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AREN'T THEY ALL LYING SAGAS? UNRELIABLE NARRATORS IN THE *ÍSLENDINGA SÖGUR*[1]

NÃO ESTARIAM MENTINDO TODAS AS SAGAS? NARRADORES NÃO CONFIÁVEIS NAS *ÍSLENDINGA SÖGUR*

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Abstract: The traditional view of the saga narrator is someone who is unbiased and detached, which may lead the audience to assume the narrator to be reliable. This article highlights instances in which the narrator can be shown to be unreliable, either deliberately or accidentally. The narrator's words at any one point may not be revealing the whole picture to the audience, as key facts may be withheld, either to be revealed later or requiring the reader to read between the lines to understand the story truth. Furthermore, saga style, with its lack of narrative flourish and tendency towards understatement, can be used to mislead the audience. Although some of the most audacious examples of unreliable narrators are found in later sagas, unreliable narrators can be found in classical and celebrated sagas, and therefore modern scholars must be circumspect about any and every claim that saga narrators make.

Keywords: Sagas, Narrators, narratology, sagas-of-Icelanders

Resumo: A visão tradicional do narrador de saga é de alguém imparcial e isento, o que pode levar o público a presumir que o narrador é confiável. Este artigo destaca casos em que o narrador pode ser mostrado como não confiável, deliberada ou acidentalmente. As palavras do narrador em qualquer ponto podem não estar revelando a imagem completa para o público, pois fatos importantes podem ser retidos, para serem revelados mais tarde ou exigindo que o leitor leia nas entrelinhas para entender a verdade da estória. Além disso, o estilo de saga, com sua falta de floreio narrativo e tendência ao eufemismo, pode ser usado para enganar o público. Embora alguns dos exemplos mais audaciosos de narradores não confiáveis sejam encontrados em sagas posteriores, narradores não confiáveis podem ser encontrados em sagas clássicas e celebradas e, portanto, os estudiosos modernos devem ser cautelosos sobre toda e qualquer alegação que os narradores de saga realizem.

Palavras-chave: Sagas, Narradores, narratologia, sagas dos islandeses

[1] My title borrows the term 'lying sagas' from the comment attributed to King Sverrir Sigurðarson describing a lost saga of Hrómundr Gripsson in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* (Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn, 1946 (volume 1), p. 27). The term *lygisögur* is sometimes used to describe late sagas on chivalric subjects (see Driscoll, 2005, p. 190). It should be noted, however, that I am limiting my discussion to the *Íslendinga sögur* in this article.

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The traditional view of the saga narrator put forward in generalist books on Old Norse-Icelandic sagas and encyclopaedia articles is one of someone who is 'detached and dignified' (Stefán Einarsson, 1957, p. 134). The saga narrator is the audience's (or reader's[3]) guide through the story: their eyes, ears, sense of smell; but the saga narrator's lack of explicit description of characters' emotional states and lack of overt ethical commentary has drawn particular comment from scholars.[4] This view of the rationalist narrator is described by W.P. Ker:

The tone of the Sagas is generally kept as near as may be to that of the recital of true history. Nothing is allowed any preponderance over the story and the speeches in it. It is the kind of story furthest removed from the common pathetic fallacies of the Middle Ages. The rationalist mind has cleared away all the sentimental and most of the superstitious encumbrances and hindrances of strong narrative. (Ker, 1931, p. 212).

This lack of sentimentality gives the sagas an historical tone, as if the narrator were giving an unbiased account of events as they happened: As Stefán Einarsson notes: '… one of the most marked characteristics of the sagas is the objective neutral point of view of their authors.' (Stefán Einarsson, 1957, p. 134).[5] Even modern scholars, while acknowledging the role of rhetoric on the part of the narrator, stress the apparent objectivity of saga style:[6]

[3] For this article I am using the word 'audience' to represent an original intended audience/readership including those who actually read the words on the page, heard sagas read aloud, or witnessed an oral telling not directly involving a written text.

[4] There are of course many ways in which saga narrators *do* offer moral judgement on characters (such as describing the opinion of their peers in saga society) or comment on characters' emotional states (for example a character who is said to display little outward reaction to news or events is by implication likely to be deeply affected).

[5] I have tried to use the word 'narrator' throughout this article to refer to the speaker telling the story through the words set out on the page. I see this as something distinct from the 'author' (i.e. the person or process that brought about the production of the text as we know it). In the quoted passage above, however, I believe Stefán Einarsson's use of the word 'author' equates to my view of a 'narrator'. I have used the neutral 'they' as a pronoun for saga-narrators, but acknowledge gendered and ungendered narrators would be useful topic for further analysis.

[6] What I'm referring to as 'saga style' is specifically the style associated with the *Íslendinga* and *konunga sögur*. On stylistic features typically associated with these sagas see Stefán Einarsson (1957, p. 133-135); Hallberg (1962, p. 70-80); and Sävborg (2017, p. 111-126). Hallberg (1962, p. 70) acknowledges a risk of simplification but nonetheless regards the *Íslendinga sögur* as 'a uniform group' that stylistically 'has unusually homogenous character'.

… 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. (Vésteinn Ólason, 2005, p. 106).[7]

It should be noted that none of the scholars mentioned above unquestioningly assume the narrator's account to be historical fact (indeed Vésteinn's comment is made in preface to a description of saga rhetoric and the way saga narrators influence the opinions and experience of their audience). This article, however, considers instances where narrators mislead their audience, for example by omitting key details, or by narrative misdirection. The simplicity of saga style should not lead us to assume saga narrators were naïve. Rather than viewing events with 'an unprejudiced eye' or 'objective neutral point of view', saga narrators deliberately (or sometimes accidentally) problematise the idea of narrative truth in their sagas, creating suspense, surprise or multiple layers of meaning in the texts.

Droplaugarsona saga: A Narrator Misleading their Audience

In the first instance, I will illustrate this concept with an example from *Droplaugarsona saga*. *Droplaugarsona saga* is generally recognised as a classical *Íslendinga saga*, likely to have been written between 1200 and 1240. It is set in the East fjords, covering the period from around 967 through to 1009; and preserved in *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol) with a vellum fragment (AM 162 C 2-3 fol) preserving a portion of the text.[8] The relevant passage occurs at the climax of the first half of the story, when the simmering feud between Helgi Droplaugarson and Helgi Ásbjarnarson is finally ready to bubble over. Helgi Droplaugarson has been made an outlaw (for the killing of his step-father Hallsteinn) but chooses not to go abroad and continues to attend local assemblies. In a memorable episode, Helgi supports his kinswoman Rannveig to leave her husband Þorgrímr skinnhúfa and as a parting gesture she throws Þorgrímr's clothes into the cesspit. Helgi Droplaugarson seems in no hurry to journey back to the safety of his farm; in contrast to which, Þorgrímr gathers forces against him including Helgi

[7] Vésteinn Ólason (1993, p. 335) also mentions the 'objectivity' and '*impassibilité*' of the *Íslendinga sögur* in his overview encyclopaedia article, but warns against taking the objectivity too literally: 'More often than not sympathies and antipathies are quite clear'. Heather O'Donoghue (2004, p. 35), on the other hand, highlights what she describes as 'the virtual absence of the rhetoric of fiction'.
[8] See Jón Jóhannesson (1950, p. lvii-lxxxii); and Finlay (1993, p. 143). Vésteinn Ólason (2005, p. 114-115) summarises the dating of most *Íslendinga sögur* by the editors of the *íslenzk fornrít* series and notes significant alternatives to these dates proposed by subsequent scholars.

Ásbjarnarson, who Þorgrímr goads into joining the force by reminding him of a vow made by Helgi Ásbjarnarson (that the namesakes will not both leave a future encounter unscathed). Having assembled a force of twelve men, Helgi Ásbjarnarson ambushes his namesake in Eyvindardalr. Helgi Droplaugarson's force offer a valiant defence, but eventually Helgi is the last man of his force standing:

Þá sá Helgi, at Grímr, bróðir hans, var fallinn, en þeir váru allir dauðir, er at honum sóttu, en Grímr var sárr til ólífis. Þá tók Helgi sverð þat, er Grímr hafði átt, ok mælti: "Nú er sá maðr fallinn, er ek hugða bezt. Þat mun nafni minn vilja, at vit skilim eigi at þessu." (Jón Jóhannesson, 1950, p. 164).

Then Helgi saw that his brother Grímr had *fallen*; all his attackers were dead, but Grímr was *mortally wounded*. Then Helgi took up the sword that Grímr had owned and said: 'Now that man who I thought was the best has *fallen*. My namesake will want us not to part like that.'[9]

Helgi Droplaugarson makes one final onslaught against his namesake, but is slain by a local farmer Ǫzurr (Helgi offers no defence against Ǫzurr on the basis that Ǫzurr is his foster-father) and Helgi Ásbjarnarson is victorious. Grímr, however, is not quite dead. His aunt arrives on the battlefield, recovers his body and transports it in secret to a healer. In the latter half of the saga, Grímr recovers and takes revenge for his brother's death by killing Helgi Ásbjarnarson.

Taking the passage above at face value leads the audience to think that Grímr has died in the exchange. There is a pun on the word *fallinn* ('fallen') from *falla*: a pun that works equally in Old Norse and Modern English – whereby the word can mean literally to fall down and figuratively to fall, i.e. die, in battle. From the context the audience naturally assumes that this refers to the figurative sense and that Grímr is dead. Furthermore, the narrator asserts that Grímr *var sárr til ólífis* (literally 'was wounded to death / not being alive').[10] The narrator

[9] Translations are my own. Glosses are from Cleasby 1957, unless otherwise stated.
[10] Both Zoega (1910, p. 458) and Cleasby (1957, p. 517) gloss the phrase *særa* or *sárr til úlífis* as 'to wound' / 'wounded to death'. Cleasby compares the phrase *úlífis-maðr* ('a person deserving of death, a criminal').

deliberately misleads the audience, giving the impression everyone from Helgi Droplaugarson's side is dead, only to resurrect him to play out the latter half of the saga.

It is worth pausing to establish some definitions as to what we might mean by *truth* in relation to saga narrative. In this article, I am in no way focussing on the sagas as historical sources and therefore have no interest in what actually happened in an historical sense. I would, however, suggest we might assume that the sagas have a narrative truth, an internal coherence within the story, a saga or story truth.[11] The saga world is governed by a set of principles and rules that, while slightly different from our own, exist nonetheless. In the example above Grímr does not die and come back to life – that would contradict the established principles of the story world in which he exists – rather he appears to die (to the characters in the text, and to the audience) and subsequently recovers. Gérard Genette (1980, p. 27) draws a distinction between story ('the signified or narrative content') and narrative ('the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself'). In Genette's terms, there is a gap between the story of *Droplaugarsona saga* (where Grímr is very seriously hurt) and the narrative (which gives impression he is dead and Helgi is the last on his side alive). It is that gap that interests me in this article.

'I wouldn't know; I'm just the narrator': Uncertain saga narrators

The narrator of *Droplaugarsona saga* proves to be unreliable in a different way at the very end of the text. While the intimation that Grímr had died on the battlefield is an example of deliberately misleading the audience, at the end of the saga the unreliability of the narrator seems to be the result of an authorial (or scribal) error. In the final passage the narrator offers the audience a clue as to who has been telling the story:

Helga bjó eptir Ingjald liðinn á Arneiðarstǫðum ok Þorkell, sonr þeira Gríms. Þorvaldr átti son, er Ingjaldr hét. Hans sonr hét Þorvaldr, er sagði sǫgu þessa. Vetri síðar en Þangbrandr prestr kom til Íslands fell Helgi Droplaugarson. (Jón Jóhannesson, 1950, p. 180).

[11] Taranu and O'Connor (2022, p. 38) deal with this concept of narrative truth describing it not as something inherent or a relationship between the story and reality but as '…a process that involves the cultural and linguistic norms by which a true account is constructed and which ensure that its veracity is recognized by an audience.' On the subject of history versus fiction also see Ralph O'Connor (2005 and 2017, p. 90-94) and Brian McMahon (2018).

Helga continued to live at Arneiðarstaðir after Ingjaldr died, as did Þorkell her and Grímr's son. Þorvaldr had a son who was called Ingjaldr, his son was Þorvaldr, who told this story. Helgi Droplaugarson died the year after Þangbrandr the priest came to Iceland.

The implication is that the narrator *is* the Þorvaldr mentioned in the passage (or at least that Þorvaldr is the narrator's source, i.e. 'who told [me] this story'). Unfortunately, the passage appears to be faulty. Rather than Þorvaldr (who has not been mentioned previously), it seems most likely that the narrator had intended to say that *Þorkell* (Grímsson) had a son named Ingjaldr[12] and that the narrator (or possibly the person who told the narrator the story) is actually the great grandson of Grímr Droplaugarson.

This confusion in the final lines of *Droplaugarsona saga* seems to be a genuine mistake (whether on the part of the author or a result of scribal transmission is not clear[13]), but elsewhere the potential fallibility of the saga narrator and their reliance on variable, incomplete or conflicting accounts is exposed in a more deliberate way. In *Reykdœla saga,* a local ruffian Eysteinn Mánason expects his property to be confiscated. Unwilling to let his property fall into his prosecutors' hands, Eysteinn burns everything including his house, property, livestock and even his servants and household:

En frá því segja menn ýmisst, hvat honum sjálfum varð fyrir. Er þat sǫgn sumra manna, at hann hafi farit útan suðr á Eyrum, ok er þat þeira sǫgn, at hann hafi farit í Vík austr ok þaðan suðr til Danmerkr. En sumir segja, at hann muni hafa brunnit með hjónum sínum. Ok vitu vér þó eigi, hvárt honum hefir heldr at bana orðit. En jarðir þær, sem þar váru eptir, urðu nú sekðarfé. (Björn Sigfússon, 1940, p. 159).

People have somewhat different accounts as to what became of him. Some people say that he went abroad from Eyrar in the south, and these people maintain, that he went east to Vík and from there south to Denmark. But others say that he will have burnt with his

[12] Further evidence to support this assumption that Þorkell is the correct name is that the second Ingjaldr mentioned above could be named after his adoptive grandfather (the first Ingjaldr mentioned and Helga's husband after Grímr), which is only of relevance if we assume a family connection between the two.

[13] *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol) is the only preserved manuscript of the passage quoted above (the fragment AM 162 C 2-3 fol. not covering this section of the saga).

household. Nonetheless, we don't know whether that was his death, but those lands which were left behind were confiscated.

Rather than being an omniscient narrator, our saga narrator actually has a limited perspective. In this case, there is a narrative plausibility regarding the narrator's uncertainty. No one from the farmhouse lived to tell the tale and Eysteinn seems to have effectively disappeared. The actual fate of Eysteinn is not important to plot as he plays no further part, indeed his disappearance and the audience's lack of knowledge adds an air of mystery. While it is not impossible that such a reference to conflicting or questionable oral sources (of which there is a particularly large number of examples in *Reykdœla saga* (Gísli Sigurðsson, 2004, p. 36)) is a result of the oral tradition on which the saga was based, it seems more likely that it is a rhetorical narrative device.[14] The narrator cannot credibly profess to know something which was not common knowledge at the time and for which no subsequent evidence or account has emerged. By admitting the questionable nature or unreliability of non-essential plot information, the narrator is in fact adding credibility to the information he presents elsewhere.[15]

A comparable example can be found in *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, p. 46), which mentions conflicting opinions as to whether the recently drowned Svanr can be seen entering the mountain at Kaldbakshorn and being welcomed by the inhabitants there. As with *Reykdœla saga*, it is of little importance to the plot to *Njáls saga* whether or not Svanr really has been seen joining his ancestors beneath the mountain, but by admitting uncertainty on these events (in this case supernatural occurrences), the narrator confirms their reliability on events of greater relevance to the plot.[16]

[14] Brian McMahon (2018, p. 18-19) suggests such comments made by saga narrators on the veracity of certain reports exhibit an intention on the part of saga authors to demonstrate to their readership a scepticism towards their sources. In relation to this episode in *Reykdœla saga*, Paul Schach (1970, p. 137) cites comparable examples in *Gunnars saga Þiðrandabana* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Stefanie Gropper (2023, p. 147) has identified five occasions in *Reykdœla saga* where the narrative voice describes different traditions about an event.

[15] Stefanie Gropper (2023, 147) highlights the use of the first person in the last sentence quoted above, noting that the plural might include the audience as well as the narrator.

[16] See Cochrane (2020, p. 12-16), for a more detailed analysis of the *Njáls saga* narrator's uncertainty Svanr's entrance to the mountain).

What Narrators Say, but Don't Say: Reading between the Lines in the *Íslendinga sögur*

As highlighted above, key characteristics of what is sometimes referred to as saga style are the use of understatement by the narrator and a tendency not to describe characters' feeling and intentions.[17] The saga audience/reader is expected to 'read between the lines', to understand characters' feelings. There are, however, examples that take this to such an extreme that the story is completely at odds with the words on the page.

Finnboga saga is generally regarded as a later (i.e. 'post-classical') saga, thought to be written in the first half of the fourteenth century.[18] The eponymous hero, Finnbogi also appears in *Vatnsdœla saga* and there are a number of events described in both texts, although *Finnboga saga* depicts a more heroic and morally superior version of Finnbogi than the earlier text. It is established in the very first chapters of *Finnboga saga* that the word of the narrator cannot be taken at face value. The marriage between Ásbjǫrn dettiáss and his wife Þorgerðr is not a happy one. Before leaving to travel to the assembly, Ásbjǫrn tells his pregnant wife that when their child is born it must be killed by exposure.[19] Þorgerðr follows her husband's instruction because … *hon vissi lyndi Ásbjarnar, bónda síns, at eigi mundi vel duga, utan hann réði* ('…because she knew of her husband Ásbjǫrn's temper, and that things would not go well if he didn't get his way') (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 255). She has some servants take the child into the wilderness where they leave him between two stones with a further stone slab over the top and some meat (*flesk*) in his mouth.[20] The baby is subsequently found by a man named Gestr gathering moss for bedding, who takes the child home to his wife Syrpa. Syrpa is skilled in magic[21] and happens to be Þorgerðr's fostermother. She decides the couple should bring up

[17] On the importance of reading between the lines in saga-style see Stefán Einarsson (1957, p. 133-135).
[18] Vésteinn Ólason (2005, p. 115). The saga is preserved in ÁM 132 fol (*Möðruvallabók*), ÁM 510 4to (*Tómasarbók*), ÁM 162 C fol (a vellum fragment).
[19] Death by exposure for infants (usually where a family could not support them) was lawful in pre-Christian Iceland (see *Íslendingabók* (Jakob Benediktsson, 1986, p. 17) and *Njáls saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, p. 272)). *Finnboga saga*, however, makes it clear that Ásbjǫrn's behaviour is not in keeping with that of a wealthy chieftain; his motivation seems to be driven by a desire to upset his wife, rather than any economic difficulty with feeding another mouth in the household.
[20] For a recent analysis of the circumstances of Urðarköttr / Finnbogi's birth, exposure and discovery see Katherine Marie Olley (2022, p. 104-106).
[21] Lorenzo Lozzi Gallo (2006, 15) notes that Syrpa's name is significant in that it can be found elsewhere as a synonym for 'giantess' or 'witch'.

the baby as their own and - after pretending to give birth - sends Gestr to Þorgerðr to ask for food and bed clothes:

Gestr kom á Eyri ok sagði Þorgerði, at Syrpa, fóstra hennar, hefði barn fætt, ok kvað hvárki vera mat né hvíluklæði. Þorgerðr undraði þetta mjök ok hugði, at fóstra hennar mundi svá gömul, at hon mundi eigi barn mega eiga, hefir um þetta fátt orða, en lætr fara slíkt, er hon þurfti. (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 257).

Gestr came to Eyrr and said to Þorgerðr that Syrpa – her foster-mother - had given birth to a child and said there was neither food nor bedclothes. Þorgerðr was very much surprised by this and thought that her foster-mother must be much too old to have a child, but didn't waste words on that and had sent everything she needed.

The child is named Urðarköttr ('scree-cat', he only later acquires the name Finnbogi) after the landscape he is found in. This motif of an infant being exposed, only to be discovered, and rescued is a common saga *topos*. A close parallel can be found in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, where Þorsteinn Egilsson has had a dream that seems to indicate that two men will die fighting over his daughter, and he attempts to avert this fate by telling his wife, Jófríðr, that should their unborn child turn out to be a girl, she should be exposed (Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, 1938, p. 53-57). As in *Finnboga saga*, the husband departs for the assembly before the birth, leaving the wife too frightened of his temper to directly disobey his instructions. In *Gunnlaugs saga*, Jófríðr tells a shepherd deliver the baby to Þorsteinn's sister to be brought up in secret. Further parallels can be found in *Harðar saga holmverja*, where a baby girl is exposed by her uncle after her mother has died in childbirth while staying with him, but the young man tasked with abandoning her places her in a location he thinks her most likely to be found (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, p. 20-21); and also in *Vatnsdœla saga*, where it is the wife of the household who orders the death of the child of her husband and his mistress only for the baby to be rescued (and again acquires a nickname as a result of the circumstances of his discovery) (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1939, p. 97-98).

Given the apparent popularity of this motif, it seems likely that a large proportion of audience of *Finnboga saga* were familiar with the *topos* and recognised it as the story unfolded. There are two sagas to read here: firstly the saga that is set out in the words as taken at face-

value (the narrative) and secondly the implied meaning (the story). If we read between the lines, we might wonder whether there is a conspiracy: Does Þorgerðr expect Syrpa to find the baby? After all, Syrpa is magic and therefore might have supernatural knowledge, sending her husband on the flimsy pretext of gathering moss, knowing that he will return with the infant. Even if she has not been complicit from the outset, by the time Gestr arrives at Eyrr for baby clothes, Þorgerðr must guess that she herself is the real mother of the child due to the age of Syrpa and Gestr and the unlikeliness of their being new parents (no doubt adding to the comedy of the scene for the original audience). She must continue the pretence, however, so as not to reveal that she has disobeyed the husband's command. Furthermore, she wants child to survive and so cannot risk exposing his true parentage at this stage. In the text, the narrator claims that Þorgerðr is surprised, but the truth of the story actually runs entirely counter to the words on the page. She is not surprised at all and entirely complicit in the pretence that she (and probably the whole household) is willing to maintain. Because Þorgerðr's outward appearance is one of being surprised, that is what the narrator describes, leaving the audience needing to decide for themselves whether that is really the case.

The overlapping events described in both *Finnboga saga* and *Vatnsdœla saga* have resulted in some scholars assuming the former to be written as a response to the latter, whereas recent scholars have tended to point out that it is at least as likely that both are independently descended from oral stories (on this relationship see Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. xl-lxiv; Margrét Eggertsdóttir, 1993, p. 194; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, p. 309-320). Regardless of the exact relationship between the two texts, *Finnboga saga* expands the role of a character in a tradition with which the audience was probably already familiar and in doing so, focuses the narrative upon him. Finnbogi is not unknown in other sources (other than *Vatnsdœla saga*, he is also mentioned in *Landnámabók* and Haukr Valdísarson's *Íslendingadrápa*), but isn't celebrated as a great hero elsewhere. The saga never descends into pastiche, but there is a playfulness and sense of tongue-in-cheek about the narrative, as if the audience is expected to realise this is a series of tall stories that one should not necessarily take at face value. For example, in chapter 8, Urðarköttr/Finnbogi (accompanied only by three farmhands) rows out to rescue the crew of a trading vessel including the skipper named Finnbogi. Urðarköttr takes the keys for the chest and proceeds to recover the most valuable possessions. Over the course of the winter the sailors die and their possessions default to the skipper, the Norwegian Finnbogi. The

Norwegian Finnbogi then dies with Urðarköttr and only one other potential witness.[22] With his dying breath Norwegian Finnbogi not only bequeaths his weapons, possessions as well those of his dead crew, but also asks for Urðarköttr to take on his name in future – on the grounds *at þitt nafn sé uppi, meðan veröldin er byggð* ('that your name will be famous, as long as the world is inhabited') (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 269). In this way, Urðarköttr transcends his humble beginnings both in terms of wealth and jettisoning the name associated with his exposure (he is referred to as Finnbogi from this point in the text onwards). There is no explicit suggestion of foul-play on the part Urðarköttr/Finnbogi and the narrator tells events exactly as if this were the truth of his story, but the lack of external witnesses to such key events might lead one to question whether the narrator is describing a version – perhaps Urðarköttr's version – of what might have happened.

These tall stories continue through the rest of the saga. Finnbogi's name is enhanced further by the Byzantine Emperor in chapter 20, following the amazing feat when Finnbogi lifts the Emperor's throne (presumably with the Emperor still sat in it) and carries it. The Emperor renames him Finnbogi inn rammi ('the mighty') and gives him a gold arm-ring, sword and shield as a naming gift. The Emperor uses almost exactly the same phrase that the Norwegian did when originally giving his name to Finnbogi (*at þitt nafn sé uppi, meðan heimrinn er byggðr*, (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 289). In contrast to the death scene of Norwegian Finnbogi, the scene in Byzantium is witnessed by twelve men in addition to the Emperor. However, none of the men are named and therefore cannot offer independent testimony in the way that citing named witnesses (particularly those whose existence is acknowledged in other saga narratives) might do. If we can call into question the feat of lifting the Emperor's throne, we can also question the existence of the unnamed witnesses. The repetition of *at þitt nafn sé uppi, meðan veröldin / heimrinn er byggð[r]* makes the phrase feel exaggerated and perhaps even ironic. One might wonder whether the narrator is wryly hinting that Finnbogi has embellished such tales himself as he returns to Norway and later Iceland. This is a playful narrator, for whom not everything needs to be given the same truth-value, including even the closing passages of the saga which assert how many sagas/stories are told about Finnbogi's sons

[22] It is not quite clear whether Hrafn (the young man introduced earlier in the chapter), is present or not at the Norwegian Finnbogi's death.

(Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 340) despite the lack of any evidence of such stories in the extant corpus.[23]

Being Economical with the Truth

One way in which saga narrators prove unreliable is by withholding key pieces of information from their audience. In his article on falsehood in the *Íslendinga sögur*, Brian McMahon (2018) highlights the importance of truth and falsehood in relation to the direct speech and actions of saga characters. McMahon (2018, p. 8-11) cites the example of chapter 19 of *Grettis saga*, where beserkers come to the farmhouse where Grettir is staying on remote Háramarsey while his host is away. Grettir (who has stayed behind with the mistress of the house, her daughter and a few farmhands) deceives the beserkers into thinking he will offer no resistance. McMahon notes that Grettir stops short of swearing an oath of allegiance, but does seem to offer tacit approval to their plans initially. In addition to Grettir's subterfuge, however, the saga narrator also misleads the audience as he gives no indication that Grettir is dissembling. The scene is played out in the exchanges between Grettir and the beserkers (narrated for the most part in direct speech) and the outward display of fear of the wife and daughter (matched only by their anger at the Grettir for his apparent failure to take up arms on their behalf). Grettir's intention is not revealed to the audience until he has locked the beserkers in an outbuilding. This demonstrates how saga style can lend itself as well to obscuring the truth of the story as it does to revealing it.

In the *Grettis saga* example, the narrator's omissions of Grettir's intentions are part of the natural staging and presentation of the story for dramatic impact. It would undermine the flow and quality of narration to declare something along the lines of 'Grettir remained in truth loyal to his host and decided to trick the newcomers'. Other saga narratives, however, push this idea of a partially obscured narrative viewpoint further still. Given that its protagonist is a trickster, it should be no surprise that *Sneglu Halla þáttr* should have a cunning narrator too. The text is preserved in two significantly different versions[24]. The tale conforms to what

[23] It is of course possible that oral material existed about Finnbogi's sons which was never written down or subsequently lost, but it seems more likely that the original audience might have smiled at such an obvious falsehood from an unreliable narrator having fun with story they are telling.

[24] The two versions are both associated with the saga of Haraldr Sigurðarson (harðráði). A shorter version is preserved in *Morkinskinna* (GKS 1009 fol), *Hulda* (AM 66 fol) and *Hrokkinskinna* (GKS 1010 fol)

Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris (2005, p. 463) describe as the 'King and Icelander' type and tells of Sneglu-Halli (sarcastic-Halli) and his relationship with King Haraldr Sigurðarson harðráði. Halli is tolerated at court despite his difficult nature and refusal to be completely subservient even to the King. In one episode, one of the King's retainers, Einarr fluga, returns from Hálogaland ('Lappland'). Both versions of the *þáttr* make it clear that Einarr is a difficult character to deal with: (in *Morkinskinna* he is an *ójafnaðarmaðr* ('overbearing man') and *óeirðarmaðr mikill* ('a very unruly man') in *Flateyjarbók*); and never pays compensation for men he has killed. Halli makes a bet with bench companion (named Sigurðr in the *Flateyjarbók* version), staking his life that Einarr will pay him compensation. When Einarr announces to the court the killing of a man (also called Einarr), Halli throws down his cutlery and claims that he has just heard of the killing of his brother. There follows a sequence in which Halli asks Einarr for compensation three times. His first two claims are refused, but for the third he tells of a dream where he seems to be poet Þorleifr jarlsskáld and Einarr is Earl Hákon. King Haraldr recognises the allusion to the story in which Þorleifr attacks the Earl through a series of magic poetry recitals,[25] and orders Einarr pay compensation. Halli wins his bet, but does not claim prize, revealing to his drinking companion he was not related to the dead man. As with *Grettis saga* the narrator does not specifically mislead the audience; rather he is silent on key facts – namely whether Halli is indeed related to the dead Einarr – until after the outcome of the bet is settled. On one hand, the audience is aware of the bet and may guess the truth, but on the other hand, by describing Halli's reaction to hearing the news (just as the *Grettis saga* narrator stressed the outward reaction of the women in the household to the events rather than internal intention of the protagonist) the narrator ensures the audience cannot be certain whether or not he is related to the dead man.

There are further instances of holding back vital information later in the same *þáttr*. In the English court, when King Haraldr (Godwinson) offers to reward Halli for a poem by pouring gold over him, he fashions his hair into a bowl to catch as much gold as he can. Once

and a longer one in *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol) and ÁM 593 b 4º (Jónas Kristjánsson, 1956, cix-cxi; Danielsson 1993, p. 599-600). On the differences between the versions see Turco (2015, p. 195), and Tirosh (2017, p. 3).

[25] The story to which Halli is alluding is told in *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds* (also preserved in *Flateyjarbók*) see Jónas Kristjánsson (1956, p. 218-227).

again, however, there is a narrative twist as the narrator reveals after the event that the poem he is being rewarded for is nothing but gibberish.

Narrative Misdirection over Multiple Chapters: *Víglundar saga*

One of the most audacious examples of an unreliable narrator is found in *Víglundar saga*. *Víglundar saga* is another late saga, which tells of the star-crossed lovers Víglundr and Ketilríðr.[26] Despite the couple's obvious devotion to each other, Ketilríðr's brothers and mother are so determined to prevent them being together that they find a series of seducers and suitors with whom to match Ketilríðr. In chapter 15 and 16 of the saga, the narrator uses similar wordplay as we found in *Droplaugarsona saga*, when Víglundr and his brother Trausti are ambushed by twelve men and Trausti 'falls' only to miraculously recover. There is, however, a more significant narrative deception which occurs in the saga, whereby the audience is misdirected (or at least potentially misdirected) for a large part of the latter half of the saga.

The deception starts in chapter 4, with the mention of Víglundr's father Þorgrímr and his half-brothers Helgi and Sigmundr, who King Haraldr sees playing boardgames and wrestling.[27] Helgi is next mentioned in chapter 18:

Helgi hafði kvángazt í Nóregi, ok var kona hans önduð, er hér var komit sögunni. Hann átti eina dóttur barna, er Ragnhildr hét, kvenna fríðust. Helgi undi eigi í Nóregi ok fór til Íslands ok kom í Austfjörðu seint landnámatíðar. Hann keypi land í Gautavík at Gauta, er þat land hafði numit, ok bjó þar til elli. (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 96-97)

Helgi had married in Norway, but his wife was dead when we get to this point in the story. He had just one daughter, who was called Ragnhildr and was the most beautiful woman. Helgi was no longer happy in Norway and journeyed to Iceland and came to the East Fjords

[26] Preserved in ÁM 551 a 4to, ÁM 510 4to, ÁM 160 fol, *Víglundar saga* is thought to have been composed around 1400 (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. xxxi-xxxii; Vésteinn Ólason, 2005, p. 115)
[27] Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 67-68. Boardgames (*tafl*, literally 'tables') feature again later in the saga. There is an interesting parallel with the scene later in the saga when Helgi (in the guise of Þórðr) is playing against Víglundr.

late in the settlement period. He bought land in Gautavík from Gauti who had settled it and lived there until old age.

And that is the last that the saga has to say about Helgi, for a long time. Although the final sentence does not specifically say he is now 'out of the saga', the implication of *bjó þar til elli*, is that he lives out his final days in Gautavík and dies there and has no further role in the saga.

In fact, Helgi does have a further important role to play in the story. In chapter 20, the narrator explains how Víglundr's father Þorgrímr sends men to Ketilríðr's father Hólmkell and they have a conversation in private (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 103). This is a similar narrative device to that described above from *Reykdœla saga*: the narrator implicitly reminds the audience of the narrator's own limited perspective. As no-one knows what they speak of (*vissi engi maðr tal þeira*[28]) that should logically include the narrator and therefore the audience as well.[29] Following this visit from Hólmkell, Þorgrímr sends three men away somewhere for three weeks, but no one (again including the audience) is aware where they have gone or what they are doing. The saga then tells of the arrival of thirty men at Hólmkell's farm:

Þat bar til tíðenda einn dag at Fossi, at þar kómu þrír tigir manna. Hólmkell spurði foringja þeira at nafni, en hann kveðst Þórðr heita ok eiga heima í Austfjörðum, en kvað þat örindi sitt at biðja Ketilríðar. (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 103).

It happened one day at Foss, that thirty men arrived there. Hólmkell asked their leader his name. He said that he was named Þórðr and he came from the East Fjords and that his intention was to ask for the hand of Ketilríðr.

Hólmkell proposes the match to Ketilríðr and despite her reluctance and Ketilríðr is given in marriage to Þórðr (*Hólmkell gipti konuna Þórði*), but the wedding itself does not happen

[28] Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 103.
[29] A comparable example can be found in *Njáls saga*, where Njáll and Skarpheðinn spend time in private conversations prior to Skarpheðinn's trip to stay with Hǫgni after his father's death (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, p. 192). The content of these conversations is never explicitly revealed by the narrator, although it seems likely that they are planning an approach to avenge Gunnarr's death (see Cochrane 2020).

(*Ekki gerði Þórðr brúðlaup til hennar*).[30] She does, however, accompany Þórðr east, takes over running his household and shares his bed. This thwarts the intentions of the latest suitor proposed by Ketilríðr's mother, Þorleifr Steinólfsson, but seems equally disastrous to our hero and Ketilríðr's true love Víglundr.

In a farcical turn of events, fate drives Víglundr and Trausti to the door of Þórðr and his young 'wife'; returning from abroad they are within sight of Snæfellsjökull, when they are driven far round the country into the East Fjords. Realising they are still technically outlaws for the killing of Ketilríðr's brothers, they give their names as Örn and Hrafn respectively. *Víglundar saga*'s influence from European literary models such as fabliaux (albeit transported into a saga-age Icelandic setting) is very apparent, as Víglundr and Ketilríðr recognise each other, then doubt that recognition, then recognise each other again, all the while unable to reveal their love for one another for fear of giving away Víglundr's identity. The farmer Þórðr's generosity towards Víglundr and Trausti is exemplary and, although Ketilríðr shares his bed, their 'marriage' still seems to be unconsummated.

Víglundr is being tested: will he betray the honourable *bóndi* Þórðr by seducing Ketilríðr and even be driven by jealousy to do physical injury to the farmer? Furthermore, Þórðr announces he is going on a journey and entrusts Víglundr with his most prised possessions (*alls þess, er mik varðar mestu* (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 114). The implication is that these possessions include not only the farm and valuables but also Ketilríðr. To avoid temptation, Víglundr also leaves for the month while his host is away. After a month, Víglundr returns and shortly afterwards so does farmer Þórðr together with both fathers – Þorgrímr and Hólmkell. The farmer reveals that he is in fact well aware of the true identity of Víglundr and that he has indeed been testing him:

Nú skal ekki leyna þik, at ek heitir Helgi, ok er ek son Eiríks jarls, en föðurbróðir þinn. Bað ek því Ketilríðar, at ek vilda geyma hana þér til handa, ok er hon óspillt af mér. (Jóhannes Halldórsson, 1959, p. 115)

[30] Jóhannes Halldórsson (1959, p. 103). One would normally assume where a saga states that 'X is given to Y in marriage' this includes the wedding, but in this case the wedding (and consummation) does not seem to have happened.

Now I shall conceal it from you no longer, that my name is Helgi and I am the son of Earl Eiríkr. I am your paternal uncle. I asked for the hand of Ketilríðr, so that I could look after her on your behalf and she has come to no shame on my account.

Þórðr / Helgi goes on to explain that the plan has been undertaken at the behest of Ketilríðr's father.

This is undoubtedly the most audacious example of a deliberately unreliable narrator described so far and the closest thing we might find to a surprise ending or narrative turn in an *Íslendinga sögur*. Helgi's true identity is kept secret from the audience throughout the four long chapters since his introduction as Þórðr. Similar to the pun on *falla* in *Droplaugarsona saga* (and in *Finnboga saga*), the narrator plays on potential misunderstandings of the typical phraseology of saga style. The narrator tells the audience that Helgi lived in Gautavík until old age, which we understand to mean 'he lived there until he was old and then died and has no further part in the story', as opposed to the equally plausible and ultimately correct reading that he lived there until he is old and then will re-enter the story. Similarly, when he does re-enter the saga, the narrator does not lie outright, as it is Helgi/Þórðr who gives his name in indirect speech (*hann kveðst Þórðr heita*) rather than the narrator and, although initially referring to him as Þórðr, the narrator then shifts to referring to him as *bondi* ('farmer') rather than by name.[31]

The idea of a character being 'out of the saga' is a familiar one in the *Íslendinga sögur*. We find what appears to be a genuine error on the part of a saga narrator in *Njáls saga* when Hǫgni Gunnarson is announced to be out of the saga (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, p. 196), only to be reappear later in the story. The strangest example of a character being declared out of the saga, however, occurs in the unusual text *Stjörnu-Odda Draumr*. This short and singular saga, which can only loosely be described as an *Íslendinga saga* at all, tells of a dream (or rather a pair of dreams) of the astronomer Oddi.[32] While on Flatey, Oddi dreams that he is at the farm at Múli where he lives and in the dream a man (whose name is never revealed) comes to lodge at the farm and tells a tale. The tale framed within the dream is a fantastic story of the Kings

[31] Interestingly the narrator is inconsistent with his naming of Víglundr over the course of these episodes, shifting between his real name and his assumed name Örn.
[32] On *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, and in particular its relation to truth and fiction see O'Connor 2012.

of Gottland, more in keeping with the style and content of a *fornaldar saga*. A few chapters into the story, the narrator introduces a character named Dagfinnr. There is a possible link to Oddi through this character's name 'Day-finder'.[33] At this point narrative layers collapse and Oddi, the dreamer, becomes Dagfinnr:

En þegar þessi maðr, Dagfinnr, var nefndr í sögunni, þá er frá því at segja, er mjök er undarligt, at þá brá því við í drauminum Odda, at hann Oddi sjálfr þóttist vera þessi maðr, Dagfinnr, en gesturinn, sá er söguna sagði, er nú ór sögunni ok drauminum, en þá þóttist hann sjálfr sjá ok vita allt þat, er heðan af er í drauminum. (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, p. 465).

Now when this man named Dagfinnr was introduced into the saga something very strange happened in Oddi's dream, in that Oddi himself seemed to be this man, Dagfinnr, and the guest, that man who narrated the story, is now out of the saga and the dream, and Oddi thought that he could see and experience everything henceforth in the dream.

Unlike many of the examples above, where unreliable narrators utilise saga convention, the dreamlike structure of this text, its narrative frame, and its refusal to obey to generic convention (just as dreams refuse to be bound by natural logic) allow the most unreliable narrator of all to disappear from the narrative midway through the story they are telling.

Implications for Reading and Researching Sagas

What does this mean for the audience – whether saga scholar or casual reader? The matter-of-fact tone of saga narrators tends to beguile the audience into assuming that the story is being presented without artifice or conscious narrative strategy and that our narrator is presenting events as they happened. The examples above, however, highlight several things:

1. The narrator's view of events is not omniscient: Narrators stress their reliance on unreliable or incomplete oral accounts as to what actually happened. Furthermore, to maintain their credibility, narrators stress their own limited view point (often about matters of little importance to the main plot of the saga), highlighting that

[33] Stjörn-Oddi ('Star'-Oddi) seems to have been a historical person as his carefully observed *Oddatala* recorded the position of the sun every day for a year and calculated the date of the summer and winter solstices.

even the narrator cannot know conversations that occur in secret, or events that are not widely reported.

2. What appears to be 'saga style', with its lack of superfluous descriptive detail and its restraint with regards to narrative flourish, is sometimes a narrative technique for holding back key pieces of information that can be revealed to the audience later in the narrative. The lack of detail given as to characters' motivation can be used to good narrative effect where the characters are being duplicitous or secretive. Sometimes the motivation becomes evident after the event, but in other cases the audience is required to read between the lines to uncover the truth of the story.

3. Furthermore, saga style can actually be used to mislead as well as limit information: Narrators sometimes use typical vocabulary and phrases which the audience associate with a particular outcome (e.g. a particular character 'falls' in a battle or 'lived to an old age') to mislead the audience into making an incorrect assumption.

All of this means that there is a possibility for gap between the story and the narrative, i.e. what the narrator is telling us at any one point in the text. Narrators tend to avoid outright lies; but certainly withhold key information, require the audience to read between the lines of the story, or mislead the audience by concealing a character's true identity or giving the impression a character is dead when this is not the case. While several of the examples above come from post-classical sagas, that is by no means the case with all the examples (*Droplaugarsona saga* being a case in point of a saga routinely ascribed to an early stage of saga development[34]). The present study would suggest that, based on existing assumptions about dates of saga composition, unreliable narrators were not a feature exclusive to or indicative of any particular date of composition, but became more obvious due to the narrative flourishes and more prominent narrative presence associated with later sagas.

If we can accept that the examples above establish the potential unreliability of some saga narrators, we might consider how that applies to the wider saga corpus. Seen in this light, some of the traditional cruxes and discussion points of saga studies may be read, not as

[34] On the potential early date of *Droplaugarsona saga* see the references above.

accidents of transmission or scribal errors, but instead as narrative strategies. For example the shorter version of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, which never explicitly states the identity of the murderer of Vésteinn, has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate as to the killer's identity.[35] We can still engage in that debate as to whether Gísli's brother Þorkell, or his brother-in-law Þorgrímr is the more likely killer given the evidence presented to the audience, but we do not need to regard the fact that the saga does not tell us directly as a defect in the text caused by poor composition or clumsy scribal tradition. Instead, it is a deliberate narrative technique, withholding key information to create the uncertainty over the identity of the killer.

Another famous example is at the end of *Laxdœla saga* when Bolli Bollason asks his mother which of her husbands she loved the most. Guðrún lists her four husbands in order commenting on each. Bolli notices that she has evaded his question and asks again. She famously responds by saying: *Þeim var ek verst, er ek unna mest* ('I was the worst, to that one who I loved the most'). (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1934, p. 228). This might be taken to refer to Kjartan Óláfsson, whose death Guðrún engineers out of spite, with Kjartan representing a fifth 'husband' who Guðrún never actually marries, but cases can be made for Þórðr Inngunnarson and Bolli Þorleiksson (her second and third husbands respectively) and this remains the subject of debate by both scholars and casual readers. The narrator has not forgotten to tell the audience, the detail has been deliberately withheld.

If we accept that our narrator is potentially unreliable, this sheds new light on even the most celebrated character from arguably the greatest saga. Recent scholars have highlighted inconsistencies or complexities about the depiction of Njáll in *Njáls saga*; in particular they have identified a gap between some of the descriptions of him in the narrative and the actions that are ascribed to him in the story.[36] For example the introduction to Njáll in chapter 20, stresses his wisdom and foresight (*vitr var hann ok forspár*, (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, p. 57)), his benevolence (*góðgjarn*), the positive outcome of every piece of advice his gives (*varð allt at ráði, þat er hann réð mǫnnum*), and how he solves the problems of all those who he meets (*hann leysti hvers manns vandræði, er á hans fund kom*). Examples can be found, however, of his wisdom

[35] On the subject of the identity of Vésteinn's killer in *Gísla saga* see Holtsmark, 1951; Andersson, 1969; Thompson, 1973; Hermann Pálsson, 1975; and Harris, 1996.
[36] See for example Miller (2014, throughout, but particularly p. 70, p. 144-145, p. 160, and p. 246), Tirosh (2014), and Sauckel (2016).

or foresight failing him, his actions having questionable motivation and his advice leading directly and sometimes intentionally to the disadvantage of those who follow it.[37] Both Miller (2014) and Tirosh (2014) make compelling arguments calling into question Njáll's actions. A few examples will suffice here: Firstly, Njáll's action of placing the cloak and boots on the pile of gold intended as payment for his fosterson Hǫskuldr Hvítanesgóði's killing by Njáll's own sons is at odds with at least one key aspect of the narrator's earlier description of him. By this action Njáll seems to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, as Flosi takes umbrage (which Njáll's son Skarpheðinn compounds by replacing the cloak and boots with trousers suggesting that Flosi has greater need for these) and the peaceful settlement for the killing collapses. Either Njáll's action is unwise and lacks foresight, or it is a deliberate attempt to disrupt the settlement and intended eventually to bring about the deaths of his own sons. Secondly, Njáll's instruction for his sons to defend the house from within against the burners can be seen in a similar light (i.e. it is either unwise and lacks foresight, or is deliberately intended to hasten his sons' deaths)[38]. Thirdly, his actions at the Alþingi when his advice leads to the deadlock of every lawsuit are in direct contradiction with the narrator's earlier assertion that he solves the problems of everyone he meets. When read with an awareness that our narrator may be unreliable, we might wonder whether the initial description of Njáll is not intended to be an entirely accurate and true description of him, but rather how he is seen by other characters in the story (the same way the *Finnboga saga* narrator's depiction of Þorgerðr's surprise is only true in the sense that is how she might appear to others), which he uses to his advantage, and by believing this unreliable narrator's initial description without question or qualification we fall into the same trap.

Conclusion

The examples given above highlight that the modern reader/audience of the *Íslendinga sögur* (whether casual or scholarly) must approach each text with a healthy scepticism. As modern readers we are more likely to be circumspect about assuming sagas tell a historical

[37] Miller (2014, p. 62-72) highlights how Njáll's foresight increasingly seems to fail him as the saga progresses.

[38] These two events are connected in the narrative by a significant interjection by Skarpheðinn after each. In the case of the first he exacerbates the problem by importuning Flosi's manliness and in the latter questioning his father's motive (albeit while following his instruction).

truth than previous generations of scholars, but we need to be careful that we are not duped into assuming that every narrator tells a consistent story truth, or that every event is assigned the same truth value. We should not confuse the apparent simplicity of saga style, with a lack of sophistication or naivety on the part of the narrator. Saga narrators can be unreliable, playful and complex. They tell us just those facts they wish us to know, when they want us to know them, and may mislead us accidentally or deliberately, creating a gap between the story and the words of the narrative for dramatic or artistic effect. While there appears to be an increasing audacity of unreliable narrators in later sagas, they can be found throughout the saga-writing-age including in the classical and most famous sagas. However, appreciating this potential gap between story and the words the narrator tells their audience at any given moment, adds to way in which we can enjoy sagas and gives fresh understanding at every reading.

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