PART ONE

THE CLOSE COMMENTARY
THE COMMITMENT TO PLAUSIBILITY

If this story has the look of a tall tale, its author has undertaken considerable care to shorten it, to make it believable. He situates his story in the real world of the eleventh century.\(^1\) The kings Audun meets are real kings, who really were at war. King Harald Hardradi, whose life could provide matter for more than a few action-adventure films, ruled Norway jointly with his nephew Magnus from 1046 and solely when Magnus died in 1047 until his death invading England in 1066, less than three weeks before William’s more successful venture at Hastings.

King Svein Ulfsson of Denmark ruled from 1047 to 1074. And if we cannot know whether Audun ever existed, a real person, Thorstein Gyduson,\(^2\) d. 1190, mentioned in the last line of the story, whom we know from chronicles and other sources to have been a wealthy man, claimed Audun as his ancestor. Though the filiation is not specified, Audun could either have been his grandparent or great-grandparent.

But the plausibility of the story is less a matter of real kings and real countries, than of real homely problems.

Audun has a mother who is dependent on him, and so real is she that he is obliged to fund her for three years before he can leave the country to get his story going. Audun would be subject to a penalty of lesser outlawry—three years exile and loss of property—were he to go abroad without providing support for his dependents for “six seasons,” i.e., three winters and summers, since the Icelanders, following Germanic practice, often counted years by seasonal half-years (ON \textit{missir};

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\(^1\) \textit{Audun’s Story}, for instance, plays with the rags-to-riches theme in a way that does not disown as wholly its association with that kind of fairy tale as does a homelier down-to-earth story of a poor Icelander making good abroad, also in M (\textit{Asa-Thord’s Story}, M ch. 68; IF 11:337–349). In that tale, Thord moves in with a rich Norwegian widow, Asa (whose name also soon comes to be attached to Thord’s as a cognomen, Asa’s-Thord). He manages her affairs well; they engage in joint ventures, mercantile and otherwise, and are commercially quite successful. Eventually he gets accepted by her well-born kin.