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Tense, Structure, and Reception in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*

Recent research on both medieval literature and modern conversational narrative has shown that narrators frequently manipulate verbal categories for pragmatic purposes. In particular, this research indicates that authors and speakers often alternate tense to perform such basic narrative operations as foregrounding events, segmenting episodes, and pacing the action (e.g., Wolfson 1982; Schiffrin 1981; Wehr 1984; Silva-Corvalán 1983; Fulk 1987; Fleischman 1990a; Richardson 1991). This pragmatic approach should be distinguished from conventional wisdom, which holds that present verbs are in the business of creating vividness or immediacy. Although the vividness explanation shares important features with the pragmatic account, recent studies are more likely to conclude that such vividness is best understood as a by-product of other narrative operations (e.g., foregrounding, segmenting, or pacing).

The Icelandic sagas test the conventional account insofar as they abound with non-vivid uses of the historical present. This characteristic has even led some scholars to suggest — wrongly, I think — that tense alternation in the sagas does not lend itself to pragmatic analysis. But the significance of the tense alternation question is not exhausted by the critique of conventional wisdom; indeed, the linguistic patterns are often less interesting than the critical and theoretical questions to which they might be (and sometimes have been) put. Past scholarship on tense alternation has traditionally fed larger debates about saga origins and dating, and though these debates are clearly important, they are not the best places to apply the methods and results of pragmatic analysis. I hope to show that these methods and results are more directly relevant to discussions of saga structure and reception rather than dating and origins. More specifically, I wish to argue that tense in the sagas is what Hans Robert Jauss calls a triggering signal in

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a process of directed perception. An alternative formulation of this claim is that tense shifts suggest ways of understanding sagas much the way specific shots and editing decisions suggest ways of understanding films. Finally, I hope to show why this is so, and to suggest that the visual analogy is not as gratuitous as it may seem.

Although many earlier works studies refer to tense alternation in the sagas, the first extended consideration of the question is Willibald Lehmann's 1939 dissertation. Lehmann's study is especially useful for isolating the narrative functions, as well as the subjective effects, of the historical present tense in the sagas. For Lehmann, the historical present is an oral strategy with two primary functions ("szenische" and "transitorische"), though he mentions other effects as well, including foregrounding and pacing. While this analysis assorts well with at least one version of "The New Philology" (Fleischman 1990b), Lehmann's terminology also retains certain vestiges of the vividness hypothesis. For example, he asserts that the characteristic feature of the scenic present is its "Anschaulichkeit": vividness, but with a strong visual connotation, a point to which I will return.

Lehmann's study was followed in 1951 by Ulrike Sprenger's book on the same subject. Sprenger offers three major comments on Lehmann's analysis. First, she switches the focus of the investigation from the individual scene to the saga as a whole:

> Das Hauptgewicht liegt bei Lehmann in der Interpretation einzelner Szenen, deren Dramatik durch das Pr.h. hervorgehoben wird. Dann scheint mir dieses Vorgehen unrichtig. Das Pr.h. ist Haupttempus der Saga und zuerst einmal als *Ganzes* zu betrachten (1951: 9 n.).

Second, Sprenger stresses the importance of studying the preterite as well as the present tense, again as it relates to the saga as a whole. Her third and most important point is that no single explanation of tense alternation will do for all sagas. She notes that the present tense predominates in the early family sagas and accounts for the basic nucleus of the narrative, while the preterite is used for accent and heightening of effect; the later and longer sagas, on the other hand, narrate predominantly in the preterite and use the historical present for accent. According to Sprenger, the major differences in tense variation can be attributed to the shift from oral to literate narrative. She argues that the later pattern reflects the influence of ecclesiastical writing, and concludes that the diachronic change shows a development from a freeprose to a bookprose manner of composition.

Sprenger's analysis is salutary insofar as it reminds us that such questions should be investigated historically as well as described synchronically. Still, the grounds for her diachronic argument are not unassailable. For one thing, the sagas are notoriously difficult to date; since the appearance of Sprenger's book, two sagas have been moved from one end of the saga writing period to the other. More to the point, this period lasted only 125 years — perhaps not enough time to rule out simple stylistic variation. Narrators rarely manipulate tense in precisely the same way, and in fact our own conversational narratives show a set of overlapping and crisscrossing similarities rather than a fixed or unified pattern of tense alternation. This lack of unity does not rule out meaningful talk about general patterns, but these patterns may not conform to clearcut diachronic ones.

The connection between tense alternation and saga origins also raises a host of questions. Even if we accept Sprenger's diachronic analysis, we might pause over the assumption that the diminished use of the historical present reflects a movement from orality to literacy. To be sure, the use of the historical present is linked to oral performance in a wide variety of languages and periods. But we also have the English tradition, in which historical present verbs are absent in Anglo-Saxon literature but ubiquitous in the later and highly intertextual works of Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet. The question of influence is also vexed; again, even if we accept Sprenger's diachronic argument, must we chalk up the change to the influence of ecclesiastical writing? Could there be another sort of literary influence at work here, not the kind that would account for the diminished and altered use of the historical present, but literary influence as the reason for the present forms in the first place? That is, could tense alternation itself have been the result of literary influence? Certainly the lack of historical present verbs in the earlier English literature should make us reluctant to posit a Germanic oral tradition which made use of this technique; or at least those partial to this account would have some explaining to do. In the face of such questions, one is inclined to accept Sprenger's diachronic complication of Lehmann's model without fully endorsing her substitute. It also seems necessary to imagine a more complex relationship between oral performance and literary style than Sprenger allowed for in 1951.

More recent studies of saga technique have benefited from investigations of narrative in a wide variety of traditions, periods, genres, and contexts. Frederic Amory's examination of the saga scene, for ex-

ample, integrates William Labov's model of conversational narrative with Carol Clover's analysis of scene composition in the sagas (Amory 1980; Labov 1972; Clover 1974). While Amory does mention the narrative uses of tense, he seems to miss two important opportunities to elaborate the point. First, there is no discussion of tense alternation as a discourse device for framing scenes. Discourse analysts have made exactly this case for tense alternation in modern American conversational narrative, though it should be noted that much of that work was just beginning to appear when Amory's piece was published (Wolfson 1982; Schiffrin 1981). The other missed opportunity has to do with tense shifting as a way of registering what Schiffrin (1981: 59 ff.) calls internal evaluation, or the methods by which narrators stage events so that they convey their own importance; these methods are usually contrasted with external evaluation, which consists of the narrator's direct commentary on the action. These missed opportunities may be related to Amory's acceptance of Paul Kiparsky's claim that the historical present in Old Norse and other Indo-European languages is best understood as a sentence-level syntactic phenomenon rather than a discourse-level pragmatic one. Karen Kossuth remedies the first omission in her 1980 article, which also makes use of Labov and Clover and points even more emphatically in the right direction. Kossuth dilutes her analysis, however, by considering several other factors, including agency, aspect, anaphora, and word order. She also endorses Kiparsky's approach without consideration of Lehmann's and Sprenger's more detailed analyses of the Icelandic evidence. These cavils notwithstanding, Kossuth succeeds admirably at her stated goal of laying the groundwork for further investigation.

The most recent treatment of this topic to my knowledge is R. D. Fulk's 1987 article on the historical present in Irish narrative, which includes a brief consideration of the Icelandic sagas. Fulk begins by arguing that Kiparsky's theory of Indo-European verbal phenomena does not adequately explain Irish tense alternation, which Fulk argues was governed by the principle of relative importance. Fulk goes on to critique Sprenger's diachronic claims about the Icelandic sagas, and offers a passage from *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* as a counterexample to her bookprose theory. The essay concludes with the following comments on tense alternation in the passage and the sagas in general:

> I cannot discern the governing principle here, though it does seem to me that in the family sagas truly exciting passages, such as scenes of combat, are narrated almost exclusively in the preterite. But it should not be surprising if it turns out that the alternation, unlike its Irish counterpart, does not reveal anything about the narrator's interpretation of the relative importance of an action. After all, a guise of uniform objectivity is an essential feature of saga style. Since saga writers attempt to reveal everything through dramatic characterization, and scrupulously avoid expository characterization and at least the semblance of all other forms of authorial intrusion, it would perhaps be surprising if the narrative did contain such a mechanical device for the purpose of revealing anything about the author's opinion of the action (342–43).

Several points require attention here. First, there may very well be more than one principle governing the use of the historical present tense in the sagas; Lehmann posits two such principles, one of which is unrelated to the narrator's interpretation of relative importance (1939: 47). Second, a pragmatic account would not be refuted even if exciting saga passages were narrated only in the preterite (they are not), though it is true that this pattern would disrupt Sprenger's bookprose claim. By charting a diachronic development in which the narrative roles of the present and preterite are reversed, Sprenger's analysis suggests that tense *alternation* is what matters, not the inherent vividness of the present tense. Finally, it is a mistake to regard tense shifting as a mechanical form of authorial intrusion which is out of keeping with saga style. Internal evaluation can be a mark of authorial control, especially in longer and more complicated narratives where framing and grounding are crucial. By way of comparison, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* shows a similar pattern of tense alternation (Richardson 1991), though few critics have faulted its narrative technique.

More worrisome, perhaps, is Fulk's suggestion that saga style precludes a pragmatic account of the sort pursued by Lehmann, Sprenger, Amory, and Kossuth. I believe this account to be the best one available, and in the rest of this article I hope to show how it elucidates specific critical and theoretical questions concerning the sagas. In general, I will maintain that the pragmatic model offers a more precise way of discussing saga structure, and that such a model is an integral part of Jauss's theory of reception, which assumes its validity.

Tense and Structure in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*

Saga structure has been a central concern since the 1960s, when formal analysis of the sagas began in earnest. The most influential work during this period has been that of Theodore Andersson, who organizes the typical family saga into six discrete parts: introduction, conflict, climax, revenge, reconciliation, and aftermath (Andersson 1967). One of the many critics of this scheme is Jesse Byock, who claims that Andersson's tendency to force sagas into an unyielding mold is evident even in his illustrative explication of *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*. Specifically, Byock argues that Andersson's model requires him to view a particular event in the þáttr, the killing of an unimportant stableman, as the tale's climax. This reading strikes Byock as fixed and artificial:

> Andersson sets up his schema according to an entirely literary decision. He fails to consider the medieval audience, which we may safely assume was far less interested in the killing of a hired hand than in the actions of the famous chieftain Bjarni. Nor from the nature of this tale does it seem that the sagaman was much interested in the stableman (1982: 51 ff.).

Part of the trouble here may be terminological; Byock is probably right that the term "climax" attributes more centrality and dramatic intensity to this incident than is justified. Bjarni is certainly a crucial character in this þáttr, and any climax (in the ordinary sense of the word) that does not include him is probably unworthy of the name.

But Byock's criticism itself raises a fundamental question; to what non-literary (or non-linguistic) criterion does Byock appeal when he safely assumes that the author and medieval audience were far less interested in this part of the story? After introducing the notion of the "feudeme", which Byock defines as the smallest active narrative element of the saga, Byock himself raises a set of related questions about audience in his conclusion:

> Did a particular sequence of feudemes evoke the recognition in the medieval audience of what was to come? Did the listeners know what forthcoming actions would be emphasized? ... If we break down large blocks of information scattered throughout the feuds, can we discover narrative codes there as well? (1982: 207)

These questions are important, and Byock is certainly correct that to

answer them "we need more than a passing acquaintance with the attributes of the society portrayed in the sagas and the institutions and laws of the Icelandic Free State" (207). Despite further elaboration in a recent article (Byock 1994), however, Byock's feudeme seems neither necessary nor sufficient to describe the grammar of saga narrative. As a narratological tool, the notion is severely restricted by its mono-generic focus. A more serious drawback, perhaps, is the model's insensitivity to the *actual* grammar of these texts; despite the terminological homage to linguistics, Byock's approach is indifferent to the pragmatic aspects of saga narrative.

A more direct approach to narrative codes, I believe, would begin with a careful consideration of the linguistic evidence. *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs* seems a good place to begin — or, more precisely, to continue — this investigation of saga structure for three reasons. First, the piece is short and self-contained, and therefore can be analyzed as a whole. Second, the story is an illustration of — and paradigm for — Anderssonian saga structure (Andersson 1967: 6); thus a pragmatic analysis can be tested against Andersson's treatment of the story, as well as Byock's critique of that treatment. Third, William Ian Miller's recent analysis of the story's social subtleties provides a detailed thematic reading which supplements Andersson's structural one. These three advantages, I believe, outweigh the two obvious disadvantages of beginning with this text: the problematic status of the þáttr as genre in and of itself (see Lönnroth 1964 and 1975; Harris 1972, 1975, and 1976) and the lack of a complete, well preserved medieval manuscript. The genre question can be deferred, as this approach (unlike Byock's) is not peculiar to the þáttr, family saga, or any other genre. Whether or not the conclusions extend to the longer sagas is an empirical question, though my preliminary investigations (as well as Lehmann's and Sprenger's results) indicate that they can be so extended. As for the textual problems, the following analysis will suggest that they are substantial but perhaps not insurmountable.

The þáttr, which Jón Jóhannesson dates to the mid-thirteenth century, exists in a fifteenth-century vellum fragment (AM 162C, fol.), as well as many paper manuscripts, the most important of which date to the seventeenth century. The badly damaged fragment covers most of the second half of the story. It lacks chapter headings, and makes great use of abbreviations for names and verbs of speech. While the chapter divisions in the paper manuscripts differ (see Jakobsen 1900–03: 75 ff.), they correlate strongly with transitional

present verbs and "natural" breaks in the narrative, frequently preceding sentences beginning with time adverbs and adverbial phrases such as *nú, þá, um morguninn,* and *litlu fyrir jól.* In AM 156, for example, there are twenty-four breaks in the script; of these, ten precede sentences with present verbs and seven precede instances of direct speech (there are no quotation marks). The Íslenzk Fornrit edition, it should be noted, is based largely on this manuscript and AM 496.

The story itself concerns a young man, Thorstein, who is injured with a horse-prod by a stableman named Thord during a horsefight. For reasons which become clear later, Thorstein shrugs off the injury as unintentional and seeks no redress. Two onlookers, Thorvall and Thorvald (who, along with Thord, work for Bjarni, the local chieftain), subsequently ridicule Thorstein by assigning him the nickname "stangarhǫgg" ('staff-struck'). Only when Thorarin, Thorstein's father, questions his son's masculinity does Thorstein finally request compensation from Thord. Thorstein receives another insult instead, whereupon he kills the stableman. Bjarni has Thorstein outlawed, but again Thorhall and Thorvald make inflammatory comments, this time within earshot of Bjarni, who dispatches them to avenge the death of Thord. Thorstein kills both of them as well. Bjarni's wife, concerned that she and Bjarni might be losing prestige in the community, goads him to avenge the deaths, and he finally challenges Thorstein to a duel. Thorstein mixes deference with verbal barbs and powerful blows in such a way as to reach a compromise with Bjarni. The terms are that Thorstein will work for Bjarni, who in turn agrees to provide for Thorarin. Perversely, Bjarni tells Thorarin that his son is dead, whereupon Thorarin lures the chieftain to his bedside and tries to stab him. Bjarni eludes the feeble swipe, chides Thorarin, and tells him of the agreement. The story ends with a brief summary of Bjarni's conversion, death, and descendants.

The pattern of tense alternation in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs* matches Sprenger's later type in which the historical present is used for transitions as well as to highlight and accent. The first two uses of the historical present introduce Thorstein and Thord; they are the only characters introduced with present verbs. If tense alternation serves as an internal evaluation device in this þáttr, this pattern tells against Byock's claim that Thord is more or less inconsequential; to the contrary, the use of the historical present seems to signal that Thord is someone to keep track of. In contrast, Bjarni is introduced in the preterite, though he is clearly a main character. The context may

be the key here; Bjarni appears in several other sagas and þættir, including *Ljósvetninga saga, Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana, Fljótsdæla saga,* as well as *Vápnfirðinga saga,* to which the earliest paper manuscript (AM 496) attaches *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*. As Miller notes:

> The story assumes the reader is quite familiar with Bjarni and his history. He is thus introduced without genealogy, which is unusual for a central saga character of chieftain rank, and several significant allusions in the story depend on a prior knowledge of Bjarni's prior kin trouble and his fight at Bodvarsdale, which are dealt with in *Vápnfirðinga* (1990: 321, n. 21).

In short, Bjarni's prominence in these eastern sagas may have made special discourse marking unnecessary.

The next sequence of historical present verbs narrates the exchange of blows at the horsefight. Interestingly, Thorstein's request that no one tell his father of the incident is also related in the present tense. While no motives are offered for this request, the choice of tense suggests its importance. This pattern is consistent with classic saga technique; mention is made of a detail whose precise significance remains unclear until the story unfolds in its own time (Ker 1908: 236 ff.). The next present verbs mark Thorarin's entrance back at the farm and Thorstein's first answer to his father's provocations. These events correspond to what Andersson labels the conflict. Of the three items Andersson includes in his summary of this portion, two are narrated in the present, while one — the attribution of Thorstein's nickname — is not.

The subsequent series of present verbs narrates Thorstein's conflict with Thord, and the distribution of these verbs suggests a more detailed version of Andersson's climax. While Byock is probably correct that this part of the story is not the author's main concern, nothing after this killing makes narrative sense if the audience misses its significance. Andersson's terse description of the revenge portion is also at variance with the more elaborate pattern suggested by the tense shifts. Present verbs are used to narrate Bjarni's legal action, Thorvald's and Thorhall's fateful conversation, and their realization that they have overspoken. A close grouping of present verbs also narrates the deaths of the brothers, their inauspicious return to the farm tied to the backs of their horses, and Bjarni's laconic reaction.

The next cluster of present verbs begins with the observation that all is quiet until Christmas, which I take to be a Lehmannesque transi-

tion into the Anderssonian reconciliation. Rannveig's goading is narrated in the present, as are Bjarni's immediate answer and their conversation the next morning. Speech verbs often occur in the present tense, and this is true in the sagas as well as in modern conversational narratives. Both Lehmann and Wolfson treat speech verbs as special cases, and Wolfson develops and rejects four different hypotheses concerning their use (1982: 51 ff.). Two of these hypotheses may be relevant to the sagas. The first is that different introducer tenses are used to distinguish the participants; this hypothesis squares well with Lehmann's class of Einführungsverba, which consists exclusively of speech verbs (1939: 50 ff.). The second hypothesis is that tense choice depends on the relative status of the reported speakers. Wolfson rejects this hypothesis as well, but Johnstone (1987) argues that it explains some aspects of tense choice in her corpus of conversational narratives involving authority figures.

Saga narrators (and characters) are of course extraordinarily sensitive to prestige, and this matter is a central concern in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs* (Fichtner 1978; Miller 1990: 51 ff.). In this particular dialogue, the need to distinguish the two speakers (Rannveig and Bjarni) may explain the recurrent use of the present tense; however, the relative status hypothesis may apply to a later exchange:

> "Ekki stoðar nú undan at mælask", *segir* Bjarni. "Leyfa muntu mér þá, at ek finna föður minn áðr", sagði Þorsteinn (75).

["You can't talk yourself out of this now", *says* Bjarni. "You'll give me permission, then, to see my father first", said Thorstein.]

Just prior to this exchange, Bjarni refuses Thorstein's offer to leave the country, a move that dramatizes the power imbalance between the two characters. Here Bjarni dictates the terms, while Thorstein must seek permission from the chieftain to see his father. That Bjarni's (but not Thorstein's) comment is delivered in the present tense may reflect the difference in their authority at this point in the story. Even in this þáttr, however, the pattern is far from clear. Further attenuating this account is the fact that the fragment has the same abbreviation for both speech verbs in this exchange, an important point to which I will return.

The present tense is also used to describe the two trips up the hill and the fighting. The resumption of the fighting is followed by the two instances of *þykkir* ('seems'):

> *Ganga* þeir nu upp á holinn ok *berjask* um stundar sakar, ok *þykkir* Bjarna maðrinn vígkœnn ok *þykkir* fastligra fyrir en hann hugði (75).

[They *go* up the hill and *fight* for a while, and it *seems* to Bjarni that the man [is a] skillfull fighter, and he *seems* stronger to Bjarni than he thought before.]

Though the tense alternation here is typical, the last sentence is unusual. Present verbs usually narrate some physical act, such as a journey, blow, or utterance. Here the last two verbs narrate a realization: namely, that Bjarni is outmuscled. The repetition of the verb only emphasizes the saliency of this realization, which is of some narrative consequence; Bjarni can rely on neither physical superiority nor deference from Thorstein. This realization is followed by another implicit one. When Bjarni leans over to tie his shoe — an act also narrated in the present tense — and survives, he gathers that Thorstein, while certainly no *ragr*, is not especially interested in killing him either (Miller 1990: 72). The main narratological point here is that these "events" — Bjarni's realization and the shoelace move — are not inherently exciting or especially vivid; framed and staged as they are, however, they manage to set the stage for the later reconciliation.

There are no other uses of the historical present in the paper manuscripts or the Íslenzk Fornrit edition after Bjarni destroys Thorstein's shield. The verbal negotiations are related in the preterite, as is the caper with Thorarin. Now it is the pragmatic account which has some explaining to do; why no present verbs here? Discourse analysts have observed that regular patterns of tense alternation are often disrupted around the peak events of the narrative (Longacre 1985). An alternative hypothesis might take account of the thematic importance of balance in the sagas, especially in the reconciliation stage (Andersson 1967: 23). Just as the apparent tense contrast in the earlier scene suggests a power imbalance, the tense uniformity here may reflect a newly achieved equipoise. Of course, this account explains only the tense uniformity and not the lack of present verbs.

At this point the aforementioned textual problems may be relevant. The paper manuscripts and modern editions regularly render the main speech verb in this section as *sagði*. The fragment, however, gives only the letter *s*, which Jakobsen's critical edition renders as *segir*. There are eight such abbreviations in this section of the þáttr (including the scene with Thorarin, which Andersson classifies as aftermath). Some evidence in favor of the present gloss is the fact that the fragment

explicitly specifies *sagði* once in this dialogue (the other past forms of speech verbs, *mælti* and *spurði*, are also spelled out). Although one cannot argue definitively that the present form is intended, neither can one confidently present this passage as a counterexample to the general pattern of tense alternation. Despite the tense ambiguity in the fragment, then, there remains a strong correlation between tense alternation on the one hand and saga structure and grounding on the other — or at least saga structure and grounding as understood by modern critics.

Tense and Reception

This correlation between tense alternation and saga structure suggests that tense is a factor in audience response. Indeed, Jaussian reception theory assumes something like the pragmatic account just described. According to Jauss,

> The psychic process in the reception of a text is, in the primary horizon of aesthetic experience, by no means only an arbitrary series of subjective impressions, but rather the carrying out of specific instructions in a process of directed perception, which can be comprehended according to its constitutive motivations and triggering signals, and which can be described by a textual linguistics (1982: 23).

This notion of reception implies at least three research tasks, all of which are taken up by the pragmatic approach. The first task is to account for the constitutive motivations for this process of directed perception; the second is to identify its triggering signals; and the third is to describe both within a theory of textual linguistics. In this case, the constitutive motivations are the set of basic narrative exigencies; the narrator must somehow structure, ground, and pace the story. The triggering signal is the switch from the preterite — usually the default tense of narration — to the present. The audience responds not to the semantics of tense, but to the saliency of the alternation. That tense is both grammatically obligatory and semantically idle in narrative — we assume that all events are past events — makes this verbal category especially available for pragmatic work. The third task, constructing a textual linguistics that can describe the process of directed perception and audience response, is of course the primary goal of narrative pragmatics. To suggest, as Fulk does, that tense alter-

nation in the sagas is unrelated to this process is to suggest a practice of anti-reception. This suggestion is not unthinkable, of course, but neither is it especially attentive to the larger patterns of tense phenomenon in medieval and modern narrative.

Another matter worth noting is the language of the critics themselves, who are inclined to describe this narrative strategy in visual terms. These visual analogies are ubiquitous in both the criticism (Clover 1974: 58) and the linguistic literature (Wehr 1984: 108 ff.). Despite the ubiquity of these analogies, I am aware of only one study, Harvey Stahl's investigation of the Psalter of Saint Louis, that directly links tense, visual grounding, and reader response. Stahl's study shows that the tense shifts in the Psalter's legends correspond to the grounding strategies of the miniatures which they accompany; what is (literally) foregrounded in the miniatures is (figuratively) foregrounded in the legends through tense alternation. This pattern leads Stahl to conclude that the legends "respond to the miniatures consistently enough to constitute a contemporary reading of them, a textual narrative that parallels the pictorial one" (Stahl 1987: 2). This conclusion suggests that the discourse notions of foreground and background are not analogies so much as governing metaphors which may be made explicit in verbal responses to visual narrative.

Tense alternation, then, is a widely observed narrative strategy which may or may not shed light on saga origins, but does seem to illuminate saga structure and reception. In particular, tense shifting in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs* systematically frames and stages the narrative. While vividness and excitement are frequently the by-products of tense alternation, they do not exhaust its narrative uses; tense shifts also mark transitions between episodes and may distinguish speakers and reflect their relative authority in dialogue, though speech verbs present special problems for this sort of analysis. Given the notorious lack of external evaluation in the sagas, this extensive use of internal evaluation is especially important to and characteristic of saga style. It is hoped that the recognition of this narrative strategy will lead to more nuanced readings of particular sagas as well as a more precise understanding of saga structure and reception.

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