

*Ars metrica* and the composition of *Egils saga*

dedicated to the memory of Hermann Pálsson

1

Verse in the Sagas of Icelanders brings with it a baggage of skaldic theory, not only taken from *Snorra Edda*, but, no less important, from the grammatical treatises. Skaldic theory was practised at an advanced level at the time when the first of these sagas were written in the early thirteenth century, and therefore we must take into account the analytical methodology to which the verse was subjected in this culture when we interpret not only the embedded verse but also the accompanying prose text. Three grammatical treatises can be dated to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, *The First*, *Second* and *Third*, all of them associated with skaldic verse-making, and preserved in conjunction with *Snorra Edda* in the manuscripts. All three are preserved in *Codex Wormianus*, the *Second* also in *Codex Upsaliensis* as an introduction to *Háttatal*, Snorri Sturluson's *ars metrica*, and the *Third*, by Óláfr Þórðarson, in the *A* and *B* manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*'s *Skáldskaparmál*.<sup>1</sup> The close association of *Snorra Edda* with the study of *grammatica* throws into relief the theoretical foundation on which the study of skaldic poetry was based in the thirteenth century. The verse was studied from the point of view of phonetics, syntax, metrics and imagery, and these considerations combined to enhance the prose when the skaldic stanza was incorporated into a saga. But what were the consequences?

2

The Sagas of Icelanders are preserved in a great variety of manuscripts from a long period of time and have undergone various changes from the moment of their conception. The manuscripts furthermore contain redactions which we need to assess in relation to their adjacent texts in the manuscripts. The original text of *Egils saga* is as elusive as that of many of the Sagas. It is preserved in three main versions, *Möðruvallabók* (written c. 1320-50), the *Wolfenbüttel* manuscript (written c. 1350), and *Ketilsbók* (Ketill Jörundsson's seventeenth-century transcription), as well as many fragments from the thirteenth century onwards.<sup>2</sup> *Möðruvallabók*, on which most editions of the saga have been based, does not contain Egill's long poems as part of the narrative. This fact brings us to the crucial question of how much of Egill Skallagrímsson's verse, especially the long poems, was interpolated in the saga in the thirteenth century. *Möðruvallabók* merely cites the first stanza of *Sonatorrek* and leaves an empty space for the first stanza of *Arinbjarnarkviða* (the poem was entered after the saga), but omits *Höfuðlausn* all together.<sup>3</sup> The habit of citing first stanzas of long poems is repeated in references to Egill's other three known poems, *Berudrápa*, *Aðalsteinsdrápa*, and *Skjaldardrápa*. Should we then read *Sonatorrek*, *Höfuðlausn* and *Arinbjarnarkviða* as integral parts of the narrative in this manuscript? Did the audience of the poems have implicit knowledge of the poems outside the confines of the saga?<sup>4</sup>

*Möðruvallabók* preserves only one version of *Egils saga*. When the text of *Möðruvallabók* is compared to the earliest fragment of the saga, the theta-fragment (mid-13<sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See further in chapter 2 of my book *Tools of Literacy* (2001).

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion of the manuscripts of *Egils saga*, see Jón Helgason 1956. See also his article on *Höfuðlausn* (1969).

<sup>3</sup> See Andrea van Arkel-de Leeuw van Weenen's edition of *Möðruvallabók*.

<sup>4</sup> See Gísli Sigurðsson's discussion of the 'immanent' knowledge of the audience at the time of the writing of the sagas (2002:47-8).

century), it is clear that the text has been revised thoroughly, shortened and polished, but also that the three verses preserved in the theta-fragment are better preserved there than in *Möðruvallabók*.<sup>5</sup> It should also be noted that Egill's verse in the saga is commonly written with another hand than that of the prose, implying, perhaps, that some of the verse was not in the scribe's copy. If we look at other Sagas of Icelanders in this manuscript it is noteworthy that there is a tendency to preserve less verse than other manuscripts from the same time.<sup>6</sup> The same uncertainty surrounds the preservation of the long poems in the other main manuscripts. The *Wolfenbüttel* manuscript contains the whole of *Höfuðlausn* but only the first stanza of *Sonatorrek*, the part where *Arinbjarnarkviða* is cited is missing, and the *Keilsbók* contains the whole of *Sonatorrek* and *Höfuðlausn* but omits *Arinbjarnarkviða*. This overview should caution us to distinguish between different versions of the saga and to follow the manuscript's choice of verse citations when we print the text according to *Möðruvallabók*.

Egill's verse is known outside the boundaries of his saga in the *Skáldskaparmál* of *Snorra Edda* and *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, and it is worth inquiring whether these two works can throw some light on the reception of his verse in the thirteenth century. Both works are written by the Sturlungs, who certainly had something to do with the writing of *Egils saga*. Snorri Sturluson's citation of verse in *Skáldskaparmál* is mostly confined to poets known from the kings' sagas, or those listed in *Skáldatal*. These were the *höfuðskáld* ('major poets'), poets who enjoyed official recognition in the written culture. Bjarne Fidjestøl noticed that there was virtually no overlap between the skaldic corpus in the kings' sagas and *Snorra Edda*, on the one hand, and the Sagas of Icelanders, on the other hand.<sup>7</sup> Even though we find verse by the same poets, it is not necessarily drawn from the same corpus of verse. This is an important point when we assess the dating of the verse in the Sagas of Icelanders; it does not belong to the corpus of historical verse most firmly associated with the writing of chronology.<sup>8</sup> Hallfreðr, Kormakr and Egill are among the most important poets of the skaldic canon in *Snorra Edda* and they are also cited in the Sagas of Icelanders. These three were recognised court poets and are listed in *Skáldatal* and cited in *Skáldskaparmál*, and therefore belong to the authoritative section of the canon.<sup>9</sup> However, the verse cited by Kormakr and Hallfreðr in *Skáldskaparmál* is from their court poetry, but not the corpus of verse in their respective sagas, which is perhaps not as historically reliable. Egill Skalla-Grímsson is the exception. He is a known court poet from *Skáldatal*, but his verse is only known from his saga, which resides on the boundary of the kings' sagas and the Sagas of Icelanders. None of the historiographers, however, authenticated his verse by citing it in an historical context of the kings' sagas. Egill's verse is cited nine times in the *Codex Regius* of *Snorra Edda*, and in seven of these instances the source is Egill's longer poems, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, *Sonatorrek*, and *Höfuðlausn*, which may, or may not, have belonged to the saga originally. The existence of these poetic citations in *Snorra Edda* may either strengthen the case for the exclusion of the poems from the 'original' text of *Egils saga*, or be an indication of a generic flirtation of the saga with the corpus of kings' sagas.

<sup>5</sup> See a comparison of the texts in Sigurður Nordal 1933:LXXXIII-LXXXV; see also a transcription of the fragment in Finnur Jónsson's edition of the saga (1886-1888:335-344), and in Bjarni Einarsson's edition of *Egils saga* (2001).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., the text of *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Bandalanna saga*.

<sup>7</sup> Fidjestøl 1985:323.

<sup>8</sup> On *Skáldatal*, see Guðrún Nordal 2001:120-30.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Foote (1984) divided the skaldic canon into three parts depending on the sources in his article 'Wrecks and rhymes: kings' sagas, treatises on poetry and grammar, and Sagas of Icelanders' (222). He dismissed the verse in the Sagas of Icelanders as historically unreliable, unless 'compelling cases can be made for specific exemptions from this dismissive rule - as can certainly be done for verse by Egill Skalla-Grímsson, for example [...] but otherwise the material must be ignored until we can achieve a more accurate chronology for it' (223). This is an important distinction to make when we discuss the verse in the Sagas of Icelanders.

It may be noted that *Codex Upsaliensis*, *Codex Trajectinus* and the B-manuscript of *Snorra Edda* omit the reference to *Arinbjarnarkviða* in *Skáldskaparmál*. Each manuscript of *Skáldskaparmál* presents a different redaction of the text. The case of *Codex Upsaliensis* is particularly noteworthy; the manuscript was written c. 1300 and can with some likelihood be attributed to the Sturlung family. Arinbjörn's patronage of Egill's poetry is among the additions in a special redaction of *Skáldatal* preserved in the manuscript. The other version of *Skáldatal*, the *Kringla* text, does not contain this reference, nor Egill's association with King Aðalsteinn or Þorsteinn Þóruson, Arinbjörn's nephew.<sup>10</sup> Why is Egill's official output enlarged in this version of *Skáldatal*? Is it because of the existence of *Egils saga* and the need to authorise Egill's verse in the saga? Óláfr Þórðarson refers only to *Arinbjarnarkviða* of Egill's long poems in *The Third Grammatical Treatise*; two of the stanzas, commonly printed as the last two stanzas, are not preserved in *Möðruvallabók*, and we do not know if they belonged in the poem originally. Óláfr's reason for citing verse in the *Treatise* is not to authenticate the treatment of the skaldic diction, as had been Snorri Sturluson's intention in *Skáldskaparmál*, but to find the most suitable examples to illustrate the figures and metaphors.

Finally, there is one further indirect reference to Egill outside his saga, again in a work of the Sturlungs, in Snorri Sturluson's *Háttatal*. The study of metrics goes hand in hand with the earliest attempts in Iceland at writing about the language. The earliest application of skaldic verse in prose is found in the kings' sagas in the late twelfth century, but before that, we have theoretical analysis of skaldic verse-making in *The First Grammatical Treatise* and *Háttalykill*, composed by Earl Rögnvaldur kali Kolsson and the unknown Icelander Hallr Þórarinnsson. Whereas *Háttalykill* presents the metres as a list with two stanzas exemplifying each metrical variant, *Háttatal* is accompanied by a prose commentary elucidating the stylistic devices intrinsic to the various metres. In the middle of *Háttatal* Snorri discusses five metrical alternatives which he attributes to early poets, who reside on the borderline of history and myth: Ragnarr loðbrók, Torf-Einarr, Fleinn, Bragi Boddason, and Egill Skalla-Grímsson. The common feature of these metrical variants is a lack of form, that is, there are no *hendingar* or internal rhyme in all, or some, of the lines. Snorri seeks to project the view that *dróttkvætt* was less advanced in the ninth century, but that greater regularity was achieved with time.<sup>11</sup> He warns young poets against emulating these poets: *ok má engi yrkja eptir því þó at þat þykki eigi spilla í fornkvæðum* ('noone should imitate their verse, even though this would not corrupt the ancient poems').<sup>12</sup> Features of *Egillsháttar* are found in Egill's verse, but never in a whole stanza.<sup>13</sup> It is of interest that *Háttatal* in *Codex Upsaliensis* ends with stanza 56, exemplifying *Egillsháttar*. This break is not due to lost leaves but indicates that the scribe chose to end his transcription at this point in the poem.

In this paper I would like to draw attention to the importance of appreciating the interaction between the metrical devices in the saga's stanzas and the subject matter of its prose. I choose four scenes in the saga for this purpose: Egill's visit to his grandfather Yngvarr, his first feast in Norway, the verbal exchange at the Gulathing on the occasion of the court case of Ásgerðr's inheritance, and Egill's commentary on his son, Þorsteinn. Metrics were no less important to the two best-known scholars of skaldic poetics, Snorri Sturluson and Óláfr Þórðarson, than skaldic imagery, and the two, form and content, are always intertwined.

### 3

*Egils saga* speaks to an audience interested in verse. The abundance of verse in *Egils saga* is not the only indicator that the saga evolves around poetry. The hero is undoubtedly a formidable poet,

<sup>10</sup> See a discussion on *Skáldatal*, in Guðrún Nordal 2001:120-30.

<sup>11</sup> Kuhn 1983:87-89, under the influence of Snorri, comes pretty much to the same conclusion.

<sup>12</sup> *Snorra Edda* 1931:240. Spelling is normalized.

<sup>13</sup> See Faulkes 1991:63.

yet he never succeeds in becoming a court poet in Norway. His poetry is admired in Iceland and England, but he never presents his verse to a Norwegian king in the manner of the court poets.<sup>14</sup> There are numerous references to verse-making in the saga, to the poets of Haraldr hárfagri, to Björn Hitdælakappi, Gunnlaugr ormstungu, Skúli Þorsteinsson, and Einarr skálaglamm, Egill's protégé.

Egill's famous entrance on to the saga in chapter 31, one third into the saga, preempts one of the saga's main themes: the poet's relationship with his patron. The three-year old Egill disobeys his father and turns up at the feast of his maternal grand-father.<sup>15</sup> This story is an *exemplum* of the ideal reciprocal relationship between the court poet and his patron, which will not be acted out in Egill's relations with the Norwegian king. It is comic, yet tragic; it is the story of the man who, though only three years old, succeeds in behaving impeccably at a feast; not a common occurrence in the saga of the grown-up Egill. However, he is an intruder in this company. Egill is placed next to Yngvarr, his maternal grandfather, opposite to his father and his brother Þórólfr. The seating at the feast anticipates his ambiguous relationship with his immediate kinsmen in the saga; he sits alone. Egill's stanzas in this episode are both in regular *dróttkvætt*, except for the first line in the second stanza. It is quite common in Egill's verse to find *aðalhendingar*, full rhyme, in the first line instead of *skothending* ('half-rhyme'). This technique is rehearsed here, and the rhyme underlines the contrasts inherent in Yngvarr's gift of three shells and a duck's egg: *Sípögla gaf söglum / sárgagls þrjá Agli* (Egils saga, v. 5).<sup>16</sup>

Egill's visit to Bárðr at Atley holds a further key to many events in the saga. Egill has just arrived in Norway, and the feast gives him an unexpected opportunity to present himself to the royal couple. The feast at Atley turns out very differently to that at Yngvarr's farm. Egill introduces himself unflatteringly to the king and queen, and it becomes apparent that Egill's dispute with the royal family is with Gunnhildr and not with Eiríkr bloodaxe. This episode is punctuated by three stanzas, each a variant of the *dróttkvætt*, exemplifying the importance of listening to assonance and word-play in Egill's verse.

The first stanza is composed under regular *dróttkvætt*, and it carries an undisguised *nío*; verbal abuse. Egill describes his host as deceitful and treacherous, and his discourtesy and rudeness to his host cannot go unavenged. Bárðr seeks advice from the queen, and they attempt to poison Egill. Egill understands the threat, cuts runes on the poison-filled horn and composes a stanza:

Rístum rún á horni,  
rjóðum spjáll í dreyra  
þau velk orð til eyrna  
óðs dýrs viðar róta;  
drekkuð veig sem viljum  
vel glýjaðra þýja,  
vitum, hvé oss of eiri  
ðl, þats Bárðr signdi.  
(Egils saga, v. 9)<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> There are many fine studies of Egill's verse. On Egill's *persona* as a poet, see Ciunies Ross, Margaret 1989. On *Egils saga*, see Torfi H. Tulinius 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Laurence de Looze (1989:127-28) and William Sawyer (1995:34-35) have most recently discussed this scene.

<sup>16</sup> I cite Sigurður Nordal's edition of *Egils saga* (1933) in this paper. It should be noted that the wording of the verse is sometimes reconstructed, especially when *Mbórnvallabók*, and the other manuscripts, preserve a corrupt text. A review of the text of Egill's stanzas would be necessary, but is outside the scope of this paper. I write ð, instead of hooked o or ø, for convenience sake.

<sup>17</sup> I carve runes on this horn, / reddened words with my blood, / I choose words for the trees / of the wild beast's ear-roots; / drink as we wish this mead / brought by merry servants, / let us find out how we fare / from the ale that Bard blessed. In this paper I use Bernard Scudder's translation of *Egils saga* in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Egill's Saga 1997:82)

This stanza is completely different from the first one. This is almost a perfect *háttleysa*, but true to *Egilsþáttur* there is hending in the 6<sup>th</sup> line, *vel glýjaðra þýja*, where Egill pays homage to the friendly waitresses. The saga contains five examples where the technique of *háttleysa* is applied in parts of a stanza, and I suggest that these instances are thematically linked in the saga. The metre is a cue; it carries implicit meaning. The first stanza is Egill's address to his mother: *Þat mælti mín móðir* (verse 7). The two next ones are also addressed to women, one to the daughter of the earl (verse 14) and the second to Helga Þorfinnsdóttir (verse 48). Helga's health is threatened by a runic message, and there are clear verbal echoes between the first line of that stanza and the one at Bárðr's feast: *Skalat maðr rúnir rista*. This stylistic variant is used for the last time in a verse spoken to Einarr skálaglammi (verse 50), where Egill boasts of his battles in Norway. Four of the five stanzas are addressed to women, but the fifth to a young apprentice. This is no coincidence. The poet steps out of his natural habitat of the skaldic stanza and talks to those who are not part of the courtly milieu; the women and the young, inexperienced poet.

The third stanza at the feast is composed when Egill's companion, Ölvir, is almost unconscious from heavy drinking. The stanza is a *tour de force*:

stóð þá Egill upp ok leiddi Ölvi útar til duranna ok helt á sverði sínu. En er þeir koma at durunum, þá kom Bárðr eptir þeim ok bað Ölvi drekka brautfararmíni sitt. Egill tók við ok drakk ok kvað vísu:

Ólvar mik, þvít Ölvi  
 öf gervir nú fölván,  
 atgeira lætk ýrar  
 ýring of grön skýra;  
 öllungis kannst illa,  
 oddskýs, fyr þér nýsa,  
 rigna getr at regni,  
 regnbjóðr, Hávars þegna.

Egill kastar horninu, en greip sverðit ok brá; myrkt var í forstofunni; hann lagði sverðinu á Bárði miðjum, svá at blóðrefillinn hljóp út um bakit; fell hann dauðr niðr, en blóð hljóp ór undinni. Þá fell Ölvir, ok gaus spýja ór honum. Egill hljóp þá út ór stofunni; þá var niðamyrk úti; (*Egils saga* 109-110).<sup>18</sup>

The pace has quickened, and the imagery in the stanza recalls that of the prose. The style of the stanza is of particular interest. Egill uses *dunhent*, echoing rhyme, where the last word of the line is repeated at the beginning of the next. Snorri exemplifies this stylistic variant in stanza 24 in *Háttatal*, and Ólafur Þórðarson alludes to such repetition when he explains *polintethon* in *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, citing Hallfreðr's famous sword-stanza as an example.<sup>19</sup> Ólafur's discussion of this *figura* explains that there must be a play of word forms as well, just as we find in Egill's stanza. This stylistic device is one of the features analysed in *ars metrica* as well as *grammatica* at the time of the writing of the saga. The verbal echo is heard throughout the stanza,

<sup>18</sup> ...so Egil got up and led him over to the door. He swung his cloak over his shoulder and gripped his sword underneath it. When they reached the door, Bard went after them with a full horn and asked Ölvir to drink a farewell toast, Egil stood in the doorway and spoke this verse: I'm feeling drunk, and the ale / has left Ölvir pale in the gills, / I let the spray of ox-spears / foam over my beard. / Your wits have gone, inviter / of showers onto shields; / now the rain of the high god / starts pouring upon you.

Egil tossed away the horn, grabbed hold of his sword and drew it. It was dark in the doorway; he thrust the sword so deep into Bard's stomach that the point came out through his back. Bard fell down dead, blood pouring from the wound. Then Ölvir dropped to the floor, spewing vomit. Egil ran out of the room. It was pitch dark outside (*Egils saga* 1997:82).

<sup>19</sup> *The Third Grammatical Treatise* ch. 15; verse 80: *Eitt er sverð þat er sverða / sverðauðgan mik gerði*. Anne Holtmark and Jón Helgason drew attention to Latin parallels for the stylistic variant of *dunhent*, 1941:125-7.

except for the silence in lines 5 and 6. In the first *helmingr* there is a remarkable description of how the ale flows across Ölvir's cheeks. He is soaked in ale. The metre *dunhent* adds to the impact of the description, the lines are married together, as if to demonstrate how the liquid drips uninterrupted from one line to the next. Harmony is achieved between form and content. A liquid of a different colour appears in the second *helmingr*. The verbal echo is ignored in the dry lines 5 and 6 when the clouds are darkening, but assonance is heard again when the rain flows: *rigna tekr regni, / regnhjóór, Hávars þegna*. The kenning *regn Hávars þegna* is a deliberate *double entendre*. The poet refers to the mead of poetry, as well as to the blood which will flow when Egill drops the horn and flings his sword. The two *helmingar* echo the bloodshed in the hall; Ölvir vomits, but Bárðr will die a brutal, bloody, death. The image is violent, yet powerful. The two bodily liquids are depicted through a reference to the rain of the heavens, and thus a cosmological allusion is realized.<sup>20</sup>

Egill Skalla-Grímsson, or should we say the poet of *Egils saga*, is particularly fond of *dunhent*, and of placing an *aðalhending* ("full-rhyme") in the wrong place (in odd lines), as in the Ölvir stanza. There are two further examples in the episode where Egill fights the court case over Ásgerðr's inheritance at the Gulathing. King Eiríkr is present, and Egill addresses him in the first stanza and alludes to his distress at the proposition that his wife is born a slave-woman:

Þýborna kveðr þorna  
þorn reið áar horna,  
sýslir hann of sína  
singimð Önuendr, mína.  
(*Egils saga* v. 25).<sup>21</sup>

The thorns are biting, as is the accusation that Ásgerðr is of low birth, and, in the following lines, Önuendr's avarice is underlined. It is as if the image is over-exposed. The first word *þý-* recalls Egill's description of the merry maids at Bárðr's feast; the very first word signals that Egill is seriously offended. Resentment cannot be avoided and Egill leaves the assembly cursing his enemies. The second stanza is composed on board a ship, and there the two first lines and the two second lines are connected through verbal assonance. Those echoing words distil the reasons for the dispute, inheritance (*arfi*) in the first lines and iand (*fold*) in the last lines; *arfi-arfljúgur*, and *foldar-foldværingi*.

Such stylistic variants are important in Egill's poetry in the saga and alert the reader and listener to underlying themes in the saga itself. I will conclude this brief discussion of a complex issue, by looking at Egill's stanza about his son Þorsteinn, the son that survived him. Þorsteinn is Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson reborn, and, accordingly, Ásgerðr's favourite, to Egill's irritation. The rivalry between the brothers, Egill and Þórólfr, is thus evoked at the very end of *Egils saga*, underlying the importance of this relationship in the saga. Þorsteinn was

allra manna fríðastr sýnum, hvít á hár ok bjart álitum; hann var mikill ok sterk, ok þó ekki eptir því sem faðir hans. Þorsteinn var vitr maðr ok kyrlátr, hógværr, stilltr manna bezt; Egill umi honum líti; Þorsteinn var ok ekki við hann ástúðigr, en þau Ásgerðr ok Þorsteinn unnusk mikit. (*Egils saga* 1933:274)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Body imagery in skaldic verse is discussed in detail in chapter 7 of my book *Tools of Literacy* (2001).

<sup>21</sup> This man pinned with thorns claims / that my wife, who bears my drinking horn, / is born of a slave-woman; / Selfish Onund looks after himself. (*Egill's saga* 1997:106)

<sup>22</sup> ...a very handsome man when he grew up, with fair hair and a fair complexion. He was tall and strong, although not on his father's scale. Thorstein was a wise and peaceful man, a model of modesty and self-control. Egil was not very fond of him. Thorstein, in turn, did not show his father much affection, but Asgerd and Thorstein were very close. (*Egill's Saga* 1997:164)

Ásgerður and Þorsteinn come up with the idea that Þorsteinn should wear Egill's silk scarves, a gift from Egill's cherished friend, Arinbjörn hersir. Egill keeps them under lock and key, like his other treasures. It rained during the assembly, and the scarves became dirty. Ásgerður washed them and put them back in the trunk. Egill noticed that they had been touched, and Ásgerður told him the truth. He then composed a stanza, remarkable for the harsh criticism directed against his son, Þorsteinn. The stanza echoes Egill's earlier stanza about Ásgerður's inheritance:

Áttkak erfínytja  
arfa mér til þarfan,  
mík hefr sonr of svíkvinn,  
svík telk í því, kvíkván;  
(*Egils saga* v. 55)<sup>23</sup>

The sorrowful father of *Sonatorrek* is distant, and we may recall that the complete poem is only inserted in the narrative in *Ketilsbók*, not in *Möðruvallabók* or *Wolfenbüttel*. Egill's grief over the deaths of his sons has not been heard by the audience of these fourteenth-century versions. The words are chosen with ice-cold perfection. Egill says that he has got an heir while he is alive; he has been buried alive. By using the technique of the *dunhenda* in lines 3 and 4 he draws out the main message: *mík-svíkvinn, svík-kvíkván*. His favourite ploy of employing full-rhyme instead of half-rhyme is used in line 3, bringing home the true message of the stanza, and perhaps the saga. It is a story of betrayal and distrust. After Ásgerður's death, Egill takes leave of his inherited estate at Borg where Þorsteinn lives with his family, and moves to Mosfell, to spend the last years of his life with Þórdís, the daughter of Ásgerður and Þórólfr, and her husband Grímr. Barren at the end, yet it was his unfavoured son, Þorsteinn, who carried his family forward, the forefather of the Sturlungs.

#### 4

*Egils saga* is a complex saga in more ways than one. One of its most striking features is the sophisticated application of Egill's verse, and the use of stylistic devices which are woven throughout the whole saga. The use of *dunhent* is the most arresting technique, stylistically, aesthetically and thematically. The saga is written in a cultural milieu passionate about skaldic verse, and the treatises on skaldic poetics, *Snorra Edda* and *The Third Grammatical Treatise*, and the manuscripts associated with the Sturlungs (such as *Codex Upsaliensis*), bear out a particular fondness for the poet Egill. We face the problem of building our interpretation of the saga, and the portrayal of its hero, on a fourteenth-century version which may, or may not, reflect the author's original intentions with the text, such as the inclusion of long poems, which is not a generic feature of the Sagas of Icelanders. By pointing this out, I do not mean to underestimate the significance of the poems in their own right, but to underline the importance of appreciating the saga and the verse of Egill in their textual context in the manuscripts.

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<sup>23</sup> I had little need of an heir / to use my inheritance. / My son has betrayed me / in my lifetime, I call that treachery. (*Egill's Saga* 1997:164)

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