

# ‘HEILIR ÞEIRS HLÝDDU’

Skaldic Audiences in Old Norse Saga Literature



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I, John Benjamin Chennells, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how audiences of Old Norse skaldic poetry are depicted in the corpus of prosimetric sagas composed primarily in Iceland between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Reading against the prevailing marginalisation of these groups in both medieval and modern thinking, it demonstrates the idiosyncratic functions of skaldic audiences in different literary environments. In doing so, the thesis shows how the social acts of performing and spectating are conceptualised and used by saga authors, and ultimately how these literary models of skaldic reception are conducive towards historical perspectives on prosimetric saga entertainment.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for the investigation, reviewing previous scholarship on the reception of skaldic poetry, and especially the regularity with which scholars have discounted saga evidence from research on the subject. The following analysis is structured primarily according to the relationships between skaldic performers and their audiences, and secondarily according to the types of utterance that skalds deliver. In chapter 2, I examine how Scandinavian rulers are portrayed responding to praise, criticism, and jesting from court poets, and show how such episodes interrogate the communal and competitive aspects of court life. In chapter 3, I consider skaldic insults, challenges, and threats, and the ways in which these utterance-types contrive and enact corresponding physical and poetic violence on their receivers. In chapter 4, I turn to saga authors' portrayal and use of skaldic love-verse, and especially how skalds attempt to influence their lovers through poetic performance. I illustrate parallels between this dynamic and the apostrophised 'lady' of skaldic convention, and demonstrate how female audiences are afforded greater agency in sagas. In chapter 5, I conduct case studies of two episodes set beyond skaldic poetry's geographic and cultural centres. I show how these instances of intercultural exchange between a skaldic performer and an audience allow saga authors to reappraise the cultural and socio-political functions of skaldic poetry.

## Impact Statement

The style of Old Norse poetry known as ‘skaldic’ is notoriously complex. The artform’s rigid metrical structure forced its medieval composers to produce knotty riddle-like verses, convoluted both in word order and in their complex metaphors which jam together disparate images. At the same time, skaldic poetry was originally practised almost exclusively via the medium of oral performance. The co-existence of these two aspects makes the audiences of skaldic poetry an intriguing proposition for research: how would these groups possibly have understood such a complex form of poetry in the moment of a single performance?

Researchers have struggled to find adequate ways to address this issue. There is on one hand a deficiency of audience-related information in the medieval sources, and on the other a host of reductive and long-standing trends in thinking about audiences that make them difficult and potentially unappealing to study. My research represents a spirited response to these points. It re-assesses and enlivens the body of primary evidence provided by saga literature, which has long and unfairly been discounted from scholarly conversations on this subject. Through a sustained focus on this material, my research paves the way towards greater understanding and appreciation of audiences both in Old Norse contexts and otherwise.

Within the academic sphere, I have disseminated my research by presenting papers at UCL’s Medieval Scandinavia seminar, the International Medieval Congress (Leeds), the International Saga Conference (Helsinki and Tallinn), and the International St Magnus Symposium (Orkney). The paper I presented in Orkney was based on the research in section 5.1 of my thesis, and is due to be published in a forthcoming collection of essays on Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson, earl of Orkney. By focusing on the performance-related aspects of Old Norse poetry, my thesis also draws on research areas that I have published on previously, as exemplified in my peer-reviewed article on ‘Transformations of Physical Space and Mental State in Performances of Eddic Poetry’, published in *Saga-Book* in 2022. These publications will ensure the ongoing impact of my research in academic circles.

I have also explored ways of directing my research towards public-facing endeavours. In 2023, I co-organised the latest iteration of the triennial conference on ‘Old Norse Poetry in Performance’ (ONPiP). Since its inception in 2016, this Oxford-based event has placed special emphasis on the value of producing dialogues between scholars and performance practitioners. At the latest event, I used my research as the basis for a joint performance with

Pétur Húni Björnsson, as part of which I facilitated a conversation about a skaldic poem between its performer (Pétur) and the group of academics and dramaturgs in the theatre audience. This event showed not only the value of drawing on the experiences of real audience members for the purposes of academic research, but also how academic research of this kind can be made communicable and beneficial to practitioners in the performing arts. In the context of the ongoing popularity of Old Norse subject matter in global media, engagement with practice-centred forums like ONPiP represents a promising means for using my research in artistic and cultural sectors.

## Acknowledgements

A page or two of A4 rarely suffices to convey the full impact that friends, family, and colleagues have on one's life and work. Although the same will inevitably be true in my case, I am extremely grateful to have been surrounded by a fantastic group of people while researching and writing my thesis, and to be able to offer my thanks to a few of them here.

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## Abbreviations

<i>ANF</i>	<i>Arkiv för nordisk filologi</i>
<i>Eddukvæði 1–2</i>	<i>Eddukvæði</i> , ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 2 vols (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014)
<i>Flat 1–3</i>	<i>Flateyjarbok: En samling af norske konge-sagaer</i> , ed. by C. R. Unger and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, Norske historiske kildeskriftfonds Skrifter, 4, 3 vols (Christiania [Oslo]: Mallings, 1860–68)
<i>FN 1–3</i>	<i>Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda</i> , ed. by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 3 vols (Reykjavik: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1943–44)
<i>ÍF 1</i>	<i>Íslendingabók, Landnámabók</i> , ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968)
<i>ÍF 2</i>	<i>Egils saga</i> , ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, 2 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933)
<i>ÍF 3</i>	<i>Borgfirðinga sögur</i> , ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 3 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1938)
<i>ÍF 6</i>	<i>Vestfirðinga sögur</i> , ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 6 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943)
<i>ÍF 7</i>	<i>Grettis saga</i> , ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1936)
<i>ÍF 8</i>	<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i> , ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 8 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939)
<i>ÍF 9</i>	<i>Eyfirðinga sögur</i> , ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 9 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1956)
<i>ÍF 10</i>	<i>Ljósvetninga saga</i> , ed. by Björn Sigfússon, Íslenzk fornrit, 10 (Reykjavik: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1940)



ÍF 12	<i>Brennu-Njáls saga</i> , ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954)
ÍF 13	<i>Harðar saga</i> , ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 13 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1991)
ÍF 14	<i>Kjalnesinga saga</i> , ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 14 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1959)
ÍF 15	<i>Biskupa sögur I</i> , ed. by Sigurgeir Steingrímsson and others, Íslenzk fornrit, 15, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2002–03)
ÍF 23–24	<i>Morkinskinna</i> , ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 23–24, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2011)
ÍF 26–28	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Heimskringla</i> , ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 26–28, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941–51)
ÍF 29	<i>Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum</i> , <i>Fagrskinna: Noregs konunga tal</i> , ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 29 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1985)
ÍF 34	<i>Orkneyinga saga</i> , ed. by Finnbogi Guðmundsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 34 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1965)
ÍF 35	<i>Danakonunga sögur</i> , ed. by Bjarni Guðnason, Íslenzk fornrit, 35 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1982)
JEGP	<i>The Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
MS(S)	Manuscript(s)
SkP 1	Whaley, Diana, ed., <i>Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035</i> , <i>Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages</i> , 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012)

<i>SkP 2</i>	Gade, Kari Ellen, ed., <i>Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300</i> , Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009)
<i>SkP 3</i>	Gade, Kari Ellen, and Edith Marold, eds, <i>Poetry from Treatises on Poetics</i> , Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017)
<i>SkP 5</i>	Clunies Ross, Margaret, Kari Ellen Gade, and Tarrin Wills, eds, <i>Poetry in Sagas of Icelanders</i> , Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022)
<i>SkP 7</i>	Clunies Ross, Margaret, ed., <i>Poetry on Christian Subjects</i> , Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007)
<i>SkP 8</i>	Clunies Ross, Margaret, ed., <i>Poetry in 'Fornaldarsögur'</i> , Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017)
<i>VMS</i>	<i>Viking and Medieval Scandinavia</i>
VSNR	Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London

## A Note on Editions, Translations, and Names

When quoting skaldic poetry exclusively, I use the editions published in the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages series (*SkP*). Passages of saga prose are mostly taken from the Íslenzk fornrit series (*ÍF*). Where I quote passages of saga prose that incorporate skaldic verse, I retain the *ÍF* edition of the verse and note the *SkP* edition alongside any significant discrepancies between the two. All quotations retain indications of editorial intervention where these are provided in the primary materials. Where manuscript material is cited, I footnote the manuscript's repository location, repository name, collection, and shelfmark.

All translations are my own, although they have regularly benefited from those of other scholars. Regarding the personal names of medieval rulers, I use only Old Norse versions (e.g. Aðalráðr, not Æthelred; Knútr, not Cnut) in recognition of the fact that I am working not with historical personages, but with literary depictions of said personages. Translations of epithets and periods of reign are provided in parentheses on each ruler's first appearance in the text.

# 1 Introduction

Nú eru Háva mál kveðin  
Háva hǫllu í,  
allþorǫf ýta sonum,  
óþorǫf jǫtna sonum.  
Heill sá er kvað!  
Heill sá er kann!  
Njóti sá er nam!  
Heilir þeirs hlýddu!<sup>1</sup>

(*Eddukvæði* 1, p. 355: ‘Now have the sayings of Hávi [“High One” = Óðinn] been spoken in Hávi’s hall, very helpful to the sons of men, unhelpful to the sons of giants. Good luck to the one who spoke! Good luck to the one who knows! Let the one who learned benefit! Good luck to those who listened!’)

In this concluding stanza of *Hávamál* (*Eddukvæði* 1, pp. 322–55), the speaker makes an unusual choice. With the poem’s eclectic and, as David Evans notes, occasionally ‘bewildering’ body of gnomic wisdom and lore still lingering in the air, the speaker opts to ground the piece in the moment of its performance, dedicating its final words to the audience.<sup>2</sup> That this choice is atypical in the context of the Old Norse poetic corpus is indicated by its close parallel in the final stanza of *Hugsvinnsmál* (*SkP* 7, pp. 358–449, see p. 448), which is exceptional enough for several commentators to indicate the probability of influence between the two works.<sup>3</sup> In this light, *Hávamál*’s concluding remark represents a rare insight into the perception of audiences in the minds of Old Norse poets.

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<sup>1</sup> Following numerous other editors, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason emend MS ‘ýta’ (‘of men’) to ‘jǫtna’ (l. 4: ‘of giants’), a change prompted by the marginal notation of the latter word by a younger hand in the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (composed c. 1260–80). See further discussion of this semantic alteration in Judy Quinn, ‘Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry’, in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations, and Their Implications*, ed. by Slavica Rankovic, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal, Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy, 20 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), pp. 183–226 (pp. 213–14) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/M.USML-EB.3.4283>>; Judy Quinn, ‘The Editing of Eddic Poetry’, in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*, ed. by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 58–71 (pp. 68–69) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316471685.004>>. MS details: Reykjavík, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, GKS 2365 4to.

<sup>2</sup> *Hávamál*, ed. by David A. H. Evans (London: VSNR, 1986), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. John McKinnell, ‘The Making of *Hávamál*’, *VMS*, 3 (2007), 75–115 (pp. 90–91) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.2.302720>>. See further Klaus von See, ‘Disticha Catonis und *Hávamál*’, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 94 (1972), 1–18 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/bgsl.1972.1972.94.1>>; Hermann Pálsson, *Áhrif Hugsvinnsmála á aðrar fornþókmennitir*, *Studia Islandica*, 43 (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1985).

One notes immediately that the concept of ‘audience’ is itself relatively amorphous here. There is no single word for ‘audience’ in Old Norse. Instead, the *Hávamál* poet illustrates the concept via the phrase ‘þeirs hlýddu’ (l. 8: ‘those who listened’). Innocuous at first glance, these two words nonetheless speak to a whole history of limited perspectives on audiences. To begin with, the use of the verb *hlýða* (‘to listen’) is in keeping with how audiences have typically been conceptualised across time. The word ‘audience’ derives from the Latin verb *audire* (‘to listen’), and a similar centring of sound is implied by the term *áheyrendur*, as ‘audience’ is expressed in Modern Icelandic.<sup>4</sup> By focusing myopically on aural aspects, each of these terms neglects the range of other embodied experiences and social interactions that comprise the act of spectating. The commonly upheld characteristic of listening, alongside that of watching, also associates audiences with passivity, portraying them as one-way consumers of experience rather than fundamental contributors to and creators of the social space of performance, as scholars of the subject persistently highlight.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside audience (in)action stands the issue of audience identity. In *Hávamál*’s case, this is signalled by the word ‘þeirs’, an enclitic comprising the conjunction *er* (‘who’, ‘which’; older form *es*) suffixed to the demonstrative plural pronoun *þeir* (‘those ones’). Signifying an anonymous collective, the use of *þeir* by the *Hávamál* poet is also in keeping with customary conceptualisations of audiences. In modern idiom, it is common to hear references to ‘the audience’, applicable not just to musical or dramatic performance, but to essentially any kind of consumable media, including literature, visual art, television, film,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., the widely discussed concept of actor-spectator ‘co-presence’ in Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 3; Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, trans. by Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 32 <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203894989>>; Philip Auslander, ‘Live and Technologically Mediated Performance’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. by Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 107–19 (pp. 110–12) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521874014.008>>; Caroline Heim, *Audience as Performer: The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Matthew Reason and others, ‘The Paradox of Audiences’, in *Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, ed. by Matthew Reason and others (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 1–16 (p. 11).

public speeches, and so on. This singular noun is a convenient shorthand; individual audience members are often uncountable and unknowable, and are consequently sublimated into a homogenous group in everyday language. Since most forms of consumable media, including orally derived poems like *Hávamál*, are intended for re-consumption beyond their immediate contexts of production, this shorthand is usually a reasonable one. In most cases, how can artists and creators possibly describe with precision or certainty the identities of their future audiences, let alone the many shadowed faces in the auditorium before them? Equally, however, scholars are rightly and recurrently critical about the prevailing ‘monolithising’ of audiences, to borrow Lynne Conner’s term.<sup>6</sup> The negation of individual experience and subjecthood implicit within ‘the audience’ as a fixed expression is, as Conner shows, undoubtedly something to be opposed, especially when one considers that marginalised communities are most likely to be the subjects of such reductive treatment.

Even in saluting ‘þeirs hlýddu’, the *Hávamál* poet evidently reiterates several of the conventions that have historically diminished such groups. Reductiveness, however, brings with it opportunity through resistance. As evinced in the varied approaches represented in Routledge’s recent *Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, audience studies has emerged as a multi-faceted and yet relatively individuated academic discipline, tapping into the otherwise under-examined experience of performance spectators.<sup>7</sup> Until now, audience researchers have concentrated primarily and understandably on modern forms of spectating.

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<sup>6</sup> Lynne Conner, ‘Disrupting the Audience as Monolith’, in *Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, ed. by Matthew Reason and others (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 53 <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003033226>>.

<sup>7</sup> *Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, ed. by Matthew Reason and others (London: Routledge, 2022) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003033226>>. See further previous major studies, including Anne Ubersfeld, ‘The Pleasure of the Spectator’, *Modern Drama*, 25 (1982), 127–39 <<https://doi.org/10.3138/md.25.1.127>>; Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990); Alice Rayner, ‘The Audience: Subjectivity, Community and the Ethics of Listening’, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 7 (1993), 3–24; Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1997) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315005751>>; Susan Bennett, ‘Theatre Audiences, Redux’, *Theatre Survey*, 47 (2006), 225–30 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557406000196>>; Freshwater; Heim.

Works of performance art are primarily associated with their creators (writers, directors, producers, actors, and so on) rather than their receivers, and records of the latter are correspondingly sparse even in modern contexts where such information is relatively easy to produce and access. As one might expect, audience-related information is much more limited in records of drama and performance from the medieval period. Although, in the context of Old Norse scholarship, this has resulted in substantial hesitancy around investigations into performance spectators (see further section 1.1), research of this kind represents the opportunity both to take audience studies in a new direction, and to reveal more about the subject matter by reading against the prevailing marginalisation of its medieval receivers.

This thesis is about audiences of Old Norse skaldic poetry, an artform practised primarily in Norway and Iceland between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. A full survey of the long history and characteristics of skaldic poetry is neither possible nor necessary here.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I will use this space to recount only the most salient points relevant to my audience-focused study, leaving more detailed introductory material for the subjects treated in respective chapters below. An important and overarching issue is the relationship between skaldic and eddic poetry, these being the two major styles into which modern scholars have traditionally divided the Old Norse poetic corpus. Although the eddic-skaldic dichotomy is difficult to maintain in several cases, certain of these styles' distinctive characteristics mitigate the problem of conducting an audience-focused study on only one of the two forms.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Comprehensive introductions are available in Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: The 'Dróttkvætt' Stanza*, *Islandica*, 42 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Poetry', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica*, 45 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 157–96 <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501741654-005>>; Kari Ellen Gade, *The Structure of Old Norse 'Dróttkvætt' Poetry*, *Islandica*, 49 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt14brv80>> [accessed 22 August 2023]; Diana Whaley, 'Skaldic Poetry', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 479–502 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996867.ch28>>; *SkP* 1, pp. xiii–xciii.

<sup>9</sup> On the problematic nature of the eddic-skaldic dichotomy, see discussion and further references in Clunies Ross, *History*, pp. 21–28.

One of these is the prevailing anonymity of eddic composers versus the fact that skaldic poets (known as *skáld* in Old Norse) are usually named in the sources preserving their work. This reflects a fundamental difference in how eddic and skaldic poems were perceived to relate to their composers; ‘no one could “own” an eddic poem’, to quote John McKinnell, whereas skaldic poems were more clearly possessions of their composers, a perspective supported by the fact that skalds frequently liken their poetic practice to that of artisans working with physical materials such as wood and metal.<sup>10</sup> This difference has further implications for the relationships between eddic and skaldic poets and their audiences. On one hand, eddic poets and their audiences are positioned similarly in relation to their artform; both parties are inheritors and preservers of the eddic tradition, and neither has a great deal of individual influence within it. Skaldic composition, on the other hand, is more clearly an act of self-assertion; skalds attach themselves to their poems with the intention of earning social and cultural capital from both their immediate audiences and those participating in the future oral traditions preserving their work. In this light, whilst skaldic performance differs from its eddic counterpart in being less predicated on communal identity and more on the composer’s individuality, this also places skaldic audiences in a position of greater importance and authority, for skalds are dependent on them to deliver the affirmation that the poets seek.

Another quality that distinguishes skaldic poetry from eddic is its relative complexity, emerging partly as a result of the strict demands of many of the skaldic metres. *Dróttkvætt* (‘court metre’), the primary skaldic metre, is stringently regulated, demanding that poets compose stanzas of eight hexasyllabic lines; alliterate the first syllable of even lines with two in the preceding odd line; produce partial internal rhyme between the penultimate syllable

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<sup>10</sup> John McKinnell, ‘Eddic Poetry and the Uses of Anonymity’, in *Old Norse Poetry in Performance*, ed. by Brian McMahon and Annemari Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 111–33 (p. 113). On the latter point, see further Tom Grant, ‘Craftsmen and Wordsmiths: An Investigation into the Links Between Material Crafting, Poetic Composition and Their Practitioners in Old Norse Literature’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019).



and one preceding it in odd lines (known as *skotheending*); and produce full internal rhyme between the penultimate syllable and one preceding it in even lines (known as *aðalhending*).<sup>11</sup> To fulfil these rules, skalds were forced to convolute the word order of their poetry, occasionally to extreme extents. Alongside these metrical and syntactic elements, the complexity of skaldic poetry is heightened by its specialised diction. Skalds make extensive use of the poetic expressions known as *heiti* ('poetic synonyms', literally 'names') and kennings. These are periphrastic devices which act as substitutes for concrete, abstract, and proper nouns. *Heiti* tend to operate as simplexes, as exemplified when Egill Skallagrímsson refers to Óðinn using the word 'Viðrir' (*SkP* 5, p. 242), one of the Norse god's many names.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, kennings always involve two parts: a base word, which stands in for the paraphrased noun and shares some of its qualities, and a determinant, which hints at the semantic field of the paraphrased noun. The paraphrased noun is called the referent. To take an example, a common kenning-type is 'hestr hafs' (e.g. *SkP* 8, p. 690: 'horse of the sea'), where 'haf' ('sea') acts as the determinant to the base word 'hestr' ('horse'), producing the referent 'SHIP'. By substituting determinants for yet more kennings, this device can be extended *ad nauseum*, introducing further layers of metaphorical distance between the signifying image and its signified concept. Often, and as exemplified by the 'Viðrir' *heiti* noted above, extensive knowledge of Norse mythology and legend is required to hurdle these riddle-like layers and arrive at the concealed information. These aspects illustrate some of the ways in which skaldic poetry represents a hermeneutic challenge to its audiences, one that potentially necessitates considerable competence and experience to navigate.

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<sup>11</sup> See further *SkP* 1, pp. lx–lxi.

<sup>12</sup> This Óðinn-name is explained in *Flateyjarbók* as follows: 'þui er hann kalladr Uidrir at þeir sogdu hann uedrum rada' (*Flat* 1, p. 564: 'He [i.e. Óðinn] is called Viðrir because they said that he governs the winds'). See further *SkP* 3, p. 969. *Flateyjarbók* MS: Copenhagen, Det kongelige bibliotek, Den gamle kongelige samling, and Reykjavík, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, GKS 1005 fol. This parchment MS was composed between 1387–90 in Iceland by the priests Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson.

The issue of audience comprehension is further complicated by the fact that skaldic poetry originated in an oral culture. The manuscript recording of skaldic poems only began in the twelfth century, and the use of runes to record verse is unlikely to have been widespread before this point. For up to several centuries in the case of the oldest poems, the main way in which audiences experienced skaldic verse was therefore by hearing and watching, not reading. The co-existence of skaldic poetry's complexity and orality have caused no small amount of scholarly consternation: how would audiences possibly have understood such a complex form of poetry in the moment of a single performance? As comprehension dawned on one element of a skaldic poem, its numerous other hermeneutic challenges would surely send clear solutions spiralling into the ether. As I discuss in greater detail below (see section 1.1), researchers have previously struggled to find adequate ways in which to address this issue.

The primary sources from the medieval era are hardly replete with information that could offer convincing conclusions. On one hand, the notion that complexity was an integral part of the skaldic artform is supported by evidence beyond that of the poetry itself. In his thirteenth-century handbook on skaldic poetics, which he calls *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson articulates one of his purposes as follows:

En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orðfjölða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja þat er hulit er kveðit: þá skili hann þessa bók til fróðleiks ok skemtunar.<sup>13</sup>

(‘But there is now this to say to those young skalds who desire to learn the language of poetry and to acquire a store of words with ancient terms, or else they desire to be able to understand that which is spoken obscurely: let him take this book as information and entertainment.’)

Other sources are relatively opaque when it comes to how audiences were expected to comprehend the kind of obscure language Snorri refers to. Skaldic poetry is preserved almost exclusively in prosimetric texts – that is, texts containing a mixture of verse and prose. These

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<sup>13</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes, 2 vols (London: VSNR, 1998), 1: *Introduction, Text and Notes*, 5.

are primarily comprised on one hand by treatises like Snorri's *Edda*, and on the other by numerous Old Norse sagas, including those in the genres of *Íslendingasögur* ('sagas of Icelanders'), *konungasögur* ('kings' sagas'), *fornaldarsögur* ('sagas of ancient times'), *biskupasögur* ('bishops' sagas'), and *samtíðarsögur* ('contemporary sagas').<sup>14</sup> Within these works, skaldic poetry exists typically in the form of free-standing *lausavísur* ('loose verses'; sg. *lausavísa*). This is a modern term referring to single stanzas of poetry either composed independently or which have potentially been excerpted from longer sequences over the course of their transmission. In their prose contexts, *lausavísur* usually act as quotations, which may be framed as originating either from within the world of the text or outside it. Modern scholars distinguish between these two types of diegetic staging by referring to the *lausavísa* in question as either an intradiegetic verse (otherwise known as a 'situational', 'occasional', or 'story' verse) or an extradiegetic verse (otherwise an 'authenticating', 'corroborating', or 'evidence' verse). Extradiegetic verses, to borrow from a recent summary by Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir and others, 'are quoted by the narrator from other sources [...] as evidence for the events depicted in the prose'.<sup>15</sup> Intradiegetic verses, by contrast, are 'spoken by figures within the world of the saga [...] and are usually seen as having a primarily aesthetic function'.<sup>16</sup> Like the eddic-skaldic dichotomy, this two-part model of diegetic staging is imperfect in many cases, where the framing of verses occasionally occupies a grey area between intra- and extradiegetic levels.

When they are staged in an intradiegetic fashion, *lausavísur* tend to act as spontaneous utterances by saga characters, usually in the presence of others featuring in the narrative. Although episodes of this type are essentially descriptions of oral performance, their 'primarily aesthetic function' diminishes the possibility of using them as reliable

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<sup>14</sup> See section 1.2 for further information on saga genres to be discussed in this thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir and others, 'Investigating the *Íslendingasögur* as Prosimetrum: A New Methodology', *VMS*, 18 (2022), 51–81 (p. 68) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.5.132122>>.

<sup>16</sup> Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir and others, p. 68.

evidence for conceptualising skaldic performance. Rarely in any case do the prose contexts of intradiegetic verses contain extensive detail regarding the actions, capabilities, and functions of the poetry's audiences. As Diana Whaley remarks, it is not uncommon to see intradiegetic verses 'spoken as though into a vacuum'.<sup>17</sup> Although, as I demonstrate later in the discussion, such narrative lacunae do not necessarily preclude analysis of the presence and effects of spectatorship on *lausavísur*, they remain a regrettable handicap when it comes to understanding how skaldic audiences were conceptualised by medieval authors.

Firmer trends are nevertheless discernible when it comes to the typical identities of skaldic audiences. Skaldic poetry is thought to have originated in a Norwegian court environment before the country's conversion to Christianity in the tenth century. This setting continued to be a locus of production in the following centuries, wherein Icelanders gained an increasing monopoly over skaldic practice and transferred their talents into other social centres in the North Atlantic region. The evidence for these aspects of skaldic poetry's contextual history is so comprehensive and commonly accepted that it need not be recited here.<sup>18</sup> Since, on this basis, skaldic poetry operated originally and predominantly as a 'courtly and elitist art', to quote Margaret Clunies Ross, courtly elites would unquestionably have been a predominant demographic amongst skaldic audiences.<sup>19</sup> These were figures in possession of the kind of cultural capital that skalds sought to extract, and to whom therefore the poets gravitated.<sup>20</sup> Given that skaldic performance represents a power transaction in such contexts, it is unsurprising to see a corresponding elevation of the stakes of performer-

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<sup>17</sup> Diana Whaley, 'Skalds and Situational Verses in Heimskringla', in *Snorri Sturluson: Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, ed. by Alois Wolf (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1993), pp. 245–66 (p. 262).

<sup>18</sup> See further discussion in, e.g., Frank, 'Dróttkvætt' Stanza, pp. 21–33; Frank, 'Skaldic Poetry', pp. 181–82; Kari Ellen Gade, 'Poetry and Its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 61–95 (pp. 76–86) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511552922.004>>; Clunies Ross, *History*, *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway: Essential Rites of Passage for an Early Icelandic Skald', *Alvíssmál*, 9 (1999), 55–72 (p. 56).

<sup>20</sup> On skaldic poetry as cultural capital, see especially Kevin Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) <<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442689152>>.

audience interactions emphasised in certain medieval sources. In his prologue to *Heimskringla* (ÍF 26–28), Snorri famously defends the historical reliability of skaldic poetry as follows:

[T]ókum vér þar mest dæmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum höfðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tókum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er háttir 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 heyði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrök, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof.<sup>21</sup>

(ÍF 26, p. 5: ‘We have mostly taken as proof that which is said in the poems that were recited in front of the rulers themselves or their sons. We take as true everything which is found in those poems about their [the rulers’] journeys and battles. It is the habit of poets to praise most the one they are with at the time, but none would dare in themselves to relate deeds of his [the ruler’s], which everyone who heard, including the man himself, would know to be falsehood and lies. That would then be mockery, and not praise.’)

Whilst this passage is frequently quoted as evidence for Snorri’s perspective on the truth-value of skaldic poetry, the dynamic he envisions between skalds and their courtly audiences often goes underappreciated. Christopher Abram gives greater attention to this issue, stating that ‘it seems reasonable to expect that the content of verses produced in this context would be policed, in order to ensure that praise, and not mockery, was what poets delivered’.<sup>22</sup>

Although, as Shami Ghosh and Rafał Rutkowski have argued, it is possible to hypothesise a number of factors that would make inaccurate praise acceptable to rulers and their courtiers, Snorri’s perspective nonetheless highlights the potential for skaldic audiences to take on more active roles in court environments.<sup>23</sup> In Snorri’s model, historical accuracy is a key criterion determining skalds’ worthiness to receive their desired cultural capital, with the audience acting as the centrepiece in the quasi-judicial framework.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Snorri’s expanded version of this argument in his separate saga of Óláfr inn helgi Haraldsson (‘the Holy’, i.e. St Óláfr; r. Norway 1015–28), available in ÍF 27, pp. 421–22.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Abram, ‘Trolling in Old Norse: Ambiguity and Incitement in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*’, in *Words that Tear the Flesh: Essays on Sarcasm in Medieval and Early Modern Literature and Cultures*, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture, 21 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 41–62 (p. 51) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110563252-004>>.

<sup>23</sup> Shami Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History*, The Northern World, 54 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 50–54 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004209893.i-253>>; Rafał Rutkowski, ‘Why Would the Skalds Not Have Lied about the Rulers’ Expeditions and Battles? Some Remarks on a Relic of Medieval Attitude toward Sources in Modern Medieval Studies’, trans. by Tristan Korecki, *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 122 (2020), 165–79.

The elitist quality of skaldic verse is evinced both in its deep and long-standing connection with court environments, and in the recurrent perception that poetic ability of this kind was a skill sustained within specific family bloodlines.<sup>24</sup> Equally, there is no question that skaldic poetry was performed beyond the circles of the social elite. The sagas portray skalds performing in a range of social and cultural contexts, often for people who represent either their social equals or inferiors. As the settings of skaldic performance expand in this way, so too do its functions; skalds are depicted using their artform for various social purposes, including to antagonise both enemies and friends, to praise and seduce potential lovers, and simply to comment on current events. Whatever position one takes on the reliability of saga accounts as sources, the texts stand in themselves as further evidence for the presence of skaldic verse in non-elite contexts. As shown in the following chapters, the storytelling tradition that the sagas represent, and which conveyed most surviving skaldic poems, existed not as an exclusively aristocratic phenomenon, but as a form of entertainment and history-making enjoyed and cultivated by people from across the social strata. On this basis, when skaldic poems were recited as part of the performance of prosimetric sagas, they would have been delivered to audience members ranging in status and background.

Despite the regularity with which audiences have been marginalised across primary and secondary literature (see further section 1.1), these groups should be of vital interest to skaldic scholars. If, as noted previously, the act of spectating is fundamental to all forms of performance art, this is especially true in the context of skaldic poetry, a core aspect of which is its capacity to solicit cultural and hermeneutic engagement from its receivers. Further research into this area is merited not just by its importance to the subject of skaldic poetry, but also because it represents the opportunity to take the relatively fledgling field of audience

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<sup>24</sup> On the perception of skaldic skill as family heritage, see, e.g., Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, The Viking Collection, 10, 2 vols (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994–98), II: *The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland* (1998), pp. 173–82; Clunies Ross, *History*, pp. 60–61.

studies in a new direction. Despite the chasm of time distancing the moment of skaldic poetry from current performance practices, the artform's determination to experiment with language, imagery, and hermeneutics resonates with several dramatic and theatrical movements that have taken place in the modern era.<sup>25</sup> An audience-centred study of skaldic poetry therefore has the potential to be genuinely and productively interdisciplinary, elucidating both the social and cultural dynamics of skaldic performance and how these are comparable to later artistic movements.

## 1.1 Scholarly Background

Although, as the above survey highlights, certain trends in the sources help to clarify conceptions about skaldic audiences, the overwhelming brevity of surviving information diminishes the possibility of producing a complete picture of these groups. Where information is in greater supply, namely in saga accounts, its unreliability represents a further obstacle to this area of study. By contrast, the absence of historical accounts and a selection of limited literary ones describing the performance of eddic poetry has been a relative boon to scholars of that field, wherein the subject is more of a *tabula rasa* and hence more conducive to modern hypotheses.<sup>26</sup> Research on skaldic performance has frequently followed this model, discounting saga accounts in favour of evidence that can be gleaned from the poetry in isolation. Examples of this method include Terry Gunnell's examination of *Eiríksmál* (*SkP*

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. comments on the parallels between skaldic poetry and Surrealism in Stefán Einarsson, 'Anti-Naturalism, Tough Composition and Punning in Skaldic Poetry and Modern Painting', *Saga-Book*, 16 (1962–65), 124–43; Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'Skaldic Blends Out of Joint: Blending Theory and Aesthetic Conventions', *Metaphor and Symbol*, 27.4 (2012), 283–98 (pp. 289–90) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2012.716295>>.

<sup>26</sup> Recent surveys of scholarship on eddic performance are available in Terry Gunnell, 'Introduction', in *Old Norse Poetry in Performance*, ed. by Brian McMahon and Annemari Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 1–16 <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367809324>>; Ben Chennells, 'Dual Identities and Double Scenes: Transformations of Physical Space and Mental State in Performances of Eddic Poetry', *Saga-Book*, 46 (2022), 31–64; Simon Nygaard, 'Exploring Religious Ritual Frameworks in the Oral Performance of the Old Norse, Eddic-Style Praise Poems *Hákonarmál*, *Eiríksmál*, and *Hrafnsmál*', *Scripta Islandica*, 73 (2023), 5–23 <<https://doi.org/10.33063/diva-499567>>.

1, pp. 1003–13) and *Hákonarmál* (*SkP* 1, pp. 171–94) as oral texts, and Anna Millward’s similar approach to early poems like *Ragnarsdrápa* (*SkP* 3, pp. 27–46), *Hrafnsmál* (*SkP* 2, pp. 727–45), *Glymdrápa* (*SkP* 1, pp. 73–90), and *Ynglingatal* (*SkP* 1, pp. 3–60).<sup>27</sup> Judith Jesch meanwhile argues that the deictic markers in Óttarr svarti’s *Hqfuðlausn* (*SkP* 1, pp. 739–67), composed in favour of Óláfr inn helgi Haraldsson (‘the Holy’, i.e. St Óláfr; r. Norway 1015–28), are not just rhetorical choices designed to make ‘the poem more personal, more intimate’, but also act as indicators of the poem’s ‘original performance context’.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst the practice of isolating skaldic verse from its prosimetric sources raises several methodological concerns, which I will return to shortly, it has nevertheless yielded notable results regarding the poetry’s audiences. A much-discussed aspect has been the skaldic kenning system and how it would have functioned for the poetry’s medieval composers and receivers. Just over a century ago, Rudolf Meissner demonstrated that whilst kennings are conducive to enormous lexical and semantic flexibility, their referential range is relatively constrained.<sup>29</sup> Meissner identifies 106 kenning referents, indicating that, once familiar with the pool of signified concepts, audiences would have little trouble recognising a kenning-type and interpreting the paraphrased noun. Bjarne Fidjestøl subsequently expanded on Meissner’s findings, suggesting that the systematic nature of kenning-types enfeebles the relationship between kennings and their referents in the context of reception.<sup>30</sup> In other words, when a common kenning-type like ‘horse of the sea’ is perceived, audiences perform

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<sup>27</sup> Terry Gunnell, ‘Performance Archaeology, *Eiríksmál*, *Hákonarmál*, and the Study of Old Nordic Religions’, in *John Miles Foley’s World of Oralities*, ed. by Mark C. Amodio (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2020), pp. 137–54 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781641893398-016>>; Anna Millward, ‘Skaldic Slam: Performance Poetry in the Norwegian Royal Court’ (unpublished MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2014), pp. 153–202.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Jesch, ‘The “Meaning of the Narrative Moment”: Poets and History in the Late Viking Age’, in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, ed. by E. M. Tyler and Ross Balzaretta (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 251–65 (pp. 260, 264) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/M.SEM-EB.3.3770>>.

<sup>29</sup> Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden: Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik* (Bonn and Leipzig: Schroeder, 1921; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> Bjarne Fidjestøl, ‘The Kenning System: An Attempt at a Linguistic Analysis’, in *Bjarne Fidjestøl: Selected Papers*, ed. by Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, trans. by Peter Foote (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), pp. 16–67 (p. 48).



a cognitive leap to the referent ‘SHIP’ without measured consideration of the kenning’s metaphorical content – that is, to quote Hannah Burrows, ‘the ways sailors are like (and not like) horse-riders, or [...] the comparability of different means of transportation or different types of journey’.<sup>31</sup> Although Burrows describes Fidjestøl’s theory as ‘reasonable’, both she and Abram have respectively questioned the semiotic reductiveness of kennings, placing greater emphasis on how they ‘involve a reassessment of their referent; they reveal qualities not usually at the forefront of our conceptualisation of a thing, but which are nonetheless there’.<sup>32</sup> This perspective bears clear similarities with the Russian Formalist notion of defamiliarization, a term coined by Victor Shklovsky and which expresses the capacity of art to subvert and refresh its audience’s perspective on the world.<sup>33</sup>

Other scholars have focused more explicitly on the defamiliarizing quality of kennings and skaldic poetry more generally. Hallvard Lie produced one such study in 1957, wherein he envisions parallels between the complex interlacing patterns of Viking Age pictorial art and the labyrinthine word order and imagery of skaldic verse.<sup>34</sup> The poetic expression of this impulse, Lie argues, was intended to disconcert its audiences:

Den ekte skaldestrofe vil spenningen, motstanden for dens egen skyld; den vil tvinge tilhøreren inn i psykiske tvangssituasjoner der han anspenst leter etter en utvei, for til slutt å lønne ham med løsnings og avspenningens lyst.<sup>35</sup>

(‘The true stanza of skaldic poetry wants tension, resistance for its own sake; it wants to force the listener into mentally challenging situations where he [*sic*] desperately looks for a way out, so that in the end he is rewarded with the pleasure that comes from resolution and relaxation.’)

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<sup>31</sup> Hannah Burrows, ‘Riddles and Kennings’, *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 51 (2021), 46–68 (pp. 47–48) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/ejss-2020-2017>>. Cf. Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘The Cognitive Approach to Scaldic Poetics, From Snorri to Vigfússon and Beyond’, in *Úr Dölum til Dala: Guðbrandr Vigfússon Centenary Essays*, ed. by Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn, Leeds Texts and Monographs: New Series, 11 (Leeds: School of English, University of Leeds, 1989), pp. 267–86.

<sup>32</sup> Burrows, ‘Riddles’, p. 52; Christopher Abram, ‘Kennings and Things: Towards an Object-Oriented Skaldic Poetics’, in *The Shapes of Early English Poetry*, ed. by Eric Weiskott and Irina Dumitrescu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 161–88 (p. 167) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781580443609-010>>.

<sup>33</sup> Victor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 16–30 (p. 21).

<sup>34</sup> Hallvard Lie, ‘“Natur” og “unatur” i skaldekunsten’, in *Om sagakunst og skaldskap: utvalgte avhandlinger* (Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide, 1982), pp. 201–315 (first publ. in *Avhandlinger utgitt av det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo. II. Historisk-filosofisk klasse*, 1957, no. 1, 1–122). Cf. Stefán Einarsson.

<sup>35</sup> Lie, p. 229 (Lie’s emphasis).

Lie's ideas have since been re-enlivened by Bergsveinn Birgisson, who uses conceptual metaphor theory to elucidate what he calls skaldic poetry's aesthetics of 'contrast-tension'.<sup>36</sup> This is Bergsveinn's way of describing how skalds clash together disparate concepts in their poetry, creating 'something unseen and bizarre' in the minds of audiences.<sup>37</sup> Bergsveinn surmises that such striking images function as part of cultural memory, making skaldic poems easier for audiences to remember.<sup>38</sup> In a more recent unpublished study, Kathryn Ania Haley-Halinski attempts to synthesise Bergsveinn's ideas with those of previous scholars who argued for the semiotic reductiveness of kennings, demonstrating how these devices deploy both defamiliarizing and conventional language simultaneously 'to engage recipients on multiple levels'.<sup>39</sup>

Although each of these studies provides insight into the act of skaldic interpretation, showing how audiences are demanded to have both cognitive range and experience, and are prompted to retain the poetic content in memory, they do so without much consideration of the poetry's contexts of oral performance. The impact of such contexts on skaldic interpretation has been the subject of terse commentary by many scholars, among them Finnur Jónsson, Konstantin Reichardt, Lee M. Hollander, Gert Kreutzer, and Roberta Frank.<sup>40</sup> Where Reichardt and later Felix Genzmer dismiss the idea that orally performed

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<sup>36</sup> Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'Skaldic Blends', p. 289; Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'What Have We Lost by Writing? Cognitive Archaisms in Skaldic Poetry', in *Oral Art Forms and Their Passage into Writing*, ed. by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008), pp. 163–84 (p. 177).

<sup>37</sup> Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'Skaldic Blends', p. 289.

<sup>38</sup> Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'Cognitive Archaisms', pp. 167–68. The concept of striking images and its function in memory can be traced back to the classical work *Ad Herennium*. See further discussion of Old Norse expressions of these ideas in Pernille Hermann, 'Memory, Imagery, and Visuality in Old Norse Literature', *JEGP*, 114 (2015), 317–40 (p. 335) <<https://doi.org/10.5406/jenglgerphil.114.3.0317>>.

<sup>39</sup> Kathryn Ania Haley-Halinski, 'Kennings in Mind and Memory: Cognitive Poetics and Skaldic Verse' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Oslo, 2017), p. 7. Cf. Elena Gurevich, 'The System of Kennings', *Nordica Bergensia*, 3 (1994), 139–56; Michael Schulte, 'Kenning, metafor og metonymi: Om kenningens kognitive grunnstruktur', *Edda*, 101 (2014), 17–31 <<https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1500-1989-2014-01-03>>.

<sup>40</sup> Finnur Jónsson, *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (København [Copenhagen]: Gad, 1920–24), I (1920), 340; Finnur Jónsson, 'Skjaldekvald', *ANF*, 45 (1929), 127–49 (pp. 131–32); Konstantin Reichardt, *Studien zu den Skalden des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts*, Palaestra, 159 (Leipzig: Mayer & Müller, 1928), p. 252; Lee M. Hollander, *The Skalds: A Selection of Their Poems, with Introduction and Notes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1945), p. 18; Gert Kreutzer, *Die Dichtungslehre der Skalden: Poetologische Terminologie und Autorenkommentare als Grundlagen einer Gattungspoetik*,

skaldic poetry may not have been immediately comprehensible to its medieval audiences, most of the other scholars take the more moderate view that the process of verse-decoding would likely have taken time.<sup>41</sup> Many commentators point loosely in the direction of performance when speculating about this hermeneutic process, as exemplified in Kari Ellen Gade's remark that 'different modulations of voice, accentuation, and pauses could have been used to delineate the syntax and facilitate the listeners' comprehension'.<sup>42</sup> John Lindow meanwhile sees the obscurity of skaldic poetry as being intrinsic to its reception rather than a hindrance.<sup>43</sup> In his much-cited study from 1975, Lindow argues that the complexity of skaldic performance represents a means of discriminating between skilled and unskilled audience members. Lindow envisions this dynamic primarily in court settings, arguing that members of the Nordic *comitatus*, known as the *drótt* ('court'), could be determined by their ability to comprehend skaldic poetry.<sup>44</sup> Further emphasis on the group dynamics of court-based performance is evident in Edith Marold's 'Der Skalde und sein Publikum' ('The Skald and his Audience'), a study making the uncommon choice to take skaldic reception as a primary frame of reference.<sup>45</sup> Despite this, Marold has little to say about the make-up or function of

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Hochschulschriften: Literaturwissenschaft, 1, 2nd edn (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1977), p. 155; Frank, 'Dróttkvætt' Stanza, pp. 28–29, 51. See further the survey of these and other scholarly contributions in Gade, *Structure*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>41</sup> Felix Genzmer, 'Studien über den Stil der Skalden', in *Deutsche Islandforschung*, ed. by Walther Heinrich Vogt, Veröffentlichungen der Schleswig-Holsteinischen Universitäts-gesellschaft, 28, 2 vols (Breslau: Hirt, 1930), 1: *Kultur*, 143–69. Cf. J. E. Caerwyn Williams, 'The Court Poet in Medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 57 (1971), 85–135 (p. 95).

<sup>42</sup> Gade, *Structure*, p. 27. Cf. Kari Ellen Gade, 'On the Recitation of Old Norse Skaldic Poetry', in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. by Heiko Uecker (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 1994), pp. 126–51 (p. 145) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110850444.126>>; Hollander, *The Skalds*, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> John Lindow, 'Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry', *Scandinavian Studies*, 47 (1975), 311–27.

<sup>44</sup> Lindow, 'Riddles', pp. 322–23. On the term *drótt*, see further John Lindow, *Comitatus, Individual and Honor: Studies in North Germanic Institutional Vocabulary*, University of California Publications in Linguistics, 83 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 26–41. On the elite community-building aspects of skaldic performance, see Annemari Ferreira, 'The Politics of Performance in Viking Age Skaldic Poetry' (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Edith Marold, 'Der Skalde und sein Publikum', in *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, ed. by Heiko Uecker, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 11 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 462–76 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110850444.462>>.

the audiences themselves, choosing instead to survey the various ways in which skalds address these groups in courtly contexts.

Several aspects of Marold's study are representative of the reductive treatment of audiences in the secondary material surveyed so far, a trend I will redress over the course of this investigation. In the first place, Marold's self-stated focus on the skaldic 'Publikum' is somewhat misleading, for her exclusive focus on the skalds' courtly audiences neglects the much broader range of contexts in which skaldic performance occurred. In general, court poetry tends to dominate in research on the skaldic corpus. This is primarily because the artform, along with several of its most cohesive extant sequences and a great number of individual stanzas, are thought to have originated in a courtly context. In discussions of skaldic performance such as those conducted by Gunnell, Millward, Lindow, and Annemari Ferreira, the familiar structures and rituals of Scandinavian courts also provide a helpful framework in what are otherwise murky methodological waters. This court-centred approach is nonetheless borne more out of convenience than evidence. Emily Osborne's research prompts greater recognition of skaldic 'Thinking Outside the Hall', wherein skalds demonstrate a recurrent desire to transcend the courtly environment that defines the immediate moment of their performance, and to speak to audiences in other places and times.<sup>46</sup> As noted previously, the diversity of such contexts of reception is evinced repeatedly in saga literature, where skalds are shown to perform in myriad social and cultural situations.

Despite the existence of these saga accounts and their potential value for researching skaldic performances and audiences, many scholars discount them on the grounds that they are 'eintönig und klischeehaft' ('monotonous and clichéd'), to quote Marold.<sup>47</sup> None of the secondary sources cited so far in this review discuss saga descriptions of skaldic performance

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<sup>46</sup> Emily Margaret Osborne, 'Thinking Outside the Hall: The Conceptual Boundaries of Skaldic Verse' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Marold, 'Publikum', p. 462.

to any great extent. Whilst the stylisation of performance-related information in sagas is undeniable, it is equally reasonable to question whether scholars are justified in examining the skaldic tradition in isolation from the primary vehicles of its preservation. Many poems are considered to predate their prose contexts, and the historical authenticity of both their content and form is often defended on the grounds that the strict demands of the skaldic form would have afforded it stability during oral transmission.<sup>48</sup> For performance scholars, this raises the possibility that the dramatic circumstances of the poems are inscribed within them; not just the information presented, but the way in which it is presented, is somehow representative of original performance conditions. Jesch's comments on deictic markers in Óttarr's *Hqfuðlausn*, cited above, represent thinking along these lines. The validity of this reconstructive enterprise is nevertheless undermined by the fact that the written record contains numerous variants of skaldic poems, many of which appear to have been intentionally produced by medieval scribes.<sup>49</sup> Although it is rarely possible to determine how far the process of scribal editing may have gone, especially where the surviving versions of skaldic poems are relatively uniform, the common practice of excerpting individual verses from longer sequences shows that saga authors and grammarians had a degree of licence when it came to reshaping skaldic poetry for their own purposes. These prose writers always quote verse purposefully, whether to illustrate a particular poetic technique, corroborate a historical event, or dramatise a poetic performance. Although the poetry is typically assumed to have priority within them, these prosimetric relationships are further examples of the multi-dimensional enmeshing that skaldic poetry was subject to when it was incorporated into prose texts. The practice of separating these two forms of media for the purpose of

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<sup>48</sup> E.g. *ÍF* 26, p. 7; Gade, 'Changing Importance', p. 165; Judith Jesch, 'Skaldic Verse: A Case of Literacy *Avant la Lettre?*', in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. by Pernille Hermann (Denmark: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), pp. 187–210.

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., Russell G. Poole, 'Variants and Variability in the Text of Egill's *Hqfuðlausn*', in *Editing Medieval Texts*, ed. by Roberta Frank (New York: AMS Press, 1993), pp. 65–105; Christopher Abram, 'Scribal Authority in Skaldic Verse: Þorbjörn hornklofi's *Glymdrápa*', *ANF*, 116 (2001), 5–19.

‘performance archaeology’, to borrow Gunnell’s coinage, is therefore always debatable, although perspectives on its validity vary among scholars.

If the relationship between the written poems and their oral predecessors is difficult to discern, so too is the usefulness of the saga accounts that depict the poetry’s oral performance. Millward advocates her belief ‘that these poems and their accompanying prose retain at least some memory of past performance traditions’, and Jakub Morawiec highlights the inevitability of scholarly reliance ‘on later saga accounts’.<sup>50</sup> Both views are nonetheless undermined by the fact that, when quoting skaldic verse in an intradiegetic fashion, saga authors regularly prioritise the ‘aesthetic function’ of prosimetrum over its capacity to act as an authentic historic record.<sup>51</sup> This function – what Heather O’Donoghue calls *littérarité* (‘literariness’) – is evident not only in the *Íslendingasögur*, which are often considered to have greater capacity for fictionality and literary effect, but also in more historically minded saga genres like the *konungasögur*.<sup>52</sup> The unavoidable fact is that sagas will always represent, and often self-consciously, a grey area between fact and fiction, and this problematises any attempt to use them to glean information about the historical reality of skaldic performance.<sup>53</sup>

Whilst the prevailing dismissal of saga accounts is understandable on this basis, less justifiable is scholars’ recurrent disinclination to investigate how performance situations function in these texts in ways other than as historical information. Studies by Stephen A. Mitchell, Lisa Collinson, Morawiec, and to a lesser extent Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, represent exceptions to this rule, wherein greater attention is given to scenes of skaldic

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<sup>50</sup> Millward, p. 24; Jakub Morawiec, ‘Characteristic of Skaldic Court Performances’, in *Pogranicza Teatralności: Poezja, Poetyka, Praktyka*, ed. by Andrzeja Dąbrowski, *Studia Staropolskie*, n.s., 31 (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk; Stowarzyszenie Pro Cultura Litteraria, 2011), pp. 41–48 (p. 47).

<sup>51</sup> Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir and others, p. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 12 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199267323.001.0001>>.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 23.

entertainment.<sup>54</sup> Again, these scholars focus predominantly on court-centred sagas, investigating both the thematic qualities of performance scenes (Morawiec, Meulengracht Sørensen), and how poetic performances are depicted in relation to the social and hierarchical aspects of court life (Mitchell, Collinson). By contrast, Jonathan Grove bucks the courtly trend in his examination of the widespread association between skalds and competitive verse-making, and how this trope is represented in the genres of *konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur*, and *samtíðarsögur*.<sup>55</sup> Probably the most impactful study in this area, however, has been Stefanie Gropper's chapter on 'Skaldic Poetry and Performance', in which she cites a broad selection of primary material in support of her view that skaldic performances are presented primarily as speech-acts in saga literature.<sup>56</sup> In other words, saga audiences are shown what a skaldic verse does – praise, insult, persuade, and so on – without necessarily being expected to understand its actual content.<sup>57</sup>

Although each of these studies highlights the merit in analysing saga descriptions of skaldic performance for more than just historical purposes, none are especially concerned with how audiences feature and function in the accounts. Gropper essentially dismisses this area of enquiry altogether, arguing that

Skaldic stanzas in the sagas rarely reflect a situation of communication between people. This can be deduced from the absence of audience reaction in the text, among other things. Instead, the stanzas signify a communication between the saga narrator and the audience of the written saga.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn', *Oral Tradition*, 16 (2001), 168–202; Lisa Fraser [Collinson], 'Royal Entertainment in Three Norse Kings' Saga Compilations: *Morkinskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Fagrskinna*' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2004); Jakub Morawiec, 'Relacje skald: władca w islandzkich þættir jako reminiscencja kultury dworskiej w średniowiecznej Skandynawii', in *Kultura Ludów Morza Bałtyckiego*, ed. by Michał Bogacki, Maciej Franz, and Zbigniew Pilarczyk (Toruń: Adam Marszałek, 2008), pp. 58–76; Morawiec, 'Characteristic'; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne* (Århus: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 1993), pp. 121–27.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Grove, 'The Contest of Verse-Making in Old Norse-Icelandic Skaldic Poetry' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> Stefanie Würth [Gropper], 'Skaldic Poetry and Performance', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 263–81 <<https://doi.org/10.1484/M.TCNE-EB.3.4077>>.

<sup>57</sup> Würth [Gropper], pp. 266, 274.

<sup>58</sup> Würth [Gropper], p. 273.

Whilst Gropper is justified in citing the prevailing absence of intradiegetic audience reactions in saga texts, this is still a highly reductive view on the literary role that these groups play. Certainly, intradiegetic verses often serve primarily as exposition for their speakers, revealing, among other things, aspects of the speaker's personality or their perspective on events. The idea that these communicative situations exclude the sagas' intradiegetic audiences is, however, either untrue or at best indeterminable in most cases. Generalising perspectives like this have nevertheless been made more admissible by the lack of research on the subject. There has been no single academic study surveying whether and how intradiegetic audiences are depicted as reacting to skaldic verse in saga literature. Instead, when the reception of skaldic poetry is relevant to the discussion, most scholars resort to well-known saga episodes in which audience involvement is more pronounced. The prime example is the scene in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (ÍF 6, pp. 1–118; see pp. 58–59) where Þórdís Súrssdóttir overhears her brother Gísli extemporising a cryptic verse in which he admits to killing her husband Þorgrímr Þorsteinsson (*SkP* 5, p. 564). After quoting the verse, the saga author reports: 'Þórdís nam þegar vísuna, gengr heim ok hefir ráðit vísuna' (ÍF 6, p. 59: 'Þórdís learned the verse straightaway, goes home, and has worked out the verse [by the time she arrives]'). Here, memorisation is instantaneous whilst full comprehension is somewhat delayed. Scholars such as Gade, Clunies Ross, Grove, and Haley-Halinski refer to this episode as evidence for how skaldic poetry may have been received and interpreted.<sup>59</sup> None of these writers, however, assess the validity of saga material when discussing the experiences and actions of real skaldic audiences, and only Clunies Ross compares the depiction of Þórdís with other relevant saga accounts. Her short section on 'Commentary by

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<sup>59</sup> Gade, *Structure*, p. 24; Clunies Ross, *History*, pp. 65–66; Margaret Clunies Ross, *Poetry in Sagas of Icelanders* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2022), p. 170 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv293p4rv>>; Grove, p. 52; Haley-Halinski, pp. 25–26. See also Jürg Glauser, 'Literary Studies', in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, ed. by Jürg Glauser and Pernille Hermann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 231–49 (p. 237) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110431360-022>>.



Saga Characters on Poetry within the Saga’, encompassing episodes from *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (ÍF 7, pp. 1–290), *Víglundar saga* (ÍF 14, pp. 61–116), and *Bandamanna saga* (ÍF 7, pp. 291–363), is nevertheless not only restricted to the *Íslendingasögur*, but also covers many fewer cases than the number required to address her chosen sub-topic comprehensively.<sup>60</sup>

## 1.2 Aims, Methods, and Materials

From the above, it is clear to see ways in which skaldic audiences have been marginalised in scholarship, and how these groups may be studied more adequately. A possible method is to build on Marold’s chapter on the skaldic ‘Publikum’, extracting audience-related information from the poetic corpus in isolation but taking a more inclusive approach to poems composed outside court environments. A study of this kind would be substantiated via the large and growing body of research being undertaken within the field of audience studies, the impact of which is yet to be felt in Old Norse scholarship. Although this point of departure is exciting and original, it would also mean perpetuating the problematic approach of sequestering skaldic poetry from its prosimetric sources, as discussed above. To lay a secure foundation for future research along these lines, the existing admixture of skaldic poetry and prose must first be examined and assessed in greater detail than previous scholars have allowed for. This is the central aim of my thesis. To address this aim, I will examine how skaldic audiences are depicted within the saga corpus, and how they function within these texts. Given the difficulty of measuring the historical reliability of saga texts, my primary intention is not to uncover the realities of skaldic reception in the medieval period, but rather to provide fuller insight into how the acts of performing and spectating are conceptualised and used by saga

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<sup>60</sup> Clunies Ross, *Poetry in Sagas*, pp. 169–74.

authors. Although this is my foremost goal, later in the thesis (see chapter 6) I will also show how this literary study is conducive to historical perspectives on skaldic performance, especially as it operated as part of saga entertainment.

The main materials I will focus on are saga episodes that involve intradiegetic verses. As noted previously, episodes of this kind are essentially descriptions of oral performance, the authenticity of which is almost always impossible to verify. I will work almost exclusively with intradiegetic verses in skaldic metres (e.g. *dróttkvætt*), although I will occasionally refer to relevant examples involving eddic metres if the poet in question is otherwise known for composing skaldic verse. Since intradiegetic verses are quoted in similar ways within all the major saga genres, my investigation will be intentionally pan-generic. Where previous studies have focused either on the courtly contexts of the *konungasögur* or, less commonly, the more provincial settings of the *Íslendingasögur*, my inclusive approach allows for greater comparison between the portrayal and function of intradiegetic audiences in different textual environments.

Amongst these environments, the *konungasögur* represent a major source of information.<sup>61</sup> Sagas within this genre tend to be about the kings of Norway from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, although certain texts narrating the lives of medieval Danish and Orcadian rulers are also admitted to the category. The earliest *konungasögur* are thought to have been composed in Norway towards the end of the twelfth century, although the best-known sagas were produced in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. From the early group, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* (ÍF 29, pp. 1–54) merits special attention due to

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<sup>61</sup> See further introductory material on the *konungasögur* in Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Biography', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 388–402 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996867.ch23>>; Theodore M. Andersson, 'Kings' Sagas (*Konungasögur*)', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, Islandica, 45 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 197–238 <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501741654-006>>; Diana Whaley, 'The Kings' Sagas', in *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14-15 May 1992*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: VSNR, 1993), pp. 43–64.

its author's previously unprecedented choice to quote skaldic poetry. This prosimetric practice continues throughout the latter group, from which the triad of *Morkinskinna* (ÍF 23–24), *Fagrskinna* (ÍF 29, pp. 55–373), and *Heimskringla* have been the most studied. These three texts mostly cover the same period of Norwegian royal history between the ninth and twelfth centuries, although *Heimskringla* is the most detailed and expansive, reaching back into Norway's semi-legendary past and incorporating a greater quantity of poetry than either *Morkinskinna* or *Fagrskinna*. Alongside these sagas, my investigation covers *konungasögur* material preserved in the late-fourteenth-century compilation called *Flateyjarbók*, and the lesser-studied *þættir* (literally 'strands [of rope]' but meaning 'short stories' in literary contexts; sg. *þáttur*) unique to the *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* manuscripts (respectively composed c. 1350–75 and c. 1400–50), which comprise a conglomeration of material primarily from *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna*.<sup>62</sup> The term *þáttur* is most readily associated with the latter saga, wherein such texts are demarcated neither by the manuscript's rubrication nor graphology. The *Morkinskinna* *þáttur* is instead primarily distinguishable from its surrounding prose 'stylistically', to quote Thomas Morcom, as part of which the narrative 'temporarily centres a socially marginal and disruptive figure alongside the presiding king within the Norwegian *hirð* ["retinue"]'.<sup>63</sup> The function of such episodes has been variously interpreted, but the prevailing opinion holds that the *Morkinskinna* *þættir* provide further insight into the characters of the kings about whom the surrounding saga narratives are composed.<sup>64</sup> Although some independent stories came to be titled *þættir* in younger manuscripts, it is now generally accepted that the *þættir* found as subsidiary elements within larger works like

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<sup>62</sup> *Hulda* MS: Copenhagen, Den arnamagnæanske samling, Nordisk forskningsinstitut, and Reykjavik, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 66 fol. *Hrokkinskinna* MS: Copenhagen, Den arnamagnæanske samling, Nordisk forskningsinstitut, and Reykjavik, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, GKS 1010 fol.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption: Narrative Insurrection in *Morkinskinna*' (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2020), p. 94.

<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, 'The Long and the Short of It', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 151–63 (p. 155) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315613628>>.

*Morkinskinna* must be understood in light of their contexts.<sup>65</sup> Alongside the sheer quantity of verses recorded in the *konungasögur*, the concentration of performance-related information in the *þættir* makes these texts crucial to the present investigation.

The other major saga genre I will investigate is the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>66</sup> Most texts within this genre are thought to have been composed in thirteenth-century Iceland, although only a few manuscripts fragments can actually be dated to this period. It is likely that the first *Íslendingasögur* were partially modelled on the prosimetric form of the *konungasögur*, but the typical setting of these sagas transitions away from the elite strata of Norwegian society towards events in Iceland between the period of its settlement in the late-ninth century up until the mid-eleventh century. *Íslendingasögur* are further distinguished from *konungasögur* by the way they incorporate skaldic poetry. Where most verses in the *konungasögur* are quoted in extradiegetic fashion, the reverse is true in the *Íslendingasögur*. In turn, poetry is afforded a closer connection with narrative events in the *Íslendingasögur*, and whilst this has tended to incur scholarly scepticism towards the historical authenticity of such prosimetric episodes, it also results in a greater quantity and diversity of scenes depicting skaldic performers, audiences, and their interactions. Whilst further introduction to individual *Íslendingasögur* is best reserved for their appearances in the following chapters, a sub-genre worthy of note at this stage is the so-called *skáldasögur* ('sagas of poets'). The core *skáldasögur* are usually considered to be *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* (ÍF 3, pp. 109–211),

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<sup>65</sup> See further Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Amplified Saga: Structural Disunity in *Morkinskinna*', *Medium Ævum*, 70.1 (2001), 29–46 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/43630338>>; Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Life and Death of the Medieval Icelandic Short Story', *JEGP*, 112 (2013), 257–91 <<https://doi.org/10.5406/jenglgermphil.112.3.0257>>; Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption', pp. 16–40. For earlier studies depicting *þættir* as an independent genre, see Joseph Harris, 'Genre and Narrative Structure in some *Íslendinga þættir*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 44 (1972), 1–27; Joseph Harris, 'Theme and Genre in some *Íslendinga þættir*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 48 (1976), 1–28.

<sup>66</sup> See further introductory material on the *Íslendingasögur* in Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 101–18 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996867.ch7>>; Carol J. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica*, 45 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 239–315 <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501741654-007>>.

*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (ÍF 3, pp. 49–107), *Hallfreðar saga* (ÍF 8, pp. 133–200), and *Kormáks saga* (ÍF 8, pp. 201–302), with *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6, pp. 119–276) and *Egils saga* (ÍF 2) standing as outliers.<sup>67</sup> Especially in the core group, the protagonists of these sagas are poets with dual desires for romance and artistic acclaim. As a result of their twin passions, the *skáldasögur* protagonists endure conflict both internally and with characters who would be their rivals in love, poetry, or occasionally both. Due to their special emphasis on the connections between poetry and society, the *skáldasögur* are a source I refer to regularly throughout my thesis.

Although less frequently discussed, the genres of *fornaldarsögur*, *biskupasögur*, and *samtíðarsögur* are also important sources within the subject area. The former genre comprises texts of a more fantastical inclination and whose subject matter is mostly heroic and legendary. By contrast, the *biskupasögur* and *samtíðarsögur* retain the realistic setting of the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, focusing respectively on the lives of Icelandic bishops between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, and events in Iceland from the early twelfth century up until the country's incorporation into the Norwegian kingdom in 1264. The body of skaldic poetry preserved within these saga genres is significantly smaller than that in the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, and is accordingly afforded less space in the following discussion.

To elicit comparison between these diverse sources, my thesis is structured primarily according to the relationships between skaldic performers and audiences rather than to saga genres. In chapter 2, I address 'Royal Audiences', covering interactions between Scandinavian rulers and their court poets as depicted in a range of episodes from the *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. My analysis refutes the notion that saga episodes of this

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<sup>67</sup> See further Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Skald Sagas as a Genre: Definitions and Typical Features', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 25–50 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547-002>>.

kind are merely ‘stock scenes’, focusing instead on the various ways in which royal audiences are portrayed responding to skaldic praise, criticism, and jesting. I show how these poetic utterances are used to interrogate questions of community within Scandinavian courts, revealing both lesser-seen aspects of rulers’ characters and the fraught social dimensions that underpin the skaldic role in elite circles. Chapter 3 is similarly and necessarily expansive regarding source material, for its subject of ‘Hostile Audiences’ is represented in almost every saga genre. Accordingly, this chapter covers evidence from the previously mentioned saga genres alongside excursions into the *kristniboðspættir* (‘short stories about Christian missions’) and *fornaldarsögur*. Via respective sections on skaldic insults, challenges, and threats, I show how the violence of hostile poetry is not necessarily reflected in the responses of its recipients. Rather, I argue that the combination of skaldic poetry’s equivocality and the precarity of conflict negotiations gives rise to considerable diversity and agency in audience responses.

Chapters 4 and 5 cover a narrower selection of primary material to address the broader concerns of skaldic poetry’s gender dynamics and cultural values. In chapter 4, on ‘Romantic Audiences’, I examine the performance and reception of skaldic love-verse. Focusing primarily on the *skáldasögur*, I demonstrate how infatuated skalds typically deliver poetry in which they attempt to position their lovers in passive roles. Although this gender dynamic likely has its origins in the skaldic tradition, I show how the authors of the *skáldasögur* redress the power balance of performer-audience relations in romantic contexts, affording significant space to female subjectivity and agency in response to – and indeed refutation of – skalds’ attempts to marginalise their lovers. Chapter 5, on ‘Audiences from beyond Scandinavia’, draws together strands from the preceding analyses and forms a coda to the thesis as a whole. There, I conduct case studies of episodes from *Orkneyinga saga* (ÍF 34) and *Morkinskinna* that present instances of intercultural exchange between skaldic performers

and audiences that originate from outside the Nordic region. I show how these accounts are in dialogue with texts depicting the romantic and hostile audience-types discussed previously. I argue that nevertheless the atypicality of non-Scandinavian audiences allows saga authors both to reappraise the socio-political functions of skaldic performance, and to reflect on the status of skalds and their artform in the transitional moment of the twelfth century.

This research has grown out of the large body of work already completed on skaldic verse. Like many before me, I have been equally fascinated and puzzled by the ‘old imponderable’ of the poetry’s intelligibility in the context of its oral performance.<sup>68</sup> Although the whole truth of this topic is bound to remain ever elusive, the pathway towards greater understanding lies in giving the best possible attention to the available information. In this regard, saga literature represents a more productive starting point than many have been willing to allow. As I will show over the course of the following discussion, a sustained study of the audience-related aspects of this corpus not only elicits greater appreciation for the personalities and functions of characters that otherwise escape attention, but also prompts a re-assessment of prevailing ideas about skaldic poetry and the sources that preserve it.

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<sup>68</sup> Matthew Townend, ‘Contextualising the *Knútsdrápur*: Skaldic Praise-Poetry at the Court of Cnut’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 30 (2001), 145–79 (p. 175) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675101000072>>.

## 2 Royal Audiences: Courtliness, Community, and Competition

Around the year 1153, Einarr Skúlason composed *Geisli* (*SkP* 7, pp. 5–65), a *drápa* (‘long skaldic poem with refrain’; pl. *drápur*) of seventy-one stanzas celebrating the life of Óláfr inn helgi.<sup>1</sup> The following account in *Morkinskinna* describes Einarr’s subsequent performance of *Geisli* at the cathedral in Niðaróss:

Einarr Skúlason var með þeim bræðrum, Sigurði ok Eysteini, ok var Eysteinn konungr mikill vin hans. Ok Eysteinn konungr bað hann til at yrkja Óláfsdrápu, ok hann orti ok færði norðr í Þrándheimi, í Kristskirkju sjálfri, ok varð þat með miklum jarteinum, ok kom dýrligr ilmr í kirkjuna. Ok þat segja menn at þær áminningar urðu af konunginum sjálfum at honum virðisk vel kveðit.

(*ÍF* 24, pp. 221–22: ‘Einarr Skúlason was with the brothers Sigurðr and Eysteinn, and King Eysteinn was a great friend of his. And King Eysteinn asked him to compose a *drápa* about King Óláfr, and he composed and presented it north in Niðaróss, in Kristskirkja itself, and there were great miracles, and a glorious sweet scent arose in the church. And people say that those intimations came from the king himself, showing that he esteemed the poem highly.’)

When a saga author wants to evaluate a skaldic performance, they are most likely to describe the quality of the poet’s delivery using words like *hárr* (‘loud’), *skoruliga* (‘authoritatively’), or the all-encompassing *vel* (‘well’).<sup>2</sup> In this case, it is notable that there is no authorial comment on Einarr’s performance. As Gropper highlights, even though the passage ‘is usually considered to be the main description of skaldic performance in the sense of “performance on stage”’, it is sparse on detail about the subject.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the saga author’s focus is on descriptions of Einarr’s intradiegetic audiences, and these provide primary insight into the skald’s performance. Alongside the poem that stands behind it, this account raises several important themes related to the royal audiences that formed a mainstay of skaldic practice.

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<sup>1</sup> The oldest complete text of *Geisli* is found in *Flateyjarbók*. For further details on *Geisli*’s MS witnesses, see *Einarr Skúlason’s ‘Geisli’: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Martin Chase, Toronto Old Norse-Icelandic Series, 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 3–5.

<sup>2</sup> Gade, ‘Recitation’, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Würth [Gropper], p. 266.



To begin with the performer at the centre of the scene, Einarr is an embodiment of courtliness. Scholars have come to connect this term closely with works of chivalric romance produced in later medieval Europe, but here and throughout I use ‘courtliness’ in a sense somewhat detached from this framework.<sup>4</sup> Although chivalric notions of courtliness are well represented in Old Norse through the translations of continental romance known as *riddarasögur* (‘knights’ sagas’), I use the term only in relation to the North Atlantic political spheres within which skalds circulated.<sup>5</sup> Where these spheres are depicted in the sagas, courtliness emerges as both an advanced knowledge of and ability to perform the codes of conduct associated with high-status individuals. These are the connotations to which I delimit the term, as opposed to its broader connections with Arthur, Tristan, and the pursuit of courtly love. To return to Einarr, his status in the courts of the Norwegian joint-rulers Eysteinn (r. 1142–57) and Sigurðr munnr (‘the Mouth’; r. 1136–55), sons of Haraldr gilli Magnússon (‘Servant [of Christ]’; r. Norway 1130–36), is affirmed by his being ‘mikill vin’ (‘a great friend’) of Eysteinn, who subsequently makes the poet his ‘stallari’ (*ÍF* 24, p. 222: ‘marshal’). Elsewhere in *Morkinskinna*, Einarr also features prominently as a retainer for other rulers, acting as an envoy and confidante for Sigurðr Jórsalafari Magnússon (‘Jerusalem-Farer’; r. Norway 1103–30) (*ÍF* 24, p. 124). Einarr’s courtly prestige is further highlighted by Ármann Jakobsson, who suggests that the skald’s service to his rulers matches that of his countryman Úlfr Óspaksson. Úlfr previously served Haraldr inn harðráði Sigurðarson (‘the Hard-Rule’; r. Norway 1046–66) as a *stallari*, and is described by the king

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<sup>4</sup> See further, e.g., C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhrrk>> [accessed 17 August 2023]; Aldo Scaglione, *Knights at Court: Courtliness, Chivalry, and Courtesy from Ottonian Germany to the Italian Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520333611>>.

<sup>5</sup> See further Jürg Glauser, ‘Romance (Translated *Riddarasögur*)’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 372–87 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996867.ch22>>; Jürg Glauser, ‘Romance – A Case Study’, in *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*, ed. by Massimiliano Bampi, Carolyne Larrington, and Sif Rikhardsdóttir (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 299–312 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787447851.020>>.

as ‘sá maðr er dyggvastr var ok dróttinhollastr’ (*ÍF* 23, p. 303: ‘the man who was most loyal and lord-faithful’).<sup>6</sup> In the mould of other preeminent skald-diplomats such as Sigvatr Þórðarson (see further section 2.2), Einarr is therefore presented as an experienced and established courtier, well-versed in the codes of conduct that facilitate and undergird his position. In this way, the magnificent setting of Einarr’s *Geisli* performance reflects the loftiness of the poet’s status at the same time as it affirms the reputation of the long-deceased Óláfr inn helgi.

The *Morkinskinna* author is not myopically focused on Einarr, however, and their equivalent interest in the audience present in Kristskirkja raises another important theme: the question of community. Amongst Einarr’s immediate auditors, all the reigning sons of Haraldr gilli – Eysteinn, Sigurðr, and Ingi (r. 1136–61) – are thought to have been present since Einarr addresses them directly in *Geisli*’s eighth stanza (*SkP* 7, p. 13).<sup>7</sup> The presence of three royal audience members in one performance space is unusual, representing in this case an especially communal affirmation of Óláfr inn helgi and his lasting impact on Norway’s sovereignty and religion. The community that *Geisli* creates is, moreover, not limited to the audience within the walls of Kristskirkja. As indicated by the *Morkinskinna* author’s use of the phrase ‘þat segja menn’ (‘people say that’), the performance evidently impressed enough to generate its own storytelling tradition, and which facilitates the present retelling of the event. Indeed, in *Geisli*’s eleventh stanza, Einarr implies that his poem is intended for audiences beyond those within earshot:

Þreklynds skulu þrændir  
þegns þrýðibrag hlýða  
Krists – lifir hann í hæstri  
høll – ok Norðmenn allir.

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<sup>6</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging: ‘Morkinskinna’ and Icelandic Identity, c. 1220*, trans. by Fredrik Heinemann (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014), pp. 281, 286. Cf. Morcom, ‘Structuring Disruption’, p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> *Einarr Skúlason’s ‘Geisli’*, p. 10.

(*SkP* 7, p. 16: ‘The people of Þrándheimr and all Norwegians must hear the magnificent poem of the strong-tempered retainer of Christ [= Óláfr]; he lives in the highest hall.’)

This declaration is intended for Einarr’s Norwegian contemporaries, but the *Morkinskinna* author pushes *Geisli*’s impact even further. As indicated by the description of the miracles produced by Óláfr inn helgi, Einarr’s delivery is envisioned as transcending the physical limitations of its performance space and engaging an audience from the spiritual realm. Óláfr’s response is the most significant in the passage, affirming the poetry’s perceived capacity to invoke communities from the past as well as the future.

From the perspective of *Morkinskinna*’s author, Einarr has risen to one of the primary challenges of encomiastic skaldic poetry: to construct and preserve a ruler’s reputation for future generations.<sup>8</sup> It is common for skalds to compare the process of poetic composition with that of physical crafting, and this often has implications for the imagined longevity of the verse, as exemplified in this stanza from Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson’s *Háleygjatal*:

Jólna sumbl  
enn vér gótum  
stillis lof  
sem steinabré.

(*SkP* 1, p. 212: ‘We [I] produced again a feast of the gods [> POEM], praise of the ruler, like a stone bridge.’)

Sentiments like this, Jesch suggests, represent skaldic poetry’s ‘urge to memorability’, its ability to ‘mediate between the past and the future through an utterance in the present’.<sup>9</sup> In this way, elegiac poems, sometimes called *erfídrápur* (‘funeral poems’), represented a means by which a ruler’s posthumous reputation could be shaped and secured. In the case of *Geisli*, it is unusual that the ruler in question has been dead for more than a century. As Erin Goeres highlights, the composition of commemorative verse tends to be occasioned within the immediate period following a ruler’s death, providing ‘a vital means of allowing the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf., e.g., Frank, ‘*Dróttkvætt*’ *Stanza*, p. 120; Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 45; Whaley, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, p. 482.

<sup>9</sup> Jesch, ‘*Avant la Lettre*’, pp. 188, 191.

community to mourn the loss of one ruler and to make way for his successor'.<sup>10</sup> *Geisli* represents a different kind of transitional moment, one in which Óláfr's rulership is reappraised not just for its martial successes, but also for its Christian ones. Einarr captures this himself in *Geisli*'s twelfth stanza:

Sigvatr, frák, at segði  
 sóknbráðs konungs dáðir;  
 spurt hefr ǫld, at orti  
 Óttarr um gram dróttar.  
 Þeir hafa þengils Mæra  
 – þvís sýst – frama lýstan,  
 (helgum lýtk) es héttu  
 hǫfuðskǫld (fira jǫfri).

(*SkP* 7, p. 17: 'Sigvatr [Þórðarson], I have heard, spoke about the deeds of the attack-hasty king; people have learned that Óttarr [svarti] composed about the ruler of troops. They, who were called the chief poets, have illuminated the courage of the prince of the people of Mærir [= Óláfr]. That has been done. I pay homage to the holy king of men [= Óláfr].')

Einarr's open acknowledgement of the work of previous skalds is striking and raises a final relevant theme: that of competition. As Martin Chase suggests, Einarr's statement implies a desire 'to distance himself from [his predecessors] and to point out that he is doing something new'.<sup>11</sup> Where Sigvatr and Óttarr praised Óláfr for his effectiveness in conflict, Einarr elucidates another side to the king, that of his relationship with God.<sup>12</sup> Like any good scholar, Einarr asserts his own originality with respect for his forebears (whose opportunity to reply is, of course, conveniently precluded by their being long dead). Nonetheless, his statement also highlights an 'anxiety of influence' underpinning the careers of all court skalds, driving them to diminish each other's compositions and aggrandise their own in an effort towards self-realisation. Competition is, furthermore, not limited to the skaldic side of performance. The co-presence of the three ruling brothers in Kristskirkja is presented as being peaceable and unproblematic on this occasion, but they and other predecessors sharing the Norwegian

<sup>10</sup> Erin Michelle Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration: Skaldic Verse and Social Memory, c. 890–1070* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 11–12  
 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198745747.001.0001>>.

<sup>11</sup> *Einarr Skúlason's 'Geisli'*, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> See further *Einarr Skúlason's 'Geisli'*, pp. 25–27.

crown are elsewhere shown to engage in recurrent struggles for primacy.<sup>13</sup> As the following analyses demonstrate, it is not uncommon to see competition of this kind emerge in rulers' roles as royal audiences.

The three themes raised by the *Geisli* performance and its retelling in *Morkinskinna* – courtliness, community, and competition – form the cornerstones of this chapter. Each of the following sections is about royal audiences like the recipients of *Geisli*, distinguished according to the function of the skaldic poetry delivered to them. In the first section (2.1), I address depictions of praised rulers. Via case studies of *Gunnlaugs saga ormsstungu* and *Arnórs þáttr jarlaskálds* (*ÍF* 23, pp. 143–46) amongst other primary material, I show how courtliness is a central concern in these contexts. I argue that the infamous 'stock scenes' of encomiastic performance are not simply reiterations of a literary motif, but more intentionally establish and interrogate a set of behavioural codes functioning to protect and affirm skaldic performers and royal audiences. Taking its point of departure from a less decorous set of social interactions, the second section (2.2) focuses on undermined rulers. Concentrating on accounts featuring Sigvatr Þórðarson, Óttarr svarti, and Þorleifr jarlsskálds Rauðfeldarson, I show how critical performances revolve more explicitly around questions of community. Exposing the strengths and weaknesses of the relationships between royal audiences and their courtiers, poetry of this kind may function either constructively or destructively, resolving divisions in the community or exploiting them to damage rulers as much as possible. In the final section (2.3) on 'Playful Rulers', competition comes more concretely to the fore. There, my analysis of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* (*ÍF* 23, pp. 270–84; *ÍF* 9, pp. 261–95), *Einars þáttr Skúlasonar* (*ÍF* 24, pp. 221–25), and *Mána þáttr skálds* (*ÍF* 30, pp. 129–32) focuses on accounts of skaldic entertainment, and how such performances interrogate the power balance

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<sup>13</sup> See further section 2.1. Cf. the *mannjafnaðr* ('comparison of men') involving the kings Sigurðr Jónsalafari (r. 1103–30) and Eysteinn (r. 1103–23) (*ÍF* 24, p. 131–34; *ÍF* 28, pp. 259–62), two of the sons of Magnús berfœttr Ólafsson (r. 1093–1103), and who ruled Norway together from 1103 until Eysteinn's death in 1123.

between skalds, other forms of court entertainer, and royal audiences. Despite the destabilising nature of the performances that playful rulers instigate, I argue that these characters are nonetheless affirmed, for they demonstrate both the capacity to transgress courtly conventions and to control the circumstances in which such transgressions occur.

Taken together, these respective sections represent a fresh approach to poet-ruler relationships, and how these are mediated by the complex nature and functions of skaldic verse. As discussed above (see section 1.1), previous research on skaldic reception has typically focused on subjects other than saga accounts of court performance. Osborne explicitly sets out to consider skaldic ‘Thinking Outside the Hall’, whilst Bergsveinn examines the cognitive aspects of skaldic reception more generally.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, court-centred studies of skaldic performance have tended to focus on poems abstracted from their prose contexts, as exemplified in the research by Gunnell and Millward cited previously.<sup>15</sup> Even Lindow’s well-known remarks on the *drótt*-testing dynamics of skaldic performance are sparse on evidence from saga literature, restricted only to his generalising comment that ‘[t]he sagas and in particular certain *þættir* tell of doughty Icelanders who would arrive at the royal court, present a *lofkvæði* [“praise poem”], and be accepted into the *hirð* [“retinue”]’.<sup>16</sup> A fuller examination of such saga and *þættir* accounts, as represented by the analyses I undertake below, produces meaningful insights into skaldic reception and its representation in court environments. Although these will emerge in different dimensions and in more detail as the discussion progresses, an overarching outcome of my study is to emphasise the fraught nature of skaldic performance irrespective of its function. As many scholars have shown, court skalds were generally good at their jobs, a perspective incontrovertibly supported by the

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<sup>14</sup> Osborne; Bergsveinn Birgisson, ‘Inn í skaldens sinn: Kognitive, estetiske og historiske skatter i den norrøne skaldediktingen’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bergen, 2007); Bergsveinn Birgisson, ‘Skaldic Blends’.

<sup>15</sup> Gunnell, ‘Performance Archaeology’; Millward, pp. 153–202.

<sup>16</sup> Lindow, ‘Riddles’, p. 322.

fact that they maintained their tradition of royal service for several centuries.<sup>17</sup> My analysis nevertheless provides greater insight into the perils and pitfalls of this occupation and the institution that supported it. I demonstrate how poets and their royal audiences, whether engaging in encomia, criticism, or play, are presented as traversing myriad possibilities for awkwardness, misinterpretation, or dire mistake.

## 2.1 Praised Rulers

Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, the primary period in which skaldic verse was produced, the poetry's dominant mode in court environments was encomiastic.<sup>18</sup> Skalds praised Scandinavian rulers for their martial ability, integrity, and generosity, all of which could be qualified by details of their deeds, usually involving military campaigns by sea and land. Although several full panegyrics like *Geisli* survive, poetic sequences of this kind are rarely attested in saga literature, the primary exceptions being *Hákonarmál* and *Eiríksmál*, which are presented as uninterrupted sequences in *Heimskringla* (ÍF 26, pp. 193–97) and *Fagrskinna* (ÍF 29, pp. 77–79) respectively. The primary function of such praise poems, as Clunies Ross notes, and as indicated in the *Geisli* episode analysed above, is to 'record the ruler's success in war and in political life for purposes of present and future propaganda'.<sup>19</sup> Whilst this argument is firmly supported by the contents of the surviving poetry, scholars have historically been less inclined to consider how the performance contexts of skaldic encomia contributed to their function. One reason for this tendency is the sparsity of

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<sup>17</sup> E.g. Gade, 'Changing Importance', pp. 84–85; Diana Whaley, 'A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 161–202 (p. 181) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511552922.008>>; Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 45. Cf. Folke Ström, 'Poetry as an Instrument of Propaganda: Jarl Hákon and His Poets', in *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. by Ursula Dronke and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 440–58.

performance-related information in the sources. Details about the composition and performance of *Hákonarmál* and *Eiríksmál*, for example, are given in neither of their prose contexts. Where this kind of information is given in sagas, scholars have frequently doubted its authenticity and therefore its usefulness (see further section 1.1). That this attitude has largely prevailed amongst scholars is indicated by the absence of saga-derived evidence in Ferreira and Gunnell's recent research on courtly skaldic performance, as well as earlier studies by Jesch, Marold, and Cecil Wood.<sup>20</sup>

Most saga descriptions of court-based encomiastic performance are brief and follow a similar pattern: the skald requests a hearing for a poem he has composed; the ruler accepts; the skald delivers the poem, some of which may be quoted; the poem may be evaluated; the ruler presents the poet with a reward, which may include material goods, weapons, or an invitation to join the retinue.<sup>21</sup> These scenes have elicited some scholarly scrutiny, although this has tended to focus on their uniformity. Fidjestøl, Poole, Lindow, and Gropper all refer to them as 'stock scenes' without much elaboration on how they function as such.<sup>22</sup> Fidjestøl lays emphasis on the reward as the 'kernel' of such scenes and Gropper expands on this aspect, arguing that the prioritisation of material remuneration over audience interpretation frames encomiastic performance primarily as a speech-act – 'that is, the performance itself is the praise rather than the content of the poem'.<sup>23</sup> While this may be true, Gropper's

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<sup>20</sup> Ferreira; Gunnell, 'Performance Archaeology'; Marold, 'Publikum'; Jesch, 'Narrative Moment'; Cecil Wood, 'The Skald's Bid for a Hearing', *JEGP*, 59 (1960), 240–54.

<sup>21</sup> This pattern has previously been articulated in Bjarne Fidjestøl, "'Have You Heard a Poem Worth More?': A Note on the Economic Background of Early Skaldic Praise-Poetry", in *Bjarne Fidjestøl: Selected Papers*, ed. by Odd Einar Haugen, Else Mundal, and Peter Foote (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), pp. 113–32 (p. 119); Würth [Gropper], p. 267.

<sup>22</sup> Fidjestøl, 'Have You Heard?', p. 119; Russell G. Poole, 'The Relation between Verses and Prose in *Hallfreðar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 125–71 (p. 129) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547-005>>; John Lindow, 'Akkerisfrakki: Traditions concerning Óláfr Tryggvason and Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld and the Problem of the Conversion', *JEGP*, 106 (2007), 64–80 (p. 77); Würth [Gropper], p. 267. Cf. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, 'Performance and Performers', in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. by Karl Reichl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 141–202 (pp. 151–53) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110241129.141>>.

<sup>23</sup> Fidjestøl, 'Have You Heard?', p. 119; Würth [Gropper], p. 268.



implication that audience involvement and interpretation are insignificant is an argument *ex silentio*. Through a closer analysis of accounts of encomiastic performance than these scholars allow for, I will demonstrate how these scenes are not simply iterations of a literary motif, but rather how they establish and interrogate a set of behavioural codes – what I will call ‘courtliness’, as set out above – undergirding performer-audience interactions. By enacting a similar codification of courtly behaviour, these accounts represent an Icelandic alternative to the interest of thirteenth-century Norwegian courts in their own hierarchies, traditions, and rituals. This is evinced in the *Konungs skuggsjá* and *Hirðskrá* codexes, respectively drawn up during the reigns of Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–63) and Magnús lagabætir Hákonarson (‘Law-Mender’; r. 1263–80).<sup>24</sup> Primarily via case studies of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* and *Arnórs þáttr jarlaskálds*, I argue that such codes are central within accounts of encomiastic performance, and that they affirm and protect both the performing skald and the praised ruler.

Amongst the *Íslendingasögur*, *Gunnlaugs saga* stands out for its thematised representation of encomiastic skaldic performance. In the saga’s fifth *lausavísa*, Gunnlaugr ormstunga Illugason (‘Snake-Tongue’) announces:

Koma skalk víst at vitja  
(viggs) döglinga þriggja  
(því hefk hljótt\*öndum heitit  
hjarls) ok tveggja jarla.<sup>25</sup>

(*SKP* 5, p. 832: ‘I will certainly come to visit three rulers and two jarls. I have promised that to the possessors of the ship of the land [> MEN].’)

This *helmingr* (‘half-stanza’) forms the basis for the saga author’s account of Gunnlaugr’s travel abroad, in which he visits Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson of Norway (r. 1000–14), King Aðalráðr inn ráðlausi Játgeirsson of England (‘the Ill-Advised’; r. 978–1016:), the Hiberno-

<sup>24</sup> *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. by Ludvig Holm-Olsen (Oslo: Dybwad, 1945); *Hirðskrá*, in *Norges gamle Love*, ed. by Rudolf Keyser and others, 5 vols (Christiania [Oslo]: Grøndahl, 1846–95), II (1848), 387–450.

<sup>25</sup> Whaley emends the MS variants ‘hlutvöndum’ (‘givers’) and ‘hreytöndum’ (‘flingers’) to ‘hljóttöndum’ (l. 3: ‘possessors’). The kenning within which the term operates becomes rather strained as a result but is followed here. See further *SKP* 5, p. 833.

Norse King Sigtryggr silkiskegg Ólafsson of Dublin ('Silk-Beard'; r. c. 989–1036), Sigurðr jarl Hloðvisson of the Orkney Islands (r. c. 980–1014), an otherwise unknown Sigurðr jarl of Skara in West Gautland, and King Óláfr inn sænski Eiríksson of Sweden ('the Swede'; r. 995–1022). Apart from Gunnlaugr's first visit to Eiríkr jarl at Hlaðir, these court visits all conform to the 'stock scene' pattern identified above. Certain aspects are closely repeated, as exemplified in the phrase 'kvaddi hann vel' (*ÍF* 3, pp. 68, 71, 75, 76, 77, 79: 'greeted him well') which is used with small variations in every scene. Whilst formulae of this kind have previously been used as evidence for the literary banality of such scenes, their successive use in *Gunnlaugs saga* functions as part of a more nuanced and developed interrogation of the codes and norms that underpin poet-ruler interactions.

In his first visit to Eiríkr jarl at Hlaðir, the inexperienced Gunnlaugr is shown to lack sensitivity to these codes. Dressed in homespun clothing and with a bleeding boil on his foot, Gunnlaugr makes a disastrous combination of presenting himself shabbily and acting superciliously. When one of Eiríkr's retainers points this out, the meeting degenerates rapidly; Gunnlaugr extemporises a versified insult about the retainer (discussed in section 3.1.1), who moves immediately to grab his axe. In this way, Gunnlaugr has directly inverted the stock scene of encomiastic performance, neglecting the ruling figure altogether and presenting poetry that provokes rather than praises.<sup>26</sup> Eiríkr immediately acts to de-escalate the situation, commanding his retainer: 'Lát vera kyrrt, [...] ekki skulu menn gefa at slíku gaum' (*ÍF* 3, p. 69: 'Calm down; men must not give attention to such things'). As Gareth Evans highlights, this is an attempt 'to rezone the boundaries of masculinity', subverting the expectation that insult recipients will defend their honour through violence (see further

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew Firth argues that Gunnlaugr's bravado 'may have appealed to a thirteenth-century Icelandic audience', whose perspective on Norwegian rulership was strained because of Iceland's incorporation into the Norwegian kingdom in 1262–64. See Matthew Firth, 'Æthelred II "the Unready" and the Role of Kingship in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*', *The Court Historian*, 25 (2020), 1–14 (p. 8) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14629712.2020.1728930>>.

section 3.1).<sup>27</sup> Whilst Evans identifies hollowness in Eiríkr's remark given that the jarl himself proceeds to succumb emotionally to another of Gunnlaugr's jibes, the command is nevertheless an affirmation of the behavioural standards from which the characters are deviating.<sup>28</sup>

The failure to abide by such standards in Eiríkr's court is emphasised by comparison with the next court visit, in which Gunnlaugr meets King Aðalráðr in England. Matthew Firth lays considerable emphasis on the saga author's apparent bias towards Aðalráðr in this scene, evinced in the supposed courtesy of Aðalráðr's conduct and the intrusion of authorial comment when the king is introduced as a 'góðr hofðingi' (*ÍF* 3, p. 70: 'good leader').<sup>29</sup> This is nevertheless an overestimation of Aðalráðr's actions. Where the saga author affords a significant amount of direct speech to Eiríkr jarl in the Hlaðir visit, none of Aðalráðr's words are reported directly in his first interactions with Gunnlaugr. That the narrative focus is rather on Gunnlaugr and his ability to improve on his previous indecorousness is indicated by his greater sense of agency in the scene. Where the opening exchanges at Hlaðir were led by Gunnlaugr's companions, in London they are presented as follows: 'Gunnlaugr gekk bráðliga fyrir konung ok kvaddi hann vel ok virðuliga' (*ÍF* 3, pp. 70–71: 'Gunnlaugr went before the king quickly and greeted him well and respectfully'). The visit proceeds smoothly: Gunnlaugr offers to present a poem to Aðalráðr, who accepts, and Gunnlaugr delivers it 'vel ok sköruliga' (*ÍF* 3, p. 71: 'well and authoritatively'). The saga author quotes the *stef* ('refrain') from the *drápa* (*SkP* 5, pp. 829–30), which Aðalráðr rewards with a precious cloak made of 'skarlat' (*ÍF* 3, p. 71: 'scarlet').<sup>30</sup> Since the cloak reappears later in the saga as a

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<sup>27</sup> Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 46 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198831242.001.0001>>.

<sup>28</sup> Evans, *Men*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Firth, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> As Anna Zanchi highlights, *skarlat* garments appear recurrently in the *Íslendingasögur*, and 'always in connection with aristocratic or otherwise flamboyant clothing'. See Anna Zanchi, "'Melius Abundare Quam Deficere': Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*", in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, ed. by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, 4 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), pp. 21–38 (p. 23).

dangerous gift to Helga in fagra Þorsteinsdóttir – the object of Gunnlaugr’s fatal attraction – the value with which the author initially associates it probably has more to do with priming its significance than the excellence of Gunnlaugr’s poem. Indeed, the saga author provides no detail to support Firth’s point that ‘the reader is meant to understand that Æthelred not only comprehends the verse, but appreciates its form and allusions as greatly complimentary and rewards Gunnlaug appropriately’.<sup>31</sup> This argument is a good example of how the terseness of saga style, compounded in this case by the formulaic character of the stock scene, leads to unsubstantiated assumptions about the capabilities and functions of skaldic audiences.

In apposition to the *skarlat* cloak, Gunnlaugr’s acceptance into Aðalráðr’s retinue is arguably the more important reward in the immediate context, for it represents success of the kind that the poet failed to achieve so spectacularly at Hlaðir – that is, integration within the courtly community. Whilst the innocuousness of the interaction makes it ‘mundane’ for Firth, the significance of this dynamic becomes apparent when the Hlaðir and London visits are compared.<sup>32</sup> Where deviation from the expected behavioural codes is disastrous at Hlaðir, Gunnlaugr’s performance as the visiting poet in London, and Aðalráðr’s as the host, are effective precisely because they accord with the formulaic mode of interaction associated with the stock scene of encomiastic performance. Indistinctiveness and mundanity are to the advantage of both performer and royal audience here, and this is made especially clear via the close juxtaposition of the Hlaðir and London visits in *Gunnalugs saga*. These first two scenes establish the importance of the courtly behavioural code, firstly by having Gunnlaugr compromise it, and secondly by having him conform to it.

Having established the script for how to interact with a ruler, the saga author presents Gunnlaugr’s following court visits as following it mostly to the letter, with the skald

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<sup>31</sup> Firth, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Firth, p. 6.

presenting poems to and being rewarded by a further four rulers. As in the Hlaðir visit, there are several deviations from the established pattern, as when Gunnlaugr begins his fatal rivalry with Hrafn Qnundarson by arguing to be the first to recite a poem for Óláfr inn sönski (*ÍF* 3, pp. 78–82). Other moments of slippage are navigated more successfully than at Hlaðir but nonetheless continue to emphasise the instability that comes with inexperience. When Gunnlaugr visits Dublin, for example, the naivety of King Sigtryggr silkiskegg causes him to risk considerable embarrassment. The account begins with the customary greeting formulae, although the author notes that Sigtryggr ‘hafði þá skamma stund ráðit ríkinu’ (*ÍF* 3, pp. 74–75: ‘had ruled the realm for a short while at that time’). Likewise, the king responds to Gunnlaugr’s request to deliver a poem by saying: ‘Ekki hafa menn til þess orðit fyrri, at fœra mér kvæði’ (*ÍF* 3, p. 75: ‘Until now, no one has done such a thing as to present a poem to me’). Gunnlaugr recites his *drápa* without further comment and the saga author quotes its *stef* and two verses. Given the king’s inexperience, both verses come across as somewhat patronising for their self-assertiveness regarding the quality of the poem and how it should be rewarded:

Muna gramr við mik  
– venr hann gjölfí sik –  
– þess mun grepp vara –  
gollhring spara.<sup>33</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 836: ‘The ruler will spare a gold ring for me; he accustoms himself with generosity. The poet will expect this.’)

Segi hildingr mér,  
ef hann heyrði sér  
dýrligra brag;  
þats drópulag.<sup>34</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 837: ‘Let the king tell me if he himself has heard a more glorious poem. It is in *drápa* form.’)

<sup>33</sup> These verses are composed in *runhent*, the end-rhymed skaldic metre first used by Egill Skallagrímsson in his *Höfuðlausn* (*SkP* 5, pp. 233–67), and which is associated with poetry composed in the British Isles. See further Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenskar bókmenntir í fornöld* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1962), p. 136; Gade, *Structure*, p. 10; Matthew Townend, ‘Whatever Happened to York Viking Poetry? Memory, Tradition and the Transmission of Skaldic Verse’, *Saga-Book*, 27 (2003), 48–90 (p. 57).

<sup>34</sup> Whaley follows the widely accepted emendation of MS ‘siklingr’ (‘king’) to ‘hildingr’ (l. 1: ‘king’) to produce alliteration in the first couplet. See further *SkP* 5, p. 837.

Despite Gunnlaugr's suggestion, Sigtryggr is unsure how to reward the poet, and proposes giving him an exorbitant gift of two *knerrir* ('merchant ships'; sg. *knorr*). The king's treasurer swiftly intervenes: 'Of mikit er þat, herra, [...] aðrir konungar gefa at bragarlaunum gripi góða, sverð góð eða gullhringa góða' (*ÍF* 3, p. 76: 'That is too much, lord. Other kings give a fine valuable, a good sword, or fine gold rings as rewards for poems'). Anonymous and present only briefly, the treasurer sounds like a well-versed saga author, popping into the narrative to remind Sigtryggr of the literary script he has deviated from. His intercession functions not only as a reminder of the conventions of encomiastic performance, but also as a nod to the saga's extradiegetic audience, who would probably have been familiar with the literary motifs he reels off. Robin Waugh reads the scene as an affirmation of Sigtryggr's power since, in his interpretation, the king demonstrates both his vast wealth (via the proposed gift of *knerrir*) and his agency (by selecting a reward that differs from both Gunnlaugr and the treasurer's suggestions).<sup>35</sup> This argument rather misses the point of the encounter, which shows Sigtryggr's power to be entirely misguided. The king represents the only member of Gunnlaugr's audience, both intra- and extradiegetic, unfamiliar with the conventions of this type of interaction. Despite the joviality of the interaction, the swiftness of the treasurer's intervention highlights the potential jeopardy of a royal misstep. As C. Stephen Jaeger has shown, the emphasis on conduct in medieval courtly environments transforms '[t]he exercise of office [into] performance; political and civic activity becomes a work of art'.<sup>36</sup> To deliver a bad performance is therefore to risk an exhibition of incapability as a leader. Whilst Sigtryggr is saved from this outcome in bathetic fashion, his near transgression of courtly decorum again highlights its significance in these contexts.

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<sup>35</sup> Robin Waugh, 'Literacy, Royal Power, and King-Poet Relations in Old English and Old Norse Compositions', *Comparative Literature*, 49 (1997), 289–315 (p. 301) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1771534>>.

<sup>36</sup> Jaeger, p. 13.

The collection of encomiastic performances in *Gunnlaugs saga* provides a useful framework within which to consider royal audiences. As the above analysis demonstrates, these scenes are not drawn unimaginatively from a stock of pre-existing motifs, but are deployed consciously to illustrate the codes of conduct by which skalds and rulers should ideally abide. Despite its apparently affirmative aim, the moment of encomiastic performance is naturally fraught with anxiety; rulers' reputations are placed in the hands of poets who are both feared and prized for their combination of extreme intellect and volatility, and whose artform is both feared and prized for its longevity in cultural memory.<sup>37</sup> The poets' performances are likewise evaluated by the most powerful of audiences, capable of delivering an instantaneous death sentence in the worst cases (see further section 2.2). In this struggle for power, at once diametric and symbiotic, behavioural codes offer some protection to both poet and audience, providing a structure that controls the terms of the performance irrespective of its content.<sup>38</sup> The importance of such formalised conduct is further emphasised by the fact that, in most of the saga accounts, the poets are newcomers to the rulers' courts, making the actions of both parties less predictable. Where poets have already established themselves in a retinue, the framing of their performances may be less formulaic, as exemplified in episodes from *Hallfreðar saga* and *Egils saga*. In the former, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld Óttarsson ('Troublesome-Poet') presents a *drápa* to his new godfather Óláfr Tryggvason (r. Norway 995–1000), but the king subverts the customary reward pattern by giving the poet a sword without a sheath (*ÍF* 8, pp. 155–56). This, the king explains, is less a gift, and more a challenge for the skald to improve his troublesome character. Alternatively, in *Egils saga*, the author makes brief reference to Einarr skálaglam Helgason ('Tinkle-Scales') threatening to abandon the retinue of Hákon jarl Sigurðarson (r. Norway 970–95)

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<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Frank, 'Skaldic Poetry', pp. 181–82; Jesch, 'Avant la Lettre'.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Laurence de Looze, 'Poet, Poem, and Poetic Process in *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*', *ANF*, 104 (1989), 123–42 (pp. 127–33); John Hines, 'Egill's *Höfuðlausn* in Time and Place', *Saga-Book*, 24 (1994–97), 83–104 (p. 98).

should the jarl refuse to hear his poem *Vellekla* (*ÍF* 2, pp. 270–72). In these instances, familiarity between poet and royal audience allows for deviation from the conventions of encomiastic performance.<sup>39</sup>

The tendency towards conventionality in how saga authors depict encomiastic performance is regrettable insofar as it diminishes the distinctiveness of rulers' responses. Albeit for the important reasons identified above, the recourse to behavioural codes acts as a mask to genuine emotional or intellectual reactions. Dissimulation of this kind may feature even in circumstances when formulaic interactions would seem difficult, as when poets incur the hostility of a ruler. This is exemplified in the accounts of so-called *Höfuðlausn* ('head-ransom') performances in *Egils saga* (*ÍF* 2, pp. 183–93), *Óttars þáttr svarta* (*Flat* 3, pp. 241–42) (discussed in section 2.2), and *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla* (*ÍF* 27, pp. 307–08), each of which sees a skald save his life by praising an angered king in verse.<sup>40</sup> The former is a famous and richly described scene in which Egill Skallagrímsson delivers a *drápa* to his nemesis Eiríkr blóðøx Haraldsson ('Blood-Axe'; r. Norway c. 931–33, Northumbria c. 947–48, 952–54). The poem itself has been the subject of exceptional scholarly attention, with many commentators observing an apparently ironic attitude in its use of clichéd themes and images.<sup>41</sup> Correspondingly, Eiríkr seems to avoid evaluation of the poem's content in his brief appraisal: 'Bezta er kvæðit fram flutt' (*ÍF* 2, p. 193: 'The poem is performed excellently'). This ambiguous reply has probably been over-analysed, with John Hines

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. the similarly unorthodox performance in *Hreiðars þáttr* (*ÍF* 10, pp. 245–60), in which Magnús inn góði tolerates and rewards a praise poem by the titular Hreiðarr, which is said to be 'fyrst kynligast, en því betra er síðar er' (*ÍF* 10, p. 260: 'extremely strange at first, but better as it progresses').

<sup>40</sup> On *Höfuðlausn* performance as a literary motif, see Odd Nordland, *Höfuðlausen i Egils saga: ein tradisjonskritisk studie* (Oslo: Norske Samlaget, 1956), pp. 60–87; Hines, p. 87; Alison Finlay, 'Risking One's Head: *Vafprúðnismál* and the Mythic Power of Poetry', in *Myths, Legends, and Heroes: Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature*, ed. by Daniel Anlezark (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 91–108 <<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442662056-008>>.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., analysis and references in *SkP* 5, p. 235; Susanne Kries and Thomas Krömmelbein, "'From the Hull of Laughter": Egill Skalla-Grímsson's "Höfuðlausn" and Its Epodium in Context', *Scandinavian Studies*, 74 (2002), 111–36 (pp. 124, 127); David Ashurst, 'Elements of Satire and Social Commentary in Heathen Praise Poems and Commemorative Odes', in *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), pp. 75–90 (pp. 76–79) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpb3xck.9>>.



describing it as ‘a distinctly backhanded compliment’ – that is, ‘the poem could not have been delivered better’ – whilst Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir reads it as a gross understatement, potentially revealing Eiríkr’s inability to understand what Egill has actually said.<sup>42</sup>

Irrespective of the ironic subtexts possibly passing between poet and royal audience, the overt function of the interaction remains affirmative: Egill praises Eiríkr and Eiríkr compliments Egill’s performance. Whilst dissimulation by both parties is likely given their mutual enmity, it is equally in their interests to maintain a pretence of civility. By resorting to the conventions of courtly conduct, Egill and Eiríkr perform reconciliation without needing to genuinely endorse it, allowing Egill to save his life and Eiríkr to bolster his reputation. A similar dynamic is evident in the account of Þórarinn loftunga’s (‘Praise-Tongue’) *Höfuðlausn* performance in *Heimskringla*. There, Þórarinn offends Knútr inn ríki Sveinsson (‘the Powerful’; r. Denmark 1018–35, England 1016–35, Norway 1028–35) by presenting him only with a *flokkr* (‘long skaldic poem without refrain’), whilst kings are conventionally accorded more elaborate poems in the form of *drápur*. When Þórarinn transforms his poem into the latter, Knútr rewards him lavishly with fifty marks of silver (*ÍF* 27, p. 308). This recourse to the conventional performance-and-reward pattern signals a return to civilities between poet and royal audience, the mask of courtliness tightening even as it had threatened to slip.

Whilst, in the *Höfuðlausn* accounts, personal grievances are insufficient to prompt complete contravention of courtliness, other narratives describe performance situations in which recourse to the conventional behavioural codes is nigh impossible. This is exemplified in *Gunnlaugs saga* when, as noted above, Gunnlaugr and Hrafn compete to present

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<sup>42</sup> Hines, p. 83; *Egil’s saga*, trans. by Bernard Scudder, ed. with introd. and notes by Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 210–11, n. 63. Cf. Finlay, ‘Risking One’s Head’, pp. 105–6; Pétur Húni Björnsson, “‘ið befta ez quæðeð fñ flutt’: Kveðnar Drápur og Kveðnar Rímur”, in *Old Norse Poetry in Performance*, ed. by Brian McMahon and Annemari Ferreira, Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 282–303 (p. 285).

panegyrics to Óláfr inn sænski. Deviating from the convention of a single skald praising a single ruler, this scene demonstrates the difficulty in accommodating the egos of two ambitious poets in one court. The resulting argument draws closer attention to the codes of conduct from which the characters deviate, as demonstrated in Hrafn's request to Gunnlaugr: 'Gerum þá kurteisi [...] at vér færim þetta eigi í kappmæli' (*ÍF* 3, p. 80: 'Let us do the courtesy, then, of not making a dispute of this'). Whilst Hrafn's term 'kurteisi' ('courtesy') is a borrowing from Old French, the mode of courtliness it is used to express is not foreign in this context. Hrafn is asking Gunnlaugr only to act politely in accordance with the behavioural codes articulated above.<sup>43</sup> His honourable intentions are nevertheless quickly undermined, for Óláfr actively encourages each skald to make biting critiques of the other's work. Although the resulting remarks are hardly genteel, they are notable for providing details of audience evaluation that most stock scenes of encomiastic performance lack. Hrafn criticises Gunnlaugr's poem for being 'ófagrt ok nokkut stirðkveðit' (*ÍF* 3, p. 80: 'ugly and somewhat stiffly performed'), whereas Gunnlaugr comments that Hrafn's is 'yfirbragslítill' (*ÍF* 3, p. 80: 'meagre in appearance') since he only deigned to present Óláfr with a *flokkr*. Whilst these remarks demonstrate attention to both the form of encomiastic poetry and the quality of its delivery, they are hardly intended to make for a comprehensive set of evaluative criteria, acting rather as biased and petty jabs in the poets' growing conflict. Based on the interlocutory role he plays in the exchange, Óláfr clearly intends to generate this kind of farcical humour, gleaning greater entertainment from the poets' enmity than their actual compositions.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> On the term *kurteisi*, see further Carolynne Larrington, 'Learning to Feel in the Old Norse Camelot?', *Scandinavian Studies*, 87 (2015), 74–94 (p. 86) <<https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.87.1.0074>>; Bjarni Einarsson, 'The Lovesick Skald: A Reply to Theodore M. Andersson', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 4 (1971), 21–41 (p. 35).

<sup>44</sup> This dynamic is paralleled in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, wherein Haraldr inn harðráði acts as a kind of umpire in a similar competition between the poets Sneglu-Halli and Þjóðólfr Arnórsson. See discussion in section 2.3.

Where an excess of poets tips the balance of power in favour of the royal audience in *Gunnlaugs saga*, the reverse is true in *Arnórs þáttr jarlaskálds*, one of the so-called *þættir* in *Morkinskinna*. If, as noted previously (see section 1.2), *Morkinskinna þættir* are to be seen as insightful expansions rather than independent stories, it is intriguing that many of them fulfil this function via displays of poetic performance. A risk of over-categorization remains in grouping certain of these narratives together under the banner *skáldapættir* ('tales of poets') or, as Wolfgang Lange originally designated in 1957, 'der Skalden-þáttr'.<sup>45</sup> It is true, however, that skalds feature in a significant number of these narratives, indicating the likelihood that they were considered to be individuals with a special capacity to unlock and evaluate aspects of kings' personalities. Whilst previous scholars have identified the tendency for *þættir* to include poets, the depictions of poetic performance in these texts, and how these relate to those in other Old Norse literary genres, have not been examined extensively. To return to *Arnórs þáttr*, this text provides a useful counterpoint to the *Íslendingasögur* analysed above via its depiction of two royal audiences vying for the praise of a single skald. In this case, the kings are Magnús inn góði Óláfsson ('the Good'; r. Norway 1035–47) and Haraldr inn harðráði, both of whom receive a praise poem from the eponymous Arnórr Þórðarson. In arguing to be the first to receive their poem, Magnús and Haraldr are the audience-equivalent of the competing Gunnlaugr and Hrafn. As I demonstrate in the following discussion, the atypicality of this performance event destabilises the conventional behavioural codes, tipping power in the skald's favour and prompting more active involvement on the part of the royal audience. I argue that the respective ways in which Haraldr and Magnús participate in the performance not only interrogate the perceived values

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<sup>45</sup> Wolfgang Lange, 'Einige Bemerkungen zur altnordischen Novelle', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 88 (1957), 150–59 (p. 153). Cf. Joseph Harris, 'Þættir', in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. by John R. Strayer, 13 vols (New York: Scribner, 1989), XII, 1–6. Many modern editions of *þættir* also uphold this category. See, e.g., 'Tales of Poets', in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, including 49 Tales*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson and others, 5 vols (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson: 1997), I: 335–68.

of encomiastic performance, but also reassert the importance of performing effectively as a royal audience.

In most cases, and as shown in *Gunnlaugs saga*, skalds could praise multiple rulers without awkwardness simply by delivering their encomia independently of one another.<sup>46</sup> In the case of *Arnórs þáttr*, the anomalous presence of two rulers within a poet's performance space is inherently problematic, as demonstrated in the kings' argument before the poems are delivered:

Þá segir Haraldr konungr: 'Hvárum skal fyrr færa kvæðit?' Hann segir: 'Fyrr inum yngra.' Konungr spyr: 'Hví hann fyrr?' 'Herra,' svarar hann, 'þat er mælt at bráðgeð verða ungmenni.' En þat þótti hvárumtveggja virðiligra er fyrr var kvæðit fært.

(*ÍF* 23, p. 143: 'Then King Haraldr says: "Whom will you deliver the poem to first?" He [Arnórr] says: "To the younger first." The king asks: "Why him first?" "Lord," he replies, "it is said that youth is impatient." But each of the two [kings] thought that the one who was addressed first would be more honoured.'))

Since neither ruler wants to concede position to the other, the issue is one of primacy, and this is a defining aspect of Magnús and Haraldr's relationship across the kings' sagas. The authors of *Morkinskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Fagrskinna* all recount that, when Haraldr returns from his journey to Byzantium and stakes his claim for the Norwegian kingdom, Magnús agrees to share the sovereignty on the condition that he retain precedence in matters of royal ceremony and position (*ÍF* 23, p. 126; *ÍF* 28, pp. 98–99; *ÍF* 29, pp. 244). In each saga, it is not long before this condition causes confrontation between the kings, as exemplified when Haraldr moors his ship in the royal berth reserved for Magnús, nearly resulting in violent conflict between the kings (*ÍF* 23, pp. 129–30; *ÍF* 28, pp. 103–04; *ÍF* 29, pp. 246–48). *Arnórs þáttr* presents another iteration of this uneasy situation, compounded in this case by the fact that the ceremony of skaldic performance is not mentioned in Magnús's conditions for his joint rule with Haraldr. Whether or not, as Ármann thinks, skaldic performance is still implicated in Magnús's conditions, Haraldr's assertion that he should be

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<sup>46</sup> A well-known exception to this rule is Sigvatr Þórðarson's time with Knútr inn ríki, which caused Óláfr inn helgi, Knútr's enemy and Sigvatr's other patron, to question the poet's loyalty (see *ÍF* 27, pp. 292–93).

the first to receive Arnórr's praise indicates that the ceremony is at least partially *terra nullius*, and therefore represents an opportunity to achieve a limited sign of primacy.<sup>47</sup>

Rather than allowing Haraldr to capitalise on this opportunity, *Arnórs þáttur* makes the king the object of mild ridicule. This is immediately evident in the passage quoted above, in which Arnórr's statement that 'þat er mælt at bráðgeð verða ungmenni' ('it is said that youth is impatient') is a direct and highly ironic allusion to the berth-conflict episode. In that scene, Haraldr patronises Magnús by claiming that the latter's hostility was caused by his youthfulness: 'er þat satt er menn mæla at bráðgeð er bernska, ok viljum svá virða, frændi, at þetta væri æskubragð' (*ÍF* 23, p. 130: 'It is true, what people say, that youth is impatient, and hence, kinsman, we are [I am] willing to consider that this was the foolishness of youth'). Given the similarity in wording between the two utterances, Arnórr's explanation should be interpreted neither as an attempt to pacify Haraldr, as Whaley argues, nor as 'alþekkt ráð foreldra þegar systkini rífast' ('well-known advice from parents when siblings argue'), as Ármann comments.<sup>48</sup> The utterance is rather a sarcastic appropriation of Haraldr's words, turning the king's proverbial wisdom against him. Whilst Arnórr's ability to speak condescendingly to Haraldr is in keeping with the elevated position that retainers are generally afforded in *þættir*, as Morcom has shown, the exceptional circumstances of this performance scene should not be understated.<sup>49</sup> Power swings towards Arnórr not simply because of his considerable wit or the parameters of the *þáttur* genre, but also because the presence of a divided royal audience gives him the chance to reignite their pre-existing conflict. The saga author records no response from Haraldr to Arnórr at this point, suggesting

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<sup>47</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Um hvað fjallaði Blágagladrápa?', in *Guðrúnarstikki kveðinn Guðrúnu Nordal fimmtugri 27. September 2010* (Reykjavík: Menningar og minningarsjóður Mette Magnussen, 2010), pp. 11–14 (p. 11).

<sup>48</sup> Diana Whaley, *The Poetry of Arnórr Jarlaskáld: An Edition and Study* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), p. 45; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Blágagladrápa', p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption', pp. 56–61. Alternatively, Theodore M. Andersson and Gade speculate that the pro-skald bias in *Arnórs þáttur* may exist because the anecdote was passed down in Arnórr's family. See *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)*, ed. and trans. by Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, *Islandica*, 51 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 431.

that, with his own words turned against him, the king has either opted for a dignified silence or been stunned into one. Correspondingly, Arnórr takes the opportunity to begin reciting *Hrynhenda* (*SkP* 2, pp. 181–206) in praise of Magnús.

Despite the initial setback, Haraldr continues to participate actively in Arnórr's performance, making frequent interruptions that castigate the skald. When, in *Hrynhenda*'s third verse (the first quoted in *Arnórs þáttr*), Arnórr praises Magnús by saying 'hverr gramr es þér stóru verri' (*SkP* 2, p. 185: 'every ruler is greatly inferior to you'), Haraldr responds immediately: 'Lofa konung þenna sem þú vill [...] en lasta eigi aðra konunga' (*ÍF* 23, p. 144: 'Praise this king as you wish, but do not criticise other kings'). In criticising Arnórr for an entirely routine example of skaldic praise, albeit a risky one in the present context, Haraldr's comment epitomises the farcical nature of the scene and highlights the ease with which skaldic conventions fall apart in anything other than typical circumstances. The king also recurrently expresses his impatience with Arnórr, commenting after one verse: 'Allákafliga yrkir sjá maðr, ok eigi veit ek hvar kómr' (*ÍF* 23, p. 145: 'The man is composing zealously, and I do not know where it will end'). On one hand, in demonstrating Haraldr's ability to rapidly decipher and interpret Arnórr's stanzas, these interruptions uphold the king's reputation in the literary sources for being a great critic and patron of skaldic poetry.<sup>50</sup> On the other, they also represent the expressions of, to quote Whaley, a 'jealous and testy' king, who recognises that Arnórr's praise for Magnús is indirectly undermining him, and who cannot help but exhibit the exact 'bráðgeð' ('impatience') that Arnórr has chided him for.<sup>51</sup>

The incumbent sense of bathos is emphasised when Arnórr finishes *Hrynhenda* and offers a poem called *Blágagladrápa* to Haraldr. Whilst the author describes this as 'gott kvæði' (*ÍF* 23, p. 146: 'a good poem'), there is an unavoidable anti-climax in the fact that no

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<sup>50</sup> See further Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Haraldr the Hard-Ruler and His Poets*, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies (London: Lewis & Co., 1968).

<sup>51</sup> Whaley, *Arnórr*, p. 45. Cf. Lee M. Hollander, 'Arnórr Thórdarson Jarlaskáld and His Poem *Hrynhent*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 17 (1942), 99–109 (p. 101).

verses are quoted to substantiate the claim. In fairness, this may be less an indictment against Haraldr and more an indication that the *páttr* author lacked source material, for there are no extant verses directly attributed to *Blágagladrápa*.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Haraldr expresses a tone of defeat when he evaluates Arnórr's two-part performance: 'Sjá kunnum vér hverr munr kvæðanna er. Mitt kvæði mun brátt niðr falla ok engi kunna, en drápa þessi ort er um Magnús konung mun kveðin meðan Norðrlond eru byggð' (*ÍF* 23, p. 146: 'We [I] can see what the difference between the poems is. My poem will quickly be forgotten and become unknown, but the *drápa* composed about King Magnús will be recited for as long as the northern lands are inhabited'). In this way, Haraldr correctly and ironically predicts *Blágagladrápa*'s fate, a humbling act of prescience that Ármann views as affirming the king's dignity in the *páttr*'s closing stages.<sup>53</sup> Although, being a poet himself, Haraldr's opinion counts for more than that of most kings here, there is nevertheless an additional sense of bathos in the fact that Haraldr has gone almost completely unaided in his efforts to advocate for his own primacy throughout the narrative. Scenes of encomiastic performances are usually moments in which skalds – and by extension saga authors – take responsibility to highlight rulers' power. Without even a single verse quoted in praise of Haraldr, the opposite is true here.

If the *páttr* author makes Haraldr into a comic character, this is enhanced by the presentation of Magnús as being comparatively dignified. Like many rulers in stock scenes of encomiastic performance (cf. the portrayal of Aðalráðr discussed above), Magnús is given very little direct speech in the episode. On one level, his silence can be interpreted as deference to the codes of conduct that ideally govern this type of ceremony; keeping quiet shows respect towards Arnórr by giving his poetry an appropriately uninterrupted hearing. In the context of the garrulous Haraldr, however, Magnús's muteness takes on the additional

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<sup>52</sup> Whaley considers several of Arnórr's poetic fragments as possibly deriving from *Blágagladrápa*. See Whaley, *Arnórr*, pp. 35, 134.

<sup>53</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Blágagladrápa', p. 12.

function of advertising his status, since it demonstrates that he, unlike his opposite number, has no need to advocate for himself. In fact, Magnús breaks his silence only once during Arnórr's performance, entreating Haraldr: 'Bíðum enn, frændi. Mik grunar, áður en lokit sé, at þér þykki lofit mitt ærit mikit' (*ÍF* 23, p. 143: 'Let us be patient, kinsman. I suspect that my praise will seem greatly sufficient to you before it is finished'). Again, this comment carries more than a hint of sarcasm given Haraldr's previous remarks on the impatience of youth. Where Magnús's silence represents an effective use of courtliness, other actions in which he deviates from convention further demonstrate his discretion as a leader. After Haraldr's summation, both kings reward Arnórr, Haraldr giving him a gold-inlaid spear, whilst Magnús gives him a gold ring (*ÍF* 23, p. 146). Nodding once more to the issue of primacy, the *þátttr* author implies that these rewards should be considered as similar in value, as evinced when Arnórr exclaims: 'Hátt skal bera hváratveggju konungsgjöfna!' (*ÍF* 23, p. 146: 'Each of the kings' gifts will be held high!'). Later, however, Magnús expands on his initial reward, giving Arnórr a *knörr* with trading goods (*ÍF* 23, p. 146). This divergence from the usual performance-and-reward pattern is a tactful move by Magnús, for in doing so he confirms that Arnórr has shown him greater favour than Haraldr without exacerbating the jealousy of his ruling counterpart.

By producing a situation in which formalised codes of conduct are compromised, the author of *Arnórs þátttr* shows, overall, why they are so important within encomiastic performances. As the above analysis demonstrates, the atypicality of Arnórr's two-part performance prompts both Haraldr and Magnús to deviate from conventional courtly behaviour, but to varying extents and effects. Haraldr is the more transgressive figure, continually heckling Arnórr with the intention of defending his status, and yet ironically revealing the weakness of his position. By contrast, Magnús primarily upholds courtly convention via his dignified silence, deviating from the prescribed patterns only to make a



tactful display of gratitude to the skald. Where previous scholars have interpreted *Arnórs þáttr* as an exhibition of Arnórr's diplomatic excellence, equally important, I contend, is its emphasis on how praised rulers are required to perform just as much as their poets.<sup>54</sup> In this story, Magnús emerges as superior to Haraldr not simply because *Hrynhenda* is a better poem than *Blágagladrápa*, but because he performs the role of the royal audience more effectively. Whilst Haraldr's inability to maintain courtly deportment undermines his position, it also produces a more detailed evaluation of skaldic performance than the typical stock scene allows for. Given that nothing of *Blágagladrápa* survives, the reasons why Haraldr prefers *Hrynhenda* cannot be fully reconstructed, but the king's commentary bears out the idea that one of the primary values of encomiastic skaldic poetry was its perceived longevity, which ensured a ruler's presence in cultural memory.<sup>55</sup> Haraldr's focus on the significance of the poetry's oral tradition is also notable. In the king's view, *Hrynhenda* will achieve longevity not simply by its passive inclusion in a canon of praise poetry, but because of its capacity to be 'kveðin' ('spoken', 'recited', 'performed') by future poets to future audiences.<sup>56</sup> His remark affirms again the value in examining the medieval contexts of reception to which skalds dedicated their encomiastic efforts.

Where previous scholars have principally interpreted saga accounts of encomiastic performance as disinterested iterations of a literary motif, my analysis has shown the more significant role they play in articulating the codes of courtly conduct that protect skalds and royal audiences alike. Abidance by these codes, as exemplified by the majority of episodes in *Gunnlaugs saga*, and even in the infamous *Hofuðlausn* performances, safeguards successful navigation of the potential volatility of a skaldic performance. On the other hand, deviation from courtliness destabilises the power balance between performer and royal audience. The

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<sup>54</sup> E.g. Ármann Jakobsson, 'Blágagladrápa', p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Andersson and Gade propose that Arnórr's use of the novel metrical form *hrynhent* in *Hrynhenda* may have been a factor in Haraldr's evaluation. See *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle*, p. 431.

<sup>56</sup> On 'skaldic re-performance', see Osborne, pp. 14–21.

resulting tension may be portrayed in bathetic fashion, as in Sigtryggr silkiskegg's haphazard meeting with Gunnlaugr, but the danger of escalating conflict is ever-present. *Arnórs þáttr* demonstrates the potential irascibility in a divided royal audience, whilst the inverse situation in *Gunnlaugs saga*, in which Gunnlaugr and Hrafn compete to perform at Óláfr inn scenski's court, ultimately eventuates in the deaths of both poets. In many saga accounts, where the actual quotation of encomiastic verse is scarce, it is clear that the framing of skaldic performance, and the interactions therein, are of equal importance to the poetic content. In these fraught moments of introduction and evaluation, saga authors are not simply reiterating a pre-existing formula, but rather are demonstrating the paradoxical vulnerability that governs the relationship between praising skald and praised ruler. In these scenes, performer and audience engage in an act that ostensibly affirms both parties, and yet the mask of courtliness that they employ, and the persistent risk that it will slip, shows that these are moments of great anxiety and potential exposure.

## 2.2 Undermined Rulers

Where encomiastic poetry functions to maintain and enhance ruling power, there also exists a selection of courtly verse that undermines it. Scholars have long distinguished between these two sub-categories according to skalds' perceived capacity to both 'praise and blame' their audiences.<sup>57</sup> Given that, as shown above, even praise poetry risked causing offense accidentally or otherwise, it is unsurprising that studies of intentional blame poetry tend to emphasise the severity of its consequences. Nicolas Meylan highlights its magical potential for 'spectacular non-linguistic effects', whilst Clunies Ross argues more generally that the

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<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Kate Heslop, *Viking Mediologies: A New History of Skaldic Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), p. 3 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2c02bhh>>; William Sayers, 'Command Performance: Coercion, Wit, and Censure in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*', *Mediaevistik*, 34 (2021), 25–48 (pp. 31, 37) <<https://doi.org/10.3726/med.2021.01.02>>; Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 40.

dangerous nature of such poetry may explain why relatively little of it has survived or, indeed, why little may originally have been composed.<sup>58</sup> As in most binary thinking, however, reliance on the ‘praise and blame’ dichotomy tends to be reductive. Court poetry does not always follow such definitive parameters in either the performer’s purpose or the audience’s interpretation. Within the blame category, furthermore, variation exists between poems that are critical but constructive, and those that are more uncompromisingly destructive. In the following discussion, I acknowledge and examine this spectrum of functions, focusing on accounts of Sigvatr Þórðarson’s performance of *Bersögglisvísur* (*SkP* 2, pp. 11–30: ‘Plain-Speaking Verses’) for Magnús inn góði, Óttarr svarti’s *mansöngsdrápa-cum-Höfuðlausn* for Óláfr inn helgi, and Þorleifr jarlsskáld Rauðfeldarson’s (‘Jarl’s Poet’) use of his poem *Jarlsníð* (*SkP* 1, p. 372: ‘Jarl’s Abuse’) to injure Hákon jarl Sigurðarson.

A connection between these accounts and the encomiastic performances discussed previously is their sustained focus on the communal dynamics of court environments. The community-building aspects of skaldic court poetry have been examined previously by scholars such as Ström and Goeres, who have respectively investigated the propagandic and commemorative influence that skalds exerted over their audiences, and the rare occasions in which skalds themselves perform with a communal voice.<sup>59</sup> These studies nevertheless focus almost exclusively on praise poetry, which generates communal sentiment by inviting courtly audiences to share in a mutual celebration of their ruler. In this section, I show how questions of community are of equal importance in depictions of critical performance. Where, in the material covered above, courtliness acts as a mask that protects skalds and their royal

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<sup>58</sup> Nicolas Meylan, ‘The Magical Power of Poetry’, *Saga-Book*, 37 (2013), 43–60 (p. 44); Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 34. Cf. Marold, ‘Publikum’, p. 472.

<sup>59</sup> On skaldic influence over court audiences, see Ström, ‘Propaganda’; Goeres, *Poetics*, pp. 8–12. On communal performance, see Erin Michelle Goeres, ‘Being Numerous: Communal Storytelling in *Liðsmannaflokkur*’, in *Medieval Stories and Storytelling: Multimedia and Multi-Temporal Perspectives*, ed. by Simon Thomson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), pp. 71–86. Cf. Russell G. Poole, *Viking Poems on War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative*, Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations, 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) <<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442683082>>.

audiences, critical performances decimate dissimulation and expose disjuncture at the heart of courtly communities. Irrespective of whether the skald's intention is to remedy or exacerbate this disjuncture, I contend that communal influence remains at the centre of their artform.

In the *konungasögur*, it is not uncommon to see skalds acting as advisors to their rulers. Poets may support or question rulers' decisions to initiate hostilities (e.g. *SkP* 1, pp. 65, 829; *SkP* 2, pp. 393–94); mediate between rulers and their allies or enemies (e.g. *SkP* 1, pp. 64, 578–627); or, of course, suggest how rulers might appropriately reward them for their service (e.g. *SkP* 1, p. 796; *SkP* 2, p. 480). To take a more specific point of departure, in their accounts of the battle of Fitjar (c. 961), the authors of *Heimskringla* (*ÍF* 26, pp. 183–84) and *Fagrskinna* (*ÍF* 29, pp. 84–85) report that Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson ('Plagiarist', literally 'Destroyer of Poets') was nominated by other retainers to deliver news of war to the king, Hákon inn góði Haraldsson ('the Good'; r. Norway c. 934–61). Eyvindr completes this task in typically theatrical fashion by extemporising the following *lausavísa*:

Blóðøxar téa beiða  
brynþings fetilstinga  
(oss gerask hneppt) ins hvassa  
hefnendr (setuefni).  
Heldr es vant, en vildak  
veg þinn, konungr, segja  
– fǫum til fornra vápna  
fljótt – hersögu dróttni.

(*SkP* 1, p. 215: 'The avengers of the keen [Eiríkr] Blóðøx do request a mail-shirt-assembly [> BATTLE] with the sword-belt-stabber [> SWORD]; opportunity for peace is becoming scant for us. It is rather difficult to tell a lord war-news, but I wished, king, for your glory; let us get our old weapons swiftly.')

Whilst Eyvindr is unquestionably acting in Hákon's interests, his verse highlights the challenge counsellors faced when negotiating with rulers. Eyvindr's task is 'vandr' (l. 5: 'difficult') not only because Hákon has previously reprimanded his subjects for false alarms about the movements of his enemies (*ÍF* 26, pp. 176–77), as Poole notes (*SkP* 1, p. 216), but also because the act of giving advice inherently risks implying incapability or ignorance on the part of the ruler. As indicated by the 'gamankviðlingr' (*ÍF* 29, p. 87: 'playful ditty'; see further *SkP* 1, p. 218) Eyvindr shares with the king during the following conflict, this risk is

somewhat mitigated in Eyvindr's case since he is presented as enjoying Hákon's good graces. Likewise, Hákon responds affirmatively to Eyvindr's verse, accepting the validity of the utterance and commenting that Eyvindr is a 'góðr drengur' (*ÍF* 26, p. 184: 'good man').

Given that Eyvindr is reticent to deliver even this relatively uncontroversial statement, it is unsurprising that the power to give overtly critical advice is afforded only to the most established of court poets. The example *par excellence* is Sigvatr's *Bersöglisvísur*, in which the poet reprimands a young Magnús inn góði for his harsh treatment of the Norwegian landowners who had killed his father, Óláfr inn helgi, at the battle of Stiklastaðir (1030). Accounts of the composition and performance of *Bersöglisvísur* are extant in three of the four primary kings' sagas: *Ágrip* (*ÍF* 29, pp. 32–33), *Fagrskinna* (*ÍF* 29, pp. 212–15), and *Heimskringla* (*ÍF* 28, pp. 25–31). The equivalent material in *Morkinskinna* (missing through a lacuna at this point) is usually supplied by the *Flateyjarbók* redaction (*Flat* 3, pp. 267–70; cf. *ÍF* 23, pp. 29–42). These sources concur that Magnús changed stance after Sigvatr's intercession, winning back the landowners and earning his auspicious nickname. Despite their overarching consensus on the motivations and outcomes of the *Bersöglisvísur* performance, the accounts contain several discrepancies in their uses of the poem, their depictions of Sigvatr, and their descriptions of Magnús's response. Previous studies have focused on the first two of these aspects. O'Donoghue and Goeres compare how the accounts incorporate different stanzas from *Bersöglisvísur*, the former focusing on their use and function as intradiegetic verses, whilst the latter examines the poetic narratives they are selected to produce.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, Evans considers the accounts' characterisations of Sigvatr as, respectively, a judicious diplomat, a plain-speaking retainer, and an impulsive entertainer.<sup>61</sup> Alongside these studies, there is room for elaboration on how the accounts

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<sup>60</sup> O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 39–42; Goeres, *Poetics*, pp. 135–45.

<sup>61</sup> Gareth Lloyd Evans, 'The Construction of Diplomacy in the Various Accounts of Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Bersöglisvísur*', *Saga-Book*, 38 (2014), 49–60.

present Magnús's reception of the poem. As I demonstrate below, there is much greater consistency in this aspect relative to the other two, representing the accounts' sustained focus on the relationship between Magnús, his court, and his broader public.

*Ágrip* includes only one verse from *Bersögglisvísur*, but it forms the crux of an account which is more 'dramatic and striking', to quote O'Donoghue, than those in any of the other kings' sagas.<sup>62</sup> The main body of the account is as follows:

Hann átti þing í Niðarósi ok reisti með freku sakargipt við Þrændi alla, ok stungu allir nefi í skinnfeld ok veittu allir þögn, en engi andsvör. Stóð upp þá maðr, Atli at nafni, ok mælti eigi fleiri orð en þessor: 'Svá skorpnar skór at fœti mér, at ek má eigi ór stað komask.' En Sighvatr kvað þar þegar vísu þessa:

Hætts þats allir ætla,  
áðr skal við því ráða,  
hárir menn, es ek heyri,  
hót, skjöldungi á móti.  
Greypts þats höfðum hneppa  
heldr ok niðr í feldi,  
slegit hefr þögn á þegna,  
þingmenn nqsum stinga.<sup>[63]</sup>

Ok raufsk þing þat með (þeima) hætti, at konungr bað alla menn finnask þar um morgininn. Ok fannsk þá í hans orðum, at guð hafði skipt skapi hans, ok var þá freka snúin til miskunnar, hét öllum mönnum gæzku ok efndi sem hann hét eða betr, ok aflaðisk hönnum af því vinsæld mikil ok nafn þat, at hann var kallaðr Magnús góði.

(*ÍF* 29, pp. 32–33: 'He [Magnús] held an assembly in Niðaróss and harshly began a charge-giving against all the people from Þrandheimr, and they all thrust their noses into skin cloaks and they were all silent and gave no answer. Then a man called Atli stood up and said no more words than these: "The shoes on my feet shrivel such that I cannot come off this spot." And Sighvatr immediately spoke this verse there:

"It is dangerous, the threat, as I hear, when all hoary men intend to turn against the king; one must plan against that in advance. It is grim, when assembly attendees rather drop their heads and thrust their noses down into their cloaks; silence has fallen over thanes."

And the assembly broke up with their conduct, such that the king asked everyone to meet there in the morning. And then it was found in his words that God had changed his disposition, and then [his] harshness was turned to mercy.'

Whilst scholars unanimously reject the historicity of this scene, the *Ágrip* author has nevertheless produced a plausible context for Sighvatr's verse in abstraction from the *Bersögglisvísur* sequence.<sup>64</sup> As Burrows argues, the author bases their account on Sighvatr's use of present tense verbs and his reference to 'þingmenn' (l. 8: 'assembly attendees'), construing

<sup>62</sup> O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *SkP* 2, pp. 23–24.

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., Poole, *Viking Poems*, p. 10; O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 40.

the poet's intercession as instinctive and public rather than, as in the other accounts, pre-meditated and private.<sup>65</sup> Other factors emphasise the immediacy and urgency with which Sigvatr's verse is associated. Firstly, it is one of only seven *dróttkvætt* stanzas and *helmingar* quoted within *Ágrip*, a relatively sparse distribution which intensifies the formal antithesis between the saga prose and the skaldic stanzas when they appear.<sup>66</sup> This antithesis is reflected here in the shattering of the landowners' sulking silence by Atli and Sigvatr's respective utterances. Secondly, in contrast to Sigvatr's comment that an uprising must be averted 'áðr' (l. 2: 'before', 'in advance'), the *Ágrip* author makes no suggestion of forward thinking in the poet's action; his performance is rather an intercession conceived and delivered 'þar þegar' ('there and then') at the brink of a civil conflict. Given the sudden magnification of sonic and interpersonal qualities in the scene, it seems almost anticlimactic that the author resorts to the typically sparse style of saga prose in describing Magnús's response. Just as the volatility of a society on the verge of collapse is exposed, the opaqueness of the prose precludes any nuance in the king's reception of the verse.

On one hand, this might be explained by the highly public context in which the *Ágrip* author situates Sigvatr's poetry, and in which opacity of thought and mind can be seen as beneficial to Magnús. On the other, the authors of *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Flateyjarbók* all set the *Bersögslisvísur* performance in the private space of the king's court, and yet continue to present Magnús as being largely unresponsive to Sigvatr. None of the authors give the king direct speech after Sigvatr's performance, his most active engagement with which is implied by the following comment in *Flateyjarbók*: 'hyggur konungr ath þessum radum og aminningum' (*Flat* 3, p. 269; cf. *ÍF* 23, p. 42: 'the king thinks on these

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<sup>65</sup> Hannah Burrows, 'Court Poetry: Assemblies and Skaldic Verse', in *Narrating Law and Laws of Narration in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Roland Scheel, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 117 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 91–116 (p. 95) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110661811-005>>.

<sup>66</sup> On this antithesis, see further O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 6.

counsels and admonitions'). As noted previously, absence of detail regarding the reactions of intradiegetic audiences is not unusual in saga literature. Given the circumstances of Sigvatr's performance, their varying representation across the saga accounts, and the fact that *Bersöglsvisur* includes many direct addresses to Magnús via vocative and second-person constructions (*SkP* 2, pp. 12, 15, 18–24, 27, 29–30), Magnús's pervading silence is nevertheless probably more meaningful than mere oversight on the part of the prose authors. The king is young and inexperienced at this stage, and is consequently portrayed as behaving rashly. He is furthermore discomfited not only by one of his retainers, but specifically by a retainer who enjoyed a strong relationship with the king's late father, and who apparently named Magnús at his hasty baptism (*ÍF* 27, p. 210). Magnús's muteness therefore reflects a power imbalance formed out of experience rather than courtly position, precluding his ability to make even a word of response to his skald. If, as might be suggested by the occasional topos of kingly aloofness towards skalds, Magnús's silence is a display of disinterest rather than humility, it may also signal his detachment from and ignorance of the social instability that his behaviour is causing.<sup>67</sup> In this alternative reading, his (lack of) response suggests that he is caught in two minds, having no real counterargument to Sigvatr but also continuing to be influenced by a personal desire for revenge.

Although Magnús's attitude, whether self-effacing or self-important, dissipates quickly in all the accounts, the authors unanimously, if unevenly, minimise Sigvatr's involvement in the king's character development. As seen above, the *Ágrip* author attributes Magnús's change of heart to divine rather than skaldic intervention, and this may accord with the purported Norwegian authorship of the text.<sup>68</sup> In *Fagrskinna*, the king's own wisdom is a

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<sup>67</sup> See discussion of this topos in Marold, 'Publikum', pp. 465–66.

<sup>68</sup> This hypothesis is based largely on the 'Norwegianisms' present in the text. M. J. Driscoll, furthermore, suggests that 'the author of *Ágrip* evinces little interest in, and indeed some ignorance of, Iceland and Icelanders'. See further *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum: A Twelfth-Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*, ed. and trans. by M. J. Driscoll, 2nd edn (London: VSNR, 2008), pp. ix–xxv (p. xi–xii).



primary factor in his development (*ÍF* 29, p. 215), whilst in *Heimskringla* the intercession of other courtiers is required (*ÍF* 28, p. 31). These factors are all present in *Flateyjarbók*, in which the king thinks on Sigvatr's advice; is advised by other courtiers; controls himself because of his wisdom and benevolence; but is also softened in temper by God (*Flat* 3, pp. 269–70; cf. *ÍF* 23, p. 42). Between the accounts, there is no clear consensus on a primary influencer in Magnús's court, only that Sigvatr was not the only one. The minimisation of Sigvatr should not, however, be taken as a critique of his poetic talent, but rather as an affirmation of the importance of 'collective action' in court environments, as Goeres argues.<sup>69</sup> In his 'praise-as-mockery' adage (cited in section 1), Snorri envisions a communal policing of poetic expression in elite settings. By contrast, the accounts of the *Bersöglisvísur* performance mutually affirm a communal policing of the royal audience by his courtiers, skaldic and otherwise. This is embodied most clearly in the *Flateyjarbók* account, whose author affirms the significance of *Bersöglisvísur* by quoting the greatest number of verses and supplementing many of them with prose elaborations, but also acknowledges the value of broader courtly counsel: 'verda þa og margir gófgir menn og godgiarnir ath stydia þessi heilrædi med godum tillogum' (*Flat* 3, pp. 269–70; cf. *ÍF* 23, p. 42: 'There were also many esteemed men of good will to support this [Sigvatr's] wise counsel with good contributions'). In *Flateyjarbók* (*Flat* 3, p. 267), *Heimskringla* (*ÍF* 28, p. 26), and *Fagrskinna* (*ÍF* 29, p. 212), moreover, the authors all include the detail that Sigvatr's intervention is precipitated by a discussion amongst Magnús's friends at court, who draw lots to decide who should approach the king. In this way, although Sigvatr makes use of his personal experiences with Magnús and Óláfr inn helgi to support his argument in *Bersöglisvísur* (e.g. *SkP* 2, pp. 15–19), he is framed as being a spokesman for the whole court. In *Ágrip* too, where the single verse from *Bersöglisvísur* comes immediately after the landowners' display of disapproval, Sigvatr acts

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<sup>69</sup> Goeres, *Poetics*, p. 140.

again as a mediator, but this time between Magnús and the broader public.<sup>70</sup> If Sigvatr's influence is ultimately diminished across all the accounts, this comes as part of an affirmation of the importance of unity within the court, a value that displaces Magnús's personal desire for revenge.

The importance of retainer involvement in critical performance is emphasised by comparison to *Óttars þáttur svarta*, a story which sees Sigvatr acting as a mediator once more in the circumstances leading to the composition and performance of Óttarr svarti's *Höfuðlausn*. Versions of *Óttars þáttur* survive in several redactions of *Óláfs saga ins helga*, including those in *Bæjarbók* (composed c. 1370–90), *Bergsbók* (composed c. 1400–25), *Tómasskinna* (composed c. 1450–1500), and *Flatheyjarbók* (*Flat* 3, pp. 241–42), the latter of which I cite here.<sup>71</sup> These sources concur that Óttarr composed *Höfuðlausn* to appease Óláfr inn helgi, whom the poet had offended by composing a 'mansöngsdrápa' (*Flat* 3, p. 242: 'erotic poem') about Ástriðr, the king's wife. As Odd Nordland and Alison Finlay have shown, the narrative pattern in *Óttars þáttur* reflects other iterations of the *Höfuðlausn* motif, also found in *Egils saga* and an anecdote involving Þórarinn loftunga in *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla* (see section 2.1).<sup>72</sup> Other scholars have investigated *Óttars þáttur* for its distinctive features, a popular aspect being the incriminating *mansöngsdrápa*, the relationship of which to other instances of *mansöngur* in the saga corpus is examined by Marold and Bjørn Bandlien.<sup>73</sup> Whilst these studies account comprehensively for *Óttars þáttur*'s relationship with other texts, atypical details relating to the story's central performance have been

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Burrows, 'Court Poetry', pp. 95–96.

<sup>71</sup> *Bæjarbók* MS: Copenhagen, Den arnamagnæanske samling, Nordisk forskningsinstitut, and Reykjavik, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 73 b fol.; *Bergsbók* MS: Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, Holm perg. 1 fol.; *Tómasskinna* MS: Copenhagen, Det kongelige bibliotek, Den gamle kongelige samling, and Reykjavik, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, GKS 1008 fol.

<sup>72</sup> Nordland, p. 72; Finlay, 'Risking One's Head', pp. 102–3.

<sup>73</sup> Edith Marold, 'Mansöngur: A Phantom Genre?', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 239–62 (pp. 245–46) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/M.TCNE-EB.3.4076>>; Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, trans. by Betsy van der Hoek, *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), p. 132.

underappreciated. In the first place, Óttarr's performance is unusual in that Óláfr solicits the poet to perform the *mansöngsdrápa* in front of the king's wife and, indeed, the rest of his court. Transforming his hall into a legal courtroom, wherein Óttarr's poetry is framed as incriminating evidence, Óláfr inverts the typical scene of encomiastic performance, inviting his poet to insult rather than praise him. Whilst this decision seems counterintuitive, it nevertheless establishes a situation in which Óláfr can justify his anger and perform it most emphatically.<sup>74</sup> Thus, when Óttarr recites the *mansöngsdrápa*, Óláfr duly reddens in complexion (*Flat* 3, p. 242). In the absence of any quoted verses, this somatic marker signals the poem's offensive qualities to the *páttr*'s extradiegetic audience.<sup>75</sup>

Óttarr is not, however, content to talk himself into a noose. In keeping with the plan he has prepared with Sigvatr, who is varyingly recorded as either Óttarr's uncle or close friend, Óttarr recites *Höfuðlausn* immediately after finishing the *mansöngsdrápa*. This atypically two-pronged performance elicits an equally atypical reaction from its audience; acting in Óláfr's stead, the king's retainers attempt to interrupt Óttarr as he moves on to his praise poem. This is described as follows in *Flateyjarbók* as follows: 'hirdmenn konungs kolludu ok mælltu at flimberinn skyldi þegia' (*Flat* 3, p. 242: 'The king's retainers called out and said that the maligner must be silent'). As implied in the term 'flimberinn' ('maligner', literally 'scorn-carrier'), the retainers view Óttarr's *Höfuðlausn* as an extension of the preceding *mansöngsdrápa*, interpreting it as a praise poem delivered ironically to mock its recipient. Whilst their attempted intervention is a small detail in the narrative, its significance is affirmed by the fact that it features in all versions of *Óttars páttr*. It is also anomalous in

<sup>74</sup> On public performances of royal anger, see, e.g., Stephen D. White, 'The Politics of Anger', in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 127–52 (p. 139) <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501718694-010>>.

<sup>75</sup> On reddening as a sign of anger in Old Norse literature, see further Edel Porter and Teodoro Manrique Antón, 'Flushing in Anger, Blushing in Shame: Somatic Markers in Old Norse Emotional Expression', *Cognitive Linguistic Studies*, 2 (2015), 24–49 (pp. 31–35) <<https://doi.org/10.1075/cogls.2.1.02por>>; Kirsten Wolf, 'Somatic Semiotics: Emotion and the Human Face in the Sagas and *Þættir* of Icelanders', *Traditio*, 69 (2014), 125–45 (pp. 134–38) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0362152900001938>>.

descriptions of skaldic performance in court environments. Where, as discussed previously, other accounts feature court poets arguing for the right to perform, or criticising each other's verse, parallels involving a mid-performance interruption are difficult to identify. Whilst the stock scene of encomiastic performance usually records only the ruler's response, the retainers' outburst in *Óttars þáttr* breaks the façade of intimacy between the poet and his royal audience, highlighting the presence of other courtiers even though they are usually construed as marginal. This detail in *Óttars þáttr* also provides a useful counterpoint to the actions of Magnús's retainers in the *Bersögglisvísur* accounts. Where Magnús's retainers were unified in supporting Sigvatr's counsel, Óláfr's retainers are open in their opprobrium for Óttarr. Although the *þáttr*'s extradiegetic audience might consequently be inclined to view Óláfr's retainers negatively, it should be recognised that both sets of retainers work to reinforce the stability of their ruler's position. Magnús's retainers reconcile the king with his court and public, whilst Óláfr's, taking cue from the king's reddening, attempt to deny the potential for further insult by an outsider.

Both *Óttars þáttr* and the *Bersögglisvísur* accounts affirm Snorri's praise-as-mockery adage, depicting the efficacy of courtly skaldic performance as depending on the approval of the whole court. As noted previously, Ghosh and Rutkowski have respectively challenged Snorri's statement, highlighting multiple factors that would make inaccurate praise acceptable to rulers and their courtiers.<sup>76</sup> These studies are right to highlight the malleability of a court audience's interpretation of skaldic poetry, particularly given the power imbalances that would likely make retainers hesitant to repudiate a ruler's praise. Equally, however, they are mostly applicable to typical settings of encomiastic performance, wherein the consequences of any ironic praise would likely be precluded by the mask of courtliness examined above (see section 2.1). By contrast, in *Óttars þáttr* and *Bersögglisvísur*, this mask is

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<sup>76</sup> Ghosh, pp. 50–54; Rutkowski.

made redundant by the exceptional circumstances of the performances, resulting in greater support for the implied audience dynamics of ‘praise-as-mockery’. In these episodes, where a threat to ruling power is neither ambiguous nor unintended, retainers are given licence to abandon their typical reticence and act either to support or repudiate a critical performance. Despite their contrasting contents and overtly undermining functions, Sigvatr’s performance of *Bersöglisvísur* and Óttarr’s of his *mansöngsdrápa* both prompt affirmation of the relationship between royal audiences and their courts.

The courtly collectivism on display in these accounts is counterbalanced by *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds* (ÍF 9, pp. 213–29), another narrative attested in *Flateyjarbók*. This text, which describes the dealings between Þorleifr jarlsskáld Rauðfeldarson and two Scandinavian rulers, Hákon jarl of Norway and Sveinn tjúguskegg Haraldsson of Denmark (‘Fork-Beard’; r. 986–1014), demonstrates the potential for critical performance to be at its most effective within a divided court. This is primarily borne out during the *þáttr*’s central event, in which Þorleifr performs a poem called *Jarlsníð* for Hákon. This immensely destructive poem is framed as an act of revenge against the jarl, who has earlier confiscated Þorleifr’s goods, burned his ship, and hanged his crew after a disagreement over trading rights. Þorleifr’s performance reciprocates this harsh treatment, invoking magical powers which cause Hákon’s hall to darken, weapons to fly from the walls and kill their owners, and the jarl’s beard and hair to fall away. Although these details associate *Þorleifs þáttr* more closely with ‘later and more fantastic sagas’ than with other *Íslendingaþættir*, as Joseph Harris comments, the author’s interest in the values of rulership, the make-up of a courtly retinue, and the ways in which both aspects are interrogated via critical performance make it a useful point of comparison to the material discussed previously.<sup>77</sup> Whilst the *þáttr*’s depiction of court

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph Harris, ‘*Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*’, in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 671–72 (p. 672).

societies has tended to be secondary to its magical elements in scholarly analyses, I will demonstrate their equal importance within the text.<sup>78</sup> I argue that Þorleifr's performances elicit a comparison between unified and divided audiences in court settings, the latter helping to facilitate the poet's revenge and thereby to subvert the ruler's reputation.

As Harris notes, the structure of *Þorleifs þáttir* is paralleled in several other *þættir*, wherein two Scandinavian rulers are juxtaposed and their qualities compared.<sup>79</sup> In this case, King Sveinn is presented much more favourably than Hákon jarl. Compared to Hákon's unaccountably severe treatment of Þorleifr, the poet's subsequent meeting with Sveinn is especially felicitous. Fidjestøl cites this meeting as a prime example of the stock scene of encomiastic performance, but Þorleifr actually outstrips the typical laudatory skald by honouring Sveinn with a 'fertugr drápa' (*ÍF* 9, p. 218: 'forty-stanza *drápa*'), double the usual length of this kind of panegyric.<sup>80</sup> Emphasising the exceptional quality of this poem, the *þáttir* author provides significant detail about its reception in Sveinn's court: 'Konungur lofaði mjök kvæðit ok allir þeir, er heyrðu, ok sǫgðu bæði vel kveðit ok skǫruliga fram flutt' (*ÍF* 9, p. 219: 'The king praised the poem greatly and all who heard it also said it was both well spoken and excellently performed'). Whilst these remarks reiterate most of the conventional terms used to evaluate skaldic performance, as Gade has shown, the inclusion of commentary from Sveinn's wider court is distinctive.<sup>81</sup> Juxtaposed with Hákon's tyrannical treatment of Þorleifr, the poet's performance at Sveinn's court prompts a display of vastly greater hospitality and cohesiveness.

The *þáttir* author's focus on the reception of performance, and particularly its communal aspects, continues in their description of Þorleifr's vengeance against Hákon. In

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<sup>78</sup> E.g. Nicolas Meylan, *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance*, Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia, 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 158–64.

<sup>79</sup> Harris, 'Þorleifs þáttir', p. 672. A famous example is *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka* (*ÍF* 6, pp. 359–68), in which the compared rulers are Haraldr inn harðráði of Norway and Sveinn tjúguskegg of Denmark.

<sup>80</sup> Fidjestøl, 'Have You Heard?', p. 119.

<sup>81</sup> Gade, 'Recitation', p. 138.

contrast to the supportive atmosphere promoted by Sveinn and his courtiers, the actions of audiences in Hákon's court are more indicative of the community's complacency and division. To engineer an opportunity to deliver *Jarlsníð*, Þorleifr adopts the cratylic persona of 'Níðungr Gjallandason' (*ÍF* 9, p. 220: literally 'Villain, son of Shrieker'), a cantankerous beggar who positions himself in a corner of Hákon's hall. Þorleifr's transition from this marginal position to centre stage is itself an artfully delivered performance. Subverting the directness and self-motivation with which skalds typically present themselves to rulers, Þorleifr ensures that Hákon only learns of his presence indirectly. The disguised poet causes a din in the beggars' corner, prompting Hákon to request a meeting with the disruptive individual. In getting him to the centre of the hall whilst maintaining anonymity, and giving Hákon and his courtiers a false sense of agency, Þorleifr's performance has its first success. Having achieved the limelight, Þorleifr continues to disarm his audience, praising Hákon whilst complaining of his own decrepitude, and absurdly stuffing his face with food. Lars Lönnroth remarks that '[t]his apparent demonstration of gluttony is evidently meant to be a comic interlude before the recitation of the *Jarlsníð*', and possibly has its background in folk traditions that would have been familiar to the *þátttr*'s extradiegetic audience.<sup>82</sup> Whilst Þorleifr's gastronomic binge also has a practical function – he is secreting the food in preparation for his return journey to Denmark – its comic aspect is not so trivial as Lönnroth implies, for it provides the *þátttr* author an opportunity to describe the reactions of the poet's audience. '[H]lógu menn nú fast at karli þessum,' the author notes; 'þjónustumenn tóluðu, at bæði væri, at hann væri mikill ok miðdigr, enda gæti hann mikit etit' (*ÍF* 9, p. 222: 'Now the men laughed hard at this old man; the serving men spoke of two things: that he was large and broad in the middle, and that he could eat a lot'). Via these divergent interpretations between

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<sup>82</sup> Lars Lönnroth, 'Old Norse Text as Performance', *Scripta Islandica*, 60 (2009), 49–60 (p. 55). See further Terry Gunnell, 'Masks and Mumming Traditions in the North Atlantic: A Survey', in *Masks and Mumming in the Nordic Area*, ed. by Terry Gunnell (Uppsala: Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi, 2007), pp. 275–326 (p. 284).

the high- and low-ranking courtiers, the author demonstrates divisions in the make-up of Hákon's court. The serving men's ability to perceive Þorleifr's physical threat beneath his disguise affirms the value of folk wisdom, whilst the naivety and complacency of the higher-ranking courtiers is highlighted by contrast.

When, having been deemed harmless, Þorleifr proceeds to recite the first half of *Jarlsníð*, a similar shift in narrative focus onto Hákon's reactions indicates equivalent complacency on his part. The *þáttr* author notes that, during this section of the poem, 'þykkir jarli lof í hverri vísu ok finnr, at þar er getit ok í framaverka Eiríks, sonar hans' (*ÍF* 9, p. 222: 'the jarl thinks there is praise in every verse, and he perceives that the exploits of his son Eiríkr are mentioned too'). Whilst Hákon's instantaneous interpretations place him on a par with such quick-witted royal audiences as Haraldr inn harðráði (cf. section 2.1), the *þáttr* author carefully conveys the subjectivity – and hence the potential inaccuracy – of the jarl's response by framing it within the verbs *þykkja* ('to think') and *finna* ('to find', 'to perceive'). In this case, the jarl's egoism proves extremely costly. When Þorleifr moves on to the next section of *Jarlsníð*, his poem produces the dire magical effects noted above, killing many of Hákon's retainers and forcing the jarl to endure the deep humiliations of losing his beard and hair, and having a knotted sackcloth tugged between his thighs. As several scholars have noted, these latter effects are attacks on Hákon's masculinity, the sackcloth element metaphorically framing the jarl as the recipient of 'phallic aggression', a common insinuation in *níð*-practice.<sup>83</sup> Although Carl Phelpstead does not mention *Þorleifs þáttr* in his article on the subject, the beard and hair loss suffered by Hákon bears out his conclusion that, in Old Norse literature, 'the loss or removal of hair symbolizes or is associated with a setting apart

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<sup>83</sup> See, e.g., Eldar Heide, 'Spinning *Seiðr*', in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives*, ed. by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, Origins, Changes & Interactions (Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp. 164–70 (p. 168) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.919497.33>>; Lönnroth, 'Text as Performance', p. 50. *Níð* and its insinuations of *ergi* ('unmanliness') are discussed in section 3.1.2.



or consecration: it becomes a rite of passage marking transition from one state to another'.<sup>84</sup>

Hákon's similar transition is a highly punitive one, forcing him from a position of power and complacency to one of depravity and shame.

Whilst the potency of Þorleifr's magic has long been recognised, less frequently discussed is the fact that Hákon's injury is made all the more severe because of its elevated notoriety. When Þorleifr reports his deeds back to Sveinn tjúguskegg, the king remarks in verse:

Grenndi Þorleifr Þrœnda  
þengils hróðr fyr drengjum;  
hafa ólítit ýtar  
Jarlsníð borit víða.<sup>85</sup>

(*SkP* 1, p. 379: 'Þorleifr diminished the honour of the prince of Þrandheimr's people [= Hákon] in front of warriors; men have disseminated the not-small *Jarlsníð* widely.')

Tom Grant highlights the phrase 'fyr drengjum' (l. 2: 'in front of warriors'), arguing that this makes Þorleifr's insult 'particularly scathing' since it frames Hákon's retainers as being collateral victims in the attack.<sup>86</sup> Whilst this may be true – several of Hákon's retainers are killed – it is more plausible to interpret this comment in relation to the following couplet, in which the infamy of the *Jarlsníð* performance is emphasised. Hákon's dishonour, Sveinn proposes, is even more emphatic because it took place in front of an audience. These *drengir* are not simply indirect subjects of *Jarlsníð*, but rather are the first in a long line of tradition-bearers to experience and pass on the story of Þorleifr's revenge. The medieval record substantiates Sveinn's point, for this story is alluded to in no fewer than six independent sources, as Grant notes.<sup>87</sup> Overall, *Þorleifs þáttr* represents a significant departure from the *Bersögslisvísur* accounts and *Óttars þáttr* regarding its depiction of courtly communities.

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<sup>84</sup> Carl Phepstead, 'Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies*, 85 (2013), 1–19 (p. 15) <<https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.85.1.0001>>.

<sup>85</sup> Townend's edition of this verse follows the emendations of most previous editors. *Flateyjarbók*'s 'greindi' ('expounded') is accordingly emended to 'grenndi' (l. 1: 'diminished'), 'hróð' to 'hróðr' (l. 2: 'honour'), and 'frá' ('from') to 'fyr' (l. 2: 'before', i.e. 'in front of'). See further *SkP* 1, p. 380.

<sup>86</sup> Grant, p. 92.

<sup>87</sup> Grant, p. 91.

Where, in the material covered previously, retainers act collectively to preserve the stability of their communities, the divisions between high- and low-ranking courtiers and the general sense of complacency in Hákon's court allow Þorleifr to deliver a devastating performance. Questions of community abound even after the fact of Hákon's dishonour, moreover, as Þorleifr's revenge becomes embedded in cultural memory. In doing so, the subversion of this courtly community goes beyond even internal discord, since, from Sveinn's perspective, Hákon's courtiers become audience members that conspire in the downfall of their lord.

Whilst the critical performances analysed in this section prompt characters to remove the mask of courtliness, the saga authors do not provide greater insight into the act of interpreting skaldic poetry. Narrative attention instead narrows in on the group dynamics of court audiences, exposing the strength or weakness of a ruler's relations with his courtiers. Unified courts, as demonstrated in the accounts involving Magnús inn góði and Óláfr inn helgi, respond more constructively to critical performances, which have the effect of either reintegrating alienated members of court or affirming their pre-existing bond. Divided courts, by contrast, are vulnerable to further degeneration, as shown in Hákon jarl's debasement by Þorleifr. Despite the common scholarly distinction between the 'praise and blame' functions of skaldic poetry, my analysis highlights how these are two sides of the same coin. The community-building aspects of encomiastic poetry have, as noted earlier, been the subject of several studies, but my audience-centric approach recognises similar dynamics occurring in critical performance. This parallel extends to skaldic poetry's diachronic dimensions, for the critical performances examined here are shown to weigh just as heavily on rulers' posthumous reputations as do the panegyrics composed in their honour. The *Bersöglišvísur* accounts concur that Magnús came to be called 'inn góði' after Sigvatr's performance, an epithet that proceeds to define his life and reign (*ÍF* 23, p. 42; *ÍF* 26, p. 31; *ÍF* 29, pp. 33, 215). Correspondingly, the author of *Þorleifs þáttr* introduces the story by condemning

Hákon jarl's status in the popular imagination: 'hverjum kynstrum, góldrum ok gerningum hann varð forsmáðr ok mjök at verðugu' (*ÍF* 9, p. 215: 'For all the witchcraft, incantations, and sorcery, he became despised and very deservedly'). The significance of individual events within the trends of Hákon's whole life is also taken up in *Ágrip*'s account of the jarl's reign, wherein his ignominious death in a pigsty is surmised as follows: 'lauk svá saurlífismaðr í saurgu húsi sínum dögum ok svá ríki' (*ÍF* 29, p. 17: 'Thus a man who lived a filthy life ended his days and his rule in a house of filth'). As my analysis demonstrates, critical poetry is often presented as being similarly meaningful, acting as an index of the relationship between a ruler and his subjects not simply at the moment of performance, but also in the annals of history.

## 2.3 Playful Rulers

Þat verður skylt,  
ef at skilum yrkja,  
greppum þeim,  
at gleði fyrða,  
allra helzt,  
ef eru færi  
virðar þeir,  
an verit höfðu.

(*SkP* 2, p. 762: 'It is the duty of the poets, if they compose with knowledge, to gladden men most of all, if those people are fewer than they have been.')

In this opening stanza of *Nóregs konungatal* (*SkP* 2, pp. 761–806), the anonymous speaker promotes entertainment as a central aspect of skaldic performance. Working in the mould of earlier encomia such as *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal* (*SkP* 1, pp. 195–213), the poem honours the Icelandic chieftain Jón Loptsson by recounting the lives of the Norwegian monarchs in his ancestry. In these opening remarks, however, the poet purposes neither to praise nor blame, nor even to single out an individual recipient for their grand composition. Instead, the utmost function of the present performance, as a display of knowledge and an iteration of the

poetic tradition, is to provide happiness and solace for its audience.<sup>88</sup> Compared to the encomiastic and critical functions of skaldic poetry, its capacity to act as entertainment might be perceived as relatively unimpressive and therefore less worthy of scholarly comment. Even in court settings, however, where the status and reputations of rulers are typically thought to be the central concerns of the skalds, one finds a considerable amount of verse recited as part of fooling, gaming, or play more generally. As one might expect, such poetry is not necessarily so lofty as panegyrics like *Nóregs konungatal*; in these contexts, poets are equally eager to invoke banality and vulgarity as matters of stateliness. This section is about poetry of this kind, focusing on how rulers are depicted receiving skaldic verse delivered with humour in mind.

Despite their ostensible light-heartedness, and like their encomiastic and critical counterparts, these interactions frequently revolve around questions of power. As Lisa Collinson highlights:

Entertaining performances [...] complicate power-balance in relationships, because participation in performance is inherently at once empowering and disempowering, possible source of control, and loss of control, for all concerned. It exposes the vulnerability of performers and potentially casts them in subservient roles, but also provides opportunities to suggest or overtly display admirable qualities and to manipulate spectator-response. Spectators, meanwhile, are less exposed, but upstaged and dependent on performers for amusement.<sup>89</sup>

Collinson's remarks on the destabilising potential of entertaining performance are a useful point of departure and, as I show below, are applicable beyond the *konungasögur* that form her object of study. Where Collinson's attention to the spectators of skaldic entertainment gives audiences due diligence, most other scholars have focused on the poet's role in these complicated power balances. Abram and William Sayers have both recently promoted the dextrous performance abilities of the infamous Sneglu-Halli, whose bawdy interactions with

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. similar comments on the entertaining function of poetic performance in the opening to Rognvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson and Hallr Þórarinnsson's *Háttalykill* (*SkP* 3, p. 1009), and to a lesser extent in the anonymous *Hugsvinnsmál* (*SkP* 7, pp. 421–22).

<sup>89</sup> Lisa Fraser [Collinson], 'Royal Entertainment in *Morkinskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Fagrskinna*', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 15 (2005), 37–50 (p. 43). See further Fraser [Collinson], 'Royal Entertainment in Three Norse Kings' Saga Compilations'.

Haraldr inn harðráði potentially afford him greater agency in relation to royal authority.<sup>90</sup>

Whilst such performer-centric approaches are more understandable in relation to entertainment episodes, which are often predicated on highlighting a poet's exceptional expertise, they also tend to avoid detailed examination of how audiences react to and participate within these atypical performance arenas.<sup>91</sup> This is the subject of the following analysis, in which I focus primarily on three tales from the kings' sagas: *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* and *Einars þáttr Skúlasonar* from *Morkinskinna*, and *Mána þáttr skálds* from *Sverris saga*. I argue that, whilst the performances depicted in these accounts afford greater agency to skalds, the poets' ability to destabilise courtly hierarchies tends to be limited by the controlling influence of the royal audience. I contend that entertaining performances represent an occasional means by which a ruler can re-assert their power, for they demonstrate the ruler's simultaneous abilities to transgress courtly conventions and to control the circumstances in which such transgressions occur.

In accounts of entertaining performance, it is commonly the royal audience who instigates the event by challenging their poet to produce a stanza. The point of departure for such challenges is often a visual scene which the poet is required to describe in verse, thus affording an ekphrastic dimension to the resulting performance.<sup>92</sup> Initial examples can be cited from the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi. Several versions of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* report that, during a storm at sea, a certain Iclander called Þórarinn opts to extemporise a verse for Óláfr's company rather than steer the longship, a task for which Þórarinn proposes the king's dog Vígi.<sup>93</sup> Óláfr obliges by holding Vígi's paws on the

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<sup>90</sup> Abram, 'Trolling', p. 61; Sayers, 'Command Performance', p. 36.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Morawiec, 'Characteristic', p. 47.

<sup>92</sup> For a general study on skaldic ekphrasis, see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Cultural Politics of the Skaldic Ekphrasis Poem in Medieval Norway and Iceland', in *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. by Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton, and David Matthews (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 227–40.

<sup>93</sup> *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson, 3 vols (København [Copenhagen]: Munksgaard, 1958–2000), III (2000), 9. Cf. *Flat* 3, p. 405.

ship's rudder, therein creating a vivid scene for Þórarinn to reproduce in verse (see *SkP* 1, p. 445). The reception of this canine comedy is briefly reported as follows: 'er vísan var kuedin ok suo var latit sem Vige hefde styrt skipinu toku men miog at glediazst' (*Flat* 3, p. 405: 'When the verse was spoken, and it was thus implied that Vígi had steered the ship, people were very amused'). Alternatively, in the so-called *Oldest* and *Legendary* sagas of Óláfr inn helgi, the king is depicted requesting Þorfinnr munnr ('the Mouth') to produce a verse about a wall-hanging depicting Sigurðr Fáfnisbani slaying the dragon Fáfnir (see *SkP* 1, p. 845).<sup>94</sup> Despite the dramatic subject matter, none of the versions of this anecdote record any response from Þorfinnr's audience. Ekphrastic entertainment is, furthermore, not limited to the principal *konungasögur*, for this latter scene finds a parallel in *Orkneyinga saga*, which recounts the history and rulers of the Orkney islands from legendary times until the death of Haraldr inn ungi Eiríksson ('the Young') in 1206. Over a century after Óláfr inn helgi's reign, and shortly before the saga's account of Rognvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson's journey to the Holy Land (discussed in section 5.1), the author reports the arrival of two poets at the jarl's court, a certain Armóðr and Oddi inn litli Glúmsson ('the Little'). As part of his Christmas festivities, Rognvaldr chooses to test Oddi's poetic abilities, ordering him to compose a verse about a wall-hanging at the same time as the jarl but without using any of the same words.<sup>95</sup> Whilst the author of *Orkneyinga saga* quotes the resulting verses by Rognvaldr and Oddi consecutively, the fact that Oddi fails the challenge (his stanza has several words in common with Rognvaldr's; see further *SkP* 2, pp. 590–91, 614–16) elicits no reaction from the audience (*ÍF* 34, pp. 202–03). For Goeres,

<sup>94</sup> *Otte brudstykker af den ældste saga om Olav den Hellige*, ed. by Gustav Storm, Det norske historiske kildeskriftfonds skrifter, 25 (Christiania [Oslo]: Grøndahl, 1893), p. 2; *Olafs saga hins helga: Die 'Legendarische Saga' über Olaf den Heiligen (Hs. Delagard. saml. nr. 8<sup>u</sup>)*, ed. and trans. by Anne Heinrichs and others (Heidelberg: Winter, 1982), pp. 138–39.

<sup>95</sup> Rognvaldr and Oddi's verses are analysed in detail in Russell G. Poole, 'Some Southern Perspectives on Starcatherus', *VMS*, 2 (2006), 141–66 (pp. 147–52) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.2.302022>>; Russell G. Poole, 'Ekphrasis: Its "Prolonged Echoes" in Scandinavia', *VMS*, 3 (2007), 245–67 <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.2.302726>>.

The silence with which this failure is met suggests that it is the fact of the challenge – that there is a poetic challenge at all – rather than the outcome which is important. The challenge establishes Rognvaldr's verse as the standard by which the other is measured, just as the speed at which he is able to compose acts as the stopwatch for his poet.<sup>96</sup>

Despite its differences in temporal and geographical setting and, to a lesser extent, genre, the anecdote involving Óláfr inn helgi involves a similar emphasis on ruling power. There, however, neither competition nor audience response are needed to affirm Óláfr, whose cultural prestige is evident in the two extravagant artworks – a tapestry and a skaldic stanza – that the king is free to combine and interchange. Whilst the bathos of the Óláfr Tryggvason scene would appear to distinguish it from these examples, an element of competition is still identifiable. As Grove argues, Þórarinn's performance 'reaffirms the solidarity between king and poet', but also 'constitutes a test of skill in which the Icelandic must show his worth by pitting his *íþrótt* ['skill'] against the king's mastery of seamanship'.<sup>97</sup> Despite their ostensible focus on entertaining pairings of visual and poetic media, these accounts are also undergirded by an interest in the performer-audience power balance as a different form of duality.

In *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, the author uses similar kinds of entertaining ekphrasis as part of a more explicit interrogation of this power balance. This text has variants in *Morkinskinna* and in the fifteenth-century interpolation in *Flateyjarbók*, the latter of which is longer, more explicit, and presented as an independent narrative.<sup>98</sup> In both versions, whimsical worlds collide as the notoriously obstreperous Haraldr inn harðráði meets the 'orðhvass' (*ÍF* 9, p. 278: 'word-sharp') Sneglu-Halli, a poet who travels from the north of Iceland to Norway with little in the way of social or financial capital. Despite his unfortunate circumstances, Halli's

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<sup>96</sup> Erin Michelle Goeres, 'Medieval Self-Fashioning: Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson and *Orkneyinga saga*', *Scandinavica*, 54.2 (2015), 6–39 (p. 14). Cf. Paul Bibire, 'The Poetry of Earl Rognvaldr's Court', in *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth Century Renaissance*, ed. by Barbara E. Crawford (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen Press, 1988), pp. 208–40 (p. 217).

<sup>97</sup> Grove, p. 159.

<sup>98</sup> Both versions of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* are given in Jónas Kristjánsson's Íslensk fornrit edition (*ÍF* 9, pp. 261–95). The relationship between the versions is contested, neither having been determined the parent text. See further Tommy Danielsson, *Om den isländska släktasagens uppbyggnad*, Skrifter utgivna av Litteraturvetenskapliga institutionen vid Uppsala universitet, 22 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986), pp. 74–75; Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption', p. 244, n. 63.

ability to harmonise with Haraldr's subversive sense of humour sees him integrate effectively at the king's court and even win out in competition with Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, Haraldr's *høfuðskáld* ('chief poet'). Whilst, as noted above, scholars have previously highlighted the skill Halli displays in achieving this social climb, Haraldr's role in generating a transgressive atmosphere in his court has received less attention. The king's reputation for being a patron and practitioner of the skaldic arts is directly stated in the introduction to the *Flatexjarbók* version of the *þáttr*, which also highlights his abrasive sense of humour: 'Jafnan kastaði hann háðyrðum at þeim mǫnnum, er honum sýndisk; þolði hann ok allra manna beztt, þótt at honum væri kastat klámyrðum, þá er honum var gott í skapi' (*ÍF* 9, p. 263: 'He always cast mocking words at whomever he deemed deserving. He was also the most enduring of men when he was in good temper, even if foul language was directed at him'). These two aspects of Haraldr's personality – the poetic and the satirical – combine for the first time in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* when the king sees a street fight in Niðaróss and challenges Þjóðólfr to describe the scene in verse. Haraldr's ekphrastic challenge is more ambitious than any of the examples discussed above, for the poet is told to portray the scufflers as famous mythological and legendary antagonists, firstly Þórr and the giant Geirrøðr, and secondly Sigurðr and Fáfnir.<sup>99</sup> Whilst Þjóðólfr fulfils this challenge in virtuoso fashion (see *SkP* 2, pp. 169–72), his initial protest that Haraldr's request is '[ó]skylt' (*ÍF* 23, p. 271: 'unbefitting') is telling. The street is as unconventional a setting of skaldic performance as a petty brawl is subject matter. The elevation of the fighters from banality to sublimity is correspondingly farcical, and further emphasises the crudeness of the scene. That Haraldr's willingness to discomfit Þjóðólfr is, at this stage in the narrative, no more than an expression of the traits noted above is indicated by his affirmative response to the verses, wherein he remarks that Þjóðólfr is a '[g]ott skáld' (*ÍF* 23, p. 272: 'good poet') and rewards him with a gold ring.

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<sup>99</sup> The order of the challenge is reversed in the *Flatexjarbók* version.



Haraldr's subversive attitude towards his poets nevertheless quickly becomes more intentional than instinctive. When, upon learning of Þjóðólfr's accomplishment, Halli implies that he may be a match for the *hofuðskáld*, the king creates another ekphrastic challenge designed to generate competition between the skalds.<sup>100</sup> In this case, the visual subject is a Frisian courtier called Túta, who is varyingly described either as a 'dvergr' (*ÍF* 9, p. 269: 'dwarf') or simply as 'lágr [...] ok digr' (*ÍF* 23, p. 273: 'small and stout'). In preparation for the challenge, Túta is equipped with Haraldr's own Byzantine mail-coat, helmet, and sword. He is then paraded before the retinue, at which point Haraldr announces that the first person to produce a verse about the spectacle will be rewarded. Túta acts here as a parodic proxy of Haraldr, appropriating symbols of the king's heroic deeds and quite literally miniaturising them. Jeffrey Turco identifies a further level of irony in this dynamic of diminution, for Frisians, according to Robert E. Kaske, 'had a reputation for being exceedingly tall in the Middle Ages', and Haraldr himself was reputed to stand at seven feet tall (see *ÍF* 28, p. 187).<sup>101</sup> Haraldr's choice to produce a satire on his own heroism is a significant one, and would seem to contravene his depiction elsewhere as being a 'chief patron of his own legend', to quote Theodore M. Andersson and Gade.<sup>102</sup> But, of course, Haraldr's status is never really at risk in this scene, for the spectacle is intended as a farce rather than a critical commentary, and its ridiculousness in turn emphasises the stability of the king's reputation in the popular imagination.

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<sup>100</sup> The provocative function of the challenge is narrated more explicitly in the *Flatteyjarbók* version, wherein Halli's remarks are relayed back to Haraldr, who comments: 'vera kann, at vér fáim þetta reynt af stundu' (*ÍF* 9, p. 269: 'It may be that we [I] will make a test of this soon').

<sup>101</sup> Jeffrey Turco, 'Loki, *Sneglu-Halla þátrr*, and the Case for a Skaldic Prosaics', in *New Norse Studies: Essays on the Literature and Culture of Medieval Scandinavia*, Islandica, 58 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 215, n. 76. See further Robert E. Kaske, 'The *Eotenas* in *Beowulf*', in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. by Robert P. Creed (Providence: Brown University Press, 1967), pp. 285–310 (pp. 292–93).

<sup>102</sup> *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle*, p. 59. A famous example of Haraldr's 'management of his own biography', to quote Finlay, is given in *Heimskringla*'s account of the king's adventures in Byzantium, wherein the testimony of Haraldr's poets is considered valid 'því at sjálfr Haraldr flutti þessa sögn' (*ÍF* 28, p. 87: 'because Haraldr himself recited this story'). See further Alison Finlay, 'History and Fiction in the Kings' Sagas: The Case of Haraldr harðráði', *Saga-Book*, 39 (2015), 77–102 (pp. 89–92); Ghosh, p. 50.

Halli is the first to respond to Haraldr's challenge, extemporising the following verse from his as-yet socially inferior position 'útar á bekkinn' (*ÍF* 9, p. 270: 'from one of the more exterior benches'):

Færðr sýndisk mér frændi  
Frísa kyns í brynju;  
gengr fyr hirð í hringum  
hjálmfaldinn kurfaldi.  
Flærat eld í ári  
úthlaupi vanr Túta;  
sék á síðu leika  
sverð rúghleifa skerði.

(*SkP* 2, p. 324: 'The kinsman of the Frisian's kin [= Túta] showed himself to me dressed in a mail-coat; the helmet-clad dwarf goes before the retinue in rings. Túta, accustomed to plundering expeditions, did not flee the fire early. I see a sword swinging on the side of the diminisher of rye-loaves [> GREEDY MAN = Túta].')

Halli's verse builds on Haraldr's predilection for parody, appropriating conventionally heroic images and reframing them. Túta's 'úthlaup' (l. 6: 'looting expeditions') earn him neither plunder nor renown but rather morsels from Haraldr's kitchens. Where generous rulers are otherwise described using kennings such as *skerðir hringa* ('diminisher of rings'), as Gade notes (*SkP* 2, p. 325), Halli describes Túta as 'skerðir rúghleifa' (l. 8: 'diminisher of rye-loaves'). By satirising the conventions of skaldic encomia, and thereby minimising heroic values to the level of banality, Halli's ekphrastic performance is a symmetrical inversion of Þjóðólfr's sublime elevation of the street scuffle. Whilst Grove evaluates Halli's poem unfavourably relative to those of his skaldic counterpart, the *þáttir*'s intradiegetic audience evidently takes a different view; Haraldr compliments Halli's delivery and rewards him, whilst Þjóðólfr, perhaps with a hint of jealousy, 'fannsk fátt um' (*ÍF* 23, p. 273: 'paid little heed to it').<sup>103</sup> Taken together, Halli and Þjóðólfr's ekphrastic performances represent the works of poets at opposite ends of the courtly hierarchy, and with correspondingly opposing enthusiasm for low-brow humour. It is to Halli's advantage and Þjóðólfr's detriment that their royal audience is currently in the mood for burlesque entertainment.

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<sup>103</sup> Grove, p. 29.

The competition between the poets continues to be predicated on this dynamic, reaching its climax when Halli requests to deliver a *drápa* to Haraldr. As in the stock scene of encomiastic performance, this passage begins with Halli greeting Haraldr, who receives him warmly, and asking for a hearing for a poem he has composed. By adopting a hitherto absent pretence of courtliness, Halli signals his readiness to move further up the hierarchy beyond his role as Haraldr's ribald jester – that is, into the position Þjóðólfr occupies. Evidently a student of the Óláfr inn sœnski school of courtly mediation (see section 2.1), Haraldr immediately detects and encourages the conflict between the poets, asking what Þjóðólfr thinks about Halli's request. The resulting argument sees the *páttr* spiral once more into farce. Þjóðólfr reveals that Halli composed a crude poem called 'Kolluvísur' (*ÍF* 23, p. 276: 'Cow Verses') whilst living in Iceland, and Halli reciprocates by reminding the court of Þjóðólfr's equally embarrassing 'Sóptrogsvísur' (*ÍF* 23, p. 277: 'Dustbin Verses'). More serious are the subsequent allegations, wherein Þjóðólfr accuses Halli of failing to avenge his father, before Halli makes the appalling claim that Þjóðólfr ate his father's killer. The truth behind this accusation, which is initially intended to imply cannibalism on Þjóðólfr's part, is not much less shameful. Halli reveals that Þjóðólfr's father died in a buffoonish accident involving a calf, upon which the sons 'took eminently pragmatic vengeance [...] by enjoying a high-protein diet for a while', as Abram drily summarises.<sup>104</sup> Whilst the wit Halli displays in this quasi-*senna* ('exchange of insults', 'flyting') is, as Abram and Sayers argue, impressive and dextrous, Haraldr's role as the poets' inciter should not be ignored.<sup>105</sup> In both versions of the *páttr*, the king situates himself as the innocent referee of the dispute, asking each contestant to elaborate on his opponents' accusations. The *Flateyjarbók* redactor is, however, more explicit regarding Haraldr's inflammatory disposition, noting after one of

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<sup>104</sup> Abram, 'Trolling', p. 58.

<sup>105</sup> Abram, 'Trolling', pp. 57–58; Sayers, 'Command Performance', pp. 31–32.

Halli's cutting remarks: 'Konungr brosti at, ok þótti honum gaman at etja þeim saman' (*ÍF* 9, p. 277: 'The king grinned at that, and he thought it fun to pit them against one another').

When Halli, ever the aficionado of ignobility, emerges victorious from the altercation, Haraldr delivers the following verdict: 'Ek skal sætta ykk, at hvárigum ykkum skal hlýða at göra öðrum mein, ok þú vakðir þetta mál, Þjóðólfr, fyrri, ok var þér þat óskylt' (*ÍF* 23, p. 278: 'I will reconcile you two in this way: neither of you will dare to harm the other, and you started this matter, Þjóðólfr, and that did not befit you'). Morcom interprets this as a statement of Haraldr's protectiveness towards Halli, but the irony in the king's appropriation of his *höfuðskáld*'s term 'óskylt' ('unbefitting') is more suggestive of antagonism.<sup>106</sup> Halli has delivered devastating blows to Þjóðólfr's reputation, but Haraldr has played no small part in the (temporary) undoing of his chief poet.

Given the anxiety with which even encomiastic forms of skaldic performance are treated elsewhere (see section 2.1), it is reasonable to ask why Haraldr would become so invested in, and even strategic about, discomfiting Þjóðólfr. The *Flateyjarbók* redactor introduces the king as enjoying conflict, certainly, but Haraldr's behaviour cannot be anything other than risky. Not only is Þjóðólfr shown to be a skaldic virtuoso (cf. *SkP* 2, p. 57), but Haraldr's appetite for ignobility, which extends even to occasional self-ridicule, potentially affords the *höfuðskáld* ammunition for a future campaign of derision. As the dispute between the poets shows, one of Haraldr's defences against this is deflection, wherein he simultaneously generates conflict and extracts himself from it. In this light, the destabilising quality of entertaining performance that Collinson highlights is restricted to the lower echelons of Haraldr's court, competition between which serves to reinforce the inviolability of the king's position. This does not account, however, for the king's decision to involve himself in ribald entertainment, as exemplified in the Túta performance. For Sayers,

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<sup>106</sup> Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption', p. 248.

[Haraldr's] known interest in scurrilous banter may be viewed as a means to distract from the possibility of more serious censure of royal rule. Real criticism is precluded by an invitation to mock defamation that no one is to take seriously.<sup>107</sup>

A poetic patron of Haraldr's magnitude would nevertheless be aware of the flimsiness of this defence, for, as shown in the critical performances analysed above (see section 2.2), skalds cannot always be relied upon to abide by the doctrines of their royal audiences, particularly if said audiences have alienated them. Haraldr is, furthermore, the subject of skaldic censure in *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, as shown when Halli criticises the king for the stinginess of his courtiers' provisions (*ÍF* 23, pp. 273–75; *ÍF* 9, pp. 271–74). Halli's histrionic consumption of gruel in this scene is in keeping with the *þátr*'s broadly humorous predisposition, but Haraldr takes the insinuation seriously enough to threaten his poet's life. Peril and playfulness are therefore not shown to be so separable as Sayers would have them, and Haraldr's willingness to accommodate Halli inherently risks being implicated in the skald's ungovernability.

For the reputation-conscious king, this risk is balanced by his ability to harness wit and banter as central currencies within his court. Where other royal audiences seek shelter behind scripted modes of skaldic performance (see section 2.1), and not always successfully, Haraldr's predilection for playfulness sees him at his best when such social formulae are abandoned. His is a dog-eat-dog court, and he trusts himself to do more eating than not. His willingness to transgress courtly conventions also demonstrates that he has less need to rely on them for the legitimacy of his rule. This is further evinced by the triviality with which such conventions are treated elsewhere in the *þátr*. When Halli entreats the king of England (said to be Harold Godwinson in the *Flateyjarbók* version) to hear a praise poem, he defers to most of the formulae of encomiastic performance articulated previously. Despite this display of courtliness, Halli's performance is nevertheless quickly revealed to be more show than substance. The *Morkinskinna* author notes: 'kvæði þetta var endilausa ein, ok kvað hann þat

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<sup>107</sup> Sayers, 'Command Performance', p. 27.

fram af munni sér' (*ÍF* 23, p. 283: 'This poem was one without end [i.e. nonsense], and he delivered it extempore'; cf. *ÍF* 9, p. 291). The *Flateyjarbók* redactor further confirms Halli's intentional incompetence, quoting a *lausavísa* in which Halli highlights the poem's deficiencies and remarks that he composed like 'sás illa kann' (*SkP* 2, p. 328: 'one who is poorly skilled'). Although the English king, in offering to reward Halli by pouring silver over his head, appears to recognise something of the skald's disingenuity, the overall scene highlights the potential hollowness of such conventionalised performances. Simply by following a formula, Halli is able to deceive a king and his court, even to the extent that another of the king's poets initially compliments the nonsense poem (*ÍF* 9, p. 290).<sup>108</sup> In this light, it is surprising to see Sayers surmise that the scene represents 'one of our rare insights into audience reception', for it is evidently predicated on a kind of artfully orchestrated misinterpretation which cannot be expected to have been typical of skaldic practice (cf. analysis of *Grettis saga* in section 3.1.2, and of *Gíffarðs þáttr* in section 5.1.2).<sup>109</sup> Compared to the hollowness of Halli's behaviour in England, his burlesque performances for Haraldr appear to be genuine attempts to gain social capital via displays of poetic ability. Haraldr's choice to encourage this playful mode of performance comes with risk, but it also allows him to demonstrate both his cognitive mettle and his independence from the mask of courtliness used by other sovereigns to legitimate their rule.

Where the relationship between Haraldr inn harðráði and Sneglu-Halli takes the dynamics of entertaining performance to extremes, other depictions of playful rulers elicit more mild interrogations of the performer-audience power balance. Reading on in *Morkinskinna*, one arrives at a short narrative describing entertaining performances by Einarr Skúlason for the joint Norwegian kings Eysteinn and Sigurðr, two of the sons of Haraldr gilli.

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. Anthony Faulkes, *What Was Viking Poetry For?* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, School of English, 1993), p. 18; Millward, pp. 99–100.

<sup>109</sup> Sayers, 'Command Performance', p. 34.

Commonly entitled *Einars þáttr Skúlasonar* by modern scholars and editors, this narrative is set around a century after the events of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* and, as the following analysis demonstrates, reflects a different era of skaldic reception in mid-twelfth-century Norway. Despite this and other distinguishing aspects to be discussed presently, the *þáttr* has not received a great deal of undivided scholarly attention, which has mostly examined the place of the story within broader categories of *Morkinskinna þættir*.<sup>110</sup> More detailed commentary in several doctoral theses tends, furthermore, to view the narrative from a performer-centric perspective. Heinrich Gimmler titles the tale ‘Einarr Skúlason displays his poetic skills’, whilst Robert Avis remarks similarly that the *þáttr* is ‘at least an affirmation, if not a celebration, of the skills of an Icelandic skald, written in all probability in Iceland by an Icelander’.<sup>111</sup> Whilst, over the course of the *þáttr*, there is an unmissable power shift towards Einarr, I will show how the extent to which the skald’s playful rulers are correspondingly disempowered has been overstated. Instead, the willingness with which Eysteinn and Sigurðr afford Einarr agency is more indicative of the changing, and perhaps diminished, status of poets in Norwegian courts at this point in the history of the skaldic artform.

Although Morcom compares Einarr and Sneglu-Halli as similar kinds of ‘trickster-skald’, the two occupy very different positions in the hierarchies of their respective courts.<sup>112</sup> Where Halli derives subversive power from his peripheral position in the court of Haraldr inn harðráði, *Einars þáttr* begins by centring its protagonist in the attention of no fewer than four royal audiences; Einarr’s *Geisli* performance, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter (see section 2), sees him perform for the joint-rulers Eysteinn, Sigurðr, and Ingi, and the

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<sup>110</sup> See, e.g., Ármann Jakobsson, *Belonging*, p. 336.

<sup>111</sup> Heinrich Gimmler, ‘Die Thættir der Morkinskinna: Ein Beitrag zur Überlieferungsproblematik und zur Typologie der altnordischen Kurzerzählung’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, 1976), p. 63; Robert John Roy Avis, ‘The Social Mythology of Medieval Icelandic Literature’ (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2011), p. 166. Cf. Grove, pp. 156–58; Morcom, ‘Structuring Disruption’, pp. 272–74.

<sup>112</sup> Morcom, ‘Structuring Disruption’, p. 272.

presence of a fourth king is added via the ephemeral appearance of Óláfr inn helgi. Einarr's prestigiousness is further highlighted, as noted previously, by his becoming Eysteinn's *stallari* ('marshal'), and by his previous service for such rulers as Sigurðr Jórsalafari. Despite his lofty position and the magnificence of his *Geisli* performance, Einarr is also content to engage in cheaper forms of entertainment. The first of three scenes of entertaining performance in *Einarrs þáttur* is occasioned when Einarr arrives late at Eysteinn's table, causing the king to decree that the two will not be reconciled unless Einarr can compose a verse before the king finishes his drink. The challenge of speed and the significance of food and drink places this scene in close parallel with another in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*, wherein Halli is forced, on pain of death, to extemporise a verse before Túta crosses Haraldr's hall while carrying a roast pig (*ÍF* 23, pp. 275–76). In keeping with this gastronomic theme, Einarr satisfies Eysteinn by producing a verse in which he comments on a recent visit to a nunnery in Niðaróss where he was not given any food (see *SkP* 2, pp. 571–72). This serves as an antithesis to the king draining a goblet for the sake of entertainment, which highlights the plentiful supplies of his court. Eysteinn's resources are, moreover, shown to be not only culinary, for Einarr's stanza is itself treated as a cultural artefact, one which gains value via its swift composition and delivery, as Avis highlights.<sup>113</sup> Topping off the king's store of edible and poetic pleasures is, lastly, the resource of time. Einarr's offence and Eysteinn's challenge are both couched in terms of the king's timekeeping, which governs the actions and availability of all his courtiers. Whilst Einarr's time is evidently important to Eysteinn – why else would the king notice his poet's lateness, let alone penalise it? – one notes a significant diminution of the 'alienation' topos relative to the equivalent scene in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur*.<sup>114</sup> There, Halli's accusation of Haraldr's stinginess is deemed serious enough that the poet

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<sup>113</sup> Avis, p. 169.

<sup>114</sup> On the trope of alienation between kings and Icelanders in *þættir*, see Harris, 'Genre and Narrative', pp. 11–13.



nearly loses his life. Here, Einarr is a touch tardy and endures only mild disapproval from Eysteinn. This opening scene of entertainment is primarily about Eysteinn's power in his court, but the instigating conflict is not so serious as to merit a full expression of the king's might.

The next scene represents a shift in narrative setting and focus, moving cross-country to King Sigurðr's court in Bergen. The appearance of 'leikarar' (*ÍF* 24, p. 222: 'players', i.e. 'jesters', 'minstrels') here allows the *þátttr* author to examine Einarr's relationship with other courtly entertainers. The action of the scene centres around a *leikari* called Jarlmaðr, who is to be beaten for having broken the Friday fast by eating goat meat. Einarr intercedes with Sigurðr, who stipulates that Jarlmaðr will only be beaten for as long as it takes Einarr to compose a verse. Five strokes are delivered to Jarlmaðr before Einarr recites the following:

Austr tók illa kristinn  
 Jarlmaðr frá búkarli  
 – gróðr vas kjöts á kauða –  
 kiðling, hinns slær fiðlu.  
 Vöndr hrökk; vámr lá bundinn  
 (vísmáll) á skip þíslar;  
 (söng leikara lengi  
 lími harðan þríma).<sup>115</sup>

(*SkP* 2, p. 572: 'The bad Christian, Jarlmaðr, who strikes the fiddle, took a kid from the farmer in the east; greed for meat was upon the churl. The wand [= WHIP] coiled; the loathsome man lay bound on the ship of the cart-pole [> CART]; the wise-spoken lash sang a hard service to the player for a long time.')

The *þátttr* author records no response from Sigurðr, suggesting that the challenge and its resulting stanza are less predicated on Einarr's relationship with his royal audience. Whilst, as Avis notes, the stakes of the entertainment are correspondingly lower for both poet and ruler, the displacement of the challenge's consequences onto Jarlmaðr nonetheless gives the scene a tone of cruelty.<sup>116</sup> Despite Einarr's comment that Jarlmaðr is his 'félagi' (*ÍF* 24, p. 223: 'fellow'), their mutual trade as performers is also used to distinguish them in this social

<sup>115</sup> Gade follows C. R. Unger in emending MS 'velmáll' (l. 6: 'well-spoken') to 'vísmáll' ('wise-spoken') to restore *skothening* with 'þíslar'. See further *SkP* 2, p. 573.

<sup>116</sup> Avis, p. 171.

hierarchy.<sup>117</sup> Where Einarr is a *skáld*, a recipient of royal patronage and an ambassador of a highly respected aristocratic artform, Jarlmaðr is a *leikari*, therein concerned with the kind of crude amusements that Einarr identifies in his verse. This discrepancy manifests in Einarr's intercession with Sigurðr, which demonstrates the poet's influence within the courtly community, but also forces him to align with the quasi-judicial group that decides on and delivers Jarlmaðr's punishment. Nothing like the magical effects of Þorleifr's *Jarlsníð* (see section 2.2) is implied about Einarr's performance, and yet the alignment between his verse and the whip strokes delivered to Jarlmaðr suggest that the *páttr* author is playing with perceptions of the physical potency of skaldic poetry.<sup>118</sup> This is also evident in Einarr's personification of the whip as singing liturgy (perhaps a metaphorical reference to the whistling sound of each stroke), which represents a striking amalgam of the roles of performer, preacher, and punisher. The first two of these roles are easily attributable to Einarr, whose name appears both in *Skáldatal* and in a list of priests in western Iceland from 1143, whilst the third is in keeping with his comments that Jarlmaðr is an 'illr kristinn' (l. 1: 'bad Christian') and a 'vámr' (l. 5: 'loathsome person').<sup>119</sup>

Despite the implication that Einarr composes as fast as possible for Jarlmaðr's reprieve, their relationship cannot therefore be described as companionable. That Einarr takes a dim view of players like Jarlmaðr is further emphasised by a verse of his quoted in *Knýtlinga saga* (*ÍF* 35, pp. 91–321, see p. 275), occasioned when his praise poem for King Sveinn svíðandi Eiríksson of Denmark ('the Singeing'; r. 1146–57) goes unrewarded:

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<sup>117</sup> Cf. Grove, p. 157.

<sup>118</sup> See further, e.g., Grant, pp. 19–54; Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 63.

<sup>119</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *The Uppsala Edda: DG 11 4to*, ed. by Heimir Pálsson, trans. by Anthony Faulkes (London: VSNR, 2012), pp. 100–02, 106, 114, 116; *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, ed. by Jón Sigurðsson and Jón Þorkelsson, 6 vols (Copenhagen: Möllers, 1857), I, 186.

Danskr harri metr dýrra  
– dugir miðlung þat – fiðlur  
– ræðr fyr ræsis auði  
Rípa-Ulfr – ok pípur.<sup>120</sup>

(*SkP* 2, p. 570: ‘The Danish lord values fiddles and pipes more dearly; that hardly suffices. Rípa-Úlfr rules over the ruler’s wealth.’)

If, as this *helmingr* indicates, Einarr viewed jesters as a threat to his value in court societies, his depiction in the *Einars þáttr* anecdote becomes a more obvious act of self-assertion. In similar fashion to the conflict-instigating actions of Óláfr inn scenski and Haraldr inn harðráði discussed above, Sigurðr’s challenge encourages Einarr to prove and use his courtly influence to the detriment of a more marginal figure. Whilst there is a concomitant affirmation of Einarr – Avis notes ‘the idea of the “king for a day”’ – the stakes of the power exchange are, as in the previous scene, rather trivial.<sup>121</sup> In contrast to the quasi-seditious acts considered elsewhere in this chapter, Jarlmaðr’s is a petty crime and receives a correspondingly patronising appraisal by Einarr. By venturing into subjects beneath the grand salutations of heroism or Christian piety that typify the skaldic verse of his era, Einarr is hardly advancing himself in Sigurðr’s court. In the absence of any response from the skald’s playful ruler, there is rather a sense of bathos about Einarr’s performance, the joviality of which stands uncomfortably at odds with the harsh punishment that undergirds the scene.

In the final scene of *Einars þáttr*, the power transfer from royal audience to poet would appear to reach its climax, for here Einarr is able to present a counter-challenge to his playful ruler. The narrative setting remains in Bergen, wherein a noblewoman called Ragnhildr is preparing her longship to depart the harbour. Seeing this, and hoping to obtain a poetic snapshot of the scene, one of Eysteinn or Sigurðr (the author does not specify) asks after the court poets in the company, but none of them are able to compose quickly enough for the king’s liking. The king calls Einarr to the harbour and challenges him to compose a

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<sup>120</sup> Rípa-Ulfr (l. 4: ‘Úlfr of Ribe’) was one of Sveinn’s counsellors, falling along with the king in the battle of Grathe Hede (1157). See further *SkP* 2, p. 571.

<sup>121</sup> Avis, p. 171.

stanza before Ragnhildr's ship passes the village of Hólm.<sup>122</sup> Having had his expertise especially called upon, Einarr nevertheless feels confident enough to stipulate the conditions of his reward before accepting the king's challenge. The interaction proceeds as follows:

Einarr svaraði: 'Þú skalt skyldr til ok hirðmenn þínir sjau út í frá at sitt orð muni hverr yðar í vísunni, ok ef þat brestr gefið mér jafn marga aska hunangs sem þér munið eigi orðin.' Konungr játti því. Þá kvað Einarr vísu:

Hola bóru rístr hlýrum  
hreystisprund at sundi,  
blæss élreki of ási,  
Útsteins, vefi þrútna.  
Varla heldr und vildra  
víkmarr á jarðríki  
– breiðr viðr brimsgang súðum  
barmr – lyptingar farmi.<sup>[123]</sup>

Þá mælti konungr: 'Þat ætla ek at ek muna: Hola báru rístr hlýrum. Já, veit Guð. Barmr lyptingar farmi.' Aldregi mundu þeir þat er í milli var.

(*ÍF* 24, pp. 224–25: 'Einarr replied: "From now on, you [the king] and seven of your retainers will pledge that each of you will remember his line in the verse and, if that fails, give me as many pots of honey as the lines you do not remember." The king agreed to that. Then Einarr spoke a verse:

"The daring woman carves the hollow of the wave with the bows toward the strait of Útsteinn. The storm-driver [> WIND] blows the swollen sails over the wooden beam [= ship's SPRIT]. There is but hardly a bay-steed [> SHIP] on earth under a more desirable cargo of the afterdeck [> WOMAN = Ragnhildr]; the broad rim [= ship's UPPER STRAKES] gains surf-energy for the hull-planks."

Then the king said: "I think I remember this: 'Hull wave carves with bows'. Yes, God willing. 'Rim afterdeck's cargo'." They never remembered what was in between.')

Where, in the previous episode, Jarlmaðr's perceived ignobility resulted in a condescending portrayal by Einarr, the poet treats the splendour of Ragnhildr and her ship with a much more conventional laudatory stance. There are few other instances in the skaldic corpus where a poet makes a noblewoman their sole subject, and the distinctiveness of Einarr's verse is further affirmed by the fact that the compound 'hreystisprund' (l. 2: 'daring woman') is unique to the stanza. The bathetic element of this scene comes not, then, in Einarr's performance, but in the reaction of his royal audience. As noted previously, it is not

<sup>122</sup> Modern Holme is situated on the Herdlefjorden around 30 kilometres north of Bergen. Ragnhildr's longship is therefore implied to have travelled some distance beyond Bergen's harbour for Eysteinn's challenge to involve any real difficulty.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. *SkP* 2, p. 573. Einarr's reference to the locale of Útsteinn (l. 4) introduces a discrepancy between the verse and *Morkinskinna's* prose, for Utsteinen is located some way south of Bergen (near Haugesund in Boknafjorden, Hordaland), whereas Holme, as noted above, is to the north.

uncommon for skalds to stipulate how a royal audience should reward them, but rarely are the corresponding performances depicted as exposing rulers' cognitive inferiority in the way that the king's is here. The lines the king remembers are, as Morcom notes, grammatically incomplete, implying a failure to glean anything meaningful from the verse.<sup>124</sup> What he does glean might be implied by the lines' nautical imagery, suggesting that he is more familiar with the convention of verses describing male seafaring, rather than the equivalent journey of Ragnhildr. Direct speech tends not, furthermore, to employ fillers or hesitation markers when deployed in saga literature, but the use of one here – 'Já, veit Guð' ('Yes, God willing') – indicates the *pátr* author's exacting and comic interest in recreating the exasperation of a king who has become both facilitator and victim of his poet's performance.

This concluding anecdote has been cited primarily for its representation of the memorability, or lack thereof, of skaldic poetry, and critics have speculated on the factors behind the king's failure to remember the whole verse.<sup>125</sup> Assuming Eysteinn to be the king at hand, Andersson and Gade highlight the fact that his upbringing took place outside of Scandinavia, potentially handicapping his ability to comprehend skaldic verse.<sup>126</sup> Although such comments misrepresent the king's role within the challenge, in which he is only obliged to remember one line, the shift in calibre of royal audience in *Einars pátr* is unquestionable. As Morcom highlights,

Much has changed since the time of Haraldr inn harðráði, who not only critiqued the verse of Ármorr jarlaskáld as it was recited but was also adept at composing skaldic verse himself. It is debatable whether the prestige of a skald is diminished if the king fails to understand his art but rewards him regardless.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption', p. 274, n. 136.

<sup>125</sup> See Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Memory, Mediality, and the "Performative Turn": Recontextualizing Remembering in Medieval Scandinavia', *Scandinavian Studies*, 85 (2013), 282–305 (p. 287) <<https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.85.3.0282>>.

<sup>126</sup> *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle*, p. 464. See further details about Eysteinn's upbringing in *ÍF* 24, p. 213; *ÍF* 28, p. 321; *ÍF* 29, p. 334.

<sup>127</sup> Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption', p. 274.

Morcom is right to highlight the difference in temporal setting between *Einars þáttr* and the other poetically driven *Morkinskinna þættir*. With around a century separating the events of *Arnórs þáttr* (see section 2.1) and *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* on one hand, and *Einars þáttr* on the other, the difference in the interpretive abilities of the skalds' audiences may reflect a perceived deterioration in skaldic comprehension towards the middle of the twelfth century in elite Norwegian circles, although scholars usually situate the decline of the artform in these contexts to the late-twelfth century (and the exceptional nature of Haraldr inn harðráði's poetic abilities must be borne in mind).<sup>128</sup> As a trio, the *Einars þáttr* anecdotes are nevertheless more firm in answering Morcom's second remark, wherein he queries the degree of separability between the social value of skaldic performance and its reception by audiences. Whilst each of the anecdotes affirms Einarr in its own way, an aspect of triviality and bathos undergirds all three of his status-promoting acts. In *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, Þjóðólfr's unwillingness to engage in such menial affairs may contribute to his discomfiting by Haraldr, but it also reflects greater self-respect for his role as the king's *hofuðskáld*. When he does satiate Haraldr's appetite for the burlesque, he is rewarded handsomely, receiving a gold ring for his verses about the street scuffle. Whilst Einarr occupies a similarly prestigious position, he is contrastingly both more content to appease his rulers' frivolous desires and less well rewarded for doing so, receiving nothing for his first two stanzas and only the farcical pots of honey for the last. Performance, as noted at the beginning of this thesis, is fundamentally predicated on the co-presence of actors and spectators, the interactions between which generate and represent the value of the artform.<sup>129</sup> In the case of this *þáttr*, Einarr's playful treatment by his royal audiences is inseparable from his position as a court performer, wherein he appears diminished relative to his skaldic forebears. Like the dwarves Fjalarr and

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle*, p. 464; Wanner, p. 75.

<sup>129</sup> See, e.g., McAuley, p. 3.

Gjalarr, who are said to create the mythical mead of poetry by mixing blood and honey, Einarr may be able to use his final winnings to continue producing poetry for Eysteinn and Sigurðr, but its value as social and financial capital appears to be more precarious than ever.<sup>130</sup>

Going a step further along the timeline of skaldic entertainment, a useful counterpoint to *Einars þáttr* can be found in *Mána þáttr skálds*, a short and likely interpolated narrative in the AM 327 4to redaction of *Sverris saga*, composed around 1300.<sup>131</sup> The events of *Mána þáttr* take place in the summer of 1184, featuring the titular poet Máni and his interactions with Magnús Erlingsson (r. Norway 1161–84) shortly before the king’s death at the battle of Fimreite (15 June 1184). As in the encounter between Einarr and the *leikari* Jarlmaðr discussed above, *Mána þáttr* centres on the relationship between skalds and jesters in court environments, although the status of the former is presented as being even less secure here. The narrative begins with Magnús’s fleet laid up in Unnardys (Hummerdus), a small island off Farsund in southern Norway. Waiting for the wind that will carry the fleet towards Fimreite, Máni passes time by commenting on the situation in verse (see *SkP* 2, pp. 641–42). Although the stanza is near metrically perfect, and Magnús remarks that it is ‘[v]el [...] kveðit’ (*ÍF* 30, p. 130: ‘well composed’), Máni’s only reward is to select a clean shirt from a nearby pile of washing. Building on this early insight into Magnús’s (under)valuation of Máni’s art, the *þáttr* author proceeds via analepsis to describe the initial meeting between the poet and king. Máni, it is said, happens upon Magnús at Norway’s eastern border having become a vagrant on his return from a pilgrimage to Rome. Despite his poor appearance, Máni knows how to greet a king properly and, upon revealing that he is Icelandic, prompts

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<sup>130</sup> Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, I, 3.

<sup>131</sup> *Sverris saga* MS: Copenhagen, Den arnamagnæanske samling, Nordisk forskningsinstitut, and Reykjavík, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 327 4to. See further *Sverris saga etter Cod. AM 327 4°*, ed. by Gustav Indrebø (Oslo [Kristiania]: Dybwad, 1920), p. xxxiv; Alfred Jakobsen, ‘Tåtten om Måne skald’, *Maal og minne*, 1980, 167–73.

Magnús to proffer the following invitation: ‘Þú munt kunna fræða, Tungli. Sezk niðr ok kveð’ (*ÍF* 30, p. 130: ‘You will know lore, Tungli. Sit down and speak’).<sup>132</sup> Máni is able to take advantage of his countrymen’s now well-established reputation for being learned storytellers, and opts to recite Halldórr skvaldri’s (‘Prattler’) *Útfarardrápa* (see *SkP* 2, pp. 483–92).<sup>133</sup> Recounting the Mediterranean exploits of Magnús’s uncle Sigurðr Jórsalafari, the poem is well-received on this occasion: ‘fekk þetta kvæði góðan róm, þótti ok vel skemmt’ (*ÍF* 30, p. 130: ‘This poem got a good applause, and it was considered fit entertainment’). Despite this, no financial reward is forthcoming and even the social capital Máni has achieved is rapidly threatened by other performers in the king’s company.

The *páttir* author notes that two *leikarar* are also present, and they entertain the courtiers by making a small dog jump over poles in front of the audience. The higher the status of the courtier at hand, the higher the dog is made to jump. Rehearsing a by-now familiar exercise in kingly conflict instigation, Magnús remarks to the newly arrived poet: ‘Finnr þú, Tungli, at leikararnir sjá ekki vel til þín. Nú yrkðu um þá vísu, ok má vera at þér verði heldr gagn at’ (*ÍF* 30, p. 130: ‘You perceive, Tungli, that the players do not look kindly upon you. Compose a verse about them now, and it may be that you will profit from it’). Máni is quick to acquiesce, extemporising two stanzas in which he mocks the *leikarar*’s performance and their physical appearance (see *SkP* 2, pp. 642–44). The second of the two verses is as follows:

Gígjan syngr, þars ganga  
– grípa menn til pípu –  
– fœra fólsku stóra –  
framm leikarar bleikir.

<sup>132</sup> Tungli, the nickname Magnús gives Máni, derives from the word *tungl* (‘moon’), playing on the fact that *máni* means ‘moon’ in poetic contexts.

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Stephen A. Mitchell, ‘Courts, Consorts, and the Transformation of Medieval Scandinavian Literature’, *NOWELE: North-Western European Language Evolution*, 31–32 (1997), 229–41 (p. 231) <<https://doi.org/10.1075/nowele.31-32.19mit>>.



Undrs, hvé augum vendir  
umb, sás þýtr í trumbu;  
kníðan lítk á kauða  
kjapt ok blásna hvapta.

(*SkP* 2, p. 643: ‘The fiddle sings where the pale players go forth. People grasp the pipe; they bring great foolishness. It is a wonder how the one who blows into the trumpet rolls his eyes around. I see the strained cheek and inflated mouth on the wretch.’)

Máni’s depiction goes further than simply portraying the *leikarar* as ‘ludicrous’, to quote Bandlien.<sup>134</sup> Such descriptions of facial distortion and eye-rolling are rather, and as Kirsten Wolf highlights, generally ‘reserved for evil and ominous supernatural beings’, including saga accounts involving ghosts and demons.<sup>135</sup> Drawing on this discourse of monstrosity, Máni’s portrayal of the *leikarar* has the corresponding effect of alienating them from Magnús’s court:

Þá varð at mikill hlátr, ok slógu hirðmenn hring um þessa leikara ok kváðu vísuna, ok æ þat oftast: ‘kjaft ok blásna hvafta.’ Þeim leikurunum þótti nær sem þeir væri í eldi ok kómsk út ór stofunni.

(*ÍF* 30, pp. 131–32: ‘Then great laughter arose at that [i.e. Máni’s verses], and the retainers made a ring around the players and recited the verses, and ever the most often: “cheek and inflated mouth”. It seemed to the players as though they were nearly in a fire, and they got themselves out of the room.’)

As in *Einars þáttr*, skaldic performance allows a court poet to assert his status relative to lower-ranking entertainers. It is interesting to note a further parallel between the episodes in that individual lines, and especially the final one, from *dróttkvætt* stanzas are singled out in the memories of their audiences. In both cases, the obvious inference is that audiences are likely to remember clearest what they have heard most recently, although the parallel also suggests that *dróttkvætt* line breaks were, whether situationally or universally, a significant aspect in the ‘different modulations of voice, accentuation, and pauses [...] used to delineate the syntax and facilitate the listeners’ comprehension’, to quote Gade.<sup>136</sup> Again, this may reflect unfavourably on the elite Norwegian audiences of the mid- to late-twelfth century,

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<sup>134</sup> Bjørn Bandlien, ‘Situated Knowledge: Shaping Intellectual Identities in Iceland, c. 1180–1220’, in *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Scandinavia, c. 1100–1350*, ed. by Stefka Georgieva Eriksen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), pp. 137–74 (p. 165).

<sup>135</sup> Wolf, p. 142.

<sup>136</sup> Gade, *Structure*, p. 27.

whose comprehension of skaldic poetry – at least in the imagination of these Icelandic saga and *þáttr* authors – is contingent on a relatively simple organisational feature, resulting in the recitation of grammatically incomplete lines rather than a more advanced decoding of imagery and syntax.

*Mána þáttr*, as Mitchell has shown, is predicated on the increasing competition between skalds and other forms of entertainer caused by the gravitation of Norwegian court culture towards European models from around the reign of Óláfr inn kyrr Haraldsson (‘the Quiet’; r. Norway 1066–93) onwards.<sup>137</sup> In this instance, Máni’s ability to harness a more traditional artform sees him win out against the *leikarar*, and thereby fare better than Einarr Skúlason during his similar entertainment-based dispute at the court of Sveinn sviðandi some decades prior, as noted above. As indicated by the connection between Máni’s Icelandic identity and Magnús’s expectation that he will have a store of entertaining ‘fræði’ (‘lore’), however, the institution of skaldic poetry and its association with Icelanders is long established by the end of the twelfth century. The artform acquired a concomitant risk of appearing archaic and unoriginal at this time.<sup>138</sup> Whilst innovations on skaldic conventions, such as those exhibited in the Orcadian works *Háttalykill* (*SkP* 3, pp. 1001–93) and *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (*SkP* 1, pp. 954–97), occurred before and during Máni’s career, the position of skalds in Scandinavian courts is evidently perceived as being less secure towards the end of the twelfth century.<sup>139</sup> In the case of *Mána þáttr*, this perception emerges in a defensive attitude towards Máni and a correspondingly critical portrayal of Magnús Erlingsson. Bandlien focuses on the former, highlighting the criticism inherent in ‘[t]he contrast between the ascetic pilgrim and skald who praised the deeds of a great crusader [i.e. Sigurðr Jórsalafari via *Útfaradrápa*], and the performers who sought to please the ambitions

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<sup>137</sup> Mitchell, ‘Courts’, pp. 233–34.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. Mitchell, ‘Courts’, p. 232.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Frank, ‘*Dróttkvætt*’ Stanza, pp. 67–68.

of the aristocracy at home while defaming a good Christian'.<sup>140</sup> It is equally important, however, to recognise Magnús's role in this biased comparison. As in its previous iterations by Óláfr inn sönski and Haraldr inn harðráði, the theme of a playful ruler instigating conflict contains a disingenuous element, for Máni's verses, like the competitive poetry between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn, and Sneglu-Halli and Þjóðólfr, are made to be less entertaining for their poetic merit, and more for the petty squabbling that they comprise and induce. Restricting competition to the lower echelons of the court also reinforces the position of the royal audience, as argued above. Where other variations on this theme are more bathetic, with prestigious poets temporarily lowered to the level of trivial bickering, Máni's obvious poverty and the similarly low status of the *leikarar* preclude an equivalent dynamic in *Mána þáttur*. Magnús's challenge is more exploitative than playful, coercing the otherwise helpless entertainers into a situation where one party must be expelled from the community. Máni's subsequent integration into Magnús's retinue is, furthermore, shown to be a relatively paltry reward; not only does the skald go without financial remuneration for his other *lausavísur*, but his ability even to benefit from Magnús's patronage is cut short by the king's imminent demise at Fimreite. In *Mána þáttur*, then, the erosion of skaldic prestige and concomitant elevation of other forms of entertainment conspire to paint a more disquieting picture of playful rulers, one in which the king has even greater licence to self-servingly misuse and marshal his court entertainers.

The material covered in this section bears out Collinson's conclusions regarding the destabilising effects of courtly entertainment, demonstrating that the principles of her study are applicable beyond the triptych of *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*. Whilst previous scholars have emphasised the empowerment of skalds via their entertaining performances, my analysis lays greater stress on the influence exerted by playful rulers.

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<sup>140</sup> Bandlien, 'Situated Knowledge', p. 165.

*Sneglu-Halla þátr*'s depiction of harmonious subversiveness between Sneglu-Halli and Haraldr inn harðráði is shown to risk a degree of instability on the king's part, but this is counterbalanced by Haraldr's displays of wittiness and his capacity to transcend the codes of conduct that other royal audiences use to protect themselves. Whilst *Einars þátr* and *Mána þátr* also demonstrate the potential for entertaining performance to function as a status-affirming act, the cachet poets are shown to gain from their compositions is limited in accordance with their diminished role in twelfth-century Norwegian courts. Einarr's ability to challenge and discomfit his king is correspondingly undermined by his otherwise trivial treatment by Eysteinn and Sigurðr Haraldssynir, whilst Máni is helpless in the face of entertainment-based exploitation by Magnús Erlingsson.

In evaluating the relationship between entertaining skalds and playful rulers that these texts interrogate, it is useful to consider Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'carnival' and its reappraisal by Terry Eagleton. Bakhtin highlights the importance of 'carnival festivities [...] in the life of medieval man' and notes their sharp distinction from and subversion of 'the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials'.<sup>141</sup> Bakhtin's concept is applicable to the material covered here, wherein the conventions of both the skaldic artform and the position of court poets are readily satirised and inverted. The subsidiary relationship of carnival to the power structures it subverts is, however, articulated by Eagleton as follows:

Carnival [...] is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare's Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.<sup>142</sup>

Although Halli, Einarr, and Máni demonstrably derive power from their entertaining performances, their *þættir* are similarly couched in terms of the poets' licencing, permitting,

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<sup>141</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>142</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin; or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: NLB, 1981), p. 148 (Eagleton's emphasis).

and containing by playful rulers. By extension, these acts of containment serve to emphasise the unyielding power of royal audiences, who possess both the freedom to transgress courtly conventions and control over the circumstances of transgression. The insidious authority of playful rulers need not be seen to completely revoke the significance of their entertaining skalds. This would, after all, be at odds with the affirmation of the place of Iceland and Icelanders in Norwegian history that *Morkinskinna* and its related texts seem poised to deliver. Again, however, the limitation of transgressive entertainment as an exercise of royal power is a counterbalancing dynamic that should not, and has been, underappreciated. No amount of laughter, these texts indicate, will dislodge the dominance of royal audiences.

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The depiction of royal audiences in sagas affirms the importance of skaldic performance as a social act. All the rulers analysed above are shown to engage in power transactions with skaldic performers, wherein they have varying levels of control over the parameters of their interactions. Accounts of encomiastic performance, as shown in the first section (2.1), depict praised rulers as having recourse to formalised codes of behaviour, which, if adhered to, ensure a secure and mutual empowerment of both skaldic performer and royal audience. Portrayals of playful rulers, on the other hand, see such behavioural codes subverted in favour of improvisation and competition. Whilst such performance spaces, as demonstrated in the final section (2.3), intensify the potential magnitude of poet-ruler power exchanges, rarely do they supersede the will of the royal audience, whose ability both to transgress and control transgression of courtly conventions is in itself represented as an exercise of power. Where playful rulers tend to disrupt their courtly hierarchies only on a temporary basis, critical performances, as shown in the second section (2.2), take place amidst the possibility of genuine and abiding courtly disintegration. In that regard, I contend that skaldic criticism,

functioning either constructively or destructively, exposes the strengths and weaknesses of courtly communities, contributing to the long-term reputation of rulers in cultural memory.

Given the wealth of material available in both the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, my analysis has necessarily focused on specific episodes within these saga genres. Alongside *Gunnlaugs saga*, similar sets of ‘stock scenes’ of encomiastic performance exist in two of the other so-called *skáldasögur*, namely *Hallfreðar saga* (see *ÍF* 8, pp. 151, 155–56, 168, 177–78, 195) and *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* (*ÍF* 3, pp. 119, 126–27). Building on my arguments about praised rulers, comparison between these texts would doubtless reveal further nuances within the codes that govern encomiastic skaldic performances. Whilst, furthermore, much attention has been devoted to *Sneglu-Halla þátr* on its own terms, there is an under-explored connection between this playful *þátr* and the one that immediately succeeds it in *Morkinskinna*, wherein Haraldr inn harðráði contrives a similar performance-based competition between his *hofuðskáld* Þjóðólfr and a fisherman called Þorgils (see *ÍF* 23, pp. 284–88). This latter text has largely been neglected by scholars in favour of its more eye-catching predecessor, but would contribute much as a point of comparison between *Sneglu-Halla þátr* and other narratives centred on skaldic entertainment amongst the social elite.<sup>143</sup> These examples are only two amongst many possibilities for future research in this area, to which comparative studies of *fornaldarsögur*, *riddararsögur*, and *samtíðarsögur* would also make fine contributions.

The material I have had scope to cover nonetheless produces significant insight into the role of royal audiences in sagas. In this regard, it is worth returning briefly to the concept of the *þátr* genre, and especially the function of *þátr* narratives as dependent features within the broader saga texts. As noted previously, the temporary restructuring of social and courtly

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<sup>143</sup> See further Turville-Petre, *Haraldr*, pp. 12–13; Bjarne Fidjestøl, ‘Tåtten om Harald Hardråde og fiskaren Þorgils’, *Maal og minne*, 1971, 34–49.

hierarchies that takes place in *þættir* is usually considered to be a means of revealing lesser-seen aspects of rulers' personalities. Given the temporary centring of poets during performance events, it is unsurprising that saga accounts of skaldic performance function in a similar way irrespective of whether they are designated *þættir*. As skalds take to the stage to either praise, undermine, or play with kings, the extradiegetic audiences of sagas and *þættir* bear witness not just to rulers as rulers, but to rulers as artful negotiators, estranged antagonists, or ribald humourists.

In the material covered here, such personal exposés tend to take priority over examination of the deeper-level cognitive aspects of skaldic reception. As noted previously, this trend is regrettable insofar as it diminishes the potential for further insight into the act of receiving and interpreting skaldic poetry in the moment of performance, a dynamic which Lindow and others have viewed as being central to its community-building function (see section 1.1). Equally, however, these cases prompt greater recognition of how skaldic performance achieves this function via other means. Alongside the poetic content itself, the framing of performance, and its concomitant displays of social ritual, transgression, and power more generally, are shown to be just as important for generating and testing group identity. By giving greater credence to these contexts, the oft-neglected prose accounts demonstrate not simply the enduring efficacy of skaldic performance as an act of community-building, as many scholars have been at pains to identify, but also the potential complexity of such an act. Across the minefield of personality types and egos that comprises skaldic performers and royal audiences, the exercise of gaining and maintaining power is shown to be no mean feat.

### 3 Hostile Audiences: ‘Skáld flugust á’?

Heyr þú bæn Buslu;      brátt mun hon sungin,  
svá at heyraz skal      um heim allan  
ok óþörf öllum,      þeim sem á heyra,  
en þeim þó fjandligust,      sem ek vil fortala.

(*SkP* 8, p. 29: ‘Hear Busla’s request; it will soon be sung in such a way that it shall be heard across the whole world, and harmful to all those who hear, and yet most fiendish to the one I wish to curse.’)

In this second stanza of her curse-poem *Buslubæn* (*SkP* 8, pp. 28–36), the pagan sorceress Busla highlights the interpersonal potency of her performance. Her verse, she stresses, is especially dire for King Hringr of the Gautar, its intended recipient, but all its audiences will be worse for having heard it. The author of *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, in which *Buslubæn* is preserved, clearly believed in the poem’s harmful properties, for although they repeatedly mention their knowledge of the full poem, they refuse to quote it completely (see *FN* 2, pp. 472–75).<sup>1</sup> Whilst *Buslubæn*’s eddic metre, female speaker, and preservation in a *fornaldarsaga* differentiate it from the poetic corpus I have elected to focus on, skaldic verse addressing a hostile audience is neither less rare nor less powerful. Hostile audiences are typically but not exclusively enemies of their skalds and, unlike their royal and romantic counterparts (the latter discussed in chapter 4), are confined to neither political nor personal contexts, featuring in a range of social settings in virtually every saga genre. The pervasiveness of this audience-type may reflect the fundamental antagonistic character that some scholars have envisioned in the art of Old Norse poets. Since the nineteenth century, many scholars have upheld a connection between the word *skáld* and a Germanic lexical group dealing with pejorative utterances (e.g. Old High German *skeltan*, Old Low German *skeldan*, Old Frisian *skelda*).<sup>2</sup> Although no concrete etymological relationship has been

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Judy Quinn, “‘Ok er þetta upphaf’: First-Stanza Quotation in Old Norse Prosimetrum”, *Alvíssmál*, 7 (1997), 61–80 (pp. 69–70).

<sup>2</sup> Elis Wadstein, ‘Bidrag till tolkning och belysning av skalde- och Edda-dikter. I. Till tolkningen av Ynglingatal’, *ANF*, 11 (1895), 64–92 (p. 89); Klaus von See, ‘Skop und Skald: Zur Auffassung des Dichters bei



established to confirm the original meaning of *skáld* as ‘(poetic) abuser’, and Jesch and Mats Malm derive an alternative semiotic tradition from the word’s appearances in runic inscriptions, the prevalence of invective within the skaldic corpus is indicative of the derisive powers that skalds possessed, or were perceived as possessing.<sup>3</sup>

The corpus of antagonistic skaldic poetry is primarily comprised by *lausavísur* and, although the sagas quote the titles of some longer poetic sequences (e.g. Björn Árneirsson’s ‘Grámagafli’ and Þórðr Kolbeinsson’s ‘Kolluvísur’; see *ÍF* 3, pp. 169–70), these seldom survive in full (but cf. *Buslubæn*, cited above). Rarely do these performances come across as pre-meditated; they are rather extemporisations that emerge in tandem with the vacillations of heated contests and rivalries. The main utterance-type in this regard is the insult. Defamation of this kind can cover an array of transgressions, summarised by Carol J. Clover as follows:

the insulter impugns his antagonist’s appearance (poor or beggardly); reminds him of heroic failure (losing a battle, especially against an unworthy opponent); accuses him of cowardice, of trivial or irresponsible behavior (pointless escapades, domestic indulgences, sexual dalliance), or of failings of honor (unwillingness or inability to extract due vengeance, hostile relations with kinsmen); declares him a breaker of alimentary taboos (drinking urine, eating corpses); and/or charges him with sexual irregularity (incest, castration, bestiality, “receptive homosexuality”).<sup>4</sup>

Clover’s use of masculine pronouns is appropriate, for skalds and their opponents tend to be male in the extant sources. Accordingly, and as several scholars have acknowledged, inverting these transgressions produces a selection of qualities perceived as manly, or, to quote Evans, ‘a working model of hegemonic masculinity’.<sup>5</sup> Given the primacy of insults in the poetic corpus and their association with the masculine values that play such a fundamental role in many Old Norse texts, it is unsurprising that scholars have paid this type of utterance most attention. Of particular interest has been the fraught concept of *níð*. A great

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den Germanen’, *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift*, 45 (1964), 1–14; M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, ‘On the Etymology of the Word “Skáld”’, in *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar: 30. júní 1969*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson and others (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1969), pp. 421–30; Gade, *Structure*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jesch, ‘*Avant la Lettre*’, pp. 191–92; Mats Malm, ‘Skalds, Runes, and Voice’, *VMS*, 6 (2010), 135–46 (pp. 136–38) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.1.102139>>.

<sup>4</sup> Carol J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe’, *Speculum*, 68 (1993), 363–87 (p. 373) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2864557>>.

<sup>5</sup> Evans, *Men*, p. 25; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. by Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), pp. 24–25.

deal of effort has been devoted toward recovering and explaining the special significance of this concept in the context of medieval Scandinavian societies, laws, rituals, and religions, but a conclusive interpretation is probably unachievable. As Finlay notes, the word *níð* ‘is used so sparingly in the texts that its specific application is probably irrecoverable, particularly since the instances which have come down to us have so often been damaged by scribal embarrassment or incomprehension’.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst this has not prevented scholars from regularly rehearsing an exercise in *níð*-interpretation, the recipients of this and other extreme forms of slander have tended to elicit only brief commentary.<sup>7</sup> Since, as is commonly remarked, poetry is one of the most serious forms in which Old Norse insults can be delivered, audience reactions are frequently expected to be equally extreme.<sup>8</sup> As Meulengracht Sørensen writes in his description of *níð*:

The man attacked must show that he is fit to remain in the community, by behaving as a man in the system of Norse ethics; that is to say, he must challenge his adversary to battle, or avenge himself by blood-vengeance.<sup>9</sup>

Given the inconsistent applications of the word *níð* in the saga corpus, it is unsurprising that a sustained focus on hostile audiences undermines Meulengracht Sørensen’s perspective on how the attacked man ‘must’ behave. Dogmatic perspectives like this, which feature recurrently in scholarship on *níð* and related verbal affronts, promote the idea that the saga

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<sup>6</sup> Alison Finlay, ‘*Níð*, Adultery and Feud in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*’, *Saga-Book*, 23 (1990–93), 158–78 (p. 162).

<sup>7</sup> For the major studies of *níð*, see Erik Noreen, *Studier i fornvästnordisk diktning: Andra samlingen*, Uppsala Universitets årsskrift, filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper, 4 (Uppsala: Akademiska bokhandeln, 1922); Bo Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning: Traditionshistoriska studier i versmagi*, 2 vols (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965–1974); T. L. Markey, ‘Nordic *níðvísur*: An Instance of Ritual Inversion?’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 5 (1972), 7–18; Folke Ström, ‘*Níð*’, ‘*Ergi*’ and Old Norse Moral Attitudes, Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies (London: VSNR, 1974); Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, p. 32; Finlay, ‘Adultery and Feud’, pp. 159–62; Alison Finlay, ‘Monstrous Allegations: An Exchange of *Ýki* in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*’, *Alvíssmál*, 10 (2001), 21–44 (pp. 21–28).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Norrønt nid: Forestillingen om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1980), p. 36; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, p. 30; Finlay, ‘Adultery and Feud’, p. 161; Jenny Jochens, ‘Representations of Skalds in the Sagas 2: Gender Relations’, in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 309–32 (p. 318) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547-012>>; Clunies Ross, *History*, pp. 41, 61–63.

<sup>9</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, p. 32.

authors' model of hegemonic masculinity was relatively consistent and inviolable.<sup>10</sup> As the following discussion demonstrates, such formulations obscure the variety and complexity of audience responses shown in saga texts. Via a more sustained and detailed analysis than previous studies have allowed for, I show how insulted opponents (including those subject to *níð*) not only react idiosyncratically in the sagas, with violence featuring in a minority of cases, but also how non-violent responses frequently receive approval from both intra- and extradiegetic sources. My audience-centric analysis also allows for greater comparison between different forms of poetic defamation, such as *kviðlingar* ('ditties') and *flim* ('critical verse'), further problematising the special status generally afforded to *níð*.

Given that insults are a mainstay in antagonistic skaldic poetry, insulted opponents are my primary object of study in this chapter, with the analysis split between responses of violent (section 3.1.1) and non-violent (section 3.1.2) natures. Unlike much previous scholarship, which comprises either terminological surveys or studies of individual or grouped family sagas, my analysis is sensitive to and yet unrestricted by different saga genres, encompassing examples from *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and *kristniboðspættir* to elucidate trends and comparative perspectives on the reception of skaldic slander. Inclusion of lesser-studied forms of poetry, as noted above, also allows me to produce a fresh appraisal of the impact of different poetic styles on their audiences. In the chapter's subsequent sections, I examine the ways in which saga authors present skalds as challenging and threatening their opponents in verse without necessarily being derisory. These utterance-types rarely feature in previous research on hostile skaldic poetry, which is primarily occupied with the wit and weight of skaldic insults. I argue that challenges and threats merit greater attention for the distinctive roles they elicit for both skalds and their opponents.

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<sup>10</sup> See further, e.g., Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning*, I: *Nid mot furstar* (1965), pp. 212–13; Frederic Amory, 'Speech Acts and Violence in the Sagas', *ANF*, 106 (1991), 57–84 (pp. 74–75).

Recipients of these utterance-types are treated in two separate sections (3.2 and 3.3), in which I examine the correspondence between physical and poetic violence the utterances contrive, and how this correspondence is mediated by saga authors. Like insults, challenges enact or coincide with a complete breakdown in relations between opponents, but I argue that their recipients play more of a subsidiary role than those who are insulted or threatened, functioning to reveal or expand aspects of the challenger's identity. Threatened opponents, on the other hand, are afforded perhaps the greatest agency of all. I argue that the open-endedness of the utterances levelled at these groups produces greater diversity and control in audience responses.

Where skaldic interactions with royal and romantic audiences tend to take place in private settings, their social networks limited by the confines either of courtly circles or intimate affairs, a prevailing theme in cases involving hostile audiences is the public-facing nature of the conflicts at hand. Irrespective of whether they include an insult, challenge, or threat, the cases I discuss continually highlight potential for the attention and involvement of the community surrounding the disputing parties. As impersonal newsmongers, these secondary audiences highlight the importance of the transmissibility of skaldic poetry more emphatically than the material I cover in other chapters. An issue given equal prominence by these cases is that of audience comprehension, and especially the potential for reinterpretation of skaldic poetry. As Burrows shows, the myriad Old Norse lexemes relating to humour, and their use in narrative sources, continually baffle attempts to differentiate between antagonistic utterances intended seriously, as jokes, or potentially both.<sup>11</sup> Compounded by the inherent complexity of skaldic poetry and poets' attempts to produce impressive and elaborate displays of enmity, the reactions of hostile audiences represent a correspondingly diverse

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Burrows, 'No Sense of Humour? "Humour" Words in Old Norse', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*, ed. by Daniel Derrin and Hannah Burrows (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 43–70 (p. 62) <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56646-3\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56646-3_3)>.

array of behaviour. The power and peculiarity of the skalds' animosity seems to defy any kind of formulaic response on the part of its recipients, despite the perspectives of previous scholars. Over the course of the following analysis, I show how the uncertain and difficult position of hostile audiences comes with a corresponding degree of flexibility, affording them opportunity to take decisive action in a conflict whether or not it proves successful.

### 3.1 Insulted Opponents

The perceived centrality of violence within the saga corpus has a long history in Old Norse scholarship. This long-standing belief is often conveyed via the words of the eighteenth-century literary historian Jón Ólafsson from Grunnavík, who memorably summarised the archetypal *Íslendingasaga* narrative as 'bændur flugust á' ('farmers fighting').<sup>12</sup> Whilst Jón's satirical remark has generated considerable mirth over the years, its generalising nature is regrettably also reflected in other scholarly investigations of violence in saga literature.

Opening his discussion of insults as speech acts in the sagas, Frederic Amory remarks:

If the true saga hero minimizes threats to his existence, *a fortiori* he aggrandizes the slightest insult to his honor or his manhood. Insults indeed jeopardize his very position in society, and for every one of them he must have satisfaction in blood from his calumniators, not to forfeit this position.<sup>13</sup>

Whilst this perspective and others like it held sway in scholarship for some time, with the benefit of sustained studies on the nuances of honour and masculinity in Old Norse literature, the prescriptive and generalising nature of Amory's comments now stands in stark relief.<sup>14</sup>

Evans examines the performance of hegemonic masculinity in greater depth, highlighting the

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<sup>12</sup> Sverrir Tómasson traces the origin of the modern popularity of Jón's phrase to its quotation in Jón Helgasson's 1926 doctoral dissertation, entitled *Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík*. See further Sverrir Tómasson, "'Bændur flugust á": Þrjár athugasemdir Jóns Ólafssonar úr Grunnavík um fornþekktir', *Gripla*, 14 (2003), 325–26.

<sup>13</sup> Amory, pp. 74–75.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Evans, *Men; Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxhrkn4>>; Oren Falk, *Violence and Risk in Medieval Iceland: This Spattered Isle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198866046.001.0001>>.

varying roles violence plays in male attempts ‘to subordinate *all* other masculinities’, whilst Oren Falk expands on the capability of violence not simply to assert power over others, but also to act ‘as a technique for dealing with uncertainty [...] bridg[ing] the ever-reopening chasm between how we make sense of the world and how the world persists in frustrating our expectations’.<sup>15</sup> David Clark offers a direct refutation of Amory’s view in his comment that ‘[t]he sagas are not a homogenous body of texts, and generalisations about attitudes to revenge [...] seem less than satisfactory’.<sup>16</sup> None of the above scholars, however, afford space to the prevailing ‘poetics of violence’ in the skaldic corpus, to quote Whaley.<sup>17</sup> Even Whaley’s study is focused on skaldic poems dealing with battles and higher-level warfare, neglecting to consider the large body of material associated with verbal abuse on a smaller scale. As highlighted above, derisory skaldic verse is often considered to be one of the most potent forms of insult in Old Norse contexts. As Sayers, Finlay, and others have highlighted, the memorability of its poetic form increases the probability that the calumny will be disseminated and remembered, thereby intensifying the personal and social damage inflicted on the insulted party.<sup>18</sup> Other scholars have, furthermore, identified the perception that insulting poetry could produce supernatural effects upon its recipients.<sup>19</sup> Given that Amory anticipates a bloody end for all insult-utterers irrespective of the form of their calumny, it is unsurprising that scholars have often correlated the extremity of poetic insults to equally extreme reactions from their recipients.

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<sup>15</sup> Evans, *Men*, p. 115 (Evans’s emphasis); Falk, *Violence*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>16</sup> David Clark, ‘Revenge and Moderation: The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland’, *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 3 (2005), 133–56 (p. 155).

<sup>17</sup> Diana Whaley, ‘The Fury of the Northmen and the Poetics of Violence’, in *Narration and Hero*, ed. by Victor Millet and Heike Sahm, *Ergänzungsbände Zum Reallexikon Der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 87 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 71–94 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110338157.71>>.

<sup>18</sup> William Sayers, ‘“*Blæju þöll* – Young Fir of the Bed-Clothes”: Skaldic Seduction’, in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), pp. 31–49 (p. 46); Finlay, ‘Adultery and Feud’, p. 161; Jochens, ‘Gender Relations’, p. 318.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 63; Meylan, ‘Magical Power’, p. 46.

Previous commentary on the responses of insulted opponents has nevertheless tended to be brief and secondary to analysis of the nature and performance of the insults themselves. In the following two sub-sections, via a sustained analysis of such responses, I interrogate the nuances of the honour code that, in the eyes of previous scholars, insult recipients were bound to enact. As noted previously, my study accounts for and compares examples from a range of saga genres, including *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, and the *kristniboðspættir* from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. In the first sub-section, I focus on the depiction of violent responses in *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12), *Kormáks saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga*, alongside *þættir* involving Þórarinn stuttfeldr, Þorvaldr inn víðfórli Koðránsson, and the Saxon priest Þangbrandr. I show how insult-instigated blood vengeance, rather than carrying the kind of ethical security that Amory envisions, is often treated critically by saga characters and authors alike. The second sub-section then counterbalances the first by investigating non-violent responses. Via case studies of *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* (ÍF 3, pp. 109–211), *Grettis saga*, and two *þættir* unique to the *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* manuscripts, I demonstrate how these forms of negotiation are portrayed as genuine alternatives to violence, not necessarily de-escalating a conflict but rather comprising a more diverse array of means by which insulted opponents maintain their honour. As much as farmers always seem to be fighting in sagas, the heterogeneity of action in these insult-centred episodes precludes any possibility that they might be reduced to the same pattern of narrative action. In these contexts at least, it is not always the case that ‘skáld flugust á’.

### 3.1.1 Violent Responses

An archetypal example of insult-instigated violence is found in *Njáls saga*, one section of which (chs 35–47) depicts a sequence of testing circumstances between the lifelong friends Njáll Þorgeirsson and Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. The sequence reaches its climax when

Sigmundr Lambason, incited by Hallgerðr Hǫskuldsdóttir, Gunnarr's wife, composes insulting verses about Njáll and his sons, prompting the sons to kill Sigmundr. Whilst, on the surface, these events seem to accord with the relatively simple pattern of insulting act followed by violent reaction, a close reading of the episode reveals greater levels of complexity than have previously been recognised. In the first place, Sigmundr's verses are not quoted in all of *Njála*'s manuscript witnesses. In the *Reykjabók* version of the saga (composed c. 1300–25), the narrator simply relates that, at Hallgerðr's bequest, Sigmundr 'kvað þegar vísur þrjár eða fjórar, ok váru allar illar' (*ÍF* 12, p. 113: 'immediately spoke three or four verses, and they were all malicious').<sup>20</sup> Whether or not the stanzas are missing through 'scribal embarrassment', to quote Finlay, their omission prompts a partial shift in emphasis on their authorship.<sup>21</sup> In this version, the greatest indicator as to the verses' content comes not from Sigmundr, but Hallgerðr, who tells her companions to call Njáll 'karl inn skegglausi' and his sons 'taðskegglinga' (*ÍF* 12, p. 113: 'old beardless'; 'little dung-beards'). Njáll is accordingly accused of effeminacy, since he lacks a marker of masculinity, whilst his sons are implied to engage in either coprophagy – 'a gross although seldom recorded insult in that society', according to Sayers – or, as William Ian Miller extrapolates, oral-anal sex with farm animals.<sup>22</sup> In later versions of the saga (e.g. *Oddabók*, composed c. 1460), three insulting *lausavísur* are inserted and attributed to Sigmundr, wherein Hallgerðr's derisory nicknames appear, as exemplified in the following verse:

Getk makligast miklu  
meins leitöndum heiti  
– trauðr rýfk trygðir – síðan  
taðskegglingar neglisk.

<sup>20</sup> *Reykjabók* MS: Copenhagen, Den arnamagnæanske samling, Nordisk forskningsinstitut, and Reykjavík, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 468 4to.

<sup>21</sup> Finlay, 'Adultery and Feud', p. 162.

<sup>22</sup> William Sayers, 'Njáll's Beard, Hallgerðr's Hair and Gunnarr's Hay: Homological Patterning in *Njáls Saga*', *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, 15.2 (1994), 5–31 (p. 16); William Ian Miller, 'Why is your axe bloody?': *A Reading of Njáls Saga* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 105  
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198704843.001.0001>>.



Heiti karl, en knýtum  
– kannak opt hugi manna –  
skjal í skömmu máli,  
skegglauss tali seggja.<sup>23</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 1242: ‘I predict that “little dung-beards”, by far the most fitting name, will later be nailed to the seekers of harm [= Njáll’s sons]; unwilling, I break truces. Call the old man “beardless” in the talk of men, but let us tie up gossip in short speech; I often enquire into people’s spirits.’)

Notable here is Sigmundr’s focus on the dissemination of his insults and their longevity in the popular imagination, both of which take precedence over elaboration on the actual insulting terms. Alongside the poet’s self-stated reluctance (l. 3) to initiate hostilities – and note that the same term ‘trauðr’ (‘unwilling’) appears in Sigmundr’s previous verse (*SkP* 5, p. 1240) – Sigmundr therefore frames himself as Hallgerðr’s subordinate, an executor of her wishes but not a supporter of them. Since Sigmundr’s verses appear to have been composed for later versions of *Njála*, they likely represent a conscious effort on the part of subsequent authors to accentuate the secondary role Sigmundr occupies in earlier versions of the prose.<sup>24</sup>

Hallgerðr and Sigmundr’s collaborative approach to insult-making lies behind Sebastian Thoma’s recent analysis of the episode, in which he too sees Hallgerðr as the primary agent, behaving in a manner customarily associated with *hvøt* (‘whetting’) to produce a kind of ‘female *níð*’.<sup>25</sup> Increasing the emphasis on female agency in the episode are a group of ‘farandkonur’ (*ÍF* 12, p. 112: ‘itinerant women’), who support Hallgerðr’s inflammatory actions by acting as informers between Hlíðarendi, Gunnarr’s household, and Bergþórshváll, Njáll’s. They first report to Hallgerðr that ‘[s]tritaðisk [Njáll] við at sitja’ (*ÍF* 12, p. 112: ‘Njáll was working hard at sitting’) – a sexual innuendo in Thoma’s view – before

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<sup>23</sup> *Oddabók MS*: Copenhagen, Den arnamagnæanske samling, Nordisk forskningsinstitut, and Reykjavik, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 466 4to.

<sup>24</sup> On the variant poetry in the *Njáls saga* tradition and its relationship with the prose, see further Guðrún Nordal, ‘The Dialogue between Audience and Text: The Variants in Verse Citations in *Njáls Saga*’s Manuscripts’, in *Oral Art Forms and Their Passage into Writing*, ed. by Else Mundal and Jonas Wellendorf (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2008), pp. 185–202.

<sup>25</sup> Sebastian Thoma, ‘A Friend in *Níð*: On the Narrative Display of Gender and *Níð* in *Njáls saga*’, in *Unwanted: Neglected Approaches, Characters, and Texts in Old Norse in Icelandic Saga Studies*, ed. by Andreas Schmidt and Daniela Hahn (Munich: utzverlag, 2021), pp. 57–86 (pp. 66–69).

reporting Sigmundr's verses back to Bergþóra Skarpheðinsdóttir, Njáll's wife.<sup>26</sup> As Jamie Cochrane and others have argued, itinerants feature frequently in the *Íslendingasögur* as 'peddler[s] of report', their gossip operating as much as 'a weapon for the powerless as for the powerful' since it 'was hard to contain through the normal channels of physical force, threat or law'.<sup>27</sup> In this case, the gossip available to the *farandkonur* is especially valuable, both for the potency of the content and because its skaldic form makes it particularly suitable for dissemination.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Njáll's family are threatened not simply by the content of Sigmundr's insults, but also by the probability that, in the mouths of loose-tongued wayfarers, they will quickly become public knowledge.

Whilst Bergþóra is quick to recognise this danger and immediately relays the insulting terms to Njáll and her sons (again, no verses are quoted), Skarpheðinn's initial reaction is to downplay the situation, replying: 'Ekki höfu vér kvenna skap [...] at vér reiðimsk við öllu' (*ÍF* 12, p. 114: 'We do not have the disposition of women, that we get angry at everything'). When Bergþóra insists that vengeance must be taken, Skarpheðinn produces another aloof remark and grins, but the appearance of red spots on his cheeks belies an internal emotional struggle.<sup>29</sup> Although Skarpheðinn's somatic response undermines his verbal ones – and hence affirms the validity of Bergþóra's demands – the fact remains that none of Bergþóra's male kin exhibit an immediate lust for blood vengeance: 'Grímr var hljóðr ok beit á vörrinni. Helga brá ekki við. Höskuldr gekk fram með Bergþóru' (*ÍF* 12, p. 114: 'Grímr was silent and bit his

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<sup>26</sup> Thoma, pp. 72–74.

<sup>27</sup> Jamie Cochrane, 'Gossips, Beggars, Assassins and Tramps: Vagrants and Other Itinerants in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Saga-Book*, 36 (2012), 43–78 (p. 55). See further Helga Kress, 'Staðlausir stafir', *Skírnir*, 165 (1991), 130–56.

<sup>28</sup> On the importance of memorability for skaldic insults, see Sayers, 'Blæju þöll', p. 46; Finlay, 'Adultery and Feud', p. 161; Jochens, 'Gender Relations', p. 318. On the memorability of skaldic poetry more generally, see, e.g., Jesch, 'Avant la Lettre'; Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'Cognitive Archaisms'; Gade, 'Changing Importance', pp. 67, 70–71.

<sup>29</sup> On this infamous scene, see further William Ian Miller, 'Emotions in the Sagas', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 89–109 (pp. 100–101); Low Soon Ai, 'The Mirthless Content of Skarpheðinn's Grin', *Medium Ævum*, 65 (1996), 101–8 (p. 105) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/43629791>>; Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), pp. 132–33 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787440746>>.

lip. Helgi did not change. Hǫskuldr went out with Bergþóra'). As Miller notes, this description of the sons' subdued behaviour is a syntactic and semantic inversion of the aggressive terms in which they were earlier portrayed by the *farandkonur*: 'Skarpheðinn hvatti øxi, Grímr skepti spjót, Helgi hnauð hjalt á sverð, Hǫskuldr treysti mundriða í skildi' (*ÍF* 12, p. 112: 'Skarpheðinn sharpened an axe, Grímr made a spear, Helgi riveted the hilt on a sword, Hǫskuldr strengthened the handle on a shield').<sup>30</sup> Taken together, these contrasting descriptions produce a dialectic perspective on the hegemonic masculine values that the Njálssynir are expected to embody, the latter promoting a violent ideal whilst the former undermines it. In this way, the saga author presents different responses to the family's shared and socially conscious anxiety. Both Bergþóra and her male kin recognise the threat that Sigmundr's insults pose to their social relations, but Bergþóra's anxiety, unlike the men's, extends beyond the family's relationship with Hlíðarendi. The complexity of the situation regarding the composition and dissemination of Sigmundr's *níð* is therefore extended to the context of reception, in which the attacked audience is sensitive both to the dangers of taking revenge and failing to take it.

When Njáll's sons succumb to the pressure to take violent vengeance, their actions nevertheless receive unambiguous approval from both intra- and extradiegetic sources. After Sigmundr's killing, Njáll welcomes his sons home like heroes, exclaiming: 'Njótið heilir handa!' (*ÍF* 12, p. 117: 'Bless your hands!', i.e. 'well done'). Likewise, Gunnarr, the primary party injured by Sigmundr's killing, dismisses Hallgerðr's complaints about it and takes no further action. The tacit understanding that Sigmundr deserved his fate is affirmed more subtly by the saga author, who portrays Sigmundr as behaving ignominiously during his fatal duel with Skarpheðinn. As Ármann argues, Sigmundr's red clothing – on the basis of which Skarpheðinn calls him 'rauðálfinn' (*ÍF* 12, p. 115: 'the red elf') – and the supine position into

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<sup>30</sup> Miller, *Bloody?*, p. 106.

which he is cast by Skarpheðinn both mark him out as unmanly.<sup>31</sup> Whilst Sigmundr's dishonourable demise might seem fitting for a character whose short appearance in *Njála* is mostly defined by malice, it would also be unfair to describe him as firmly 'unheroic' since, as noted earlier, his role in the production of the *níð* is secondary to Hallgerðr. As Ármann goes on to argue, the author of *Njáls saga* is frequently critical of hegemonic masculine values, and this prompts further re-evaluation of the relative 'heroism' of Njáll's sons' vengeance.<sup>32</sup> Their hesitance in enacting violent revenge emphasises the precarity of the act when it is eventually undertaken and highlights the spectre of feud that haunts the whole affair. Overall, the saga author's presentation of both the composition and reception of Sigmundr's insults intentionally avoids clear markers of right and wrong, undermining any impression that the ultimate violent response is straightforward and righteous.

Not all insulted opponents in the *Íslendingasögur* are so anxious about the consequences of their violent responses. In *Kormáks saga*, when the caustic character Narfi makes a sexually charged taunt against Kormákr via an improvised couplet (see *SkP* 5, p. 1046), the latter experiences no doubt in repaying the perceived 'hæðiyrdi' (*ÍF* 8, p. 216: 'gibes') by whacking Narfi with the back of his axe.<sup>33</sup> This example highlights the potential inadequacy of a non-violent response, since Kormákr initially rebuffs Narfi with a couplet of his own (see *SkP* 5, p. 1047) before determining the physical escalation necessary. Sayers, who considers Kormákr's verse a sufficient rejoinder to Narfi's, speculates that the assault is an 'afterthought' on the part of the saga author, but this perspective neglects to consider the significance of the close parallels between the two poets' compositions.<sup>34</sup> Narfi improvises

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<sup>31</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*', *Viator*, 38 (2007), 191–215 (p. 193) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.302082>>.

<sup>32</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity', pp. 214–15.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed reading of the nature and symbolism of Narfi's insult, see William Sayers, 'Ringing Changes: On Old Norse-Icelandic *Mál* in *Kormáks saga*', *Gripla*, 33 (2022), 69–113 (pp. 78–81) <<https://doi.org/10.33112/gripla.33.3>>.

<sup>34</sup> Sayers, 'Ringing Changes', p. 81.

his couplet using the verse-form *hnuggent* ('deprived of rhyme'), which Kormákr copies in his reply.<sup>35</sup> Whilst the lyrical symmetry of the exchange contributes to the 'comic bathos' of the episode, to quote O'Donoghue, Kormákr recognises correctly that the joke is on him at this stage; he is injured both by the content of Narfi's verse and by his inability to surpass Narfi's poetic style. In this way, Kormákr's assault provides a forceful if rather inelegant means both to repay the insult and, equally importantly, to assert control over the terms of the exchange. Although the same kind of blow is presented as lethal in *Njáls saga* (see *ÍF* 12, p. 417), Narfi is not badly hurt in this case, and this is in keeping with O'Donoghue's view of the episode's comedic atmosphere.<sup>36</sup> Such a bathetic undercurrent may explain Kormákr's disregard for any potential repercussions of attacking Narfi, as would the class difference between the two characters. In the *lausavísur* Kormákr composes after the assault, he describes Narfi as 'ófróðr Áli orfa' and 'fœðir frenju' (*SkP* 5, pp. 1048, 1049: 'unwise Áli of scythes'; 'feeder of the cow'), both of which can be resolved to mean 'servant', and concludes:

Veitk, at hrímugr hlúki,  
hrókr saurugra flóka,  
sás túnvöllu taddi,  
tíkr eyrendi hafði.

(*SkP* 5, p. 1049: 'I know that the sooty good-for-nothing, the loudmouth with filthy matted hair – the one who manured the home fields – had a bitch's burden.')

These remarks on the vulgarity of Narfi's lifestyle and occupation (cf. further discussion of such themes in Kormákr's poetry in section 4.1.2) emphasise Kormákr's superior status and suggest, by extension, that Narfi's punishment is appropriate for someone of his social inferiority. By contrast, Njáll and his sons are unable to dismiss Sigmundr so readily since, as is made clear by his introduction in *Njáls saga* (*ÍF* 12, p. 105), he has some social standing.

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<sup>35</sup> *Hnuggent* is 'a metre in which the odd lines have no internal rhyme and seven syllables, while the even lines are structured similarly to even lines in *náhent* but containing *skothending* rather than *aðalhending*' (*SkP* 5, p. lxxii).

<sup>36</sup> Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormáks Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 40 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198117834.001.0001>>.

Whatever weight one places on the influence of personal circumstances, however, instances in the *Íslendingasögur* in which a skaldic insult is ultimately avenged with lethal violence are rare.<sup>37</sup>

In their depiction of court environments, saga authors frequently highlight the irrepressible threat of violence, wherein a skaldic insult acts like a flame to a powder keg. In *Gunnlaugs saga*, and as discussed in the previous chapter (see section 2.1), decorum deteriorates rapidly in Gunnlaugr's first visit to a royal court when he insults a retainer called Þórir via the following verse:

Hirðmaðr es einn,  
sás einkar meinn;  
trúið hönnum vart;  
hann's illr ok svartr.

(*SkP* 5, p. 827: 'There is a certain retainer who is extremely malicious. Trust him warily; he is evil and black.')

The insulting quality of this verse seems to derive particularly from its unsophisticatedness. In his later interaction with Sigtryggr silkiskegg of Dublin, Gunnlaugr employs the same metre (*runhent*, 'end-rhymed') to produce an effective if rather overblown panegyric. Here, however, the end-rhymed form, lacking alliteration in the first couplet and combined with the monosyllabic and relatively unimaginative terms 'meinn', 'illr', and 'svartr', is intentionally deflating.<sup>38</sup> If kings and jarls are marked out for complex *drápur* and *flokkar* primarily according to their status, then the childlike simplicity of this verse is a statement of Gunnlaugr's lowly estimation of Þórir. The retainer certainly has no trouble recognising the

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<sup>37</sup> Of the 41 instances from *Íslendingasögur* and *þættir* that I have found as describing the performance of an insulting skaldic verse or verses, only 5 (or just over 12%) included a physically violent response by the intradiegetic audience. The instances in question are Sigmundr's verses from *Njála*, Narfi's couplet from *Kormáks saga*, Gunnlaugr ormsunga's *helmingr* (discussed immediately below), Björn Hítðelakappi's unquoted *Eykyndilsvísur* (see section 3.1.2), and Þorleifr rauðfeldarson's *Jarlsníð* (see section 2.2). Since mine is not a statistical analysis, this should not be regarded as a comprehensive set of results, but rather as a guideline towards the overall trends in the responses of insulted opponents.

<sup>38</sup> Finlay similarly detects an intentionally insulting crudity in the use of *runhent* in Björn Arngeirsson's *Grámagafllím* (*SkP* 5, pp. 96–100). See further Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations', p. 33.

derisory nature of the verse, since he moves immediately to grab his axe (*ÍF* 3, p. 69), presumably intending to use it on Gunnlaugr.

Instinctual violence of this kind is paralleled in several *konungasögur* accounts, particularly in *Morkinskinna*'s *þættir*. In *Sneglu-Halla þátt*, Þjóðólfr attempts to attack Halli after the insult exchange discussed previously (see section 2.3), in which both poets have recited embarrassing poems about the other's meagre Icelandic background. In *Þórarins þátt* *stuttfeldar* (*ÍF* 24, pp. 134–37), Árni fjöruskeifr ('Shore-Skewed'), a retainer of Sigurðr Jórsalafari, similarly draws his sword in response to an insulting verse composed by the eponymous Þórarinn. Such quickfire recourse to violence reflects the volatility with which saga authors associate courtly environments (as discussed in chapter 2), and in these cases seems to represent an instinctive expression of the potential incompatibility between a disruptive Icelandic outsider and the Norwegian courtly in-group, as highlighted by Ármann amongst others.<sup>39</sup> In this line of thinking, the Icelanders' poetry represents a particularly provocative contributor to the distinctive characteristics that set them apart from their Norwegian counterparts. Whilst this is presented as a cause for initial alienation, it is notable that the violent responses are negated in each of the above examples. The author of *Sneglu-Halla þátt* reports that Þjóðólfr 'varð [...] stöðvaðr' (*ÍF* 23, p. 278: 'was stopped'), whilst, in *Gunnlaugs saga*, Eiríkr jarl himself intervenes, commanding his retainer: 'Lát vera kyrrt, [...] ekki skulu menn gefa at slíku gaum' (*ÍF* 3, p. 69: 'calm down; men must not give attention to such things'). Although, as noted previously, Eiríkr's rezoning of masculinity appears somewhat hollow considering his proceeding behaviour, his advocacy of keeping one's composure is supported by other depictions of insulted opponents.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *Belonging*, pp. 13–14. Cf. Morcom, 'Structuring Disruption', pp. 91–93, 97.

<sup>40</sup> Evans, *Men*, p. 47.

The author of *Þórarins þáttur stuttfeldar* promotes this quality via comparison of two recipients of Þórarinn's insults. The audiences in question are the previously mentioned Árne and his fellow retainer Hákon mǫrstrútr Serksson, the former of whom acts as the primary antagonist in the episode. When Þórarinn presents himself at Sigurðr's court, Árne tricks him into delivering a verse that includes Hákon's unflattering nickname (*mǫrstrútr* literally means 'Suet-Hood', although 'Lard-Arse', as Ármann translates the term, perhaps comes closest to capturing the meaning in modern terms).<sup>41</sup> The verse is nevertheless otherwise innocuous (see *SkP* 2, p. 480) and Hákon, recognising that Þórarinn has been duped, accommodates the newly-arrived skald in his company, who are described as 'allkátir' (*ÍF* 24, p. 136: 'very cheerful'). Danger subsequently resurfaces when Hákon asks Þórarinn to compose a verse about Árne to make amends for the initial insult. The resulting composition, which brings about Árne's violent response, is as follows:

Fullviða hefr fræðum  
Fjǫruskeifr of her veifat  
lystr ok leiri kastat  
lastsamr ara ins gamla.  
Ok vannt eina kröku  
orðvandr á Serklandi  
– Skeifr, bart Hǫgna húfu  
hræddr! – varliga brædda.

(*SkP* 2, p. 481: 'Eager Fjǫruskeifr [= Árne] has dangled knowledge very widely in front of the army, and, slanderous, has slung the mud of the old eagle [> BAD POETRY]. But the word-wary one scarcely fed a single crow in the land of the Saracens. Skeifr [= Árne], you bore Hǫgni's cap [> HELMET] fearfully!')

This verse, insinuating malice, weakness, and, worst of all, cowardice on Árne's part, is clearly more insulting than the one Þórarinn composes about Hákon, and this partly explains the difference in the two retainers' responses. Also notable is Þórarinn's reference in the first *helmingr* to previous poetic compositions by Árne. The kenning 'leiri ara ins gamla' (ll. 3–4: 'mud of the old eagle') alludes to the myth of the mead of poetry, in which Óðinn in eagle-form regurgitates most of the precious liquid into vats within the walls of Ásgarðr, but also

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<sup>41</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *Belonging*, p. 13.



expels some backwards to waylay the pursuit of the giant Suttungr.<sup>42</sup> Where the main part of the mead is given to ‘þeim mönnum er yrkja kunnu’ (‘those who know how to compose poetry’), this latter substance, Snorri notes sardonically, becomes ‘skáldfífla hlut’ (the ‘poetaster’s share’).<sup>43</sup> According to Þórarinn, Árni is one such *skáldfífl* and his poetry is, essentially, shit.<sup>44</sup>

As in the competition between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn in *Gunnlaugs saga* (see section 2.1), and Halli and Þjóðólfr in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* (see section 2.3), *Þórarins þáttr* presents another example of a courtly contest between poets. Árni is recorded in *Skáldatal* as a poet of both Magnús berfœttr Ólafsson (‘Bare-Legs’; r. Norway 1093–1103) and Sigurðr Jórslafari, although his place of origin has not survived.<sup>45</sup> Whether or not Árni takes after his antagonistic counterparts Hrafn and Þjóðólfr in being Icelandic, his dispute with Þórarinn also centres on their respective power at court via the medium of poetry. In each of these examples, the protagonist’s success depends upon his ability to supersede his opponent’s reputation as a poet. This is evinced in Þórarinn’s derogatory stance discussed above, Gunnlaugr’s remark that Hrafn’s poetry is ‘yfirbragslítill’ (*ÍF* 3, p. 80: ‘poor in appearance’), and Halli forcing Þjóðólfr to recite his ignoble ‘Sóptrogsvísur’ (*ÍF* 23, p. 277: ‘Dustbin Verses’). Like Hrafn and Þjóðólfr, Árni has established himself in the Norwegian in-group before the arrival of the protagonist, and is forced to fend off what he feels is a threat to his influence. Where Hrafn is relatively honourable in his contest with Gunnlaugr, however, Árni’s self-centred attempts at subterfuge and his recourse to violence make him more like the jealous Þjóðólfr. Of the three antagonistic poets, moreover, Árni is potentially the biggest

<sup>42</sup> See Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, I, 4–5.

<sup>43</sup> Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, I, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Mitchell, ‘Hydromel’, p. 178.

<sup>45</sup> Snorri, *Uppsala Edda*, pp. 106–07. In *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, Árni is said to have spent a winter in Iceland with the titular Þorgils Oddason, which indicates that he may have been a visitor to the country rather than having domicile there. See *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), I, 20–22.

loser. The *þáttr* author compares him unfavourably not only to Þórarinn, but also to Hákon, the episode's other insulted opponent. When Árne draws his sword on Þórarinn, Hákon, the *þáttr* author reports, 'bað [Árna] hætta ok vera kyrran ok kvað hann á þat mega minnask at hann [myndi bera lægra hlut ef þeir ættisk við]' (*ÍF* 24, p. 137: 'ordered Árne to desist and to be quiet, and told him that he might remember that he would be worsted if a fight arose between them').<sup>46</sup> Here, Hákon is shown to be superior not simply because of the physical threat he poses, but also because of his ability to prevent violence. Although his calmness and wiliness are probably more beneficial to his position in the courtly hierarchy than to Þórarinn's safety, they are nonetheless the most advantageous qualities within this *þáttr*'s comparison between two insulted opponents.

A similarly unsympathetic perspective towards instinctive violence is evident in some of the *kristniboðspættir* preserved in compilations of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. These short texts are, in Siân Grønlie's words, "semi-hagiographic": they draw on both hagiographic conventions and local oral traditions of storytelling'.<sup>47</sup> In this, they are unlike the related genres of *byskupasögur* ('bishops' sagas') and *heilagra manna sögur* ('saints' sagas') in that their descriptions of tenth- and eleventh-century events feature secular conventions alongside hagiographic ones, the most relevant example being the inclusion of skaldic poetry.<sup>48</sup> Some of this poetry functions as part of pagan resistance to Christian missionaries, as exemplified by an instance of poetic *níð* in *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla* (*ÍF* 15, II, 49–89). Set around the year 980, this text recounts the missionary activities of Þorvaldr inn víðförla Koðránsen ('the Widely Travelled') and the German bishop Friðrekr. When the

<sup>46</sup> The editors Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson supply the latter part of this sentence with material from the *Hulda* MS.

<sup>47</sup> Siân Grønlie, *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), p. 111 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787441606>>.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Grønlie, *Saint*, p. 23.

missionaries preach Christianity at the *alþing*, pagan Icelanders conspire against them and commission anonymous poets to compose the following verse:

Hefir börn borit  
byskup nú,  
þeira er allra  
Þorvaldr faðir.

(*ÍF* 15, II, 79: ‘The bishop has borne nine children; Þorvaldr is the father of them all.’)

Unlike the other verse considered in this chapter so far, this poem is in *fornyrðislag*, thereby associating it stylistically with poetry of a more mythical-heroic nature. Most commentators highlight the connection between this accusation of homosexual progeniture and its close parallels in the eddic poems *Lokasenna* (*Eddukvæði* 1, p. 413) and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (*Eddukvæði* 2, p. 254), both of which feature characters insulting an opponent by claiming that he has fathered children.<sup>49</sup> If, on the basis of these parallels, and as Joaquín Martínez Pizarro suggests, the insult is formulaic, its performance could be seen as invoking a supernatural illocutionary force against the recipient.<sup>50</sup> Whether or not one accepts this possibility, the poem’s stylistic and semantic connections to narratives dealing with pagan material accentuate its anti-Christian function. Its relatively simple form also makes it easy to remember, transmit, and, like Gunnlaugr’s *runhent helmingr*, adds a demeaning quality to the slander.

Several sources concur that Þorvaldr killed two of the skalds responsible for this verse, although they vary in the detail with which they depict the missionary’s subsequent reproval by Bishop Friðrekr. In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, Þorvaldr justifies his actions by claiming his inability to endure being identified as ‘ragr’ (*ÍF* 15, II, 80: ‘unmanly’), but the bishop takes a different perspective:

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<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, p. 55; Siân Grønlie, ‘Preaching, Insult, and Wordplay in the Old Icelandic *Kristniboðsþættir*’, *JEGP*, 103 (2004), 458–74 (p. 466).

<sup>50</sup> Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, ‘On *Níð* against Bishops’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 11, 1978, 149–53 (p. 151).

Þat var lítil þolraun þó at þeir lygi þat at þú ættir börn, en þú hefir fært orð þeira á verra veg, því at vel mætta ek bera börn þín ef þú ættir nokkur. Eigi skyldi kristinn maðr sjálf leita at hefna sín, þó at hann væri hatrliga smáðr, heldr þola fyrir Guðs sakir brizli ok meingörðir.

(*ÍF* 15, II, 80–81: ‘That was a small test of endurance, even if they lie about you having children, but you have taken [i.e. interpreted] their words in a worse way, because I may well carry your children if you had some. A Christian man must not seek to avenge himself, even if he is hatefully scorned, but rather endure reproach and offences for God’s sake.’)

Meulengracht Sørensen reads this scene as ‘an anecdote which display[s] the bishop’s

Christian patience and humility, in contrast to Þorvaldr’s old-fashioned self-assertion’.<sup>51</sup>

Grønlie similarly suggests that it is ‘an exemplum for how to counter peacefully the effects of malicious slander [...] provid[ing] one way out of the endless and ultimately fruitless cycle of verbal and physical violence’.<sup>52</sup> One notes that Friðrekr reaches this resolution by rezoning masculinity in a different way, appealing to an ideal that accords with Christian values rather than heroic ones. As part of this process of rezoning, and as Grønlie notes, Friðrekr ‘twists the words into a better sense’.<sup>53</sup> This positive reappraisal is at odds with what seems to have been a general anxiety surrounding the reinterpretation of Old Norse poetry, in which it was feared that superficially innocuous, or even encomiastic, verse could conceal defamation through wordplay.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, Friðrekr uses the polysemy of the poetry for a therapeutic purpose, not necessarily negating its insulting content, but demonstrating that alternative responses are nonetheless available to its audience. Despite the extremity with which scholars have tended to associate versified insults, this example presents an inverse dynamic: poetry, as opposed to everyday language, offers greater leeway to the insulted opponent because of its inherent potential for re-interpretation by audiences.

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<sup>51</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, p. 55.

<sup>52</sup> Grønlie, ‘Preaching’, p. 473.

<sup>53</sup> Grønlie, ‘Preaching’, p. 473.

<sup>54</sup> This interpretation is based on the proscription in *Grágás* against composing either defamatory or encomiastic poetry about another person, accompanied by the acknowledgement that praise can be composed ‘*tíð haðungar*’ (‘to mock’). See *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen, 2 vols (Copenhagen [Kjøbenhavn]: Brødrene Berlings bogtrykkeri, 1852; repr. Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974), II, 183, § 238. For other critical interpretations, see Burrows, ‘Court Poetry’, pp. 92–93; Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 232; Meylan, ‘Magical Power’, pp. 45–46.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the Friðrekr episode is not representative of every appearance of poetic insult in the *kristniboðspættir*. In the various sources recounting his missionary activities in Iceland, the Saxon priest Þangbrandr is depicted as a relatively uninhibited death-dealer to those who insult him in verse. As reported in *Landnámabók* (ÍF 1, p. 348), *Heimskringla* (ÍF 26, p. 320), *Njáls saga* (ÍF 12, pp. 260–61), *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (ÍF 15, II, 134), and *Kristni saga* (ÍF 15, II, 21), Þangbrandr kills Vetrliði Sumarliðason for composing *níð* about him. Except for *Landnámabók*, the same sources also record Þangbrandr taking lethal vengeance against Þorvaldr inn veili (‘the Ailing’) for the same offence (see ÍF 26, p. 320; ÍF 12, p. 261–62; ÍF 15, II, 22, 137). Whilst these actions must have contributed to the priest’s posthumous reputation for having a hair-trigger temperament, they are not wholly representative of his behaviour as a hostile audience. In *Njáls saga*, Þangbrandr is confronted by Steinunn Refsdóttir, who composes two *dróttkvætt* stanzas (see *SkP* 5, pp. 1273–77) in which she triumphantly asserts that the priest’s ship has been wrecked by Þórr. Despite the similarity between Steinunn’s poetic provocation and those he has elsewhere avenged, Þangbrandr is credited with no response whatsoever (ÍF 12, p. 265–67). Via this performance, and as Sandra Ballif Straubhaar argues, Steinunn draws power from typically masculine milieux; her verses describe ‘sailing and shipboard life’ and also complete ‘a series of four skalds lampooning Þangbrandr, the first three of whom are male’.<sup>55</sup> This appropriation of gendered power domains, as Emma Jørgensen suggests, may explain Þangbrandr’s inability to act in this instance.<sup>56</sup> Equally, and as indicated elsewhere in saga literature, a man taking violent vengeance against a female antagonist seems to have

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<sup>55</sup> Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, ‘Ambiguously Gendered: The Skalds Jörunn, Auðr and Steinunn’, in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 261–72 (p. 268). Cf. also Grønlie’s comments on Steinunn’s advocacy of a “pagan” ideal of aggressive masculinity’ in Siân Grønlie, “‘No Longer Male and Female’: Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives”, *Medium Ævum*, 75 (2006), 293–318 (p. 294) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/43632766>>.

<sup>56</sup> Emma Cecilie Sørli Jørgensen, ‘Old Norse Sacred Textures as Women’s Means of Protection against Christianity’, seminar presented at University College London, 23 February 2023.

been considered shameful. Such an act is described as ‘níðingsverk’ (*ÍF* 6, p. 101: ‘a deed of a despicable person’) in *Gísla saga* when Eyjólfur Þórðarson orders his men to kill Auður Vésteinsdóttir for shaming him. Whether or not Þangbrandr and Steinunn’s interaction involves equivalent gender dynamics, it continues to demonstrate that violent responses were not the absolute prerogative of insulted opponents.

Whilst scholars have previously upheld violence as the archetypal form of insult-instigated vengeance, the material surveyed in this sub-section does not substantiate it. As noted above, Falk argues that violence is frequently portrayed in medieval Scandinavian contexts as a way of mitigating uncertainty. My analysis affirms and expands upon this perspective, for whilst the violent responses examined above do emerge out of uncertainty – or potential threats to a character’s agency – they are not usually presented as an indisputable solution. Instead, further uncertainty prevails in how violence is evaluated. In the first place, the magnitude of an opponent’s violent reaction cannot always be correlated to the magnitude of the slander. The cases I have examined encompass verses ranging from elaborate slander to vacuous mockery, but the violent reactions themselves are not usually so distinctive as to represent indices for the insults’ offensiveness. Rather, the context in which the insult is delivered determines the nature and evaluation of a violent response. As indicated by the episode involving Sigmundr’s *níð* in *Njáls saga*, blood vengeance is likely to be considered anxiously in the context of the *Íslendingasögur*, given the genre’s emphasis on family ties and feuding. In the context of Scandinavian courts and Christian missions, where the principal characters are usually less constrained by familial bonds, insulted opponents have a higher proclivity for violence. Even in these contexts, however, the instinctiveness of a violent reaction tends to incur criticism from both intra- and extradiegetic sources. As highlighted by Hákon mǫrstrútr’s favourable comparison to Árni fjǫruskeifr, and by Bishop Friðrekr’s advice to Þorvaldr inn víðfǫrli, non-violence is frequently presented as a viable and

occasionally ideal way to maintain one's honour in the presence of a maligner. The audience-centric analysis conducted here reveals de-escalation to be a more prevalent concern than has previously been appreciated. Whilst the potential power of skaldic insults is unquestionable, the efficacy of reciprocal violence is rarely so certain, before, during, and after the fact.

### 3.1.2 Non-Violent Responses

Building on the theme of de-escalation articulated above, the apparent predominance of violence in sagas can be further problematised by considering characters who opt to respond non-violently to skaldic insults. Despite the supposed severity of such insults, non-violent responses occur frequently. In fact, if one accounts for the many episodes involving an insulting skaldic performance which elicits no response from its intradiegetic audience, non-violence emerges as the majority reaction-type in the saga corpus.<sup>57</sup> Given the negative portrayal of violent action in many of the accounts examined above, this trend is probably less surprising than it might otherwise appear. It does, however, stand at odds with skaldic poetry's 'prevailing ideology of aggression', to quote Whaley, who goes on to highlight some rare examples of verse wherein '[v]alue is [...] placed on peace-making and moderation' (for her examples, see *SkP* 1, pp. 143–49; *SkP* 2, pp. 175–76, 337–43, pp. 564–65).<sup>58</sup> Poole likewise highlights the exceptional advocacy of non-violence in Halli stirði's ('the Stern') *flokkr* commemorating the 1064 peace negotiations between Haraldr inn harðráði and Sveinn Úlfsson in Götaälv (see *SkP* 2, pp. 337–43), although his selection of *Viking Poems on War and Peace* otherwise focuses overwhelmingly on the former over the latter.<sup>59</sup> Whaley's suggestion of the possibility 'that the poetry of moderation is underrepresented' is supported,

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<sup>57</sup> Of the 54 instances from *Íslendingasögur*, *þættir*, *konungasögur*, *kristniboðsþættir*, and *fornaldarsögur* that I identified as describing the performance of an insulting skaldic verse or verses, 43 (or just under 80%) included either a non-violent response by the intradiegetic audience or no response.

<sup>58</sup> Whaley, 'Fury', p. 89.

<sup>59</sup> Poole, *Viking Poems*, pp. 73–85.

albeit somewhat tangentially, when one considers the many instances of non-violent response by insulted opponents in the sagas.<sup>60</sup> Although such audience-centred actions lie beyond the scope of Whaley and Poole's studies, giving them greater credence allows for further interrogation and deconstruction of scenes and themes of violence. In the following case studies of *Bjarnar saga*, *Grettis saga*, and the aforementioned *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna þættir*, I show how non-violent responses comprise more diverse ways of maintaining honour, representing either alternate means of reciprocation, or highlighting the inequity in certain power imbalances that disfavour the recipients of skaldic insults.

*Bjarnar saga Hítælakappa* is primarily a story of the feud between two rivals, Björn Hítælakappi Arngeirsson ('Champion of the People of Hítardal') and Þórðr Kolbeinsson. This text is a prime example of the correlation between poetry and insult witnessed across the *skáldasögur* (see further introduction in section 1.2), with its two protagonists producing an extraordinary amount of invective verse about each other. 'Insults', as Finlay notes, 'are the currency of the feud in the same way as killings or physical attacks are in other sagas.'<sup>61</sup> Finlay builds on this argument in a later article, highlighting how the author of *Bjarnar saga* 'actively seeks to build up symmetry between the productions of his two poets, so that he can present their works in pairs, with one insult answering another'.<sup>62</sup> This perspective corresponds neatly with the theme of duality that runs through *Bjarnar saga*; not only are Björn and Þórðr diametrically opposed as defamatory poets, but also as lovers (both men compete for the love of Oddný eykyndill Þorkelsdóttir ('Island-Candle')), and more generally as men.<sup>63</sup> In the context of this study, their rivalry is remarkable not simply for the number of antagonistic verses it produces, but also because the conflict escalates to violence only at a

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<sup>60</sup> Whaley, 'Fury', p. 89.

<sup>61</sup> Finlay, 'Adultery and Feud', p. 158.

<sup>62</sup> Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations', p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Laurence de Looze, 'Poet, Poem, and Poetic Process in *Bjarnarsaga Hítælakappa* and *Gunnlaugssaga orms tungu*', *JEGP*, 85 (1986), 479–93 (p. 483).



relatively late stage despite its poetic aspect. Where previous studies have focused on the content of Björn and Þórðr's insults, I will examine how the rivals reciprocate, deflect, or negotiate insults, rather than avenging them with blood. I will focus on the section of the saga that sees Björn and Þórðr's conflict migrate into the public domain, a transition caused primarily by a change in the rivals' geographical situation. During the 'winter stay' episode (chs 12–14, discussed in section 4.1.2), in which the greatest concentration of *Bjarnar saga*'s antagonistic verse occurs, the rivals' physical isolation on the Þórðr's farmstead affords their conflict a degree of privacy. After Björn's departure, the two men continue their conflict at several stages of geographical removal, remaining informed about each other's activities and the insults that each composes about those activities. The resulting upturn in the conflict's notoriety causes the rivals, in turn, to compose and negotiate insults in the presence of the wider community. In this case, Björn and Þórðr's corresponding use of legal procedures represents a genuine alternative to violence, not, as one might expect, because of its purportedly therapeutic aim, but because it allows Björn and Þórðr to escalate their conflict in a more controlled environment.

Attention to the broader dissemination of Björn and Þórðr's verses begins immediately after the conclusion of the winter stay episode. Björn delivers the first strike in this context, composing a verse that mocks Þórðr for a seal-inflicted injury (*SkP* 5, p. 82). Þórðr, the saga author notes, '[s]pyrr [...] þetta ok heyrir kveðna vísuna, ok þykkir ekki góð ok þó líkast vanða Bjarnar' (*ÍF* 3, p. 152: 'finds out about this and hears the verse spoken, and thinks it bad, and yet typical of Björn's habits'). As Marold highlights, the implication 'is that [Björn's] stanzas get disseminated to a wider circle, although no explicit statement is made to that effect'.<sup>64</sup> The saga author is nevertheless more explicit in describing the

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<sup>64</sup> Edith Marold, 'The Relation between Verses and Prose in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 75–124 (p. 117) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547-004>>.

dissemination of the next verse, in which Þórðr scorns Björn for picking up a new-born calf, an act implying ignobility and possibly bestiality (see *SkP* 5, p. 84).<sup>65</sup> Similar to how the *farandkonur* spread news between Hlíðarendi and Bergþórshváll in *Njáls saga* (see section 3.1.1), Þórðr is informed about his rival's husbandry by a group of 'gestir' (*ÍF* 3, p. 153: 'guests'), who were staying with Björn at the time. These people subsequently become the primary audience for Þórðr's insulting verse, which, despite general agreement that it should be 'litt borinn' (*ÍF* 3, p. 154: 'sparsely disseminated'), is 'á dreif drepinn' (*ÍF* 3, p. 154: 'scattered about'). As the impersonal construction of these comments demonstrates, Björn and Þórðr's conflict is presented as moving into the public domain almost automatically and without any specific informants being identified. In this way, the performance of poetic insults, as opposed to their prose counterparts, is portrayed as a self-generating process, one that invokes a broader range of audiences despite awareness of the constituent social damage it causes.

With equal rapidity, Björn and Þórðr recognise the potential to humiliate each other more emphatically in front of these secondary audiences. Björn responds to Þórðr's verse in a highly conspicuous manner, riding to Þórðr's household with an entourage of sixty men and summoning his rival. Ancillary characters again attempt to prevent the rivalry garnering further attention by requesting that Björn and Þórðr settle within the district, but Þórðr refuses. At the *alping*, it is determined that Þórðr will compensate Björn with 'hundrað silfrs' (*ÍF* 3, p. 154: 'one hundred and twenty [ounces] of silver'), an enormous sum roughly equivalent to a man's wergild, as Finlay notes.<sup>66</sup> Given the emphatic nature of the settlement, I would question Burrows's view that this case is 'successfully and seemingly quietly

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<sup>65</sup> For analysis of the symbolism of Þórðr's verse, see Ursula, 'Sem jarlar forðum: The Influence of *Rígsþula* on Two Saga-Episodes', in *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. by Ursula Dronke and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 56–72 (p. 71); Finlay, 'Adultery and Feud', p. 169; Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations', p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> Finlay, 'Adultery and Feud', p. 168.

resolved'.<sup>67</sup> Although the saga author records no opinions about the settlement, it seems unlikely that the outcome is intended to be read as a private affair, particularly given Bjørn's strategy to publicise his case highly. Even though Þórðr submits to the council's terms, his situation can hardly be deemed a success. I suggest rather that Bjørn's public campaign has triumphed emphatically: he has forced his rival to admit an exorbitantly expensive wrongdoing at the largest communal event in the country, demonstrating simultaneously his social and legal capital.

Þórðr, by contrast, is not afforded such success when he takes reciprocal action on the public stage. In this case, Bjørn is the offending party, following up his legal case by raising a *níð* sculpture on Þórðr's property and accompanying it with a poetic insult. Depicting two men in a sexual act, the sculpture is again presented as a matter of public interest: 'mæltu menn, at hvárskis hlutr væri góðr, þeira er þar stóðu, ok enn verri þess, er fyrir stóð' (*ÍF* 3, p. 155: 'People said that neither part of the figures standing there was good, and yet that of the one who stood in front was worse'). In the presence of these onlookers, Bjørn recites a verse commenting on the effigy and possibly identifying Þórðr as the receptive figure, although corruption makes this difficult to confirm:

Standa stýrilundar  
staðar ...  
glíkr es geira sækir  
gunnsterkr at því verki.  
...  
...  
stendr af stála lundi  
stýrr Þórrøði fyrri.

(*SkP* 5, p. 87: 'The steering-trees of the place [> MEN, i.e. the sculpted figures] stand ... The battle-strong seeker of spears is suited to that deed ... Strife stands foremost with Þórðr from the tree of steels [> WARRIOR].')

Produced via a combination of verse and sculpture, and drawing on the sexual taboos of the culture to which Bjørn belongs, his portrayal of Þórðr as sexually passive acts as a metonym

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<sup>67</sup> Burrows, 'Court Poetry', p. 106.

for his rival's broader status as *argr* ('unmanly').<sup>68</sup> In *Gísla saga*, a similar instance of sculpted *níð* immediately prompts the insulted party to fight a near-fatal duel with the offender (see further section 3.2). Contrastingly, in *Bjarnar saga*, Þórðr only responds to Björn's bipartite insult the following spring, his actions almost exactly replicating those of the previous episode: Þórðr rides to his rival's farmstead with sixty men and summonses Björn, who insists on taking the case to the *alþing* despite protests from relatives. There, however, the parallels end, for Þórðr's compensation is valued at a measly three marks of silver, less than a fifth of the fine he had to pay Björn in the inverse situation. Finlay argues that this apparent discrepancy may be explained by the connection in subject matter between Þórðr's verse and the sequence of 'Kolluvísur' (*ÍF* 3, p. 170: 'Cow Verses') he elsewhere composes about Björn, suggesting that the larger fine was incurred by a larger body of poetry.<sup>69</sup> Given the parallelism between the episodes, however, and the fact that Björn's insult is more clearly defined as *níð* (see *ÍF* 3, pp. 155–56), Þórðr's vastly inferior settlement must also be read as an indictment against him.

Whilst, from these episodes, it would be plausible to interpret legal action as a substitute for violence – and hence simply violence in another form – later episodes in *Bjarnar saga* suggest that the public environment of Björn and Þórðr's conflict can be stabilising as well as escalating. In the build-up to a well-attended horse fight, the spectators ask Þórðr for 'skemmtun' (*ÍF* 3, p. 174: 'entertainment'), and he acquiesces by reciting a poem about Björn's wife entitled 'Daggeisli' ('Daybeam'), none of which is quoted. Despite the provocative subject matter, Björn, the saga author reports, 'hlýddi skemmtan it bezta' (*ÍF* 3, p. 174: 'listened to the entertainment in good spirits') and responds with his own

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<sup>68</sup> The insinuation of the *ergi* (noun form of *argr*) complex is considered to be typical of *níð* practice in general. See further Ström, 'Níð', 'Ergi', pp. 4–5; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, pp. 18–20. For a recent reappraisal of this *Bjarnar saga* episode, see Alison Finlay, "'Þat þótti illr fundr": Phallic Aggression in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*', in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. by Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Berlin: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), pp. 167–82 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxhrkn4>>.

<sup>69</sup> Finlay, 'Adultery and Feud', pp. 168–69.

‘entertainment’, a poem about Þórðr’s wife Oddný entitled ‘Eykyndilsvísur’ (‘Island-Candle Verses’). The saga author’s use of the term *skemmtun* captures the ironic temperament in which these poems are delivered and interpreted. For Björn and Þórðr, ‘Daggeisli’ and ‘Eykyndilsvísur’ cannot be received in isolation from their other poetic insults, but the poems also carry a bathetic undercurrent in this context, acting as genuine moments of levity for the other characters present. In this way, the public environment of these performances allows their antagonism to be temporarily reframed, turning them into melodrama rather than hotblooded warfare. Although, furthermore, Þórðr attempts to attack Björn during the subsequent horse-fight, the spectators act again as peacemakers, getting between the rivals before real damage can be done (*ÍF* 3, p. 175). This episode represents a counterpoint to the preceding legal cases, demonstrating that the funnelling of the conflict into public channels is simultaneously inflammatory and stabilising. Björn and Þórðr have discovered a way to compete at a higher level, but this has also come at the cost of greater outside interference.

Over the course of the episodes discussed here, the author of *Bjarnar saga* demonstrates both the stability offered by, and the ultimate limitations of, the communal structures through which the rivalry develops. Previous scholars have briefly acknowledged the public format of the rivalry, which draws it into comparison with the common portrayal of feuding in the *Íslendingasögur*, wherein reciprocating violence is presented as an institutionalised system of dispute resolution.<sup>70</sup> My analysis expands on the role of poetry in publicising the conflict and, correspondingly, the role of publicity in prompting Björn and Þórðr to perform for broader audiences. Since, for the rivals, communal institutions and events act as further sites of competition rather than therapeutic spaces, they simultaneously represent alternatives to physical violence and the inevitability that violent escalation will

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<sup>70</sup> E.g. Marold, ‘Verses and Prose’, p. 117; Finlay, ‘Monstrous Allegations’, p. 31; Finlay, ‘Phallic Aggression’, p. 168. For the classic studies of feud in the sagas, see Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

occur. In this light, and as Burrows notes, it is fitting that the denouement of the saga is sandwiched by two legal cases.<sup>71</sup> The first comprises a breakdown in relations, in which Björn's tally of insulting verses is deemed to outnumber Þórðr's by one (*ÍF* 3, pp. 188–90). The catastrophic consequences of this case are captured by the second, in which a suit is made against Þórðr for killing Björn (*ÍF* 3, pp. 209–11). Public interest, it would seem, is limited in its capacity to maintain equilibrium in a conflict.

Where *Bjarnar saga* shows that non-violent responses can still involve escalation, other *Íslendingasögur* highlight positive results when diplomacy is made a priority. In *Grettis saga*, Hafliði á Reyðarfelli is presented as a skilled negotiator via his ability to defuse an insult-based conflict between his ship's crew and the eponymous Grettir Ásmundarson. Having been outlawed for the first time, Grettir departs Iceland on a merchant vessel, but opts to lie under the ship's boat and compose 'kviðlingar' (*ÍF* 7, p. 51: 'ditties') about his fellow sailors rather than aid them aboard the ship.<sup>72</sup> The saga author provides an example of one such verse, which is framed as Grettir's response to the sailors' plea for help on a cold day: 'Happ er, ef hér skal kropna | hverr fingr á kyrpingum' (*SkP* 5, p. 665: 'It will be good luck if every finger on the wretches shrivels here'). As Grove notes (*SkP* 5, p. 666), Grettir's insult centres on the sailors' physical deformity, the rare term *kyrpingr* implying that they are 'either [...] "stooping, bent-backed men" or "gnarled, wrinkled men", marked by hard work or cold'. In contrast to the skaldic trope of the toughened sailor as a model of masculinity, battered bodies have, for the fresh-faced Grettir, become metonyms of unmanliness.<sup>73</sup> This *kviðlingr*, presumably along with the others that Grettir has composed, is described as *níð* by

<sup>71</sup> Burrows, 'Court Poetry', p. 106.

<sup>72</sup> Grettir's disruptive behaviour potentially provides a model for its close parallel in the *Flateyjarbók* version of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* (discussed in section 2.3), wherein a seasick Halli also lies under the ship's boat and exchanges insulting couplets with Þjóðólfr. See *ÍF* 9, p. 293.

<sup>73</sup> On this trope, see, e.g., Richard Perkins, 'Rowing Chants and the Origins of *Dróttkvæðr háttur*', *Saga-Book*, 21 (1982–85), 155–221; Sayers, '*Blæju þöll*', p. 39. The ignobility of the frail male body is also famously expressed in several self-reflexive verses by Egill Skallagrímsson in his old age. See *SkP* 5, pp. 384–89.

the sailors, who also promise retribution for his actions (*ÍF* 7, p. 51).<sup>74</sup> The likelihood that this retribution will be fatal is clarified by Hafliði, who confirms the sailors' plan 'at steypa [Gretti] fyrir borð' (*ÍF* 7, p. 52: 'to throw Grettir overboard'). At this stage, the narrative is following what seems like a typical pattern of insult and response; Grettir has derided his companions' masculinity and lethal violence is the likely outcome.

Taking after the Bishop Friðrekr school of poetic re-interpretation (see section 3.1.1), Hafliði nonetheless manages to defuse the situation by exploiting skaldic poetry's innate capacity for equivocation. He suggests that Grettir recite 'nøkkur níðvísa' (*ÍF* 7, p. 52: 'some níð-verse') about him, and adds: 'Kveða má svá, at fegri sé vísan, ef grafin er, þótt fyrst sé eigi allfögr' (*ÍF* 7, p. 52: 'One can compose in such a way that the verse is more pleasing if it is dug into [i.e. scrutinised], though it is not very pleasing at first'). Hafliði proceeds to contrive a performance situation in the presence of the other sailors, and Grettir delivers the following stanza:

Annat var, þá er inni  
át Hafliði drafla  
– hann þóttiz þá heima –  
hvellr at Reyðarfelli.  
Ok dagverðar darra  
dómskreytandi neytir  
tysvar Tveggja nesja  
takhreins degi einum.

(*SkP* 5, p. 667: 'It was another time, when full-voiced Hafliði ate curds inside at Reyðarfell; he felt at home then. And, twice in one day, the embellisher of the judgement of spears [> WARRIOR] enjoys a morning meal of a Tveggi [= MAN] of the reindeer of the headlands' grip [> SHIP].')

Considerable ink has been spilled on how this verse fulfils Hafliði's request for multiple interpretive possibilities. Without reiterating previous debates in detail, the prevailing interpretation situates criticism in the first *helmingr*, where Hafliði is portrayed as a landlubber, and then an intentionally ambiguous perspective in the second *helmingr*, in which

<sup>74</sup> Reflecting the fact that *kviðlingr* is more descriptive of a poem's form than its content, the term is applied to poetry with a range of functions across the saga corpus. Some *kviðlingar* are serious insults like Grettir's (e.g. *ÍF* 2, p. 70; *ÍF* 12, pp. 89, 264; *ÍF* 23, p. 281), whilst others are mild jests (e.g. *ÍF* 29, p. 87), news reports (e.g. *ÍF* 4, p. 232), or snippets of time-honoured poetry (e.g. *ÍF* 6, p. 225; *ÍF* 29, p. 50). See further the summary of the term in Burrows, "'Humour' Words", p. 59.

Hafliði consuming two meals can be interpreted either as a sign of gluttony or as suitable nourishment for a man committed to working longer hours than the rest of the crew.<sup>75</sup>

Hafliði's crew, however, are disinclined to indulge these enigmatic qualities. They immediately interpret the verse as 'allillr' (*ÍF* 7, p. 53: 'very malicious'), but Hafliði convinces them to delay taking vengeance by portraying himself as a bigger man than Grettir: 'eigi vil ek hafa sœmð mína í veði til móts við illgirni hans ok forsjáleysi' (*ÍF* 7, p. 53: 'I do not wish to stake my honour against his ill-will and thoughtlessness'). To this, the crew reply: 'Mun oss eigi mega sem þér? Hvat mun oss heldr bíta níð hans en þik?' (*ÍF* 7, p. 53: 'Will we not be like you? Why does his níð afflict us rather than you?'). The sailors' apparent confusion derives from the fact that, as in the cases involving Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson and Bishop Friðrekr discussed previously, Hafliði is attempting to rezone their masculine values. Via his display of restraint, Hafliði presents violence and impulsiveness as unheroic traits, the same ones, in fact, that diminish Grettir as a man. Again, the polysemy of skaldic poetry is the foundation for this revaluation, flexibility at the level of skaldic narrative allowing for flexibility in the attitudes and actions of its audience. Despite the fact that it replicates the kind of situation in which the sailors were previously abused, Grettir's *tvíraðr* ('bi-semantic') performance represents poetry as therapy, providing a space in which honour-related values can be rethought without significant consequence.

Equally, however, the farcical nature of this situation needs to be acknowledged. If, as Laurence de Looze suggests, Hafliði's 'suggestion is of a two-tiered reception of poetic verse and of poetry as presenting a hermeneutic challenge to its audience', then it is a suggestion made disingenuously.<sup>76</sup> Hafliði's crew are not invited to engage in the hermeneutic challenge of Grettir's verse, but rather are guided unknowingly into submission. As Poole points out,

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<sup>75</sup> For a fuller analysis, along with summaries of previous interpretations, see Russell G. Poole, 'Lof en eigi háð? The Riddle of *Grettis saga* Verse 14', *Saga-Book*, 27 (2003), 25–47.

<sup>76</sup> Laurence de Looze, 'The Outlaw Poet, The Poetic Outlaw: Self-Consciousness in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*', *ANF*, 106 (1991), 85–103 (p. 94).



this instance of skaldic performance can be considered in Lindow's terms as a means of discriminating between an in-group (Hafliði and Grettir) and an out-group (the other sailors) defined by their respective interpretive abilities.<sup>77</sup> Equally, such a binary would not tell the full story of this interaction, for Hafliði does not resort to non-violence solely for Grettir's protection, but primarily because it represents the best way to maintain his ship's resources in terms of manpower. Here, de-escalation is contingent on convenience.

In other narratives, restraint is presented as more of a moral principle than an advantageous tactic. In this regard, comparison can be made to the *konungasögur*, and particularly to two of the *þættir* unique to the *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* manuscripts. These are *Þorgríms þáttur Hallasonar* (ÍF 9, pp. 297–303) and *Hrafn's þáttur Guðrúnarsonar* (ÍF 8, pp. 317–33). Since most *þættir* scholarship has focused on the use of such narratives in *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók* to this point, these texts have remained relatively understudied, especially for the connections between poetic performance and violence that they depict and interrogate.<sup>78</sup> As the following analysis demonstrates, these connections, alongside some thematic resonances with *Íslendingasögur* narratives, place the *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna þættir* in dialogue with the other material covered so far. In the present context, the most notable feature of *Þorgríms þáttur* and *Hrafn's þáttur* is their strikingly similarly Icelandic protagonists, both of whom feign ignorance in response to poetic insults. As in the episode from *Grettis saga* just discussed, *Þorgríms þáttur* sets its insult-based conflict aboard a merchant ship destined for Norway. Þorgrímr has purchased a half-share in the vessel, whilst the other half is taken by two Icelandic brothers, Bjarni and Þórðr Hallbjarnasynir. The ill-fated interaction between these characters during their voyage is

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<sup>77</sup> Poole, 'Lof en eigi háð?', p. 34.

<sup>78</sup> E.g. Harris, 'Genre and Narrative'; Harris, 'Theme and Genre'; Gimmler; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Amplified Saga'; Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris, 'Short Prose Narrative (*Þáttur*)', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), pp. 462–78 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996867.ch27>>; Rowe and Harris; Morcom.

described in brief terms as follows: ‘Þeir Bjarni ok Þórðr flimtu Þorgrím ok váru illa til hans, en hann lét sem hann vissi eigi’ (ÍF 9, p. 300: ‘Bjarni and Þórðr composed mocking verses about Þorgrím and were ill-disposed towards him, but he behaved as if he was unaware’). Whilst Bjarni and Þórðr’s insults are not quoted, the term *flimtun*, as Burrows highlights, usually refers to utterances that are both poetic and pejorative.<sup>79</sup> The *þáttir* audience is perhaps intended to assume that Bjarni and Þórðr’s poetry is about Þorgrím’s recent recovery from a near-death experience in a snowstorm, as part of which he was nourished on hot milk (ÍF 9, p. 300). As Bjarni points out later in the *þáttir*, this dairy-based diet coincided with the ‘imbrudagar’ (ÍF 9, p. 301: ‘ember-days’), a period of fasting in the liturgical calendar of Western Christian churches. Bjarni and Þórðr’s *flimtun* therefore probably comprises criticism for Þorgrím’s contravention of Christian law, although the consumption of milk alone may have carried implications of unmanliness.<sup>80</sup>

Since Þorgrím is said to have been a follower of Óláfr inn helgi (ÍF 9, p. 299), the Christian aspect may explain the non-reaction of a potentially penitent man. Equally, however, and as further developments indicate, Þorgrím’s inaction can be taken more as a sign of selflessness than of self-reproach. When, later in the *þáttir*, Bjarni presents a praise poem to the Norwegian magnate Kálfr Árnason, in which he praises Kálfr’s deeds in Óláfr inn helgi’s downfall at the battle of Stiklastaðir, Þorgrím describes Bjarni’s performance as ‘níðingsverk’ (ÍF 9, p. 301: ‘a deed of a despicable person’) and, without much further

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<sup>79</sup> Burrows defines the term as follows: ‘*flim* and *flimtun* refer to mocking verses. They seem to differ from verses that could be described as *háð* in that those verses have double meanings or offer ironic praise in order to highlight the failings of the target, whereas a *flimtun* is straightforwardly critical. In terms of form, the word can describe both short, simple ditties (e.g. *Morkinskinna* st. 21 [ÍF 23, p. 138]), and sophisticated compositions in complex skaldic metres (e.g. *Egils saga* st. 8 [ÍF 2, p. 108])’. See further Burrows, “‘Humour’ Words”, pp. 58–59.

<sup>80</sup> See further Yoav Tirosh, ‘Milk, Masculinity, and Humor-Less Vikings: Gender in the Old Norse Polysystem’, *Limes: Studia i Materiały z Dziejów Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 13 (2020), 136–50; Thomas Morcom, *Three ‘Þættir’ from ‘Hulda-Hrokkinskinna’: ‘Þorgríms þáttir Hallasonar’, ‘Hrafn þáttir Guðrúnarsonar’, and ‘Gísls þáttir Illugasonar’* (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

deliberation, kills him.<sup>81</sup> These actions represent a rather extreme manifestation of the thinking behind Snorri's praise-as-mockery dynamic (see section 1); the audience of an encomiastic skaldic poem deems the contents unacceptably biased and acts immediately to reject the performance. Although, as noted previously, such a dynamic is unlikely to have emerged in reality, it provides significant insight into Þorgrímr's character. Taken together, Þorgrímr's two contrasting reactions as an insulted opponent demonstrate not that he lacks the capacity to challenge his defamers, but that he prizes the honour of his deceased ruler over his own.

Contrastingly, in *Hrafn's þáttr*, the inaction of the titular Hrafn cannot be explained as owing to a similar sense of loyalty. Having been outlawed in Iceland for killing the son of his father's murderer, Hrafn travels to Niðaróss and lodges with a man called Ketill rípr ('Crag'), a town officer in the service of Magnús inn góði. The degeneration in Hrafn and Ketill's relationship is described by the saga author as follows: 'lagði [Ketill] fæð á Hrafn ok orti um hann heldr hæðiliga. Hrafn lét sem hann vissi þat eigi' (*ÍF* 8, p. 325: 'Ketill behaved coldly with Hrafn and composed poetry about him in a rather mocking way. Hrafn behaved as if he was unaware of it'). The reason for Ketill's animosity is somewhat unclear, for although the *þáttr* author cites its origins in his 'ódyggð ok eiginligri hugarlund' (*ÍF* 8, p. 325: 'faithlessness and particular disposition'), it is also reported that: 'lǫngum talaði [Hrafn] við Helgu, dóttur Ketils' (*ÍF* 8, p. 325: 'Hrafn spoke at length with Helga, Ketill's daughter'). Lengthy conversation between a man and a woman, as discussed more fully in chapter 4 (see section 4.2.2), is a motif in the sagas, signalling burgeoning but illicit erotic interest and appearing frequently in scenes like this one, in which the man acts as a visitor to the woman's

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<sup>81</sup> Bjarni's performance, as Finlay notes (*SkP* 1, p. 876), agrees with other sources that identify Bjarni gullbráskáld Hallbjarnarson as a follower of Kálfr, and who composed *Kálfsflokkur* (*SkP* 1, pp. 877–89) in his honour. If the evidence in *Kálfsflokkur* is trusted, however, the narration of Bjarni's death at Þorgrímr's hands must be false, since the contents of several stanzas deal with events as late as the mid 1040s.

home.<sup>82</sup> Despite the *páttr* author's comments on Ketill's personal defects, a perceived seduction of Helga by Hrafn (whose namesakes also feature in *Gunnlaugs saga*'s notorious love triangle) would represent a more reasonable cause for Ketill's animosity. Whatever their genuine trigger, Ketill's compositions are, like Bjarni and Þórðr's, unquoted, although the adverb 'hæðiliga' ('mockingly') suggests a reliance on verbal trickery over evidence of Hrafn's offences.<sup>83</sup>

If, unlike Bjarni and Þórðr's criticism of Þorgrímr, Ketill's insults have no basis in reality, why would Hrafn risk his honour by leaving them unchallenged? In this case, the primary reason is the power imbalance between the antagonists. Since Ketill is an officer of the Norwegian king, Hrafn would risk provoking the full power of the state by taking vengeance, a consequence he has already endured after avenging his father in Iceland. This is indeed how the *páttr* unfolds: when Ketill later tries to sell Hrafn into slavery, Hrafn kills him and spends a large portion of the narrative hiding from King Magnús; when the king and Icelfander eventually meet, Hrafn cites both Ketill's defamatory poetry and the attempt to enslave him as justification for the killing (*ÍF* 8, p. 332). As in *Þorgríms páttr*, then, the insulted opponent is shown to have the capacity for violence, but factors other than personal pride determine whether and how this capacity is deployed. In both *pættir*, it is notable that the major factor determining these non-violent responses is the power of the Norwegian monarchy. As Morcom argues, the *pættir* unique to *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* can be considered in the context of the legal changes imposed on Iceland after it became part of the Norwegian kingdom circa 1262–64.<sup>84</sup> Morcom highlights that the crimes of the Icelandic protagonists in these texts would all be classified as *níðingsverk* under *Jónsbók*, the legal code adopted in

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<sup>82</sup> On the 'love visit' motif, see Jenny Jochens, 'The Illicit Love Visit: An Archaeology of Old Norse Sexuality', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1 (1991), 357–92; Bandlien, *Strategies*, pp. 63–92; Daniel Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken: erotik, känslor och berättarkonst i norrön litteratur* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007), pp. 51–55, 111–29.

<sup>83</sup> Burrows, "'Humour' Words", pp. 58–59.

<sup>84</sup> Morcom, *Three 'Pættir'*.

Iceland at approximately the same time as *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* was composed in the early 1280s. Unlike the *Morkinskinna þættir*, several of which highlight extra-legal privileges afforded to Icelanders by Norwegian rulers, these texts demonstrate – and, in Morcom’s view, potentially protest against – a new socio-political reality, one in which Icelanders are prevented from representing themselves fairly in Norwegian communities. The non-violent responses analysed above can be read in accordance with this political agenda. Þorgrímr and Hrafn are both shown to value honour either for themselves or their lords, but they restrain themselves from challenging their detractors, whose connections to Norwegian power afford them the ability to abuse Icelanders with impunity. In this context, non-violence is not an ideal response, but a symbol of Icelandic subjugation by Norwegian colonisers. Whilst this agenda seems local to *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* given the political context in which the manuscript was produced, it is helpful to place these two *þættir* in dialogue with the other material analysed in this sub-section. Not only do these texts draw on similar cultural reference points to the *Íslendingasögur*, such as fractious sea-voyages and love visits, but they continue to highlight alternative non-violent means by which an insulted opponent could maintain his honour. In these contexts, malicious poetry is presented as a sign of the composers’ immorality, rather than the audiences’.

The insulted opponents examined over the course of these two sub-sections affirm the emphasis previous scholars have placed on the potency of poetic insult in medieval Scandinavian contexts. Saga authors consistently depict the composition and performance of defamatory poetry as an extreme act, and it frequently gives rise to extreme anguish on the part of its intradiegetic audience. Via a sustained focus on the audience perspective, however, my analysis prompts a reappraisal of earlier views, demonstrating that the extremity of poetic insults lies not in the certainty of a violent response, but in the certainty that no ideal response exists. As demonstrated in the first sub-section (3.1.1), violent vengeance is often negated,

criticised, or considered anxiously for fear of further escalation. Non-violent responses, on the other hand, comprise more diverse means of maintaining honour; they occasionally involve either alternate means of escalation, as in *Bjarnar saga*, or have their basis in mitigating factors, as exemplified by the power imbalances in *Grettis saga*, *Þorgríms þáttr*, and *Hrafn's þáttr*. Across these texts, uncertainty once again emerges as a dominant concern. In contrast to Falk's survey cited above, and in which violence is perceived as a stabilising force, insulted opponents recurrently display a capacity for violence, but are often loath to deploy it due to varying social and cultural factors. One such factor, which distinguishes this study from Falk's, is the role of poetry in generating conflict. My analysis has demonstrated not simply the severity of a skaldic insult but, further, the uncertainty that ensues from the ambiguity of poetic language. As highlighted by the parallel cases from *Þorvalds þáttr* and *Grettis saga*, skaldic poetry's interpretive malleability confounds clarity on the part of the insulted opponent, leading to considerable diversity in audience responses. Overall, whilst the performance of skaldic insults remains an intensely anti-social act, it is unlikely to be a death sentence. Its inconclusiveness instead represents jeopardy and opportunity in equal measure, allowing insulted opponents to turn the tide of a conflict should they navigate the initial storm.

### 3.2 Challenged Opponents

Challenges (taken here in the sense of 'invitations to combat') comprise the second major category of utterance within the corpus of antagonistic skaldic verse. In this selection of poetry, skalds exhibit the kind of commitment to martial heroism that justifies their reputation for being warriors as well as poets.<sup>85</sup> So, however, do their opponents. Unlike insulted

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<sup>85</sup> See, e.g., Frank, 'Skaldic Poetry', p. 181; Whaley, 'Skaldic Poetry', p. 482.

opponents, who frequently find non-violent means to negotiate a hostile verse as shown above, challenged opponents usually engage in combat with their skaldic counterpart. The correspondence between physical and poetic violence that these skaldic challenges contrive places them in parallel with the battle poetry previously surveyed by Whaley. Her study, however, centres almost exclusively on poetry from the *konungasögur*, leaving aside *lausavísur* in favour of longer poetic sequences and featuring only a brief section on ‘terminology referring to enemies and victims’.<sup>86</sup> There is therefore room to examine these challenged opponents, and how they are depicted in other saga genres, in greater detail. To that end, the first selection of case studies in this chapter, taken from *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Egils saga*, and *Heiðarvíga saga* (ÍF 3, pp. 213–326), analyses skaldic challenges that are uttered just before or during combat. Using these examples, I argue that challenged opponents function largely in a subsidiary role, acting to affirm the characters of their skaldic counterparts. Later in the section, I also consider a separate episode from *Heiðarvíga saga* and another from *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (FN 1, pp. 93–148), both of which involve skaldic challenges delivered as part of *hvatir* (‘whettings’; sg. *hvöt*). I contend that these performances are similarly revealing for the selfhood of the *skáldkonur* (‘women poets’) who deliver them, although in these cases tension is introduced between the skalds’ gender roles and their appropriation of power from masculine milieux.

For medieval authors, and as exemplified by the famous, if dubious, accounts declaring a recitation of the *Song of Roland* before the Battle of Hastings, descriptions of significant battles frequently merited poetic performances.<sup>87</sup> In Old Norse literature, an

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<sup>86</sup> Whaley, ‘Fury’, pp. 83–84.

<sup>87</sup> On the different medieval accounts of this performance, see David Douglas, ‘The “Song of Roland” and the Norman Conquest of England’, *French Studies*, 14 (1960), 99–116 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/XIV.2.99>>; William Sayers, ‘The Jongleur Taillefer at Hastings: Antecedents and Literary Fate’, *Viator*, 14 (1983), 77–88; Jane Gilbert, ‘The *Chanson de Roland*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, ed. by Sarah Kay and Simon Gaunt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 21–34 (p. 24) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521861755.002>>. See further bibliographic references in Andrew Taylor, ‘Was There a Song of Roland?’, *Speculum*, 76 (2001), 28–65 (pp. 28–29, n. 3) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2903705>>.

expression of this impulse is found some accounts of the battle of Stiklastaðir, before which Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld Bersason (‘Kolbrún’s Poet’) is said to have delivered a rousing performance of *Bjarkamál in fornu* (*SkP* 3, pp. 495–506).<sup>88</sup> Whilst combat on this larger scale gives rise to longer discreet performances, smaller fights in sagas tend to elicit snatches of verses composed and uttered in rhythm with parries and ripostes. A relevant example occurs early in *Gísli saga* during a duel between a certain Hólmǫngu-Skeggi and the eponymous Gísli. According to the version of the saga in the AM 556a 4to (composed c. 1475–99), the only redaction containing the poetry to be discussed, Gísli fights this duel on behalf of his friend Kolbjörn, who is Skeggi’s rival suitor for the hand of Þórdís, Gísli’s sister.<sup>89</sup> Skeggi arrives at the duelling site first and, seemingly aware of Kolbjörn’s cowardice, has a *níð* sculpture constructed depicting Gísli and Kolbjörn in a sexual act (cf. the *tréníð* episode in *Bjarnar saga*, discussed in section 3.1.2). Upon witnessing this insult, Gísli reveals himself, and the subsequent action is narrated as follows:

Skeggi hefir sverð þat, er Gunnlogi hét, ok hogggr með því til Gísla, ok gall við hátt. Þá mælti Skeggi:

Gall Gunnlogi,  
gaman vas Sǫxu.<sup>[90]</sup>

Gísli hjó í móti með hoggspjóti ok af sporðinn skildinum ok af honum fótinn ok mælti:

Hrökk hræfrakki,  
hjók til Skeggja.<sup>[91]</sup>

(*ÍF* 6, pp. 10–11: ‘Skeggi has the sword that was called Gunnlogi, and he strikes at Gísli with it, and it resounded loudly. Then Skeggi said:

“Gunnlogi resounded; it was fun for Saxa.”

In return, Gísli cut off the bottom of [Skeggi’s] shield and his lower leg with a halberd, and said:

“The carrion-spear [> SWORD?] shrank back; I struck at Skeggi.”)

<sup>88</sup> Þormóður’s performance and its possible connection to the Hastings model are discussed in Klaus von See, *Edda, Saga, Skaldendichtung: Aufsätze zur skandinavischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, Skandinavistische Arbeiten, 6 (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1981), pp. 259–71.

<sup>89</sup> MS details: Reykjavík, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 556a 4to.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. *SkP* 5, p. 549.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. *SkP* 5, p. 550.



In evaluating this scene, modern scholars have frequently sought to deconstruct the relationship between the poetry and prose. The common interpretation, upheld since Anne Holtsmark's 1951 analysis, identifies some confusion on the part of the prose author, who has taken Skeggi's term 'Saxa' as a reference to the name of his island-home, rather than a coded allusion to another weapon, as Holtsmark suggests.<sup>92</sup> As several scholars have remarked since, the apposition Skeggi construes between 'Gunnlogi' and 'Saxa' as respectively masculine and feminine nouns frames the duel as 'gladiatorial coitus', to quote Falk, in which Skeggi's weapon triumphantly violates Gísli's.<sup>93</sup> Gísli's reply appropriates and reorients this sexual dynamic, rebranding Skeggi's sword as the potentially necrophilic 'hræfrakki', the timidity of which is signalled by its retraction in the face of Gísli's heavy blow. Falk also incorporates the second line of Gísli's couplet into this dynamic, arguing that 'Skeggja', a word semantically associated with beards, can be interpreted as a symbol for Skeggi's pubic hair, which Gísli mercilessly attacks.<sup>94</sup>

Whether or not, as previous scholars have suspected, the author of *Gísli saga* has incompletely appreciated or perhaps intentionally suppressed these symbolic aspects, their treatment of the verses nonetheless merits further attention.<sup>95</sup> Physical and poetic violence are equated here via their symmetrical positions in the call-and-response pattern that the author establishes. As Alexander J. Wilson highlights, the duellers' actions are similarly paralleled; both deliver one strike followed by a *fornyrðislag* taunt.<sup>96</sup> In this regard, Skeggi's couplet does not act as a challenge to Gísli only by virtue of its content, but also through its status as

<sup>92</sup> Anne Holtsmark, *Studies in the 'Gísli saga'*, Studia Norvegia, 6 (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1951), pp. 22–27.

<sup>93</sup> Oren Falk, 'Beardless Wonders: "Gaman vas Soxu" (The Sex Was Great)', in *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, ed. by Antonina Harbus and Russell G. Poole (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 223–46 (p. 228) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/9781442683020.18>> [accessed 11 May 2023]. See further Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, pp. 59–61; Edel Porter, 'Lost in Transmission: Reconstituting Forgotten Verses in *Gísli saga Súrssonar*', *VMS*, 9 (2013), 173–95 (pp. 189–90) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.1.103881>>.

<sup>94</sup> Falk, 'Beardless Wonders', pp. 238–44.

<sup>95</sup> O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 148. See further the similar argument in Porter, pp. 189–91.

<sup>96</sup> Alexander J. Wilson, 'Engi maðr skapar sik sjálf: Individual Agency and the Communal Creation of Outsiders in *Íslendingasögur* Outlaw Narratives' (unpublished PhD thesis, Durham University, 2017), p. 59.

a performative speech-act. In particular, Skeggi's use of the past tense creates a sense of narrative closure, representing his attempt to exert control over how the duel is and will be perceived. In this way, the contest is transformed into a battle for both physical and hermeneutic dominion, with Skeggi's couplet defining the duel in terms that deride Gísli's honour. Compelled to offer a reciprocal response, Gísli outmatches his opponent, landing physical and poetic blows that leave his opponent with no reply. In doing so, he demonstrates both his bodily strength and his ability to withstand the accusations of unmanliness levelled at him via the two-pronged *níð* sculpture and verse. The mirroring of Skeggi's actions by Gísli – which is furthermore paralleled in another fight-cum-verse exchange later in the saga (see *ÍF* 6, p. 50) – suggests a degree of restraint and righteousness on Gísli's part, as Wilson remarks.<sup>97</sup> Gísli's is multi-modal violence *quid pro quo*, exhibiting no bloodlust but rather a confidence in his superiority as a poet and a man.

A similar dynamic is evident in one of the two duelling episodes in *Egils saga*, in which Egill Skallagrímsson fights a *berserkr* called Ljótr inn bleiki ('the Pale'). As in *Gísli saga*, the duel is fought over a woman's marital arrangements and, again, the duellist intended to protect those arrangements is replaced by the saga protagonist.<sup>98</sup> In this case, Egill fights on behalf of Friðgeirr, nephew of his best friend Arinbjörn and brother of the woman Ljótr wishes to marry. Although Friðgeirr actually gets as far as the duelling ground, when Egill extemporises a *lausavísa* urging the company to fight on behalf of the weaker Friðgeirr (see *SkP* 5, p. 272), Ljótr challenges him directly in the following terms:

Gakk þú hingat, inn mikli maðr, á hólminn ok bersk við mik, ef þú ert allfúss til, ok reynum með okkr; er þat miklu jafnligra en ek berjumk við Friðgeir, því at ek þykkjumk eigi at meiri maðr, þó at ek leggja hann at jörðu.

<sup>97</sup> Alexander Wilson 'Engi maðr', p. 58. Þorgrímr and Gísli's later verse exchange employs *dróttkvætt* rather than *fornyrðislag*, but it concludes, as in the duel with Skeggi, with Gísli in the ascendancy. Cf. the similar verse episode in *Kormáks saga*, discussed in section 3.1.1.

<sup>98</sup> On the trope of the *berserkr* as an unwelcome suitor, see Benjamin Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme', *Scandinavian Studies*, 54 (1982), 279–94.

(*ÍF* 2, p. 203: ‘Get into the arena and fight me, big man, if you are so eager for it, and let us test each other. That would be more equal than a fight between me and Friðgeirr, because I would not think myself a greater man, even if I kill him.’)

Since Egill is renowned for his troll-like stature (see *ÍF* 2, p. 178), the moniker Ljótr addresses him with here is probably a sincere remark rather than an ironic taunt. Likewise, Egill treats Ljótr in relatively respectful terms in the two *lausavísur* he extemporises before the fight. In the first of these, Egill appears to accept and reciprocate Ljótr’s challenge, closing the stanza with the following vocative expression: ‘skapa verðum vit skjaldi | skæru, drengr, á Mœri’ (*SkP* 5, p. 274: ‘You and I, bold man, will fashion a fight with the shield in Møre’). According to Lauren Goetting’s analysis of the term’s various semantic applications, *drengr* typically refers to a ‘a brave, virtuous, and often young man’ in skaldic contexts.<sup>99</sup>

Egill maintains similar manners in his next verse:

Høggum hjaltvond skyggðan;  
hæfum rōnd með brandi;  
reynum randar mána;  
rjóðum sverð í blóði.  
Stýfum Ljót af lífi;  
leikum sárt við bleikan;  
kyrrum kappa errinn  
– komi qrn á hræ – jornum.

(*SkP* 5, p. 275: ‘We [I] strike with the bright hilt-wand [> SWORD], hit the shield with the sword, test the moon of the shield-rim [> SWORD], redden the sword in blood. We [I] cut Ljótr off from life, play painfully with the pale one, subdue the bold champion with irons [i.e. weapons]; the eagle comes to the corpse.’)

Although Clunies Ross (*SkP* 5, p. 276) detects sarcasm in Egill’s description of Ljótr as ‘kappi errinn’ (‘bold champion’), I contend that this remark should be interpreted at face value. Both the duellists’ pre-fight utterances suggest that they regard each other as worthy opponents, and the incantatory, near-*áttmælt* form of this second stanza creates the sense that Egill is more focused on exhorting himself than maligning Ljótr.<sup>100</sup> The skald is confident, but not so complacent as to risk emboldening his opponent with an insult. Derision is instead

<sup>99</sup> Lauren Goetting, ‘*Pegn* and *Drengr* in the Viking Age’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 78 (2006), 375–404 (p. 395).

<sup>100</sup> *Áttmælt* (‘eight-times spoken’) is ‘a *dróttkvætt* stanza in which each of the eight lines contains a separate clause’ (*SkP* 5, p. lxxi).

central to the verse that Egill composes when he takes the upper hand in the duel, at which point he highlights Ljótr's timidity and refers to him as 'happlauss beiðir hodda' and 'vábeiða' (*SkP* 5, p. 276: 'a hapless demander of treasures [> AVARICIOUS MAN]'; 'a monster', literally 'a woe-demander'). If Egill's stance before this point is relatively sincere, this would place him in parallel with the composers of skaldic battle poetry, who, as Whaley notes, often highlight their opponents' honourable qualities.<sup>101</sup> In the *Íslendingasögur*, such a stance is less common; as the other material examined so far demonstrates, an opponent's character is usually derided if it is made relevant to the conflict at hand. In this light, Egill's stance seems local to the narrative function of the duel, which, in Benjamin Blaney's view, highlights Egill's 'positive, bright side; [he] is polite, brave, loyal in his friendship, dauntless and poetically creative'.<sup>102</sup> The cordial way in which Egill and Ljótr address each other supports this function, emphasising the honour-earning potential of the encounter.

In this regard, the long-held scholarly scepticism towards the historicity of this episode should be acknowledged.<sup>103</sup> Poole highlights that the prose adds little to the information in Egill's *lausavísur* and, by highlighting a host of stylistic parallels between the verses, suggests that they once formed an independent poetic sequence which acted as a 'running commentary' of the duel.<sup>104</sup> Taken together, Blaney and Poole's perspectives produce a plausible narrative for the genesis of the episode: a 'running commentary' poem describing a duel between the composer and a *berserkr*, and probably attributed to Egill, existed as a source for the saga author, who chose to situate it in a setting that demonstrates Egill's noble qualities. In this hypothesis, Ljótr's legendary and stereotypical nature is advantageous to the saga author, since it emphasises the impressiveness of Egill's victory

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<sup>101</sup> Whaley, 'Fury', pp. 83–84.

<sup>102</sup> Blaney, p. 290.

<sup>103</sup> See, e.g., Sigurður Nordal, 'Formáli', in *ÍF* 2, pp. v–cv (p. xxvi); Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga*, Rit, 8 (Reykjavik: Stofnun Arna Magnússonar, 1975), pp. 15, 259; Poole, *Viking Poems*, pp. 175–78.

<sup>104</sup> Poole, *Viking Poems*, pp. 180–81.

without need for further explanation of the character's relevance either to the story or its historical context. As in *Gísla saga*, then, the author of *Egils saga* deploys a poetic challenge to enhance the protagonist's reputation. The context for the challenge is correspondingly designed to emphasise the protagonist's qualities, drawing on literary motifs that aid in communicating Egill's physical and personal strengths.

Further parallels can be drawn to *Heiðarvíg saga*, an *Íslendingasaga* whose organisational principal is not, as usually, a single Icelandic family, but rather the *heiðarvíg* ('battle of the heath') that occurred between factions from Húnavatn and Borgarfjörður in 1014. The relevant section of the narrative focuses momentarily on a fight between Eiríkr viðsjá ('the Wary') from the former camp and a certain Þorljótr from the latter. Eiríkr is unknown outside *Heiðarvíg saga*, which also contains the full extent of his poetic output (see *SkP* 5, p. 979). One of his *lausavísur* is attached to the fight with Þorljótr and is quoted before the combat begins:

Hlotit hofum, rjóðr, af reiði  
randir, þuðra branda  
– beruma vægð at vígi,  
Veggbergr, – saman leggja.  
Mjök hefð heyrt at hjarta  
hug þínum við brugðit;  
nú skulum, foldar fjotra  
fúrleynir, þat reyna.

(*SkP* 5, p. 1000: 'We have been allotted to clash shields together out of anger, reddener of thin blades [> WARRIOR]; we will not be given mercy in the fight, Veggbergr ["rock of Veggir" = Þorljótr]. I have heard your heart much praised for courage; now we must prove that, fire-concealer of the fetters of the land [> MAN = Þorljótr].')<sup>105</sup>

As in Egill's verses, Eiríkr is relatively complimentary about his opponent here (but see note 105 above), acknowledging Þorljótr's courage and that Eiríkr will need to fight without

<sup>105</sup> The kenning 'foldar fjotra fúrleynir' (ll. 7–8: 'fire-concealer of the fetters of the land') has been the subject of some scholarly debate. Without fully restating the summary in Colin Grant's edition (*SkP* 5, p. 1002), the question is whether a concealer of gold (the referent for 'fire of the fetters of the land') is miserly or generous, the latter perspective requiring the explanation that a generous man must store up wealth in order to distribute it. As Grant notes, the kenning 'almost looks like an ironic reversal' referring to an 'ungenerous man', but the contrast this would produce with Eiríkr's otherwise admiring attitude is difficult to resolve in the absence of an analogous kenning pattern. In his translation, Grant leaves both possibilities open by giving 'man' as the referent, which I follow here.

hesitation to defeat him. Eiríkr's approving attitude is shared by the prose author, who describes Þorljótr as 'kappi mikill' (*ÍF* 3, p. 303: 'a great champion') and, after Eiríkr's verse, comments that the two men 'eigusk við lengi, ok þat segja menn, at varliga sé hraustari menn, hvárrtveggi manna mestr ok sterkastr, vápnfærir vel ok ofrhugar' (*ÍF* 3, p. 304: 'fought for a long time, and people say that there were scarcely more valiant men; each of the two were the best and strongest of men, dextrous with weapons and fearless'). The prose author's impartiality towards the two opponents is in keeping with the broader neutrality of the narrative, which gives equal credence to the tragedy of the losses sustained by both the Húnavatn and Borgarfjörðr factions. 'There is', as Andersson remarks, 'a certain detachment and noncommittal air about the saga: the actors are caught up in a pattern of feuding without becoming personally involved.'<sup>106</sup> Eiríkr's verse indicates a similarly impartial sympathy for his opponent, his repeated references to the inexorability of the fight indicating a corresponding degree of reluctance for it. As in Egill's pre-duel verses, this respectful stance highlights Eiríkr's honour and also emphasises the extraordinary and tragic circumstances of the *heiðarvíg*, in which compatriots are forced to become enemies.

Despite the author's claim to have an extradiegetic source on the duel – 'þat segja menn' quoted above – Þorljótr is almost as obscure as Eiríkr beyond the remit of *Heiðarvíga saga*. As Björn M. Ólsen notes, he is probably the same Ljótr from Veggir who is recorded as having fallen in the *heiðarvíg* in *Landnámabók* (*ÍF* 1, p. 85), and Poole takes this as evidence for the existence of 'an oral tradition concerning Ljótr/Þorljótr [...] perhaps with Eiríkr's verse already attached to it'.<sup>107</sup> For Poole, the possible independence of this tradition is strengthened by the fact that 'Þorljótr is introduced specifically for the encounter with Eiríkr: he has no other part in the story. The fight between them, along with the verse, appears to be

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<sup>106</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 149.

<sup>107</sup> Björn M. Ólsen, *Um Íslendingasögur*, *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenzkra bókmenta að fornu og nýju*, 6.3 (Reykjavík: Ríkisprentsmiðjan Gutenberg, 1937–1939), p. 201; Poole, *Viking Poems*, p. 189.

“tacked on” at the end of the battle description’.<sup>108</sup> If Poole is correct in suspecting that Eiríkr’s *lausavísa*, like Egill’s verses about Ljótr inn bleiki, originally belonged to an independent sequence of poetry about the *heiðarvíg*, it seems likely that the saga author ‘tacked on’ the duel to gratify the fact that Eiríkr’s verse unequivocally indicates his participation in single combat.<sup>109</sup> Whilst Þorljótr does not seem to have been an invention of the saga author, his positive portrayal is in keeping with the encomiastic stance of Eiríkr’s verse. Poet and prose author mutually affirm the honour in individual action and character over the allegiances that drew the men into hostility.

The material surveyed so far highlights a shift in emphasis when hostile audiences are presented with skaldic challenges rather than insults. For the insulted opponent, whose personality and selfhood, as shown in the previous section (3.1), is central to his conflict with the skald, identity and his ability to protect it are crucial. The challenged opponent functions contrastingly to affirm or expand the identity of the skald challenging him. Ljótr and Þorljótr feature in their respective sagas only to the extent that they enhance the extradiegetic audiences’ appreciation for Egill and Eiríkr, and are otherwise quickly excised. This subsidiary role of challenged opponents is similarly observable when skaldic challenges are introduced into whetting episodes. The *hvöt* is a trope in the *Íslendingasögur*, usually featuring a female character inciting her male relations to take vengeance for a dishonour done to them. Whilst these scenes have received much scholarly attention in general, relatively little has been said about their occasional incorporation of skaldic poetry.<sup>110</sup> This

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<sup>108</sup> Poole, *Viking Poems*, p. 188.

<sup>109</sup> Poole, *Viking Poems*, pp. 182–94.

<sup>110</sup> As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir remarks, the female inciter is ‘by now a critical cliché’. Several of the major surveys of the motif include: Rolf Heller, *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas* (Halle am Saale: Niemeyer, 1958); Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 174–204 <<https://doi.org/10.9783/9781512802818>>; Carol J. Clover, ‘Hildigunnr’s Lament’, in *Cold Counsel: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, ed. by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (London: Taylor & Francis, 2001), pp. 15–54; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 17–25.

will be my focus in the following discussion, wherein I demonstrate how the subsidiary role I have articulated shifts in the presence of a female poet.

Another episode from *Heiðarvígá saga* serves as a point of departure. In this case, the primary actors are Þuríðr Ólafsdóttir and her sons Barði, Steinn, and Steingrímur, the former of whom has failed to achieve adequate retribution for the killing of his brother Hallr. As in many whetting scenes, Þuríðr stages her incitement during a family meal, serving her sons a huge ox-leg cut into three and topped with stones (*ÍF* 3, p. 277).<sup>111</sup> When her sons question the significance of this, she reminds them that Hallr was carved into even larger pieces of meat, and that the stones are no easier to digest than their brother's unavenged death. Þuríðr continues by pacing around 'eiskrandi' (*ÍF* 3, p. 277: 'bellowing') and reciting the following verse:

Brátt munu Barða frýja  
beiðendr þrimu seiða;  
Ullr, munt ættar spillir,  
undlinns, taliðr þinnar,  
nema, lýbrautar, látir,  
láðs valdandi, falda  
– lýðr nemi ljó\*ð sem kvóðum –  
lauð\*hyrs boða rauðu.<sup>112</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 986: 'Demanders of the coalfish of battle [> WARRIORS] will deride Barði soon. Ullr of the wound-snake [> WARRIOR = Barði], you will be reckoned the destroyer of your family, unless, ruler of the way of the pollack of land [> GENEROUS MAN = Barði], you cause the foam-fire's envoys [> MEN] to be hooded in red [i.e. killed]. Let people learn the poem as we [I] spoke it.')

Zoe Borovsky notes that Þuríðr's verse, in similar fashion to a whetting stanza by Þorbjörg Grímkelsdóttir in *Harðar saga* (*ÍF* 13, pp. 1–97, see p. 90; *SkP* 5, p. 942), acts to intensify her *hvöt* 'by increasing the fixity of the form'.<sup>113</sup> I would interpret Borovsky's term 'fixity' here in relation to Þuríðr's verse as a speech act. According to their literary depiction as semi-ritualised performances, and as Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir highlights, *hvatir* entail an

<sup>111</sup> On the common association between incitements and mealtimes, see Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament', p. 37.

<sup>112</sup> Following other recent editors, Grove emends the MS readings 'orð' ('words') to 'ljóð' (l. 7), and 'lauðr hyrs' ('foam of fire') to 'lauðhyrs' (l. 8). See further *SkP* 5, p. 987.

<sup>113</sup> Zoe Borovsky, 'Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature', *Journal of American Folklore*, 112 (1999), 6–39 (p. 16) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/541400>>.



illocutionary force, as part of which speech compels its recipients into vengeful action.<sup>114</sup> In this sense, the force of Þuríðr's speech is elevated by her use of poetic language, which is more impactful by virtue of its memorability and its distinctness from everyday speech. This is intensified by the fact that Þuríðr addresses her audience directly and repeatedly, further soliciting their cognitive engagement via her command in the seventh line. Þuríðr's verse and the mysterious stones that garnish her sons' grisly breakfast are in this way paralleled; via their respective linguistic and symbolic ambiguities, the poem and the stones demand interpretive engagement, fixing themselves as markers of shame in the minds of the audience. In this light, Þuríðr's two-pronged approach bears resemblances to the infamous *tréníð* ('wood-níð') episodes in *Gísla saga* and *Bjarnar saga* (discussed in section 3.1.2), both of which see poetry and physical sculpture paired as multi-modal insults against enemies.

As part of her performance, and in similar fashion to Steinunn Refsdóttir (discussed in section 3.1.1), Þuríðr seems to co-opt power from the masculine sphere. In this regard, it is interesting to note Jenny Jochens's distaste for the description of Þuríðr 'bellowing' before delivering her verse, 'since berserks also behave in this fashion'.<sup>115</sup> This connection between Þuríðr and *berserkr* warrior culture is nevertheless potentially more artistic than misogynistic. *Berserkir* are indeed said to enter a state of extreme rage known as 'berserksgangr' (*ÍF* 26, p. 17: '*berserkr*-state'), but this does not necessarily imply 'a complete loss of control', as Rebecca Merkelbach has shown.<sup>116</sup> In fact, some *berserkir* are depicted as summoning this state at will to provide them with a situational advantage (e.g. *ÍF* 3, p. 222). Arguably of greater importance here, however, is the close connection between *berserkir* and Óðinn, a god whose various attributes include both mastery of poetic craft and extreme efficacy in battle, and whose name has its origins in the proto-Germanic word *wōdu*, meaning 'frenzy',

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<sup>114</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Bodies, Words*, p. 19.

<sup>115</sup> Jochens, *Images of Women*, p. 188.

<sup>116</sup> Rebecca Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland* (De Gruyter, 2019), p. 105 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501514227>>.

‘fury’, or ‘madness’.<sup>117</sup> Taken together with her proceeding poetic utterance, Þuríðr’s bellowing is therefore not just *berserkr*-like, but more specifically Odinic. To communicate her challenge as emphatically as possible, Þuríðr adopts the guise of no less a figure than the chief Norse god, hoping perhaps to evoke a similarly furious emotional state in her audience. The sons’ reaction to this performance, to which I will return shortly, is instantaneous; they rise from the table immediately and hastily prepare themselves to avenge Hallr.

Þuríðr’s masculine-coded performance finds a useful counterpoint in the poetry of Áslaug Sigurðardóttir, a semi-legendary figure who performs skaldic verse as part of a *hvot* in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. The tendency for studies of the female inciter to focus on the *Íslendingasögur* has resulted in less attention being given to both this text, which differs markedly in temporal and geographical setting, and Áslaug’s role as an inciter therein. Several parallels between this *fornaldarsaga* and the more provincial narrative in *Heiðarvíga saga* nonetheless help to elicit a dialogue on skaldic challenges uttered by female characters. In the first place, the setting of Áslaug’s *hvot* is similar to Þuríðr’s: Áslaug’s stepsons Eiríkr and Agnarr have been killed in battle with King Eysteinn of Sweden, and, upon delivering this news to her other sons Sigurðr, Björn, Hvítserkr, and Ívarr, Áslaug demands that they take vengeance. When, as in other whetting scenes (cf. the discussion of *Njála* in section 3.1.1), Áslaug’s sons express reluctance at the prospect, she extemporises the following verse to increase the intensity of her persuasion:

Eigi mundi yðvar  
óhefnt vera lengi,  
eitt misseri eptir,  
ef ér dæið fyrri,  
– lítt hirði ek því leyna –  
ef líf hafa knætti  
Eiríkr sitt ok Agnarr  
óbornir mér niðjar.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>117</sup> See, e.g., Einar Haugen, ‘The Edda as Ritual: Odin and His Masks’, in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by R. J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), pp. 3–24 (p. 6).

<sup>118</sup> Like many in *Ragnars saga*, this verse lacks internal rhyme. Where other verses in *Ragnars saga* conform to the *dróttkvætt* variant Snorri calls *Ragnars háttir* (‘Ragnarr’s metre’; see further *SkP* 3, p. 1163), this verse lacks

(*SkP* 8, p. 661: ‘You [i.e. Áslaug’s sons] would not be long unavenged, [not] a single season afterwards, if you die first – I care little to conceal this – if Eiríkr and Agnarr, kinsmen not born to me, could have their life.’)

Both here and in her previous stanza (see *SkP* 8, p. 660), Áslaug’s strategy is to provoke her sons by highlighting the relative superiority of their deceased brothers. Although this is not a complete subversion of the typical relationship between eulogising skald and praised audience (as is envisioned in Snorri’s ‘praise-as-mockery’ dynamic; see section 1), the absence of the heroic Eiríkr and Agnarr highlights a corresponding absence of heroic qualities in the living sons. Rather than emphasising the threat of reprisal as in Þuríðr’s verse, Áslaug’s performance carries a more indirect illocutionary force, compelling its audience to prove that they will be worthy of similar words when they come to be eulogised.

Like Þuríðr’s, Áslaug’s performance is also undergirded by masculine values. When, as Anna Solovyeva highlights, Áslaug learns of her stepsons’ deaths, she takes the place of her husband, the legendary King Ragnarr loðbrók (‘Shaggy-Breeches’), as the receiver of the envoy’s versified message (see *SkP* 8, p. 657), thereby acting in the typically masculine role of a royal audience.<sup>119</sup> Áslaug’s delivery of a skaldic poem deepens this participation in the masculine sphere, as does her subsequent request to join her sons on their vengeance mission (*FN* 1, p. 125). This represents a further parallel with *Heiðarvíga saga*, in which Þuríðr rides to join her sons following their departure (*ÍF* 3, p. 278). The two sagas vary, however, in how they treat these parallel participations in masculine spheres by female characters. In *Ragnars saga*, Áslaug’s sons, unlike Þuríðr’s, rebuff her poetic performance immediately: “‘Eigi er víst,” segir Ívarr, “hvárt þat stoðar nakkvat, þótt þú kveðir aðra vísu at annarri”” (*FN* 1, p. 122: “‘It is not certain”, says Ívarr, “whether that helps at all, though you speak one verse after another””). After some further deliberation, Áslaug’s *hvot* appears on the verge of

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both *aðalhending* and anacrusis in the even lines, which characterise that verse form. Rory McTurk (*SkP* 8, p. 623) cites the *Ragnars saga* poetry’s departure from the strict rules of *dróttkvætt* as evidence for the fact that it was probably ‘composed relatively late’.

<sup>119</sup> Anna Solovyeva, ‘Men’s Business? Two Female Skalds of the Uppsala Edda and the Origins of Poetry’, *Kyngervi*, 1 (2019), 16–36 (pp. 26–27).

failure – ‘þótti henni þeir eigi mikils meta sín orð’ (*FN* 1, p. 123: ‘She thought they did not attach great value to her words’) – until her youngest son, the three-year-old Sigurðr, extemporises his own stanza affirming his intention to take vengeance for Eiríkr and Agnarr (see *SkP* 8, p. 663). Given his exceptionally young age, Sigurðr’s performance is a significant feat, matched only by Egill Skallagrímsson, who is also said to have delivered a *dróttkvætt* stanza at the age of three (*ÍF* 2, pp. 81–82). Whilst Solovyeva perceives poetic ability as part of this family’s heritage – as indeed it is portrayed in many sagas – Sigurðr’s performance supersedes Áslaug as much as it affirms the gift she has bestowed upon him.<sup>120</sup> His voice, as Solovyeva notes, is ‘decisive’ in the scene, causing the other brothers to change their minds (*FN* 1, p. 123) and to express their mutual desire for vengeance in their own verses (see *SkP* 8, pp. 665–668).<sup>121</sup> Whilst this seems like a touching family moment, in which each son mirrors his mother’s poetic language to affirm her wishes, the sons’ verses are better read as a reclaiming of the masculine power that Áslaug has appropriated. This reading is further supported by the fact that, when Áslaug seeks to join the mission, she is denied access to her sons’ ships, and is only permitted to command a land-based army on the condition that she rename herself Randalín (*FN* 1, p. 125: ‘Shield-flax’). Whilst this name associates Áslaug with powerful valkyrie warriors, as Solovyeva notes, it should not be ignored that her entry into the sons’ warrior culture comes at a cost to her agency and identity.<sup>122</sup> The limits Áslaug’s sons impose on her again place this narrative in dialogue with *Heiðarvíga saga*, in which Þuríðr’s attempt to join her sons’ mission is denied with greater cruelty. There, Barði has the stirrups loosened on Þuríðr’s horse, causing her to tumble ignobly into a ditch (*ÍF* 3, p. 279; cf. Jochens’s aforementioned comments on the episode’s misogynistic undercurrent).

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<sup>120</sup> Anna Solovyeva, ‘Power over Men and Power over Words: The Poet-King Ragnarr Loðbrók’, *VMS*, 16 (2020), 221–44 (pp. 228–33) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.5.121524>>.

<sup>121</sup> Solovyeva, ‘Power over Men’, p. 231.

<sup>122</sup> Solovyeva, ‘Men’s Business?’, p. 26.

Overall, Þuríðr and Áslaug's use of skaldic poetry distinguishes them from the typical female inciter, demonstrating their ability to deploy and synthesise modes of power from both masculine and feminine domains. These episodes, however, place greater weight on the influence exerted by challenged opponents. Unlike Gísli, Egill, and Eiríkr, all of whom enhance their reputations by fulfilling the skaldic challenges they receive or deliver, Þuríðr and Áslaug are denied complete participation in the masculine sphere by their respective sons. In this light, the poetic form of Þuríðr and Áslaug's utterances is simultaneously enabling and limiting, for it reveals both unexplored characteristics and tension between those characteristics and the poets' circumstances. It is likewise through the cynical responses of the sons that the extradiegetic audiences of *Heiðarvígá saga* and *Ragnars saga* recognise the conflict that Þuríðr and Áslaug endure between their gender roles and the masculine power domains they seek to draw upon.

Across the material covered in this section, a shift emerges in the role occupied by the hostile audience. Even though skaldic insults and challenges both engender or develop hostility with their recipients, the two utterance-types, as they are utilised in saga prosimetrum, differ according to the respective emphases they place on the performer and the intradiegetic audience. Insults invite opponents to defend their selfhood and are therefore audience-centric, whereas challenges, which function primarily to affirm or reveal the selfhood of the skald, are performer-centric. Whilst modern studies of intradiegetic verses tend not to focus on them, socially oriented nuances of this kind are evidently important to saga authors, allowing them to depict and deepen characters on the basis of sociality and interaction.

### 3.3 Threatened Opponents

The third and final type of utterance I will consider in this chapter is the threat. Amory connects this speech act with the categories considered above, highlighting that threats, challenges, and insults ‘galvanize hearers to sudden violence or stiff resistance’.<sup>123</sup> He adds:

a threat will not just pledge some kind of violence to someone (its illocutionary force, which ‘does something’ in the form of a pledge) but will further alarm the threatened hearer by affecting him with fear and apprehension (its perlocutionary force, or emotional charge).<sup>124</sup>

Whilst Amory’s remarks on the perlocutionary force of threats are helpful in the present context, it is useful to refine his description of the speech act’s illocutionary force. The verse by Þuríðr Óláfsdóttir just considered (see section 3.2) serves as a helpful example. Although Þuríðr threatens Barði to make her verse more impactful – ‘munt taliðr spillir ættar þinnar’ (*SkP* 5, p. 986: ‘You will be reckoned the destroyer of your family’) – the whole utterance, as part of the *hvot*, is a challenge, since it confirms Þuríðr’s expectation that Barði will take vengeance for his brother. Whilst Þuríðr’s verse demonstrates that threats and challenges are complementary forms of speech act, they are primarily distinguishable by virtue of the respective expectations that they place on the recipient: challenges assert the utterer’s firm expectation that the recipient will fight for or against them, whereas threats make no such claim to certainty, allowing for a non-violent outcome on the condition that the recipient meets certain terms. By emphasising the responsibility of the recipient to appease the utterer in an appropriate way, and as I demonstrate in the following discussion, threats give rise to greater diversity and agency in audience responses.

An initial example can be taken from *Grettis saga*. Upon his return to Iceland after his second trip abroad, and long after his juvenile jesting with the Norwegian merchants (see section 3.1.2), a much more mature Grettir learns simultaneously of his father’s death, his

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<sup>123</sup> Amory, p. 73.

<sup>124</sup> Amory, p. 73.

brother's killing by Þorbjörn Arnórsson, and his own outlawry. To expedite vengeance for his brother under the trying circumstances of being a second-time outlaw, Grettir aims to secure swift and inconspicuous transport to his kinsman's home at Gilsbakki. A solution presents itself in the form of a horse called Sǫðulkolla, owned by a certain Sveinn from Bakki, and which Grettir commandeers without approval. What follows is a farcical game of cat and mouse in which Sveinn pursues Grettir with the intention of prosecuting him without realising that, since Grettir is already outside the law, no compensation will be forthcoming.<sup>125</sup> The irony of the situation is compounded by the distance between the culprit and his pursuer. As Sveinn chases Grettir across the Icelandic countryside, and as mapped out in Table 1 below, the latter leaves behind a breadcrumb-like trail of *lausavísur* with the passers-by he encounters, who then recite them to Sveinn. In these stanzas (*Gr* 32, 34), Grettir provides veiled clues as to his identity, thus transforming the chase into a test of

Verse	Extemporised by	In the presence of	Recited to
<i>Gr</i> 31: 'Heðan reið á burt beiðir...' ( <i>SkP</i> 5, p. 709)	Sveinn	—	—
<i>Gr</i> 32: 'Segðu í breiðar bygðir...' ( <i>SkP</i> 5, p. 712)	Grettir	Halli	Sveinn (after <i>Gr</i> 33)
<i>Gr</i> 33: 'Sáttu, hvar reið inn rétni...' ( <i>SkP</i> 5, p. 714)	Sveinn	Halli	—
<i>Gr</i> 34: 'Færðu hafloga hirði...' ( <i>SkP</i> 5, p. 717)	Grettir	Unnamed woman	Sveinn (after <i>Gr</i> 35)
<i>Gr</i> 35: 'Hverr reið hótí fyrri...' ( <i>SkP</i> 5, p. 720)	Sveinn	Unnamed woman	—
<i>Gr</i> 36: 'Hverr reið hryssu várri...' ( <i>SkP</i> 5, p. 722)	Sveinn	Grettir	—
<i>Gr</i> 37: 'Heim reið ek hryssu at Grími...' ( <i>SkP</i> 5, p. 724)	Grettir	Sveinn	—

Table 1. Contexts for the performance and transmission of the *Sǫðulkolluvísur*, according to *Grettis saga*.

<sup>125</sup> Grove (*SkP* 5, pp. 707–09) argues that the whole episode should be considered in light of its probable Icelandic legal background, and particularly the proscriptions against illicit horse-riding introduced in *Jónsbók* (1281). The episode has otherwise proved somewhat perplexing for scholars. See previous perspectives on its origins and function in Lotte Motz, 'Withdrawal and Return: A Ritual Pattern in the Grettis Saga', *ANF*, 88 (1973), 91–110 (p. 97); O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 196–201.

Sveinn's ability to interpret skaldic poetry as well as his physical endurance.

Despite demonstrating the capacity to compose his own *dróttkvætt* stanzas, Sveinn is unable to decode Grettir's hints, and this causes him to speculate with unsubstantiated confidence about their encounter, as the following *helmingr* from verse 33 demonstrates:

Heraðsmenn skulu hvinni  
hefning fyrir þat nefna;  
bera mun bók at hváru  
blán, ef ek næða hánun.

(*SkP* 5, p. 714: 'The district-men must stipulate the vengeance upon the pilferer for that; he will have a blackened [i.e. bruised] body, if I catch him.')

Grove (*SkP* 5, pp. 715–16) highlights Sveinn's use of legal language here, which demonstrates both his evaluation of Grettir's character – 'hvinn' (l. 1: 'petty thief', 'pilferer') implies a low-status individual – and his intention to achieve retribution both via official channels and possibly illicit violence. Whilst Sveinn's threat is undergirded by the dramatic irony noted above, it is not devoid of genuine danger. Sveinn cannot prosecute Grettir for the horse-theft, but his intended actions would make the outlaw's presence known to the local authorities, potentially jeopardising Grettir's mission. Grettir seems to recognise this in the stanza preceding Sveinn's (*Gr* 32), where he refers to the chase as a 'dufl' (*SkP* 5, p. 712: 'game of dice' or 'gambling'). Lotte Motz uses this word as evidence for her overall argument that the Söðulkolla episode is based on folk traditions with a background in cultic practices.<sup>126</sup> Alternatively, I read 'dufl' as an acknowledgement that the pursuit involves stakes for both opponents; Sveinn is gambling only on his ability to recover his horse, but Grettir risks much greater loss if his anonymity is compromised. This risk is exacerbated by the fact that Grettir involves other audiences in his game of versified clues, reciting his first stanza to a certain Halli in Borgarfjörður, and the second to an unnamed woman at Deildartunga, a farmstead in the same area. Although, as Grove notes (*SkP* 5, p. 713), Grettir's performances for these characters function partly in relation to the stipulation in

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<sup>126</sup> Motz, pp. 98–99.



*Jónsbók* that the crime of *hrossreið* (a ‘horse-ride’) is less severe if it is publicised – a stipulation that the outlawed Grettir is ironically not subject to – the passers-by also increase the conspicuousness of Grettir’s journey.<sup>127</sup> Whilst these audiences are presented only as memorisers and transmitters, rather than interpreters, of Grettir’s stanzas, the other material discussed in this chapter indicates that poetry composed in hostile contexts frequently carried the potential for dissemination and discussion in the wider community (cf. the discussion of *Bjarnar saga* in section 3.1.2).

Despite this potential danger, Grettir is shown to exert such witty control over the situation as to almost negate the possibility that he would ever fall foul of Sveinn’s enmity. His verses, as Grove highlights (*SkP* 5, pp. 715, 720), continually anticipate and undercut the brash posturing Sveinn conducts in his own poetry. When, in verse 33, Sveinn interrogates the wayfarer Halli about ‘inn rétni slyttumákr’ (*SkP* 5, p. 714: ‘the stubborn idler’), Grettir has already provided Halli with a correspondingly provocative self-description via his verse 32, in which he calls himself ‘drengur í svörtum kufli’ (*SkP* 5, p. 712: ‘a fellow in a dark cloak’). When, moreover, in verse 35, Sveinn asks the unnamed woman for Grettir’s identity and predicts that his opponent ‘mun lengi rekaz undan í dag’ (*SkP* 5, p. 720: ‘will be driven before [me] for a long time today’), his interlocutor already has Grettir’s following composition as a response:

Færðu hafloga hirði,  
(hefir braut gripit lautar  
áll) velborin vella  
(vigg) dís, gamanvísu.  
Ek vilda svá jöldu  
Yggs líðgjafi ríða  
æst, at ek mun gista  
orðrakkr at Gilsbakka.

(*SkP* 5, p. 717: ‘Well-born goddess of gold [> WOMAN], convey this amusing verse to the guardian of the sea-flame [> WARRIOR = Sveinn]; the eel of the hollow [> SERPENT = Grettir] has seized the horse away. I, the word-bold ale-giver of Yggr [> POET], wanted to ride the mare so eagerly, such that I will spend the night at Gilsbakki.’)

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<sup>127</sup> See further *Jónsbók: The Laws of Later Iceland. The Icelandic Text According to MS AM 351 fol. Skálholtsbók eldri*, ed. and trans. by Jana Schulman (Saarbrücken: AQ-Verlag, 2010), p. 351.

Grettir's concluding comment that he will spend the night at Gilsbakki (ll. 7–8) rebuts Sveinn's prediction about the course of the pursuit, whilst the kenning 'áll lautar' (ll. 2–3: 'eel of the hollow') acts as an *ofljóst* device answering Sveinn's question about Grettir's identity, since *grettir* is a *heiti* for serpent.<sup>128</sup> Jest and jeopardy intersect once again here, for whilst Grettir's coded self-reference forms part of the puzzle-game that his 'gamanvísa' (l. 4: 'amusing verse') invites Sveinn to play, it continues to risk compromising his anonymity.<sup>129</sup> The delicate and ironic control demonstrated in Grettir's pre-prepared responses to Sveinn's remarks nevertheless undermines any sense that Grettir's playfulness will be his downfall. As the two men vie for control over the terms in which the pursuit is framed (cf. the discussion of *Gísla* saga in 3.2), Grettir is continually shown to have the upper hand.

The protagonist's superiority is also affirmed by the responses of the other characters. When Sveinn hears Grettir's second stanza, the saga author notes: 'Hann hugsaði vísuna ok mælti: "Eigi er ólíklegt, at þessi maðr sé eigi mín leika"' (*ÍF* 7, p. 151: 'He pondered over the verse and said: "It is unlikely that this man will be my plaything"'). Even though Sveinn fails to solve the riddle of the verse, the hermeneutic challenge it represents, and possibly the sophistication of its imagery, causes him to reappraise the composer's character. This reaction is an apt reminder that skaldic poetry communicates meaning in many ways. Whilst modern critics tend to 'solve' skaldic verses, envisioning, likewise, a similarly academic exercise on the part of the poetry's medieval audiences, this example highlights the communicative potential of skaldic poetry even in the absence of a conclusive

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<sup>128</sup> *Ofljóst* ('too transparent') is a form of wordplay in which a homonym of the intended solution (usually a personal name) is substituted by a synonym or circumlocutory phrase. Grettir refers to himself using the same serpent-*heiti* in three of his other *lausavísur*. See *SkP* 5, pp. 692, 734, 767.

<sup>129</sup> The term *gamanvísa* is otherwise relatively uncommon, appearing most famously in pluralised form in several *konungasögur* (see *ÍF* 23, p. 114; *ÍF* 28, p. 89; *ÍF* 29, p. 237) as the title of a poetic sequence by Haraldr inn harðráði.

interpretation.<sup>130</sup> As evinced in Sveinn's term 'leika' ('plaything'), the use of gaming-related language is again notable here, emphasising both the joviality of the episode and the irony of Sveinn's dawning realisation that Grettir has continually controlled the rules of their encounter from the beginning. One notes further that, in employing this term, Sveinn deviates from the legal language that had previously defined his utterances (cf. the *Gr* 33 *helmingr* quoted above), and that he is correspondingly beginning to mirror the playful terms that Grettir uses to describe the chase.

The ultimate meeting between the two at Gilsbakki succinctly epitomises these dynamics. Despite his apparent recognition of Grettir's higher status, Sveinn continues to adopt an aggressive posture when he delivers the following *helmingr* upon arrival:

Hverreið hryssu várri?  
Hver verður raun á launum?  
Hver sá hvinn it stærra?  
Hvat mun kuflbúinn dufla?

(*SkP* 5, p. 722: 'Who rode our [my] mare? What recompense will there prove to be? Who has seen a more puffed-up pilferer? What will the cloaked one gamble?')

Grettir hears this and adopts the same end-stopped verse-form in his reply:

Heim reið ek hryssu at Grími;  
hann er gildir hjá kotmanni;  
þat mun ek launa litlu;  
láttu okkr vera sátta.

(*SkP* 5, p. 724: 'I rode the mare home to Grímr [Þórhallsson, Grettir's kinsman]; he is worthy compared to a cottager; I will provide little recompense for this; let us be reconciled.')

These two quatrains combine to create a verse in the form that Snorri calls 'greppaminni' ('poets' reminder'), in which the composer poses questions in each line of the first *helmingr* and then answers them in the same order in the second.<sup>131</sup> The use of this verse-form introduces yet another element of gaming to the episode, since, as Vésteinn Ólason notes, such stanzas are frequently presented as riddles.<sup>132</sup> At the literal level of the exchange,

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Abram, 'Kennings', p. 170; Burrows, 'Riddles', p. 51.

<sup>131</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: VSNR, 2007), p. 20.

<sup>132</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, 'Greppaminni', in *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar 30. júní 1969*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavik: Heimskringla, 1969), pp. 198–205 (p. 198). Cf. Lars Lönnroth, 'Greppaminni Revisited', in

however, the two men communicate in much the same vein as before: Sveinn continues to gamble on an aggressive approach, presumably hoping to intimidate his opponent with a barrage of questions containing threatening legal language (e.g. ‘laun’: ‘recompense’; ‘hvinn’: ‘pilferer’), whilst Grettir systematically dismantles Sveinn’s stance, asserting himself confidently (l. 1), highlighting the higher status of his host (l. 2), refusing to pay compensation (l. 3), and somewhat bathetically declaring their hostility at an end (l. 4). At the symbolic level, the bisection of the *greppaminni* stanza between the two opponents is also significant. Since a *greppaminni* stanza is usually (albeit not exclusively; see note 132 above) the jurisdiction of a single speaker, Grettir’s appropriation of the second *helmingr* might be interpreted as an ultimate wresting of poetic power from Sveinn. Once again, Grettir controls not only the information exchanged between the opponents, but also the terms in which the exchange takes place. Given this apparently unassailable display of power, I would question Evans’s argument that Sveinn achieves reconciliation with Grettir ‘through non-resistance and the foregrounding of [his] inferiority’.<sup>133</sup> The humour of the episode derives rather in Sveinn’s unsubstantiated sense of superiority, which Grettir decimates with unmitigated skill and confidence.

As a whole, and in emphatic fashion, this episode demonstrates the potential for a threatened opponent to exert greater agency in a conflict with a skald. The threats that Sveinn poses both in physical and poetic forms are swiftly and emphatically dispatched in a virtuoso display of wordplay and gamesmanship by Grettir. Whilst Sveinn’s ignorance of Grettir’s identity inherently undermines his position in the contest, Grettir’s victory is no less impressive, particularly given the dire circumstances of his brother’s death and second

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*Greppaminni: rit til heiðurs Vésteini Ólasyni sjötugum*, ed. by Margrét Eggertsdóttir and others (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2009), pp. 269–77 (pp. 273–76).

<sup>133</sup> Evans, *Men*, p. 134.

outlawry, as O'Donoghue highlights.<sup>134</sup> In this context, Grettir manages not simply to refute Sveinn's threats, but also to pre-enlist other audiences to act as spokespeople for his poetic counter-narrative. The ensuing sense that Grettir's victory is a foregone conclusion is wryly acknowledged by the saga author, who, at the conclusion of the episode, notes that the two skalds compiled their respective verses into an otherwise-unattested poem entitled 'Sǫðulkolluvisur' (*ÍF* 7, p. 152: 'Sǫðulkolla Verses'). As is implied by this metatextual allusion, the Sǫðulkolla episode evidently makes for a good story, one in which the threatened opponent had complete control over the beginning, middle, and end.

As in Grettir and Sveinn's interactions with Icelandic civilians, a similar interest in the public-facing potential of skaldic threats is found in *Kormáks saga*. The relevant episode takes place in the section of the saga recounting Kormákr's hostility with Þorvaldr tinteinn Eysteinnsson ('Tin-Rod'), who has married Kormákr's great love Steingerðr Þorkelsdóttir. Deeming Kormákr's ongoing visits to Steingerðr a slight against the family's honour, Þorvaldr, his brother Þorvarðr, and Narfi pay a vagrant to compose a *níð* verse about Steingerðr, which describes Kormákr's sexual desire for her in highly explicit terms (see *SkP* 5, p. 1140). The conspirators exacerbate this insult by ordering the vagrant to disseminate the verse under the pretence that Kormákr composed it. When Kormákr discovers this, he responds violently, killing Narfi in a contemptuous fashion similar to their previous encounters (cf. section 3.1.1) and attempting the same with Þorvaldr, who, the saga author notes, 'skauzk í skugga ok skammaðisk sín' (*ÍF* 8, p. 278: 'scurried into shelter and shamed himself'). Despite being physically separated from Þorvaldr, Kormákr manages to deliver the following threat to his love-rival:

Nú mun ættleri ýta  
 oddmætandi\* hœta  
 – vér kunnum skil *skepja* –  
 Skíðinga mér níði.

<sup>134</sup> O'Donoghue correspondingly views the episode as one of 'emotional respite' from the tragedies in Grettir's life that circumscribe it. See O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 201.

Naddhríðar skalk níða  
Njót, svát steinar fljóti;  
nú hefk illan enda  
Eysteins sonum leystan.<sup>135</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 1143: ‘Now the point-meeter [> WARRIOR = Þorvaldr], the dishonourer of mankind, will threaten me with the Skíðingar’s *níð*; we [I] know how to shape the necessary response. I must create such *níð* against the Njótr of the spear-storm [> WARRIOR = Þorvaldr] that stones will float. I have now unleashed an evil end for Eysteinn’s sons.’)

Having been denied the satisfaction of blood vengeance, Kormákr turns to the violent potential of poetry, the same mode of attack that the conspirators used against him. His verse also appropriates and redeploys a similarly interlaced image of violence and sex as that found in the conspirators’ *níð* verse. There, Kormákr’s genitals are alluded to via the kenning ‘gunnþrðigra geira garða gaupelds’ (*SkP* 5, p. 1140: ‘battle-erect spears of the enclosure of hole-fire [> PENISES]’).<sup>136</sup> If Kormákr’s ‘oddmœttandi’ (l. 2: ‘point-’ or ‘spear-meeter’) is read as another phallic innuendo, it acts as a subversive response to the conspirators’ image, using similar combat-based language to frame Þorvaldr as a willing participant, if not the receptive actor, in sexual intercourse between men.<sup>137</sup> Although this reading relies on accepting Marold’s emendation (see note 135 above), it supplies the *níð* dynamic with which the saga prose associates the verse (*ÍF* 8, p. 279), but which O’Donoghue finds conspicuously

<sup>135</sup> To resolve the garbling of ll. 1–2 in *Möðruvallabók*, Edith Marold accepts Sophus Bugge’s conjectured emendation of MS ‘ætlæla’ (meaning unknown) to ‘ættleri’ (l. 1: ‘person who dishonours their kin’), and the same editor’s emendation of MS ‘auðmœtandinn’ (‘the wealth-meeter’) to ‘oddmœttandi’ (l. 2: ‘point-meeter’). Also emended is MS ‘segja’ (‘say’) to ‘skepja’ (l. 3: ‘shape’, ‘create’) to reintroduce a second stave alliterating with ‘Skíðinga’ in the following line. Lines 3–8 of this verse appear in almost identical form in verse 52 in *Kormáks saga*, and many editors print only this version (see full references in *SkP* 5, p. 1116). Some scholars, however, consider the prose context of verse 65 (the version quoted here) to correspond more completely with the contents of the poetry. On this basis, I elect to consider this version and its context in the following discussion. See further commentary in O’Donoghue, *Genesis*, pp. 114, 132–33; Sophus Bugge, ‘Om versene i Kormáks saga’, *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, 1889, 1–88 (p. 76). *Möðruvallabók* MS: Copenhagen, Den arnamagnæanske samling, Nordisk forskningsinstitut, and Reykjavík, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 132 fol.

<sup>136</sup> This interpretation of the kenning, followed in Marold’s edition (*SkP* 5, p. 1140), is based on Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s suggestion that ‘gaup-’ is semantically connected to modern Norwegian *gaupa/gaupe* (‘frame around an opening’) and modern Icelandic *gopi* (‘small opening’), giving the sense of ‘hole’. See further *SkP* 5, p. 1142.

<sup>137</sup> Almqvist and, later, Finlay detect a similarly libellous phallic reference in Björn Arngeirsson’s ‘sækir geira’ (*SkP* 5, p. 87: ‘seeker of spears’), the verse containing which is described as *níð* in *Bjarnar saga* (*ÍF* 3, p. 155). See further Almqvist, *Norrön niddikning*, I, 177; Finlay, ‘Adultery and Feud’, p. 170.

absent.<sup>138</sup> In this way, the first *helmingr* of Kormákr's verse provides a sample of the kind of slander that he threatens in the second.

The promised *níð* is given emphatic prominence via Kormákr's use of *adynaton* (hyperbole to the point of impossibility) in the sixth line, a device which has drawn the attention of several scholars regarding the possibility of classical influences on Kormákr's poetry.<sup>139</sup> The threat may not, however, be as efficacious as this device would make it appear, for Þorvaldr and Þorvarðr hardly seem reluctant to engage in a war of words along the lines Kormákr proposes. The saga author notes that their sexually charged *níð* verse 'er [...] borit um allt herað' (*ÍF* 8, p. 278: 'is disseminated across the whole district'), and the aftermath of the subsequent encounter with Kormákr is likewise framed by its impact in the public sphere: 'Þetta fréttisk um heraðit, ok vex at eins óþokki milli þeira. Þeir Þorvarðr ok Þorvaldr bræðr eru stórorðir, en Kormáki líkar þat illa' (*ÍF* 8, p. 279: 'News of this spreads around the whole district, and only disfavour grows between them [i.e. Kormákr and the Eysteinnssynir]. The brothers Þorvarðr and Þorvaldr speak boldly [literally "are bold-worded"]', and Kormákr dislikes this'). Like the transmission of gossip in *Bjarnar saga* (see section 3.1.2), these impersonal comments demonstrate the Eysteinnssynir's strategy to negotiate the conflict through public channels rather than a physical encounter. When Þorvarðr subsequently challenges Kormákr to a duel, he makes no appearance at the appointed time and location. Kormákr then issues another challenge to Þorvarðr, adding that his opponent will be 'hvers manns níðingr, ef hann kemr eigi' (*ÍF* 8, p. 280: 'every man's *níðingr*, if he does not come'), but the Eysteinnssynir respond by initiating legal action against Kormákr, forcing a delay to

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<sup>138</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 133.

<sup>139</sup> See Theodore M. Andersson, 'Skalds and Troubadours', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 2 (1969), 7–41 (p. 16); Alison Finlay, 'Skalds, Troubadours and Sagas', *Saga-Book*, 24 (1994–97), 105–53 (p. 142); Alison Finlay, 'Skald Sagas in Their Literary Context 2: Possible European Contexts', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 232–71 (p. 245) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547-009>>.

the duel until the Húnavatn assembly in the autumn (*ÍF* 8, p. 281).<sup>140</sup> Given the derisory way in which the saga author frames Þorvaldr's retreat before the onrushing Kormákr, and the fact that Kormákr has lost his only previous duel against Bersi Véleifsson (*ÍF* 8, p. 238), the brothers' attempts at non-violent posturing must be explained partly as an exhibition of cowardice. Equally, however, the other material studied in this chapter demonstrates that, in the *Íslendingasögur*, conflicting parties are frequently at pains to humiliate their opponents in public spheres as well as private ones. Þorvarðr and Þorvaldr intentionally disregard the possibility of a direct confrontation with Kormákr, focusing instead on a propagandic campaign of unsubstantiated self-congratulation, bravado, and libel intended to influence the perspective of the broader community. Part of their strategy is to use the stereotypically anti-social aspects of Kormákr's skaldic identity against him, justifying the challenge to single combat as a response to 'níðsins ok annarra svívirðinga' (*ÍF* 8, p. 279: 'his [i.e. Kormákr's] níð and other shameful acts'), whilst the subsequent legal action is again initiated 'um níð' (*ÍF* 8, p. 281: 'over níð').<sup>141</sup> Given Kormákr's propensity for producing provocative poetry, it is natural that this is central to the Eysteinnssynir's attacks against his honour.

As these bouts of shadowboxing are narrated, and a physical encounter between Kormákr and his rivals is deferred, the saga author focalises fully on the skald, accompanying him to the first abandoned duel, quoting his versified frustrations (see *SkP* 5, pp. 1144–46), and reporting his fervent desire not to compensate the Eysteinnssynir at the ensuing legal case

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<sup>140</sup> The phrase *hvers manns níðingr* appears in similar contexts in several other *Íslendingasögur*, suggesting that it may be a formulaic expression invoking the opprobrium of the community and possibly supernatural forces. See further William Ian Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England', *Law and History Review*, 1 (1983), 159–204 (p. 186) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/743849>>; Ali Frauman, "'Um ǫll níðingsverk þín": Femininity and Cowardice in the *Hvot* Episodes', *Scandinavian Studies*, 91 (2019), 269–88 (pp. 277–78) <<https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.91.3.0269>>; Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen, 'The *Níðingr* and the Wolf', *VMS*, 7 (2011), 171–96 (pp. 174–75) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.1.102621>>.

<sup>141</sup> On skalds' stereotypically anti-social qualities, see, e.g., Russell G. Poole, 'Introduction', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 1–24 (p. 4) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547-001>>; Diana Whaley, 'Representations of Skalds in the Sagas 1: Social and Professional Relations', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 285–308 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547.285>>.



(*ÍF* 8, p. 281). Given the one-sidedness of the narrative during these events, and the disparaging tone in which Þorvaldr and Þorvarðr's actions are reported, the saga audience is probably intended to empathise with Kormákr's frustration, and to agree with him when he remarks that the Eysteinssynir's misfortunes are 'sjálffelldr' (*ÍF* 8, p. 281: 'self-inflicted'). Whilst, in this light, Þorvaldr and Þorvarðr's behaviour as threatened opponents is not intended to be seen as admirable, it nonetheless represents a viable response to the danger that Kormákr poses. Their strategy is consistent with public-facing actions deployed by both protagonists and antagonists in other sagas, and intelligently uses Kormákr's incendiary identity against him. As in *Grettis saga*, this episode demonstrates the potential impotence of skaldic threats when they enter the context of reception. Whilst the Eysteinssynir are not as admirable as the impressive Grettir, their actions continue to highlight the influence of hostile audiences, even when faced with such a volatile poet as Kormákr.

As in previous sections, the hostile audiences considered here exhibit significant variety in their responses to skaldic threats. In the first place, they do not tend to resort to physical violence, or to abide by the terms stipulated in the skalds' threats. The responsibility of the threatened opponent to appease the skald seems rather to provide enough scope for the opponent to act on their own terms, whether that be to downplay the hostility (as in *Grettis saga*) or to negotiate it via alternative means (as in *Kormáks saga*). In both cases, the poetic nature of the threats also appears to push the conflicts more fully into the public sphere; Grettir intentionally involves ancillary characters in his verse-inlaid pursuit by Sveinn, whilst Þorvaldr and Þorvarðr use Kormákr's poetry as justification for their physical and legal attacks against him. Such public-facing actions are shown to be intelligent moves. They provide the threatened opponent with security, as shown when Grettir lessens the severity of his *hrossreið* by publicising it, and in the Eysteinssynir's conspicuous display of bravado by challenging Kormákr. They also act as opportunities to undermine the opponents' skaldic

counterparts: Grettir demonstrates his poetic superiority to Sveinn, whilst the Eysteinnssynir publicise the illegality of Kormákr's behaviour. Overall, where insults and challenges elicit severe breakdowns in relations, threats are treated more like negotiating points by their recipients, functioning to punctuate an ongoing conflict rather than as inexorable catalysts towards violence. Due to the malleability of their implied expectations, threats, in turn, do not necessarily assert the absolute power of the skald, but rather afford the audience an opportunity to turn a conflict to their advantage.

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The designation *níðingr* ('contemptible person') is frequently cited as the dire fate of those insult-recipients who are unable or unwilling to challenge the terms of an insult or other hostile poetry levelled against them.<sup>142</sup> As Finlay writes, the term comprises 'everything that a man ought not to be', and once applied to a person 'is thought of as an unchangeable part of his being'.<sup>143</sup> Bo Almqvist extrapolates upon this perceived severity as follows:

It is, then, very natural that a person who had been called a *níðingr*, or threatened with that name, would be driven into a great wrath, even more so, if we take into consideration that the situations (e.g. before or during a battle, after a murder etc.) would be especially conducive to hysterical and violent feelings.<sup>144</sup>

As my analysis of many such supposedly wrath-inducing situations demonstrates, there is a discrepancy between theory and practice on this subject. Whilst skaldic insults, challenges, and threats are extreme speech-acts, their recipients do not necessarily act as if *in extremis*. The sagas instead bear witness to greater diversity in the responses of hostile audiences than scholars have previously acknowledged. As demonstrated in the first section (3.1), insulted opponents are frequently self-critical or criticised should they opt for a violent response, whilst non-violent reactions are not only viable alternatives in a therapeutic sense, but also

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<sup>142</sup> For a detailed reading of the semantics of *níðingr*, see Thorvaldsen.

<sup>143</sup> Finlay, 'Phallic Aggression', p. 181.

<sup>144</sup> Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning*, I, 212.

because they provide opportunities to damage an opponent beyond physical means. In the second section (3.2), I demonstrated how challenged opponents play a more subsidiary role than their insulted and threatened counterparts, pushing skalds either to enhance their reputations, or to reveal broader dimensions of their characters. Threatened opponents, as demonstrated in the third section (3.3), exhibit the greatest potential to reverse the status of a conflict, frequently using the power of public opinion to subvert skalds' incendiary strategies.

This latter point merits further expansion, for, as I have highlighted recurrently, antagonistic skaldic performances are distinctive for the regularity with which they invoke the attention of the broader community. As noted by the scholars cited at the beginning of this chapter (see the introduction to section 3.1), this is partly explained by the dishonouring function of the poetry, which is exacerbated via its dissemination in the social circles to which the injured party belongs. My analysis nevertheless prompts reappraisal of these social dynamics. On one hand, the cases examined above highlight how hostile audiences are just as capable of using public attitudes, events, and institutions to counteract poetic attacks. By exploiting these networks, hostile audiences harness the kind of social capital that their skaldic counterparts can be shown to lack. On the other, should a hostile audience fail to take this kind of initiative, the voice of public opinion is not usually shown to be a mouthpiece for skaldic slander. As exemplified in the many cases where bystanders intervene to prevent a violent escalation, or in which de-escalating tactics are advised by ancillary characters, the community typically prioritises collective interests over those of either antagonist. The communicability of hostile poetry may therefore be one of its advantages, but it rarely proves decisive in the texts I have analysed.

Whilst my pan-generic approach has allowed for greater exposition of such trends than in previous scholarship, it also prompts reappraisal of some scholarly generalisations, particularly in relation to the key terms associated with antagonistic skaldic poetry. *Níð*, as

noted at the beginning of the chapter, has been afforded special significance by many scholars, but the diversity in the responses of *níð*-recipients undermines the idea that insults of this kind demand a specific – or, in light of some scholarly remarks, ritualised – course of action.<sup>145</sup> Whilst, furthermore, the related concepts of *kviðlingar* and *flim* are often regarded as ‘less dangerous’, their appearances in *Grettis saga*, *Porgríms þáttr*, and *Hrafn þáttr* (see section 3.1.2) demonstrate the potential for these insults to elicit equally lethal reactions.<sup>146</sup> In this regard, my sustained focus on audience perspectives gives less weight to discreet categories of poetic insult, and more to a spectrum of terms for pejorative language, using which a saga author could signal different gradations of insult without necessarily being bound by generic or stylistic expectations. This perspective is substantiated by the fact that Old Norse, like many languages, contains many words – Burrows counts over fifty – referring to ridiculing utterances.<sup>147</sup> Within such a miscellany of mockery, ‘clear lines’, as Burrows acknowledges, ‘are difficult to demarcate’, reflecting the fact that humour is highly heterogenous by virtue of the innumerable ways it can manifest.<sup>148</sup> Although I have shown several ways in which this highly nuanced form of communication operates in contexts of poetic performance, it has still been necessary to be selective rather than comprehensive. An utterance-type I did not have scope to examine, for example, is the gloat. Although skaldic boasting occurs less frequently in the saga corpus, examples from *Áns saga bogsveigis* (see *SkP* 8, p. 4) and *Bandamanna saga* (see *SkP* 5, p. 12) represent the opportunity to consider audience reactions to verses uttered after the conclusion of hostilities. The retrospective nature of these verses distinguishes them from the poetry I have analysed, prompting the

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. Markey, p. 7.

<sup>146</sup> See, e.g., Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 62.

<sup>147</sup> Burrows, “‘Humour’ Words”, p. 62.

<sup>148</sup> Burrows, “‘Humour’ Words”, p. 62.

possibility of fruitful comparison with other forms of skaldic poetry concerning past conflicts, such as the battle verse surveyed by Whaley.<sup>149</sup>

In sum, and in contrast to the influence skalds are presented as exerting in political contexts, skaldic performance takes on a different quality when directed at hostile audiences. In the absence of a ruling figure, power, in one sense, swings towards the poet, whose elaborate and malicious verses act as both attempted self-promotion and audience decimation. These moments of antagonistic performance are unquestionably impressive, combining elite poetic ability with acute sensitivity to cultural morality and ethics. Whether this potency carries over into the context of reception is, however, less certain. The power of the antagonistic performances may itself become ammunition for audience retaliation. As shown in the poetic challenges delivered during whetting scenes and in *Kormáks saga* (see sections 3.2 and 3.3), the artform's anti-social aspects prompt some audiences to question skalds' moral and ethical security. The subjectivity of humour that Burrows highlights is, furthermore, compounded by the very poetic qualities that make the skalds' animosity so forceful. As demonstrated in my case studies of *Þorvalds þáttr* and *Grettis saga* (see sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2), the inherent equivocality of skaldic poetry creates potential for hostile audiences to reinterpret the utterances levelled at them, and thereby to assert their agency in a conflict. In this way, the notoriety and complexity of skaldic performance are partly responsible for its potential inefficacy in contexts of hostile reception. Given the range of forces acting upon these poetic conflicts, it is unsurprising that the behaviour of hostile audiences is as difficult to systematise as the hostile language they are forced to negotiate. By deploying poetry to make their expressions of enmity as impactful as possible, the skalds not only exhibit the full extent of their creative abilities, but also elicit significant diversity in the

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<sup>149</sup> Whaley, 'Fury'.

responses of their opponents. Violence, these characters demonstrate, is but one solution to the intractability of a skaldic enemy.

## 4 Romantic Audiences: Love in the Time of Kennings

Whilst court settings, and the concomitant power of audiences there, appear to have been their favoured environment, skalds demonstrate equal aptitude for translating their skills into different contexts and communities. They seem to have done so, in fact, without necessarily re-inventing the wheel. As Poole highlights, skaldic poetry's political function 'as a vehicle for praise, commemoration, and satire', was mirrored in personal contexts by its capacity for expressing 'love, grief, and abuse'.<sup>1</sup> Whilst skaldic poetry is not primarily renowned for its association with romance, verse addressing an erotically desired person, or the poet's emotions for that person, features recurrently within the corpus, usually in the form of *lausavísur* and *flokkar*.<sup>2</sup> Nor is this kind of verse alien to courtly contexts. Poole highlights several examples of 'love-verse' composed by Scandinavian elites, including *Snæfríðardrápa* (*SkP* 1, p. 67) by Haraldr inn hárfagri Hálfðanarson ('the Fair-Hair'; r. Norway c. 860–932), Haraldr inn harðráði's *Gamanvísur* (*SkP* 2, pp. 35–41), Magnús inn góði's *lausavísa* for a 'siklings systir' (*SkP* 2, p. 6: 'ruler's sister'), Magnús berfœttr's *lausavísur* for a woman called Maktildr (*SkP* 2, pp. 387–89), and the anonymous *Liðsmannaflokkur* (*SkP* 1, pp. 1014–28).<sup>3</sup> These poems are beyond the scope of this study, since the sagas preserving them provide little indication that they were ever performed in the presence of the female figures they address.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst these Scandinavian elites give enough information to at least hint at the identities of their female audiences, skaldic convention more commonly invokes an

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<sup>1</sup> Poole, 'Introduction', p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 276–78.

<sup>3</sup> Russell G. Poole, 'Some Royal Love-Verses', *Maal og minne*, 3, 1985, 115–31.

<sup>4</sup> For the prose contexts of these poems, see (*Snæfríðardrápa*): *ÍF* 29, 5–6; *ÍF* 26, 125–7; (*Gamanvísur*): *ÍF* 23, p. 114; (Magnús inn góði's *lausavísa*): *ÍF* 23, p. 148; (Magnús berfœttr's *lausavísur*): *ÍF* 24, pp. 60–62; (*Liðsmannaflokkur*): *ÍF* 35, p. 116.

anonymous female addressee, who functions as an observer and evaluator of the poet's masculine exploits. Consider, for example, this eleventh-century verse by Þjóðólfr Arnórsson describing the launch of Haraldr inn harðráði's war-fleet:

Rétt kann ræði slíta  
ræsis herr ór verri;  
ekkja stendr ok undrask  
ára burð sem furðu.  
Ært mun, snót, áðr sortuð  
sæfong í tvau ganga  
(þoll leggr við frið fullan)  
ferkleyf (á þat leyfi).<sup>5</sup>

(*SkP* 2, p. 152: 'The ruler's army knows [how] to tear the oars perfectly out of the stroke; the woman stands and wonders at the display of the oars, as [at] a marvel. Lady, there will be rowing before the tarred oars, four-edged, break in two; the fir-tree [> WOMAN] gives permission for this in complete peace.')

The dynamic of the verse is well summarised by the inimitable words of Roberta Frank:

'When [a skald] says "O Lady," he really means "Notice me. Admire me, advise me, advertise me. Look lady, how good I am at being a man."'”<sup>6</sup> For Helga Kress, 'það er nánast klifun í dróttkvæðum að skáldin ávarpa konur í kvæðum sínum. Þær eiga að vera vitni að hetjudáðunum og lofa kveðskap þeirra' ('It is almost cliché in *dróttkvætt* that the skalds address women in their poems. They have to be witnesses to their exploits, and praise their poetry').<sup>7</sup> In most cases, this apostrophe technique tends not to have its basis in reality; the female addressee has no identity or function external to the role constructed for her by the skald, and hence her gaze acts merely as a projection of the poet's self-admiration. Several scholars have described this dynamic in similar terms since Frank's original exposition, although Osborne has recently nuanced the discussion by demonstrating the additional involvement of apostrophised women in 'references to the future and [...] a wider discourse

<sup>5</sup> Whaley emends the variant MS readings 'ert' and 'art' (seemingly forms of the adjectives *err* or *orr*, meaning 'swift', 'active', 'generous') to 'Ært' (l. 5: 'rowing'), since the former do not agree with the feminine noun 'snót' (l. 5: 'woman', 'lady'). See further *SkP* 2, p. 153.

<sup>6</sup> Roberta Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women', in *Poetry in the Scandinavian Middle Ages: The Seventh International Saga Conference, Spoleto, 4–10 September 1988*, ed. by Teresa Pàroli (Spoleto: Presso la sede del Centro studi, 1990), pp. 67–83 (p. 57).

<sup>7</sup> Helga Kress, *Mattugar meyar: íslensk fornbókmenntasaga* (Reykjavik: Háskóli Íslands, 1993), p. 181.



of poetic dissemination'.<sup>8</sup> Where Osborne's analysis focuses on absent audiences, there are also cases in which saga authors 'make the skald's apostrophized woman a full participant in the narrative, giving her a name and literary function', as Frank identifies.<sup>9</sup> Frank does not, however, analyse these intradiegetic audiences or their functions, both of which remain understudied.

To address this subject, the primary cases I will consider are from the *Íslendingasögur*, and particularly the quasi-subgenre known as the *skáldasögur* (see further section 1.2), since these are the texts in which female addressees are most fully realised as characters external to the poetry. The *skáldasögur*, and the skalds who comprise their protagonists, are associated with a considerable amount of verse employing the apostrophe technique, the primary proponent being Kormákr Ögmundarson, who uses it twenty-four times in his verse quoted in *Kormáks saga* (*SkP* 5, pp. 1039, 1056–58, 1068, 1082, 1114–15, 1128–30, 1135, 1153–56, 1173, 1180–81). The use of apostrophe is not, however, a defining feature of this subgenre. Instead, the related issues of love, and the factors that frustrate love's fulfilment, are commonly considered to be the skald sagas' primary pre-occupation.<sup>10</sup> The female addressees within these texts are correspondingly portrayed as observers and lovers simultaneously.

In the first section of this chapter (4.1), I consider whether and how these roles overlap. Focusing initially on Helga in fagra Þorsteinsdóttir ('the Fair') of *Gunnlaugs saga* and Steingerðr Þorkelsdóttir of *Kormáks saga*, I examine how skalds attempt to manipulate how they are perceived by their romantic audiences, and, therein, whether and how the gaze of the romantic audience is in keeping with that of the apostrophised women of skaldic

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<sup>8</sup> Osborne, p. 49. See further Bjarne Fidjestøl, "'Out They Will Look, The Lovely Ladies": Views of Women in Norse Literature', in *Bjarne Fidjestøl: Selected Papers*, ed. by Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, trans. by Peter Foote, Viking Collection, 9 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), pp. 333–42; Kress, *Mattugar meyar*, pp. 181–82; Sayers, 'Blæju þöll'; Bandlien, *Strategies*, pp. 43–61.

<sup>9</sup> Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women', p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> Clunies Ross, 'Skald Sagas as a Genre', pp. 26–27, 48–49.

convention. In keeping with the theme of love rivalry within the *skáldasögur*, I then consider how skalds attempt to manipulate how their rivals are perceived, with Kolfinna Ávaldadóttir of *Hallfreðar saga* and Oddný eykyndill Þorkelsdóttir of *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* providing the primary cases. Having examined romantic audiences positioned in passive roles, in the second section (4.2) I consider romantic audiences that are portrayed as taking greater initiative in response to skaldic performance, or occasionally engaging in skaldic performance themselves. My intention is not just to acknowledge that female characters regularly surpass passive roles (as section 4.1 also demonstrates), but also to investigate how and why explicit agency on the part of the romantic audience reshapes her relationship with the skald. I begin by examining romantic audiences that affirm their love, as seen in verse compositions by Steingerðr in *Kormáks saga* and Ketilríðr Holmkelsdóttir of *Víglundar saga*. I then consider an example of more pronounced repudiation by romantic audiences, as evinced in Þorbjörg kolbrún Katladóttir's ('Coal-Brow') revenge against Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld Bersason in *Fóstbræðra saga*.

Alongside elaboration of the woman-as-observer role, this chapter's focus prompts re-evaluation of the much-debated concept of *mansöngur*, which is usually taken to mean 'love poetry' in lieu of a literal English translation. This term had significant weight in legal contexts, as indicated in the Icelandic law code *Grágás*: 'Ef maðr yrkir mansöng *vm cono* oc *varðar scog gang*. kona asöc ef hon er xx. eða ellre. ef hon vill *eigi sækia láta*. oc a lavg raðande hennar sökena' ('If a man composes *mansöngur* about a woman, the consequence is outlawry. If the woman is twenty years or older, she prosecutes. If she does not want to take up the prosecution, her guardian should take the case').<sup>11</sup> On this basis, Jochens argues for 'erotic libel' as the original meaning of *mansöngur*, since it represents verse designed not to praise a desired woman, but rather to insult the male kin of the woman whose sexuality they

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<sup>11</sup> *Grágás*, II, 184, § 238.

controlled as a commodity.<sup>12</sup> Whilst Jochens's characterisation fits many of the *Íslendingasögur* accounts, other examples indicate that the meaning of the term could and did change depending on context. Elsewhere, for example, Jochens herself acknowledges that *mansǫngr* describes verse expressing love and lamentation as well as libel, and contends that the form progressed from the latter to the former functions between its representation in earlier poetry and later Icelandic *rímur*.<sup>13</sup> Marold's survey of *mansǫngr* in a wider selection of Old Norse texts nevertheless indicates the potential over-simplicity of Jochens's proposed timeline.<sup>14</sup> In the conclusion to this chapter, comparison of audience reactions to and participation within *mansǫngr* allows me to further problematise the term, suggesting that it was deployed retroactively by saga authors to signal the potential emotional and social effects of verses, rather than to define them in generic terms.

*Mansǫngr* is relevant to the present discussion not simply because of its association with erotic desire, but also because of its association with class. The first component *man-* is, as Meulengracht Sørensen highlights, 'almindeligvis identificeres med substantivet *man* (neutrum), "trælkvinde"' ('commonly identified with the noun *man* (neuter), "slave-woman"'), and, despite his acknowledgement that this explanation is not wholly satisfactory, scholars have largely been content to accept it.<sup>15</sup> Jochens, for example, uses *mansǫngr*'s legal implications to offer the tentative conclusion 'that a *mansǫngr* originally described the sexual use of a slave woman by a man other than her owner, or ridiculed the owner's sexual performance'.<sup>16</sup> However one evaluates Jochens's contention, it is notable that analogous class dynamics are evident in many of the *skáldasögur* romances, with the poet often coming

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<sup>12</sup> Jenny Jochens, 'From Libel to Lament: Male Manifestations of Love in Old Norse', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 247–64 (p. 252); Jochens, 'Gender Relations', p. 318.

<sup>13</sup> Jochens, 'Libel to Lament', p. 250.

<sup>14</sup> Marold, '*Mansǫngr*'.

<sup>15</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> Jochens, 'Libel to Lament', p. 253.

from a family of higher rank than that of the female subject he composes about.<sup>17</sup> In this light, the romantic audiences of the *Íslendingasögur* bear witness to a significant change from the performer-audience power dynamics considered previously. As noted above, a symmetry exists between the functions of skaldic verse in political and personal contexts, and yet the accompanying relationships between the skalds and their audiences are asymmetrical in terms of verticality. At home in Iceland, skalds are not beneath the subjects of their verse. Instead, their social superiority prompts them to position their audiences as a kind of stage on which to perform grand and valiant expressions of emotion. It will be my contention in this chapter, however, that the stage represented by the romantic audience rarely provides stable footing. Instead, romantic audiences' overwhelmingly resentful reactions seem to destabilise their skaldic counterparts, hinting at a disconnect between the skalds' artform and genuine expressions of love.

#### 4.1 The Female Gaze: Romantic Audiences in Passive Roles

Kress's brief discussion of the apostrophised women of skaldic poetry is appropriately entitled 'Í augum kvenna' ('In the eyes of women').<sup>18</sup> When employing the apostrophe technique, skalds are not creating fully realised audiences, but rather gendered gazes that act as mirror images of their ideal selves. For Kress, 'þannig verða skáldin oft að spegla sig í konum til að treysta mörk sín, skilgreina sig sem karla og skáld' ('the skalds often have to mirror themselves in women to consolidate their boundaries, to define themselves as men and poets').<sup>19</sup> The femininity of the apostrophised figure appears to be a long-standing tradition. Tacitus, for example, remarks upon the tendency for Germanic tribesmen to take their women

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<sup>17</sup> See further Jenny Jochens, 'Romance, Marriage, and Social Class in the Saga World', in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland*, ed. by Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin, *Islandica*, 54 (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2008), pp. 65–79.

<sup>18</sup> Kress, *Mattugar meýjar*, p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> Kress, *Mattugar meýjar*, p. 182.

to war with them, since ‘these are the witnesses whom each man reverences most highly, whose praise he most desires’.<sup>20</sup> This spectating role, in which women are adjacent to, but restricted from participating within, the masculine sphere of action, is also evinced in sources more contemporary to the Saga Age. As Fidjestøl notes, the whole corpus of skaldic poetry contains not a single *nomen agentis* kenning (e.g. Sigvatr Þórðrson’s ‘beitir sverðs’, *SkP* 1, p. 666: ‘swinger of the sword [> WARRIOR]’) referring to a woman.<sup>21</sup> When female action is implied in skaldic poetry, it is more typically ‘deferred in favor of potential action’, as Sayers highlights.<sup>22</sup> An example is Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld’s ‘Híldr hvítings’ (*SkP* 1, p. 834: ‘Híldr of the drinking horn [> WOMAN]’), a common kenning-type that utilises the conventional femininity of the act of ale-serving without actually depicting women performing said act. These arguments demonstrate a fundamental patriarchal mindset within the skaldic tradition, framing women as essentially passive figures.

Passivity operates here as a prerequisite for the apostrophised woman to mirror a skald’s manliness. Lacking agency, the female gaze becomes deferential, unconscious; it is essentially the skald’s own. Continually positioned in this role but simultaneously forming the bedrock for male poets’ self-promotion, the apostrophised women of skaldic convention strongly embody what audience scholars Matthew Reason and others have described as the ‘paradox of passivity’:

[The] critique of apparent passivity recurs throughout discussions of audiences, often in lock-step with arguments about their inherent active-ness. Audiences are passive, they don’t do anything – except applaud, or cheer, sigh, boo, whistle and walk out. Audiences don’t do anything – except through their silence, their focused attention, and their presence they bear witnesses in a manner that is essential to the entire event. [...] The paradox of audiences is that sometimes the most active role is to do nothing physically and yet be central to everything.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, trans. by H. Mattingly, revised by S. A. Handford (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> Fidjestøl, ‘Lovely Ladies’, p. 341.

<sup>22</sup> Sayers, ‘*Blæju þöll*’, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Reason and others, ‘The Paradox of Audiences’, p. 7.

The apostrophe convention is an excellent example of this paradox, since it demonstrates the skalds' concurrent insistence on having and marginalising witnesses for their performances. Given that, as Sayers argues, silence – the 'suspension of judgement' – represents the only threat that apostrophised women could pose to skalds, it is natural that complications arise when saga authors give these female spectators a voice, reworking them into fully realised characters rather than artificial reflectors.<sup>24</sup> In these contexts, female audiences are given greater licence to harness their paradoxical passivity, thereby obtaining greater power than scholars have tended to recognise. In the following discussion, I examine several such characters, categorised according to the way in which skalds attempt to guide their gaze. In the first sub-section (4.1.1), I address the spectating role directly, analysing how skalds attempt to impress female characters using poetic performance, and how these audiences react. The second sub-section (4.1.2) covers the parallel dynamic in which skalds use scurrilous poetry to try and damage their audiences' opinions of love-rivals. Through comparison of these related romantic strategies, I establish and examine the similarities between the apostrophised women of skaldic convention and the romantic audiences of saga literature. In doing so, my analysis also demonstrates the increased capacity for female subjectivity in the sagas, allowing romantic audiences to subvert the passive roles in which skalds attempt to position them.

#### 4.1.1 Spectating Lovers

On the correspondence between depictions of female spectators in skaldic poetry and saga literature, instructive examples can be drawn from *Grettis saga*. As O'Donoghue observes, Grettir seems to be depicted as finding greatest fulfilment in heterosocial relationships, as

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<sup>24</sup> Sayers, 'Blæju höll', p. 43.

evidenced in his ‘loving relationship with his mother, as opposed to the breakdown of relations with his father’.<sup>25</sup> Evans posits women’s inherent ‘masculine inferiority’ as the reason for this, since female characters are ‘subsequently not a threat to Grettir’s own position of dominant masculinity’.<sup>26</sup> This argument is not consistently substantiated, however, since the author of *Grettis saga* describes at least two occasions in which female perceptions pose just such a threat, motivating Grettir into extreme action. During his volatile sea-voyage aboard the merchant ship (also discussed in section 3.1.2), Grettir experiences his first dalliance with romance, flirting with the wife of one of his fellow sailors, who makes a habit of sewing up his shirt-sleeves (*ÍF* 7, p. 53).<sup>27</sup> Whilst the crew mock Grettir’s preference ‘at klappa um kviðinn á konu Bárðar stýrimanns en at gera skyldu [hans] á skipi’ (*ÍF* 7, pp. 51–52: ‘to stroke the belly of the captain Bárðr’s wife rather than do his duty on the ship’), Grettir is only motivated to help the ship navigate difficult weather when his companion Hafliði points out that his paramour will be less than impressed with Grettir’s laziness. Grettir acknowledges this in a verse:

Stöndum upp, þó at undir  
alltíðum skip ríði;  
veit ek, at víf mun láta  
verr, ef ek ligg á knerri.  
Því mun öllungis illa  
aldygg kona hyggja  
hvít, ef hér skal láta  
hvert sinn fyrir mik vinna.

(*SkP* 5, p. 672: ‘We [I] stand up, though it [the sea?] rides very frequently under the ship. I know that the wife will be displeased if I lie on the ship. The faithful, fair woman will think it altogether evil, if I should always let the work be done for me here.’)

Grettir proceeds to help the sailors with such energy and strength that their quips are silenced for the remainder of the journey (*ÍF* 7, p. 55). Later in the saga (*ÍF* 7, pp. 239–40), two women happen to see Grettir naked while he is asleep, and one of them, a serving girl,

<sup>25</sup> O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 207.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, *Men*, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Gifts of clothing between women and men tend to be a sign of love in the *Íslendingasögur*. See further Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 57–60.

announces her surprise at how poorly endowed he is relative to his large frame. Grettir hears the serving girl's laughter, grabs her, and extemporises two verses emphasising his virility (see *SkP* 5, pp. 783–89), which he proceeds to demonstrate by raping her. Whilst the example involving the sailor's wife probably involves a mixture of genuine infatuation and dry humour on Grettir's part, both these cases are primarily about power dynamics. Emasculating female gazes, or the threat they pose, prompt Grettir to go to extreme lengths to demonstrate his masculinity. With poetry central in both scenes, these examples demonstrate at the outset that the evaluative female gaze of skaldic convention can be found in similar form in the saga tradition.

Where the captain's wife and serving girl appear only momentarily in *Grettis saga*, heterosexual desire, and accordingly the female gaze, play a more central role in the *skáldasögur*. In *Kormáks saga*, Steingerðr Þorkelsdóttir's perceptions of Kormákr Ögmundarson are more nuanced, and fluctuate as the couple's romance blows hot and cold. The power of Steingerðr's gaze is emphasised from her first appearance, when her feet, poking over a threshold in a farmhouse in Gnúpsdalr, are observed by a lovestruck Kormákr. When she perceives Kormákr's gaze – 'Nú finnr Steingerðr, at hon er sén' (*ÍF* 8, p. 208: 'Now Steingerðr notices that she is seen') – Steingerðr moves to a position where only her face is illuminated, and this forms the subject of Kormákr's second and third *lausavísur*, the latter of which is as follows:

Brámáni skein brúna  
brims und ljósum himni  
Hristar hǫrviglæstrar  
haukfránn á mik lauka.  
En sá geisli sýslir  
síðan gollmens Fríðar  
hvarmatungls ok hringa  
Hlínar óþurft mína.

(*SkP* 5, p. 1034: 'The brow-moon [> EYE] of the linen-clad Hristr of leeks' surf [> WOMAN] shone hawk-sharp on me from the bright heaven of her brow. But that light-beam of the eyelids' moon [> EYE] of the Fríðr of the golden necklace [> WOMAN] later causes harm for me and for the Hlín of rings [> WOMAN].')



As M. A. Jacobs argues, the ocular light-beam Kormákr describes may be a product of the Platonic model of extramissive vision, which was prominent up until the twelfth century, and in which the eyes are envisioned as producing rays that interact with light.<sup>28</sup> The power of Steingerðr's gaze, as Poole highlights, contrasts with and contests Kormákr's role as a passive voyeur.<sup>29</sup> Kormákr proceeds to describe his inability to conceal his 'hyrjar stríð' (*SkP* 5, p. 1035: 'fire [= THOUGHT] of distress') from Steingerðr's eyes, and later overhears her evaluating him in a discussion with her serving woman: 'Steingerðr kvað hann vænan ok at ǫllu sem bezt, – "þat eitt er lýtit á, hárit er sveipt í enninu"' (*ÍF* 8, p. 210: 'Steingerðr said that he [Kormákr] was attractive and excellent in every aspect – "this is the only blemish: the hair curls on his forehead"'). Whilst the skald and his lover appear to have equal opportunity to evaluate each other's bodies at a distance here, the primacy of Steingerðr's gaze is confirmed when, after his stay at Gnúpsdalr, Kormákr asks his mother to make good clothes for him, specifically 'at Steingerði mætti sem bezt á hann lítask' (*ÍF* 8, p. 215: 'so that Steingerðr could see him at his best').

As the saga progresses, Kormákr's cognizance of Steingerðr's gaze develops into something like the relationship between speaker and apostrophised woman in skaldic convention. On several occasions, he directs *lausavísur* at Steingerðr in which he boasts about masculine exploits, extolling his ability to defeat those who might impede their relationship (*ÍF* 8, pp. 220, 222; cf. *SkP* 5, pp. 1053–54, 1056–58), and his willingness to fight duels on her behalf (*ÍF* 8, pp. 285–87; cf. *SkP* 5, pp. 1153–58). Bersi Véleifsson, Steingerðr's first husband, similarly addresses Steingerðr with a verse reporting his victory in

<sup>28</sup> M. A. Jacobs, 'Hon stóð ok starði: Vision, Love, and Gender in *Gunnlaugs saga ormsstungu*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 86 (2014), 148–68 (p. 153) <<https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.86.2.0148>>.

<sup>29</sup> Poole, 'Introduction', p. 22. On the parallels between this scene and the mythological voyeurs Freyr and Skaði, see Roberta Frank, 'Onomastic Play in Kormákr's Verse: The Name Steingerðr', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 3 (1970), 7–34; John Lindow, 'When Skaði Chose Njǫrðr', in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland*, ed. by Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2008), pp. 165–81.

a duel with Kormákr (*ÍF* 8, pp. 239–40; cf. *SkP* 5, pp. 1070–72). Unlike the Gnúpsdalr episode, in which the chronology and intended audience of the *lausavísur* are frequently at odds with the saga prose, there is reasonable alignment between poetry and prose in most of these examples.<sup>30</sup> Apart from Bersi's verse and one of Kormákr's, they all address a female audience in the second person with the clear intention of winning her approval. Steingerðr's appearances as the recipient of these verses has nevertheless been interpreted as perfunctory. As O'Donoghue points out, she elicits Bersi's verse with a query – 'hon spurði, hversu farit hafði' (*ÍF* 8, p. 239: 'She asked how it had gone') – of the kind that 'can be used [...] easily and successfully to incorporate into the narrative any strophe which is not actually discrepant with the saga prose, but which may not be linked directly to the immediate narrative'.<sup>31</sup> Steingerðr's decision to attend Kormákr's duel with Þorvarðr Eysteinnsson, her husband's brother, can likewise be explained simply as a way to provide an appropriate audience for Kormákr's three verses about the event.<sup>32</sup>

Although intradiegetic audiences are often used to 'stage' *lausavísur* in this way, Steingerðr's appearances are not necessarily so mechanical.<sup>33</sup> Rather, Steingerðr's responses to Kormákr's peacocking are evidently intended to be meaningful for their relationship, for she consistently refuses to respond to his performances positively. On the first occasion, she remarks that Kormákr behaves 'óvarliga' (*ÍF* 8, p. 220: 'unwarily') and, on the next, replies to him as follows: 'Mæl þú eigi svá mikit um, [...] mart má því bregða' (*ÍF* 8, p. 222: 'Do not speak so much about it; a great deal may cause this [situation] to change'). After Kormákr's verses at the duel with Þorvarðr, the saga author records only a brief response from Steingerðr to Kormákr's request that she leave with him: 'hon kvazk munu skipa um menn' (*ÍF* 8, p. 287: 'She said she would decide on her arrangements with men'). The brevity of

<sup>30</sup> On the prosimetric inconsistencies in the Gnúpsdalr episode, see O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, pp. 18–36.

<sup>31</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Clunies Ross, *Poetry in Sagas*, pp. 93–97.

these reactions should not undermine their significance. Steingerðr's repudiation is not so much a withdrawal of her gaze, but rather an expression of the fact that Kormákr consistently comes up short in her eyes. For O'Donoghue, Steingerðr becomes a 'shadowy, even inscrutable figure' over the course of the saga, and she criticises the author for failing to fully develop Steingerðr's transition from the youthful girl, teasing Kormákr with her toes and twinkling eyes, to the disillusioned older woman one sees in these responses.<sup>34</sup> Whilst some of Steingerðr's other actions, such as her abrupt decision to follow Kormákr abroad (*ÍF* 8, p. 293), suggest a fickle attitude towards her skaldic lover, she is nevertheless consistent in repudiating his vainer performances. If, then, Kormákr is drawing on a skaldic convention by inviting his lover's gaze in this way, it is a strategy that backfires significantly, prompting Steingerðr to be more ambivalent than approving, and more active in dismissing him.

Not all spectating lovers prove to be so judgemental of their skaldic counterparts. Helga in fagra Þorsteinsdóttir of *Gunnlaugs saga*, for example, is renowned for her potent gaze, but it lacks a critical edge when she directs it on her lover Gunnlaugr. Like the apostrophised women in skaldic poetry, Helga's supposed passivity has long been a hallmark in critical appraisals of her character, with Else Mundal writing that 'ikkje i alle islendingesoger er kvinnene like passive som Helga i *Gunnlaugs saga*' ('nowhere in all the sagas of Icelanders are the women as passive as Helga in *Gunnlaugs saga*').<sup>35</sup> Differing from this perspective, Jacobs and Meulengracht Sørensen acknowledge the influence that Helga is able to exert within her community via her gaze.<sup>36</sup> This is exemplified when, at a feast in Skáney following her marriage to Hrafn, Helga makes such a public display of gazing at Gunnlaugr that bystanders readily interpret her continued love for him, and her corresponding

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<sup>34</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 183.

<sup>35</sup> Else Mundal, 'Føreord', in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1980), pp. 5–27 (p. 18). See further the summary of other scholarly commentary on Helga's passivity in Jacobs, pp. 148–49.

<sup>36</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'The Individual and Social Values in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 60 (1988), 247–66 (pp. 257–58); Jacobs, pp. 159–60.

disrespect for her husband (*ÍF* 3, p. 89). The saga author emphasises the power of Helga's gaze elsewhere too, as evinced in her famous exchange with Gunnlaugr by the Øxará river: 'Ok er þeir gengu austr yfir ána, þá stóð Helga ok starði á Gunnlaug lengi eptir' (*ÍF* 3, p. 97: 'And when they [Gunnlaugr and his brother Hermundr] had crossed the river eastwards, Helga stood and stared at Gunnlaugr for a long time afterwards'). This prompts Gunnlaugr to extemporise a verse, the same one, in fact, that Kormákr composes about Steingerðr's hawk-sharp gaze, beginning 'Brámáni skein brúna' and quoted above. Whether or not the scholarly consensus is right to deem this an act of appropriation by the author of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the verse is used effectively to develop the theme of the female gaze.<sup>37</sup> Jacobs highlights the saga author's use of the verb *stara*, which appears similarly situated in the Gnúpsdalr episode in *Kormáks saga* (see *ÍF* 8, pp. 209–10), but which is much rarer than *líta* ('to look') or *sjá* ('to see'), and whose connotations 'border on the intrusive and threatening'.<sup>38</sup> Gunnlaugr is correspondingly rendered passive by the power of Helga's vision, construing himself, like Kormákr, as the helpless recipient to its tragic consequences. As Jacobs argues, Gunnlaugr's focus on the brightness of Helga's gaze also contrasts with his comments on his characteristic black eyes from his previous *lausavísa* (*ÍF* 3, p. 96; *SkP* 5, p. 856).<sup>39</sup> In optical terms, he is quite literally outshined by her here.

In prospect, Gunnlaugr is an excellent subject for Helga's gaze, since he is continually presented as being conscious to keep up appearances. During the Skáney feast episode, the saga author comments: 'Gunnlaugr var þá vel búinn ok hafði þá klæðin þau in góðu, er Sigtryggr konungr gaf honum, ok þótti hann þá mikit afbragð annarra manna fyrir margs

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<sup>37</sup> Poole, e.g., contends that in *Kormáks saga* 'the verse forms part of a coherent sequence in which the speaker predicts that his love at first sight will lead to pain and grief', whilst in *Gunnlaugs saga* 'the pain and grief have already come to pass and so [...] gives the distinct impression of having been lifted from a different context'. See Poole, 'Verses and Prose', p. 162. See further Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson's notes in *ÍF* 3, p. 97; Russell G. Poole, 'Compositional Technique in Some Verses from *Gunnlaugs saga*', *JEGP*, 80 (1981), 469–85 (pp. 481–82).

<sup>38</sup> Jacobs, p. 160.

<sup>39</sup> Jacobs, p. 160.

sakar, bæði afls ok vænleiks ok vaxtar' (*ÍF* 3, p. 89: 'Gunnlaugr was well dressed at the time, and was wearing the good clothes that King Sigryggr had given him, and he seemed very markedly superior to other men for many reasons, both in physical strength and appearance and stature'). Following his father's advice to behave aloofly – 'ok mun þik aldri konur skorta' (*ÍF* 3, p. 89: 'And you will never be short of women') – Gunnlaugr has evidently prepared himself carefully for onlookers, showing off both his natural good looks and the cultural capital he has gained overseas. Who, however, is Gunnlaugr trying to impress? Helga's proclivity for gazing might make her the obvious candidate, but the person or people who deem Gunnlaugr 'markedly superior' are not explicitly identified. In this regard, it is important to note the recurrent significance of anonymous onlookers in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Earlier in the story, Gunnlaugr contrives a mock marriage between himself and Helga, presumably hoping, before Helga's father dispels the possibility, that the ceremony will have some validity (*ÍF* 3, p. 60). On this occasion, the saga author notes: 'varð mǫnnum mikit gaman at þessu, þeim er við váru staddir' (*ÍF* 3, p. 60: 'There was a lot of pleasure in this for the people who were present'). Another instance of mock performance occurs later in the saga when Gunnlaugr sees two Norwegian players impersonating himself and Hrafn in a simulated duel (*ÍF* 3, pp. 99–100). Here, the spectators are given indirect speech to summarise the event's humiliating qualities: 'Þeir mæltu, er hjá stóðu, at Íslendingar hyggi smátt ok væri seinir til at muna orð sín' (*ÍF* 3, p. 100: 'Those who stood by said that the Icelanders struck weakly and were slow to remember their words'). As these examples demonstrate, the world of *Gunnlaugs saga* is evidently one of many eyes and ears, in which the actions of its principal characters are perceived by a broad and vigilant intradiegetic audience.

These evaluative gazes seem overall to weigh heavier upon Gunnlaugr than do Helga's. To return to the *Øxará*, whilst emphasis is placed on Helga's gaze via Gunnlaugr's

verse and the saga author's striking lexical choices, it does not motivate Gunnlaugr towards the saga's tragic conclusion. It is rather Hrafn that proposes the fatal duel (*ÍF* 3, p. 98), and Hrafn who admits to jealousy as his primary motivation for doing so (*ÍF* 3, p. 102). By contrast, Gunnlaugr appears in no hurry to fight his love rival; after being 'síðbúinn mjök' (*ÍF* 3, p. 99: 'very late in preparing') to leave Iceland, Gunnlaugr spends a summer raiding with Eiríkr jarl of Hlaðir, delaying the duel for a year longer than planned. Tellingly, Gunnlaugr only hurries to meet Hrafn after seeing the mock duel in Norway and hearing the spectators' accusations of his implicit cowardice. Elsewhere, Gunnlaugr's verses recurrently reveal his preoccupation with the other spectators of the love triangle between himself, Helga and Hrafn. When, for example, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld makes Gunnlaugr aware of Helga's marriage to Hrafn, Gunnlaugr replies:

Meir séumk hitt, en hæru  
hoddstríðandi bíðit,  
orð, at eigi verðak  
jafnröskr taliðr Hrafn.<sup>40</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 839: 'I am more afraid of that word, that I am not reckoned as brave as Hrafn, than that the hoard-harmer [> GENEROUS ONE = Gunnlaugr] will not wait to be hoary-haired [i.e. might die young].')

Later, in a verse addressed directly to Helga, Gunnlaugr swaps Hrafn for Helga's father as the primary object of his disdain:

Lítt sá hqlðr inn hvíti  
(hornþeys) faðir meýjar  
(gefin vas Eir til aura  
ung) við minni tungu.<sup>41</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 846: 'The white man, the girl's father [= Þorsteinn], saw little in my speech. The Eir of the horn-thaw [> WOMAN = Helga] was married young for gold.')

<sup>40</sup> Whaley supplies the MS reading 'bíði' ('will wait') with the negative suffix '-t' to produce 'bíðit' (l. 2: 'will not wait'), which more strongly supports the logic of Gunnlaugr's claim. See further *SkP* 5, p. 841.

<sup>41</sup> Following previous editors, Whaley emends MS 'hjørþeys' ('of sword-thaw [> BATTLE]') to 'hornþeys' (l. 2: 'of horn-thaw [> DRINK]') to produce a woman kenning with Eir (l. 3: a name used for both valkyries and a goddess). See further *SkP* 5, pp. 846–47.

Despite the potential power in Helga's gaze, Gunnlaugr is evidently more intent on performing for other observers, supporting the argument that love tends to be subordinate to male rivalry within the skald sagas.<sup>42</sup>

This manifests also in the couple's relationship as a skaldic performer and audience. The saga author frames Helga as an intradiegetic audience to only two of Gunnlaugr's verses, including the *helmingr* quoted above. In the verse immediately following this *helmingr*, Gunnlaugr makes his sole uses of the vocative to address Helga – 'Væn vín-Gefn' (*SkP* 5, p. 848: 'Beautiful wine-Gefn [> WOMAN]') – and identifies her father Þorsteinn in the second person: 'faðir þín' (*SkP* 5, p. 848: 'Your father'). These phrases represent the only intra-poetic evidence situating Helga as an intended audience of Gunnlaugr's verse. Even in these verses, Gunnlaugr's attention is divided, his criticism of Helga's father and mother overshadowing both his compliment for her beauty and his gift of a valuable cloak. Where, as one might expect of Steingerðr for instance, other romantic audiences repudiate such behaviour, Helga's reaction seems to express only contentment: 'Hon þakkaði honum vel gjöfina' (*ÍF* 3, pp. 90–91: 'She thanked him warmly for the gift'). The scholarly perception of Helga as passive, I would argue, derives from this apparent capacity to tolerate Gunnlaugr's petulance in all its extremes. Her tolerance can nevertheless also be seen as an expression of her dominant and persistent love for Gunnlaugr, which, as Sävborg argues, is unexampled in other saga love affairs.<sup>43</sup> In this light, the power of Helga's gaze, and Gunnlaugr's apparent ambivalence towards it, are not necessarily contradictory. Helga's gaze is not judgemental as in skaldic convention. It is rather an expression of her devotion to Gunnlaugr at the expense of all other individuals and social values. Correspondingly, if unfortunately, Gunnlaugr's

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<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Finlay, 'European Contexts', p. 235; Jochens, 'Gender Relations', p. 331.

<sup>43</sup> Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 388, 393.

impulse is to seek affirmation in the eyes of others. Perhaps, like Steingerðr, Helga needed to subscribe to the long-standing strategy of treating Gunnlaugr mean to keep him keen.

The cases analysed in this sub-section affirm Frank's contention that the apostrophised women of skaldic convention can be realised as 'full participant[s]' in saga narratives.<sup>44</sup> Whilst the spectating role is frequently preserved in this process, it is evidently developed according to the personalities and functions of the characters that inhabit it. Where Helga's gaze represents an emphatic affirmation of her love for Gunnlaugr, threatening not his status but that of her male relatives, Steingerðr's is a withering expression of her dissatisfaction with Kormákr. These perspectives also fit naturally with how Helga and Steingerðr receive skaldic verse. Where Gunnlaugr, assured of Helga's affections, pays her scant attention in his poetry, Kormákr's inability to fulfil Steingerðr prompts him to dedicate more verse to her than any other skald manages for his romantic audience.<sup>45</sup> If, as my analysis would suggest, the saga authors were drawing on skaldic conventions in depicting these relationships, they evidently chose to treat the role of the female spectator more flexibly. In *Kormáks saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, this results in renewed affirmations of the power of the female gaze, counterbalanced by its ability to express individual subjectivity.

#### 4.1.2 Unfulfilled Lovers

As noted above, male rivalry features consistently across the *skáldasögur*, occasionally becoming so prominent as to seemingly subsume the romantic plotline. As Andersson and others have shown, the skald's antagonistic and romantic relationships often connect as part of a love triangle, in which the rival succeeds in winning the woman the skald loves, without

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<sup>44</sup> Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women', p. 60.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women', p. 60.



necessarily winning her affection.<sup>46</sup> In this light, should a skald fail to impress his romantic audience, the natural corollary is for him to attempt to subvert her opinion of the rival.

Leading on from the discussion of Steingerðr in the previous sub-section, an initial example can be drawn from *Kormáks saga*:

Einn morgin snimma ríðr Kormákr frá skipi, ferr at finna Steingerði ok talar við hana, biðr hana gera sér skyrtu. Hon kvað enga þörf kvámu hans, kvað Þorvald eigi mundu þola hefndalaust eða frændr hans. Kormákr kvað vísu:

Mákak hitt of hyggja,  
hví þú skyldir verða,  
gullhlaðs geymipella,  
gefín tindráttar manni;  
trauðla mák of tēja  
tanna, silki-Nanna,  
síz þik fastnaði frægja  
faðir þinn blotamanni.<sup>[47]</sup>

Steingerðr mælti: ‘Auðheyrðr er fjándskapr í slíku, ok man ek segja Þorvaldi hróp þitt, ok er slíkt engum manni sitjanda.’

(*ÍF* 8, p. 264: ‘Early one morning, Kormákr rides from the ship, goes to meet Steingerðr, talks with her, and asks her to make him a shirt. She said there was no need in his coming, and that neither Þorvaldr nor his kinsmen would endure it unavenged. Kormákr spoke a verse:

“I cannot comprehend this, why you, guardian-fir of gold-lace [> WOMAN = Steingerðr], must be married to a tin-worker [i.e. Þorvaldr]; I can hardly produce a smile with my teeth, silk-Nanna [> WOMAN = Steingerðr], since your father betrothed you, famous one, to a craven man.”

Steingerðr said: “There is clear hostility in this, and I will report your slander to Þorvaldr, and this is not to be endured by any man.”)

By this stage in the saga, as O’Donoghue argues, Kormákr’s concerns are more centred on the ignobility of Steingerðr’s partner, rather than the fact of her being married to another man.<sup>48</sup> In this scene, however, his residual desire to test Steingerðr’s feelings is apparent in his request for her to make him a shirt, which would be a symbol of affection.<sup>49</sup> When she rejects him, Kormákr adjusts his approach, targeting Þorvaldr with accusations of cowardice.

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<sup>46</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, ‘Skald Sagas in Their Literary Context 3: The Love Triangle Theme’, in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell G. Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), pp. 272–84 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110823547-010>>; Jenny Jochens, ‘Triangularity in the Pagan North: The Case Of Björn Argeirsson and Þórðr Kolbeinsson’, in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. by Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland, 1999), pp. 111–34; Jochens, ‘Gender Relations’.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *SkP* 5, p. 1114. Marold’s edition of this verse does not differ significantly from Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s Íslensk fornrit version, only adjusting ‘gull-’ (l. 3: ‘gold’) to the earlier spelling ‘goll-’.

<sup>48</sup> O’Donoghue, *Genesis*, pp. 111–13.

<sup>49</sup> Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 57–60.

Kormákr's comments on the vulgarity of Þorvaldr's occupation are a running theme in his poetry (see *SkP* 5, pp. 1118, 1125, 1156–57), and their juxtaposition in this verse with compliments for Steingerðr's reputation and rich clothing highlights the social inequality he perceives in their relationship. The absence of internal rhyme in several of the lines (only ll. 3 and 6 respectively employ *skothending* and *aðalhending*), three of which are also extrametrical, may also be intended to convey the unnaturalness of the marriage. In this way, the verse simultaneously affirms and diminishes Steingerðr, for it demonstrates the social superiority that she is meanwhile wasting with Þorvaldr. Steingerðr's reply represents a robust defence, affirming her commitment to Þorvaldr and thereby protecting his honour. Although there is a natural element of self-interest in her response since her social status is now tied to Þorvaldr's, she is also consistent in repudiating similar instances of interference from Kormákr, as discussed previously. This pattern of performer-audience interaction – skaldic verses denigrating a rival, followed by repudiation from the romantic audience – is a typical one, as the following analyses of *Hallfreðar saga* and *Bjarnar saga* demonstrate.

*Hallfreðar saga* provides an infamous example of this dynamic when Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld denigrates his rival Gríss Sæmingsson while in bed with Kolfinna Ávaldadóttir (*ÍF* 8, pp. 181–82). This pillow-talk setting, together with its use of *lausavísur*, has analogues in *Kormáks saga* (*ÍF* 8, pp. 272–76), and to a lesser extent in *Gunnlaugs saga* (*ÍF* 3, pp. 88–89) and *Bjarnar saga* (*ÍF* 3, pp. 149–50). In all these scenes, the setting is intimate and private, providing a space in which the skald and his beloved can communicate without being observed. Hallfreðr performs three verses attacking Gríss, the first two of which focus on his sexual relationship with Kolfinna:

Leggr at lýsibrekku  
 leggjar íss af Grísi  
 – kvöl þolir Hlín hjá hönnum –  
 heitr ofremmðar sveiti.

En dreypilig drúpir  
dýnu Rón hjá hönunum  
– leyfík ljóssa vífa  
lund – sem qlpt á sundi.

(*SkP* 5, p. 896: ‘Hot powerful sweat from Gríss lies on the bright-slope of the ice of the arm [> WOMAN = Kolfinna]; Hlín [> WOMAN = Kolfinna] endures torment next to him. And the dripping Rán of the feather-bed [> WOMAN = Kolfinna] droops next to him, like a swan swimming. I praise the bright woman’s temper.’)

Þrammar, svá sem svimmi  
sílafullr, til hvílu,  
fúrskerðandi fjarðar,  
fúlmör á troð böru,  
áðr an orfa stríðir  
ófríðr þorir skríða,  
– hann esa hlaðs við Gunni  
hvílubráðr – und vǫðir.

(*SkP* 5, p. 897: ‘The diminisher of the fjord’s fire [> MAN = Gríss] lumbers to bed like a herring-full fulmar, swimming on the path of the wave [> SEA], before the ugly harmer of the scythe-handle [> MAN = Gríss] dares to creep under the sheets. He is not bed-hasty with the Gunnr of lacework [> WOMAN = Kolfinna].’)

Here, Hallfreðr produces a grotesque and somewhat contradictory image of Gríss’s physicality. As Wilson highlights, the offensiveness of Gríss’s sexuality is depicted differently in the two verses, the first portraying him as laboriously libidinous, whilst in the second he rudely lacks sexual desire.<sup>50</sup> This aspect of Hallfreðr’s denigration is supported by a subtle subversion of Germanic legend, in which the poet parodies the topos of the marital bed death. Exemplified most famously in the legend of Brynhildr’s revenge against Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Guðrún Gjúkadóttir (see, e.g., *Eddukvæði* 2, pp. 335–48), this motif typically sees a wife awaken covered in the blood of her murdered husband. Here, the wife’s grief is swapped for repulsion, and the blood of the heroic husband for the sweat of an old labourer, a substitution further supported by the fact that the word *sveiti* can refer to either bodily fluid. The pillow-talk setting also corresponds neatly with this slanderous strategy, for it embodies the kind of physical intimacy that Gríss is portrayed as ruining so emphatically. By replacing Gríss in this setting, Hallfreðr presumably hopes to imply his own sexual superiority.

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<sup>50</sup> Alexander J. Wilson, ‘Let the Right Skald In: Unwanted Guests in Sagas of Poets’, in *Unwanted: Neglected Approaches, Characters, and Texts in Old Norse in Icelandic Saga Studies*, ed. by Andreas Schmidt and Daniela Hahn (Munich: utzverlag, 2021), pp. 28–56 (p. 45).

Hallfreðr's defamation of Gríss is further reinforced by his attempt to alter Kolfinna's role as an audience. Preceding the actual recitation of the verses, Hallfreðr asks Kolfinna about her love with Gríss, which she affirms, but he suggests otherwise, claiming that Kolfinna has been composing verses about her husband. Although the verses' speaking persona and the subsequent prosecution of Hallfreðr (*ÍF* 8, p. 187) make the fallacy of this claim obvious, it nevertheless subverts the immediate dynamic of the scene. Suddenly, with Kolfinna as the original composer, Hallfreðr becomes only a broadcaster of public rumour, albeit the repetition of scurrilous rumours was still a dangerous act (cf. section 3.1.1). This seems superficially like an attempt to make Kolfinna complicit in insulting Gríss, and yet, as Wilson rightly argues, Hallfreðr's claim also threatens Kolfinna's reputation in the community, since it 'blurs the distinctions between the public realm and that which should be kept private'.<sup>51</sup> Like the content of Hallfreðr's verses, the claim can also be interpreted as parodic, since it subverts the conventional means by which erotic poetry was composed and disseminated. As noted earlier, *Grágás* proscribes only against men composing *mansöngur* about women, and does not even consider the possibility of women composing similar verse about men. Whilst Hallfreðr's insulting verses would not seem to fall within the remit of *mansöngur* – the version of this scene in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, in fact, specifically distinguishes between Hallfreðr composing 'mansöng til Kolfinnu ok ósæmðarorðum við Grís' (*ÍF* 8, pp. 183–84: '*mansöngur* for Kolfinna and words of dishonour against Gríss') – their erotic content becomes more subversive when placed in the mouth of a female speaker. Whilst this authorship claim, together with its implication of a broader pre-existing audience for his verses, is naturally devoid of substance, Hallfreðr's contempt for the truth accords with his aim to unsettle Kolfinna. Taking advantage of her hospitality, Hallfreðr proceeds to play with the conventions of both skaldic poetry and its performer-audience

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<sup>51</sup> Alexander Wilson 'Unwanted Guests', p. 45.

relationship. It is a statement of power corresponding with his true intention not to seduce Kolfinna, but, as Wilson argues, to insult, humiliate, and ultimately punish her via a sexual assault.<sup>52</sup>

Hallfreðr's abuse nevertheless meets with stern resistance. In the version of *Hallfreðar saga* in *Möðruvallabók* (composed c. 1330–70), the author gives the following direct speech to Kolfinna in response to the two verses quoted above: 'Ekki er slíkt bót annars, ok mikit undr, at hraustr maðr vill slíkt gera' (*ÍF* 8, p. 181: 'There is no other remedy for this, and it is astonishing that a valiant man wants to do this'); 'Ekki mun Gríss yrkja um þik, ok semði þér betr at óvingask eigi svá við hann, því at eigi veit, hvar manni mætir' (*ÍF* 8, p. 182: 'Gríss will not compose about you, and it would suit you better to not be so unfriendly towards him, because one never knows where one might meet someone'). The author of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* affords even more agency to Kolfinna in this lengthy response:

En er Hallfreðr stóð upp á morgininn, kvað hann nokkurar vísur, þær er eigi er þörf á at rita, bæði með mansöng til Kolfinnu ok ósæmdarorðum við Grís. Þá mælti Kolfinna: 'Þat er undarligt, er þú, vaskr maðr, vill svá illa kveða; hefir þú helzti mikla ósæmd gort Grísi, þó at þú smáir hann ekki með ófögnum verka, því at hann mun ekki kveða um þik, hann er maðr góðgjarn ok óáleitinn, ef honum eru eigi stórar skapraunir görvar. Hefir þú svá at eins þína sök til búit við hann bæði nú ok fyrr, at þér væri heldr heyriligt at bæta yfir við hann en at flimta hann, því at hann mun reynask hraustr karlmaðr, ef hann á eptir sínum hlut at sjá ok sé honum ósæmd boðin.'

(*ÍF* 8, pp. 183–84: 'And when Hallfreðr got up in the morning, he spoke some verses of which there is no need to write down, including both *mansöngr* for Kolfinna and words of dishonour against Gríss. Then Kolfinna said: "It is astonishing that you, a valiant man, want to compose in such an evil way. You have done great dishonour to Gríss – even though you do not scorn him with ugly deeds – especially because he will not compose about you. He is a good-willing and peaceful man, so long as no great tests are made on his temper. In your case, you have only acted against him both now and earlier in such a way that it would be better for you to make amends with him than to slander him, because he will prove to be a valiant man if he takes care of things in his own way and dishonour is given to him."')

The atypical length of Kolfinna's reaction in this version may be explained on one hand by the author's apparent distaste for Hallfreðr, signalled by the abrupt intrusion into the narrative to justify the absence of the Hallfreðr's verses. On the other, Kolfinna's lack of love for

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<sup>52</sup> Alexander Wilson, 'Unwanted Guests', pp. 45–46.

Hallfreðr is consistent across the traditions of their relationship, as Sävborg highlights.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in both versions of the scene, and in similar fashion to the passage from *Kormáks saga* quoted above, Kolfinna is quick to defend her husband. Her speeches, however, not only give more detail about her perception of the two rivals for her love, but also respond directly to the comparison that Hallfreðr has elicited between himself and Gríss. Whilst Kolfinna confirms her perception of Hallfreðr as ‘hraustr’ or ‘vaskr’, she also describes Gríss in similar terms, and adds, in comparison to Hallfreðr’s inflammatory behaviour, that Gríss would not compose insulting verse in the same way. As with Kormákr’s peacocking (see section 4.1.1), then, the way in which Hallfreðr attempts to influence Kolfinna backfires emphatically. In one of the most developed responses by any of the romantic audiences in the *skáldasögur*, Kolfinna accepts Hallfreðr’s invitation to compare him to Gríss and quickly judges him inferior to her husband.

Competition between male rivals is even more central to *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, the last of the *skáldasögur* to be discussed in this section. Whilst, as several scholars note, the text’s male rivalry eventually eclipses the romantic plotline more completely than in any other skald saga, the two strands come together explosively in the episode where Björn stays with Þórðr, his love rival for Oddný eykyndill Þorkelsdóttir, for a particularly fractious winter stay at Þórðr’s farmstead in Hítarnes (*ÍF* 8, pp. 139–50).<sup>54</sup> This section contains the saga’s highest concentration of *lausavísur*, mostly comprising adversarial comments between Björn and Þórðr. Despite the enmity between the two and their mutual reluctance to conceal it, it is equally clear that Björn’s winter stay is inescapable once it begins. On two occasions, arguments between the rivals prompt Þórðr to extemporise *fornyrðislag* verses urging Björn to leave – ‘Út skaltu ganga’ (*SkP* 5, pp. 66, 77: ‘Out you must go!’) – but Björn is insistent on

<sup>53</sup> Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, p. 434.

<sup>54</sup> Finlay, ‘European Contexts’, p. 236; Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, p. 370.

staying – ‘Hér munk sitja’ (*SkP* 5, p. 66: ‘Here I will sit’).<sup>55</sup> Neither man can back down without appearing cowardly, and the result is a claustrophobic setting and hotbed for the production of skaldic invective, not dissimilar to the intimate scene from *Hallfreðar saga* just discussed.

The physical proximity of the love triangle is nevertheless different here, for the author’s focus is less on the intimacy between Björn and Oddný. The implication, for example, that the two sleep together during the winter stay can only be detected in Björn’s verses, one of which sees him comment euphemistically on Oddný’s desire ‘at mæla’ (*SkP* 5, p. 67: ‘to talk’) with him.<sup>56</sup> In another verse, he implies that he fathered Oddný’s son Kolli, but this is set later in the saga (*ÍF* 3, pp. 171–72). The saga author is silent on this matter and, on the one occasion that Björn and Oddný appear to have some privacy, notably focuses on Þórðr, who creeps back into the house and attempts to hear their conversation (*ÍF* 3, p. 141). Since Oddný’s affection for Björn is never really in doubt in *Bjarnar saga* – Sävborg remarks that it is ‘osedvanligt stark’ (‘unusually strong’) – the author’s attention shifts towards the impact of their relationship on Þórðr, and indeed the other members of his household.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, whilst the saga author frames Oddný as present for many of the *lausavísur* Björn extemporises during his stay, she is never their sole audience. This is captured effectively by the scene in which Þórðr vaunts his relationship with Oddný over Björn, placing her on his knee, kissing her, and extemporising a verse that emphasises his success in beating Björn to her love (*ÍF* 3, p. 142; see *SkP* 5, p. 68). The performance is intentionally provocative and Björn accepts the challenge, escalating the exchange with three verses that remind Þórðr of his cowardice when Björn ambushed him on the Brenneyjar (*ÍF* 3, pp. 143–

<sup>55</sup> On the inconsistency in Þórðr inviting Björn to stay and then incongruously asking him to leave, see Marold, ‘Verses and Prose’, p. 98.

<sup>56</sup> Like gifts of clothing, ‘the “talk” formula’, to quote Sävborg, is a sign of romance between men and women in saga literature. See Daniel Sävborg, ‘The Formula in Icelandic Saga Prose’, *Saga-Book*, 42 (2018), 51–86 (p. 64). Cf. Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 45–51.

<sup>57</sup> Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, p. 365.

44; see *SkP* 5, pp. 69–72). In these verses, Björn’s attention barely wavers from Þórðr, addressing him with a vocative expression in each, and with four other uses of the second person. In the middle verse, Björn addresses Þórðr as ‘litill sveinn’ (*SkP* 5, p. 70: ‘little lad’), casting his rival, as Wilson argues, not only ‘as insufficiently manly, but also impl[ying] that he is incapable of fulfilling the role of husband because of his supposed immaturity’.<sup>58</sup> For Wilson, this, and instances like the one in which Þórðr snoops on Björn and Oddný’s conversation, give Björn the ammunition to reconstrue his and Þórðr’s relationships to Oddný, ‘fram[ing] Þórðr as an unwanted outsider and [...] supplanting his host’s position’.<sup>59</sup>

This argument eloquently captures the duality of Björn and Þórðr, whose opposing positions on the spectrum of manliness, as de Looze posits, seemingly offer the potential for one to replace the other in Oddný’s affections.<sup>60</sup> Wilson’s perspective should be refined, however, in light of the fact that Björn’s excruciating focus on Þórðr is not replicated for Oddný. Across the eleven verses that Björn composes during the winter stay, he never addresses Oddný in the vocative or second person, only ever referring to her in the third person. Whilst these verses express sympathy for Oddný’s discontent (*SkP* 5, p. 79), and praise her wisdom (*SkP* 5, p. 64) and personality (*SkP* 5, p. 74), they never contrive the kind of performer-audience intimacy that one finds at some stage in all the other *skáldasögur* love affairs. Perhaps the greatest indictment against Björn’s respect for Oddný as his romantic audience is the fact that he does dedicate a love poem of sorts to her – the ‘Eyknðilsvísur’ (‘Island-Candle Verses’) cited previously (see section 3.1.2) – but this is used as a scurrilous insult against Þórðr and is publicly broadcast via its performance at a horse fight at which Oddný is apparently absent (*ÍF* 3, p. 174). None of this poem’s content is quoted in the horse fight scene, although Marold, O’Donoghue, and Walter Heinrich Vogt have all argued that

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<sup>58</sup> Alexander Wilson, ‘Unwanted Guests’, pp. 50–51.

<sup>59</sup> Alexander Wilson, ‘Unwanted Guests’, p. 51.

<sup>60</sup> de Looze, ‘Poetic Process in *Bjarnarsaga*’, p. 483.



other of Björn's *lausavísur* containing the word 'eykyndill', Oddný's nickname, fit their prose contexts poorly in *Bjarnar saga*, suggesting the possibility of a once-independent love poem.<sup>61</sup> Finlay is nevertheless sceptical of this, and highlights the incoherence of the supposed poetic sequence once abstracted from its prose context.<sup>62</sup> Whatever the possible prehistory of the 'Eykyndilsvísur', the saga author's decision to situate it in a highly public context, without Oddný even featuring in the intradiegetic audience, is a clear sign of Björn's overwhelming attention on his rival. As indicated further by his response to Þórðr's boasting, Björn denigrates Þórðr not by focusing exclusively on Oddný as an audience, but by allowing his poetry to circulate in the broader community.

During the winter stay, in which events are localised to Þórðr's farmstead, this secondary audience is naturally comprised by the members of the household. Both exchanges of *fornyrðislag* verses, for example, occur when the household are gathered for evening activities. The second arises while Björn and Þórðr are socialising 'í bekk' (*ÍF* 3, p. 148: 'on the bench'), and the first is caused by Björn's interactions with some women (presumably Þórðr's female kin or servants), who then become witnesses to the exchange: 'Þórðr kom inn, ok hann sá, at Björn átti tal við konur. Þat var um kveld, ok var Björn kátr við þær. Þórðr kvað þetta' (*ÍF* 3, p. 140: 'Þórðr came in, and he saw that Björn was talking to women. It was the evening, and Björn was cheerful with them. Þórðr spoke this [verse]'). Several of the *dróttkvætt lausavísur* are similarly framed by the presence of bystanders, including Oddný (cf. *ÍF* 3, p. 145), but also two of Þórðr's daughters (*ÍF* 3, p. 150). How these secondary audiences receive Björn's verses is never stated, but their importance is highlighted by the saga author's recurrent interest in verse dissemination. This is exemplified most obliquely by Þorkell Dalksson's fatal conversation with his farmhand about Þórðr and Björn's insulting

<sup>61</sup> Marold, 'Verses and Prose', pp. 83–91; O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 124; Walther Heinrich Vogt, 'Die Bjarnar saga hítðœlakappa: Lausavísur, frásagnir, saga', *ANF*, 37 (1921), 27–79 (p. 49). Cf. Osborne, p. 69.

<sup>62</sup> Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations', p. 32.

poems (*ÍF* 3, pp. 168–70), as well as in the material discussed in chapter 3 (see section 3.1.2).

Utilising skaldic poetry’s inherent memorability and potential for re-performance, Björn exacerbates Þórðr’s denigration by making it as public as possible.

To return to Oddný, the intentional publicity of Björn’s performances seems to impact negatively on her role as the romantic audience. Sävborg notes Oddný’s absence from long stretches of the narrative following the winter stay episode, but the minimisation of her role is also evident there.<sup>63</sup> It is implied, for example, when Björn compromises rationing within the farmstead and Þórðr’s servants threaten to run away (*ÍF* 3, pp. 146–47), demonstrating his intention not only to disrupt Þórðr’s relationship with Oddný, but also other aspects of his rival’s life. Oddný’s dissatisfaction with the situation is demonstrated by her only response as an intradiegetic audience, which comes after Björn’s penultimate verse during the winter stay: ‘Oddný bað þá, at þeir skulu eigi yrkja um hana, ok talði eigi þetta vera sín orð’ (*ÍF* 3, p. 150: ‘Then Oddný ordered that they [Björn and Þórðr] must not compose about her, and said that this [i.e. the perspective expressed in Björn’s verse] was not her word’). Oddný’s response is a rejection of her collateral position in Björn and Þórðr’s rivalry, and hence an acknowledgement of her misuse as a skaldic audience. The author’s use of the preposition *um* (‘about’) is significant in this regard, since it places Oddný in a performer-audience relationship similar to that of the *mansöngur* composer and his female subject.<sup>64</sup> As in that relationship, Oddný is being composed *um* (‘about’), not *til* (‘to’), highlighting that she has no influence over the content of the rivals’ verses since she is not their intended audience.<sup>65</sup> Like Kolfinna, her status and agency within the wider community are correspondingly threatened. In this light, her negative response to Björn’s verse is as necessary as it is effective, for Þórðr and Björn relent from composing adversarial verses for the remainder of

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<sup>63</sup> Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, p. 370.

<sup>64</sup> *Grágás*, II, 184, § 238.

<sup>65</sup> On the *um/til* distinction, see further the conclusion of this chapter.

the winter stay. Given the almost-uncontrollable volatility of the rivalry at this stage in the saga, Oddný's ability to effect this temporary truce is in itself a striking affirmation of the influence romantic audiences are capable of delivering despite their marginalised position.

Overall, whilst Björn's strategy to publicise his denigration of Þórðr seems effective, it also contravenes the special attention that *skáldasögur* protagonists usually pay their romantic audiences. With the assurance of Oddný's affection, Björn's attention shifts away from the female gaze and concentrates on Þórðr's status in the community. Björn's focus on Þórðr is certainly connected to their roles as hostile audiences (see further section 3.1.2), and it might also be read in relation to the potential homoerotic relationship between the two, as is advanced primarily in Jochens's interpretation of the saga.<sup>66</sup> Björn and Þórðr's relationship may equally not be so unique, for Björn's neglect of his romantic audience in favour of other observers has parallels in *Gunnlaugs saga* (see section 4.1.1). Either way, it is clear that neither man is as intent on competing for a romantic audience as are Kormákr and Hallfreðr. Rather, their myopic and public feud causes some of the most grievous collateral damage in the *skáldasögur*. Aside from the eight men killed as a direct consequence, Oddný herself suffers a worse fate than any of Steingerðr, Kolfinna, or Helga, enduring a long depressive illness until her own death (*ÍF* 3, p. 206).

This sub-section and the previous have revealed previously under-explored parallels between the apostrophised women of skaldic convention and the romantic audiences of saga literature. Between these traditions, there is a similar awareness of the potential power of female gazes, and equally of attempts to manipulate them by male performers. The skalds' impulse in both their poetry and their depiction by saga authors is to respond to the female gaze by attempting to control it. In the longer and more democratic form of literature that the sagas represent, however, female subjectivity emerges in greater depth. Skalds' attempts to

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<sup>66</sup> Jochens, 'Triangularity'.

manipulate the perceptions of their romantic audiences, both about themselves and their rivals, largely fall on deaf ears, with Steingerðr and Kolfinna's responses representing particularly uncompromising expressions of their agency. Helga and Oddný, who are distinguished by their relatively unchanging affection for their skaldic counterparts, share a gaze that differs in quality, threatening not its object of desire, but anyone who might wish to control it. If, overall, the 'passive roles' indicated in the title of this section are the theoretical ideal for lovestruck skalds, the romantic audiences of the *skáldasögur* demonstrate how quickly they deteriorate in practice. These women, and the authors depicting them, supersede the traditions of their literary forebears, carving out space for audience perspectives despite ongoing attempts to marginalise them.

## 4.2 Why Women Address Skalds: Romantic Audiences in Active Roles

As the previous section has demonstrated, the romantic audiences of saga literature are female players in a male-dominated game. In isolation, skaldic poetry was overwhelmingly practised by men and, despite extant records of female skalds, the artform tends to distinguish between the masculine and feminine spheres as being respectively familiar and Other. In skaldic verse, 'woman' is elevated to the mythic plane via her portrayal as goddess, valkyrie, or giantess, but such transfigurations cannot override her passive position; she remains overwhelmingly a patroness, recipient, and audience, rather than a performer in her own right.<sup>67</sup> This situation is paralleled in the romantic contexts of the *Íslendingasögur*, in which men tend to be given the active role in pursuing erotic desire, and male relatives wield primary control over a woman's marriage arrangements, although this is not necessarily absolute.<sup>68</sup> When they receive skaldic love poetry in these contexts, women therefore operate

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<sup>67</sup> See further Sayers, 'Blæju þöll', p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> See further Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 77 <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801455964>>; Bandlien, *Strategies*, pp. 2–5, 85–92. On modes of female power,

as subjects within two androcentric institutions, the skaldic and the romantic. As exemplified in research by Jochens, Clover, Jesch, Jóhanna Katrín, Kress, Bandlien, and many others cited elsewhere in this chapter, a great deal of scholarship has been devoted towards interrogating and deconstructing women's marginalised position within these institutions.<sup>69</sup> Many of these scholars, furthermore, highlight the Old Norse literary contexts in which women obtain greater agency, but female marginalisation has tended to dominate gender-centric discussions in skaldic scholarship.<sup>70</sup> Whilst this trend represents an important albeit rather depressing reflection of skaldic poetry's overarching gender dynamics, the exceptions to this rule, especially as they emerge in saga contexts, merit further attention than they have previously been afforded. The continued centring of male skaldic paramours in such saga accounts ensures that they would fail a modern 'Bechdel test'. Equally, however, the examples I discuss below represent a notable shift in emphasis from the material covered previously. Here, romantic audiences are afforded greater agency either to respond to skaldic performance or to engage in it themselves. In the following, I discuss several such cases, accounting for romantic audiences in both affirming and critical roles, and demonstrating how these roles cause relationships to shift between the female audience, her skaldic counterpart, and the wider community.

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especially as they are presented in the sagas, see, e.g., Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament'; Miller, *Bloodtaking*, pp. 212–13; Else Mundal, 'The Position of Women in Old Norse Society and the Basis for Their Power', *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 2 (1994), 3–11 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.1994.9959652>>.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. Jenny Jochens, 'Before the Male Gaze: The Absence of the Female Body in Old Norse', in *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1991), pp. 3–29 <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429056857-1>>; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*; Jochens, *Images of Women*; Jochens, 'Romance, Marriage, and Social Class'; Clover, 'Regardless'; Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Bodies, Words*; Kress, *Mattugar meyjar*; Helga Kress, *Fyrir dyrum fóstru: konur og kynferði í íslenskum fornbókmenntum* (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Rannsóknastofa í kvennafræðum, 1996); Bandlien, *Strategies*.

<sup>70</sup> E.g. Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women'; Fidjestøl, 'Lovely Ladies'; Sayers, 'Blæju þöll'; Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 93. Cf. some exceptions to this trend in Straubhaar; Solovyeva, 'Men's Business?'

#### 4.2.1 Affirming Lovers

The tumultuousness of the *skáldasögur* romances is in many ways their hallmark. The troughs of frustration and dejection that the lovers endure are accordingly counterbalanced by peaks of joy and unimpeded affection. Whilst the saga authors tend to convey these positive emotions through the verses of their male protagonists, there are also instances in which romantic audiences are afforded greater agency to express infatuation. This sub-section considers two such cases from *Kormáks saga* and *Víglundar saga*.

As the previous section demonstrated, Steingerðr's role as a romantic audience is defined primarily by repudiation of Kormákr's attempts to influence her. There is nevertheless a notable exception to this tendency, situated during the blissful ignorance of the couple's early romance, when their mutual affection is pitted against violent attempts to separate them by the sons of a local woman called Þorveig, and at the behest of Þorkell, Steingerðr's father. At this time, Kormákr's visits to Steingerðr become inherently dangerous, but the saga author nevertheless affords the couple intimate – and, as O'Donoghue drily remarks, 'improbable' – moments to converse, usually involving a verse or two by Kormákr.<sup>71</sup> One of these moments represents a significant deviation from Kormákr and Steingerðr's standard performer-audience relationship, in which the two each extemporise a *helmingr* expressing their desire to marry the other:

Þá kvað Kormákr vísu:

Hvern myndir þú hrundar  
Hlín skapfrömuð línu,  
líknsýnir mér lúka  
ljós, þér at ver kjósa?<sup>[72]</sup>

Steingerðr segir:

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<sup>71</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 46.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *SkP* 5, p. 1058.

Bræðr mynda ek blindum,  
bauglestir, mik festa,  
yrði goð sem gerðisk  
góð mér ok sköp, Fróða.<sup>[73]</sup>

(*ÍF* 8, pp. 222–23: ‘Then Kormákr spoke a verse:

“Which of Hrundr’s champions [> WARRIORS] will you, Hlín of linen [> WOMAN], choose as a husband for yourself? Comforting looks disclose brightness to me.”

Steingerðr says:

“I intend, ring-damager [> GENEROUS ONE], to betroth myself to Fróði’s brother [> Kormákr], [even if he were] blind, for however it goes, the gods and fates would have been good to me.”)

Steingerðr’s *helmingr* is the only verse spoken by a woman in the core *skáldasögur*. The uniqueness of the verse has caused many scholars to view it cynically, as exemplified in Finnur Jónsson’s derisive comment that ‘om Steingerds digterevne forlyder der ellers intet’ (‘nothing else is said about Steingerðr’s ability as a poet’) in *Kormáks saga*.<sup>74</sup> Whilst, as Einar Ól. Sveinsson notes, no sufficient arguments can be made either to affirm or dismiss Steingerðr’s authorship, there are factors that undermine the credibility of the verse in its current context.<sup>75</sup> It is strange, for example, that Steingerðr refers to Fróði, who is Kormákr’s brother only through his father Ögmundr’s previous wife Helga, and who dies before Ögmundr even leaves Norway (*ÍF* 8, p. 205). O’Donoghue highlights this, and also Steingerðr’s abrupt reference to blindness, which, she argues, places the verse more naturally in the Gnúpsdalr episode, when Steingerðr and her serving woman comment on Kormákr’s dark eyes (*ÍF* 8, p. 211).<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, as in the similar case of the appropriated Kormákr verse in *Gunnlaugs saga* (see section 4.1.1), Steingerðr’s allusion to blindness could be read as an intentional inversion of Kormákr’s comments on her own ‘líknsýnir’ (l. 4: ‘comforting looks’).

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. *SkP* 5, p. 1059.

<sup>74</sup> Finnur Jónsson, ‘Sagaernes Lausavísur’, *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, 1912, 1–57 (p. 11).

<sup>75</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Formáli’, in *ÍF* 8, pp. v–cxxiii (p. xci).

<sup>76</sup> O’Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 51.

Symmetry is indeed key to this exchange. The standard *dróttkvætt* stanza is neatly divided between the performance participants, with two kennings in each *helmingr*, and several words and rhymes mirrored between the verses. One notes the consonantal pair *-nd* that forms *skothening* in both opening lines, and the *ó* vowel that features in the *aðalhening* of both closing lines. The verb *muna* ('will') is repeated, whilst the pronouns *þú* and *ek*, and *þér* and *mér*, occupy the same syllabic positions in the first and final lines of each *helmingr*. Given these points of harmony, the distinction that O'Donoghue draws between the *helmingar* – that Kormákr's 'is not at all out of place in its narrative and immediate context', but that Steingerðr's 'originally belonged to the earlier part of the story, and is out of place in chapter 6' – is questionable.<sup>77</sup> Whilst it is plausible that both *helmingar* have been appropriated from other contexts, it is equally clear that, in their current situation, they function primarily through their interconnectedness, affirming the mutual and unified affection between Kormákr and Steingerðr at this stage in the saga.

The verses' current context, I contend, should also be considered regarding the doubts over Steingerðr's authorship. Whilst this issue will probably remain unresolvable, the significance of Steingerðr being afforded a poetic voice in this moment has been underappreciated, even more so if the verse was not originally hers. The author's decision (if it was theirs to make) to elevate Steingerðr beyond her usual role as the romantic audience is an effective way to hail the peak of her relationship with Kormákr. It is a celebration of true love, which overrides cultural expectations surrounding the couple's roles as, respectively, the active male suitor and poet, and the passive unmarried woman and audience. The socially subversive nature of this exchange is also emphasised by comparison to the proscription in *Jóns saga helga* against similar kinds of performances between members of opposing sexes:

Leikr sá var monnum tíðr er ófagrligr er, at kveðask skyldu at, karlmaðr at konu en kona at karlmanni, klækiligar vísur ok hæðiligar ok óáheyriligar. En þat lét hann af takast ok bannaði með öllu at gera.

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<sup>77</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 51.



Mansǫngs kvæði eða vísur vildi hann eigi heyra kveðin ok eigi láta kveða. Þó fekk <hann> því eigi með ǫllu af komit.<sup>78</sup>

(*ÍF* 15, II, p. 211: ‘That ugly practice was customary among people, in which a man had to exchange shameful verses, disgraceful and unacceptable, with a woman, and the woman with the man. But he [Bishop Jón] caused it to cease and banned anyone from doing it. He did not want to hear *mansǫngr* poems or verses spoken, and did not allow their recitation, though he did not get rid of them altogether.’)

Despite the differences in genre and setting that distinguish *Jóns saga* and *Kormáks saga*, the performance practices described in the two texts are nevertheless remarkably similar, and the connection is strengthened by *Kormáks saga*’s probable site of composition in Miðfjörður, close geographically, if not politically, to the literary centre in Þingeyrar that produced *Jóns saga*.<sup>79</sup> Given the instability of *mansǫngr* as a term (see introduction to chapter 4), there is no need to describe Kormákr and Steingerðr’s exchange in precisely that way. It is nevertheless plausible that the saga author’s depiction of their exchange could have been informed by the kind of twelfth-century practices described in *Jóns saga*. The perceived illicitness of these practices also fits the social disapproval that circulates around the *skáldasögur* romances, and might, in this case, forebode the inevitable collapse of Kormákr and Steingerðr’s relationship, since it finds expression primarily in illegitimate contexts. Authentic or not, Steingerðr’s *helmingr* therefore represents an effective literary device, capturing both the peak and potential downfall of her relationship with Kormákr via a sophisticated understanding of skaldic metrics and performance practices.

Active participation by the romantic audience is pushed to new heights in the late-fourteenth century *Víglundar saga*. This text pays homage to the core *skáldasögur* via its lovelorn poet-protagonist Víglundr, but is equally distinguished by its chivalric themes and happy ending, leading Marianne Kalinke to describe the saga as a ‘bridal-quest romance’.<sup>80</sup> Whaley argues alternatively for a compromise between generic terms:

<sup>78</sup> Alternative versions of this passage are given in Marold, ‘*Mansǫngr*’, pp. 250–251.

<sup>79</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Formáli’, pp. cvii–cviii.

<sup>80</sup> Marianne E. Kalinke, ‘*Víglundar saga*: An Icelandic Bridle-Quest Romance’, *Skáldskaparmál*, 3 (1994), 119–43.

This is not [...] a decadent outgrowth of the Sagas of Icelanders, but a transformation and hybridization of the genre by an author who clearly relished his literary freedom and used it to take a feud plot in an unusually optimistic direction.<sup>81</sup>

In Víglundr, however, the saga author has not ventured far from the classical model. Like his *skáldasögur* counterparts, Víglundr is hopelessly in love with a woman (in this case, Ketilríðr Holmkelsdóttir); expresses his love in verse addressed both to her and other confidants; goes abroad to raid and to promote himself in the Norwegian royal court; and engages in occasionally violent rivalry with the people who attempt to denigrate him and impede his relationship. Ketilríðr also resembles the romantic audiences of the *skáldasögur*, as evinced in the consistency of her love for Víglundr despite her marriages to other men; her awareness of the instability of their relationship while it remains illegitimate; and, of course, her role as a recipient of skaldic love poetry. She nevertheless outstrips the classical role of the romantic audience by being more active in expressing her feelings for Víglundr, which she does both in the saga's prose and verse. The two vellum manuscripts preserving *Víglundar saga*, AM 551 a 4to and AM 510 4to, differ in their record of Ketilríðr's poetry, the latter including a verse that the former lacks.<sup>82</sup> Whilst, as Jóhannes Halldórsson notes, AM 551 is usually considered to contain the better text, the amount of Ketilríðr's poetry contained within both manuscripts comprises a total – three *lausavísur* and one *helmingr* – that few other *skáldkonur* can match.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Diana Whaley, 'Introduction', in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, ed. by Diana Whaley (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. ix–xlv (p. xxxi).

<sup>82</sup> MSS details: Reykjavik, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 510 4to; Reykjavik, Handritasvið, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 510 4to.

<sup>83</sup> Jóhannes Halldórsson, 'Formáli', in *ÍF* 14, pp. v–lxxvi (p. xxxii). The only female skald (excluding the legendary and mythological figures that compose in eddic metres) that matches Ketilríðr's total output is Jörunn skáldmær, whose so-called *Sendibítur* (*SkP* 1, pp. 143–49; possibly 'Biting Message') comprises three half-stanzas and two full ones. See further surveys of Jörunn's poetry and that of other female skalds in *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, ed. by Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, Library of Medieval Women (Cambridge: Brewer, 2011) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81tbg>> [accessed 3 December 2022]; Jenny Jochens, 'At the Dawn of Nordic Literature: A Chorus of Female Voice', in *Female Voices of the North: An Anthology*, ed. by Inger M. Olsen, Sven Hakon Rossel, and Robert Nedoma, Wiener Texte Zur Skandinavistik, 1 (Wien: Edition Praesens, 2002), pp. 11–53.

If, as Jóhannes suspects, Ketilríðr's verses, and all the rest in *Víglundar saga*, were composed by the saga author, one must give due consideration to the author's choice to afford their female characters a more pronounced poetic voice relative to those of their *skáldasögur* antecedents.<sup>84</sup> Ketilríðr's verses are primarily mournful, lamenting her mistaken belief that Víglundr has drowned at sea (*SkP* 5, p. 1412); the imminent absence of Víglundr when he decides to travel abroad (*SkP* 5, p. 1422); and her marriage to an older man (*SkP* 5, p. 1430). In *Víglundar saga*, the female lover is therefore given license to express the kind of lovesickness that is usually reserved for the skaldic protagonist, and in the same poetic medium. Equally, this tendency is not inverted completely, as exemplified in the four *lausavísur* Víglundr composes while he is away from Iceland (*SkP* 5, pp. 1424–30; cf. *ÍF* 14, pp. 104–06).

Two of Ketilríðr's verses have a discernible intradiegetic audience. Most notable in this context is the performer-audience relationship elicited by Ketilríðr's final verse, set during the saga's climactic episode in which Víglundr (disguised as a man called Örn) is staying the winter with a certain Þórðr from Gautavík, to whom Ketilríðr has been betrothed. The verse in question is part of an exchange of *helmingar*, occasioned when Víglundr, distracted by thoughts of Ketilríðr, has just been checkmated by Þórðr in a board game:

Kom húsfreyja í stofuna ok sá á taflit ok kvað þenna vísuhelming:

Þoka mundir þú Þundar  
þinni töflu inn gjölfí,  
ráð eru tjalda tróðu,  
teitr at öðrum reiti.<sup>[85]</sup>

Bóndi leit til hennar ok kvað:

<sup>84</sup> Jóhannes, 'Formáli', p. xxv.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. *SkP* 5, p. 1438. Klaus Johan Myrvoll differs from Jóhannes's Íslenzk fornrit edition of this verse (and follows Finnur Jónsson) in emending the singular 'teitr' (l. 4: 'merrily') to plural 'teit', thereby associating the adjective with Ketilríðr's 'ráð' (l. 3: 'recommendations') rather than Víglundr's move.

Enn er mótsnúin manni  
men-Hlín í dag sínum;  
einskis má nema elli  
auð-Baldr frá þér gjalda.<sup>[86]</sup>

(*ÍF* 14, p. 111: ‘The housewife [Ketilríðr] came into the living room, looked at the board, and spoke this half-stanza:

“You, generous one [= Víglundr], will move your Þundr-piece merrily to another square; those are the recommendations of the prop of drapes [> WOMAN = Ketilríðr].”

The landowner looked at her and said:

“The necklace-Hlín [> WOMAN = Ketilríðr] is still turned against her man today; the wealth-Baldr [> MAN = Þórir] can give you nothing except old age.”)

The *helmingr*-exchange is immediately reminiscent of the one involving Kormákr and Steingerðr, but this scene is inversely predicated on a sense of asymmetry. Ironically, given the board-game setting, each character is one step out of place here. The ‘generous one’ Ketilríðr addresses affectionately is not her partner, both in the sense of the alternating *helmingar* and her imminent marriage, but Víglundr. He cannot, however, reciprocate Ketilríðr’s affection without appearing to undermine his host. In place of the reciprocating *helmingr* one would otherwise expect from Víglundr, Þórðr’s poetic reply stands as an awkward and gloomy admission of his status as an obstacle to Ketilríðr’s romantic fulfilment. The landowner’s blocking role is further reflected in his being Víglundr’s opponent in the board game. Playing such games is, as Sävborg highlights, yet another saga motif signalling burgeoning affection between a man and a woman, but Þórðr again stands in the place of the romantic counterpart, thereby projecting his love-rivalry with Víglundr onto their table-based competition.<sup>87</sup> As the winter stay progresses, Víglundr, unlike Björn (see section 4.1.2), actually goes to great lengths to avoid confronting Þórðr, even leaving the farmstead at one stage (*ÍF* 14, p. 114). Although the saga author soon reveals that Þórðr is actually Víglundr’s uncle Helgi, who has been keeping Ketilríðr safe so that the lovers can marry, the *helmingr*-

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<sup>86</sup> Cf. *SkP* 5, p. 1439.

<sup>87</sup> Sävborg, *Sagan om kärleken*, pp. 61–62.

exchange effectively captures Ketilríðr and Víglundr's undiminished affection at a point when it looks never to be fulfilled.

Ketilríðr's second *lausavísa* is also presented to an intradiegetic audience, in this case her father Hólmkell, who prompts the following response when he asks why she cannot sleep:

Skammt leidda ek skýran  
skrauta-Njörð ór garði;  
þó fylgdi hugr minn hánú  
hvers kyns konar lengra.  
Munda ek leitt hafa lengra  
ef land fyrir \*ægi væri,  
ok Ægis mór yrði  
allr at grænum velli.<sup>88</sup>

(*SkP* 5, p. 1422: 'I led the bright ornaments-Njörð [> WELL-DRESSED MAN = Víglundr] a little way out of the yard, although my spirit would have followed him for longer in every way; I would have led further if there was land for [i.e. instead of] sea, and the whole heath of Ægir [> SEA] had become a green field.')

This verse is somewhat incongruous with its prose context, since in the ensuing conversation Ketilríðr tells Hólmkell that her sorrow derives from her brothers' death rather than Víglundr's departure (*ÍF* 14, p. 100). This lends credence to Jóhannes's argument that the verse was probably not in the original text of *Víglundar saga*, and at the very least makes Hólmkell's role as Ketilríðr's audience somewhat perfunctory in this version of the text.<sup>89</sup>

As with Ketilríðr's other poetry, this verse also has an irregular rhyme scheme, with *aðalhending* and *skothending* either missing (ll. 1, 4, 6) or incomplete (ll. 2–3, 5, 7–8). Clunies Ross agrees with Klaus Johann Myrvoll (see *SkP* 5, p. 1409) that this may be a deliberate choice by the saga author, according with a broader tendency 'to give female characters simpler metrical forms or plain *dróttkvætt* stanzas with few kennings and other stylistic complexities'.<sup>90</sup> Clunies Ross subsequently argues that this tendency likely derives in

<sup>88</sup> Myrvoll follows Finnur Jónsson in emending MS 'lægi' ('bed', 'couch') to 'ægi' (l. 5: a *heiti* for 'sea'), thereby resolving the over-alliteration in l. 5. Myrvoll also follows Kock in emending MS 'mar' ('sea' or 'horse') to 'mór' (l. 6: 'heath', 'moor'), producing, in his view, a neater juxtaposition with the subsequent image of the 'green field'. See further *SkP* 5, pp. 1423–24.

<sup>89</sup> Jóhannes, p. xxv.

<sup>90</sup> Clunies Ross, *Poetry in Sagas*, p. 162, n. 17.

the scepticism medieval audiences would have taken towards female skalds. This argument is nevertheless weakened by the fact that the male poets in *Víglundar saga* are not presented as being much more technically competent than their female counterparts. Of the fourteen verses attributed to Víglundr, for example, only three (*SkP* 5, pp. 1413, 1424–26) conform completely to the standard *dróttkvætt* rhyme and alliteration schemes, and syllable count varies considerably even in these. The irregularity of Ketilríðr's verses may therefore have more to do with the style and capabilities of *Víglundar saga*'s author, or the trends in poetic composition and language change preceding the saga's composition, as Jóhannes suggests.<sup>91</sup> Either way, and as Clunies Ross acknowledges, the use of *dróttkvætt* remains 'a signal to the audience that [the verse in question] should be taken seriously'.<sup>92</sup> I would add that, on one hand, if the author has intentionally 'simplified' Ketilríðr's verses, their intention may have been to make them as accessible as possible to the extradiegetic audience, allowing for their emotional weight to be understood with minimal contemplation. On the other, the irregularity of Ketilríðr's poetry might also be seen as an intentional subversion of the *dróttkvætt* form, thereby affording her a distinctive poetic voice. Compare, for example, the exchange in *Kormáks saga* discussed above, in which the repeated words and rhymes in Steingerðr's *helmingr* make it seem almost like an echo of Kormákr's. By contrast, Ketilríðr's compositions are mostly monologues, with only the above *helmingr* addressed to Víglundr. If, accordingly, one reads Ketilríðr's verses as autonomous expressions, what seem like deficiencies become idiosyncracies, allowing Ketilríðr to present her emotions in words that are truly her own.

It is clear, in the general context of skaldic prosimetra, that Steingerðr's and Ketilríðr's performances are anomalous. Even taking into account Carolynne Larrington's

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<sup>91</sup> Jóhannes, p. xxiv.

<sup>92</sup> Clunies Ross, *Poetry in Sagas*, p. 165.

argument that younger texts like *Víglundar saga* ‘adapted and modified the innovative emotion scripts of [...] Arthurian translations, discussing love in ways that differ markedly from the mediations of heterosexual desire at stake in, for example, some of the poets’ sagas’, voices of female skalds are still rarely heard in the corpus as a whole, and rarer still are female expressions of love in *dróttkvætt*.<sup>93</sup> As noted earlier, the expectations placed on women in medieval Icelandic society would certainly have influenced this literary trend. This cultural backdrop, combined with the uniqueness of Steingerðr’s and Ketilríðr’s verses, makes the recurrent scholarly scepticism outlined in this sub-section unsurprising. Via a slight adjustment in perspective, however, the above analysis has demonstrated some of the narrative functions of the female skaldic voice, irrespective of its authenticity. Via a subtle use of echoing between *helmingar*, the exchange between Steingerðr and Kormákr demonstrates a harmonious but ultimately doomed relationship. Ketilríðr’s performances, on the other hand, are potentially more innovative in their irregularity, and certainly represent a more autonomous expression of female emotion. These characters go further than the spectating and unfulfilled lovers analysed in the previous section (4.1), not only pushing back against the androcentric aspects of skaldic performance, but also appropriating the medium for their own purposes.

#### 4.2.2 Critical Lovers

‘Óþarfar unnustur áttu;’ remarks Bersi Halldórsson, addressing his son Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, ‘hlauzt af annarri ørkuml þau, er þú verðr aldri heill maðr, en nú er eigi minni ván, at bæði augu springi ór höfði þér’ (*ÍF* 6, p. 176: ‘You have harmful girlfriends: from one you received a lasting wound, from which you have never fully healed, and now the

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<sup>93</sup> Larrington, p. 91. On the increased capacity for expressions of female subjectivity in later *Íslendingasögur*, see also Clunies Ross, *Poetry in Sagas*, p. 163.

no-smaller prospect that both your eyes might spring out of your head’). This comment is made in *Fóstbræðra saga*, one section of which sees Þormóður woo his ‘óþarfar unnustur’ – Þórdís Grímudóttir and Þorbjörg kolbrún Katladóttir – with duplicitous simultaneity, composing a praise poem first for Þorbjörg, but then rededicating it to Þórdís. Building on the analyses conducted so far, this sub-section will focus on the revenge Þorbjörg exacts on Þormóður for his lazy courting strategy. Whilst Kress sees Þórdís and Þorbjörg as competitors for Þormóður’s gaze, the following discussion will demonstrate that Þorbjörg’s actions against Þormóður are more representative of individuated agency than jealousy.<sup>94</sup>

Þórdís is Þormóður’s first love in *Fóstbræðra saga*, their romance beginning after Þormóður has separated from the company of his sworn brother Þorgeirr Hávarsson. The couple’s interactions at the farm of Þórdís’s widowed mother Gríma are typical of the ‘illicit love visit’ motif, as articulated by Jochens: Þormóður regularly visits and talks with Þórdís, causing rumours to spread that he is seducing her; Gríma offers Þormóður the more legitimate option of marrying Þórdís, but he declines and resumes his visits after some time has passed; when further pleas to Þormóður fail, Gríma resorts to ordering her slave Kolbákr to attack him (*ÍF* 6, pp. 161–65).<sup>95</sup> Þormóður’s decision not to marry Þórdís is not the only evidence that his feelings for her are superficial, for the saga author twice prefaces Þormóður’s visits by noting how bored the skald is while staying in his father’s home (*ÍF* 6, pp. 161, 162). Also notable in the present context is the fact that Þormóður does not compose poetry for Þórdís in a strict sense, choosing instead to modify a praise poem originally composed for his other girlfriend Þorbjörg. Several skalds demonstrate the ability to revise their previous compositions (e.g. Þórarinn loftunga’s *Höfuðlausn* in *SkP* 1, p. 849; Eldjárn’s *lausavísur* in *SkP* 2, pp. 406–08; see discussion of these examples in sections 2.1 and 5.2) and the adaptation of love poetry

<sup>94</sup> Kress, *Fyrir dyrum fósturu*, pp. 154–56.

<sup>95</sup> Jochens, ‘Illicit Love Visit’, pp. 370–73.



specifically is paralleled in *Óttars þáttr svarta* (see section 2.2), but rededicating a poem to a different audience is otherwise extremely rare in Old Norse literature. As the exception that proves the rule, Þormóður's actions demonstrate that the relationship between performers and their audiences is otherwise broadly sacrosanct in the skaldic corpus. In the case of *Fóstbræðra saga*, the rededication supports Andrew McGillivray's perspective that Þormóður's feelings for Þórdís are probably closer to lust than true love.<sup>96</sup>

This attitude persists in Þormóður's romance with Þorbjörg, the daughter of another widow called Katla, which takes place in between affairs with Þórdís while he is supposed to be collecting dried fish in Arnardalr. In this case, the saga author spends more time establishing the setting for the couple's initial encounter, features of which resonate with those of other amorous skalds. Just like Grettir, for example, Þormóður neglects outdoor work in favour of entertaining himself with the exclusively female inhabitants of Katla's farmhouse (*ÍF* 6, p. 171), and his exchange of mutually appreciative glances with Þorbjörg (*ÍF* 6, p. 170) is similar to that of Kormákr and Steingerðr in Gnúpsdalr (see section 4.1.1). Katla's house is nevertheless distinguished by its 'erotic, permissive atmosphere', to quote Marold, since the women find Þormóður's presence and the 'mansöngsvísur' that spring involuntarily from his mouth not only acceptable but actively, and perhaps euphemistically, pleasurable (*ÍF* 6, pp. 170–71).<sup>97</sup> It is in this context that Þormóður composes the so-called *Kolbrúnarvísur* ('Kolbrún Verses') in praise of Þorbjörg. The suspension of social norms within Katla's house also factors into Þormóður's performance of this poem, since, in a bathetic subversion of the stock scene of encomiastic skaldic performance (see section 2.1), Katla rewards Þormóður with a gold ring and gives him the nickname *Kolbrúnarskáld*, *Kolbrún* being Þorbjörg's nickname.<sup>98</sup> The suggestive and nonchalant playfulness of the Arnardalr interlude seems to

<sup>96</sup> Andrew McGillivray, 'Lover in a Dangerous Time: *Pathos* and the Warrior-Poet in *Fóstbræðra saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 93 (2021), 383–404 <<https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.93.3.0383>>.

<sup>97</sup> Marold, 'Mansöngur', p. 248.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, p. 63; Osborne, p. 231.

be part of a general tone-shift in this section of *Fóstbræðra saga*, as Guðni Jónsson highlights: ‘verður sú frásögn eins og þægileg hvíld eftir styr og vopnabrák fyrsta þáttarins eða sem hlé á undan storminum, sem á eftir kemur og jafnan fylgir Þorgeiri’ (‘The episode [chs 9–11] is like a comfortable rest after the battles and crashing of weapons of the first section [chs 1–8], or a calm before the storm that comes later and always follows Þorgeirr’).<sup>99</sup>

The saga author nonetheless ensures that the jocundity of Þormóðr’s affairs is continually underpinned by the seriousness of their potential social consequences. Þormóðr’s first interactions with Þórdís, for example, arouse concerns from the local community – ‘af hans kvámum ok tali var kastat orði til, at hann myndi fífla Þórdísi’ (*ÍF* 6, p. 161: ‘From his visits and conversation, word went round that he would seduce Þórdís’) – and his decision to recite the ‘Kolbrúnarvísur’ ‘svá at margir menn heyrðu’ (*ÍF* 6, p. 171: ‘so that many people heard’) proves detrimental, since his subsequent betrayal of Þorbjörg plays out on a stage that is consequently more public. In both cases, with male relatives absent in Gríma and Katla’s respective households, communal opinion acts as the voice of patriarchal concern for Þórdís’s and Þorbjörg’s sexual security, which Þormóðr would otherwise appear to be able to compromise unopposed.<sup>100</sup> It is ultimately before this secondary audience that Þormóðr has to admit his mistreatment of Þorbjörg: ‘Nú lýsir hann fyrir alþýðu, hversu farit hafði um kvæðit, ok gefr þá af nýju við mörq vitni Þorbjörgu kvæðit’ (*ÍF* 6, pp. 176–77: ‘Now, in front of everyone, he reveals how the poem had gone, and then gives the poem to Þorbjörg anew in front of many witnesses’). As this demonstrates, Þorbjörg’s role as Þormóðr’s skaldic audience has become a metonym of her role as his romantic partner, and both have been compromised publicly via the rededication of the ‘Kolbrúnarvísur’. Þormóðr’s explicit affirmation of the former role thus becomes an implicit confirmation of her sexual security.

<sup>99</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ‘Formáli’, in *ÍF* 6, pp. v–cxi (p. liv).

<sup>100</sup> On the significance of Gríma and Katla being widows, cf. Jochens, ‘Illicit Love Visit’, pp. 373–74.

Whilst the weight of public opinion helps push the affair towards this resolution, Þorbjörg herself takes the most active role in defending her status. After Þormóður rededicates the ‘Kolbrúnarvísur’, Þorbjörg appears to him in a dream, wherein she orders him to announce his wrongdoing and curses him with eye pain until he does so (*ÍF* 6, pp. 174–75). The curse represents one of the most severe responses of any of the *Íslendingasögur*’s romantic audiences: ‘hann hafði svá mikinn augnaverð, at hann mátti varla þola óþepandi ok mátti eigi sofa’ (*ÍF* 6, p. 175: ‘He had such great eye pain that he could barely endure it without crying out and could not sleep’). The manner of Þorbjörg’s revenge is in keeping with other examples of female-induced magic in the *Íslendingasögur*, particularly since, without male relatives to support her in the public sphere, Þorbjörg has no recourse to the ‘formal, official power’ of the Icelandic legal system, as Jóhanna Katrín surmises.<sup>101</sup> Kirsi Kanerva and McGillivray respectively compare Þorbjörg’s curse with similar examples of eye pain in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (*ÍF* 13, pp. 99–172, see pp. 169–72), *Ljósvetninga saga* (*ÍF* 10, pp. 3–106, see p. 103), and *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* (*ÍF* 3, pp. 191–92), the latter surmising that in each case ‘eye pain is inflicted as punishment for [a character] wavering in their beliefs or displaying a lack of loyalty to a person or an ideal’.<sup>102</sup> Neither scholar, however, comments on the fact that all these eye-pain sufferers are men, even though, as Annette Lassen has argued, eyes and eyesight are recurrently used as metonyms for masculinity in Old Norse literature.<sup>103</sup> In this light, it is plausible that these ocular punishments are incurred not simply through disloyalty, but specifically through disloyalty as a contravention of a masculine ideal. Þorbjörg’s revenge likewise demonstrates not only how Þormóður has failed her as an amorous poet, but also how he has failed himself as a man.

<sup>101</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, ‘Women’s Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 81 (2009), 409–36 (p. 430).

<sup>102</sup> Kirsi Kanerva, “‘Eigi er sá heill, er í augun verkir’: Eye Pain in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century *Íslendingasögur*”, *ARV*, 69 (2013), 7–35 (pp. 10–13); McGillivray, p. 396.

<sup>103</sup> Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi* (København [Copenhagen]: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 2003), p. 8.

It is through this lens, I would argue, that Þórdís and Þorbjörg's exclusive appearance in the more light-hearted section of *Fóstbræðra saga* should be interpreted. Separated from Þorgeirr and yet to meet Óláfr inn helgi, Þormóður has, in these romantic episodes, none of the masculine bonds that inspire his heroic actions in the rest of the saga. In this light, Þormóður's affairs with Þórdís and Þorbjörg are not only a comic digression of the kind Guðni envisions. Rather, the contrastive function of these female characters is more significant for the narrative as a whole, highlighting a nadir in Þormóður's homosocial heroics that he must, and does, recover from. It seems unfortunate to modern readers that Þórdís and Þorbjörg should function primarily in such a negative role, but the situation is unsurprising given the saga's broader tendency towards androcentrism, as exemplified in the author's famous comments on Þorgeirr's misogynistic outlook: 'Þorgeirr væri lítill kvennamaðr; sagði hann þat vera svívirðing síns krapts, at hokra at konum' (*ÍF* 6, p. 128: 'Þorgeirr was not much of a women's man; he said it was a disgrace to his strength to bow to women'). Given this context, Þorbjörg's rendition of the role of the romantic audience is nevertheless all the more impressive. Repudiation, as the previous section (4.1) demonstrates, is a common feature in the responses of romantic audiences, but Þorbjörg delivers it more emphatically than any of the other characters considered in this chapter. Her actions represent an affirmation of the bond between the skaldic performer and his audience, one that could not be stronger in this couple's case given that Þormóður's nickname literally marks him out as 'Kolbrún's Poet'. Here, and as so often in Old Norse literature, language has preternatural power over reality, but it is Þorbjörg's ability to harness it makes her one of the most (in)famous romantic audiences in the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> E.g. Thomas Bredsdorff, 'Speech Act Theory and Saga Studies', *Representations*, 100 (2007), 34–41 (p. 36) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2007.100.1.34>>; Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Naming the Landscape in the *Landnám* Narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*', *Saga-Book*, 36 (2012), 79–101 (pp. 81–85). For a more general study, see Stephen Wilson, *The Means of Naming: A Social and Cultural History of Personal Naming in Western Europe* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

This section has examined ways in which romantic audiences eschew the passive roles in which they tend to be placed, taking greater ownership not only of their subjectivity, but also how it is expressed. In analysing this dynamic, I have necessarily selected the primary cases rather than working comprehensively. In the context of critical lovers, it would be interesting to compare Helga's repudiation of one of Hrafn's verses in *Gunnlaugs saga* (*ÍF* 3, p. 88), which draws upon the legendary love triangle between Brynhildr, Sigurðr and Guðrún, as Andersson has discussed.<sup>105</sup> The material covered in this section has nonetheless demonstrated the potential for romantic audiences to both actively affirm and criticise their relationships with skalds. Taken together, the actions of Steingerðr, Ketilríðr, and Þorbjörg reveal a greater preoccupation with social subversiveness than the cases analysed in the previous section (4.1). Where the spectating and unfulfilled lovers discussed earlier tend to defend social institutions (particularly marriage), these cases revolve more frequently around illegitimate love, highlighting both its thrills and the severity of its potential spills. Illicit behaviour is, of course, primarily characteristic of *skáldasögur* protagonists, but the potential for their romantic audiences to engage similarly in the rebellious and the clandestine has been under-appreciated.<sup>106</sup> By engaging in skaldic performance themselves, Steingerðr and Ketilríðr affirm and mirror the behaviour of their skaldic counterparts, although Ketilríðr's idiosyncratic innovations on *dróttkvætt* indicate more autonomy on her part. By contrast, Þorbjörg expresses aversion to Þormóðr's behaviour in a way that is correspondingly averse to the patriarchal structures that support him. Whilst the subversiveness of romantic audiences in active roles may be unsurprising given their marginalisation in both the skaldic tradition and romantic norms, these cases demonstrate distinct ways in which women express their agency, finding ways to play a male-dominated game by their own rules.

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<sup>105</sup> Andersson, 'Love Triangle Theme', pp. 274–75.

<sup>106</sup> See further, e.g., Whaley, 'Representations'.

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‘In general’, writes Poole, ‘the skald saga women are shown as no mere passive vessels but as acting deliberately, whether to thwart or to support their lovers’ schemes.’<sup>107</sup> As the above analysis demonstrates, this contention is refined via a detailed study of the actions of the *Íslendingasögur*’s romantic audiences, whose routine repudiation of skaldic performance brings into question whether the ‘passive’ and ‘active’ roles I have used to structure this chapter are necessarily so distinct. In the first section (4.1), focusing on the female gaze, I demonstrated parallels between the conventional apostrophe to a female audience in skaldic poetry and the *skáldasögur* protagonists’ tendency to position their romantic audiences as either spectating or unfulfilled lovers. The responses of characters like Steingerðr, Kolfinna, and Oddný represented a refutation of these roles and an affirmation of their subjectivity. With less interference from or altogether unprompted by their skaldic counterparts, romantic audiences are also occasionally afforded greater initiative to express their feelings about their relationships, as the second section (4.2) demonstrated. In this regard, compositions by Steingerðr and Ketilríðr, and Þorbjörg kolbrún’s emphatic revenge, demonstrated two sides to romantic audiences’ active roles: the affirmative and the critical. Altogether, and to further problematise the distinction between these characters’ active and passive roles, romantic audiences are evidently effective in harnessing the ‘paradoxical passivity’ of audiences highlighted earlier in the chapter (see the introduction to section 4.1). Their actions are not primarily an outright refusal of marginalised positions – spectator, patroness, audience – but a demonstration of the influence that can nonetheless be exerted from the margin.

A topic which recurred tangentially in several of the cases examined above, and which merits further attention here, is *mansqngnr*. As noted in the introduction (see section 4),

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<sup>107</sup> Poole, ‘Introduction’, p. 22.

Jochens and Marold's respective investigations of this term have established the range of its possible applications in Old Norse literature. With a focus on performer-audience relationships, the present study further demonstrates the flexibility of *mansǫngr*. To return to *Hallfreðar saga*, the author of the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* version, as noted earlier, distinguishes between Hallfreðr's verses as follows: 'kvað hann nokkurar vísur [...], bæði með mansǫng til Kolfinnu ok ósæmðarorðum við Grís' (*ÍF* 8, pp. 183–84: 'He spoke some verses, including both *mansǫngr* for Kolfinna and words of dishonour against Gríss'). By contrast, the proscription against *mansǫngr* in *Grágás* specifies that outlawry is the consequence 'ef maðr yrkir mansǫng vm cono' ('if a man composes *mansǫngr* about a woman').<sup>108</sup> The distinction between these sources, as noted by Jochens and Osborne, arises in the implied relationships between the *mansǫngr* composer and his female subject. Whereas Hallfreðr performs directly *til* ('to') Kolfinna, *Grágás* stipulates against compositions made *um* ('about') women, the latter suggesting that the intended audience of *mansǫngr*, in keeping with its inflammatory function, was the community at large.<sup>109</sup> As Marold's survey demonstrates, and as exemplified in the possible connection between *mansǫngr* practices and Kormákr and Steingerðr's *helmingr*-exchange (see section 4.2.1), neither the female subject nor the wider community can easily be designated the archetypal *mansǫngr* audience, since both appear regularly in Old Norse sources. *Óttars þáttr svarta*, in fact, demonstrates the possibility for both audiences to co-exist, since the titular Óttarr composes a *mansǫngsdrápa* initially 'um' (*Flat* 3, p. 242: 'about') Queen Ástriðr, wife of Óláfr inn helgi, but later performs it in her presence (see section 2.2). Nor do audience reactions, moreover, give a clearer picture of *mansǫngr*. Some characters, such as Kolfinna, react with the kind of displeasure that one would expect of the practices outlined in *Grágás*, but others, such as

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<sup>108</sup> *Grágás*, II, 184.

<sup>109</sup> Osborne, p. 73; Jochens, 'Gender Relations', p. 318.

Steingerðr and Þormóðr's female audiences in Katla's house, react positively to verse described as *mansöngur*. Despite Jochens's and Marold's attempts to elucidate meaningful patterns from the Old Norse sources that employ the term, these discrepancies cannot be explained conclusively. Rather, it seems likely that saga authors, in similar fashion to some modern scholars, deploy the term retroactively not to define the associated poetry in generic terms, but to signal its potential emotional and social impact.

As in any study of this kind, there is more material that could potentially be considered. Whilst I have intentionally delimited my study to the *skáldasögur*, a detour into the *fornaldarsögur* throws up several interesting counterpoints to the affirming and critical lovers discussed in the second section. In *Qrvar-Odds saga*, the eponymous Oddr receives a magical shirt in Ireland from a woman called Qlvör, who extemporises a *háttlaus* stanza when she bestows the gift upon him (see *FN* 1, p. 316; *SkP* 8, p. 813).<sup>110</sup> As in Ketilríðr's distinctive use of *dróttkvætt*, the uniqueness of Qlvör's stanza is highlighted by the fact that *háttlaus* features nowhere else in *Qrvar-Odds saga*. Qlvör's spontaneous performance is likewise a prelude to romance; following Qlvör's versified description of the shirt's materials and their places of origin, Oddr replies with his own *fornyrðislag* verse (see *SkP* 8, p. 919) and invites Qlvör to accept the reward of marrying him. In *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* meanwhile, one finds similar verse exchanges to those present in *Kormáks saga* and *Víglundar saga*. In the first (*FN* 1, p. 107), an exchange of *helmingar* sees Ragnarr loðbrók predict that his romantic audience, Áslaug, will respond positively to his sexual advances (*SkP* 8, p. 630), before Áslaug replies in the same poetic form, but firmly in the negative (*SkP* 8, p. 631). In a subsequent attempt at versified seduction (*FN* 1, p. 108), Ragnarr offers Áslaug a shirt that had belonged to his deceased wife Þóra (*SkP* 8, p. 690), but Áslaug again declines (*SkP* 8, 633). Whilst I have opted to examine the close interconnections of the

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<sup>110</sup> *Háttlaus(a)* ('formless') is 'a variant of *dróttkvætt* without internal rhyme' (*SkP* 5, p. lxxii).



*skáldasögur* in this chapter, comparison to these *fornaldarsögur*, wherein poetry is used similarly as part of flirtation, seduction, and especially rejection, represents a promising avenue for future study.

Overall, it seems almost anticlimactic that the skalds' grand expressions of love tend not to be reciprocated with positive responses from their romantic audiences. O'Donoghue expresses similar disappointment in her comments on Kormákr and Steingerðr's stay in an unnamed farmhouse: 'Throughout the scene, Steingerðr's replies to Kormákr, and her resistance to his advances, are uncomfortably at odds with the eloquence and grandeur of the verses, and indeed with the romantic potential of the reunion.'<sup>111</sup> Whilst this disparity between verse and prose, which O'Donoghue calls 'farcical', might be explained by Steingerðr's disillusionment with Kormákr in this instance, parallel dynamics in the other *skáldasögur* and some *Íslendingasögur*, as this chapter has demonstrated, suggest that this has deeper significance for the love affairs of Old Norse prosimetra.<sup>112</sup> In opposition to the hyperbolic histrionics of skaldic poetry, these texts point to smaller gestures – a conversation, a board game, the giving or repairing of clothes – as the building blocks of genuine affection. These are, to borrow Sif Rikhardsdóttir's term, the 'emotive scripts' in which true love is gently (under)stated.<sup>113</sup> In this light, it is unsurprising that the skalds, whose fundamental creative energy pushes them irrepressibly towards the grandiose and the ostentatious, are lovesick so much of the time. High emotion and grand praise may be fit for royal audiences but, according to saga authors at least, it is not what women want.

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<sup>111</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 129.

<sup>112</sup> O'Donoghue, *Genesis*, p. 129.

<sup>113</sup> Sif Rikhardsdóttir, pp. 27–32.

## 5 Audiences from beyond Scandinavia: Affect and Alterity

Today, it is not possible to experience skaldic poetry as anything other than a foreign language. Old Norse scholars have no choice but to interpret the poetry and its associated prose literature without, in the strictest sense, a native understanding of the language in which it was originally composed. This is even the case for modern Icelanders, whose living language is closest to Old Norse, but which has also undergone phonological and morphological change since the medieval period. No matter how educated one becomes in the skaldic artform and the cultures that produced it, it is therefore impossible to empathise completely with its medieval audiences, whose native command of Old Norse would have afforded them access to linguistic gestures and nuances that can only be reconstructed via extended interpretive, and frequently speculative, effort.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis (see section 1.1), scholars have postulated that original skaldic audiences must have had a considerable amount of expertise in the poetry's diction and metre, enabling them to interpret the meaning of verses on first hearing or soon afterwards. Lindow's well-known argument that membership to 'the Nordic comitatus' could be determined via an elite audience's ability to decipher skaldic poetry represents one of the more developed outcomes of this line of thinking.<sup>1</sup> As demonstrated by the case studies I have conducted so far, this understanding is not consistently substantiated by the literary sources, in which audiences are occasionally depicted as varying in their ability to comprehend skaldic poetry (see, e.g., sections 2.1 and 2.3). The assumption of a skilled audience can be problematised further by examining literary depictions of skaldic performance in which the intradiegetic audience cannot be expected to have a high degree of

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<sup>1</sup> Lindow, 'Riddles', pp. 321–22.

experience or competency. Although it is possible to postulate a range of factors making any given audience unskilled, I will focus in this chapter on characters whose place of origin is reported as being from beyond Scandinavia, and who must therefore be understood to face linguistic, cultural, and social barriers in their interactions with skalds. My use of the term Scandinavia here requires some further clarification, for the relationship between this signifier and the region it purports to represent is stable neither in modern geographical terms nor in how the medieval Nordic region is understood retrospectively.<sup>2</sup> In the context of Old Norse literary studies, the signifying scope of Scandinavia is not usually restricted to the mainland countries of Norway, Denmark, and Sweden as in modern usage, for it is also taken to encompass other polities in the medieval north, including Finland, Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands. Narrowing further into the field of skaldic studies, England and the Orkney islands would not be classified as Scandinavian in modern terms, and yet important events and developments related to the skaldic artform also took place in these areas.<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this study, my focus will be on audiences whose native home is resolutely outside this group of interconnected Nordic cultures, and who can therefore be expected to lack familiarity with skaldic poetry and its accompanying cultural values.

Regarding the historical context of skaldic performance, it is likely that people from beyond Scandinavia would have encountered skaldic poetry. Beyond the literary sources, *Skáldatal* highlights that the skaldic trade demanded a willingness towards itinerancy, and that the primary centres of skaldic production were the courts of Scandinavian rulers.<sup>4</sup> As focal points for international politics, these courts would have played host to a range of regional groups at any one time, making them likely sites of contact between skalds and

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<sup>2</sup> On the modern semantics of ‘Scandinavia’, see, e.g., Anna Lindskog and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, ‘Editorial Introduction to Nordic Cultures’, in *Introduction to Nordic Cultures*, ed. by Anna Lindskog and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (London: UCL Press, 2020), pp. 1–8.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Snorri, *Uppsala Edda*, pp. 100–17.

audiences from beyond Scandinavia. An example of this, albeit involving less culturally distinct audiences, is the court of Knútr inn ríki in Winchester, the *Knútsdrápur* produced in which have been interpreted as making ‘a special effort toward intelligibility in a mixed English-Scandinavian milieu’.<sup>5</sup> The hypothesis is also borne out in the sagas, which depict skalds performing in the presence of audiences from non-Scandinavian regions, usually in socially elite contexts. I must stress immediately that such accounts are rare; in this chapter, I analyse only two saga narratives involving audiences from beyond Scandinavia. Accordingly, I do not intend to make this small sample size representative of all intercultural interactions facilitated by skaldic performance. Rather, I use examples of this audience-type to refine established theories about skilled skaldic audiences, and to broaden the range of this investigation to include figures that might otherwise have escaped attention.

I primarily consider two intradiegetic audiences, both of whom feature in narratives set in the twelfth century. I focus firstly on Queen Ermingerðr of Narbonne, who is framed as the recipient of a *lausavísa* by Rognvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson in *Orkneyinga saga* (*ÍF* 34, pp. 209–10), and secondly on Giffarðr, a knight from Normandy who features in a *Morkinskinna þáttr* as the subject of verses by Magnús berfœttr and an otherwise-unknown Icelander called Eldjárn (*ÍF* 24, pp. 51–56). In both cases, my interest is in how skaldic poetry is presented as operating in spaces beyond its geographic and cultural centres, and how its non-Scandinavian audiences are shown to embody different kinds of alterity. I begin with Ermingerðr, whose description as both ‘drottning’ (*ÍF* 34, p. 209: ‘queen’) and ‘mær’ (*ÍF* 34, p. 210: ‘maiden’) makes her an intriguing intersection between the royal and romantic audience-types investigated previously. Between the encomiastic verse Rognvaldr addresses to Ermingerðr

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<sup>5</sup> Russell G. Poole, ‘Óttarr svarti’, in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 459–60 (p. 459). See further Matthew Townend, ‘Cnut’s Poets: An Old Norse Literary Community in Eleventh-Century England’, in *Conceptualizing Multilingualism in England, c.800-c.1250*, ed. by Elizabeth M. Tyler, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages*, 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 197–216 (pp. 199–201) <<https://doi.org/10.1484/M.SEM-EB.4.8010>>; Townend, ‘*Knútsdrápur*’, pp. 174–75.

and her depiction in the saga prose, I demonstrate how she represents an exotic variation on the familiar romantic audience-type from the *skáldasögur*, complementing Rognvaldr's presentation in *Orkneyinga saga* as a cosmopolitan ruler keen to engage with continental cultures. I then discuss Giffarðr, who is contrastingly defined by a marked incompatibility with Scandinavian culture. I show how Giffarðr's atypicality as an audience allows the *páttr* author to reassert the ideal group dynamics of skaldic performance whilst also acknowledging a spectrum of interpretive ability in how skaldic poetry is received. As these points indicate, the narrative functions of audiences from beyond Scandinavia are highly idiosyncratic, reflecting the fact that nationality, ethnicity, and cultural identity were not fixed qualities, but rather could be deployed fluidly by saga authors depending on their interests. In the cases to be discussed, it is just such a fluid foreignness that allows the saga authors to re-evaluate skaldic performance and its socio-political functions in new cultural contexts.

## 5.1 Rognvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson's Journey to the Holy Land

### 5.1.1 Ermingerðr, Queen of Narbonne

'To judge from the sagas,' remarks Poole, 'the medieval kings of Norway had quite an aptitude for love-verse.'<sup>6</sup> In support of this view, Poole cites Haraldr inn harðráði's *Gamanvísur*, a *lausavísa* by Magnús inn góði for a 'siklings systir', Magnús berfœttr's *lausavísur* for a woman called Maktildr, Haraldr inn hárfagri's *Snæfríðardrápa*, and the anonymous *Liðsmannaflokkur* (see citations at the beginning of chapter 4). Although Poole produces eloquent arguments regarding the drifting authorship of several of these verses, he does not consider the fact that several of these poems' female addressees come from beyond Norway. According to *Morkinskinna* (ÍF 23, p. 115), the 'Gerðr gollhrings í Gørðum' (*SkP* 2,

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<sup>6</sup> Poole, 'Love-Verses', p. 115.

p. 36: ‘Gerðr of the gold ring [> WOMAN] in Russia’) described in *Gamanvísur*’s refrain is Elísabeth, daughter of Jaroslav (r. Novgorod 1010–34), and who was betrothed to Haraldr during his time in Russia. According to Poole, the probable identity of Magnús berfœttr’s ‘Maktildr’ is Matilda, the daughter of Malcolm III of Scotland (r. 1058–93).<sup>7</sup> The composer of *Liðsmannaflokkur*, on the other hand, addresses an unnamed woman ‘sús býr í steini’ (*SkP* 1, p. 1025: ‘who lives in stone’), which several scholars read as a reference to the walls of London.<sup>8</sup> Although the individual contexts of composition and preservation for these poems must be considered, there is a notable trend here: the medieval kings of Norway had quite an aptitude for love-verse, and they frequently addressed it to female audiences from other countries.

Aside from anything else, this affirms the potential for skaldic poetry to act as part of negotiation between ruling powers, as is also attested by the diplomatic roles occupied by several skalds.<sup>9</sup> The sagas preserving these poems nevertheless give little indication that they were ever performed in the presence of the female figures they address. No descriptions of intradiegetic audiences are given for the *lausavísur* of either Magnús inn góði (*ÍF* 23, p. 148) or Magnús berfœttr (*ÍF* 24, pp. 60–62). Such details are also ambiguous in the prose contexts of *Gamanvísur* and *Liðsmannaflokkur*. In *Morkinskinna*, *Gamanvísur*’s composition is situated during Haraldr inn harðráði’s journey from Austríki (the Baltic territories) to Hólmgarðr (Novgorod), making his travelling companions his most likely audience (*ÍF* 23, p. 114). On the other hand, the authorship of *Liðsmannaflokkur* is inconsistent across the poem’s sources. Two of the sagas of Óláfr inn helgi attribute the poem to the titular king, whilst the author of *Knýtlinga saga* claims that it ‘var ortr af liðsmönnum’ (*ÍF* 35, p. 116: ‘was composed by

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<sup>7</sup> Poole, ‘Love-Verses’, pp. 116–17.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Goeres, ‘Being Numerous’, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Evans, ‘Construction of Diplomacy’.

[Knútr inn ríki's] followers').<sup>10</sup> These conflicting accounts give little indication that *Liðsmannaflakkr*'s female addressee was present for any potential performance of the poem.

For a depiction of an intradiegetic female skaldic audience from beyond Scandinavia, one must turn to *Orkneyinga saga*, and in particular to the famous episode in which Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson, jarl of Orkney, stays with Queen Ermingerðr of Narbonne during his journey to the Holy Land. *Orkneyinga saga*'s description of this journey is distinctive for the richness of its poetic sources. The author quotes twenty-seven verses by Rognvaldr and four other poets travelling with the jarl, totalling nine more than in *Heimskringla*'s account of the equivalent journey by Sigurðr Jórsalafari (*ÍF* 28, pp. 239–54). Of the verses that contribute to the *Orkneyinga saga* account, most scholarly attention has been directed at those that address Ermingerðr. This figure, whose depiction is highly stylised in *Orkneyinga saga*, has a historical counterpart in the Viscountess Ermengard, who ruled over the city of Narbonne for almost six decades in the twelfth century, including the time at which Rognvaldr made his expedition.<sup>11</sup> In *Orkneyinga saga*, Ermingerðr lays on a feast for Rognvaldr under the pretence that it will aid her international reputation (*ÍF* 34, p. 209). At one point during the feast, Rognvaldr composes a verse in praise of Ermingerðr, and this is succeeded by several further encomiastic verses composed by Rognvaldr and his poets during their onward journey. Since Narbonne is known to have been a centre for troubadour productivity, with Ermengard figuring as one of its key patrons, it has long been thought likely that these verses represent the influence of troubadour traditions on skaldic poetry.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For the Óláfr attributions, see Styrmir Káason's *Lífssaga*, preserved fragmentarily in *Flateyjarbók* (*Flat* 3, pp. 237–39), and *Die 'Legendarische Saga'*, pp. 48–53.

<sup>11</sup> See further Fredric L. Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501722554>>.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Jan de Vries, 'Een skald onder de troubadours', *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde*, 1938, 701–35; Bjarni Einarsson, *Skaldasögur: Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldasagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1961), pp. 36–37; Bjarni Einarsson, *To skjaldesagaer: En analyse af Kormáks saga og Hallfreðar saga* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), pp. 18–19; Bibire, 'Poetry', pp. 219–21; Bandlien, *Strategies*, pp. 113–19; Carl Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings: Saints' Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings' Sagas*, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 340 (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, Arizona

Despite her relatively unique position amongst skaldic audiences, Ermingerðr has nevertheless received less attention in her own right. Meissner considers how Ermingerðr is portrayed in Rognvaldr's verse alongside other literary sources that likely inform the prosimetric scene, whilst Bandlien makes a similarly brief examination of the 'Norse element[s]' that undergird the queen's role at the feast.<sup>13</sup> Building on these studies, I will focus in greater detail on how Ermingerðr is portrayed as Rognvaldr's audience, allowing me to draw connections between the queen's appearance in *Orkneyinga saga* and the audience-types analysed in previous chapters.

The verse Rognvaldr delivers at the feast is as follows:

Vísts, at frá berr flestu  
Fróða meldrs at góðu  
vel skúfaðra vífa  
vøxtr þinn, konan svinna.  
Skorð lætr hár á herðar  
haukvallar sér falla  
– átgjörnum rauðk erni  
ilka – gult sem silki.

(*SkP* 2, p. 592: 'It's certain, wise woman, that the goodness of your [hair-]growth surpasses most women with locks of the meal of Fróði [> GOLD]. The prop of the hawk-field [> WOMAN = Ermingerðr] lets her hair, yellow like silk, fall onto her shoulders; I reddened the talons of the greedy eagle.')

Sayers finds no indication in *Orkneyinga saga* that this verse was 'ever formally presented to [Ermingerðr]'.<sup>14</sup> In the prose, however, the verse is placed following a passage in which Rognvaldr and Ermingerðr have been conversing at the feast. It is introduced using the standard intradiegetic formula '[þ]á kvað jarl vísu' (*ÍF* 34, p. 209: 'then the jarl spoke a verse'), with no other obvious situation that the deictic marker *þá* could allude to. Since, moreover, Rognvaldr addresses Ermingerðr directly in the verse, it is difficult to discern any other implication than that the poem was delivered in her presence. Sayers' perspective is

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Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), p. 105. See critical perspectives on this perceived direction of influence in Andersson, 'Skalds and Troubadours'; Finlay, 'Skalds, Troubadours'.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Meissner, 'Ermengarde, Vicegräfin von Narbonne, und Jarl Rögnvald', *ANF*, 41 (1925), 140–91 (pp. 161–77); Bandlien, *Strategies*, pp. 117–18.

<sup>14</sup> William Sayers, 'Onomastic Paronomasia in Old Norse-Icelandic: Technique, Context and Parallels', *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, 27.1 (2006), 91–127 (p. 92).



understandable, however, for there is little evidence within the verse to suggest that Rognvaldr has tailored it for his foreign audience. It is in conventionally complex *dróttkvætt* and makes reference to the legendary King Fróði, for whom the giantesses Fenja and Menja are said to grind gold out of a magical millstone in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*.<sup>15</sup> Even were the verse to be translated for Ermingerðr, this allusion would require no small amount of explanation. Gade has, furthermore, highlighted the likelihood that an addressee of skaldic poetry, even if unable to grasp the full content of a poem, would at least 'have been able to recognize [their] own name, especially when emphasized by rhyme and alliteration'.<sup>16</sup> By using the word 'Ermingerðr' in the verse, Rognvaldr could indeed have given the queen an interpretive aid that would mitigate the language barrier between them. Even though the jarl does this in his very next *lausavísa* (*SkP* 2, p. 594), her name can only be detected as a complicated *ofljóst* pun in this initial verse, according to Sayers's analysis.<sup>17</sup> These factors suggest that the intended audience of Rognvaldr's verse was one educated in skaldic diction, and it is difficult to imagine either Ermingerðr or even the historical Ermengard, who was a patron of similarly complex troubadour poetry, fitting this parameter.

Whilst, for Bandlien, the language and diction of Rognvaldr's poetry precludes the possibility that he would ever have performed for the real Ermengard, the pretence is nevertheless maintained in *Orkneyinga saga* that meaningful communication occurred between the jarl and the queen.<sup>18</sup> In his later *lausavísur*, Rognvaldr remarks: 'Orð skal Ermingerðar | ítr drengr muna lengi' (*SkP* 2, p. 594: 'The glorious warrior [= Rognvaldr] will remember the words of Ermingerðr for a long time'). He reminisces in another verse: 'Unðak vel, þás vanðisk | víneik tali mínu' (*SkP* 2, p. 597: 'I liked it a lot, when the wine-oak [>

<sup>15</sup> Snorri, *Skáldskaparmál*, I, 52–57.

<sup>16</sup> Kari Ellen Gade, 'Penile Puns: Personal Names and Phallic Symbols in Skaldic Poetry', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 6 (1989), 57–67 (p. 57). See further commentary on the importance of naming in skaldic praise poetry in Ferreira, pp. 120–84.

<sup>17</sup> Sayers, 'Onomastic Paronomasia', pp. 93–97.

<sup>18</sup> Bandlien, *Strategies*, p. 116.

WOMAN = Ermingerðr] became accustomed to my conversation’). This latter comment is the only real acknowledgement of there being any communicative hurdle between Rognvaldr and Ermingerðr. As is often noted, the pair might have been aided in overcoming such a hurdle by Bishop Vilhjálmr of Orkney, who, the saga author states, was educated in Paris and joined the expedition as a ‘túlkr’ (*ÍF* 34, p. 204: ‘interpreter’).<sup>19</sup> It is possibly on this basis that Rognvaldr learned about the troubadour tradition and proceeded to adopt some of its themes. Although none of these factors comprehensively supports the idea that Ermingerðr was intended to appreciate Rognvaldr’s verse in its entirety, they prompt recognition of the verse as a fantasy of cultural negotiation between Rognvaldr and his intradiegetic audience. As Phelpstead highlights, construing Ermingerðr via a kenning based on pagan mythology represents a striking blend of cultural and religious values, potentially contravening the fact that the ‘easy intercourse’ between the travellers and Ermingerðr’s court relies to some extent on their mutual ‘belong[ing] to Christendom’.<sup>20</sup> It also seems likely, however, that Rognvaldr’s blending of Scandinavian and Occitan poetic traditions enhances the value of the verse as a sign of praise.<sup>21</sup> For Rognvaldr’s audience in Narbonne, references to Nordic mythology would give his verse an exotic quality without diminishing its affirmation of the Occitan leader or her culture. In this light, the verse is a gift befitting Ermingerðr as both a queen and a patron of poets, even if she is unable to understand it completely.

Rognvaldr’s willingness to craft a dialogue between the foreign and the familiar is nevertheless diminished by comparison to the depiction of Ermingerðr in *Orkneyinga saga*’s prose. Consider the following passage, which immediately precedes Rognvaldr’s verse:

Þat var einn dag, er jarl sat at veizlunni, at drottning gekk inn í hollina ok margar konur með henni; hon hafði borðker í hendi af gulli. Hon var klædd inum beztum klæðum, hafði laust hárit, sem meyjum er títt at hafa, ok hafði lagt gullhlað um enni sér. Hon skenkti jarli, en meyjarnar léku fyrir þeim. Jarl tók hönð hennar með kerinu ok setti hana í kné sér, ok tölðu mart um daginn. Þá kvað jarl vísu.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Bibire, ‘Poetry’, p. 221; Finlay, ‘Skalds, Troubadours’, p. 116; Bandlien, *Strategies*, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> Carl Phelpstead, ‘Skaldic Saints and Stories of Miracles: Christianity and Vernacular Literary Culture in Trondheim and Kirkwall’, *Northern Studies*, 44 (2013), 80–97 (p. 85).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Würth [Gropper], p. 268.

(*ÍF* 34: 210: ‘One day, when the jarl was sat at the feast, the queen came into the hall, and many women [were] with her. She held a golden goblet. She was dressed in the best clothes and wore her hair loose, as is customary for young women, and had a golden band around her forehead. She served drink to the jarl, and the other girls performed for them. The jarl took her hand with the goblet and set her on his knee, and they spoke a great deal during the day. Then the jarl spoke a verse.’)

Ermingerðr’s wealth and status are evident in this lavish depiction of her clothing and accessories, justifying the use of the term ‘drottning’ (‘queen’). There are nonetheless few other parallels between this description and those of the royal audiences analysed in chapter 2. Rather, as Meissner and Jochens identify, the sentence describing Ermingerðr’s hair and headband closely resembles Snorri’s portrayal of the lesser-known Norse goddess Fulla as ‘mær ok ferr laushár ok gullband um hǫfuð’ (‘a young woman with loose hair and a golden band around her head’).<sup>22</sup> Scholars have stressed the improbability that the historical Ermengard, who had already been married twice by the time of Rǫgnvaldr’s visit, would have worn her hair in the custom of young – or, as is implied, unmarried – women, although Meissner defends the accuracy of Rǫgnvaldr’s description by citing a range of medieval sources which portray loose hair as fashionable for high-status women, irrespective of their age or marital status.<sup>23</sup> Either way, the resonance with Snorri’s description of Fulla, and the frequent association between long, loose hair and young, unmarried women in the sagas, would suggest that the author is drawing on native traditions in this description rather than an advanced knowledge of hairstyles in continental courts.<sup>24</sup> Olof Sundqvist, in fact, envisions this scene as having ‘a ritual context’, indicated by Ermingerðr’s formal attire and her company of women, which allow her to display her ‘hospitality and generosity’ alongside her ‘splendour, wealth and grace’.<sup>25</sup> Whilst these are characteristics befitting a royal skaldic audience, the passage as a whole does not support this impression.

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<sup>22</sup> Meissner, ‘Ermengarde’, p. 163; Jochens, ‘Male Gaze’, p. 13. Quote from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and ‘Gylfaginning’*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes, 2nd edn (London: VSNR, 2005), p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Meissner, ‘Ermengarde’, pp. 163–66.

<sup>24</sup> Jochens, ‘Male Gaze’, pp. 12–17.

<sup>25</sup> Olof Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers: Ceremonial Buildings and Religious Strategies for Rulership*, Studies in the History of Religions, 150 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 365.

Despite Ermingerðr's grand entrance, her distinctive splendour is sublimated into a conventional image of female skaldic audiences when she interacts more closely with Rognvaldr. Bandlien makes brief reference to the 'Nordic element' that undergirds Ermingerðr's behaviour at the feast, but this can be clarified and expanded upon by comparison to other sagas.<sup>26</sup> The comment that Rognvaldr and Ermingerðr 'töluðu mart um daginn' ('spoke a great deal during the day') is an example of a saga motif which, as noted previously, signals burgeoning romance, and which recurs frequently enough for Sävborg to describe it as 'the "talk" formula'.<sup>27</sup> Sävborg identifies ninety iterations of this formula in the *Íslendingasögur*, and notes that it is 'often combined with passionate love stanzas'.<sup>28</sup> Since a stanza of this kind immediately succeeds the conversation motif here, it is worth comparing Rognvaldr's depiction to that of other poets in the sagas. Returning briefly to the romantic plotlines of the *skáldasögur* (discussed in chapter 4), one notes that Kormákr (*ÍF* 8, p. 214), Gunnlaugr (*ÍF* 3, p. 65), Björn (*ÍF* 3, p. 113), and Þormóðr (*ÍF* 6, p. 161) are all explicitly described as 'chatting up' women, whilst Hallfreðr and Kolfinna are on one occasion depicted in precisely the same posture as Rognvaldr and Ermingerðr: 'Hallfreðr setti hana í kné sér [...] ok talaði [...] við hana' (*ÍF* 8, p. 145: 'Hallfreðr placed her [Kolfinna] on his knee and talked with her'). That this is a distinctly skaldic posture is supported by comparison to *Hávamál*, one section of which sees the daughter of a character called Billingr instruct Óðinn to seduce her by talking (*Eddukvæði* 1, p. 341), as Jochens highlights.<sup>29</sup>

Another parallel with the *skáldasögur* is found in the prose immediately after Rognvaldr's verse, where Ermingerðr's townspeople suggest that the jarl marry their queen. The saga author reports Rognvaldr's diplomatic refusal in indirect speech: 'Jarl kvazk fara vilja ferð þá, er hann hafði ætlat, en kvazk koma mundu þar, er hann færi aptr, ok myndi þau

<sup>26</sup> Bandlien, *Strategies*, pp. 117–18.

<sup>27</sup> Sävborg, 'Formula', p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Sävborg, 'Formula', p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', p. 378, n. 62.

þá gera ráð sín, sem þeim líkaði' (*ÍF* 34, p. 211: 'The jarl said he wanted to carry on with the journey as he had intended, but he said he would come there [to Narbonne], when he journeyed back, and then they would make their plans as they liked'). This resonates with *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, both of whose protagonists travel abroad promising credulously that they will return to marry a woman (*ÍF* 3, pp. 67–68, 114–15). Unlike Gunnlaugr and Björn, and despite eulogising Ermingerðr in no less than eight of his *lausavísur* (*SkP* 2, pp. 592–603), Rognvaldr never returns to fulfil his promise.

When Paul Bibire describes the Narbonne episode as 'a miniature from a romance', it is therefore worth asking: what kind of romance?<sup>30</sup> Based on the parallels cited above, I would place the Narbonne episode alongside the romantic tradition of the skald sagas, aspects of which were themselves influenced by Iceland's exposure to continental romance.<sup>31</sup> Several aspects of Ermingerðr's depiction in *Orkneyinga saga*, however, including the connection to Fulla and Sävborg's 'talk' formula, would suggest that the author was drawing on motifs local to the Scandinavian environment in which the saga was composed, rather than attempting to give the episode an explicitly exotic dimension. The hybridity of foreign and familiar elements exhibited in Rognvaldr's verse is, furthermore, diminished in the depiction of Ermingerðr as a skaldic audience in the prose. The queen's distinctive features are made irrelevant when, as an audience, she is positioned in the kind of passive posture that pervades depictions of romantic audiences in the *skáldasögur*.

Gender roles are at work here not simply in the traditional framing of female skaldic addressees as observers and affirmers of masculinity, as discussed previously (see section 4.1). Other aspects of Ermingerðr's characterisation are also in keeping with the recurring trope in Old Norse literature in which female Others are figured as the objects of male sexual

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<sup>30</sup> Bibire, 'Poetry', p. 220.

<sup>31</sup> For an extended discussion of this topic, see Finlay, 'European Contexts'.

desire.<sup>32</sup> The intertextual connection to the goddess Fulla, for example, associates the queen with the otherworld of Norse mythology, which is enhanced by Rognvaldr's allusion to the myth involving Fenja and Menja. Consider also the partial association between the Norse transliteration of Ermengard and the giantess name Gerðr. This name also carries connotations of intercultural sexual liaison, since one of its most famous bearers is the giantess Gerðr of *Skírnismál* (*Eddukvæði* 1, pp. 380–88), who is solicited to have sex with the god Freyr. In this light, Rognvaldr pulling Ermingerðr onto his knee might be read as more than just a 'charmingly naive' transgression of courtly decorum, to quote Phelpstead; it is a power-play in which the exotic, represented by a woman, is made to conform with the thematic principles of a native tradition, represented by a man.<sup>33</sup> A further parallel can be drawn to the extreme example of this dynamic in Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's *Hákonardrápa*, in which Hákon jarl Sigurðarson's conquest of Norway is framed as the seduction of a woman who personifies the land (*SkP* 3, pp. 219–24).<sup>34</sup> Whilst Rognvaldr's intentions are not to conquer Narbonne, it is recurrently implied that he might have 'conquered' Ermingerðr. Irrespective of the strength of these resonances, they demonstrate again Ermingerðr's incorporation into frames of reference that would have been familiar to *Orkneyinga saga*'s Scandinavian audience. Understandably, given that they probably lacked any detailed information about Occitan culture, the saga author makes no attempt to present Ermingerðr's

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<sup>32</sup> See further, e.g., Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Bodies, Words*, pp. 69–73; John McKinnell, *Meeting the Other in Old Norse Myth and Legend* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2005), pp. 147–80.

<sup>33</sup> Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings*, p. 105.

<sup>34</sup> For the principal studies of this much-discussed poem, see Folke Ström, 'Hieros gamos-motivet i Hallfreðr Óttarssons Hákonardrápa och den nordnorska jarlavärdigheten', *ANF*, 98 (1983), 67–79; Gro Steinsland, *Det hellige bryllup og norrøn kongeideologi: En analyse av hierogamimyten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1991), pp. 119–27; Olof Sundqvist, 'Aspects of Rulership Ideology in Early Scandinavia – with Particular References to the Skaldic Poem Ynglingatal', in *Das frühmittelalterliche Königtum: Ideelle und religiöse Grundlagen*, ed. by Franz-Reiner Erkens (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), pp. 87–124 (pp. 115–17); Roberta Frank, 'The Lay of the Land in Skaldic Praise Poetry', in *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. by Stephen O. Gloescki (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007), pp. 175–96; Lasse C. A. Sonne, 'Hallfreðr's hellige bryllup: Udgivelse og tolkning af et skjaldedigt', *Maal og minne*, 100 (2008) <<http://ojs.novus.no/index.php/MOM/article/view/251>> [accessed 25 September 2023]; Christopher Abram, *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019), pp. 77–79 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbcd06q>>.

Otherness as a particularly regional quality. Her exoticism and subsequent familiarity accord instead with Scandinavian traditions. I will return shortly to the nature of the relationship between the saga narrative and its extradiegetic audience, but for now it suffices to consider the character of Ermingerðr as a variation of other skaldic audience-types, rather than a genuinely distinct category.

### 5.1.2 Rǫgnvaldr's Scandinavian Audiences, Intra- and Extradiegetic

Following the interlude in Narbonne, the author of *Orkneyinga saga* continues to refer regularly to verses by Rǫgnvaldr and his poets. As these figures journey around the Spanish coast and into the Mediterranean, they note the locations they visit, mentioning ten place names across the twenty-seven verses associated with the pilgrimage.<sup>35</sup> These names represent something of a travel itinerary, affirming the authenticity of the journey by fleshing out the detail of its individual stages. The fact that all the verses are intradiegetic also contributes to this dynamic. By localising the composition of the verses to the places they describe, the saga author portrays the skalds as the primary audience to the spectacle of the foreign world, anticipating, facilitating, and mediating its reception by future audiences back home in Scandinavia. This dynamic, and how it manifests between the Scandinavian members of Rǫgnvaldr's intra- and extradiegetic audiences, merits further discussion. As I demonstrate below, Rǫgnvaldr and the audiences within his company produce an intentional display of self-confidence during their travels abroad. This performance is directed at the

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<sup>35</sup> The places mentioned are Humra (Humber), Vesla (possibly Wallsend; see below), Jórðán (Jordan), Nerbón (Narbonne), Spánn (Spain), Nǫrvasund (Strait of Gibraltar), Krít (Crete), Akrsborg (Acre), Prasnes (Freswick, according to Bibire), Imbólum (suggestions for this locale include Ampipholis in Macedonia and the Isle of Imbros in the Dardanelles), and Mikligarðr (Constantinople). See further *SkP* 2, pp. 594–625. On the 'Vesla' question, see Bibire, 'Poetry', p. 232; Matthew Townend, *English Place-Names in Skaldic Verse* (Nottingham: English Place-Name Society, 1998), p. 76.

reception of the journey back home in Scandinavia, affirming both Rognvaldr's social prestige and aspects of Nordic culture beyond its geographical centres.

As in the Narbonne episode, the verses in this section of the saga receive no responses from intradiegetic audiences in the saga prose. There are nevertheless three instances in which the author places the poets in dialogue with one another, framing the verses they produce as exchanges. The first exchange comprises a discussion about Ermingerðr between Rognvaldr, Ármóðr, and Oddi inn litli Glúmsson, to which each poet contributes a verse of praise (*ÍF* 34, pp. 211–12; *SkP* 2, pp. 594, 616, 622). In the second, which occurs during the travellers' siege of a castle in Galicia, Sigmundr ǫngull ('[Fish-Hook]') extemporises a verse in response to two by Rognvaldr (*ÍF* 34, pp. 216–18; *SkP* 2, pp. 596–97, 626). In the final exchange, Rognvaldr and Sigmundr swim across the river Jordan, tie knots in some brushwood, and extemporise verses about the event (*ÍF* 34, pp. 231–32; *SkP* 2, pp. 604–05, 627). Finlay suggests that the first exchange is an adaptation of the occasional saga motif in which skalds produce verses on the same subject as part of a courtly game (cf. section 2.3).<sup>36</sup> She further posits the likelihood that all the verses alluding to Ermingerðr in *Orkneyinga saga* were composed as part of a sequence, and that the connection is clearest to see in this exchange, where each poet uses Ermingerðr's name directly.<sup>37</sup> Considering the prose context as well, in which the men are said to be sitting and drinking in good humour (*ÍF* 34, p. 210), the interaction comes across as homosocial fantasizing, in which the idea of Ermingerðr is shared around like an erotic version of pass the parcel.

Although the latter two verse exchanges between Rognvaldr and Sigmundr take place during less convivial occasions, they continue to represent a similar kind of homosocial gaming. In the second exchange, Rognvaldr extemporises a verse interweaving a description

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<sup>36</sup> Finlay, 'Skalds, Troubadours', p. 108.

<sup>37</sup> Finlay, 'Skalds, Troubadours', p. 114.



of the siege of the Galician castle with his memories of Ermingerðr, and Sigmundr, according to the framing of his verse in *Orkneyinga saga*, takes up this idea, asserting that details of his unsurpassed bravery should be reported to an unnamed ‘fjallrifs fægipella’ (*SkP* 2, p. 626: ‘polishing fir of the mountain rib [> WOMAN]’). Absent audiences are also the subject of the third verse exchange, although this time they are portrayed in a highly negative light. Having tied a knot to mark the distance he has travelled, Rognvaldr comments:

En hykk, at þó þykki  
þangat langt at ganga  
– blóð fell varmt á víðan  
völl – heimdrögum öllum.

(*SkP* 2, p. 604: ‘But I think that it will seem to all stay-at-homes a long way to go there; warm blood fell onto the broad field.’)

Jesch (see *SkP* 2, p. 628) considers the term ‘heimdragi’ (l. 4: stay-at-home’) to be a euphemism for Sveinn Ásleifarson, Sigmundr’s stepfather and Rognvaldr’s great rival in the concluding section of *Orkneyinga saga*. Despite his familial relationship with Sveinn, Sigmundr again reciprocates Rognvaldr’s sentiment in his own *lausavísa*, asserting that his knot is tied for a ‘þembilþjótr’ (*SkP* 2, p. 627: ‘puffed-up sulker’) who sits at home. Rognvaldr then rounds off the exchange by expressing the poets’ mutual enmity for Sveinn: ‘Vér riðum þann knút kauða í þykkum runni’ (*SkP* 2, p. 605: ‘We tie that knot for the wretch in the thick bush’). It is common for skalds to compare their immediate, masculinity-proving situation with figures enjoying the pleasures of domestic life, who are usually either women or, as here, shameful men.<sup>38</sup> It is also common for such comparisons to involve a contrast between life on land and at sea, as exemplified by another *lausavísa* by Ármóðr composed during the journey (see *SkP* 2, p. 623).<sup>39</sup> If this topos is represented here, Rognvaldr’s verse may be seen as drawing a parallel between Jordan and maritime environments as similar kinds of otherworldly frontier. Even if that is a valid reading, however, the final verse

<sup>38</sup> Fidjestøl sees this kind of comparison as typical ‘soldier poetry, unremarkable in itself’. See Fidjestøl, ‘Lovely Ladies’, p. 338.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Perkins, p. 163.

exchange and its preceding counterparts hardly portray the travellers as intrepid explorers. Rather, as playful audiences reciprocating one another's poetic themes, Rognvaldr and his men come across as an insular, self-affirming company despite their continual contact with new cultures.

That this group dynamic is itself something of a performance is indicated by the fact that, in all three exchanges, the travellers' attention is centred on absent audiences, and particularly how their journey will be perceived back in Orkney and other Scandinavian polities. This is especially clear in the aftermath of the company's battle with a Byzantine dromon (a type of Byzantine warship), in which the travellers express their frustration at having divergent narratives of the same event: 'mæltu sumir, at þat væri ómerkiligt, at þeir hefði eigi allir eina sögu frá þeim stórtíðendum' (*ÍF* 34, p. 227: 'Some said that it was foolish that they did not all have one story about these great events'). They agree that Rognvaldr should confirm a version of the narrative to which they will all abide, and he does this by extemporising a skaldic verse (*SkP* 2, p. 603). Goeres analyses this scene using Stephen Greenblatt's concept of 'self-fashioning', arguing that Rognvaldr's power to write his own narrative – and hence to realise his status as a leader – is intentionally subverted by the medium in which he chooses to do so.<sup>40</sup> As Goeres demonstrates, the potential malleability of details within Rognvaldr's verse 'insists upon the subjective, uncertain nature of the story-telling process, and its ambiguous reinterpretation in the skaldic form'.<sup>41</sup> Regarding the medieval audiences who would eventually participate in this story-telling process, and whom the dromon-conquerors appear so intent on impressing, Jesch proposes the following:

*Orkneyinga saga* is not a fictional story in which the reader or listener is meant to suspend disbelief [...]. Rather its author seems to be engaged in a historical enterprise. He wants to engage his audience in dialogue about the story he presents. The audience is encouraged to look at that sources of that story critically, to sift them and to consider questions of bias and distortion.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Goeres, 'Self-Fashioning', pp. 22–25.

<sup>41</sup> Goeres, 'Self-Fashioning', p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Jesch, 'Narrating *Orkneyinga Saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 64 (1992), 336–55 (p. 350).

Jesch argues that the author of *Orkneyinga saga* prompts this critical engagement via ‘selective reminders of the narrator’s presence’, a claim that shares parallels with Bibire’s earlier analysis, in which he contends that the episode in the saga in which Rognvaldr appears as a disguised fisherman (*ÍF* 34, 199–200) is intended to be a kind of interpretive challenge for the saga’s receivers.<sup>43</sup> Goeres’s argument aligns naturally with these perspectives; the travellers’ disagreement about the battle with the dromon and the subsequent ambiguity of Rognvaldr’s verse prompt a similarly critical stance on the part of the saga’s extradiegetic audience, and without any need for narratorial intrusion. This stance is further encouraged by the fact that Rognvaldr’s verse receives no response from an intradiegetic audience, thereby placing the burden of interpreting and evaluating the jarl’s narrative squarely on the shoulders of the saga audience.

Whilst these scholarly perspectives valuably prompt recognition of the influential relationship between skaldic and saga storytellers and their audiences, my analysis also demonstrates how they might be refined in the context of *Orkneyinga saga*’s account of the journey to the Holy Land. In this case, the act of interpretation by the extradiegetic audience is not necessarily so unrestrained and instrumental as these scholars suggest. Rather, the perspective of the audience is guided by a sense of identity both with the saga’s author and its characters. The use of *skáldasögur* motifs to depict the romance between Rognvaldr and Ermingerðr, as discussed above (see section 5.1.1), suggests that these were shared cultural capital between *Orkneyinga saga*’s author and audience, and that the translation of these motifs to a foreign setting would have been an interesting variation on a familiar theme. Regarding the other verses produced during the journey, the description of foreign lands and the use of associated place names provides the extradiegetic audience with a glimpse of

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<sup>43</sup> Jesch, ‘Narrating’, p. 350; Paul Bibire, ‘Few Know an Earl in Fishing-Clothes’, in *Essays in Shetland History: Heiðursrit to T. M. Y. Manson*, ed. by Barbara E. Crawford (Lerwick: The Shetland Times, 1984), pp. 82–98 (pp. 96–97).

different territory. There is nevertheless little to suggest that this glimpse is intended to be defamiliarizing, for these foreign words and worlds are integrated within the metrical and thematic conventions of skaldic verse relatively effortlessly, complementing the almost unshakable self-confidence that the poets perform as they playfully exchange verses with one another.

The section of *Orkneyinga saga* dealing with the journey to the Holy Land may therefore elicit a similar narrative-audience relationship to what Jesch has described. The outcome of that relationship is nevertheless guided by familiar frames of reference and the depiction of the travellers' consummate ease, both of which anticipate and mediate the saga audience's reception of the foreign world. The intended effect is comparable to Ármann's reading of the account of Sigurðr Jórsalafari's equivalent journey in *Morkinskinna*:

The audience of *Morkinskinna* is clearly expected to realize that Sigurðr's nonchalant attitude is nothing but a clever mask and that Norway is in fact not as rich, nor as splendid as these southern lands. However, the audience is also expected to side with the Norwegian king and his entourage, to approve of their deception, and feel that Norway's prestige is important; that it is admirable to make such an impression on foreign monarchs so that they are tricked into believing that Norway is a country more splendid than it actually is.<sup>44</sup>

Exchanging Sigurðr for Rognvaldr, *Orkneyinga saga* achieves a similar effect by indulging the extradiegetic audience's interest in exotic places and peoples, and yet simultaneously demonstrating the stability of Scandinavian traditions even beyond their geographic and cultural centres. This dynamic is also in keeping with how modern scholars tend to envision Rognvaldr. A self-proclaimed polymath (*SkP* 2, p. 576), the jarl, as Jesch highlights, was a key figure during Orkney's twelfth century renaissance, a period in which the islands' 'confident and creative culture was Norse-speaking, literate in two alphabets, both poetically and historically-minded, thoroughly Christian and southward-looking, yet conscious of an ancient Scandinavian heritage that bound Orcadians closely to their cousins in Norway and

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<sup>44</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Image Is Everything: The *Morkinskinna* Account of King Sigurðr of Norway's Journey to the Holy Land', *Parergon*, 30.1 (2013), 121–40 (p. 135) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2013.0016>>.

Iceland’.<sup>45</sup> This interplay between foreign and familiar, continental and Nordic, new and old, all of which Rognvaldr embodies so emphatically, is represented clearly in *Orkneyinga saga*’s account of the journey to the Holy Land. As my analysis demonstrates, the saga’s audiences, both intra- and extradiegetic, play no small part in achieving this literary representation of artistic and cultural exchange.

## 5.2 Englishmen, Normans, and Icelanders: Anomalous Audiences in *Giffarðs þáttr*

Despite the suppression of certain aspects of cultural difference in *Orkneyinga saga*, Rognvaldr and his company would have been exotic figures in the context of the continental and Mediterranean places they visited, outliers among the people they encountered. Journeys into otherworlds are not uncommon in Old Norse literature, as evinced in many *fornaldarsögur*, *riddararsögur*, and eddic myths.<sup>46</sup> The inverse dynamic is also frequently represented, wherein an unknown outsider visits familiar territory, usually to subvert or test aspects of that territory’s social structures and hierarchies.<sup>47</sup> One such visitor relevant to the current context is a Norman knight called Giffarðr, whose journey through Norway, Sweden, and England is described in *Morkinskinna* as part of the short narrative known as *Giffarðs þáttr* (*ÍF* 24, pp. 51–56). According to the *Morkinskinna* author, Giffarðr arrives in Norway at the beginning of the twelfth century during the reign of Magnús berfœttr, joining the king’s company just as it is about to embark on a campaign into Sweden. The following narrative is

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<sup>45</sup> Judith Jesch, *The Nine Skills of Earl Rögnvaldr of Orkney* (Nottingham: Centre for the Study of the Viking Age, University of Nottingham, 2006), p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., *Between the Worlds: Contexts, Sources, and Analogues of Scandinavian Otherworld Journeys*, ed. by Matthias Egeler and Wilhelm Heizmann, *Ergänzungsbände Zum Reallexikon Der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, 118 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110624663>>.

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., the various stories involving Óðinn as an incognito visitor, including *Grímnismál* (*Eddukvæði* 1, pp. 356–66), *Vafþrúðnismál* (*Eddukvæði* 1, pp. 367–79), and *Gátur Gestumblinda* (*FN* 1, pp. 215–25). See further Haugen.

structured around three scenes of skaldic performance. The first takes place in Fuxerna, where Giffarðr, having failed to show up for Magnús's battle with King Ingi Steinkelsson (r. Sweden 1079–84, 1087–1105), is accused of cowardice as part of a verse exchange between Magnús and one of his retainers.<sup>48</sup> Shunned, Giffarðr departs Magnús's company and boards a ship destined for England. This is the setting for the second performance, in which an Icelandic called Eldjárn extemporises a verse taunting Giffarðr for being unable to bail out the ship. Once in England, Giffarðr attempts to prosecute Eldjárn for the verse, precipitating the third and final performance, in which Eldjárn revises his original composition to produce a verse that sarcastically praises Giffarðr for his bravery at Fuxerna. These verses are all about Giffarðr, but he has no control over their composition or performance. In other words, *Giffarðs þáttur* is a story about a recurring and completely unwilling skaldic audience.

This story has been the subject of greater academic attention recently, with talks by Morcom and Goeres preceded by a chapter on the story's possible historical background by Gade.<sup>49</sup> As these scholars have shown, the Norman Giffarðr is something of an anomaly in *Morkinskinna*, whose *þættir* otherwise centre almost exclusively on Icelanders and Norwegians. This aspect of *Giffarðs þáttur* has nevertheless been downplayed to varying extents. The respective focuses of the three scholars – Gade addresses the *þáttur*'s historical background, Morcom its narratological structure, and Goeres its self-conscious interrogation of poetry as historical evidence – leave more to be said about Giffarðr's status as a cultural outsider. In particular, and as I demonstrate below, the knight's atypicality as a skaldic

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<sup>48</sup> Fuxerna, referred to in *Morkinskinna* as 'Voxerni' (*ÍF* 24, p. 53), is located across from Lilla Edet on the western side of the river Götaälv in Sweden. Cf. *SkP* 2, p. 407.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Morcom, 'Embedded Narrative as a means of Isolation in *Giffarðs þáttur*', unpublished paper presented at the conference 'Embedded Narratives in the Literatures of the Medieval North' (Katowice, Poland, 8–9 April 2022); Erin Michelle Goeres, '*Giffarðs þáttur* and the Unreliability of Skaldic Verse', unpublished paper presented at the conference 'Íslendinga sǫgur: 17th International Saga Conference' (Reykjavik, Iceland, 12–17 August 2018); Kari Ellen Gade, 'Morkinskinna's Giffarðsþáttur: Literary Fiction or Historical Fact?', *Gripla*, 11 (2000), 181–98.

audience is a crucial part of the narrative, allowing for re-evaluation and affirmation of norms surrounding the group dynamics of skaldic performance.

Giffarðr's outsider status is signalled as soon as he is introduced in *Morkinskinna*. Where saga characters' traits are usually introduced in the objective voice of the narrator, Giffarðr's are reported in indirect speech: 'kom maðr sá fyr Magnús konung er Giffarðr hét ok kvazk vera kynjaðr af Vallandi ok bauð sik til þjónostu við konung ok lézk vera riddari góðr' (*ÍF* 24, p. 51–52: 'The man who was called Giffarðr came before King Magnús, and he said he was from Valland [France], and offered himself for the king's service, and professed that he was a good knight'). Morcom highlights the lack of narratorial authority in this and the proceeding passage, which, he suggests, primes the extradiegetic audience to anticipate Giffarðr's failure to live up to his own description.<sup>50</sup> To this argument, I would add that Giffarðr's introduction also emphasises his status as a stranger. Characters with conventional saga introductions benefit not just from the presence of narratorial authority, but also from the implication that their traits are known to the saga author, and hence that they have a place in the body of cultural knowledge giving rise to the narrative at hand. Genealogies comprise one of the major ways in which saga authors express such knowledge, using familial background to situate and potentially affirm the place of characters in the social and political structures of the storyworld.<sup>51</sup> The absence of such information in *Giffarðs þáttur* is not necessarily proof of Giffarðr's foreignness – similarly sparse details are, for example, given about Sneglu-Halli's background (*ÍF* 9, pp. 263–64) – but it also signifies the knight's immediate disconnection with both his intradiegetic companions and the *þáttur*'s extradiegetic audience.

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<sup>50</sup> Morcom, 'Isolation'.

<sup>51</sup> See further, e.g., Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds: Genealogical Structure as a Principle of Literary Organisation in Early Iceland', *JEGP*, 92 (1993), 372–85; Clunies Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, pp. 135–36.

With the *páttir* audience primed to mistrust Giffarðr's qualities, the author proceeds to build a picture of the knight's incompatibility with Scandinavian culture, and his role as a skaldic audience plays a central role in this. The first verse exchange occurs just before the battle at Fuxerna, when Magnús notices Giffarðr's absence and asks: 'Villat \* flokk várn fylla? | Falsk riddari inn valski?' (*SkP* 2, p. 386: 'Does he not want to join our troop? Is the French knight hiding?').<sup>52</sup> One of his retainers responds immediately with the following verse:

Spurði gramr, hvat gerði  
Giffarðr, þars lið barðisk;  
vér ruðum vöpn í dreyra;  
vasat hann kominn þannig.  
Framreiðar vas fnauði  
fulltrauðr á jó rauðum;  
villat \* flokk várn fylla;  
falsk riddari inn valski.<sup>53</sup>

(*SkP* 2, p. 832: 'The ruler asked what Giffarðr did where the troop fought. We reddened weapons in blood; he had not come there. The coward was very reluctant to ride forth on a red horse. He does not wish to join our troop; the French knight hides himself')

Constructed using strikingly simple syntax, these verses represent skaldic communication in a relatively easy mode, functioning in turn to illustrate the social and cultural bonds between Magnús and his retainer. The king's couplet is a call to which his retainer wholeheartedly responds, whilst the retainer's anonymity allows him to become a spokesperson for Magnús's entire company, their collective identity emphasised by the use of first-person plural pronouns in both verses. The appropriation of Magnús's couplet in the retainer's stanza is therefore not a cynical act, but one that affirms the retainer's complete alignment with his king, as Goeres argues.<sup>54</sup> Adding to this affirmative form of repetition, the fact that Magnús and the retainer reciprocate roles as skaldic performer and audience also affords the interaction a degree of temporary equality. Again, this places an emphasis on collective

<sup>52</sup> Following Finnur Jónsson, Gade emends MS 'vill hann eigi' ('he does not wish') to 'villat' (l. 1), remedying what would otherwise be an extrametrical line. See further *SkP* 2, p. 386.

<sup>53</sup> Gade's emendation of MS 'vill hann eigi' to 'villat' (l. 7) is repeated here.

<sup>54</sup> Goeres, 'Giffarðs páttir'.



identity from which Giffarðr is pointedly excluded. In this light, the group dynamics in the scene are strongly comparable to Lindow's argument that skaldic performance represented a means of determining membership to 'the Nordic comitatus'.<sup>55</sup> As this reciprocal performance demonstrates, Giffarðr's absence is not just from the conflict at Fuxerna, but also from the community at its core.

The second performance builds on this theme and makes Giffarðr's disconnection from Scandinavian culture more explicit. On Giffarðr's subsequent journey to England, the sailors encounter stormy weather, but the knight is 'liðlítill, ok liggr hann jafnan í hafinu þá er aðrir jósu' (*ÍF* 24, p. 54: 'of little help, and he lies down constantly during the journey while the others bailed'). This precipitates the following prosimetric scene:

er Eldjárn gengr til austrar ok sér hvar Giffarðr liggr þá kveðr hann vísu:

Hví samir hitt at dúsa  
 hirðmanni geðstirðum?  
 Verðr nú, þótt kjöl kosti,  
 knár riddari enn hári.  
 Þats satt at ek býð byttu,  
 breiðhúfuðum, reiða,  
 austrs til hór of hesti  
 hvaljarðar, Giffarði.<sup>[56]</sup>

Ok síðan taka þeir England.

(*ÍF* 24, pp. 54–55: 'When Eldjárn goes to bail and sees where Giffarðr lies, he speaks a verse:

"Why does it befit the wit-stiff retainer to sit around? Be hardy now, hoary knight, though the keel is strained. It's true that I command Giffarðr to carry a bucket; the bilge-water is too high in the broad-hulled horse of the whale-land [> SHIP]."

And then they reached England.'))

Eldjárn's description of Giffarðr emphasises the knight's alterity amongst the other sailors.

Where they work hard to negotiate the storm, Giffarðr is lethargic. Where Eldjárn has the cognitive capacity to extemporise a *dróttkvætt* stanza despite his heavy workload, Giffarðr is

<sup>55</sup> Lindow, 'Riddles', pp. 321–22.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *SkP* 2, p. 406. Gade's edition of this verse has the following differences from the Íslenzk fornrit edition quoted here: 1) *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* MSS 'vest[u]' is selected over *Morkinskinna*'s 'verðr' (l. 3: 'be'); 2) MS 'ek býð' (l. 5: 'I command'), retained in the Íslenzk fornrit edition, is silently emended to 'býðk'; 3) 'hór' (l. 7: 'high') is spelled 'hár'; 4) *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* MSS 'í' is selected over *Morkinskinna*'s 'of' (l. 7: 'too').

‘geðstirðr’ (l. 2: ‘wit-stiff’). Eldjárn’s use of the connected word ‘hirðmaðr’ (l. 2: ‘retainer’) is, in this context, laden with irony, since Giffarðr has only just been expelled from Magnús’s retinue and is displaying none of the heroic qualities associated either with that role or his status as a ‘riddari’ (l. 4: ‘knight’). His lethargy might be explained by the fact that he is ‘hárr’ (l. 4: ‘hoary’, implying ‘old’), but it might also derive from a sense of self-importance preventing him from participating in the ignoble work of bailing seawater. ‘Geðstirðr’ could also therefore be read as ‘strong-minded’ (see, e.g., Gade’s translation in *SkP* 2, p. 406), which would imply more arrogance than dim-wittedness on Giffarðr’s part.

Taken together, the boat setting, the protagonist’s disruptive inertia, and the consequent use of skaldic poetry draw this scene into comparison with its close parallel in *Grettis saga*, wherein, as discussed previously (see sections 3.1.2 and 4.1.1), Grettir chooses to compose *kviðlingar* about his fellow sailors and flirt with the captain’s wife rather than help with bailing. As in *Giffarðs þáttur*, Grettir’s actions have alienating consequences; the sailors’ threat to throw Grettir overboard represents a blatant sign of his incongruity in their community. These symmetrical narratives diverge, however, in recounting the responses of their skaldic audiences. In Grettir’s case, a versified provocation by his companion Hafliði prompts the outlaw to recognise the error of his ways. Grettir proceeds to acknowledge this in a verse of his own and then to help his fellow sailors with startling efficacy. By contrast, in Giffarðr’s case, Eldjárn’s verse appears to elicit no response from its recipient, as is implied by the concluding line of prose quoted above. In this context of reception, the variant interpretive possibilities offered by Eldjárn’s verse become all the more significant. When Giffarðr arrives in England, he claims to a ‘borgargreifi’ (*ÍF* 24, p. 55: ‘town governor’) that he has been ‘níddan [...] í kveðskap’ (*ÍF* 24, p. 55: ‘slandered in poetry’). In her notes on Eldjárn’s verse (see *SkP* 2, pp. 406–07), Gade follows this interpretation, sharing Giffarðr’s perspective that the verse is designed ‘to taunt’ the knight. If, however, this is Giffarðr’s

genuine interpretation, then his silence following its performance is surprising. As Goeres points out, ‘in attempting to prosecute Eldjárn for the composition of shaming verse, Giffarðr is dealing with the Icelandic skald in a very Icelandic way’.<sup>57</sup> By extension, and in comparison with Grettir’s immediate face-saving response (alongside others of the hostile audiences discussed in chapter 3), one might have expected Giffarðr to offer a rebuttal to Eldjárn’s poem. The knight’s silence could be taken contrastingly as a sign of his unmanliness.

There is nevertheless an alternative way to interpret Giffarðr’s response. In his theory of the reception of literary texts, Wolfgang Iser highlights the importance of ‘blanks’, which, he explains, are areas in a text where information seems to be withheld or missing, and which readers must negotiate to flesh out meaning.<sup>58</sup> Sif Ríkhardsdóttir, reading the passage in *Egils saga* where Ásgerðr Bjarnardóttir discovers the death of her husband Þórólfr Skallagrímsson (*ÍF* 2, p. 148), identifies the potential for similar dynamics in the reception of saga literature:

The scant information provided by the narratorial voice and the characters’ gestures or responses requires the reader to fill in the gaps so to speak. The reader or audience are thus expected to infuse the characters’ behaviours and silences with emotive content drawn from their own personal experiences as well as from previous literary encounters and the generically stipulated signifying horizon of the saga world.<sup>59</sup>

Giffarðr’s silence is one such ‘blank’ or ‘gap’ and, in the form of the *páttir*’s first performance scene, the author has provided a ‘signifying horizon’ by which it can be interpreted. Seen in parallel to the interaction between Magnús and his retainer – and, at further remove, Haflíði and Grettir’s shipboard exchange – Eldjárn’s performance is equally provocative, his verse, like Magnús’s couplet, acting as a call for an audience response. Despite containing a couple of biting remarks, Eldjárn’s verse is likewise intended to elicit a similar audience response to Magnús’s couplet. Rather than an insult, it is a vociferous offer of camaraderie, an incitement for Giffarðr to change his ways and to join the community of Scandinavian sailors by

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<sup>57</sup> Goeres, ‘*Giffarðs páttir*’.

<sup>58</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *How to Do Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 66.

<sup>59</sup> Sif Ríkhardsdóttir, p. 65.

working with them. The validity of this interpretation is supported by the fact that Eldjárn alludes to the desperation of the sailors' situation twice (ll. 3, 7), and the fact that his taunts are relatively innocuous compared to some other skaldic insults (cf., e.g., the *níð* accusations cited in section 3.1.1). Communal reintegration is certainly the effect of Haflíði's similarly charged verse upon the disruptive Grettir. It is through this prism that the 'blank' of Giffarðr's response can be appreciated more completely. Although he eventually arrives at the (mis)interpretation that Eldjárn's verse is slander, the knight's initial silence is more suggestive of his confusion regarding the poem's content and function. Given the ease with which Grettir and Magnús's retainer gratify the provocations of their skaldic interlocutors, Giffarðr's contrasting uncertainty is most readily explained by his cultural difference. Although his actions result in his becoming the object of shame and derision, Giffarðr's only real crime is that of misunderstanding, precluding any possibility of his recognising and accepting Eldjárn's offer of camaraderie.

The third performance scene represents a culmination of this theme. In England, Giffarðr summons Eldjárn to trial, but Eldjárn denies slandering Giffarðr and offers to recite the incriminating verse, which he revises as follows:

Frák, at flóttu rǫkuð  
 – falsk annat lið manna –  
 – þar vas harðr, es heyrðak,  
 hernaðr – á Foxerni.  
 Varð hjalmþrimu herðis  
 hár, þars staddir vǫruð,  
 gangr, þars gauzka drengi  
 Giffarðr í hel barði.

(*SkP* 2, p. 407: 'I heard that you pursued the fleeing ones at Fuxerna – the other host of men hid themselves – it was hard warfare there, I've heard. The course of the increaser of the helmet-clash [> WARRIOR = Giffarðr] was glorious, where you were stopped, where Giffarðr beat into Hel [i.e. killed] warriors from Götaland.')

The town governor appointed to judge the case naturally concludes that the verse is not slander, but Giffarðr recognises Eldjárn's sarcasm and interprets the content as 'háð en eigi lof' (*ÍF* 24, p. 56: 'mockery and not praise'). Without referring to these events, Snorri uses

the same phrase in his defence of the historical accuracy of skaldic praise poetry in *Heimskringla*, where he claims that skalds would not over-exaggerate praise, for ‘[þ]at væri þá háð, en eigi lof’ (*ÍF* 26, p. 5: ‘that would then be mockery, and not praise’). If, as Gade and Sigurður Nordal have argued, Eldjárn’s ironic performance formed the basis for Snorri’s thinking, then it was potentially ill-founded.<sup>60</sup> Goeres, for example, argues that the episode mocks the idea of the authenticating verse, since ‘it shows how easy it is to substitute one verbal utterance for another’.<sup>61</sup> As Ghosh has suggested, moreover, Giffarðr’s unwillingness to humiliate himself by admitting to the ironies in Eldjárn’s verse provides a good example of why over-exaggerated praise may have been acceptable to skaldic audiences.<sup>62</sup>

As this argument highlights, the reception of skaldic poetry is of primary interest to the author of *Giffarðs þáttr*. Giffarðr and the English governor provide the author with audience members that are, to quote Goeres, ‘outsiders to the world of skaldic poetry’, although the extent of their unfamiliarity with that world is ambiguous.<sup>63</sup> Giffarðr overinterprets the hostility of Eldjárn’s first *lausavísa* but is able to comprehend the nuanced sarcasm of Eldjárn’s second. The governor meanwhile prefaces his judgement by saying that he is ‘[l]ítt [...] skældinn’ (*ÍF* 24, p. 56: ‘not well versed in poetry’), but recognises that Eldjárn’s second verse is praising, not shaming. When he first hears about Giffarðr’s case, moreover, he states: ‘er mér enn mart ókunnigt þat er þessu fylgir. En þenna hlut kann ek þó sízt at skynja er kveðit er’ (*ÍF* 24, p. 55: ‘There are still many things that pertain to this [case] that I do not know. But I understand this part least: how to interpret what was said [i.e. in Eldjárn’s first verse]’). This ill-defined space of reception, where semi-comprehension and silence dominate, allows the *þáttr* author to re-evaluate skaldic performance. For Goeres and Ghosh, the revisionist nature of Eldjárn’s second verse, and its respective interpretations by

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<sup>60</sup> Sigurður Nordal, *Snorri Sturluson* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1973), p. 136; Gade, ‘Giffarðsþáttr’, pp. 183–84.

<sup>61</sup> Goeres, ‘Giffarðs þáttr’.

<sup>62</sup> Ghosh, p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> Goeres, ‘Giffarðs þáttr’.

Giffarðr and the English governor, highlight a fundamental problem with the historical authenticity of skaldic poetry, demonstrating not that skaldic poetry is anti-communicative, but that its meaning is contingent upon the mind of the recipient.

As the thematic capstone to the *páttr*, however, Eldjárn's second performance also continues to demonstrate the importance of cultural belonging in determining how skaldic poetry is interpreted. In his second *lausavísa*, Eldjárn reciprocates the malice that Giffarðr has shown in the form of the legal case, inverting his previous offer of camaraderie and alienating Giffarðr further from the Nordic communities he has encountered. Although, in failing to fight at Fuxerna and to work on the ship, Giffarðr has undoubtedly earned some disapproval, his ultimate ostracism comes as a result of his cultural and communicative incompatibility with Scandinavians, and this is demonstrated through his behaviour as a subject and audience of skaldic poetry. Taking the *páttr*'s three scenes of skaldic performance together, the author's interest is evidently in audiences that are respectively typical and anomalous. The verse exchange between Magnús and the retainer represents an ideal interaction between a skaldic performer and an audience, one in which the interpretive relationship between the two parties is mirror-like and uninhibited. From the *páttr* author's perspective, the normativity of this relationship is then confirmed by Eldjárn and Giffarðr's problematic encounters, in which a misinterpretation escalates their conflict to the point of the Norman knight's social expulsion.

As Morcom points out, the section of *Morkinskinna* describing Giffarðr's interactions with Eldjárn is one of the few parts of the saga that 'can be considered a genuine digression', since it neglects Magnús berfœttr entirely and is bookended by the following extradiegetic discourse markers: 'er nú at segja frá honum lítit þat' (*ÍF* 24, p. 54: 'There is now a little to tell about him [i.e. Giffarðr]'); 'er nú lokit frá þeim at segja' (*ÍF* 24, p. 56: 'This is now the

end of what there is to say about them’).<sup>64</sup> To expand on this argument, *Giffarðs þáttr* also digresses from the broader trend in *Morkinskinna* in which the socially peripheral position of Icelanders, relative to the ‘central’ Norwegian culture in which they participate, affords them subversive power.<sup>65</sup> Although Eldjárn’s capacity for mockery associates him with some of the subversive qualities that the *Morkinskinna* author codes as Icelandic (cf. the analyses of *Arnórs þáttr* and *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* in sections 2.1 and 2.3), the main cultural outlier in this *þáttr* is the Norman Giffarðr. Whilst, relative to the Scandinavians he encounters, the knight appears cowardly, lethargic, slow-witted, sensitive, and potentially pompous, none of these traits are confirmed in the objective voice of the *þáttr* author. Instead, Giffarðr’s foreignness is the primary factor determining his peripheral status. This sets him up to fail as a skaldic audience, and thereby to emphasise the normativity of the Scandinavian audiences to which he is compared. Although, overall, historical (un)reliability may be one aspect of the *þáttr* author’s interest in skaldic poetry, it is the perspective of an anomalous audience that enables them to produce their principal insight: the centre of meaning in skaldic poetry may be unstable, but its demise is certain in the minds of audiences from beyond Scandinavia.

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Since skaldic poetry is a notoriously complex and challenging artform, it is unsurprising to find relatively few depictions of audiences who cannot be expected to have some familiarity with its characteristics and associated cultural values. Of the cases that are available to study, one would expect the characters’ inherent inexperience to make them relatively distinctive. Although my analysis has highlighted several such idiosyncratic qualities, it is nevertheless notable that accounts involving this audience-type have much in common with the others

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<sup>64</sup> Morcom, ‘Structuring Disruption’, p. 257.

<sup>65</sup> See further Ármann Jakobsson, ‘King and Subject in *Morkinskinna*’, *Skandinavistik*, 28 (1998), 101–17; Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Individual and the Ideal: The Representation of Royalty in *Morkinskinna*’, *JEGP*, 99 (2000), 71–86.

considered over the course of this thesis. Absences of intradiegetic audience response remain a tendency, although the potential interpretive value of these ‘blanks’ is probably at its highest in these contexts, where silence may signify communicative difficulty rather than mere authorial laconism. Regarding the type of skaldic poetry performed for these audiences, there is greater distinctiveness in the troubadour inflections of Rǫgnvaldr’s *lausavísur*, which indicate a willingness to engage with and affirm the cultural difference of a foreign audience. As noted above, however, the atypicality of Rǫgnvaldr’s poetry should also be considered in the context of the more pronounced continental outlook that defined several aspects of the jarl’s reign, and which existed alongside his commitment to maintain skaldic traditions.<sup>66</sup> None of the other poetry considered in this chapter, moreover, seems to have been especially tailored for its foreign audiences, and its intended effects (praise for Ermingerðr, insult for Giffarðr) are not unusual.

Even accepting that aspects of these saga accounts are generic, however, the small sample size analysed in this chapter still poses striking theoretical problems, prompting development of some of the established theories about skaldic audiences. The very fact that skaldic audiences of various experience levels existed, for example, highlights the need for caution when postulating homogeneity in how any poem would have been interpreted. *Giffarðs þáttr* demonstrates this effectively via its depiction of two extremes in skaldic interpretation: the verse exchange between Magnús and his retainer represents an ideal performer-audience relationship, whilst Eldjárn’s performances for Giffarðr and the English governor are fraught with communicative and cultural complications. Although it is unlikely that either of these situations would have arisen regularly in historical reality, they prompt recognition of the spectrum of interpretive ability that would have existed in all skaldic audiences regardless of their level of experience. Underscoring this point, *Giffarðs þáttr*’s

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Jesch, *Nine Skills*, p. 16.



anomalous audiences would also benefit from comparison with their counterparts in *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Sneglu-Halla þátr*, both of which depict a degree of skaldic misinterpretation by audiences in the British Isles (see further sections 2.1 and 2.3). Further exploration of this peculiar geographic connection would doubtless speak further to the role of skaldic performance as an index of cultural similarity and difference in these texts, and would be well supported by previous research on skaldic poetry's British connections by Matthew Townend, Frank, and others.<sup>67</sup> Beyond this apparently British proclivity for poetic puzzlement, scholars might be forgiven for homogenising hypothetical audience responses in other contexts, since most will be accustomed to the kind of conventional formulae used in *Orkneyinga saga* to describe Rognvaldr's stay in Narbonne. The sublimation of Ermingerðr into the romantic tradition of the *skáldasögur* diminishes the potential to examine her unique interpretation of Rognvaldr's verse, serving instead to frame the jarl as a mediator between Scandinavian and European cultures.

Alongside the European identities with which Giffarðr and Ermingerðr are associated, a further connection between these texts, as noted in the introduction to this chapter and which merits further expansion here, is their twelfth-century setting. More specifically, the setting of *Giffarðs þátr* can be situated to around 1100–01 since Magnús berfœtr's Swedish campaign took place in the spring of the latter year, whilst Rognvaldr's meeting with Ermingerðr has generally been dated to the winter of 1151–52.<sup>68</sup> Although the greater displacement of skalds by European forms of entertainment, especially in Norwegian courts, occurred some time later than these events, as exemplified by the late-twentieth-century

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<sup>67</sup> Matthew Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry in Viking Age England', *The Review of English Studies*, 51.203 (2000), 349–70 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/res/51.203.349>>; Townend, 'Knútsdrápur'; Townend, 'Whatever Happened'; Townend, 'Cnut's Poets'; Roberta Frank, 'Did Anglo-Saxon Audiences Have a Skaldic Tooth?', *Scandinavian Studies*, 59 (1987), 338–55; Roberta Frank, 'A Taste for Knottiness: Skaldic Art at Cnut's Court', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 47 (2018), 197–217 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0263675119000048>>.

<sup>68</sup> Gade, 'Giffarðsþátr', pp. 184, 186; Bibire, 'Poetry', p. 219; Finlay, 'Skalds, Troubadours', p. 106; Clunies Ross, *History*, p. 44.

setting of *Mána þáttir* (see section 2.3), Giffarðr and Ermingerðr's roles as audiences nevertheless reflect a transitional role for skalds and their artform in this period.<sup>69</sup> A representative of the European elite, Giffarðr is shamed and alienated as part of what seems to be a defensive attitude towards the skaldic artform and its broader connections to Scandinavian culture. Ermingerðr's foreignness is meanwhile not dismissed so readily, but her depiction in both Rognvaldr's verses and the prose of *Orkneyinga saga* is equally affirmative of several Nordic literary conventions. Of further importance to the *Orkneyinga saga* account is, as Phelpstead highlights, Ermingerðr and Rognvaldr's mutual belonging to Christendom, which helps to facilitate their intercultural exchange.<sup>70</sup> The twelfth-century poetic context can be cited in this regard also, for, as Guðrún Nordal has shown, this period saw a strengthening of the relationship between ecclesiastical centres of learning and skaldic verse-making in Scandinavia, especially in Orkney during and after the time of Rognvaldr's reign.<sup>71</sup>

None of these aspects should, of course, be taken to override the uniqueness of *Giffarðs þáttir* or *Orkneyinga saga*'s account of Ermingerðr's meeting with Rognvaldr. It is nevertheless reasonable to highlight a connection between these audiences from beyond Scandinavia and the period in which the relationship between that region and a central continental culture was developing, a primary factor being the consolidation of, and internal reflection upon, Christianity in many Nordic countries.<sup>72</sup> Giffarðr and Ermingerðr are not necessarily heralds of the degradation of skaldic prestige in the face of European competition.

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Wanner, p. 75.

<sup>70</sup> Phelpstead, 'Skaldic Saints', p. 85.

<sup>71</sup> Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 19–40.

<sup>72</sup> On this subject, see, e.g., Knut Helle, 'The Norwegian Kingdom: Succession Disputes and Consolidation', in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, ed. by Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 369–91 (pp. 376–79) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521472999.020>>; Haki Antonsson, 'Traditions of Conversion in Medieval Scandinavia: A Synthesis', *Saga-Book*, 24 (2010), 25–74; Carl Phelpstead, 'Converting to Europe: Christian Themes in *Knýtlinga saga*', *VMS*, 1 (2005), 163–77 <<https://doi.org/10.1484/J.VMS.2.3017469>>.

In their local contexts, however, these audiences provide saga authors with new ways to evaluate skaldic performance and its socio-political functions, foretelling a changing role for skalds and their artform in the latter half of the High Middle Ages.

## 6 Conclusion

Whether written or oral, poems are inextricably bound to audiences. In fact, the moment of a poem's composition is inseparable from the moment of its reception; as soon as an idea is expressed in verse, it finds its first audience in the mind of the poet. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, audiences are fundamental to this symbiotic relationship, but have typically been marginalised in traditions of thinking both historic and modern. In the case of skaldic poetry, this dynamic is exacerbated both by the composers' desire to use their verse for self-promotion, and by the corresponding dearth of information on the audiences' identities, capabilities, and functions. Paradoxically, the totality of skaldic audiences is also far more heterogeneous and expansive than can be shown in one investigation alone. Spanning well over a millennium, the potential reception history of the skaldic corpus contains many aspects that deserve greater attention. In my thesis, I have elected to cover only one aspect of this long and understudied history: the depiction and function of skaldic audiences within saga literature.

Even this methodological frame has required the inclusion of a substantial body of primary material. Just as the environment of the Norwegian court gave rise to skaldic verse, so too must any performance-focused analysis of the artform begin there (see chapter 2). Approaching the poetry largely in isolation, previous scholars have focused on the ideal functions of skaldic verse in these settings, especially how poets praise, legitimise, commemorate, and otherwise support the status of their royal audiences. Although there is value in assessing these functions with a degree of distance from the poetry's performance contexts, my focus on saga accounts prompts greater awareness of the precarious social interactions that such courtly performances involved. By emphasising these contextual factors, the literary accounts also highlight the need for re-assessment of the centrality

generally afforded to encomiastic poetry in skaldic scholarship. Whilst the panegyric is undoubtedly a crucial part of the skaldic skillset in court environments, the range of saga material describing poetic criticism, play, and other modes of performance demonstrates other means by which skalds could engage with Norwegian power structures. It is through scenes involving these alternate performance modes, furthermore, that saga authors gain greater licence to examine the role of the royal audience. Relinquished from the formulaic exchanges that typify encomiastic encounters, undermined and playful rulers are shown to be vivacious and full-bodied characters, anxious to avoid embarrassment or delighting in social deviance. In contrast to the performer-centric approaches that have tended to define earlier research, my analysis affords more space to these aspects, revealing new ways in which kingship, spectatorship, and their points of connection were evaluated by saga authors.

In keeping with the various social contexts in which skaldic poetry appears in the sagas, my analysis has given equal weight to settings beyond the Scandinavian royal court. Venturing into these new horizons, skalds continue to use their artform in similar ways, namely as part of efforts to acquire power and honour. Saga authors recurrently highlight the notoriety of skaldic poetry as being an important aspect of this self-assertive exercise, as shown by the many episodes in which skalds use poetry to sway public opinion away from their enemies (see chapter 3). Despite prior scholarly emphasis on the extremity of skaldic insults, my sustained focus on the audience side of these confrontations reveals greater diversity in reactions to hostile poetry than has been previously assumed. My analysis not only reinforces the perception of skalds as being anti-social in saga literature, but also elaborates on the reasons behind this trend. Where the complexity and ostentatiousness of skaldic poetry support its function in political environments, hostile audiences are shown to exploit these characteristics, counteracting poetic slander by showing how it lacks either truthfulness or righteousness. The potential ineffectiveness of skaldic influence is further

evident in many of the *Íslendingasögur*'s romantic storylines. My study of these texts (see chapter 4) not only reveals there to be an under-appreciated connection between the apostrophised 'lady' of skaldic convention and the romantic audiences of the *skáldasögur*, but also how the latter are afforded far greater agency in response to attempted seduction by poet-paramours. Given a voice by saga authors, romantic audiences share the capacity of their hostile counterparts to speak back to skalds, demonstrating the paradoxical agency of figures that are concurrently marginal and yet necessary to the act of performance.

In an investigation purposing to read against marginalisation of this kind, it would have been remiss not to consider characters whose circumstances put them at odds with archetypal skaldic audiences. In this regard, my analysis of episodes involving audiences from beyond Scandinavia (see chapter 5) highlights one way in which saga authors use the anomalous to re-evaluate the typical. Where scholarly scrutiny of *Orkneyinga saga*'s Narbonne interlude has hitherto been diverted towards the possibility of troubadour influence on Rǫgnvaldr jarl's poetry, my focus on the characterisation of Queen Ermingerðr represents an alternative approach to the text's interrogation of European and Nordic values. As part of this, my study highlights the parallels between Ermingerðr's role in the narrative and the royal and romantic audience-types discussed previously, and which serve to support the cultural value of skaldic poetry beyond its usual territory. A similarly pro-Scandinavian attitude is detectable in the lesser-known *Gíffarðs þáttr*. My reading of this text places less weight on the issue of skaldic poetry's historical accuracy, which previous scholars have emphasised, and more on the matter of performer-audience familiarity, manifesting here in the form of cultural difference.

The subject of my final case study, *Gíffarðs þáttr* fittingly speaks to some of the major scholarly concerns raised at the beginning of this thesis (see section 1.1). One of these is the issue of audience (in)comprehension. The respective misinterpretations of skaldic verse

by Giffarðr and the English governor represent rare acknowledgements of the poetry's potential unintelligibility, which is borne out not simply by its tangled word order and obscure imagery, but also by its partial dependence on a shared cultural identity between performer and audience. Although these aspects have been cited in modern scholarship, they feature only rarely in the work of the saga authors, who usually portray the experience of skaldic audiences as involving little to no hermeneutic difficulty. Of the cases covered above, only Sigtryggr silkiskegg in *Gunnlaugs saga* (see section 2.1) and the sons of Haraldr gilli in *Einars þáttur* (see section 2.3) react to skaldic verse with apparent uncertainty, and even then only to a small extent. In contrast to these exceptions, the majority of intradiegetic audiences appear unmoved by the complex artistry of skaldic verse. This trend can frequently be explained by the narrative functions skaldic verses play in sagas. Where a *lausavísa* is used to convey information about a narrative event, for example, characters will frequently react to the content of the verse as if it had been spoken in everyday language. This allows the plot to proceed uninhibited by convoluted descriptions of the hermeneutic process, which in any case would be out of keeping with the typical terseness of saga style.

Although the sagas generally lack such detail on the artistic elements of skaldic poetry, there is no reason to envision the same ambivalence applying to the audiences of the sagas themselves. Iser's concept of narrative 'blanks' is a useful framework in this regard. As noted previously, Iser's blanks are moments in which information appears to be missing or withheld from a narrative.<sup>1</sup> Whilst I previously delimited this concept to my analysis of skaldic communication in *Giffarðs þáttur*, the overwhelming absence of audience response within the sagas can be viewed as a much broader form of blank, one that provides insight into the role of skaldic verse in saga entertainment. In Gropper's view, cited at the beginning of this thesis, this blank signifies convenience. For her, saga authors focus primarily on the

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<sup>1</sup> Iser, p. 66.

illocutionary effects of skaldic poetry within the storyworld, thereby leaving saga audiences to engage with the hermeneutic complications of the verse ‘only at a secondary level’.<sup>2</sup> In my view, this latter aspect is not so secondary as Gropper contends. In keeping with some of my comments on the framing of skaldic poetry in *Orkneyinga saga* (see section 5.1.2), I contend that the absence of audience reactions within sagas is more plausibly read as an encouragement of hermeneutic engagement on the part of saga audiences. If the entertainment value of skaldic stanzas resides at least partly in the act of parsing their complexity, then the saga authors’ reluctance to provide detail on audiences’ responses and conclusions probably represents a means of maximising this. Iser notes how blanks function ‘to stimulate the process of ideation to be performed by the reader’, and I contend that the corpus of skaldic prosimetra can be understood in similar terms.<sup>3</sup> Either individually or communally, the sagas’ extradiegetic audiences are the ones with primary responsibility for decoding skaldic verse, thereby affording them the greatest possible appreciation for the poetry’s artistic, cultural, and social value. Is it necessary to imagine, like Judy Quinn, that ‘[w]hen prosimetrum involves the quotation of poetry [...] the narrator’s voice is at once in competition with another voice, which through its poetic form is graced with significance and authority’?<sup>4</sup> By contrast, I envision an approach to saga entertainment couched less in terms of competition and more in terms of collaboration. During and after the quotation of a skaldic stanza, the narrator concedes authority willingly rather than begrudgingly, allowing for a break in the narrative where the performer(s) and audience may discuss and interpret a poem’s meaning together.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Würth [Gropper], p. 274.

<sup>3</sup> Iser, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Quinn, ‘First-Stanza Quotation’, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Frog, ‘How the Hell Do You Read This?: The Evolution of Eddic Orality Through Manuscript Performance’, in *Old Norse Poetry in Performance*, ed. by Brian McMahon and Annemari Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 191–215 (p. 209) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367809324>>; Joyce Coleman, ‘Interactive Parchment: The Theory and Practice of Medieval English Aurality’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 25 (1995), 63 (p. 77) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3508818>>; Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public*



Whilst detailed testing of these ideas is beyond the scope of this investigation, they represent a viable point of departure for future research. My thesis has laid firm foundations for studies of this kind, which could also incorporate audience-types that are less frequently represented in the saga corpus, and hence which I have not had space to cover. It would be interesting, for example, to compare the material analysed above with those occasional saga episodes in which a verse is staged in intradiegetic fashion, and yet without any other characters apparently being present. The representation of such moments in *Grettis saga* and *Gísla saga* has been the subject of brief discussion by O'Donoghue, but further material could be compared, such as the soliloquy-like presentation of Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* (*SkP* 1, pp. 663–98) in *Heimskringla* (*ÍF* 27, pp. 441–42), or Haraldr inn harðráði's versified promise of vengeance against Einarr þambarskelfir (*SkP* 2, pp. 47–49), which is varyingly recorded as being spoken either from the king's balcony or through some palatial latticework (see *ÍF* 23, pp. 207–08; *ÍF* 28, p. 124; *ÍF* 29, p. 263).<sup>6</sup> Compared to the interpersonal tension involved in many of the cases I have elected to study, how do these quasi-private performances relate to the concept of 'audience', and how do they function within their narratives? Addressing these and similar questions would no doubt prompt further insight into the varied ways in which audiences operate in saga literature, allowing for deconstruction of groups whose make-up and function may be highly idiosyncratic, and yet who may otherwise be seen simply as faceless spectators.

There is also clearly room for further audience-centric approaches to the skaldic corpus on its own terms, albeit with the caveats outlined earlier in the thesis (see section 1.1). Precedent for applying this methodological framework to medieval Germanic poetry has already been set by Nikolas Gunn, whose recent article on 'attentional phenomena' in

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in *Late Medieval England and France*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 93–97.

<sup>6</sup> O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 143, 180–81. Cf. Osborne, p. 20.

*Beowulf* elucidates how the poet controls audience attention in relation to the character of Grendel.<sup>7</sup> Given the continual centring – and indeed testing – of audiences’ cognitive capabilities in skaldic poetry, this literary corpus would represent a rich playing field for scholarly thinking along similar lines. Where previous research has frequently relied on the royal court as a foundation for conceptualisations of skaldic performances and audiences, it would be intriguing to see further audience-centred studies that acknowledge and compare the much wider range of contexts in which the poetry is known to have been received. Therein lies an interdisciplinary exercise both exciting and daunting. As Reason acknowledges,

The audience experience envelops all of these – the personal and the collective, the multi-sensory, the social, the immediately affective and the retrospectively interpretative – but these different elements all require different kinds of understanding, different conceptualisations and different ways of researching.<sup>8</sup>

Although, in the case of skaldic audiences, empirical data on many of these elements is extremely limited, the opportunity to mitigate this lies in the inherent interdisciplinarity of audience studies. Collaboration with related fields such as ‘the philosophical tradition, historiography, comparative analysis, ethnography and practice-based research’, to repeat only those that Reason cites, would aid in traversing the information gap and producing a more complete picture of skaldic audiences.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the heterogeneity of skaldic audiences is best and perhaps only understood through a heterogeneity of research methods. Any models produced as a result of such approaches would not only make for valuable comparison with the literary conclusions I have reached, but could also speak back to

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<sup>7</sup> Nikolas Gunn, ‘The Poetics of Attention in Old English Verse: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to the Depiction of Grendel in *Beowulf*’, *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics*, 32 (2023), 329–54 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/09639470231177583>>.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Reason, ‘Methods, Methodologies and Understanding Audiences’, in *Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, ed. by Matthew Reason and others (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 241–47 (p. 241) <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003033226>>.

<sup>9</sup> Reason, p. 243.

research on modern audiences, especially as they exist in relation to complex and testing forms of performance art.

Even as one seeks better ways to delve the depths of cognition, sociality, and affect that comprise the audience experience, it must equally be acknowledged that the unknowability of audiences will continue to be one of their key characteristics and strengths. In her remarks on *Theatre & Audience*, Helen Freshwater acknowledges the near impossibility of having collective and social identities in the modern era of ‘swiftly shifting populations and sites of wealth’:

in many of today’s urban centres it is impossible to be sure that the people you live, travel, or work alongside – and those whom you sit next to in the theatre – share your language, your sense of national identity, or indeed any of your beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

The contrasting perception that medieval societies were less mobile and diverse has given scholars license to assume greater certainty regarding the collective values of skaldic audiences. Court audiences have been conceptualised as generally subscribing to the capacity of performance to create group identity and sustain ruling power, whilst hostile and romantic audiences have been characterised as largely powerless in the face of skaldic influence. Despite its tendency towards the fictive and the stylistic, the literary evidence I have studied is nevertheless a sure sign of the oversimplicity of these models. In the sagas, skalds regularly use their artform to garner influence amongst their audiences, but this process is not always shown to be a *fait accompli*. Instead, and with equal regularity, saga authors highlight the capacity of audiences to speak back from the margin and to disrupt or support the designs of their skaldic counterparts. Much of this power resides in the inherent inscrutability of spectators – that is, the ineffability of their individual and collective values, and consequently the unpredictability of their reactions. It is this quality that makes audiences potentially ungovernable in the face of authority, and also what makes them such intriguing objects of

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<sup>10</sup> Freshwater, p. 8.

study. In getting to know audiences better, one also learns the importance of not knowing them completely.

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