

WHAT WAS VIKING POETRY FOR?

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I WOULD like to make it clear to begin with that these proceedings are not the celebration of the 1200th anniversary of the first viking raid on England, which took place at Lindisfarne on 8th June AD 793.

Upp skaltu á kjöf klífa,
køld er sævar drífa;
kostaðu hug þinn herða,
hér skaltu lífit verða.
Skafll beygjattu skalli
þótt skúr á þik falli.
Ást hafðir þú meyjja;
eitt sinn skal hverr deyja.

You must climb up on to the keel,
cold is the sea-spray's feel;
let not your courage bend:
here your life must end.
Old man, keep your upper lip firm
though your head be bowed by the storm.
You have had girls' love in the past;
death comes to all at last.

There are various ways of taking the last two lines; I do not think the poet was thinking particularly of rape and pillage. Rather I am reminded of Sir Andrew Aguecheek: 'I was adored once, too', he said.

Old Icelandic has been taught in this Faculty of Arts for over a quarter of a century. Before I came here it had for several years been made available to students in the Faculty by Bernard Standing in the German Department (from about 1968) and Wyn Evans in the Library (from about 1967). It must have been because of their success and enthusiasm that in 1973 the Department of English decided that it wanted its own Icelandicist, but it was mainly due to the determination of Geoffrey Shepherd when he was professor of Medieval English in this Department that Old Icelandic was made available in the English syllabus here and a post created for it. Our presence here this afternoon is thus due, as so many good things in the arrangements in the School of English are, to the influence of Geoffrey Shepherd, to whom I owe not only my present position but also much of whatever there is of value in my understanding of the subjects I teach. This debt is incalculable, his loss is irreparable and a greater man than him I do not expect to encounter. The position of Old Icelandic studies in this country as a whole, however, as well as my progress in them, owes most to

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the efforts of Professor Peter Foote of University College London, who has given immense encouragement and support to everyone in this field for several decades. I am also grateful for the way in which successive heads of this School of English have responded to the demands for Old Icelandic to be given a respectable status in the syllabus and organisation of the School. The Library too has been helpful in building up a reasonable stock of books on Icelandic literature without which teaching Old Icelandic in this University would have been a great deal harder.

For my part, I have always perceived my role as one of facilitating the study of Old Icelandic texts for those who have become interested in them for their own sake. Most of my work has therefore been devoted to making texts available, mainly to English speaking readers, in usable editions and translations. As time has gone by, I have become more and more interested in Iceland as a country and culture which is in various fundamental ways quite different from anywhere else in the world, and I am convinced that the contemplation of that difference is a most salutary activity.

It is largely as a result of a historical accident that Old Icelandic is generally in this country taught as part of an English degree course. The subject first became of interest to English academics because in the latter part of the nineteenth century Icelandic sagas were found to contain interesting analogues to various Old English texts, particularly *Beowulf*. This was first noted by Guðbrandur Vigfússon, an Icelander working in Oxford, in 1873.¹ Then viking poetry, most of which has been preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, was also of course known to have influenced and to have been imitated by many English poets of the Romantic period and later. Some of it seems to have been composed by vikings in the British Isles and can therefore count as part of British culture in the Middle Ages, and their productions may have influenced some English writers already at that time. The pagan mythology recorded in Icelandic sources has been held to throw light on Anglo-Saxon pagandom, about which English sources are rather reticent, and the heroic ideals of Icelandic sagas and poems are

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often thought to extend our understanding of the corresponding English ideology. The vikings also had a great influence both on the development of the English language and of English institutions in the Middle Ages. But it is not these kinds of connections that I want to use this afternoon to justify the study of Old Icelandic in the twentieth century. I think a case can be made for its direct relevance to modern situations.

The short poem of which I gave an inadequate English version a few moments ago is reported, by an eyewitness, to have been spoken by one Þórir jökull (the surname seems to mean 'Ice') just before he died on the evening of 21st August 1238. He had been engaged in a battle of a kind that had become widespread in thirteenth-century Iceland, which was part of the continuing struggle for internal power that characterised the turbulent period in Iceland's history now known as the Sturlung Age. It was the Battle of Orlygsstaðir, between two substantial groups of men. Large numbers had already been killed; many of those remaining alive who had sought sanctuary in the local church had been granted quarter, but there remained six in the church who had not been, and among these was Þórir jökull (these events took place in the fully Christian Iceland of the early thirteenth century). When the calls of nature became irresistible, those inside the church, unwilling to desecrate it by performing natural functions inside, requested permission to go and perform them outside. Permission was granted. When they emerged, towards evening, they were apprehended and executed one by one. When his turn came, Þórir jökull recited his poem, and then they cut off his head.²

There are some curious features about the poem in relation to its historical context. We are not told whether Þórir jökull had himself composed it; it is not claimed, as it often is with such verses in medieval Icelandic prose narrative, that it was composed extempore. It does not relate closely to the reciter's situation, since although it appears to be about someone soon to die, the death envisaged is one by water; and there is no reason to think that Þórir was a particularly old man at the time of his death. It is possible that the poem had been composed on an earlier occasion

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by a shipwrecked person, as he tried to save himself by clinging to the keel of his upturned boat, and was being quoted by Þórir although it did not apply closely to his situation. If so, the anticipated drowning had apparently not taken place, since otherwise presumably no one would have known of the poem, unless of course there had been a convenient audience present who had not been drowned (but in any case the person addressed in the poem is surely the poet himself). If the drowning man had recovered, it may have been Þórir himself (we know almost nothing of his earlier history); otherwise he is quoting. Or of course the poem might have been composed by someone who was not in danger of drowning, but who was imagining what it would be like to be in that position; and there are plenty of other Icelandic poems that use such a device, of recreating a historical or indeed fictional situation and providing appropriate words for a character to speak who was not the poet. In that case again the poet may have been Þórir, who now finds that his earlier fictional poem has an unexpected historical application, since although there is a suspicion that many of the famous last words of dying vikings had been studiously prepared beforehand rather than being the inspiration of the moment, it seems unlikely that Þórir himself could have prepared for his execution in this way, or that the concentration of his mind induced by his approaching death would have resulted in just this poem. A further, and perhaps more likely explanation, is that the references to the sea and to drowning are metaphorical, since such metaphors too are by no means unknown in viking poetry. In that case again, it is hard to tell whether the poem is Þórir's own or another's, and whether it was composed for his actual situation or in other circumstances. Dying not just with a laugh, but also with an epigram, had become a regular, almost obligatory feature of the viking farewell by the thirteenth century, and of course the epigrams may often have been composed afterwards on the viking's behalf by other people in the interest of making what must always have been rather a messy business more acceptable for the survivors to contemplate;

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to give death a dignity in retrospect that it probably rarely had at the time. In Þórir's case, however, since the proceedings were recorded by an eyewitness whose veracity there is no reason to doubt, it appears that he actually did recite his poem just before he was killed.

An indication of what a truly autobiographical poem about a shipwreck might have been like is given by an anonymous poem quoted by Snorri Sturluson in his Prose Edda:

The breaker quickly crashed down on me. The wide one [i.e. the ocean] invited me to its home. I did not accept the flat one's hospitality.

In some ways the most interesting question about Þórir's poem, however, is not why or when it was composed but why it was reported. The account comes in *Íslendinga saga*, a chronicle of thirteenth-century Icelandic events by Snorri Sturluson's nephew Sturla Þórðarson. This chronicle is a fairly sober account, not given to flights of fancy, and generally confining itself to events which were of some public significance. The writer really only mentions Þórir jökull at all at this point in order to report his dying words; we hear nothing else. It must be that the poem itself was considered significant, and I suppose the reason for our modern interest in this poem is likely to be the same as the reason for Sturla's interest: it is a powerful evocation of the feelings of a man about to die which seems to have applicability beyond the immediate situation, whatever it was, of the poet when he composed it. The poem seems to have been intended as a consolation or encouragement to the dying Þórir, and to have been quoted by the historian so that it might be a consolation to others in analogous situations. Poetry as consolation is a concept amply documented in medieval Icelandic literature. The best known example is Egill Skallagrímsson, who, crushed with grief after the death of two of his sons, the second one his favourite, drowned at sea, is reported to have determined to starve himself to death. This was in the latter half of the tenth century. He went to bed and refused food. His daughter was sent for and she persuaded him to express

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his grief in a poem, an elegy for his dead sons, and he thereafter composed *Sonatorrek*, ‘On the irreparable loss of his sons’, one of his best and most moving poems, and recovered his desire to live.³ It goes over the possible responses to his loss, and the list seems almost like the agenda for a modern counselling session, not to speak of the analogy with Mr and Mrs Ramsbottom and their son Albert: he could try to seek the impossible vengeance upon the killer, Ocean himself, or try to gain compensation from him; or beget a replacement; but when so many of his family are dead (he recollects the long list of his dead relations), those who are alive give him no pleasure. Egill also comments on the difficulty of finding proper expression for his grief: his tongue feels heavy. But in the end in this poem he thanks Óðinn, giver of the poetic art, for having given him as a remedy for his sorrows such a splendid gift, which he describes as blameless and without blemish, recalling the way in which medieval Irish poets referred to their art as being ‘without flaw, without shame’ (*can mangairacht, can mebail*; perhaps ‘without deceit, without shame’, i. e. both morally and artistically perfect?⁴ — I take such similarities between Old Irish and Old Icelandic verse to be the result of parallel cultural development rather than of influence in either direction. The idea is familiar: I have heard music described recently as the only ecstasy without retribution). The preservation of Egill’s *Sonatorrek* (the whole text of which was not originally included in his saga) is presumably due to its effectiveness as an assuager of grief in its readers as much as to its significance as a historical source, which is not great. Similarly the preservation of various expressions of love (usually unfulfilled) of viking poets both in sagas about them and elsewhere can be taken to be because it was held to be effective love poetry in itself rather than for its historical significance. This is after all why most love poetry is celebrated beyond the circle of the original author: it is used second-hand so to speak by other people. It is thus clear that viking poetry at least sometimes dealt with those topics that have traditionally in western Europe come to be regarded as the most appropriate ones for

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lyric: love, death and poetry itself. Unfortunately the viking poems that deal with these topics are a minority of what has been preserved, and to anthologise these as examples of an extensive corpus largely devoted to other topics gives a misleading impression of the poetry as a whole and runs the risk of simply recreating the poetry of the vikings in the image of the Romantics and misreading it as personal expression in a way that was probably not originally intended.

The most characteristic kind of verse that has been preserved from the Viking Age is praise poetry — praise either of the living or of the recently dead — which is a genre that modern readers have difficulty with, since it emphasises the ambiguous status of poetic expression in regard to its sincerity and meaningfulness, aspects of poetry which have been greatly over-emphasised in twentieth-century criticism. Thomas Love Peacock has powerfully expressed the modern antipathy to poetic eulogy in his novel *Melincourt* (published in 1817) where he makes his character Mr. Fax say in response to Mr. Forester's recalling of Southey's over-romantic view of Norse skalds (or court poets) as noble savages:

As to the "Scald's strong verse," I must say I have never seen any specimens of it, that I did not think mere trash. It is little more than a rhapsody of rejoicing in carnage, a ringing of changes on the biting sword and the flowing of blood and the feast of the raven and the vulture, and fulsome flattery of the chieftain, of whom the said Scald was the abject slave, vassal, parasite, and laureat, interspersed with continual hints that he ought to be well paid for his lying panegyrics.⁵

This, as far as it goes, is an accurate description of the nature of much viking poetry. Poets, often Norwegian to begin with, but in the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries increasingly of Icelandic origin, travelled to the courts of Scandinavian (and sometimes English) kings and offered eulogy in the expectation of reward. There is no problem about the purpose of these poems in their original context. They were part of the ritual of the royal court, encouraged by the king since they supported his role and legitimised his claim to kingship; they reflected and affirmed the

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values and ideology of the warrior class to which they were addressed, praising the king above all for the traditional viking virtues of generosity and valour. The situation is widespread in early cultures, and mirrors that in, for instance, early Ireland and Wales and has been claimed to be an inheritance from Indo-European culture. Like much official literature from other historical contexts it affirmed the dominant ideology and thus strengthened the identity and sense of power of the group that patronised it. Nor is there any problem, generally speaking, with the purpose of the Icelandic writers of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries who recorded much of this poetry in manuscripts. Nearly all viking poetry that has been preserved (apart from that on mythological or legendary themes that was collected by some antiquarian in the thirteenth century and is preserved mainly in the anthology now known as the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda) is in the form of quotations of short extracts either in sagas about the history of the northern countries, where they are included as sources to document the main prose narrative; or in sagas about Icelanders, where they are included as expressions of the feelings or responses of the characters in the story, and are thus part of the narrative; or in Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, where they are used to exemplify the use of various figures of speech that that work was designed to encourage. These circumstances of preservation undoubtedly account for what is certainly a biased selection of texts, though the bias is different from the one that appears in modern anthologies of viking poetry; what has been preserved is texts (or those parts of them) that were found useful as historical sources, or as expressions of the personality of Icelandic heroes of earlier times, or as exemplifications of the skaldic art for those who wished to become proficient in it. What is problematical is why Icelanders in the generations between the time of the supposed oral composition of these poems in the tenth and eleventh centuries and the time of their recording in manuscripts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries should have gone on repeating and handing down oral versions of these obviously unreliable eulogies of dead foreign kings in poems that often have no

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evident poetic merit in themselves. Many hundreds of poems, comprising thousands of lines of verse, some of them consisting of series of 20 or more 8-line stanzas, others (like Þórir jökull's poem) apparently consisting of just one such independent stanza, must have been handed down in this way, since there was little recording of such verses before the thirteenth century when the use of the Latin alphabet for writing on parchment first became widespread in Scandinavia (one only has been preserved in a runic inscription from about the year 1000). It is likely that the oral preservation took place largely in Iceland, since the majority of the poets were Icelandic, as are the vast majority of the manuscripts that contain them, and there is unlikely to have been enough continuity in Scandinavian courts to ensure their preservation there, and there is very little evidence that there was ever much of an audience for skaldic poetry, once the initial delivery before the king to whom it was addressed had taken place, outside Iceland. What led Icelandic peasants of the tenth to the thirteenth centuries to repeat tedious eulogies of foreign kings to each other rather than to amuse themselves with romances like the rest of Europe?

The answer, I think, lies partly in the phenomenon of transferability. As I have said, certain medieval Icelandic poems, like those of Þórir jökull and Egill Skallagrímsson, are of a kind that can easily be appropriated by other people than the poet, and made to apply to a new user's situation as long as this new situation has some analogy or comparability with the original one. This is the way in which much romantic poetry has been used by English readers of the last two centuries. Tennyson's *In Memoriam* has been used by countless readers to console themselves for their own private griefs which may or may not be similar to that which inspired the original poem. Lyrics like *Abide with me* are reused and appropriated even by groups of people who sing the words together when they are not at the point of death and not feeling lonely, using them to reflect or indeed to induce feelings appropriate to Sunday evenings or funeral services or football matches, and they can even be found usable as words for a popular song, even

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if this may upset those who would like to confine the text to uses closer to what the original poet had in mind. Love poems are notoriously reused by people other than the original poet as expressions of feeling for those who cannot find words of their own to express their feelings, even if those users would be mightily offended by the suggestion that the original poet was not intending the words literally and sincerely to express his actual response to a real situation. This reusability or transferability is to a large extent the criterion for evaluation of lyric poetry, at least by non-academics and readers of anthologies. While valuing them as supposedly individual expressions of personal emotion in their original context, people want to read them mostly because they can appropriate them as usable words to express their own real or fancied emotions. This accounts for the kind of poetry that usually gets into anthologies. The preservation of Þórir jókull's poem and Egill's *Sonatorrek* vouches for the fact that in medieval Iceland too poems could be reused in this way. So what kind of re-appropriation could account for the preservation of skaldic eulogy?

It is true that a lot of skaldic poetry is repetitive and uninformative both about the ostensible topic and about the poet and his background. But one remarkable feature of skaldic poetry that has been emphasised in the study of it by Gert Kreutzer (published in 1977)⁶ is that it contains a great deal of self-reference and that it often makes both the poem and the poet into topics. It seems to be generally in the opening and closing passages of longer poems that this phenomenon appears, and it is only Snorri Sturluson in his treatise on poetry who finds it useful to quote these passages, because they illustrate the use of kennings that he was interested in. But a surprising number of such passages have been preserved, enough to make it clear that viking poems were often as much affirmations of the importance of the poet and his own control of words as of the importance of the king who was the ostensible subject. Although many of these passages amount simply to the traditional request for silence, the point is that the poet, arriving from Iceland in a foreign court uninvited and without particular status, gets a hearing and achieves status thereby. There

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are innumerable examples of verbs in the first person (sometimes the authorial first person plural) emphasising the role of the poet. For example, the eleventh-century Icelandic poet Steinþórr says:

I am mightily proud of my ancient horn-cascade of the meanness-avoiding cargo of Gunnlǫð's embrace, though it be meagre.

Here you have an example of one of the complicated kennings or periphrastic descriptions that were used to describe poetry by reference to the myth of its origin, according to which Óðinn gained it in the form of an intoxicating drink from Gunnlǫð after sleeping with her for three nights; the lines also contain the topos of authorial humility.

Einarr skálaglamm begins one of his poems:

Land's magnanimous guardian I bid hear — hear, earl, Kvasir's blood — the fjord-bone's men's yeast-surf [more kennings for poetry].

Six extracts from this poem affirm the poet's exultation in his activity:

There flows over all the shield-warriors the dwarf's mountain-kept liquid . . . I shall succeed in bailing the draught of Óðinn's wine-vessel before the seamen — I need no urging to that . . . I have attempted poetry about this . . . Óðinn's deeds benefit me. Swell of Óðreyrir pounds against song's skerry [i.e. my teeth] . . . Now it is that Boðn's wave starts to swell. In the hall let the king's men make silence and hear dwarf's ship.

Egill Skallagrímsson in his poem for Eiríkr bloodaxe claimed:

The prince offered me hospitality; praise is for me a duty. I bore Óðinn's mead [i.e. the mead of poetry] to the land of the English.

Glúmr Geirason:

Listen! I begin the feast of the gods' ruler for princes. We crave silence, for we have heard of the loss of men.

Ormr Steinþórsson:

No need for men to nurse fear about my poetry. In Óðinn's booty I use no spite. We know how to order praise-works.

The king did not escape the requirement to give his whole attention. Óttarr the Black said:

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Let the prince listen to the beginning of the poem for him; the king's praise shall be extolled. Let him note properly the forms of my eulogy.

And Porvaldr blönduskáld says significantly:

Hail battle-keen king, and also your brave housecarls. Men have my poetry, filled with your praise, in their mouths.⁷

It is true that much of this is not very informative or revealing self-reference. In some cases, when one has unravelled the meaning behind the kennings, one finds that almost a whole stanza contains only the equivalent of the statement 'I am uttering poetry', and in some cases a statement consists only of the clause *ek yrki* 'I am making poetry' — a somewhat extraordinary statement for a poem to contain. But it is clear that in a sense anyone who repeats this poetry is appropriating the role of the poet; if he repeats it before an audience, the performance becomes a dramatic one in which the reciter becomes the original poet and his audience the original audience. Skaldic poets, it should be noted, were not professionals and had no special training: they were ordinary vikings who had developed a personal gift for poetical expression. As in later times in Iceland, where it could be said of someone one wanted to imply was extremely stupid that he could not even string a verse together, poetry was regarded as a normal and universal ability, though of course different degrees of skill were acknowledged. The reciter of court poetry achieves the status of one who has made his mark in a great foreign court, who by his control of the most highly-valued form of verbal expression achieves power over the construction not only of the political past but, dramatically, of the present and potentially of the future. One of the traditional roles of the viking was his achievement of fame and fortune by going abroad and gaining status in the service of a foreign king. For his compatriots back home it was possible by appropriating the poems in which this status was affirmed to partake in that power and to relive the glories of the viking past. Moreover Icelandic poets were accepted throughout Scandinavia as, not quite the unacknowledged legislators of the world, but the historians at any rate of the Northern world, and were valued by

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the kings of Norway as ensuring preservation of the fame of their exploits for the future just as later Icelandic saga authors were valued as historians of Scandinavia through the new medium of prose history. In repeating their poems, the poets' descendants participated in this role of preservers of history and determiners of the ideology of Scandinavian royal courts, not only celebrating the successes of the original poets in this respect, but re-enacting their successes. Medieval Icelanders quite rightly, in my view, believed that the greatest achievements of the vikings were their poems. Thus an Icelandic farmer repeating Egill's head-ransom poem in an Icelandic farmhouse would himself become Egill overcoming his enemy Eiríkr bloodaxe and neutralising his hostility by the power of his words and his control of the expression of the king's own ideology; the king could not execute the upholder of his own glory. The farmer would be a viking defeating his enemy not by the power of his sword but by the power of his words and his control of the difficult technique of skaldic verse, so difficult that the king would hardly be able to understand it himself, and would not be able to dispute his statements. The king's fame was in the hands of the poet and of the preservers of that poetry.

It will not have escaped the notice of those of you that have visited the York Archaeological Trust's exhibition of Viking Age York that there is only one Norse king that they are able to name and document: Eiríkr bloodaxe. This is largely due to the Icelandic Egill Skallagrímsson's praise of him in his head-ransom poem *Hofuðlausn*, in which his faint praise of Eiríkr is by no means as destructive of that king's reputation as the silence of other poets about the other kings of York was to theirs.⁸ Norse kings depended on the poets for their undying praise which gave these poets the power of life and death over them. Egill, in presenting King Eiríkr with his splendid encomium forced the king, if he wished to retain the reputation that it endowed, to reward the poet with his life, even though Egill had killed, among others, the king's own son. It is delightful to recollect that the head-ransom poem itself is avowedly not a sincere encomium of Eiríkr, indeed it is a masterpiece of veiled irony. Nevertheless it

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gave the king what he desired — a reputation beyond the grave which awaited him within the year — and Egill was rewarded with what he acknowledged was the ugliest gift that a poet had ever received for his poetry — his own head.

The power that their control of skaldic poetry gave the Icelanders was fully recognised by them and their preservation of this poetry reminded them of the status they held as the historians of the Norwegian kings, and of the fact that they were able to hold the destiny of those kings in their hands. There is no better illustration of the fact that the pen — or in their case the tongue — was mightier than the axe. Poetry could bestow — or withhold — immortality. The axe could only kill.

In this respect the sincerity of the praise of the king was irrelevant: the poem was not an expression of admiration of the king, but of the poet's power over the king's destiny and his eternal reputation. If the king treated the poet well, acknowledged his power, the poet would reward him by eternal fame. If not, the poet had the power to damn him eternally in the memory of his audience and all subsequent audiences. There are indeed a few examples of condemnatory poetry. King Magnús Ólafsson of Norway was criticised by the Icelandic poet Sighvatr quite roundly in a poem known as 'The plain-speaking verses'; the king reformed and came to be known to posterity as Magnús the Good as a result. Egill Skallgrímsson's verse curses of Eiríkr bloodaxe were supposed to have been the cause of the king's exile from Norway. Most critical or libellous verse has been suppressed, like the so-called scoffing verses of Þorleifr the Earls' poet about Earl Hákon (*Jarlsníð*, libel of the earl), though it seems to have existed and to have been feared. The poet's power is also revealed in the stories of the three head-ransom poems, though they have not all survived complete, in which poets redeemed their heads after mortally offending Norse kings by composing poems in their praise. One is that by Egill himself, who had not only cursed Eiríkr bloodaxe out of Norway but killed many of his friends and one of his sons. When he unexpectedly found himself at the king's mercy one would expect the king to have had little hesita-

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tion in ordering his execution. But Eiríkr was persuaded to give him time to compose a poem in his praise and to deliver it the next morning. The poem turned out to be either damning with faint praise or ironic in its praise; it is certainly not sincere. But the king dared do no other than accept it, and Egill was released, like Óttarr, author of another head-ransom poem that enabled him to escape from condemnation by Óláfr Haraldsson (later St Olaf) for making love to the king's wife. Other poets were also rewarded handsomely for their poems, and the connection between successful composition and status at the foreign court is emphasised by cases such as that of Arnórr jarlaskáld, poet of the earls of Orkney, who was actually encouraged to marry into the earls' family. A verse of his states:

Beneficial to the people, the kinsman of Heiti (i.e. earl Rognvaldr) decided to bring about a family connection with me. As a result strong links with the earl by marriage caused glory to be built up for us.⁹

The Icelandic poets who travelled to foreign courts and presented poems to kings and earls, gaining status, wealth and fame thereby are really more comparable to the wandering Irish scholars of the early Middle Ages than to the vernacular court poets of Britain and Ireland. They also left their native countryside and travelled to places where their intellectual gifts would guarantee them a warm reception and favour among influential foreign potentates. John Scotus, like many an Icelandic skald, was able to mock the king himself, knowing that his ability as a poet protected him from the wrath that would have engulfed any other kind of person for his daring. He is said to have been asked by the jocular Charles the Bald in his cups, as he faced the king across the table, 'What separates the sot from the Scot', and to have replied 'Just a table, my liege'.¹⁰ Both kinds of poet found their success abroad. The difference is that the poems of the Irish *vagantes*, being literary and in Latin, never became popular among the ordinary people back home, while the Icelandic poets composed in the vernacular in an oral tradition and captured the imagination of their compatriots. Neither the Irish *vagantes* nor the Icelandic

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skalds ought in my opinion to be compared with the licensed jesters of the later Middle Ages, however. Their criticism was taken much more seriously.

Icelanders not only repeated poems by their forebears that had been delivered in royal halls. They told stories in prose about how they had not only impressed foreign kings, but tricked them, deceived them, or in other ways got the better of them. One of the best examples is Sneglu-Halli. He is said to have come to the court of King Harald Godwineson in England in 1066 and to have offered the king a poem. It turned out to be incomprehensible to the English audience, and when the king asked his own poet what he thought of it, he said he wanted time to work it out. The difficulty is assumed to have lain not so much in the foreignness of the Icelandic poet's language, as in the complexity of his poetic style. Sneglu-Halli, however, said he had to leave quickly. The king then said he would reward him appropriately by pouring silver over his head; he could keep what stuck, which would be likely to be as much as had stuck in his mind of the incomprehensible poem. Sneglu-Halli asked if he could first go outside to perform a necessary action, and when he returned he had smeared his hair with tar and arranged it in the form of a dish which then enabled him to catch most of the silver that was poured over him. He then left, and made good his escape. His poem had in fact been, we are told, a deliberate and daring rigmarole of nonsense and therefore a mockery of the king. Peacock's Mr. Fax was wrong about one thing. One thing that these poets are not is subservient. Indeed one indication of their pride is that when they are composing real poetry, they often use the same kennings — generally with the meaning generous or valiant man — of themselves as they do of the king they are addressing. (Thus Einar skálaglamm: 'Gold-sender lets ground-getter enjoy Óðinn's mead'.¹¹) Their poetry asserts the claim of so to speak the common viking — generally by origin an Icelandic peasant — to be heard in the courts of the great, and their pride in their expressive skill.

Such stories as this about Sneglu-Halli are unlikely to be entirely true, and the authenticity of many of the preserved poems

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themselves can be called into question. Old Icelandic studies have had their share of morale-destroying revaluations over the last few decades like many other disciplines. In addition to the general undermining of our faith in the rationality of our study caused by structuralist and post-structuralist literary theories, readers of Old Icelandic literature have first of all had to accept that the earlier belief in the oral origins of the sagas was unfounded, and that they are literary works influenced to quite a large extent by foreign models; then that the chronological edifice built up on the basis of supposed literary influences was also badly based, and many of the sagas we had come to accept as the oldest were in fact among the latest. Most recently doubt has come to be cast too on the age of many of the poems that were assumed to have been composed in the oral and heathen period, which, it is now argued, are in fact in many cases much later literary compositions fathered on to prehistoric poets. The least of the problems created by these revisions of long-held dogma is that the historical value not only of the prose texts, but even of the poetry which had for long been supposed to underpin them and guarantee their historical accuracy is now undermined. My concern, however, fortunately, is not with the truth of the stories and poems, or with their original meanings, but with the reasons why they were preserved and handed down among Icelanders after the end of the Viking Age. Their importance to these later Icelanders as myths would not have been affected by their historicity or lack of it. Interest in and development of the biography of viking poets is of course one reason for the preservation of stories about them, and along with the stories their (supposed) poems would often have been repeated, but quite a lot of viking verse is preserved independently of any biographical element about the poets, and meaningless poetry is not going to have much better chance of survival for being associated with interesting personalities. Nevertheless there was a surprising amount of interest in individual identity and individuality in the treatment of heroes of the past in medieval Iceland, especially of poets, for the heroes of many of the earliest sagas were viking poets, and biography and biographical anec-

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dotes are one result of this interest; the preservation of poetical texts ascribed to individual named poets is another (and an interesting one at a time when poetry in most other European countries was largely anonymous). The treatment of viking poets in Icelandic sources has certain similarities to the way in which the poems and biographies of troubadours were celebrated in France. While prose sagas are extraordinarily detached and non-committal in their depiction of events, skaldic poetry by contrast emphasises very strongly the subjective judgments and attitudes of the poets. Similarly, the narrator is a very shadowy, self-effacing figure in prose sagas, while the figure of the poet is given great emphasis, not only in stories about poets, but in the poems themselves, though it should be noted that the emphasis is on their identity and self-assertiveness rather than on their individuality or subjectivity, on their role as poets and Icelanders rather than on their character. It is doubtful whether self-expression comes into it.

Poetry was, according to a myth of its origin reported by Snorri Sturluson and referred to by many medieval poets, a gift of the god Óðinn and conveyed by the drinking of a draught of the magical mead that Óðinn had rescued from the giants — the giants being personifications of the principle of disorder, Óðinn the great orderer or controller of the power of chaos; this symbolises both the poet's power over words, his being able to impose order on them, but also the secondary power that this gives him over the topics treated in his verse. Though several poets thank Óðinn for the gift in their poems, it is not certain that the origin myth means that poetry was seen as an inspirational activity or as having divine characteristics: if everything Óðinn said turned out to be poetry, as Snorri alleges, this is not because poetry was perceived as a divine form of utterance so much as that poetry was seen as imposing order on the chaos of experience, which is a characteristically divine activity, though one in which men participate. Poetry and reason are complementary functions; the divine mead is, according to Snorri, given to both poets and scholars (*skáld ok fræðamenn*), you will be glad to hear.¹² Even though one of the Icelandic words for poetry, *óðr*, also meant frenzy, the dominant

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idea about the poet was that he was a craftsman, his activity an *íþrótt* or skill, the verb to compose was *yrkja*, to work. The poet was a wright. One poet, Hallar-Steinn, speaks thus of his craft, comparing the activity with that of a ship-wright:

I have smoothed with poetry's plane my refrain-ship's prow, careful in my craftsmanship.¹³

His ordering of words and of the world was not primarily a creative activity, and originality of content was no more emphasised in early Iceland than in other medieval societies. Originality of expression, within the limits imposed by a highly conventional traditional diction, does seem to have been valued, however, and one of the things we are able to admire in skaldic poets is the ingenuity with which they find new ways of saying the old things. But the lack of interest in originality of content or meaning is emphasised by the almost total lack of prophecies, allegory, or other forms of secondary truth-telling in early Scandinavian literature, though there are a number of prophetic dream-poems incorporated into sagas as foreshadowing devices; but one of the most striking of apparently prophetic poems, the *Darraðarljóð* in *Njáls saga*, has recently plausibly been shown to be a more characteristic historical narrative relating to the poet's past rather than to his future. The fact that many of the viking poets were actually Christians shows that their talk of poetry as a gift of Óðinn must have been metaphorical. In any case when poetry is said to be divine in origin, it is clear that it is usually being spoken of as a god-given skill, and nothing is claimed for the origin of its content.

A quality that was highly regarded in skaldic verse was technical complexity. It was not naive in construction. The characteristic skaldic stanza consisted of two quatrains with six syllables in each line, thus 48 syllables in all, a fixed trochaic cadence to each line, and carefully restricted rhythms in the first four syllables of each line. Each line contained a pair of internal syllabic rhymes, and alliteration bound two syllables in each odd line with the first syllable of the following even line. Usually each quatrain contained at least two interwoven statements, and the nominal elements

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in these statements were usually expressed by complex kennings each of at least two components, sometimes as many as five or six. It is understandable on the one hand that audiences might often have found difficulty in understanding this verse, and also that under some circumstances people may have found pleasure just in contemplating the complexity and skill involved and in unravelling the hidden meaning. The complexity and compression are one reason for the relative thinness of content in these verses.

I will give you an example of this, a love poem by Kormakr:¹⁴

Brámáni skein brúna
brims af ljósum himni
Hristar hǫrvi glæstrar
haukfránn á mik lauka;
en sá geisli sýslir
síðan gollmens Fríðar
hvarma tungls ok hringa
Hlínar óþurft mína.

This means roughly:

The linen-adorned herb-foam-Hrist's hawk-bright eyelash-moon [i.e. the lady's shining eye] shone upon me from her brows' bright heaven. That beam of eyelids' moon of the gold necklace-Fríðr [i.e. the lady's glance] will afterwards cause my trouble and that of the Hlín of rings [i.e. will lead to unhappiness for both of us].

Though there is a certain perverse pleasure to be got from disentangling the complexity of expression, the resulting statement is pretty banal and conventional, and I do not think the poetical quality of such verses, the ingenuity and skill of their construction, on its own explains their preservation, even though one might claim that they are both artistic and refined. It often comes close to being like one of George Eliot's characters, who had 'a voice so much more impressive than anything he ever had to say', or even like the nightingale in the cynical Spartan view, a voice and nothing else (the man who said this was expecting to find some meat on the bird).¹⁵ Icelanders have always claimed to be a literary and poetically inclined people, but they no longer today take pleasure in skaldic verse for the poetry's sake. It is worth

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noting that both early Ireland and England are supposed to have had poets widely composing praise-poetry of comparable intricacy, but very little such poetry has been preserved from the pre-literary period in those countries compared with what has survived from Iceland. The truth is that this sort of complexity and these topics belong to specific cultures, and normally cease to be valued except for historical reasons once the cultural situation has changed. Although Norse poets were not professionals as vernacular poets in early Ireland and England seem to have been, the original compositions were closely related to the social situation of the poets and their society and ceased to have their original meaning outside that situation.

The verbal complexity of much skaldic verse makes it open to a charge of deliberate mystification, and it is clear that poets and those who used the poetry were aware of this. There are anecdotes in the sagas that capitalise on the possibility of failure to communicate in this poetry besides the comic version of the situation in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*; indeed difficulty of interpretation seems to have been prized. It is certainly one of the things that gave poets an advantage over their audience that they were not afraid to use. They were not above making cynical use of their verbal power and exploiting mystification as a means of asserting their superiority to their audience, and communication may not have been their prime concern. In his description of poetic technique Snorri Sturluson more than once refers to poetic art as speaking in a hidden way, of the cloaking of meaning rather than making it clear, which was the province of the interpreter. Kennings are frequently seen as analogous to riddles. Such masked expression is of course a form of wit, and as long as the poet can hold his spell over his audience it does not perhaps much matter if they do not understand much of it or if it is more or less empty of meaning, as long as they believe in it as an activity. But when the stage was reached in the thirteenth century that writers like Snorri needed to write treatises to explain the poetry, it was doomed. Snorri himself of course tried to use his poetry and his knowledge of it as a weapon in his political manoeuvrings, but in sending his *Háttatal* to Earl Skúli of

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Norway to ingratiate himself with the regent he miscalculated the effect this would have on the Earl's rival King Hákon, at whose behest Snorri was killed in his own cellar by one of the king's followers in 1241; his poetry did not save his head. It is ironic that Snorri and many of his contemporaries seem to have regarded his greatest achievement as this unsuccessful poetry, while he is more highly regarded now for his prose writings.

Moreover as insincere praise of unpraiseworthy kings, which reveals very little of the poet's own personality, this poetry does not seem to have much value in its content, and much of it is in fact ideologically almost empty. It is assertive (of the poet and his skill) rather than expressive, though ostensibly its main purpose is evaluation, rather than narrative. Its historical content therefore is often minimal. Any poetry, to have any effect at all, needs a certain amount of specific detail; it cannot be all generalisation or it fails to come to life. But an advantage of the comparative lack of specific detail in much skaldic verse is that it makes the words the more easily applicable to other situations than the original one. Death (or dead people) as a topic of universal relevance in particular is one that can easily give a poem this generality of applicability, and skaldic verse is often about these universal topics, what one might call the common human predicaments.

In this verse of Sighvatr, poet to St Olaf, he seems to be expressing his personal grief for the king's death, but the real purport of the verse is the status that he enjoyed during the king's lifetime, when he was an important man in the king's fleet, and that now he is the spokesman not only for the dead king's subjects, but even for the land of Norway:

The high leaning cliffs seemed to me to laugh all over Norway — once I was known on the ships — while Óláfr lived; now the hills — such is my grief — I was full of the favour of the prince — seem to me much sadder since.¹⁶

There would have been three stages in the transmission of skaldic verse. The original performance would have been part of the ritual of the royal court, upholding its ideology by praising the

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king for his traditional virtues, and affirming the role of the poet as formulator and preserver of these virtues. The poet would then presumably report these proceedings when he returned home to Iceland, and his poetry would have been learned and repeated by his successors in Iceland, who would have appropriated them for themselves, acquiring status for themselves and for Iceland by the power they were seen to possess over this form of verbal expression. (It is possible that some of these poems were particularly the preserve of later poets, who learned and passed on the works of their predecessors as metrical and rhetorical models.) Finally these poems became available to historians of the thirteenth century who used them as historical confirmation of the narratives they were constructing about the past of Scandinavia. These three stages would presumably have involved three different kinds of editing of the text. Certainly the last stage resulted in only those poems or parts of poems being preserved which were usable for the purpose of historical reconstruction of the political past. The intermediate stage would have involved selection of those texts that could be used to affirm the position of Iceland and Icelanders as significant in the political destiny of the northern world. At the first stage those poems would particularly be remembered that contributed to the life of the royal courts and reflected the successes of Icelandic poets at them.

It may be, as I said earlier, that in some cases the first stage did not actually happen; many of the poems that thirteenth- or fourteenth-century sources claim to have been composed by vikings in the tenth and eleventh centuries and to have been performed by them in the presence of Norwegian kings may in fact have been composed later in Iceland as a reconstruction of a past that was believed to have been like that, and some of the poems may in fact never have been performed at foreign courts at all. First-person expression does not guarantee that the poems are authentic. Indeed it is possible that much of this supposedly traditional poetry was never an oral tradition at all, but a literary one originating in Iceland in the literary period. This does not affect the validity of the poems as expressions of the myth of Icelandic defiance.

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One of the main purposes of viking poetry, I therefore suggest, was to affirm the Icelandic national identity; it was primarily, it seems, important for Icelanders rather than for other Scandinavians, as their poetry, their voice, even more than the sagas of Icelanders, which were being written only over a period of about a century and a half, while skaldic poetry was cultivated in Iceland for nearly four centuries. In the sagas Icelanders told stories about their past to justify their political and social situation and aspirations at the end of the Middle Ages. In their poetry they found a more direct reflection of one of their main achievements throughout their history. Both the sagas and skaldic poetry served the myth of Icelandic refusal to be subservient, but it was expressed first in the poetry and for longer.

The principal myth that skaldic poetry upholds is that of Icelandic defiance of authority. Viking poets were not going to bow in the face of temporal authority any more than Þórir jókull and many an earlier viking warrior did in the face of death. Most medieval Icelandic sources claim that the settlement of Iceland itself in the ninth century and the creation of a republic there was the result of the refusal of many noble Norwegians to submit to the authority of king Haraldr finehair. The family of Egill Skallagrímsson were the archetypal individualists who continually refused to submit to successive kings of Norway. The myth appears in sources about the vikings from outside Iceland too. Dudo of St Quentin, well-known creator of myths about the Norsemen, writing in the early eleventh century, depicted a group of Danes replying to an emissary of the Franks whom they claimed to have come to conquer when he asked them ‘Under what name does your leader act?’ with the statement ‘Under none, for we are all of equal authority.’ When asked ‘Will you bow the neck to Charles, king of France, and turn to his service and receive from him all possible favours?’ they reply ‘We shall never submit to anyone at all, nor ever cleave to any servitude, nor accept favours from anyone. That favour pleases us best which we win for ourselves with arms and toil of battles.’ When they did in fact come to pay homage to the king of the Franks, their leader Rollo

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(for they were not really all equal) ‘put his hands between the king’s hands, which not his father nor his grandfather nor his great-grandfather had ever done to anybody . . . Then the bishops said: “Anyone who receives such a gift ought to bend down and kiss the King’s foot.” But Rollo said: “Never will I bend my knees to anyone’s knees, nor will I kiss anyone’s foot.” But impelled by the entreaties of the Franks he ordered a certain soldier to kiss the King’s foot; and he immediately took hold of the King’s foot, lifted it up to his mouth and, still standing, kissed it, thus toppling the King over.’¹⁷ The Icelanders inherited this pride in the refusal to bow the knee either to god or king, which is maybe one reason why they are so reluctant to join the European community. (Egill in his *Sonatorrek* boasts astonishingly ‘I do not worship Óðinn because I am eager’.¹⁸)

The myth is unaffected by the fact that many historical Icelanders did in fact kow-tow to foreign kings, though I think it is a misunderstanding to describe skaldic poets as self-abasing. There is no conflict between the idea of vikings refusing to be subservient and their willingness to offer poetical praise to kings. The poets are often depicted as being only superficially subservient, and apart from the anecdotes of outright defiance, many poets are described as only submitting to the king of Norway after considerable persuasion, like Hallfreðr, who earned the nickname of the ‘troublesome poet’ as a result, and it is maintained that their acceptance of authority is only of their own free will and because they admire the individual king, not a result of acceptance of authority for its own sake. Even when overtly praising the king, Icelandic poets, as I have pointed out above, in fact devote a lot of space in their poems to self-assertion. The very perfunctoriness of their praise is not necessarily a failure of either sincerity or effectiveness, but an ironic avowal that it is not the one being praised, but the one who is praising who is important. Indeed there are some praise-poems where the recipient of the poem, the one being praised, is not even named and is now unknown; but the name of the poet is nearly always remembered. The celebration is of the poet, not of his addressee nor even of his poetry.

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As we look back at the surviving corpus, we tend to undervalue those poems that are useful only as enhancing the status of medieval Icelandic poets. Even Icelanders nowadays find it hard to see any relevance in much of the praise poetry of the Middle Ages. They have other ways of affirming their identity and importance in the world. But besides the historical information about events and conditions in medieval Scandinavia that are contained in these poems, and besides the interest of the diction and structure of these poems for the historian of literature, there is still a fair number of poems composed by Icelanders in the Middle Ages that we can appropriate as having some applicability to situations in which we find ourselves. I do not believe that mere reconstruction of a vanished and now irrelevant civilisation — if civilisation is the word to describe the Viking Age — is itself a sufficient justification for the expenditure of time and money on its study. Nor do I think that we should be apologetic about or try to avoid appropriating and reapplying poetry of the past. Studying poetry purely for its historical interest without regard to its contemporary meaning is being academic in the worst sense of the word. One of the attractions of the Icelandic sagas is that they contain narratives that present issues in human existence that seem to have a universal, or at least a very wide, significance; they have a sufficiently open ideological framework, what has been called existential neutrality, since they are about men without any fixed ideology — men without belief, hope, or fear — so that it is possible to read and enjoy them as comments on the human condition that we can still identify with and find relevant. It has been my intention to show that some viking poetry too can be read in this way, that although it may have arisen from a particular unrepeatable (I hope) historical situation, it can yet be appropriated in the twentieth century and found to contain usable expressions of feeling in response to analogical situations of various kinds. Indeed my present situation, where I have for the moment, for the first and maybe the last time, the attention (I think) of a fair number of distinguished colleagues, is in a way analogous to that of the Icelandic viking poet forcing his productions on a sometimes

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reluctant alien audience, and this gives a certain piquancy and added meaning, for me, to my recitation this evening of one or two viking poems. I hope you have understood more of what I have said than King Harald did of Sneglu-Halli's poetry. In any case I am not going to indulge in any insincere eulogy. It is one of the most important criteria of the status of poetry of the past as having permanent value that it should have this kind of reusability. I believe that there is at least some medieval Icelandic poetry that can be claimed to have it.

Climb up on to the keel:
this storm is for real.
Let not your courage bend,
here your life must end.
Old man, keep your upper lip firm
though your head be bowed by the storm.
You have had girls' love in the past.
Death comes to all at last.

NOTES

- ¹ See *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Gudbrand Vigfusson (Oxford 1878), I xlix.
- ² *Ibid.*, I 379; *Sturlunga saga*, trans. Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas (New York 1970–74), I 343.
- ³ *Egil's saga*, trans. Gwyn Jones (New York, 1960), ch. 78.
- ⁴ *Irische Texte* III, ed. W. Stokes and E. Windisch (Leipzig 1897), 106.
- ⁵ Thomas Love Peacock, *Melincourt* (London 1817), 387–88.
- ⁶ Gert Kreutzer, *Die Dichtungslehre der Skalden* (Meisenheim am Glan 1977), 172–215.
- ⁷ The above examples of skaldic verse are quoted in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*; see Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London 1987), 66 ff.
- ⁸ *Egil's saga*, trans. Gwyn Jones (New York, 1960), ch. 60.
- ⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London 1987), 131.
- ¹⁰ Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (London 1934), 52.
- ¹¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London 1987), 114.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 62.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 115.
- ¹⁴ *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavík 1939), 209.
- ¹⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia* 233A.
- ¹⁶ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford 1976), 86.
- ¹⁷ Peter Foote and David Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London 1970), 79; R. H. C. Davis, *The Normans and their Myth* (London 1976), 56.
- ¹⁸ *Egil's saga*, trans. Gwyn Jones (New York, 1960), ch. 78.