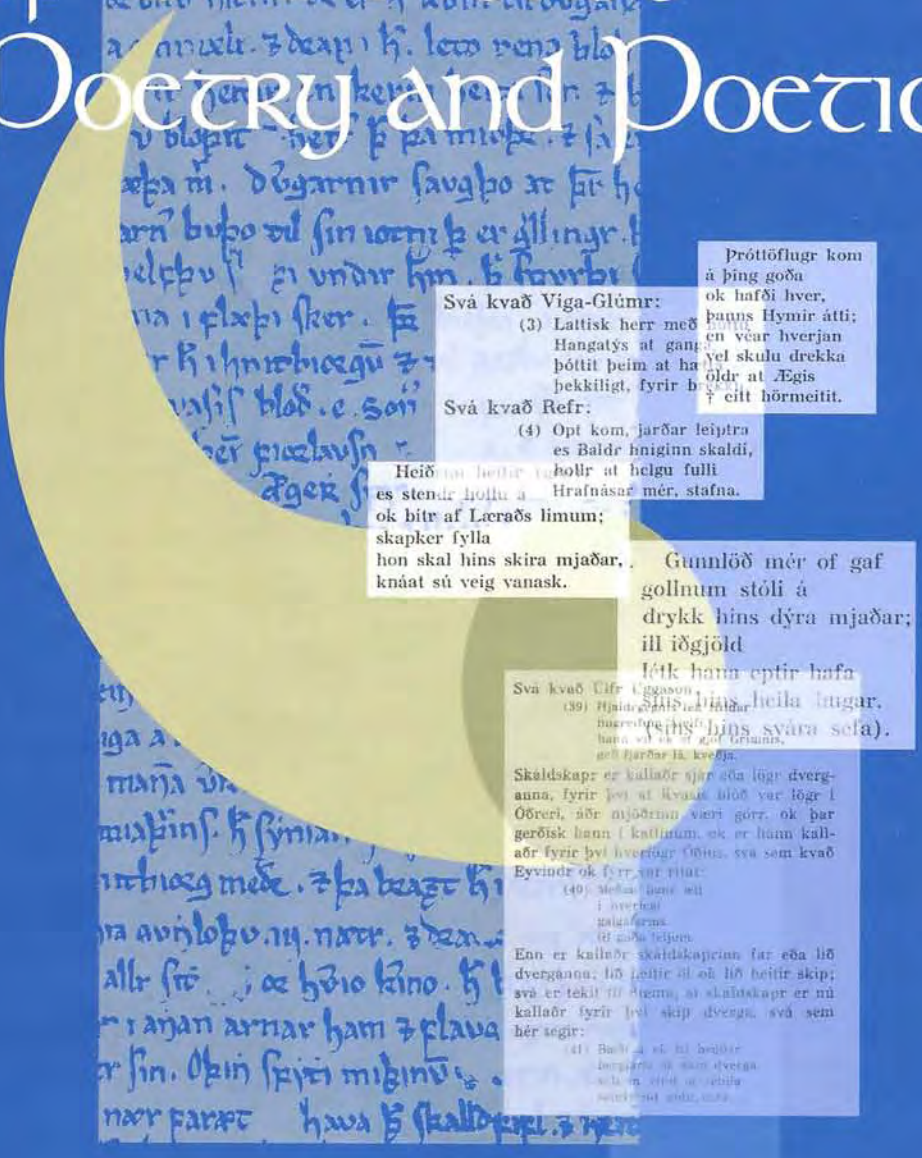
A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics



Margaret Clunies Ross

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D. S. BREWER

Thanks are due to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra,
for a financial subsidy granted to the author towards the publication of this volume.

First published 2005
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 1 84384 034 0

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ross, Margaret Clunies.
A history of old Norse poetry and poetics / Margaret Clunies Ross.
p. cm.
Summary: "Guide to and description of the medieval poetic tradition in Scandinavia" – Provided by publisher.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-84384-034-0 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Old Norse poetry – History and criticism. 2. Poetics – History. I. Title.
PT7170.R67 2005
839.6'1009–dc22

2004025181

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Typeset by Word and Page, Chester

Printed in the United Kingdom at the
University Press, Cambridge

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea of writing a book on the combined and related themes of Old Norse poetry and poetics came to me while I was on exchange at the University of Bonn during the winter semester of 2000–1, substituting for my colleague Rudy Simek, who took my place at the University of Sydney. I had chosen to give a sixteen-week lecture course on this subject and, as I prepared my weekly lectures, I came to realise that there was no one book that covered both topics, although there are some that deal with Old Norse-Icelandic poetry. Further, as I had already started to plan the new edition of the corpus of skaldic poetry with my colleagues Kari Gade, Guðrún Nordal, Edith Marold and Diana Whaley, it seemed an opportune time to write a book accessible to specialists in the field and to non-specialists and students, taking stock of advances in our understanding of the nature of Old Norse poetry and poetics and the most recent research in those fields. In addition, I wanted to express some of my own ideas on these subjects, many of which I have been thinking about off and on over many years.

I should like to thank my students in Bonn for giving me the stimulus to write the lectures that were the precursor to this book, and for continuing to attend my lectures — in some cases for the full sixteen weeks — on topics that are complex and sometimes abstruse. I should also like to pay tribute to my University of Sydney honours and postgraduate students of recent years, particularly Anna Hansen, Kate Heslop, Tarrin Wills and Kellinde Wrightson, for the opportunity to work with them and, in three cases, supervise their doctorates on poetry and poetics. Other thanks are due to the Australian Research Council for awarding me a Discovery Grant which has allowed me to conduct research in better libraries overseas than I have at home, though I must also express my gratitude to the Interlibrary Loan staff and facilities at Fisher Library of the University of Sydney for their excellent service at all times. I am also grateful to the University of Sydney for awarding me a full year's Special Studies Leave in 2003, which has allowed me to write this book in peace, and to spend a term as a Visiting Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, for which I express my gratitude to the Warden and Fellows, especially to the Dean of Visiting Fellows, Martin West. In the later stages of writing up, Kate Heslop helped me to track down various bibliographical references.

EDITORIAL NOTE

The Icelandic alphabet

Readers familiar with Old Norse-Icelandic will find this paragraph unnecessary, while it is essential preliminary reading for those without a knowledge of the language. The Roman alphabet was used for writing Old Norse, except for a small number of vowels and consonants. Two symbols, *þ* (upper case *Þ*) and *ð* (upper case *Ð*), represent the sounds written *th* in English; *þ* occurs in word-initial position, while *ð* is found in medial or final position. The following vowels and vocalic ligatures will also be encountered: *æ* represents a front vowel (approximately equivalent to the *a* in English *hat*); *ø* and *œ* are approximately equivalent to the *œu* in French *œuf*; *ǫ* is similar to the *ou* in English *bought*. *Y* and *ý* are short and long rounded front vowels, like the *u* in French *pur* or *ü* in German *für*. Accent marks over vowels indicate length; vowel length is important, as signified by minimal word pairs, distinguished only by the length of the vowel, e.g. *goð*, 'a god', *góð*, 'good' (masculine accusative singular).

Citation of Old Norse-Icelandic textual material

Titles of Old Norse texts are given in normalised Old Icelandic, approximated to early-thirteenth-century usage, and translated into English on their first mention only; thereafter only the Icelandic title is given, unless the first mention has been much earlier in the book. The same treatment is accorded to nicknames and other Old Norse appellations. All continuous texts quoted in the book are accompanied by an English translation. Quotations from Faulkes 1987 restore the Old Icelandic forms of proper names, where Faulkes has Anglicised them.

Personal names of medieval people or saga characters are given in their normalised Old Norse-Icelandic form. This means that names are presented with nominative inflections, if applicable, e.g. Egill (not Egil), Eiríkr (not Eirík or Eric). The same applies to the names of modern Icelandic scholars, where the appropriate Modern Icelandic forms of their names are given. Because most Icelanders of the present day have no surnames, it is conventional to refer to them by their first name after first mention (so Finnur for Finnur Jónsson) and, in bibliographies and indices,

to list them alphabetically by first name rather than patronymic. Place names are also presented in Old Norse nominative form, e.g. Borgarfjǫrðr, but, if there is an accepted English equivalent, that name is also given in parentheses, e.g. Vík (Oslofjord area).

Conventions for the presentation of poetic texts

All citations of poetry more than one verse line in length are set out as verse. All emendations to texts are indicated by italics. The Old Norse texts are always accompanied by an English translation below the verse or set of verses. Quotations of verses from skaldic poetry also have a *Prose word order* set out below the cited verse and before the translation in order to help the reader follow the often fragmented order in which interpretation of words and word groups must proceed. The *Prose word order* is omitted for eddic poetry and for some skaldic poetry where the word order is uncomplicated.[1]

Within the translations of skaldic verses the reader will often find capitalised words enclosed in square brackets. Following the conventions established for the forthcoming new edition of the skaldic corpus (Whaley *et al*. 2002: 41–5, available on the web at http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au), these capitalised words represent the referents of kennings, two-element periphrases for nouns that are not actually mentioned in the texts themselves. An example cited in Chapter 1 contains a kenning for a woman, who is said to be *vitr Vǫr víra* ('intelligent Vǫr ⟨goddess⟩ of wires'). When he mentions 'wires' the poet has in mind twisted silver wires used in jewellery. The goddess-name Vǫr (whose meaning is indicated using angle brackets) stands for the woman, whose real name is not given, and the whole periphrasis, 'goddess of wires', forms a kenning for a woman whom the poet has set his heart on. In the translation this information is encoded thus: 'Intelligent Vǫr ⟨goddess⟩ of wires [WOMAN] . . .'. Some kennings have more than one element and in those cases a > leads the reader from one referent to the next. An example occurs in the same verse in Chapter 1, where we find another woman-kenning, this time with two elements, 'Eir ⟨goddess⟩ of the land of the mackerel [SEA > WOMAN]'. Here it is first necessary to construe 'land of the mackerel' separately as a sea-kenning before understanding that it forms part of a higher-order woman-kenning.

[1] For a definition of the terms 'eddic' and 'skaldic', see Chapter 1.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations that form part of manuscript sigla are explained in the context in which they are cited, except for the common abbreviation AM (see below).

AM	Arnamagnæan Collection, now in two locations, Reykjavík, Stofnun Árnamagnússonar á Íslandi, and Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, Nordisk Forskningsinstitut, Copenhagen University.
lv.	*lausavísa* (separately cited verse).
M	*Málskrúðsfræði*, 'Science of the Ornaments of Speech', the name given to the second part of Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise*.
MG	*Málfræðinnar Grundvǫllr*, 'The Foundation of Grammar', the name given to the first part of Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise*.
Skj AI–II and BI–II	Finnur Jónsson, ed., 1912–15. *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*. Vols. AI, AII (tekst efter håndskrifterne) and BI, BII (rettet tekst). Copenhagen, Gyldendal. Repr. 1967 (A) and 1973 (B). Copenhagen, Rosenkilde & Bagger.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Old Norse Poetic Corpus

What this book is about

The subject of this book, Old Norse poetry and poetics, was one of particular importance to the Viking Age and medieval societies of Scandinavia, and nowhere was it more significant than in Iceland, from where the major part of our extant textual evidence derives. An incident, doubtless mythical, recorded in the *Edda* ('Poetics') of *c.*1225 by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson[1] reveals something of the complex of ideas that underpinned traditional Norse views of poetry and poets. It concerns an exchange of verses between a troll-woman and a poet, Bragi Boddason the Old, an archetypal figure of semi-divine status and the earliest named poet whose verses have survived in written form. The troll-wife challenged Bragi to identify himself as they met in a wood one dark evening and he did so in the following verse (one of a pair of verses, in the first of which the troll-woman listed her own characteristics):

> 'Skáld kalla mik
> skapsmið Viðurs,
> Gauts gjafrǫtuð,
> grepp óhneppan,
> Yggs ǫlbera,

[1] The *Edda* of the Icelandic poet, politician and historian Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) is one of the most important works of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and a major source for our knowledge of Norse poetry, poetics and mythology. It will be referred to many times in this book, and is the main subject of Chapter 8. The work comprises four parts: a Prologue, *Gylfaginning* ('The Tricking of Gylfi'), *Skáldskaparmál* ('Poetic Diction') and *Háttatal* ('List of Verse Forms'). *Gylfaginning* presents an overview of Norse mythology, from the creation of the world to its destruction and partial recovery; *Skáldskaparmál* characterises and exemplifies the special diction of Old Norse skaldic poetry, while *Háttatal* discusses and exemplifies a large number of Old Norse verse forms and includes some stylistic analysis. Snorri's *Edda* is extant in four manuscripts (three of these being medieval) of independent value that contain all four parts, and in three other medieval manuscripts that contain parts of *Skáldskaparmál*.

óðs skap-Móða,
hagsmið bragar.
Hvat er skáld nema þat?' (Faulkes 1998 I: 83–4, verse 300b)

Translation. 'They call me skald, thought-smith of Viðurr ⟨Óðinn⟩ [POET], gift-getter of Gautr ⟨Óðinn⟩ [POET], un-scant poet, Yggr's ⟨Óðinn's⟩ ale-bearer [POET], inspired poetry's creating-Móði ⟨son of Þórr⟩ [POET], skilful smith of verse [POET]. What is a poet other than that?'

Bragi's self-definition employs a list of kennings (*kenningar*) or poetic periphrases for the concept 'poet' (given here in square brackets) and poetic synonyms (*heiti*) to reflect the two dominant indigenous Nordic conceptions of the art of poetry: poetry as a gift of the gods, particularly of the god Óðinn,[2] and poetry as craft or skill (*íþrótt*), with the poet represented as a clever song-smith or craftsman of verse (Kreutzer 1977; Clover 1978). The analogy between a poet and a smith, which we find in many other places in Old Norse verse, is important, for it expresses technological excellence and power. The craft of the blacksmith or worker in wood or metal represented the peak of early medieval technology, so the analogy between creating clever craftwork and creating complicated, clever poetry would have held a great deal of importance for early medieval people. The idea of the poet as a clever song-smith further relates to the role of the court poet (*skáld*) of Viking Age Scandinavia and later as the pleaser of princes and the entertainer of their courts. The social and intellectual milieu of the courts seems to have given an impetus to the development of a court poetry that privileged abstruse diction, fractured syntax, riddling allusions to Old Norse myth and heroic legend and complex verse forms. It is not surprising that such a self-reflexive poetic art also produced a corpus of indigenous poetic theory. Both the art of Norse poetry and its theorisation are the subjects of this book.

The term 'Old Norse' normally includes all medieval West Norse linguistic and social groups, that is, the societies of Norway and the colonies that were established by settlers from Norway during the Viking Age (*c*.800–1050) in Orkney, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, the Hebrides, Ireland and the north-west coast of England. However, for the

[2] According to Norse myth, this gift took the form of an intoxicating mead, which Óðinn stole from a giant, Suttungr, and his daughter Gunnlǫð, and brought back to the gods in his crop (he had transformed himself into an eagle in order to escape). He gave some of the regurgitated liquid to those human poets who showed themselves worthy of it. This mythic narrative, to be discussed more fully in Chapter 5, formed the basis of a great many self-reflexive kennings for poets and poetry.

purpose of this book, the term 'Old Norse' will be extended geographically to include medieval Sweden and Denmark, to the extent that those East Norse-speaking societies and their Viking Age colonies practised and enjoyed Norse poetry. The Anglo-Saxon and Danish rulers of England, for example, during the tenth and eleventh centuries almost certainly appreciated Old Norse verse (Frank 1987, 1990; Townend 2000, 2001), while several Icelandic sagas of the thirteenth century, including *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* ('The Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson') and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* ('The Saga of Gunnlaugr Serpent-tongue') represent their Icelandic poet-heroes as composing poems for Anglo-Saxon kings, and, in Egill Skallagrímsson's case, for Eiríkr blóðøx ('blood-axe'), the Norwegian ruler of York. Within the Old Norse area, however, the most important players in this history were the Icelanders: not long after the establishment of their colony, in the early tenth century, they came to rival and then outdo Norwegians as poets; they also cornered the market in writing prose literature, and, as we shall see, this meant that they controlled both the recording of Old Norse poetry and the ways in which poetry and poets were presented in medieval Norse literature.

I have called this study *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* for several reasons. In the first place it adopts a chronological approach to its subject, beginning with what we can deduce of the oral phase of Old Norse poetic composition and theory, and moving historically from what are presumed to be the oldest surviving poems through the work of poets active in the late Viking Age and so to the age of literacy and Christianity, from the early twelfth to the end of the fourteenth century, the terminus of the book. The changes that Old Norse poetry underwent during the five-hundred-odd years of its productive life is another of the themes of this book, and those changes only make sense when surveyed chronologically. At the same time, the book is not only a historical survey. It attempts to explain why poetry was so important to people in medieval Scandinavia and it explores indigenous understandings of what poetry was, what it was good for, and why people practised it. It also looks at indigenous concepts of the poet and his (or sometimes her) role in society, as well as the native classification of poetry into particular genres. It is my contention that it is illuminating to both subjects to study Old Norse poetry and poetics in conjuction, though few earlier studies have done so, with the important exception of Guðrún Nordal (2001) for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Again, the subject of Norse poetics requires a historical approach, and, for the early period, a series of deductions from external evidence, while the later literature on poetics from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland

can be appreciated best in the context of the predominantly Latin grammatical and rhetorical traditions of medieval Europe. Such a comparative, historical approach reveals where Icelanders stood in relation to the wider European intellectual tradition of the Middle Ages as well as showing up what is unique about their own culture.

There is another historical dimension to a study of Old Norse poetry and poetics, which is important in itself and indirectly confirms the assertion with which I began this introduction: that poetry was of very great importance to Icelandic society in particular. It is reasonable to infer that a society that continues to compose poetry in modes derived from older genres and poetic styles and to study and comment upon earlier poetic treatises is one for which poetry continues to play a central intellectual role. Both those conditions were fulfilled in Iceland after the Middle Ages, where ballads and narrative poems called *rímur* continued medieval poetic traditions, though with significant changes, and where scholarly commentary upon such works as Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* flourished from the Renaissance onwards. Although it is outside the scope of this book, one should not neglect the important role of Icelandic scholar-commentators from the sixteenth century until the present day in identifying and preserving manuscripts containing Old Norse poetry and poetics and in interpreting them for their own people and the wider world. Their discoveries and interventions have been of major significance in the history of this subject.[3]

A history of any subject needs to determine its chronological boundaries, which are inevitably to some extent artificial. In this case they are complicated by methodological problems produced by the nature of the written sources in which Old Norse poetry has been preserved. With the exception of metrical runic inscriptions, these date in their extant form

[3] Some of the highlights of this disciplinary history are well known, like the role Árni Magnússon (1663–1730) played in rescuing Icelandic manuscripts from deterioration and potential destruction and in making Icelandic poetry known to the educated European world of the seventeenth century, in part via Thomas Bartholin's *Antiquitatum Danicarum de causis contemptæ a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis* (1689), and the provisions in Árni's will that made the establishment of the Arnamagnæan Commission possible (see Benedikz 2002; Böðvar Guðmundsson 1993). Other aspects of the history of Icelandic studies, including the indebtedness of early editions of Icelandic sagas and the poetry contained in them to learned Icelandic commentators, who in turn influenced the first professional academic scholars of Old Norse poetry in the nineteenth century, such as Konráð Gíslason at the University of Copenhagen and Guðbrandur Vigfússon at the University of Oxford, still await a comprehensive study. Aspects of the Icelandic tradition are covered in Faulkes 1977–9, Sverrir Tómasson 1996 and Einar G. Pétursson 1998.

from the thirteenth century and later, and are thus almost all considerably younger than the purported age of the poetry they contain. This subject is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Another major complication, and one related to the question of sources, is that at least some of the poetry usually considered early must have had an oral prehistory before it was written down. Just how long such poetry existed in oral form, and what transformations it underwent, have been hotly contested issues in Old Norse poetic scholarship and are to some extent irresolvable (see Fidjestøl 1999; Quinn 2000). Bearing these two major problems in mind, we may say that this history of Old Norse poetry begins with verse deemed to have been composed in the ninth century AD (or earlier in the case of a few runic inscriptions) and concludes with the somewhat arbitrary date of 1400, which has specific relevance to Iceland rather than other parts of Scandinavia, as the place where the traditional indigenous poetic arts were practised longest. Christian skaldic poetry in particular continued in Iceland until the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century (Jón Þorkelsson 1888; Jón Helgason 1936–8).

The mid-fourteenth century in Iceland was a period in which traditional poetry could still be composed, but it was competing with new literary forms that would eventually take over from the older poetic kinds in vigour and importance. The two most significant of these new forms were *rímur* and ballads. A discussion of Icelandic ballads, which are preserved in mainly post-medieval sources, is beyond the scope of this study and has been the subject of an excellent book (Vésteinn Ólason 1982). The case for including early *rímur* in this study is somewhat stronger, though still equivocal. *Rímur* are long narrative poems, usually divided into cantos, with each such division (or *ríma*) showing different and usually complicated patterns of rhyme and alliteration, and strict counting of stressed and unstressed syllables. Their subject matter was taken, in the main, from medieval sources, including particularly romances of various kinds, and some Icelandic sagas, as well as folktales, religious *exempla* and some Old Norse myths, as told in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. Although the first known *ríma*, Einarr Gilsson's *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar* ('The *Ríma* of Óláfr Haraldsson') dates probably from around 1350 and thus belongs to the late medieval period,[4] the flowering of the genre took place from the fifteenth century until well into the nineteenth. So, on a chronological basis, the

[4] Einarr was an accomplished poet in the skaldic measures of *dróttkvætt* and *hrynhent* as well as in the new *ríma* form; *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar* is extant as a prefatory text to the fourteenth-century compilation Flateyjarbók ('The Book of Flatey'). For a text, see Finnur Jónsson 1905–12: 1–9.

rímur are less medieval than modern, to the extent that those contrastive terms are meaningful in an Icelandic context. Their relatively sudden appearance in Iceland may suggest the influence of foreign poetry, probably metrical romances. On the other hand, the influence of both eddic and skaldic poetry on *rímur* is clear as far as style, diction and metrics is concerned. The metaphoric diction of *rímur* clearly shows the influence of skaldic *kenningar* and *heiti*, while those eddic poems in which narrative predominates may have been influential in shaping the way in which the *rímur* narrate their subjects. *Rímur* thus continue many of the traditional features of Old Norse poetry in living form beyond the Middle Ages.

The Old Norse poetic corpus and its sources

One measure of the importance of Old Norse, especially Icelandic, poetry within medieval Scandinavian culture is the proportion of the corpus that has survived beyond the Middle Ages. One can safely assume that more existed than we now know, though how much more is uncertain. The corpus of Old Norse vernacular poetry is among the largest bodies of vernacular verse that has survived in European medieval languages, including Old and Middle English, Old French, Old and Middle High German, Old Irish and Middle Welsh, and yet Scandinavia and Iceland in particular did not have large human populations. In addition, some poetry was composed in Latin in indigenous measures between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, probably considerably more than has survived (Gottskálk Jensson 2003; Friis-Jensen 1987). Before exploring the character of Norse poetry, therefore, it is worth surveying its variety and extent and the kinds of sources in which it has been transmitted.

Eddic-type poetry

Modern scholarship usually divides Old Norse poetry into two kinds, called eddic (or eddaic) and skaldic (or scaldic), and there is some medieval support for this division, though it is by no means an absolute one.[5] It will

[5] Other scholars to have wrestled with the inherited terminology and the problems of Old Norse poetic classification are von See 1980: 19, Frank 1985: 160 and Fidjestøl 1993a: 592. The latter's briefly sketched position (*loc. cit.*) accords in broad terms with that explored in more detail in the present chapter: 'A more serious definition covering this corpus [skaldic verse] will have to use partly conceptual and partly chronological criteria, applying the term skaldic verse to all Old West Norse alliterative poetry that is neither eddic nor belonging to the Icelandic *rímur* genre, and that is composed before about 1400'. Even this definition somewhat begs the question of what eddic poetry is.

emerge in the course of this discussion that no one criterion divides eddic-type poetry from that usually called skaldic, and these terms will be examined more critically in the section 'Eddic vs Skaldic' below. In fact, it could be argued that the main impetus that has led scholars to declare eddic poetry a separate category and apply the name 'eddic' to it was a historical accident coupled with a misapprehension. In 1643 an Icelandic bishop and antiquarian, Brynjólfur Sveinsson, acquired a small medieval manuscript that he found to contain a number of poems, many of which he realised he was already familiar with. Recognising similarities between the poems in this hitherto unknown codex and the still well-known treatise on poetics and mythology by Snorri Sturluson, which was called *Edda* in the Middle Ages and beyond (Faulkes 1977), Brynjólfur jumped to a false conclusion. He surmised that the newly identified manuscript contained poems compiled by the early Icelandic scholar and historian Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133), and he called the codex *Edda Sæmundi multiscii* ('The Edda of Sæmundr the Very Wise'). Brynjólfur then hypothesised that Snorri had later quoted from some of these poems in his own *Edda*. From that time the title *Sæmundar Edda*, *The Elder Edda* or *The Poetic Edda* (to distinguish the poems in this codex from Snorri's *Edda*, *The Younger Edda* or *The Prose Edda*) came to be applied to this poetic anthology without any medieval authority, for there is no evidence that Sæmundr ever did compile such an anthology, nor that its name was *Edda*. Thus, not only has there been a confusion of nomenclature between two distinct literary compilations, but the Elder Edda anthology, despite its undoubted importance, has been somewhat artificially cordoned off from other sources of poetry of a comparable type in subsequent discussions.

The anthology that Brynjólfur Sveinsson acquired in 1643 passed in 1662 into the Royal Library in Copenhagen as a present to King Frederick III of Denmark. There it acquired the shelf-mark GKS 2365 4to, and is still usually referred to by that siglum, being known as the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, even though the manuscript was returned to Iceland in 1971 and is now in the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi in Reykjavík. This small codex, measuring 19 x 13 centimetres, and usually dated to *c*.1275, contains thirty-one separate poems arranged in two groups, the first mythological, the second heroic. A number of the poems in the second, heroic, group deal with legends that have counterparts in other Germanic literatures, for example, the group of poems about the hero Sigurðr, or the poem *Vǫlundarkviða*, a narrative about the famous smith Vǫlundr, known in German as Wielant and in Old English as Weland. By contrast, none of the mythological poems have clear counterparts in other Germanic

literatures, though several of the gods named there, including Óðinn, Þórr and Týr, are known to have been represented in the pre-Christian pantheons of most Germanic peoples. In some cases there are explanatory prose introductions and colophons to individual poems in the anthology and prose links between stanzas, which suggests that the late-thirteenth-century compiler of the Codex Regius felt the need to clarify the narrative sequences of some of its allusive poetic texts.

It is obvious from the *Gylfaginning* section of his *Edda* that Snorri Sturluson, writing in the 1220s, knew a number of these poems, for parts of some of them, particularly the mythological ones, appear as quotations there, either to back up statements about Norse myths or as the direct speech of gods, giants and other mythic beings. Moreover, the first poem of the Elder Edda collection, *Vǫluspá* ('The Sybil's Prophecy'), provides the basic framework for Snorri's own account in *Gylfaginning* of the creation of the world and its inhabitants, together with their destruction and partial renewal. Sometimes Snorri's quoted texts differ from those in the Codex Regius anthology, occasionally significantly. There has been considerable debate but no resulting certainty about whether Snorri knew these poems only in oral form, or had access to early written compilations that may have been forerunners of the Codex Regius and other anthologies. The work of Lindblad (1954, 1980) has indicated that there were several stages in the putting together of the Codex Regius text, and it can be seen as one product of a more general thirteenth-century desire to collect and codify the poetry and traditional learning of the past, a desire in which Snorri obviously shared and to which he may have given an impetus.

It is probably because Snorri Sturluson made such great use of eddic poetry in his *Edda* that two of the manuscripts that contain Snorri's *Edda* also contain additional poems conforming to the same general type as those in the Codex Regius anthology. Thus the Codex Wormianus (AM 242 fol., designated W) of the mid-fourteenth century contains an incomplete text of the poem *Rígsþula* ('The Rigmarole of Rígr'), which tells how the god Heimdallr, calling himself Rígr, visited a socially stratified human society, comprising slaves, free farmers and aristocrats, and begot an heir on a woman from each class, a sequence that led finally to the emergence of a royal scion, Konr ungr (=*konungr*, 'king') from the offspring of Jarl, 'Earl'. AM 748 Ia 4to, of *c.*1325 (A), contains parts of the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri's *Edda*, and in addition a collection of mythological poems, most of which duplicate those in the Codex Regius collection. The poems in AM 748 Ia 4to are, in their manuscript sequence, *Hárbarðsljóð* ('The Chant of Hárbarðr [a name for Óðinn]', from stanza 19/7), *Baldrs draumar* ('The

Dreams of Baldr'), *Skírnismál* ('The Speech of Skírnir', up to the end of stanza 27), *Vafþrúðnismál* ('The Speech of Vafþrúðnir [a giant]', lacking stanzas 1–20/1), *Grímnismál* ('The Speech of Grímnir [a name for Óðinn])', *Hymiskviða* ('The Poem about Hymir [a giant]') and the beginning of the prose introduction to *Vǫlundarkviða* ('The Poem about Vǫlundr'). All these poems, with the exception of *Baldrs draumar*, which is found only here, are also in the Codex Regius, though not in the same order.

Snorri Sturluson knew more poems of eddic type than have survived.[6] For example, in *Gylfaginning* he quotes two stanzas of a dialogue between the god Njǫrðr and his mismatched giant bride Skaði in which each complains bitterly about having to stay in the other's abode (Faulkes 1982: 24). The Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, writing about 1216, seems to have known a version of this poem too, for he attributes a similar exchange, presented in Latin verse, to the hero Haddingus and the giantess Regnilda (*Gesta Danorum* I.viii.18–19, Olrik and Ræder 1931: 31–2, Fisher and Ellis Davidson 1979–80 I: 32–3). A little later in *Gylfaginning*, when describing the attributes of the god Heimdallr, Snorri quotes two lines from an otherwise unknown poem he calls *Heimdalargaldr* ('The Incantation of Heimdallr') (Faulkes 1982: 26). There are other unsourced eddic fragments in Snorri's *Edda*, mostly in *Gylfaginning*, but also in a few instances in *Skáldskaparmál*.[7] Two manuscripts of *Skáldskaparmál*[8] also contain a whole eddic poem which appears nowhere else, *Grottasǫngr* ('The Song of Grotti'), supposedly the complaint of two giantesses, Fenja and Menja, who were forced by the Danish king Fróði to labour unremittingly at the hand-mill Grotti, grinding gold, peace and prosperity for him (Faulkes 1998 I: 52–7). Eventually they took their revenge by grinding out an army against him, which caused his death. This poem is quoted in a section of *Skáldskaparmál* that lists kennings for gold, one of which is 'Fróði's flour' (*mjǫl Fróða*). Verses from another eddic-type poem that deals with Danish

[6] Some additional eddic-type poetry is known from later reworkings of Snorri's *Edda*, even from after the Middle Ages (see Jón Helgason 1966).

[7] These have been conveniently gathered together and edited in Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 315–21. Included there on pp. 318–20 are several sets of named *þulur* (sg. *þula*) or lists of poetic synonyms and names for the subjects of Old Norse poetry, which are in eddic verse forms. There are many other versified *þulur* in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, normally found at the conclusion of *Skáldskaparmál*. They are usually considered to be of twelfth-century date, though some may be older.

[8] These are the Codex Regius of Snorri's *Edda* (R), GkS 2367 4to (*c*.1325) and the early modern (*c*.1595) paper Codex Trajectinus (T), MS 1374 in the University Library of Utrecht. The first stanza is also cited in AM 748 II 4to (C) of *c*.1400.

legendary history, *Bjarkamál* ('The Speech of Bjarki', to be discussed below), are also found in this section.

It has been suggested (Faulkes 1982: 66; Clunies Ross 1992: 646–7) that Snorri deliberately confined his citation of eddic-type poetry to *Gylfaginning*, while reserving most of his skaldic citations for *Skáldskaparmál*, because he wanted to observe a chronological as well as a generic distinction between them. It can be inferred that he considered eddic poetry not only appropriate to *Gylfaginning* because of its subject matter, Norse mythology, but also akin in age to the mythological worlds he was describing there. To the extent that some eddic poetry is placed in the mouths of supernatural beings in *Gylfaginning* and represented as their utterances, the illusion is created, perhaps founded on a residual belief, that the gods and giants of the past spoke in eddic measures. Skaldic-style poetry, on the other hand, is presented in *Skáldskaparmál* as the work of mostly known, named individual poets from the early Viking Age up to the twelfth century. Snorri's arrangement of verse forms in *Háttatal* ('List of Verse Forms'), the final section of his *Edda*, is not inconsistent with the way in which he organises the presentation of poetry in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*. As Faulkes has observed (1999: xxiii), Snorri's placing of *dróttkvætt* ('court metre'), the chief skaldic verse form, first in his metrical listing and *fornyrðislag* ('old story metre'), the chief verse form of eddic poetry, last, is not due to ignorance of the likely historical development of Old Norse metres, but rather because he was following a typological rather than a historical approach, and so placed the simpler, and arguably older, verse forms last. I will return to metrical distinctions between eddic- and skaldic-style poetry in the final section of this chapter.

Snorri's implicit view of eddic-type verse as old poetry that deals with old subjects,[9] both mythological and legendary, is supported by another major source location of eddic-type verse, namely, that group of Icelandic prose sagas, called by modern scholars *fornaldarsögur* ('sagas of ancient time'), which have as their subjects the lives and adventures of legendary and heroic figures who lived in prehistoric times. In their prehistoric chronological setting *fornaldarsögur* contrast with the historical setting (ninth century and later) of the main action of other saga genres, such as

[9] Another group of poems that deal with old lore and use eddic verse forms are riddles (of which the best known, the so-called riddles of Gestumblindi, occur in the *fornaldarsaga Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* ('The Saga of Hervǫr and King Heiðrekr')) and didactic poems like *Hugsvinnsmál* ('Speech of the Wise-minded One'), loosely based on the Latin *Disticha Catonis*, and *Sólarljóð* ('Song of the Sun'), both of which are in *ljóðaháttr* ('song measure').

konunga sögur ('sagas of kings'), *Íslendingasögur* ('sagas of Icelanders' or family sagas) and *samtíðarsögur* ('contemporary sagas'), as well as sagas of bishops and various historical sources for the history of Iceland like *Landnámabók* ('The Book of the Land-takings'). Although it is possible to find poetry in so-called eddic verse forms in texts of these genres, it is less common than poetry in skaldic measures. By contrast, much, but by no means all, of the poetry quoted in *fornaldarsögur* is of eddic type, and is often represented as the utterance of figures from the legendary past. Although we cannot be certain of the actual age of this poetry, it purports to be, and in some cases may in fact be, old, perhaps pre-Viking Age. Most scholars have considered that poems such as *Hlǫðskviða*, the so-called *Battle of the Goths and the Huns*, from the *fornaldarsaga Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, are among the oldest extant Old Norse poems, on grounds of subject matter, style and verse form. Similarly, editors of eddic-type poetry have usually included poems such as *The Death Song of Hildibrandr* (from *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, 'The Saga of Ásmundr the Champion-killer') and *Víkarsbálkr* ('The Section of Víkarr'), supposedly the composition of the legendary Starkaðr, from *Gautreks saga*, as genuinely old, along with *Bjarkamál in fornu* ('The Old Lay of Bjarki'), three verses of which appear in Snorri's *Edda*, with two additional stanzas found in two of Snorri's historical works, *Heimskringla* ('Circle of the World') and *Óláfs saga helga* ('Saga of St Óláfr'), where the verses are entitled *Húskarlahvǫt* ('The Whetting of the Body-guards'), and two fragments of four and two lines respectively in the *Laufás Edda* of Magnús Ólafsson (Heusler and Ranisch 1903: 21–32; Faulkes 1998 I: 60–1, 188–9; Faulkes 1977–9 I: 265, 272). A much longer poem on the same subject in Latin hexameters, which includes the hero Bǫðvarr bjarki's arousal of the Danish troops at Hrólfr kraki's last battle,[10] appears in book 2 of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (Olrik and Ræder 1931: 53–61; Fisher and Ellis Davidson 1979–80 I: 56–63). Friis-Jensen (1987: 71–2) has argued that Saxo's poem has been completely reworked to epic proportions following Latin models, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, book 2.

There has been some controversy about the age of *fornaldarsögur*, and, while many scholars consider the majority of them to have been relatively late products of Icelandic saga writing, Torfi Tulinius (2002: 44–69) has recently argued with some plausibility that at least some of these works,

[10] On account of his tall, skinny form, King Hrólfr is nicknamed *kraki* ('pole-ladder'); the hero Bǫðvarr is called *bjarki* ('little bear') because he was the son of a man who had been transformed into a bear; he and his two brothers each had various bear-like traits.

particularly those, like *Hervarar saga* and *Vǫlsunga saga* ('The Saga of the Volsungs'), that rework Germanic heroic legends, may be no younger than the earliest sagas of Icelanders, which are generally thought to have originated in the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries. Other *fornaldarsögur*, however, are likely to have taken shape in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. If genuinely old poetry was preserved inside these sagas, as well, perhaps, as poetry that was made to seem old, then the impetus to repackage heroic and legendary verse is probably attributable to a similar antiquarian, recuperative urge that caused Snorri Sturluson to systematise the traditional techniques of skaldic verse in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal* for young poets of his day and provide a digest of Old Norse myth in *Gylfaginning* so that they could understand the many mythological allusions the verse depended on.

A desire to align native with foreign encyclopedic knowledge probably lies behind the inclusion of an indigenous poem of prophecy in eddic mode in each of two major late medieval Icelandic historical compilations, Hauksbók ('The Book of Haukr') (1306–*c*.1310), and Flateyjarbók (1387–94). Hauksbók consists of several sections, which contain historical, mathematical, chronological, geographical and philosophical works, written partly by and partly under the direction of the Icelandic lawman Haukr Erlendsson (d. 1334). The cosmological poem *Vǫluspá* (also in the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda and quoted in part in Snorri's *Edda*), which deals with native cosmology and cosmogony and is prophetic in form, occurs in the manuscript on folios 20–1 in the context of theological subjects, including a plan of Jerusalem.[11] Stefán Karlsson (1964; Gunnarr Harðarson and Stefán Karlsson 1993) has argued on palaeographical grounds that *Vǫluspá* was inserted into the compilation by an Icelandic hand after Haukr's death. The historical compilation Flateyjarbók is prefaced by two poems, the early *ríma Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar* by Einarr Gilsson, in the new literary mode, and the eddic-type poem *Hyndluljóð* ('Chant of Hyndla'), the first

[11] It is worth noting here that Hauksbók contains another prophetic poem, *Merlínússpá* ('The Prophecy of Merlin'), an Icelandic poetic translation in two parts of the *Prophecies of Merlin* contained in book 7, chs 3–4 of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*. This work was translated into Icelandic as *Breta sǫgur* and appears in Hauksbók, as does *Merlínússpá*, attributed to the monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson of Þingeyrar monastery in the north of Iceland, who died in 1218 or 1219. Probably following the native poetic models of prophetic poetry, *Vǫluspá* and *Vǫluspá in skamma* (see below), *Merlínússpá* is in *fornyrðislag*. Another *fornyrðislag* poem which belongs in the prophetic group is *Darraðarljóð* ('The Song of Dǫrruðr', *Skj* AI: 419–21, BI: 389–91), found only in manuscripts of *Njáls saga* ('Saga of Njáll'), in which a group of valkyries chant a magic song to influence the outcome of a battle between a 'young [Norse] king' and the Irish, often considered to be the battle of Clontarf (1014).

part of which is a genealogical poem about the ancestors of a Norwegian man named Óttarr heimski ('the foolish'), informing him of his family connections and entitlements to hereditary lands (see Gurevich 1973). The latter, prophetic and mythological, part of this poem (stanzas 29–44) seems to have been known by the separate title of *Vǫluspá in skamma* ('The Short Sibyl's Prophecy'), and the thirty-third stanza of the poem, otherwise known only from Flateyjarbók, is quoted by Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning*, where it is said to be from *Vǫluspá in skamma* (Faulkes 1982: 10). It is hard to know how old this poem may be; a common view is that it is a twelfth-century antiquarian compilation (see Faulkes 1982: 176).

Skaldic-style poetry

In quantitative terms, much more Old Norse poetry can be categorised under the head of skaldic- than eddic-style verse, even though, as we shall see, a great deal of poetry usually classified as skaldic was actually composed in *fornyrðislag*, the chief verse form used for eddic-style verse, and in other measures usually considered eddic. There are an estimated 5500 stanzas and half-stanzas in Finnur Jónsson's standard edition, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning* (1912–15). Metrical grounds alone are not sufficient to identify this category of verse, which takes its name from the Old Norse noun *skald*, later *skáld*, 'poet',[12] probably the commonest term for a composer of verse in texts that relate to the historical period in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia. If for the moment we adopt the loose and somewhat circuitous definition of skaldic poetry as the work of skalds of the historical period from the late ninth to the late fourteenth centuries, then we may say that skaldic poetry was the dominant poetic mode of that age in Norway and Iceland and to a certain extent in other parts of the Scandinavian world.

Poetry itself and the composition of poems could be referred to as *skáldskapr*, while the language of poetry, that is, what distinguished it from everyday usage — what, in terms of modern linguistics, made it into a metalanguage — was called *skáldskaparmál*. There is no doubt that people were

[12] The vowel appears to have been originally short, and this can be seen in early skaldic poetry when the word *skald* appears in internal rhymes. In this book I shall follow established convention and use the form with the long vowel even where I discuss poets of the period before the fourteenth century, when the vowel appears to have been lengthened. The etymology of the term *skáld* has been debated, but a common view is that the noun is cognate with Old High German *skeldan* ('to scold'), English *scold* (both noun and verb), and may have originally referred to the satiric or critical role skaldic poets sometimes played at the courts of Viking Age kings and earls and to their more general practice of verse libel (*níð*). See Steblin-Kamenskij 1969.

fully conscious of the power of poetic language to change the meanings of words and disguise one meaning behind another, for law texts from the medieval period specify that words in legal contexts must be used in their literal, as opposed to their poetical, senses. The Icelandic Commonwealth law code *Grágás* (lit. 'Grey Goose') specifies that 'Every word is to be as it is spoken. No word is to be taken according to the language of poetry (*at skáldskaparmáli*)' (Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Konungsbók* 1974: 181, K § 237; Dennis, Foote and Perkins 2000: 195; see also Fritzner 1886–96 III: 277a). We shall see in following chapters that the power of poetry to have a direct impact upon human life, whether for good or ill, was one of the most important characteristics ascribed to it by medieval Scandinavians, and that characteristic is reflected in the various kinds of poetry that can be distinguished on the basis of indigenous nomenclature.

Skaldic-type poetry can be contrasted with eddic verse in several ways: in respect of its location in manuscript corpora, in its subject matter, in terms of authorship, with regard to certain illocutionary features[13] and in terms of style and verse form. However, as we shall see in the concluding section of this chapter, no single one of these criteria is sufficient to define a poem or verse as skaldic rather than eddic, and my own preference would be to abandon these two words as contrastive and exclusive terms. They are unfortunately too deeply embedded in the critical literature on Old Norse poetry to allow one to do so completely, and, as we have already seen, circumstantial evidence from medieval sources, including Snorri's *Edda* and *fornaldarsögur*, suggests that medieval Scandinavians themselves considered eddic-type poetry as special and old-fashioned. Further, as we shall see, skalds from the ninth century onwards often expressed certain kinds of poetry — prophetic and didactic verse, memorial lays for dead rulers, and some kinds of dream poetry — in eddic verse forms. These subjects expand the notion that eddic measures were appropriate to old lore to include the realms of the paranormal, death, the world of dreams and foreseeing the future.

Existing editions of Old Norse poetry may create the impression that

[13] The term 'illocutionary' is derived from the writings of the philosophers J. L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1979) on the nature of speech acts, in which they recognised a difference between constative acts, whose validity depended on their truth or falsity in the circumstances in which they were uttered (or were said to have been uttered), and performative speech acts, which were divided into illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, the former acts that occur in speech, the latter acts that occur through or as a result of speech. This approach to language, which has considerable relevance to the study of Old Norse poetry, recognises the effects of speech acts upon speakers and hearers rather than focusing exclusively on their truth value.

there is an exclusive divide between eddic and skaldic verse. The corpus of the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda has been edited as a stand-alone volume, the standard text being that of Neckel and Kuhn (1983, and four earlier editions of the same work).[14] Neckel and Kuhn include as an appendix six additional poems that are not in the Codex Regius, together with eddic fragments from Snorri's *Edda* and *Vǫlsunga saga*. The volume of edited texts was later accompanied by a lexicon (Kuhn 1968), glossing all words in the corpus. This lexicon, originally produced in German, has more recently been issued in expanded and revised form in English by La Farge and Tucker (1992). Other eddic-type poetry, particularly a selection from *fornaldarsögur*, was edited in a separate volume by Heusler and Ranisch (1903). A more recent, and as yet incomplete, edition of *The Poetic Edda* by Ursula Dronke (1969–), follows the same principles of collection, though not of arrangement, as we find in Neckel and Kuhn. Commentaries on eddic poetry, both recent and less recent (e.g. Detter and Heinzel 1903; von See *et al*. 1997–) reinforce the impression that this body of poetry should be considered separately from the rest of the Old Norse corpus, even though there are significant intersections between them, and the same message is conveyed by secondary studies and concordances (e.g. Kellogg 1988; Harris 1985; Frank 1985). There is good reason for what has happened: the problem is that although the Codex Regius collection (and a few additional texts) undoubtedly has integrity as a medieval anthology, the integrity of the poetry within it as a separate literary kind is not absolute.

Editions of what has been conventionally presented as Old Norse skaldic verse err on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion. The standard edition is that of Finnur Jónsson (1912–15) (abbreviated *Skj*), which fills four large volumes, AI–II being a diplomatic edition of the poetry from selected manuscripts, BI–II providing a critically edited text with a Danish translation.[15] The material is arranged chronologically, century by century, according to poet, where known. Anonymous verse and verse from particular sagas not ascribed to particular poets, as well as poetry judged inauthentic, is placed at the end of the appropriate century. Much of the content of *Skj* has also

[14] There were a number of forerunners to the first Neckel edition of 1914, two of the most significant being by Sophus Bugge (1867) and Ludvig Wimmer and Finnur Jónsson (1891).

[15] Finnur's edition was challenged on a number of grounds by the Swedish scholar Ernst Albin Kock in a new edition (1946–50) and a large series of what he called *Notationes norrœnæ* (1923–44). However, Kock's challenges did not for the most part involve any rethinking or reordering of the skaldic corpus itself.

been edited, sometimes several times, by editors of the separate prose works, usually sagas of some kind, in which the poetry has been preserved. Very little of this corpus has in fact been preserved in manuscripts solely devoted to the collection of skaldic verse, with the exception of some Christian religious poetry. Because Finnur Jónsson aimed for inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness, and probably because the Codex Regius corpus was already so well defined by 1912–15, one finds that *Skj* includes a number of the eddic-type poems we have already discussed, including all poems from *fornaldarsögur* and, like *Bjarkamál* and the *þulur*, from other kinds of sources. Much of this material in not strictly skaldic, even according to the criteria listed at the beginning of this section. However, *Skj* excludes poems in Latin composed in indigenous verse forms[16] as well as poetry of likely medieval provenance extant only in post-medieval sources (Jón Helgason 1966).

We may say that Finnur Jónsson's position in *Skj* was to call all Old Norse poetry that did not belong to the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda and a few additional eddic-type poems and fragments 'skaldic', and that position can be endorsed if the term 'skaldic' is used in a very broad sense to include all vernacular Norse poetry composed between the late ninth and fourteenth centuries except for the Codex Regius collection and a small group of related poems. This will also be the position adopted by a new edition of the skaldic corpus now under way and due for publication in nine separate volumes from 2006 to 2011. *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* will include basically the same corpus as *Skj*, with the addition of the seventy-odd known metrical compositions in runes and the Latin verses mentioned above.[17] It will differ from *Skj* in a number of particulars, one of which is worth mentioning here because it will allow one to see more clearly than *Skj* does the nature of the source texts from which the poetry is drawn.

This concerns the way in which the poetic material is organised into volumes. *Skj* adopted a chronological arrangement which largely disregarded the source contexts in which the poetry was found, a tricky subject to be discussed more fully in Chapter 4. It is true that the A-volumes would lead the scholar who carefully studied the manuscript variant readings to

[16] Finnur published a number of these separately in 1886.

[17] The work-in-progress project has a web site, on which details of the editors, the texts, and many manuscript images and other research tools are freely available. Its address is http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au. The text of the second revised edition of the *Editors' Manual* (2002) and a *Supplement to the Manual* (2004) is available on the web and gives details of the editorial methodology adopted for the new edition.

the actual sources where the poetry has been preserved, but this detail is not available in the B-volumes, which most non-specialists use, and the stanzas' context or contexts of citation are not prominent in *Skj*. In recent decades, opinion among skaldic scholars has come to consider the contexts of preservation of skaldic poetry very important. They are, after all, major indicators of the ways in which medieval compilers and scribes understood this poetry and cannot be disregarded in its editorial arrangement and interpretation.

Eight of the nine[18] proposed volumes of the new edition will follow the broad categories of manuscript witnesses in which Old Norse poetry (with the exception of the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda) has been preserved. It is fundamental to our study to recognise that by far the major part of all Old Norse poetry that has survived from the Middle Ages has done so within prose texts and, often, as piecemeal quotation of single stanzas within those prose texts. Accordingly, there is good reason to group together in an edition all the poetry from a particular type of source, and this will be the case with the new edition. Two volumes, comprising around 1270 stanzas and half-stanzas, will be devoted to the poetry that has been transmitted in sagas of kings (*konunga sögur*), predominantly sagas about kings of Norway and their skalds, but in some cases extending to other parts of the Scandinavian world.[19] These volumes are particularly significant as they detail what Icelandic saga writers of the late twelfth to the late thirteenth centuries, for the most part, imagined as the context in which skalds performed what was probably their originary poetic role, to celebrate and praise the achievements of the rulers for whom they worked and in whose service they travelled from place to place accompanying fleets and armies or undertaking political missions. Another branch of court poetry is dynastic verse in honour of a kingly or princely line together with necrologies of rulers. It is presumed that the court poetry of skalds from the Viking Age must have been transmitted orally for the most part before such time, perhaps in the late twelfth century, when it was written down and cited in kings' sagas.

A third volume of the new edition (around 840 stanzas and half-stanzas) will comprise poetry from another major source group of manuscripts, without which our knowledge of both Old Norse poetic practice and theory would be very slight. This volume will contain all the poetry (with the exception of eddic-type poems also found in the Codex Regius and a small

[18] The ninth and final volume will contain bibliographies and indices.

[19] Fidjestøl 1982 is an invaluable survey and analysis of the corpus of poems preserved in kings' sagas.

number of additions) found in manuscripts containing Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* and several other treatises on poetics, which will be discussed in Chapters 7–9. Here are to be found not only some court poetry, both in praise of rulers and in praise of the lavish gifts they bestowed on their poets (the so-called pictorial and shield poems), but a wealth of other verse which Snorri and the authors of the other poetic treatises used to illustrate their analyses of the diction and verse forms of skaldic poetry. In addition, there are several other complete skaldic poems added to one or other of these manuscripts, such as *Íslendingadrápa* ('The Poem with Refrain about Icelanders'), *Jómsvíkingadrápa* ('The Poem with Refrain about the Jómsvíkingar') and *Málsháttakvæði* ('Poem of Proverbs').

An area into which skaldic poetry eventually expanded after the conversion of Scandinavians to Christianity was religious and devotional verse in honour of the Christian God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saints of the Christian Church and a variety of liturgical and doctrinal subjects. Approximately a thousand stanzas and half-stanzas on Christian subjects exist, many of them in the form of long and elaborate poems, some recorded in unique manuscripts outside a prose context. These will be presented in a single volume, which will reveal the richness of this branch of skaldic verse and document the various changes in poetic style and subject matter that the move from a poetry anchored in indigenous religious ideology and mythology to that anchored in the Christian faith required of its practitioners.

Another volume will be devoted to poetry from sagas of Icelanders, a large (around 725 stanzas and half-stanzas) and important category which includes some of the best-known skaldic verse attributed to saga characters such as Egill Skallagrímsson, Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld ('troublesome poet'), Gísli Súrsson, Grettir Ásmundarson and many others. A companion volume of around 360 stanzas and half-stanzas will comprise poetry bearing on the history of Iceland from diverse historical sources, including *Landnámabók*, contemporary sagas and sagas of bishops. Poetry from *fornaldarsögur* (around six hundred stanzas and half-stanzas), though often not in skaldic verse forms, will occupy a separate volume. Finally and for the first time in an edition of Old Norse poetry, the corpus of runic inscriptions that have metrical form (around 70 stanzas) will have its own volume, complete with images of the material objects on which the inscriptions are found.

Metrical runic inscriptions

In the standard editions of both eddic- and skaldic-style poetry (Neckel and Kuhn 1983; Heusler and Ranisch 1903; Finnur Jónsson 1912–15), only one poetic text transmitted in runic script makes its appearance. That is the inscription on a standing stone at Karlevi, on the island of Öland in the Baltic sea, which is usually dated *c.*1000 and commemorates a Danish warrior who lies buried in a mound, over which the stone probably originally stood. The poetic text (*Skj* AI: 187, BI: 177) is in the *dróttkvætt* measure. The absence of runic poetic texts from the standard editions is largely due to the fact that most of them were unknown to earlier editors. However, during the twentieth century a considerable number of new runic inscriptions on stone, bone and wood have come to light, principally in archaeological excavations, and at the present time approximately seventy inscriptions are known which have metrical form, a number of these being fragments.[20] Of this number, five to six are in the older runic alphabet or futhark, while the remainder are in the younger futhark. Approximately twenty-two stanzas are of Norwegian or Danish provenance, and about forty come from Sweden. There are no metrical inscriptions from Iceland.

The runic poetry is diverse in character, style and metre, as well as in age, but unlike poetry preserved in manuscripts, does not present problems of dating caused by the presence of surrounding prose texts. The chief subjects of this verse are charms (often to do with actual or wished for sexual adventure) and so-called love poetry (see Knirk 1997), memorial inscriptions, poetry of insult and defamation (*níð*) and praise poetry. A good deal of the verse is surprisingly late; several of the staves from the major find at the old Hanseatic quarter of Bryggen in Bergen date from the fourteenth century, and show that some level of traditional poetic composition was alive in that part of Norway as late as *c.*1380. For example, the rune stave B257 from Bergen is dated *c.*1380–90. It is a charm incorporating a curse and is reminiscent, both in subject matter, style and metre, of some of the poems of the Elder Edda, especially *Skírnismál* and *Hávamál* ('Speech of the High One [Óðinn]'). On the other hand, much of the poetry

[20] I am indebted to Professor Edith Marold of the University of Kiel for much of the statistical information provided here and for access to the metrical runic corpus, which she and Professor Hans-Peter Naumann of the University of Basel are preparing for the new edition *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*. Useful web-based resources for runic texts are at *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm, Runearkivet i Oslo, http://www.ukm.uio.no/runenews/, Nordiskt runnamnslexikon, http://www.dal.lu.se/runlex/index.htm and *Svenska Runstenar och Runinskrifter*, http:// hemsidor.torget.se/users/r/runor/.

is clearly skaldic in character, with regular *dróttkvætt* and the use of skaldic diction including kennings, like the love-complaint on another rune stave from Bergen (B255 of *c.*1300):

> Vǫ́r kennir *mér* víra
> vitr úglaðan sitja;
> Eir nemr opt ok stórom
> ǫluns grundar mik blundi.
>
> *Prose word order*. Vitr Vǫ́r víra kennir *mér* sitja úglaðan; Eir grundar ǫluns nemr mik blundi opt ok stórom.
>
> *Translation*: Intelligent Vǫ́r ⟨goddess⟩ of wires [WOMAN] teaches me to remain unhappy; Eir ⟨goddess⟩ of the land of the mackerel [SEA > WOMAN] takes away my sleep, often and mightily.

The variety of subjects, mentioned above, probably accounts for the mixture of styles and verse forms we find in the runic corpus, as some of them, like charms, were traditionally expressed in eddic-type measures, while others, like praise poetry, normally followed a courtly style. In addition, there are three instances in which runic texts offer variants of stanzas also known from manuscript sources. The best known is a *helmingr* ('half stanza') on a rune-stick discovered in Trondheim in 1975 (N829, 1, dated *c.*1175–1225), which is very close in wording to the first half of a *lausavísa* attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson in *Egils saga* (*lv*. 38 in *Skj* AI: 58, BI: 51). In the saga, Egill's verse is occasioned by his discovery that a young man, spurned as a suitor by a girl whose family Egill is lodging with, has tried to carve love-runes on a piece of whalebone, but through lack of expertise has instead carved a runic charm that made her very ill. The *helmingr*, couched in general terms, cautions people against carving runes unless they have a good understanding of what they are doing.[21] A Bergen rune stave (B88 from *c.*1335; Seim 1986) offers a verse fragment that echoes one of the so-called *Gamansvísur* ('Fun Verses') attributed to King Haraldr harðráði in the compilations Morkinskinna ('Rotten Parchment') and Hrokinskinna ('Wrinkled Parchment') (*Skj* AI: 358 (stanza 7), BI: 329; Andersson and Gade 2000: 149, nos. 62 and 473). The third runic quotation from a poem known in manuscript is a single line on the Bergen rune stave

[21] Knirk (1994) provides a definitive interpretation of the Trondheim *helmingr* and discusses its possible relationship to the half-stanza in *Egils saga*. His conclusion is that it is 'most likely that the runic verse preserves an older half-stanza that was remoulded by tradition or by the author of *Egils saga* into the first half of the stanza *Skalat maðr rúnar rísta*' (1994a: 418).

B57 of *c.*1300 containing a ship-kenning, *Ekkils ýtiblǫkkum*, 'on the launched steeds of Ekkill ⟨sea-king⟩', which occurs in the twelfth-century Icelander Hallar-Steinn's *Rekstefja* ('Poem with Inlaid Refrains') 16/7. These quotations, and others in Latin,[22] indicate that the Norwegian communities of medieval Bergen and Trondheim included individuals who were both literate and fond of Old Norse poetry as well as classical and medieval poetry in Latin.

Eddic versus skaldic?

We have seen so far that the terms 'eddic' and 'skaldic' are closely associated with the historical study of Old Norse poetry and with existing editions of conventionally distinguished corpora of Old Norse poetic texts, but doubts have been raised about their validity as definers of exactly what sets different groups of poetry apart from one another. The late-thirteenth-century anthology, the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, together with a small number of additional poems, has been treated as a special case, and consequently the poems in that collection have assumed definitional status as 'eddic'. There are indeed several characteristics that typify the poems of this collection, but all of them also apply to some poems that have been conventionally placed under the skaldic umbrella. Conversely, some poems deemed skaldic are so by virtue of only one or two of the criteria that are usually thought to characterise skaldic poetry while they share a number of their other defining features with eddic-type verse.

One way of approaching the issue of classification is by examining defining criteria that range from greater to lesser exclusiveness. We will look first at metrical criteria, for these have usually been regarded as crucial to the distinction between eddic and skaldic verse, and so they are in some respects. At the highest level of certainty, we can safely say that there is no eddic-type poetry, narrowly defined, in *dróttkvætt* ('court metre'), which is by far the commonest verse form used by skaldic poets and can be regarded as their standard. There were a number of variants of the *dróttkvætt* measure, and most of these are also confined to skaldic verse. Among the most notable is *hrynhenda* (or *hrynhent*), 'falling, flowing measure', in which the length of each line was expanded from six to eight

[22] As well as common Latin tags, which were probably learnt in the schoolroom (especially Virgil, *Eclogue* 10: 69, about the power of love, which appears three times in the Bergen corpus), there is also one runic inscription (N603) that presents quotations from two Latin poems otherwise known only from the *Carmina Burana* (Liestøl 1980: 1–9; Knirk 1997: 30; 1998: 485).

syllables. This became the metre of choice for many Christian skaldic poets. The development of *hrynhent* is very likely to have been influenced by the trochaic metres of medieval Latin hymns. Other important measures usually classified as skaldic are likely to derive from the most common eddic metre, *fornyrðislag* ('old story metre'), which is a Norse development from the common Germanic alliterative long line, found in the cultural repertoire of all Germanic-speaking peoples from the Middle Ages whose vernacular poetry has survived (Lehmann 1956). Indeed, *dróttkvætt* itself may well have been a development from indigenous verse forms, perhaps under the influence of foreign measures, among which Irish and Latin verse forms have been most often and most plausibly implicated.[23]

Old Norse eddic poetry is stanzaic, like skaldic verse, in contrast to most examples of the common Germanic verse form, which do not observe any stanzaic boundaries. The stanzas of *fornyrðislag* verse are, however, often of irregular length. The lines, although of variable syllabic count, are usually considerably shorter than those of other early Germanic verse, such as Old English or Old High German, and this is the result of a strongly realised syncope of syllables that did not bear strong stress. It is likely that these characteristics of the Old Norse alliterative line in the period immediately before the ninth century predisposed it to further metrical development in the following century (see Gade 1995: 226–38). Although *fornyrðislag* is by far the commonest measure to be found in the Elder Edda poems, it is not the only one used in that corpus, where *málaháttr* ('speeches-form') and *ljóðaháttr* ('song-form') are also found. Moreover, as Faulkes has observed (1999: 83), *fornyrðislag* is the commonest measure after *dróttkvætt* to be found in the poems collected in *Skj*. This statistic means that the use of *fornyrðislag* alone cannot determine whether a poem is eddic or skaldic in style; other criteria, to be discussed below, must be brought into consideration.

Several measures, which are usually and rightly considered skaldic, almost certainly derive from *fornyrðislag*. One of these is *runhenda* (or *runhent*) ('end-rhyme'), in which lines are of four syllables (not six, as in *dróttkvætt*), alliteration follows the same patterns as in *fornyrðislag*, and the lines have end rhyme rather than internal rhyme, a change possibly influenced by Norse poets' acquaintance with Latin hymns in England or Ireland. The first known examples of this verse form come from Egill

[23] There is an extensive literature on this subject, which has not been without controversy, as adherents of the indigenous and foreign theories of origin have crossed swords; Gade (1995: 8–11, 250–1, notes 27–36) summarises the arguments and refers to major contributions to this debate.

Skallagrímsson and his father Skallagrímr in the tenth century, Egill's *Hǫfuðlausn* ('Head-ransom'), composed *c*.950 before Eiríkr blóðøx at York, being the most famous example of the measure. Probably the most important development from *fornyrðislag*, aside from *dróttkvætt* itself, was *kviðuháttr* ('poem measure'), characterised by alternating lines of three and four syllables, in odd and even lines respectively, and lacking regular rhyme. This measure was very important, particularly in the ninth and tenth centuries, and may be first detected in part of the inscription of the Swedish Rök stone of *c*.850 (Wessén 1964: 10; Gade 1995: 234–5), but then in the great genealogical poems *Ynglingatal* ('List of the Ynglingar', *c*.900), *Háleygjatal* ('List of the Men of Hálogaland', *c*.986) and *Nóregskonungatal* ('List of the Kings of Norway', *c*.1190), as well as in a number of other poems attributed to various skalds (see Faulkes 1999: 84 for a list; also Fidjestøl 1982: 175–7). Egill Skallagrímsson chose *kviðuháttr* for two of his long poems, *Sonatorrek* ('Irreparable Loss of Sons'), a lament for the deaths of his sons and other family members, and *Arinbjarnarkviða* ('Poem about Arinbjǫrn'), a poem in honour of his friend, the Norwegian *hersir* ('local chieftain') Arinbjǫrn Þórisson.

Metrical forms do not exist in a vacuum. Either their formal qualities entail certain other characteristics, as is the case with alliterative poetry generally, and *dróttkvætt* in particular, or they combine conventionally with particular stylistic characteristics and certain kinds of subject matter. It is these kinds of combined criteria that allow us to classify Old Norse poetry as eddic rather than skaldic, or vice versa, though it has to be said that there remains a body of verse which cannot be definitively classified according to any of the criteria discussed here.

Criteria of style, subject matter and illocutionary purpose further support the classification of poetry in *dróttkvætt* measure as skaldic. *Dróttkvætt* poets took the already formalised long line of *fornyrðislag*, which had been divided into two half-lines separated by a metrical caesura, and linked by alliteration (one or two syllables in the a-line, and one, the first to bear strong stress, in the b-line), and made it even more formalised. *Dróttkvætt* stanzas were of eight lines, each of which contained six syllables, the last two syllables forming a cadence of long plus short syllable, with each stanza comprising two, usually syntactically independent, halves or *helmingar*. Odd lines carried a form of assonance on stressed syllables, which was called *skothending* (lit. ?'shot catching') while even lines bore full internal rhyme or *aðalhending* (lit. 'noble catching') in these circumstances. Such a stringent metrical environment favoured the development of two special stylistic phenomena: firstly, a system of conventional

nominal circumlocutions and synonyms for the noun subjects of poetry, termed *kenningar* and *heiti* respectively, which could fill the elaborate, alliterating *hendingar* of each *helmingr*, and, secondly, conventionally fragmented syntax within the *helmingr*, which delayed the syntactic completion of grammatical clauses until the end of each *helmingr*.[24] Both these stylistic phenomena have also been plausibly connected with the social and locutionary environment in which skaldic poetry first appears to have flourished, as an elite poetry at the courts of Norwegian rulers of the ninth century where clever, enigmatic verse may have been at a premium (see Lindow 1975, 1976), but one cannot neglect the role of the verse form itself in predisposing to certain kinds of stylistic elaboration.

While *kenningar* and *heiti* are occasionally found in the Elder Edda collection and in other eddic-type poetry, they occur there as sporadic rather than systematic stylistic features, just as they do in Old English heroic poetry like *Beowulf*, in contrast to *dróttkvætt* verse, where they are much more regular.[25] Word order, however, is almost never fragmented in eddic-type poetry. Poetry in *kviðuháttr* occupies an intermediate position according to these criteria; because it uses a less elaborate verse form than *dróttkvætt*, its use of *kenningar* and *heiti* is on the whole less, its word order is more straightforward, and the eight-line stanza form is not always observed. However, on balance, because of the fact that kennings are used there, that the subject matter is often (though by no means always) courtly and that it often shows a tendency to internal rhymes (see Gade 1995: 237), it seems legitimate to classify *kviðuháttr* as a skaldic measure.

Three examples of verses in *dróttkvætt*, *fornyrðislag* and *kviðuháttr* will clarify the above remarks and demonstrate the capacities and idiosyncrasies of these measures. Alliterating letters are marked in bold and

[24] Sometimes there is syntactical continuity between *helmingar* of a stanza, that is, a clause is not completed until the second *helmingr*, and sometimes there is syntactic continuity between stanzas, but both these phenomena are uncommon and the second is rare except in *kviðuháttr*, where we often find continuity between stanzas. Faulkes (1999: 77) gives a list of poems where syntactic linkages occur. Gade has argued (pers. comm. and *Supplement to Editors' Manual* 2004) that the syntactic unit in *kviðuháttr* may have been greater than the eight-line stanza in some cases.

[25] This statement requires qualification in one respect; during the period after the conversion to Christianity (the eleventh and early twelfth centuries), skalds tended to avoid the use of kennings because they were felt to be too closely connected with paganism, and concentrated more on elaborate syntactic fragmentation. However, from about 1150 new Christian kennings came into use and, in what one might term the antiquarian period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, kennings with pagan content were again brought into use for political and religious purposes. These stylistic developments are addressed in Chapters 6 and 10.

hendingar in italics. Kenning referents are enclosed in square brackets in the translation.

1. *Dróttkvætt helmingr* attributed by Snorri Sturluson in *Skáldskaparmál* to the eleventh-century Icelandic skald Hallvarðr Háreksblesi, probably from a poem, *Knútsdrápa* ('Poem with Refrain about Knútr') in honour of the Danish king Knútr (Old English Cnut, Modern English Canute) on the occasion of his expedition to England in 1016.

> **R**auðl*jós*a sér **r***æs*ir
> — **r***ít* brestr sundr hin hv*íta* –
> **b**aug*jǫrð* **b**rodda f*erðar*
> — **b***júg*rend — í tvau fl*júg*a. (Faulkes 1998 I: 70, verse 239)
>
> *Prose word order*. Ræsir ferðar brodda sér rauðljósa baugjǫrð fljúga í tvau — hin hvíta bjúgrend rít brestr sundr.
>
> *Translation*. The impeller of the journey of weapon-points [BATTLE > WARRIOR] sees the red-bright ring-land [SHIELD] fly in two — the white curved-edged engraved shield breaks apart.

In this *helmingr* the sentiment is conventional — the warrior king causes his opponents' shields to be destroyed — and the implicit stance of the poet, speaking in the present tense, is of an observer of the great and warlike deeds of his patron. The verse gains its effectiveness, within the tight *dróttkvætt* structure, by the use of one kenning for the king (*ræsir ferðar brodda*) and another for a shield (*rauðljósa baugjǫrð*), while there is also a *heiti* for the concept 'shield' in *rít* (line 2), which means 'something engraved', but occurs commonly as a shield-*heiti* in skaldic verse. In each case, the shield (or possibly two separate shields) are further described by means of adjectives of colour (*rauðljós* and *hvítr*). A glance at the bolded and italicised letters in the quoted stanza reveals that all the nominal periphrases or ornaments are signalled by either alliteration or *hendingar* or both, leaving the verbal elements of each of the two clauses in the *helmingr* (*sér fljúga í tvau* and *brestr sundr*) free to complete the sense of the half-stanza. Hallvarðr is able to maximise his use of all the available features of *dróttkvætt* through syntactic fracture of the phrasal elements that belong together and the insertion of the common skaldic device of an intercalary clause in lines 2 and 4, which allows him to postpone the punch-line of the first clause to the end of the *helmingr* and finish it off in a decisive fashion.

2. The first stanza of *Atlakviða* ('Poem about Attila'), a heroic poem of

the Elder Edda collection, in the verse form *fornyrðislag*. Atli (Attila, leader of the Huns) has sent a messenger named Knéfrǫðr to his rivals Gunnarr and Hǫgni, his wife Guðrún's brothers, to entice them to his court where he intends to acquire their legendary wealth and then murder them. This poem is part of a heroic series in the Codex Regius manuscript that deals with the legendary dynasty of the Gjúkingar, perhaps to be identified with the historical Burgundians.

> **A**tli sendi **á**r til Gunnars
> **k**unnan segg at ríða, **K**néfrǫðr var sá heitinn;
> at **g**ǫrðum kom hann **G**júka ok at **G**unnars hǫllo,
> **b**ekkjum aringreypum ok at **b**jóri svásum. (Normalised from Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 240).
>
> *Translation*. Atli sent a messenger to Gunnarr, a well-known man to ride, he was called Knéfrǫðr; he came to the courtyards of Gjúki and to Gunnarr's hall, to the hearth-encircling benches and the delicious beer.

By contrast with Hallvarðr's stanza, *Atlakviða*, like most eddic-type poetry, is anonymous. Its subject is an old legend, based loosely on Germanic history of the Migration Age in continental Europe, not on the exploits of historical Scandinavian kings. The narrator effaces himself and describes an event that he assumes his audience knows, imbuing it nevertheless with a sense of dramatic suspense, as the messenger enters the welcoming world of the Germanic hall that he is about to plunge into disarray. This world is a typical one, and the epithets ('hearth-encircling benches', 'delicious beer') and possessives ('Gjúki's courts', 'Gunnarr's hall') suggest a known and stable environment in which discord is about to be unleashed. In this respect *Atlakviða* is very like Old English heroic poetry, and what has been preserved of Old High German heroic verse. There are neither kennings nor *heiti* in this verse, and the word order is straightforward.

3. Stanza 17 from Egill Skallagrímsson's *Arinbjarnarkviða c.*960 (not an attested medieval title). This poem, in *ljóðaháttr*, is known only from one medieval manuscript (Mǫðruvallabók (M), AM 132 fol., of *c.*1350), where it is written on folio 99v after the text of *Egils saga*. Two additional stanzas, believed to be from the same poem, are cited in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* of *c.*1250 in the manuscripts W and A, and lines 5–8 of stanza 17 are also found in two manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* (R and W), in a section of *Skáldskaparmál* discussing kennings for the god Freyr. The

poem is an encomium for a personal friend, stressing his generosity and loyalty to the poet, Egill.

> Þat **a**llsheri
> at **u**ndri gefsk
> hvé hann **u**rþjóð
> **au**ði gnœgir,
>
> en **G**rjótbjǫrn
> of **g**œddan hefr
> **F**reyr ok Njǫrðr
> at **f**járafli.[26]
>
> *Prose word order*. Þat gefsk at undri allsheri hvé hann gnœgir urþjóð auði, en Freyr ok Njǫrðr hefr of gœddan Grjótbjǫrn at fjárafli.
>
> *Translation*. It is a matter of wonderment for all the world how he heaps riches upon the populace, but Freyr and Njǫrðr have endowed 'Stones-bear' [=Arinbjǫrn] with wealth-power.

We see here that poetry in *kviðuháttr* has similarities with both eddic- and skaldic-style verse, but is probably best classified as skaldic, for, though it has dispensed with internal rhyme, it is still a syllable-counting measure. It also characteristically shows some kennings or kenning-like formations, as here in the punning skaldic device of *ofljóst* (lit. 'too clear'), in which Arinbjǫrn is called 'Stones-bear'. It is necessary to substitute the verse's *grjót* (n. 'rock, stones') with *arinn* (m. 'hearth' (made of stone)), to get the point (*bjǫrn*, m. 'bear' is common to both compounds). On the other hand, the word order is simple, and the two parts of the stanza are not syntactically discrete.

In discussing these three examples of Old Norse poetry, several criteria other than metrical ones have emerged as often distinguishing eddic- from skaldic-type verse. These include subject matter (old heroic tales versus praise of a historical leader or friend) and the illocutionary stance of the narrating poetic voice (engaged poet observing actions of the here and now or praising a man whose qualities are known to a contemporary audience, versus a self-effacing narrator telling a story that his audience knows and has probably heard before). These differences in poetic persona relate to the fact that much (though not by any means all) skaldic poetry is ascribed to named poets, whereas relatively little poetry in eddic measures is. All of

[26] The text is my own edition of this verse in preparation for the forthcoming new edition of the skaldic corpus.

the Codex Regius core poems are anonymous. Stylistic qualities, too, though they cannot be relied on in all cases to differentiate eddic- from skaldic-style poetry, are a good guide. Full-blown *dróttkvætt* is clearly different in a number of ways from traditional *fornyrðislag*, but many half-way situations lie between them, and these are often sensitive to indigenous genres or subgenres, which cut across the eddic–skaldic divide of modern scholarship.

Earlier in this survey, we saw that poetry associated with prophecy and didacticism usually adopted eddic measures, even though some of it was not of great antiquity. Another genre that sometimes favoured eddic modes was poetry in praise of rulers, and especially praise-poems belonging to the group termed in Old Norse *erfikvæði*, or memorial poems. Included here are the following tenth-century encomia: Þorbjǫrn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði* (or *Hrafnsmál*) ('The Poem of Haraldr' or 'The Speech of the Raven'), a poem in *málaháttr* and *fornyrðislag* in honour of King Haraldr hárfagri ('fine-hair', *c*.900, *Skj* AI: 24–9, BI: 22–5), Eyvindr skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál* ('Speech about Hákon', after 961, *Skj* AI: 64–8, BI: 57–60), a panegyric on King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri ('Aðalsteinn's foster-son'), which combines *fornyrðislag* for the battle sections and *ljóðaháttr* for the concluding section of praise, and the anonymous *Eiríksmál* (*c*.954, *Skj* AI: 174–5, BI: 164–6), also in a mixture of *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttr*, for King Eiríkr blóðøx. Later encomia employing *fornyrðislag* are Gísl Illugason's memorial poem about King Magnús berfœttr ('bare legs', *c*.1104, *Skj* AI: 440–4, BI: 409–13) and Ívarr Ingimundarson's *Sigurðarbálkr* ('Section about Sigurðr', *c*.1140, *Skj* AI: 495–502, BI: 467–75).[27] Much of this poetry is relatively simple when it comes to diction and word order.

[27] A useful register of the various metres employed in the poetry published in *Skj* (with the exception of *dróttkvætt*) may be found at the back of the BII volume on pp. 609–10.

CHAPTER TWO

An Indigenous Typology of Old Norse Poetry 1: Technical Terms

Having reviewed the modern division of Old Norse poetry into eddic- and skaldic-type verse, and discovered a number of complicating factors that make a simple division of the corpus difficult, I will now examine ways in which Viking Age and medieval Scandinavians classified Old Norse poetry and what that can tell us of the uses to which they put the poetic arts and the values they ascribed to them. This poetry and medieval Norse attitudes towards it developed first in an oral society and many signs are displayed of a close relationship between poetic genres and social interactions. Much of the verse is agonistically toned, meaning that it represents direct interpersonal interaction and confrontation between protagonists, often of an aggressive kind. In a great deal of the poetry the speaking voice of the poet or the protagonist of the action is audible.

Titles and types of poetry

The nomenclature of eddic poems whose medieval titles are known indicates that they were classified as speech-related genres of various kinds, that is, they were conceptualised as speech acts in an Austinian sense. In terms of their form, they are either catalogue poems, often presented as dramatic dialogues, or narratives of mythic or heroic adventures. Their names suggest that, to medieval people, their role as speech acts was predominant and it is notable that, particularly among the mythological poems, the verses are often presented as the direct discourse of gods and heroes or other authoritative beings.[1] Titles of individual

[1] This characteristic has led some scholars to conclude that eddic mythological poetry is the record of sacred dramas, once enacted in pre-Christian ritual (see Phillpotts 1920; Holtsmark 1950; Gunnell 1995). Aside from the lack of corroborative evidence for such rituals, one imagines that it would be very unlikely for material with such a history to have been preserved by a Christian compiler of the late thirteenth century.

poems distinguish the *mál* ('speech, words') at the most general discourse level (e.g. *Hávamál*, 'Speech of the High One [Óðinn]', *Skírnismál*, 'Speech of Skírnir',[2] *Alvíssmál*, 'The Words of All-Wise [a dwarf]', *Hamðismál*, 'Words of [*or* about] Hamðir') from the *spá* ('prophecy', e.g. *Vǫluspá*, 'Prophecy of the Sibyl', *Merlínússpá*, 'Prophecy of Merlin'), the *ljóð* ('chant', e.g. *Hárbarðsljóð* 'Chant of Hárbarðr [Óðinn]', *Hyndluljóð*, 'Chant of Hyndla [a giantess]), the *senna* ('diatribe or invective', e.g. *Lokasenna*, 'Loki's Invective'),[3] the *hvǫt* ('incitement', e.g. *Guðrúnarhvǫt*, 'Incitement of Guðrún') and the *grátr* ('lament', e.g. *Oddrúnargrátr*, 'Lament of Oddrún'). Mythological poems like *Hymiskviða* and *Þrymskviða* ('Poem about Þrymr [a giant]'), whose titles' second element, *kviða*, probably denotes a narrative poem,[4] embody continuous narratives of one or more known myths but are less common than the speech genres within the mythological group (see Klingenberg 1983). Within the heroic poetry of the Elder Edda group, most of the poems still have names that refer to different kinds of speech act, even though many of them include a good deal of third-person narrative.

Another indigenous category, and one that is often prominent in oral societies, as well as in those for whom literacy is a new technology, is the list (see Goody 1977: 74–111). Not all traditional Norse lists had metrical form, however, nor were all of them of purely indigenous origin; some are likely to have had mixed indigenous and foreign, Latinate prototypes. According to Ari Þorgilsson, author of the earliest extant history of Iceland, *Íslendingabók* ('The Book of Icelanders', *c*.1122–32), his work made use of *ættartala ok konunga ævi*, 'genealogies and the life of kings', which he later omitted from the revised version of his history that has survived. These are presumed to have been regnal lists of the kings of Norway, and are likely to have been originally in oral form. Lists of Icelandic and Swedish lawspeakers and Norse poets are also extant. The latter, *Skáldatal* ('List of Poets') (*c*.1260), is a product of literacy in its present form, for it includes reference to Scandinavian and foreign rulers and their court poets well into the literate age. An oral prototype for such lists of poets and lawspeakers, both offices of high social status in early medieval Scandinavia,

[2] The title *Skírnismál* appears in AM 748 I 4to (A); in the Codex Regius the name of the poem is the descriptive *Fǫr Skírnis* ('Skírnir's Journey').

[3] The title *loka senna* appears in the Codex Regius immediately before the beginning of the first stanza of the poem. The noun *senna* ('diatribe, invective') occurs in *Guðrúnarhvǫt* 1/1, *Þá frák sennu slíðrfengligsta*, 'Then I heard a diatribe most virulent' (it was Guðrún inciting her sons to revenge).

[4] Heusler 1941: 154. For a review of the nomenclature, see Quinn 1990.

is very likely. A version of *Skáldatal* is inserted into the Uppsala manuscript of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (DG 11, of *c*. 1325, pages 43–7), another being found in the manuscript AM 761a 4to, pages 11–17r, a copy of the now lost medieval manuscript Kringla.

Poetic versions of the *tal* ('list') form include poems celebrating members of important Norwegian dynasties and, in one case, *Nóregskonungatal*, an Icelandic family, the Oddaverjar, who had Norwegian royal connections on the wrong side of the blanket. Examples are *Ynglingatal*, listing members of a Swedish and Norwegian dynasty, and *Háleygjatal*. We have noted in Chapter 1 that these dynastic poems are in the verse form *kviðuháttr*. Snorri Sturluson's *Háttatal* ('List of Verse Forms') is a learned catalogue illustrating a wide variety of skaldic and eddic verse forms available to poets in the early thirteenth century. It forms the final section of his *Edda*. One of its forerunners was the poem *Háttalykill* ('Key to Verse Forms'), also exemplificatory of a variety of Norse metres, composed by the Icelander Hallr Þórarinsson and the Orkney Earl Rǫgnvaldr kali Kolsson in the 1140s. Behind both *Háttatal* and *Háttalykill* lie Latin as well as indigenous influences, as will be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. Another catalogue form, of special interest to poets, was the *þula* or versified list of poetic synonyms (*heiti*) for the major subjects of skaldic verse, such as gods, men and women, ships, weapons and gold. Though *þulur* were of most use to skaldic poets, the extant examples use eddic verse forms. The evolution of the *þula* is speculative, but in all probability is attributable to the need oral poets felt to have access to versified aide-mémoires which functioned somewhat like rhyming dictionaries (see Clunies Ross 1987: 80–91). At the same time some *þulur* recorded in manuscripts containing Snorri's *Edda* (which is where most of them are found) are clearly of learned and relatively late origin in their present forms, as they include synonyms of Latin and even Greek origin (Amory 1984).

Old Norse terms used to differentiate kinds of skaldic verse are largely based on formal criteria, including metrical and stylistic considerations. Something of native Norse conceptions of the nature and purpose of skaldic verse may be learned from a study of the titles of skaldic poems, but care must be taken to distinguish those for which there is medieval evidence to support a known title from those titles that are only attested from after the Middle Ages or are the inventions of modern editors.[5] Two

[5] Finnur Jónsson lists all named skaldic poems at the back of the BII volume of *Skj* on pp. 606–8, but does not distinguish there those for which there is medieval authority from those whose titles are not attested in medieval sources.

kinds of skaldic title are apparent; those which refer to a specific poem, perhaps to the context in or for which the poem was composed or the patron for whom it was intended, and those that were probably generic in origin, but came at some stage to be applied to specific examples of a genre.

To take the second group first, one of the best known generic titles is the Hǫfuðlausn ('Head-ransom'), applied to a small group of poems, of which four are mentioned in Old Norse sources, composed by a poet who had to ransom his head (that is, save his life) by composing a praise-poem about a patron whom he had offended in some way. The best-known and earliest example of this kind is Egill Skallagrímsson's *Hǫfuðlausn* for King Eiríkr blóðøx, a brilliant but ironically insincere poem that supposedly rescued the poet from mortal danger at York.[6] Other 'head-ransom' poems are attributed to two eleventh-century Icelandic poets Óttarr svarti ('the black') and Þórarinn loftunga ('praise-tongue') and to the early-twelfth-century Icelander Gísl Illugason.[7] It is not known whether the title *Hǫfuðlausn* derived originally from Egill's poem, as the actual name only appears in medieval prose sources much later than the poem itself, or whether it already existed as a generic title in the tenth century (Clunies Ross 2004).

Another of Þórarinn loftunga's poems was called *Tøgdrápa* ('Poem with Refrains about a Journey') about King Knútr of Denmark and England, and a journey he took into Norway in 1028. Underlying this title seems to be an awareness that a special form or metre was appropriate to the description of journeys, one which may in fact have been invented by Þórarinn for this poem. Snorri Sturluson's *Háttatal* gives two variants of 'journey-metre', which he calls *tøgdrápulag* and *tøglag*, the general term for the form being given as *tøgdrápuháttr* ('journey-poem form') (see Faulkes 1999: 30, 150).[8] Faulkes notes (1999: 150) that Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa*,

[6] The story is told in *Egils saga*, ch. 60 in Sigurður Nordal 1933: 185–92 and chs 61–2 in Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 100–12.

[7] Óttarr composed a twenty-stanza head-ransom poem for the Norwegian king Óláfr Haraldsson *c*.1022, after having offended the king by composing a poem about his wife Ástríðr which was too explicit (no doubt sexually); for the text of the poem, see *Skj* BI: 268–72. Only the *stef* or refrain of Þórarinn's poem for King Knútr inn ríki ('the powerful') Sveinsson remains (*Skj* BI: 298); his offence seems to have been to insult the king by composing a poem about him that was too short and not elaborate enough (described as a *flokkr*, 'poem without a refrain', and a *dræpling*, 'a little *drápa*, one that is too short'). The third poet who is said to have composed such a poem, in honour of King Magnús berfœttr ('bare legs') (r. 1093–1103), was the Icelandic skald Gísl Illugason (fl. *c*.1100); this poem does not survive and may never have existed.

[8] The etymology of *tøg*- (and its stem vowel) is uncertain; Faulkes speculates (1999: 150) with *tog* (n. 'rope'), *tøgr* (m. 'ten', poem of ten stanzas) and German *Zug* ('journey').

the next poem in this form, is also a journey poem and also about King Knútr. A third possible contender for identification as a generic title is Hrafnsmál, 'Speech of the Raven', a name applied to a poem by the Icelander Þormóðr Trefilsson, recorded in manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga*, about some local killings in the west of Iceland during the tenth century. The same title was applied to a poem by the Icelandic historian and poet Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84) in his biography of the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–63) celebrating a number of the king's bloody battles. The motif of the raven rejoicing in carnage is prominent in Sturla's poem, and, in a more muted fashion, in Þormóðr's, suggesting the rationale for the title *Hrafnsmál*.[9]

Titles that refer to specific skaldic poems are dominant in the corpus. Many are compound nouns ending in an element that indicates the degree of formality and technical elaboration the poem possesses. Such elements, whose technical senses will be discussed below, include *–drápa* ('long poem with a refrain'), *–flokkr* ('long poem without a refrain'), *–stefja* ('[poem] having a refrain') and *–vísur* ('[collection of] verses'). The first elements of such compounds are usually the names of those about whom the poem has been composed, e.g. *Íslendingadrápa* ('A *Drápa* of Icelanders'), *Kátrinardrápa* ('A *Drápa* of [St] Katharine'), or some more descriptive word, e.g. *Glymdrápa* ('Noise *Drápa*', referring to all the echoic battle-effects in this poem), *Glælognskviða* ('Sea Calm Lay'), *Austrfararvísur* ('Verses about a Journey Eastwards'). A number of Christian skaldic poems do not refer to formal aspects of the poem in their titles, but focus more on the work's religious significance, as, for example, in *Líknarbraut* ('Path of Mercy'), a poem on the significance of Christ's cross, and *Harmsól* ('Sorrow-sun'), which centres on the themes of salvation, sin and redemption. Some titles, such as *Geisli* ('Light Beam', a eulogy about St Óláfr Haraldsson) and *Lilja* ('Lily', referring to the Virgin Mary's role in salvation history) are uncompounded.

A small group of poems that are either critical of patrons or downright

[9] The collection of stanzas attributed to Þorbjǫrn hornklofi ('horn-cleaver') on the subject of King Haraldr hárfagri's battles and life at his court, known as *Haraldskvæði*, is also sometimes referred to as *Hrafnsmál*, though this title does not have medieval authority. It doubtless derives either from the poet's nickname (*hornklofi* appears as a raven-*heiti* in a *þula*, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1848–87 II: 488, 571) or from the dialogue frame of part of the poem in which a valkyrie and a raven, that claims to have followed the young king ever since it emerged from its egg, discuss the exploits of King Haraldr. The personae of raven and poet seem to merge in this poem, to the extent that it can be reconstructed from the manuscripts in which it occurs (see Fidjestøl 1993b).

libellous are also attested; in all probability there were more of these, but because of their highly dangerous character, to be discussed below, most of them have not been preserved in the historical record; those that have been, at least in part, include Jórunn skáldmær's *Sendibítr* ('Biting [i.e. critical] Message'), directed at Hálfdan svarti ('the black'), son of Haraldr hárfagri, Sighvatr Þórðarson's *Bersǫglisvísur* ('Plain-speaking Verses'), critical of King Magnús Óláfsson's punitive treatment of the farmers of Trøndelag who supported the overthrow of his father Óláfr Haraldsson in 1030, and Þorleifr jarlsskáld's *Jarlsníð* ('Earl's Libel') about Earl Hákon Sigurðarson, a poem whose text has not been preserved, though its powerful physical effect upon the earl and his hall is described in graphic detail in the late-thirteenth- or early-fourteenth-century *Þorleifs þáttr Jarlsskálds* ('The *Þáttr* (short narrative) of Þorleifr, Earl's Poet').[10]

The variety of titles reviewed here is exemplified early in the skaldic tradition. The Norwegian Bragi Boddason the Old, the earliest skald whose poetry has been preserved, is said to have composed a *drápa* (a sequence of verses with a refrain or *stef*) for a patron named Ragnarr, possibly the legendary ninth-century Viking leader Ragnarr loðbrók. It went by the name *Ragnarsdrápa* ('Long Poem with a Refrain for Ragnarr'), according to Snorri's *Edda* and *Skáldatal*. Another early skaldic poem of *c*.900 with a descriptive title attested by Snorri is *Haustlǫng* ('Autumn Long'). Presumably its composer, Þjóðólfr of Hvinir, took a whole autumn season to perfect it. Einarr Helgason skálaglamm ('scales tinkle'), a poet active in the late tenth century, composed a poem called *Vellekla* ('Lack of Gold'), for Earl Hákon Sigurðarson. This title is very likely to have been an indirect reference to the skald's feeling that Hákon had not rewarded him handsomely enough for his poetry.

Technical terms for skaldic poem types and parts of poems

In terms of the manner in which they have been transmitted to posterity, and presumably in terms of medieval conventions also, a subject to be discussed in Chapter 4, all skaldic poetry can be divided into extended poems and single verses, that is, freestanding usually occasional verses, which modern scholars term *lausavísur* ('separate verses'). As we shall

[10] Though this prose text, preserved in Flateyjarbók, is not old in its present form, the traditions about Þorleifr's libel poem may be. It bore the alternative title of *Konu(r)vísur* ('Woman's Verses'), perhaps referring to the power of the poet's verbal assault to feminise its victim, in Hákon's case by rotting his beard and causing half his head hair to fall out.

see, poetry transmitted as single verses may or may not have originated that way. *Lausavísur* are usually presented within prose texts as quotation, either through the narrator corroborating some historical event by citing a verse supposedly composed by a poet who was an eyewitness to the event or close to it in time, or, within a saga text, by the narrator attributing a verse or verses to a character in the story (see Bjarni Einarsson 1974). In cases of the latter type, the verses are presented as the extempore compositions of individuals who figure in the narrative. Characteristically, *lausavísur* are cited singly but sometimes in runs of two or more verses separated by a small portion of prose. The technical unit here is thus the individual stanza (*vísa*, 'verse') in *dróttkvætt* or another verse form, whose characteristics have been discussed in Chapter 1. Quite often, though, a half- stanza or *helmingr* is the cited unit, and sometimes only a couplet, or *fjórðungr*; as *dróttkvætt helmingar* were usually syntactically and conceptually independent, they could easily stand alone in a prose context.

Mostly it is easy to distinguish between *lausavísur* and extended poems in the medieval and later manuscripts in which Old Norse poetry has come down to us, but this is not always the case. The main reason for uncertainty is that authors of the prose texts in which the poetry is often cited do not always quote the whole of a work at the same time, and in some cases we find different numbers and sequences of stanzas said to belong to the same poem in different manuscript traditions. Occasionally groups of stanzas are ascribed to different skalds in the various manuscript witnesses. The tendency of medieval Icelandic prose writers to use skaldic poetry as quotation and to divide extended poems into smaller fragments to serve that purpose makes it difficult at times to put the pieces back together or even sometimes to decide whether one is justified in putting certain pieces together with certain others.

The identification or reconstruction of extended skaldic poems must employ a variety of external and internal criteria.[11] One of these is contemporary or near-contemporary evidence for the poem's title, circumstances of composition and form, as found in the explicit testimony of medieval manuscripts. Most poems with titles, such as those reviewed in the preceding section, are extended poems; *lausavísur* do not normally have titles. In many cases of extended poems, the prose text also gives information about the poet, the circumstances of composition and the formal status of the poem itself. For example, Einarr Skúlason's poem *Geisli* is introduced at

[11] These criteria are set out in detail in chapter 2, 'Reconstruction of Poems', in the *Editors' Manual* for the new edition of the corpus of skaldic poetry (Whaley *et al*. 2002: 7–12).

the head of the column of Flateyjarbók in which it appears (folio 1a) by a rubric which reads *Geisli er Einarr Skulason quad vm Olaf Haraldsson*, '*Geisli*, which Einarr Skúlason recited about Óláfr Haraldsson'. Criteria internal to the poem itself, including an opening address to the patron or audience, a call for silence, the development of subjects and images over a number of stanzas and the presence of refrains are conventional indications of the existence of an extended poem rather than a collection of *lausavísur*. Many of the terms by which these distinguishing features were named are well attested in the medieval record (see Kreutzer 1977: 207–14 for a survey).

On purely formal grounds, a fundamental distinction was made between different kinds of extended poem on the basis of internal structural features, the chief of which was the presence or absence of a refrain or *stef* (lit. 'term, fixed period of time', and so 'line of verse'). The *stef* usually comprised a recurring couplet at the end of a *helmingr* or full stanza that separated a passage of several verses, though it could vary in length from two to four lines, normally presented as a unit. Occasionally the *stef* was dispersed in single lines over two or more stanzas, and was then referred to as a *klofastef* ('split refrain') or a *rekstef* ('driven, chased refrain'), hence the title *Rekstefja* of a poem by Hallar-Steinn, which he himself bestowed on his creation (stanza 1/4). The section of an extended poem enclosed by *stef* was referred to as the *stefjamél* ('interval between refrains'), a term used by Snorri Sturluson in *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 30), or alternatively as *stefjabálkr*.[12] To qualify as a *drápa*, a poem usually had to have a *stef*, to distinguish it from less elaborate sequences like the *flokkr* (lit. 'herd', 'group' [of stanzas]) without a refrain.[13] The *drápa* was the most highly

[12] *Mél* means 'an interval of time'. Some medieval authorities refer to one or more groups of stanzas divided by *stef* as *stefjabálkr*, but this term was apparently also sometimes used of a single run of stanzas separated by *stef*. It is used in Snorri's *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla* in this latter sense: *Í þeiri drápu* [Þórarinn loftunga's *Tøgdrápa*] *er sagt frá þessum ferðum Knúts konungs, er hann fór ór Danmǫrku sunnan til Nóregs, ok er þetta einn stefjabálkr* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51 II: 308), 'In that *drápa* it is told about those journeys of King Knútr, when he travelled out of Denmark from the south to Norway, and this is one *stefjabálkr*' (a run of six stanzas are then cited). *Bálkr* means 'dividing wall, section in a list, group of [verse forms]'; see Faulkes 1999: 36. *Bálkarlag* is the name of a metre in both *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 38) and the *Third Grammatical Treatise* (Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 68). Many modern dictionaries and scholars (see Tate 1978) use *stefjabálkr* to refer specifically to the middle section of a *drápa* in which there is more than one run of stanzas separated by refrains, but the medieval evidence suggests that *stefjamél* and *stefjabálkr* are synonymous.

[13] I have said that *drápur usually* have to have a *stef* because there are a few instances in which poems are called *–drápa* and do not have one, e.g. Haukr Valdísarson's

valued of the skaldic kinds, because of its formality and elaborate construction. Its name may indeed refer to its defining structural feature if, as Sigurður Nordal suggested (1931–2: 148), it derives from the phrase *kvæði drepit stefjum* ('a poem set with refrains'). Both the indigenous terms *stef* and *mél* lay stress on time intervals, suggesting the movement from one section of the *drápa* to another and the absolute time taken in the recitation were important features differentiating *drápur* from other kinds of skaldic poem.

Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa*, the earliest extant *drápa*, has at least one refrain, according to the two sections of the poem identified and preserved in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri's *Edda* (Faulkes 1998 I: 51, 73). It occurs in a *helmingr* rather than a full eight-line stanza, and in each case the first two lines of the *helmingr* draw attention, in different wording, to the fact that the heroic narrative Bragi tells is represented on a decorated shield his patron has given him. Then comes the *stef*, which flatters the patron again by mentioning his name as well as his present,[14] but finally directs attention back to the poet by alluding to the many stories that the shield provided him with:

> Ræs gáfumk reiðar mána
> Ragnarr ok fjǫlð sagna.
>
> *Prose word order*. Ragnarr gáfumk mána reiðar Ræs ok fjǫlð sagna.
>
> *Translation*. Ragnarr gave me a moon of the chariot of Rær ⟨sea-king⟩ [SHIP > SHIELD] and a multitude of stories.

A *stef* was intended to be flattering to the patron or subject of the *drápa*, often mentioning him by name, as well as highly memorable (Fidjestøl 1982: 182–90; Kuhn 1983: 212–14). In some cases, only the *stef* of a particular *drápa* has survived, like that of the praise-poem for Knútr that Þórarinn loftunga composed after having been criticised for composing a mere *dræpling* (see note 7). The *stef* with which he ornamented his *drápa* was certainly a model of contemporary political correctness, comparing

Íslendingadrápa. Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa* may have had a *stef* if a single *helmingr* cited separately in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 15, verse 44; *Skj* BI: 144, st. 21) belongs to the *drápa* (see the verse usually numbered 10, *Skj* BI: 141).

[14] The shield is referred to by the kenning *máni reiðar Ræs* ('moon of the chariot of Rær'); Rær is the name of a sea-king, whose 'chariot' is a ship, and the shield is the ship's 'moon', an allusion to the appearance of round, probably painted, shields in rows along the gunwales of Viking Age ships.

Knútr to Christ, an 'over the top' comparison that must have pleased even that ambitious ruler:

> Knútr verr grund sem gætir
> Gríklands himinríki. (*Skj* BI: 298)
>
> *Translation*. Knútr defends [his] territory just as the guardian of Greece [CHRIST] [defends] the kingdom of heaven.

Many elaborate *drápur* have more than one refrain, and this phenomenon enables the poet to divide off the first, introductory section of the poem, the *upphaf* ('beginning, opening'), from the intermediate sections (*stefjamél* or *stefjabálkr*) and the conclusion or *slœmr* ('slim [end]').[15] The fact that the formal elaborations made possible by the use of the *stef* were considered to be of aesthetic and communicative significance is attested in skaldic poetry itself. A good example, in which the twelfth-century Icelandic poet Hallar-Steinn compares himself to a shipwright and the poem to a ship, and then equates parts of the poem, divided by *stef*, to parts of the ship, with the poem's *upphaf* paralleled to the ship's prow, is from an otherwise unknown poem about a woman, quoted in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri's *Edda*:

> Ek hefi óðar lokri
> ǫlstafna Bil skafna,
> væn mǫrk skála, verki
> vandr, stefknarrar branda. (Faulkes 1998 I: 63, verse 203)
>
> *Prose word order*. Ek hefi skafna branda stefknarrar lokri óðar, vandr verki, Bil ǫlstafna, væn mǫrk skála.
>
> *Translation*. I have smoothed the prow[16] of the refrain-ship [DRÁPA > UPPHAF] with the plane of poetry, painstaking in [my] work, for the Bil

[15] It is not entirely certain that *upphaf* was a medieval technical term for the opening section of a skaldic *drápa*, though the balance of probability lies in its favour. Some usages of the term are not clearly technical (e.g. Þórarinn loftunga, *Glælognskviða* 1/6), though others probably are (e.g. Óttarr svarti, *Óláfsdrápa sœnska* ('*Drápa* about Óláfr the Swede') 1/1, *Jǫfurr heyri upphaf . . . bragar mins* (*Skj* BI: 267), 'Prince, listen to the beginning . . . of my poem'). The term *slœmr* for the concluding section of a long poem seems to have come into fashion from some time in the twelfth century, as it is not attested before that, and is not used in Snorri's *Edda*. It occurs in Hallar-Steinn's *Rekstefja* 24/2, composed about Óláfr Tryggvason, and in a number of poems with Christian subjects, dating from the mid-twelfth century (e.g. *Harmsól* 46/6) into the late fourteenth (e.g. *Drápa af Maríugrát* 37/2).

[16] *Branda* (acc. pl. from *brandr*, usually used in the plural) is translated here 'prow' and

> ⟨goddess⟩ of the ale-ship [DRINKING HORN > WOMAN], for the beautiful forest of the bowl [WOMAN].

Stál (lit. 'steel') or inlay of intercalary or parenthetical clauses within the half-stanza was an admired syntactic feature of skaldic verse, and one that characterised *lausavísur* as well as extended poems. An example of *stál* is in the *helmingr* by Hallvarðr Háreksblesi quoted in Chapter 1; the feature in this instance allows the poet to underline the destructive battle-power of King Knútr by introducing an additional clause that repeats and so deepens the meaning of the main clause. Other uses of *stál* allow the poet to introduce a comment in his own voice on a particular event or situation, or an ironical remark that undermines the main clause may be introduced. Verses that utilised this feature could be termed *stæltr* or 'inlaid [with hammered steel]', according to *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 10) and the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises* (Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 70, 113, 136–7). Like many other technical terms for the compositional features of skaldic poetry, to be discussed further in Chapter 5, *stál* and *stæltr* draw on the vocabulary of smithing, in this case metal-working, to describe the parts that make up an Old Norse poem.[17]

assumed to be a *pars pro toto* usage. There has been some debate on what the *brandar* of a ship were (see Jesch 2001: 147–8), but they are here assumed to have been a pair of often ornamented carved strips of wood along the sides of a ship's prow, and so here meaning the prow as a whole.

[17] There are numerous other technical terms for the diction and verse forms of Old Norse poetry that employ vocabulary whose literal sense belongs in the realms of wood- or metal-working. For example, the noun *stafr* means literally a stave or staff of wood (a long thin piece), but was used in the poetic treatises, and presumably also in common discourse, of a letter of the alphabet (runic or Roman) and the sound it represented, and, with reference to poetry, an alliterating sound. The alliterating staves in odd lines of skaldic verse were termed *stuðlar* (sg. *stuðill*), lit. 'props, supports', terms again taken from wood-working. A number of these terms are discussed further in the chapters on Old Norse poetic treatises.

CHAPTER THREE

An Indigenous Typology of Old Norse Poetry 2: Genres and Subgenres of Skaldic Verse

The genres of skaldic poetry

As with eddic poetry, agonistic speech acts are never far from the surface of the classificatory vocabulary of the genres of skaldic verse. Thus it will come as no surprise that there are many Old Norse literary terms for poems of praise and blame, which point to one of poetry's main social purposes, to serve as a public endorsement of the dominant values of early Norse, especially Norwegian, court society and of the figure of its ruler, in particular, as a leader in war, a tough fighter himself, and a generous rewarder of his personal entourage. Encomium or praise poetry, in the form of eulogy (*hróðr*, *mærð*, *lof*, *lofkvæði*) and memorial lay (*erfikvæði*) are the modes of much skaldic verse composed by Norwegian and Icelandic poets whose patrons included kings and princes in Scandinavia, a small number of Icelandic chieftains, and rulers of England and the Orkneys. Praise poetry was the dominant skaldic mode of the period between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, at least in court circles or circles with courtly pretensions.

There also exists a small number of examples of court poems in which poets express criticisms of their royal or aristocratic patrons, and I have already canvassed the view that the dangers inherent in composing and then recording poetry that was critical of its subject was the main reason why such a small number of examples of this kind have survived in written form. The other side of praise, insult or shaming slander (*níð*), lampooning or satire (*flim* or *flimtan*), mockery (*spott*) or blame (*háð*, 'ridicule') is, however, well represented in the corpus of skaldic verse, though less often in extant court poetry than in a variety of personal and public contexts recorded for Icelandic society between *c*.900 and 1300. *Níðvísur* or verses of insult and calumny are reported in various contexts, from the verbal ammunition of the pro-pagan opponents of foreign missionaries in Iceland *c*.1000 to the numerous personal quarrels represented in family sagas (see

Almqvist 1965–74). They are presented in both the oldest Norwegian and Icelandic law codes as serious offences which, if proven, led to outlawry and possible death for the slanderer.[1] In all cases *níð* verses served to undermine a person's (normally a man's) honour, usually by casting doubt on his sexuality as a measure of his manliness (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983). Underlying the psychodynamics of these poetic subgenres of blame is the idea that poetry has the power to affect its victims with physical harm and mental hurt as well as to damage their reputations with dishonourable imputations. In these respects *níð* poetry is akin to sorcery, that is, the practice of magical arts supposed to cause particular damage to their victims, whether physical or mental. I will take up this subgenre again later in this chapter, when considering the special development of skaldic poetry in Iceland.

Another kind of poetry that was considered liable to damage a person's reputation was *mansǫngskvæði* or love poetry.[2] This kind of verse is also mentioned in the Icelandic lawcode *Grágás* in the same section as *níð* as something strictly forbidden and punishable with full outlawry, and there is no doubt that it was thought capable of turning a woman's affection to a particular man, without her knowledge and often against her will. This property of *mansǫngvar*, which again align them with types of sorcery, was not so much feared for its effect on the woman herself as for the dishonour it brought to the woman's male kin, whether father, husband or brother, who were supposed to guard her sexual purity on behalf of the kin-group and defend it against outside predators. If an unauthorised male gained sexual access to the woman, her honour and that of her male kin would be tarnished (Clunies Ross 1994a). This male perspective on human sexual behaviour is revealed throughout Old Icelandic literature to have been the norm in early Scandinavian society.

There is little extant evidence for the existence of *mansǫngskvæði* in courtly settings, for the same reasons as presumably led to the suppression of court poetry critical of rulers. It would have been a brave skald who dared to compose flattering poetry about his patron's wife, mistress, mother or sister, because every time he praised her body or her mind he

[1] The relevant passages from the west Norwegian *Law of Gulathing* and the Icelandic commonwealth code *Grágás* are conveniently summarised, with Old Norse texts and English translations, in Meulengracht Sørensen 1983: 15–18, 100. See *Grágás* K §238, 'Um skáldskap' (Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 183–5; Dennis, Foote and Perkins 2000: 197–9).

[2] *Mansǫngr* (pl. *–sǫngvar*) derives from *man* ('slave (male or female), girl, maiden') + *sǫngr* ('song').

would run the risk of implicit intimacy with her (how otherwise did he obtain the information?) and so suggest that his patron had been cuckolded. Some court skalds, nevertheless, may have sailed close to the wind by composing poems in praise of royal or noble women: the most telling evidence for this comes from an anecdote concerning Ástríðr, daughter of King Óláfr sœnski ('the Swedish'), who later (*c*.1019) married the Norwegian king Óláfr Haraldsson. The Icelandic poet Óttarr svarti was forced to compose a head-ransom poem, as has been mentioned in Chapter 2, because his new Norwegian patron found a poem he had composed about Ástríðr too explicit. Ástríðr indeed inspired other poetry and seems to have been a remarkable woman (see Jesch 1994–7). After her husband Óláfr's death she was exiled to Sweden but nevertheless acted to support the political career and claim to the Norwegian throne of her stepson Magnús. Sighvatr Þórðarson composed a poem praising her, the deeply strategic woman (*djúprýð kona*), for acting as if Magnús were her own son, and urged Magnús himself to acknowledge her magnanimous generosity appropriately (see *Skj* BI: 231–2).

It is worth mentioning here six *helmingar*, seemingly from a poem in praise of an unknown woman, attributed to a little-known Icelander named Ormr Steinþórsson, whose *floruit* is variously dated between *c*.1130 and the latter part of the twelfth century. Five of the six half-stanzas appear only in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, though one of these is also in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*. A sixth, presumed to belong to the same obscure poem (Jón Helgason 1966: 177), is quoted in the so-called *Laufás Edda* (Faulkes 1977–9 I: 397), compiled by the Icelandic priest Magnús Ólafsson (1573–1636) on the basis of the Codex Wormianus of Snorri's *Edda* but with numerous additions. Both Ólafur Halldórsson (1969, 1990) and Russell Poole (1982)[3] have speculated about whether the fragmentary remains of Ormr's poem might not be related to another poetic fragment, said in Flateyjarbók to belong to a poem named there as *Snæfríðardrápa* (or *Snjófríðardrápa*) ('*Drápa* about Snæfríðr'), a Lappish woman with whom King Haraldr hárfagri was said to have been infatuated according to several

[3] Poole (1982: 125–6) arranges all these verses in a reconstruction as a fragmentary long poem, and includes an English translation. He also points out in this article that many extant Old Norse love verses are in the relatively rare verse form *hálfhnept* ('half curtailed'), and suggests that this may have been a traditional measure for love poetry. He also suggests a possible similarity with some early-thirteenth-century poems, such as Bjarni Kolbeinsson's *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (see further Chapter 10), that combine an antiquarian enthusiasm for old stories with supposedly personal references to the poet's own love longing.

historical sources.[4] Ormr may thus have used the Haraldr–Snæfríðr story either to conceal the subject of his own passion, named as Sæunn, or to contrast Haraldr's extreme obsessiveness with the decorousness of his own love.

Outside courtly circles, some of the runic scraps of poetry that have survived from the Hanseatic merchants' quarter of Bryggen in Bergen reveal an active culture of *mansǫngskvæði* (Knirk 1997). An anonymous *dróttkvætt* stanza from the first half of the thirteenth century, found carved on a rune stave (B145) together with the Latin tag *omnia vincit amor: et nos cedamus amori*, 'love conquers all: we also must submit to love' (Virgil, *Eclogue* 10: 69), refers in its first *helmingr* to how the poet (the 'I' of the verse) was overcome with desire for a beautiful young woman some time previously:

> Fell til fríðrar þellu
> fárligrar mér árla
> fiskáls festibála
> forn byrr hamarnorna. (Text of Liestøl, Krause and Jón Helgason 1962)
>
> *Prose word order*. Forn byrr hamarnorna fell mér árla til fríðrar fárligrar þellu fiskáls festibála.
>
> *Translation*. The ancient breeze of the cliff-goddesses [GIANTESSES > DESIRE] fell to me early with respect to the beautiful, dangerous young pine tree of the fastened fire of the fish expanse [SEA > GOLD > (beautiful, dangerous, young) WOMAN].

In simpler terms, the first *helmingr* may be paraphrased as 'Desire for the beautiful, dangerous young woman overcame me a long time ago'. The interpretation of the second *helmingr* is difficult and has been variously understood, but it probably means something like 'this desire has retained its hold on the poet' (see Liestøl, Krause and Jón Helgason 1962; Liestøl 1963: 27–9; Frank 1978: 169–70, 179–81). Several extant scraps of love poetry in the runic corpus and, for example, in Snorri's collection of examples of kennings for women, seem to indicate that men's disappointments in love when women rejected them, as well as their passionate sexual desire for a particular woman, were frequent subjects of *mansǫngsvísur*.

[4] These include Flateyjarbók (Unger and Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1860 I: 582–3), *Ágrip* (Driscoll 1995: 4–7) and *Heimskringla*, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* ('Saga of Haraldr Finehair') ch. 25 (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51 I: 125–7).

The stringent Icelandic legal prohibitions on the composition of love poetry (and indeed on the poetry of insult) make interesting reading in the context of the so-called love poetry of the *skáldsögur* or poets' sagas of the *Íslendingasögur* corpus and the possibly troubadour-inspired love poetry that Jarl Rǫgnvaldr kali Kolsson of the Orkneys is said to have composed about Viscountess Ermengarda of Narbonne in the course of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1151–2, as told in *Orkneyinga saga* ('Saga of the Orkney Islanders', *c.*1200).[5]

Praise poetry and its subgenres

Having surveyed the continuum of skaldic genres across the range from praise to blame to ensorcelment on behalf of sexual passions, it is necessary to return to the dominant courtly genre, the praise-poem or encomium, for a more nuanced definition. In doing so, we must first of all distinguish between poetic performance and use in courtly environments and what we can learn from medieval texts about poetry's role in Iceland and other environments where there was an absence of courtly life. In courtly environments skalds were members of an elite household of hand-picked warriors, the *drótt*, who served a king or an earl. The skald's official role was to compose memorable poems about the ruler and his glorious deeds, for which he hoped to be appropriately rewarded with gifts, which might include both valuable material objects and landed property. Alongside the skald's celebration of his patron, however, he was usually ensuring his own fame, because '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' (Faulkes 1993a: 12).

Court poets had a semi-professional status, though they were still only part-timers, the rest of their lives being spent in travelling on viking expeditions or — if they were Icelanders — working on their family farm. In the Viking Age they travelled with their patrons on the latter's military campaigns and recorded details of the kings' battles and journeys and their generosity to their followers as well as their ruthless slaughter of the enemy. A frequent subject of skaldic praise poems was the king's prowess

[5] There is an extensive literature on the subject of whether the so-called love poetry of the skald sagas and related narratives has been influenced by foreign literature, especially by troubadour lyrics (Bjarni Einarsson 1961). The most recent opinion on this matter is largely negative, though the possibility exists of a southern-influenced culture of poetic composition in the Orkneys; see the essays in Poole 2001a, which point out how different the Old Norse poetry really is from that of Provence and other centres of courtly love, different in both conception and emphasis.

as a warrior at sea and his skill as a strategist in sea battles. Usually these encomia were ornamented with kennings and other rhetorical devices that elaborated and amplified the often basically simple referential meaning of the poetry. The oldest extant skaldic poem of this type to use the *dróttkvætt* measure (that is, fit for the *drótt*, or royal entourage) is *Glymdrápa*, composed by the Norwegian skald Þorbjǫrn hornklofi ('horn-cleaver'). The name of the *drápa* seems to allude to the wealth of clever sound effects that provided a verbal echo of the land and sea battles of King Haraldr hárfagri ('finehair') whom the poem celebrates. Stanza 7 provides an example of Þorbjǫrn's art, two intercalaries in the first *helmingr* and one in the second emphasising the din of battle:

> Ríks — þreifsk reiddra øxa
> rymr — knǫ́ttu spjǫr glymja —
> svartskyggð bitu seggi
> sverð þjóðkonungs ferðar,
> þás (hugfyldra hǫlða)
> hlaut andskoti Gauta
> (hǫ́r vas sǫngr of svirum)
> sigr (flugbeiddra vigra). (*Skj* BI: 21)
>
> *Prose word order*. Svartskyggð sverð ferðar ríks þjóðkonungs bitu seggi — rymr reiddra øxa þreifsk — spjǫr knǫ́ttu glymja — þás andskoti Gauta hlaut sigr; sǫngr flugbeiddra vigra of svirum vas hǫ́r.
>
> *Translation*. The dark-shining swords of the troop of the powerful national king [(royal) WARRIORS] bit the men — the roaring noise of the swung axes was powerful — spears resounded — when the opponent of the Gautar[6] [HARALDR] obtained the victory — the song of the flight-forced spears over their necks was loud.

Panegyrics of this kind comprised the principal genre of skaldic verse in its courtly setting. Their main purpose was to record the ruler's success in war and in political life for purposes of present and future propaganda. They probably also served to entertain the *drótt*, to add to the ruler's magnificence and to provide intellectual challenge and stimulation to those who heard their elaborate diction. The primary focus of these poems is largely on the ruler's glorious deeds; the poet, who reports them, and is their secondary focus, usually appears in the role of a reliable and authoritative eyewitness, and one whose relationship to his patron was frequently

[6] People of Götaland in southern Sweden.

one of close companionship, if not friendship, though always mindful of the difference in rank between them. According to *Fagrskinna*, chapter 2 (Bjarni Einarsson 1985: 59), Þorbjǫrn hornklofi was an old friend of King Haraldr's, and had been at his court constantly since his childhood ([*hann var*] *gamall vinr konunga, er jafnan hafði í hirðum verit frá barnæsku*).

Some praise poems of the late Viking Age seem to have had additional functions that can probably be attributed to the influence of the growingly literate world that Scandinavians encountered outside their own countries. Jesch (forthcoming) has suggested that some skaldic court poetry from the late Viking Age was intended to serve similar functions to certain kinds of written documents in other parts of early medieval Europe. Just as Anglo-Saxon and other European societies of the tenth and eleventh centuries used annals, charters and writs to confirm events and transactions in writing, with precise dates, locations and lists of persons involved, so some skalds of this period incorporated similar references into their poetry, which was still an oral medium of record. Some of the poetry of Arnórr Þórðarson jarlaskáld ('earls' poet') (after 1011 — after 1073), is of this kind, particularly his *Þorfinnsdrápa*, composed more than twenty years after the events it describes, in honour of Þorfinnr Sigurðarson, one of the most prominent earls of Orkney. An Icelander by birth, Arnórr spent much of his early adult life in the Orkneys and was married to a relative of the earls (Whaley 1998: 43–4). He participated in the fighting at two major battles described in *Þorfinnsdrápa*, which took place between *c*.1036 and *c*.1044, so, although an interval of time separated his experience of these and other events from his composition of the *drápa*, there is an eyewitness vividness and attention to local detail as well as a chronological awareness that informs this poem, even extending to the naming in two instances of the day of the week on which specific engagements took place (Whaley 1998: 53–4). Stanza 13 gives a good idea of this kind of composition; I quote from the edited text and translation of Whaley (1998: 244), to which I have added the one kenning referent:

> Veit'k, þar's Vatnsfjǫrðr heitir,
> — vas'k í miklum haska —
> míns — við mannkyns reyni —
> merki dróttins verka.
> Þjóð bar skjótt af skeiðum
> skjaldborg fría morgin;
> gǫrla sá'k, at gríndi
> grár ulfr of ná sǫrum.

> *Prose word order*. Veit'k merki verka dróttins míns, þar's heitir Vatnsfjǫrðr. Vas'k í miklum haska við mannkyns reyni. Þjóð bar skjótt skjaldborg af skeiðum fría morgin. Sá'k gǫrla, at grár ulfr gríndi of sǫ́rum ná.
>
> *Translation*. I know there are tokens of the exploits of my lord, where it is called Vatnsfjǫrðr.[7] I was in great peril with the trier of men [ÞORFINNR]. The crew carried swiftly the shield-wall from the ships on Friday morning. I saw clearly, how the grey wolf stretched his jaws over the gashed corpse.

Because the court poet frequently filtered the exploits of his patron through his own, first-person narration of events, as in the example from *Þorfinnsdrápa*, there were many opportunities for him to draw attention to himself by means of a variety of traditional motifs, which included his call for a hearing from the *drótt* and self-referential asides about his own poetic activities, often expressed through kennings that alluded to the myth of how the god Óðinn endowed poets with the ability to compose poetry through his gift to them of a draught of the poetic mead.[8] Some skalds, such as the Icelander Sighvatr Þórðarson, became semi-official ambassadors for their lords and two of his poems describe official journeys and diplomatic missions, in which the poet himself is an important participant, and acts independently of his lord. These are his *Austrfararvísur* ('Verses about a Journey Eastwards'), *c*.1017, and his *Vestrfararvísur* ('Verses about a Journey Westwards'), *c*.1025–6, about a journey he took to England to gather intelligence about Knútr's plans for gaining power in Norway. *Austrfararvísur* concerns a diplomatic mission Sighvatr undertook on behalf of King Óláfr Haraldsson *c*.1017–19 to Earl Rǫgnvaldr of Västergötland in modern Sweden, a journey represented as difficult, full of hopeless inefficiency (he says he had a dreadful leaky old tub of a boat) and one that took him deep into the backblocks of Swedish heathendom. In these verses, less formal than the *drápa*, the poet's own persona comes through strongly, and he is able to maintain a certain ironic, even comic, perspective on his adventures, which also allows him to laugh at himself. The tone is dramatic, chatty, amusing, but he is appalled at the rough conditions and benighted people that he had to encounter on the way and he plays up the differences between himself and those he visits, partly through the use of direct speech to report what they said, a stylistic device not much used in skaldic verse before the

[7] Probably Loch Vatten, an arm of the sea branching off Loch Bracadale on the west coast of Skye (Whaley 1998: 244 and further references given there).

[8] This subject is treated in greater detail in Chapter 5.

twelfth century. We may perhaps imagine King Óláfr's retinue back in Christian Norway laughing with a superior, cultivated scorn at the antics of the heathen Swedes and Sighvatr's own representation of himself being abused by a tough pagan woman, as in stanza 5 of the *Austrfararvísur*, where he comes upon a house in which the inhabitants are performing a ritual, *álfablót*, a sacrificial feast in honour of the elves:

> 'Gakkat inn', kvað ekkja,
> 'armi drengr, en lengra;
> hræðumk ek við Óðins
> — erum heiðin vér — reiði';
> rýgr kvazk inni eiga
> óþekk sús mér hnekði
> álfa blót sem ulfi
> ótvín í bœ sínum. (*Skj* BI: 221 with changed punctuation)
>
> *Prose word order*. 'Gakkat inn en lengra, armi drengr', kvað ekkja; 'ek hræðumk við Óðins reiði — vér erum heiðin'; óþekk rýgr, sús hnekði mér ótvín sem ulfi, kvazk eiga alfablót inni í bœ sínum.
>
> *Translation*. 'Don't you go inside any further, you miserable fellow', said the woman; I'm afraid of Óðinn's wrath — we're heathens!' The unlovely dame, who drove me away determinedly like a wolf, said they were holding an *álfablót* in her farmhouse.

There are other kinds of skaldic praise poetry developed for a courtly environment whose purpose and circumstances of performance are clear from their generic attributes. Three such subgenres of the skaldic encomium deserve mention here. The first is the *erfidrápa* (from *erfi*, 'funeral feast') or memorial lay, which was designed to be recited at royal funerals or at celebrations that marked the death of a king or earl. Although Ohlmarks (1944) argued that the *erfidrápa* was the origin of the whole of the skaldic art, there are no major differences between this subgenre and other kinds of praise poem, except that the subject of it was dead and not living at the time of its composition and recitation (see Fidjestøl 1982: 198). A common concluding trope of memorial lays is the assertion that the world will be destroyed or suffer cataclysmic harm before another such ruler is born. In pre-Christian times, this trope is likely to have been tied to the invocation of the destruction of the world at Ragnarǫk and the ruler being received into Valhǫll, as we see in Eyvindr skáldaspillir's *Hákonarmál* (*c*.961), discussed below. In early Christian *erfidrápur*, like Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld's memorial lay for King Óláfr Tryggvason

(*c*.1001, *Skj* BI: 150–7), the trope of the world bursting apart is combined with an added prayer that Christ would preserve the ruler's soul in heaven. From the eleventh century at least two *erfidrápur* in honour of King Óláfr Haraldsson (St Óláfr) bear witness to the early development of the idea that this king was a saint. The older of these, Þórarinn loftunga's *Glælognskviða*, composed shortly after Óláfr's death in 1031, mentions the king's uncorrupted body and certain miracles associated with his burial place; his successor, Sveinn Knútsson, to whom the poem is addressed, is urged to pray to Óláfr for permission to rule Norway. Only fragments remain of another *erfidrápa* for Óláfr composed by Sighvatr Þórðarson, but they again lay stress upon cosmic disturbances at the time of the ruler's death (a solar eclipse, reminiscent of that reported by several of the Christian gospels to have occurred at the death of Christ) and miracles associated with his body and shrine.

From the beginning of the twelfth century, the celebration of the death of the ruler could encompass such clearly Christian ideas as the concept of the ruler's life as both a physical and a spiritual pilgrimage, as we find in Markús Skeggjason's *Eiríksdrápa* for the Danish king Eiríkr eygóðr ('ever-good') Sveinsson, who died in Cyprus in 1103 on his way to the Holy Land (see Jesch 2003). *Geisli*, an *erfidrápa* for St Óláfr by the twelfth-century Icelandic priest and poet Einarr Skúlason, emphasises the miracles that Óláfr performed as well as the military victories he won. This is not surprising, as the poem was commissioned by King Eysteinn, son of Haraldr gilli ('servant') Magnússon, and Archbishop Jón Birgisson (see *Geisli* 8 and 71), probably to support the establishment of an independent Norwegian see at Trondheim following the visit to Norway of Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear in the spring of 1153. According to Morkinskinna (Finnur Jónsson 1932: 446; Andersson and Gade 2000: 393), Einarr recited his *erfidrápa* in Trondheim cathedral, probably in the summer of 1153 (Chase 1981: 44). *Geisli* sets up an elaborate set of parallels between the royal saint and Christ, using imagery that compares both to the sun and sunlight, hence the significance of the poem's name. Stanza 18, beginning the *stefjamél*, and its *stef* in lines 5–8, which deals with the miracles Óláfr performed after death, exemplifies this trope:

> Fúss emk, þvít vann vísir
> — vas hann mestr konungr flestra—,
> — drótt nemi mærð — ef mættak,
> manndýrðir stef vanda.
> Greitt má gumnum létta

Guðs ríðari stríðum;
rǫskr þiggr alt sem œskir
Óláfr af gram sólar. (Text: Chase 1981: 153 with normalisation)

Prose word order. Emk fúss vanda stef, ef mættak, þvít vísir vann manndyrðir — hann vas mestr konungr flestra — drótt nemi mærð. Guðs ríðari má greitt létta gumnum stríðum; rǫskr Óláfr þiggr alt sem œskir af gram sólar.

Translation. I am eager to craft a *stef*, if I am able, because the prince performed man-befitting glories — he was the greatest king over many — may the retainers hear my praise-poem! God's knight [ÓLÁFR] can readily alleviate men's afflictions; brave Óláfr will receive all he desires from the king of the sun [GOD].

The emphasis of this Christian *erfidrápa* has shifted from praising the king's martial victories for their own sakes to the good he can do for his people, as much in terms of their spiritual improvement as their political or martial welfare. Indeed the poet's choice of words like *stríð* (line 6), which can mean both 'grief, affliction, sorrow' and 'strife, war', but probably implies the former in this context, shows the change of direction of Christian memorial poetry very clearly, as does Einarr's choice of kennings such as *Guðs ríðari* ('God's knight') (line 6), to characterise Óláfr himself. This is the first instance of the word *ríðari* (alternative form *riddari*) in Norse poetry, and probably shows the influence of European romance literature. However, it also makes the orthodox Christian point, as does the *stef* as a whole, that Óláfr as ruler mediates between God and his people.

It is interesting to turn back for comparison to Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir's (lit. 'poet-destroyer', ?plagiarist) late pagan *Hákonarmál*, composed probably after the death of Hákon inn góði around 961. This poem, which uses the eddic measures *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðaháttr*, represents the ruler's welcome into Valhǫll among the pagan gods. The poet concludes with a stanza (21) that suggests both the cosmic dimensions of Hákon's death and the adverse political effects of that death upon his people:

Deyr fé,
deyja frændr,
eyðisk land ok láð;
síz Hǫkon
fór með heiðin goð,
mǫrg es þjóð of þéuð. (*Skj* BI: 60)

Translation. Animals die, kinsmen die, the land and territory is laid waste; since Hákon travelled among the heathen gods, many people have been enslaved.

This stanza incorporates an echo of a presumably semi-proverbial couple of lines that also occur in the eddic poem *Hávamál* (stanzas 76/1–2 and 77/1–2), *deyr fé, deyja frændr*. Eyvindr's concluding stanza is ambiguous on several levels. For one thing, it can be interpreted as a political comment on the harsh rule of Hákon's successor Haraldr gráfeldr ('greycloak'); for another its attitude to paganism is ambivalent, as Marold (1972, 1993a) has shown. In *Hávamál*, the *deyr fé, deyja frændr* stanzas' second parts introduce a contrasting idea: of something that never dies, a man's good reputation. Here, however, the gloom of the lines is merely intensified, not countered, by the statement that since Hákon has gone to the heathen gods the people have suffered harsh oppression. This last remark could be interpreted to imply that not only have the people suffered under his successor, but also that the kinds of advantages that Christianity might bring with it cannot but be absent from a life after death entrusted to the heathen gods.[9] Such oblique commentary is perhaps the kind of thing one might expect from a skald who lived in troubled and transitional times both in politics and religion.

A second subgenre of the courtly praise poem comprises a relatively small group of genealogical poems, which celebrate the members of a dynasty and, in particular, the last and — so the poet puts it — the most illustrious member of the line. The significant poems in this group are *Ynglingatal*, composed by Þjóðólfr of Hvinir in about 900 to celebrate the Norwegian Vestfold dynasty and its most recent member, Rǫgnvaldr Óláfsson, in particular, and *Háleygjatal*, composed by Eyvindr skáldaspillir for Earl Hákon Sigurðarson, the last great pagan ruler of Norway, after his victory over the Jómsvíkingar, a group of warriors based on the south Baltic coast, in 985. There is also the much later *Nóregskonungatal*, composed for the Icelandic chieftain Jón Loptsson *c*.1180, in imitation of the earlier compositions, which belong to the pre-Christian period. As we have seen in Chapters 1 and 2, these genealogical poems use the metre *kviðuháttr* and take the form of versified lists (*tal*). They begin far back in the mythic past and trace the ancestors of a contemporary royal or aristocratic line from such forebears. It seems to have been characteristic of the subgenre to concentrate on how the royal forebears met their deaths, thus

[9] Marold (1993a) has noted a number of signs in this poem of religious ambivalence towards heathendom.

revealing a close connection with *erfikvæði*. In *Ynglingatal*, which Snorri Sturluson uses as the basis for his *Ynglinga saga* ('Saga of the Ynglingar'), the legendary history of the kings of Norway that prefaces *Heimskringla*, the kings' burial places are also mentioned; in *Háleygjatal*, this information is given in only one instance.

As might be imagined, this group of poems provided early medieval historians with a marvellous peg upon which to hang their narratives, especially those that covered the preliterate period, for which written evidence about their subjects was lacking. In addition, the frequent suggestion of involvement of these royal ancestors with pagan supernatural forces was conducive to their use in later prose narratives that subscribed to the theory that the Scandinavian kings were descended from the pagan gods (Faulkes 1978–9). It seems reasonable to assume that the social purpose of genealogical poetry was, first, to celebrate the distinguished line of the present ruler, and then to commemorate the dead in a necrology that is likely to have been originally associated with rituals involving cults connected with the relics or grave-mounds of the dead rulers. We know, for example, that the mound complexes of the royal house of Vestfold, which have survived into modern times, reveal an expectation that the worlds of the living and the dead were connected (Christensen *et al*. 1992; Herschend 2003). We also know, as Anne Heinrichs has demonstrated in her study of the legends concerning the prehistoric Yngling king Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr (1989: 109; 1994: 44–7), that, long into Christian times in Norway, it was considered necessary for those who wished to inherit their family lands to secure their legitimate rights to those lands by proving that their ancestry stretched back to the denizen of the family grave mound established by pagan ritual (*til haugs ok heiðni*). In such circumstances genealogical poetry served a clear socio-political and religious purpose: it established, in a chronological order that was easily memorable, a connection between a family line and the gods and between the alleged members of that family line in order of descent, as well as indicating how and where they died. These were the necessary pieces of information that were needed for someone establishing his claim to royal or noble succession in early medieval Norway.[10]

[10] The eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, preserved in Flateyjarbók, can be understood in the light of the literary and social expectations that underlie the genealogical poem, as Gurevich has shown (1973). Here the supernatural female figures of the giantess Hyndla and the goddess Freyja are concerned to remind a certain Óttarr, called *heimski* ('foolish'), of his ancestral claims to land by means of genealogical information that he appears to have forgotten (presumably the reason why he has attracted such a

Nóregskonungatal, composed for the late-twelfth-century Icelandic chieftain Jón Loptsson, provides an interesting coda to the genealogical poem's history. This anonymous composition, which has been preserved mainly in Flateyjarbók, celebrates the connection between the Oddaverjar, at the time the most powerful family in Iceland, and the Norwegian royal house, through Jón's family relationship with King Magnús berfœttr, his mother's father, his mother being illegitimate. In recent years scholars, particularly a younger generation of Icelandic researchers, have been drawing attention to the extent to which commonwealth Iceland, while ostensibly republican and kingless, was both fascinated by royalty and eager to assert its royal connections (see Ármann Jakobsson 1997, 2002). This tendency, which can be seen in a variety of prose texts, especially kings' sagas and sagas of Icelanders, manifested itself most strongly in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries among the most powerful Icelandic families of Oddaverjar, Haukdælir and Sturlungar, and it was also in their circles that the role of poetry began to assume similar social and political purposes to that which had traditionally applied to court poetry composed for the kings of Norway and other Norwegian-influenced realms (Guðrún Nordal 2001: 117–95). Jón Loptsson's claim to royal status is thus strongly signalled by the unknown author of *Nóregskonungatal*'s generic choice of the genealogical poem, otherwise only found in connection with mainland Norway.

In Chapter 10 we shall look in more detail at what happened to skaldic poetry in Iceland among the powerful families in the period immediately before the demise of the commonwealth in 1262–4, but a preview is in order here. Briefly, it seems that Icelandic skalds began a revival of the art as a political tool to advance themselves with Norwegian rulers. Of course poets such as Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson did not become skilled skalds for political ends alone, because obviously these men of great intellect had much wider and less applied interests. The important point to note here, however, is that they began to practise genres of skaldic verse that had previously not been used in Iceland but which were strongly associated with the Norwegian court, and they directed them to Norwegian rather than Icelandic recipients. There are very few indications in Old Icelandic literature that encomia or memorial lays were composed about Icelanders in Iceland in the period before the late twelfth century. Guðrún Nordal (2001: 130–1) has recently reviewed the evidence:

nickname), and which he needs in order to win a lawsuit against a certain Angantýr. The genealogies that the supernatural women provide are represented as Óttarr's reward for his faithful cultivation of the *ásynjur* ('goddesses') with ritual sacrifice (stanza 10).

> Two poems are mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Illugadrápa* ['Poem with Refrain about Illugi'] by Oddr skáld . . . and Þormóðr Trefilsson's *Hrafnsmál*, where the cleverness and cunning of Snorri goði Þorgrímsson are praised . . . . A memorial poem by Arnórr jarlaskáld on Gellir Þorkelsson is mentioned at the end of *Laxdœla saga* ['Saga of the People of Laxárdalr']. . . . The reference to such memorial poems in both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdœla saga* associates the writing of the earliest Sagas of Icelanders with royal historiography. Both saga authors acknowledge skaldic poetry as contributing to the portrayal of these three chieftains, who are the forefathers of thirteenth-century aristocrats; they deserved skaldic eulogizing in the same way as the rulers of Scandinavia. That this is a deliberate authorial device is best shown by pointing out that Arnórr's poem is not cited in the saga; the desired effect is achieved by merely mentioning that such a poem existed. Two poems are composed in honour of dead friends or relatives: Egill Skalla-Grímsson composed *Sonatorrek* after the death of the poet's sons . . . and Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld his *Þorgeirsdrápa* in memory of his foster- brother Þorgeirr Hávarsson . . . . Egill and Þormóðr are not composing in the service of these men. The poems are personal in their expression of praise and lament after the death of a loved one.

There is one other important and ancient subgenre of the courtly praise poem, which made a fleeting appearance in Iceland, in circumstances that also reveal pretensions to royal connections. This is the subgenre of the picture poem or poem descriptive of an object. Picture poems gave verbal descriptions of visually represented scenes on objects that were often gifts to a skald from a patron, who in return expected a praise poem in his own honour. Most of the extant picture poems, or fragments thereof, date from the early Viking Age (late ninth and tenth centuries); most of them give verbal pictures of scenes from Norse myth or from heroic legend. Two of the best known are the *Ragnarsdrápa* of Bragi Boddason the Old, and the *Haustlǫng* of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir. The powerful late-tenth-century mythological poem *Þórsdrápa* by Eilífr Goðrúnarson, which narrates the god Þórr's journey to the home of the giant Geirrøðr and their subsequent fight, may also be a picture poem, but the poem itself gives no hint of a pictorial subject and does not mention a patron by name, though *Skáldatal* associates Eilífr with Earl Hákon Sigurðarson. Picture poems are an indirect means of praising the patron; their subtext is 'look how generous and wealthy my patron is if he can reward me with such a splendid object, on which so many magnificent scenes from myth and legend are richly depicted!' Some scholars have wondered whether the Latin genre of *ekphrasis*, or pictorial description, may not have given the picture poem an

impetus at the courts of early Viking Age rulers, because it was a popular late Latin genre among European rulers of the early Middle Ages (Lie 1956). This hypothesis, though very plausible, cannot be proved, but, if true, it would suggest that Viking Age rulers were keen to emulate the early medieval European world not only in terms of material culture but also in less tangible ways.

The pictorial poem is the subgenre of skaldic verse in which mythic and legendary narrative is paramount, and thus it is not surprising to discover that it had virtually no place in the skaldic repertoire after the conversion to Christianity. This subgenre shows a continuity with mythic and heroic narratives in eddic measures, but transposed to a courtly setting. In some instances, indeed, skaldic and eddic poems have the same subject matter. *Ragnarsdrápa* deals in part with the legend of the deaths of the heroes Hamðir and Sǫrli at the hands of the Gothic tyrant Jǫrmunrekkr (Ermanaric). The eddic poem *Hamðismál* has the same subject, as we may see from two sample stanzas, *Ragnarsdrápa* 3 and *Hamðismál* 23, that reveal considerable similarities of vocabulary, phraseology and subject matter:

> Knátti eðr við illan
> Jǫrmunrekkr at vakna
> með dreyrfáar dróttir
> draum í sverða flaumi.
> Rósta varð í ranni
> Randvés hǫfuðniðja,
> þás hrafnbláir hefndu
> harma Erps of barmar. (Whaley *et al*. 2002: 63)
>
> *Prose word order*. Eðr Jǫrmunrekkr knátti at vakna við illan draum með dreyrfáar dróttir í sverða flaumi. Rósta varð í ranni Randvés hǫfuðniðja, þás hrafnbláir barmar Erps of hefndu harma.
>
> *Translation*. And then Jǫrmunrekkr was forced to wake to an evil dream among the blood-stained troops in the eddy of swords [BATTLE]. There was tumult in the hall of Randvér's ⟨son of Jǫrmunrekkr⟩ chief kinsmen [GOTHS] when the raven-black brothers of Erpr [HAMÐIR AND SǪRLI] avenged [their] sorrows.

> Styrr varð í ranni, stucco ǫlscálir,
> í blóði bragnar lágo, komið ór briósti Gotna. (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 272)
>
> *Translation*. There was tumult in the hall, the ale-cups fell down, men lay in blood, that had flowed from the breasts of Goths.

At least one Icelandic skald, Úlfr Uggason, imitated the subgenre of the picture poem, and he did so in circumstances which were almost certainly designed to evoke the regal magnificence of Norwegian court society. The social context is given to us in *Laxdœla saga*, one of the most aristocratically minded sagas of Icelanders, usually considered to have been composed *c*.1250; parts of the poem itself have survived in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, where it is quoted at various places in *Skáldskaparmál*. In chapter 29 of *Laxdœla saga* we are told that Óláfr pái ('peacock'), illegitimate son of Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson and Melkorka, daughter of an Irish king who had been sold into slavery, built a magnificent hall at his farm at Hjarðarholt. Óláfr was a great lover of splendour, as his nickname 'peacock' implies, and the saga writer's description of his hall indicates how many resources he put into keeping up his aristocratic, if not regal, life-style:

> Þat sumar lét Óláfr gera eldhús í Hjarðarholti, meira ok betra en menn hefði fyrr sét. Váru þar markaðar ágætligar sǫgur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu; var þat svá vel smíðat, at þá þótti miklu skrautligra, er eigi váru tjǫldin uppi. . . . eptir þat fastnar Geirmundr sér Þuríði, ok skal boð vera at áliðnum vetri í Hjarðarholti; þat boð var allfjǫlmennt, því at þá var algǫrt eldhúsit. Þar var at boði Úlfr Uggason ok hafði ort kvæði um Óláf Hǫskuldsson ok um sǫgur þær, er skrífaðar váru á eldhúsinu, ok fœrði hann þar at boðinu. Þetta kvæði er kallat Húsdrápa ok er vel ort. Óláfr launaði vel kvæðit. Hann gaf ok stórgjafar ǫllu stórmenni, er hann hafði heim sótt. Þótti Óláfr vaxit hafa af þessi veizlu. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 79–80)
>
> That summer Óláfr had a hall built at Hjarðarholt, which was larger and better than people had ever seen before. On the wood of the wainscot and also on the rafters, famous stories were carved. It was so well crafted that it was thought more showy without the tapestries than with them. . . . after that Geirmundr was betrothed to Þuríðr and their wedding was held later that winter at Hjarðarholt. A great number of people attended the feast as the hall was fully built by that time. Among the guests was Úlfr Uggason and he had composed a poem about Óláfr Hǫskuldsson and the stories carved on the wood of the hall, which he recited at the feast. It is called 'House *Drápa*' and is well composed. Óláfr rewarded him well for the poem. He also gave fine gifts to all the important people who had attended the feast. Óláfr's standing is thought to have increased considerably as a result of this feast.

Although this description is well known to readers of Icelandic sagas, the rather unusual nature of the poem and its performance *in an Icelandic context* have not been fully appreciated. As with *Nóregskonungatal*, the

courtly and pagan nature of the subgenre of skaldic verse that Úlfr chose for *Húsdrápa* ('House Poem') clearly marks it out as not only a very special poem fit to celebrate a very fine hall building carved with scenes from Norse myth, but as a recognition of the 'royal' pretensions of Óláfr himself, a man who, though illegitimate (like Jón Loptsson's mother), was a descendant of an Irish king on his mother's side, and, on his father's, could claim family connections with Norwegian aristocracy. Furthermore, the saga reveals Óláfr behaving as a Norwegian king could be expected to behave to his retinue, including his court poet. Úlfr also performs his part in an appropriately 'courtly' way: by directing his poem both to his patron and the elaborate carvings on the walls of the hall, he manages to flatter his patron's ego and compliment him on his splendid life-style. The result is that, in expected courtly fashion, Óláfr gives him a good reward for the poem. All this would be standard fare as an incident in a king's saga or a *þáttr* about relations between a Norwegian king and an Icelandic court poet, but the scene here is set in Iceland in the immediate pre-conversion period. As with Arnórr jarlaskáld's poem on Gellir Þorkellsson, also mentioned in *Laxdœla saga*, the saga writer feels no need to quote from Úlfr's poem in order to create the effect of courtly magnificence associated with the circumstances of *Húsdrápa*'s recital.

The twelve stanzas and half-stanzas from *Húsdrápa* which have been preserved in fragmentary form in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* reveal that Úlfr Uggason composed his picture poem quite consciously within the Norwegian tradition exemplified by Bragi and Þjóðólfr. In terms of metre, elaborate style and subject matter he is in full conformity with Norwegian courtly norms. All the scenes described in the preserved stanzas are mythological, and one, the god Þórr's fight with the World Serpent, Miðgarðsormr, was a favourite subject both of eddic verse and of early skaldic picture poetry.[11] The other subjects are the funeral of the god Baldr and an obscure myth in which the gods Loki and Heimdallr, both in the form of seals, struggle for an object called *hafnýra* 'sea-kidney', possibly a

[11] Many poems and fragments of poems on this subject exist, bearing witness to its great popularity in the period before, during and soon after the conversion to Christianity, when Þórr's fight with the World Serpent was seen to parallel Christ's harrowing of hell and defeat of Satan (Gschwantler 1968). Pictorial representations of this subject were also popular, both in Scandinavia itself and in the Viking colonies (Meulengracht Sørensen 1986). Among the known poetry, there is the eddic-style *Hymiskviða*, verses by Bragi Boddason (traditionally considered part of *Ragnarsdrápa*, though this ascription is dubious), *Húsdrápa*, and fragments by Ǫlvir hnúfa, Eysteinn Valdason and Gamli gnævaðarskáld. Aside from *Hymiskviða*, all this poetry comes to us only in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*.

girdle named Brísingamen which later belonged to Freyja, at a rocky outcrop called Singasteinn (see Schier 1994: 80–101). A single *dróttkvætt* stanza that Úlfr composed on this subject has been preserved:

> Ráðgegninn bregðr ragna
> rein- at Singasteini
> frægr við firna slœgjan
> Fárbauta mǫg -vári.
> Móðǫflugr ræðr mœðra
> mǫgr hafnýra fǫgru
> — kynni ek — áðr ok einnar
> átta — mærðar þáttum. (Faulkes 1998 I: 20)
>
> *Prose word order*. Frægr rein-vári ragna, ráðgegninn, bregðr við firna slœgjan mǫg Fárbauta at Singasteini. Mǫgr átta mœðra ok einnar, móðǫflugr, ræðr áðr fǫgru hafnýra — ek kynni þáttum mærðar.
>
> *Translation*. The renowned defender of the gods' ground-strip, helpful with counsel [BIFRǪST[12] > HEIMDALLR], competes with the extremely sly son of Fárbauti ⟨giant, father of Loki⟩ [LOKI] at Singasteinn. The son of eight mothers plus one [HEIMDALLR], mighty of mood, is the first to get hold of the beautiful sea-kidney [?BRÍSINGAMEN]. I make it known in strands of praise.

It is not surprising that Snorri, himself a composer of skaldic verse in the courtly tradition and an avowed advocate of the importance of the work of the chief court skalds, should have provided a number of quotations from this poem, and almost certainly used it in support of his narratives of Baldr's death and, to some extent, Þórr's fight with Miðgarðsormr in *Gylfaginning*. Among other things, it demonstrated that an Icelander, composing about the magnificent hall of a local chieftain, could compete with the best poets serving Norwegian rulers of the Viking Age.[13]

[12] The gods' rainbow bridge.

[13] A similar message is conveyed by an episode in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ch. 78 (Sigurður Nordal 1933: 268–73), in which the younger poet Einarr Helgason skálaglamm visited Egill at Borg and left him a present of an ornamented shield, which he himself had been given by Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson. The message conveyed by this episode is that Einarr considered Egill a greater poet than he was, and one in the courtly tradition, one for whom a precious gift, such as was usually bestowed by Norwegian patrons upon their court poets, was more than fitting, even though he lived on an Icelandic farm (see Clunies Ross forthcoming 2005). In the saga, which some scholars consider to have been the work of Snorri Sturluson, Egill appears angry at the gift, cursing that it requires him to compose a poem in return. For all that, we are told, he

Skaldic poetry outside a courtly environment

I turn now to consider the circumstances in which poetry is reported to have been composed and performed and the ways in which it was evaluated and understood in early medieval Iceland, far from the environment of a royal court. We have already seen that a number of the subgenres of skaldic poetry, closely tied as they were to a courtly audience and a royal patron, could not have been expected to flourish in Iceland, where there were neither kings nor courts, except to the extent that Icelanders such as Óláfr pái Hǫskuldsson and Jón Loptsson harboured kingly pretensions and attracted the composition of skaldic verse in appropriately courtly genres. After the middle of the twelfth century, too, new genres of poetry, such as historical, didactic and Christian religious verse, developed for the most part outside Norway, particularly in Iceland and the Orkneys. These developments are treated in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 10.

The interesting thing is that, far from inhibiting the composition of skaldic verse in Iceland, the new, kingless society there seems to have provided an environment in which some kinds of poetry flourished and new uses for poetry were devised. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the sources of this evidence, sagas for the most part, need to be treated with great care, but, if we are to believe the textual evidence of kings' sagas, *þættir* (short narratives, usually about a single character, sg. *þáttr*) and the skald sagas within the sagas of Icelanders in particular, medieval Icelanders moved poetry in two directions. On the one hand, a amajority of the most important court poets of the Norwegian kings in the eleventh and earlier twelfth centuries were Icelanders, who seemingly became professionals abroad and excelled in the composition of the skaldic genres I have already reviewed. On the other hand, in Iceland itself and outside the environment of the court, poetry came to assume wider-ranging roles, though almost certainly those roles were at least in part built upon the traditional roles and purposes that poetry had in early Scandinavian society before the settlement of Iceland at the end of the ninth century. However, we have to take care not to let the extant sources distort our vision. Can we believe the sagas of Icelanders and, to a lesser extent, the contemporary sagas, when they depict a considerable number of 'ordinary' Icelanders breaking into poetry at significant moments in their lives, or is this merely a literary fiction? My

rises to the occasion with a shield-lay, *Skjaldardrápa*, a single stanza of which is cited in the Mǫðruvallabók manuscript of *Egils saga*. Egill's courtly credentials are emphasised still further by the saga's attribution to him of another shield poem, *Berudrápa*, the gift of a Norwegian aristocrat, and Mǫðruvallabók again cites a stanza of this work. Both titles, *Skjaldardrápa* and *Berudrápa*, mean 'shield lay'.

own view is that, although the texts' authors may exaggerate Icelanders' poetic prowess out of a sense of national pride or a desire for literary cohesion, the high level of poetic activity depicted there does bear some relation to the importance attributed to poetry in medieval Iceland. How much can probably never be quantified.

Much more attention than has previously been directed at this subject needs to be focused on the alleged circumstances of both composition and performance of poetry according to sagas of Icelanders and on the apparent purposes for which the poetry was composed, as well as on its represented perlocutionary effects upon its audience. Following ideas about the performative character of Old Icelandic poetry already canvassed, this dimension needs to be taken into consideration when we read the prosimetrum or mixed verse and prose of saga literature. We must be attuned to the likely social purposes the poetry would have served, whether as *lausavísur* or as longer poems of more formal structure. We also need to be aware that something of the elevated social status attaching to poetry in a courtly context was by no means absent from its composition and performance in Iceland and the Orkneys.[14] Most of those who are represented as composing poetry in Iceland were significant men of good family (Guðrún Nordal 2001: 120–30), though in some cases, it is true, we know very little about the background of individuals who were poets. Most were men, though some were women. It is difficult to estimate how frequently women composed poetry, but there is no doubt that some did, both in Norway and Iceland, and the compositions of several have been handed down in reputable sources, though only one poetess, the tenth-century Norwegian Jórunn skáldmær ('poet-maiden'), makes it into Snorri's *Edda* (Kreutzer 1972; Jesch 1991: 164–5; Straubhaar 1993; Clunies Ross 2000a).[15]

Old Icelandic texts often present the ability to compose poetry as a talent running in families, that is, it seems to have been thought of as something that could be inherited from one generation to the next (Clunies Ross 1998: 173–82). For example, the family history of the eleventh-century Icelandic poet Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson (also known as Skáld-Refr) shows a strong

[14] We know relatively little about the practice of poetry in other Viking colonies, such as the Faroes and Shetland, with the exception of the British Isles, where there were kings and sub-kings, Anglo-Saxon, Irish and Viking.

[15] A good number of skaldic verses are attributed to women in sagas, often though not always paired with verses attributed to male characters. Very many of these women's verses (though not the men's) were classified as inauthentic by Finnur Jónsson and separated in *Skj* from their contexts. His reasons for so classifying the verses are rarely given, and seem to rest upon an unexamined assumption that women were less likely than men to compose *lausavísur*.

poetic talent inherited in the female line and a paternal line distinguished by several holders of heathen priestly office. His mother Steinunn belonged to the anti-Christian faction in Iceland at the time of the conversion. She composed poetry celebrating the god Þórr's achievement in wrecking the foreign missionary Þangbrandr's ship, according to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* ('The Great Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason') (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 II: 159; Turville-Petre 1976: 65–7; see also Clunies Ross 1998: 176). Refr also had a foster-father, Gizurr gullbrá ('golden eyelashes'),[16] who seems to have been a court poet of King Óláfr Haraldsson and to have died at the battle of Stiklastaðir in 1030. Two *helmingar* of Refr's, quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 7 (verse 4), 9–10 (verse 17)), are thought to be from a poem about Gizurr. The first of these laments the loss of a man who trained him as a poet, or possibly inspired him as a poet:[17]

> Opt kom — jarðar leiptra
> er Baldr hniginn skaldi —
> hollr at helgu fulli
> hrafn-Ásar mér — stafna. (Faulkes 1998 I: 7)
>
> *Prose word order*. Opt hollr kom mér at helgu fulli hrafn-Ásar — Baldr leiptra jarðar stafna er hniginn skaldi.
>
> *Translation*. Often the kind man brought me to the holy drink of the raven-god [ÓÐINN > POETRY] — the Baldr ⟨god⟩ of the light-flashes of the land of prows [SEA > GOLD > MAN] is departed from the poet.[18]

Much poetry said to have been composed by medieval Icelanders is preserved in prose contexts in the form of *lausavísur* or single verses. In some cases, we know from the prose context of preservation, or from other sources, that these *lausavísur* originally formed parts of named, extended poems. For example, there are several insulting verses directed by the poet Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld at Gríss Sæmingsson, husband of Kolfinna Ávaldadóttir, the woman he loved. These verses are presented in *Hallfreðar saga* as a sequence of *lausavísur* but are probably part of a named *níð*-poem called *Grízzvísur* ('Gríss-verses') (Poole 2001b: 144–9).

[16] On variations of this poet's nickname and the historical sources in which he appears, see Fidjestøl 1997b.

[17] A third stanza, apparently from this personal memorial poem from one poet to another, is in *Heimskringla* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51 II: 382).

[18] If the kenning *Baldr leiptra jarðar stafna* is a reference to Gizurr gullbrá, then there is probably an intended pun on his nickname, i.e. the Baldr [MAN] of gold.

Chapter 10 of the saga refers to this poem by name (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939: 188, 193) and characterises it as *hálfníð*, 'half-insult', but does not say in so many words that the quoted verses formed part of it, though they almost certainly did. The same information is conveyed in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 II: 306). *Landnámabók* (S183, H 149, Jakob Benediksson 1968 II: 224) tells us that Hallfreðr's *níð* had dire consequences: because of it, Brandr Ávaldason, brother of Kolfinna, killed Hallfreðr's brother Galti at the Húnavatn assembly, and this killing is also mentioned in chapter 10 of the saga and in *Óláfs saga* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 II: 307). As we can see from one of the Gríss verses cited here (*Skj* BI: 160, *lv*. 15), they conformed to the pattern of *níð* or shaming slander by insulting Gríss's person and insinuating that he was not as virile as he should be:

> Leggr at lýsibrekku
> Leggjar íss af Grísi
> — kvǫl þolir Hlín hjá hǫnum —
> heitr ofremmðar sveiti;
> en dreypileg drúpir
> dýnu Rǫn hjá hǫnum
> — leyfik ljóssa vífa
> lund — sem ǫlpt á sundi. (Whaley *et al*. 2002: 67)
>
> *Prose word order*. Heitr ofremmðar sveiti leggr at lýsibrekku leggjar íss af Grísi — Hlín þolir kvǫl hjá hǫnum; en dýnu Rǫn drúpir dreypileg hjá hǫnum, sem ǫlpt á sundi. Leyfik ljóssa vífa lund.
>
> *Translation*. Hot, most rank, sweat streams from Gríss onto the bright slope of arm's ice [SILVER > WOMAN] — Hlín suffers anguish beside him; and the eiderdown-Rǫn ⟨sea-goddess⟩ [WOMAN] droops, gloomy, beside him, like a swan in a bay. I praise the bright lady's nature.

It is not difficult to compile a list of the main contexts and purposes for which poetry is said to have been composed and recited in Iceland, according to saga evidence, and a study of these contexts and purposes also gives us some insight into how its audience understood and reacted to it. Even if we are unable to decide in some cases whether verses attributed to saga characters are authentically theirs or fictions of a later saga writer, we can at least accept that the medieval audiences of the sagas considered such attributions and purposes plausible. The historical record indicates that some kinds of poetry provoked immediate, drastic and sometimes lethal reactions, and the poetry of *níð*, as well as the somewhat less dangerous

lampoon (*flimtán*), is the most obvious case of this kind. We have seen that the purpose of such poetry was clearly to damage the victim's honour and reputation, normally through some kind of sexually based innuendo, but it was also thought to be able to inflict actual physical harm. It may seem strange to us that poetry could be credited with such dire consequences, but it is clear from Old Norse literature that people believed in the power of words to bring about social and physical effects. In this respect some kinds of poetry have to be seen as kinds of sorcery, with the poetry considered able to 'bite' its victim, just as a sword or other material weapon could. Thus the consequences of composing it were often physical violence inflicted by the victim and his supporters upon the poet and his allies.

A number of the poems of the Elder Edda, such as *Hárbarðsljóð*, show that the poetry of insult could be expressed in eddic as well as in skaldic verse. What gave skaldic poetry a particular advantage here, however, and the reason why saga literature shows it being used in commonwealth Iceland more often than eddic verse forms for this purpose, was the potential and often the actual obscurity of skaldic diction, with its complex kennings and fragmented word order. Given that the composition of *níð* verses was a dangerous and risky business for the poet, it was advantageous to him to be able to veil his true meaning in seemingly innocent-sounding words, or to use a word or phrase with double meaning or to express himself in such a convoluted way that only a select few were able to understand the meaning of the verse. This is a subject I will come back to in Chapter 5, when I discuss the aesthetics of medieval Scandinavian poetry. People in the know clearly enjoyed the intellectual challenge of deconstructing a skaldic verse. Equally, it provided a very effective cover for a poet whose message was provocative or insulting.

There are several other kinds of Old Norse poetry that were practised in Iceland and probably also in Norway which were comparable to *níð* verses in both intention and effect. One such is the extraordinary carnivalesque parody *Grettisfœrsla* ('Grettir's Moving'), preserved at the end of one manuscript of *Grettis saga* (AM 556 4to, on fols 52v–53r). The poem, which is mentioned in chapter 52 of the saga in the course of the episode of Grettir's capture by the farmers of Ísafjǫrðr, seems to be a scurrilous, exaggerated burlesque of a projected 'Grettir's' flurry of activities, which include cross-gender work, mundane farm tasks, sexual promiscuity and bestiality.[19] The poem *Buslubœn* ('Busla's Prayer') (*Skj* BII: 350–3)

[19] This is the view of Heslop (2002: 269–99, 385–92). Ólafur Halldórsson (1960; 1990: 19–50), to whom credit is due for rescuing what remains of this poem (or concatena-

uttered by the old woman Busla in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, is a good example of the poetry of ensorcelment which invokes supernatural forces in order to achieve a desired effect by threatening the man at whom it is directed with physical harm and disgrace. We may assume from this and other evidence in Icelandic literature, that there were some kinds of verse magic practised by women as well as men, or perhaps by women more commonly than by men. Love poetry or *mansǫngsvísur*, which, as we have seen, was banned in Iceland, was another kind of poetry designed to enchant or ensorcel. All these kinds of verse were intended to concentrate words in intensely effective formalised verbal pathways in order to bring about particular physical or psychosomatic effects in those against whom they were directed. Love poetry of this kind was intended to cause a woman whose affections were not committed to a particular man to become sexually obsessed with him. The eddic poem *Skírnismál* is built upon the assumption that such love magic is possible and that a woman, in this case a giantess, Gerðr, could be compelled against her will to give herself to a man, here the god Freyr. We have seen a Norwegian example of such love magic from the Bergen excavations earlier in this chapter. We may assume that the ban upon the recitation of such verses stemmed from anxiety about the social disruption they could cause, and in particular the threat they posed to the orderly conduct of arrangements for the betrothal and marriage of women, which was a social process controlled by men and therefore reflecting directly upon their honour if a woman engaged in flirtation or actual sex with men other than her intended husband. It is probably in part for this reason, because they could, with their poetry, disrupt orderly marriage alliances, that the poets of the skald-saga group (Kormakr Ǫgmundarson, Hallfreðr Óttarsson, Bjǫrn Arngeirsson Hítdœlakappi ('champion of the people of Hítardalr') and Gunnlaugr ormstunga ('serpent- tongue') Illugason) are represented as so troublesome and disruptive, especially in sexual matters.[20]

There are a number of other occasions recorded in Icelandic saga literature in which poetry serves clearly performative purposes, which do not,

tion of verse and rhythmical prose) from the damaged manuscript, from which some doubtless prudish person had attempted to scrape it, has a different view. He does not consider the 'Grettir' of *Grettisfœrsla* as a parodic version of Grettir Ásmundarson, the saga protagonist, but imagines the poem to be part of a harvest-festival game, during which a phallic token, possibly an embalmed sheep's penis (named Grettir), was passed around the participants and the *Grettisfœrsla* text recited over it.

[20] Several of the chapters in Poole 2001a make valuable contributions to the understanding of the sexual politics of the skald sagas; see especially those by Whaley, Jochens and Clunies Ross.

however, have anything to do with sorcery. Rather, they can be understood within a legal or evidentiary framework of interpretation. Sometimes, verses could be used as a covert form of admission of responsibility or guilt for an action; on other occasions poetry functioned as the dramatisation of a legal case. An instance of the latter kind is the *Máhlíðingavísur* ('Verses about the People at Mávahlíð'), attributed to the tenth-century Icelander Þórarinn svarti ('the black') Þórólfsson in *Eyrbyggja saga*. As Kate Heslop has demonstrated (2002: 142–79), these stanzas are a dramatisation of Þórarinn's difficult legal situation, and a persuasive appeal to his powerful relatives to help him in a lawsuit. They constitute an intervention in the processes of informal verbal dishonouring and formal legal redress. Heslop (2002: 143–4) mentions several other instances of verses associated with an individual's appeal to relatives for help in a legal case, in *Grettis saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga* ('Saga of Killings on the Heath') and *Þórðar saga hreðu* ('Saga of Quarrel-Þórðr'), and sees 'the performance genre of these "request for aid" sequences . . . [as] one of persuasive oratory'.

A verse which clearly functions (again in a legal sense) as an admission of responsibility for a killing is that uttered by Gísli Súrsson in chapter 21 of *Gísla saga*. The context is familiar: Gísli has killed Þorgrímr in retaliation for the latter's part in killing Gísli's brother-in-law Vésteinn. However, he has not publicly proclaimed his killing, as Icelandic law required for a killing not to be classified as murder. He does so cryptically, first by some rather puzzling but suggestive statements and then by means of a verse, which is heard by no one other than his sister Þórdís, who hears it and soon understands its meaning. The short sentence in the saga describing Þórdís's cognitive processes, as we might call them, is one of the few descriptions in Old Icelandic literature of someone actually unravelling the meaning of a skaldic stanza:[21]

Gísli kvað þá vísu, er æva skyldi:

Teina sék í túni
tál-gríms vinar fǫlu,
Gauts þess's geig of veittak
gunnbliks þáamiklu;
nú hefr gnýstœrir geira
grímu Þrótt of sóttan,
þann lét lundr of lendan

[21] *Gísla saga* is extant in two separate versions and there are several variations between them even in the prose of this passage; the verse has been variously interpreted. Here I follow that of the Íslenzk fornrit edition; a slightly different interpretation is in *Skj* BI: 97.

landkostuð ábranda.
Þórdís nam þegar vísuna, gengr heim ok hefir ráðit vísuna. (Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943: 58–9)

Prose word order. Sák teina í þáamiklu túni vinar fǫlu tǫl-Gríms, Gauts gunnbliks þess's of veittak geig; nú gnýstœrir geira hefr of sóttan Þrótt grímu; lundr ábranda lét þann landkostuð of lendan.

Translation. Gísli then spoke a verse, which should never have been [spoken]:

I saw sprouts on the greatly thawed field of the friend of the giantess of deception-Grímr [GIANT > ÞÓRR + GRÍMR = Þórgrímr], of the Gautr ⟨=Óðinn⟩ of the battle-gleam [SWORD > WARRIOR = Þórgrímr], the one to whom I gave out harm; now the increaser of the clash of spears [lit. 'clash-increaser of spears' BATTLE > WARRIOR = Gísli] has overcome Þrótt ⟨=Óðinn⟩ of the mask [WARRIOR = Þórgrímr]; the tree of river-fires [GOLD > MAN = Gísli] has endowed the land-grabber with land.

Þórdís learnt the verse immediately, goes home and [by then] has worked it out.

The original context of composition and recitation of the verses cited in saga texts within a predominantly Icelandic context is usually only accessible to us through saga prosimetrum created for the most part in the thirteenth century and sometimes later than that. Our views on the authenticity of both verses and their purported performance contexts will vary from case to case, depending on some variables that are discussed in Chapter 4. What is at issue here, however, whatever our understanding of these variables, is how we view the verses themselves and their ostensible functions within the prose texts of which they are part. Through much of the twentieth century one of two approaches to verses cited in sagas of Icelanders has been dominant. Many scholars and editors of saga texts have considered the verses within them as unlikely to have been the compositions of Icelanders of the age of settlement for a variety of reasons, metrical, linguistic or conceptual, and have argued that they were more likely to have been the compositions of twelfth-century antiquarians, whether the actual authors of the prose sagas in question or some other persons (e.g. Jón Helgason 1969). In such instances, and they are many, the emphasis has therefore been laid on features of the verse that betray its later origin, rather than on more general characteristics of the poetry or its function within the prose context in which the saga writer has placed it. The second approach, usually taken by scholars with literary rather than philo-

logical interests (e.g. Turner 1977), has been to view verses attributed to saga characters as a kind of safety-valve for the emotions and thoughts that the tight-lipped, supposedly objective style of saga writing favoured by most thirteenth-century Icelandic authors did not allow to be expressed in the saga prose. Heslop (2000, 2002) has argued persuasively that modern critics have tended to equate *lausavísur* with lyric poetry, seeing them as the expression or dramatisation of personal feeling, thereby ignoring the agonistic, performative and persuasive function that these verses often have within their prose contexts. Such an approach involves our seeing verses as performances of a socially valorised version of the self of a saga character (usually based upon a historical personage), as he or she attempts to persuade, question, evade or otherwise disturb a particular Icelandic social ethos. An advantage of this approach is that it allows us to urge with some confidence that the functions which medieval Icelandic saga-authors ascribed to purportedly tenth-century poetry can be retrieved, even if the motivations of the original composers can only ever be reached at second hand.

What is needed now in order to understand the large number of *lausavísur* and other poetry handed down in sagas of Icelanders, as well as in contemporary sagas and *fornaldarsögur*, is a new typology that takes account of the various performative contexts in which they have been recorded. A further analysis of the kinds and purposes of medieval Icelandic poetry would include a considerable range beyond what has already been discussed in this chapter: first, frankly occasional verse, inspired by a memorable event and often recorded in more than one source. Examples include a verse about the popularity of Ingólfr Þorsteinsson among the ladies, both young and old, recorded in both *Hallfreðar saga* and *Vatnsdœla saga* ('Saga of the People of Vatnsdalr') and a short verse recorded in both *Laxdœla saga* chapter 28 and *Kormaks saga* chapter 16 about an incident in which a bedridden old man, left alone to mind a baby in his cradle, is powerless to get out of bed and pick up the child when he rolls out of the cradle onto the floor. The old man's verse (and he was a known poet, Hólmgǫngu-Bersi) reflects on the weakness shared by old age and extreme youth, but notes that the latter will improve, the former get worse. As we have already seen with the examples of Egill Skallagrímsson, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld and Hofgarða-Refr, poetry of personal lament, in honour of dead friends, mentors or kinsmen, was a viable subgenre, which can be related to the courtly *erfikvæði*.

Subgenres of a more agonistically driven kind include the request for aid from one kinsman to another, as identified by Heslop (2002), and other

socially purposeful poetry associated with feud and the taking of vengeance for injury or death among the kin, which was a major theme of Old Icelandic saga literature (Andersson 1967; Byock 1982). Under this head we may identify the following subgenres: verses announcing a killing or conveying news of a death; women's whetting verses (*frýja*); requests for news and responses to it; statements of intention to take vengeance. Another group of subgenres is connected to the first but couched in a supernaturally sanctioned mode. Here belong prophetic verses, often revealed to their speaker through dreams, foreboding future events, and the verses spoken by corpses and inanimate objects, such as stones and a cloak, frequently urging vengeance or prophesying future disasters.[22] The new typology of non-courtly Old Norse poetry, most of it in skaldic measures, will reveal not so much an occasional poetic art in the sense of sets of extempore verses, as the sagas' rhetorical positioning of them urges us to believe, but rather occasional poetry composed and performed for defined, socially identifiable purposes in harmony with the major themes of saga literature as a whole.

[22] I am most grateful to my former doctoral student, Kate Heslop, for data that she has collected but not yet published supporting the identification of the subgenres listed in this paragraph. Obviously, a good deal of further research needs to be done to put flesh on these bones.

CHAPTER FOUR

Circumstances of Recording and Transmission: Poetry as Quotation

An interesting paradox underlies all our research on Old Norse-Icelandic poetry from the Viking and early Middle Ages: our knowledge of it depends absolutely upon its existence in written form, yet probably very little of it had a primarily written existence before the latter part of the twelfth century. That is to say that, except for the compositions of a number of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders, which may well never have existed in oral form (a subject to be considered in later chapters), all medieval Norse poetry is likely to have been first composed and recited orally. This applies to skaldic as well as to eddic poetry and means that we have to be aware of the dynamics of orality when considering Norse poetics but at the same time recognise that the processes of transmission and of writing the poems down will have almost certainly had their effects on the poetic texts we know. An important question, then, is that of the nature of the effects of transforming an oral poetic tradition to a written one and of maintaining it in writing.

When Old Norse poetry did come to be written down, it was not written down on its own or for its own sake, at least not to begin with. In Chapter 1 we saw that very little of the large corpus of Old Norse poetry that has come down to us in medieval manuscripts exists outside a prose context. This statement holds true both for eddic and skaldic poetry. The fact is that, with some important exceptions, Old Norse poetry survives in the written record as quotation within a higher-order prose narrative or non-narrative context. This means that its function, within that prose context, is very often exemplificatory or evidentiary; it provides confirmation (or is made to appear to do so) of what the narrative voice of the prose text asserts. Compare, for example, Snorri Sturluson's use of examples (*dœmi*) of skaldic diction from the best older poets to demonstrate the use of specific kenning-types in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of his *Edda*. Compare also

the use of verse citations in kings' sagas to provide confirmation for certain points in the prose narrative.

Another consequence of the use of poetry as quotation in Old Norse prose literature, whether of skaldic verses in kings' sagas, sagas of Icelanders and contemporary sagas, or of eddic poetry in *fornaldarsögur*, is that most of it comes to us piecemeal, quoted one or two stanzas at a time for the most part. Nowadays we refer to these solitary or piecemeal quoted verses as *lausavísur*, 'free, separate, unattached verses'.[1] Was it always like this, or was it in many cases, as several scholars have begun to suspect in recent years, that a number of originally longer poems were chopped up into quotable quotes by saga writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? This is a view that Russell Poole has been putting over a number of years now (1991, 2001b), and one which we also find Edith Marold arguing, apropos the so-called *Eykyndilsvísur* ('Island-candle Verses')[2] of Bjǫrn Hítdœlakappi (1999) and, more recently (2001), apropos all the verses in *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa* ('Saga of Bjǫrn, Champion of the People of Hítardalr'). She suggests that most of the stanzas now scattered through the text of *Bjarnar saga* once formed constituent parts of several *flokkar*, older than the saga, which the saga writer broke up and inserted at appropriate points into his narrative. She argues further that the majority of these stanzas may have belonged to dialogue poems, possibly of the *senna* type, in which adversaries engaged in agonistic contest. She does not see them as offering commentary or communication of the speaker's own experience in soliloquy form. In this respect, analyses such as Marold's and Poole's support the view advanced in Chapter 3, that much of the verse in sagas of Icelanders is 'a means of performing strategic versions of the self in situations where persuasion is paramount' (Heslop 2002: 2). It may also be the case that the manner in which a good deal of this poetry has been preserved as *lausavísur* has given us a distorted impression of its original formal character. As Poole describes them (2001b: 125), such exercises in textual stratigraphy, as he and Marold demonstrate can be performed on some prosimetra at least, may allow us to discover compositional stages in the manipulation of verse and prose elements in saga writing.

Even though Old Norse poetry comes to us for the most part as quotation

[1] Snorri uses the phrase *laus vísa* once in *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 24) to refer to verses that are separate from a sequence or longer poem: *ok eru þessir hættir dróttkvæðir kallaðir í fornum kvæðum, en sumir finnask í lausum vísum*, 'and these variations of form are called *dróttkvætt* in old poems, but some are found in single verses'.

[2] Eykyndill is a nickname for Oddný, the woman Bjǫrn loves but fails to win as his wife.

within a larger prose narrative — a rhetorical phenomenon which many writers refer to by the Latin term *prosimetrum* — a number of recent scholars have argued that we can detect significant differences between different kinds of skaldic verses from the special ways in which they are used by medieval writers of prose narratives. If this is so, such a differentiated usage may provide us with a direct insight into the medieval status and character of the poetry itself, but does the argument in fact hold water? Those scholars who have put this argument (Bjarni Einarsson 1974; Foote 1984a: 242–8; Whaley 1993a) have stated that there are two distinct types of verse quotation in Old Norse prose literature, for which a fixed terminology has not been firmly established. The first type has been called 'authenticating' verses, or 'substantiating' verses or 'evidential' verses or 'reports'; this type is held to provide authenticating, authoritative information as a source for the prose narrative. The second type has been called 'situational' verses, 'non-substantiating' verses, 'part of the story' or 'speech acts'; this second type is held to be more organically integrated into the surrounding prose narrative and represented as the utterance of a saga character or poet 'in response to an event, a situation or a verbal cue, and they may themselves affect the course of events or the ensuing conversation. Thus they potentially form the kernel of an episode, and their removal would damage the plot structure' (Whaley 1993a: 251). 'Authenticating' verses tend to be introduced by a formula like *svá segir X* , 'so says X (the name of the poet)', while 'situational' verses are more often introduced with the formula *þá kvað X þetta*, 'then X said this'. Whaley (1993a: 253) has argued that authenticating verses tend to come from long compositions, like royal panegyrics, while situational verses tend to be *lausavísur*. If, however, it was possible for saga writers to break up long poems to make them look like *lausavísur*, then we may have to think again about this proposed formal correspondence, even if we accept for the moment that the saga writers' use of verses corresponded to their understanding of the verses' status and character. In any case, as Whaley herself admits (1993a: 253–5, note 15), the distinction between the two kinds is often blurred,[3] and there may well be more than two kinds anyway, matters to which I will shortly return.

[3] Jesch (1993) has put the case for a mode of citation intermediate between the two kinds in the so-called 'political sagas', like *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*, where the status of quoted verses as authoritative utterances in a historical narrative had not yet fully firmed up, probably because the earliest versions of these sagas were among the oldest composed (*c.*1200).

The taxonomic influence of Snorri Sturluson

The taxonomy of modern scholars, outlined above, has undoubtedly been influenced by the views of Snorri Sturluson on the value and use of skaldic poetry as source material for historians. Modern scholars have been pleased to discover that Snorri appears to have endorsed the use of poetic citations in some Old Norse literature to assert or demonstrate the validity of a prose narrative, thus throwing a spotlight on the 'truth-value' of Old Norse poetry cited in sagas of kings, where most of the 'authenticating verses' identified by modern scholars are thought to reside. Snorri's high evaluation of ancient poems (*forn kvæði*) in the prologue to his *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla* and in the prologue to his separate saga of Óláfr Haraldsson is both well known and supportive of this general view, and has received recent endorsement (e.g. Beck 1999). In fact Snorri's view has probably had a shaping role in the modern approach to skaldic poetry, at least as far as its reliability as source material for prose narratives is concerned (see Meulengracht Sørensen 2001).

In the prologue to *Ynglinga saga* Snorri makes the following statement:[4]

> Með Haraldi konungi váru skáld, ok kunna menn enn kvæði þeira ok allra konunga kvæði, þeira er síðan hafa verit í Nóregi, ok tókum vér þar mest dœmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum hǫfðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tǫkum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er háttr skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrǫk, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51 I: 5)
>
> There were skalds with King Haraldr, and people still know their poems and poems about all the kings there have since been in Norway, and we take examples mostly from what is said in those poems which were recited before

[4] The version of this statement in the longer version of the prologue to the separate saga of St Óláfr found in MS Stockholm 2 4to is worth comparison, as the emphasis is somewhat different: *En þó þykki mér þat merkiligast til sannenda, er berum orðum er sagt í kvæðum eða qðrum kveðskap, þeim er svá var ort um konunga eða aðra hǫfðingja, at þeir sjálfir heyrðu, eða í erfikvæðum þeim, er skáldin færðu sonum þeira. Þau orð, er í kveðskap standa, eru in sǫmu sem í fyrstu váru, ef rétt er kveðit, þótt hverr maðr hafi síðan numit af qðrum, ok má því ekki breyta* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51 II: 422), 'But yet it seems to me that the most significant form of verification is what is said in plain words in poems or other poetic composition, in that which was composed about kings and other chieftains so that they themselves heard it, or in those memorial poems that the skalds brought forward to their sons. Those words, which appear in the poetry, are the same as they were originally, if they are correctly recited, even though each man has since then learnt them from others, and for that reason cannot be changed.'

> the princes themselves or their sons. We take everything to be true that is to be found in those poems about their journeys or battles. Though it is the habit of skalds to praise most the one in whose presence they are, yet no one would dare to tell a prince himself about deeds of his which all those who heard them would know to be nonsense and invention, as he would himself. For that would be mockery rather than praise.

It is generally held that Snorri is here endorsing the truth-value of skaldic poetry composed in praise of Nordic rulers, which he claims to have used as a basis for his own historical narratives, possibly, as Sverrir Tómasson has argued (1989), in the face of some contemporary scepticism about their reliability as sources. Snorri's position has been endorsed by many modern scholars, to quote Diana Whaley again in a recent survey (2000: 167): 'Where they appear to be genuinely contemporary, skaldic verses take us closer to events than any other source, and since functionary poets often served their masters as warriors as well as propagandists, they are in effect despatches from the front line.' Such a view is of course supported by narratives like the various versions of the story of the role played by the poet Þormóðr at the battle of Stiklastaðir in 1030, where King Óláfr the Saint met his death. In Snorri's version of the narrative in *Heimskringla*, Óláfr instructs three of his court poets, including Þormóðr, to take up positions as observers of the battle so that they could present a faithful version of the king's heroic death for posterity, and Snorri quotes from their verses. In fact though, as Meulengracht Sørensen has tartly observed (2001: 185), 'all three men are killed in the battle and two of them do not compose other verses than the one mentioned before the battle. The third, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, is quoted for a further five stanzas, all of which form part of the dialogue in the text. As documentation Snorri uses a series of verses from Sighvatr's *Erfidrápa*, but Sighvatr was in Rome at the time the events took place.' Thus none of the stanzas by the three poets who were present at the battle are of any primary value in backing up the historical events narrated, while corroboration is provided by verses composed by a skald who was not an eyewitness. However, the verses cited contribute to Snorri's narrative of this, the climax of his saga of St Óláfr, and they participate in the making of a memorable dramatic scene.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned that, although we surmise that most Old Norse poetry was first composed and recited orally, it owes its preservation to the medieval impetus to produce literate versions of indigenous traditions. Many scholars think that skaldic poetry probably formed the nucleus of much of the first historical writing in Norway and Iceland, so that it became, as it were, the testimony of an oral tradition preserved in the

amber of historical prose narrative, principally about the kings of Norway. The earliest historical writings such as Oddr Snorrason's Latin life of King Óláfr Tryggvason (*c*.1190), the Norwegian synoptic history *Ágrip* (*c*.1200), and *Sverris saga* ('Saga of [King] Sverrir') (completed before 1210) include quotations from skaldic verse.[5] To quote Diana Whaley again (2000: 167), 'The only variety [of oral tradition] that is now believed to have survived more or less intact into the literate era is skaldic verse, preserved by its tight and intricate metre in a way that even legal formulae and genealogies could not match.'

Such a judgement would seem to place modern evaluations of 'authenticating' skaldic verses on a par with the views of Snorri Sturluson, expressed in both *Heimskringla* and the *Edda*, that skaldic poetry from the Viking Age was both a reliable witness to the events of the past and a source of reliable information about them. Yet many modern readers and scholars have not been fully convinced of this viewpoint for several reasons. One is on account of discrepancies that can occur between saga verse and saga prose, though these can be explained as the saga writer's misunderstanding or reuse of earlier poetic texts. Another is because, when it comes to the crunch, the content of skaldic verses is often highly stereotyped and relatively low in factual content, though, as we have seen with the example of Arnórr jarlaskáld's *Þorfinnsdrápa* in Chapter 3, skalds could be factual when they wanted to be. A more important reason for being sceptical of applying Snorri's valorisation of skaldic poetry as factual to the whole corpus of poetry of the 'authenticating' type is the knowledge that can easily be gained of its non-factual side, that is, its tendency to prefer ornamentation, in the form of elaborate figures of speech, such as kennings and *heiti*, and syntactic fragmentation, over direct information. In the version of his defence of skaldic sources in the preface to the separate saga of St Óláfr (quoted in note 4 above), Snorri restricts the category of poems of the highest reliability to those which were spoken in plain words (*er berum orðum er sagt*) before kings or other chieftains or in memorial poems recited before their sons. Given his own undoubted knowledge of the complexities of skaldic diction, as exemplified both in his *Edda* and in his actual usage of skaldic verses in his historical writings, we must

[5] The Norwegian *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* ('An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings', *c*.1177–87) by the monk Theodoricus mentions the 'ancient poems' (*antiqua carmina*) of the Icelanders as providing some kind of basis for the events of prehistory in the absence of written sources (Storm 1880: 3; McDougall and McDougall 1998: 1), though he quotes from classical authors such as Lucan and Virgil, not from skaldic poetry, in the main part of the history.

see these remarks as a kind of special pleading, deliberately ignoring the non-referential aspect of skaldic poetry to make a point about indigenous sources that he wanted to present as if they were equivalent to the written sources of medieval historians writing in Latin. However we understand them, they restrict Snorri's claim for the source value of skaldic poetry to a very small sample of the corpus and cannot be considered a generalisation that fits all poetry even of the 'authenticating' type.[6]

So, in consideration of these and other factors still to be discussed, have we, in fact, understood Snorri correctly when he stresses the reliability and authenticity of skaldic verses as the basis for historiography? In the passage in which he justifies his use of skaldic verse as source material, Snorri argues on two grounds. First, he says that we should believe the words of the old skalds because they were eyewitnesses to the events they describe, a justification that was a standard one in ancient classical and medieval historiography.[7] We have already seen, with the example of the poets at Stiklastaðir, that this criterion should not be believed too strictly, even in Snorri's own practice. Second, he says that we should believe the skalds because they had to recite their compositions to the faces of the men about whom they were composing or to their close relatives, so that if they distorted or lied about what their patrons had done, that would constitute criticism, scorn or insult rather than praise. By implication, then, praise poetry had to bear some reasonably clearly defined relationship to what society would accept as empirical truth.

Snorri's second argument is based, however, not on an absolute sense of the truth-value of the content of skaldic verse, but on an awareness of the socio-dynamics of interpersonal relations between a poet and his patron. He is evaluating an imagined oral poetic performance rather than the effect upon a reader of words on a page. The relationship he envisages is in part symbiotic — that is, there is a precarious sense of equality in it because each partner in the performance needs the other, the patron to enhance his reputation, the poet to gain status and reward, but in terms of social status there is a clear inequality, in that the patron, being typically a king or an earl, is, by

[6] Fidjestøl (1997b: 300) interpreted Snorri's remarks here in a somewhat different way from what I have done, writing: 'One of his most striking observations lies in the distinction he made between the panegyric in poetry and the concrete information about men's movements and battles which that poetry also contains. Falsifying such easily checked facts was what Snorri saw as *háð en eigi lof*.'

[7] See Smalley 1974: 22–5. Sturla Þórðarson frequently asserts the reliability of eyewitness accounts of events in *Íslendinga saga*. It is commonplace in the writings of the Venerable Bede, who exerted a considerable influence on early Icelandic historical writings, and it is also explicit in the *Íslendingabók* of Ari Þorgilsson.

definition, of the highest rank in his group, certainly higher than the poet. Thus there is a social pressure upon the poet in a courtly situation to say nice things about his patron. In a number of Icelandic stories, particularly short narratives or *þættir*, the writers often present Icelandic skalds as asserting an equality with the kings of Norway because they are outsiders — proud, independent Icelanders — and, in real life, this may have been one of the reasons why Icelanders seem to have been able to dominate the practice of the skaldic art at the courts of Scandinavian kings and earls in the later part of the Viking Age (see Clunies Ross 1999). Snorri's second argument is thus one in favour of plausibility and social acceptability rather than outright factual truth or, to put it another way, of seeming to be truthful rather than necessarily actually being so. His second argument, then, addresses itself to the non-factual, non-referential part of skaldic verses, whereas the first argument relates to their factual anchor points, such as references to the patron's journeys or battles, upon which the whole performance rested. This may be what he had in mind when he spoke of poetry in 'plain words' in his preface to the separate saga of St Óláfr.

This brings us again to an issue raised in earlier chapters. We have seen that many of the indigenous Icelandic terms for kinds of poetry, both eddic and skaldic, refer to speech acts of various kinds and are agonistically marked (they imitate actual encounters between individuals, many of which express rivalry or aggression). This evidence strongly suggests that behind the early Nordic peoples' understandings of the nature of poetry and its intellectual and social effect lay a conceptualisation of poetry as a kind of powerfully concentrated and directed speech act. Now modern linguists and philosophers of language have taught us to see that all discourse, whether spoken or written, whether poetry or prose, conveys different kinds of meaning. There is, first of all, referential meaning, that is the factual content of an utterance, which, in the case of skaldic verse is often relatively small, though by no means always so. In addition, as also with eddic verse, the referential meaning often depends on the audience's prior understanding of certain 'facts' that were part of their common cultural knowledge, like the events and personages of Norse myth or the tenets of the Christian religion or the military campaigns of a well-known Norwegian king. These 'facts' were frequently alluded to rather than spelled out; indeed, as we will see when we come to look at the aesthetics of Norse poetry, bald, unadorned 'facts' were not likely to be considered appropriate for poetic presentation. It is with this kind of meaning that Snorri is concerned in part in the prefaces to *Ynglinga saga* and the separate saga of St Óláfr, but he is equally concerned with another dimension of an

utterance, which modern speech act theory also concerns itself with, that is to say, its social, interpersonal direction and impact. In J. L. Austin's speech- act theory, as we have seen in Chapter 1, all speech acts were divisible into two classes, constative and performative. 'Constative speech acts refer to a state of affairs in the world: they make a statement which can be evaluated as true or false depending on the goodness of fit between the statement and the world. Performatives, on the other hand, are speech acts that, when said in a particular context, cause a change in a state of affairs in the world' (Heslop 2000: 15). Further, the twin concepts of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts were developed to account for those dimensions to human discourse that relate to the effects (desired or actual or both) of speech acts on those who utter them and those to whom or for whom they are uttered. We may say that Snorri Sturluson recognised both the constative elements in skaldic verses (their references to battles and journeys and so on) and their performative dimensions. His second reason for trusting the validity of ancient skaldic verses is based upon his awareness of the social norms that governed illocutionary acts in early medieval Scandinavia, not on his concern for their truthfulness as historical sources in a modern sense.

There is ample evidence that Snorri was not alone among medieval Scandinavians in recognising the psychodynamics of speech acts. In fact it could be said that society in general in medieval Norway and Iceland (and probably the rest of Scandinavia also) classified all kinds of human discourse (of which poetry was only one branch, though a very important one) in this way. To return now to the indigenous categories of eddic and skaldic poetry, it seems fair to say that those categories are based upon what we can extrapolate as an indigenous speech-act theory, that classified kinds of poetry in terms of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. It means that early Scandinavian people must have perceived kinds of poetry as performatives, and this is not surprising given the often closely felt relationship between poetry and other kinds of performatives, like sorcery or magic, which persisted, as Bo Almqvist has clearly demonstrated in the second volume of his *Norrön niddiktning* (1974), well beyond the Middle Ages in Iceland. It is likely that when poetry came to be written down, this dimension of the poetic composition was not lost, but recognised and incorporated into the prosimetrum of much saga literature. Hence, when thinking of skaldic poetry as the basis for historiography, Snorri Sturluson was conscious of both the referential meaning of the stanzas as a basis for a 'true' history, and their appropriateness to their subject and his actions in performative terms. Snorri uses the same set of criteria here as were

invoked in the medieval Scandinavian evaluation of *níð* or defamation: it was a question of appropriateness, plausibilty and measure. If the praise was too great or applauded the patron for something everyone knew he had not done, then praise turned to insult and, perhaps more significantly, dishonour. Thus the indigenous conceptualisation of the nature, kinds and effects of poetry was one that worked within the parameters of this pervasive sense of individual honour, which required to be tested at every opportunity, so that most human interactions were potentially honour-bringing or honour-removing, that is to say, shameful.

'Authenticating' versus 'situational' verses?

Having evaluated Snorri's statements about the truth-value of certain kinds of skaldic poetry, we can now return to the view of some scholars that there are two basic kinds of skaldic verse citation in Old Norse prose literature, 'authenticating' and 'situational'. It is important to note that this is not the same as saying there are two basic types of skaldic verse. The reason why the opposition of 'authenticating' and 'situational' verses is somewhat fuzzy in fact is that this distinction is what one can call a second-order distinction, that is, it is a perception of difference in the *use* of skaldic stanzas by saga writers and other prose authors and not necessarily a distinction valid for the poetry itself as it existed in the oral tradition, though it may sometimes be. Thus we have to ask the question which is implied by the 'authenticating'–'situational' distinction: do saga writers always use parts of extended courtly poems as 'authenticating' stanzas and always use *lausavísur* as 'situational' verses? In other words, did they always conform to what may have been a culturally determined and genre-based set of choices or were they at liberty — at least to some extent — to use poetry as they wished in their prose texts? If we are to believe the analyses of scholars like Poole and Marold, the answer to this last question is clearly 'yes', at least in some instances, where they demonstrate the strong likelihood that long poems could be dismembered by saga writers for use in prosimetra.

There is another matter that we need to build into our analysis, and this ties it in with my earlier observations on the implicitly performative nature of medieval Scandinavian poetry. There has been a tendency for those modern scholars who have written about the differences between 'authenticating' and 'situational' verses to equate the 'authenticating' type with referential truths and to see the 'situational' type as, in Whaley's words (1993a: 254), associated with 'the more fictional end of the spectrum of

saga-literature'. This association leads them to view most poetry that is quoted in kings' sagas, where it is regarded as in 'authenticating' mode, as likely to be authentic, that is, generally likely to be by the skald to whom it is attributed and of the chronological age imputed to it. By contrast, poetry quoted in sagas of Icelanders, where it is 'situational' and part of the narrative, may well be inauthentic, that is, not by the personage to whom it is ascribed but by a later poet or by the saga author himself. The reasons given for doubting the authenticity of 'situational' verses are many and various, but the effect of this rather simplistic division has been to neglect the 'situational' verses because of a basic insecurity about their authenticity, while at the same time failing to recognise that many verses of the 'authenticating' variety serve similar purposes. For example, in the 1993a article mentioned above, Whaley sets out a taxonomy of situational verses from *Heimskringla* classified according to Austin's speech act theory. This is an interesting and profitable exercise, but it exempts the 'authenticating' type of poetry from analysis in terms of the theory, just as the performative argument in Snorri Sturluson's observations about why skaldic stanzas should be trusted as the basis of historiography has been neglected. In fact, verses whose main function in saga prose is to authenticate or exemplify usually have multiple functions if they are considered both as poems and as quotations in prose works. While their authenticating role is to the fore in the prose context, they are usually more complex than that: they may include constative speech acts, as well as being assertives or representatives. Whaley half acknowledges this in her concluding remarks (1993a: 263).

In support of the distinction between 'situational' and 'authenticating' verses, Whaley offers two examples, both from *Heimskringla* (1993a: 252–3). The first, the 'situational' verse, is by the woman skald Hildr Hrólfsdóttir (*Skj* BI: 27), who upbraids King Haraldr hárfagri for exiling her son Gǫngu ('Stamper')-Hrólfr from Norway. The second, 'authenticating' verse comes from Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Magnússflokkr* ('Poem without a Refrain about Magnús') (*Skj* BI: 333–4). In it the skald describes how King Magnús Óláfsson is victorious in a fight against the Wends at a place named Hlýrskógsheiðr. One of the main differences between these two stanzas, and one which doubtless influenced Snorri in deciding how to use them, is that Hildr's stanza is grammatically a direct address to King Haraldr, beginning *hafnið Nefju nafna*, 'you are spurning Nefja's namesake', and thus lends itself to incorporation into the fabric of the prose as direct speech, whereas Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's verse from *Magnússflokkr* is a first-person assertion (*hykk*, 'I think, I believe, i.e. I assert') combined with an implicit indirect statement, of the form 'I believe [that] Magnús stood

first of men in battle'. Such a structure lends itself to presentation by a historian as a constative speech act or an act of assertion, given that its context of utterance is believed to be that of an official court poet who often claims to have been an eyewitness to events he describes. However, if we measure the referential content of the two stanzas by Hildr and Þjóðólfr, there is little to choose between them. Hildr's stanza gives us a periphrasis for the referent of the stanza, Gǫngu-Hrólfr, in *Nefju nafna*, thus identifying him as the namesake of his maternal grandfather, Hrólfr nefja ('nosy'); it tells that Haraldr is responsible for sending him into outlawry, and records Hildr's own moral condemnation of the king (*illt's við ulf at ylfask*, 'it is bad to act the wolf with a wolf'), which is another kind of information. Þjóðólfr's verse tells that the nephew of Haraldr (Magnús) was brave in battle, that he had a large army, and that his opponents, the Wends, lay dead in large numbers across the heath as a result of his actions.

Why did medieval Norse writers use the prosimetrum?

Questions of the authenticity of skaldic verses cannot be altogether sidestepped, nor in many cases can they be definitively answered. As long as we see the 'authenticating' versus 'situational' use of skaldic stanzas as a second-order distinction, not necessarily one that bears on their intrinsic value as aesthetic objects or even as sources of information, either for medieval people or for ourselves, one can accept that there is a valid difference between them in terms of their form and mode of address, whether first or third person, but not necessarily in their content or their authenticity. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise what 'authenticating' and 'situational' verses have in common and what common textual purposes they serve within the prosimetra in which they have been preserved. There are far more similarities than differences between them.

Continuous written prose discourse in medieval Scandinavia almost from its known beginning in the twelfth century made use of the prosimetrum. This kind of writing was common in many parts of medieval Europe and can be found in other societies too (see Harris 1997; Harris and Reichl 1997; Friis-Jensen 1987: 29–39). In medieval Latin literature the combination of verse and prose in a literary text was usually the work of the one author, who composed in both media, and the effect of interspersing verse within the prose text was to enhance the stylistic register of the whole, impart dramatic immediacy to a narrative, and, sometimes, to introduce proof or exemplification in an argument. As Friis-Jensen has observed (1987: 41), vernacular Norse sagas and the prosimetrum of Saxo

Grammaticus, who was probably influenced by indigenous Scandinavian conventions of quotation, differ from the predominant prosimetrum of Latin literature by quoting verses not of their own composition, or not ostensibly so. These verses are attributed to named poets, mostly of a past age, who may or may not be represented as actual protagonists in the narrative itself.

The prosimetrum was a natural choice for Old Norse writers: it was prestigious, in terms of the elite Latinate culture of medieval Europe, and it allowed Scandinavian authors to write about the past, and indeed the present, in a way that gave them the liberty of introducing into their contemporary prose the supposedly authentic testimony of the oral past: poetry. For a society that had had a very short literate history, the incorporation of poetry into prose gave unmediated access (or so it was represented) to the very words of authoritative figures from the past, the skalds and, even further back, heroic and mythological figures from prehistory. They all spoke poetry — of various kinds.

Anthony Faulkes has made the point that someone who repeated the words of a poet was himself appropriating the poet's role and, if he repeated it before an audience, 'the performance becomes a dramatic one in which the reciter becomes the original poet and his audience the original audience' (1993: 13). In the pre-literate period in Scandinavia, poetry had to be repeated in order to live, and those who invested intellectual capital in keeping it alive could themselves gain glory from that act. In literate times repeating and possibly modifying verses must have been closely linked to the composition of prosimetrum. This kind of act also gave kudos and transferred status. In addition, there was another significant force in the development of prosimetrum: it was a way of preserving, shaping and controlling the past. It is surely significant that, in medieval Scandinavia, the writing of history and the recording of Old Norse poetry largely became the preserve of Icelanders, people of a new, kingless society that had most to gain by writing themselves into history and writing the history of other people, especially Norwegians (see Meulengracht Sørensen 2000; Faulkes 1993a: 15). The record is clear that Icelanders quickly surpassed Norwegians as poets at the courts of the kings of Norway, even though skaldic poetry appears originally to have been a Norwegian invention. After the settlement of Iceland it seems that skaldic poetry came to serve a different range of functions away from a court environment from what it did in the royal entourage, although those functions can be seen to derive in large part from the original courtly repertoire. Of course, in assessing both these phenomena, we have to take account of what we would nowadays call 'media

hype', that fact that Icelanders largely controlled textual production in the sense that they wrote the texts in which poetry and representations of poets were recorded, though these works were often bankrolled by Norwegians. Nevertheless, as Faulkes has written (1993: 15), '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'. If we think of this phenomenon in terms of modern post-colonial literary experience, then the Old Norse empire certainly wrote back to the motherland.[8]

[8] I refer to the title of an influential book on modern post-colonial literature in English, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York, Routledge, 1989).

CHAPTER FIVE

Old Norse Poetic Aesthetics

The image of the poet

The definition of a skald conveyed in Bragi Boddason's verse *Skáld kalla mik*, quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1, indicates that there were two fundamental ways in which medieval Scandinavians conceptualised poetry: on the one hand as a divine gift in the form of an intoxicating drink, and, on the other, as a craft or skill, an *íþrótt*, that is, an accomplishment of human intelligence. These two ways of understanding the genesis and nature of poetry were unlikely to have been viewed as contrastive or contradictory in their eyes, although they may seem so to us. In fact, a comment that occurs at the end of Snorri Sturluson's account of the myth of the origin of the mead of poetry in *Skáldskaparmál* (a myth to which I will shortly return), reveals that divine inspiration was considered unlikely to fall to someone who did not already possess the ability to compose poetry:

> En Suttunga mjǫð gaf Óðinn Ásunum ok þeim mǫnnum er yrkja kunnu. Því kǫllum v[ér] skáldskapinn feng Óðins ok fund ok drykk hans ok gjǫf hans ok drykk Ásanna. (Faulkes 1998 I: 5)
>
> But Óðinn gave Suttungr's mead to the Æsir and to those people who are skilled at composing poetry. Thus we call poetry Óðinn's booty and find, and his drink and his gift and the Æsir's drink. (Faulkes 1987: 64)

The first sentence of this quotation clearly indicates that Óðinn, divine possessor of the source of poetic inspiration, the poetic mead, did not give this intoxicating substance to everyone indiscriminately; rather, he gave it only to those people who already possessed the skill which enabled them to compose poetry. This formulation implies that, for human poets, the skill was primary and needed to be in place before the divine gift was conferred, the reverse of the modern Western concept of inspiration, which almost

certainly owes its genesis to Christian and classical rather than Germanic models.[1]

The poet as craftsman

I shall first consider how medieval Scandinavians conceptualised the skills involved in composing poetry. We have seen in earlier chapters that several of the technical terms for some of the formal characteristics of skaldic poetry were clearly derived from the vocabulary of metal- and wood-working, suggesting that the poet's art was considered comparable, in the intellectual sphere, to the skilled craftsman's in the material.[2] In Chapter 2 mention was made of the common skaldic stylistic feature named *stál* or inlay. This refers to parenthetical clauses within the half-stanza, which are often called intercalary clauses, that is, clauses that intervene between main clauses or parts of main clauses or are juxtaposed with them. Verses that regularised this feature could be termed *stælt* or inlaid. There is also the related stylistic device known as *hjástæltr*, 'juxtaposed, abutted', in which an independent clause presenting an analogy is placed side by side with a statement dealing with another subject. In cases where this is a regular stylistic feature the verse form itself may be termed *hjástælt*, and in such cases, according to Snorri Sturluson in *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 10), *skal orðtak vera forn minni*, 'the arrangement of words must be old traditions'. The best-known example of this technique used by a Norse skald is a praise-poem by the tenth-century Icelander Kormakr Ǫgmundarson, either in honour of Earl Sigurðr Hákonarson (d. *c*.962) or, more plausibly, his son

[1] The medieval Christian conception of poetic inspiration is discussed later in this chapter. Although it is unlikely that classical ideas exerted any direct influence upon medieval European representations of the subject, they too favour the notion that the poet is marked out by the gods at birth or as a child. Bees laid honey on Pindar's infant lips (Pausanias 9.23.2); Callimachus (fragment 186.29) speaks of the Muses looking upon a child with favouring eye, or they intercept him one day while he is on other business and give him a symbol of poetic skill, a bay branch (Hesiod, *Theogony* 22–35), or a lyre (Archilochus legend). I am grateful to Martin West, of All Souls College, Oxford, for this information.

[2] This is by no means the only semantic field from which these technical terms are drawn, however. A study of the terms used in *Háttatal* and in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* reveals a diversity of analogies for the formal characteristics of skaldic verse, many of them based upon comparisons from the natural world, from the way in which a fox dodges and weaves (*refhvarf*, 'fox-turn' or antithesis, Faulkes 1999: 134) to the docking of an animal's tail (*alstýfðr*, 'completely docked', with every line catalectic, Faulkes 1999: 96).

Hákon.[3] Several stanzas from this poem are quoted in *Skáldskaparmál*. The last line of each stanza contains a mythological reference, while the body of the stanza praises the earl. One of the verses that probably belonged to this poem runs thus:

> Hróðr geri ek of mǫg mæran
> meir Sigrøðar fleira;
> haptsœnis galt ek hánum
> heið. Sitr Þórr í reiðum. (Faulkes 1998 I: 84, verse 301)
>
> *Prose word order*. Ek geri meir fleira hróðr of mæran mǫg Sigrøðar; ek galt hánum heið haptsœnis. Þórr sitr í reiðum.
>
> *Translation*. I will again compose more praise about the famous son of Sigrøðr [=Hákon]; I have been paying him the reward of the fetter-looser [ÓÐINN > POETRY]. Þórr sits in [his] chariot.[4]

The rhetorical effect of *hjástælt* such as this is clearly to draw a loose but flattering comparison between the living ruler who is the poem's main subject and a mythological or heroic figure, in this case the god Þórr, who symbolises physical power and authority. Insofar as this poem is dedicated to a member of the family of the earls of Hlaðir, who were well-known supporters of paganism in tenth-century Norway, the use of *forn minni* gains a special edge, no more so if the poem was indeed in honour of Hákon Sigurðarson, who re-established pagan sanctuaries that had been destroyed by the Christian sons of Eiríkr blóðøx.

The range of terms for intercalated clauses in skaldic verse depends upon an analogy between the way in which a poet inserts a clause within or alongside another one and the way in which a metalworker, a smith, inserts a thin decorative wire into the surface of a metal object. This was frequently done with silver wires by Viking Age craftsmen: 'Silver . . . was applied to the surface of base metal objects in a number of different ways: by means of

[3] *Skj* AI: 79–80, BI: 69–70 calls the poem *Sigurðardrápa* ('Poem with Refrain about Sigurðr'). The *mǫgr Sigrøðar* ('son of Sigrøðr') mentioned in the verse quoted here (stanza 5 in *Skj*) and some other indications suggest the subject of the poem was probably Earl Sigurðr's son Hákon inn ríki ('the powerful'), who ruled in Norway *c*.974–95.

[4] Several points in the interpretation of this *helmingr* are uncertain, including the identity of the person addressed. The statement that Kormakr will again compose more praise about the patron (or 'continue to compose more praise', Faulkes 1987: 132) suggests that this verse was originally placed at the beginning of a new section of the praise-poem, or possibly at the beginning of a new poem; the precise sense of the Óðinn-kenning *haptsœnir* in line 3 is unclear, though there is no doubt that it refers to this god (see Faulkes 1998 II: 301–2).

thin plates, by encrustation (when silver is hammered on to a hatched surface), or by inlay (where wires are hammered into engraved lines)' (Graham-Campbell and Kidd 1980: 146). Other inlay techniques known to have been used by Viking Age craftsmen involved first engraving patterns on the surface of a silver- or gilded bronze-covered object, such as a sword hilt, and then filling them with a pure black substance known as niello, usually silver sulphide. A good example of this technique is exhibited by a sword hilt from a boat burial at the Viking Age town of Hedeby (Haithabu), which is encrusted with gilded bronze and inlaid with niello (Elsner 1992: 41). The different colours establish the pattern of the inlaid ornament contrastively, and perhaps this was also how inlaid clauses were perceived by those who heard them, as clearly marked off by their syntax from their textual surrounds.[5]

Two verses by different poets already quoted in Chapter 3 illustrate how skalds were frequently able to use the stylistic device of inlay in order to highlight their own comments on the main subject matter of the stanza, just as metal-workers picked out a pattern in niello or silver wire. These are Hofgarða-Refr's *helmingr* on the loss of his teacher Gizurr gullbrá, beginning *Opt kom — jarðar leiptra*, and Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's *hálfníð* verse, beginning *Leggr at lýsibrekku*, imagining how his rival Gríss makes love — or fails to make love — to his beloved Kolfinna. In Refr's *helmingr*, the intercalary sentence *Baldr leiptra jarðar stafna er hniginn skaldi*, 'The Baldr of the light-flashes of the land of prows is departed from the poet', serves to emphasise the poet's feeling of sadness and loss at the death of his kind teacher. Hallfreðr's verse paints a very unpleasant and demeaning picture of the sweaty, smelly Gríss Sæmingsson trying to make love to his wife Kolfinna. In another of the *Grísvísur* Hallfreðr compares Gríss to a seabird, a fulmar, regurgitating fish and wallowing around to little effect in the marital bed. By contrast, Kolfinna is like an outwardly serene swan swimming in a bay, holding herself aloof from her disgusting husband. Here, the first inlaid clause *kvǫl þolir Hlín hjá hǫnum*, 'Hlín suffers anguish beside him', brings out what Hallfreðr imagines as Kolfinna's silent suffering under these unpleasant conditions, while the second, *leyfik ljóssa vífa lund*, 'I praise the bright lady's nature', allows the poet to indicate his own feelings for Kolfinna and perhaps to imply that, if he had had anything to do with the love-making, it would have gone in a quite different way.

Many technical terms for the composite parts of skaldic poems or their

[5] Many years ago the Norwegian scholar Hallvard Lie (1952) made an extensive study of the relationship between skaldic style and Viking Age art, arguing that the intricate interlace patterns of the latter are paralleled by the intricacies of skaldic verse.

stylistic and metrical effects derive from the semantic fields of wood-working and building, as we have seen in Chapter 2 apropos words such as *bálkr*, *stafr* and *stuðill*. It was also customary for poets to represent the act of poetic composition in terms drawn from the semantic fields of wood-, stone- and metal-working and to refer to the poems themselves in terms of the most complex and highest-status artefacts of Viking Age and medieval society, such as halls and ships, both largely made of wood in the Middle Ages (see Kreutzer 1977: 246–63; Sayers 2002). In Chapter 2 I adduced the example of a *helmingr* by Hallar-Steinn, beginning *Ek hefi óðar lokri*, in which these analogies are paramount. Another telling example comes from Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise* of *c*.1250. In chapter 15 of its second section, often called *Málskrúðsfræði* ('Science of the Ornaments of Speech'), Óláfr characterises the important role alliteration plays in binding together the lines of Old Norse poetry in terms that are based on the model of the construction of clinker-built ships, whose hulls were made from overlapping planks or strakes, tied to strengthening frames and cross-beams either with pliable tree roots or fastened with wooden or metal nails (Foote and Wilson 1980: 242–3; Sjøvold 1985: 23–6):

> Þessi figura er mjǫk hǫfð í málssnildar list, er rethorica heitir, ok er hon upphaf til kveðandi þeirrar, er saman heldr norrœnum skáldskap, svá sem naglar halda skipi saman, er smiðr gerir, ok ferr sundrlaust ella borð frá borði. Svá heldr ok þessi figura saman kveðandi í skáldskap með stǫfum þeim er stuðlar heita ok hǫfuðstafir. (Normalised from Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 96–7)

> This figure is much used in the art of eloquent speech, which is called rhetoric, and it is the foundation of that poetical effect that holds together Norse poetry, just as nails hold a ship together, which a [ship]wright makes, and [which] goes in loose order or plank from plank. So too this figure holds together the poetical effect in poetry by means of those staves which are called *stuðlar* ['props, supports', alliterating letters in odd lines] and *hǫfuð-stafir* [chief alliterating staves, in even lines].

One of the best-known examples of the analogy between a poem and a building and its poet and a builder comes from the tenth-century Icelander Egill Skallagrímsson's *Arinbjarnarkviða*, his personal praise-poem in honour of his friend, the Norwegian chieftain Arinbjǫrn Þórisson. This poem is not quoted in the text of *Egils saga* itself, but has been added on a leaf following the saga text in the medieval compilation Mǫðruvallabók. In stanza 15 the poet represents himself as a workman who has chosen his

lengths of timber (the themes of his poem) and is all ready to begin building. What is conventionally given as the last stanza (25) compares the poet, Egill, to a builder who gets up early in the morning to start work and direct his servants on the job. However, the stanza is not really about building a house, but about composing poetry, so here he directs his 'speech-servant', the tongue, to build a poem out of words for his friend. In the second *helmingr* he compares his poetic activity to someone building up an indestructible heap of stones to form a sacred cairn in 'the home-field of poetry', an analogy which may suggest a sacred function for the art of poetry:[6]

> Vask árvakr;
> bark orð saman
> með málþjóns
> morginverkum;
>
> hlóðk lofkǫst
> þanns lengi stendr
> óbrotgjarn
> í bragar túni.
>
> *Prose word order*. Vask árvakr; bark orð saman með morginverkum málþjóns; hlóðk lofkǫst þanns stendr lengi óbrotgjarn í túni bragar.
>
> *Translation*. I was early awake; I put words together by means of the morning work of the speech-servant [TONGUE]; I built up a praise-pile [PRAISE-POEM] which will stand for a long time not willingly broken in the home-field of poetry [?POETIC CORPUS or ?MEMORY].

If poets were craftsmen, what kind of craftsmen were they in the eyes of medieval Scandinavans, and how did they compare in social esteem with other kinds of craftsmen, such as metal- and wood-workers? How were those who were craftsmen of the mind represented in medieval Norse texts, and are there any similarities between the characteristics ascribed to poets and those ascribed to other kinds of craftsmen? If so, why is this? In order to begin to answer this series of questions it is useful to consider another verse from *Egils saga*, one attributed, not to Egill himself, but rather to his

[6] This was Sigurður Nordal's understanding of the connotations of the kenning *bragar tún*: 'skáldskapnum er hér líkt við umgirtan helgistað, þar sem kvæðin standa eins og hörgar' (1933: 267–8), 'poetry is here compared to an enclosed sanctuary, where poems stand just like sacrificial cairns'. The text of this verse and others cited from *Egils saga* in this chapter is from my own edition, based largely on Mǫðruvallabók, in preparation for the forthcoming new edition of the skaldic corpus.

father Skalla ('bald')-Grímr, who had some skills as a poet but perhaps more as a smith. In chapters 29 and 30 of the saga, which tell how Skalla-Grímr established his household in Iceland in the early days of the settlement there, the saga writer lays considerable stress on Skalla-Grímr's capacity for hard physical work, as a shipwright, a farmer and a blacksmith, *járnsmiðr mikill* (Sigurður Nordal 1933: 78; Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 40–2). He was in the habit of getting up early in the morning to start work in the smithy, which made his servants, who had to get up early too, complain. In answer to their sluggishness, he is said to have composed a verse about the importance of early rising for a good blacksmith who wants to grow rich from his trade. The way in which this complex *lausavísa* expresses this subject, an unusual one in the skaldic corpus, forms an interesting parallel to the verse from *Arinbjarnarkviða* above, with its emphasis on the poet as an early-rising 'builder' of words:

> Mjǫk tekr ár, sás aura,
> ísarns meiðr at rísa,
> váðir Vidda bróður
> veðrse*y*gjar skal kveðja;
>
> gjalla lætk á gulli
> geisla njóts, meðan þjóta,
> heitu, hrœrikyt*j*ur
> hreggs vindfrekar, sleggjur.
>
> *Prose word order*. Meiðr ísarns tekr at rísa mjǫk ár, sás skal kveðja aura veðrse*y*gjar váðir bróður Vidda; lætk sleggjur gjalla á heitu gulli geisla njóts, meðan vindfrekar hrœrikyt*j*ur hreggs þjóta.
>
> *Translation*. The tree of iron [BLACKSMITH] is obliged to rise very early, who wants to gain silver from the wind-sucking clothing of the brother of Viddi ⟨=Ægir, a sea god⟩ [WIND > BELLOWS]; I let sledge-hammers ring on the hot gold of the owner of lightbeams [FIRE > IRON], while the wind-greedy stirring-huts of the blast [BELLOWS] roar.

The analogy between Skalla-Grímr the poetic blacksmith and his son Egill the poet as craftsman has other dimensions in the saga. Both are avaricious and hoard money, and both are dark and ugly, with disturbingly aggressive mood swings. There is definitely a family likeness between father and son on a number of levels. As I argued many years ago (Clunies Ross 1978, rept. 1989), Egill and his father share a number of traits, both physical and mental, with another group of Icelandic saga characters, namely the poets who are the protagonists of the *skáldsögur* or sagas of

poets. *Egils saga* has many affinities with this group, which comprises *Kormaks saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, while *Fóstbrœðra saga* ('Saga of the Foster-brothers') also has a claim to be considered here (Clunies Ross 2001). The main characters in these sagas, all poets, are dark in colouring (red hair is also possible, though less common) and ugly, with prominent features. In temperament they are quarrelsome and aggressive, but gifted with the ability to compose poetry. We shall see, when considering the myth of the origin of poetry, that these qualities have their counterpart in the character traits attributed to the Norse god Óðinn, the god of poetry. However, he is also a god of war and a being who, while possessing supreme intellectual gifts, is unreliable, untrustworthy and given to stirring up conflict among humans. Many poets, as represented in saga literature, share these characteristics.

On one level then, we might say that the image of poets in Old Icelandic literature, particularly in some of the *Íslendingasögur*, reflects that of the god from whom they got their poetic gifts. But why should both god and human poets be represented in this way? If we look also at the figure of the craftsman or smith in Old Norse literature, we find a similar constellation of qualities. We may think of the mythical smith Vǫlundr, whose uneasy relationship with King Níðuðr is the subject of the eddic poem *Vǫlundarkviða* or of the smith Reginn, foster-father of the hero Sigurðr, whom the prose introduction to the eddic poem *Reginsmál* ('Speech about Reginn') describes as a dwarf in stature, wise, ugly and skilled in magic (*Hann var hveriom manni hagari, oc dvergr of vǫxt; hann var vitr, grimmr oc fiolkunnigr* (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 173), 'he was more skilful than every man, and a dwarf in stature; he was wise, ugly and skilled in magic'). We may then also recall that, in *Egils saga*, Egill and before him Skalla-Grímr and *his* father Kveldulfr all have very edgy relations with authority figures, in their cases successive kings of Norway.

These examples indicate that medieval Scandinavian attitudes to those groups who were among the most skilled in the community, whether in intellectual or in practical abilities, were highly ambivalent, and it is interesting to speculate on why this was so. Looking to the evidence provided by the material-historical (that is, archaeological) context of the Viking Age economy, Hines (2003) has argued that the pejorative attitude expressed in many sources towards the smith figure (and, I would add, the stereotypical attitude towards the poet as dark and troublesome) stems from the fact that, although both these groups were very important to the upper classes of society, as they provided them with luxury material goods and court entertainment and praise poetry respectively, those same upper classes found it

very difficult to control their technicians' expertise in ways they wanted. In the case of skilled craftsmen, Hines points to 'the growing economic importance and social potential of such manufacturers, and the attempts by the governing social elite to harness and control those forces demonstrated archaeologically by the Viking-period tool cult and the evidence from Ribe' (2003: 34). This can also be seen in the growing importance of trading posts and towns, where most specialist craftwork was carried on in the Viking Age. The extent to which the aristocracy and particularly royalty were able to benefit from the productivity of towns must have been of crucial importance at this time. The mythological literature about smiths can be interpreted as expressing the anxieties of the upper classes that they were not able to control these new sources of wealth to the extent they would have liked. As far as poets were concerned, the ruling classes' anxieties doubtless turned on the potential of the skalds' art for criticism and satire as well as for praise.

The poet as recipient of Óðinn's mead

Another reason why both smiths and poets may have been represented as disruptive and troublesome in Norse tradition is because their work involved knowledge and specialist skills that were not available to everyone in the community. These special resources could therefore be thought of as arcane skills and privileged kinds of knowledge. In the case of poets, their special powers were represented as coming from outside human society as a gift from the gods, something inherently otherworldly. It is to this conjunction of ideas that we must look for the second dominant way that medieval Scandinavians conceptualised poetry: as a divine gift and its practitioners as specially bound to the god of poetry, Óðinn. Unsurprisingly, this was a view of themselves that poets enjoyed and did not refrain from promoting in their verses. Indeed it could be argued that, because of the self-referentiality of much skaldic verse and because Snorri Sturluson, himself a poet, gave such prominence to the myth of the poetic mead in both his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* and to kennings for poetry in *Skáldskaparmál*, we have inherited a view of this second way of representing Old Norse poetry and poets which exaggerates its general significance in the wider Scandinavian community, where the poet-as-craftsman concept was probably more important.

At the beginning of this chapter I quoted a statement from the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* about Óðinn's gift of the mead of poetry to both the gods and those humans who are skilled at

composing verse. In context, the statement is attributed to Bragi, another god of poetry (possibly one with specific responsibility for skaldic verse), and it comes straight after his narrative of the myth that tells how Óðinn acquired this precious substance. Bragi is provoked to tell the story by a question from his interlocutor, Ægir, a sea deity: *Hvaðan af hefir hafizk sú íþrótt er þér kallið skáldskap?*, 'From where did that skill that you call poetry originate?' Parts of this myth are also narrated in the first section of a work usually attributed to Snorri, *Heimskringla*, a history of the kings of Norway, which is prefaced by a legendary history of their forebears in prehistoric times, named *Ynglinga saga*. In chapter 4 of *Ynglinga saga* the circumstances leading up to the mead myth are treated as a historical event. This historical approach is also briefly sketched in *Skáldskaparmál*, where the narrative indicates that the events are a sequel to a war between the Norse gods and a people (*fólk*) called Vanir, the members of whose group, Njǫrðr, Freyr and Freyja, are elsewhere considered deities.

The myth of the poetic mead was the basis for a great many conventional kennings and other expressions for poetry and poets in skaldic verse, as Bragi's statement goes on to say, 'Thus we call poetry Óðinn's booty and find, and his drink and his gift and the Æsir's drink'. In order to understand the full meaning of such circumlocutions, we need to know and ponder the myth, and that is of course why Snorri narrates it near the beginning of that part of the *Edda* that deals particularly with skaldic diction. We notice particularly that the myth (Faulkes 1998 I: 3–5; 1987: 61–4) involves a series of transformations, which require the giving and taking of life. The story began with discord, a war between the gods and the Vanir, but then a truce between the two groups led them to spit together into a cauldron, and from that mingled spit they created the wise being Kvasir. However, he, who went around the world teaching wisdom, was killed by some dwarfs. They then mixed his blood with honey so that it fermented and became the poetic mead. Possession of the mead (and, perhaps, by implication, keeping it out of general circulation) led to death for both the dwarfs and later Suttungr, a giant who stole it from them. Óðinn, with help from the giant's daughter Gunnlǫð, to whom he offered sex in exchange for three drinks of the mead, stole it from Suttungr and then, having transformed himself into an eagle, took the liquid in his crop and regurgitated it into containers the gods had laid out at their home, Ásgarðr, in readiness for his return. Thus his so-called gift to human poets was not really his in the first place, but stolen property, which was created out of a murderous act.

In an earlier study of Old Norse myths (Clunies Ross 1994b: 150–2, 216–18), I argued that the myth of the poetic mead may be interpreted in

the following way. Poetry, being both a skill (*íþrótt*) and an inspiration from the gods,[7] belongs to two contrasting worlds represented in Old Norse mythological texts: the world of ordered intellectual control on the one hand, presided over by the gods, and on the other the world of natural processes, where giants and female supernatural beings, such as the Norns who determined Fate, were dominant. Natural processes included birth, the unpredictable tenor of life (where Fate was operative) and death. There was a tendency, in this as in other mythologies, to align the natural world with the feminine and to see the world of culturally determined order as a masculine sphere. Poetry largely belongs to the male world (though a few women poets are known to have existed) but, in generating poetry, the gods mimic female processes of pregnancy and giving birth: their spitting into a cauldron generates the wise being Kvasir while Óðinn's swallowing and regurgitating of the mead when he is transformed into an eagle makes it fruitful for the life of the mind. Anthropologists have termed this kind of ideology, in which males appropriate female reproductive processes, male pseudo-procreation.[8] We can also see that human poets, in their creativity, are represented as mimicking Óðinn's pseudo-procreative powers. Not only do they receive from his mouth the regurgitated mead and become intoxicated with it, but, as it is an alcoholic drink, it may also cause them to vomit. This idea is prominent in several verses attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson, who is himself both a prodigious drinker and an accomplished poet, as well as in the accompanying prose text of *Egils saga* and in many other places in Old Norse poetry and literature (Kreutzer 1977: 257–8). Poetry is also often represented as a form of organic growth within the poet (see Kreutzer 1977: 260), an idea that is strongly pseudo-procreative. Poets, then, are creative beings, but their very creativity makes them unruly as well as powerful (hence the literary representation of poetry not as an abstract mental process but as an intoxicating alcoholic liquid). The product of their creativity, poetry, is a powerful force for social good as well as social disturbance and, in their own lives, they often play ambivalent social roles. This ambivalence is expressed in many Icelandic sagas through the stereotype of the dark, ugly and difficult skald, as we have already seen.

[7] The name of the god of poetry, Óðinn, is significant here, for it means 'the inspired, the frenzied one' and is cognate with a not uncommon word for poetry in skaldic verse, *óðr* ('mind, fury, poem, poetry'). Compare the kenning for a poet, *óðs skap-Móði* ('poetry's creating-Móði'), in Bragi Boddason's self-definitional stanza quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1.

[8] For references to the anthropological literature on this topic, see Clunies Ross 1994b: 150–2.

One important attribute of poetry in Old Norse culture that is probably related to the concept of poetry as the gift of the gods was that it was regarded as a vehicle for conveying major truths about the world and human life. This close imputed relationship between poets and the divine was to prove difficult, as we shall see in Chapter 6, when skalds became Christian and so lost a major support for the ideological basis of their art in its traditional form. The myth of the origin of poetry as an intoxicating drink formed from the gods' spittle endorses this traditional view. In addition, a number of Óðinn's own attributes reveal that the god of poetry was thought to have wide-ranging mental powers which many scholars have aligned with those of a shaman (see Buchholz 1971), who could change shape, often into the form of an animal or bird, and fly or move through the world to gather knowledge. In the eddic poem *Grímnismál*, which Snorri quotes in *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 1982: 32–3), the power and extensibility of Óðinn's mental reach is expressed through the idea that he owns two ravens, Huginn ('Thought') and Muninn ('Memory'), which he sends out to fly the world every day on his behalf and return to him thereafter. This verse expresses both the power and sweep of the shaman's mental capacity, but, by contrast, the fear also that the roving mind might never return to the inert body or that — a worse fate — the shaman might lose his memory:[9]

> Huginn oc Muninn fliúga hverian dag
> iormungrund yfir;
> óomc ec of Hugin, at hann aptr né komið
> þó siámc meirr um Munin. *Grímnismál* 20 (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 61)
>
> *Translation*. Huginn and Muninn fly every day over the mighty earth. I fear for Huginn that he may not come back, yet I am afraid more about Muninn.

Descending from the spirit world to the environment of Viking Age court society, skalds more often used the myth of the poetic mead and the notion of poetry as a divine gift as a rhetorical trope that drew attention to their own importance and high status in human society than they did to

[9] In Snorri's *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 7, where Óðinn's shamanism is described as if it belonged to a historical Sámi shaman, as Lindow has recently argued (2003), his inert body after the wandering spirit has left it is thus described: *Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr*, 'Then the body lay as if it were asleep or dead' (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51 I: 18).

claim direct supernatural powers for themselves. In many cases references to the mead myth are highly stereotyped, yet for all that they serve to foreground the poets' special and privileged status. As Anthony Faulkes has remarked (1993: 12), 'one remarkable feature of skaldic poetry . . . is that it contains a great deal of self-reference and that it often makes both the poem and the poet into topics'. To do this, the poems' narrative stance employs both first-person utterance, in which the skald draws attention to himself, his creative role and his own opinions, as well as third-person narration of the major events being described. In so-called 'situational' verses, the skald and his activities are often the main subject of the narrative action, which may be focalised by a mixture of first- and third-person statements; in 'authenticating' verses the main narrative is usually in the third person, while intercalary clauses tend to use the first person. At the beginnings of skaldic praise-poems, poets usually call for silence and the hearing of their audience (Wood 1960), drawing attention in the process to their own roles as word-smiths and receivers of Óðinn's gift both there and at other salient points in their compositions.

Snorri Sturluson quoted a large sample of skalds' self-referential opening gambits in *Skáldskaparmál* under kennings for Óðinn and for poetry (Faulkes 1998 I: 6–14). Among them is a rather complex allusion to the mead myth, attributed to a certain Steinþórr:

> Forngervan á ek firnum
> farms Gunnlaðar arma
> horna fors at hrósa
> hlítstyggs ok þó lítinn. (Faulkes 1998 I: 9, verse 13)
>
> *Prose word order*. Ek á at hrósa firnum forngervan fors horna hlítstyggs farms Gunnlaðar arma ok þó lítinn.
>
> *Translation*. I have reason to be extremely proud of the anciently made waterfall of horns [(MEAD OF) POETRY] of the mediocrity-shy cargo of Gunnlǫð's ⟨giantess, daughter of Suttungr⟩ arms [ÓÐINN], and yet it is meagre.

Here the antithesis between divine plenitude and human inadequacy provides an indigenous modesty topos that builds on the idea that poetry is a gift from Óðinn to human poets. A good example of a poet drawing attention to himself and his composition in mid-stream, as it were, is the quotation, cited earlier in this chapter, from Kormakr Ǫgmundarson's *Hákonardrápa*. When the poet says 'I will again compose more praise about the famous son of Sigrøðr [=Hákon]; I have been paying him the

reward of the fetter-looser [ÓÐINN > POETRY]', he nicely balances a flattering reference to the patron with a self-referential allusion to the source of his own talent. His talent is a reward (*heið*) from Óðinn, which he then pays out to his lord, thus joining god, poet and ruler in a linked chain of gift-giving.

There are a great many stories about poets in Old Norse literature, mainly preserved in Icelandic manuscripts and therefore frequently told from an Icelandic point of view. Most of these stories reinforce the notion of the poet as a man of importance in Norse society, particularly but not exclusively in a courtly environment, and, if the poets happened to be Icelanders, as many were, then these men were presented as not only the best among poets but the equal of all Norwegians and other foreigners, not excluding the king! There are many short prose narratives or *þættir*, often preserved in compilations of sagas about various Norwegian kings, that celebrate the cleverness of Icelanders, especially Icelandic poets, while many of their poetic compositions about the kings and earls they served have been preserved in the kings' sagas themselves. Underlying these literary representations of poets is a good measure of Icelandic national pride as well as a conception of the high value that we have already seen was accorded to poets generally in medieval Norwegian and Icelandic society.

Poetic aesthetics

I will turn now from the way in which poetry and poets, together with myths about poetry, are presented in Old Icelandic literature to a consideration of the aesthetics of Old Norse poetry itself, that is to say, the qualities about the poetry as human cultural expression that people in medieval Norway, Iceland and other societies of Norse influence valued and enjoyed. I will begin with some consideration of the aesthetic qualities of eddic poetry, arguably, as we have seen, the earlier form. Unlike skaldic verse, which in its origins and development is strongly associated with courtly society in Norway, there is no indication that those who composed and listened to eddic poetry were a social elite, though, to the extent that the subject matter of this poetry concerned the gods and heroes of the ancient Germanic and Norse world, an aristocratic rather than a commoner's perspective on life is discernible.[10] This, however, is probably true of most of the poetry in the common Germanic alliterative verse form that has

[10] This is perhaps most obvious in the poem *Rígsþula*, which Sverre Bagge has shown (2000) endorses the social hierarchy of Viking Age society, with the king and the

survived from the early Middle Ages, whether in Old High German, in Old English or in Old Norse, and true indeed of medieval European literature generally. It has survived largely because it was thought valuable enough to deserve being written down. This means that someone with the power to authorise a costly form of production — the preparation and writing of manuscripts — and a technology — that of writing — which only the educated classes by and large had access to, had decided that resources should be spent on putting into written form on parchment or vellum vernacular poems that until that time had probably had a purely oral existence and transmission. It is not surprising then that such poetry endorses the outlook on life of the upper classes, even if it was actually enjoyed by people more generally. However, it is almost certain that the subject matter of Norse eddic poetry, pagan myths of the gods, giants and dwarfs on the one hand, and legends about well-known heroes of the Migration Age in Europe on the other, which were the common property of all the Germanic peoples, was widely known by the communities of medieval Norway and Iceland.

This very fact — of its subject matter being widely known — is an important part of the aesthetic character of Old Norse eddic poetry. It has often been observed that, in societies in which the subject matter of literature and other cultural forms, like songs and the visual arts, is widely known, it is less necessary (for obvious reasons) for poets and other artists to tell the story that underlies that work of art (see Clunies Ross 1983). This phenomenon, that the audience knows the story-line already, has several important effects upon the aesthetic of such texts. First, it means that there are far fewer works in which one actually finds a full-scale narrative of a myth or other kind of plot, because the audience knows it already and it would be boring for them to hear it spelled out in detail. This may sometimes be frustrating for modern readers and scholars, who would dearly like to know, for example, why it was that the god Freyr fought a giant named Beli, a mythic story that Snorri Sturluson refers to in his *Edda*, without, however, giving any details, and which is the basis for several kennings for

nobility in control and at the top, and the free peasants, labouring and slave classes below them. However, virtually all the poems of the Elder Edda that have survived assume, implicitly or explicitly, a perspective which is oriented towards the upper classes of society: the characters are noble and live in courts — if in heroic poems — while, if they are gods, they behave as if they were aristocrats. Only rarely do members of the non-aristocratic classes assume dominant positions in this poetry and only rarely, as in the probably twelfth-century *Atlamál* (traditionally thought to have been composed in Greenland), does what Ursula Dronke has called a 'provincial realism' (1969: 108) break into the geographical setting of these poems.

the god.[11] As we know no other telling of this story, its full extent is likely to remain a mystery to us. When the audience already knows a narrative, it is unnecessary for the poet or other artist to create suspense in the way we find essential in the traditional modern novel, although there are ways in which the sense of terror and anticipation can be intensified even with a known story, as we see very clearly from the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* or the Old Icelandic *Grettis saga*, works that share significant motifs (Cook 1993).

Understandably, traditional poets and their audiences often value most highly allusive, even cryptic references to well-known stories or other kinds of information or perhaps an unusual perspective on a well-known legend. One example is the Old Norse *Atlamál* in comparison with *Atlakviða*; another, the telling of the heroic fight at Finnesburh in the Old English *Beowulf*, where the narrator looks at it from the viewpoint of both a woman and a man who face tragic dilemmas of personal loyalty, compared with that in the much more straightforward independent *Finnesburh Fragment*, which narrates the story as a typical surprise attack on a Germanic hall. Old Norse eddic poetry displays many of the aesthetic qualities that derive from its subject matter being known to its audiences. Very few of the poems of this type are of primarily narrative kind, as Heinz Klingenberg (1983) has demonstrated in an excellent study. Of the mythological poems in the Elder Edda collection, only *Skírnismál*, *Hymiskviða*, *Þrymskviða* and *Vǫlundarkviða* are primarily narratives.[12] *Þrymskviða* tells the myth of how the god Þórr had his hammer stolen by the giant Þrymr and how the gods managed to get it back by having Þórr dress up as the giant's bride, while *Vǫlundarkviða* narrates the master smith Vǫlundr's imprisonment by a tyrannous king, Níðuðr, and tells how he took his revenge on the king and his family. *Hymiskviða* contains two mythic narratives, the one made contingent on the other in the poem; they are the myth of how the gods Þórr

[11] The myth is alluded to in *Gylfaginning* straight after Snorri's narrative of Freyr's wooing of the giantess Gerðr through his proxy, Skírnir, and the link between the two myths is said to be that the reason why Freyr was swordless when he fought Beli and had to use a stag's antler as a weapon was because he had given his sword to Skírnir when he went to giantland to woo Gerðr (Faulkes 1982: 31–2). The kenning *bani Belja* ('slayer of Beli [FREYR]') forms part of a lengthy quotation from *Vǫluspá* (st. 53) towards its conclusion. In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri gives the kenning *Belja dólgr* ('enemy of Beli') for Freyr, citing a *helmingr* by Eyvindr skáldaspillir in support (Faulkes 1998 I: 18, verse 61). Compare *bǫlverðung Belja* ('evil troop of Beli [GIANTS]'), *Haustlǫng* 18/3, quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 23, verse 69).

[12] Although it was not in the Codex Regius collection, being preserved only in some manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, *Grottasǫngr* should also be added to this list of primarily narrative poems.

and Týr obtain a cauldron for brewing ale from the giant Hymir, and the better-known myth, and a Viking Age favourite, of how Þórr, in company with Hymir, rows out to sea in order to catch the World Serpent Miðgarðsormr. *Skírnismál* narrates how the god Freyr becomes infatuated with a giantess named Gerðr and how he sends his servant Skírnir to woo her on his behalf and persuade the reluctant giantess to marry him through the use of some rather heavy threats.

Among the heroic poems of this collection, explicit narrative is more frequent, though a good deal in the background to the telling is still left to be supplied by the audience from their common cultural knowledge. It is assumed, for example, by the poet of *Hamðismál*, that his audience will know something about the main characters of his poem and their situation in the legendary world that forms its backdrop. Many scholars have observed the tendency for these originally separate legends and their characters to coalesce into a kind of family drama in which all the characters are related, forming the early medieval equivalent to a modern television soap opera. In the third stanza of *Hamðismál*, quoted below, the poet assumes that his audience knows who the protagonist, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, is, and how she comes at this point in her life history to have two young adult sons, Hamðir and Sǫrli. Although it is true that the poet makes some concession to his audience by informing it, through Guðrún, of why the sons must now ride off to seek vengeance for their sister Svanhildr, who has been trampled to death by horses, the identity of the perpetrator of this deed, the Gothic tyrant Jǫrmunrekkr (a stock character of early Germanic heroic literature), is not spelled out, the location of his murder of the young men's sister is only hinted at and there is no indication of his motive:

> 'Systir var yccor Svanhildr um heitin,
> sú er Iǫrmunreccr ióm um traddi,
> hvítom oc svortom, á hervegi,
> grám, gangtǫmom Gotna hrossom.' (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 269)
>
> *Translation*. 'Your sister was called Svanhildr, whom Jǫrmunrekkr had trampled by horses, white and black, on the military highway, by the grey, tame-paced horses of the Goths.'

The tendency on the part of early Norse poets to assume the audience had the background knowledge to understand subjects that are expressed in an allusive fashion is even more marked in the majority of the mythological

poems of the Elder Edda. One of the main reasons for this is that many of these poems are presented as the direct speech of the supernatural beings themselves. These beings, whether gods, giants, dwarfs or prophetesses, may present mythological information in the form of a monologue or a direct address to another supernatural being, in which they are able to allude to a variety of happenings in the mythological world they inhabit and take for granted. The audience is expected to understand the background to what they are saying, and the directness of speech so produced often creates dramatic, memorable and economical poetic effects, as in the opening stanza of *Vǫluspá*, the poem with which the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda begins:

> Hlióðs bið ec allar helgar kindir,
> meiri oc minni, mǫgo Heimdalar;
> vildo, at ec, Valfǫðr, vel fyrtelia
> forn spioll fira, þau er fremst um man. (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 1)
>
> *Translation*. I request a hearing of all the holy kindreds, the greater and the lesser, descendants of Heimdallr. You, Father of the Slain, wanted me to set forth the ancient histories of men, those which I remember farthest back in time.

These words of the prophetess are highly dramatic and conjure up the whole sweep of divine and human history. They first call for a hearing from her audience, which is thus brought immediately into the action of the poem, and identified as the descendants of the god Heimdallr. However, if one does not know the myth in which Heimdallr visits all the human social orders in turn and has sexual intercourse with their female members — a myth we know only from another eddic poem, *Rígsþula* — the significance of her reference to the kinsmen of Heimdallr is lost. In addition, the audience has to understand that she goes on to address not them, or not them directly, but her interlocutor, Óðinn, the sinister Valfǫðr of line 3, who has forced her to share her secret knowledge with him. The audience of this kind of eddic poetry is thus involved in the action as bystanders to events of the mythical past, present and future.

There is another important kind of eddic mythological poetry that requires a great deal of background knowledge on the part of its audience, and that is the group of dialogue poems like *Vafþrúðnismál*, *Grímnismál, Hárbarðsljóð*, *Alvíssmál* and *Lokasenna* which represent supernatural beings in some kind of agonistic dialogue with one another. The distinguishing feature of this group of poems is that knowledge of mythology is used

by the participants in these dialogues to score points off one another and in most cases the being who proves to be the poorer in mythological knowledge actually suffers gross misfortune or even death because of it. This kind of poetry has often been called by modern scholars 'wisdom-contest poetry', and we see similar features in the so-called *Gátur Heiðreks* ('The Riddles of Heiðrekr'), in *Hervarar saga*. As the narrative frame of these poems requires the protagonists, sometimes concealing their true identity, to put to one another the most difficult and cryptic questions about Norse myths or mythic events, it is obviously necessary for their human audiences to be well versed in the minutiae of Norse mythology. We may also infer that the audiences of this kind of verse actually enjoyed its obscure, riddling style and content, perhaps identifying with the winning contestant, who is usually one of the gods. An example of a 'wisdom contest' between a god and a giant is *Vafþrúðnismál*, in which the god Óðinn, in disguise as a human wanderer, engages in a wisdom contest with the wise giant Vafþrúðnir. Óðinn wins, taking unfair advantage of his giant opponent by asking him a question that only he, Óðinn, knows the answer to:

> Óðinn qvað:
> 'Fiolð ec fór, fiolð ec freistaðac,
> fiolð ec reynda regin:
> hvat mælti Óðinn, áðr á bál stigi,
> siálfr í eyra syni?' (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 55)
>
> *Translation*. Óðinn said, 'I have travelled much, I have put a great deal to the test, I have tried a multitude of powers: what did Óðinn himself say in his son's ear, before he was placed on the funeral pyre?'

The allusion is to the death of Baldr, Óðinn's son, killed by his own brother, Hǫðr, and the elaborate funeral that followed. The question both causes the giant to lose the contest, crying foul play, and reveals his opponent's identity. It brings the contest to a sudden end and the giant to a realisation that he spoke all his own considerable wisdom 'with a doomed mouth' (*feigom munni*).

Snorri Sturluson makes use of the traditional form of the wisdom context in the *Gylfaginning* section of his *Edda*, both in its frame narrative, in which the rather naive Swedish king Gylfi dares to take on a group of clever men, the so-called Æsir from Troy, who spin him yarns about the gods in whom they say they believe, and, within the text itself, by quoting extensively from two wisdom contest poems of the Elder Edda, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*, as well as from *Vǫluspá*, as authorities for the

mythological information that *Gylfaginning* provides. It is possible, as Anthony Faulkes surmised (1982: xxv), that behind this type of eddic wisdom-contest poetry lies 'an ancient Scandinavian tradition of composing poems of mythological instruction as dialogues or dramatic monologues'. This line of thinking might suggest that eddic poetry of this type was actually a way of teaching poets the tools of their trade in an oral society and helping them to remember the complex events of mythological history, as it were, in dramatic and memorable form. If so, such poetry may have been relished particularly by practitioners of the art of poetry more than by general audiences. The same may be true of the *þulur* or poets' mnemonics, which list synonyms for the main referents of traditional poetry and bear considerable similarities to the lists of old lore that we find in some eddic mythological poetry, such as *Alvíssmál*.

The direct, dramatic quality of much eddic poetry has led some scholars to suggest that it may have been the script, as it were, for actual rituals and religious ceremonies in pre-Christian Scandinavia. This view was promoted by Bertha Phillpotts (1920), who was strongly influenced by the Cambridge myth and ritual school of anthropology, and espoused by such scholars as Anne Holtsmark (1950), who applied it to skaldic mythological verse, and Einar Haugen (1983), who invoked it in the context of eddic verse. It has been most recently and most thoroughly examined by Terry Gunnell (1995), who is inclined to accept that at least some of the poems of the Elder Edda, particularly those in the measure *ljóðaháttr*, evolved within a tradition of ritual drama. In spite of the evidence he adduces, a certain scepticism remains. There is nothing in the poems themselves that needs to be accounted for as the script for ritual dramas, while their dramatic characteristics and forms of direct speech are easily explicable in terms of the overarching medieval Norse conception of all kinds of poetry as speech acts with direct effects, as we have seen in earlier chapters, as well as in the idea, which Snorri Sturluson certainly assumes in the Prologue and *Gylfaginning* sections of his *Edda* when he puts quotations from eddic poetry into their mouths, that the gods and other supernatural figures of Old Norse myth spoke in poetry, and in eddic verse forms at that.

To turn from poetry in eddic measures to the poetry of the medieval Norse skalds, we enter an aesthetic world in which there are certainly similarities with the character of eddic poetry but also some important differences. Although, as we have seen, the audience of eddic poetry was expected to bring to its understanding a general cultural knowledge of pre-Christian myth and Germanic legend, the language of eddic verse was largely straightforward and its word order and syntactical arrangements

were not too different from those we presume to have existed for spoken Old Norse during the Viking Age. The nature of the alliterative line and the individual verse form a poet used of course exerted a shaping influence on the resultant poetic discourse and, together with the mythic and legendary subject matter, led to the existence in the poetic corpus of a significant number of specifically poetic words and semi-formulaic phrases that were probably not used in spoken registers.[13] It is also sometimes the case that, because poetic words are elsewhere unattested, the precise meanings of some terms that occur in the poetry of the Elder Edda are uncertain. Sometimes scholars have suspected unusual words of being loans from other languages or, if they occur usually in Old Norse in a different sense, as for example, the phrase *ǫrlǫg drýgja* ('to engage in war') in *Vǫlundarkviða* 1 and 3, the influence of foreign cognates has been suspected, in this case from Old English. Kennings also occur sporadically in eddic verse, probably as a consequence of reworking of the poetry in the late Viking Age or even later than that.[14] Having conceded all these things, however, the diction, syntax and verse forms of eddic poetry are still relatively straightforward in comparison with those of skaldic verse. Why, then, did skaldic poetry become so complicated, not so much in what it says (its referential meaning), but in how it says it?

Skaldic verse was in origin the poetry of the *drótt*, the royal or aristocratic retinue, and then of the *hirð*, or royal court (Lindow 1976). It was thus an elite poetry and, generally, those who belong to elites seem to need to mark themselves out as special in social terms by adopting cultural practices that ordinary people do not or cannot follow as, for example, by wearing special clothes, wearing long hair when others wear it short (see Wallace-Hadrill 1982) or by behaving in special ways. In early medieval

[13] Useful resources for the study of the vocabulary of eddic verse are the second part (*Kleines Wörterbuch*, 1968) to Neckel and Kuhn and its English enlargement and translation by La Farge and Tucker (1992), where *hapax legomena* are marked with an asterisk. Another useful work is Robert Kellogg's concordance (1988). On the question of the extent to which eddic poetry was formulaic, see Harris 1983 and 1985. The general consensus is now that eddic poetry was not fully formulaic, in the sense put forward by the Homeric scholars Parry and Lord (see Lord 1960), but rather part of a 'memorial tradition' in which, however, some formulae appear (see also Lönnroth 1981).

[14] Examples are *bani Belja* ([FREYR], *Vǫluspá* 53/5; see note 11 in this chapter), *Friggjar angan* ('the joy of Frigg' [BALDR], *Vǫluspá* 53/7–8), *sviga læ* ('the destruction of brushwood' [FIRE], *Vǫluspá* 52/2), *kinnskógr* ('cheek-forest' [BEARD], *Hymiskviða* 10/8), *brimsvín* ('surf-pig' [WHALE], *Hymiskviða* 27/8) and *hraunhvalr* ('lava-whale' [GIANT], *Hymiskviða* 36/5). All the kennings in *Hymiskviða*, and there are more than those listed here, are comic in effect.

Norway, one of the badges of the courtly elite was undoubtedly its cultivation of skaldic poetry. Some of the elitist tendencies of Old Norse poetry were already present in certain kinds of eddic verse, such as the wisdom contest poem, but others developed presumably during the ninth century at the courts of Norwegian rulers. It is probably no coincidence that the flowering of the art of skaldic poetry coincided with the growth in power of the kings and earls of Norway into rulers with pretensions to control over the whole of Norway, not just small parts of it. Skaldic poetry was a perfect medium of propaganda for these rulers, as long as those who heard it could understand and be impressed by its special diction, complex syntax and intricate verse forms. The settlement of Iceland (*c*.870–930) took place around the time that skaldic poetry was becoming established as an elite, courtly art in Norway. Within a hundred years or so of becoming a group of people who regarded themselves as different from Norwegians, Icelanders had, as it were, cornered the market in skaldic verse, a feat that they later appear to have followed up by cornering the market in saga narrative. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen described their cultural superiority thus (2000: 13): 'Icelanders were professionals, a kind of literary Swiss Guard, which was called upon when it became necessary to relate history in poetry or in writing.' But Icelanders took the art of skaldic poetry further, as we have seen in Chapter 3: in their own island society and in those sagas which tell their own history, Icelandic skalds developed new uses for skaldic poetry and thereby made some significant changes to its character.

When we consider why skaldic poetry was regarded as special we should bear in mind the traditional ideology that underlies the image of the poet as a skilled word-smith and a beneficiary of the divine gift of the poetic mead. In all probability this ideology was in existence in some form or other before the Viking Age;[15] however, there is no doubt that the strong association drawn between the god Óðinn and poets both in myth generally and in the imagery of the skalds themselves when they speak of their art (see Clover 1978) endorses the idea of a special relationship between poets and the chief god of Viking Age warrior elites. In addition, it seems that at some unspecifiable time, but probably fairly early in the Viking Age, a second

[15] The evidence of words for poet and descriptions of poetic activity in other early Germanic literatures is equivocal (von See 1981; Opland 1980: 232–56) and even an etymological analysis of common terms yields differing results, sometimes stressing the creative side of poetic activity, sometimes poets' roles as satirists and entertainers (see Holthausen 1963: 281, *scop*; Alexander Jóhannesson 1956: 780, 822). A major difficulty here is the probable opposition of the Christian establishment to traditional poetic roles and status and thus the problem of interpreting Christian representations of poets and poetry in early Germanic societies outside Scandinavia.

god of poetry came into being, that is Bragi, whom Snorri Sturluson presents as the chief authority on the art of skaldic poetry in the frame narrative to *Skáldskaparmál*. Both there and in *Gylfaginning*, in addition, he is given a goddess wife, Iðunn. The rise of Bragi as a divine or semi-divine figure seems particularly associated with the ascendancy of skaldic poetry as the dominant kind of poetry in Norway and its colonies during the Viking Age. Most scholars who have written about this subject have come to the conclusion that Bragi, the god of skaldic poetry, is a deified form of Bragi Boddason inn gamli ('the old'), the earliest skald whose poetry has survived in the written record (see Clunies Ross 1993a).

In Chapter 1 we saw that the Old Norse term *skáldskapr* was used not only to refer to skaldic poetry itself but to the rules and procedures that governed the composition of this kind of poetry. When, near the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*, the god Bragi's questioner, Ægir, asks him to describe the nature of poetry (and he means here skaldic poetry quite specifically) Bragi answers as follows:

> Þá mælir Ægir: 'Hversu á marga lund breytið þér orðtǫkum skáldskapar, eða hversu mǫrg eru kyn skáldskaparins?'
>
> Þá mælir Bragi: 'Tvenn eru kyn þau er greina skáldskap allan.'
>
> Ægir spyrr: 'Hver tvenn?'
>
> Bragi segir: 'Mál ok hættir.'
>
> 'Hvert máltak er haft til skáldskapar?'
>
> 'Þrenn er grein skáldskaparmáls.'
>
> 'Hver?'
>
> 'Svá: at nefna hvern hlut sem heitir; ǫnnur grein er sú er heitir fornǫfn; in þriðja málsgrein er kǫlluð er kenning . . .'. (Faulkes 1998 I: 5)

> Then spoke Ægir: 'In how many ways do you vary the vocabulary of poetry, and how many categories are there in poetry?'
>
> Then spoke Bragi: 'There are two categories into which all poetry is divided.'
>
> Ægir asked: 'Which two?'
>
> Bragi said: 'Language and verse forms.'
>
> 'What choice of language is used in poetry?'
>
> 'There are three categories in the language of poetry.'
>
> 'What are they?'
>
> 'To call everything by its name; the second category is the one called substitution; and the third category of language is what is called kenning [description] . . .'. (Faulkes 1987: 64).

This series of questions and answers, which in both form and substance

remind one of the pedagogic techniques of the medieval schoolroom, is nevertheless the closest we come in the surviving literature from medieval Scandinavia to a definition of the characteristic features of skaldic poetry. The passage has received much comment, and the interpretation of the terms Snorri uses to differentiate the three categories of poetic diction is somewhat problematical. It is discussed in greater detail in the Appendix.

Whatever our precise understanding of the meanings Snorri intended by the terms *fornafn* (Clunies Ross 1993b) and *kenning* (Amory 1993), it is clear from the passage quoted here and from the whole arrangement of the third and fourth parts of the *Edda*, that he understood there to be two major distinguishing features of skaldic poetry, its diction (discussed in *Skáldskaparmál*) and its various special verse forms, which are the subject of the *Edda*'s fourth part, *Háttatal*. A modern analyst would certainly wish to include a third characteristic, namely syntax and word-order, which are often deliberately fragmented in skaldic verse in comparison with prose discourse, but it seems probable that Snorri himself did not differentiate fully between syntax and verse form. In a number of cases of the different kinds of verse forms he discusses in *Háttatal*, their use of special syntactic features, involving the breaking up and dispersal of clauses within the verse or half-verse, are seen by him as an integral part of the verse form itself.[16]

Anyone who has even a slight acquaintance with skaldic poetry will realise that its audiences must have valued the qualities of complexity and abstruseness very highly and enjoyed them for their own sakes (see Faulkes 1997). In this respect we can understand how some of the aesthetic characteristics of eddic poetry, like its interest in the detail of myth and legend, and its expectation that audiences would understand these without having them spelled out, could have been carried over and intensified in the practice of skaldic verse. The connection between the wisdom-contest form and the riddle is also particularly suggestive, and it is probable that the riddling, esoteric character of skaldic verse and the knowledge necessary to understand it would have been another feature of the art that appealed to a courtly elite (on this, see Lindow 1975). We see the qualities of complexity and abstruseness most clearly in the nature of skaldic diction, but it is also evident in the verse forms, which, as we have seen in Chapter 1, are of great complexity.

The diction of skaldic poetry may seem at first sight to be extraordinarily

[16] Faulkes (1999: xxi) thinks that Snorri may have used the names of some of these syntactic features to name verse forms by employing them consistently himself, thereby suggesting they were integral features of a particular verse form, whereas in earlier times they had in fact been used sporadically.

difficult — and one would not wish to deny its difficulty, for that is one of its conscious features — but its complexity is fundamentally rule-based and it is possible to establish its basic premises, although frequently their application leaves room for ambiguity and individual interpretation. The fundamental principle of skaldic diction is one of noun substitution. In simple cases, of the type that Snorri may be describing in the words *at nefna hvern hlut sem heitir* in the passage from *Skáldskaparmál* quoted above, and which he elsewhere refers to as *heiti*,[17] poets used a rich store of what we would call poetic synonyms to substitute for either a common or a proper noun. For example, a king could be called *yngvi* in poetry, a noun almost certainly derived from the name of the eponymous ancestor of the Ynglingar, the dynastic name of the kings of Norway. A king to whom this name was applied (as happened to King Haraldr harðráði ('hard ruler'), for example)[18] would, assuming he and his courtiers understood the dynastic reference, find such a substitution very flattering, as it explicitly acknowledged his place in a mighty royal line. One can see from this single example that noun substitution, even at a relatively simple level, adds complexity to the referential meaning of skaldic poetry by setting up a range of carefully controlled allusions to significant elements in the cultural world of the poems' audience and, particularly, of the person to whom it was directed.

The kenning was a more complex type of noun substitution, in which, characteristically, a noun phrase comprising two nouns in a genitival relationship (or a compound noun with an implicit genitival relationship between two distinct elements) was used by a poet as a substitute for a noun referent, which was never actually mentioned in the text of the poem itself. In the latter respect, the non-appearance of the referent in the actual poetic text, the kenning resembles the riddle, whose 'solution' is never actually named in the riddle text. Modern scholars refer to the three essential elements of the kenning as the base word, the determinant, which is usually

[17] Faulkes (1998 II: 306) in his gloss to *heiti* ('name, appellation, designation, term'), points out that *at nefna hvern hlut sem heitir*, 'to call each thing by its [normal] name', is not the same as a *heiti*, which should be 'usually, though not always, . . . a name which is not the normal one by which a person or thing is called'. If, in his definition of the three categories of poetic language, Snorri did *not* mean to refer to a *heiti* in the sense of a synonym in *at nefna hvern hlut sem heitir*, and the literal sense of this expression would certainly support this interpretation, then he left the *heiti* as poetic synonym out of account in his list of categories of skaldic diction, for there is no doubt that *heiti* in this sense are characteristic of skaldic diction.

[18] In a verse quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 69, verse 236; cf. I: 196), thought to be from Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Sexstefja* ('Poem with Six Refrains').

in the genitive case or implicitly so, and the referent, which is unnamed.[19] For example, in a verse cited right at the end of his saga (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939: 302), the Icelandic poet Kormakr Ǫgmundarson calls warriors *hjarar þundar*, 'Óðinns of the sword', using as base word the plural form (*Þundar*) of the name Þundr (which is an alternative name for Óðinn) together with the genitive singular of the noun *hjǫrr*, a poetic term (*heiti*) for a sword. No word for the referent 'warriors' actually appears in the verse; this is something the audience must work out for themselves. There is nothing unusual about this kenning, but, as we see, its construal requires considerable knowledge, not only of the special vocabulary of poetry and Óðinn's many names, but of the rules governing the composition and use of kennings as well.

Many kennings were far more complex than this one and contained a series of embedded compounds. When we come to work out the meaning of these complex kennings (and we presumably follow similar mental processes to listeners of the Viking Age) we have to, as it were, unpack the meaning of each element before we can understand the meaning of the whole extended kenning. It is like opening a series of boxes, each one nested inside another, slightly larger one; we begin with the smallest, and then work our way through to the biggest. In *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 5), Snorri identified three levels of kenning, a simple periphrasis, such as the example from Kormakr given above, double kennings with two periphrases, which he termed *tvíkent* and a third category, with more than two periphrases, which he called *rekit* ('extended', lit. 'driven').[20] The most extended Old Norse kenning on record has six separate elements (see Whaley *et al*. 2002: 43–4).

An example will clarify the process of kenning interpretation. We find in a skaldic poem the compounded kenning 'stave of the icicle of the tumult of axes' (see Whaley *et al*. 2002: 43). In order to understand it we must first recognise that any tree-name or name of a straight piece of wood (here 'stave') can be the base-word of a man-kenning. We then look to see how it

[19] 'Die einfache Kenning ist also ein zweigliedriger Ersatz für ein Substantivum der gewöhnlichen Rede', 'The simple kenning is thus a two-element substitute for a substantive of everyday speech' (Meissner 1921: 2). Meissner's study of skaldic kennings is the most comprehensive empirical study and classification of kennings to date, though more linguistically sophisticated approaches are to be found in Fidjestøl 1997a and Amory 1982. Valuable contributions have also been made by Marold (1983, 1993b).

[20] *Reka* ('to drive') can also be used in metal-working terminology of the process of hammering an inlay into a surface; here again there is an analogy between poetic ornament and the ornamentation a metal-worker produces on a ground.

is determined and we find the double genitival phrase 'of the icicle of the tumult of axes'. We see that the determinant is compounded (as there are two genitival phrases); this tells us that we need to know what kind of an 'icicle' we are dealing with here, and we may suspect a metaphorical process, as the poet has introduced a distinctive semantic field, different from that pertaining to battles. Usually the best way forward is to go straight to the subordinate kenning, in this case 'the tumult of axes', and work out its meaning first. It turns out to be a very straightforward battle-kenning and this then allows us to decide that the 'icicle' which the 'stave' possesses is likely to be a sword. Both swords and icicles are long, thin and sharp, so a metaphorical parallel enters the mind of the interpreter, and ultimately leads him or her to understand the whole kenning 'stave of the icicle of the tumult of axes' as referring to a warrior.

It is evident from the analysis above that, the more complex the kenning, the greater the probability that the skald would introduce metaphorical analogies between the various base-words, determinants and referents. Many of these were fairly stereotyped, but others were fresh and deliberately highlighted by the skalds. Both Snorri and his nephew Óláfr Þórðarson, author of the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, recognised the presence of metaphor in kennings but, as we will see in more detail in the Appendix, they differed on the extent to which they allowed metaphor to be at the heart of the process of kenning formation. The term *nýgerving* (or *nýgjǫrving*, lit. 'new creation'), is used by both writers to refer to metaphoric extension of meaning in extended kennings. Snorri in particular is at pains to assert that this process should be in accordance with verisimilitude and the nature of things, *með líkindum . . . ok eðli* (*Skáldskaparmál*, Faulkes 1998 I: 41), and in *Háttatal* recorded the term *nykrat*, 'in the form of a *nykr* or water monster' (Faulkes 1999: 7) for extended kennings that mixed metaphors. He gave the following example: *En ef sverð er ormr kallaðr, ⟨en síðan⟩ fiskr eða vǫndr eða annan veg breytt, þat kalla menn nykrat, ok þykkir þat spilla* (Faulkes 1999: 7), 'But if a sword is called a serpent and then a fish or a wand or varied in another way, people call that *nykrat*, and it is considered to be bad style'.

In spite of what Snorri states here, and I have suggested elsewhere (Clunies Ross 1987: 76–7) that he was influenced by classical ideas of decorum, both his and later rhetorical treatises' use of the term *nykrat* as well as the actual practice of the skalds indicate that such metaphorical dissonances were appreciated by Norse poets and their audiences just as much as *nýgervingar* were. Egill Skallagrímsson was an outstanding exploiter of the literary potential of extended metaphor, and his *lausavísa*

(no. 13 in *Skj*), expressing his sorrow at his brother Þórólfr's death and his recovery of equilibrium after King Æthelstan of England has compensated him handsomely, provides an excellent example of the practice, in which not only kennings but all parts of speech in the verse continue the original metaphor:

> Knǫ́ttu hvarms af harmi
> hnúpgnípur mér drúpa;
> nú fannk þann es ennis
> ósléttur þær rétti;
> gramr hefr gerðihǫmrum
> grundar upp of hrundit
> (sá's til ýgr) af augum
> (armsíma) mér grímu.
>
> *Prose word order*. Hnúpgnípur hvarms knǫ́ttu drúpa mér af harmi; nú fannk þann es rétti þær ósléttur ennis; gramr hefr of hrundit upp af augum mér gerðihǫmrum grundar grímu — sá's ýgr til armsíma.
>
> *Translation*. The jutting peaks of the eyelids [(beetling) EYEBROWS] knew how to droop from grief; now I have found one who straightened those furrows of the forehead [EYEBROWS]; the prince has pushed up from my eyes the fencing crags of the ground of the mask [FACE > EYEBROWS] — he is fierce towards arm-strings [RINGS].

There are other features of skaldic diction that reveal how poets and their audiences revelled in the rhetorically complex and obscure. The use of inverted kennings, in which the order in which one has to process the elements of compounds is disrupted, is a clear indication of the skalds' delight in obscurity for its own sake. A kenning from the late-twelfth-century *Plácitus drápa*, a poetic version of the legend of St Eustace (Plácitus), provides an example of this common practice. In stanza 4/3–4 the anonymous skald refers to Plácitus as *viggþollr Vinnils*. Here the first element of the compound *viggþollr* (lit. 'horse-tree'), must be construed with the determinant, *Vinnils*, from Vinnill, the name of a sea-king,[21] otherwise the kenning does not make sense. Its meaning therefore is 'tree of the horse of Vinnill' [SHIP > (SEA)MAN], employing the commonplace skaldic equation between trees and humans, and between beasts of burden on land and ships. Another phenomenon, the reverse of the inverted kenning, which modern scholars often refer to by the classical rhetorical term tmesis

[21] Vinnill occurs elsewhere in a *þula* list of sea-king names attached to Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Faulkes 1998 I: 110, verse 416).

(Amory 1979), involves the splitting of elements of compounds that actually belong together in sense by placing intervening material between them. This often, but not always, happens with personal names, as in Þjóðólfr of Hvinir's separation of the two elements of the goddess Iðunn's name in *Haustlǫng* 10/ 3–4:

> þá vas Ið- með jǫtnum
> -unnr nýkomin sunnan. (*Skj* BI: 16, my punctuation)
>
> *Literal translation*: then was Ið- among the giants -unnr recently arrived from the south.

A variety of puns and other forms of word play are additional indicators of skaldic cleverness and verbal dexterity. *Ofljóst* (from *ofljóss*, lit. 'too clear') was the ironic term that both Snorri Sturluson and his nephew Óláfr Þórðarson applied to this group of rhetorical figures,[22] which were commonly used in skaldic verse, particularly to conceal proper names, especially those of women. The threat of penalties for the composition of *mansǫngvar* doubtless gave impetus to this practice. Frank (1970) has shown how often women's names are concealed in poetry using *ofljóst*, by substituting a homonym or a synonym for one or both elements of a compound name, such as Steingerðr, the name of the woman Kormakr Ǫgmundarson loved. A simple example of *ofljóst* was given towards the end of Chapter 1, in Egill Skallagrímsson's reference to his friend Arinbjǫrn as *Grjótbjǫrn* (*Arinbjarnarkviða* 17/5). Here *grjót* ('rock, stone') is more or less synonymous with *arinn* ('hearth' (made of stones)) and the audience must substitute the one for the other. Quite often, however, in extended kennings punning occurs on the referent of one kenning and the double sense of that (unexpressed) referent must be carried in the mind into one's interpretation of a second kenning element. An example from a *lausavísa* (*Skj* no. 14) Egill Skallagrímsson composed to reveal and at the same time conceal his love for his brother's widow Ásgerðr shows this kind of word play at work. He states that he has to conceal his face in his cloak when Ásgerðr comes into his mind, and refers to her as *faldr foldar berg-Óneris* (lit. 'the headdress of the earth of rock- Ónerir ⟨supernatural being, ?giant⟩'). Here we have to understand the 'earth' of a giant as a mountain, for giants were conventionally supposed to inhabit rocks and

[22] See Snorri's *Edda*, *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 109) and *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 12, 13, 14); the *Third Grammatical Treatise* (Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 66, 89, 171–2).

mountains. Then we must find a synonym for 'mountain', which will give us part of Ásgerðr's name. This can be none other than *áss* ('rocky ridge'). The *faldr*, or woman's headdress of (or belonging to) the *áss* requires another word-substitution with the more or less synonymous *gerða* ('snood, article of woman's clothing'). Finally we arrive at the real referent of this double kenning, namely Ás-gerðr.

The mental processes involved in interpreting skaldic diction may seem very laborious to someone not well versed in the rules and conventions of this poetry. For a person who knew these conventions, however, the process would have been much faster and evidently intellectually exciting, in a way similar to the interest and excitement one may get out of solving riddles or crossword puzzles. In each case, we are not dealing with a random set of comparisons and substitutions, but rather one that was rule-governed and largely predictable. Although it may at first sight seem strange to employ a set of base-words for men and women that are tree names, once one learns that this equivalence occurs regularly, it is easy to anticipate.[23] Similarly, contrastive equivalences between snakes and fish, horses and ships, land and sea, gold and fire and many other entities form a regular part of the metalinguistic world of skaldic practice. We are also dealing with a restricted set of referents for skaldic kennings and thus a fairly predictable set of subjects. Because the skaldic poetry of the Viking Age is both courtly and pagan, we expect kennings for all the pagan Norse gods, for kings, warriors, poets, poetry, ships, the sea, men, women, battle, weapons and armour, horses, wolves and other carrion eaters, and a few other animals. Later, Christian poets modified this repertoire to include kennings for the Christian God, Christ, holy men and women and some of the more abstract beliefs of the Christian religion. In skaldic poetry we do not expect — and we do not get for the most part — kennings for everyday objects such as foods, most kinds of clothing, tools like spades and hoes, and ordinary household implements like spoons and saucepans.[24] It is only in the skaldic poetry composed in Iceland about non-courtly and non-military subjects that poets ring the changes on some of the conventional, courtly kenning types of the court poetry composed for kings and earls. The

[23] Snorri offers an elaborate rationale for this practice in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 40; see also Clunies Ross 1987: 107–10), but it may have originated in the Norse myth of the creation of the first human pair, Askr and Embla, from tree-trunks (*Vǫluspá* 17–18; *Gylfaginning* in Faulkes 1982: 13) or been simply based on the similarity between trees and humans as tall standing objects.

[24] With this observation in mind, it is instructive to study the miscellaneous category 'Kenningar verschiedenen Inhalts' ('Kennings of miscellaneous content') in Meissner 1921: 433–6.

deliberate introduction of non-courtly registers in skaldic verse, frequent in Icelandic *níð* poetry, is a subject that has not yet received a great deal of scholarly attention, but it certainly merits further study.

CHAPTER SIX

The Impact of Christianity on Old Norse Poetry

In order to understand traditional Old Norse poetry, those who heard it had to have an understanding of what we might call the conceptual world that lay behind it, that is, all the assumed knowledge of how the world in which humans lived came about and was organised. In the previous chapter the reasons why it was necessary to come to Old Norse poetry with a good deal of cultural knowledge became clear. This was a poetics that was not transparent and did not yield up its meaning easily. Wherever *kenningar* and *heiti* and other rhetorical figures were used, the audience needed to be aware of certain fundamental ways of thinking that were necessary both for the formation of these figures of poetic speech and for their interpretation. They needed to be able to think in terms of certain kinds of contrastive parallelisms, to oppose certain categories of terms with certain others. If they heard a kenning for the sea which took the form 'land of the ship', 'plain of the fish', 'hall of the whale' and so forth, they needed to realise — and they probably did this subconsciously — that at the base of all these kennings was a way of thinking that contrasted things of the land with those of the sea and then deliberately mixed them up in the kenning, so that the base-word of a sea-kenning was likely to be a noun that referred to something belonging to the semantic field 'land or object pertaining to the land', while the determinant probably referred to something from the semantic field of nouns pertaining to the sea (see Meissner 1921: 93–8). There are many other habitual kinds of connection, a good number requiring metaphorical associations, that are fundamental to the operation of the Old Norse kenning system: between humans and trees, as we have seen in Chapter 5, or between battle and storms or other bad-weather phenomena. Evidently, such riddle-like exercises in detection, which operated within conventional boundaries, gave people pleasure and intellectual stimulation, but they also required them to think in quite specific, predetermined ways.

Although a good deal of the conceptual world of traditional Old Norse

poetry was based on an observation of natural phenomena in their association with human life, a significant part of it was anchored in the world of Scandinavian and Germanic myths and legends, that is to say, in the world of traditional Scandinavian culture (Marold 1990). We have seen that much Old Norse poetry is allusive and assumes its audience's knowledge of traditional myths and legends. This knowledge was also required for the understanding of the conceptual world of the kenning and *heiti*. For example, it is necessary to know the many alternate names of the Norse gods, particularly those of Óðinn, in order to understand some of the simplest kinds of kenning, such as *Viðris arfi* ('son of Viðrir ⟨=Óðinn⟩ [ÞÓRR]'). In this case it is necessary to know that Óðinn is Þórr's father in Norse myth. This is a kind of kenning without metaphorical content, that Snorri termed a *sannkenning* ('true description') (Faulkes 1998 I: 107). Slightly greater mythological knowledge is required for a kenning such as *fellir fjall-Gauts* ('the feller of mountain-Gautr ⟨=Óðinn⟩'). 'Mountain-Gautr' is a kenning for a giant, as the conventional inhabitant of mountains or rocks, and the habitual killer of giants is Þórr, who is thus the referent of this *tvíkent* kenning.[1] Many other kennings are still more complex and more demanding of the audience's mythological knowledge than these two examples.

We can see how the mythological referencing potential of the kenning system worked in the hands of skilful practitioners of the skaldic art from a rather amusing episode told in a short tale known as *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* ('The Tale of Skinny (or 'Sarcastic')-Halli'), which has been preserved in biographies of the Norwegian king Haraldr harðráði (r. 1046–66).[2] Haraldr was well known as a patron of poets and was an accomplished poet himself. This episode illustrates his cleverness with the skaldic art as well as that of one of his chief court poets, the Icelander Þjóðólfr Arnórsson. According to the story, which may or may not be based on a historical event, the king and the poet were walking down a street one day, when they passed a house where a blacksmith and a tanner were quarrelling. The men then started

[1] *Viðris arfi* is a kenning for Þórr in a *helmingr* of Bragi Boddason's about Þórr's fight with the world serpent, quoted in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Faulkes 1998 I: 14, verse 42). *Skj* considers it part of *Ragnarsdrápa* (BI: 4). *Fellir fjall-Gauts* occurs in Úlfr Uggason's *Húsdrápa* 6/1–2 (*Skj* BI: 129), also quoted in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 17, verse 55).

[2] Jónas Kristjánsson 1956: cix–cxiv, 263–95. The basic sense of Halli's nickname is 'weaver's shuttle' and opinion seems to be divided on whether it should be interpreted as a reference to his physical appearance or to his mental disposition. For an analysis of the episode, see Turville-Petre 1968 and 1976: 100–1 for a text and English translation of the verses.

fighting one another. King Haraldr ordered Þjóðólfr to make a poem about them, but Þjóðólfr was reluctant, as he did not consider a brawl between two craftsmen a fitting subject for a poem by a royal skald like himself.[3] The king, however, came up with a way of getting around the issues of propriety and decorum and proposed that the two craftsmen should be presented as figures from Norse mythology. The myth he chose as the basis for this comparison was that of the visit of the god Þórr to the giant Geirrøðr, a narrative that Snorri Sturluson tells in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of his *Edda* (Faulkes 1998 I: 24–30; 1987: 81–6) and which he bases on a long and complex late-tenth-century mythological poem, *Þórsdrápa*, by Eilífr Goðrúnarson. The gist of this rather obscure but powerful myth is that Þórr travels to giantland to visit Geirrøðr, though the purpose of his journey is not entirely clear, at least in the poem. On the way he has to surmount a number of hazards and dangers, like a river that suddenly rises alarmingly, which he discovers to have been caused by one of the giant's two daughters urinating (or possibly menstruating) into the stream higher up the mountain. When he eventually arrives at Geirrøðr's hall, the giant calls Þórr in for games, which he begins by throwing a glowing lump of molten iron at the god, who, nothing daunted, catches it in his iron gloves and throws it right back at the giant. It penetrates Geirrøðr's body and causes his death.

Following King Haraldr's urging, Þjóðólfr composed a stanza about the fight between the blacksmith and the tanner, representing the blacksmith as Þórr and the tanner as Geirrøðr. He used kennings like *Þórr smiðbelgja* ('Þórr of the smith's bellows'), for the blacksmith, while the tanner became *Geirrøðr hrøkkviskafls húða* ('Geirrøðr of the moving tool for dressing hides'). The king enjoyed this verse, and asked Þjóðólfr to compose another one, this time comparing the blacksmith to the hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani ('Fáfnir's slayer') and the tanner to the dragon Fáfnir, who guarded a fabulous hoard of gold, and whom Sigurðr killed on Gníta-heath. Now the blacksmith is *Sigurðr sleggju* ('Sigurðr of the sledge-hammer'), while the tanner is *skafdreki skinna* ('the scraping dragon of hides').

[3] The issue of the subjects that were considered proper to skaldic verse, and hence to skaldic diction, was considered briefly at the end of the previous chapter. The episode examined here provides good evidence to support the observation that only certain kinds of subject matter and certain semantic fields of poetic diction were considered appropriate to skaldic poetry, at least in its courtly context. Note that, in the two examples given, the higher-ranking craftsman (the blacksmith) is compared to a god, Þórr, and a hero, Sigurðr, while the tanner is equated with a giant and a man who has been turned into a dragon. Comparing a man to a giant in a kenning was an acknowledged means of insulting him; see *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 40; 1987: 94).

Such intellectual amusement in this instance illustrates how mundane subjects could be presented as if they were subjects from myth and legend in order to have fun at the expense of the lower social orders while at the same time not offending the proprieties of courtly poetry. However, far more commonly, skalds presented elevated subjects, such as the praise of kings and their actions, their battles and journeys, using kennings and *heiti* that were permeated with associations between the subjects of their poetry and the world of pre-Christian myth and legend. This meant that there was a vital link between the world of the poems' actual subjects and the supernatural world of gods and heroes, even though references to that supernatural world were often quite conventional. As long as Scandinavia remained pagan, the complex diction of traditional poetry reinforced the traditional belief system, as it was intended to do, but when the kings of Norway decided that they and their people should become Christians, the part of the intellectual foundation of traditional Norse poetic diction that was based on the old religion and mythology was called into question.

Historians of religion call the type of religious conversion that is initiated by those in political authority, who then persuade their subjects, often at the point of the sword or facing the barrel of a gun, to follow them, a 'top-down conversion', as contrasted with religious movements that come about as a consequence of popular feelings and pressures. The conversion 'moment' in Norway, as in most other early medieval Western societies, was of this 'top-down' kind. It occurred during the reign of King Óláfr Tryggvason, that is, during the years 995–999/1000, and the conversion of Iceland took place at the end of that period.[4] During the reign of Óláfr's successor, Óláfr Haraldsson (1015–30), the conversion was consolidated in both Norway and Iceland and, a year after his death in 1030 at the battle of Stiklastaðir, Óláfr Haraldsson's body was exhumed and he was acknowledged to be a saint. He was never officially canonised, but this did not stop the king's missionary bishop, Grímkell, from proclaiming his sanctity. Later a cathedral was built at Niðaróss (Trondheim) to shelter the saint's relics and his shrine. Although both the Óláfrs were militant Christians who used physical force to persuade their subjects to convert, they are both often represented in medieval Norse literature, including poetry, as displaying the personal quality of humility that more often

[4] Strömbäck 1975 is still the best general guide to the conversion of Iceland, but see now Orri Vésteinsson 2000. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999) presents a case for the importance of pagan ritual at the formal moment of conversion, while Jochens (1999) argues that the Celtic Christians who were among the early settlers, along with their descendants, ensured that the conversion was relatively peaceful.

characterises saints in medieval Christian literature. We have seen in Chapter 3 how a number of skalds in the eleventh and twelfth centuries composed *erfidrápur* for Óláfr Haraldsson that promoted his sanctity.

It is likely that many people in Norway and Iceland had been exposed to the ideas and rituals of the Christian religion for some time before the official moment of conversion decreed by the king in Norway and, after pressure from Norway and foreign missionaries, by the Althing in Iceland (Foote 1993). It is estimated that some people, particularly those who travelled and needed to trade with Christians, had probably been coming into contact with Christian culture from the early ninth century, and some had accepted a form of partial baptism (Latin *prima signatio*, Old Norse *prímsigning* or marking with the sign of the cross) in order to be able to do business with Christians. This phenomenon is reported of Egill Skallagrímsson in chapter 50 of his saga (Sigurður Nordal 1933: 128; Bjarni Einarsson 2003: 72). We also know that some of the early settlers in Iceland, particularly those from the Celtic countries, were Christians when they arrived, although it is likely that their fellow-settlers were not sympathetic to their faith and their behaviour (Clunies Ross 2002). During the 150 or so years of Christian consolidation in Norway and Iceland, political authority was reinforced by the establishment of the authority of the Christian Church and its regional organisation, under the protection of the kings and, in Iceland, of the chieftains (Orri Vésteinsson 2000). Churches were built, bishops consecrated and monasteries established. In the earliest period, those who taught Christianity were foreign missionaries and bishops, chiefly from England and Germany, but soon the first generations of Norwegians and Icelanders had been trained, though many spent time in schools and monasteries abroad before returning home. In 1103–4 the see of Lund in Skåne (then part of Denmark) was elevated to archiepiscopal status and for about fifty years became the metropolitan see for the whole of Scandinavia, as Hamburg-Bremen had previously been. Niðaróss became the see for Norway, along with Iceland, the Faroes, Orkney and Greenland, in 1152–3 and Uppsala for Sweden in 1164.

It was obviously necessary to provide the new cadre of Christian priests, who were to teach people the fundamental beliefs and rituals of Christianity as well as the kinds of social behaviour that Christianity favoured, with basic Christian texts so that they could instruct their charges in at least the rudiments of the faith. Everyone had to be instructed in order to be baptised, at which time they had to formally renounce the devil and the pagan gods and affirm their adoption of the Christian faith. Everyone was

supposed to know the *Pater noster* and the Creed.[5] There were many rituals of the Church that were introduced more gradually, including fasting and the observance of saints' days, confession and communion. In order to educate the clergy themselves, schools were set up and the rudiments of a Christian education were taught. For this to take place in Iceland and in Norway, many Latin texts had to be translated into the vernacular languages. Hence it is that amongst the oldest Icelandic manuscripts to have survived are religious works, including collections of sermons, a translation of the Anglo-Saxon Alcuin of York's treatise *De virtutibus et vitiis* ('Concerning the Virtues and Vices') and a translation of the *Elucidarius* of Honorius Augustodunensis.

To return to the impact of the conversion upon traditional Norse poetry, when the political authorities in Norway and Iceland (particularly the former) adopted Christianity, the intellectual and religious foundations of this poetic art were called into question. Given that skaldic poetry, at least of the courtly variety, was an official, if not a propagandist, literature, this problem must have presented itself in a particularly acute manner to both the patrons of the art and the poets who created it. Comparisons between earthly rulers and the Norse gods and all forms of diction that contained mythological references to the old religion became tabu. The kings and other rulers, who were the normal subjects and patrons of skaldic poetry, were now the patrons of a new religion which had supplanted the old one in most respects. The Christian God rather than Óðinn or Þórr was the king of heaven; the pagan gods were demonised and regarded as manifestations of Satan. The earthly king was God's regent and was supposed to have Christ-like qualities; the shrines and rituals of paganism had been supplanted, often on the same sites (Gräslund 2001: 29–64), by churches and Christian rites, which frequently took place at the same times of the year as the old festivals; the law and social and political institutions had been Christianised, at least in part. And to cap it all, Christianity preached a religion of personal salvation, in which, for each faithful Christian, Christ had died for him or her so that he or she could go, not to the dubious pleasures of Valhǫll (Valhalla), but to the Christian heaven, where there would be no Ragnarǫk ('doom of the powers') to fight in, but, after Christ's Second Coming and the Harrowing of Hell, life everlasting for commoners as well as kings and warriors. Christianity had a powerful message for both the rich and famous and for the poor and insignificant, and it also had the

[5] The eleventh-century Faroese chieftain Þrándr í Gǫtu is credited with a very unorthodox vernacular *Kredda* (a version of the creed) (*Skj* AI: 211, BI: 202); see also Foote 1984b.

superior status of a religious culture that had absorbed what it judged to be good in the culture of classical antiquity. In the face of all these benefits, it is perhaps slightly surprising that the traditional poetry of Norway and Iceland survived such an onslaught, but it did so, and adapted to the changed cultural and religious circumstances in a very interesting manner.

The *locus classicus* in Old Norse literature for what conversion to Christianity meant for a pagan skaldic poet is without doubt the anonymous Icelandic *Hallfreðar saga* and the verses concerned with the poet's conversion preserved there.[6] Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld was the favourite skald of King Óláfr Tryggvason and part of the saga of this poet records how very reluctant he was to give up paganism but, at the king's insistence, how he struggled to accept Christianity. A series of five whole and fragmentary verses records this struggle and the king's supposed reaction to it, and they have been most recently studied by Diana Whaley (2003), who presents a new edition of their texts (2003: 235–6).[7] The verses show the poet distancing himself increasingly from his old gods by several traditional means. In the first stanza of the sequence there is a strong sense of nostalgia in Hallfreðr's recollection of the 'good old days' when he was free to sacrifice to Óðinn. On the other hand the intercalary sentence *skipt es á gumna giptu*, 'there is a change in men's fortunes', signals his awareness of the inevitability of change, but does not reveal any joy at having to observe it. The second stanza is also nostalgic and recalls the special relationship between poets and the god Óðinn, which Hallfreðr gladly shared. Moreover, in the first *helmingr* he presents this as a normal state of affairs, one from which he is being pressed to depart with sorrow (*en trauðr*). His so-called hatred (*fjón*) for Óðinn seems unconvincing; likewise his service of Christ, his new poetic master, is perfunctorily expressed. The third stanza goes a little further in repudiating Óðinn, by drawing attention to one of that god's negative qualities, his fraudulence and trickery (*lómr*) towards those who praise him. Whaley has argued that Hallfreðr's choice of the unusual kenning *hrafnblóts goði*, 'priest of the raven sacrifice', to refer to the god represents his demotion from divine status. There is also the poet's recognition, in his use of the phrase *ór*

[6] The saga is extant in the fourteenth-century compilation Mǫðruvallabók and discontinuously in various manuscripts of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* and in Flateyjarbók. Whaley (2003: 234 and note 2) lists the most important manuscripts containing Hallfreðr's conversion verses. The verses are also in *Skj* AI: 168–9 and BI: 188–9.

[7] In this study she refutes allegations made by earlier scholars that Hallfreðr's verses are unlikely to be the genuine compositions of a late-tenth-century convert, basing her argument on conceptual, contextual, stylistic and metrical grounds.

heiðnum dómi ('from heathendom, from heathen times'), in the last line of the third stanza, that those times are over and gone.

It is only in the last two stanzas of the conversion sequence that Hallfreðr turns up the heat against the pagan gods, and even here the emphasis is upon his fear of their fury when they discover that he has abandoned their cults — a theme that appears in a number of Old Icelandic texts — and his recourse to Christ as one who might be capable of even greater anger. Christ's love is sought as a form of protection rather than anything more spiritual, and he is conceptualised as like a human ruler who is subordinate to one of higher authority, namely God. The sense of nostalgia reappears in the first *helmingr* of the last stanza, together with a renewed emphasis on the importance of sacrifice (*blót*) to the pagan religion, and a sense that the whole world is in turmoil. The final lines stress yet again that Hallfreðr is compelled to convert (*verð'k ok neyddr frá Njarðar niðjum*, 'and I am forced to leave Njǫrðr's kin') and pray to Christ (*Krist at biðja*).

In the prose context of Hallfreðr's reluctant conversion, he is made to complain to King Óláfr that the new religion is not *skáldligr*, that is, not poetical, not conducive to poetry. The reasons for his saying so are clear: poets were the god Óðinn's favourites and enjoyed his divine gifts. Those gifts consisted in the special verse forms and diction that gave poetic discourse its unique character; if the traditional diction had to be abandoned poetry would be an empty shell. In spite of this declaration, however, both his saga and his extant praise poetry indicate that Hallfreðr accepted the new religion and what went with it: Óláfr became his godfather and the poet enjoyed a continuing relationship with him as his court poet.

The immediate reaction to the conversion from poets in the generations after Hallfreðr, during the whole of the eleventh century and the early twelfth, was to abandon the pagan elements in kennings and *heiti*, and to cultivate kennings of types that could be applied to Christian concepts, such as kennings for kings or rulers and the heavens. Fidjestøl (1993c) has demonstrated statistically the rapid decrease in mythological kennings in the court poetry of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, rising again in the period around 1200 in the neoclassical poetry of Snorri Sturluson and his nephews. Fidjestøl argued that court poets were quick to adopt the new religion, seeing it as a means of establishing even closer links with their royal patrons. Old concepts that were capable of application to the new ideology were given a Christian interpretation, as in a *helmingr* attributed by Snorri Sturluson in *Skáldskaparmál* to Eilífr Goðrúnarson. Snorri introduces this obscure verse in the following way when giving examples of kennings for Christ:

Hvernig skal Krist kenna? Svá at kalla hann skapara himins ok jarða⟨r⟩, engla ok sólar, stýranda heimsins ok himinríkis ok engla, konung himna ok sólar ok engla ok Jórsala ok Jórdánar ok Griklands, ráðandi postola ok heilagra manna. Forn skáld hafa kent hann við Urðar brunn ok Róm, sem kvað Eilífr Guðrúnarson:

> Setbergs kveða sitja
> suðr at Urðar brunni
> (svá hefir ramr konungr remðan)
> Róms banda (sik lǫndum). (Faulkes 1998 I: 76)

How shall Christ be referred to? By calling him creator of heaven and earth, of angels and the sun, ruler of the world and the kingdom of heaven and angels, king of the heavens and the sun and angels and Jerusalem and Jordan and Greece, master of apostles and saints. Early poets have referred to Him in terms of the well of Urðr and Rome, as Eilífr Guðrúnarson said:

> They say [he] sits south at the 'Urðr's well' of the rock-seat [CAPITOL HILL] of the gods of Rome — thus has the powerful king [CHRIST] increased his realm with lands.[8]

The point of this apparently curious juxtaposition of the pagan notion of the well of Fate*, Urðar brunnr*, where the Norns presided in Norse mythology, and the idea of Christ ruling from the seat of Western Christendom, Rome, was to show that pagan concepts of numinous authority could be aligned with, and then appropriated by, comparable Christian ones, so that, in Eilífr's words, 'the powerful king [CHRIST] has strengthened himself with

[8] The punctuation of the verse and the interpretation offered here follow that suggested by Louis-Jensen (2000). She proposes that the poet is establishing a parallel between Norse mythology which situates the well (*Urðarbrunnr*) of the prophetic Norns at the root of the World Ash tree, Yggdrasill, where Óðinn comes to gain wisdom, and the well on the Roman Capitol hill by which the Tiburtine sybil prophesied to the Emperor Augustus that the newborn Christ would rule the world. Whether parallelisms of this degree of sophistication are likely to be found in the work of a poet of the late tenth century may be doubted by some, however, as Louis-Jensen indicates (2000: 82). Faulkes (1987: 126) translates: 'Thus has the powerful king of Rome increased his realm with lands of heath-land divinities [giants; i.e. heathen lands]. He is said to have his throne south at Weird's well.' On this reading the prose word order would be: *svá hefir ramr konungr Róms remðan sik lǫndum bǫndum setbergs — kveða sitja suðr at Urðar brunni*. Faulkes interprets *setberg* as 'flat-topped mountain, moor, heath' and *setbergs bǫnd* as a kenning for giants. Still other interpretations of the *helmingr* are possible. Frank (1978: 118–19) takes *sitja setbergs* to mean 'sits on a table-mountain' and *banda lǫndum* as 'over (with) lands where the (heathen) gods are worshipped'. Further important studies of this *helmingr* are by Weber (1970), who emphasises its typological character, and Vésteinn Ólason (1996).

lands'.[9] The point of this kind of parallelism is that the Christian concept is the more powerful and subsumes the pagan one (in this case two pagan ideas), but at the same time the pagan concept has similarities to its Christian counterpart, prefiguring it just as events described in the Old Testament were held to prefigure those described in the New.

This kind of thinking, which is usually called typological, gained momentum in Scandinavia in the twelfth century as a means of 'linking the pre-Christian history of the North to its Christian sequel' (Weber 2001: 149), but may have begun somewhat earlier. It was a way of thinking with which Snorri Sturluson, writing in the early thirteenth century, was thoroughly familiar and it underlies the continued use of some pagan myths and images in other texts, including sermon literature, and in the Scandinavian visual arts of the Christian period (Gschwandtler 1968, 1990). The figures of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Þórr, who killed the World Serpent Miðgarðsormr, both of them killers of serpentine figures and so easily comparable with Christ in his capacity as vanquisher of Satan in serpentine form or as Leviathan, were the most susceptible of this treatment. Gschwandtler (1990) also drew attention to a similar role for the mythological motif of the binding of the wolf Fenrir, and the gods' forcing open of his jaws, as a parallel to Christ's Harrowing of Hell and his forcing of hell-mouth. The well-known sequence of carvings of the story of Sigurðr and his killing of Fáfnir on the Norwegian stave-church portal from Hylestad, Setesdal (*c.*1200), now in Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo, shows the continued use of compatible motifs from pagan legend in Christian contexts into the thirteenth century.

Once Scandinavians had accepted that there was ideological room for their pre-Christian mythology within the new Christian world view, albeit with modified status as typological parallel or as historicised myth, the way lay open to reintroduce it judiciously into skaldic poetry, not always as pure decoration, as some scholars continue to think, but as a kind of historicised accommodation of pagan myth to the dimensions of pre-Christian history, wherein pagan gods became imperfect forerunners of the protagonists of history as it was known to Christians. This view, which is strongly aligned with euhemerism,[10] finds its most articulate expression in Old Norse in

[9] Eilifr also composed *Þórsdrápa*, a difficult poem replete with pagan imagery, though one that some scholars have seen as the last gasp of paganism, perhaps even a parody of the old myths (Frank 1986).

[10] A way of explaining myths as based on historical events and persons of the past, not as narratives embodying religious beliefs or stories about beings believed to be supernatural. See further discussion in Chapter 8.

Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, where he makes it clear exactly how the old myths and the ancient kennings are to be understood and himself illustrates the typological method brilliantly in his qualified presentation of the belief system of pagan Scandinavia in *Gylfaginning*:

> En ekki er at gleyma eða ósanna svá þessar sǫgur at taka ór skáldskapinum for[nar ke]nningar þær er hǫfuðskáld hafa sér líka látit. En eigi skulu kristnir menn trúa á heiðin goð ok eigi á sannyndi þessar sagnar annan veg en svá sem hér finnsk í upphafi bókar. (Faulkes 1998 I: 5)

> But these stories are not to be consigned to oblivion or demonstrated to be false, so as to deprive poetry of ancient kennings which major poets have been happy to use. Yet Christian people must not believe in heathen gods, nor in the truth of this account in any other way than that in which it is presented at the beginning of this book. (Faulkes 1987: 64–5).

Snorri is referring to the Prologue to the *Edda* when he mentions 'the beginning of this book'. There he sets out the theoretical basis for his approach, which is founded on the dual premises of Norse mythology as a manifestation of a 'natural' religion and the Norse gods as clever and powerful men who migrated to Scandinavia from Troy and persuaded the indigenous people that they were divine. He is specifically referring to the practice of the chief skalds of the Viking Age when he talks about 'ancient kennings', but his exposition of skaldic diction in *Skáldskaparmál* makes it clear that he saw the poetry of the eleventh and twelfth centuries as following the kenning types established by the *hǫfuðskáld*, or chief poets of the earlier period.

The traditional image of the Old Norse poet, as presented in Chapter 5, also required some rehabilitation in the new Christian society. The close tie between concepts of poetic creativity and Óðinn's gift of the poetic mead needed revision in line with Christian ideas of inspiration. While poets continued to draw attention to themselves and their poetry in terms of the mead myth, by the twelfth century they also invoked the Christian deity. Einarr Skúlason begins his *Geisli* with an invocation of the Trinity and then follows it with a prayer for inspiration in the manner of a Latin *invocatio*. As Chase has observed (1981: 77), Einarr 'broke a tradition three centuries old by beginning in this manner' and his practice was followed in most of the Christian skaldic poems that came after him. Another concept that needed modification was the very idea of the relationship between poetic capability and divine assistance. We have seen in Chapter 5 that traditional Norse thinking seems to have been that a person had to show himself

skilled in poetry *before* he obtained Óðinn's gift, otherwise it was useless to him. Christian ideology put the process the other way round: a person previously lacking poetic talent could be turned into a fine poet by divine or other supernatural inspiration. The archetypal early medieval Western example of this way of thinking is the famous miracle story narrated by the Anglo-Saxon scholar Bede (d. 735) in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* about the poet Cædmon.[11] This story exemplifies all salient elements in the Christian concept of poetic inspiration: before his miraculous experience Cædmon was so diffident about composing and reciting poetry that he used to withdraw from after-dinner entertainment sessions at the monastery of Whitby. On one such occasion, when he saw the harp coming round the table in his direction, he withdrew to the byre and went to sleep. That night he had a vision of a being who encouraged him to sing about the beginning of creation, in spite of Cædmon's demurral that he was incapable of it. Next morning the gift was on him and he poured out the extant hymn attributed to him and then song after song, all on Christian subjects, which the marvelling monks of Whitby wrote down, as Cædmon was himself illiterate.

There are similar stories about poets in Old Icelandic, and some scholars have suggested that these are directly indebted to Bede's story.[12] While it is possible that Bede's narrative was known in Iceland, the Icelandic stories are more likely to reflect a common Christian paradigm in which true poetic inspiration comes from God and operates miraculously upon the human subject, without that subject necessarily having to have the innate skills required for the work. A remarkable narrative about the Icelandic skald Sighvatr Þórðarson (*c*.995–1045), favourite poet of King Óláfr Haraldsson, shows how the old myth type of the poet as beneficiary of the divine mead could be adapted to the new Christian paradigm. This narrative is found in versions of Snorri Sturluson's *Separate Saga* of St Óláfr and tells how the young Sighvatr, growing up in obscurity in the west of Iceland, becomes gifted with poetic talent after having caught and eaten a marvellous fish, after which he sets out for St Óláfr's court in Norway. Although the story conforms to a well-known tale type, and though it continues the mead myth's insistence that skalds eat or drink a divinely provided substance in order to become good poets, the fish is a Christian symbol signifying Christ himself and the Christian eucharist and, as such,

[11] Colgrave and Mynors 1969: 414–21, book IV, ch. 24.

[12] Turville-Petre 1972: 42–3, 49–50, and note 68, which discusses Old Norse parallels to the Cædmon story and cites references to the secondary literature on the subject.

would likely have suggested a Christian context for Sighvatr's acquisition of his talent as a poet to those who heard this story (Clunies Ross 1999).

Both Sighvatr and Cædmon were oral poets. Another change that took place gradually during the first centuries of Christianity in Scandinavia was the growth of literacy. We do not know for sure who were the first literate skalds, but it is reasonable to assume that by the twelfth century some poets were literate and, if they could write as well as read, may have written their own compositions down. Clearly, the most likely skalds to have been literate were those who were clerics, like Einarr Skúlason[13] and the other later twelfth-century poets who composed poetry on Christian subjects and addressed audiences of religious brethren. However, literacy was not uncommon among lay Icelanders in the twelfth century, and many chieftains were in minor orders. Guðrún Nordal (2001: 19–40) has provided compelling evidence of both the standard of literacy among the intelligentsia of twelfth-century Iceland and of their capacities as poets and literary critics. Certainly, by the time Snorri Sturluson sent his *Háttatal* poem from Iceland to its Norwegian recipients Duke Skúli and the young King Hákon Hákonarson in *c*.1222, the composition, recording and delivery of skaldic poetry had become a literate and literary activity, and one not without the potential for political influence in the new courtly environment in Norway.

Many of the best poets of the eleventh century did not compose poetry on specifically religious themes but they assumed a Christian perspective on life, and composed verses that, while quite traditional, could be understood in a Christian context. The poetry of Arnórr Þórðarson jarlaskáld (after 1011 — after 1073) is of this kind, as Whaley has shown in several articles (especially Edwards 1982–3, and her edition of his verse, 1998). Arnórr exploits many traditional kinds of skaldic diction that do not necessarily involve pagan references, like 'motifs of weapons flying, carrion beasts scavenging, or ships being launched, a great variety of *heiti* . . . and some 150 kennings' (Whaley 1993b: 21). There are, however, allusions to the pagan gods, to pagan creation myths and, most strikingly, to the apocalyptic conclusion of the eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, which may itself be a product of the transitional period between paganism and Christianity (McKinnell 2003). The resonant panegyric of the penultimate stanza (22) of *Þorfinnsdrápa* stands between pagan *erfidrápa* and Christian prayer for the good of

[13] Einarr was a priest, but he was also a descendant of the Mýrarmenn, the family to which Egill Skallagrímsson and other famous poets belonged. On his importance as a literate, educated exponent of the new academic poetics of the twelfth century, see most recently Guðrún Nordal (2003).

the ruler's soul. To the extent that the eschatological detail of the sun turning black reminds one of the book of Revelation, and the extent to which that and the detail of the earth sinking into the dark sea is reminiscent of *Vǫluspá* 57/1–2, *Sól tér sortna*, *sígr fold í mar* ('the sun starts to blacken, land sinks into sea'), the stanza uses the mixed Christian and pagan references typologically, as we have seen was characteristic of this period:

> Bjǫrt verðr sól at svartri,
> søkkr fold í mar døkkvan,
> brestr erfiði Austra,
> allr glymr sær á fjǫllum,
>
> áðr at Eyjum fríð*ri*
> — inndróttar — Þorfinni
> — þeim hjalpi goð geymi —
> gœðingr my*n*i fœðask.
>
> *Prose word order*. Bjǫrt sól verðr at svartri; fold søkkr í døkkvan mar; erfiði Austra brestr; allr sær glymr á fjǫllum, áðr gœðingr fríð*ri* Þorfinni my*n*i fœðask at Eyjum. Goð hjalpi þeim geymi inndróttar.
>
> *Translation*. The bright sun will turn to black; earth will sink in the dark ocean; Austri's ⟨dwarf⟩ toil [SKY][14] will be rent; all the sea will roar over the mountains, before a chieftain finer than Þorfinnr will be born in the Isles. God help that guardian of his retinue. (Text, prose word order and translation by Whaley 1998: 265 with additional marking of the kenning referent).

On the other hand, Arnórr's poetry is directly Christian in that it assumes the working of the Christian God and his agents in the world, appeals directly to God, as in the stanza above, compares the patron to God, as in his compliment to King Magnús Óláfsson in *Hrynhenda* 19/3–4 that he was *et næsta goði í þessum heimi*, 'next after God in this world' (Whaley 1998: 180) and, even more elaborately, in the preceding verse 18 of *Hrynhenda* invokes God's protection of the king (Whaley 1998: 178–9). Here Arnórr suggests that angels accompany Magnús as he makes his ship skim over the sea's surface:

[14] Austri, Vestri, Norðri and Suðri were, according to Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 1982: 12), four dwarfs who each held up a corner of the sky, which the gods made in ancient times from the skull of a primeval giant, Ymir, whom they murdered. The dwarfs' names correspond to the four directional points of the compass. These dwarfs' names are listed in a catalogue of dwarfs in *Vǫluspá* 11–16, at 11/2–3, also quoted in *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 1982: 16).

unnir jafnt sem ósamt renni
engla fylki himna þengils

Translation. just as though the angel-host of the skies' prince [GOD] were skimming the waves with him.

Not only is this one of the earliest references to angels in Scandinavian literature (Whaley 1998: 63), but Arnórr, in another *helmingr* cited only in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 35, verse 116; *Skj* AI: 353, BI: 326; Whaley 1998: 312), deals directly with the significant Christian theme of the archangel Michael weighing up human souls at Judgement Day and separating the good from the bad. Its context is unknown, but Whaley (1998: 35) has revived the interesting suggestion of Gudbrand Vigfusson and York Powell (1883 II: 184) that the verse possibly comes from the memorial poem that Arnórr composed for the Icelandic chieftain Gellir Þorkelsson. This, as we saw in Chapter 3, is mentioned but not quoted in *Laxdœla saga* chapter 78 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 229). However, the saga writer there indicates that the poem contains mention of a very fine church that Gellir built at Helgafell and it is possible that this *helmingr* belongs to that poem and describes paintings, hangings or carvings of the Last Judgement in the church or on its walls.[15]

An important metrical innovation which was popularised by Arnórr[16] should be mentioned here, because it was to become a competitor for *dróttkvætt*, previously the dominant verse form, in the twelfth century and later, especially for religious poetry. This was the verse form known as *hrynhent* (*hrynhendr*) or *hrynjandi*, a term that probably means 'falling' or 'flowing', perhaps in imitation of waves breaking regularly on the sea shore (Lie 1962). It almost certainly derives from the influence of medieval Latin verse forms, probably the trochaic metres of Latin hymns, upon

[15] Compare the fragmentary surviving wooden incised panels from the farms at Bjarnastaðahlíð and Flatatunga in Skagafjǫrðr, which Selma Jónsdóttir (1959) has argued belong to an eleventh-century Byzantine-type Last Judgement scene. For the Christian content of Arnórr's stanza see Edwards (1982–3: 40–1) and Clunies Ross (1987: 135–6).

[16] Whether Arnórr invented the verse form or was the very first to use it is still an open question. It used to be argued that the first poem in which *hrynhent* makes its appearance is *Hafgerðingadrápa* ('Tremendous Waves' Lay'), recorded in *Landnámabók* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968 I: 132–4 and II: 395) and there attributed to a Hebridean Christian who called upon God, *reynir munka* ('the tester of monks'), to protect him on a journey to Greenland, around the time when Eiríkr the Red colonised it. If correctly connected to the early days of the Greenland settlement, the poem would have to date from *c*.1000. Jakob Benediktsson (1981) has proposed a date in the second half of the eleventh century.

dróttkvætt (Kuhn 1983: 312, 337–41; Faulkes 1999: 82–3). Arnórr's *Hrynhenda*, composed *c*.1045 about King Magnús the Good, is the first significant example of the use of this new verse form, which expanded the line to eight syllables as against *dróttkvætt*'s six and had four stresses rather than three. The longer line resulted in a falling metre and one much closer to the Latin measures of the period.

During the twelfth century Christian skaldic poetry came into its own and a new skaldic poetics developed, secure in a Christian ideology that allowed some pagan references to be incorporated typologically into a clearly Christian discourse. In other circumstances mythological references lent grandeur and occasion to a poem, as in Einarr Skúlason's *Øxarflokkr* ('Axe Poem') about an axe he had received as a gift, that was 'packed with mythological *kenningar*' (Gade 2000: 74), doubtless to indicate how aware he was of the ekphrastic tradition that he was continuing.[17] Although courtly praise poetry continued to be composed, this century is distinguished by a number of major skaldic compositions with Christian subjects as their main themes, not simply incorporated as references. It was not until mid-century that the new Christian poetry really flourished, but its beginnings are detectable in the century's first decade, particularly in the 'new look' *hrynhent* praise poem *Eiríksdrápa*, composed by the Icelandic lawspeaker Markús Skeggjason (d. 1107) in memory of the Danish king Eiríkr eygóðr ('ever good') Sveinsson, who died in 1103 (*Skj* AI: 444–52, BI: 414–20). This poem has been mentioned briefly in Chapter 3 in the context of changes we are able to track in the *erfidrápa* as it came to accommodate Christian perspectives on life and death for the famous.

Eiríksdrápa breaks new ground in a number of ways, in subject matter, diction and verse form, and possibly also in its context of delivery. As Judith Jesch has observed (2003: 273) it 'bridges the gap between the praise poetry of the mid-eleventh century, which may occasionally be Christian in tone but is still overwhelmingly traditional in subject matter, and the Christian poetry of the mid-twelfth century . . . which may be traditional in form, but is entirely Christian in subject matter'. The poem is by no means a complete break with tradition; rather, it still lauds the king as a bold leader in war against the heathen Wends, an intrepid sea-voyager and a Scandinavian ruler whose status was recognised in the lavish gifts a whole array of European rulers gave him, including the king of Miklagarðr

[17] On Einarr's clever use of these mythological references, see Guðrún Nordal (2003: 9–11) and Poole (1982: 129–30).

(Constantinople) but, as Jesch has noted (2003: 272–3), 'What is new in Markús' poem is this idea of pilgrimage [to the Holy Land] as a spiritual voyage, this concern with the inner life and the soul'. Some of the vocabulary that expresses the latter concern looks forward to the vocabulary of the later part of the century, developed to express fundamental Christian concepts such as remorse, penitence and atonement.

There are some important new directions in this poem, which suggest the interconnection of religion and politics in the new medieval Christian polity. Eiríkr's most celebrated martial activity is against some of the heathen adversaries of Christianity, the Wends. His visits to holy places, Rome, Bari[18] and Jerusalem are not only acts of piety in themselves — or so they are represented — but reinforce his credentials as a Christian ruler. Another powerful theme in *Eiríksdrápa* is the emphasis that Markús lays on Eiríkr as a builder of churches (stanza 25) and, perhaps most importantly, on his role in removing the metropolitan see from Saxony (*Saxland*), establishing an archbishopric at Lund for all Scandinavian-speaking people, and appointing Archbishop Qzurr as its incumbent (stanza 27). Magnus Olsen (1921) once suggested that *Eiríksdrápa*, which is a memorial lay, may have been composed for delivery at Lund in the presence of Eiríkr's brother and successor Nikulás, perhaps by the Icelandic bishop Jón Qgmundarson on the occasion of his consecration there in 1105. Whether this is true or not is unknown, but such a poem would seem to be directed to both a secular and ecclesiastical audience, just as Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli* was on a not dissimilar occasion in Trondheim. The circumstances of *Geisli*'s performance have been mentioned in Chapter 3: it took place probably in the summer of 1153 shortly after the establishment of the Norwegian see at Niðaróss (Trondheim), following the visit there of Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear. The celebration of St Óláfr in this context not only emphasises Norwegian pride in its ecclesiastical independence, but may have also had a political motive, to try to make the pope recognise Óláfr's sanctity and canonise him (Lange 1958: 142). Again the audience was a mixture of kings, clergy and the laity.

Such courtly *drápur* as *Eiríksdrápa* and *Geisli* with both religious and political motives are only one of the modes in which skaldic poetry could

[18] Bari was an important Adriatic port, rivalling Venice, but its significance in this context is that it was the centre of the cult of St Nicholas in the Middle Ages. In 1087 the remains of St Nicholas of Myra were stolen from Myra in Lycia by sailors from Bari, and brought to their home port to be deposited in the crypt of the basilica of San Nicola, which was begun in 1089. In the following years the city became a major religious centre. Icelanders were very conscious of the importance of St Nicholas and Bari; see Sigfús Blöndal (1949) and Cormack (1994: 137).

be composed in the twelfth century. Even though a good deal of poetry from this period has almost certainly been lost (Attwood 1996b: 237), what has survived indicates a considerable variety of composition. A number of lexical, structural and conceptual similarities between some of the surviving poems and *Geisli* point to that poem's considerable contemporary or near-contemporary influence on a new kind of religious poetry, which is most clearly exemplified in the poems *Plácitus drápa*, *Harmsól* and *Leiðarvísan* ('Way Direction') (Attwood 1996b). As has been mentioned earlier, *Plácitus drápa* is a poem based on the *Life of St Eustace*, the story of the Roman martyr Eustace, which tells how Placidus (the name Eustace bore before his conversion) was converted to Christianity when he realised that the stag he was hunting was a manifestation of Christ. In *Harmsól* the poetic persona presents himself to Christ as a repentant sinner seeking mercy and proceeds to give a short salvation history, concluding with prayers to Christ and the Virgin Mary for himself and all Christians. *Leiðarvísan* is an Icelandic version of the medieval legend of the Sunday letter, supposedly written by Christ and released from heaven on a Sunday to inform all Christians of a number of do's and don'ts of their religion, particularly emphasising the prohibition on working on Sundays.

These three poems, like some other Christian skaldic verse, have survived outside prose contexts and do not form part of prosimetra. They address in the one case the life of a saint, and in the other two the fundamental moral and religious concerns of every Christian. Interestingly also, a number of the poems on Christian subjects from this period onwards are anonymous, and Martin Chase has suggested that 'even though their authors must have been known when they were copied down, the anonymity of the majority of these texts reflects the monastic ideal of humility and a sharp departure from a tradition in which the names of skalds were remembered longer than their verses' (1993: 75). Both *Harmsól* (see stanza 33) and *Leiðarvísan* (see stanza 46) in their mention of *systkin*, 'brothers and sisters', seem to be directed at religious congregations, and it is clear that their subject matter is closely allied with that of sermon literature. All three of these poems reflect major changes that had taken place in the skaldic art during the twelfth century: changes to verse form, diction, genre, subject matter, narrative strategy, performance occasions and recording opportunities. Lange (1958: 286–9) maintained that formal changes to Christian skaldic poetry were minimal and focused on the necessity to build up the vocabulary to express Christian concepts, seeing poems of this kind as new wine in old bottles ('neuer Wein in alten Schläuchen', 1958: 288), but a detailed examination of two of these poems,

Plácitus drápa and *Harmsól*, reveals many other changes of a substantial kind.

Neither poem can be precisely dated, though it can be safely said that they were both composed in the period between 1150 and 1200 in an Icelandic cultural and religious world which was, as Jonna Louis-Jensen has remarked (1998: xcvii), 'equally capable . . . of valuing native and imported wisdom, native and imported art'. The most recent editors of the poems, Katrina Attwood (1996a, b) and Jonna Louis-Jensen (1998), have indicated that older theories which attempted to advance criteria revealing the supposed influence of poems of this period upon one another and then deriving a chronological order of composition from such hypotheses must be regarded with scepticism. The only fixed chronological points are the date of *Geisli*'s performance in Trondheim cathedral (1153 or possibly 1154) and the date of the manuscript of *Plácitus drápa*, *c*.1200.

Plácitus drápa is anonymous, like much Christian skaldic poetry, but unlike secular skaldic verse, which is strongly connected with known poets. The composer of *Harmsól* names his poem in the second-to-last stanza (64) and begs his listeners to pray for him, a circumstance which, as Paasche observed (1914: 173), probably caused the scribe of the sole manuscript in which it is extant, AM 757a 4to, to identify the poet in a marginal note as *Gamli kanoke*, Canon Gamli, whom, we are told in *Jóns saga postola* IV ('Saga of John the Apostle IV'), a work to which Gamli also contributed four verses from a longer *hrynhent drápa* in the apostle's honour, lived 'east in Þykkvabær' (*austr í þyckabe*), that is, in the Augustinian cloister of Þykkvabær, founded in 1168.

The composers of skaldic verse on Christian subjects are likely to have been members of the clergy and, in certain cases, in monastic orders. They would therefore have been men of some education in Christian culture, likely to have received at least a grounding in *grammatica*, and to have been aware of the ideas and stylistic resources of Christian Latin literature. They must also have been aware that a Christian author's subject was always some aspect of Christian revelation, and thus deserving of the Augustinian *sermo humilis*, a clear but lofty style appropriate to matters of the highest Christian importance.[19] The history of Icelandic Christian

[19] See Auerbach 1965: 25–82 for the development of *sermo humilis*. It is often stated that the desire for clarity in Christian skaldic poetry dates from the fourteenth century, and can be associated particularly, as Peter Foote has done (1984c), with the *Poetria nova* (*c*.1210) of Geoffrey of Vinsauf and other thirteenth-century European theorists. However, it seems likely that poets such as Einarr Skúlason were already aware in the twelfth century of the desirability of eschewing obscure diction in poetry with Chris-

skaldic poetry can be seen, in some respects, as an ongoing rapprochement between traditional indigenous poetic strategies and generic expectations and those made available from Christian Latin resources. We can demonstrate that Icelandic skalds were able to imitate Latinate sources in vernacular poetry, while still keeping within the larger conventions of skaldic verse and rarely, at least in the earlier period, appearing obviously Latinate.

Their purposes in composing poetry can be confidently related to the evangelical and pedagogic purposes of the Christian Church, and the occasions upon which they are likely to have had their compositions performed (or recited them themselves) were most probably religious festivals, whether observed in monastic environments or more generally. Their target audiences, similarly, are likely to have been monastic or more general mixed Christian audiences. As to the genres of poetry to which these poems conform, although most are formally and conventionally *drápur*, their conceptual and persuasive affinities, as Paasche saw clearly in 1914, are with medieval European vernacular religious verse, whose composers created a new voice independent of their Latin models. No one has yet devised appropriate generic names for this new skaldic poetry: Bjarne Fidjestøl's suggested 'the legendary poem' is hardly a satisfactory label for the variety of poetry it covers.[20]

The circumstances in which these Christian poems have been recorded and preserved also confirm their differences from secular or more traditional skaldic verse. Whereas the latter is preserved, often piecemeal, in prose sagas or large manuscript compilations, this poetry tends to be preserved in manuscripts that contain other learned literature and/or other Christian poems. Thus AM 757a 4to, dated to *c*.1400, contains, besides *Harmsól*, Óláfr Þórðarson's *Third Grammatical Treatise*, the text known as *Lítla Skálda* ('The Little Poetic Treatise'), a text on the mythical wolf Fenrir, a version of part of Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*, a set of *þulur*, and, in this order, the Christian skaldic poems *Heilags anda vísur* ('Verses of the Holy Ghost'), *Leiðarvísan*, *Líknarbraut*, *Harmsól*, *Maríu-*

tian subjects; cf. *Geisli* 67/ 3–4, *ber orð koma af órum bragar stóli*, 'plain [*or* clear] words come from our seat of poetry'.

[20] Fidjestøl 1993a: 593: '*Geisli* . . . is the first major representative of the legendary poem. From the second half of the 12th century onward, legendary poetry becomes the dominant genre, including poems to Christ and the Virgin Mary, the apostles and other universal as well as local saints, and poems on the holiness of Sunday, on the importance of repentance, and on other themes.' The question of nomenclature for these new kinds of poetry is taken up again in Chapter 10.

drápa ('Poem about Mary') and *Gyðingsvísur* ('Verses about a Jew').[21] The folios containing this assortment of poems form a kind of anthology of Christian skaldic verse from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. It used to be thought that AM 673b 4to, of *c*.1200, the earliest written text of any skaldic poem extant, was a free-standing manuscript, and that the text of *Plácitus drápa* ('Long poem with Refrain about Plácitus'), fifty-nine stanzas of which are there preserved, had been independently recorded. Its most recent editor, Jonna Louis-Jensen, has produced strong evidence to suggest that the manuscript was probably once part of a codex which also contained AM 673a 4to II. The latter's present contents include part of a version of the Old Icelandic translation of the *Physiologus*, and two homilies, on the religious-symbolic meanings associated with a ship, and the spiritual meaning of the rainbow (Louis-Jensen 1998: xcii–xciii).

With all these material signs of difference, it should not surprise us to find the poets of *Plácitus drápa* and *Harmsól* using a thoroughgoingly new register in their verse. At the outset, it should be appreciated that these men were doing something exciting and something new, something that is likely to have appealed to their audiences aesthetically as well as religiously. An analysis of their verse technique shows at every turn that they chose expressive registers and stylistic strategies deliberately and not *faute de mieux*, as much scholarly writing has implied.[22] With *Plácitus drápa* we are now, thanks to Louis-Jensen's demonstration of the relationship between it and several Icelandic versions of the prose *Plácidus saga* ('Saga of Plácidus') (1998: ciii–cxxv), in a position to explore in some detail what those strategies were. And with *Harmsól*, which, as Paasche showed (1914: 111–12) cannot be far from homiletic material such as we find in the Old Icelandic Homily Book (Wisén 1872), we can be pretty sure of the poet's source material (at least in general terms) and his objectives.

Even though some of the Christian poetry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries uses kennings for a somewhat greater range of referents

[21] There are recent detailed descriptions of this manuscript and its contents in Guðrún Nordal 2001: 64–66 and Wills 2001: 45–52.

[22] Even Louis-Jensen, to whose scholarship I am much indebted, seems to assume that *Plácitus drápa* has little literary merit; see her comments (1998: ciii): 'Poetic merit has had little to do with the scholarly interest elicited by *Plácitus drápa*', and (1998: cxvii): 'It may be worth noting that the prose writer does not avail himself of poetic diction used in the construction of kennings, which could mean that they were regarded simply as formulae, a position that modern readers may find reassuring.' See my comments below on the question of the presumed formulaic nature of these kennings.

than we find in twelfth-century verse,[23] it is noticeable that Christian poetry in the main restricts the terms for which it produces kennings to the following categories: kennings for God and/or Christ (sometimes difficult to distinguish), kennings for men, and sometimes women, including both humans in general and specific protagonists of Christian stories, such as Eustace-Placidus and his wife Theopista; kennings for other sacred personages, including the Virgin Mary. In the twelfth-century corpus the last-named referent is attested only from *Harmsól*. With Lange (1958: 208) we may classify many of these terms as *nomina sacra* and note that, without exception, they follow traditional skaldic practice in comprising periphrases for animate beings. To this list must be added kennings for the poet's breast and/or mouth, as the repository of poetry, such as Gamli's request to God in *Harmsól* 1/ 1–4 (*Skj* BI: 548), *lúk mér upp hlið óðborgar góðu heilli*, 'open up for me the gateway of the poetry-fortress [BREAST > MOUTH] with good grace'. This kind of kenning, as has already been mentioned, rings the changes on traditional references to Óðinn as the god who bestowed the mead of poetic inspiration on skalds. By contrast, other kinds of nouns, including abstract terms, often part of the Christian moral and religious vocabulary, are unadorned. Many such terms were relatively recent additions to the Norse vocabulary or were indigenous words that had developed special Christian meanings. Few of them would have been part of the skaldic vocabulary in pre-Christian times. An example, *Harmsól* stanza 64, will demonstrate the literary effect of such practices:

> Létum hróðr, þanns heitir
> Harmsól, fe*til*h*jól*a[24]
> fyr hugprúða hríðar
> herðendr borinn verða.

[23] Wrightson (2001: 135–42) gives a list of kenning-types and actual kennings to be found in the poems in honour of the Virgin Mary that she edits. These mostly date from the late fourteenth century. Here there is little evidence of much increase in the number of nominal referents that were the subject of kennings over those to be found in twelfth-century poetry: the list comprises kennings for angels (2 examples), Ave Maria (4 examples), bishop (4 examples), breast (1 example), Christ (51 examples, many incorporating a kenning for heaven), fiends (1 example), God (6 examples), gold (5 examples), heaven (20 examples), the holy cross (3 examples), the holy spirit (3 examples), man (18 examples), priest (1 example), tears (3 examples), the Virgin Mary (36 examples, many as parts of a Christ-kenning), woman (30 examples), other (6 examples).

[24] The manuscript at this point reads *fe..lkiosa*, which Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1844: 33–4) read as *fetilkjóla* ('shoulder-band strap ship (keel)'), which is closer to the manuscript, but makes for difficulties of interpretation. Attwood (1996a: 101–2, 238) adopts Sveinbjörn's emendation.

> Mér biði hverr, es heyrir,
> heimspenni, brag þenna,
> œski-Þrór ok eirar
> unnrǫðla miskunnar. (*Skj* BI: 564)
>
> *Prose word order*. Létum hróðr, þanns heitir Harmsól, verða borinn fyr hugprúða herðendr hríðar fe*til*hjól*a*. Hverr œski-Þrór unnrǫðla, es heyrir þenna brag, biði mér heimspenni miskunnar ok eirar.
>
> *Translation*. We [=I] have caused a praise-poem, which is called *Harmsól*, to be brought before the mind-proud executives of the storm of the shoulder-band wheel [SHIELD > BATTLE > WARRIORS]. May each wishing-Þrór ⟨=Óðinn⟩ of wave-suns [GOLD > MAN], who hears this poem, pray for me to the world-encircler [GOD] for mercy and compassion.

In this stanza we see two quite elaborate examples of kennings for men (the first really a warrior-kenning, but translatable simply as 'men', the second using an Óðinn-*heiti* as the base-word of a kenning that has Everyman as its referent), and one kenning for God, typically for this poetry employing an agent noun, 'world-encircler', together with two unadorned references to the poem itself (*hróðr*, *bragr*) and two unadorned abstract nouns referring to the Christian virtues of mercy (*miskunn*) and compassion (*eir*).

It is often supposed that poets restricted themselves to the kenning categories listed above and refrained from developing kennings for other nouns because they were following traditional practice in producing kennings for God on the model of kennings for human rulers, with an associated kenning for his heavenly kingdom, as Snorri Sturluson indicates poets should do in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 76–9). In the same way they continued traditional kenning types for men and women, albeit with some interesting lexical and syntactic emphases.[25] It has sometimes been alleged that the vocabulary of Christian skaldic poetry took some time to develop and that, in the main, as abstractions were not often subjected to kenning-formation in traditional skaldic verse, Christian skalds refrained from innovating in these areas. While these things may be so, there are probably other, equally important reasons why Christian skalds restricted their kennings to a relatively narrow range of subjects.

The first is that by giving pride of place to kennings for God and Christ, skalds were able to approximate the style of Latin hymns and prayers to the

[25] Among these may be mentioned the frequent use of present participles as agent nouns, the use of specific kinds of adjectives and the very frequent use of inverted kennings.

Creator and Ruler of the cosmos in ways that exploited native resources. It is clear that Christian Latin poets often employed either a two-noun phrase (such as *auctor rerum*, 'originator of things') or an adjective and noun phrase (such as *omnipotens genitor*, 'all-powerful begetter') or a two-noun phrase with qualifying epithet (such as *maximus auctor rerum*, 'greatest originator of things'),[26] and this could easily be imitated by the use of a kenning for a ruler with appropriate adjectival qualification, such as *Plácitus drápa* 1/3–4's *frægr valdr fjǫrnis foldar* ('renowned ruler of the helmet of the earth [HEAVEN > GOD]'). The focalisation created in these poems by multifarious warrior- and other man-kennings of a fairly conventional kind, particularly when they introduce the machinery of pre-Christian mythology, is something that a modern sensibility finds hard to reconcile with a Christian aesthetic. *Harmsól* 64, cited above, gives us two examples of this type, where the kennings Gamli uses seem very inappropriate to the context in which he uses them, if we pay attention to the referential meaning of their parts and their allusions. In the second *helmingr* of this stanza Gamli asks men to pray to God to show mercy to the poet, himself. The context is thus thoroughly Christian. However, the kenning for the men not only incorporates a reference to the god Óðinn under his name Þrór, but, by calling each man *hverr æski-Þrór unnrǫðla* ('each wishing-Þrór of the wave-sun', that is, by inversion, 'each man who wishes for gold'), Gamli seems to draw attention to the kind of human activity, namely desire for gold or material wealth, that one might have thought inappropriate to men at this point of the poem, when they are being exhorted to pray to God for the soul of their fellow-man. We find similar, apparently jarring, usages in *Plácitus drápa* and other Christian poems.

Jonna Louis-Jensen (1998: cxvii, 91) has suggested that kennings of this type, which seem to invoke a traditional skaldic paradigm that is quite inconsistent with the main subject of the verse in which they are used, should be considered as merely formal elements, like alliteration or assonance, lacking significance of meaning beyond the identification of their referents. There may be some truth in this assertion, and yet modern textual analysis tells us that no lexical element of a text is purely decorative. The chief semiotic value of kennings of this type was probably emphatic and designed to show how the central protagonists in the Christian drama, namely God and humans, could be kept in the forefront of the audience's attention through a series of clever periphrases, which

[26] These examples come from the first line of Magnentius Rabanus Maurus's prayer to God (Raby 1959: 117, no. 89).

exploited the traditional resources of the kenning system (with very frequent use of inverted kennings), and included the occasional allusion to pagan deities. It is noteworthy, indeed, that poets seem to have carefully controlled the proportion of referents that carried kennings in order to reveal shifting narrative emphases. This is very obvious in *Plácitus drápa*, where the protagonists are sometimes the object of kenning formation, sometimes not, as the narrative progresses.[27]

If we turn now to the nouns that are not the subjects of kennings, there are several reasons that can be suggested for their lack of ornamentation. The first is that the poets may have wished their verse to show how clearly it was related to the latest in homiletic writing and concept-formation in the vernacular, and to link that kind of Christian up-to-dateness with their facility in traditional skaldic composition in order to produce an indigenous religious poetic diction, combining the best of the old with the best of the new. Lange (1958) has demonstrated how frequently lexical items appear for the first time in Old Icelandic in this poetry, and these are not only specifically religious terms, but others of more general relevance. It is highly likely that these poets' audiences would have registered neologisms with approval and at the same time understood the relevance of the poets' more technical references to moral virtues and vices and calls for prayer and penitence. The prominence of doublets for moral virtues and vices in *Harmsól*, for example, suggests a convergence with the preacher's art.[28] The fact that these poems are not full of Latinisms in spite of their closeness to Latin sources (see Louis-Jensen 1998: cvii) underscores the point: they are clever in terms of both the old and new poetics, but they are also resolutely Norse.

Louis-Jensen's revelation of the relationships between the various versions of *Plácidus saga* and *Plácitus drápa*, especially Version C of the saga (1998: ciii–cxxv), allows us to get a very good idea of the likely

[27] The fluctuations in the use of kennings and simplices to refer to Plácitus's wife Theopista are significant and are clearly used in a manner analysable in terms of modern narratological theories of focalisation. In stanza 17, for example (Louis-Jensen 1998: 101), there are two unadorned terms for Theopista (*kona*, 'woman', and *eiginbrúðr*, 'true wife' — some might call the second a *sannkenning*) and one kenning, *hodd-Gefn* ('treasure-Gefn ⟨=Freyja⟩ [WOMAN]'). The kenning, with its connotations of precious ornament and sexuality appropriately focalises the lust of the pagan man who is about to abduct her; it is the subject of a clause that means 'The WOMAN looked beautiful to him'. The other terms stress her relationship as true wife to Plácitus, who is about to lose her.

[28] There are many such examples in *Harmsól*; cf. 4/1–4, *miskunnar ok eirar*; 4/7, *fyr vás ok lǫstu*; 5/8, *fyr vás ok galla*; 12/3–4, *blóði ok holdi þínu*; 20/5 and 7–8, *hauðr ok hlýrni . . . betri ok dýrri*.

working method of the composer of this poem. Although, as she stresses, we cannot point to a precise source for the *drápa*, her analyses have confirmed that 'the drápa does indeed descend from the same translation as A and C [versions of the saga], and . . . shows a peculiar affinity to C' (1998: cvii). A comparison clearly shows that the poet drew on an Icelandic prose text for some of his vocabulary, often Christian technical terms, but equally turned some of the material into kennings and adapted other parts freely to suit his purpose, employing all the resources of his art, including alliteration and internal rhyme, to create poetic effects. A few examples from the *drápa*'s stanza 18 demonstrate the poet's method.

The first *helmingr* (whose second *helmingr* comprises the second instance of the first *stef*) reads as follows:

> Dýrðhittir bað dróttin
> dagbøjar sér tøja
> hæst gat hrjóðr við freistni
> hugborð móins storðar. (Louis-Jensen 1998: 102)
>
> *Prose word order*. Dýrðhittir bað dróttin dagbøjar tøja sér; hrjóðr storðar móins gat hæst hugborð við freistni.
>
> *Translation*. The acquirer of glory [MAN = Plácitus] bade the lord of the day-farm [HEAVEN > GOD] help him; the distributor of the land of the snake [GOLD > (GENEROUS) MAN = Plácitus] received highest mind-board [COURAGE] against trial.

A comparable passage is missing from all versions of the saga but Version C, which reads at line 129 (Tucker 1998: 35) *bad gud miskunar ad hann mætti vel standast syna freistne*, '[Plácidus] prayed to God for mercy that he might be able to withstand well the temptation of sins'. Here the poet has transformed the implicit subject of the first clause [he] and its object [God] into kennings, while he introduces the verb *tøja (sér)* ('to grant, help'), which is found only in Christian writings (Lange 1958: 104) and, in the second clause, expands to the alliterating *gat hæst hugborð við freistni*, keeping only the abstract noun *freistni* ('trial, temptation') in common with the prose work. *Hugborð*, although it is found in prose works, occurs only once elsewhere in poetry, in a *lausavísa* (no. 3) of Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld (*Skj* AI: 282, BI: 260–1). We find this poet acting in a similarly free manner throughout his *drápa*, creating poetic effects from the prose wording and preserving some of the vocabulary of the prose text, particularly that which was strongly associated with Christian concepts. Thus in stanza 19, con-

cerning Theopista's abduction by a heathen man, the verb *saurgask* ('to be polluted'), is found in the A version of the prose text and in the *drápa*, but the poet introduces the noun *samvist* ('cohabitation, (conjugal) intercourse') (occurring only here in poetry), without any apparent encouragement from a prose source.

Skaldic poetry of the second half of the twelfth century looks forward to another 150 years of the skaldic art. Many of the changes documented here lead on to further developments during those years. They include the modifications to the skaldic tradition brought about by the growth of literacy and the importance of the education system for clerics and laypeople of the upper class; the consequent appearance of self-consciously literary and antiquarian poetry; the renewed exploitation of skaldic praise poetry and historiography by Icelandic magnates in order to curry political favour with Norwegian rulers; and the growing demand for clarity and simplicity of diction, especially in compositions with explicitly Christian subjects, which in Iceland was to some extent more of a political manifesto than a rhetorical reality.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Poetics and *Grammatica* 1: The Twelfth Century

> Þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjǫðr sá er hverr er af drekkr verðr skáld eða frœðamaðr. (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, *Skáldskaparmál*, Faulkes 1998 I: 3)
>
> They mixed honey with the blood [of the wise being Kvasir] and it was transformed into that mead, whoever drinks from which becomes a poet or a scholar.

The Christian-Latin educational tradition in Iceland

The changes in religious ideology discussed in the previous chapter affected medieval Norse poetics in five main ways: they affected the practice of poetry, that is, its actual composition, as we have seen, and they affected the theories that underlay that practice. They also heralded changes in the media through which poetry and ideas about poetry were expressed and brought about some shifts in the kinds of people who became poets and the ways in which those poets were educated in their art. We have seen that for the pre-Christian period poetic theory is largely inferential, that is, we can deduce how people conceptualised and valued poetry from several kinds of empirical evidence: from the conventional distinctions of genre, verse form and diction traditionally applied to both eddic and skaldic verse, from the internal evidence of poetic style and subject matter, and from representations in Old Norse literature, including myth, of poetry and poets. To a greater extent, after the conversion to Christianity, and particularly as the twelfth century proceeded and people began to use the new technology of writing, poetic theory became more explicit and began to take written form. Poetry and scholarship about poetry, as the quotation above implies, seemed natural bedfellows in the Icelandic tradition and were sanctioned by mythological authority. However, much of the new poetic theory was imported into Icelandic culture from the Christian-Latin educational tradition of mainstream medieval Europe, and thus several questions

immediately arise: how far this foreign learning was applicable to Norse poetry; why it was applied to vernacular poetry at all and how far what we read in the poetic treatises of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries reflects native rather than Christian-Latin ideas about poetry.

With the coming of Christianity to Norway and Iceland, formal schools were established, whose main purpose, as in the rest of medieval Europe, was to educate the clergy in the foundations of the Christian faith, in order to ensure that they were able to teach it correctly and authoritatively to the ordinary people for whose souls they were responsible, avoiding heresy. In much of medieval Europe lay people did not attend such schools and so were not formally educated, although sometimes lay members of the aristocracy also received an education. The situation in Iceland was in some respects not unlike that of the rest of Europe, but in other respects unique on account of its geographical isolation, the small size of the population and the latter's scattered dispersal around the island. As in many other medieval communities, the political, religious and social elite in Iceland at the time of conversion became the new Christian elite. They ran the Church in Iceland and also the schools. Their families and protegés composed most of the new written literature in Iceland and continued to compose skaldic poetry, for poetry remained a prestigious art and even a medium for both political and religious advancement. A considerable number of the members of the Icelandic chieftain class attended schools and some were ordained, as the author of *Kristni saga* ('History of Christianity') tells us.[1] It was not until 1191 that the Church in Iceland forbade men to be both secular chieftains and in orders (Jón Sigurðsson and Jón Þorkelsson 1857–99 I: 289–91).

An example, which happens to be well documented, shows how high social status, political and religious power and the provision of formal Christian education went together in the first period of Christianity in Iceland. We learn from Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* as well as from other sources that the chieftain Gizurr Teitsson the White was among the first Icelanders to be baptised by the missionary Þangbrandr and that he led the Christian faction at the national assembly, the Alþingi, at the time when it made the crucial decision to adopt Christianity in the year 1000. Having accepted the new faith, he then put all his eggs in that basket, so to speak,

[1] *Kristni saga*, ch. 17 (Kahle 1905: 50–1) lists the following chieftains as taking holy orders: Hallr Teitsson of Haukadalr, Sæmundr the Learned of Oddi, Magnús Þórðarson of Reykholt, Símon Jǫrundarson of Bœr, Guðmundr Brandsson of Hjarðarholt, Ari the Learned, Ingimundr Einarsson of Reykhólar, Ketill Þorsteinsson of Mǫðruvellir and Jón prestr Þorvarðsson.

and sent his son Ísleifr (b. 1006) to be educated abroad at Herford in Westphalia. Ísleifr did well there and was consecrated priest. He came back to Iceland about 1025 and was elected the first Icelandic bishop of Iceland by the Alþingi in 1056, his see being at Skálholt in the south of the island. He established a school at Skálholt for the training of priests, among whom were his own sons. One of them, also named Gizurr (1042–1118), succeeded him as bishop in 1082 and continued in that office until his death. He was responsible for a very important economic innovation, which greatly increased the wealth of the Church in Iceland, namely the introduction of a system of tithes, so that farmers were obliged to pay a certain proportion of their income for the maintenance of the Church.[2] Another son, Teitr (d. 1110), was a priest who studied at Skálholt and then taught at a school in Haukadalr, where his best-known pupil was Ari Þorgilsson, author of *Íslendingabók* and probably the initiator of *Landnámabók*. Teitr was one of Ari's principal informants about the history of Iceland and it is perhaps indicative of the way in which traditional social roles became master-pupil roles in the new educational system, that Ari draws attention in the first chapter of *Íslendingabók* to the fact that Teitr was his *fóstri*, his foster-father. There he names his three principal informants as Teitr, his own father's brother Þorkell Gellisson, and Þuríðr, daughter of Snorri goði, *es bæði vas margspǫk ok óljúgfróð*, 'who was both very wise and full of true information' (Jakob Benediktsson 1968 I: 4). Here we see, in Ari's teachers, a combination of the old and the new educational traditions, oral and literate, one woman and two men.

Although the exact number of schools in existence in Iceland during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is not precisely known, those that we do know of suggest quite a high percentage of such establishments in comparison with the population as a whole. There were schools associated with the two bishoprics on the island, Skálholt in the south and Hólar in the north, from an early date. We know that Bishop Jón Ǫgmundarson of Hólar (in office 1106–21), who was consecrated in Lund, then the metropolitan see for all Scandinavia, hired foreign teachers for his school; his saga mentions that he brought Gísl Finnsson back from Gautland (southern Sweden) to teach *grammatica*, and brought a certain Rikini from France to teach

[2] Orri Vésteinsson (2000: 67–74) has argued that the tithe system came in much more gradually than written sources indicate, and reinforced the existing client relationship of those who paid tithes to the social elite. A very good account of the interplay between personal power and influence, the early Icelandic Church and the development of Christian education in Iceland is to be found in this major study. See also Hermann Pálsson 1999, esp. 19–26.

musica, singing and versification.[3] The first monastery in Iceland was founded at Þingeyrar in 1133, and not long afterwards, in 1155, Þverá in Eyjafjǫrðr was established. Others followed, Hítardalr in the late twelfth century for a brief period, and then Helgafell in the west, Þykkvabær in the east (1168), with a nunnery at Kirkjubœr in 1186. Viðey, an Augustinian establishment on an island outside Reykjavík, was founded in 1225 or 1226. All these places are associated with literary production in medieval Iceland. There were, in addition, other schools set up on various chieftains' farms, where there were also churches. One of the best known of these was at Oddi, where the first Icelandic historian Sæmundr Sigfússon lived and where, in the late twelfth century, Snorri Sturluson was brought up and educated.

The basic curriculum of schools in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland was designed to train boys and young men who were to become priests or, in some cases, secular leaders.[4] Medieval schools followed the practice of classical antiquity in dividing the curriculum among the seven liberal arts, and of dividing these into two groups, the *trivium*, comprising grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, and the *quadrivium*, made up of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. It may be questioned whether this division was strictly followed in Iceland, but there is evidence of an interest in several of these branches of learning in the literature that medieval Icelanders themselves wrote. However, there seems little doubt that the fundamental skills taught in these schools would have been a basic level of literacy in Latin, as the universal language of education and of the Western Church, and also in Icelandic; the elements of the subject known in Latin as *grammatica*; and the ability to chant the offices, hymns and other parts of the Christian liturgy correctly. For the latter, some knowledge of medieval singing practice and, most importantly, metrics was required, because the medieval Church laid great stress upon the correct performance of the sacred texts. None of the actual Latin texts used in these schools from the early period has survived, though we may deduce what some of them were by studying Icelandic church inventories (*máldagar*) that often list textbooks used by medieval churches and monastic establishments (Olmer 1902: 60–1). According to an inventory from a little after 1184, the

[3] The saga of Bishop Jón gives quite a detailed account of these foreign teachers and their Icelandic pupils (Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *Biskupa sögur* I 1858: 239–41; Foote 2003: 17, 21, 82–3, 86–7, 123).

[4] One or two girls appear to have been able to sneak an education as well, but they were almost certainly a small minority; *Jóns saga biskups* ('Saga of Bishop Jón') mentions a young woman named Ingunn among the pupils at Hólar (Jón Sigurðsson and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *Biskupa sögur* I 1858: 241; Foote 2003: 88).

monastery of Helgafell already owned 120 books by that time (Jón Sigurðsson and Jón Þorkelsson 1857–99 I: no. 69; Ólafur Halldórsson 1966: 41).

All Western European societies that took up Latin learning encountered several fundamental problems when they assumed this foreign culture as their educational standard. The Germanic and Celtic peoples in particular, whose native languages were not close cognates of Latin, were faced with education in a foreign language about a foreign culture, which they were challenged to make their own. The classics, particularly the Christian classical writers, were the focus of attention; the language about which grammar was written and sacred music composed, was Latin. For those like the Irish, the Anglo-Saxons and the Icelanders, with a strong indigenous elite culture, it was necessary to decide how they could keep what was important to them of the old traditional ways and compatible with Christian thinking. So all these peoples became literate in their own language as well as in Latin, and were thus in a position to record their own vernacular literatures, a process that often led to the development of new literary forms, as happened with the Icelandic saga.

In Iceland, more than in most parts of Europe, the vernacular language was used very widely almost from the beginning of the literate period.[5] Translations from Latin are among the earliest known works in Icelandic, and they include, among other works, the popular theological treatise *Elucidarius*, the bestiary entitled *Physiologus*, and a chronicle of world history, *Veraldar saga* ('History of the World'). Also among the earliest written texts were the first version of the commonwealth law code, sermons, genealogies and historical writings, like Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*. All the works mentioned so far were in prose, but poetry and poetics were among the indigenous genres to receive attention in the newly literate culture, certainly from the end of the twelfth century and probably from the middle of that century.

Grammatica and poetics in medieval north-west Europe

To us the term 'grammar' refers to the structure and principal parts of a

[5] In most parts of medieval Europe such a phenomenon would likely indicate a relatively poor knowledge of Latin in the local community and this has been a common modern assumption about medieval Iceland. However, lack of extant evidence for medieval Icelandic writings in Latin may indicate more about their relative neglect after the Middle Ages than their original absence; see Gottskálk Þ. Jensson (2003: 259): 'the exceptionality of Icelandic medieval literature lies rather in how much was written in the vernacular, not in how little was written in Latin'.

language and how these are used in speaking and writing. We think of the various parts of speech, the inflectional system, the syntax and word order of a language and so on. In the Middle Ages, however, the term *grammatica* had a wider reach. It included the things we now include but it also covered other areas, which we would regard as disciplines in their own right, such as phonology, or the sounds of a language, orthography, or spelling, parts of the discipline of rhetoric, concerning the style and literary figures of speech that writers use, and metrics or the various verse forms of poetry. When we come to examine several medieval Icelandic texts that are nowadays termed 'grammatical treatises', together with other works on poetics, we need to remember this wider definition of *grammatica*,[6] because, as we will see, they represent a concerted and highly significant attempt on the part of Icelandic writers to develop an indigenous written poetics within an indigenous *grammatica*. The work of the Icelandic grammarians 'can be seen as an attempt to establish a secure footing for the continued use of Icelandic as a *Schriftsprache* with a suitable scholarly apparatus to that enjoyed elsewhere by Latin, and for this it was essential that a recognized and codified grammar should be available . . . . As the *ars poetica* was an integral part of the classical description of grammar, a native grammatical tract with any claim to completeness would have to include it; however, in the surviving Icelandic grammatical material . . . poetical material is given considerably more prominence than this basic need for inclusion would stipulate' (Tranter 2000: 143). This last observation suggests the continuing importance of poetry and poetics in the native Icelandic tradition, now reinforced by Christian-Latin learning. The various grammatical works produced in Iceland and the Orkney islands from the mid-twelfth until the mid-fourteenth century are all understandable as parts of the grammatical tradition, broadly considered.

When the Christian Church expanded into western and northern Europe during the early Middle Ages it at once encountered a major linguistic problem in ensuring the education of both clergy and laity: none of the local vernaculars had previously been written down, except in a very limited way. Latin, on the other hand, being the official language of Roman administration and education in those areas of Europe that had formed part of the Roman Empire, was adopted by the Church for similar purposes throughout Europe, so that all who aspired to education were obliged to

[6] Gabrielle Knappe (1996, 1999), writing of Old English, has coined the phrase 'grammatical rhetoric' for the rhetorical area of this subject, and defines it as 'the rhetorical aspect of grammar teaching, that is, grammatical studies concerned with the good production of texts' (1999: 20).

learn a language that was not their mother tongue. This circumstance meant that the school grammars of Latin developed for native speakers in late Antiquity had to be adapted to the needs of pupils who were learning a foreign language. Thus, in the period between *c*.500 and 1100, we find the development of so-called 'descriptive grammars' of Latin (Law 2003: 112–57), which supplemented the somewhat terse grammars of late Antiquity, the most popular of which were Aelius Donatus's *Ars minor* and *Ars maior* (*c*. AD 350) and Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae* from the early sixth century.

Alongside the treatment of grammar proper in late antique and early medieval textbooks, there was also a consideration of elementary rhetorical figures, as these had been defined in the stylistic tradition of late antique rhetoricians and literary critics, and encapsulated in the very popular and influential book III of Donatus's *Ars maior*. Unhelpfully for the understanding of Norse poetic diction, as we shall see, the Donatian tradition represented figurative language in terms of deviations from the norms of 'correct' speech and divided such deviations into 'vices' and 'virtues' of speech, the latter being justified as ornaments of language. However, the very presence of some consideration of poetic diction in the Latin schoolbooks gave Icelandic grammarians the opportunity to expand their commentaries to include extensive sections on indigenous poetic diction. Another relevant influence upon the development of medieval attitudes to figurative language, which is so prominent in Old Norse poetry, was the Christian determination to interpret both the scriptures and classical authors allegorically so that they were compatible with Christian doctrine. A seminal work in this area was the Anglo-Saxon scholar Bede's work on figures and tropes, *De schematibus et tropis*, in which he demonstrated, by the use of examples from Christian texts, that Latin rhetorical principles applied equally to the understanding of Christian literature.

Metrics was another field of study closely related to grammar which was of central importance in medieval Christendom. However, this subject also posed a major problem for European students and theorists. Classical Latin versification was a quantitative system, that is to say, it was based upon a perceived distinction in the lengths of syllables in words so that specific verse forms were made to employ a regular set of metrical units or 'feet' in which long and short syllables were arranged in particular patterns. For example, a dominant Latin verse form used by both classical and Christian-Latin poets, whose works were studied and imitated in early medieval Western Europe, was the hexameter. Every hexameter verse consists of six metrical feet, each of which must be either a dactyl (a long

syllable followed by two short ones) or a spondee (two long syllables), except for the last foot, which has to be either a spondee or a trochee, one long syllable followed by a single short syllable. At least since the Carolingian era quantity distinctions had been lost from vernacular Latin and long syllables substituted by stress-accent, a phenomenon first recognised as a literary form in the eighth century by Bede in his *De arte metrica*:

> Videtur autem rithmus metris esse consimilis, quae est uerborum modulata conpositio, non metrica ratione, sed numero syllabarum ad iudicium aurium examinata, ut sunt carmina uulgarium poetarum. (Kendall in Jones 1975: 138)
>
> But it can be seen that *rithmus*[7] is exactly similar to [quantitative] metre, since it is the varied arrangement of words, not on a metrical basis, but according to the numbers of syllables determined by the judgement of the ears, as is the case with the songs of vulgar [*or* vernacular] poets.

Bede's words, as Tranter has remarked, suggest a hierarchical view of metrics, in which classical measures are considered superior to 'mere numbers of syllables [that] can be heard and counted, without the need for academic analysis' (1997: 73). Thus it was considered necessary, for people who aspired to a Latin education, even those whose vernaculars were derived from Latin, to learn how to compose quantitative verse. This meant that such skills had to be taught, a process which happened by and large in schools, frequently attached to monasteries or cathedrals, where systematic instruction could be given to students, most of whom would have been destined for the Church. Within the Latin tradition of versification, however, which was put to the use of the early medieval Church, new metres and verse forms developed that were predominantly syllabic, that is, they were based upon a regular number of syllables per line of verse. It should also be emphasised that such features as accentuation, tonicity, stress, alliteration and rhyme also played a part in the evolution of medieval Latin verse forms, which were at their most pervasive and influential in society as a whole in the hymns and sequences of the Church. In Christian liturgical practice memorised verse texts, which had their origin in a literate tradition, were realised in oral performance as melodic singing or recitative, a process that threw a good deal of emphasis upon metrics and music as important subjects in the monastic and ecclesiastical curriculum.[8] In the early Christian hymn we also see the development of another

[7] The term *rithmus* seems to mean here isosyllabic stress rhythm (Jones 1975: x).

[8] We noted earlier that, when the Icelandic bishop Jón Qgmundarson established a

important feature which was to influence vernacular European poetry in the Middle Ages, namely stanzaic form, or the development of the arrangement of verse lines into bundles with defined beginnings and endings, which we call stanzas. The use of end rhyme, as a feature that clearly demarcated the ends of lines and linked lines in pairs arranged in formalised patterns, assisted in the definition of stanzaic form. Its growing influence is evident in many early medieval vernacular poetic traditions, including the Irish, the Old High German and, to a considerably lesser extent, the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse. The development of the Old Norse *runhent* verse form,[9] which employs end rhyme, is probably due to the influence of Latin hymns, and possibly Irish measures, but, for the most part, Old Norse verse forms up to the fourteenth century remain resolutely committed to internal rhyme and assonance (*aðalhending* and *skothending*).[10]

We know that the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons quickly became adept at composing Latin poetry in quantitative metres (Lapidge 1999a and references given there), though their compositions often reveal a limiting of metrical possibilities compared with classical models and the use of quasi-formulaic phrases in a manner reminiscent of vernacular poetry (Orchard 1994: 73–125). Latin verse was taught at the Hólar school under Bishop Jón Qgmundarson (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Sigurðsson 1858 I: 239–41; Foote 2003: 18–19, 21, 82–5, 88). The vernacular verse forms of the Celtic and Germanic-speaking peoples, however, as far as we are able to assess them in their pre-literate period, operated on very different principles from those governing classical Latin poetry, but on principles that were closer to those of medieval Latin versification, as Bede recognised them in *De arte metrica*. Vernacular grammarians and poetic

school at Hólar in the early twelfth century, he brought two foreign teachers to Iceland to teach what he must have considered the two most important subjects in his cathedral school, namely *grammatica* and *musica*. For the possible importance of hymnody in the development of Icelandic and Irish verse forms, see Tranter 1997: 125–7.

[9] On *runhent* and Latin influence, see Faulkes 1999: xvi. Other influences from Christian hymns and sequences may be seen in the verse form *hrynhenda* (sometimes combined with *runhent*), which became the most popular measure for the composition of Christian skaldic poetry in the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Chase 1993: 75).

[10] We may define these subcategories of *hending*, or 'grasping', more narrowly as '*aðalhending*, "chief rhyme", i.e. phonemic identity of tonic vowel and subsequent consonants of a stress-bearing syllable up to the following vowel or word-boundary, *skothending*, "shot (=inserted?) rhyme", phonemic identity of all consonants following the tonic vowel of a stress-bearing syllable, the vowels themselves being non-identical' (Tranter 1997: 111; see also Gade 1995: 62–3).

theorists, who were bound to be conscious of the Christian-Latin traditions of grammar, metrics and rhetoric, thus had a number of important issues to confront when they devised vernacular versions of Latin textbooks on these subjects. Given the cultural superiority of Latin and the power of the new technology of writing which Christianity disseminated to elite groups within early medieval societies, there was a question of the extent to which vernacular poetry and poetics could survive the influence of Latinity as independent and ongoingly productive elite cultural forms. Then there was the issue of whether and to what extent vernacular poetry and poetics were affected by the conventions and expectations of Latin poetry and poetics, as well as the extent to which theoreticians of vernacular poetics were able to present their own poetic systems as valid and valuable beside and in comparison with the Christian-Latin tradition.

The Icelandic grammatical tradition

The remarkable corpus of 'grammatical' works surviving from medieval Iceland reveals that a number of Icelandic scholars took up these challenges and produced treatises on orthography, phonology, rhetoric and metrics which show the influence of foreign learning but also have independent value. In an important recent book, Guðrún Nordal (2001) has argued that from the twelfth century the study of skaldic poetry formed part of the school curriculum in Iceland, alongside Latin authorities, and became 'a crucial tool in scholastic learning and historiography' (2001: 23). Not only did skaldic verse provide the vernacular *auctores* to compare with Latin ones, but 'it was precisely the roots of skaldic verse in pagan myth and the prehistory of Scandinavia that further allowed skaldic verse to be compared favourably with classical Latin writers' (*ibid.*). The existence of such a large corpus of grammatical treatises and writings on poetics, including Snorri's *Edda*, gives some support to this hypothesis, as does Guðrún's own analysis of the nature of thirteenth-century skaldic verse, which she presents as somewhat academic and shaped to the needs of a Christian clerical culture. On the other hand, it could be argued that the teaching of Latin versification and the elements of Latin grammar, metrics and rhetoric were a sufficient impetus, among a people whose native poetic tradition placed great emphasis on complexity of poetic form and diction, to produce a body of vernacular written works that classify and analyse skaldic poetry.

Although this fact is often ignored in histories of medieval European education, linguistics and literary theory (e.g. Murphy 1974; Law 1993,

1997; Conley 1994; Hüllen and Klippl 2002), the Icelanders have the distinction of writing more in the vernacular than any other medieval European people about their own language and poetry. Most of this group of overtly theorising texts, which include Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, are preserved within manuscripts that also contain his *Edda* in full or in part. Four so-called *Grammatical Treatises* and a fragment of a fifth have been preserved in these manuscripts.[11] They are all in Icelandic and display an independent attitude to their subject matter. Recent approaches to the manuscripts containing the treatises emphasise that their parts should not only be seen as separate, free-standing works but that they form part of a tradition of creative compilation and commentary on poetry and poetics that extended into the post-medieval period in Iceland.[12] The compilations reveal an interest in a variety of issues in medieval grammar and poetics seen from an Icelandic viewpoint, from phonology and orthography to poetic diction and metrics, and, in Snorri's *Edda*, the relation between poetic language and Old Norse myth. The Codex Wormianus (W) contains almost the whole corpus of these texts with a preface, and, excluding Snorri's *Edda*, they have been referred to as the first, second, third and fourth grammatical treatises from their arrangement in this manuscript and because they do not have titles there.[13]

At least a grounding in the Latin schoolroom tradition must be assumed for the writers of all the theoretical texts mentioned here, though the depth of their knowledge probably varied considerably. Snorri Sturluson's Latin education is the least certain, though he was undoubtedly a man whose

[11] The major medieval manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* are the Codex Regius (R, Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, formerly Copenhagen, Old Royal Collection, MS 2367, 4to, written about the middle of the first half of the fourteenth century), the Codex Wormianus (W, Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan Institute, AM 242 fol., written about the middle of the fourteenth century), Codex Trajectinus (T, Utrecht, University Library, MS 1374, *c*.1600 but based on a lost medieval exemplar similar to R) and Codex Upsaliensis (U, Uppsala, University Library, MS De La Gardie 11, 8vo, of the early fourteenth century). W also contains the four Grammatical Treatises and a preface; U contains the Second Grammatical Treatise. Two other medieval manuscripts, both now in the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, Reykjavík, AM 748 1 b 4to (A) and 757 a 4to (B), which contain parts of *Skáldskaparmál* (the third part of Snorri's *Edda*), also include parts of the *Third Grammatical Treatise*. For fuller details, see Faulkes 1982: xxix–xxx and Finnur Jónsson 1931a: iii–xvii.

[12] See Krömmelbein 1992 and Johansson 1997. For the post-medieval tradition, see Faulkes 1977–9 and Einar G. Pétursson 1998.

[13] Until relatively recently these titles also reflected scholars' estimates of the relative ages of the treatises, the first being thought the earliest, the fourth the latest. Raschellà (1982) argued that the so-called second treatise is likely to be younger than the third but older than the fourth.

knowledge of traditional Norse culture was encyclopaedic. It is likely that he had the rudiments of a Latin education, and some awareness of contemporary poetic theory, at least as hearsay. If he had had more, it has been suggested (Faulkes 1993b and pers. comm.), he could not have composed such a free and original treatise as his *Edda*. The authors of the four *Grammatical Treatises* were certainly acquainted with Latin sources, though in all instances they adopt an independent, if not always a fully original approach to their material. Of the four *Grammatical Treatises*, only the Third and Fourth concern poetics, narrowly defined, the First and Second dealing with the sounds and spelling system of Old Norse.[14]

The *First Grammatical Treatise* was composed at some time between *c*.1125 and 1175, while the second has been variously dated, though its most recent editor, Fabrizio Raschellà, believes it was composed *c*.1270–1300. The *Third and Fourth Grammatical Treatises* are fully within the Latin educational tradition. Though the third includes some original reference to runic letters and offers independent remarks on skaldic rhetoric, it largely follows the structure and content of the Latin grammars of Priscian and Donatus, which were widely used in medieval schools. The *Third Grammatical Treatise* was written by Snorri Sturluson's nephew Óláfr Þórðarson some time between 1245 and 1252, probably for use in the school he established at Stafaholt. Óláfr's chief debts are to books I and II of Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae* and to Donatus's *Ars maior*, part III. His treatise gives a vernacular summary of Priscian's analysis of the various parts of speech in the first nine chapters and then gives an Icelandic version of Donatus's *Ars maior*, part III, in chapters 10–16. Chapter 16 is an expansion of Donatus's treatment of figures and tropes, and attempts to show how the stylistic resources of skaldic poetry and native poetic terminology to some extent correspond to those of the classical inheritance. Óláfr's underlying argument, that both Latin and Old Norse poetics were independently derived from the language and literature of the ancient classical world, almost certainly builds on the thesis of the Prologue to

[14] Raschellà (1983, 1993) and Micillo (2000) give good overviews of the grammatical tradition in Iceland; individual editions of the four *Grammatical Treatises* are Hreinn Benediktsson 1972 (*First*, *c*.1125–75), Raschellà 1982 (*Second*, *c*.1270–1300) and Björn M. Ólsen 1884 (*Third*, *c*.1245–52 and *Fourth*, *c*.1340s). The *Third Grammatical Treatise* is also available in a new edition by Thomas Krömmelbein (1998), though based on Ólsen's text, and with a German translation, introduction and notes. The first part of the treatise is edited and translated into English by Wills (2001), while Collings 1967 is a dissertation on the second part with Icelandic text, English translation and commentary on sources. For Icelandic knowledge of European literary theory in Latin in the fourteenth century, see Foote 1984c.

Snorri's *Edda*, to be discussed in Chapter 8. The *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* is entirely devoted to stylistics and was probably intended to complement and update Óláfr's and Snorri's work. It is anonymous and most likely dates from the fourth decade of the fourteenth century. It is based in the main on Alexander de Villa Dei's *Doctrinale* with additions from the *Graecismus* of Evrard de Béthune. It follows its Latin sources fairly closely in respect of both form and content but gives many examples from Christian skaldic verse, a good number of which are not recorded elsewhere and were probably the author's own compositions.

The earliest Icelandic treatises in the grammatical tradition

The two earliest Icelandic treatises in the grammatical tradition, which date from the twelfth century, show a particular interest in orthography and metrics respectively. The first is easily explained in the context of the Icelanders' relatively recent adoption of literacy and the author's desire to devise a standard orthography in which traditional and new literate genres could be recorded in a textually stable fashion. The second is explicable both on account of the importance and complexity of skaldic verse forms in the native tradition and, probably, from the authors' awareness of the existence of the so-called *clavis metrica* ('metrical key') as a means of exemplifying the variety of Latin metrics and a desire to provide something comparable for Old Norse. The orthographical work is the anonymous Icelandic *First Grammatical Treatise*, and the treatise on metrics is a versified catalogue of verse forms called *Háttalykill* ('Key to Verse Forms'), probably from *c.*1140, attributed to the Orkney earl Rǫgnvaldr kali Kolsson and the Icelander Hallr Þórarinsson. The *First Grammatical Treatise* and *Háttalykill* are very different works, but each gives a strong indication of the issues that come to the fore in the thirteenth-century treatises that follow them.

The unknown author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* set himself the task of devising a spelling system that would be the best and most unambiguous means of writing Icelandic. In the process he undertook some sophisticated phonological analysis of the sounds of Icelandic and the graphs that could be used to represent them. He wrote at a time when writing using the Roman alphabet was very new when applied to Icelandic, and, from what he says, there were evidently conflicting views about what system of orthography to use and what script to write in. Many of the earliest extant Icelandic manuscripts show the influence of Continental Caroline minuscule, but, with the exception of the letter þ (upper case Þ),

lack the characteristic insular letter-forms that the English had been using for some centuries to write their language. The First Grammarian was inclined to adopt the insular script, with its additional letter-forms þ, ƿ, ð and æ (the first two of which derive from the runic alphabet) and both he and contemporaries such as Ari Þorgilsson were very much aware of English traditions of spelling, orthography and historiography.[15]

The First Grammarian stressed the importance of writing down texts in his own language, and he mentioned a range of genres for which the new orthography was needed. One of the kinds of literature he not only mentioned but quoted from is Icelandic poetry. In fact he used examples from skaldic poetry to demonstrate the distinctiveness of one sound from another in Icelandic by means of what modern linguists call 'minimal pairs', that is, two words which differ from one another by a single phoneme. Indeed, at one point he makes the following very interesting statement: *Skáld eru hǫfundar allrar rýnni eða málsgreinar sem smíðir* [*smíðar*] *eða løgmenn laga*' (normalised from Hreinn Benediktsson 1972: 224–7), 'Poets are the authorities in all matters of the art of speech (*rýnni*)[16] or distinction of language (*málsgrein*), just as craftsmen [are of their craft] or lawyers of the laws'. This, and the fact that he used poetic examples to support his phonemic distinctions, suggests that he saw in the art of skaldic

[15] In fact, although þ [θ], called *thorn*, ð [ð], called *eth*, and æ [æ], called *ash*, became widely used in Icelandic orthography, the runic ƿ (called in Old English *wynn* or *wen* and used for writing [w]) never took hold, as Old Norse had converted this phoneme to [v]. See Chapter 9, note 13, however, for evidence of Óláfr Þórðarson's awareness of the letter and its name.

[16] There is considerable variation of opinion among scholars about the meaning attributable to the word *rýnni* in this context. Hrein Benediktsson (1972: 224–7 and note to 87: 5) glosses it as 'writing', translating 'in all (matters touching the art of) writing or the distinctions (made in) discourse' and this is also the sense attributed to it by Einar Haugen (1972: 20–1), 'skill in letters', translating 'in all problems touching the art of writing or speaking'. In Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek* 19/7 we find the kenning *rýnis reið* ('carriage of knowledge' [HEAD]); however, this reading is conjectural, as manuscripts have *rínis* here, and *rýni* or *ríni* may not be the same word as is used by the First Grammarian. *Rýnni* is probably cognate with *rún* ('rune, knowledge, letter [of the alphabet]'), *rýna* ('to talk (secretly)'); cf. *Rígsþula* 11/5, *ræddo oc rýndo*, where the context makes it clear that private oral communication is at issue. Hreinn Benediktsson, however, while acknowledging this as the likely etymon, sees a reference to written, not oral, discourse. Two questions remain: does this noun refer to the oral or the written articulation of knowledge? Do *rýnni* and *málsgrein* have the same or contrastive fields of reference? It is particularly difficult to say, as *málsgrein* has so many shades of meaning in the grammatical literature, from 'distinction of meaning' (content as opposed to sound), 'distinction of language', as suggested here, 'sentence', 'syntax', 'use of language' (see Faulkes 1999: 127). Hreinn Benediktsson thought the two nouns were equivalent, Haugen took them to be contrastive.

poetry with its *aðalhendingar* and *skothendingar*, as well as its syllable-counting verse forms and special diction, the locus of authority about language in the native tradition, a locus he could draw upon when establishing a new system for writing the language efficiently.[17] In this respect, then, native poetics provided a counterpart to the metrical strictures governing Latin poetry. Those operating in skaldic poetics were of a different kind, to be sure, but they could be seen as equally significant. The new writing system, if properly applied, could not only reflect the insights of skaldic practice but serve as a medium through which the works of Icelandic and Norwegian poets could be written down. The First Grammarian thus importantly sets the scene for the treatises on poetics that follow and indeed for the writing of skaldic verse more generally, though his system of orthography was more honoured in the breach than the observance.

The name *Háttalykill* ('Key to Verse Forms') is a Norse calque on the Latin phrase *clavis metrica*, meaning 'metrical key'. The work to which it refers is a poem consisting of forty-one double stanzas, each pair exemplifying a certain metre or formal distinction of a poetic verse form. In the first thirty double stanzas it takes as its theme the tales of ancient heroes and legendary rulers of Denmark and Sweden, beginning with Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and thereafter deals with the military achievements of the historical kings of Norway. The end of the poem is missing. According to *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 81, *Háttalykill* was composed in the Orkneys by Rǫgnvaldr kali Kolsson, earl of the Orkneys, and a visiting Icelander Hallr Þórarinsson. If so, other dates in the saga would put this composition about the year 1142. The poem itself is not quoted in the saga, though it is mentioned there, and exists only in two seventeenth-century paper manuscripts, both written by the Icelander Jón Rúgmann in Sweden, which are generally thought to have been copied from a medieval exemplar of *c*.1150–1250.[18]

Some scholars have seen the connection between Orkney and Iceland as suggestive in this context. Some time ago Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1937) articulated the view that there was a close family and cultural connection between the Oddaverjar, the important family who lived at the farm of

[17] A similar idea was enunciated by Frank (1978: 37) and taken further by Guðrún Nordal (2001: 24), who argues that what the First Grammarian writes may imply 'that skaldic art was systematically used to illustrate grammatical definitions . . . skaldic verse would possibly have been an integral part of the intellectual training of Icelandic students'.

[18] For an edition, see Jón Helgason and Anne Holtsmark 1941. For recent discussion, see Gade 1993, Faulkes 1999: xvi, Tranter 2000: 150–1 and Guðrún Nordal 2001: 29–36.

Oddi in southern Iceland, where, significantly, Snorri Sturluson was brought up, and the earls of the Orkney Islands. One view also holds that *Orkneyinga saga* was composed at Oddi, though using an earlier form of the saga emanating from the islands.[19] Certainly, skaldic poetry appears to have flourished on Orkney and there is also evidence that the islands were something of a cultural conduit for foreign influences travelling to Iceland. Earl Rǫgnvaldr is said to have visited Narbonne in Provence on his way to the Holy Land, and some scholars have thought to find the influence of Provençal love lyrics on his poetry.[20]

Jón Helgason and Anne Holtsmark, *Háttalykill*'s most recent editors (1941), proposed a learned context for the poem's production, suggesting that the two poets may have been imitating Latin handbooks of metrics which exemplify many different kinds of metrical forms with practical poetic examples. It is probable that they did have such models in mind, but, if so, more recent scholarship has drawn attention to the rather imperfect way in which they have assimilated these foreign models. Nevertheless, *Háttalykill* is the first Old Norse work to give a poetic demonstration of a variety of poetic measures, and so must be considered within the grammatical tradition that sought to approximate Norse poetics to Latin learning. As yet, however, as Tranter has observed (2000: 150–1), there is no metapoetical content to this *clavis*, and no prose explication: 'there may be modelling on foreign forms, but there is no analysis: in this respect the foreign learning had yet to make its mark' (Tranter 2000: 151). This is true enough, but the very existence of such a poem suggests a rapprochment already in the 1140s between native and foreign poetics, one that Snorri Sturluson was to imitate and sharpen in his *Háttatal* ('List of Verse Forms'), the last part of his *Edda*, but probably the first to be written.

[19] See the Introduction to the edition of Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965 for a survey of the evidence; also Helgi Guðmundsson 1997: 233–95.

[20] See Frank 1978: 167–8 and 178–9 and Finlay 2001: 239–43 for a salutary assessment of the superficiality of that possible influence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Old Norse Poetics and *Grammatica* 2: The *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson

The background to Snorri and his Edda

Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (or *The Prose Edda* or *The Younger Edda*) is without doubt the most important Old Norse contribution to medieval Scandinavian poetics and arguably one of the most interesting and original theoretical works of the Western Middle Ages considered as a whole.[1] It differs from the other extant Icelandic grammatical works in that it deals not only with Old Norse poetic diction and metrics, but also with the conceptual background to traditional eddic and skaldic poetry. In order to achieve the latter goal, it includes a coherent exposition of Norse mythology and a statement about the place pre-Christian lore should have in Christian Icelanders' world vision. Its date of composition is not precisely known but is probably *c*.1221–5; the oldest manuscript that contains it (Codex Upsaliensis) ascribes its compilation to Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), a member of a powerful Icelandic family who was deeply involved in Icelandic and Norwegian politics.

Who was Snorri Sturluson? We are lucky that we know more about this man than about most other medieval Icelanders, largely thanks to the information supplied about him by his nephew Sturla Þórðarson, in whose brilliant *Íslendinga saga*, the main work in the *samtíðarsaga* ('contemporary saga') *Sturlunga saga*, he appears as a character. Snorri was born into a family, the Sturlungar, who were to be among the most powerful in Iceland during the politically troubled and often violent half-century from

[1] We may compare the Irish tradition, beginning with the vernacular grammar known as *Auraicept na nÉces* ('The Scholar's Primer'), usually dated to the eighth century (Ahlqvist 1983), which was followed by a number of other vernacular treatises; the late-tenth-century Anglo-Saxon abbot Ælfric's grammar of Latin, but written in Old English *c*.995 (Zupitza, rev. Gneuss 1966); and the Occitan *Leys d'amors* ('Laws of Love') from *c*.1332, which detailed the grammar and poetics of Occitan troubadour poetry (see Law 2003: 201–4 and references cited there).

1200 to 1262–4, when Iceland surrendered its political independence to Norway, and became a dependency of its parent society. This period is in fact named after the Sturlung family, as we often refer to it today as *Sturlungaöld*, 'the age of the Sturlungs'. Snorri, like most male members of his family, was deeply involved in the political manoeuvres of that time, and in fact met his death because of them. On 22 September 1241 a force of seventy men hostile to Snorri, led by his estranged son-in-law Gizurr Þorvaldsson, attacked his farm at Reykjaholt. They found Snorri hiding in the cellar and, despite his twice-repeated desperate plea *eigi skal hǫggva*, 'don't strike', they killed him there.[2]

Snorri was politically powerful and wealthy in Iceland as well as being a man of some note in Norway. In Iceland he owed a lot of his wealth to his marriage and other liaisons with women and then to a string of political deals. His father Sturla, or Hvamm-Sturla (d. 1183), as he was known from his residence at Hvammr in the north-west of Iceland, was what we might call today *nouveau riche* and upwardly mobile. While he was still a young boy, Snorri had the good fortune to benefit from his father's ambition and, as a consequence of a legal wrangle with the then most powerful man in Iceland, Jón Loptsson (1124–97), leader of the southern Icelandic family of the Oddaverjar, he was fostered at Jón's farm at Oddi from the age of three.[3] Jón Loptsson valued both the native traditions of Iceland and the rest of Scandinavia (we have seen in Chapter 3 that his mother was an illegitimate daughter of the Norwegian king Magnús berfœttr) and also the learning that had come, via Latin and other European vernaculars, from the Christian tradition. He was the grandson of the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon inn fróði ('the learned'), who lived between 1056 and 1133 and was reputed to have been the most learned man in Iceland in his day. It is said that Sæmundr was the first Icelander to write works of history, probably in Latin, and, though none have survived, the circumstantial evidence for his scholarship seems trustworthy.[4] He studied somewhere in southern Europe, most likely in France (*Frakkland*), and probably established a school at Oddi in association with the new church he had built there. To have been brought up at Oddi was probably the most fortunate thing that ever happened to Snorri Sturluson, both in terms of his education and his political career. Although we know no details of his education, we are

[2] *Íslendinga saga*, ch. 301 (Örnólfur Thorsson *et al*. 1988, I: 439–40).

[3] An account of how the fosterage took place is given in *Sturlu saga*, ch. 78 (Örnólfur Thorsson *et al*. 1988 I: 98–9).

[4] Sæmundr is mentioned several times by Ari Þorgilsson in his *Íslendingabók* and in a number of other reliable historical sources; see Hermann Pálsson 1999: 27–9.

fairly safe in assuming that he received at least the rudiments of a Latin education and that he learnt a lot about native Icelandic poetry, history and other indigenous subjects, such as genealogies and the law. These circumstances of his education probably explain a good deal about the nature of the *Edda*, which is a blend of native and foreign learning.

Although *Íslendinga saga* tells us a lot more about Snorri's involvement in Icelandic and Norwegian politics than it does about his intellectual life, he was by no means only a politician. His intellectual gifts extended to the law and to literature, including poetry. In the years 1215–18, and again in 1222–31, Snorri held the almost presidential position of lawspeaker (*lǫgsǫgumaðr*) at the Alþingi. In literature, aside from the *Edda*, Snorri almost certainly composed *Heimskringla*, a history of the kings of Norway from prehistoric times onwards, and some scholars think he also wrote *Egils saga*, though this plausible hypothesis is incapable of proof. In his own day, Snorri was better known for his poetry than for his prose works, for which we chiefly celebrate him today. Several contemporary works of Old Icelandic literature mention Snorri's poetry, including some of his compositions that are now lost.[5] One of the manuscripts of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (Stock. Perg. 4to. no. 18 of the early fourteenth century) reminds its audience in the very first chapter that the saga's poet-hero was a descendant of the famous skald Egill Skallagrímsson, and that many other poets, including Snorri Sturluson, were produced by that kin-group, the Mýrarmenn: *Sumir váru ok skáldmenn miklir í þeiri ætt: Bjǫrn Hítdœlakappi, Einarr prestr Skúlason, Snorri Sturluson ok margir aðrir* (Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938: 51, note 3), 'Some of that kin-group were also great poets: Bjǫrn Hítdœlakappi, the priest Einarr Skúlason, Snorri Sturluson and many others.'

Unlike the titles of many Old Icelandic works, which have been given to them in modern times, we know that the title *Edda* was in use for Snorri's work in the Middle Ages and that its compilation, if not its authorship, was attributed to him. The evidence comes from the oldest manuscript, the Uppsala Edda (Uppsala University Library, De la Gardie 11, U). There is a rubric at the beginning of this manuscript's text of the *Edda* which reads as follows:

> Bók þessi heitir Edda. Hana hefir saman setta Snorri Sturluson eptir þeim hætti sem hér er skipat. Er fyrst frá Ásum ok Ymi, þar næst Skáldskaparmál

[5] For the details of these poems and the places where they are mentioned, see Faulkes 1999: xxi–xxiii and Guðrún Nordal 2001: 187–8.

> ok heiti margra hluta, síðast Háttatal er Snorri hefir ort um Hákon konung ok Skúla hertuga.
>
> This book is called *Edda*. It was compiled by Snorri Sturluson in the manner in which it is arranged here. It is first about the Æsir and Ymir, then *Skáldskaparmál* ['the language of poetry'] and terms for many things, finally *Háttatal* ['list of verse forms'] which Snorri has composed about King Hákon and Duke Skúli.

Three possible explanations of the meaning of the name *Edda* have been proposed. The first is that it is the same word as the *edda* that appears in the poem *Rígsþula* stanzas 2, 4 and 7 with the meaning 'great-grandmother' (*Ái oc Edda*, 'great-grandfather and great-grandmother'), so suggesting that the work contained 'great-grandmother-style learning', that is, old-fashioned learning. The second is that it derives from the place-name Oddi, and means 'the book from Oddi', although this is unlikely as Snorri did not live at Oddi after his youth. The third, and most likely, is that it means 'Poetics' and is an Icelandic diminutive based on a Latin verb, *edo*, 'to compose poetry' (Faulkes 1977).[6]

Snorri's *Edda* was probably composed in stages from *c*.1221 onwards, beginning with the fourth part, *Háttatal*. Snorri is likely to have begun this part shortly after his first visit to Norway in 1218–20. At this stage of his life he was coming to realise that he could use his intellectual gifts, and especially his skill in the composition of skaldic poetry, to court the favour of Norwegian rulers in the manner of a traditional Viking Age court poet (Gade 2000: 84–6, 88–9; Guðrún Nordal 2001: 117–43). And this is what he did. He sent praise poems to the Norwegian kings Sverrir Sigurðarson and Ingi Bárðarson and to Earl Hákon galinn ('the crazy'). Hákon sent lavish gifts in return and an invitation to visit Norway, but he died before Snorri was able to take up the offer. However, he did travel to Norway to see Hákon's widow, Kristín, who was then remarried and living in Gautland, during his visit in 1218–20. At that time he spent two winters with Duke (*hertogi*) Skúli Bárðarson, regent for the young king Hákon Hákonarson, during which time he became a royal retainer and received the title of *lendr maðr* ('landed man', 'baron') from them. In gratitude for this honour and for other presents, Snorri composed the poem *Háttatal* in honour of both Duke Skúli and King Hákon and he is also said to have composed two additional praise-poems for Skúli alone.

[6] As we have seen in Chapter 1, there is another corpus of poetic material which has been conventionally referred to since the seventeenth century as 'the Poetic or Elder Edda'. Some verses from that poetic corpus are quoted in Snorri's *Edda*.

It is generally assumed that the other three parts of the *Edda* were composed subsequently, possibly over a period of many years. There is some evidence that *Skáldskaparmál* was never fully finished in a modern sense. A question has sometimes been asked as to whether it is more appropriate to call Snorri the author or compiler of the work. The answer is partly speculative, in that we do not have detailed knowledge of Snorri's working methods, and in part dependent on our understanding of how people in the Middle Ages understood the concept of authorship.[7] It is certainly true that the work exists in several different manuscript versions that were written during the Middle Ages, and these attest to a lively tradition of copying the text, adding to it, or reducing it, that continued beyond the medieval period. It is also possible that *Skáldskaparmál*, which is in less finished form than *Gylfaginning* and *Háttatal*, and includes some material also covered in *Háttatal*, may not have been completed (if completion is an appropriate term to invoke here) at the time of Snorri's death in 1241. The verb *samansetja*, which is used of Snorri's literary activity in the rubric to the Uppsala Edda, lays greater stress on his bringing material together, possibly with the help of amanuenses, that is, compiling the *Edda* out of pre-existing materials, than on the more creative side of authorship in the modern sense. However, a systematic study of the *Edda* as a whole cannot fail to notice the latter quality as well.

Overview of the Edda's structure

The work is in four parts in the one medieval manuscript, R, in which it appears uninterrupted by other material, and this is the form that has been followed by most modern editors.[8] It begins with a Prologue, which places Old Norse pre-Christian myth and religion in the context of medieval Christian explanations for pagan beliefs. *Gylfaginning* ('The Tricking of Gylfi') follows, an account of Old Norse cosmology, cosmogony and eschatology set in a narrative frame, which allows a legendary Swedish

[7] On this question see Lönnroth 1964–5, Clunies Ross 1992: 652–4 and, for Europe more generally, Minnis 1988.

[8] For an explanation of the sigla of Snorri's *Edda* manuscripts, see Chapter 7, note 11. The existence of the early modern manuscript T, which follows R's quadripartite structure, is the justification for thinking that the most complete form of the *Edda* was similar to what we find in R. As Tranter has remarked (2000: 151), the form of the *Edda* in R shows that 'the mythological concerns are paramount', while this is much less the case in the other major medieval compilations, U, W and the fragmentary manuscripts AM 748 I 4to and 757a 4to, which have more obvious affinities with medieval grammatical literature (Tranter 2000: 151–3).

king named Gylfi to question a fictional trinity of deities, High, Equally High and Third, about the major pre-Christian Nordic myths. The purpose of this section, which is illustrated with quotations from eddic mythological poetry, is to give an overview of Norse mythology as required background knowledge to the third section of the *Edda*, *Skáldskaparmál*. However, as a narrative *Gylfaginning* achieves literary and conceptual independence, and this has led many people, particularly in modern times, to read it separately from its fuller context.

Skáldskaparmál begins with some discursive material, including the myth of the origin of poetry, but leads into a fairly systematic enumeration and exemplification of the major kenning-types of Old Norse skaldic poetry from the works of the poets Snorri characterised as the chief skalds (*hǫfuðskáld*), the Norse equivalents to the poetic authorities (*auctores*) of classical literature. Topics covered include kennings for the gods and goddesses, men and women, gold, weapons, battle, ships, animals and birds of various kinds. Some mythic narratives appear here to explain the origin of certain kennings. After the lists of kenning-types comes a list of *heiti* or poetic simplices for major topics in Old Norse poetry. The fourth part of the *Edda*, *Háttatal*, is most like a formal school treatise and has clear associations with the Latin *clavis metrica* genre. As we have seen, this may have been the first section of the *Edda* that Snorri composed. It takes the form of 102 stanzas in praise of the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson and his father-in-law Duke Skúli, each exemplifying a different Norse verse form. The poem, accompanied by an extensive prose commentary, is preceded by an explanation of the formal characteristics of skaldic poetry (alliteration and rhyme), the various verse forms and a brief account of rhetorical devices which overlaps material in *Skáldskaparmál* to some degree. Snorri had at least one Icelandic model for *Háttatal* as well as (presumably) Latin metrical treatises, and this was *Háttalykill*, composed in the Orkneys some seventy years earlier.

Háttatal

The following sections of this chapter offer a discussion of the four parts of Snorri's *Edda*, but out of the order in which they occur in the manuscripts. My purpose in presenting them in this fashion is to highlight first those parts, *Háttatal* and *Skáldskaparmál*, that have the most obvious connections to the Latinate educational tradition, and then to move to a brief consideration of the Prologue and *Gylfaginning*, which place the work, as a treatise on Norse poetics, in its religious and cultural milieu. *Háttatal* is

treated first, because it is likely to have been the first part to have been composed and because it was influenced by an earlier metrical work, *Háttalykill*, just as it in turn influenced the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises*. *Háttatal* is, of all the four parts of Snorri's *Edda*, closest to Latin schoolbooks in terms of its structure and mode of commentary; on the other hand, it is not in any way constrained by a necessity to compare Old Norse with Latin verse forms but rather uses the classical structural models to set forth native versification.

Háttatal is probably to be dated to the early 1220s, shortly after Snorri returned to Iceland from his first visit to Norway in the years 1218–20, and is likely to have been the first part of the *Edda* that he composed (Wessén 1940: 31–2). The treatise comprises two distinct but interrelated elements. The first is a praise-poem in traditional skaldic style about the generosity and battle prowess of King Hákon Hákonarson, who reigned from 1217 to 1263, but was only thirteen years of age at the time of his accession, and his co-regent and future father-in-law, Duke Skúli Bárðarson (1188/9–1240). The poem consists of 102 stanzas divided into three sections (to each of which the term *kvæði* is given), and in it Snorri exemplifies a wide variety of verse forms available to Norse poets. Each section focuses on one or other of the patrons: section 1, stanzas 1–30, is about King Hákon; section 2, stanzas 31–67, is about Skúli hertogi, except for stanza 67, which is about both men; section 3, stanzas 68–95, is also mainly about Skúli, while stanzas 96–102 refer to both rulers.

The poem is likely to have had a dual function from the outset. Its text shows it to be clearly exemplificatory,[9] so Snorri must have had the idea of using it as a *clavis metrica* while at the same time directing it in traditional fashion to his two Norwegian patrons in the hope of winning their favour, just as a Viking Age skald would do. It is a panegyric in the old style: 'it presents the persona of the poet as a traveller attracted irresistibly by the fame of his patron, whose undying fame the skill of the poet is set to guarantee. The mode of address is direct, the exploits of the patrons being alluded to rather than directly narrated, and the framework of expectations is predominantly martial. In its self-confident acceptance of the poet's competence and value to its patron it is directly in the tradition of the tenth-century heyday of Icelandic *skáldskapr* in Norway' (Tranter 2000: 147–8). The difference here, however, is that *Háttatal* was almost certainly a written composition and thus, as Anthony Faulkes states (1999: ix), 'is an

[9] Note particularly stanza 100, which begins *Gløggva grein/ hefi ek gert til bragar,/ svá er tírætt hundrað talit* (Faulkes 1999: 39), 'Close account have I given of poetic form so that ten tens are told' (Faulkes 1987: 220).

example of the modification of the skaldic tradition brought about by the increasing use of the written word for literature in Scandinavia: instead of being recited aloud from memory by the poet in person before the ruler and his court, Snorri's poem was (presumably) sent in manuscript form to its patrons to be read by them or to them by somebody else'.

The second element of *Háttatal* is a prose commentary that points out the main features of each verse form, while at the beginning of the treatise there is an exposition of the general rules of Icelandic versification and types of poetic diction, the latter of which in part overlap some of the discussions in *Skáldskaparmál*. This circumstance, that Snorri moves from the exposition of characteristics of the verse form to a discussion of poetic language, indicates that he had some difficulty in making an absolute separation between metrics proper and the semantic and syntactic features of skaldic verse, and in this he was probably following native tradition. It has sometimes been doubted whether Snorri was the author of the prose commentary, on account of the inconsistencies that we occasionally find between the verses and the prose commentary and between the meanings attributed to certain technical terms in *Háttatal* versus the definitions of those same terms in *Skáldskaparmál*, but Faulkes, the work's latest editor, thinks that on balance Snorri is most probably the author: 'there does not seem sufficient reason to doubt that the commentary is by Snorri, and that it formed part of his overall purpose in compiling the *Edda* as a handbook for young poets' (1999: xi).

There are a number of likely influences upon the structure and content of *Háttatal*, though Snorri gives no direct reference to any source, a characteristic of the other parts of the *Edda* as well. A discussion of probable influences upon his work is therefore to a degree speculative. It is very likely that the twelfth-century *Háttalykill* gave him the idea of composing a vernacular key to the verse forms of Old Norse poetry. Some of Snorri's examples are virtuosic, and are unlikely ever to have been practised before him, though they could theoretically have been.[10] As Faulkes has observed (1999: xvii), another difference between *Háttalykill* and *Háttatal* is that the former belongs in overall theme more with dynastic and genealogical poetry, such as *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal*, than with the courtly praise poetry that served as Snorri's model.

Háttatal may have been subject to a number of foreign influences. The

[10] An appendix (75–88) to Faulkes 1999 gives a detailed listing of the precedents (or lack of them) for the various verse forms exemplified in *Háttatal*, from which it is revealed that just over thirty out of the total of 102 have no known precedents, another thirty or so have clear precedents, and the remainder have partial precedents.

most likely seems to be one or more examples of the *libri centimetri*, or works containing one hundred stanzas, exemplifying various metrical forms. The *De centum metris* of the fourth-century Latin poet Servius (Keil 1855–80 IV: 456–67) seems to have provided the model for medieval collections of one hundred different verse forms with a commentary, a genre Bede refers to in chapter 24 of his *De arte metrica* (Kendall in Jones 1975: 138). Snorri may have been acquainted with Latin examples of the *centimetrum* or heard about them. Equally, he may have known other Latin works and got some of his ideas for the structure of *Háttatal* from these, even perhaps being influenced in his development of indigenous technical terms by the kinds of distinctions Latin authors made in classical *artes grammaticae* (Marold 1995: 109–14). Faulkes (1999: xv) has drawn attention to the similarity between the opening of *Háttatal*, with its dialogic articulation of the basic kinds and characteristics of Norse verse forms, so reminiscent of the medieval schoolroom, and the beginning of book 3 of the fourth-century Fortunatianus's *Ars rhetorica*. As Faulkes concedes, however, it is the manner of the two texts that are similar, rather than their subject matter and categorisation. That manner, the use of question and answer dialogue, is a common medieval pedagogic technique, which we also find Snorri using from time to time in *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál*.

Háttatal is a remarkable achievement of medieval scholarship, and combines analytical description in the prose passages with virtuosic poetic exemplification. The combination serves to remind us that Snorri was a practising poet as well as a theorist. It also serves to remind us that he was influenced in his analysis by traditional modes of thought as well as by the Latinate tradition. A study of the arrangement and terminology he uses to categorise Icelandic verse forms is revealing of the position of *Háttatal* between native and foreign learning, and in what follows I am indebted to both Tranter (1997: 113–18; 2000) and Faulkes (1999 *passim*, but especially 75–88), who have made thorough and recent studies of this subject. The verses in *Háttatal* are arranged in a hierarchical rather than a chronological order, with *dróttkvætt*, the standard and highest-ranking form for praise-poems coming first, and *fornyrðislag* and its variants last, as befits the simplest forms from a technical point of view. As we have already noted in Chapter 1, this arrangement does not mean that Snorri was ignorant of the longer history of *fornyrðislag*, which is evident from other parts of the *Edda*, particularly *Gylfaginning*, but rather shows him adopting a typological approach to Old Norse verse forms.

At the beginning of his exemplificatory poem, Snorri introduces a

discussion, using the dialogic form mentioned above, of what he calls 'distinction of meaning' (*málsgrein*) and 'distinction of sound' (*hljóðsgrein*) in Norse poetry.[11] Under these heads he discusses syllable length, rhyme, line length, stanzaic structure, alliteration and the kenning. He recognised that *dróttkvætt* lines should normally have six syllables, but adopts a position that concedes that sometimes they have one or two more or less. Following the approach of Latin metrical treatises, he terms these variations *leyfi*, or permissible deviation from the rules (Faulkes 1999: 7–8). Snorri's description of alliteration and rhyme is interesting for several reasons, and, as Tranter has argued, it reveals his 'intermediate position between the literate world of the classical grammars and native practice, originally oral' (1997: 97).

The fact that he deals with these phenomena in such detail argues for his independence of the classical tracts and his recognition of what characterised native poetics, something for which we owe him a debt of gratitude, for in no other medieval work in a Germanic language do we find an exposition of the principles governing the pervasive phenomenon of alliteration and in no other Icelandic work do we find a clear exposition of the rules for line-internal rhyme. On the other hand, as the quotation below clearly shows, Snorri presents alliteration and internal rhyme as phenomena of spelling rather than phonetics and disregards entirely the necessary connection between alliterating letters and stress accent:

> Hér [in a quoted poetic example] er stafasetning sú er hætti ræðr ok kveðandi gerir, þar eru tólf stafir í eyrindi, ok eru þrír settir í hvern fjórðung. Í hverjum fjórðungi eru tvau vísuorð. Hverju vísuorði fylgja sex samstǫfur. Í ǫðru vísuorði er settr sá stafr fyrst í vísuorðinu er vér kǫllum hǫfuðstaf. Sá stafr ræðr kveðandi. En í fyrsta vísuorði mun sá stafr finnast tysvar standa fyrir samstǫfun. Þá stafi kǫllum vér stuðla. Ef hǫfuðstafr er samhljóðandi, þá skulu stuðlar vera enn inn sami stafr, sem hér [poetic example]. . . . En ef hljóðstafr er hǫfuðstafrinn, þá skulu stuðlar vera ok hljóðstafir, ok er fegra at sinn hljóðstafr sé hverr þeira . . .
>
> Qnnur stafasetning er sú er fylgir setning hljóðs þess er hátt gerir ok kveðandi. Skal sú grein í dróttkvæðum hætti svá vera at fjórðungr vísu skal þar saman fara at allri stafasetning ok hljóða. Skal í fyrra vísuornni þannig greina þá setning:
>
> Jǫrð kann frelsa fyrðum.

[11] Note that Snorri uses *málsgrein* here in a somewhat different sense from the First Grammarian, cited in Chapter 7. However, if my understanding of the passage in the *First Grammatical Treatise* is correct, both passages contrast spoken discourse as articulated sound with its meaning.

Hér er svá: ‘jǫrð . . . fyrð-’. Þat er ein samstafa í hvárum stað ok sinn hljóðstafr fylgir hvárri ok svá upphafsstaf[r en einir stafir eru] eptir hljóðstaf í báðum orðum. Þessa setning hljóðfalls kǫllum vér skothending. En í ǫðru vísuorði er svá:

Friðrofs konungr ofsa.

Svá er hér: ‘-rofs . . . ofs-’. Þar er einn hljóðstafr ok svá allir þeir er eptir fara í báðum orðum, en upphafsstafir greina orðin. Þetta heita aðalhending. (Faulkes 1999: 4)

Here there is one aspect of spelling that determines the verse form and creates the poetical effect, that there are twelve staves [alliterating sounds] in the stanza, and three are put in each quarter-stanza. In each quarter-stanza there are two lines. Each line contains six syllables. In the second line there is put first in the line the stave which we call the chief stave. This stave determines the alliteration. But in the first line this stave will appear twice at the beginnings of syllables. We call these staves props. If the chief stave is a consonant, the props must be the same letter, as here [poetic example]. . . . And if the chief stave is a vowel, the props must also be vowels, and it is more elegant that each of them should be a different vowel . . .

There is a second aspect of the spelling that is involved in the rule of the sound which constitutes the verse form and poetical effect. This distinction in the *dróttkvætt* [court-metre] form requires that the quarter-stanzas have the same arrangement of letters and sounds. In the odd lines this rule is analysed thus:

iörd kann frelsa fyrdum

Here there is: *iörd . . . fyrd-*. There is one syllable in each position and each has a different vowel and also initial consonant, but there are the same letters after the vowel in both words. This rule of assonance we call *skothending* [half-rhyme]. But in the even lines it is thus:

fridrofs konungr ofsa

Here there is: *-rofs . . . ofs-*. There is the same vowel and all the same sounds following it in both words, but the words are distinguished by their initial letters. This is called *adalhending* [full rhymes]. (Faulkes 1987: 166–7)

The discussion of the kenning that follows is equally remarkable, and different in some particulars from Snorri’s treatment of it in *Skáldskaparmál*, something to be examined in the Appendix to this book. In a well-known passage (Faulkes 1999: 5–6; 1987: 167–70) he distinguishes between levels of complexity in the kenning, differentiating the simple,

two-element kenning, comprising one base word and one determinant, from the double kenning (*tvíkent*) and the extended kenning, involving more than two determinants, which he calls *rekit*. These terms have been of great use to modern scholars and are still employed in contemporary analysis of skaldic diction. He also sets up a contrast between kennings that embody literal descriptions of their referents, which he calls here *sannkenningar* (lit. 'true kennings'), and those which involve some kind of metaphorical equation between the base word(s) and determinant(s) on the one hand, and the referent(s) on the other. As we have already seen in Chapter 5, he calls extended metaphorical descriptions which involve a series of harmonious images *nýgjǫrvingar* ('new meanings'), while reserving the term *nykrat* ('monstrous, monstrosity'),[12] for those that switch from one metaphorical comparison to another.

The various names that Snorri gives for the different verse forms exemplified in *Háttatal* afford insights into the native Norse poetic tradition. His terminology reveals at least six different principles of nomenclature, and these are set out, following Tranter (1997: 113–18), in Table 1, with examples (the numbers refer to the stanza numbers of *Háttatal*).

Table 1. Names of verse forms in *Háttatal*

(a) Prefix + *hendr*/*henda*/*hent* (18 cases in all)
The prefix is in each case an adverbial modifying the participle *hendr*.
EXAMPLES
24 *dunhent* ('echoing rhymed'; cf. *duna*, 'noise, din', esp. of battle)
36 *þríhent* ('triple rhymed')
65 *draughent* ('ghost rhymed' or ?'trunk rhymed', either < *draugr*, 'ghost, revenant' or *draugr*, 'trunk of a tree')
(b) Adverbial + past participle of process
In this group the title of the stanza suggests that a certain alteration has been performed on a basic stanza.
EXAMPLES
12 *stælt* ('steeled, inlaid with steel')
13 *hjástælt* ('abutted', lit. 'side-steeled')

[12] The word derives from the Old Icelandic *nykr* ('fabulous water-monster'), half human and half animal, i.e. composed of different entities; cf. Old English *nicor* ('water monster') as in *Beowulf* 422, 575, 845 and 1427; cf. also Old High German *nihhus*, Modern German *Nix*(*e*) ('water spirit, water nymph').

33 *veggjat* (‘walled’ or ‘wedged’)

77 *hálfhnept* (‘half-shortened’)

78 *alhnept* (‘fully shortened’)

(c) Adverbial + *mælt*, ‘spoken’

The final element of all components of this group suggests the manner in which a poem is to be, or can be, delivered.

EXAMPLES

9 *sextánmælt* (‘sixteen-spoken’, i.e. consists of 16 complete subject + verb units)

47 *iðurmælt* (‘repeatedly spoken’)

(d) Forms in noun (common) or adjective + *háttr* (‘verse form’)

EXAMPLES

26 *orðskviðuháttr* (‘proverb form’)

67 *háttlausa* (‘lacking in form’, i.e. the form is without hendings)

(e) Personal names

Stanzas 54–8 are named after the skalds Ragnarr, Torf-Einarr, Egill, Fleinn and Bragi respectively.

(f) Miscellaneous nominal forms

EXAMPLES

17 *refhvarf* (‘fox turn’, a kind of antithesis)

40 *greppaminni* (‘poets’ reminder’)

It is clear, even from the small number of examples from each category given here, that, while some of the names are classified in terms of particular categories of verse form, using elements such as *háttr* (‘manner, mode, verse form’), *hent* (‘rhymed’) and *lag* (‘tune, measure, metre’), together with another element that describes the character of that particular verse form, many of them, perhaps a majority, do not describe the verse form in terms of its metrical or formal characteristics, but rather in ways that refer to semantic or stylistic characteristics, like 47, *iðurmælt* (‘repeatedly spoken’). The example Snorri gives of this verse form makes it clear that the form is not distinguished on metrical grounds, but because it uses four *fjórðungar* (‘couplets’) which repeat the same idea using different words. This observation also holds true for Snorri’s analysis of the various kinds of kenning, which is put to use in *Háttatal* to exemplify distinctions of verse form, when the distinctions are in fact stylistic. Many of the names, such as *refhvarf* or *refhvǫrf*, pl. (‘fox turn, antithesis’), involve metaphorical comparisons between poetic structures and figures of speech and

phenomena in the natural or cultural world known to the Icelanders, something mentioned in Chapter 5 in connection with the question of how the craft of the poet was traditionally conceptualised in early medieval Scandinavia. Additional categories of subdivision are allowed for by the use of the comparative and superlative adjectives *meiri* and *mestr* or *minni* and *minnst*, as, for example, in *in minni refhvǫrf* ('the lesser fox turn'), in which, according to the example, there is one antithesis in each line of the verse.

It is apparent that most of Snorri's categories of verse form derive from the native rather than the Latinate tradition and are classified according to indigenous rather than Latinate principles. It is also apparent that many of them are based on oral rather than written criteria, as they use classifying elements that refer directly to speech patterns or spoken utterance in some way.[13] However, there is also evidence that Snorri was influenced to some degree by the classification system of the learned metrical treatises, in which verse forms are defined in terms of metrical units and syllables (see Marold 1995: 113). This is most obvious in the case of the *runhenda* metres, which are almost certainly influenced by Latin anyway. As Tranter has suggested (2000: 150), this evidence indicates that Snorri was disinclined to try to distort or change the native tradition of classification when it was well established, but, where it was not, felt free to experiment with Latinate categories.

Skáldskaparmál

Within Iceland, *Skáldskaparmál* was arguably the most important, most copied and most imitated part of Snorri's *Edda* in the late Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance. The extant manuscripts preserve it in varying forms, and, as we have seen earlier, Snorri may have been experimenting with different arrangements of its material without making a final decision on which version was the best. It is likely to have been used as a text book in some Icelandic schools of the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and perhaps more generally for purposes of private study (Foote 1984b;

[13] This is apparent in some of the names themselves and also in Snorri's analysis. For example, as Tranter (1997: 115) points out, Snorri analyses the sixteen units of *sextánmælt*, not in terms of *málsgrein*, or 'sentence', but as *mál*, 'speech, utterance', thereby 'drawing emphasis away from the structure of the sentence, as analysed on the page, and emphasizing instead the acoustic aspect, the sixteen breaks in delivery by which the syntactical pattern is orally characterized. In doing so he is being led away, by the traditional, orally conceived title of the form, from a writing-based analysis to one based on patterns of perceived sound.'

Faulkes 1998 I: xxxviii; Guðrún Nordal 2001). Its major purpose was didactic and instructive, but in its fuller versions, it shared *Gylfaginning*'s objective of providing the mythological and legendary background to the diction of skaldic poetry and in particular to the kennings and poetic synonyms (*heiti*) of skaldic verse. There are substantial sections of *Skáldskaparmál* which narrate myths and legends in order to illustrate various features of poetic diction, often going well beyond what was strictly necessary for this purpose.

Skáldskaparmál is more varied in both content and structure than the other three parts of the *Edda*. It begins with a largely narrative section, occupying the first four chapters of the treatise, in which two important myths are narrated. The first is the abduction of the goddess Iðunn by the giant Þjazi and the subsequent revenge expedition of the giant's daughter Skaði, and this is followed by the myth of the mead of poetry. The telling of these myths is motivated by a narrative frame, such as recurs sporadically in *Skáldskaparmál*, in which the scene is set at a feast put on for the gods by a sea-giant Ægir, who finds himself sitting next to Bragi, god of poetry. Bragi is cast as the narrator of the myths and the source of the information about poetry that follows, though the dramatic illusion is only fitfully maintained. In the course of a brief dialogue between the two conversationalists (chapter 1),[14] the audience is alerted to the division of poetry into two categories, verse forms (*hættir*) and language (*mál*), and the discussants move to the choice of language (*máltak*) that occurs in poetry (*skáldskaparmál*). Poetic diction is thus the main subject of *Skáldskaparmál*, as verse forms had been of *Háttatal*, and poetic language is said to be divided into three categories (*grein*), in a problematical passage, discussed in the Appendix to this book. This then leads into a major section of the work in which kennings for a large number of poetic referents are set out and exemplified with quotations (*dœmi*), largely from skaldic verse, beginning with Óðinn and the other gods and concluding with kennings for Christ and earthly kings. There then follows a section that lists *heiti*, poetic simplices for a variety of referents, to some extent repeating the subjects in the kenning list.[15] The separation of *heiti* and kennings is not watertight in

[14] Even though it is in fact the fifth chapter, the count of chapters in *Skáldskaparmál* has conventionally begun here because nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century tradition has seen the first four chapters as part of *Gylfaginning*, entitling them unhistorically *Bragaræður* ('The Speeches of Bragi'). There is no medieval evidence to support this view, and the narrative frame of *Skáldskaparmál* has a different pair of discussants from that of *Gylfaginning*.

[15] There is a convenient synopsis of the subjects of these lists in Faulkes 1998 I: viii–x

either list, however. After an interesting chapter on homonyms and the skaldic figure of *ofljóst*, several manuscripts follow with a substantial collection of *þulur*, or versified lists of poetic synonyms, which are unlikely to be Snorri's work (Faulkes 1998 I: xv–xviii). In addition to the analytical value of Snorri's lists and categories, the examples he adduces from skaldic poetry, which range from single stanzas and half-stanzas to long quotations of many stanzas, mainly from mythological poetry, mean that *Skáldskaparmál* has recorded a large corpus of skaldic verse that is unlikely to have survived otherwise. It is thus of immense value to the modern student of Old Norse poetry and its interpretation.

The foregoing summary of *Skáldskaparmál*'s content and structure has omitted one important detail. It is a passage in chapter 5 (or chapter 1, using the traditional numbering) in which the narrator's voice (Snorri's rather than Bragi's at this point) enunciates the didactic purpose of his treatise.[16] Part of this important passage has already been quoted in Chapter 6, where we looked at Snorri's understanding of the typological method of interpreting older literature in Christian terms. The passage quoted there is immediately preceded by the following statement:

> En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orðfjǫlða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja þat er hulit er kveðit: þá skili hann þessa bók til fróðleiks ok skemtunar. (Faulkes 1998 I: 5)
>
> But these things have now to be told to young poets who desire to learn the language of poetry and to furnish themselves with a wide vocabulary using traditional terms; or else they desire to be able to understand what is expressed obscurely. Then let such a one take this book as scholarly enquiry and entertainment. (Faulkes 1987: 64)

While we do not know how extensively Snorri's book was used for training young poets, that purpose is clearly signalled here and the dual medieval objective of learning and entertainment duly invoked. It is interesting also that the statement draws special attention to the wealth of traditional terms in skaldic verse and its propensity to obscurity as

(following the order of R) and on pp. xlix–l showing the arrangement in U, A and B, while Guðrún Nordal (2001: ch. 5) has an extensive discussion of the ways in which various Icelandic treatises list and categorise kennings and *heiti*.

[16] This section, together with a passage that follows it on the story of Troy interpreted as a means of narrating Norse myths, was often regarded as a later addition to *Skáldskaparmál* or as an intrusion from *Gylfaginning*, and has been considered, by those who hold such views, as the Epilogue (*Eptirmáli*) to the latter work.

characterising features of the art. Later skalds would keep hold of the one and eventually repudiate the other, at least in theory.

In *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri sets forth examples (*dæmi*) from the poetic practice of his chief authorities, the early skalds he calls *hǫfuðskáld*, to demonstrate how poets should form kennings and other poetic figures for the chief subjects of skaldic verse: for the gods and goddesses, for poetry itself, for men and women, giants, ships, battle, weapons and armour, gold and so forth. As he introduces each subject, he instructs the audience on what the proper kenning types for it are. So, for example, he introduces the subject of Loki thus:

> 'Hvernig skal kenna Loka? Svá at kalla son Fárbauta ok Laufeyjar, Nálar, bróður Býleists ok Helblinda, fǫður Vánargands (þat er Fenrisúlfr) ok Jǫrmungands (þat er Miðgarðsormr) ok Heljar ok Nara, ok Ála frænda . . . heimsœki ok kistuskrúð Geirrøðar, þjófr jǫtna, hafrs ok Brísingamens ok Iðunnar epla, Sleipnis frændi . . .'. (Faulkes 1998 I: 19–20)

> 'How shall Loki be referred to? By calling him son of Fárbauti and Laufey, of Nál, brother of Býleistr and Helblindi, father of Vanargandr, i.e. Fenris-wolf, and of Jǫrmungandr, i.e. the Miðgarðr serpent, and Hel's and Nari's and Áli's relative . . . Geirrøðr's visitor and casket-ornament, thief from giants, of goat and Brisingamen and Iðunn's apples, relative of Sleipnir . . .'. (Faulkes 1987: 76–7)

Without demonstrating this point in detail here, all or almost all the recommended types of kenning for Loki in this list refer to myths and mythic fragments Snorri had already set forth in *Gylfaginning* or expounded elsewhere in *Skáldskaparmál*. He thus provides for his native poetry what accompanied the classics of Greek and Latin literature in the medieval schoolroom tradition: an account of classical myths and legends which could then be exemplified from the best classical poetry, the authorities (*auctores*) of the handbooks of poetry and poetics that had come down to the Middle Ages from late classical times. His *auctores* were the chief skalds of the Viking Age and the first half of the twelfth century; his equivalent to classical mythology and to the Christian references which were also present in many medieval handbooks of poetics were the myths of pagan Scandinavia. The fact that he set them out in such detail, probably more than was strictly necessary for his purpose, suggests that he thought them of real intellectual value, as the Prologue to the *Edda* indeed suggests. It seems probable too that he enjoyed them as good stories and wanted his audience to do so, as have generations of people who have read them since the Middle Ages in his excellent and often amusing prose.

The Prologue to the *Edda*

There are still some scholars who consider that the Prologue is not part of Snorri's work, but the addition of another writer, who added a learned framework to the *Edda* at a later date. This view has been very popular in Germany since it was first enunciated by Andreas Heusler in 1908 and in recent decades has been especially associated with the Frankfurt scholar Klaus von See (1988 and 1993). It is very difficult to see how this position can be upheld, as the Prologue is in most of the main medieval manuscript witnesses and there are no textual or palaeographical grounds on which to classify it as a later addition. Furthermore, it would be necessary to regard passages from other parts of the *Edda*, such as that from *Skáldskaparmál* addressed to young poets, as similarly interpolated. This is because that text refers quite clearly to the position that has been taken towards pagan myth 'at the beginning of this book', which can only refer to the Prologue. Most modern scholars have seen the Prologue as providing an overview of the material presented in later sections (though some see it as only relevant to *Gylfaginning*), indicating the author's own opinion of its value and the ways in which Christian readers and students of poetry could take Norse myths and legends seriously without endangering their status as devout Christians. This is in accordance with the normal medieval purposes of Prologues to learned works, which were well known in Iceland (Sverrir Tómasson 1988). Generally they set out the major themes of the work they introduced or the author's position in respect to his sources. In the other major work we are fairly confident is by Snorri, *Heimskringla*, there is also a Preface in which the author discusses the oral and written sources for his histories of the kings of Norway. In the *Edda*, his sources were the commonly known myths and legends of pre-Christian Scandinavia and both eddic and skaldic poetry.

The main purpose of the Prologue, however, is not to present Snorri's sources directly, but to indicate how such potentially dangerous subject matter should be understood by people of Christian faith. He presents two major arguments in this regard. It has to be understood that by far the commonest medieval Christian attitude to pagan religions, myths and rituals was to regard them as the delusions of Satan and actively threatening to Christians. Although by the time Snorri wrote Iceland had been Christian for some two hundred years, it was still difficult for Christian writers to present paganism in any other terms than as the work of the devil and certainly not worth the serious attention of good Christians. This probably explains why so little written evidence has come down to us from medieval Europe outside Iceland for the pre-Christian religion and myths of its

inhabitants. Snorri was proposing to do something quite radical in medieval terms: to devote a whole treatise to the exposition of pagan Nordic myth and the traditional poetry that depended so heavily upon it. He therefore needed to prepare the ground carefully, from both an ideological and a literary point of view.

Let us take the ideology first, as the Prologue expounds it. In the first part of the Prologue Snorri puts forward an argument that all pagan religions are imperfect perceptions of the basic truths that Christianity alone embodies in a complete form. This is the so-called argument for natural religions, which was known in Snorri's day and had a certain following, particularly among those scholars who were influenced by the philosophers and religious historians of the School of Chartres in France. Whether Snorri had any direct knowledge of their work, we may never know, but some of the ideas in this part of the Prologue are very much in line with their thinking, as has been established by several scholars (Dronke and Dronke 1977; Faulkes 1983). He begins the Prologue with reference to events narrated in the book of Genesis of the Christian Bible, including Noah's flood and the dispersal of different human races who survived it. He claims that succeeding generations 'forgot the name of God' and thus no one knew anything about his creator. However, God did not abandon these people completely; rather, he left them with 'earthly understanding' (*jarðlig skilning*) which enabled them to use their five senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste to gain an imperfect, but roughly correct knowledge of the world around them, even to the point of understanding that there was some unseen controller (*stjórnari*) orchestrating it all. In *Gylfaginning* and to some extent in *Skáldskaparmál*, we find that the pre-Christian religion and myths of Scandinavia can often be explained in these terms (Clunies Ross 1987). What the Scandinavians, as well as all other pagans lacked, however, was 'spiritual wisdom' (*andlig spekðin*); hence their beliefs, as attested particularly in *Gylfaginning*, appear as distortions or half-echoes of Christian ideas.

Snorri combines the argument that all religions have some basic understanding of the nature of things with another theory, that purports to explain how pre-Christian Scandinavians happened to adopt a particular brand of paganism. This is an argument of a different kind, but, like the argument for natural religions, it is one that refrains from writing off paganism as an evil Satanic delusion. The second theory was well known in the Middle Ages and derived ultimately from ideas that were introduced into classical culture through the writings of the fourth-century BC Greek mythographer Euhemerus, and so named euhemerism after him. Euhemerus wrote a

'Sacred History' in which he gave an anthropomorphic explanation of current mythology, that is, he argued that all the so-called gods of myth were really outstanding human beings, and that later on people had imagined them to be divine. Myths, in this view, were exaggerated and distorted records of facts.

Snorri uses this kind of argument in the Prologue. He writes that the supposed Norse gods, the Æsir, were actually human refugees from the destruction of the city of Troy in Asia according to classical literature, and derives their name, by a false etymology, from the word *Ásia*. These Æsir made their way from Troy to the northern and western parts of the world and conquered the local rulers and peoples as they went. Óðinn was their leader and everywhere they went he placed members of his dynasty to rule over the local peoples. They thus established a kind of empire in the north, first in 'Saxland' (Saxony, i.e. Germany), then in Denmark and Sweden and other parts of Scandinavia. They taught their language and culture to the native peoples of these lands, who presumably lost their own. Thus Norse myths and legends, and the traditional language in which these were expressed, poetry, can be seen to be an inheritance from the classical world. Snorri does not quite go that far in the Prologue, but the suggestion is there, and it was made explicit by his nephew Óláfr Þórðarson in his *Third Grammatical Treatise*, as we shall see in Chapter 9.

The second argument of the Prologue is what motivates the literary design of the whole work, and provides a springboard into *Gylfaginning* and a narrative framework within which the action of *Gylfaginning* can unfold. Towards the end of the Prologue, we are introduced to a certain Gylfi, a Swedish king who has had such dealings with the Æsir from Troy that he is motivated to go and find out for himself the sources of their power and influence.[17] And this is how *Gylfaginning* begins, at least in the main manuscripts, with Gylfi deciding to disguise himself as a traveller, called Gangleri, and setting out to visit the Æsir in their splendid hall, there to discover the secrets of their beliefs. The whole narrative of pre-Christian Norse myth is then set in the context of his quest, in which he engages a parody of the Christian Trinity, the High, Equally High and the Third One (*Hár, Jafnhár ok Þriði*) in a series of questions designed to reveal the core of their religion. Thus Snorri, by narrative means, distances himself and his Christian audience from the truthfulness of the old religion, while still

[17] In fact, they cheat him. A female member of the group, Gefjon, uses her four sons by a giant, who appear as oxen, to plough away a vast tract of Sweden to form the island of Sjælland in Denmark. This is the subject of a stanza by Bragi Boddason, which Snorri quotes both here and in his *Ynglinga saga*, the introduction to *Heimskringla*.

being able to narrate a synthesis of the major myths and beliefs of pagan Scandinavia.

Gylfaginning

Snorri Sturluson was the only medieval Icelandic poetic theorist to provide a systematic — or apparently systematic — overview of the pagan myths of Scandinavia alongside an analysis of poetic diction and verse forms. This overview is largely achieved in *Gylfaginning*, but it is augmented in *Skáldskaparmál*, where there are a number of lengthy mythic and legendary narratives, like Þórr's single combat with the giant Hrungnir or a group of legends concerning the Niflungar, provoked by a discusssion of kennings for gold. Only in *Háttatal* is there a complete absence of mythological material.

Gylfaginning achieves a rounded picture of the major topics that any mythographer, past or present, would consider important in setting out the beliefs of a human society in its origins, the world it lives in, the supernatural beings it believes in and the course of past, present and future time. It deals first with the beginning of the world, when all that existed was a primaeval abyss, to which Snorri gives the name Ginnungagap ('mighty [*or* magic] abyss'), and then describes how the elements of heat and cold, combining together in some poisonous rivers by the name of Élivágar ('Poison Waves'), were quickened into life and took the form of a being named Ymir, the ancestor of all the frost giants, and, indeed, in a certain sense, the ancestor of all living, anthropomorphic beings, including the gods. The narrative goes on to account for the origin of the deities called Æsir, who were of giant ancestry on the maternal side, and then tells how three of them, Óðinn, Vili and Vé, killed the giant Ymir and made all the physical features of the world from his body parts. Later this same trio of gods created the first human pair out of two logs of wood lying on the seashore. We hear also of other beings who governed the heavenly bodies, the sun, moon, planets and stars, and whose regular activities are essential for the establishment of the science of chronology. After they had built their home of Ásgarðr, which is represented as a medieval walled town, another of the gods' creative acts was to produce the race of dwarfs, who live under the ground and are the craftsmen of the gods. This act seems to have been carried out in response to a visit to Ásgarðr of some giantesses, who in some unspecified way threatened the gods' carefree lifestyle and their enjoyment of a golden age. The final group of supernatural beings to be introduced are the fates, called Norns (*nornar*), who live at the World Ash tree,

Yggdrasill, along with Mímir, custodian of a well in which lies wisdom and intelligence. It is at the World Ash that the gods hold their assembly.

Having established the classes of anthropomorphic beings in the world, *Gylfaginning* then moves to a closer consideration of the gods themselves, where they live and who they are, and several mythic narratives are given here about certain of them. Each male and female deity gets a short character portrait, in a manner reminiscent of the way in which Icelandic saga authors introduce characters into their narratives. The anomalous figure of Loki, whose father was a giant and whose mother a goddess, is introduced, together with an account of his three monstrous children by a giantess. They are Hel, the female custodian of the underworld of death, the World Serpent Miðgarðsormr, and the wolf Fenrir. The narrative then launches into the story of how the gods, desperate to conrol Fenrir, bound him by trickery, in the course of which one of them, Týr, lost his right hand. At this point the signals of impending destruction of the gods' world, which until this point have been muted, start to intensify and become more numerous. Each of Loki's monstrous children poses a threat to the world in which the gods maintain a tenuous order over nature: Hel reminds us that all living beings — even gods — have to die; the World Serpent lives in the ocean surrounding a circular earth and threatens the disorderly encroachment of the sea upon the land, while the wolf Fenrir threatens to range uncontrollably and swallow the sun and the moon, robbing the world of its accustomed alternation of day and night, light and darkness. The last two of Loki's children will break free at Ragnarøkr ('Twilight of the Powers'),[18] and, with Loki himself, help a group of fire giants oppose the gods in a final battle.

The next part of *Gylfaginning* covers a variety of topics about the gods and their environment, including Valhǫll ('Valhalla'), the place where those who die in battle and are selected to form Óðinn's warrrior troop in readiness for the final battle are carried by his female assistants, the valkyries (*valkyrjur*) or choosers of the slain, and where they can relax for the time being and treat themselves to endless supplies of pork and mead. From here on, some longer mythic narratives occur: the myth of the giant builder and the origin of Óðinn's eight-legged horse Sleipnir; the very long narrative of Þórr's visit to the enormously powerful and gigantic Útgarða-Loki, where Þórr and his companions appear to disgrace themselves in contests of strength; the account of Þórr's fight with the World Serpent,

[18] Manuscripts containing Snorri's *Edda* consistently give this form of the word, which proved inspiring to Romantic writers and composers, but in the poem *Vǫluspá*, which lies behind Snorri's narrative, we find *ragna rǫk* ('fate of the powers'), and this is likely to be the earlier concept.

Miðgarðsormr, and then, ominously for the gods, the myth of the death of Óðinn's and Frigg's favourite son, Baldr, and the gods' failure to win him back from the clutches of Hel. According to Snorri's narrative, Loki was heavily implicated in Baldr's death, and a sequel to the myth describes his punishment.

The final section of *Gylfaginning* concerns the disintegration of the gods' world in disorder and death. It is first signalled by natural events, very cold winters without any summers, and a weak sun, then by human discord and the removal of the constraints that regulate social life: great battles, fighting and incest among family members. A wolf will swallow the sun, and another one the moon. The wolf Fenrir will break his bonds and range free; the sea will surge up onto the land as the World Serpent flies into a giant rage. Along with all this, a ship bearing a hostile crew of fire demons, frost giants, Loki and all the people of Hel will come to confront the assembled gods at the plain called Vígríðr. There will be single combats between individual gods and their chosen adversaries: Óðinn fights Fenrir, Þórr Miðgarðsormr and so on. The narrative ends with a suggestion of a limited return to a paradisal new world for a select group of the gods; Þórr's sons, Móði and Magni, bearing his hammer, will return, and Baldr and his brother Hǫðr, who killed him at Loki's instigation, return together. The prospect of renewal extends even to humans, for another primal pair, Líf and Leifþrasir, will appear from their hiding place in a wood and will have the morning dews for their food. Even the sun will be renewed.

This summary of the contents of *Gylfaginning* presents a seemingly incontestable narrative, but this is misleading, as Snorri's mythography is by no means straightforward but artful and selective. The first thing to notice is its very cohesion and apparent comprehensiveness as a narrative. To us this may appear a natural and expected quality of any expository text, but in the Middle Ages such qualities were rare, and we may doubt whether, before Snorri, anyone had attempted a single, comprehensive account of Norse mythology. To have written such a work as *Gylfaginning* was itself a major achievement, and one for which we must be eternally grateful to Snorri, as without it, and the rest of his *Edda*, our own understanding of Old Norse myth would be massively less than it now is, not to speak of our understanding of the myths that underlie the often cryptic references in both eddic and skaldic poetry, especially in the kennings of the latter. And, if all the makers of Thor comics, fantasy novels and films and other modern creations ultimately dependent on the existence of *Gylfaginning* were to pay royalties to the descendants of Snorri Sturluson, the latter would be very rich indeed!

The second point to make about *Gylfaginning* in a sense undercuts the first: for all its authoritative breadth of coverage, Snorri's account of Norse mythology is in fact selective and highly dependent on a number of poetic sources, which, in some cases, provided conflicting evidence. The latter is not unsurprising, as it is very unlikely that much, if any, of this poetic material was available in a written form when Snorri wrote.[19] But there is another reason why he, as it were, 'massages' his sources for the evidence he wants, and perhaps, in at least one case, may have made up a line or two. There is good evidence that the account of Norse pagan myth that he presents in *Gylfaginning* in particular, but also, to some extent in *Skáldskaparmál*, is slanted in such a way as to make it a slightly distorted version of ideas that are fundamental to Christianity. Here, of course, we must remember the Prologue and its account of natural religions. The Norwegian scholar Anne Holtsmark (1964) suggested that *Gylfaginning* was intended as a parody of Christian ideas; that is perhaps overinterpreting the echoes of Christianity in the text and seeing them as savagely ironic. My own view (Clunies Ross 1987) is that they are certainly sometimes intended to be comic, as when the normally mighty Þórr is made to appear puny and ineffectual besides the enormous Útgarða-Loki, but that the echoes of Christian thought are intended to suggest in a positive way what pagans can achieve with their 'earthly understanding' and their five senses in the absence of 'spiritual wisdom'. The results often leave something to be desired, but they are indications, as the Prologue suggests, that even pagans have a basic understanding of universal truths.

There are many examples in *Gylfaginning* of Snorri's representation of Norse mythology to make it seem to include concepts familiar to Christians. Right at the beginning the Swedish king Gylfi, disguised as a traveller named Gangleri, enters the hall of the Æsir from Troy to find himself confronted with a counterpart to the Christian Trinity, Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði, 'High, Equally High, and Third'. It is this 'trinity' who answer all his questions. It is significant that the very first part of the Æsir's narrative is concerned to build up Óðinn as not only the chief of the gods, which he arguably was in Viking Age Scandinavia, but as a supreme and omnipotent god, who lives throughout all ages and rules all his kingdom

[19] There has been a considerable amount of debate on this point. Some scholars think some of the poems that Snorri used may have already existed in written form in the 1220s, though there is no direct evidence to support this hypothesis. The Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, which contains most of his chief sources for *Gylfaginning*, was compiled in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, but Lindblad (1954, 1980), who has made the most extensive study of the codex, believes it went through several earlier versions before achieving its present form.

and governs all things great and small. Such words, and others in the same vein, are appropriate to the Christian God and remind one of the Creed, but do not really apply to Óðinn as far as we can tell from Norse poetry, our closest witness to pre-Christian beliefs.

The impression that pagan Norse beliefs were similar to those of Christianity is also created by a judicious choice of poetic examples, which Snorri cites in support of his presentation in *Gylfaginning*. Most of his poetic sources quoted in this part of the *Edda* are from the poetry of the Elder Edda rather than from skaldic verse, and this seems to be a deliberate choice to indicate the antiquity of these sources.[20] Indeed, for some of the myths narrated in *Gylfaginning* Snorri clearly had skaldic sources, which he cites in *Skáldskaparmál*, but he does not quote them in *Gylfaginning* as he wished to give that part of the *Edda* an air of antique authority.[21] He also chose his examples from eddic poetry very carefully. Frequently the text of the poems he cites is a little different from that of the same verses in the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, and, while this is what one would expect of a poetic tradition just emerging from orality, there is at least one case in which scholars have suspected that Snorri either deliberately chose an existing version favourable to a Christian interpretation or possibly invented at least one line of a verse himself. It comes towards the end of the discussion of the role of the Allfather (otherwise Óðinn) at the beginning of the world. Gangleri is made to ask the Æsir how the world began and what it consisted in. An orthodox Christian reply would invoke the idea of God's creation of the world from nothingness, *creatio ex nihilo*, and Snorri causes the High One to reply to Gangleri's question with a quotation from the poem *Vǫluspá* ('The Sybil's Prophecy'):

> Gangleri mælti: 'Hvat var upphaf? Eða hversu hófsk? Eða hvat var áðr?'
> Hár svarar: 'Svá sem segir í *Vǫluspá*:
>
> Ár var alda
> þat er ekki var.
> Vara sandr né sær
> né svalar unnir.
> Jǫrð fansk eigi

[20] The three most important sources for *Gylfaginning* are *Vǫluspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*.

[21] A good example is provided by his narrative of the funeral of the god Baldr in *Gylfaginning*, where one of his major sources was clearly the *Húsdrápa* of the late-tenth-century Icelandic skald Úlfr Uggason, verses from which he quotes in *Skáldskaparmál*. For a detailed discussion, see Clunies Ross 1992: 651.

né upphiminn,
gap var ginnunga
en gras ekki.' (Faulkes 1982: 9)

Gangleri spoke: 'What was the beginning? And how did things start? And what was there before?'

High replied: 'As it says in *Vǫluspá*: It was at the beginning of time, when nothing was; sand was not, nor sea, nor cool waves. Earth did not exist, nor heaven on high. The mighty gap was, but no growth.' (Faulkes 1987: 9)

It so happens that two other versions of the poem *Vǫluspá* exist, one in the Codex Regius, where it is the first poem in the collection, and the other in the fourteenth-century compilation Hauksbók. Aside from some minor variations, there is one line which reads significantly differently in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* from the readings in the other two witnesses. This is the second line, which Snorri gives as *þat er ekki var*, 'when nothing was', but where the other two sources have *þar er Ymir bygði*, 'when Ymir lived'. Given his presentation of the Allfather as existing from the beginning of time and given also the Christian belief that God created heaven and earth where before nothing existed, a stanza from an ancient poem reinforcing these ideas gave them authority and authenticity. Snorri certainly knew the myth of Ymir, the primaeval giant, and used it later in *Gylfaginning*, but to quote a stanza claiming that Ymir existed at the beginning of time would not have suited his purpose here.

There is one other way in which Snorri makes certain that his audience understands the mythological narrative of *Gylfaginning* in the way that he directs them in the Prologue, and that is through his frame narrative of Gylfi's quest for knowledge from the Æsir from Troy. The frame narrative both dramatises and qualifies his quest: we are made aware that things are not as they seem. Gylfi is not Gangleri and the three Æsir are humans, not gods. They tell him about their own beliefs, but in such a way that allows the audience to remain sceptical of what they say. And at the end of *Gylfaginning* the whole scene in which he has been engaged, the Æsir's hall and all the activities going on there disappear suddenly, so that Gylfi can see nothing at all. In spite of the possibility that this has all been an illusion, or a delusion, as the Christian audience might see it, Gylfi goes home to Sweden and tells people there what he has seen and heard, and the audience is led to believe that this is how such information passed down in oral tradition into historical times.

Both *Gylfaginning* and *Skáldskaparmál* make use of frame narratives, the former more consistently than the latter. This literary device allows

Snorri to qualify what appears within the frame, just as, for example, the fourteenth-century Italian Giovanni Boccaccio did in his *Decamerone*, when he had people telling each other stories as they enjoyed themselves in a garden away from the plague-gripped Florence of 1348, or as the late-fourteenth-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer did in *The Canterbury Tales*, when he had his pilgrims tell each other stories on the way from London to Canterbury. Frame narratives, as used by all these medieval authors, allow them to introduce a richly nuanced authorial voice into their narratives, without compromising an independent stance towards their subject matter. In Snorri's case, the frame narrative has one further function, and this is to remind us of the status of the *Edda* as a textbook on poetics as well as a handbook of mythology.

The frame narratives support dialogue, and the dialogue form, particularly between a master and a pupil, was one of the commonest medieval Latin schoolroom techniques, something Snorri almost certainly had in mind as suitable to a vernacular poetics. However, the dialogue form also had resonances in traditional Norse poetry, particularly that of the wisdom-contest type, in which supernatural beings compete with one another to determine which of them knows the most arcane mythological lore. Snorri plays on this second, traditional dialogue situation right at the beginning of *Gylfaginning*, when he has the rather simple-minded Gylfi enter the Æsir's hall and dare to ask them questions. As the High One reminds him, 'he would not get out unscathed unless he was the more learned' (*Hár segir at hann komi eigi heill út nema hann sé fróðari*), and we may assume that Gylfi's punishment was to be thoroughly deceived by his clever opponents. The disparity between Gylfi and the Æsir in terms of knowledge and intelligence is the source of a series of running jokes in *Gylfaginning*, as indeed is Gylfi's very persona in disguise, which would remind a knowledgeable audience of the favourite disguise of the god Óðinn, as he wanders the world anonymously in search of wisdom.[22]

Snorri's extensive treatment of Norse myths in his *Edda* is unique in the Icelandic grammatical literature and cannot be paralleled in any other medieval vernacular texts. So why does Snorri combine poetics and mythology, or, to put it another way, why does he precede his exposition of the diction and verse forms of skaldic poetry with an exposition of Norse myths? If, as many have argued, *Háttatal* was the first part of the *Edda* to be composed, and it is the only part without mythological content, then we

[22] Snorri is fully aware of this analogy and plays with it, by having Gylfi quote the first stanza of the eddic poem *Hávamál* ('The Speech of the High One', i.e. Óðinn) as he enters the Æsir's hall.

may perhaps deduce that Snorri came to recognise after he had written it that the young poets and whoever else might read his treatise needed a more systematic understanding of Norse myth than they could gain from whatever they picked up of old lore in the Christian Iceland of the early thirteenth century. And the main reason why they needed this systematic understanding is clear enough to anyone who has studied even a small amount of skaldic poetry, particularly that of the Viking Age. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the diction of skaldic poetry is dependent upon a good knowledge of traditional myths and a world view that was based on exactly the material that Snorri systematised in *Gylfaginning* and exemplified further in the extended narratives in *Skáldskaparmál*.

CHAPTER NINE

Poetics and *Grammatica* 3: The *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises*

Snorri's *Edda* was a landmark work in the history of Icelandic poetry. Not only did it look back to the poetry of the classical period, the Viking Age and the twelfth century, and present both a compendium of the best poetry from the past, as Snorri saw it, together with a definitive handbook on how to interpret it, but it offered instruction in verse composition to young poets of Snorri's own age, the first decades of the thirteenth century. Snorri himself put theory into practice with his own compositions, and so initiated the last period of the skaldic art in Iceland, which was to be one in which the art of poetry became more academic than it had been in previous centuries. We may characterise the skaldic verse of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as technically experimental and very accomplished, but often postmodern in its reinvention of earlier genres such as the encomium. Although both Snorri and his nephews, Óláfr and Sturla Þórðarson, composed praise-poems in honour of Norwegian rulers, their literary activity was conducted through a written medium, as we have seen with *Háttatal*. Sturla, for example, composed a good deal of verse about King Hákon Hákonarson, whom he had never met, for quotation within *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* ('Saga of Hákon Hákonarson'), which he wrote as the king's official biographer. Such circumstances are very different from the presumed oral preservation of skaldic praise poetry from the Viking Age which was inserted as quotation into later written sagas.

Parallel to the development of a more self-conscious academic poetic practice in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland, we find continued activity in the composition of grammatical handbooks, which are more clearly indebted to learned models than Snorri's *Edda* is. This chapter focuses on the two most significant grammatical works of this period, both of which deal centrally with poetics. They are the so-called *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises*. Each shows the influence of Snorri's earlier work, but at the same time is more modern both in its awareness of

foreign treatises on poetics and in the authors' selection of poetic examples to illustrate Norse poetic practice. Whereas one may say that Snorri presents a conservative account of Norse poetry of the classical period, the authors of the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises* include some contemporary poetry and a considerable number of verses which are not attested elsewhere, some of which they are thought to have composed themselves.

The Third Grammatical Treatise

The *Third Grammatical Treatise* was written by Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld ('white, bright poet'), illegitimate son of Snorri Sturluson's elder brother Þórðr. Óláfr was born about 1210 and, as a member of the Sturlung family, appears as a participant in *Sturlunga saga* as well as in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* and *Knýtlinga saga* ('Saga of the Successors of Knútr'). In 1237 he travelled abroad with Snorri, and is said to have performed as a poet at the royal courts of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. He returned to Iceland some time between 1242 and 1245 and established a school at Stafaholt in Borgarfjǫrðr, where, as a subdeacon himself, he is thought to have taught priests. It has been surmised that he may have written the *Third Grammatical Treatise* for use in the Stafaholt school, and its composition is usually assigned to the years immediately after he returned to Iceland. He was elected Lawspeaker of Iceland in 1248–50 and again in 1253, but resigned the position in the same year on account of his failing health. He died in 1259.

Like his uncle Snorri, Óláfr was a practising poet, who was highly esteemed by his contemporaries. Some of his poetry has been preserved, including part of a poem about King Hákon Hákonarson in the saga of that king written by his brother Sturla, a poem in *hrynhenda* also from *Hákonar saga*, two stanzas from an *Árónsdrápa* in praise of his friend Árón Hjǫrleifsson, and fragments from a poem about the English saint Thomas à Becket.[1] Like Snorri — and arguably more successfully — he put his poetic skills to use to his own advantage in gaining favour with Scandinavian kings as well as to educational use in the compilation of his treatise on poetics, in which some of the examples are probably his own compositions. Gísli Sigurðsson (2000) has demonstrated how much the poetic examples that Óláfr uses in his treatise are indebted to oral transmission, much of it quite localised to

[1] For Óláfr's poetry, see *Skj* AII: 92–8 and BII: 104–10; also Guðrún Nordal 2001: 181–4.

the west of Iceland where he lived. This statistic indicates that even a theorist deeply indebted to learned foreign models for the structure and organisation of his treatise is still dependent to a reasonable extent on oral tradition when it comes to providing examples of Norse poetic practice to support his arguments. What will be tested in what follows is the extent to which Óláfr's work can be said to constitute a work of indigenous poetic theory, given the undoubted and strong influence of Latin grammatical writings upon its conception and its organisation of material.

There are four medieval manuscripts containing all or part of the *Third Grammatical Treatise* in addition to versions of the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, a work to which the treatise is clearly indebted. The two most important are the Codex Wormianus (W), AM 242 fol., from *c*.1350–70, which contains all four grammatical treatises together with a text of Snorri's *Edda*, and AM 748 I b 4to (A) of *c*.1300–25.[2] A also contains a fragment of a fifth grammatical treatise, another text entitled *Lítla Skálda*, a fragment on the wolf Fenrir, part of *Skáldskaparmál*, a set of *þulur*, and the poem *Íslendingadrápa*. A is the version preferred by modern editors, who have included Björn Magnússon Ólsen (1884), the standard modern edition, Finnur Jónsson (1927) and Thomas Krömmelbein (1998), the last of whom also has a facing German translation and useful notes. Both Finnur's and Krömmelbein's texts have used Ólsen's edition as their base. In his doctoral thesis of 2001 (University of Sydney) Tarrin Wills produced a new edition, translation and commentary of the first part of the *Third Gramnmatical Treatise*, and I am indebted to him for some of the information presented here. In addition, an English translation of the second part of Óláfr's treatise together with an extensive introduction on its place in both the Icelandic and European grammatical traditions exists in an unpublished Master of Arts thesis from Cornell University by Lucy Collings (1967). Finally, the Italian scholars Federico Albano Leoni (1985–6), Fabrizio Raschellà (1983, 1993, 1994) and Valeria Micillo (1994, 1995, 1999, 2000) have written a number of articles on learned influences on Icelandic grammatical literature, including the *Third Grammatical Treatise*.

There are two parts to the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, and these have been termed by modern scholars *Málfræðinnar grundvöllr* ('The Foundation of Grammar') and *Málskrúðsfræði* ('Science of the Ornaments of Speech') respectively. Neither of these titles has any medieval authority, though the phrase *kenningar Donati* ('the teachings of Donatus') appears

[2] The other two manuscripts are AM 757 a 4to (B) of *c*.1400 and AM 757 b 4to (w) of *c*.1450–1500, the latter of which contains a text that is probably a copy of W.

as a title at the beginning of *Málskrúðsfræði* in A. *Málfræðinnar grundvöllr* (*MG*) is in some ways a more independent and theoretically interesting work than *Málskrúðsfræði* (*M*), though this statement by no means implies that the latter is without interest. On the contrary, although it is based squarely on the one major source, book III of the *Ars maior* of the late classical grammarian Donatus, with input from later commentary traditions, it throws up a wealth of interesting information in the course of Óláfr's attempt to demonstrate the similarities and differences between Norse and Latin poetics. Although a dispassionate analysis reveals more differences than similarities, Óláfr's attempt to draw parallels between the two traditions itself brings out a great many fascinating pieces of information about Norse poetics. His own theoretical self-positioning is also not without interest.[3]

The sources for *MG* are less easy to pin down. Parts of it are abridgements of sections of the other basic work that underlies medieval grammatical rhetoric, Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae*, books I and II, but Óláfr uses a good deal of other material that is independent of Priscian, some of it Latinate, some of it indigenous. We may see throughout a preoccupation with aural distinctions, which reflects his fundamentally oral approach to his native language and its poetry, in spite of his Latin models. This is a bias he shares, like much else, with Snorri Sturluson. The work begins with a definition of sound, *Allt er hljóð þat er kvikvendis eyru má skilja*, 'Sound is everything which the ears of a living being can discern', and then proceeds to differentiate various kinds of sound as a preliminary to establishing the nature of (human) voice.[4] Thereafter attention, following Priscian, moves on to discuss the kinds of 'voice' that

[3] It is necessary to sound a note of caution here, however. Micillo has argued, in contributions not yet fully published, that a lot of what appears to be Óláfr's original commentary is likely to be stimulated by Latin sources. She gave some striking examples to support this argument in a paper delivered at the 2003 12th International Saga Conference on *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages* (but not published in the conference preprints), which even include cases in which Icelandic examples of particular figures are cited, e.g. *M* 16: 29, *Her er grimhugaðr settr fyrir Þór. Þar er óeiginlig [líking], þvíat margir menn aðrir en Þór váru grimhugaðir* ('Here "fierce-humoured" is put instead of "Þórr". That is an improper comparison, because many men other than Þórr were fierce-humoured'). Compare the ninth-century Irish scholar Murethach's *In Donati artem maiorem, similitudo non propria: nam superbus fuit ille [=Aeneas], fuerunt et ceteri superbi* ('improper comparison: for [though] he [=Aeneas] was proud, others were also proud') (Holtz 1977: 240). Here Óláfr seems to have lifted the meat of his example from Murethach, substituting the name of the Norse god Þórr for the classical Aeneas.

[4] Micillo (1999: 226) has suggested a possible influence, probably through the insular tradition, from Boethius's theory of music on Óláfr's discussion of the nature of sound.

can be written down. This subject leads to a discussion of the letter (of the alphabet), which is defined thus: *Stafr er hinn minzti hlutr raddar samansettrar, sem rita má* (2.1), 'The letter is the smallest part of connected vocal sound which can be written'.[5] In this section, Óláfr discusses syllables (*samstǫfur*), and then the phenomena of accent and aspiration, as well as the existence of long and short syllables and the nature of quantity or length (*tími eða stund*). Apart from the syllable and its length, which Snorri mentioned briefly in *Háttatal* (Faulkes 1999: 3) and for which Priscian I.4 provides a source, the other phenomena Óláfr discusses were not treated by Snorri. Priscian I.5 is the model for the section on accent, which is thus made to conform to classical rules, though Icelandic examples are given. There are also some similarities between Óláfr's text in chapter 2 and the *Second Grammatical Treatise*, and it seems that parts of both the first and the second chapters of *MG*, especially the sections on sound, are indebted to some work more in the tradition of medieval dialectic and/or Aristotelian physics than grammatical literature, though this has not been securely identified.[6]

The third chapter of *MG* begins by addressing the relationship between sounds and the letters of the alphabet, both in Latin and in Old Norse. Here, although for the most part Óláfr tries to make Norse conform to Priscian's dictates, he also introduces some observations on the special sounds of Old Norse and on the runic alphabet. By far the greater part of chapter 3 and all of chapter 4 are devoted to an analysis of the nature of the runic alphabet, and the sounds it represents, taking off from Priscian's observations on the 'accidents' of the letter (I.8 and other sections) and probably using more recent grammarians, such as Alexander de Villa Dei (Ville-Dieu, Normandy), for some of his observations on the diphthong. As far as one can tell, the material relating to runes is original work on Óláfr's part and it is in many respects one of the most original parts of the whole treatise (see Raschellà 1994). Björn M. Ólsen (1884: xxii–xxviii; see also Kusmenko

[5] In my quotations from *Málfræðinnar grundvöllr* I am citing the edition and translation of Tarrin Wills (2001), which is available on the web at http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/~tarwills/thesis/mg/.

[6] Krömmelbein (1998: 38–55) produces some helpful parallels, though with classical texts that Óláfr is unlikely to have known directly. Wills (2001) suggests that the *Summulae logicales* of Petrus Hispanus (*c*.1245 or possibly a little earlier) provides a close parallel, but it is most unlikely to have been known directly to Óláfr. Some medieval intermediary source seems necessary, but what it was is at present not fully determined. Micillo's suggestion, given in her 2003 lecture (see note 3) that Óláfr may have been indebted to Petrus Helias's commentary on Priscian (*Summa super Priscianum*, *c*.1140, ed. Reilly 1993) may well turn out to be the most promising lead yet.

1993) argued that Chapter 3 was based on a twelfth-century treatise by a certain Þóroddr rúnameistari ('rune master'), but his argument is conjectural and incapable of proof.

The remaining chapters of *MG* treat the syllable and the word, and, with the latter, the various parts of speech. While Priscian I.16, 47 and II.1, 2, 12–22 formed Óláfr's foundation here, there are both additional, and more up-to-date grammatical sources and, in the section on the syllable, a discussion of some features of Norse poetic practice, including the two kinds of internal rhyme, *aðalhending* and *skothending*, both previously defined by Snorri in *Háttatal*, and a short section on the verse form *runhendr*. In this section, Óláfr acknowledges a debt to Snorri, quoting *Háttatal*, stanza 83, lines 5–6 (Faulkes 1999: 34). At several points (5.10, 5.23, 5.31) he makes no bones about the fact that his Latinate models are not always appropriate to Norse, yet for all that he continues to use them.

We may say that pragmatism and practical knowledge of the Icelandic language and Norse poetry were at odds in Óláfr with his fundamental theoretical position, which was, as he puts it eloquently in the first chapter of *Málskrúðsfræði* (*M*), to see Old Norse poetry and poetics as based on the same rules as the classical grammarians set out for Greek and then Latin:

> Í þessi bók má gǫrla skilja, at ǫll er ein listin, skáldskapr sá, er Rómverskir spekingar námu í Aðenisborg á Grikklandi ok sneru síðan í latínumál, ok sá ljóðaháttr eða skáldskapr, er Óðinn ok aðrir Asiamenn fluttu norðr hingat í norðrhálfu heimsins, ok kenndu mǫnnum á sína tungu þesskonar list, svá sem þeir hǫfðu skipat ok numit í sjálfu Asialandi, þar sem mest var fegrð ok ríkdómr ok fróðleikr veraldarinnar. (*M*, ch.10, text of MS A, AM 748 I b 4to, normalised from the edition of Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 60).
>
> In this book it may be clearly understood that the art of poetry which the Roman sages learnt in Athens in Greece and then transferred into the Latin language is the same art as the verse form of songs or poetry which Óðinn and other men of Asia brought hither northwards into the northern hemisphere; and they taught men this type of art in their own language, just as they had organised and learnt it in Asia itself, where beauty and power and knowledge were the greatest in the world.

When he mentions 'this book', Óláfr means book III of Aelius Donatus's *Ars maior* (ed. Holtz 1981: 653–74), probably the most frequently used textbook of grammatical rhetoric in Europe in the medieval period. In the first part of this chapter, just before the passage quoted, Óláfr describes the nature of Donatus's book, pointing to the fact that it sets out both the

beauties and the faults of speech. So he is claiming here that Donatus's work allows one to see that Norse poetry and poetry in Latin and Greek operate according to the same principles.

This is a very interesting position to take and one which, while strongly reminiscent of what Snorri Sturluson wrote about the connection between classical poetry and Old Norse — the passage just quoted has verbal echoes from the Prologue to Snorri's *Edda* — is in fact a departure from Snorri's position. Óláfr's attitude to Snorri, in intellectual terms, is, as Krömmelbein (1998: 28–30) has put it, 'Hommage und Abkehr' ('homage and renunciation'). Unlike Snorri, who espouses the euhemerist theory of the translation of the Æsir from Asia direct to Scandinavia, bringing with them their language and poetry, which can therefore be seen to be one, Óláfr sees knowledge and learning coming to the north in the conventional *translatio studii* from Greece and Rome (see Micillo 1995: 72–4). In addition, and importantly, he argues that the equivalence between the Norse and classical traditions can be discovered from Donatus's book, a written source, which has set out the faults and ornaments of Latin poetry. It then follows that, in order to bring out the Norse parallels to these Latin figures, he must subject vernacular poetry to the analytical framework of Donatus's Latin, and this is what he does.

M consists primarily of a list of the grammatical *vitia* ('faults') and *figurae* ('figures') which were the core of grammatical rhetoric and included the exegesis of poetic style. We have seen that in classical and medieval Latin textbooks the use of rhetorical figures in poetry was illustrated with quotations from the major classical poets, and, in the Middle Ages, after Bede, from Christian-Latin poets as well. The task Óláfr set himself, then, was to follow Donatus in expounding the faults and beauties of poetic diction, and to illustrate them with examples from Old Norse poetry that supposedly revealed the same principles of composition as Donatus's Latin examples. The extent to which he was able — or not able — to do this constitutes *M*'s real interest and originality.

The question arises as to what kind of a text of Donatus's *Ars maior* Óláfr was using. Many medieval commentaries on and updates of the treatise existed, and some of them are likely to have been known to Óláfr, either directly or indirectly. Collings (1967) was of the opinion that he was using a thirteenth-century edition and commentary, which incorporated some contemporary reassessments of Donatus's position, but left the basic structure unaltered. Micillo (1999) has argued more recently, however, that Óláfr is likely to have been familiar with a Donatus commentary or commentaries in the early medieval insular tradition of the ninth century,

such as those of Sedulius Scottus, Murethach or the anonymous author of the *Ars Laureshamensis*.[7] A number of the comparisons she adduces from these commentaries are striking and are likely, when fully published, to lead to a reconsideration of the extent of Óláfr's originality. Micillo considers further (1995: 76–7) that, although Óláfr shows some knowledge of new grammatical ideas and models circulating in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, his basic position on grammatical rhetoric is traditional and conservative. However, the Latin grammatical terminology of *M* reflects twelfth- and thirteenth-century understandings. One of the most obvious instances of this is Óláfr's 'indiscriminate application of the term *figura* to the *vitia* and *licentiae*' (Collings 1967: 55), so that for him the term could cover any 'fault' that was allowed on one of the three grounds of stylistic beauty, necessity or metre.

Many of the additions to or divergences from Donatus's text in *M* are common to other medieval grammatical commentaries, but there are some which are possibly Óláfr's own and may reveal his attempt to accommodate indigenous Norse poetry and poetic theory to his Latin model. In the past, it has been customary to ascribe at least some of these to his own invention, but, the more that is known about the commentary tradition, the less seems to be attributable to Óláfr himself. Writing in the 1960s, Collings (1967: 49) summarised the major divergences between the standard text of Donatus and *M* as comprising the following fields: *figurae* — change in inventory; *vitia* — additional definitions; altered definitions; different grammatical terminology; etymological arguments; euhemeristic theories; the use of typological symbols and the comments on Norse poetics and actual examples of Norse poetry given in the treatise. Of these fields, probably only the last three can now be regarded with any confidence as original, and it may well be that when Micillo publishes a promised new edition of Óláfr's treatise, doubt will be thrown on them as well. To give just a few examples, Micillo has traced a number of Óláfr's unusual etymologies to either insular Donatus commentaries from the ninth century, or to the commentary *Summa super Priscianum* by the early-twelfth-century writer Petrus Helias, whose influence upon the First Grammarian and even Snorri Sturluson has also been suspected (but see Clunies Ross 1987: 72 for a more cautious view). She demonstrates (1999: 216–20) how Óláfr's explanation of the words *barbari* and *barbarismus* and his derivation of the term *soloecismus* can be paralleled in the writings of the

[7] For a survey of the work of these *scotti peregrini*, see Law 1997: 144–6 and note 42 on p. 153 and 2003: 139–57.

insular commentators Murethach, Sedulius Scottus and the anonymous *Ars Laureshamensis*. She has also adduced parallels from the same treatises for Óláfr's additional and altered definitions of *vitia* and *figurae*.

Óláfr's overall aim, as we have seen, was to show that Norse and Latin poetics were identical, 'his whole thesis being that the Latin figures of speech are also to be found in Icelandic verses and therefore indicate the superior structure of the latter' (Collings 1967: 66). One of the greatest interests of his treatise for a study of medieval Scandinavian poetics must therefore be the information this process of comparison brings out about traditional Norse names for the figures he describes and his explanations of native poetic practice. In addition, he exemplifies his discussions with a large number of examples from Old Norse poetry, most of it skaldic. In all he names thirty-four poets and refers to 123 examples of poetry, making 354 lines altogether. Gísli Sigurðsson (2000) has shown that these stanzas are very interesting from several points of view.

Firstly they reveal the depth and breadth of Óláfr's knowledge of skaldic poetry, which proves to be more localised to the west of Iceland than one might have expected. There are ninety examples (many of them fragments) that are known only from the *Third Grammatical Treatise* and thirty-three examples that are known from other sources; some are attributed to named poets, others not; some of the latter we know to be from specific sources, but Óláfr does not bother to name them, perhaps because he felt they were too well known to require attribution. Interestingly, only one poet from the *Íslendingasögur* is referred to by name — Egill Skallagrímsson — though examples are quoted from *Fóstbrœðra saga* and *Bjarnar saga Hítdœla-kappa* without attribution to particular poets and from *Kormaks saga* with a different attribution from that in the saga itself (Gísli Sigurðsson 2000: 102–3). Óláfr quotes verses from the kings' sagas in Fagrskinna, Morkinskinna and *Heimskringla*, along with some in *Egils saga* and Snorri's *Edda*, which suggests that these works all existed in written form by the time Óláfr was writing in the mid to late 1240s. However, other poems, like Einarr Skulason's *Geisli*, may have been known to him in oral form. In addition, the suprisingly large number of references to verses that are not known from any other source (set out in tabular form in Gísli Sigurðsson 2000: 104–7), shows that our knowledge of skaldic poetry is partial and that Óláfr's was particularly good when it came to the work of poets from his own area of Iceland and well-known court poets. Interestingly, Óláfr does not refer to the works of poets, like Gísli Súrsson, who never became known as court poets, and Gísli Sigurðsson has speculated that 'this might be an indication that the common poetic tradition in the

country had its centre at royal courts in other countries rather than at the Althing', suggesting that 'continuity in the skaldic tradition was kept alive by Icelanders at the Scandinavian courts rather than in Iceland, where the evidence shows a limited knowledge of stories and poetry from remote areas; stories and poetry which people had never heard and could also not read before the later, fourteenth-century compilations appeared, such as *Möðruvallabók* and *Vatnshyrna* ['Book of Vatnshorn']' (2000: 109–12).

M is arranged in seven chapters, which follow *MG* in the manuscripts. These have been numbered 10–16 by modern editors. In A, the best manuscript, all but one of these chapters have a title, which are set out in Table 2.

Table 2. The chapter headings of *Málskrúðsfræði*, according to MS A

10. *kenningar donati*, 'the teachings of Donatus'
11. *de barbarismo*, 'about barbarism' [flaws of speech, faulty style]
12. *her hæfr vpp soloecismum*, 'here begins solecism' [faults in congruity of speech or construction]
13. no title, begins *Með barbarismo ok soloecismo erv taldir .x. læstir*, '10 faults are enumerated under barbarismus and soloecismus'
14. *her ærv merktir læstir mætaplasmi*, 'here are noted the faults of metaplasmus' [deviation from grammatical norms for metrical reasons]
15. *de scemalexeo*, 'about schema lexeos' [poetic embellishments]
16. *de tropo et metaphoræ*, 'about the trope and metaphor'

It is clear from this list that Óláfr's work, like that of all Donatian grammatical rhetoric, was firmly in the tradition termed in Latin *recte loquendi scientia*, that is, 'knowledge of how to speak well'. We have seen that Óláfr's main source was a version or versions of book III of Aelius Donatus's *Ars maior*. This book was frequently referred to in the Middle Ages by its first word, which is 'Barbarismus', and this also gives a clue to the character of the treatise itself and the rhetorical tradition it supported. First and foremost grammatical rhetoric was designed to teach people how to speak well, and thereafter how to write well, and to that end listed a large number of so-called vices of speech (*vitia orationis*), which were thought to have their parallel in poetic licences (*virtutes orationis*). These were considered to be acceptable because they ornamented poetry for reasons of stylistic beauty and metrical and other necessities. Such an ideology was not actually a very suitable framework within which to understand

medieval Scandinavian poetry, as it promoted a view that tolerated poetic language as aberrant from the norms of good linguistic usage rather than as something worthy of study because it used language with skill and imagination, as medieval Scandinavian poetry clearly did. Further, it made no allowance for the obvious differences between prosaic and poetic registers and lexical choice in the Germanic tradition. Authors of medieval handbooks of grammatical rhetoric were concerned to describe features of poetic style that would produce good texts, but the framework within which they presented these things was a rather negative and restrictive one. That is why all but the last two of Óláfr's chapter headings in *M* refer to what were classified as faults of speech which were nevertheless supposed to be able to produce good poetry, a paradoxical position, especially when applied to skaldic verse, which delighted in the abstruse and complex.

After *M*'s first chapter, which states Óláfr's theory that Norse and classical poetics are one, he proceeds, following the general outline of his source, to produce examples from Old Norse poetry for a large number of Donatian 'vices of speech' and, where he can, native technical terms to parallel those found in the Latin handbooks. There are about thirty of these native terms. An impartial analysis fails to find them very similar to the Latin, but they are often nevertheless revealing of indigenous Norse methods of classification. About half of them can also be found in Snorri's *Edda* and there seems little doubt that Óláfr was strongly influenced by his uncle's work, though he did not always follow it exactly, as we have already seen.

Chapter 11 on *barbarismus* mainly illustrates poetic differences from ordinary speech that are said to be necessary for reasons of metre, rhyme or alliteration, such as the addition or subtraction of a syllable. However, the examples given here, and in many other chapters of *M*, sometimes also reveal information about particular forms of poetic diction or stanzaic arrangement, once again showing, as is also the case with Snorri Sturluson, that Icelandic poetic theorists found it difficult to discuss features of the verse form proper separately from figures of speech. Óláfr gives the following verse primarily as an example of where a long vowel is shortened in poetry but comments further:

> Svanr þyrr beint til benja
> blóðs vindara róðri.
>
> Hér er vindara róðri sett fyrir vindára róðri; þat er flugr. Þessi samstafa er skǫmm gǫrr fyrir fegrðar sakir þvíat þá ljóðar betr. Þar er ok sú skáldskapar grein, er jafnan [W: oft] þykkir vel koma ok menn kalla ofljóst. (*M*, ch. 11, *de barbarismo*, normalised from the edition of Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 66).

> The swan of blood [BIRD OF PREY] rushes straight towards wounds in the rowing of wind-oars [WINGS > FLIGHT].
>
> Here *vindara róðri* is put instead of *vindára róðri*, that is, flight. This syllable is made short for the sake of [stylistic] beauty, because it sounds better. There also occurs here that type of poetic diction which is always [W: often] considered appropriate, and which men call *ofljóst*.

The point Óláfr appears to be making here is that it sounds better to have the first 'a' of *vindara* short (because the line would otherwise be too heavy), but that the audience (or reader) would be bound to see a pun or double meaning here between the nouns *ari* ('eagle') and *ár* ('oar'), and that produces a case of the skaldic figure known as *ofljóst* (lit. 'too light, too clear'), which Snorri defined in chapter 74 of *Skáldskaparmál* and mentioned several times in *Háttatal*.[8] *Ofljóst* was one of the commonest forms of skaldic word-play, and its name, attested by both Snorri and Óláfr, reveals a rather ironic appreciation of how the deliberate opening up of two (or sometimes more) possibilities for the interpretation of a verse in fact makes it less clear but more interesting.[9]

A list of the technical terms Óláfr introduces in *M* in the course of his exemplification of Donatus's faults and figures with Old Norse examples reveals a good number of terms, mostly descriptive in nature, for both verse forms and special kinds of diction. A number of them also occur in Snorri's *Edda*, most frequently in *Háttatal*, to which Óláfr specifically refers in chapter 15, but sometimes also in *Skáldskaparmál*. Óláfr does not always use this common terminology in exactly the same way as Snorri, especially when it comes to discussion of the figure *metaphora* (see Appendix), but his debt to his uncle in certainly clear. However, Óláfr is by no means a slavish follower of either Donatus or Snorri; he offers insightful, sharp and often illuminating discussion of many of the distinguishing features of Norse poetics, especially of figures of speech, and he gives many valuable examples of poetic usage. Indeed, as we saw earlier, the wealth of examples is one of the greatest points of interest of *M*.

Table 3 shows the native technical terms that Óláfr uses in *M*. I have omitted what one might call semi-technical words such as *fólgit mál* ('hidden, obscure speech') and *spot* ('mockery'), which are terms not precisely applied to one figure of speech alone, and the obviously ersatz

[8] References to *ofljóst* in *Háttatal* include 12/26, 14/3 and 13/13 (adverbial usage); references are to pages and lines of Faulkes's 1999 edition.

[9] Faulkes (1997: 21–2) offers an excellent analysis of the complexities of *ofljóst* and other skaldic figures, and their part in skaldic aesthetics.

calques on Latin terms in Donatus that are unlikely to have had any firm status in the native tradition outside the grammatical literature, such as, for example, Óláfr's four native terms for Donatus's four types of barbarismus, *adiectio*, *viðrlagning* ('addition'), *detractio*, *aftekning* ('subtraction'), *immutatio*, *skipting* ('substitution') and *transmutatio*, *umsnuning* ('metathesis').[10] Table 3 lists only those words which the text indicates to be indigenous terms that may have had some currency outside the schoolroom, using a formula such as 'people say . . . X' or 'we call it . . . Y', whether these refer to verse forms or figures of speech. It is probable that in most instances this kind of information is additional to what Óláfr would have found in his Latin exemplar. An asterisk before the Icelandic word denotes that the term is also found in Snorri's *Edda*. Of the thirty terms listed here, seventeen or 56.7% are used by both writers, and it is clear that *Háttatal* rather than *Skáldskaparmál* was the stronger influence upon Óláfr. Nevertheless, he often uses technical terms in a different sense from the way Snorri used them, which perhaps indicates their lack of fixity in the grammatical tradition.

Table 3. The native technical terms given in *M* and their Latin equivalents

The Latin term is given in the left-hand column, the Icelandic gloss or comment in the right. * denotes that the term is also found in Snorri's *Edda*, either in *Háttatal* (*Ht*) or *Skáldskaparmál* (*Skm*)

Ch. 11. *barbarismus*	
inmutatio litterae	**stafaskipti* (*Ht*) 'change of letters',[a] *hér er hvern sett fyrir hvert, til þess at hendingar halldisk í dróttkvæðum hætti*.
detractio	**ofljóst* (*Ht*, *Skm*), 'too clear' (word play, pun); also mentioned in ch. 14
barbarismus by addition of aspiration	*hér er hrammastan sett fyrir rammastan, at kveðandi halldisk i bálkarlagi*;[b] **bálkarlag* (*Ht*), 'division measure'

[10] Micillo 1994 contains an examination of such terms, mostly calques on Latin terminology. In this case the four Latin terms Óláfr translates are found in Sedulius Scottus's *In Donati artem minorem* (Löfstedt 1977: 337).

mytacismus (‘m’ at end of one word and beginning of next)	*ok kǫllum vér þat dregit á stál* (‘inserted into the inlay’), *ef á milli hendinga verðr*.
Ch. 12. *soloecismus*	
apocope (see also ch. 14)	*orðkólfr*, ‘word clapper’ (in ch. 14 gloss is that figure involves removing a letter or syllable at end of word)
oratio directa	*viðmælt*, ‘spoken to’
oratio obliqua	*hliðmælt*, lit. ‘side spoken’
quarter stanza, couplet	**fjórðungr* (*Ht*)
Ch. 13. no title	
Two kinds of *cacenphaton*	
(a) juxtaposition of the same letter at the end of one word and the beginning of another	*þreskǫldr*, ‘threshold’
(b) ‘if the attributes of something are unsuitably ascribed to another’	closely aligned to figure **nykrat* (*Ht*), ‘monster-like’ or *finngalknat*, ‘centaur-like’, both found in **nýgervingar* (*Ht*, *Skm*), ‘new ?metaphors’
tautologia	*ofkennt*, ‘too much *kennt*’, unnecessary repetition of kenning-type, e.g. 2 kennings for ‘king’ in same sentence.
Ch. 14. *metaplasmus*	
various archaisms	poetic forms beginning *vr-*, like *vrǫngr*, termed *vindandi forna*[c]
syncope	example given, *þars* < *þar es*, defined as **bragarmál* (*Ht*), ‘poetic speech’; both here and in *Ht* examples involve elision of vowels; terms **hending* (*Ht*), ‘rhyme, assonance’ and **skothending* (*Ht*) are also used.

Ch. 15. *schema lexeos*[d]	
paranadiplosis	**drǫgur* (*Ht*), ‘drawings’; cf. vb. *draga*. In *Ht*, Snorri explains term is used when a word last in one stanza is ‘drawn’ into the next as its first word. Óláfr quotes *Ht* 15/7–8 and 16/1 to illustrate this figure.
paronomasia (‘similar sounds with dissimilar meanings’)	**aðalhending* (*Ht*), ‘full rhyme’. Óláfr says this is the origin of all those metres composed with rhyme, refers to *Ht* for many examples.
paranomeon	Alliteration; uses terms **stuðlar* (*Ht*), ‘props, alliterating staves in odd lines’ and **hǫfuðstafir* (*Ht*), ‘head staves, chief alliterating letters’. Óláfr says alliteration holds together Norse poetry as nails do a ship.
homoeoteleuton (‘several sounds held together by the same ending’)	**riðhendan* (*Ht riðhendr*), ‘rocking rhymes’, rhymes close together at ends of lines; Óláfr also equates this figure with Snorri’s **inn nýi háttr* (*Ht*), ‘the new verse form’.
dialyton (enumeration of many nouns without a conjunction)	*klauf*, ‘cloven [foot]’ = 2 **sannkenningar* (=?*mannkenningar*) linked to same object without use of *ok*; with more than 2 *sannkenningar* = *svipa*, ‘whip’.

Ch. 16. *tropus et metaphora*	
metaphora (‘transfer of words or things to another meaning’)	**sannkenning* (*Ht*, *Skm*); Óláfr adds that all kennings in Norse poetry are composed with this figure; Snorri uses term in different senses; see Appendix.
type of *antonomasia* in which a phrase of general reference, like ‘the fortunate one’, substitutes for proper name	*Njarðarvǫttr*, ‘Njǫrðr’s glove’, name of type of sponge; Óláfr says this is a fault, adding ‘it is not numbered among the poetical licences (*leyfi*)’
epitheton	**sannkenning*

parenthesis (interruption of sentence, interpolated clause)	**stælt* (*Ht.*), 'inlaid' or **álagsháttr* (*Ht*), 'extension form'
enigma (abstruse comparison between things)	*gáta*, 'riddle'

[a] *Stafaskipti* is used by Snorri in *Háttatal*, but with the meaning 'distribution, arrangement of staves (alliteration)'; see also Faulkes 1999: 144.

[b] The last clause is not in MS A.

[c] Óláfr adds the comment 'we consider that now archaic speech, and that practice is now called old *vindandi* in poetry because it is no longer customary in Norse speech' (*ok þat hyggium vér fornt mál vera, en nú er þat kallat vindandin forna í skáldskap, þvíat þat er nú ekki haft í norrœnu máli*). The term *vindandi*, which occurs nowhere else in Old Icelandic, derives from *vend*, given in *MG* as the name of the v-rune and presumably derived from the Old English name of the *p* [w] rune, > *wenn*, West Saxon *wynn*, which, as we have seen in Chapter 7, was not used to write Icelandic, as w > v in pre-literate times. It is interesting that Óláfr was still aware of this archaic phonological feature, whose existence is necessary to appreciate the regularity of alliteration in some early skaldic and eddic poetry, as he himself exemplifies with an otherwise unattested verse he attributes to Egill Skallagrímsson. *Vr-* is sometimes restored by modern editors. For a discussion of poetic examples that imply the earlier presence of *vr-*, see Fidjestøl 1999: 242–5.

[d] Óláfr equates Greek *schema* (which both Donatus and Priscian glossed correctly as *figura*) with Old Icelandic *skrúð* ('ornament, apparel'), i.e. understands it to mean *ornatus*. This was a common misunderstanding of medieval commentators, and is to be found in the *Graecismus* of Evrard de Béthune, among others (see Collings 1967: 60–1; Micillo 1999: 225–6).

Many of Óláfr's comparisions between classical and Norse rhetorical figures are more remarkable for the ingenuity of his arguments and what they reveal about Norse practice than for the scientific equivalences of the two poetic traditions. A number are inexact comparisons or stretch the classical definition somewhat (Collings 1967: 67–8), while others are really comparing quite different things or, if there is a valid analogy, the phenomena are of disparate importance in the two systems. This inequality is most obvious in chapters 15, *de scemalexeo*, and 16, *de tropo et metaphoræ*, where Óláfr argues for the equivalence of some of the most important principles of Old Norse poetry with the rhetorical devices of the classical system. The analogy between *paronomasia* and *aðalhending* is quite misleading and fails to establish the central importance of full internal rhyme to Norse poetics. Thus, both here and in his discusssion of other

central features of Norse poetics like the kenning and alliteration, Óláfr is obliged to add a prose comment on how structurally or conceptually important in Norse (but not in classical poetry) the feature is. We hear that alliteration 'holds together Norse poetry just as the nails hold together a ship', though the same could not be said for *paranomeon* in the classical system, which has no structural importance.[11] Although, unlike Snorri, Óláfr equates the various forms of the kenning with the figure *metaphora*, the classical frame of reference within which he is obliged to discuss the figure fails to do justice to the complexity and vigour of the Old Norse kenning. He is hampered both by the classical definition of *metaphora* as a transfer of meaning from one word to another for various reasons and by the actual significance of *metaphora* in classical poetry, where it is far less important and far simpler than the Norse kenning, nor do all the features of the kenning appear in classical poetry. As Tranter has observed (2000: 146), Óláfr was probably aware that he was skating on thin ice in proposing this equivalence, and so attempted to bolster his argument (though in fact he weakens it still further) by quoting an example from Ovid which, as Tranter says, 'is almost laughable in its simplicity' when compared with the Old Norse kenning.[12]

The constraints imposed by the models of grammatical rhetoric upon Óláfr, and before him, upon Snorri and other earlier Norse writers on poetry, were in some ways quite severe. It is hard to know whether he and his predecessors felt them to be constraints, or whether the undoubted mismatch between Norse and Latin poetics simply aroused their ingenuity in explaining the features of the one system in terms of the other, only commenting frankly on the Norse system, as Table 3 shows, when there was obviously more to say about native traditions and terminology than

[11] A translation of this difficult passage (Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 96–7) with its analogy between poetic composition and the craft of the ship-wright (see Chapter 5, where the Icelandic text is also given) is offered again here: 'Paranomeon is when many words have a single initial letter, as here: *Sterkum stilli/ styrjar væni*, "There may be hope of battle for the strong ruler". This figure is much used in the art of eloquent speech, which is called rhetoric, and it is the foundation of that poetical effect that holds together Norse poetry, just as nails hold a ship together, which a [ship]wright makes, and [which] goes in loose order or plank from plank. So too this figure holds together the poetical effect in poetry by means of those staves [alliterating sounds] which are called *stuðlar* [props, supports, alliterating letters in odd lines] and *hǫfuðstafir* [chief alliterating staves, in even lines].'

[12] This is the only place in *M* where Óláfr actually quotes a Latin verse example (it is from Ovid's *Ars amandi* I.8, *Tiphys et Antomedon dicat amoris ego*), all his others being Norse. This strongly suggests special pleading. He is likely to have found this Latin example in his sources; it appears in Alexander de Villa Dei's *Doctrinale* (see Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 103).

their models afforded. Although it is true that Óláfr from time to time comments on the disparity between Norse and Latin poetics, the overall structure of the *Third Grammatical Treatise* does not reflect an independent view of poetics, unlike Snorri's *Edda*, when seen as a whole, although it may also be the case that some parts of *MG*, especially the treatment of runes, were original to Óláfr. It is in the detail and the asides of his treatise that Óláfr's originality is to be found, and in the way he chose, and probably sometimes invented, poetic citations to exemplify the various Latin figures. The *Third Grammatical Treatise* is, in this sense, a major contribution to medieval poetic theory, and a work that very much repays the attention of the modern scholar of Old Norse poetry.

The Fourth Grammatical Treatise

The *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* was probably composed nearly a century after Óláfr's work, and is generally dated to somewhere between 1340 and 1350 (Ólsen 1884: xlii–xliv; Holtsmark 1960: 418; Raschellà 1993: 237). It is extant only in the Codex Wormianus (W). On one level it can be seen as a continuation of the second part of the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, *Málskrúðsfræði*, using some of the newer treatises on poetics that had presumably by then become more widely available in Iceland than they were in Óláfr's day. Its unknown author drew on two of the most influential textbooks of the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the *Doctrinale* of Alexander de Villa Dei (1199) and the *Graecismus* of Evrard of Béthune (a little before 1212). Although these works were not part of the new speculative grammar, based on logical principles, that came to dominate some of the late twelfth- and thirteenth-century French schools, notably at the University of Paris, they did make available a new digest of the works of Priscian and Donatus, taking account of more recent commentaries. They were intended for students who had already mastered the rudiments of *grammatica*, and were both written in hexameter verse, something that was not imitated by the Fourth Grammarian, who wrote in prose but provided extensive Icelandic verse examples of rhetorical figures. The inventories of medieval Icelandic religious houses indicate that there were copies of both the *Doctrinale* and the *Graecismus* in Iceland during the Middle Ages.[13]

Many scholars believe that the Fourth Grammarian may also have been the author of a short preface (Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 152–5) to all four

[13] The *Graecismus* is mentioned in the inventories of Viðey, Mǫðruvellir and Hólar (Olmer 1902: 21–2), while the *Doctrinale* appears in the inventories of Hólar and Viðey (Olmer 1902: 16).

grammatical treatises in the Codex Wormianus. Another possibility is that the author of the preface (perhaps one and the same as the Fourth Grammarian) may have been the compiler of the entire Codex Wormianus, which is usually dated *c*.1350 (Sverrir Tómasson 1993a; Johansson 1997: 207). W is the most extensive collection of grammatical literature in any medieval Icelandic codex, and thus a compendium directed specifically at poets and scholars. A growing body of internal and circumstantial evidence associates W with one or other of the northern Benedictine monasteries of Þingeyrar or Munkaþverá (Sigurður Nordal 1931: 17; Sverrir Tómasson 1993a; Johansson 1997: 10–16). There is also some evidence internal to the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* that connects it with *Heiðarvíga saga*, which has also been associated with Þingeyrar, and that is its citation of six lines from a stanza by a skald named Eiríkr víðsjá ('wide-seeing'), which is also to be found in *Heiðarvíga saga*, but nowhere else. Guðrún Nordal (2001: 88) has drawn attention to another possible link: W has somewhat of a Danish interest (it is the sole source of the eddic poem *Rígsþula*, for example), and the Fourth Grammarian includes a verse by a poet named Þorleifr Þorkelsson skúma ('the dark'), which is also quoted in *Jómsvíkinga saga* ('Saga of the Vikings of Jóm'), a work with a very strong focus on Danish subject matter. One of the verses most likely composed by the Fourth Grammarian himself also refers to near contemporary Danish history, and, according to Björn M. Ólsen (1884: 252), shows a lively Icelandic sympathy for the suffering of the Danes 'under the German yoke'.

The *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* is based mainly on a section called *de figuris grammaticis* which was appended to chapter 12 of Alexander's *Doctrinale* and includes four figures, *brachylogia*, *climax*, *sinacriamos* and *teretema*, which were defined in chapters 1–4 of Evrard's *Graecismus*. Aside from its Latin sources, the treatise is noteworthy for its sixty-two separate verse quotations, which the author uses to exemplify his cited figures. A high proportion of these verse quotations have Christian subjects, and, it is surmised, those which are not attributed to a named author (51/62 or 82.3%) were probably composed by the Fourth Grammarian himself, who was almost certainly a cleric, probably a monk, if the association with Þingeyrar is given credence. From the time of Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1848–9 II: 250), Abbot Bergr Sokkason of Munkaþverá (d. 1345) has been suggested by some scholars as the author of the treatise. The remaining eleven stanzas or parts of stanzas are attributable to the following authors: Þorleifr jarlsskáld, also cited in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, Eiríkr víðsjá, also cited in *Heiðarvíga saga*, Þorleifr (Þorkelsson skúma), also cited in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, Eilífr (?Goðrúnarson), Arnórr jarlaskáld, also

cited in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, Einarr Skúlason, Snorri (Sturluson) and Óláfr (Þórðarson).

The religious and learned nature of many of the illustrative quotations and prose glosses in the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* differentiates it strongly from earlier treatises and marks it as the product of a different, perhaps monastic milieu, one in any case in which skaldic poetry primarily exemplifies Christian teachings, while still acknowledging its secular and classical antecedents. While both Snorri and Óláfr include stanzas of clearly Christian stamp, these are in a minority, although a significant one. It is notable that Snorri closes the section of the *Edda* dealing predominantly with kennings by means of a discussion of those that can refer either to Christ or to human rulers, that is, he recognises the problem of ambiguity deriving from the additional field of reference that Christianity imposed upon traditional Norse poetics, declaring *Þar* [i.e. in verse that may refer to Christ or to an earthly ruler] *koma saman kenningar*, 'there the kennings become ambiguous' (Faulkes 1998 I: 78). This exploration of ambiguity looks forward to the conclusion of the *Third Grammatical Treatise* where Óláfr deals in a much more explicit and elaborate way with the phenomenon of comparison in Christian contexts. After reviewing examples of various forms of comparison in Icelandic poetry generally, Óláfr concludes his treatise with a commentary on two verses which require interpretation following the principles of Christian typology (Paasche 1914: 92–3; Louis-Jensen 1981).[14] As we have seen in Chapter 6, typology requires one to see meaningful parallels between 'types' or 'figures', frequently comparing events or persons of the Old Testament of the Christian Bible with those of the New, the former being considered to prefigure those of the latter. Óláfr's placing of these two stanzas as the culmination of his treatise is almost certainly a deliberate indicator of his recognition of the higher status of Christian truths in comparison with those deriving from the traditional Norse world.

The conceptual world of the Fourth Grammarian takes the existence of

[14] The first verse is ascribed to an Abbot Nikulás, probably the Icelander of that name (Nikulás Bergsson) who was the first abbot of the monastery of Munkaþverá (d. 1159), and involves a parallel between two messengers carrying a bunch of grapes from the Promised Land on a pole (a reference to Numbers 13.24), and the Crucifixion, at which Christ (=the grape) is crushed against the Cross. The second, anonymous, *helmingr* has been much discussed; following Louis-Jensen (1981), the comparison seems to have been (in the first, unrecorded *helmingr*) between the rod of Aaron, which bore fruit, and the Virgin Mary, who gave birth to Christ; the second *helmingr* then employs a metaphorical use of single elements from the typological comparison of the first in which Mary = rod (*vǫndr*) and Christ = fruit (*epli*).

typology and other kinds of Christian exegesis more or less for granted. His is a learned treatise that does not hide its learning, whether indigenous or from the exegetical writers of the Christian Church. Very little recent research has been carried out on the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* but it would certainly now repay a detailed study of its sources, its debt to earlier grammatical treatises and its use and probable invention of skaldic examples in the light of the current interest in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century poetic tradition in Iceland. Of interest, among other things, is the author's self-presentation, both in his verse and his prose; his attempts to replicate some of the *Doctrinale*'s Latin *sententiae* in his Icelandic verse examples; his sometimes heavily moralising tone, his evident interest, to judge by his poetic examples, in Scandinavian history and politics, both past and contemporary, and his command of Christian exegesis and interpretation. Like Óláfr's treatise, the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise* is far from slavish in its use of Alexander and Evrard and other sources, which are bound to increase in number once the treatise is studied in detail.[15] Likewise, a close study of the poetry in the treatise, which forms a considerable part of the whole work, should advance our understanding of the continuing life of skaldic poetry in Iceland, particularly in the schools and religious houses during the fourteenth century.

[15] Aside from those identified by Björn M. Ólsen in his edition, both Rudolf Meissner (1932) and David McDougall (1988) have drawn attention to biblical and homiletic sources for the verse beginning *Sæll er senn í milli* in chapter 22, together with the accompanying prose commentary (Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 144–6). Meissner also discusses other biblical and apocryphal references.

CHAPTER TEN

The Icelandic Poetic Landscape in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

The art of skaldic poetry remained vigorous in Iceland during the thirteenth and at least the first part of the fourteenth century. There is also good evidence for the continuing knowledge of, and interest in, poetry in eddic measures, not least the production of the compilation of divine and heroic poems in the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda from about 1270–80. By the middle of the fourteenth century, however, *rímur*, long narrative poems derived from prose sources, usually sagas, and influenced by European metrical romances, had begun to take the place of skaldic poetry, though skaldic compositions of a religious nature, especially in the *hrynhenda* measure popularised by the poem *Lilja* ('Lily', discussed below) still had imitators into the sixteenth century (Jón Helgason 1936–8; Jón Þorkelsson 1888). Although *rímur* were a distinctive, new poetic kind, they were influenced both in form and in diction by eddic and skaldic poetry. They carried on some of the medieval poetic techniques of traditional Icelandic poetry from the fifteenth century until the nineteenth, so, in a certain sense, one can say that Icelandic poetry displays a continuous, though changing, tradition from the Middle Ages into modern times. Dance songs and ballads are also likely to have been influential in shaping late medieval and early modern Icelandic tastes in poetry, though most of our evidence for Icelandic ballads comes from after the Middle Ages (Vésteinn Ólason 1982).

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were the great ages for the first recording of medieval Icelandic literature. It is believed that most sagas were written down in this period and the major part of the corpus of Old Norse poetry was embedded in sagas and other works such as the poetic treatises. As we have seen in earlier chapters, a good deal of this poetry was ascribed to poets who lived before the end of the twelfth century, but we only know it because later historians and authors of treatises on poetics considered it valuable, for reasons that have already been discussed. On the other hand, there are considerable numbers of thirteenth- and fourteenth-

century prose works which record contemporary or near contemporary poetry, that is, the works of poets composing in the prose writers' own day, or close to it, and sometimes including their own verses, as we have seen was the practice of Sturla Þórðarson and is likely to have been the case with his brother Óláfr and the anonymous Fourth Grammarian. There are also some manuscript compilations, mostly from the early sixteenth century, that collect together a number of fourteenth-century religious poems; these are particularly associated with the Catholic resistance to the Reformation in Iceland which was centred around the northern see of Hólar and its last Catholic bishop Jón Arason, who was beheaded in 1550.

Sources for thirteenth- and fourteenth-century poetry

As Guðrún Nordal has demonstrated in her book *Tools of Literacy* (2001, esp. ch. 3), there is a great deal of Icelandic poetry that has survived from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and it was recorded in a variety of sources. We can divide these sources into five main kinds; *fornaldarsögur* and late *Íslendingasögur*; the grammatical treatises; historical sagas; biographies and lives of saints and associated verses; and poetry, almost exclusively religious, that has survived outside a prose context. Guðrún herself (2001: 76) divides this corpus into five categories of a slightly different kind, in part because she deals only with skaldic poetry, and so excludes poetry in *fornaldarsögur*, which is largely in eddic measures. Fourteenth-century religious poetry is also excluded. She also treats one poem, *Merlínússpá* ('Prophecy of Merlin'), as in a category of its own (a translation from Latin), and creates another separate category, a translated saint's life, for the verse in *Jóns saga postula* IV. Both these categories are handled differently below, but her remaining groupings, textbooks and treatises, historical writing and native biographies or Icelandic saints' lives, overlap those presented here to a considerable extent.

Fornaldarsögur and late *Íslendingasögur*

By contrast with all other kinds of sources listed here, we cannot be precise about the date of composition of the prose works in this category, though some of them are likely to have been composed in the late thirteenth or the fourteenth centuries. Late sagas of Icelanders, such as *Grettis saga* or *Þórðar saga hreðu* ('Saga of Quarrel-Þórðr'), probably came into being in the fourteenth century; it remains an open question as to whether all or some of the verses in these sagas are of the same date as their presumed

prose composition, or are considerably earlier. Similar questions hang over sagas of Icelanders considered to have been composed earlier in the thirteenth century, of course, but that subject has been reviewed extensively in Chapter 4 and will not be traversed again here. Likewise, we cannot be sure of the age of *fornaldarsögur*. These, as we have seen in Chapter 1, contain mostly poetry in eddic measures. Some of it is likely to be old, perhaps very old; some of it on the other hand may be contemporary with the composition of the prose saga, and it is difficult to know how old such sagas are. It has been commonly supposed that *fornaldarsögur* as a group are younger than *Íslendingasögur*; however, Torfi Tulinius (2002: 46–69) and before him Anne Holtsmark (1966) have argued that at least some of the *fornaldarsögur* may date from the same period as the earliest *Íslendingasögur*, the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Others, by contrast, almost certainly belong to the period under review, and it is as well to remember this corpus of possibly thirteenth- and fourteenth-century archaising verse when assessing the poetic output of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Iceland.

The grammatical literature

The substantial quantity of poetry contained within manuscripts that preserve the various Icelandic grammatical treatises, including Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, has been discussed in Chapters 7–9, though there the focus has been on the poetry quoted within the treatises, a good deal of which dates from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, some of it, including Snorri's *Háttatal*, being composed by the authors of the treatises themselves. In addition to the poetry preserved in the treatises, however, several of the manuscripts include additional poems, some (but not all) having an 'academic' character compatible with pedagogical treatises of grammatical rhetoric. Only manuscripts U (Uppsala DG 11) and C (AM 748 II 4to), of the medieval grammatical codices, contain no additional poetry.

While two of the skaldic poems preserved in manuscripts of this category probably date from the second half of the twelfth century (*Harmsól* and *Leiðarvísan*, both discussed in Chapter 6) and the eddic *Rígsþula* may be a Viking Age composition (Bagge 2000), the remainder of the verse is of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century date. The Codex Regius of Snorri's *Edda* (R) includes, immediately after the end of *Háttatal*, two poems that were probably composed in the Orkneys in the early thirteenth century, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Málsháttakvæði*, both of which have been attributed

to Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson (*c*.1150–1223).[1] The inclusion of these poems probably speaks for the close political and intellectual contacts between the Oddaverjar and other Icelandic chieftains, such as Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, and the educated classes in the Orkneys, as we have already observed in connection with the possible model that *Háttalykill* provided for *Háttatal*.[2] The Codex Wormianus (W) includes the eddic poem *Rígsþula* after the grammatical material, and is our only known source for this work, as well as a poem on the Virgin Mary, *Maríuvísur* ('Verses on Mary'), in a fifteenth-century hand. AM 748 I 4to (A), which has been divided into two parts since its return to Iceland from Denmark in 1996, contains in its first section (Ia) seven eddic poems, in full or in part, most of which are also to be found in the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda, except for *Baldrs draumar*.[3] The second part of this manuscript (Ib) includes at the end the poem *Íslendingadrápa*, a composition attributed to the otherwise unknown Haukr Valdísarson, celebrating a number of Icelandic heroes of the saga age. There has been some debate about its age, which some scholars place in the twelfth century (Jónas Kristjánsson 1975; Frank 1978: 68), but others assign to the thirteenth (Bjarni Einarsson 1989). AM 757 a 4to (B) contains, besides its grammatical components, a collection of the following religious poems, preserved only here and in the following order: *Heilags anda vísur*, 'Verses of the Holy Ghost',[4] *Leiðarvísan*, *Líknarbraut* ('Path of Mercy'), a late-thirteenth-century poem on the Cross and Christ's crucifixion, *Harmsól*, *Maríudrápa* ('*Drápa* of Mary'), a fourteenth-century *dróttkvætt* poem in honour of the Virgin, and *Gyðingsvísur* ('Verses about a Jew'), a fourteenth-century miracle of the Virgin, in which a Jew is converted to Christianity.

Historical sagas

In this category are included *Sturlunga saga* and *Hákonar saga*

[1] *Jómsvíkingadrápa* is attributed to Bishop Bjarni in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000 I: 178), and alluded to in the AM 510 4to manuscript of *Jómsvíkinga saga*. His authorship of *Málsháttakvæði* is inferred from stylistic and linguistic similarities (Holtsmark 1937: 10–14), and, one might add, from similarities of attitude and interest that the subject matter reveals.

[2] There is a considerable literature on Orkney–Oddi connections, personal, political and economic; see Halldór Hermannsson 1932: 41–2, Helgi Guðmundsson 1997: 54–72 and Guðrún Nordal 2001: 47.

[3] For details of these poems, see Chapter 1.

[4] This fragmentary thirteenth-century *dróttkvætt* poem is a free translation of the Latin hymn *Veni creator spiritus*, the earliest known translation of a Latin hymn into Icelandic; for a study, see Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1942.

Hákonarsonar, together with a translation from Latin, *Breta sǫgur* ('Sagas of the British'), which is the Icelandic version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* of *c*.1136. In the Hauksbók version of *Breta sǫgur*, a verse translation of Geoffrey's *Prophetiae Merlini*, namely *Merlínússpá*, is included. It was composed by Gunnlaugr Leifsson, a monk at Þingeyrar monastery, who died in 1218/19, and was also the author of the Latin saga of King Óláfr Tryggvason and of the now lost Latin version of the saga of Bishop Jón Ǫgmundarson. This two-part poem, in *fornyrðislag*, almost certainly imitates the verse form of the indigenous prophetic poem *Vǫluspá*, as we have seen in Chapter 1. It is a free Icelandic verse translation of a Latin prose original, in contrast to *Heilags anda vísur*, which is a free Icelandic verse translation of the metrical *Veni creator spiritus*.

Sturlunga saga is the name given to a large compilation of historical texts by a variety of authors, probably put together *c*.1300. It contains in all 150 skaldic stanzas by known and anonymous poets embedded in its various texts, though they are most heavily concentrated in a small number of sagas, *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* ('The Saga of Þorgils and Hafliði'), *Þórðar saga kakala* ('The Saga of Þórðr the Stammerer'), and, most of all, *Íslendinga saga* ('The Saga of the Icelanders'), which is also by far the longest part of *Sturlunga saga*. *Íslendinga saga* was written by Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84), illegitimate son of Snorri Sturluson's elder brother Þórðr and younger brother of Óláfr, author of the *Third Grammatical Treatise*. Sturla's work covers the major political events of the period between the last decades of the twelfth century and the end of Icelandic independence in 1262–4, and includes among the large cast of characters many members of the Sturlung family, after which the compilation takes its name, including his uncle Snorri and himself.

A great deal of poetry composed by Sturla Þórðarson has survived, as we noted in Chapter 9, but only in his own prose compositions. It is not quoted in his brother's grammatical treatise, but that is probably because most of it had not been composed by the 1250s, when the treatise is presumed to have been written. Eight stanzas are preserved in *Sturlunga saga*, but a great deal more of his verse is found in his *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, his biography of King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway, probably written *c*.1265. The circumstances in which Sturla came to be invited to compose *Hákonar saga* by Hákon's son and royal successor Magnús lagabœtir ('lawmender'), are described by Sturla himself in his brilliant *Sturlu þáttr* ('Tale of Sturla'), which is preserved in only one manuscript version of *Sturlunga saga* (Reykjarfjarðarbók and its descendants). Using the well-known narrative topos of the Icelandic skald at the Norwegian king's court who

has to prove his poetic skills and use his cunning to escape the king's wrath (like his distant ancestor Egill Skallagrímsson at the court of Eiríkr blóðøx at York three hundred years earlier),[5] Sturla depicts himself as gaining recognition at the Norwegian court when he travelled there in 1263, at a time when the Norwegian king counted the Sturlung family among his enemies. He is invited on board the king's ship and wins over the suspicious and rather hostile king at the queen's urging by first telling a story, *Huldar saga*, about a troll woman, and then reciting a poem praising Magnús's father, King Hákon, and Magnús himself. Magnús ends up by commissioning him to write the biography of his father and himself, the latter of which has, ironically, not survived.

Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar contains ninety-five stanzas of verse composed by Sturla himself, together with verses on Hákon by several other skalds, including Snorri Sturluson. It is one of several examples from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in which an author provides the prose context for his own verse.[6] Four of Sturla's poems appear in the saga, *Hrynhenda* (19 stanzas, *hrynhent* metre), *Hákonarkviða* (42 stanzas, *kviðuháttr* metre), *Hrafnsmál* (20 stanzas, *haðarlag* metre) and *Hákonar-flokkr* ('A Refrainless Poem about Hákon') (11 stanzas, *dróttkvætt* metre). Two stanzas by Sturla about Magnús lagabœtir are also quoted there.

Biographies, saints' lives and associated verses

There are four lives of indigenous subjects in this category, two of them of bishops: I also include here (though Guðrún Nordal puts it with *Breta sǫgur* among translated texts) the saint's life *Jóns saga postula* IV, which includes some verses by Canon Gamli of Þykkvabær, author of *Harmsól*. In addition to Gamli's verses from his *Jónsdrápa* ('Poem with Refrain about Jón'), this life of St John the Apostle also quotes three verses on the saint by Nikulás Bergsson, first abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Munkaþverá (d. 1159), and probable author of a pilgrim guide to Rome and the Holy Land (*Leiðarvísir*, 'Journey Guide'), and five by Kolbeinn Tumason (d. 1208), the most powerful chieftain living in the north-west of Iceland in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The two bishops' sagas are *Páls saga byskups* and *Guðmundar sǫgur byskups*. *Páls saga*, a

[5] There are many, probably consciously drawn, similarities between *Sturlu þáttr* and the account of Egill Skallagrímsson at York in *Egils saga*. On this see Gade 2000: 88–9 and Guðrún Nordal 2001: 127.

[6] Other instances are Snorri's *Háttatal*, the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises*, and the mid-fourteenth-century version D of the saga of Bishop Guðmundr Arason, to be discussed below.

short biography of Páll Jónsson, bishop of Skálholt from 1195 to 1211, contains four verses by Ámundi Árnason (d. 1229), all on aspects of the bishop's private life and family. The author, who is said in the saga to have been 'the most accomplished craftsman in wood in the whole of Iceland', *þann mann er hagastur var ad trie á aullu Jslandi* (Jón Helgason 1978: 415), seems to have been a friend and confidant of the bishop. The purpose of the verses, as Guðrún Nordal has observed (2001: 99–100), was not to authenticate the author's narrative, but to enhance Páll's status and reputation as a member of an important Icelandic family, the Oddaverjar, with its links to Norwegian royalty and aristocracy.

There are four versions of the saga of Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237), bishop of Hólar from 1203 to 1237, all of them in some way connected with attempts to have this very controversial cleric declared a saint. Guðmundr was a champion of the right of the Church in Iceland to be regarded as independent of the power of the secular chieftains, and during his attempts to establish these rights, he fell out with a large number of the Icelandic chieftains and a great deal of fighting took place between his followers and their opponents. After his death in 1237 his supporters, many of them clerics, began various attempts to have Guðmundr officially declared a saint; these attempts, which were ultimately unsuccessful, included the exhumation of his body in 1314 and the translation of his relics in 1344. The first life of Guðmundr (*Prestssaga*, 'The Priest's Saga') was probably written a few years after his death, but it only covers the early years; later biographies, covering his whole life, were probably written after his exhumation in 1314, most probably during the years 1320–61. The various sagas about Guðmundr are remarkable for the amount of skaldic poetry in them, something that Guðrún Nordal (2001: 101–2) has attributed to Guðmundr's own interest in poetry and his close family connections with a number of well-known poets in the north of Iceland. However, a good many of the poems about him were composed quite some time after his death, so it is likely that we need to refer to the intense effort on the part of many people, particularly clerics, to have him canonised as an additional reason for the presence of so much poetry in his biographies. It is also the case that a lot of the material in the sagas of this bishop is derived from the two biographies of secular leaders to be discussed below, and also from *Íslendinga saga*.

After the translation of Guðmundr's relics in 1344, a number of poets joined in the effort to promote his cause, including Arngrímr Brandsson, abbot of Þingeyrar (d. 1361), who composed a *hrynhent* poem of sixty-six stanzas in Guðmundr's honour as well as three verses in *dróttkvætt* on the

same subject. The lawman and poet Einarr Gilsson was also prolific in his compositions in praise of Guðmundr. He composed a *dróttkvætt* poem of forty stanzas, another of seventeen stanzas in *hrynhent* measure, and *Selkolluvísur* ('Seal-head Verses'), a *dróttkvætt* poem of twenty-one stanzas, which narrates one of the miracles attributed to the bishop, in which he overcame an evil female spirit in the form of a seal (Clunies Ross 2003b). All these verses are extant only in the latest, D-version of *Guðmundar saga*, which, Jón Helgason argued (1950: 18–21), was probably translated into Icelandic from Latin, and the Icelandic verse added to the translation in order to elevate the style. The versatile Einarr is also noteworthy for his composition of the first extant Icelandic *ríma*, usually dated *c*.1350, *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar*, extant in the prefatory part of Flateyjarbók (Finnur Jónsson 1905–12: 1–9).

The two biographies of secular subjects, *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* and *Áróns saga Hjǫrleifssonar*, have close connections to the subject matter of both *Guðmundar saga* and *Íslendinga saga*. All of these works represent events and persons important in the turbulent politics of thirteenth-century Iceland. *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* exists as an independent saga, the latter part of which was also used by the compiler of *Sturlunga saga*. It is the biography of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, a chieftain of the Seldælir family of western Iceland, and a famous physician, who was killed by his enemy Þorvaldr Snorrason in 1213. The independent saga exists in two versions, one of which contains thirty-four stanzas or half-stanzas, while the other has twenty-eight. Although Hrafn is said to be a poet in his saga, the author admits that little of his poetry has survived, and in fact none is quoted in his saga. However, Guðrún Nordal has put forward evidence that Hrafn was a great patron of poets, and she thinks that he 'maintained a group of poets for his own benefit' (2001: 172), at least six of whom are known by name.

Áróns saga Hjǫrleifssonar has had a difficult textual history and is not now preserved complete in any one source. It exists in an early-fifteenth-century vellum fragment, two seventeenth-century paper copies, and in the saga of Bishop Guðmundr Arason, which drew material from an earlier version of *Áróns saga* than now exists independently. Sixteen verses in this saga are likely to have come from the original *Áróns saga*. The saga is the biography of Árón Hjǫrleifsson (1199–1255), a man whose family connections led him to become a follower of Bishop Guðmundr in his conflict with several members of the Sturlung family, in particular Sighvatr Sturluson and his sons Tumi and Sturla. Árón was one of the leaders in the killing of Tumi at Hólar in 1222 and was later seriously wounded in a revenge attack

led by Sighvatr and Sturla. He was then outlawed and on the run in Iceland for four years, before escaping to Norway in 1226. He undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, joined the household of King Hákon Hákonarson in Bergen and eventually returned to Iceland, where he was reconciled with Þórðr Sturluson, brother of Sighvatr and Snorri. It has been argued with some plausibility (Porter 1970–1) that this saga, which presents Árón in an almost saintly light in contrast to his depiction in *Sturlunga saga*, may have been composed as yet another work pressing for the canonisation of Bishop Guðmundr. One of the poets whose verse is recorded in praise of Árón, the priest Þormóðr Óláfsson, was still alive in 1338.

Religious poetry that has survived outside a prose context

Most Old Norse poetry that survives outside a prose context, that is to say, is not embedded in a prose work as quotation, is Christian religious verse. A collection of twelfth-, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Christian poems in AM 757a 4to, a manuscript that also contains parts of Snorri's *Edda*, has been mentioned above under 'The grammatical literature'. Several sixteenth-century collections of religious verse, in particular AM 713 4to, AM 622 4to and AM 721 4to, were compiled from fourteenth- or fifteenth-century manuscripts. These verse collections take their place beside the many prose legendaries and collections of miracles and saints' lives that were compiled in Iceland between the late thirteenth and the early sixteenth centuries (Kalinke 1996: 24–44). AM 713 4to, for instance, was compiled by the priest Ari Jónsson and his sons Tómas and Jón at Staðr in the north of Iceland. Their purpose was to boost the status of a number of the saints of the Catholic Church, whose cults were being called into question by supporters of Lutheranism. It is likely that the manuscripts on which they drew in putting together their compilation came from a northern monastery, and either Munkaþverá or Mǫðruvellir have been suggested (Jón Helgason 1932; Stefán Karlsson 1970).[7] AM 713 4to includes poems in honour of a number of saints, including St Catherine of Alexandria, St Peter, holy virgins (*Heilagra meyja drápa*, 'Poem about Holy Virgins') and several poems in honour of the Virgin Mary. These are *Drápa af Maríugrát* ('Poem on the Lamentation of Mary'), *Vitnisvísur af Maríu* ('Testimonial Verses about Mary') and three *Maríuvísur* celebrating various miracles of the Virgin. These poems in honour of the Virgin have been edited most recently by Wrightson 2001. They are poetic versions of

[7] For a general survey of the literary production of the northern Icelandic Benedictine monasteries in the fourteenth century, see Sverrir Tómasson 1993b.

popular Latin treatises which had been translated into Icelandic or versified miracle stories, most of which were widely distributed in medieval Europe.[8] Evidence internal to these poems indicates that their author (or authors) are likely to have been monks, composing in the latter part of the fourteenth century, doubtless to entertain and edify a monastic audience. To judge from various allusions in *Drápa af Maríugrát*, the author of this poem had a male audience in mind (Wrightson 1997a, b).

Several other early-sixteenth-century compilations preserve collections of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century skaldic religious verse along with some contemporary poems. AM 721 4to, like AM 713 4to, contains poems in honour of various saints, the Virgin, the apostles and Christ's Cross. It is probably also a northern manuscript. One of the most influential poems of the fourteenth century, *Lilja*, a *drápa* of one hundred stanzas in honour of the Virgin Mary, has also come down to us in manuscripts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These include Bergsbók (Holm Perg 1 fol. of *c*.1400–25), AM 713 4to, AM 622 4to (*c*.1549) and AM 99a 8vo.[9]

Two late wisdom poems: *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Sólarljóð*

Two poems that probably date from the thirteenth century, though they are only extant in later, mostly much later, manuscripts should also be mentioned before we conclude this survey of the Icelandic poetic landscape in the later medieval period. They are *Hugsvinnsmál* ('The Speech of the Wise-minded One'), and *Sólarljóð* ('Song of the Sun'). Like *Málsháttakvæði*, which has some thematic connections with *Hugsvinnsmál*, though it is very different in tone, these poems are an amalgam of learned Latinate and traditional repertoires, to the latter of which they hark back allusively. Whereas *Hugsvinnsmál* is a poem of gnomic wisdom, *Sólarljóð* is a powerful dream vision, in which a dead father appears to his son and advises him on how to conduct his life and achieve salvation, after having given a striking account of his own death, his otherworld journeys and his vision of

[8] *Drápa af Maríugrát* is based on an Icelandic prose translation of *Liber de passione Christi et doloribus et planctus matris* ('Book of the Passion of Christ and the Sufferings and Weeping of [His] Mother') by the Italian Ogerius de Locedio (1136–1214) (Wrightson 2001: xiii–xiv), while the other works are miracle stories, which have numerous analogues in medieval European Marian miracle collections from northern France and England, aside from *Vitnisvísur af Maríu*, an apparently unique Icelandic adaptation of a tale of a young woman who enlists the help of the Virgin (whose image in a church has witnessed their vows) to ensure that her errant betrothed returns and marries her (Wrightson 1997c).

[9] For descriptions of all these Arnamagnæan manuscripts and their contents, see Kålund 1889–94 II: 1: 34–7, 128–31 and 390.

Christ as the sun of righteousness. This poem thus combines the didactic and visionary modes and reinterprets pagan wisdom and prophetic compositions like *Hávamál* and *Vǫluspá* within a Christian apocalyptic world view. Both *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Sólarljóð* are self-consciously archaising and imitative of these eddic poems, in theme, style and metre,[10] yet at the same time they draw on major Christian frames of reference, European vision literature in the case of *Sólarljóð* and popular didactic lore, in particular the *Disticha Catonis*,[11] in respect of *Hugsvinnsmál*. It is doubtless because their authors managed to harness both native and foreign traditions so effectively that both these poems remained influential well beyond the Middle Ages (see Fidjestøl 1979 for *Sólarljóð*). Their long-lasting popularity is demonstrated by the fact that both are extant in numerous sources, mostly paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century onwards.

Figures in the landscape

We can ask a number of questions of this overview of the Icelandic poetic landscape in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in order to get an idea of its dynamics, such questions as: who composed poetry at this time? in what literary genre? for whom? and why? From what sections of Icelandic society did the skalds of this period come and what were their objectives in composing verse in traditional measures, mostly skaldic? In the review of the poetic landscape just conducted, it is clear that some of the categories of text overlapped (like *Áróns saga*, *Hrafns saga* and *Sturlunga saga*, for example), and some of the poets were either related by blood or by common interests, whether religious or political. It is also clear that by no means all prose writing of this period included poetry. There is a great variability as to the amount of poetry present in thirteenth and fourteenth-century saga writing across the genres — some have none at all or very little, while others have a great deal. On the other hand, the treatises of grammatical rhetoric

[10] Both poems are in *ljóðaháttr*, following the pattern of much Old Norse didactic verse.

[11] *Hugsvinnsmál* is generally considered to be loosely modelled on the *Disticha Catonis* ('The Couplets of Cato'), a collection of didactic Latin couplets in which a father gives advice to his son. This popular work, dating from the second or third century AD, was very influential in medieval Europe and was often translated into vernacular languages. Already by the mid-twelfth century, the First Grammarian knew at least one of the Latin couplets, which he quotes with an Icelandic prose translation (Hreinn Benediktsson 1972: 228–9). The title *Hugsvinnsmál* is based on an incorrect etymological connection between the Latin adjective *catus* ('wise, shrewd'), translated into Icelandic as *hugsvinnr*, and the personal name Cato of the Latin title. See further Evans 1993 and references given there.

all contain an abundance of poetry, as one might expect, and they are one of our chief sources for Old Icelandic poetic texts as well as for what they have to say about the rules that govern the composition of poetry. It seems that we have the impending Reformation to thank, somewhat ironically, for the impetus that led in the sixteenth century to the gathering together of hagiographical and other religious verse.

The question of what technical terms to apply to the poetry composed in this period is an interesting one. To some extent, earlier designations, such as *–drápa* and *–flokkr*, *–vísur*, *–kviða*, *–mál* and *–tal* could be and were applied, but the works so termed were often self-conscious in their manipulation of generic and strucural expectations, giving what we might today call a postmodernist tinge to some of the poetry of this age. The term *sǫgukvæði*, 'story poem' or 'history poem', was applied by Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson in *Jómsvíkingadrápa* 5/8 to his own recreation, with many flippant asides and embroideries, of the legend of the Jómsvíkingar, a band of Danish Vikings and their various adventures.[12] This term could be generalised to other poems that deal with the history of a past age, whether native, such as *Íslendingadrápa* and *Krákumál* ('Speech about Kráka'), or foreign, like *Merlínússpá*. One may say that a frequently antiquarian and sometimes also self-consciously playful approach to persons and events of the past is detectable in much *sǫgukvæði*, aligning it with some kinds of prose *fornaldarsögur*. Another kind of antiquarianism is detectable in poems like *Merlínússpá*, *Hugsvinnsmál* and *Sólarljóð*, whose authors use eddic genres and verse forms to set up echoes between their Christian verse and indigenous visionary and didactic poetry such as *Vǫluspá* and *Hávamál*. The English term 'legendary poetry' has sometimes been applied to the considerable range of narrative or semi-narrative poems on various aspects of Christian salvation history and the life and miracles of Christ, the Virgin Mary and a number of Christian saints that were composed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (see Fidjestøl 1993a: 593). However, the authors of these poems appear to have applied traditional generic and metrical classifiers to them, even though they manifestly use new and different narrative strategies from earlier long skaldic poems, including direct address of speaker to audience, dialogue and monologue (see Lindow 1982: 109–21). Moreover, in poems such as *Lilja*, new rhetorical and structural resources derived from Christian numerology are combined with the traditional internal divisions of the *drápa* into *upphaf*, *stefjabálkr* and *slœmr*.

[12] On the term *sǫgukvæði* see Fidjestøl 1991 and 1993a. Lindow (1982: 109) considers the term refers to narrative rather than historical poetry.

One way of classifying the various kinds of sources of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century poetry is to categorise them in terms of the interest bases and orientation of those poets whose works are represented there. The treatises of grammatical rhetoric have an educational focus, but it is one that is also bound up in the celebration and perpetuation of the tradition of skaldic poetry as an elite, court-oriented art. Snorri Sturluson's *Háttatal* is an interesting combination of a praise-poem directed at two Norwegian rulers and an exemplificatory poem in the *clavis metrica* tradition. It is worth observing that two of the authors in this group, the two whose identities we know, Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr Þórðarson, belong to the powerful Sturlung family. The *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises* are closer to the schoolroom and also, particularly the latter, have a clearly Christian purpose. If, as Guðrún Nordal has suggested, skaldic poetry was used alongside Latin poetry in the Icelandic schoolroom, and verse composition in Icelandic was encouraged there, this partly explains the strength of this group of sources as witnesses to Icelandic verse composition in this period.

The historical sagas and biographies of both bishops and secular men can be considered together, even though we can see, among the poets who promoted the cause of Bishop Guðmundr Arason, a clearly ecclesiastical and hagiographical focus, which aligns their work with poetry in honour of saints and the Virgin. Some of the poets whose verses are recorded in historical and biographical sources are anonymous; of those whom we can identify, however, most fall into well-defined groups, as Guðrún Nordal's 2001 study has shown. As far as thirteenth-century skaldic verse is concerned, most of what has been preserved (and this could be a sample biased towards those poets with a privileged background or supported by men of privilege) can be shown to be the work either of men from the ruling families, powerful chieftains and farmers, or compositions by men to whom these powerful clans acted as patrons. Insofar as these men probably controlled the production of written texts to a large extent, such a result is predictable. There is clear evidence in some cases, as for example in Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga*, that Sturla suppressed the poetry of some skalds whom we know from *Skáldatal* to have been among King Hákon's court poets, presumably because he did not consider them worthy of inclusion, while he included a great deal of his own poetry, even though he was never at King Hákon's court. As Guðrún put it (2001: 143), 'skaldic verse-making becomes in Sturla's hands a conscious semantic layer in the writing of a king's saga: the poet and the writer are the same man'.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries it is apparent that Christian religious verse composition by clerics, whether priests or monks,

was of growing importance, and in the fourteenth century it becomes the major kind of skaldic verse to be composed. In this period there are many poets whose primary environment and frame of reference was the community of Christians, in many, perhaps most, cases fellow clerics rather than the lay public. This religious verse, much of it inspired by Christian liturgical, homiletic and hagiographic texts, was without doubt composed by literate men and circulated in written form, probably within ecclesiastical communities for the most part, where at least some of the manuscripts appear to have remained until the sixteenth century. A number of these texts include mention of *lærðir menn*, 'learned men' (that is, men in the religious life) as the direct recipients of religious teachings and the wisdom imparted by such figures as the Virgin herself, as we find in *Drápa af Maríugrát* 42/6 (Wrightson 2001: 21), or, as is the case in *Líknarbraut* 8/2 and 46/7, the poet addresses his evidently mixed audience as *bræðr* ('brothers') and *systr* ('sisters') or *systkin* ('brothers and sisters, siblings'), indicating that he was a cleric, and possibly a monk (Tate 1974: 34–5).

Written verse composition is also likely to have been practised by many laymen in the thirteenth century. We have seen, when discussing Snorri Sturluson's *Háttatal* in Chapter 8, that this skaldic praise poem directed at the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson and Duke Skúli was probably conveyed to its intended audience in writing, so that, although Snorri was invoking traditional skaldic verse forms and diction, he was using the new elite form of communication, writing, to send his poem to its audience. It was a fitting medium in which to communicate with this particular king, at least, as Hákon was to become a known patron of literature. It was under his patronage that many foreign romances or *riddarasögur* were translated into Norwegian for the use of his court (Barnes 1993). With *Háttatal* we see, perhaps for the first time, an Icelandic poet composing a written secular encomium. This had important implications for both the poetry itself and its mode of presentation (no longer were poet and patron eyeball to eyeball), and for the opportunities for Icelandic poets who aspired, as some evidently did, to emulate the political success of their forebears in the tenth and eleventh centuries in influencing the Norwegian king, at a time when travel to Norway had become both less common and more politically dangerous. One could say that members of the Sturlung family, in particular, managed to give a new, almost postmodern life to secular skaldic praise poetry, and they did it by controlling the means of production totally.

Two scholars (Gade 2000; Guðrún Nordal 2001) have recently pointed to the importance of *Sturlu þáttr* in *Sturlunga saga* as giving literary

expression to this phenomenon, and *Hákonar saga* for realising that control. In *Sturlu þáttr* the poet is also the narrator of the prose text and tells how he successfully gained the favour of the king and queen by telling them a story, *Huldar saga*, reciting his poetry to them and then gaining a commission to write two royal biographies. In the *þáttr* Sturla manages to make the audience aware of his own superiority as an entertainer and word-smith in comparison with the king and queen and the rest of the Norwegians, just as in the Viking Age, Icelandic poets had eloquently won over earlier Norwegian rulers and become their court poets. In *Sturlu þáttr* in fact the narrative seems to introduce some doubt as to whether the king and queen really understand Sturla's poetry but they are definitely impressed, the king exclaiming somewhat rashly: *þat ætla ek at þú kveðir betr en páfinn* (Jón Jóhannesson *et al*. 1946 II: 234: Örnólfur Thorsson *et al*. 1988 II: 766), 'I think you recite [?or 'compose'] better than the Pope does'!

Range and style in late medieval Icelandic poetry

To complement this chapter's survey of the Icelandic poetic landscape in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and to establish something of the range and varying styles practised at that time, I will analyse three examples of the kinds of poetry identified in the survey. These do not encompass all the resources of poetry in this period, but should give some idea of its complexity and range, and how it differs from the poetry of the Viking Age and the twelfth century, while still maintaining those characteristics of verse form and diction that are the hallmarks of skaldic verse. The three examples are arranged in chronological order, the first, Kolbeinn Tumason's prayer on the day before his death in 1208, from the beginning of the thirteenth century; the second, two verses by Sturla Þórðarson from the mid-thirteenth century; and the third, from *Lilja*, from the mid-fourteenth century. Much more research needs to be carried out on the poetry of this period, particularly on the debt of Christian skaldic verse to Latin sources both in prose and verse and to Icelandic prose translations of Latin sources, as well as later poets' literary borrowings from their predecessors, before the late medieval poetic landscape can stand out clearly. It is to be hoped that one of the advances of the new edition of the skaldic corpus, mentioned in Chapter 1, will be a clarification of the liturgical and theological antecedents of much of this poetry, which has had much less critical attention in recent times than the poetry of the Viking Age and the twelfth century.

Heyr himna smiðr, attributed to Kolbeinn Tumason

Introduction. Three verses have survived in two versions of the saga of Guðmundr Arason (version B of *c*.1320 and version D of *c*.1350) of a prayer that is said in the saga to have been uttered or composed (the Icelandic word is *kveðit*) by Kolbeinn Tumason the day before he died at the battle of Víðines in the autumn of 1208. Some doubt has been cast on Kolbeinn's authorship of these verses and on whether he could have composed them spontaneously on the day before his death (Stefán Karlsson 1996: 59), but, though he was a layman, the concepts and images expressed in them are those that any well-instructed Christian of his day would have known and so were perfectly within his intellectual reach. Whether he composed the verses himself or recited the composition of someone else (a less likely possibility, in my view), the verses are powerful, moving and seemingly artless in their simplicity. Yet they resonate with words that express fundamental Christian doctrine, whether their ultimate source was the psalter, as Stefán Karlsson has suggested (1996) or early Icelandic vernacular homilies (Bjarni Einarsson 1973) or, most likely, the public liturgy. The influence of Kolbeinn's poem has been enduring in the tradition of Icelandic religious poetry and hymnody, and there is evidence that the verses were associated with a melodic accompaniment at least from the seventeenth century (Jón Helgason 1975: 223–4). In the form in which the poem is transmitted in *Guðmundar saga*, however, its closest affinities are with medieval forms of private prayer, in which an individual prays to God in private to seek forgiveness from sin and request personal protection (see Lapidge 1999b). The normalised text printed here is that of Finnur Jónsson (*Skj* BII: 48–9; see AII: 39–40 for variant readings). The verse form is *runhent*. No prose word order has been given, as syntax and word order are straightforward.

Heyr himna smiðr,
hvers skáldit biðr;
komi mjúk til mín
miskunnin þín;
því heitk á þik,
þú hefr skaptan mik;
ek em þrællinn þinn,
þú 'st dróttinn minn.

Goð, heitk á þik,
at grœðir mik;
minzk mildingr mín,

mest þurfum þín;
ryð þú rǫðla gramr,
ríklyndr ok framr,
hǫlds hverri sorg
ór hjarta borg.

Gæt, mildingr, mín,
mest þurfum þín
helzt hverja stund
á hǫlða grund;
sett, meyjar mǫgr,
máls-efni fǫgr,
ǫll es hjǫlp af þér,
í hjarta mér.

Translation. Listen, craftsman of the heavens [GOD], to what the poet prays; may thy gentle mercy come to me; I call upon thee because thou hast created me; I am thy servant, thou art my lord.

God, I call upon thee to heal me; generous one [CHRIST *or* GOD] remember me, we [=I] stand very much in need of thee; prince of sun and moon [GOD], powerful and courageous, clear every sorrow from the man's [my] stronghold of the heart [BREAST].

Generous one [CHRIST], watch over me, we [=I] stand very much in need of thee every single hour upon the ground of men [EARTH]; place, son of a virgin [CHRIST], beautiful speech-substance [THOUGHTS] in my heart — all help comes from thee.

Commentary. The poet begins with a direct prayer to God for mercy, explaining that it is natural for him to call upon God as his creator, as one who stands towards him as master to servant. The last two lines echo a commonplace about the relationship of God and the individual human that could be found either in the psalms of David or in homiletic writing, or indeed in the liturgy. Stefán Karlsson (1996: 58) has suggested that the clause *hvers skáldit biðr* in line 2 refers, not to Kolbeinn himself, but to David the biblical psalmist; however, a third-person reference to himself by an Icelandic poet would be entirely in keeping with skaldic tradition and complements the third-person reference of stanza 2/7–8, *hǫlds hverri sorg*/*ór hjarta borg*, where the poet again refers to himself in the third person as 'the man'.

There is a clear progression in terms of the devotional trajectory of private prayer from the first stanza, in which the speaker prays for God's mercy for himself, to his request for God to heal him of sins (*at græðir*

mik), and to rid him of sorrow in the second stanza, and his asking Christ in the third stanza to watch over him during his time on this earth and to place 'beautiful speech-substance' (*málsefni fǫgr*) in his heart. The poem concludes with an acknowledgement that all help comes from the deity, just as at the beginning the speaker asks God, as the creator of all things, for mercy. The progression of thought in stanzas 2–3 is emphasised through skilful verbal repetition and variation.

Whether the tradition that associates the recital of this poem with the day before Kolbeinn's death is fictional or based on oral transmission of eyewitness accounts — or both — its sentiments are entirely appropriate to a man who most likely felt himself to be in imminent danger of death. He is concerned for the state of his soul and he asks God for mercy; he wants to be healed, not of physical wounds (though these may well also have been in his mind — he was hit in the forehead by a stone the next day, and died as a result), but of spiritual wounds and sorrow. In the last stanza the Christian suppliant turns to Christ as the intermediary between God the Father and the sinful human upon this earth, which he may suspect he is shortly to leave. He asks Christ to place beautiful *málsefni* in his heart; this compound, which occurs in only one other instance in Old Norse poetry, has been interpreted in the translation above as a kenning for thought, suggesting that readiness for contrition and the contemplation of the help that God provides are what the suppliant is asking Christ to place in his heart.[13]

The diction of Kolbeinn's prayer includes a number of nouns, adjectives and verbs that occur commonly in Christian discourse, whether prosaic or poetic, words such as *biðja* (1/2), *mjúkr* (1/3), *miskunn* (1/4), *skepja* (*skaptan* 1/6), *dróttinn* (1/8) and *þræll* (1/7), in its specific Christian context mentioned earlier, *Goð* (2/1), *græða* (2/2 in its Christian sense) and *hjǫlp* (3/7). Although the kennings are simple, none containing more than one determinant, they are appropriate and effective in context. The first kenning for God, *himna smiðr* ('craftsman of the heavens') (1/1), unique to this poem in the skaldic corpus, emphasises God's role as creator of the world, which is later given as the justification for the direction of the suppliant's prayer for mercy. *Rǫðla gramr* ('prince of sun and moon') (2/5) is reminiscent of *rǫðla ǫðlingr* in *Harmsól* 16/6, composed probably within Kolbeinn's lifetime or close to it; *meyjar mǫgr* ('son of a virgin') (3/5) is a *sannkenning* for Christ, though one that is timely in its reminder of the Virgin's role, with her Son, as intercessor for human sinners; the

[13] Finnur Jónsson (1931b: 396) glosses this instance as 'genstand for tale' ('subject for conversation') and expands *setja málsefni fǫgr í hjarta e-m*, 'vække en til gode tanker og deres udtryk', 'to arouse someone to good thoughts and their expression'.

appropriateness of *málsefni* (3/6) as a kenning for thought has already been mentioned. *Mildingr* (2/3 and 3/1) is an appellation for God that appears commonly in Christian skaldic verse, though it seems earlier to have had a purely secular application.

Verses by Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84): (a) from *Íslendinga saga*; (b) from *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*

(a) A verse from *Íslendinga saga*

Introduction. There are eight verses by Sturla Þórðarson in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, two in *Þorgils saga skarða* ('Saga of Þorgils the Harelipped') and another six in Sturla's own *Íslendinga saga* (for location and manuscript details see Guðrún Nordal 2001: 191–3 and Table 3.4). The *lausavísa* below appears towards the end of *Íslendinga saga*, after Gizurr Þorvaldsson had been made the first earl of Iceland in 1258 (Jón Jóhannesson *et al*. 1946 I: 528). It records Sturla's outrage at having been deprived, by royal fiat, of the lands in the Borgarfjǫrðr area, which he understood Gizurr had promised to him. The second *helmingr* of the verse is repeated, with slight variation, in *Sturlu þáttr* (Jón Jóhannesson *et al*. 1946 II: 231). Finnur Jónsson (*Skj* AII: 129, BII: 136) assigns this verse to the year 1261. The text is taken from *Skj* B; the verse form is *dróttkvætt*.

Rauf við randa stýfi
(rétt innik þat) svinnan
alt, þvít oss hefr vélta,
Óðinn, þats hét góðu;
skaut, sás skrǫkmǫl flýtir,
(skilk hvat gramr mun vilja)
Gautr unni sér sleitu,
slægr jarl við mér bægi.

Prose word order. Óðinn rauf alt þats hét góðu við svinnan stýfi randa, þvít hefr vélta oss — innik þat rétt; slægr jarl, sás flýtir skrǫkmǫl, skaut bægi við mér; skilk hvat gramr mun vilja; Gautr unni sér sleitu.

Translation. Óðinn [=Gizurr] broke all that he promised of good to the bold cleaver of shields [WARRIOR = me, Sturla], because he has defrauded us [=me] — I tell that correctly; the sly earl, who lets false stories fly, shouldered me aside; I understand what it is the prince [=Gizurr] will want; Gautr [⟨Óðinn⟩ = Gizurr] loves a fight.

Commentary. This verse pulls no punches in directly criticising Gizurr for breaking his word, defrauding Sturla of what he considered rightfully his and being innately sly and provocative. The latter charge is tellingly underlined by two direct comparisons with the god Óðinn, once by directly naming him and the second time by referring to Gizurr by one of Óðinn's many names, Gautr. Óðinn, as everyone in Iceland would know, was a fickle, untrustworthy god, who loved causing discord between people. The name Gautr had considerable political currency in thirteenth-century Iceland, as it was the name of Gautr of Mel, a powerful councillor to King Hákon Hákonarson, who, like the Norse god, had only one eye. Snorri Sturluson had earlier composed a stanza about this Gautr, comparing him to Óðinn (*Skj* AII: 78, BII: 89), and Sturla may well have had this in mind when he put Gizurr, the king's representative in Iceland, on the same footing (see Guðrún Nordal 2001: 127).[14] Comparisons of one's political opponents with Óðinn were not uncommon in late-twelfth- and thirteenth-century poetry. A half-stanza by Jón Þórarinsson (*c*.1180; *Skj* AI: 536, BI: 517, where he is called Jón Þorvaldsson; see Guðrún Nordal 2001: 151–2) compares Sturla Þórðarson the elder, paternal grandfather of our poet, to Óðinn.[15]

Another interesting dimension to this verse, which is classifiable as *níð*, comes from the fact that it was composed by the writer of the saga. It is hard to know whether the verse achieved currency outside the saga, but, even if it did, as seems likely, the poet as author would not have been subject to the same kind of constraints as skalds who relied solely on oral transmission to disseminate their satire.

[14] In *Sturlu þáttr*, however, Gautr of Mel plays a positive role in bringing Sturla into the royal presence. Snorri's stanza was certainly known to Sturla, as it appears in manuscripts of *Hákonar saga*, as well as in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, where Óláfr cites it as an example of *eikon*, a comparison of two persons or their characteristics, and comments 'here there is an "improper" comparison between Óðinn and a certain malicious man' (*hér er óeiginlig líking milli Óðins ok nǫkkurs illgjarns manns*, normalised from Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 117); for manuscript locations, see *Skj* AII: 78.

[15] In addition to the direct comparisons between Gizurr and Óðinn there may be veiled literary allusions to both Óðinn and another deceitful god, Loki, connoted by Sturla's use of two adjectives. The first of them is *svinnr* ('?wise, bold'), which is also employed by the late-tenth-century skald Úlfr Uggason in his *Húsdrápa* 9/1, also with reference to Óðinn in the context of his son Baldr's funeral. The second suggestive adjective is *slægr* ('sly, deceitful'), which also occurs in *Húsdrápa* 2/3, in this instance with reference to Loki in his contest with the god Heimdallr. Both verses are extant in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998 I: 9, 20) and are likely to have been known to Sturla. Even if he did not have *Húsdrápa* in mind, the connotations of *slægr* are none too flattering, being applied in several contexts to foxes (a proverbial comparison) and once to a juggler (see Finnur Jónsson 1931b: 520).

(B) *HÁKONARFLOKKR*, STANZA 1, FROM *HÁKONAR SAGA HÁKONARSONAR*

Introduction. Sturla compiled this commissioned biography of King Hákon and composed the poems in it in 1264–5. Detail of both the poems and the commission by Hákon's son Magnús is given under 'Historical sagas' earlier in this chapter. *Hákonarflokkr* comprises eleven *dróttkvætt* stanzas in praise of Hákon's various conquests, concluding with his attempt to subdue the Orkneys, where he met his death in the winter of 1263. This is the first of several stanzas that celebrate the king's conquest of a group of rebels, the Ribbungar (the name means 'mob', 'rabble'), from the Vík (Oslofjord) area, who fought against him and his father-in-law Skúli during the 1220s. Snorri Sturluson also commemorated the early part of this conflict in stanzas 63–6 of his *Háttatal*, and these stanzas, with the exception of 65, are quoted by Sturla in chapters 74–5 of *Hákonar saga*, so it is not surprising that we find verbal echoes of Snorri's verses in Sturla's encomium. One difference is, however, that Snorri's verses focus on Skúli's part in the fight against the Ribbungar. Sturla's verses give Skúli, who later rebelled against the king and tried to assert his independence as a ruler, a less prominent role. The text is from *Skj* BII: 132 (cf. *Skj* AII: 124–5).

> Ern lét austr til Vǫrnu
> allvaldr skipum haldit;
> Rínfúra vann rýrir
> Ribbunga hlut þungan,
> ok óstilta elti
> ǫrþingaðr víkinga
> (rǫnd klauf ræsir steinda)
> reiðr á land af skeiðum.
>
> *Prose word order*. Ern allvaldr lét haldit skipum austr til Vǫrnu; rýrir Rínfúra vann þungan hlut Ribbunga, ok reiðr ǫrþingaðr elti óstilta víkinga á land af skeiðum — ræsir klauf steinda rǫnd.
>
> *Translation*. The vigorous all-ruler ⟨Hákon⟩ steered his ships east to Varna; the distributor of Rhine-fire [GOLD > (generous) RULER = Hákon] caused the Ribbungar a heavy fate, and the angry holder of an arrow-meeting [BATTLE > WARRIOR = Hákon] drove the uncontrolled Vikings up onto land from their warships; the leader ⟨Hákon⟩ split coloured shields.

Commentary. The verse is clearly in the traditional mode of a skaldic encomium, praising the achievements of the ruler in a sea-battle against his enemies, extolling his vigour and activity in driving his enemies before

him. This is poetry composed for a specific literary and political purpose on commission; there is little point in speculating on the personal feelings of the poet towards the subject of his verse, a king who had shown great hostility to the poet and his family. *Hákonarflokkr* owes a literary debt to a long-standing skaldic tradition in Iceland, of composing encomia in honour of Norwegian kings. There is a particular debt to Snorri's *Háttatal* and this is indicated by verbal echoes. Lines 3–4 *Rínfúra vann rýrir/ Ribbunga hlut þungan* are reminiscent of *Háttatal* 64/5–6, *ruddisk land en ræsir Þr[ænda]/ Ribbungum skóp bana [þun]gan*, 'the land was cleared but the Thronds' chieftain [Skúli] gave the Ribbungs a heavy death' (Faulkes 1999: 28; 1987: 204). Apropos the gold-kenning *Rínfúrr* ('Rhine fire'), Guðrún Nordal (2001: 331–2) has observed that Sturla is the only thirteenth-century poet besides Snorri (who gives the legendary background to it in considerable detail in *Skáldskaparmál*) to use this type of gold-kenning, which is well attested in the poetry of the early skalds. Here, therefore, it may be seen as a conscious archaism.

From *Lilja*, stanzas 1, 4 and 98

Introduction. The final example comes from a skaldic poem of the mid-fourteenth century, *Lilja*, composed by an Icelandic monk named Eysteinn (possibly Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, who died in 1361). The poem is a *drápa* in the verse form *hrynhent* ('falling, flowing'), which had become more popular than *dróttkvætt* as the predominant metre of skaldic poetry in the fourteenth century. In earlier chapters we have noted that *hrynhent* was almost certainly a development influenced by medieval Latin verse, probably an attempt to imitate the falling trochaic metres of Latin hymns and sequences, and thus appropriate to vernacular Christian poetry. *Hrynhent* adds two syllables to the six-syllable line of *dróttkvætt* and tends to be end-stopped, with a regular, trochaic rhythm, which achieved considerable popularity in the late Middle Ages and beyond. It was often called *liljulag* ('Lily verse form') in Iceland, after this poem which furnished the most popular example of its use.[16]

Lilja is a complex poem and its hundred stanzas reveal the use of medieval number symbolism in its structure (Hill 1970), while its content is full of allusions to Christian doctrine. It is a poem of Christian salvation history, and it moves majestically from God's creation of the world and humans, through the main events of the Old Testament, to those of the life

[16] There is also an Icelandic saying attesting to the poem's popularity, that *öll skáld vildu Lilju kveðið hafa*, 'all poets would like to have composed *Lilja*'.

of Christ, concentrating especially on the role of the Virgin Mary and the events surrounding Christ's incarnation and birth, the sinful nature of mankind after the Fall of Adam and Eve and the role of the devil in leading them astray. The crucifixion, Christ's second coming and the necessity for penance, confession and contemplation in Christian spiritual life receive due attention, but the greatest emphasis lies on the role of the Virgin in entreating Christ for mercy for human sinners. The title of the poem indicates that it is dedicated to her.

Many scholars have discussed the various influences that went into the making of *Lilja*, and it is clear that Eysteinn was thoroughly anchored in a Christian Latin theological and rhetorical background. Hans Schottmann (1973: 202, 240–6) has made a study of *Lilja*'s likely sources and the author's familiarity with rhetorical figures, as have Erik Noreen (1926: 297) and Paul Lehmann (1936–7 II: 56), while Peter Foote (1984c) posits the influence of some of the later medieval rhetorical treatises on Eysteinn's many and various stanza structures and metrical and stylistic devices, especially the *Poetria nova* (*c*.1210) of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, which was probably the most influential of the thirteenth-century *artes poeticae* to teach poets how to use the 'colours' of rhetoric by the use of preceptive examples. Foote (1984c: 259–64) points out the probable influence of Geoffrey's discourse on the fall and redemption of mankind and the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve upon verses we find in *Lilja*, and the influence of Geoffrey and Matthew of Vendôme, whose *Ars versificatoria* of *c*.1175 is named in medieval Icelandic book inventories,[17] on Eysteinn's diversity of stylistic resources, which include direct speech, stychomythic question and answer, and many other devices which are hard to parallel in earlier skaldic verse.

In spite of its undoubted metrical, stylistic and conceptual complexity, however, *Lilja* achieved an overall effect of poetic simplicity and gained a reputation for stylistic limpidity and perspicacity, which is what lies at the bottom of the saying that every poet would have liked to compose it. This is a seeming paradox which requires examination. The simplicity is, in fact, more apparent than real and it is achieved through a highly conscious repudiation by the poet, in both the introductory and concluding stanzas, of the traditional stylistic and metrical complexity of skaldic poetry in favour of different kinds of complexity, which the poet does not really acknowledge. The text is taken from *Skj* BII: 390–416 (cf. *Skj* AII: 363–95).

[17] See Olmer 1902: 51 (no. 248, *Tobias glossatus*), 53 (no. 256, *Vita Thobiæ*) and 73; also Foote 1984c: 264.

1. Almáttigr guð, allra stétta
yfirbjóðandi engla ok þjóða,
ei þurfandi stað né stundir,
staði haldandi í kyrrleiks valdi,
senn verandi úti ok inni
uppi ok niðri ok þar í miðju,
lof sé þér um aldr ok æfi,
eining sǫnn í þrennum greinum.

Translation. Almighty God, ruling over all hosts of angels and peoples, not needing place nor time, keeping places in the power of tranquillity, being at the one time both outside and inside, above, below and in the middle, praise be to thee for [all] time and eternity, true unity in three divisions.

4. Fyrri menn, er fræðin kunnu
forn ok klók af heiðnum bókum,
slungin mjúkt af sínum kóngum
sungu lof með danskri tungu;
í þvílíku móður-máli
meir skyldumz ek en nǫkkurr þeira
hrærðan dikt með ástar-orðum
allsvaldanda kóngi at gjalda.

Translation. Men of earlier times, who learnt old and wise lore from heathen books, sang the praise of their kings, elegantly wrought, in the 'Danish' [i.e. Scandinavian] tongue. I, more than any of them, am obliged to give a poem composed in words of love in the same mother tongue to the all-ruling king.

98. Sá, er óðinn skal vandan velja,
velr svá mǫrg í kvæði at selja,
hulin fornyrðin, at trautt má telja,
tel ek þenna svá skilning dvelja;
vel því at hér má skýr orð skilja,
skili þjóðir minn ljósan vilja,
tal óbreytiligt veitt af vilja,
vil ek at kvæðit heiti Lilja.

Translation. He who has to compose a complex poem chooses to put so many obscure archaisms in [his] verse that one can hardly count them! I consider that this hinders comprehension. Since here you can well understand [my] clear words, people may understand my plain desire: this straightforward speech, presented with pleasure; I want the poem to be called *Lilja*.

Commentary. We see at once that, leaving aside the effects of the *hrynhent* metre, *Lilja* achieves a very different effect from pre-fourteenth-century skaldic poetry, even from Christian verse like *Harmsól* and *Plácitus drápa*. For a start, the poem contains almost no kennings and very few *heiti*. The word order and syntax are not fractured, as in much earlier skaldic poetry. These departures from earlier practice are what constitute Eysteinn's claim to clarity and simplicity in stanza 98. Furthermore, in stanza 4 Eysteinn contrasts his own role, as a Christian poet composing in the vernacular in praise of God, with poets of earlier times who praised secular kings. Interestingly, he refers to the source of their wisdom as 'heathen books', not oral tradition, thus showing how far he was from the traditions that he was repudiating.

At the same time that he was proclaiming himself the poet of clarity and simplicity, Eysteinn was actually using all kinds of rhetorical complexity of both a traditional and non-traditional kind. In stanza 98, for example, as Peter Foote has demonstrated by detailed analysis (1984c: 266), he uses the verse form *dunhent* ('echoing rhymed'), which involves a highly elaborate rhyme scheme, and there is elaborate word-play and sound-play, on such forms as *velr*/*vel*/*tel*/*skil*/*dvel*, with deliberate variation of *tel*/*telja*, *skilja*/*skili*, *vilja*/*vili* and so on. As Foote remarks (*ibid.*), 'this is a *tour de force* by which Eysteinn demonstrates how artful poetry can be without recourse to esoteric language', or *hulin fornyrðin*.[18]

Eysteinn was not alone in Iceland in his call for poetry to achieve clarity rather than obscurity in the manner of the older skalds, although he was the purest and most influential exponent of this theory. Other monastic or clerical poets did likewise, particularly the supporters of Bishop Guðmundr Arason. Abbot Arngrímr Brandsson (d. 1361) in his *Guðmundarkvæði*, composed in 1345, says he is avoiding *Eddu reglur* ('the rules of [Snorri's] *Edda*'), in his poem (2/1, *Skj* BII: 372), while the same note is struck, more explicitly, by Abbot Árni Jónsson at the conclusion of his *Guðmundardrápa* (stanza 78/1, *Skj* BII: 461), where he refers somewhat defensively to

[18] The phrase *hulin fornyrðin* recalls Snorri Sturluson's comment in his passage of advice to young poets in *Skáldskaparmál*, as it was probably intended to: *En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orðfjǫlða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja* þat er hulit er kveðit (Faulkes 1998 I: 5, my emphasis; for a translation see Chapter 8, under *Skáldskaparmál*). Snorri clearly considered obscure poetry a positive thing. Óláfr Þórðarson uses the slightly different phrase *folgit mál* ('concealed speech') in *M* (Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 85), which probably echoes another of Snorri's phrases *yrkja folgit* ('to compose with concealed meaning') (Faulkes 1998 I: 109), which he uses with reference to the figure *ofljóst*.

the fact that his poem will appear rather stiff (*allstirður*) to the masters of the skaldic art (*yfirmeisturum Eddu listar*).[19] It may be that one motivating factor for these men was their desire to communicate with like-minded clerics outside Iceland, particularly in Norway, where skaldic poetry was no longer appreciated nor, probably, well understood.[20] However, Christian ideology with its pressure to communicate using the *sermo humilis*, a plain style that conveyed the Christian message clearly and without embellishment, was the most important factor in turning Christian skalds who continued to use traditional verse forms from the obscure, allusive and riddling style followed by poets of the pre-Christian age and advocated by the grammatical treatises. The beginnings of this movement are already apparent in the twelfth century, as we have seen in Chapter 6 apropos Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*. And Kolbeinn Tumason's prayer to God clearly displays some of the limpid qualities that Christian skalds strove for, though he does not eschew the use of simple but effective kennings. Nor were they abandoned by a number of other fourteenth-century poets, whose verse still contains kennings for a considerable range of Christian topics, including God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the Virgin, various saints, priests and monks, angels, the Cross and numerous other subjects (see Wrightson 2001: 135–42).

[19] *Edda* in these phrases is likely to refer to the grammatical treatises, and especially to Snorri's *Edda*. The word *yfirmeistari* otherwise appears only in *Lilja* 51/1, where it is used of Christ.

[20] See Foote 1984c: 267, note 46 and references cited there.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Conclusion

> Hvárki á maðr at yrkja um mann lǫst né lof. *Grágás* K § 238, 'Um skáldskap' (normalised from Vilhjálmur Finsen 1974: 183)
>
> A man has no right to compose defamation or praise of anyone. (Dennis, Foote and Perkins 2000: 197)

This interesting statement opens the Old Icelandic law code *Grágás*'s discussion of poetry. While most of this section concerns defamation and the various penalties exacted for its practice, a modern reader may wonder why it begins by stating that a man has no right to compose either defamation or praise. Why mention praise here, which is laudatory of its subject? Why should a man not have an inherent right to compose it? The answer lies in one of the main themes of this book, that in Old Norse, and particularly Icelandic, society, poetry was never value-neutral and so was never free from an illocutionary or perlocutionary effect. Praising someone, just as much as blaming him, required social sanction and needed to be measured and appropriate. Praising someone inserted the poet into a particular social space, and also projected a particular social image of the poem's subject into society at large. This was as true of the situation at the Norwegian court as it was of that at an important man's farm in Iceland or of an individual's self-promotion or defence of his own actions. And poetry with Christian subject matter was not exempt from the social dynamic that bound a poet and his subject either, the difference being that God was its ultimate subject, though voicing praise of God in poetry often entailed the support and permission of powerful secular rulers or clergy.

In one sense the self-presentation of the poet and author Sturla Þórðarson in *Sturlu þáttr*, discussed in Chapter 10, provides a fitting note on which to conclude this book because it reinvigorates in a written medium the concept of the clever and eloquent Icelandic skald of the Viking Age, a poet who entertains his elite Norwegian audience with ease and vigour, not to speak of a little manipulation. We have seen, from a great many different

kinds of evidence, how highly this aspect of the poetic art was valued in medieval Iceland, and presumably, at least in the early centuries, in Norway as well. The 'aesthetic preference for complexity and puzzlement' (Faulkes 1997: 30), which we find most fully realised in the skaldic *dróttkvætt* poem, was, however, at least in Iceland and possibly also in Norway, not confined to the social elites but appears to have been more broadly based. If we are to believe Icelandic saga literature, individuals with no aristocratic pretensions could sometimes compose skaldic verse, and there are stanzas on a variety of subjects from a variety of persons within saga literature.

Thus the high intellectual value assigned to poetry in medieval Norway and its colonies, of which Iceland and the Orkneys were the most important in terms of poetic practice, resided in the whole society and not just in its elite, though the elite were arguably always the determiners of poetic taste and innovation. Its broad social base ensured the long life of traditional poetry in both eddic and skaldic measures, even after the introduction of Christianity and the availability of foreign literature. It ensured also that clerics in Iceland would compose Christian poetry in traditional skaldic measures, even though they gradually modified both diction and verse forms. Our first firmly datable *dróttkvætt* verse, on the Karlevi stone in Sweden, is usually assigned to *c.*1000, and some skaldic verse may be up to a century earlier; Eysteinn's *Lilja* comes from the middle of the fourteenth century and some skaldic verse was still being composed in the early fifteenth century. This gives the skaldic art a life span of about five hundred years, which is not bad *sub specie aeternitatis* for such a complex poetry.

A final measure of the central status of vernacular poetry in this society, and one with which this book has been particularly concerned, is the fact that Icelandic writers, several of whom were practising poets themselves, produced vernacular handbooks of vernacular poetics, thereby confirming the status of their native poetry not only to themselves but in comparison with the rhetorical and grammatical tradition of medieval European Latinity. There was a national pride at work in this endeavour, but the writers and poets had no difficulty in producing the evidence to support their position. We owe them and all those who recorded the poetry itself a debt of gratitude for the texts that allow us to see, even at the distance of some six hundred years, something of the richness of Old Norse poetry and poetics, a richness that is hard to parallel in any other medieval European culture.

I am confident that in a few years' time some of the statements and suggestions in this book will be superseded as a consequence of all the

work generated by the forthcoming new skaldic edition and by continuing research on the poetic treatises and their probable sources. The reader will find indications in many chapters of areas where new studies are urgently needed: in the kinds of poetry quoted in sagas of Icelanders and contemporary sagas and their role as socially purposeful performative speech acts; in the rhetoric and sources of Christian skaldic poetry; and in the poetry quoted in the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise*, to name just three. In spite of this book's status as, to some extent, a work in progress, I hope I have communicated the sense of excitement about Old Norse poetry and poetics as a major intellectual achievement of medieval Scandinavians, and Icelanders in particular, that those of us who work in this field currently experience. Building on the great work of publishing and surveying the Old Norse poetic corpus, which was carried out by scholars of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, such as Finnur Jónsson, Jón Helgason, Fredrik Paasche and Hans Kuhn, the period from the mid-1970s to the present has seen the steady opening up of the study of Old Norse poetry to literary analysis and other kinds of research among a wider readership, which includes specialists in other fields of early Scandinavian studies, such as history, archaeology and the history of religion. The beginning of this phase, which is still ongoing, was marked by the appearance of Peter Hallberg's literary survey of Norse poetry (1975), and the two anthologies of skaldic poetry published within two years of one another by Gabriel Turville-Petre (1976) and Roberta Frank (1978). These works, and Klaus von See's excellent German introduction to skaldic verse (1980), have now inspired two generations of scholars to study skaldic poetry in greater and more sophisticated detail. A number of those studies began as doctoral dissertations, some of which have still not been published, though their authors will, for the most part, publish versions of them for the new skaldic edition. I have tried, wherever possible, to refer to these dissertations and their findings in this book, especially as many of them took as their subjects the major Christian skaldic poems of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, a subject not seriously studied since the 1950s.

In the field of poetics, too, a great deal of illuminating research has been undertaken and published, yet there is also much about the so-called grammatical treatises that remains to be understood. We now have good recent critical editions of Snorri's *Edda* (Faulkes 1982, 1998, 1999), and the *First* and *Second Grammatical Treatises* (Hreinn Benediktsson 1972; Raschellà 1982), but, although Björn M. Ólsen's 1884 edition of the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises* was a pioneering work, and Krömmelbein's 1998 edition and translation of the *Third Treatise* is useful, a new

edition of both these treatises is urgently needed, one that will re-evaluate the manuscript evidence, trace as many of these writers' sources as securely as possible, and undertake detailed work on the poetry quoted in the treatises and the authors' interpretations of it. Valeria Micillo has a new edition of the *Third Grammatical Treatise* in preparation; we urgently need a new edition and study of the *Fourth*, which is the most neglected area of research into Old Icelandic poetics at the present time. Above all, the Old Icelandic grammatical literature needs to be made more accessible to scholars of medieval European poetics and grammatical rhetoric generally, so that the undoubted importance of this corpus of texts may be recognised more widely.

APPENDIX

Snorri Sturluson's View of Figurative Language

Medieval schoolbooks normally dealt fairly briefly with the subject of poetic diction. Their standard procedure was to list the rhetorical figures and tropes (*figurae et tropi*) of Latin literature and to exemplify them briefly with citations from major poets, both classical and, after Bede, Christian. Figures and tropes were conventionally regarded by medieval grammarians as ornaments of poetic diction rather than integral features, an essentially superficial view that did not really suit a discussion of the nature of skaldic poetry, where kennings and *heiti* were fundamental to the practice of the skalds and formed a distinctive poetic metalanguage. Another conventional medieval attitude to poetic language, which we see influencing both Snorri's work and the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises*, was to evaluate figures and tropes in terms of a classical sense of decorum and then to classify them as stylistic virtues or vices, depending on whether they ornamented the poem harmoniously in accordance with what was regarded as natural or not. Fundamental, also, was an understanding of the nature of the process by which figurative language operates. Figurative language caused a problem for medieval poetic theory, as it was seen as in a sense 'unnatural'. The standard explanation, which was to be found in all elementary grammatical treatises, was that every word had its own 'proper' (*proprius*) meaning, which is what we would call the 'literal' sense of a word. This was conceived of as singular, that is, there was thought to be a one-to-one relationship between a word and its meaning, whereas, as modern semantics tells us, many words in human languages have several senses in common usage. When a word is used in a metaphorical or figurative sense it clearly assumes a different meaning from its literal counterpart, though the two are related; the standard medieval explanation for this new meaning was that the word had taken on a meaning that was not really its own, that is, it had assumed for the moment an 'improper' (*improprius*) sense.

Óláfr Þórðarson translates what the late classical grammarian Donatus

has to say on the subject of the trope with its transferred meaning from a 'proper' to an 'improper' sense in chapter 16, *de tropo et metaphoræ*, of his *Third Grammatical Treatise*:

> Tropus er framfœring einnar sagnar af eiginligri merking til óeiginligrar merkingar með nǫkkuri líking fyrir fegrðar sakir eða nauðsynjar. (Normalised from the edition of Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 100)
>
> *Tropus* is the transfer of one word from its proper meaning to an improper meaning with a certain similarity, for the sake of [stylistic] beauty or out of necessity.

He then goes on to talk of various kinds of trope, including *metaphora*, which he sees as the fundamental trope of the Old Norse kenning system, claiming:

> Með þessi fígúru eru samansettar allar kenningar í norrœnum skáldskap, ok hon er mjǫk svá upphaf til skáldskaparmáls. (Normalised from Björn M. Ólsen 1884: 104)
>
> All kennings of Norse poetry are composed with this figure, which is thus virtually the origin of poetic diction.

I have examined Óláfr's analysis of skaldic poetry in terms of this and other Latin figures in Chapter 9, but it is important to recognise that he is working with a definition of metaphorical diction which characterises figurative language as a kind of 'add-on' to discourse, and one that is justified only in certain circumstances, that is, to introduce stylistic beauty and in cases of what the textbooks call 'necessity'.

Snorri Sturluson's theorising about skaldic diction in both *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal* also shows the influence of this approach to figurative language, though he nowhere states it as plainly as Óláfr does, nor does he quote any Latin source. However, there are some important differences between Snorri's and Óláfr's understanding of the subject, which are crucial to their respective presentations of the Old Norse kenning. Unlike Óláfr, who sees the trope *metaphora* as the basis of the kenning and the foundation of *skáldskapr*, Snorri resists metaphorical explanations of kenning types, even when it seems obvious to a modern analysis that they are based on metaphorical equivalences. For example, in his discussion of kenning types for men and women in *Skáldskaparmál*, he uses an elaborate etymological argument to deny, in effect, that a metaphorical equivalence

between humans and trees lies at the basis of the numerous kennings for men and women in skaldic poetry that use a tree name as base word:[1]

> Hvernig skal kenna mann? Hann skal kenna við verk sín, þat er hann veitir eða þiggr eða gerir . . . . Hvernig skal hann kenna við þessa hluti? Svá at kalla hann vinnanda eða fremjanda eða ⟨til⟩ fara sinna eða athafnar . . . . Ok fyrir því at hann er reynir vápnanna ok viðr víganna — alt eitt ok vinnandi; viðr heitir ok tré, reynir heitir tré — af þessum heitum hafa skáldin kallat menn ask eða hlyn, lund eða ǫðrum viðar heitum karlkendum ok kent til víga eða skipa eða fjár. (Faulkes 1998 I: 40)

> How shall a man be referred to? He shall be referred to by his actions, what he gives or receives or does . . . . How shall he be referred to by these things? By calling him achiever or performer of his expeditions or activities . . . . And because he is a trier (*reynir*) of the weapons and doer (*viðr*) of the killings, which is the same thing as achiever — *viðr* is also a word for tree, there is a tree called *reynir* [rowan] — on the basis of these terms poets have called men ash or maple, *lund* [grove, tree] or other masculine tree-names and made reference to killings or ships or wealth. (Faulkes 1987: 94)

More significantly, Snorri's actual definitions of the basic categories of skaldic diction allow very little scope or importance to what we would call metaphorical language. He seems unwilling to recognise the power of the creative imagination in his theorising, though at the same time he gives ample evidence of his understanding of the practice of skaldic creativity in his mythic narratives and quoted poetic examples. My own view (see Clunies Ross 1987 and Chapter 8 of this book) is that his overarching presentation of the pre-Christian myths and religion of the Scandinavians as in a certain sense 'true', even if limited, and of skaldic poetry as the verbal expression of these beliefs, caused Snorri to reach for an explanation of the diction of that poetry as also 'true' in the sense that it was non-metaphorical, given that the standard medieval grammatical definition of the trope was that it was a 'transfer of one word from its proper meaning to an improper meaning'. This did not accord well with Snorri's presentation of Norse myth and poetry in the *Edda* as providing insights into the conceptual world of the pagan Scandinavians.

Snorri's definitions of the categories of poetic language occur at various points in the text of *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal* and there has been considerable debate about their meaning, including discussion about whether they

[1] This matter is discussed more fully in Clunies Ross 1987: 107–10.

relate to particular technical terms in the Latin grammatical literature.[2] The definitions he uses are set out in Table 4 with the key terms italicised.

Table 4. Snorri Sturluson's terms for categories of poetic diction

Location references are to pages and lines in Faulkes 1998 and 1999; translation follows Faulkes 1987 with some modifications.

Skáldskaparmál, ch. 1, 5/17–24 [Bragi describes the three categories (*grein*) of poetic language.] 'Svá: *at nefna hvern hlut sem heitir*; ǫnnur grein er sú er heitir *fornǫfn*; in þriðja málsgrein er kǫlluð er *kenning*, ok ⟨er⟩ sú grein svá sett at vér kǫllum Óðin eða Þór eða Týr eða einnhvern af ásum eða álfum, at hverr þeira er ek nefni til, þá tek ek með *heiti* af eign annars Ássins eða get ek hans verka nokkvorra. Þá eignask hann nafnit en eigi hinn er nefndr var . . .'	'Thus: to call everything by its name; the second category is the one called replacement; the third category of language is what is called kenning [?description], and this category is so constructed that we speak about Óðinn or Þórr or Týr or one of the gods or elves in such a way that, for each of them that I mention, I add a simplex from the characteristics of another god or I mention some deed or other of his. Then the latter becomes the owner of the name and not the one who was named . . .'
Skáldskaparmál, ch. 33, 41/7–17 'Nú er þessi saga til þess hvaðan af þat er, gull er kallat eldr eða ljós eða birti Ægis, Ránar eða Ægis dœtra. Ok af þeim *kenningum* er nú svá sett at gull er kallat eldr sævar ok allra hans *heita*, svá sem Ægir eða Rán eigu heiti við sæinn.	'Now this [just narrated] is the story of how it came about that gold is called fire or light or brightness of Ægir, Rán or Ægir's daughters. And from those kennings the practice has now developed of calling gold fire of the sea and of all its appellations, just as Ægir and Rán are also names for the sea.

[2] See Brodeur 1952, Halldór Halldórsson 1975, Clunies Ross 1987, Faulkes 1998 I: xxv–xxxvii and in various notes and glosses to the text of *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998) and *Háttatal* (1999).

Ok þaðan af er nú gull kallat eldr vatna eða á ok allra árheita. En þessi heiti hafa svá farit sem ǫnnur ok kenningar, at hin yngri skáld hafa ort eptir dœmum hinna gǫmlu skálda, svá sem stóð í þeira kvæðum, en sett síðan út í hálfur þær er þeim þóttu líkar við þat er fyrr var ort, svá sem vatnit er sænum en áin vatninu en lœkr ánni. *Því er þat kallat nýgervingar alt er út er sett heiti lengra en fyrr finnsk*, ok þykkir þat vel alt er með líkindum ferr eða eðli.'

And hence gold is now called fire of lakes or rivers and of all river-names. But it has happened with these terms and kennings as with others, that the more recent poets have composed in imitation of the ancient poets, as things were in their poems, and then extended into areas that they thought similar to what had earlier been included in poetry, as lake is to sea, and river to lake, and stream to river. This is therefore called innovation when terminology is extended further in meaning than there are earlier examples of, and this is all considered acceptable when it is in accordance with probability or the nature of things.'

Skáldskaparmál, ch. 54, 83/113–14

'Hvernig er *ókend setni⟨n⟩g skáldskapar*? *Svá at nefna hvern hlut sem heitir*. Hver eru *ókend heiti skáldskaparins*? Hann heitir bragr ok hróðr . . .'

'What is the rule for poetry without periphrasis? To call each thing by its name. What are the unperiphrased names of poetry? It is called poem (*bragr*) and praise (*hróðr*) . . .'

Skáldskaparmál, ch. 67–8, 107/12–108/5

Enn eru þau heiti er menn láta ganga fyrir nǫfn manna. Þat kǫllum vér *viðkenningar* eða *sannkenningar* eða *fornǫfn*. Þat eru *viðkenningar at nefna annan hlut réttu nafni* ok kalla þann er hann vill nefna eiganda eða svá at kalla hann þess er hann nefndi fǫður eða afa; ái er hinn þriði . . . . Þessi heiti kǫllum vér viðkenningar ok svá þótt maðr sé kendr við bœ sinn eða skip sitt þat er nafn á eða eign sína þá er einkarnafn er gefit. *Þetta kǫllum vér sannkenningar* at kalla mann speki-

There are also those terms that are put in place of men's names. We call these *viðkenningar* [circumlocutions] or *sannkenningar* [(true) descriptions] or *fornǫfn* [substitutions]. They are circumlocutions when one names something else by its normal name, and one calls the person that one wants to refer to its possessor; or when one calls the person the father or grandfather of the one that has been named. The third relationship is great-grandfather . . . . We call these terms circumlocutions, as also if a man is referred to by his dwelling or his ship, when it has a name, or by one of his possessions when it is given a proper name. We call them descriptions (*sann-*

mann, ætlunarmann, orðspeking, ráðsnilling, auðmilding, óslœkinn, gæimann, glæsimann. *Þetta eru fornǫfn.*	*kenningar*) when men are called sage, thinker, rhetorician, mentor, munificent one, unsluggish, heedful man, dandy. These are substitutions.
Þessi eru kvinna *heiti ókend* í skáldskap: Víf ok brúðr . . . Kona er ok kǫlluð beðja, mála, rún⟨a⟩ búanda síns ok er þat *viðrkenning*.	The following are non-periphrastic terms for women in poetry. Wife and bride . . . A woman is also known as bedfellow, gossip, confidante of her husband, and this is circumlocution.

Háttatal, chs 1–6, pp. 5–7

‘Hvern⟨i⟩g skal breyta háttunum ok halda sama hætti? Svá: *at kenna eða styðja eða reka eða sannkenna eða yrkja at nýgjǫrvingum*	‘How may the verse forms be varied and the same form kept? By using kennings [periphrastic descriptions] or *stuðning* [support] or extended kennings or literal kennings or by composing with extended metaphors . . . .
Kenningar eru með þrennum háttum greindar: fyrst heita *kenningar*, annat *tvíkent*, þriðja *rekit*. Þat er kenning at kalla fleinbrak orrostu, en þat er tvíkent at kalla fleinbraks ⟨fúr⟩ sverðit, en þá er rekit ef lengra er	Kennings are distinguished by three kinds of usage: first there are simple kennings, second double, third extended. It is a kenning to call battle ‘spear-clash’, and it is a double kenning to call a sword ‘fire of the spear-clash’, and it is extended if there are more elements . . . .
Hvat eru *sannkenningar*? . . . Þat er sannkenning at styðja svá orðit með sǫnnu efni, svá at kalla stinn sárin, þvíat hǫfug eru sár stór; en rétt er mælt at þróask . . . [three kinds of *sannkenning* are then enumerated]	What are literal kennings [descriptions]? . . . It is a literal description when the word is supported with a literal epithet like this, for instance to call wounds severe, because great wounds are heavy; and it is correct to say that they increase. . . .
Hvat eru *nýgjǫrvingar*? . . . Þat eru nýgjǫrvingar at kalla sverðit orm ok kenna rett, en slíðrirnar gǫtur hans, en fetlana ok umgjǫrð hams hans. Þat heldr til ormsins nátturu at hann skríðr ór hamsi svá at hann skríðr mjǫk til vatns. Hér er svá sett nýgjǫrving at hann	What are extended metaphors? . . . These are extended metaphors when one calls a sword a snake and uses an appropriate determinant, and calls the scabbard its path and the straps and fittings its slough. It is in accordance with a snake’s nature that it glides out of its slough and then often glides to water. Here the metaphor is so constructed that the snake goes to find the

ferr leita blóðs bekkjar at þar er hann skríðr hugar stígu, þat er brjóst manna. Þá þykkja nýgjǫrvingar vel kveðnar ef þat mál er upp tekit haldi of alla vísulengð. En ef sverð er ormr kallaðr, ⟨en síðan⟩ fiskr eða vǫndr eða annan veg breytt, þat kalla menn *nykrat*, ok þykkir þat spilla.'

stream of blood where it glides along the path of thought, i.e. men's breasts. Metaphors are held to be well composed if the idea that is taken up is maintained throughout the stanza. But if a sword is called a snake, and then a fish or a wand or varied in some other way, this is called a monstrosity, and it is considered a defect.'

We may say, looking at all these passages, that they differentiate two basic kinds of poetic diction, single words, to which the name *heiti* or *ókend heiti* is sometimes given, and periphrastic descriptions, which usually comprise more than one word or are compound nouns. The basic term for a periphrasis in Snorri's *Edda* is *kenning* (or *kend heiti*) a noun formed from the Icelandic verb *kenna* ('to recognise, describe, teach'). It is not known whether this word was a traditional term for skaldic periphrases or whether Snorri developed a new meaning for the noun. I have argued elsewhere (Clunies Ross 1987: 50–9, 177–9) that the noun in Snorri's usage conveys the sense that the kenning is a term applied to a referent in recognition of its essential qualities and — paradoxically — the true qualities of the base word and determinant from which the kenning is constructed, in terms of their relationship to the referent itself.

There are several other terms Snorri introduces in *Skáldskaparmál* to refer to special kinds of periphrasis, *viðkenning* and *sannkenning* being the principal ones, and *fornafn* (pl. *fornǫfn*) another. The term *viðkenning* is discussed only once (in passage 4); the other two terms appear in several places. Although there has been a good deal of controversy about the interpretation of these three terms, particularly *viðkenning* and *fornafn*, it is clear that all three must refer to alternative terms for human beings or for supernatural beings, that is, they are substitutes for proper nouns. In presenting these categories as in some ways special, Snorri may have been influenced by medieval grammatical theory, which held that proper names were significantly different from common nouns in the way they conveyed meaning (Clunies Ross 1987: 64–79). Some scholars think that the term *fornafn*, which Snorri uses once in *Háttatal* in the grammatical sense of a pronoun, may be an Icelandic calque on the Latin *pronomen* (Clunies Ross 1987: 64–79; 1993b). In these extracts, he clearly uses the term in a stylistic sense rather than a grammatical one, and he may have been aware of

classical and medieval grammarians' views (which are of course wrong) that pronouns could only replace proper nouns, not common ones. Another opinion is that Snorri intended *fornafn* to reflect the Latin rhetorical term *pronominatio* (which could also be called *antonomasia*), which is a descriptive epithet or phrase referring to an individual by his family connections instead of by his proper name (Halldór Halldórsson 1975: 25–7). To call the god Baldr *Óðins sonr* ('Óðinn's son') would be an example of this kind.

Snorri appears to use the term *sannkenning* in two different ways. In passage 4 he uses *sannkenning* to refer to a series of compounded descriptive terms (which must give accurate or true pictures of their referents), like *orðspekingr* ('word-wise man') for a skilful speaker. In passage 5, from *Háttatal*, *sannkenningar* are descriptive adjectives or adverbs which augment the meaning of a noun, like '*great* wounds'; here the *sannkenning* is said to support the noun 'with true material' (*með sǫnnu efni*). In each case, the *sannkenning* brings out the 'true' or innate, essential qualities of a referent, though by different means.

It can be inferred from this analysis that neither Snorri's basic categories *ókend heiti*/*heiti* and *kend heiti*/*kenning*, nor the other categories discussed so far depend on an opposition between metaphorical and non-metaphorical language, or tropes and non-tropes. However, as I have suggested earlier, his very categorisations themselves indicate that he wished to see the relationships between entitites of the natural and cultural worlds encoded in skaldic diction as 'true' in the sense that he claimed for pagan lore in the Prologue. There is one of his categories, however, that seems to admit certain, limited kinds of metaphorical discourse to skaldic practice. This is the term *nýgjǫrving* (or *nýgerving*), literally 'new creation', which occurs in passage 2 from *Skáldskaparmál* and again in passage 5 from *Háttatal*. In his English translation (1987), Faulkes gives the word 'allegory' for this term, but my own view is that 'innovation' is closer to the mark in passage 2, while in passage 5 it approximates to 'extended metaphor'.

In passage 2 Snorri wishes to show his awareness of the fact that the practice of skalds changed over time, and that younger poets have extended the field of reference of certain kenning types for common nouns by using words from a wider semantic field, while still keeping to the sense of the original kenning type. He makes this observation after telling a story to explain why it is that gold can be called Ægir's fire. He notes that in this kind of kenning, various words for 'water' can be substituted for the word 'sea' (or its personification, Ægir), and various words for kinds of flame for the base word 'fire'. *Nýgjǫrving* here seems to mean something like

'extension of a kenning element's semantic field while still keeping its basic sense value'. We may note also that Snorri approves of this semantic stretching as long as it is done in accordance with probability or the nature of things (*með líkindum . . . eða eðli*), an observation that is reminiscent again of his view that skaldic diction must be 'true' to its referents.

In passage 5 *nýgjǫrving* describes another way of extending the meaning of a kenning, not by extending the semantic fields of its components, but by developing the metaphorical equation between a base word and a kenning referent (the example Snorri gives is to call a sword a snake) in one or more additional kennings which 'stretch' the equivalence of base word and referent. He says one could call a sword, say, 'snake of the arm' (he does not propose an actual determinant), and then, in a second kenning, call the sword's scabbard the 'snake's' path, and then develop this further by saying that the 'snake' 'goes to find the stream of blood where it glides along the path of thought, i.e. men's breasts'. Faulkes's translation of 'allegory' is more appropriate to this kind of usage, though it is still not entirely appropriate, as allegory almost always involves personification and the maintenance of two levels of meaning in a narrative over a much longer part of a literary work than a single stanza, which is what is envisaged here. There is no doubt that Snorri is here describing elaborate extended metaphors, though he does not say so in so many words. It seems quite likely that he writes here with the medieval definition of a trope in mind, which allows such transferences of meaning when beauty or necessity require it. The fact that he then comments that *nýgjǫrvingar* are 'held to be well composed if the idea that is taken up is maintained throughout the stanza' suggests that he is influenced by classical ideas of decorum, such as those enunciated in Horace's *Ars poetica* and repeated by many medieval rhetoricians, rather than by skaldic practice (see Clunies Ross 1987: 76–7, 186). Snorri terms the opposite practice (common among skalds) of switching comparisons, calling a sword now a snake, then a fish or a wand, *nykrat*, that is, 'monstrosity' (a *nykr* being a water-monster) and says it is considered a defect.

To conclude, then, Snorri's basic categories of poetic diction contrast non-compounded and compounded terms. The latter category, the kennings, are further differentiated when they refer to proper nouns. On all levels of the *Edda*, in his technical terminology, his prescriptive examples of kenning types and in his exemplary, mythic stories, Snorri stresses the closeness of skaldic poetry to actual probability and truthfulness of the 'real' world, and, except for his discussion of *nýgjǫrvingar* in *Háttatal*, does not describe any clearly metaphoric process. We may say that,

although he understood the metaphorical processes of the skaldic art, at least intuitively, and as a practitioner himself, he does not choose to allow for them in his *Edda*. Thus it would seem that his perspective is more that of a Christian mythographer or perhaps a philosopher of language, intent upon explaining the language of Scandinavian poetry in terms of his overarching hypothesis about pagan religion, than that of a medieval grammarian in the sense of the popular schoolroom works of Donatus and Priscian.

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