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Voice and World in *Jökuls þáttir Búasonar*

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References to the world(s) of the sagas are ubiquitous, especially in the context of the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* (see Merkelbach 2022).¹ Despite this ubiquity, however, these narrative worlds have neither been adequately explored nor sufficiently theorised, so that most references to them remain vague and undefined. It is probably for this reason that misconceptions abound about the nature of narrative worlds, and especially saga worlds. Marie-Laure Ryan (2015: 11) has observed that, “[i]n earlier days, ‘world’ was a totality of meanings associated with authors or with genres [...], a distinctive set of values, themes, or objects of thought”, and this also applies to saga scholarship. It has thus been argued that narrative worlds are equivalent to genres, so that the *Íslendingasögur* are set in their own world, the *fornaldarsögur* in another, and so on. Torfi Tulinius (2000: 527), for instance, suggests that “the notion [of narrative world] is intimately related to that of genre”, perhaps even equating the two. Similarly, Bampi (2017: 8) recently called for more engagement with the notion of what he calls fictional worlds, stating that

a major task for future research in this field will be analyzing the semantics of the fictional worlds in the sagas along the lines drawn by recent studies. [...] The study of how various fictional worlds are constructed will also contribute towards defining a repertoire of primary and secondary features associated with saga genres.

Like Torfi, Bampi thus essentially collapses the distinction between world and genre.

A further misconception is related to the ‘Otherworlds’ of the *fornaldarsögur*, which have been argued to be entirely separate from the world occupied by humans. Scholars assume that there is a more or less binary opposition between a ‘real’, ‘Scandinavian’ world, ‘This World’, and a ‘magic’ or ‘Other World’ (see, for example, Eremenko 2006; Leslie 2009; Orning 2010). There thus seems to be a general misunderstanding in saga scholarship regarding the nature of storyworlds. Instead, a saga’s storyworld is the world described by the entire text, including any paranormal encounters or episodes set in other countries. As discussed below, this storyworld can partake in a larger transnarrative storyworld, so that the two overlap. But in the narratological conceptualisation of storyworlds, narratives do not move between a *fornaldarsaga* world and an *Íslendingasaga* world, a ‘Scandinavian world’ and an ‘Otherworld’, or a *raunheimur* (“real world”) and a *heimur skáldskaparins*

1 I would like to thank Alexander Wilson, Yvonne Meixner, Basil Price, and Eduardo Ramos for their comments on this article.

(“world of literature/fiction”) (see Torfi Tulinius 1990: 154), in which the more realist of the two is equivalent to our own world. These worlds, if this is indeed what they are, as well as the ability to move between types of worlds via portals,² are all part of the same storyworld of a given saga.

To gain a new, and deeper, understanding of the way the world(s) of the sagas are constructed and relate to one another, we have to investigate the theories behind narrative worlds, fictional worlds, or storyworlds. I will use the latter term since “storyworld is a broader concept than fictional world because it covers both factual and fictional stories, meaning stories told as true of the real world and stories that create their own imaginary world, respectively” (Ryan 2014: 28). This is especially useful in the context of the *Íslendingasögur*, with their complex entanglements of what one might call historicity and fictionality, and this then allows an extension towards other genres with which the *Íslendingasögur* are connected.³ Storyworlds may be defined as “totalities that encompass space, time, and individuated existents that undergo transformations as the result of events” (Ryan 2019: 63). This means that storyworlds are dynamic and “undergo global changes” (Ryan 2015: 13), and the changing, ever-evolving nature of storyworlds will be central to my analysis below. Another approach is offered by the author Arkady Martine (2019). Drawing on Herman’s (2002: 9) notion of “storyworlds as *mental models* of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion”, she writes: “A ‘storyworld’ can be defined as a possible world constructed by, not only the narrative on the page, but the cognitive results of the process of comprehending the story, cued by the author and experienced and completed by the reader”. Because they are mental models, Martine argues, storyworlds contain both the features that constitute the *actual* narrative as well as those features that are *possible* in the world in which this narrative unfolds. She concludes: “A storyworld is thus a co-created world between author and audience, bound by mutually held-in-common rules of causality and verisimilitude”. Thus, storyworlds arise out of a dialogue between a narrative and its audience: they are experiential, both, as Wolf (2012: 25) notes, for the characters within the world who experience the changes it undergoes, and for the audience whose experiences and prior knowledge help create and shape the world.

Worlds, as mental models, thus exist beyond and outside of the texts (literary, cinematic, artistic, musical) that create or project them – they are larger than what is shown in the text and can take on a life of their own. Because they are dynamic, worlds can be expanded to include new characters and their stories. Ryan describes this as one form of textual or world proliferation: the idea that many stories, and even many texts, can all be set in, and ultimately build and expand, the same world. This has also been referred to as transfictionality or, more neutrally, transnarrativity, and it is characterised by “the migration of fictional entities across different texts” (Ryan 2013: 365). However, saga literature – and especially many of the *Íslendingasögur* – could also be argued to create a shared narrative

2 Harwood-Smith (2018: 56) defines portals as “an identifiable threshold, which literally removes the protagonist from their own world at some point in the narrative, to another place, time, or both.” Travelling through liminal zones such as storms or forests may not work instantaneously, but I would argue that these sequences fulfil a similar function in saga literature.

3 Examples of such connections are the genealogies that tie Grettir and Egill to the *Hrafnistumenn*, the appearances of foreign rulers, or shared locations.

universe populated with the same characters – like Snorri goði, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, Guðmundr ríki – set in the same locations and at the same time, in a society and culture that follow the same rules. This does not, however, entail that this storyworld is limited only to this one genre, or that it is built by the genre as a whole. It is not genres that develop, build, or project worlds, but narratives, which, taken together, can then form more or less discrete genres. While the *Íslendingasögur* seem to form a genre linked by a transnarrative storyworld that is shared across most of the texts within the genre, this is not always the case. The indigenous *riddarasögur*, for example, can form smaller cycles of pre- and sequels, and while they seem to exist in a world of shared values and social structures, relating to knights and bridal quests,⁴ they do not build this world together. More than one saga can be set in the same location in the vague temporal space that sagas of this group generally occupy, thus potentially contradicting the story told or world built in another.⁵

Because every story creates its own world, everything depicted in a story is part of this particular world. When a story contains several worlds, this is usually done through ontological proliferation, meaning that the text “sends its readers into many other worlds than the primary fictional world, where the embedding story takes place” (Ryan 2017: 37). Ontological proliferation usually relies on structures that include frame and embedded narratives, and this seems to have been a popular form of narration and worldbuilding in the Middle Ages.⁶ However, when a story sends its characters through a portal into what seems to be a different world, this world is still a part of the larger narrative world projected by the story. Thus, as observed above, the ‘Otherworlds’ of the *fornaldarsögur* are not separate narrative worlds, but instead form an important part of *fornaldarsaga* worldbuilding. At the same time, the part of the narrative world that is commonly occupied by humans may resemble our world,⁷ or what we think our world may have been like at the time, but it is also part of the same storyworld.

To exemplify and contextualise some of these observations, the rest of this article will explore the storyworld of one *þáttir* and the way this world relates to larger ideas about the connections between storyworlds, texts, and genres. This reading will thus ultimately show that theoretical approaches to storyworlds allow a new understanding of the generic hybridity of saga literature. In my analysis, as the title suggests, I will occasionally also draw on the importance of the voices present in all saga literature, and especially on the voice of the narrator. It is this voice that shapes, and guides us through, a story’s world, and this is particularly important in the case of the narrative that is at the centre of the present study – a story that crosses geographical and generic boundaries in more than one way, for in the creation of *Jökuls þáttir Búasonar*, the voice of the narrator goes against the voice of tradition.⁸

4 Glauser (1983: 185) and Kalinke (1990: 7) both describe the world of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* in these terms.

5 Thus in *Vikt*, France is impoverished, while *Nít* depicts it as the centre of courtliness and wealth.

6 See *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Decameron*, but also *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*; see Merkelbach (2022).

7 On the relationship between storyworlds and the primary world they are based in and draw from, see Ryan (1991); Tolkien (2006); Wolf (2012).

8 All translations are my own.

Jökull is the son of Búi Andriðsson, the protagonist of *Kjalnesinga saga*. Búi stayed with the giant-king Dofri one winter and had an affair with his daughter Friðr, which results in pregnancy. As the child turns out to be a boy, he is sent to Búi at the age of twelve. When Jökull arrives in Iceland, he is described as *ungr ok stórþrífli* (*Kjaln*: 42; “young and very good looking”), but Búi refuses to acknowledge his paternity and instead challenges the young man to a wrestling match. Jökull wins with Friðr’s paranormal intervention, and Búi is mortally wounded and dies shortly afterwards. The saga notes: “Jökli þótti verk sitt svá illt, at hann reið þegar í brutt ok til skips, er búit var suðr á Eyrarbakka, ok fór þar utan um sumarit; en síðan höfum vér önga sögu heyrt frá honum” (*Kjaln*: 43; “Jökull felt so bad about his deed that he rode away at once and to the ship which was going south from Eyrarbakki and he left Iceland in the summer. After this we have not heard any stories about him”). Vér, the narrator/author/scribe, has no knowledge of Jökull’s fate. Not satisfied with this ending, the saga’s B version adds, “Ætla þat flestir, at hann muni hafa farit aptr til móður sinnar ok þar verit með móðurfrændum sínum” (*Kjaln*: 43 n. 1; “Most people think that he went back to his mother and stayed there with his mother’s kin”). This implies that the half-troll Jökull decides to live with his giant kin rather than pursuing a life among humans, and it is notable that this story is attributed to *flestir*, and thus to the anonymous majority behind the creation of tradition. The C version of the saga, however, entirely contradicts both the voice of the narrator of A and the voice of tradition found in B, and instead adds a new story: *Jökuls þáttr*. As Jóhannes Halldórsson (1959: xx) notes in his introduction to *Íslensk fornrit* 14, “[e]inhverjum lesanda Kjalnesinga sögu hefur þótt að því söknuður, að slíkt mannsefni sem Jökull Búason ætti sér enga skráða sögu eftir tólf ára aldur” (“some reader of *Kjalnesinga saga* thought it a shame that, after the age of twelve, a great guy like Jökull Búason should not have his own written saga”).

The *þáttr* begins by repeating that Jökull regretted what he had done and left Iceland immediately. But instead of sailing back to Norway, the ship is swept off course and all the way to Greenland. There, Jökull encounters two troll women who attack him. He beheads one, but the other, Gnípa, surrenders and becomes his friend and helper. Together with his companions, Jökull eradicates her entire family and in compensation she asks him to help her woo Grímnir, the son of the local troll king Skrámr. Jökull again fights and kills the trolls, and in Skrámr’s cave he finds Hvítserkr and Marsibilla, the son and daughter of King Soldán of Serkland. They were abducted by the giant who intended to marry Marsibilla, which Hvítserkr was able to prevent. Jökull saves the prince and princess and receives gifts from Gnípa and Grímnir. They sail to Serkland, a huge feast is held, Hvítserkr and Jökull become sworn brothers and Jökull marries Marsibilla. The two live happily ever after.

Even this short summary shows how *Jökuls þáttr* spans settings and cultures associated with very different genres – and thus with what have traditionally been conceived of as different worlds. This becomes even more obvious if we take a closer look at some of the elements of the *þáttr*. The story’s beginning shows an interesting instance of medieval transnarrativity, the idea that more than one story can be set in the same world. Jökull himself of course forms the most obvious connection to the storyworld of *Kjalnesinga saga* – and thus perhaps to the *Íslendingasögur*. But this is reinforced by the mention of Eyrarbakki, the harbour from which he sets sail, which was an important port for many centuries, and which appears in a large number of *Íslendingasögur*. This location thus provides a tangible link both to the narrative world associated with this group of texts, but

also to the primary world of the audience: it is an anchor both on the transuniverse and the intrauniverse level.⁹

This location and the character of Jökull are the only link to *Íslendingasögur* world(s), however; from now on we enter more fantastic territories, both in terms of geography as well as narrative. It has generally been noted that, in its main adventures, *Jökuls þáttur* draws strongly on *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra* (see Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959: xxi; Kruse 2009: 130). While the setting is transferred from Helluland to Greenland, the story follows similar patterns. However, Jökull's encounter with the two troll women Gnípa and Geit – whose names are introduced by the narrator, but somehow Jökull knows them too – is not only modelled on *fornaldarsögur* patterns, as a similar story is also told in *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*. The *þáttur* thus plays with worldbuilding motifs drawn from both 'viking romances' and late *Íslendingasögur*, and here we see the first instance of the way it modifies its sources. More significant in the present context, however, is the fact that Gnípa and Geit, and indeed all the trolls that appear in the *þáttur*, are 'standard' *fornaldarsögur* trolls and very different from Jökull's maternal family. From their characteristic *skinnstakkar* ("leather coats"), which are long in the front but "fylgdu ... ofanverðum þjóhnöppum" (*Jökul*: 49; "followed the upper buttocks") in the back, to their behaviour that defies gender conventions and their cave homes, Gnípa and her family stand in sharp contrast to the almost refined court of Dofri. Significantly, Fríðr is mentioned in the same instance as the trolls' *ókvenlig* ("unwomanly") behaviour, which reinforces the disparity between the two groups: in *Kjalnesinga saga*, Fríðr's beauty is stressed from her first encounter with Búi,¹⁰ while the troll women her son meets in Greenland are notably grotesque with their long noses and lips that hang "ofan á bringu" (*Jökul*: 49; "down to the chest"). In its depiction of the paranormal, *Jökuls þáttur* thus closely aligns itself with *fornaldarsögur* conventions, and builds its Greenland setting accordingly. The paranormal is a component of what Ryan (2014: 29) calls a world's "physical laws and values: principles that determine what kind of events can and cannot happen in a given story". These physical laws are, in turn, part of the larger "structures by which we make sense of a story or a world" (Wolf 2012: 154). This means that, if two storyworlds share the same paranormal element, as is the case with *Jökuls þáttur* and, for instance, *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra* – and perhaps the *fornaldarsögur* in general – this links their narrative worlds. In its worldbuilding, *Jökuls þáttur* thus not only draws on its continuation of an *Íslendingasaga* and a primary-world Icelandic setting, but also on a paranormal dimension shared with a wider textual tradition.

A further element is introduced to the *þáttur* once Jökull and his companions leave Greenland. Hvítserkr and Marsibilla were introduced as the children of King Soldán of Serkland, so from this point on, a new dimension enters the narrative, but it is only fully developed when we reach this new setting. Serkland is here aligned with the courtly joy and splendour associated with similar foreign settings in the *riddarasögur*: a huge feast is held to celebrate the return of the prince and princess, "píment og klaret" (*Jökul*: 58; "spiced wines") are served, and many instruments played. Overall, the setting is characterised by "allri gleði þeiri, er fást mátti í því landi" (*Jökul*: 58; "all the joy that can be had in this country") –

⁹ For the use of these terms, see Ryan (1991: 32).

¹⁰ See *Kjaln*: 29–30, which describes Fríðr as "fögr at álitu ok vel búin. [...] öll var hon listulig at sjá" ("beautiful to behold and well dressed. [...] she was very attractive to look at").

perhaps a nod to a similar phrase in *Nítíða saga*?¹¹ The plot shifts, too, and the story turns into a bridal quest with Jökull wooing Marsibilla, and Hvítserkr later marrying the daughter of the king of Bláland. In its conclusion, the *páttr* thus builds a romance world of rulers and feasts, bridal quests and dynastic succession; that Jökull and Hvítserkr swear brotherhood also fits well with the *riddarasögur*'s idea of homosociality. In terms of plot, setting, and culture, the world we arrive in at the end thus draws on romance conventions in its construction.

Starting in Iceland, the *páttr* thus takes its audience on a wild ride through a *fornaldarsaga* version of Greenland and all the way to a romance ending in the exotified south of Serkland and Bláland. Throughout, the narrator/author/scribe carefully chooses his material and puts his own spin on the sources. This is most noticeable in the *páttr*'s engagement with material derived from *Hálfðanar saga*. Where the *fornaldarsaga* highlights Hálfðan's affair with the giantess Brana, *Jökuls páttr* sets up similar expectations by having Gnípa comment on Jökull's marriageability. But when he has defeated the troll woman and she offers herself to him with the words, "Njóttu nú fallsins, karlmaðr" (*Jökul*: 50; "Now make use of my fall, man"), he threatens to kill her instead (see McKinnell 2009: 209). However, as Kruse (2009: 131) observes, these are not the only changes to the story:

Die unter Umständen "unmotiviert" zu nennende Unterstützung Hálfðans durch Brana, die ihn sogar losschickt, sich eine Prinzessin zu suchen, wird hier ersetzt durch die Forderung der Trollfrau, die immerhin beide Male dem Helden ihre gesamte Familie opfert, nach Hilfe bei einer ganz ähnlichen "Brautwerbungsfahrt". Jökull bekommt "seine" Prinzessin mit Namen Marsibil zudem ganz traditionell, indem er sie aus Trollhand befreit.

The occasionally "unmotivated" (so to say) support of Hálfðan by Brana, who in fact sends him off to find himself a princess, is here replaced by the demand of the troll woman – who after all in both cases sacrifices her entire family for the hero – for aid in a very similar "bridal quest". In addition, Jökull acquires "his" princess Marsibil in a thoroughly traditional way by freeing her from the hands of the trolls.

The *páttr* thus makes conscious choices in its worldbuilding and storytelling, deviating from its sources wherever it makes sense to do so. In avoiding an affair with Gnípa, the *páttr* not only removes a potential repetition of the previous generation's story, but also chooses to align Jökull more clearly with his human side, as seems to be necessary for a future king of Serkland.

It is especially in the depiction of this country and its inhabitants, however, that the *páttr* departs from its sources. Serkland and its ruler Soldán (sultan) are mentioned frequently in the Icelandic romances, but everywhere they appear, they are a racialised, 'Othered' threat. Thus, in *Nítíða saga*, Soldán and his three sons all try to take the eponymous protagonist by force; additionally, the oldest son is physically grotesque and described as "fullur upp af göldrum ok gerningum" (*Nít*: 126; "full of magic and sorcery"). Similarly, in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, the Serkish king Soldán wants to woo the maiden-king Fulgida, but like his namesake in *Nítíða saga*, he tries to do so by force (*Vikt*: 46). Fulgida (or rather, her brother

11 *Nít* 142 is of course much more explicit in the way it distances Iceland from the French court. See also Barnes (2014: 24).

Blávus in disguise) tricks Soldán and kidnaps his daughter Rósíða – the old king dies of grief. In both cases, then, Saracen wooers are dangerous and threatening and have to be removed, but *Viktors saga* shows that their daughters can be married. However, these examples are not unique: Saracen opponents are in fact so common that Geraldine Barnes (2014: 10) lists them as one of the

attributes of romance – typically, princes on quests in exotic foreign lands for brides or for the restoration of their patrimony; combats with dragons, giants and Saracens; adventures in unknown lands which ultimately bring material rewards, noble brides and the acquisition of new kingdoms.

It is therefore significant that *Jökuls þáttir* uses its Serkish setting as a shorthand not only for exoticism but also for courtliness:¹² instead of fighting Soldán, Jökull becomes his son-in-law and successor. However, the inclusion of this setting allows the *þáttir*'s world to become much bigger, and thus perhaps more interesting to an Icelandic audience, than a European courtly setting would have done. The world of *Jökuls þáttir* is thus truly universal, both in the breadth of motifs it adapts and in its geographical scope. But rather than indiscriminately drawing on a multitude of sources, the *þáttir* always manages to make this material its own. The world we enter in *Jökuls þáttir* may be influenced by pre-existing models of worldbuilding drawn from different genres of saga literature, but in its combination and modification of these models, the *þáttir* is unique – its world is unique. It thus becomes more than a mere sequel to *Kjalnesinga saga*, instead demonstrating the kaleidoscopic force at work behind the composition of late medieval Icelandic literature.¹³

Within its limited space – in the Íslenzk fornrit edition, *Jökuls þáttir* is just twelve pages long – the *þáttir* thus manages to take us on a journey through what has been conceived of as three different genres and three different worlds. But if, as outlined above, every story generates its own world, and a realist Iceland, a paranormal Greenland, and a romance Serkland all appear in the same story, then surely they are all part of the same world too? This idea is supported by the narrative voice as well, or rather by its unobtrusiveness. Probably due to the *þáttir*'s compactness and its relatively linear story, the narrator does not have to intrude to structure the story, and since the *þáttir* is essentially medieval fanfiction that has no basis in oral tradition – and that may even contradict it, as argued above – the common phrases that refer to this tradition are absent as well. The *þáttir* also opens *in medias res*, and this is not only the case when it is transmitted with *Kjalnesinga saga*: in those manuscripts in which it appears without its prequel, a short “það er upphaf þessara sögu” (“this is the beginning of this story”)¹⁴ may have been added before throwing the audience right into the narrative.¹⁵ Later on, the narrator does not intervene when guiding us to Greenland, and the journey to Serkland is even less remarkable: while the *þáttir*'s trollish Greenland can only be reached through a liminal, portal-like stormy voyage, no

12 On the vagueness of Serkland as a setting, see Sverrir Jakobsson (2016: 226). It seems to be this very vagueness that allows saga writers to adapt it to a multiplicity of narrative and worldbuilding purposes.

13 On the kaleidoscope of esp. *riddarasaga* writing, see Kalinke (1990: 65).

14 This appears, for example, in ÍB 139 8vo, 137 v. Lbs 2329 4to, 447r, has the colourful phrasing “Þar er nú til að taka ok frá að segja” (“It now has to be picked up here and told about”). Both manuscripts are from the nineteenth century.

15 *handrit.is* lists 41 manuscripts for the *þáttir*. Of these, 27 also contain *Kjalnesinga saga*. In the remaining 14, the *þáttir* is variously transmitted with ‘classical’ and ‘post-classical’ *Íslendingasögur* and *-þættir*, *fornaldarsögur*, and *riddarasögur*.

such crossing is necessary to reach the exotic south of the story's end. Compared to *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, another *þáttr* that features a complex configuration of narrative worlds, where the narrator frequently has to intervene to guide the audience through the ontological proliferation of storyworlds embedded in the narrative (see O'Connor 2012: 476–77; Merkelbach 2022), *Jökuls þáttr* does not seem to need such elaborate commentary. I would argue that this is another sign that, unlike *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*, the present *þáttr* presents only one narrative world. This world may span most of the globe, but it is a unified whole that seamlessly integrates all of its facets, and in which Icelandic ports can coexist with Greenland trolls and Saracen princesses.

Tommy Danielsson (1993: 348) has commented that “*Jökuls saga* [sic] is an adventure tale, totally devoid of the realistic background of many *Íslendingasögur*. Still, the story is quite entertaining, not least because of its burlesque style and dialogue”. But, as this discussion has demonstrated, *Jökuls þáttr* never aspires to being an *Íslendingasaga*. Instead, it skilfully blends narrative modes derived from all three main imaginative genres of saga literature, creating a world of its own through which we are guided by an unobtrusive narrative voice. The *þáttr* thus shows that world and genre can connect, but do not need to – and generic hybridity can be built into saga worlds. Saga writers had full control over their material and their worldbuilding; they were free to select from pre-existing models and to reconfigure them, thus allowing their characters to boldly go into worlds where no one had gone before.

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