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The problem of the literary
genre in post-classical
Íslendingasögur: some
observations on *Gull-Þóris
saga* and *Víglundar saga*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The scope of this work is to take into consideration two Icelandic sagas, namely *Víglundar saga* and *Gull-Þóriss saga*, which have been classified among the so called “Post-classical” sagas and, consequently, have either received less attention or badly judged by scholars dealing with this matter.

The problem which will be taken into consideration will be that of literary genres regarding sagas, which has been topic for debate for quite a long time. Different classifications have been proposed in the course of the years; however they were underlined by a qualitative judgment, influenced by the first studies made about sagas in the 19th century, which aimed at finding a national literature for Iceland which could be compared to those in Europe. These studies, even if outdated, had a strong influence until recent years.

Therefore a debate about saga genres has re-entered the agenda of many scholars, but agreement about the matter has not yet been reached.

As starting point for my analysis I will consider the discussion on literary genres which has been developed within the theory of literature proposed by the different schools, starting from the Russian Formalist School.

Some of the concepts which will mostly be taken into consideration are that of system and of systemic evolution.

Literature and texts are considered as systems capable of evolution, determined by some laws. Moreover the system is divided into “canonized” and “non canonized” literary genres, and it is through the latter that the system is capable of evolving and modifying itself.

Another interesting point developed by the Formalist school was that of the intra-relations between the literary system and the overall socio-political system; notion which will be further developed by the Structuralist school in Prague.

Some of the scholars active in the debate within the Structuralist school have proposed that

the relations within the socio-political system and the literary system are bilateral, in the sense that an author can modify the society where he is living in, but at the same time his or her production is partially determined by external factors.

All these ideas have then been taken into consideration by the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar when developing his Polysystem Theory.

In his studies he emphasized the importance of inter- and intra-systemic relations and the concept of evolution of the system, thus giving importance to the diachronic level of analysis. Moreover he visualizes the literary system (as all other systems) as composed by a center – or many centers – and by some peripheral positions, which are fundamental for the evolution of the system itself.

Other concepts which will be dealt with are those of the “theory of reception” developed by Jauss and the studies on genre evolution and on literary genres in the Middle Ages by Köhler.

Following this overview on the theory of genre I am going to take into consideration the saga production of the *Íslendignasögur* and I will discuss the problem of genre sub-division in Icelandic medieval literature.

After a short panoramic over this matter I will take in consideration the two sagas and analyze some of their characteristics which are relevant to the problem.

I will try to show that *Víglundar saga* can be considered an *Íslendingasaga* despite the fact that it has been suggested that it could be considered a romance.

As for *Gull-Þóris saga* I will take into consideration the supernatural in the saga, e.g. those characteristics which have been criticized since they have been considered as a sign of literary decadence of the saga production.

It will be shown that the characteristics of these sagas, in respect to the rest of the *Íslendingasögur*, can be explained if the theoretical approaches about literary genres

explained above are taken into consideration

The pros of these theories are first of all, that they consider genres as historical entities, and therefore capable of evolution and modifications, and secondly they links literary creations to social-cultural instances, which gives the opportunity to explain texts as cultural products, and therefore culturally determined, avoiding in this way any qualitative judgments.

2. ON THE THEORY OF GENRES

The problem of literary genres seems to be one of the oldest and most puzzling within the field of literary studies – it appears in fact to be quite obvious to each reader that a novel is completely different from a poem, the difficulties lie in how to describe literary genres from a scientific point of view and how to distinguish a genre from another. This point can lead to the more basic questions about the definition of genres, the relationship between a single text and the genre it should be part of and even about the existence *a priori* of literary genres; in other words one may wonder if literature is really based on genres or not. Since the time of Aristotle the concept of “genre” has been plain and the base of the literary theory in the Western culture, but since the Romanticism there have been attempts to free the writer from this concept, which was seen as too authoritative and pedantic. On the other hand during these last decades this resistance has been overcome and interest around this particular argument has arisen again.

In the following sections I am going to deal with a short, and without presumption of comprehensiveness, history of the theory of genres; focusing in particular on the Formalist and some of the post-Formalist approaches to the problem.

2.1 THE ORIGINS OF THE THEORY OF GENRES: FROM THE ANTIQUITY TO THE ROMANTIC PERIOD.

The firsts who have dealt with the concept of literary genres have been the Greek philosophers, among whom Plato and Aristotle are the most influential.

In his third book of the “*Politeia*” Plato distinguishes three different speech categories and he links them to three specific genres: if the poet is speaking the genre is an older dithyramb, if the poet makes other people speak the genre can be either a tragedy or a comedy and if there is a mixture of the first two then we are dealing with an epos¹.

After Plato, Aristotle distinguishes in his “*Peripoietikes*” (“*Poetics*”) two literary types, epic

¹ Zymner (2003: 11).

and drama, according to their mode and object.

The typical and probably familiar tripartite subdivision of poetry in epic, lyric and drama, which for centuries has been the cornerstone of theories on poetics, and which has been attributed to Aristotle, has actually been the result of an erroneous interpretation of his “Poetics” and an interpolation with Plato's theory, which in any case does not categorize the lyrical form².

It has to be noted that neither Plato nor Aristotle intend to provide a normative categorization but rather a descriptive one³. The first normative poetic of the literary genres appears after some centuries, namely with Horace's “Ars poetica” where he deals with the problem of style, which has to change according to situations and genres.

Within the Italian Renaissance, Aristotle's “Poetic” was seen as a sort of teaching book on poetics up to the 18th century, often with many misunderstandings. These regard for example the so called “three units” of time, space and action, which had to be respected according to the teachings on tragedy writing. According to Renaissance scholars these rules went back to Aristotle, but in reality he only wrote about the unit of action and he just recommended that it should not last longer than a single day; in any case he wrote nothing about the unit of space.⁴

This attitude, which lasted until the late 18th century, can be denominated as “normative poetics”, and among other things it was believed that literary genres were static in time and that it was not possible to accept the existence of a new genre just because it had not been defined by Aristotle⁵.

A radical change of opinion occurred in the 18th century, in particular in Germany within the movement of the “Sturm und Drang”, where for the first time it was recognized the historicity of literary genres, which were seen no more as universal entities but rather as historical products, which could undergo changes, which could be born (as the success of

2 Duff (2000: 3).

3 Zymner (2003:11)

4 Zymner (2003:12)

5 Duff (2000: 4)

the new genre of the novel was showing) and which could die (as it was happening for the epos). In particular the theories developed by Johann Gottfried Herder are particularly interesting, since he made use of an inductive methodology for the description of the poetics of genres – which means from the particular historical case to the general concept – rather than of a deductive methodology, which was typical of the preceding poetics of genres⁶.

The same ideas were expressed by the philosopher Hegel who exerted a great deal of influence during that period with his theories about the interpretation of history⁷.

Other concepts which have been influential for the discussion on literary genres have been those expressed by Johann Wolfgang Goethe, who made a differentiation between “Dichtarten” (kinds of poetry, namely the different genres) and “Naturformen” (natural forms) of poetry, of which he recognizes just three: “Epos”, “Lyrik” and “Drama”. These “Naturformen” are not the genres from which they are named, but they are rather characteristics which can appear in every literary work of every kind of genre⁸.

During the same years, when the German Romanticism was at its highest peak, Frederich Schlegel took a step further in the discussion on genres, stating that every literary work establishes a genre on its own, thus totally rejecting the traditional distinction between literary genres. This refusal of the concept of genres became then typical of the Romantic movement, and one of the most influential ideas in the 20th century⁹.

Some years later a work which exerted a great deal of influence, despite the fact that it was not a book about literary history, has been Darwin's “*Origin of Species*”. This is due to the fact that the romantic movement had already developed an organic metaphor on its own, and Darwin's book was seen as a confirmation of this idea. Therefore, after the publication of Darwin's book, the evolutionary paradigm, stating that literary genres have an evolution similar to that of the living beings, has been used by many scholars, among whom

6 Zymner (2003: 25)

7 Duff (2000: 4)

8 Zymner (2003: 27-28)

9 Duff (2000: 5).

Ferdinand Brunetière, with his “*L'évolution des genres*”, is to be cited. Despite having been criticized for his uncritical application of the evolutionist theory to the literary genres, his ideas about the evolution of a genre from another have been of great importance for the literary debate in the 20th century.

On the whole it could be said that the legacy of the late 18th and 19th century scholarly about literary genres consists of three different points:

- literary genres are not universal entities but rather historical, developing (also in a Darwinian sense) entities,
- in order to understand literary genres one has to adopt an inductive methodology,
- literary genres can also be ignored.

2.2 THE 20th CENTURY

In the beginning of the 20th century, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce wrote in his work “*Estetica*”:

“Dalla dottrina dei generi artistici e letterari derivano quelle fogge erronee di giudizio e di critica, mercè le quali, innanzi a un'opera d'arte, invece di determinare se sia espressiva e che cosa esprima, se parli o balbetti o taccia addirittura, si domanda: – E' essa conforme alle leggi del poema epico o a quelle della tragedia? Alle leggi della pittura storica o a quelle del paesaggio? (...) Ogni vera opera d'arte ha violato un genere stabilito, venendo così a scompigliare le idee dei critici, i quali sono stati costretti ad allargare il genere, senza poter impedire per altro che anche il genere così allargato non sembri poi troppo stretto a causa del sorgere di nuove opere d'arte¹⁰ (...)”

According to Croce literary genres are just artificial constructs created by the critics, and when he states that every work of art breaks the rules of a literary genre he keeps the line of

¹⁰ Croce (1912: 44)

thoughts paved by the Romantic theorists.

His work and opinions have been greatly influential for the following debate about this matter and have been followed by many similar instances in the course of the century, forming thus a line of critics who refused completely the idea of literary genres, which are seen as simply classificatory summaries based upon unsure philosophical concepts.¹¹ Among them the post-structuralist critic Margrit Schnur-Wellpott and the French philosophers Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida are worth mentioning.

The former developed the concept of “Semiotic of the écriture” and according to this, she regarded literary genres as fictitious concepts, since the common characteristics of a text with other texts are no more the focal point of the discourse, which are now the missing elements and structures in a particular text.¹²

Blanchot's views on the categories of “book” and “genre” inspired Derrida's essay “The Law of Genre”, where he states that the boundaries among genres are dismantled as soon as they are created, since the characteristics by which a text is inscribed in a certain literary genre are not part of it¹³.

Other views about this matter in the 20th century are those which affirm the existence *a priori* of literary genres, in accordance with Goethe's “Naturformen” hypothesis and the theory of the three literary genres, among which there are those who claims that genres originate in the “human nature” and that they are ahistoric in the sense they can be found in every kind of culture in different forms.¹⁴

Probably the most important representative of these ideas is Emil Steiger, who links his theories about literary genres to Heidegger's philosophy and interprets genres as ideas existing in the “Sein des Menschen”.¹⁵

11 Zymner (2003: 46)

12 Zymner (2003: 44-47)

13 Duff (2000: 5)

14 Zymner (2003: 49)

15 Zymner (2003: 50)

2.3 RUSSIAN FORMALISM AND THE QUESTION OF LITERARY GENRES

The Russian Formalist school was founded by a group of critics of the late 19th century in two different places – in 1915 at the Moscow Linguistic Circle, of which the main representative was Roman Jakobson, and in 1916 at the OPOJAZ (the Society for the study of Poetic Language) in Petersburg, which was the seat for Boris Eichenbaum, Viktor Schlovsky and Yuri Tynyanov.

From the very beginning pluralism is the main characteristic of the Formalist movement, not only geographically but also intellectually speaking, since its representatives had many different approaches to the study of literature.

Due to this fact many formalists insisted that the formalist approach was not based on a particular method, but it was rather a new task for the scholarship and probably one of the few point of agreement among these critics was the necessity of a multi-methodological approach.

This disagreement about the methodology was equaled by an epistemological diversity among the Formalists, because, regardless of the fact that the object of inquiry should be literature and not its cultural domain, Tomashevsky claimed that Formalists see poetics as studying the phenomena of literature, while on the other hand Jakobson insisted that the object of the literary science is literariness, which is:

“what makes a given work a literary work”¹⁶

Despite this epistemological disagreement Russian Formalism didn't dissolve in a number of different doctrines because it was in itself “anti-foundationalist”, i.e. it regarded all scientific approaches, including the formalist one, as liable of fallibility.

Science was seen as a process in which different theories compete against each other in a self-correcting process, which was exactly what the Formalists scholars did – they made hypothesis and then turned against them, they contradicted and corrected each other up to

16 Steiner (2008: 14)

the point that Eikhenbaum stated that if the Formalists were forced to admit of having a universal theory, unable or not in need of evolving, then the Formalist method would have come to an end¹⁷.

For this reason Steiner (1995) in his review about the Russian Formalism describes the movement through three different models of studies it developed – the machine, the organism and the system¹⁸ – of which here the last one will be described in more details.

Before that it is necessary to explain what literature, or with a Formalist expression “literary fact”, is according to the formalists.

In his essay “The literary fact” (“O Literaturnom fakte”) published for the first time in the journal “*Lef*”, Tynyanov points out at the instability of what people consider a “literary fact”, since he states that what we regard now as a work of literature can be seen by future generations as a simple fact of everyday life and not considered to be part of literature, and this would not only regard the peripheries of the system of literature, but also its center¹⁹.

The notion of system appeared quite early in the Formalist theories to indicate the nature of a text.

A system-text was seen as dominated by a tension between its “constructive principle” and the subordinated “material”, which renders a certain work perceived as an artistic form.

At the same time this perceptibility is possible if the text is confronted with the background of the preceding literary traditions and norms or with other works in the literary system²⁰.

The literary system is dynamic, because the purpose of art is to “counteract the deadening impact” (Erlich 1955: 220), and in this context the concept of literary change becomes of the greatest importance. That's the reason why the members of the OPOJAZ have given so much importance to the historical processes of literature and to defining the laws of literary evolution, which concerned much more literary genres rather than great authors, who

17 Steiner (2008: 17)

18 Steiner (2008: 17-21)

19 Duff (2000: 33)

20 Steiner (2008: 20)

“were [was] reduced to the status of an agent of impersonal forces. 'Art', said Skhlovskji, is not created by the individual will, by the genius. The creator is simply the geometric point of intersection of forces operative outside him.”²¹

The evolution of a literary genre is according to Tynyanov irregular and dominated by the concept of dislocation. He puts forward as example Puhkin's *poema* (translator's italic) “Ruslan and Lyudmila” – which is considered a *poema* just because it is in its essence a *non-poema*.

This work created a dislocation in the literary system, since it was perceived as an exception to the genre-system. The principle which, according to Tynyanov, helped this literary work to be perceived as a *poema* was the constructive and energetic principle of size. As long as this is preserved, the feeling for this particular genre is preserved and as a consequence there can be an endless dislocation of the construction²².

According to Aage Hansen- Löwe:

“Der Gegenbegriff ist bewußt gegen den konventionellen Begriff der klassifikatorischen Genres gerichtet und bezeichnet in seiner weitesten Definition nichts anderes als jenes differenzierende Merkmal, das die Dominante bestimmter Verfahren bzw Funktionen dem Werk verleiht: Werke mit identischen Dominanten bzw. vergleichbarem “konstruktiven Prinzip” bilden ein Genre, das – im Gegensatz zu einer Genredefinition, die auf strukturellen Merkmalen des Artefakts aufbaut – ein ständig verändbares Objekt der ästhetischen Wertung und Neuinterpretation darstellt.”²³

The literary genre is therefore conceived as a dynamic system, since the consciousness of a genre arises only when a genre is supplanted, or better dislocated, by another one, which is not its direct evolution but rather its substitution.

21 Erlich (1955: 221)

22 Duff (2000: 32)

23 Aage Hansen- Löwe (1978 : 379)

The old literature can be presented under another light, for example with the means of the parody, and old elements are re-inserted in a new, unfamiliar context and by this rendered perceivable again²⁴.

The point which needs to be made clear now is how literature and literary genres can evolve, when a point of stagnation is reached; in other words which are the main laws of literary evolution.

New material can be found in everyday life, when a constructive principle in literature is supplanting an existing one, and in doing so it seeks new phenomena, which it can be applied to.

According to Tynyanov, this happened in the second half of the 18th century in Russia with letter writing, which from a fact of everyday life became a literary fact. The constructive principle of the ode, which was the predominant literary genre of the time, was beginning to become automated so that another constructive principle was set into motion and it found its materials in the letter²⁵.

An everyday life phenomenon can become part of literature also in a second way, when a constructive principle strives to be applied to the largest number of phenomena.

Similarly, a predominant genre tends to spread its characteristics into other genres, so taking Tynyanov's example, in periods when poetry is predominant the prose assumes a rhythmic character. The next step is that the constructive principle overpass the boundaries of literature and begins to be applied also in everyday phenomena.²⁶

Other ways for literature and literary genres to evolve are the possibility of looking back to the past and re-elaborate old material or a process defined “canonization of the junior branch”.²⁷

Viktor Shklovskij, one of the member of the OPOJAZ wrote:

“When the 'canonized' art reach an impasse, the way is paved for the infiltration of elements

24 Erlich (1955: 226)

25 Duff (2000: 41-43)

26 Duff (2000: 43)

27 Erlich (1955: 227)

of non- canonized art, which by this time have managed to evolve new artistic devices.”²⁸

The canonization of the junior branch is a an ongoing process and it causes an unstoppable changing of the dominant principle; this dynamic leads to a discontinuous series of different systems which is characterized by contrasting dominant principles²⁹.

If the preceding observations are applied to the question of literary genres, it means that when the canonized genres reach a stagnation, new elements can be found in the so called “non-canonized” genre, placed in the periphery of the literary system, so that they can reach the status of canonized genres.

Literary evolution then can be divided in four different stages:

- 1- a contrastive principle of construction dialectically arises in respect to an automatized principle;
- 2- the constructive principle seeks the easiest application;
- 3-it spreads over the maximal number of phenomena;
- 4- it becomes automatized and gives rise to a contrastive principle of construction.³⁰

The last point which needs to be taken into consideration is the relationship between art and other instances of life.

In early stages of the OPOJAZ school art was considered as autonomous from the other spheres of social life; a work of literature couldn't be considered as a reflection or a consequence of social or anthropological dynamics, as well as literary dynamism was purely an intra-systemic process.³¹

This position was however questioned quite soon and from different parts within the Formalists themselves. One of the first who took position against the assumption of the

28 Erlich (1955: 227)

29 Aage Hansen- Löwe (1978: 383)

30 Steiner (2008: 20-21)

31 Erlich (1955: 175; 222)

absolute independence of art from the social system was Viktor Zhirmunskij. He stated that the the evolution of the literary system cannot be properly explained if only intra-literary causes are taken into consideration, because they can just explain the need of a change but not how it is going to happen, which is only determined by other socio-cultural systems.

Also Jan Mukařovský set himself against the pure independence of art from the social fabric but in a way opposite to Zhirmunskij's ideas. Namely he stated that the change within the literary system is induced by extra-literary systems but the development of the change is determined purely by intra-literary factors.³²

Among others also Tynyanov discussed this matter and according to him, the literary system is part of the overall cultural system and it interacts with it, partially because of the social character of language.³³

These observations paved the way to the theories developed by the Structuralists of the School of Prague, among whom some emigrated Formalists appear; but these theories are going to be dealt with in the following paragraphs.

On the whole the main achievements of the Formalist movement have been to have freed literary criticism from what can be called “esthetic egocentrism”³⁴ and to have put forward the concept of literary system, which is dominated and determined by a series of intra-systemic relations, and to have determined the importance and the modalities of literary evolution.

One of the main beneficiaries of Formalist methodologies have been medieval literature and art, since, using Jakobson's words:

“Nothing is more erroneous, than the widely held opinion that the relation between modern poetry and medieval poetry is the same as between the machine-gun and the bow.”³⁵

32 Erlich (1955: 223-224)

33 Steiner (2008: 21)

34 Erlich (1955: 236)

35 Erlich (1955: 236)

This means that there is no direct correspondence between modern literature and medieval literature, which obeys to its own rules and should be investigated taking into account its own developments and not its relationship with modern ones.

2.4 POST- FORMALIST DEVELOPMENTS

Because of the repressing policy of the U.S.S.R the Formalist school didn't have the chance to keep on developing and some of its representatives took refuge in Prague where they entered in contact with the scholars of the Prague Linguistic Circle and together they laid the basis for the development of the Structuralist school.

According to Structuralists, literature is a specific, hierarchical system within the system of the human culture and it is seen as a form of communication.³⁶

Because of this, the pragmatic and semiotic factors of the literary activity assumed a certain relevance within the theories developed by the Structuralists.

In particular Mukařovský has redefined the relationship between the writer and his/her work and the ideas on the theory of reception, assuming the existence of objective factors which influence the production and the reception of a literary work. So, the relationship between the system of literature and the social- cultural system acquires a double-face character: they are seen as two partially autonomous systems – thus neglecting some purely deterministic theories – but at the same time they are mutually related, in contrast to theories of the immanence of the literary system³⁷.

Other important points developed by the Structuralist school for the present discussion are those regarding the literary evolution, which was differentiated in three branches: production history, reception history and history of structure.

Production history focuses on the relationship between the tradition and the creative personality of the writer and the reciprocal influence between texts and genres which

36 Doležel (2008: 40)

37 Doležel (2008: 46- 49)

influence the evolution of a period or author³⁸ and we add, a literary genre.

Reception history focuses on posthumous interpretations and evaluations of a text, but more interesting for the present analysis is the theory about the history of structure.

The literary system finds its need for evolution in the process of conventionalization – when an aesthetic principle becomes conventionalized then the structure creates a necessity for change.

How this change is reached it is determined both by internal reasons but also by extra-literary factors:

“Structural literary history does not deny the impact of heteronomous, extraliterary factors: 'Literary works are materialized by people, they are facts of social culture and exist in numerous relationship to other phenomena of cultural life'.”³⁹

So it can be inferred that the Structuralist school took many ideas originated in the Formalist theories and it developed them by stating a closer dialectical relationship between literature and society, which will be fundamental for the development of the polysystemic theory, which will be dealt with in following paragraphs.

A Structuralist work which has developed some other interesting ideas about the definition and evolution of literary genres is ”The morphology of Folktales” by Vladimir Propp⁴⁰.

Being influenced by Tynyanov's idea of “literary function”, Propp analyzed a corpus of 100 Russian magical folktale and he got to the conclusion that, despite the superficial differences, they all had the same underlying structure.

He discovered that there are 101 fixed different functions for the personae portrayed in folktales, which combine in 7 fixed orders, uncovering in this way a sort of “grammar of the genre” which would be a pre-existing structure to the actual folktales, determining their surface structure.⁴¹

38 Doležel (2008: 53)

39 Doležel (2008: 56)

40 Note that Steiner (2008) counts it among the Formalist works, which is a proof of the strong relationship between the two schools.

41 Zymner (2003: 51-52)

Propp's methodology was a combination of the synchronic investigation of Saussurean methodology with the Goethean concept of “morphology” and the idea of splitting up the folktales in smaller units developed by the Russian literary historian Veselovsky.⁴²

This work has been so influential that Propp is generally renowned as the founder of the branch of “narratology”. The problem with his analysis within the “grammar of the genre” is the fact it doesn't work so good with other literary genres as it does with the folktale, since other texts need to be reduced to such a level of abstraction which would make the very category of genre disappear.⁴³

Another work which has been influential for the theory of genres which developed after Formalism is Mikhail Bakhtin's work. His ideas about the particular genre of the novel, which, according to him, has substituted all the others, are increasingly gaining consent among many scholars.

Bakhtin concentrates on the relationship between “primary genres” and “secondary genres”.

The former are the simpler ones like letters, everyday stories and “speech genres”, the latter are the literary genres which are created by the combination of the primary genres. According to him all literary genres are in any case a way of interpreting reality.

In all his works Bakhtin gives a special role to the genre of the novel, since, according to him, it has downgraded all the other literary genres and it constitutes a link between the primary and the secondary genres.⁴⁴

A further Structuralist scholar (but not part of the Prague school) has been quite influential for the Anglo-American criticism on literary genres, namely the Canadian Northrop Frye.

His aim was to apply the morphological study made for folktales also for other literary genres, focusing on the analysis of pre-generic structures.

His greatest achievement is to have shown the complexity of the process which creates the

42 Duff (2000: 12).

43 Duff (2000: 13)

44 Duff (2000: 8-11)

structures of literary forms and his idea on the evolution of these structures through different literary levels.⁴⁵

Two other currents of thought which developed or are inspired by the Russian Formalism are to be mentioned: the Polish Formalist movement and the project of the Constance School and in particular of Hans Robert Jauss.

The former, which developed in Lublin and Gdańk focuses – through the work of Ireneusz Opacki – on the process of literary hybridization, namely how genres can combine and form a new genre.

Similarly to Russian Formalism changes in genres are obtained through processes of conflict and combination, and according to Opacki each period is dominated by a literary genre, which he calls “royal genre” and which tends to give its characteristics to other genres⁴⁶.

Jauss' approach on the other hand is called “Aesthetic of reception” (*Rezeptionästhetik*) and it takes into account the reception of a literary work rather than the production and its author.

To the Formalist school he recognizes the merit of introducing aesthetic perception as a way of studying literary works but he also criticizes their tendency of isolating the work of literature from its social context. From the Marxist theories he appreciates the concern with historicity and the task of his aesthetic of reception is to reconcile these two ways of thinking⁴⁷.

He introduces the notion of “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*) which is:

”An intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a “system of references” or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual brings to a given text⁴⁸”

45 Duff (2000: 13)

46 Duff (2000: 14)

47 Holub (2008: 321)

48 Holub (2008: 323)

The horizon needs be objectified, in order to evaluate a literary work and according to Jauss there are three ways of doing so:

- 1- Normative standards of literary genres can be taken into account
- 2- The literary work can be compared with other older works or with its historical environment
- 3- The distinction between reality and fiction, which is always available to the reader, can be analyzed.

Following the objectification of the horizon of expectations, the artistic value of a certain work can be judged: if the expectations are not fulfilled then the artistic value of a work is high, if they are then the artistic value is low⁴⁹.

What is most important about Jauss' theories is the image of the function of literature which comes out:

”As a social construct the horizon of expectation would thus consist not only of norms and values, but also of desires, demands and aspirations. A literary text is not a mere reflection of some other part of the social order. Rather, it plays an active role in its reception, calling into question and altering social conventions.⁵⁰”

To the present matter it means that if a literary work does not respect the expected norms of a genre it could mean that it has the function of altering a specific social convention or conveying a certain meaning, thus playing an active role in the social system and not only being passively influenced by it.

Jauss' theories about medieval literature are also of a certain importance for the present work but they will be taken into account in more details in the following chapters.

49 Holub (2008: 323)

50 Holub (2008: 326)

In these last years the interests on the concept of genre has widened outside the horizons of literary studies, gaining a central role also in the fields of cinema studies and interestingly enough also in political studies, history, religious studies and even interdisciplinary academic fields which nothing have to do with literature or literary studies. It has also linked with the filed of gender studies, probably due to the proximity of the words genre and gender, which e.g. in French are exactly the same.

This doesn't mean that all the problems and doubts related to this particular topic have been solved, since till nowadays a great debate on some terminological issues as on the so called “genology” is still at hand.

2.5 POLYSYSTEM THEORY

In the beginning of the 70s the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar begun to formulate his theory which will take the name of Polysystem Theory. His starting points were some theoretical assumptions developed by the Formalists and the Structuralists.

From the Formalist approach he took the concept of system which he however expanded to that of a polysystem, in order to emphasize the complexity of the structure and of the relationships between the various elements and those between a particular system and other systems. From the Structuralist theories he took the idea of structural evolution, thus taking into account the diachronic level of analysis.

As he points out:

“[...]the polysystem hypothesis involves a rejection of value judgments as criteria for a priori selection of objects of study. This must be stressed for literary studies [...]. If one accepts the polysystem hypothesis, then one must also accept that the historical study of literary polysystem cannot confine itself to the so-called “masterpieces”[...]”⁵¹

51 Even-Zohar (1990: 13)

The polysystem is constituted by various strata which are in an ongoing struggle to move from its peripheries to the center; this concept allows the analysis of the changes occurring within the system. At this point the notion of “canonization of the younger branch” developed by Viktor Shklovskij comes at hand: the peripheries of the literary polysystem are occupied by those works which are classified as “non-canonized”, while the center positions are occupied by the “canonized” work. The dynamic tension between them allows the evolution of the system, it prevent its stagnation and it compels the canonized repertoires to change.

The existence of non-canonized repertoires is fundamental for the surviving of the literary polysystem because, if the canonized repertoires are no more adequate to answer the demands of the socio-cultural system, they are usually pushed into the periphery by a non-canonized one which conquer the centers of the literary polysystem⁵².

The peripheral positions are furthermore important for the inter-systemic relations. In fact, literature is part of the bigger polysystem of “culture”, which includes also language, politics and ideology and with which it maintains complex relations, occurring via the peripheries.

Moreover, every cultural polysystem is part of a sort of mega-polysystem, which includes several cultural unities having mutual relations. As an example Even-Zohar brings Europe in the Middle Ages. According to him, Central and Western Europe were a polysystem, of which the center was occupied by literature written in Latin and all the vernacular literatures were occupying the peripheral positions. After a process of gradual decrease this mega-polysystem collapsed into a series of smaller mono-cultural polysystems which in any case continued to have mutual relationships. These were not all at the same level, since some cultures begun to develop earlier, and they were usually taken as sources by younger cultures.⁵³

52 Even-Zohar (1990: 16-17)

53 Even-Zohar (1990: 24)

A system, in order to survive, has to reach a good grade of heterogeneity, so that it can accumulate enough material to suffice all its needs; this means that, on the whole, inter-systemic relations are fundamental for the system.

It must be noted though that the stability of the system does not coincide with the stability of the repertoires; a system is stable if it can manage the changes occurring in its repertoires without collapsing.

If we consider literature as constituted by literary genres, some interesting observations for a theory of genres can be drawn by these ideas, and namely that genres are in a struggle to occupy the center of the polysystem; when this is obtained the winning genre can influence all the others in the periphery. At the same time new items and characteristics can enter the system through the peripheral genres, thus allowing systemic evolution. If the canonized genres are not able to respond to the demands of the system they are then substituted by one (or more) of the non-canonized genres which at this point will influence the others.

The most important observations which can be drawn from the Polysystem Theory, and which will be useful for the following discussion are therefore that literary genres are organized within a literary polysystem which is in contact with the broader cultural and socio-political polysystem. Literary evolution, and therefore the mutual influence and changing of genres is fundamental for the survival of the system.

2.6 SYSTEM OF GENRE, SOCIETY AND LITERATURE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

At this point of the discussion it is useful to introduce some observations about what have been said about the system of genres until now in relationship to the Medieval literature. In the course of the discussion some useful hints will be made also at the relations between an hypothetical system of genres and the system of society which have produced it.

As it has been said, Hans Robert Jauss developed a theory named *Rezeptionästhetik*, which takes into account the reception of a literary work within the social cultural system it is produced. Because of this, every literary work needs to conform to some characteristics which constitute the horizon of expectations; in this sense every work must be inserted into a genre in order to be interpreted, understood and qualified.

Since every work needs to be inserted into a genre, this could lead to the idea that in the end every work constitutes a genre in itself but not if one understands literary genres as "historical families".⁵⁴

Therefore the history of literary genres can be seen as:

"a temporal process of the continual founding and altering of horizons, the metaphors of the courses of development, function, and decay can be replaced by the non-teleological concept of the playing out of a limited number of possibilities"⁵⁵

It follows that a work which is considered a masterpiece alters the horizon of expectation by giving the genre a new direction, but at the same time it must fulfill some characteristics of the genre itself to be recognized and accepted.

As interesting and illuminating as these concepts may appear they do not give an answer to the problem of the reality of the literary genres and of their social functions; a theory which tried to answer to these questions was developed, not in the literary studies, but in the field of theology. In fact, for the study of the Bible it was introduced the idea that the literature fulfills the needs of the society which produced it by means of different literary forms, styles and genres. In this sense literary genres are social phenomena and are therefore dependent on the social system they are inserted.⁵⁶

54 Duff (2000: 131)

55 Duff (2000: 132)

56 Duff (2000: 134- 136)

This means that the genres are to be observed as "in re"⁵⁷, as a series of works having in common some constant traits, but at the same time constantly changing, forming a system which is in relation to other different systems. The position of a genre within the hierarchic system of literature is influenced by the social system and in particular by the position in the system of society of the social group which produces the literary works.

Each system of genres has in itself a tendency to stabilization, in the realization of a limited number of alternatives among virtually infinite ones but at the same time it has a tendency in the acceptance of elements which disturb its equilibrium. Towards these new elements the system can have a negative feed-back, thus rejecting them, or a positive feed-back, by integrating them and beginning a restructuring of the hierarchy. Interestingly these two different answers towards external elements can be present at the same time in a literary system, since the dominant genre tends to refuse innovations in order to maintain its position while the more peripheral ones tend to integrate new elements.⁵⁸ The intrusion of new elements and the consequent destabilization of the system is dependent to the strength of the social classes, whose the genres are expression of. For example, in the 18th century the genre of the epos was sacrificed by the system, since it was the expression of a social class, the aristocracy, that had no real function in the system of society other than social prestige.⁵⁹ This proves also that the changing within the system of genres are to be reconducted to those in the social system, which makes pressure to it for adaptation. Sometimes a completely new system of genres can be used by a social system, as for example the return to the classic genres in the late Middle Ages, determined by the ascendancy of a new capitalistic class. However, it is important to say that an imported system has to subdue to changing of functions and to modifications in order to be accepted⁶⁰.

57 Köhler (1982: 15) Jauss uses the expression "locus in life" to express a really similar concept, that of the original meaning and use of works belonging to a certain genre within the community. Duff (2000: 136)

58 Köhler (1982- 19)

59 Köhler (1982-20)

60 Köhler (1982- 23) This observation takes us back to the *Rezeptionstheorie* as developed by Jauss.

The literary system, as every kind of system, is a way of getting hold of reality and it reduces its complexity by giving meaning to it.⁶¹ When the society has changed so much that the models provided by the literary system and genres are no more suitable, the necessity of integrating new experiences causes some modifications in the system; some genres change or broaden their functions and there can be the creation of many differentiated sub-genres. The answer to the new necessities of new groups can be given, according to Köhler, in four different ways:

1- some genres assume the functions of more standardized and rigid ones, in order to transpose with new motifs the new social characteristics,

2- new genres are created "ad hoc" for the new social demands,

3-the system makes use of "mixed genres"

4- the traditional system is rejected and a completely new one is imported.⁶²

The formation of the Romance literatures in the beginning of the Middle Ages can be taken to this last point. Traditionally, it was looked at the classical genres to explain the birth of the vernacular literatures, but at a more attentive look it seems rather improbable that the new Christian literature could match the categories of the ancient literary theory. For example the correlation between the style and the subject of the literary work was not present anymore, since the mysteries of the faith could be handed down in the most humble style in order to be understood by everyone. More direct parallels to the Romance tradition, which was forming at the time, can be found in the Bible, which contains a great number of poetic and prose genres; worldly and spiritual lyrics, heroic and historical sagas, legends of

61 Köhler (1982- 17)

62 Köhler (1982- 24)

martyrs, novellas, historiographies and biographies, forms of wisdom literature and religious instructions.⁶³

The form-historical method, as developed in the study of the Bible and applied to the medieval literature can cast new light on the problem of the "literarization" of the genres in that period.

In the Middle Ages literature is determined by its "locus in life", which means that the genre distinctions are determined by the social (or religious) functions a text was supposed to express.

This leads to the assumption that an object of study can be the distinction between worldly and spiritual functions and their relationship with literariness, which in the case of the Middle Ages makes sense when:

"it is understood as the *process* of gradual literarization of genres that originally are tied to cultic, religious and social functions."⁶⁴

If the beginning of this process is set in the Middle Ages (and it actually appears to be so with the courtly lyric⁶⁵) then it can be inferred that:

"the function of a genre depends not only on its relation to a real, lived procedure, but also on its position within a comprehensive symbolic system familiar to contemporaries. For the literary genre the question of "locus in life" has a synchronic as well as a diachronic dimension: it implies its function within the comprehensive ordering of the symbolic forms of expression of a culture and, at the same time, its position in the historical change of this symbolic system."⁶⁶

This process should not be seen as a linear development but rather as the result of different forces working at the same time and for this reason it can result in the contrary to the

63 Duff (2000: 136-137)

64 Duff (2000: 138)

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Ibid.*

original purpose of the genre⁶⁷. An example is the history of the passion play as sketched by Jauss. Traditionally, the passion play was seen as an example of secularization, in which the religious event from the 10th century developed itself up to become in the 15th century a dramatic play through the insertion of worldly contents. Rainer Warning has shown, however, that this development has been caused by different events which, as it seems, came out as a popular protest against the monotheistic dogmas.⁶⁸

2.7 FINAL REMARKS ON THE THEORY OF GENRES

Scope of this chapter was to make a short review of the history of the the theory of genres and to draw some theoretical deductions which will be put to practice in the following chapters of the present work.

It has been seen that a concern about the theory of genres begun already in the antiquity with the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who set a descriptive theory of the poetics of their time. Soon their descriptive observations were interpreted as normative ones and literary genres were seen as static and universal entities. A change of view begun in the 18th century with the movement of the "Sturm und Drang" in Germany, which for the first time recognized the historicity, and the possibility of evolution, of literary genres. Many new theories concerning literary genres followed these ideas and among others the concept, put forward first by Schlegel and then remarked by Croce, that literary genres do not exist since every work of art, breaking the rules of the genre it should be applied to, constitutes a genre in itself. This was one of the two main currents of thoughts of the 20th century, the other one considering literary genres as universal entities, existing in the "*Sein des Menschen*".

A groundbreaking theory was developed by the Russian Formalist theorists, who introduced the concept of system to describe literariness and literary works. Of all the observations made by these scholars the following ones regarding the theory of genres will be considered in the course of this work:

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Duff (2000: 139)

- the "literary fact" is a variable concept;
- literary works are systems inserted in a dynamic literary system whose dynamism is essential in order for its survival
- the system of literary genres needs new literary material in order not to reach stagnation. New material can be found in "facts of everyday life", in the re-use of old material or through the process of the "canonization of the junior branch";

The formalists were fundamental for the development of other schools of thoughts which have contributed to the development of the theory of genres. The "direct" descendant of the formalists is the Structuralist School of Prague. These scholars developed the concepts formulated by their Russian colleagues by pointing out that the literary system is a form of communication and that it is mutually related to a more general system of the human culture. What is most important for this work is the fact that the Structuralists put in relation the literary system and the cultural system, admitting that the latter can influence the former.

From the work of these two schools Itamar Even-Zohar developed in the 70s his Polysystem Theory which gives some of the most important theoretical assumptions for the present work. He viewed the literary system as a hierarchical polysystem in communication with a wider socio-cultural polysystem. Since the system is hierarchical, some genres occupy its central positions (canonized repertoires), thus being the dominants of the system and influencing all the others, which occupies the peripheral positions (non-canonized repertoires), with their characteristics.

The struggle of the non canonized repertoires to occupy the central positions of the polysystem ensures its dynamic and survival. Their importance resides also in the fact that new materials enter the polysystem, when necessary, via the peripheral positions.

Other important theories about literary genres which will be taken into consideration are those developed by Jauss, in particular the *Rezeptionästetik* and the *Erwartungstheorie*.

The main idea is that the literary genres answer some social political demands in order to be accepted and to influence the same social system which has created them. Thus, the focus of the observation is moved from the production of the work of literature to its reception and the mutual relation between literature and society.

3. THE “ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR”

Among the different genres of the saga⁶⁹, the so-called *Íslendingasögur* have received great attention by scholars in the field of saga studies. They count as *Íslendingasögur* 40 sagas which should have in common at least the following three features, which at the same time separate them from all the other kinds of saga:

- the time of events
- the scene and place of events
- the time of writing⁷⁰.

As regards the time of events, the action generally takes place from approximately the first years of colonization of Iceland to a century later (930- 1030 ca), with some scenes taking place some years earlier in Norway.⁷¹

The events take place generally in Iceland, even if in some cases the action can be moved to Greenland or America (as it is the case for the *Grænlandinga saga* and the *Vinland Sagas*), to the British Isles or Scandinavia and in some cases also as far as Constantinople.⁷²

The discourse turns out to be more complicated when the time of writing is considered.

According to Ólason (2005) :

“The period of composition of the *Íslendingasögur* has long been a matter of disagreement among scholars. In the nineteenth century it was widely believed that they were works of the twelfth century, but this view was abandoned completely in the twentieth century.”⁷³

It is now believed generally, that the majority of these sagas were composed during the 13th century, while the remaining one third was written in the 14th century.⁷⁴

69 A more thorough discussion of all the other genres of the saga would overcome the scope of the present work.

70 Nordal (2008: 315).

71 Ólason (2005: 101).

72 Nordal (2008: 316).

73 Ólason (2005: 116).

74 Ólason (2005: 102).

Being this quite a long period scholars have attempted to make a sub-categorization of the *Íslendingasögur* focusing on the evolution of the genre during this lapse of time.

Sigurður Nordal has attempted to subdivide the sagas into 5 groups taking as main taxonomic criterion the time of writing, but taking also in consideration their different stages of development and the presence of unrealistic elements within the plot.

He states:

“Den følgende inddeling af Isl. s. i fem grupper er i hovedsagen kronologisk, dog med de forbehold, at en saadan ordning ikke strengt kan gennemføres indenfor hver gruppe, at en række sagaer i virkeligheden tilhører to grupper, og at der intet er i vejen for, at f. eks. de ældste sagaer i en gruppe kan være ligesaa gamle som de yngste i den foregaande. Det er nemlig ikke blot tale om ordning efter tidsfølgen, men efter stadier i udviklingen, hvor man altid maa regne med, at nogle forfattere er forud for deres tid og andre efternølere. Men i det hele og store vil udviklingsstadierne tilnærmelsesvis falde sammen med alderen”.⁷⁵

The first group of *Íslendingasögur* is composed of six sagas written in the first decades of the 13th century as for example *Fóstabræðra saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*⁷⁶)

These sagas appears to have grown out from the *konungasögur* (kongesagaerne) being partially a supplement to them and having them as major models.

The second group is made up of 12 sagas, all written in 50 years up to 1280 at the latest. Some of them are for example *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga þátr*⁷⁷.

Their common feature is that all of them have more or less an origin in what Nordal calls

75 Nordal (1952: 235). ”The following partition of Is. s. in five groups is mainly chronological though with the remark that such an order can not be strictly implemented within each group, that a serie of sagas in reality belong to two groups and that it is not an obstacle that for example the oldest sagas in a group can be as old as the youngest sagas in the preceding group. It is not only a question of chronological order but also of development stages, where you always have to take into account, that some authors are ”before their time” and others are ”behind” it. But on the whole the development stages coincide with the age. (My translation.)

76 Nordal (1952: 235-244)

77 Nordal (1952: 244)

“folkelig tradition”⁷⁸ These sagas become more independent from the *konungasögur* even if some references to other saga genres, to old translations and to religious literature are still present.

A bigger independence from different saga genres and a more concrete shaping as a self-standing genre are achieved in the sagas of the third group, which, according to Nordal:

“[...] kan med et summarisk udtryk kalde sagaerne i denne gruppe realistiske romaner,- romaner i sammenligning med sagaerne i første og anden gruppe, realistiske i forhold til den fjerde og femte.”⁷⁹

With these sagas the saga-writing has reached its highest peak. Among the others one can name *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Bandamanna saga*, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, *Brennu-Njáls saga*⁸⁰.

Sagas in the fourth group (as for example *Fljótsdæla saga*, *Þorskfirðinga saga* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*⁸¹) are, if compared to the preceding group, less realistic and more similar to the *fornaldarsögur* (oldtidssagaers), and some of them seem to be more recent rewriting of older sagas.

The fifth group (which can be represented among others by *Finnboga saga ramma*, *Kjalnesinga saga* and *Víglundar saga*⁸²) is then composed of sagas from the 14th century and all of them seem to have been greatly influenced by other more fictional saga genres.⁸³

Theodore Andersson on the other hand has tried to categorize the different sagas according to their relationship with the kind of saga genres and he came up with 3 different groups:

1- the biographical mode

78 Nordal (1952: 249).

79 Nordal (1952: 254). “[...] can with a summarizing expression call sagas in this group realistic novels- novels as compared to sagas of the first and second groups, realistic relatively to those in the fourth and fifth.” (My translation.”)

80 Nordal (1952: 254- 261)

81 Nordal (261- 266)

82 Nordal (1952: 266- 269)

83 Nordal (1952: 235-269).

2- the regional or chronicle saga

3-the feud or conflict saga.⁸⁴

Another possible subdivision of the *Íslendingasögur* is hinted at by Mundal (2007) who makes a sub-categorization of the sagas in:

a- archaic sagas 1200-1280 (e.g. *Fóstbróðra saga* *Grólendinga saga*, *Reykdóla saga*, *Vápnfirðinga saga*,)

b- classic sagas 1240-1310 (*Laxdóla saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, *Bandamanna saga*, *Njáls saga*)

c- post-classic sagas 1300-1450.(*Flóamanna saga*, *Finnboga saga ramma*, *Gull-Þóris saga*, *Víglundar saga*)⁸⁵

This division is based on the different style of writing of the sagas, on their similarities with the *konungasögur* and on the themes which are treated in the texts.

According to Mundal the archaic sagas are characterized by the style of language, by their strict relationship with the *konungasögur* and by a rather clumsy composition.

Despite these facts she also admits that it's difficult in many cases to make a clear-cut separation from the archaic sagas to the classic sagas regarding their style and mode of narration.

Post-classic sagas on the other hand seem to be more clearly differentiated from the other two sub-categorizations. This would mainly be due to the fact that later sagas move away from the realism which characterizes the *Íslendingasögur*.⁸⁶

In fact one of the main narrative techniques of the *Íslendingasögur* is that they are written as if they were history. The characters are in many cases known from other sources; place

84 Nordal (2008: 316).

85 Mundal (2007: 372)

86 Mundal (2007: 372-374).

names correspond to real ones and were supposedly well known to Icelanders and events are told in a chronological way with a consistency in the description of society and culture.⁸⁷

Post-classic *Íslendingasögur* seem to lose this characteristic of realism, since there is the presence of some magical and fantastical elements, drawing them nearer to non-realistic saga genres as the *fornaldarsögur* or the *riddarasögur*. They are going to be treated more thoroughly in the following chapters.

3.1 THE FORM OF NARRATIVE

When dealing with *Íslendingasögur* one has to keep in mind that there exists a gap between the time of the events and the time of the actual writing, so that the world described in these texts is not identical with the world of the time when they were written. As a consequence the form of narrative is influenced by the ideology and the ideas of their time of production about a past which was in many ways different.⁸⁸

The structure of each saga is determined by its subject matter; Mundal (2007) has identified three different narrative structures. Some *Íslendingasögur* can be seen as biographies because they mainly deal with the life of a single character (as example she takes the *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*), and in this case there is just a brief introductory account of his family and ancestors; other sagas deal with the lives of more generations and in this other case the saga can either focus on just one family or on a specific geographical area (for example *Laxdóla saga*)⁸⁹.

These different types of sagas are usually not clearly differentiated, since a single saga can contain features of all the three types; an example being the *Njáls saga*, which deals with the lives of Njáll and Gunnarr but at the same time it focuses on the general events of their

87 Ólason (2005: 105)

88 Ólason (2005: 102)

89 Mundal (2007: 374)

geographic milieu.⁹⁰

Ólason (2005) has identified on the other hand just two different subject matters: sagas either deal with the life of a single protagonist or they trace the story of some feuds, describing how they developed and their final resolution. Even in this case, though, he admits that there is not a clear cut distinction between these two different kinds of saga, since in many cases the feuds in which the protagonist is involved are an important narrative element of the whole story.⁹¹

Despite these differences sagas have usually a common narrative pattern, based on the development of a feud between two different parties.

The clash begins in many cases for a futile reason which is seen though as an attack to the honor of a man and his family; since the concept of honor was so important in the old Nordic society as described in the sagas one had to repay the offense in at least an equal manner. In most cases the first step was not violence but usually a demand for compensation, but in the world described in the sagas the balance is not easily restored and a single conflict could develop in a series of growing clashes between the two parties which would reach its climax with a murder.

This usually happens when the compensation offered is not acceptable to a particular individual involved in the conflict.

At this point vengeance is required, which usually leads to another killing; this opens the way to a spiral of violence up to the point that the two parties are so badly injured that a final settlement has to be set, and usually the people originally involved in the dispute are either dead or outlawed.⁹²

Scholars have attempted to identify some common narrative patterns within the structure of *Íslendingasögur*. Andersson (1967) divides each saga in different elements following the

90 Mundal (2007: 374)

91 Ólason (2005: 103)

92 Ólason (2005: 104).

development of the conflict:

- 1- Introduction
- 2- Conflict
- 3- Climax
- 4- Revenge
- 5- Reconciliation
- 6- Aftermath⁹³

This schema seems to be too simple and in many cases the narrative elements of climax and revenge repeat themselves in the course of the narration, thus causing a repetition of the narrative patterns, when for example the narrator describes more different feuds at approximately the same time jumping from one one feud to another;⁹⁴ in other cases this schema doesn't apply at all.

Byock (1982) criticizes Andersson's scheme by saying that:

“This proposed structure which is ill-fitting in many cases, serves only to summarize the action rather than to tell us anything about the particular nature of Icelandic narrative.”⁹⁵

According to him the greatest problem with Andersson's and others' sequential orders is that sagas were not built according to uniform sequences but rather by the combination of the active elements, which he calls “feudemes”:

- conflict.
- advocacy.
- resolution.⁹⁶

93 Mundal (2007: 382).

94 Ólason (2005: 104).

95 Byock (1982: 50).

96 Byock (1982: 57-58).

These elements are not bound to be in a sequential order but rather they combine themselves in many different ways, which Byock calls “clusters”, which create “chains of feud”, which make up a saga.

He points out that these “feudemes” do not represent everyday procedures of that time, and sagas did not represent real life as it was, but they give strong indications about social modes of actions and what was considered socially acceptable or not.

The saga writer had to stick to well known sources such as characters, feuds and events of the time of the settlement, which were part of the common store of information and of the collective memory of Icelanders. Despite this fact and the fact that he had to develop his story according to recognizable and acceptable patterns, the saga writer had freedom to adapt the well known material to the tale he was writing, thanks to the use of such feudemes.⁹⁷

3.2 THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

As said before one of the main characteristic of the *Íslendingasögur* is that they are written as if they were history; place names were well known to Icelanders of the time and often characters of the sagas are known from other literary sources.

Nevertheless it is clear that the knowledge of primitive Viking society has become less and less precise and in many cases saga authors have included references to accounts which sometimes are also contrasting.

According to Ólason (2005) the *Íslendingasögur* contribute a process of “textualization of Icelandic history”⁹⁸ and they represent the ideas and views of the Icelandic people regarding their past.

There is no agreement among scholars on the origin of this process, even if it has been supposed that it is based on the attempt of saga writers to imitate the oral narratives or in

97 Byock (1982: 58-62).

98 Ólason (2005: 105).

their actual belief that what they were writing was actually real⁹⁹; but what is sure is that this attitude has influenced the narrative techniques used to write these sagas.

In order to retain this idea of historicity, the events are usually presented in a chronological order; there can be some anticipations but they are always made through supernatural events like dreams or prophecies, which gives the impression that the plot is driven by some supernatural forces.¹⁰⁰

In other cases these supernatural events have a structural function, because they are used by the authors to keep the text together or to raise the expectation for a certain episode. In fact, even if the events are told in a chronological order, some specific episodes can have more importance than others. In these cases the narration becomes wider and more detailed while, on the other hand, a relatively long period of time can be summarized in a single line.¹⁰¹

The narrators are generally non-omniscient in order to stick to the idea of historicity they wanted to convey and for this reason they seldom described the inner feelings of their characters.

On its whole the narrative method used to write the *Íslendingasögur* is formal objectivity, and this is also recognizable in the description of the characters of the sagas, who are described from an outer point of view and generally don't represent mere stereotypes; they rather seem to be real people with both positive and negative aspects. Heroes and villains in these sagas can be described with the same characteristics and as a consequence the distinction between good and evil tends to be much less clear than in other kind of sagas. This way of outlining characters can derive from the 13th century Icelandic traditional ideas about characters, which have been influenced by the heroic poetry and by everyday life. In addition to this, saga writers payed a lot of attention to their characters' physical appearance, since it was seen as part of their personality.

Despite this fact, in order to arise sympathy or drive the attention to a particular character

99 Ólason (2005: 106).

100 Ólason (2005: 106).

101 Mundal (2007: 383-384).

the saga writer used to narrate events from his perspective, even if his attitude was presented as very negative.

The role of women in *Íslendingasögur* is clearly different to that of men, and it is generally that of victims of the feuds arising between men or of their decisions. (Even if there are some significant exceptions, as for example in *Njáls saga*).

In recent research about gender roles in the sagas it has been recognized that women in the *Íslendingasögur* generally have four functions: warrior, sorceress, avenger or inciter.¹⁰²

They are usually portrayed from the point of view of men and are judged according to how they help or contrast men in the saga¹⁰³.

3.4 FINAL REMARKS ON THE ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR

If we take into consideration what has been said so far about the *Íslendingasögur*, the main feature which stands out is their tendency to objectivity with the aim of telling stories about the Icelandic past as if they were history.

In this sense the representation of history is achieved mainly by the use of genealogies, which are a common feature among (almost) all the sagas and which led to the phenomenon of “family ownership of the past”.

In other words Icelanders of the 13th and 14th centuries, with the means of the sagas, recreated their past within a process of historicization of literature.¹⁰⁴ *Íslendingasögur* then become an instrument of the so called “cultural memory”¹⁰⁵.

A progression from myth to history with the means of literature can be distinguished in the creation of the sagas; the stories of the age of migration from Norway and the age of the settlement are decisive for the “cultural memory” of the Icelandic people; it's not their

102Ólason (2005: 107-109)

103Mundal (2007: 386-387).

104Glauser (2000: 210-211).

105Glauser (2000) referring to Assmann (1997) writes that “cultural memory [...] arises from an affective, creative approach to memories, and brings about a conscious relationship with the past by overcoming the break”. (p. 211)

historicity though, but rather their functions as historical constructions which are important for the memory process.¹⁰⁶

Bearing this in mind the understanding of the later *Íslendingasögur* (sagas written in the 14th century) becomes crucial, since the main critics which have been put forward in the course of years of research is that they tend to loose the objectivity and their characteristics of historicity integrating some unrealistic or fantastic episodes typical of other saga genres. This would seem a tendency which goes against the process of historicization and of the creation of a “cultural memory”. Therefore a deeper insight into the literary development of the genre of the *Íslendingasögur* in a later period and their social-political meaning in the 14th century is needed and it's going to be dealt with in the following sections.

106 Glauser (2000: 213)

4. THE POST-CLASSICAL *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*

By "post-classical" Icelandic sagas it is meant a number of sagas written between the 14th and mid 15th century. Else Mundal classifies under this label the following 15 sagas:

Grettis saga Ásmundarssonas

Flóamanna saga

Kjalnesinga saga

Fljótsdæla saga

Þorsteins saga Síðu Hallsonar

Harðar saga ok Hólmverkja

Finnboga saga ramma

Þorskfirðinga saga (Gull-Þóris saga)

Svarfdóla saga

Króka-Refs saga

Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss

Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings

Þórðar saga hreðu

Víglundar saga

Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls

According to her:

“Dei etterklassiske sogene, som er skrivne på 1300-talet, og nokre truleg også på 1400-talet, skil seg gjennomgåande langt klarare frå dei to andre gruppene av soger enn dei såkalla arkaiske og klassiske sogene skil frå kvarandre”.¹⁰⁷

The characteristics which differentiate these sagas from the rest of the *Íslendingasögur* are,

¹⁰⁷Mundal (2004: 290). ”The post-classical sagas, which are written in the 14th century and some possibly even in the 15th century, differ more from the other two groups of sagas than the so-called archaic and classical sagas differ from each other.” (My translation)

according to her, a more extensive use of fantastic elements and episodes within the narration along with some elements from romance tradition. This change in the narrative material seems to have been influenced by the French literature, which was introduced in Iceland from Norway from the 13th century, and by other saga genres as for example the *fornaldasögur* and the newly created *rimúr*.¹⁰⁸

The intrusion of foreign and fantastic elements in the realistic genre of the *Íslendingsögur* would have been caused by a general cultural decline in Iceland in the course of the 13th century. In 1264 Iceland lost its independence and at the same time underwent a big economic crisis caused by continuous volcano eruptions, years of famine and the plague. The economic power passed into the hands of foreigners and Iceland fell into a cultural national depression.¹⁰⁹

At the same time also the Icelandic church begun to change its character, beginning to be more involved in the political power and therefore the cultural life which allowed the coexistence of new Christian and old pagan elements came to an end.¹¹⁰

Because of these factors, in particular the fact that they were seen as the fruits of a declined cultural level, the study of post-classical *Íslendingsögur*, along with the *fornaldsögur*, *riddarasögur* and *rimur*, has been neglected in the course of history or matched by negative qualitative judgements as "worthless, insignificant and un-Icelandic"¹¹¹ in favor of a concentration of the studies in the "classical" *Íslendingsögur*.

As for example, in his book *Sagalitteraturen* Sigurður Nordal treats the first three group of *Íslendingsögur* in about 6 to 10 pages each, while he devotes no more than 5 pages all together to the sagas of the fourth and fifth group. (These two groups correspond according to other classifications to the post-classical *Íslendingsögur*).

Moreover, when dealing with these two last sub-groups of sagas, he adds some slightly

108Hallberg (1964: 129-130)

109Hallberg (1964: 132)

110Hallberg (1964: 133)

111Cardew (2004: 16)

qualitative judgments, as for example the followings:

“Efter sagaerne i tredje gruppe vilde man vente, at Isl. S fortsatte videre som romandigtning, men saaledes at de efterhaanden blev mindre realistiske, stærkere paavirket af de flittig dyrkede oldtidssagaers smag.”¹¹²

“Vi har her altsaa for disse sagaers vedkommende med en *senere omarbejdelse af ældre sagaer* (Nordal's italics) at gøre, en *slags bastarder* (my italics) af ældre og yngre sæger.”¹¹³

This attitude is present in many other studies¹¹⁴ and the tendency of focusing on the so called “classical” *Íslendingasögur* is partly to be taken back to the view which judges the movement from a more realistic saga writing to a more fictional one as a failure, since the realistic features were seen as the distinguishing mark of these sagas, which is linked to the introduction of foreign elements to the native literary material.¹¹⁵

This prescriptive attitude has its roots in the Icelandic Romantic movement influenced by the European one and the birth of a nationalistic sentiment in the 19th century.

The beginning of the interest in Iceland in the *Íslendingasögur* can be traced to the publication of the journal *Fjölnir* in the 19th century, of which editors were among the most enthusiastic representatives of the national cause for independence from Denmark. It is in this view that they regarded some of the *Íslendingasögur* as having a historical truth and then useful for the national cause. On the other hand other kinds of literature as the *rímur* and the *lygísögur*, having a completely different character were not appreciated. The Fjölnismenn pursued an idealization of the Icelandic literature together with a nationalistic

112Nordal (1952: 261)

“After the sagas of the third group one would expect that the Sagas of Icelanders continued with novel writing, but they gradually became less realistic, more strongly influenced by the industrious cultivated taste of the Sagas of the old times.” (My translation)

113Nordal (1952: 262)

“Therefore we have, as regards these sagas, to do with a later re-working of older sagas, a kind of *crossbreed* of older and younger sagas.” (My translation)

114Cardew (2004) quotes “*A History of Icelandic Literature*” by Stéfan Einarsson and “*The Age of the Sturlungs. Icelandic Civilisation in the Thirteenth Century*” by Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Cardew (2004: 16)

115Cardew (2004: 17)

romantic policy which aimed at the restoration of the Alþingi in its original seat in Þingvellir and at the recreation of an Iceland similar to that of the 13th century . Not all Icelanders agreed with these views, as others urged for a modernization of Iceland, and in the end these positions prevailed. Nonetheless, the need to give Iceland a literary tradition and an important history which could compete with those of other European nations found its answer in some of the *Íslendingasögur*, which were to become those defined as “classical”. Other forms of literature were condemned and ostracized¹¹⁶:

“this intellectual and moral contempt for traditional narratives that were thought to exhibit little in the way of national, or perhaps nationalistic, consciousness was, as the century advanced, extended to include a disapproval of, and scholarly distaste for, any saga narrative that displayed tendencies deviating from a limited canon of pure *Íslendingasögur*, as conceived of as unique ethnic Icelandic genre. The primary value of the *Íslendingasögur* was perceived to be their status as historical documents.”¹¹⁷

The first clear separation of “good” sagas from “bad” sagas appeared with Guðbrandur Vigfússon's edition of *Sturlunga Saga* in 1878, where in the “Prologomena” he divides the sagas in “greater”, “minor” and “spurious”. About these last ones, which will become eventually the so-called “post-classical” sagas, he states that they are poor in style and matter and that they prove that the tradition of the old heroic age was declined.¹¹⁸

After these years the focus for the study of the *Íslendingasögur* was shifted from their historicity to their artistic merits, in the freeprose – bookprose¹¹⁹ debate, but the assumption

116Arnold (2003: 89-90)

117Arnold (2003: 89-90)

118Arnold (2003: 91)

119 These two positions are the fruits of two school of thoughts about the origin of the *Íslendingasögur*. The freeprose position claimed that these sagas were accounts of what happened in the 10th century, transmitted orally up to the 12th century, when they begun to be written down. The bookprose position on the other hand maintained that these sagas were artistic creations, originated both from oral tradition and literature and did not really concern the life of Icelanders in the 10th century, but rather with the artistic devices of their creators.”

[https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/2148/24\(2\)%2077-82.pdf?sequence=1](https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/2148/24(2)%2077-82.pdf?sequence=1) last seen 05/01/2012

that certain sagas constituted the classic canon of the saga production, or rather that some of the sagas were characterized by a lack of merits, was not put into question.

The nationalistic view of the medieval literature continued after the creation of the Reign of Iceland, in union with the Danish Crown, in 1918 and in particular with Sigurður Nordal. He regarded the best sagas as the product of a southern school of aristocratic intellectual and the northern school of Þingeyrar, where mostly religious texts were produced. After the flourishing of the classical *Íslendingasögur* the two schools would have separated again, taking as a consequence from one side the production of entertainingly and fictional stories and from the other annals.¹²⁰

In the end the aim of the Icelandic scholars of the 18th and 19th century was to create a canon of pure *Íslendingasögur* which should be different from all other European genres and which would bear a “mark of Icelandicness”.¹²¹ Thus the best examples of the *Íslendingasögur* are those:

“that portray the high bearing of the saga hero, indicate the skill and intelligence of the saga author, and are sensitive to historical probability”¹²²

“The classical *Íslendingasögur* are, therefore, those narratives which focus most skillfully on native Icelandic issues and bear the stamp of historical probability, albeit non necessarily accuracy. The broad term for these attributes is realism, [...]”¹²³

All the sagas lacking one of these elements are therefore considered worse examples of the genre, and the cause for this decline is the influence of non-Icelandic features:

“where realism is deemed to be lacking among the *Íslendingasögur*, they are assigned an

120Arnold (2003: 102)

121Arnold (2003: 103-105)

122Arnold (2003: 103)

123Arnold (2003: 106)

inferior status, for example, as “spurious” or as illustrative of a decline in taste”¹²⁴

The definition of the classical *Íslendingasaga* has been determined as it was seen above, by a phase of Icelandic ethnocentrism in the 18th-19th century, but it was also influenced by a similar instance of ethnocentrism that developed in the 13th century and which gave birth to the very same sagas (and also to the *riddarasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*). In fact, the 13th century was a period of social and civil disorder in Iceland and the literary works of this time are the result of an attempt to answer to these problems by conveying an ideal concept of a golden age during the Settlement Age at the moment when the political unity was threatened by internal struggles.¹²⁵

The 19th century struggle for independence and its consequential ideological ethnocentrism found a parallel and an expression of the same ideals in some of the *Íslendingasögur* which were given the title of “classical”; all others who lacked some of the ideals characteristics were labeled as “spurious” or in the following years “post-classical”. The definition of a classic canon has therefore been influenced ideologically by two phases of ethnocentrism in Iceland, one in the 13th century and the other in the 19th century.¹²⁶

124*Ibid*

125Arnold (2003: 237)

126Arnold (2003: 241)

5. THE PROBLEM OF GENRE IN THE SAGA LITERATURE

After having described the most common and traditional classification of the different genres of the sagas I would like to point out some problems about these generic labels by referring to three articles appeared in the journal “*Scandinavian Studies*” n. 47 in 1975. The articles have been written by Lars Lönnroth, Joseph Harris and Theodore M. Andersson.

The main problem, which these articles deal with, is if the traditional classification of the saga literature is suitable to describe these literary works or if it needs to be remade.

In the opening of his article ” The concept of genre in the saga literature” Lönnroth points out that a genre usually sets certain rules, regarding the subject, structure and style, which apply to a certain number of texts. The issue with the classical generic classification of sagas is that they do not define genres in a strict sense. For example, it is generally assumed that one of the main differences between *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* from one side and *fornaldarsögur* on the other side is that the formers are “realistic” and “trustworthy” while the latter are “fictional” and “fantastic”. On the other hand:

“it is generally admitted that some *konungasögur* contain “fantastic” and “fictional” elements, while some *fornaldasogur* may be at least partly “realistic” and based on historical facts”¹²⁷

According to him the existing distinctions have a mostly historically differentiation base and few attempts have been made to make a classification based on structure, style or literary origins or to re-construct the original distinctions made by saga writers, which are probably more interesting.¹²⁸

In an earlier article Lönnroth went against the modern classification of sagas because it does not correspond to that of the 13th century. According to his research no lexical

¹²⁷Lönnroth (1975: 420)

¹²⁸*Ibid.*

distinctions were made between what we call nowadays *konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* but there were classificatory terms used to describe secular biography (*ævissaga*) and saints' lives (*lífssaga*). The terms *konungasögur* and *riddarasögur* appear to be used in the 14th century as proved by a catalog of the Viðey monastery library of 1396, which mentions “*Riddara sögur i tveim bókum*”, and by *Magus saga jarls* where it is written:

“*þeir vilja till heyra frásagnir, sem þeim þikki kátligar til gamans, svá sem er Þidreks saga, Flóvent saga eðr aðrar riddara sögur.*”¹²⁹

It appears therefore that in Old Icelandic there were terms to describe works with foreign origins while there was a lack of terminology for indigenous works.

To this point Joseph Harris in his article “*Genre in the saga literature: a squib*” makes a distinction, which has been inspired by an article on folklore by Dan Ben-Amos, between analytic genres and ethnic genres. The former would be a system developed by scholars in order to speculate about a certain corpus, while the latter would be the original system of categorization. The problem with the ethnic genre system, despite a recent interest among scholars, is that we don't have enough evidence in order to reconstruct it. The interest in ethnic genres is linked to a general condemnation of the analytic system, which is seen as anachronistic¹³⁰, but it has the advantage that it gives scholars the chance to talk about the literary material in question.

The traditional system of classification of sagas has developed quite unconsciously over the centuries and discrimination have been made both by intuition and by the use of some discriminative criteria as setting, style, historicity etc. The use of other, more narrow criteria can lead to a different taxonomy and in theory the number of combinations of discriminating features are infinite, but a general discrimination of all the possible

129Cardew (2004: 14)

130Harris (1975: 429)

groupings can be made by taking into account how useful and how revealing they are.¹³¹

According to Harris:

“These qualities have something to do with simple conventionality but also seem a matter of compromise between incorporation of a maximum number of common features and a maximum number of texts. Such a compromise seems to be exactly the virtue of the traditional standard system. Nordal's innovation of elevating only the feature of temporal setting, grouping a large number of texts according to a single criterion, is revealing for only a few purposes because the texts have so little in common”¹³²

The idea of finding some common narrative patterns among sagas in order to confirm the existing classifications or to provide some new ones has gained popularity in more recent years and Andersson's observation on the *Íslendingasögur* common narrative pattern, which can be divided in six moments, has been criticized by Lönnroth because it wouldn't fit in all the *Íslendingasögur* but it would fit in some of the *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.¹³³ Andersson defends his proposal by saying that first of all one should not be too rigid in the division and that the purpose of his study was to suggest typical features. Intersections are possible and lead to different kind of combinations:

” *Egils saga* has links with the king's sagas and *Grettis saga* has links with the legendary sagas, but on balance they have a community of setting, dramatic construction, and plausability which links them more closely with one another than with any saga in the royal or legendary groups.”¹³⁴

The most fundamental thing according to Andersson is that the sagas should be considered and analyzed in their wholeness and not be fragmented in order to compare parts of them with parts from other sagas.

131Harris (1975: 430)

132Harris (1975: 430)

133Andersson (1975: 420)

134Andersson (1975: 439)

Contrary to this idea, Lönnroth proposes that each saga should be divided into small units in order to render the classification easier. This depends on the fact that secular literary production, like hagiographies, was written following strict compositional rules on the prologue, epilogue etc. while the general structure was a free creation of the writer.¹³⁵

Despite their differences, Andersson, Harris and Lönnroth conclude that a complete reorganization of the taxonomy of the saga system would be confusing and probably pointless, but on the other hand attention should be focused on the "gray zones"¹³⁶, i.e. on those texts which render the actual classification problematic.

In more recent years the question of the taxonomy of the sagas has come back into discussion, mostly with the aim of re-evaluating the sagas others than the "classical" *Íslendingasögur*. Clunies-Ross (1998) asserts that the traditional groupings in which the different sagas are sub-divided are to be considered sub-genres of the wider saga genre. This would depend on the fact that sagas display different modes of narration – realistic/historical, genealogical/biographical, fantastic/supernatural and prosimetric – but there are very few sagas which display just a single mode of narration.¹³⁷

At the same time, it is in many cases difficult to establish a precise chronology for the genres of the sagas or of the different sagas within a sub-genres, as it seems that traditional dating can be put into discussion. For example, the *fornaldarsögur*, which are usually dated from the late part of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, could actually have appeared at the same time as most of the other sub-genres, which means in the course of the 12th and 13th century. This because their genesis could be linked to a slow transformation of the narrational mode of legendary and eddic material from poetical to prosaic.¹³⁸

Clunies-Ross' assumption is basically that all sagas have a general homogeneity and if it

135Lönnroth (1975: 425)

136Andersson (1975: 441)

137Clunies-Ross (1998: 50-51)

138Tulinius (1995: 45- 58)

possible to make a distinction, that is at a descriptive level but not at a generic level, because in virtually all sagas there are intertextual references which have been classified by scholars as “anecdotes”, “foreshadowing” etc.¹³⁹

Torfi Tulinius in his article ”Saga as a myth: the family sagas and social reality in 13th-century Iceland”, presented at the 11th International Saga Conference agrees with Clunies-Ross' view of sagas as ”multi-modal” products, but he considers their division in different genres, which are in a systemic relationship with each other, useful.

Generic classifications are important because they raise the reader's expectations about the text he is about to read. At the same time in a synchronic system the different genres can interact with each other in different ways:

- narrative structures originating in a genre can adapt to the world represented in another,
- different worlds can coexist within a single work
- there can be intertextual allusions in a genre to worlds of other genres.¹⁴⁰

Because of these possible inter-generic references, a different classification of the genres of the saga literature is possible. A more dynamic description of the saga corpus, which takes into consideration the interplay between genres, is obtained by considering it as a system organized around five principles:

- genealogy
- geography
- religion
- relation to the supernatural
- social status of the protagonists.¹⁴¹

139Clunies-Ross (1998: 53)

140Tulinius (2000: 526- 528) [rp-www.arts.usyd.edu.au/medieval/saga/pdf/526-tulinius.pdf](http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/medieval/saga/pdf/526-tulinius.pdf)

141Tulinius (2000: 527)

The genealogical principle is a chronological one and it comes out from the *góðar* attempt to root their origins in past times. The geographical one is based on the places where the action takes place and it separates the *fornaldarsögur* from the romances and the *konungasögur* from the *Íslendingasögur*. The union of the geographical and the genealogical principle results in the traditional division of sagas in *samtíðasögur*; *biskupasögur*; *konungasögur*; *Íslendingasögur*; *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*.¹⁴²

If other organizing principles are taken into consideration one gets a different image of the literary system and can make some interesting observations. The religious principle divides clearly the *biskupasögur* and the *samtíðasögur* from the *fornaldarsögur* since in the former there are no references to the pre-Christian world, while the latter are set in a clearly heathen pre-history. *Konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* find themselves in an intermediate position since their textual world is in transition from heathenism to Christianity: the characters of these sagas can be either heathens or Christians, converted to the new religion or pagans who, however, have a good understanding of Christian principles.¹⁴³ Therefore, many of them are in an ambiguous position towards the two religions and this “ontological uncertainty” is, according to Tulinius, a typical feature of the *Íslendingasögur*, which will come out from the analysis of the remaining organizing principles.

The principle of the social status of the characters displays in fact the same division among the sagas – in the *fornaldarsögur*, the *riddarasögur* and in the *biskupasögur* the social status of the people is clear and it remains unchanged in the course of the narration, while in the *Íslendingasögur* the social status is either changing or unclear.¹⁴⁴ Some of these sagas portray characters who are losing a higher social status – *Hrafnkels saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Egills saga* for example.

The last principle to take into consideration is the representation of the supernatural. In the

142Tulinius (2000: 529)

143Tulinius (2000: 529- 530)

144Tulinius (2000: 532)

samtíðasögur the supernatural doesn't appear but in dreams or visions, while in the *fornaldarsögur* and the *riddarasögur* supernatural events are normal and more than common. In the *vitae* and religious texts supernatural elements are also present but with a clear distinction between divine and diabolical character, while this is rarely present in the *fornaldarsögur*.¹⁴⁵

Also in this case *Íslendingasögur* occupies an intermediate position:

“The fact that these sagas take place in historical time and in places their authors knew seems often to have inhibited them from allowing such events in their stories, even though they are more frequent than in contemporary sagas and there are distinct differences in this between individual sagas. But there remains a reluctance in describing the supernatural.”¹⁴⁶

Grettla saga and *Eyrbyggja saga* are two among the family sagas in which the use of the supernatural is more extensive, but in any of these it is completely explicit. In the former Þórólfur *bægifótr*'s haunting is never displayed directly but only through the consequences of his activities, similarly in the latter Glámur's ghostly activities are described through what he can do to animals and objects.¹⁴⁷

Also in those sagas, in which authors seemed more reluctant to insert supernatural phenomena, there are however hints at situations out of the ordinary. This is the case, for example, with *Hrafnels saga* where there is a mysterious disappearance of a flock of sheep and where Einarr tries to ride without consent the horse Freyfaxi, which holds strangely still.¹⁴⁸

The *Íslendingasögur* then seems to represent an “ontological uncertainty” when one takes into consideration the principles of religion, social status and representation of the

145Tulinius (2000: 530)

146Tulinius (2000: 531)

147Tulinius (2000: 532)

148Tulinius (2000: 532)

supernatural, which at the same time locate these sagas to an intermediary position within the system. At the same time the geographical and genealogical principles put this family sagas in the middle of the system.

This would suggest an uncertainty in the identities which can be linked to a crisis in the status of the social class of the leading families in Iceland in the 13th century patronizing the composition these sagas, which is proved by some contemporary sources.¹⁴⁹

This ideological as well as ontological crisis of the ruling class in Iceland in the 13th century would thus have created two different literary genres: the *fornaldarsögur* and the *Íslendingasögur*. The former are set in a prehistorical and mythological past, and their protagonists are ideal figures who take on the problems and fears of the people in Iceland in the 13th century. The latter instead are ambiguous myths which are set between the world of their creators and that of the “Matter of the North”.

149Tulinius (2000: 532- 535)

6. VÍGLUNDAR SAGA

6.1 VÍGLUNDAR SAGA: SUMMARY

The story begins with a long premise set in Norway at the time of King Haraldr inn where the scene is briefly set. It is told in fact that the king was gaining power and that many men who didn't want to submit to him decided to go willingly in exile.

A man named Þórir was an earl at the time and he had a daughter called Olof who was considered the most beautiful in Norway. He had a dwelling built for her and called the best women to teach her all the finest arts so that after a while she was praised by everyone. Nevertheless Þórir didn't allow anyone to marry her.

Another man named Ketill, who was considered the best layer, was a great friend of King Haraldr and he was married to Ingibjorg; they had two sons: Gunnlaugr “the Boisterous” and Sigurðr “the Wise”.

After a while the king decided to move war in the south and Ketill's sons went with him. When an earl named Eirik of Rogaland heard about the king's arrival he had a great feast prepared and he welcomed the king with the greatest honor. At the feast Ketill's sons were sitting close to the king and they were assigned the honor of being cupbearers and they acquired a great honor for this. At the end of the feast the earl gave the king some precious objects as a gift and he showed him his sons, who were playing a board-game on an apple orchard. Once back the king was informed that they were called Sigmundr and Helgi and the youngest was called Þórgrímr and was born outside the marriage.

Nevertheless he stood out of his brothers and the king was so impressed by him that he gave him a golden ring and accepted to take him with him.

Some time later the king went to another feast held by a man named Sígurðr. Þórgrímr was serving as a cup bearer and he accidentally spilled the content of a goblet on a man named Grim, who was a relative of Sigurd and an arrogant man. He got furious and offended Sigurd who drew his sword and killed him. The king payed for Þórgrímr and the matter was

solved there.

After that the king held a great feast at his court and both Earl Þórir and Ketill from Raumaríke were invited. Þórgrímur was as usual serving as a cupbearer and when he and Ólof, Þórir's daughter, saw each other they fell immediately in love and at the end of the feast Þórgrímur asked Þórir for the hand of his daughter but he didn't answer.

Some time later Þórgrímur took leave from the king and went to Þórir to ask again for the hand of Ólof; the Earl refused, but some time later, during a feast, he promised Ólof to Ketill of Raumaríke. As soon as Þórir discovered this he went to Earl Þórir's home where the marriage was being held. Once there he said that he considered Ólof to be his since they swore to each other to get married, but Ketill refused to hand her to him and they began duelling. At this point the lights of the house went off and when they were lit again Þórgrímur and Ólof had disappeared. They decided to sail towards Iceland, where they settled at Ingjalshvol and got married and had two sons: Trausti and Víglundur.

From this moment the setting of the story moves from Norway to Iceland.

At that time there was a man called Hólmkell who lived near Foss and he was married to a woman called Þorbjörg. They had two sons, Jökull and Einarr and the same year that Víglundur was born they had also a daughter who they named Ketilríður. She wasn't loved by her mother so that when she had grown up Hólmkell rode with her towards Ingjalshvol and asked Ólof to foster her. She accepted and so it happened that Ketilríður stayed with Þórgrímur's family and after a while she and Víglundur came to love each other.

Víglundur wanted to make their love official but Ketilríður was reluctant because:

“eru þar, [...], margir hlutir í móti, þat fyrst, at þér megi þetta ekki í hug vera, er þú ert fulltíða; verði þér jafnan hverflyndir karlmenn um slíka hluti. Þá er annat, at mér stendr þat ekki, enda vil ek þat ekki, at fara eigi ráðum föður míns fram. En þat it þriðja, at fyrir má bíta, at ek sé mín eigi ráðandi, ok veit ek, at þar ganga mest ar ráð móður minnar; hefir hon

lítit ástríki á mér.”¹⁵⁰

“There are many thing speaking against this, [...], first of all, you may not be so inclined when you have grown up. You men are always fickle in such matters. Furthermore, it is not appropriate for me to against my father's wishes – nor do I desire it. The third reason, which settles the matter, is that I cannot do as I choose, and I know that most things go as my mother dictates. She has little love for me. Nonetheless, I know of no one whom I would rather marry than you if I myself could decide, but my heart tells me that we'll encounter great obstacles no matter how things turn out.”¹⁵¹

In the meantime Einarr and Jökull created some problems in the district and they didn't like the high respect which was paid to Þórgrímr, so Einarr decided to seduce Ólof so that Þórgrímr would have been obliged to avange himself and they hoped that it wouldn't end good for him. His mother Þorbjörg agreed with the idea, so that one day he rode towards Ingjaldshvol with his brother Jökull while Þórgrímr was not at home. As soon as Ólof saw them she asked her maid to wear her cloak and made her sit in the sewing room while she sent another one to open the door. Einarr asked where Ólof was and he was answered that she was in the sewing room and as soon as he entered and begun talking to whom he thought it was Ólof, a man dressed in black walked inside the hall branding a sword. He said that he was called Ottar and that it was time to go and greet Þórgrímr who was coming home. At these words Einarr and Jökull flew from there. The man was in reality Ólof and she told her husband everything, but he decided not to bring charges against his friend Hólmkell since nothing bad had happened.

Another incident caused by the two brothers happened some time later when Jökull asked Víglundr to give him his horse. As Víglundr refused they decided to set the matter with a horse fight, which eventually ended with Víglundr's horse Bleikrinn winning against the one of the two brothers. The two parties at that point begun fighting until the two fathers,

150Víglandar saga (1959: 76)

151The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 418)

Þórgrímr and Hólmkell, separated them.

Despite this fact they remained friends and Víglundr and Ketilríðr kept on loving each other, even if Þorbjörg and her sons were not happy with that.

One other night Jökull and Einarr tried to steal Víglundr's stud mares but they were too well protected by the stallion Bleikrinn. Because of this they got furious and killed it. In order to conceal this fact they pushed the corpse down the cliff so that everyone would have thought that he had fallen by itself.

Some time later they also stole two oxen belonging to Þórgrímr, they took them home and killed them. All of this happened with their mother's approval.

As soon as Víglundr and Trausti discovered what had happened to their horse they reported the news to their father who nevertheless decided not to do anything about this. Even when he discovered that the oxen that he most praised had been stolen he decided not to act. When his friend Hólmkell understood that his sons had stolen the oxen he immediately went to Þórgrímr but they decided that Hólmkell just had to pay as much money as Þórgrímr wanted since he was not to put on a charge against his sons, and their friendship remained intact.

Þorbjörg was friend to a woman called Kjölvör who was said to be skilled in magic and devoted to evil. She paid her hundred pieces of silver to harm the two brothers Víglundr and Trausti.¹⁵²

In the meantime the two lovers Víglundr and Ketilríðr loved each other even more and this is how the saga describes their love:

“En þau unnust því heitara með leyniligri ást ok fólginni elsku þeim í brjósti þegar I fyrstu, er þau váru uppvaðandi, svá at rætr elskunnar ok uppvöxtr ástarinnar, er alri varð upprættir

¹⁵²The text says about Kjölvör: “Kjölvör hét kona, er bjó í Hraunskarði; hon var fjölkunning mjök ok at öllu illa fallinn, harðla óvinsæl við alþýðu manna.” Víglundar saga (1959: 82)

ór þeira hjörtum, eptir því sem náttúra er amorsins, at eldr yndsins ok logi elskunnar brennr því heitara ok sækir því meir brjóst ok hjörtu mannanna saman sem fleiri vilja þeim meina ok stærri skorður við settar þeira vandamanna, er áðr hefir ást ok elska saman fallit þeira á millum, sem nú þessara manna, Víglundar ok Ketilríðar, því at hvárki mátti af öðru sjá, þaðan af er þau sáust fyrsta, ef þau skyldu eptir því gera, sem hugir þeira stóðu til.”¹⁵³

“They had such a secret loved concealed in their hearts that their deeply entrenched love and the fruit of their affection could never be uprooted from their hearts, since this is the nature of true love. For the fire of affection and the flames of love burn all the more intensely, and weld together the hearts and minds of lovers all the more tightly, the greater the number of those who wish to injure them and the greater the obstacles that families place in the path of those whom love and affection have brought together, as was the case with these two, Viglund and Ketilrid.”¹⁵⁴

A sailor named Björn, who was Þórgrímr's farmhand used to go out to sea with two men who got ill because of Kjölvör's magic. He therefore asked the two brothers Víglundr and Trausti to go with him. As soon as they were sailing Kjölvör cast a spell so that the weather turned bad and they were driven out in the sea towards south-west. As they were about to shipwreck they landed at Dögurðanes where Þorkell Skinnvefja lived. As soon as Ketilríðr learned that the two brothers were dead she fainted, but when they got home the following day she reunited joyfully with Víglundr.

The story turned briefly to Norway where Ketill Raumr was not satisfied with the way things turned out with Þórgrímr. His daughter Ingibjörg had become the most beautiful of Norway and a man named Hákon went to Raumaríke to asked for her hand. Ketill Raumr gave his consent to him only if he would have gone to Iceland and kill Þórgrímr. Hákon agreed and he went on his way to Iceland. When he arrived the first people he met were Jökull and Einarr, who invited him to stay with them and their parents at Foss. There he told them and

153Víglandar saga (1959: 82)

154The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 421, 422)

their mother about his mission and they decided to accomplish it together. They also told him about their sister Ketilríðr, who at the time was living with Ólof at Ingjaldshvol and Hákon wanted to see her. Hólmkell didn't agree on the fact that she had to come back at home, since he know that Þorbjörg felt no love for her. Despite this fact, knowing that he couldn't oppose his wife he went to Ingjaldshvol to fetch Ketilríðr. When she and Víglundr separated they spoke to each other as it follows:

“[...] gengr Víglundr til Ketilríðar ok mælti svá: «Hér er kominn faðir þinn; þykjumst ek vita, at hann ætlar at sækja þik ok flytja þik heim með sér; mun hann ok því ráða; en þat vilda ek, Ketilríðr, at þú myndir öll okkur einkamál, því at ek vei, at ek verð þér aldri afhuga.» Ketilríðr mælti ok grét við mjök: «Fyrir löngu þóttumst ek vita, at vit mundum eigi njótast mega í náðum. Þætti mér nú betr, at vit hefðim þar færa um talat, en ekki er víst, at þú unnir mér meira en ek ann þér, þótt ek tala þar um færa en þú; en sé ek, at þetta [eru] ráð móður minnar; hefir ek lítit ástríki af henni haft um langan tíma, ok er þat líkast, at farnar sé gleðistundir okkrar, ef hon ræðr; en þó vilda ek vel una, ef ek vissá, at þér gengi vel til, ok annathvært munu vit njótast aldri eðr munu þar ráð fóður míns til ganga, en þó á hann við þungt at hræra, þar sem eru bræðr mínir ok móðir, því at þau vildu allt í móti mínum vilja gera, en lát þú sem sirt á þér finna.» Síðan gekk Víglundr at henni ok kyssti hana.»¹⁵⁵

“[...] Viglund went to Ketilrid and said: « Your father has come here. I realise that he intends to fetch you and take you home with him. He has the power to decide in this matter, but I want you, Ketilrid, to remember all we have said to each other. I know that I shall never stop loving you.» Ketilrid wept copiously and said, «I've known for a long time that we would never be able to enjoy our love in peace. I now think that it would have been better if we had talked less about this, for I am not at all sure that you love me more than I love you, even though I talk less about it than you. Now I realise that my mother's plotting is at the bottom of this. For a long time now I have received little love from her, and if she is in charge, it is most likely that our joyous time together has come to an end. In spite of everything, I would be satisfied if I knew that things were going well for you. Either we

155Vígglundar saga (1959: 86)

shall never be able to enjoy our love, or my father will have to find a way to help us, but he has his hands full if my brothers and mother are involved, since they will do anything to oppose me. But don't let on how you are taking this.» Viglund then approached her and kissed her.”¹⁵⁶

After this she was taken home but she refused to serve Hákon as her mother had ordered her, and her father let her have her way.

Some time later some games were played at Esjutjörn and there Víglundr and Ketilriðr saw each other again and she gave him the name of Víglundr *inn væna* (the beautiful) and they gave each other a ring.

Hákon was not happy with these events and the same evening he asked Þorbjörg to forbid her daughter to go to the games and her husband could do nothing about it.

The games kept on going and one time Jökull got angry with Viglundr and he strucked him so hard that his eyebrow split open but he didn't have time to revange himself. His father Þórgrímr asked him why he didn't revange himself and treated him coldly. The occasion for the revenge occurred the following day, when Viglundr did exactly the same thing to Jökull and the two parties begun fighting until they were separated and went home.

Other games were played later at Foss and even if Þórgrímr didn't want his sons to go there they decided to participate. There Víglundr sat the whole day with Ketilriðr and her father had a board game taken for them. Hákon hated the two brothers even because he wanted to marry Ketilriðr but her father always refused to give him her hand. In the evening, she asked Viglundr and Trausti not to go away because she suspected that her brothers were about to ambush them. Despite this they went away and in fact they were attacked by some men of Foss, but they defended themselves well. Jökull said to his father that the blame of the incident was on the brothers. Hólmkell got really angry about this and as a consequence he gave Ketilriðr in marriage to Hákon, who decided to stay in Iceland since he didn't kill Þórgrímr

¹⁵⁶The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 424)

The games continued at Foss and Hólmkell discovered the truth about the ambush and he thought he had exaggerated in letting Hákon marry his daughter. When it was the time for Viglund and Trausti to go home Hólmkell said that he preferred that they stayed there for his two sons, Hákon and other men from Foss had disappeared. They decided to go anyway even if Ketilriðr asked them to take another road, but Víglundr wanted to meet with Hákon to set the matter.

They met with the two brothers, Hákon and some other men from Foss at the same spot where they had the first battle. Viglund killed after a long battle both Hákon and Jökull but he laid down as dead because of exhaustion, while Trausti and Einarr killed each other. The only two people who survived came back to Foss and told what had happened and that the two sons of Þórgrímr had fallen in battle as well as the two of Hólmkell. When Ketilriðr heard this, she fainted and when she got up her mother reproached her harshly and asked her husband for revenge, which he didn't find a good idea:

“[...] «ok er mál at safna mönnum ok drepa Þorgrímr prúða ok hefna sem greypiligast.» «Mun því nokkut vel ráðit?» segir bóndi. «Þykir mér sem hann sé saklauss af drápi þeira bræðra, en Þorgrímssynir máttu eigi meira fyrir týna en lífinu; lá þeim þat fyrir at verja hendr sínar.»¹⁵⁷

“[...]« it's time to round up the men and kill Thorgrim the Elegant and to avange the deed as fiercely as possible.» «Is that really the best course of action?» said her husband. «It seems to me that he is innocent of the killing of our sons, while Viglund and Trausti could not do any more than lose their lives. What else could they do but defend themselves?»¹⁵⁸

After the battle Víglundr regained consciousness and discovered that his brother too was still alive. After a while their father arrived and he took them home, but he concealed them and pretended that they were dead by placing a mound over his sons and his men who had

157Vígglundar saga (1959: 94)

158The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 429)

been killed. Moreover he decided with his friend Hólmkell not to bring the case before law court. Þorbjörg was not happy with this and asked her father Einarr from Lon to persecute the case and seek full outlawry for Þórgrímr's sons, in the case they were alive. They finally were sentenced to that crime at the assembly of Þorsnes.

In the summer Hákon's shipmates sailed to Norway and reported to Ketill the news from Iceland. He asked his sons Gunnlaugr Ofláti (the Boisterous) and Sigurðr inn Spaki (the wise) to go to Iceland and avenge him by killing Þórgrímr. When they went out in the sea they found a really bad weather and eventually they got shipwrecked off Öndvert. Þórgrímr discovered this and saved them and invited them to stay at his place, which they accepted. While they were there Sigurðr fell in love with Helga. They decided not to avenge their father by killing Þórgrímr, also because Sigurðr had made a vow never to repay good with evil; in the summer they got ready to sail off to Norway.

Meanwhile Earl Eirik had died and his son Sigmundur inherited everything, even if he wasn't given any title since King Haraldr did not want to favour Þórgrímr's kinsmen because of his friendship with Ketill.

At that time a man called Steinólfr, with a son named Þorleifr, asked for Ketilriðr in marriage and even if she refused he said that he was going to marry her anyway, and he did this with her mother's agreement. That summer Víglundr and Trausti were completely recovered and their father advised them to go to Norway with Gunnlaugr and Sigurðr, saying that they would just receive good from them. The night before the departure the two brothers went to Foss and said farewell to Ketilriðr. She was very happy to see the two brothers and they talked for a long time. When they had to separate Víglundr asked Ketilriðr not to get married while he was away but she said that the decision was to be made by her father. He then asked her to cut and wash his hair and he made a vow that no one would do the same to him as long as she was alive. When they parted Ketilriðr wept painfully and Víglundr recited a verse:

“«Mær, nem þú mínar vísur,
munnfögr, ef þú villt kunna;
þær munu þér at gamni,
þorn-Grund, verða stundum;
en ef, ítrust, verðr úti
eygarðr litinn, Freyja,
þá muntu mín, in mjóva,
minnast hverju sinni.»¹⁵⁹

“«Pretty maiden, take
my poem if it please you;
delivered to delight you,
brooch-bearer, now and then.
When your eyes, Freyja,
espy the islet garth,
your mind will seek me,
slender maid, each time.»¹⁶⁰

When Hólmkell entered her room and saw Ketilriðr weeping, he asked her what was the problem and she said that she was thinking about her brothers. Therefore he asked her if she wanted them avanged:

“«Vildir þú láta hefna þeira?» segir Hólmkell. «Þat skyldi prófa, ef ek væra svá karlmaðr mikils ráðandi sem nú er ek kona.» Bóndi svarar: « Vit þat fyrir satt, dóttir, at ek hefir þat fyrir þína skuld gert at ganga ekki at þeim bræðrum, því at ek veit, at þeir lifa, ok dylst þú ekki fyrir mér, á hvárn máta er þú villt vera láta, því at ek skal, þegar ek get, drepa þá, ef þat er þinn vili.»¹⁶¹

“«Do you want to have them avenged?» asked Holmkel. «That would be clear if I were a

159Vígundar saga (1959: 98)

160The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 431)

161Vígundar saga (1959: 100)

man with power to act, but I am in fact a woman.» Her father said: «You may be sure, my daughter, that for your sake I have not moved against Víglund and Trausti even though I know that they are alive. Don't conceal from me what you want done, since I intend to kill them when I can, if that is your will.»¹⁶²

She then said that she wouldn't want them to be killed nor outlawed, and that they would be given some money for their trip and that she would just marry Víglundr if it was in her power to decide. Hólmkell then went out of his home to follow the two brothers. When they saw him coming Trausti said that it was a chance for Víglundr to get Ketilriðr if he killed her father, but he answered that he would never do that because of the loyalty he showed him. So they hid in the hayfield to make way for him and when he passed, he let fall a money punch and a rune stick, where he inscribed the conversation between him and Ketilriðr; after that he rode home.

When they arrived at the ship of Gunnlaug and Sigurðr they asked to be taken aboard and they said they were called Vandráðr (Trouble-prone) and Torráðr (Problem-prone). At sea they revealed their real identities and the two sons of Ketill decided not to do any harm to them because of the hospitality that Þórgrímr showed them in Iceland.

When they arrived home their father was not there. The day he came back he saw his sons, who did not greet him, sitting with those two strangers and he asked why they didn't greet him and who those people were.

They said that they were the sons of Þórgrímr and so Ketill ordered his man to seize them. At that point his son Sigurðr said that he and his companion would defend them:

“Mikill er þá munr várr Þorgríms príða, en hann tók okkr bræðr af skipbroti ok gerði við okkr hvern hlut öðrum betr, en hann átti alls kosti við okkr, en nú villtu drepa sonu hans saklausa; munu vér kumpánar verða yðr skeinuhættir, en Þorgrímssynir eru drepnir, því at eitt skal yfir oss ganga alla saman.”¹⁶³

162The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 432)

163Vígglundar saga (1959: 102)

“There's a great difference between Thorgrim the Elegant and us, since he rescued us two brothers from a shipwreck, and he dealt with us all the better when we were completely at his mercy, but you now want to kill his sons without cause. We two and our companions would sooner wound you than have Thorgrim's sons killed, because we are all going to meet the same fate.”¹⁶⁴

At this point Ketill's rage vanished, because he didn't want to attack his own sons and it was decided that the matter should be solved by Gunnlaugr. He said that Þórgrímr should have given legal right to Ólof, but she should renounce her inheritance and that Ketill would receive hers. Ingibjörg would have been given in marriage to Trausti while Sigurðr would marry Helga Þórgrímsdotter.

Everyone was happy with that and for four years the four foster-brothers stayed together and went to wars. The only one who didn't seem as happy as before was Víglundr, because he could just think about Ketilriðr.

In the meantime in Iceland Þórgrímr and Hólmkell were seen talking one whole day and after some days the latter sent three of his men away and they came back after three weeks, without anyone knowing where they had been. At that time a man called Þórðr arrived at Foss with thirty men and he asked for the hand of Ketilriðr. Her mother wanted the marriage contract to be made and in the end Hólmkell gave his consent, even if his daughter didn't want to marry. Þórðr took her to the East Fjords where he lived but they did not celebrate their wedding and Ketilriðr was unhappy despite the attentions Þórðr gave to her.

That summer the four foster-brothers came back from warring expedition and they all had their hair washed, except Víglundr who had made an oath not to wash his hair as long as Ketilriðr was alive. Then they decided to go to Iceland. Ketill's son arrived first and they were hosted by Þórgrímr; they told him all about the settlement that was made in Norway

¹⁶⁴The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 433)

and that his sons were about to arrive.

When they were at sight of Iceland a storm didn't allow them to land. They were at sea for fifty days and in the end they made land in the East Fjords, in Gautavík, The farmer of the place welcomed them and they said that he could take anything he wanted from the cargo. He answered that he would come with his wife so she could choose whatever she wanted. As soon as they returned, Ketilriðr recognized Víglundr immediately but didn't react. The farmer invited them to stay with him and when they arrived at home he lost his footing and his wife reproached him:

“Illt er at eiga gamla mann.”¹⁶⁵

“It's a nuisance to be married to an old man.”¹⁶⁶

They remained the whole winter there, but Víglundr was unhappy while his brother and the farmer were most cheerful. Ketilriðr in the meantime always wore a while in her face because she didn't want to be recognized by Víglundr. One day though she was outside without her veil and Víglundr saw her and got extremely angry. His brother told him that it would have not been a good deed to kill her husband, because he treated them so warmly:

«Þat er it mesta óráð at gera nökkut illt bónda, svá vel hann hefir gert til okkar, ok mundi okkr þat til ógæfu verða, ef þú dræpir bónda hennar saklausan, ok leið þik þar frá», ok kvað vísu:

«Þit munið, brenndra bauga
brjótr, aldrigi njótast,
ef þú gæðingi góðum
grandar Fáfnis landa.
Áhlaup munu eigi

165 Víglundar saga (1959: 107)

166 The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 436)

einhlít vera rítar;
taka skulum rétt til ráða,
raunfróðlingar, bróðir.»¹⁶⁷

“«It would be inadvisable to harm her husband, considering how well he has treated us. It will be our misfortune if you kill her husband without cause. You should forget it,» and he spoke a verse:

«You'll never, breaker of rings,
win the maid in wedlock,
if you harm the good ruler
of Fafnir's great realm.
Dealing blows with weapons
does not solve dilemmas.
We two brothers must behave
beyond blame and reproach»¹⁶⁸

During the night Víglundr went to the bedroom where the farmer and his wife were sleeping, in order to kill him, and he saw that they were sleeping in the same bed but separately. Trausti stopped him by saying that he should behave like a man and not kill a person while he was sleeping.

The next morning the farmer was very happy and he asked Víglundr why he was such in a bad mood and he asked him to play a board game, at which Víglundr lost because he could not concentrate. At that point Ketilriðr told Víglundr how to play and the game was a draw. Another time they found each other alone outside, but they exchanged a few words and after that Víglundr went to the farmer and by reciting two stanzas he said to him that the two of them were in love.

167Vígundar saga (1959: 108, 109)

168The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 437)

The farmer said that he thought that things would in any case turn out good . He then said that he was to go away for a while and that he wanted Víglundr to take care of his farm, since he trusted him more than anyone else.

While he was away the two brothers decided to leave because the people could have been thinking that Víglundr was trying to seduce the farmer's wife.

When the farmer came back he had with him Þórgrímr, his wife Ólof and their daughter Helga, Sigurd and Gunnlaug and Hólmkell. In the meantime Ketilríðr had prepared everything for the wedding since the farmer wanted to celebrate it now.

When they were all together the farmer revealed that he in reality was Helgi, Ketilríðr's uncle and that he asked for Ketilríðr in marriage to save her. He also revealed that it was a plan made by Hólmkell and that Ketilríðr didn't know anything about it; at this point Víglundr made peace with Hólmkell.

After that Víglundr and Ketilríðr got married, as well as Helga and Sigurðr and Ragnhild with Gunnlaug.

The former lived at Foss while Trausti at Inhjaldshvol; Gunnlaug and Sigurðr returned to Norway.

6.2 SOME OBSERVATIONS ON VÍGLUNDAR SAGA

In this section I will take into analysis some characteristics of the *riddarasögur* as a genre and make some observations on the fact that *Víglundar saga* should in fact be considered as part of the *Íslendingasögur* and not a romance.

Víglundar saga was written in the end of the 14th or in the beginning of the 15th century and is preserved in two vellum manuscripts: AM 551a 4to and AM 510 4to. The former dates from the 15th century while the other is probably of the 16th century.¹⁶⁹

The Polysystem Theory, as it will be shown, helps us to understand that, the fact that *Víglundar saga* shows many of the characteristics of the romances can be read as a

169Ashman Rowe (1993: 692)

phenomenon related to socio-political changes which find expression in the literary production of the time. To similar observations lead the theories developed by Jauss and Köhler.

6.2.1 ROMANCES IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC LITERATURE

The first romances to have been written in Old Norse have been translations of French or Anglo-Norman works, which were made at the court of the Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarson. (1217- 63) and probably they arrived in Iceland almost immediately after their composition.¹⁷⁰ This dating is determined by two factors: it is historically known that king Hákon tried to transmit the chivalric ideology at his court, and therefore it is probable that he commissioned the translation of European chivalric literature, which is proved by some direct references to him made in the sagas, where he is said to be their commissioner.¹⁷¹

The manuscript tradition is mostly Icelandic and it shows that in the 13th and 14th century there was a certain consciousness of these texts as a genre, since many manuscripts appear to be collections of *riddarasögur*.¹⁷²

Lönnroth has pointed out that there are also some contemporary sources which make use of the term, unlike other modern genre definitions:

“Först skall då konstateras, att facktermerna *Íslendinga sögur* och *fornaldar sögur* aldrig använts förrän i modern tid [...].

Något annorlunda förhållander det sig med begreppen «riddarasagor» och «kungasagor». Uttrycket *riddara sögur* finns belagt i en lista över Viðey klostres bokförråd 1396 (*Riddara sögur í tveim bókum*) samt i efterskriften till *Mágus saga jarls* (*þeir vilja heyra þær frásagnir, sem þeim þikki kátlingar til gamans, svá sem er Þjóðriks saga, Flóvents saga eðr aðrar riddara sögur*).[...]

170Barnes (2000 : 266)

171Glauser (2005: 373)

172Glauser (2005: 377)

Riddara sögur motsvarar å sin sida närmast de utländska *romans courtois*, men också i detta fall är det snarare en ämnessfär än en bestämd genre som anges.”¹⁷³

So, despite the fact that *riddarasögur* was probably not a generic term *per se*, it is still important to note that these texts were probably seen as different and separate from others literary products.

After the reception of the translated romances there was in Iceland in the 14th century a production of independent *riddarasögur*, which similarly to many other saga genres have been long ignored in international scholarship since they were seen as a symbol of the decadence of the Icelandic literature in the late Middle Ages.¹⁷⁴

The most prominent characteristics of the sagas of the knights are their settings, since they are often set in distant and exotic lands, the narration of supernatural events and their tendency to the hyperbolic.

As regards the main themes and the ideology of the *riddarasögur*, Geraldine Barnes write:

“the ultimate aim in the *riddarasögur* is the acquisition, extension, and legitimization of power, through marriage, conquest, and the validation of the hero's identity, which may be obscured by the circumstances of his birth (*Adonias saga*), enchantment (*Ala flekks saga*), usurpation (*Adonias saga*, *Bærings saga*, *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands*), or abduction (*Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans.*)”¹⁷⁵

173Lönnroth (1964: 21, 22) “First it must be noted that the technical terms *Íslendinga sögur* and *fornaldarsögur* have never been used before modern times. A slightly different attitude underlays with the concepts of «*riddarsagor*» and «*kungasagor*». The expression *riddara sögur* is inserted in a list of the *Víðey* monastery in the year 1396. (“Sagas of the nights in two books”) and in the afterword of *Mágus saga jarls* (They wanted to hear stories that they thought were entertaining, like *Þíðriks saga*, *Flóvents saga* and other sagas of the knights. [my translation])
Riddara sögur correspond from their own part mostly to the foreign roman courtois, but also in that case it's specified more a sphere of arguments rather than a particular genre. My translation.

174Barnes (2000: 266)

175Barnes (2000: 277)

Differently from their European counterparts the *riddarasögur* are not an expression of a courtly and chivalric environment, and this is clearly seen by the motifs they display. As for example women in these sagas, differently from the European *romans courtoises*, are usually just seen as a means for getting richness and inheritance and they are not the “objects of love quests”¹⁷⁶

As a consequence marriage is not seen as the final result of a love desire but chiefly as a means to obtain power and wealth. Because of this, relations between the sexes are not determined by the courtly and chivalric behavioral code.

In fact many heroes in these “independent” *riddarasögur* are described according to the canons of romances, as exemplars of virtues, nobility, beauty, chivalric behavior and strength, but rarely they display these characteristics in the course of the narration. On the other hand even women do not behave according to the stereotypical image of romances; on the contrary Icelandic sagas of the knights introduce the character of the *meykongr* (maiden queen), which is a re-elaboration of the *valkyrja* of the Edda and the saga literature. These figures are characterized by an aggressive monogamy and reverse the literary conventions of wooing, not only of European but also of Icelandic ascendancy.¹⁷⁷

Because of these characteristics it has been wondered if the literary model for the “independent” *riddarasögur* are really translated romances or rather other literary forms.

According to Barnes (2000) the model for these sagas could have been the *fornaldarsögur*, which have probably been written in the first half of the 13th century.

These sagas share some features with the *riddarasögur* such as “a predilection for stories of bride quests, a fascination with royal power, a geographical range which extends to India, and an assertive and sometimes playful narrator.”¹⁷⁸ According to Tulinius (1995) the *fornaldarsögur* display a changing in their mode from heroic and tragic to adventurous and comic towards the end of the 13th century, when Iceland from a free state became a

¹⁷⁶*ibid.*

¹⁷⁷Barnes (2000: 277-280)

¹⁷⁸Barnes (2000: 275) It must be noted though that most of the *fornaldarsögur* date from the 14th and 15th century and that their dating to the 13th century is not shared by all scholars. In her work Barnes refers to Tulinius (1995) for this dating.

dominion of the Norwegian crown. They also show a grown interest in the royal power and how one's can grow his power and authority. The appearance of the *riddarasögur* coincides with this period and it seems therefore that these last features of the *fornaldarsögur* are mirrored in these new sagas.¹⁷⁹

The role of the narrator is particularly interesting because it is one of the most prominent elements which differentiates the *riddarasögur* from the *Íslendingasögur*. In fact the latter genre is known for its objectivity and the narrator never intervenes directly in the narration. Differently from this the author often makes some invocation to the readers or listeners, or makes some ironic comments on the facts he is narrating. Typical of these sagas are also references to other authorial written sources (existing or even fictitious) in order to prove the truthfulness of the events described.¹⁸⁰

6.2.2 VÍGLUNDAR SAGA: AN ICELANDIC ROMANCE OR AN ÍSLENDINGASAGA?

In her article published in *Skáldskaparmál* in 1994 “Víglundar saga: an Icelandic Bridal-Quest Romance”, Marianne Kalinke, as an answer to the the accusation that *Víglundar saga* is a declined and degenerated form of *Íslendingasaga*, fruit of a general decline in literature and morality, suggests that this saga should be considered a bridal quest-romance since the action is determined by the protagonist's quest for a wife. In this section I will briefly go through all the arguments she puts in favor of this theory and subsequently I will try to provide some alternative options to her readings, which aim at showing that in fact *Víglundar saga* should be considered as part of the *Íslendingasögur*. Its particularities are determined, as it will be shown, by the internal evolution of the literary polysystem and by different social-political demands.

She starts her analysis by noting that the author must have had a good knowledge of other

¹⁷⁹Barnes (2000: 275-276)

¹⁸⁰Barnes (2000: 271)

romances and in particular of *Friðþjófs saga*. The narrative motifs between the two sagas would be the same and the difference is the focus in the narrative in the *Víglundar saga* on the relationship between the two parents. Nevertheless the main characteristic which differentiates this romance from all the others is the fact that it's set in Iceland and that the conflicts are generated and solved according to the model of the *Íslendingasögur*¹⁸¹

According to her:

“If the local color is removed from the narrative, however, the saga turns out to be a bridal-quest romance exhibiting the familiar two-tiered structure: the forestory focuses on the bridal quest of the hero's father, while the main narrative recounts that of the eponymous protagonist.”¹⁸²

A link between the forestory and the main narrative is the character of Hákon, who lands in Iceland to pursue his own bride-quest, since he wants to marry the daughter of Ketill of Raumaríki, but in order to do that he has to kill Þórgrímr because he has to avenge the abduction of Ketill's spouse.

But after meeting Ketilríðr's mother and brothers he enters the feud between these and Víglundr and he actually changes his object of the bride quest to Ketiltíðr. The feud between these characters reaches its climax with the killing of Hákon and the two brothers of Ketilríðr and with the outlawing of Víglundr and his brother Trausti.

Because of these events the two sons of Ketill, Sigurðr and Gunnlaugr are sent to Iceland to avenge their father, but they eventually are those who solve the feud and reconcile with Þórgrímr. In fact his union with Ölof (Ketill's daughter) is said to be valid and Ketill is repaid for the loss and the peace between the two men is set.¹⁸³

It appears therefore that the plot is not determined by the love of the protagonists (both in

181Kalinke (1994: 120-121)

182Kalinke (1994: 123)

183Kalinke (1994: 124).

the forestory as in the main narrative) but by the two conflicts generated in the quests of getting a bride, which are strictly interwoven, since the former influences the latter because of the need of avenging the abduction of the bride, while the resolution of the latter causes also the resolution of the one of the forestory.

The difference between the two is that the conflict in the first part of the saga is resolved in a conventional way for romances¹⁸⁴, since the protagonist abducts the woman he wants; on the other hand the second conflict is developed in an unconventional way, because it is influenced by the rivalry between the parents of Ketilríðr concerning authority.¹⁸⁵

The plot of the main narrative is determined by the quest for a bride and the conflict is mostly determined by Þorbjörg's hatred for her daughter, Víglundr and also for the protagonist's father. Her hatred for Þorgrímr could be explained by her envy for his fortune, but the treatment she reserves for her daughter (and consequently to Víglundr) remains unexplained. In the economy of the narration she plays the role of the inimical parent which in romances is usually played by the father. The motifs are however different, since the fathers usually don't want to give their daughters in marriage because they love them too much or they don't find any suitable pretender; she, on the other hand, doesn't want to give Ketilríðr in marriage to Víglundr just for pure hate, resembling the function of the evil step-mother of fairytales. Her role in the *Íslendingasögur* is unique and the only parallel which can be found is in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, which is a *fornaldarsaga*. In this story the evil mother is the maiden king Ölof, who names her daughter Yrsa (the same name of her dog) and doesn't want to recognize her. But in this case her hatred for her daughter may be explained as a vengeance against Helgi, who, after having raped her, refuses to take her as a wife.¹⁸⁶

As regards the saga in question it could be that Þorbjörg's hatred for Ketilríðr may be

184Some lines later she writes: “It is somewhat unusual for the protagonist of a romance to resort to abduction; such an expedient is usually reserved for the antagonists. The reason for this may be the implicit realization – even in the realm of fiction – that abduction ordinarily does not lead to marriage.”
Kalinke (1994: 126-127)

185Kalinke (1994: 127- 128)

186Kalinke (1994: 134-135)

caused by the love her father shows to her and their mutual relationship.

The relationship between father and daughter, when speaking about marriage, is also another issue in the saga. In fact both in the first part as in the second part the daughter's consent of marrying their suitors is bound to the will of their fathers: when Þorgrímr asks Ólöf what she would answer if he asked her hand she said:

“hon kvað engi mótmæli af sinni hendi, ef faðir hennar vildi.”¹⁸⁷

“She replied that she would not object if her father gave his approval”.¹⁸⁸

In the second part of the story Ketilríður replies to Víglundr more than once that she will not do things against the will of her father:

“Þá er annat, at mér stendr þat ekki, enda vil ek þat ekki, at fara eigi ráðum fōður míns fram.”¹⁸⁹

“«Faðir minn mun því ráða» segir Ketilríður «því at ek má ekki, enda vil ek ekki í móti hans vilja gera.»¹⁹⁰

“ Furthermore it is not appropriate for me to go against my father's wishes – nor do I desire it”¹⁹¹

“«My father will decide», said Ketilrid, «because I am not allowed to, and I do not want to go against his will.»¹⁹²

187Víglandar saga (1959: 70)

188The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 415)

189Víglandar saga (1959: 76)

190Víglandar saga (1959: 98)

191The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 418)

192The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 431)

The theme of *ráð* is in fact, according to Kalinke, a leitmotif in the saga.¹⁹³

Another interesting aspect of the saga is the friendship between Hólmkell and Þorgrímur, the two fathers, who despite the violence between their sons manage to remain friends. The only moment when their relationship has a break is after the killing of three of Hólmkell's men by Víglundur and Trausti and he avenges himself by giving Ketilríðr in marriage to Hákon. However as soon as he discovers that the incident was caused by his sons he repents immediately.¹⁹⁴

In her article Kalinke answer to the question posed as heading of this section by saying that *Víglundar saga* must be considered a romance, and more precisely a bride-quest romance.

The narration is determined by the quest for a bride of the protagonist(s) , which is resolved in the two parts in two different ways: in the forestory by means of abduction and in the main narrative by the help of those characters who are benevolent with the hero. The happy ending of the bridal-quest is moreover a typical characteristic of the romance.

The characteristics which favored its former classification as an *Íslendingasaga* (its space-time and the specifically Icelandic classifications of the conflicts) are just “incidental aspects”.

“The laws prevailing in *Víglundar saga* are those of the romance rather than the *Íslendinga sögur*. Consequently, despite its temporal and geographical setting, despite its Norwegian and Icelandic cast of characters, despite its feudlike conflict, one is justified in designating *Víglundar saga* as a romance, to be more precise, a bridal-quest romance.”¹⁹⁵

193Kalinke (1994: 136)

194Kalinke (1994: 139)

195Kalinke (1994: 142)

6.2.3 VÍGLUNDAR SAGA: AN *ÍSLENDINGASAGA*

Kalinke's discussion is based on the assumption that the bridal quest is a typical theme of romances, and the fact that the story ends happily with the marriage of the protagonists would ensure the fact that we are dealing with a romance.

However the theme of contracting a good match is present widely in the *Íslendingasögur*; the main difference with romances is that the focus is on the legal rituals connected with marriage and betrothal, set in a fictional world.¹⁹⁶

An important factor is the social status of both the man and the woman: in fact for the betrothal to be a good match it is necessary that they share the same social status¹⁹⁷.

In the forestory of the saga it is told that earl Þórir had a daughter named Ólof who was the most beautiful in Norway:

“Jarl ól við konu sinni eina dóttur barna, er Ólof hét; hon var þegar á unga aldri furðu kurteis. Hon var allra kvenna fríðust sköpuð, þeira er þá váru í Nóregi[...] En þegar hon hafði aldr til, þá völdust til margir ágætir menn at biðia hennar, en jarl var mjök kostvandr fyrir hennar hönd, ok kom sá engi, at hann vildi hana gipta.¹⁹⁸

“The earl and his wife had a daughter whose name was Olof. When she was still very young she was already very gracious. Among the women who were then in Norway she was the most beautiful.[...] And when she reached the appropriate age, many excellent men came to ask for her hand, but the earl was so exacting in his expectations for her that there was no one he wanted her to marry”¹⁹⁹

In these lines there is the introduction of the woman who is going to be abducted by Þorgrímr. She displays some characteristics who are typical of women in sagas dealing with betrothals: she is an only daughter, and therefore she can provide wealth and status to her

196Schulman (1997: 297)

197Schulman (1997: 297)

198Víglandar saga (1959 : 64)

199The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 412)

pretender.²⁰⁰

Some lines later her first pretender Þorgrímr is introduced. He is the son of earl Eiríkr who was ruling in Rogaland and is described as being “ a great leader and popular among his men”²⁰¹ His son would seem therefore a perfect match for Ólof, since their social status is the same but for a detail, because when asked about his sons by the king he answers:

“Þorgrímr inn þriði, ok er hann frilluborinn.”²⁰²

“Thorgrim is the name of the third. He was born out of wedlock.”²⁰³

This fact therefore would seem to put Þorgrímr in a lower social position than Ólof, even if he was one of the king's men.

When Ketil of Raumaríke lost his wife he went to Þórir and asked for Ólof in marriage:

“Þat var nú þessu næst, at Ketill af Raumaríki var riðinn til Þóris jarls við þrjá tigu manna. Þar var þá ok Haraldr konungr at veizlu. Ketill hóf þá upp bónorð sitt ok biðr Ólofar geisla sér til handa, ok með fulltingi konungs, þá giptir Þórir jarl Ólofu, dóttur sína, Katli. Lagði Ólof þar ekki jáeyrði til né samþykki”²⁰⁴

“The next thing that happened was that Ketil of Raumaríke rode over to Earl Thorir's with thirty men. King Harald was also present at the feasting. Ketil then proposed marriage and asked for the hand of Olof the Radiant, and, given the support of the king, Earl Thorir betrothed his daughter Olof to Ketil. Olof gave neither her approval nor her consent to this.”²⁰⁵

200Schulman (1997 : 312-315) In a footnote she makes a list of sagas who display characters who are only daughters Among others: *Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Finnboga saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*. Schulman (1997: 313)

201The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 413)

202Víglandar saga (1959 : 68)

203The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 414)

204Víglandar saga (1959 : 71)

205The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 415-416)

In this case Ketill seems a far better suitor for Ólof, being both of them of the same social status and, as a matter of fact, her father has no doubt in giving her in marriage. Interestingly enough, Ólof's desires are not taken into consideration. She plays a passive role and usually this "inevitably lead[ing] men into conflict over them and ultimately furthering feuds."²⁰⁶

In fact the next thing that happens is that Þorgrímr leaves the king and kidnaps Ólof from her marriage. Before this, there is another small passage which deals with the legality of the marriage between Ketill and Ólof:

“Þorgrímr mælti: «Hefir þú, Ketill, keypt Ólofu?» Ketill kvað þat satt vera. «Var þat nökkut ned hennar ráði gert?» segir Þorgrímr. «Ek ætlaða, at Þórir jarl mundi sjálfir eiga at ráða dóttur sinni,» segir Ketill, «ok mundi þat kaup lögligt vera, sem hann gerði.» Þorgrímr segir: «Þat segir ek, at vit Ólof höfnum eiða bundit, at hon skyldi öngvan mann eiga nema mik, ok segi hon, hvárt eigi er svá.» En Ólof kvað þat satt. « Þá þykjumst ek eiga konuna.»[...]²⁰⁷

“Thorgrim said, «Has Olof been betrothed to you, Ketil?» Ketil said that was the case. «Was this done with her consent?» asked Thorgrim. «I thought that Earl Thorir himself had the right to make decisions for his daughter,» said Ketil, «and that the contract he made was legal.» Thorgrim said, «I declare that Olof and I have sworn to each other that she would marry no one but me. Let her say whether this is so.» Olof said that it was the truth. «In that case I consider the woman mine,» said Thorgrim.²⁰⁸

Here again there is a reference to the issue of the legality of betrothal, which is determined by the decision of the father and not by the will of the woman.

At this point there is the beginning of the fight between Ketill and Þorgrímr, but the lights

206Schulman (1997: 297)

207Vígglundar saga (1959 : 73)

208The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 416-417)

go out and when they are restored, it appears clear that the latter has abducted Ólof and as a consequence the king outlaws him.

In her paper Kalinke writes that this is the end of the first bridal-quest:

“[...]the determinant of plot in *Víglundar saga* is the quest for a bride: in the forestory the end is achieved by means of abduction, with the wooer acting alone.[...]”²⁰⁹

In my opinion this section of the saga is not ended here because it seems that the determinant of the plot is not really the quest for a bride but rather the development of feuds related to the matter of legal betrothals and marriage. In fact this is the beginning of the feud between Þorgrímr and Ketill, which will be solved further in the saga.

In fact some chapter later the narration returns to Norway where it is said:

“[...]Ketill raumr unír illa við málalyjtir þær, er urðu með þeim Þorgrími inum prúða; tók hann fast at eldast ok þótti eigi hægt til atgerða.”²¹⁰

“Ketil the Large was displeased with the way things had turned out between him and Thorgrim the Elegant. He was rapidly aging and did not think it would be easy to pursue action in the matter.”²¹¹

At this point a new character appears, Hákon, who asks for Ketill's daughter in marriage. In order to get his revenge Ketill says that he will agree on that only if he goes to Iceland and kill Þorgrímr.

Once in Iceland he gets involved in the feud between Víglundr and his brother Trausti against Jökull, Einarr and their mother Þorbjörg (Ketilríðr's brothers and mother). He becomes therefore a character of the other main feud of the saga, because after a while he

209Kalinke (1994: 142)

210Víglundar saga (1959: 84)

211The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 423)

decided to stay in Iceland, since he understood that there was no way for him to kill Þorgrímr. He decides to help Þorbjörg and her son to kill Víglundr, and as a reward he would have gotten Ketilríðr as a wife.

As a consequence he gets killed by Víglundr and the news are taken back to Ketill by Hákon's companions.

The first attempt for Ketill to get his revenge has therefore failed. When Hákon's shipmates tell Ketill what happened he decides to send his sons Gunnlaugr and Sigurðr to Iceland to avenge his dishonour.

When they arrive they shipwreck and they are saved by Þorgrímr. Because of this they decide not to avenge their father:

“Það var einn tíma, er Gunnlaugr kom at máli við Sigurð, bróður sin; hann mælti svá: «Skulu vit ekki leita til hefnda við Þorgrím, því at þat veit ek, at við fáum fullgott færi á honum?» Sigurðr mælti: «Þetta er betra ómælt. Þætti mér ek þá launa illu gott, ef ek skylda þann mann drepa, er mik hefir áðr tekit af skipbroti og gert við mik hvern hlut öðrum betr; skylda ek heldr verja hann en vont gera ef því væri að skipta.» Skildu þeir sitt tal, ok kom Gunnlaugr aldri at því optar.»²¹²

“One time Gunnlaug got into a conversation with his brother Sigurd, and this is what he said: «Should we not attempt to take vengeance on Thorgrim? I know that we have a very good chance to do so.» Sigurd said: «This would have been better left unsaid. I think it would be repaying good with evil if I were to kill the man who has taken me in after the shipwreck and has treated me better with each passing day. I should rather defend him than do him evil if I had to choose.»

Events evolves so that Gunnlaugr and Sigurðr came back to Norway with Þorgrímr sons Víglundr and Trausti and as soon as Ketill discovered this he wanted to kill them to avenge himself. But his own sons said that they would defend them because of the way Þorgrímr treated them in Iceland. At this point Ketil said that it was not thinkable for a father to

212Víglandar saga (1959: 96)

attack his own sons and it was decided that the matter should be solved by Gunnlaugr, who was a just man and expert of law:

“«Þat er þá mín gerð, at Þorgrímr skal eiga sjálf Ólöfu ok svá skal hon hafa fyrirgert öllum arfi eptir Þóri jarl, föður sinn; skal faðir minn hann at réttu taka eptir hann, en faðir minn skal gipta Ingibjörgu, dóttur sína, Trausta Þorgrímssyni, en Sigurðr spaki skal eiga Helgu Þorgrímsdóttur. Læt ek hér mína gerð standa.» Öllum þótti þetta vel gert og vitrliga; undi Ketill vel, við þar sem þá var komit.»²¹³

“I arbitrate the Thorgrim be given legal right to Olof, but she will have to forgo her entire inheritance upon the death of her father Earl Þórir. My father will receive her inheritance instead, but my father will have to give his daughter Ingibjorg in marriage to Trausti Thorgrimsson, while Sigurd the Wise is to marry Helga, Thorgrim's daughter. This is my arbitration in the matter.” Everyone thought that this was well done and wise. Ketil was quite pleased with matters as they stood.²¹⁴

This is the end of the first feud, the one between Ketill and Þorgrímr. All the events are caused by Ketill's willingness to avenge himself, but it is interesting to notice that the narration revolves around failed attempts of revenge.

In the end the marriage between Þorgrímr and Ólof is declared legal with the clause that she will give her inheritance after her father's death to Ketill. Moreover the ties between the two families are made tighter by other two marriages, those between Ingibjörg and Trausti and Sigurðr and Helga. In the end therefore these marriages have the typical characteristics found also in other sagas:

“the marriage allows the newly joined families to end feuds, to increase political ties, to create new generations, to create affinities, and to join land and property.”²¹⁵

213Vígglundar saga (1959: 102)

214The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 433-434)

215Schulman (1997: 298)

The conflict in what Kalinke defined the “main narrative”, which is the story between Víglundr and Ketilríðr follows a path similar to many other found in *Íslendingasögur*.

The narrative is, similarly to that of the “forestory”, determined mostly by the theme of vengeance, and not as Kalinke suggests by the bridal-quest. Particularly in this point she seems to contradict herself in her paper:

“[t]he suitor's bridal quest, which is expressed mostly through the emotion conveyed in the depiction of Víglundr's and Ketilríðr's love for each other, hardly advances the plot.”²¹⁶

But in a later passage she affirms:

“the bridal quest determines the plot of the main narrative, the conflict of which is generated not only by Þorbjörg's irrational dislike of her daughter Ketilríðr, which subsequently is translated into animosity toward Víglundr, but also by her animosity towards Víglundr's father.”²¹⁷

The bridal-quest as determinant of the narration seems therefore quite problematic.

I will try to propose a subdivision of the events in the saga trying to focus on the role of the fathers of the two lovers and on the consequences, in term of the advancement of the plot, of accomplished or unaccomplished revenges.

Hólmkell is married to Þorbjörg and they have two sons: Jökull and Einarr.

Þorgrímr arrives in Iceland, buys land at Ingjaldshvál, marries Ólof and they have two sons and a daughter: Trausti, Víglundr and Helga.

Þorbjörg gives birth to Ketilríðr. She is loved by her father but not by her mother, who did not want to teach her anything.

Ketilríðr is fostered by Ólof and at Ingjaldshv she and Víglundr fall in love.

216Kalinke (1994: 126)

217Kalinke (1994: 128)

Víglundr wants to pledge their love but Ketilríðr doesn't want to do anything against her father will and she knows that her mother has no love for her.

Jökull and Einarr are unruly in the district and they are displeased because of the respect Þorgrímr has in the district.

Einarr decides to seduce Þorgrímr's wife so that he would have to avenge himself.

The attempt to rape Ólof fails and Þorgrímr decides not to avenge himself.

Víglundr's horse fights against Jökull and Einarr's and kills it. There's a fight between the two parties and two of Víglund's men were killed and two of the brothers from Foss. Hólmkell discovers that Víglundr and Ketilríðr are in love.

Jökull and Einarr kills Víglundr's horse and steal Þorgrímr's oxen.

Víglundr and Trausti discover the dead stallion and suspect that Hólmkell's sons are behind it. Þorgrímr decides not to do anything.

Þorgrímr discovers that his oxen has been stolen but he does nothing.

Hólmkell discovers that his sons have stolen the oxen and he offers to Þorgrímr to pay as much as he wanted for it. The matter is solved in this way.

Þorbjörg and his sons hire the seeress Kjölvör to harm Víglundr and Trausti. One day in the autumn she causes them to shipwreck but they get home unharmed the following day.

Hákon arrives in Iceland and Þorbjörg wants her daughter Ketilríðr to come home because she wants her to marry him. Hólmkell does not agree but goes and fetch her from Foss.

Ketilríðr does not want to serve Hákon and her father tells her to do as she wants.

Víglundr and Trausti go to the games at Esjutorn and meet Ketilríðr. Hákon is not happy with that and nor is Þorbjörg and she asks her husband to forbid Ketilríðr to go to the games.

At the game Jökull injures Víglundr but he couldn't avenge. His father reproaches him.

The following day Víglundr injures Jökull.

At the game at Foss Víglundr and Ketilríðr spend the day together and Hákon is

displeased with that. He asks Hólmkeðll to marry his daughter but he refuses.

On the way home the people from Foss attacks Víglundr and Trausti. They defend themselves and kill three men. Jökull decides to blame the people from Ingjaldshvål of the accident. Hólmkeðll got really angry.

Hólmkeðll gives Ketilríðr in marriage to Hákon. When he discovers the truth about the accident he repents.

At the games Víglundr reproaches Ketilríðr for having married Hákon who in the meantime has disappeared with Hólmkeðll's son.

The people from Foss attack Víglundr and Trausti on the way home. The two brothers kill Jökull, Einarr and Hákon and they fall almost dead.

Þorbjörg wants to kill Þorgrímr for avenge herself for the deaths of her sons, but Hólmkeðll does not agree with her, since he thinks that he has no fault for the events and indeed they remain friends.

Þorbjörg asks her father Einarr to persecute Víglundr and Trausti and they are declared outlawed.

Víglundr and Trausti, who in the meantime have lived secretly at Ingjaldshvål go to Norway with Gunnlaugr and Sigurðr. Víglundr says farewell to Ketilríðr. She is very sad and asks her father to help Víglundr, which he does.

While the two brothers are in Norway Þorgrímr and Hólmkeðll seat a whole day in conversation. Some time later a man named Þórðr from the East Fjords arrives at Foss and asks to marry Ketilríðr and Hólmkeðll gives his permission. Ketilríðr and Þórðr moves to the East Fjords.

On the way to Iceland Víglundr and Trausti has a shipwreck and were rescued in the East Fjords by Þórðr. Víglundr gets upset when he recognized Ketilríðr.

Víglundr decides not to harm Þórðr in order to get Ketilríðr because he has treated him well.

One day the farmer departs and Víglundr decides to leave the farm until his return in order not to let people think that he has dishonoured Ketilríðr.

Þórðr returns with Þorgrímr, Ólof, their daughter Helga, Sigurðr, Gunnlaugr and

Hólmkell. It is revealed that Þórðr is Earl Eirkr, Víglundr uncle and that the marriage between him and Ketilríðr has not be consumed. He has married her in order to keep her safe according to the plan made by Hólmkell.

Hólmkell consents on the marriage between Víglundr and Ketilríðr. Helga is given in marriage to Sigurðr and Ragnhild, Helgi's daughter to Gunnlaugr.

As it can be seen from the scheme above the events folds themselves as in a “classical” *Íslendingasaga*: there is a series of conflicts between two parties (Víglundr ant Trausti against Jökull and Einarr) which reaches its climax with the killing of Hólmkell's sons and the outlawing of Þorgrímr's sons. After this event there is the beginning of the process of reconciliation which ends with the marriage between Víglundr and Ketilríðr.

The conflict is caused in the beginning by Einarr's envy for Þorgrímr:

“Illa þykir mér, at Þorgrímr inn þrúði hefir svá mikil metorð hér i heraðinu [...]”²¹⁸

“I am not pleased that Thorgrim is so highly respected here in the district”²¹⁹

This fact is repeated also further in the saga, when Þorbjörg hires the seeress Kjölvör to kill Víglundr, but at this point it's also added that they were also envious of the love between Víglundr and Ketilríðr:

“Því at þeim lék in mesta öfund á þeim, en höfðu spurt, hvern kærleikr var með þeim Víglundi ok Ketilríði, en fyrimundu þeim at njótast, sem síðan gaf raun á.”²²⁰

“They did this because they were extremely envious of Viglund and Trausti and, moreover, had found out that Viglund and Ketilrid loved each other. They begrudged them their love,

218Vígundar saga (1959: 77)

219The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 419)

220Vígundar saga (1959: 82)

as they demonstrated later.”²²¹

The economy of the narration is determined mostly by the decision *not to act* taken mostly by Hólmkelll and Þorgrímr because of their friendship, and by the conflict between Hólmkelll and his wife in finding a good match for their daughter.

Many are the occasions where action is not taken against evil deeds. First after the failed attempt to dishonor Ölof , Þorgrímr says:

“Ekki skulu vit okkr at þessu gefa sakir Hólmkels, vinar míns, með þvíat Einarr kom ekki sínum vilja fram.”²²²

“We should not bring charges against my friend Holmkel for this, since Einar was not able to have his way.”²²³

Even after Víglundr's stallion had been killed and his own ox stolen he decided not to take action against Hólmkelll, who, as soon as he discovered that his sons had stolen Þorgrímr's oxen, offered him as much money as he wanted provided that he did not bring charges against his sons:

“«Vil ek,» segir hann, «lúka verð fyrir uxana, svá mikit sem þú villt sjálfir hafa, ef þú sækir þá eigi saksónum»”²²⁴

“I want to settle on a sum for the oxen as high as you want, provided you do not bring charges against them.”²²⁵

Quite interesting is the way Hólmkell reacts to events in two different occasions, because it

221The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 421)

222Víglundar saga (1959: 78)

223The complete sagas of Icelanders (1959 : 419)

224Víglundar saga (1959: 81)

225The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 421)

can throw light on his attitude towards Víglundr.

After the battle between his sons, Víglundr and Trausti, where three of his men were killed he got really angry because he believed that the battle was caused by Víglundr and Trausti:

“Sagði Jökull föður sínum, at Víglundr ok Trausti hefði drepit heimamenn hans þrjá, – «en vér vildum ekki á hluta þeira gera, fyrr en vér fyndum þik.»” Hólmkell varð þá reiðr mjök við sögu þessa.”²²⁶

“Jokul told his father that Viglund and Trausti had killed three of his men, «but we did not want to take action against them until we had talked to you.» Holmkel was very angry when he heard the story.”²²⁷

As a consequence he decided to give Ketilríðr in marriage to Hákon.

However he reacts in a completely different way when his sons have been killed by Víglundr and Trausti, but he decided not to take action because he knows that they just defended themselves:

“«Mun því nökkut vel ráðit»? Segir bóndi. «Þykir mér sem hann [Þórgrímr] sé saklauss af drápi þeira bræðra, en Þórgrímsynir máttu eigi meira fyrir týna en lífinu; lá þeim þat fyrir at verja hendr sínar.»²²⁸

“«Is that really the best course of action?» Said her husband. «It seems to me that he is innocent of the killing of our sons, while Viglund and Trausti could not do any more than lose their lives. What else could they do but defend themselves?»²²⁹

226 Víglundar saga (1959: 90)

227 The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 427)

228 Víglundar saga (1959: 94)

229 The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 429)

This extremely different reaction can be explained by the idea Hólmkell has about Víglundr. In the first case it seems that he thinks that he has failed him as a good match for his daughter, since he believes that he had caused the armed conflict with his sons. In fact as soon as he discovers the truth he repents and thinks that he has gone too far in letting Hákon marrying Ketilríðr to Hákon. In the other case he has no doubt about Víglundr's honor, since he knows that he has just defended himself and therefore he doesn't think that action is necessary.

It seems that the main preoccupation is that Víglundr can be a good match for Ketilríðr. This is also one of the main reasons for the conflict between husband and wife, which is characteristic of this saga.

In fact after the arrival of Hákon in Iceland Þorbjörg wants her daughter to come home because she wants her to marry him:

“«Eigi skal þat vera,» segir hon [Þorbjörg] «skal ek fyrr sækja hana en hon sé þar lengr ok fái þvílíkt orð af Víglundi sem á horfist; vill ek fyrr gipta hana Hákonni, því at þat lízt mér sómaráð.» Skilja þau tal sitt at því.”²³⁰

“«That won't do.» She [Þorbjörg] said, «for I would sooner fetch her myself than for her to stay there any longer, subject to likely gossip because of Viglund. I would rather marry her to Hakon, since that seems to me an honourable match» With this their conversation ended.”²³¹

There is therefore, as Kalinke has pointed out, another more subtle conflict in the saga, that between Ketilríðr's mother and father. Speaking about the betrothal of the first part of the narrative Kalinke in a footnote makes an observation which I believe is illuminating about the aforementioned conflict. She writes:

“The disagreement turns on older, pre-Christian legislation, which held that “fathers or

230Víglandar saga (1959: 86)

231The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 424)

other male relatives (my italics) were responsible for the betrothal and marriage of their womenfolk” and new ecclesiastical laws according to which the suitor was to get the consent of the woman he wished to marry.”²³²

It must be remembered that Þorbjörg is always sided by her two sons (“male relatives”). From this point of view the conflict between the couple is played on another dimension, that of two different conceptions of marriage and betrothals. Seen from this perspective her sudden disappearance from the saga can be easily explained: with her sons dead, she has no male relative to oppose to Hólmkell and therefore she can, legally, play no further role in the saga.

All these observations would point to the fact that *Víglundar saga*, despite the fact that it could be considered a romance it is, because of its textual construction, an *Íslendingasaga*. In order to show that *Víglundar saga* can be considered as an *Íslendingasaga* I have to briefly take into consideration some aspects of literary evolution and the Icelandic literary polysystem of the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century.

As stated by Even-Zohar the literary polysystem is hierarchical and made up of elements which are in a constant dynamic tension in order to acquire the dominant position. This dynamic ensures the evolution of the polysystem.

Within the systems making up the polysystem the translated literature usually occupies a peripheral position, but in three cases it can occupy a central position:

1- when a polysystem is “young”

2- when a literature is peripheral or “weak”

²³²Kalinke (1994: 135)

3- when there are turning points.²³³

Other important observations that need to be taken into account is the concept of genres as “historical families”, as developed by Jauss. In this sense, genres can evolve, and in order to catch their characteristics they must be considered within the historical situation (locus in life) they are inserted. Moreover, literary works must conform to a certain “horizon of expectations”, they have therefore to conform to some characteristics, determined by the expectations of the social-political system they are inserted in.

Köhler has pointed out that the literary polysystem is an expression of some social classes and it is a way of getting hold of reality. If the society has changed so much that the models provided by the literary polysystem do not correspond to the new needs, the system undergoes some modifications, and the one which is interesting here is that the system makes use of “mixed genres”.

At this point a look at the Old Norse literary polysystem of the end of the 13th century is necessary²³⁴.

The 13th century was the century when many of the Icelandic saga genres began to be written or saw a time of particularly intense composition. The genesis of the vernacular literature lies probably in the writing of genealogies (*áttvísir*), of the preceding century, which show a particular interest of Icelanders in royal lineages, which is expressed in the composition of the *konungasögur* from the late 12th century. Short after, there is the appearance of both the first *Íslendingasögur* and the first *fornaldarsögur*. These two sagas rely on a genealogical principle but display two different worlds.²³⁵

A major turning point in the literary system is determined by the first translations of European romances, the *riddarasögur*, which began to be known at least after 1226, which

233Even-Zohar (1990: 47)

234 For the sake of this discussion only the relationships between works written in vernacular will be taken into consideration.

235Tulinius (2000: 250)

is the year of the translation at the Norwegian court of *Tristams saga*²³⁶.

As it was mentioned before, according to Even-Zohar, when there is a turning point in literature the translated literature can occupy a central position within the polysystem (at least for a while), and this seems the case with medieval Icelandic literature. The introduction of translations of romances provided the literary polysystem with new themes and motifs, and caused a modification of the repertoire so that the *riddarasögur* influenced other saga genres.

As Glauser has pointed out:

”[...]the translated riddarasögur had a significant influence on the Icelandic saga literature of the late thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. Family sagas, legendary sagas and indigenous riddarasögur not only made use of narrative material – motifs, subject matter, texts – from the romances, but also adopted narrative structures and modes of narration.”²³⁷”

In other words the translated *riddarasögur* favored a process of hybridization which would become even more intense with the creation of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* from the late 13th to the 14th century.²³⁸

The centrality of the *riddarasögur* within the literary polysystem in Iceland in the end of the 13th century and in the 14th century is also proved by the fact that most of these sagas have been handed out in Icelandic manuscripts of those years.

As Even-Zohar writes:

”[...]the augmentation and restructuration of a repertoire by the introduction of new elements, as a result of which each product is less predictable, are expression of an innovatory repertoire.”²³⁹

236Glauser (2005: 375)

237 Glauser (2005: 377)

238 Bampi (2012)

239 Even-Zohar (1990: 25)

This means in this case that, once the *riddarasögur*, first through translation and then through indigenous ones, have taken the center of the polysystem, they have modified the existing repertoires (*Íslendingasögur and fornaldarsögur*) by spreading their characteristics to the latter, and in this way creating hybridization by means of intra-systemic relations²⁴⁰.

As it has been stated, modifications in literature occur by means of extra-systemic relationships, i.e. by socio-cultural modifications. Köhler has moreover pointed out that the use of "mixed-genres" is a way for a new social group to express new needs and experiences.

Herefore, it should be expected that at a certain point in the end of the 13th century a new predominating social class should have appeared, which re-shaped the polysystem in order to promote and represent itself. The reshaping would have been necessary since the existing repertoire was not apt to its need of expression. As it will be said in the following paragraph the end of the 13th century was a period of socio-political and economical changes in Iceland.

If all these principles are taken into consideration and applied to the study of *Víglundar saga* it is possible to see that the observations made by Kalinke (1994) do not completely hold. If the problem of the genre of this saga is seen from a polysystemic perspective a different solution comes out. In fact, the saga has been written in all probability around the end of the 13th century, when the *riddarasögur* reached the center of the literary polysystem.

Seen from this perspective, it is expected that, rather than being a romance which is played out following the characteristics of an *Íslendingasaga*, it is exactly the other way round, i.e. it is an *Íslendingasaga* which has been strongly influenced by the characteristics of romance.

Kalinke bases her paper on the assumption that the narrative structure of the saga is based

240 The fact that the genre occupying the the centre(s) of the polysystem influences also other genres has been pointed out also by Tynjanov: "A fact of similar kind is the tendency of a victorious order or genre to affect other fields. [...] A constructive principle strives to exceed its normal bounds. See Duff (2000: 43)

on the quest for a bride and that the spatio-temporal setting represents only a "local color":

"If the local color is removed from the narrative, however, the saga turns out to be a bridal-quest romance exhibiting the familiar two-tiered structure: the forestory focuses on the bridal quest of the hero's father, while the main narrative recounts that of the eponymous protagonist."

[...] The choice of setting, both temporal and geographic, determined in turn both the personell and the expression of the conflict – but not the governing element of plot, that is, the protagonist's quest for a bride.²⁴¹

I do believe that the choice of setting is determinant in giving this saga a place within the literary polysystem of that time.

Tulinius (2000) organized of the literary polysystem of Iceland around five dynamic principles: genealogical, geographical, social status and the supernatural.

Both the genealogical and the geographical principle are spatio-temporal principles and a combination of these two underlies, among others, the distinction between *Íslendingasögur* and *riddarasögur*.

The notion of world is moreover quite important in the context of the sagas, since it arises the expectancies of the readers (or listeners), who interpret it as a generic sign.

Therefore if a saga is set in Iceland (and in Northern Atlantic Europe) this would be a major sign of an *Íslendingasaga*.²⁴² In fact, other different kind of sagas are set in world others than Iceland. For example, the *riddarasögur* are usually set in distant lands, or the *fornaldarsögur* in a prehistorical Scandinavia. If the *Erwartungshorizont* developed by Jauss is taken into consideration at this point, it is possible to see that for a certain saga to be interpreted by the reader it has to conform to his or her "system of references". In other words, different geographical words correspond to different sagas. As Tulinius points out:

"Despite structural and thematic similarities between the romantic *fornaldarsögur* (the

241Kalinke (1994: 123)

242Tulinius (2000: 252)

adventure tales, sometimes called *lygisögur*) and romances, there seems to have been an awareness that the worlds of these two genres were not quite the same, and that different things happened there to different characters. *Samsons saga fagra* is a romantic saga from the fourteenth century which reveals in an interesting way this awareness, because the author plays on the difference between the *matière de Bretagne*, which provides the setting for the main story, and the Matter of the North, which provides very different themes and situations for a trip undertaken to the North by one of its main characters.”²⁴³

This means that “in different worlds happen different things” and because of this the setting of a saga in Iceland at the time of the colonization is a strong generic sign for an *Íslendingasaga*.

The genealogical principle, which is also a spatio-temporal, is linked with the grounding of the leading families in the past.

According to Tulinius the political instability in Norway in the 12th century favored the leading class of Iceland to build its identity by means of genealogies and historiography.

However, in the 13th century, the identity of the ruling class in Iceland was being put into question, both in Norway and Iceland, and this created a feeling of uncertainty in the society, which probably fostered the writings of fictional works which had their focus on the historical past, the *Íslendingasögur*.

By the end of the century, and in the beginning of the 14th century these ontological uncertainties were solved by the inclusion of Iceland in the Norwegian state and by the new political and social actors, who were given their positions of power by royal office²⁴⁴. The question of the social identity became therefore more complex, because new social actors entered the scene of the political power in Iceland. In fact, the power was contended not only by the old ruling families and the new men of the king, but also by a new powerful economic class which was arising thanks to the development of the commerce of the

243Tulinius (2000a: 528) <http://rp-www.arts.usyd.edu.au/arts/medieval/saga/pdf/526-tulinius.pdf> last view 21/01/2013

244Tulinius (2000: 261)

skreið. As a consequence the way to justify power changed in accordance to the changes in the society.

From the point of view of the literary system, this caused the genealogical principle to disappear or to lose its importance so that the geographical principle was the only one which remained to distinguish different kinds of sagas.

Because of this, I would say that the fact that the spatio-temporal world of *Víglundar saga* is the one typical of the *Íslendingasögur* it does not represent as Kalinke has defined it, a "local color", but a highly distinguishing feature, which collocates this sagas within the genre of the family sagas.

6.3 FINAL REMARKS ON VÍGLUNDAR SAGA

In the previous section I have tried to show that, if some theories developed by Itamar Even-Zohar in the Polysystem Theory and by Jauss and Köhler are taken into consideration, it is possible to infer that the characteristics of romance which can be seen in *Víglundar saga* are determined by the systemic evolution of the Icelandic literature. Nevertheless I have tried to show that the narratives in the saga are determined, not only by the logic of the bridal-quest but also by the logic of the feud, which is more typical of *Íslendingasögur*.

From the textual analysis made in the preceding paragraph it appears that the main themes developed in the saga are the social and legal issues related to betrothal and marriage. It has been seen that social status is an important factor as much as the role of the fathers in deciding a good match for their daughters.

The preoccupation with marriage and betrothal and with their social issues are determined by the social developments which interested Iceland in the end of the 13th century.

After Iceland was absorbed into the Norwegian state in 1262 there have been some constitutional changes, the most important being the abolition of the institution of the

góðar and the introduction of the *wergild*²⁴⁵.

With the abolition of the *góðar* institution a new ruling class, more connected to the king, gained in importance (*höfðingar*). Moreover some new families gained importance, those connected with the new trade of *skreið* which developed in that period.²⁴⁶

This class didn't have the genealogical links to royal families and therefore genealogies did not work as means of self-promotion. Apparently a way to gain importance and the possibility of gaining political power was through marriages, as it is hinted by Tulinius:

“It is possible that Sturla Sighvatsson's marriage to Solveig Sæmundardóttir of the Oddavejar family was important in making him eligible to become Earl of Iceland.”²⁴⁷

These facts would therefore explain for the characteristics of *Víglundar saga*.

If we assume that it was written in this milieu of new economic powerful families where a means of self-promotion is marriage, the whole narrative of the saga, based on betrothals and marriage, is justified, as it is the complete absence of genealogies.

Also the introduction of the *wergild*, according to which killing a man was a crime against the king, can have influenced the composition of *Víglundar saga*, since in the main narrative the two fathers, as it has been shown, are unwillingly to take violent action and create feuds.

Therefore, it can be seen that the composition of the saga is strongly influenced by the socio-cultural system it has created it and inter-systemic relations are fundamental in understanding the characteristics of a literary work, or using Jauss' words, the saga is determined by its “Sitz im Leben”, the cultural and political environment of the end of the 13th century.

245Karlsson (2000: 90)

246Bampi (to appear)

247Tulinius (2000: 259)

7. GULL-ÞÓRIS SAGA.

7.1 GULL-ÞÓRIS SAGA: SUMMARY

The saga begins with a long list of the genealogies of the protagonists of the story and tells how they all settled in the area of Þorskafjörð after their arrival from Norway. The first event to be told is the beginning of the feud between Steinólfr the Short and Þórarinn krókr because of the land that Steinólfr had taken, and which Þórarinn considered his own property. It is also told that he became enemy with Heimlaug the seeres since he drove her away of her land.

It happened that, when all the young people mentioned in the prologue were spending their time together playing games on the ice during the winter, they nominated Þórir, son of Odd, leader by his companions because of his abilities. The same summer a ship came from Norway and the skipper was Odd's cousin Bárðr. Since he wanted to keep traveling between Norway and Iceland he asked his cousin for some men, and Þórir with his sworn brothers volunteered. They were Ketillbjörn son of Gilli, Þórhallr and Þórsteinn the sons of Þuríðr Drikkin, Hyrningr Hallson, Björn Beruson, Ásmundr Naðrsson, Már Hallvarðsson and Óttar Skáldsson. As soon as they arrived in Norway they met Þórir's uncle Sigmund who was staying with the king and he gave them the advice to go away, since King Háralðr inn hárfagri did not treat well people without money as they were. He sent them to his friend Úlfr in Halogaland, where they started fishing cod.

At this point begins the first and most prominent part in the saga with supernatural events:

Þat var einn dag, er þeir félagar reru á fiski ok kómu síð at landi. Úlfr gekk í móti þeim. Ok er þeir höfðu buit um skip sitt, sá Þórir, hvar eldr var, nær sem lýsti af tungli, ok brá yfir blam loga. Þórir spurði, hvat lýsu þat væri. Úlfr segir: “Ekki skulu þér þat forvitnast, því at þat er ekki af manna völdum.” Þórir svarar:” Því mun ek þó eigi vita mega, þótt tröll ráði fyrir?” Úlfr kvað þat vera haugaeld. Þá grófst Þórir eptir. En Úlfr segir at lyktum ok mælti:” Agnarr hét bersekr, son Reginmóds ins illa; hann lét gera haug þenna ok gekk þar í með skipshöfn sína alla ok mikit fé annat. Hann verr hauginn med tröllskap síðan, svá at

engi má nær koma, en margir eru dauðir, er til hafa komit at brjóta, eðr ella hafa þeim orðit önnur skyrsi.”²⁴⁸

One day the companions were fishing and returned to the shore late. Ulf walked up, and when they had beached their ship, Thorir saw a fire that looked like moonlight and a black flame rising above it. Thorir asked what kind of light it was. Ulf answered: “ Don't get curious about that, for it is not caused by human beings.”

Thorir answered: “ Why shouldn't I know about it just because *trolls* cause it?” Ulf said that it was will-o'-the-wisp burning over a mound. Then Thorir inquired further. Finally Ulf said: “ There was a *berserk* named Agnar, the son of Reginmod the Evil. He had this mound made and entered it with his entire crew and a great of wealth. He protected the mound with witchcraft afterwards, so that no one may go near it. Many who have gone to rob the mound are either dead or have met some other terrible fate, and we do not know whether he was turned into a troll dead or alive.”²⁴⁹

Þórir decided to go to Agnarr's cave and steal his treasure despite the fact that Úlfr and all his companions were against the idea. Only Ketillbjörn dared to follow Þórir. That very night Þórir had a strange dream about Agnarr:

“Þá dreymdi Þóri at maðr kom at honum, mikill, í rauðum kyrtli og hafði hjálm á höfði og sverð búið í hendi; hann hafði um sig digrt belti og þar á góðan hníf og glófa á höndum; var þessi maðr mikilúðligr ok virðuligr. Hann mælti reiðuliga til Þóris og stakk á honum döggskónum og bað hann vaka og mælti: "Ills manns efni ertu er þú vilt ræna frændr þína, en eg vil," sagði hinn komni maðr, "gera til þín verðleikum betr því at ek em bróðir föður þíns og sammæðr við hann; ek vil gefa þér gjafir til þess, at þú hverfir aptr og leitir annarra féfanga. Þú skalt þiggja at mér kyrtli góðan, þann er þér mun hlífa við eldi ok vápnum, og þar með hjálm ok sverð. Ek skal ok gefa þér glófa þá, er þú mant enga fá slíka, því at liði þínu mun óklaksárt verða ef þú strýkr þeim með. Þessa glófa skaltu á höndum hafa, þá er þú bindr sár manna ok man skjótt verk ór taka. Kníf ok belti læt ek hér eptir, ok þat skaltu

248Gull-Þóris saga (1991- 183)

249The complete saga of Icelanders (1997- 338)

jafnan á þér hafa. Eg mun ok gefa þér tuttugu merkr gulls og tuttugu merkr silfurs. Þórir þóttist svara, at honum þótti þetta of lítit af svá nánnum frænda og férið ok lézt eigi aptr munu hverfa við litla fémútu.

"Vissi ek eigi," segir Þórir, "at tröll væri mér svo nær í ætt, áður þú sagðir mér. En engrar eirðar ættir þú af mér ván ef ei væri frændsemi með okkr."

Agnarr segir: "Seint munu þín augu fyllt verða á fénu og því máttu várkynna mér," sagði Agnar, "at mér þykki féð gott því at þú munt ærið mjög elska féit, áðr lýkur."

Þórir segir: "Ekki hirði ek um illspár þínar. En þiggja vil ek at þú vísir mér til meiri févánar ef þú vilt þitt fé undan þiggja."

"Heldr vil ek þat," segir Agnar, "en deila illdeildum við þik. Valr hét víkingr, er átti gull ; hann bar féið undir helli einn norðr við Dumbshaf ok lagðist á síðan ok synir hans með honum ok urðu allir að flugdrekum. Þeir hafa hjálma á höfðum og sverð undir bægslum

Nú er hér kalkr, er þú skalt drekka af tvá drykki, en förunautr þinn einn drykk, en þá verðr eptir þat sem má."

Síðan vaknar Þórir, ok váru þessir hlutir allir þar í hjá honum, er Agnarr gaf honum. [...] Eptir þat tók Þórir kalkinn ok drakk af tvá drykki, en Ketilbjörn einn; þá var enn eptir í kalkinum. Þórir setti þá á munn sér ok drakk af allt. Nú fell á þá svefn.

Agnarr kom þá enn ok ávitaði Þóri, er hann hafði allt ór drukkit kalkinum, ok kvað hann þess drykkjar gjalda mundu inn síðara hlut ævi sinnar.²⁵⁰

“Thorir dreamed that a tall man in a red tunic approached him wearing a helmet and holding an ornamented sword. He wore a thick belt with a good knife attached to it, and he wore gloves on his hands. The man was imposing and splendid.

He spoke angrily to Thorir, jabbing him with the chape of his scabbard and telling him to wake up, and said: “You are not much of a man if you would rob your kinsman, but I will treat you better than you deserve, for I am your father's half-brother born of the same mother as he. I will give you gifts if you turn back and pursue booty elsewhere. You will receive a fine tunic from me, which will protect you from fire and weapons, and a helmet

250Gull-Þóris saga (1991: 185-186)

and sword as well. I will also give you gloves the like of which you'll not find anywhere, for your men will remain unharmed if you stroke them with the gloves. You must wear these gloves on your hands when you bind men's wounds, and soon the pain will subside. I leave the knife and belt here, and you must always wear them. I will also give you twenty *marks* of gold and twenty marks of silver.”

Thorir dreamed he answered that he thought this too little from such a close and wealthy relative, and he said he would not turn back for a trifling bribe.

“I didn't know,” said Thorir, “that a troll was so closely related to me until you told me. But you wouldn't have hoped for any mercy from me had we not been related.”

Agnar said: “Late will your eyes be filled with wealth, and you will excuse me for being fond of money, because you will love it enough before your time is up.”

Thorir replied: “I don't care about your evil prophecies. Bu I will accept your showing me where I can find more treasure if you want to hold on to yours.”

“I would rather do that” said Agnar, “than tangle with you. A viking named Val had a lot of gold. He carried it into a cave up north at the Giant's Sea and afterward lay down on it with his sons, and they all turned into dragons. They wear helmets on their heads and swords under their wings. Now there is a chalice from which you shall take two drinks and your companion one drink, and whatever is left over should be left”.

Then Thorir awoke, and all of the things that Agnar had given him were there beside him. [...] Afterwards, Thorir picked up the chalice and took two drinks from it, and Ketillbjorn took one. One more swallow was left in the chalice. Thorir raised it to his lips and downed the remaining drops. They then fell asleep.

Agnar then returned once more and rebuked Thorir for having drunk the rest of the chalice. He said he would pay for that drink in the latter part of his life.²⁵¹

Þórir went with some companions to Valr's cave without listening to Úlfr's protest against it. Inside the dragon's cave other supernatural events happen: Þórir asks for Agnarr's help to have light and a flash comes from the entrance and they made the dragons to fall asleep. The encounter with the dragons causes some deaths among the warriors but it resulted in the conquest of a big treasure, which was decided to be left to Þórir, who on the other hand

²⁵¹The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 339)

divided the objects which Agnarr gave to him with his companions.

After this they returned to Úlfr and then they moved towards Sweden and ended up in Gotland, where the earl acknowledge his kinship with Þórir. He remained in Gotland for three years and there he fought with his companions against two *berserks* and defeated them. In the meantime, in Iceland, Þórir's father had died and Hof-Hall's gained fortune in the land but he entered in conflict with Hallstein and the people at Reykjanes because he wanted to collect tolls for his temple there.

As soon as his son Hyrningr came home and told him about his journey with Þórir, Hall decided to set up against Þórir. They put up a fight in Búlkarós and then in Vaðilseyri. The result is in Þórir and his party killing three of Hall's men and these killing Þórarinn Hallsteinsson. After this an agreement is set between the two parties: Hallsteinn asked for two hundreds marks of silver and the land at Uppsalar was given to Hall.

After these events Þórir gained a great respect for his journeys and he asked Hallsteinn for the hand of his daughter Þuríðr on behalf of his friend Ketilbjörn. For himself he asked the hand of Ingibjörg, Gils daughter. The marriage was kept secret from Þorgeirr of Óláfsdal because he was in love with Þuríðr, but eventually he came to know about it and decided to pay Steinólfr, with whom Þórir was not in good relationship, to ambush him. After that he went to Hall to ask for his support. He made a plan to kill Þórir's sworn brothers and he hired Askmaðr and Kýlan the Dueller to kill Már Halvardsson.

As soon as Hallvarðr discovered about the killing of his son he went to Þórir to ask him to set the matter. Þórir, Ketilbjörn and the Kinnarssons went and killed Kýlan. After that they searched for Askmaðr. When they arrived at his farm the doors were sprung, so they decided to put it on fire but at this point they are testimonies of a supernatural prodigy:

“Tóku húsin skjótt at brenna, 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 longbrandinum 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 þat var Katla. Hon kom til Uppsala ok

sagði Þorbirni tíðndin, en hann fór þegar á fund Halls ok segir honum. Þeir Þórir tóku fé allt, þat er Askmaðr hafði átt, ok fluttu heim með sér á Þóirstaði.²⁵²”

“The building quickly caught fire, and when most of them were burned down and the people who were offered a truce had come out, Thorir and his men saw two pigs running in the same direction away from the buildings, a sow and a hog. Thorir grabbed a piece of wood out of the fire and threw the burning log at the hog's thigh. Both legs were broken, and it fell on the spot. Now when Thorir got there, he saw that it was Askmann. Thorir killed him, but the sow ran off into the woods. It was Katla. She went to Uppsálar and told Thorbjörn the news, and he went at once to see Hall and tell him. Thorir and his men confiscated everything Askmann had owned and carried it home to Thorisstaðir.²⁵³”

Katla went to Uppsálar and told Thorbjörn the news, who went to see Hall and inform him. Þórir confiscated all of Askmaðr's properties.

At this point of the manuscript AM561, 4to the text has been erased for about two leaves and the events from the end of chapter 10 to almost the end of chapter 12 are known only through some later insertions.²⁵⁴

In the insertion it is narrated about the feud between Þórir and Steinólfr, caused by the possession of a whale which landed in the island of Hvallatur, which was Þórir's land. While chasing Steinólfr's boat to retake the pieces of the whale which had been stolen, Þórir killed one of Steinólfr's men. After this Steinólfr went to Temple-Hall to ask for help and he sent him to his son Rauðr, where he stayed with his men for some time. One day, when Þórir and Ketillbjörn were coming back from Grostaðir, where they had been Groa Geirleifsdóttir's guests, they were victim of an ambush by Rauðr and Steinólfr.

Þórir and Ketillbjörn defended themselves bravely and the former killed two men and the

252Gull-Þóris saga (1991- 200-201)

253The complete saga of Icelanders (1997- 346)

254“The following two pages of the manuscripts, comprising roughly two chapters, have been erased, and are almost entirely illegible. The section printed below [in the edition] is taken from an insertion whose history before the nineteenth century is unclear, though it is certainly not original.” The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997: 346).

latter one.

From here on the manuscript is readable again.

Þórir killed Rauðr and then returned with his men at Þóirstadir. Rauðr's killing was compensated by Þórsteinn's wounds, but Þórir did not want to agree with Thorbjörn about the matter of the property and he said that that problem would be solved afterwards.

After these events Þórir went to visit his son Guðmundr and they decided to go to Uppsali. Þorbjörn recognized them and he asked his son Örn to go and call Hall for help. Guðmundr run after Örn and in the attempt of stopping him he killed him while Þórir fought with Thorbjörn, who in the end fell dead.

To set the matter Þórir went to see Thorbjörn's brother Þórðr and he set a case against him for having sent a troublemaker in his territories. The matter was set as hundred marks of silver were paid for the killing of Örn while Thorbjörn's death was balanced with the theft Þórir was victim of. He also claimed the property of Botn and Uppsali and the latter was given to Þorgerðr.

Another supernatural, or at least mysterious, event is narrated at this point:

“Þat vandist á at Þórisstöðum, at þar hurfu gymbrlömb tvau grákollótt hvert var ok höðnukið tvau með sama lit.

Þat var eina nótt um várit, at Þórir mátti eigi sofa. Hann gekk þá út, ok var regn mikit. Hann heyrði jarm þangat, er stíat var. Þórir gekk þangat ok sá á réttargaðinum, at þar lágu kið tvau bundin ok lömb tvau, en I rett satu konur tvær; þær léku at hnettafli, ok var taflit allt steyp af silfri, en gyllt allt it rauða. Þær brugðust við fast ok urðu hræddar [mjök]. Þórir fekk tekit þær ok setti niðr hjá sér ok spurði, hvi þær legðist a fé hans. Þær buðu allt a hans vald. Hann spurði, hverjar þær væri. Þat var önnur Kerling, dóttir í Barmi, en önnur kveðst vera dóttir Varða ofan ór Vörðufelli, ok nefndist hon flagðkona, en hin hamhlaupa. Þórir gerði þá sætt með þeim, at þær hefði sauði með sér, en hann taflit ok þat, er þar fylgdi. En á tugnumun taflpungsins var gullbaugr, settr steinum, en annar silfrbaugr var í borðinu. Þetta allt tók Þórir, ok skildu við þat.”²⁵⁵

255Gull-Þóris saga (1991- 205)

“It happened regularly at Thorisstadir that two grey, polled ewe-lambs and two goat-kids of the same colour disappeared each spring.

One spring night, Thorir could not sleep. He went outside, and it was raining hard. He heard bleating over by the pen. Thorir walked over and saw two kids and two lambs lying tied up on top of the sheepfold wall, and two women were sitting in the sheepfold. They were playing a *board game* [orig. italic]; the entire board was cast in silver, and the red squares were gold. They were startled and became very frightened. Thorir managed to capture them, and set them down beside him and asked why they were stealing his livestock. They offered to submit to him entirely. He asked who they were. One of them was Kerling, the daughter of Styrkar in Barm, and the other claimed to be the daughter of Vardi from Vordufell; she was said to be a troll-woman and the other a *shape-changer* [orig. italics]. Thorir made a deal with them that they could have the sheep, but that he got the board and everything that went with it. There was a gold ring embedded with stones on the pouch's strap, and a silver ring in the board. Thorir took all of this, and then they parted. Frosta kept the settlement but Kerling did not.”²⁵⁶

During that time Eyjúlf from Múli and Helgi from Hjallar were not in good relations because the people from Hjallar were stealing hayfield and pasture from Múli. One day a man named Gunnar arrived at Muli and he saw that some bulls belonging to Helgi were tramping over Eyjolf's hay and he decided to set the matter himself. He rode the bulls to a path along the sea and towards the river; Gunnarr and his son Grim followed him. As soon as he reached the river he met Helgi's son Þórarinn the fierce with fifteen men while Helgi was on the other side of the shore. A battle exploded between the two parties and Gunnar slew Þórarinn and other two men while Grim killed one. After that Gunnar threw a stone towards Helgi and he broke his lower ribs. While this was happening, Eyjolf saddled two horses, and when the battle was over he asked Gunnar and Grim to ride to Þórir and tell him the news.

He invited Grim to stay with him, but not Gunnarr, whom he considered a troublemaker. Grim didn't want to separate from Gunnarr and Guðmundr, Þórir's son, didn't want to part

²⁵⁶The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 349-350)

from Gunnarr. As a consequence Þórir asked them all to stay with him and he had Eyjolf's stock driven in Þóirstadir.

After a while Helgi's son Frakki and Bljug decided to take revenge and they attacked Þórir and his son Guðmundr when they were going to have their horses trimmed. They made an ambush but they were both killed. Þórir didn't compensate for these killings but in change to Thorarin's death he hand over Þorgeirrsdal.

After that Þórir was invited to the feast in honor of Gísl skeiðarnef, who had died, and he went to Olafsdal with his sworn brothers; this was the occasion for Steinólfr to solve the problem about the possession of Steinólfsdal with Þórir.

Steinólfr, Kjallakr and his son and a lot of men travelled to Ólafsdal when Þórir was supposed to go home, while at the same time, Ólafr and Þorgeirr sailed with some men towards Langeyri, where they settled to spy Þórir's movements. Steinólfr with other men were watching Þórir's movements from the southern side of Kroksfjardanes. When Þórir left the feast he went to Gróstaðir were Gróa informed him of the ships and she sent words to Halldór saying that Þórir could be in need of men.

A great battle broke out between Þórir, Steinólfr and their men and in this occasion Þórir wore the gloves that Agnarr gave to him.

A long series of battles followed this and the result was in the killing of six men. After this Þórir went back to his farm and a truce was negotiated.

Þórir's livestocks often went to graze into Hrómundr of Gröf's land and in payment for this he gave him every year a gelding and a lamb. But Þórir got tired of this and lamented about it, so that one day Gunnarr went to Hrómundr and killed him. Þórir got extremely angry about this and he drove Gunnar away, who went to Muli at Grim's house and there he was given a place to live.

At this point a man called Þórmoðr came from the north to Helgi's house after having committed a killing and he was given protection with the condition that he had to kill Þórir. He tried to do this when Þórir was riding across Þorskafjörð, but he failed and was killed and the same fate occurred to Helgi.

After this Þórir was on his guard and had a fortification built around his farm because he could not reach an agreement with Stýrkar about Helgi's death. In fact, some time later, Stýrkar armed a ship with ten men and he sailed with his daughter Kerling to Hofstadir to ask Hall for help. He armed fourteen men and together they sailed towards Þóristadir. As it was said Kerling was a “troll-woman” and in fact she made the ship invisible in order for the company to sail across the fjord undisturbed:

“[K]erling hafði ráð fyrir liði þeira, ok hon hafði huliðshjálmm yfir skipinu, meðan þau reru yfir fjörðinn til Þórisstaða.”²⁵⁷

“Kerling was in charge of the company, and she made the ship invisible while they rowed across the fjord to Thorisstadir.”²⁵⁸

As soon as they arrived to the fortification Kerling opened the lock with magic, but she was thrown out by a saw which run into her:

“Þau gengu frá skipi ofanverða nótt, ok gekk Kerling fyrst í virkit, því at þegar spratt upp 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 honn fór öguf út af virkinu, [...]”²⁵⁹

“They left the ship late at night. Kerling went first into the fortification, because the lock opened immediately before her when she approached it. But when she entered, a large sow rad head-on into her so hard that she was knocked backwards out of it again.”²⁶⁰

All the noise awakened the men inside the fortification and Þórir, Þuríðr Drikkinn and other twelve men set on a battle against the intruders; but they were soon badly wounded because their weapons didn't bite. This was the effect of Kerling's magic and when Þuríðr Drikkinn

257Gull-Þóris saga (1991- 216)

258The complete saga of Icelanders (1997- 355)

259Gull-Þóris saga (1991- 216)

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discovered it he killed her and the effect of her spell disappeared:

“Þeir Þórir urðu sárir mjök, því at vápn þeira bitu ekki. Þá sá Þuríðr drikkinn, at Kerling fór um völlinn at húsbaki ok hafði klæðin á baki sér uppi, en niðri höfuðit, ok sá svá skýn á milli fóta sér. Þuríðr hljóp þá út af virkinu ok rann á hana ok þreif í hárit ok reif af apr hnakkafilluna. Kerling tók í eyra Þuríði báðum höndum ok sleit af henni eyrat ok alla kinnfilluna ofan, ok í því tók at bíta vápn Þóris, ok urðu þá mjök skeinusamir.”²⁶¹

“Thorir and his men were wounded badly, because their weapons would not bite. Then Thurid Drikkinn saw Kerling walking around behind the house with her clothes pulled up and her head bent down, looking backwards through her legs at the clouds. Thurid then leapt out the fortification, attacked her, and grabbed her hair, tearing the flesh off the back of her neck. Kerling grabbed Thurid's ear with both hands and tore off the ear and the flesh of her cheek below it. And at that moment Thorir's weapons began to bite, and they did a lot of harm.”²⁶²

The result of the battle was in the death of five men on the side of Stýrkar and two on the side of Þórir. After this an agreement was reached between Þórir and Stýrkar with the help of Hallstein but Hall was left out of it and he went to live in Fagrídal with Steinólfr, were they conspired against Þórir and decided to attack his best friend Ketillbjörn. The ambush was made in the autumn, when Ketillbjörn was at home. Steinólfr and Hall, their men Lodin and Galti, other fifteen men, Grim and his son Hergils from Vellir made the attack. The very same day Gunnar had ridden toward Þóirstadir and Þórir told him that he had dreamt that his friend would be in need of of men. Then he rode with his sworn brothers to help Keillbjörn. In the meantime Steinólfr had put on fire Ketillbjörn's farm and a battle was in course between the two parties. Before the arrival of Þórir and his men both Ketillbjörn and Asmund were killed and Hall with Steinólfr had left, after having stolen some things from the farm. Þórir got furious and swore to try to avenge Ketillbjörn and for

261Gull-Þóris saga (1991- 216, 217)

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this reason we went to Völvustadir and asked Heimlaug the seeress to help and advice him, which she accepted to do. She sent word to Þórir that Grim was back in Vellir. Therefore he rode there with his men and he killed Grim and Gunnar striked Hergils. When they were coming back they saw Hall, Lodin and Galti coming from Baer and Þórir decided to chase them. He reached them by Steinfolsdal and he threw a spear towards Hall who was wounded on his back and died after a while when he was fleeing away. In the meantime Þórir entered into a *berserkr's* rage and killed Galti. After this, Thorid offered Hyrning a settlement in Hofstadir as compensation for his father's death, which he accepted, and since then he got on well with Þórir.

After this Steinólfr remained in the south, worried about the news and things remained quiet for a while. One autumn he went out on a boat with ten of his men and they remained stuck in the west of the fjord because of a storm. When Heimlaug the seeress discovered it she had Þórir called and arranged for the storm not to stop. Þórir left immediately with his son Guðmundr, Vöflu-Gunnar and the Kinnarsons and other four men and Grim from Muli and one of his men. He was joined by Óttar in Másdal and one of his men.

When they arrived in Steinólfrsdal they put up a battle against Steinólfr and the result was in the death of five of Þórir's and fifteen of Steinólfr's men. Atli the son of Úlfr the Squinter tried to mediate between them. During the following winter Steinólfr died because of the injuries he got during that battle. Þórir healed but he became different and difficult to deal with, and that autumn the chests with Val's gold disappeared.

In order to compensate for Steinólfr's death his relatives pretended that those who were responsible for it had to go away from the country. So Guðmundr, Grim, Vöflu-Gunnar and Óttar went away for a long time, but Þórir refused to go abroad and paid instead a great sum of money.

A leaf of the manuscript is missing at this point and the story resumes in the middle of a battle between Þórir and his men and the people from Djúpiþjórd Among them there were

Stýrkar and Kerling. Þórir chased her until they reached a great ravine. Kerling fell in a waterfall and Þórir threw a great slab of rock at her which hit her between her legs and caused her death. That place is called Kerlingargil and Kerlingareyri has been said to be haunted from that moment.

In the following years Þórir remained in Þóirstadir and became even more difficult to deal with. One summer he got the false news that his son Guðmundr had died in a battle and he was so despaired that he disappeared from his farm and no one has seen him ever since. It is said that he turned into a dragon and laid down on his golden chest, and in fact for sometimes people saw a dragon flying from the mountains above Þóirsstadir.

After these events his son Atli took possession of the properties and he didn't have any problems with his neighbors.

7.2 SOME OBSERVATIONS ON GULL-ÞÓRIS SAGA

The saga as we have it is transmitted in codex unicus, namely AM 561 4to, which dates from around 1400.²⁶³ The vellum manuscripts contains other two late *Íslendingasögur*: *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Reykðæla saga* and three *rimúr*.

The text of the saga is preserved with two lacunæ, one from the end of chapter 10 to the beginning of chapter 12 and the other in chapter 20, which, however, have been integrated in some later paper manuscripts and which have been included in former editions of the sagas.²⁶⁴ The edition which has been taken into consideration in this study is the one present in the serie *Íslensk fornrit*, which follows the vellum manuscript AM 561 4to.

The most explicit supernatural elements in the saga are not equally distributed in the narration but they are concentrated in the part of the saga set in Norway.

The saga begins in the most typical way with a long list of genealogies. Important for this discussion are the references to Gull-Þóris which are present in *Hauksbók* and in *Sturlubók*,

²⁶³Eggertsdóttir (1993: 249)

²⁶⁴Cardew (2004: 19)

and in some places the saga is very similar or even identical to these versions of the *Landnámabók*, which according to Cardew (2004), who refers to Björn M. Olsen, would prove that the saga existed in a certain form before it was copied in the only vellum manuscript we still have. The saga therefore was grounded in historical reality and the adding of supernatural elements in the later redaction would show, according to me, a different vision that Icelanders of the end of the 13th century had on the period of the colonization of Iceland.

The first fantastic episode occurs in the 6th chapter, after Þóris' and his companions' arrival in Norway. There they went to visit Þóris' uncle Sigmundur who advised them to travel north to his friend Úlfr and gain some money, since poor men were not welcomed warmly at the court of Háraldr hárfagri.

At this point there's the first contact with the supernatural in the saga:

Þat var einn dag, er þeir félagar reru á fiski ok kómu síð at landi. Úlfr gekk í móti þeim. Ok er þeir höfðu buit um skip sitt, sá Þórir, hvar eldr var, nær sem lýsti af tungli, ok brá yfir blam loga. Þórir spurði, hvat lýsu þat væri. Úlfr segir: “Ekki skulu þér þat forvitnast, því at þat er ekki af manna völdum.” Þórir svarar:” Því mun ek þó eigi vita mega, þótt tröll ráði fyrir?” Úlfr kvað þat vera haugaeld. Þá grófst Þórir eptir. En Úlfr segir at lyktum ok mælti:” Agnarr hét bersekr, son Reginmóds ins illa; hann lét gera haug þenna ok gekk þar í með skipshöfn sína alla ok mikit fé annat. Hann verr hauginn með tröllskap síðan, svá at engi má nær koma, en margir eru dauðir, er til hafa komit at brjóta, eðr ella hafa þeim orðit önnur skyrsi.”²⁶⁵

One day the companions were fishing and returned to the shore late. Ulf walked up, and when they had beached their ship, Þórir saw a fire that looked like moonlight and a black flame rising above it. Þórir asked what kind of light it was. Ulf answered: “ Don't get curious about that, for it is not caused by human beings.”

Þórir answered: “ Why shouldn't I know about it just because *trolls* cause it?”Ulf said that

265 Gull-Þóris saga (1991: 183)

it was will-o'-the-wisp burning over a mound. Then Þórir inquired further. Finally Ulf said: “ There was a *berserk* named Agnar, the son of Reginmod the Evil. He had this mound made and entered it with his entire crew and a great of wealth. He protected the mound with witchcraft afterwards, so that no one may go near it. Many who have gone to rob the mound are either dead or have met some other terrible fate, and we do not know whether he was turned into a troll dead or alive.”²⁶⁶

Despite the fact that Úlf and his companions didn't think it to be a good idea, Þórir decided to go and steal Agnarr's gold. That very night the same Agnarr appeared to Þórir in a dream and revealed him that he is his uncle and offered him some magical gifts if he didn't rob his treasure:

“ek vil gefa þér gjafir til þess, at þú hverfir aptr og leitir annarra féfanga. Þú skalt þiggja at mér kyrtil góðan, þann er þér mun hlífa við eldi ok vápnun, og þar með hjálm ok sverð. Ek skal ok gefa þér glófa þá, er þú mant enga fá slíka, því at liði þínu mun óklaksárt verða ef þú strýkr þeim með. Þessa glófa skaltu á höndum hafa, þá er þú bindr sár manna ok man skjótt verk ór taka. Kníf ok belti læt ek hér eptir, ok þat skaltu jafnan á þér hafa. Eg mun ok gefa þér tuttugu merkr gulls og tuttugu merkr silfurs.”²⁶⁷

“I will give you gifts if you turn back and pursue booty elsewhere. You will receive a fine tunic from me, which will protect you from fire and weapons, and a helmet and sword as well. I will also give you gloves the like of which you'll not find anywhere, for your men will remain unharmed if you stroke them with the gloves. You must wear these gloves on your hands when you bind men's wounds, and soon the pain will subside. I leave the knife and belt here, and you must always wear them. I will also give you twenty *marks* of gold and twenty marks of silver.”²⁶⁸

Since Þórir said that it would seem to him too little, Agnarr revealed to him that there was

266 The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 338)

267 Gull-Þóris saga (1991: 184)

268 The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 339)

even a greater treasure he could fetch, possessed by a viking named Valr, who transformed himself into a dragon with his sons in order to protect his wealth:

“Valr hét víkingr, er átti gull mikit; hann bar féið undir helli einn norðr við Dumbshaf ok lagðist á síðan ok synir hans með honum ok urðu allir að flugdrekum. Þeir hafa hjálma á höfðum og sverð undir bæglum”

“ A viking named Val had a lot of gold. He carried it into a cave up north at the Giant's Sea and afterwards lay down on it with his sons, and they all turned into dragons. They wear helmets on their heads and swords under their wings.”

The motif of the mutation into a dragon is repeated in the end of the saga, where after many years Þórir, believing that his son has died, disappeared with his gold. The saga reads as following:

“[...] en þat hafa menn fyrir satt, at hann hafi at freka 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.”²⁶⁹

“[...]but people believe that he turned into a dragon, and lay down on his gold chests. It also happened for a long time afterwards that people saw a dragon flying down from the mountains above Þórisstadir – at the place called Gullfoss (Gold Falls) – and over the fjord to the mountain that rises above the farm at Hlid.”²⁷⁰

It is interesting to notice that while the episode in Norway is described objectively as if it had really happened, the one set in Iceland is introduced by the sentence “hafa menn fyrir satt”. It seems that, when contact with the supernatural happens in Iceland, the author (or whoever transcribed the saga in the remaining manuscript) is reluctant in describing objectively the supernatural event and therefore he resorts to that formulation in order to

²⁶⁹Gull-Þóris saga (1991: 226)

²⁷⁰The complete sagas of Icelanders (1997 : 359)

put in doubt the effective reality of what he is writing.

The two fictional worlds, as intended by Tulinius, that of the *Íslendingasögur* and that of the *fornaldarsögur* are still seen as separate in the saga, and the discriminating principle between the two would be a geographical one: Iceland is home of the fictional world of the *Íslendingasögur* while Norway (or even Scandinavia since the companions fight against two *berserkr* in Sweden) is home of the fictional world *fornaldarsögur*.

This co-existence of different worlds within the same literary work is not surprising if literature is considered as a polysystem in which intra-relations between different synchronic genres are possible and also necessary for the survival of the system itself.²⁷¹

In fact, when the narration returns to Iceland, it follows the path of many other *Íslendingasögur*, with the protagonists getting involved in local feuds. There are however other supernatural events, not directly connected with the travel abroad made by Þórir, but the mode of narration is similar to the final episode of Þórir transforming into a dragon.

In chapter 10 one of Þórir's companions is murdered, but the protagonist is able to trap the killer inside the house, which is set on fire. At this point something strange happened:

“Tóku húsin skjótt at brenna, ok er fallin vǫru flest húsin ok menn gengu út, þeir er grið vǫru gefin, sá þeir Þórir, at svín tvau hlupu eins vegar frá húsunum, gyltr ok gríss. Þórir þreif einn rapt ór eldinum ok skaut longbrandinum 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 þat var Katla. Hon kom til Uppsala ok sagði Þorbirni tíðndin, en hann fór þegar á fund Halls ok segir honum. Þeir Þórir tóku fé allt, þat er Askmaðr hafði átt, ok fluttu heim með sér á Þóirstaði.²⁷²”

271 Tulinius (2000) writes: “in a system of synchronic genres the differences between them can also engender meaning, when there is any kind of interaction between them. This interaction can be of different types: narrative structures originating in one of the genres can be adapted to the world of another, there can be a coexistence of different worlds within the same work and there can be intertextual allusions within one genre to the world of others.” (p. 251)

272 Gull-Þóris saga (1991: 200-201)

“The building quickly caught fire, and when most of them were burned down and the people who were offered a truce had come out, Þórir and his men saw two pigs running in the same direction away from the buildings, a sow and a hog. Þórir grabbed a piece of wood out of the fire and threw the burning log at the hog's thigh. Both legs were broken, and it fell on the spot. Now when Þórir got there, he saw that it was Askmann. Þórir killed him, but the sow ran off into the woods. It was Katla. She went to Upsalir and told Thorbjorn the news, and he went at once to see Hall and tell him. Þórir and his men confiscated everything Askmann had owned and carried it home to Þórisstadir.²⁷³”

Shape-shifting is the most common supernatural element in this saga, since there are other two instances where there are references to this practice. The first is in chapter 14 where Þórir finds two women playing a board game in his yard, and one of them is Kerling who is said to be a shape-changing witch; the second is in chapter 17 where there is an episode similar to the one quoted before, because a sow attacked Kerling, and, even if not explicitly said, it seems that the sow is Þurirðr drikkin, one of Þóris' companions.

Some other major episodes within the saga where there is a contact with the supernatural in Iceland are all in chapter 17 and they are referred to Kerling. She firstly conceal the boat of Gull-Þóris' enemies by means of a magic helmet and in the battle following this episode she casts a spell so that the weapons of Þóris' men could not bite. When she is discovered she is attacked and the enchantment is broken. This episode is anyway almost comical:

“Þeir Þórir urðu sárir mjök, því at vápn þeira bitu ekki. Þá sá Þurirðr drikkin, at Kerling fór um völinn at húsbaki ok hafði klæðin á baki sér uppi, en niðri höfuðit, ok sá svá skýn á milli fóta sér. Þurirðr hljóp þá út af virkinu ok rann á hana ok þreif í hárit ok reif af aprt hnakkafilluna. Kerling tók í eyra Þurirði báðum höndum ok sleit af henni eyrat ok alla kinnfilluna ofan, ok í því tók at bíta vápn Þóris, ok urðu þá mjök skeinusamir.”²⁷⁴

“Þórir and his men were wounded badly, because their weapons would not bite. Then Thurid Drikkin saw Kerling walking around behind the house with her clothes pulled up

273The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 346)

274Gull-Þóris saga (1991: 216-217)

and her head bent down, looking backwards through her legs at the clouds. Thurid then leapt out the fortification, attacked her, and grabbed her hair, tearing the flesh off the back of her neck. Kerling grabbed Thurid's ear with both hands and tore off the ear and the flesh of her cheek below it. And at that moment Þórir's weapons began to bite, and they did a lot of harm.”²⁷⁵

When finally she is killed by Þórir in the last chapter, she falls down a waterfall, which since that moment was believed to be haunted:

“Steypist Kerling ofan í einn mikinn fors, en Þórir kastar eþfit henni hellusteini miklum, ok kom á milli fóta henni, ok þar lézt hon. Heitir þar síðan Kerlingargil ok Kerlingareyrr, ok þar hefir jafnan síðan reimt þótt.”²⁷⁶

“Kerling fell down into a great waterfall, and Þórir threw a large slab of rock after her. It hit her between the legs, and she died there. That place is now called Kerlingargil and Kerlingareyri and it has been considered haunted ever since.”²⁷⁷

As Cardew (2004) has pointed out, during the sagas there are very few references to the gifts that Þórir has received from Agnarr, even if they would be extremely useful for a man involved in battles and feudes. As he writes:

“Þórir, however, remains a character of normal abilities whilst he resides in Iceland, despite his heroic status in terms of the saga as a whole.”²⁷⁸

A similar example is found in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*. Here, the hero Björn when traveling abroad, encounters a dragon and kills it with just one blow of his sword, but when at home in Iceland he appears to be a rather normal person, and not even particularly

275The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 355)

276Gull-Þóris saga (1991:225)

277The complete saga of Icelanders (1997: 359)

278Cardew (2004: 26)

exceptional.²⁷⁹

It has been seen in the preceding analysis that the introduction of the translated *riddarasögur* in the Icelandic literary polysystem created a major turning point, by means of introducing new narrative modes and motifs.

Because of this, *riddarasögur* have been able to stay in the center of the literary polysystem and therefore they tended to spread their characteristics also to other fictional genres.

Also with the analysis of the *Víglundar saga* it was seen that *Íslendingasögur* have been directly influenced by these new elements, so that this saga clearly shows elements of hybridization between the two genres.

Romances however not only influenced existing genres with their characteristics but they caused a general re-shaping of the polysystem around five principles identified by Tulinius: genealogy, geography, religion, representation of the supernatural and social status.²⁸⁰

Particularly interesting for an analysis of *Gull-Þóris saga* is the representation of the supernatural, since late *Íslendingasögur* have been criticized because they abandoned their characteristics of realism and objectivity in favor of more fictional and fantastic ones.

According to Tulinius:

“In their representation of the supernatural, the family sagas again seem to occupy an intermediate position in the generic system. The fact that the sagas take place in historical time and in places their authors knew seems often to have inhibited them from allowing such events in their stories, even though they are more frequent than in contemporary sagas and there are distinct differences in this matter between individual sagas. But there remains a reluctance to describe direct contact with the supernatural.”²⁸¹

With the *Íslendingasögur* acquiring more explicit fantastic elements in the end of the 13th

279Tulinius (2000: 251)

280Tulinius (2000)

281Tulinius (2000: 255)

century it seems therefore that generic hybridization was favored not only between romances and other genres but also between pre-existing genres.

The *Íslendingasögur* underwent therefore a generic evolution which interested particularly the principle of the representation of the supernatural, in which they got nearer to the *förnaldarsögur*.

At this point, it should be shortly taken into analysis which relationship medieval Icelanders had with the supernatural, and in particular why at a certain point, in narratives where the representation of the world was more realistic, it was acceptable to have more explicit fantastic elements.

In her article published in the journal “Scandinavian Studies vol. 69” Margareth Clunies Ross makes some interesting remarks on this point. She writes that medieval Icelanders were more inclined than contemporaries to accept the existence of non verifiable forces and elements in the world and that in any case differences of opinion existed in the society.

Moreover she writes:

“The fantastic mode in the saga frequently occurs precisely where there is some uncertainty as to the nature of reality, or where social norms of the culture are subverted, or where the present confronts the past and the author needs to produce an explanation of who and why things have happened or people have acted in certain ways. This is so particularly where there has been an obvious breach with the past, as in the phenomena of the settlement of Iceland itself and the conversion to Christianity, or *the loss of independence in 1262-64* (my italics)”²⁸²

It could seem therefore that the loss of independence and the social-economical changes, which were happening in the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th have apparently created a different conception of the period of the settlement, which allowed the writers of the *Íslendingasögur* to include more explicit supernatural elements in the sagas.

282Clunies Ross (1997: 450)

From this point of view the *Gull-Þóris saga* is particularly interesting, since it has been altered in a later period after its original composition, by the insertion of some elements from the *fornaldarsögur*.²⁸³

What can be inferred from all these observations is that, even if genre hybridization permitted two different textual worlds to coexist in the same work (in this case the world of the *Íslendinasögur* and that of the *fornaldarsögur*) they tend not to intermingle and characters behave coherently to the textual world they find themselves in every point of the saga. The discriminating element would be geographical: when the setting is outside Iceland events take place in the world of the *fornaldarsögur*, characterized by fantastic elements, dragons, magic and heroes gifted with superhuman powers; when the setting is Iceland the references to the supernatural become more veiled, less explicit and exaggerated and the events related to them are open to question.

283Cardew (2004: 20)

8. CONCLUSION

The aim of this work was to make some observations on the problem of the literary genre when applied to the saga Icelandic saga production, especially as regards the so called “post-classical” *Íslendingasögur*. In fact these sagas, of which the *Gull-Þóris saga* and the *Víglundar saga* have been taken into consideration here, have received less scholarly attention because they were seen as hybrids of other saga genres, and therefore a sign of decadence of the cultural production of Medieval Iceland.

This attitude was determined by the fact that, from the very beginning, the classification of sagas into different genres was linked to socio-political instances. With the Romantic movement in the 19th century, the first scholars aimed at creating an Icelandic literary corpus, which could compete with the other European literatures. This ideal corpus was found in those sagas which would have been classified as “classical”, thanks to their characteristics of realism and objectivity.

Even when the historicity of these group of sagas was put into doubt, with the freeprose-bookprose debate, the assumption of the existence of a “classical” saga production was not questioned, and in the end it could be said that the aim of scholars of the 18th and 19th century was to create a canon of sagas which would be different from all other European genres, and therefore being purely Icelandic. All those sagas which did not match these requirements were seen as a symbol of cultural decadence and therefore ignored in the studies.

With the course of time this attitude has changed and an interest in the classification of the sagas has contributed to starting a debate. The starting point of the discussion have been three articles published on the journal “Scandinavian Studies” n. 47 in 1975 by Lars Lönnroth, Joseph Harris and Theodore M. Andersson. The common idea was if the old taxonomy of the sagas was suitable for describing the production or if a new one was needed.

Lönnroth's idea was that, the modern taxonomy does not correspond to the one used by Medieval Icelanders and that an attempt to reconstruct the old classification would be more interesting.

A similar concept is put forward by Harris, who makes a distinction between analytic and ethnic genres, the latter being the original system of categorization. Even if the ethnic genres are mostly lost he claims that the use of more narrow criteria can lead to a different taxonomy, and the best one is that which is more revealing about the history and characteristics of the sagas.

The idea that different criteria can be taken into account is put forward also by Andersson, who focuses on the common narrative patterns of sagas, which, according to him, can be divided into six different moments.

Despite their differences all three conclude that creating a new taxonomy would be probably pointless and confusing, but on the other hand scholarship should focus on those texts whose classification is problematic.

Along this line another debate on the different sagas genres has grown, and in the present work some observations made by Margareth Clunies Ross and Torfi Tulinius has been taken into consideration.

They both see sagas as "multi-modal" products but Clunies Ross is of the idea that on the whole sagas are homogenous products and the distinctions that can be made are only at a descriptive level but not at a generic level, while Tulinius still considers the division in different genres useful, because generic classifications raise the reader's expectations about the text.

He points out that in a synchronic system genres can interact with each other in different ways, and because of this a different and more dynamic, also from the diachronic point of view, classification of genres can be made, if the system is considered as organized around five principles: genealogy, geography, religion, relation to the supernatural and social status of the protagonists.

Taking into consideration these principles he came to the conclusion that the *Íslendingasögur* represent an "ontological uncertainty", which put them in the center of the system. This is bound to the crisis of the leading families in Iceland in the 13th century, who created two different genres: the *Íslendingasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*.

Tulinius' ideas are based on some theoretical concepts which have been taken into consideration in this work, namely the concept of literary genres of formalisms and the concepts developed by the Structuralist School of Prague.

The main achievement of the formalists has been to put forward the concept of the literary fact as a dynamic and variable concept and the idea of literature as a dynamic system, which needs new genres in order to survive and not to reach stagnation.

The Structuralist School took up these ideas and focused on the relationship between the literary system and the overall cultural system .

The Polysystem Theory, developed by Itamar Even-Zohar developed many of the ideas mentioned before. He considered literature as a hierarchical polysystem which is in communication with a wider socio-cultural polysystem. Because of the hierarchy of the system, some literary genres occupy the central positions, while others the peripheral ones. The non-canonized repertoires, i.g the literary works occupying peripheral positions, struggles to reach the center, which ensure the dinamicity and survival of the polysystem.

Jauss' contribution to this work is his theories named "Erwartungstheorie" and "Rezeptionsästetik". The general idea is that literary genres, and literature in general, have to answer to some socio-political demands in order to be accepted in and influence the cultural system that has created them. Moreover, in order to be interpreted and understood, literary works have to conform to the expectations of the public. Therefore, with his

theories, Jauss has relocated the attention from the production to the reception of the work.

Bearing all this in mind I have analyzed two sagas, the *Gull-Þóris saga* and the *Víglundar saga*, which have been classified among the "post-classical" *Íslendingasögur*.

The former has been transmitted in *codex unicus*, AM 561 4to, from around the year 1400, but it has probably been composed, in a different version, without the supernatural sections which have probably been added in the 13th century

I have therefore taken into consideration all the fantastical episodes present in the saga, and came to the conclusion that they are not equally distributed in the narration, with a big predominance in the first part of the saga, when the action is set in Norway. Moreover the contact with the supernatural is described in two different ways within the sagas. When the events are set in Norway the narration is more objective and the supernatural is described as real, while, when back in Iceland, the supernatural is seen as uncertain, and they are introduced by formulations as "hafa menn fyrir satt".

Therefore it seems that in this saga there is the presence of two different fictional worlds, that of the *förnaldarsögur*, where the supernatural is part of the reality and that of the *Íslendingasögur*, where it is not.

The discriminant between these two worlds is, taking into consideration Tulinus' principles, the geographical one: when events take place in Iceland then the "rules" of the *Íslendingasögur* are applied, while when they move to Norway it's the pattern of the *fornaldarsögur* which is valid.

This fact, which was earlier seen as a sign of literary decadence, is not surprising if literature is seen as a dynamic polysystem, where all genres have intra-systemic relations.

The *Gull-Þóris saga* is therefore a fruit of a process of re-shaping of the literary polysystem determine by the introduction of romances in Iceland. This favored a general process of

hybridization, even among pre-existing genres, as is the case with *Gull-Þóris saga*.

This process was also determined by a different conception of the period of settlement which probably was developed in the end of the 13th, beginning of the 14th century, determined by the loss of independence and social-economical changes.

Víglundar saga has been preserved in two vellum manuscripts, AM 551a 4to from around the 15th century and AM 510 4to from the late 15th or maybe 16th century and it has been probably written in the end of the 14th century, beginning of the 15th century.

This saga has drawn a lot of material from *riddarasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*, and therefore has been almost ignored by scholars.

In an article published in "Skáldskaparmál" Marianne Kalinke suggests that, because of the common features with the *riddarasögur*, and in particular that, according to her, the narration is determined by the logic of the bridal-quest, *Víglundar saga* should be considered a "bridal-quest romance", rather than an *Íslendingasaga*.

My analysis has led to the conclusion that, on the other hand, the narration is also determined by the logic of the feud, which is typical for an *Íslendingasaga*. From the analysis I have carried out it appears that one of the main theme is the legal issue related to betrothal and marriage.

If we take into consideration that literary developments are determined also by extra-literary factors, the preoccupation with those matters in the text can be explained by taking account the evolution of the Icelandic society in the late 13th century. In fact, after the loss of independence, the institution of the *góðar* was abolished and new social classes emerged, one connected to the king of Norway (*höfðingar*) and the other connected to the new commerce of *skréið*.

These new classes did not have genealogical links to royal families, and genealogies did not work as means of self-promotion. That's why, if we consider the *Víglundar saga* as a

product of this particular social milieu, there is no presence of the “classical” genealogy in the beginning of the saga. On the other hand the means for self-promotion was marriage, which would explain one of the main themes of the saga.

The analysis of the two sagas showed that their textual characteristics, which determined the fact that they are considered as a result of genre hybridization, are determined by the evolution of the system of Icelandic literature, in which the translation of European romances favored a re-shaping of the entire repertoires with the developing of mixed-genres. This re-shaping was determined by modifications happening in the society from the end of the 13th century. The loss of independence and the rising of new social powerful classes, either connected to the Norwegian court or connected to the new commerce of *skréið* which developed from the end of the 13th century. These new classes had in any case different needs of the *góðar* of the previous century and as a consequence the literary works produced in the 14th century reflect the needs of these new classes.

From a wider perspective it can be said therefore, that if a different approach is adopted to the study of those “gray zones” within the genres of the sagas, some interesting observations can be made, which can lead to a deeper understanding of the literature, culture and society of late medieval Iceland.

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