

**Performance and Norse Poetry:
The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn**
The Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture for 2001

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Performance Studies and the Possibilities for Interpretation

How should we moderns “read” a medieval text?¹ Thanks to the work of many scholars, not least the pioneering studies of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, we are today able to understand the nature and implications of a preserved medieval work’s background as an oral text much better than did the early and brilliant (but narrowly gauged) generations that included such giants within Old Norse as Jacob Grimm, Konrad von Maurer, Theodor Möbius, Rudolf Keyser, and N. M. Petersen.² Given these advances in our understanding of orality, performance, and the ethnography of speaking, how do we decode the social, religious, and literary worlds of northern

¹ By “read” I mean here the full range of decocting techniques employed by modern scholarship, including but not limited to those associated with traditional philology and folkloristics, as well as such emergent approaches as those collectively known as “cultural studies.” This essay was delivered as the 2001 Albert Lord/Milman Parry Memorial Lecture under the sponsorship of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri. For their encouragement, sage comments, and helpful criticism, I warmly thank John Foley, Joseph Harris, Gregory Nagy, and John Zemke.

² Already as Parry was in the early stages of his research project in the Balkans, he envisioned its implications for the older works of northern Europe: “My purpose in undertaking the study of this poetry was as follows. My Homeric studies [. . .] have from the beginning shown me that Homeric poetry, and indeed all early Greek poetry, is oral, and so can be properly understood, criticized, and edited only when we have a complete knowledge of the processes of oral poetry; this is also true for other early poetries such as Anglo-Saxon, French, or Norse, to the extent they are oral. This knowledge of the processes of an oral poetry can be had up to a certain point by the study of the character of a style, e.g., of the Homeric poems; but a full knowledge can be had only by the accumulation from a living poetry of a body of experimental texts” (Mitchell and Nagy 2000:ix).

Europe in the Middle Ages? How, for example, do we understand the role of poetry in Nordic society and how do we view the composition of poetry in that world? And how do we take advantage of these advances while at the same time resisting the temptation to ignore what can be gained by old-fashioned philology and the study of mythology?³ Of course, the role of orality in the composition of Old Norse poetry and prose has been a dominant heuristic theme in the history of modern scholarship in that region. Whether investigators have been focussed on such literary and cultural issues as compositional techniques, or modern nationalistic efforts to lay claim to these wonderful medieval texts from the periphery of Europe, or the historical value of the contents of such works, the degree to which the basic shape, form, and character of these materials was imparted by a background either in a popular (and thus oral) or a courtly and ecclesiastical (and thus written) cultural matrix has been at the heart of a generations-long debate, an argument that significantly parallels the concerns of Homeric analysts and unitarians.⁴

In Old Norse studies, these opposing views came to be crystallized around the dichotomy *Freiprosa* - *Buchprosa* (“Freeprose – Bookprose”) scholarly strife that also reaches back into the nineteenth century. As with comparable debates in adjacent fields, serious intellectual goods were at stake in this heavily dichotomized clash of views between advocates of an essentially neo-romantic and passionately democratic perspective on the one side, and a fundamentally restrictive and equally passionate elitist view on the other.⁵ In addition, the Freeprose - Bookprose debate in northern Europe was fraught with significant nationalist overtones that can be conveniently summarized as “Who owns the sagas?” Are they to be understood as part of the cultural legacy of all of Scandinavia, the product of an oral culture that had migrated to Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries and had been recorded there in the 1200s (and thus cultural goods to which other Nordic

³ Cf. Bauman 1996:17, “...the enduring importance of the intellectual problems that the philological synthesis was forged to address constitutes a productive basis on which we as folklorists might orient ourselves to our cognate fields and disciplines.”

⁴ On the Homeric debate, see Foley 1988:4-6 *et passim* and Nagy 1996a:93-94, 133-34 *et passim*, and the relevant entries in Foley 1985 (available online at www.oraltradition.org).

⁵ Cf., for example, Andersson 1964, Byock 1984, and Clover 1985:239-40; for a recent review of positions, see Harris 1998; on the outlines and implications of the Freeprose - Bookprose controversy, see Mitchell 1991:1-6 *et passim*; for a review of works on Eddic poetry, see Harris 1985 and Acker 1998:85-100.

countries, Norway in particular, might legitimately lay claim)? Or are they the product of a specifically written literary culture that develops uniquely in Iceland in the Middle Ages (and to which only the Icelanders might lay claim)? This debate needs to be understood against the backdrop of inter-Nordic colonialism and the fact that the nineteenth-century nationalist movements in both Norway and Iceland were at just this point in time agitating for independence after more than half a millennium of political and cultural dominance from afar. The Freeprose - Bookprose debate was then not “only” about literature and culture, and not “only” a matter of concern within the rarified atmosphere of the academy. It was all of that, to be sure, *plus* an emotionally charged political topic about which many had opinions and in whose outcome everyone in that region of the world had a stake.

Whereas one might reasonably expect to gain a great deal from a close examination of the oral-written debate in Old Norse studies in those earlier periods, for the most part this opportunity was seriously compromised by inflexible and unsubtle thinking by advocates of the two opposing sides of the argument. In recent decades, however, a number of those in the field have advocated a view that looks to take the best of the hardened Freeprose - Bookprose positions and forge a synthesis that has no *a priori* theoretical conclusions but looks only for practical and useful ways to understand the texts that the antiquarianism and narrative sensibility of the medieval Icelanders have bequeathed to us.⁶ Perhaps one of the most important developments in this kind of thinking has been the realization that the question should no longer be styled as, to quote one noted scholar’s confident conclusion in 1964, that “the inspiration of the sagas is ultimately oral.”⁷ This sort of understandable (if regrettable) formulation can naturally only give rise to endless debate—we will never possess the sort of litmus test that would allow us to address without doubt such an assertion. Rather, the question needs to be framed as “How do we best understand the Norse materials?”

Fortunately, just as the pronouncement concerning the ultimate “orality” of the sagas (above) appeared, a promising way out of the morass was being developed by anthropologists and folklorists: what is variously referred to as the “ethnography of speaking,” performance studies, and so

⁶ Cp., for example, the sometimes contrasting views in Andersson 1966, Lönnroth 1976 and 1978, Byock 1982, Harris 1983, Clover 1986, and Mitchell 1987 and 1991; despite the different orientations of these authors, however, they appear to share the view that a new synthesis of approaches is a desideratum.

⁷ Andersson 1964:119. It should be noted that Andersson’s early embrace of the oral character of the sagas seems to have loosened considerably in the intervening years.

on.⁸ The tenets of such an approach—that we conceive of such cultural monuments as artistic communication and attempt to situate them in history and social life using tools drawn from a wide variety of disciplines—do not from today’s vantage point sound especially earth-shaking, but occasionally the results have been. In addition to its inherent intellectual benefits, a performance-based analysis of Old Norse literature brings with it a further advantage—namely, it allows scholars in the field to step back from approaches that are implicitly politically sensitive within the discipline; in other words, it represents an important means of escaping the fossilized and largely unproductive positions associated with the *Buchprosa - Freiprosa* debate. Some years ago folklorist Richard Bauman applied this “ethnography of speaking” approach specifically to Old Norse in an important discussion (1986a; cf. 1992), but one that, unfortunately, has been largely overlooked by scholars of Old Norse. To a great extent, the following comments owe their existence to the works of Bauman, Geertz, Hymes, Foley, Nagy, and so many other practitioners of such studies—all of whom implicitly (and several explicitly) build on Parry’s and Lord’s ethnographic observations from the 1930s, a project looking to set “lore against literature,”⁹ the lore of a living tradition against the literature of a long-gone world.¹⁰ The collective approach that precipitates out of the works of these scholars exhibits far less rigidity than did the old oral versus written debate. Moreover, the emerging consensus shows how by understanding living traditions of oral literature, by a sophisticated application of folklore theories and practices, and by abandoning what were still in the main (although heavily disguised) legacies of nineteenth-century romanticism and class wars, we can improve our ability to apprehend the long-lost cultural moment of the medieval literary enterprise. Toward these

⁸ The clarion cry of this new movement had already been sounded in 1959 with Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, but with respect to our materials, the beginnings are much more naturally seen, I would argue, in Hymes 1962, followed shortly thereafter by Hymes 1964, an introduction to a collection that included such influential studies as Frake 1964. Within the anthropological tradition, the works of Hymes, Geertz, and Victor Turner have been of particular moment, perhaps especially on those of us in allied fields. A specific, and early, application of such a contextualizing approach to the Icelandic sagas can be seen in Turner 1971.

⁹ E.g., Bauman 1977 and 1986b, Foley 1991, 1992, and 1995, Geertz 1973, Hymes 1962 and 1964, and Nagy 1990, 1996a, and 1996b. The phrase “lore against literature” I take from the 1935 typescript of Milman Parry’s “The Singer of Tales” (see Mitchell and Nagy 2000:viii).

¹⁰ This symbiosis is deftly outlined in Foley 1995:1-29.

ends, I present in the sections that follow: 1) a discussion of poetics and performance in the Old Norse world, specifically of how a range of alimentary images is used in Old Norse conceptualizations of poetry, and then 2) a discussion of how our appreciation for this metaphor enables us to understand in new ways important aspects of performance, and the representation of such performances, in the Old Norse world.

Poetry, Potables, and Physiology

Before examining how Icelanders understood and presented the performance of poetry in the narratives of the thirteenth century (mainly), it is important to recognize the high status poetry had in the Nordic world, a region notably devoid of epic verse but otherwise much enamored of the art of poetry. Indeed, poetry was so highly prized in the Old Norse world that the chief god of their pagan pantheon, Óðinn, was reported to have spoken entirely in meter (*Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir*) and in that context, it is said that his priests were called songsmiths (*ljóðasmiðir*) (Aðalbjarnarson 1962:17). The most famous and prized form of poetry in the world of northern Europe from the ninth to the thirteenth century was a style of verse that represented a metrically very demanding development from the original narrative forms of verse common to the Germanic world. This kind of poetry was associated with the scalds, the court poets, mainly Icelanders in later periods, who declaimed their works at the various Nordic courts.¹¹ So central to the Scandinavian world was this verse form that its acknowledged originator within Old Norse tradition appears to have been raised to godhead status within a century of his death. Bragi Boddason the Old is the oldest known scald, a historical ninth-century figure, famous as the primogenitor of the art. But Bragi is also the name of the god specifically associated with poetry. According to our principal guide to the world of Norse mythology, Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *Edda*, "There is one [god] called Bragi. He is renowned for wisdom and especially for eloquence and command of language. Especially he is knowledgeable about poetry, and because of him poetry is called *brag*. . ." (Sturluson 1987:25) (*Bragi heitir einn. Hann er ágætr at speki ok mest at málsnilld ok orðfimi. Hann kann mest af skáldskap, ok af honum er bragr kallaðr skáldskapr. . .* [Jónsson 1954:43]). This apotheosis

¹¹ For an introduction to scaldic poetry, see Holtmark 1982, Frank 1978 and 1985; although dated, Hollander 1945 remains a useful overview.

of Bragi Boddason the Old into the god Bragi is by no means certain, but represents the widely accepted understanding of the relationship.¹²

The complete aetiological myth about the origins of poetry is, significantly, a story told in Snorri's *Edda* by the god Bragi himself, where it is Óðinn who acquires poetry for men and the gods from the giants. Briefly, the story runs as follows: as a resolution of the Æsir gods' war with the Vanir gods, a man named Kvasir is created from the spittle the gods have spat into a vat (cf. the version in Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*, Aðalbjarnarson 1962:12-13). Kvasir is so wise that no one can ask him a question he cannot answer, and he spends his days traveling and teaching people. The dwarves secretly kill him, drain his blood, mix it with honey, and turn it into the mead that makes all who drink it a poet or a scholar (. . . *hverr, er af drekk, verðr skáld eða fræðamaðr*; Jónsson 1954:102). The dwarves, when asked about Kvasir, claim that he has suffocated on the wealth of his knowledge because no one was sufficiently educated to ask him questions. Now the giants come into possession of the mead, and Suttungr places it inside a mountain called Hnitbjörg watched over by his daughter Gunnlöð. Óðinn arranges for the servants of Suttungr's brother to kill each other and he works in their place in expectation of getting hold of the mead as a reward. When he is refused a drink, Óðinn has the brother bore a hole into the mountain; the god changes himself into a snake, and crawls through the hole to the place where Gunnlöð guards the mead. Óðinn sleeps with Gunnlöð for three nights and she allows him to drink three draughts of the mead. He consumes all the mead, turns himself into an eagle and flies back to the home of the gods, pursued by Suttungr, also in the shape of an eagle. When Óðinn arrives in Ásgarðr, he spits the mead up (. . . *þá spýtti hann upp miðinum*; Jónsson 1954:104) into the containers the other gods have set out. But during his escape, as Óðinn looks back and sees Suttungr chasing him, “. . . he sent some of the mead out backwards, and this was disregarded” (Sturluson 1987:64) (. . . *at hann sendi aftr suman mjöðinn, ok var þess ekki gætt*; Jónsson 1954:104). Anyone is allowed to use it, and that is what is known as the poetaster's share (*Hafði þat hverr, er vildi, ok köllum vér þat skáldfífla hlut*; Jónsson 1954:104). Otherwise, Óðinn apportions the mead out to the Æsir and “. . .to those people who are skilled at composing poetry” (Sturluson 1987:64) (. . . *ásunum ok þeim mönnum, er yrkja kunnu*; Jónsson 1954:104).

This myth, especially in its full and complete form, is of course chock-a-block with symbols and meaningful associations; naturally, there

¹² See Mogk 1887 and Turville-Petre 1975:186, who notes that “[Bragi] was an historical poet, whom mythological speculators had promoted to the rank of godhead.”

exists a long list of interpretations, not least those based on the story's connections with other traditions, especially Indic and Celtic, that suggest a background in Indo-European mythology.¹³ The centrality in this myth of what looks to be a reflex of Greek *ambrosia* and Vedic *soma* and *amrita*—an intoxicating drink whose consumption imparts special power to the drinker—has naturally been the focal point of much scholarly attention.¹⁴ And part of our understanding of this myth is the “shamanistic” view according to which Óðinn changes himself into a snake, drinks the hydromel, escapes as a bird and regurgitates the mead for the use of the gods and men—much as a bird would do in feeding its young. A recent observation has added a further, fresh perspective on our aetiological myth of the acquisition of poetry, and that is the degree to which it relates to *comparanda* from several traditions where similar myths apparently look to explain text as recomposition-in-performance. Citing examples from Persian, Telegu, Irish, French, and Greek, Gregory Nagy points out that in a number of traditions there exist myths in which “the evolution of a poetic tradition [. . .] is reinterpreted by the myth as if it resulted from a single incident” (Nagy 1996a:70). In these instances, the myth treats the tradition as though it were an original book that has been scattered and is now held by various performers within the tradition, a scenario in which “paradoxically a myth about the synthesis of oral traditions [. . .] is articulated in terms of written traditions” (Davidson 1985, here quoted from Nagy 1996a:70). Clearly our Norse myth about the origins of poetry is of a somewhat different sort, yet there are important points of contact as well. In our materials we have a story in which poetry has a single origin in the anthropomorphic being Kvasir, the wisest man in the world, who is slain (dismembered?) and his blood turned into the stuff of poetic composition. This elixir is rescued from the Otherworld of giants and dwarves by Óðinn, acting on behalf of men and the gods. But this potent liquid is, despite

¹³ Discussions on this issue range from the imaginative (e.g., Stephens 1972) to the skeptical (e.g., Frank 1981). For a general orientation to this myth, see Turville-Petre 1975:35-41; perhaps the broadest frame for understanding the text has been suggested in Meletinskij 1973, summarized and developed in Meletinskij 1977. This myth is also found in *Hávamál* 104-10, and referred to in several tenth-century scaldic verses, as well as the 8th-century (?) Lärbro stone on Gotland.

¹⁴ On the parallel of Indra obtaining *soma*, see especially Dumézil 1973; the parallels to the use of spittle are explored in Stübe 1924; on the broader associations with the use of intoxicating liquors, see especially Doht 1974. Of course, the connection between other intoxicants, such as wine, and poetry is known in many other traditions in roughly comparable periods. See, for example, Harb 1990 and Scheindlin 1984.

Óðinn's best efforts, not restricted to those whom he chooses but is in the form of the "lost" portion also spread out in the world and available to all. As in those other traditions, Norse composition as articulated in the form of the mead is scattered through the deeds of the principal deity.¹⁵

This reification of poetry—projecting inspiration, skill with words, and wisdom into the physical image of mead—is widely employed in the Norse world. The poet consumes intoxicating drink and then metaphorically "regurgitates" words of poetry, just as Óðinn has consumed and regurgitated the mead. This connection between such liquids, wisdom, and poetry is strong in Norse tradition. In fact, in addition to the mead of poetry, Norse mythology also speaks of a special elixir containing all wisdom coming from the well of Mímir, a figure who can boast numerous associations with wisdom, knowledge, and foresight. It is for a drink from this well that Óðinn gives one of his eyes. Once he has quaffed the liquid in exchange for the partial loss of his physical sight, he gains insight.¹⁶ A connection rarely made with this aspect of Óðinn's career is the degree to which it would appear to conform to other culture heroes who are viewed as being formative in the creation of the poetic tradition—Homer as a blind singer is the prime example, of course, but one notes also the existence of a figure like the Ćor Huso about whom Parry heard so much in the Balkans of the 1930s.¹⁷ To what extent an Icelandic poet who engaged in the composition and recitation of his art was mindful of such filiations as those with Óðinn is uncertain, although both in the Norse world and elsewhere the argument has been made that poets were aware that their craft had divine inspiration, perhaps even a mimetic function during the performative moment.¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. the remarks in Foley 1998 and 1999 :49-63, where Foley demonstrates (1998:149) "how the legendary singer, although represented as a once-living individual by the lesser, real-life bards who follow in his footsteps, is also a way of designating the poetic tradition."

¹⁶ Cf. Andrews 1928, whose clever construction of this complex is worth noting: he suggests that Mímir is actually a skull used as a drinking vessel, and thus would be the fountain of wisdom from which Óðinn drinks.

¹⁷ See the remarks on Isak/Hasan Ćoso, Ćor Huso, and Homer in Foley 1998 and 1999:49-63.

¹⁸ Cf. the Homeric case as outlined in Nagy 1996a:96-97: "I must insist that this kind of 'acting' in the context of archaic Greek poetry is not a matter of pretending: it is rather a merger of the performer's identity with an identity patterned on an archetype—a merger repeated every time the ritual occasion recurs." On the relationship between the

How thoroughly Óðinn's acquisition of the poetic mead was meaningfully integrated into Norse presentations of poets and poetry is indicated by the following scene from *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, a saga whose eponymous hero is often associated with Óðinn.¹⁹ In this tale, Egill's enemies have plotted to kill him and his men by poisoning them. Egill undertakes to consume all the alcohol as the only one who will not be harmed by the poison (Pálsson and Edwards 1980:188-89):²⁰

One man was given the job of serving each toast to Egil and his men, and kept egging them on to drink up quickly, but Egil told his men not to have any more, and he drank their share, that being the only way out of it. When Egil realized that he couldn't keep going any longer, he stood up, walked across the floor to Armod, put both hands on his shoulders and pressed him up against the pillar, then heaved up a vomit of massive proportions (*Siðan þeysti Egill upp ór sér spýju mikla. . .*) that gushed all over Armod's face, into his eyes, nostrils and mouth, and flooded down his chest so that he was almost suffocated. When he recovered his breath he spewed up (*. . . þá gaus upp spýja. . .*) and all of his servants there began to swear at Egil. What he'd just done, they said, made him the lowest of the low, and if he'd wanted to vomit (*spýja*) he should have gone outside, not made a fool of himself inside the drinking hall.

'I shouldn't be blamed by anyone for this,' said Egil, 'I'm only doing the same as the farmer. He's spewing (*spýr*) with all his might, just like me.'

Then Egil went back to his seat, sat down and asked for a drink. After that he recited this verse at the top of his voice:

With my spew I swear
 Thanks for your sociability!
 We have witnesses that
 I could walk the floor:
 Many a guest's gift
 Is even more gushing;
 Now the ale has ended up
 All over Armod.

scald and his art see, for example, Clover 1978 and the works noted in Frank 1985:180-81. For the specific example of Egill Skalla-Grímsson in this regard, see Olsen 1936.

¹⁹ Many aspects of Egill's career tie him to Óðinn, such as the gouging out of Ármóðr's eye, making him appear like "one-eyed Óðinn." See Olsen 1936 for a treatment of this relationship on more aesthetic grounds.

²⁰ All citations from the original are to Nordal 1979:225-27.

Armod jumped to his feet and ran out, but Egil asked for something more to drink. The housewife told the man who had been serving all evening to carry on as long as they wanted to drink, and make sure they had enough. The man took a great ox-horn, filled it and gave it to Egil, who swilled it down in one draught. Then he said:

Let's swallow each swig
 This sailor keeps serving;
 The bard is kept busy
 With barely a break:
 Not a lick shall I leave
 Of this malted liquor,
 Though the fellow keep filling
 Fresh horns till day break.

Egil kept on drinking for some time, tossing down each horn he was given, but there was little fun to be had in the room as not many were still drinking. Then Egil and his companions got up, took down their weapons from the wall where they had hung them, and went over to the granary where their horses were kept. There they lay down on the straw and slept through the night.

Crude though we understand this scene to be, many have perceived in it a reflex of ancient concerns with intoxicants, ingestion, and the production of poetry as a kind of regurgitation, a recurring theme in this saga in particular.²¹ Of interest in this connection is the fact that the author of *Egils saga* here uses the verb *spýja*, cognate with the term used in the corresponding section in *Snorra edda* about the acquisition of the poetic mead, *spýta* (< **spyēu-*, **spyū-*; see Buck 1988:264-66), rather than, for example, *hrækja* ("to spit"). Important here too is the fact that Kvasir himself is made from the spittle the gods have spat into a vat. The conservative lexical choices of the saga's author, often suggested to be Snorri Sturluson himself,²² have been shown elsewhere to reflect deep

²¹ This same image of consumed liquid and produced poetry is used commonly elsewhere in *Egils saga*, as when, heavily despondent and contemplating death after his son has died, Egill refuses all food and drink. Egill's daughter tricks him into drinking milk and he goes on to compose one of his most famous poems, *Sonatorrek* (Nordal 1979:245-56). The concatenation of the rules of hospitality, drinking, vomiting, and poetry is pointedly used as well when Egill visits the king's steward, Atleyjar-Bárðr (Nordal 1979:106-11). Medieval texts frequently employ the image of vomiting to a different end, often the idea of the non-contrite sinner returning to his sins as a dog returns to its vomit. See Toswell 1993 for a discussion and further examples.

²² The classic formulation of this argument is Hallberg 1962.

connections to Norse traditions (e.g., Mitchell 1998), and we may here have another instance of this trend. Not only are such themes woven into the subtle nature and meaning of every part of the narrative, the same reflexive awareness of poetry's archetypal background in the consumption of liquids and other sustenance is marked in Egill's poetry itself. Indeed, Egill frequently uses metaphors based on this association, paraphrases that specifically conjure the image of Óðinn's original act of bringing poetry to humanity—*arnar kjapta órð* ("seed or produce of the eagle's beak"); and *Viðurs þýfi* ("Óðinn's theft") (Nordal 1979:276, 246).

In fact, kennings, those elaborate metaphors in which Old Norse poetry delights, confirm and extend this association: paraphrases for the art of poetry include "Odin's drink," "the Æsir's drink," "Kvasir's blood," "dwarfs' drink," "the rain of dwarves," "Suttungr's mead," and "the liquid of Hnitbjörg." Óðinn's trip back to Ásgarðr in the shape of an eagle has also given rise to metaphors for poetry, as well as some opportunities for understanding yet further how the Norse viewed the full range of this image. Early in the twelfth century, Þórarinn Stutfeldr uses the kenning *leirr ens gamla ara* ("the mud of the old eagle") to refer to poorly executed poetry.²³ The reference comes in the context of what amounts to a competition between court poets, and in his verse, Þórarinn mocks both the bravery and poetic skill of his adversary. The kenning is built, of course, on Snorri's story, outlined above, of how Óðinn acquires the Poetic Mead, but "spills," as bowdlerized translations often gloss it, some of the mead during his escape.²⁴ What the text says, however, is that "he sent some of the mead out backwards" (*at hann sendi aftr suman mjöðinn*). This is not a case, as it often seems from polite translations, of spillage: Óðinn quite literally excretes this portion of the mead. This defecated mead has no merit or value, is not watched over by anyone, and this exudate, rather than the regurgitated mead, is what poetasters consume, with obvious results. "The mud of the old eagle" is euphemistic—the phrase quite clearly refers to "the dung of the old eagle" (cf. *leirr* "mud, filth, dung"; cf. Egilsson and Jónsson 1966:368). Þórarinn's meaning could not be more clear: his enemy's poetry is shit.

²³ Jónsson 1912-15:462. In addition to this twelfth-century occurrence, there exist both thirteenth- and fourteenth-century examples. See Frank 1978:100-01.

²⁴ Young's well-known translation reads, for example: "It was such a close shave that Suttung did not catch him, however, he let some fall, but no one bothered about that" (Sturluson 1973:102).

That this physiological frame of reference was, like the larger myth from which it derives, well-known and well-used can be established by exploring some of our saga texts. In Sturla Þórðarson's thirteenth-century *Íslendinga saga* (part of the so-called *Sturlunga saga*), we are told of troubles in the region around Miðfirði and Víðidal. At the heart of this discord is a man named Tannr Kálfsson: *Hann var orðillr. Hann orti ok var níðskár. Engi var hann manna sættir* (Jónsson 1948, II:58) ("a spiteful gossip, a man who spread rumor and malicious statements, and was on good terms with no man" [McGrew and Thomas 1970-74, I:155]). In typically laconic saga-style, we are immediately told that a certain lampooning verse appears in the region about the sons of Gísli, but its author is quite clearly to be understood as Tannr. A killing takes place, and now as part of the renewed verbal war the men of Víðidal tell a mocking story about the men of Miðfirði, according to which the latter make up a mare: one man is the back of the mare; another, the belly; yet another, the feet; still another, the thigh; and Tannr, "the arse. For, they said, he dirtied all who had anything to do with him with his filthy droppings" (McGrew and Thomas 1970-74, I:156) (*arsinn. Hann sögðu þeir skíta á alla þá, er við hann áttu, af hrópi sínu* [lit., "the arse. For, they said, he shat on all who had anything to do with him with his slanders."] [I:156; Jónsson 1948, II:59]).

This little slice of life from thirteenth-century Iceland draws on and explicates the myth of Óðinn's acquisition of the poetic mead—that myth is not just an explanation for how poetry came to be, or even why poor or inadequate poetry exists, but rather points to the social origins of versecraft. Many of the Old Norse terms connected with poetry derive from words that designate this sense of caviling or defaming. And although the synchronic moment, in this case mainly the thirteenth century and the periods immediately adjacent to it, is our principal subject, our understanding of that period is necessarily informed by the diachronic perspective. A short digression into etymology is then not out of order. Thus, *hróp* (vb., *hrópa*), for example, has here the old sense of "slander, defamation" (cf. Old English *hropan* "to shout, proclaim, howl"; modern Swedish, etc. *ropa* "call, cry, clamor"; cf. Low German *rufen*).²⁵ Of related interest is the probable etymology of the terms for poetry, poets, and so on, viz.—*skáld* (whence, *skáldskapr* "poetry," and so on). Despite a long-standing debate about the derivation of this term,²⁶ scholarship overwhelmingly accepts that it is

²⁵ See de Vries 1961:260; Buck 1988:1250-51.

²⁶ See the bibliographic discussion on this and related points in Holtmark 1982 and Frank 1985:180-82, as well as the references in de Vries 1961. Important elements

cognate with English *scold* and, indeed, with a whole host of terms relevant to this discussion (e.g., modE *say*, *scold*; ON *saga* [all derived from **sek*^w-, “to say, utter”]). The very etymology of the act of poetry in Old Norse thus suggests a performative character. A related image emerges in *Porleifs þátr jarlsskálds*, where Porleifr employs the outward appearance of delivering praise poetry in order to gain a hearing at the Norwegian court. Once he has secured the venue, he recites instead an insulting lampoon (*nið*) to the king as a reward for the king’s earlier misdeeds. This same corrective quality is further underscored by medieval Nordic law, which contains provisions for what it terms a *skáldstöng* (“libel-pole”).²⁷ Nineteenth-century Icelandic popular tradition knew of such a concept, a custom believed to be a reflex of older practices (Cleasby 1874:455):

The beina-kerlinga-vísur of mod. times are no doubt a remnant of the old níðstöng;—certain stone pyramids (*varða*) along mountain-roads are furnished with sheeps’ legs or horses’ heads, and are called beina-kerling (*bone carline*) [. . .] a passing traveller alights and scratches a ditty called beina-kerlinga-vísa (often of a scurrilous or even loose kind) on one of the bones, addressing it to the person who may next pass by. . . .

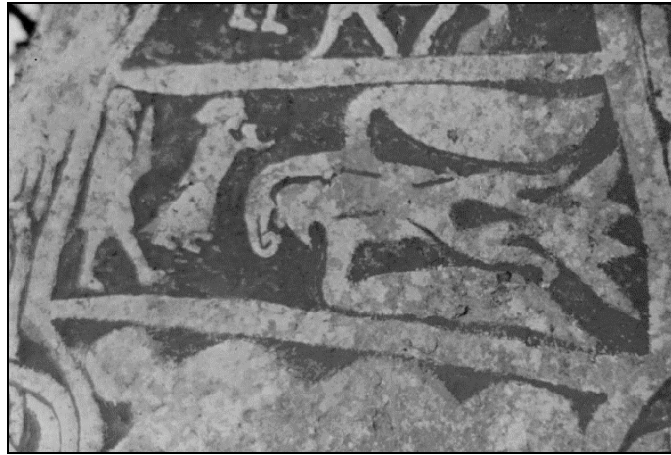
Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar presents a scene that echoes this same idea: late in Grettir’s career, he steals a horse and is chased by the owner of the horse over a long distance. During the chase, Grettir stops for rest and food, composing verses as he does so, sometimes teaching the stanza to those nearby. His pursuer mimics this behavior, stopping at the same places and also composing poetry. When the two finally end the race harmoniously, they compare notes about their versecraft, assembling the whole episode for each other, have much fun from it, and part the best of friends (Jónsson 1964:147-53). The vignette cited earlier from *Egils saga* raises another important opportunity for our understanding of Norse poetry *in situ*: Egill is travelling and has taken shelter with Ármóðr. His “gushing” behavior thus comes in the context of his being a guest (and, of course, at the same time, the host is trying to poison him). Hospitality—and its rules—becomes then one of the central stylized features of this marked form of performative behavior. Utterances of scaldic verse can come almost anywhere and at any time (the so-called *lausavísur*; cf. Lie 1982), if we are

of this discussion are to be found in Olsen 1911, See 1964, and Steblin-Kamenskij 1969. Of related interest is the proposal in Werlich 1964 and 1967, refuted by Hollowell 1978.

²⁷ Cf. Keyser and Munch 1846-95, I:430; more generally, see de Vries 1961:481, Falk and Torp 1904-06, Hellqvist 1957, and Buck 1988:1298-1300.

to believe the contexts provided in the narrative frameworks in the sagas, but marked, stylized presentations of elaborate praise compositions come predominantly within the asymmetrical context of guest-host relationships, especially as this literary marketplace increasingly comes to be characterized as Icelanders traveling from afar to the various Nordic courts. Old Norse literature is not so well-known as is Homeric literature, for example, for an obsession with the rules of hospitality. Still, large sections of the eddic *Hávamál* treat this issue (e.g., st. 2), encouraging reciprocity between host and guest (cf. st. 42: *gjalda gíof við gíof*) and the equitable treatment of strangers (sts. 2-7). The specific relationship between the king's hospitality and the poet's duty to respond with verse is noted directly in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, when the eponymous hero comments in his so-called "Head Ransom" (*Höfuðlausn*), *Buðumk hilmir löð / þar ák hróðrar of kvöð / berk Óðins mjöð / á Engla bjöð*, "I offered myself to the king in [= responding to his] hospitality; I have the duty to praise him; I carry poetry (= "the mead of Óðinn") to England" (Nordal 1979:186).

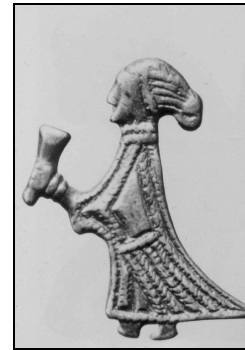
The ethnography of giving and receiving in medieval Scandinavia suggests that beyond the transparent and readily apprehended character of this relationship, much more subtle and complex filiations are acted out through various reciprocal acts of munificence (cf. Gurevitch 1968 and Mitchell 1983, with bibliography). The distinction between native purveyors of scaldic poetry, essentially an "aristocracy of the mind" within Norse society, to whom remuneration is owed in the form of hospitality, fellowship, and community contrasts sharply with the image that emerges of professional entertainers for whom little respect is shown (cp. the case of Old Swedish *lækæri* ["player"] in Schlyter 1822-77, I:36; cf. Mitchell 1997). That mead and hospitality were intimately connected in Germanic tradition has been the thrust of much scholarship and appears to be a common feature of the archaeological record, including the panel on the Gotlandic Lärbro stone that appears to parallel the story of Óðinn and the acquisition of the Poetic Mead (figure 1) and the many "valkyrie" figurines holding beakers of mead (?) recovered in northern Europe (figures 2-3); moreover, a number of literary texts treating the Germanic world, from *Waltharius* to saints' lives, testify to aspects of this same tradition (cf. Enright 1988; Bridges 1999). One scholar has argued that this image is reflected in *Beowulf* when the hero is welcomed by Wealpeow behaving within this "valkyrie tradition" (cf. Damico 1984). Despite the many differences of their views, all of these scholars argue that the triptych of mead, poetry, and hospitality possesses widespread and deep roots in northern Europe.

Figure 1

Óðinn flying with the Poetic Mead in the shape of an eagle?

Figure 2

Valkyrie with horn of mead greeting a warrior?

Figure 3

Valkyrie with horn of mead?

Performing Poetry

Mindful of the truth of the comment that “oral tradition comes to life in performance” (Nagy 1996a:19), let us examine the fictional representations of such scenes in documents against the background of our discussion of hospitality, reciprocity, and this new understanding of the alimentary view of poetic creation among the Norse, and see if we cannot “unpack” the materials and arrive at a better understanding of the texts. It would seem to me to be obvious, but nevertheless worth noting, that the “cultural moment” is in every case for me contemporary with the written formulation of the surviving text—thus, a scenario set in the twelfth century

but coming to us in a text composed in the thirteenth century should clearly be understood (barring convincing evidence to the contrary) as a thirteenth- and *not* a twelfth-century phenomenon. Thus, although our texts treat many different periods, we must regard these settings as of little importance in this instance and focus on the period from which the documents derive, in most instances cited here, the 1200s (cf. my comments in Mitchell 1991:xii-xiii).

In one of the most famous scenes of *sagnaskemmtan* (“saga entertainment”), *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* (composed ca. 1237), we are told of how at a wedding at Reykhólar in 1119 several prosimetrical sagas are narrated, at least one of them including a long poem (*flokkr*) at the end. Yet for as often as this episode has been examined, the activities of the wedding guests in the period leading up to the saga narration are rarely connected with this well-known scene.²⁸ In this earlier episode, the saga tells of how various guests engage in dueling lampoons.²⁹ As the wedding feast progresses, the drinking keeps pace, and we are variously told that “there was no shortage of good drink” (*Skorti ok eigi drykk góðan*), later that “They all now drank happily and the drink soon made them boastful” (*Drukku nú glaðir, ok rekkir þá brátt drykkin*), and yet further that “Everyone now began to drink heavily and grew somewhat intoxicated” (*Þeir drukku nú ákaft, ok fær á þá alla nökkut*).³⁰ One exception to this heavy carousing is a guest named Þórðr, who is described as “not much of a drinking man” (*ekki mikill drykkjumaðr* [33]), cursed with a bad stomach, labored breathing, dyspepsia, a receding hairline, and sour breath. These features become the cause of several versified lampoons by other guests—e.g., “Whence comes this stink?” / “Þórð is breathing at table” (41) (*Hvaðan kennir gef þenna? / Þórðr andar nú handan* [34]). Þórðr responds in kind to each of the taunts, and his retorts and those of the others underscore the association between imbibing, items expelled from the mouth, and poetry. In fact, the image of poetry—apparently bad poetry—is in these exchanges explicitly expanded to include breathing (*andi*) and belching (*repta*), in particular the association between poor poetry and mephitic stench of constant burping.

²⁸ E.g., Liestøl 1945, Dronke 1947-48, Foote 1955-56, Lönnroth 1976:170-72, and See 1981.

²⁹ These stylized insults resemble, but perhaps do not rise to the level of, the so-called *senna* or *mannajafnaðr*. On the *senna*, see especially Harris 1979. Cf. Swenson 1991, although she does not take up the case of *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*.

³⁰ Text and translation from McGrew and Thomas 1970-74 :40-41 and Jónsson 1948, I:33, respectively. All subsequent references to *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* are given parenthetically in the text.

But what seems to be a jovial time for all—Þórðr is said to laugh heartily at the versified calumnies—turns bitter when a voice from the movable benches, where the low status guests are seated, utters an apparently more insulting and mocking verse. When Þórðr inquires of his hostess who the man is, and is told by her, he says that he will leave immediately if the offending poet—or poetaster—is not asked to depart. The refusal to turn him out precipitates a crisis and in the end Þórðr leaves, but not before two more insulting verses (presumably by the same man) have been thrown at him, and the episode concludes by noting that “it is not told that anyone spoke of giving him gifts” (43) (*En eigi er getit, at neitt yrði af gjöfum við hann* [37]). This phrase must be understood as a clear indication that the host-guest relationship has broken down entirely by the time Þórðr moves to others quarters. Immediately after this scene, the saga says that “there was increased merriment and joy now, good entertainment and many sorts of amusements—dancing, wrestling, and storytelling” (43) (*Þar var nú glaumur ok gleði mikil, skemmtan góð ok margs konar leikar, bæði dansleikar, glímur ok sagnaskemmtan* [37]).

After this section follow the vastly better known comments about the famous *fornaldarsaga* narrations with their verses: Hrólfr tells a saga about a viking, a barrow robber, and a berserker, “with many strophes too” (44) (*ok margar vísur með* [37]), while the priest Ingimundr narrates a story about the scald Ormr of Barra, “with many verses and, towards the end of the saga, many good *flokks* [poems] which Ingimund himself had composed” (44) (*ok vísur margar ok flokk góðan við enda sögunnar, er Ingimundr hafði ortan* [38]).³¹ The sub-text of this portion of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* treats matters of status, host-guest responsibilities, and other aspects of the reciprocal relationship of this important dyad. If we consider these scenes in tandem, as they are presented in the saga, it would appear that one of the more honored and high-status guests has been insulted in verse by one of the low-status guests, but as this man is part of another high status guest’s followers—and indeed, even acts as his proxy in some ways—the hostess refuses to honor Þórðr’s request and he leaves in a huff. The scene as a whole forms a metanarrative in which the lampoons function as a proxy discussion about the host-guest relationship.

Although scaldic poetry was known throughout the Nordic world and is common enough in entirely domestic contexts in the Icelandic sagas (e.g.,

³¹ Cf. Harris 1997 :134-35, on the prosimetrical character of the saga described here and the question of how tradition may dictate “a recurrent formal arrangement in which longer poems cluster at the end of a saga.”

Grettis saga Ásmundarssonar), the *locus classicus* for the *dróttkvætt* stanza is the *court*, as its very name implies (< *drótt* “comitatus”), and it is here we see the most elaborate presentations of it at work.³² It would seem that each of the Nordic courts plays a role as the recipient (or would-be recipient) of this kind of poetry,³³ but none more so than the Norwegian court, to which Icelandic scalds traveled in hopes of delivering their elaborate poems and in still higher hopes of receiving remuneration, perhaps of even becoming a king’s man (cf. *Kounungsskuggsjá*).

Instructive in this regard, in part because it seems so atypical, is *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, one of several dozen short narratives interwoven into the lives of the Norwegian kings. *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* differs from most of these short narratives, or *þættir*, by virtue of its relative lack of cohesive structure, apart from what seems to be the author’s need to supply a narrative to accompany Halli’s poetry. This story gets off to an unusual start, it would seem: as Halli’s ship arrives in Norway, they are greeted by some passers-by, one of whom, “a man in a red tunic,” turns out to be the king (Haraldr Sigurðarson, sometimes called *harðráði* or “hard-rule,” d. 1066). After he greets Halli and discovers that they have spent the night at a certain location, the king insultingly inquires, “Didn’t old Agði screw you?” (*sarþ hann yðr eigi þa Agði*).³⁴ Halli responds in the negative and when the king asks why this is so, Halli says in turn to the king, “he was waiting for a better man and was expecting you this evening” (244) (*beið hann at bettri manna venti þin þangað iquell* [235]). In fact, as jarring as this comment and its response may strike us today, it is a fitting opening for a tale filled with competitive, male witticisms. When later Halli is presented at the court, the king says that he must find his own lodgings, “but I will not be stingy with food for you” (244) (*en eigi spari ec mat við þic* [235]). Halli takes up residence and the king sets a series of poetic challenges for him and his opponent, the court scald Þjóðólfr, especially verses composed “on the spot,” based on events that have unfolded in front of them, such as a fight between a smith and a tanner. When Halli engages in a prank that impugns the quality—and especially the quantity—of the food from the king’s table, the king responds

³² Cf. Frank 1978:21-33 for a general orientation to the *dróttkvætt* verse.

³³ See, for example, Mitchell 1997 on this point.

³⁴ Text and translation from Jónsson 1932 :235 and Andersson and Gade 2000:244, respectively. All subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text. In addition to the manuscript tradition found in Jónsson, *Sneglu-Halla Þáttr* is also found in Unger 1867:93-101.

to his hi-jinks that very night.³⁵ He has an entire roast pig sent to Halli's table with the following instructions: "Take this to Halli and tell him to compose a stanza before you get to his place. Deliver that message when you get halfway across the floor, and if he does not get the stanza finished, it will cost him his life" (246) (*fer þetta Halla s. h. oc seg honom at hann havi ort v. apr en þv kemr firir hann. oc mel þat þa er þv kemr amitt golfit. oc ef eigi er þa ort ser hann bana sinn* (238)]. Surprisingly, Halli manages this difficult assignment and thereby saves his life.

Attitudes toward this *þáttr* have generally been negative because of its apparently elusive, unsatisfying structure, but we are now better prepared to understand its intent: the abbreviated *senna*—the ritual exchange of insults—that begins the episode carries the burden of the narrative's meaning, and frames the *þáttr*'s fascination with hospitality, imbibing and eating, and competition, especially in the form of poetry. Indeed, virtually every element of this tale reflects concern with the reciprocal obligations of the guest and his host as they are actualized by consumption and poetic production. In the late fourteenth-century variant of this *þáttr* found in *Flateyjarbók*, for example, it was said to have been the king's custom to eat just a single meal each day, and when he had his fill, he would call for the tables to be cleared immediately, even if many were still hungry (Clark 2000:696).³⁶

King Harald's custom was to eat one meal a day. The food was served first to him, as would be expected, and he was always very well satisfied by the time the food was served to the others. But when he was satisfied, he rapped on the table with the handle of his knife, and then the tables were to be cleared at once. Many were still hungry (*voru margir þaa huergi næri mettir*). It happened on one occasion that the king was walking in the street attended by his followers, and many of them were not nearly satisfied (*voru margir þaa huergi nærri mettir*). And then they heard a noisy quarrel at an inn. It was a tanner and a blacksmith, and they were almost attacking one another. The king stopped and watched for a while. Then he said, "Let's go. I don't want to get involved in this, but, Thjodolf, compose a verse about them" (*en þu þiodolfr yrk vm þa visu*).

³⁵ On Sneglu-Halli's transgressive behavior and the broader structural elements among such *þættir* of what Harris, in an adaptation of Vladimir Propp's schema, terms Alienation/Reconciliation, see Harris 1972:7-8, 11. On this narrative and the broader theme of verbal wit, see Harris 1976:7-16.

³⁶ Icelandic text from Vigfússon and Unger 1860-68:417.

The treatment of this subject—the stinginess of the king at his table, and Halli’s poetic and mocking responses—is, in fact, the principal sub-text of the *þátr*, as Halli time and again notes the hunger King Haraldr’s guests must endure and his own reactions to the condition. That the person responsible for the *Flateyjarbók* version of the tale apparently understands that the audience needs to have this meaning in mind and underscores the point by adding in the explanatory remarks about the king’s dining habits is undoubtedly attributable to the demise in the receptiveness of the Nordic courts to scalds and scaldic verses in the century and a half that separates the *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók* versions of *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. In other words, by the end of the fourteenth century, the once-flourishing interconnected relationship between the various dyads of poet : praised, honorer : honored, supplicant : superior, sender : receiver, Icelander : non-Icelander, guest : host has passed into oblivion, and for the audience to apprehend fully the nature of the text, it needs the clarification the later editor has supplied (cf. Mitchell 1997).

Yet of all scenes concerning the oral presentation of poetry and prose in the Old Norse world, the one that holds the most meaning for us—exactly because it provides us with a remarkable “snapshot” of distinctly different models of literary activity in the thirteenth century rather than a single uniform model, as is sometimes assumed—is the story of Sturla Þórðarson in *Sturlu þátr* and its famous scene of saga narration and declaimed praise poetry.³⁷ The text reports events that took place in 1263, when the Icelander Sturla Þórðarson came to King Magnús Hákonarson of Norway, to whom he has been defamed, looking to repair the damage of the misrepresentations. Reminiscent of the king’s behavior in *Sneglu-Halla Þátr*, the king here refuses to listen to him, but does allow him to accompany the royal party onboard ship, supplying him with food (Jónsson 1948, III:377-79; translation mine).³⁸

³⁷ Cf. my earlier comments on this scene, Mitchell 1991 :98-102 and 1997 , discussions on which the current reading builds. Although I do not make direct reference to the “ethnography of speaking” in these earlier works on *Sturlu Þátr*, I take this opportunity to note the important influence this area of anthropology (and especially an encounter with Frake 1964, and the approach implicit in it, early in my studies in anthropology) had—and continues to have—on my conceptualization of cultural questions.

³⁸ Cf. Kålund 1906-11, II:325-26. The compilation as a whole probably dates to ca. 1300.

And when men lay down to sleep, the king's forecandleman asked who should entertain them. Most remained silent at this. Then he asked:

'Sturla the Iclander, will you entertain [us]?'

'You decide,' says Sturla. Then he told (*sagði*) **Huldar saga*, better and more cleverly than any of them who were there had heard (*heyrt*) before.

Many thronged forward on the deck and wanted to hear (*heyra*) it clearly, so that there was a great throng there.

The queen asked, 'What is the crowd of men on the foredeck?'

A man says, 'The men there want to hear (*heyra*) the saga that the Iclander is telling (*segir*).'

She said, 'What saga is that?'

He replied, 'It's about a great troll-woman, and it is a good story and is being well-told (*vel frá sagt*).'

The king told her to pay no heed to this but to sleep. She said, 'I think this Iclander must be a good fellow and much less to blame than he is said to be.'

The king remained silent. People went to sleep for the night. The following morning there was no wind, so that the king's ship was in the same place. When the men were sitting at table during the day, the king sent to Sturla some dishes from his table. Sturla's companions were pleased at this, and [said], 'Things look better with you here than we thought, if this sort of thing goes on.'

When the men had eaten, the queen sent a message to Sturla asking him to come to her and bring with him the saga about the troll-woman (*bað hann koma til sín ok hafa með sér tröllkonu-söguna*), Sturla went aft to the quarterdeck then and greeted the king and queen. The king received his greeting shortly but the queen received it graciously and easily. The queen then asked him to tell that same story (*segja þá sömu sögu*) that he had told in the evening. He did so, and told the saga for much of the day (*sagði mikinn hluta dags sögu*). When he had told [it] (*hafði sagt*), the queen and many others thanked him and understood that he was a knowledgeable and wise man.

As a result of his well-told troll saga, Sturla is given the opportunity the next day to declaim a panegyric he has composed in honor of the king, and he later delivers a further praise poem in honor of the king's father. Sturla's performances and poems ingratiate him to the king, and eventually the king awards Sturla what must have been one of the great literary commissions of the age, the responsibility for composing his father's saga, *Hákonarsaga Hákonarsonar*. Attempts to assess carefully whether the

narration of **Huldar saga* is to be understood as one about saga reading (the phrase “bring the saga with him” being understood as implying a manuscript) or saga telling (the phrase “better and more cleverly” being understood as implying an unfixed text) abound.³⁹ Despite the discord and consternation, the episode has engendered among such excellent readers of saga literature, a reasonable solution to its apparently contradictory information is available.

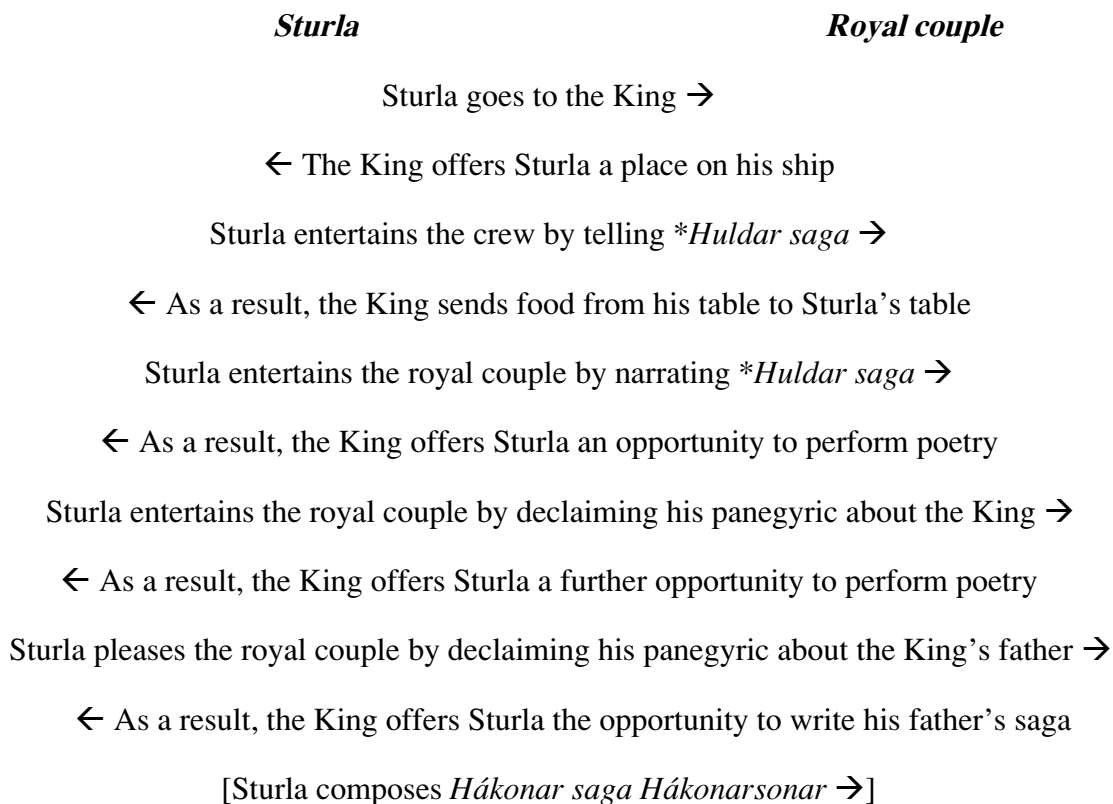
The author’s handling of the scene betrays his concern with a whole series of distinctions between the Norwegian court and his Icelandic hero: in one case, he is portraying a Danish-born queen who now lives at the Norwegian court, an institution that had been the center of an active translation industry for at least 35 years and possessed a noteworthy library. When she calls for Sturla to entertain them onboard the becalmed ship, the cultural frame established by her background (that is, the royal courts of Denmark and Norway) anticipates an entertainer who will come forward with a manuscript from which he will read. In fact, Sturla has no such manuscript. He arrives with no other possessions than his native talent and from it rebuilds his career, and, indeed, Sturla’s lack of worldly goods is underscored by the fact that he has with him no provisions, but must live instead off the good will of the royal couple. The ability of “Sturla *the Icelander*” to use poetry and saga narration as the means to become a Norwegian court favorite reflects a widespread idea in Scandinavia concerning Icelandic antiquarianism and narrative skill, a view one finds already in twelfth-century Danish and Norwegian historiographers,⁴⁰ and one the saga’s author is only too happy to perpetuate and exploit. Thus, the forecastleman’s question, *Sturla inn íslenzka, viltu skemta?* (“Sturla the Icelander, will you entertain us?”), which introduces Sturla’s obviously oral narration of **Huldar saga*, contrasts pointedly—and is intended to contrast—with the queen’s request that Sturla be sure “to bring the saga” with him when he comes before the royal couple. Here the author has neatly juxtaposed the traditional and modern, the non-elite and elite forms of literature (that is, “unaided narration” and “manuscript-based narration”), appropriate respectively to the ship’s forecastle and its quarterdeck, and the text carefully emphasizes the national, social, and aesthetic differences between the two forms as they are practiced and anticipated. In this episode, in fact, we witness the wide range of literary possibilities at mid-century:

³⁹ E.g., Einarsson 1957 :158; Pálsson 1962 :52; Hofmann 1971 ; Lönnroth 1976:172; and Clover 1982:194. Cf. Mitchell 1991, 1997.

⁴⁰ E.g., Storm 1880:1 and Müller 1839, I:7-8.

oral saga narration (Sturla's two recitations of **Huldar saga*); declaimed scaldic poetry (the panegyrics to Magnús and Hákon); and the written and read saga (*Hákonarsaga Hákonarsonar*, Queen Ingibjörg's expectations of **Huldar saga*). This story thus captures Old Norse literary history at a liminal moment, and displays, on the one hand, through the queen's remarks about manuscript-based saga entertainment and the king's commissioning of Sturla to write a saga, the extent to which the increasingly prevalent custom of written narration had eaten away at oral recitation, while, on the other hand, it demonstrates the strength of, and the court's appreciation for, the venerable tradition of orally delivered scaldic praise poetry and oral saga narration.

Furthermore, Sturla's stay with the royal couple displays a pattern of ever more important exchanges between the poet and his host. Schematically, these reciprocal exchanges might be represented as follows:



That Sturla and the royal couple engage in a series of exchanges involving narration (especially poetry), sustenance, and hospitality seems beyond dispute, and indeed the degree to which food, poetry, and narration are

offered as tokens of honor is striking in this example.⁴¹ A similar structure characterizes, it seems to me, *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* and several of the other texts under discussion here, although in several instances, what is exchanged is not honor but its obverse, ritual insult. But even this form of stylized malediction has its place in the hierarchy of verbal exchanges, representing a form of honor: Þórðr's difficulties in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* do not seem to derive from the nature of what is said but rather from its source, that is, from someone not of sufficient station to engage with him in this exchange of barbs. This apparently acceptable ritual behavior is interrupted when someone of the wrong—specifically lower—social status directs several lampoons at Þórðr. This contrarious behavior disrupts the orderly procession of the increasingly caustic barbs within the delicately balanced network of hospitality, stylized insult, and versified rejoinder.

Conclusion

The Icelanders of the thirteenth century have, as even this incomplete review indicates, provided us with multiple opportunities to observe sagas and poetry in performance. By viewing these episodes through the prism of what Clifford Geertz (1973), borrowing from Gilbert Ryle, calls “thick description,” and Richard Martin terms the “grammar of context” (1989:4-10; cf. Bauman 1996), and the common ground John Foley has sought between “Immanent Art” and ethnopoetics (Foley 1995), interpretations emerge that differ significantly from what previous generations had concluded, working as they were within the framework of the dead, and deadening, argument of oral versus written, *Freiprosa* - *Buchprosa*, Freeprose - Bookprose. Of course, a fair question would certainly be whether or not this attempt to extract meaning from such scenes could not simply have been carried out in the strong light of traditional philology and mythology studies. My view is a qualified “no”—one need only look at the many decades of scholarly deadlock over whether Sturla did or did not own a manuscript to see how enervating the debate remained when it was framed by extreme views within the Freeprose - Bookprose controversy.

The advantages of this performance-oriented approach are even clearer when we remind ourselves of Bauman's tripartite dissection of such analyses (that is, *performance as practice*, of “cultural life as situated human accomplishment”; *cultural performances*, “framed, heightened, public, and

⁴¹ On the much-discussed broader issue of the “ritual feast,” see Bauschatz 1978 and Enright 1988:179, and the bibliographies there.

symbolically resonant events”; and *the poetics of oral performance*, “performance as a mode of communication”; Bauman 1986a:132-33), all three of which are in play here in varying degrees. Through each of these performance approaches, and the occasion of performance provided by the sagas, our understanding of medieval Nordic prose and poetry is enhanced, and we are better positioned to formulate answers to the question posed above, “How do we best understand the Norse materials?” In fact, our examination of the Nordic mead of poetry underscores the reality for the Norse materials of what John Foley has so elegantly described as “the enabling event of performance and the enabling referent of tradition” (1995:208-13; cf. 1992): Icelandic narrative tradition frequently portrays “enabling events,” such as the declaiming of poetry at the courts; Nordic mythological and poetic tradition gives us numerous “enabling referents,” such as the hydromel of praise and the effluvia of scorn; and the study of performance provides modern scholarship with the *clavis hieroglyphica* that allows us to discover the meaning in the potent combination of the two.

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