

Saga as a myth: the family sagas and social reality in 13th-century Iceland

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In the second volume of *Prolonged Echoes*, Margaret Clunies Ross's penetrating and important study of myth in Old Norse society of the Middle Ages, she argues that the sagas are a special genre within European medieval literature. She also argues that all of the sagas constitute one single genre, albeit with sub-genres, rather than the sagas being constituted of several distinct genres as we have been accustomed to viewing them (Clunies Ross 1998, 50-51). I agree with what I believe to be her major arguments in favor of this idea, i.e. that all types of sagas (legendary sagas, king's sagas, family sagas or sagas of Icelanders, contemporary sagas) have respective positions within a shared historical continuum and that all of them are to different extents multi-modal, i.e. blend different modes of narration, mainly fantastic and more realist modes (Clunies Ross 1998, 100-102). However, I think it is more useful to consider the sagas as belonging to different genres rather than a single one, and that these different genres interact in what could be called a literary system. If this is not done, what I believe to be the specificity of the family sagas does not become sufficiently clear.

In the following paper I will attempt to describe this literary system as it is organised on the basis of five principles: genealogy, geography, religion, relation to the supernatural and social status of the protagonists. I will then examine a certain number of family sagas as they fall into this system. This will reveal what I believe to be a specific trait of these sagas distinguishing them from others: their predilection for what I have called ontological uncertainty, i.e. the uncertain religious, supernatural and social status of their protagonists.

I will then relate this to what was going on in Icelandic society in the first half of the 13th century, which is when family sagas seem to have appeared. This is a period when the dominant group in society seems to be recomposing itself. On the one hand, a hitherto more or less homogeneous chieftain class is dividing itself into a class of overlords dominating the others: on the other hand, church officials, until then a part of this homogeneous dominant class, define themselves increasingly as a separate group with its own identity, inducing the remaining chieftain class to define itself as laymen. It is my contention that this social redefinition is the main drive behind the appearance of the family sagas, and that they express the uncertainty that necessarily accompanies such a redefinition.

The following ideas are also presented in my contribution to *Old Norse Literature and Society* (ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, forthcoming).

I. A literary system

Genres are an important element in the communication between authors and readers, since the generic markers tell the reader into what kind of world he is being led and — in consequence — how he is to interpret the work (Todorov 1970, p. 12). The notion of “world” is important in this context and has been elaborated upon by several theoreticians of literature (Eco 1979; Pavel 1986). Each genre evolves in a different “possible” (Eco) or “fictional” (Pavel) world. As soon as the reader commences reading, he more or less unconsciously interprets the generic signs which tell him in what kind of world he is and thus what to expect. For example, if he is reading a *fornaldarsaga* he will expect to find supernaturally strong characters evolving in a world of wonders, whereas if he is reading a historical account, as in *Sturlunga saga*, he will expect people like him evolving in the same world as his own.

These are only two of the infinite number of possible worlds, but as can be seen, the notion is intimately related to that of genre and can throw light on how genres interact in what could be called a literary system, and which can in many ways be compared to a language. In the same way as in the latter, the difference between its elements — phonemes or words — signifies: in a system of synchronic genres the differences between them can also engender meaning, when there is any kind of interaction between them. This interaction can be of different types: narrative structures originating in one of the genres can be

adapted to the world of another, there can be a coexistence of different worlds within the same work and there can be intertextual allusions within one genre to the world of others. We have already seen an example of the first type in how the principal plot of *Laxdæla saga* seems to have been borrowed from heroic legend, making the characters and their destiny slightly “larger than life”. Chapter 5 of the family saga *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* gives us an example of the second, when, during his travels abroad, Björn encounters a dragon which he kills with one blow of his sword. This shows what a hero he is and puts his subsequent not so glorious life in Iceland into strange perspective. An example of the third can be found in the contemporary saga *Íslendinga saga*, when one of Snorri Sturluson’s men compares him to Hrólfr *kraki* in a verse, implicitly drawing a comparison between the legendary king who was betrayed by his son-in-law and Snorri, whose men were complimenting him on how powerful his own sons-in law were (*Sturlunga saga*, p. 305).

An interesting feature of these three genres is that they are genealogically ordered and that many thirteenth-century Icelanders claimed descent from characters in the two other saga groups (Clunies Ross 1993, p. 382). Despite this fact, the world of the *fornaldarsögur* is not the same as the world of family sagas which in turn is not the same as that of the contemporary sagas.¹

The worlds of these three genres are, however, not the only ones in the literary system. There are several others, among whom the world of romance, which began to be known at the latest in the third decade of the thirteenth century via the translation of *Tristrams saga* in 1226. Here the genealogical ordering does not apply. Instead, a kind of geographical organisation can be perceived. Despite structural and thematic similarities between the romantic *fornaldarsögur* (the adventure tales, sometimes called *lygisögur*) and romances, there seems to be have been an awareness that the worlds of these two genres were not quite the same, and that different things happened there to different characters. *Samsons saga fagra* is a romantic saga from the fourteenth century which reveals in an interesting way this awareness, because the author plays on the difference between the *matière de Bretagne*, which provides the setting for the main story, and the Matter of the North, which provides very different themes and situations for a trip undertaken to the North by one of its main characters (Torfi H. Tulinius 1990, p. 147-48).

Still other textual worlds were part of the literary system, those of pagan mythology as well as of hagiography and Scripture, these last two being of considerable importance, since narrative structures were borrowed from saint’s lives and allusions could be made to biblical stories or themes. Icelandic authors

¹ See Edwards and Pálsson 1971, p. 8-13 for an attempt to classify Icelandic medieval literature on the basis of Northrop Frye’s principles. The difference between their approach and the one attempted here is that theirs is based on the nature of the hero, rather than that of the world in which he evolves.

and readers would have been particularly prepared for intertextual play between different textual worlds, because part of their poetic heritage, skaldic poetry, was based on just such interplay, mainly between the world of the skald and that of Norse mythology, but also that of Christian thought and symbolism (Clunies Ross 1987, p. 93; Torfi H. Tulinius 1995, p. 204-09).

For several decades scholars have been accustomed to using Sigurður Nordal's chronological division of the corpus of prose narrative literature into *samtidssagaer*, *fortidssagaer* and *oldtidssagaer* (Sigurður Nordal 1953, p. 181). Taking into account this interplay between the different genres, I believe the saga corpus could be described in a more dynamic way as a generic system organised by five principles. As will be seen, the first two, genealogy and geography, are spatio-temporal and therefore quite concrete, whereas the three remaining principles are less tangible: religion, the supernatural and social status.

The genealogical principle results from the chieftain class's endeavour to ground its identity in the past. It is implicitly a chronological one like Nordal's since genealogy is a way of structuring time, but it is through genealogy that the passing of time is perceived rather than a more chronological time-reckoning such as ours. The geographical principle separates *fornaldarsögur* from romances, i.e. the Matter of the North from the other *matières*, but also kings' sagas from family sagas, their respective geographical locations being Norway or Denmark for the former and Iceland for the latter. A combination of the genealogical and geographical underlies the usual classification of sagas into *samtíðarsögur*, *biskupasögur*, *konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*.

II. Ontological uncertainty

The third organising principle is religious, the world of pagan myth on the one hand, Christian stories of conversion, saints and miracles on the other. *Fornaldarsögur* and myths happen in a heathen world, *vitae* of saints, bishops and missionary kings in a Christian one. Heathenism is absent from the world of the contemporary sagas except through accounts of dreams and intertextual allusions in poetry. However, the world of the kings' sagas and the family sagas is interesting because it represents a transition from one of these worlds to the other, from paganism to Christianity.

The religious principle highlights the "in-between"-ness of these two groups of sagas. They take place in a transitory period between paganism and Christianity and they are constantly, often discreetly though, being opposed in the texts. From a literary point of view, this is particularly interesting in the case of the family sagas. The fact that their textual world is a world in transition results in what could be called an ontological uncertainty about the characters they portray. Some remain pagan all their lives but can be what Lars Lönnroth

has called “noble heathens” (Lönnroth 1969), i.e. someone who has a natural understanding of Christianity without having been exposed to the Gospel. Some characters are obviously not and would not have been seen in a positive light by thirteenth-century Icelanders. Other pagans are converted, but in a more or less ambiguous way. The case of Egill Skalla-Grímsson is very interesting from this point of view, because he is not quite a convert and not quite a heathen either, having been prime-signed and his earthly remains taken from a pagan burial mound and moved to hallowed ground after the Conversion (Torfi H. Tulinius 1997). Hallfreður is a convert but has many relapses and is only redeemed by the mutual bond between him and King Ólafur Tryggvason (Kalinke 1997). While Njáll and Þorsteinn Egilsson can be seen as unambiguous converts to Christianity, a figure such as Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir is interesting because she is portrayed as a convert who learns to feel deep contrition for her past sins.² Finally, the life of Grettir Ásmundsson, though only a child when Iceland was converted to Christianity, takes place in an ambiguous transitory period where, as is said in the saga itself, “many vestiges of heathendom remained” (*Grettis saga*, p. 245).³

The nature of Grettir’s world is therefore not quite that of the author of the saga, which brings us to the fourth organising principle of the literary system: the representation of the supernatural. There is a distinct difference between the way the supernatural appears in *fornaldarsögur* on the one hand and contemporary sagas on the other. The latter are historical chronicles and it is rare to read about anything outside of the realm of the natural. This does not mean that thirteenth-century Icelanders had the same attitude to the supernatural as our contemporaries (Bayerschmidt 1965, p. 39-53). Medieval Christianity certainly allowed for the intervention of the supernatural in human affairs, divine or diabolical, and there were also many surviving beliefs from pagan times which people probably did not know whether to classify under the former or latter category (Torfi H. Tulinius 1999). When the supernatural intervenes in the contemporary sagas, however, it is usually in the form of dreams or visions, and its direct impact on human affairs is very rare.

In the *fornaldarsögur*, on the contrary, direct contact with the supernatural is the rule. The same applies to the world of the adventure tales, whether they are *riddarasögur* and exploit the matters of the South or younger *fornaldarsögur* building on that of the North. Despite the differences between the two, the supernatural seems to be handled in the same way. In the world of

² That is the sense of the Herdís Bolladóttir’s dream near the end of the saga (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 224). The bones of the *völva* who comes to visit her are burned by Guðrún’s tears. As Bjarni Guðnason has elucidated in an as yet unpublished work, this confirms that they are signs of true contrition, holy and therefore active against pagan remains.

³ “En þó at kristni væri á landinu, þá vǫru þó margir gneistar heiðninnar eptir.” The english version is taken from Bernard Scudder’s translation (*The Complete Sagas of Icelanders II*, p. 168).

religious texts, the supernatural also intervenes freely. Here, however, a distinction must be made, because in these texts its presence is characterised as either divine or diabolical, while in the pagan world of the *fornaldarsögur*, these categories seem rarely to apply.

This distinction must, however, be qualified for the *vitae* of more recent saints, whose miracles were considered a proof of their holiness. Here, the supernatural is in general less spectacular and treated in a more circumspect way. This is probably due to the fact that the cult of the saints had economical and political dividends. Everybody wanted his saint and the Church had to institute a system of verification in which accounts of the life and miracles of the proposed saints were investigated (Geary 1983). This fostered a debate in medieval society — not on whether miracles happened, which no one seems to have doubted, but on whether individual accounts were true or not.

This questioning may have been encouraged by political uses of “proofs” of sanctity current in Norway and Iceland in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century (Foote 1974). It can be seen in a dialogue between Sighvatur Sturluson and Arnór Tumason reported in *Íslendinga saga*. Arnór tells his brother-in-law that he had been sick all winter until he was asked to take part in the battle in which they were engaged, at which moment his illness suddenly disappeared. In an implicit mockery of their opponents, Bishop Guðmundur’s men who were convinced of his ability to work miracles, Sighvatur asks whether he believes this to be a miracle. Arnór answers: “I call this an event and not a miracle” (*Sturlunga saga* 1988, p. 261; Foote 1974, p. 43-44).⁴ This same attitude can also be seen in the way King Sverrir (d. 1202), in one of his speeches, ridicules the archbishop’s promise to King Magnús’s men that those who would fall in the battle against Sverrir would immediately enter Paradise (*Sverris saga*, p. 42-3; Foote 1974, p. 38-41).

In their representation of the supernatural, the family sagas again seem to occupy an intermediate position in the generic system. The fact that the sagas take place in historical time and in places their authors knew seems often to have inhibited them from allowing such events in their stories, even though they are more frequent than in contemporary sagas and there are distinct differences in this between individual sagas. But there remains a reluctance to describe direct contact with the supernatural.

An example of this attitude is the account of Þórólfur *bægifótr*’s haunting in *Eyrbyggja saga*. He is never shown actively pursuing his victims. We are only shown the effect of his activity and the fact that his remains have become hideous to look at (*Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 94-5). The literary result of this reluctance to describe direct contact is that the accounts become more compelling than in the *fornaldarsögur*. Blanks are left for the imagination to fill in, like in a modern horror film. This technique is mastered to perfection in the

⁴ “Slíkt kalla eg atburð en ekki jartegn.”

chapters on Glámur in *Grettis saga*, whose author was obviously inspired by the tale of Þórólfur bægifótr. He likewise delays describing direct contact with Glámur, increasing progressively the tension by showing what the ghost can do to men and animals, until Grettir is alone with him, making this one of the most genuinely hair-raising episodes in the family sagas (Torfi H. Tulinius 1999).

Eyrbyggja and *Grettla* contain more than an average amount of supernatural material. Elsewhere this element can be more discreet but still has to be accounted for. *Hrafnkels saga* may be one of those with the least interest in such things. However, one should consider more carefully the mysterious disappearance of the flock of sheep and the subsequent tempting of young Einar by the only horse he wasn't allowed to ride. Indeed, Freyfaxi holds unnaturally still while all the other horses, who usually are very tame, can't be caught. There is a definite suggestion that there might be some thing out of the ordinary going on — possibly related to the pagan god the horse is consecrated to (*Hrafnkels saga*, p. 101-03).

In the same way as for the religious principle, the supernatural is used to show ontological uncertainty. This trait can be seen in the way Glámur is portrayed in *Grettis saga*. The author willingly creates a hesitation in his reader's mind about the nature of his haunting of *Forsæludalur*. Is he a ghost, originating in pagan times, like the *vættir* he was killed fighting, or is he diabolical? This, in turn, leads to doubt about the status of Grettir himself (Torfi H. Tulinius 1999). Just as enigmatic though less overtly involving the supernatural is the description of Skalla-Grímur's death in chapter 58 of *Egils saga*. The upright position of the body and the way Egill avoids looking his dead father in the eyes while taking him out of the house through a hole in the wall, strongly suggests he is trying to prevent his returning as a ghost. This aspect must be taken into account when interpreting the saga (Torfi H. Tulinius 1999).

III. Social ambiguity

This ontological uncertainty in the family sagas can be extended to other fields, the most interesting one being that of social status, the fifth principle organising the literary system. Characters in legendary fiction, be it those of *fornaldarsögur*, chivalrous tales or even hagiography, are ideal figures who are representatives of a certain social status which transpires in how they look or what they do. A good example of this is Áslaug in *Ragnars saga* who becomes a ravishing beauty despite her step-mother's efforts to make her ugly. On the other end of the spectrum, the people who are portrayed in the contemporary sagas are also determined by their social status, even when they are not ideal representatives of their class. The family sagas seem, however, rather to focus on changing or unclear social status of the characters. *Hrafnkels saga* is an example among many, being the story of its eponymous hero's fall from his

position of *goði* of Hrafnkeldalur and his reclaiming of it. *Gísla saga* is another, the main hero losing his status of free farmer to become a tracked outlaw. *Egils saga* is of particular interest here because it deals in so many respects with degraded or threatened social status: the regional kings of Norway who must submit to Harald Fine-Hair, the sons of Hildiríður who do not receive what they consider their rightful inheritance, Egill himself whose claims to wealth and status are threatened by Berg-Önundur's allegations that his wife Ásgerður is illegitimate, Þorsteinn Egilsson's dealings with Steinar Sjóónason whose ultimate goal was to supplant his neighbour's position as chieftain of their area. In many of these cases the rightful positions of the respective protagonists are unclear.

A case of ambiguous social status is that of Ólafur Höskuldsson in *Laxdæla saga*. He is the son of a slave-girl, as his future wife arrogantly remarks when she is courted (*Laxdæla saga*, p. 63). He should therefore be considered inferior to his brothers and his children inferior to his nephews. In fact, because of Ólafur's qualities and the love his father has bestowed upon him after learning of his mother's royal origins, things are more or less the other way around and this creates tensions within the family.

An example of loss of social status through loss of respect is that of Ólafur's half-sister Hallgerður in *Njáls saga*. She is a chieftain's daughter and jealous of her position in society, as can be seen in the episode when she and Bergþóra argue about the respective seating of Hallgerður and Bergþóra's daughter-in-law (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 91). The theft of the cheese and her betrayal of her husband Gunnar among other actions, gradually lead to her losing the consideration of her equals, as can be seen in Skarphéðinn's remark to her later in the saga: "Your words don't count, for you're either a cast-off hag or a whore" (p. 228).⁵ Her life has proved the ambiguity her uncle saw in her as a child when he asked Höskuldur from where thief-eyes had come into their family (p. 7).

If the genealogical principle organising the literary system of medieval Iceland places the family sagas in a central position situated between the distant and highly stylised past and the present in all its complexity and opacity, the following three: religion, the supernatural and social status, bring to light their intermediary status. Indeed, they are set in a period when heathen times, as they are represented with their cluster of themes which belong to the "Matter of the North", meet the new era of Christianity, and when the supernatural, often of same origin, intrudes into a world almost identical to that of the authors and audience of the sagas. This creates a hesitation about the ontological status of what is portrayed which seems also to apply to the social position of the protagonists.

⁵ "Ekki munu mega orð þín, því at þú ert annathvært hornkerling eða púta." The english version is taken from Robert Cook's translation (*The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* III, p. 109).

We can now take another look at the principle of geographical organisation according to which the family sagas are not intermediary but are placed on one of the extremities of the scale, nearest to their authors and audience: home. Indeed, they are about the ancestors of leading Icelandic families and must therefore have something to do with who they are. It is very tempting to link this uncertainty about identities in the family sagas with some kind of ambiguity, questioning or doubt concerning the identity of the social class which seems to have created them: the leading families of early thirteenth century Iceland.

Indeed, when we look at a variety of sources, we see evidence that the identity of this ruling class was being questioned, especially in Norway. A significant example is the taunting of Páll Sæmundarson in Bergen in 1216 (*Sturlunga saga*, p. 254-5). He was the eldest son of the leading family in Iceland at the time, the Oddaverjar, a family which prided itself on links with the Skjöldung dynasty and of close family ties with the Norwegian royal house, since Páll's great-grandmother was said to be a daughter of King Magnús Barefoot. When Páll arrived in Bergen, the merchants there made fun of him, pretending to believe that he was going to make a claim to the Norwegian throne. Implicit in their mockery is doubt concerning the truth of the Oddaverjar's nobility, since Páll is allusively being compared to a number of royal pretenders of questionable birth who arrived from countries across the sea to Norway in the twelfth century. Among these was king Sverrir himself, grandfather to the then reigning king, Hákon Hákonarson.

Another sign of this questioning can be found in the historical synopsis of Norwegian history, *Historia Norwegiae*, which probably dates from the same period (Santini 1993). It is manifestly Norwegian and gives a different account of the settlement of Iceland from Icelandic sources: the first settlers had to flee Norway because they had committed murder (*Historia Norwegiae*, p. 92-3).⁶ What appears to be a response to this is to be found in the version of *Landnámabók* attributed to Styrmir Kárason (ca. 1170-1245) and thought to date from the same period (*Landnámabók*, p. civ). In its epilogue it gives as reason for composing such a work the necessity to answer foreigners who call Icelanders descendants of criminals and slaves (*Landnámabók*, p. cii-ciii).⁷ Whether or not these two texts and the Bergen incident are directly linked, they bear witness to a debate about the origins of the Icelandic aristocracy in the first decades of the thirteenth century, the exact period literary fiction is flowering.⁸

⁶ "ob reatus homicidiorum patriam fugentes"

⁷ "at vér séim komnir af þrælum ok illmennum"

⁸ In a recent article Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (1995, p. 50) discusses the origin of this supposed epilogue to Styrmir's version of *Landnámabók* and comes to the conclusion that it is more likely to be from the seventeenth century because of flimsy manuscript evidence and similar statements in *Crymogæa* by Arngrímur Jónsson (1568-1648). She therefore believes this epilogue to be more consistent with seventeenth-century attitudes she describes in the article than what can be known

It may be that doubts about the legitimacy of the aristocracy's claim to supremacy were also shared by Icelanders themselves. *Sturlunga saga* tells us that in 1255 farmers in Eyjafjörður and Skagafjörður said, when asked to accept Þorvarður Þórarinnsson and Þorgils skarði as *höfðingjar* or overlords of their districts, that it would be best to have none at all (*Sturlunga saga*, p. 706-07).⁹ This might not mean that they doubted the legitimacy of the two's identities but it does imply a doubt about the *höfðingjar*'s usefulness as a class.

It would not come as a surprise to find that the complexification of Icelandic society from the mid-twelfth century onwards, when aristocrats with pretensions to overlordship lifted themselves above the ranks of a former class of *goðar*, created friction within society. In a recent thesis Orri Vésteinsson has shown that bishop Þorlákur in the late twelfth century and bishop Guðmundur in the early thirteenth were both members by birth of the ruling class but were marginalised by poverty in the case of Þorlákur and illegitimacy in Guðmundur's (Orri Vésteinsson 1996, p. 254-58). It is tempting to consider the two bishops' respective attacks on the aristocracy's authority in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries as having not only been motivated by Church policy but also by their own backgrounds. As powerless members of the ruling class, they had grudges against those who wielded power. Whether this explanation is correct or not, Vésteinsson convincingly shows that by the last third of the thirteenth century, the Icelandic higher clergy had established a separate identity, distinct from that of the lay aristocracy it had been part of since the beginnings of Christianity in the country (Orri Vésteinsson 1996, p. 260-91).

Vésteinsson's thesis also shows that while some of the former *goðar* families disappeared during the period in which *höfðingjar* flourish, others maintained local authority and rose to influence again after the weakening of the aristocratic families in the conflicts of the Sturlung age (Orri Vésteinsson 1996, p. 304). This class shared ancestry and a similar culture with the *höfðingjar* and had more or less the same values and ideas about itself. It did not, however, have the family links to royalty most of the latter claimed to have and which were a key aspect of aristocratic identity. Indeed, both the Oddaverjar and the Haukdælir were blood-relations of the Norwegian kings. I suspect that Sturla Sighvatsson's marriage to Solveig Sæmundardóttir of the Oddaverjar family was important in making him eligible for becoming *jarl* of Iceland. This seems to have been a condition of the deal he struck with king Hákon if he managed to bring the country under Norwegian rule (*Hákonar saga*, p. 91).

of medieval attitudes. She does not however seem to make the connection with *Historia Norwegiae*.

⁹ See also the debate about how to interpret this refusal between Gunnar Karlsson (1972 and 1980) and Helgi Þorláksson (1979 and 1982).

Though more research has to be done, it does seem that there were a number of social factors in medieval Iceland which could question the identity of the families in power in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. This scepticism would also have fostered a critical attitude towards — or at least doubt about — the tales of the past which established this identity. It is therefore interesting to consider the remarks of the author of *Porgils saga og Hafliða* in the often cited description of literary entertainment at the wedding feast at Reykjahólar. It is said that the stories of Hrómundur Gripsson were called *lygisögur* (fictional tales) by King Sverrir but however people claimed descent from this hero of ancient times (*Sturlunga saga*, p. 22).¹⁰ Though *Porgils saga* is now thought to date from after 1237 (Brown 1952, p. xxix), this split attitude about the truth of the “Matter of the North” seems somewhat older. It is tempting to connect such ambiguity with the changes going on in Icelandic society during the whole period. What comes out of this is that the development of fiction in Iceland seems to accompany the slow disintegration of a social model based on an ideological construct which is being questioned.

IV. Conclusion: fiction and uncertainty

Uncertain ontological status is perhaps a common feature of sophisticated fiction in the Western tradition. Chrétien’s romances have been read as the expression of an identity crisis of the chivalry in the second half of the twelfth century (Köhler 1956). The fictions of Cervantes in early seventeenth-century Spain show an interest in ambiguities of social position and the gap between ideological representations and reality. Nineteenth century French novels, from Balzac to Proust, deal with the instability of the social order after the Revolution and the uncertainty of identities after the downfall of the *ancien régime* and the rise of a bourgeois industrial society. The most important novels of our century are grounded on metaphysical doubt which affects not only individual identities but also the nature of perception, memory and even the coherence of the self. It could be said that the evolution of narrative fiction has accompanied that of Western humankind’s perception of itself and the world, from a mythical-religious world-view necessarily founded on some metaphysical truth to an open and scientific attitude which has learned to live with ontological uncertainty.

It is therefore interesting to note that the rise of fiction in early thirteenth-century Iceland seems intimately linked to a crisis of the identity which had been established by the historiographers of the preceding century, an identity in many ways built on an image of the distant past constructed with the “Matter of the North”. As its treatment became more elaborate and thus more fictional, two

¹⁰ “En þessari sögu var skemmt Sverri konungi og kallaði hann slíkar lygisögur skemmtilegar. Og þó kunna menn að telja ættir sínar til Hrómundar Gripssonar.”

genres appeared more or less simultaneously. The *fornaldarsögur* are set in a mythical prehistorical world where ideal figures play out the fears and preoccupations of thirteenth-century Icelanders. The family sagas take place in the same physical world as theirs but during the Conversion period two centuries before the appearance of the genre, an age of transition and shifting identities in which authors and audience seem to have believed their social world originated. The characters represented are religiously, socially and morally ambiguous, which is what makes them so interesting as creatures of fiction. An example of this are the main characters of *Egils saga*, perhaps the first major family saga. As settlers they founded Icelandic medieval society but they also had blood-ties with Norwegian nobility, with whom they had shared roots in the pagan past. They are ambiguous for they belong to two different worlds, the one of the saga's audience and the one of the "Matter of the North".

The interest in the ambiguities of identity might be the reason for the international success of the family sagas over the last century and a half. With them we are already in the world of the novel, because saga society is much like ours: a stratified yet mobile society where identities are unstable and where there is an ongoing struggle between individuals climbing the social ladder. Such a premature development of novelistic discourse is due to an unusual historical situation: political instability in Norway during most of the twelfth century allowed the ruling class of Iceland to use medieval humanism to forge its own identity as an independent aristocracy through the constitution of genealogies and historiography. The strengthening of the royal state, however, attracted the Icelandic aristocracy into the king's orbit, provoking competition for status. This new situation acted as a revelator of tensions within the upper layers of society and led to a symptomatic questioning of the ideological foundations of the social system. This questioning is at the heart of the genre which is closest to the identity of authors and audience of saga literature: the family sagas.

If sagas are myth in the sense that they are the product of a particular group of humans' need to make sense of who they are and what is going on around them, they are also history because they try to find this meaning within a Christian world-view based on a linear conception of time. The type of society that produced myths such as the family sagas would thus have been a medieval Christian society. However, this society was experiencing rapid change as well as doubt about its identity and of those who lived and had lived in it. That is why it also needed a special type of myth, myth which involved itself with the uncertainty of identities. I believe that this type of myth can also be called the novel, and that among the different types of sagas, only the family sagas are myths in the same way novels are.

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