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The Viking Dialogue Narrative: Egil's Saga and Storytelling

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The Viking Dialogue Narrative: Egil's Saga and Storytelling

Abstract

Egil's Saga¹ invites inquiry about its composition with its unique use of poetry and prose. Its origins in the traditions of the Icelandic sagas grounds the text within a historical and cultural context that, while still under debate, guides the student of the Icelandic sagas in understanding the likely authorial purpose and intent behind the structure and motives behind the sagas and their tellers/writers. Egil's Saga's composition not only retells the life narrative of its titular poet but speaks to the purpose of storytellers and their craft.

The Poetry of Structure in Composition

Egil's Saga draws much of its narrative material from oral sources and multiple stories about the warrior-poet Egil Skallagrimsson and his family (Andersson 19). The story begins with the focused life narratives of his direct ancestors two generations before his birth. Sparing no detail, it establishes the political and personal struggle Egil's own life will be shaped by in what scholars have considered to be a tightly written narrative. This tight narrative contrasts the episodic nature of the saga's biography of Egil which may come across as haphazard and of a poorer composition in regard to narrative structure. However, it is upon a re-evaluation of the text that an underlying structure becomes apparent. In his article, "The Construction of *Egil's Saga*," Torfi Tulinius argues that the saga's composition presents itself as "consciously planned" (Tulinius 23).

¹ The title of the saga as well as its eponymous protagonist varies in spelling from scholar to scholar: Egil's Saga, Egils Saga, Egills Saga, Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar, Egla; Egil Skallagrimsson, Egill Skalla-Grimsson. *Egils saga einhanda ok Asmundar Berserkjabana* is an entirely different saga about an "Egil One-Hand," not the son of Skallagrim.

Tulinius acknowledges scholarship arguing that Egil's Saga is not crafted well or with much intention. Saga scholars such as Andersson and W.H. Vogt point to differences in the quality of composition between the "first part," the life narratives of Egil's familial predecessors Kveldulf, Thorolf, and Skallagrim, and the "second part," Egil's life narrative (Tulinius 24). Andersson follows a thread of criticism that notices a "lack of coherence" in the second half of the saga; it concludes that the plausibly singular "author" of the saga "fails to display the same command of his material" that he demonstrates in the first part (24). Andersson further adds in his text, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*:

"the matter [of the second part] seems more diversified and less of a piece than elsewhere. . . . There is no genuine or inherent focus. . . . Even the central part of the saga concerned with Egil's conflict with Erik is diluted and made bland by a quantity of episodic scatterings about the Norwegian court, the colonization of Iceland, and Viking raids abroad" (Andersson 350).

In Egil's conflict with King Harald's successors, various digressing episodes stretch thin or break up the tension between the clashes of Icelanders and Norwegian royalty. These sub-plots are related to the relevant struggles of Egil and his companions. However, these narrative asides occasionally contribute little in the telling of Egil's lifelong struggle with the enemies of his forefathers. Andersson ultimately argues that the inconsistency of the saga's overall narrative structure distracts from the necessity of extra-narrative details. What could be the compositionist's² purpose for this seeming inconsistency?

² It is not known how many storytellers or medieval Icelandic writers had an influence over the creation and shaping of Egil's Saga and its surviving form. Andersson and Vogt refer to a singular writer or author as do other saga scholars. To avoid confusion, the compositionist(s) of Egil's Saga is referred to in the singular.

W.H. Vogt's takes a similar position to Andersson's about the jarring difference in composition between the first and second part, but he further explores the possible reasons behind this contrast. While Vogt's position does not explicitly focus on a lack of control by the author of the second part, it does parallel with Andersson's in suggesting that the author had too much information about Egil at his disposal, certainly a result of oral transmission. This would explain the seeming lack of skill in the storytelling craftsmanship to put an abundance of conflicts together in a way that matches the tight and focused two-strand narrative in the first part (Tulinius 24). In *The Growth of Medieval Icelandic Saga*, Andersson supports a similar notion regarding a possible effort by the compositionist of the second part to put together numerous episodes. He states that Egil's Saga certainly did not begin as a single narrative but as the composition of the saga and the roots of saga-telling imply, "there were probably dozens of stories or equivalent oral stories [about Egil Skallagrimsson]" (Andersson 19).

Tulinius also cites Bjarni Einarsson and Baldur Halfstath, both of whom highlight "parallels and recurring motifs" that suggest a craft in the apparent inconsistency. Einarsson argues for the wit of composition behind the sagas with its adherence to "the laws of literature" and its interplaying use of oppositions, parallels, and thematic variations (Tulinius 25; Halfstath 135-148). Supporting this notion of mastery demonstrated in Egil's Saga's underlying structure, Tulinius notes that "The division of the saga into two parts represents only the simplest level of its organization. It is also important to consider how its smaller units are arranged" (Tulinius 25). Andersson points to the dispersed episodes discussing the settlement of Iceland as evidence of an author who did not know how to include all the information he had. Tulinius counters this critique, stating that "these settlement episodes can in fact be shown to play a highly significant role in the structure of the saga" (26). This role is evident in the phenomenon Tulinius argues as

being more than coincidence, a distinct literary feature of Egil's Saga that can be called the "Ketil Pattern."

Tulinius uses the Ketil Pattern as a main support for his argument as it is easy to follow: the pattern surrounds the recurring name "Ketil." It is not uncommon for multiple characters to share the same name in the Icelandic Family sagas or even for the sharing of names to be used to parallel characters and situations; Egil's Saga uses similar names (such as the various Thorolfs) to invite the audience to draw parallels between Egil's uncle and brother. The Ketils of Egil's Saga do not take precedence in the overall narrative to the same noticeable extent as the Thorolfs. Besides revealing a structure that likely was intentional, the Ketil Pattern shows that asides and digressive episodes of the saga are more than mere supplementary events, or at least the compositionist working on the saga making a conscious effort to rein in a multi-generational tale with numerous narratives about the famous Viking poet passed on written or orally.

Tulinius cites Bjarni Einarsson as the one who pointed out how peculiar it was for there to be similarities between the story of Ketil Haeng's settlement in Iceland and the story of Ketil Gufa's arrival and "his search for a place for himself and his followers" (Tulinius 26, Einarsson). Egil's Saga's account for Ketil Gufa turns out to have been composed with artistic liberties when compared to the account for Ketil Gufa in *The Book of Settlements (Landnamabok)*, a body of work containing records independent from Egil's Saga. As Tulinius concludes, this is an instance of the sagateller/writer of Egil's Saga "inventing details to enhance the similarity between the [Ketils'] stories" (Tulinius 26). A question of authorial intent arises: why did the saga's storyteller alter the life account of one Ketil Gufa to be similar to that of a Ketil Haeng? Tulinius and Einarsson's answer is that these stories serve a greater purpose.

Further evidence for the Ketil's being more of an intentional inclusion begins with the later mention of a "Ketil Blund"; as with Ketil Gufa, *Landnamabok* has a different record than that of the narrative of Egil's Saga. Bjarni Einarsson points out that while many versions of *Landnamabok* "derive their knowledge from *Egil's Saga*," there is one that contrasts by containing an account that is independent of Egil's Saga (Tulinius 26). Both he and Tulinius conclude that "it would seem that the author of the saga invented Ketil Blund in order to introduce yet another settler of this name [Ketil] into the story" (26).

Another common trait the three Ketil stories share is their placement "at clear breaks in the narrative" (26). Ketil Haeng's settlement in Iceland precludes the transfer of the saga's focus from Thorolf Kveldulfsson to Skallagrim, occurring after Thorolf's death and before the spotlight is put onto Skallagrim. Ketil Blund's settlement in Iceland occurs once Thorolf Skallagrimsson befriends Eirik Blood-Axe and before the two episodes from Egil's childhood that initiate him as the next main character to take the saga's spotlight. Finally, Ketil Gufa's settlement of Iceland occurs after Egil has begun to settle down in Iceland for good having reached old age.

Each introduction of "Ketil + cognomen" is followed by the killing of slaves, dramatic climax, chieftain's son in mortal danger, and wedding(s) (29). The case of Ketil Gufa seemingly deviates from this pattern but still conforms at a basic level. His settlement is followed by the escape of his slaves who then pillage and destroy Thord Lambason's farm. The saga then shifts its attention to the marriages of Egil's daughter and stepdaughter. After these direct narrative responses to Ketil's arrival and Egil's return, a major tonal shift in the saga occurs. It is climactic in its pivotal tone as it marks the end of Egil's hope for the future and the beginning of his

struggles as a man too old to raid as he used to. Bodvar, Egil's son, drowns when the ship he is on is struck by high winds in a fjord (27).

Whereas the other Ketils have some mention outside of the saga in other medieval Icelandic literature, the Ketil known as "Ketil Hod" or (as he is known in the English translations) "Ketil the Slayer" is exclusive to Egil's Saga. On the surface, he only exists in the saga to demonstrate Egil's willingness and desire to kill the king at that point of the narrative (28). Ketil the Slayer does not appear at a clear break in the narrative but still shares a proximity to a similar set of events. There is the death of a son of regal status (Rognvald), a dramatic climax between Egil Skallagrimsson and Berg-Onund over an inheritance, and two marriages: Berg-Onund and Gunnhild, Thorfinn and Saeunn (28-29). There is not direct killing of slaves, but the "dead slaves tied to trouble" motif persists in the form of Asgerd (Egil's wife) being unable to easily claim her inheritance because her mother (now deceased) was a slave (29).

The overall narrative structure of the saga aligns with the mentions of the Ketils in the same way as stanzas and refrains in poetry as per Tulinius's explanation. He gives evidence for this poetic structure by aligning the saga's narrative with the Ketil Pattern, using chapters to emphasize the division of sections according to the pattern.

Though modern chaptering of the saga has been difficult given how the manuscript *Mothruvallabok* has two lacunae, two missing sections. This manuscript is the basis of all translations (Tulinius 32) and has chaptering. The manuscript often referenced to fill in the gaps is the *Wolfenbittel* book (another manuscript the saga is translated from), which lacks chaptering. However, with research and work done by Bjanri Einarsson and other scholars on the saga's manuscripts, it has been estimated that there might have likely been around ninety chapters when the sagas text was finalized in manuscript form. Ninety is the number of chapters

modern editors put into most translations. There are exceptions such as Sigurthur Nordal's that divides the saga into eighty-eight chapters, and it manages to do so without scholarly controversy as the total of ninety is not a certain amount but one plausible according to current findings (30-31, 38).

Tulinius maps the Ketil Pattern onto the ninety-chapter scheme and overall narrative form beginning with Ketil Haeng's settlement (chapter 23), the only Ketil in the first part of Egil's Saga, being the transition of narrative focus from Thorolf Kvedulfsson (chapters 1 to 22) to Skallagrim (chapters 24 to 30). The second Ketil, Ketil Blund, and his settlement (chapter 39), marks the transition of the saga's focus from Thorolf Skallagrimsson (chapter 32 to 38) to Egil and Egil's voyages (chapter 40 to 57). Ketil the Slayer marks the middle point in Egil's adventures (chapter 57), and then Ketil Gufa marks the closing half of Egil's voyages (chapters 58 to 77) with his settlement (chapter 78), his retirement from the Viking life, and the maturing of his son Thorstein (chapters 80 to 90). Thus, the assortment of events, Ketils, and chapters bring out the organization of the saga (Tulinius 30). If the Ketil Pattern is as intentional as Tulinius argues, then it demonstrates a literary hand that knows how to organize its subject matter and source material to provide a sense of cohesion to the shifting compositional form of the saga.

Though the arguments contrast regarding the nature of the saga's compositional differences between the first and second part, what is clear by these observations of the textual evidence is that the storytelling behind Egil's Saga is ambitious: it takes what is strongly implied by the text to be a multitude of narratives and accounts, and it then uses the advantages of a written form (parallel details and motifs across the text) to assemble a life narrative that is not biography or hagiography but one true to what was said or known about the warrior poet, Egil

Skallagrimsson. Rather than be just a list or anthology of stories, the storyteller behind Egil's Saga's surviving manuscripts composed the narrative in a way that shows structural unity among the apparent irregularity. How he specifically intended these connections to help the reader is not certain; the pattern itself is at its most significant an almost reiterative narrative structure surrounding characters of a common name. This does not mean to say that the internal mechanisms of the saga's composition have no purpose further than narrative organization: Guthrun Nordal demonstrates in her analysis of Egil's poetry a purpose to rhyme beyond conforming to a poetic form. Jesse Byock also makes a compelling argument for the repetitive kind of storytelling evident with the Ketil Pattern. It is in his analysis, as discussed later, that the event types surrounding Ketils begin to appear to be like the glue between various episodes, either invented to tie the episodes together or a creative way to organize tales of similar themes in a manner reminiscent of poetry.

The Poetic Saga

Egil's Saga is renowned not only for its extensive episodic storytelling but also its poetry. Similar to the narrative structure, the poetry's interconnectedness suggests the hand of a skilled compositionist who is capable of working with repetition in verse for a unifying effect across multiple poems of various topics. Whereas the prose patterns leave little clues as to any further purpose other than marking breaks and story transitions, the poetic patterns tie contexts and echo motifs across the saga's episode.

It is clear to a reader after witnessing Egil use verse to express his thoughts on a few occasions that for him poetry is a way to tactfully and succinctly express intense feelings. His most celebrated poems—*Arinbjarnarkvitha*, *Sonatorrek*, and *Hofuthlausn*—exhibit this expressive skill the most. Yet intense emotions are not only the purpose of Egil's poems or why

he switches to verse rather than plainly expressing his thoughts. In her article, “*Ars Metrica* and the Composition of *Egil’s Saga*,” Guthrun Nordal analyzes Egil’s poetry through the forms and conventions of skaldic verse. As demonstrated in her analysis, Egil’s poetry possesses a complexity of multiple dimensions: each poem not only speaks to its scene but to other scenes and poems throughout the narrative of the saga.

Nordal’s analysis provides several examples of poetic devices present in Egil’s Saga. Two of the more notable devices that connect poems across the saga are *hattleysa* and *dunhent*. When one analyzes just the device of *dunhent* and its use in the poetry attributed to Egil, the saga’s poetic complexity becomes apparent.

Dunhent, “echoing rhyme,” is where “the last word of the line is partially repeated at the beginning of the next — Olvi / ol ; yrar / yring; regni / regn . . .” (Nordal 47). As Nordal clarifies, this poetic device was “one of those features of prosody [patterns of rhythm and sound] analysed [sic] in metrical and grammatical treatises” that were highly relevant around the time period the saga was written in (47). According to Nordal, *Dunhent* is also alluded to a “similar poetic repetition” in Snorri Sturluson’s *The Third Grammatical Treatise*; in the treatise, Olafur Thortharson “uses Hallfred’s famous sword-verse, which includes the word *sver[th]* (“sword”) in seven of its eight lines, to exemplify the figure *polintethon*”. According to Olafur, this repetition “requires a play of word forms as well as the echo in sound”—traits found in the first instance of *dunhent* in Egil’s Saga (47).

In Egil’s Saga, the first stanza that uses *dunhent* is spoken at Egil’s encounter with Eirik and Gunnhild at Bard’s farm in Atley. It occurs after Bard tries poisoning a drunken Egil. After the horn he carves protective runes on shatters, Egil helps an almost passed-out Olvir to the door of the hall they are feasting in. Bard tries to head out to serve Olvir a farewell toast, but Egil

stops him and through his drunkenness composes verse that uses *dunhent*, echoing verse, to amplify its imagery; Nordal comments “the continuity between the [final two] lines suggests how the liquid falls in a continuous downpour” (47). The first four lines of the verse are of Egil speaking of his and Olvir’s intoxicated state (Scudder 75). Yet the matter-of-fact tone of the poem shifts by the fifth and sixth lines where they, to paraphrase Nordal, prepare the audience with a tonal darkening of the sky: “Your wits have gone, inviter / of showers on to shields;” (Nordal 47, Scudder 75). “Inviter of showers on to shields” begins Egil’s threat with imagery that visualizes bloodshed as well as the plentiful serving of drink (showers) to warriors (shields as in those who would carry shields: Egil, Olvir’s crew, and King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild’s consort). The *dunhent* begins with the following and closing two lines: “now the rain of the high god / starts pouring upon you”— “*rigna getr at regni, / regnbjotr, Havars thegna*” (Nordal 47, Scudder 75). The *dunhent*, the echoing of these two final verses, creates a double entendre. The first pair of meanings the echo connects is the mead of poetry—the “rain of the high god”³—with the blood of Bard that Egil is about to shed (47). The second set of meanings foreshadows what follows afterwards in prose: the *dunhent* paints a picture of showering of mead and blood. Mead and blood are shed in the form of blood spewing from Egil skewering Bard with a sword and Olvir then vomiting (mead pouring out from him) onto Bard before collapsing next to him (47).

Dunhent is used in Egil’s Saga not only for local effect but for purposes that span the text. *Dunhent* echoes a theme of Egil’s struggle with loss from “Egil’s litigation at the Gulathing” to “his final confrontation with his son Thorsteinn” (47). The loss experienced by Egil

³ Nordal explains the further meaning in her essay on page 47 of *Egil the Viking Poet*. The importance of the “rain of the high god” and how it ties into the Norse myth about Odin’s theft of the “mead of poetry” is not only connected there, but the mythological relevance it would bear to medieval Icelanders is detailed in the Introduction of *Egil the Viking Poet*, page 7.

at the Gulathing is that of his wife's inheritance. This conflict arises from her being accused as having been born of a slave-woman. Asgerd's mother was swept away from her home by Bjorn after her brother Thorir refused to give her hand in marriage, and she conceived Asgerd while away. The other party contending against Asgerd and Egil, Onund and his wife Gunnhild, base their argument to inherit all of Bjorn's wealth by Gunnhild's mother, Olof, being properly wed and not "captured and made a concubine" (Scudder 108). Egil, on the other hand, argues that he and his wife inherit only half of Bjorn's estate.

The first dunhent stanza Egil speaks on the occasion is after the king responds to his close friend Arinbjorn argument for Asgerd. However, unlike previous instances, such as his *hattleysa* composed before an earl's daughter that persuaded her favor, Egil's poetry does not sway the king's opinion even as the well-composed response that it is. His attempt at poetic persuasion does not go unrecognized, as Queen Gunnhild scolds King Eirik by accusing him of "[letting] this big man Egil run circles around you" (109). Even when Egil's poetry does not sway decisions of royalty to his favored outcome, it still inspires concern and worry to those who are wary of him.

It would not be an episode from Egil's Saga if there were no verses shown for the saga's audience to see the poetic skill themselves. Before the king and the Gulathing assembly, Egil uses *dunhent* in the following stanza:

"This man pinned with thorns claims / that my wife, who bears my drinking horn, / is born of a slave-woman; / Selfish Onund looks after himself" – "Thyborna kvethr thorna / thorn reith aar horna, / syslir hann of sina / singirnth Onundr, mina" (Nordal 48, Scudder 109).

Nordal argues in her commentary that “the *dunhenda* technique serves to bring Egil’s point home” before the court and the saga’s audience, as evident in the original language when compared to the English translation (48). It also jogs the audience’s memory to the earlier use of *dunhenda* at Atley where Egil first came into direct conflict with Eirik and Queen Gunnhild. Nordal also notes that the first word, beginning with *thy-* (“slave”), signals back to “Egil’s description of the merry maids at Bard’s feast” and “that Egill [sic] is seriously offended” (Nordal 48).

After scolding her husband, Queen Gunnhild’s orders the aids of the royal court to bring weapons to the Gulathing and prevent Egil and his party from attaining any further progress on their case. In the process, Egil tries to call for a duel to prevent the violence between both parties, but Arinbjorn persuades him to pull away and pursue their case no longer. Furious and anxious about the ordeal, Egil composes a verse while they sail away from where the Gulathing was held. In the stanza, he again applies *dunhent*:

“Thorn-foot’s false heir ruined / my claim to the inheritance. / ... / We disputed great fields / That serpents slumber on: gold.” – “Erfingi reth arfi / arfljugr fyr mer svarfa, / ... / ver deildum fjol foldar / foldarvaeringja, goldin” (48).

The English translation of these verses maintains much of the wordplay involved in Egil’s stanza at the Gulathing. Onund’s pining with thorns (“thorn-foot”) not only describes how petty and agonizing the entire case is, but also states that his efforts to attain all of Bjorn’s estate are doomed from the start, “pinned” being of the past tense. More so, Nordal notes that the echoing effect between the first and last pair of the stanza’s lines “distil the reasons for the dispute”: inheritance (*arfi / arfljugr*) and land (*foldar / foldvaeringja*). This distillation not only

reminds the audience what the dispute is about but provides the poet with a way to reorient his thoughts in a response that takes apart what was presented to him or what he witnessed.

One of the final verses Egil composes at an old age utilize *dunhent* to express his complicated grief through an echoing form that uses its resonance to emphasize major motifs of the saga as well as echo back to the beginning of the second part. Egil's verse expresses grief that is two-fold: Egil's bitter loss of an old friend and the surviving mantle of such a relationship being taken up by a step-son who is anything but on good terms with his step-father.

It is prior to an upcoming assembly that Asgerd and Thorstein choose to use the silk scarves ("cloak" or "gown" in Scudder's translation) that Arinbjorn gave to Egil early on in the saga. Nordal notes that not only was Arinbjorn a friend but a patron with "Egil being listed as Arinbjorn's court poet in the version of *Skaldatal* found in Codex Upsaliensis" (Nordal 49). Since his friend's death, the warrior-poet has kept these scarves "under lock and key in a chest, along with his other treasures". At the assembly, Thorstein ends up dragging the scarves through the mud as they are long on him. When he returns home, Asgerd puts the scarves away. Egil soon discovers his scarves have been ruined (though according to the manuscripts Nordal refers to they were washed) and confronts his wife who then confesses. In response, he speaks a verse:

"I had little need of an heir / to use my inheritance. / My son has betrayed me / in my
lifetime, I call that treachery. / The horseman of the sea / could well have waited / for
other sea-skiers / to pile rocks over me" (Scudder 187, Nordal 49).

Here *dunhent* is used for the final time in the saga to echo back to two previous episodes sharing thematic and motif connections. The foremost connection is that Egil faces a bitter betrayal that involves the loss of property relating to loved ones. Whereas at the Gulathing Egil and Asgerd lost their claim to her father's property to her relatives, here Egil 'loses' the silk cloak that his

closest friend Arinbjorn gave him when his son seized his inheritance prematurely. The verse specifies this echo with the dunhent, signaling specifically back to the verses using dunhent Egil composed during and after the episode at the Gulathing.

It is in the untranslated verse that the dunhent's effect of emphasis is more apparent:
 "Attkak erfínytja / arfa mer til tharfan, / mik hefr sonr of svikvinn, / svik telk, i thvi,
 kvikvan" (Nordal 49).

Nordal writes that the "first two internal rhymes in the first two lines play on the same consonant clusters: *erfi/arfa/tharfan*." In the third and fourth verse, Egil uses full rhyme, "his favorite ploy": "*mik/svikvinn, svik/kvikvan*" (50). Nordal's reference to it being Egil's favorite ploy is evident in the previous example. This full rhyme was used to describe Egil's grief over inheritance, and here again it is used, echoing it as well as a more direct betrayal of trust Egil had in those around him. Egil's trust was betrayed when his wife was denied their inheritance before the king, and here his trust is betrayed when his son claims an inheritance without seeking his father's permission and too soon. It is through the dunhent used in these verses that betrayal and distrust are emphasized. Furthermore, according to Nordal's observation, this rhyme points not only to them being the true message of this verse, but the theme of the saga. Yet this verse's connections in motifs and themes do not end here.

The second connection this verse with dunhent possesses is with one of the first verses composed in the saga. Egil composes said verse after his mother praises him for having the makings of a fine Viking (Scudder 68). This follows after Egil, at the age of seven, drives an axe into the head of a bully who had almost killed him previously. Egil's father, Skallagrim, is described as indifferent to this dramatic event, whereas Egil's mother Bera takes pride in her son taking action in a way that could be described as pre-mature for a Viking. This mark of a pre-

mature Viking foreshadows with excitement as to what Egil will become in the future. Egil's comment about his son acting as a pre-mature Viking ("The horseman of the sea / could have waited") appears to be an ironic and bittersweet twist in its echoing. Whereas Bera praises the young Egil for being a Viking in the sense that he goes forth and deals with his enemies decisively, Asgerd encourages Thorstein to—in effect—plunder his own father's bounty. Such a subtle connection with such resonant suggestions as to the meaning behind it demonstrates the effectiveness of echoing in dunnent and the verses that apply such echoing across the saga.

The recurring structures throughout the poetry demonstrate a degree of intent in the composition of the saga. While the first part of the saga had a narrative tightness, the more episodic second part of the saga features repetition in prose and poetry that brings structural coherence and motif importance to its looser narrative. However, suggested intent and what recurring motifs can only suggest so much as to the storyteller's purpose.

Saga-teller/Writer's Purposes for Egil's Saga

Part of a storyteller's craft is considering their audience. This is apparent in the saga's patterns, which if intentional were applied in consideration to the medieval Icelandic audience and other audiences the saga-teller had in mind. Information regarding the tastes of the medieval audiences of the sagas is not easy to come across. Yet in the analyses of the sagas that have been preserved and passed on manuscript form such as Egil's, what the compositionist of Egil's Saga was striving for with the saga becomes clearer.

Guthrun Nordal states early on in her article that Egil's Saga recognizes its audience as one invested in Egil Skallagrimsson the poet if not poetry. An audience invested in poetry would not simply hear or read of a poem without going into its deeper meanings. As Nordal's dissection of the use of dunnent and echoing devices shows, it is likely the compositionist understood how

to manipulate or craft the verses to emphasize relevant narrative motifs (for the verses exclusive to the saga), where to put or mention them to add necessary depth to characters or situations, and likely knew how each poetic composition spoke to the others by their narrative location and in their echoing motives and devices. This is apparent in the aforementioned example of Egil's verse about Thorstein echoing motifs from one of his first compositions. The compositionist's understanding about how important poetry would be for the saga's audience explains the attention to how each poem is constructed according to medieval Icelandic poetic conventions. It also explains the regular instances of Egil composing verse and the featuring of his most celebrated poems that make him the revered warrior-poet among the sagas that he is recognized as.⁴

Jesse Byock in *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* argues that the purpose the sagas for the audiences of their time were not primarily records of tradition or purely literary works (see footnote).⁵ Rather, one of the main draws of the medieval Icelandic audience to the sagas was the narratives' reflection of the Icelander and his interests, as apparent through not only how the Icelandic hero "looks primarily to his own self-interest"—being a hero not out to save the world or defend civilization—but also how the sagas generally revolve around the Icelandic feud, which "stands at the core of the narrative[s], and its operation reaches into heart of Icelandic society" (Byock 3, 1).

⁴ Egil's popularity with the medieval Icelandic and Norse audience is best summarized in a quote from Snorri Sturluson: "Many were grateful to Egill for his poetry" (Andersson 289).

⁵ Byock covers this nuance in the "Introduction" chapter, discussing the nuance in the context of two competing perspectives in twentieth-century saga scholarship. The freeprosists, whose view was dominant in the beginning of the twentieth century, viewed the sagas as records of oral tradition. During their time another concept that was also well-considered was that the sagas (alongside other medieval literature) had a strong historical basis and could be read almost as historical records. Bookprosists, whose view gained traction post-mid twentieth century, argued the sagas as primarily literary constructions whose narratives consisted mostly of invention.

Other facets of appeal Byock identifies includes the Christian elements (which Tulinius notes⁶) and subtext. These elements and subtexts lead earlier scholars to conclude that alongside the epic nature of some saga heroes such, the sagateller/writer had to look outside of his own traditions for “the narrative tools adequate for constructing sophisticated tales about their not-so-distant forefathers”. Scholars who accepted this view pointed to similarities in the sagas with Germanic heroic traditions or other medieval narrative structures containing “Christian thought and narrative forms, especially hagiography.” They then concluded that the sagas were either “end products” or “innovative Icelandic adaptations”. Byock rebuts this notion, stating that these features—the presence of similarities to the Germanic heroic tradition and Christian thought—are graftings, later additions, and not core elements (Byock 9). Tulinius shares a similar observation in *The Enigma of Egil*, where he writes that it is likely that the compositionist of Egil’s Saga included these Christian elements for the Christianizing medieval Icelandic audience; it was not unusual, as the saga was a product of a culture where literature and oral tradition developed to have the tools necessary to facilitate complexity to appeal to its audience in a nuanced manner (pp. 289-294).

The later “grafting” is also evident in the nature of the saga’s epilogue where the bones of Egil are dug up and his skull is revealed to have trollish features and proven be unbreakable when a priest tries testing its strength by striking it with an axe (Scudder 204). It is the core subject matter, what makes up the narrative, that demonstrates the inspirations of the stories that “are about the conflicts and the anxiety inherent in [the Medieval Icelanders’] society; between

⁶ The recurring number of three and its multiples and their relation to Egil’s life (i.e. his age at key narrative points and the number of verses attributed to Egil in the saga) are plausibly a reference to the Holy Trinity, a literary practice not uncommon to medieval writers with Christianized audiences (Tulinius 33).

the medieval audience and the sagaman there was a contract of *vraisemblance* [or a strong desire in storytelling for there to be believability or an air of authenticity to the subject matter, whether accurate or faithful in spirit, components, and structure]” (Byock 38). Among the sagas there are those that resort to fantastic, magical, and mythological inclusions; Egil’s saga mentions shapeshifters, runic magic, and guardian spirits. Though one could argue that these elements technically invalidate the claim that the sagas did not take continental inventions regarding the heroic epic, there is the counter-argument showing that these inclusions play a minor role in the overall narrative and are not the heart of the narrative, as Byock addresses in his introduction (3). In other words, these occurrences are likely additional graftings from more fantastical oral sources or what the storyteller believed would supplement the appeal of the narrative.

Another point of possible appeal the sagas may have had to their original audiences is their narrative complexity and length. Scholars who view the complicated and lengthy narratives as examples of definitive literary construction or something beyond the compositional capabilities of oral storytellers ignore a narrative technique that Byock argues is present throughout the overall structure in the sagas. This “simple compositional technique” equipped the “sagaman to narrate in detail a specific instance of a feud while preparing future conflicts and the involvement of other characters” (Byock 8). The traits of this technique are mirrored in the Ketil pattern—more specifically, the “elements” of it are the types of sub-narratives surrounding a Ketil, all the Ketils together forming a long and loose but apparent narrative chain. In this technique, a simple selection of narrative elements was reorganized by a logic that would preside in the daily lives of the medieval Icelandic audience, a logic that therefore provided the realism the *vraisemblance*-hungry audience was looking for (8).

Available to the saga compositionist⁷ were the logics of the oral tales, family genealogies, and texts of historical focus such as the *Islendingabok*, the *Landnamabok*, and the *Gragas* (extensive legal compilations) (28). These provided the logic, the understood processes and explanations for events, for the saga narratives. In most cases, the logic that guided the narrative element groups was that of the feud, which was definite enough to maintain an air of realism but open enough for the elements in the groups to be “[combined] in a variety of ways and [be] not sequentially bound.” These groups would then be linked to one another, yet still share a same basic set of elements with the only major variation being what logic was applied and what new characters entered. While the narratives may seem complex on the surface, when deconstructed (as with the Ketil Pattern) their mechanism appears simple. How the typical saga can produce unique and unexpected complexity is evident in that this “technique of prose composition is simple” and “adaptable; in this quality lies its vitality” or its ability to provide innovative and new sagas of extensive length that maintained “an aura of plausibility” while being not beyond the capabilities of a competent storyteller (8).

Other patterns or devices that may involve a logic centered on audience expectation is Tulinus’ observation that the narrative structure of the second part, if distinguished by chapter, matches the structure of Egil’s *Hofuthlausn*. This is less of a logic in regard to telling a complex story with a simple technique, as it instead works upon the audience’s familiarity with poetry, specifically Egil Skallagrimsson’s. The over-structure that seems to intentionally resemble one of the saga’s most notable verses is fitting to organize the episodic life narrative of a revered warrior-poet. Considering the certain case that the saga was composed from numerous accounts

⁷ As previously mentioned, whether it was one compositionist or several who were responsible for the saga material’s final organization is not certain in scholarship. To avoid confusion, the compositionist(s) are referred to in a general singular term.

and sources, using the structure of a poem seems not only intuitive but an ideal means to handle such an extensive work of composition, written or told.

The saga audience of what likely was a later telling/writing down of Egil's Saga were likely interested in a Christian interpretation, as strongly suggested by the grafting of Christian narratives in the epilogue. Much earlier audiences, certainly those from the start, were invested in hearing about the warrior poet, his poetry, his lineage, the accounts, the local tales, the traditions, and all the other narrative elements involved in the composition of Egil's Saga. This plausible development process suggests that the saga was re-composed for shifting tastes. Saga scholarship (including a few of the aforementioned) has addressed the likelihood of re-composition.

Egil's Saga was influenced by an awareness of the political atmosphere of its time, defined by a development of an Icelandic cultural and political identity distinct from its roots (Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*). The real Egil Skallagrimsson is recorded as a court poet in the *Skaldatal* (a catalogue of poets), yet in his saga he is portrayed as very difficult to keep near Norwegian royalty (or royalty near him) (Nordal 41). While the saga focusing on Norwegian King Magnus and Harald view their royal policies "at arm's length and somewhat obliquely," the sagateller/writer of Egil's saga "brings the political issues much closer to home". According to Andersson, Egil's Saga demonstrates a shift in perspective where "Icelanders are no longer measured against Norwegian kings" but instead "the kings are measured against an Icelandic protagonist"; the saga serves as a "temporizing diplomacy" that satisfies two separate audiences with contrasting interests: one Icelandic and the other Norwegian (41). Whereas the other sagas Andersson analyzes use the cameo of the Icelander to boast in proximity to Norwegian royalty, Egil's Saga puts the Icelander up against Norwegian

royalty on a regular basis. However, its teller/writer shows some restraint and sensitivity for the dual readership, some of whom may not be so enthusiastic for what could've been an easily polarizing tale. The sagateller/writer in this instance diplomatizes the narrative with the “ironizing ambiguity in Egil’s character”. This ambiguity “results in a more complex portraiture than was practiced in the early sagas” (Andersson 206). A famous Icelandic court poet with more depth and ambiguity to him makes interest in his narrative more negotiable. He is thereby easier to digest to an audience more likely to favor the Norwegians he is difficult with. This handling is similar to the previously mentioned saga of Norwegian kings that utilized a complex portrayal of King Harald to appeal to a broader audience rather than repel them with a more aggressive portrayal of a notorious king.

Andersson notes that Egil’s Saga’s portrayal of politics and political actors was not only built upon interests of its audience and tellers of its time, but it also opened the way for “the development of literary subterfuge” and an “increasingly overt self-assertiveness in the Icelandic sagas”. The sagas in this case therefore served as a cultural-political vehicle for the attitudes fostered under the political strains between Iceland and Norway. One of such sagas displaying these qualities is the later *Laxdaela saga*. Its focus on Iceland is not only greater compared to previous sagas such as Egil’s but bestows early Iceland “with a quasi-royal grandeur”. The shift in self-perception is clear with Icelanders no longer having to contend with the glory and might of Norwegian royalty, but instead “[traveling] to the Norwegian court for an opportunity to display their own accomplishments” (207).

As for the political attitude and identity portrayed in Egil’s Saga, his travels to the Norwegian court is less about displaying Icelandic glory and more about the Icelander confronting a king whose family has acted against his for generations. This is not to say the saga

itself takes a neutral stance in the political struggle, but more so takes a position that highlights Icelandic grievances but does so with nuance. Rather than alienate one audience with a foul betrayal of Norwegian royalty and with a glorifying portrayal of Egil Skallagrimsson or lose the interest of both with a tepid portrayal of either, the author of Egil's Saga portrays both poet and king as formidable, complicated, and interesting opponents regardless of who may seem to have the advantage in the situation they are in.

Egil's Saga: The Purpose of Its Compositionist

As seen throughout Egil's Saga, from the nature of its origins, to its prose, to its poetry, and to its historical purpose, the sagateller/writer has composed his source material to add a sense of cohesion throughout the saga's complicated composition. Aware of his contemporary audiences and their tastes, the compositionist who shaped the saga organized and grafted to what appealed to medieval Icelanders, whether they sought Christian interpretations, complex narratives surrounding land disputes under the Icelandic feud, the poetic depth from a revered poet, or a tale that reflected their social and political realities.

What Egil's Saga's composition shows is that a storyteller takes what knowledge they have gathered over the years and through the careful application of authorial liberty shape what they know into the context and logic of narrative. A good storyteller can tell narratives that not only entertain, inform, remind, preserve, and demonstrate, but generates discussion and discourse, whether it be with the audience or with other storytellers. This discussion in the sagas is evident in Andersson's analysis of how each saga responded to its predecessor by approaching similar topics but then handling them differently. A storyteller of high achievement and purpose, such as a saga-teller, handles the information they present with sensitivity to the tradition behind their materials, to what appeals to their audiences (what invests them into the story), and what

they want others to take from their compositions. What Egil's Saga says about storytelling is that it is a craft of discourse beyond simply getting a point across. Storytelling at its strongest approaches a subject of interest and speaks of it through the nuance and specificity of narrative. It ties together information that would seem to excessive or unnecessary in normal communication (as seen in the second part of Egil's saga) and by bringing contextual cohesion to a multitude of topics, a compositionist can present a picture broader than a single perspective, and can speak to more than one discussion. Egil's Saga and its titular character show that a good storyteller tells a story not only to entertain and inform, but to also to provoke interest in what is involved in the story even if audiences are not initially interested in the details.

As testified again and again by the inquiry of scholars and by the persistence of Egil's Saga in the minds of its audience throughout history, the sagamen of medieval Iceland demonstrate the ultimate worth of a storyteller in the narratives that have survived the transition of time and place, drawing the interests of new readers centuries after the events occurred and their oral accounts were created, and granting other audiences a glimpse into the medieval Icelandic mind. Storytelling is not simply the act of informing while entertaining the audience. As the composition of Egil's Saga demonstrates, storytelling is the craft of contextualizing what is told in a way that subtly guides and provokes the knowledge and curiosity of the audience.

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