

Literary Aesthetics in Oral Art

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The earliest vernacular texts from medieval Europe exhibit many features of oral-formulaic composition. They are also, however, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, quite bookish in other respects. They have been preserved in codices that exploit the book's ability to organize and preserve a single, unified, stable text of considerable length. That the earliest vernacular texts represent a collaboration between the two cultures, oral and literate, is becoming a received opinion among medievalists.

In the case of Germanic poetry, the sharing of a common body of myth and legend by Germanic peoples who by the tenth century were widely dispersed points to the origin of their traditions in pre-migration Europe and hence to a considerable period of time during which they existed in oral tradition. Even later in Romance texts, the formulaic quality of the *Song of Roland* and the *Poem of My Cid* suggests that they too were the products of literary cultures in which the inherited rules of oral art played an essential role. Identifying the boundaries in these texts between their allegiances to oral and to literate culture is an interesting project and one that may be essential in making progress toward understanding the rules of oral art in early medieval vernacular texts. Perhaps I can illustrate the idea with an example from thirteenth-century Iceland.

The principal manuscript in which the so-called Poetic Edda has been come down to us is *Codex Regius* 2365, 4°, now happily in Reykjavík after a long residence in the Royal Library of Denmark, from which its name is derived. This book was well thought out. Although it is a collection of poems on what were even then considered to be old traditional subjects, it has been organized as a book, carefully arranging the material into a structured literary whole. It begins with a poem that Snorri Sturluson called *Völuspá*, telling of the creation of the world and the gods and prophesying their destruction. Following *Völuspá* are ten more poems associated with supernatural beings. Then come the legendary- mythological poems about the Völsungs, which make up the balance of the book. To help the reader understand these poems in their context, someone (the "Compiler" of *Codex Regius* 2365 we could call him) has written a

few prose notes and comments. We may easily infer that the whole idea and production of this manuscript was dependent on a climate in thirteenth-century Iceland of widespread interest in the myths and legends of pagan antiquity. The Compiler's style in his prose pieces is similar to that of Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda* or to the style of some of the legendary prose sagas such as *Völsunga saga*. Where these two works overlap with the Eddic collection the similarity is very close indeed, sometimes *verbatim*. Occasionally, however, the Compiler is superior, both in phrasing and in the inclusion of significant detail.

Because of the close textual similarities among *Codex Regius*, Snorri's *Edda*, *Völsunga saga*, and other manuscripts of the Eddic poems (including even a few instances of the Compiler's prose), it would be impossible to identify the Compiler with the scribe of *Codex Regius*. The Compiler is a more distant figure whose work, by and large, is being copied. The scribe may here and there have performed the Compiler's function, of course, but the surviving body of very similar texts is too large and complexly related to each other to permit any one of them to be considered the original, including even the idea of a structured anthology that we find in *Codex Regius*.

To the Compiler we owe the writing out of poetic texts that have in some unknown manner been derived from oral traditions. Their formulaic structures of expression are consistent with oral composition. To complicate matters, however, the fact that some of them were known by titles suggests an existence for some period of time as fixed texts, in the manner of traditional Scandinavian dance texts, which remained in oral tradition until the nineteenth century.

We are chiefly indebted to the Compiler for the succinct summaries of occasionally indispensable background information that he provides in prose. His narrative prose is of two kinds. In the first type, he adopts a narrative voice identical to that of the narrator of the poems, telling enough of the story in prose to lead seamlessly into the verse, either a whole poem or a part of a poem. He does not even mention the poem as such, but just moves the narrative back and forth from his prose to the poetry, presumably inherited by him from oral tradition. The Compiler is also capable of stepping out of the fictional world and referring, from outside, in the voice of a thirteenth-century scholar, to the poems as poems. At the beginning of a poem that is sometimes called *Oddrúnargrátr* he briefly identifies Oddrún and her circumstances and then adds, "About this story it is here told in verse." Similarly, he writes before the poem *Atlakviða* that Guðrún Gjúkadóttir had avenged her brothers, *svá sem frægt er orðit* ("as has become well known"), and then adds a few words later, "About that, this poem is made." These two voices may of course derive from two separate sources, but that is something we are never likely

to know. The second, scholarly voice has several shadings, from the kind of collector's note I have just quoted to a greater ideological remove from the old material.

The Compiler refers several times in his comments to “heathen times” or “antiquity” (the word is *forneskja* in Icelandic), and to “old stories” (*fornar sögur*). He is aware of himself, in other words, as occupying a boundary between two worlds—his own rational, scholarly, literary world and the more fantastic world of ancient myth and legend from which the poems have come down. At the end of the second poem of Helgi Hundingsbani, one of those heroes like Völundur the Smith and Sigurður, whose association with valkyries makes him a transitional figure between gods and men, the Compiler's intellectual and aesthetic allegiances are divided. He wants both to preserve the story and to dissociate himself from it. He writes:

It was a belief in heathen times that men could be reborn, but that is now called old wives' foolishness. Helgi and Sigrún are said to have been reborn. He was named Helgi, Prince of the Haddings, and she was Kára, the daughter of Halfdan, as is told in the poem *Kárukjóð*, and she was a valkyrie.

Neither the poem *Kárukjóð*, by the way, nor other tradition of Kára has survived. It is characteristic of this time and place (but nonetheless remarkable) that the Compiler should be able to mention a traditional poem—one that contains old wives' foolishness—by name. The very last words of his book are in a similar scholarly vein. At the conclusion of the vast myth of gods and heroes his work has recreated, he says merely, “This poem is called the old *Hamðismál*.”

The Compiler's book, *Codex Regius* 2365, 4°, is an important document in the history of Germanic myth and legend. It is especially remarkable that a scholar would have taken such pains to recover and preserve traces of a prehistoric and pagan past as late as the thirteenth century. His work shows that he was conscious of occupying an intellectual position between “modern” thirteenth century rationalism and the fantasy of heathen times. This consciousness was not unique with him. It was part of the movement in which he worked and is characteristic of Snorri Sturluson and of most of the anonymous writers at this time in Iceland, especially the “compilers” of the legendary sagas, the so-called *fornaldasögur*. There may be similar instances in most of our earliest vernacular narratives.

I am reminded, to conclude, of a moment early in *Beowulf*, when the Danes in their desperation make offerings to idols, and the narrator says “Such was their custom, the hope of heathens” (178b-79a). Unlike the much later Icelanders, however, the *Beowulf* writer elaborates the point

with high seriousness, condemning heathen belief then and (by implication) now. Still, it is a subtle instance of what is more obvious in the Icelandic: the presence of a medieval poetic sensibility whose allegiances and whose art stretch between two worlds.

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