

Roberta Frank  
University of Toronto

#### WHY SKALDS ADDRESS WOMEN

Between 970 and 1210, some sixty-four dróttkvætt stanzas by thirty-three named and four anonymous skalds address a woman, sometimes in unexpected circumstances. One poet is moved to pass on information about a leaking boat:

"Then sixteen of us baled out, lady, in four  
stations, but the surf foamed. The sea broke  
upon the ship's hull." (11)<sup>1</sup>

Another tells of finding his ship vandalized on the beach:

"A shudder passes through my heart; the man  
has lost a boat and ship on the flat shingle,  
lady; but who knows if I might not be willing  
to repay the one who burned the skald's vessel  
for the cold coals of the ship." (12)

In what may be the oldest "O lady" apostrophe in dróttkvætt, a skald announces his intention to go fishing:

"Let us have the sea-horse [ship] run with sea-  
feet [oars] from the north to the winged-with-  
tails prophecy-terns of the long nets [herring]  
to find out if the field-grass of glaciers  
[herring], which sea-swine [ship] root up,  
become available to my friends, noble lady." (1)

The sources preserving these stanzas do not identify the female addressee or acknowledge her existence. Snorri Sturluson cites the last stanza, for example, as evidence that a run of herring broke the Norwegian famine of 970.<sup>2</sup> The writers of the kings' sagas were more interested in the facts they could get out of the early poets than in generic or ideological signals. And modern scholarship has, on the whole, followed in their readerly tracks. Since the content of skaldic verse is distinctly male-centred, celebrating a masculine pride of life, it has understandably not seemed a very likely or positive

---

<sup>1</sup>The numbers following each verse give its location in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup>Haralds saga gráfeldar, ch. 16; Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni Abalbjarnarson, IF 26 (Reykjavík 1941) p. 233.

source of information about women in the medieval North.<sup>3</sup> But a poet's attitudes are also reflected, indirectly, in his structural decisions, in his selection of a concrete setting and of an audience thirsting to hear what his dramatized "I" has to say. Keeping in mind E. D. Hirsch's observation that a "genre is less like a game than a code of social behavior," I shall in this paper be describing when it was not only permissible but excruciatingly good manners for a Norse poet to speak to the 'other'.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the most famous and prolific skalds -- Bragi, Þjóðólfr of Hvin, Egill, Glómar Geirason, Ulfr Uggason, Einarr skálaglæma, Eilífr Goðrúnarson, Hallfréðr, Arnórr Þórðarson, Markús Skeggjason, Einarr Skúlason, even Snorri Sturluson -- never address a female in their verse; of those who do, a majority do it only once. Women are refused admittance to the more esteemed compositions, the formal court drápur that make up about one-third of the 21,000-line dróttkvætt corpus. These praise poems, composed for a contemporary prince and recited in his hall, typically address both the king and his comitatus; women, if present, are never acknowledged.<sup>5</sup> (The emendation that allows Haller-Steinn's Rekatefja [ca. 1200]

---

<sup>3</sup>But see Bjarne Fidjestøl, "Ut no glytter dei fagre droaer," Syn og Segn 8 (1976) 1-9; Carol Clover, "Hildigunnr's lament" in Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature, ed. J. Lindow, L. Lönnroth, G. W. Weber (Odense 1986) 141-186.

<sup>4</sup>Validity in Interpretation (New Haven 1967) p. 93.

<sup>5</sup>On the skald's two-fold addresses, see Gerd Kreutzer, Die Dichtungslehre der Skalden, 2 ed. (Weissenheim am Glan 1977) pp. 264-266. On vocatives, see Hans Kuhn, Das Dróttkvætt (Heidelberg 1983) §82a. The changing use and frequency of the vocative in skaldic eulogies deserves separate study. Apostrophes were definitely in vogue at the courts of Knútr the Great and St. Óláfr: Óttarr svarti's drápa for Knútr hails that king 21 times in 11 stanzas; his Hofuþlausn for Óláfr, 26 times in 20 stanzas. Twenty years later, in his Hrynhenda (Meagnádrápa), Arnórr Þórðarson still fits 26 apostrophes into 20 stanzas; yet the same skald's Meagnádrápa, Þorfinnsdrápa, and Erfidrápa for Haraldr harðráði are vocative-free.

to address women is not a happy one.)<sup>6</sup> Religious drápur, occupying another 7,000 lines, also invoke two audiences, the king (or other known denizen) of heaven and, this time, all men, not just those within earshot. One anonymous Christian poem from the thirteenth century -- Liknarbreut -- explicitly includes women as listeners: "I call brothers and sisters to the poem" (II 152, 162, 86). But it is only in the remaining one-third of the corpus, in the informal, occasional verses called visur, lausvisur, or flokker, that an individual woman may be addressed.

And when she is, the skald's 'O lady' apostrophe is a kind of shorthand, a mnemonic of masculinity. When he says 'O lady' he really means 'Notice me. Admire me, advise me, advertise me. Look lady, how good I am at being a man.' It is to a woman and not to a man that the skald announces how incomparably dangerous his battle or voyage was (28, 23), how it was not cowardice that kept him out of the war (26), and how bravely he (or, preferably, his best friend) died (30, 29). On the one occasion in the kings' sagas in which a skald addresses a woman, here the Vicountess of Narbonne, in order to eulogize her, his goal is apparently the same as in the male eulogies, to obtain a laissez-passer into the rich world of her court (33). But the skald seems unable to sustain his adulatory posture, and quickly turns attention back to himself, to his own battlefield prowess. It is as if, halfway through the stanza, a traditional generic rule reasserted itself, a

---

<sup>6</sup>Rekatefja at. 24 is clearly addressed to men, but the poem's opening and closing stanzas, preserved only in Bergsbók, are thought to address women, the first by emendation, the second ambiguously: Hera gnótt Hrunda 'a multitude of linen-valkyries' (I 543, 525, 255); herr prúðr hervi 'troops proud in linen' (I 552, 534, 260). The first MS line starts off Hera gnótt 'a multitude of troops' (as in Háttatal 68). The third word, possibly Hrunda (with nasal abbreviation), is odd, since the scribe's graphemic system does not elsewhere abbreviate n or g before d or ð. But whether Hrunda or hrifa, this word most likely defines not hera (em. hera) but the following man-kennings: Hrunda [or hrifa] randhvøla renni-Fundr 'brandishing-god of the boss-wheel of valkyries (or storms)'. Overdefined shield-kennings are a specialty of the poem: in the same stanza, skjaldr linna skrunnar 'tree of the cloud of the shield's snake'; in at. 29: 'offerer of the cloud of the shaking storm of the wooden-plank of Skuggull'. Suggested reading: "I ask men to listen to my poem about the warrior."

rule that in dróttkvætt the female addressed watches while the addressing male acts.

This is the theme of three verse sequences (27, 19, 24) composed within forty years of each other, beginning in the second decade of the eleventh century, by court skalds working for, respectively, Knútr the Great, his contemporary and enemy, St. Óláfr, and the latter's half-brother, Haraldr harðráði. Each poem contains the tag út munu ekkjur líta 'the ladies will gaze out' and depicts 1) a hero, 2) with retainers, 3) at the beginning or end of an expedition, 4) in the presence of glittering light, and 5) watched by a townswoman to whom the skald addresses his remarks.<sup>7</sup> After Chrétien de Troyes, no literary description of a tournament was complete without a mention of the watching ladies; here, too, it seems, the viking poet wanted his feats on the field to catch the feminine eye.

The first poem, the Lifanennaflokkur, attributed to Knútr's lifanenn or troops, celebrates that king's capture of London in 1017, portraying it not so much as a political triumph as a colorful courtship display, a chance for the soldiers to show off in front of the ladies. The second, Sighvatr's Austrfararvísur, describes the hardships and happy outcome of the skald's journey to Sweden around 1020. Among the more than 160 stanzas by Sighvatr, this is the only one (19) directed to a female; here it is not a battle but a delicate diplomatic mission that culminates in a display of the male before the female. In the third and final use of the theme, Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's flokkur on King Haraldr's sea-levy of 1060, watching women preside over a departing war-expedition. The warriors sailing off to battle feel the eyes of the women of Trondheim at the beck of their heads, and an oceanic weight of expectations pressing them forward. The skald promises: "Rowed it will be, lady,"

---

<sup>7</sup>The first four of these basic motifs are elements in the Old English "hero on the beach" type-scene, found some twenty times. The Old English theme has no woman, the Old Norse, no beach. See David K. Crowne, "The Hero on the Beach: An Example of Composition by Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 61 (1960) 362-72.

converting one of the female spectators into an audience for the men's solemn vows.<sup>8</sup>

In the first poem, glittering light is provided by the weapons flying over the field, shedding their fire over the king; in the second, by the bright ring bestowed upon the skald; in the third, by the gilded dragon-prow gleaming over the royal ship. Like the glittering aura that predicts or highlights success, the skald's watching women are not merely decorative: they are there to ensure that masculine standards are upheld. By shifting the point of view from actor to spectator, the three poets implicitly invite us, the audience, to see and hear the happenings for ourselves, to take the female role. Geoffrey of Monmouth's observations around 1135 that women at Arthur's court rejected men who had not proved themselves three times in battle -- and that they watched and inspired their fighters from the top of the city walls -- have struck historians of courtly love as somewhat premature, coming as they do two decades before the first romances were composed.<sup>9</sup> Yet the women addressed by our three skalds seem to be doing much the same thing more than a century earlier.

About two-thirds of the skaldic stanzas addressed to women are preserved in the family sagas. But while it has not seemed likely that the stanzas already cited from the kings' sagas are spurious, late fabrications attributed to early skalds, none of the verse in the family sagas is considered secure; nor do we have any way of distinguishing confidently between tenth-, twelfth-, or even thirteenth-century layers.<sup>10</sup> Couplets or even larger units could always be recomposed: one

---

<sup>8</sup>On the locations and arrangements of the three sequences in the kings' sagas, see Bjarne Fidjeatøl, Det norrøne Fyrstediktet (Øvre Ervik 1982), Index s.v. Lifsa, Sigv III, and Pj68A IV. My reading of 27.7 follows Russell Poole, "Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History: Some Aspects of the Period 1009-1016," Speculum 62 (1987) 282.

<sup>9</sup>Historia regum Britanniae, ed. Edmond Fauriol in La Légende arthurienne: Etudes et documents. Bibliothèque de l'école des hautes études, 257 (Paris 1929) ch. 157, p. 246. English trans. by Lewis Thorpe, The History of the Kings of Britain (Penguin Books 1966) pp. 229-30 (ix 14).

<sup>10</sup>See Peter Foote, "Wrecks and Rhymes," Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies (Odense 1984) pp. 223-24.

stanza in Kormaks saga contains a female vocative in its first two lines (2.33); a second version of the stanza in the same saga has a different opening couplet, eliminating the woman (at. 65). Authors of the family sagas, unlike those of the kings', usually make the skald's apostrophized woman a full participant in the narrative, giving her a name and literary function. (A less explicable difference is the tendency for kings'-saga skalds to use heiti when addressing women [avanni, averri, hall, kona, sprund, anót] and for family-saga skalds to use full kennings.)

Two family-saga skalds are responsible for almost half of all female apostrophes in the first volume of Skaldedigtning. Kormakr addresses a woman twenty-four times, more than double the number of his runner-up, Gisli, with eleven. Fewer than half of Kormakr's female vocatives occur in the twenty-four stanzas making up his love poetry, and those that do chiefly express his exasperation that the women had the bad taste to get herself married to another man.<sup>11</sup> The context is one of males competing for the same women, of the skald's struggle to gain a momentary advantage over another man. The most lyrical address to a woman in the entire skaldic corpus is by a skald whose mistress has just mentioned that her husband plans to ambush him on the way home (10). It is when the family-saga skald is most absorbed in himself -- his dreams, his interiorness, his extinction -- that he is most likely to address the 'other'. Skalds tell their dreams to women (2.43, 4.13-19, 4.32-36, 21, 17). They tell a woman in what part of the anatomy they have been wounded (22), and how well they are dying (2.64, 20, 32).

The skald's use of female apostrophes suggests that feud in Iceland was very much a woman's business. When Víga-Glúmr goes home to mother and finds that enemies have encroached upon his property, he quickly composes a stanza to reassure her of his belligerent intentions (8.1). When a skald worries that his reputation has been damaged, that his exacting of vengeance was not carried out in a classically heroic way, it

---

<sup>11</sup>See Theodore M. Andersson, "Skalds and Troubadours," Medieval Scandinavia 2 (1969) 22, for a list of love stanzas.

is to a female that he presents his defense (8.2, 9). The last dateable dróttkvætt verse to address a woman was composed by Guðmundr Galtaeón in 1210 when men were criticizing his friend Hrafn for making peace. The skald assures Hrafn's sister, and not a male relative, that in his opinion Hrafn behaved prudently (37). One poet who seems extraordinarily sensitive to what women were expecting of him is Þórarinn sverti of Eyrbyggja saga. His seventeen-stanza sequence, the Máblísingavísur, contains no fewer than seven references to females, beginning with his boast that he warded off reproaches from women and ending with his plea to a woman that he did not break any law in killing his opponent (5.17). Þórarinn addresses a man three times in his poem, in contexts different from those in which women are addressed. One stanza (12) contains two statements, each directed to a different individual, a man in the first quetrain and a woman in the second. The skald begins by reminding his male friend of good days together in the past. He then turns to a woman to express his fear that he may soon be forced to take to his heels. Male bonding is fine and good, but when something is really troubling the skald he tells it to the judge -- a woman.

It is not a surprising or unexpected conclusion that there was a set of conventions in skaldic poetry that 'saw' male and female differently, that gave to women a power and prestige that was not theirs by law but by custom and circumstances. Still another set of conventions, this time stylistic, may have made the skald's vocatives more audible to his listeners:

A surprisingly large number of the poets just mentioned park their vocatives in the opening syllable (hofu~~st~~tafr) of the second line (and occasionally of the fourth) in either or both half-stanzas. The three most frequent placements are:

1. Long monosyllabic base and definer filling first two syllables of line 2. These include (a) the compound-type mengrund, of which 19 examples are listed in the Appendix; three skalds (18, 37, Vígl saga 6) place the compound in the first two syllables of line 4, while one (7) -- an incompetent berserk -- waits until line 5; (b) base words with a long verbal prefix (held-Eir); and (c) heiti preceded by an adjective (ægri sprund, svinn brúðr, denek helli). Disyllabic heiti (sverri, svenni) will occur only in first or final positions in lines 4, 8, or (rarely) 1.

2. Long monosyllabic base with two disyllabic, alliterating definers filling, respectively, the first syllable of line 2 and last four of line 1. Examples: handar bála Hlín, handar girðir Hlín, greipa glóðar Gerðr, hauka setra Hildr, Dreupnia drógar díg; with adjective replacing one definer: forrær feldu Frigg, herra hrossa Þrúðr, golla ens galle Gerðr.

3. Trisyllabic two-part kennings with rhyming definer and base: (with full rhyme, placed in line 2) línu Hlín, báru Vör; (with half rhyme, placed in line 3) aura Eir, golla bella, tvinna Syn; the monosyllabic word fills the first syllable of the line, the disyllabic, the last two. Three-part kennings with full rhyme (munder fagrviða grund) follow the same pattern.

Practice varies from skald to skald and between the two saga groups. In the Máliþingavísur, the two female apostrophes (and three male apostrophes) fill, as predicted, the opening syllable(s) of line 2; the skald's five non-vocative references to women do not occur in this position. In Kormákr's first six stanzas, three non-vocative women-kennings (sta. 1, 5) have the same initial position in line 2 as his first female apostrophe (at. 6); of Kormákr's 24 female apostrophes, 15 follow one of the three patterns outlined above. Víge-Glár's two female apostrophes -- and none of his non-vocative women-kennings -- fill the first two syllables of line 2. The skalds of the kings' sagas are less predictable. In Lifmannaflokkur, one female apostrophe and one woman-kenning fill the opening syllable(s) of line 2; the remaining two apostrophes (in the final verse) are placed in the first syllable, fourth line, of each half-stanza, as if signalling closure. Neither of Sighvatr's female apostrophes (19) opens line 2, and only one of Þjóðólfr's two vocatives does (24).

#### APPENDIX

##### Dróttkvætt Stanzas Addressed to a Woman

Note: Numbers in parentheses give the location of the stanza in the standard editions. The roman numeral refers to the volume, the arabic the page, in the following sequence: 1. Den norsk-islandske skaldedigtning, ed. Finnur Jónsson, A. Tekst efter håndskrifterne, I-II (Copenhagen 1908-15; reprinted 1967-73); 2. The same, B. Rettet tekst, I-II (Copenhagen 1912-15); 3. Den norsk-islandske skaldediktningen, revideret av Ernst A. Kock, I-II (Lund 1946-49).

Stanzas from the kings' sagas are identified by an asterisk (\*), from poetological treatises, by a caret (^); stanzas from the family sagas and Sturlunga are unmarked. Attributions and chronology follow for convenience the above editions. "Spurious" stanzas addressing women (that is, verses put into the mouths of saga-age skalds but assigned by Finnur Jónsson to the thirteenth or fourteenth century) are collected for comparison in part B. Stanzas in eddic metres have been excluded, as have the dróttkvætt Marian invocations (e.g., Harasól, stanzas 59-61).

Part A Poet	Stanza Number	Location
*1. Eyvindr Finnason ǫl-Gerðr	13	(I 74, 65, 40)
2. Kormákr Ögmundarson mengrúnd	6	(I 81, 71, 43)
ǫlstafna lyaigrúnd	18	(I 83, 74, 45)
linu Hlín	19	(I 83, 74, 45)
lín-Gefn; hring-Eir	24	(I 84, 75, 45)
Gefn; hgrfit	29	(I 85, 76, 46)
gollhlaða geymiþalla; silki-Nanna	32	(I 85, 77, 46)
linu Hlín	33	(I 85, 77, 46)
handar bála Hlín; dyneyjar sköfnunga Freyja	40	(I 87, 79, 47)
fjarðar legga Freyja	41	(I 87, 79, 47)
nen-Gefn; auð-Frigg	43	(I 87, 80, 48)
földu hald-Eir; þæru Vör	49	(I 88, 81, 48)
handar skers þella	50	(I 88, 81, 48)
golla þella	51	(I 89, 81, 49)
handar girðla Hlín; földu Frigg	60	(I 90, 83, 50)
kona; Sága	63	(I 91, 84, 50)
greipa glóðar Gerðr	64	(I 91, 84, 50)
3. Þórketill klyppr Þórðarson Þjórranna Nanna	1	(I 99, 93, 54)
4. Gíali Súrason unnfúra fold; aura Eir	13	(I 103, 98, 57)
þornreið	17	(I 104, 99, 57)
aura Eir	19	(I 105, 100, 57)
skjaldsteins skorð; bláfóldar skafia hyra snyrtigótt	20	(I 105, 100, 58)

seima þar-Lofn	32	(I 108, 103, 59)
þaug-Hlín; lauka Vör	33	(I 108, 103, 59)
tvinne Syn	34	(I 108, 103, 59)
hgr-Bil	36	(I 108, 104, 59)
5. Þórarinn svarti máhlífingr hgr-Gerðr	12	(I 114, 108, 62)
mundar fagrviða grund	17	(I 115, 109, 62)
6. Halli þarsærkr líðar hanga leyggjar Gerðr; hána vanga hirðidís	1	(I 115, 110, 62)
7. Leiknir þarsærkr hoddgrund; hvítings Hlín	1	(I 116, 110, 63)
8. Víga-Glómur Eyjólfsson menþöll	1	(I 118, 112, 63)
hgrveig	7	(I 119, 113, 64)
9. Brúsi Hallaason þorða Gøndul; blíka beiði-Hlökk	1	(I 121, 116, 65)
10. Þjórn Breiðvíkingakeppi aralínna þella	1	(I 133, 125, 70)
^11. Brennu-Njáll avanni	1	(I 139, 130, 72)
*12. Þórlleifr jerskald avarri	5	(I 143, 134, 74)
^13. Orar Barreyjarskald Draupnía drógar dís	1	(I 143, 135, 74)
*14. Stefnir Þórgilsson hall; váða Gerðr	2	(I 154, 146, 80)
15. Grísa Smáingsson néaskorb	1	(I 174, 164, 88)
16. Gunnlaugr orastunga Illugeson vín-Gefn	9	(I 196, 187, 99)
17. Hrafn Qmundarson bróðr	1	(I 198, 188, 100)
18. Þórðr Kolbeinsson auð-Hlín	3	(I 217, 207, 108)

*19. Sighvatr ( <u>Austrferarvísur</u> ) kona; mjóð-Nanna	15	(I 238, 224, 116)
20. Þóróðr Kolbránsrakald svanni	25	(I 288, 266, 137)
21. Björn Hítðalakappi skarar landa Nið-branda Nauna	20	(I 304, 281, 144)
22. Helgi dýr Skefilsson linnvengis Bil	1	(I 308, 285, 146)
*23. Hárekr Eyvindarson í Þjóttu ifla flausts Jgrð	2	(I 309, 286, 146)
*24. Þjóðolfr Arnórsson sprund	18	(I 381, 351, 176)
anót	20	(I 381, 351, 176)
*25. Sneglu-Halli þóra	10	(I 390, 360, 180)
*26. Ulfr staliari hgrbrekka	1	(I 403, 372, 185)
*27. <u>Lifsmannaflokkur</u> Syn	7[4]	(I 422, 392, 194)
Ilar; fyllar dags fit	10[7]	(I 423, 393, 194)
*28. <u>Sveinsflokkur</u> svanni	1	(I 423, 393, 195)
*29. Þórkell hamarakald unnar dags Sói	2	(I 439, 409, 201)
*30. Gísl Illugason savarri	1	(I 444, 413, 204)
*31. Sigurðr jórsalafari svanni	3	(I 454, 422, 209)
32. Þárgíls Oddason golls Gerðr	1	(I 493, 465, 228)
*33. Regnvaldr Kali Kolsson kona	15	(I 508, 482, 236)
*34. Hallar-Steinn flóða fóra hirði-Sif	3	(I 552, 534, 260)
skála mærk; glatafne Bil	4	(I 553, 535, 260)
*35. <u>Stríðskeravísur</u> hnosae Þráðr	1	(I 590, 591, 288)

36. Anonymous [C] bróðir	27	(I 600, 600, 292)
37. Guðmundr Galtason línsþing	1	(II 43, 52, 32)

Part B

Níals saga

hauka setra Hildir; svanteiga eids björk	13	(II 201, 214, 112)
eids síka skorða	26	(II 204, 218, 113)

Ragnars saga loðbrókar

kona	I. 1	(II 232, 251, 130)
kona	V. 6	(II 235, 255, 133)
þorn-Bil	VI. 2	(II 238, 257, 134)

Grettis saga

hodda grund; hgr-Gerðr	8	(II 432, 464, 255)
gulls selja	17	(II 435, 466, 256)
valla dís	26	(II 438, 469, 257)
hornflætar hirði-Sága	35	(II 440, 471, 258)
eyleggjar Freyja	46	(II 443, 474, 259)
hringa grund	54	(II 445, 476, 260)

Þórðar saga hreða

Leifnis lautar fegrvite lind; bróðir	2	(II 451, 483, 264)
gullbauga þella; aras sýner grund; þellis þella	9	(II 453, 485, 265)

Vígþunder saga

svanni; Hlökk	3	(II 455, 488, 266)
marglößar tróða	4	(II 456, 488, 267)
svanni	5	(II 456, 488, 267)
mær; þorngrund; Freyja	6	(II 456, 489, 267)
lauka reið; tróða	11	(II 457, 490, 267)
bróðir; Hlín; líðar eids lýsigrund	23	(II 461, 493, 269)