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## ON THE CLASSIFICATION OF EDDIC HEROIC POETRY IN VIEW OF THE ORAL THEORY

The Oral Theory as presented by Albert Lord in his *Singer of Tales* has given us a totally new insight into the nature of the oral background of Eddic poetry.

It has always been assumed that Eddic poetry was preserved orally for a long time before it was written down by Icelanders in the thirteenth century. This assumption, however, has always been made without full attention being paid to what was entailed in the postulation of an oral existence for a poetic genre.

Various studies have appeared in which scholars have tried to establish the orality of Eddic poetry by counting formulas and other characteristics of oral poetry. These studies, however, cannot prove whether or not the use of formulas shows that Eddic poems were preserved and composed orally in a manner similar to the epics studied by Parry and Lord in Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup>

In consequence, scholars either assume that Eddic poetry was composed in a manner similar to the Yugoslavian epics, or think that it was not, or try to think of some different ways of composing and memorising poetry, basing their ideas either on personal experience from written cultures or on the evidence of Old-Icelandic literature. Neither of

these methods has much bearing as evidence for the orality of Eddic poetry. The weakness of the first approach is obvious and the second cannot be used either, because the evidence was written down by literate people who were brought up after the introduction of writing to Icelandic society. They therefore did not have an understanding of how poetry was preserved at an oral stage - no more so than the oral poets themselves!

Before we go any further we have to make a decision that cannot be based on any scientific evidence. Should we apply Lord's model to Eddic poetry? If we say 'no', we have to argue for very special circumstances in Iceland and Scandinavia, circumstances that can hardly be paralleled elsewhere, and ignore all the advances made in the field of oral research in the last decades. If we say 'yes', we can profit from all the research which we would otherwise have to ignore.

I think that it is more fruitful to say 'yes'.

This is not to say that the text of the poems in the Codex Regius can be studied as a 'text' from an oral performance. Before the writing of the Codex Regius the poems had been preserved in writing for some time. The problem therefore always remains how oral our actual text is and how the written and oral traditions influenced each other from the time the first poems were committed to writing (thus establishing the idea of a fixed text for the first time) and until the Codex Regius was compiled. This interaction is a separate problem and should not distract our attention from the centuries before the time of writing when the oral tradition was carried on without the interference of writing.<sup>2</sup>

Once we have said 'yes', many of the traditional studies of Eddic poetry are no longer valid; most importantly, those that have been undertaken in order to determine both age and the intertextual relations of the Eddic poems. A poem in an oral tradition is renewed every time it is performed and is therefore only as old as its latest performance, and textual

parallels can be accounted for as evidence of a common poetic language. As a result of this we need no longer regard two Eddic treatments of a certain heroic theme as different poems (in pairs like *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II* and *Atlakviða* and *Atlamáli*); one of which is considered younger and even less authentic and artistic. Now it is possible to see such treatments as variations of the same poem, a circumstance which gives us a new insight into the different treatments and their adaptation to new conditions and varying audiences.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I shall look at these poetic pairs and try to reinterpret some of the evidence that has hitherto been used to assign them to different age categories. I shall then proceed to show how this different view can change and improve our understanding of several of the poems dealing with the story of Guðrún, Gunnar, Högni, Atli, and Oddrún.

Scaldic poetry is generally believed to have been popular in courtly surroundings, whereas Eddic poetry is to a greater extent likely to have lived among ordinary people. Unfortunately very little is known about the Eddic poems in this respect and all we can do is to look for evidence in the poems themselves to see whether they reflect the surroundings in which they were composed or mainly recited.

If an Eddic poem is influenced by scaldic diction, stresses the glory and honour of the male hero or the power of kings, the importance of gold and so forth, may we not then assume that it has been recited to an audience familiar with these matters, that is in courtly surroundings? If on the other hand, a poem describes the heroes as ordinary people, uses language close to every day speech and betrays little or no knowledge of courtly life, may we not then be entitled to the conjecture that these poems were recited among farmers or lower-class people with little knowledge of a warrior's life at court: by people who liked to be

entertained by stories about famous legendary characters?

We can also look for specifically male or female characteristics in the poems. If, for instance, a poem deals with a female hero or heroine, describes her feelings and the effects which the heroic activity of the males has on her, and sees everything from the viewpoint of the women involved, may we perhaps then conclude that this poem was, if not necessarily composed by a woman, at least transmitted by women who were correcting the specifically male viewpoint often found elsewhere in the heroic cycle: that women are evil and lacking in understanding of the the heroic ideals of men?

The two poems about Helgi Hundingsbani (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and //) deal with the same characters and events. By investigating the parallel passages we may therefore get an idea of the different background of the poems and thus suggest where each poem is most likely to have been recited.

Joseph Harris<sup>4</sup> has compared the two and I will use much of the material he has drawn attention to. Harris, however, presupposes that the first lay is a scaldic revision of the second one. In the light of the Oral Theory such a presupposition is misleading and the evidence used by Harris to drive home his conclusions can equally well be used for a different argument.

In both the Helgi lays there is a 'senna' between one of Helgi's companions and their opponent, in which Helgi himself intervenes when the insults reach their peak. This is generally interpreted as being intended to show Helgi in a positive light. He does not partake in the flyting but puts an end to it. The more 'mudslinging' the flyting contains, the more Helgi shines forth when he finally intervenes. In the first lay of Helgi the 'senna' is longer and contains much more offensive language than the second lay. Here we can observe the general tendency of the first lay: the main

emphasis is laid on Helgi and his heroism.

The language of the two poems differs considerably. The first lay is rich in Scaldic diction, both kennings and other poetic expressions, common in Scaldic poetry. We also have descriptions of fleets, armies and princes which are not prominent in the second poem. In the first lay we meet with more mythical allusions than in other heroic poems. Such a diction and such allusions suggest an aristocratic audience. This evidence all points to a king's court and one particular scald has even been suggested as the author of the poem since his style is supposed to be reflected in it.

Apart from the difference in diction, we have a great difference in the treatment of Helgi's wife, Sigrún, her relationship with her husband and her dilemma. In the second lay Sigrún approaches Helgi affectionately, claiming that she loved him before she even saw him. She emphasises her fears, since her father expects her to marry someone she does not care too much for. She is torn between her own feelings on the one hand and loyalty towards her family on the other. She asks for Helgi's love and protection. Helgi, in a knightly fashion, tries to put her at ease. She can stay with him, and he will deal with the family. Sigrún's agony is further aggravated when Helgi has killed her father and brothers - except one who later kills Helgi in revenge. On that occasion, Sigrún cries out that she would much prefer that those who are dead would be alive and that she could nevertheless rest with Helgi. When her brother has taken revenge on Helgi she turns her wrath towards him, explains her love for Helgi and praises him. The last passage tells of Helgi's return from Valhalla. He is allowed to stay one night with Sigrún, they both express their happiness - he being dead, enjoying a living woman in his bed and she alive, being perfectly happy lying with a cold and bloodstained corpse. When Helgi does not return the following nights, Sigrún languishes away and finally dies.

Sigrún and her feelings thus play an important role in the second lay. In the courtly version in the first lay, her part is reduced. The first lay ends when Helgi has killed Sigrún's family and they see a happy future ahead of them. Sigrún's love for Helgi and her conflicting loyalties are also deemphasised.

The first lay describes Sigrún as a valkyrie and her first meeting with Helgi is not at all as romantic as that found in the other lay. Directly on seeing her, Helgi suggests that they go home together. Sigrún ignores the suggestion and says that there are more important things in store for him than to enjoy himself, namely to fight her father. The difference between the two poems can be summarised in the two stanzas where Sigrún explains her problem to Helgi.<sup>5</sup>

First lay (st. 18)

Hef *ir* mi *nn* fap *ir*  
meyio si *nni*  
*grimmom* heitit  
Granmars syni;  
e *nn* ec hefi, Helgi!  
Havðbrodd q *vepi nn*  
k *onung* óneisan  
se *m* cattar son.

Second lay (st. 16)

"Var ec Havðbroddi  
í her fæstnöp,  
e *nn* iofvr a *nnan*  
eiga vildac;  
þo sia *mc*, fylc *iri*  
frönda reipi,  
hefi ec mins fædvr  
mvráp brotip."

The stanza from the second lay is mainly concerned with Sigrún's dilemma, whereas the first lay plays down her part but uses the opportunity to gloryfy Helgi.

Thus the first lay might have lived among courtly people and have been recited by people who were well trained in Scaldic diction and familiar with the life of warriors whereas the second lay seems to reflect more interest in emotions, particularly those of women, showing no signs of the courtly culture which can be observed in its counterpart.

Of course it is difficult to judge whether this is enough to allow us to conclude that the second lay was transmitted by women, but given the different version it is hard to explain where we can find a taste which

neglects heroic splendour and manly qualities for the sake of a woman's dilemma – except among women.

Atlamál and Atlakviða make up a similar pair: two poems which tell the same story from different perspectives. This is the story of how Atli invited his brothers-in-law, Gunnar and Högni, to his court only to kill them, and how Guðrún, Atli's wife and Gunnar's and Högni's sister, then killed Atli. These poems have been regarded as originating in different centuries, Atlakviða as being one of the oldest poems in the Edda and Atlamál one of the younger. Atlamál is often supposed to have been composed in Greenland. There seems to be a general consensus to regard Atlakviða as a courtly poem on grounds similar to those we have discussed earlier in connection with the first lay of Helgi. Atlamál on the other hand appears to be more remote from the life of the nobility. In Atlamál the kings are treated as ordinary farmers, the gold which plays a major role in Atlakviða is hardly mentioned. The heroes' motivations are thus neglected for the sake of just telling a story. Apart from these differences, Atlamál seems to reflect the views of farming women rather than those of the farming men. In Atlamál it is mentioned that Guðrún has to wait at home when Atli sends messengers to invite her brothers to the final feast. Gunnar's and Högni's wives, who are unknown elsewhere, are also introduced into the story and receive more attention than their husbands. The welcoming party for the messengers is described from the viewpoint of the women who serve the ale. We are also told how the beds were made up after the party and our attention is drawn to underwear which needs washing. Nothing of this is mentioned in Atlakviða.

The difference between the poems has been explained through the theory that poetic taste changed over the ages. In older times the emphasis was laid on heroic behaviour of men. Emotions were seldom or never referred to or described. This taste is then supposed to have

developed towards a preference for a more lyrical style, where closer attention is paid to love and other emotions. Instead of simply telling a story, the poems start giving motivations as to why things happen. We also get more detailed descriptions of certain events, and more delays in the narrative than earlier. This increasing interest in feelings appears only when women are described. The feelings of men are not dealt with at all.

Theodore M. Andersson<sup>6</sup> has most recently compared *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*. He describes *Atlamál* as a conscious reworking of *Atlakviða*, undertaken in order to adapt it to a new taste. At the same time certain new motifs from German sources are supposed to have been introduced into the new lay. Part of the assumption is also that the two poems originated in different geographic and cultural areas.

It would seem that we have to allow for different literary tastes in the same age. It is impossible to imagine a general change of taste in a genre which seems to be so widespread as Eddic poetry, a genre which unlike court poetry is not limited to one social class.

To account for the differences between the two poems it suffices to regard them as representing different values and points of view, co-existing in the same age, though among different classes and sexes. These problems can more profitably be discussed than those regarding the respective age of the poems. To the latter question no definite answers can be given, both for the reason that the methods for determining age are insecure, and most importantly for the reason that a text which has survived orally would have been in a constant state of change.

Eddic poetry has been classified into age categories, very old, very young and then one or two categories in between depending on the preferences of individual scholars. What I would like to suggest is that we interpret the evidence which has been used to give the labels old and young to the poems as evidence of varying backgrounds which would have existed



in all periods. Thus the so-called old poems where heroism and manly qualities are emphasised could be labelled male-orientated poems, but those which have been regarded as being young, since they concentrate on women and their emotions, might be termed female-orientated. These would then be the two extreme points just as very old and very young in the other method. Some poems would remain in between. From the point of view of class differences we may also talk about aristocratic- versus farmer-orientated poems.<sup>7</sup>

We might ask then why we should bother to give new names to already existing categories. Is this relevant to our understanding of these poems?

Those who regard the heroic poems as emanating from different periods tend to regard the story of the Nibelungengold in the Edda as a unity, where every poem adds to what one finds in the others. The poems are all regarded as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle representing the total story. Some of the female-orientated poems, however, would seem to fit very badly into such a general framework.

The male-orientated poems tell of how Sigurður was slain by his brothers-in-law and how, when Guðrún is married to Atli, Atli invites his wife's brothers in order to obtain their treasure. Atli kills the brothers, Gunnar and Högni, but fails to get the treasure, and Guðrún then, having previously tried to warn her brothers not to come, immediately kills Atli and their two sons in revenge. These poems only marginally deal with the women. Guðrún appears as unnaturally cruel when she kills her husband, Atli, and her own sons with him, in revenge for the death of her brothers. After all, Atli killed Guðrún's brothers in order to revenge the death of Guðrún's former husband, Sigurður, and in trying to gain possession of the Rhine-gold, he also served his wife's interests. Guðrún's motives for her actions are thus difficult to understand in the male-orientated poems.

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Among the female-orientated poems to be discussed here, I include the

three poems named after Guðrún, the first, second and third lay of Guðrún, and Oddrúnargrátur. Oddrún is not known from other sources but is said to be Atli's sister and Gunnar's lover. In these four poems actions not mentioned elsewhere are discussed and we are also given new motivations for actions we have met with in other poems.

The first lay of Guðrún deals with the heroine's reactions after Sigurður's death. She is unable to weep and give words to her sorrow. Various women come up to her, trying to console her by telling stories of their own misfortune, how the heroic activity of their sons and husbands has caused them grief. Finally, when one of the women shows Sigurður's corpse to Guðrún, Guðrún bursts into tears and is able to speak again. She then describes her love, solitude and dejection now that her husband is dead. This episode is not known from other sources.

The second lay of Guðrún tells of her life between Sigurður's death and her marriage to Atli. She goes to Denmark and stays there for a while. Here we meet with detailed descriptions of various kinds of embroidery, different techniques used for weaving and so forth, descriptions which reflect an insider's knowledge and point to women as the most likely reciters of the poem. Guðrún is then forced against her will by her family to marry Atli. The poem comes to its climax when she is threatened by not being allowed to marry anyone, unless she marries Atli. Guðrún yields and prophesises that this marriage will not bring fortune to her family, since her brothers will be killed by Atli. The poem ends with Guðrún's arrival at Atli's court.

To fit this poem into the overall frame of the Nibelungen-story, various theories have been suggested<sup>8</sup> concerning Guðrún's intention to take revenge on her brothers by marrying Atli and then killing Atli in order to avenge her brothers – acting as she does because she is no longer believed to be in full control of herself. These speculations are all

affected by the German version of the story where Guðrún's counterpart, Kriemhilt, instigates the killing of her brothers. It would appear, however, that these speculations overlook the basic theme of this poem which is that Guðrún is helpless and forced to marry Atli against her will. Revenge plays no part in her motivations in the second lay of Guðrún.

The third lay of Guðrún and Oddrúnargrátur are in line with this idea, but in contradiction to the version as it is told in the male-orientated *Atlakviða*. In *Oddrúnargrátur*, Atli's sister, Oddrún, has a love-affair with Gunnar. Atli disapproves of this. Unknown to Guðrún he invites Gunnar to his court, where Gunnar is killed. Atli is not trying to gain possession of Gunnar's treasure, he simply defends the honour of the family - against Oddrún's will. This interpretation of Atli's motivation for the slaying of Gunnar is not met with elsewhere.

Finally it is noteworthy that in the female-orientated poems a lengthy period of time is supposed to have elapsed between the slaying of Guðrún's brothers and her revenge on Atli. We can no longer discern in these poems a clear cause-and-effect relation between these two acts. In *Atlamál*, the female- or farmer-orientated poem, we meet with a passage in which Atli and Guðrún have a serious argument about their marriage, each directing accusations against the other. Finally, in the third lay of Guðrún, we are given a new reason for Guðrún's revenge on Atli. The poem, which takes place after the brothers' death, describes how Atli believes stories about Guðrún's unfaithfulness, which have been brought to his ears by a concubine of his. In order to prove her innocence, Guðrún puts her hands in boiling water. She deplors the fact that her brothers are no longer alive to protect her honour and avenge her humiliation with the sword. Here, consequently, she has a good reason to kill Atli. She acts in order to avenge herself. The contradictions in Guðrún's behaviour have been solved by changing the background of the story.

If we use the classification I have suggested we are able to explain why the story has changed as we have seen. The female-orientated poems should not be forced to fit into a general frame-work of the heroic poems. Rather should they be regarded as independent interpretations, made by women or for the benefit of a female audience.

1. See for a thorough survey of these studies: Joseph Harris. "Eddic Poetry." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*. Ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985. Pp. 68-156. (See esp. pp. 111ff).
2. See: Albert B. Lord. "The Merging of Two Worlds: Oral and Written Poetry as Carriers of Ancient Values." In *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context*. Ed. by John Miles Foley. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986. Pp. 19-64.
3. These problems have of course been realized by previous scholars. See e.g. Joseph Harris (above), pp. 120ff. Also: Ruth H. Webber. "The *Cantar de Mio Cid*: Problems of Interpretation." In *Oral Tradition in Literature*. (Above) Pp. 65-88.
4. Joseph Harris. "Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems for Questions of Composition and Performance." In *Edda: A Collection of Essays*. Ed. by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983. Pp. 210-242.
5. Quotations from: *Norroen fornkvæði*. Ed. by Sophus Bugge. Christiania 1867.
6. Theodore M. Andersson. "Did the Poet of *Atlamál* Know *Atlaqviða*?" In *Edda: A Collection of Essays*. (Above) Pp. 243-257.
7. For a more detailed discussion on this and the following, see my article: "Ástir og útsaumur: Umhverfi og kvenleg einkenni hetjukvæða Eddu." In *Skírnir* 160 (1986). Pp. 126-52.
8. See most recently: Robert J. Glendinning. "*Guðrúnarqviða Forná*: A Reconstruction and Interpretation." In *Edda: A Collection of Essays*. (Above) Pp. 258-282.