Northern Antiquity

The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga
Northern Antiquity
THE POST-MEDIEVAL RECEPTION
OF EDDA AND SAGA

Edited by Andrew Wawn

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Foreword

Of Herculean height and strength, with his long black beard descending to his waist, he resembled a Viking of old, and such I conceive he at times supposed himself to be. In fact, so deeply was he imbued with the spirit of antiquity, that a continual antagonism between the past and the present, or rather, I should say, between the imaginary and the real existed in his breast. He was two gentlemen at once. Though a sincerely religious man, still I cannot help suspecting that in his heart of hearts he looked on Christianity as a somewhat parvenu creed, and deemed that Thor, Odin, Freya, etc., were the proper objects of worship. In dull fact, he was an excellent citizen, a householder, paying rates and taxes, an affectionate husband, and the good father of a family; but in the dream, the fancy [...] he was a Berserker, a Norse pirate, ploughing the seas in his dragon-beaked barque, making his trusting falchion ring on the casques of his enemies, slaying, pillaging, burning, ravishing, and thus gratifying a laudable taste for adventure. I fear he preferred the glorious dream to the sober reality. I think he inwardly pined at his own respectability.

Not every post-medieval enthusiast of Edda and saga featured in this volume would have sought to match either the length of Sir George Webbe Dasent's Viking-style beard or his dreams of berserk service in a dragon-beaked barque. Many, however, would have identified readily enough with other features of this wry but affectionate portrait of one of Victorian Britain's greatest Northern antiquaries. They would have empathised with the sense of vivid imaginative engagement, and perhaps also with that persistent itch of romantic irresponsibility which no amount of scratching by the fingers of civic or academic probity could entirely alleviate. They would certainly have been unsurprised by the extent to which personal and political commitment to the values of the ancient North could create a level of scholarly energy every bit as Herculean as Dasent's height. The Englishman was an editor and translator of sagas; a publicist and projector in all matters Northern; and, even by the standards of the age, an intensely politicised philologist. And, no disadvantage to a still marginal subject area in need of influential friends,

[Charles Cavendish Clifford], Travels by 'Umbræ' (Edinburgh, 1865), pp. 3–4.
he was for many years assistant editor of The Times.2

Many aspects of Dasent’s mercurial career are mirrored in the scholarly figures highlighted in this collection of essays. European enthusiasm for the medieval North has, since the early seventeenth century, taken many forms and been driven by many impulses, both learned and ‘lewed’—aesthetic, antiquarian, anthropological, archaeological, mythological, philological, nationalistic, political, and (every bit as important) personal. It is these impulses which find recurrent expression in essays whose governing theme is the post-medieval rediscovery and reception of Edda and saga in the lands bordering and the islands surrounded by the North Atlantic. Seven of the papers (Malm, Hagland, Lundgreen-Nielsen, Boyer, Glauser, Clunies Ross and Quinn, Kennedy) were first delivered as lectures at the International Saga Conference in Gothenburg in August 1991, as contributions to a workshop on the reception of Old Icelandic literary texts; three further essays are also the work of conference members (Byock, Driscoll, Wawn), though the topics differ from those originally presented in Sweden; the remaining three contributions (Helgason, Haraldsson, D’Arcy) represent the work of other scholars currently engaged in this now happily flourishing area of study.

Medieval monk, Enlightenment sage and modern advertising executive have constructed their versions of the Viking past with strikingly dissimilar priorities in mind. The ridiculous has thus had its place alongside the sublime, the sensual alongside the cerebral. In the papers which follow we move from heated debates about sagas in the wartime Alþingi to decadent depictions of Viking life in the Edwardian theatre; our gaze shifts from heroic statues of Óðinn to horned-helmeted Vikings glaring fiercely at prospective purchasers from the top of sardine tins.

Theoretical interest in the generalities of ‘reception’ is properly balanced by attention to the idiosyncrasies of individual receivers as colourfully dissimilar as Olaf Rudbeck, N.F.S. Grundtvig, Hallíldó Laxness, and W.H. Auden. We find the medieval saga tradition coverted but successfully renewing itself in Enlightenment Iceland, whilst, elsewhere, we observe the emergence of a saga canon very different from that which obtains today, with times when and places in which works like Bósa saga and Fríðþófs saga towered in popular esteem over the likes of Brennu-Njáls saga. Reflecting the tension already noted between Dasent’s glorious dream and his sober reality, the essays register other clashes, controversies and contradictions which have found expression through the cultivation and promotion of Northern antiquity—the uncertain Norse challenge to Graeco-Roman educational, cultural and imaginative hegemony; the battle between purism and innovation fought as translators seek to do stylistic justice to their spikily evasive primary texts; the fruitful and intriguing interplay between orature and literature which took place within the cultural space established by the Icelandic kvöldvaka; the bumpy transition from script to print which in Iceland postdated Gutenberg by several centuries; the political promotion of saga which could polarise radicals and conservatives of every age and nation; the images of trenchant nationalism which sagas encoded for readers in Iceland, mainland Scandinavia, the British Isles and Normandy; and, not least, the extent to which armchair reveries sometimes crumbled in the face of raw and dispiriting realities which travel to the saga-steads could reveal. It is surely appropriate, moreover, that the volume concludes with a mordant modern ‘rime’, that ‘harmonie of words’ which for so long was held to be the distinctive voiceprint of the Northern muse.

In the preparation of this volume I have been greatly helped by the patience and cooperation of my far-flung contributors. In the preparation of my own contribution, I am very happy to acknowledge the help afforded by research grants from the British Academy, and from the School of English, University of Leeds. If the reception of Edda and saga in the United States is one of several topics not treated in this essay collection, it can at least be said that much of the proof-reading was done in the library of St Mary’s College of Maryland, and by the shores of Chesapeake Bay, one of many sites eagerly and erroneously promoted in the nineteenth century for the coveted title of Vinland. Not for the first time I am very conscious of how much I owe to the warm hospitality and good humour of my bayside host Dr John Richowsky.

A final word on two matters—one typographical, the other editorial—in which the synchronisation of ancient and modern has proved troublesome. Firstly, throughout this volume it has been necessary to represent Old Icelandic hooked ð by Modern Icelandic ð. Secondly, in three of the following essays (Haraldsson, Kennedy, Wawn) there are repeated references to the life and works of the nineteenth-century Icelandic scholar Eiríkur Magnússon. On the title-pages of his publications and in correspondence Eiríkur used the older form ‘Eiríkr’, whereas his friends and his biographer Stefán Einarsson favoured the more modern spelling ‘Eiríkur’. Editorial attempts ‘ãþ sigla milli skers og bárú’ in dealing with this tiny but teasing problem seem destined to end in tears and inconsistency. Accordingly the modern form has been adopted throughout.

Andrew Wawn
Adel, Leeds
June 1994
The End of the Saga: Text, Tradition and Transmission in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Iceland

JÜRGLAUSER

This essay deals with the final phase of the manuscript transmission of Icelandic saga literature at the turn of the century. For a variety of reasons this topic has never been properly examined or discussed; neither philologists nor paleographers nor literary historians seem to have regarded the study of late paper-manuscript copies of well-known sagas as a worthwhile enterprise in its own right. This short paper seeks merely to draw attention to some central aspects of a much broader subject area. I shall try to outline the transmission of the traditional Icelandic narrative genres in hand-written and printed forms during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and I shall conclude by identifying some of the reasons which led to the decline of this centuries-old tradition.¹

STARTING POINT: FJÓRAR RIDDARASÖGUR (1852), FELSARBORGARSÖGUR (1854)

In the autumn of 1852 the Prentsmöja Islands in Reykjavík issued a small and modest looking octavo booklet of 120 pages (7½ sheets), at thirty-two 'skildingar' a copy. The volume contained four texts: 1. Sagan af Pógrini og köppum hans, 2. Sagan af Sálusi og Nikanor, 3. Ævintýri af Ajax keisarasyni, 4. Sagan af Valdimar kógni. This Fjórar Riddarasögur anthology was the first in a long line of popular Icelandic saga

editions (Figure 1). The edition was not well received, however. In the journal *Pjöðólfr* 92 (29 September 1852), the romantic poet and novelist Benedikt Sveinbjarnarson Gröndal (1826–1907)—one of the leading literary figures in the tiny Icelandic parnasus—published a scathing review of this first saga edition by Einar Pórðarson which was entirely representative of its time. It is worthwhile to examine in some detail the attitudes struck in this review and in the ensuing rejoinder, since the arguments rehearsed there contain elements of a discourse which was by no means confined to this isolated Icelandic instance. It was rather part of much larger and more systematic process of sociocultural bifurcation which had begun to exercise its influence in most parts of Europe in the post-Enlightenment years:

…I en vegna þess, að þá minn þeirriða, sem öllum vill eyða, og á öllum vinnar, breyttir hlutum meir eða minna í hinum frammennanda straxum alda og ára, og hlutum koma opt lýsir sjónir epír langan aldur slítnir og eyðdir, og eins og annarlegir lýsir þá, sem níc eru uppi: vegna þessa þurfa þeir líka nakvamari skóðan og vandlegri meðferði, ef þeir á rjettan hátt eiga að sýna oss liða tíð. Pá munu allir skilja, að jeg meina til fornleifa og fornrita, og það er einkum tvennt, sem vakir lýsir sjóerjum þeim vónuðum manni, er vill halla þeim á loft, nl. (1) helgi þeirra, svo að þeir sjást øyreytatir og Óðbjarg, með ummerkum þfundinrar, og þó svo fullkommlegir, sem auðið er, og (2) síu nýtsemi, sem menn hafa af þeim til að sjá liðin tíma, sem leiddir af hinu lýsir, og er því ódagreinlega sameinaði. Þetta hefur nú verið reynt og gjótt af hinum ágetustu mónum, þarði þeim, sem hafa um mið lýsir Fornfræðisfaggið, og þeim, sem hafa tekjí þatt í ‘Fornfræðisfaggið Nordurlanda’. Til þess að sýna oss gómul rit á prenti í Óðbjarga mynd, og eins og þau hafa fundist, hafa þeir farð rjettan veg, með því, að látu prenta þau nákvæmlega eptir handrit-unum, og skýra frá mismunandi orðum (Variantes loci), og frá því, hvæter þau muni vera rituð, hvætan þau sjuðu o.s.frv.

Einsininn var sú gullótt—eða forgyllta öld—hjá oss hjer á sjálftu voru landi Íslandi, að það átti að fara að geða út fornsögur vorar hjer í landinu sjálftu, og eptir þær hringir, sem prentsmiðjan fjækkt, fæddist hin svo nefnda ‘Viðeyjar Niðlja’. Hana þekkja allir, nú eptir að herra E. Pórðarson er orðinn ‘valdamaður’ í prentstofunin, þá er eðileg, að hann vill verka landinu til sæmdar, svo sem opinber embættispersona, og nú vekur hann upp aptur nyja gullótt (eða forgyllta öld) og forna hefðumóð, og geður út—raunar í sameiningu við herra skómakara H.

2Title and full bibliographical information as printed: *Fjórar Riddarasögur.* Útgefnar af H. Erlendssyni og E. Pórðarsyni. Prentað í prentsmiðju Íslands, hjá E. Pórðarsyni. 1852.
Erleindsson—því skómakari er hann—Fjórar Riddarasógor.

Jeg veit raunar, að herra E. Póðarson er prentari, og herra H. Erleindsson er skómakari, en jeg þekki ekki þessa menn sem fornfrækinga, og það veit jeg, að hingað til hefur enginn, nema fornfræingar, lagt hendur að því, að gefa út fornsögur—nema um Viðeyjar njálú. Jeg get því ekki tekið það fyrir annað, en ösvinðum drámum, sem stendur í formálumum, að sognúrar sju prentaðar eptir því ‘fullkomnast, eldta og bezta handriti’, sem þeir gátt fengið, því þessi öðr voga engir að leggja sjær í munnum, nema þeir sjuæ màlfræingar eða fornfræingar, eða að öðrum kosti össinnamennum.

Pað er líka sjörverjum manni þjóst, sem nokkuð þekkir hversu á stendur, að þetta fyrirtæki er einungis stofnað í groða skygni,—og sognúrar kvað vera gefnar út ‘til að skemmta alþýðu’. Pað er ágætt fyrirtæki, en það er þer stofnað með því, að hafa þjóð oru að háði. Er það ekki að það þjóðina að háði, þegar þeir taka ráð sín saman, til þess að hafa fjöð út fyrir bók, sem gefin er út öll þjóðung, heimildaraus og vitlæs. Þegar því er hogið upp í opin eyrun á alþýðu, að menn haft ‘vit sognúrar sjálfari’, sem sumar voru aldrei til, og eru svo ösvinrir að vona, að þetta fyrirtæki mun verða vinni? Því hvaða fyrirtæki er þetta? Pað er svo annar les margar fornsögum, og spinnum sínar upp sjálfur eitthvort bannsett boll, sem er óldungis út út og á móti anda tímans og þjóðarinnar, en hinn prentarullið, og bullarinn stendur upp á axlir.

Jeg skal nú skýra betur þessi þrjú öðr, sem eru það, að jeg kalla sognúrar: bjaðgjarar, heimildaraus og vitlarus [...]. Að jeg kalla þær vitlarus, þarf engrar skýringar, því það fylgur af núnu undanganganda, þeði af Nr. 1 og 2, og líka af því, sem jeg annars hafi áður sagt, að þær ekki neitt eiga við anda þjóðarinnar. Því hversu á það að eiga við nokkrá þjóð og nokkurn tíma, sem er vitleysa? Að minnst kosti er það að þeir þjóðið um sumum sognum, sem ufølgðum eru skáld. Jeg veit, að háðum muni þykir leðinlegt, að heyrta upptalningu á smekkleysum, dónskusleitum, ramvitlausri ländalingu og öðru þess konar; en ef nokkur langar til að sjá þetta, þá lesi hann ‘Fjórar Riddarasógor’, og enginn skyldi trú, að þetta sé gefið út 18521 (Gröndal 1852).2

[Because time which creates and destroys everything, changes things to a greater or lesser extent in its ever-rolling stream, and things are brought to light which have lain lost or damaged for years, and seem strange to people alive today: accordingly such things require more accurate examination and more careful treatment if they are properly to reveal former times to us. It must be understood that I am referring to antiquities and old texts, and there are two things in particular which every careful scholar who wishes to exhibit them should be

3See also his Ritsafrn III 15–18, 512.
without sources and incorrect[...]. 3. That I call them distorted hardly needs any explanation, because it follows on directly from what has previously been said about (1) and (2), and also from the other point which I have made already, that they do not suit in any way the spirit of the people. Therefore how ought it to suit any people or any period which is stupid? At least it is quite evident from some sagas that the publishers are poets. I know that people would be bored by lists of vulgarities, Danicisms, totally warped geographical descriptions, and the like; but should anyone desire to see that sort of thing, then let him read Fjórar Riddarasögur, and no-one would believe that such a thing could be published in 1852!

How does Gröndal approach his subject in these paragraphs? Hardly surprisingly, he adopts the viewpoint of an elitist, educated member of the bourgeoisie and attacks the Fjórar Riddarasögur edition because of its non-scholarly format. In Gröndal’s opinion (see his first section), the norm for any editorial work on Old Norse saga-literature had been established by the famous publications of the Fornfræðifælag. Gröndal contrasts these fine editions with more recent publications such as the ill-famed Æðey edition of Brenna-Njáls saga (1844) or the newly edited Riddarasögur: volumes which were produced—and this alone is seen as sufficient reason to discredit the editions in question—by a printer and a shoemaker respectively. The very willingness of such people to undertake this sort of work is regarded as little short of ‘ðósvíðr dramb’ [pure arrogance], since scholarly work on the literature of the Icelandic Golden Age ought to be the sole prerogative of specialists, the ‘málfræðingar eða fornfræðingar’ [philologists and paleoetologists]. In the next section Gröndal further castigates the two editors because of their evident intention to profit financially from the sale of these booklets (‘einarings stofnaf i gróða skyini’) and because of the editors’ apparent concern that the books should entertain the public (‘til að skemmta alþyðu’). It is of course no coincidence that the four narratives printed in the Riddarasögur volume are taken from the sub-genres of legendary sagas (fordalsarsögur) and late fictitious sagas (bygissögur, Márchensagas), and not from the group of more prestigious family sagas (Íslendingasögur). Gröndal’s dismissal of such texts as ‘bannsett bull’ [pure rubbish] reflects a condescending and ignorant disregard of popular, post-classical genres all too characteristic of many nineteenth-century philologists (Driscoll 1990). Gröndal criticises among other things the ‘bíjagabar’, ‘heimildlarausar’, ‘vítalausar’ [distorted, unsupported by sources, incorrect] form of the sagas. It is this last reproach which is of particular interest here. The view the Fjórar Riddarasögur are utterly incompatible with the ‘anda tímans og píðarinnar’ [spirit of the time and the nation], and the book teems with individual instances of ‘smekkleysum’ [tastelessness], a key concept in all enlightened discussion.

The response of the two editors Einar Póðarson and Hannes Erleidsson to Gröndal’s criticisms appeared on the last day of 1852. So characteristic is it of other prevailing attitudes that it also deserves to be quoted in full:

Mál er komið, að svara nokkrum orðum uppá útsætingu öfnuma mansins í f. árg. þjóðsöfis [...] út á þær Fjórar Riddarasögur.

Útsætingnar þessar skulum við ekki reka orð fyrir orð, því þær verðskulda það ekki, fyrst að mergurinn í þeim er þetta: að ekki geti nein sí rítigóð eða saga verið annað en bull eða vítleysa, sem prentari og skómkari gefa út. Ekki skulur við svo fégrar sögur þessar, að ekki kunnin mega finna margt þeim betra og uppyggilegra, en þó núminum við, að þær séu og geti verið eins meinaus dægrastytturingar fyrir alþyðu, eins og sum það, sem snillingarnir útgöru að banga saman og þjóða fram; vera kann, að t.a.m. ‘Kvíðulvakan f. Sveit’, og ‘Bònróðsfórin’ hafi haft eitthvað fram yfir Riddarasögurnar, en það er öftundið enn ágætið í þeim og snifðum, og enginn mun finna meiri skemtar um þessum heikingum en af Riddarasögunum. ‘Órvarroðsdrápa’ kann að vera fógrum skáldmæli og eftir þeim manni er hana orti, en það eru þá einungis vísindamennir um og skáldin, en ekki fáfróðar almiði, sem finnur það. Þetta núminum við að séu nú einherjir helstu frumritarð heknælingar, sem komið hafa út í þeim árinum, til að skemta alþyðu; því ekki teljum við ‘Ungsmannsamanía’, sem að er handa börnum, eða ‘Æfinýrin’ sem eru sönufull eplit munnumelur, og ekki útleggingarborðið af þúsund og einni nót. Við hefðum ekki gefið út Riddarasögurnar hefðu læða snillingarnir útgöru þeirri sigdir og ogísigdir, sem að eru gan og sömi þessar fáfróða og fáteka lands, boðið fram eitthvað sem var betra til að skemta almiðunum; en við höldum að við séum skálaur af að hafa smáðað landa okkar, eða ‘haft þjóð vora að hábi’ með útgáfu þessara saga, sem svo við eru til skrifaðar, og hafa verið lesnar til dægrastytturingar, að meðan ekki kemur út annað fróðlega eða snjallara frá þessara tíma snillingum, en ritlæningar sem við nefndum [...]. 2. að hann nefni okkur nokkurn pann, sem semur ekki útlegur þækar til þefuntar, sem ekki gjörið það með þess að fá uppur þeim kostnaðin og fyrirhöfnina—há skulum við fyrirverða okkar fyrir að hafa ætlali til að þera upp kostnaðinn fyrir útgáfu að sögunum; hann mun annars eiga bágt með að sanna, að þetta fyrirtæki haft fremur verið stofnað í gróða skyini, heldur enn útgáfu hvertar annarrar bókar sem er í látin gångna á prent, einkum þeirra bæktlinga, sem þessir—á meðal útlanda ærlendum—soldnu húfunda h’ hlaupa i að semja, til þess að afla sjar málsíðu matar i þann spívin. En við höfum ekki svipt tilfinningarannin í núnu tekkið til að vinna sjar ínálveið þó við lejum prenta sögurnar; en vel getur okkur skilizt, að hann sjé þurfugur, því opt fer það saman, fullur munnum með hoika og
we can well understand that he is needy, because a mouth full of arrogance and mockery such as the criticism of the sagas bears witness to and an empty stomach often go together, and so by the same token do self-aggrandisement and iniquity. But regardless, we have no intention of demeaning ourselves by answering the critic’s inventive more than we have already done in these lines; but we end by reminding him of the words of the poet: ‘Oft by his speech may a man be known, who he really is’, etc. [Hallgrímur Pétursson, _Passusálmur xi 15_] The editors of _Fjóra Riddarasögur_.

The essence of this rejoinder is an elegant rhetorical strategy: the editors concede that the sagas in question are merely ‘meinlaus døgrastrøytning fyrir alpyðu’ [a harmless entertainment for the people], but for ‘fáfróður almúgí’ [the uneducated common man] they are at least amusing as the writings of the ‘lærðu snillingarnir ungu’ [learned young geniuses] in which only ‘visindamennirr og skáldın’ [scholars and poets] can find pleasure. Young poets have produced nothing which could ‘skemmta almúgum’ [amuse the common people] in the way that the old chivalric sagas can. The second part of the rejoinder addresses the accusation of profit-making. Here one is reminded of the arguments which were deployed a hundred years earlier by the Danish bookseller Fridrich Christian Pelt; in an answer to the learned Ludvig Holberg, Pelt wrote that he was not willing to starve as ‘a martyr to good taste’. This rejoinder illustrates very clearly the commercialisation of popular culture described by the English scholar Peter Burke. This commercialisation took place in Western Europe in the period 1650-1800 and reached Iceland by the middle of the nineteenth century. Benedikt Gröndal struck the final blow by writing a parody verdict in a fictional lawsuit:

_Dómur f sökninn 1/1852._—_Hið visindalega gogn útgöfendum Fjóra riddarasaga [sic]._

 År 1852, hinn 31. dag desembermaður, var hinn visindalegi réttur settur og háldinn á hans áðurstæði í Reykjavík, þar þar var fyrirtekið ofanskrifað mál, sem þannig er undir komið, að í nóvembermaðu læðud tveir öknungur brúkuglar inn í flókka vorra lærðu samverkamanna, og uppvoxtu með smekklausum og vitaðum

The End of the Saga

[Verdict in the case 1.1852.—Scholarship vs the editors of Fjórar Riddarasögur.

On the 31st day of the month of December in the year 1852 the scholarly court was convened and held at its address in Reykjavik, where the above-cited case was considered, a case which began in November when two unknown upstarts crept into our learned assembly and with their tasteless and imbicilic products caused such a commotion that the peace was disturbed in our learned kingdom. They published a book called Fjórar Riddarasögur, for a description of which see Pjöðlur, vol. iv. pp. 367–368, from which it can be seen that the book is not fit to be in any house. And when the court wished with good intention to exercise its paternal authority and remove from the people this idiotic playing, these upstarts rose up with a great hue and cry, and spoke in a manner inappropriate for children to adopt with their parents or their betters. And although it is clear that such is punishable, since these men stand completely culpable before the court of scholarship and the muses of learning, yet it seems to the court that it is better not to pass judgement on the accused before a doctor has given his opinion as to the state of their health. […]

In the light of this evidence it seems to the court that the sentence of death cannot be passed on the accused, even though it was customary to kill anyone who tried to force his way into the Eleusinian Mysteries, and although they have forced their way in the same manner into our scholarly assembly, this has been the result of ignorance rather than malice. The court felt that the psychological and evidence cited above must be taken as valid, since a person of sound body and mind would never have ventured into such incomprehensibility and impertinence, and moreover would never have bought the help of anyone else. Moreover, it is the verdict of the court that since it was established and founded by the muses on Parnassus and Apollo Musagetes, and since it is required to protect their kingdoms and countries, the accused should be condemned for disturbing our scholarly peace with their nonsense, like owls among a flock of doves. The editor of Pjöðlur, on the other hand, despite the fact that he had joined the ranks of the accused, was not required to appear physically and spiritually before the court, both on the grounds that he is one-legged, so the court felt that he would not be capable of hopping there, and also because he was in all likelihood guilty of that self-centredness that comes from hunger, since his newspaper and opinion is on an uncertain footing, so that he cannot be held to account.

In view of all the above it was therefore deemed fitting and proper:

The accused in this case, the editors of Fjórar Riddarasögur, should persist and increase in their spiritual confusion, but should be careful not to have their mouths full of arrogance and their spirits full
of mockery. Similarly they should from now on avoid all invective and vicious comments against those who hope through their paternal authority to edify them and drag them out of the mud-pit of ignorance. Moreover, they should march off the battlefield of learning.

In this piece, preserved in a single manuscript and not printed during Gröndal's lifetime, the refusal to acknowledge that the two lowly editors had any right to engage in literary and educational activities is even more blatant than in the original review. Gröndal arrogates to himself the right to exercise judgement in the name of science ('Híð víssindalega gegn útgefendum') and to exclude the editors from the battlefield of learning ('marséra burt af lárdómsins vigvelli'). Gröndal's attempt at denigrating a popular-literary project resulted in ultimate failure; but his attempt convincingly illustrates Pierre Bourdieu's theories about the socially disintegrative, and stratificatory role of education in early modern and modern Europe (Bourdieu 1979).

Two years after the publication of Fjörar Riddarasgöur an Icelandic translation of Johann Gottfried Schnabel's Insel Felsenburg appeared under the title of Felsenbogarsgöur.7 Discussion of this work followed a course similar to the debate over the Fjörar Riddarasgöur volume. In a first review in Ættóðafur, the anonymous reviewer criticises amongst other things the fact that the contents of the book had become old-fashioned long before this new translation was first made available to an Icelandic readership:


Pessar marklaussu og smekklaussu lygassógar þókutu hafandi til dægrar stýtingar fyrir svo sem rúmun mannsaldri hér frá meðal hins


8Anonymous review of the Felsenbogarsgöur in Ættóðafur 7, 4/5, 2 December 1854, 13–14.
MANUSCRIPT AND PRINT TRANSMISSION

The correspondences between these two polemics which appeared almost simultaneously are remarkable, but of course not coincidental. The discussion of education, taste, popular enlightenment, and professionalism matches closely the central elements in Jónas Hallgrímsson’s rimur review from 1837. This celebrated article appeared at a turning point in the history of Icelandic culture. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, an important development took place in the transmission of traditional narrative literature—rimur and sögur; the quasi-medieval tradition of manuscript circulation gave way to the modern printed book. Up to about 1850 it is possible to distinguish between a popular tradition, marked by manuscript diffusion (Glauser 1994), and a quite separate learned print tradition; thereafter, in the wake of Einar Póðarson’s pioneering 1852 edition, the earlier, hand-written form of text distribution is replaced by an increasing number of popular

10Jónas starts his review with his now famous attack on this traditional and very popular genre: ‘Eins og rimur (á Íslandi) eru kveðnar, og hafa verið kveðnar allt að þessu, þó eru þær flestirnar þjóðinni til mínkunar—miður er ekki til neins að leifa því—og þar á ofan koma þær tölurverðu iliu til leifar; eða og spilla tilfinningu á því, sem fugurt er og skáldleg og sömir sjör vel í göðum kveðskap, og taka sjör til þjóunustu “gáfur” og krapta margra manna, er heðru gjetað gjert eftithvað þarfarar—orkt eftithvað skárar, eða þá að minsta kosti þjóðnað mefnlaussn duggur-sokk, meðan þer vonu að “gallinkamba” og “fimbulfamba” til avarandi spoðs og athléturs um alla veröldina.’ (p. 18) [As rimur (in Iceland) are recited, and have been recited through the ages, they are, most of them, to the nation’s discredit—there is no point in denying it—in addition to which they do quite a lot of harm; they destroy and corrupt the feeling for what is beautiful and poetic and befitting good poetry, and take into their service the intelligence and energy of many who could have done something more useful—composed something better, or at least knitted a harmless sock, while they were ‘humply-dumpying’ and ‘rumpity-tumpitying’ to the eternal sport and amusement of the entire world]; see also Rumbke 1981.

11For questions of terminology and methodology see Darnton 1982.

and inexpensive editions during the 1870s and 1880s. With regard to the reviews of Fjórar Riddarasögur and Felsenborgarsögur, it is worth mentioning that it was only after printed editions had begun to appear more widely that public discussion started about works previously circulated in manuscript. Circulating manuscripts never enjoyed the broadly-based public attention that was accorded to the printed editions. It was this new mass publication format that made possible any modern debate about the aesthetics of literature.

Previous literary debate had been restricted to rehearsing all too familiar eighteenth-century attitudes; the 1746 prohibitions relating to saga reading and rimur singing were repeated; the recitation of old tales during the kvöldvökur was rejected in favour of Bible reading; a sharp distinction was drawn between respectable (and historical) Íslandaþyggur and disreputable legendary and chivalric sagas which were rejected because of their fictional (and often fantastic) elements. Confronted by the power of middle-class literary institutions such as printing presses, publishing houses, and literary journals, the ‘medieval’ practice of distributing saga manuscripts came to an end towards the end of the nineteenth century. It is interesting to observe, however, that these popular printed saga editions adopted important features from the manuscript tradition. These books were still intended to be read aloud and their main form of distribution remained the kvöldvöku entertainment, with its largely peasant audience—non-bourgeois, non-urban, non-learned.

12See, for example, Leikafjøla (1757) by Porstein Pétursson (1710–1785): manuscripts AM 936 4to and Ls. JS 113 8vo.

13From this interesting apartment, I proceeded to a large room adjoining, which is properly the bed-room of the servants. The beds were clean and neatly arranged, and, what is but too little attended to in Iceland, the place was well aired. It gave me peculiar pleasure to be informed, that this apartment also formed the domestic chapel. Here, the whole family, which consists of twenty members, assembles every evening, when a psalm is sung, and, after a chapter of the Bible has been read, an appropriate prayer is presented by the head of the family. Besides this exercise, the Secretary [Briem] spends an hour or two, in the long winter evenings, in reading to the family, while at work; and, what cannot be sufficiently commended, he has substituted the reading of the historical books of Scripture for that of the Sagas, which was formerly in universal use, and is still kept up by most of the peasants.’ (Henderson 1818, I 87)

14See, for example, Jón Ingjaldsson (1799/1800–1876), Andilig Æminningar-Hugvejka: Ls. IB 720 8vo (1847).
non-specialised readers and listeners. Functionally, saga manuscripts and popular saga editions from the second half of the nineteenth century had their closest parallels in stories which were printed elsewhere as chapbooks, *Volksbücher*, *Groschenhefte*, *historier*, *folkebøger*, *skilings-tryk*. In line with the cheap French editions of popular stories from the eighteenth century, anthropologists would here speak of an Icelandic *Bibliothèque bleue*. In the following section, some features of these newly available and popular volumes will be illustrated.

**Manuscripts**

**Title-pages.** I shall begin this section by examining some saga manuscript title-pages from the late nineteenth century. They indicate something of the variety of content and function represented by these manuscripts. There is, for example, the rather simple form of a title-page as represented by Lbs. 2956 8vo, a manuscript of 598 pages, written between 1858 and 1864: ‘SAGNA / B.O.K. / SKRIFUD / AF. / I.L.S. / 1858–64’. An index (‘Innihald Bókarinnar’) lists the titles of the eleven stories at the end of the volume (Figures 2 and 3). A late (1905) copy of *Huldar saga*, Lbs. 3026 4to, 444 pages, has the laconic title ‘Sógu / Bók’, but a supplementary title-page offers an additional source reference: ‘Sagann / af / HULD DROTTNINGU / hinni / MÍKLU. /—/ og / ýrmsum er við þa Sógu Koma / og er sú sama er Sturla Lögmaður sagdi / á skipi Magnússar Konúns Lagabætis / 1263.’ The manuscript is dated on the last page: ‘Endað að skrifa 9 Desember 1905. / af H.B. Jónssyni’. Other manuscripts like Lbs. 3022 4to identify the work’s genre on the title-page: ‘GAMLAR / RIDDARASÖGR. / Skrifðar / af / Porstein Guðbrandsson / á / Kaldranesesi. / 1876’. This particular collection contains seven chivalric and fictitious sagas.

Several hand-written title-pages make clear that the manuscripts were used within a certain functional framework of cultural activity. For instance, the title page of Lbs. IB 161 8vo, written in 1853, gives an

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15See, for example, the remark of Benedikt Ásgrímsson in the preface to his edition of *Sagan af Jónfer konungi* (Reykjavík 1901), p. [2]: ‘Eg vona, af því að sagan er skemmtileg, að menn geti stytt sér eina kveldstund með því að lesa hana.’ [I hope that because the story is enjoyable men can while away an evening reading it].

16On the variety of written and oral forms of transmission, see Schenda 1993.
Icelandic version of the *uitle-dulce* topos: ‘Eim Lístill / Samtíð / ígur / Til Dægra stittingar og Fröðleiks’. Another similar manuscript Lbs. ÍB 160 8vo, written in 1847–1848, asserts the recreational rather than the didactic function of literature, and underlines its value for the traveller: ‘Eim Lístill / Kvöldva / ka / Til skemtunar og Dægra stítt- ígur’; ‘pví / Skemtun maður er vagn á veg’ (Figure 4). The contents of this collection consist of a mixture of rémir, sögur, gátur, kvæði, ævintýr í. The book closes with a traditional scribal formula: ‘endar so / pettað litla æfentír Bökina / verði hun òllum til á nægju / um eina quvöld stund. / Fines / 2.9.48’, thus evoking the image of the *kvöldvaka*, that specifically Icelandic institution of the evening wake which took place during the winter and served primarily as an occasion for the production of woollen articles, but which also served as a source of entertainment for the farm inhabitants (Hermanns Pálsson 1962, Magnús Gíslason 1977). In a copy of *Vilhjálmss saga sjöðs* from the early nineteenth century, Lbs. 3127 4to, a reference to this form of literary communication, involving a writer, a reciter and a group of listeners, can be found in the formula at the end of the text (Glauser 1983, 78-100; 1985): ‘Nw er saga þess kom / en á enda, haf þeir stora þock sem hilða / minne sa er las hinu ængva er skrifade’.

*The process of copying.* Several manuscripts offer precise information as to their sources. Thus the title-page of Lbs. 674 4to, about 1820–30, reads: ‘Ein Froðleg / Sogu Book / Ínó haldandi / Nockrar Merkilegar Fraa / Saginar af kongum og magtar / Mønnum Forndar nu ad / Nyu uppskrifadar eftir hund / rad aara gömlu exscripto; / fra Vatnsfirdi / ad Forlæg og Uppakostnadi, vurdulegs’. Such comments are, however, more often to be found at the end of a text, as for example in Lbs. 791 8vo, p. 60: ‘og endar so / Sagan af Agnari Hróars Syni / endað að skrifa þan / 16 December 1888 / af Vilhjalm Einarsins / Skrifad eftir hand riti / Íons Jónssonar bóna á / Simbakoti 1888’. Certain information offers further insights into the process of copying: as a rule, copies were written during the winter, as in the case of Lbs. 3023 4to: ‘Endað að Skrifa Dag 9 Februari 1882 / af / Árna Sveinbjarnarsins / á Oddstöðum’. This manuscript has the following title-page identifying date and place: ‘Nockrir / Smá-þættir / af / markverðum / Islendingum / skrífadar / af / M: Thorarensen / Weturinn 1823 / i / Kastrumahöfnum’ (Figure 5).

From the evidence of other dates it is apparent that it could take as

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17Grímur M. Helgason 1986 discusses the texts produced by Jón Jónsson of Simbakot (1834-1912).
much as a whole year to complete the copying of a 450 page quarto manuscript (Lbs. 1618 4to); that the aforementioned Vilhjálmur Einarsson of Ævergastad (Lbs. 791 8vo) finished Aðgarðs saga on December 16; he then needed another two days to copy out ‘dátilt saga af Adam’ (thirty-six pages), and a further month and six days to copy out ‘Sagan af Remundi og Melusinu’ (thirty-four pages) which he duly finished on 24 January 1889.

Occasionally there are insights into personal tragedies, as in the case of Lbs. 3629 4to in which Helgi Sigurðsson commemorates his late son Helgi (1847–70) by means of a short biography included at the end of Ajax saga (1876). The younger Helgi had copied out the two texts in the manuscript at the age of sixteen whilst he was working in the fishing industry; he subsequently died aged only twenty-three. That someone so young should be engaged in the writing of manuscripts is in line with information from other writers’ biographies; it seems that young people often acquired their writing abilities through the copying of sagas, thereby also laying the foundations for later, more extensive text collections.

The end of the manuscript tradition. The final stage of the active manuscript tradition was reached when texts were simply copied out into
exercise-books and were no longer used for traditional purposes of recitation (Lbs. 3027 4to), or when hand-written passages serve only to complete fragmentary printed texts (Lbs. 2497 8vo, c. 1902) (Figure 6).

Magnús Jónsson of Tjaldanes. The climax of the manuscript tradition and the conclusion of the centuries-old process of collection and transmission is represented by the work of Magnús Jónsson of Tjaldanes (1835–1922): twenty quarto volumes of Formmannasögur Norðurlanda (Lbs. 1491–1510 4to), 800 pages in each volume (a total of 16,000 pages), with the volumes written between 1883 and 1909. This project represents a kind of a summa of Icelandic saga literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As is shown by the example in the illustrations,

In addition to this imposing collection (Lbs. 1491–1510 4to), numerous manuscripts by Magnús Jónsson of Tjaldanes are to be found in the National Library of Iceland and in private collections. It is clear that some of these manuscripts represent second or at times even third copies of individual volumes of Formmannasögur Norðurlanda. As M.J. Driscoll (personal communication) has suggested, it is not impossible that Magnús copied parts or the whole of the vast 16,000 page collection two or three times.

Magnús copies his texts very carefully. He paginates the volumes neatly, uses running titles and establishes a consistent page content of twenty-two lines. He even goes so far as to mimic the appearance of critical editions by paginating the prefaces with Roman ciphers (Figure 7).

Unlike most other writers, Magnús comments on his sources, on his searches for manuscripts, and on his earlier work on this same massive project. He does this by means of ‘formlár’ [prefaces], thus seeking to imitate printed scholarly editions. In these introductions which very often contain extremely useful information about the late sagas, Magnús addresses such questions as the ownership of his source-manuscripts (frequently it was Guðbrandur Sturlaugsson), and the treatment and reconstruction of texts, as in the case of Völsunga saga. In volume twelve of the Formmannasögur Norðurlanda (Lbs. 1502 4to, iii), where he resorts to a printed edition in order to supplement an inadequate source, thereby highlighting the parallel transmission of manuscripts and printed editions. These comments make it clear that it was not Magnús’s primary intention to copy sagas which were well known and widely available. His aim was rather to collect and preserve rare and inaccessible narratives. The activity of text collection was to him of greater importance than making use of these Formaldarsögur Norðurlanda texts in kvöldvaka recitations. An overall pattern of manuscript transmission has thus been illustrated: the process began during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; suffered interruption in the sixteenth century; enjoyed a revival in the seventeenth century (Springborg 1969, 1977; Jakob Benediktsson 1981); and ended with the work of a writer and compiler who assembled his collection of texts in accordance with his antiquarian, historical and (perhaps to some extent) his commercial interests.

Transmission statistics. A tentative and very preliminary attempt at determining statistically the extent of Icelandic manuscript transmission on the basis of available catalogues reveals that in public libraries there are about 550 manuscripts from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with most of them containing several sagas. In comparison, there are about five hundred nineteenth-century rímun-cycles, preserved in more than one thousand rímun manuscripts; and about one hundred and thirty popular editions of rímun were printed between 1800 and 1920.

Editions

It is instructive to compare these (tentative) figures with the number of known saga editions. The following list contains the popular (that is non-
The End of the Saga

Króka-Refs saga
Copenhagen 1890
Selkirk 1900

Laxdæla saga
Akureyri 1867

Máguð saga
Copenhagen 1858

Margrétar saga
Reykjavík 1916

Marsílius saga
Reykjavík 1907

Marteins saga
Reykjavík 1885

Mírmanns saga
Reykjavík 1880

Níkulás saga
Reykjavík 1884

Njáls saga
Winnipeg 1889

Ólafs saga helga
Reykjavík 1912

Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar
Reykjavík 1844

Páls saga, Hungurvaka
Reykjavík 1893

Parmes saga
Reykjavík 1893

Postula sögur
Winnipeg 1889

Sátís saga
Reykjavík 1884

Samsons saga
Reykjavík 1844

Sex søgu-þættir
Gimli 1836

Sigurðar saga frækna
Reykjavík 1850

Sigurðar saga þögla
Reykjavík 1855

Skáld-Helga saga
Reykjavík 1884

Starkarð saga
Winnipeg 1889

Tróðumanna saga
Reykjavík 1897

Valdimars saga
Winnipeg 1911

Vamsdrála saga
Reykjavík 1913

Vígðens saga
Reykjavík 1852

Vilháld saga sjóðs
Reykjavík 1858

Villifers saga
Reykjavík 1886

Vígmund saga
Reykjavík 1885

Vingvars saga viðförla
Reykjavík 1878

Pjalar-Jóns saga
Reykjavík 1886

Pógrims saga
Reykjavík 1857

Póris þatr hasts
Reykjavík 1907

Póris þatr hasts
Eyrarbakki 1852

Póris þatr hasts
Copenhagen 1874

Akureyri (eight), Canada (seven), Copenhagen (six), Viðey, Leirárgarðar, Ísafjörður (two each), Seyðisfjörður, Bessastaðir, Eyrarbakki (one each). The generic distribution deserves particular attention. Hardly any kings’ sagas, religious sagas, pseudo-historical sagas or chivalric sagas were published in popular editions. Only two legendary sagas appeared in separate editions, in all likelihood because of the existence of C.C. Rafn’s edition of Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda (Rafn 1829–32). Thus it was the forty-seven late-medieval and post-Reformation original romances which represented the majority of the sagas listed. Only fourteen family sagas appeared in these inexpensive editions, until Valdimar Ásmundarson and Sigurður Kristjánsson began publishing their popular Islendinga sögur series at the end of the century.

It is very difficult to determine the purchasers and thus the primary users of these editions. In their prefaces and postscripts, the editors usually address their readers as ‘alþýða’ and ‘alþýgi’ [the general public], and the printed sagas claim to be designed for the ‘kvöldvaka fri svæt’ [rural evening wake]. The subscriber list printed in the third volume of Rafn’s Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda states that of the one hundred and fifty subscribers to this expensive, three-volume work almost exactly one third were peasants and farm-hands (forty-two instances of ‘bóndi’, ten of ‘vinnumaður’ and ‘vinnumpullur’). The second largest group (some 20%) consists of clergymen (thirty-two instances of ‘sírur’), whilst the remaining subscribers tended to be higher civil servants, physicians, craftsmen and the like. In the case of the small, cheap editions from the end of the century, no lists of subscribers are extant, but the percentage of peasants and farm-hands was doubtless rather higher.

In all, seventy-seven editions appeared between 1804 and 1916, only four of them from the first half of the century. In the 1880s alone twenty-three editions were issued.

The places of publication were Reykjavík (forty-seven instances),
In this context it is interesting to see how printed transmission perpetuated central features of the manuscripts. Time and again these small books state that the sagas are intended to be read aloud during the kvöldvaka: ‘Mér fannst þess vert að sagan væri gefin út til skemtunar sógusjóninni.’ [It seemed to me worthwhile to publish this saga for the entertainment of the saga-nation.] (Porleifur Jónsson 1886, iv). It is in the prefaces and postscripts of these editions that the historicity of the sagas is discussed: ‘Að framannskriftið er búið að færa nág rök fyrir áreitiðsel, líthelgheimi Íslandsmannasögur eptir Langnáum og eru fáar sógur hennir meir samdóma; en svo eru fleiri sógur sem viti til Íslandsmannasögur.’ [From what was written above there should be sufficient evidence for the trustworthiness of Íslandsmannasaga according to Landnamabók, and there are few sagas with which it agrees more completely, but there are also other sagas which refer to Íslandsmannasaga].

Again, sources for the editions are recorded: ‘Sógu þessa af Skáld-Helga, sem nú er í fjöra skípti prentuð, hefur hreppstjóri Magnús Jónsson í Tjaldanesi skrifað upp eptir mjög gamalli bók, skrifaði með fallegru settuletris skrifti, mikil bundinn, en þó vel læsliegri; á þessari bók voru margar fleiri sógur og kveðti [...] hann mun vera einn af sógufröðbustu mónnun, er nú lifa á landi hér, S.E.’ [This text of Skáld Helga saga, which is here printed for the first time was copied from a very old manuscript by Magnús Jónsson, hreppstjóri of Tjaldanes, written in beautiful gothic script, heavily abbreviated but quite readable. There were many other sagas and poems in this manuscript [...] he is one of the most knowledgeable people now living in this country. S.E.]

Typical of the printing industry at this time are comments to the effect that additional volumes would follow, if the present one were to be well received: ‘Verði þessari sógu vel tekið af löndum mínun, hef jeg í hyggju, að gefa út með fíðum fleiri þessa kyns sógur, eptir þeim handritum, sem bæt verða fengin. Reykjavík í marzm. 1857, Egill Jónsson.’ [Should this saga be well received by my compatriots I have in mind to bring out in the course of time more sagas of this kind, based on the best manuscripts available. Reykjavík, March 1857. Egill Jónsson].

Unlike the chapbooks printed in Denmark, Sweden or Germany, Icelandic saga-editions were never illustrated. Nonetheless the parallels as regards function, subject matter, production, distribution, and outward appearance between Central and Northern European stories such as Helena Antonia af Konstantinopel (Figure 9) and the late Icelandic saga-editions are striking. In both cases, narratives which had been transmitted over several centuries with few textual changes were now printed in massive numbers. Their explicit mode of presentation was that of story recitation (often including a double scene: Lómroth 1978, 1979) in front of the fire-place as in the Swedish chapbook, or during the activities of the Icelandic kvöldvaka.

**ICELANDIC LITERARY INSTITUTIONS DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

The examples which have been discussed so far show that Icelandic popular literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was persistently marked by traditional and ultimately anachronistic sociopolitical factors.

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SAGAN
AF
ÐJALAR-JÓNÍ,
Gefin út
AF
GUNNLAUGI ÞÓÐARSYNI,
Kostad af
ÉGÍL JÓNSSYNI.

REYKJAVÍK.
Í FRENTMÍNÍ GÍLANDS. E. ÞÓÐARSON.
1857.

Figure 8. Sagan af Ðjalar-Jóni 1857.

Histórið
om
Den Þróna og Tálmodiga
Helena Antonia
Af Constantinopel.

Hveruði man fan beðjda þránd sérhæðissi.

Stockholm, w. Ólso, Sóðermástarorg, 170-4.

Figure 9. Historia om Den Sköna och Tålmodiga Helena Antonia Af Konstan-
tinopel, Swedish Chapbook, Stockholm 1847.
cultural practices. Influenced by foreign, middle-class culture, modern literary institutions developed in Iceland around the middle of the last century. These institutions took the form of the printing-press, literary journals and publishing houses. Besides these modern forms of distribution there was a second, older transmission route by which traditional narrative genres could circulate in manuscript form up to the First World War.

Reflecting on this anachronistic cultural behaviour of the Icelanders it is interesting to recall the findings of French and American scholars who postulate that high degrees of literacy linked to the availability of the print media lead without exception and more or less automatically to significant social changes (Davies 1975, Eisenstein 1968). The evidence from Iceland points in exactly the opposite direction. It reveals a society dominated by a strong sense of cultural continuity; literacy was widespread though not of course universal.26 These high literacy levels and the actual reading practices in Iceland, which were partly reflected in the manuscript tradition of saga literature, played little part in the modernisation of Icelandic agrarian society. Literacy was to only a very limited degree an agent of social and political progress. The traditional orientation of the popular narratives was too powerful.

A quotation from Halldór Laxness’s novel Sjálfstætt fólk, published in 1934–1935, may serve to summarise and illustrate the transition from the older, quasi-medieval recitation and reading culture to more modern forms of the European entertainment industry during the first decades of this century:

[...] En þetta var ekki ait. Það er einsog mig minni að ég hafi lofað þér Örvaroddssögðu einverntíma f vetur, sagði fæðir hennar, og þau fórú til bóksalans.

Bóksalinn var aldurhinginn maður [...]. Prættýrur það fékk hann orð fyrir að fylgjaði alveg ótrúlega vel með tímanum. Bókaverðlun hans var í lítlu skoti uppó lofti í gömlum brotnu húsi, sem var falit í bakvið önnur hús. Leðin lá uppeftir myrkum brakstiga, sem ætlaði eingen enda að taka. [...]

Fást hér bækur? spuruð Bjartur.

Bækur og bækur, svarði bóksalinn,—thað kemur an uppá.

Ja það er nú bara vegna hennar Sóló minnar, sagði Bjartur. Hún er farin að reka nefndi í skrudur, þetta grey, svo ég mun hafa lofað henni einverntíma f vetur að gefa henni Örvaroddssögðu. Ég borga útí hönd.

[...] En þessum svifum þurfti fæðir hennar aðvitíða að koma auga á bokina líka, og náttúrliga varð hann vondur einsog avinlega út þesshátar, —þetta er sospurit evítverd fjandans ekkisins ástarprúgslí, sem þeir setja saman sunningarnir til að eyðisgjöf hjártaða í kvenfólkum.

Ja þetta vil nú kvenfólkki hafa fyrir því, sagði bóksalinn, ég er það inn að látu yfir þráttu stykki af þessari bók á undanfornum tímum árum, og það er enn það verði að spyrja eftir henni. Það hjálpa ekki eintömr morð og vísindi. Það verður líka að vera einhver yst á bókmentum. Lăngur var Örvaroddur á sinni tíð, en hver er komen til að mæla leident ástarinnar?

Pað for einsog við mætt búast, Bjartur lent í hjarki við bóksalann um andra nútíman og sníðfóránnar, en Ásta Söljilla var alveg utanvið sig [...]. Heimsökinni endaði á því að Bjartur keypt söguna af Mjalhvit konungsdottur og gaf döttur sinni.

Hann á ein sjó lausaleiksbörn, einsog líka best sest af því hvað

26See the studies by Loftur Guttormsson on literacy in early modern Iceland; for example his ‘Laesi’ in Frosti F. Jóhannsson 1989, pp. 117–144.
hann höndlar með, sagði Bjartur, þegar þau voru komin heilu og höldnu niður þá myrkri og brakandi stigur sem leiddu til Leyndardóma ástrarinnar. (Hallóðr Laxness 1961, I 225–227)

[But that was not all. ‘I seem to recollect that I made you a promise of Orvar-Odds Saga awhile ago,’ said her father, so they made their way to the bookseller’s.

The bookseller was an old man [...]. In spite of this he was reputed to keep remarkably well abreast of the times. His shop was at the top of a tumbledown old house hidden behind other buildings, a little room partitioned off from the rest of the garret. The way lay up a dark, creaking staircase that seemed as if it would never end. [...]

‘Can we get books here?’ inquired Bjartur.

‘Books and books,’ replied the bookseller; ‘it all depends.’

‘Well, it was just something for our Sola here,’ said Bjartur. ‘The little wretch has begun sniffing about between the covers, and it seems I must have promised her Orvar-Odds Saga at some time or another. I pay on the nail.’

‘Pray God for guidance, man. It’s thirty-odd years since I sold the last copy of Orvar-Odds Saga. The country now stands on an entirely different cultural footing nowadays. I can recommend the story of King Solomon’s Mines there, all about the hero of Umslopogaas, in his own way a great man, and in my opinion no whit inferior to Orvar-Oddur.’

That’s rather more than I’m prepared to believe. Some more of that damned modern rubbish, I suppose. And no one is going to tell me that that fellow you mentioned just now could ever have stood up to Orvar-Oddur, and him fully twelve Danish ells in height.”

‘Maybe, but the country happens to have reached a stage in its development when it wants to keep abreast of the times, and we booksellers have to take that into account. Surely you, Miss Sola, will agree that one must adapt oneself to the times? Come here, love, and take a look at my up-to-date books. Here we have a world-famous novel about a man who was murdered in a cart, and here is a scientific account of the depravity of the Papacy, all about how those bad people abroad, monks and nuns, led immoral lives in the Middle Ages. And here I can show you a book that’s practically new and absolutely the height of fashion nowadays; just look at it, little miss, don’t you think we’d like to read it?”

[...] And when she looked at the title-page of the topmost volume, she was struck with such amazement that her heart almost stopped its beating. That strange, significant business which she had never heard mentioned by its name, but of which both the animals at home and her reading of the Jomsviking Ballads had given her an inkling—whole books had been written about it, then: The Secrets of Love, Wholesome Advice Regarding the Union of Man and Woman.

The End of the Saga

Union? thought the girl, trembling with fright, as if she thought her father was about to slap her face—how can there be union of a man and a woman? She hoped and prayed that her father would not catch sight of this book. Seldom has a book awakened a young girl’s curiosity in such measure, seldom has a young girl been so shy of a book [...]. Her father, of course, must choose this very moment to notice it too, and naturally he lost his temper, as he always did when this subject cropped up. ‘This looks like some of the damnable filth brewed by those misbegotten swine in Reykjavik to rot the hearts of the women,’ he growled.

‘It’s what the women want, all the same,’ replied the bookseller.

‘I’ve sold thirty copies of it in the last five years and it’s still in demand. Murder and science are by no means enough. There has to be a certain amount of love in our literature also. Orvar-Oddur was a long man in his time, but who would care to measure the length of love?’

The result was inevitable; Bjartur and the bookseller started wrangling about the spirit of modern literature and the superior skill of the classics, while Asta Sollitja stood looking on in utter bewilderment [...]. The visit ended with Bjartur buying his daughter the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

‘He had seven or eight bastards, as anyone would expect after seeing the sort of stuff he deals in,’ said Bjartur when they stood safe and sound at the foot of the dark and creaking stairs that led to the Secrets of Love. [Thompson 1946, 195–7]

At a moment when the books of Rider Haggard were conquering the last of the small trading-posts on the coast, the epoch of Órvar-Oddr and the cheap saga-editions was at an end. Ultimately it was not the attacks of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians directed against the heathen elements in the stories, nor the polemics of the eighteenth-century enlighteners against superstition, nor the aesthetic objections of nineteenth-century romantic writers, which stopped the Icelanders singing the rímur and copying and reciting the sagas. With his own characteristic precision and irony Laxness describes the years after the First World War as a period with far-reaching socio-cultural implications for the dissolution of the pre-modern Icelandic culture. Between the quotations from Gróndal (1852) and Laxness (1920–30) lies a period of some seventy to eighty years during which Iceland underwent a gradual transformation from a socially, politically and culturally backward nineteenth-century country, with structures that seemed almost medieval, into a modern Western society. The transition from handwritten manuscript to printed book—in itself, of course, only a minor element in these upheavals—brought about certain changes in cultural behaviour after 1850. But it is only after the replacement of the kvöldvaka by modern, middle-class
forms of culture during the period 1910–20 that the hand-written and printed narratives from ancient times lost their place irreversibly in Icelandic cultural life.²⁷ Or, as one of the most prolific writers from the last phase of the saga writing, Guðbrandur Sturlaugsson from Hvítadalur, puts it in 1892:

                                                                   Þettað [Flóres saga konungs og sona hans] er störfeingleg Riddara
saga enn égi vil eg ábrigjaat sannindi hannar, hún er einsog fleiry
þess háttur sögur gérð til gamans og døgrastitningar sem margur haði
áður gaman af þeim langu veikravöldum en nú er sú skémum
Söguleftsinsins farin að ganga úr gildi. (Lbs. 1618 4to, 457).

[This is a fine chivalric romance, but I do not wish to vouch for its
truthfulness. Like other such stories it was made for entertainment
and diversion, which many find enjoyable in the long winter evenings,
although now this kind of saga-reading for pleasure is beginning to
lose its validity.]

So it was that the end of the kvöldvaka also led to the end of the saga.

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²⁷In a recent article (Glauser 1993) I have tried to illustrate comparable
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fib = Híð slenska bókmennat Afghanistan.


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Lbs. = Landsbókasafn Íslands


JS = Jón Sigurðsson.


