

The Treatment of the Supernatural and the Fantastic in Different Saga Genres

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The distinction between the supernatural and the fantastic

Both the supernatural and the fantastic are found in all saga genres, to a greater or lesser extent. I have chosen to discuss both the supernatural and the fantastic as phenomena opposed to the real or natural. One reason for this is that the two categories are not clearly divided, and the first subject matter I want to comment upon is the problematic division between the supernatural and the fantastic in saga literature.

The supernatural deals, according to the standard definitions in dictionaries, with beings and phenomena that are not subject to natural laws. The fantastic, on the other hand, deals with beings and phenomena that do not belong to the real, experienced world, but rather to imagination and fantasy. This distinction may be clear in principle, but not always in practice, and in fact the supernatural is often included in the fantastic, at least partly, as the word is used, for instance in the phrase 'fantastic literature'. Regarding saga literature, however, we should firstly maintain that the line of demarcation between the supernatural and the fantastic is important in principle because the supernatural and the fantastic have different relations to truth; secondly, this line of demarcation is fuzzy because what was regarded as truth would be dependent on many different factors.

It may, for instance, be difficult to decide whether trolls or giants should be regarded as supernatural beings or fantastic beings. The attitude towards such beings, or the belief in them, may be decisive. Trolls or giants belonging to, or derived from, the mythic world should perhaps be regarded as supernatural beings, while the fairy-tale type fits into the fantastic world. Other examples of beings which probably could be counted among both supernatural and fantastic beings are the dragons. There can be little doubt that dragons found in the legends of the Church (in *heilagra manna sögur*) are supernatural beings since they are representations of the Devil. The dragon which Björn hitdælakappi has to fight in *Bjarnar saga* (ch. 5) is, on the other hand, more of the fairy-tale type and belongs to the fantastic world. In the *fornaldarsögur* it may be difficult to decide whether dragons should be regarded as supernatural or fantastic beings. The dragon Fáfnir in *Völsunga saga* is a man who has become a dragon after shifting shape and could perhaps also be regarded as a supernatural being, but the majority of the dragons within this genre belong to a fantastic world where the heroes fight dragons and trolls in the periphery of the human world. On the basis of the dragon motif alone it is, however, very difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the supernatural dragon and the fantastic dragon.

In other cases it may be easier to label a motif as fantastic. The story about the creature with only one leg, the *einfættingr*, in *Eiríks saga rauða* (ch.12), for instance, is probably a figment of imagination placed in the periphery of the world (in Vinland) without any basis in Old Norse beliefs. Talking animals or birds seem also to belong to the fantastic. There are, however, also animals found in so-called realistic literature which come close to these fantastic creatures, for instance the dog Saur, in *Hákonar*

saga góða in *Heimskringla*, which the people of Trøndelag chose for their king. By means of sorcery they had put into the dog the understanding of three men, and the dog barked twice but spoke every third word. The fact that this fantastic dog is embedded in a realistic saga and is the result of magic, in which people believed, makes the borderline between the supernatural and the fantastic very blurred.

Magic objects of many kinds are also found in different saga genres, and it is again difficult to say whether these objects should be related to the supernatural or to the fantastic. Magic weapons and armour, for instance weapons that will kill every time they are used, and shirts which make the men who have them on invulnerable, are motifs which occur both in the realistic sagas of Icelanders and in the non-realistic *foraldarsögur*. The number of motifs with magic objects is, however much higher in the *foraldarsögur* than in the sagas of Icelanders, and there are more different motifs of this kind in the *foraldarsögur* – and especially in the Icelandic indigenous *riddarasögur*. In the sagas of Icelanders most magic objects belong to one of two types, magic weapons and magic clothes. In the *foraldarsögur* and the Icelandic indigenous *riddarasögur* we find a greater variety of magic objects: drinks which cause oblivion, strength or love, magic stones with powers of different kinds, objects which render a person invisible, flying carpets and many other fantastic things.¹ If we use credibility as a criterion to distinguish between the supernatural and the fantastic we see again that there is no sharp line of demarcation between the two; with regard to frequency, form of motifs and credibility there are gradual transitions between the supernatural and the fantastic.

One would perhaps think that shape-shifting belonged entirely to the fantastic world, but that is not so. The total transformation where the human body disappears and is transformed into an animal of some kind, or into the shape of another person, is probably not found within a frame of believable literature, but closely related motifs are found in realistic as well as non-realistic saga literature. The ability to take on the shape of an animal was seen as sorcery. A good example of this motif in a saga of Icelanders is found in *Kormáks saga* ch. 18 where Kormákr injures a whale which turns up close to his ship. People thought this whale had the eyes of Þórveig, the saga says. This Þórveig, who was a well known sorceress, at the same time became ill, and died in bed as a result of the injury caused by Kormákr.

The belief that sorcerers and sorceresses were able to send their souls out of their bodies in the shape of an animal – or an object – to carry out a task was related to the Old Norse conceptions of *seiðr* and also to Saami religion. Again we can observe a gradual transition between fantastic motifs describing events which probably nobody would believe had actually taken place – at least not in their own time and within their own environment – and motifs describing events and phenomena which were deeply rooted in people's religious conceptions.

As we have seen, it is often difficult to distinguish between the supernatural and the fantastic on the basis of the literary form alone. There is sometimes a tendency to make motifs which occur both in realistic saga genres and non-realistic saga genres more fantastic or exotic in the non-realistic texts. Good examples of this can be found in the descriptions of magic objects which really are more fantastic in the *foraldarsögur* and the indigenous *riddarasögur* than in the sagas of Icelanders. There

¹ A survey of magic objects can be found in Boberg, 1966, 60–93.

is also a tendency in the realistic saga literature to focus more on the sorcery which provided the magic objects with magic power than is the case in non-realistic literature. In the non-realistic literature magic objects are intrinsically magic, and no explanation is needed. In the shape-shifting motif in *Kormáks saga* just mentioned we can also observe a tendency in realistic saga literature to anchor such motifs in what people believed. *Þóttusk menn þar kenna augu Þórveigar, and ok er þat sogn manna, at hon hafi af því dait*, the saga says.

It also seems that the framework within which a motif is embedded, for instance the genre, will often signal whether a story is introduced as something which should be believed in or not, or whether it should be regarded as supernatural or fantastic. A motif will in other words be interpreted and understood in the light of the context. This means that some rather fantastic motifs, as for example the dead speaking from the grave (*Njáls saga* ch. 78) probably were more easily regarded as truth in the sagas of Icelanders than in a *fornaldarsaga*.

The *belief* that certain beings really existed, even though few, if any, people had seen them, and that strange things caused by magic or sorcery could happen is, as I see it, the main criterion for distinguishing between the supernatural and the fantastic. However, there is no sharp division between the believable and the unbelievable. It has often been argued that the fantastic – and what I have labelled as supernatural is then often included – needs distance in space or time or both. It is no doubt true that fantastic – and supernatural – elements are much more frequent in texts which tell about events that happened long ago and far away than in stories from the author's own time and environment. The explanation for this, that people were more willing to believe that strange things could happen in the distant past and in foreign countries than in their own time and milieu, may be true – to some extent.

But there may also be other factors which contribute to the difference between the sagas of Icelanders on the one hand with a frequent use of motifs including the supernatural – even though there are great differences within the genre – and sagas of kings and contemporary sagas (*Sturlunga saga*) on the other hand with few such motifs. One such factor may be that the causal connections are more emphasized in the sagas of Icelanders than in the more chronicle-related saga genres, and the supernatural is in many cases used to explain what happens. Another factor may be that the sagas of Icelanders are more concerned about entertainment than are sagas of kings and contemporary sagas. The supernatural – and the fantastic – have no doubt a great potential for entertaining; and the supernatural, which is of most relevance for the sagas of Icelanders, brings a kind of mystery and excitement into the story. The more frequent use of the supernatural – and to some extent even of the fantastic – in sagas of Icelanders than in other realistic saga genres is probably not only a question of a more uncritical attitude concerning events in the past; it may also have something to do with genre and literary function, and the fact that the supernatural does not often occur in contemporary sagas is not only the result of a more critical attitude concerning the present and the recent past. If *belief* were only a question of enough distance in space and time, the division between the supernatural and the fantastic would also be reduced to a question of distance; more and more of the fantastic (the unbelievable) would be transferred to the supernatural (the believable) with growing distance in space and time. When the line of demarcation between the two categories

seems to be more or less wiped out in modern literature characterized as 'fantastic literature' or 'magic realism', this may have something to do with belief becoming less important in modern society. So far as the Middle Ages were concerned, however, the belief in supernatural beings and phenomena was important, and therefore so was the distinction between the supernatural and the fantastic.

Sagas and magic realism

Even though there are sagas of Icelanders where supernatural elements are rare, the supernatural plays a great part in many of these sagas. As Margaret Clunies Ross pointed out in the conclusion of *Prolonged Echoes* vol. II (Clunies Ross, 1998,192) sagas of Icelanders and contemporary sagas are more modally mixed in their representation of the paranormal than many scholars have cared to admit. However, when the blend of realism and the supernatural has been seen as a problem, the reason is probably that the scholars – more or less unconsciously – have expected saga realism to share its most important features with the realism of modern times, and have forgotten to take the differences in culture into consideration.

In the Old Norse culture, the combination of the realistic and the supernatural was in a way a logical combination. The stories about the supernatural seem to share a very important feature with stories about realistic events: they are, in spite of their differences, believable. Supernatural beings, objects and events were not regarded as unreal, but they were real in a way different to beings and objects belonging to the normal world which everybody could see and experience. In the Old Norse world view the supernatural existed, and even though there was probably a certain amount of scepticism against placing some supernatural phenomena in the author's own time and environment – perhaps especially those which, more or less, overlapped with the fantastic – the realistic and the supernatural could therefore, in principle, easily be combined, much more easily than the realistic and the fantastic, and if we look at the realistic saga genres, it is obvious that the combination of the realistic and the supernatural is much more common than the combination of the realistic and the fantastic.

Realism which mirrored a society where the belief in the supernatural was important would have to include the supernatural in some way. The sagas of Icelanders have sometimes been characterized as idealized realism because of the idealized picture this literature gives of the time of settlement and the people from that period. The main characters of these stories are in some ways closer to the heroes of heroic literature than to ordinary people from everyday life, therefore heroic realism could also be used to label this style of art. However, when we take into account how important and how frequent the supernatural motifs are in many sagas of Icelanders, magic realism, a term which was applied in the 1960's to a very specific South American genre characterized by the blend of realism and fantasy, would also seem to be a well-founded choice of term to label the kind of realism found in the sagas of Icelanders. There are, however, some important differences.

A common aspect of magic realism is that the fantastic or supernatural elements are never explained. In saga literature they are often – but not always – explained, and the function – especially of supernatural elements – is to explain what happens.

Another common aspect of magic realism is that the readers are left uncertain whether to believe in the magical interpretation or not. In saga literature the belief in these elements is important regarding some genres. In realistic saga genres, and especially in the legends of the Church, there is a strong belief in the supernatural which is clearly expressed. It is this belief which makes the combination of realism and the supernatural unproblematic. A third difference is that in magic realism the lines of demarcation between what seems real and what seems unreal are wiped out. In the realism of the sagas, this line is clearly marked. In spite of the differences between the sagas of Icelanders and the modern literature which has been labelled magic realism, the comparison with magic realism may help us to see some traits in saga literature in a new light.

Drawing the line of demarcation between the supernatural and the fantastic

One should perhaps think that since the supernatural can be more easily accepted within the framework of a realistic story than the fantastic, the drawing of the demarcation line between the real and the supernatural would not be important. On the contrary, this borderline is very important.

The line of demarcation between the real and the supernatural is perhaps most important, and clearly marked, in the *heilagra manna sögur*. The reason for this is obvious. The miracles, or events that are not subject to natural laws, are proofs of God's power. To underline the supernatural character of the events which are described as miracles of the saints through whom God makes his power visible, is the main point of the miracles. However, when we look at the miracles we can observe that these stories vary widely over how they differ from a believable everyday story. Some miracles, for instance, tell about women who lose jewels in the grass or farmers who lose farm animals in the wilderness. They pray to a saint, and the lost objects are found. Other miracles of the same ordinary type tell about people who pray for good weather or for recovery from an illness – from which it is possible to be healed. The miracles of this type are miracles only because they are defined as such. Miracles of a more supernatural character tell about events for which there could be no natural explanation, for instance recovering from an illness for which there is no natural cure, a severed tongue which grows back when the saint, in a dream, touches it – not to mention people called back from the dead. The presence of the supernatural can also be emphasized by a vision of the saint in a dream. Yet another type of miracle comes close to the fantastic, for instance when wild animals gather around the saint to be blessed by him (*Blasius saga*) or in other ways get human traits.

The broad variety within the genre of miracles as regards the supernatural, which in fact includes both the natural and the fantastic, emphasizes, as stated earlier, that the definition – or the understanding – of the supernatural is partly dependent on the context or the genre. Both the natural and the fantastic can be presented as supernatural events in a context where the supernatural is expected.

In the sagas of Icelanders there are quite a lot of motifs in which the supernatural appears within the realistic frame. Sorcerers and their actions seem to be popular topics. Stories about bad weather or fog caused by sorcerers, their ability to send their soul out of their body on certain commissions, to cause accidents and bad

luck or sometimes the opposite – in short, to make strange things happen – are found in the majority of the sagas.

Supernatural beings are also frequently found in realistic saga literature. In many sagas we meet *fylgjur* in the shapes of animals. Such animals are external souls, a person's alter ego, and the shape of the animal reflects the character of its owner. Such *fylgjur* could be seen in a dream, by a few people who had the power to see supernatural beings, or by the person himself just before his death. Such animals act precisely in the same way as its owner will act in the near future, and the typical literary function is to foreshadow what is going to happen. Other *fylgjur* have the shape of a woman: such *fylgjur* are guardian spirits, especially for the head of the family. They can make themselves visible, and their appearance or disappearance is of fundamental importance for their owner's fortune or misfortune.

A supernatural being of a frightening type is *mara* or *trollriða*, who sits on the chest of sleeping people, or attacks people or animals in other ways. According to what people believed, such beings were actually sorceresses, and the conception is related to the idea of shape-shifting. A very good example of the belief in *trollriður* is found in *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 15, where Geirríör is accused of having nearly caused the death of the young man Gunnlaugr.

The living dead are supernatural figures who are found in different motifs. The recently dead man who is seen 'alive' in his grave mound is not a very common motif, but is found in *Njáls saga* (ch. 78) where Gunnarr is both heard and seen in his grave mound. A more common motif is the hero fighting someone who is long dead (the *haugbúi*) in the grave mound, to bring out gold and silver or other objects of great value. The dead people who return to the world of the living – or will not leave the world of the living – and roam about the farm or the whole district, terrorizing people and spreading fear or death, are in fact a rather common motif in the sagas of Icelanders; good examples of such motifs are found for instance in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*.

The supernatural phenomena and beings mentioned above are also found in other genres than sagas of Icelanders, both realistic and non-realistic; but some motifs are not found, or are very rare, in contemporary sagas. Concerning the frequency and importance of motifs that include the supernatural, the sagas of Icelanders are in fact closer to the *fornaldarsögur* than to contemporary sagas. Stories about sorcery are frequent in both these genres, and so are stories about *fylgjur* of the animal type. The fight between the hero and the *haugbúi* is a common motif in both genres, and the motif of the recently dead man returning to his grave mound, which is an uncommon one, is a motif that *Njáls saga* shares with heroic poetry (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*), which has much in common with the *fornaldarsögur*.

It is not always easy to see at first glance whether a certain motif is taken from one genre or the other. Besides the tendency of motifs in the *fornaldarsögur* to be more exotic or closer to the fantastic than the corresponding motifs in sagas of Icelanders, as already mentioned, an important difference between the genres is that there is a stronger tendency in the sagas of Icelanders than in the *fornaldarsögur* to emphasize the line of demarcation between the natural and the supernatural. The difference, however, is one of degree. The fact that some supernatural beings are only – or normally – seen in dreams, for instance *fylgjur* in the shape of an animal,

emphasizes their supernatural character. This is the same in the two genres. Supernatural beings that appear in dreams in realistic literature also appear in dreams in non-realistic literature, and supernatural beings that are often or normally visible, for instance the living dead, are so regardless of type of literature. However, the sagas of Icelanders will normally underline the idea that the supernatural is something unusual more strongly than the *fornaldarsögur*. When Njáll in *Njáls saga* hears that Gunnarr has been seen and heard in his grave mound, he has to be told three times before he believes it. This shocking effect which makes the action stop for a moment underlines the fact that the supernatural is something more than entertainment. The supernatural seems to be more frightening in the realistic than in the non-realistic saga genres, and the fearful and sinister atmosphere caused by the appearance of the supernatural contributes greatly to the emphasizing of the line of demarcation between the normal and the supernatural world.

In the *fornaldarsögur* fantastic motifs are much more common than in realistic saga literature. As opposed to the line of demarcation between the natural and the supernatural, the line of demarcation between the natural and the fantastic is not clearly marked. The hero can travel to the lands of trolls and he can use magic objects as if they were the most ordinary things. This light atmosphere and relaxed distance to the events in the stories are probably closely connected to the fact that these stories are primarily entertainment and not meant to be believed. When the line of demarcation between the natural and the supernatural is also less clearly drawn in the *fornaldarsögur* than in realistic saga literature, it should probably be seen as a function of the non-realistic character of the genre.

The mysterious Guðriðr in *Grænlandinga saga* – a case study

A special kind of marking the appearance of the supernatural found in connection with different beings or phenomena is the sound of a bang or a crack in the air. In *Njáls saga* (ch.125) a crack, *bröst mikinn*, is heard in the air at the appearance of a supernatural being, a man riding a grey horse in the sky, before Njáll and his family are burnt to death. A similar crack in the air is heard in *Grænlandinga saga* (ch. 7) at the same moment as a supernatural female being who has just arrived becomes invisible and disappears; and this happens at the same moment as the first *skrælingr* is killed. What actually happens in *Grænlandinga saga* ch. 7 is not clear, and has been interpreted in different ways. I will comment on this motif since it demonstrates how motifs in which the supernatural appears may offer a key to the interpretation of the text, how closely interwoven the realistic story and the supernatural occurrence are, and at the same time how the borderline between the two is clearly drawn.

Grænlandinga saga tells about Karlsefni's expedition to Vinland and the Greenlanders' meeting with the local people in the new world. Karlsefni's wife Guðriðr has just given birth to a son, and is sitting in the doorway to her house with her son's cradle. Suddenly a shadow appears in the doorway, and a small woman dressed in black enters. She is blond (*ljósjörp*), pale, and had big eyes. She goes to Guðriðr and asks her name, and Guðriðr tells her; and when Guðriðr asks this mysterious woman her name, she answers that she too is named Guðriðr. Guðriðr invites her to sit down beside her. But at the same moment that one of Karlsefni's men

kills a *skrælingr* who was after their weapons, Guðriðr hears a crack, and the mysterious woman who had just appeared as a shadow in the doorway has disappeared. Nobody other than Guðriðr has seen this woman. In the footnotes to this text in *Íslensk fornrit* it is said that the name Guðriðr for the mysterious woman must be a copying error, and that she is probably the ghost of an Old Norse woman. As I will interpret this text, the woman who appears from nowhere is Guðriðr's *ættarfylgja*, her family's guardian spirit, and the fact that she too is named Guðriðr underlines the family connections, and is no error. The *ættarfylgja* was usually the special protector of the head of the family – and in all the other cases which we know from the sources, she is the protector of a man. When this supernatural woman turns to Guðriðr, Guðriðr is in a way appointed head of the family, and this is in many ways consistent with the picture of her in the sources. When the Old Norse *ættarfylgja* appears in Vinland, we may have a parallel in *Víga-Glúms saga* where the *ættarfylgja* moves from Norway to Iceland to follow the Icelandic branch of the family, or we may have a parallel in *Þáttur Þiðranda ok Þórhalls* where the belief seems to be that a family could get new *ættarfylgjur* – in that particular text, Christian *ættarfylgjur* after Christianization. The settlement in the new world may have been regarded as a break in history which called for new *ættarfylgjur* from the new world. The mysterious woman who appears as a shadow in Guðriðr's doorway is blond and has a Nordic name, but she is small and has big eyes – the big eyes are used elsewhere in the text to characterize the people of the new world. She may be a new *ættarfylgja*, combining Nordic characteristics and characteristics of the people of the new land, who turns up to secure luck and happiness for the settlers; but the first killing of a *skrælingr* makes the settlement in the new world impossible, and the new *ættarfylgja* disappears with a crack in the air. In *Fóstbræðra saga* (ch. 23) such a crack is called *vábrestir* and is explained as a bad omen which foreshadows great events, but it also seems to be closely connected to the appearance – or disappearance – of supernatural beings or phenomena and is used to mark the crossing of the borderline between the natural and supernatural. In the story about the mysterious Guðriðr the line of demarcation towards the supernatural is, in contrast with magic realism, clearly marked, but in the story itself there is absolutely no explanation of the strange event. Perhaps the audience was supposed to understand, but it may also be that the author wanted to create an atmosphere of mystery in much the same way as an author writing within the genre of magic realism and leaving the audience uncertain as to what had happened and what to believe.

The fantastic and its function

There is not the same logical combination between realism and the fantastic as between realism and the supernatural; and the clearly fantastic motifs are not so frequent in realistic saga literature either, but they occur. There is, however, one field where the real and the fantastic touch in realistic saga literature, namely the exaggerations. Within realistic saga literature there is a limit to the heroes' brave deeds. When Gísli in *Gísla saga* in his last battle puts his intestines back in place, tightens his belt around his wounded belly and recites a perfect skaldic stanza before killing his last enemy, or when Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld at the battle at Stiklarstaðir pulls out the arrow in his own heart, leans back and says, 'Well has the king fed us, I

am fat still about the roots of my heart,' these stories are hardly believable. However, the authors of the sagas of Icelanders love to balance on the line between most unlikely and absolutely unbelievable. The fact that they push this line as far as they can contributes largely to the entertainment value of this literature.

The entertainment value that the fantastic – exaggerations included – has in the non-realistic literature, is probably also very important in realistic saga literature, and may explain why such elements are found in literature that presents itself as true stories. However, the demand for truthfulness may be characteristic of Old Norse saga literature in a certain period in the High Middle Ages. In the Late Middle Ages we can observe that saga literature became more modally mixed, genres merged into each other, and the fantastic became more easily included both in the youngest sagas of Icelanders and in the late interpolated sagas of kings. Not only in the late phase of the development of saga literature but also in some texts which are probably old, fantastic elements are found within a realistic frame. Björn hitðælakappi in *Bjarnar saga hitðælakappa*² fights a flying dragon, and the beginning of *Ágrip*, the Norwegian saga of kings from the late twelfth century, takes its point of departure in rather fantastic stories. As I have previously argued (Mundal, 2005, 50f) the explanation of modally mixed texts in the oldest phase of saga writing could be that the oral tradition was less divided into genre types than later written sagas. Fantastic elements in early sagas which generally lay claim to truthfulness could reflect an oral tradition performed by storytellers who were less preoccupied with truth than the later authors.

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² I have earlier argued that this saga is one of the oldest sagas of Icelanders (Mundal, 2000, 187–203).