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Within and Without Family in the Icelandic Sagas¹

Kári Gíslason

The Icelandic sagas reflect a deep social interest in the nature of family obligations. Narrative tension and drama often result from carefully plotted increases in competition between families, while considerable space is given over to family biographies and genealogical information. As a result, the saga authors' conception of the historical seems closely bound to a desire to represent family life. In *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Íslendinga saga*, the representation of family life extends to the situation of internal family conflicts, when the strict ethical codes underpinning the centrality of family obligations seem to be complicated and perhaps even threatened by characters' formation of stronger bonds outside the family. The portrayal of internal family conflicts in these two sagas enabled the authors to express complex and often conflicting ethical issues.

This essay raises an issue that has long had a central place in Icelandic saga studies, but which I think will reward further discussion, that is, the representation of family life. Recent studies of this aspect of the sagas have yielded interesting results, particularly in the specific context of the contemporary sagas, or sagas that were written at around the same time as the events they describe. When, in 1998, Guðrún Nordal wrote that 'every individual in the saga [*Íslendinga saga*], of social importance or of little means, has a well-defined role to play and the exact family and social relations underscore the action at every level',² she was both confirming a long-held sense of the sagas as family documents and surprising us with just how intense family meaning was in the action and ethical dimensions of the narratives. Her study, it seemed, gave very precise support to an earlier contention that had been made by Margaret Clunies Ross, namely, that fundamental 'to the medieval literary and historiographical tradition of which *Íslendinga saga* forms the conclusion is a conception of history as family generated and family linked'.³ Both the family and contemporary sagas appear to integrate family matters in all aspects of the stories they tell; family is the central and unifying cultural concern of saga authors and their contemporaries.

Thus, conflicts in family and contemporary sagas most often have a basis in family life. Allegiances within and between families help create a sense of a logical progression in the majority of disputes, at least as much as do perceived gains or losses in honour,

¹ This essay is an expanded version of a paper that I gave at the Sydney Symposium in Old Norse Studies in April 2008. I am grateful for the helpful comments given by the other Symposium participants, and in particular Margaret Clunies Ross. I also wish to thank Martin Duwell, Vésteinn Ólason, Stefanie Gropper, and Úlfar Bragason for their comments on an earlier version of this essay that appeared as a chapter in my 'Narratives of Possession: Reading for Saga Authorship' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Queensland, 2003), Chapter 2.

² *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), p. 24.

³ 'Myth and Society in *Íslendinga saga*', in *Samtíðarsögur: Proceedings of the Ninth International Saga Conference* (Akureyri, 1994), pp. 674–88, (p. 676). See also her 'The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds: Genealogical Structure as a Principle of Literary Organization in Early Iceland', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 42 (1993), 372–85, and, '*Íslendinga saga* as Family History', *Frá Suðlægri Strönd*, 3 (1987), 73–83.

another popular area of inquiry for scholars interested in the basis of saga characters' decision-making.⁴ When the underlying framework of family life becomes apparent in the narrative, whether in the large quantities of genealogical information, in stories of the tensions that develop because of kinship obligations, or in sagas taken up entirely with a single family, we find expressed an underlying assumption that a saga is the means by which authors record, define, and interpret family life. If a saga is history, it is history as family biography, and very seldom abstracted beyond the domestic perspectives of key protagonists and their relations.

One reason is that family support takes on added importance in a society that lacks an executive arm of government. For the first three hundred years of its history, Iceland relied on an unusually high degree of self-regulation of disputes, because the medieval Icelandic legal structure made the parties themselves administer and enforce their claims. A legal system without an executive arm needed, in the place of government, an array of supporters who would help disputants press or defend their cases, as well as moderators and advisors who would be prepared to act as representatives of a common desire to curtail the extent and impact of disputes. In medieval Icelandic society, both roles most often fell to the families and friends of the disputants, creating a breadth of community involvement in disputes that is perhaps difficult to imagine today.

While the system that resulted was often a dangerous one for those involved in conflicts, the family sagas generally depict the violence that did occur as a precise expression of the stage that a dispute or feud had reached; in fact, a key skill in reading the sagas is being able to predict, as the first audience surely did, where the patterns of a feud will take the dispute next.⁵ Violence in the family sagas is almost always predictable in this way, although there are famous exceptions – there has, for example, been some disagreement about why in *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* Hrafnkell kills Sámr's brother, Eyvindr, instead of Sámr himself.⁶ By and large, though, the community represented in the sagas has sufficient knowledge of the conventions of family duty and honour as

⁴ In many of the family sagas, honour appears to function as a form of social currency, limited in quantity and capable of exchange. Thus, honour can be gained by diminishing the stature of an opponent, effectively robbing them of some of their social standing. See William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og Ære: Studier i islandingesagaerne* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993). Compare Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1998), pp. 226–27, and Richard Bauman, 'Performance and Honor in Thirteenth Century Iceland', *Journal of American Folklore*, 99 (1986), 131–50, (pp. 139–46).

⁵ Jesse L. Byock is particularly strong in his emphasis on the social basis of feud-based narratives. He argues that '[i]t is impossible to understand the Old Icelandic sagas without comprehending the function of feud in medieval Iceland. Feud stands at the core of the narrative, and its operation reaches into the heart of Icelandic society. The dominant concern of this society—to channel violence into accepted patterns of feud and to regulate conflict—is reflected in saga narrative', in his *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 1.

⁶ See for example Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's saga* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971); Peter Hallberg, 'Hrafnkell Freysgoði and the "New Man"', *Scandinavian Studies*, 47 (1975), 442–47; Peter Hallberg, 'Hunting for the Heart of *Hrafnkel's saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 47 (1975), 463–66; Fredrik J. Heinemann, '*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: The Problem with the New Man', *Scandinavian Studies*, 47 (1975), 448–52. See also the description of the debate about *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* in Maria Bonner and Kaaren Grimstad, '*Munu vit ekki at því sættask*: A Closer Look at Dialogues in *Hrafnkel's saga*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 111 (1996), 5–26, (pp. 6–7).

represented in the sagas to be able to correctly interpret assaults and killings. When, as in the case of violence within family groups, the heroic code seems to be under threat, the saga author tells us that the community disapproves – the certainties around the appropriate use of violence have been undercut.

Clearly, the sagas emerged out of a society that needed and valued strong family bonds, and one would expect the sagas to reflect and even justify the general view of family life as being central. But the sagas do more than simply express a social norm: they examine it with a degree of historical awareness that makes it possible for the representation of family life to function thematically. This is clearest in the case of internal family conflicts, or in cases when the family's sense of unity is threatened by its members' ways of dealing with disputes. Of particular interest are situations where the family has not only come to disagree, but appears incapable of settling on the right way of solving its disagreements.

Gísla saga Súrssonar (herein *Gísla saga*)⁷ and *Íslendinga saga*⁸ have tended not to be discussed together, mainly on the grounds that they belong to different genres – family and contemporary sagas, respectively – and that those two genres have quite different ways of representing and interpreting the past.⁹ For many, *Gísla saga* has seemed a riddle to be solved, both in terms of the action of the saga and its ethical underpinnings – the trick to solving it seemed to lie in understanding Gísli's adherence to the heroic code and in a careful reading of his poetry for the real state of things. Consider this description by Joseph Harris:

What saga prose and skaldic riddles have in common may lie at the level of bare epistemology. The sagas are famous for their severe limitation to the observable; psychology, for example, is presented through outward and visible signs—W. P. Ker called it face-of-the-clock psychology. A secret that could only be known between two persons is reported in the only form everyone else could know: they were observed to be talking alone ... Reality is a kind of epistemological puzzle; the elements for solving it are there, but each person and the reader has to solve it for himself. *Gísla saga* is full of such small epistemological riddles, and the narrative turns of a murder which is never firmly credited to anyone and is still a source of disagreement.¹⁰

⁷ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit VI (Reykjavík: Íslenzk fornritafélag, 1943), pp. 1–118.

⁸ *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, 3 vols, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1981), II, pp. 1–512.

⁹ On the generic classification of the sagas, see for example Miller, *Bloodtaking*, Chapter 2; Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), Chapter 3; Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Intellectual Complexion of the Icelandic Middle Ages: Toward a New Profile of Old Icelandic Saga Literature', *Scandinavian Studies*, 69 (1997), 443–53; Kirsten Hastrup, 'Text and Context: Continuity and Change in Medieval Icelandic History as "Said" and "Laid Down"', in *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages: A Symposium*, ed. Elizabeth Vestergaard (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 9–25; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Íslendingasögur og Þættir', in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, 5 vols, ed. Böðvar Guðmundsson, Sverrir Tómasson, Torfi H. Tulinius, and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993), II, pp. 25–163; and Theodore M. Andersson, 'Splitting the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 47 (1975), 437–41.

¹⁰ 'The Enigma of *Gísla saga*', in *The Audience in the Sagas: The Eighth International Saga Conference*, 2 vols (Gothenburg, 1991), I, pp. 181–92, (p. 189). See also Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Concepts of Truth and

As in the case of Hrafnkell's killing of Eyvindr, Vésteinn's death appeared to lie outside normal feud patterns, and so posed interpretive problems, for modern readers at least. *Íslendinga saga*, on the other hand, was for a long time regarded as a fairly transparent, reliable document, one that recorded in almost annalistic fashion the events of the thirteenth century; certainly, *Íslendinga saga* did not offer the audience the kind of riddles that Harris describes.¹¹ The following example of its historical mode comes from Chapter 5:

Pau misseri eftir váru dylgjur miklar með mönnum ok ófriðr á landi. Um haustit var veginn Markús á Rauðasandi, en um várit eftir var brenna Önundar í Langahlíð. En sætt var á brennumálit um sumarit á þingi, ok gerði Jón Loftsson.¹²

[The year after, there was a great deal of tension among the people and strife in the land. In autumn, Markús of Rauðasandr was killed, and the burning of Önundr in Langahlíð occurred in the following spring. The case of the burning was settled at the assembly during the summer by Jón Loftsson.]¹³

At times, Sturla's annals express familial interests, as in this section from Chapter 10:

Snorri Sturluson fæddist upp í Odda með Jóni Loftssyni, meðan hann lifði. Var Snorri þá níttján vetra, er Jón andaðist. Var hann þá með Sæmundi, fóstbróður sínum, þar til er þeir Þórðr Sturluson báðu til handa honum Herdísar, dóttur Bersa ins auðga frá Borg á Mýrum. Hann átti átta hundruð hundraða. En Snorri var þá félauss, því at móðir hans hafði eytt fjórum tigum hundraða, þeim er hann tók eftir föður sinn. Lagði Guðný þá Hvammsland til kvánarmundar Snorra ok var brúðkaup þeira í Hvammi.¹⁴

[Snorri Sturluson was brought up at Oddi by Jón Loftsson, while the latter was alive. Snorri was nineteen when Jón died. He then lived with Sæmundr, his foster-brother, until Þórðr Sturluson requested on his behalf the hand of Herdís, the daughter of Bersi the rich from Borg in the Mýrar district. He had eight hundred hundreds. At the time, Snorri was without means, because his mother had spent the forty hundreds that he had got from his father. Guðný then transferred Hvammsland to Snorri as bride-price, and their marriage was in Hvamm.]

Falsehood, Fair Description and Misrepresentations in Medieval Icelandic Writings', *Sydney Studies in Society and Culture*, 3 (1986), 61–73, (pp. 62–64). On the disagreements over the identity of Vésteinn's killer, see for example Claiborne W. Thompson, 'Gísla saga: The Identity of Vestein's Slayer', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 88 (1973), 85–90. See also Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Murder in a Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in *Gísla saga*', 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: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 235–63.

¹¹ For a discussion of the early scholarship, see Úlfar Bragason, 'On the Poetics of *Sturlunga*' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, 1986), pp. 16–33.

¹² *Íslendinga saga*, p. 9.

¹³ Translations are my own.

¹⁴ *Íslendinga saga*, p. 14.

Snorri would become a major player in the disputes of the thirteenth century, and so this domestic narrative also contributes to *Íslendinga saga*'s account of the thirteenth-century conflicts that were to lead to Iceland's loss of independence in the 1260s. And, of course, Snorri Sturluson was the author of *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda* – details about saga authors of the kind we have here made *Íslendinga saga* an important source of information about Iceland's literary history. Thus, while *Gísla saga* was complex – or, in Joseph Harris' terms, a puzzle that sought the reader's participation in its solving¹⁵ – *Íslendinga saga* was an invaluable source of social and literary history. In the context of on-going debates about the historicity of the sagas, and in particular about the creative elements in the family sagas, *Íslendinga saga* was considered to stand firm as both a social document and an indication of the thirteenth-century context of saga writing.

A significant change in approaches to *Íslendinga saga* came in the 1980s, when scholars began to look more closely at the creative aspects of *Sturlunga saga*, the compilation of which *Íslendinga saga* is a part.¹⁶ The compilation was one of the last of the key medieval Icelandic texts to be subjected to structural analysis, and earlier studies, notably by Theodore Andersson and Carol Clover, were applied more or less directly.¹⁷ A dissertation by Stephen Tranter suggested that both the compilation as a whole and its individual sagas had been crafted to reflect the compiler's historical point of view,¹⁸ while Úlfar Bragason's study argued that many of the literary devices found in the family sagas were replicated in *Íslendinga saga*.¹⁹ Additional studies by Margaret Clunies

¹⁵ See n.10, above.

¹⁶ An important earlier contribution in this respect was by Robert J. Glendinning. His studies revealed that the interweaving of dreams is one of *Íslendinga saga*'s most notable artistic achievements, and central to its ability to allude to family saga narratives and give contemporary political events added symbolic significance – see his 'The Dreams of Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* and the Literary Consciousness in 13th Century Iceland', *Arvík*, 29–30 (1973–74), 128–48, and, 'Saints, Sinners, and the Age of the Sturlungs: Two Dreams from the *Íslendinga saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 38 (1966), 83–97. See also Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action*, pp. 25, 43, 48–51.

¹⁷ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964) and *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) can be viewed as initiating complementary components of the structural approach in Old Icelandic studies, and much of the scholarship about structure and meaning in the sagas which has followed can be viewed in light of the twin concerns of saga origin and saga form. Compare Carol Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982): Clover argues that the Icelandic sagas are not constructed according to classical ideas about unity, but that, like other medieval authors, saga authors use 'coherent multiplicity rather than unity', conceive 'of a plot as parallel and interlocking subplots', and weave together 'simultaneous lines of action', or *strand* the narrative (*The Medieval Saga*, p. 16). Clover's observations help to explain the aesthetic part played by such medieval tools as proliferation, entailment, and the reflexive expansion of the plot (pp. 20–33). The sagas' unity, 'like that of the prose romances, is not the traditional unity of theme (where each part is related to the main action), but the characteristically medieval cohesion of themes (where each part need only relate to another part), the formal result being a brachiate plot including a considerable portion of matter which is neither strictly necessary nor strictly superfluous but something in between' (pp. 53–54).

¹⁸ See for example the comparative analysis of *Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* in Stephen Norman Tranter, 'Sturlunga saga: *The Role of the Creative Compiler*' (Frankfurt: Lang, 1987).

¹⁹ Some of the features in common that Úlfar Bragason identifies are: travel episodes and elevated prose to describe births and add importance to a character (*On the Poetics*, pp. 105–08); proverbs and characters' discomfort can cast a certain light on events (p. 110); characters' behaviour may be judged or emphasized through the use of comparisons with other characters; dreams and the pairing of similar scenes add significance to events; characters' posturing, and conspicuous or strange events, are related to thematic

Ross,²⁰ Kari Ellen Gade,²¹ Marlene Ciklamini,²² and Lois Bragg²³ contributed to the growing sense that the family and contemporary sagas were not as separate as had once been thought: *Íslendinga saga* was just as likely as the family sagas to shape historical events in ways that reflected a particular interpretation of the past. It might well be that the contemporary sagas represented a different social order, but they shared in the family sagas' use of historical events as a basis for sophisticated narratives dealing with complex ethical concerns.

A reason that the family and contemporary sagas had for so long been kept apart was the sense that by the thirteenth century many of the defining values of the more immediate post-settlement period, the so-called saga age of 870–1050, had been lost. In the later medieval period, Iceland's independent spirit seemed threatened by the behaviour of a small number of increasingly powerful chieftains, who, as well as building support in Iceland, sought to improve their standing at home by obtaining the backing of the Norwegian crown. The sense of individual honour that was so central to the heroic code of the family sagas was being eroded by the formation of large armies. The local and national assemblies, once the centrepiece of the Icelandic legal system, seemed less democratic in the thirteenth century. And it seemed now that a few large kin groups had managed to reduce the complex legal culture to a crude system of factional warfare.

However, at the same time as literary scholars were using structural analysis to join family and contemporary sagas, social historians presented a strong challenge to this long-held impression of social decline in the thirteenth century. It was claimed that Icelandic nationalism of the early twentieth century, rather than the sagas themselves, lay behind a picturing of the Icelandic Commonwealth as beginning with a golden period of independence and ending with the thirteenth-century decline into civil war and foreign influence. Sigurður Nordal, who was both an Icelandic diplomat and a leading scholar of Old Icelandic, represented the tendency of the so-called Icelandic School to relate discussions of the literary qualities of the sagas to the question of Icelandic independence.²⁴ And, in an influential book, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, William Ian

development, such as excess and fall (pp. 112–17); and the 'ethical temper' of *Sturlunga saga* is akin to the family sagas in its 'sense of proportion and moderation' (p. 120). Other common features include the use of introductions and conclusions (pp. 44–5, 77, 80), narrational levels consisting of primary units and episodes, sequences, and overall compositional levels (pp. 46, 56, 81), as well as in parallels, symmetry, and stock scenes (pp. 49–56).

²⁰ See especially her, 'Myth and Society in *Íslendinga saga*', pp. 675, 678, and 683 for a discussion of Sturla's use of models from the family sagas for his history.

²¹ '1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gerr', in *Samtíðarsögur: Proceedings of the Ninth International Saga Conference* (Akureyri, 1994), pp. 194–207, and 'The Naked and the Dead in Old Norse Society', *Scandinavian Studies*, 60 (1988), 219–45.

²² 'Biographical Reflections in *Íslendinga saga*: A Mirror of Personal Values', *Scandinavian Studies*, 55 (1983), 205–21; 'The Christian Champion in *Íslendinga saga*: Eyjólfur Kársson and Aron Hjörleifsson', *Euphorion*, 82 (1988), 226–37; 'Sturla Sighvatsson's Chieftaincy: A Moral Probe', in *Sturlustefna: Ráðstefna Haldin á Sjö Ártíð Sturlu Þórðarsonar Sagritarar 1984*, eds Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1998), pp. 222–41; and 'Veiled Meaning and Narrative Modes in *Sturlu þáttir*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 99 (1984), 139–50.

²³ 'Disfigurement, Disability, and Disintegration in *Sturlunga saga*', *alvíssmál*, 4 (1994), 15–32, and 'Generational Tensions in *Sturlunga saga*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 112 (1997), 5–34.

²⁴ Jesse L. Byock, 'History and the Sagas: The Effect of Nationalism', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 1992), pp. 43–59, (p. 58).

Miller argued that the system of honour that had often been identified in the family sagas was also present in the contemporary sagas – the thirteenth century was not as different as earlier scholars had felt it to be. For social historians, there was both cultural continuity and stylistic similarities in the family and contemporary sagas.

Guðrún Nordal, a literary scholar whose work has also contributed to debates in historical studies, adopted a middle approach:

The sagas were written over a period of more than two hundred years, during a time in which Icelandic society underwent dramatic structural changes and therefore it is likely that the authors had different views on the sagas they were depicting, even though the structure of that society may adhere to similar rules in many sagas. An assimilation of the society of the family sagas and that of *Íslendinga saga* is also problematic: the society of *Íslendinga saga* is a historical reality, not an idealization of a fixed pattern of behaviour.²⁵

I think Guðrún Nordal's view is to be favoured: there are differences between the family and contemporary sagas that have to be taken into account, especially, I think, in the case of *Íslendinga saga*. It was written by someone very closely connected to the events it describes, Sturla Þórðarson. Sturla was a prominent member of one of the kin groups most heavily involved in the disputes of the thirteenth century, and in his writing of *Íslendinga saga* often has call to narrate his own part in those disputes.²⁶ This level of authorial intimacy with events and characters is not present in any of the family sagas: while the family sagas may have their source in stories going back to the time of their setting, the versions that have survived are the works of authors writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Naturally, this distance in time alters the point of view, and most readers would acknowledge a somewhat idealistic and self-consciously historical tone to the family sagas not present in *Íslendinga saga*. The family saga authors are presenting a world that in important ways has been lost, and they are careful to educate their audience when they assume a lack of knowledge about that past world.²⁷ That is, saga authors themselves appear to recognize a difference between the worlds of the family and contemporary sagas.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the educational strand in the narrative is not as definite in the contemporary sagas. Sturla Þórðarson, who was related to many of the key protagonists, does not always bother to explain his or others' connections; that is, he takes

²⁵ *Ethics and Action*, p. 22.

²⁶ For attempts to describe Sturla's life, see for example Gudbrand Vigfusson, 'Prolegomena', in *Sturlunga saga Including The Íslendinga Saga of Lawman Sturla Thordsson and Other Works*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1878), I, pp. xvii–ccxiv, (p. xcvi); Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, 'Sturla Þórðarson', in *Sturlustefna: Ráðstefna Haldin á Sjö Ártíð Sturlu Þórðarsonar Sagnritara 1984*, eds Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1998), pp. 184–203. Gudbrand Vigfusson's portrayal reflects a common perception of Sturla as a peaceful and moderate intellectual (see pp. xcvi–xcviii). See, similarly, Marlene Ciklamini, 'Biographical Reflections', pp. 205, 208–18. Compare R. George Thomas, 'The Sturlunga Age as an Age of Writing', *Germanic Review*, 25 (1950), 50–66, (p. 54), and, W. P. Ker, 'Sturla the Historian', in *Collected Essays of W. P. Ker*, ed. Charles Whibley (London: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 173–95.

²⁷ The shorter version of *Gísla saga*, for instance, uses the word *sið*, or 'custom', five times and it appears on two occasions in the longer version of the saga in dialogue between characters. On both occasions, the intention appears to be to ensure the reader will see the characters' actions in their proper historical context.

the audience's understanding for granted. As a result, for the modern reader there is a density to *Íslendinga saga* that has made it necessary for scholars today to prove rather than assume its similarities to the family sagas and to carefully unravel and define the relationships between characters.²⁸ Yet, despite the large amount of close detail in *Íslendinga saga*, in some respects Sturla Þórðarson shared a conception of authorship with the family saga authors – he was as prepared as they to represent the past in a way that suited the dramatic, symbolic, and ethical direction of the story.

For our reading of family in both the family and contemporary sagas, the interpretive problem is largely the same, and centres on the relationship between content and form. Ought the face-of-the-clock psychology of the sagas, a feature crucial to the sagas' participation in an existing tradition of stories passed down from earlier generations, and the lack of clear interior worlds, prevent an audience from looking for other indicators of the sagas' ethical viewpoints? I hope in the case studies that follow to show that both family and contemporary saga authors aimed to integrate a range of narrative effects, particularly through the use of tensions within and between families, to develop a dialogue with the past that centred on changing ethical codes. That is, saga authors were committed to objective narration, but they did not necessarily see that objectivity as a hindrance to historical interpretation.

This dual authorial role – of both inheriting stories from the past and narrating them in ways that highlighted the authors' own concerns – was the subject of my doctoral thesis.²⁹ I argued there that saga authorship was *multi-functional*, that is, capable of performing a range of functions at once, and that attempts to look for either historical or literary authorship were simplistic. Although the approach is not post-structuralist, my way of talking about saga authorship has drawn on Foucault's use of the term *function* to discuss the authorial voice of a given work.³⁰ That is, in looking for conceptions of authorship, I have placed most emphasis on the literary and historical aims that are implied at a textual level. Thus, whether or not the saga authors were sophisticated or naïve in their use of the stories of the Viking Age, they did manage to integrate what today might be viewed as contradictory functions: scribal and didactic, historical and creative.

How, then, does a reading of the sagas as texts with multi-functional authorship rest with that most central and stable of social issues in the sagas – the obligations of family life? Was the saga authors' approach to family a critical one, or, for the purpose of saga writing at least, were they prepared to accept the heroic code – the social inheritance and the folklore of family – in full, that is, that blood relations were to be honoured unconditionally, and that characters who failed in this test of honour were to be judged severely? A gauge may be found in instances where families are not getting along, and here I would like to turn to a closer reading of incidents in *Gísla saga* and *Íslendinga*

²⁸ The index of family relationships which Guðrún Nordal draws up at the close of *Ethics and Action* gives the precise kinship relations which exist in *Íslendinga saga*. Indexing characters' relationships allows for a more systematic comparison of their personal positions (see pp. 27, 43). Such connections form the basis of Guðrún Nordal's understanding of the ethics of the saga (for instance, the family loyalty between Sturla Þórðarson and his father that can be read in Sturla's portrayal of his father, Þórðr (pp. 44–46).

²⁹ Kári Gíslason, 'Narratives of Possession: Reading for Saga Authorship' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Queensland, 2003).

³⁰ Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in *Foucault Reader*, trans. Josué V. Harari, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1979), pp. 101–20.

saga. In both sagas, we will see authors using relationships that are not based on the primary obligations of kinship by blood as a way of highlighting internal family conflict and the ethical tension that those conflicts reflect.

Just before Gísli Súrsson dies, he has the opportunity to deliver a final verse, the closing lines of which are:

vel hygg ek, þótt eggjar
ítrslegnar mik býti;
þá gaf sínum sveini
sverðs minn faðir herðu.³¹

[I am content, though the edges,
finely crafted, bite me;
That sword-strength was given to his son
by my father.]

Gísli is crediting his father in a way that seems a fitting expression of the heroic code and the role of genealogy: the character trait of bravery belongs in the family, to be inherited with land and material goods. And, while Gísli inherits courage and the sword *Grásíða*, Þórdís' inheritance seems to be the sex appeal of some of the other family members: she is the object of others' interest, just as her uncle Gísli Þorkelsson was when the family still lived in Norway – he had obtained the sword *Grásíða* through a relationship with his sister-in-law. And yet, in the overall context of the saga, Gísli's acknowledgement of his father is more significant than a mere acknowledgement of hereditary traits. Rather, Gísli is stating that he is particularly strongly connected to his father, perhaps in a way that his siblings are not. Early in the saga, Gísli and his father are angered by an affair between Þórdís and Bárðr, a friend of Þorkell. Gísli and his father share an uncompromising view of the family's honour, and, in guarding it, Gísli kills Bárðr. For Þórdís and Þorkell, the family's honour at that time means the death of a lover and a friend.

The tension about Bárðr, as with that around later events in the saga, comes about because of a conflict between family unity and honour, on the one hand, and the relationships that the family members choose for themselves, on the other. Bárðr is the first of a number of people chosen by the family as a friend or lover who goes on to play a major part in internal family disputes. Bárðr's role seems rather more structural than that of the later characters: he is a foil for the characterization of the siblings and the establishment of the differences between them. Those in a similar role later on are far more developed characters: they are Vésteinn (Gísli's friend and perhaps Þórdís' preferred husband), Auðr (Vésteinn's sister and Gísli's wife), Þorgrímr (both Þórdís' husband and Þorkell's friend), and Þórdís' second husband, Börkr. Like Bárðr, their relationships with the siblings seem happier than the internal family ones. For instance, Gísli has more support from and closeness to Vésteinn and Auðr than with his siblings, while Þorkell aligns himself with Þorgrímr despite the fact that Þorgrímr feels himself unable to commit to a blood-brotherhood attempted at a Spring Assembly. The picture

³¹ *Gísli saga*, p. 114.

that is developing is one of a family that does not understand one other and, as a result, develops affinities elsewhere.

Gísli struggles to balance his obligations to Þórdís and Þorkell with the deeper emotional bond that he has formed with Auðr and Vésteinn, who appear to share Gísli's and his father's uncompromising ethical outlook. But when a clash between the two sides of his life – the blood relations and chosen families – occurs, Gísli is true to his core values, which means being faithful to his blood-bonds: Gísli's sworn-brother Vésteinn has been murdered, and, aware that his brother Þorkell is either the killer or the killer's accomplice, Gísli protects him. Gísli later kills Þorgrímr in revenge for the murder of Vésteinn, and, while Þorkell reciprocates and protects Gísli, Þorkell's help is given in return for Gísli's and is limited to acts which will not lead to Þorkell becoming entangled in the dispute. In Þorkell's case, the help marks the extent of his perceived duty to Gísli – Gísli himself tells us that he would have done more for Þorkell were their fates reversed. As it is, Auðr provides the kind of support that Gísli needs, and risks her life in not only protecting her husband but in assaulting his pursuer Eyjólfur. The saga leaves us in little doubt that Vésteinn, Gísli's sworn-brother, would have been as loyal as Auðr.³²

Thus, if the saga could be said to adopt Gísli's point of view, his brother is falling short of what is expected. Yet while Gísli's point of view is a dominant one, it is not necessarily the only view in which the author is interested, or with which he has some sympathy. Þórdís and Þorkell are given more complex roles than merely that of siblings undeserving of Gísli and his loyalty to the heroic code. Twice, they become close to the same men – Bárðr in Norway and Þorgrímr in Iceland – and in both instances see the relationship terminated by Gísli. In both cases, a sibling is present at the killing: Þorkell witnesses and is angered by Gísli's surprise killing of Bárðr, while, in one of the most explicit treatments of family tension in the saga corpus, Þórdís is lying next to her husband when he is killed by her brother. Only a very determined reader could ignore the siblings' sides of the situation.

Þórdís and Þorkell do not give Gísli the unequivocal support that he is prepared to offer them, but instead establish relationships outside the family that are, up to a point, to be preferred to the kinship with Gísli. When Gísli dies, Þórdís reacts strongly against those responsible: she wounds Eyjólfur and divorces Börkr. But up to this point she shows a preference for chosen rather than existing relationships – she uses a verse by Gísli about the murder of her husband Þorgrímr to instigate a legal case against him, and, in that limited sense, is responsible for the first stage of Gísli's downfall: she solves the puzzle of who killed Þorgrímr and broadcasts the answer to Gísli's enemies. Þórdís and Gísli have formed different answers to the same problem: who do you prefer when there is a conflict between those you love and your blood relatives? Þórdís seems willing to do something that Gísli would not, to repudiate her kinsman.

Just as Þórdís' perspective comes through, so too Þorkell's life is narrated in a way that explains and to some extent excuses his behaviour towards Gísli. There is his perspective on the two deaths that I have mentioned earlier. Also, during a blood-brotherhood ceremony at Þórsnes, he sees his chosen ally Þorgrímr draw back from ties

³² Vésteinn receives a late warning from Gísli not to attend an autumn feast that he and Auðr are holding – Gísli is aware that Vésteinn is in danger from Þorkell and Þorgrímr and hopes to prevent an attack. Vésteinn, declaring that the warning has come too late for him to turn around, continues on, most probably in full knowledge that he faces a serious threat. The decision is a reflection of a sense of honour based on the heroic code. See *Gísli saga*, Chapter 12.

with Vésteinn, and no doubt gathers from this that Þorgrímr and Gísli are now on opposing sides of a dispute that at this stage is only indistinctly connected with Vésteinn. Þorgrímr does not give a precise reason for refusing blood-brotherhood with Vésteinn,³³ and so the audience is left with a hint of the tensions within the group and some foreshadowing of the intensification of those tensions that will come. When Þorkell later hears a conversation between Auðr and his wife, Ásgerðr, that reveals that his wife had an earlier interest in Vésteinn, the earlier breakdown of the blood-brotherhood ceremony comes more clearly into focus: perhaps Þorgrímr was aware of the earlier affair and so the potential for hostilities to arise within the group.

However, I think we miss the point of the saga if we look too hard for an authorial sympathy for one character over the others. What is more important for the overall effect of the work is that the combination of perspectives results in a narrative which, while not seeing inside the characters, looks inside the family and examines ethical tensions that exist there, and which might also exist at a broader social level. The family functions as an interior, separate space which can be used by the author to thematize ethical difference. Saga conventions made it impossible for authors to experiment far beyond the face-of-the-clock psychology, but the centrality of the family as a social and generic concern offered a method of building tension objectively. Despite the differences between the family and contemporary sagas, the same effect is present in *Íslendinga saga*, where again we see the tension between family obligations and relationships of choice at the core of the story.

Íslendinga saga by Sturla Þórðarson is the most conspicuous of the sagas in its adoption of a country-wide perspective: it describes the conflicts of the thirteenth century and how they led to Icelandic chieftains submitting to the rule of the Norwegian king in the 1260s. However, like *Gísla saga* and the family sagas in general, it is grounded in the more immediate realism of family power plays, both within and between families. To look at Iceland as a whole is to look inside the families that are disrupting that nation's development. The work as a whole portrays the ultimate accession of Gizurr Þorvaldsson to the Icelandic earldom from the point of view of various members of the Sturlungs, the author's family group and Gizurr's most significant rivals for power.

Guðrún Nordal's reading of *Íslendinga saga* suggests that its dramatic and political movement is *towards* the success of Gizurr, that is, that despite the author's family allegiance, the saga is with Gizurr in his political career and ambitions for Iceland. This reading is in line with the structural observations made by Úlfar Bragason: Sturla Þórðarson uses family saga conventions to guide the audience in its understanding of Gizurr's success. Both Guðrún Nordal and Úlfar Bragason find a thematic unity amid the multiplicity of components which characterize the *Sturlunga* compilation as a whole, as well as *Íslendinga saga*, its largest and central work. However, as in *Gísla saga*, that thematic unity exists alongside an historicism that privileges the particular, especially the details of family life: history involves choices and decision-making, and tensions within kin groups are often at the core of the most difficult choices that are made. A fascinating but difficult question is whether *Íslendinga saga* as a whole reflected Sturla Þórðarson's

³³ Þorgrímr states, as they are about to shake hands on blood-brotherhood pact, 'Ærinn vanda hefi ek, þótt ek gera þetta við þá báða, Þorkel og Gísla, mága mina, en mik skyldir ekki til við Véstein' (*Gísla saga*, p. 23): 'I have enough difficulty if I do this with both Þorkell and Gísli my brothers-in-law; I will not be bound to Vésteinn.'

shift in allegiance, that is, from an author who went from seeing himself as part of the Sturlung family to one who saw that family group as damaged to the point of being beyond repair.

The question evades a definite answer, because Sturla Þórðarson endeavours to tell the saga in the same mixed style of objectivity and limited authorial insight that we find in the family sagas. This is despite Sturla's dual role as character and author, one that permits him unequalled access to the internal problems in the Sturlung family and the ways in which they are contributing to Gizurr's success. Certainly, the patterns of conflict in the thirteenth century remain as familial as they were in the time of Gísli. Thus, while Sturla may well be plotting a trajectory that leads to Gizurr's success, the weight of his familial point of view is such that Gizurr is generally positioned as ambiguous. That is, in structural terms, Gizurr's characterization shares something of the positioning of Þórdís and Þorkell in *Gísla saga*: their perspectives are present but less central and seemingly easier to overlook.

Sturla's dual role as author/character means that his perspective is given double emphasis. But his desire to conform to saga conventions mitigates the impact of a personal bias that might otherwise dominate the work, and permits the relatively late entry of his perspective as a character to have real narrative impact. He does not appear in the saga until he feels, as an author, that he is relevant in terms of the objective narration of Icelandic history. He quietly records his own presence at Christmas festivities held at Snorri Sturluson's farm,³⁴ as well as his father Þórðr's use of him as a messenger during the disputes over the Snorrunga chieftaincy.³⁵ At this stage, Sturla is just an observer, because he is not contributing to the divisions within the Sturlung group.

But eventually, and perhaps unavoidably given the period in which he lived, Sturla is drawn into the internal feuding, and he takes part in his father's raid on their kinsman Órækja's farm at Saurbær.³⁶ Órækja is a major headache for the Sturlung family, and Sturla's actions against him, including the summoning action undertaken with his brother, the poet Óláfr Þórðarson,³⁷ are carefully justified. For instance, we are told of Órækja's raiding and of the killing of Einarr, 'góðr bóndi' ('a good farmer'),³⁸ a very family saga-like appeal to a shared sense of a breach of basic moral standards. As others have noted, the prose of *Íslendinga saga* becomes much more immediate and clear as we get to the torture of Órækja, a scene which Kari Ellen Gade regards as a largely fabricated one and which certainly announces the author's increased involvement both as a character and as an interpreter of the action of which he is now a part.³⁹ We might argue that at this point Sturla adopts the kind of narrative voice that is able to produce a symbolic episode from a family dispute, perhaps even a moral tale, about the loss of political power. At the very least, we sense that there has been movement beyond the annalistic tone of some of the earlier narration.

By the time of the attack at Flugumýri, a famous attempt by Gizurr's enemies to stop his political advance, Sturla the character has seen his kin group severely put down by

³⁴ *Íslendinga saga*, p. 126.

³⁵ *Íslendinga saga*, pp. 146–47; see also p. 226 and Chapter 118, where Sturla again acts as messenger.

³⁶ *Íslendinga saga*, Chapter 101.

³⁷ *Íslendinga saga*, Chapter 106.

³⁸ *Íslendinga saga*, p. 256.

³⁹ '1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gerr', esp. pp. 196–98 and 202–04.

Gizurr. While the bulk of the saga has dealt with the rise of Sturla's family to a position of dominance in Iceland, the three most powerful men in this group, the author's uncles, Snorri and Sighvatr Sturluson, and his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson, are now all dead at Gizurr's hands. Were Sturla Þórðarson bound by the heroic ethic of *Gísla saga*, he would be unwilling to negotiate with Gizurr. Yet, while there is resentment towards Gizurr, it is balanced, in some quarters, by a desire to see the ongoing violence between the factions come to an end. Sturla, in particular, is willing to be reconciled, and accepts a proposal that Gizurr's son Hallr marry his daughter Ingibjörg. On the eve of the burning at Flugumýri, a wedding feast is held, celebrating a new union and a new peace. The author, father of the bride, is present at the feast, but, crucially, leaves the farmstead before the attack begins.

Several family saga conceits have been used to mark out the importance of the events that then follow: Eyjólfur, the leader of the burners, is turned away from reconciliation with Gizurr by a sharp attack on his courage by his wife; strange cries are heard in the area; there is illness at Flugumýri; characters who are caught between both sides are depicted in their failed attempts to warn Gizurr of a coming attack; and as the attackers make their way to the farm, those who should raise the alarm fail to do so. These portents are common literary features of the family sagas, used now, as in the family sagas, to heighten the reader's sense of anticipation and awareness of the importance of the moment.

During the attack, the narrator turns to the sleeping quarters at Flugumýri, to Gizurr's swift reaction, to the instant response of his wife, Gróa, which is to pass him his weapon, and to Hall, Gizurr's son, and Ingibjörg, his newly-wedded wife and the author's daughter. The Flugumýri household puts up a good defence, attested by those who were present during the attack:

Peir börðust lengi nætr ok höfðu svá harðan atgang, at því er þeir menn hafa sagt, er þar váru, at eldr þótti af hrjóta, er vápnin mættust. Ok svá sagði Þorsteinn Guðmundarson síðan, at hann kvaðst þess hvergi komit hafa, at menn hefði jafnfræknliga varizt. Ok allir hafa vörn þá ágætt, er varð á Flugumýri, bæði vinir ok óvinir.⁴⁰

[They fought long into the night and had such hard fighting, that those who were there have said that there was fire in the air when the weapons clashed. Þorsteinn Guðmundarsson said later that never before had men defended themselves so bravely. All have praised the defence at Flugumýri, both friends and enemies.]

This reporting through others' observations interacts with a far more dramatic voice which depicts the deaths of Gróa, Gizurr's wife, and their sons, and the remarkable escape that Gizurr makes. Saga conventions give the episode its literary colour, and the chronicle its impression of truthfulness and accuracy. With an attack by force making no headway, the assault turns to fire, and the farmstead quickly fills with smoke. We hear that:

⁴⁰ *Íslendinga saga*, pp. 435–36.

Gizurr lagðist niðr í skálanum með setstokkinum öðrum megin ok lagði nasirnar ok höfuðit við gólfrit ok þar Gróa, kona hans, hjá honum.⁴¹

[Gizurr lay down in the hall by the partition beam on the other side and placed his nose and head against the floor, and there (also) Gróa, his wife, beside him.]

Gizurr expects that Gróa will probably be allowed out:

Gizurr gekk at henni Gróu ok tók fingrgull tvau ór brókarbeltis pungu sínum ok fekk henni í hönd, því at hann ætlaði henni líf, en sér dauða ... Gizurr fann þá á Gróu, at henni fannst mikit um skilnaðinn þeira.⁴²

[Gizurr approached Gróa, took two gold rings out of his pouch attached to his belt and put them in her hand, as he expected life for her, but death for himself ... Gizurr found that Gróa was greatly affected by their parting.]

The level of private detail that we see in these quotations exemplifies the use which this saga is making of techniques present also in the family sagas. The narrative's concentration on individuals' actions and choices gives definition and meaning to the events, just as in the family sagas, where characters are empowered to speak, to act, and to live through the choices and allegiances that they make. In that world of early Iceland, cherished in the family sagas, there is time and space for the fullness of a great decision and a momentous act.

And, as in *Gísla saga*, objective saga style and domestic detail provide a basis for the perspectives of different characters to emerge, and so allow for the thematizing of ethical tensions and difficult decision-making. This is clearest at the end of the burning at Flugumýri, when Gizurr has to face the deaths of his wife and son:

Þá mælti Gizurr: 'Páll frændi,' segir hann, 'hér máttu nú sjá Ísleif, son minn, ok Gróu, konu mína.' Ok fann Páll, at hann leit frá, ok stökk ór andlitinu sem haglkorn væri.⁴³

[Then Gizurr spoke: 'Páll, kinsman', he says, 'here you can now see Ísleifr, my son, and Gróa, my wife.' And Páll noticed that he turned away, and that tears fell across his face like hailstones.]

By turning to the more personal, less documentary, style of narration which we find in the family sagas, and by concentrating on the domestic loss which the attack brings about, Sturla is able to link this episode to the family sagas, their themes, and the type of discourses established there. Sturla's critical distance varies according to the form and meaning of the content, and although his voice retains its objective, realistic quality, it manages to connect the audience to the intensely domestic tensions of the family sagas.

⁴¹ *Íslendinga saga*, p. 438.

⁴² *Íslendinga saga*, p. 439.

⁴³ *Íslendinga saga*, p. 445.

The private, familial point of view narrows the narrative focus but expands the possible connections that can be made with other texts and the periods they describe.

Sturla's decision to pursue a settlement with Gizurr shows a commitment to civil order that is as strong as Gísli's commitment to family honour. The two values are rather at odds, and it is hard to imagine that Gísli would ever take the same course as Sturla. However, the sagas share a figuring of family as a means of establishing and complicating conflicting perspectives and ethical tensions. The narration of domestic detail enables the author to explore the impact of events in detail, and the sagas appear to reach a greater level of dramatic urgency when they represent the tensions of family life. The objective saga form, in its subtle variations and expansive description of family history, allows stories to have historical immediacy and thematic complexity.

In particular, when the family cannot settle on a way of resolving its disputes, the sagas explore ethical differences that appear to place the characters beyond the hold of the family obligations they inherited at birth. And, while the family sagas seem more direct than the contemporary sagas in their historical framing of the action, both use family life as a way of representing the difficulties of decision-making during disputes over power, honour, and friendship. Through their representation of family life, the authors of *Gísli saga* and *Íslendinga saga* were able to express complex and often conflicting ethical issues, using a traditional mode of storytelling to develop a critical discourse about changing ethical values while preserving the past in a sympathetic way.

Creative Writing and Literary Studies
Queensland University of Technology