

CHAPTER DIVISIONS: THE CASE OF GUNNLAUGS SAGA

John Tucker
University of Victoria

Narration, like language, encodes human experience. Like language, it necessarily depends on our ability to segment. For it is segmentation that allows us to discern the causal or temporal structures through which life constitutes itself for us as patterned and meaningful. Thus the effort that narratologists have made to understand the nature of narrative segmentation, both in the abstract and as it occurs in various literatures, genres, periods.

The sagas of Icelanders comprise a distinctive corpus of materials which is the product of culture with a common understanding of the nature of human life and its proper telling. It seems reasonable to assume that similar principles of segmentation will inform the various sagas and that a fuller understanding of these principles of segmentation will enable the better definition of the distinctive achievement of this remarkable corpus. A number of scholars have attempted to identify the constitutive units of saga structures. Pátr-theory, assuming the piecemeal assembly of sagas out of smaller story units, is the literary reflex of evolutionary biology with its concern for adaptive strategies of survival. Theodore Andersson provides an abstract, architectonic analysis according to which saga narrative inevitably moves through a predictable, limited number of steps; Lars Lönnroth's modified version of this schema and Jesse Byock's feudemes equally depend on quasi-linguistic approach to the study of story telling, though the particular linguistic models vary: transformational grammar, perhaps, and phonological theory. The scenic approach, on the other hand, announces its dramatic origins.¹

Each of these ways of reading has cast its special light on the complex phenomenon of saga telling and all enjoy textual support of one kind or another, but each proceeds at its work of dissection with tools, as it were, made elsewhere. And none can claim pre-eminence, for "the only way to demonstrate the superiority of a theory of plot structure is to show that the descriptions of particular stories which it permits correspond with our intuitive sense of plot and that it is sufficiently precise to prohibit descriptions which are manifestly wrong".² But how reliable is our intuitive sense when it comes to narratives hundreds of years old. What saga reading is "manifestly wrong"? The question then arises: Is there any direct, meta-textual evidence for what saga culture took to be the constitutive unit or units of saga narrative?

As far as I can see the only such evidence is the manuscript indications of chapter divisions. Yet these chapter divisions seem to have interested very few. The prevailing attitude seems well summarized by Lee M. Hollander's somewhat contradictory comment: "The chapter divisions and headings of

Icelandic saga manuscripts are notoriously inconsequential. Still, it is hardly permissible arbitrarily to cut up the text
"³

No one seems to have taken Hollander up on his statement of notorious inconsequence, at least not directly. Ralph Allen cites the comment, but only to deny that it applies to the chapter divisions of *Njáls saga*. And Lars Lönnroth does not explicitly take issue with it when he notes Allen's citation in order to insist on the same exception.⁴ But what are the grounds for treating the chapter usage in *Njáls saga* as exceptional? And considering the almost universal silence among scholars on the subject of chapter divisions (Allen and Lönnroth are notable exceptions), how can their inconsequence be notorious?

Yet I am sure that many modern readers, including scholars, have wondered at the logic of chapter divisions in the sagas. Even in printed editions, where they tend to be combined and rationalized, the chaptering may sometimes strike us as wilful, inconsistent or naive. At best chapter divisions may appear merely to emphasize the momentary pauses or transitions in the stories themselves, telling us nothing important or new. Also the different manuscripts of the same saga are unlikely to agree wholly in their treatment of divisions, which might seem to demonstrate that the placement of divisions is matter of scribal choice and therefore of little account, to the extent that scribes (admittedly the medieval avatars of modern editors) are a mechanical lot, though fortunately given to committing the kinds of errors on which our stemmatics depend.

Clearly the attribution of chapter divisions is a problematic exercise. The agreement of good manuscripts may be construed as demonstrating the authenticity or originality of a specific division, allowing us, like Lars Lönnroth, to look to it for evidence of authorial perception. Conversely we may find most intriguing precisely those divisions that seem to us counter-intuitive or the fruit of "manifestly wrong" interpretation. To my mind it hardly matters. For what can indubitably be said about chapter divisions is that they offer the best clues we are ever likely to get as to the contemporary, structured reading of the sagas. They record, we cannot prove how faithfully, the informed understanding of a period that took the physical disposition of texts very seriously. For, in the thirteenth-century, just when presently surviving sagas came to be composed and written down, there developed throughout Europe an intense interest in the technology of "book-learning." As Malcolm Parkes has observed,

"The late medieval book differs more from its early medieval predecessors than it does from the printed books of our own day. The scholarly apparatus which we take for granted--analytical table of contents, text disposed into books, chapters, and paragraphs, and accompanied by footnotes and index--originated in the application of the ideas of ordnatio (arranging) and compilatio (assembling) by the writers, scribes, and rubricators of the thirteenth,

fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries."⁵

The most familiar and direct evidence of this new orientation is probably to be found in the books of the bible, for though the bible had been divided into chapters before the thirteenth century these division were unsystematic and local. Our present chapters are believed to descend from the Paris bible and Stephen Langton, who died in 1228, and who recognized that scholarship would be facilitated by a single, universal standard. Biblical chapter divisions in any case deserve mention in this context because they provide a better model for the proper dimensions of saga chapters than do the chapter usages of modern novels.

Modern chapter breaks assume single readings, and a plethora of reading possibilities. But the sagas, like the bible, were texts for rereading. As Lars Lönnroth reminds us, "Initials and rubrics seem to have functioned as a kind of signpost for readers leafing through the manuscript in search of some particular story or incident." ("Structural Divisions," p. 50) Initials then are in the first instance a visual phenomenon. Their illumination or historiation arose out of mnemonic necessity, just as the "highlining" of a modern student does. Those responsible for the insertion of initials, usually done later because in a different ink, give every evidence of having enjoyed their marginal opportunities, though not in family saga manuscripts, which do not seem to have felt the need of offering their readers anything more than their superb texts. Sometimes, however, these manuscripts do offer the guidance of rubrics, or headings, as to the content of the chapter; how often, if ever, they are accompanied by the numbers that habitually insist on the sequentiality of chapters in modern saga editions, I cannot presently say.

It is important to emphasize the visual character of chapter-making initials, in order to remind ourselves that not only narrative imperatives but also mechanical factors and decorative considerations can affect their placement. If a scribe forgot to allow space for the later insertion of an initial in a different coloured ink, he might end up changing the location of a chapter opening. The leaving of spaces and their partial filling was a moderately complicated business which involved either the right justification of the tag-end of a chapter, if it was short enough, or the superposed doubling back of the first line of the new chapter. A good deal of care and thought went into these transitions, despite the frequent failure of rubricators to insert the actual initial. And the physical size and layout of the manuscript might affect the frequency of occurrence of decorative initials. But it would be a mistake to over-emphasize the physical or decorative aspect of initial making if by doing so we are tempted to dismiss them as simply the aping of a prestigious but alien technology, the product of scribes chiefly concerned that Icelandic books look "real".

The paradoxical effect of introducing divisions is, of course, to create unities. Chapters have their own dynamics, contained

as they are between openings and closings. And openings and closings enjoy a rhetorical foregrounding which creates the possibility of observing levels of accentuation and which demands increased care of the decorums of onset or closure. Take beginnings, for example. What are we to make of the tendency to open chapters by referring to rulers and reigns. Is it a borrowed historiographical dating convention or an act of flattery? For whom should the honour be reserved? for kings only? or for earls? or for rulers who play important parts in the stories? And if their introductions involve the repeated use of the same formula, should a translator reproduce or mask the repetition?

That these questions should arise depends on the fact that the introduction of chapter divisions, in Roman Jakobson's oft-cited phrase, "projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." ⁶ Jakobson was talking about sonic equivalents characteristic of poetry, in which foot equals foot, line equals line, sequentially. Such equivalence is one of the marked features of literary language, distinguishing it from more usual language equivalence, the paradigms within which we find the words we use, in which a rejected choice is part of a word's meaning. Chapter openings are all formally equivalent: they relate not only syntagmatically to the closures they succeed and the chapters they introduce, but paradigmatically to all the other openings in the given text but also in the entire textual corpus. They enhance the possibilities and effects of choice and comparison.

But the discussion has become too vague. It's time to turn to a concrete example. I have chosen Gunnlaugs saga, partly because it's of a convenient length, but mostly because I happen to have access to four editions, as well as reproductions of the two main manuscripts, and two translations--a reasonable amount of information, though I could do with a bit more.⁷ As the table (see the Appendix below) demonstrates, there are 28 points at which one or more of the texts adduced-- the standard edition, the manuscripts, or the Gwyn Jones translation--introduce chapter breaks. In a number of places these coincide, but discrepancies are not infrequent. Editors have chosen not to follow the lead of the A manuscript (Holm 18) as regards divisions, though all base their editions on it. Presumably it should be possible to derive a set of rules which would account for the various decisions that the table highlights. Why, for instance, do the editors recognize some divisions but not others. Why in one case do they seem to invent their own?

A moment ago I referred to the frequent habit of starting chapters with references to rulers. Three of the chapters in the edition begin this way: Ch. 6 with Earl Erik and his brother Svein in Norway, Ch. 7 with King Ethelred in England, Ch. 9 with King Olaf in Sweden. But Ch. 8 begins "Siðan siglir Gunnlaugr af Englandi með kaupmönnum norðr til Dyflinnar. Þá réð fyrir Írlandi Sigtryggr konungr silkisegg . . ." If we compare these sentences with those separated by division 10, we

will observe that the difference involves only a one sentence displacement of the chapter break. Thus: "Nú sigla þeir Gunnlaugr í Englandshaf ok kómu um haustit suðr við Lundúnabryggjur, ok réðu þar til hlunns skipi sinu.//Þá réð fyrir Englandi Áðalráðr" Are we to understand the variation to be carefully calculated, perhaps to avoid repetition, or as a simple mistake of the kind referred to above? And what are we to make of the two immediately following chapters in A, each of which introduces an Earl Sigurd by means of the "þá réð" formula. The chapters created are shortish and the repetitions may seem excessive, but Gunnlaugr has just boasted of his intention to visit "tveggja jarla". The parataxis of A cannot with complete confidence be attributed to artistic naivety.

Most opening formulae, like those just mentioned, give pride of place to temporal adverbials. The notable exception is the "x hét maðr" formula which (with minor variants) begins most sagas and many chapters within them. About three-quarters of the 28 sagas I surveyed in preparing this paper, including Gunnlaugs saga, begin precisely this way.⁹ And apart from Þorsteinn, father of Helga, whose entry opens the saga, the phrase is used here to introduce Önundr, father of Hrafn, in Ch. 5. On the other hand, the editors have been unimpressed by division 19 ("Þórðr hét maðr") which apparently ascribes undue importance to a man who enters the saga simply to wrestle with Gunnlaugr. Interestingly this is the one point at which a chapter break in B does not coincide with one in A. B's occurs one sentence earlier: "Þeir tóku land norðr á Melrakkaslétu í Hraunhöfn hálfum mánaði fyrir vetr ok skipuðu þar upp."

As a starting strategy, "x hét maðr" strikes me as remarkable, for it so uncompromisingly rejects that most conventional and useful of opening gambits, the phrases "in illo tempore," "once upon a time," that may be used either to anchor a story in time or to cast it thoroughly adrift. It's as if the act of naming is what sets the clock ticking, asserting social context, family responsibility, psychology . . . name, cognomen, family, story. Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings merely makes the phenomenon explicit: "Þat er upphaf þessarar sögu, at Þörbjorn hét maðr; hann var Þjóðreksson. Hann bjó í Ísafirði á þeim bæ, er heitir at Laugabóli. . ." But is character naming as an opening device an exclusively male, freeborn phenomenon? Almost, it would seem. Two chapters of Kormáks saga, as well as one of Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa, and most notably the opening chapter of post-classical Fljótsdala saga open "x hét kona" or something similar. And the occasional thrall is also given pride of place. Jófriðr is allowed to open one chapter in the A version of Gunnlaugs saga with the anomalous "Jófriðr var átján vetra er Þorsteinn fékk hana," which occurs in a passage considered suspect by editors and relegated to footnote status.

Perhaps the most interesting of the opening formulae is the phrase "nú er at segja" which occurs in Chs. 10, 11, and 12 of Gunnlaugs saga. One must accept that for the scribe certainly and saga-writer possibly the repetitions of this opening is a self-conscious stylistic device. A quick check of

the Randolph Quirk translation reveals that the the modern scholar, creature of a different aesthetic, cannot bring himself to adopt identical phrasing: thus "To return now to Gunnlaug . . . ," "Now there is Hrafn's story to tell . . . ," "Now it is to be told of Hrafn that" Having imposed equivalence on consecutive moments in a narrative, the Icelandic text chooses to underline their identity, whereas the English translator has accepted the structural equivalence imposed by chapter placement but has chosen to mask it stylistically.

Quirk's choice of different translations, it should be noted, is not simply a matter of trying to avoid repetition. The narrative gaps which are being closed by the formula are not all quite the same. The first, which he renders "to return," involves a kind of loop back in time--three years to be exact--a heterodiagetic retroversion, I believe, the narratologists would term it. This type of chapter break should have a familiar feel to it, for novelists (if I may risk a gross generalization) avail themselves of the chapter form to gain just this kind of disjunctive freedom. In a story about two men competing for the same woman the action necessarily bifurcates periodically, posing the saga writer some nice narrative dilemmas as he moves back and forth between his lovers and their stories.

The "nú er at segja" formula seems at first sight to resemble very closely all the other openings that lead off with an adverbial of time, which is to say all but two of the thirteen chapters of Gunnlaugs saga. But there is a difference, for this "now" can belong to the narrative present, unlike all the other adverbs which locate actions in relation to one another and to events, seasons, and reigns of the "real" world. It is not, I think, an accident that the narrative present should be foregrounded in this way as the story reaches its climax and the urgency of the telling begins to match the urgency of the action.

Among the other items deserving of our attention in this saga is the editorial creation of one division and suppression of another. The first occurs between Chs. 1 and 2: "Eitt sumar er þat sagt at skip kom af hafi í Gufuárós." The A manuscript dignifies the sentence with a well-formed and largish E which is, however, not marginalized. The "er þat sagt" formula is a meta-textual aside similar to "nú er at segja" and appropriate to a chapter opening, but such a focus on the arrival of a ship is possibly just a little unusual. In any event the manuscripts do not agree with the editors here. More striking is the editorial decision, against the authority not only of A but of B, to suppress division 8. The sentence de-emphasized by this action, "Ok þessu nær urðu þau tíðendi, er bezt hafa orðit hér á Íslandi, at landit varð allt kristit ok allt fólk hafnaði fornum átrúnaði," is virtually an aside, though a momentous one, with no direct narrative consequences. We have therefore two choices: to treat the capitalized O as a literary genuflection or to see it as marking a crucially important development that introduces a whole new era and is wholly

worthy of a scribal flourish. The editors seem to have adopted the first interpretation, seeing it as an example of a story betrayed by a religious instinct.

Though I spoke earlier of chapter divisions as providing occasions both for openings and for closing, we need not, I think, delay long over examples of the latter, though Gunnlaugs saga, like all sagas, provides instances aplenty of an authorial concern for the dynamics and decorums of closure. Closing formulae bid characters adieu (Ch. 2: ". . . ok er hann nú ór sögunni"); they leave children to grow up (Ch. 3: ". . . ok fæddisk þar upp með mikilli virðing ok ást af föður ok móður ok öllum frændum); they send heroes on voyages, sometimes allowing them to reach their proximate destinations (Ch. 5: ". . . ok lágu þar í lagi ok skipuðu upp"; Ch. 6: ". . . ok réðu þar til hlunns skípi sínu"); sometimes, more suggestively, they strike an ominous note (Ch. 9: ". . . en Helga hugði illt til ráða"; Ch. 11: ". . . enda varð þat fram at koma sem til dró"); or they reflect on death (Ch. 12: "Öllum þótti mikill skaði at um hvárntveggja þeira, Gunnlaug ok Hrafn, með þeim atburðum sem varð um líflát þeira"); before they utter the final amen (Ch. 13: "Ok lýkr þar nú sögunni").

Endings are not simply the incidental by-products of openings, but rather significant parts of the same structural moment, yet they do not seem equally to have engaged the saga-writer's attention. In this respect, I would venture to propose, saga narrative differs from that of the modern novel; for novels the calculus of the chapter division is chiefly the calculus of closure. Novelists must learn the trick providing us exits from their stories, exits that allow us turn off the light yet compel us to return. Saga chapters present rather entry points, as Lars Lönnroth, in the passage cited above, has remarked.

Doubtless much remains to be said about the segmental coherences, as well as the dynamic disjunctions and emphases introduced by saga chapters, but I will move to my conclusion by posing the problem of a translator's responsibility in this regard. Translation strategies will surely differ depending on a translator's purpose: to purvey a saga text to a novel reading public or to give modern readers access to an alien literary world without defamiliarizing it. One of the strategies affected will be the choice and placement of chapter divisions. Gwyn Jones seems to have chosen the first option; as the appended table indicates, he has decided to suppress a number of chapter breaks and to move one, albeit only a sentence backward. Let us briefly consider a consequence for his first chapter, which combines into a single unit all the events leading to Helga's return to her mother at age six. Chiefly this results in a downplaying of the division between Ch. 2, which concludes with the just-mentioned dismissal of the Easterner ("ok er hann nú ór sögunni"), and the beginning of Ch. 3, in which Þorsteinn informs his apparently unsuspecting wife that she is pregnant and will bear a child in the very near future, indeed while he is away. (The news, to be sure, is that she must kill her daughter if girl it is--an injunction

justified very carefully by a prophetic dream, lest we think as ill of Þorsteinn, for his decision, as his wife does.) In manuscript A this chapter also concludes with the "ok er hann nú ór sögunni" formula, this time referring to the shepherd, Þorvarðr, who has carried the new-born baby to Þorgerðr for protection, while the next chapter begins with Þorsteinn's return from the assembly. But to a modern reader this division seems less logical than the one that could be introduced two sentences later with the comment "Nú liðu svá sex vetr at þetta varð ekki víst." And it is just here, in fact, that Jones places his paragraph break. I do not believe that Jones treatment of this passage should be described, in Hollander's terms, as arbitrarily cutting up the text; translation decisions are always moot. But the story has been subtly changed, its rhythms are altered: they're less unexpected and less interesting.

To conclude, however we choose to construct our editions or present our translations, it seems to me improvident to ignore the evidence of manuscripts when we set about trying to discern the segmenting principles on which the narrative grammar of the sagas relies. Chapters may or may not be original to their texts and they are surely preserved with varying degrees of accuracy, but they tell us something non-trivial. And they facilitate the comparative analysis not merely of manuscript versions of the same story but of the internal equivalences that segmentation necessarily creates.

NOTES

¹Andersson, The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins, pp. 61-65; Andersson, The Icelandic Family Saga, pp. 3-30; Lönnroth, Njáls Saga, pp. 68-82; Byock, Feud, pp. 47-62; Clover, "Scene in Saga Composition," ANF 89 (1974) 57-83.

²Jonathan Culler, "Defining Narrative Units," Style and Structure in Literature, ed. Roger Fowler, p. 127.

³Review in Speculum 38 (1963) 328. (Actually Norman Blake's thirty-eight chapter edition and translation of Jómsvíkinga saga, the target of Hollander's criticism here, must be truer to the manuscript divisions than Hollander's own thirty-eight chapter translation of 1955, since Blake adds no chapters and evidently suppresses fewer than does his critic.)

⁴Allen, Fire and Iron, p. 66; Lönnroth, "Structural Divisions in the Njála Manuscripts," ANF 90 (1975) 79.

⁵Parkes, "The Influence of the Concepts of Ordinatio and Compilatio on the Development of the Book," Medieval Learning and Literature, ed. Alexander & Gibson, p. 135.

⁶Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," Style in Language, ed. Thomas Sebeok, p. 358.

⁷Editions: Jónsson (1916), Nordal and Jónsson (1938),

Reuschel (1957), Foote (1957); manuscripts: Perg. 4:0 nr 18 in the Royal Library, Stockholm (A) and AM 557 4to (B); translations: Quirk (1957) and Jones (1961). The treatment of chapter divisions varies in the different editions: Jónsson (1916) is a diplomatic edition which gives both the A ms. numbers (which go wrong because Ch. 5 is counted twice) and the conventional editorial chapter numbers; Nordal and Jónsson's IF edition reproduces all the chapter divisions of A (save 13) as paragraph indentations; Reuschel's paragraphing, which has an appearance similar to the last-mentioned, sometimes but not always reproduces the A ms. chapter divisions; the Foote edition adopts modern patterns of indentation so that chapter divisions become quite invisible.

^aSvarfdæla saga, on the other hand, never uses the phrase introductorily, though 22 of Njáls saga's 159 chapters begin with the same formula.

APPENDIX

Chapter Division	Edition		MS A		MS B		Translation	
	Ch	Words	Ch	Words	Ch	Words	Ch	Words
	1	130	1	180	1	820	1	1450
1			2	740				
2	2	690						
3	3	630	3	300	2	630		
4			4	340				
5	4	590	5	440	3	760	2	590
6			6	150				
7	5	1220	7	170			3	1220
8			8	1050	4	1050		
9	6	560	9	560	5	560	4	1810
10	7	680	10	680	6	680		
11	8	580	11	230	7	580		
12			12	120				
13			13	230				
14							5	970
15	9	960	14	540	8	960		
16			15	420				
17	10	770	16	550	9	530	6	770
18					10	240		
19			17	220				
20	11	1580	18	750	11	incomplete	7	1580
21			19	830				
22	12	1130	20	120			8	1130
23			21	360				
24			22	210				
25			23	430				
26	13	650	24	220			9	650
27			25	180				
28			26	250				

Average w/ch		770		390		680		1130