The Old Icelandic short stories or novelle conventionally termed ðættir¹ seem to be consistently distinguishable from the whole body of relatively long works or sagas only by the criterion of relative length. Except for discussions on a high level of generality, it is less enlightening to speak of the saga as a genre inclusive of such widely disparate works as, for example, a contemporary royal biography such as Sturla’s Hákonar saga and a typical lygisaga than to employ smaller categories; similarly it is of limited use to deal critically with the whole heterogeneous body of short narratives as the ðáttir.² Instead we need a division of ðættir into their most natural or at least critically revealing groupings based on a sustained attempt to analyse and describe the


². Anthony Faulkes offers a brief but lucid contrast of ðáttir and saga in general, supported by comparison to short and long narrative forms in continental literature, in Two Icelandic Stories: Hreiddars þáttir [and] Orms þáttir, Viking Society for Northern Research, Text Series 4 (London, 1968), pp. 1–5; and there are comments on “the” þáttir in Lange and Joseph. However, criteria other than length (and of course there are some “þættir” that are longer than some “sagas”; examples in Lange, p. 153) are difficult to generalize as typical, let alone exclusive, and really seem to characterize only certain groups of ðættir. For example, the general features of the whole corpus of ðættir (or its best exemplars) mentioned by Andreas Heusler (Die altgermanische Dichtung, 2nd ed. rev. [Potsdam, 1941], p. 222), “verdichtete Problemstellung” and concentration on a single point, and by Lange, “inneres Gewicht des Erzählten,” describe the group discussed in this paper but not necessarily the entire corpus.
tales according to shared features. In “Genre and Narrative Structure in Some Íslendinga þættir” 3 I attempted one aspect of this critical taxonomy by isolating one group of some thirty-one þættir according to Wellek and Warren’s prescription for genre study:

Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience). The ostensible basis may be one or the other ... but the critical problem will then be to find the other dimension, to complete the diagram.4

The earlier paper dealt with “outer form,” especially narrative structure, while my aim here is in the spirit of experimentation to test whether the “diagram” can be completed by finding the “other dimension” in an examination of the “inner form” of the same group of stories.

1. Inner Form as Theme

Wellek and Warren’s very general notion of inner form can be interpreted as comprising a work’s whole conceptual structure including what Northrop Frye calls theme. In Frye’s extended Aristotelian terminology the relevant aspects of narrative are mythos (plot) and dianoia (thought):

When a reader of a novel asks, “How is this story going to turn out?” he is asking a question about the plot, specifically about that crucial aspect of the plot which Aristotle calls discovery or anagnorisis. But he is equally likely to ask, “What’s the point of this story?” This question relates to dianoia and indicates that themes have their elements of discovery just as plots do.

3. SS 44 (1972), 1–27; that article introduces the thirty-one stories, which are cited according to references and abbreviations given there, pp. 2–3, n. 7; no attempt will be made in the present article to cite the literature on all the stories.

A narrative may emphasize plot, thought, or Frye's third element character and setting, but even the most "objective," plot-dominated work cannot be without its thematic aspect: "There can hardly be a work of literature without some kind of relation, implied or expressed, between its creator and its auditors." In dealing with ancient and anonymous works such as the saga literature there is every reason for caution in drawing conclusions about the relation between the work and its audience, but there is no justification for ignoring the subject altogether. The new view of this material as trustworthy literature rather than history of questionable reliability has opened the way for a criticism that goes beyond the formalism that was the only literary viewpoint until recent decades. Several studies of the methods by which a saga or þáttir communicates meaning have appeared, and the terms "didactic" and "exemplary" have even been used in this connection. The supposed uninterpretability of the sagas has given way to an interest in saga ethics not as historical reflections of the Saga Age but as the literary meaning of predominantly thirteenth century works; however, the conceptual dimension of saga literature has not, as far as I know, been explicitly linked with the problem of genre.

Objections to literary treatment of the thirty-one stories that form the subject of this study could still be raised from the points of view of unity and independence. They are preserved for the most part as episodes in large compilations dealing with the kings of Norway,

9. Another type of objection involving the usage of terms like þáttir has been raised by Lars Lönnroth, "Tesen," pp. 19-21, and answered by Harris, "Genre and Narrative Structure," pp. 21-27; the debate is continued in SS 47 (1975), 419-41.
sometimes headed “þættir af ...” or “Frá...,” sometimes marked off only as separate chapters or occasionally not at all. Nevertheless, virtually all literary historians have offered the opinion that þættir in general were originally independent works; Guðni Jónsson reflects this consensus when he writes:

Sennilegt er um flesta þættina, að þeir sé upphaflega sjálfstæðar frásagnir, samdir án þess að til væri beint æltað, að þeir væri teknir upp í önnur rit. En vegna efnis þeirra hafa þeir snemma verið felldir inn í sögur þeirra konunga, sem þeir sögðu frá, og hefð það vafalaust orðið til þess að bjarga þeim frá glöjtun mórgum hverjum.10

Jan de Vries explicitly refers to þættir as “kurze selbständige Erzählungen,” and this is the implication of most of the critical commentary, translation, and anthologies that have dealt with þættir.11 The evidence for this view derives from such paleographic facts as the discrepancy between the number of þættir in the existing kings’ sagas,12 the shifting place of some that appear in full or as synopses in several compilations,13 and linguistic indications that date some

10. ÍF 7: xcix; cf. ÍB, pp. v–vi. Björn Sigfússson has expressed a different view of the relationship of the þættir to the kings’ saga (ÍF 10: xci): “Þættir eru samdir til fyllingar konunga sögum,” but he sees them as “sjálfstæðir.” Cf. Sir William Craigie’s “Prefatory Note” in Fornar smásögur, p. iv: “These [full-length sagas], on account of their length, have been preserved as separate works, even although a number of them might be included in one manuscript. On the other hand, each short story would have been written on at most a few leaves of parchment, and so ran a risk of being lost or destroyed in course of time. In this way they would have disappeared if they had not been inserted in, or added to, the longer sagas under the name of þættir” (cf. Gardiner, p. x).


12. Especially important is the discrepancy between Msk and Flat; cf. Jón Helgason, p. 14; de Vries, II, 280.

13. For example, Sneglu-Halla þáttir is found abbreviated but in place in the extant
Theme and Genre in Some Islendinga Pættir

,... at least in the case of Morkinskinna, earlier than the main history. Internal references in some stories are redundant in the larger context or even contradict that context or other pættir, and reading sequentially through a compilation such as Morkinskinna reveals great differences in style.

In addition some pættir exist also in anthology manuscripts independent of any “host” saga. In some cases these independent texts may have been excerpted from the konunga sögur, but this would at least be evidence that the anthologists of the later Middle Ages regarded the stories as more or less self-sufficient. These conclusions about the original independence of pættir are best supported by particular text histories. Stúfs pættir, the best example, is extant in an independent version and a version adapted and trimmed to its place in Morkinskinna, and B. M. Ólafsen has shown conclusively that the independent version, though extant in later manuscripts, represents the original more closely. Somewhat similarly Gull-Ású-Pórðar pættir is found in an independent form, attested late, and also adapted in the continuum of Morkinskinna; and Porsteins pættir sögufróða probably existed first only independently, though now represented by a kings’ saga version and a fuller independent

Msk but very much fuller and added as an appendix in Flat. Probably the original of Msk did not have the pættir, and the extant Msk added it, while severely condensing, from an independent source also known to Flat (see IF 9: cix–cxiv).


15. Especially brought out by Bjarni Ádalbjarnarson, Om de norske kongers sagaer, Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo, II. Hist.-Filos. Klasse, 1936, no. 4 (Oslo, 1937), 154–59, but also mentioned elsewhere. Some evidence, too, may be derived from express comments of contemporaries as in the preface of Flat which enumerates the manuscript’s contents in such terms as: “Par næst frá Ólafí konungi Tryggvasoni meðr öllum sinum þáttum. Því næst er saga Ólafí konungs hins helga Haraldssonar meðr öllum sinum þáttum” (Flateyjarbók, ed. V. Bjarnar and F. Guðmundsson [Reykjavík, 1944–45], 1).

16. Final word on all matters relating to the textual history of the pættir of Msk must await publication of the book on that subject in preparation by Heinrich Gimmler. [Die Thetttir der Morkinskinna: ein Beitrag zur Überlieferungsproblematik und zur Typologie der altnorwegischen Kurzerzählung, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität zu Frankfurt am Main, Fachbereich 10—Neue Philologien, Diss., 1972. Eds.]

17. B. M. Ólafsen, Stúfs saga, Árbök háskóla Islands, 1911 (Reykjavík, 1911); cf. IF 5: xci–xcv; the kings’ saga version is found in Msk, Hulda, Hrokkinskinna, and Flat; both versions are edited in IF 5 and Islendinga sögur, ed. Guðni Jónsson (= IS; Reykjavík, 1953), vol. 4.

version in later manuscripts. Only one of this group of þættir exists *only* in an independent form: *Porsteins þáttr Austfirðings* is headed "Af Þörsteini Austfirðing" and "Ævintyr af Þörsteini nokkrum austfirzkum" in its paper manuscripts; it was never adapted for inclusion in a king’s saga.

While the arguments behind the assumption of original independence of the þættir in general are impressive and supported by such clear cases as that of *Stúfs þáttr*, it may yet be that not all þættir or even all of the group under study can be regarded as artistically autonomous works. Hence the more cautious formulations of some literary historians are entirely justified, for example: "many such episodes were themselves originally independent stories ... little doubt that many of them were originally independent" (Anthony Faulkes); "der tildeles dem en vis selvstændighed indenfor disse [større saga-værker] og med rette" (Finnur Jónsson). Among the thirty-one þættir some will be more readily accepted as independent than others; *Auðunar þáttr* and *Hreidars þáttr*, for example, are widely known and appreciated, but *Porsteins þáttr Síðu-Hallssonar* was omitted from the collected *Íslendinga þættir* and the appropriate *Fornrit* edition and has attracted no critical comment or translation.

From another point of view the question of independence is replaced by that of unity: are these whole and unified works and therefore fit objects of critical scrutiny? The consensus agrees in general that they are; *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, *Íisleifs þáttr*, and a few others less tightly composed than most have already been discussed in this connection but seem to exhibit enough common features of the genre to be included, while *Ögmundar þáttr* has, I have argued elsewhere, a

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20. *ÍF* 11: cxi–cxii (Jón Jóhannesson); also *Porsteins þáttr forvitra* is found only independently though included with other þættir appended to the sagas of Magnus and Haraldr in *Flát*.
22. *Porsteins þáttr* is recognized by Finnur Jónsson, *Litt. hist.*, II, 620–21 and *Msk*, p. xix; Bjarni Áðalbjarnarson, pp. 154–56; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *ÍF* 8: cxvii–cxviii; but is printed separately only in *ÍS* 10. One factor determining which stories we regard as autonomous seems to be the accidents of scholarly tradition since some þættir were culled out as "pearls" (the insistent metaphor of generations of scholars) of Old Norse narrative art in early translations.
unity all its own.\textsuperscript{23} Clearly the modern compositions such as “Sighvats þáttur” cannot be admitted, even though some manuscripts did occasionally divide a story into separated sections.\textsuperscript{24} Sturlu þáttur forms a case apart; since it seems to be intended as a continuation of Porgils saga skardóa and opens with a cross-reference to a passage in that saga, it is probably best not to consider this þáttur as artistically autonomous in the sense that the others of this group apparently are. Nevertheless there are real similarities between the story material, structure and tone of Sturlu þáttur and others of the group.\textsuperscript{25}

With caution, then, and pending more detailed study in several specific cases, we can assume that the thirty-one þættir are largely independent and more or less unified works of literature and hence that Frye’s question “What is the point of this story?” is not misplaced. However, the saga literature offers no terminology to indicate the presence of theoretical thought about literature in terms of outer and inner form or mythos and dianoia, nothing analogous to Chrétien de Troyes’ celebrated triad of matière, sens, and conjointure, the Chaucerian fruit and chaff, or the patristic cortex and medulla (integumentum, nux, nucleus, etc.). Usually saga sens is deeply implicit, but among the þættir at least scribes and authors sometimes speak out in one way or another about the meaning of their work, occasionally very clearly.

For example, Porsteins þáttur Ausfirdings tells how a poor Icelander saved the life of a stranger who had been deserted in combat by his comrades and who later proved to be King Magnús Ólafsson; when the Icelander is mocked by the retainers, King Magnús defends him:

\begin{quote}
“Sá inn sami maðr veitti mér mikit lið, þá er þér várúð hvergi í nánd
ok gerði þat við þann, er hann vissi eigi hvern í valr, ok mun hann vera
góðr drengr, ok er þat vitugra, at gera eigi mikir spott at ókunnnum
manni, því at leitun mun í vera, at röskvari maðr fásk ok betr hugaðr,
on svá mun ok sumum sýnask, at þat væri happ, er honum bar til
handa.” (ÍP, p. 351)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23.} Ögmundar þáttur dyttis ok Gunnars helmings: Unity and Literary Relations,” forthcoming in ANF. [Reprinted in this volume, Eds.]
\textsuperscript{24.} “Genre and Narrative Structure,” p. 3, n. 7 and p. 15.
\textsuperscript{25.} B. M. Ólsen, Um Sturlunga, Safn til sögu Islands 3 (1902), 495–98; Pétur Sigurdsson, Um Íslandinda sögu Sturla Þórðarsonar, SSL 6 (1933), 137–38; Sturlunga saga, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Rínmbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík, 1946), II, xlviii–xlix; Sturlunga saga, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1954), III, xi.
To this Porsteinn replies:

"Auðsét var þat, herra, at guð sendi mik ýðr til hlífðar, þvi at miklu meira fannsk mér um ýðar ásjónu en þú værir alþýðu maðr, ok brá mér þessu í skap, at duga þér." (IP, p. 351)

Thus the story concerns appearance and reality in human relations, the best attitude toward a stranger, and the potential powerful friend in any stranger; and these themes are given a numinous quality and divine sanction by references to fortune and God’s will. This story, a version of the international tale known as “The King in Disguise,” has analogues which interpret themselves similarly, and with these parallels there can be no misunderstanding the “point” or “points” of the story of Porsteinn.26

Nevertheless, the meaning of a story was not fixed for all time by the author or first recorder, and sometimes a diachronic factor has to be considered. For example, the most familiar version of Steins þátr, that of Heimskringla, tells how the hero fell out with King Ólafr Haraldsson and fled from court and how a partial reconciliation was brought about through the mediation of friends. Steinn owed his life to an earlier good deed through which he gained the lasting friendship of Ragnhildr Erlingsdóttir, and the þátr introduces this information as a rare authorial retrogression after the story has unrolled to its structural midpoint. The retrogression seems to be an intentional artistic device having the effect of holding the reader’s attention and bringing a cause, actually distant in time, into direct juxtaposition with its effect: Steinn sowed kindness and harvested friendship and support. We witness the snowballing effect of support so well known to the sagas, and blame for the initial estrangement between Steinn and Ólafr is equally distributed in this objective treatment. In a later manuscript, however, a scribe, perhaps offended by Steinn’s defiance of the king and saint, has “reinterpreted” the story to the Icelander’s discredit by adding an epilogue telling how he came to a bad end and explaining: “Gafsk honum svá af ofmetnaði ok óhlýðni við Óláf konung” (ÍP, p. 266).

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A similar reinterpretation seems to have occurred in the case of Ásbjarnar páttr Selsbana where the older texts present an impartial story which in the oldest non-fragmentary version carries the following sober authorial or scribal indication to the reader of the significance of the tale: “Af þui likum lutum ma nokcot marka um viðr skipti þæirra Olafs konongs oc ærlings.” However, the redactor of the Flateyjarbók version is of a slightly different opinion as to the “point” of the story: “koma þó öll [stories about St. Ólafr] í einn stað niðr áðr lúki, þvíat þau hniga ok hallast öll til vegs og vörðingar hinum heilaga Ólaf á annathvot sakir jarteignagerðar eðr frægðar ok framaverka, einarðar eðr öruggleiks, sem enn mun lýsat í eftirfaranda efni ok æfintýri.” This statement clearly represents a more pious reading of the story. It appears that in the course of its evolution the páttr has acquired the extended episode of Ásbjörn’s death, and the correspondence of a simple historical explanation with the short version of the hero’s death in the earliest version and a religious “moral” with the expansively told slaying of Ásbjörn in the later version probably constitute two interpretations separated by more than a century.

Such scribal interpretations can be misleading. In the case of Ívars páttr, for example, the story itself suggests an interpretation emphasizing the friendship and the confidant relationship between king and Icelander, and King Eysteinn observes that Ívarr should come to him each day to talk about his lost sweetheart: “því at þat verðr stundum, at mönnnum verðr harms sín at léttaða, er um er røtt”—a sentiment that suggests unforced the courtly idea that heart’s ease is the sharing of heart’s sorrow. Yet to this tale of amour de loin, its effect, and its resolution in the confidences of a friend, a scribe or redactor has appended an interpretation that narrows the themes of the páttr to an exposition of the relevant aspects of the king’s character: “Í þeima hlut má marka, er nú mun ek segja, hvern dýrðarmaðr Eysteinn konungr

27. Ólafs saga hins helga, ed. O. A. Johnsen (Kristiania, 1922), p. 47.
29. IP, p. 154; the sentiment quoted is paralleled in the Roman de la Rose (ll. 3099–3110) but also in Hávamál (121, 8–10; 124, 1–3) and probably widely elsewhere (e.g., Harley lyrics [ed. G. Brook], No. 9, ll. 41–44); the universal nature of “courtly love” is argued with Scandinavian examples in Peter Dronke, Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric (Oxford, 1965), I, 39–42, 243–47; for connections with various sagas and a different interpretation see Hermann Pálsson, Hrafnkel’s Saga and Other Icelandic Stories (Penguin: Baltimore, 1971), pp. 21–22.
Caution is necessary, then, in treating these stories as literature: basic thematic contents of the stories were subject to reinterpretation by scribe/redactors with consonant changes in the narratives; and it is not established for every exemplar of the group that it was created as an artistically independent, unitary work, though that is a safe generalization. But with the additional caveat that literary meaning is never exactly paraphrasable and always distorted in analysis, we may survey the thirty-one Þættir for thematic common denominators and attempt finally to sketch the inner form of the group.

2. Survey of Thematic Content

The theme of friendship, though in forms less sentimental than Ívars þátr, is important in these stories generally. Gull-Ásu-Póðar þátr, Porsteins þátr Síðu-Hallssonar, and Steins þátr (already discussed) embody this theme in a peculiarly effective form since in each the hero’s survival depends entirely on the intervention of his friends. All three stories make it clear that even one friend can be a man’s salvation in dire circumstances since that friend may lead to another more powerful ally, and all three imply the rather unromantic notion of friendship as a practical reciprocal arrangement.

In fact friendship is not easily dissociated in these stories from another general ethical principle, equally unromantically conceived, that of gift-giving. Gull-Ásu-Póðr overcomes the disdain of Viðkunnr by the timely presentation of a poem; and when real trouble begins for Póðr, Viðkunnr backs him, then calls on his own more powerful friend Sigurðr Hranason, who in turn calls in the most powerful friend of all King Eysteinn (both friendships are based on obligations incurred in the past). Similarly Porsteinn Síðu-Hallsson first establishes his claim on Einarr, who in the end is able to reconcile King Magnús to the Icelander, through a persuasive gift of fine horses; Einarr himself is too old and careful to accept the gift with its obligation, but his son Eindriði welcomes the horses and the Icelander’s case. The stories of Auðunn vestfærizkr and Póvarðr krákunef can be understood as glosses on the proverb “æ sér gjöf til gjafar”; both Auðunar þátr and Póvarðs þátr concern a hero from the West
Fjords whose regal gift is the occasion for a contrast between the all too human Haraldr harðráði and a rival. Though Audunar pátrr is far too rich and complex to be adequately summed up with the proverb, Porvarðs pátrr gives a good illustration of the reciprocity and obligatory nature of gift-giving in archaic and primitive societies: a gift must not be refused without reason, should not be hoarded, and must be repaid.30 Thus King Haraldr's initial act in refusing the sail proffered by Porvarð is anti-social, and Eysteinn orri, stepping into the king's role, accepts and repays the gift, later relaying it to the king. Though Haraldr acquires the sail in the end, his behavior has been thoroughly discredited.

The closely related theme of generosity and its proper limits is common to Brands pátrr, Ísleifs pátrr, and Páttr Pormóðar. In the first of these King Haraldr harðráði becomes annoyed hearing again and again about the far-famed generosity of Brandr and decides to test the Icelander by demanding first his cloak, second his axe, and third the very tunic off his back. Brandr hands over each immediately but cuts one sleeve off the tunic, and Haraldr draws the right conclusion, underscoring the point of the tale: "Þessi maðr er bæði vitr ok stuð-lyndr. Auðsét er mér, hví hann hefir erminni af sprett; honum þykkir sem ek eiga eina hónindina, ok þá þó at þiggja ávallt en veita aldrigi" (ÍP, p. 20). Thus generosity is presented as a praiseworthy quality, but its proper nature also involves mutual obligation and reciprocity. In the first episode of Ísleifs pátrr Brandr and Ísleifr stand briefly in the shadow of King Haraldr's displeasure because Brandr had passed on with unseemly swiftness the king's gift mantle; a king's gift might be given away, but the circumstances should be extraordinary (as King Sveinn had pointed out in Audunar pátrr). The tension is resolved when Haraldr sees the good priest Ísleifr wearing the mantle and is so impressed that he pronounces the cloak his own gift to Ísleifr, giving Brandr an equivalent reward and commending himself to Ísleifr's prayers. In this episode, as in that of Ísleifr's marriage, the pátrr emphasizes the godliness that shone through in the young priest's appearance; one glance told the astute king that Brandr's

generosity had not been rashly bestowed, and Haraldr’s own generosity is doubled.

*Pátrr Pormóðar* contrasts the treacherous and stingy character of Knútr inn ríki with the divinely colored generosity of Saint Ólafr. The first part of the pátrr tells how Pormóðr reluctantly comes to serve Knútr as court poet and how he has to wring his agreed-upon reward from the close-fisted Dane; in addition Knútr puts Pormóðr’s life in danger by prevailing on him much against his will to accept the post of stafnbúi with a disreputable viking attached to the Danes. In the second part, by contrast, King Ólafr grants the poet his life in spite of his great offense in having killed the Norwegian stafnbúi. Established ethical values—royal generosity, the loyalty it inspires, and a king’s regard for the life and wishes of a follower—are here employed for a tendentious historical comparison as in *Porleifs pátrr, Hreiðars pátrr,* and widely elsewhere.

A number of the stories hold up for admiration the value of wit, the ready answer and facile verse or tale, portraying situations in which the hero’s advancement into favor with the king depends on his verbal wit. *Óttars pátrr* is a typical case of headransoming through poetry, but it is interesting that Óttarr’s initial offense also derives from his having been too bold with words. In this respect it resembles *Sneglu-Halla pátrr,* a tale which more than any other is predicated on the value of wit; one of Halli’s taunts in his flyting with Pjóðólfr is that the rival poet had carried out ashes as a child because he was thought “tīl einkis annars fær r fyrir vitsmuna sakir, ok varð þó um at sjá, at eigi væri eldr í, því at hann þurfti allt vit sitt í þann tíma” (ÍP, p. 232). *Porsteins pátrr sögufróða* and *Sturlu pátrr* are both familiar examples of the averting of a king’s wrath through saga-telling, though Sturla also presented his poems so well that the king observed he recited better than the Pope. A similar situation in *Stúfs pátrr* is resolved through the hero’s feats of memory and poetic composition; here the theme of wit is underscored in the king’s final speech: “Satt er þat, at kvæðit er allvel kvæðit, ok ek skil nú, hver efni í eru um þitt míð, at þú munt eiga mikít undir þér um vitsmuni . . . skal þér ok kostr hirðvistar ok at vera medð oss, ef þú vill” (ÍP, p. 273). In general the literature shows poets surviving and sometimes imperiled by their wits, and the opportune (e.g. *Gull-Ásu-Pórðar pátrr*) or rash (e.g. *Steins pátrr*) verse has a role in several other stories of our group.
Porleifs þáttir jarlsskálds shows the dark side of the universal theme of the power of poetry. Þorleifr suffers under the arbitrary violence of Hákon jarl and flees to Denmark, but he returns in disguise in a kind of mock reconciliation scene to blast Hákon with a magical satire; for Þorleifr knew not only to compose praise poetry but had learned the ancient art that made the poet feared: níð. 31

However, the surviving version of Porleifs þáttir emphasizes the ethical-religious situation above all. Hákon’s tyrannical behavior is natural to a man who traditionally represented the worst in heathendom, and the þáttir confronts him with a foil in the Christian king of Denmark, Sveinn Forkbeard. The author had a talent not only for the grotesque but for effective contrasts, and the central part of the þáttir is structured as four contrasting scenes. At Sveinn’s court Þorleifr asks to present a poem, and the king inquires about his qualifications; the poem is a “fertug drápa,” the most honorable and ornate of poems, having a refrain that links Sveinn with divine authority (“gipta óðlings himins róðla”), and is presented by a brilliant young (nineteen) skáld. In the corresponding scene in Norway, Þorleifr appears as an old churl calling himself Niðungr Gjalandason, asks to recite and is questioned on his qualifications; the poem itself is the “verstrbragr,” a níð that shatters Hákon’s reputation instead of enhancing it. Sveinn gave distinguished gifts as a “kvæðislaun,” but Hákon received a terrible kvæði as laun for his greed and overbearing. Upon his return to Denmark Sveinn welcomed Þorleifr and outfitted him with a ship, cargo, and crew, while in the contrasting scene in Norway, the initial meeting of the jarl and the poet, Hákon had threatened Þorleifr, burned his ship, stolen his cargo, and hanged his crew. Finally, as if we might miss this message, the þáttir opens with a long and extreme denunciation of the pagan Hákon in heavy Christian rhetoric, closing on a similar note, and the author’s or redactor’s Christian indignation stands in amusing juxtaposition to the Odinic role of his hero and the primitive character of his basic Stoff.

31. Sneglu-Halla þáttir probably provides the best gloss on the central implications of Þorleifr’s story: King Haraldr said to Einarr fluga: “svá mun fara méð ykkrit, sem fór méð þeim Hákoní Hlaðajarli ok Porleifi skáldi, ok þat sama gerir Halli ... ok megu vít sja, at bittir hefri níðit rékari mann en svá sem þú ert, Einarr, sem var Hákon jarl, ok mun þat munat, méðan Norðlond eru byggð, ok er verri einn kvæðingr, um dyran mann kvæðinn, ef munaðr er eptir, en lítil fémúta” (ÍP, p. 239–40).
Christian views come to dominate in nine further stories. *Gísls þáttr*, *Halldórs þáttr I*, and *Hrafnþ þáttr* all establish a situation in which a magistrate has the power to avenge a killing but is moved by religious considerations to forgiveness and reconciliation, and all three stories contrast the old-fashioned retaliatory ethic as practiced by the protagonists with Christian leniency on the part of the rulers. This same formulation also covers the special case of the two-part *Ögmundar þáttr* (perhaps also *Pátrr Pormóðar* though the religious atmosphere is not so strong there), and these four stories are among the richest of the group.

In *Gísls þáttr* the young hero arrives in Norway with a mission of revenge against one of King Magnús Bareleg’s retainers, and he carries it out manfully despite great odds. The Icelanders then in Niðarós, under the leadership of Teitr Ísleifsson, band together and resolve to free their countryman; their conduct is honorable but ultimately ineffective, and the causes of the king’s relenting are the justice of the hero’s grievance, his own courage and rectitude, and especially the supernatural aid mediated by the Icelandic priest Jón Ögmundarson. At Gísl’s nadir he is fettered and cast into a dungeon; his execution is ordered, but all this takes place on a Saturday, and before the king’s command can be carried out church bells ring to signal the official beginning of the holy day. The author is delightfully evasive about the ringing of the bells: the king attributes it to a conspiracy of ecclesiastics; and though the bishop denies this, Priest Jón says nothing; Gísl himself attributes his rescue by the “noon-bells” to his having twice spared the life of his enemy Gjafvaldr out of pious motives. The author does not take a position between these two opinions, but when we compare the very similar motifs in *Ásbjarnar þáttr*, where Pórarinn Nefjólfsson bribes the bellman to ring in Easter Sunday early in order to save the life of Ásbjörn, it becomes clear that the author has provided us with a real choice between the divine agency imagined by the idealistic Gísl and the rationalistic alternative envisioned by the king. In either case these bells, like those of *Ásbjarnar þáttr* and *Porsteins þáttr skelks* (perhaps even like the Easter bells of Goethe’s *Faust*), mark a peripeteia and a salvation. The shadow of Jón the Priest also falls over the episode of Gjafvaldr’s repentance, and the reconciliation completed, the narrative focuses on Jón and how he
cured a repentant antagonist who was certain that Jón's words had "bitten" him—again a divine act through the agency of Priest Jón.

*Halldórs þáttir* I comprises a triple Alienation/Reconciliation structure with motivation for the reconciliations generated by a story-within-the-story, Einarr þambarskelfir's retelling of his youthful experience with King Ólafr Tryggvason. I have argued elsewhere that the story-within-the-story, which so obviously carries exemplary force, is in fact a typological narrative; but whether I have proved my case or not the force of the Christian values of forgiveness and reconciliation are especially clear in this tale.

*Hrafns þáttir*, like *Gísls þáttir* and *Halldórs þáttir* I, presents a hero who is saved from the king's wrath more by an act of God through his saints than by worldly power and influence. The contrast of effective divine causation with ineffective secular strength is present in all three—Teitr's forces and Bergljót's show of strength do not achieve the reconciliations—but is especially emphasized in Hrafn's story. In parallel scenes Sighvatr, Hrafn's kinsman, approaches the two powerful nobles Einarr ín naumdælski and Einarr þambarskelfir seeking help: "Eða hvat skal ek þar eiga, er þú ert? . . . Skal ek nökkut traust eiga, þar er þú ert, Einarr?" (*IP*, p. 108). When both fail him, Sighvatr makes his third appeal, this time to the true source of help, religion in the form of the sainted Ólafr: "er ok enn eptir fulltrúinn minn, ok skal nú þagat leita traustsins, sem enn hefir aldrei bilat; en þat er inn heilagi Óláf r konungr" (*IP*, p. 109). Later, after the saint's intervention has succeeded, Sighvatr reveals to all assembled that he had prayed to the saint for help "þá er hann haf i ekki traust af félogum sinum" (*IP*, p. 112). So *Hrafns þáttir* emphasizes more than its two companion þáttir that true traust is in God and his saints. Divine intervention, however, begins before Sighvatr's prayer since in view of the ending it is in this light that we must see the two major coincidences of Hrafn's Norwegian outlawry: his chance encounter with King Magnús in the woods and his arrival at the site where Magnús's fleet was anchored awaiting a wind (a wind which seems to stay only for Hrafn and indeed springs up after Sighvatr's prayer).

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32. Harris, "Christian Form."

The prayer brings Saint Ólafr's aid in the form of a dream appearance and admonition to Magnús, and in the battle itself the saint was seen fighting on Magnús's side.

Hrafns þáttir shares a number of other features with Gísls þáttir and Halldórs þáttir I; all are late and largely fictional, and all show strong traces of the learned style, with alliteration, pairing of words and phrases, and parallel constructions. More strikingly, all end in an assembly or trial scene in which the premises for the story's reconciliations are revealed as one or more retrospective narratives. Hrafn is, like Gísl, a young man more sinned against than sinning; like Gísl he shows heroic virtue and stoic courage at every point, and his revenge—both in the Icelandic feud that forms the Introduction and in the main part of his þáttir—is justified though the lesson of all three stories clearly lies in tempering justice with mercy.

Ögmundar þáttir dytts ok Gunnars helmings is a single þáttir composed of two parallel parts with different sets of characters, but as a whole it fits into the thematic pattern of the three tales just discussed. The first half is set in pagan times during the rule of Hákon jarl and concerns the personal honor, family pride, and revenge of the pre-Christian ethical code, while the second half takes place against a Christian background in the reign of King Ólafr Tryggvason and concerns allegiance to Christianity and the king who embodies it. Since Ögmundar þáttir has been discussed in detail elsewhere, I will only add that a kind of typology may be observed here too; the type of the Old Law correlates with the period before the síðaskipti, with its story of an eye for an eye, and that of the New Dispensation, with its tale of salvation and reconciliation, with the Christian period in Scandinavia.

Three more stories, Porvalds þáttir tasalda, Egil's þáttir Síðu-Halls-sonar, and Porsteins þáttir forvitna, employ the device of a mission whereby the hero wins forgiveness of his sovereign. All are actuated by the kind of divine intervention that we have seen especially in Hrafns þáttir, and Egil's þáttir and Porvalds þáttir also show the blessings of Christian conversion in similar ways. Porvalds þáttir35 is a relatively uncomplicated tale given a rather schematic treatment and composed of a frame and an episode: the former telling how

34. Harris, “Ögmundar þáttir.”
Porvaldr was defamed to King Ólafr by one Helgi, a retainer, and how he redeemed himself by bringing in the old heathen Bárðr for baptism; the latter relating Porvaldr’s conflict with Bárðr. The Bárðr episode is romantic and shows numerous similarities with Porsteins þáttir uxafóts and other monster-quelling tales and some remarkable resemblances to Snorri’s tale of Útgardarlóki. Of thematic importance, however, is that Porvaldr’s victory is due to the intervention in a dream of the saintly King Ólafr Tryggvason, to an amulet with the names of God, and to the hero’s timely prayer (as in Ögmundar þáttir and many versions of the Beowulf-Grettir story). Bárðr had always been one of those redeemable heathens who rejected idols and sacrifices but believed in his own might and main; and now that he has found a man who is stronger, through God’s help, he is willing to worship that man’s God. The story closes with Bárðr’s soul-saving conversion, death in white, and the happy disposition of his property and daughter; Porvaldr shows restraint in dealing with the villain Helgi, who is merely turned out of service.

Like Porvalds þáttir, Egils þáttir36 tells of a young Icelander who is readmitted to the king’s (Ólafr Haraldsson’s) favor on condition of his bringing in a recalcitrant old heathen for baptism, also having a plot structure composed of a frame and an inset episode (the mission). Throughout both stories the hero is closely accompanied by his faithful Pylades (Sigurðr, Tófi), and these friends take over the land and possessions of the ex-renegade who dies soon after baptism (Tófi succeeds Valgautr as son and heir; Sigurðr marries Bárðr’s daughter and inherits his land). In both stories the heroes are captured and stay overnight with their pagan host-captor; in both the hero receives divine aid on his mission, and the king comes out of town to meet the approaching heathen and baptize him there. Despite these similarities, however, Egils þáttir is written in a different style.

36. Egils þáttir is treated as independent by Finnur Jónsson, Litt. hist., I, 551 and Mogk, p. 775; its manuscripts are: (1) Flat, (2) Tómasskinna, (3) Bergsbók, (4) Legendary Saga (ed. Johnsen, pp. 48–51); (5) paper manuscripts (Sex söguþáttir, ed. Jón Pórkelsson [Reykjavík, 1855]); and a summary in Heimskringla (Ólafs saga helga, ch. 155) and Snorri’s Separate Saga of St. Ólafr. The relationships among the first four are discussed by Sigurður Nordal, Om Olaf den heldiges saga: en kritisk undersøgelse (Copenhagen, 1914), pp. 65–66, 124–25, but the changes in Tómasskinna and other literary relations (for example with Jóns saga helga) require more study; the þáttir is discussed here in the Flat version (Ib).
from that of *Porvalds páttir*, more realistic, set in a more modern period, and less openly relying on supernatural agency; and despite a few flaws, *Egils páttir* is one of the most complex and highly wrought of the group.

*Egils páttir* is emphatically a religious story embodying themes of reconciliation and conversion, each especially associated with one part of the plot structure; but as the main plot and the episode (mission) converge at the end, so do the separate themes. The episode (mission to Valgautr) establishes a contrast between the Christian court of Ólafr and that of the heathen jarl, who is so opposed to the king and his faith that he imprisons his guests, including his own son Tófi; but Egill speaks to the jarl of Saint Ólafr with a wondrous, even unearthly eloquence that moves Valgautr to relent so far as to promise to meet with the king. This secures the king’s pardon for Egill and Tófi, but the old man still refuses conversion until, suddenly falling sick, he feels the wrath of God.

The main story tells of Egill’s offense to the king, how he suffered for it, and how reconciliation was at last achieved. The sickness that falls so heavily on Egill, though naturalistically motivated, is expressive of his estrangement from the holy king; and when Ólafr relents in his anger and touches Egill, his cure begins. Not only is the theme of Christian reconciliation expressed in the main action of the story, but it is underscored by thematic use of words and phrases such as *sáttarfund* and *koma á fund* throughout. It is only at the end of the story, however, when the action of the episode and that of the main story converge that we realize conversion is also a kind of *sáttarfund* and retrospectively notice the parallelism between events and language of the episode and those of the main tale.

*Porsteins páttir forvitna* does not so much condemn the curiosity of the title as exalt the power of Saint Ólafr who from the first protects and guides Porsteinn on his quest for a golden bough. Perhaps it is the saint himself who appears as a hermit to end Porsteinn’s wanderings in the woods, to hear a kind of confession from him, to chastize his meddling, and to put him on the “right way” (“en réttan farveg hefir þú enn”). In any case Porsteinn withstands his penance bravely though he must call on the saint for protection against the dragon. In almost any other medieval language a story such as Porsteinn’s would be said to possess allegorical resonances, but perhaps it is as well to rest content with its obvious religious significance.
Porsteins þáttr skelks, a delightful anecdote with folktale connections, is neither solemn nor heavily didactic; in form it is a farcical version of the kind of tragic encounter with evil presented by Piðranda þáttr ok Porhalls. Nevertheless its Christian message and values are serious. Porstein (like Porstein forvitni and Egill Siðu-Hallsson) endures his adventure in consequence of having disobeyed his king (Ólafr Tryggvason); but luckily he has the sang-froid to deceive the devil into giving vent to screams, knowing that King Ólafr will awaken and have the church bells rung to put the demon to flight. The Christian powers are more than sufficient to save the hero, but the devil’s information about Hell is also edifying: Sigurðr Fafnisbani and Starkaðr inn gamli, the best and the worst of the pre-Christian heroes, suffer accordingly.

Finally there is Pórarins þáttr I, a story concerned with liberality and hospitality that indicates a “brother’s keeper” is rewarded and protected by God. Pórarinn and Porsteinn pledge mutual friendship and that they will always lodge together when in the same land. First this is exemplified in Porsteinn’s visit to Iceland; then in Norway Pórarinn uses his old friendship with King Ólafr to obtain lodgings at court for Porsteinn—a seemingly impossible request on behalf of a Dane and retainer of Ólafr’s archenemy King Knútr. Pórarinn is next forced to procure a place in the hall for his nephew Bjarni and to take responsibility for Bjarni’s actions. All this creates a situation in which Ólafr is susceptible to suspicion, and the jealousy of two treacherous courtiers, Helgi and Pórir, is excited. A conspiracy and slander result in a false accusation and a trial: in the ordeal the innocence of the three heroes is attested by the judgment of God, and the plotters are eventually punished. Pórarins þáttr is one of the richest and best of the group. Like Halldórs þáttr I, Gisls þáttr, and Hrafns þáttr it climaxes in a trial scene where a story is told that explains the outcome of the trial and thus the main tale, and like them this þáttr shows the heroic code in a sympathetic, if whimsical light but emphasizes religious values and divine power.

To summarize the types of thematic content in the twenty-six stories from the group surveyed thus far: it appears that about seventeen have what we might call humanistic themes and about nine religious, though there is no sharp line between them (e.g. in Porleifs þáttr). The humanistic group could be broken down into those that
seem to emphasize the practical value of friendship (Ívars þáttir, Gull-Ásu-Póðar þáttir, and Porsteins þáttir Síðu-Hálslssonar), gift-giving and generosity (Auðunar þáttir, Brands þáttir, Porvarðar þáttir, Ísleifs þáttir, and Páttir Pormóðar), and verbal wit (Óttars þáttir, Sneglu-Hálla þáttir, Porsteins þáttir sögufróða, Sturlu þáttir, Stúfs þáttir, and Porleifs þáttir). The remaining three tales could perhaps be comprised in a group that also shows the value of friendship but specifically in the context of the properly hospitable or at least courteous treatment of a stranger (Porsteins þáttir Austfirðings, Steins þáttir, Æsbjarnar þáttir). Within the religious group we can recognize themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, of punishment and testing, of Christian responsibility, and of conversion, supernatural intervention being present in all nine, but the stories are difficult to pigeonhole. Gísls þáttir, Halldórs þáttir I, and Hrafn þáttir are all about forgiveness for a killing, all climaxing with a trial scene. Porsteins þáttir forvitna, Porsteins þáttir skelks, and Pórarins þáttir I portray punishments and testing, the last also Christian responsibility and its reward in a trial scene ending in reconciliation. Egils þáttir and Porvalds þáttir show forgiveness and reconciliation (for a falsely alleged wrong in the latter) achieved through a conversion mission, and Ógmundar þáttir also has reconciliation and conversion coupled.

3. Inner Form as Ethos

Admittedly analysis of what any story is “about” is debatable. Such thumbnail interpretations as I have indulged in here are necessarily reductive and no doubt subject to the charge of the “Procrustean fallacy” associated with any kind of criticism that goes beyond an individual work to a group. The five stories not yet mentioned (Hreiðars þáttir, Porgríms þáttir, Halldórs þáttir II, Odds þáttir, and Pórodds þáttir) for various reasons defy assignment to one of the interpretative categories used above, and the variety of themes in the twenty-six stories discussed does not show as much unity of conceptual interest as, for example, Andersson found in his study of sophrosyne in a group of ten family sagas.37 Nevertheless it is clear that the þáttir of

37. Andersson, “Displacement.”
this group as a whole tend toward humane and conciliatory values; not all honor specifically Christian values but none conflict severely with medieval Christianity.

However, with an interpretation of “inner form” at a higher level of generality, as Weltanschauung, tone, or ethos, the group exhibits more conceptual unity, and the common denominators of subject matter and structure seem to be concrete reflexes of a spiritual bias common to the optimistic outlook of the stories under study. All chart the relationship between two main characters, a king and a commoner, usually an Icelander; the Icelander is the hero with whom the reader identifies, and his relationship to the king is normally one of relative dependence and powerlessness. In many (not all) ethical authority rests with the king or one of two kings, and the hero’s success and failure are measured in terms of royal favor. In several stories the hero is specifically said to be poor; and these þáttir often present their heroes as victims of Norwegian prejudice, sometimes in form of suspicion and a diffuse hostility as in Steins þáttir, sometimes clearly focused as in the jealous lack of acceptance faced by Gull-Ásu-Dórðr as a poor Icelander making good through his own efforts. The Norwegian nobleman Einarr fluga shows a general dislike of Icelanders in both Sneglu-Halla þáttir and Odds þáttir, and an undercurrent of court hostility toward the Icelandic hero is important in Óttars þáttir, Porsteins þáttir sögufróða, and Porsteins þáttir Austfirdings. A more specific attitude is shown in a reference to the traditional accusation of indolence in the Icelandic national character in Gísls þáttir. In Porsteins þáttir skelks Ólafr Tryggvason comments on Þorstein: “sýnir þú þat sem talat er til yðvar Íslendinga, at þær sêð mjökk einrunir” (FS, p. 87), and the traditional insult of calling an Icelander mörlandi (“suet-lander,” in effect “eater of greasy sausages”) occurs several times.

38. Cf. Lange, pp. 153, 155; Auðun, Gull-Ásu-Dórðr, Þorsteinn sögufróði, and Þorstein forvitni are explicitly “poor,” and four more are implied to be.

39. “Eigi varu þer nú tömlatir, Íslendingar,” IP, p. 44.

40. These stories may also reveal something of real thirteenth-century Icelandic attitudes toward Norway and the kingship (as suggested by several scholars including Mohr, cited below, and Marlene Ciklamini, “Medieval Icelanders at the Royal Court as Described in the ÞÁttir,” a paper read before the Scandinavian Literature Section of the Northeast Modern Languages Association, Spring, 1972); they are not out of harmony with famous passages often cited in this connection (such as Stefni’s description of the Icelanders in Stefni’s þáttir, IP, p. 250). However, a Norwegian document like Konungs skuggsjá also offers a great number of parallels to the outlook of the stories,
The function of such attitudes in the stories is the same as that of the poverty of some of the heroes: to dramatise the hero’s achievement in moving from rags to riches and from disfavor to reconciliation. Moreover the adverse judgments on Icelanders are carefully controlled by the Icelandic authors and often mixed with grudging admiration (as on the part of Einar fluga). The Icelander is pictured as a breed apart, cleverer and more tough-minded than the Norwegian in spite of his disadvantages as a provincial or even foreigner. If he is eccentric (einraenn), he is also admired for courage (“þér séð ofrhugar miklir, Íslendingar”).41 He may be “stríðmæltr ok hardðorðr, en mjök fátalaðr ... þykkjumikill sem aðrir Íslendingar,”42 but he is often also unbending in the face of superior power (“djárðrmæltr við tigna menn”).43 Or he may be a witty literary man like Stúfr (“Ök hér er kominn íslenzkr maðr; þat horfír til gamans”).44 In most cases derogation of Icelanders is placed in the mouths of inferior or disreputable people rather than the king. It is true that King Haraldr harðráði pronounced Icelanders self-willed and unsociable (“Eru þér einraðir, Íslendingar, ok ösðblandnir”),45 but the context here and in the other þættir that show his relations with an Icelander tends to support the judgment of the Flateyjarbók interpolator that “Haraldr konungr elskaði mjök Íslendinga”46 and to show him generally well disposed to Icelanders though his own touchy, jealous, and harsh temperament in tradition insures that King Haraldr will never shower affection on anyone.

The ethos of our stories emerges most clearly, perhaps, from a comparison of their characters with those of the family saga. The sagas are in many respects far removed from the heroic world they portray, and the saga authors clearly did not stand for an ideal of pure self-assertion. But as every reader, at least since Ker, has been

41. Ögmundar þáttr, ÍP, p. 450.
42. Halldórs þáttr I, ÍP, p. 69.
43. Of Þórarinn Nefjólfsson, ÍP, p. 289 (also elsewhere).
44. ÍP, p. 268.
45. Sneglu-Halla þáttr, ÍP, p. 224.
46. ÍP, p. 221; this passage is missing in the Msk version and appears to be an expansion by Flát or a predecessor.
aware, they still reflect a heroic ethos in the choice and portrayal of their main characters and plots. The men of the þaðtir are not of the same cut. Wolfgang Mohr, putting the opposition þáttr-man: saga-man in strongest contrast, phrased it very simply: the þaðtir present an image of man that "... nicht altheroisch, sondern mittelalterlich [ist]." Mohr's article, "Wandel des Menschenbildes in der mittelalterlichen Dichtung," touches only briefly on this contrast in Icelandic literature, viewing it in a broad European perspective; and if his contrast of fated man in the sagas with the selfless, Christian image of man in the þaðtir (Mohr is obviously thinking chiefly of the group of þaðtir under study) is oversimplified, it at least points to a valid distinction. Revenge and honor continue to be important in the world of the thirty-one stories; but where the family sagas are set in a society of potential equals, in these þaðtir we identify with the little man in an unequal social situation. The values of these þaðtir are chiefly survival values.

The difference between the family saga's structure (the feud or conflict structure) and the Alienation/Reconciliation structure of our stories corresponds to the opposition tragedy: comedy in the broadest senses of those words. Frye shows how in tragedy the hero becomes isolated from his society but is incorporated into society in comedy; common forms of isolation in tragedy are death or the fall from high estate; some forms of integration into society in comedy are what Frye calls the "theme of acceptance" and the "theme of salvation" (as in Dante's Commedia). Most of the family sagas are tragic in this sense, and most of our group of þaðtir are comic.

Frye shows further that tragedy and comedy in this sense often correspond to "high mimetic" and "low mimetic" on his scale of modes (the relation of author and audience to the characters or to the hero). In the "high mimetic" mode characters are heroically larger than life; their wills and powers are greater than ours though fully human. In the "low mimetic" mode the characters (or the hero) are people of the same limitations and, metaphorically, of the same stature as we the readers. This

is roughly the “modal” relationship of saga-hero to þáttr-hero too; and even though this is a broad generalization that inevitably does not do justice to every case, a comparison of the life and temper of, say, Egill Skallagrímsson with Egill Síðu-Hallsson or Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi with Gunnarr helmingr (of Ögmundar þáttur) reveals their difference in magnitude. Frye found that the resolution of “low mimetic” comedy often involves a social promotion, and this is true for a number of our þættir, while the most typical family sagas are not success stories but stories of failure, the “doomed defense of a narrow place against odds” (to quote Ker again). If the saga in its tragic aspect is the heir of heroic poetry, as many scholars including Andersson have asserted, perhaps we can carry the analogy of the dichotomy we are discussing one step further and wonder whether this kind of short story can be viewed as the heir of the folktale.48 Certainly many of these stories manifest a folktale glow of wish-fulfillment: a young man of ability but penniless sets out for the court; he overcomes difficulties, proves his worth to the king, makes his fortune and marries—not a princess as these are realistic tales—but perhaps a rich widow. The triumphant underdog of folklore may be the prototype.

In any case we cannot fail to notice the contrast of the conflict and fate of the heroic literature with the reconciliation and luck of these þættir and to observe the difference in scale between the doomed tragic hero (Grettir: “sitt er hvárt, gæfa ok ervileikr”) and the prospering þáttr hero (Auðunn: “þótti vera hinn mesti gæfumaðr”). Contrasting medieval man with his heroic ancestor, Mohr summarized: “Er hat

kein Schicksal, sondern Geschick und Glück,” and he writes of this shift in the literary imagination:

An die Stelle der heroischen Fabeln treten anekdotische und novellistische Themen. Jetzt wird es erzählenswert, wie ein Mensch sich im Widereinanderspiel der Gesellschaft durchsetzt, wie er sich geschickt aus der Klemme zieht, oder umgekehrt, wie sich der Ungeschickte blamiert und der Spitzbube entlarvt wird.49

This change is common to European literature, and Frye also observes that Western literature has moved steadily down the scale of modes. This contrast, overdrawn for clarity, need not be conceived except very broadly in chronological terms; *Ruodlieb* antedates the *Nibelungenlied*, some of the þættir are earlier than most family sagas, *chansons de geste* are written side by side with *fabliaux*, etc. Nevertheless we do find medieval Icelandic recognition of such differences:


It is comforting to see such an authority on Icelanders as King Haraldr hárdráði also prone to exaggerate this contrast. There is no better representative of the comic outlook of these stories than *Hreïðars þáttir heimska*, a brilliant character study. Medieval literature, we are told, provides few examples of character development except on the religious pattern of conversion, but folk literature provided another pattern, the coming-of-age or initiation into manhood and a full share in society. Initiatory patterns are common in the family sagas, where they are often set in Norway,50 and the plot structure of the þættir under study lent itself to such a treatment (especially for Gísl, Hrafn, Ógmundr dytrr, Gunnarr helmingr, and Kolgrímur in *Porgríms þáttir*).

Hreiðarr then is shown coming of age in three stages. In the first the “home fool” is brought to Norway and into the sphere of King Magnús; Hreiðarr’s brother Þóðr claims that he was motivated to bring his retarded brother out of fairness and the hope that he might gain some luck (gæfa) by contact with the king, and this proves to be the case. Magnús sees far more in Hreiðarr than most people, and predicts that he will experience wrath and prove to be a skilled artist; these predictions come true in the second and third stages, but first Hreiðarr acquires experience in Magnús’s court. Acceptance at court is the start of the hero’s “socialization” process, and this is crystallized in a scene in which the Icelander sheds his dirt and old clothes for a new suit. Despite his brother’s urging that he dress himself after the courtly fashion, Hreiðarr refuses, maintaining his integrity, but does agree to a new suit of homespun. In the second stage Hreiðarr learns anger at the expense of the life of one of King Haraldr’s retainers and incurs the wrath of Magnús’s joint king. Finally the prophesy of Hreiðarr’s innate talent as a craftsman proves true when he meets with Haraldr again but is not reconciled.

The fourth and last section of the story explicitly recapitulates this development and projects it into the future at a second meeting with King Magnús:

Nú kveðr Hreiðarr kvæðit ok er þat allundarligt, fyrst kynligast, en því betra er síðar er. Ok er lokit er kvæði, mælti konungr: “Þetta kvæði sýnisk mér undarligt ok þó gott at nestlokum; en kvæðit mun vera með þeim hætti sem ævi þín; hon hefir fyrst verit með kynligu móti ok einraenligu, en hon mun þó vera því betr er meir liðr á” (ÍP, p. 131).

Analogy between poet and poem is used in Gunnlaugs saga to characterize Gunnlaugr and Hrafn, but those are static portraits; in Hreidars þáttu we seem to have encountered a character truly in transition, a transition that continues beyond the end of the story, for the narrator reports of Hreiðarr’s later life: “ok ferr hans ráð mjök eptir getu Magnúss konungs, at þess betr er, er meir liðr fram hans ævi” (ÍP, p. 132). However, the narrator adds “ok hefir hann gört sér at mestum hluta þau kynjalæti, er hann sló á sík inn fyrra hlut ævinnar,” and we are left with the recurring riddle whether or not
a medieval character development must be viewed as revelation of previously hidden features.

As a character Hreidarr is related to the folk type of "coalbiter," "Askeladd," or "despised youngest brother." The coalbiter would lie beside the kitchen fire all day getting in everyone's way, but great power, nobility, and kindness had been disguised in his ungainly form, and Askeladd succeeds where others fail. Hreidarr, however, is even more like Parzival, whose "tøren kleider" in Wolfram's version symbolize the hero's ignorance and country manners and who also has a comical habit of blurting out his thoughts.⁵¹ Probably the similarities are traceable to folktale types; but in the case of Parzival we are left with no doubt that our hero actually changes and matures in the course of his story; with Hreidarr the question remains.

_Hreidars þaþtr_ makes use of parallels and contrasts for some very subtle effects; for example, in each of the hero's first three stages of growth he asserts himself against opposition to go to a meeting with a king, and Magnús himself points out these parallels. This trick of construction has thematic significance when the brothers are introduced as a contrasting pair, Þóðr popular, sophisticated, and handsome but small in stature, Hreidarr big, ugly, and considered a fool. Still, as the story progresses, it is Hreidarr who earns the respect and affection of the king and about whom the story is told. The contrast between the two brothers and the relationship of physical size to qualities of the inner man seem to be isolated for inspection in a curious incident in the story; Hreidarr has impetuously set out running to the assembly, while Þóðr tries to overtake him but falls further and further behind:

> Ok er Hreidarr sér, at Þóðr för seint, þá málti hann: "Þat er þó satt, at illt er líttill at vera, þá er aflit nærr ekki, en þó mátti vera fráleikrinn, en líttit ærla ek þik af honum hafa hlotit, ok væria þér verri vænleikr minni ok køemisk þú með öðrum mönnun" (ÍP, p. 116).

⁵¹. David Blamires, _Characterization and Individuality in Wolfram's Parzival_ (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 142-45 and 214, calls this aspect of Parzival's personality the Dümmling theme. G. B. Woods, _The Unpromising Hero in Folklore_ (Harvard Diss., 1910) catalogues types of the Male-Cinderella, several of which show similarities to Hreidarr and some other þaþtr heroes.
The hero's unusual size and strength reflect his superior character, and his brother's smallness corresponds to his relative inferiority in the story, while Hreiðarr's ugliness, the physical reflex of his admirably simple and open nature, contrasts with Þórðr's good looks and the sophistication that goes with them.

This alignment of personality and body forms an interesting contrast to the other outstanding example of the body as mirror of the soul in these þættir, the case of Galti and Kolgrímr in Porgríms þáttur.52 Porgrímr had two retainers: "hét annarr Galti, mikill maðr ok styrkr, annarr Kolgrímr, líttill ok fraligr" (ÍP, p. 311). When their master was to stand trial for manslaughter in the prejudiced and actually illegal court of Kálfr Árnason, Galti disobeyed Kálfr's ruling about coming to court unarmed and concealed an axe under his cloak; at that moment in the story Galti is distinguished by his nickname: "Galti inn sterki, fylgarmaðr Porgríms, greip upp bolöxi" (ÍP, p. 313). In the assembly Kálfr pronounced Porgrímr an outlaw, and the slain man's brother suddenly rushed out of the crowd and struck him his death blow. Kolgrímr turned to Galti and urged him to avenge their master, and at that point the narrator uses Kolgrímr's nickname with an apposition that underscores the parallelism: "Pá mælti Kolgrímr inn litli, fylgarmaðr Porgríms: 'Hefn þú hans, Galti, þú hefir oxina'" (ÍP, p. 314). Galti is afraid even to give the axe to Kolgrímr, and finally Kolgrímr snatches it away commenting that if Galti is so afraid, he will not dare to hinder him either. Then Kolgrímr gives his master's assailant a fatal wound.

Here the arrangement of Hreiðars þáttur is reversed. Galti's size and strength do not mirror greatness, and it is Kolgrímr the Little who possesses the heart to take an honorable revenge. Thus in Porgríms þáttur too the same ethos of the success of an unlikely hero obtains. Porgrímr's opponents, the Icelanders Bjarni and Þórðr, are shown at every point as bullies who victimize an older man out of spite and as flatterers of the pretender to authority Kálfr Árnason. The ultimate hero is the little man Kolgrímr, at the beginning only one of Porgrímr's followers but later the leader of the party; the

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final evaluation of Kolgrímr closes the þáttur: “ok þótti inn besti kaupdrengr.”

If the generalizations offered about theme and ethos require no qualification in the case of Porgríms þáttur, some modification is in order for a few of the group. Steins þáttur and Ásbjarnar þáttur have a harsher view of realities, whether or not they originally ended with the hero’s death. In Odds þáttur Icelanders successfully elude the king’s authority; but the usual conciliatory ending is neutralized, and the story does not produce the happy effect typical of the group. Pórodds þáttur Snorrasonar, like Porsteins þáttur tasalda and others, employs the Alienation/Reconciliation structure as a frame for the narration of adventures on a mission. The framed tale of adventures is interesting for its construction in three scenes of increasing danger and decreasing realism, and the story is told with humor; but Pórodds þáttur appears to be thematically sterile, and even the happy ending seems perfunctory. Finally Halldórs þáttur II and Porleifs þáttur both recount in an epilogue (Conclusion) some further dealings between those Icelanders and the respective Norwegian rulers; in Porleifr’s case a trick of Hákon jarl’s causes his death, while King Haraldr tries unsuccessfully to take vengeance on Halldórr; nevertheless both stories agree well with the temper of the group.

It appears, then, that the thirty-one þættir all share a common outlook on man and the world and most (perhaps twenty-six) manifest a limited range of generally humane and conciliatory themes. This would constitute a shared “inner form” in the terminology of Wellek and Warren, corresponding to a common “outer form” revealed in narrative structure and common features of characterization and rhetoric. This closes the generic circle, but a number of cautions are in order. The stories of the group are not “all the same.” Neither formal analysis nor conceptual analysis is a science; our notions of “inner

53. Pórodds þáttur first appears in Snorri’s work (Separate Saga and Heimskringla) and is taken over into Flát; however, an allusion in Legendary Saga (ed. Johnsen, p. 80) suggests that its compiler knew the story. De Vries, Finnur Jónsson, and Mogk do not give the þáttur separate treatment, but it is anthologized by 40ÍP, ÍP, and IS 4.
form" are vague; other groupings are possible and other interpretations. And of course "outer" and "inner" forms are not independent variables but directly interdependent.

So the value of the experiment proposed at the outset is not scientific; but if the generic approach has a place in literary criticism of the sagas, our understanding of the individual stories must have been enhanced by the discussion of them as a group. Failing the objective tests of a science, that is our only control on criticism.