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READING FOR SAGA AUTHORSHIP. A CHARACTER-BASED APPROACH

So I seemed to have arrived at this: doubtless
I have methods, but they begot themselves, in
which case I am only their proprietor, not
their father.

— Samuel L. Clemens, *The Art of Authorship*.

THERE is no Old Icelandic word with the modern associations of originality, individual intellectual voice, artistic intention, and creativity that are generally connoted by *authorship*.¹ The terms used to describe saga writing in medieval Iceland emphasise quite different values, such as the value of repeating, of putting together, and of telling.² Yet readers may be justified in finding authorial voices in the sagas equivalent, in terms of creative design and historical consciousness, to modern novelists. Many sagas, after all, are great artistic achievements, combining dramatic intensity with social history and a national, often international, outlook. My aim here is to support the reading of saga authorship as a creative and interpretive act by connecting the methods char-

¹ Consider, for example, the *Shorter OED* definition of an *author* as ‘the person who originates or gives existence to anything’ (134) and *authorship* as the ‘occupation or career as a writer of books’ (134). This idea of *authorship* as a professional pursuit and one centred around the creativity of the individual is generally attributed to the desire of authors in the eighteenth century to make a living from their writing (see, for example, Jaszi 1991; Woodmansee 1984; Saunders and Hunter 1991; Barthes 1977; and Foucault 1979).

² Sverrir Tómasson discusses the Old Icelandic descriptors of what modern readers might alternatively regard as either creative and individual acts of story-telling or the work of a scribe. Noting the terms previously listed by M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij — *rita* (‘to write’), *skrifa* (‘to write’), *setja á bók* (‘set in/on a book’), *setja saman* (‘to put together’), *samsetja* (‘to put together’), *segja fyrir* (‘dictate’) — Sverrir Tómasson asks whether it is appropriate for us to use the term *author* as we use it today to talk about Old Icelandic writing, telling, and setting together (1988:182). For most, *authorship* has sufficed as an awkward fit for what the saga authors do.

acters of the sagas use to represent themselves and their world and the literary and historical aims of the saga authors, a link I call *secondary authorship* and which I will explain in detail in this essay. We will see that, while there may be a lack of Old Icelandic works dealing directly with the principles of literary and historical writing, there are nevertheless clues to be found in the way saga characters represent themselves and the situations in which they find themselves.

Despite the sagas' sophistication, scholars have tended to classify them either as highly creative works or as unconscious ethnographies of medieval Icelandic social norms. Neither approach is satisfactory, as each relies on an argument for artistic or non-artistic intention that is difficult to reconcile with the sagas themselves, which tend to manifest a range of aims, from creative to documentary, didactic to historical. The division between historical and literary approaches to the sagas has generally been unhelpful. One instance of this was that both book-prose and free-prose approaches failed to adequately recognise the fact that sagas are often episodic or by nature compilations, that, while *episodes* may have an integrity in terms of their historical outlook and fictiveness, the narrative voice of a saga *as a whole* is often more complex.³ In this respect, saga writers may be viewed as expert weavers of tales, some inherited, some no doubt invented with the author's immediate audience in mind.⁴

The book-prose/free-prose divide should be more or less obsolete today, although recent sociological approaches to the literary aspects of the sagas have de-emphasised the question of authorship in a rather free-prose way, and literary anthropology of the sagas, originating with Turner's essay, has attempted to shift attention back to the sagas' historicity and credibility as products of thirteenth century cultural norms.⁵ However, literary scholars may take some comfort in that Miller's, Jochens', Bagge's, and Byock's detailed accounts of early and medieval Iceland help to show that the case against the sagas' historical reliability has sometimes missed the point:⁶ the family sagas

³ On the 'integrity' of saga episodes, see Maxwell 1957-1961.

⁴ See, for example, Clover 1984 and Úlfar Bragason 1986.

⁵ Credibility in this respect is closely tied to the sagas' appearance as traditional narratives. See the recent discussion by Quinn (2000: esp. 32-37); and Gísli Sigurðsson (2000), who discusses the evolution of the debate about oral tradition and 'where the oral and written meet in a written text' (183).

⁶ These scholars have been influenced by socio-anthropological approaches to the text. In this regard, see also Bauman's 1986 argument about the application to Old Icelandic literature of

represented *possible* and not actual events to their audience, and, as there was relatively little social change between the saga and writing ages, the sagas provide an accurate portrait of medieval Icelandic society, at least until the civil disturbances of the early 1200s. While there is a familiar circularity to this thesis – after all, our evidence for the difference between the saga and writing ages comes entirely from the writing age — the case for significant social continuity is more compelling than a modern reader's assumption that the sagas take a largely ironic view of the ethical standards embodied in them.⁷

And yet the sagas are historical novels of a kind and in no way blind to the historical differences to which they give witness (see Harris 1986). When they feel the need, saga authors carefully explain differences between the worlds of their characters and their intended audience. In this respect, the authors of *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Eyrbyggja saga* are conspicuously helpful, the former interested in the difference of past ethical values and engaged in a 'sympathetic effort to investigate their meaning and limits in concrete dramatic situations' (Vésteinn Ólason 1998:174),⁸ the latter an expert story-collector who builds a region's history out of folk lore and ghost stories, biographies of leading figures, genealogical information, and histories of well-known disputes. For example, for all it tells us about competition for land, *Eyrbyggja saga*'s account of the elaborate means by which Snorri goði acquires the Helgafell farm functions, primarily, as a humorous story that adds

Geertz' concept of performance (1993: esp. 131-34). Bauman, like the other scholars noted, attributes the beginning of anthropological approaches to the sagas to Turner's 1971 essay.

⁷ On the vexed question of defining the differences between the Sturlung Age and early Iceland, see esp. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1953; Byock 1986; Miller 1990:40, 319; Jónas Kristjánsson 1998; Clover 1985:233; Clunies Ross 1994:675.

⁸ In what seems to be a refutation of the drive in the 1970s and 1980s to read for strong thirteenth century moral statements in the sagas, Vésteinn Ólason insists that 'efforts to transform the sagas into parables or moral tales, almost always end up obfuscating what matters most and diminishing the artistic and emotional impact of the works' (1998:10-11). On Bakhtinian readings of medieval Icelandic literature, see Würth 2000 and, of medieval texts more generally, see Farrell 1995. Cf. Vilhjálmur Árnason's approach as stated in his study of morality and social structures in the sagas (1985, 1991). He discusses the application of romance, humanist, and sociological approaches to the question (1991: esp. 157-160), and favours an approach which is directed towards studying the ethical power of social institutions to which individuals in the saga belong (163-164), the basis, that is, of the 'sociomoral conflict which is of the essence of the sagas' (164). On the sagas' historical stance, see also Bagge 1992: esp. 63-64, and 1991: 30. On the saga authors' recognition of changing ethical landscapes, see also Sayers 1996; Lönnroth 1969; Schach 1982; Allen:91-96. Regarding the critical reception of the *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, see esp. Sørensen 1986; Andersson 1968; and Vésteinn Ólason 1999 and 1998:167-174.

colour to the portrayal of the central character. The point it makes is that Snorri's ability to deceive is remarkable.

A significant factor in such issues of authorship and interpretation is the relative paucity of information from the medieval period dealing directly with the nature of creative and historical composition. Just as A. J. Minnis took as his starting point in the discussion of prologues in *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (1984) the absence of medieval documents directly concerned with the principles of literature, so too in Old Icelandic studies we are required to make up for a lack of explicit direction, for the most part taking the sagas' internal literary logic and implied ethical norms as the basis of discussions of authorial aims and likely audience responses. While this brings with it the dangers of over-interpreting the sagas and of imposing onto them modern, at times ill-fitting critical concerns, the lack of contextual materials has had its advantages, particularly in producing a field that was if not comfortable at least well familiar with authorial absences long before Barthes declared authors to be dead, and a field whose history of close reading meant that it was in a position to benefit from new critical and structural approaches to literature more generally (cf. Sverrir Tómasson 2002: esp. 202-03 and Torfi Tulinius 2004:159-165).

Neither are scholars of Old Icelandic new to the fraught nature of attempting to divide history from fiction, as the family sagas in particular integrate material held by the author and audience to be truthful with fictive elements borne out of generic conceits and individual imagination. Naturally, the family sagas are not post-modern texts, but post-modernism, with its emphasis on the uncertainty of authorial voice and meaning and textuality, has developed a set of critical tools that may help us to reassess equally modern assumptions about divisions of history and fiction, or at least support a less rigid approach to medieval Icelandic conceptions of the historical.

It is the case that in medieval studies more generally, the boundaries between literary-critical and historical scholarship have become less distinguishable:

Literary scholars must now engage some of the fundamental questions to which social and cultural historians have led them, while attempting to understand why the latter have fallen short of providing sufficiently nuanced answers – questions such as Foucault's in "What Is an Author": "How, under what conditions, and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse?" ... As long as inquiry into specifically literary operations and conflicts is construed as a flight

from the socially and historically “real,” rather than the critical pursuit of distinctive medieval modes for shaping it, literary historians can have nothing of substance to offer to a cultural criticism that has for the most part been strangely obtuse about the formal properties and social dispositions of the medium in which its objects are given to inquiry – a medium of almost infinite variety before the age of print. (Middleton 1992:27)

So, too, saga authorship need not be viewed as a fixed category but rather a variable function of the text, one which saga authors do not appear to have limited to one or other rhetorical mode, be that the objective receptiveness of a scribe, the persuasiveness of a cleric who collects narratives and comments on them, or the creativity of an author who has been influenced by exotic literature (variations with parallels in Minnis’ division in terms of *scriptor*, *compiler* and *commentator*, and *auctor*; 1984: esp. 94-95 and 100-01).⁹ For example, episodes which involve negotiation and persuasion in *Eyrbyggja saga* are narrated with great sophistication, each character, or side of the exchange, being given ample opportunity to make himself look good or bad. In a sense, it is this objective distance which makes the narration of Snorri’s Helgafell purchase a bitter one for Þorkr. The author purports simply to watch him make a fool of himself in front of Snorri, and the lack of overt narrative sympathy or antipathy, whereby the exchange seems to create its own moral discourse, has the effect of mocking Þorkr without the author having to cast him as internally immoral or, perhaps more importantly, having to justify Snorri’s moral nature. The author maintains a scribe’s position at the side of the action in order to allow the morality of the incident to be borne by the events themselves.

The author of *Vatnsdæla saga* sets himself a different task, certainly in terms of the rhetoric of the saga. He helps the narrative to reach fully into the mind of his characters and audience members. Situations are not given the chance to

⁹ Chaucer’s self-conscious use of a compiler’s voice as a literary mode in *The Canterbury Tales* makes a useful comparison here: ‘... for the most part, Chaucer was content to assume the role of compiler and to exploit the literary form of *compilatio*. Indeed, so deliberate was he in presenting himself as a compiler that one is led to suspect the presence of a very self-conscious author who was concerned to manipulate the conventions of *compilatio* for his own literary ends... Chaucer was an author who hid behind the ‘shield and defence’ of the compiler.’ (Minnis 1984:210) Amongst the range of authorial voices adopted in the family sagas, one is analogous to the role Chaucer adopts, in which the saga author presents his creativity as a collection of pre-existing narratives.

speak for themselves, and the author's frequent recourse to proverbs suggests that he is unsure of the effect action can have on an audience if it is not accompanied by commentary of some sort. Generational tensions feature in this saga, as they do in many, but the author adopts the theme clumsily in his characterisation of Þorsteinn and Ingimundr (for example, when the former is thinking of his father's harsh words as he takes on the preterhuman Jökull).¹⁰ The representation of the relationship between Ingimundr and his father Þorsteinn suffers from too much authorial interest: a falsely ominous air surrounds Ingimundr's youthful arrogance at the same time as his egoistical comments are praised, and it seems that the author struggles to find the right balance between his portrayal of Ingimundr's foolhardy youth and his desire to show that there is general community approval of Ingimundr's heroic qualities. The author has not abandoned objective saga style altogether but, perhaps when his confidence in the ability of the scene to carry the saga's moral rhetoric falters, he attempts an internal dialogue. This openness on the part of the author of *Vatnsdæla saga* contrasts vividly with the ability of many saga authors to develop their characters in understated ways.

After a brief comparison of the narrative voices in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* we see that saga authors perceived their role differently, as well as the types of characters their stories would produce. It is unfortunate, then, that twentieth-century approaches tended to bind the saga authors to fixed types and looked for *either* tradition *or* individual creativity. If we translate the problem into contemporary theoretical terms, we might say that in the past saga authorship has been equated to intention rather than function, that despite their anonymity, saga authors were to be accorded personality and one set of aims or the other. Perhaps Julian Barnes' admittedly very modern conception of *authorship* as a range of aims and functions is a better starting point:

... the argument that every writer and reader has with himself or herself, the argument art never ceases to have with itself: Beauty v. Unity, Contemporary Relevance v. Future Durability, Primacy of Form v. Urgency of Message, Style v. Content, The Artist as Controlling Creator v. The Artist as Played-Upon Instrument, and so on. (217-218)

¹⁰ Regarding generational tensions in the sagas, see Schach 1977 and Bragg who observes that 'literary themes and motifs having to do with father-son relations are quite common in the saga literature in general and must therefore have been of wide interest in the society that produced the sagas' (1997:8).

In the Old Icelandic context the last of these arguments – arguments as to the relative importance of the functions of authorship – has been seen as a duel between tradition and creativity, interestingly perhaps by the authors themselves. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, the ‘argument’ seems close to the surface, even if it not as easily recognised as the ironic voice of the modern novelist:

Nú sækja þeir Eyjólfir at fast ok frændr hans; þeir sá, at þar lá við sæmð þeira ok virðing. Leggja þeir þá til hans með spjótum, svá at út falla iðrin, en hann sveipar at sér iðrunum ok skyrtunni ok bindr at fyrir neðan með reipinu. Þá mælti Gísli, at þeir skyldi bíða lítt þat, — „munu þér nú hafa þau málalok, sem þér vilduð.” Hann kvað þá vísu:

Fals hallar skal Fulla
fagrleit, sús mik teitir,
rekkilót at rökkum,
regns, sínnum vin fregna.
Vel hygg ek, þótt eggjar
ítrslegnar mik býti;
þá gaf sínnum sveini
sverðs minn faðir herðu.

Sjá er in síðasta vísa Gísla. (*Gísla saga* 1943:114-115)

[They attack him fiercely, Eyjolf and his kinsmen; they saw that their honour was at stake. They wound him then with their spears, so that his bowels begin to come out; and he gathers the bowels in with his shirt and ties them underneath with the cord. Then Gísli told them to wait a little – ‘You will finish up the case as you want to.’ He spoke a verse: Sheer goddess of shower / Of spear-shaft’s hall, cheer-heart, / Brave, bids of her lover, / Bold one, the cold tidings. / Fain am I though finely / Forged bright edges bite me; / My sire’s true sword temper, / Shows in his son’s life-close. This is Gísli’s last verse. (Johnston 1963:58)]

‘This is Gísli’s last verse,’ says the prose which brackets the verse, pausing in much the same way as Gísli’s attackers must pause in order to allow and to observe Gísli’s self-definition. The sentence contrasts sharply with the tone of the *vísa* itself, and this allows us to read for an authorial distance, as the author looks back on the *vísa* and recognises it as the character’s attempt to understand and express the situation at hand. The sentence’s narrative finality

may also reflect an authorial claim to the control of Gísli's poetry: the author knows the sequence of verses and their narrative shape. *Síðasta vísa Gísla* is a phrase with a cyclical quality, made up of three words which are phonetically and grammatically tied together, each word is in the possession of the other, an interconnectedness which reflects the positioning of Gísli's poems as the total possessions of Gísli. Gísli's poetry performs a distinct part of the meaning of saga as a whole; they are private statements of a world of thought that we can tie to Gísli's self-conception, but which also form part of the character's social world and part of that overall meaning developed and controlled by the saga author. The saga is polyphonic, allowing changing levels of control in the relationship between the author and his material. And in respect of both authorial distance and the self-consciousness credited to Gísli, we see the saga performing a *secondary authorship*, a character's act of representation that we could connect to our ideas about authorship in medieval Iceland.

Gísli's poems are situated separately and yet inside the world constructed by the author in much the same way as Egill Skallagrímsson's chamber is located separately and within the totality of the farmstead at Borg, a secret, private, and safe place in opposition to the exposed communal spaces of the household. The situation this time is the loss of a family member, Egill's son:

Mjök erum tregt
tungu at hrœra
eða loptvætt
ljóðpundara;
esa nú vænligt
of Viðurs þýfi
né hógdrægt
ór hugar fylgsni. (*Egils saga* 1933:246)

Egill tók at hressask, svá sem fram leið at yrkja kvæðit, ok er lokit var kvæðinu, þá færði hann þat Ásgerði ok Þorgerði ok hjónum sínum; reis hann þá upp ór rekkju ok settisk í qndvegi; kvæði þetta kallaði hann Sonatorrek. (*Egils saga* 1933:256-257)

[My mouth strains / To move the tongue, / To weigh and wing / The choice word: / Not easy to breathe / Odin's inspiration / In my heart's hinterland, / Little hope there. (Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards 1976: 204)

As the poem progressed, Egil began to get back his spirits and when it was completed he tried the poem out before Asgerd, Thorgerd and his household. Then he got out of bed and took his place on the high-seat. He called the poem 'Lament for My Sons'. (Hermann Pálsson P. Edwards 1976:209)]

The verse is the beginning of *Sonatorrek* and the prose a comment which follows the poem as a whole. It suggests, I think, an authorial conception of what the poem means to the character Egill. In itself, the first verse signals a range of concerns regarding both the internal and bodily nature of composition, as well as the objects of the act of composition. In addition, there is a relationship between the internal and physical struggle of the poet and the object of the poem: Bǫðvarr's death is the cause of grief as well the poem's supposed object, whilst grief creates both Egill's dumbness (or the poetic theme of dumbness) and a very eloquent stream in the narrative within the *kvæði*. The *kvæði* successfully blends the physical and the psychic, the subject and the object. The prose comment, and the narrative of Egill's loss frame the *Sonatorrek* as a whole and can be said to stand outside Egill's personal and physical space. That is, the poem appears to look in, just as Egill's daughter wishes to look in, to view what effect the poetic performance is having on the mood of the utterer.

The prose narration around the poem creates a chamber that is, in a literary sense, similar to the distance which the physical chamber represents for Egill's relationship with his world and his various losses: the loss of poetic fluency, the loss of a son, and the loss of his youth and former strength. The prose comment about the poem goes on to follow the early life of the poem, that it is delivered to Ásgerðr and Þorgerðr, that Egill then resumes his place as head of the household, and that Egill himself names the poem *Sonatorrek*. The narration recognizes the life of the *skáld* and how the poetic act affects the *skáld*, and watches the *kvæði* move, firstly, from Egill to a discourse with himself within his room, secondly, an exchange with his family, and thirdly, into an expression of his household. Egill is being commented on in a way that emphasizes his belonging to an older, past world — to the historical Iceland of an earlier age as it is jointly conceived by the author and his audience. At the same time, the surrounding prose codifies the poem as a character's private statement of self that *acts on* the author: here, the poetry and prose combine to form a dialogue between saga author and Egill, the poet of a saga, about the

nature of loss and its expression in verse.¹¹ That is, the saga author is engaged in a representation of authorship, a *secondary authorship* that, while some way from being a direct treatise on the nature of composition or literary effects, may nevertheless be useful when discussing conceptions of saga authorship. Although the author is portraying a character accepted by his audience as historically credible, the process by which the character represents the world around him may be imbued with, and indeed may influence, the saga authors' own, late medieval conception of how representation comes into being and then becomes accurate and true to sources, informative, analytical, artistically praiseworthy, and entertaining.

Aside from the composition and delivering of poems, perhaps the clearest example of *secondary authorship* is the widely-discussed instance of storytelling in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* during saga entertainment (*sagnaskemmtan*) at a wedding feast at Reykhólar, an event that suggests that even those sagas used as entertainment during celebrations and other important gatherings were scrutable.¹² The author explains who told which story and troubles over the truth value of sagas. An amusing exchange of verses concerning Þórðr Þorvaldsson's bad breath precedes the author's list of the entertainment at the feast. The author's apparent pleasure in this spiteful banter, and his later concern about what people think about the old stories, are candid acknowledgments of a world of thinking about well-chosen or memorable words and the contexts in which they are delivered. The sagas are not only representations,

¹¹ As one would expect, poetic composition has received a great deal of attention to date. Even recent scholarship about Old Icelandic poetic composition is immense (see generally Turville-Petre 1976; Frank 1978; Poole 1991; Clunies Ross 1998b; and regarding the characterisation of poets, see, e.g., Vésteinn Ólason 1998:144-145). In a recent article, Torfi Tulinius emphasizes the creative and intellectual links between saga events, poetic composition and the outlook behind it, and the nature of saga narratives (2001: see esp. 192-194), and discusses possible meanings behind the presence of both complex meaning and a conceit of God-given poetic talent (2001:198). See also Larrington 1993, who examines Old Icelandic wisdom poetry; especially interesting is her discussion of wisdom and knowledge in *Hávamál*, the guide to honourable conduct (see 1993:4-36; see further Toorn 1955): Old Icelandic wisdom poems defy normal narrative or chronological patterns (65), suggesting that in certain contexts knowledge and guidance are sufficient functions of textuality. That is, 'an aesthetic impulse is always at work in the organisation of the wisdom poem: with no inherent logical or chronological order, its structure becomes symphonic in character. Themes are taken up, allowed to drop, returned to in a different key or tempo, modulated until resolution is finally reached' (Larrington 1993:220).

¹² See further Foote 1955-1956; Úlfar Bragason 1994; Bauman 1986:135-137. See also Anderson and Gade's discussion of *Morkinskinna* (2000: esp. 963, and *Morkinskinna* ch. 42).

they often thematise the act of representation, seeking in a sophisticated way to understand communication in and of the past.

Secondary authorship need not be limited to such clear-cut instances of composition. Other representational if less creative discourses may also reflect conceptions of saga authorship if the character's speech or behaviour can be analysed in terms of the modes of representation that are encoded in them and not merely in terms of the characters' plot function.¹³ This necessarily casts a rather wide net, and may open the approach to the criticism of taking common features of all literature as starting points in a discussion of the specific authorship context in medieval Iceland. However, the aim of the *secondary authorship* approach is to expand the range of texts that can be used in discussing saga authorship, and as such a broad definition of *secondary authorship* is preferable to a narrower, if more precise one: this allows us to at least begin by looking at a wide range of representations by characters, taking each as a potential reflection of how saga authors conceived of literary representation.

Persuasion and advice, for instance, often involve expressions of how characters in the sagas interpret events and other characters, as can the very detailed legal arguments which the family sagas at times relish at the cost of narrative momentum.¹⁴ If one function of saga authorship is to preserve legal history, then characters' fascination with legal detail is an instance of characters making representations on a theme taken up by the genre as a whole:

¹³ Compare Cook's emphasis on will in the family sagas in 1973: 'in the typical actions of the saga the inner life is played down in favour of manifestations of the will' (93). Such expressions of the will include whetting (97-101), requests for aid (102-105), trickery (105-106), persuasion and reluctance (106-108), warnings which demonstrate the object's unyielding will (108-109), and wise refusals (111-112). Amory's (1991) categories of saga speech acts, namely refusals of requests (64-68), breaches of contract (68-73), threats (73-74), insults (74-77), and challenges (77-80) are also starting points for an analysis of the sagas that is, although with a sociolinguistic emphasis, similar to my idea of *secondary authorship*. Speech act theory does not stress the authorial nature of words but their relation to other modes of social performance and various performance structures. It is this interest in words as social functions, anthropologically aligned with physical actions rather than ironic narratives, that distances speech act theory from my notion of *secondary authorship*, and I do not consider Amory's formulation of social exchanges in the sagas to be immediately applicable here. See also Bonner and Grimstad 1996, who have collaborated as linguist and literary scholar on a dialogue analysis of *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* (5); they develop a performative approach that can be linked to arguments by Amory 1991 and Bauman 1986.

¹⁴ Regarding legal advocacy in the saga age, see, for example, Lönnroth 1976:88-102, and, more generally, Miller 1990; Byock 1982 and 1986; and Berger 1976 and 1978-1981.

the characters and plot share a role in defining the narrative as partly legal and the law as partly narrational in nature. Likewise, insults provide characters with the opportunity to sum up and represent important features of another character's life, perhaps the most famous example of which is Skarpheðinn's self-destructive verbal abuse of chieftains in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, when Njáll attempts to secure support after the killing of Hǫskuldr Þráinsson. Such insults can be read as a reflection of the saga authors' interest in characters' fame as well as the authors' pleasure in a form of characterisation that juxtaposes the action with a character's reputation, both distinguishing features of the family saga genre.¹⁵

Impressive rhetoric in the sagas is given to women inciting men to violence (Cook 1992:40). Such female whetting, and incitements to violence by other characters dependent on men, is to be found predominantly in the family sagas, but they are also present in *Sturlunga saga* (for example, in *Íslendinga saga*, the whetting of Eyjólfur prior to the burning at Flugumýri), and indicate to us something of the power that well-timed or highly-charged language could give to those otherwise disenfranchised (Miller 1990:212-13).¹⁶ Dreams are also of interest here. They, like insults and calls to action, often contain intertextual allusions to the mythical world or to the past more generally, a configuring of historical and mythical characters that can be performed in order to vocalise a prediction, understanding, and interpretation of the meaning of events in the saga. Saga characters themselves recognise these functions of dreams and, as we see in the case of Guðrún's discussion with Gestir in *Laxdæla saga*, the meanings possessed and generated by dreams must be interpreted by those who, perhaps rather like saga authors, are wise enough to understand the

¹⁵ There has been considerable discussion of sexual libel, or *níð* (e.g., Gade 1986; Jochens 1992; Sørensen 1980). Clunies Ross 1986 examines the ways in which truth is thematized by virtue of the saga society's closeness to oral art, and considers the development of complex poetry as a means of veiling criticism and maintaining a poetic elite. Of course, here, the legal regulations of *níð*, some of which are to be found preserved in the medieval law code *Grágás*, can be viewed as a regulation of authorship and speech, and reflect a sensitivity to honour quite as elaborate as modern defamation laws. The situation 'favoured the development of an elaborate formal means of slandering others while appearing to produce quite innocuous utterances' (Clunies Ross 1986:65). Finlay 1990-1993 discusses the role of insults in the so-called *ástarsögur* (romantic sagas), in which insults are structured as part of a feud narration (see esp. 170-171). See also Swenson 1991.

¹⁶ See further Clover 1986; Jochens 1986 and 1996; Frank 1973; Helga Kress 1977. Cf. Cormack 1994; Sigurður Nordal 1941; Scott 1985. See also B. Sawyer 1980 and 1990; Vésteinn Ólason 1998:147-156.

significance of the appearance, in narratives, of mythical beings and other famous characters of the past.¹⁷

In a similar way, reports often function to relate information from a character's perspective or in a way that reflects the disposition of the characters listening. Important saga characters, especially kings who are assisted by a large body of retainers, rely on others to report events that will affect them. In *Sturlunga saga*, too, spies are employed to discover the movement of opposing forces, and the ability to judge the accuracy or inaccuracy of their reports appears to be one of the key skills of a thirteenth century chieftain. The oratory skill of such figures, too, seems to have been of interest to authors and audiences. Perhaps the kings' sagas informed leaders about the successful conduct of political careers, in which case the oratorical skill of saga characters must have been valuable because its forms and structures could, even in the Icelandic social context, be copied for tone and content (see Bagge 1991 and 1996). Similarly, patterns of advice in the kings' sagas can be regarded as part of the sagas' overarching function as paradigms of advice.¹⁸

Elevated direct speech, or dialogue between characters that carries special significance for the plot, though often brief, can be regarded as a key aspect of saga characterisation and as a moment in which an author's conception of issues facing the saga society comes to the fore. I have in mind characters' speech during critical moments, such as when key decisions are made, when final words during battles are spoken, in death scenes, or in those moments when saga authors appear to betray something of a character's inner world – enigmatic phrases like *fogr er hliðin* and *en nú falla vötn öll til Dýrfaðar* are

¹⁷ Significant dream narratives feature in the family sagas, the kings' sagas, and in *Sturlunga saga* (see Glendinning's two studies of Sturla Þórðarson's dreams in *Íslendinga saga*). As Clunies Ross observes, intertextual aspects of characterisation in *Íslendinga saga* help to enhance the status of thirteenth century political figures like Snorri (1994: 680-683; cf. Boyer 1975). Central characters' relationship with the past in *Heimskringla* are more problematic. For those who, like the two Óláfrs, are pressing for conversion to Christianity, the heathen past represents an opposition force, one that must either be negotiated or overcome. One of Óláfr Tryggvason's victories over his heathen opponents comes when he is able to interrupt the relationship which the *bændr* conceive between themselves and the heathen gods: Óláfr insists on a sacrifice of the leading men in the district (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 67, 315-316). For our study of secondary authorship, Óláfr's discussion of the past is interesting because it appears to recognize a difference of past and current heathen practice, and manipulates that difference in order to achieve a political point.

¹⁸ Speeches of this kind are rare in the family sagas, but, as Brown argues, *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* does share the kings' sagas' pleasure in kingly rhetoric.

perhaps the most famous.¹⁹ Laughter sometimes carries a similarly oblique power, heroic laughter in the face of fate or danger offering audiences an opportunity to pinpoint the time at which a character perceives the overall meaning of the events in which he/she is caught. It is this sense of a character's recognition that gives to laughter the features of *secondary authorship*: laughter can express a crystallisation in a character's perception of his/her fortunes (G. Clark 1994:184, for instance, suggests that Hallgerðr's laughter in *Brennu-Njáls saga* represents her assurance that Þjóstólfr must die).²⁰

To sum up: Much of the drama of the sagas comes when characters make major decisions or when characters respond conspicuously to the events around them. In such moments, saga authors are given an opportunity to place historical events in the context of directly expressed reactions. This not only adds an intensity and an insightfulness that are difficult to achieve by an exterior perspective; it provides the opportunity for the audience to view events with sympathy, empathy, and with a sense of the drama that is unfolding. In such moments, characters perform a *secondary authorship*; that is, while they may not express directly an author's view of the events of the saga, characters are themselves engaged in a kind of authorial activity and thus may offer an insight into saga authors' ideas of authorship and its limits. Thus, a discussion of

¹⁹ Lönnroth's study of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for instance, makes it clear that the author of that saga was well-read, and that such comments as this one by Gunnarr, and Njáll's beautiful expression of his grief at the loss of Hǫskuldr — 'when I heard that he had been slain I felt that the sweetest light of my eyes had been put out' (Cook 2001:207) — indicate something of his reflections of how Christian writing might be used in a local context (see Lönnroth 1976: 153-157 concerning connections with *Grænlandinga saga* and *Alexanders saga*, 102-105 on a clerical influence, esp. 116-126 regarding the influence of Romance literature on Gunnarr's characterisation; see also the note to Cook 2001:332).

²⁰ For Clark's argument for dynamic characters in the sagas, see especially 175-176. Consider, too, how much is captured by Snorri Sturluson's response to Hallveig Ormsdóttir in *Íslendinga saga*: „En þat var Hallveig Ormsdóttir er þá var férið á Íslandi. Snorra þótti hennar ferð heldr hæðileg ok brosti að” (*Sturlunga saga* 1988:284-285); 'And it turned out to be Hallveig Ormsdóttir, who was then the richest woman in Iceland. To Snorri, her mode of travel seemed rather ludicrous, and he smiled at it.' Sturla Þórðarson, the author of this account and Snorri's nephew, could well have enjoyed this story, and the rather amusing reflection of Snorri's wit that it suggests. The story is given added bite by the fact that Snorri is outdone by Sturla Sighvatsson in the quest for Solveig — „þótti mönnum sem hann [Snorri] hefði til annars ætlað” (286; 'it seemed to men as if he [Snorri] had other plans' for a union with Solveig) — and by Snorri's eventual partnership with Hallveig: „Hafði Snorri þá miklu meira fé en engi annarra á Íslandi” (290) — 'Snorri then had much more property than anyone else in Iceland' (my translations). On Snorri's relationship with Hallveig, see Jochens 1994:459. On laughter in the sagas, see also Le Goff 1992.

concepts of saga authorship is not entirely dependent on historical arguments about the evolution of medieval literature, but rather can include reference to a wide variety of behaviour and representation present in the sagas themselves.

It is apparent from the list of examples given above that an analysis of the functions of saga authorship based on *secondary authorship* is textual and relies heavily on close analysis of characterisation in the sagas. In this respect, the approach can be tied in with scholarship by those interested in the scope and depth of characterisation in the family sagas. *Secondary authorship* tends to highlight authorial skill and differences within the saga corpus and in this way supports scholarship on saga characterisation by Vésteinn Ólason,²¹ Cook,²² Foote, Schach,²³ and Einar Ól. Sveinsson.²⁴ Additionally, the sense of authorship developed by Bagge in his various studies of medieval historiography, particularly his discussions of the educative strand in these works, the effect of their episodic structure, and the close connection of character and history in the sagas,²⁵ suggests medieval Icelanders attached great value to

²¹ See, e.g., Vésteinn Ólason 1998:esp. 98-99, 101-106. On Vésteinn Ólason's desire for increased scholarly attention to characterisation, see 135-138.

²² Cook stresses that the characters of the family sagas are interesting "in their own right" (1973: 88). See also Cook 1989 and 1992. For an early example of a psychological approach to the sagas, see Hight (1928-1929), who observes that despite the minimal vocabulary of inner life in the sagas, 'an act here, a word there, will often reveal to the attentive reader the whole secret of a situation' (70). See also Wilson 1969.

²³ See esp. Schach 1978, where the author lists the main forms of character portrayal in the sagas, including introductions, contrast, juxtaposition, descriptive passages, and what is described as 'character by instalments' (see 254-257) or the repetition of a characteristic for a particular effect. See also Schach 1972 and 1977 for slightly earlier indications of Schach's scholarship, which can be regarded as a leading attempt to shift focus from structure to sophisticated saga characterisation.

²⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson's discussions of *Brennu-Njáls saga* are the best illustration. Cf. Lönnroth, 1970:esp. 155-158; Gurevich 1992a; and Miller 1992:esp. 105. Both Gurevich and Miller argue for disposition-based characterisation in the sagas. See also the socio-linguistic approach to emotions in Heinrichs (1972:esp. 25-28); and Dronke's interpretive method in her discussion of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (1981:esp. 5).

²⁵ Bagge, in his study of *Heimskringla*, argues that Snorri Sturluson was more than a compiler because he 'reflected on what to include or not' (1991:31), a definition which would see the compiler of *Sturlunga saga* in the category of author (see, e.g., Tranter's comparative analysis of *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*; Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1878:xcix-cxii) and which certainly dispels any doubt about Snorri Sturluson's status as an author. As Andersson points out, narrative control of history (and for what end that control is sought) is an important metaphor for Bagge: concerning the account of the Battle of Fimreite in *Sverris saga*, Bagge writes, "the author not only fails to give an account of Sverrir's strategy but narrates the events in a

characterisation, especially the relationship between character and success.²⁶ For example, Bagge considers Snorri's biography of Saint Óláfr (in *Óláfs saga helga*) as an integration of persuasive tools drawn from the world of literature and of ethics, whereby stranding and scene shifting are combined to heighten both coherence and the possibility of audience empathy or distaste (for example, Bagge 1991:42).²⁷

A number of objections can be made to assuming that there are echoes of saga authors' interests in the speech and action of their characters. Firstly, saga characters often inhabit a very different social context to saga authors, and are confronted with choices which an author must only be able to imagine. Such an author may never be forced to decide on whether to accept a sentence of outlawry or go into hiding in the Icelandic highlands. This, in itself, does not constitute an obstacle for *secondary authorship*, as I am not asking whether the lived reality of early Icelanders or of Scandinavian kings and earls was the same as that of medieval Icelandic authors. Even if that were the case, we would still have to avoid any automatic correlation of outlook between characters and authors. Rather, the aim here is to show that saga authors thematised representation and interpretation as a stage in recognising and reaching across such distances of time and place.

A second objection, and one that often lies behind structural or formal readings of sagas, is that we ought not to exaggerate the individual creativity behind saga characterisation. This argument is based on two sensible propositions: firstly, that saga authors were often the inheritors of traditions about figures of the past, and so may not have had much in the way of creative free-

way that directly seems intended to obscure it" (1996:43; see also Bagge 1993). These historians are active in promoting particular points view and, as is suggested by the combined structuralist/social analyses done in the field (e.g., Lönnroth 1976), Icelandic authors were not immune to European influence or a medieval tendency to be heavy-handed in pushing a particular bias, ethical point of view, or to writing with a distinct aim in mind (e.g., 1996: 91-93 in relation to Sturla Þórðarson's authorship, in 1265, of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*). In this regard, the sagas are not a special case; the objective veil created by saga style is often very thin indeed (Lönnroth 1970; Schach 1970a; Whaley 2000). Especially in later works, saga authors are capable of taking a morally instructive point of view (Vésteinn Ólason 1998:180-86).

²⁶ See also the character-basis of historical writing in *Morkinskinna*; as Andersson and Gade observe, their careers are described 'less in terms of political history as in terms of character study'" (2; see also 62-63 for Andersson and Gade's discussion of reflexive literary comments in *Morkinskinna*).

²⁷ Cf. the approach to medieval historiography in Wallace-Hadrill 1981: esp. 46 and 54-57.

dom, and secondly, there are discernible character *types* in the sagas, suggesting that conventions or patterns governed the representation of some events (for example, the reception of Icelanders abroad). This objection is part of a larger methodological divide in literary studies between unifying approaches to literature and readings that concentrate on difference.²⁸ My position is that the identification of character types is a fair caveat to place on reading for character and difference in conceptions of authorship, but I would also stress that although some characters are portrayed in a way consistent with similar figures in other sagas, the author still has scope to offer his own understanding of that character. It is these instances of understanding, often expressed through *secondary authorship*, that are of most interest here.

A third objection, at the other extreme, is that to look for reflections of medieval authorship in the way characters represent themselves is to down-play the authors' creative abilities, that is, their sophistication in creating highly differentiated characters who have their own integrity. We must accept that medieval authors' creativity, in some instances, restricts our study of authorial connection with characters, and my tendency is to presume a high level of literary competence. Of course, I am here concerned with just this type of variation in saga characters' self-conception, and it is of equal interest when authors create characters who are portrayed as different to them or when authors suggest that characters belong to another world or ethical era.

As well as connecting with work by scholars on characterisation, *secondary authorship* also has the benefit of tying in with readings of the sagas in terms of the *mentalité* that is represented in both the act of saga composition and the worlds which the sagas portray.²⁹ This has been a particularly useful approach in relation to mythical aspects of the Icelandic literary imagination (for example, Gurevich; Clunies Ross; Sørensen), and has come to be part of a broadly accepted philological apparatus which also blends historical linguistics,

²⁸ We might follow Harris's observation and suggestion that 'one of the sacred paradoxes of literature, or at least of narrative literature, is that of multiformity within uniformity, and properly understood uniformity is not a criticism but a tool of criticism for coming to terms with conflicting claims of the Many and the One' (1972: 27).

²⁹ *Mentalité* describes the existence, or retrospective abstraction, of a common intellect at a given time; its proponents seek out 'evidence of collective intellectual purpose' (Gurevich 1992b:4). That is, 'a chaotic and heterogeneous stream of perceptions and impressions is converted by consciousness into a more or less ordered picture of the world which sets its seal on all human behaviour. The subjective side of the historical process, the manner of thinking and feeling particular to people of a given social and cultural community, thus becomes part of the objective process of history' (8).

source-analysis, and studies in folklore. In *Prolonged Echoes*, Clunies Ross has discussed Sørensen's approach as a new historicist one, as he attempts to define a social picture, drawn from a range of texts, for juxtaposition with literary texts. This approach enables us to differentiate self-conscious literary aims of saga authors and the underlying values in their work, or the unconscious authorial self-expression that helps to shape, at a fundamental historical level, the interpretive nature of saga authorship.

In this regard, a key aspect of a *secondary authorship* approach is that it suggests that the authorial function is capable of great variety, that it is *multi-functional*, a conception of saga authorship that dovetails with new historicism's insistence that the social energy in literature speaks, not as 'blazing genesis' but through 'complex, ceaseless borrowing and lendings' (Greenblatt 1998:7) – there can be a more detailed understanding of the historical past which *coexists* with our differentiation of past perspectives and an appreciation of the distortions that may arise when scholars attempt to create unified historical narratives. This is a powerful development for approaches to Old Icelandic literature and one that reminds us of Middleton's comments above: these point the way for a discussion of cultural practices, such as authorship, in positive terms, despite the texts' uncertain relation to tradition, historical reality, and social developments of the thirteenth century. Although 'there can be no single method, no overall picture, no exhaustive and definitive cultural poetics' (Greenblatt 1998:19), there does remain the possibility of analysis and discussion of authorship and its relation to an historical period. While it may not be possible for us to trace the development of a classic style which embodies a single definition of saga authorship, a meaning remains, apart from our own, which informs our interpretation of the sagas and the concepts of authorship they reflect. Variation in the narrative voice supports the identification of diverse functions of saga authorship: the way that sagas characters represent themselves and their world can assist us in developing a nuanced view of these functions.

Our approach to the sagas should not be premised on the notion that the literary quality of the sagas can be subtracted during the search for reality itself: there the question ceases to be about the outlook behind saga composition, and instead asks how to account for the sagas' literary affectations in the process of the greater goal of describing a culture. Approaches which insist that 'behind genre there is life' (Hastrup 1986:9) are in danger of re-writing the sagas. The agency of the audience and the strengths of saga conventions gave historical power to certain incidents, for instance, the warrior-poet Egill's

recovery through poetic composing from the death of his son. Whatever medieval audiences might have thought of the plausibility of the incident, the *Sonatorrek* is consistent with both Egill's earlier characterisation and the saga as a whole, a biography of an egoist who can drink from the cup of Óðinn and fight like the greatest of Vikings. This blend of mythic and heroic narratives makes Egill's response to his son's death a credible one, even if no-one in medieval Iceland had ever seen a large, ugly, and violent fellow like Egill commemorate the death of a son in verse.

Saga authorship and the medieval reception of saga narratives are highly accommodating – the saga form permits a wide range of material and modes of narration to be included. Saga authors deploy a mix of narrative voices in order to produce a literature that is sophisticated in its conception of historical figures but which is also sensitive to a social need to preserve and perform traditional modes of narration. The idea of *secondary authorship* supports a complex conception of saga authorship by linking the variety in characters' representations to saga authors' aims: Saga authorship is multi-functional, these functions sometimes seemingly at odds.

Partly concealed by the sagas' narrative objectivity, an 'argument' about the function of authorship can nevertheless be identified, as we saw above in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. The argument, a tension between the authorial functions of preserving and interpreting poems, is less self-consciously incorporated in this writing than in other literatures,³⁰ but as I noted before it is evident enough for many scholars to have argued that the free-prose/book-prose debate is simplistic. For example, in a series of influential articles and a major treatment of *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Lars Lönnroth showed that, in the hands of a skilled saga author, it was possible to adapt oral traditions to serve as allegory and even political rhetoric.

Tradition and the demands of the public largely determine what should be in the house, and certain sections leave very little room for innovation. Other sections, however, and the overall design are left to the architect, even though he may often have to compromise his basic vision to make room for all the things which are felt to 'belong'. (Lönnroth 1976:39)

³⁰ See Andersson's position in *Icelandic Family Saga*, in which he writes that 'the saga comes very close to pure narrative without ulterior motive of any kind, much closer, for example, than the modern practitioners of objectivity, whose work is, after all, socially and philosophically loaded' (1967:32). Compare more recent scholarship by Andersson (for example, 1989: esp. 40, and 1994).

The architect is constrained by conventions and expectations, but liberated by counter-balancing functions: to be inventive and instructive. Set ideas about famous characters will limit creativity, as will traditions of form and style, not least the saga conceit of exteriority of narrative point of view. Sometimes, sagas even seem to be truthful in a “syncretic” way, the text apparently intended as a transparent document of past reality.³¹ In this sense, the sagas are documents of reality, the authorial functions chiefly those of recording and preserving historical material, including narratives, laws, genealogies, and poetry.

Thus, while we might say that the first function of saga authorship was to preserve information of the past, whereby the text has a quasi-legal, even constitutional character, this function was compatible with others with more openly interpretive elements. The settlement, the introduction of Christianity, and “the Icelanders’ self-identification as the custodians of their own and all Scandinavia’s traditional history and culture” (Clunies Ross 2000:117) motivated Icelanders to produce a large amount of literature with what appears to have had “an ordering, authoritative aim, one in which the country is viewed as an independent entity, a kingdom without a king” (Sørensen 2000:14). Historical writing was the means by which Iceland, in its religious and culturally self-conscious projects of preservation, came to be expressed and incorporated into useful narratives. Yet preservation coalesced with interpretive and educative aims — placing Icelandic history in the context of the Christianisation of Northern Europe, understanding the motivations of complex characters, and discerning changes in Icelandic society since its formation in the ninth century. Such aims often come to the fore during moments of *secondary authorship*.

³¹ Steblin-Kamenskij writes that ‘whoever reported syncretic truth about the past strove simultaneously for accuracy and for reproduction of reality in all its living fullness’ (1993:24). Attributing this approach to the past means looking beyond modern distinctions of fiction and truth. He writes that a ‘literary work is not something in and by itself, but something in which a certain interpretation is implicit. A work of conscious artistic invention is as a rule intended to be understood as artistic invention. But the family sagas obviously do not belong among such works....Fiction in the sagas is, so to speak, ‘latent’ fiction, fiction which the saga creators regarded as permissible, remaining within the limits of truth.’ (31)

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SUMMARY

'Reading for Saga Authorship. A Character-based Approach.'

Keywords: authorship, reading, audience.

The author's aim is to support the reading of saga authorship as a creative and interpretative act by connecting the methods and characters of the sagas use to present themselves and their world and the literary and historical aims of the saga authors, a link which is here labelled secondary authorship.

EFNISÁGRIP

Höfundur lýsir í þessari grein hvernig vinnulagi þeirra manna sem settu saman Íslendinga sögur er háttað og athugar hvort kalla megi þá höfunda í nútíma skilningi. Hann sýnir fram á með dæmum hvernig hugmyndir þeirra og lífs- og söguleg sýn birtast í sjálfum verkunum um leið og hann ræðir viðhorf bókmenntafræðinga nútímans, eins og t.d. Rolands Barthes og Michels Foucault til höfunda og lesenda og ber saman við hugmyndir þær sem koma fram í íslenskum miðaldabókmenntum.

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