

Skaldic Praise Poetry and *Macrologia*: some observations on Óláfr Þórðarson's use of his sources

Elena Gurevich

Institute of World Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences

In a well known episode in *Morkinskinna* (*Saga Magnús góða ok Haralds harðráða*) we find an account of Arnórr Þórðarson's recital of his praise poems composed in praise of the co-regents, King Haraldr and King Magnús of Norway.

The saga relates that when Arnórr, the skald of the Orkney earls, got to the hall where both kings were sitting at table and greeted them King Haraldr asked:

'To whom will you recite your poem first?'
He said, 'To the younger one first.'
The king asked, 'Why him first?'
'My lord,' said Arnor, 'it is said that young men are impatient.'

But both of them considered it more honourable to receive their poem first.

The poet began his poem, mentioning first the earls in the west, and then

describing his own journeys.

Hearing this, King Harald said to King Magnus, ‘How, sir, can you waste time on this poem, since it is mainly about his journeys and the earls in the islands in the west?’

King Magnus said, ‘Let’s wait a bit, uncle. I suspect that before it’s finished you’ll find the praise of me more than enough.

Then the poet recited this stanza:

Magnús, hlýð til máttigs óðar,
Mangi veit ek fremra annan;
Yppa røðumk yðru kappi,
Jóta gramr, í kvæði fljótu;
Haukr réttir est þú, Hørða dróttinn,
Hverr gramr es þér stórum verri;
Meiri verði þinn en þeira
þrifnuðr allr, unz himinn rifnar.

Magnus, hear my potent poem,
I know no one surpassing you.
Prince of Jutes, I aim to praise
your prowess in this flowing poem.
Lord of Hordaland, you’re heroic.
Other leaders fall short of you.
May all your success surpass theirs
until the heavens are sundered.

(Hrynhenda, 1: Skj. B I 306, 2)

Then King Harald said, ‘Praise this king as you wish, but do not belittle other kings.’¹

The poet continued his recital, praising Magnús in every stanza of his panegyric. While listening to the poem King Haraldr made another comment (“This man composes very boldly, and I have no idea how it will end.”). It is difficult to decide whether Haraldr was implying that the skald went too far “carrying panegyric to superlative heights which earlier poets, from a certain sense of poetic tact, had refrained from approaching”² or rather that this comment (“*Allákafliga yrkir sjá maðr*”) referred to the unusual swift tempo of Arnórr’s “flowing poem” composed in a new *hrynhent* metre.³

When the poem was finished, Arnórr recited Haraldr’s poem. The saga tells us that it was a good poem called *Blágagladrápa*. When the recital was over and King Haraldr was asked which poem he considered the better, he replied: “We can see the difference between the poems. My poem will soon fade away and be forgotten, while the *drápa* composed about King Magnús will be recited as long as there are people in the North.”⁴ (And we know that, true to his prophecy, no remnants of Haraldr’s praise-poem have been preserved.) After that Arnórr received handsome gifts — his *bragarlaun*, reward for poetry. Finally the skald had promised King Haraldr to compose an *erfidrápa* in his honour if he survived him. And this he did, and extensive fragment of this memorial poem has come down to us.

According to this account, the above cited stanza No. 1 of *Hrynhenda* (“*Magnús, hlýð til máttigs óðar...*”) was preceded by an introductory part, probably a stanza (or several stanzas) which provoked Haraldr *harðráði*, a well known expert in skaldic poetry, to make a critical remark on the content of the verses. We are told that Haraldr found fault because Arnórr began his poem not

by addressing himself to King Magnús but by referring to the Orkney earls and to his own travels, i.e. to something that had nothing to do with the praise of the king.

There are good grounds for believing that two couplets (*fjórðungar*) ascribed to Arnórr in the *Third Grammatical Treatise (TGT)* belong to this otherwise unknown prelude to *Hrynhenda*. In *TGT* the first of these fragments illustrates *macrologia* (“loquacity”), one of the categories borrowed from Latin *ars poetica* and listed among the so called *læstir* — poetic “slips” or “faults” which it was necessary to avoid in poetry. Cf.:

“Macrologia ær kallað langt sæn, þat ær tekr onytsamliga lvti til þess mals, ær skalld talar, ok ær þessi figura víða sætt iǵndverðvm kvæðvm, sæm arnoR qvað i Magnvs drapu:

‘Sæinkvn varð þa ær hlæbarð hanka
hnika ár hin liota bára’.

her sægir hann fra rakfórvm sinum, ænn þat hæyrir ekci konvngs lofi. Þæssi figvra verðr ok, ef maðr talar þǵrfvm flæira vm hinn sama lvt <...>”⁵

[“Macrologia is a long utterance (‘sentence’) which adds unnecessary things to the skald’s speech, and this figure is often placed at the beginnings of poems, as Arnórr said in *Magnúsdrápa*:

‘My bear of the rope (= ship) was late
when an ugly wave carried away an oar.’

Here he tells of his own hard times at sea and that does not belong to the king’s praise. The same figure arises when one is saying more than will suffice about one and the same thing...”]

Later in the treatise we find another couplet by Arnórr, presumably, extracted from the same context:

klivfa let ec i kaupfǵr dvfv
knarra minn víð borðin stinnv.⁶

[“I was urging my strong-sided ship to break waves in a journey.”]

Thus, the king of Norway and two centuries later the author of the learned poetics have agreed that in the opening stanzas of his famous poem Arnórr deviates from certain rules regulating the composition of praise-poetry. However, there is no room for doubt that they came to this conclusion by different ways for the very notion of “rules” had essentially different implications for both parties. Whereas for Haraldr “rules” implied unwritten traditional patterns and modes of composition established since olden times and supported by the authority of the great poets of the past (*höfuðskáld*), for Óláfr Þórðarson, the author of *TGT*, “rules” meant first and foremost those instructions one could learn from the medieval Latin poetics which he was taking for universal and therefore applicable to native poetry. The theoretical foundation for applying the norms of Latin rhetoric to the local tradition was an

idea of internal unity of classical and Norse poetic craft seen as a result of their common origins. This idea, probably developed from the Prologue to *Snorra Edda*,⁷ was clearly expressed in the introductory chapter to *Málskrúðsfræði*: “In this book it may be fully understood that all is one craft — that art of poetry which Roman wise men learned at Athens in Greece and afterwards turned into the Latin language, and that metrical form or art of poetry which Óðinn and other men of Asia brought here to the northern half of the world <...>”.⁸

Following — in compliance with this argument — Continental rhetorical handbooks Óláfr in the spirit of Latin *ars poetica* was warning the skalds against various “faults” (*læstir*) discussed in his learned sources. One of these “faults” was *macrologia*, which was presented in *TGT* in the same way as in *Ars maior* (book 3) of Donat (Cf.: “Macrologia est longa sententia, res non necessarias comprehendens <...>”).⁹

It is quite obvious that internal differences between the two poetic systems throw doubt upon validity of a standard range of classical rhetorical categories employed in *TGT*. Traditional skaldic poetry with its particular modes of composition, diction and style could not be easily forced into the Procrustean bed of an experimental “doctrine of rhetoric” which was an adaptation of foreign models. Accordingly, what was considered “a fault” in the opinion of such authorities as Priscian or Donat in reality could have been a normal skaldic practice. However, in the case of *macrologia* Óláfr’s argument seems to be corroborated by one piece of evidence produced by the native tradition itself, namely, by the story about Arnórr’s presentation of his poems at the Norwegian court. Although Haraldr harðráði was entirely unaware of classical rhetoric, as an expert in skaldic poetry he took notice of a rhetorical “fault” which was later discussed by a learned grammarian.

Nevertheless, there is one point in Óláfr’s account of *macrologia* that cannot but draw our attention. I have in mind the statement of *TGT* that “this figure is often placed at the beginnings of poems”. It follows from this remark that “macrological” introductions to praise-poems of the type that was exemplified by a couplet from Arnórr’s *drápa* were not exceptional in skaldic tradition. But if so, such introductions could hardly have been regarded as inappropriate in a panegyric. When composing their verses the skalds were drawing not on some abstract prescriptions or rules, but on specific precedents in poems they knew. Thus, in spite of what is said in the report from *Morkinskinna*, it is questionable whether “loquacity” was ever considered a deviation from traditional norms.

In order to give an answer to this question, it is necessary to analyze the sources it would be natural to rely on, namely, other introductory sections of skaldic praise-poems. Unfortunately, preserved fragments of skaldic poems composed in praise of princes are not especially illuminating in this respect. As is well known, most of the stanzas from praise-poems have come down to us only because they are cited in the king’s sagas where they appear as source-

quotations intended to support the prose reports about events in the lives of celebrated rulers. No wonder that such poetic quotations can tell us little about anything “that does not belong to the king’s praise”. Thus, the fate of the lost prelude to Arnórr’s *Hrynhenda* was hardly a unique one. Due to the very conditions of its transmission in the king’s sagas a great deal of skaldic praise poetry had no chance to survive at all. It is worth remembering in this connection that the only fully preserved panegyric composed before the second half of the twelfth century, *Höfuðlausn* by Egill Skalla-Grímsson, was transmitted in a different way — as a supplement to *Egils saga*.

However, even those defective verses we have at our disposal can tell us a lot about the genre of skaldic panegyric. Although poetry of this kind is more impersonal than *lausavísur* and the main hero of a praise-poem is its addressee, there is still place for the poet himself. The theme of the authorial presence in skaldic poetry has been thoroughly discussed in modern criticism, so, there is no need to dwell on it at length. Besides first person intrusions and various short parenthetical inserts into the eulogistic text which we usually meet throughout the poems, we may now and then run across even more extensive accounts of a skald’s own experiences. *Upphaf* and *slæmr*, introductory and concluding parts of a *drápa*, can be seen as special “territories” where the skald’s authorial presence is to be expected.

As a rule, a praise-poem opens with the traditional “bid for a hearing” (*heyri, hljóðs biðk*) most frequently expressed in its very first lines.¹⁰ (Cf.: “*Jöfurr heyri upphaf, / ofrask mun konungs lof / háttu nemi hann rétt, / hróðrs síns bragar míns*”. Óttar svartí, *Óláfsdrápa sænska: Skj. B I 267, 1* — “Lord, listen to the beginning of your poem, a true praise of the king is going to be pronounced, he will appreciate the meter of my verses”). This formal introduction, an invocation to the eulogized prince and a request for silence, was a direct outcome of conditions of actual oral delivery in the king’s hall. That is why, in spite of its formalized structure, it was no mere convention (comparable, for instance, with a similar introduction in *Völuspá*, 1: *Hlióðs bið ec allar helgar kindir* <...>), but retained its meaning and function of an appeal to a specific person made in a situation of skaldic recitation.

Sometimes we find this formal beginning expanded and developed into a rather extensive introductory part of the poem. The well known and most admirable example of such *drápu-upphaf* are the first six strophes of Einarr skálaglamm’s *Vellekla*, a poem in honour of Earl Hákon of Norway. Einarr starts by addressing the earl with the traditional “bid for a hearing” formula (“*Hugstóran biðk heyra / heyr jarl Kvasis dreyra* <...>” *Vell.*, 1: *Skj. B I 117, 1* — “Great-heart, I bid you listen — listen, earl, to Kvasir’s blood [i.e., poetry]”¹¹), then elaborates with great artistry the conventional theme of poetry and poetic performance which is expressed in varied “sea” images, and ends the prologue by urging the audience to listen (“*Nú ’s þats Boðnar bára, / berg-Saxa, tér vaxa, / gervi í holl ok heyri / hljóð fley jöfurs þjóðir*.” *Vell.*, 6 — “Now

Boðn's wave [i.e., poetry] waxes — the prince's men give silence in the hall and listen to the ship of the berg-Saxar [berg-Saxar = dwarves; i.e., poetry]."¹²

The other great skald, Egill, when addressing the eulogized king in the first strophes of *Höfuðlausn* did not confine himself to the theme of poetic performance:

Vestr komk of ver
en ek Viðris ber
Munstrandar mar,
svá 's mitt of far;
drók eik á flot
við ísabrot;
hlóðk mæðar hlut
munknarrar skut.

“West I came over the sea bearing the sea of Viðrir's breast [Viðrir = Óðinn; i.e., poetry]; thus is it with me. I led the boat at ice-break; I loaded the stern of the ship of spirit [i.e., breast] with praise.”

Buðumk hilmir lǫð,
ák hróðrs of kvǫð,
berk Óðins mjǫð
á Engla bjǫð;
lofat vísa vann,
víst mærik þann;
hljóðs biðjum hann,
þvíat hróðr of fann.

“The prince invited me; I have to pronounce the song; I bear Óðinn's mead [i.e., poetry] to the table of the Angles; I made praise to the king, I am going to glorify him; I bid him to listen to me for I have brought forth the verses.”

Hygg vísi at,
vel sómir þat,
hvé ek þylja fet,
ef ek þǫgn of get;

“Give heed, lord, for I compose well, I need silence <...>.”

(*Höfuðlausn*, 1—3: Skj. B I 30—31).

This introduction is echoed in the closing:

Jǫfurr hyggi at,
hvé ek yrkja fat;
gótt þykkjumk þat,
es ek þǫgn of gat;
hr[oe]rðak munni
af munar grunni
Óðins ægi
of jǫru fægi.

“Lord, consider, how I have composed my verses; I am glad that silence was given to me; with my mouth I have stirred from the bottom of the mind [i.e., breast] Óðinn's sea [i.e., poetry] over the warrior.”

Bark þengils lof
á þagnar rof;
kank mála mjǫt
of manna sjǫt;
ór hlátra ham
hróðr berk fyr gram;
svá fór þat fram,
at flestr of nam.

“I have delivered the lord's praise loud and clear; I speak truly in the halls of men; out from the harbor of laughter [i.e., breast] I brought poetry; and it went forth so that all took it in.”¹³

(*Höfuðlausn*, 19—20: Skj. B I 33).

According to Cecil Wood,¹⁴ only two instances show a variance with the

traditional pattern for the position of *hljóðs biðk* in skaldic praise-poems. In Egill's *Höfuðlausn* we find one of such occasions. Not until the last lines of the second stanza does the skald's bid for a hearing take place (*hljóðs biðjum hann*, it also pays to notice that Egill's impersonal request is formally irregular). In contrast to other sustained skaldic praise-poems, that most frequently start with an appeal to the prince, *Höfuðlausn* opens with Egill's report of his journey to England. Evidently, Egill presents this otherwise "macrological" topic in such a way that it is by no means alien to the king's praise, for it is introduced simultaneously with the theme of poetry. As is usual, the latter is expressed by means of kennings referring to the myth of the origin of poetry. We may suspect, however, that in the opening verses of *Höfuðlausn* some of these conventional periphrastic images could allude to the skald's own situation.¹⁵ His praise-poem, the poetic mead loaded on "the stern of the ship of spirit" (= his breast) the skald is bearing to the table of his enemy, the king of England, is intended to ransom him from death in the same way as the mead of poetry ransomed from death on the skerry the mythical dwarves Fjalar and Galar (hence, a kenning for poetry "dwarves' ship"). A distinct parallelism between the real sea the skald came over and the boat he led at ice-break, on the one hand, and "the sea of Viðrir's breast" (= poetry) he brought with him and his "ship of spirit" with poetry on the stern, on the other, is apparent.

However singularly the theme of poet's sea journey was elaborated by Egill, Arnórr's *Hrynhenda* was not the first skaldic panegyric that employed it. It is noteworthy too that in *Höfuðlausn* it occurs in the same position as in Arnórr's poem, i.e. in the *drápu-upphaf* where it precedes the phrase of formal introduction — the skald's bid for a hearing. It is probably mere coincidence that another poem in this genre which makes use of the theme of poet's sea journey was composed by a descendant of Skalla-Grímr and an elder kinsman of Óláfr Þórðarson, Snorri Sturluson. Although Snorri was acknowledged to be the greatest authority on skaldic poetics, it can be easily demonstrated that some stanzas of his *Háttatal* provide us with obvious instances of "the fault" his nephew, the author of *TGT*, found in Arnórr's *Hrynhenda*.

As was mentioned above, not only opening but also closing stanzas of a *drápa* are those parts where we can expect to find the skald speaking about himself. That is true for Egill's *Höfuðlausn*. As to Snorri's *Háttatal*, a *drápa* of one hundred and two stanzas, which is both a praise-poem celebrating Earl Skúli and King Hákon and a skaldic key to metres, it has a unique construction. According to the prose commentary, the panegyric consists of three poems (marked at stanzas 31 and 68); however, in the body of the poem at stanza 69 Snorri mentions that he is starting the fourth poem.¹⁶ Besides that, in contrast to other poems in praise of princes, *Háttatal* has no formal introduction at all.

The first poem which glorifies the king opens with an account of his deeds and lacks the traditional bid for a hearing. But in spite of this irregularity of construction the first poem has a rather extensive closing (*slæmr*) which takes

as a main topic the poet himself. What, actually, draws our attention in these verses is the theme of skald's sea travels presented side by side with the theme of poet's reward, traditional for this part of a *drápa*. Cf.:

Ískalda skark ǫldu
eik, vas súð en bleika
reynd, til ræsis fundar
ríks; emk kuðr at slíku;
brjótr þá hersis heiti
hátt, dugir s[oe]mð at vátta,
auðs af jarla prýði
ítrs; vasa siglt til lítils.

“My boat was cleaving an ice-cold wave on the way to the mighty king, the pale boards (literally: ‘the clinchings of a ship’s boards’) were given a trial; I am known for that. The destroyer of beautiful treasures (i.e., the warrior = I) received the glorious name of hersir from the adorning of earls (i.e., the king); this is a clear mark of honour; I would not travel for a thing of little value.”

(*Skj. B II 68, 27*)

Starting with a report of his journey to Norway the skald then gives a poetic account of his stay at the king's court:

Tvær mank hilmi hýrum
heims vistir ótvistar,
hlautk á-samt at sitja
seimgildi fé mildum;
fúss gaf fylkir hnossir
fleinstýri margdýrar;
holtr vas hersa stilli
hoddspennir fjölmennum.

“I remember my two joyful visits to the gracious prince; it was my fortune to sit next to the generous gold-payer; the lord willingly gave costly valuables to the thrower of shafts (i.e., to the warrior = to me); the breaker of treasure (i.e., the warrior = I) was well disposed towards the retainers of the ‘stiller’ of chiefs (*hersar*).”

(*Skj. B II 69, 29*).

Then the theme of skald's sea travels appears in the concluding stanzas of the third and the last poem in which Snorri demonstrates his self-pride, speaking about his poetic abilities and the high quality of his creation:

Gløggva grein
hefk gort til bragar;
svá 's úr[oe]tt hundrað talit;
hróðrs orverðr
skala maðr heitinn vesa,
ef svá fær alla háttu ort.

“I have made a clear distinction between the verse-forms, so that a hundred of them are enumerated; the man who is able to compose in every metre will not be called unworthy of praise.”

Sóttak fremð,
sóttak fund konungs,
sóttak ítran jarl,
þás ek reist,
þás ek renna gat
kaldan straum kili,
kaldan sjá kili.

“I sought for fame, I sought the king's company, I sought the company of the glorious earl, when I was cleaving the cold stream with the keel, when I was gliding through the cold sea (with the keel).”

(*Skj. B II 88, 100—101*).

Since even such a great rhetorician as Snorri could permit himself “to add unnecessary things” to the praise of the rulers and to glorify his own poetic skill and production in a panegyric, “loquacity” of this sort was hardly considered a

fault in skaldic tradition.

There is thus no sufficient evidence that self-referring authorial intrusions in the introductory and closing parts of a praise-poem in which a poet could give an account of his own experiences (at sea or elsewhere) were ever regarded as a deviation from traditional rules of skaldic composition. In all likelihood the very category of *macrologia* as it is described in *TGT* must have been inapplicable in skaldic poetics for the high degree of self-consciousness in the skald encouraged the Old Norse poet to speak openly about himself in his verses.

As to the above cited anecdote from *Morkinskinna* we may assume that the real cause of King Haraldr's displeasure must have been envy of his co-ruler, King Magnús, who received his poem first. There is not much doubt, that Óláfr Þórðarson knew the saga report of Arnórr's recitation of *Hrynhenda* and, pursuing his own ends, used a couplet from this poem to illustrate an adopted rhetorical category. Certainly, it was no mere chance that he fixed upon this very example for it was supported by the authority of Haraldr harðráði, the most accomplished royal critic of skaldic production and the best poet of all Norwegian kings.

References

- ¹ *Morkinskinna*. Udg. C.R.Unger. Christiania, 1867, p. 31. Trans. Judith Jesch from *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Viking Age Classics. Leifur Eiríksson Publ., Reykjavík, Vol. 1, p. 335 f. All the verses are quoted from *Den norsk-islandske óskjaldedigting*. (A: Text efter håndskrifterne, 2 vols. B: Rettet text, 2 vols.). Udg. ved Finnur Jónsson (1912—15). København: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1967—73.
- ² Hallvard Lie, "Hrynhenda." *KLNM* 7 (1962), p. 27.
- ³ Bjarne Fidjestøl, "Arnórr Þórðarson: skald of the Orkney jarls." In: Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Selected Papers*. Ed. Odd Einar Haugen & Else Mundal. Trans. by Peter Foote. The Viking Collection 9. Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 1997, p. 113.
- ⁴ *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. 1, p. 336.
- ⁵ *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske Afhandling i Snorres Edda*. Udg. Björn M. Ólsen. Copenhagen, 1884, p. 81 f. See Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet*. Øvre Ervik: Alvheim & Eide, 1982, p. 128.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- ⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál: Snorri Sturluson's ars poetica and medieval theories of language*. The Viking Collection 4. Odense: Odense Univ. Press, 1987, p. 27.
- ⁸ *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske Afhandling*, p. 60; trans. from Margaret Clunies Ross, *Op. cit.*, p. 27.
- ⁹ *Den tredje og fjerde grammatiske Afhandling*, p. 81 (notes).
- ¹⁰ See Cecil Wood, The Skald's Bid for a Hearing. In: *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 59 (1960), p. 240—254.
- ¹¹ Trans. from Carol J. Clover, Skaldic Sensibility. In: *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, bd. 93 (1978), p. 77.
- ¹² Trans. from Clover, *Op. cit.*, p. 78.
- ¹³ Trans. from Clover, *Op. cit.*, p. 74—75.
- ¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 245 ff.
- ¹⁵ See Clover, *Op. cit.*, p. 75.
- ¹⁶ See Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*. Ed. Anthony Faulkes. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 17, 29—30.