

**Fantasy in *Njal's Saga*: History as Spectral Past
(Abstract)**

**Carolyn B. Anderson
(University of Wyoming)**

In this paper, I will draw on Derrida's notion of history as a textual past, which functions as a kind of specter in the present, to investigate the ways in which identities are fantasized, negotiated, and exchanged. The family saga is a representation of the past introjected as history of the self and community. It displays a melancholia for the loss of individual male power, which was increasingly destructive during the Sturlung Age to the point of causing the loss of Iceland as a separate state, which in turn is alluring because that same violent masculinity made the participants worthy of representation, which was itself a doomed attempt to recuperate the loss inherent in violence and masculinity. For example, the text raises the issue of laws and nationhood when Njáll asks whether Iceland will be built with laws or destroyed, and Gunnar wistfully asks, 'I wish I knew whether I am any the less manly than other men, for being so much more reluctant to kill than other men are' (*'Hvat ek veit', segir Gunnarr, 'hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en þórum mönnum at vega menn', Njal's Saga ch. 54*). Certainly, the political change of the 1260's is an opportunity for some, and a loss for others. The Family Sagas become one of the chief ways of narrating the shift to this new present reality, and, as with all conjurations of the past, the 'readability of a legacy is <not> a given...' because the specter of the past is always '...hospitable...but also never free of anxiety...' (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 108).

The past is a place to mourn the loss of power now, and we see repeated instabilities in the view of the past, signaling melancholic ambivalence. The family sagas differentiate repeatedly between the pagan and the Conversion, focusing on the law, on the foreign, on exotic women, on the presence of omens, dreams, and fetches. This desire to create boundaries can be read as a reflex of projecting onto the past, onto the other, all that is otherwise lost in the present. In many family sagas, Christians revert to pagan practices, fetches appear, dreams and violence repeat. Whether these are real is irrelevant: the incidence of repetition and return to the past is explicable in terms of the desire for the presence, in the text at least, of the socially absent and lost contemporary power. The pagan supernatural element, and the uncanny dreams and spectacles, which are otherwise critically embarrassing to those who want to make the sagas historical, can be read in the light of this melancholic representation as a connection to the realm of the Imaginary lost Ideal. It is a return in the present of the text to an invented past, a medieval identity of their own, but one that is a specter.