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The Role of the Storyteller in Old Norse Literature

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D. PHIL. THESIS AND ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the figure of the oral storyteller as depicted in various Old Norse literary sources written down during the High Middle Ages, the majority in Iceland, between the mid-twelfth and early fourteenth centuries. It comprises a literary-critical discussion of how storytellers and the art of storytelling are imagined, interpreted and represented within these texts. Where possible, connections are drawn between genres, and across considerable temporal and geographical distances, in order to illustrate the strength and endurance of cultural preoccupations with disguise, narrative structure and the role of intermediaries in different historical and creative contexts.

The central contention is that the eddic poets and saga authors shared a common and profound sensitivity to the metatextual dimension of the storytelling endeavour in which they were engaged, and that this sensitivity manifested itself in strikingly similar ways across the whole period. The thesis is structured thematically, rather than chronologically, in order to foreground enduring cultural trends. The first chapter discusses the metatextual tendencies of the eddic poets, noting their recurring interest in disguise and the assertion (or appropriation) of an identity by characters who feature in their stories. It also includes an analysis of *Vǫluspá* which suggests that the poem lends itself to recitation by multiple performers. Chapter Two analyses depictions of public storytelling in the sagas and the relationship between writer and oral reciter as presented in the prologues and epilogues composed to ‘frame’ a number of these texts. Chapters Three and Four contain close readings of passages from the Sagas of Icelanders and eddic poetry, which demonstrate how certain characters, often of low social status, temporarily take on the mantle of a storyteller and perform their accounts of events so as to illuminate the texts' broader interest in the mechanics of literary narrative.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	*Arkiv för nordisk filologi* (Christiania (later Lund), 1883-)
ASPR	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
ÍF	Íslenzk fornrit: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (Bloomington IN, 1903-)
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association* (Baltimore MD, 1889-)
SBVS	*Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* (London, 1895-)
SS	*Scandinavian Studies* (Champaign IL, 1941-)

A NOTE ON REFERENCES AND TRANSLATIONS

In the footnotes references appear in full at a work's first appearance and subsequently by abbreviation or by author and date. Full details can be found in the bibliography.

All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. Icelandic personal names and place names are rendered in the nominative case.

INTRODUCTION

i. Opening Remarks

The stories that make up the Old Norse literary corpus are numerous and diverse. They range from historical records, to legendary accounts depicting real people occupying identifiable places, to mythical narratives concerning gods, heroes, and the imminent end of the world. United by the common language through which they are told, these stories span nations – from Eastern Europe to remote Greenland – and time, with the earliest surviving manuscript in Old Norwegian dated to about the year 1150, although many of the extant texts are thought to retain the imprint of a much more ancient oral heritage.[1] For all their diversity, however, many of these disparate stories share a second mutual characteristic, besides their common language, and that is the fact that at one time, in one form or another, they were invented, edited or refined by generations of oral storytellers whose imprint remains faintly detectable upon them. These shadowy forerunners or counterparts of the literate writer, and the various ways in which their influence on this rich literature continue to be felt, form the subject of the present study.

Unlike the modern novel, only rarely do the Old Norse sagas and the verse texts contained in the *Poetic Edda* draw attention to the fact of their being narrated. For the most part, their authors actively resist readers' attempts to focus on the narrative voice, creating instead the impression of objective disinterest by apparently attempting to 'refine themselves out of existence,' as one assessment has it.[2] In this respect these texts distinguish themselves from skaldic verse, which often retains both the voice of, and traditional association with, a single named author. Where skalds sought to enhance and preserve their reputations through

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1 The manuscript AM 237a fol. is commonly dated to c.1150. See David McDougall, 'Homilies (West Norse)', in Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf, eds, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (London, 1993), pp.290-2. The dating of many Old Norse stories, particularly the sagas, is a vexed and long-contested subject. For a recent summary see Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Companion to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, 2010), pp.37-51. On the possibility of a long prose narrative form containing similar material predating the arrival of literacy in Iceland, see Carol Clover, 'The Long Prose Form', *ANF* 101 (1986), 10-39.

2 Robert Kellogg and Robert Scholes, *The Nature of Narrative* (London, 1996), p.55.

their work, the original creators of the most famous sagas – the *Íslendingasǫgur* – like the poets of the *Edda* now seem lost to us entirely.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, scholarly interest in the origins of these works frequently focused on attempts to identify them with particular authors and to delineate a clear chronology by means of which the progress of such phenomena as 'saga style' could be traced. Frustratingly, although the Old Norse literary corpus is relatively large, there is little reliable contemporary social history now available. The sagas themselves provide the primary source for historians seeking to interpret the social *milieu* of High Medieval Iceland and much of Scandinavia, while accounts of saga composition and transmission are in famously short supply. Recent scholarship has therefore concentrated less on the identification of specific authors and reciters who might once have been associated with these texts, and more on understanding the structure and social function of the corpus. Despite this shift in emphasis, the creative intelligence behind these works continues to preoccupy readers, who increasingly seek insight into the author's mind by way of the text itself. Since it is not possible to examine the material which once circulated in a purely oral tradition, we must confine our attentions here to the written record.

As is the case when dealing with any medieval literary tradition, the term 'storyteller' is a problematic designation. It can be used, variously, to denote the author, narrator or speaker of a text. In the case of certain poems and sagas these three persons may once have been one and the same, but they cannot have remained so indefinitely. When a severance occurred, at the point of the original author's death if not before, the mantle of 'storyteller' would have fallen to others, through whose retellings the work became available to future audiences. This statement, of course, presupposes that oral recitation, whether from manuscript or memory, would have continued even after a text had been set down in writing, and this cannot be proved in every case. Nonetheless, in describing the practices of medieval consumers of stories, D. H. Green draws our attention to what he terms 'the intermediate

mode of reception... in which a work was composed with an eye to public recital from a written text, but also for the occasional private reader.'[3] In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the majority of sagas and the manuscripts of the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* were written, the predominant means of reception would still have been aural. Unless we seriously credit the possibility that these texts were committed to parchment with no intention that they should ever be read aloud (a likelihood much diminished by the contents of several prologues and epilogues to the sagas, which demand the attentiveness of an implied audience – a trope unlikely to be purely rhetorical) then we must continue to treat this corpus as a deliberately flexible form of literature suitable for both private and public reception.[4] This observation is especially significant since an audience will habitually identify the speaker of a text with its narrator – despite the modern narratologist's attempts to impose a distinction between these two figures – and this identification will have a significant effect on the performances which that speaker is able to produce, as we shall see.

Throughout this study, the term 'storyteller' should be taken to mean the implied speaker of a saga or poem. I use this form of words to indicate a distinction between the 'storyteller' and the 'narrator.' Whereas the latter term refers to a literary construct, present in both public and private readings, the former applies to any individual who recites the text aloud. In performance, the storyteller assumes the role of the narrator, but from a critical point of view remains distinct and separable from him or her. The apparently paradoxical term 'oral literature' has previously been used by Ruth Finnegan in her significant study *Oral Poetry*.[5] She, however, applies it more narrowly to a poem conceived orally and later transcribed, whereas for our purposes it may also accommodate written texts, both in prose and verse, conceived with the intention that they should, could or would be orally performed. These

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3 D. H. Green, 'Orality and Reading: The State of Research in Medieval Studies', *Speculum* 65:2 (April 1990), 277. See also Else Mundal, 'How did the Arrival of Writing Influence Old Norse Oral Culture?', in Slavica Ranković, Leidulf Melve and Else Mundal, eds, *Along the Oral-Written Continuum* (Turnhout, 2010), pp.163-81.

4 The contents and significance of these prolegomena are discussed in Chapter 2.

5 Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge, 1977), p.28.

categories are not mutually exclusive, and it is clear that these written texts, in turn, may have drawn on an internally allusive oral corpus, thus further complicating and confusing the roles of author, narrator and storyteller. Hence, in this study, the three terms will remain distinct: the 'author' is the agent who first composed either an oral fragment or a written text; the 'narrator' is the persona from whose perspective the story is told; and the 'storyteller' is the implied speaker whose style of delivery any performer of the narrative is encouraged to adopt.

All works designed for oral dissemination will include implicit cues designed to influence the transmission of the text in performance. A modern dramatic script will often frame these as stage directions, setting them apart from the spoken dialogue by some typographical means such as the use of an italic font or parentheses. However, it is equally possible for a writer to encode cues for a performer within the text itself. These may be metrical, such as we often see in Shakespeare when incomplete lines of blank verse appear to suggest a dramatic pause, or when the use of hemistichomythia encourages two actors to respond very rapidly to one another in dialogue.[6] They may equally come in the form of onomatopoeic language, or the frequent use of dialect words to suggest a particular accent, or simply colourful depictions within the story of how the different characters speak, walk or deport themselves, which might influence how they are portrayed during an oral performance of the text. These cues, whatever form they take, will inevitably retain the imprint of an author's dramaturgical imagination, and will no doubt be mediated and shaped by an editor, and perhaps also a compiler in the case of anthologised materials. Taken together, they in some sense resemble a musical score, and only by interpreting and understanding this score can any semblance of the authors' intentions for the performance and transmission of these stories now be recovered.[7] 'Storytellers' are the musicians who inherit this score and attempt

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[6] As, for instance, in William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. James R. Siemon, 3rd ed. (London, 2009), I. ii. 194-204. Here Richard 'woos' Lady Anne, preying on her vulnerability by pressing his advantage during their verbal sparring.

[7] I am indebted for this image of the score to Terry Gunnell, 'The Drama of the *Poetic Edda*: Performance as a Means of Transformation', in Andrzeja Dąbrówki, ed., *Progranicza teatralności: Poezja, poetyka, praktyka* (Warsaw, 2012), p.17.

to play it. Each will bring an individual style to the recital of a text, but all will be responding to it by attempting to infer and interpret its author's design.

ii. Choice of Primary Literature

This study will largely confine itself to a discussion of how storytellers are represented in eddic poetry – principally the texts found in the *Poetic Edda* – and in the *Íslendingasǫgur*. Except in passing it will not engage with skaldic verse, largely because the right of a skald to be identified as the author of his work is typically upheld, meaning that the dialectic between an author and the storyteller who inherits and has some license to reinterpret his words is lacking. The contents of the *Poetic Edda*, like the *Íslendingasǫgur*, are treated, both in their manuscript contexts and in terms of how they are discussed in the wider literary corpus, as a common inheritance (albeit, in the case of the eddic poems, the legacy of a pagan society whose time had passed long before the manuscripts were produced). By contrast a skaldic poem is an individually fashioned and tradeable commodity, offered to a patron in exchange for his favour. It therefore may be said to 'belong' both to the skald (its inventor) and the patron (its subject). It is firmly in the skald's interest to be identified as the teller of his text and, as Stefanie Würth points out, 'It never seems to be the case that a skald recites another skald's poem [in the sagas] – as might be expected since the poems must have been transmitted orally for a very long time.'[8] Consequently no distinction is implied between the skaldic author and the skaldic storyteller. Additionally, skaldic verse by its very nature is seldom used to frame a story. While it may contain fragments of mythological tales, these are of secondary importance to the praise which it lavishes on its subject, as well as to the elaborate use of kennings and the metrical sophistication which are the hallmarks of finely-

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8 Stefanie Würth, 'Skaldic Poetry and Performance', in Kate Heslop, Judy Quinn and Tarrin Wills, eds, *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross* (Turnhout, 2007), p.267. There is an argument to be made for occasional exceptions to this statement (such as the episode in which a beggar is persuaded to recite a slanderous verse and erroneously attribute it to Kormákr in *Kormáks saga*), but these are remarkably few and far between compared with the numerous borrowings of and quotations from the eddic material. See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Kormáks saga*, ÍF VIII (Reykjavík, 1939), pp.277-8

wrought court verse. As such, skalds may be classed as storytellers in the broadest sense of the word, but skaldic verse is not among the literary genres best suited for our attention here.

Some of the same caveats might be applied to individual eddic verses pronounced by characters in the sagas, but they cannot apply to the poems of the *Poetic Edda* itself. These are all anonymous, a state with which the compiler of the Codex Regius was apparently satisfied, leaving no space for their authors' names and including, so far as we can tell, no images or cyphers suggestive of their identities.[9] The same can be said of Snorri Sturluson, who neither attributes any of the verses he quotes from this collection to a named author nor gives any indication of dissatisfaction with that fact that they are perforce presented as anonymous. Moreover the poems actively appropriate the voices of seers, gods, heroes and unnamed narrators who pronounce on the distant past as though with the confidence of eyewitnesses.[10] As such, the narrators of the poems and their authors are clearly distinct. Most of the poems in the *Edda* contain at least the rudiments of a plot, even if, like *Hávamál* or *Alvíssmál*, these are used mainly as a mechanism to frame the recitation of common wisdom. There is reason to suppose an oral pre-history for many, if not most, of these poems: Snorri, for instance, quotes versions of several in his *Prose Edda*, which predates the writing of the Codex Regius, and the language of several poems is notably archaic.[11] Moreover, even if certain texts were first conceived by poets of the literate age, the subject matter, derived from ancient Germanic tradition, is often unequivocally of oral descent.

A final reason why the poems of the *Edda* have been selected for this study is the fact that throughout the collection much use is made of the disguise motif, and a majority of the poems are overtly concerned, in some way or other, with questions of identity and trustworthiness. I will argue that these concerns reflect a self-awareness on the part of their earliest reciters and audiences of the authenticating and, at times, subversive power of

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9 For the avoidance of doubt, whenever reference is made to the Codex Regius, the term should be taken to refer to MS GKS 2365 4to, now in the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík.

10 The same may be said of numerous verses preserved in the *fornaldarsǫgur*. See, for instance, Judy Quinn, '"Ok verðr henni ljóð á munni" – Eddic Prophecy in the *fornaldarsögur*', *Alvíssmál* 8, 1998, 29-50.

11 See Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2005), p.xiv.

storytelling, which in turn provides a valuable insight into how the role of the storyteller himself was conceived in relation to the transmission of these verses.

Among the most distinguished of the oral theorists to have worked on Old Norse literature, the late John Miles Foley was one of the first to recognise the importance of discussing orally-derived texts with a view to their original or intended performance contexts. In outlining his approach in 2002, he wrote,

> With Voices from the Past which survive only in manuscript and are typically accompanied by little or no descriptive information, we can't identify the kind of living performance cues typical of voiced texts or oral performances... Still, we can't afford to ignore the expressive dimensions of what is – notwithstanding the mute memorial – an oral poem.[12]

It is by attending to these 'expressive dimensions' implicit in surviving Old Norse texts that scholars like Bertha Phillpotts and Terry Gunnell have arrived at the conclusion that several of the verses preserved in the *Poetic Edda* were at one time designed not only for oral but, specifically, dramatic performance.[13] Foley's remarks nonetheless apply equally to prose works conceived with oral delivery in mind, and perhaps especially to the sagas, which were not composed in isolation from the society they represent but rather must have existed symbiotically with it, at once recalling and influencing the deeds of successive generations. By exploring the 'expressive dimensions' inherent in a saga text, we may hope to illuminate the intentions of those who wrote it down and gave it the narrative shape it now enjoys.

Among the various saga genres, the *Íslendingasǫgur* and the contemporary sagas contain the most plausible depictions of domestic activities in Iceland, where the texts themselves were written. In these sagas, scenes of public storytelling *per se* are rare and frustratingly brief, but these works are nonetheless instructive because of what they reveal about the cultural assumptions of those who were their intended readers and auditors. The saga authors frequently feel the need to explain certain practices of their ancestors, such as the

12 John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Chicago, 2002), p.103. See also Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. Nicholas Jones (London, 2004), p.329 and Linda Dégh, *Narratives in Society: A Performer-Related Study of Narration* (Helsinki, 1995).

13 Bertha S. Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge, 1920), Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 1995).

rules of duelling, whereas activities which would have been more familiar to their immediate audience go unremarked.[14] Many *Íslendingasǫgur*, like the poems of the *Edda*, are also intensely preoccupied with the subjects of disguise, identity, plausibility, honesty and deception, all of which are bound up with the art of performance. While sagas belonging to other genres share these interests to some extent, they are less immediately informative because of the other competing influences to which they are so frequently subject. The *fornaldarsǫgur*, for example, are filled with scenes which are alien from the daily lived experience of their intended audience, and this may make them less instructive sources for examining the prevailing contemporary view of storytellers in medieval Iceland. Similarly, the *riddarasǫgur* are disproportionately influenced by the storytelling conventions of continental Europe, while the *konungasǫgur* are largely set abroad and among aristocratic society, where customs and habits are understood to be different. None of these caveats would make an examination of texts belonging to any of these saga genres invalid, but they do serve to reinforce the pragmatic wisdom of first approaching the role of the storyteller through the prism of the *Íslendingasǫgur*. The sagas in question present themselves as a quasi-historical testament to the lives of their authors' ancestors and thus their early audiences would expect them to accurately reflect a sense of how storytellers fit into domestic Icelandic society.

This study will take the view that, whatever the ultimate origins of the medieval sagas, the majority of texts which survive are written in such a way as to suggest an oral origin, whether real or merely a convention, and that this detail in itself is instructive when considering the question of how oral storytelling as an art and practice was regarded by those who wrote the sagas down. Since the reality of storytelling in an entirely pre-literate age is impossible to recover, our focus shall be rather on how the writers of the later period chose to present and engage with the practice of oral storytelling through their own works. Additionally, whereas this study might have restricted itself to a single genre – whether prose

[14] The rules for duelling are set out in *Kormáks saga*, p.237.

or verse – there is no reason to suppose that medieval storytellers were prone to do this, and if anything the prosimetrum of many sagas speaks to the versatility of those who compiled and performed them. This outline of the corpus to be examined here is not exhaustive, and related texts from other genres have not been excluded where they may shed light on questions raised by analysis of this primary group (for instance, Chapter 1 makes several references to Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, while passages from *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* are discussed in Chapter 2). Such latitude is appropriate when dealing with Old Norse literature, since the generic categories much used by scholars today are a modern invention. Nevertheless, where texts from beyond the nominal corpus are referenced, care has been taken to ensure they perform an ancillary function only, and do not detract from the central focus on the *Íslendingasǫgur* and poetry of the *Edda.*

iii. Metatextuality

One feature which is common to both the *Íslendingasǫgur* and poems of the *Edda* is their frequent metatextual awareness and commentary, and it is this in particular which justifies their forming the mainstay of the corpus for this study. This common awareness is most obviously apparent in those rare scenes where characters within the text embark on a public act of storytelling or some other kind of performance which may seem to resemble the performance of the saga or poem in which they themselves appear. It is evident too in the frequent intertextual commentary given by saga authors when they refer and defer to other sagas in which further details of an event or personage are given. The sagas also comment on their limitations at times, noting that certain elements of the full story have been redacted, or remarking that no more is known about a particular circumstance. In light of this self-referential tendency, it is important to closely examine those occasions when the text of a saga or poem praises or criticises a particular characteristic in an intradiegetic performer, in order to establish how far an oral reciter of the text might be extending the invitation to his audience

to judge him according to the same criteria. To some extent this is true of all oral literature, but in this study I shall argue that it is particularly important when considering the Old Norse corpus, not least because the dictates of honour and integrity native to medieval Iceland and Scandinavia laid an additional burden on the shoulders of a storyteller who should not be seen to lie or to unfairly belittle or aggrandise the subjects of his story.[15] Thus the sagas, and some poems, regularly cite their sources and provide substantiating comments. At times they also include challenges, whether implicit or overt, to any member of the audience who feels he might be capable of rendering the story better.

The level of self-awareness articulated in these texts gives us some means of recovering how their authors conceived of the storytellers who would go on to disseminate their work. Since the individuals who took on this role left no recorded trace (there were, in other words, no written reviews of their artistic practice) we have only the authors' intentions and expectations to rely on in generating a picture of how storytellers fitted into the culture of the medieval North. Nevertheless, it is essential that we examine the metatextual elements of these works with care, since otherwise ‘the intermediate mode of reception’ will be entirely closed to us. This will involve a sensitivity to the performance dynamics which may be embedded in these texts, and a sustained recognition of the demands they make on an oral performer.

In an attempt to advocate a more performer-centric approach to the study of Western drama in general, the critic Martin Esslin once wrote,

> In the purely academic study of drama attention tends quite naturally to focus on the element most readily accessible for study: the text, the play as literature. The quality of the other elements, the performance, the lighting, the magnetism of the actors, is far more elusive and was, before the invention of mechanical recording techniques, almost totally lost. Yet these are the elements which play the decisive part in attracting audiences to the theatre... and which, if we really analysed the impact of a theatrical experience on audiences, would also, I am sure, be found to account for the bulk of the enjoyment the audience derives from a theatrical experience.[16]

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[15] Consider, for instance, the proscription on taunts (even if truthful) in *Grágás*. Icelanders are also warned there that both the invention and repetition of slander can lead to lesser outlawry. See Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, eds and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland* (Winnipeg, 1980-2000), ii, pp.196-7.

[16] Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (London, 1978), p.87.

Esslin's emphasis on the dynamics of a performance suggests that the storyteller and the manner in which the story is told are the most crucial elements in determining how that story would be received and the response it would generate in a live performance. Although this study is concerned with 'storytelling' rather than 'drama' *per se*, it is difficult to dispute that the performance dynamics which Esslin describes – personal 'magnetism' not least – must have played a substantial role in the dissemination, endurance and medieval reception of saga and eddic literature.[17] Indeed, the storyteller's style of delivery, vocal inflections, gestures and interpretations must tell us at least as much about a culture as the literature it produced. The difficulty for medievalists, having once accepted this contention, is in recovering any sense at all of these performative habits when the evidence which testifies to them is so slight and so doubtful.

In her lecture 'The Audience of Beowulf,' Dorothy Whitelock advanced a bold methodology which will somewhat resemble the approach taken in this study. In reference to the Old English poem of her title she wrote,

> For my own part, I should like to know what effect the poet was consciously striving to produce on the men of his own time: I want to see if by studying these men we can get any nearer to that knowledge. It will be necessary in the first place to gather what we can about them from the poem's own statements and implications; but this does not mean that I wish to use the poem merely as a quarry for social history. I propose to use the poem of *Beowulf* to elucidate the poem of *Beowulf*.[18]

She goes on to explain this approach in greater detail: first, she will analyse the explicit statements which the poem makes about its purpose – few though they are – and then supplement this by considering the values and motives expressed or implied by the characters who make up Beowulf's world. The scope of the present study will not be so broad, although the corpus to be examined is considerably larger. Here we will explore first that which is explicitly said in Old Norse literature about performative conventions, assessing the way in which the authors of the surviving texts present the phenomenon of storytelling. We will then

17 See Gunnell (1995), p.12.
18 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), p.3.

examine a series of recurring preoccupations within the literature relating to disguise, deception and the assumption of new identities which further substantiate our view of how storytelling as an art was perceived at the time of the texts' production.

iv. Methodology

Taking all this into account it is clear that a thorough understanding of the Old Norse storyteller depends on our recognising his performative role in communicating the contents of a text – the *res* – either to an implied or to an actual audience. The historical individuals who once gave voice to these texts, possibly both before and after their being committed to parchment, are now inaccessible to us. What remains is to assess the texts themselves in order to construct a sense of the implied storyteller and attempt a dramaturgical analysis of his characteristics. In part this will involve a close reading of the corpus to identify scenes which resemble storytelling explicitly, but it will also be constructive to consider incidents both in the sagas and the poetry where individual characters step – however briefly – into the role of intradiegetic storyteller, thus providing us with the opportunity for a metatextual reading of the text's own author's sense of self.

In his book *The Irish Storyteller*, Georges Zimmerman poses the question, ‘Is the presence of a teller within the tale a way for the actual storyteller to define his own role and draw the audience's attention to the act of telling?’[19] In the case of the Old Norse corpus, while we cannot speak for the author's intentions, it is clear that the occasional direct and frequent indirect descriptions of storytelling do serve to remind us that we too occupy the role of an audience and encourage us to compare our own experience with that of the audience described within the saga or poem at hand. It is therefore wholly appropriate to consider what evidence the texts may contain concerning the prejudices and assumptions which their authors had about storytelling.

[19] Georges Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin, 2001), p.517.

This study begins with the *Poetic Edda*, discussing the motif of disguise and its likely implications for the manner in which these poems were intended to be performed. Disguise, I shall argue, is an essential tool for the oral storyteller, and a convenient rhetorical device for eliding the boundaries between an author, a character, a transmitter and an audience. The study goes on to examine scenes of public storytelling and other kinds of performance in the sagas, seeking to establish parallels with the way in which storytellers are treated in the eddic tradition. The third chapter is concerned with a variety of characters who temporarily assume the role of 'storyteller,' including messengers, witnesses, liars and emissaries. In further developing the theme of disguise and misdirection it approaches the 'idea' or 'motif' of the storyteller as a literary construct rather than the individuals themselves who may once have assumed this role. The fourth and final chapter considers the theme of memory in these texts and its particular resonance in the oral-literary *milieu* which surrounded their production. The conclusion presents a number of roles played by storytellers in the sagas and the poetry, and makes several suggestions about how that role was conceived and appropriated by the writers and editors who inherited custody of the Old Norse literary tradition through successive generations.

This thesis sets out to establish how a close reading of *eddic* poetry and the *Íslendingasǫgur*, particularly with reference to their common metatextual tendencies, can better inform our understanding of how literate authors of the High Middle Ages conceived of and presented the figure of the oral storyteller. It will examine points of similarity and divergence across the corpus of texts outlined above in order to explore how consistently this figure is presented, and whether various discrete 'types' of storyteller may be distinguished. Finally, it will explore how a thorough examination of the presentation of oral storytellers in these works can improve our understanding of the literary approach to narrative taken by the poets and prose writers of the literate age.

Chapter One: 'I AM NOT THAT I PLAY' : DISGUISE AND THE PERFORMANCE OF EDDIC POETRY

'Οὖτις ἐμοὶ γ' ὄνομα'
'My name is Nobody'
- Odysseus to Polyphemus, *The Odyssey*, ix, 366

i. Introduction

This chapter will explore the storytelling possibilities encoded in the surviving record of eddic poetry. Since the historical conditions under which these verses were conceived and transmitted are all but irrecoverable, the approach taken will be to explore the self-reflexive aspects of these literary texts which may suggest the ways in which storytelling and the performance of narrative verse were conceptualised by those who played a role in such processes. If the historical saga performers are shadowy figures, whose identities have escaped inclusion in the textual record, then the real life oral reciters of the eddic poems are even more obscure, and any attempt to name them even more speculative on the basis of the available evidence.[1] Given this, the modern reader may consider it striking that the poems themselves are so overtly concerned with identity and disguise, and may even be inclined to wonder whether the frustrating anonymity of their composers and performers is simply an accident of history. We might be tempted to suppose that anonymity, or, at least, an ambiguous identity associated with the storyteller was in some ways a desired by-product or condition of their performances. This is the proposition which will be examined here.

ii. Tracing the Eddic Reciters

In contrast to the shadowy anonymity of generations of eddic reciters, the act of identifying or naming a character in an eddic poem is often accorded special prominence – as, for example, in *Grípisspá* (sts 1, 3) and *Fáfnismál* (note the prose passage following st.1).[2] Genealogies,

1 Although this has not stopped scholars from attempting to do so, with perhaps the most notable example being Sigurðr Nordal's attempt to attribute the authorship of *Vǫluspá* to the little known poet Vǫlu-Steinn. See Sigurður Nordal, 'Three Essays on *Völuspá*', trans. B. S. Benedikz and J. S. McKinnell, *SBVS* 18 (1970-73), 79-135.

2 See below, p.128.

patronymics and the frequent reuse of given names within a family line in honour of an eminent ancestor all attest to the cultural significance with which an individual's name was invested by the society which produced these texts.[3] The notion that an individual might inherit some part of his namesake's spirit is hinted at in the prose passage which follows the final stanza of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* in the Codex Regius, and Hilda Ellis Davidson has drawn attention to an episode from the Flateyjarbók redaction of *Óláfs saga helga* which alludes to a similar belief.[4] Given this intra-textual enthusiasm for asserting one's identity and placing significance on an individual's name, it has been a constant source of anxiety to scholars that the composers and reciters of the eddic poems, like the authors of the sagas, have remained anonymous to generations of readers.[5] No satisfactory written record of their identities has ever been discovered, and no common characteristics have been ascribed to them, save that they must have possessed capacious memories and some talent for public performance. Among those likely to have nurtured and exhibited such talents were lawyers, priests and other learned persons, yet Judy Quinn has argued that many of those who told or performed traditional stories, whether in verse or prose, must have been 'marginal members of society,' at least by the late twelfth century, since their public recitations appear to be the subject of censure in Oddr Snorrason's Latin preface to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.[6] By contrast, the very existence of the Codex Regius and Snorri's *Prose Edda* would seem to imply a desire among literate men to preserve at least the matter, if not the means of delivery, of oral stories with a long history – and, indeed, of explicitly pagan material. The extensive corpus of *fornaldarsǫgur* similarly indicates that it was not merely the fantastical or

3 See Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík, 1998), p.121, and John McKinnell, 'The Paradox of *Vafþrúðnismál*', in Donata Kick and John D. Schafer, eds, *Essays on Eddic Poetry* (Toronto, 2014), p.158.

4 See H. R. E. Davidson, *The Road to Hell: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York, 1968), pp.138-40. The episode alluded to occurs in Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Flateyjarbók* (Akraness, 1945), ii, 7, p.7.

5 Bertha S. Phillpotts, *Edda and Saga* (London, 1931), p.21. Attempts to recreate the original context for eddic recital are fraught with difficulties. See, for instance, Benjamin Bagby*, The Reconstruction of Eddic Performance,* http://sequentia.org/programs/program05-02.html (2001), accessed 8 March 2014.

6 Judy Quinn, 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', in Margaret Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), pp.38-40. The passage in question can be found in Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar* (Copenhagen, 1932), p.2. See further p.138 of this study.

controversial nature of stories which caused them to be viewed with scepticism, but rather the way in which they were framed and the communities within which they circulated.

With Oddr's concern about authenticity in mind, the framing device within which Snorri Sturluson presents his *Gylfaginning*, a prose compilation of many of the stories which run counter to the Christian tradition, becomes particularly instructive. Like the saga-man's conventional invisibility, the personae of Gylfi and the Æsir serve to insulate the storyteller from the material which he presents. Two 'ginningar' ('confidence tricks') take place within the frame narrative, and several more throughout the course of the mythological episodes themselves.[7] We learn that King Gylfi, in anticipation of his meeting with the Æsir, 'brá á sik gamals manns líki' ('changed himself into the form of an old man'), his intention presumably being to conceal his identity, although strikingly we are given no textual explanation as to why this subterfuge might be required.[8] Perhaps it is second nature for anyone who trifles with forbidden subject matter, and certainly the *Poetic Edda* contains several examples of gods and heroes disguising themselves in a similar fashion. When he arrives at the hall, however, Gylfi finds that the Æsir have anticipated him, and he is faced with three individuals (or, perhaps, three aspects or manifestations of the same individual, since all three names are traditionally associated with Óðinn) who, by virtue of their mysterious identities, have the advantage of him. The deceiver thus becomes the deceived.[9]

The hall itself is an optical illusion which vanishes at the conclusion of the tale. John Lindow has connected this spatial deception with the experience of Þórr and his companions in Útgarðaloki's hall, arguing that they, too, were deceived by Óðinn, and even suggesting that this episode is included as a test or clue suggesting the identity of his interlocutors, which Gylfi fails to recognise.[10] In conjunction with Snorri's apparently syncretic prologue, we may also be tempted to read it as a commentary on the deceptive allure of pagan narratives. If

7 Consider for instance Loki's transformation into a fish in an attempt to gull the Æsir (ch.50) and the loss of Týr's hand while deceiving Fenrir (ch.25).
8 *Gylfaginning,* ch.2. Chapter divisions follow Faulkes (2005).
9 See Rory McTurk, 'Fooling Gylfi: Who Tricks Who?', *Alvíssmál* 3 (1994), 17.
10 See John Lindow, 'Thor's Visit to Útgarðaloki', *Oral Tradition* 15:1 (2000), 181-3.

Lindow is right then the moment of revelation, when Gylfi finally perceives how he has been gulled, coincides with the dissipation of the illusion. Had he fathomed the identities disguised behind his interlocutors' assumed names sooner, it might have been that the fiction of the Æsir's hall would have become unsustainable, and the story would have ended there. Instead, the Æsir bring their narrative to a conclusion when they have exhausted the canon of knowledge which they are prepared to share, leaving Gylfi still uncertain as to their true identities (ch.53). The role of Snorri's readers (or possibly auditors) coincides with Gylfi's experience within the fram narrative: a collusion in the fictional scenario and a temporary – and controlled – setting aside of Christian conviction to allow the story to be told. The hall thus becomes a liminal 'performance arena.'[11] That the hall must vanish is inevitable – the Æsir are false gods, doomed to share the Biblical fate of Baal[12] – but for so long as the illusion is allowed to endure, those who enter the hall, which we might term a 'conceptual theatre' within which pagan tales can be safely recounted, can appreciate the stories *as stories* rather than as competitive claimants which threaten to disrupt their faith in Christ. Ultimately the frame device is an enabling convention allowing good Christians to maintain their distance from the pagan material with which they are engaging while nevertheless allowing themselves to be entertained by it – it is, in a way, cathartic.[13]

The motif of the disguised or unfamiliar wanderer arriving at a hall and having business with its occupants is familiar to us from eddic poetry, and Snorri no doubt expects us to recognise the parallels (although curiously he omits the exchange between Óðinn and Frigg with which *Vafþrúðnismál* opens – perhaps he knew a version of the poem which did not include it). Several of the poems in the *Poetic Edda*, including *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Lokasenna*, and *Grípisspá,* either begin with this scenario or feature it prominently. Lars Lönnroth has postulated a correspondence between the situation of this

[11] See John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington, 1995), p.47.

[12] 1 Kings 18:20-40. The prophets of the false god Baal are routed by Elijah after the God of Israel demonstrates His power by causing sodden timber to burst into flame.

[13] McTurk (1994), 17. McTurk describes the exchange as a 'ritual of initiation' for Gylfi into the pagan faith. Readers conscious that a deception is being practised, however, are not subject to such ritual conversion.

traveller and that of the storyteller who is to perform the text, perhaps as a third-person recitation or, in some cases, by assuming the voice or voices of the characters depicted. Associating himself with this literary tradition of exotic wanderers empowers an unknown reciter to become known first by the parts he plays, and only later, on his own terms, according to his own name and corresponding identity. When such persons tell stories involving an unmasking or revelation of a concealed identity Lönnroth calls this the 'Ulysses motif,' commenting,

> One function of this motif is evidently to make the audience identify the performer with the traveller [in the story or poem] and hence to make their own drinking party enhanced and glamorized by the presence of a poetic messenger from a lost world of myth and legend.[14]

Again we note the assertion that such recitals would naturally accompany feasts, and were therefore intended to be a relatively democratic form of entertainment, staged amid a boisterous *milieu* in which the performer takes on the identity of his literary persona for the duration of his recital. Like the literary saga-man, he is a storyteller consciously playing on a common understanding of what a storyteller should be. The figure in the Norse pantheon most often linked with Ulysses is, of course, Óðinn,[15] and an awareness of this convention would surely have influenced how audiences responded to such lines as the following, from *Hárbarðsljóð*: 'Hárbarðr ek heiti, | hylk um nafn sjaldan' ('I am called Hárbarðr, | I seldom conceal my name').[16] The humour clearly works on several levels: on a textual level, Óðinn is concealing his name behind a pseudonym; metatextually, the reciter can be said to be obscuring himself behind the god. An audience familiar with the conventions of eddic recitation would have been constantly conscious of both layers of disguise. In terms of staging, the scenario invoked by this poem is remarkably non-specific. The prose introduction

14 Lars Lönnroth, 'The Double Scene of Arrow-Odd's Drinking Contest', in Hans Bekker-Nielson, Peter Foote, Andreas Haarder and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, eds, *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium* (Odense, 1979), pp.254-6.

15 Consider Jonas Rasmus' 1702 attempt to prove that Odysseus and Óðinn were one and the same. For a discussion of Rasmus' work, see Jonas Wellendorf, 'Odin of Many Devices: Jonas Rasmus (d. 1718) on the Identity of Odin and Odysseus', in Timothy R. Tangherlini, ed., *Nordic Mythologies: Interpretations, Intersections and Institutions* (Berkeley, 2014), pp.115-32.

16 *Hárbarðsljóð,* st 10. Quotations from eddic poetry are taken from the two volume ÍF edition: Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds, *Eddukvæði* (Reykjavík, 2014).

in the Codex Regius tells us only that Þórr's origin was in the east and that he had reached a fjord – a liminal point between two places figuratively akin to the space occupied by the reciter astride the two 'scenes' envisioned by Lönnroth in his book *Den Dubbla Scenen*.[17] A single reciter would play both Hárbarðr, on one side of the fjord, and Þórr on the other. Were the performance to be shared between two speakers, the distance between them during the recitation would serve simultaneously as the room in which the performance occurred and the body of water separating one god from the other.

The principal difficulty with Lönnroth's ingenious suggestion is that we have no proof and only very limited (and disputed) evidence for the existence of such itinerant eddic performers as a feature of pre-literate Icelandic society.[18] It is just as possible that those who performed such poems were wealthy, established persons of fixed abode. Once again, our emphasis here is not on the historical reality of such storytellers, since we have no means of determining this, but rather on the way in which they are presented through these texts, and here we see a significant enthusiasm for disguise, with a singer performer acting in such as way as to convey both the character of Óðinn and the persona of Hárbarðr which he has assumed. Given that the poem is so conspicuously concerned with assumed identities, it would be in any reciter's interest to play up his similarities to a hypothetical rootless wanderer in performance. In other words, the surviving texts say little that is trustworthy about the social identity of those who recited them, but they may indicate the way in which such reciters presented themselves in performance. To return to *Hárbarðsljóð,* we would then have a reciter, playing a 'Reciter', playing Óðinn in disguise (and presumably also playing Þórr). This may appear to be an excessively complicated model, but it would certainly help to explain why such little emphasis is placed in the sagas on the individual style and characteristic delivery of storytellers (as distinct from skalds) if they tended to adopt, for the

[17] Lars Lönnroth, *Den dubbla scenen: Muntlig diktning frän Eddan till Abba* (Stockholm, 1978). For further elaborations on this thesis see Lars Lönnroth, 'Hjálmarr's Death-Song and the Delivery of Eddic Poetry', *Speculum* 46 (1971), 1-20. See also Lönnroth (1979), pp.94-109.

[18] Terry Gunnell, '"The Rights of the Player": Evidence of *Mimi* and *Histriones* in Early Medieval Scandinavia', *Comparative Drama* 30:1 (Spring 1996), 1-31 provides the most detailed recent survey.

most part, a conventional *persona* for the duration of their recital.

Such a *persona* is most famously manifested in the Odinic figure of Norna-Gestr, storyteller and protagonist of his eponymous *þáttr*. Upon arriving at King Óláfr's court, Gestr is introduced to us as follows:

> Konungr tók honum vel ok spurði, hverr hann væri; en hann sagðist Gestr heita. Konungr svarar: Gestr muntu hér vera, hversu sem þú heitir. Gestr segir: Satt segi ek þér til nafns míns, herra...[19]

> The king bade him welcome and asked, what his name was, and he said he was named Gestr [‘Guest’].The king answers: ‘Guest you shall be here, however you are called.’Gestr says: ‘I have told my name truly to you, lord...’

Here it is initially unclear whether the stranger is concealing his identity behind a false name (literally, ‘guest of the *Nornir*,’ by whom he is said to have been fostered) or rather, as he claims, whether he has given his true name which suggests a rootless identity as a permanent guest, forever reliant on the kindness of strangers. In this respect, the anonymity conferred by such a name would have suited a travelling reciter of eddic verse, allowing him to pose as a wide variety of subjects from the ‘lost world of myth and legend.’ Analogues for the itinerant poet from the Old English tradition readily suggest themselves, including the unnamed *scop* known to us and to posterity as *The Wanderer,*[20] and Widsith,[21] whose name, like Gestr's, implies a nomadic lifestyle.[22] Of course, a persuasive performer need not actually have been itinerant in order to assume such a guise: like the patriarch who invests himself as Father Christmas by the addition of a false beard and costume, it is entirely conceivable that any man might take on the identity of Norna-Gestr for the duration of a recital and then shed it when the performance came to an end. Such a view coincides with Hollander's suggestion that reciters of eddic poetry would have considered themselves to be ‘merely continuers, or elaborators, of legendary tradition,’ undertaking re-creative rather than creative acts, and

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19 *Norna-Gests þáttr*, in Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (Reykjavík, 1943-4), i p.247.

20 For the full text of the poem, see George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds, *The Exeter Book,* ASPR III (New York, 1936), pp.134-7.

21 For the full text of the poem *Widsith*, see *The Exeter Book*, pp.149-53.

22 See Margaret Schlauch, ‘Wīdsīth, Víthförull and Some Other Analogues’, *PMLA* 46:4 (December 1931), 969-87 and Jeff Opland, ‘*Scop* and *Imbongi* IV: Reading Prose Poems’, *Comparative Literature* 45:2 (1993), 97-120.

metaphorically dressing themselves in the borrowed weeds of their ancestors, teachers or sources of inspiration in order to preserve a distinction between themselves and the role of reciter which they were undertaking.[23] The impression of an itinerant performer, constantly in motion, fits well with this image of a professional chameleon, and would thus have served the purposes of any Old Norse storyteller, regardless of his actual biography – he might have donned some form of costume or entered a space or simply risen to speak in such a way as to recall a wanderer arriving with a tale to tell. Indeed, it is not necessarily clear that wandering storytellers need ever have existed in Iceland, where this *þáttr* was recorded, for the idea of the 'Ulysses motif' to have taken root. The silence of the sagas on the subject of these putative itinerant bards, if they did once exist, is difficult to explain. If they were as familiar as the skalds during the Saga Age, why should they go unreferenced in these later texts? One possibility is that, unlike the skalds, and perhaps in line with the saga-men, those who took on the role of reciters were at pains to dissociate themselves from the stories they recited, intending that the material should endure in its own right, independent of their agency as disseminators. Thus they would vanish behind such stock identities as 'Gestr' and 'Widsith'. Such a distancing mechanism might serve a similar function to the ostensibly anonymous third-person narrative voice of the sagas or the frame narrative within which Snorri couches *Gylfaginning*, emphasising the distance between the individual telling the story and the role of *storyteller* which he adopts in order to do so.

An intriguing and partly analogous figure from the sagas for this role of self-styled reciter is the 'Barkman,' an identity temporarily assumed by the hero of *Ǫrvar-Odds saga.*[24] This is another case of a literal naming convention, since he supplements (or perhaps suggests) his pseudonym with a costume fashioned from tree bark. Lönnroth uses this episode to illustrate his conceit of the 'double-scene,' observing that an early redaction of the saga has Oddr call himself Víðfǫrull ('far-traveller'), rather than Nœframaðr ('Barkman')[25] – a stock,

[23] Lee M. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda* (Austin, 1962), p.xvii.
[24] *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, i, pp.359-69.
[25] Lönnroth (1979), pp.116-9.

literal name which associates him with the tradition of Widsith and other travelling tellers of tales, and also recalls Óðinn's alias 'Vegtamr,' which the chief god assumes in *Baldrs draumar*.[26] In an oral tradition, there is no reason why an early audience should not have recognised both identities within the same individual, whichever disguise a particular recitation had him adopt. Thus different versions of the story are simultaneously tenable, and the identities assumed by its hero are cumulative: he is, for those who know of him, both Viðfǫrull and Nœframaðr. The audience of the saga jointly participates with Oddr's drinking companions in constructing an identity for the man behind the (bark) mask using both the information he gives about himself and their intertextual knowledge of him from a broader tradition. The audience knows him to be Ǫrvar-Oddr, but they might not be familiar with him in this particular guise, or they might recognise this version of the story as being subtly different from one they have heard previously. They, too, are compelled to employ their deductive powers, and are thus brought closer to the experience of Oddr's drinking companions as they struggle to solve the riddle of the man behind the mask.

Whether eddic performers were itinerant or not, it is plain that they had to be proficient in persuading their audience to accept the disguises they adopted, setting them as individuals apart from the role of 'reciter' which they were undertaking. These disguises may have taken a physical form as some scholars have suggested, perhaps involving physical props, masks or elements of costume, or they may have simply been figurative: a performer asserts that he is in role and is then understood to remain so for the duration of the performance.[27] Instances where the disguised reciter makes overt reference to the disguise motif (through invocations of figures like Gestr and Nœframaðr) should therefore be regarded as metatheatrical, potentially self-referential, and as rich a source as any we have for interrogating further the vexed question of how these elusive performers saw themselves and their own vocation. Jan de Vries suggested some time ago that the absence of any written

[26] *Baldrs draumar,* st.6.

[27] See, for instance, Phillpotts, (1920), pp.176-90 and Gunnell (1995), pp.50-85.

testimony identifying a discrete class of oral performers may be the result of a conscious attempt to remain anonymous during the re-creative act of recitation.[28] If so it would represent a remarkable continuity of attitude towards authorship and ownership shared by these performers and the composers of the sagas.

For our purposes, let us take 'disguise' to mean the deliberate concealing of a character's identity based on an intention to deceive.[29] Disguise may take the form of a false name, a misleading costume (or both in cases like the 'Barkman'), or the adoption of deceptive attributes. It is important to delineate between cases where a character assumes a new identity *ex nihilo* (a 'creative' act), and those where an existing identity is appropriated, with or without the consent of its original possessor (a 're-creative' act). An example of the former phenomenon might be Óðinn's assumption of the name Grímnir, 'the masked one,' in the eddic poem *Grímnismál*, whereas the burlesque comedy of *Þrymskviða* provides us with an instance of the latter in which one god, Þórr, assumes the name of another, Freyja, completing the illusion by concealing his face beneath a veil and wearing distinctive items of her jewellery. They then proceed to perform something resembling a 'play within a play' as they travel to Þrymr's court to retrieve the central focus of the poem, Þórr's hammer. In the process of assuming a disguise, both Óðinn and Þórr are adopting a role, which they then proceed to perform until the conclusion of their respective poems, at which point they reveal themselves and the narratives cease, much like the exchange between Gylfi and the Æsir at the moment of unmasking. Revelation coincides in each case with a narrative apotheosis.

We may identify all of these disguised protagonists as performers, whose stories are in turn performed by eddic reciters (or storytellers).[30] This parallel serves to remind us that disguise is both a thematic and formal feature of eddic poetry. When the gods reveal

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[28] Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, trans. B. J. Timmer (London, 1963), p.165.

[29] The *OED* gives us 'Altered fashion of dress and personal appearance intended to conceal the wearer's identity; the state of being thus transformed in appearance for concealment's sake.' See OED Online (Oxford, December 2016), Accessed 9 January 2017. At the time of writing, this entry has not been updated from that originally published in the dictionary in 1896.

[30] I use the term 'reciter' to mean those who spoke these poems for an audience, without necessarily assuming that they were also the composers.

themselves in first person poems, bringing their stories to an end, so too does the performer symbolically doff his guise and conclude his narrative. In her 1917 survey of disguise in the saga tradition, Grace van Sweringen Baur helpfully observed, ‘disguise is never an end in itself, but always a means to an end.’[31] For Þórr, in *Þrymskviða*, the end is readily apparent – the gulling of Þrymr and the re-acquisition of his hammer. Óðinn's motivations, though characteristically more enigmatic, are suggested by the prose preface to *Grímnismál* in the Codex Regius, and appear to revolve around his wager with Frigg. But what end might have been served by the reciters going to such lengths to assume a borrowed guise?

Óðinn, as we know from the sagas, is particularly adept at creating new identities for himself through the assumption of disguises, often for the purpose of gaining the upper hand over an interlocutor in a flyting or a wisdom contest.[32] For this reason he should be considered just as suitable a patron for eddic performers as he is for the skalds.[33] In *Vafþrúðnismál*, for instance, a disguised Óðinn withholds his name until Vafþrúðnir finally infers it from his interlocutor's unique wisdom:

> ‘Ey manni þat veit,
> hvat þú í árdaga
> sagðir í eyra syni;
> feigum munni
> mælta ek mína forna stafi
> ok um ragna røc.’
> ...
> ‘Nú ek við Óðin deildak
> mína orðspeki,
> þú ert æ vísastr vera.’[34]
>
> ‘No man knows that
> Which, in days of yore, you
> said in your son's ear;

[31] Grace van Sweringen Baur, ‘The Disguise Motif in the Germanic Hero-Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies and Notes* 4:3 (August 1917), 221.

[32] See for example the riddle-sequence during which Óðinn appears in the role of ‘Gestumblindi’, in G. Turville-Petre, ed., *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (London, 1956), pp.36-51.

[33] On the relationship between skalds and their patrons, including their patron deity, see Alison Finlay, ‘*Egils saga* and other poets' sagas’, in John Hines and Desmond Slay, eds, *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga* (London, 1992), p.105. On the correspondences between eddic poets and Óðinn, see Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes* (Odense, 1998), ii, p.177 and Kari Ellen Gade, ‘Poetry and its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture’, in Margaret Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), p.65.

[34] *Vafþrúðnismál*, st.55.

> with a fated mouth
> I have spoken my ancient wisdom,
> and about Ragnarǫk.'
> ...
> 'Now I with Óðinn have contested
> in wise speech;
> you will always be the wisest of beings.'

It is widely accepted that this text was among Snorri's sources for *Gylfaginning*,[35] prompting us to speculate that Óðinn's chosen alias, Gagnráðr, and Gylfi's choice of Gangleri may not be unrelated (both are 'wanderers' or 'walkers,' and both are guests in another's hall – much like Widsith or Gestr). The latent power which rests in the capacity to recognise and name your interlocutor – or opponent, in this case – should not be understated.[36] If Vafþrúðnir had identified Óðinn it is surely unlikely that he would have engaged in this contest, since he would have anticipated the outcome (the text makes plain that he is familiar with the incident to which Óðinn refers and with the fact that the question can only be answered by the god himself). Disguise is, once again, a means to an end (from the character's point of view) and a mechanism for allowing an otherwise implausible exchange to have taken place (from the reciter's).

Besides *Vafþrúðnismál*, eddic poems featuring a false (i.e. invented) identity include *Grímnismál*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II, Baldrs draumar, Lokasenna, Hárbarðsljóð* and *Hávamál,*[37] in which Óðinn seemingly refers to himself in the third person and also makes reference to 'Bǫlverkr' (st.109), another of his *personae*. Like Gestr, Grímnir and Gagnráðr, this pseudonym – literally 'bale-worker' or 'evil-doer' – ostensibly makes for a poor disguise. In a cultural context where titles often have literal significance – 'Fáfnisbani,' for instance, referring literally to the slayer of Fáfnir – the willingness of the god's interlocutors to accept

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35 Faulkes (2005), p.xxiv. Indeed, Snorri quotes from the poem on five occasions in *Gylfaginning*, once in each of Chapters 5, 7 and 51, and twice in Chapter 53.

36 As much was evidently apparent to the compiler of the Codex Regius. Note the prose interjection between st.1 and st.2 of *Fáfnismál,* which refers to the ancient belief in a dying man's power to curse his adversary if he knew his name.

37 A problematic case since the majority of scholars think it a redaction of several poems, not all of which may have originally been spoken by Óðinn and not all of which may have been associated with disguise. See Terry Gunnell, 'Eddic Poetry', in Rory McTurk, ed., *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (London, 2005), p.85.

such blatantly false names is curious to say the least.[38] Anatoly Liberman has argued that, 'Giving a false name had the effects of magic: even the person's closest associates were no longer able to recognise him.'[39] Yet this cannot be a universal eddic convention. If it were, why would Þórr require a veil in *Þrymskviða*? Why would Helgi need to dress in women's weeds to evade capture at King Hunding's court?[40] On a textual level, the giving of a false name may be enough to effect a plausible disguise, but any attempt to translate these poems into a pictorial or dramatic form would render absurd the idea that a simple change in name can be synonymous with a change in identity as perceived by others.

A more plausible explanation would be to suggest that the false name is itself a kind of riddle which would not be out of place in a wisdom contest. Like Lönnroth's putative itinerant reciter, Óðinn conceals his real identity behind a façade in order that he may be judged on his performance, not pre-judged according to his reputation. As a result, a 'double-scene' is once again taking place: narratively Óðinn is competing with Vafþrúðnir, but from the point of view of an audience his choice of a stock pseudonym constitutes a vicarious invitation to them to participate in the vocal exchange of old lore and wisdom. In order to facilitate and control such an immersive, interactive exchange, the reciter would have had to be a living catalogue of mythological material – the oral equivalent of Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*. As Robert Kellogg has observed, '…the performer is a member of the audience. His competence is matched by theirs, and they could in some circumstances exchange places.'[41] Óðinn is competing with Vafþrúðnir, but simultaneously the audience is competing to anticipate the outcome of the contest and answer the mythological questions posed. By assuming a stock, enigmatic or riddlic name, such as 'Bǫlverkr,' Óðinn symbolically renounces his own identity for the

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38 Ursula Dronke sees this allusion by the *Hávamál* poet as evidence of Óðinn's 'audacity,' effectively flaunting his penchant for disguise. See Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda: Volume III: Mythological Poems* (Oxford, 2011), p.58.

39 Anatoly Liberman, 'Mistaken Identity and Optical Illusion in Old Icelandic Literature', in Anatoly Liberman, ed., *Word Heath. Wortheide. Orðheiði: Essays on Germanic Literature and Usage* (Rome, 1994), p.168. See also Gunnell (1996), 2.

40 *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II,* prose passage following st.1.

41 Robert Kellogg, 'Literacy and Orality in the *Poetic Edda*', in A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack, eds, *Vox intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages* (London, 1991), p.190.

duration of the disguise, an act mirrored in performance by the eddic reciter, who doffs his own identity to allow him to play both the god and the *jǫtunn*. Disguise in this case is not a 'putting on' but rather a 'setting aside' of the self to function instead as a conduit for the transmission of the text.[42]

Wisdom contests are not the only eddic poems for which an interactive style of delivery has been posited. In some cases it is even possible to conceive of a scenario for transmission in which the audience, too, is initially ignorant of a speaker's identity. The opening exchange between Óðinn and Frigg renders this impossible in the case of *Vafþrúðnismál* (although these verses need not necessarily have been included in every oral recitation of the poem), but it has been suggested as a possible context for the transmission of *Lokasenna*. Terry Gunnell identifies sixteen speakers in the poem, noting that any solo reciter would have to effect some sixty-one transitions from one speaker to another. In the case of a monologic delivery, he posits the possibility that the poem functioned as 'a form of mythological guessing game,' with the hearers competing to anticipate Loki in identifying each member of the Æsir who speaks to him.[43] This interpretation recalls Ker's conception of the text as 'pure sport – or pure art,' and relies both on an audience interpreting the allusive clues to each god's identity and on the reciter having a comprehensive command of his material so as to respond appropriately to any contribution they might make while the game is being played out.[44] In this case, of course, characters are initially disguised from and then revealed to an audience, but within the world of the poem all the participants are known to

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42 This is an observation which has led some readers to associate eddic transmission with the *Þulir* (*Hávamál*, st.111). See further Phillpotts (1931), pp.144-5; Introduction to David A. H. Evans, ed., *Hávamál* (London, 1986); and Russell Poole, 'Þulir as Tradition Bearers and Prototype Saga-Tellers', in ed. Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge, *Creating the Medieval Saga* (Odense, 2010), pp.237-59.

43 This argument depends on his thesis that the prose attributions of text to speakers were a later addition to the poem by a compiler, and not intended to be spoken in the context of an oral recitation: see Gunnell (1995), pp.11-12, 238-40. See also John McKinnell, 'Motivation and Meaning in *Lokasenna*', in Donata Kick and John D. Schafer, eds, *Essays on Eddic Poetry* (Toronto, 2014), p.177. Given that other prose contributions to the Codex Regius appear to be editorial additions (such as the prose which links the *Helgi* poems), this is a distinct possibility. Olga A. Smirnickaja, '*Grímnismál* on the Eddic Stage', in *The Audience of the Sagas: Proceedings of the Eighth International Saga Conference* (Göteborg, 1991), ii, p.261 presents a similarly premised argument for interpreting *Grímnismál* as a game, although here the participants exist within the text, not outside it.

44 W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (London, 1922), p.42.

one another. The reciter (or storyteller) is the prism through which they are seen by the audience.

By contrast, in *Hárbarðsljóð*, it may be that the opposite holds true. Here Þórr willingly accepts Óðinn's assumed identity, of Hárbarðr or 'Ferjukarlinn' ('the ferryman'), whereas the audience of the poem may well already know – or suspect – his real name. Just as possible is the suggestion that they may have effectively competed with Þórr to discover the ferryman's identity, interpreting it as a riddle and part of the 'game' of recitation, deducing it from textual – and, perhaps, performative – clues.[45] Óðinn is particularly associated with certain attributes which distinguish him from the role he has assumed (such as his distinctive hat and beard). Would these have been in evidence during a recital of the poem? And would they have been considered visible to Þórr or exclusively present for the benefit of the audience?[46] Like *Gylfaginning,* this text raises the question of who is the victim of the deception being practised – if, indeed, there *is* necessarily a victim. Either Óðinn is successful in withholding his identity, or Þórr becomes conscious of the disguise at some stage and has, we must therefore assume, some vested interest in allowing it to go unchallenged. The game for the audience, already an invitation to recognise some of the stories behind the insults directed at Þórr, becomes one predicated not only on guessing the identities of the duelling gods[47] but also, secondarily, on guessing whether Þórr has at any point recognised the deception that is being practised. Thus we might read into the Ferjukarlinn's devotion to '… góða eina | ok þá er ek gerva kunna' ('…good men only | and those whom I can recognise')[48] an implicit acknowledgement that the real challenge to Þórr is not to win the war of words but to pierce the deceptive façade – to solve the riddle of the ferryman's identity. Similarly, it is significant that Óðinn contradicts himself, first claiming that Þórr's mother is dead (st.4) and

[45] Gunnell argues for a correspondence between the word *leikr* ('play') and the act of recitation, conflating the idea of public games with that of public oral performance. See Gunnell (1995), pp.25-6, n.8.

[46] Archaeological and literary evidence in support of this idea is extremely scant. See Gunnell (1995), pp.36-80 for the most detailed summary of relevant finds.

[47] Or, at least, of Óðinn, assuming that the marginal speaker attributions were associated with the text in its oral manifestation(s). This assumption has been contested by Gunnell (1995), pp.282-329, and for our purposes can at least be said to be unsafe.

[48] *Hárbarðsljóð*, st.8.

then subsequently acknowledging her as alive (st.56), suggesting perhaps that his disguise is slipping as he becomes caught in his own lies. If Þórr is conscious of this contradiction he makes no mention of it. Þórr's failure to name his opponent arguably concludes the contest in Óðinn's favour. It is equally possible, however, that both gods know each other by the end of the exchange, and are simply complicit in sustaining the fiction of Hárbarðr to allow them to trade jibes without being personally liable and honour-bound to experience future enmity. In this case it would be a matter for the reciter to indicate at what point Þórr recognises that his interlocutor is not what he purports to be. A war of words becomes, rather, a game of guises. Like the hall in *Gylfaginning*, the narrative framework depends on all participants accepting – or, at least, pretending to accept – the ferryman's purported identity for the duration of the exchange. Like 'Bǫlverkr' or 'Grímnir', 'Hárbarðr' ('Greybeard') can scarcely be called a persuasive pseudonym. It is an example of self-conscious literary artifice, carrying distinctly Odinic connotations. The riddle is posed for Þórr to solve.[49] Whether he does so – or, indeed, even appreciates that it has been set – is a matter for the poem's audience and reciters to determine between them; the text makes no clear statement one way or another. Its reticence, moreover, allows the reciter (or reciters, if the poem was ever performed as a duologue) to remain aloof, technically guiltless of favouring either the cause of Óðinn or Þórr.[50]

The aspect of competition between the figures depicted in the poem and the audience for and among whom it was transmitted reinforces the suggestion that in order to enjoy and appreciate the game implicit in the text it was necessary to disassociate it from the individuals who were performing it – much like a modern play in which actors set themselves apart from their roles. Unlike skaldic verse, which has a clear topical referent, and is still often associated with a named composer in the written record, eddic poems such as these directly benefit from

[49] This riddle has baffled some modern, as well as medieval, audiences. Both Bergmann and Rydberg identified Hárbarðr with Loki. For discussion of the parallels between this text and *Lokasenna* see Carol Clover, '*Hárbarðsljóð* as Generic Farce', *SS* 51:2 (Spring 1979), 124-45. See further Friedrich Wilhelm Bergmann, ed., *Das Graubartslied (Hárbarðslióð): Lokis Spottreden auf Thor* (Leipzig, 1872) and Viktor Rydberg, *Undersökningar i germanisk mythologi* (Stockholm, 1886), i.

[50] The suggestion that the poem lends itself to recitation as a duologue goes back as far as Jón Helgason, 'Norges og Islands digtning', in Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Nordisk kultur, VIII: Litteraturhistorie* (Stockholm, 1953), ii, p.35.

the anonymity of their speakers.[51] For the purposes of recitation they are identified solely with the characters they represent and the disguises – whether literary or metaphorical – that they assume. Such texts therefore provide listeners and participants with an opportunity to experience the wit of a flyting without becoming personally implicated in the outcome.

When discussing such dramatic elements as the assumption of disguise or the pseudo-ritualistic exchange of insults in some of these texts, Terry Gunnell makes comparisons between them and the liturgy of a Roman Catholic Mass.[52] Although not an exact parallel, since no sacramental practice appears to be encoded in the poems, the image of the performer as priest is useful insofar as a priest purports to be a conduit linking participants in the Mass directly to God. This image aligns closely with Ursula Dronke's interpretation of *Hávamál*:

> *Hávamál* begins and ends in a hall... moving easily from the human hall to Óðinn's, from the world to the otherworld… The otherworld is a mirror of Óðinn that men have made for him, and the poet himself sees Óðinn's shadow within it.[53]

Just as we move from one location to a mirror location within the text, so too the world of the performance and the world of the text may be said to reflect one another if we accept the image of reciter as conduit, judged not on his overt charisma – as a skald would be – but on his capacity for self-abnegation and on the integrity of his disguise.[54] Of course, certain performative qualities would still be called for – the ability to hold the attention of a crowd not least – but by shifting the emphasis from the teller to the story, as in a drama, such a self-effacing convention would have enhanced the sense that the stories told were ancient and the product of an unbroken line of oral transmission.

A sacramental experience is about reducing the distance between the worshipper and his god; an eddic recital presented as though by the participants themselves or one immediately proximate to the action would have had a similar effect, bringing the ancient

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51 Würth (2007), p.267.

52 Introduction to Gunnell (1995), esp. pp.13, 18.

53 Dronke (2011), p.36.

54 Morton W. Bloomfield and Charles W. Dunn, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (Cambridge, 1989), p.94; Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn', *Oral Tradition* 16:1 (2001), 168-202, esp. 172.

storyworld into the immediate present. Gunnell has suggested a role for the *goðar* in perpetuating these poems in Iceland, their dual role as priest-chieftains lending itself well to the dual-role of storyteller and voice of gods or heroes. He notes that even the architecture of the Icelandic hall – which he takes to be the real site of the 'hof' ('temples') alluded to in several place names – resembles the cosmology of the Old Norse mythos.[55] *Goðar* are certainly among the candidates for reciters (and early saga-tellers), but unlike skaldic verse the eddic poems are readily decoded and memorised, and may have endured across a much broader demographic group. For all the praise lavished on the immutable staying power of poetry in such sources as the prologue to *Heimskringla*, its intractability as a vehicle for pagan stories may also have been a source of concern among the governing class both in Iceland and Scandinavia as the Middle Ages progressed.[56] Presenting it as common property through the self-abnegating performance style of its reciters would only have exacerbated this tension, reinforcing the value of disguise to the reciter, who could claim to be participating in a tradition rather than overtly challenging the Christian-dogmatic authority of the ruling class.

Nowhere is the transformative process by which a reciter assumes the mantle of disguise more in evidence than in the opening of *Grípisspá.* Again, the poem begins with the convention of an unknown traveller – whose voice might, initially, be that of the poet, the reciter or the hero; the audience cannot be certain – approaching a foreign hall and seeking an audience with its lord, the renowned prophet Grípir. The speaker at first identifies himself, apparently paradoxically, as 'maðr ókunnigr' ('an unknown man'),[57] and is then challenged (on Grípir's behalf, by a proxy who acts as his agent) to name himself. The need for this exchange is readily explained if we concede the likelihood that the speaker is, at this point, as much an unknown quantity to the audience of the poem as he is to Geitir, the doorkeeper. The king's retainer is also, effectively, the audience's retainer in this scenario, allowing them to

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[55] Terry Gunnell, '*Hof*, Halls, *Goðar* and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Hall', *Cosmos* 17 (2001), 18.

[56] See Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed., *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI (Reykjavík, 1941-51), i, p.4. Subsequent citations from *Heimskringla* refer to this edition.

[57] *Grípisspá*, st.2.

enter the text vicariously, while in naming himself in response to the question the reciter unambiguously asserts his identity (i.e. Sigurðr) for the duration of the recital. If the performance involved any form of costume or attribute reinforcing this alias, this surely would be the point to produce it, thus accounting for the subsequent line 'hann er ítarligr at áliti' ('he is striking to behold'),[58] which might otherwise suggest a correspondence between the performer's 'real' appearance and his assumed identity. The performer and audience are deliberately anonymised, existing in the world of the poem only vicariously, through the agency of proxies. They are silent participants, exchanging stories about disguise under the protection afforded by being *in* disguise.

So far we have seen how the creation of a new identity, often through the assumption of a disguise, allows speakers *in* and speakers *of* eddic poetry sometimes to associate themselves with certain qualities and perform certain votive, riddlic or provocative roles while protecting the integrity of their 'true' identities. They are proxies, functioning like seers; or they perform under allusive 'stage names' like Grímnir.[59] Yet there are also cases extant in the tradition where, rather than invent a new identity or resort to stock, allegorical titles, a protagonist performs an act of impersonation, taking on the role of another distinct character from within the tradition. This is important insofar as it distinguishes poems in which a narrative voice is apparent (e.g. *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*) and those in which the speaker is a 'stock' or anonymous traditional figure (e.g. *Vǫluspá*), from those in which a reciter would have purported to speak in the voice of a figure deserving either reverence or a sceptical reception, depending on whether the context of the recital was pagan or Christian (e.g. *Lokasenna*). The inherent dangers of being associated with a stolen or borrowed identity would have been familiar to such reciters from their own repertoire. If impersonating a controversial figure, it would have been doubly important to preserve a distinction between oneself and one's part. A cautionary case of identity theft was presumably once to be found in

58 *Grípisspá*, st.4.
59 See p.26 of this study.

those poems lost on account of damage to the Codex Regius which are thought to have contained an account of Sigurðr assuming the likeness of Gunnarr,[60] a dishonesty which ultimately precipitates the downfall of both men, and is referred to ominously in *Grípisspá*.[61] A more humorous tone attends the mythological *Þrymskviða*, although this text, too, ends in violence brought on by an act of impersonation.

In this poem Þórr impersonates Freyja in order to redeem his hammer from the giant Þrymr. The fact that the thunder-god has been denuded of his warlike attribute has been associated with his symbolic emasculation.[62] However, Loki's strategy of borrowing the goddess's feather cloak (a feminine attribute) to seek it has received less attention.[63] In doing this, of course, Loki prefigures Þórr being dressed in Freyja's clothes and assuming her identity, which is achieved both by the goddess's act of self-abnegation: 'stǫkk þat it mikla | men Brísinga' ('The great necklace of the Brisings fell from her'),[64] and the god's being invested with this necklace in her stead (sts 15, 19). Þórr is extremely reluctant to impersonate a woman, whereas Loki has no compunction about borrowing her cloak as a means to an end. When he later disguises himself as Freyja's maid (st.20) he is evidently better suited to the undertaking than his companion. This is suggested by the text, which continues to refer to Þórr as a married man (st.24), whereas Loki is called 'in alsnotra ambótt' ('the very wise maid'),[65] a distinctly feminine appellation – his deceptive act is the more compelling, and Þrymr harbours no suspicions about him. Since the Æsir, like the audience of the poem, are complicit in the act of disguise there can be no argument for the honour of the real Freyja being impugned, in their eyes, by the actions of her (imperfect) *doppelgänger*. She is deferring

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60 See Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca, 1980).

61 *Grípisspá,* st.37. Without the text of these poems this example serves only to increase our awareness of the multiplicity of disguise motifs explored in the tradition. These events are described in *Vǫlsunga saga* and are hypothesised to have appeared also in a now lost *Sigurðar saga.* Although this title appears in Snorri's *Háttatal*, Faulkes cautions that it may have referred to a body of traditional stories and to no one text in particular. See Faulkes (2005), p.xxiii.

62 See, for instance, John McKinnell, 'Myth as Therapy: The Usefulness of *Þrymskviða*', in Kick and Schafer (2014), pp.200-20.

63 Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 1991), p.142.

64 *Þrymskviða*, st.13.

65 *Þrymskviða*, sts 26, 28.

her agency to a proxy. In a similar way, the reciter of the text would surely be freed from any implication of dishonour were he to adopt a woman's voice – or even attributes – for the duration of the performance. He too is, after all, a proxy for Þórr, and if the god is free from blame so also is his representative. Such distancing mechanisms become all the more potent and significant when one considers the proscription in *Grágás* against cross-dressing, the penalty for which is said to be lesser outlawry.[66] Notwithstanding divergent views on the dating of this poem, it is clear that reciters of such a text in Iceland were treading a fine line, and this sense of danger may well have enhanced the appeal of such a performance. To the skills of the adept storyteller, therefore, we must add a talent for self-preservation, and we may even view certain of the distancing mechanisms to be found in these poems as elaborate forms of escapology.

This discussion speaks to the question of whether eddic reciters must necessarily have been of the same gender as the characters they impersonated. This is less of an issue in the case of *Þrymskviða*, since all dialogue is framed by an extradiegetic narrative voice (that of the reciter, acting as conduit for a traditional poetic episode), but poems like *Vǫluspá*, spoken in a female voice, have provoked speculation that the performer must either have been female or else have impersonated a woman.[67] This latter possibility has often been described as problematic, since the prospect of a male performer impersonating a woman would surely have provoked accusations of 'unmanliness'. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen draws our attention to a Norwegian law code, preserved in *Staðarhólsbók*, which, like the earlier-noted *Konungsbók* text, proscribed the practice of men dressing as women.[68] Even if we dispute his

[66] This is according to *Konungsbók*, or MS Gl. Kgl. Sml. 1157 fol. in the Old Royal Collection, Copenhagen, dated c.1260. The relevant passage is numbered 254 in Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, eds and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (Winnipeg, 2000), ii, p.219.

[67] See Phillpotts (1931), p.140; more recently, Jenny Jochens, '*Vǫluspá*: Matrix of Norse Womanhood', in Teresa Pàroli, ed., *The Seventh International Saga Conference: Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (Spoleto, 1990), pp.257-277, and Gísli Sigurðsson, '*Vǫluspá* as the Product of an Oral Tradition: What Does that Entail?', in Terry Gunnell and Annette Lasson, eds, *The Nordic Apocalypse: Approaches to Vǫluspá and Nordic Days of Judgement* (Turnhout, 2013), pp.45-62.

[68] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), p.22. For evidence of medieval disguise traditions and cross-dressing, see further Terry Gunnell, 'Grýla, Grýlur, "Grøleks" and Skeklers: Medieval Disguise Traditions in the North Atlantic?', *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore*, 2001, 33-54.

argument for a similar legal and cultural prohibition having existed in Iceland, the conclusion he adduces from saga literature, that, 'A man was a man only as long as he had the strength, courage and virility to be so,' would surely render our reciters – whoever they were – susceptible to the charge of effeminacy if they were to dress as women or affect the voices of women.[69] Unless, that is, their acts of impersonation were considered to be exempt from this charge because the act of oral transmission was considered to be one of becoming a conduit for the identities and words of others, rather than of appearing, as it were, under one's own name. Games and gamers are often exempt from the usual societal constraints, and the example of such texts as *Þrymskviða*, like *Hárbarðsljóð*, can be seen as playing on this gaming topos, where the agency of the eddic performer(s) – like that of the Lord of Misrule[70] – serves to excuse both participants and audience from the demands of the usual social etiquette.[71] This sense of unruliness would help to explain the perennial popularity which allowed these stories to survive the transition to literacy.

There are several instances in the *Poetic Edda* when that threat of unruliness comes to the fore in the narratives themselves, as disguises are almost penetrated and impersonators only narrowly avoid discovery – an event which, like the *vǫlva's* naming of Óðinn in *Baldrs draumar* (st.13), would undermine their status and place them at the mercy of those whom they sought to deceive. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* the ironically named Blindr inn bǫlvísi notices Helgi's piercing eyes as he works at the mill, commenting, 'Hvǫss eru augu | í Hagals þýju' ('Piercing are the eyes | Of Hagal's maidservant').[72] However, due to Hagal's intervention, the hero remains masked.[73] Similarly, Þórr is apparently unable to check his

69 Sørensen (1983), p.87.

70 Max Harries, *Sacred Folly: A New History of the Feast of Fools* (Ithaca, 2011), pp.11-62. See also James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Myth and Religion* (London, 1922), 583-7. McKinnell makes a similar argument for *Lokasenna*. See McKinnell, 'Motivation and Meaning in *Lokasenna*', in Kick and Schafer (2014), p.196.

71 Thomas M. Malaby, 'Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience', *New Literary History* 40:1 (2009), 205-218.

72 *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II,* st.2.

73 Heroes are often given away by their unmistakable gaze. In *Fáfnismál*, st.5 the eponymous *wyrm* refers to Sigurðr by the epithet 'fráneygi sveinn' ('bright-eyed youth'), and *Rígsþula*, st.32 credits Heimdallr's most aristocratic son with the same characteristic: 'ǫtul váru augu' ('he had piercing eyes'). This is also the characteristic which almost gives Þórr away in *Þrymskviða*, st.27.

manly appetite when travelling incognito in *Þrymskviða* (st.25), but while Blindr may have his suspicions, he does not act on them, and Þrymr's appear to have been allayed altogether by Loki's quick imagination;[74] the heroes in both poems achieve their respective objectives with their disguises surviving intact. The risk of discovery – of having your assumed persona subjected to scrutiny and ultimately found to be wanting – was a threat of which oral performers must have been acutely aware if we accept Sørensen's argument that the act of impersonation, particularly impersonating a woman, was inherently dangerous.[75] So long as their audience accepted them as conduits, however, there would have been no cause to censure male reciters for dressing in women's clothes or speaking in women's voices. While we cannot say for certain that eddic reciters were all men, therefore (although all the commonly suggested analogues are, including Widsith and Gestr; and in *Beowulf* too it is the men who tell the tales), we can state that so long as they were understood to be acting as proxies, as *loci* for others, they could have played men or women, gods or ghosts, with equal impunity.

iii. Conduits and Votive Voices

The most obvious textual parallels for the concept of reciter as conduit mooted above are 'votive speakers' – that is, those who act as prophets and interpreters of dreams within the poems and the sagas. Grípir in *Grípisspá* is an example of this type, but still more instructive for our purposes, insofar as they mirror the storytelling technique of the texts in which they appear, are the two sibyls depicted in conversation with Óðinn in *Baldrs draumar* and *Vǫluspá*. In the latter case, casting the *vǫlva* in the role of conduit may help to account for the opening lines in which, despite the poem's apparent addressee being Óðinn, a wider audience is directly invoked:

> Hljóðs bið ek allar
> *helgar* kindir,

[74] *Þrymskviða*, st.26.
[75] Óðinn and Loki accuse each other of taking female form in *Lokasenna*, sts 23-4.

meiri ok minni
mǫgu Heimdalar[76]

Hear me, all of you
hallowed people,
the great and the small
children of Heimdallr.

Although several readers have assumed that the 'helgar kindir' are the Æsir,[77] there is no reason why the address could not be designed directly for the immediate audience of the poem – especially if we accept the convention of the 'double-scene,' thereby allowing that the *vǫlva*/reciter is addressing the Æsir/audience.[78] The listeners are thus vicariously situated amongst the gods without having explicitly made any (potentially sacrilegious, or at least controversial) claims to divinity. This implied context is enhanced by the appellation 'children of Heimdallr,' which we may take, in light of *Rígsþula*, to refer directly to the race of men.[79] Arguably this opening represents a case of the 'triple-scene' - the *vǫlva* is addressing an individual (Óðinn), an immediate audience (the auditors of the poem), and a universal audience of gods and men, perhaps transcending time and providing a conscious link between the mythic past and material present. Since her very function in the poem is to act as a conduit, conveying knowledge from another world, this reading is entirely consistent with the argument that the subject, like the reciter of this text, deliberately assumes the role of anonymous intermediary.

Given our earlier observation that Óðinn's various stock disguises – 'the masked one;' 'the wayfarer' – may be read as riddlic feints in a mythological sparring match, it is important to note that the *vǫlva* in *Vǫluspá* is in no doubt concerning her interlocutor's identity. If Óðinn has affected a disguise (as he does in *Baldrs draumar,* although there is no textual reference to one here) then it is readily penetrated in the opening lines – unless, of course, 'Valfǫðr,' is

[76] *Vǫluspá*, st.1.
[77] See, for instance, Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2014), p.283.
[78] See Hollander (1962), p.2.
[79] *Rígsþula*, sts 5-7, 17-19, 31-2.

simply another adopted name like 'Grímnir.'[80] This however seems unlikely, since it could apply only to Óðinn, whereas names like 'Vegtamr' are more universal, having the allegorical quality of stock poetic identities – 'Everyman' figures. Of course, preserving the conventional distinction between her addressee, 'Valfǫðr,' and the god, even in the knowledge that they are one and the same, could account for the speaker's habit of referring to 'Óðinn' in the third person (sts 18, 31, 32, 46, 53), a convention she only breaks when apparently taunting him with evidence of her superior knowledge (st.28).[81] When the *vǫlva* identifies and names Óðinn in *Baldrs draumar*, contrastingly, his true identity would appear to be a genuine revelation to her, as she states:

> Ertattu Vegtamr,
> sem ek hugða,
> heldr ertu Óðinn,
> aldinn Gautr![82]
>
> You are not Waytamer,
> as I thought,
> instead you are Óðinn,
> the old Gaut!

Having correctly solved the unvoiced riddle of her interlocutor's identity, the *vǫlva* is able to draw the exchange to a close on her own terms. In *Vǫluspá* the balance of power is reversed. Despite repeatedly demanding of the god whether he wants to hear more, the *vǫlva* gives no indication that she is acting under compulsion (she has not been summoned from the dead, like her analogue in *Baldrs draumar*), but rather out of choice. As Jenny Jochens has argued, 'While Óðinn is in charge... in the *Baldr* poem, the vǫlva in our poem [*Vǫluspá*] emerges clearly superior to the chief god… the vǫlva finally sinks away, but of her own volition.'[83]

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[80] The *vǫlva*'s perspicacity is less apparent in the Hauksbók redaction of the poem, which refers instead to 'vafǫdr' ('Woe-father'), who is the subject of the stanza, rather than its addressee, and whose identity is open for discussion – although he may well be Loki. It is possible that in this version that Óðinn remains unrecognised. It is even possible that the poem is not being directed to him at all.

[81] Whether she identifies herself by name is a matter of dispute. Hermann Pálsson notes in his edition of the poem, 'Although most scholars have identified Heiðr [st.22] with Gullveig, Sophus Bugge implied in his emended text that Heiðr was the narrator of *Vǫluspá*, and I can see no valid reason why the woman described here should be anyone else.' See Hermann Pálsson, ed., *Vǫluspá: The Sibyl's Prophecy* (Edinburgh, 1996), p.17.

[82] *Baldrs draumar*, st.13.

[83] Jochens (1990), p.273.

In part at least we must attribute this superiority to a thorough awareness of the god's past and future identity, and an imperviousness to his talent for disguise.[84] Indeed, we may also argue that her use of numerous different titles for Óðinn throughout the poem (such as 'Valfǫðr' in stanza 1 and 'inn aldni' in stanza 28) demonstrates how comprehensively she knows him, pre-empting any attempt he might make to gain the upper hand over her through subterfuge. Whether she identifies herself by name or not (and it is surely significant that Óðinn does not name her, since to do so would correspondingly be to assert *his* dominance), the *vǫlva* is not the subject of her poem but rather the conduit of old lore sought out by a curious traveller. This role is foregrounded by the inclusion of a reference to her *útiseta* (st.28), a rite associated with *seiðr*, by means of which she physically locates herself at the boundary between two spaces – the threshold of a mortal hall and divine (or metaphorical) hall.[85] She is, symbolically, the gatekeeper, monitoring access between the two worlds – a role which again reminds us of the eddic reciter, monitoring the transmission of old lore from past to present and from the mythic to the material world. As in a drama, the poem lasts so long as the speaker is in role, acknowledged as the conduit of an old story, not the innovator of a new one.

Ursula Dronke proposes that the poem's 'knot of tense and person' is intended to further reinforce this impression that the votive speaker sits between worlds, providing through her speech act a link from one to another.[86] She further suggests a context for transmission which would have seen the poem recited by a priestess addressing an idol of Óðinn. While tempting to the imagination, such an image is difficult to corroborate with any textual or archaeological source, but it is striking that Dronke too recognises the priest-like, quasi-sacramental function of the performer whosoever he or she may have been. Gísli

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[84] Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda: Volume II: Mythological Poems* (Oxford, 1997), pp.27-30. Dronke suggests that there are actually two *vǫlur* who speak within the poem, although Gísli Sigurðsson (2013), p.29 rejects this. Whether we detect one or two voices, the familiarity with Óðinn's characteristic multiplicity remains apparent.

[85] See Gísli Sigurðsson (2013), p.50.

[86] Dronke (1997), p.31.

Sigurðsson proposes a similar thesis:

> The vǫlva concludes (in st.63) by saying that 'now she will sink.' It is possible that her words should be read as the closing scene of a performance of which *Vǫluspá* may have formed a part. One can certainly visualise a woman dressed up as a vǫlva performing a narrative/visionary poem like *Vǫluspá* under conditions not totally different from those of the costumed Þorbjǫrg *lítilvǫlva* in her sybillic 'act' in Greenland.[87]

Again, a critical mass of evidence for this proposal is wanting, but Gísli's suggestion that the performer would have 'dressed up' or assumed a disguise to perform the role deserved further consideration. We know from the sagas that a character's attire could have tremendous symbolic resonance for an auditor. According to an argument made by Sørensen, Chapter 123 of *Njáls saga* depicts Flosi expressing extreme personal hurt at the gift of what appears to be a woman's cloak.[88] Similarly in texts like *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, a man's choice of garment can indicate his purpose or state of mind. When Hrafnkell sets out to slay Einarr we are told that 'Hann ríðr í blám klæðum,' ('He rode in blue-black clothes,')[89] indicating a literary convention, conceivably indebted to historical practice, in which ritual dressing to perform or embody a particular act or persona was well attested. Other possible sources of inspiration for this literary use of costume may have included the supposed practice of 'Berserk' warriors of dressing in bearskins, possibly in order to allow them to channel the primal spirits of these animals.[90] These are not instances of disguise *per se* – the saga protagonists and warriors are still clearly identifiable – but the suggestion that a costume or attribute confers certain qualities on whoever adopts it has important implications for recitative practice.

There is nonetheless a profound difference between the disguise topos and the process of achieving a *bona fide* change of nature and identity – a process by which reciters and their subjects become interchangeable in the minds of their audience. Eddic texts like *Lokasenna*

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87 Gísli Sigurðsson (2013), p.56.
88 See Sørensen (1983), pp.9-11.
89 Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ÍF XI (Reykjavík, 1950), p.104.
90 The alternative etymology is that 'ber' implies 'bare skin'. See Hilda E. Davidson, 'Shape-Changing in the Old Norse Sagas', in Charlotte Otten, ed., *A Lycanthropy Reader* (Syracuse, 1986), p.149. See further H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp.66-9 and *Heimskringla*, i, pp.17-18.

and the *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* poems may be recounted as participatory games and colourful tales of adventure, but the tone of *Vǫluspá* is altogether different, more portentous, and if well delivered would surely create the sense of a temporary unity between reciter and sibyl, during which the former is perceived to change into the likeness of the latter. This must also be true of the poems composed mainly in *ljóðaháttr*: as Gunnell puts it, 'the audience could not have avoided seeing the oral performer and the character that they are performing at least momentarily as one and the same person (like an actor in a theatre).'[91] In the case of these texts, then, the reciter is not merely donning a symbolic guise, but temporarily morphing into the character he (or she) purports to represent.[92] This is a more profound form of impersonation; a more absolute instance of self-abnegation than we have so far been discussing, but this too has analogues in the texts themselves. Fáfnir takes the form of a *wyrm* in *Fáfnismál*, while according to *Reginsmál* his brother adopts the shape of his namesake – an otter. If we take Regin, Fáfnir and Otr to be brothers in the literal, genealogical sense, then it follows that at least two have undergone a metamorphosis since birth. The prose interpolation after st.14 of *Reginsmál* supports this conclusion, since it states that, 'Fáfnir lá á Gnitaheiði ok var í orms líki' ('Fáfnir lay on Gnitaheiði and was in the form of a *wyrm*').[93] In other words, he was not inherently a *wyrm* by nature, but had assumed a *wyrm*'s shape – whether by choice or compulsion is unclear. The eddic tradition preserves a definite distinction between physical and spiritual identity, as witness these lines from *Grípisspá:*

> þá hǫmum víxlið
> er it heim komið,
> hefir hvárr fyr því
> hyggju sína.[94]
>
> Your forms change
> when you come home
> each of you will have
> his own spirit [again].

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[91] Terry Gunnell, '*Vǫluspá* in Performance', in Gunnell and Lassen (2013), p.73.

[92] For a wider survey of the medieval preoccupation with identity and metamorphosis see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), esp. pp.168-89.

[93] *Reginsmál*, prose interpolation between st.14 and st.15.

[94] *Grípisspá*, st.43.

Grípir is in no doubt that the soul can be divorced from the body, and it follows therefore that a body can change while the identity associated with it remains constant. While this process is different from a performance – being a translation of the spirit from one vessel to another rather than an act of self-abnegation – the distinction is nevertheless important. The soul can speak through a borrowed mouth, and a traditional figure who appears in different iterations is still possessed of essentially the same nature. This phenomenon parallels the workings of an oral tradition in which different versions of the same story would certainly have circulated and exerted influence on one another.[95] Small wonder, then, that the subject of metamorphosis should remain so prevalent in a literature dependent for its promulgation on a process of constant retelling and reinvention.

Physical metamorphosis also features in *Vǫlundarkviða* and in the sagas, and is especially prominent in Snorri's account of Þórr's journey to the hall of Útgarðaloki.[96] This episode, perhaps derived from a lost poetic source or sources, sees the god's party tangle with manifestations of fire, the ocean, old age and the Miðgarðsormr, each of which has assumed a deceptively unthreatening *hamr* or aspect.[97] Yet, despite appearing in disguise, at least two of these opponents (Logi and Elli) may be readily identified by the very literal names given to them (‘fire’ and ‘old age’ respectively). As with *Hárbarðsljóð* it is possible to speculate that in Snorri's source poem(s) – if not necessarily in his own account – Þórr may have deduced the identity of each antagonist during the competition. If this is so, presumably he preserves the convention of appearing to accredit their disguises out of deference to his host and/or a willingness to continue playing the game to which Útgarðaloki has challenged him. Calling the premise into question would prematurely end the contest, as surely as interrupting the storyteller would force the narrative to break off. Whether Þórr deduces the identities of his antagonists or not (Útgarðaloki's explanatory coda may be an invention of Snorri's, restating

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95 Foley (1995).

96 See, for instance, the example of the shapeshifter Kveld-Úlfr in *Egils saga* and the many guises of Oddr in *Eyrbyggja saga.*

97 Detlef Brennecke, ‘Gab es eine *Skrýmiskviða*?’ *ANF* 96 (1981), 1-8; Faulkes (1982), pp.xxiv-xxv.

what the audience of the source poem(s) would have already surmised) those to whom such a tale was recounted cannot have been ignorant of the meaning of these names, and must therefore have anticipated the outcome of the contests. In a culture rife with kennings and with a burgeoning riddle tradition, it would be difficult to imagine that an innate capacity for metatextual reception did not exist among the audience for this story. John Lindow has explored the episode in some detail, suggesting for instance that, since *kǫttr* appears among the names of *jǫtnar* listed by Snorri, 'cat of the sea' may have been a familiar kenning for the Miðgarðsormr.[98] It is curious, given his contention that Útgarðaloki is in fact Óðinn in disguise, that Lindow does not draw the explicit connection with *Hárbarðsljóð*, in which Þórr is similarly encountered and tested by his fellow god, operating again under a pseudonym. In both cases it would appear that Þórr is being tested in two respects: how does he respond to the challenges and insults of his counterpart, and is he able to successfully decode the riddle of his counterpart's identity? This twofold challenge motif is familiar to us from the chivalric tradition (see, for instance, the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which also features an instance of metamorphosis as the titular knight is revealed to be Sir Bertilak at the denouement), and from such allegorical texts as *The Vision of Piers Plowman*.[99] The auditor of such tales must keep in mind the simultaneous roles performed by a reciter who, in addition to his own nature, would assume the voice of each character featured in the tale and of the narrator who speaks with an authority derived from the story's purportedly ancient origins.

The cause of the metamorphosis described in this episode, by way of which such abstract concepts as age and such distinctive creatures as the Miðgarðsormr pass unrecognised, goes unexplained in Snorri's retelling, although the episode is evidently supposed to be read either as supernatural or simply as a parable. By contrast, deliberate alteration of one's body by other means could have profound implications for one's identity in

[98] Lindow (2000), 180.
[99] Piers himself assumes a succession of identities which the dreamer is required to deduce from what other allegorical manifestations say about him.

more worldly literary contexts. Sørensen, commenting on an incident in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga,* in which Sturla Sighvatsson has his cousin castrated, reminds us that such an act of physical emasculation carried severe connotations for a victim's reputation and public persona.[100] Such permanent change to a man's body represented the most extreme form of the unmanliness implied in the wearing of women's clothes.

Not all metamorphoses are so extreme, nor do all necessarily require a physical change Like Þórr's antagonists in the Útgarðaloki episode, it is possible in the *Poetic Edda* to achieve metamorphosis in consequence of changing your name or, conversely, to change as a result of having a name or title conferred upon you. When Helgi kills King Hunding he earns the right to be known as 'Hundingsbani'; when Sigurðr kills the dragon he becomes 'Fáfnisbani.' Both men enter the heroic pantheon replete with these new appellations, each of which incorporates the name, and thus the reputation, of the individual whom they have slain. They have not wholly changed, but have rather been augmented by these conquests, incorporating some memorial remnant of their vanquished foe into their own identity. In the poem *Rígsþula,* functional titles are initially conferred upon men and women by the god Rígr, only for the greatest of these men to contend with his progenitor and ultimately overcome him, take his place and, crucially, assume his name (or, at least, his title, the etymology of 'Rígr' apparently suggesting 'king' - in any case, the guise he wears when he travels among men):

> Þá ǫðlaðisk
> ok þá eiga gat
> Rígr at heita.[101]
>
> Then he grew greater
> and got the right
> to be named Rígr.

The story is one of earning an identity; of progressing from being mortal to being divine. A similar case has been made for Bragi, the oldest known skald, who shares a name with one of the Æsir, prompting the suggestion either that the eddic tradition confused their identities or

[100] Sørensen (1983), p.84. See also Mats Malm, 'The Notion of Effeminate Language in Old Norse Literature', in Heslop et al. (2007), pp.305-20.
[101] *Rígsþula*, st.43.

that a deliberate appropriation took place: either Bragi the skald took the name of his patron or else he was himself elevated to the pantheon of gods on account of his mastery of the art form.[102]

In this light, we might also consider the references to resurrection in the prose interjections punctuating both *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* and the succeeding *Helgi* poem as a retrospective acknowledgement that listeners who encountered these texts in their oral manifestations would have instinctively linked one Helgi to another. A prose interjection between stanzas six and seven of *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* tells us: 'Hiǫrvarðr ok Sigrlinn áttu son mikinn ok vænan. Hann var þǫgull; ekki nafn festisk við hann.' ('Hjǫrvarðr and Sigrlinn had a son, tall and fair to behold. He was silent. No name was associated with him.') Even without this qualification, it is apparent from the verse lines which follow (sts 6-7) that before meeting the valkyrie this hero is either anonymous or bears some other appellation than that of his famous namesake. When this heroic identity is conferred upon him, this second Helgi demands to have the valkyrie also. It is as though in accepting this name he must come to resemble its originator more closely. As Liberman puts it, 'One's name was regarded as one's part, and in the pre-Saussurean age it was natural to live up to one's name.'[103] The Helgi of the latter poem symbolically metamorphoses into his antecedent by apparently reliving his relationship with a valkyrie who was, we are told, Sváva reincarnated. Through the agency of the valkyrie, the composer of *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar* is able to attach the significance of an established heroic identity to a character genealogically removed from the original source of the name. One Helgi takes on the mantle of another, assuming both his attribute (the valkyrie) and his fame, and becoming a conduit for his legacy, just as in *Rígsþula*. Another suggestive analogue from the sagas is the episode in *Víga-Glúms saga*, in which the titular protagonist dreams that he encounters the *hamingja* of his grandfather (curiously figured as a woman in this dreamscape). Upon awakening he declares that this

[102] See further Mitchell (2001), 172-3.
[103] Liberman (1994), p.234.

same spirit will now live on in him, and promptly receives news of his grandfather's death.[104] Glúmr makes no claim to his ancestor's name or physical form, but a spiritual metamorphosis has nonetheless taken place, grafting the essence of his forebear onto his own identity and reputation.

We have seen how an eddic protagonist may choose to adopt or relinquish a new identity, either by assuming a disguise ('creation'), impersonating another individual ('recreation') or actually altering his physical or nominal appearance ('metamorphosis'). Each change constitutes a kind of performance – even though some metamorphoses are permanent, they nevertheless involve the replacement of one 'outward show' with another. Such acts are inherently dangerous, in that the protagonist's true nature may be discovered, and this may prove his undoing. However, it is equally possible that a *failure* to accredit to a character his true identity may precipitate a crisis. In *Hamðismál*, the protagonists Hamðir and Sǫrli meet their half-brother Erpr on the road, yet give no indication that they recognise him as one of their own:

> Fundu á stræti
> stórbrǫgðóttan:
> 'Hvé mun jarpskammr
> okkr fultingja?'
>
> They met on the road
> a man full of clever stratagems:
> 'How can a swarthy dwarf
> give us any help?'[105]

Here the brothers are denying their own kinsman, with whom they share a common lineal identity (the brothers are 'goðborn' ('descendants of gods'),[106] and should, like Glúmr, share in the inheritance that is the *hamingja* of their antecedents). The poem goes on to demonstrate in graphic detail how their act of fratricide weakens them; they are implicitly punished for

[104] Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., *Víga-Glúms saga*, ÍF IX (Reykjavík, 1954), pp.30-31. See further Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), pp.227-30.

[105] *Hamðismál*, st.13. Translation taken from Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford, 1996), p.240. Hollander (1962) translates 'jarpskammr' as 'brownish bastard' (p.318). Both renderings indicate a racial distinction between the brothers and their half-brother which emphasises their unwillingness to identify with him. The second edition of Larrington's text reads 'How can this dark-haired little lad give us any help?' removing the racial overtones. See Larrington (2014), p.232.

[106] *Hamðismál*, st.16.

failing to recognise Erpr – a third of their collective strength and family integrity. Only at the point of death does Hamðir acknowledge this mistake, naming Erpr for the first time:

> Af væri nú hǫfuð,
> ef Erpr lifði,
> bróðir okkarr inn bǫðfrœkni,
> er vit á braut vágum.[107]
>
> Off that head would now be,
> if Erpr was living,
> our brother, valiant in battle,
> whom we killed on the road.

It is of course possible that the brothers realise their mistake before they are in extremis, but given Erpr's riddlic offer to help,

> ‘Hvat megi fótr
> fœti veita,
> né holdgróin
> hǫnd annarri?’[108]
>
> ‘How may a foot
> help a foot
> or a flesh-grown hand
> assist another hand?’

it seems more likely that the solution to both the literal riddle and the vexed question of the *jarpskammr*'s true nature come to Hamðir together, prompted by the apotheosis of his death and, perhaps, the association he draws between the limbless king in front of him and his brother's riddle.[109] Since we have already noted a cultural preoccupation with avoiding such cases of mistaken identity, it is possible to read into this episode an example of the vital social role played by the eddic reciter, through whom such mis-identifications could be corrected or avoided altogether. He is the recorder; the repository of society's common memories; the ‘echo chorus’ which Bertha Phillpotts identifies in the detached narrative voice of the family sagas.[110] The reciter adopts a series of disguises in order to effect a series of revelations, each

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[107] *Hamðismál*, st.28.
[108] *Hamðismál*, st.14.
[109] This is unlike the account in *Vǫlsunga saga*, in which they acknowledge Erpr's identity before arriving at the hall. However the saga is much later, and generally more concerned with solving riddles than perpetuating them. See *Vǫlsunga saga* in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, i, p.90.
[110] Phillpotts (1931), p.178.

of which coincides with a point of narrative climax. The parallel between the recitative craft and the subject matter is again apparent. The subtext reads: do not misjudge me according to my appearance or the part I seem to play.

iv. *Vǫluspá:* The Gordian Knot of Tense and Person

Of all the poems in the eddic corpus, none has received so much attention and scrutiny in the modern period as *Vǫluspá,* the story of the creation, destruction and rebirth of the world told through a combination of memory and prophecy. In the introduction to her 1997 edition of the poem, Ursula Dronke referred to a 'knot of tense and person' intertwining the voices of the multiple *vǫlur* whom she believed she had detected within the poem.[111] John McKinnell, reviewing Dronke's work, contested this reading, arguing instead that there is only one *vǫlva*, and accounting for her varied use of pronouns and the poem's frequent shifts in tense and perspective by suggesting that she veers erratically in and out of a trance state, during which she visualises and expresses herself in the third person.[112] Both scholars agree, however, that the question is further complicated by the now widespread view that in *Vǫluspá* we have a textual response to an oral-dramatic poem which drew on a *bona fide* prophetic tradition now largely lost to us. As Christopher Abram puts it, 'An eddic poem can be viewed as a fossil of a once vital living tradition of myth and poetry, which developed organically as it moved through time and space.'[113] We are, at best, several degrees removed from the source material for the surviving versions of the poem – as, in all probability, were the scribes responsible for recording them in the Codex Regius (**R**), Hauksbók (**H**) and the various manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* (**SnE**).[114]

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[111] Dronke (1997), p.29.

[112] John McKinnell, 'Review: Ursula Dronke, ed. *The Poetic Edda. Vol. 2 Mythological Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997', *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001), 116-28. See also Vésteinn Ólason, '*Vǫluspá* and Time', in Gunnell and Lassen (2013), esp. p.29. Vésteinn considers Dronke's vision of two *vǫlur* to be 'an unnecessary complication.'

[113] Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North: The Gods of the Norsemen* (London, 2011), p.19.

[114] The manuscript commonly referred to as 'Hauksbók' is now preserved in three fragments in the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies in Reykjavík. The fragment containing the *Vǫluspá* verses is AM 554 4to.

There have been a number of attempts to identify the author of *Vǫluspá* either as a prophetess in her own right, or perhaps as a sibyl's son, re-imagining his mother's voice through the medium of poetry.[115] That the author was male, Christian, and seeking to replicate rather than participate in, the conventions of a *séance*, is still a widely endorsed supposition.[116] Just as varied are the models of the text in performance promulgated in recent years.[117] Given this, we may wonder why neither Dronke nor McKinnell devotes space in their respective analyses to the possibility of an oral prehistory for the poem which involved its recitation by multiple speakers – certainly, this would go some way towards accounting for the use of the third person pronoun *hon* in the poem, which otherwise has no clear topical referent.[118] Gering addressed the problem in his 1922 edition by simply replacing every awkward instance of *hon* with *ek*, but as Sigurður Nordal subsequently argued this was an evasion rather than a solution.[119] In that same article, Nordal also rejected out of hand a more innovative solution (which he attributes to Guðbrandur Vigfússon) that the poem might be read as a dialogue between three *vǫlur*.[120] Despite this cursory dismissal, the possibility that the poem should contain multiple voices is not inherently absurd and deserves proper consideration. Certainly some poets must have practised the art of collective composition, as witness the provision (no.378) in *Staðarhólsbók* equally censuring *all* who participated in the production of offensive verses.[121] Moreover, we have already entertained the proposition that such texts as *Lokasenna* and *Hárbarðsljóð* were performed by more than one reciter. The poem *Grottasǫngr* features the voices of two giantesses which, at times, join in concert – an effect

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115 For the former explanation, see Hermann Pálsson, 1996, p.14. For the latter, Sigurður Nordal, 'The Author of *Völuspá*', trans. B. S. Benedikz, *SBVS* 20 (1978-81), 114-30.

116 Jochens (1990), p.278.

117 For an account of the most prominent performances, see Gunnell (2013), pp.63-77.

118 McKinnell thinks Heiðr, whose name he translates as 'heath,' is the single speaker of the poem (cf. McKinnell, 'On Heiðr and Gullveig', in Kick and Schafer (2014), p.40), and that Gullveig is likely an invention of the poet (p.45). Turville-Petre (1964) identifies Gullveig as Freyja (p.159). Else Mundal thinks the two names may refer to the same person whom she also identifies as the narrative voice; see Else Mundal, '*Austr sat in aldna...* Giantesses and Female Powers in *Vǫluspá*', in Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann, eds, *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz (1922-1997)* (Vienna, 2002), p.186.

119 Sigurður Nordal, 'Three Essays on *Völuspá*: II Framework and Structure', trans. B. S. Benedikz and John McKinnell, *SBVS* 18 (1970-73), 96.

120 Sigurður Nordal (1970-73), 99.

121 See Dennis, Foote and Perkins (2000), p.354 (numbered 424 in this edition and paralleled in *Konungsbók*).

perhaps more efficiently achieved through multi-participant performance than by any other means.[122] In light of these examples, although neither **R** nor **H** explicitly calls for a multi-participant performance of the text (neither, we may note, does *Lokasenna*), the hypothesis that it was once rendered in such a form remains to be disproved.

Among McKinnell's objections to Dronke's thesis of multiple *vǫlur* is his concern that the first speaker – the putative 'Vǫlva A,' to whom Dronke assigns the opening lines – cannot later act simply the mortal embodiment for a 'spirit *vǫlva*' ('Vǫlva B'), as she suggests, due to the evidence of st.2 in which that same voice claims,

R	**H**
níu man ek heima, níu íviðjur, mjǫtvið mæran, fyr mold neðan.[123]	níu man ek heima, níu íviðjur, mjǫtvið mæran, fyr**ir** mold neðan.[124]
Nine worlds I remember, nine wood-giantesses, the great measuring-tree, beneath the earth.	Nine worlds I remember, nine wood-giantesses, the great measuring-tree, beneath the earth.

These can hardly be the recollections of a mortal seer, since they predate the very origin of the human race. The term *vǫlva*, meaning 'wand carrier' (from *vǫlr*) is elsewhere applied only to mortals with prophetic powers, and not to gods or other timeless beings. This objection is less compelling, however, if we posit that it is in fact a dead *vǫlva* (Dronke's 'Vǫlva B'), the spirit voice summoned from Hel like the *vǫlva* in the partly analogous *Baldrs draumar*, who speaks first and in the first person, independently of her counterpart, 'Vǫlva A.' In the two fuller versions of the poem (**R** and **H**), this speaker describes her audience as comprising both the gods and members of the human race, who are described as their descendants:

R	**H**
... kindir	**helgar** kindir

[122] See Judy Quinn, 'Mythological Motivation in Eddic Heroic Poetry: Interpreting *Grottasöngr*', in Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, eds, *Revisiting The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend* (London, 2013), pp.177-8. For further discussion of the evidence for multi-participant performance in the medieval Germanic and Scandinavian world see Gunnell (1995), pp.334-50

[123] *Vǫluspá*, st.2. Because manuscript variation is so central to the argument which follows, quotations will cite all three versions of the poem where cognate verses survive. Divergences between one witness and another will be indicated through use of bold typeface.

[124] Deviations from the **R** text will be rendered in bold typeface when citing from **H** and **SnE**.

meiri ok minni mǫgo Heimdalar.[125]	meiri ok minni mǫgo Heimdal**l**ar.
... children great and small offspring of Heimdallr.	Hallowed children great and small offspring of Heimdallr.

We might be tempted to picture this medium speaking at a meridian point between the birth of the world and its rebirth – to imagine that the poem represents an act of handing over the metaphorical torch of narrative from the past to the future. This reading would correlate with that of scholars who consider this text to be a Christian response to, and adaptation of, pagan themes and imagery, which are implicitly expropriated by the ascendant Christian tradition through constant reference to the passing of the old order.[126]

If we assign these opening lines to one speaker, whose knowledge is entirely of the past, then it follows that she may be considered the speaking voice of the whole first part of the poem – irrespective of whether we include the, possibly interpolated, dwarf *þula*[127] – up until st.21 in the **R** text,[128] when a new voice supersedes hers, apparently continuing the first *vǫlva*'s narrative, but now in the third person. This change in pronoun would most obviously signify a change in speaker in any other text, and it is surely worth exploring whether such a reading is coherent in the case of *Vǫluspá.* This reading may also encourage us to consider conflating the identities of the first speaker and the figure known as Heiðr, since it would appear to be she whom the second speaking voice now proceeds to describe. In a performance context, however, the possibility would also exist for the second speaker to gesture to a third party named Heiðr, and so this attribution must ultimately remain uncertain.[129] In st.23 the first voice apparently resumes control of the narrative, reverting to the past tense, recalling past deeds which she herself, seemingly, witnessed. The two voices appear to alternate

[125] *Vǫluspá*, st.1.
[126] Dronke (1997).
[127] McKinnell (2001), pp.116-7.
[128] Verse numbering in this paragraph applies only to the **R** version of the poem. See below for discussion of how the verses might be apportioned in **H**.
[129] Dronke (1997) thinks Gullveig is a distinct individual. Heino Gehrts, 'Die Gullveig-Mythe der *Vǫluspá*', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 8 (1969), 321-78 is less certain, while Else Mundal (2002) maintains that a common identity for Heiðr and Gullveig is possible.

throughout the remainder of the poem, with the majority of stanzas being potentially attributable to either speaker without a breakdown in coherence. St.28 in **R** is particularly difficult to attribute, since the scribe's orthography provides no clue to distinguish direct speech from description. The text reads:

R	**SnE**
Ein sat hon úti	...
þá er inn aldni kom,	...
yggjungr ása,	...
ok í augu leit:	...
‘Hvers fregníð mik?	...
Hví freistið mín?	...
Allt veit ek, Óðinn,	Allt veit ek, Óðinn,
hvar þú auga falt:	hvar þú auga falt:
í inum mæra	í inum mæra
Mímisbrunni.’	Mímisbrunni;
Drekkr mjǫð Mímir	drekkr mjǫð Mímir
morgin hverjan	morgin hverjan
af veði Valfǫðrs.	af veði Valfǫðrs.
Vituð ér enn – eða hvat?[130]	Vituð ér enn – eða hvat?

Alone she sat outside,
when the old one came,
the terrible one of the gods,
and looked in her eyes:
‘Why question me?
why tempt me?
I know all, Óðinn,
where you hid your eye:
in the famed
Well of Mímir.’
Mímir drinks mead
every morning
from Father of the Slain's pledge.
Do you understand yet – or what?

The editorial decision to place the middle section of the stanza within speech marks seems justified – the words belong to whichever being spoke to Óðinn during the previous encounter being described, whom we take to be the same *vǫlva* who spoke the opening of the poem, recalling a past life during which she and Óðinn partook in an exchange which in some way mirrors the current situation. Yet in performance, we may wonder whether those lines ought to be spoken by the reciter playing this ‘spirit *vǫlva*’ – as though performing a dramatic scene –

[130] *Vǫluspá*, st.28. Speech marks appear as in the ÍF (2014) edition.

or by the *vǫlva* who began the stanza, since the speech occurs in the context of her portion of the narrative. It is also possible that a third party in the role of Óðinn himself might speak them. We could further consider whether the subsequent lines in this stanza rightly belong inside the speech marks: are the words spoken by way of proof; to taunt the god; or to inform the present audience – the 'mǫgo Heimdalar' ('Offspring of Heimdallr') of st.1?

Clearly, in a modern rendition of the poem, the text might be divided in several different ways between two choral performers and still make sense, but the suggestion being made here is that the text contains inbuilt cues for changes in voice which more or less correspond to Dronke's division of lines between the two *vǫlur*, who she imagines to be portrayed by a single reciter. The first voice speaks of things past; the second describes the first (including identifying her as Heiðr) and then speaks of things to come. Certain stanzas, such as this one, may remain inscrutable, but by enumerating the different possible distributions of lines between two speakers – both of whom, like anyone else, retain the ability to speak in the first and third person depending on the subject of what they are saying – it may be possible to throw new light on the theatrical dimension of this deeply rhetorical poem.

At this stage it becomes necessary to introduce a number of caveats. First, the stanza numbers given above refer only to the **R** version of the poem. Because it is incomplete, the **SnE** version is of little use either in supporting or undermining the possibility of the poem having contained multiple parts attributable to multiple performers in a hypothetical oral tradition. The **H** text follows a narrative pattern broadly similar to **R** and is not inconsistent with the reading suggested here. In this case, the stanza attribution would be as follows: stanzas 1-23, narrated in the first person and in the past tense, belong to the first speaker (again, a possible candidate for the name Heiðr which appears here in st.27). Stanzas 24 to 27, which describe the first speaker (and possibly a third party, depending on the identification of Heiðr) in the third person must belong to a second speaker, whereas the narrator of events

long past – Dronke's purported 'spirit *vǫlva*' – would appear to resume speaking in st.28 if we accept the argument made above that the speaker of this passage is describing a series of personal recollections spanning ancient history up to the present day. Stanzas 28-33 also belong to this speaker, while stanzas 34-35, narrated in the third person yet from the perspective of a prophet surveying the future, may be attributable to either voice, as is most of the remainder of the poem. As such, it is possible to make the case that both the **R** and **H** texts reflect a poem narrated in two voices which acknowledge one another's presence in the discourse through the shift in pronouns, and each belong to a distinct individual, one of whom has far-reaching memories of the past, and the other of whom evidently knows something of the future.

One major flaw in this model, however, is that it does not address the possibility of more speakers beyond these two. Guðbrandur Vigfússon's suggestion of three speakers tallies well with the fact that we experience time in three tenses (past, present and future) and that Old Norse mythology provides a convenient prophetic identity to impersonate each tense in the form of the three *Nornir* (Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld).[131] We have already acknowledged that the reference to Heiðr (**R** st.22, **H** st.27) might cause a performer to implicate a hitherto silent third participant in the recital, so it is surely possible that this third party might later speak some of the text. Whereas it is neat and convenient from a modern critical perspective to assign one voice to the past and another to the future, the poem never strictly licenses us to do so as it stands in either manuscript.

It is important also to note that none of the manuscripts contain any apparent paratextual cues for a change in the identity of the speaker at any of the points hitherto suggested. No rubric exists to substantiate this argument, nor is it possible to claim – as Terry Gunnell seeks to do for *Lokasenna*[132] – that the poem as it stands could not plausibly be

[131] Since they appear in the third person in st.20 they are hardly candidates for the speakers of the poem, rather an example of how mythological beings, particularly women, often worked in concert. See further the example of Þorbjǫrg lítil-vǫlva discussed below, pp.59-62.

[132] Gunnell (1995), ch.3, esp. p.238. See also McKinnell, 'Motivation and Meaning in *Lokasenna*', in Kick and Shafer (2014), p.188.

performed by a single reciter. It could, though not without generating some controversy about the erratic changes in person and perspective. In positing (at least) two voices, personated by (at least) two distinct performers, we potentially reduce the ambiguity about who is speaking at any point, why the shifts from first to third person occur, who Heiðr is, and why the switches between past and future take place so abruptly. The hypothesis of multiple narrative voices, personated by multiple reciters, does not amount to a poem told through dialogue, since none of the participants are addressing one another; rather, they all combine to narrate the same sequence of events from their different perspectives and, at times, address either a past or present iteration of Óðinn. Heiðr (if it is indeed she who speaks first), presumably summoned to the present audience from the world of the dead, draws on personal recollections, while the second speaker (or third, fourth and so on) makes no mention of her sources, but rather invokes the gift of prophecy when framing her contributions. This shared delivery is by no means an unusual dramatic device, featuring in diverse other contexts ranging from *Gylfaginning* to the three witches who address Macbeth.[133] In each case, every speaker reinforces what the others are saying, while sharing the narrative responsibility evenly between them. Consequently the relationship between the speakers and their addressee is unequal: they speak with a corporate voice whereas each individual to whom they address themselves must make his or her own judgement concerning the information they thus receive. The speakers present a united front.

Since verses from *Vǫluspá* are quoted so often in Snorri's *Prose Edda* it is tempting to imagine that his text may hold some key to this problem, but on almost every occasion when he refers to these verses it is the poem, rather than its narrator, which he identifies as his source. The only exception occurs in Chapter 14 of *Gylfaginning* in which Hár quotes the poem's list of dwarf names, interspersed with the attribution, 'Ok þessi segir hon nǫfn þeira

[133] As has been widely noted, Shakespeare's play contains numerous allusions to stories and tropes which feature prominently in the Old Norse corpus. See Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2004), pp.144-5 and Jón Karl Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla*, trans. Victoria Appleton (London, 2017), pp.90-91, 135-6.

dverganna'[134] ('And these, she says, are the names of the dwarves.') The 'hon' ('she') in question is clearly the speaking voice at this point in *Vǫluspá*, but besides discounting the possibility of a chorus of many voices chanting the names of the dwarves in unison, this citation does nothing to dissuade us from the possibility that this 'she' could apply only to the speaker who lists the dwarves – in other words, the remainder of the poem goes unattributed. By a similar logic, we may call into question the argument that the poem's name prescribes a single speaker. The title 'Vǫluspá' is used by Snorri to designate a version of this text with which he was familiar, and the 'faint remnants' of this title may just be detected on the first folium of the Codex Regius.[135] While we cannot make any certain grammatical pronouncements as to the implication of this word, given the lack of evidence for the noun *vǫlva* occurring in the genitive plural form elsewhere in Old Norse,[136] we may still admit of the possible agency of two speakers within the poem if we distinguish between the prophetic voice of the future and the (possibly reanimated) voice of the past which we may incline to ascribe to Heiðr (hereafter: ?Heiðr). This reading would render the first voice (who speaks second) that of the titular *vǫlva*, while the second belongs to another being with whom she shares the discourse, although the prophetic utterances are all her own. It is also worth acknowledging, of course, that the title may well be a product of textuality rather than orality, conceivably part of an attempt by scribes to convert a polyvocal oral utterance into a simpler form (in a written context) for the benefit of the private reader.

Returning to the poem, it is important to note that st.43 in the **R** text (st.31 in **H**) presents the first of three instances (five in **H**) where the following formula occurs:

R	**H**
Fjǫlð veit hon frœða - fram sé ek lengra	Fram sé ek lengra, fjǫlð **kann ek segja**
Much old wisdom she knows - I see further ahead	I see further ahead, I can speak much wisdom

[134] *Gylfaginning*, p.16.
[135] Frederic T. Wood, 'The *Vǫluspá* and its Name', *SS* 20:4 (November 1948), p.209.
[136] See the entry for 'VÖLVA' in Guðbrandur Vigfússon, Richard Cleasby and William A. Craigie, eds, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1957) (hereafter, 'Cleasby-Vigfússon').

If we take each of the stanzas containing this formula in **R** to be spoken by the second voice in the poem – the speaker with the gift of foresight (a perspective which might be shared between multiple performers, all nevertheless united in their shared prophetic capacity) – then a clear distinction begins to emerge between the now dead ?Heiðr, whose knowledge is all of the mythic past, and the seer who speaks these lines, now adopting the first person pronoun to juxtapose her own prescience with her counterpart's faculty of recollection. The prophetic stanzas that follow this utterance, sts 43-55 in **R,** must in all probability belong to the same voice – this seer who speaks of the future, rather than the past; who thrice distinguishes herself from her counterpart through the use of this repeated formula. In the oral tradition, it is conceivable that during different recitations of the poem these words were used by a second performer to wrest control of the narrative from the speaker (?Heiðr) and so pivot the narrative from the mythic past to the eschatological future – an interruption which bears some semblance of originating with a dialogue partner, engaging with the words of her counterpart.

Performers, working from their common memory, might have improvised to some extent, and it is also possible that different variants of the poem involved different numbers of performers.[137] With this in mind, it is instructive to turn to the equivalent formulation in the **H** text, which dispenses entirely with the third person pronoun. Since a distinction between voices is elsewhere extant in this version of the poem also, two readings of this passage are possible: first, we might suppose that the distinction between the voice of the past and the prophetic voice with knowledge of the future identified in **R** does not obtain in the **H** text. Second, we might attribute each of the two lines to a separate speaker whenever this formulation occurs. This latter reading would represent a 'handing over' of the prerogative to speak from one participant to another. This third and final section of the poem (**R** st.56-62; **H**

[137] Else Mundal suggests an improvisational tradition as being among the reasons why the genre of mourning songs did not, for the most part, survive the transition to literacy. See Else Mundal, 'Female Mourning Songs and Other Lost Oral Poetry in Pre-Christian Nordic Culture', in Lars Boje Mortensen, Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen and Alexandra Bergholm, eds, *The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds* (Turnhout, 2013), p.385.

st.46, 50-58) moves the narrative perspective from past and future to a post-apocalyptic rebirth of the world. From this point it remains wholly unclear who is speaking – Dronke suggests that perhaps both voices combine in unison.[138] This section is related in the third person (with the exception of **H** st.50), but it is equally possible that either *vǫlva* is being described as experiencing this new vision.

Before further exploring this multi-speaker model, it is important to establish at least the possibility that rituals resembling *séances*, involving multiple *vǫlur*, were a feature of pre-Christian Nordic society which the poet may have had contact with or, at the very least, a strong sense of.[139] Two obvious literary analogues suggest themselves: Chapter 4 of *Eríks saga rauða* and Chapter 2 of *Ǫrvar-Odds saga* both contain accounts of prophetesses in a pre-Christian context frequently associated with analyses of *Vǫluspá*. The first of these passages describes the prophetic rites of Þorbjǫrg lítil-vǫlva. Two details from this text are pertinent to our analysis. In describing Þorbjǫrg, the saga author comments, 'Hon hafði átt sér níu systr, ok váru allar spákonur, en hon ein var þá á lífi' ('She had nine sisters, and all had the prophetic gift, but she was the only one still alive.')[140] This detail may be taken to imply that the sisters had once practised prophecy together, like the fates of Greek mythology, and that Þorbjǫrg is now weakened by their absence. The implication is strengthened by Þorbjǫrg's request for assistance from other women who can chant as part of her arcane ritual. Evemtually, after some persuasion, a woman named Guðríðr is convinced to participate in the chanting, despite her initial (Christian) impulse to decline. Guðríðr notes that she too inherited her magical knowledge through a female family connection: 'Hvárki em ek fjǫlkunnig né vísindakona, en þó kenndi Halldís, fóstra mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur' ('I have neither witchcraft nor the arcane arts, but I learned from Halldís, my

[138] Dronke (1997), p.29.

[139] For Ursula Dronke's analysis of the correspondences between the pagan and Christian Sibylline traditions see Ursula Dronke, '*Vǫluspá* and Sibylline Traditions', in R. North and T. Hofstra, eds, *Latin Culture and Medieval German Europe* (Groningen, 1992), pp.3-24.

[140] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, *Eríks saga rauða,* ÍF IV (Reykjavík, 1935), p.206.

foster mother, what in Iceland she taught me, and she called them ward songs').[141]

Here, then, we have an account – albeit late, and possibly an interpolation borrowed from some unknown source – of women working collectively to commune with spirits.[142] *Ǫrvar-Odds saga* provides further analogous material. Here, in Chapter 2, another woman named Heiðr attends a feast and prophesies the fates of those present. Since, in both instances, these prophetic acts take place in the context of a public gathering, and since *Vǫluspá* begins with an appeal to a diverse audience of gods and mortals, it is at least possible to regard all three accounts as superficially similar at the outset, despite being recorded at different times and for different audiences. Like Þorbjǫrg, it would appear that Heiðr does not practise prophecy *sola.* The saga tells us that she travels with a retinue: 'Hún hafði með sér fimmtán sveina ok fimmtán meyjar' ('She had with her fifteen boys and fifteen girls.')[143] Although their precise role is not stated, the fact remains that in neither Heiðr's case nor Þorbjǫrg's does the ritual surrounding the act of prophecy appear to be an individual endeavour. This conclusion may appear to contrast with the **R** text of *Vǫluspá*, st.28, in which the *vǫlva* is depicted sitting alone in contemplation, assuming a meditative posture familiar to readers of the Old English poem *The Wanderer* – another text haunted by the suggestion of polyvocality.[144] Both the saga accounts, however, maintain a distinction between the sibyl's preparation and her communicative act for which others are certainly present and appear in one way or another to play their part in the recitation.

It would be dangerous to suggest that either of these saga accounts represents a true historical portrait of the prophetess' craft. Both appear to be much later than the conception of *Vǫluspá*, and are thus written at an even further remove from the action they depict. Nonetheless, the idea of prophecy as an act involving multiple participants – and, in the case

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[141] *Eríks saga rauða*, pp.206-7.
[142] See Hermann Pálsson, *Oral Tradition and Saga Writing* (Vienna, 1999), p.100.
[143] *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*, p.286.
[144] The subject of the latter part - possibly the whole - of the poem is said to ruminate while 'gesæt him sundor æt rune' ('he sat apart in secret meditation'), contemplating life's mysteries. *The Wanderer*, line 111b. See Bernard Muir and Nicholas B. Kennedy, eds, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* (Exeter, 2006) for a discussion of the possibility of multiple voices being active in the delivery of the poem.

of Þorbjǫrg and Guðríðr, multiple voices – lends further credibility to the view that two speakers could have performed *Vǫluspá* without seriously deviating from a common cultural understanding of what a prophetic act might have looked (and, indeed, sounded) like. *Laxdœla saga,* too, features an instance of collective magic-working through the medium of song.[145] We might also note that the Heiðr of *Ǫrvar-Odds saga* speaks eddic verse when relating her communications with the spirit realm, and refers to herself in the third person.[146] She does not, however, purport to act as the conduit for a second, disembodied voice, and the kind of distinction and interplay between first and third person knowledge and perspective which recurs in *Vǫluspá* is entirely absent from these three stanzas which she speaks to Oddr.

Returning to *Vǫluspá*, three possibilities exist: that the poem was only ever designed to be spoken by a single voice, alternating between tense and person in a somewhat haphazard way; that two voices may be discerned – that of the living *vǫlva* and the spirit of a dead *vǫlva*, both of which speak through the medium of the same reciter; or that each of these two voices was personated in performance by a different reciter – or, possibly, by multiple reciters achieving a choral theatrical effect. This third model does offer us a mechanism for explaining why at some points the poem addresses Óðinn as if he is present, and at others describes him as though from a distance. According to the convention of the double-scene, we may posit that the first speaker, ?Heiðr, is in communion with the pagan god, whereas the second voice speaks to the assembled audience in the hall.[147] Complications arise in **R** st.28 (not paralleled in **H**), but can be accounted for by attributing the first four lines to the second vǫlva, describing an encounter between ?Heiðr and Óðinn which might even be replicated by the first speaker in some way in performance. It is immaterial who speaks the remainder of the stanza: the words belong to ?Heiðr, whoever repeats them here.

The final line of the poem (in both the **R** and **H** versions) raises further questions. For

145 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Laxdœla saga*, ÍF V (Reykjavík, 1934), pp.105-6.
146 Hollander speculates that the word *Edda* may derive from *óðr*, which he translates, ‘soulful utterance,’ making the use of eddic verse for prophecy especially apt. See Hollander (1962), p.xiii.
147 Lönnroth (1971); Lönnroth (1978); Lönnroth (1979).

one, if we entertain the two-speaker hypothesis, and admit the possibility that each *vǫlva* may, at different points, refer to the other in the third person, we cannot be certain as to who is the subject – the *hon* – of this closing line: ‘Nú mun hon søkkvask’ (‘Now she must sink.’) If two *vǫlur* were present it would be possible to read this line as a set-up for some dramatic effect in which one either departs the performance space or visibly demonstrates that she has ceased to speak for the spirit of the dead. Regardless of the number of performers, it is certainly possible to read this line as suggesting a parting of the ways between the voice of the dead *vǫlva* (?Heiðr) and the conduit through whom she is speaking in the poem. Like taking off a mask (an action which might, after all, have accompanied such a recitation – we can never be sure) this line indicates that the performance has ended.[148] It might also be read as reinforcing the convention that the actor and her role are not to be confused outside the strictly delineated performance state.

Eríks saga rauða tells of Þorbjǫrg performing her sibyllic act from atop a *hjallinn* or ‘raised platform.’ ‘Sinking,’ in her case, might simply entail descending once her utterance is complete. The topography is less clear in *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*, but the scene is evidently supposed to take place indoors, since each man is said to rise from and return to his seat, and Oddr is concealed under his cloak on a bench in plain view of the *vǫlva*. She too may occupy a platform, or perhaps even a high-seat, as Þorbjǫrg is said to do at her feast: ‘Var henni búit hásæti ok lagt undir hana hœgindi; þar skydi í vera hœnsafiðri’ (‘There was a high-seat set for her and under her was a cushion; that was to be stuffed with hens’ feathers.’)[149] Whether Heiðr is seated or standing, it is clear that each of the men has to rise to hear his fortune told. This *vǫlva* is thus also well placed to ‘sink’ at the conclusion of her prophetic act, literally as well as figuratively. In this connection we might also consider the account given in the Irish *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*, dated to the early twelfth century, of a Viking pagan priestess named Ota

148 Gunnell (2013), p.74 suggests that the reciter in question may have been masked.
149 *Eríks saga rauða,* p.206.

answering questions put to her from atop an altar.[150] Although the details are scanty, this image comes in the context of a raid on local churches which suggests a deliberate appropriation of a symbolically Christian space to perform a pagan rite. Whether the account is true cannot be proved, but the similar impression of a seeress being elevated on a dais conveyed in the Norse texts suggests a longstanding and widely established impression of what such a performance framework looked like, with the seeress positioned imperiously on an elevated platform, overseeing her audience.

The common habit of descending back to the level of the mortal assembly once the prophetic act is complete suggests that the speaker or speakers of *Vǫluspá* would have been similarly set apart in some way from the poem's audience, and may remind us of the habit of several storytellers described in the sagas seating themselves in a designated seat in order to distinguish themselves from their audience.[151] Although the historical veracity of the temple described in *Eyrbyggja saga* has been called into question, it is striking that it too includes reference to a raised platform, and it suggests that such a specific site for performance was commonplace in the imagination of saga writers, and therefore likely to derive from a real arrangement for religious and quasi-religious performances – however temporary or makeshift it may have been.[152] The act of 'sinking' then represents a collapse of the distance – literal and metaphorical – between audience and performer(s). The individual who temporarily assumes the role of seer, moving in the realm of spirits, now returns to the world of men. The performance becomes the nexus (or 'knot,' to borrow Dronke's analogy) which binds the mortal and the immortal; the past and the future; the actor and the enacted. Having 'sunk' – both in a textual and a physical sense – no speaker of the poem would be considered to remain in prophetic mode. The knot would have come undone.

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150 James Henthorn Todd, ed., *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: The war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill, or, The invasions of Ireland by the Danes and other Norsemen: the original Irish text* (London, 1867), pp.12-13. See also Jesch (1991), pp.108-9.

151 See below, p.210.

152 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds, *Eyrbyggja saga*, ÍF IV (Reykjavík, 1935), pp.7-9. See Olof Sundqvist, 'The Question of Ancient Scandinavian Cultic Buildings: With Particular Reference to Old Norse hof', *Temenos* 45:1 (2009), 65–84 for discussion of the temple passage.

Following this analysis, several tentative conclusions may be advanced. First, there is no reason to assume that an oral version of this poem need only have been recited by a single performer – indeed, the multiplicity of tenses, pronouns and modes of addressing Óðinn give us every reason to call this assumption into question. Methodologically, it is difficult to speak of probabilities when we know so little of the performance context in which this text was transmitted, and so we must keep an open mind with regard to the possibility of polyvocal recitation. Moreover the evidence of the sagas, although they do not depict a pair of seers prophesying in tandem, does encourage the view that sibylic acts were not always performed alone. Second, the multiple-speaker model is not essential for the poem to be comprehensible. Nevertheless, it provides a framework for a more coherent recitation, illustrating more clearly the relationships between past and future, first and third person, which Dronke believes to have been conceived of as deliberately abstruse – although she presents little evidence as to why this should be. Dramaturgically, the text works most effectively if the discourse is shared such that each pronoun used has a distinct, present topical referent in performance. The lack of manuscript rubric suggesting a change in speaker makes it difficult to prove that this model of delivery was what the scribes imagined or intended; the lack of analogous poetry renders it hazardous to speculate about the authors' design; for a modern audience, however, the possibility of two speakers delivering the poem in tandem would elucidate some of its more challenging subtleties. For this reason, the possibility that eddic storytellers worked in tandem when reciting this and other poems must remain open to us.

v. Summary

So who were the eddic reciters? And how uniform were they as a group? Unlike the skalds they are not known as the heroes of sagas, with the closest example possibly being the shaddowy Norna-Gestr. It is of course quite probable that skalds knew and perhaps also recited traditional eddic verses in addition to their own compositions – and they certainly

possessed the tools to extemporise new poems in eddic metres. However, a distinction between the two verse traditions remains. Skalds retain a sense of personal association with the material they recite, whereas eddic transmitters preserve a deliberate distinction between their personal identities and the material they convey. Skalds are considered to have agency in the creation, performance and dissemination of their work. By contrast, eddic reciters defer their agency by adopting the role of conduits.

To return to the hypothesis of the eddic performer as a wandering reciter of stories (Lönnroth's 'Ulysses motif'), seemingly suggested by such disparate figures as Nœframaðr, Gestr and Óðinn's chosen stock aliases (Gagnráðr, Vegtamr), the possibility that such a figure could act as a conduit either for divine lore or ancestral legacies must surely have rendered them persons of interest in their own time. Óðinn is the patron god of the skalds, but their identities are not conflated with his since they remain the makers and owners of their own poetry. Where eddic reciters are concerned, the case is different. As conduits, some temporarily take on the guise of gods and heroes, and their imperative is not to extemporise but to faithfully recite or re-enact, yet some remain distinct from the tales they narrate, steppin instead into a 'stock' role as purveyors of ancient wisdom. They are free from censure because it is not their work but rather the deeds and words of the gods and heroes which are being judged (or, in a pagan context, perhaps revered). The skald's concerns are temporal – he is the possessor of his poem, at least until he barters it in exchange for patronage, and is principally responsible for the transmission of it under his own name. By contrast the eddic conduit is charged with continuing another's tradition under the guise either of famous names or such stock titles as 'Far-traveller,' 'Way-goer' and 'Mask.' The association of these reciters with the mythic-heroic past provides, of course, an additional form of insurance against censure, in that their audiences cannot be quite sure that it is they and not their borrowed identities who are present in the hall during a recitation.

It is unlikely that there ever existed a cultural consensus as to who could or could not

assume the vocation of an eddic reciter. No law code stipulates the remit of such a performer, nor is he (or she) explicitly attested in the sagas. Professional itinerant storytellers similar to the Old English *scop* may have existed in Iceland or Scandinavia at one time, but it is also possible that the spectre of such figures is simply an anachronistic misreading of the literary topos of the rootless wanderer. What we can deduce from this survey, however, is that the identity of the reciter is less important than his function: to act as conduit or gatekeeper between the legendary past and the material present. In order to discharge this role effectively he had to be a master of disguise – whether literal or figurative – and well versed in the art of disassociating his personal reputation from the identities he performed.

The art of the eddic poets, and those reciters who served as their proxies and shepherded their poems through the ages until they eventually achieved fixed written forms, was in disguising their own identities behind the parts they played, the mantles they assumed, and the voices in which they spoke. An eddic performance was an act of self-abnegation, and it is testament to the proficiency of these artists in disguising themselves that they have now almost totally vanished behind the masks of their various poetic personae. To this extent, the disappearance of these individuals from recorded Icelandic history should not surprise us.[153] Their legacy is the veneer of timeless anonymity associated with these texts, a disguise which has now endured, virtually undisturbed, for at least the better part of seven centuries.

[153] Bertha Phillpotts recognised the extent to which these eddic performers have remained successfully anonymous, commenting, ‘their anonymity is of that more profound type which wraps in obscurity not only the individual but the whole class.’ Phillpotts (1920), p.31.

Chapter Two: STORYTELLERS IN HISTORY, PSEUDO-HISTORY AND SAGA

‘There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.’

- Donald Rumsfeld, 12 February 2002

i. Introduction

The craft of storytelling is common to all civilizations throughout history. Its prominence in medieval Scandinavia is attested by a rich literary, pictorial, runic and archaeological record. Fiendishly allusive kennings and a clear interest in riddlic and allusive language further entrench our confidence that storytelling – whether in the form of gossip, exchange of news, personal and collective recollection, prediction, ritual utterance, oratorical embellishment, myth or heroic legend – was an established fact in all the Norse-speaking provinces throughout the Middle Ages. Among the best surviving Old Norse literary works we find preserved a number of stories which are well-crafted, emotionally resonant and dramatically engaging. It is therefore natural that scholars from the Grimm brothers on have devoted substantial energy to attempting to identify the individuals who conceived and performed these particular works – either in a hypothesised oral form or as written texts designed to be orally recited. In the absence of much contemporary record of such persons and their perceived social function, it is perhaps equally natural that these investigations have been almost universally inconclusive.

In light of this failure to supply with any confidence the names and biographies either of those who composed the eddic poems and the sagas, or of the vast majority of those scribes who committed them to parchment, this chapter will pursue a different approach. Rather than interrogate these rich texts solely as historical sources, we will examine them through the prism of literary criticism and close reading. The object will be to explore what the texts *as they stand* say or suggest about the craft, culture and role played by storytellers of the High

Middle Ages, the Saga Age (c.870-1056 AD), and the heroic or mythic past. From these observations, tentative conclusions may be drawn which – although they bring us no nearer to naming the author of a single saga or eddic lay – nonetheless have repercussions for our understanding of how those authors and poets of a later age wished to present (and, at times, perhaps romanticise) their own vocation as they themselves practised and understood it. Given the frequent reference to genealogies and the importance of recalling what came before,[1] it would seem logical that storytellers would have been highly conscious of how their own practice related to that of their spiritual antecedents.[2] We will take this proposition as our starting point.

ii. The Historical Testament

Since Tacitus composed his *Germania* in c.98 AD, successive historians of Northern Europe have recorded the debt they owe to those sources who willingly regaled them with stories of their people. Indeed, Tacitus described the Northmen as among the most forthcoming of all his contemporaries – especially when feasting and drinking, calling them,

> gens non astuta nec callida aperit adhuc secreta pectoris licentia ioci; ergo detecta et nuda omnium mens.[3]
>
> A race neither clever nor cunning, feeling free in the midst of the feast, they open the secret chambers of their thoughts: thus everyone's attitude is revealed and laid bare.[4]

At first glance, the culture thus presented seems a world away from the laconic, private figures who appear in the medieval sagas, through which the Norsemen of a later age recounted their semi-fictionalised history.[5] Nonetheless, whatever else might have changed in

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1 See Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Landnámabók*, ÍF I (Reykjavík, 1968).

2 See Finlay (1992), pp.33, 45.

3 Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Germania*, 22.3. Quotation taken from W. Peterson and M. Hutton, eds, *Germania*, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1914), p.296.

4 *Germania,* trans. J. B. Rives (Oxford, 1999), p.86.

5 I use the term 'semi-fictional' to indicate the compromise that has been reached between the early scholars of the *Íslendingasǫgur*, who viewed the texts as essentially historical, and those revisionists, led by Sigurður Nordal, who, in the mid-twentieth century, argued that they were more akin to medieval novels. For a recent summary of this debate, see O'Donoghue (2004), pp.130-34. For an example of the former approach see Knut Liestøl, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, trans. A. G. Jayne (Oslo, 1930). For the latter, see Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða: A Study*, trans. Thomas R. George (Cardiff, 1958).

the space of a millennium, the Norse enthusiasm for sharing their stories with outsiders had clearly not abated by the time medieval chroniclers like Adam of Bremen (c. 1040-1081) and Saxo Grammaticus (c.1150-c.1220) wrote their respective accounts of the history, culture and legends of the North. Writing more than a century after Adam, we might expect Saxo to draw heavily on his predecessor historian's work, but instead, as the most recent editor of the *Gesta Danorum* has observed, Saxo's reliance on Adam's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* is 'wilful' and inconsistent.[6] Rather than citing earlier histories, he prefers to identify his principal source as the Scandinavians themselves – and particularly the Icelanders, to whom he attributes an especially high degree of memorial ability and cultural awareness:

> Nec Tylensium industria silentio oblitteranda. Qui cum ob natiuam soli sterilitatem luxurie nutrimentis carentes officia continue sobrietatis exerceant omniaque uite momenta ad excolendam alienorum operum notiam conferre soleant, inopiam ingenio pensant. Cunctarum quippe nationum res gestas cognosse memorieque mandare uoluptatis loco reputant, non minoris glorie iudicantes alienas uirtutes disserere quam proprias exhibere. Quorum thesauros historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosius consulens haut paruam presentis operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui. Nec arbitros habere contempsi, quos tanta uetustatis peritia callere cognoui.[7]
>
> The diligence of the men of Iceland must not be shrouded in silence; since the barrenness of their native soil offers no support for self-indulgence, they practise a steady routine of temperance and devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds, compensating for poverty by their intelligence. They regard it as a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgement it is just as elevating to discourse on the prowess of others as to display their own. Thus I have scrutinized their packed store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognized such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses.[8]

Unlike Tacitus' characterisation of a disorderly Germanic culture with a penchant for over-sharing, this description presents a (no doubt romantic) construal of the people of Iceland as the *de facto* authorised oral chroniclers of Danish story-craft. Significantly, the emphasis is placed not on their dramatic or performative talents, nor on the artistic composition of their accounts, but rather on the sober fastidiousness with which they are said to preserve their

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6 Karsten Friis-Jensen, ed., *Gesta Danorum* (Oxford, 2015), ii, p.xlix.
7 Friis-Jensen (2015), i, p.6.
8 Trans. by Peter Fisher in Friis-Jensen (2015), p.7.

traditional narratives for future generations. Of course, we cannot take this description entirely at face value, since it is in Saxo's interest to present his sources as distinguished in these respects, forming as they do the mainstay of his claim to be accurately transmitting the ancient stories of his countrymen. Had it not been for the men of Iceland, his prologue seems to say, still more might have been lost, and it thus serves his purpose to emphasise their oral archival facilities rather than their flair (such as it was) for entertaining one another through their *art* of storytelling.[9]

Such an emphasis on the memorial prowess of the Icelanders resonates with the view expressed by the Norwegian historian Theodoricus in the prologue to his history of the Norwegian kings, completed at some point between 1161 and 1188.[10] In it he writes,

> Operæ pretium duxi... pauca hæc de antiquite regum Norwagiensium breviter annotare, et prout sagaciter perquirere potuimus ab eis, penes quos horum memoria præcipue vigere creditur, quos no Islendinga vocamus, qui hæc in suis antiquis carminibus percelebrata recolunt.[11]

> I have deemed it worthwhile… to write down in brief these few details concerning the ancient history of the Norwegian kings, as I have been able to learn by assiduous inquiry from the people among whom in particular the remembrance of these matters is believed to thrive – namely those whom we call Icelanders, who preserve them as much celebrated themes in their ancient poems.[12]

For contemporary writers, then, the medieval Icelanders were thought of as possessing long memories and preserving a reliable account of their own history. Almost no indication is given in these accounts of the process by which the desired information was obtained, nor the characteristics of the individuals whose knowledge was drawn upon. Were these informants capable of dramatic and engaging storytelling, or were they tedious and uncharismatic, valued for the information they could share but not for their dramatic talents?

To the comments made by Saxo and Theodoricus we may now add those of an actual

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9 For a discussion of how knowledgeable elders functioned as living memorial archives see Stefan Brink, ‘Minnunga Mæn: The Usage of Old Knowledgeable Men in Legal Cases’, in Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir, eds, *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture* (Turnhout, 2014), pp.197-201.

10 Peter Foote, Introduction to Ian McDougall and David McDougall, trans., *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensuim: An account of the ancient history of the Norwegian kings* (London, 1998), p.xi.

11 Prologue to Gustav Storm, ed., *Monumenta Historia Norvegiæ: Latinske kildeskrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen* (Oslo, 1880), p.3.

12 McDougall and McDougall (1998), p.1.

Icelander, Snorri Sturluson, who similarly cites the prodigious memories of his people as an important component in his antiquarian work, supplemented by the poems he attributes to the Norwegian skalds of bygone days, whom he identifies as the chief sources for his *Heimskringla*.[13] Despite ostensibly reserving his highest praise for these foreign poets, Snorri's prologue dwells at greatest length on those qualities of his contemporary Icelandic informants, the custodians of these ancient sources, which make them trustworthy authorities, and from this we may deduce a similar desire to elevate the memorial gifts of his countrymen. Like his foreign counterparts, Snorri chooses to stress the fact that the Icelanders accurately preserved such stories, rather than present details of the manner in which they related them to him. His emphasis is securely on the reliability of his source material, rather than the performative capacities of those through whose charge it had passed.

Adam of Bremen, meanwhile, says nothing at all about the nationality of his informants, although he is likewise inclined to stress the extent of their learning. Since his subject is not Iceland, he makes no mention of Icelandic sources specifically. He does, however, record the debt he owes to, '...pleraque omnia seniorum, quibus res nota est, traditione didici'[14] ('…the tradition of older men who knew the facts.)[15] In this sense, his prologue resembles those of Snorri, Saxo and Theodoricus, emphasising the objective reliability of his sources.

Together, these accounts provide strong evidence for the role of older informants, particularly Icelanders, in sustaining narrative traditions from one generation to the next. What they fail to account for is precisely the subject matter which concerns us here: the means by which these stories, both historical and fictional, were transmitted down the generations and subsequently retold to historians seeking to piece together the history of Iceland and Northern Europe.

Kevin J. Wanner has argued persuasively for the Icelanders' vested interest in

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13 *Heimskringla*, i, p.4.
14 Prologue to B. Schmeidler, ed., *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (Turnhout, 1917), p.2.
15 Francis Joseph Tschan, trans., *A History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (New York, 1959), p.5.

presenting themselves as the principal custodians of a legacy which was not only historical but also artistic, and if this was so then the accounts quoted above give only some measure of their success. Wanner claims that there was, from as early as the mid-tenth century, '…a program by Icelanders to establish a majority share in the cultural capital available in West Norse society.'[16] In light of this view, Saxo's comment that his informants practised storytelling so assiduously as a consequence of their poverty is particularly revealing, suggesting as it does the ambition to make themselves indispensable to those with whom they shared a common heritage. Similarly, it is striking that Theodoricus ascribes ownership of the poetic corpus to the Icelanders, even though the content is derived from that same common heritage, and the sagas make mention of numerous poets who were not themselves Icelandic. Whether or not we accept Wanner's view that this sense of Icelandic ownership was the result of a programmatic design by the Icelanders themselves, their frequent recurrence in these disparate prologues is certainly striking. Particularly suggestive is the quotation which Theodoricus' prologue takes from Boethius: 'clarissimos suis temporibus viros scriptorum inops delevit opinio'[17] ('reputation without authors has effaced those men who were very famous in their own time').[18]

Such a warning must have preyed heavily on the minds of great men who engaged the gifts of skalds to protect them from the threat of future obscurity. Although, in context, this quotation is meant to refer to the numerous disparate Norwegian princes and *jarls* who preceded Haraldr hárfagri, it has resonance too for the lost names of those poets and learned sources themselves who preserved the accounts of later rulers from which Theodoricus drew his material. Even by the twelfth century, many of their names were either lost or not thought sufficiently important to record, and it may be in this light that we should view the attempts

[16] Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda* (London, 2008), p.58.

[17] Prologue to Storm (1880), p.3. The reference is to Boethius' *Philosophiae consolatio*, Book 2, Prologue 7, Verse 13.

[18] McDougall and McDougall (1998), p.1. Kraggerud provides a more literal translation: 'But how many men, famous in their own time, has [not] oblivion devoid of written records extinguished?' See Egil Kraggerud, 'Boëthius and the Preface of Theodoricus' *Historia* opinio versus oblivio once again', *Collegium Medievale* 18 (2005), 145.

by Icelandic memorialists to stake a claim on the authority and knowledge required to preserve and maintain these traditional narratives. In so doing they were not necessarily asserting their own right to be identified with these stories, but the right of the nation of Iceland to exercise authority and editorial control over them. As a newly settled frontier province in the tenth century, Iceland was of necessity a conservative place, and thus served as a fertile cultural space for the old stories to take root.[19] Such practices as having the Lawspeaker recite one third of the law aloud and in public for each of the three years of his term of office, and the enthusiasm for recording the history of the settlement eventually manifested in Arí Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*,[20] speak to a culture distinctively competent in performing its attachment to memory, and this same reputation clearly impressed itself on Saxo and Theodoricus by the time they came to write their respective contributions to this memorial tradition.[21] Indeed, Judy Quinn has intriguingly likened the role of storytellers and reciters to that of the Lawspeakers in Iceland insofar as they were living repositories of knowledge which had to be publicly declaimed as a matter of ritual and means of instruction.[22] It would seem to follow that this emphasis on establishing Iceland as instrumental in preserving for posterity the history and stories of an entire people would provide a strong incentive for Icelanders to become especially well-versed in the performative arts, marrying their memorial capabilities with an impressive and engaging storytelling style. Unfortunately, none of these historians make any attempt to describe such a style, and the reasons for their being so impressed by the stories they were told are left unstated.

The anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup offers us an insight into the question of whether we should seek to distinguish between historians and storytellers in undertaking this study when she writes,

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19 See Kirsten Hastrup, *A Place Apart: An Anthropological Study of the Icelandic World* (Oxford, 1998), p.90.

20 Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Íslendingabók*, ÍF I (Reykjavík, 1968).

21 See Quinn (2000), pp.31-2.

22 Quinn (2000), pp.31-2. The parallel is most apparent in the story of Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði Þorkelsson lying under his cloak in contemplation, much as Icelandic poets and prophets were said to do. cf. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak* (Uppsala, 1978), p.113.

> In Icelandic, *saga* means both story and history. It is literally what is 'said' about previous events, periods, or people. Telling makes history. The Icelandic sagas are stories of different historical veracity, but the point is that in the concept of *saga*, story and history are one.[23]

This observation is of greater value to the literary critic than to the modern historian whose vocation is to distinguish between the event itself and what was said about it. The literary scholar, however, is encouraged to consider all those skilled in the transmission of stories – whether they thought of their material as unornamented fact or embellished revisionism – to be suitable subjects for our investigation into the written depictions of storytellers and the customs surrounding storytelling. On these matters, the prologues of Saxo, Snorri, Theodoricus and Adam of Bremen say little, and so it is to the storytellers' legacy, the literary texts themselves, that we must turn for further illumination. In so doing, however, we should be conscious of this caution from Vésteinn Ólason: 'Defining the mindset of a saga author who neither refers to himself nor ever describes his methods of work is pure guesswork.'[24] Clearly we cannot know with certainty the mind of any such author – the more so in the case of saga literature since its written form is very probably the result of several voices contributing in one way or another to the store of content and perhaps also the manner of expression of the surviving text. Nonetheless, all forms of literary criticism are pre-eminently concerned with the task not only of comprehending what is written but also of offering a series of competing interpretations of its subtextual meaning, and advancing an argument for the most plausible or, at least, the most dramatically engaging of these.[25] Although we cannot always extrapolate an author's overt intentions when the evidence for these is so limited, we are entitled to seek a subtextual agenda in his work, not least in relation to how he presents others engaged in his craft. We may also contest the implication that no saga author ever

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23 Hastrup (1998), p.23. A similar rationale is proposed in Paul Bibire, 'On reading the Icelandic Sagas: Approaches to Old Icelandic Texts', in Beverly Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor and Gareth Williams, eds, *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian sea-borne expansion and settlement before 1300 - a festschrift in honour of Dr. Barbara E. Crawford* (Leiden, 2007), pp.3, 14-15.

24 Vésteinn Ólason (1998), p.213.

25 John McKinnell, '*Vǫlundarkviða*: Origin and Interpretation', in Kick and Schafer (2014), p.225 expresses this same argument in relation specifically to poetic texts.

refers to himself: on the contrary, it is entirely possible for an writer to do so obliquely, without necessarily resorting to the first person. The language of the sagas, as Vésteinn himself has been instrumental in showing, is a profoundly subtle one, and there is no more reason to suppose that further enquiry into the authors' conception of storytelling will be fruitless than there is to imagine that the saga form itself has no more secrets to render up.

iii. A Portrait of the Artist: Telling Stories about Storytelling

Any investigation into the few passages in the sagas which directly describe the practice of storytelling must inevitably begin with the episode of the wedding at Reykjarhólar in 1119, described in Chapter 10 of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*. Frequently cited and penetratingly surveyed, this (possibly interpolated)[26] passage has now been subjected to so much scholarly attention that it has become almost conventional to preface any new analysis with an *apologia* for re-treading familiar ground. Stephen Mitchell, for instance, writes of this passage that,

> It has been exhumed time after time, subjected to one inquest after another, and then put to rest until its next meeting with scholarly coroners, and yet almost always, interpretations of the episode with regard to saga entertainment vary according to the intellectual orientation of the researcher involved.[27]

Certainly, those hoping to find in this short chapter the key to determining the historical reality of saga and poetic recitation in Iceland have been disappointed, or have concluded with assertions which are ultimately unprovable without corroborating evidence. Even the mechanics of saga transmission remain opaque, allowing one scholar to claim with confidence that the episode depicts the 'reading aloud' of stories, while another asserts – equally emphatically – that the sagas recounted here must have been recited from memory or improvised.[28] Yet there is still some merit in a further examination of this account since, for

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[26] Andreas Heusler, 'Die Anfänge der isländischen Saga', in Stefan Sonderegger, ed., *Kleine Schriften* (Berlin, 1969), ii, pp.388-459. See also A. LeRoy Andrews, 'Studies in the Fornaldarsǫgur Norðrlanda', *Modern Philology* 9 (1911-1912), 386-8.

[27] Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (London, 1991), p.92. For similar disclaimers see Peter Foote, 'Sagnaskemtan: Reykjarhólar 1119', *SBVS* 14 (1953-57), 226 and Ralph O'Connor, 'Truth and Lies in the Fornaldarsögur', in Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson and Annette Lassen, eds, *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed: studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (Copenhagen, 2009), p.134.

[28] For the former view see Hermann Pálsson (1996), p.14. For the latter, Lars Lönnroth, 'Old Norse Text as Performance', *Scripta Islendica* 60 (2009), 52.

our purposes, what is most arresting is the metatextual dimension to the story here: the opportunity to engage with a saga author describing the process by which, in *his* conception, such storytellers plied their craft in a near-contemporary setting. Thus an analysis of the passage may reveal more about the author of *Þorgils saga* than it does about the craft of the storytellers Ingimundr and Hrólfr whom he describes. It is his presentation of their craft which concerns us here, and the question of how he, the author of a written saga, conceptualises such oral performers as these.

Before proceeding further it is necessary to remark on the use of the term 'author' in this connection. As the saga's editor Ursula Dronke (writing as Ursula Brown) asserted in her introduction, 'It is unlikely that the author of *Þorgils saga* will ever be identified beyond doubt.'[29] Despite this, she describes the 'strong impression of his personality and turn of mind' which she perceives him to have left on the work.[30] Two assumptions are apparent from this comment: first, that the author was male (a near certainty if we assume the term to imply literate ability and if we accept Dronke's assessment that he had received clerical training), and second, that authorship may safely be ascribed to a single individual.[31] This latter assertion is more difficult to justify, since even the most vehement adherent of the so-called 'Bookprose' approach must acknowledge the paucity of holographs among the surviving corpus of saga manuscripts.[32] Where sagas exist in different redactions, it is often challenging to determine which version of the wording should be ascribed to the original inventor of the prose – assuming, of course, that there was such a person.

For this reason, the term 'author' must be used with care when considering the sagas, but it is nonetheless clear that a single guiding intelligence can be identified in many surviving texts, regardless of the variations which may occur between redactions. This guiding intelligence may, of course, take the form of a narrative compromise between several

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[29] Introduction to Ursula Brown, ed., *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* (Oxford, 1952), p.l. Subsequent quotations from the saga refer to this edition.

[30] Brown (1952), p.lii.

[31] Brown (1952), pp.l-li.

[32] For a convenient summary of the 'Freeprose'/'Bookprose' debate see Clunies Ross (2010), pp.39-41.

collaborators, but wherever narrative unity does exist in a saga it may at least be said that any such compromise was a successful one. So little is known of how sagas were composed that it is possible to believe in a circumstance in which different authors wrote different episodes with minimal contact between them. So long as the episodes cohere, however, it is clear that some form of compositing did take place, even if this was the work of an enterprising scribe rather than any of the original participants. To this central intelligence, therefore, whether it be wholly the voice of one man or the collective voice of several, let us apply the term 'author.' Whatever the historical origin of this voice might have been, we may treat it as a literary construct – whether accidental or intended – in the same tradition of the modern author's voice transmitted through the medium of her editor.

The relatively short distance between the events recounted in *Þorgils saga* and the probable time of their being written down is no guarantee that the account is factually accurate.[33] It does, however, suggest that those details which are not accompanied by an authorial justification or explanation would have made sense to the saga's intended audience and been taken as a fair representation of what storytelling – in literature, if not necessarily in life – was thought to be like.[34] Our author's admiration for the integrity of oral transmission is apparent in the defence he makes of this storytelling anecdote, which, he acknowledges, has elsewhere been denounced by other purported witnesses of the wedding feast. The act of including it in the saga – whether interpolated or otherwise – speaks to an attempt at some stage in the saga's evolution to valorise and endorse the testimony of the source who is said to have preserved, rather than invented, the account. In this sense, the saga author is putting himself on the line and taking a position which renders his own character subject to analysis.[35] Such vulnerability is rare, and thus critically significant.

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33 Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, 'Performance and Performers', in Karl Reichl, ed., *Medieval Oral Literature* (Berlin, 2012), p.156. See also Joseph Harris, 'The Prosimetrum of Icelandic Saga and Some Relatives', in Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, eds, *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse* (Cambridge, 1997), p.134.

34 See Paul Schach, 'Some Forms of Writer Intrusion in the *Íslendingasögur*', *SS* 42:2 (1970), 154-5.

35 Foote (1955) argues persuasively that the controversy concerning the account refers to the attribution of the stories told to particular speakers, rather than to the fact of their having been recited at all.

Before arriving at the saga's ‘famous’[36] description of ‘sagnaskemtan’ (‘saga entertainment’) alleged to have taken place at this gathering, the saga author states that it occurred in a context of: ‘margskonar leikar, bæði dansleikar, [ok] glímur...’ (‘various entertainments, both dancing and wrestling...’).[37] Storytelling was, then, just one of the diversions on offer at this feast, although, as the one most comprehensively described, we may deduce that it was of special interest to our author. He further informs us that the celebrations lasted for seven nights, prompting us to consider that the verbal entertainments, no less than the dancing and wrestling, may not have taken place in a single sitting, and may even have been episodic, dispersed over several nights, as is the case in *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða*, an instructive, if brief, tale preserved in three manuscripts including Morkinskinna.[38] This tale describes the experience of a storyteller at Haraldr Sigurðarson's court whose origins, besides being an Icelander, are regrettably obscure. On instruction from the king he tells the story of Haraldr's travels in an episodic form which lasts the duration of Yuletide. The text makes clear that each episode was discussed by the assembly, with the manner in which it was told provoking a wide range of opinions.

Returning to *Þorgils saga*, we now come to the performance event itself, which the saga introduces with the aforementioned peculiar disclaimer:

> Frá þvi er nǫkkut sagt, er þó er líti[l] tilkoma, hverir þar skemtu eða hverju skemt var. Þat er í frásǫgn haft, er nú mæla margir í móti ok látask eigi vitat hafa, því at margir ganga duldir ins sanna ok hyggja þat satt, er skrǫkkvat er, en logit þat, [er] satt er.[39]
>
> There is something reported of this, about who there provided entertainment and what it was - although it is of little consequence. This is the report, which many now say is false and pretend not to have known, for many are ignorant of truth, and think that true which is invented, and think that a lie which is true.

Numerous scholars have remarked on the motivation behind incorporating such a statement in

[36] Foote (1955), p.226.
[37] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.17.
[38] *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða*, in Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Íslendinga sögur* (Reykjavík, 1947), xii. Dorothy Whitelock makes a similar case for the episodic performance of *Beowulf* in similar circumstances. See Whitelock (1951), p.20.
[39] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, pp.17-18.

this account. Liestøl thought it the invention of a deliberately provocative scribe,[40] while Foote called it an excursus on the part of the author, 'whose small importance or relevance in the saga he recognises.'[41] In her edition, Brown suggests that the saga-writer 'appears to be apologizing' for introducing this tangent.[42] This last suggestion is the most intriguing, since it raises the question why any author would insert (or scribe retain) material which demanded from him an apology – the more so when the material in question was, as he admits, of controversial veracity. The author of this passage cannot be ignorant of the perversity of this inclusion; rather he is using the device of a rhetorical apology to attract our attention to the gloss he is putting on controversial material which has little bearing on the plot of the saga (the expulsion of Þórðr earlier in the chapter bring the more significant narrative development for those who are closely following the story), yet is of intense vocational interest to any writer whose sources are partially or predominantly oral. By including and defending the storytelling anecdote, he is implicitly stressing the importance of the convention that a saga should give a true account of the events it describes, and the indictment of those who reject this version argues for an attempt to present himself as the most authoritative chronicler of the feast.[43] He gives no evidence in support of his version – citing none of the verses, for example, to which he alludes – although he adopts a lofty tone, and so it seems that we are to adduce his authority from three circumstances: the acknowledgement of countervailing versions (demonstrating that he has done his research and made his judgement in the light of stronger evidence), the fact that his account, now in written form, belongs to a literary genre typified by its claims to unbiased historicity, and the level of detail within this account and the saga as a whole which elevates him to the status of a scholar.

The deceptively dismissive 'þó er líti[l] tilkoma' ('though it is of little consequence')

[40] Knut Liestøl, 'Til spørsmålet om dei eldste islendske dansekvæde', *Arv* 1 (1945), 69-100, esp.70-75.

[41] Foote (1955), p.230. O'Connor (2005), p.115 notes that those who commissioned sagas often enjoyed at least as strong a claim to 'authorship' as those who composed, compiled or retold them. See Also Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1976), p.194.

[42] Brown (1952), pp.74-5, n.17/26.

[43] A similar rhetorical trope may be found in *Grettis saga*, Chapter 58, where the saga author acknowledges that his narrative appears to contradict the description of Grettir given in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa.* See Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ÍF VII (Reykjavík, 1936).

amounts to a modesty topos in light of the following sentence, which excoriates those who deny or mischaracterise the stories they have heard. Note that the writer does not condemn men for having forgotten what transpired at the wedding, but rather for *pretending* not to know the truth when, in fact, they do – that is, deliberately sustaining a fiction which contradicts the 'frásǫgn' ('narrative') that he presents as their commonly inherited recollection of the event at which none were present. Jesse Byock has supplied us with the convenient phrase 'a contract of *vraisemblance*,' which he describes as binding the saga-teller to his audience, and the implication of this excursus would seem to be that the present narrator's competitors (for what else should we call those peddling conflicting versions of the story?) have broken their end of the bargain.[44] Ignorance, he implies, is not a sin, whereas the bending of truth beyond a certain point is reprehensible.[45] Such a position may shed light on two aspects of saga-telling in particular: the need to preserve traditional narratives while simultaneously entertaining an audience with each new telling, and the question of whether storytelling was at any time, or in any sense, a professional craft.

In the first case, no two oral renditions of a story can ever be identical. This is as true in a modern theatre space, specifically conditioned to minimise variation from one performance to the next, as it was in medieval Iceland where the conditions must have been less conducive. D. H. Green, who has done much to popularise the view that oral performances remained the dominant means of publishing texts in this period, articulates the issue clearly:

> This give-and-take element of oral communication, also dependent on unforeseeable details of time and place, imposes restrictions on the extent to which what is spoken can be planned ahead in detail and, in lengthy communications, grants an important role to memorising and mnemonic devices, but also to the need to extemporise.[46]

This would have been especially true if we imagine an episodic form of storytelling taking

44 Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (London, 1982), p.38. See also Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)* (Ithaca, 2006), p.7.

45 This distinction between forms of untruth is a recurring preoccupation among saga authors, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this study.

46 Green (1994), p.61.

place under different performance conditions on each successive night, as is the case in *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða*. Although the modern discipline of performance studies was not practised in Iceland at this time, an awareness of the mutability of stories in response to their changing performance contexts is surely evident from the description given of the wedding at Reykjarhólar.[47] Both the acknowledgement of Ingimundr as author of several skaldic additions which occurred 'við enda sǫgunnar' ('towards the end of the saga') and the claim, with regard to *Hrómundar saga*, that, 'Þessa sǫgu hafði Hrólfr sjálfr samansetta' ('Hrólfr had put this saga together himself')[48] provide evidence that these two performers saw nothing remarkable in rendering versions of their stories which they augmented both by adding to and editing their respective sources. Despite our awareness that the historical reality of saga transmission across the centuries cannot live in this passage alone, what it does reflect is this author's sense of being at ease in relating a performance scenario which involved both fidelity to traditional narratives and complementary creative endeavours on the part of the present generation of storytellers. Ingimundr's verses are commended by the saga author, who makes no use of distancing mechanisms such as the common deference to public opinion or third party report, and the detail ascribing editorial agency to Hrólfr must be similarly intended as praise, since his contribution to the feast is described in the same breath as Ingimundr's without any contrast being drawn between them.

Returning to the question of saga-telling as a professional exercise, we must first examine the connotations of this term. Theodore Andersson equivocates only slightly when he asserts that,

> There is no evidence of professional or quasi-professional saga tellers in Iceland, but there are some indicators that historical lore was in the hands of persons with special qualifications.[49]

Certainly, there is no mention in *Þorgils saga* of any monetary payment being made to Hrólfr

[47] For an introduction to the application of 'performance studies', see Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London, 2013).
[48] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.18.
[49] Andersson (2006), p.19. See also Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls saga* (Pittsburgh, 1971), p.21.

or Ingimundr in return for their stories – indeed, the wedding feast takes place at the latter's house, and must surely have cost him a considerable amount, lasting seven nights and accommodating the most prominent men from the region and their retainers. Moreover, although both performers are said to be renowned storytellers when they are introduced into the saga, this is presented as an ancillary detail. Ingimundr's name makes its first entry in Chapter 3, accompanied by the title 'prestr' ('priest'), while Hrólfr's defining characteristics seem to be his friendship with Þorgils Oddasonar and his allegiance to him as his 'þingmaðr' ('Thingman'). Of course, a man might have two professions in life. Snorri Sturluson was notoriously prolific, being a *goði*, two-term Lawspeaker and skald all at once, and the descriptions of the entertainers in this saga appear to suggest a similar variety of employments. However, it is clear from both character sketches that neither man is associated first and foremost in the public mind with the role he later takes on as storyteller. The account of the wedding in Chapter 10 need not be exhaustive, moreover – it might be that that saga author intends only to describe these two performances because they are controversial, or because they came from the most prominent among the entertainers at the feast (whether for their social status or capability as performers). We can draw no conclusions as to whether such storytelling occasions were the preserve of the many or the few, although certainly these two were distinguished by their presentational ability. These observations recall to mind Kevin Wanner's contention that 'cultural capital' was a tradeable commodity in Iceland at this time.[50] It is not sufficient to show that Ingimundr and Hrólfr were not dependent for their livelihoods on their storytelling gift if we infer this only from the fact that no money is said to have changed hands. They may have won renown, patronage and authority by their retellings, and this increase in their respective stores of 'cultural capital' may have contributed to the inclusion of this passage in the saga insofar as it serves to foreground the importance both of storytellers to an occasion such as this wedding and of such occasions to storytellers, who

50 Wanner (2008).

depended on them for advancement of their reputations.

In a saga otherwise recognised for ‘poise in its telling,’[51] it would be strange to imagine that this digression to discuss the practice of storytelling was considered merely an indulgence by whoever conceived it, besides which the scene is artfully constructed in its own right. Parchment was an expensive commodity in the twelfth century, and Dronke is right to contend that the burden of proof rests with those who believe the episode to be an interpolation, but in a sense the passage's origin is irrelevant to an analysis of its author's commentary on storytelling, since whatever else he may have been, he too is telling a story here, and is thus a fit subject for our investigation.[52] The author of this passage is clearly making a point about the danger of false accounts and presenting his as truthful through a combination of feigned humility and rhetorical skill. As Dronke notes, the term ‘lygisǫgur’ (‘lying sagas’), which occurs shortly after this censorious preamble to the storytelling episode, is a rare term in early sagas, and was probably therefore chosen to emphasise the contrasting importance of truth in the face of the false accounts with which the writer is so conspicuously concerned.[53] This is the same theme with which he closes his chapter, claiming, ‘hafa þó margir fróðir menn þessa sǫgu fyrir satt’ (‘...yet many wise men hold that these stories are true.’)[54] What is the implication of this coda? That the men who believe the ‘lying sagas’ are really fools – or, at least, ignorant (the word ‘fróðir’ being an ironic choice)? That such men might have been considered wise in their time, but not now? Or merely that, for all their wisdom, those present at the feast were so captivated by the performances that they engaged for the duration of the *sagnaskemtan* in a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ which, on account of their sagacity, does especially great credit to the two named storytellers?[55] Finally, is it possible that wise men in 1119 – and perhaps even the writer who set the saga down and

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[51] Brown (1952), p.xv.

[52] Ursula Dronke, ‘The Saga of Hrómund Gripsson and *Þorgilssaga*’, *SBVS* 13 (1946-53), 71.

[53] Brown (1952), p.76, n.18/5. The editor observes that this is the earliest recorded use of this term when applied to a work of art.

[54] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.18.

[55] The phrase ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, frequently adopted by dramaturgs, was originally introduced in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London, 1817), ii, p.2.

incorporated this episode – really believed in the historical reality of Hrómundr Grípsson and his fanciful adventures?

Ralph O'Connor has made the most sustained case for this last possibility, arguing that truth is a relative concept, and that medieval Icelanders, 'believed in elves at home, dragons abroad, giants in the past and preternatural happenings in all these locations.'[56] The detail concerning 'fróðir menn' may therefore be included in an attempt to place the interpretative responsibility squarely in the hands of the saga's audience. Given that we have remarked already on the controversial nature of this episode, this non-committal distancing technique serves to protect our author's integrity here, deferring at once to unnamed wise men, a foreign king and the present auditor or reader for judgement. The final line of the chapter sustains the possibility that Hrólfr's stories, despite being referred to as 'lygisǫgur' ('lying stories'), may in fact be true, in the sense that they dealt with real people and circumstances, even if the presentation was in some way enhanced.

In order to further complicate this dense passage, the author now refers to the verdict of an external authority, heretofore unmentioned in the saga text. He describes how, 'En þessarri sǫgu var skemt Sverri konungi, ok kallaði hann slíkar lygisǫgur skemtiligastar' ('This one story was entertaining to King Sverrir, and he said such lying sagas were very enjoyable.')[57] This is surely a digression within a digression. Sverrir Sigurðsson ruled Norway from 1185 to 1202, and when the events described in this saga transpired he was not yet born. His inclusion as an authority on 'lygisǫgur' has been of interest to scholars seeking to date the saga, in that it may help to establish a *terminus post quem* for the text (although this is disputed by those who see this passage as a later addition).[58] Equally significant for us, however, is the need the author feels to invoke such an authority in this context and so elaborate on a passage which he has already framed as tangential to the main narrative. One

[56] O'Connor (2009), p.365. On the applicability of this argument to 'travel episodes' in the sagas see also Geraldine Barnes, 'Authors, dead and alive, in Old Norse fiction', *Parergon* 8:2 (1990), 19-21.

[57] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.18.

[58] Liestøl (1945). Brown (1952) rejects Liestøl's reasoning, as do the editors of an earlier edition: Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, eds, *Sturlunga saga* (Reykjavík, 1946).

explanation for Sverrir's inclusion is offered by Paul Bibire:

> For the writer, however, entertainment and veracity seems [sic] to be locked together through genealogy: 'and yet people know how to reckon their genealogies to Hrómundr Gripsson.' … The king was in a particularly appropriate position to appreciate false genealogies, since he probably invented his own dynastic claim to the Norwegian throne.[59]

If the saga is indeed casting Sverrir as the beneficiary of such false reports, then there is surely a profound irony in his calling any saga a 'lie' – especially when his testimony is set against the countervailing view of Iceland's 'fróðir menn.' It may be possible to infer nationalistic overtones from this passage, which serve to further advance the Icelanders' claim to be the most trustworthy compilers of such lore in the medieval North. Then again, it is also possible to interpret this difference of opinion as a commentary on the mutability of such accounts as Hrólfr's story – from a plausible narrative in 1119 to a 'lying saga' by the time it reached King Sverrir. The king himself is accredited as the ultimate source for his own biography in the prologue to *Sverris saga*, and from this we may infer that he was thought to be a man who took a keen interest in how his story was presented for posterity.[60] Interestingly, the addition of Ingimundr's self-authored verses 'við enda sǫgunnar' ('at the end of the saga')[61] implicitly casts doubt on the role of verse as the guarantor for the veracity of prose accounts in the saga so fervently insisted upon by such authorities as Snorri Sturluson and Theodoricus monachus.

The sheer variety of possible interpretations of this passage, and its enduring interest for modern scholars, speak to a profound success on the part of the author in distancing himself from the controversy he relates. He avoids coming down on either side of the question of truth or falsehood in relation to these so-called 'lygisǫgur' (even avoiding ownership of that term) and, in so doing, maintains his authority as an Icelander to speak from an elevated position above the fray.[62] In describing the performances, he indicates that Ingimundr's verse

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59 Bibire (2007), p.8.

60 Þorleifur Hauksson, ed., *Sverris saga*, ÍF XXX (Reykjavík, 2007), p.4. This same prologue contains a defence of the veracity of the text to follow, citing, among other qualities, its proximity to the king.

61 *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.18.

62 See Bibire (2007), p.7.

composition was good, and that both he and Hrólfr were thought to be fine performers, but his commentary is all on the side of their presentational gifts rather than the veracity of their stories. The distinction is not a small one, the boundary between 'story' and 'discourse' being more obvious in a predominantly oral tradition than a widely literate one.[63] Here the saga author commits himself to a view on the quality of delivery, but remains scrupulously equivocal about the merits of the stories themselves. In so doing he draws attention to the speaker's role as conduit and elaborator, as distinct from source – a key concept in Icelandic storytelling practice, to which we will return in subsequent chapters.

As we have seen already, the two named performers in this episode from *Þorgils saga* are not professional entertainers, in the sense that they do not derive their income from their art (at least in the main). On the contrary, one is a priest and the other a lawyer, and while this does not exclude the possibility of a storytelling profession operative in Iceland in the early twelfth century, the fact of their unpaid status going unremarked may incline us to think such a thing unlikely. Of course, it is just possible that a new generation of literate storytellers would have worked consciously to excise all direct reference to such professional oral performers from their writing in order to reduce the threat from the competing versions of the sagas which such persons offered. Such an occurrence seems distinctly improbable, however, and would have required a far greater degree of co-ordination and common purpose across more than one hundred years of written composition than has been seriously suggested, still less proved.[64] Such a blatant omission would, moreover, undermine the historical pretensions of the sagas, since audiences would surely have queried the careful excision of a whole class of professional persons. The argument that they were so much a fact of normal life as to warrant no mention in the saga texts is difficult to sustain in at least this case, since the author

[63] Kellogg (1991), p.95.

[64] M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober (Odense, 1973), p.135 makes the provocative suggestion that all the family sagas could conceivably have been the work of a single author, but his suggestion has not gained traction, and most scholars rather incline towards Sigurður Nordal's contention that the stylistic differences between the surviving texts are too great to sustain such a possibility. See Sigurður Nordal, 'Sagalitteraturen', *Nordisk kultur* 8b (1953), 233. More recent commentators have subscribed to such a broad spectrum of dating as to render common authorship altogether unlikely. See, for instance, Carol Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca, 1982).

feels it is clearly worth mentioning the other entertainments provided at the wedding feast.[65] Nevertheless, it is apparent that the qualities of *amateur* sagamen, meaning those who told stories without any apparent expectation of financial reward, did concern and intrigue the author(s) of this saga.

The two such performers depicted in the Reykjarhólar episode have already been introduced in immediate succession earlier in the saga, and both their names are accompanied by fairly detailed character portraits:

> Ingimundr prestr Einarsson, Arasonar, hann bjó á ættleifð sinni á Reykjahólum. Hann var vinsæll maðr ok þó nǫkkut févani ok var þó bæði ǫrr af peningum ok it mesta stórmenni í skapi, sem ætterni hans var til. Hann var skáld gott ok at mǫrgu inn mesti mætismaðr... Ingimundr var frœðimaðr mikill ok fór mjǫk með sǫgur ok skemti með kvæðum ok orti...
> Hrólfr... var... lǫgmaðr mikill ok fór mjǫk með sakir. Hann var ok sagnamaðr ok orti skipuliga, vel fjáreigandi ok átti gott bú.[66]
>
> Ingimundr the Priest, son of Einarr Arason, lived at his family home at Reykjarhólar. He was a popular man and though not rich he was both great of largesse and of great mental status, as his family was. He was a good skald and in many ways the worthiest man... Ingimundr was a very wise man and told stories compellingly and entertained with poems and writing...
> Hrólfr... was a great lawyer because he was diligent. He was also a saga-man and wrote fine poems, [he was] wealthy and had a good estate.

This dual introduction informs our appreciation of who these storytellers were in this saga author's mind. Neither Ingimundr nor Hrólfr makes his living from stories, but both are known for their verbal gifts. If Old Norse had a word to distinguish a putative class of professional storytellers from such men as these it has left no trace – Hrólfr is called a ‘sagnamaðr’ (‘saga-man’), while Ingimundr is a ‘skáld’ – an identification which owes more to his innate ability than his source of income.[67] Each is said to combine his gift for saga telling with a talent for poetry – and, indeed, at the wedding we see both arts combine in recitations that supplement prose fiction with verses, some of them attributed to Ingimundr himself. The clear implication that at least one (probably both) of these storytellers feels

65 Gunnell (2001), p.34 speculates that the commonplace familiarity of dramatic entertainments might account in part for their disappearance from the written literature.
66 *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, pp.2-3.
67 See Wanner (2008), p.64.

himself at liberty to alter and augment his story in performance, through the addition of newly composed verse, endorses Emily Lethbridge's assertion that,

> Concepts of authorship, fixed authorial intentions and the perceived inviolability of the 'original' authorial text were not, on the whole, ingrained in the oral or written textual consciousness of medieval Icelanders to the same degree or in the same way that they are in our modern consciousness.[68]

Ingimundr is praised for his invention, but in no sense is he now portrayed as the owner of his recitation – that distinction is apparently reserved for posterity. Were he declaiming skaldic verse of his own creation the case might be different, but here the verses he speaks merely serve to augment a narrative of which he is custodian rather than owner. What matters to the saga author in this case is the quality of the performance over and above its fidelity to its oral progenitors. Here we see the saga depart from that insistence on literal accuracy which characterised the historical claims of Snorri, Theodoricus and Saxo cited earlier in this chapter and, indeed, from its own discussion of the historical truth of the events depicted in the passage discussed above. For Snorri, Theodoricus and Saxo the focus was on the content of the stories told, but here within such a story we see the emphasis shift to the mode of their telling.

The core essence of the saga is thought sufficiently robust to sustain its integrity even though the manner of its delivery may vary. The detail attributing certain *flokkar* to Ingimundr implies clearly that the whole narrative was not considered to be his creation, and indeed the author credits Hrólfr with having 'samansetta' ('put together')[69] his contribution to proceedings rather than naming him as its original source or author. In this respect, both these characters share the saga author's claim to be framers and presenters of material, rather than inventors. Other pertinent details provided by this saga include the respective relationships of the two performers to the saga's titular protagonist, Þorgils Oddason, who, along with the bride's father, is said to be one of 'mestir virðingamenn' ('the foremost men').[70] Ingimundr is

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[68] Emily Lethbridge, '*Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions and Critical Interpretations', in Quinn and Lethbridge (2010), p.125.

[69] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.18.

[70] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.14.

his cousin and Hrólfr is one of his Thingmen: both are landed men of means, but neither is among the most prominent people in society (although Ingimundr, as host of the wedding party, presumably enjoys inflated status on this occasion). The connections between these men and Þorgils are repeatedly referenced, suggesting a relationship of patronage consonant with their both being identified as skalds. Amateur storytellers as they may be, the author's (or possibly scribe's) criticism of those who deny the account of these entertainments having taken place in the form described indicates that they were of some public interest and that the stakes for each man were, therefore, significant.

Ingimundr's capacities and temperament as a performer receive further emphasis at the opening of this chapter, perhaps weakening the case for the wedding incident having been wholly interpolated – without this passage, why would the saga author have devoted such energy to emphasising the narrative and performative gifts of this supporting character?[71] Our second introduction to Ingimundr the Priest provides us with the following additional perspective on his character:

> Ingimundr var it mesta gǫfugmenni, skáld gott, ofláti mikill bæði í skapferði ok annarri kurteisi, inn mesti gleðimaðr ok fekk margt til skemtunar. Hann var inn vitrasti maðr ok helt sér mjǫk til vinsælda við alþýðu. Hann var ok mikils virðr af mǫrgum gǫfgum mǫnnum.[72]

> Ingimundr was the worthiest of men, a good skald, a great show-off both in temperament and other courtesy, a great man of good cheer who gave many entertainments. He was a very wise man and did many things to be popular with common people. He was thought well of by many great men.

Among the details furnished here, Ingimundr is clearly popular among both those of higher and lower status – that is, not only his apparent patrons, Þórðr and Þorgils, but also the 'alþýða' ('common people') who would have numbered among his audience at such a grand event. Implicit in this wide appeal are his charisma and his diplomacy, his talent as a storyteller seeming to derive from a combination of skill and likeability, a notable contrast to the heroic poets of the classical sagas, such as Egill Skallagrímsson, who is portrayed as

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[71] Ingimundr's proficiency with poetry is also referred to in Chapter 18.

[72] *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, p.13.

morose and misanthropic.[73] Then again, Egill's greatness lies not only in his artistic pre-eminence, but also in his martial skill and wealth, the relative lack of which might incline another poet to rely more on the patronage of powerful allies. Ingimundr's wisdom is emphasised in both descriptive passages, and here his performative inclinations are also referred to, indicating that these were among the characteristics for which he, a vocational storyteller, was widely known (his repeated designation as a 'skáld gott' is particularly striking). Whereas Hrólfr receives a less detailed evaluation, the fact of his being a lawyer is of note since that profession, like Ingimundr's priesthood, would have lent itself well to the experience of making public declamations (both are orators by trade) and to the need to exercise and train a retentive memory. Where we do find occasional reference to the criteria by which a good oral performance might be judged, audibility is high on the list of desirable traits, and one would imagine that this was similarly important for a lawyer, familiar with the need to make himself heard above the fray at Thing meetings. We also learn that both men are literate, a feature unsurprising in the context of their professions, but striking because it implies a distance between them and their antecedents in the oral tradition who perhaps still number among their sources for the stories they share.[74]

Both these men are likeable, talented, professional and of considerable, though ultimately limited, social status, reliant for their social standing on the good will of their patrons. The saga makes no mention of their being commissioned in advance to produce these entertainments at the feast, although it does distinguish them from their point of entry into the narrative as men known for their performative abilities. As the host, it might be Ingimundr's prerogative to make some contribution to the festivities, but Hrólfr's offering occurs unprompted by any dialogue in the saga, and we are left to speculate on whether it was anticipated, requested on the spot, or spontaneously begun by the performer himself, perhaps taking advantage of a break in the dancing, wrestling and feasting which otherwise occupied

[73] Finlay (1992), pp.33-4.

[74] See Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 2001), p.150.

the guests. This account only tells us so much, but in other saga narratives we occasionally encounter scenes of impromptu storytelling, and these contributions at the wedding feast might be intended as examples of the same phenomenon (hence, perhaps, the controversy about whether they actually took place). In *Fóstbrœðra saga*, Fífl-Egill describes the scene of just such an unplanned performance:

> Egill mælti: 'Þorgrímr segir þar sǫgu.' Þormóðr mælti: 'Frá hverjum er saga sú, er hann segir?' Egill svarar: 'Eigi veit ek gǫrla, frá hverjum sagan er, en hitt veit ek, at hann segir vel frá ok skemmtiliga, ok er stóll settr undir hann úti hjá búðinni, ok sitja menn þar umhverfis ok hlyýða til sǫgunnar.' Þormóðr mælti: 'Kunna muntu nǫkkurn mann at nefna, þann sem í sǫgunni, allra helzt er þú segir svá mikit frá, at gaman sé at.' Egill mælti: 'Þorgeirr nǫkkurr var mikill kappi í sǫgunni, ok svá virðisk mér sem hann Þorgrímr myndi verit hafa nǫkkut við sǫguna ok gengit mjǫk vel fram, sem líkligt er. Vilda ek, at þú gengir þangat ok hlýddir til skemmtanar.'[75]

> Egill said: 'Þorgrímr is telling a story.' Þormóðr asked: 'Whom is it about, the story he's telling?' Egill said: 'I do not clearly know whom the saga is about, but it seems to me that he is telling it well and entertainingly, and a chair is set under him outside his booth, and men are sitting around there and listening to the story.' Þormóðr replied: 'You must know the name of some man who is in the story, especially as you say so much about how entertaining it is.' Egill said: 'Þorgeirr was a certain great warrior in the story, and then it seemed to me that Þorgrímr must have been somewhat in the story and fought very well, as was to be expected. I wish you to go there and listen to the entertainment.'

One key detail in this episode is that Þorgrímr is seated during his rendition, much like Gunnar Lambason during a comparable scene in *Njáls saga*. In that case we are told, '...ok ver settr undir hann stóll' ('...and a chair was set under him.')[76] Egill does not tell us explicitly that Þorgrímr has had his chair set up for the express purpose of storytelling, but its convenient presence suggests that this is likely, first since it would normally be found within the tent (Egill tells us that the storytelling event is taking place 'úti hjá búðinni'), and – more persuasively – because the messenger sees the need to mention this detail, indicating that he considers it relevant to the conventional form of storytelling, and therefore pertinent in assisting Þormóðr to swiftly grasp the performance dynamics of the event he is describing.

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75 Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Fóstbrœðra saga*, ÍF VI (Reykjavík, 1963), p.231.

76 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ÍF XIL (Reykjavík, 1954), p.442. A third instance of an entertainer seating himself before commencing occurs in *Óttars þáttr svarta,* although here Óttar is in the subservient position of being the king's prisoner, and so he sits on the floor. See *Óttars þáttr svarta* in Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Íslendinga Sögur* (Reykjavík, 1947), xii, pp.159-63.

Once again, the metatextual character of this exchange is of significant literary interest to us. The saga author presents Egill as the impromptu private storyteller describing a hastily convened performance of public storytelling. We may incline to imagine an authorial expectation that an oral rendition of *Fóstbrœðra saga* could take place in similar circumstances to those which he outlines.[77] As we did in the case of *Þorgils saga*, we may instructively examine this text's account of the man now telling his side of the story.[78]

Þorgrímr Einarsson enters the saga at the beginning of Chapter 16 bearing the unpromising nickname 'Þorgrímr trolli' ('Þorgrímr Troll').[79] We learn that he is a Greenlander (storytelling is not an exclusively Icelandic aptitude, although the most celebrated practitioners in Icelandic literature tend to be Icelanders), and is on his way home with a cargo of fine linens. He is a merchant, and of sufficiently high status to rank as co-captain of his vessel alongside his partner Þórarinn ofsi Þorvaldsson. We learn later that he has the status of *goði* when he comes to live in Iceland.[80] Again, we have here a storyteller of substantial rank (he merits his own booth at the Althing), who is also, notably, a traveller, and whose nickname suggests both a martial reputation, which Egill infers from the self-portrait he offers during the telling of his story, and a grotesqueness more in line with the characteristic poet's persona found in the poets' sagas than with the performers described in *Þorgils saga*.

Egill is openly referred to as a fool in the saga, and makes no effort to refute this characterisation. As such, even though he claims not to be following Þorgrímr's story it may actually be wholly intelligible to most of its audience. These would appear to be Thingmen, for the most part, although more eminent auditors are clearly not thought to be out of place, as witness Egill's encouraging Þormóðr to join them (while this could be further evidence of Egill's foolishness, Þormóðr's failure to comment on it must incline us to believe the the

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77 See Lönnroth (1978) and Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga* (Reykjavík, 1962).

78 These sagas are often cited together as examples of what Theodore Andersson calls 'a dramatic style borrowed, I surmise, from the best storytellers.' Theodore M. Andersson, 'From Tradition to Literature in the Sagas', in Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf, eds, *Oral Art forms and their Passage into Writing* (Copenhagen, 2008), p.12.

79 *Fóstbrœðra saga*, p.201.

80 *Fóstbrœðra saga*, p.224.

invitation itself is not out of place). In this sense, although the storyteller is a man of some public distinction – though not among the foremost rank of Icelandic society – his audience is notably diverse. Egill's choice of the verb 'hlýða' ('to listen'), having also the meaning 'to obey' or 'to defer to,' is striking as it suggests a rapt attentiveness, and also significant in distinguishing the audience's manner of attending from that with which they might 'watch' or 'view' a spectacle or performance. The implication is that the words (or sounds or intonations) are the dominant entertaining element in this recital, even though Egill claims not to fully apprehend their substance. The performer is static, insofar as he is seated, and the fact of his audience sitting around him further limits his capacity for sudden movement during his delivery. This also, coupled with Egill's confidence that he has time to travel to Þormóðr's booth and return to catch more of the narrative, attests to its relative length (interrupted by rain, we do not know how long it would have lasted in its entirety). Þormóðr, an educated man, argues that an auditor must surely appreciate the thrust of the narrative in order to enjoy the performance, but Egill gives us a different impression: much like the stereotyped groundling in the theatres of the English Renaissance, his appreciation of the performance depends less on the content of the story than on the entertaining manner of its telling.[81] Unlike a theatregoer, there is no suggestion of physical action to arrest his attention, so the operative element must be the intonation and delivery of the words. To some extent, he may also infer the quality of the storytelling from the response of others in the audience, but his intention to return indicates that he is enjoying himself regardless of the comprehension barrier. As to what characteristics distinguish such a high quality recital, Egill does not say. Other texts make some reference to the commendable qualities in a fine oral performance – *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, for instance, praises its titular hero for having 'flutti fram kvæðit vel ok skǫruliga' ('brought out the poem well and bravely').[82] Where they do occur, however, such

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[81] It is worth noting the use of 'skemmtiliga' in Egill's description of Þórmoðr's performance which emphasises the pleasing form of the telling more than the content of the story itself. Cleasby-Vigfússon has the following definition: 'to tell a story well and pleasantly'.

[82] Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ÍF III (Reykjavík, 1938), p.71.

statements are decidedly non-technical and provide little sense of the expressive choices the performer made, tending only to praise him for audibility. Of course, it is entirely possible on this occasion that the author means to implicitly criticise Egill for judging the manner of Þorgrímr's storytelling when he fails to apprehend its meaning, but this does not detract from the sense we are left with that a literal understanding of what is being said is only one element of an appreciation for storytelling as depicted in this saga.

One further detail from the storytelling episode in *Fóstbræðra saga* worth noting is the considerable length of Þorgrímr's story, and the imputed correlation between length and significance or quality. When later questioned by Þormóðr about the direction the narrative was taking, Þorgrímr replies, ‘Eigi getr þat í fám orðum sagt, stórmerki þeirar sǫgu’ (‘That cannot be told in few words, the great wonders of that story.’)[83] Like Ingimundr, this storyteller is not above hyperbole, and is as much an advocate for his own skill as Egill was when speaking on his behalf. Nevertheless, the connection between length and quality must surely have a bearing on the saga author's sense of the characteristics which make for a good recitation. A similar relationship between length (and, perhaps, complexity) and quality or importance is to be found in *Egils saga* when the author refers the reader to ‘langar frásagnir’ (‘long narratives’)[84] telling the story of King Haraldr. There is an clear sense of deference to the subject matter here, both on the grounds that *Egils saga* is not the place for such a lengthy tangent, but also that Haraldr's stature is such as to have earned him lengthy obituaries which would be debased by the act of reducing their richness through summative parsing.[85] By contrast there is something rather apologetic about the brief disclaimer by the author inserted at the end of *Bolla þáttr Bollasonar*: ‘...ok hǫfu vér eigi heyrt þessa sǫgu lengri’ (‘...and we have heard no more of this story.’)[86] In other words, had the author been in a position to

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83 *Fóstbræðra saga*, p.232.

84 Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ÍF II (Reykjavík, 1933), p.7.

85 Clover makes a similar claim when discussing Chapter 177 of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, calling the author’s defence of complex, elaborate and anecdotal storytelling ‘narrative brinkmanship.’ He is clearly aware that the story is getting away from him, but the art involved in controlling it is implicit in this description. See Clover (1982), p.36.

86 *Laxdœla saga*, p.248. The editor incorporates this *þáttr* into the chapter numbering for the saga to which it is appended in the MS.

render a longer account, he would have done so. These quotations may have a bearing on the long running debate about the possibility of the long prose form existing in the oral tradition.[87] While length is a relative concept, the literate saga authors clearly associate it with the quality and status of a narrative, and it is a similar concern about his limited stock of stories which causes the storyteller in *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða* great anxiety. Stories may be episodic, but the longer they are the higher their status in the performative canon, at least in the case of these examples. Þormóðr's request for a summary of Þorgrímr's story may thus be calculated to appear dismissive – a slight on his ability as a storyteller which may be designed to imply that his material (which, of course, concerns himself) is insubstantial.

In her article 'The Long Prose Form', Clover argues that the scribes who committed fixed versions of the sagas to parchment anticipated them being further transmitted and received in both their oral and written forms. She writes, 'The obvious explanation for the often-noted fact that the Icelandic sagas combine oral tradition with literary innovation is to suppose that their authors intended them for both forms of publication.'[88] Such reasoning would imply that a scribe or author thought it suitable for a reader to appropriate his own voice and speak in the first person when bringing *Bolla þáttr* to a close. There is nothing in the manuscript to suggest that this closing sentence was intended as a rubric for the private reader rather than part of the body of the text, and the same is true in the case of other sagas that close on a statement which uses the first person plural pronoun 'vér,' including *Þórðar saga hreðu*, where a similar formulation is used. The storytelling episode in *Fóstbrœðra saga* makes no explicit statement about the voice Þorgrímr adopts when reciting his story, but it is important to consider the possibility that his story might have been told in a way which resembled the written saga in which it is described: specifically, that he adopted the objective tone of the literate saga-man, and that the majority of his narrative was told in the third person. Two details may suggest this. The first is Egill's remark, '...ok svá virðisk mér sem

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[87] See Clover (1986).
[88] Clover (1982), p.201.

hann Þorgrímr myndi verit hafa nǫkkut við sǫguna ok gengit mjǫk vel fram, sem líkligt er.' ('...and then it seemed to me that Þorgrímr must have been somewhat in the story and fought very well, as was to be expected').[89] If Egill is certain (albeit only when prompted by Þormóðr) about the identity of Þorgeirr, why this uncertainty about the appearance of Þorgrímr himself in the story? The reason could be that the story is being told in the third person – consistent with classical saga style – and the certain identification of Þorgrímr the character (perhaps appearing under an alias) with Þorgrímr the storyteller is therefore not possible.

Alternatively, of course, we must consider Egill's acknowledged foolishness which, coupled with his failure to immediately remember those details which Þormóðr ultimately persuades him to share, renders him a poor witness to Þorgrímr's performative technique. Turning then to the second cause we have to suspect that this storyteller may be using such conventional distancing techniques as an objective tone and third person narration, we must proceed to examine the exchange between Þormóðr and Þorgrímr immediately before the latter is killed. Having been asked, perhaps insultingly, to summarise the events of his story, and having declined to do so, Þorgrímr calls upon his interlocutor to name himself. Þormóðr replies by calling himself 'Ótryggr' ('Unreliable'),[90] to which Þorgrímr responds by asking about his parentage. '"Hvers son ertu?" sagði Þorgrímr. "Em ek Tortryggsson." Þá vildi Þorgrímr upp rísa af stólinum. Þórmoðr høggr þá í hǫfuð honum...'[91] ('"Whose son are you?" asked Þorgrímr. "I am Tortryggr's son." Then Þorgrímr made to rise up from his chair. Þórmoðr then strikes him on his head...') 'Tortryggr' has the meaning of 'untrustworthy,' and the combination of two such allusive names coupled with Þorgrímr's sudden reaction would suggest that he is particularly sensitive to their connotations. One reason for this well-honed

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89 *Fóstbræðra saga*, p.231.

90 *Fóstbræðra saga*, p.233. There is some MS variation here. Flateyarbók has 'Vigfús' for 'Ótryggr,' and both this MS and the 'R' text group of manuscripts (AM 142 fol., and AM 556 a 4to) have 'Ótryggsson' in place of 'Tortryggsson.' The variant given here is common to the Mǫðruvallabók and Hauksbók texts. 'Vigfús' might be an equally appropriate choice for an alias, having the meaning of 'eager warrior,' and the variation may simply be down to individual scribal humour.

91 *Fóstbræðra saga*, p.233.

sensitivity, and for Þórmoðr's decision to invent such names (sacrificing, in the process, the element of surprise) could be that Þórmoðr is using this device to comment on Þorgrímr's dramatic rendering of the events concerning Þorgeirr's death, and perhaps also on his similar use of a false name or identity for his persona in the story. It would not be necessary to make this connection in order to appreciate the dynamics of the scene, but for those paying close attention this parallel would reward their engagement by introducing an additional layer of meaning to the exchange. For those who recognise the parallel, Þórmoðr is presented as the champion of a true account to contradict Þorgrímr's self-congratulatory lies.

All of this is, ultimately, speculative. The saga author has chosen not to share more of the content of Þorgrímr's story with the reader than what Egill conveys to Þórmoðr in his booth. The question of whether or not Þorgrímr directly identified himself with the warrior whose companions slew Þorgeirr in his story is not, however, as irresolvable as it may initially appear. On the contrary, the relationship between the narrator and the characters portrayed in his narrative goes directly to the heart of saga style. As Vésteinn Ólason describes it,

> The narrative method of the *Íslendingasögur* is marked by its formal objectivity and discretion; the narrator appears to view with an unprejudiced eye the unfolding events, explaining what happens and reporting the words of men as if they had just been spoken.[92]

By this definition, whatever story Þorgrímr was telling could not be considered by the saga author to be itself a saga in the same genre if he failed, by introducing himself as a character in the narrative, to maintain this veneer of objectivity. A generic distinction is being drawn in this episode between the self-serving oral storyteller and the saga-teller, be his medium oral or written, who distinguishes himself from his material, striving to remain, as Jónas Kristjánsson put it, 'invisible.'[93] This distinction returns us to the question: what can the saga's own accounts of storytellers teach us about the saga authors' perceptions of such men and of themselves? In this case, Þorgrímr's error is in telling a story about himself and failing to

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92 Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', in McTurk (2005), p.106.
93 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature*, trans. Peter Foote (Reykjavík, 1988), p.204.

remain invisible – an error which provides Þormóðr with the honourable pretext to exact his revenge. There is clearly a sense in which the act of public storytelling, engaged in by men of status, is a dangerous one, and we may even read this episode as a parable warning against such amateur efforts as Þorgrímr's which, despite its entertaining quality, cost him his life.

The implicit distinction being drawn here is perhaps not between the amateur and the professional in the oral tradition, but between the amateur (oral) storyteller and the professional (literate) *saga*-teller – a distinction difficult to articulate by contemporary performers, since the Old Norse language offers us only one word, 'saga,' for both forms of story.[94] It is useful for our purposes to observe that Þorgrímr did not frame his story as a 'lygisaga,' which might perhaps have indemnified him against the retribution which is meted out to him, but rather – through his intrusion into his own narrative and failure to preserve a credible sense of invisible objectivity – he attempted to practise a deception, on account of which he lost his life. His moment of revelation in hearing Þórmoðr identify himself as 'Ótryggr Tortryggsson,' his instinctive standing up from the chair, reflects his awareness that this characterisation of him as untrustworthy and unreliable is well merited. Unlike the 'fróðir menn' of *Þorgils saga*, who may be taken in without reproach by stories which appear plausible to them, his was a conscious act of appropriating the conventions of storytelling to defame another man, and for that he paid a price. That he is so quick in solving the riddle of this false name, however, speaks to his talent for understanding wordplay, often (as in *Þorgils saga*) the mark of a gifted oral performer.

The potential cost of telling a lie, as distinct from a 'lygisaga' (which is understood to conform to different rules), disguised as a saga (which depends for its success on its being publicly accepted as authoritative and credible), is similarly explored in *Laxdœla saga*, Chapter 18. At this stage in the story, Þorkell trefill has become suddenly wealthy on account of a shipwreck in which several people died causing him to inherit their wealth. The case for

[94] See Harris (1997), p.135.

his receiving this inheritance depends upon the order in which the mariners died. Among the sailors there was one survivor, named Guðmundr, whom Þorkell entrusts with a particular version of the story of the shipwreck. If generally accepted, this story will substantiate his claim to be a lawful inheritor. Guðmundr recites this version of events in the presence of 'margir menn' ('many men'),[95] but almost immediately a problem presents itself:

> Guðmundr hafði áðr nǫkkut ǫðruvísa sagt. Nú þótti þeim frændum Þórarins nǫkkut ifanlig sjá saga...[96]
>
> Guðmundr had previously told another version. Now Þórarinn's kin were suspicious of the story...

The implied link between the stability of an account and the trustworthiness of a source is elsewhere clearly reflected in such forms as Snorri Sturluson's insistence on the trustworthiness of poetry because it is immutable, and in the pains taken by some saga writers to trace the lineage of their informants back to characters featured in the sagas themselves.[97] The kinsmen of the deceased – Þorkell's rival claimants – have heard two competing versions of the story from the same source, and are understandably suspicious of this revised account. Rather than accuse Guðmundr outright, thereby impugning his honour directly, they demand that Þorkell share the inheritance with them. Refusing to do so, he offers to undergo an ordeal to prove the veracity of his account. The very fact that such a convention should have existed (and, by likening it to similar ordeals undertaken by Christian men, the saga author implicitly attests to its continuance into the thirteenth century) indicates a cultural anxiety that men tended to bend the truth to suit their own purposes, and that challenging them was difficult when the challenge was brought solely on the basis of hearsay – hence the insistence in *Grágás* that multiple witnesses be called to attest to the vast majority of crimes. Guðmundr is an insufficiently persuasive liar to effectively and credibly contradict his own earlier account. Notably, Þorkell is the real author of Guðmundr's revised story, and the saga draws our

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95 *Laxdœla saga*, p.42.
96 *Laxdœla saga*, p.42.
97 Perhaps the most famous example is the reference to Þorvaldr in *Droplaugarsona saga.* See Jón Jóhannesson, ed., *Droplaugarsona saga*, ÍF XI (Rekyjavík, 1950), p.180.

attention to his controlling influence, as well as betraying an author's anxiety that the quality of his work may be diminished in the hands – or mouth – of an inept oral publisher. Guðmundr is an unremarkable man, a sailor who had a lucky escape, and does not fit the profile of the persuasive storyteller which we have so far encountered in *Fóstbrœðra saga* and *Þorgils saga.* By contrast, Þorkell is a man with a following and an impressive Machiavellian streak which enables him to undermine the ordeal (which he himself suggests, further staking his claim to being unimpeachable) and so achieve his fortune. Of the two men, it is Þorkell who manifestly has more in common with the other storytellers that have so far peopled these accounts. However, like Þorgrímr trolli, his story is a self-serving lie rather than a self-effacing account of recent history, and accordingly the saga author describes how it puts him in significant danger.

This is a case of a story landing its author in trouble from which he then escapes by trickery, but there are also accounts in the sagas, and particularly among the later *þættir*, of condemned men avoiding death through the intervention of talented storytellers capable of staging a compelling performance in a crisis. The most famous case of a performer saving his own life through a celebrated display of his art must certainly be Egill Skallagrímsson's *Hǫfuðlausn*,[98] but more pertinent for our purposes is a similar scenario which plays out in *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri*, one of several tales in which Halldórr Snorrason, himself a noted storyteller, takes centre stage.[99] Because the chosen medium through which his salvation is secured is prose, this account is of particular interest in light of those surveyed already in this chapter, and it is made doubly so because Einarr, the storyteller who pleads for Halldórr, adopts certain tropes of written saga style but maintains a first person presence within his own narrative. As with Egill, it is Halldórr's short temper which is the cause of his

98 *Egils saga,* pp.183-95. In the following chapter the king praises Egill not for the content of the poem, but rather for the fact that it was 'Bezta... fram flutt' ('Well delivered'). For further discussion of the bearing this incident has on meta-narrative in the sagas see Alison Finlay, 'Risking One's Head: *Vafþrúðnismál* and the Mythic Power of Poetry', in Daniel Anlezark, ed., *Myths, Legends and Heroes: Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature* (Toronto, 2011), p.91.

99 Halldór also features in *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn síðari*, *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða, Eyrbyggja saga, Heiðarvíga saga* and *Laxdœla saga*, ch.78, in which Snorri goði appears to rank him foremost among his sons (although still less prominent than Bolli).

trouble, although significantly he is provoked by a man named Kali insulting him with a story about his past. Here again the danger of relating a biographical anecdote directly to its subject is made clear, although the story later juxtaposes this personal attack with an autobiographical defence which reflects the potential power of that same subject if he is sufficiently skilled to turn his own experience to his own advantage. Insulted by the slight to his reputation, Halldórr kills Kali, and then appeals to Einarr, Kali's kinsman, for clemency. Einarr's reaction is curious. Rather than convene a trial or attempt a summary judgement he assembles all his retainers and declares, 'Ek vil nú skemmta yðr...' ('I will now entertain you...').[100]

Were it not for the evidence we have already examined concerning the authoritative potency of public storytelling, we might initially consider this proposition absurd – even a non sequitur – yet the author makes no such suggestion and records no surprised reaction from the crowd. Einarr, unlike the seated storytellers in *Fóstbrœðra saga* and *Njáls saga*, underlines the urgency of his intervention by standing throughout, and proceeds to tell his (admittedly much briefer) story. It takes the form of an autobiographical parable, in the course of which he is captured by Danes and sold as a slave to an unknown benefactor who exacts from him a promise to be merciful to others in the future. That promise given, the benefactor unmasks himself and is shown to be King Óláfr Tryggvason; he then vanishes. In deference to the promise he made to his king, Einarr now pardons Halldórr.

Until this denouement is reached the device of the story told within this story appears clumsy and ill explained, but there is a coda which may shed light on Einarr's motivation in responding to the death of Kali in such an apparently eccentric way. The author tells us that, 'Ok áðr Einarr hafði lokit sögu sinni, var Bergljót komin á þingit, kona hans, með mikla sveit manna...' ('And before Einarr had finished his story, Bergljót, his wife, came there to the meeting with many men...').[101] Bergljót's agenda, we learn, is to intervene on Halldórr's behalf

[100] *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri*, in Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Stories from the sagas of the kings: Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri; Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn síðari* (London, 1980), p.9. All quotations from this text are taken from this edition.

[101] *Halldórs þáttr*, p.14.

if her husband moves against him. In light of this development, his parable suddenly appears a stroke of diplomatic brilliance, providing him with grounds on which to pardon his guest for the crime of murdering Kali without suffering a loss of face in the opinion of the assembled public. Still more advantageously, he has managed to convey almost a laying on of hands by the esteemed King Óláfr, further enhancing his own reputation by his purported proximity to this saint-like figure. Metatextually we might extend the implications of this effect still further to include the author – or reciter – of *Halldórs þáttr* who, by adopting Einarr's voice to recount this anecdote, aligns himself with this royally endorsed storyteller. In Einarr, then, we again encounter a man not quite of the first rank in society, and not exempt from local political and social pressures, who is nevertheless diplomatic and inventive with his narrative gifts, and so succeeds in enhancing his reputation – the very motivation we may also ascribe to the ill-fated Þorgrímr trolli of *Fóstbrœðra saga*.

Although he does little storytelling of his own in this account, Halldórr Snorrason retains in all the stories told about him the reputation of a gifted performer. Just as Einarr is keen to benefit from the reflected glory of King Óláfr, so the unnamed itinerant storyteller of *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða* invokes Halldórr's name to lend both credibility and authority to his story. This text retains its curiosity for scholars not least because of the Icelander's claim, made when asked how he learned the story of King Haraldr, 'Þat var vanði minn út á landinu, at ek fór hvert sumar til þings, ok namk hvert sumar af sögunni nökkut at Halldóri Snorrasyni' ('It was my custom, out in that country [Iceland], that I went every summer to the Thing, and I learnt every summer some of the saga from Halldórr Snorrason.')[102] Part of the reason for naming Halldórr must be to enhance the impression of an unbroken chain of oral transmission – essential for a storyteller to avoid the fate meted out to such examples as Þorgrímr trolli, or to avoid the peril in which the likes of Þorkell trefill find themselves.[103] Yet there is also the impression, endorsed by the anonymity of this speaker, of seeking to appropriate the famous

[102] *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða*, p.176.
[103] Halldórr was known to have accompanied Haraldr on his travels.

storyteller's implicit endorsement, not as author but as interpreter, and perhaps to 'tell it like he used to.'

Other details of this brief episode resonate with those we have examined already. The context of a festival (in this case, Christmas) puts us in mind of the wedding feast at Reykjarhólar, at which it seems both poetry and prose was performed. Another analogous case is that of *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, in which the poet earns his seat at the feast on account of his excellent renditions, recognising again the value of the cultural capital inherent in performance.[104] The mention of the Icelandic Thing as a context for public recital echoes the events of *Fóstbrœðra saga*,[105] and the characteristics of the storyteller – his national identity, itinerant status, learning, dramatic flair and acknowledged debt to the oral tradition, to say nothing of his anxiety for having a limited store of stories to draw on – all coincide with other instances of how the authors of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries chose to portray their narrative antecedents.

Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða, the king's remark, 'Nú eru drykkjur miklar of jólin, ok má skömmum við sitja at hlýða skemmtan' ('There is great drinking at Yule, and [people] can only then sit a short time, and listen attentively to entertainment')[106] may remind us of the detail recorded in *Þorgils saga* that such storytelling as there was at these events took place amid dancing and wrestling – certainly, the capacity to command attention must have been among the would-be storyteller's talents.[107] Even Þorgrímr's well-attended storytelling in *Fóstbrœðra saga* is subject to interruption when rain stops play.

We may regret that so few anecdotes built around the kind of performative act here surveyed have survived from the 'classical' period of saga writing. Even examples from the later 'contemporary' period of *Sturlunga saga* are relatively sparse. Yet those that do remain,

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[104] Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, ÍF IX (Reykjavík, 1956).

[105] Hermann Pálsson (1999), p.80 discusses the implications of this reference to the Thing for public performance in Iceland.

[106] *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða*, p.176.

[107] Hermann Pálsson (1962) draws our attention to several similar injunctions in later saga manuscripts warning audiences to attend to the story and avoid distractions like eating and idle talk.

while being of limited value to the historian, if carefully read provide substantial literary insights into the creative agenda of those same scribes, authors and redactors who preserved, augmented or perhaps conceived them. No analysis of these texts can conclusively demonstrate the reality of storytelling in the oral tradition, but close readings such as these can bring us closer to an appreciation of how literate storytellers sought to portray their forebears and superimpose on these artistic constructs the creative anxieties which shaped their own sense of the role they played in continuing to tell those same stories for which they were now the self-appointed (or, more probably, commissioned) conduits. The impression left of successful storytellers, notably Icelanders (among whom the authors of these written records numbered), is of an enormously proficient elite group – what Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has called, 'a kind of literary Swiss Guard.'[108] It is difficult to escape the suspicion that these extremely metatextually conscious authors were both the active generators and grateful recipients of a considerable level of reflected glory. The challenge with which they provided themselves was first of re-imagining hard acts to follow, and, second, of then going one better.

iv. Behind the Curtain: Framing and Presenting the Sagas as Written Texts

The voice of the Old Norse oral storyteller fell silent many centuries ago. The written sagas, it is now widely believed, are not transcripts of oral stories *per se* but examples of a form which developed out of the oral *milieu* and assumed characteristics all its own.[109] The authors who *wrote* the sagas – as distinct from those who told, recited or performed them – are not the principal subject of the present study. Nevertheless, their attachment to the use of prologues and epilogues to frame the stories they tell may provide valuable additional insight into their

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[108] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (ca. 870–1400) and their Relation to Literary Production', in Margaret Clunies Ross, ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), p.13.

[109] See Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Another Audience – Another Saga: How Can we Explain the Different Accounts in *Vatnsdoela saga* and *Finnboga saga ramma* of the Same Events?', in Hildegard L. C. Tristram, ed., *Text und Zeittiefe* (Tübingen, 1994), p.375.

and their contemporaries' conception of the storytelling art as a whole (which they had, after all, inherited), and, in particular, the constraints and possibilities of oral performance. We have already noted the importance of Snorri Sturluson's prologues to *Heimskringla* and the 'separate' *Óláfs saga helga*, along with those penned by the historians Adam of Bremen, Saxo Grammaticus and Theodoricus the Monk.[110] To these we may now add some extracts from the saga texts themselves. Depending on the manuscript rubrics and presentational features it is sometimes possible to identify a prologue or coda as deliberately intended to be treated as separate from the text it accompanies, and a similar conclusion may safely be drawn when such passages do not accompany their respective sagas in every redaction. In some cases the distinction is less clear, and such commentaries may be included in the opening or closing passages of the saga itself. Both iterations have value for us, however, and in one sense the second, 'interpolated,' prologue or epilogue is of particular significance since it is clearly supposed to be read as integral and indispensable to the text upon which it provides a commentary.

One especially striking coda is to be found at the end of *Víglundar saga*, a remarkable work which combines fantastical elements from the *fornaldarsǫgur* with the geographical specificity and stylistic features commonly found in the *Íslendingasǫgur*. Following on from the conventional announcement that the saga has ended, the text continues with a poem and a final prose coda:

> At henni ma þykja mikit gaman, gleði oss guð alla saman; fór þar endir, en vér séum allir guði sendir; ok hverr sem þessar allar sögur girnist at segja, þann þarf eigi löngum at þegja; *vér köstum allir kvölum ok mæði, ef kappar girnast ágætt æði, sögur ok menntir ok signuð fræði ok síðan eptir sannleiks gæði. Hafi þeir þökk, er hlýddu, ok þeir, er söguna þýddu, ok Þorgeirr(?), er letrit skráði; sjálfr guð ok María þá alla náði. Þrír feðgar hafa skrifat bók þessa, ok biðið til guðs fyrir þeim öllum.* Amen.[111]
>
> That this may seem a great pleasure,
> God delights us all together;
> there went the end [of the story],
> but we are all sent by God

[110] See pp.68-71 of this study.
[111] Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Víglundar saga*, ÍF XIV(Reykjavík, 1959), p.116. The italicised passage, beginning 'vér köstum allir...', occurs only in the text as preserved in AM 510 4to.

> and whoever desires to recount all these stories
> does not long stay silent.
> *We cast off all pain and shortness of breath, if men desire great frenzy,*
> *stories and skills and blessed wisdom and then afterwards truth and goodness.*
>
> *May they have thanks, who listened, and those who wrote the stories down, and Þorgeirr(?), who signed [them] in words, God Himself and Mary pardon them all. Three, father and sons, have written this book, and pray to God for them all. Amen.*

Notably, this concluding prayer, if spoken, is designed to be voiced by a performer whose own name is absent from the list of credits associated with the listeners and the writers of the saga. The reference to the collective writing of the book is intriguing, but is more likely to refer to the provenance of the present manuscript than the saga it contains, partly on the grounds that it is omitted from the other witnesses and partly on account of the choice of the verb 'skrifa' ('to write') implying the act of inscribing rather than imagining – a distinction which the modern English word 'write' does not allow for.[112] As such it lends little to our understanding of how written saga urtexts came to be. The note of unity between all concerned with the performance which this coda strikes is, however, pertinent, and the reciter's absence from the closing lines might simply allow him to display an apparently natural modesty in the context of an oral performance, reserving the ownership of the saga to its authors, scribes and audience. There is one reference, however, to the storyteller in this epilogue as it appears in the AM 551 a 4to redaction of the text. The speaker implicitly identifies himself as a member of the audience: all who listened, he says, are sent by God, and any, therefore, might potentially recount the story. His role is one of amplifying and disseminating the author's work and, much like an evangelist, he encourages his auditors to do the same – thanking them, as he does, for the part they play in the life of the text.

A similar note of thanks is sounded in the conclusion to one version of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* which, strikingly enough, survives in the same fifteenth century manuscript as one redaction of *Víglundar saga* (including an abbreviated version of the coda quoted above), AM 551 a 4to. We may incline to suspect the role of a compiler particularly attached to

[112] See the entry for 'SKRIFA' in Cleasby-Vigfússon, which gives the etymology as Latinate (from *scribere*).

this mechanism for celebrating such stories when they come to their end, although they appear to have been recorded here by different scribes. Whether the epilogue pre-dates this manuscript or not, it serves to colour our appreciation of how such stories were presented to a reading (and listening) public around the end of the fifteenth century, and reflects again the same anxiety to condition reception and insulate the transmitter which we encountered in the scrupulously impartial discussion of storytelling in the much earlier rendering of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*. The epilogue, which again follows the conventional declaration that the saga has ended, reads,

> Lýkr hér sǫgu Grettis Ásmundarsonar várs samlanda. Hafi þeir þǫkk, er hlýddu, en sá litla, sem krabbat hefir sǫguna. Er hér verksins endir, en vér sém allir guði sendir, amen.[113]
>
> Here ends the saga of Grettir Ásmundarson, our countryman. May they have thanks, those who listened, but may he have little thanks who wrote the saga. Here is the work's end, and may we all be sent [commended] to God, Amen.

Setting aside for a moment the question of authorship of this passage, several features stand out. One is the inclusion of auditors and a writer in the same sentence, clearly indicating that the written text (this manuscript is dated to c.1500) was still intended – or at least presented – for oral dissemination.[114] As in the epilogue to *Víglundar saga,* the juxtaposition of writer and auditor conspicuously passes over the reciter, who receives no anticipatory thanks from this scribe for the task of performing the saga, depending rather for any such praise on his immediate audience. Additionally, it is surely significant that Grettir's nationality is foregrounded in this coda, making clear the implication that this is a story about an Icelander for the primary edification of Icelandic audiences. This is 'cultural capital' probably to be traded within Iceland, in the first instance, rather than a redaction of the saga which had been commissioned or intended for foreign recipients. Moreover the readers, listeners and writer are explicitly connected to each other and to Grettir in another way, through the appeal to their common Christian deity. Although Grettir's Christianity is not an explicit focus of his saga,

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113 *Grettis saga*, p.290.

114 For the dating of this manuscript, see Sture Hast, ed., *Harðar saga* (Copenhagen, 1960), pp.30-32, 82-6.

this closing passage may be intended to foreground it, much in the same way it calls attention to his nationality as an Icelander (a nation from which, ironically, he lived so long in exile).[115] Brief as it is, this passage may be interpreted as one of the earliest critical commentaries on the saga text, offering a particular interpretation of its subject's faith and sense of national identity.

The word 'krabbat' ('wrote') is derived from 'krabb', cognate with the English 'crab' and signifying a scrawl. As such, it clearly refers to the literate scribe rather than the saga's original inventor, but it is unclear whether we should take this to mean the present scribe, the scribe of the exemplar from which this copy of the saga is derived or the first scribe to have committed the saga to parchment. The specific use of 'krabbat' makes this last possibility the least likely, unless the scribe of AM 551 a 4[to] thought himself to be copying from the urtext. Whether this dismissal of the scribe's agency amounts to a modesty topos on the part of the present writer or an objection to the poor quality of his source remains in doubt, although we may note with interest that the second possibility is only readily apparent to a reader, not a listener, who would naturally elide previous redactions and so conflate the voice of the scribe with those of all his predecessor scribes. For a silent reader, this comment may be read as self-effacing, even though in fact it calls greater attention to the persona of the scribe than is typical. For the oral performer, however, the phrasing of this epilogue causes him to appear critical of the scribe while reserving no comment for the quality of his own delivery.

If the reciter were to include this epilogue in his performance of the saga (as the reference to 'those who listened' clearly encourages him to do), the fact of his giving voice to it may appear to subvert any intended connotations of modesty and seem rather to criticise the scribe. Is he, therefore, supposed to be speaking in the voice of the scribe? Or is this a ploy on the part of the scribe to wrong-foot him? In either case it contrasts strikingly with the thanks offered at the conclusion of *Víglundar saga* in AM 510 4to. Unusually, the principal scribe of

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[115] See Dean Miller, *The Epic Hero* (London, 2000), p.315.

this manuscript has been successfully identified as Þorbjǫrn Jónsson.[116] Little is known about Þorbjǫrn besides that he was resident at Steingrímsfjörður and received during his lifetime a number of pardons from representatives of the church, which might perhaps influence our interpretation of the tone he takes in the epilogue to *Grettis saga* (if, indeed, it was he who composed or edited this coda).[117] He is a conspicuously intrusive scribe, appending one marginal note that explains an earlier break in the saga text on the basis that it was time to pause for prayer. In this sense, he too might be considered a storyteller whose own voice plays a part in the transmission of his texts. In view of the other named storytellers examined thus far, it is instructive to note that he was recently characterised by one scholar as follows: 'Þorbjörn was not a member of society's highest class, but he was a travelled and landowning farmer.'[118] Here perhaps is reason to suspect that the class of oral performer who might recite from such a book (and, clearly, it was compiled with oral recitation in mind, since these epilogues both make reference to listening) was not far removed from that of the scribe who wrote a large part of it, and moreover that the two identities may at some point have been housed in the same body. Perhaps the absence of thanks recorded for the scribe was thus intended as a personal joke which only works when Þorbjǫrn himself recites the saga aloud. Such a reading must lend particular weight to the fact that this epilogue is separated from the saga text by the intervening announcement that the saga ends 'hér' ('here'). If we take this to be an orthographic statement, then whatever follows those words on the page is conspicuously separate from the saga, and may thus belong to another voice than that of the conventionally invisible narrator.

We may go so far as to describe the voice of the storyteller as a role performed by the literate saga writers pursuing a series of goals: to achieve a common tone which served to unify their work in the face of 'false' oral accounts which competed with their authorised

[116] The text of the saga begins on 7v. Þorbjǫrn Jónsson's hand can be detected from 16r-53r where the saga text ends.
[117] Stefán Karlsson, 'The Localisation and Dating of Medieval Icelandic Manuscripts', *SBVS* 25 (1998-2001), 138-58.
[118] Stefán Karlsson (1998-2001), 155.

histories; to shield their personal artistry behind the veneer of a traditional inheritance; to synthesise their invention with whatever was retained from oral accounts; and finally to present to the outside world a monolithic impression of the saga genre – a voice reserved exclusively for the Icelanders – a corporate form of copyright. In this sense, the saga writers were performing a part just as the oral reciters (and there was probably some overlap between the two groups) went on to do in conveying these works to a wider audience. This model of assuming a specific role helps to make sense of Snorri's description of the conversion process from report into story described in one of the prologues to the separate saga of St. Óláfr, clearly recognising a distinction between the two forms.[119] It may also shed light on the famous coda to *Droplaugarsona saga*, in which the saga-man tells us: 'Þorvaldr átti son, er Ingjaldr hét. Hans sonr hét Þorvaldr, er sagði sǫgu þessa' ('Þorvaldr had a son, and he was called Ingjaldr. His son was called Þorvaldr, who told this story.')[120] Tempting as it might be to consider this a generically typical third person reference to the author of the extant saga, it is surely more likely that the informant, Þorvaldr, was merely the purveyor of report which subsequently underwent the process of being transmuted into a story ('saga') by a succession of oral and literate saga-men.[121] Pragmatically, the author's name would do nothing to authenticate the saga, whereas naming its source preserves a sense of proximity to the action it relates. Þorvaldr may indeed have 'sagði' ('said' or 'told') the news, but it was 'samansetta' ('assembled' or 'presented') by others. A similar attempt to associate a saga with a known authority (who is most unlikely to have authored it *per se*) can be found in one redaction of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, which claims to follow the version of the story given by Arí Þorgilsson, prefacing the saga text with a single sentence which contains no fewer than three references to his renowned wisdom, which it thereby seeks to co-opt and associate with the text that follows.[122]

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[119] Prologue to *Óláfs saga Helga* in *Heimskringla*, ii, p.422.
[120] *Droplaugarsona saga*, p.180.
[121] See O'Connor (2005), 114.
[122] The manuscript in question is Perg 4:o nr 18 in the Royal Library, Stockholm.

Prologues and epilogues are more commonly found in later manuscripts, and most frequently accompany romantic or fantastical sagas, thereby emphasising the saga-man or compiler's sense that some extra-textual endorsement is called for. Indeed, their very absence from most of the *Íslendingasaga* corpus speaks to a certain confidence that these stories would be accepted by their audiences without challenge, even if they might occasionally be loath to swear to their precise historicity. As such, the differences between the voice of the saga-man 'in role' (i.e. striving for the traditional invisible style so prized in the classical sagas) and 'in person', making a direct address to his audience, are increasingly keenly felt as time goes by. Conspicuously fantastical stories like *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* sometimes even include within their prologues and epilogues a kind of mission statement in defence of the storytelling arts:

> Er þat ok bezt ok fróðligast at hlýða, meðan frá er sagt, ok gera sér heldr gleði at en angr, því at jafnan er þat, at menn hugsa eigi aðra syndsamliga hluti, á meðan hann gleðist af skemmtaninni. Stendr þat ok eigi vel þeim, er hjá eru, at lasta, þó at ófróðliga eða ómjúkliga sé orðum um farit, því at fátt verðr fullvandliga gert, þat er eigi liggr meira við en um slíka hluti.[123]

> But it is best and wise-minded to listen while a story is told, and make of it joy rather than discontent, thus it is always that men think no other sinful thoughts while they are enjoying the entertainment. It does not stand well for those who who are there to criticise, though ignorantly or clumsily these words have been told, since few will do perfectly that which is of such small importance as this [storytelling].

In short, the storyteller is an entertainer whose work – albeit structured around pagan and arguably immoral themes – serves to distract an audience from sinful thoughts and, by extension, actions. This re-casting of the storyteller as a moral instrument is striking, and although it is not possible to argue solely on the basis of one example that this re-framing of his art was symptomatic of a broader cultural movement, similar passages in other *fornaldarsǫgur* may encourage this view.[124] What is perhaps most striking about *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* in particular is the extent to which the epilogue directly engages with many of the questions which have so far concerned this study. This final passage from the saga is worth

123 *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ii, p.360. Subsequent quotations from the saga refer to this edition.

124 Ralph O'Connor has collected and tabulated such references. See O'Connor (2005), 126-7.

quoting at some length:

> Stendr því bezt at lasta eigi eða kalla lygð fróðra manna sagnir, nema hann kunni með meirum líkendum at segja eða orðfæriligar fram at bera. Hafa ok forn kvæði ok frásagnir meir verit fram sett til stundligrar gleði en ævinligs átrúnaðar. Verðr ok fátt svá ólíkliga sagt, at eigi finnist sönn dæmi til, at annat hafi svá orðit. Þat er ok sannliga ritat, at guð hefir lánat heiðnum mönnum einn veg sem kristnum vit ok skilning um jarðliga hluti, þar með frábæriligan fræknleik, auðæfi ok ágæta skapan.
> Nú verðr hér endir á þessu máli frá Hrólfi Sturlaugssyni ok hans afreksverkum. Hafi hverr þökk, er hlýðir ok sér gerir skemmtan af, en hinir ógleði, er angrast við ok ekki verðr at gamni. *Amen*.[125]
>
> It stands best not to revile wise men's tales or call them lies unless one can expound [the story] with more understanding or present it more plausibly. Ancient poems and old stories have been offered more as momentary entertainments rather than eternal truths. Moreover few things have been spoken which are so improbable that true examples cannot be found for them where something else happened in that way. That is truly written above, that God has given the heathen people wisdom, like the Christians, sense and understanding of earthly things, along with excellent prowess, wealth and beautiful forms. Now here is the end of this tale of Hrólfr Sturlaugsson and his deeds. Everyone has thanks, who listened and made an entertainment of it [the story], but those others have little joy who are bothered by it and will not be entertained. *Amen.*

Here again we see the dichotomy between truth and falsehood being first expressed (indicating a clear awareness that it was a common cultural concern) and then dismissed as irrelevant to this storyteller's art. The connection between truth and elegance is also significant, implying that the quality of a rendition (be it textual or oral) should be taken into account when judging the virtue of a story. The saga here challenges a critical audience either to propound a better – that is, more believable and simultaneously more engaging – version of the story, or to accept this as the best one available. Implicit in this is the desire to create a canon of accepted story variants – an agenda frequently discernible in later written sagas such as in *Grettis saga* which at one point attempts to resolve just such a disparity through an appeal to popular consensus:

> Grettir var jafnan með Birni, ok reyndu þeir margan frœknleik, ok vísar svá til í sǫgu Bjarnar, at þeir kallaðisk jafnir at íþróttum. En þat er flestra manna ætlan, at Grettir hafi sterkastr verit á landinu, síðan þeir Ormr Stórólfsson ok Þórálfr Skólmsson lǫgðu af aflraunir.[126]
>
> Grettir was staying with Bjarni, and they tried many bouts, and it is said in *Bjarnar*

125 *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga,* pp.460-61.
126 *Grettis saga*, p.187.

> *saga* that they were called equal at sports. But it is most people's belief that Grettir was the strongest man who lived in the country since Ormr Stórólfsson and Þórálfr Skólmsson ended their strength-contests.

By acknowledging and then contradicting the earlier account, using popular opinion as proof, this later saga seeks to establish a definitive version of events, much as the writer of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* does in relation to the controversial account of the wedding feast of 1119. Storytellers were clearly confident of the need, at least in this later period, both to acknowledge and seek to supersede alternative narratives which recounted the same events, often offering a pre-emptive riposte to readers or hearers who might dispute their interpretation. Where a writer found himself not inclined or not able to proffer a definitive account he would make reference to another saga and cede to it the greater authority concerning a particular subject. Whoever composed the final chapter of *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* was clearly interested in these matters and chose to adopt a compromising tone, placing greater emphasis on the composition and delivery of the saga than on its content, and shifting the emphasis from its trustworthiness to its value as a source of distraction and entertainment. Noticeably he reserves his thanks only for those who appreciated his story, and is dismissive of any who did not, arranging his concluding statement in such a way that it reads like a prayerful invocation, with a final appeal to God to condemn this latter group to misery. Again we are faced with the vexing question: in whose voice are these lines are intended to be heard? If the scribe's, he is likely at some distance from the ‘performance arena’ and so is insulated from this divisive closing note; if the reciter's, much depends on his ability to bring the crowd on side and charm them into praising his rendition.[127] There is something of the finely-crafted peroration about this ending, which contrasts sharply with the more factual and impersonal conclusions of most kings' sagas, bishops' sagas and Sagas of Icelanders. Taken as a whole, this epilogue is a spirited defence of the storyteller's craft and of his role and value in presenting a definitive account of a tale which, ultimately, cannot be proved false. It is a bold

[127] See Foley (1995), p.47 for a discussion of the term ‘performance arena.’

and dramatic intervention which speaks to a far greater willingness in this later period to proactively make the case for storytelling, presumably in the face of a real or perceived threat to the survival and appreciation of such fantastical tales as this.

The argument for suspension of disbelief and investment in the story-world so forcefully put in *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* is very similarly stated in the prologue to *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, preserved in a single Norwegian manuscript likely dating from the late thirteenth century.[128] Whereas the author of this prologue takes a very different line on the range of variant versions of the narrative likely to have persisted (and whereas his claim that no version may differ from that preserved in old songs is undermined by the evidence of re-ordering of material in the early half of the manuscript), both texts share the view that the distant past is a largely unknown country, and that to dispute the truth of a story merely based on the absence of first-hand evidence is a risky endeavour.[129]

> En þat er heimskligt at kalla þat lygi, er hann hefir eigi sét eðr heyrt, en hann veit þó ekki annat sannara um þann hlut. En þat er vitrligt at skoða með skemmtan í samvizku sjálfs sín þat, sem hann heyrir, fyrr en óþekkist við eðr fyrirlíti.[130]

> But it is foolish to call that a lie, which one has not seen or heard, when one knows nothing else more true about it. It is wise to consider with entertainment in one's own conscience that which one hears before either rejecting or despising it.

Ostensibly the difference between the standards demanded of a storyteller working in the *fornaldarsaga* genre and one working on the *Íslendingasǫgur* is stark. In the first case, the story must be entertaining and not totally impossible, whereas in the second the emphasis is placed much more on its essential plausibility. In practice however, as this injunction from *Þiðreks saga* suggests, the storyteller working in either genre is not so much constrained by historical fact, which often cannot be established without contemporary written testimony and other positive proofs to rely on, but rather by the collective memory of which he and his audience are the custodians, and to which he is contributing with each new retelling of the

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128 Torfi H. Tulinius, *Kynjasögur úr fortíð og framandi löndum*, in Vésteinn Ólason, ed., *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* (Reykjavík, 1993), ii, pp.212-14.
129 Francis G. Gentry, *The Nibelungen Tradition: An Encyclopedia* (New York, 2002), p.41.
130 Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Þiðreks saga af Bern* (Reykjavík, 1951), pp.7-8.

sagas. He is the continuer of tradition rather than the investigator of historical fact.[131]

A useful analogy for this distinction may be the view held by some today in the largely secular climate of Northern Europe that the quasi-historical stories of a society's foundation have something in common with religious custom: that is, they are held to be true by many out of the desire that they should be so rather than on account of any verifiable proof, since it is convenient to accept them, thereby accepting the whole ethical and cultural edifice which has been built on them over centuries. Unlike the historian, the scholar, or the theologian who tests and refines our understanding of our shared past, many who profess belief in the essential truth of ancient stories do so without wishing to test them individually: it is the general impression of their truth which is desired and sustained. Thus, for instance, in the Christian tradition many parents tell their children the story of Christ's birth in a stable in Bethlehem. Among these storytellers, some will describe it as a matter of historical truth; others as a fiction; and still others as a tale which does not quite fit into either category, but occupies some hinterland between. It may be that this same ambivalence is all that the storytellers of the later Middle Ages were asking of their audiences: not to believe, but simply to affirm. Put differently, the burden of proof rests on those who would disavow a traditional narrative, rather than those who subscribe to it – and sustaining their credulity is the responsibility of the storyteller.[132] Thus, the prologue of *Þiðreks saga* can confidently assert that those men who lived before the flood were far greater in stature since it is not possible to present evidence which disputes this. By contrast, any contested claim about a living or recently deceased public figure could easily provoke a hazardous dispute, as countervailing evidence and stories might abound.

This freedom from modern notions of the historian's duty to proof over possibility is

[131] On the *fornaldarsǫgur* see further Helgi Þorláksson, 'The Fantastic Fourteenth Century', in John McKinnell, David Ashurst and Donata Kick, *The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th-12th August* (Durham, 2006), pp.365-71.

[132] For a discussion of how this perspective has been explored by folklorists, see Timothy R. Tangherlini, '"It Happened Not Too Far from Here...": A Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization', *Western Folklore* 49:4 (October 1990), 371-90 and Elliott Oring, 'Legendry and the Rhetoric of Truth', *The Journal of American Folklore* 121:480 (Spring 2008), 127-66.

even to be found in the prologues to some kings' sagas – notably *Sverris saga,* which takes a similar line to *Þiðreks saga* in arguing for the primacy of authoritative written tradition over the expectations and credulity of an audience: ‘Ok þykkir oss þat líkara at þær sagnir muni vera við sannendum er á bókum eru sagðar frá ágætismǫnnum þeim er verit hafa í forneskju’ (‘It seems likely to us that these stories must be true which are told in books concerning famous men, those who lived in old times’).[133] Truth, in the view propounded by this writer, is a self-reinforcing concept sustained through writing, and therefore the importance of an authorised corpus of stories about the past is difficult to overstate. Implicit in this rationale is the centrality of the authoritative storyteller to the secure functioning of society, but the danger posed by his unauthorised counterparts is equally plain. The prologue as preserved in the Flateyjarbók version of the saga is explicit in attesting the superiority of this account over others, citing an unbroken line of (written) transmission from one named source to another, and concluding: ‘Er ok ei líkt hvárt sannligri er, þessi saga er svá er til komin rǫksamliga eðr inar aðrar er ýmisligir menn hafa fyrir sagt ok haft þó ekki til nema sǫgusǫgn eina, ok mega þó sannar vera’ (‘However truthful it is, this saga is such as to have become authoritative over anything else that has been said by various people, and it is the case that only one version can be true’).[134] Storytelling was a competitive art no less than skaldic verse-crafting. This iteration of the prologue concludes with clear evidence that it was designed to be read aloud, exhorting uninterested listeners to excuse themselves so that those who desire to hear the saga may do so. From this we might infer a sizeable intended audience and perhaps the likelihood that saga recitation often took place amid a host of other diverting activities.[135] Just as the saga author must compete with more colourful accounts of his narrative, so too the storyteller was obliged to compete for the attention of an audience with many other distractions. This trope is familiar to us from the world of court poetry, and especially from the poem known as

[133] *Sverris saga*, p.4.
[134] *Sverris saga*, Appendix I, p.285.
[135] See Joseph Harris, ‘Eddic Poetry’, in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, eds, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (Ithaca, 1985), p.115.

Hrafnsmál which depicts King Haraldr hárfagri's skalds competing for attention with all manner of other entertainers:

> At hundi elskar Andaðr
> ok heimsku drýgir
> eyrnalausum
> ok jǫfur hlœgir.
> Hinir eru ok aðrir,
> es of eld skulu
> brennanda spôn bera;
> logǫndum húfum
> hafa sér und linda drepit
> hældræpir halir.[136]
>
> Andaðr fondles an earless dog, and he plays the fool, and makes the prince laugh. There are others too and their task is to carry a burning woodchip across a fire; they have flaming hoods under their belts, those who deserve a kicking.

The demands made on poets in such circumstances were clearly substantial, and while the entertainments on offer may have been different in Iceland, the sense of vibrant competition from all directions is clearly apparent from these saga prologues, which sought to condition the audience to remain attentive by pre-emptively praising all those who did. Even in a more domestic setting it is likely that distractions would abound, whether in the form of household chores or constant comings and goings, and so the level of attention demanded by an intricately plotted saga might be in short supply. Through prologues and epilogues, the writers and reciters of these sagas exercised a small measure of influence over how their stories were likely to be received. As such, they are deceptive, rhetorical, performative and contradictory. Yet, for all that, they provide a rare sample of the storyteller's own voice, expressing his own agenda. As such, they play a crucial part in informing our understanding of who these storytellers were seen to be, and how they wished to represent themselves.

v. Summary

One of the difficulties in undertaking to explore the place of the storyteller in Old Norse literature is that the term itself is an anachronism. As we have seen, the boundaries between

[136] Þorbjǫrn hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)*, ed. R. D. Fulk, in Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035* (Turnhout, 2012), i, p.116, st.23.

writer and reciter, scribal and authorial voice, historian and fantasist were fluid and permeable. To some extent this was no doubt the natural product of a different approach to literature from that taken by critics today, but on a more fundamental level it was this very elusiveness which allowed authors and performers to sustain often provocative narratives about events sufficiently recent and sociologically important to remain controversial. Whether the individuals who performed these roles at the time necessarily thought of themselves as elusive is almost beside the point: unlike their European cousins, figures like Chaucer and Dante, these Old Norse storytellers presented their material in voices sufficiently ambivalent and intertwined to allow them to sustain plausible deniability were their individual integrity ever to be called into question. The very uncertainty about the nature and persona of the storytelling voice is emphasised by the absence of the oral reciter from the literate record, even though references to the sagas and poems being 'heard' are commonplace. No evidence has been found that storytelling was a principal or exclusive source of income for many – if any – Icelanders, but their renditions of the stories themselves served as cultural capital which could be bartered, exchanged, commissioned or altered in the service of a wealthy master or a demanding audience. In this sense, successful storytellers were undoubtedly professionals, and their absence from the written record represents a measure of their success. They were the elusive and mercurial point of contact between author and audience who managed to make themselves as blameless as the books which later took their place.

Chapter Three: MEN OF PARTS : THE STORYTELLER AS AGENT

'The nature of bad news infects the teller.'
- Messenger, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, I. ii

i. Introduction

In this chapter we will turn our attention away from the few explicitly attested cases of saga-telling still extant in Old Norse literature and concentrate instead on figures who perform a similar communicative function, utilising similar rhetorical tools, but who are not necessarily introduced to us either as vocational storytellers or professional entertainers *per se*. We will begin by examining the role of the intermediary, figured in both eddic and saga literature, who speaks on behalf of others and assumes the same role of conduit for the words of others which we have hitherto explored. The chapter then turns to *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and considers it as an especially self-aware and metatextually conscious saga which focuses constantly, albeit indirectly, on the social power of stories and the inherent danger of lying or of being seen to lie. We will then consider the way in which the sagas present acts of deception or lying and the central function often played by eyewitnesses whose testimony is essential to the narrative progress of the story. The chapter concludes with some broader suggestions for applying these insights to our reading of the corpus as a whole.

ii. Mortal Media of the Middle Ages

In pre-literate societies communication over great distances – whether measured in space or time – is just as possible, and indeed just as crucial, as it is in literate cultures. However, in such circumstances the words of each party are often mediated through the messengers, intermediaries and proxies whom they employ to represent them, endowing these agents with considerable *de facto* power to influence how the words in their charge are transmitted and received. In seeking to identify those characteristics most commonly associated with the medieval Scandinavian storyteller in all his guises, it it striking that relatively little has yet

been written by scholars about the treatment of figures who play such a role in the literature, despite the fact that they are commonplace in a variety of genres, frequently referred to, and understood by both poets and saga authors to play a significant role in facilitating narrative development. Like the self-styled proxies for ancient and prophetic lore which we have examined already, messengers and other intermediaries act as channels through which the words of others are transmitted. Frequently anonymised and often mentioned only in passing, they are nonetheless vital for the narrative coherence of the sagas and several of the poems, and their function as devices for moving the plot forward or connecting disparate events and persons makes them a natural parallel for the role of storytellers in communicating and framing traditional narratives for wider audiences.

One of the difficulties in examining figures who fit into the broad category of 'proxy' is that possible subjects for study abound. So many and so varied are the intermediaries recorded in the literature that we may usefully begin this investigation by asking whether they may practicably be considered a homogeneous group at all. Among the examples which follow it would be true to say they have few shared characteristics besides their common designation as transmitters of information and the fact that they appear in texts written down by Icelanders, albeit hundreds of years apart. One approach to this question might be to narrow the definition of 'proxy' to include only those figures who fulfil the specific role of conduit in an oral society, which would otherwise be occupied by a written instrument in a literate culture. This distinction has the advantage of excluding marginal figures whose status as proxies might otherwise be adduced by individual readers from their actions, and allows us to focus more clearly on a group who, for all their characteristic differences, serve a similar narrative function.

Even with this caveat the group we might term proxies is still remarkably diverse including men and women, people of all classes, gods and monsters, and – especially in poetic texts – birds and beasts, among them Óðinn's ravens and the squirrel Ratatoskr, who

ceaselessly conveys messages from one end of the world tree to the other.[1] Although common across several genres, proxy figures are almost invariably peripheral to the action they facilitate, chronicle or describe. The most noteworthy instance where such a character takes centre stage occurs in the eddic poem *Skírnismál*, often cited as among the most theatrical of these poems – a contention which might plausibly suggest a cultural association between messengers and actors, both vocations which involve speaking on behalf of – or by appropriating the voice of – another person.[2] *Skírnismál* survives in full in the *Codex Regius* or MS GKS 2365 4to (**R**) and in part (the first twenty seven stanzas) in MS AM 748 i 4to (**A**). The story it tells centres on Freyr's 'skósveinn' ('page') who travels to the home of the *jǫtunn* Gymir to win the love of Gymir's daughter Gerðr for his master. He refers to his errand ('Ørindi min'[3]), rather than to his message *per se*, but he nevertheless satisfies our selection criterion as a 'proxy speaker,' being the oral intermediary between the *jǫtunn* and the god, and using words and, indeed, stories (contrasting visions of Gerðr's future, should she choose either to accept the god or to reject him) as the prime means of achieving his objective, which might otherwise be conveyed, albeit less compellingly, in writing. The figure of Skírnir is virtually unknown to us except from this poem and short passages in the *Prose Edda* recounting the same events.[4] The similarity in detail, and Snorri's decision to incorporate a stanza from the poem, suggest that this may have been his primary source for the tale. Ursula Dronke is not alone in reading an allegorical subtext into Skírnir's name, equating him as she does with a sun ray, but whatever his origin, by the time he enters the written corpus he is presented as an anthropomorphic character, and must be regarded as such for the purposes of analysis.[5] This text is of especial interest to us in addressing the use of proxies in a literature

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1 *Gylfaginning*, p.18.

2 Phillpotts (1920); Gunnell (1995). The editors of the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* subdivide the poem into 'scenes,' and among its more recent editors Dronke confidently refers to 'The Play and its Plot.' See Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, eds, *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (Oxford, 1883), i, pp.110-117 and Dronke (1997), p.386.

3 *Skírnismál*, st.38.

4 *Gylfaginning*, pp.30-32.

5 Dronke (1997), p.399. See also E. O. G. Turville-Petre, 'Fertility of Beast and Soil in Old Norse Literature', in Edgar C. Polomé, ed., *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium* (Austin, 1969), p.253.

which had been, for generations, dependent on such people for its preservation and transmission, since it is atypical in thrusting such a figure to the fore.

One striking dissimilarity between Snorri's account and his eddic source material as it survives today is his inclusion of the following speech which he attributes to Freyr: 'Ok nú skaltu fara ok biðja hennar mér til handa ok hafa hana heim hingat hvárt er faðir hennar vill eða eigi, ok skal ek þat vel launa þér' ('And now you must go and ask for her hand for me and bring her to my home, whether her father wills it or not, and I shall reward you well for this deed').[6] In this version of events, the god clearly stipulates his servant's remit and is directly responsible for Skírnir's errand. The surviving witnesses to the eddic text, however, include no such stipulation, leaving it unclear whether Freyr's intentions and his proxy's actions are entirely in sympathy. This ambiguity complicates Skírnir's role as a conduit, as we shall see when we examine his tactics for bending Gerðr to his will. Neither of the surviving manuscripts containing the poem incorporates Freyr's explicit instruction – instead, the poet simply has him lament his cares (sts 6-7), and then has Skírnir solicit payment (sts 8-9) – presumably for the errand he is about to undertake, although the parameters of that errand have not been directly discussed. Later in the poem (st.41) he brings back Gerðr's reply to his suit, but we may note that at no point did Freyr explicitly instruct him to raise it. On the contrary, this is a messenger utilising his own agency – his own initiative – to take the substance of his master's desires and improvise a means of satisfying them, much in the way that a storyteller might take artistic licence when seeking to entertain his audience, without overstepping the essential boundaries set down for him by the inherited tradition with which both they and he are likely to be familiar to some degree.

Revisionist editors might wish to posit a missing verse or verses here from a redaction of the poem which more closely resembles Snorri's account. They might reasonably point out that both surviving versions of *Skírnismál* are widely believed to derive from the same

6 *Gylfaginning*, p.31.

exemplar (albeit indirectly), and that it is just possible that Snorri may have had access to a longer eddic narrative which made Freyr's instructions explicit.[7] There is, of course, no direct evidence for the existence of such a version of the poem – either in the oral or literate tradition – and Snorri is more than capable of elaborating or explicating his source material as we see elsewhere in *Gylfaginning*.[8] In the absence of convincing extrinsic evidence, we must turn to the text itself to explore whether the omission of Freyr's instructions compromises either the coherence or consistency of the narrative. Although this question may seem abstruse in the larger context of this argument, it nonetheless bears significantly on the question of agency, in that the characterisation of Skírnir implicit in the poem depends considerably on the extent to which he is allowed to improvise in pursuit of his master's desires (and his own), rather than expected simply to transmit a message word for word, as a written instrument would. The absence of explicit instructions from Freyr indicates that this messenger is less an extension of the god's will and more an independent player in his own right. His bargaining for Freyr's horse and sword enhances this impression by suggesting that he holds some measure of power – some ability to reach the giantess (whether verbally or physically) which his master does not share, although it also demonstrates his dependence on the god for self-advancement. It is unclear whether Skírnir will retain these treasures once his task is done, or whether he believes he will need them on his journey, and Freyr agrees to loan them. Whatever the case, his ability to persuade his master to render up these valuable possessions is noteworthy. Both master and messenger are shown to be symbiotically dependent on one another – an observation which reflects the poem's connection to the cyclical ecosystems of the natural world and, perhaps, an awareness of the interdependence of poet and patron. Clearly both parties understand that a contract now exists between them. The specifics as to how the god's designs might be brought about, however, he entrusts unspoken to his agent.

7 See Elias Wéssen's introduction to E. Munksgaard, ed., *Codex Regius of the Elder Edda MS No. 2365 4to, Royal Collection, Royal Library of Copenhagen* (Copenhagen, 1937), p.17. See also Dronke (1997), p.403.

8 We have, for example, no source for the frame narrative concerning King Gylfi. Variations between *Gylfaginning* and *Ynglinga saga* also speak to a consciously creative mind at work, editing his material to suit the purpose at hand.

In further addressing the proposition that the poem may once have been longer and contained stanzas spoken by Freyr which would contradict this reading, it is worth taking a moment to explore Skírnir's character as presented elsewhere in the eddic account. From the outset he is engaged as a go-between, entrusted by Freyr's mother, Skaði, to complete the following task:[9]

> ...þess at fregna:
> hveim inn fróði sé
> ofreiði afi.[10]
>
> ...ask him this:
> About whom is the wise man [Freyr]
> so enraged?

Skírnir replies directly that he is hesitant to use this form of words, thereby asserting his editorial prerogative; and in the next stanza (st.3) we hear him adopt a more tactful approach, calling Freyr 'fólkvaldi goða' ('folk-leader of gods') and 'minn dróttinn' ('my leader'), and soliciting the reason for his cares from behind a veil of obsequiousness. Skírnir is not the only servant in the *Poetic Edda* to finesse his patron's words in this way. In *Grípisspá*, Grípir's steward Geitir exercises similar creative agency in mediating Sigurðr's words when he relates them to his master (st.4). Having first appropriated Grípir's voice to anticipate his request for Sigurðr to give his name, Geitir then declines to pass on this intelligence, referring instead to his visitor as 'maðr... ókuðr' ('an unknown man').[11] We should not read too much into the fact that Grípir then greets his visitor by name, since he is a sage and has already had a vision of Sigurðr's future from which, presumably, he recognises his guest (st.5). The salient point is that the messenger has withheld this knowledge from his master, acting under his own agency. What his motive may be goes unremarked, but the fact that this exchange features at all in the

9 The prose introduction states that Njǫrðr has already engaged him on this errand and then ascribes the first stanza to Skaði who, apparently redundantly, makes the same request. If the prose is a late addition to the verse, it is possible that this opening stanza was attributed to Njǫrðr in some versions of the poem.

10 *Skírnismál*, st.1.

11 See Elseus Sophus Bugge, ed., *Norrœn fornkvæði, islandsk samling Kaldet Sæmundar Edda hins fróða* (Copenhagen, 1867), p.205. Bugge argues that a verse has been lost in which Geitir identifies the visitor. However, such an identification is unnecessary for Grípir, a prophet, to recognise him – as the introductory prose makes clear: 'Sigurðr var auðkenndr' ('Sigurðr was easily known'). Bugge's view must therefore be considered wholly speculative.

poem grants us licence to speculate about this choice, and to note the messenger's independent mind and ability to conceal, which exists alongside his duty to reveal – thus distinguishing him as a different kind of communicator from his prophetic master who is impelled to reveal the contents of his vision, despite a stated reluctance to do so. He, Geitir, is an oral editor and interpreter of the information that comes his way.

The opening stanzas of *Skírnismál* similarly establish Skírnir's credentials as an astute interpreter and re-framer of errands, and make all the more plausible his use of personal initiative in pursuing Gerðr. His function as an emissary also introduces a dimension of plausible deniability for the higher status figures in the story: if Freyr had reacted violently to the intrusion into his private thoughts, Njǫrðr and Skaði could not have been the targets of his ire, since it was not they but rather Skírnir who put the question to him. Likewise, in pursuing his suit through Skírnir, Freyr both avails himself of a sensitive and empathetic mouthpiece and distances himself from the tactics used at his unspoken behest not only to woo but also to subdue Gerðr. This phenomenon of sustaining 'plausible deniability' is an effective rhetorical device. In essence, it involves preserving a degree of ambiguity about who is responsible for an errand such as Skírnir's. By doing so, the agent ensures that it is difficult to hold him accountable for his words, since the impression is created that he is merely a channel of communication, not its source. Moreover, the agent's patron also benefits from this ambiguity, since an auditor may well remain unsure whether the agent is acting in concert with his wishes or has overstepped his authority and invented a form of words all his own, meaning that it is difficult to blame the patron directly for an aggressive or inelegant communication.

That Skírnir is also his own agent, capable of pursuing his own agenda, is suggested by Freyr's apparently anxious response upon his return from Gymir's court:

> Segðu mér þat, Skírnir -
> áðr þú verpir sǫðli af mar
> ok þú stígir feti framarr -
> hvat þú árnaðir
> í jǫtunheima

þíns eða míns munar.[12]

Tell me this, Skírnir -
before you unsaddle your horse
and you step a foot further -
what you accomplished
in *Jǫtunheimar*
of your or of my will.

The manuscript reading of the poem – that Freyr has left his instructions deliberately vague – sits well with the twofold anxiety betrayed in this stanza. Freyr is primarily concerned to learn whether or not Gerðr will consent to have him for her lord, but the final line suggests an uneasiness about whether Skírnir has acted out his role as messenger or pursued his own agenda (the internal rhyme of 'þíns' with 'míns' perhaps suggests a juxtaposition between the two). What that agenda might be is uncertain, and the text contrives to keep it that way, giving us no sense of the messenger's overarching personal concerns – his 'superobjective,' in Stanislavskian terms – and thereby entitling us to share in Freyr's anxiety.[13] The suggestion that the god and his page are symbiotically dependent on one another goes some way towards explaining the messenger's motivation, but Snorri's version of the story casts further doubt on Skírnir's fealty when he has Hár conclude his account by adopting a prophetic tone: 'Verða mun þat er Frey mun þykkja verr við koma er hann missir sverðsins þá er Muspells synir fara ok herja' ('It must come about that it will seem worse to Freyr to miss his sword when Múspell's sons set out on the warpath.')[14] We may be tempted to wonder what becomes of Skírnir after this story such that he does not feature during the gods' final stand at Ragnarǫk, where a page would be of greatest assistance to his master. Perhaps, as a personification of sunlight, he is simply destined to die when the sun is blotted out,[15] but the suspicion remains that this is a relationship built upon mutual benefit, and that Skírnir's real loyalty is to his own self-interest. His allegiance to Freyr is ultimately a balancing act between risk and reward.

The same caution might be detected in the slight variation between stanzas 8 and 9 of

[12] *Skírnismál,* st.40.
[13] See Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London, 2008).
[14] *Gylfaginning*, pp.31-2.
[15] *Vǫluspá* st.55 (**R**); st.49 (**H**); st.26 (**SnE**).

the poem. Rather than discuss the task at hand, Skírnir exerts some leverage in requesting the loan or gift of Freyr's horse and sword – a request to which the god acquiesces. The parallelism and apparent inversion of their respective statuses between these two verses is significant. Rather than the messenger repeating the god's text word for word, here it is Freyr whose words are supplied for him in a manner suggesting a ritualistic contract – a more equal relationship than one might usually imagine existing between a god and his page. We might instructively compare this call-and-response dynamic to the common legal procedure, attested to in several sagas, whereby the repetition of one person's words by another binds them together contractually.[16] In this light, the use of the conditional tense in the final line of stanza 9 might be taken as an implicit warning to Skírnir to hold up his side of the bargain. Freyr notes that his sword does indeed have magical properties, but these may only be invoked '...ef sá er horskr er hefir' ('…if he who has it is wise.')[17] The subtextual power dynamic between these two – ostensibly unequal, but in fact each seeking self-advancement from the other, and therefore interdependent – can also be detected in stanzas 4 and 5. Freyr calls his servant 'ungi' ('young') as a way of differentiating them from each other; in his very next speech, Skírnir implicitly dismisses this distinction, remarking, 'þvíat ungir saman | várum í árdaga' ('that we were young together | in times gone by.')[18] As a god whose remit includes vitality and renewal, Freyr's continual youth – which he presumably shares with the elemental Skírnir – must underpin this comment.[19] Later, Skírnir's offer of apples to Gerðr appears to recall the myth of Iðunn, with its theme of eternal youth.[20] Although not directed at the god, the implication that all the Æsir and Vanir share in this immortal state problematises the simple power dynamic which would exist were Freyr straightforwardly Skírnir's elder. Again, the distinction between messenger and master is shown to be less stable than it appears on first encountering the text. Freyr's attempt to represent himself as the older and wiser personality is

[16] See, for instance, Gunnlaugr's mock declaration of his engagement in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, p.60.
[17] *Skírnismál*, st.9.
[18] *Skírnismál*, st.5.
[19] See *Gylfaginning*, p.24.
[20] See Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Falukes (London: 1998), pp.1-2.

revealed to be mere bluster.

Skírnir's equivocal position – as a character in his own right acting on behalf of another; as an emissary from Ásgarðr sojourning in the land of the giants – is next addressed most pertinently in stanza 18. Have gained access to Gymir's court, Skírnir is commanded to positively identify himself. Strikingly, he elects rather to *negatively* identify himself by describing what he is *not* – a choice which may resemble the act of self-abnegation so frequently associated with the eddic reciters, as discussed in Chapter 1. In so doing he uses the precise form and formulation of words with which Gerðr has supplied him, stating:

> Emkat ek álfa
> né ása sona
> né víssa vana;
> þó ek einn um komk
> eikinn fúr yfir
> yður salkynni at sjá[21]
>
> I am not of the elves
> nor the sons of the Æsir
> nor of the wise Vanir -
> though I have come alone
> across the fierce fire
> to see your homestead.

Again a kind of transference is taking place here in order to preserve plausible deniability. On the one hand, Freyr is not here, so the words about to be spoken are not strictly his. On the other, through this apparent act of self-abnegation, Skírnir essentially indemnifies himself from being held personally accountable for what is subsequently said and done. Gerðr is caught at a disadvantage, and the words she hears are a repudiation of her question, rather than an answer to it. It is instructive to compare this tactic with the prose commentary in the heroic poem *Fáfnismál* which notes that the knowledge of someone's identity confers a certain power over him.[22] This idea has been developed at some length by Anatoly Liberman who claims it as a common fact across Old Norse mythological texts that, ‘One's name was an

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[21] *Skírnismál*, st.18.
[22] *Fáfnismál*, prose passage after st.1.

integral part of one's individuality.'[23]

Throughout their exchange, Skírnir never discloses his name, leaving Gerðr little option but to go on referring to him in generic terms such as 'sveinn' ('boy' or 'servant'). By contrast, he names her at once (st.19), and his mastery over her is emphasised by his reference to runes in stanza 36 – an unsubtle allusion to his ability to colour her reputation by his report – by words which, in this case, become branded on her, just as the message he bears back will leave an indelible mark on her reputation. In this detail in particular, we see the latent power of the intermediary. Despite an explicit reference to 'Ørindi mín' ('my errand') in stanza 38, much of the dramatic tension in this latter part of the poem depends on the ambiguity concerning Skírnir's motives and whether he is acting exclusively on his master's behalf. The use of pronouns is particularly compelling in support of this reading. Despite having presented himself simply as Freyr's mouthpiece in stanza 18, Skírnir makes frequent use of 'ek' ('I') and 'mín' ('my'), thus implicating himself in proceedings and thereby preserving the symbiotic covenant between messenger and master which states that neither may be held solely responsibly for the other's actions. If Skírnir's methods are distasteful to Gerðr (as how could they be otherwise?) then Freyr is exempt from the blame as his messenger was acting on his own initiative; similarly, Skírnir takes care to present himself as merely the instrument of his lord's will. Neither is wholly culpable in this act of blackmail; both are complicit.

When Skírnir returns to Freyr it is noteworthy that he declines to comment subjectively on the outcome of his errand, apparently repeating Gerðr's words exactly as he received them from her:[24]

'Barri heitir,
er vit báðir vitom,

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23 Anatoly Liberman, 'Snorri and Saxo on Útgarðaloki, with Notes on Loki Laufeyjarson's Character, Career and Name', in Liberman (1994), p.196.

24 Curiously, this stanza is abbreviated ('rather erratically,' according to Dronke (1997), p.385) in **R**, and it does not appear in **A**. As such, we are left to infer its similarity to the preceding stanza 39 on the basis that a scribe would surely have recorded any divergences in his exemplar in full. There is adequate space on the vellum leaf (fol.23r) for an additional line of text had he wished to do so. Dronke (1997) and the editors of the ÍF edition (2014) take the liberty of rendering the two stanzas identically, except, in the latter case, by replacing 'bæði' with the masculine form 'báðir.' The same variation can be found in Gustav Neckel, ed., *Edda: Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern*, rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1983).

lundr lognfara.
En ept nætr nío
þar mun Niarðar syni
Gerðr unna gamans.'[25]

'Barri it is called,
as we both know,
a wind-becalmed grove.
And after nine nights
there, to Njǫrðr's son
Gerðr will give love.'

Although the verse occurs twice, the emphasis on the personal pronoun shifts when the text comes from the messenger's mouth, as opposed to that of its original author – the giantess. There is a performative aspect to Skírnir's words, which were originally Gerðr's, and this would be especially apparent in an oral recital of the poem. Would a single narrator have altered his intonation to suggest Gerðr's voice or Skírnir's? In a multi-participant performance, of the kind posited in Chapter 1, would the reciter playing Skírnir have made any attempt to imitate the way in which Gerðr had previously delivered the same lines? When Gerðr speaks these words to Skírnir the implication is that both she and he know the name of the grove Barri. When Skírnir repeats these words, unmediated by comment or elaboration, it appears that those complicit in this knowledge are himself and Freyr. While the shift in emphasis is subtle, it nonetheless speaks to the Pandarus-like intervention of this intermediary who is, by virtue of his errand, an intruder on their intimacy – as all messengers in matters of love must be. That he is privy to the intelligence of their secret encounter encourages an impression of him as a voyeur – an impression strengthened by the juxtaposition between his natural aspect as the sun's ray and the image of a night-time tryst upon which unwelcome light is intruding. The implications are unsettling – the sun has pierced the veil of night, with all the sexual connotations that image suggests – and again point to the poem's interest in the often unacknowledged power of proxies derived from the information – the wisdom – to which they are so needfully made privy. The image of light being re-directed in this way is, of course, a

25 *Skírnismál*, st.41. The precise meaning of 'lundr lognfara' is uncertain: 'lognfara' is an unusual compound comprising 'logn' ('calm') and 'fari' ('journeying').

recurrent one, first introduced by Freyr when he opines,

> ...þvíat álfrǫðull
> lýsir um alla daga
> ok þeygi at mínum munum.[26]
>
> ...The elf-glory [light]
> illuminates every day
> but not according to my desires.

By enlisting Skírnir to convey his love to Gerðr, the god is inviting an aspect of the sun, with all its illuminating properties, to reveal the secret desires of his heart to their object. It is an act which renders him vulnerable, and reinforces again the degree to which he is dependent on his agent. There is also an additional irony if we take the introductory prose into account, since Gerðr falls into Freyr's power following his intrusive viewing of her from atop Hliðskjálf. We might well wonder what implications this similarly voyeuristic conclusion has for the evolving power dynamic between Freyr and his servant.

Skírnir represents an important case study for two reasons: first, because he provides a distancing mechanism which insulates Freyr from Gerðr's initial reaction, and second because he is shown to exercise considerable agency in determining the scope and remit of his own mission. In both respects he resembles the storyteller: he is the conduit for tales presented as authentic and distantly derived, but he demonstrates a considerable ability to shape his material such that it is best suited for his immediate audience (he mediates his approach differently depending on whether he is addressing Skaði, Freyr, Gerðr, her maid, the mysterious herdsman, or the horse). He also appropriates the words, and possibly the tone of others. These same correspondences are detectable elsewhere in the *Poetic Edda*. In *Grímnismál*, Óðinn betrays much the same uncertainty as to the reliability of his ravens as Freyr does when he questions whether Skírnir has been governed by his will or by some ulterior motive.[27] The inverse fear – that of being misrepresented to others by a messenger who brings news of you – occupies several stanzas of *Hávamál*. The poem's audiences are

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26 *Skírnismál*, st.4.

27 *Grímnismál*, st.20. See also Pernille Hermann, ‘Key Aspects of Memory and Remembering in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature’, in Hermann *et al*, (2014), p.17. For a discussion of this stanza, see below pp.172-4.

cautioned against boastfulness (st.6), foolishness (st.27) and misrepresentation (st.8). In each case the implication seems to be that such failings live long in the memories of those who encounter them, and that bad reputations, once known and circulated, are seldom altered or unmade. This cultural anxiety, which is likely also at work in Skírnir's decision to withhold his name from Gerðr, is one point of continuity between the eddic tradition and the later prose sagas. It is important not to overstate the parallels between the character of Skírnir as presented in the poem and the storyteller in all his many guises throughout the corpus. There is nothing to suggest that these parallels were consciously intended by the author of the written poem. Nevertheless, by embodying the disturbing power of a messenger to expose the vulnerability of his patron, Skírnir represents a striking example of how influential a talented storyteller can be in a culture dependent on oral discourse even long after the introduction of writing, and it is surely unlikely that so metatextually self-conscious a people as the medieval Icelanders could remain ignorant of this dimension to the poem for long if it were widely circulated.

By retaining their anonymity, intermediaries remain aloof from the very discourses which they enable. Snorri is perhaps expressing an awareness of, and engagement with this phenomenon in *Gylfaginning* when he elects to name his Æsir 'Hár, 'Jafnhár' and 'Þriði' - names carrying the clear implication that one might just as well be taken for another, as well as emphasising how much less accountable they are than the 'ancient tales' which they purport to relate. No attempt is made to distinguish between them, nor do we learn that Gylfi himself made any such attempt during their protracted exchange. One vessel of knowledge is as appropriate for his purpose as another, it would appear, so long as they all claim to draw on the same ancient tradition. Yet the dynamic would be altogether different if one or more were known by name, or by some other distinguishing feature. What if they were ever to disagree – or present conflicting accounts? In fact, Gylfi's capacity to adjudicate between them is severely restricted by the veil of anonymity which shrouds all three. In a similar way,

although a number of the *Íslendingasǫgur* are commonly identified by the names of their protagonists, and referred to as such in the manuscripts which bear witness to them (e.g. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*; *Gísla saga Súrssonar*), none is named for a messenger or mere proxy, and there is no equivalent text to *Skírnismál* among the sagas in which such a character takes centre stage and dominates the action. For all the supposed 'democratic' credentials of the saga genre, these texts contain no analogue for Skírnír or Gylfi who, while functioning ostensibly as conduits for others' words, are also projected into the role of protagonist.[28] On the contrary, the sagas are concerned primarily with preserving and enshrining the reputations of significant historical figures (and supplementing them with some entirely fictional accounts), and are notably circumspect when describing the often mischievous part played by those who claim to speak on behalf of others, despite the fact that it is often such seemingly incidental people who precipitate the most destructive and enduring feuds.

Among the *Íslendingasǫgur*, *Njáls saga* is perhaps the most consistently sceptical of the agency of proxies. Throughout the feuding in the first half of the saga, it is typically by interrogating and criticising the accounts of intermediaries (whether self-appointed or commissioned by others) that Gunnarr and Njáll succeed in keeping the peace between their two families. On one occasion, following the killing of Sigmundr and Skjǫldr, it is a condition of the settlement Gunnarr brokers that the slander which led to their deaths must not be repeated.[29] This overt resort to censorship betrays a lack of trust for the gossip-prone public, and an anxiety that self-appointed re-tellers of the incident would not otherwise hesitate to repeat the offending words, discolouring the reputation of Njáll and his sons in the popular consensus. Indeed, it may be this concern for the future reputation of his family that prompts the usually peaceable Njáll to give his tacit assent for the killing, which he does using the not especially subtle metaphor of salmon-fishing to signal his support for his sons killing these enemies of the family (although, like Freyr in *Skírnismál*, he stops short of voicing his desire

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28 See Phillpotts (1931), p.162. Phillpotts argues that saga authors typically display a noteworthy degree of sympathy and fellow-feeling for characters of low status in their narratives.

29 *Njáls saga*, pp.115-8.

explicitly, thus preserving for himself a veneer of plausible deniability were that charge ever to be brought against him).[30] Again we see that overt power in this society is fragile and dependent on public approbation.[31] As such, those who spread an authorized version of events play a necessary role, whereas those who reframe their narrative – as messengers like Skírnir are prone to do – represent a threat to power and, therefore, to the peace. It is significant to note, of course, that Njáll is most renowned as a lawyer, and thus well aware of the possibilities when advocating on another party's behalf. The overlap between lawyers and effective storytellers is again apparent in this saga, and should certainly not surprise us when we recall Gísli Sigurðsson's observation that legal experts continued to receive and give instruction entirely without the assistance of written texts as late as the early twelfth century.[32]

The capacity for news to travel unbidden throughout the country is frequently remarked on in the sagas. Such formulae as, 'Þetta gerðu menn at nýjum tíðendum' ('People thought that was novel news')[33] serve to reinforce the sense of the population at large speaking with the voice of consensus – fulfilling the role of 'a sort of embryo chorus in a Greek play' ascribed to them by Bertha Phillpotts.[34] Their power depends both on their anonymity and on their numbers – no one individual can be praised or blamed for circulating the news, and thus it becomes impossible to quash it. The frequent implication is that once a character's reputation has been forged in the crucible of public opinion it becomes virtually unalterable. In a pre-literate age, the agents of this process, whether referenced or not, must be the contemporary storytellers who, well served by the complicity which this convention of public consensus demands, choose where possible to conceal their individual identities. When gossipmongers are not explicitly referred to in the sagas, it is sometimes that case that public opinion seems to manifest almost unprompted, yet in such cases the key distinction between

[30] *Njáls saga*, p.115.
[31] A similar case is made by Else Mundal, 'Memory of the Past and Old Norse Identity', in Lucie Doležalová, ed., *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages*, (Leiden, 2010), pp.463-72, esp. p.464.
[32] Gísli Sigurðsson (2004), p.57. See also Hermann Pálsson (1999), p.91.
[33] *Njáls saga*, p.26, in reference to the divorce case of Hrútr and Unnr.
[34] Phillpotts (1931), p.178.

those being talked about and those who do the talking remains overt. It is striking that the family saga authors (whether of the written texts we have or their oral precursors) either chose to adopt that same indemnity conferred by anonymity that served these gossips so well, or were compelled to do so as knowledge of their identities passed out of the corporate memory, causing their voices to blend with those of the wider community and seem to speak on their collective behalf. Some scholars have suggested that this decision (and it must have been a decision – conscious or otherwise – at least for the scribes, since they possessed the tools to identify themselves as the recorders of these tales) may be explained on the basis that these authors saw themselves as transmitters rather than artists.[35] This may well be so – and would, in fact, indicate a close parallel between their sense of their own literary mission and the role they ascribe to intermediaries within their texts – but it is equally probable that they saw the political value of implicitly affiliating themselves with the rest of the 'chorus' – choosing, like Skírnir – to play the role of proxy, rather than self-acknowledged innovator. Indeed, one scholar has recently suggested that modern readers are not at all justified in reading into the references to hearsay a genuine fidelity to an older oral tradition. Instead, '...references of this type could easily all be a stylistic device of the scribes, aimed at convincing the reader that their work was based on genuine sources and their accounts reliable.'[36] In other words, such frequent references to popular opinion present the impression that the saga-tellers were transmitting unmediated the stories of others, whereas in practice they remained free to exercise a certain degree of literary agency in terms of how they chose to frame those narratives – what to include, what to omit, and how best to order the information they selected. This interpretation is particularly plausible in the culturally conservative Icelandic tradition. As Kirsten Hastrup notes,

> In Iceland, where memory is practised to an extraordinary degree [...] history is shaped and reshaped in a collective recollection of age-old themes [...] The 'said,' as story and history, is constantly recirculated, and in the process it both surrounds and constitutes

[35] See Lönnroth (1976), pp.194-203.
[36] Gísli Sigurðsson (1994), p.329.

the contexture of the Icelandic world.[37]

Some of the content of the sagas, like that of the eddic poems, may well have already been familiar to their earliest audiences, albeit from an array of different sources and intersecting tales they had heard. Regardless of their level of prior knowledge, however, it was the re-teller's responsibility to anticipate their expectations by including such references to popular opinion as would indemnify him against any charge of inauthenticity or – worse – deliberate untruth. The judgements he presents are not expressed as his, therefore, but as the community's.

Besides references to the chorus-like consensus of the (by modern convention 'silent') majority, the family sagas also employ generic stock characters to undertake the role of intermediary in ways that often influence the course of events and thereby foreground the power of persuasive storytelling. One such figure is Gunnarr's shepherd in *Njáls saga*, who warns him of the approach of Otkell and Skammkell in Chapter 54. In an account which reminds us of the latitude with which Skírnir undertook his errand, the shepherd relates the substance of Skammkell's slur against Gunnarr, although his choice of words is not exactly similar. In the previous chapter we hear that Skammkell criticised Gunnarr as follows: 'Þat myndi mælt, ef ótiginn maðr væri, at grátit hefði' ('It would be said, if he were an ordinary man, that he cried').[38] Certainly, the tone of this remark is derogatory, but the speaker is also at pains to indemnify himself twice over: first, by attributing the (hypothetical) slur to a depersonalised public consensus, and second by inserting a crucial subclause avowing that Gunnarr is not an 'ótiginn' ('ordinary') man. This comment is altogether more nuanced than the report which Gunnarr subsequently receives. In the mouth of the shepherd, Skammkell's words are rendered thus: 'því at Skammkell sagði austr í Dal at þú grétir, þá er þeir riðu á þik ofan' ('Skammkell said over at Dal that you cried when they rode at you').[39]

Although the reported speech resembles the original closely, it is shorn of the

[37] Hastrup (1998), p.47.
[38] *Njáls saga*, p.135.
[39] *Njáls saga*, p.136.

indemnifying caveat that Gunnarr is no ordinary man, and is directly attributed to Skammkell, without any acknowledgement that he phrased his remark – whatever his tone – as a hypothetical. Were this shepherd a man of status, possessed in the saga of a name and a history, we might feel a more natural obligation to read some motive into this apparent distortion of Skammkell's words – an act of relatively minor significance, perhaps, to the mind of the modern reader, but one which nonetheless precipitates Skammkell's death. Might those caveats have saved his life? And should we trust the shepherd's words when he goes on to justify his action on the hypocritical grounds that he hates it when men make such false reports (as Skammkell had of Gunnarr)? The cynical mind might suspect that this distortion was engineered specifically to achieve the reward which, the saga tells us, later comes the shepherd's way. His motivation is ultimately that of self-interest, rather than selfless fidelity to the transmission of another's words, and is perfectly capable of re-framing them to his own advantage. We might usefully note the kernel of truth in this story, however: Skammkell did, indeed, make a disparaging remark, just not precisely the one with which he is credited. Here we see the messenger again assume the role of editor, rather than innovator.

It is especially ironic that the shepherd should prove Skammkell's undoing, since he himself, acting as Otkell's messenger to his powerful kinsmen, will utterly distort their advice in transmission (well beyond the subtler, self-serving editing done by the shepherd), and thereby initiate the escalation in hostilities which culminates in his death. The saga stresses that Skammkell is thought to be deceitful, with Hallbjǫrn calling him 'inn lygnasta mann' ('the most false man'),[40] and that his reputation as a liar, as much as the lie itself, is to blame for his demise. By contrast, the shepherd who betrays him to Gunnarr enjoys no such repercussions, but rather sinks quietly back into obscurity, somewhat the richer for the carefully finessed message he delivered to his master. There is something intriguingly subversive about the fact that the anonymous, low-status messenger in this comparison comes

40 *Njáls saga*, p.128.

off the richer; again, the subtextual deference to the power of public opinion above the agency of the high-status individual is clear.

The unreliability of shepherds specifically is a theme of Oddr Snorrason's preface to his rendition of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in which he enjoins his readers against taking the word of such sources at face value, and urges them rather to rely on written texts: ‘Ok betra er slict með gamni at heyra en stivp meðra saugvr, er hiarðar sveinar segia, er enge viet hvart satt er’ (‘And it is better to listen to such [tales] with enjoyment than to stepmothers' stories, which shepherd-boys tell, which nobody knows the truth of.’)[41] Often taken as a manifesto for the primacy of literacy over stories in the oral tradition, this passage has been examined in some detail by Judy Quinn. Her assessment is as follows:

> The actual wording of Oddr's comment suggests that the tales were transmitted by farm-workers but associated with step-mothers... Probably neither of the terms ‘step-mother’ or ‘shepherds’ is a literal designation of a social group but a mechanism of literary reflex, disparaging the transmitters of these kinds of tales as marginal members of society, less likely to have been empowered by literacy, and more likely to have alluded to traditional oral discourses.’[42]

The suggestion that these generic groups should have acquired the reputation of colluding in the distortion or elaboration of historical truths speaks to an enduring interest in the agency of these ‘marginal’ classes, whose influence on the literature was understood to be intense and essential, if not always welcome.

Since the boundaries between audiences and authors are permeable in an oral culture, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the quest for ‘authenticity’ which occupies many scholars today was also a pressing concern for saga writers such as Oddr. Unwilling to trust the storytellers who had preserved these tales, but unable to draw on other sources (apart from the poetic corpus), a healthy scepticism would have been an essential component of such work. By this same token, a chapter appended to the saga in MS AM 310 4to, and also usually attributed to Oddr, includes the following text:[43]

> Þessa sogu sagþi mer Asgrimr abboti Uestliða s. Biarni prestr Bergþors s. Gellir

[41] *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar*, p.2.

[42] Quinn (2000), p.40. For further discussion of this passage see O'Connor (2009), pp.366-7.

> Þorgils. s. Herdis Daða dottir. Þorgerðr Þorsteins. d. Inguðr Arnors. d. Þessir menn kendu mer sua sagu Olafs konungs T. s. sem nu er sogð. Ec synda oc bokina. Gitsure Hallz s. oc retta ec hana eptir hans raðe.[44]
>
> I was told this story by Abbot Ásgrímr Vestliðason, the priest Bjarni Bergþórsson, Gellir Þorgilsson, Herdís Daðadóttir, Þórgerðr Þorsteinsdóttir, [and] Inguðr Árnórsdóttir. These people instructed me in the saga of King Óláfr Tryggvason as it is now told. I showed the book to Gízurr Hallsson and corrected it with his counsel.

This careful referencing of multiple sources and deference to an established authority for correction is a marked attempt to set this text apart from its oral antecedents which, so far as we can tell, deliberately eschewed association with particular sources for the most part, being framed rather as a continuance of unbroken oral discourse – a convention also to be found in Ári's *Íslendingabók*. That phrase 'sem nu er sogð' ('as it is now told') is especially instructive, since it implies a conscious effort to distinguish the present iteration from any competing – allegedly spurious – versions. The written article is not merely 'the saga' but 'the saga as told here' – the authorised redaction. This conscious grounding of the text in the present recalls the cultural importance of reasserting foundational stories for contemporary audiences, and reflects a concern to distinguish truth from report, with storytellers being the primary sources for both.

The question now arises of where the boundary lies between playing the role of intermediary effectively – that is, serving your master's interests, whether that master be an individual who has entrusted you with an errand or an audience wishing to be entertained – and lying or manipulating the truth in pursuit of your own ends. In a study examining the act of lying in *Njáls saga*, Paul Beekman Taylor posits the following:

> In the mouths of small men the lie is a banal attempt to refuse the implications, as well as the fact, of an event. It is an imitative act, mocking its own model of truth. Its immediate implications touch the use of language as a denial rather than an assertion of strength. In the mouths of heroes... the lie is creative, an interpretation of facts or events. This 'lie' is a verbal complement to physical and moral strength.[45]

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[43] Though its source may have been his fellow monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson. See further Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Om de norske kongers sagaer* (Oslo, 1937), pp.85-6 for the case against Oddr having shown his text to Gizurr Hallsson. This argument is persuasively refuted in the introduction to Andersson's more recent translation: Theodore M. Andersson, trans., *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* (New York, 2003), pp.3-4.

[44] Finnur Jónsson (1932), p.247.

In light of Oddr's anxiety concerning the potential influence of shepherds and stepmothers in the tradition, we are forced to revisit this dismissal of the agency of 'small men.' As we have seen, some who wear that title within the sagas – like Gunnarr's shepherd – are extremely creative in their mediation of the truth. Indeed, our own interpretation of that 'truth' is often derived solely from the anonymous saga author, whose witnesses are frequently stock, generic, and quite possibly invented for the purpose. Their testimony is therefore at once both irrefutable and unreliable. Oddr's scepticism is well placed, while Taylor seems to underestimate the sympathetic bond between the narrative voice of the saga and the convenient 'small men' through whom the author comments on, directs and frames the action. Saga authors and storytellers, more than most men, would have been perpetually conscious both of their free agency to 'lie,' enhance or elaborate, and of the grave risks associated with doing so ineptly, without giving proper thought to the law of unintended consequences.

As though to reinforce this sense that the saga author is perpetually conscious of the influence which can be exerted by anonymous proxies, a second shepherd intrudes into the text of *Njáls saga* as a witness invoked by Skarpheðinn during his verbal assault against Þorkell hákr, whose integrity he attacks with characteristic bluntness: 'Er þér ok skyldara at stanga ór tǫnnum þér razgarnarendann merarinnar, er þú ázt, áðr þú reitt til þings, ok sá smalamaðr þinn ok undraðisk, hvi þú gerðir slika fúlmennsku' ('You should pick from your teeth the pieces from your mare's arse which you ate before you rode to the Þing; and your shepherd saw you and was appalled that you could do such a wretched thing').[46] Given our previous experience of shepherd informants, we are left to wonder what form of words were used, how closely Skarpheðinn's taunt resembles them, and whose choice it was to communicate this alleged indecency. Indeed, we may even question whether the shepherd is not merely a rhetorical flourish on Skarpheðinn's part, designed to lend apparent credibility to

[45] Paul Beekman Taylor, 'Wielders and Welders of Words: Bare Lies and Garnished Truths in *Njáls saga*', in Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson and Hans Bekker-Nielsen, eds, *Sagnaskemmtun: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson* (Vienna, 1986), p.296.

[46] *Njáls saga*, p.305.

an outrageous allegation. Like so many intermediaries in this literature he goes unnamed, and cannot therefore be cross-examined by the man he accuses. That he is identified as one of Þorkell's own retinue only serves to amplify the insult. The subtext to Skarpheðinn's taunt, once again, is that popular opinion – the ultimate arbiter of reputation – has turned against Þorkell.

In the latter part of the saga, which deals with Kári and Flosi, one event of particular interest in relation to storytelling and the elaboration or distortion of the truth in transmission revolves around the death of Gunnarr Lambason. Called upon by his host to give an account of the burning, Gunnarr provides a version of events which, the saga-teller assures us, is partial and unfair. In response, Kári rushes into the hall and strikes off his head. Flosi then proceeds to communicate the same intelligence, but in a manner that was 'trúat' ('trusted') by all who heard it. Here the storytellers themselves are subject to the court of popular opinion, and the penalty for being caught in a falsehood is graphically illustrated. This incident demonstrates the pitfalls which await the overtly self-serving storyteller, whatever claim he might have to be an authentic witness to, or authority on, the events he relates. A similar account is given of Þorgrímr's death in *Fóstbrœðra saga.*[47] In comparing these two instances, Chadwick and Chadwick observe, 'In these two cases we can see saga in its first stage. The story-teller himself is one of the chief characters in the story; he tells of what he has seen and done himself.'[48] For our purposes, these two episodes depict storytellers purporting to play the role of mere intermediaries, having news to report and a personal account available to them. There is an irony inherent in any saga author incorporating such an event into his tale since it throws his own claim to trustworthiness into sharp relief. This is a kind of narrative brinkmanship which adds a subtextual tension to any oral performance of a saga, and therefore introduces the possibility for competition between storytellers and their audiences – any member of which would be free to attempt to contradict or improve on a certain detail,

[47] See pp.91-4 of this study.
[48] H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge, 1932), i, p.581.

thus subjecting both to the censure of public opinion.[49] Figures like Gunnarr Lambason and Þorgrímr Einarsson are exaggerated in contrast to the measured tone and objective pretensions of the dispassionate narrative voice.

Writers write about writing. From Chaucer to Chesterton, a self-aware commentary on the author's own artistry, whether overt or implied, is a constant literary preoccupation. In pre-literate cultures, particularly those so concerned with reputation and posterity as existed in Scandinavia and Iceland in the Middle Ages, the same self-consciousness and desire for self-advancement is evident from the frequent occurrence of, and commentary on, proxy speakers, both in the sagas and the eddic tradition. These instruments of oral reportage implicitly celebrate the act of conveying news authentically, expediently and in such a way as to exert an active influence on the course of events. Very occasionally, as in *Gylfaginning* and, from time to time, in *Njáls saga,* authors call explicit attention to the role of these intermediaries in catalysing momentous happenings. Frequently, however, they remain anonymous, generic, and appear to act as mouthpieces for the general mood; yet they are often characterised as self-interested, possessed of initiative, and capable of putting their own spin on the material they transmit. Ostensibly peripheral, their influence is essential to the resolution of numerous narratives, and their absence would cause the whole fabric of the saga or poem to unravel.

There is no single 'type' of intermediary, and each of the cases examined here must be treated on its own terms, rather than taken to be representative of a characterisation common to all sagas or eddic poems. Collectively, however, their presence and even the variability of their guises suggest an anxiety about the process of transmission and representation which crosses traditional generic boundaries in Old Norse scholarship and unites the authors of the earliest eddic texts with the later saga writers. Sections of *Njáls saga*, the written text of which is generally thought to be of later origin than most family sagas,[50] might even be read

[49] For a discussion of the relationship between saga performer and audience, see Kellogg (1991), pp.89-101. The term 'narrative brinkmanship' is frequently used in saga analysis conducted by Carol Clover. See especially Clover (1982).

[50] Lönnroth (1976).

as a deliberate, overt commentary on the unreliability of traditional narratives and the dangers experienced when 'great' men (and women) allow themselves to be unduly influenced in their actions by a single, partial account of local events.[51] The same anxiety can be detected in Oddr's much earlier prologue to his text of *Óláfs saga.* The themes which preoccupy these messengers – from the opportunistic Skírnir to the choric voices of shepherds and stepmothers in the sagas – range from authenticity to persuasiveness; from mediating between two masters to serving one's own best interests; from preserving the impression of plausible deniability to being identified as the praiseworthy transmitter of news which benefits its hearer. In short, their agenda coincides closely with that of the storyteller himself, and for this reason the often peripheral proxies in these varied narratives are the deserving objects of increasingly thorough scrutiny.

If the use of intermediaries is one way in which saga and eddic protagonists achieve plausible deniability and avoid or pre-empt confrontation, then another device available to them is misdirection – whether through lying outright about their intentions, or through framing their position in such a way as to actively encourage others to misunderstand what they say. The ethical and performative complexities of seeking to mislead another person by convincing them of an untruth are, as we have seen, as much a concern of the storyteller as any of the characters he depicts, and is to these complexities that we must now turn.

iii. Between Fiction and Falsehood

The society depicted in the *Íslendingasǫgur* is an honour-based culture in which characters regularly announce their recent deeds and demand acknowledgement for them from their peers and the wider public. Even when such openness is bound to provoke intergenerational feuding and sustained ill feeling, it is frequently presented as preferable to secrecy and omission. The law codes nonetheless make clear that dishonesty incurred a heavy penalty, and

[51] See, for instance, Miller (2014), p.98.

the proper functioning of society depended in large part on everyone knowing where he or she stood in relation to everyone else.

In a paper published in 1986, Paul Beekman Taylor attempted to construct a taxonomy of types of lie told across the *Íslendingasǫgur* corpus. He proposed a list of ten distinct kinds of falsehood:

1. Denial of fact;
2. Refusal to address a fact;
3. Changing the account of a fact;
4. Pretending ignorance of a known fact;
5. False flattery;
6. Invention of a fact for personal gain;
7. Slander to incite bloodshed;
8. Slander to belittle the fame of someone;
9. Literal fictions which interpret fact;
10. 'Being untrue' (oath-breaking / identity concealing).[52]

This list represents a welcome starting point for examining this vexed subject matter, and we should be indebted to Taylor for compiling it. Upon close inspection, however, a number of discrepancies exist within it which must lead us to question its capacity to express all the forms, permutations and implications of lying as an activity undertaken by saga characters.

For one thing, Taylor's list does little to distinguish lies from truths on the basis of intention. A lie, like any communicative act, involves a transmitter and a receiver. Thus 'false flattery,' as perceived by its object, may have been intended as genuine praise by the speaker who is accused of flattery. Must a speaker intend deception if we are to treat his words as false, or is honourable intent sufficient to exempt him from this discussion? If so, the same defence of 'plausible deniability' afforded to proxy figures like Skírnir could be very widely applied. Another shortcoming of this list is its categorical expression, which fails to account for a lie told in pursuit of an uncertain outcome: what if a speaker were to slander a third party while indifferent to the consequences – be they violent or otherwise? Should we place that lie in category 7 or 8? How should we deal with miscommunication or impersonation? Are shapeshifters lying when they assume an altered form, perhaps concealing their true selves

[52] Taylor (1986).

like Satan in the Garden of Eden?[53] And isn't category 10 - 'being untrue' - an unhelpfully broad, catch-all repository for acts of deception which, while they may not fit the general *schema*, are among the most interesting and original in the sagas precisely because they represent deviations from normal behaviour?

We must ask these questions not to undermine the value of attempts like Taylor's to make some sense out of the sagas' interest in various modes of deception – an interest, after all, which resembles certain eddic poets' preoccupation with disguise[54] – but rather to call attention to the great variety of deceptions which can be practised in a society so thoroughly aware of the weight words carry and the importance of conducting your affairs in a public and open way. The art of deception in all its forms is too great a subject for the scope of the present study, but it may be instructive to focus on just two episodes from two of the apparently later sagas – *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga* – in order to explore how the act of lying can have very different moral implications depending on the circumstances. Nowhere is the suggestion made that these stories should be treated as 'lygisǫgur', and anyone who retold them would therefore be aware of the potentially serious repercussions of wrongly describing a notable figure of the Saga Age as a liar outright.

In Chapter 19 of *Grettis saga* the narrator recounts an episode in which Grettir encounters a group of *berserkir* ('berserkers') on Háramarsey. At this point in the saga, Grettir is staying on the island as the guest of Þorfinnr Kársson shortly after Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson had ordered the expulsion of *berserkir* from Norway. One morning, when Þorfinnr is away on the mainland, a boatload of *berserkir* arrives intending to surprise and kill him. Instead they are met by Grettir who gains their trust before persuading them to surrender the majority of their weapons, plying them with drink, luring them into a storehouse and slaughtering them there. Grettir's conduct throughout this entire episode is clearly and wilfully deceptive – involving, at the very least, both false flattery and identity-concealing, but it is worth

[53] Genesis 3:1-22.
[54] See Chapter 1 of this study for a discussion of this phenomenon.

examining the text in some detail to assess how these deceptions may be justified or excused in the context of his otherwise honourable nature. Þorfinnr's wife is certainly supportive of Grettir's conduct, telling him, 'hefir þú... mikla frægð unnit ok leyst mik ok hjú mín frá þeiri skemmð' ('you have... won great fame and secured me and my household against this shame.')[55]

That Grettir won fame through deception might initially seem counter-intuitive, but it is nevertheless true. When the *berserkir*, led by the brothers Þórir þǫmb and Ǫgmundr illi first arrives on the island, Grettir questions them about their identities, indicates that he recognises them by reputation, but says nothing about his own agenda. When Þórir infers that Grettir is Þorfinnr's retainer he neither confirms nor denies this claim ('refusal to address a fact or statement' being one of Taylor's categories of deception), responding instead with an apparent non sequitur: 'ef ek þættumk nǫkkurn mótgang eiga at gjalda, þá vilda ek þann veg at koma' ('If I had any score to repay [to Þorfinnr], then I would want things to turn out [as they have].')[56] The characteristic circumlocution of saga style can easily obscure the importance of the conditional tense here, and indeed we may presume that it does just that so far as Þórir is concerned, since neither he nor his followers make any further enquiry into the motivations of this apparently serendipitous ally. On the contrary, Þórir expresses his gratitude that Grettir should be so forthcoming (when, in fact, he has said nothing of substance and offered only a hypothetical summary of his position based on a condition which the saga's audience knows to be untrue). Grettir replies, 'Orða sinna á hverr ráð' ('Everyone decides his own words').[57] Like the technique of circumlocution, a propensity for gnomic adages is common to saga heroes, and it seems therefore natural, within the bounds of the genre, that the cautionary subtext of this statement should go unnoticed by the brothers. To an attentive saga audience, however, its function would be clear: to underscore the care Grettir is taking in allowing the brothers to deceive themselves, rather than resorting to the technique of lying to them

[55] *Grettis saga*, p.69.
[56] *Grettis saga*, p.64.
[57] *Grettis saga*, p.64.

explicitly.

Diverging briefly from Taylor's scheme, we might prefer to view this as passive deception rather than active deception. Grettir continues to employ his evasive technique of speaking conditionally to avoid directly answering Þórir's invitation to name a price for his supposed assistance:

> Grettir svarar: “Eigi ætla ek hér til launa fyrir at svá gǫru, en ef vér erum þvílíkir vinir, þá er þér farið á brott, sem nú horfisk á, þá mun ek ráðask til lags með yðr; en þó at ek mega minna en einnhverr yðar, þá mun ek eigi letja stórræðanna.”[58]

> Grettir answers: ‘I have no plan now to receive payment for this, but if we are still such friends, when you depart from here, as matters look like turning out, then I would desire to travel with you; although I can do less than any of you, I would not impede your great deeds.’

Once again, close examination reveals that Grettir has taken great care in phrasing this reply – indeed, to Taylor's list we might usefully add the term ‘false modesty,’ which is on the whole uncharacteristic of this rather forthright saga hero. It might be thought ironic that a man later legendary for his outlaw status should be so conscientious a lawyer in his own pre-emptive defence, but perhaps it is unsurprising when we consider that the practice of law in the sagas is elsewhere held up as a supremely honourable pursuit.[59] There are several components to this ingenious answer. First, Grettir states that he does not expect immediate recompense – rather, as we infer, that will come when the opportunity to kill the brothers arises. Next, he reverts to his familiar tactic of speaking hypothetically: *if* they remain friendly (as we confidently expect they will not) *then* he would like to travel with them. His final statement, belittling his own prowess, is perhaps the only outright lie told here, although arguably such a statement is inherently subjective, and might therefore be defended as an example of good manners rather than an explicit untruth.

The noteworthy change in Grettir's evasive tactics comes when Þórir, now deep in his cups, proposes an oath of friendship. Grettir elegantly evades this test by reciting the proverb

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[58] *Grettis saga*, p.65.

[59] Although there are exceptions, such as the famous lawyer Njáll deliberately and calculatingly turning a blind eye to his sons' lawlessness in *Njáls saga*, Chapter 44.

‘ǫl er annarr maðr’ (‘ale changes a man’),[60] and causing the discussion to be deferred until the morning. It is significant that the mention of oaths should be included in this passage, thereby escalating the tension of the scene by raising the possibility that Grettir will later be forced to break his word, but this is a verbal trap which he avoids with considerable poise. His change in tactics, however, should alert us to his limitations as a liar: he is prepared to bend, amend and tailor the truth, but not to be foresworn. The encounter with the *berserkir* represents not only a martial challenge for Grettir, but also a moral one: how to preserve his honourable character while simultaneously practising a deception. It is worth noting the presence of witnesses to Grettir's words in the form of the *húsfreyja* and her women, who can attest to his honesty when Þorfinnr returns. This observation lends additional weight to Grettir's rebuke when he next speaks to Þorfinnr's wife: ‘Ek þykkjumk nú mjǫk inn sami ok í kveld, er þér tǫluðuð hrakliga við mik’ (‘I think I am now the same man I was earlier this evening when you spoke with me so disgracefully’).[61] This is true both in a literal sense and in that he has avoided the temptation to compromise his honour by lying ‘outright’ to the *berserkir*, remaining constant in his intentions (thus, the same man) and largely allowing them to hear and see what they chose to and draw their own conclusions. Ultimately it is they who construct the lie that he is their ally, and they who suffer the consequences.

The example of Grettir demonstrates that deception is not inherently presented as a moral failing in the sagas but, like anything, it can be done well or badly; it may be justified as a means, not an end. Later in the saga Grettir presents himself at an assembly under an assumed name and in disguise. The farmers who encounter him swear a truce with him and then, when his identity is revealed, consider whether Grettir's deception would justify them in breaking their word. In the event the truce holds, and the justification given reinforces the importance of keeping one's word. Hjalti Þórðarson summarises the farmers' position: ‘halda skulu vér grið vár, þó at vár hafi orðit hyggendismunr; vil ek eigi, at menn hafi þat til

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[60] *Grettis saga*, p.66.
[61] *Grettis saga*, p.69.

eptirdœma, at vér sjálfir hǫfum gengit á grið þau, sem vér hǫfum sett ok seld' ('We will hold to our truce even though we have not been equally clever; I do not want people to look back and judge that we reneged on a truce which we ourselves arranged and pledged').[62] One deception here trumps another, and the respect for Grettir's cunning – though grudging – reinforces our sense that lying well, like fighting well or reciting poetry with skill, could be an heroic quality. This has a bearing on the qualities demanded of an effective storyteller, since any form of embellishment or amplification in performance could be perceived as a deception if not skilfully presented – at least when recounting a purportedly factual *Íslendingasaga* like this one. *Grettis saga* is acutely aware of the vulnerability of the hero in this situation, and implicitly praises his ingenuity in escaping with both his life and honour intact.

If this concern with the unstable but essential boundaries between truth, lies and fiction were unique to *Grettis saga* it would be an important characteristic of the text, but one whose broader importance might be easily minimised on account of that saga's reputation for being an outlier in any number of ways. As Laurence de Looze has written, 'what has *Grettis saga* been accused of if not of being a stranger and foreigner discovered in the midst of true Icelandic sagas?'[63] In fact, however, the same preoccupation reoccurs throughout the *Íslendingasǫgur*. Grettir's careful reticence and attempt to trap others into making false assumptions concerning him is paralleled and commented on in *Laxdœla saga* when King Mýrkjartan is obliged to interrogate Óláfr Hǫskuldsson with scrupulous care, having recognised him as a man prone to give away no more than has strictly been asked: 'Ok enn spyrr konungr vandligar um ætt Óláfs en fyrrum, því at konungr fann, at þessi maðr var ríklátr ok vildi eigi segja lengra en hann spurði' ('Then the king asks more carefully about Óláfr's family than before, since the king felt that this man was proud and would not say more than he was asked.')[64] There is no suggestion here that Óláfr should be viewed as dishonourable

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62 *Grettis saga*, p.235.

63 Laurence de Looze, 'The Outlaw Poet, The Poetic Outlaw: Self-Consciousness in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*', *ANF* 106 (1991), 102.

64 *Laxdœla saga*, p.56. There is some variation between manuscripts here. See *Laxdœla saga*, p.56, n.2.

because he is careful with his words – on the contrary, it is frequently the case that such careful reticence is praised in a saga hero. It is far more common that speech acts, rather than loaded silences, are the catalyst for some hostile action.[65]

Another instance in which the precise formulation of a question is significant occurs in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* during an exchange between Geirr and his chief slave, Kolr. The episode occurs at a point when Geirr is actively looking for the brothers Helgi and Gunnarr who are thought to be in hiding near to his farm. One evening, the farmer asks his slave for news, and Kolr responds that he has nothing to tell 'því að mér þykja það engin tíðindi, sem eg sé' ('I never think what I see to be newsworthy').[66] Recognising the ambiguity in his slave's reply, Geirr rephrases his enquiry to ask specifically what it is that Kolr has seen today, whereupon he relates a sighting of the refugee brothers, and thus Geirr locates his quarry. This is a very brief episode, receiving no further commentary from the saga author (indeed, the text immediately cuts away to another scene), and may have been included for any number of reasons. It is significant, however, in that it draws our attention once more to the sagas' fixation on the care which must be taken with words, thereby indirectly highlighting the verbal and linguistic skill involved in their own retelling. Depending on the reception of the saga, Kolr's reticence might appear to be the product of a reluctance to do more than was strictly asked of him, as a kind of one-upmanship on his master, or simply taken at face value as evidence that he did not apprehend the importance of what he had witnessed. Regardless, the significant detail is Geirr's perceptive interrogation which clarifies the situation, much as the *berserkir* in *Grettis saga* might have done had they been less eager to jump to conclusions.

If Grettir is an heroic liar, who uses deception sparingly in the defence of the vulnerable and to achieve glory for himself, then the sagas implicitly juxtapose him with a less honourable cast of characters for whom lying and deception – still means to an end – are the tools for laying great men low. Among this group Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, a central antagonist

65 This is a point made forcefully in *Hávamál*, sts 6, 19, 27, 29. The heroic injunction to keep your hostile thoughts hidden is issued explicitly in st.46.

66 Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, ÍF XIV (Reykjavík, 1959), p.349.

of *Njáls saga*, is pre-eminent. In the court case following the burning he is the advocate on the prosecution side, despite his complicity in Njáll's death, and his startling hypocrisy is clear for all to see. His opposite number, however, Eyjólfr Bǫlverksson is scarcely more honest, having been illegally bribed to take on the defence. When they clash at the Fifth Court one aspect of proceedings is particularly noteworthy. During a series of exchanges Mǫrðr perjures himself by swearing that the witnesses he has produced are legitimate when, in fact, this is not only untrue but so blatantly untrue as to be apparent to everyone present. Here is an example of 'bad' lying: artless, self-serving and ultimately unsuccessful. Referring back to Grettir's skilful conduct in deceiving the *berserkir*, we may suspect it is all the more contemptible because of the setting: Mǫrðr has sworn oaths before the court and is dishonoured in the breach of them, whereas Grettir's deceptions were all passive, with the *berserkir* vulnerable to the charge of having practised a deception on themselves. The key point, however, is that it is not the act of lying *per se* for which Mǫrðr is condemned, but the intention behind it, the context in which it takes place, and the singular lack of success for its author.

To illustrate this further, we may turn to an earlier episode in the saga during which Gunnarr (in the deceptive guise of Kaupa-Héðinn) wins the right to prosecute the case against Hrútr by speaking a summons under his breath. This episode is the central concern of the much maligned Chapter 22 which Heusler famously referred to as 'das Monstrum,' since he felt it jarred stylistically with the rest of the saga.[67] Thematically, however, its exploration of disguise is entirely in keeping with the saga's broader preoccupations. In this case, Gunnarr's use of the legally correct form of words is found to be binding, despite the fact that Hrútr was unaware they had even been spoken. Ostensibly, Gunnarr's conduct should arouse in us a similar sense of ire as Mǫrðr's during the trial: not only has he concealed his true identity from Hrútr, thereby lulling him into a false sense of security, but he has also misrepresented his intentions in order to trick him into liability in a legal case. As William Miller puts it, 'Njal

[67] Andreas Heusler, '*Einleitung.' Die Geschichte vom weisen Njal* (Jena, 1922), pp.14-15.

did not play fair beating Hrut; he took advantage of his hospitality, of his trying to have an entertaining evening with a stranger he took in, who is a stranger only under false pretences.'[68] Once again, however, a close examination of the text offers us a more favourable interpretation of Gunnarr's conduct. The exchange between Gunnarr and Hrútr is anticipated by Njáll as follows:

> "Stefn þú nú þá," skalt þú segja, "en ek mun í annat sinn." Þá mun Hrútr stefna, ok skalt þú hyggja at því vandliga, hver atkvæði hann hefir. Þá mun Hrútr mæla, at þú skylir stefna; þú skalt þá stefna, ok skal stefna rangt, svá at eigi sé meir en annat hvert orð rétt. Þá mun Hrútr hlæja, ok mun hann þá ekki gruna þik, en mæla þó, at fátt sé rétt í; þú skalt kenna fǫrunautum þínum, at þeir hafi glapit þik. Þá skalt þú biðja Hrút, at hann mæli fyrir þér, ok biðja, at hann leyfi, at þú mælir eptir; hann mun þat leyfa þér ok stefna sjálfr málinu; þú skalt þegar stefna eptir ok mæla þá rétt ok spyrja þá Hrút, hvárt rétt sé stefnt. Hann mun svara, at þat megi eigi ónýta; þá skalt þú mæla lágt, svá at fǫrunautar þínir heyri: "Stefni ek handseldri sǫk Unnar Marðardóttur."[69]

> 'Recite the summons,' you should say, 'and I will repeat it after you.' Hrútr will then recite the summons – pay careful attention to every bit of his wording. Then he will ask you to repeat the summons; do so, but do it so badly that no more than every second word is correct. Hrútr will laugh and have no suspicions, and he will say that not much was correct in your summons. Blame your companions and say that they distracted you. Then ask Hrútr to recite it again and to let you recite it after him. He will grant this and recite the summons himself. Recite it after him and say it correctly, then ask Hrútr if the summoning was correct. He will say that no one could fault it. Then say softly, but so that your companions can hear, 'I hereby make this summons in the suit turned over to me by Unnr the daughter of Mǫrðr [Gígja].'

Setting aside Njáll's extraordinary clairvoyance in describing the precise ebb and flow of this conversation, we may see here shades of the same technique used by Grettir to give the brothers Þórir and Ǫgmundr just enough rope with which to hang themselves. The deception is cunningly conceived, audacious in its complexity and reliance on several moving parts and – crucially – designed to play on its subject's failings as a paragon of heroic virtues. Read one way this trick, like Mǫrðr Valgarðsson's act of perjury, reflects negatively on those who conceive and enact it, since by doing so they open themselves to the charge of dishonourable conduct; but read another, this is a reductive and inaccurate assessment of the 'honour' concept. Throughout the saga both Njáll and Mǫrðr are repeatedly praised for their skill in law which relies on their verbal dexterity, and a trick such as this one is simply an extension

[68] Miller (2014), p.71.
[69] *Njáls saga*, p.62.

of that skill. Whereas perjury – the denial of fact; the breaking of an oath – deserves censure, here Hrútr is at least as culpable for incompetence as Gunnarr is for subterfuge; and in cases such as these the well constructed untruth is presented as simply another weapon in the hero's arsenal, and not a fatally undermining flaw.

In view of these examples we may suggest two criteria which distinguish a creditable lie from an affront to the honour code as presented in the sagas, and these are that it must succeed, and that it must be audacious. The subject of deception is an intricate and often subtextual theme in many sagas, and it would be precipitous to argue that these criteria are equally applicable to every text and every redaction in the genre. Nevertheless, close scrutiny of such examples as these may incline us to believe that our habit of assessing saga heroes in terms of their honourable credentials could only be improved by acknowledging that the well-crafted lie can, in some circumstances, be as heroic and impressive a feat as any martial or judicial success. Crafty liars who are otherwise perceived as weak, such as Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, are not redeemed by their cunning, but they do deserve some credit for it. Similarly, figures like Grettir and Gunnarr are enhanced and not reduced in our imagination by their audacious ability to cloud the perceptions of other characters and so achieve their plans by subterfuge.

The necessity of scepticism when dealing with an unknown interlocutor is also the subject of comment in several sagas, and failure to observe this convention is frequently the cause of misadventure. In several cases, the onus to discover the truth appears to rest on the party who is deceived, more than the onus to be strictly truthful appears to concern the deceiver. The criteria by which the truth of a statement might be ascertained are rarely stated directly, but we do receive some insight into this question from an episode in *Heiðarvíga saga* in which Þorgísl Arason exhibits what appears to be characteristic modesty (arguably a form of deception, though not one which appears overtly on Taylor's list) by denying that he has any special skill in pronouncing legal formulae. Undeterred, Snorri goði insists that

Þorgísl's reputation as a skilled lawman is not in dispute, commenting, 'mikit mun til haft, er einmælt er um' ('there must be much in that, since all men agree.')[70] Here we see the paramount importance of public consensus writ large. A single report of Þorgísl's qualities might warrant scepticism, but acclaim from multiple sources makes the tale more plausible. Such comments as this might easily be disregarded were it not for the fact that there is no other clear reason for the saga authors to include them so frequently aside from their metatextual implications. The same may be said of comments made concerning the veracity of certain reports: they are typically brief and rarely is it clear what narrative function they serve except as a kind of indirect authentication for the version of events recounted in the saga itself. Thus, for example, the author of *Gull-Þóris saga* interrupts the progress of his narrative in the closing moments to address reports that Guðmundr Þórisson had died in a battle one summer, summarily dismissing these as a lie.[71] This statement is abrupt and without context, encouraging us to suppose that at one time the saga author was keen to dispel a genuine rumour. Its persistence in the text once again attests to the prevailing concern that truth could easily be lost in the oral *milieu*, and that proactive deception was by no means the only cause of this. As much as the saga authors preached scepticism in response to storytellers, they were also intent on ensuring that their own works would pass this test.

One final aspect of deception with which the sagas are notably preoccupied is the theme of disguise as a form of identity concealment (number 10 on Taylor's list), which recalls our survey of the eddic corpus in Chapter 1. We have already noted the episode in *Njáls saga* in which Gunnarr presents himself in the likeness of Kaupa-Héðinn so as to enact a ploy as ingenious as it is improbable. Yet, remarkably, the sagas are strewn with examples of still less plausible disguises which again raise the question of deception and, in particular, the issue of who is at fault: the party who adopts a disguise or the insufficiently sceptical party who fails to see through it. Like Gunnarr, the titular hero of *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*

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[70] Sigurðr Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Heiðarvíga saga*, ÍF III (Reykjavík, 1938), p.312.

[71] *Gull-Þóris saga*, published under its other common name: Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vlihjálmsson, eds, *Þorskfirðinga saga*, ÍF XIII (Reykjavík, 1991), p.226.

assumes the guise of a beggar – a disguise which he enhances by colouring his eyelids black.[72] Þorleifr jarlsskáld makes an even greater effort to achieve a similar effect, as we learn from *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, which describes his adoption of a goat's beard and two spiked crutches.[73] Moreover, a disguise need not be visual to have the intended deceptive effect. In a memorable episode from *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, Þórólfr starri almost succeeds in his plan to assassinate Refr by imitating the voice of one of his servants to gain access to him in the night. Although their exchange ultimately goes badly for Þórólfr, this verbal ability, no less than any physical disguise or set of attributes, would be a notable asset to a storyteller working to ensure that the numerous characters of the sagas – often identified by very similar names – should remain distinct from one another in a recital. Strictly speaking, Þórólfr's successful attempt to disguise his voice could not be called a lie, although it is deceptive, and indeed he is commended by the saga for his skill as a mimic. By contrast, when he identifies himself as the shepherd his dishonourable conduct is plain to the reader, and his subsequent demise does not surprise us.

There is an important distinction to be drawn in both the sagas and the eddic poems between an artful deception and an explicit lie, which brings dishonour to whoever utters it. This difference, easily dismissed as too subtle to concern the casual reader, is in fact central to an appreciation of the social and artistic constraints of which Old Norse authors were perpetually conscious. As Paul Bibire writes,

> Old Icelandic had no term which can be translated as 'fiction', though it has words translated as 'true' (*sannr* 'true, trustworthy, trusty'), and 'lie' (*lygi* 'deliberate falsehood'). Of these the second seems uncontroversial; the first, *sannr*, certainly includes factual accuracy, but is a wider word embracing notions of trust and trustworthiness as well. A narrative that is described as *sannr* must certainly be literally true, but it is also likely to be worthy of trust in other ways as well, most obviously perhaps exemplary.[74]

Saga authors, as we have seen, were expected both to show fidelity to traditional narratives

[72] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Hallfreðar saga*, ÍF VIII (Reykjavík, 1939), p.164. This description is present only in the redactions of the saga associated with *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and does not appear in Mǫðruvallabók, AM 132 fol.

[73] *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, p.228.

[74] Bibire (2007), pp.9-10.

and to frame their work in an original way, so as to edify new generations of readers and receivers. Preoccupied as they were by this dual purpose, it is unsurprising that the nature of honesty and deception is frequently the subject of discussion and exemplification in their work. Perhaps the most famous instance of performative deception (and subsequent metamorphosis) in the sagas occurs in *Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts ok Gunnars helmings* when the titular Gunnarr takes on the likeness of the god Freyr.[75] Somewhat improbably he is a success in the role, touring Sweden in this guise and finding favour with all whom he visits. Although often read as a light vignette or extraneous holdover from an older traditional narrative, this incident in fact provides one of the clearest examples in Old Norse literature of a character's identity being wholly subject to his reception among audiences. That the primacy of public opinion should be so prominently satirised in this case reflects the argument made throughout this study that the storyteller receives his license to entertain from his public, and forfeits his individual identity when performing for them, merging his own persona with that of the narrative itself and presenting incidents and characters for the scrutiny and judgement of others. This applies equally to the performers of eddic poetry and of sagas, and need not have been a conscious act, nor one expressly intended to deceive an audience into mistaking the storyteller's own agency in the artistic process in order to be effective. On the contrary, it may simply reflect the high level of sensitivity to metatextual and intertextual implications which is a running theme in these stories. By observing the keen and careful distinctions which characters in the sagas and poems draw between lies, deceptions and fictions, however, we move one step closer to an appreciation of the fine and tempered balance in which authors, audiences and performers held one another. In this sense, the Old Norse storyteller was bound up with his public in a policy of mutually assured destruction: so long as he maintained the fiction of his impartiality, and defended it against all challenges, the responsibility for establishing the truth and meaning of a story remained theirs alone.

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[75] This episode survives in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and, in a redacted form, in the Vatnshyrna manuscript of *Víga-Glúms saga*.

In one sense, then, the storyteller's role resembled that of a witness testifying about true events, as he understood them from his perspective. He appears impartial because he positions himself at a remove from the action, albeit sufficiently close to relate in some detail what he understands to have taken place. Returning once more to the metatextual dimension of his endeavour, it is worth considering whether those characters who fulfil a similar role in the sagas – that is, those who witness events and are later called on to testify concerning them – are presented in such a way as to shed further light on the storyteller's own practice, as it was understood by the saga authors. It is to these intra-textual witnesses that we now turn.

iv. Called to Bear Witness : The Contradictory Dual Nature of the Saga-Teller

The role of witnesses to significant events in the sagas is important for two reasons: first, because they are so numerous and so frequently invoked by the narrative voice that there must be some authorial rationale for their frequent recurrence; and second, because the self-consciously objective style of saga prose casts readers of the sagas in a similar role. This focus on the agency of witnesses is, perhaps, unsurprising in the context of a literary genre so indebted to and concerned with the law. Hermann Pálsson has suggested that scenes from the sagas involving court cases may have been enacted, in some form, at Thing meetings; if so, the immediate juxtaposition of contemporary cases with the semi-fictionalised repeat performances of those which dated back centuries would certainly have allowed for some rich intertextual mischief-making on the part of both actors and advocates (and there may well have been considerable overlap between the two vocations, as proposed by Judy Quinn).[76] While attractive, the evidence for such performances having actually taken place is not conclusive, but it is certainly true to say that the sagas were not composed in isolation from contemporary society, and their detailed – at times pedantic – focus on law and legal process must to some extent have reflected contemporary preoccupations. We are presented in the

[76] Hermann Pálsson (1999), p.117; Quinn (2000), pp.31-2.

sagas with an ostensibly unmediated account of events and charged with interpreting it. Thus, just as today a barrister might ask a witness to report what she or he observed of a person's physiological responses or sartorial choices, but may not lead them to infer anything from this, so the right to make such inferences is transferred in this case from saga author to saga witness. Such a technique serves to turn the receiver's attention from the transmitter to the text, and so evaluate the evidence rather than the intermediary who is providing it. In this way the saga author performs the dexterous feat of allowing himself space for *amplificatio* without drawing undue attention to himself in the process.

In his examination of the importance of explicitly attested eyewitnesses in the Old English poetic corpus, Richard Marsden poses the question, ‘Can there in fact be a more abject fate for a proud nation, more thorough annihilation, than the loss of the story of their heroes?’[77] A similar preoccupation can be detected in the *Íslendingasǫgur*, along perhaps with an awareness that the role of the storyteller in sustaining these institutional memories is so essential that it guarantees him the right to exercise some artistic licence in how he passes on his knowledge. A prime example of an intra-textual eyewitness who serves in some way to provide a commentary on the experience of saga reception appears in Chapter 69 of *Grettis saga*. Here we are re-introduced to figure of Illugi Ásmundarson, Grettir's younger brother, who has hitherto played only a very minor role in the story. When he first entered it, some thirty-two chapters earlier, the saga author characterised him as ‘manna efniligastr’ (‘the most promising of men’)[78] and, in stark contrast to his famous brother, as ‘gæfr ok forsjáll’ (‘quiet and prudent’),[79] but for much of the story his promise remains unexplored and unfulfilled. In volunteering to accompany his brother to Drangey on what proves to be his final journey, Illugi gives his reason as fraternal loyalty, but adds the following illuminating remark: ‘...ok gørr veit ek, hvat um þik líðr, ef ek fylgi þér’ (‘…and I will know more of what happens to

[77] Richard Marsden, ‘The death of the messenger: the “spelboda” in the Old English *Exodus*’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 77 (1995), 163.
[78] *Grettis saga*, p.125.
[79] *Grettis saga*, p.125.

you if I accompany you.')[80] At a stroke he establishes himself as a key eyewitness to the events which will dominate the penultimate part of the saga, creating the impression that his testimony will play a role in informing the perspective of the saga-teller. Given this saga's widely recognised, albeit fraught, relationship with the Old English *Beowulf*, it is tempting when we read these words to see Illugi as a kind of Wiglaf figure, a proxy for the storyteller bringing us closer to the action of the saga and implicitly establishing the veracity of the narrative which follows.[81] Wiglaf's is among the 'authenticating voices' in the poem which Stanley Greenfield describes as fundamentally important to understanding the poet's presentational technique and the reason for his persistent focus on poets and storytellers throughout.[82] This parallel is especially important since, apart from the 'promising' and 'prudent' Illugi, the only other witness to Grettir's three winters on Drangey is the wholly unreliable vagrant Þorbjǫrn, whom Grettir nicknames Glaumr, perhaps seeking to distance him from the many other characters who share his name throughout the saga – ironic, given that the replacement name he chooses suggests a very specific and all the more ominous counterpart – an undead *draugr* whom Grettir vanquished at considerable personal cost. A somewhat sudden and implausible addition to this outlaw troop, we learn that Glaumr 'skrumaði mikit' ('chattered a lot')[83] and is invited to accompany the brothers simply because Grettir finds him amusing. As if to drive home the idea that Glaumr is not a persuasive or plausible informant, the saga author concludes this description by calling him a 'gárungr' (buffoon), and we later hear several accounts of his cowardice, rendering him even more unlike Illugi.

Thus far it would appear that the saga is inviting us to witness the events concerning Grettir's exile on Drangey through the prism of Illugi's eyes, whose credentials as an authoritative witness are established in stark contrast to our only other possible source of

[80] *Grettis saga*, p.223.
[81] See R. W. Chambers, 'Beowulf's Fight with Grendel, and its Scandinavian Parallels', *English Studies* 11 (1929), 81-100.
[82] S. B. Greenfield, 'The Authenticating Voice in *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976), 51-62.
[83] *Grettis saga*, p.224.

information. Since the period in question spans three years it is clear that any implicit claim to historicity in the saga must be supported by some evidence of precisely the sort which Illugi might be relied on to provide. In fact, however, neither he nor Glaumr survives long enough to recount any of this. Illugi is executed the morning after Grettir's death, and Glaumr is cut down by Þorbjǫrn ǫngull's party before he reaches Ósland. Subsequently, doubt is also cast on the accuracy of Þorbjǫrn's version of events, with the saga author recounting how,

> Ǫngull fór til Nóregs ok lét enn mikit um sik; þóttisk hann mikit þrekvirki unnit hafa í drápi Grettis. Virðu ok margir svá þeir, sem ókunnigt var, hversu þat hafði til borit, en margir vissu, hversu frægr maðr Grettir hafði verit.[84]
>
> [Þorbjǫrn] ǫngull travelled to Norway and made much of himself; he thought he had accomplished a great deed by killing Grettir. Many people valued it, who were unaware of how it had been accomplished, because Grettir had been such a famous man.

It is Þorbjǫrn's boasting which leads Þorsteinn drómundr to him and sets the scene for Grettir to be avenged. When Þorsteinn is taken into custody, however, having killed his adversary in a conspicuously public way, we learn that his story could not be believed – and clemency was therefore out of the question, because – 'at engi var sá þar, er kynni nǫkkut um at bera með Þorsteini' ('there was no one there who could bear witness with Þorsteinn.')[85] And thus the saga-teller once more directs our attention to the importance which he continues to attribute to witnesses, without whom corroboration and resolution are said to be impossible.

Having been thus directed to the necessity for scepticism and the importance of tracing all testimony back to eyewitnesses, the reader or auditor of the saga now encounters a problem. On the one hand, it is tempting to simply accept the storyteller's omniscience concerning the events on Drangey as a narrative convention similar to that found in other literary genres like the novel or, indeed, like eddic verse. On the other, the saga's author constantly asserts the importance of witnesses when they do feature in the story, and seems reticent to let the theme of characters informing for or against each other drop. Are we as readers or auditors, therefore, entitled to let his hearsay testimony go unchallenged? Without

[84] *Grettis saga*, p.270.
[85] *Grettis saga*, p.273.

naming witnesses of our own, we are hard pressed to improve on it, and so the saga account must stand, although the author is clearly conscious throughout of such ironies as this, which arise explicitly whenever a key event goes apparently unobserved.

When Grettir commits his first killing in Chapter 16 he witnesses against himself, albeit obliquely, in a curious stanza which appears to mimic the detached perspective of the saga author:

> Hygg ek, at hljóp til Skeggja
> hamartroll með fǫr rammri,
> blóð vas á gunnar Gríði
> gróǫ̇r, fyr stundu áðan;
> sú gein of haus hǫ́num
> harðmynnt ok lítt sparði,
> vask hjá viðreign þeira,
> vígtenn ok klaus enni.[86]
>
> It seems to me that there leapt at Skeggi
> a troll-like being, it came with intent,
> the warlike one was eager for blood
> to increase, just a moment ago;
> the grin on her head,
> hard mouthed, little shrank,
> sank in their conflict,
> teeth clove his forehead.

Killings such as this must be declared, and in this stanza Grettir discharges his obligation. His choice to do so obliquely is a striking one, however. Does he really expect that his companions will not infer his guilt? If a deception is intended, the intention is short-lived, for when challenged by Þorkell he gives a full account of what transpired, seemingly without hesitation: 'Þorkell þagnaði ok mælti síðan: "Ǫnnur efni munu í vera, ok mun Grettir hafa drepit hann; eða hvat bar til?" Grettir segir þá allan áskilnað þeira' ('Þorkell reflected and then said: "Something else has taken place, seemingly Grettir has killed him; so what did happen?" Grettir then tells all that had passed between them.')[87] Why the two approaches in such a short space of time? On a technical level we might suspect that the saga author had access to this stanza and felt the need to incorporate it – but if so, why attribute it to Grettir, speaking self-

86 *Grettis saga*, p.47.
87 *Grettis saga*, p.47.

reflexively and in the third person? Why not to another, conveniently invented witness?

Kate Heslop has called verses like this one ‘a means of performing strategic versions of the self in situations where persuasion is paramount,’ and in this light we must entertain the possibility that Grettir is contriving to carefully shape his reputation, causing the men to think first of a monster and then – only on reflection – to associate that monster with the man capable also of such lyrical extemporisation.[88] Whether he hopes that this will mitigate their judgement of him we cannot know, since the saga provides no further insight into his thought process at this point. The key words, however, are surely ‘Hygg ek’ (‘It seems to me’). Possibly Grettir is not expecting to deceive his companions in fact, but is rather tempting them with an attractive alternative to accusing him which would allow everyone concerned to keep the peace without either Grettir dishonouring himself by lying or Þorkell and the others failing in their duty to a man for whom they were responsible – Þorkell calls Skeggi ‘fenginn til fylgðar við mik’ (‘given to my retinue’).[89] Such a motivation would fit comfortably with Grettir's other pronouncements in this chapter, notably when he intercepts Skeggi and demands to see his haversack with the words, ‘lát mik sjá, því at mart er ǫðru líkt.’[90] (‘let me see, since many a thing is like another.’) Grettir is not prepared to accept the other man's interpretation of the evidence before him (*viz* that it is his own bag he has found), but once Skeggi is dead there is no witness other than Grettir to his killing, so Grettir may believe it is not so difficult to mistake the true aggressor for a troll, and thus for everyone concerned to save face.

There is another detail to consider here, as Robert Cook points out.[91] Grettir was – at least on the evidence of the saga, coloured admittedly by the imperfect witness of its teller – not the aggressor in his lethal encounter with Skeggi. On the contrary, the retainer struck first

88 K. Heslop, ‘Contest and Conviviality. Scenes for the Performance of *Íslendingasaga lausavísur*’, Ph.D thesis, University of Sydney (2002), p.2. Cited in Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, (Cambridge, 2005), p.70.

89 *Grettis saga*, pp.47-8.

90 *Grettis saga*, p.46.

91 R. Cook, ‘Reading for Character in *Grettis saga*’, in John Tucker, ed., *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays* (New York, 1989), pp.226-40; Robert Cook, ‘The Reader in *Grettis saga*’, *SBVS* 21 (1982-85), 133-55.

and Grettir retaliated in self-defence. As such, an attempt – however half-hearted – at amelioration would make sense here. If the company could agree to accept Grettir's account of how the scenario 'seemed' to him then further animosity could be avoided: the story of the troll would have served to heal the rift between them which was otherwise inevitable.

This is a rare case in which there is no other witness to contradict Grettir (except, that is, the saga author), and so his story of a troll – though a preposterous half-truth – cannot be immediately contradicted without careful reflection on the part of Þorkell. Again it is instructive to compare the reception of this story to a legal case, wondering on whose side the burden or proof lies in the absence of a witness. Like Þórdís in Chapter 18 of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, puzzling over Gísli's incriminating verse confession, Þorkell realises the truth of Grettir's guilt, but Grettir places him in the uncomfortable position of having to accuse him outright – perhaps gambling on the possibility that Þorkell might prefer to err on the side of caution when faced with such an enigmatic opponent.

The issue of how news travels in Iceland and what role witnesses play in its transmission recurs throughout the saga. Chapter 57 begins by telling us that news of Þórir rauðskeggr's death at Grettir's hands has reached the ears of his long-time antagonist Þórir í Garði. We may find the idea that this intelligence is known to him improbable if we recall the previous chapter in which Þórir rauðskeggr is killed in secret, at night, during a storm, in an isolated hut on Arnarvatnsheiðr. Although Þórir í Garði did send him to kill Grettir, he has not heard from him for two winters, so how did news of his sudden death travel so far and so fast? Possibly the answer lies in an authorial remark made subsequently in Chapter 59: 'Hér fór, sem mælt er, at opt er í holti heyrandi nær' ('It has happened here, as in the old saying, that hearers are at hand in a wood.')[92] As the editor of the Íslenzk fornrit edition of *Grettis saga* notes, the word 'holt' is not otherwise recognised as meaning 'wood' in Icelandic, and this may suggest that the proverb was not originally native to Iceland.[93] If so, the fact that the saga

92 *Grettis saga*, p.189.
93 *Grettis saga*, p.189, n.5.

author was so taken with it as to appropriate and share it with us in his own voice speaks to its significance for him. The landscape of *Grettis saga* is peopled with hidden informants, and in many ways this frees the author from the need either to invent or cite specific witnesses. Just because the saga makes no explicit mention of such persons, and the conditions for witnessing an event are inauspicious, this does not allow us to be certain beyond doubt that no witness was present – only that we, from our own limited vantage point, did not notice one. Thus, again, the metatextual sophistication of the saga is apparent: the storyteller and audience alike are privileged only to a partial account of what happened, made all the more plausible by the technique of eliding our experience with that of eyewitnesses within the text.

Our perspective as readers or auditors of saga literature gives us only a partial, clouded view of the circumstances which surrounded any event depicted therein, and by rigorously following this stylistic convention of treating us as witnesses rather than telepathic participants the saga-teller keeps us dependent on him, providing just a sufficiently strong sense of his authenticity to command our trust. This is an effective rhetorical technique, enhanced rather than reduced in some sagas by the inclusion of occasional admissions that a particular detail is unknown to this storyteller. *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa* incorporates such an admission into the description of Bjǫrn's final battle:

> Þá þreif Bjǫrn sporð skjaldarins hinni hendinni ok rak í hǫfuð Þórði, svá at hann fekk þegar bana; en sumir menn segja, at hann legði hann með sǫxunum til bana. Kolli sótti Bjǫrn fast, nær í mesta lagi einna manna í sífellu, þótt vér kunnim eigi at greina, hvert sárafar hann veitti honum.[94]

> Then Bjǫrn grasped the shield's point with his other hand and drove it into Þórðr's head, so he was slain at once; but some men say that he stabbed him to death with the mane-shears. Kolli fought Bjǫrn fiercely, the most unstintingly of all the men, though we cannot describe every injury he caused to him.

By conceding his uncertainty on these specific points, the storyteller essentially asserts his confidence in all other aspects of his tale, causing it to appear studiously careful about disseminating only the truth. Not only that, but he captures something of the intense heat of

[94] Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, eds, *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, ÍF III (Reykjavík, 1938), p.201.

battle during which such details are often difficult to determine, thus enhancing our experience of witnessing the events of the saga from a safe remove.

Witnesses who become the focus of a saga are often used to tempt an audience into inferring misconduct without accusing another character outright. William Ian Miller makes the case that Hrappr in *Njáls saga* was invented by the saga author to further discredit Hallgerðr,[95] but the effect is a subtle one, as he describes it:

> The narrator does not tell us for a fact that Hrapp and Hallgerd are lovers, but he is not about to suppress the local gossip that gives her another slap in the face. He fully had the power to have her and Hrapp unambiguously be lovers. But since he was not really inside the farmhouse himself and it was quite dark, he remains agnostic and thus much nastier, insinuation being more salacious than hard truth.[96]

A similar effect is achieved in *Grettis saga* during the protagonist's sea voyage aboard Hafliði's ship in Chapter 17. The saga tells us, 'Stýrimannskona sú in unga var því jafnan vǫn, at sauma at hǫndum Gretti, ok hǫfðu skipverjar þat mjǫk í fleymingi við hann' ('The captain's young wife was always at hand to sew up Grettir's sleeves, and the crew had much to say about that').[97] Typically, we are not told what they said, but the insinuation is clear and, in contrast to an explicit accusation, impossible to dispute. The authenticating reference to the crew diverts our attention from the fact that the decision to include this detail – even if it rightly belonged to one or several oral traditions about Grettir – rests squarely with the saga-teller. He almost goes so far as to admit to this level of manipulative involvement when describing Grettir's childhood, telling us: 'Mǫrg bernskubrǫgð gerði Grettir, þau sem eigi eru í sǫgu sett' ('Grettir played many childish pranks which are not in this saga').[98] This indicates that some form of editorial selection has taken place, but we must note how careful he is even here to divest himself of agency in favour of the saga: it is the story which tells itself, he seems to say, and we who witness and interpret it. This is not 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.' Rather, it is an artistically and carefully constructed narrative – or, at

95 The rumour that they are having an affair occurs in *Njáls saga*, p.220.
96 Miller (2014), p.155.
97 *Grettis saga*, pp.53-4.
98 *Grettis saga*, p.42.

the very least, is taking pains to appear so. It is of course possible that the author only knew the stories he relates – or, indeed, invents – and included this reference to his art of selection to imply a greater store of traditional wisdom than he actually possessed (a form of *occupatio*), but the point is that we can never know, and that our perspective on events remains circumscribed, and dependent on the storyteller.

It is instructive to contrast this authorial statement with Grettir's admission of guilt when questioned about the death of Skeggi. We recall that he described 'allan áskilnað þeira' ('all that had passed between them'), and would thus appear to be a less partial witness than the saga author himself, who picks and chooses his material, by his own admission, being constrained by the desire to sustain an engaging and coherent narrative. Robert Cook and Kathryn Hume have taken great pains to account for the structural integrity of *Grettis saga* as it survives for us, and have to a considerable extent overcome the previously widespread view that some incidents – not least the concluding *Spésarþáttr*[99] – are A-class manuscript interpolations not germane to the whole.[100] In light of their work, and the author's comment on selectivity, we may justifiably approach each seemingly incidental detail in the saga with the expectation that it was probably incorporated more as a consequence of authorial design than traditional necessity. The author is hardly an unbiased witness to the life of Grettir, and for this reason he is forced to cite the testimony of others to bolster his own authority in places – although this effect is largely not apparent upon a cursory reading.

Eyewitnesses are, of course, notoriously unreliable in any objective sense, yet often uncritically trusted by jurors in our modern courts – as they often appear to have been in medieval Iceland. The psychologist Michael W. Eysenck tells us:

> Eyewitness memories are fragile and can easily be distorted by post-event information (e.g. misleading questions) producing retroactive interference. Eyewitness memories can also be distorted by pre-event information (proactive interference). An eyewitness's confidence is often a poor predictor of the accuracy of his/her memory for an event.[101]

[99] *Grettis saga*, pp.270-89.

[100] See Cook (1989); K. Hume, 'The Thematic Design of *Grettis saga*', *JEGP* 73:4 (1974), 469-86.

[101] In A. Baddeley, M. W. Eysenck and M. C. Anderson, *Memory* (Hove, 2009), p.341.

To this caution we may add trial attorney Clive Stafford Smith's remark that, whereas witnesses speaking truthfully are inclined to alter, confuse, complicate or misremember their stories, those with something to gain by lying are ostensibly the more persuasive: ‘Rarely... do biased or mendacious “professional” witnesses crumble in the face of an aggressive lawyer, throwing up their arms and confessing their sins. It is difficult to move a professional liar.’[102] Icelandic saga authors may have composed their narratives without the benefit of modern psychological understanding, but texts like *Grettis saga* are nonetheless acutely attuned to these problems, and throw considerable doubt on the testimony of such people even as they invoke them in place of the author to authenticate the account being given. Take the episode in Chapter 36 in which two eyewitnesses to the fight between Grettir and Kormákr, earlier described in Chapter 30, give diverging accounts of the event. The dichotomy between their stories is enhanced by the convenient fact of their both being named Þorbjǫrn, making them prone to be mistaken for one another by an audience listening to the saga: the two accounts become blurred, and difficult to follow. Just as it is easy to confuse one Þorbjǫrn for the other, so truth can easily be misconstrued as falsehood, and *vice versa* – a constant preoccupation for saga authors.[103] Indeed, there appears to be a surfeit of Þorbjǫrns in this particular saga,[104] allowing for some intricate parallels to be drawn, but threatening also to confuse our interpretation of the events we are invited to witness. Further confusion might arise in an oral performance of the saga between whether the witness statement originates with the performer or an unseen author, making the testimony difficult to critique. In this case, Þorbjǫrn øxnamegin is, at this point, a supporter of Grettir, describing his actions in the fight against Kormákr as honourable. In contrast, Þorbjǫrn ferðalangr gives his own narrative account of what transpired:

‘Þar var bæði,’ sagði hann, ‘at ek sá hann Gretti ekki til frægðar vinna, enda hygg ek,

[102] Clive Stafford Smith, *Injustice: Life and Death in the Courtrooms of America* (London, 2012), p.67.
[103] See pp.78-86 of this study.
[104] See p.159 of this study for reference to another Þorbjǫrn whom Grettis nicknames, perhaps as part of a conscious effort on the saga author's part to preserve clarity.

> at honum skyti skelk í bringu, er vér kómum at, ok allfúss var hann at skilja, ok ekki sá ek hann til hefnda leita, er húskarl Atla var drepinn, ok því ætla ek aldri hug í honum, ef hann hefir eigi nógan liðsafla.'[105]
>
> 'It was both,' he said, 'that I saw Grettir do no renowned work, as it seemed to me, terror shot him in his heart, when we came at him, and he was very eager to part, and I did not see him seek vengeance when Atli's house-karl was slain, thus it seemed to me there is no heart in him if he has not a sufficient gathering of troops [to support him].'

It is instructive to contrast this story with the saga-teller's own version given in Chapter 30. From his elevated perspective he causes us to witness Grettir placing himself at the head of his company (this being privileged information which Þorbjǫrn ferðalangr does not possess, since he came later to the fray), but then proceeds to tell us that by the time the Þorbjǫrns arrived battle had been joined and Grettir 'ruddisk um fast' ('was making great havoc'),[106] giving us the impression of a confounding spectacle for the onlookers. We hear from the saga-teller about the death of Atli's servant at the hands of Gunnarr, but nothing specific about Grettir's reaction beyond a general displeasure when the battle lines are parted.

Knowing what we do of Grettir's character (and the mention earlier in the same chapter of the boulder *Grettishaf* serves to reinforce our impression of his exceptional strength), we are inclined to doubt Þorbjǫrn ferðalangr's version of events when the subject comes up again in Chapter 36, but as witnesses ourselves to their act of witnessing the battle, we have to concede that – on the evidence available to us – neither Þorbjǫrn was an impartial witness, and both took greater liberties with the evidence of their eyes than was strictly legitimate. After we witness the battle, the saga author tells us that, 'Þorbjǫrn ferðalangr gerði at þessu mikit kalls' ('Þorbjǫrn ferðalangr made sarcastic remarks about this').[107] What, we may ask, was Þorbjǫrn øxnamegin saying all this time? The saga avoids the question, yet relations between the two sides worsen, so why include the detail except to seed in our heretofore unbiased minds a prejudice against the witness whose account is out of step with the saga author's agenda? This is the fine line the saga-teller walks between advocate and

[105] *Grettis saga*, p.124.
[106] *Grettis saga*, p.103.
[107] *Grettis saga*, p.104.

witness; between spinning a yarn and presenting it entirely as the work of others or – still less impeachable – as an historical truth.

Having an agenda as a saga-teller causes problems; yet manifestly all sagas are built around them, since they are intricately plotted, frequently dramatic and, as this text has explicitly admitted, constitute only selective versions of events. The burden of authority appears to be spread in the text between a series of witnesses, creating a tapestry of interwoven and mutually sustaining accounts; yet all are framed and amplified by the storyteller; the witness upon whose testimony we ultimately rely. If we doubt that he was conflicted about this burden of responsibility, it is worth recalling that the entire narrative of this saga turns on a single hearsay account, without which Grettir's story would have followed an entirely different course. The episode in question is, of course, the sentencing of the saga's protagonist to full outlawry described in Chapter 46. In issuing a temporary stay of execution, Skapti lǫgsǫgumaðr explains his reasoning as follows: 'Víst er þetta illt verk, ef svá er, sem þetta er sagt; en jafnan er hálfsǫgð saga, ef einn segir, því at fleiri eru þess fúsari, at fœra þangat, sem eigi berr betr, ef tvennt er til' ('Surely this is foul work, if it was as has been said; but only half a story is ever told, if only one speaks, since most people are ready to believe the worst if two versions are available.')[108] Although Skapti is ultimately unsuccessful in achieving a reprieve for Grettir, his words nonetheless come at the crux of the saga, and their importance to the storyteller should not be overlooked. For those of a numerological inclination, it may appear significant that this declaration comes very near the mid-point of the saga's ninety-three chapters; for others, it is sufficient to note that it marks a change in the narrative's trajectory from charting Grettir's rise to witnessing his fall. There are no witnesses at the court to speak in Grettir's defence, and Grettir himself is not present. As such, the prudent Lawspeaker is ultimately overpowered by the belligerent (at least, according to the saga-teller) Þórir Skeggjason, and a partial verdict is returned.

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[108] *Grettis saga*, p.146.

The role of the reader or auditor in responding to a saga is to witness the story and pass judgement upon it. The actors with whom it is concerned, though constantly witnessing one another's deeds, are too close to the *holt* to see the trees. Of the storyteller, both statements are true: he is the dominant figure who shapes and spins the narrative, choosing what to include, what to omit, where to lay emphasis, whom to quote and how to order his material. Yet he is also the subordinate party, invested in his work and subject to the judgement of his audience. His solution to this *impasse* is a sleight of hand: posing as a witness being deposed by the audience, and playing on the very prejudices and insecurities in us which allow us to feel we can look through him to the saga and engage with it objectively. In interpreting the saga, the audience's duty is to cross-examine him thoroughly and practise the very scepticism he advocates. The role of saga reader or auditor, no less than that of the victim of an attempted deception, cannot be a merely passive one.

v. Summary

Throughout this chapter we have seen how the themes of deception, appropriation, representation and the testimony of others recur throughout the *Íslendingasǫgur*. We have emphasised the necessity incumbent on readers or auditors of the sagas to actively engage with the persona of the storyteller, constantly examining his statements for their metatextual significance. We have also considered the role of intermediaries common to both the eddic and saga tradition, and identified these proxy figures as proxies also for the storyteller on a number of occasions, allowing poets and saga authors to comment obliquely on their own craft. While conceding that *Grettis saga* may be among the most self-consciously literary works in the genre, we have nonetheless employed it as a convenient prism through which traits common to a number of texts have been explored. Both the sagas and the eddas are explicitly concerned with disguise and deception, and with the fine line between employing these tools in the service of a creditable cause and bringing dishonour on oneself by utilising

them ineptly or for reprehensible purposes. It is increasingly clear that the closer the storyteller strays towards transgressing the social norms, the more scope he affords himself to innovate and entertain. Set against that, the necessity of operating within an established tradition is a powerful tempering agent, and the tension between these two imperatives underlies much of the most creative work in both the poetry and prose literatures.

Chapter Four: TIDES OF TIME : THE STORYTELLER AS CHRONICLER

'The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.'
- T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

i. Introduction

Having now examined how eyewitnesses and those claiming personal proximity to events are presented in the sagas, this chapter will go on to explore the ways in which the storytellers depicted in Old Norse literature structure their work to engage with the past and future, recognising that in the majority of cases such figures are the inheritors of traditional narratives rather than their point of origin. It begins with a discussion of memory, principally as described in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*, arguing that there is a self-referential dimension to these descriptions that betrays a collective anxiety among authors about the instability of memorially founded oral traditions which continued to exert a strong cultural influence during the age of literacy. The chapter goes on to examine the thematic and linguistic links between figures associated with prophecy and those who practise the storytelling arts, focusing particularly on the characterisation of Grípir in *Grípisspá* and Gestr Oddleifsson in *Laxdœla saga*. It concludes with a comparison between these two strands of self-reflexive writing and presents the case for a highly metatextually conscious mentality underpinning major literary works recorded in Iceland during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

ii. Memory and Oral Culture in Medieval Iceland

The *Poetic Edda* presents its reader with a physical manifestation of memory in the form of Óðinn's raven Muninn. *Grímnismál* st.20 describes the chief god as constantly fearful of being abandoned by his memory in lines which, Pernille Hermann suggests, indicate a particular sensitivity towards the unpredictable nature of this faculty:[1]

[1] Hermann (2014), p.17.

Huginn ok Muninn
fljúga hverjan dag
jǫrmungrund yfir;
óumk ek of Hugin
at hann aptr né komit,
þó sjámk meirr um Munin.

Huginn and Muninn
fly every day
over the wide earth;
I fear for Huginn
that he will not return,
but I dread more for Muninn.

The implication would appear to be that memory has its own agency, and that while it may be expected to return, that expectation is accompanied by anxiety, since memory is essentially inhuman and unknowable. The verb 'fljúga' uses the active voice, and the ravens' names appear in the nominative case, emphasising their self-governing nature, not being subject to Óðinn's control. There is no sense of their being sent on an errand – rather, they are presented as flying under their own direction, leaving Óðinn in a state of uncertainty and unknowing – an apt description of someone who has lost, however temporarily, his mind and memory.

The fact that *Grímnismál* st.20 explicitly privileges memory is also important to note, since it implies either that Óðinn values it more highly than 'Huginn' (the mind working in the present), or that he is more certain of the bird which represents his present awareness returning to him, whereas the bird that represents his grasp on the past is less readily to be trusted. The metaphor of memory taking flight may also lie behind the allusive image of the 'Óminnishegri' ('heron of forgetfulness') of *Hávamál* st.13, and might perhaps put us in mind too of the conflation of transitory memories with the seabirds in the Old English poem *The Wanderer*,[2] which contains echoes of the same anxieties concerning transience and loss that we find so frequently in eddic

[2] The text of the poem appears in *The Exeter Book*, p.135, lines 45-57. For a discussion of the origin and meaning of the term 'Óminnis hegri' see Ursula Dronke, 'Óminnis hegri', in Bjarni Fidjestøl *et al*, eds, *Festskrift til Ludvig Holm-Olsen på hans 70-årsdag den 9. juni 1984* (Øvre Ervik, 1984), pp.53-60; see also Kate Heslop, 'Minni and the Rhetoric of Memory in Eddic, Skaldic and Runic Texts', in Hermann *et al* (2014), p.81.

verse.[3] Such a depiction of memory as inherently unstable suggests an authorial conviction that stories, once lost, cannot be recovered, and implies a vocation among poets and storytellers, the custodians of cultural memory, to continuously recall the past to the present – if for no other reason than to remain certain of it; to preserve the conceptual infrastructure within which their contemporary audience experiences the world. Those lines from *Grímnismál* would seem to imply a daily return of the ravens – recalled by their falconer in a cyclical, ritualistic way – which speaks to the need for memories to be reiterated not irregularly, but constantly. We might also be tempted to read into this sustained interest in the social function and importance of memory a resistance to the kinds of change precipitated by the increasingly widespread adoption of Christianity, the religion of the book. Storytelling is, by its nature a nostalgic and conservative venture.[4] Virtually the entire eddic genre is concerned with the mythic and heroic past. Even the term 'fornyrðislag' ('old lore metre') carries with it the sense of a tradition rooted in memory and concerned principally with sustaining itself in the face of modern innovation. As Judy Quinn suggests, these same connotations may be inferred from the use of the tag 'inn forni' attached to several texts in the *Poetic Edda* – an attempt to preserve a sense of their authenticity, framing them as memories rather than reconstructions.[5]

Physical memorials have always co-existed with cultural memory in Scandinavia, since long before the age of literacy. Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga* describes the manner in which a great chieftain might be remembered for posterity before the keeping of written records: 'En eptir gǫfga menn skyldi haug gera til minningar; en eptir alla þá menn, er nǫkkut mannsmót var at, skyldi reisa bautasteina' ('And in memory of a man of consequence, people should build a mound to celebrate their memories; and in honour of all other men who proved their valour, a memorial stone should be

[3] For a discussion of the relationship between birds and memory in the Middle Ages more generally see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2008), pp.43-4.
[4] Fínnegan (1977), pp.126, 213.
[5] Judy Quinn, 'The Naming of Eddic Poems', *Parergon* 8:2 (1990), 105.

raised.')[6] Like the Victorian knot in the handkerchief, these memorial sites served the function of prompting recollection only so long as their individual legacies and associations continued to be known (that is, recalled; reaffirmed).[7] This observation holds true regardless of whether or not the memorial was inscribed: if so, the information preserved would usually be limited to a brief mnemonic designed to prompt a detailed recollection of the deceased's life and legacy; if not, those charged with periodically refreshing the cultural memory concerning the dead would have had still less to go on, and their particular knowledge would have been all the more valuable and fragile.[8] The passage from *Grímnismál* cited above suggests an abiding consciousness that memories have an agency of their own and, like the capacity for thought in old age, may depart without warning and never return. Storytellers and reciters of poems, whether amateur or professional, were the acknowledged institutional guardians against such losses, and any attempt to identify or describe them cannot fail to examine their role as living testaments to the past, whose social worth depended in part on their ability to reliably resist the transient pressures of the modern world.

Elsewhere in his antiquarian work, Snorri emphasises the potency of memory for the old gods – and Óðinn especially. His entire *Prose Edda* presents itself as an attempt to recall, systematise and preserve a memory of old lore previously absent from the written tradition and at risk of being lost if those who maintained it were to die without passing it on. He frequently alludes to and credits his oral sources *en masse*, without distinguishing individuals from society's corporate memory, by using phrases such as 'er þat sagt' ('it is said'),[9] and is at pains to stress the contiguity between memory and wisdom.[10] When Hár is speaking of Óðinn's many names in *Gylfaginning* he

6 *Ynglinga saga*, in *Heimskringla*, i, p.20.
7 On 'memorial sites', see further Pierre Nora, Maurice Agulhon, Charles-Robert Ageron and Collette Beaune, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Paris, 1984-92).
8 Consider for instance Thorwald's Cross on the Isle of Man (Andreas III, MM 128), which also features an image of a bird reminiscent of an Odinic raven. See Andy Orchard, *The Elder Edda: A Book of Viking Lore* (London, 2011), p.115.
9 e.g. *Gylfaginning*, p.7.
10 See Ward Parks, 'The Traditional Narrator and the "I Heard" Formulas in Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England* 16 (1987), 45-66. Parks discusses the use of similar formulae in Old English poetry, arguing that they reflect an enduring conceptual process which envisaged stories as 'native' to the oral tradition, even when their present iteration is a written one.

comments, '…en sumir atburðir til þessa heita hafa gerzk í ferðum hans ok er þat fœrt í frásagnir, ok muntu eigi mega fróðr maðr heita ef þú skalt eigi kunna segja frá þeim stórtíðindum' ('…but some names came from events and his journeys and these formed into tales, and you will never be named a wise man if you cannot recount these stories').[11] So for Gylfi to become wise he must internalise and be deemed competent to recall a host of stories when prompted by simple mnemonics such as names. He must, in a sense, be conversant in the exclusive dialect of wise ('fróðr') men who, by their learning, have the ability to endow their stories with credibility. There are no eyewitnesses to testify to the truth behind Óðinn's names, so storytellers like Gylfi must step into their role, proving their authority not by their proximity in time to the particular subject matter they recall, but rather by the range and scope of their learning as a whole. In the case of *Gylfaginning,* it is worth noting Snorri's awareness that a master storyteller possesses the ability to distort and appropriate his material to serve his own ends.

After Gylfi has left the presence of the Æsir, the narrative returns to them in an epilogue which describes how, 'minnask á þessar frásagnir allar er honum váru sagðar, ok gefa nǫfn þessi hin sǫmu er áðr eru nefnd mǫnnum ok stǫðum þeim er þar váru, til þess at flá er langar stundir liði at menn skyldu ekki ifask í at allir væri einir' ('they recall all the stories which they had told him, and gave the same names mentioned above to people and places there, such that after a long time men would not doubt that they were all the same.')[12] This calculated manipulation of the raw substance of story speaks to Snorri's cautiously equivocal relationship with the oral tradition which his text in many ways purports to celebrate. His three storytellers profit from their tale, enshrining their own fantastical legacies by making Gylfi their ambassador. This closing passage throws doubt on the authenticity of what has gone before while sustaining the reader's admiration for the storytelling capability of these three mysterious Æsir whose true identities, though allusively suggested by the

[11] *Gylfaginning*, p.22.
[12] *Gylfaginning*, pp.54-5.

names they give themselves and by their apparent wisdom, remain shrouded in mystery. Just as the eddic poems derived their authority from their invocation of ancient voices – *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, for instance, begins 'Ár var alda' ('It was early in ancient times')[13] – so Snorri implicitly authenticates his own account by presenting it as derived from oral sources, albeit with the caveat that oral tales can be corrupted, and it is safer to rely on the book where that option presents itself. Finally what, if anything, are we to make of the fact that we are presented with three storytellers in this account – disparate voices, yet always in concordance and never at odds? To be accepted as one of the wise – the communally authorised – an oral storyteller would have had to harmonise his own tale-telling with that of his respected peers and forebears.

A majority of the poems in the *Edda* feature the voice of a third-person narrator who takes no direct part in the action but who nevertheless sets the scene and introduces the plot or comments on it once it is underway. Of the heroic poems, only five do not feature such a voice and, of these, one (*Guðrúnarkviða in forna*) is nonetheless explicitly framed as a narrative, although the narrator in this case is identified as Guðrún describing her own life retrospectively, rather than as an anonymous storyteller.[14] The narrator's voice is noticeably less detectable in the earlier part of the *Poetic Edda*, featuring in only one of the first six texts in the Codex Regius manuscript (and then only in a single stanza, st.5 of *Vafþrúðnismál*, which covers a transition in the action from Ásgarðr to the giant's hall). For the purposes of this taxonomy, we may discount the prose which accompanies these verses, on the grounds that it may or may not have travelled with the poems through the oral tradition, and that in either case it serves an objective, descriptive function, contextualising the story rather than necessarily 'belonging' to it. In each case, the prose is inessential to the coherence of the narrative in performance, and is necessary only for the reception

13 *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, st.1. Larrington translates this, even more emphatically, 'It was at the start of time...' See Larrington (2014), p.110.

14 The five poems distinguished in this way are *Helgakviða Hjǫrvarðssonar*, *Fáfnismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, *Helreið Brynhildar* and *Guðrúnarkviða in forna*. We might also usefully append *Hyndluljóð* to this list as another major eddic poem without an explicitly detectable narrator's voice.

of these texts in their written form.[15] Where a narrator does feature as a dominant voice, his claim to authority is frequently substantiated by language testifying to the antiquity of his tale. *Hymiskviða*, for instance, begins, 'Ár valtívar…' ('Early in time, the victory-gods…')[16] Similar formulae are to be found in the opening lines of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*, *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta, Sigurðarkviða in skamma, Oddrúnargrátr, Atlamál in grœnlenzku*, *Rígsþula* and perhaps most evocatively in st.2 of *Hamðismál:*

> Vara þat nú
> né í gær,
> þat hefir langt
> liðit síðan[17]
>
> It was not today
> nor yesterday,
> much time has passed
> since that time.

In all these cases, authority and antiquity appear to be inextricably linked. The primary importance of establishing the tale's credentials – whether as a piece of entertainment or high art – is reflected in the common decision to open with an indication of its great age. This device preserves the convention that the tale itself, rather than the teller, commands authority. Just as Snorri draws on the personae of the Æsir in *Gylfaginning*, presenting himself solely as the conduit through which they tell their own story (and Gylfi as the medium through which the reader receives it), so in eddic verse we are encouraged to recognise the authority of the tales themselves; independent, in that they are not described as the property or product of a named author. In this way the tales retain some of the authenticity of eyewitness accounts, recalled in their original and authoritative forms, rather than improvised subsequently by a fallible fabricator of stories.

Hymiskviða is particularly valuable for us in developing the theme of the teller's voice within the text, since he appears at one point, in the version recorded in both the Codex Regius and

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[15] For a fuller development of this argument, see Gunnell (1995), Chapter 3.
[16] *Hymiskviða*, st.1.
[17] *Hamðismál*, st.2.

AM 748 i 4to, either to defer to another, perhaps more specifically competent storyteller, or to assert his own authority on the subject. The relevant lines appear in the Íslenzk fornrit edition in st.38, although from their contents it appears not unlikely they were originally intended to come earlier:

> En ér heyrt hafið
> – hverr kann um þat
> goðmálugra
> gørr at skilja –[18]
>
> But you have heard
> – he can, of that,
> who is wiser in the lore of the gods
> speak further –

The stanza goes on to describe a man's loss of his two children, and may be an allusion to the tale of Þjálfi and Rǫskva.[19] The use of the preterite tense of the verb 'heyra' ('to hear') indicates that the audience is expected already to know the tale alluded to, and makes clear that it exists in the popular consciousness independently of the present narrative. It is entirely possible that the tale would not be universally known, and that these lines represent a rhetorical whetting of the appetite for further eddic tale-telling, but whatever the case the reason given for not digressing into this other tale of Þórr is not one of economy, but rather a statement that the storyteller in this text feels himself not necessarily the best qualified or best placed to recall that particular incident. It is entirely possible to read these lines as an implicit challenge to the assembly issued by a self-confident storyteller, or, alternatively, as a written remnant of an oral version of the poem which incorporated a particular deference to a specific individual, likely to have been acknowledged in some way during a performance. Whatever the reason for this brief digression, its inclusion demonstrates that the reciter *is* purporting to be particularly knowledgeable or competent to relate the story of Hymir's cauldron, regardless of his reputation for knowing other mythological tales. These lines, whether intended to be assertive or humble, nevertheless implicitly raise the status of

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18 *Hymiskviða*, st.38. Although Dronke prints this poem, she omits these lines on the basis that they are 'irrelevant to [the narrative of] *Hym*.' See Dronke (2011), p.75 and pp.106-7.

19 This episode appears in *Gylfaginning*, p.37.

his audience, establishing their complicity as part of a community of fellow tale-tellers.

Ursula Dronke omits the stanza containing these lines and the stanza which follows from her edition of the poem, apparently on the basis that, 'There is no way in which these two stanzas can be fitted into the text of Hymiskviða.' She goes on to assert that they must have been placed there mistakenly by a 'tired scribe.'[20] Yet the fact of their being extant in two manuscripts (albeit possibly derived from the same exemplar)[21] clearly contradicts this sentiment – they have, indeed, been 'fitted in.' Whether incorporated by scribe or oral reciter, their presence is a matter of fact. Moreover, intertextual allusions of this sort are not unusual in the eddic tradition. Robert Kellogg characterises the composition of the *Poetic Edda* thus:

> In the mind of the Compiler of the Codex Regius, the eddic poems were very much like epic episodes in the mind of an oral performer. They existed for him and could be fully comprehended and appreciated only in a much larger world of story.[22]

Dronke's objection to the inclusion of such allusive stanzas surely undervalues this intertextual capability on the part of storytellers and their audiences by superimposing on the text a modern desire for self-sustaining internal coherence. As has been frequently noted, the ability to engage with complex riddles and kennings, when received aurally, speaks to a culture in which ready access to this 'world of story' was not simply the preserve of the few – although it remains probable that those especially trained or gifted in the art of imaginative recall would also have been the most proactive participants in sustaining such a tradition.[23] One need only consider a text like *Lokasenna* to recognise the demands an eddic recitation could make an the audience's memorial faculties.[24] An auditor need not appreciate all the allusions for the text to succeed as a piece of artistry and entertainment, but the more cognisant he or she is of the meaning behind Loki's taunts and the gods' rebuttals, the richer the text becomes.

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20 Dronke (2011), pp.106-7.

21 This is the view of Finnur Jónsson proposed in Finnur Jónsson, ed., *De gamle Eddadigte* (Copenhagen, 1932). The contrary position is put in Gustaf Lindblad, *Studier I Codex Regius av Äldre Eddan I-III* (Lund, 1954).

22 Kellogg (1991), p.99.

23 e.g. Heslop, in Hermann *et al* (2014), p.79. See also Brink in Hermann *et al* (2014), p.205.

24 See p.28 of this study.

To deny that st.38 is germane to the text of *Hymiskviða*, as Ursula Dronke seeks to do, is to neglect important evidence about the way in which eddic recitation appears to have worked.[25] Whether or not an original creative mind intended that the reciter should allude to this other Þórr-centric story is now impossible to discover. That the poem as it stands should do so, however, is not inconsistent with the tradition's intertextual character. In an oral tradition, the boundaries which separate stories are less tangible than when those same stories are codified by a literate scribe, since an individual 'story' is more difficult to quantify, having no fixed beginning or end, nor necessarily any paratextual cues to distinguish one episode from another. Accordingly we must acknowledge that at some point a scribe or reciter thought it entirely plausible that the storyteller might defer in this way to other authorities. As to what function these two 'intrusive' stanzas, as Dronke calls them, may serve, they might be taken as an invitation to the assembled audience for anyone well-versed in the story of Þjálfi and Rǫskva to tell it. This would again reflect the participatory and mutually reinforcing nature of oral storytelling (perhaps alluded to by Snorri's triumvirate of storytellers in *Gylfaginning*). Alternatively such lines might be appropriate in a case where the story has already been told or was sufficiently well-known to need no telling – hence the positive assertion 'ér heyrt hafið.' A third possibility is that such a device introduces the idea of the story, which the same performer might then be induced to recite, thus sustaining his value as an entertainer for at least the length of another tale – much like Scheherazade or the troubled protagonist of *Íslendings þáttr sǫgufróða*. The lines are an appeal to the memory of the auditors to recall and recover the content of that second story concerning Þórr, and to undertake in the moment of performance, albeit on a more modest scale, much the same activity that Snorri sets his mind to in synthesising the Norse 'world of story' into a coherent narrative in his *Prose Edda*. In some sense, the nominal storyteller offers himself as a prompt to jog the collective memory of the assembly.

[25] Dronke (2011), p.75

Aside from this instance of deferring to another teller, many of the poems in the *Edda* (as noted already) assert their narrator's authority by establishing the antiquity of the events with which they are concerned. This distancing device serves to instil in any given reciter the authority of generations of his predecessors who have previously recounted this same memory. This effect is subtle, but frequently deployed to characterise the speaker as one who knows – who recalls – rather than one who makes or invents. As readers, we should be careful not to be taken in by the same device: the fact that a narrator makes claims to be engaged in an act of distant recollection does not mean that this is, in fact, his practice. Indeed, by indemnifying himself in advance against any charge of innovation or improvisation, he actually becomes freer to embroider his material as he sees fit to respond to the context of the present recitation. Scholar and dramaturg Marvin Carlson describes the phenomenon of 'ghosting' in performance – that is, of being associated, in the collective mind of your audience, with every role they have previously seen you play.[26] In eddic performances where the ancient past is invoked, the reciter is attempting to achieve the reverse effect: that of distancing himself from his own identity and subordinating himself to an imagined tradition of forebears stretching far back into the mythic past. In a similar vein, the author Oskar Jensen has described the process of conceiving new stories inspired by the ancient eddic tradition as 'writing on a palimpsest of stories already in your head' – familiar, but faint in the memory.[27] We may go so far as to remark that several of the difficulties encountered in dating specific texts in the collection owe something to the self-consciously archaic form in which potentially late stories (such as *Þrymskviða*) are presented. We see the same trope deployed by authoritative speakers in other eddic poems: the second stanza of *Vǫluspá* describes how the speaker was born 'ár' ('early in time') – early enough to recall nine worlds and the first giant, Ymir. Similarly the giant Vafþrúðnir's

[26] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theater as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, 2001).

[27] Unpublished proceedings of the conference 'Stories and Storytelling in the Medieval World', convened by the Early Medieval Interdisciplinary Conference Series, which took place on the 11th and 12th April 2015 at University College London. Dr Jensen's paper was entitled 'Picking from the *Smörgåsbord*: Old Norse myth in recent children's literature'.

authority appears to derive from his ability to recall 'fornum stǫfum' ('ancient lore').[28] Whether delivered in the storyteller's voice or through the medium of a character, this trope makes clear the link between memory – specifically experiential memory – and authority. The further back you can recall, the greater authority you have to recite. If storytellers were not themselves necessarily old, their narrative personae certainly seemed to be. This authenticating device ironically allowed them to be freer in using their improvisational powers, although whether this was a freedom they indulged remains to be seen.

Joseph Harris has strongly criticised the early tendency of scholars to consider improvisation and memorisation 'a simple pair of semantic opposites.'[29] Nonetheless, when dealing with verse texts it is clear that some consistency must have been established from one performance to another – especially if we admit the likelihood that certain texts were spoken, at one point or another, by multiple reciters, or in a context where other proficient eddic performers were also present.[30] Even then the text need not have been static – any actor can attest to the mutability of text in performance – but a fluent transition from one speaker to the other without breaking the narrative arc of the poem would have been necessary from a reception point of view, since eddic poetry is, for the most part, narrative in character and follows a progressive linear chronology.[31] The performance of a poem by multiple participants could perhaps have been achieved by the repetition of particular phrases or formulae, signalling a passing of the metaphorical 'talking stick' from one reciter to the next, or perhaps by a physical gesture indicating that another reciter was to 'take the floor,' or by the direction of a third party arbitrating between participants. Poems like *Skírnismál*, if performed by multiple reciters, would have needed to conform fairly closely to the same text whenever recited, as

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[28] *Vafþrúðnismál*, st.1.

[29] See Joseph Harris, 'Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems For Questions of Composition and Performance', in Susan E. Deskis and Thomas D. Hill, eds, *Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing: Old Norse Studies by Joseph Harris* (Ithaca, 2008), p.191.

[30] See Gunnell (1995), pp.236-81. Snorri's *Gylfaginning* gives us a further indication that corporate storytelling was not an implausible phenomenon.

[31] An important exception to this dictum being *Vǫluspá*, as discussed in Chapter 1.

the speakers would have had to take their respective cues from specific words, gestures or phrases – assuming, that is, a correspondence between particular speakers and particular characters needing to be voiced. This observation is made on the simple basis that there is an irregular distribution of verses between the various speaking voices in that text, which must nevertheless be preserved in order to communicate the necessary narrative content. For instance, the poem appears initially to establish the convention that each character speaks an alternate stanza of six lines, only to then subvert this by having Freyr speak both stanzas 6 and 7. If a second reciter, in the role of Skírnir, were to cut him off after one stanza then the obstacle to his achieving Gerðr would go unvoiced. Similarly, the lines of stanza 15 are attributed to Gerðr's maid, but this is a half stanza of only three lines in both surviving texts of the poem, and whoever was to speak Gerðr's next lines must have known and anticipated this deviation from the usual form in order to preserve the fluency of the recitation.[32]

By contrast, a more explicitly 'turn-based' text, such as a flyting, could be a framework better suited for improvisation. Gunnell has noted the game-like qualities of texts like *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna*, where different voices compete to outdo one another in extremity of insult.[33] Given that neither text contains a complex narrative arc (rather, the scenario is established and concluded, but the intervening stanzas are interchangeable without affecting the substance of the plot) the reciters' memory for structure and consistency between retellings is less rigorously challenged. Eddic verse, therefore, affords multiple possibilities for variation, but the scope for this depends on the metrical and narrative complexity of each particular poem and the number of voices involved in reciting them. A 'wisdom' or 'proverbial' text like *Hávamál* might be rearranged, condensed and lengthened from one retelling to the next without impeding its coherence as a poem.[34] As such, any shared or sequential recitations would have been relatively free from the need for performers to

32 The lineation, as described here, follows the ÍF edition.
33 Gunnell (1995), p.246. See also Smirnickaja (1991), p.261. Smirnickaja makes a similar case for *Grímnismál.*
34 Indeed several scholars have considered the written text an amalgamation of diffuse sources. See Gunnell, 'Eddic Poetry', in McTurk (2005), p.85.

each recall a substantially similar iteration and arrangement of verses. Whether the actual process was one of innovation or conservation, however, the convention to which the *Edda* so frequently returns is that the substance of the poems – be they stories or proverbs – is sufficiently antique as to be inviolable.

The storyteller's craft operates at the intersection between memory and invention, with reciters simultaneously representing themselves as a novel source of contemporary entertainment and as living memorial testaments to the past. It should be noted, in this context, that two pasts existed in their memories: the historical past and the storied past, and that they were uniquely equipped to suggest parallels between these. In Snorri's fictionalised account of this process of synthesising recollection with invention, the three storytellers of *Gylfaginning* conspire in secret to speak with one voice, each corroborating the others' tales, but the intention remains the same: to present novelty as indistinguishable from inherited tradition. This observation, by itself, is not new. Gísli Sigurðsson has described the process by which the written form of the family sagas likely came into being in similar terms:

> …All this [subject matter] had churned about in popular memory over many centuries and undergone the whole range of modification, loss and accretion that inevitably accompanies such preservation.[35]

Whoever these generations of storytellers were, they shared a common authority to voice, edit and enhance the shared stories of their culture, whether in verse or prose. The extent to which they could actively exercise such re-creative agency is likely to have depended on their individual reputation, competence and audience, to say nothing of the subject matter they had in hand. The ability to control the past, to paraphrase the Party's slogan in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, rests on one's authority in the present, and thus storytellers – and the scribes who succeeded them as chroniclers of Icelandic culture and mythology – must have been credited with authority derived in large part from the feats of memorial recall and inventive delivery which they were capable of

[35] Gísli Sigurðsson (2004), p.54.

performing in the present.[36]

The occasional direct references to the art of storytelling in the sagas support this impression: Icelanders are often celebrated in their travels abroad for their narrative gifts, such as when Sturla Þórðarson impresses King Magnús in *Sturlu þáttr*, a short narrative contained within the *Sturlunga saga* compendium which tells of the family rivalries that dominated the Sturlung Age (c.1220-c.1260). In this episode, Sturla recites a story referred to as 'Huldar saga' which concerns the rampages of a violent troll. We learn that Magnús is impressed not only by the Icelander's telling of the troll saga, but because he told it better and more fully than any other storyteller – indicating both that the material was already known to his auditors and that they judged him on his performance and thoroughness, even though his version clearly differed from their memories of how the tale had otherwise been told.[37] Admittedly the tale of a troll may well have been interpreted as fictional, but it is the storyteller's fidelity to previous re-tellings, rather than to historical fact, which is in question here, and Sturla is clearly both confident and competent enough to flaunt his infidelity quite openly. Nonetheless, it is likely he would have been more cautious if his subject matter had been drawn from the more recent past – and it seems likely he will curtail his tendency to innovate when executing the king's commission to assemble the saga of Magnús' own deeds for fear of contradiction.[38] One might imagine that greater latitude existed in composing or augmenting heroic verses recalling the legendary past than when commissioned to compose kings' sagas, since there were fewer authorities capable of challenging a composer's recollection or characterisation of events. Contrastingly, the strict metre of skaldic verse texts would have inhibited the kind of loose *ad hoc* alteration or improvisation for which the scope and mutability of prose texts allows.[39]

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36 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, 1949).

37 *Sturlu þáttr*, in Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, eds, *Sturlunga saga* (Reykjavík, 1946), ii, pp.231-5.

38 Snorri comments directly on this phenomenon when asserting the authority of skaldic sources in his Preface to Heimskringla, i, p.4.

39 See Lönnroth (1976), p.102 for an argument that oral sagas were conceived of as a succession of interchangeable short narrative units. The case for the long prose form is explored in Clover (1986).

Skaldic verses perhaps more closely resemble the fixed memorial stones than the ever-evolving sagas and *þættir* which are their literary cousins.

One surviving example of a familiar story receiving different treatment in different redactions may be found in the *Poetic Edda*, and is suggestive in exploring how storytellers may have approached the need to reconcile narrative innovation with memorial tradition on occasion. Theodore Andersson makes a persuasive case that the poet of *Atlamál in Grœnlenzku* was familiar with at least one surviving source for his poem, a version of which precedes this text in the Codex Regius and is known to us by the name *Atlakviða*. According to Andersson, 'the poet of *Atlamál* (whether a Greenlander, an Icelander, or a Norwegian) knew *Atlaqviða* [sic], but had also come into contact with a German version of the story.'[40] As he points out, this theory has significant implications for the constraints under which eddic poets and reciters worked, in terms of how far and how radically they could deviate from their source material without running the risk of offending their audiences' sensibilities or failing to satisfy their expectations. Of particular note is a theme in the later text which neatly resembles Sigurðr's valediction in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (st.25) – both Sigurðr and Atli are said to 'rísa' ('rise') at the moment of their wounding – Atli begins to recount, for posterity, the history of his relationship with Guðrún. When he accuses her of proving a poor wife, however, she interrupts his narrative with her own account, commenting as she does so: 'Lýgr þú nú, Atli, | þótt ek þat lítt rekja' ('Now you lie, Atli, | Although I care but little').[41] The qualifying statement is somewhat unpersuasive since she then spends a full five stanzas expounding her own version of their history. When she seeks to capitalise on his weakness and provides an account more flattering to herself, however, Atli is equally reluctant to let it stand uncorrected:

Lýgr þú nú Guðrún!

[40] Theodore M. Andersson, 'Did the Poet of *Atlamál* Know *Atlaqviða*?', in Robert J. Glendenning and Haraldur Bessason, eds, *Edda: A Collection of Essays* (Winnipeg, 1983), p.255.

[41] *Atlamál in Grœnlenzku*, st.96.

lítt mun við bœtask
hluti hvárigra,
hǫfum ǫll skarðan;[42]

Now you lie, Guðrún!
That will hardly amend
the share of each [of us],
we have both suffered wounds.

The salience of this exchange for our purposes is most apparent if we consider how an oral-dramatic rendition of this text, or something very like it, would appear to an audience. A kind of compromise or amelioration of two contradictory narratives is taking place before the eyes (and ears) of the onlookers. Indeed, following this dialogue, and the bitter act of vengeance which occasioned it, a curious kind of pseudo-reconciliation between Guðrún and her dying husband takes place when she agrees to afford him proper funeral rites. Through this device the poet explores the complexity of their relationship which, although it ended violently, was clearly characterised by a shared concept of honour and deserving. By letting both narratives be spoken, he problematises the idea of an unbroken tradition and – if Andersson is right about his familiarity with the earlier poem – presents himself as an accomplished editor, thus allowing himself the opportunity to reconcile the earlier version of the story, ending in Guðrún's death, with his longer version in which she drifts across the sea to Jónakr's court.

Just as honour and the importance of legacy are overriding concerns for Guðrún and Atli, so too they remain contemporary preoccupations of the poems' audience, and an awareness of this cultural similarity must have influenced the approach taken by those who retold such ancient stories. The ability to make the past seem extant in the present is another device deployed frequently by storytellers to subtly reinforce the contemporary resonance of their material. Often in the sagas we encounter a sudden change in tense which reinforces the immediacy of a particular scene or sequence. Take the following example, from *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoði*:

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[42] *Atlamál in Grœnlenzku*, st.101.

> Hrafnkell reið heim ok sagði tíðendi þessi. Hann etr mat, ok eptir þat safnar hann mǫnnum at sér, svá at hann fær sjau tigu manna, ok ríðr um þetta vestr yfir heiði ok kemr á óvart til Aðalbóls, tekr Sám í rekkju ok leiðir hann út.[43]
>
> Hrafnkell rode home and told these tidings. He eats a meal, and after that he collects men to himself, so that he gets seventy men, and he rides with them west over the heath and comes to Aðalból, he takes Sámr in his bed, and leads him outside.

The events described all took place in the past – as viewed from the perspective of the saga's readers – but the deliberate inconsistency in tense is of most interest to us here. We are explicitly told that Hrafnkell 'rode' home and 'told' tidings, himself performing the role of eyewitness and first generation storyteller. Yet immediately the perspective shifts from the reader's present to the character's: he 'eats,' 'collects men,' 'rides' (as though to emphasise the shift in tense, the same verb is used twice in succession, once as 'reið' and then again as 'riðr'), and 'takes' Sámr unawares in his bed. Superficially the effect is a simple one: to dramatise the narrative by conflating the distance between the events depicted and the present audience. For this reason, we often see this rhetorical technique deployed at moments of high narrative tension. Yet there is a second advantage to the storyteller in deploying this trope: through it, he co-opts his audience as fellow eyewitnesses, seeing as though for the first time the events of the saga, supplanting Hrafnkell in this capacity and finding themselves positioned as authorities, empowered by this shift in tense to comment freely on the events they appear to be experiencing in the present. In this way the saga-teller sustains the legend of Hrafnkell while providing himself with an effective mechanism to innovate.[44] He adopts the perspective of the eyewitness – even describing events in the saga, such as the horses shying away from Einar, for which there was no witness mentioned in his account (ch.5) – in order to speak authoritatively. His audience, though conscious of this fiction, allow themselves to become complicit in it in order that the story can be renewed and retain its dynamism as it passes from teller to teller. The storyteller is uniquely licensed, on account of his acknowledged skill both at memorial

43 *Hrafnkels saga*, p.131.
44 For a review of the long-running dispute about the historicity of the saga, see Jónas Kristjánsson (1988), pp.250-54.

recall and narrative innovation, to depart from historical truth in order to elevate it to the status of legend.

The evidence suggests that this reverence for memory (ironically, the best licence for creative innovation and fiction) endured long after the establishment of a literary tradition which ultimately came to succeed its oral predecessor as the most durable witness to Old Norse literature. The Preface to *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, usually dated to the mid-thirteenth century,[45] begins with this assertion:

> Ef menn vilia girnast at heyra þau stórtíðendi, er verit hafa í fornum sið, verðr hvártveggja at gera, at spyrja þess, er menn viltu eigi áðr, ok svá festa í minni. Ef menn vilja kunna ókunnar sögur ok langar þá er betr ok gengr síðr ór minni, at ritaðar sé.[46]

> If men wish to hear of the great events that took place in ancient times, they must both find out what they had not previously known, and then keep it in their memory. If men want to learn long and unfamiliar stories, it is better that they be written down than that they pass out of memory.[47]

This text is instructive in several respects. First, it is noteworthy that the ultimate audience for this work was still envisaged as comprising 'hearers' – implying that the text was to be recited publicly, rather than read privately.[48] Secondly, a distinction persists between the learning process and the subsequent recalling of the story ('sva festa í minni'), which calls to mind again the mythological distinction between Huginn and Muninn that we encountered in *Grímnismál*. Learning the content of a story is not perceived, at least by this author, as being equivalent to understanding it sufficiently fully to recall it on a subsequent occasion. Finally, the fact that the author states the need for a written record in terms which juxtapose its existence with the risk of loss of memory indicates that this attitude was not universally held – indeed, the Preface is an argument for it, presupposing the

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[45] Edward R. Haymes, trans., *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern* (London, 1988), Introduction. For an argument in favour of an earlier date see Marina Mundt, 'Observations on the Influence of *Thidriks Saga* on Icelandic Saga Writing', in Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson and Desmond Slay, eds, *Proceedings of the First Icelandic Saga Conference* (London, 1973), pp.335-59 and Theodore M. Andersson, *A Preface to the Nibelungenlied* (Stanford, 1987).

[46] *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, i, p.3.

[47] Haymes (1988), p.3.

[48] See Parks (1987) for a more detailed exploration of this trope in Old English, after which he concludes that it need not imply a genuine oral origin for a story, but rather a sense that orality remained the natural *milieu* for storytelling in the mind of the early medieval auditor or reader.

existence of an alternative school of thought. The author is here acknowledging that his text is designed to function as an *aide memoire,* but he appears to resist the modern, literate view that the written text is superior to the memorised work because it is static. By contrast, the wording of this quotation clearly privileges memory over written record, but goes on to state that the latter is preferable to having no record at all. Such an outlook reflects an enduring regard for the oral tradition and its practitioners despite the advent of literacy – a view also acknowledged by Else Mundal, who writes, 'if oral story-telling on the basis of written books was common practice and performed by literate people in an improvisational artistic form, the prestige of oral art forms would most likely have continued to be high.'[49] Anthropologists have noted the continuing high regard for memorial competence in Iceland, in particular, even today.[50] This text from *Þiðreks saga* indicates that, initially at least, the case for the book had to be made in contradistinction to a confident and vital tradition of living memory. As much is made clear from the account in *Íslendingabók* of the writing down of the law at Breiðabólstaður between 1117 and 1118[51] and from a clause in *Grágás* giving primacy to the version of the written law kept at Skálholt.[52] The need to specify a primary authority indicates an enduring interest concerning the reliability and consistency of books when compared to a single living recollector of the law – the Lawspeaker – to whom all previous litigants had deferred.[53]

The book becomes an authority in time, but at the point of inception it lacks altogether the tradition-bearing authenticity of oral recollection. The book represents a divisive mechanism which separates the reciter from the common folk memory alluded to in *Hymiskviða* st.38.[54] The

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49 Else Mundal, 'How did the Arrival of Writing Influence Old Norse Oral Culture?', in Ranković *et al* (2010), pp.178-9.

50 See Hastrup (1998), p.47.

51 *Íslendingabók*, pp.23-4.

52 Dennis, Foote and Perkins (1980), i, p.213.

53 Gísli Sigurðsson (2004), pp.57-9; Peter Foote, 'Oral and Literary Tradition in Early Scandinavian Law: Aspects of a Problem', in Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Peter Foote, Andreas Haarder and Hans Frede Neilson, *Oral Tradition Literary Tradition: A Symposium* (Odense, 1977), pp.47-55.

54 See above, pp.179-81.

competence to read was not necessarily equated with the competence to remember – if anything, it perhaps suggested a deficiency on the part of the storyteller whose stock in trade had hitherto been his virtuoso memory.[55] Such a view was common throughout medieval Europe and, if not native to Iceland, would nonetheless have been encountered by Icelanders during their travels on the continent. Authorities like Hugh St Victor (c.1096-1141) reflected the wisdom of Socrates that writing 'implanted forgetfulness in the soul,' and thereby worked to counteract the storyteller's considerable aptitude for memorial recall.[56] A useful modern analogy for the impact of literacy might be the 2005 Turner Prize winning artwork Shedboatshed, designed by Simon Starling. The piece shows a garden shed which has been demolished and reconstructed in the form of a boat. The boat itself was then broken down and turned again into a shed – although one which retains distinctive maritime features and looks altogether dissimilar to the shed with which the artist started. Like the process involved in creating Shedboatshed, the act of transmuting a performed work into a written text in any culture makes it impossible to recapture the essence of the original performance when that work is subsequently read. Its form is irrecoverably changed. As such, the continuous oral inheritance has been broken.[57] Such a process clearly disrupts the storyteller's claim to an authentic inheritance stretching back to eyewitness accounts. Now, discrepancies between a performed and a written text require investigation: both cannot be acceptable, and one or other must achieve primacy. Literacy was thus a prime threat to the preliterate storytelling tradition, and storytellers in Iceland following its introduction would have had to adapt to the demands of the new medium (themselves becoming literate) or die out, having been superseded as arbiters of tradition, much like the Lawspeakers ultimately were by the written law codes. In any event, their craft was changed irrevocably once the stories which were their stock in trade became standardised and

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[55] Hermann Pálsson calls attention to the case of *Stúfs þáttr*, noting, 'the poet Stúfr Kattarson knew by heart more than a hundred and twenty *flokkar,* and many more *drápur.*' *Oral Tradition and Saga Writing* (1999), p.94.

[56] For further discussion see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to the Written Record*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, 2013), p.187.

[57] For a discussion of the impracticability of re-staging a performance based on a transcript or textual recording, see Edward L. Schieffelin, 'Moving Performance to Text: Can Performance be Transcribed?', *Oral Tradition* 20:1 (2005), 80-92.

appropriated by the clerics and monks.

The opening line of the poem *Oddrúnargrátr* provides further evidence for the sense that each eddic composer and reciter wished to represent himself as a link in an unbroken chain of memorial discourse – thus anticipating (or resisting) any suggestion that a modern technology, like the book, can play a comparable role in authenticating a story. The narrative voice begins by stating, 'Heyrða ec segja | í sǫgum fornum' ('I heard it said | in ancient tales...')[58] The verb-pair in the first helmingr contextualises and thereby authorises the recitation as part of an ongoing chain of oral transmission. The storyteller has been a member of an audience, such as the one to whom he, in turn, now speaks. His authority comes directly from his ancient source – note that it is not his predecessor as reciter whom he cites, but rather the 'sǫgum fornom' as if they themselves were speaking to him. In this way he asserts the authenticity of his tale while simultaneously denying his own agency as a creative innovator. A similar device is deployed frequently in Old English literature, including by the *Beowulf* poet, who invokes as his source the tales he has heard of 'ġeārdagum' ('days gone by').[59] His persona, like our eddic storyteller's, is that of receptacle for and conduit of ancient lore. Could such a phrase be the invention of a scribe, intent on asserting the credentials of his text? Possibly; but if so his attempt was notably unsuccessful, since it continues to implicitly revere the ancient tales above the modern innovation of writing, perpetuating a hierarchy in which the oral storyteller was the true and trusted source, and the written word ultimately indebted to him. The Old English parallels also suggest an authorising convention which pre-dates the written form, having cross-pollinated different Germanic oral traditions, travelling by word of mouth from one kingdom to the next. By invoking this device, the written poem captures the same sentiment as the prologue to *Þiðreks saga*: that it is better to sustain the ancient tales in written form than to lose them altogether, while also acknowledging that writing remains the poorer cousin of

[58] *Oddrúnargrátr*, st.1.

[59] R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, eds, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008), p.3, line 1b.

performative storytelling. Snorri implicitly raises the counterargument in the closing chapter of *Gylfaginning* when he describes how potent storytellers are able to manipulate their audiences by appropriating their oral inheritance and reshaping it to suit their purposes.[60] The ongoing tension between oral and literate narrative may yet help to account for the scarcity of overt references to the Icelandic oral storyteller throughout the expansive saga corpus, despite his clear (albeit implied) significance to each of these authors.

If memory is such a core component of the eddic tradition it should hardly surprise us that it also features prominently as a theme in eddic compositions – an observation which, in itself, enhances the already strong case for an oral prehistory behind many of the surviving texts.[61] The literate culture's imperative to 'write what you know' is reflected among eddic works in the tendency to address the theme of memory and the constant fear of forgetting or being forgotten. The most prominent example of this theme must surely be the characterisations of Óðinn, who, besides his reliance on his raven Muninn, is frequently seen questing for knowledge – much of it derived from ancient memory – and seeking hopelessly to preserve his legacy against the obsolescence threatened by *Ragnarǫk*. This reading is especially pertinent in the case of *Vafþrúðnismál*. Although sometimes interpreted as simply a repository of ancient lore, this poem is dramatic, and the poet has gone to some lengths to introduce a degree of tension about the outcome of the contest by having the character of Frigg repeatedly assert her anxiety for her husband at the outset:

Heima letja
ek mynda Herjafǫðr
í gǫrðum goða,
þvíat engi jǫtun
ek hugða jafnramman
sem Vafþrúðni vera.[62]

Detain at home
I should the Host-Father

[60] *Gylfaginning*, pp.54-5.
[61] Harris, 'Eddic Poetry', in Clover and Lindow (1985).
[62] *Vafþrúðnismál*, st.2.

in the court of the gods,
I know no giant
equally as powerful
as Vafþrúðnir is.

And again, subsequently:

Heill þú farir!
heill þú aptr komir!
heill þú á sinnum sér![63]

May you go safely!
May you come back safely!
Be safe on your way!

If the poem was designed simply as a mnemonic, why retain this dramatic frame device? And if it was a scribal addition why did he render it in verse rather than prose, which is the convention for apparent additions made elsewhere in the manuscripts? Indeed, if the purpose of the poem was simply to commit mythological data to memory, then the burden on the memory of these opening stanzas would have been wholly counter-productive. As such we must assume a deliberate narrative agenda behind the introduction of Frigg in these opening passages. To some extent she is the mouthpiece of the audience, demanding of Óðinn to know his intention in confronting Vafþrúðnir. His answer at first appears straightforward, yet also curiously vague:

hitt vil ek vita
hvé Vafþrúðnis
salakynni sé.[64]

This I would know
what hall-companions
appear in Vafþrúðnir's hall.

Óðinn proposes to join Vafþrúðnir's companions, despite the protestations of his wife. The implication of this verse is that he means to know the *jǫtunn*, and thereby to master him. To that end he engages in the stock scene of the wisdom contest, quite plausibly indulged in by rival storytellers in an oral *milieu* (one thinks of the banished *scop* Deor in the Old English tradition, made lordless

63 *Vafþrúðnismál*, st.4.
64 *Vafþrúðnismál*, st.3.

after being supplanted by a talented rival poet).[65] That so little is done in the poem to explain the phenomenon of the wisdom-duel suggests that the format was deemed familiar to its intended audience. We may infer from the manuscripts that the convention of the wisdom contest – even if no longer current – lived on in the minds of readers, since no prose explanation has been appended to it, as is the case in other poems, such as *Fáfnismál,* which clearly deal with obsolete customs. Here, then, is further evidence of the obstinate hold which oral traditions exerted on the memories of thirteenth-century Icelanders. In the stanzas that follow, Óðinn and the *jǫtunn* draw ever closer to the narrative of *Ragnarǫk* and the theme of the god's own fate. Óðinn's motivation here has been much debated, and there is little in the poem to suggest that the giant furnishes him with any new knowledge or insight.[66] Perhaps the more telling detail is the refrain that Óðinn utters seven times in the course of the poem – once to Frigg, when alluding to his motivation for challenging the *jǫtunn*, and six times towards the end of his inquisition of the giant:

> Fjǫlð ek fór,
> fjǫlð ek freistaða,
> fjǫlð ek reynda regin;[67]
>
> Much have I travelled,
> much have I tested,
> much have I tried the powers;

Here is a character intent on establishing his legacy, yet rapidly exhausting his options. Vafþrúðnir's implied death at the end of the poem, though caused by Óðinn, is presented as the result of his limited knowledge. Readers of the poem, having connected it with an analogous episode in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, have traditionally interpreted the posing of this question about the secret imparted to Baldr as simply a tactic by the god to bring the wisdom contest to a swift conclusion, having learned all he desired from the giant.[68] Yet the fact remains that he has learned

[65] For the full text of the poem, see Krapp and Dobbie (1936), pp.178-9.
[66] McKinnell, 'The Paradox of *Vafþrúðnismál*', in Kick and Schafer (2014).
[67] *Vafþrúðnismál*, st.3. Sts 44, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54 replace 'freistaða' with 'freistaðak.'
[68] See *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, p.50.

nothing at all – the poem even concludes with the giant confirming Óðinn's status as 'vísastr vera'[69] ('the wisest being'), implying that his knowledge exceeds the giant's in every respect. What, then, was the point of precipitating the encounter?

It is even possible that when Óðinn described his rationale to Frigg in terms of seeking the *jǫtunn*'s company he was actually auditioning the Vafþrúðnir as a possible witness to his legacy, a figure wise enough to disseminate his story and sustain his reputation after the inevitable events of *Ragnarǫk* have taken place. Read in this way, Vafþrúðnir's inability to answer the final question is actually a disappointment; a confirmation that at least one part of Óðinn's story must die with him. It is a reminder to the poem's audience that even the storyteller's knowledge of the old gods is incomplete. It is perhaps because he is so aware that even he risks being forgotten that Óðinn involves himself so frequently in the affairs of men in both the saga tradition and in eddic texts like *Grímnismál*. In *Baldrs draumar,* we even see the chief god summon a manifestation of the past from the world of the dead – perhaps an allusion to his preoccupation with the preservation and recall of things now lost. The gods' attempt to rescue Baldr as retold in *Gylfaginning*,[70] and the somewhat analogous quest of Brynhildr in her attempt to be reunited with Sigurðr in spite of his death (*Helreið Brynhildar*), also reflect an unwillingness throughout these poems to abandon the past, and may be read as metaphorical accounts of the quest to preserve these figures' respective legacies.

A concern for the destructive power of forgetting is also writ large in the legendary material concerning the Vǫlsung line. *Vǫlsunga saga* (ch.28) describes a 'grimmt ǫl' ('ale of forgetting') which, once imbibed, precipitates Sigurðr's downfall and the legacy of vengeance to which this leads.[71] To take another example, although the course of events narrated in the *Poetic Edda* (and, for that matter, in *Þiðreks saga*) differs in several important respects, both *Edda* collections are arranged such that Grípir's prophecy precedes Sigurðr's downfall. In each case, therefore, he is

69 *Vafþrúðnismál*, st.56.
70 *Gylfaginning*, pp.45-8.
71 See p.34 of this study.

shown to be forewarned and forearmed against his own destruction. The failure of this forewarning to protect him is due to his involuntary act of forgetting, rather than the heroic imperative to act despite foreknowledge of the consequences – a reminder to any audience of the importance of remembering old tales and heeding the wisdom of sage-like individuals. Might the written incarnation of Grípir be indebted to a self-portrait of the oral storyteller who conceived him? We cannot tell. Certainly there are some correspondences: his ability to prophesy is associated, in the introductory prose, with his acknowledged wisdom, a point reinforced in the verse text, which calls him 'glaðr konungr' ('cunning king'), and his facility with words is foregrounded in st.8:

> Segðu, gegn konungr,
> gerr en ek spyrja,
> snotr...[72]
>
> Say, honest king,
> better than I can speak it,
> wise one...

Like the giant Vafþrúðnir, here is a clear example of a storyteller who might rightly be regarded as an amateur, but is revered and respected nonetheless. This again calls into question the oft-stated view that storytellers play no role as characters in this literature: on the contrary, they are everywhere in evidence, and marked out especially by their memorial facilities.

In assembling his recollected and newly-contextualised version of these stories, Snorri is acutely conscious of the effect of time and transmission on oral traditions. In describing the purpose for which the Æsir deceive King Gylfi he writes,

> …ok gefa nǫfn þessi hin sǫmu er áðr eru nefnd mǫnnum ok stǫðum þeim er þar váru, til þess at þá er langar stundir liði at menn skyldu ekki ifask í at allir væri einir, þeir Æsir er nú var frá sagt ok þessir er þá váru þau sǫmu nǫfn gefin.[73]
>
> …and they [the Æsir] give those same names which were mentioned before to men and places such that after time passed men would not doubt that they were all the same, those Æsir who have now been spoken of and those people to whom they gave those names.

[72] *Grípisspá*, st.8.
[73] *Gylfaginning*, pp.54-5.

Implicit in this is the same recognition hinted at in the preface to *Þiðreks saga* that memory is susceptible to change and contextual influence; that the 'sǫgum fornum' of *Oddrúnargrátr* no longer speak so clearly and resonantly to the storytellers of Snorri's day; that the reciters are losing their authority, which can only be preserved by common consent and by covenant.[74] We may surmise that a similar sense of the fragility of corporate memory incited the production of the Codex Regius and other manuscripts containing eddic material. This passage also characterises the Æsir as self-serving deceivers – an impression reinforced by Snorri's choice of title. The clear impression left is of the threat of the unreliable narrator, indicating a subtle shift in favour of the intransigent authority of the written word. Simultaneously, however, these closing lines also illustrate the durability of the oral inheritance, with identities and personae passed on seamlessly from one era to another. Read thus, it is a celebration of the oral achievement, much in keeping with Snorri's self-consciously antiquarian endeavour. To read this passage simply as an attack on orality would, therefore, be to underrate its author's own fond respect for the tradition upon which his own work so thoroughly depends.

Old Norse poetry – be it skaldic or eddic – provides, through its antiquity, heightened diction and link to a wider world of story, an unique opportunity for a reciter and audience to transcend the usual rules and strictures of their society. It grants poetic licence to participants to locate themselves in the midst of an epic narrative capable of sustaining the most dramatic extremes of human behaviour. It is to this feature that Ursula Dronke alludes when she writes of Gísli Súrsson,

> In his saga Gísli is never said to be a poet, so natural has the convention become that emotion, inmost thoughts, and visions, are to be expressed by any man (if expressed at all) in verse: as if these human utterances, precious in content as well as in style, are, by some archaic, instinctive, protective taboo, to be kept remote from the traffic of common speech.[75]

The key to achieving this state is complicity between reciter and audience, and the strongest means of sustaining this is by tapping into or invoking a common cultural memory and legacy. The reciter

74 See further Fínnegan (1977), p.126.
75 Ursula Dronke, 'The Poet's Persona in the Skalds' Sagas', *Parergon* 22 (1978), 24.

is the epicentre of this dramatic event – his own identity, ironically, forgotten and subsumed in a collective sense of ethnic and cultural communality.[76] His authority is derived from his *orðaforði* – his word-stock – and from the commonly agreed ancient provenance of his tales. Strikingly, it is not necessary that an audience considers the tales to be true – nowhere in the *Edda* does the narrative persona explicitly assert the veracity of his stories (although he may do so through proxies such as Grípir) – only that they should be considered genuinely archaic. In this way he presents himself as an objective transmitter of the traditional inheritance, and empowers his audience to act as the subjective judges of its value. The standard poetic intervention is always to quote hearsay, never to question it.

The storyteller is the prompt for a collective act of recollection, not the sole recollector in his own right. For this reason he may improve or embroider his tales, but the outcome and substance must remain familiar. He is not acting in the capacity of poet – or maker – but rather of prism through whose words the world of the ancients may be glimpsed.[77]

iii. Remembrance of Things to Come

As much as a storyteller must perforce concern himself with what has already taken place, the *Íslendingasǫgur*, like the heroic and mythological poetry to which they are so frequently indebted, are also littered with prophecies of what is still to come. Sometimes the narrative voice will anticipate the future course of events, and sometimes mystical or prescient figures will acquaint characters with a foretaste of their destinies. Indeed, so steeped in the language of anticipation are some sagas that the agency of the prophet and that of the storyteller are at times difficult to distinguish. The divinatory ability of prophets is frequently associated with such characteristics as great wisdom and long memories. As we have seen, this association would not be surprising to any

[76] Else Mundal, 'Memory of the Past and Old Norse Identity', in Doležalová *et al* (2010), p.468.

[77] Or, rather, 'heard,' as Margaret Clunies Ross implies in her elegantly titled study *Prolonged Echoes* (Odense, 1994-1998).

reader familiar with the eddic tradition, in which mythological beings like the *jǫtunn* Vafþrúðnir and the oracle of *Vǫluspá* take considerable pains to impress upon us the antiquity of their wisdom in order to establish the accuracy of their foresighted utterances.[78] This association between past and future may put us in mind of the philosophy of Saint Augustine who claimed that mastery over a narrative requires more than simply the ability to recount it in a linear form. The gifted storyteller must retain the capacity to move backwards and forwards within his text while still retaining a sense of the whole.[79]

A recent trend in studies of the Old Norse oral tradition – especially as it is supposed to have persisted in Iceland after the Settlement – has been towards Carol Clover's concept of the 'Immanent Saga.'[80] As promulgated in her monograph of 1986, this model envisages long prose narratives existing in a fluid state in the popular consciousness, and taking fixed form only during the process of 'telling' (or 'retelling') before an audience. Tommy Danielsson further develops this notion by imagining 'det muntliga havet' ('the oral sea'),[81] within which compositions were constantly in flux. He uses this model to account for the anonymity of much of the surviving literature, as each extant text was probably derived via an extensive genealogy of authors, all claiming to trace their respective versions back to eyewitness testimony and to 'sǫgum fornum' ('ancient tales'). As a result of this culture of reuse and recycling, storytellers – for all that they must have possessed certain exceptional qualities as performers – would frequently find themselves relating stories in circumstances where the main actions and events were already well known to their audiences.[82] While it is not incumbent on the listener (or reader) to understand every allusion

78 See Chapter 1 of this study.
79 Carruthers (2008), pp.21-2. See also Augustine's *Confessiones*, ed. and trans. William Watts, corrected by W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge MA, 1960-61).
80 Clover (1986). See also John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington, 1991).
81 Tommy Danielsson, *Sagorna om Norges kungar: Från Magnús góði till Magnús Erlingsson* (Hedemora, 2002). See also review by Theodore M. Andersson, 'Five Saga Books for a New Century: A Review Essay', *JEGP* 103:4 (October 2004), 505-27. The image itself has a long history and numerous literary manifestations – see, for instance, Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (London: 1998).
82 This would certainly have been true of poetry. See Richard Harris, 'A Study of *Grípisspá*', *SS* 43:4 (1971), 346.

in a saga in order to have a working understanding of the narrative as a whole. The better informed the reader or auditor, the more capable he would be of anticipating the course of events that the saga-teller was in the process of relating.

The mid-thirteenth century appears to have witnessed a concerted antiquarian endeavour to preserve the old stories, as evidenced by such works as Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*, the prologue to *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, and the Codex Regius manuscript. From these we can infer an emerging awareness, at least in literate circles, of the disappearance of this common familiarity with the stories which made up the 'open sea' of oral transmission – possibly linked to the increasingly literate mentality of Icelandic society.[83]

Nevertheless, the written texts as they have come down to us remain remarkably allusive and intertextual, with one saga frequently anticipating or commenting on another.[84] As Richard Allen has remarked, 'Saga literature, like oral literature, has a built-in allusiveness.'[85] As such, sagas and their sources were conceived of as interdependent. To borrow Tommy Danielsson's metaphor again, written texts were islands, rising out of the oral sea of story. Their authors frequently acknowledged them as such – regularly alluding to a shared heritage of stories and presenting their work as but one instalment in an ongoing saga which, like human history, was circumscribed only by the creation and the Final Judgement.

In his analysis of *Njáls saga*, Miller suggests that the author, at least of the version which survives today, was highly conscious of the pseudo-prophetic gift which he and his audience potentially shared in knowing beforehand the histories of Njáll and Gunnarr. Any oral performance of this saga unsupported by a manuscript would have amounted to a test both of the storyteller's memory and of his audience's. Even were the saga to be read aloud from a book, the memory of the audience would still be tested in terms of their ability to remember the identities of figures from

83 Mundal, 'How did the Arrival of Writing Influence Old Norse Oral Culture?', in Ranković *et al* (2010), pp.178-9.
84 Lethbridge (2013), p.93.
85 Allen (1971), pp.68-9.

elsewhere in the story, and throughout the saga tradition, and to establish for themselves in the moment of transmission the same allusions and parallels which scholars are in the business of collecting today. Miller argues that from its very first word the text plays on such foreknowledge: ‘For those who were familiar with some version of the story in which they knew a Mord figured prominently, the tone borne by the saga's first word is ominous.’[86] He goes on to describe ‘a Cervantian kind of jokesterism’ in the story's frequent use of parallel namesakes, citing similarities between this Mǫrðr's relationship with Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson and the later case of another Mǫrðr (Valgarðsson) being linked to another Hǫskuldr (Hvítanesgoði) – an equally acrimonious association.[87] There is a certain dark humour to be derived from this parallel in the context of a saga built around the central device of Njáll and Gunnar striving to resolve a seemingly endless succession of interrelated family feuds. Two generations on from the opening episode of the saga, there is still no love lost between a Mǫrðr and a Hǫskuldr.

A similar device may be detected in the eddic tradition, where the sharing of a name frequently suggests a significant relationship between two otherwise quite distinct figures.[88] Miller is not necessarily suggesting that every detail of the saga was foreknown by the audience – quite the contrary – but it is surely probable that some of their number came to it already familiar with references to key plot points from other sources, such as the following, from *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*: ‘Þat hefir it þriðja þing verit fjǫlmennast, annat eptir brennu Njáls, it þriðja eptir Heiðarvíg’ (‘That was the third most crowded Thing, another [was] after Njáll's burning, and a third after the killings on the Heath.’)[89] Whether or not the early audiences of the saga knew this particular reference is beside the point, although it is noteworthy that the author of this saga sees no

86 Miller (2014), p.18. For a similar interpretation see Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Some Types of Ambiguities in the Sagas of Icelanders’, *ANF* 119 (2004), 47.

87 Miller (2014), p.175.

88 See, for instance, the multiple characters named Helgi who feature in *Helgakviða Hundingsbani II*, and the inclusion of the text of *Helgakviða Hiǫrvarðsonar* between the two poems which concern his namesake.

89 *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, pp.95-6. The killings on the heath are described in *Heiðarvíga saga*, making this a doubly-allusive passage. Chapter 137 of *Njáls saga* refers to the Althing following the burning as the most populous of all such meetings that men could remember.

need to elaborate on what he means by the reference to Njáll's burning – as why should he, since it attracted so much attention from Njáll's contemporaries? Rather, this reference serves as but one example to show how Njáll was associated in the popular consciousness with the event of his burning. The Icelanders who first gathered to hear his saga told probably contained at least some among their number who, from the moment of his introduction, were prolepticly anticipating the climactic manner of his demise. The storyteller's role was therefore not to surprise them with the fact of the burning (although he may have caused them to question their own memories by framing the story in a particularly original way), but rather to entertain them with the manner of his describing it and with his ingenious and allusive artistic devices tying Njáll's story to the larger world of story in which he was viewed as but one protagonist among many.[90]

Indeed, given the propensity of characters to appear in multiple sagas throughout the corpus, one device for achieving this – at least in this written version of the story – might have been the choice to focus the early part of the saga on Gunnarr before pivoting to Njáll and sustaining the narrative beyond Gunnarr's demise. As Clover writes,

> For all their individual ‘completeness,’ the sagas share characters, dovetail matter, and refer and defer to one another in a way that suggests that they were not conceived of as self-contained wholes but as interrelated or interdependent members of a larger undertaking.[91]

There could readily have been a ‘Gunnarr's saga’ - indeed, given his stature, it is not unlikely that there was – but this is not it. Here his story, like Mǫrðr's, is related through the prism of Njáll's, and each protagonist in turn is caught up in an undercurrent which contains the story of Iceland, the language once again reminiscent of the ‘open sea.’ Whenever we read that a character is ‘úr sǫgunni’ (‘out of the saga’)[92] the impression created is that the story has an agency of its own, and moreover that it is rooted in a time and place rather than an individual. Gunnarr and Njáll both leave

[90] Kellogg (1991) introduces the phrase ‘world of story,’ which serves a similar conceptual function to Tommy Danielsson's ‘sea of orality.’
[91] Clover (1982), p.41.
[92] The phrase appears in ch.12, ch.17 and twice in ch.80 of *Njáls saga*. Similarly, characters are said to be ‘úr sǫgu’ in ch.81 and ch.145.

the saga, but the narrative continues in their absence. Certainly, they continue to exert an influence on events from beyond the grave – the institutional memory of their importance, preserved among their relatives, is the catalyst for the blood-feud with which the last chapters of the saga are concerned – but the implication conveyed by 'úr sǫgunni' is that characters come and go and the storyteller really had no control over them since the core of the story was irreducible and unalterable. Like Óðinn's raven Muninn, they steer their own course. As we have seen already, this is a feint, but an effective one, since it once again presents the storyteller as the authentic voice of the past, exceptional in his wisdom, but removed from the action and apparently unable to affect its course towards a predetermined end.

Thus audiences might approach the sagas with foreknowledge of the fate awaiting many of the key characters, but remain one step behind the storyteller in anticipating on which families, localities or incidents he would choose to focus. In an oral rendering, these choices might vary from teller to teller – or even from one recital to the next – with audiences delighted and surprised not by the course events took but by the editorial and performative choices made by the individual storyteller, under the veil of historical authenticity. We know how Njáll is to die, but not necessarily when – whether in this saga or another. It is therefore appropriate that sagas should end, rather than begin, with a statement of their subject matter – as, in this case, 'Ok lýk ek þar Brennu-Njáls sǫgu' ('And thus I end burnt Njáll's saga').[93] Prior to this appellation, the saga is not the property of any one of its characters. Indeed, Miller even presents a picture of different participants vying for 'ownership' of the story, staking their claim to predominance in the absence of a named author/narrator.[94] For our purposes it is significant to note the phrasing of this closing line which implies at once that the saga belongs to its principal protagonist, rather than to any author; and, at the same time, that this claim to ownership is conferred by the saga-teller or scribe (speaking here,

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[93] *Njáls saga*, p.464.
[94] Miller (2014), p.210. See also Allen (1971), p.95.

as nowhere else, in the first person).[95] Sagas are never autobiographical, like some eddic poetry – their tellers are never identified with their primary subjects – but they do depend for their coherence and identities on the agency of those tellers, whether working in a literate or oral medium.

In relation to this question of who owns or predominates in a saga, Gísli Sigurðsson – also a notable proponent of the 'immanent saga' thesis – explores the case of Þorkell Geitsson, who appears throughout the corpus as a significant 'bit player' in several sagas.[96] Despite a rich and dynamic biography, we have no surviving record of a saga in his name ever having been composed. Nonetheless, Gísli submits, '...there is enough material for such a saga, and that the audience could have been familiar with what can be called 'The Immanent Saga of Þorkell Geitsson.''[97] The significance of this proposition for us is to reinforce the selective editorial agency of the saga-teller, who alone chooses where and how to chart his narrative course, even though it passes through a series of landmarks already foreknown by his audience as well as by himself. Gísli's proposition may put us in mind of the remark by the late American actor Dabbs Greer that, 'Every character actor, in their own little sphere, is the lead.'[98]

Even without the closing attribution, it would be difficult to contend that Njáll is not the pre-eminent character in 'his' saga – but it is not always so clear, in the absence of authorial comment or manuscript rubric, whose story is being told. Modern readers instinctively look for such cues, and not all sagas are so slow to ascribe ownership to named participants. *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, for instance, when describing an episode from the life of King Hákon, draws on 'his' saga for corroboration: 'svá sem sagt er í sǫgu hans' ('just as it says in his saga').[99] Whether this refers

[95] There is some variation between the manuscripts containing the saga as to precisely how it ends. The closing statement quoted here is taken from the version of the saga recorded in Mǫðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.). Variations include 'lýkr' (Gráskinna: GKS 2870) or 'lúku vér' ('X' group MSS) for 'lýk ek.' See further footnote 1 on p.464 of the ÍF edition of the saga. For details of those manuscripts which constitute the 'X' group, see further p.clii of the Introduction to the ÍF edition.

[96] Gísli Sigurðsson, 2004.

[97] Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Methodologies for the Study of the Oral in Medieval Iceland', in Hildegard L. C. Tristram, ed., *Medieval Insular Literature between the Oral and the Written II* (Tübingen, 1997), p.190.

[98] In a speech to the Albany, NY, Times Union, 2000, quoted in Valerie J. Nelson, 'Dabbs Greer, 90; busy character actor played everyman-type roles', in *The Los Angeles York Times*, 1 May 2007.

[99] *Egils saga*, p.239.

directly to Snorri's version of the saga recorded in *Heimskringla* or to another version with which the scribe or author was familiar is unclear, but evidently readers encountering *Egils saga* in this form were expected to have access to or familiarity with some version of the events of Hákon's life, which was commonly referred to as ‘his’ saga. There may have been a number of variant versions in circulation at the same time, but by asserting Hákon's posthumous ownership of them all, the author of *Egils saga* conveniently circumvents the need to endorse a particular author's rendition of Hákon's life, and thus promotes the impression of consistency and intertextual coherence within the written saga genre.

Assuming the events and characteristics of major historical figures like King Hákon or Egill himself were well known to audiences, the primary space for innovation in a saga would be in depicting the minor characters, perhaps borrowing from a repertoire of remembered *þættir* those stories which most dramatically illuminated the lives of the protagonists. Such a tendency would account for the insertion of a figure like Hrappr into the professedly historical *Njáls* saga.[100] We have no record to corroborate the existence of Hrappr other than as a device of literary artifice, yet he is noteworthy in suborning the storyteller's prerogative to shape the narrative, at one point threatening Guðbrandr, his host, as follows: ‘“Mjǫk þykki mér ok logit frá þér,” segir Hrappr, “er þat var sagt at þú tœkir við ǫllum þeim, er þik bæði, ok engi maðr væri jafnágætr sem þú. Mun ek því í móti mæla, ef þú tekr eigi við mér”’ (‘“It seems to me that many lies have been told about you,” says Hrappr, “it was said that you take in all men, those who asked, and no man was as noble as you. But I will tell a different tale, if you will not take me in”’).[101] Again we witness the self-awareness which is characteristic of the most accomplished Icelandic literature. The storyteller has inserted a fictional character who provides commentary on the uncertain boundaries between fiction and historically-derived tradition, threatening to demean Guðbrandr's reputation in the minds of a

[100] See p.165 of this study.
[101] *Njáls saga*, p.210.

future audience. The inescapable subtext is that a storyteller is capable of having a substantial impact on the transmission of narrative, but more than this the episode with Hrappr serves to underline the essential importance of cultivating storytellers who are wise – whose authority is derived from 'sǫgum fornum' rather than invented. The role of the storyteller, from his panoramic position as foreknowing and historically wise narrator, is to '...look into the seeds of time, | And say which grain will grow, and which will not.'[102] As such, he draws on a store of common wisdom and familiar motifs to catalyse a new retelling of familiar events. His scope for innovation is limited by the need to conform to the foreknowledge of his audience, but he retains the capacity to impress them by drawing new and striking parallels between his own texts and others they may have known.

Certain sagas are more consciously prone to tout the narrator's prophetic credentials than others. *Vatnsdœla saga*, for instance, when describing Þorsteinn's escape from the monstrous hall-dweller Jǫkull, tells us, 'Þorsteini var annarra forlaga auðit en vera þar drepinn' ('Þorsteinn was not foredoomed to be killed there').[103] Given the supernatural overtones which permeate this scene, we may choose to infer from this statement an indication that Fate is playing an active role in the saga. It might equally be read, however, simply as a statement of authorial prescience – a nod and a wink (perhaps literally in the setting of an oral performance) to the audience, intended to draw them, once again, into complicity with the saga-teller through recognition of a foreknowledge they both share. The phrasing is, of course, retrospective – the storyteller knows that Þorsteinn's death must occur later in the narrative in order for the story to retain its traditional form, and so he is free to speak of it as though his survival in this instance is a foregone conclusion. Yet the language of destiny is a deliberate choice, evocative of the earliest eddic poems, suggesting not only that we know Þorsteinn's historic fate, but that his fate was preordained before ever the events in Jǫkull's hall took place. The storyteller is again calling attention to his pseudo-prophetic ability. Desire to achieve a

[102] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London, 1951), I. iii. 58-9.
[103] Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Vatnsdœla saga*, ÍF VIII (Reykjavík, 1939), p.8.

similar effect may underlie an equally prophetic passage in *Laxdœla saga,* in which the enigmatic Gestr Oddleifsson foresees the following end for the heroic Kjartan:

> Gestr svarar: 'Þarfleysa er at segja þat, en eigi nenni ek at þegja yfir því, er á þínum dǫgum mun fram koma; en ekki kemr mér at óvǫrum, þótt Bolli standi yfir hǫfuðsvǫrðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá ok hǫfuðbana, ok er þetta illt at vita um svá mikla ágætismenn.'[104]
>
> Gestr replies: 'There is no need to speak of that, but I won't hide it from you since you ask, as during your life it must come about. It would not seem strange to me if Bolli were to stand over Kjartan's head-guardian [corpse], and in harming him cause his own slaying, and this vision is even more saddening because of the excellence of these guests.'

There are a number of significant details in this passage, not least the prophet's reticence to predict the future until prompted to do so by his son. We see evidence of a similar cautiousness in texts like *Baldrs draumar* (st.4), and in *Grípisspá* (st.19), perhaps suggesting a deep-seated cultural sense that, even though it be known, the future should not be discussed lightly or without provocation. Possibly the foreshadowing of an event was believed to make its coming to pass all the more likely. It may be that such an understanding lies behind Oddr's reluctance to have his future read in *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*, and might again serve as an apt metaphor for the importance of reputation in a culture where the stories told about you would likely affect your future status and well-being – a powerful statement for a storyteller.[105] Joseph Harris makes this point overtly in reference to *Vǫluspá*, citing 'the vanishing distinction... between foretelling and foreshaping.'[106] There is a curious contrast in Gestr's remarks to Kjartan in *Laxdœla saga* between the cautious phrasing of his prediction ('ekki kemr mér at óvǫrum'), which seems to imply some uncertainty, and the level of detail into which the prophet feels competent to go, anticipating not only the slaying of Kjartan but also its repercussions for Bolli. Perhaps this prophet, though wise enough to anticipate the likely outcome for these two heroic men, yet holds out some hope that they may break the cycle of tragic repetitions laid down for them more by precedent than predestination. As a character in the saga,

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[104] *Laxdœla saga*, p.92.
[105] *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, i, pp.287-9.
[106] Harris and Reichl (2012), p.147.

Gestr cannot be certain of its outcome; as a mouthpiece for the storyteller, he is perpetually conscious of it.

Among the most iconic saga heroes like Skarpheðinn and Grettir, Kjartan is in some respects a consciously anachronistic throwback to an imagined heroic age. Kjartan stands near, if not necessarily on, the threshold between history and hyperbole. His implausible deeds elevate him to a status befitting his role in a saga which consciously draws on the eddic cycle recounting the deeds of Guðrún, Brynhildr, Gunnarr and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, whose role Kjartan fills in the cycle of retribution which Gestr's prophecy anticipates. It is worth noting Gestr's reticence to characterise his words as in any way the cause of Kjartan's death – he is merely chronicling it in advance. Again, the question of agency is vital for our conception of the storyteller: he is not driving events, merely interpreting them in the context of the fluid, intersecting stories with which he surrounds himself. In this way the saga circumvents Vésteinn Ólason's dictum that, ‘Unlike the narrators of novels and chivalric sagas, Íslendingasǫgur narrators never state in advance what will happen later, and never describe the same events more than once.’[107] On the contrary, the sagas are built on the principle of repetition echoing down the generations.

We might usefully ask what function Gestr serves in the story other than to mediate between the storyteller and his audience. Perhaps conscious that his auditors would approach each telling of this saga with a different level of foreknowledge, the inclusion of such excursus as Chapter 33 in which Gestr variously interprets Guðrún's dreams, answers Óláfr's questions and makes this prophecy privately to Þórðr, helped to ensure all members of his audience were equally primed for the direction the story was to take. As noted above, the saga-teller stops short of implicating Gestr in Kjartan's fate – he is merely a wise man who knows the outcome in advance because he has seen it all before. Heroic history is here seen repeating itself in the more tangibly familiar context of

[107] Vésteinn Ólason (1998), p.96. Vésteinn goes on to make this same exemption for cases of prophetic utterance on p.98, although he does not allow himself to be drawn into conflating the identities of the prophet and the proseist.

Saga Age Iceland. Gestr's prescience is essentially an advertisement for the value of the storyteller's otherwise intangible wares: knowledge of the past, the subtext goes, equates to seemingly uncanny foreknowledge of the future. In this way the storyteller effectively, albeit indirectly, raises his own status through his implied kinship with Gestr. The latter is not said to derive his prophetic awareness from magical means, any more than does Njáll when he foresees the outcome of lawsuits. Rather, prophecy is derived from precedent, and an understanding of the relationship between cause and effect: an old and wise man who has seen it all before accurately predicts how events will turn out this time around. In this respect, the term 'cycle,' so often applied by scholars to such epic poetic sequences as the *Niebelungenlied* and the heroic poems concerning the Vǫlsungs and Gjúkungs in the *Poetic Edda*, is particularly apposite: time is cyclical, in the tradition of the Greek notion of *καιρός* ('Kairos'), and stories which took place once tend to recur as frequently in fact as in fiction. In this sense, Gestr's very name is suggestive: he poses as a guest from the world of the past (which is also the world of the future) expounding his age-old wisdom in the present tense. The oral tradition maps this recurrence more accurately than a literate one, since details are prone to change in each retelling although the narrative skeleton remains unyielding. Both the narrator of *Laxdœla saga* and Gestr Oddleifsson are telling the same story – the one in the past tense, the other in the future – and both can therefore lay comparable claims to understanding its ramifications for future generations.

As suggested above, Gestr serves during this prophetic interlude in Chapter 33 as a mouthpiece for the narrator, who is intruding on his own narrative, though at pains to adopt the persona of a real, verifiable authority in order to escape the charge of having in any way altered the true course of historical events. This same Gestr (appropriately named, as he is effectively a 'guest' actor in sagas named for others) also features as a wise and foreknowing authority in *Gísla saga, Njáls saga*, *Kristni saga*, *Króka-Refs saga* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings,* and is historically attested

in *Landnámabók.* Throughout the corpus he is described in terms of his wisdom and foresightedness, with each new reference to him enhancing his reputation for these qualities in the public consciousness. Again, the intertextual habit of the sagas and the sense of a common awareness of key recurring figures helps the modern reader to realise the significance of Gestr's prophecies whenever they occur (they are never wrong), and accounts for his particular suitability to act as proxy for the saga-teller, whose art is concerned with the structuring and sustaining of a largely foreknown narrative. To this extent he functions much like Tiresias in the orally-derived Greek tradition – known and trusted for his proleptic ability, and thus a suitable vehicle for the narrator to comment on events outside of the linear timestream of the saga. This identifying of the saga-teller with his representation of Gestr Oddleifsson makes particularly pertinent Þórðr's question, in relation to his father's foresightedness: 'Hvat berr nú þess við, faðir minn, er þér hrynja tár?' ('Now what does this mean, my father, that there are tears in your eyes?')[108] Foreknowing as he is, Gestr can still be touched by the tragedy of Kjartan's downfall and the collapse of his friendship with Bolli. Through Gestr, the storyteller invites his audience to participate in a similarly emotional response to his story. Like Chaucer's intrusive Hoost in *The Canterbury Tales*, Gestr is an intradiegetic narrator, providing commentary on the saga even in the telling of it.

A prophet like Gestr knows what course events will take without necessarily shaping them; yet by acquainting the subject of a prophecy with its contents, the speaker can hardly be considered wholly innocent of what follows. The distinction between knowing a person's future and being instrumental in bringing about that future is one of the more complex concerns of saga-tellers, who are vocationally conscious of the need to indemnify themselves against the latter charge. In alluding as it does to the eddic heroic cycle from which Guðrún derives her name and Kjartan his heroic stature, the text of *Laxdœla saga* implicitly draws on such seemingly heathen notions as fate and predestination, as exemplified in these lines from *Hamðismál*: 'Kveld lifir maðr ekki | eptir kvið

[108] *Laxdœla saga*, p.92.

norna' ('No man outlives the evening | after the Norns' sentence.')[109] The agency of such figures as the Norns is notably absent from the *Íslendingasǫgur,* meaning that foreknowledge of the future is less readily explained away. In the example from *Laxdœla saga* discussed above, Gestr is making no claim to have authorship over the fates of Kjartan and Bolli – he is simply their faithful chronicler. Although he is called wise, he is not a sorcerer – indeed, he actively resists sorcery, and is among the first of the Icelanders to convert to Christianity according to the text of *Njáls saga*.[110] As such we must presume that his apparently prophetic wisdom is derived not through magical but through mundane means. If he – like the author, for whom he speaks – is sufficiently perceptive to sense the 'subtle repetitions, parallels and echoes in gradually changing circumstances'[111] which connect the story of Kjartan and Bolli (perhaps an invention of the author's, though Gestr encounters it first-hand) to the Sigurðr/Gunnarr legend, then his prophetic utterance may derive from simple deduction, rather than supernatural inspiration. Saga literature is thus an echo-chamber for blending the reverberations of history, memory and myth.[112] The same motifs, circumstances and relationship dynamics recur frequently. In this respect the performance of a saga in the oral tradition would have closely resembled Marvin Carlson's conception of drama when he writes,

> One of the most important effects of drama's recycling of material is that it encourages audiences to compare varying versions of the same story, leading them to pay closer attention to how the story is told and less to the story itself. Thus, in a kind of paradox the author uses a familiar story to emphasize the originality of his contribution.[113]

As noted above, such a contribution on the part of a saga-teller would not necessarily have been thought of in terms of his alteration to the plot, but rather the way in which he presented his narrative; what he chose to foreground, whom he praised, and how he generated dramatic tension in

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[109] *Hamðismál*, st.30.

[110] *Njáls saga*, pp.267-9.

[111] Introductory note to the saga in Bernard Scudder *et al*, trans., *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection* (London, 2001), p.174.

[112] For a discussion of the role of the sagas in shaping perceptions of national identity among Icelanders see Slavica Ranković, 'The Performative Non-Canonicity of the Canonical: *Íslendingasǫgur* and their Traditional Referentiality', in Lars Boje Mortensen, Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen and Alexandra Bergholm, eds, *Medieval Identities: Socio-Cultural Spaces 3* (Turnhout, 2013), pp.247-72.

[113] Carlson (2003), p.27. See also Ranković (2013), p.248.

relating a fundamentally familiar story.[114]

If the sagas are somewhat equivocal in their representation of purported prophets, we need only look to the *Poetic Edda* for less circumspect literary manifestations of the seer. Many of the texts contained in this anthology, like *Hamðismál*, were surely in the early saga-tellers' minds as they constructed each new retelling of their particular subject matter. The heroic world of the *Edda* is, in some respects, reassuringly uncomplicated: fate is ineluctable, and mere men (and even gods) have no agency to resist or alter it. Like Gestr Oddleifsson, the sage Grípir, who features in the poem *Grípisspá*, tells the story of Sigurðr's life in a way that is, at once, familiar to the poem's audience and novel to its subject. We are thus rendered co-prophets, complicit in the poet's narrative, aware both of the content and veracity of Grípir's words, and similarly powerless to stop them from coming true: Sigurðr's future is our far-distant past. Of course, the example of *Laxdæla saga* suggests that our past is prone to repeat itself if its lessons go unheeded. In recapitulating past tragedies, the storyteller achieves the feat of tutoring his audience without overtly appearing to do so; conflating their experiences with those of their forebears, be they real or imagined. This observation raises questions as to his status, as a performer, relative to that of his audience: his power derives from his knowledge and his skill in performing that which he knows, yet the reluctance to impose an overt moral on his narrative may suggest that the storyteller or eddic reciter was seldom of the same high status as figures like Grípir and Gestr whose voices he was prone to appropriate. This mode of storytelling through the medium of prophecy would have had an especially visceral effect in the oral tradition, in which there is no fixed, static account of the prophecy's outcome to refer back (or, rather, forward) to. It may be that each of the storyteller's auditors thinks he or she knows the eventual outcome of the tale, but they cannot know it with certainty until it is told. This is the same tension between the anticipated and the hoped for end

[114] That the plots of the various sagas were familiar and mutually intelligible to their various authors is attested by numerous intertextual references. For a development of this argument, see Clover (1986), esp. p.41; also Emily Lethbridge, 'Dating the Sagas and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*', in Else Mundal, ed., *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen, 2013), p.93.

which so transfixes the heroine of Willy Russell's play *Educating Rita* that it allows Frank to describe how, 'even without ever having heard the story of *Macbeth* you wanted to shout out, to warn him and prevent him going on, didn't you? But you wouldn't have been able to stop him would you?'[115] Though ignorant of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, the medieval Icelandic storyteller was nonetheless well versed in its application.

The cyclical nature of the poem *Vǫluspá*, like the echoes of the Sigurðr narrative in *Laxdœla saga*, seems to suggest that the tellers of such tales occupy a pan-optical position in time and space, with their knowledge of the past informing their knowledge of the future. In his celebrated analysis of the poem, Sigurður Nordal remarked that,

> ...the future is always hidden in the past, as few men have realized more clearly than the author of *Völuspá*, and no one can make others trust in his untested prophetic gift unless he demonstrates his knowledge of the secrets of former times.[116]

Unlike the saga authors, bound to a convention of telling their story as a progression through linear time, *Vǫluspá* travels from the present to the distant past, then on into the future before resolving itself on a scene reminiscent of the Genesis narrative and the rebirth of the world in historical time. Like the later saga authors, the 'great poet of the *Doom*' enacts a symphonic interplay between past and future.[117] Again resorting to a dramatic metaphor, Judy Quinn describes how, 'Spatially the speaker in *Vǫluspá* is constructed as the observer of a panorama, where the world is transformed into a stage, and world history into a series of entrances and exits from that stage.'[118] The opening invocation of the poem is addressed at once to 'mǫgu Heimdalar' ('Heimdallr's children') and 'Valfǫðr' ('Father of the slain')[119] – that is, the race of men, the poem's present audience who are to survive the cataclysm of *Ragnarǫk*, and the leader of the gods whose decease the seeress will prophesy. The poet/prophetess, who declares her intention (or obligation) to sink ('søkkvask') at the

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[115] Willy Russell, *Educating Rita* (London, 2001), I. vi.
[116] Sigurður Nordal (1970-73), p.91.
[117] Ker (1922), p.139.
[118] Judy Quinn, '*Vǫluspá* and the Composition of Eddic Verse', in ed. Pàroli (1990), p.316.
[119] *Vǫluspá,* st.1. See note on p.39 for the alternative Hauksbók reading.

end of the poem, is therefore narrating her vision from a relatively raised position which we might be tempted to associate with the elevated 'þular stóli' ('þulr's chair') referenced in *Hávamál* (st.111) or even with Óðinn's 'Hliðskjálf'[120] – the raised chair from which he can see into all worlds, though presumably not all times, since he relies on such prophets as this vǫlva and such emissaries as his ravens for that vantage.[121] In rising, as she does, to declaim her poem, the seeress implicitly sets herself apart from her subject – above it, looking down. By means of this spatial metaphor she separates herself from the events which transpire, distinguishing herself, as an observer, from supernatural agents such as the *nornir* who play an active part in governing the fate of men. She is therefore a reviewer of the unfolding drama, rather than an actor in it, and thus aligned with the storyteller (or reciter) who impersonates her voice.

In an article of 2012 Terry Gunnell used the term 'performance archaeology' to describe the process of seeking to infer the conditions for oral transmission of a poem from clues encoded in the (admittedly later) written text.[122] Describing the action in *Vafþrúðnismál*, for example, he notes that Óðinn repeatedly resists the giant's invitation to sit, and posits two reasons for this: first, that by continuing to stand Óðinn would appear defiant, and second, that in this way he would remain visible to a large audience, whether standing or sitting.[123] In a similar way, the vǫlva's physical aloofness provides her with a better vantage point, while simultaneously exposing her to greater public scrutiny. The parallels with the performer are obvious: set on a stage, he or she is exposed to the praise or censure of an audience, and the convention of declaiming from an elevated position was thus naturally associated with performance. It is no coincidence that the superlatively dramatic eddic poem *Skírnismál* begins with an instruction to Skírnir to assume a similarly elevated position: 'Rístu nú' ('rise now') as he is awoken by Skaði.[124] Similarly, if we were to believe, with Bertha

[120] Referred to in the prose prologue to *Skírnismál* and in *Gylfaginning*, p.13.
[121] Note the parallel with the high seat set up for Þorbjǫrg lítil-vǫlva in *Eríks saga rauða* discussed on p.62 of this study.
[122] Gunnell (2012), p.18.
[123] Gunnell (2012), p.33.
[124] *Skírnismál*, st.1.

Phillpotts, that the prose passages attached to *Fáfnismál* in the Codex Regius represent actions traditionally associated with performances of the poem, it is surely notable that Sigurðr begins the poem by rising out of a pit into the performance arena.[125]

Storytellers do not necessarily share the vǫlva's claim to secret knowledge, but they are like her in controlling the presentation of whatever knowledge they do possess, and drawing inferences from it through allusion and intertextual contrast. It would have been perfectly possible to retell the events of *Laxdœla saga* without relating them to the exemplar of the Sigurðr cycle, but it is in this very act of association – in connecting two spatially and temporally distant narratives – that the storyteller fulfils the obligation of his craft. If his text has prophetic implications for his present (or intended future) audience, he must deliver them cautiously and generally, to avoid the appearance of criticising his listeners by associating them with the less fortunate characters in his tale. Nonetheless, by connecting Kjartan to Sigurðr he brings the mythic hero a degree closer to his historical counterpart; and by conflating the distance between them, he evokes contemporary resonances for his audience – suddenly the lives of past heroes are not so far removed from the present. Such a technique sustains the 'double-scene' device common to both eddic and saga literature as promulgated by Lönnroth and discussed in Chapter 1 of this study.[126]

Foreknowledge of the future is almost always presented as a heavy burden – particularly for those whose fates are themselves implicated in that knowledge. The dictum of *Hávamál*,

> ørlǫg sín
> viti engi fyrir,
> þeim er sorgalausastr sefi.[127]
>
> Of his fate
> let him not know beforehand–
> whose mind is most sorrowless.

is laden with dramatic irony when we consider that these words are usually ascribed to Óðinn who,

[125] See Phillpotts (1920).
[126] Lönnroth (1978); Lönnroth (1979).
[127] *Hávamál* st.56.

like the poem's auditors and readers, is well aware of the ultimate circumstances of his fated demise.[128] As noted already, the imperative facing the poet or storyteller in the world of foregone conclusions and constantly recycled narratives is to remain just one step ahead of his audience, subtly adjusting and augmenting his inherited text to better fit the present context for delivery. As Slavica Ranković suggests,

> With each performance (return, repetition), a saga would have been the site of iteration and change, a place where communal identity, ideals, and values were not simply passed down, 'taught' to the young, but were simultaneously being learnt from these 'pupils' in the live interactions in which the very confirmation of one's identity vitally depends on continual renegotiation and readjustment in order for it to fit a changing world.[129]

Her observations clearly have a bearing on poetic recital, too, when we consider the example of *Vǫluspá,* which survives in variant versions all built around the same narrative skeleton. In this sense, fate, at least in the eddic tradition, may be considered somewhat elastic. The beginnings and ends of stories are known, but Tommy Danielsson's metaphor of 'the open sea' helps us to visualise the infinitely multiplicitous nexus of possibilities that could be drawn on in order to connect the one to the other. Thus the story of *Ragnarǫk* could be told over the course of a single poem (such as *Vǫluspá*) or through a sequence of poems, perhaps including *Hyndluljóð*; or indeed, as evidenced by the variant versions of *Vǫluspá* in the *Codex Regius, Hauksbók* and *Snorra Edda,* at greater or lesser length, with a variety of details compiled according to the demands of the audience and the occasion, and the capacity and caprices of the reciter. Ursula Dronke has even suggested that some eddic poems may have left space for improvised contributions from multiple participants during performance.[130] The activity of characters within the tradition reflects this elastic understanding of destiny as something which may be deferred though not defeated. In his analysis of *Lokasenna*, John McKinnell posits that Loki's intention in disrupting Ægir's feast is, 'to hurry Fate along by provoking a final breach between himself and the gods.'[131] He goes on:

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[128] Dronke (2011), p.37.
[129] Ranković (2013), p.248.
[130] Dronke (2011), p.36.
[131] John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge, 2005), p.176.

> If my interpretation of Loki's purpose is correct, Þórr is quite simply a fool. He makes no attempt to delay the final breach with Loki, but charges straight in with violent threats which we know are in contradiction of Fate and therefore cannot be carried out.[132]

It is interesting to note the implicit distinction here between a god's ability either to hasten or delay the inevitable, but not ultimately to avert it. Again, the parallels with the storyteller are direct: he is not the author of the tradition, but he retains both the ability and the obligation, given that the end of his tale is often if not always a foregone conclusion, to control the pace and emphasis in his retelling. Whether working from a mental script or improvising from traditional formulae and motifs, the role from which he derived praise or blame was that of performer, not author, and it is therefore to the performative qualities associated with prophetic figures in the texts – such as Gestr's tears – that we should address our attention.

The example of *Lokasenna*, as interpreted by McKinnell, provides a fine metaphor for the two classes of reader or auditor who might have been exposed to these stories in the oral culture of medieval Iceland. On the one hand we have those participants in the tradition who – like Óðinn and Loki – already know the general course which fate will take and are therefore empowered, like the storyteller, to manipulate the events leading to that inexorable conclusion. These participants, the storyteller's peers, we may think of as sailors on the 'sea of orality,' who themselves possessed the capacity to appropriate, reshape and retransmit the same stories in their turn – who were, like the seeress of *Vǫluspá*, elevated above the level of the waves and able to plot a course forward or backward. On the other hand, those who were hearing these tales for the first time were at a disadvantage, unable to appreciate them in all their allusive complexity. These men and women we may think of as swimmers – surrounded by the oral tradition, but unable to effectively chart their way through it. Whether this image of the sea would have been recognised by Old Norse storytellers is difficult to establish beyond doubt, but it fits well with the attested trend of metaphors equating the transference of knowledge with the passage of liquids from one place or person to

132 McKinnell (2005), p.193.

another.[133] Such metaphors are particularly in evidence in the *Prose Edda*, for instance in the story of the mead of poetry (*Skáldskaparmál*, ch.5). The ability to evince mastery over the allusive network which constituted the oral tradition was certainly much admired by Snorri, as the following passage from *Gylfaginning* suggests: 'Þá mælir Gangleri: "Geysi mǫrg heiti hafi þér gefit honum. Ok þat veit trúa mín at þetta mun vera mikill fróðleikr sá er hér kann skyn ok dœmi hverir atburðir hafa orðit sér til hvers þessa nafns"' ('Then says Gangleri: "You have given him a great many names. And I believe it to be true that he must be a very wise man here who can give details and examples of every event implied by each of these names"').[134]

The many names of Óðinn, it is implied, act as mnemonic triggers for the wise man's memory – and memory, as we have seen, encompasses both the past and, through deduction, the future.[135] Óðinn's quest for foreknowledge of *Ragnarǫk* may therefore be closely connected with his concern for the daily return of his raven Muninn: both his past and future are uncertain, and so he constantly turns to storytellers (Vafþrúðnir, the *vǫlur*) to provide a stable sense of continuity from the one to the other. Implicit in Snorri's mission when composing his *Edda* was an antiquarian's desire to preserve the influence and status of the storyteller in a world increasingly determined and defined by men of literacy. The Æsir relate their stories orally to Gylfi, before discharging him to return with them to his own kingdom to be tested on his own wisdom. We might be tempted to ask why they don't simply give him a book. Perhaps in preserving the dialogic structure of the exchange, indebted as it is to wisdom poems like *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál*, Snorri intends to both elevate and protect the legacy of the oral storytelling form. The anonymity of the three storytelling Æsir is a characteristic which allows them to readily appropriate the collective voice of the 'sǫgum fornum.'

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133 See Quinn (2010), pp.184-5.

134 *Gylfaginning*, p.22. On the important relationship between one's name and one's identity, see pp.27-8 of this study.

135 For a detailed study of memory in the European Middle Ages and the practice of remembering a text so comprehensively as to move backwards and forwards in it at will see Carruthers (1990), pp.21, 238. See also Mundal, 'Memory of the Past and Old Norse Identity', in Doležalová (2010), p.464.

That voice often expresses itself in fatalistic terms throughout the eddic corpus. Echoing the doom-laden sentiments expressed in the earlier *Hamðismál*, the poet of *Grípisspá* has his hero exclaim, ‘munat skǫpum vinna’ (‘you cannot win against fate’).[136] Strikingly, this poem appears in the Codex Regius immediately after another text which incorporates a similar expression. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbani II*, Helgi reassures his bride with the words, ‘vinnat skjǫldungar skǫpum’ (‘the princes cannot resist fate’).[137] Here are conveniently juxtaposed one of the older poems in the corpus and one of the younger, both of which dwell on the limits of the hero's power and the storyteller's art. Grípir's fidelity to the truth is frequently asserted throughout the text – he is described as honest and wise, and despite his protestations to the contrary Sigurðr demands of him that he engage his prophetic gift.[138] Two further details in this text are of particular value for our purposes. The closing stanza, spoken by Sigurðr, confirms Grípir's state as foreknowing without the ability to influence or alter his subject's fate. His agency to speak these prophetic words depends on Sigurðr's visit and his invitation to do so.[139] Some of the prose texts we have examined (*Ǫrvar-Odds saga*, for instance) present the prophet as a pilgrim, overtly seeking a platform upon which to perform. In the eddic tradition, however, his wisdom is always actively sought out, with the subject travelling as pilgrim or supplicant to learn the nature of their fate (*Vǫluspá*; *Vafþrúðnismál*). While this dynamic necessarily raises the status of the poetic prophet, compared with that of his prose counterpart, it does nothing to enhance his agency to reveal or conceal: there is no prophecy in the *Edda* which contains or constitutes a lie, and the honesty of Grípir – linked to his age – is frequently stressed. In this sense, he is like Gestr and the various *vǫlur* whom Óðinn consults: aware of the future, but powerless to alter its course. He, too, is a slave to the tradition in which he is a participant performer – an observation which reinforces the link between seer and storyteller. The

136 *Grípisspá*, st.53.
137 *Helgakviða Hundingsbani II*, st.23.
138 *Grípisspá*, st.21.
139 *Grípisspá*, st.6. Note that the poem makes clear who initiates the prophecy by distinguishing it from the general conversation described in the previous stanza.

other salient detail in this poem occurs in stanza 48 where Sigurðr demands to know,

> 'Hvat er þá, Grípir,
> get þú þess fyr mér,
> mun ek saðr vera
> at sǫgo þeiri,
> eða lýgr á mik
> lofsæl kona
> ok á sjálfa sik?
> Segðu, Grípir, þat.'[140]
>
> 'What is this, Grípir,
> you infer this for me,
> must they come true
> these stories?
> Or else shall she lie about me,
> that praiseworthy woman,
> and also herself?
> Grípir, tell me that.'

Even in a context where the outcome is known to and trusted by all concerned (hero and prophet; audience and reciter) the heroic imperative is still to express hope against inexorable odds. Sigurðr's doom is a matter of fact surely known to all those who encounter this poem, yet the text retains dramatic interest precisely because, in confronting his certain demise, the hero retains his resolution to play his allotted part. Such courage surely spoke to an audience who, in Else Mundal's words, 'were not only preoccupied with their own past, but by the way they would be remembered once they themselves had become the past.'[141] In mediating between the past and the future, the storyteller asserts his custodianship of the reputations of individuals and of the society and ethos they represent. Storytelling is, by its nature, conservative since it is a memorial tradition, yet it must also continue to innovate if the storyteller is to remain afloat on the 'sea of orality' and so distinguish himself and his agency from the tides and undercurrents upon which he ultimately depends. The storyteller makes himself the mouthpiece for that tradition. In the words of Gísli Súrsson, renowned both as a martial hero and a man of words – as well as a prophetic dreamer –

[140] *Grípisspá*, st.48.
[141] Mundal, 'Memory of the Past and Old Norse Identity', in Doležalová (2010), p.464.

'því at mæla verðr einnhverr skapanna málum' ('Fate must find someone to speak through').[142] In other words, men have allotted parts to play, in life as in literature, and the part of the storyteller is to memorialise the deeds of others. In the context of his saga, Gísli speaks these words to Auðr by way of excusing her for playing her role. By incorporating them in his account, the storyteller similarly indemnifies himself as the conduit, not the cause of what transpires.

iv. Summary

Among the difficulties in attempting to describe the presentation of storytellers in the Old Norse corpus, the greatest must surely be the sheer range and variety of individuals to whom that term might be applied. Here we have examined two common themes of storytelling practice: the importance of memory and the metatextual implications associated with characters who have prophetic abilities. What again emerges most prominently from this discussion is a sense of the wilful anonymity of gifted storytellers who present themselves not as innovators but as conduits for the words, memories and legacies of others. In this respect the storyteller may be confidently distinguished from the skald, and while one individual may very probably have fulfilled both roles on many occasions, it is clear that they were perceived to have very different social functions. The skald is an advocate for his patron, but he is also a celebrated inventor in his own right, at least when it comes to form, metaphor and association; the prophet and memorialist, by contrast, are prisms through whom the words of others pass, although they do exercise creative agency in generating frame narratives which often seem to resemble the performance context of their recitations. What commentary they add is subtle, discrete and often unattributable without careful close reading, but it is nonetheless present and, once a reader becomes attuned to it, remarkably widespread. Far from being obscure and incidental, therefore, commentaries on the storytelling arts dominate the literature of this period.

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[142] Björn Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, ÍF VI (Reykjavík, 1943), p.34.

CONCLUSION

The task of this study has been to explore how Old Norse literature presents and engages with the role of the storyteller, so central to its transmission both during the pre-literate age and, at least for a time, thereafter. Indeed, even today the tradition of recounting sagas at key sites in Iceland where the events they describe are said to have taken place continues to attract its exponents.[1] We have considered the sagas' own evidence – scant though it is – for the conventions surrounding acts of public storytelling and other artistic performances, and concluded that there is little likelihood of a professional class of storytellers having been simply written out of the saga record because of their low social status; on the contrary, the majority of public storytelling episodes involve performers of high status. We have supplemented this analysis with close reading of several eddic poems in order to identify enduring cultural preoccupations concerning the social function of storytellers. Finally, we have examined a number of cases in which figures in the literature are cast in the role of storyteller, affording us metatextual insight into the creative practices behind their representation.

Throughout this survey, a number of themes have emerged, perhaps the most prominent of which is the latent power conveyed by anonymity, invisibility and the deferral of agency from the individual to the audience or, by extension, to corporate memory as a whole. This is by no means an original observation when it comes to saga authors. In 1980, for example, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards wrote of the author of *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* that, 'Like so many other story-writers in medieval Iceland, where people were more interested in the tale than the teller, he was awarded the ultimate accolade his readers could bestow: total anonymity.'[2] Similarly, In 1992, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen asserted that,

> The writers of the sagas (or the people who rewrote them) went so far in their exploitations of the possibilities of the written story that they made themselves (or the original authors)

[1] Public attention has recently been called to this practice by, for instance, Alison Kinney, 'Words Could Not Fell Me', *The Paris Review* (30 November 2015); Kári Gislason and Richard Fidler, 'Exploring Iceland through its Viking sagas', ABC Radio Australia (Tuesday 15 March 2016).

[2] Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, eds and trans., *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (Edinburgh, 1980), p.7.

invisible, which would have been unthinkable for the oral narrator whom they are imitating.[3] On the basis of the evidence collected here, however, we must now dispute this simple dichotomy by suggesting that oral storytellers, too, possessed the means – in many cases explicitly supplied to them by their texts – to perform the role of a similarly detached and aloof voice from the past. Indeed, as we have seen, the very interplay between the voices of scribes, oral reciters, authors and narrators, and the claim which all shared to traditional authenticity allowed each a significantly greater amount of latitude when recasting a familiar story than any one individually might claim. In this context, the recurring preoccupation with disguise speaks to a sophisticated awareness of the deceptive possibilities of storytelling and reflects an enduring interest in the difficulty of distinguishing truth from falsehood, frequently suggesting that the burden of responsibility for so doing lies with an audience rather than the performer.

On the subject of performance, the recent work of scholars like Terry Gunnell, Joseph Harris, Lars Lönnroth and others has done much to persuade the scholarly community of the importance of such methods as 'performance archaeology' to understanding the eddic poems. We have been slower to recognise the importance of similar methods for the sagas, but in view of the episodes discussed here it is increasingly apparent that the simple distinction between oral and literary transmission is deceptive, and that the role of the storyteller did not end with the committing of his tales to parchment. In many respects, the period of saga writing during which – on the evidence of prolegomena – at least the expectation of oral publication remained predominant is perhaps the richest mine of information we now have concerning the practice of saga recital as understood and presented by scribes and saga authors. Privately reading the sagas provides only limited insight into their mechanics, and oral articulation – indeed, performance – is essential to developing a fuller appreciation of their contents, just as it is for the poems. On the latter subject,

[3] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Some Methodological Considerations in Connection with the Study of the Sagas', in Gísli Pálsson, ed., *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Enfield Lock, 1992), p.40.

the possibility of multi-participant performances within the eddic tradition should not be excluded from critical approaches, not least because it may help to account for certain apparent contradictions within the text of poems like *Vǫluspá* and *Lokasenna*. Whereas the consensus has, until recently, tended to favour viewing each eddic poem as designed for a single speaker to recite, I am unaware of any clear justification for doing this. A modern dramatist would not limit herself to writing for a single speaker, and there is no reason to suppose an Old Norse poet would do so either. The twentieth-century verse dramas of Yeats in particular, which actively call into question the perceived distinction between poetry and plays, are distinguished by an experimental melding and confusing of voices to achieve 'chorality and dialogic effects' similar to those we have identified in the eddic poems.[4] Yeats' work is often as concerned with transmission and reception as it is with narrative content, and there is no reason to assume that this could only be a modern phenomenon or one dependent on the existence of a literate culture; on the contrary, the absence of a written literary framework would surely encourage experimentation, especially within a community in which several members knew versions of the poems or stories being performed. That the oral tradition allows poems to remain somewhat mutable – changing from one performance to the next, and perhaps even evolving in form and function, from ritualistic recitation to 'mere' entertainment – is still more reason to consider whether the case for multi-participant recitals is instructive in building up a fuller appreciation of certain texts. At the very least, I suggest, the burden of proof now lies with those who would discount this possibility altogether; if broadly accepted its implications are potentially far reaching.

If eddic poems could be recited by multiple performers, acting either in concert or in competition, then the same is undoubtedly true, in principle, of the sagas. Although none of the attestations of storytelling which we have examined describe a multi-participant recital of the same

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4 Pierre Longuenesse, 'Playing with Voices and with Doubles in Two of Yeats's Plays: *The Words upon the Window-pane* and *A Full Moon in March*', in Margaret Mills Harper and Warwick Gould, eds, *Yeats's Mask* (Cambridge, 2013), p.103.

story, the propensity of saga texts as they survive to 'refer and defer' to one another[5] makes the circumstance of one storyteller giving ground to another who was especially well-versed in retelling a particular episode entirely plausible. The wedding at Reykjarhólar episode in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* presents two storytellers competing for praise,[6] and the epilogue of *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* does leave room for more competent storytellers to contradict the version of events given (or improve on the manner in which they have been put across).[7] It is clear, therefore, that the role of the storyteller cannot be simply conflated either with that of the saga author or the studiously impartial saga narrator. Rather than operating in isolation as part of a systematic project to preserve and codify the history of the Icelanders, storytellers are presented as agenda-driven entertainers, trading in cultural capital and as much motivated by self-advancement as any other character in the texts. Whether or not they ever worked in concert, they were thought of as being part of the social *milieu*, rather than forming some discrete class aloof from it. One explanation for the apparent paucity of examples of readily-identifiable 'storytellers' may simply be that the term had universal application: what distinguished you was your performative ability, rather than your simple competence to share tales about your forebears.

This thesis set out to establish how a close reading of *eddic* poetry and the *Íslendingasǫgur*, particularly with reference to their common metatextual tendencies, can better inform our understanding of how literate authors of the High Middle Ages conceived of and presented the figure of the oral storyteller. We have now considered several 'types' to whom that term might be applied, ranging from those who adopt a disguise or *persona*, through prophets depicted in both sagas and eddic verse, to liars and those who mislead their audience – whether honourably or otherwise. What has emerged is a sense that the 'role' of the storyteller was precisely that – a part played in performing these narratives, whether prompted by a manuscript or from memory. The

5 Clover (1982), p.41.
6 See pp.75-90 of this study.
7 See pp.111-2 of this study.

voice of the storyteller could draw on characteristics associated with each of these ‘types’ in order to set itself apart from the tone of everyday discourse and thereby enhance its authority. A gifted storyteller was in control of his material, recognising and responding to the metatextual suggestions encoded in stories such as those we have examined here. For the literate author, the storyteller was a vessel over whom he exercised limited (and often largely subtextual) control, while the storyteller could always defer to the ancient and authoritative provenance of his tale, using his storytelling *persona* as a metaphorical shield to safeguard himself against any charge of unfair or inaccurate representation of stories largely regarded as common property.

What has not emerged from this study is any sense that a separable or cohesive ‘class’ of oral storyteller was ever perceived to have existed by those who wrote down this literature in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The corpus does make clear, however, that a range of cultural preoccupations persisted from the composition of the earliest eddic poems through into the later period, and among these was a concern about the corrosive influence of falsehood on ancestral memory. The power of words and the importance of reputation in conferring and altering a person's identity and public status is also a running theme, inseparable from the storytellers who, by virtue of their charisma and ability to engage an audience, played a large part in shaping and preserving the legacy of the dead. A persistent attempt to assert and evaluate the truth of any narrative account was also part of the storyteller's remit, and we have identified a range of examples in which saga narratives pre-emptively respond to any anticipated criticism of their innate truth. By exploring in detail such episodes as Grettir trapping the *berserkir* into believing a false narrative of their own construction, the most self-aware of saga authors draw attention to the fact that not all people are equally diligent in ascertaining the truth.[8] Thus humility, self-knowledge and a lawyer-like ability to establish the veracity of a tale before reporting it are all part of the gifted storyteller's act of self-abnegation.

[8] See pp.145-51 of this study.

The texts foregrounded in this study have tended to be those most overtly aware of their own metatextual properties, but this self-conscious artistry is a recurring theme throughout the whole corpus. Old Norse storytellers traded in cultural capital with a level of self-awareness, compounded by notions of honour and an aversion to inelegant dishonesty, which typically exceeds our own. If a dishonesty were to be practised it should be audacious and effective in order to avoid being regarded simply as an outright 'lie'. In reading the sagas we should be acutely aware of these facts which, coupled with the evidence for their impressive memorial recall, allowed storytellers to operate on an impressively subtle and intertextual level, drawing connections between stories and circumstances which likely continue to elude us. They were acutely sensitive to questions of agency, and skilled in deferring their own. Thus, whereas the historical examples upon whom the literate authors based their conception of the storyteller are now lost to us, it is still possible to recapture and define a sense of their social and artistic role. This study presents just such a sense.

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In Dave Malloy's 2014 theatrical song cycle *Ghost Quartet*, a narrative which spans seven centuries and several generations, the audience is occasionally called upon to play a part in the action. During the final song in the sequence, the musicians gradually distribute instruments among the assembly, instructing each member of the audience to play his or hers in a certain way, following a set rhythm. One by one, the performers then leave the performance area, and in their absence the music continues, uninterrupted. The effect is a moving one: their bodies have vanished, but their song goes on. In many ways this is an apt comparison for the fate of the Old Norse storyteller: no longer reachable in person, all that remains is a spectre, faintly imprinted on the written record. Though virtually invisible, his influence remains profound, and his own story continues.

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