

Gender and Genre:

Short and Long Forms in the Saga Literature

Maðr er manns gaman.
Hávamál

The male world of the *þættir* (singular: *þáttur*) or short stories of the Old Norse-Icelandic saga literature can be exemplified in a telling form by the thirteenth- or fourteenth-century tale about Gestr of the Norns, *Norna-Gests þáttur*.¹ The guest, a visitor from the distant pagan and heroic past, finds his way to the court of the first Christian king of Norway, Óláfr Tryggvason (the year would have been 998). An atmosphere of tension accompanies the stranger, who is not Christian but has been primesigned; and the mystery peaks when Gestr, challenged by a wager, produces a fragment of a golden saddle buckle that had belonged to the ancient hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Pressed for an explanation, the old man begins his reminiscences of the heroic age with the story of Sigurd's youth, including a minor incident in

1. Critical text in Ernst Wilken, ed., *Die prosaische Edda im Auszuge nebst Völsunga-saga und Nornagests-tháttur*, Theil I: Text (Paderborn, 1877), pp. 235–261. (Wilken's 2nd ed. rev. of 1912 omits the introductory discussions; cf. there pp. vi–vii.) There are two versions: *Flateyjarbók: En samling af norske kongesagaer mid indskudte mindre fortøelinger*, [ed. C. R. Unger and G. Vigfússon] 3 vols. (Christiania, 1860–68), I, 346–359; and *Norrøne skrifter af sagnhistorisk indhold*, ed. Sophus Bugge, I [=Det norske oldskriftselskabs samlinger, VI] (Christiania, 1864), 47–80 [from “S” (= MS. AM 62) with readings from *Flateyjarbók*]. See further Nora Kershaw (Chadwick), ed. and tr., *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past* (Cambridge, 1921), pp. 11–12 (pp. 14–37 translate “A”, a text close to Wilken and *Flateyjarbók*); Friedrich H. von der Hagen, *Völsunga- und Ragnars-Saga nebst der Geschichte von Nornagest*, *Altdeutsche und altnordische Helden-Sagen*, vol. 3, 2nd ed. rev. Anton Edzardi (Stuttgart, 1880), pp. lxii–lxiv (pp. 345–397 translate Bugge's edition of S). The literature on the story is cited in Joseph Harris and Thomas D. Hill, “Gestr's ‘Prime Sign’: Source and Signification in *Norna-Gests þáttur*,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 104 (1989), 103–122.

which Gestr, then Sigurd's servant, acquired the buckle, and goes on to the story of Sigurd's death at the hands of his brothers-in-law. The next day Gestr's saga-telling continues with an account of Brynhildr's death and Gestr's experience with the sons of Ragnarr Loðbrók. The reminiscences conclude with the virtues of a series of six kings ranging from the fifth to the ninth centuries, all from Gestr's direct experience. Now Gestr volunteers the explanation of his destiny: when he was an infant, spae-wives (*nornir*) came to his home; the first two prophesied good, but the third said he should live no longer than the candle beside him would burn. He now carries the candle with him. Having lived three hundred years, he had come to Olaf to be baptized; and after a short period as one of the king's retainers, he quietly lighted his candle and expired in Olaf's presence.

Here Olaf's all-male court frames narratives from the pre-Christian past; the retainers and, especially, the king himself evaluate Gestr and his old stories against an implicitly masculine, Christian, and courtly standard, and the consummation of Gestr's life is acceptance into the retinue, baptism, and death in the very presence of the king as his candle burns out. The only "couple" here is obviously the lord and his loving warrior, but the story is not totally without women, for most of Gestr's old lore paraphrases Völsung and Nibelung material which, of course, prominently concerns women—Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr, Guðrún, Grímhildr, Oddrún, Svanhildr—and could be described as a series of misalliances. Gestr's mysterious harping included a lay, "the ancient Wiles of Guðrún," but the centerpiece of his saga-telling was his account of Brynhild after Sigurd's murder, including a text of "Brynhild's Hell-ride" that deviates interestingly from that of Codex Regius of the Elder Edda. As Gestr concluded his account of Brynhild's pagan funeral, her flyting with a troll-woman, and this ogress's final shriek and leap from a cliff, the audience of retainers shouted "That's fine! Go on and tell us some more!"² But the king, mindful of their spiritual welfare, intervened: "You need not tell us any more about things of that kind," and continued: "Were you ever with the sons of Lothbrok?"³ The only other women in *Norna-Gests þáttir* are the norms, the prophetic, semi-divine vagabonds, who determined Gestr's

2. Translations from Kershaw (Chadwick), here p. 33.

3. Kershaw (Chadwick), pp. 33–34.

fate ages ago, and Gestr's own mother who, like Meleager's, preserved her son's life-token, the candle.

In literature a long life, especially a supernaturally long life—we find the device from the early Old English *Widsith* to the Čapek-Janaček *Makropoulos Case*—is an opportunity to display a slice of history or history *tout court*,⁴ and *Norna-Gests þátttr* presents its audience with a version of history in which different eras are corollated with different conceptions of “the couple.” The most ancient pre-Christian stage begins with a family, but Gestr's father presides over a household which is the scene of a rite performed entirely by women; the religious atmosphere is primitive, pre-heroic, inhabited by nameless collective female powers to which the individual male is subject. The second stage features heroic individuals of both sexes, together with the tragic couples and triangles of the Völsung-Nibelung stories; woman does not control fate, but in the person of Brynhild she participates fully in the heroic struggle against it. The gods are individual and male, disposal of the dead is by fire; in short, it is the pre-Christian heroic age. Olaf, however, puts an end to tales of cremation and proud, violent suicides and adultresses like Brynhild and pointedly turns the saga-telling to an all-male, military milieu verging on the Christian period: “Were you ever with the *sons* of Lothbrok?” And the remainder of Gestr's account of “history as I witnessed it” is a survey of kings and courts ending with the most Christian, Louis the Pious. The final stage, the framing setting in Olaf's court, implicitly stretches on to the writer's present.

Norna-Gests þátttr is not isolated in the saga literature; its analogues include a group of brief anecdotes in which Óðinn or some other representative of the pagan past entertains a Christian king and his men,⁵ but it has a close twin in the *Tale of Tóki Tókason*.⁶ Tóki was

4. For *Norna-Gests þátttr* in this connection see Friedrich Panzer, “Zur Erzählung von Nornagest,” in *Vom Werden des deutschen Geistes: Festgabe Gustav Ehrismann...*, ed. Paul Merker and Wolfgang Stammeler (Berlin and Leipzig, 1925), pp. 27–34, and Margaret Schlauch, “*Widsith*, *Vithförull*, and Some Other Analogues,” *PMLA* 46 (1931), 969–987.

5. Discussed in Harris and Hill; an analogue omitted there is to be found in *Flateyjarbók*, II, 397–398: before vanishing into the sea Þórr tells tales of the past which include his slaying demonic women.

6. *Tóka þátttr Tókasonar* is found in *Flateyjarbók*, II, 135–138 and in *Fornar smásögur úr Noregs konunga sögum*, ed. Edwin Gardiner, with a foreword by Sir William A. Craigie (Reykjavík, 1949). Translations mine.

fated to live through two life-times and sought out St. Olaf to complete his primesigning with baptism, "and he wore his white baptismal clothing until his dying day." Tóki's saga-telling mentions no women and reflects only military *Männerbünde* comparable to Norna-Gestr's service with the sons of Lothbrok; though the setting is pre-Christian, the purpose in *Tóka þátr* is less a contrast with the Christian present than a comparison of Hrólfr kraki, the great Danish hero-king, and his warriors, with the similar figure from Norway, Hálf, and his comitatus, the Hálfrekkr.

Further, we may be justified in seeing in a third story, *Þorsteins þátr skelks*,⁷ a less obvious analogue of this group of tales: The Iclander Þorsteinn is among Olaf Tryggvason's retinue on a progress; in the middle of a spooky winter night Þorsteinn went alone to the privy, an outhouse fitted with two rows of eleven seats. A devil popped up out of the innermost seat, identifying himself as a figure from the heroic age, Þorkell hinn þunni (Thorkel the Thin) who fell in the battle of Brávellir with King Haraldr Wartooth. Þorsteinn began asking him about the torments of Hell: no hero bears them better than Sigurd Fáfnisbani and none worse than Starkaðr the Old, who screams in pain. Now Þorsteinn begs the fiend to "Howl like Starkad, just for a little,"⁸ and an escalating series of three mighty howls follows as the goblin moves several seats nearer with each howl. The last scream knocked Þorsteinn into a coma, but just then King Olaf had the church bell rung, and the devil fled groaning back down the privy. Þorsteinn had, of course, been playing for time and banking on the screeches waking King Olaf, who would know what to do. The folktale motif of the boy who does not know what fear is emerges in a concluding dialogue with the king in which Þorsteinn receives the new nickname of *skelkr* "shudder." Basically, however, this þátr is a polished Christian satire on the old pagan heroes, conceived with real humor and realized in snappy dialogue that I have not tried to paraphrase. But the story is also, arguably, a parody of the type of story represented by *Norna-Gests þátr* and *Tóka þátr*.

7. Found in *Flateyjarbók* and *Fornar smásögur*; the literature on the story is cited in John Lindow, "Þorsteins þátr skelks and the Verisimilitude of Supernatural Experience in Saga Literature," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Odense, 1986), pp. 264–280.

8. Translation by Jacqueline Simpson, *The Northmen Talk: A Choice of Tales from Iceland* (London and Madison, 1965), pp. 152–155, here p. 154.

Here the wanderer through time is not primesigned but a pagan hero; he does not enter the hall to stand before the king on his high seat but sidles up to a retainer on the toilet seat; his encounter with the Christian does not end with baptism, acceptance by the Männerbund, and death near the king, but with the plunge back into the privy (a kind of baptism!), rejection, and eternal life in suffering. In the architecture of the privy, travestyng that of a noble hall, and in the devil's moving from seat to seat we might see parody of a motif like that of *Tóka þáttur* where the hero goes along the benches trying the strength of each retainer in order to find his level and his seat; the comparison of ancient heroes—a historical *mannjafnaðr* or comparison of men—reminds again of *Tóka þáttur*, while the vilification of Starkaðr in comparison with Sigurd is reminiscent of *Norna-Gests þáttur*. In any case, whether or not the parodistic reading is justified, it is certain that women are completely absent and the value structure of the story is based entirely on king, court, and muscular Christianity.

A cruder analogue, but a richer subject for gender analysis, is called *Sorla þáttur*.⁹ We can recognize, as in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, three or four narrative segments that represent stages of history. The first is a mythic prelude in which the actors are the old gods, here distorted in another Christian satire, but this time a humorless one. Freyja is Odin's mistress; one day she sees where four dwarves are forging a magnificent necklace (elsewhere called the Brísingamen); they refuse to sell it but agree to give it to her in return for four nights of sex. Odin heard how Freyja had acquired the jewelry and determined to punish her by sending Loki to steal it; Loki managed this by turning into a fly, then a flea. Freyja begged Odin to return the necklace and he relented on condition that Freyja agree to cause a quarrel between certain kings who would live in the distant future; the fight was to be eternal unless "there be some Christian man so brave and so much favoured by the great good fortune of his liege lord that he shall dare to take arms and enter among the combatants and slay them."¹⁰ Odin's conditions, of

9. *Flateyjarbók*; *Fornar smásögur*; and editions of the *fornaldarsögur*.

10. Translation by Kershaw (Chadwick). On connections between *Srloþþáttur* and *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts* (*Flateyjarbók*; *Íslendinga þættir*, ed. Guðni Jónsson [Reykjavík, 1945]) see Alan L. Binns, "The Story of Þorsteinn Uxafót," *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 14 (1953–55), 36–60, esp. 38–42: Þorsteinn is the son of Ívarr ljómi and in one episode ends a feud between "dead" pagans by administering a lasting death; like the episode of Ívarr's intervention, Þorsteinn's is put into a Christian perspective.

course, predict the course of the rest of the story, a narrative trajectory ultimately modeled on salvation history. In this first, mythic stage of history, then, "the couple" is illegitimate, and woman is presented in her lowest form as bitch-goddess; foreknowledge and design of the future stem from the weak and immoral Odin but are carried out by the evil goddess. As in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, fate is female and can be broken only by a Christian man, a member of the king's Männerbund.

The second narrative stage is the pre-Christian heroic age which culminates in a version of the *Hjaðninga víg*, the widely-known story of Heðinn's elopement with Hildir, daughter of Hogni. Prefixed to this is the short but complicated *fornaldarsaga* of Sqrli, a Norwegian viking, who slew King Hálfðan of Denmark to acquire his precious warship; later Sqrli, accompanied by his own father, encountered the sons of Hálfðan, Hákon and Hogni, in battle. The only survivors of the two families were Sqrli and Hogni; having orphaned each other, they became blood brothers, "and both remained true to their oaths as long as they lived."¹¹ When Sqrli finally fell in one of his viking raids, Hogni avenged him. Sqrli's story has a chaste all-male cast; the precious object is not acquired by Freyja's unpleasant means, and good clean violence leads to that most masculine of fantasies, the *Waffenbruderschaft*. (More precisely, the fantasy is of a man's meeting his match in battle and, after fighting to a draw, creating a brotherhood of arms: this fantasy is found most famously, perhaps, in Gilgamesh's wrestling with Enkidu, but the violent inception of the friendship of Robin Hood and Little John also comes to mind.) The "couple" in this phase is not the king and his retainer but its more primitive prototype, the "warrior male" and his double—if I may borrow for a moment from the language of Klaus Theweleit in his *Männerphantasien*.¹² This stage of Hogni's life is free of women and woman-borne fate, but in the next phase of the story female elements re-enter.

Heðinn is a pirate-king of Serkland, imagined perhaps as the Barbary Coast. Alone in a forest he meets a goddess, whom we deduce to be Freyja though she calls herself by the valkyrie name Gøndul. This scene and Heðinn's subsequent meetings with Gøndul have a strongly

11. Kershaw (Chadwick), p. 48.

12. *Male Fantasies*, tr. Stephen Conway, Erica Carter, and Chris Turner, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, 1987–89; originally Verlag Roter Stern, 1977–78).

erotic aspect, but her charms are used with a purpose, to infect Heðinn with the desire to surpass King Hogni. When he arrives in Denmark, Heðinn is made welcome, and the two heroes compete to a draw in all manner of sporting tests; finally they swear blood-brotherhood and promise to share everything equally. But Sqrli's model cannot be recreated with women on the scene to spoil the warrior idyll; we now learn that Hogni has a wife and as only child a daughter whom he loves exceedingly. And now Heðinn again encounters Gøndul who gives him a drink of forgetfulness and reawakens his sense of emulation: for his honor's sake, she persuades him, he must do away with Hogni's wife and abduct the daughter Hildr by force. The author explains: "The wickedness and forgetfulness contained in the ale which Hethin had drunk had so got the better of him that there seemed to him to be no alternative, and he had not the slightest recollection that he and Högni were 'foster-brothers.'" ¹³ Meanwhile Hildr has seen the future in dreams and tries to reason with Heðinn but realizes that "in this case you are not your own master." The murder of the queen in a sort of sacrifice may pattern with the acquisition of a valued object in the first two parts of the *pátttr*; afterward Heðinn again meets Gøndul, again drinks, falling asleep in her lap; Gøndul devotes them all to Odin, and Heðinn awakens to catch a glimpse of her disappearing, "big and black." He now understands the evil he has done, but the murder has barred any retreat; the abduction and pursuit must proceed as in the traditional versions of the story.

Heðinn finally makes a stand on the island Hoy; when the two men meet, both seem to understand the agency behind the murder and abduction, but they embrace their doom with tragic nobility. Because of Freyja's evil magic any man slain in the battle would have to start up and fight again and again, and the torture of this battle lasted, not until Ragnark as in more traditional versions, but 143 years until the first year of King Olaf Tryggvason's reign in 995. Meanwhile Hildr, whose name means "battle" and who bears the blame for the *Hjaðninga víg* in more traditional versions—Hildr sat in a grove and watched. This third section of *Sqrli pátttr*, then, is heroic in a full-blooded sense that makes it comparable to the *Völsung* story in *Norna-Gests pátttr*: the setting is pre-Christian, men and women both have an opportunity to

13. Kershaw (Chadwick), pp. 51–52.

feel and to struggle gallantly. But the era is cursed and the "couple" is ill-fated; a wife and mother must be crushed beneath a viking ship, while an abducted bride must spend an immensely long wedding night watching her father and her husband, the would-be blood brothers, kill each other: male *Waffenbruderschaft* is wrecked by devilish pagan interference, an interference gendered female. These fundamentally noble heathens never have a chance against the corrupting sex and magic of the goddess.

The fourth and last section of the þátrr takes place in the early days of the Christian present and is briefly told: Olaf and his warrior retinue land on Hoy, and Ívarr ljómi, a good Christian strengthened by the luck of his king, has the honor of giving the *coup de grace* to Hogni, Heðinn, and all their good men. The theology of this conclusion is not learned, but death is presented as a release from torment, and the basic pattern of salvation history—divine intervention in the history of calamities that was the pagan world—is not hard to see. Interestingly enough no disposition of Hildr is mentioned; we are left with the image of her seated in a grove and watching the battle, and there she seems to belong. In the Christian present "the couple" is constituted by the king and his warrior Ívarr in the company of their comrades-at-arms.

The four stories mentioned so far show a common attitude toward history, religion, and gender, inclusion and exclusion, in short a common value structure. With this pattern established, let me pause briefly to place these short narratives in the context of the saga literature generally. The literary study of þættir might be said to begin with Wolfgang Lange's 1957 article "Einige Bemerkungen zur altnordischen Novelle."¹⁴ Before Lange excellent historical and editorial work was done on individual stories, but glimpses of the place of short narratives in what Northrop Frye called "an order of texts" are few and far between.¹⁵ The importance of Lange's modest article is that it brought precisely this sense of a literary-historical order to bear and first mooted questions of genre that continue to be fruitful. I had not discovered Lange, however, when I began working on the þátrr in 1967; my inspiration came instead from T. M. Andersson's newly published *The*

14. *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 88 (1957), 150–159.

15. Discussed or registered in Joseph Harris, "Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga þættir*," *Scandinavian Studies* 44 (1972), 1–27, and in "Þættir," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. J. R. Strayer, vol. 12 (New York, 1989), pp. 1–6.

Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading.¹⁶ Analysis of narrative structure gave me a key, I thought, to justifying some order among the hundreds of unordered short stories I had been reading in textual conglomerates such as *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók*; at the same time Andersson's method seemed to ignore or suppress all the fascinating problems of narratological theory and genre and so to be in need of supplementation. The subject of the short narrative forms blossomed from the end of the 1960s through the '80s, closely linked to the development of literary-theoretical interest in the saga literature generally.¹⁷ Anyone who writes about short forms must have in mind some kind of contrast with long forms,¹⁸ but beyond that general contrast any characterization of the þættir very quickly becomes characterization of one group of their texts. The same could be said of "saga"—how many brief references to "the saga" or "sagas" really refer only or principally to the family sagas? Despite theoretical gaps, however, the short narrative forms are now established as a particular set of themes within discourse on the saga literature. In evidence I would cite the most recent comprehensive history of Old Norse-Icelandic literature; Jónas Kristjánsson's *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature* from 1988 is a conservative work but the first to offer a separate chapter on þættir on the same level of organization as that of major genres such as the sagas of the Icelanders.¹⁹ That is canonization!

The boundaries of the field, however, remain extremely vague. Most of the hundreds of short narratives in Old Norse-Icelandic are included within larger collections with a narrative arrangement; *Norna-Gests þáttir*, for example, is preserved as an episode in the longest of the biographies of Olaf Tryggvason (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*). How can we tell what was an independent literary work, and wouldn't the very notion of independence—so central to our conception of literature—be a historically relative one?²⁰ Lange estimated the total corpus of þættir at over one hundred, but this

16. (Cambridge, Mass, 1967); the first result was a dissertation, "The King and the Iclander: A Study in the Short Narrative Forms of Old Icelandic Prose," Harvard 1969.

17. Bibliographical survey in Harris, "Þættir."

18. For interesting thoughts along these lines, see Mary Louise Pratt, "The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It," *Poetics* 10 (1981), 175–194.

19. Tr. Peter Foote (Reykjavík).

20. The problem is discussed but not solved in Joseph Harris, "Theme and Genre in Some *Íslendinga þættir*," *Scandinavian Studies* 48 (1976), 1–28 [reprinted in this volume, Eds.], and in "Þættir."

guess shows more courage than clarity of generic conception. The "ethnic" or native terminology does not offer a safe guide,²¹ but some regions of the hazy terrain of the short narrative have been convincingly mapped. In my last taxonomical effort of this kind I recognized seven fairly well-defined groups of þættir that account for at least sixty stories.²²

The kind of cultural-historical question raised by the present conference has scarcely been posed of this corpus of tales. There have been literary interpretations of individual þættir, of course, and I did discuss what Wellek and Warren called "inner form" in the best-known subgroup, thirty-one texts that chart the changing relationship of an Icelander with a Norwegian king: twenty-six seemed to have certain common denominators of "theme," seventeen having "humanistic" and nine "religious" themes; and by a still more general measure, that of Weltanschauung, these short forms seemed to embody a high-medieval "comic" ethos by comparison to the heroic and tragic ethos of the longer sagas.²³ Very recently Vésteinn Ólason has interrogated a small subset of þættir for "the self-image of the free man"; he finds that the "essence of these tales seems to be a solution to the contradiction that a 'free' man increases his honour and his worth by subordinating himself to another man, the king."²⁴ This analysis is fully convincing, but to the extent that Vésteinn Ólason has rightly captured the "essence" of the þættir, their promise as a mirror of "the making of the couple" seems slight. Here the saga literature once again seems to stand distinctly outside the mainstream of European literature, to be in respect to the "couple" quite unlike *fabliaux*, *Märchen*, *novelle*, or *Schwänke*. This conclusion runs counter to the Europeanizing trend in saga studies²⁵ and to the tendency of good essays by Walther Heinrich Vogt and Wolfgang Mohr on the "Wandel des Menschenbildes" from tragic to comic,

21. Ethnic and analytic genre terms were especially debated in three articles on "Genre in the Saga Literature" by T. M. Andersson, Lars Lönnroth, and Joseph Harris in *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975).

22. "Þættir."

23. "Theme and Genre."

24. "Den frie mannens selvforståelse i islandske sagaer og dikt," in *Medeltidens fødsel*, Symposier på Krapperrups Borg, 1, ed. Anders Andrén (Nyhamnsläge, 1989), pp. 277-286, here p. 285.

25. The trend is defined and reviewed by Carol J. Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca, N. Y., 1985), esp. p. 251.

as attested, in part, by such stories as our þættir.²⁶ It even runs counter to my own just paraphrased generalizations on the medieval, rather than heroic ethos of þættir! But the contradiction is more apparent than real.—Let us return to the stories in search of “the couple” or its absence.

One recognizable generic nucleus²⁷ comprises tales that focus on the clash of pagan and Christian cultures in the conversion period. In some of the group this generic idea is realized in a precise and personal form: one of the evangelizing kings is brought into contact with heathens; after a conflict, the pagans are converted and integrated into Christian society²⁸—unless the conversion element is negated and, like Rauðr inn rammi, the resistant pagan is martyred.²⁹ One instance of the standard pattern would be *Páttir Eindriða ilbreiðs* where a Noble Heathen undergoes testing in sports in direct competition with the king; the result is not quite brotherhood, as in the comparable struggle of Heðinn and Hogni, for Olaf’s superiority is divinely sponsored.³⁰ But the young man is baptized and received into the retinue: “and the king took him into his own company with the greatest affection. And Eindriði never parted with the king again as long as they both lived, and he was always thought the most splendid of men.” The young hero is unmarried and never brought into contact with a woman, though he does honor the pleas of his mother and sister in the archery contest—a version of the international William Tell motif. Continental influence is patent in this tale,³¹ but just as obviously the basic value system we have already explored is at play here: what counts is male, Christian,

26. Vogt, “Wandel im altnordischen Menschentum,” *Preussisches Jahrbuch*, Sept. 1923, pp. 315–322; Mohr, “Wandel des Menschenbildes in der mittelalterlichen Dichtung,” *Wirkendes Wort*, 1. Sonderheft (1952), pp. 37–48; rpt. *Wirkendes Wort: Sammelband II* (Düsseldorf, 1963).

27. Some discussion of the idea of genre implied in this phrase is to be found in “Genre and Narrative Structure,” pp. 22–23.

28. This group of þættir is further discussed in Joseph Harris, “Folktale and Thattr: The Cas of *Rognvald and Raud*,” in *Folklore and Medieval Studies*, ed. Carl Lindahl and Erika Brady (= *Folklore Forum* 13 [1980], 158–198), and in “Saga as Historical Novel,” in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, pp. 187–219 [Reprinted in this volume, Eds.].

29. *Flateyjarbók* and *Fornar smásögur*.

30. *Flateyjarbók* and *Fornar smásögur*.

31. Perhaps Irish influence is ultimately behind the “feat” in which the king juggles knives while running around his moving ship on the oars.

and courtly; the highest good is to live and die with your king. The conversion group comprises at least twelve þættir; but not all stress the courtly Männerbund quite as much as our example. In one a mother urges compassion;³² in another the only female character, a wife and mother, is instrumental in bringing the heathen father and son to God and to the king, and thus also in ending their estrangement from each other.³³ But in another story from this group, *Sveins þáttir ok Finns*, a divided family, apparently made up only of men, is restored to unity through conversion, but this time *without* female agency—clearly a story with the same value system we have been encountering.³⁴ The generational conflict that is often a concomitant of the conversion theme in the saga literature appears also in *Helga þáttir ok Úlfs*, which at least allows its single female a role in the family.³⁵ The three stories we have already examined, *Norna-Gests þáttir*, *Sǫrla þáttir*, and *Tóka þáttir*, are the best representatives of what in my taxonomy is a subgroup of conversion þættir in which the king is brought into contact with the heathen-heroic past; in a broader sense, however, any tale about conversion told from the vantage point of the securely Christian Middle Ages is an encounter between a doomed old order and a historically inevitable new order.

Finally, one tale from the conversion group constitutes an interesting exception to the absence of the "couple" as family; this is *Vǫlsa þáttir*, a spritely Christian satire with something of the air of Continental short-story forms.³⁶ It is easy for a modern audience to appreciate

32. *Svaða þáttir ok Arnórs kerlingarnefs* in *Flateyjarbók* and *Íslendinga þættir*.

33. *Rognvalds þáttir ok Rauðs* in *Flateyjarbók* and *Fornar smásögur*; for literature on the story see Harris, "Folktale and Thattr."

34. In *Flateyjarbók* and *Fornar smásögur*; for literature see Elizabeth A. Rowe, "Searching for the Highest King: St. Christopher and *Þáttir Sveins ok Finns*," forthcoming in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* [105 (1990), 131–39. Eds.].

35. *Flateyjarbók* and *Fornar smásögur*; on generational conflict see Paul Schach, "Some Observations on the Generation-Gap Theme in the Icelandic Saga," *JEGP* 81 (1982), 196–203, and Harris, "Saga as Historical Novel."

36. *Flateyjarbók* and *Fornar smásögur*; cf. Harris, "Historical Novel"; for significant recent work on the þáttir see Gro Steinsland and Kari Vogt, "'Aukinn ertu Uolse ok vpp vm tekinn': En religionshistorisk analyse av *Vǫlsa þáttir* i *Flateyjarbók*," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 96 (1981), 87–106; they understandably omit mention of the misleading Herbert S. Joseph, "Völsa þáttir: A Literary Remnant of a Phallic Cult," *Folklore* 83 (1972), 245–252. The classic analysis is still Andreas Heusler, "Die Geschichte von Völsi, eine altnordische Bekehrungsanekdote," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, 1903, pp. 24–39 (rpt. in *Kleine Schriften*, II, 372–387). Translations mine.

because its skillful construction, satirical tone, and humorous sense of the absurd readily appeal to our skeptical tastes. The simplicity of the central narrative, told in short simple sentences, as well as the domestic setting and cast of characters, are reminiscent of fairytales; the unsaga-like characters are anonymous types—except for the comic touch of a named dog of unnamed masters. A long tradition lies behind the extant text, but in the form left by the final author the story assaults pagan superstition from a position of Christian rationalism with little overt moralizing. The message is principally embodied in the parody of paganism in which cult members worship an object called the *vølsi*—a pickled horse penis! This perversion of religion is related to the family's isolation and to the personal propensities of individual family members, and the Christian satirist implies a relationship between *social* inversion within the household dominated by the wife and this “unnatural” cult, instigated and perpetuated by the “proud” old woman. The party of the *vølsi*—the wife, the libidinous servant girl, and the rowdy son—are effectively contrasted with the anti-*vølsi* group: intelligent but passive father, virginally squeamish daughter, and plain, honest manservant, who would rather have a nice loaf of bread than the sacred fetish. The logic of Christian myth may lie behind the fact that the household's “fall” is blamed on the wife while the maiden daughter is first to note the “advent” of the saint King Olaf, who will convert the family to the True Faith; the author adds that “the old woman was slow taking to the Faith, but the farmer rather readier”; and “After they had been instructed in Whom they ought to believe and had come to recognize their Creator, they saw what a foul and unmanly way of life they had had and how deviant from all other good men.” A “manly” standard within the family seems to depend on restoration of the traditional hierarchy as much as on religious orthodoxy.

The best-known group of *þættir* comprises thirty-one stories which concern, almost by definition, exclusively male relationships; their focus is principally on vertical relationships between the king and the Iclander (the relationships studied by Vésteinn Ólason under the aspect of “freedom”), but the stories also concern horizontal male relationships, mostly within the *Gefolgschaft*. Very few women or male-female couples play a role. At the end of his story Auðun does return to Iceland to care for his mother, but she is the only woman

mentioned in this most celebrated of þættir.³⁷ The much admired and much translated *Story of Brandr the Generous* mentions no women at all,³⁸ and ten others of the group, including some of the best, have no use at all for women.³⁹ These thirty-one stories are based on a male dyad, a pair of roles usually filled by an Icelander and a king; the difference in power between the two roles is crucial, and the plots can be understood as variations on an alienation phase followed by a reconciliation phase.⁴⁰ This core plot structure is often framed by a journey from and return to Iceland, and a number of specific variations on the generic plot structure have been described. Essential in the present context, however, is that the only "couple" consistently in sight is male, and the generic plot normally ends in re-establishment of solidarity between them, though it is not strictly a solidarity of equals. There are some incidental women: Gísl Illugason is guarded in the king's jail by an old woman, probably only because the verse attributed to him in this situation addresses a woman.⁴¹ Egill Síðu-Hallsson brought his wife and daughter to Norway, first leaving them in a rented house but later moving them right into the court, but the purpose of this brief episode is made clear when the king prophesies that the girl will be lucky: "and it turned out that way ... for she is the mother of the holy bishop Jón."⁴² This little passage may be an interpolation introduced as an oral variant ("Svá segir sumir menn..."); in any case it is a narrative excrescence. A protagonist's wife back in

37. Íslenzk fornrit 6; among the more recent literature on the þáttir is Edward G. Fichtner, "Gift Exchange and Initiation in the *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka*" *Scandinavian Studies* 51 (1979), 249–272; but see especially the review of folk narrative connections in John Lindow, "Hreiðars þáttir heimska and AT 326: An Old Icelandic Novella and an International Folktale," *Arv* 34 (1978), 152–179, supplemented by Harris, "Folktale and Thattir."

38. *Brands þáttir orva* in Íslenzk fornrit 4; recent literature: *Stories from the Sagas of the Kings*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London, 1980), and Hermann Pálsson, "Brands þáttur örva," *Gripla* 7 (1990), 117–130; also cf. Sverrir Tómasson, "Vinveitt skemmtan og óvinveitt," in *Maukastella: færð Jónasi Kristjánssyni fimmtugum* (Reykjavík 10. April, 1974), pp. 65–68 (mimeographed).

39. *Hreiðars þáttir heimska*, *Odds þáttir Ófeigssonar*, *Stúfs þáttir blinda*, *Þorsteins þáttir austfirðings*, *Þorsteins þáttir sögufróði*, *Þorvarðar þáttir krákunefs*, *Þáttir Þormóðar*, *Þorsteins þáttir skelks*, and *Þorsteins þáttir Síðu-Hallssonar*.

40. The structural analysis is elaborated in Harris, "Genre and Narrative Structure."

41. *Gísls þáttir Illugasonar* in Íslenzk fornrit 3; cf. Roberta Frank, "Why Skalds Address Women," in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, ed. Teresa Päröli (Spoleto, 1990), pp. 67–83.

42. *Egils þáttir Síðu-Hallssonar* in *Íslendinga þættir*, ed. Guðni Jónsson; translation mine.

Iceland may be alluded to (*Þorgríms þáttur Hallasonar*),⁴³ or she may have a minor part to play in introductory events in Iceland before the journey to Norway (*Þóraríns þáttur Nefjólfssonar*).⁴⁴ Since several of these stories relate the youthful adventures of a man who returns and settles in Iceland, we might expect to find the “couple” established at the end of the tale, but this is not the case. When it is told of an Icelander such as Hreiðarr heimski that “many men are descended from him,” we must assume that mention of his marriage is simply elided.⁴⁵ Þorsteinn austfirðingr declines King Magnús’s invitation to marry and settle in Norway; and though he settled in Iceland and was thought a *gæfumaðr* or man of good luck, the story does not say that he had descendants—probably because he is purely fictional.⁴⁶ Only *Ísleifs þáttur byskups*, which does deal with historical material, actually makes the establishment of a family part of the story’s conclusion.⁴⁷

In the dozen or so stories of this group in which a woman does play a more than nominal role, she is usually an agent (or merely an incident) in the alienation or reconciliation of the men. Bergljót, wife of Einarr Þambarskelfir, is prepared to intervene with arms against her husband to save Halldórr Snorrason,⁴⁸ and another great lady acts in a similar manner in *Steins þáttur Skaptasonar*.⁴⁹ There is nothing distinctively female about this role of helper and mediator, which is played much more often by men in the stories generally; there is, however, a passing interest in the dynamics of the royal or nearly royal couple in four or five stories. Take *Sturlu þáttur* for example: Sturla Þórðarson finds himself seriously on the outs with King Magnús Hákonarson; the intervention of a friend has not healed the breach, and now Sturla

43. Íslenzk fornrit 9.

44. *Íslendinga þættir* (chapters 8–11 only; cf. Harris, “Genre and Narrative Structure,” p. 3, n.).

45. So also for Auðunn vestfirzki of *Auðunar þáttur*.

46. Cf. Joseph Harris, “The King in Disguise: An International Popular Tale in Two Old Icelandic Adaptations,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 94 (1979), 37–81 [reprinted in this volume, Eds.]; Hermann Pálsson, “Early Icelandic Imaginative Literature,” in *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen, et al. (Odense, 1979), pp. 20–30.

47. Ed. B. Kahle in *Kristni saga* ... (Halle, 1905); the wooing and other incidents in the life of Ísleifr are treated as separate episodes in “Genre and Narrative Structure,” p. 15; in retrospect I would treat them as episodes within the structural segment Conclusion.

48. *Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar I* in Íslenzk fornrit 5; cf. Joseph Harris, “Christian Form and Christian Meaning in *Halldórs þáttur I*,” *Harvard English Studies* 5 (1974), 249–264 [reprinted in this volume, Eds.], and Faulkes, *Stories from the Sagas of the Kings*.

49. *Íslendinga þættir*.

must spend some time in close quarters on shipboard with the King and Queen.⁵⁰ His reception among the crew and retainers is cool until he entertains them with a saga-recital; the queen sees the crowd and conceives an interest in hearing the story. The next day, in a passage famous for its implications about saga-entertainment or *sagnaskemmtun*,⁵¹ the queen's mediation prevails to the extent of sending for Sturla to come to the poop-deck to entertain the royal couple. The saga-telling leads to permission to perform a praise poem before the king; and so, little by little and with much applause from the queen, Sturla is led into full favor and earns the king's accolade: "It's my opinion that you recite better than the Pope himself." Eventually Sturla achieves membership in the retinue and the title of *skutilfsveinn*. Notice, incidentally, that the subject matter of Sturla's saga-telling is a *Huldar saga*, "about a huge she-troll"; here Christianity presumably plays no role, but the presentation of the demonized, primitive, female *Stoff* to an enthusiastic male audience is similar to the situation in *Norna-Gests þáttur*.⁵²

In *Sturlu þáttur* and generally in these stories the female member of a couple shows more conciliatory good sense and goodwill than the male and is shown getting round him, getting her way by diplomacy or power or both. An amusing variation on the same idea occurs in the second of the *þættir* about Halldórr Snorrason where the generic apparatus of reconciliation comes to nothing, and the final interview of those old comrades Halldórr and King Haraldr parodically inverts a reconciliation scene: instead of appearing hat in hand before a king sitting in state in his beer hall, the Iclander breaks into the king's

50. Edited separately in Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Sturlunga saga*, III (Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 367–383; see discussion of manuscripts and semi-independent status of text, p. xi. Translations used here are from Simpson, *Northmen Talk*, but this is an incomplete rendering; see Julia McGrew and R. George Thomas, tr., *Sturlunga saga*, II (New York, 1974), pp. 489–499, for a complete translation. Úlfar Bragason, "Sturlunga saga: Atburðir og frásögn," *Skáldskaparmál: Tímarit um íslenskar bókmenntir fyrri alda*, 1 (Reykjavík, 1990), 73–88, demonstrates the influence of literary patterns on the supposedly raw historical *Stoff* of the *Sturlunga saga* complex partly in a detailed discussion of this story.

51. Cf. Hermann Pálsson, *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga* (Reykjavík, 1962), esp. pp. 52, 116, 168–169.

52. Huld may be the troll-witch of that name who took on the form of a mare to trample King Vanlandi to death in *Ynglinga saga*; however, the name is generic for "witch"; cf. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga og samfund: En indføring i oldislandsk litteratur* (Copenhagen, 1977), pp. 162–163.

bedroom and stands towering, fully armed, over Haraldr and the queen as they lie in bed; and instead of presenting a gift or a poem or a task accomplished, Halldórr demands the queen's ring in payment for money owed him. Haraldr tries to temporize, but the queen intervenes:" 'Give him the ring,' said the queen. 'Can't you see the way he's standing over you, the killer?'"⁵³

In two stories, *Qgmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings* and *Porvalds þáttur tasalda*, an adventure among pagans is part of the story's generic reconciliation section and includes a conversion and marriage to a formerly heathen woman.⁵⁴ But the inclusion of a little conversion story as part of the reconciliation of king and Icclander is found most brilliantly realized in *Pórarins þáttur Nefjólfs sonar*, where the retrospectively told conversion episode involves the mother of one of the protagonists. This generic juxtaposition resembles that found in the tale of the encounter of Þorsteinn skelkr with the devil, where the incident we examined in connection with narratives of the *Norna-Gests þáttur* type is set within an alienation-and-reconciliation framework concerning an Icclander and his king.

The well-made story of Hrafn Hrótfirðingr, also known by his mother's name as Guðrúnarson, probably gives more space to woman and family couples than any other of the group of thirty-one.⁵⁵ The long prelude in Iceland is a typical feud saga in little; Guðrún is the main figure (with a role a bit like that of the mother of Víga-Glúmr): she endures after the killing of her husband until her son will be old enough to take revenge, and she uses all her wiles to get him safely out of the country when he does. The second part in Norway is a quite regular alienation-reconciliation story, except for the prominence given women. Hrafn's offences begin with his attentions to his host's daughter, but she and her mother attempt to intercede for Hrafn. When the offences escalate and Hrafn is outlawed, the women drop out of the story, but when King Magnús Ólafsson is finally reconciled with Hrafn,

53. *Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar II* in Íslenzk fornrit 5; translation from *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Stories*, tr. Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth, 1971); cf. Harris, "Genre and Narrative Structure," p. 19.

54. A couple is encountered in the adventures in *Pórodds þáttur Snorrasonar* and in *Porvalds þáttur*; Íslenzk fornrit 27: 255-261 (and pp. 1-11); Íslenzk fornrit 9: 119-126.

55. Íslenzk fornrit 8, and W. H. Wolf-Rottkay, ed., *Altnordisch-isländisches Lesebuch* (Munich, 1967); translations mine.

the denouement includes marriage to the girl and fetching his mother from Iceland to join the newly established—mostly female—family in Norway. But this probably fictional tying-up of loose ends does not prevent the more genre-specific concluding formula: "Hrafn was ever after with King Magnús, as long as the king lived."

The wealthy widow Ása figures importantly in the story of a certain Þórðr, sans patronymic, who was satirically nicknamed for his association with her, Gull-Ásu-Þórðr, Rich-Ása's Thord.⁵⁶ The relationship, partly business, partly pleasure, is the cause of trouble, as the poor but energetic Icelander is seen in Norway as a social climber. The main interest of the story, however, lies not in Ása and Þórðr as a couple, but in the clever way the underdog Icelander overcomes hostility and prejudice, and, like several others of the group, the story especially thematizes friendship. The relationships in question are among men, but the real point is an unsentimental conception of friendship as reciprocity for favors given. The story ends with marriage, social approval, and wealth.

A relationship to a woman is also the cause of trouble in a third story, *Óttars þáttur svarta*: the famous Icelandic poet had composed love verses about Olaf Haraldsson's queen. The reconciliation also comes, as so often, through poetry, but the queen too is active in the reconciliation.⁵⁷ The author of this anecdote—almost too brief to analyze—is interested in the ambiguous relationships within the royal couple and among the three characters. The situation is charged but inexplicit, perhaps not yet "triangular desire," but pointing in that direction.

Perhaps the funniest story of the group is one of the least unified, *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*.⁵⁸ Here Haraldr harðráði's rough and often bawdy sense of humor is on display from the very first episode, which involves clever repartee around the consummate male insult, passive sodomy. In the fuller and more original version, King Haraldr's queen, who did not like Halli, is mentioned near the beginning and reenters near the end of the þáttur where she criticizes the king for associating with the foul-mouthed poet; the incident goes like this:

56. *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttur* in Íslenzk fornrit 11; my translations.

57. *Óttars þáttur svarta* is ch. 4 of "Sighvats þáttur" in *Íslendinga þættir*; cf. the explanation in Harris, "Genre and Narrative Structure," p. 3 n., and Simpson's treatment in *Northmen Talk*.

58. Íslenzk fornrit 9; my translations.

[Halli was staring admiringly at a valuable silver-chased axe in the king's hand:] The king noticed that right away and asked whether the axe pleased Halli. He answered that he liked it very much. "Have you ever seen a better axe?" Halli answered, "I don't believe so." The king asked, "Would you let yourself be bugged for the axe?" "No," said Halli, "but it seems to me excusable that you would want to give the axe away the same way you acquired it." "And so it shall be, Halli," said the king, "you take it and make the best use of it: for it was freely given to me, and so I shall give it to you." Halli thanked the king. In the evening, when the company had sat down to their drinking, the queen told the king clearly that it was bizarre and not at all appropriate to give that treasure of an axe to Halli—"something which is hardly property for men of non-noble rank, bestowing it in return for his filthy language. Meanwhile, some men get little for their good service." The king answered that he himself would decide to whom he gave his treasures: "I do not want to turn Halli's words—those which are ambiguous—to the worse interpretation."⁵⁹

King Haraldr goes on to offer the queen a further demonstration of linguistic ambiguity and how interpretation is a two-edged sword. He calls on Halli to compose an ambiguous verse about her—"and let's see how she takes it." The verse is racy and philologically difficult, but the gist is that she, Queen Þóra, is the person most suitable to perform certain sexual services for Haraldr. "'Take him out and kill him,' said the queen, 'I will not put up with his slander.' The king commanded that no one be so bold as to lay a finger on Halli for this—but something can be done about it if you think some other woman is more suitable to lie beside me and be queen. And you don't know praise of yourself when you hear it." This is a triangular situation we know from modern life: the wife and the free-living friend as rivals for the established and powerful figure, the husband.

Another form of the triangle appears in the last of this group of

59. ÍF 9: 293–294; on the versions of the þáttir, cf. pp. cix–cxiv. The passage I have translated here is briefly discussed by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, tr. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense, 1983), p. 27, in the general context of defining *níð*, and compare Michael Minkov, "Sneglu Halli, 2: 11: *Dróttinserðr*" *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 22, pt. 5 (1988), pp. 285–286.

stories I mean to mention, *Ívars þátr Ingimundarsonar*.⁶⁰ Ívarr was at the court of King Eysteinn Magnússon and sent a message home to Iceland to a woman there, declaring his love and asking her not to marry anyone else. The messenger was Ívarr's own brother, but the brother betrayed Ívarr and married the woman himself. Ívarr had already arrived in Iceland when he learned of this situation, but he immediately returned to Norway and the king's court. Most of this very short story is occupied with King Eysteinn's attempts to discover the cause of Ívarr's resulting depression and then to cure it. The king's suggestions of the other-fish-in-the-sea cure and his offer of money are greeted glumly, but his third suggestion does work: "We'll talk about this woman to your heart's content for as long as you wish, and I'll devote my time to it. Sometimes a man's grief is soothed when he can talk about his sorrows." This idea has echoes not only in the *Roman de la Rose* but in the Norse *Hávamál*,⁶¹ and the talking cure, as psychotherapy is sometimes called, must be universal. The original triangle situation obviously relates this story to a whole series of Icelandic sagas, *Bjarnar saga Hítöðlakappa*, *Kormaks saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, and *Laxdæla saga*, and beyond them to a worldwide narrative structure of triangular desire.⁶² In all these sagas the couple that should have come into being but did not, the absent couple, haunts long texts that deal with the rivalry of two men. The desire they feel toward the same woman feeds on imitation, is the "imitative desire" of René Girard's triangle, and the jealousy between them is a bond to which we could assign different names. But what is interesting in the present context is the *contrast* with *Ívars þátr*. In the full-length sagas the triangle is sustained to the death, and this is presumably what originally made the material *söguligt*, worth telling in a saga. But in the short story the spell of the triangle is broken, and the narrative retreats to the male dyad, the warrior and his loving lord. (In Germanic imagina-

60. *Íslendinga þættir*; for manuscripts and editions see Ulset p. vii; translation from Hermann Pálsson, *Hrafnkels saga and Other Stories*.

61. *Roman de la Rose*, ll. 3099–3110; *Hávamál*, 121, 8–10; 124, 1–3; cf. Harris, "Theme and Genre," p. 26, n. 29.

62. The Baldr-Höðr-Nanna story as told by Saxo (book three) may be cut from the same cloth, and the tale of Helgi Hjörvarðsson, his brother Heðinn, and the valkyrie Sváva may have been more comparable in a more original form (*Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, prose after st. 30 to end).

tive life, insofar as it is documented in literature, *this* “couple” is the older; one thinks, for example, of the OE Wanderer searching far and near for a lord who will not only cheer and support him but who would “know my loving thoughts” [“(minne) myne wisse”].) In the thirteenth-century saga literature the exploration of the erotic triangle belongs to Icelandic settings and to the longer genre, the sagas, but the þátrr-hero Ívarr returned to the court and the king. In terms of genre, one might say, exaggerating a bit, that Ívarr’s story begins as a saga but reverts to þátrr status. In fact, the treatment is that of the short story throughout, and it is only through the comparanda that we know the initial situation was treated by preference in saga-length works. Within the story, however, the king replaces the woman and the rival; and while the triangular stories of the sagas end tragically, the þátrr takes leave of its hero, his cheerfulness restored, on what Northrop Frye might have called a comic note of incorporation or reincorporation into the courtly Männerbund. The closing benediction on Ívarr is “And he remained with King Eysteinn.”

Our conclusions about the couple in þættir—at least about the couple in the sense of our conference theme—must be moderately negative. In the medieval North short narrative forms were *not* found notably suitable for exploring domestic problems, but *Ívars þátrr* does point the way to anyone who would wish to pursue the problem of the couple in early Icelandic literature. The *skáldasögur*, the group of sagas chiefly about the lives of poets and constructed on an enduring love triangle, would be a beginning.⁶³ After that almost all the great family sagas would offer rich materials, and the student of the couple in these longer forms could build on the relatively rich secondary literature on aspects of gender already in place.⁶⁴ *Njáls saga* shows that the domestic couple could have a narrative significance even in the absence of a love triangle, but an irritant, a third factor, is necessary to the generation of a narrative, for the marriage portraits in the sagas contain few cries or whispers of post-Romantic inwardness. In the family sagas that

63. Cf. Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur: Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldasagnanna formu* (Reykjavík, 1961), and the contextualization by Clover, “Icelandic Family Sagas,” esp. pp. 249–251.

64. Especially conspicuous is Thomas Bredsdorff, *Kaos og kærlighed: En studie i islændingesagaens livsbillede* (Copenhagen, 1971); and cf. Clover’s survey in “Icelandic Family Sagas,” pp. 256–259.

irritant is usually competition, outward conflict, or some stage of a feud: for instance, the couple comes memorably to the fore in *Hávarðar saga Ífsfirðings* in the context of delayed revenge. Two sagas would stand out, however, as especially important for the treatment of the couple: *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Laxdæla saga*. *Gísla saga* is the more intense and narrower of the two, showing the failure of most human institutions—oath brotherhood, servant-master loyalty, female same-sex friendship, blood kinship, kinship overvalued in incestuous desire, perhaps also religion—but it is the bond of the married couple that emerges from the story as the least weak.⁶⁵ A reading of *Laxdæla saga* from the point of view of the couple would have to be, I would argue, considerably more complicated. Admittedly the saga appears simple in the central constellation of Kjartan, Bolli, and Guðrún where it draws on the classic structures of triangular desire in the sense of René Girard.⁶⁶ The solution of the tension here is neither the institutionalization of the triangle as in the *skáldasögur* nor Ívarr's retreat to the male bond; instead *Laxdæla saga* revives the pattern of the Völsung-Nibelung story with two couples superseding but never quite dissolving the triangle and of course leading to a re-enactment of the tragic paradigm of the ancient heroic story. For its part *Gísla saga*, also famously haunted by the Völsung material,⁶⁷ deploys its quadrangles and triangles in interlacements that are less predictable but no less tragic. But when we go beyond the core narrative to consider the sweep of *Laxdæla saga* from Unnr in djúpúðga through the unforgettable last words of Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir, it is clear that permutations of the triangle would not be adequate to the saga's discussion of sexual politics.

Our survey of þættir has delved into only two groups, totaling some forty-five short stories. Outside these groups a few texts may be more

65. One of the most recent contributions to the study of gender-related themes in *Gísla saga* is Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in *Gísla Saga*," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, pp. 235–263.

66. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore and London, 1966 [French original 1961]); cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985).

67. See, for example, Heinrich Matthias Heinrichs, "Nibelungensage und *Gísla saga*," in *Beiträge zur deutschen und nordischen Literatur: Festgabe für Leopold Magon zum 70. Geburtstag*, 3. April 1957, ed. H. W. Seiffert, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für deutsche Sprache und Literatur, 11 (Berlin, 1958), pp. 22–29, and Meulengracht Sørensen, "Marital Bed."

directly relevant to the thematics of the couple.⁶⁸ The jolly *Hróa þáttr heimska* comes to mind: there the socially modest Danish hero moves from the patronage of the king, Sven Forkbeard, to a wealthy marriage to the clever daughter of a famous Swedish lawman; the male world of the first part of the þáttr thus stands in contrast to Hrói's dependence on the wisdom of his wife (and her father) in the second part, and Hrói's trials eventuate in a good marriage, literally "the making of a couple." The author was, however, probably most interested in his nordicization of the central motifs of the story from the *senex cæcus* tale of the *Seven Sages*; moreover, *Hróa þáttr* is an isolated case.⁶⁹ My impression is that also *outside* the two main groups of þættir surveyed here, the short forms were not an important instrument for thinking through problems of the couple. Of the long forms, the saga genres, I have glanced only at the family sagas, but there, it seems to me, we do find a fairly extensive problematization of marriage, jealousy, and the politics of the couple. How can we explain this literary-historical pattern where long and short forms roughly reverse expectations formed from continental literature?

A hint may be given by the echoes of the mythic and heroic stories in the sagas, what has been called their heroic legacy, eddic perspective, or *eddischer Blick*.⁷⁰ Problematic love relationships in the Nordic mythic material, where they are common enough, tend to be seen from

68. Conspicuously absent from our survey is the small group of þættir that deal with Icelandic feuds, texts such as *Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana* (Íslensk fornrit 11) and the first part of the *Hrafns þáttr* discussed above. These operate with the same narrative structure as the family sagas; in fact, the justly well-known *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs* served Andersson's *Family Saga* as a structural model for the feud saga, and the dearth of such feud þættir in the corpus has been thought due to their having been early absorbed into or expanded as feud sagas (Herbert S. Joseph, "The Þáttr and the Theory of Saga Origins," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 87 [1972], 95; cf. Clover, "Icelandic Family Sagas," pp. 291-294). Domestic relations probably come in for about the same amount of attention there as in the family sagas. *Gunnars þáttr*, for example, repeats an incident of *Laxdoela saga* in which Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir rides roughshod over her fourth husband at their wedding feast—an anecdote significant for cultural history but probably not part of a gender/genre pattern.

69. Dag Strömbäck, "En orientalisk saga i fornnordisk dräkt," in *Donum Grapeanum: Festskrift tillägnad överbibliotekarien Anders Grape på sextiofemårsdagen, den 7 mars 1945* (Uppsala, 1945), pp. 408-444; rpt. in *Folklore och filologi*, Skrifter utg. av Gustav Adolfs Akademien för Folklivsforskningen 48 (Uppsala, 1970), 238-254.

70. Andersson, "The Heroic Legacy," in *Family Saga*, ch. 3; Roberta Frank, "Onomastic Play in Kormakr's Verse: The Name Steingerðr," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 3 (1970), 7-34, esp. 27-34; Ulrike Sprenger, *Praesens historicum und praeteritum in der altisländischen Saga* (Basel, 1951), esp. p. 17.

the male perspective;⁷¹ but in the heroic poetry this problematics of the couple is registered to a great extent in women's voices or from a female point of view—so much so that a term like "heroine-ic poetry" would not be out of the question if it were not so unwieldy. It may be that the family sagas inherited not only the specific motifs and story-patterns noted by earlier scholars such as Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Magnus Olsen and not only their spirit and rhetorical structure as argued by the likes of W.P. Ker and T.M. Andersson, but also this aspect of their thematics.⁷²

Against the eddic legacy of the family sagas we might set the *skaldic legacy* of the major groups of þættir. Of course our conventional term "skaldic poetry" covers a great variety of poetic phenomena over time and space, but one can recognize more or less central and more or less marginal areas, and praise of the ruler, especially in "court-meter" (*dróttkvætt*), is agreed to lie at the heart. Skaldic praise-poetry was, according to the stereotypes, presented by the poet before his lord in the presence of the warriors of the court; the dramatis personae and scene are, therefore, also typical for the þættir we have surveyed, and a great many of the short stories are, like *Ívars þátr* and *Sturlu þátr*, stories of poets or saga-tellers. In an inventive article John Lindow suggested that the inherent ideology of such poetry correlated with its notoriously difficult, riddle-like style; it functioned as a kind of test or sign of initiation into the *drótt* or court: "Early skaldic poetry might, therefore, be regarded as a device for isolating non-members, i.e. the lower classes and women, from the *drótt*. It functioned, in effect, as a kind of secret language in which the members of the *drótt* could maintain their collective traditions in a special way and also communicate without being wholly understood by others, indeed to the exclusion of others."⁷³ Similarly the þátr-hero wants to be included in his lord's

71. Pointed out by Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur*, pp. 11–14, and Roberta Frank, "Onomastic Play," p. 27.

72. See Andersson, *Family Saga*, for the earlier references; some later studies in this kind are: Anne Heinrichs, "Beziehungen zwischen Edda und Saga: Zur Interpretation zweier Szenen aus der *Heiðarvíg* saga," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 99 (1970), 17–26; Oskar Bandle, "Isländersaga und Heldendichtung," in *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar*, 30. júní 1969, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, et al. (Reykjavík, 1969), pp. 1–26; Haraldur Bessason, "Mythological Overlays," in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni* 20. júlí 1977 (Reykjavík, 1977), I, pp. 273–292.

73. "Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry," *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975), 311–327, quotation: pp. 322–323.

favor and ranked among the retainers; it is, as we have seen, a value system based on the male dyad in the context of the Männerbund. Implicitly it excludes women, family, and the heterosexual couple.⁷⁴ Unlike the sagas, where the heroic legacy is woven into warp and woof, the þættir seem, as we have already seen, to fence off eddic influences with a distancing frame or to exclude them altogether; but the “skaldic legacy” is part and parcel of their stories.⁷⁵

One is reminded of the comparison of the two verse forms by Haraldr harðráði, about whom so many þættir tell: he improvised a stanza in the easy eddic meter *fornyrðislag*, but immediately corrected himself: “That is badly composed, and I must make a second stanza and make it better.”⁷⁶ The content of the better poem is quite similar, but the form is that of the elaborate court meter. (Presumably any women who happened to be marching along toward destiny at Stamford Bridge would have understood the first stanza but not the second! Obviously any theory can be pushed to absurdity.)⁷⁷ Like eddic verse the sagas were a relatively open form, expansive enough to accommodate several kinds of materials and influences and to develop several themes; open too in the sense of being self-explanatory and accessible to mixed audiences which would have shaped the treatment and thematic repertoire.

By comparison skaldic court verse and the central groups of þættir are closed forms, with a smaller range of themes and values implying, probably, a narrower audience. Consider again the example of Sturla Þórðarson: he told a saga with what we might call “late eddic” content and featuring a demonized female; the audience ranged from the crew to the king, but especially appreciative was the queen. When Sturla recited a skaldic poem, however, it was explicitly for the king, though the queen listened in. Her approving comment was greeted by the king with irony: “Are you able to follow it quite clearly?” She extracts

74. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, argues that even relationships that seem to exclude women are inscribed with the whole question of gender arrangements; p. 25 and passim.

75. The chief instance of other eddic manifestations in þættir would perhaps be the incident in *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* in which Þjóðólfr Arnórsson is directed to compose verses portraying quarreling commoners, a smith and a tanner, first as Þórr and Geirrøðr, then as Sigurd and Fáfnir (Íslenzk fornrit 9: 267–269).

76. So in *Heimskringla*; for the other sources, see Íslenzk fornrit 28: 187–188.

77. On women skalds see Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, *Skáldkonur fyrri alda*, I (Akureyri, 1961).

herself with a tactful ambiguity, but as a woman and a Dane she may have had two strikes against her as a critic of skaldic verse.⁷⁸ (Some comments in the sources suggest, though, that not every male ruler who was willing to pay for a poem could actually understand it.) Internally, then, we see two different audiences correlated with gender and genre, but who formed the audience of *Sturlu þáttir* itself, or of *Gísls þáttir* or *Stúfs þáttir* or any of them? There is no reason external to the texts to suppose the audiences actually restricted to any sort of Männerbund; yet in a vague way this narrower ancestry seems inscribed in the stories. Like courtly eulogy, stories of the kind we have been discussing had a limited future, but the structural limits of the genres or subgenres probably are an essential part of the high level of literary achievement we find among the þættir.

Our conference topic comprises two themes, the couple and short narrative forms, and invites the consideration of short forms as a favored instrument of medieval literature for consideration of the problems—copious in all ages—of the core of every family. For the continental mainstream this is undoubtably one of the roles of *fabliaux*, *Mären*, *novelle*, and the like, while the contemporary West Scandinavian literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries seems to offer a contrast and counterinstance. The thesis of a favored nexus between short forms and the domestic theme of the couple should be viewed, however, as a special case of a more general hypothesis connecting gender and genre. At this deeper level the þættir constitute strong confirmatory evidence.

78. Cf. Simpson, *Northmen Talk*, p. 4, n.