

A CHANT CAME TO HER LIPS:
EDDIC PROPHECY IN THE FORNALDARSÖGUR

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The expression in the title of this paper, “ok verðr henni ljóð á munni,” occurs a number of times in the *fornaldarsögur*,¹ most often, though not exclusively, with regard to female speakers. It describes the narrative moment just before poetic recitation when the speaker is apparently subject to an impulse to speak in verse that is not simply a result of conscious thought or her own deliberate composition. Sometimes the narrative describes intense physical compulsion as the speaker fights to keep her mouth closed; at other times the speaker delivers her solemn words as if to give effect to their meaning, as prophecy or curse. Occasionally, the formulation seems a cliché, evoking little more than the atmosphere of staged, formal utterance set in the legendary past. Across these different usages, however, a pattern emerges associating the foresight and insight of particular kinds of female figures with the involuntary utterance of verse in eddic measure.

In *Hjálmþés saga ok Ölvis*² (Jónsson: 1954: 4, 198ff.), the hero *Hjálmþér* encounters a monstrous woman described as having a horse's mane, tail and hooves, large hands, white eyes and a huge mouth. She is carrying a fine sword, the likes of which no-one has ever seen before. Being a hero in a *fornaldarsaga*, *Hjálmþér* is naturally captivated by the woman's superior weapon and appalled by her other attributes. He stands his ground when she makes a move on him and thinks to himself that he should not appear lost for words (“Hann hugsar, at sér skuli eigi orðfall verða”), a moment of psychological penetration in the saga narrative that registers the fundamental importance of formalised verbal exchange in an encounter of this kind. *Hjálmþér* recites an eddic verse in order to elicit her identity, his fright at seeing her the likely explanation for his ingenuous line – “Ólík þykki mér þú öðrum vífum” (‘you don't seem like other women to me’). She recites a verse in response, naming herself *Vargeisa* and offering to accompany him and faithfully tend to his every need, an offer he shies away from because of the unease such a figure might cause among his companions. Their negotiations continue in prose, the hopeful *Hjálmþér* asking if she will give him her sword, something she refuses to do unless he will kiss her. *Vargeisa*'s announcement of this characteristic Old Norse mythological contract – other-worldly possessions for sexual favours – induces in her an apparently altered state, in which poetry comes to her lips as if by some force other than her own will (“ok varð henni ljóð á munni”).

The verse her monstrous lips speak prophesies that the sword will bring *Hjálmþér* victory, if only he will give her a simple kiss. In prose, the hero confesses to being afraid of kissing her snout in case he gets stuck – a possibility *Vargeisa* admits is a real danger – but turning away *Hjálmþér* remembers earlier advice from another troll-woman, and revives his chances of getting the sword by professing, in verse, his eagerness to kiss her in exchange for the sword. His eddic verse seals the bargain, and the delighted troll-woman then details the choreography of their exchange. He is to throw himself about her neck while she throws the sword up into the air; if he hesitates it will be his death.

¹ The definition of the corpus of *fornaldarsögur* is complicated (see Reuschel 1933, Tulinius 1993 and Mitchell 1993). For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on a stylistic pattern that crosses generic boundaries, I take the corpus simply to be as constituted by Jónsson's 1954 edition.

² This saga is only preserved in post-medieval manuscripts; see Pálsson 1985.

Hjálmþér is given no time for reflection or recitation as she immediately tosses the sword; he sensibly embraces and kisses her, while she acrobatically catches the falling sword behind his back. Well satisfied with his performance, she hands him the sword and recites two verses. The victory prophecy is reiterated, but a warning not to injure or defame his companion Ölvir is also issued. Suddenly alive to the portentous nature of a troll-woman's poetic utterance, Hjalpmþér warily asks if there is in fact a spell on the sword. Equally alive to the audience's enjoyment of the convention she replies, "No, but I will now place one on it."

This intimate encounter between a hero and a troll-woman concludes with Hjalpmþér's peremptory inquiry about the identity of the member of his father's bodyguard who will accompany him the following summer. In prose the troll-woman envisions the choice his father will offer him, and Hjalpmþér innocently admits he will abide by his father's will. Vargeisa is again moved to involuntary utterance ("Varð henni þá ljóð á munni"), and in a verse both prophetic and instructive, advises the hero whom he must choose. This choice of course pays off, and the hero is well served by the troll-woman's advice. But left to his own devices, Hjalpmþér is prone to forget the valuable counsel of troll-women, even when it has been delivered in the memorable form of verse. During negotiations with his appointed companion, Hörðr, Vargeisa has to materialise on one of the benches in a hall in order to remind him of her advice ("Hann kom at einum bekk ok sá þar Vargeisu standa. Honum kom í hug, hvat hún hafði mælt" 203). On seeing her, Hjalpmþér at once turns on his heel and resumes playing the part of the hero as scripted. The troll-woman's embodiment³ in the narrative at this point serves to remind Hjalpmþér and the audience of the prophetic strand which runs through the unravelling story of heroic adventure.

A similar narrative strand is found in *Qrvar-Odds saga*, though there the eddic verse is uttered by a *völva* named Heiðr – to an audience familiar with *Völuspá*, this presumably signalled the quintessential prophetic voice (Vsp 22). Like the *völva* who recites *Völuspá*, the Heiðr of *Qrvar-Odds saga* is keen to accept fine gifts in return for her prophecy,⁴ but unwilling to be bullied or beaten.⁵ Oddr is ill-disposed to the *völva* from the beginning, hiding under a cloak while she delivers her prophecies to everyone else at Ingjaldr's feast, coming out only to threaten to hit her on the nose with his stick if she includes him in her vatic pronouncements. In the corpus of eddic poems the *völva* appears well versed in the genre of the verbal contest as well as the *spá* (Quinn, forthcoming), and she takes Oddr on, delivering her prophecy for him in verse rather than the prose prophecies that the host and other guests at the feast have been treated with. Heiðr insists not only that she pronounce his fate, but significantly, that Oddr listen to it ("ekki fer ek at við hót þín, því er at fréttanda um þitt ráð, ok þar má ek ok frá segja, en þú skalt til hlýða" Boer: 1888, 15). The inevitability of his fate is underscored by the wording of its pronouncement – "ok þá varð henni ljóð á munni" ('and then a chant came to her lips') – suggesting that the *völva*'s utterance is inspired by a presence beyond her body.

³ The ability of the troll-woman to materialise in an instant can provide the hero with physical assistance as well as good counsel. In a later scrape involving a whale (232-3), Hjalpmþér realises he is in a serious predicament and calls to mind the offer of help from the two troll-women, Skinnhúfa and Vargeisa. As soon as he has spoken his thoughts out aloud, he sees two vultures flying towards the whale.

⁴ "Valði henni Herfótr hringa oc men" 29, 1-2 (Codex Regius version of *Völuspá*, quoted from Neckel Kuhn 1983, 7) – no detail is given in the poem of the kind of exchange existing between Heiðr and the householders she visits, only that she was "angan illrar brúðar" (Vsp 22, 7-8).

⁵ The *völva* in *Völuspá* implicitly warns Óðinn not to threaten her ("Hvers fregnit mic, hví freistið min? alt veit ec Óðinn, hvar þú auga fall" Vsp 28, 5-8).

According to accounts of heroes' lives in eddic poems,⁶ mythological female beings called *normir* ('norms') allot people's fates at birth, focusing on the manner or location of their deaths as the definitive end point in their "ørlog" ('the laying out [of their life]') (Clunies Ross: 1994, 202). It is just this matter which Oddr fears Heiðr will disclose, displaying a less sanguine temperament than others in the audience who are said to be well-pleased to preview their fortunes even though the span of their lives is touched on (Boer: 1888, 13). In the saga narrative Oddr's fate is distinguished from the others not only through his comical attempt to use a cloak to hide from Heiðr's foresight but through the *vǫlva*'s seemingly involuntary shift into eddic rhythm to declare it. Her insistence that Oddr hears the prophecy also works to establish a proleptic narrative that neither the hero nor the audience is likely to forget.

Heiðr's verse prophecy does indeed concentrate on Oddr's death: no matter where he travels, he will meet his death there at Berurjóðr, the place of his birth; and the cause of his death will be a serpent that will strike from within the worm skull of the horse Faxi. The harshness of these involuntary words is softened by the *vǫlva*'s prose address to Oddr: he will live for one hundred years and gain an honourable reputation for himself, though she reiterates the place and cause of his eventual death (Boer: 1888, 15). Neither verse nor prose is to Oddr's taste, and he strikes the *vǫlva* on the nose causing blood to fall to the ground. Claiming the assault to be unprecedented Heiðr leaves the feast at once, taking with her the fine gifts offered by the host. Oddr also leaves to find the horse Faxi and kill it, burying it in a deep pit and covering it with a pile of large boulders and sand, declaring that he has now thwarted the prophecy. This is the version of the prophecy in the earliest extant manuscript of *Qrvar-Odds saga*, Stockholm 7 (S).⁷ In the slightly younger version, AM 344a (M),⁸ Heiðr offers Oddr a three-hundred-year lifespan and the prospect of always being well received on his travels, but he still hits her (Boer: 1888, 14). There are a couple more lines of verse in M as well – 7 as opposed to 5 lines in S – one of which reinforces the prediction of Oddr's grand age.⁹ Later manuscripts,¹⁰ which represent a younger version of the saga, preserve a more elaborate account of the exchange, Heiðr reciting an additional stanza in which she reprimands Oddr for doubting her words, insisting that a *vǫlva* always speaks the truth, and a more circumspect Oddr claiming that if the horse gets out of the grave he has buried it in, it will be the work of trolls.¹¹

After the long and successful life promised by the *vǫlva*, which provides him with the kingdom of Húmland, abundant income from taxes and two male heirs, Oddr is moved to travel back to the Norwegian island of Hrafnista. His wife Silkisif expresses dismay at his plans to visit such an inconsequential piece of real estate, but Oddr's ties to his ancestral land are strong and he is curious ("svá er þat ok, at eyin er lítills verð; . . . mun ok ekki tjóa at letja mik, þvíat ek em ráðinn til ferðarinnar . . ."; "svá mikil forvitni er mér á at sjá [Berurjóðr], at vér verðum at lægja seglin ok ganga á land" Boer: 1888, 191-

⁶ See *Helgaquíða Hundingsbana in fyrri 2, Reginsmál 2, Fáfnismál 11-13 and 44, Hamðismál 30, and Hunnenschichtlied 34*. A description of the role of the norms is found in *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes, 1982, 18/13-22) and in *Vǫluspá 20* they are given the individual names Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld.

⁷ Holm perg 7 4^o, 43v-57r, dated to c1300-1325 (*Orðbog over det norrøne prosasprog*).

⁸ AM 344a 4^o, 1r-24v, dated to c1350-1400. For an account of the manuscript preservation of the saga see Boer (1888), and Mitchell (1991, 109) for a recent summary. Bandle (1988) has analysed the significance of the variations between versions, as has Kroesen (1993).

⁹ "þá ertu fullgamall fylkir orðinn" (Boer: 1888, 15, note to verse 2).

¹⁰ AM 343a, 4^o 59v-81v (c1450-1475); AM 471, 4^o 61r-91v, 93r-96v (c1450-1500); AM 567 IV, 4^o 2ra-3vb (c1400-1500); AM 173, fol (c1700), known as A, B, C and E respectively. See further Boer (1888, i-vii).

¹¹ "þat ætla ek, at ek láta ummælt, at tröll eiga hlut i, ef Faxi kemz upp . . ." (Boer: 1888, 16).

3). After a nostalgic tour of his now desolate boyhood haunts, Oddr declares to his companions that the curse on his return has been dispelled. And indeed, Berurjóðr appears to have been afflicted by the modern curse of soil erosion as much as the work of trolls, until Oddr happens to trip on the uneven terrain, and poking at the ground to see what has caused him to stumble, sees the once-hidden horse's skull lying exposed. The appointed snake immediately slithers out of it and gives Oddr his death-bite, and it's all over for the hero but the recitation of a long poem. In the M version of the saga, Oddr is mid-sentence in his declaration that there is little chance of the old prophecy the *völva* made ever coming true now, when he stops and says: 'but wait, what's that lying over there?' ("en hvat liggr þarna" Boer: 1888, 192).

Analogues to a hero receiving an early announcement of his fate exist in other sagas. In *Orms þáttr*, preserved in *Flateyjarbók* as part of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (Faulkes: 1978, 39-40), the young Ásbjörn is singled out at his father's feast by a visiting *völva* and told that he will be esteemed on his many journeys abroad and die of old age as long as he never goes north to Norðmærr, the home of his mother's ancestors. Like Oddr, Ásbjörn says he does not believe the prophecy,¹² provoking the *völva* to a more potent form of pronouncement. Having insisted that the matter is beyond his judgement, a chant comes to the *völva*'s lips ("ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni" Faulkes: 1978, 70) and she recites his "þrlög". In the verse prophecy Ásmundr's death in Norðmærr is presented as inevitable, and not something a change of itinerary could preclude. Like Oddr, he is driven by curiosity to test his luck against the woman's word (Faulkes: 1978, 71), though he decides to do so younger rather than older. Ásbrandr's hubris is highlighted by his friend Ormr's counsel to respect the *völva*'s wisdom ("en eigi þikki mér þú mega um keppa, því at gnógu mart vita þess háttar menn sem hon er" Faulkes: 1978, 71) and by a verse Ásbrandr recites while drinking with Ormr one evening ("Vætiki vissi vólva . . . Gramir eigi spá hennar" Faulkes: 1978, 72).

His bold mission to go north and rid the island Sauðey hin ýtri of the giant Brúsi is, as we might expect, ill-fated, and Ásbrandr is tortured to death by the giant as a deterrent to other would-be interlopers. Ásbrandr's stomach is opened up and while Brúsi is pulling out his intestines until they are completely unwound the hero recites nine verses, highlighting in a rather grisly way how poetic recitation could indeed be conceived as an out-of-body experience. The opening lines of his death-scng call on listeners to carry news of his fate to his mother since he had promised her he would return to their ancestral lands ("Segist þat minni móður . . . Hafði ek henni heitit at ek heim koma munda . . ." Faulkes: 1978, 75). In the case of both Oddr and Ásbrandr the call to foreign adventure is strong, strong enough to keep them abroad for almost all their adult lives. The *völva*'s prophecy certainly establishes a perfect framework for adventure narratives (Tulinus: 1995, 143), but in the context of local oral traditions it also provides the perfect explanation for what could keep such a promising figure away from home: only a curse on his return worked by trolls and made public by a hapless *völva*. Both narratives belong to a set of texts that celebrate the deeds of the people of Hrafnista island ("Hrafnistumenn"), some of whose descendants settled in Iceland.¹³ The sagas were written down in Iceland, their authors probably wishing to demonstrate – in an exuberantly comical manner – that the heroic qualities of their Hrafnista ancestors lived

¹² As Lönnroth (1969) and Tulinus (1995, 144) have pointed out, this kind of scepticism towards pagan beliefs works to establish the hero as amenable to Christian morality. A similar attitude is evident in *Vatnsdala saga*, quoted later in this paper.

¹³ The other sagas are *Katils saga hængs*, *Grims saga loðjinnna* and *Áns saga bogsveigis* (Jørgensen 1993). All four sagas are preserved together in A (see footnote above) three of them in B and two in C.

on (Faulkes: 1978, 31-2). The identification of family with place that appears fundamental to the narrative structure of these episodes presumably passed from oral legend to written saga just as it had passed from Norway to Iceland with little diminution of celebratory spirit.

While the similarity between these episodes may be accounted for in part by literary borrowing (Faulkes: 1978, 32), another encounter between legendary heroes and a *vǫlva* suggests a deeper cultural identification of women's eddic verse with the involuntary utterance of truth. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*,¹⁴ a *vǫlva* called Heiðr is once again doing the rounds, but on this occasion she is performing her prophecies at the invitation of the evil King Fróði, who wants to seek out and kill his nephews, Hróarr and Helgi. Their sister Signý has already recognised them despite their disguises, and burst into tears at the sight, another act of involuntary female expression linked to the revelation of truth. When asked why she is weeping, she speaks an eddic verse which identifies them, but only within earshot of her sympathetic husband, the earl. The king holds a feast to receive the *vǫlva*, and asks her to prophesy. In the moments before the chant comes to her lips, her mouth appears to be seized by an involuntary spasm preventing her from keeping it closed ("Hún slær þá í sundr kjöftunum ok geispar mjök, ok varð henni þá ljóð á munni" Jónsson: 1954, 1: 8). In her verse, she reveals that there are two untrustworthy ones in the hall; the king presses her to reveal whether it is the boys themselves. She begins reciting another verse but is interrupted by Signý who tries to stop the exposure of her brothers' identities by throwing the *vǫlva* a gold ring, and were it not for her susceptibility to involuntary verse utterance, this might have worked. The *vǫlva* clearly wants to accept the bribe, and composing herself in prose, she suddenly claims not to know what she was talking about. The king is suspicious and threatens to torture her unless she tells the truth. Her mouth again gapes wide, and with difficulty she announces that it will be Hróarr and Helgi, sitting there in the hall, who will kill King Fróði. Her verse suddenly breaks off, and in prose she continues:¹⁵ "nema þeim sé fljótt fyrirfarit, en þat mun eigi verða" (Jónsson: 1954, 4: 9).

In this scene a conflict is set up between involuntary poetic utterance – which reveals a truth dangerous both to the subject of the prophecy and the speaking subject – and prose, the language of compromise which the *vǫlva* momentarily uses to try and extricate herself from personal danger. She cannot, because the prophecy has in a sense taken effect once she has given voice to it. With the king presumably in a state of doomed shock, the *vǫlva* descends from the scaffolding she had been installed on, and voluntarily speaks another verse, celebrating the fierce intentions of the young princes. In the conflict between poetry and prose – between the involuntary utterance of truth and the self-willed negotiation of social relations – the *vǫlva*'s body, and particularly her mouth, is represented as the site of conflict. A further narrowing of focus is found in *Vatnsdæla saga*, when the root of the *vǫlva*'s tongue is disparaged as an unlikely source of authority by a resistant subject of prophecy: "Mér er eigi annara at vita mín forlög fyr en fram koma, ok ætla ek mitt ráð eigi komit undir þínum tungurótum." (Sveinsson: 1939, 29).

The phrase "verða henni ljóð á munni" is not confined to the *foraldarsögur*, occurring in other genres at moments in the prosimetrum when the involuntary utterance of truth is used to extend the narrative. For instance in *Völsa þátr* it is told that while travelling incognito King Óláfr and his companions pass the early evening in an unlit room in a farmhouse to avoid recognition. The farmer's daughter comes in and asks the

¹⁴ This saga is only preserved in post-medieval versions (see Slay 1960).

¹⁵ On the punctuation of this prosimetric shift, see Slay (1960, 11).

guests their names; they all say they are called Grímr. Holding up a light and examining them more closely, she is suddenly moved to declare in verse that she recognises her king before her (“uerdr henni liod a munne ok mælti suo . . . kenni ek þig konungr minn kominn ertu Olafri” *Flateyjarbók* 1860-8, 2: 333). Acknowledging that she is a very wise woman, the king nonetheless asks her to keep her intelligence quiet.

The compulsion to speak verse is not confined to the female gender, but when the speaker is male the kind of utterance tends not to be the prophetic *lióð* that casts such a long shadow over the narrative, but the more mundane *vísa* (verse) or *staka* (ditty), poetry arising from the speaker’s own reflections.¹⁶ In both cases the phrase “verða henni/honum á munni” implies that the speaker is unable to suppress the words that come to their lips, but whereas the subject of a female speaker’s revelation is characteristically the true nature of something she sees – either in the present or the future – the subject for a male speaker is most often his own deep feelings. In *Njáls saga*, a casual comment by Gizurr hvíti to Kári that he was lucky to have escaped the burning of Njáll and his family brings to Kári’s lips a confession of his profound grief (“Þá varð Kára vísa á munni: ‘. . . menn nemi mái sem ek inni mín; harmsakir tínum’ Sveinsson: 1954, 354). Gizurr responds by saying that it is to be expected that he should have such intense memories of escaping from the burning house, but that they will not talk any more about that now. In a resumption of the discourse of stoic masculinity, Kári replies that he is going to ride back home. In *Svarfdælasaga* Ásgeirr’s sons are sent out to fetch herbs by their mother but return empty-handed, having taken a nap on their way home instead of guarding their sacks. Interestingly, it is a question from their mother that prompts Þorleifr’s admission of humiliation and intention to revenge (“. . . ok fara þeir heim ok mæta möður sinne. Hun spurde þui þeir hefde ecke med at fara. þa varð Þorleyffe wijsa aa munne . . .” Kristjánsson: 1966, 36). Earlier in the saga their sister Yngvildr notices a wound on one of the boy’s bodies, and is moved to declare its source (“Það varð henne aa munne er hun saa þetta. Sia ben marker spiöte spor” Kristjánsson: 1966, 22). Even though her words are not in verse, the incident is another demonstration of the association in saga narratives between certain female speakers and the compulsive disclosure of their insights into events going on around them.¹⁷

In the *fornaldarsögur* disclosures of this kind are not always accompanied by a description of compulsive speech, but the pattern outlined above is still apparent, even if the women involved are stock comic figures. The only verses in *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, for instance, are spoken by women the hero meets in a heathen temple. Sixty of them join together to recite one verse declaring their knowledge of Sturlaugr’s hostile mission there and the grim reception they have in mind for him (“Þá kváðu þær kveðling þenna, er þær sáu Sturlaug . . .” Jónsson: 1954, 3: 141-2). The temple priestess, who has previously been described as being as large as a giant, dark as death, heavy as a mare, black-eyed and, rather redundantly, evil-looking, says he will never escape with his life, and in an attempt to seal his fate, recites a verse detailing his gruesome end. The saga’s sympathies are not with these heathen dinosaurs, and despite acquitting themselves well

16 Other occasions when this formulation is used to describe poetic utterance by a man include *Den Store Saga om Olav den Helige* (“. . . ok fann Sighuati þat i ordum manna at þær löstudu skaldskap hans. þa varð Sighuati vísa aa munni . . .” Johnson and Helgason: 1941, 2: 831); *Bandamanna saga* (“Of(eigr) s(eigr) ok varð staka aa munni . . .” followed by a second stanza introduced in the more usual manner “Ok enn kvað hann” Magerøy: 1956, 41-2); and *Jónsvíkinga þátr* (“Ok þetta heyrir Æinar skalaglam sem jall mælti. þa varð honum vísa a munne . . .” *Flateyjarbók* 1860-8, 1: 195).

17 Another instance of the phrase introducing prose utterance by a woman is found in *Ágrip*: “En þat er sagt, at með gøringum Gunnhildar snorísk matsveinn einn aprt með skeyti ok varð þetta á munni: “Gefit rúm konungsbana,” ok lét fara skeyiti i flokkinn . . .” (Einarsson: 1985, 11).

in their verses, Sturlaugr gets the better of them, making a mockery of the priestess and her prophetic words by running her through with a halberd and living heroically ever after, until, that is, he is overtaken by old age, an event foreseeable by all mortals, not just those gifted with prophetic vision. In the mouths of some eddic-speaking women in the *fornaldarsögur* the speech act of prophecy is closely related to that of the curse. *Buslabæn* (*Busla's prayer*), spoken by Busla to King Hringr to induce him to lift his execution order on the hero Herrauðr, details all the frightful things that are set to happen to the king unless he reverses his decision: vipers will gnaw his breast, his horse will go lame and his ship sink, he will be impotent if he tries to make love, and – in an escalation of the threats – trolls and elves will burn his halls, stallions will ride him, and storms will drive him to madness (Jónsson: 1954, 3: 291-5). Just as the King has the power to cancel the edict that will spell the end of Herrauðr's life, so too can Busla negate her curse on his life. Not surprisingly, the king answers her prayer by promising to spare the hero's life, and she goes on her way.

There is not space here for a full analysis of all the encounters between heroes and women who speak to them in verse,¹⁸ but the prosimetric patterns of the *fornaldarsögur* suggest that when these saga-writers represented the ancient past there was a close association in their minds between verse prophecy – and the related enunciations of advice and curse (what to do and what not to do in the future) – and certain kinds of women. The *völva* is one such woman, but there are a cluster of other terms that attach to these figures (“finngálkni,” “tróllkona,” “gýgr,” “jötuns dóttir” “risadóttir”),¹⁹ who frequently have some affiliation with the chthonic world, living in rock caves or in the sea and attributed with knowledge about the future or the world in general beyond the hero's ken. The cultural association evident in these verses has its roots deep in Old Norse mythology which Margaret Clunies Ross (1994, 127-8) has argued genders the gods' world as male and the giant world as female, generating myths in which male gods undertake quests for the natural resources of the giant world, including knowledge of the future and desirable material goods. Traces of this mythological configuration are apparent in the *fornaldarsögur* where male heroes embark on adventures and women, who to some degree or another are unlike the women they usually meet, cross their paths and present them with information or weapons.²⁰ In the corpus of (whole) eddic mythological poems,²¹ the *völva* is portrayed as acquiescing to the gods' demands for knowledge (in response to either magical chants, bullying or the offer of jewellery) but sinking back into a comatose or death-like state after her recitation. The passive nature of female knowledge recurs in the sagas in the representation of women's susceptibility to the involuntary utterance of the true nature of things behind appearances, including the real identity of disguised men and the nature of heroes' “ørlög”, even if the utterance is against the speaker's will and puts her at risk. In the *fornaldarsögur* this predisposition is

¹⁸ Other encounters with eddic-speaking women not dealt with in this paper are found in *Völsunga saga* (Jónsson: 1954, 1: 158-62); *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar* (Jónsson: 1954, 1: 235-8, 251-53, 266, 279-80); *Þáttur af Ragnars sonum* (Jónsson: 1954, 1: 293, 301); *Norna-gests þáttur* (Jónsson: 1954, 1: 326-30); *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (Jónsson: 1954, 2: 11-22); *Ketils saga hængs* (Jónsson: 1954, 2: 169-72); *Grims saga loðinkinna* (Jónsson: 1954, 2: 187-8); and *Hjálmþés saga ok Ólvis* (Jónsson: 1954, 4: 205-10, 214-17 and 238-9). In *Hálf's saga ok Hálfarekka* a verse spoken by a mountain that rises out of the sea follows the conventions of eddic prophecy spoken by a *völva*: “Ek sé Hringju . . .” (Jónsson: 1954, 2: 100-1), though this style is also used by the prophesying marmenill of the saga (102ff).

¹⁹ See Kroesen 1996 for a discussion of some of these terms.

²⁰ Heroes also meet male figures who give them gifts, such as the old man in *Orvar-Odds saga* who gives him stone arrows, predicting he will need them one day, but he does not speak in verse (Boer: 1888, 141).

²¹ The corpus consists of the anthologies preserved in GKS 2365 4to and AM 748 I 4to, with additions of single poems from other manuscripts as edited by Neckel and Kuhn (1983).

also spread across a wider group of female beings – as well as the *vǫlva* who dwells among men, it includes troll-women, temple-priestesses and an Irish princess.

It is Oddr who meets the Irish princess as he travels through the world during his 300-year life. In an act of revenge for the killing of his dear friend Ásmundr, Oddr kills four men in a clearing and tries to kidnap a beautiful woman cowering nearby. She addresses him by name and reveals that she knows all about him, intelligence that to Oddr's mind makes her a troll.²² She offers him money to leave her alone, but Oddr explains that's not what he is after. She then offers to make him a shirt – an even less attractive offer to Oddr – until she details the shirt's magical properties: it will protect him from cold, fatigue and hunger, and be invulnerable to weapons unless he is running away. Of course a hero like Oddr wouldn't be seen dead running away, so she cleverly closes the deal. In selling the idea of the shirt to him, the princess negotiates a variation of the typical bargain between hero and prescient woman: precious goods in return for not raping her. The inversion of the usual theme is played out further when Oddr returns a year later to collect the shirt and offers a reward to the princess, now known by name as Qlvǫr. Having lost her father and three brothers to Oddr's arrows, she is having trouble defending her kingdom from viking attacks, and asks as her reward that Oddr stay there for three years. He immediately proposes another bargain – his services as a warrior in return for marriage – which she reluctantly accepts after observing “*manngjarnliga mun þér mælt þykkja*” (Boer: 1888, 83).

When Qlvǫr hands over the shirt to him a chant comes to her lips (“*Þá varð henni ljóð á munni*” Boer: 1888, 81), in which she describes the making of the shirt by women in seven different lands.²³ Its exotic origins and expensive manufacture presumably lend the shirt its magic properties, and perhaps Qlvǫr's declaration somehow gives effect to its potential – making her verse a kind of spell – for there is nothing in the verse that otherwise links it to the kinds of utterance that are introduced in this way in other sagas. Oddr speaks a verse in reply that is also found within the sequence of stanzas preserved at the end of the saga – the so-called *Ævidrápa* spoken as he lies dying after being bitten by the snake at Berurjóðr. This particular stanza is simply a description of how it felt to try on the silken shirt, yet its delivery is also described as a chant coming to his lips (“*Þá varð Oddi ok ljóð á munni*” Boer: 1888, 81), indicating perhaps that this saga author occasionally used the phrasing as a cliché to imbue the narrative with a sense of the legendary past. The M version of the saga in particular shows this tendency, using the phrasing elsewhere when the other manuscripts simply read “*kvað*”.²⁴ But even in M its use is not indiscriminate, with the verses exchanged during Oddr's drinking contest with the braggarts Sigurðr and Sjólftr introduced by “*ok [hann] kvað þetta*” (Boer: 1888, 159-

22 In the earliest extant manuscript of the saga (S), Oddr simply says: “*hvat muntu vita, at ek heiti Oddr?*” (Boer: 1888, 73), whereas in M he calls her a troll and an evil being: “*hvat troll veiztu, in illa vættir, hvat ek heiti?*” (Boer: 1888, 72). In the younger version of the saga, she is also called a troll (A, B and C manuscripts).

23 The M version of the stanza reads “*sex*” but S, A, B, C and E read “*sju*”. The lands listed in the verse actually number five.

24 Oddr's response to Hjálmar's question about whether he did anything to avenge the death of Ásmundr (a stanza also preserved within the *Ævidrápa*) is introduced by “*Oddr kvað þá*” in S, and “*Þá verðr Oddi ljóð á munni*” in M, A, B, C and E (Boer: 1888, 77). A later stanza recited by Hjálmar is introduced by “*ok kvað þetta*” in A and B, but “*Þá varð Hjálmar ljóð á munni*” in M; there is a lacuna in S (Boer: 1888, 102). Also within the lacuna are two more instances of the phrasing used in M and the later manuscripts (Boer: 1888, 97 and 105), in the former with reference to stanzas by Hjálmar, Oddr and Angantýr, who within the same series of verses are described reciting without this marked form of delivery: “*Þá kvað Hjálmar þetta*” and “*Þá segir Oddr enn svá*” (Boer: 1888, 98-9).

67), a blessing since we may not wish to hear what came to their lips once they had drunk so much they were incapable of composing any more verses (see Lönnroth 1979).

The phrasing is used once more towards the end of *Qrvar-Odds saga* when, in order to win the hand of another princess, Oddr goes to a country called Bjalkaland to collect taxes from King Álfr and his wife Gyðja, worshippers of heathen gods and skilled magicians. In the S version of the saga Oddr kills Gyða and then engages her husband in a series of poetic exchanges aimed at denigrating the heathen gods, before killing him too and collecting the taxes. In the M version Oddr kills Álfr during a battle to win the town, and confronts the queen, described as “hofgyðjan” (‘the temple-priestess’), who is standing between the city gates and shooting arrows from all her fingers. As he sets fire to the temples, a chant comes to the priestess’s lips (“ok verðr henni ljóð á munni” Boer: 1888, 180), and she demands to know who he is. Oddr directs his disrespectful verses about Óðinn to her, before chasing her with an oak-club and finally killing her by hurling a boulder at her through the skylight of her temple. The difference between these two versions is complex, but once again an association is found between involuntary utterance and a certain kind of female speaker even when, across manuscripts, the content of the verse is similar.

Many scholars have discussed the way in which extant texts of eddic verse can be used to interpret the evolution of the literary genre of the *fornaldarsaga*.²⁵ In general verse is regarded as the vehicle for dramatic presentation and psychological interpretation (Lönnroth: 1971, 7 and Erlingsson: 1987, 383) – most typically by the actors in the narrative themselves – expressed through the poetic genres of last words, farewell, boast, and insult, which, like operatic arias, retard the action and break the narrative flow of the prose (Lönnroth: 1990, 78-81). The eddic verses examined in this paper are of a rather different nature, in that they are spoken by figures who, by and large, are peripheral to the action and rather than retarding it, forecast it. Clearly authors and audiences of *fornaldarsögur* had a taste for this kind of narrative play, enjoying the stylistic and often comic possibilities that arose when a *völva* or troll-woman confronted the hero and reminded him of his scripted “ørlög”. In these examples verse and prose do not only operate as stylistic opposites encoding characters’ different psychological registers, but also as concurrent narratological strands, reminding both the hero and the audience of what is in store for them. The prose narration is complemented by a particular kind of poetic narration which is lent authority not by the social standing of the speaker, but by the imperative nature of her utterance. The reiteration of the phrase “ok verðr henni ljóð á munni” in this narrative context suggests that whether or not these verses were actually transmitted from ancient times, saga authors wanted to represent them as the products of a culture in which certain women could perceive things ordinary men could not, and certain social situations could induce them to speak.

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²⁵ Among these see Heuler 1941, Holtsmark 1965, Buchholz 1980, Hoffmann 1971, Erlingsson 1987, and Lönnroth 1971 and 1990.

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