

ORAL POETRY AS MARTIAL ART:
INCITEMENT IN THE IDEAL UTTERANCES OF HARALDR SIGURTHARSON.

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I.

Framm göngum vér í fylkingu
brynjulausir und bláar eggjar;
hjalmar skína, hefkat ek mína;
nú liggir scrúð várt at skípum niðri.

II.

Krjúpum vér fyr vápna
valteigs brokun eigi
svá bauð Hildir at hjaldri
haldorj í bug skjaldar;
hátt það mjök þars mættisk,
mennskorð bera forðum,
hlakkar íss ok hausar,
hjalnstofn í gný malma.

In *The Singer of Tales*, Albert Lord emphasizes the simultaneity of composition and performance for an oral poet, thereby redirecting critical inquiry away from the question of when an oral poem *would* be performed, to the question: "when *was* the oral poem performed?" (13). The distinction made available by Lord's reformulation is one between poetic production culminating in performance and poetic production *as* performance. Old Norse battle poems, composed and uttered on the battlefield, constitute one form of production as performance. These martial poems, largely available in prose sagas of significantly later derivation than the events in question, are also profoundly recalcitrant in relation to Lord's desire to know when, or even how, something *was* performed. The fieldwork of a medievalist -- like that of a classicist -- is inevitably different from that of an on-site observer, as the problems of a text-oriented criticism and a through-a-glass-darkly oral tradition are compounded by the age, and often the goals, of the manuscripts, and also by the circumstances of manuscript production, which can generally be characterized as an encounter (sometimes figured as productive, sometimes as destructive) between a pagan, Scandinavian oral tradition and a Latinate, literate Christian one.

Two poems attributed to King Haraldr Sigurtharson of Norway as battle poems from the 1066 Battle of Stamford Bridge in England crystallize some of the problems of unpacking medieval oral poetry. An examination of the context and content of these two poems offers insights into problems of assigning poetic voice, for the speaker, though represented as Haraldr, is opaque and radically problematized in terms of identity (these poems are inevitably the product of a complicated creation/transmission process, not the transparent 'recorded' utterances of a man dead before they encountered vellum), number (this transmission process inevitably involved several people), and gender (that the song culture assigns a female inciting voice to Haraldr raises the question of -- in addition to *how* and *when* -- *why?*). These two poems, one eddic in form, the other skaldic, have much to say about the obverse and reverse of the Old Norse oral poetic economy, and thus about reworking, mimesis, and originality; they also allow a number of insights into the balance of prose and poetry in written saga literature -- for the accompanying prose tries, much like the modern-day critic, to negotiate an older poetry. Last and not least, they offer

snapshots, however dim, of the medieval Scandinavian vision/re-visioning of King Harald's life, death, and utterances.

One rewarding take on the notion of Old Norse battle poetry as performance is that of language as a martial art, an equal player with actual physical conflict in the ebb and flow of violence and incitement in pre-Christian Scandinavia. If voice, time, and specific performance context for a particular battle poem remain uncertain to someone perusing a later text, perhaps the powerful edge behind the tradition can be a certainty. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's observation that "The knife of an idea cuts real flesh" provides a fine summation¹; when I represent the production of some forms of language -- some formulae, in fact -- as a form of martial art, I am drawing on the enormous tradition of Old Norse incitement and insult, in which a speech act is often the first move in a blood feud, war, roadside skirmish or some other form of violent conflict. Among the most notable forms of deadly speech act are: first, the *hvot* or female whetting, in which a woman incites a man to perform a particular deed, second, *nid*, the utterance of libel or creation of some kind of insult-marker (e.g. a stick with a horse's head on it, a form of sexual insult), and third, the *senna* or gibling, an exchange of insults, perhaps best encapsulated in the eddic poem *Lokasenna*, in which Loki insults his fellow deities one by one. As I shall demonstrate later, the two poems attributed to Haraldr are masterfully 'traditional,' and evoke all three of these types of martial speech.

The *martial art* formulation is imagined here as a response to the need, in Ruth Finnegan's phrase, "to break down the once-unquestioned and over-arching concept of text" (21): a notion of speech-acts that are embedded in both societal violence and artistry may help to unearth some problems of terminology in relation to an unpacking process directed at battle utterances, but predicated upon text. Coextensive with a shift from 'poetic production for' to 'poetic production in' is a shift in critical terminology, from text-based to oral/aural, from a notion of immutable product to a more fluid idea of process. Texts of poems produced in oral circumstances are the imperfect envoys that critics treat with, while other inadequacies inhere in critical terminology itself. In the face of an oral tradition of reworking, of formulae and building-blocks, terms such as *formulaic* and *repetitive* -- often used in negative senses by critics attuned to a text-based ideal of originality perpetually engaged in Bloomian strife with Tradition -- have to be stripped of their pejorative resonance and recognized as markers of creativity.

The question logically follows, what degree of creativity is embodied in these two thematically repetitive battle poems, versus what degree of, for lack of a better phrase, historical accuracy? The first answer of several is that there can be no clear distinction between fact and fiction in relation to Haraldr's utterances, nor are fact and fiction particularly useful categories when interrogating oral transmission, unless we are to take all performative changes (and thus, inevitably, all 'performances') as lies, which is surely a misreading of the most fundamental sort. It is nevertheless worthwhile to take a step back from the speech-acts as we encounter them to look at the text-life of the man represented as their speaker, Haraldr Sigurtharson, called 'Haraldr Hardradi' or 'Harald Hardruler,' eleventh-century king of Norway and, according to tradition, noted poet. Accounts of Haraldr's life and death, from his Viking exploits to his final fall at the Battle of Stamford Bridge on September 25, 1066 against the forces of Harold Godwinson of England, appear in a number of histories and compilations of histories, including the thirteenth-century *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna* manuscripts and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. Haraldr's own poetry, as given in saga contexts, is largely autobiographic -- in the sense of first-person, whether or not Haraldr actually produced it -- and provides a highly personal verse counterpart to the more objective and objectifying prose that maps out Haraldr's extraordinary life. A theme of twinning or doubleness is not inappropriate to the interaction of the prose and poetry in both the *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* versions of Haraldr's life: crudely put, events and interpretation revolve around one another, with the uncertainty of transmission making it impossible, in a chicken/egg scenario, to do much more than identify the two components. Joseph Harris wryly notes that a model that accommodates

problems of dating and "deals strictly with generic typology" is "the way to write literary history of oral poetry" ("Hadubrand's Lament," 85); his caution about assigning chronology to speech-acts seems applicable to the related project of assigning authenticity, especially when authenticity can be construed as a form of validation. Are these poems less historically interesting if they are products of an oral tradition negotiating in its own way the major happenings in a nation's past, than if they are products of an omniscient narrator? Are they less an authentic response to the pressures and politics of Stamford for being a 'transmitted' -- to whatever slippery, unknown degree -- response?

Often large questions of strategy and story-telling are best examined in a small frame. I shall focus on representation of the battle at Stamford, taking Snorri's version for my text (though all elements I focus on are also present in the *Fagrskinna* manuscript), as particularly rewarding in relation to several ongoing critical debates regarding the assignation of direct speech to historical personages, poetic production, poetry's social functions, and the respective functions of eddic and skaldic poems. The two Stamford poems, one eddic in form, the other skaldic, are products of a traditional art, brilliantly expressive of situational, artistic, and mythic elements, all within forms bound by convention. The unifying principle behind these disparate elements is Haraldr's *reconstructed* purpose in composing these battle poems. In my argument, the context of the two poems (both situational and textual), their thematic alignment, and their stylistic polarity, all participate in an organizing principle of martial incitement that reflects Haraldr's particular and unenviable military position, his related *reconstructed* desire to turn distinctive features and functions of both eddic and skaldic form to his advantage, and his *reconstructed* final choice of a female voice to do so. When I speak of Haraldr's reconstructed purpose and desire, I am necessarily speaking of his intention(s) as understood by people after his death; likewise his poetic choices are choices assigned to him in a sort of loop-back to an unknowable, and perhaps nonexistent, ordinary utterance. These two poems, called 'Haraldr's' in a sort of social contract with a national poetry (Snorri's cycle of kings' sagas in particular is tightly bound up with claims of national identity) that is unlikely to be indifferent to a Norse king's poetic prowess, embody a particular kind of mimesis: behind Haraldr's apparent purpose in composing these poems is the shadowy purpose-behind-a-purpose of a song culture creating, embellishing, and/or transmitting 'his' words. I choose to maintain this social contract by occasionally referring to the poems as Haraldr's poems, with the idea that real insights into at least a notional Haraldr are possible, and with a more pragmatic notion that the formulation *these two poems attributed to Haraldr Sigurtharson* is an unwieldy one.

One question must be, how have other critics chosen to understand these poems -- as oral poems trapped in a later text, or as the situation-specific utterances of one man, transmitted with formidable accuracy into writing, and thus into 'history'? Traditional text-based criticism has assessed the evidence for Haraldr's composition of these poems as strong. Saga literature documents the presence of skalds on the battlefield, to the point that the notion of battlefield composition -- though not during the fighting itself -- is not unusual. Finnur Jónsson endorses the likelihood of Haraldr's production of most of the poems traditionally ascribed to him.² Though Jónsson's credulous approach to the authenticity of many skaldic poems has been criticized over the past years, Roberta Frank comments that "poetry in the kings' sagas still commands credence" (173). Joseph Harris speculates -- citing Haraldr's two compositions -- that themes of prayer on the night before battle and of pre-battle poetry evoke "common Norwegian-Norman customs" ("Eddic Poetry," 119). These observations are all highly valuable in relation to a conflation, in Gregory Nagy's terms, of *genre* with *occasion*: insofar as "the occasion is the genre," these poems are samples of the types of poems produced, in fact, by Norse kings, on battlefields -- they have *credence*, and reflect *customs* (43). The point where the occasion, defined by Nagy as "the context of this speech act," is "destabilized or even lost," however, is the point where I suspect that a text-based criticism needs reformulation (43) In the intervening years between Haraldr's death and the dispersal of his followers and the

production of manuscripts about his life and words, in a situation in which oral transmission is performance is composition -- leaving aside the unknown root utterance -- the occasion is inevitably destabilized. Thus, with the frame "lost...the occasion has to be re-created by the genre" (Nagy 43). If the premise of simultaneous composition and performance is granted, transmission is immediately and inherently destabilizing. Harald's poems are thus instances of "authoritative re-enactment, impersonation" (Nagy 44).

A major factor in critical willingness to accept these poems as Harald's own compositions has been the apparent 'historical' nature of many accounts of the Stamford incident. The basic outline of Harald's untenable military position at Stamford is consistent across a range of sources, including the aforementioned Old Icelandic works, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the eleventh-century *Gesta Guillelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum* written by Guillaume de Poitiers. Terence Wise observes that "all contemporary sources agree that [Harald] was taken completely by surprise at Stamford Bridge" (157). Harald's defeat of the Northumbrians at Fulford a few days previous to the battle at Stamford is also well-documented, as are sundry details concerning Harald's men, equipment, movements, and military tactics upon arrival in England. Historians such as Terence Wise, Alan Lloyd and Denis Butler appeal to a body of apparently 'known facts' about the of the lay of the land around Stamford and the movement of the skirmishing between Harald and Harold.

It is important to keep the 'known facts' firmly in mind when considering these two poems even while maintaining that the poems themselves are not known facts in any transparent sense. Certainly it is a form of idealism -- no pejorative sense intended -- to take these poems as reflective, in the smooth-surface, undistorted-vision sense, of the words spoken by Harald of Norway on the day of his death. In another, more ripples-in-a-pond sense, they are indeed reflective -- in fact they are reflective of another kind of idealism, an acute and culturally-attuned sense of what would be appropriate and desirable to utter under particular circumstances. The phrase *ideal utterances* from the title of this paper is intended to invoke both ideals, that of the unattainable perfect record, and that of the unrecorded thus unfixed perfect utterance, which are two ultimately sympathetic manifestations of a desire to get as close to a particular moment in the past as possible. The focus on a sense of appropriate utterance is perhaps the most rewarding for the purposes of this paper; mimetic utterances are only *appropriate*, however, in relation to the historical moment they are envisioned as responsive to, so a criticism that tracks known facts has much to offer. A.R. Georges offers this insight:

The development of an awareness that tales can change or be altered as they are transmitted from person to person and from place to place, and that variability might be common rather than anomalous, motivated some investigators to shift their attentions from *the stories people tell to those who tell tales* and to *the act of telling stories* (161).

The circumstances of the battle at Stamford form the energetic core of the two Harald poems, but it is a responsive core, not a passive one. This is an essential point in the mystique of these poems, handed down as Harald's rising to the moment: they have much to teach about a notional Happening, and the question of whether the *notional* is or was *actual* is not of primary interest.

Beyond the undesirability of effecting a schism between fact/actual and fiction/notional in the textual presentation of Harald's life, there is of course the impossibility of such a project to be considered. In a further examination of text-based criticism: Harald's historical situation is not viewed as reliably represented at the line-by-line level of any Old Norse source. Snorri's version of the battle at Stamford has been

criticized from several (opposing) points of view -- both for invoking the battle of Hastings rather than that of Stamford, and alternatively for an anachronistic military presentation of the conflict as heavily Norman- (hence cavalry-) influenced (Lloyd 192-195). Though Snorri-the-historian has his defenders, for example Richard Glover, his prose narrative of Harald's experiences is not received as objective history in any strict sense (Glover 67). There appears to be consensus that such events as Harald's fall from his horse and Harold's offer of seven feet of earth to his enemy are the most easily identifiable 'fictional' elements, and Lloyd pronounces both of these details to be "dramatic clichés" which had been applied "in substance" to William the Conqueror by earlier writers, and which pre-existed even these applications (195). While the criteria of fiction and non-fiction are not ones I am pursuing, and while Lloyd's usage of *cliché* treads upon the pejorative edge of *formulaic*, it is precisely these moments of situational detail, often involving assignations of direct speech, that I wish to focus on, not for their historical accuracy or lack thereof, but for the critical tools they provide for reception and interpretation -- meaning ours and Snorri's at the very least -- of Harald's compositions. The elaborating pattern in Snorri's version, and the extent to which Snorri's prose embodies, in Roberta Frank's words, "a core of oral commentary coeval with the verse" is at the heart of much unresolved debate about transmission of poetry and prose, and about the nature of oral poetry (177).

In Snorri's account of the Stamford episode, the Norsemen are caught by surprise by the English and separated from their armour and ships. For Snorri and for his audience, and thus in Snorri's rendition for Harald and his audience as well, Harald's poetry is necessarily the product of an awareness of poor military odds, of demoralized fighters, and certainly of the likelihood of defeat. Still accepting Harald as the speaker, and keeping in mind the tradition of insult, I suggest that Snorri's account offers an additional spy to Harald's poetic production, in that Harold Godwinson's offer of "vii. fōta rím eða því lengra, sem han er hæri en adrir menn," clearly an instance of verbal provocation (and all the more powerful for being epigrammatically rendered), is understandable as a conscious challenge to Harald's verbal prowess (*Heimskringla* 506). Poet-King Harald, whose poetic gaming is well-documented in *Morkinskinna* where he and the skald Þjóðólfr compete with a fisherman to make the best poetic variations on a theme, is unlikely to be unaware of the double-pronged threat, both military and verbal, that had been offered to him. The advantage of the elaborating detail of Harold's quotable quote (which is *formulaic* in Scandinavian terms, being present in a number of other tales, though not necessarily *untrue* because of this) lies in the characterization of Harald -- as having both poetic and physical turf to defend -- that it permits. There is no doubt that many instances of direct speech in *Heimskringla*, this offer certainly among them, have the same status as the two poems: that of authoritative impersonations. That the grave-plot offer is both a window into Harald's interiority and the product of an externally-constructed characterization is just one instance of a double-vision into both the mimetic past and the inner workings of the Old Norse oral tradition.

The pattern of Challenge and Retaliation essential to Old Norse insult is not far removed from the pattern of verbal competition that Harold and Harald engage in; a potential weakness to this rendering of the matter may be that Harold does not stay to hear his challenge taken up, but if the challenge is framed as the need to create memorable utterance(s), it does not matter whether Harold stays so long as posterity preserves/transmits Harald's response, nor do the two kings confront each other personally on the battlefield -- where they are undoubtedly in competition -- since Harald, in another somewhat formulaic moment, dies from an anonymous arrow in the throat. That Harold's offer is formulaic -- and would have been a familiar gambit to a contemporary audience -- makes it no less effective as a form of whetting. Many moments of incitement in *Njáls saga*, for example, rely on exchanges of a pithy and formulaic nature that nevertheless have profound specific resonance, as when Skarp-Hedinn distills his contempt for Flosi into the remark: "Hafa fáir várir frændr legit óbættir hjá garði várum, svá at vér hafim eigi hefnt" (*Ed. Jónsson* 165). If Harold Godwinson's speech is a form of whetting,

it makes Harald's poems examples of both retaliation (to Harold) and incitement (to himself, and to his men) -- thus his poems are tactically quite brilliant, as they make use of several types of deadly speech act simultaneously. Again there is that double-vision: Harald's tactical brilliance highlights the tactical brilliance of assigning such poetic choices to him.

The functional and thematic analogies between Harald's two verses and such poems as *The Battle of Maldon* are obvious; however, it does not seem excessive to say that Harald's poems reflect a distinctive sense of situational awareness, in that being "brynjlausir" in the first poem and perhaps shieldless -- certainly not too reliant on external protections -- in the second poem, can clearly be understood as invoking the armourlessness of the day. There is also an impression of deliberate allusiveness, particularly in the second poem where shieldlessness draws on a body of tales about shieldless fighting, and where the figure of Hildir evidently -- the so-called conventional nature of kennings will be addressed later -- draws on mythic representation of the valkyries, the handmaids of Odin. The apotropaic function of Harald's poems, which attempt to ward off the notion of the undesirability of fighting unprotected/shieldless, is thus somewhat different from the thematization of losing with dignity in *The Battle of Maldon*.

Apotropaic utterances bound Snorri's treatment of the confrontation at Stamford, in a form of ring-composition. Again it is instances of direct speech that provide the most profound insights into the notional Harald. When Harald rides out to inspect his men, his horse falls down under him, and he at once cries: "Fall er fararheill" (Snorri, *Heimskringla* 505). Clearly this is not the most instinctive reaction to a fall immediately preceding (unequal) combat, and Harold Godwinson produces the more obvious one when he comments of the fallen man: "er þat vænna, at farinn sé at hamingju." "Fall er fararheill" serves a purpose analogous to a cry of "Avert!" directed against a bad omen or curse. Harald, praised after his death for being resourceful "hvárt er hann skyldi taka skjótt eða gera löng ráð fyrir sér eða öðrum," makes a swift and strategic decision not merely to make the best of things, but to turn a bad thing to his advantage through the forced interpretation of his fall as a good omen for a journey.

The thematic parallelism of Harald's oral gloss on his fall from the horse and his subsequent creation of two poems extolling the virtues of fighting unprotected is unmistakable. Forced interpretation, in a positive sense, is the productive impulse that informs Harald's two poems. Within this apotropaic activity, the metrical and representational choices embodied in the two poems are revealing across a range of inciting and oral-poetic strategies. The first poem employs the eddic form called *fornyrðislag*, sometimes called "epic metre" (Hallberg 13): it is strophic, consists of half-lines bound together by alliteration on accented words, and employs patterned strong and weak metrical elements (lifts and sinkings) (Gordon 315). The *fornyrðislag* line has two lifts and an unfixed number of unstressed syllables. Old Norse scholars regard eddic poetry as a more popular, popularized and looser form in relation to skaldic poetry, and see Harald's initial effort as the more technically undemanding and crowd-pleasing of the two poems, while the second poem, composed in skaldic *dróttkvætt* form, is more stylistically rigorous and more connected to court life (Hollander 469). The *dróttkvætt* is the most common skaldic metre, and is strictly defined. A normal line consists of six syllables, three of them stressed, and each stanza has both alliteration (binding half-lines together) and assonance. Odd-numbered lines have half-asonance or "impure syllabic rhyme," (known as *skothending*) and even lines have full assonance or pure syllabic rhyme (*adalhending*) (Hallberg 19). The syntactic separation of half-verses or hemings is practically a law in the *dróttkvætt*, and both of Harald's poems have syntactically distinct hemings. Detailed formal and metrical analysis of these two poems is not the object of this inquiry and has, in any case, been done elsewhere. Nevertheless a certain stylistic dialogue between the two poems strikes me as carefully planned, not merely in the switch from one form to another, but in the insights made available through the act of juxtaposition, and perhaps this

balancing act has a recuperative function in relation to negative usages of *repetitious* and *formulaic*. For example, if skaldic poetry uses variation infrequently -- shunning what Lee Hollander labels that "true epic, retarding device" -- then it is noteworthy to have an entire skaldic poem, by virtue of its focus on military unprotectedness, being a variation on a theme evolved in a partner-poem (Hollander 11). The first poem depicts the inexorable and presumably undismayed forward motion of Harald's *brynjulausir* men against their enemies; the second takes on a hortatory tone and urges against cringing and creeping behind shields, bidding Harald in particular to hold his head high in the fighting.

The production of a poem in eddic style by a named poet is a well-documented circumstance, since "skalds were also involved in the composition of Eddic poetry" -- though often with very strict metrics, in contrast to the looser mythic and heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, eddic appendix, and *eddic minora* (Hallberg 11). However, eddic poetry as it is currently defined, being a "genre based on stylistic affinity," remains overwhelmingly anonymous, of uncertain date and provenance (Harris, "Eddic Poetry" 93, 69). Analogies between the eddic poem and the ballad have frequently been made. These two poems occupy a somewhat liminal space between *anonymous* and *named*. The category of anonymity may usefully be re-examined in light of the named but elusive speaker: is *anonymity* a sufficiently accurate term to cover all the contingencies of this case? Perhaps other terms such as *destabilized*, *transmitted* -- terms attuned to the fragmentation of the very notion of *one poem, one poet* -- are of some value here as well. Certainly the secure, clearly articulated name of this speaker does not constitute a secure -- or monologic -- poetic voice.

One obvious implication of Harald's back-to-back production of these two poems is a blurring of sharp social or cultural boundaries dividing the production and appreciation of eddic and skaldic poems. John Lindow argues for a certain ambiguity and for crossable stylistic lines, urging us "to accept that the sharp distinction between skaldic and eddic verse is largely our own invention, and that the same persons may well have composed and enjoyed both verse forms" (33). Certainly Harald acts out the potential contained in Lindow's 'may well have composed.' Perhaps another speech-act attributed to Harald can shed some further light on the eddic/skaldic debate: the notion of qualitative distinction between eddic and skaldic forms is given utterance by Harald when he announces his opinion of his own first effort, saying "Þetta er illa kveðit ok mun verða at gera aðra vísu þetri" (Snorri, *Heimskringla*, 507). The judgement implied in that phrase, since Harald's response to the need to make a *better verse* is to switch poetic forms, is a critique of eddic verse as inferior to skaldic. The nature of that inferiority, on this occasion and generally, is the indeterminate point. If the inferiority is social, Harald responds by abandoning a folksy, popular style; if it is aesthetic, Harald makes a switch to a more technically impressive form. It is possible that Harald merely thinks his first poem is poorly composed within the *fornyrðislag* genre; however, since Harald's response, taking poetry as "a stylisation of linguistic rhythm," is to code-switch, the judgement of "þetta er illa kveðit" may apply to the entire project of production of poetry in eddic forms (Arnason 3). Jónsson's description of the transition echoes Harald's, with the first poem taken as "simpelt," which implies an undesirable simplicity to the *fornyrðislag* form (Jónsson 469). It is also possible, of course, that the entire eddic/skaldic debate is a tactic that enables the song culture to assign two poems, not just one, to the moment of Harald's death; to discard this notion out of hand might be to take too "simpelt" a stance in relation to an event that has clearly been the focus of intense and sophisticated cultural interrogation.

Even if the "illa kveðit" designation is a deflecting tactic, it is worth speculating that Harald's switch to skaldic form functions as a slightly morbid, perhaps prophetic, invocation of the memorializing, occasional, and named properties of skaldic poetry. In some sense this is Harald's death poem, not dissimilar from samurai death poems composed in medieval Japan. At the literal level this skaldic poem is certainly transmitted as Harald's last poem, and it does not seem unlikely that an awareness of death is meant to inhere in the poem. Perhaps there is a certain logic to the song culture's ultimate use of a

form that, unlike the balladic *fornyrðislag*, traditionally bonds with its composer's name. Haraldr may, in some sense, be envisioned here as tinkering with his own verbal gravestone; Jónsson fixes on this memorializing function when he discusses "Haralds svanesang" (469). As I made passing mention to Harold Bloom in an earlier comment on originality, it now seems appropriate to effect more of a reconciliation between text-based criticism and the examination of oral poetry, by noting Bloom's comment that "...every poet begins (however "unconsciously") by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do" (10).

That the two poems are part of a package-deal, and not of ascending merit from eddic to skaldic, seems to me to be supported by their mutually-reinforcing content and form. The first poem employs the metrics of the majority of the mythic and heroic poems, but has no overt mythic content; the second poem contains overt mythic content in a format more usually employed for occasional verse. I suspect a stepping-stone relationship leading from the first poem to the second in terms of intensity of mythic overtones -- potential in the first, incantatory poem, realized in the second, overtly mythical one. Obviously this interpretation hinges on the mythic elements in the kennings in the second poem, which, in view of the function of the poem as incitement to battle and the construction of the kennings around a mythic figure who incites men to battle, seems a solid assumption. This is not to make a general statement about the function and meaning of kennings, which are often called *conventional* in a sense synonymous with *without significant word-by-word or mythic resonance*, but rather a specific one in relation to this poem which clearly manifests a mirrored relationship of theme -- which involves exhortation to battle prowess -- and construction/lexicon -- which revolves around the figure of Hildir-of-the-hawk's-ground, the True-of-Word, a female figure whose association with the battlefield is clear even if the particular Hildir of the Battle of the Hjathningar, who incites everlasting battle by raising warriors from the dead, is not specifically invoked, which, in fact, I believe she is (Snorri, *Edda* 122).

The feminine noun *hildir*, meaning 'battle,' is primarily a poetic word, and is a component in a number of expressions related to the battlefield, such as *heilir hildar til*, *heilir hildi frá*, *vekja hildi*, *hefja hildi*, and many others. There are, in fact, at least three common ways to say 'shield' using *hildir* as an element in a genitive construction: *hildar-sky*, *hildar-vé*, and *hildar-veggr*. The whole range of poetic vocabulary involving *hildir* was available at the time of this poem's composition; it is unlikely that a choice of the proper name, denoting either Högni's daughter Hildir of the Battle of the Hjathningar -- which Snorri says will last until the doom of the gods -- or Hildir the *valkyrja* or *chooser of the slain* is random (*Edda* 122). To put it another way, a negative decision against the substantive is significant since it opens the tricky realm of poetic onomastics within an expressive mode that routinely uses mythic figures as building blocks. Even if one of the possibilities for identification of Hildir-of-the-hawk's-ground could be definitively eliminated (e.g. perhaps the *valkyrja* option would make the kenning too self-referential?) Hildir, as either Chooser-of-the-slain or Raiser-of-the-dead, would remain a figure of powerful mythic *potestas*.

The debate about the conventional nature of kennings has no resolution in sight, with strong arguments on both sides. Roberta Frank observes that "We are not really sure what we mean when we call a kenning conventional" (168). I wish to fix on the point that the argument for a conventional nature to kennings has never yet reached the point of attributing loss of control over kennings to poets, nor indeed to accusations of pervasive repetitiousness, though there are certainly kennings that have a synonymic or metonymic impact, e.g. 'battle-icicles' for swords. Perhaps it might be beneficial to shift the grounds of this debate to one of *formula* rather than *convention*, for it seems to me that to call a kenning conventional is to identify it as a formula, following Milman Parry's oft-quoted definition of "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (41:80). Both the infrequency of slavish repetition and the "symbiotic relationship between kennings and myth" work against an

assumption that 'Hildir-of-the-hawk's-ground, in the context of an incitement poem, is an unproblematic, indeed reflexive, kenning for *woman* or *noble lady* or more specifically for Haraldr's mother, Ásta, as has been proposed elsewhere (Lindow 27). Lindow observes that, whatever the undetermined and problematic *religious* resonance of skaldic kennings, they are largely "based on mythology and requir[e] some acquaintance with myth and legend to be comprehensible" (27). In a sense, Haraldr's reference to Hildir is meaningful to his audience only in relation to Hildir's place in Norse mythology. The inclusion of a woman whose name is 'Battle' in a battle poem is too obvious an accident; certainly Hildir is frequently invoked in Old Icelandic poetry, but it appears that she is most frequently invoked in exactly this martial sphere, as when the kenning *Högni's-daughter's-tree*, for example, is used to denote 'warrior.' I am not arguing for any particular religious importance for Haraldr's Hildir; it is my impression that the choice of a representational system of martial incitement for Haraldr's poems is highly pragmatic, comparable to a cry of "fall er fararheill" after falling off a horse. And one should ask, why would strong inciting poems be envisioned as *appropriate* as Haraldr's last words? The two Haraldr poems both capture and explain some 'known facts' of the Battle at Stamford: historically, *someone's* incitement had the desired effect, since the Norsemen refused to surrender long after their defeat was inevitable -- they did not, in fact, cringe behind their shields. The Battle at Stamford was the largest and most destructive military encounter ever to have taken place in England up to that point, and of the more than two hundred ships that Haraldr brought with him (Snorri says two hundred and forty, plus supply ships), accounts agree that only twenty-four Norse ships departed (Wise 157-160).

In addition to mythic resonance, Haraldr's incitement involves a number of other allusive organizing conceits, such as his focus on shieldlessness, or on 'not hiding behind the curve of a shield.' Snorri describes Haraldr's men as having their shields, helmets, halberds, and swords -- some also have bows and arrows -- but not their armour. When Haraldr rides out on his inspection, he rides around a battle array described as a ring of men "skjöldr við skjöld" (Snorri, *Heimskringla* 505). There can be no doubt that Haraldr's choice of subject is deliberate, both referential to and removed from the real problem of being "brynjulausir," and also participatory in a strategy of allusiveness. The shield poem is "usually taken to be the oldest skaldic genre" and owes much to *ekphrasis* or the description of a work of art, a form with early roots and named practitioners in ninth-century Carolingian courts (Frank 179). Heroic literature provides myriad examples of poems inspired by shields, perhaps most notably in Homeric tradition. Haraldr is a participant in this shield-poem tradition, and also an outsider in it, for his poem takes as a starting point the absence or unuse of shields. The simultaneous invocation and rejection of the shield poem that Haraldr's approach embodies seems to me self-conscious. It is on a par with the sophistication of the mythic allusiveness discussed previously. A number of skaldic poems on eddic/mythological themes take the decorated surface of a shield as the pretext for the subsequent treatment of a mythological subject, as in Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa* (Hallberg 121). The tradition of Haraldr's active participation in the judgement and production of skaldic poetry makes it likely that this thematic device was envisioned as known to him, and the treatment of shields in these Haraldr poems may take a somewhat similar leap to mythic significance: once again, the stage is set for a conflation of the mythic moment with the notional moment. In short, both Haraldr as Poet-King and Haraldr as Mythic Figure gain greatly by the placement of shields in his compositions; the authorized impersonation is a powerful one, and is pulling out the stops.

Haraldr as Warrior-King gains by the shield motif as well. There is a thread in Old Norse tradition in which fighting shieldless is celebrated as a manifestation of battle prowess, in connection with a general and generalizable emphasis on the confrontation and overcoming of heavy odds. A random sampling of armed conflicts in *Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar* reveals a number of scenes in which Egill's shieldless or unprotected state provides definitive proof of his fighting abilities. When Egill escapes from King Eiríkr and his men after killing Bard, he escapes by swimming to an island, and "Þá var þat

rád hans, at hann tók hjálminn, sverð ok spjótt, ok braut þat af skapti ok skaut því á sæ út" (137). The saga author is careful to outline Egill's resources, and it is with these limited resources that Egill subsequently kills a number of the king's men and steals a boat from them, thus effecting his escape. Similarly, in Egill's fight with the berserker Atli, the shields of both Atli and Egil prove useless (Egil's Saga 243). Egil's sword shortly proves useless as well and he wins the fight by ripping out Atli's throat with his teeth. There can be no doubt that a primary story-telling function of shieldlessness or inadequate preparation is to enhance impressions of ferocity and battle prowess. Jónsson's version of Harald's thematic material -- "Ligesom hans første vers bærer disse vidne om kong Haralds urokkelige kamprød og aldrig svigtende kraft og tryghed" -- emphasizes Harald's *kraft* (Jónsson 469). Harald's compositions reflect an awareness of the potential for aggrandizement inherent in military disadvantage, and they employ this awareness to their own ends. The mimetic power of the poems is such that the destabilized occasion is subsumed into its myriad ideal versions -- of which, of course, we have only two to consider. From these two, the notional Harald emerges as an *appropriate* speaker, both voiced by and voicing his own poems: he is Poet, King, Warrior, and Mythic Inciter, all in one.

It may be that the Mythic Inciter is the key persona in those four. Circling back to the figure of Hildir, I return to the unanswered question: *why* does the song culture assign a female inciting voice to Haraldr Hardradi in his ultimate speech-act? Haraldr's repetition of *let us, let us, she bade, she bade* to rouse his troops creates a speaking voice that is highly gender-ambiguous and also points to a female verbal keystone or underpinning to martial violence. It seems that if language is a martial art, it may also be a feminine art, a verbal choosing-of-the-slain. Haraldr's skaldic poem invokes the figure of Hildir in precisely the spatial context -- the battlefield -- in which she appears in mythology. Haraldr thus moves Hildir one step closer to the action than the valkyries in the thematically comparable eddic poem *Darraðarljóð* (preserved in *Njáls saga*), who determine the outcome of battle at a distance, with their influence mediated through their weaving and singing as they sit at a loom strung with men's intestines and weighted with men's heads. In *Darraðarljóð*, the valkyries chant to themselves (Ed. Magnusson 349):

The Valkyries go weaving
 With drawn swords,
 Hild and Hjorthrimul,
 Sanngrid and Svipul,
 Spears will shatter,
 Shields will splinter,
 Swords will gnaw
 Like wolves through armour.

The implication of a poem like *Darraðarljóð*, that the valkyries are a determining force on the battlefield, is deliberately literalized through the process of on-site composition/invocation of Hildir. The conflation of a feminine inciting voice with the voice of the notional Haraldr in the second poem is the most fascinating poetic decision in this entire array: in the end, which voice is more submerged, that of Hildir, or that of Haraldr? Since that is a question that cannot be answered after looking at only one poem, to offset the striking image of women weaving death, I offer Patricia Klindienst Joplin's comment that "If the voice of the shuttle is oracular it tells us Fate never was a woman looming darkly over frightened men; she was a male fantasy of female reprisal" (53). The word *fantasy* brings me back full-circle to the attempt to define the *occasion* of these poems: inevitably, to allude to a mythic battle-inciter on the battlefield, to speak in her voice, is to invoke her: these two poems *perform* mythic incitement as only battlefield poems have the power to do. It seems to me that this literalization of myth, this mimetic process, is the underlying hope and aspiration behind the entire web of incitement of these two poems.

Through mimesis of mythology itself, the two poems attributed to Haraldr Hardradi, particularly the second, attempt to become *the thing itself*, to perform the presence and incitement of Hildir 'weaving' men's lives, and deaths. A central concern with death is indeed linked with the creation of poetry here, as the notional Haraldr incites men to die *appropriately*, by using the *appropriate* words.

¹Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995.)

²"Ægtheden af disse vers kan, når man ser bort fra det nævnte drömmever, ikke være nogen tvivl underkastet." (Jónsson, *Den Oldnorske og Oldislandske Litteraturs Historie*, 469.)

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