenth-century text of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* concerning the unlikely healing of Hrólfr's severed feet: as we saw earlier, the context of this passage suggests that its author saw 'fiction' not as a legitimate means of disguising inner truth but as an unimportant error introduced by a scribe who had mistakenly taken his figurative poetic sources literally.[242]

This association between fiction and verse (preserved in the modern Icelandic term for fiction, *skáldskapur*) also emerges in Sverrir's other example, which is a prologue preserved in a late fifteenth-century manuscript of *Adonias saga*, AM 593a 4to. This prologue contains two of Æsop's fables which are introduced as poetic fictions, *fabulas sem froder menn hafa vessad* ('fables which learned folk have versified').[243] The term *fabula* refers only to these fables, not to the saga which follows, from which it is very deliberately separated in both content and form: Sverrir's analysis in fact reflects this demarcation, and he has not tried to press for a reading of *Adonias saga* itself as *fabula*.[244] Whatever moral truths this saga-author wished to convey in the saga proper, he conveyed by means of *historia* : he emphasised this fact by spending the first chapter dovetailing its Syrian characters into the learned framework of universal history, beginning with the authenticating phrase, *[S]vo hofum vær lesit i frædibókvm* ('Thus we have read in learned books').[245]

Evidence that sagas were written to conform to theories of 'fictional truth', then, is lacking, even if the terminology and concepts were known to some of the authors. On the extremely rare occasions where they used such terminology, they took pains to show that it was not to be applied directly to their own sagas. Both *fabula* in *Adonias saga* and *figura* in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* denote the work of poets of the past (Gautier, Homer, the 'versifier' of Æsop's fables), and the narrators make it clear that these old sources were qualitatively distinct from saga-prose, in both medium and mode: they were poetry, not prose, and their mode was figurative, not mimetic or literal. The narrator of *Adonias saga* says of his fabling prologue that *snertur þat ecki þetta mál* ('it has nothing to do with the present matter'),[246]

[242] *Ibid.*, pp. 251–2; see above, pp. 145–7.

[243] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, III, ed. Loth, p. 71, line 16.

[244] Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 250–1, 294–302; see also Sverrir Tómasson, 'The "fræðisaga" of Adonias', in *Structure and Meaning*, edd. Lindow *et al.*, pp. 378–93.

[245] *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, III, ed. Loth, p. 74, line 12.

[246] *Ibid.*, p. 73, lines 13–14.

while, for the narrator of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, to translate figurative language into saga-prose results only in inaccuracy.

The same pattern of exclusion may also be seen in a remarkable passage in another romance-saga, *Gibbons saga*, in which the deliberate creation of prose fiction as *fabula* seems to be hinted at. The introduction of a beautiful princess prompts the narrator to warn those people *er gamann þikkir at komponera minna sogr edr fabvlera einn ævinntyr* ('who find it amusing to compose short stories or invent a tale') to be quiet and refrain from describing her beauty in eloquent metaphorical discourse – at which point another narratorial figure, *sa er æfintyrit setti* ('he who wrote the [present version of the] tale'), cuts in and vows that, if he only knew enough Ovid, he would write an entire Bible *af henar prydi ok kvrtesligum listvm* ('about her magnificence and courtly refinements').[247] Once again, the act of inventing stories is associated with Classical poetry and teasingly contrasted with sacred texts. It is flirted with but shut out of the saga as we have it: the first narrator characterises it as an inappropriate form of *amplificatio*, something which 'other people' indulge in, while the second narrator pretends not to be learned enough to make use of it.

This last example suggests that not all saga-authors were personally hostile to the idea of fiction. Experimental boldness, narrative sophistication, and the skilful recasting of European learned conventions are so much in evidence in other aspects of saga-writing that it seems possible that the authors of *Gibbons saga* and (perhaps) *Adonias saga* were doing more than simply marking the boundary between native romance-saga and foreign fable: they may also have been testing the limits of their own genre. In at least one case, such experimentation seems to have resulted in what might almost be seen as a fictional saga. The legendary tale in *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* is framed as a dream, an accepted setting for figurative or fabulous narrative: by this subterfuge, the story can still claim to be truthfully told if the dream was reported accurately, even though its status as a dream means that it is not a 'real' saga.[248] In these cases, the authors' avoidance of outright fiction seems to have stemmed less from their anxiety about the concept than from their need to entertain a wide audience, some of whom would have found such techniques inappropriate or incomprehensible.[249]

With this in mind we may return to the idea which has been suspended for

[247] *Gibbons saga*, ed. R. I. Page (København 1960), p. 22, lines 2–9. This passage is preserved in the early fifteenth-century manuscript AM 335 4to and, with considerable variation, in later manuscripts.

[248] I have developed this idea in my unpublished paper '*Stjörnu-Odda draumr* and Icelandic legendary storytelling', Viking Society Conference, 26 February 2005, which I am preparing for publication.

[249] See Hallberg, 'Some aspects of the fornaldarsögur', p. 10.

the last few paragraphs – that saga-entertainment often took place in the form of public recitations in farmhouses. Some scholars have suggested that the ideology enshrined within the romance-sagas presupposes an elite audience made up of the wealthiest and most powerful Icelanders, some of whom could have been clerics or clerically trained laymen.[250] Yet even if, for the sake of argument, we discount the possibility that humbler folk were present at such occasions, not all of these high-status listeners would have been enormously learned or particularly polite. It seems probable that stories like *Gibbons saga* were meant to function on several levels, its author amusing his fellow scholars with his Latin puns and references to Ovid while keeping more conservative listeners on board by refraining from full-scale fiction. Likewise, the references to hecklers in the *apologiae* had practical value in a public recitation but might have been taken less seriously by a scholar reading on his own.

This, in turn, opens up the possibility that the more radical authors could have intended their sagas to be received and enjoyed as deliberate fiction by scholars of a similar disposition, concealing this meaning from uninitiated listeners by insisting on their sagas' truth-value (much to the amusement of their fellow-scholars). This is what Vésteinn Ólason seems to have meant by suggesting that the truth-claims in *Bósa saga* were intended as jokes for a 'well-informed audience'.[251] While this may have been so, to view the *apologiae* solely as learned in-jokes is to ignore (or dismiss) the presence of less learned listeners whose response is seen as irrelevant to the meaning of a saga. Such argumentation also depends on the precarious assumption that the 'well informed' were necessarily sympathetic to the idea of a fictional saga. The examples which we have been surveying suggest that even tentative flirtation with this idea was extremely unusual. So, while it is possible that some romance-sagas were circulated as a form of covert 'fiction', that term cannot be used without severe qualification, because the evidence tends to point in the opposite direction.

This evidence is, of course, limited in its scope. Herein lies our chief problem. The report of King Sverrir's opinion in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* represents our sole attested mediaeval example of a positive reception for made-up stories, of what we might call 'happy scepticism'. Probably many mediaeval Icelandic listeners followed King Sverrir's example, being unwilling to believe in the truth of a particular saga but enjoying it as entertainment; nor was this form of enjoyment necessarily restricted to the learned. But this is matter for speculation.

[250] Barnes, 'Romance in Iceland', p. 270. On the sagas' 'implied audience', compare Glauser, *Isländische Märchensagas*, and Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar*, pp. 303–23.

[251] Vésteinn Ólason, 'The marvellous north', p. 117. See above, p. 131.

The *apologiae* tell us nothing of whether people responded in this way: the only kind of audience-response whose existence we might be able to surmise from these passages is the 'grumpy scepticism' against which they were so forcefully aimed. We shall probably never know the other side of the story. The better-behaved listeners and the silent readers, sceptical and credulous alike, saga-authors could afford to leave to their own devices; and so must we.

CONCLUSION

The learned rhetorical form of the complex *apologia* flourished in an age of widespread British and Continental influence on Icelandic literature; so one might expect it to have close counterparts in other European writing. Certainly, most of its individual *topoi* are familiar throughout mediaeval literature. Truth-claims in particular flourished in accounts of Eastern wonders, especially from the thirteenth century onwards.[252] Yet, with the single exception of the Norwegian *Konungs skuggsjá*, I have so far found no rhetorical form approximating to this phenomenon outside Iceland. Neither in romances, *fabliaux*, Spanish *novelas* and Italian *novelle* on the one hand, nor in the various other forms of European historiography and *mirabilia* on the other, do authors seem to have devoted so much energy to insisting that their texts should not be dismissed as lies (despite inaccuracies) and setting out how sceptical listeners ought to behave.[253] The complex *apologia* developed within a culture of popular saga-entertainment unique to Iceland, where it had a specific function: silencing noisy sceptics.

It seems unlikely that Icelandic audiences were any noisier than their foreign counterparts: the narrators of chivalric verse-romances in late mediaeval England also implore their listeners to be quiet and listen.[254] Yet the English evidence suggests either that these audiences were not given to accusations of lying, or that accusations of lying would not have been felt to damage the romance's value. After all, since the twelfth century the truth of a verse narrative had not been tied

[252] Examples include Jacques de Vitry's history of the East, and Mandeville's Travels. For differing assessments of these truth-claims see Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford 1991), pp. 30–6; Lorraine Daston & Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York 1998), pp. 60–6.

[253] Saints' Lives provide the closest parallels: see Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles*, pp. 125–6.

[254] For examples see Crosby, 'Oral delivery in the Middle Ages', p. 101; A. C. Baugh, 'The Middle English romance: some questions of creation, presentation, and preservation', *Speculum* 42 (1967) 1–31, at pp. 13–14; T. Hahn, 'Gawain and popular chivalric romance in Britain', in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Krueger, pp. 218–34, at p. 229.

as closely to historical veracity as that of prose.[255] Saga-authors presented their texts, implicitly or explicitly, as histories – sometimes fallible and wayward histories, but histories all the same. As they experimented with the norms of their genre, pouring into this mould the exotic ingredients and narrative devices of romance, a proliferation of unlikely stories resulted. The tension between these stories and the special expectations of historical truth peculiar to their genre created a need for the *apologia*. In struggling to show that even the less likely parts of the story were worth enjoying, the authors of the more complex *apologiae* came as close as saga-authors could ever come to articulating a theory of saga-fiction – a theory, in fact, which demanded the repudiation of deliberate untruth. In romance-sagas the historian's stance may seem to have become 'no more than a literary convention';[256] but one may equally say 'no less', since genre is itself defined by literary conventions. It is hard to imagine something as elaborate as the epilogue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* being written purely as an atavistic reflex; conversely, if sagas were routinely accepted as fiction, *apologiae* would not be needed. Far from enabling these sagas to be listed under the banner of fiction, this form testifies to the special generic status of the Icelandic saga, which time and again refuses to fit into our neat categories.

'Fiction' today is far too voluminous and dominant a category to be especially neat. Entertaining narratives – film, soap, novel, comic strip – are fictional almost by definition. Novelists operate under a contract with their readers that what they write is not to be taken for historical fact, even if 'historical' characters obtrude. For present-day film-makers, these contracts have even assumed legal substance. Their need to avoid litigation has led to their displaying, after the film proper, a textual 'epilogue' even more formulaic than the Icelandic ones, and no less directly addressed to potential hostile audiences, but to precisely the opposite effect – declaring that any resemblance between the film and real life is 'entirely coincidental' and therefore not defamatory.[257]

[255] This distinction seems to be borne out by the fact that Walter Map, writing in Latin prose, claims to have been accused of lying by hecklers (*De nugis curialium*, edd. & transl. James *et al.*, pp. 110–13). Yet one naturally asks why nothing approximating to the *apologia* has been found in Gaelic prose-sagas, similarly rooted in historical narrative. Those which display the clearest affinities with the Icelandic romance-sagas, the Early Modern and Modern Irish 'romantic tales', have as yet received scant scholarly attention, and none from this viewpoint. Some modern Irish folktales contain such vestigial *apologiae* in their *envois* as 'That's my story; and if there's a lie in it, let there be': *Folktales of Ireland*, ed. & transl. Sean O'Sullivan (Chicago, IL 1966), p. 204.

[256] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 'Fact and fiction', p. 303. The importance of paying proper attention to 'mere convention' in such matters has been demonstrated by Morse, *Truth*.

[257] The push towards fictionality in the early modern novel was born in a similar context of legal manoeuvring, as explored by Davis, *Factual Fictions*.

Saga-audiences, by contrast, were entertained by stories which purported to be true. Demonstrably untrue stories may have been relished by some; but, for those Icelanders who had the demanding task of reading sagas aloud in the farm, they seem to have caused more trouble than they were worth. The same might be said of the casual use of the term 'fiction' in saga-scholarship. It may have been necessary once to bandy about such terms simply to justify the act of literary criticism, back in the days when narratives had to be fictional to be fair game. In these decadent days, when even scientific writings can usefully be subjected to literary analysis, such props are no longer needed. The rise of fiction in mediaeval and early modern European narrative was a far more troubled and tortuous process, and therefore far more interesting, than is often supposed. Nowhere, perhaps, was its rise more troubled than in Iceland. Sagas may sometimes seem like precocious anticipations of later and more familiar forms of prose narrative, but the mirroring is only partial: in so many ways they inhabit another world. These points of strangeness and difference should be flagged up, not smoothed over, if we are to appreciate more fully the sophistication of this remarkable genre.[258]

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