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TOWARDS A CLASSIFICATION OF EARLY ICELANDIC POETRY

I

The conventional binary division of early Icelandic verse into "scaldic" and "Eddic" has long outlived its usefulness and should be discarded. This simplistic dichotomy has served to perpetuate certain misconceptions about the nature of our old poetry, and the obvious way to put things right is to abandon the present system and seek a more cogent classification.

In the past it has been taken for granted that every poem (excluding the rímur) composed in Old Norse before c.1400, whether in Norway, Orkney, Greenland or Iceland, must be classified as either "scaldic" or "Eddic"; traditional scholarship refuses to allow for a third category: if a Norse poem is not "Eddic" it must belong to the "scaldic" group, and vice versa. Definitions of these terms tend to be somewhat vague and uncritical; this applies particularly to the"scaldic" category which serves as a catch-all for those poems and fragments which don't fit easily into the "Eddic" group, even if they have no distinctive "scaldic" feature. Most scholars writing on Old Icelandic poetry have compared and contrasted "scaldic" and "Eddic" verse, but we are unlikely to find a more useful statement of their differences than the following extract from Peter Hallberg, Old Icelandic Poetry, Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse. Tr. by Paul Schach and Sonja Lindgrenson (Lincoln, Na. 1975):

Old Icelandic poetry is generally divided into Eddic and skaldic verse.....The Eddic lays deal with material from Norse mythology and Germanic heroic legend. Without exception the authors of such poems remain anonymous. Skaldic verse, on the other hand, generally bears a more topical impress and treats definite situations from the poet's own times. Many skaldic poems are encomiastic and are dedicated to some ruler or other. All skaldic poetry is to a high degree the creation of practitioners who were keenly conscious of their mastery of the art. The names of many skalds are known, both Norwegians and, above all, Icelanders. In contrast to the Eddic lays, their work can often be dated quite accurately.

In form, too, one can distinguish characteristic differences. To be sure, in both genres alliteration is an essential, fundamental prosodic principle, as indeed it is in all older Germanic poetry. But the meters of the Eddic lays are substantially simpler than those of skaldic verse. Eddic poetry is not by any means completely lacking in poetic words and circumlocutions, but on the whole it is very straightforward. By contrast, the skalds (in the narrower, more specific sense of the word) often make a virtue of their endeavor to avoid the direct expression, a penchant that sometimes transforms their poems into veritable rebuses.

(pp.11-12)

When we apply these guidelines to the total range of OI verse we soon discover that they are both misleading and inadequate for the purpose of setting up two mutually exclusive categories. While it is true that most of the so-called "Eddic" lays deal with material from Norse mythology and (Scandinavian and) Germanic heroic legend, we must not forget that so also do several "scaldic" poems, e.g. Húsdrápa, Ragnarsdrápa and others listed below. Moreover, under the blanket label "Eddic" are included certain poems which have nothing to do with "Germanic heroic legend" and precious little with Norse mythology, such as Hávamál (the main section), Hyndluljóð, Ríga*þ*ula, Gróttasöngur, Grógaldur, Fjölsvinnsmál. And considering the fact that a number of "scaldic" poems are composed in fornyrðislag and ljóðaháttur, the feature of meter is hardly distinctive enough to separate the two groups. Let us consider some examples briefly. The anonymous *þ*ulur are mostly in the "Eddic" fornyrðislag, their diction is simpler than that of any other kind of verse in medieval Iceland, and yet they are classified as "scaldic". Moreover, the dvergatal section of Völuspá is a typical *þ*ula, and there are other *þ*ulur containing mythological references. It is hard to see why the dvergatal should be acceptable as "Eddic" when it constitutes a part of Völuspá but forfeit that rare distinction when it is edited separately. If it is a major function of literary classification to group together generically-related works rather than set them apart, it is baffling to find Hávamál in the "Eddic" category while Hugsvinnsmál is classed as "scaldic". Both poems are essentially didactic in purpose, dealing with moral and social

problems; they use the same verse form (ljóðaháttr)and share certain other significant features. Hugsvinnsmál is the Icelandic version of the Distichs of Cato, though partly modelled on Hávamál. Another Latin-derived poem, Merlínusspá, a rendering in fornyrðislag of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Prophecies of Merlin, is also classified as "scaldic" although it has much more in common with the "Eddic" Völuspá than with "scaldic" verse. There are in fact excellent reasons for grouping these two "prophecies" together. Finally, it seems incongruous to classify the total range of OI Christian verse as "scaldic" poetry. One of the ironic features of the "Scaldic"-"Eddic" set-up is that Eysteinn Asgrímsson's Lilja is regarded as"scaldic", in spite of the fact that the poet condemned the use of kennings and other scaldic practices.

I propose that we should base our classification of OI verse on the subject matter and purpose of each individual poem. In this connexion it is worth bearing in mind that certain poetic fragments fail to yield the information we require for taxonomic purposes. However, we must assume that every OI poem was about something and that it was aimed at a certain audience and for a particular purpose. OI poets wrote about themselves as well as other people, whether it was the ladies they loved, the kings they served, the enemies they hated, or celebrated heroes from a bygone age. A poem may serve to entertain (skemmta) or instruct fræða); others were intended to praise (lofa) or calumniate (niða) specific individuals.

Our first step towards a new classification of OI verse is to divide the entire corpus into two major groups, viz. sacred and secular. In this context the term sacred refers exclusively to the Christian faith, even though certain ancient poems, such as Grímnismál, may have been held in high reverence by pagan worshippers. Every poem which is not explicitly Christian will here be regarded as secular. In order to simplify my present task I shall confine my remarks to secular verse; however, an extended version of this paper will deal with Christian poetry as well.

A. Narrative Verse

Taken as a whole, OI poetry is mostly about specific personages and their particular actions; in other words, narrative verse is our main concern. Exceptions are listed under the blanket term Non-narrative verse later in the paper. There are certain poems in which the poet describes his own experiences and so figures as the principal character, the most celebrated poem of this kind being the Austrfararvísur of Sighvatur Þórðarson. But usually the poet writes about other people, either his own contemporaries or else heroes from the past. In the former case there was often a special relationship between poet and subject; this applies in particular to the professional court poets (hirðskáld) who served Scandinavian rulers, their patrons. We subdivide poems about the poets' contemporaries into three groups:

A 1. Encomiastic verse (lofkvæði). Typical for this highly conventional kind of verse are poems praising a Norse-speaking king or earl for such qualities as munificence and valour, fighting skill and seamanship. But an essential purpose of such poetry is not so much to describe what kind of a man the patron is as to relate what he has done: the battles he has fought and the perilous voyages he has undertaken. The opening stanza often includes a formal request for a hearing, and the first recital of the poem in public appears to have been an important social function. The poet's aim was not only to please his sovereign but also to impress his public. The earliest extant poems of this kind are an anonymous fragment by Þjóðólfur úr Hvini and Þorbjörn hornklofi's Glymdrápa and Haraldskvæði. It should be noted here that the Ragnarsdrápa of Bragi gamli and the Ynglingatal of Þjoðólfúr ur Hvini belong to different poetic kinds, although both are written in honour of a prince. Scores of lofkvæði from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries still survive, most of them incomplete. The last example we still have of this kind of poetry is a fragment of Sturla Þórðarson's Magnúsdrápa.

Poems about individual battles and other important events should also be classified as lofkvæði, since the exploits of the prince in whose honour such a poem was composed invariably redound to his honour. Examples include Sighvatur's Víkingarvísur and Steinn Herdísarson's Nizarvísur.

Eulogies were addressed not only to princes but also to people of

lower ranks. The outstanding examples of this kind is Egill Skallagrímsson's Arinbjarnarkviða where the major theme is friendship, but there are several others. Battles and skirmishes between farmers in Iceland are commemorated in such poems as Þormóður Trefilsson's Hrafnsmál and Sturla Þorðarson's Þverárvísur.

A 2. Memorial verse (erfikvæði). One of the striking features of the lofkvæði is that the poet addresses the recipient in the second person. Such poems were written about and for the same person. In this respect they differ radically from the erfikvæði, which commemorate a dead king but may be written for his son and heir, cp. Snorri's remark, "... í erfikvæðum þeim sem skáldin færðu sonum þeirra". A typical erfikvæði deals on the one hand with the life and achievements of the dead person and on the other with the grief caused by his death. Examples include Eyvindur skáldaspillir's Hákonarmál and the anonymous Eiríksmál; both are remarkable for their pagan spirit. From the Christian era we have plenty more: Hallfreður's Erfidrápa Olafs Tryggvasonar, Sighvatur's Erfidrápa Olafs helga, Arnórr's Erfidrápa Haralds harðráða, Gísl Illugason's Erfikvæði Magnúss , etc. Sturla Þórðarson's Hákonarflokkur which ends with a brief glimpse of the king's funeral in Bergen (March 22, 1264) belongs here.

Several erfikvæði commemorate people of lower rank, e.g. Þormóður's Þorgeirsdrápa, Ólafur hvítaskáld's Aronsdrápa and his

brother Sturla's Þorgilsdrápa. Egill Skallagrímsson's Sonatorrek is more concerned with his own grief than with the life and character of his favourite son who died very young; the poem is therefore classified under Lament (angurljoð).

A 3. Defamatory verse (níðvísur). Whether a níðskáld based his insults in fact or fantasy the effect could still be deadly. Although we are left with only fragments of níðvísur there are good reasons to believe that they usually included a narrative element. However, the term níðvísur could also cover maledictory verse, such as the curse Egill laid on Eiríkur blóðöx and Queen Gunnhildur. Examples of calumnies are the Grámagaflím of Björn Hítdælakappi, the Jarlsníð of Þorleifur jaarlaskáld and various other fragments.

A 4. Heroic poetry (hetjukvæði). A considerable number of poems deal with people and events belonging to early history and the legendary past, both Scandinavian and Germanic. In addition to those in the "Poetic Edda" and the "Eddica minora" of Heusler and Ranisch there are a good many more. Certain poems about Norse and Icelandic heroes in the tenth-eleventh centuries should be included in this group, e.g. Bjarni Kolbeinsson's Jómsvíkingadrápa, the twelfth century Olafsdrápa Tryggvasonar and Haukur Valdísarson's Islendingadrápa. The first part of the mid-twelfth century Háttalykill is about ancient heroes but the second half traces the history of the royal house of Norway down to the twelfth century. The fact that Háttalykill serves a dual

purpose, exemplifying different verse forms as well as surveying the lives of kings and heroes, need not worry us here. Poems on history and heroic legend vary in style and presentation. An interesting device is to make the dying hero describe his life, as is done in Krákumál, Æviðrápa Orvar-Odds, Hallmundarkviða and the dánaroðir of Hjálmar hugumstóri and Ásbjörn prúði. Genealogical poetry should probably be placed in a separate category, but Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal, Noregskonungatal and Hyndluljóð have enough narrative matter to justify their inclusion in this section.

A 5. Mythological poems (goðakvæði). Poems in this category are set in the timeless, hypothetical world of the Æsir and their heroes are gods rather than men. As was indicated earlier, certain poems (Hyndluljoð, Rígsþula, etc) which deal with mortals and have an earthly setting have sometimes been mistakenly classified as goðakvæði. In addition to those included in the "Poetic Edda", the most important goðakvæði are Þjóðólfur úr Hvini's Haustlöng, Ulfur Uggason's Húsdrápa and Eilífur Guðrúnarson's Þórsdrápa, but there are several interesting fragments as well. It should be noted here that before the end of our period certain myths were versified in ferskeytt (Lokrur, Prymlur) as were historical and heroic tales (Ólafs rímur Haraldssonar, Þrændlur, Griplur, etc). Several hetjukvæði and goðakvæði were partly based on pictorial representations of legend. The earliest of these, Bragi's Ragnarsdrápa relates both hero tales, namely those of Ermanric and the Everlasting

Battle, and myths of Gefjun and Þór.

B. Non-narrative verse

B 1. Didactic poems (fræðiljoð). The most important of these, Hávamál and Hugsvinnsmál, were essentially intended to instruct the public at large about diverse human and social problems. The rúnatal and ljóðatal sections of Hávaamál deal with arcane knowledge reminiscent of Sigurdrífumál (which belongs here too).

Málsháttakvæði is a kind of florilegium, combining proverbial lore with literary allusions and the poet's observations on his disappointment in love. The Norwegian Rúnakvæði contains a number of allusions to legend and myth as well as making some commonplace statements about nature, but its most important function is to provide a list of the names of runic letters. The Þulur, already mentioned in a different context, include knowledge of linguistic, mythological and geographical significance. The Heiðreks gátur and other riddles belong to this group of instructive verse, and it is tempting to include the moralistic Bersöglisvísur of Sighvatur here as well; although their primary purpose was to teach King Magnus how to conduct himself as a ruler, it seems reasonable enough to treat the poem as a warning to any other prince as well.

B 2. Persona lyric (einkaljóð). This group consists of poems in which the poet deals with himself and his relationship to the environment, including verse about nature and such recurrent topics as poetry, old age, dreams, women, voyages, battles and so on. Love poetry (mansöngur) plays a significant role in the literature, and so does lament (angurljóð) including Sonatorrek and other dirges. Here we should briefly mention complaints such as the one composed by Helga Bárðardóttir in Greenland when she thinks of her home in Iceland: "Sæl væra ek / ef sjá mætta'k / Aðalþegnshóla/ ok Ondverðarnes ..." This reminds us of the celebrated song attributed to Deirdre: "Ionmhain tír an tír-úd thoir, / Alba go n-a hiongantaibh..." (Thomas F. O'Rahilly, Measgra Dánta II (Cork 1927), pp.123-4). From women in exile taking comfort in nostalgic thoughts about their homeland we move on to the last item on our agenda: dream verses, surely one of the most remarkable poetic kinds from medieval Iceland.