

KINGS AND ICELANDERS IN POETS' SAGAS AND ÞÆTTIR

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In 1985, Carol Clover tentatively revived an old theory about the role of the poets' sagas in the genesis of the *Íslendingasögur*:

It has been speculated that the skald sagas as a group constitute an evolutionary link between the somewhat earlier kings' saga tradition and the somewhat later family saga tradition. According to this thinking, interest gradually shifted from the Norwegian kings to the poets in their courts (a natural development because the poets and the authors of the kings' sagas, as well as a sector of the early audience, were mostly Icelandic), so that in time the poets, and eventually their Icelandic families and communities, themselves became the subjects of sagas. The appeal of this model is obvious: it explains the shift from Norwegian to Icelandic subject matter as well as the shift in form from royal biography to community chronicle (Clover 1985, 249).

Clover pointed out that the proposed redatings of the 'marginal' poet's saga *Fóstbræðra saga* late in the period of saga composition, and of *Reykjakela saga*, not a poet's saga, to an earlier date, if accepted, disrupt this neat chronological model. To this we must now add Bjarni Guðnason's claim that another poets' saga, *Bjarnar saga Hítarlakappa*, is one of the youngest of the *Íslendingasögur*, instead of one of the oldest, as generally believed (Bjarni Guðnason 1994). On the other hand, the same author's proposed late redating of *Heiðarvíga saga* (1993) would be potentially helpful in removing a text which does not concern a poet from the group of putatively early texts.

The considerable body of *Íslendinga þættir*, short stories relating the experiences of Icelanders abroad, often in confrontation with Norwegian and other kings, which were interwoven into the ever-expanding compilations of *konungasögur* produced in Iceland during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, obviously shares with the poets' sagas the potential status of 'missing link' between sober histories of Norwegian kings and the more licensed treatment of the Icelanders' own antecedents developed in the *Íslendingasögur*. In 1986 Tommy Danielsson cast the *þættir* in the role of link between *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, speculating that it was the inclusion of these relatively trivial, often patently fictional narratives within the established and sanctioned historical mode that triggered the impulse to record narratives more centrally focussed in Iceland:

Man kunde säkert inte föreställa sig att använda dyrbart pergament för de berättelser som gick i folkets mun och som var självklara beståndsdelar av livet – de behövde inte existera annorstädes än i minnet. Kanske var det just kungakrönikorna som erbjöd det första incitamentet till att teckna ned eget muntligt material. Där kunde digressioner om möten mellan islänningar och kungar accepteras. Nästa steg vore i så fall att dessa

digressioner | sin tur blev incitament till att skriva ned hela sagor ur den egna traditionen (81).

As Bjarni Guðnason's arguments demonstrate, the question of the dating of the Íslendingasögur continues to be debated. However, the main concern of the present paper is, rather, to suggest some parallels between the material in the poets' sagas in which the heroes encounter rulers, and similar anecdotes found in the þættir. The heroes of the poets' sagas share elements of turbulence and temperamental instability, which have been considered an essential concomitant of their poetic gifts:

All the skalds are men of great physical strength, poor judgement, a violent temper, and an inability to get on with other people...Their character portraits link their temperamental instability with their poetic gifts in such a way as to imply that these are connected. The underlying hypothesis of the skald sagas seems to be that these men, being aggressive by nature, are naturally disposed to composing poetry of an agonistic nature. (Clunies Ross, forthcoming)

Possibly because most of the surprisingly little commentary devoted to the þættir has been concerned with generic definition, few have been tempted to overstep the boundaries of genre and examine the poets' sagas in the light of those þættir which deal with the interactions of Icelandic skalds with foreign kings. The comparison yields some insights, if not into the origins of the distinctive characterization of the Icelandic skald, at least into its evolution.

Of the six poets' sagas, the four most closely related - in which the poet vies with another man for the love of a woman - all include interludes at foreign courts, in which the hero proves his worth in the eyes of one or more ruler, usually though not always with the help of poems of praise. In *Bjarnar saga Hítödelakappa* the hero and his rival, the poet Þórðr Kolbeinsson, meet at the courts of Jarl Eiríkr and later, King Óláfr Haraldsson. A central focus of *Hallfreðar saga* is, of course, the poet's problematic relationship with King Óláfr Tryggvason which earned him the nickname *vandræðaskáld*; but the saga also recounts, often in scenes of parallel phrasing and construction, his appearance as poet before Jarl Hákon, Jarl Eiríkr, Jarl Sigvaldi Strút-Haraldsson, and King Óláfr of Sweden. The hero of *Gumlaugs saga*, similarly peripatetic, fulfills his own announced ambition of visiting, and eulogising, three kings and two jarls; significant to the narrative are his falling-out, later resolved, with Jarl Eiríkr, and his poetic competition with the rival skald Hrafn Önundarson at the court of King Óláfr of Sweden. The exception is *Kormaks saga*, whose hero - although his court poetry is recorded in *Heimskringla* and *Snorra Edda* - is not presented in the saga as a court poet. His travels abroad and service with King Haraldr gráfeldr are placed late in the saga, rather than initially as with the other poets; and he serves in a military, rather than a skaldic capacity. This difference of emphasis in *Kormaks saga* goes together with a more single-minded treatment of the narrative of frustrated love. Kormakr is unstable and vacillating like the other skalds, but more mysteriously so; all the other sagas are motivated by a tension between the hero's love, and his desire to go abroad and win fame and honour. So Gumlaugr:

'Vita skyldir þú fyrst, hvat þú vildir. Ertu eigi ráðinn til útanferðar ok lætr þó, sem þú skyllir kvángask? Er þat ekki jafnræði með ykkur Helgu, meðan þú ert svá óráðinn...' (ÍF 3, 66)

and Björn Hítöslakappi:

'Satt segir þú þat, Þórr, at Oddný er in sömiligsta kona ok fullboðin mér í alla staði ... en ek þykkjumk enn of lítt reynt mik hafa í framgöngu ok óviða kannat hafa góðra manna siðu, en ef ek fer þegar til Íslands, þá mun ek eigi nenna at fara svá skjótt frá ráðahag mínum.' (ÍF 3, 118)

The story of the hero's *útanferð*, and his invariable success in establishing himself as a personage of importance outside the confines of Iceland, mirrors the structure of a distinctive group of *þættir*. Attempts to define the *þáttir* genre, and indeed to determine whether it can rightfully be called a genre, have been controversial, but the most authoritative voice on the subject, Joseph Harris, drew up in 1972 a cautious working inventory of 31, a group which has come to be designated *útanferðar þættir*, stories of a journey from Iceland to Norway (Harris 1972, 2n.). Of these 31, ten have a poet as protagonist; in two others, poets play significant parts. If the poets' sagas, numbering six including *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, constitute an important sub-class of the 40 or so *Íslendingasögur*, the poets' *þættir* make up a much higher proportion of the group isolated by Harris. This high proportion presumably reflects the historical fact that the provision of poetic eulogy at Norwegian and other Northern courts was a growth industry among ambitious young Icelanders, particularly at the end of the tenth and throughout the eleventh century (though de Vries entered the caveat that the impression of the dominance of Icelanders as skalds is a misleading effect of the survival of the historical record in Icelandic texts: I, 155-57). The predominance of Icelandic skalds in this period also helps to account for the fact that the chronological range of the rulers and events covered by the *þættir* is somewhat later than that of the *Íslendingasögur*, a fact which Harris implies to be the accidental result of the clustering of *þættir* about 'the most famous kings, Óláfr Haraldsson (1015-1030), Magnús Ólafsson (1035-1047), and Haraldr harðráði (1046-1066)' (Harris 1972, 3; see also Jónas Kristjánsson 1988, 300). Of course, the fame of these kings is partly the result of their employment of poets as propagandists. Whatever the historical reality, this body of stories about poets significantly expands the evidence of the poets' sagas themselves for the traditional and cultural implications of the role of skald, and in particular their meaning to the authors who shaped sagas of a particular kind about heroes designated as skalds.

The 'evolutionary' model of saga origins referred to by Carol Clover would, presumably, have the poets' sagas developing under the influence and inspiration of the *þættir*; this is certainly implied by Danielsson's suggestion, though he does not specifically name the poets' sagas. The reality must undoubtedly have been less linear and more complex. The more credible theories of saga origins start with the premise of a tradition of oral storytelling,

however this is conceived (see, most recently, Carol Clover's theory of 'immanent' saga: Clover 1986). This entails the possibility of constant cross-fertilization between various strands of tradition even before their literary deployment. Thus, Ursula Dronke's conclusion to her speculations on the relationship between the stories of the suspiciously similar poet-heroes, Björn Hítöðlakappi and Björn Breiðvíkingakappi of *Eyrbyggja saga*:

Such arguments, balancing probabilities with unknowns, cannot prove historical precedence; they can only remind us what a lively traffic in time-honoured motifs there must have been between one tale and another in the creative period of saga-composition (1981, 70-72).

Gunnlaugs saga is generally agreed to be late, but its main story-line is anticipated by two references in *Egils saga* to 'Helga in fagra, er þeir deildu um Skáld-Hrafn ok Gunnlaugr ormstunga' (276, 300). Bjarni Einarsson considered that *Gunnlaugs saga* must have existed in an earlier written version (1961, 269-70), but an orally-circulating tradition may be a likelier explanation. Since the existing text of *Gunnlaugs saga*, in its turn, is very likely to be influenced by *Egils saga* in its characterization of the obstreperous poet and the contrast with the milder figure of Þorsteinn Egilsson, we have another case of material passing from one body of tradition to another and back again.

The evolution of the þættir is also complex. Perhaps because of their presumed origin in oral tradition, the many þættir included in the existing text of *Morkinskinna* are often loosely assumed to be old; the entry on 'þáttir' in *Medieval Scandinavia: an Encyclopedia*, for example, implies that these stories were part of the text from its origin in the early 13th century (Pulsiano *et al.* 1993, 661), whereas the same volume's account of *Morkinskinna* is firm that 'the "Oldest Morkinskinna" ... differed from the surviving version in not containing ... most or all of the þættir about Icelanders' (419). Such judgements rest largely on contextual considerations: for instance, Jónas Kristjánsson argues from the consistency of characterization of Halldórr Snorrason in his þáttir and in the body of the *Morkinskinna* text that 'the author of the þáttir knew the original *Morkinskinna* text and created his own work of art on the basis of it' (1988, 301).

The case of *Ívars þáttir Ingimundarsonar* is particularly significant for the poets' sagas since, alone among the þættir, it shares their common story of rivalry in love. Ívarr, an Icelandic poet cited elsewhere in *Morkinskinna* although his poetic attainments play no part in the þáttir, is consoled by King Eysteinn of Norway when he learns that the poet's less distinguished brother, charged with bearing a message to his beloved in Iceland, has married the girl himself. Bjarni Einarsson, seeing in this þáttir the conduit through which the story of 'proxy wooing' reached *Bjarnar saga*, claimed an early date, with the vague assertion that 'bendir stíl og orðfæri fremur til eldra tíma en yngra'. His main justification, however, was that

væri ólíklegt að þetta merkilega söguefni hefði verið nýtt so lítilfjörlega í stuttum þætti eftir að rituð hafði verið ein eða fleiri Íslendinga sögur með þetta höfuðminni í upphafi (1961, 50).

But the inconsequential treatment of the love-rivalry in the þátrr can be accounted for by the fact that it is not the main concern of that narrative, which is used to illustrate King Eysteinn's discernment and generosity in consoling Ívarr for his loss; just the result to be expected, in fact, where an already well-known story is routinely invoked as an occasion for *what really* interests the author. Joseph Harris, correctly in my view, does not consider the story to be early, and detects in its existing incarnation signs of adaptation which change the emphasis:

To this tale of *amour de loin*, its effect, and its resolution in the confidences of a friend, a scribe or redactor has appended an interpretation that narrows the themes of the þátrr to an exposition of the relevant aspects of the king's character: "Í þeima hlut má marka, er nú mun ek segja, hværr dýrðarmaðr Eysteinn konungr var, eða hvé mjök hann var vinholtr ok hugkvæmir eptir at leita við sína ástmenn, hvat þeim væri at harmi" (Harris 1975, 6).

The likelihood is that *Ívars þátrr* derived its inspiration from one or more of the poets' sagas, or at least from the oral sources underlying them. Another instance of direct communication between the two genres, Íslendinga saga and þátrr, is *Ögmundur þátrr dytt*. The portion of this two-part þátrr which deals directly with Ögmundur is incorporated in the *Vatnshyrna* version of *Víga-Glúms saga*, since its hero was a kinsman of Glúmr; the complete version is included in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*.

It should be added that the Íslendingasögur, or at least those parts of them concerning the adventures of Icelanders abroad, were themselves pressed into service in the continual process of expansion with which the konungasögur were elaborated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The first part of *Bjarnar saga Hítudalokappa*, itself lost, can be retrieved in summary form from its interpolation in a fourteenth-century expansion of Snorri Sturluson's *Separate Saga of St Óláfr*, which also included extracts from other sagas concerning Icelanders who came into contact with the king, *Laxdæla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 3, biv). Much of the material concerning Björn's adventures abroad presumably originated as part of the growing legend concerning the saint, but was excluded from the earlier, more skeletal versions of the konungasögur. Similarly, the fuller of two surviving redactions of *Hallfreðar saga* is preserved in segments interwoven with *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, an expansion of the *Heimskringla* saga of this king which also incorporates material from other, mainly historical texts. The sources of some of the material in *Hallfreðar saga* are recoverable from translations of Oddr Snorrason's Latin Life of Olaf Tryggvason, which incorporated stories from oral sources with material from written sources.

A picture emerges of a constant traffic of material from saga to þátrr and back again, both before and after the beginning of literary record. As material was adopted from one kind

to the other, it acquired new emphasis according to the demands of the context and the prepossessions of the author, as Harris remarked in the case of *Ívars þátr*. As well as the straightforward relocation of narrative material, we must reckon with more sophisticated literary techniques. Wolfgang Lange suggested that chapter 31 of *Egils saga*, in which the three-year-old Egill makes his *début* as skald, originated as a self-conscious parody of the stereotypical þátr scene of a poet's introduction at a foreign court. In this scene the precocious hero, having been forbidden to attend a local feast, rides after his father on a pack-horse, impresses the host with two accomplished dróttkvætt verses, and is rewarded with three snail-shells and a duck-egg:

Einmal wird der künftige Held der Sage, der Skalde Egil, vorwegnehmend aufs deutlichste charakterisiert als einwillig, halsstarrig, stolz und mutig. Er tritt gleichsam mit einem vollen Akkord in seine Geschichte ein. Alle seine hier gezeigten Eigenschaften wird er später in noch ganz anderem Masse erweisen. Zweitens: das Stück ist zwischen den Zeilen eine gekante Parodie ... auf die bekannten grossen Szenen 'der Skalde vorm König'. Alles ist da und wird sorgfältig eingehalten: die Gabe, der Dank, Anweisung eines ehrenvollen Sitzes für den Dichter; eine Szene also nach dem Komment, nur dass der Held eben ein Knirps ist, der ernst genommen wird. (Lange 1957, 158)

Of course, the familiar scene of the encounter of king and poet is not confined to the þátrir. *Egils saga* itself includes several examples. But the pattern already established in those þátrir which must be of early origin is so consistent that it seems likely to have played a part in moulding the poet's characteristic temperament as depicted in the poets' sagas. The author of *Egils saga* was not alone in using a technique of allusion to the associations called up by this kind of story to establish his hero from the first as 'einwillig, halsstarrig, stolz und mutig'; the same associations probably influenced the authors of other poets' sagas, less conspicuously and perhaps unconsciously, in depicting their heroes as difficult, troublesome and independent-minded.

The '*útanferðar þátrir*' have as their structural backbone the element of confrontation between king and Iclander, although this broad definition encompasses a range of tones. In some the confrontation boils down to a light-hearted test of verbal skill; some use character analysis for didactic ends; others lean towards the exaltation of those kings around whom bodies of hagiographic legend collected. Harris contrasts the generally tragic tone of the *Íslendingasögur* with the comic ethos of the þátrir; 'comic' not in respect of their humour, though many set a high value on wit or are otherwise clearly intended as light entertainment, but in their structure of alienation followed by reconciliation, in contrast to the conflict central to the sagas. The saga hero is dominated by fate; the þátrir hero turns out to be 'inn mesti gæfumaðr'. This comic tone depends partly on the fact that 'where the family sagas are set in a society of potential equals, in these þátrir we identify with the little man in an unequal social situation' (Harris 1976, 18). The notion of the hero as 'little man' is less apparent in the þátrir about poets, many of them well-known figures such as Arnórr Þórðarson or Óttarr inn svarti,

than in stories such as *Audunar þáttur*, which is all the more effective for the obscurity of its hero. But even well-known poets have to start somewhere; the þáttur characteristically treats the hero's first appearance abroad, or first appearance before a new king, and tension exists between the audience's knowledge of the hero's underlying quality, and the king's gradual recognition of this. The strength of this convention probably underlies an inconsistency in *Bjarnar saga*. When Þórðr Kolbeinsson first appears at Jarl Eiríkr's court, the Jarl turns to his fellow-Icelander, Björn, to identify and vouch for him, although Þórðr has already been established as a well-known and widely-travelled poet who must have been known to the Jarl.

Some þættir are more self-conscious than others in defining temperamental or physical characteristics that are specifically seen as Icelandic, but this assumption is present in all of them, if only as a way of establishing the essential narrative element of the hero's 'otherness'. Harris refers to 'a folktale glow of wish-fulfillment' in the worldly success achieved by many þáttur heroes (1976, 19); we may also see wish-fulfillment in the tendency to represent a certain rugged eccentricity, seen as typically Icelandic, as capable of getting the better of the more sophisticated attainments of the court. An extreme example of this type is the 'clever fool' hero of *Hreiðars þáttur*; the comment of Jónas Kristjánsson shows that the notion still has resonance with today's Icelanders:

Hreiðarr is described at the outset as an "ugly man and with hardly wits enough to look after himself". This is how he appeared to others, but beneath his uncouth exterior he is a man of sense and ready speech and a superb craftsman to boot. A rare portrait but true to life - there have been a good many Hreiðarrs in Iceland and they have not disappeared entirely yet, despite the effects of our compulsory schooling and frenzied mobility. (1988, 304)

Hreiðarr's dignified rusticity recalls the striking effect of Gunnlaugr ormsstunga's first appearance at the Norwegian court:

Gunnlaugr var svá búinn, at hann var í grám kyrtli ok í hvítum leistbrókum. Sull hafði hann á fœti niðri á ristinni; freyddi ór upp blóð ok vágr, er hann gekk við; ok með þeim búningi gekk hann fyrir jarlinn ... Jarl mælti: 'Hvat er fœti þínum, Íslending?' 'Sull er á, herra,' sagði hann. 'Ok gekk þú þó ekki haltr?' Gunnlaugr svarar: 'Eigi skal haltr ganga, meðan báðir fœtur eru jafnlangir.' Þá mælti hirðmaðr jarls, er Þórír hét: 'Þessi rembisk mikit, Íslendingrinn, ok væri vel, at vér freistaðim hans nökkut.' (ÍF 3, 69)

The repeated address to, or reference to, Gunnlaugr as 'Icelander' (repeated twice more in the succeeding passage); the physical grotesqueness of the injured foot, neatly proclaiming the newcomer simultaneously uncouth and stoical; the hostile reaction of the courtier to his assertiveness, and the urge to 'test' him; are all reminiscent of characteristic þáttur themes. Again reminiscent of *Hreiðars þáttur*, whose hero reminds Haraldr harðráði of his father's shameful nickname 'sýr', is Gunnlaugr's blatant reference to the death of Jarl Eiríkr's father Hákon in a pig-sty. The resulting estrangement from the Jarl, the intercession of a fellow-Icelander, and the

ultimate reconciliation brought about through flattering verse also follow a familiar þáttir pattern. The anecdote may be based on a þáttir-like tradition about Gunnlaugr's relations with Jari Eiríkr; or it may have been invented for the saga in imitation of stories like *Hreiðars þáttir* (Gunnlaugr's credentials as an authentic court poet rest on little evidence other than the saga itself). Either way, the author developed the story along conventional lines in order to align his hero with the outspoken, inelegant but courageous figures familiar in stories of poets in foreign courts. The importance of confrontation in the conventional structure of the þáttir may have contributed to the characterization of poets as aggressive, turbulent and outspoken.

Other þáttir heroes, less obviously eccentric, are motivated by a similar innocence of, or indifference to, the customs and hierarchies of the *hird*. This enables them to bypass the conventional pecking order, not to mention the generalized hostility of the courtiers towards foreigners, to establish themselves in positions of particular favour, sometimes almost equality, with the king. While the characterization of the Icelander-hero is universally positive (though subsidiary Icelandic figures may be less flatteringly portrayed), kings appear in varied and ambivalent guises. Not only are their roles determined by their popularity or otherwise in tradition; they are often called upon to fulfill simultaneously the contradictory roles of foil to the hero's independent spirit, and validation of his status. The Icelandic skald might strut his independence of kings, but ultimately his identity as skald depended on the stature of the leader his verse commemorated. The hero of *Stífs þáttir* compliments the stature of his prospective client, Haraldr harðráði - shown in an unusually genial light in this story - while underlining the need for a poet to seek the public sphere abroad in order to make use of his talents: 'At síðr hefi ek kvæði ort um tigna menn, at ek hefi engan tigginn mann sét fyrr en yðr' (ÍF 5, 287)

The same point is more satirically made in *Sneglu-Halla þáttir*. The hero and his rival, the famous poet Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, both claim to have composed no poems other than those in praise of King Haraldr harðráði; it emerges, though, that each has composed a poem about some farcical or demeaning incident in his life back in Iceland. Halli has composed the *Kolluvisur*, 'er hann orti of kyr út á Íslandi, er hann gætti'; Þjóðólfr 'Sjóptrogsvísur, er hann orti út á Íslandi ... Þjóðólfr hafði þat verk, er hann var heima, at hann bar út ösku með öðru ungmenni, ok þótti til enkis annars foerr, ok varð þó athyggja, at eigi væri eldr, svá at mein yrði at' (ÍF 9, 276-77). The story is incoherent in that the poems sound from their titles less likely to be autobiographical than satirical attacks on the menial occupations of others - and indeed, the name *Kolluvisur* refers in *Bjarnar saga Hitdalakappa* to a poem supposedly composed by one poet about an undignified encounter between his rival and a cow. The effect, though, is to contrast the poets' present eminence, exchanging witticisms with the urbane King Haraldr, with the limited sphere accorded to their talents in Iceland.

The rhetorical contrast between elevated and low or proscribed genres of poetry is in fact a common theme in the þáttir about poets. Many feature the device of a poem which begins in one vein and modulates into another. Hreiðarr's first attempt at poetic expression is intended to mimic the development of his personality in the þáttir, as the contrasted poems of

Gunnlaugr and Hrafn in *Gunnlaugs saga* echo their contrasted temperaments: 'Nú kveðr Hreiðarr kvæðit, ok er þat allundarligt, fyrst kynligast, en því betra er síðar er.' (ÍF 10, 260)

Other poems cross the boundaries of genre more dramatically, like Þorleif's *njó* on Jarl Hákon which begins as a praise poem; and Óttarr svarti's escape from his predicament when, having composed love verses too indiscreetly on King Óláfr Haraldsson's wife, he follows the enforced recital of the offending verses with an encomium of the king. To an extent surprising in a genre founded on the relationship of poet to king, and therefore most concerned with the role of poet as eulogist, these stories stress the diversity of the poets' art, and the power of poetry to foment strife as well as glorify both poet and subject. In the more extended narratives of the poets' sagas, these roles have become isolated from each other and at times reduced; *njó*, for instance, plays little active part in the narrative other than in *Bjarnar saga*, and Kormákr's status as court poet is ignored by his saga. The fact remains that all the heroes of the poets' sagas have important relationships with rulers, usually as eulogists; are involved in love stories and credited with love verses, though fewer than might be expected; and are said to be given to *njó*. The theme of the intertwining of these aspects of the poet's art in the þættir is intriguing. On closer examination, it could throw light on the central question concerning the poets' sagas: Why should poets so consistently be involved in stories of rivalry in love?

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