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“SHOULD SHE TELL A STORY ...”

In Quest of Eiríkur Laxdal’s Poetics

I

IN 1987, A 200-YEAR-OLD work of fiction by Icelandic author Eiríkur Laxdal Eiríksson (1743–1816) was published for the first time. Titled *Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar* (*The Story of Ólafur Þórhallason*, hereafter referred to as *Ólafssaga*) it had previously been available only in manuscripts. It is the story of a young man who grows up in the northern part of Iceland but travels far and wide around the country, encountering outlaws and elves, among others, along the way. Tales of varying length told by some of the individuals Ólafur meets, primarily women, interrupt the story of his own travels. The result is an intricately layered tale, with many of the stories-within-the-story woven into the overarching narrative and affecting the reader’s understanding of it. Another prose work by Eiríkur, *Ólandssaga* (*Utopia*) preserved in a single manuscript and first made available in print in 2006, has a similarly complex structure.¹

Scholars placing Eiríkur’s writing within the context of literary history have generally taken one of three viewpoints. Some who encountered *Ólafssaga* in the nineteenth century and even later seem to have regarded it as a (rather poor) collection of Icelandic folk tales.² This view can be rep-

- 1 Þorsteinn Antonsson and María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir prepared both stories for publication. Þorsteinn’s afterwords to *Ólafssaga* and María Anna’s MA thesis about the book are the most thorough discussions of Eiríkur’s life and work, but they have also written extensively on *Ólandssaga*. See Þorsteinn Antonsson, “Höfundurinn og sagan,” in Eiríkur Laxdal, *Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar. Álfasagan mikla*, eds. Þorsteinn Antonsson and María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1987), 373–427; María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir, *Tveggja heima sýn. Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar og Þjóðsögurnar*, *Studia Islandica* 53 (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun, Háskóli Íslands, 1996); Þorsteinn Antonsson and María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir. *Útsýni til Ólands. Um uppruna, hugmyndir, viðhorf og sambengi Ólandssögu eftir Eirík Laxdal* (Reykjavík: Sagnasmíðjan, 2018).
- 2 See Þorsteinn Antonsson, “Höfundurinn og sagan,” 418–25; Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson, *Skáldsögur Jóns Thoroddsens*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Helgafellsútgáfan, 1942), 18.

resented by Guðbrandur Vigfússon's comments about Eiríkur's authorship in a foreword to Jón Árnason's 1861 folk tale collection:

He [Eiríkur] wrote down all the tales, both those he himself knew and those he was told, and gathered them into a large collection. But because the fellow was called a poet and said to be intelligent, even eccentric, he compiled all these stories together into one as he wished, inserting verses here and there, so that it is impossible to know what his own contribution is and what is folklore.³

Since the mid-twentieth century, however, Eiríkur's writing has generally been considered to mark the advent of the novel in Iceland.⁴ *Ólafssaga* has been viewed in this respect more positively than *Ólandssaga* and compared to various eighteenth-century European novels that describe intrepid travelers in unfamiliar lands. These include *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift, *Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum* (*Niels Klim's Underground Travels*, 1741) by Ludvig Holberg, and *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (*Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, 1796) by Denis Diderot.⁵ The third approach views *Ólafssaga* as a product of an

- 3 Guðbrandur Vigfússon, "Formáli að 1. útgáfu," *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri. Safnað hefur Jón Árnason*, vol. 2, eds. Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík: Bókaiútgáfan Þjóðsaga, 1954), xxxi. For an overview of the scholarly reception of Eiríkur Laxdal's life and works, in particular *Ólandssaga*, see Madita Knöpfle, "Conceptions of Authorship. The Case of Ármanns rímur and Their Reworkings in Early Modern Iceland," *In Search for the Culprit. Aspects of Medieval Authorship*, eds. Stefanie Gropper and Lukas Rösli (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2021), 252–60.
- 4 Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson laid the foundation for this view and claimed *Ólafssaga* and *Ólandssaga* marked "the advent of the Icelandic novel." He believed the former to be superior both in terms of structure and style. See Steingrímur J. Þorsteinsson, *Skáldsögur Jóns Thoroddsens*, 186.
- 5 See María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir, *Tveggja heima sýn*, 63, 137 and 239 and Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson, "Sagnagerð frá upplýsingu til raunsæis," *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 3, ed. Halldór Guðmundsson (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1996), 184–88. María Anna and Matthías also mention a few older novels such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605–1615). See also Örn Ólafsson, "Upplýsing í gegnum þjóðsögur. Um Ólafs sögu Þórhallasonar eftir Eirik Laxdal," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 60/2 (1999): 95–104. These scholars also mention an older Icelandic "novel," *Sagan af Parmes Loðinbirni* (*The Story of Parmes Polar Bear*), thought to have been written by Jón Bjarnason between 1756 and 1775 and inspired by the literary tradition associated with *Robinson Crusoe*.

ancient narrative tradition that falls somewhere between traditional folk tales and novels. The earliest adherent of this view is Einar Ól. Sveinsson, who pointed out in 1940 that foreign folk tale collections like *’Alf Laylah wa-Laylah* (*The Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Arabian Nights*) had probably shaped Eiríkur’s writing.⁶ It is important to note that any one of these views does not necessarily exclude the others. But although many scholars have concurred with Einar Ólafur, there has been little direct comparison of *Ólafssaga* to such classic works of literature.

Einar Ólafur explains that the narrative of *Ólafssaga* can be divided “into two parts, the frame [Ice. *umgerðir*] and the insertions [Ice. *ifellur*]. The latter are narratives about men and women who cross Ólafur’s path.”⁷ The two Icelandic literary concepts in the quotation correspond to various English terms describing layered narrative structures. These include *embedding/embedded narrative* and *nesting/nested narrative*, but narratologists also commonly refer to Chinese boxes and Russian dolls to explain this sort of storytelling technique. Such pieces reveal that the two literary terms do not describe opposite phenomena but rather two sides of the same phenomenon; each nested object, tucked inside a larger one, can serve as a nest for another object, and so on. Nested narratives can be found in the ancient Greek epic *Odyseús* (*The Odyssey*) but are also considered a conventional feature of postmodern literature.⁸ Furthermore, they are characteristic

- 6 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Um íslenzkar þjóðsögur* (Reykjavík: Sjóður Margrétar Lehmann-Fillhús, 1940), 103. See also Stefán Einarsson, *Íslensk bókmenntasaga 874–1960* (Reykjavík: Snæbjörn Jónsson, 1962), 269; Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson, “Sagnagerð frá upplýsingu til raunsæis,” 184; Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, “Íslensk og ólensk ævintýri,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 69/1 (2008): 131–35; Romina Werth, “Inngangur,” *Andlit á glugga. Úrval íslenskra þjóðsagna og ævintýra*, eds. Romina Werth and Jón Karl Helgason (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2021), 30. Some of these scholars also mention the influence of the story collection *Les mille et un jours* (*The Thousand and One Days*, 1710–1712), compiled by François Pétil de la Croix in the style of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Several Icelandic translations from *The Thousand and One Days* are preserved in eighteenth-century manuscripts. Cf. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, “Þúsund og einn dagur: Íslenzkar þýðingar og varðveizla þeirra,” (cand. mag. thesis, University of Iceland, 1972).
- 7 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Um íslenzkar þjóðsögur*, 108. The quotation is taken from the English translation of the study: Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The Folk-Stories of Iceland*, trans. Benedikt S. Benediktz (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), 128.
- 8 Numerous scholarly works address this narrative technique, including Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), 223–37; Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma

of various early Oriental narratives, including *Sindbād-nāmāh* (*The Seven Sages*), a story cycle which was originally written in Persian, Sanskrit, or Hebrew and reached Europe through Arabic, Greek, Latin, and finally French translations and rewritings. *The Seven Sages* became a widely popular text during the Middle Ages, influencing for example the legendary Icelandic saga *Egils saga einhenda og Ásmundar berserkjabana* (*The Story of Egil One-Hand and Asmund Berserker-Slayer*, 1300s).⁹

This article is devoted to the structure of *Ólafssaga*. The discussion is largely built around Tzvetan Todorov's writings on nested narratives in his collection of essays *Poétique de la prose* (*The Poetics of Prose*, 1971). In one of its early chapters, Todorov explains his approach by considering the difference between literary criticism and poetics, with regards to modern linguistics. The linguist's task, he explains, is not to interpret the meaning of individual sentences but rather to discover the rules and customs underlying the language system. Similarly, poetics as an academic discipline should not seek to judge or interpret individual works but rather to understand and explain literature as a form of expression and shed light on the structures and customs of literary creation. Todorov, who was influenced by Russian Formalists, admits that the danger with poetics is that its conclusions will be too general. On the other hand, he places little stock in literary criticism that merely aims to rearrange the text or restate the meaning of a particular literary work. Such an interpretation can dissolve "into the work-as-object to such a degree that it risks vanishing into it altogether."¹⁰ He believes it is best to find a happy medium between these two extremes so that the specific illuminates the general and vice versa. In most of the chapters in *The Poetics of Prose*, Todorov focuses on

Hughes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989); Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach. An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1987), 112–30.

9 See Gottskálf Þór Jensson, "Hvat liðr nú grautum, genta? Greek Storytelling in Jötunheimar," *Fornaldarsagornas Struktur och Ideologi. Handlingar från ett symposium i Uppsala 31.8–2.9 2001*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson, Annette Lassen, and Agneta Ney (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2003), 193. Lena Rohrbach points out that the embedded narratives in *Ólafssaga* are called "þættir" and compares them to "þættir" in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, such as *Flateyjarbók*. See Lena Rohrbach, "Subversive Incriptions. The Narrative Power of the Paratext in Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar," forthcoming in *Scandinavian Studies*.

10 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 35.

one or two literary works. Among these are *The Odyssey*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, and the medieval French story cycle *La Queste del Saint Graal* (*The Quest of the Holy Grail*), each of which shares common features with *Ólafssaga* and can shed light on Eiríkur Laxdal’s poetics.

II

In a chapter titled “Primitive Narrative,” Todorov critiques the widely held belief that traditional narrative literature is characterized by a simple style and structure that was tainted by later writers who succumbed to modernist trends and a growing demand for originality. Such a view assumes that a “natural” narrative is cohesive, serious, psychologically realistic, and free from contradiction, repetition, and digressions. Todorov struggles to see which older literary works this view is built upon and cites examples of contradictions, repetition, and digressions in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. This classical narrative is thought to have been composed in Greece in the eighth century BCE and was translated into Latin in 1510, into French a few decades later, and into English in the early seventeenth century. According to Todorov, *The Odyssey* has a dual narrative structure, with the hero having adventures and then telling people he encounters along his journey about those adventures. This aspect is so prominent that Todorov is uncertain “which of the two is the main character,” the hero Odysseus or the narrator Odysseus.¹¹

To give an idea of the structure of *The Odyssey* we can consider three of its early chapters. In Book VII, Odysseus arrives at the palace of Alcinoüs on the island of Scheria and begins to recount the treacherous voyage he undertook to get there from Ogygia. In Book VIII, an unnamed bard in the king’s court entertains Odysseus by singing “the famous deeds of fighting heroes – the song whose fame had reached the skies those days: The Strife Between Odysseus and Achilles, Peleus’ Son.”¹² The song affects Odysseus so deeply that he sheds tears. He regains the role of narrator in Book IX, when he begins telling the king about his travels from Troy to Ogygia:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Roger Fagles (New York, London, Victoria, Toronto, Auckland: Viking, 1996), 193–94.

Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people,
 what a fine thing it is to listen to such a bard
 as we have here [...]. But now
 you're set on probing the bitter pains I've borne,
 so I'm to weep and grieve, it seems, still more.
 Well then, what shall I go through first,
 what shall I save for last?
 What pains – the gods have given me my share.
 Now let me begin by telling you my name ...
 so you may know it well [...]¹³

Odysseus poses here a fundamental question of all narration: “[W]hat shall I go through first, what shall I save for last?” If we list the events in question, using letters to represent chronological order and numbers to represent the order in which the events are presented, we can see that the two are not aligned: A2: Odysseus’ conflict with Achilles; B4: Odysseus travels from Troy to Ogygia; C3: Odysseus travels from Ogygia to Scheria; D1: Odysseus tells Alcinous about his travels and listens to the bard. Todorov’s conclusion is that *The Odyssey* is “a narrative of narratives; it consists of the relation of the narratives the characters address to each other.”¹⁴ By repeatedly recounting past events, the text demands that the reader converts plot into story, turns *syuzhet* into *fabula*, to borrow the terminology of the Formalists.¹⁵

Like *The Odyssey*, *Ólafssaga* is a third-person narrative describing the travails of a hero journeying from one place to another but also featuring nested stories in which individual characters recall past events. At the outset, we are told that Ólafur is a teenager and his father Þórhalli rather advanced in age. The latter is planning to send Ólafur out to round up a herd of sheep that have not returned to their farm, but he starts by telling his son about his own past, emphasizing his dealings with German merchants. After listening to his father’s story, Ólafur sets out on his search and soon comes upon a large cave. Deep inside it he discovers a great dwelling, where he is greeted by the beautiful elf woman Þórhildur. She

13 *Ibid.*, 211–12.

14 Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 61.

15 Todorov discusses these concepts further in a chapter titled “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” *ibid.*, 45.

starts telling Ólafur where her people come from and later of her parents' courtship, her own birth, the loss of her mother, and her father's madness, which is the result of a curse. After listening to the tale, Ólafur helps Þórhildur break that curse. She thanks him and offers him her assistance should he ever find himself in trouble. After that, Ólafur heads home with the sheep. Numerous other nested stories interrupt the primary storyline in subsequent chapters.

Unlike Odysseus, Ólafur seldom takes on the role of narrator, but it is sometimes noted that he tells others what has happened to him in previous chapters. A good example is from Ólafur's first encounter with the elf woman Álfhildur who asks him “að segja sér allt af högum hans síðan hann tók að leita fjár föður síns. Tók hann til frá upphafi og sagði söguna þar sem hér var komið, snjallt og áheyrilega, og undraði flesta.” (“to tell her all that has befallen him since he began searching for his father's sheep. He started at the beginning and recounted the story up to the present moment, with great skill, to the wonder of many.”)¹⁶ Furthermore, the third-person narrator of *Ólafssaga* occasionally implies that the work is based on Ólafur's own account. Describing his departure, the narrator explains, for instance: “Litast þá Ólafur um og sá að sól skein í heiði, og hefir hann svo síðan sagt að hann hafi þá tvo hluti fegursta séð: plássíð, í hverju hann var staddur, og Álfhildi, er stóð fyrir framan hann.” (“Ólafur looked around and saw that the sun shone in a cloudless sky, and he has since said that he saw then two of the most beautiful things: the place where he stood, and Álfhildur, who stood before him”, 48) Considering these examples, *Ólafssaga*, just like *The Odyssey*, can be described as a narrative of narratives, a work of fiction that “speaks its own creation.”¹⁷

III

Todorov continues discussing nested narratives in the chapter “Narrative-Men.” At the outset, he explains how characterization in classic works of literature is *a-psychological*. In *The Odyssey* and *The Thousand and One*

16 Eiríkur Laxdal, *Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar. Álfasagan mikla*, eds. Þorsteinn Antonsson and María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1987), 41. All quotations from *Ólafssaga* are translated by Julie Summers. For the rest of the article, I will refer to this source in the main text with page numbers within brackets.

17 *Ibid.*, 61.

Nights, he explains, there is a simple and logical connection between an individual's character and actions. There is rarely any attempt made to explain why one person is brave and another a coward. The characterization is primarily built on one person telling his or her personal story to another person. This clarifies why the works in question are structured the way they are:

The appearance of a new character invariably involves the interruption of the preceding story, so that a new story, the one which explains the “now I am here” of the new character, may be told to us. A second story is enclosed within the first; this device is called *embedding*.¹⁸

Todorov explains that this sort of interruption to the narrative is analogous to subordinate clauses, using this complex German sentence to illustrate his point: “Derjenige, der den Mann, der den Pfahl, der auf der Brücke, der auf dem Weg, der nach Worms führt, liegt, steht, umgeworfen hat, anzeigt, bekommt eine Belohnun.”¹⁹ The first few chapters of *Ólafssaga* can be illustrated in a similar manner: “Ólafur, who listened to his father describe his interactions with German merchants, met Þórhildur, who claimed her parents were under a spell, when he was looking for his father's sheep.”

In the chapter in question, Todorov primarily focuses on the structure of *The Thousand and One Nights*, a large story collection thought to have been compiled in eighth-century Persia or India, though parts of it date much further back.²⁰ A French reworking of the Arabic version was published in France at the start of the eighteenth century, and its influence quickly spread throughout Europe. An English translation was published in 1714; a Danish translation followed in 1745; and pieces from these were translated into Icelandic in Eiríkur Laxdal's day.²¹ Like *Ólafssaga*, *The Thousand and One Nights* is a third-person narrative, but most of the stories presented are embedded within the frame story of Shahrazād's conver-

18 *Ibid.*, 70.

19 *Ibid.*, 71.

20 On the complex history of *The Thousand and One Nights* and its reception in the West see Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights. A Companion* (London and Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2005).

21 Cf. Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, “Middle Eastern Tales in Icelandic Tradition,” *Narrative Culture* 10/1 (2023): 151–73.

sation with her husband, the jealous King Shahryār. Each time he marries, he has his new young bride killed at the end of the wedding night to ensure that she will not betray him. Every morning, to save herself from this fate, Shahrazād tells Shahryār a tale so exciting that he stays the execution until the following night. In this way, she prolongs her life one day at a time. She is careful not to end any story without promising another, but she also employs the technique of having a character in one story tell another story, giving her husband even more reason to let her live.

Among the embedded stories Todorov examines is “The Tale of the Hunchback.” Here, Shahrazād tells her husband of a group of four men – a broker, a steward, a doctor, and a tailor – suspected of having killed the titular character, who in fact choked on a fish bone. The sultān, after having listened with great skepticism to the four men describing their dealings with the deceased man, decides to have them all executed unless they can tell him a more spectacular story than the tale he has already heard of the hunchback’s fate. The strongest effort comes from the tailor, who claims that two days earlier, he was at a feast where he met a lame man who told the gathered guests about his unpleasant interactions with a barber, who was also present at the feast. When the lame man finishes his account, the barber describes events from his perspective, reporting that he had gone to the court of the khalīfah and told him a series of stories about his six brothers. In each of the barber’s stories, the brother in question has his own things to say. For instance, the fifth brother, al-Ashār, is accused of theft and multiple murders but saves his life by telling the walī (district governor) “all his adventures from beginning to end.”²² At this stage, we have encountered five narrative layers in *The Thousand and One Nights*:

The third-person narrator tells us that ...

Shahrazād tells Shahryār that ...

a tailor tells a sultān that ...

a *barber* tells party guests that ...

he (the barber) has told a khalīfah that ...

al-Ashār has told the walī “all his adventures.”

22. *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, trans. Powys Mathers, vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 352.

From this point on, the stories are completed one at a time, just like the subordinate clauses in the German sentence Todorov cited. But there is also a sort of short circuit between the surrounding nest and the nested story within. When the tailor finishes his tale, the sultān summons the barber to his court. The barber manages to remove the fish bone from the throat of the hunchback, who turns out to be alive. By telling his story, the tailor saves his own life as well as the lives of his three companions, and Shahrazād once again succeeds in extending her life by at least a few more nights. It's no wonder that the characters in *The Thousand and One Nights* are constantly telling one another stories, says Todorov, since "narrating equals living."²³ Additionally, he underlines that "embedding is an articulation of the most essential property of all narrative. For the embedding narrative is the *narrative of narrative*. By telling the story of another narrative, the first narrative achieves its fundamental theme and at the same time is reflected in this image of itself."²⁴

Ólafssaga contains one intricately woven narrative akin to that of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The third-person narrator describes Ólafur's journey traveling south over the vast expanse of Arnarvatnsheiði, where he passes by a farm in an unfamiliar valley. A middle-aged housewife, Ingibjörg, welcomes Ólafur and invites him inside, where he meets her husband Dvalinn and their teenage daughter, Sólrún. Dvalinn scowls when he sees the guest, predicting that he will bring harm to the family, but Sólrún entertains her father to show Ólafur kindness. For her part, she undresses and lies down beside Ólafur. But when he begins to caress her, she implores him:

[...] ekki spilla meydómi sínum því að hún hefði ekki gjört þetta af nokkrum holds- eður lostatilfinningum – „heldur gjörði ég það til að firra bæði föður minn og þig vandræðum því að ég veit að faðir minn gjörir þér ekkert mein svo lengi sem ég er hjá þér.“

Ólafur spyr hverslags fólk þetta sé en hún lést mundi birta honum sannleikann ef hann gjörði hennar vilja. „Vil ég því segja þér Þáttinn af Ólafi Hrólfsyni og Dvalin, syni hans (184).²⁵

23 Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 73.

24 *Ibid.*, 72.

25 Lena Rohrbach highlights how, in the manuscript of *Ólafssaga* (as in the 1987 edition), some

(...) not to spoil her of her maidenhead, for she had not done it out of any desire of the flesh – “I did it to keep you and my father from trouble, for I know my father will not do you any harm as long as I am by your side.”

Ólafur asks what sort of folk they are, and she says she will tell him the truth if he honors her wish. “I will tell you

The tale of Ólafur Hrólfsson and Dvalinn, his son.)

Here, narration takes the place of intimate relations and possibly also saves Ólafur’s life.

Sólrun begins by telling the story of Ásdís, who was forced to marry the widowed farmer Grímur. One day, Grímur’s mother Herdís sees her daughter-in-law crying and asks what is troubling her. Ásdís answers: “Með því ég hefi reynt þig að tryggri konu vil ég segja þér fylgjandi sögu, jafnvel þó hún sé mér ekki viðkomandi, og máttu þar af marka að margir hafa sorg að bera þó ekki sé sem mín sorg.” (“Because I have proven myself loyal to you, I will tell you the following story, although it does not concern me, and you will see that many people have sorrow to bear, though not like mine.” 186) The story is about a girl whose father sends her out to his farm’s shieling. One day, while she’s alone, a boy approaches her and asks her to give him some milk for his dying mother. The farmer’s daughter follows the boy to a small cave where his mother is lying ill. After she has been revived by the milk, the farmer’s daughter asks her “hvornin hún væri komin í slíkar ánauðir” (“how she came to be in such a situation”, 186). The mother answers by telling the story of the farmer Steinn and his daughter Steinunn, who is in her thirties and still living with her parents, though many suitors have asked for her hand in marriage. Steinn comes close to forcing Steinunn to marry but ends up reconsidering as his daughter is a headstrong creature. Interrupting her own narrative, the sick mother acknowledges that she is telling her own story.

of the nested narratives are framed by paratextual designations: “The vast majority of the in total 243 chapters in the saga are introduced with chapter headings stating only the number of the chapter [...]. Ten chapters have however a second heading that notifies the following as þáttur [...]. These chapters are introduced with initials in Fraktur that are considerably larger and more decorated than the other chapter initials, and most of the time the headings are also written in a larger Fraktur script.” See Lena Rohrbach, “Subversive Inscriptions.”

[...] þegar hún var átján vetra var það nokkurt kvöld *að ég var ein úti stödd – því að ég er síu sama sem ég nú frá segi –*, kom maður nokkur til mín ókenndur og bað mig veita sér brautargengi, sér lægi þar mikið við, og gjörði ég sem hann bað og kom í jarðgryfju nokkra eður hól sem var holur innan. Lá þar kona á gólfi og skyldi ég sitja yfir henni; stóð ekki lengi þar á því strax eftir að ég kom fæddi hún fagurt sveinbarn sem þó strax deyði eftir fæðinguna.

Var ég þar nokkurn tíma í allgóðu eftirlæti.

Maður nokkur var þar sem var unglegur að aldri, hér um bil tvítugur. Hann var sonur hjónanna og hét hann Hrólfur. Hann var fríður maður að ásýnd og leit hýru auga til mín strax þegar og ég engu síður til hans; og kviknaði með okkur ástarþokki og óx hann þó síðar meir. (emphasis added, 187)

([...] one evening when she was 18 winters old, *I was alone outside – for it is I whose story I now tell –*, a strange man came to me and asked for my assistance with something of utmost importance to him, and I did as he asked and came to an underground hollow. A woman lay there on the ground, and I was meant to care for her; I was not there long before she delivered a beautiful baby boy, but he died immediately after the birth.

I was there for quite some time taking care of her.

The man was youthful, perhaps twenty. He was the couple's son and was called Hrólfur. He was an attractive man to behold and was immediately fond of me, and I no less of him; there was a spark of love between us that was to grow even greater.)

At this point, we can have encountered four narrative layers in *Ólafssaga* but also observed that there is a short circuit between at least two of them. When Ásdís concludes the story of Steinunn, we discover yet another short circuit: Ásdís admits to Herdís that she is in fact the farmer's daughter who visited Steinunn at her sick bed.

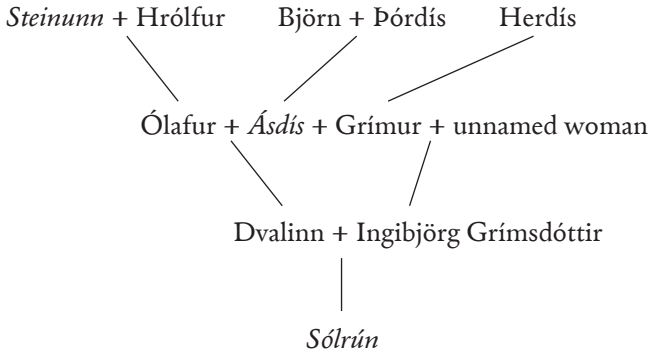
The third-person narrator tells us that...

Sólrún tells Ólafur that...

Ásdís tells Herdís that...

Steinunn has told *her* (a farmer’s daughter/Ásdís) that...
she (Steinunn) and Hrólfur fell in love.

When Sólrún finishes her story, it furthermore becomes clear that she, Ásdís, and Steinunn all belong to different generations of the same family and that Dvalinn and Ingibjörg are stepsiblings. This revelation requires the reader to radically rearrange and reevaluate the information that’s been presented, not only to turn *syuzhet* into *fabula* but also to construct the narrators’ family tree.



The difference between plot and story in “The Tale of Ólafur Hrólfsson and Dvalinn, his son” can be illustrated, as before, by using letters to represent chronological order and numbers to represent the order in which the events are represented: A6-B5-C7-D2-E8-F4-G9-H3-I10-J1-K11 (see appendix for more). The narration is spurred by Ólafur Þórhallason’s curiosity as to “what sort of folk” are hosting him in their home. To borrow from Todorov’s terminology, the plot can be described as Sólrún, Ásdís, and Steinunn’s interwoven “now I am here” accounts.

Furthermore, it is frequently implied in *Ólafssaga* that storytelling is a means to salvation. This can be clearly seen when Herdís encourages Ásdís to tell of her woes: “því gjörðir þú svo mundi kannske nokkur léttir á henni verða og þú fáir einhverja bót þá sem þér er hulin meðan þú talar ekkert

þar um, því að alltið verður (mönnum léttara eftir) það sem er opinberan og hafa menn þó nokkra huggun af því að um hana sé talað” (“for if you would do so, the burden might feel lighter and you might feel some sense of relief, as you are hidden as long as you do not talk about it, for a man always feels relief when what was in darkness is brought out into the light and finds comfort in knowing it is being discussed” 186). The same point is highlighted again when Ásdís finishes her narration: “Vegvísaði hún þessari sinni sögusögn með svo margföldum tárur að Herdís sýndist þau nær óstillandi, grét hún þá með og það því meira sem Herdís þurfti huggunar með af Ásdísi. Og gladdist Ásdís þá svo mjög að hún missti helming harms síns.” (“Her tale was punctuated by so many tears that they seemed to Herdís nearly uncontrollable. She joined Ásdís in weeping and wept so much that she needed Ásdís to comfort her as well. And Ásdís was so greatly cheered that her sorrow diminished by half.” 190–91)

IV

The third classic work of literature Todorov discusses in his book is *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, which was compiled by an unknown author in thirteenth-century France but remained unpublished until the mid-nineteenth century. The relevant chapter, titled “The Quest of Narrative,” is to some extent inspired by the writing of medieval historian Albert Pauphilet. Here, Todorov points out that in the medieval French text, stories of the knights’ travels and dreams are often interpreted by hermits or monks, adding that they are comparable to theologians who provide typological interpretations of the Bible. “One half of the text deals with adventures, the other with the text which describes them,” writes Todorov.²⁶

Todorov gives the example of Sir Gawain’s vision of a herd of bulls grazing. Three of them were “coupled together at the neck by strong, unyielding yokes. The bulls exclaimed in a body: ‘Let us go farther afield to seek out better pasture!’”²⁷ Sir Gawain asks a holy man to interpret the dream for him, and the man says the herd represents the knights of the round table and the bull’s words refer to the knights’ decision to set out in

26 Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 123.

27 *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, trans. P. M. Matarasso (Middlesex, Baltimore, Victoria: Penguin, 1969), 164.

search of the Holy Grail. Although these wise figures clearly have knowledge that the knights lack, their interpretations are somewhat ambiguous and even contradictory. In one of the tales about Lancelot, the color black is interpreted as symbolizing sin, but in one of Bors' dreams, black represents the church and, therefore, virtue. Things are further complicated when the devil appears in the guise of a priest and presents an interpretation of the color black that is explicitly intended to confuse Bors. To some extent, Todorov explains, "the quest of the Grail is the quest of a code. To find the Grail is to learn how to decipher the divine language."²⁸

Another narrative feature Todorov discusses in this context are prophecies, which are a familiar feature of folk tales and also appear in other types of texts. "Thus Circe, or Calypso, or Athena predicts to Odysseus what will happen to him," observes Todorov in his discussion of *The Odyssey*, adding that at times Odysseus even predicts his own future.²⁹ Prophecies are also a common feature in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* and often appear in the form of spells that are contingent on positive or negative conditions: "If X does this or that thing, then this or that will happen (to him)."³⁰ Such spells essentially provide a formula for the plot, indicating to the readers ahead of time what the hero will do, even if he has some limited choices (breaking a spell, for instance). But with each page of *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, even these options dwindle. Todorov specifically focuses on the adventures of Galahad. While the other knights are more like traditional folk tale characters, whose ultimate triumph is not assured, it is clear early on that Galahad is the good knight who will overcome every obstacle in his path and see the quest of the Holy Grail through to the end. Stories about him become so predictable that they revolve less around the question of "What will happen next?" than the question of "What is the meaning of the Grail?". Todorov sees a persistent tug-of-war between these two questions in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* and clarifies that they are at play in most literary works and can even shed light on different literary genres:

The two fundamental types of detective story, the mystery and the adventure, illustrate these same two points. In the first case, the

²⁸ Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 129.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

story is given in the very first pages, but it is incomprehensible. A crime is committed almost before our eyes, but we do not know its true agents nor the real motives. The investigation consists in returning to the same events over and over, checking and correcting the slightest details, until at the end the truth breaks out with regard to this same initial history. In the second case there is no mystery, no backward turn. Each event provokes another, and the interest we take in the story does not come from our expectations of a revelation as to the initial *données*; it is the expectation of their consequences which sustains the suspense.³¹

Ólafssaga contains quite a few instances of the same events being described more than once and from different points of view. Lena Rohrbach has specifically addressed this feature in an article about paratextual elements of *Ólafssaga*, but she finds few examples of it in early Icelandic literature.³² However, various classic works present multiple points of view. We need only recall “The Little Hunchback” from *The Thousand and One Nights*, where the lame man and the barber describe their conflict in different ways. But if we stay with *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, we can see that Ólafur, just like the knights of the round table, takes part in a series of events of which he himself has only a limited understanding. The elf women in the story must repeatedly explain to him what has *really* taken place.³³ They also predict what will happen to him in the future, and it sometimes becomes clear later that at the root of what has happened is an enchantment or curse of which Ólafur himself was unaware. Consequently, there are many places in the narrative where one can identify the tug-of-war between the two questions Todorov discusses; the story variably focuses on the road ahead and on the road already traveled. This is clearly illustrated by a trial scene of *Ólafssaga* in which Ólafur finds himself facing a possible death sentence. The court case evokes some of

31 *Ibid.*, 136.

32 Rohrbach mentions *Sálus saga ok Nikanórs* as one of few exceptions. Lena Rohrbach. “Subversive Inscriptions.”

33 Cf. Lena Rohrbach, “Weibliche Stimmen – männliche Sicht. Rekalibrierungen von Gender und Genre in der Ólafs saga Þórhallasonar,” *Þáttasýrpa. Studien zu Literatur, Kultur und Sprache in Nordeuropa. Festschrift for Stefanie Gropper*, eds. Anna Katharina Heiniger, Rebecca Merkelbach, and Alexander Wilson, *Beiträge zur Nordischen Philologie* 72 (Tübingen: Francke 2022), 257–65.

his earlier dealings with the elves, and it is hence useful to trace them in some detail.

After bringing his father's sheep back home, early in the story, Ólafur sails to the island of Drangey, where he has an affair with the elf woman Álfgerður. He ends up killing her foster father in self-defense and is completely beside himself as a result. Þórhalli, concerned about his son, decides to send him once again to Þórhildur, who is in Ólafur's debt. She declares that Álfgerður is responsible for his turmoil and decides to send him to seek help from Álfhildur, along with a message and a ring. Álfhildur reads the message and seems ready to turn Ólafur away but changes her mind when he gives her the ring and decides to take him as her husband. Furthermore, she confirms that Álfgerður had cast a love spell on Ólafur: “verður þér með engu bjargað nema þú hafir samræði með þeirri konu sem yfirgangi í dyggðum Álfgerðar vonsku. En svo bjó hún í hag fyrir þig að Þórhildur í Þórhildardal kynni þér ekki að hjálpa, [...] og því hefi ég það til ráðs tekið, sem mönnum er kunnugt.” (“nothing will save you unless you make love to a woman whose virtue exceeds Álfgerður's wickedness. And the spell was cast such that Þórhildur of Þórhildardalur Valley would be unable to help you [...] and that is the reason that I have done what I have done.” 41) Moreover, Álfhildur tells Ólafur a nested story of Álfgerður's past, painting a deeply unpleasant picture of her. Reportedly, Álfgerður was falsely accused of licentiousness in her early years, which resulted in her turning from virtue to vice. Álfhildur explains: “Hingað til hafði hún elskað hreinlyndi og hreinlífi en nú tók hún fyrir sig fláttskap og undirferli; gjörðist þar hjá en versta og líðilegasta skækja og æfði sig þannin í öllum ódyggðum að hennar líki hefir síðan trautt fundist.” (“Before, she had loved honesty and chastity, but she now grew cunning and deceitful, became the worst, foulest harlot and practiced the ugliest vices that it has hardly been possible to find her equal.” 46)

Within a year, Álfhildur gives birth to Ólafur's daughter. Still, she decides to send him on a journey to the south of Iceland, out of Álfgerður's immediate reach. Álfhildur claims that he must stay away for three years, “og mun þú í nógar þrautir komast og það af ráðum Álfgerðar og mun þú þær þó allar vel yfirvinna” (“and you will encounter many troubles sent by Álfgerður but will overcome them all” 54). This prediction comes true, and then some, because Ólafur ends up engaged to a mortal woman. When

Álfhildur and Ólafur next cross paths, she is so shocked by this news that she dies. As a result, her father-in-law takes Ólafur to the elf court, accusing him of having manipulated Álfhildur with the ring he gave her, “sem með sinni náttúru orkaði því að hún gat ekki annað en gjört hans vilja þegar hún hafði hann meðtekið” (“which by its very nature made it impossible, once she had accepted it, for her to do anything but acquiesce to his will” 165). At this point, Álfhildur’s half-sister, Góðhjálp, shows up and promises to help Ólafur. Her name (literally meaning “good help”) underlines that she, just like the hermits in *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, has knowledge that the hero of the story lacks. Góðhjálp informs Ólafur that Álfhildur’s stepmother had declared that the latter “skyldi fá sinn dauða vegna unnusta síns sem nú er orðin vegna þín” (“should meet her death because of her betrothed, as has now happened because of you” 136). Once again, Ólafur discovers that things are not as they seem.

Góðhjálp enlists a solicitor to defend Ólafur in court. During the trial, he underlines that Ólafur did not know why Þórhildur sent him to Álfhildur and was aware of neither the nature of the ring nor the contents of the message. The solicitor then reads the message aloud. That text can be considered yet another nested narrative in *Ólafssaga*, as it supplements the description of Ólafur and Álfhildur’s initial meeting. In the message, Þórhildur asks Álfhildur to save Ólafur, who is lusting after Álfgerður of Drangey. Þórhildur appeals specifically to Álfhildur’s own good nature and feminine desire: “Hann er dauðans maður. Hví skal honum ekki bjargast? Hans líf og heilsa stendur á yðar valdi. Oft falaðan girndargrip sendi ég yður nú. Þér vitið að brúka hann og þegja og vænti ég nú náðar af yðar náð.” (“He is a dead man. Why should he not be saved? His life and health are in your hands. I am sending you a greatly desirable object. You know how to use it and keep quiet, and I expect you to show mercy.” 167) The message proves that Álfhildur was fully aware of the consequences of accepting the ring. Regarding Ólafur’s responsibility for Álfhildur’s death, the solicitor points out that he had been under her stepmother’s spell and that polygamy is allowed among the elves. In the end, Ólafur is acquitted.

But the quest for the truth about Ólafur’s interaction with the elf women does not end there. As in classic detective mysteries, Eiríkur Laxdal’s poetics entails “returning to the same events over and over, checking and correcting the slightest details, until at the end the truth breaks out with

regard to this same initial history.”³⁴ The most powerful twist comes when Álfgerður of Drangey finds an opportunity to tell Ólafur the whole story from her point of view. By her own account, she has fallen victim to slander, to the evil spells cast by her own stepmother, and to Ólafur’s unreliability, as he has placed his faith in Þórhildur and Álfhildur’s rumors about her. Álfgerður criticizes him especially harshly for this last point, “því að þegar þú fannst og reyndir að ég elskaði þig byrjaði þér að gjöra sama við mig og gegna ekki annarra mælgí. Því að hverjum skyldir þú betur trúá en sjálfum þér?” (“for when you came to see that I loved you, you began to do the same, ignoring the words of others. For whom should you be better able to believe than yourself?” 329). Furthermore, Álfgerður reveals that she herself wrote the message that Þórhildur asked Ólafur to take to Álfhildur in the first place and is, consequently, largely responsible for everything that has happened so far. At this point in the story, Ólafur has married Þórhildur, who is pregnant with his child. Shortly thereafter, it is revealed that she has gone into labor too early and delivered a stillborn child, probably due to her own carelessness. Now Þórhildur is taken to court, facing a death sentence.

A fair share of the characters in *Ólafssaga* turn out to be under magic spells and therefore hardly acting of their own accord or fully responsible for their own actions. Both Álfhildur and Álfgerður are trying to break the spells cast by their stepmothers, and that struggle shapes their interaction with Ólafur.³⁵ For most of the story, he believes that he is under Álfgerður’s spell, but this turns out to be only partially true. In the end, Álfgerður is acquitted of willful wrongdoing. In her place, Þórhildur ends up being the primary culprit of the story, with Ólafur coming in at a close

34 Todorov. *The Poetics of Prose*, 136.

35 The “stepmother-and-casting-of-spells-motif” is, as Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir has underlined, exceptionally common in Icelandic fairy tales (mainly collected in the nineteenth century) and can at least partially be traced back to medieval Icelandic literature. The connection between Icelandic stepmother-tales and *Ólafssaga* is briefly addressed by María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir, primarily in view of Eiríkur Laxdal’s biography, but this is a topic worthy of further attention. Cf. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “Stjúpur í vondu skapi,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 55/3 (1995): 25–36; Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “Enchantment and Anger in Medieval Icelandic Literature and Later Folklore,” *Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination*, eds. Bernd-Christian Otto and Dirk Johannsen (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 68–90; María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir, *Tveggja heima sýn*, 249–52.

second for foolishly taking her at her word and believing Álfhildur's slander. Just as in the medieval French legends, or a typical detective mystery, additional information is revealed throughout the narrative, forcing readers to continually reevaluate how they perceive individual characters and events.

V

In her fundamental 2006 study, *Tveggja heima sýn* (*View of Two Worlds*), María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir examines how Eiríkur Laxdal recycles various Icelandic folk tales in *Ólafssaga*.³⁶ She highlights, however, that while the work is “firmly rooted in the oral storytelling tradition, it concurrently bears clear marks of the author distancing himself from that tradition.”³⁷ That same year, Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson writes in a history of Icelandic literature that while *Ólafssaga* is “on the border between oral and written narrative techniques,” the author manages to “weave a cohesive story out of the contradictions of his own day and age.”³⁸ Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson makes a similar claim in a recent history of Icelandic literature, as does Lena Rohrbach in her article about paratextual elements of *Ólafssaga*.³⁹ Margrét Eggertsdóttir makes even a stronger claim in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, also from 2006, when she argues that Eiríkur Laxdal was not only an original writer but in fact “far ahead of his contemporaries [...]. The character of Ólafur is like characters in modern or postmodern literature [...] fractured and self-contradictory.”⁴⁰

In this article, *Ólafssaga* has been analyzed from a different point of view. When the content, structure, and characterization of the work

36 María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir *Tveggja heima sýn*, 143–234.

37 *Ibid.*, 242.

38 Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson, “Sagnagerð frá upplýsingu til raunsæis,” 184.

39 Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, “Leiðin til nútímans,” *Íslenskar bókmenntir. Saga og sambengi*, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2022), 452; Lena Rohrbach, “Subversive Inscriptions.”

40 Margrét Eggertsdóttir, “From Reformation to Enlightenment,” *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy Neijmann, *Histories of Scandinavian Literature*, vol. 5. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 249–50. María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir similarly compares Eiríkur's work to twentieth-century modern and post-modern novels by Thor Vilhjálmsson and Lawrence Durrell. See María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir, *Tveggja heima sýn*, 42 and 53.

are considered, it can be seen as part of a centuries-long literary tradition of layered narratives that focus on storytelling. The three classic works that have been presented here are all “on the border between oral and written narrative techniques.” Plenty of other classical works featuring nested narratives could have been examined in that context, such as Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decamerone* (*The Decameron*, 1348–1353), Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387–1400), and Snorri Sturluson’s “Gylfaginning” in *Snorra Edda* (*The Prose Edda*, c. 1220–1230).⁴¹ European writers continued producing extended narratives in this tradition throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Such works have been labeled *novel cycles* or *novel streams* (Fr. *roman-fleuve*) in France, one of the earliest examples being *L’Astrée* (*Astree*, 1607–1627) by Honoré d’Urfé.⁴² Published in five volumes, it contains a multitude of digressions held together by the main story of the love between shepherdess Astrée and shepherd Céladon. Interesting novel cycles from Eiríkur Laxdal’s day include Jan Potocki’s *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* (*The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, 1805) and Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).⁴³

Before we part with *Ólafssaga*, it is tempting to take one final look at *The Poetics of Prose*. Todorov points out that although *The Quest of the Holy Grail* largely revolves around interpreting the meaning of the Grail in light of Christian theology, no definitive answer is ever given. He rejects the theory, espoused by Pauphilet and other scholars, that the Grail represents God himself. Todorov claims that according to medieval thinkers, God would never reveal himself to mankind through secular literature. Hence, he suggests that the quest of the Holy Grail is not only a quest for a code or meaning but also a quest for a story that can communicate that which

41 Cf. Jón Karl Helgason, “Omkring Snorres poetikk. Skaldskapens rolle i Vafþrúðnismál og Snorra Edda,” *Snorres Edda i Europeisk og Islandsk kultur*, ed. Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (Reykholt: Snorrastofa, 2009), 107–30.

42 María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir mentions *Astree* in a footnote in her discussion about the structure of *Ólafssaga* without discussing in detail the possible connection between the works. See María Anna Þorsteinsdóttir, *Tveggja heima sýn*, 242. See also Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, “Íslensk og ólensk ævintýri,” 133. Additional interesting Italian titles from this period are *Le piacevoli notti* (*The Facetious Nights*, 1550) by Giovanni Francesco Straparola and the seventeenth-century *Il Pentamerone* (*The Pentamerone*, 1634–1636) by Giambattista Basile. See Romina Werth, “Inngangur,” 15–16.

43 In the chapter “Narrative Men,” Todorov briefly compares *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* to *The Thousand and One Nights*. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 70–71.

cannot be communicated: “Thereby narrative appears as the fundamental theme of *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (as it is of all narrative, but always in a different way).”⁴⁴

Can we apply this view to *Saga Ólafs Þórhallasonar*? Much of what has been presented in this article would seem to suggest so. According to *Ólafssaga*, we are destined to tell and listen to stories, and this can be both a blessing and a curse, as can be seen when Þórhildur and Ólafur run into each other near the very end of the story. The elf woman accuses her ex-husband of having scorned her, and she intends to take revenge by casting a final spell on him.

[...] sjálfur skaltu verða fátækur, félaus og fyrirlitinn af öllum. Við það skaltu búa allan þinn aldur nema þú fáir óspillta mætur sem ekki er yngri en seytján vetra, vel efnaða, fríða og góðsama, hverri þú skalt fram lesa allt hvað þú hefir séð og heyrt. Vilji hún þá og geti sagt þér aðra eins sögu af yfirjarðarfólki og þú hefir sagt henni af álfafólki og gangi þar til að eiga þig skal þér hólpíð verða, annars ekki. (365)

([...] you yourself shall be poor, destitute, and scorned by all. Thus shall you live out the rest of your days, unless you find an unspoiled maiden no younger than seventeen winters, well-to-do, attractive, and good, to whom you shall recount all that you have seen and heard. Should she tell a story of mortals like the one you have told of the elves, and should she agree to be your bride, only then shall you be safe.)

“Should she tell a story ... only then shall you be safe.” It seems particularly fitting that Eiríkur Laxdal’s inspired work of fiction concludes with a prophecy of yet another cycle of stories and storytelling.⁴⁵

Translated from Icelandic by Julie Summers

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁵ I would like to thank Julie Summers for translating the article from Icelandic into English. I also would also like to thank Lena Rohrbach, Romina Werth, anonymous peer reviewers and the editors of *Gripla* for their valuable suggestions.

APPENDIX

ORDER OF EVENTS IN “THE TALE OF ÓLAFUR
HRÓLFSSON AND DVALINN, HIS SON”

Below, events of this nested narrative of *Ólafssaga* are labeled with letters corresponding to chronological order and numbers indicating the order in which they are described.

- A6. Steinunn, the daughter of Elín and Steinn, is 18 years old when she is visited by an elf man. She goes with him to an underground hollow and helps his wife deliver a son, who dies. The elf couple’s older son, Hrólfur, escorts her back.
- B5. When Steinunn is 34 years old, she does not want to marry any suitor.
- C7. Hrólfur makes off with Steinunn. Her parents search but do not find her. She and Hrólfur have nine children. Steinunn is 58 when she gives birth to Ólafur.
- D2. Ásdís is born and grows up with her parents, Björn and Þórdís.
- E8. Steinunn is 68 when Hrólfur dies.
- F4. Steinunn is 72 when she falls ill. Ólafur Hrólfsson visits Ásdís, who is in the shieling, and asks her to give his mother some milk. Steinunn tells Ásdís her story.

NESTED STORY # 3

- G9. Steinunn concludes her story. Ólafur Hrólfsson escorts Ásdís back. Mother and son frequently visit Ásdís at the shieling. Steinunn dies. Ólafur and Ásdís’ love grows. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to Dvalinn. Ólafur leaves with him.
- H3. In the autumn, Ásdís’ father marries her off to Grímur, a widower who has a daughter, Ingibjörg. Ásdís tells her mother-in-law Herdís the story of the farmer’s daughter and Ólafur Hrólfsson.

NESTED STORY # 2

- I10. Ásdís concludes her story and admits to Herdís that she is the farmer’s daughter from the story. One autumn, a vagabond (Ólafur

Hrólfsón) visits with his seven-year-old son. Grímur forces Ásdís to look after these guests. Both she and Ólafur die upon their reunion. Grímur takes in Dvalinn as a foster son, Dvalinn and Ingibjörg marry, and Dvalinn kills Grímur's manservant. Grímur helps Dvalinn and Ingibjörg flee into the mountains. Their daughter Sólrún is born.

- J1. Ólafur Þórhallason visits Dvalinn's farm. Dvalinn's daughter Sólrún tells him the entire story from start to finish.

NESTED STORY # 1

- K11. Sólrún concludes her story, and Ólafur Þórhallason promises to help her family.

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ÁGRIP

„Vilji hún þá og geti sagt þér aðra eins sögu ...“: Í leit að skáldskaparfræði Eiríks Laxdals

Efnisorð: frásagnarfræði, rammafrásagnir, skáldsagnagerð, Eiríkur Laxdal, Hómer, *Þúsund og ein nótt*, *Leitin að hinum helga gral*

Í greininni er fjallað um frásagnarfræðileg einkenni *Sögu Ólafs Þórhallasonar* eftir Eirík Laxdal. Segja má að fræðimenn hafi skoðað og metið sagnagerð Eiríks frá þremur sjónarhornum. Ýmsir sem komust í tæri við *Ólafssögu* á nítjándu öld og jafnvel síðar virðast hafa litið á hana sem misheppnað safn þjóðsagna. Frá því um miðja tuttugustu öld hafa skrif Eiríks hins vegar almennt verið talin marka upphaf skáldsagnagerðar hér á landi. Samkvæmt þriðja sjónarhorninu tilheyrir *Ólafssaga* hins vegar sígildri sagnahefð sem unnt er að staðsetja mitt á milli þjóðsögunnar og skáldsögunnar. Án þess að fyrri sjónarhornunum tveimur sé alfarið hafnað er lögð áhersla á að sagan eigi ýmislegt sameiginlegt með frásagnarbókmenntum fyrri alda og í því sambandi gerður samanburður á henni og hinni forngrísku *Ódysseifskviðu*, arabíska sagnasafninu *Þúsund og einni nótt* og franska miðaldatextanum *Leitin að hinum helga gral*. Í öllum tilvikum er stuðst við greiningu búlgarsk-franska fræðimannsins Tzvetans Todorov í verkinu *The Poetics of Prose*. Þegar tekið er tillit til efniviðar, uppbyggingar og jafnvel persónusköpunar *Ólafssögu* má líta á hana sem skilgetið afkvæmi aldalangrar bókmenntahefðar lagskiptra frásagna þar sem ekki er aðeins unnið úr munnlegri sagnahefð heldur er sú hefð beinlínis sett á svið.

SUMMARY

“Should she tell a story ...”: In Quest of Eiríkur Laxdal’s Poetics

Key words: Narratology, embedded narratives, fiction writing, folktales, Eiríkur Laxdal, Homer, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*

This paper analyses the narration in Eiríkur Laxdal’s *Saga Ólafs Þórbhallasonar*. Scholars placing Eiríkur’s writing within the context of literary history have generally taken one of three viewpoints. Some who encountered *Ólafssaga* in the nineteenth century and even later seem to have regarded it as a rather poor collection of Icelandic folk tales. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, the text has generally been considered to mark the advent of the novel in Iceland. The third approach views *Ólafssaga* as a product of an ancient narrative tradition that falls somewhere between traditional folk tales and novels. While not fully rejecting the first two views, the article compares Eiríkur’s work to three elaborate classical works of narrative fiction: Homer’s *Odyssey*, the Arabic story-cycle *The Thousand and One Nights*, and the French medieval narrative *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. The analysis, inspired by Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Poetics of Prose*, reveals that *Ólafssaga* can be seen as part of a centuries-long literary tradition of layered narratives that focus on storytelling.

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