

## **Orality in a Norse-Icelandic Perspective**

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Students of early Scandinavian literature and folklore face analogous problems when dealing with oral tradition. For most readers of the Icelandic sagas, that tradition constitutes no more than a stylistic and factual backdrop to the developed artistry of literary narrators taking their cue from works written at the major centers of European civilization; for most folklorists of the early twenty-first century, oral narrative has more to do with individual self-expression than with loyalty to the collective memory. One Scandinavian folklorist has gone so far as to question the validity of the international folktale typology of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson (Aarne and Thompson 1961), stating that the nineteenth-century records of oral prose tradition rather give the impression of kaleidoscopic variation of motifs and episodes. This influential scholar also held that complex folktales probably could not be remembered over long periods of time (Holbek 1987:256).

In ballad research a similar trend has been perceptible under the influence of the oral-formulaic theory, the stability of the inherited song text being played down in favor of spontaneous re-creation in performance. Some East European and Irish folklorists insist, however, that the oral transmission process is (or was) understood by tradition bearers themselves as essentially reproductive. In a West and North European context the role of verbatim memorization has undoubtedly been underestimated: once famous but now-forgotten examples include the Icelandic scribe who reconstructed a saga lost in the great Copenhagen fire of 1728 (Helgason 1926:42-44), and the illiterate Irishman some two centuries later who could repeat a romantic tale almost word for word as it had been read to him from a published edition (Ó Duilearga 1981:xi). The fate of oral literature has in fact been interwoven with that of written literature at least since the introduction of printing, or in the Icelandic context since paper manufacturing made it possible to multiply manuscript books at low cost. As a reassurance to those who doubt the viability of long narratives

surviving in oral tradition over many centuries, we can point to the written texts that both reflected and sustained the art of recitation.

In recent decades there have been tendencies for folklorists on the one hand simply to abandon the study of oral literature in its historical perspective, and on the other hand to adopt the reductionist view that all oral narrative is derived from written models. The second trend is a predictable and necessary reaction to the romantic picture of the bookless folk, but it presses the subjugation of oral to written tradition too hard. We can be quite certain that the tales of the Brothers Grimm in Germany or of Asbjørnsen and Moe in Norway have exerted normative influence on the oral storytelling of the nineteenth century, and that saga and ballad manuscripts helped to keep alive the memory of medieval literary texts. But at the same time there is compelling evidence of preliterate storytelling in Europe, and I do not think that this evidence will go away because of the reluctance of some scholars to integrate it into their treatments of folk literature and saga.

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