

Hamhleypur in *Þorskfirðinga saga*: a post-classical ironisation of myth?

Phil Cardew

School of Cultural Studies, King Alfred's College, Winchester¹

The notion of the *hamhleypa*, an individual able to change shape at will, is common enough within Icelandic saga narrative, particularly within fantastic narratives commonly classed as *fornaldarsögur*. These individuals hover on the fringes between the human and the non-human, possessing abilities which are beyond the reach of individuals who operate within the sphere of the natural, but appearing (at least at times) to also share the form of their human protagonists. They are found in narratives such as *Völsunga saga*; narratives which belong to the dim-and-distant past, a world in which the laws of nature – the nature of human life within the Middle Ages – are suspended. A world populated by dragons and trolls; former inhabitants of an earth since taken over by human kind.

The world in which the narrative of *Þorskfirðinga saga* is set is very much

¹ I would like to express my grateful thanks to *The British Academy for research in the Humanities* for their kind award of a travel grant in order that I might present this paper to the 11th International Saga Conference at the University of Sydney in July 2000.

the world of the Middle Ages, albeit the early Middle Ages. The events narrated in *Porskfirðinga saga* take place only just outside the historical period normally called the *söguöld*² A.D. 930-1030. The only reference in the saga to which any form of date may be attached is the statement at the end of chapter 15 that:

Ekki var þessi sætt í saksóknir, því at þessi tíðindi urðu fyrr en Úlfjótr flutti lög til Íslands út³

[This truce was not brought to court, because these events took place before [that time] when Úlfjótr brought the law out to Iceland.]

Although the dating of this event is not precise, Jón Jóhannesson suggests that in the *Konungsannáll Úlfjótr* is said to have arrived in Iceland in A.D. 927.⁴ This is enough to give us a context for the action of *Porskfirðinga saga*. It takes place before the establishment of the Alþingi, and, certainly, before Christianity reached Iceland. Yet it takes place after the semi-mythical world of pre-history in which the *fornaldarsögur* are set; this is the world of the *fortidssagaer*⁵ rather than that of the *oldtidssagaer*.⁶

In one way, the setting of the saga within an historical framework earlier than that normally found within the *Íslendinga sögur* allows the saga more freedom with respect to those supernatural and fantastic elements that form part of its narrative. However, this freedom in no way tinges the naturalistic narrative of events taking place within Iceland. Whilst there are no law courts in which the characters may engage in legal conflict, there is a scrupulous sense of fair play in the settlements that occur after the relevant characters have engaged in battle. A sense of fair play which, moreover, operated within the same constraints as the overtly legal settlements of other, more classical, sagas. As an example, after the first conflict involving Þórir, upon his return to Iceland, when Þórir, Hallsteinn and Hallr have fought a hard battle it is said that:

Hallr bauð þá sættir, ok kom því svá, at hann seldi Hallsteini sjálfðæmi fyrir víg Þórarins. En hann gerði tvau hundruð silfrs; en menn þeir, er fellu við Búlká, skyldu koma fyrir tilfór. En sá, er Þórir vá á Vaðilseyri, var fé bætrr, ok kom þar fyrir Uppsaland, ok skyldi allt ógert, ef Hallr heldi eigi sættina. Fór Hallr við þetta heim ok undi illa við.⁷

[Hallr then offered terms of reconciliation, and arranged things in such a way that he granted to Hallsteinn the right of self-judgement for the killing of Þórarinn, and he fixed the compensation amount at the silver equivalent of two long-hundred ells [of wadmal];

² Age of the sagas.

³ *Porskfirðinga saga*, p.214.

⁴ Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, translated by Haraldur Bessason as *A history of the old Icelandic commonwealth* (Winnipeg, 1974), p.40.

⁵ In Icelandic the *fortidarsögur*. The phrase is coined, in Danish, by Sigurður Nordal in "Sagalitteraturen", *Litteratur-historie B: Norge og Island* (Stockholm, Oslo, Copenhagen, 1953) pp.180-273. See the discussion of Nordal's generic groups in chapter 1, above.

⁶ In Icelandic, *forneskjusögur*.

⁷ *Porskfirðinga saga*, p.195.

but those men who fell by the Búlk river were to make up for the attack. But the one whom Þórir killed at Vaðilseyrr, was compensated for with wergild, and for that the land at Uppsálar served as equivalent, and everything would be null and void, if Hallr did not keep the agreement. Hallr went home at that, and was profoundly displeased.]

This settlement, which is entirely typical of the way disputes are arbitrated in the saga, bears all the marks of one arrived at through legal proceedings. The estimation of the value of an individual's death, the granting of *sjálfðæmi* to an aggrieved party, the waiving of compensation because of ambush, or unprovoked attack, and the granting of land as well as money in compensation, are all elements found frequently in other sagas. Another common feature is the dissatisfaction of one side with the settlement, providing an excuse for the disagreement to be re-kindled when the opportunity next arises.

However, the narrative of the saga, whilst dealing in the main part with a fairly natural dispute revolving around land, family loyalty and the control of temple tolls, contains elements which might, at the very least, be considered unusual within a naturalistic setting. Characters travel abroad and meet mound-dwellers and dragons and, within Iceland itself, there are occasional moments of magic and the supernatural, involving shape changing and sorcery. It is the differentiation between these two settings – Iceland and abroad – and the representation of the fantastic within those two settings that is of central interest to this paper.

The main *útanferð* episode within *Þorskfirðinga saga* occurs in chapters three to six, where Þórir Oddsson and his *fóstbræðra* travel abroad in search of fame and fortune. Events narrated within these chapters provide, for many scholars, the most important features of the saga, providing, as they do, links with the 'Bear's son' type of the folktale and thence with the Old English poem *Beowulf*. Such features as can be shown to be held in common between *Þorskfirðinga saga* and the 'Bear's son' type of the folktale are associated more with Beowulf's descent into the *mere*⁸ to fight Grendel's mother (*Beowulf*, ll.1492-1643)⁹ than with his fight with the dragon at the end of the poem (*Beowulf*, ll. 2460-2751),¹⁰ despite the nature of the adversaries in *Þorskfirðinga saga*.

The *útanferð* narrative of *Þorskfirðinga saga* differs significantly from characteristic representations of the 'Bear's son' tale, particularly as identified by Friedrich Panzer.¹¹ Þórir is not alone in his quest, and is not chasing after a monster that he has already wounded, as the classic 'Bear's son' scenario would demand. The 'demons' he encounters are, in this case, dragons, who have done little harm to humanity, and are content to sit guarding their hoard in a remote

⁸ i.e. "lake".

⁹ Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd. ed. (Boston, 1950), pp. 56-61.

¹⁰ *Beowulf*, pp.92-103.

¹¹ Friedrich Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagen Geschichte I. Beowulf* (Munich, 1910).

place, away from human habitation.¹² Þórir is guided in his quest by a third party, in the form of Agnarr, the mound-dweller who claims to be his paternal uncle, and it is through Agnarr's agency that he is able to gain the treasure that the dragons are guarding. Agnarr is responsible for the light which enables the companions to find their way through the cave, and which puts the dragons to sleep when it shines upon them, at the same time making the swords apparent to Þórir and his companions. Þórir's companions do not abandon him; those who are with him stay in the cave as long as he does, while those who await him above engage the dragon that flies out of the cave, wounding it with a spear. One of them receives a mortal wound from the blood that gushes from that wound, and the other is severely incapacitated in his foot, so that he is unable to give any assistance to his companions below. Þórir restores him to health with the gloves Agnarr gave him, on his return.

All the changes made in *Þorskfirðinga saga* to Panzer's model tend to have an effect of making the expedition more practical and believable. Þórir and his companions do not dive into a lake or engage their adversaries at its bottom, but climb through a waterfall into a cave behind it. They make elaborate plans in order to accomplish this endeavour which are scrupulous in their practicality in taking account of how the difficult terrain to be overcome. We do not witness a venture in which there is one superhuman hero with loyal followers who allow him to take all the risks and accomplish all the heroic feats. It is true that Þórir is more accomplished than his companions; however, many of them accompany him, and all join him in stabbing the dragons; this is a joint venture with a leader, not the act of a single hero. Þórir's prowess is particularly evident, for he is the only one athletic enough to make the return journey unaided. However, he makes this journey lightly-clad, and drags the treasure and his companions up after him, having left people below who can tie the treasure onto the rope for him.

Þorskfirðinga saga seems to have attached great importance to making an unlikely tale plausible and believable. In this respect the narrative follows the path suggested by Vladimir Propp, in his comparison of the treatment of reality in folklore and literature.¹³

In literature, the unusual is depicted as something possible and arouses emotions of horror, rapture, and amazement; we are ready to believe in the events described. In folk prose, the unusual acquires dimensions impossible in life.¹⁴

Admittedly, the dragons that Þórir and his companions encounter are not part of the everyday, realistic, world. However, everything has been done to provide a

¹² In this respect they are far more like the dragon in *Beowulf*, before it is angered by the theft of part of its hoard and turns on humanity in vengeance for this action.

¹³ Propp, Vladimir, trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin, ed. Anatoly Liberman, *Theory and history of folklore* (Manchester, 1984), esp. pp.16-38.

¹⁴ Vladimir Propp, *op. cit.*, p.19.

logical train of events despite the fantastic nature of the monsters encountered. The dragons must be overcome in order for Þórir and his companions to get hold of the treasure; the existence of the treasure has been revealed to Þórir by a third party, Agnarr, who is thus protecting his own hoard of wealth; Þórir has become aware of that hoard of wealth through seeing a strange light in the sky following a fishing trip; Þórir and his companions are engaging in fishing in order to gain some wealth during their trip abroad; Þórir and his companions travelled abroad in search of wealth and adventure. Despite the improbability of the actions undertaken, the logical cause and effect that moves the companions from one scenario to another is ordinary and practical. They react to the circumstances that confront them as the story advances, and behave as we would expect them so to do.

This sense of logicity within the narrative of even the most improbable event within the saga may well have to do with the nature of the characters involved. If we were to use the theory of modes as adapted from Northrop Frye by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards,¹⁵ it would be possible to state that the fundamental difference between the heroic characters of *Völsunga saga* and Þórir is that they function somewhere between the ‘romance’ and ‘myth’ modes of narrative whereas Þórir is placed firmly within the ‘high mimetic’ mode during the *útanferð* episode, slipping back into the ‘low mimetic’ mode only after he returns to Iceland.¹⁶ Þórir is completely human, and therefore requires the assistance of a non-human agency (in the form of Agnarr) in order to confront and overcome the fantastic monsters which he encounters in the cave of Valr the viking.

Þórir’s basic humanity is important as he is, in the words of R.W. Chambers,¹⁷ ‘a historical character; he was one of the early settlers of Iceland’. Chambers’ only authority for this statement is *Landnámabók*, which includes Þórir Oddsson amongst those settlers whose land claims it lists. In terms of the current discussion, it might be less problematic to say that Þórir is presented to

¹⁵ Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary fiction in Medieval Iceland* (Reykjavík, 1971).

¹⁶ This, in itself, provides a useful contrast between the nature of the *útanferð* and Icelandic section of the saga’s narrative. The shift from one to another is, in terms of the rôle of the central character, modal, and illustrates the effects of the combination of narratives from different modal perspectives (we will not, at this stage, go as far as to say genres). This may well be the cause of such explicatory lines within the *útanferð* episode as: “{THORN]eir fundu, at Þórir var allr maðr annarr en hann hafði verit’[They found that Þórir was altogether a different person from what he had been] (Porsfirðinga saga, p.187). That Þórir is “altogether different’ is not obviously explained by the narrative that has led the audience to this point within the saga. Some explanation is therefore required as to why Þórir has moved onto a different level; the explanation for this is that the narrative has shifted modes.

¹⁷ R.W. Chambers, *Beowulf: an introduction to the study of the poem with a discussion of the stories of Offa and Finn*, third edition, with a supplement by C.L. Wrenn (Cambridge, 1959, rpt. 1963), p.459.

us as an historical person by his inclusion within *Landnámabók*.

The *útanferð* incident is also of importance to us, here, because of the nature of the dragons from whom Þórir and his companions take the treasure. These, as the narrative of *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar* makes clear, were once humans - the viking, Valr and his sons, Köttr and Kisi who, in order to escape capture, fled to the cave with their treasure and turned themselves into dragons.

Valr var í ferð með þeim. Hann greip upp gullkistur tvær. Þær váru svá þungar, at tveir menn höfðu nóg at bera þær. Oddr hljóp eftir honum, en er þeir kómu at fossinum, steypiti Valr sér ofan í hann, ok skildi svá með þeim.

Þá komu þeir at Köttr ok Kisi, Gaukr ok Haukr, ok sem þeir kómu at fossinum, þa greip Köttr Hauk, en Kisi Gauk, ok steiptust með þá ofan í fossinn ok drápu þá báða. Hellir stórr var undir fossinum, ok köfuðu þeir feðgar þangat ok lögðust á gullit ok urðu at flugdrekum ok höfðu hjálma á höfðum, en sverð undir bæglum, ok lágu þeir þar, til þess at Gull-Þórir vann fossinn.¹⁸

[Valr was travelling with them (Köttr and Kisi). He took up two gold-chests. They were so heavy that two men would have had enough (to do) to carry them. Oddr ran after him, and when they came to the waterfall Valr threw himself down into it, and so they parted.]

Then Köttr and Kisi, Gaukr and Haukr approached, and when they came to the waterfall, Köttr grabbed Haukr, and Kisi Gaukr, and fell down with them into the waterfall and killed them both (Gaukr and Haukr). There was a large cave was behind the waterfall and father and sons swam thither and laid themselves on the gold and became flying dragons and had helmets on their heads and swords under their wing-pits, and they lay there until that time when Gull-Þórir overcame the waterfall.]

This form of shape-changing is quite in keeping with our perception of the presentation of the fantastic within a mythic environment. It is very much not in keeping with our perception of Þórir as a *landnámsmaður*. Indeed, the narrative of *Þorskfirðinga saga* displays a similar ambivalence of attitude in its portrayal of similar events within the portion of the saga set in Iceland. The setting of the saga in a pre-Christian society allows for a relative degree of freedom in the practice of what might be considered witchcraft in the saga. Its use is not frowned upon in the same way as it is, say, in *Laxdæla saga*, and its practitioners are not instantly executed. Indeed, there are individuals on both sides who use supernatural forces for their own ends, and for the most part it is only those not on Þórir's side who suffer for it.

Indeed, those instances of the use of some special, supernatural, skill form the only instances of fantastic events occurring within the Icelandic part of the saga. These events are interesting in their mixture of supernatural and naturalistic settings, and in their indication of the possession of strange powers by seemingly ordinary people.

In chapter 10, after the murder of Már Hallvarðsson, the first member of the *föstbræðralag* to die within Iceland, Þórir and some of his *föstbræðr* trap one of

¹⁸ *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, pp. 284-5.

the murderers in his house, setting a fire against the door.

... ok er fallin váru flest húsin ok menn gengu út, þeir er grið váru gefin, sá þeir Þórir, at svín tvau hlupu eins vegar frá húsunum, gyltr ok gríss. Þórir þreif einn rapt ór eldinum ok skaut logbrandinum á lær galtanum, ok brotnuðu báðir lærleggirnir, ok fell hann þegar; en er Þórir kom at, sá hann at þar var Askmaðr. Gekk Þórir af honum dauðum, en gyltrin hljóp í skóg, ok var þat Katla.¹⁹

[... and when most of the buildings had collapsed, and those who had been given quarter came out, Þórir and his companions saw two pigs running from the buildings on one side, a young sow and a hog. Þórir caught up one rafter from the fire, and threw the lighted brand at the thigh of the hog, and both the thigh bones broke, and he fell immediately; and when Þórir came there he saw that it was Askmaðr. Þórir left him dead, but the sow ran into a wood, and it was Katla.]

This is not the only occurrence of shape-changing in the saga. In chapter 14, Þórir comes across two women playing a game of *hnettafl*;²⁰ one is said to be the daughter of Varði from Vörðufell, an ogress, and the other Kerling, the daughter of Styrkárr in Barmr, a *hamhleypa*, or shape-changing witch. Furthermore, in chapter 17, an incident occurs when Styrkárr and Kerling are attacking Þórir at his home which, if not explicitly an act of shape-changing, certainly contains echoes of the incident quoted above.

Þau gengu frá skipi ofanverða nótt, ok gekk Kerling fyrst í virkit, því at þegar spratt lássinn fyrir henni, er hon kom at; ok er hon kom í virkit, hljóp at henni gyltr mikil ok svá hart í fang henni, at hon fór öfug út af virkinu, ok í því hljóp upp Þuríðr drikinn ok bað Þóri vápnast, segir, at ófriðr var kominn at bænum.²¹

[They went from the ship towards the end of the night and Kerling went into the stronghold first because the lock sprang open at once before her, as she approached; and when she came into the stronghold, a huge young sow rushed at her, and so hard into her arms that she went backwards out of the stronghold, and then Þuríðr drikkin ran up and asked Þórir to get armed, saying that war had come to the farm.]

Even if one does not connect the young sow with Þuríðr drikkin, a connection which has been thought to have some validity,²² the image of a young sow running out of a besieged house clearly reminds the reader/listener of the earlier incident. That the reference is made obliquely is interesting, suggesting a certain amount of caution in the narrative when dealing with unusual or potentially supernatural events; a caution which might seem somewhat out of place within the fantastic world of the *fornaldarsögur*, but which is very apt within the realistic world of the *Íslendinga sögur*.

Most striking about both these references to shape-changing is that the

¹⁹ *Þorskfirðinga saga*, p.200 - 201.

²⁰ A game of strategy, not unlike chess.

²¹ *Þorskfirðinga saga*, p.216.

²² Notably by Inger M. Boberg, in her *Motif-index of early Icelandic literature*, (Copenhagen, 1966) who refers to chapter 17 of *Þorskfirðinga saga* under the heading of "D630: Transformation at will".

people who transform themselves do so into domestic animals, which seem to have little in the way of heroic connections. H.E. Ellis Davidson,²³ in a study which deals chiefly with the transformation of individuals into bears and wolves, comments on such incidents that:

Sometimes men and women take the shape of pigs, but such episodes are of a different nature from those concerned with wolves and bears. [...] In the saga stories, the change into a boar or pig is generally used as a means of disguise to avoid attack by enemies [...]. Such stories are of a more conventional kind, and have not the convincing force of the tales of shape-changing [into wolves and bears]. These supernatural instances might, therefore, be deemed more domestic than heroic, and actually be seen to undermine the potential symbolic force they might, otherwise, possess.

Chapter 17 contains three other references to supernatural events, all connected with Kerling Styrkársdóttir, the *hamhleypa* of chapter 14. On the way over to the encounter discussed above, she hides the attackers' ship with a *huliðshjálmr* [concealment-helmet] so that they cannot be seen crossing the fjord. Then, at the beginning of the attack, Þórir and his men have the worst of it "því at vápn þeira bitu ekki"²⁴, until Þuríðr drikkin notices Kerling behaving strangely:

... Kerling fór um völlin at húsbaki ok hafði klæðin á baki sér uppi, en niðri höfuðit, ok sá svá sk[yacute]in á milli fóta sér.²⁵ Þuríðr hljóp þa út af virkinu ok rann á hana ok þreif í hárit ok reif af aprt hnakkafilluna. ... ok í því tók at bíta vápn Þóris, ok urðu þá mjök skeinusamir.²⁶

[... Kerling was going across the field at the back of the house, and had the clothes on her back [pulled] up, and her head down, and was thus looking at the clouds between her legs. Þuríðr then rushed out of the stronghold and leapt upon her and seized hold of her hair and ripped it off at the nape of the neck, backwards. ... and at this [point] Þórir's weapon began to bite, and they [Hallr's men] became highly prone to being wounded.]

This last account, like that of the pig knocking Kerling down, is, in a somewhat morbid sense, rather comical. Although the effect of Kerling's actions is serious (rendering the weapons of her opponents little more than useless) the method

²³ H.R. Ellis Davidson, "Shape-changing in the Old Norse sagas" in Porter, J.R. and W.M.S. Russell, *Animals in folklore* (Ipswich and Cambridge, 1978), pp.126-142.

²⁴ Because their weapons did not cut

²⁵ There is an interesting comparison with this ritual to be found in chapter 10 of *Kormáks saga*, wherein the description for the *hólmganga* between Kormákr and Bersi includes the following: "þat váru hólmgöngulög, at feldr skal vera fimm alna i skaut ok lykkjur í hornum; skyldi þar setja niðr hæla þá, er höfuð var á öðrum enda; þat hétu tjösnur; sá er um bjó, skyldi ganga at tjösnunum, svá at sæi himin milli fóta sér ok heldi í eyrasnepla með þeim formála, sem síðan er eptir hafðr í blótr því, at kallat er tjösnuþlót." [It was the law of *hólmganga*, that (the) the cloak should be five ells square and (have) loops in (the) corners; therein should be driven pegs of the kind that had a head at one end; they were called *tjösnur*; the one who made these preparations should go towards the *tjösnur*, so that (he) could see the sky between his legs and hold onto (his) earlobes with the invocation, that has since been used again in the sacrifice which is called *tjösnuþlót*]. (*Kormáks saga*, in Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Vatnsdæla saga* [Reykjavík, 1939], p.237).

²⁶ *Þorskfirðinga saga*, pp. 216-7.

she employs to carry out her spell (if that is what it is) exposes her to ridicule. The punishment she receives²⁷ is cruel and startling, but, considered in relation to the types of death and mutilation that are common in saga narrative, not surprising. It also functions well in retaining a shocking sense of reality within the context of the chapter. These may be characters with strange powers, but they are human underneath it all.

The last reference to shape-changing within the saga is more typical of the kind of imagery we would associate with a mythic, or heroic, tale, and draws both the Icelandic and *útanferð* elements together around the gold that Þórir takes from Valr's cave at the beginning of the saga. References have been made in earlier chapters to Þórir going into a berserk rage, which has links with the idea of shape-changing; at the end of the saga his reaction to the (mis-)reported death of his son is:

at hann hvarf á brott frá búi sínu, ok vissi engi maðr, hvat af honum væri orðit eðr hann kom niðr, en þat hafa menn fyrir satt, at hann hafi at dreka orðit ok hafi lagizt á gullkistur sínar. Helzt þat ok lengi síðan, at menn sá dreka fljúga ofan um þeim megin frá Þórisstöðum ok Gullfors er kallaðr ok yfir fjörðinn í fjall þat, er stendr yfir bænum í Hlíð...²⁸

[that he disappeared from his farm, and no one knew what had become of him or [where] he ended up, but people hold it to be true that he became a dragon and lay down on his gold-filled coffers. It went on happening for a long time afterwards that people saw a dragon flying downwards on the side of Þórisstaðir that is called Gullfors, and across the fjord into the mountain which stands over the farm at Hlíð.]

This section of the saga brings the narrative (at least as far as the gold is concerned) full circle. Yet that circle is not complete from a generic viewpoint. Whilst at the beginning of the saga the narrative is matter-of-fact about strange events (magical storms, dreams involving conversations with the undead, wonderful gifts, dragons and the like), at the end the style is more circumspect, leading to the suggestion that the events being related are open to question. “[Þ]at hafa menn fyrir satt” that Þórir turned into a dragon, and it is only “menn” in general, rather than named individuals who see a dragon flying about the neighbourhood

The relatively matter-of-fact use of supernatural forces within the main body of the story further illustrates the mingling of fantastic and naturalistic narrative within the saga as a whole. However, the individuals who move between the supernatural and the natural are still presented as human in aspect. Þuríðr drikkin “var mörgu slegin ok gerði manna mun mikinn”²⁹, and Kerling

²⁷ And the revenge she metes out to Þuríðr, who loses her ears and the topmost parts of her cheeks

²⁸ *Þorskfirðinga saga*, p.226.

²⁹ “was touchy and had strong likes and dislikes.” *Þorskfirðinga saga*, p.177

is only “heldr margkunnig”³⁰. Other individuals are not presented as strange in any way, until such time as they manifest themselves as pigs, for example, or are discovered to have undead uncles occupying cairns. The other world is very much a part of everyday life, and is essentially human.

This movement towards the naturalisation of mythic narrative elements in the section of the saga taking place on Icelandic soil, would seem to fit very well with a conceptualisation of that part of the narrative, and the characters within it, as ordinary human beings - albeit from a relatively archaic society. This is not the world of the *fornaldarsögur*, where dragons and trolls are taken as a matter of fact. This is a world where too much cannot be asked of the imagination, a world of reality.

Why, then, the dragons of the *útanferð* episode? One possibility - one accepted by the editors of the *Íslensk fornrit* edition - is that an older narrative concerning Þórir Oddsson and Oddr *skrauti* existed prior to the relatively late transcription of the saga narrative that we now have. If this is the case then it would certainly explain allusions to Þórir’s marvellous adventures within *Landnámabók* which are evidential of the narrative being in circulation prior to transcription of AM 561 4to which is generally dated to somewhere around 1400. This older version may well have presented a narrative which only dealt with the *útanferð* episode, but such a theory is, at best, speculative.

The inclusion of narrative elements which reflect an interest in the fantastic is, of course, not uncommon in the later *Íslendinga sögur*, the *fornaldarsögur* and some *riddara sögur* and thus *Þorskfirðinga saga* reflects a general tendency criticised by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson concerning the degeneration of the saga form due, as he saw it, to its, increasingly, uncritical inclusion of material of a fabulous nature.

... the country was now deluged with chivalric romances, whose falsehoods were added to the wonders of the legends and native superstition. Gradually all things dulled men’s judgement. Norway became more and more Europeanized, and holy relics from the South were everywhere. ... And the closer grew the connection between Iceland and Norway, the less independent of the international way of thinking the Icelanders became.³¹

However, *Þorskfirðinga saga* only displays this lack of judgement, as Einar Ólafur has it, in that section of the saga which takes place outside Iceland. Once the narrative returns home, as it were, the narration of shape-changing, magic events, and the like, becomes far more circumspect, a circumspection that is summed up by the second-hand reporting of Þórir’s transformation into a dragon at the end of the saga. Furthermore those supernatural events which are narrated as taking place within Iceland are placed firmly in the hands of humans, rather than fantastic monsters or being beyond the pale of humanity. In

³⁰ i.e. “rather skilled in magic.” *Þorskfirðinga saga*, p.176

³¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The age of the Sturlungs. Icelandic civilisation in the thirteenth century*, trans. Jóhann S. Hannesson (Ithaca, N.Y., 1953), pp.124-125.

some respects these events undermine the heroic atmosphere created by the *útanferð* section of the saga, with the transformation of men into pigs, for example, adding a touch of domesticity to an otherwise fantastic event. This could indicate a sense of irony at times in the saga's narrative; an ironic sense which refuses to take aspects of the saga's own narrative too seriously.

It is this ironic treatment of the supernatural within an Icelandic setting which is of the most interest. It shows a narrative form which, whilst wishing to develop its subject matter into the realm of the fantastic does so in such a way as to avoid the very accusations levelled at it by Einar. The events narrated are unbelievable, therefore they are naturalised, placed within an everyday setting and given a sense of internal logic. It is this sense of internal logic and narrative development which, more than anything, indicates a generic form which is not degenerating but experimenting, pushing at the boundaries of the traditional and becoming self-consciously literary.